

Conflict and Change on a Cultural Frontier: The Rise of Magdalena Valleau, Land Rioter

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On August 5, 1746 a club-wielding crowd of approximately forty people confronted tenant farmer Edward Jeffers at his home on the Ramapo Tract, Bergen County, New Jersey. It was another in the endless confrontations over property rights which defined public life in the colony. The mob threatened “to club him out of possession,” seized some of his land, and demanded that he take a lease from their leader for the remainder of his holdings. Jeffers, “being apprehensive they would Execute their Threats against him, and turn him and his Family out of doors,” complied with the crowd’s leader.¹ There was nothing unusual about this incident in the context of the time. Disputes over the ownership of over 600,000 acres in northern New Jersey led to decades of collective violence in the mid-eighteenth century. What was unusual about this incident was that the crowd was composed almost entirely of Dutch-speaking people and was headed by a women, Magdalena Valleau. Between 1740 and 1752 she led disgruntled landholders in an ongoing and often violent struggle against the Board of Proprietors of East New Jersey for ownership of the 50,000-acre Ramapo Tract. She was the only woman to persistently lead crowd actions in the disjointed struggles for ownership of the American countryside which raged between 1740 and 1840. Her life thus provides us with a unique tool for understanding the cultural aspects of these conflicts.

Microhistory offers a way to extract meaning from the scattered, largely legal sources through which we know of Valleau’s career as an agrarian leader. Microhistory is the reconstruction of single events or individual lives in order to examine broader patterns of change in the past. Borrowing methodologies from the social sciences, microhistorians have used often fragmented records to reconstruct the meaning of hunting shirts in revolutionary Virginia, the intellectual cosmos of a sixteenth-century Italian miller, the social origins of Captain Bligh’s angry words on the *Bounty*, and the theology of a street corner preacher in antebellum New York City.² By inserting themselves into their subject’s lives, microhistorians have been able to show the range of possibilities and problems faced by individuals in moments of change.

Magdalena Valleau’s reconstituted life is an example of a small story that reveals previously unknown characteristics of seemingly familiar periods in the past. Her public behavior illuminates the interconnection between two powerful currents of change in the first British empire: rejection of the powerful tendency towards cultural homogenization which early American historians call Anglicization, and violent resistance to the efforts of regional gentries to

gain legal control of millions of acres on the empire's physical peripheries. And what we know of her private actions illustrates how the middle colonies' broad ethnic and religious diversity encouraged people to seek advantage by changing group identity.³ Her choice of a Dutch persona in a rapidly anglicizing world suggests the advantages that an ethnic allegiance offered propertied women. That identity helps explain her success as a crowd leader in the otherwise masculine-dominated phenomenon of eighteenth-century rural unrest.

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Magdalena Valleau arrived in New York in 1702 as a French girl named Madeline Fauconier. Over a period of several decades she refashioned herself into a Dutch woman. This transformation was representative of broader but poorly understood patterns of personal and group refashioning which became evident in the ethnically heterogenous middle colonies in the eighteenth century as some sought advantage in transforming their ethnic and/or religious identities. The microhistorian's methods allow us to tease an understanding of this transformation from the fragmented records which record Valleau's life. In her choice of religious allegiance, legal practices, residence, and finally her name, Valleau showed a decided tendency towards a Dutch persona. This refashioning unintentionally helped set her on the course towards leadership of the Ramapo Tract's agrarian rioters.

Valleau's father, Peter Fauconier, was a royal official of some importance in the administration of New York and New Jersey's royal governor Lord Cornbury, an aggressive anglicizer appointed to his twin post in 1702.⁴ More than likely, Fauconier was a refugee from France, where Louis XIV's Revocation of the Edict of Nantes had caused Protestants to flee the realm, and the Frenchman had managed to attach himself to Cornbury's extended household. Fauconier should logically have embraced English institutions and the English language so championed by Cornbury, but instead his family initially held tight to their French identity. They joined New York City's French (Reformed) church rather than the state-endorsed Church of England, and Madeleine Fauconier married a Frenchman named Peter Valleau.⁵

Like several other subordinates of the controversial Cornbury, Fauconier speculated in land. In 1709, he headed up a company of French and Dutch investors who bought property in Bergen County along the unsettled New York-New Jersey border, about thirty-five miles west of New York City.⁶ Non-English groups like the one headed by Fauconier had been leaving the area around Manhattan since the failure of Leisler's Rebellion (1689-1691). Some exited in response to overpopulation, and others fled the Anglicization of New York that seemed to intensify each year.⁷ Fauconier's choice of Bergen County

lands suggests a growing attachment to Dutch culture: Bergen County was the most “Dutch” county in New Jersey, with a predominately Dutch-speaking population.⁸

The Fauconier-Valleau family began to visibly recast themselves as Dutch after the Ramapo lands were purchased. A sparse record of shifting institutional allegiances suggests the tensions and doubts this recasting raised in the family. In 1716, the Valleaus had their eldest son baptized in the Hackensack, New Jersey Dutch Reformed church, but subsequently two daughters were baptized in New York’s French church.⁹ This may have merely reflected circumstances, or it may be that the family self-consciously struggled with their ethnic and religious identity at that time.

The family’s permanent removal to the New Jersey countryside after 1720 resolved their doubts about assimilating into the Dutch subculture of the middle colonies. In 1730, Fauconier donated property to the Ramapo community to establish a Dutch Reformed church, and the congregation rewarded him with “seats for himself and wife for a continual possession for themselves and their heirs.”¹⁰ It was a signal decision; Fauconier and his family could have tried to establish a French church, or founded an Anglican church, as a number of leading local men of all ethnicities across northern New Jersey were doing in the same decade. But the family took neither of these viable options. At a time when the Anglicization of the first British empire was accelerating, this family laid down their native ethnicity and rejected an English identity in order to embrace Dutch institutions. They continued along this path well after the Revolution. We know that in the 1780s, members of the Valleau (Vallo) family (probably Magdalena Valleau’s granddaughter) belonged to a Dutch Reformed congregation.¹¹

The transformation of the Fauconier family’s ethnic identity from French to Dutch followed a recognizable pattern, one that should temper contemporary perceptions of rampant Anglicization. There was a considerable “French” element among the original Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam, and a recent study suggests that these early Huguenot immigrants tended to readily assimilate into the Dutch population.¹² When the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes brought more French refugees to New York City in the late 1680s, the majority of these refugees who married outside their ethnic group took Dutch spouses.¹³ French mates evinced a strong tendency to accept Dutch customs, particularly inheritance and other property-related practices.¹⁴ While these trends began to wane as the pace of Anglicization increased in the eighteenth century, Valleau’s adherence to the older pattern of assimilation suggests that not all elements of the middle colonies’ non-English population saw an advantage in a British identity.

