

“THE TRUTH OF IT IS, SHE HAS HER REASONS FOR PROCREATING SO FAST”:
MARIA TAYLOR BYRD’S CHALLENGES TO PATRIARCHY IN EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY VIRGINIA

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by
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ABSTRACT

“THE TRUTH OF IT IS, SHE HAS HER REASONS FOR PROCREATING SO FAST”: MARIA TAYLOR BYRD’S CHALLENGES TO PATRIARCHY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIA. (May 2012)

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Maria Taylor Byrd (1698-1771) was the wife of wealthy colonial planter and politician William Byrd II. In the relatively extensive scholarship concerning William Byrd II, historians have consistently overlooked his second wife, Maria Byrd. They have simply labeled her as weak and submissive to the patriarchal authority of her husband. Considering only the sources generated by William Byrd II, this conclusion is reasonable. However, sources that illuminate Maria Byrd’s life before and after her marriage indicate that she was powerful in her own right. Particularly in the last portion of her life as a wealthy, widowed mother, Maria Byrd wielded a significant amount of control over herself and those around her. Maria Byrd’s life disproves the concept of the Golden Age Theory, which states that eighteenth-century Virginia women were completely subjugated by patriarchal male authority.

The primary way that Maria Byrd challenged the white, male patriarchal authority of eighteenth-century Virginia was through motherhood. Rather than directly challenge her powerful husband, she closely coerced the actions of her son, William Byrd III. As the matriarch of her family, Maria Byrd’s intensely emotional connection to her son presaged the

affectionate modern family structure that fully emerged in the nineteenth century. However, her relationship with her son became constrained in the last decade of her life. Maria Byrd used her wealth to express her disapproval by bequeathing her money to her grandchildren rather than her son. Therefore, Maria Byrd is most historically significant as a mother due to her use of both personal and social authority and her representation of the initial transformations within the American family structure.

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INTRODUCTION: “THE GOOD PATRIARCHS”

Nothing has happened new in this family since last year. We jogg on soberly and peaceably in our state of innocence, enjoying all the blessings of a comfortable sun and a fertile soil. Our comforts like those of the good patriarchs are mostly domestique, observing with a partial delight how the flowers of our own planting improve. Our lives are uniform without any great variety, til the seasons brings in the ships. Then we tear open the letters they bring us from our freinds, as eagerly as a greedy heir tears open a rich fathers will. But as no pleasure derived from this imperfect world flows clear to us, so every time Mrs. Byrd hears from any of you, she sleeps no more that live-long-night, than if she were jealous her good man shoud slip out of bed and go to Fartamira. Therefore I find it necessary, when any English letters come to hand late in the day, to pocket ‘em up till next morning. Thus when Madam has the whole day before her, perhaps her joy may evaporate so far as to allow her some rest. In this prudent manner female passions require to be managed sometimes, to confine them within bounds and keep, them like a high-mettled horse, from runing away with their owner.¹

In a letter to his sister-in-law in England, colonial planter and politician William Byrd II described his world as both idyllic and firmly controlled under his patriarchal authority. Detailed, intimate, and revealing extant writings such as these have made William Byrd II a fascinating topic of study for scholars. Historians such as Kenneth Lockridge and Michael Zuckerman have met with great success in such a pursuit. Now is the time to broaden the focus onto the Byrd family. Specifically, who was the Mrs. Byrd described above? What kind of authority did she wield in the slave society of eighteenth-century Virginia? How did William Byrd II manipulate her so effectively? How did power relate to the social structure of the elite, white family? Is there a story behind these lies over letters?

¹ William Byrd II to Anne Taylor Otway, Virginia, June 30, 1736, *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684-1776*, ed. Marion Tinling (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1977), 483. [Hereafter *Correspondence*]

“Mrs. Byrd” referred to Maria Taylor Byrd (1698-1771), the second wife of William Byrd II and mother of William Byrd III. A closer examination of sources reveals that Maria Byrd was not as easily governed by these powerful men as William Byrd II’s story about the mail indicates. In truth, she managed her passions, her self, and the people around her, particularly within her family, more effectively than her husband imagined. Maria Byrd entered into her marriage largely on her own conditions and wishes. She chose her battles wisely in that she did not attempt to directly challenge her much older and socio-politically powerful husband. Rather, Maria Byrd fully realized her personal and social authority later in life as a wealthy, widowed mother.

Maria Byrd is also significant of study because she represents the American family’s transition from a pre-modern to modern structure. The pre-modern family was exemplified by William Byrd II and characterized by restraint, peace, and material connections rather than strong affections. William Byrd II did not desire any deep emotional attachment to his family beyond living their lives “soberly and peaceably.” However, when Maria Byrd became the matriarch of the family after William Byrd II’s death, she presided over a much more loving and insular atmosphere.² As much as Maria Byrd was committed to her family, she did not hesitate to exert her influence into broader Virginia society, particularly as she conducted family business. She was therefore a hybrid between pre-modern and modern, exhibiting the public activity of the former and the emotional intensity of the latter. Overall, however, Maria Byrd is evidence that eighteenth-century Virginia women were not entirely subordinate or subjugated to male control and wielded a significant amount of authority.

² Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family Values in Jefferson’s Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 11, 36, 174-175.

The revelations of Maria Byrd's agency contribute to a void in the scholarship of early American women's history, a discipline that has gradually become more inclusive and nuanced. The study of American women's history has not always been popular. Women have been often neglected in the traditional discourses of political and military history. However, the social history revolutions of the 1960s made women, as well as other traditionally ignored groups of people, legitimate subjects of historic study. The resulting scholarship validated the historic impact of women, who historians previously believed to have no agency. However, the consideration of women's role in American history has been neither simple nor static. The study of the lives of colonial Virginia women, for example, has changed dramatically from the 1930s, when historians first broached the topic, and will continue to change in the future.

The study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women of Virginia has been shaped by a concept called the Golden Age Theory for nearly its entire existence. The Golden Age Theory attempts to explain a perceived change in women's status that occurred roughly at the end of the seventeenth century. This theory often invokes comparisons of seventeenth-century women to eighteenth-century women, as well as variations between colonial and British women. According to the Golden Age Theory, the new settlement of Virginia required every individual's labor, therefore women could engage in any occupation. Due to this labor scarcity, men highly valued women and their work. Additionally, a severely unbalanced sex ratio and high mortality rate gave women marriage bargaining power that enabled them to gain wealth and social status. As the colonies never fully enforced English

common law, many legal variations in Virginia benefitted women's rights.³ The scant scholarship on women from the 1930s set the groundwork for this theory, while full support came in the 1970s. Almost as soon as the Golden Age Theory took a prominent place in literature, however, historians began to question its validity. More recent historians have devoted study to qualifying the Golden Age Theory, while some have called for an entirely new model altogether. Several historians have begun using a patriarchal model of study instead of the Golden Age Theory.

Julia Cherry Spruill laid much of the groundwork for the Golden Age Theory. Published in 1938, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* seeks to illuminate specifics about the everyday life of women in the southern colonies, primarily Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Early colonial women faced many hardships in their role as the civilizing agents within a rough settlement of men in the wilderness. English attitudes of womanhood defined these female colonists, who men valued highly as housewives and mothers. To describe colonial women's participation in public affairs, Spruill turns first to the situation in England. Early in the seventeenth century, British women were interested in politics and some held jobs outside the home. However, after the Restoration, women of the late seventeenth century participated much less in business and other public affairs. Spruill notes a similar trend in the colonies, although the shift occurred around the century mark. According to Spruill, seventeenth-century colonial women "stated their requests confidently and boldly, [and] professed no ignorance of politics." However, the behavior of women changed in the eighteenth century, which "saw a decline in the vigor and self-reliance of women...and a lessening of their influence in public matters." Spruill also

³ Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in North America," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984), 593-619. 595.

hints that while at the height of their power, American colonial women held greater legal freedoms than any woman in England ever enjoyed.⁴

Thus, Spruill provides most of the necessary features of the Golden Age Theory. She distinguishes a change in women's status both regionally (between the colonies and England) and temporally (between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). However, Spruill presents these theories almost as hints hidden within her details of women's everyday life. She does not provide strong evidence to support these claims, most significantly the detailed demographic studies upon which Golden Age Theory proponents would later rely. Simply put, Spruill makes the points but not the arguments.

Historian Edmund Morgan helps to define the Golden Age Theory with his work, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975). Within this general account of the development of colonial Virginia, Morgan finds that women held significant economic advantages due to the scarcity of females in the colony. He even asserts that "Virginia was on the way to becoming an economic matriarchy, or rather a widowarchy."⁵ This interpretation allocates a great deal of power to widows due to their ability to concentrate wealth in seventeenth-century Virginia, although it assumes that economic factors were the primary forces that defined women's status.

Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh further strengthen the position of the Golden Age Theory in their article, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," published in 1977. Carr and Walsh focus on "social and demographic disruptions," including an overwhelmingly immigrant population, high

⁴ Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 4-5, 19, 43-45, 241-243, 346.

⁵ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 165-166.

mortality rate, late marriage, and an unbalanced sex ratio, all of which made women more powerful. These factors gave women more control over their property and more authority within the family, despite the ever-present dangers of death from disease or childbirth, the cruelty of indentured servitude, and the birth of illegitimate children. However, as the daughters of immigrant women began marrying at younger ages than their mothers, a larger native, rather than immigrant, population emerged. These demographic developments transformed the seventeenth-century freedoms for women into “more traditional European social controls,” as mothers lost power within the household, widows lost control over property, and young women had less freedom of choice when selecting a husband.⁶ By defining the critical shift from an immigrant to native population, Carr and Walsh clearly elucidate that the economic and familial status of women universally decreased as time progressed. The idea that life was better for women earlier in colonial settlement is the primary argument made by historians promoting the Golden Age Theory.

