

A WIFE'S LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE: GENDER, RELIGION, AND POLITICAL ORDER IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND

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THE FACTS OF THE CASE

During the winter of 1635–36, Roger Williams fled Massachusetts Bay Colony and made his way to what would become Providence, Rhode Island. There he set up a “shelter for persons distressed for Conscience.” Among those who accompanied him was one Joshua Verin, a roper by trade. Verin would later purchase the house lot abutting Williams’s property. Two years later, in an undated letter in early May, Williams wrote to John Winthrop asking for advice concerning “[...] one unruly person” whose speech, Williams believed, threatened “[...] no other than the Raping of the Fundamentall Liberties of the Country,” which he believed should be “dearer to us than our Right Eyes.”¹ Apparently a disagreement had broken out between the neighbors, because Williams later complained that Verin had refused to join him in prayer for at least a year and had further forbidden his wife, Jane, from joining in as well. When she disobeyed her husband, Verin had “[...] trodden her under foote tyrannically” to the point that Jane Verin’s neighbors feared “[...] with his furious blowes she went in danger of her life.”² As a consequence of this “brutish carriage,” on May 21, Providence Town Records indicate that Joshua Verin was disenfranchised for

¹ Glenn W. LaFantasie, ed. *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*. Volume I, 1629-1653. (Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI, 1988), (hereafter cited as *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*), 154. LaFantasie believes the unruly person refers to J. Verin, whose case would come before the town later in the month.

² Winthrop Papers, I, (Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society), 209; MHSC 4, VI, 245; Howard M. Chapin, *Documentary History of Rhode Island: Being the History of the Towns of Providence and Warwick to 1649 and of the Colony to 1647*. (Providence, 1916), 72.

“restraining [her] liberty of conscience.”³ Verin left Providence sometime before June 10, 1638,⁴ “hale[ing] his wife with ropes to Salem, where she must needs be troubled and troublesome as differences yet stand.”⁵ This appears to be the first time that a wife’s liberty of conscience, independent of her husband’s, was upheld in the English colonies.

QUESTIONS RAISED

Why did the people of Providence charge Joshua Verin with violating his wife’s liberty of conscience? Why not charge him with putting his wife in “danger of life”? What were the motivations of the “heads of households” that made the decision? Why did Joshua Verin come to Rhode Island? Did he follow Roger Williams because he was “distressed of conscience” and seeking refuge? If so, why did he not attend prayer services for almost a year? Or, did he follow his wife, Jane, and his mother-in-law, the Widow Reeve, to Rhode Island because they were female activists who had challenged the Church and Magistracy in Salem? What repercussions, if any, did this case have in Rhode Island and the other colonies? To what extent was this case influenced by the course of events involving Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in Massachusetts Bay Colony? Did this case have any influence on Roger Williams’s views on total religious freedom? Is there any connection between this case and the principles it represented, and the Massachusetts Body of Liberties of 1641 which made wife beating illegal for the first time in the English-speaking world? Finally, to what extent do events in Rhode Island reflect tensions in the trans-Atlantic world?

STRATEGIES ADOPTED

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to reconstruct as much as possible the lives of Joshua and Jane Verin before they left England in 1634, before they arrived to Providence in 1636, and after they returned to Salem in 1638. Second, the origins, experiences, and beliefs of the residents of Providence who were either directly involved in the decision making (heads of household) or indirectly influenced the decision-makers both in Old and New England must also be explored. Third, the key Puritan ministers and theologians must be identified and their different positions within Puritanism regarding the position of women within Puritan patriarchy, the possibility of women being among the “elect” or “Visible Saints,” the issue of female prophesying, and changing attitudes regarding domestic abuse must be clarified. Fourth, the role of New England women in Puritan churches must be investigated to shed light on Jane Verin and her behavior. This essay will review preliminary results from investigations into the first three of the four questions listed above.

³ *Early Records of the Town of Providence*. Vol. I. (Snow & Farnham City Printers, Providence, 1892).

⁴ On June 10, 1638 Verin was not called neighbor in the record (indicating he had already departed), and Williams confirmed the land was laid out to newcomers. Chapin, 75-76.

⁵ Winthrop Papers, 2, 109; MHSC 4, VI, 245; Chapin, 72.

FINDINGS ON THE VERINS

Jane Verin, *not* Joshua, was the reason the Verins came to Providence. In her experiences, she was typical of other female dissenters, such as Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer, and others who were perceived to be a threat to the established social order in Massachusetts Bay and who would later suffer the consequences. Records indicate Joshua arrived in New England in June 1635 on the *James* with his parents and siblings.⁶ Joshua, his father, and his brother Hilliard were all landowners, members of the First Church of Salem, and held various positions of authority in Salem.⁷ While both Joshua and Jane were admitted to communion in the First Church of Salem, in the two years prior to their arrival in Providence, Jane refused to worship with the Congregation and later denied the churches of the Bay Colony were true churches because they had not separated from the Church of England.⁸ According to John Winthrop, Williams had been so influential and persuasive in Salem that “many there (especially of devout women) did embrace his opinions and separated from the Churches [...] he has drawn about twenty persons to his opinion [...] [they] went all together out of our jurisdiction and precinct, into an Iland, called Read-Iland [...] and there they live to this day [...] but in great strife and contention.”⁹ It is entirely possible that the Verins left Salem because they were about to face the consequences of *Jane's* challenges to the ministry. In fact, once in Providence, it was *Joshua* who refused to attend religious services. In his letter to John Winthrop, Roger Williams notes that Joshua Verin had “refused to heare the word with us (wch we molested him not for) this twelve month.”¹⁰ Jane continued her defiance of authority by disobeying her husband and attending prayer services with Roger Williams and other faithful, suffering a life-threatening beating as a consequence.