Assimilation into the Dutch culture offered advantages to all members of the Fauconier-Valleau family, but in comparison to English practices, the

traditions of the Netherlands offered women particular benefits in public life. A complex web of Dutch inheritance customs and popular beliefs about gender roles permitted propertied women to participate in community matters and to vigorously protect their property rights.¹⁵ Specifically, the Dutch inheritance practice known as *Boedelhouderschap* dictated that the surviving spouse should receive all of the property in a marriage as opposed to English widows' normal third.¹⁶ Over eighty percent of Dutch husbands in the New York area who wrote wills between 1664 and 1725 followed Dutch custom and named their wives as their sole heirs. Dutch parents, unlike their English counterparts, tended to divide their property evenly among their children regardless of their gender, thus giving single Dutch women more property.¹⁷ These customs helped create a greater sphere of acceptable public activity for Dutch propertied women in New York City and its environs. By the 1740s, *Boedelhouderschap* and the related customs would effectively make Magdalena Valleau the Ramapo Tract's largest property holder and legitimated her leadership of local yeomen in their conflict with the East Jersey Proprietors.

No doubt by the time she was an adult, Magdalena Valleau knew that some Dutch women enjoyed greater freedom in property matters than their English counterparts. As a child and young woman in New York City, she would have seen a number of vigorous Dutch women running trading houses, handling family business, and otherwise asserting themselves in a manner distinct from the females in New York's ethnically polyglot population. Mary Spraat Provoost, the widow of "Ready-Money" Provoost, ran his successful merchant house after his death. Ironically, she later took as a second husband James Alexander, the leader of the East Jersey Proprietors with whom Magdalena Valleau would later quarrel.¹⁸ Other assertive Dutch women living in the New York area included Alida Schuyler Van Renssealaer, a widow who operated her own trading enterprises in Albany and New York.¹⁹

Had Valleau been growing up a generation later, these role models among the Anglo-Dutch elite would not have existed. The public careers, or rather non-careers, of the daughters of Alida Schuyler Van Renssealaer Livingston demonstrate the degree to which the Anglicization of the Dutch elite had progressed by the mid-eighteenth century. While Alida's daughter Margaret traded occasionally during the long absences of her Scottish soldier-husband Samuel Vetch, she did not establish a trading house and was active in commerce only sporadically, and her sister Joanna never entered business.²⁰ The powerful pull of the cosmopolitan English core, the extension of trading networks, and the intermarriage of the Dutch elite with the English-speaking gentry fractured the Dutch community. By 1750, elite women living in the trading centers of Manhattan and Albany and on the estates of the Hudson River Valley embraced anglicized gender roles even as residents of the countryside like Magdalena Valleau continued to live in Dutch ways.

The transformation of Valleau's Christian name suggests she willingly created a Dutch persona for herself, and demonstrates how shreds of evidence read in the context of a person's life can reveal conscious decisions. While the earliest records identify her as the French "Madelaine," by 1740 proprietary records repeatedly refer to by the very Dutch/Germanic "Magdalena." The Board of Proprietors' efforts to anglicize her name to "Mary" in the early 1740s failed,²¹ and in 1747 she signed her name "Magdalen" to a petition against the Board.²² While that name still has a certain French character, the trajectory was clearly toward a Dutch identity.

Valleau's choice of institutional allegiance and practices further illustrate her self-conscious identification as Dutch. She continued to attend the Paramus Dutch Reformed church (where preaching was in Dutch) until her death. She purchased a plot in the burying ground at the Paramus church for herself and her family, a cemetery which became known as the Valleau Cemetery.²³ Certainly, Dutch inheritance customs worked to Valleau's advantage. Neither her husband's nor her father's complete will has survived, but the records of the East New Jersey Proprietors indicate that the Board regarded Valleau as the primary heir to her father's 3,400 acres and repeatedly referred to her aged and infirmed father's property as if they were her own.²⁴ Adhering to Dutch traditions, Valleau's own will divided her estate evenly between her four sons and her two daughters.²⁵ Several male members of the Valleau family were of legal age when she came to dominate family business matters in the 1740s, but she remained firmly in charge.²⁶

The overwhelmingly Dutch character of the Ramapo community helped cement Valleau's attachment to her Dutch persona. All seventy-six Ramapo household heads in the mid-1740s had Dutch, German, or French surnames and spoke Dutch.²⁷ While the lack of taxation records inhibits the examination of the Ramapo Tract's social structure, a list of homesteads compiled in the 1740s suggests a society in which differences in the distribution of wealth were clearly visible. A Board survey in the 1740s of the households on the tract (which the Board hoped to force into tenancy) indicates that these farmers lived on lots which ranged from fifty to 3,400 acres: twenty six lived on lots of less than 100 acres; thirty three lived on lots of between 100 and 200 acres; eight lived on lots of between 200 and three hundred acres; one had a farm of between 400-500 acres; and four had farms of over 500 acres, with Valleau controlling at least 3,400 acres by 1740.²⁸

The cultural ways of the Netherlands and New Netherlands continued to influence community life across largely Dutch Bergen County (in which the Tract lay) throughout the eighteenth century.²⁹ A variety of Dutch customs, such as the celebrations of Paas (the Dutch festival of Easter) and Whitsunday (the day of Christ's post-resurrection appearance to the apostles), played important roles in the ritual life of the New Jersey Dutch population.³⁰