The greatest champion of the Golden Age Theory emerges in 1974 when Roger Thompson published his book, *Women in Stuart England and America: A Comparative Study*. Thompson argues that, during the seventeenth century, women’s status in England was decreasing while women’s position in the colonies was much better. The rise of capitalism in Stuart England brought an end to women’s valuable role as a household producer. Similar to Carr and Walsh, Thompson argues that a surplus of men in Virginia resulted in greater respect, more equality, and increased control over families and marriage for women. For example, Thompson finds many instances of “greater parental permissiveness [which] might well argue that the mother played a greater role in family

⁶ Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, “The Planter’s Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34 no. 4 (October 1977), 542-571. 542-543, 551-552, 556-557, 560, 565, 567-569.

government than in a more patriarchal, authoritarian society.” Additionally, the settlement of the colonies resulted in a simplified and flexible legal code, which resulted in more equality for women. Change for the worse inevitably came with a more balanced sex ratio and an Anglicization of legislation in the eighteenth century. Therefore, as the colonies became more English and less American in the eighteenth century, the status of women suffered.⁷

Mary Beth Norton was the first historian to outright discredit the Golden Age Theory. Her 1984 article, “The Evolution of White Women’s Experience in Early America,” enumerates the weaknesses of the Golden Age Theory and calls for historians to construct a new model. According to Norton, the concept of eighteenth-century decline of women’s status is “simplistic and unsophisticated.” The Golden Age Theory relies too heavily on women’s economic function; newer scholarship that abandons the Golden Age Theory is more complicated due to its observance of other factors contributing to the lives of women. Norton agrees that women’s experiences did change at the end of the seventeenth century. Some of these transformations include an increased involvement in domestic manufacturing, due to the stabilizing economy, and a more important role for women as mothers, due to religion in the northern colonies and slavery in the southern colonies. Although Norton writes about all women of colonial America, New England is clearly her expertise. Norton believes these trends dealing with the home and family are also applicable in the southern colonies, but concedes that more research will be necessary to confirm this conclusion. Norton’s loud dissent from the Golden Age Theory inspired later historians to describe change in women’s lives with more accuracy and complexity, rather than resorting to nondescript labels of better

⁷ Roger Thompson, *Women in Stuart England and America: A Comparative Study* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1974), 5, 11, 23, 36, 75, 145, 161, 260-263.

or worse. Norton also motivates historians to concentrate their studies on more specific regions.⁸

Thus far, historian Kathleen M. Brown strays the most from the Golden Age Theory. Her book, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (1996), demonstrates the heightened impact that race had on the lives of white Virginia women. According to Brown, Virginia patriarchy used discourses of gender in the formation of racial slavery: “plagued by unruly settlers and a lack of supporting institutions, Virginia’s elite planters may have had the best hope of constructing a legitimate authority in the colony in their capacity as adjudicators of gender relations.” Whereas in the early seventeenth century, a wench signified an English woman of low status, by the 1730s, this term’s definition was limited to African women. However, in the creation of this race-based patriarchy, men of the white elite relied on the cooperation of women (often through alliances of marriage), yet they were simultaneously threatened by white women’s subversion (sometimes in the form of gossip).⁹

Brown largely suggests replacing the traditional Golden Age Theory with studies on patriarchal forms. Along with every other historian who has studied this topic, Brown identifies a change in the late seventeenth century. However, Brown defines this change as an “intensification of patriarchal forms.”¹⁰ It was this patriarchy, this new stratification of society, that influenced women. Brown never openly questions whether this transformation was better or worse for women; these simple epithets provide very little real information to

⁸ Norton, “The Evolution of White Women’s Experience in North America,” 594-595, 601, 606-607, 609.

⁹ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1, 91, 95, 118, 132, 135-136, 281, 370.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

describe women's lives. Brown adds complexity to the issue by asserting that eighteenth-century white women were firmly entrenched below the ruling patriarchs, yet this male authority was both challenged and reinforced by women's actions. While women may have lost some status to the stronger patriarchal system, white women also might have gained status as racial slavery allowed them to pursue roles of domestic leisure.