In defying Church authorities in Salem, and later defying her husband's authority in Providence, Jane Verin not only challenged Puritan notions about appropriate behavior for women, but her actions threatened to undermine the very basis of family and community structure.¹¹ At the same time, between 1640 and 1680, Puritans in Massachusetts Bay

⁶ Michael Tepper, ed., *Passengers to America: A Consolidation of Ship Passenger Lists from the New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, Baltimore, 1978, p. 46. NOTE: Verin left from the town of Hampton, England.

⁷ Joshua was the son of Philip and Dorcas Verin. Both Philip and Joshua's brother Hilliard were freemen and members of the First Church of Salem. Each held a variety of appointed offices in Salem; Hilliard was clerk of the Salem Quarterly Court.

⁸ See Koehler, *Search for Power*, p. 217. Williams's followers at Salem were Jane Verin, Mary Oliver, Margery Reeves, and Margery Holliman. They “refused to worship with the congregation from 1635 to 1638 and the latter two women denied that the churches of the Bay colony were true churches.” See also Winthrop, *Journal* I, pp. 162 and 168, and Felt, *Annals of Salem* II, 573 and 576.

⁹ John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop 1630-1649*, Richard S. Dunn, James Savage & Laetitia Yeandle, eds., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, pp.163–164.

¹⁰ *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*. I: 1629-1653, p. 156.

¹¹ See Jane Kamensky, “Talk Like a Man: Speech, Power, and Masculinity in Early New England,” *Gender and History*, 8 (April 1996): 22-47. Kamensky argues that gender was central to understanding a person's rightful place in Puritan society. She states that in their theology as well as in their social and spatial arrangements, New Englanders were “people of the word;” and by making

would enact the first laws anywhere in the world against “domestic tyranny,” especially spousal and child abuse.¹² Foster defines Puritanism as a continuing interaction among magistrates, ministers, and laity dedicated to creating a godly society by imposing their version of social and ecclesiastical discipline on their neighbor.¹³ In order to accomplish this, the Puritans set up a state church system. Civil power reinforced ecclesiastical authority. These structures of control were not well established in the Providence community, which was still in its infancy. In fact, Williams states that Joshua Verin had “openly in Towne meeting more than once professthe to hope for and long for a better Government then the Contry hath yet...”¹⁴

After his return to Salem, Joshua Verin received several grants of land¹⁵ and also served in a variety of capacities at the Church.¹⁶ Clearly, he and his family remained members in good standing in both the town and church community.¹⁷ In contrast, Jane continued to challenge the legitimacy of the Puritan hierarchy. Court records note that on October 4, 1638, she was “referd [*sic*] to Salem,”¹⁸ and on December 25, 1638, Jane Verin was presented in court at Salem for absence from religious worship,¹⁹ shortly *after* her husband received a substantial land grant. Church records indicate that Jane Verin was removed

sermons the centerpiece of ritual life, “Puritan thinkers demanded heightened respect for the voices of godly ministers, that is, for the voices of eminent men.” p. 27. Thus, when a woman like Jane Verin challenged the legitimacy of the First Church in Salem, she also challenged the authority of the male hierarchy that supported it.

¹² See Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy Against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present*, Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2004. In Chapter One, “Wicked Carriage,” Pleck argues that Puritans used both church and civil courts to intervene in cases of family violence, particularly because the family was the foundation upon which the religious commonwealth would be constructed and family violence was “wicked carriage”—assaultive and sinful behavior—that threatened the individual and community’s standing before God.” p. 17.

¹³ Charles L. Cohen, “The Post-Puritan Paradigm of Early American Religious History,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, Vol. LIV.4 (October 1997), p. 701.

¹⁴ *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*. Volume I, 1629-1653, p. 154.

¹⁵ *Town Records of Salem, Massachusetts*, Vol. I; 1634-1659, Essex Institute, Historical Collections, Second Series, Vol. I, Part I, (Salem, 1868). Town records indicate that Verin received a two-acre house lot on February 6, 1635. (p. 9) On August 29, 1638, he was granted a 10-acre lot, (p. 73) and on November 21, 1638, he received a 40-acre land grant. (p. 97) See also: Felt, *Annals of Salem*, Vol. I, 2nd edition, Boston, 1845. p. 170.

¹⁶ On July 6, 1644, Joshua Verin was assigned to check on church attendance and attentiveness. On December 3, 1677, the Church asked another member of the Verin family to speak with congregation members who were “under the Churches admonition for scandalous sin.” *The Records of the First Church in Salem*, p. 144.

¹⁷ Joshua Verin’s brother, Hilliard, served as clerk of Essex County. See Michael Tepper, ed., *Passengers to America: A Consolidation of Ship Passenger Lists from the New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, Baltimore, 1978. p. 134.

¹⁸ John Noble, supervisor, *Records of the Court of Assistants of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay 1630-1692*, Boston, 1904. Quarter Court held at Boston on October 4, 1638, p. 79.