Magdalena Valleau lived her life among these Dutch farmers, bore six children, watched her husband die, coped with her aged father's infirmity, and eventually found herself leading crowd actions.³¹

In the eighteenth century, linguistic, religious, and institutional allegiance played as important, if not a more important role, in fixing identity as did birth. Because so many institutions in the middle colonies were new or unstable, because so many different groups lived in proximity to one another, movement between the institutional networks which established individual and collective identity was easier than might be expected. Studies of other independent women living in the middle colonies suggest that more than one took advantage of the plurality of religious and ethnic groups to choose a particular social identity which offered a greater vehicle to freedom.³² A recent study of New Jersey's eighteenth-century Scottish population demonstrates how they altered their religious affiliations in order to construct a distinctly Scottish ethnic identity.³³ For some people, the maintenance of Dutch customs became an act of political defiance against a rapidly advancing English culture. In Valleau's case, that moment of defiance came in the early stages of the struggle against the Eastern Board of Proprietors for control of the Ramapo Tract.

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The property conflicts that led Magdalena Valleau to become a crowd leader grew from a much-disputed transformation in property holding patterns in the British Atlantic world which worked decidedly against the interests of independent smallholders and tenants. Financial interests, created in part by the desire to emulate the customs of the English aristocracy, encouraged regional gentries to remake property-holding patterns on the empire's physical margins, often in the face of fierce opposition from small farmers of different religions and ethnicities. The effort of Protestant gentry to enclose common land in parts of southern Ireland encouraged the nocturnal crowd activities of "Whiteboys," secret societies of largely Catholic tenant farmers which smashed fences to thwart the ambitions of their genteel opponents. In Ulster and parts of Scotland, "Oak Boys" resisted the gentry's efforts to change the conditions of tenancy or practices of common usage.³⁴ And in Britain's American colonies, a number of eighteenth-century regional elites tried to use seventeenth-century grants made by the House of Stuart to gain control of vast portions of the countryside. They soon found themselves locked in violent conflict with culturally distinct armed yeomen who were determined to resist efforts to force them off the land or into tenancy.³⁵

The Board of Proprietors of East New Jersey were among the first of these aggressive regional gentries to act. They used Stuart grants to claim to large tracts of land, over 600,000 acres, including the Ramapo Tract. The resulting

disputes were legally complex, but the crux of the matter was simple: the resident Board claimed that all legitimate property titles in East New Jersey derived from the grants made by the English crown in the seventeenth century to the colony's original proprietors. Thousands of farmers living on the contested lands claimed ownership via alternative sources.³⁶ The particular issue at Ramapo was the legality or illegality of Fauconier's Company's 1709 purchase of the 50,000-acre tract. The company had acquired the property from Native Americans and an agent of the so-called English faction of the East Jersey Board of Proprietors,³⁷ non-resident shareholders based in London.³⁸ The resident, so-called Scottish faction of the Board refused to legitimate sales made by the English faction, and challenged the legal validity of Fauconier's purchase as early as 1714.³⁹ However, the Eastern Board's general weakness at that time prevented it from nullifying the sale, and the issue temporarily died.⁴⁰

The controversy resurfaced in October 1725, when the Eastern Board, by then dominated by a vigorous young Scottish lawyer named James Alexander, began internal discussions to determine how best to wrest control of the Ramapo Tract from Fauconier's Company.⁴¹ Alexander's world view and that of his fellow Board members was profoundly shaped by the social and cultural model of cosmopolitan London and the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, as well as by their Scottish origins. Anxious to emulate English aristocrats, immersed in a political literature which celebrated landed wealth over commercial activity, the gentlemen proprietors were determined to build large estates in the countryside.⁴² In 1739, Alexander opened unsuccessful negotiations with Fauconier's Company to settle the question of ownership. A year later, the Board demanded that the settlers on the Ramapo Tract take short-term (three-year) leases or vacate their homes—a demand most refused.⁴³ It was on this legal stage that the dramas of Magdalena Valteau's public life were played out.

Like the conflict between the Catholic "Whiteboys" and the largely Protestant aristocracy of Ireland, the conflicts in the American countryside pitted farmers trying to hold on to their ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities as well as their property rights against a gentry who, regardless of ethnic origins, saw cosmopolitan England as their primary cultural model. We can see these forces at play on the Ramapo Tract as Magdalena Valteau and the other residents of Ramapo resisted the efforts of an anglicizing gentry to turn Dutch farmers into English tenants.

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Using endless rounds of fruitless negotiations and selectively applied mob violence, Magdalena Valteau frustrated the gentry's efforts to secure control of the Ramapo Tract from 1740 until 1752. Valteau's aggressive assertion of her

property rights was very much in keeping with the Dutch property and inheritance traditions that encouraged propertied women to act assertively in public life. As chief negotiator in a heated dialogue between two formal institutions (Fauconier's Company and the Board of Proprietors), Valleau forced the Board to deal with her as an equal in business matters. Her material status as a large property holder in her local community clearly informed her actions, but she cannot be understood outside her cultural and temporal context.

On April 21, 1740, Valleau began her defense of her property holdings in a meeting with proprietor James Alexander. "By direction of her [elderly] father" recalled Alexander, Valleau came to the Board of Proprietors and "expressed a great inclination to compromise the matter of the Romopock [Ramapo] lands and desired to know what terms he, the said Alexander, thought could be given."⁴⁴ Alexander's use of the term "great inclination" is suggestive; Valleau continually led the Board to believe that she would be willing to reach an agreement if only all of the details could be worked out, but such a compromise never materialized. On June 22, 1741 Alexander again met with Valleau, who arrived only to declare that "she said she found it impractical to make up any account according to the matter of compromise before proposed, for that her father had lost his memory."⁴⁵ This convenient memory lapse bought her and her family two more months, and another round of confrontations with Alexander.

