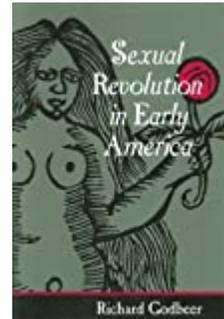




Richard Godbeer. *Sexual Revolution in Early America.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xii + 430 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6800-9.



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Rethinking Behavior and Belief in Early America

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Richard Godbeer's book on sexuality in colonial British America has been eagerly awaited by those of us who had heard or read parts of this project in conference papers or articles. Those presentations had been filled with fresh insight and careful research.[1] His full study, published in May 2002, has lived up to its promise. His careful, nuanced study is by far the best discussion of colonial sexuality available to scholars. While not slighting discussions of theory, Godbeer has avoided opaque jargon and balanced the theory with vignettes that bring the period and its people to life.

Beginning with a discussion of early New England, Godbeer uses three chapters to elaborate and extend the work begun over a half-century ago by Edmund Morgan in his pioneering essay, "The Puritans and Sex." Daniel Scott Smith, John Demos, Robert Gross, Laurel Ulrich, and others expanded on Morgan's insight as family history and women's history developed during the 1970s and 1980s.[2] By the time that Godbeer began working on this book, women's historians and historians of sexuality had blazed a trail by exploring the interplay of gen-

der, class, and race on the intimate and public behavior of early Americans as well as extending the work to areas beyond New England.[3] Godbeer has taken that rough trail and made it a highway. The first three chapters thoroughly rework the image of puritanism, while the second group of three chapters moves the study to the colonial South to explore the ways race and culture shaped the understanding of sexuality. Here Godbeer reworks southern history to be truly multicultural by showing the importance of European interaction with Indians in shaping the sexual landscape of the South as well as the impact of enslaved Africans. The book concludes with three chapters exploring the changing standards of sexual behavior and its regulation in the eighteenth century.

The author requests that readers check their modern assumptions about sexual orientation and identity at the door, and proceed into the past with an open mind. Godbeer argues that sex in the early modern world was something one *did*, not something that defined what someone *was*. The book documents more than one sexual revolution in early America. Sexual customs of early modern Britons allowed for sexual intimacy between betrothed

and for the recognition of long-standing relationships without a marriage ceremony. Puritan leaders worked to impose a new sexual order, emphasizing sexual relations as a gift given to married couples, insisting on regularized marriages, and eroticizing spirituality. This sexual revolution was never complete, however.

To the south, leaders worried that the European settlers living on the edge of a “wilderness” would soon sink into savagery. The differences in marital customs and courtship between Europeans and Indians led leaders to characterize the native peoples as licentious, and fostered the development of racialized definitions of morality. As enslaved Africans became more common, and a mulatto population testified to the reality of interracial sex, southern leaders focused on regulating white women’s sexuality, thus deflecting any focus on the actions of white men with the vulnerable enslaved women. In a classic version of “blame the victim,” black women were then perceived as naturally licentious. Certain common themes emerge in New England and the South. In both regions ordinary residents had retained older patterns of behavior that were different from those the elites thought necessary to create an orderly society. In both areas women’s sexuality was problematized, and women were forced to negotiate a difficult terrain complicated by male power and class deference.

The author carefully distinguishes between what the leaders wished was true and what the ordinary colonists believed. More than one community tolerated sexual behavior that was contrary to the official positions of their leaders and of the law. Colonists continued to live together without marriage ceremonies and to abandon partners, finding new ones without legal separation or divorce. In fact, Godbeer argues that sexual standards became more permissive as the eighteenth century progressed. Adults expressed increasing anxiety about young people’s behavior, especially the freedom that young women claimed. This freedom was evidenced by increased premarital pregnancy (couples who had a child less than seven months after marrying) and single motherhood. By the time of the American Revolution, a majority of couples appear to have been intimate before marriage. For example, overnight stays were not uncommon among young couples not yet engaged. Adopting the rhetoric of independence during the American Revolution, young adults insisted on the freedom to choose life partners without parental interference. Urban centers were notoriously “boisterous and bawdy” (p. 299) and venereal disease was widespread.

Adults responded not by passing more restrictive laws, but by turning to moral suasion. With greater freedom came greater risk for young women, and a whole realm of non-governmental cultural institutions sought to convince young women to uphold chastity and be guided by their parents. Novels, songs, and religion were all enlisted to warn young women of the risks of liberty. In the seventeenth century both men and women faced prosecution for fornication. By the late eighteenth century, fornication prosecutions were almost exclusively of women. Chastisement of those who strayed from norms moved out of public view and became private. As communities stopped prosecuting for fornication or premarital pregnancy, church congregations increasingly began to discipline couples for these offenses. Communities continued to enforce standards through gossip, mobs, and social pressure.

Godbeer tackles community reactions to other forms of sexuality as well, through discussions of sodomy, bestiality, incest, and rape. A similar pattern emerges. People saw anti-social acts, not innate behavior. Colonists assumed that homosexual acts were just that—acts, which they defined as sinful because they were non-reproductive. Because sexuality was tied to reproduction, and thought of in terms of penetration, communities had almost no way to recognize a lesbian act. Communities tolerated a certain level of difference, responding only when events became very public or notorious. Social class and race mattered, especially in rape.

In only one way does Godbeer’s deft handling of sources slip. Colonial newspapers are a good source of essays and poems, most of which are published anonymously or under pseudonyms. Godbeer found a rich vein of sexual commentary in these essays and mined it well. However, he too readily assumed that the gender of the author is discernible based on the voice of the poem or the pen name adopted. (For example, see the discussion of a *South Carolina Gazette* exchange on interracial sex, pp. 212-213.) There is, however, no guarantee that because an anonymous piece seemed to adopt the perspective of a woman that it was actually written by one. Men and women writers frequently have adopted cross-gender personas in order to make their case. Similarly, the author is too quick to assume that a popular song lyric claiming to be a mother’s tale was actually written by a woman (pp. 254-255).

The book does not explore changes in belief or behavior beyond 1800. What is clear is that the American Revolution coincided with another revolution, which pri-

vated sexuality. The first decades of the new nation saw young people declaring their sexual independence as strongly as the nation declared its political independence. The cost for this new freedom, however, was borne unequally. Increasingly only women faced censure for sexual misconduct. Women would face the social censure alone, or in the case of women of color, were presumed to be sexually debased. With freedom came the double standard. What had not yet developed was the private sphere culture that would be an effective restraint on the behavior of youth (at least of the middle class). That is a nineteenth century story.

Sexual Revolution in Early America is a fascinating read that deserves a wide audience. It should provoke new studies and comparisons with other parts of the "new" world and with Europe.

Notes

[1]. In the interests of full disclosure of a potential conflict of interest, I was the official commentator at an Organization of American Historians poster presentation at which Godbeer presented a piece of his research leading to this book. Thus I am acknowledged in the book's foreword as one of a number of scholars who offered comments on parts of his research. I had no further con-

tact with the author or input into the book.

[2]. Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," *New England Quarterly* (December 1942), pp. 591-607; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); Daniel Scott Smith, "Parental Power and Marriage Patterns: An Analysis of Historical Trends in Hingham, Massachusetts," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (August 1973); Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976); and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

[3]. See for example the work by John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

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