¹⁹ *Records of Quarterly Court*, Essex County, I, p.10.

from the First Church of Salem on January 7, 1640.²⁰ This seems to indicate that Jane Verin continued to act on her conscience.

Acting on one's conscience not only caused strife within the Verin marriage but also within the extended family. The divisions in the Verin family reflect the fissures that appeared in Massachusetts Bay colony. Joshua Verin clearly disagreed with his wife on the status of the New England churches relative to England as he remained a congregant; he ultimately resorted to beatings to discipline her. Joshua Verin's brother and sister-in-law probably sided with Jane in that they, too, challenged the authority of the First Church of Salem and later suffered admonishment, removal from the church,²¹ and physical punishment for their beliefs.²²

In addition to the teachings of Roger Williams, it is likely that Jane Verin was influenced by the preaching of Anne Hutchinson, a midwife and spiritual advisor to other women who had begun holding meetings in her home for the purpose of repeating and discussing the previous week's sermons. Women often made up a majority of worshipers in Puritan congregations.²³ She, along with others who came to be known as the Antinomians, challenged the magistracy of Massachusetts Bay Colony, many of whom she claimed were preaching a Covenant of Works, a doctrine contrary to Puritan teachings. According to John Winthrop, "the last and worst of all, which most suddenly diffused the venome of these opinions into the very veines and vitals of the People in the Country, was Mistrus Hutchinsons double weekly-lecture."

The Hutchinsons had followed the Reverend John Cotton to Massachusetts Bay Colony. They were members of the Alford congregation. In England, this congregation believed it should be responsible for choosing and paying for their minister. But in Massachusetts Bay, the Company leadership appointed all ministers and paid their salaries. The Alford faction tried to organize a separate church, but could not gain official recognition. As a result, they began to meet privately. The Hutchinsons' home was often used for private worship services; her brother-in-law, the Reverend John Wheelwright, often preached at their farm.²⁴

Winthrop claimed that fifty to sixty people (and sometimes as many as eighty) attended her talks, "seducing [...] almost all parts of the Country, round about."²⁵ Ultimate-

²⁰ Richard D. Pierce, ed., *The Records of the First Church in Salem, 1629-1736*, (Essex Institute, 1974), p. 10.

²¹ Records of the First Church of Salem indicate Jane, wife of Phillip Verin, was removed on May 2, 1640. *The Records of the First Church in Salem*, p. 9.

²² Between 1660 and 1663, Joshua's brother Philip and his wife, Joanna (Jane), were presented many times for nonattendance at public worship, and Philip was set by the heels in stocks in November 1663 for denying the country's power to force any to come to the public worship.

²³ Cohen argues that by 1660, women regularly composed two-thirds of church membership, a figure that held steady throughout the eighteenth century. p. 719. He agrees with Bonomi and Treckel that American religion had been "feminized" by the mid-seventeenth century, a fact that enabled women to "institutionalize a broader definition of church membership that enabled Puritan theology to continue functioning as the dominating ideology of New England's social order." p. 720.

²⁴ Carol Berkin, *First Generations: Women in Colonial America*, New York, 1996, pp. 37-40. See also Eve LaPlante, *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman who Defied the Puritans*, New York, 2004.

²⁵ David W. Hall, ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*. (Middle-

ly, the Puritan church state had to respond to twin challenges: the threat posed to the social order by the Antinomians and other dissenters, and the danger to the patriarchy posed by activist females who stepped outside the acceptable boundaries of gendered norms. Anne Hutchinson was found guilty not only of heresy, but of conduct unbecoming a women. According to Carol Berkin, Winthrop viewed Anne Hutchinson's dissent as a challenge to "family order, sexual morality, and the subordination of women to men."²⁶ The Puritan response to these threats was enforced conformity. Antinomians were admonished, disarmed, excommunicated, banished, and otherwise silenced. Women, too, were silenced and punished for failing to conform to Puritan expectations of female behavior that was passive and obedient.²⁷ Berkin concludes that the "Puritans did not resolve, except by fiat and force, such critical questions as how did sainthood disrupt the hierarchy of gender or of the family, and who determined the code of behavior for an individual saint."²⁸

It should also be noted that Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer, and Harding were Puritan women who were perceived to be more radical than their husbands. William Hutchinson joined the exiles, explaining he "was more nearly tied to his wife than to the church." According to Raymond R. Irwin's study of Antinomian exiles in Rhode Island,

the true radicals, and the ones who got the most attention from Puritan authorities, were often women whose much less extreme husbands became guilty by association with their spouses. More than that, these men were seen as failing to control their wives, and thereby as yielding to that weaker sex, an unacceptable state of affairs in a society where women were thought to be inclined to evil.²⁹

In short, the radical behavior of these women challenged Puritan assumptions about gender, masculinity, and the entire social order.

This same question caused dissent among Providence residents. While Williams and others were willing to tolerate Joshua Verin's refusal to attend religious services, when Verin tried to draw his wife, Jane, into the "same Ungodliness with him," Williams and some of the other heads of household voted to "discard him from our Civill Freedome."³⁰ William Arnold, for example, protested the town's vote to disenfranchise Joshua

town, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1968), 205-208.

²⁶ Berkin, *First Generations*, p. 39.

