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Exploiting the Patriarchy: Privilege, Context, and Masculine Accomplishments

Elizabeth Iobst

While the word feminism was not coined until 1837, a colonial woman named Margaret Brent is commonly referred to as the first American feminist.¹ Additionally, it was not until approximately 1848, when a group of abolitionists assembled in Seneca Falls, New York, that the fight for equal rights for women truly began.² Typically, Margaret Brent is considered the first American feminist because she transcended archetypal gender boundaries by becoming an attorney, a successful businesswoman, and a land owner all while remaining unmarried. She was the first woman in the colonies to seek the right to vote and actually participated as a member in Maryland's General Assembly.³ Although she was denied the right to vote, her ability to speak in the General Assembly was significant given that women at that time were only allowed to attend general assembly sessions as spectators.⁴ Regardless of whether or not Margaret was actually the first American feminist, her accomplishments, independence, and position in her society are significant given the environment and society in which she lived.

While Margaret Brent was certainly an accomplished woman, it is paramount to recognize how privilege shaped her success. Margaret Brent was able to manipulate the patriarchy of her day to her advantage because of her privilege. Margaret was an educated, wealthy, white woman with a high standing in society.⁵ Her family and upbringing presented her privileged connections to men in the position of power. Margaret Brent's privilege allowed her to negotiate gender boundaries. Her accomplishments were all possible because of her unique access to this power. Moreover, Margaret's ability to secure roles typically limited to men of her

¹ Leslie F. Goldstein, "Early Feminist Themes in French Utopian Socialism: The St.-Simonians and Fourier," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 1 (Jan-Mar 1982): pg. 92-94. ; Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Fathers & Mothers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), pg. 281.

² History.com Staff, "Women's Suffrage," History, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage>.

³ Monica C. Witkowski, "Margaret Brent (ca. 1601-1671)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Brent_Margaret_ca_1601-1671.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

era contributed to her success. In this paper, I will argue that Margaret Brent earned her place in society by performing masculine gender roles and achieving success in those roles. By remaining unmarried, working in business, and representing men in court she earned the respect of the men in her community.⁶ Because Margaret Brent manipulated the patriarchy and transcended gender boundaries, she is considered the first American feminist. Additionally, this paper seeks to prove that society remembers Margaret Brent because she was a woman with privilege and the capacity to perform male gender roles.

Margaret Brent was born in 1601 in Gloucester, England. Her parents, Richard and Elizabeth Brent, had thirteen children, five of which were sons.⁷ Her father Richard Brent was the Lord of Admington and Lark Stoke, and her mother was a descendent of King Alfred and William the Conqueror.⁸ While there is little information on her childhood, Margaret was raised a Roman Catholic, and the Brent family was wealthy.⁹ Daughters of families similar to the Brent family typically lived a discreet life learning domestic skills such as needlework and cooking.¹⁰ Ann Baker, a British historian, writes “Daughters of such families usually lived quietly at home under the domination of their fathers until they married, at which time control of their lives and their fortunes was transferred to their husbands.”¹¹ Margaret Brent, however, received some education as she had the skills necessary to become a successful businesswoman and attorney.¹² Her family had close ties to the Calvert family, who were the proprietors of Maryland.¹³ This

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lois Green Carr, “Brent, Margaret (c. 1601-c. 1671),” in *Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Edward T. James (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) pg. 236.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Witkowski, “Margaret Brent (ca. 1601-1671).”

¹⁰ Ann Baker, “Margaret Brent (ca. 1601-ca. 1671),” *Maryland Leaflet No. 1*, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/002100/002177/html/brochure.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

connection would present Margaret Brent with noteworthy advantages and opportunities throughout her life. This connection eventually propelled Margaret into Maryland's General Assembly and would lead to Margaret asking for the right to vote. Margaret's connection to the Calvert family is what would give her the means necessary to manipulate the patriarchy and contributed to her legacy.

In 1638, Margaret Brent migrated to Maryland with her sister Mary Brent and her brother Giles Brent.¹⁴ Monica C. Witkowski, an independent scholar, suggests that their motivation to move may have been religious as Maryland offered religious freedom and England did not.¹⁵ Margaret's privilege and connections positioned her better off for success than most immigrants.¹⁶ Typically, immigrants had a difficult time establishing themselves in the community, finding paying jobs, and struggled to purchase land.¹⁷ Margaret's economic status, which she inherited from her family, enabled her to bring servants to Maryland. Because of her family status, her amount of servants, and because she had connections to the Calvert family, Margaret and her sister were granted 2,000 acres of land.¹⁸ Her brother Giles was also granted a significant amount of land; however, he was granted land on Kent Island where he developed his own large plantation.¹⁹ Cecil Calvert, a proprietor of Maryland and second Lord Baltimore, granted them this land on the same terms as the first settlers or "adventurers."²⁰ Becoming a significant land owner in Maryland was directly the result of Margaret's status, wealth, and

¹⁴ Witkowski, "Margaret Brent (ca. 1601-1671)."