The exchanges between Alexander and Valleau became heated as each side stubbornly refused to give ground. In further negotiations, Valleau demanded 5,000 acres for her impaired father (knowing, of course, that she was the sole heir) at the symbolic rent of one peppercorn per year; that past rents from a portion of Ramapo be paid to her family; and that seven tenants be given up to her father in exchange for her family convincing the other investors in the Company not to sue the Board.⁴⁶ Alexander's reaction to these demands reveals the tense, eyeball to eyeball character of the negotiations. "The said Alexander," recorded the secretary of the Board, "says that upon hearing those high and growing demands of Mrs. Valleau so very different from the first proposition reported to this Board at last sitting . . . It was not without putting some restraint on himself that he could keep his temper, but that he only said that as to the past rents and tenants, he could not give her any hopes that the Proprietors would concede any part of them."⁴⁷ In the four dry volumes which comprise the Board's published records; this is perhaps the only account of someone becoming upset. Alexander's anger suggests the degree to which Valleau had momentarily thrown him on the defense.

Valleau's ability to position herself rhetorically between two extremes allowed her to keep the Board on the defensive in the Ramapo matter. At meetings held in 1742 (during which the Board again remarked on "the

unreasonableness" of her demands), Valleau agreed to abandon the rest of Fauconier's Company in exchange for concessions to her family.⁴⁸ The following year, Valleau "declared she was willing to stand to the agreement formerly made with Mr. Alexander & Mr. Ashfield [another member of the Board] and to execute it" as soon as she could determine that the other settlers would not trouble her father. She "said that by herself & children, she had encouraged the people to comply with the Proprietors terms . . . and that she refused to join with Barbarie, who pressed hard to stand suit against the Proprietors."⁴⁹ By juxtaposing herself and her family against the supposedly militant Barbarie, Valleau encouraged the Proprietors to believe that they were dealing with the most moderate and reasonable element on the Ramapo Tract, that they (the Proprietors) had reached the best deal possible, and that further efforts to secure the lands would only lead to more conflict.

As the Board soon learned, Valleau had no intention of being "reasonable" with them. When the Board's agent John Forman arrived at her Ramapo home to finalize the deal, he discovered that what had apparently been settled was indeed still subject to renegotiation.⁵⁰ After arguing with Valleau for some time over what lands she was to have under the agreement, they parted company squabbling, the matter still unsettled.⁵¹ This sort of Fabian strategy allowed Valleau to maintain leadership of her followers in Fauconier's Company, to retain control of the Company's lands, and to manipulate the Board into believing that a settlement might be near at hand.

Valleau and other members of Fauconier's Company used collective violence as an important part of their strategy for retaining control of Ramapo. With Valleau dragging her feet in negotiations with the Board, small crowds drawn from Fauconier's Company terrorized a number of newly planted proprietor tenants on the contested lands. Mob actions began in April 1740, when seven men and three women from Fauconier's Company (one of whom was almost certainly Magdalena Valleau) attacked a newly settled proprietor tenant on the tract. After repeated threats against his person and property,⁵² a mob went to the home of tenant Isaac Brower, "forcible entered into his house . . . and cast him, family and goods out of doors and pulled down his house."⁵³ This incident, the first that we know of in New Jersey where women took direct action in defense of property title, signalled the beginning of rioting on the Ramapo Tract which would continue sporadically for decades to come.

Civil life on the tract deteriorated in the wake of this dispossession as members of Fauconier's Company turned violently on the Board's tenants and clients.⁵⁴ A report from an agent the following spring sketches some aspects of the intimidation suffered by the Board's Ramapo tenants. "Mr. Alexander and Mr. Ashfield, to whom the affairs of Romopock was referred, made report to this Board," concerning the state of the Ramapo Tract in June 1742, "that on the 9th of April last William Ramsay [a Board agent] came and acquainted

said Alexander that Isaac Bogart, one of the people who have accepted of leases from this Board, said that he would not accept of this lease, nor pay any rent." Bogart had probably been swayed by the treatment received by his neighbor, Gerrit Van Blercum, whom "Josias Valleau [obviously a relative, probably the son, of Magdalena Valleau] has abused," and who received further abuse from Sias Valleau, to the point that "he is almost blind."⁵⁵ Others suffered in the same manner. In 1742 and 1743 Fauconier's Company launched a new series of attacks against Board tenants. For a time these assaults focused on a small community of free black tenant farmers which had established itself on the Ramapo Tract with the Board's aid. Victims of kidnappings, beatings, and dispossessions, these farmers pleaded with the Board for help, but the great landholders were unable to protect them,⁵⁶ declaring in frustration that they would "soon lose all our credit and the ground we have got" in Bergen County if they did not stop this effort to sweep their tenants from the countryside.⁵⁷

When collective violence began, Valleau's name, or the name of a member of her family, figured prominently in each incident.⁵⁸ But, except for the initial assault against Isaac Brower, she remained behind the scenes as her kin and neighbors assaulted the Board's tenants. The Board believed that Valleau inspired the rioting, and certainly by the end of 1742 they knew through hard experience that Valleau was the effective leader of Fauconier's Company. The rounds of negotiation had forced the Board to recognize her equality in property matters, an equality which grew from her behavior as a Dutch woman.

In the mid-1740s the struggle for Ramapo entered a kind of static netherworld. Dutch custom legitimated Magdalena Valleau's leadership of Fauconier's Company in round after round of fruitless negotiations with the Board. Simultaneously, she covertly encouraged the campaign of violence against the Proprietors' tenants. However, this harassment failed to break the Board's spirit and its members refused to surrender their legal claims to the Ramapo Tract. The stalemate was temporarily broken when many New Jerseyans beyond Ramapo, angered by the great gentry's renewed property claims across the colony, rose in armed revolt. In that moment of crisis Magdalena Valleau began openly organizing and leading crowd actions against the Boards' clients, perhaps drawing on the heritage of Dutch mum-culture leaders in the Netherlands, who traditionally used their social contacts to organize actions to defend their communities.

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While throughout early modern Europe women participated in urban crowd actions, they seem to have played a much less significant role in direct action in the eighteenth-century American countryside. By placing Valleau within her cultural and temporal context, her seemingly unique role as an

agrarian leader becomes comprehensible and helps us understand why agrarian unrest was so overtly masculine in much of British North America. The political customs of Dutch culture, unknown outside the middle colonies, empowered her directly or indirectly to organize large crowd actions in defense of her property and community.