²⁷ Berkin concludes that Hutchinson and her supporters "hardened the government's determination to demand conformity, not only in doctrine, but in the social arrangements between the sexes. It established the principle that religious dissent, or error, and a woman's subordination were linked." She cites the trial and excommunication of Anne Eaton in 1641 for her position against infant baptism, the trial and condemnation of Sarah Keayne in 1646 for "irregular prophesying in mixed assembly," and the conviction of Joan Hogg in 1655 for "disorderly singing and idleness, and for saying she [was] commanded of Christ to do so," as evidence of the attempts by the ministry and magistracy to enforce gender conformity. pp. 39-41.

²⁸ Berkin, *First Generations*, p. 37.

²⁹ Raymond D. Irwin, "Cast Out from the 'City upon a Hill': Antinomian Exiles in Rhode Island, 1638-1650," *Rhode Island History* 52.1 (1994): 2-19; p. 7.

³⁰ *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, I: 1629-1653, p. 156.

Verin, because as a Puritan male, Verin had a duty to discipline his wife. He argued that Verin had acted "out of conscience," and that the town's decision violated an earlier ordinance that specified "no man should be molested for his conscience."³¹ Unlike their Puritan counterparts in Massachusetts Bay, Roger Williams and his supporters endorsed complete liberty of conscience as the best means of ensuring law and order. Williams later wrote that "libertie alone is the key to a l[a]sting civil peace." There is no indication that religious conscience was conceived as anything but gender neutral.

FINDINGS ON THE PROVIDENCE COMMUNITY

Genealogical and historical registers, passenger lists, town and court records, the correspondence of Roger Williams and John Winthrop, and the compilations of early Massachusetts and Rhode Island history also shed light on the motivations of those who decided against Joshua Verin in 1638. As English Puritans newly arrived from England, many of the original proprietors and their families would have had experience with active female participation in Church affairs in both Old and New England. Because of the persecution by the Crown, English Puritans often met in conventicles (private meetings in the home). As members of congregations and as "Visible Saints," women signed church covenants, formed at least half of most congregations, bore either public or private witness to their faith, and sometimes preached in lay ministries.³²

Most of these practices continued in New England churches, although ministers disagreed on the level of female involvement in Church affairs and governance.³³ Records indicate that slightly more than one-third of the one hundred fifty persons signing the Co-

³¹ *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, I: 1629-1653, Footnote 7, p. 156; Winthrop, *History*, I, pp. 340-41.

³² Marilyn J. Westercamp, "Anne Hutchinson, Sectarian Mysticism, and the Puritan Order," *Church History* 59.4 pp. 482-96. Westercamp cites Stephen Foster's study, "New England and the Challenge of Heresy, 1630-1660: The Puritan Crisis in Trans-Atlantic Perspective," in which he notes private meetings organized by the laity were common practice in England. When an established church suspended or deposed sympathetic ministers, private meetings often continued. Westercamp also cites several studies that have concluded that not only was lay leadership known to English Puritans, but during these years, women as well as men were frequently observed in these leadership roles. Some preachers allowed women to attend congregational meetings but have not voice; while others allowed women to speak occasionally (e.g., to witness to their own conversion or to reprove a clear fault in the congregation). She also notes that some of the independent congregations that were formed allowed lay preaching. Many independent congregations of London allowed all lay members, including women to debate, vote, and preach. "Women were also known to have preached in Lincolnshire, Ely, Hertfordshire, Yorkshire, and Somerset. The author also notes that when George Fox established the Society of Friends, women were included in leadership and preaching roles, pp. 486-87.

³³ Gerald F. Moran, "'Sisters' in Christ: Women and the Church in Seventeenth-Century New England," *Women in American Religion*, Janet Wilson James, ed., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), p. 49. Moran studied women entering New England churches between 1630 and 1639. Fifty-two per cent of entrants in the First Church in Salem (organized 1629) and forty-seven per cent of entrants in the First Church in Boston (organized 1630) were women.

venant of the First Church of Boston on August 27, 1630, were women.³⁴ When members of the Church of Charlestown gathered on November 2, 1632, the first page of the covenant includes sixteen women among the thirty-five signatories.³⁵ The renewal of the Church covenant signed at Salem in 1637 promises that the signatories would “walke with our brethren & sisters in [...] Congregation, with all watchfulness & tenderness [...]” It was signed by 85 men and 79 women, including Dorcas Verin.³⁶ Women in Salem also made public professions of their faith experience as a condition of church membership. These recent types of female behavior would have been fresh in the minds of the heads of household who had to decide on the appropriateness of Joshua Verin’s discipline of his religiously active wife. This is significant given that among the original proprietors, Thomas Angell, Alice Daniell(s), Francis Weston, and Richard Waterman were members of the First Church of Salem prior to their arrival in Providence. There they experienced Puritan women being actively involved in both the public and private life of the congregation.

As mentioned earlier, some of the residents of Providence clearly believed that Verin was within his rights to discipline his wife, arguing that when they consented to liberty of conscience, they never “intended that it should extend to the breach of any ordinance of God, such as the subjection of wives to their husbands.”³⁷ To this objection, John Greene responded that “if they should restrain their wives, etc., all the women in the country would cry out of them.”³⁸ As a more orthodox Puritan male, Joshua Verin, in the absence of a church state, had to step in and exercise his “governorship” of his unruly wife.