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Baker, "Margaret Brent (ca. 1601-ca. 1671)."

¹⁷ "History of Immigration 1620-1783," *Immigration to the United States*, accessed April 29, 2018, <http://immigrationtounitedstates.org/548-history-of-immigration-1620-1783.html>.

¹⁸ Baker, "Margaret Brent (ca. 1601-ca. 1671)."

¹⁹ The Editors of Maryland Public Television, "Giles Brent (1600-1672)," *Exploring Maryland's Roots: Library*, accessed April 29, 2018, <http://mdroots.thinkport.org/library/gilesbrent.asp>.

²⁰ Carr, "Brent, Margaret (c. 1601-c. 1671)," pg. 236.

connections to powerful men. While the evidence is not clear cut, it appears the Cecil Calvert may have had more personal motives for granting Margaret and her sister land. Cecil Calvert may have been motivated to grant women land in order to develop Maryland and stimulate its economy.²¹ Additionally, because of Margaret's family and relationship to the Calvert family, Cecil Calvert would have been able to trust and depend on Margaret to develop land and report back to him.

While Margaret's privilege granted her the land, she needed to prove her merit by succeeding in traditional masculine gender roles in order to gain the respect of her male counterparts. Margaret needed to perform traditional masculine gender roles because Maryland was, and still is, a patriarchal society; therefore, the path to power and success was created using masculine gender roles and accomplishments. This required that Margaret remain unmarried. When they first arrived in Maryland, Margaret Brent and her sister Mary had to fight for their right to own land. At first, Margaret and Mary were denied the land Cecil Calvert granted them because they were single women.²² Then, the Brent sisters were told that they would be given the land contingent upon marrying within seven years. Finally, they were granted the land without any strings attached: however, there is no evidence explaining why they were granted this privilege.²³ One possible reason may have been Cecil Calvert's desire to develop Maryland. Even though Margaret would have faced significant pressure to wed, she remained unmarried

²¹ Maria A. Day, "Cecilius Calvert (1605-1675)," *Achieves of Maryland (Biographical Series)*, accessed April 19, 2019,

<http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/000100/000191/html/191extendedbio.html>.

²² Brent Breedin, "Margaret Brent: The First First Lady To Run For Office," *White House Weekly*, July 12, 1999, 3, Academic OneFile, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=coll33478&id=GALE%7CA55342050&v=2.1&it=r&sid=%20AONE&asid=1a26e99#>.

²³ Ibid.

and was able to become a landowner.²⁴ Similar to Queen Elizabeth the First, it appears that Margaret refused to wed in order to keep power. As long as she remained unmarried, Margaret remained in control of her own finances and property. If she had married, her husband would have been in control of her property.²⁵ In essence, by becoming “married” to their land, Margaret and Queen Elizabeth the First protected their power and right to their land. In her article “Margaret Brent: First American Suffragist”, Jennifer Chaplin suggests that Margaret may have even taken a vow of celibacy.²⁶ A vow of celibacy would have further enhanced her status as unmarried and independent. Along with her sister Mary, Margaret established an estate named Sister’s Freehold. On their estate, the Brent sisters grew tobacco and sold the indentures of servants they imported from England. Additionally, Margaret owned a mill on Kent Island that her brother watched over.²⁷

After establishing herself as a landowner, Margaret Brent began to establish herself as a successful businesswoman. She managed her own estate, finances and business affairs just like a man would do.²⁸ Margaret lent money to immigrants and appeared in court to collect her debts and manage her affairs. She would even represent other colonists, both men and women, in court including her brother Giles.²⁹ Her privilege as an established white woman gave her the resources necessary to establish her business. By remaining unmarried, Margaret was able to perform the gender roles of an elite white man which then allowed her to earn the respect of her male colleagues.

²⁴ Jennifer Chaplin Harris, “Margaret Brent: First American Suffragist,” *Off Our Backs* 28, no. 7 (1998): 9, accessed April 15, 2018, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20836140?pg-origsite=summon&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