In the Netherlands, older widowed women often used their control of neighborhood kinship/affinity networks to mobilize crowds in defense of their community. These women (called *mum-culture* leaders by a leading historian of the subject) led various extralegal actions in the Netherlands, including tax, religious, and political riots as well as the food rioting which historians of the period have come to associate with women.⁵⁹ Of the thirty-eight known tax-related riots which occurred in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, at least ten had women leaders. Women participated in large numbers in Orangist riots in 1653, 1672, 1747, and 1782. In the especially turbulent year of 1672, women played leading roles in at least eleven of the seventeen known political demonstrations.⁶⁰ Traditions of feminine defiance were part of the oral culture of the society, passed from mothers to daughters. Well into the eighteenth century, Dutch-language pamphlets occasionally celebrated these political women.⁶¹ After 1745, Magdalena Valteau acted much like a *mum-culture* leader, organizing and openly heading crowd actions in defense of community property rights. Whether she knew of these traditions herself is unclear, but they may well have prepared her followers to accept her leadership in their agrarian conflict. And her unique role as a crowd organizer highlights the overwhelmingly masculine and British character of the wave of rural unrest which swept eighteenth-century America.

By the mid-1740s, the Board's legal maneuvering against various groups of yeomen land claimants had created a zone of contested ownership of over 600,000 acres spread across much of northern New Jersey. These areas included the 400,000-acre Elizabeth Town Tract, which stretched across the northern portion of the colony; tens of thousands of acres in the interior of Newark Township; the 30,000-acre Peapack Tract; and the 18,000-acre Harrison Tract (both in central New Jersey); the townships of Maidenhead and Hopewell in West Jersey; and a host of other lands as well as Ramapo.⁶² The majority of those threatened by the Board's claims were of British descent, with New Englanders comprising the largest group. There was, however, a considerable Dutch-speaking minority on several of the contested tracts. Some of these people became embroiled in the violent upheaval which defined public life in the colony in the 1740s.

The disputes eventually exploded into an armed rebellion which nearly broke royal control of the colony. The threatened yeomen, led by the New Englanders of Essex County, immediately to the south of Bergen, allied to create a countergovernment and deny the property claims of the great gentry.

These developments could be traced to September 19, 1745, when a crowd of 150 men attacked the royal jail at Newark in Essex County in order to free a man arrested for trespass at the gentry's request.⁶³ Gradually, the groups hostile to the Board formed an extralegal coalition to break the gentry's grip on the countryside, and Valleau joined with these dissidents. In the late spring of 1746 Board agents claimed in a report that "the tenants there stand true to the Proprietors tho' all the neighbors thereabouts have signed the Newark papers" [meaning that Fauconier's Company had joined the Newark-centered coalition against the Proprietors].⁶⁴ A second report declared that Mrs. Valleau and her relatives were "threatening the [Board] tenants" who would not take new leases from her.⁶⁵

Valleau's role in organizing violence in this period of crisis strongly suggests that of a Dutch "mum-culture" leader. With the community's property hanging in the balance, Valleau assumed direct control of crowd actions against the Board's tenants. Had an observer from the Netherlands witnessed Valleau's behavior in this period of widespread conflict, s/he would have understood it in terms of the actions of Dutch women leaders active in similar situations in the Old World. Valleau used her kinship and social connections to organize attacks on the Board's tenants like that which the Board's agent and tenant Edward Jeffers suffered in August, 1746. That crowd, led by "Mrs. Valleau, her son in law Stout, [and] her son Theodore Valleau" consisted of over forty people, far larger than any of the previous crowds active on the Tract.⁶⁶

The Dutch presence in the broader coalition encouraged the gentry to construct the unrest rhetorically as an alien insurgency in a British world. In so doing, they hoped to open an ethnic fissure in the coalition arrayed against them. The New Englanders of Essex County led the coalition, but the Dutch presence on four (Ramapo, Newark, Harrison, and the Great Tract) contested tracts made them the coalition's primary ethnic subgroup. The gentry used satire and linguistic difference to try to marginalize the Dutch. The main thrust of this attack was a 1747 letter to the *New York Weekly-Post Boy* written in pidgin Dutch-English. It purported to be between several of the disaffected Dutch, but in actuality it came from the pen of East New Jersey Proprietor Robert Hunter Morris.⁶⁷ The letter included a number of charges common in proprietor literature: that the committees formed by those opposed to the proprietors intended "dat such mans be put into offices as ovr Committee tink best qualified to promote our publick good." The letter went on to claim that "destroying de Proprieteurs Titel, will be unhinging and defeeting almost all de Estates in dis as well as de oder provinces in America." In the gentry's rhetorical construction, the riots were an alien insurgency designed to gain power for a non-English ethnic group.⁶⁸

While Valleau played the key role in mobilizing the Bergen County disaffected during this crisis, she did not receive a place on the central committee

of disgruntled Jersey landholders which effectively seized power from the government in 1747. In fact, the Ramapo Tract was the only area of contested ownership which did not have a committee representative, making her absence all the more conspicuous. The largely British and exclusively male leaders from the other disaffected areas may have rejected the idea of a woman sitting alongside them in political debate. Valteau's unique role in crowd actions followed from Dutch values and norms. Her activities thus highlight the overtly masculine and British character of most agrarian unrest in the American countryside.

That Valteau chose to stay off the dissidents' central committee should not be discounted. She, unlike many of the leaders from other areas, avoided indictment for treason during the massive wave of unrest in New Jersey, a charge which carried with it the penalty of death. She may have feared that should she join the central committee such an indictment would have been forthcoming.⁶⁹ For whatever reason, Valteau remained aloof from the committee, and at the end of 1747 her relationship with the other dissident landholders became more distant. The death of the militantly pro-Board governor Lewis Morris and the appointment of New Englander Jonathan Belcher to replace him led Valteau, among others, to petition the new governor for redress.⁷⁰ Even as she joined other disaffected people in petitioning Governor Belcher, Valteau—always anxious to seek a business advantage—tried to make a secret agreement with the “scheming” proprietor James Alexander at the expense of her tenants which would have secured her personal property rights from all legal challenge.⁷¹ It was, as she realized, an ideal moment to negotiate: the Board, buffeted by years of rioting, now faced a new governor with his own agenda, one that might well go against the Board's interests. For one reason or another, Valteau's deal with Alexander never went through, but after 1747 the character of her participation in the unrest changed. While retaining her position as chief negotiator, spokesperson, and leader of Fauconier's Company, she once more moved behind the scenes of the low-level collective violence which continued on the Ramapo Tract after 1747.