FINDINGS ON THE ANTINOMIAN CRISIS

The Antinomian controversy, too, had a definite impact on the decision-makers during the Verin case. There was a direct family connection between Anne Hutchinson and Richard Scott, who was an original proprietor and married to her sister, Katherine. Scott arrived on the same ship, *Griffin*, in 1634 as the Hutchinson family. Roger Williams personally arranged for Ann Hutchinson and her followers to obtain a land grant in Portsmouth. They arrived in late March 1638, *before* the Verin case was heard. Hutchinson and other women, including Mary Dyer, continued to prophesy and preach after their arrival in Rhode Island. The wives of several of the original proprietors had been involved in troubles with their respective churches in Salem and Boston prior to their arrival in Providence.³⁹ Even if they were not Antinomians themselves, the original proprietors in Providence who had belonged to the First Church of Boston would probably have known William and May Oliver, Robert

³⁴ *Records of the First Church in Boston*, pp. 12-15.

³⁵ *Records of the First Church in Boston*, Footnote 4, p. 15.

³⁶ David Pulsifer, “Extracts from Records kept by the Rev. John Fiske, during his Ministry at Salem, Wenham, and Chelmsford,” *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute* (Vol. I, #2, May 1859), Salem, 1859, 37-39.

³⁷ Winthrop, *History*, I, 340-41.

³⁸ Winthrop, *History*, I, 340.

³⁹ These women were Jane Verin, the Widow Reeves (Jane’s mother), Margery Holliman (2nd wife of Ezekiel Holliman, Julia Marchant (wife of Stukely Wescott), and Margaret (wife of Francis Weston).

and Phillipa Harding, William and Mary Dyer, and Richard and Jane Hawkins. These families had been admonished by their churches in England and would in 1638 come to Portsmouth with the Antinomians after being banished from the church in New England. In fact, John Winthrop himself linked Mrs. Oliver's heresy before the ministers and magistrates in Massachusetts Bay and the Verin case.⁴⁰

FINDINGS ON ORIGINAL PROVIDENCE PROPRIETORS

All of the proprietors who decided to disenfranchise Joshua Verin were recent arrivals to New England. Given their experiences in Massachusetts Bay Colony, there was a predisposition to be sympathetic to a person's liberty of conscience. Roger Williams himself escaped to Rhode Island before he could be imprisoned for his challenges to both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in Massachusetts Bay; eight of the other heads of household were either admonished, excommunicated, or banished by their respective New England churches prior to their arrival in Providence.⁴¹ Thus they had firsthand experience of religious intolerance.

In addition, the Baptist and Quaker leanings of some of the original Proprietors predisposed them to support Jane Verin. In a journal entry dated 16 March 1638/9, Winthrop writes,

At Providence things grew still worse; for a sister of Mrs. Hutchinson, the wife of one Scott, being infected with Anabaptistry, and going last year to live at Providence, Mr. Williams was taken (or rather emboldened) by her to make open profession thereof, and accordingly was rebaptized by one Holyman, a poor man late of Salem. Then Mr. Williams rebaptized him and some ten more.⁴²

Eleven of the original proprietors would become founding members of the First Baptist Church in Providence.⁴³ The Baptists allowed women to preach to female assemblies. Three of the original proprietors, Thomas Harris, Richard Scott, and Francis Weston, would get into legal troubles because of their Quaker beliefs. The Quakers rejected inequality of

⁴⁰ See footnote p. 16 in Bartlett, *Colonial Records of Rhode Island*, Vol. I, 1636-63, Providence, 1856.

⁴¹ In *Documentary History of Rhode Island*, (Providence, 1916) Howard M. Chapin argues that the town permitted Verin full liberty to worship as he chose and took no action until his actions came under civil censure for civil disturbance and for violating the covenant of religious toleration. He concludes, "Verin persecuted his wife for her religious practices. The town did not persecute Verin for his religious practices, but punished him for his religious intolerance of others, particularly of his wife." p. 72.

⁴² Quoted in Chapin, *Documentary History of Rhode Island*, p. 94.

⁴³ Chad Brown, William Carpenter, Gregory Dexter, John Greene, Ezekiel Holliman, Thomas James, Thomas Olney, Sr., Richard Waterman, Stukely Wescott, William Wickenden, and Joshua Winsor.

men and women and accepted an active role for women in lay ministry and church governance. Roger Williams would later lament that the “weaker sex” are “too much inclin’d to Quakerism.”⁴⁴

Roger Williams clearly believed in a woman’s inferiority. He accepted an essentially subordinate role for women as one consigned by the Bible, arguing that even “though the Holy Scripture were silent, yet Reason and Experience tell us, that the Woman is the weaker Vessel, that she is more fitted to keep and order the House and Children, & [...] that the Lord hath given a covering of longer Hair to Women as a sign or teacher of covering Modesty and Bashfulness, Silence, and Retiredness; and therefore, [women are] not fitted for Manly Actions and Employments.”⁴⁵ He was equally staunch in his opposition to female prophesying, arguing that any woman who preached in public assemblies represented “open violence” against God’s way, a “business sober and modest Humanity abhor to think of.”⁴⁶ Despite these views, Williams would nonetheless support women’s full liberty of conscience. Even prior to Hutchinson’s official banishment, he arranged for her and her supporters to purchase land in what would come to be Portsmouth, Rhode Island, in March of 1638.⁴⁷ He supported Jane Verin’s right to liberty of conscience, even if it challenged her husband’s authority in May 1638. And it is clear that females did prophesy in Rhode Island after the Verin case. Edward Johnson, a critic of female religious activism, writes,

