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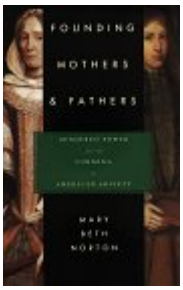

Mary Beth Norton. *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. x + 496 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-42965-4.

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Women in U.S. Colonial Society: Locke vs. Filmer

Mary Beth Norton's examination of gendered power in early colonial America is incisive and well-written. Using extensive court records from New England and the Chesapeake, Norton demonstrates how the two regions developed diverse modes of political and judicial behavior as a result of demographic and religious differences between them (p. 12). These developments affected women in various ways, having an impact on the extent and conditions of their access to power and authority.

Norton convincingly argues that New Englanders, having immigrated as families with a higher percentage of women in their population than in the Chesapeake, organized their society according to a Filmerian worldview. In a Filmerian system, based on the theories of Sir Robert Filmer, society was organized hierarchically, with one's position in this hierarchy dependent upon a number of factors, such as age, gender, and status. The system asserted a unified theory of power, in which the family was seen as the foundation of the state and the two institutions were virtually inseparable. The American adaptation of Filmer increased the responsibilities of the heads of families, viewing them as crucial links in the chain of hierarchical authority that governed their society (p. 39). Yet because of its emphasis on the family and status, the system also inadvertently provided an avenue for some women, usually high-status widows or fictive widows, to obtain real power. Occupying a position of status, but not subject to male authority, such women exposed the logical contradictions in Filmerian thinking–a conceptualization of power that on the one hand glorified the power of fathers and on the other offered mothers, symbolic and real, unparalleled access to the wielding of legitimate authority (p. 403).

The Chesapeake, on the other hand, offered no such avenue for women. Chesapeake society was not as dependent on the family as that of New England because of a smaller female population and a larger number of families made up of men and their indentured servants. Their society anticipated Lockean thinking in basing women's relationship to the polity on their gender alone; the family and state were not seen as analogous, as they were in New England, and the state was considered an unquestionably masculine realm. Accordingly, the state did not interfere in family matters and sexual behavior as frequently as did the New England government under the Filmerian system.

Norton's argument is amply supported by numerous

examples from colonial court records; her examination of these records and their implications is thorough and convincing. *Founding Mothers and Fathers* is indeed a major contribution to the field of early American history. Norton's analysis is detailed and developed beyond any previous work. Her comparison of early New England and the Chesapeake contributes to our growing sense of the diversity of colonial America, as does her critique of gender and class (or status).