High birth, considerable property holdings, assertiveness, and the willingness to take risks certainly reinforced Valteau's authority as a crowd leader. In the eighteenth century, birth and property played a large part in determining social status. In an isolated, newly settled rural area the widowed daughter of a former royal official would have a high social standing. The fact that her father had founded the community enhanced her status. Valteau owned the largest single farm on the Ramapo Tract, and in a world where property established status, that made her an important person.⁷² But while her status enhanced her authority, it was her ethnicity that transformed this status into the authority to act in the public sphere.

* * *

On August 20, 1752, "Doctor John Baird and Theodore Valleau" appeared at a Council of Proprietors armed with "a letter of attorney from Mrs. Magdalena Valleau empowering them to agree with the Proprietors concerning her father, Peter Fauconier's claim at Romopock."⁷³ After some negotiations concerning transfers of property between members of the company, "the said attorneys declared that they were ready to perform Mrs. Valleau's part of what she was to perform by virtue of her agreement with this Board."⁷⁴ Magdalena Valleau probably granted the power of attorney to these two men because of illness, but symbolically her absence marked two profound shifts in the lives of the people on the Ramapo Tract and across the Dutch subculture of North America. The property conflicts were again entering a dormant period, and the continuing trend of Anglicization within eighteenth-century colonial society promoted a decline in the aspects of Dutch culture that had encouraged women's participation in direct confrontations with the Board.

Collective violence waned across New Jersey in the 1750s. The new governor, the impact of a revolt within the anti-Board movement which challenged the minor gentry's control over the insurgency, the outbreak of frontier violence associated with the beginning of the Seven Years' War, and sheer exhaustion combined to bring a prolonged lull to collective violence. At the end of the war, violence again erupted at Ramapo, continuing sporadically thereafter until 1790, when the Board finally divested its lands there.⁷⁵

The Dutch customs which had empowered Magdalena Valleau as a negotiator and crowd leader were also waning in the 1750s. Even during the period of intense unrest over property, the Anglicization of Dutch society which began in the seventeenth century continued unabated. While the number of wills surviving from the Ramapo Tract is too small to allow for analysis, a recent study indicates that between 1751 and 1775 inheritance customs among the ethnic Dutch in the New York City area began to conform to English norms. After 1751, only forty-five percent of Dutch males in New York left all property to their widows, as opposed to the eighty percent earlier in the eighteenth century.⁷⁶ A decline in the use of Dutch language paralleled the decline of Dutch inheritance practices, cutting off Dutch Americans from their traditional oral culture. The stories of women crowd leaders and women's political activism, the traditions of the mum-culture in whatever form they assumed in America, would also have begun to fade. While Dutch language and customs persisted longer in the more isolated environs of the New Jersey, the subculture's traditions of female property inheritance and ownership that had encouraged Magdalena Valleau's rise began to disappear even before her death sometime during the mid-1750s.⁷⁷ These changes, occurring over a number of years, probably explain why women played no role in direct

negotiations or crowd actions at Ramapo against the Board after 1763, when rent strikes and collective violence resumed.⁷⁸ Change in the culture led to a change in the gendering of overt resistance to the Board at Ramapo after 1750.

Like so many other colonists in the mid-eighteenth century, Magdalena Valteau found herself faced with the realities of cultural and structural change.⁷⁹ The Dutch subculture encouraged women to be especially assertive in the defense of their property and their community; Valteau's sex made her unique among New Jersey's land rioters, but broadly typical of Dutch women in the middle colonies. That she chose to join that culture at the moment of its decline suggests that the region's cultural diversity offered one type of freedom for white European women: the ability to seek advantage by moving from one ethnic or religious identity to another. In Valteau's case, her movement from a French to a Dutch culture not only helped secure her property rights, but thrust her into the role of a crowd leader, an essentially masculine role in the eyes of the broader British culture.

Magdalena Valteau's public life points to directions for further historical investigation, particularly of the problem of how non-British political traditions informed eighteenth-century popular political behavior in North America. While some scholarship has probed popular beliefs among various British migrants, only recently have historians begun to examine the culture of Germans, Dutch, and other groups.⁸⁰ If mum-culture traditions indeed informed Valteau's actions in the 1740s, then perhaps other non-British traditions informed plebeian political beliefs in the eighteenth century. Certainly Valteau's public life invites us to examine more closely the transmission of non-British value structures to eighteenth-century America. And her life suggests that assimilation may have occurred at different rates for men and women in the Dutch subculture of the middle colonies, as women struggled to retain a Dutch identity that empowered them in matters of property.⁸¹ Seen in its broadest context, then, Magdalena Valteau's life sheds new light on the interrelationship of seemingly unconnected transformations in ethnic identity, inheritance patterns, gender relations, language, and property holding practices that occurred in eighteenth-century British North America. And her life reminds us of just how contentious were the middle colonies' physical and cultural frontiers.