There were some of the female sexe who (deeming the Apostle Paul to be too strict in not permitting a roome [for women] to preach in the publique Congregation) taught notwithstanding [...] having their call to this office from an ardent desire of being famous [...] [and Hutchinson] the grand Mistress of them all [...] ordinarily prated every Sabbath day, till others, who thirsted after honour in the same way with her self, drew away her Auditors.⁴⁸

FISSURE WITHIN THE PURITAN CHURCH REGARDING WOMEN

In seventeenth-century England the status of married women was determined by *The Lawes and Resolutions of Womens Rights*, which put forward the doctrine of *feme couverte*, that is, that “after marriage, all will of the wife in judgement of the law is subject to the will of

⁴⁴ Benedict Arnold, son of William Arnold and a future governor of Rhode Island, would leave his gray horse to Quaker women to use in their preaching.

⁴⁵ Koehler, *Search for Power*, 306, and *George Fox Digg’d*, Appendix, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Koehler, *Search for Power*, 306, and *George Fox Digg’d*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ On February 19, 1638, two of Hutchinson’s supporters, John Coggeshall and William Aspinwall, wrote to Roger Williams regarding the availability of land. On March 7, 1638, nineteen men would form a civil compact and departed for Portsmouth, R.I., before Anne Hutchinson’s office banishment on March 22, 1638. Hutchinson herself left for Rhode Island 6 days later (March 28, 1638). *Records of Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, Providence, 1856, I, 52.

⁴⁸ Koehler, *Search for Power*, 324 and E. Johnson, *Wonder-working Providence*, p. 186.

the husband.”⁴⁹ The law, however, was unclear about the extent to which the will of the husband prevailed in the event of the wife's challenge to his authority. The editor of the seventeenth-century *The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights* argued that under English law, “castigation” was permissible, but he was uncertain as to the limits beyond which a husband's reasonable right to correct his wife became unlawful and unreasonable. Blackstone's *Commentaries*, published 1765-1769, were also ambiguous on this issue. He emphasized a husband's right to chastise his wife, again within reasonable bounds.⁵⁰

The Puritan Divines, too, were divided on this issue. The “Homily of the State of Matrimony” (1563) argued that women should patiently suffer anything their husbands did, but that husbands should under no circumstances beat their wives—this being the “greatest shame that can be [...] to him that doeth the deed.”⁵¹ Puritan Divines such as William Gouge argued that a husband should correct his wife only verbally, since to beat her would be like beating himself. In contrast, William Whately argued that in extreme cases, physical punishment might be necessary, although he cautioned against it being undertaken in anger in that “it seemeth too impious in him to do it and too servile in her to suffer it.”⁵²

Paradoxically, Puritan families and communities were patriarchal and hierarchical, but Puritan marriages stressed reciprocity and partnership.⁵³ Marilyn J. Westerkamp has argued that English sectarian groups firmly asserted the direct operation of the Holy Spirit on the individual, articulating a form of spiritual egalitarianism which Westerkamp deems “an equalizing faith irreconcilable with the hierarchy necessary to order seventeenth-century society.”⁵⁴ While the Puritan Divines agreed that women could experience the saving grace of God and thus attain church membership, they disagreed on the public role of women in Puritan congregations. In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, St. Paul admonishes,

Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in church.

⁴⁹ Anne Laurence, *Women in England, 1500-1760, A Social History*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 227.

⁵⁰ Susan Dwyer Amussen, “‘Being Stirred to Much Unquietness’: Violence and Domestic Violence in Early Modern England,” *Journal of Women's History*, 6.2 (Summer 1994), p. 71.

⁵¹ Quoted in Amussen, “Being Stirred to Much Unquietness,” pp. 71-72.

⁵² Quoted in Amussen, “Being Stirred to Much Unquietness,” p. 72. Amussen concludes that “the most generous interpretations of seventeenth-century patriarchal power never gave a husband more than a limited right to correct his wife's behavior through physical force. Such correction was to be used only for serious issues and was distinguished from beating, administered in anger for trivial faults.” p. 72.

⁵³ See John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New Haven, 1970) and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*, (New York, 1982) for an analysis of Puritan family dynamics and everyday life in the early colonial era.

⁵⁴ Marilyn J. Westerkamp, “Anne Hutchinson, Sectarian Mysticism, and the Puritan Order,” *Church History* 59.4 (December 1990), p. 488.

But St. Paul also encourages women to read the Bible and notes that women have a teaching function. Further, St. Paul insists that women were to share equally in the benefits of Christian belief and life.

According to Ann M. Little, “marriage created manhood in early New England.”⁵⁵ Some defended Verin for having exerted his God-given authority over his wife; perhaps this is the reason the residents of Providence did not censure Joshua Verin for his brutish carriage toward his wife. They clearly believed, however, that he had overstepped the boundaries of acceptable behavior and were willing to take actions to restore peace and harmony in the community by taking away his civil freedoms.