²⁵ The Editors of Maryland Public Television, “Margaret Brent (1601-1671), *Exploring Maryland’s Roots: Library*, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://mdroots.thinkport.org/library/margaretbrent.asp>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Witkowski, “Margaret Brent (ca. 1601-1671).”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Margaret Brent's unique family life and connections with powerful males enabled her to establish herself in Maryland as a landowner, attorney, and businesswoman. Once she was a reputable woman in Maryland, Margaret was given even more power because of her relationship to the Calvert family. In 1645, a few years after civil war broke out in England in 1642, rebellion spread to Maryland.³⁰ Richard Ingle, a Protestant ship captain, led an attack on Catholic settlers in Maryland which caused the Governor of Maryland, Leonard Calvert, to flee to Virginia.³¹ This left the colony in a state of disorder until Governor Leonard Calvert returned a year later with mercenaries to regain control of the colony. Upon his return, Governor Leonard Calvert became severely ill.³² According to the "Deposition Regarding Leonard Calvert's Last Wishes", Governor Leonard Calvert declared Margaret his executrix six hours before his death.³³ This left Margaret in charge of his estate, debts, and other affairs.³⁴ He also appointed Thomas Greene as the next governor.³⁵ Due to Margaret's connections to powerful men, ability to perform masculine gender roles, and position in society as an established white woman, Leonard Calvert granted Margaret this additional power.

Once she was named Leonard Calvert's executrix, Margaret asked for the right to speak in the assembly and for the right to vote in Maryland's General Assembly.³⁶ In the "Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly January 1637/8-September 1664", it states, "Came Mrs

³⁰ The Editors of Maryland Public Television, "Margaret Brent (1601-1671)."

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Deposition Regarding Leonard Calvert's Last Wishes, naming Margaret Brent as his Executrix to "Take all, & pay all" GOVERNOR AND COUNCIL (Proceedings)", 1647-1651, Liber A, Folio 64, MSA S-1071-4, Accessed April 15, 2018, http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/002100/002177/images/sc5458_000014_000489-0001.jpg.

³⁴ The Editors of Maryland Public Television, "Margaret Brent (1601-1671)."

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly January 1637/8-September 1664," *Archives of Maryland Online*, Accessed April 15, 2018, <http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000001/html/am1--215.html>.

Margaret Brent and requested to have vote in howse for her selfe and voice also for that att the last Court 3rd Jan: it was ordered that the said Mrs Brent was to be looked upon and received as his Lordships Attorney.”³⁷ Margaret was not granted the right to vote. The records show that, “The Gour [governor] denied that the said Mrs Brent should hace any vote in the howse. And the said Mrs Brent protested agst all proceedings in this pfit Assembly, unlesse she may be pnt. And have vote afores.”³⁸ When her request was denied, Margaret Brent responded with anger.³⁹

While Margaret did not receive the right to vote, her request represented the first time a woman asked for the right to vote in the colonies.⁴⁰ Margaret asking for the right to vote is arguably the most impactful event of her legacy. However, this section of the proceedings show that Margaret was motivated to ask for the right to vote because of her recent appointment as Lord Baltimore’s executrix not because of or in spite of her gender.⁴¹ This suggests that Margaret Brent was not an actual feminist fighting for equality for woman. Instead, it suggests that Margaret was a shrewd and independent women looking to improve her life and increase her power. These proceedings demonstrate an argument against Margaret Brent being considered the first feminist and contribute more evidence to the argument that her legacy is based on her privilege.

During Margaret’s term as executrix, the colony was in a time of crisis. The mercenaries she hired began to demand their pay and threaten the colony.⁴² The Calvert estate’s inability to pay off his debt to these mercenaries forced Margaret to develop a plan to prevent a mutiny. First, she imported corn from Virginia to feed them because Maryland was in the midst of a

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly January 1637/8-September 1664.”

³⁹ Norton, *Founding Fathers & Mothers*, pg. 281.

⁴⁰ Harris, “Margaret Brent: First American Suffragist.”

⁴¹ Norton, *Founding Fathers & Mothers*, pg. 281.

⁴² Ibid.

serve corn shortage.⁴³ She then exercised her power as Leonard Calvert's executrix to claim the power of attorney Leonard Calvert held as the Lord Proprietor.⁴⁴ With this power, Margaret was able to sell the Proprietor's cattle to raise enough money to settle the remaining debts. Once Margaret pacified the mercenaries, many became settlers in Maryland and the rest dispersed throughout the colonies.⁴⁵ Margaret Brent proved to be a wise choice as executrix as she was able to subdue their aggression by acting as a poised, courageous, patient and diplomatic man.⁴⁶ This suggest that positive and powerful attributes were associated with masculinity rather than femininity.