Notes

1. William A. Whitehead et al., editors, *Documents Relating to the Colonial, Revolutionary, and Post-Revolutionary History of the State of New Jersey* (Archives of the State of New Jersey, 1st Series, I-XLII [New Jersey, 1880-1949] Volume VI, 415-416, hereafter cited as NJA; George J. Miller, ed., *Minutes of the Board of Proprietors of the Eastern Division of New Jersey*, I-III, (Perth Amboy, New Jersey, 1949-1960), Volume III, 67, hereafter cited as MBPEDNJ).
2. For the meaning of hunting shirts in revolutionary Virginia, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina., 1982) 256-259, 311, 321; for the miller, see Carlo Ginsburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, 1980); Greg Denning, *Captain Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge, 1992); Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York, 1994). For a discussion of various aspects of microhistorical method, see Isaac, 323-357, and Carlo Ginzberg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, 1986), especially 1-16 and 156-164.
3. Despite the limitations of the sources, an ever-growing number of studies have appeared concerning the middle colonies. Among the studies that have informed this essay are Randall Balmer, *A Perfect Babel of Confusion* (New York, 1989); Linda Briggs Biemer, *Women and Property in Colonial New York: The Transition from Dutch to English Law, 1643-1727* (Ann Arbor, 1983); Jon Butler, *The Huguenots in America* (Cambridge, 1983); Joyce Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot* (Princeton, 1992); Milton Klein, *The Politics of Diversity: Essays on the History of Colonial New York* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1974); Adrian C. Leiby, *The Early Dutch and Swedish Settlers of New Jersey* (Princeton, 1964); Donna Merwick, *Possessing Albany, 1630-1710, The Dutch and English Experiences* (Cambridge, 1990); John Murrin, "English Rights as Ethnic Aggression: The English Conquest, the Charter of Liberties of 1683, and Leisler's Rebellion in New York," in William Penack and Conrad E. Wright, eds., *Authority and Resistance in Early New York* (New York, 1988); Eric Nooter and Patricia U. Bonomi, eds., *Colonial Dutch Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (New York, 1988); Oliver Rink, *Holland on the Hudson: An Economic and Social History of New York* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986). For a general discussion of the historiography of the middle colonies, see Wayne Bodle, "Themes and Directions in Middle Colonies Historiography, 1980-1994," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. LI, (3), 355-388.
4. William Nelson, ed., *Collections of the New Jersey Historical Society*, Volume IX (Newark, NJ, 1916), 109. Between 1702 and 1738 New York and New Jersey shared an imperial governor who usually concentrated his attention on the former colony.
5. Balmer, *A Perfect Babel of Confusion*, 82. *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the year 1911*, New York Tax Lists 1695-1699, Volumes I-II (New York, 1912), 16, 51, 92, 129, 159, 189, 235.
6. Philip Schwarz, *The Jarring Interest: New York's Boundary Makers* (Albany, 1979), 82.
7. Balmer, 44-116; Merwick, 220-295, gives a detailed account of the cultural conflict in New York during and after Leisler's Rebellion.
8. Balmer, 63-64.
9. Nelson, ed. *Collections*, 204.
10. *Ibid.*, 109.
11. Tobias Wright, ed. *Records of the Reformed Church in New Amsterdam and New York, Baptisms, Volume II, From January 1731 to December, 1800*, 395. On November 2, 1788, Francis Marschalk and Magdalena Vallo (Valleau) had their son Andrew Faulkenier baptized in a Dutch Reformed Church in New York City.
12. David E. Narrett, *Inheritance and Family Life in Colonial New York City* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 90-91, 200; David William Voorhees, "The 'fervent zeale' of Jacob Leisler," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, VI, (3), 447-472; Leiby, 109; Butler, 159.
13. Butler, 159; Goodfriend, 8-81; Leiby, 1-33; Balmer, 100. For an interesting new discussion of the French background of some of the New Amsterdam settlers, see Voorhees, "The 'fervent zeale' of Jacob Leisler," 447-472.
14. Narrett, *Inheritance and Family Life in Colonial New York City*, 91-93.

15. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York, 1987), 168, 260, 398-427.
16. David E. Narrett, "Dutch Customs of Inheritance, Women, and the Law in Colonial New York City," in William Pencak and Conrad E. Wright, eds., *Authority and Resistance in Early New York* (New York, 1988) 33; David S. Cohen, *The Dutch-American Family* (New York, 1992), 138-139.
17. David Narrett, "Dutch Customs of Inheritance," 39.
18. Paul David Nelson, *William Alexander, Lord Stirling* (Alabama, 1987), 7
19. Cynthia A. Kierner, *Traders and Gentlefolk: The Livingstons of New York, 1675-1790* (Ithaca, 1992), 20-21, 50-51. The young Valleau may even have heard stories of the Dutch women naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, who explored in Surinam in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century and published several works on naturalism. Certainly, Merian is an excellent example of an independent, intellectually aggressive Dutch women. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 140-202.
20. Kierner, 50-51.
21. MBPEDNJ, II, 279. In this tenant list and several others, the Proprietors referred to her as "Mary". At some point, this effort to remake her in the image of a British woman was abandoned.
22. Nelson, ed., 109, 204; "Petition of the Residents of Upper Saddle River, October 22. 1747" page 47, Volume VI, James Alexander Papers, Special Collections, Firestone Library, Princeton University (hereafter cited as JAP/SC/FL/PU). I am grateful to Professor Susan Klepp of Rider University for her insightful remarks on the matter of naming.
23. *Ibid.*, 204. For the language of preaching in the Paramus church, see Henry D. Cook, "A Sketch of the Reformed Church of Paramus," *Papers and Proceedings* 1910-1911, No.7, Bergen County Historical Society, 57.
24. *Collections* of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1908, Abstract of Wills Volume XVII, Corrections, Volume II (New York, 1909), 274; *Collections* of the New-York Historical Society, Abstracts of Wills Volume VI, 1760-1766, 444. MBPEDNJ, II, 278-279. This list of tenants shows Mary (Magdalena) Valleau as holding 3,400 acres of land and makes no mention of her father; MBPEDNJ, II, 294 demonstrates the Proprietors' negotiating with Valleau as if she owned the property in question.
25. NJA XXXII, Abstracts of Wills III, 332.
26. These were almost certainly the sons of Magdalena Valleau.
27. MBPEDNJ, II, 244-246, 278-279, 286, 363.
28. Derived from the MBPEDNJ, Vols. I and II, and the Ryerson Papers, Special Collections, Rutgers University Library (hereafter cited as RUL), especially MBPEDNJ, II, 244-246, 278-279, 286, 363.
29. Leiby, 50-58, 109-121.
30. Cohen, 160-164; Balmer, 99-156.
31. NJA, XXXII, Abstracts of Wills, III, 332.
32. Wayne Bodle, "Jane Bartram's Application: Her Struggle for Survival, Stability, and Self-Determination in Revolutionary Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115 (1991), 185-220; Daniel B. Shea, "Introduction to 'Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge,'" in William L. Andrews, ed. *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives* (Madison, 1990), 130-131.
33. Ned Landsman, *Scotland and Its First American Colony, 1683-1765* (Princeton, 1985), especially 195-263.
34. James S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Whiteboy movement, 1761-5," *Irish Historical Studies* (Dublin, Ireland, 1979), 20-54; Francis Joseph Bigger, *The Ulster Land War of 1770* (Dublin, 1910) 1-45, passim.
35. The literature on agrarian unrest is growing. See Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1990); Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, (New York, 1981) 36-71; Patricia Bonomi, *A Factious People* (New York, 1971) 179-228; Irving Mark, *Agrarian Conflicts in Colonial New York, 1711-1775* (New York, 1940); Sung Bok Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664-1775* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1978); A. Roger Ekirch, "Poor Carolina": *Politics and Society in Colonial North Carolina, 1729-1776* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1981) 132-147; Marvin L. Michael