In 1646, the Reverend Thomas Edwards published in London the third edition of *The First and Second Part of Gangraena: or A Catalogue and Discovery of Many of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies, and Pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this Time*. The Epistle Dedicatory indicates his purpose was to explain the increase in unrest in English churches and to investigate complaints about “all sorts of illiterate mechanick Preachers, yea of Women and Boy Preachers.”⁵⁶ Many of the errors contained in his catalog focused on women who appeared to be actively involved in their congregations, particularly reports of women who prophesied and preached, not only to female assemblies,⁵⁷ but also to male audiences.⁵⁸ This edition of the catalog chronicled errors “within these four years last past,” indicating that female religious activism had continued in England. This religious activism was not confined to preaching and prophesying, but also included reports that some “honest understanding men” had accepted that “[...] ’tis lawfull for wives to give without their husbands consents something out of their husbands estates, for the maintenance of the Church and Ministers whereunto they belong.”⁵⁹ It is clear that the gendered norms of seventeenth-century English society were being challenged by religious women in both Old and New England.

Prophesying, an emotional and authoritative form of speech, also became a point of dispute for the Puritan ministry in New England. While all “Spirit” mystics of Puritanism believed that God lead people to salvation through the Holy Scripture, preaching, and providence, many also believed in the “possibility of a mystical, ecstatic union with God.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ann M. Little, “‘Shee Would Bump His Moudly Britch’: Authority, Masculinity, and the Harried Husbands of New Haven Colony, 1638-1670,” in *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*, Michael A. Bellesiles, ed., (New York, 1999), p. 45. She argues that in Puritan society duties and privileges were assigned to people according to their gender. “Men freed themselves of their fathers’ authority by assuming governorship over—and responsibility for—wives, and eventually over their children, servants, and slaves.” p. 45.

⁵⁶ Rev. Thomas Edwards, *The First and Second Part of Gangraena: or A Catalogue and Discovery of Many of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies, and Pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this Time*, (hereafter cited as *Gangraena*) 3rd ed, London, 1646, p. 1.

⁵⁷ *Gangraena*: in Part II, Edwards details the actions of a woman in Brasted and other neighboring towns, claiming “[she] doth meet other women, and after she hath preached, she takes the Bible and chuses [*sic*] a Text, some Verses in a Chapter, and sometimes a whole chapter, and expounds and applies to her auditors.” p. 87.

⁵⁸ *Gangraena*: in the Appendix, Edwards documents the actions of a women preacher by the name of Mrs. Attaway who was discovered preaching to “4 or 5 men.” (Appendix, pp. 113-14).

⁵⁹ *Gangraena*, Part I, pp. 31-32.

⁶⁰ Marilyn J. Westerkamp, “Puritan Patriarchy and the Problem of Revelation,” *Journal of Interdis-*

Anne Hutchinson, for example, is quoted as saying, "It is said, I will poure my spirit upon you Daughters, and they shall prophesie, & if God give mee a gift of Prophecy, I may use it..."⁶¹ John Winthrop later commented that the people "grew into so reverent an esteeme of her godlinesse, and spirituall gifts, as they looked at her as a Prophetesse, raised up of God for some great worke now at hand."⁶² In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, both Catholics and Protestants believed that devotion to God's will superseded obedience to a husband's authority. In fact, women were allowed to join churches separate from husbands' place of worship.⁶³ "If God commanded a Protestant woman to prophesy, she was required to do so, 'yea though the Husband should forbid her.'"⁶⁴ There is no evidence to support the idea that Jane Verin was called to prophesy; but certainly the facts support the contention that she was willing to challenge both the ministry in Massachusetts Bay and her husband's authority in following her religious conscience. Winthrop's journal notes that some of the Providence residents who voted to disenfranchise Joshua Verin believed that "if Verin would not suffer his wife to have her liberty, the church should dispose her to some other man, who would use her better."⁶⁵ Roger Williams letter to Winthrop asserts that Jane was willing "to stay and live with him or else where, where she many not offend, etc."⁶⁶ Except in the case of her religious conscience, she was evidently ready to continue to submit to his authority.

CONNECTIONS TO THE RHODE ISLAND CHARTER OF 1663

The commitment to complete liberty of conscience in Rhode Island is widely attributed to Roger Williams and John Clarke. Williams states quite clearly that his purpose in establishing a new community at Providence was to create a shelter for persons "distressed of Conscience."⁶⁷ He believed that "inforced uniformity is the greatest occasion of civill Warre [...] of the hypocrisie and destruction of millions of souls. The permission of other consciences and worships than the state professeth, only can [...] procure a firme and lasting peace."⁶⁸ He clearly rejected the Massachusetts Bay notion of enforced orthodoxy, calling persecution for the cause of conscience a "bloody tenet," that was "lamentably contrary to

ciplinary History, XXIII.3 (Winter 1993), p. 577.

⁶¹ Marilyn J. Westerkamp, "Puritan Patriarchy and the Problem of Revelation," p. 583.

⁶² Westerkamp, "Puritan Patriarchy and the Problem of Revelation," p. 583.

⁶³ Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630-1800* (Boston, 1998), p. 86.

⁶⁴ Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630-1800* (Boston, 1998), p. 56.

⁶⁵ *Journal of John Winthrop*, p. 277.

⁶⁶ Quoted in *Documentary History of Rhode Island*, p. 71.