Margaret Brent's ability to act in the role of a courageous and diplomatic man is why the mercenaries listened and reasoned with her. In the "Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly April 2-21 1649", Margaret is praised for her ability to "pacify" the individuals during the mutiny.⁴⁷ The proceedings report, "for the Collonys safety at that time in her hands then in any mans else in the whole Province" which emphasizes Margaret's ability to transcend gender. While the general assembly recognized she was a woman, they also recognized that she was able to perform in the gender role of a man. They even go as far as saying that Margaret was able to act better than "any mans in the whole Province."⁴⁸ The proceedings continue to say, "for the Soldiers would never have treated anyother with that Civility and respect and though they were even ready at several times to run into mutiny yet she still pacified them."⁴⁹ In her book, *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*, Mary

⁴³ Carr, "Brent, Margaret (c. 1601-c. 1671)," pg. 236.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly April 2-21 1649," *Archives of Maryland Online*, Accessed April 15, 2018, <http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000001/html/am1--239.html>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Beth Norton suggests, “Because of her status as an English gentlewomen and the respect with which she was regarded in the province; therefore, Margaret Brent commanded even greater deference from the soldiers than a man of comparable rank would have.”⁵⁰ The soldiers recognized Margaret was a woman; however, they respected her because she was established, powerful, and independent.

Even though her actions prevented mutiny, Margaret Brent faced repercussions because she did not seek Cecil Calvert’s permission before selling the cattle.⁵¹ He wrote a letter expressing his disapproval of her actions.⁵² Surprisingly, the General Assembly of Maryland came to Margaret’s defense. The “Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly April 2-21 1649” state,

“we verily Believe se hath not then we conceive from that time she rather deserved favour and thanks from your Honour for her so much Concurring to the publick safety then to be justly liable to all those bitter invectives you have been pleased to Express against her Hereupon we cannot Chuse but wonder why your Lordship should write so tartly against People who all involved under the Censure of your Lordships Letter for protesting against all the Laws in which which were pretended to be in force and enacted by Leo Calvert Esqr deceased our late Governor at the last Assembly held by him afore his death...”⁵³

This section from the proceedings demonstrates how Margaret Brent gained the respect of her male counterparts. While Margaret’s privilege as a white, wealthy women gave her the resources and ability to be an unmarried landowner, businesswoman, and attorney, she had to reinforce her

⁵⁰ Norton, *Founding Fathers & Mothers*, pg. 286.

⁵¹ The Editors of Maryland Public Television, “Margaret Brent (1601-1671).”

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

position in society by performing successfully in masculine gender roles. In this insistence, it was through her masculine accomplishment of pacifying soldiers threatening mutiny which in turn saved the colony. This accomplishment, along with others, allowed Margaret to reinforce her position in society as an independent and authoritative woman. While Margaret's privilege established her position in society, it was her ability to perform in traditional male gender roles that secured this position.

The extent to which Margaret performed masculinity is revealed when her life is compared to her brother and sister's experiences in Maryland. As previously mentioned, Giles Brent had a large plantation on Kent Island.⁵⁴ Giles played a significant role in developing Maryland as he served as a judge, councilor, treasurer, burgess, and Commander of Kent Island.⁵⁵ Giles had a close relationship with Governor Leonard Calvert and was a political and an economic leader.⁵⁶ He married an Indian princess in an attempt to gain more land and power; however, this move would be his demise. The Calvert family felt threatened by this marriage and would eventually force Giles to move to Virginia.⁵⁷ There is no information available on Mary Brent besides the facts that she was a part of the Brent family, traveled to Maryland, and lived with her sister Margaret.

Margaret's life did not differ greatly from her brother's life as they were both successful business people, owned land, and were eventually ostracized from Maryland because they became too powerful. Additionally, Giles married in order to gain power while Margaret remained unmarried to maintain her power. The lack of information on Mary Brent's life in

⁵⁴ The Editors of Maryland Public Television, "Giles Brent (1600-1672)."

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

comparison to the relatively large and readily available information on Margaret and Giles further suggests that Margaret was able to perform masculinity. The amount of primary sources and information on Margaret suggest that the society in which she lived valued her accomplishments just like they did Giles's accomplishments. The same cannot be said for her sister Mary. By comparing these three siblings, it becomes increasingly apparent that Margaret Brent had the capacity to perform the masculine gender which facilitated her success.

In summary, Margaret Bent's success in a male dominated society was strongly influenced by factors beyond her innate abilities to succeed. She was born into a wealthy family that had unique access to powerful male individuals who created exclusive opportunities not offered to other females in the society of her time. It is because of this privilege that Margaret Brent became a successful businesswoman, attorney, landowner and was the first woman to ask for the right to vote in the colonies. Society remembers Margaret as a progressive woman and as the first American feminist because of her accomplishments in defying traditional gender roles. Therefore, Margaret Brent is remembered because she was a wealthy, white woman who had connections to powerful men in Colonial America and had the capacity to perform gender. Understanding and appreciating the role of gender performance and privilege in the early Atlantic world reveals that our country and society was established on a bias, patriarchal structure. Even today, our culture perpetuates this structure as white men are still favored over women and people of color. By understanding the origins of our prejudiced society, we can better understand how and why we need eradicate the inherent bias built into our society.

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