Kay, "The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A Class Conflict," in Alfred Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (Dekalb, 1976) 71-123; James P. Whittenburg, "Planters, Merchants, and Lawyers: Social Change and the Origins of the North Carolina Regulation," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series., XXXIV, (1977), 215-238; Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986); David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst, Mass., 1980); John Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth* (New York, 1989) 131-229; John Murrin and Rowland Berthoff, "Feudalism, Commun-alism, and the Yeomen Freeholder The American Revolution Considered as a Social Accident," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, *Essays on the American Revolution* (New York, 1973) 256-288.

36. See Brendan McConville, "*These Daring Disturbers of the Public Peace*": *Agrarian Unrest and the Struggle for Power in New Jersey, 1700-1776* (Ithaca, 1998) and Thomas Purvis, *Proprietors, Patronage, and Paper Money* (New Brunswick, 1986), 200-231.

37. Maxine N. Lurie and Joanne R. Walroth, eds., *Minutes of the Board of Proprietors of the Eastern Division of New Jersey from 1764 to 1794*, Volume IV (Newark, 1985) 5n, (hereafter cited as MBPEDNJ IV). NJA. XIX, Newspaper Extracts, III, 425. *New York Gazette or Weekly Post Boy*, October 14, 1754.

38. MBPEDNJ, IV, 5n, xxxix. NJA, XIX, Newspaper Extracts, III, 425. *New York Gazette or Weekly Post Boy*, October 14, 1754. The history of conflict within the Board of Proprietors is so complex that discussion of it here can only provide the most basic overview. Simply put, the English Proprietors were a minority faction within the Board who had little contact with the resident Proprietors, many of whom were Scottish. Their conflict stretched back into the seventeenth century, and had been a contributing factor in the collapse of the Proprietor government at the end of the seventeenth century.

39. MBPEDNJ, II, 278-279.

40. Schwarz, 133-164; New York and New

Jersey Boundary Papers, New York Historical Society (hereafter cited as NYHS).

41. MBPEDNJ, IV, 13n. Alexander was the father of William Alexander, Lord Stirling, the faux aristocrat who fought for the American cause in the Revolution.

42. McConville, "*These Daring Disturbers of the Public Peace*," chapter 3, "The Enlightenment's First Offensive."

43. MBPEDNJ, IV, 5n. Landsman, 21-22, 83.

44. MBPEDNJ, II, 115.

45. *Ibid*, 125.

46. *Ibid*, 278-279.

47. *Ibid*, II, 126.

48. *Ibid*, 157-158.

49. *Ibid*, 241.

50. *Ibid*, 294.

51. *Ibid*, 298-299.

52. *Ibid*, 112.

53. *Ibid*, 113.

54. *Ibid*, 244-245.

55. *Ibid*, 173.

56. *Ibid*, 90, 223, 241-242, 244.

57. *Ibid*, 244.

58. *Ibid*, 67.

59. Rudolph M. Dekker, "Women in Revolt: Popular Protest and its Social Basis in Holland in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 16, 1987, 350-352. Dekker is the best discussion in English of Dutch women crowd leaders.

60. *Ibid*, 337-362, especially 339- 340.

61. *Ibid*, 353.

62. See McConville, Chapters 1-3, 7.

63. McConville, Chapter 7 "The People Against the Government."

64. NJA , XV, Journal of the Governor and Council, III, 590-591.

65. MBPEDNJ, II, 84, 241-242.

66. MBPEDNJ, III, 84.

67. Robert Hunter Morris to James Alexander, Augth 20, 1747. James Alexander Papers, Princeton University, Volume V, 85.

68. NJA, XII, Newspaper Extracts, III, 408.

69. McConville, Chapter 7, and Chapter 9 "A Tale of Two Men."

70. Mrs Valleau to Governor Belcher, October 4, 1747. Volume VI, James Alexander Papers, Special Collections, Princeton University, 47.

71. *Ibid*, 66.

72. MBPEDNJ, II, 279.

73. Ibid, 220.

74. Ibid, 220.

75. MBPEDNJ, IV, 5n, xxxix.

76. David Narrett, "Dutch Customs of Inheritance," 39.

77. NJA XXXII, Abstracts of Wills, III, 332.

The filing of her will suggests a death in 1755 or 1756.

78. MBPEDNJ, IV, 28, 36n.

79. Rowland Berthoff and John Murrin, "Feudalism, Communalism and the Yeomen Freeholder," 256-288.

80. A.G. Roeber, *Palatines, Liberty, and Property* (Baltimore, 1993) 283-310, discusses

how the ethnicity of German immigrants mediated their understanding of liberty and the coming of the Revolution. David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed* (New York, 1989) is devoted to British North America. Fischer explores how British subcultures experienced and understood their political experience. See Fischer, 199, 410, 595, 777.

81. Balmer, 100-102, offers strong support for this view. He insightfully examines the feminization of Dutch Calvinism and its relationship to the distinctive Dutch gender practices, particularly concerning women and property.