⁶⁷ *Documentary History of Rhode Island*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Theodore Dwight Bozeman, "Religious Liberty and the Problem of Order in Early Rhode Island," *New England Quarterly*, 45.1 (March 1972): p. 62.

the doctrine of Christ Jesus the Prince of Peace.”⁶⁹ He had come to believe that “Forc’t Whorshpp stincks in Gods Nostrills.”⁷⁰

John Clark, too, shared these beliefs. He had arrived in Boston in 1637 and immediately became embroiled in the Antinomian controversy. For “peace sake” he moved to Acquidneck with the help of Roger Williams (“who for matter of conscience had not long before been exiled from the former jurisdiction”).⁷¹ In *Ill Newes from New-England*, John Clark challenges the magistracy in Massachusetts Bay Colony, particularly the way in which the colony attempted to enforce religious orthodoxy by persecuting persons of conscience. He describes his arrest and persecution by Massachusetts Bay magistrates during his visit there in 1651, noting that “the spirit by which they are led, would order the whole world.”⁷² He also lists laws from the Bay colony, which according to Clark, prove “that the Authority there established cannot permit men [...] freely to enjoy their understandings and consciences, nor yet to live [...] unless the can doe as they doe, or say as they say [...] or else say nothing.”⁷³ Clark challenges what he calls “the use of the civil sword” to enforce a religious order, arguing that it leads only to hypocrisy. The Massachusetts Bay colony had sentenced Baptists to banishment. Further, their beliefs, particularly about visible baptism, were considered blasphemous, a capital transgression punishable by death. He concludes by reiterating his opposition to religious intolerance:

But by outward force to seek to constrain, or restrain an others conscience in the worship of God, & doth presuppose one man to have dominion over another mans conscience, and is but to force servants, and worshippers upon the Lord [...] and is the ready way to make men dissemblers and hypocrites...⁷⁴

While in the Verin Case, Williams had upheld a women’s right to liberty of conscience, the 1663 Charter formally extends that liberty to all persons. In a letter to the Town of Warwick on New Year’s Day, 1665, Williams reflects on the success of John Clark’s mission to England to secure a charter from the King Charles II. He notes that the royal grant and charter bestows upon Rhode Islanders, “inestimable Jewells,” primary among

⁶⁹ Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent, of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, Vol. III, (Providence, 1867; reprint New York, 1963): p. 425. See also James P. Byrd Jr., *The Challenges of Roger Williams: Religious Liberty, Violent Persecution and the Bible*, Macon, Georgia, 2002. Byrd analyzes the Biblical sources of Williams’s conceptions of religious liberty and toleration.

⁷⁰ *The Bloody Tenent, of Persecution*, p. 470.

⁷¹ John Clarke, *Ill Newes from New-England: or A Narrative of New Englands Persecution Wherin is Declared that while old England is becoming new, New-England is become Old*. London: 1652, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Vol. I, 4th edition, Boston, 1852. (hereafter cited as *Ill Newes from New-England*). pp. 23-24.

⁷² *Ill Newes from New-England*, pp. 27-61. Clark was accused of preaching and baptizing on the Lord’s Day in a conventicler and having professed against the institution of the Church. He was imprisoned and ordered to be fined or whipped. Friends paid his fine.

⁷³ *Ill Newes from New-England*, p. 65.

⁷⁴ *Ill Newes from New-England*, p. 103.

them being peace and liberty.⁷⁵ The Charter includes the provision that “noe person within the sayd colonye [...] shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question for any differences in opinione in matters of religion.” As long as citizens behaved in a peaceable and orderly fashion, they could “freely and fully have and enjoye his and their owne judgments and consciences.”⁷⁶ Given Williams’ willingness to support Jane Verin’s liberty of conscience in 1638, it is no accident that the Charter of 1663 uses gender neutral language in codifying that liberty for all Rhode Islanders to enjoy. In the letter, Williams acknowledges with gratitude John Clarke’s respect for the peace and liberty of others as having been a determining factor in the royal decision to grant the charter, but he also goes on to express his belief that the “waight wch turn’d the scale with him was the truth of God [...] a just Libertie to all Mens Spirits in Spirituall matters together with the peace and prosperitie of the whole Colony.”⁷⁷

In *Fierce Communion: Family and Community in Early America*, Helena Wall concludes that “Colonial society began by deferring to the needs of the community and ended by deferring to the rights of the individual.”⁷⁸ In the case of Rhode Island and the problem of liberty of conscience, this is clearly true. Although the Verin case set no precedent for subsequent cases involving women’s rights in Rhode Island, it must be examined within the full context of events both in Old and New England. Very early in its development, the Verin Case forced Williams and other residents to confront the very issues which were perceived to be undermining the quiet and calm of England and the Massachusetts Bay colony, namely, the right to dissent with the Church of England, the issue of liberty of conscience, the differing positions of Puritanism on the issue of domestic violence, the place of women in Puritan social and religious life, and the role of civil government in responding to these developments.

AFTERWARD

Joshua Verin left New England and arrived in Barbados by September 1663. He appears on the register of St. James parish, Barbados, in December 1679. At the time he owned ten acres and eleven slaves. On October 7, 1694, he married Agnes Simpson at St. Michael’s in Barbados and died on March 15, 1695. As a landholder and member of the local congregation, Verin had clearly been accepted by the new congregational community there. Jane Verin, the cause of much unrest in the Verin family, disappears from the historical record after 1640.

⁷⁵ *Correspondence of Roger Williams*, I 1629-1653, pp. 534-41.

⁷⁶ Charter, 8 July 1663, *Records of Rhode Island*, II, 10.

⁷⁷ *Correspondence of Roger Williams*, I 1629-1653, p. 536.

⁷⁸ Helena M. Wall. *Fierce Communion: Family and Community in Early America* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. vii.