This study of Maria Byrd follows the lead of Norton and Brown. Maria Byrd's life helps to disprove the Golden Age Theory by showing the continued existence of powerful women in the eighteenth century. For example, Morgan finds that seventeenth-century women assumed great power and wealth in widowhood. However, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Maria Byrd possessed the same authority. This work also advances a slightly modified model of analysis by examining Maria Byrd as a mother, in addition to her role as a wife and her participation in the legal and economic world. Much of the scholarship that seeks to disprove the Golden Age Theory focuses almost exclusively on women's attempts to challenge the patriarchal authority of their husbands, yet Maria Byrd discovered that she was much more powerful as a mother by subtly directing the young patriarch of her son. Overall, historians have not considered the subject of motherhood to be a significant subject of study until the early nineteenth century. An examination of Maria Byrd's life is significant because the study of early American women's history still requires more evidence that eighteenth-century women were not powerless.

A brief biography of both William Byrd II and William Byrd III helps to provide the proper social and political context of Maria Byrd's family and the broader culture of colonial Virginia. William Byrd II's father, William Byrd I, came to Virginia from England to inherit lands that had belonged to his uncle, Thomas Stegge, in 1670. Three years later, William

Byrd I married Mary Horsemanden Filmer, a young widow. William Byrd II was born on March 28, 1674. The couple also had three daughters. William Byrd I accumulated thousands of acres of land and held important political positions, including president of the Council. The first Byrd was one of the richest and most powerful men in Virginia when he died in 1704.¹¹

William Byrd II and all of his sisters went to England for their education. William Byrd II was only seven years old when he came under the care of his mother's family and arrived at Felsted Grammar School, where he received an education fitting for gentleman. Byrd studied business in Holland for a year, and then studied law at the Middle Temple until he passed the bar in 1695. While living in England during this early part of his life, Byrd made many influential friends and came to love the English culture. During this time, he distinguished himself by earning membership into the Royal Society, a prestigious organization of men devoted to learning and science.

Byrd returned to Virginia for a little more than a year in 1696. He was elected to the House of Burgesses, but jumped at the opportunity to return in England, where he acted as an agent for the colony. In 1705 Byrd received word of his father's death and returned to Virginia to take possession of his estate, totaling more than 26,000 acres. Soon after his arrival Byrd became receiver general of the colony and a member of the Council. In 1706 Byrd married Lucy Parke, after receiving written approval from her father in England, Daniel Parke. The couple had two daughters, Evelyn (born 1707) and Wilhelmina (born 1715). Two other children died in infancy.

¹¹ Pierre Marambaud, *William Byrd of Westover, 1674-1744* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1971), 16-57.

Daniel Parke, Byrd's father-in-law, died in 1710. All of the family lands in Virginia were to be sold to pay off his debts. Byrd, desirous of both Parke's land and social position, agreed to pay the debts in exchange for the land. Unfortunately, Byrd was unaware of the great extent of Parke's debts and continued to pay them off until old age. In addition to his desire for more land, William Byrd II was also politically ambitious. He unsuccessfully tried to become the governor of Virginia and Maryland. Byrd received neither of these appointments and he instead directed his efforts in opposition of Virginia's governor, Alexander Spotswood. Both a desire to undermine Spotswood and rectify his debt situation led Byrd back across the ocean to England in 1715.

Sensing that his business in England would be of some duration, William Byrd sent for his wife, Lucy Byrd, who arrived in the summer of 1716. In November of that year, Lucy Byrd died of smallpox. William Byrd mourned for his wife, but within two months he began writing letters to Miss Mary Smith, whom he referred to as 'Sabina.' Mary Smith was a coquette and toyed with William Byrd's emotions, but her father did not approve of the match. While Byrd had many social engagements in London, he also represented the Council in its feud with Governor Spotswood. In 1720 Byrd returned to Virginia to make peace with the governor. The result of this dispute was that the power of the governor and the Council became somewhat equalized. An uneasy truce existed between the two powers until the House of Burgesses eventually gained more authority.

After organizing his affairs at his home, Westover, William Byrd returned to England in 1721, again as a colonial agent. He again courted various wealthy women before marrying Maria Taylor in 1724. Greeted with the expense of a new family, William Byrd went back to

Virginia, where it was cheaper to live. Although he planned to return to England, after he had paid his debts, Byrd never saw England again.

Back in Virginia, William Byrd devoted his time to the management of his plantations and colonial politics. In 1727, he was chosen to help redraw the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. This proved to be an exciting and dangerous adventure as the party surveyed 241 miles along the border during the spring and fall of 1728. The journey inspired Byrd to purchase a vast amount of land in the wilderness of North Carolina. He endeavored to sell tracts of this land to immigrants and colonists. Byrd also went on other voyages to discover the possibility of mining on his property in 1732, to survey his lands in North Carolina in 1733, and to distinguish the boundary of the Northern Neck in 1736. Just as his father before him, Byrd became president of Council in the last year of his life. William Byrd II died in 1744. By then he had paid off all his debts and was among the most prestigious and wealthiest of Virginians.

The son of William Byrd II and Maria Byrd, William Byrd III was born on September 6, 1728. He grew up with his parents and three sisters on Westover plantation, along the James River in Charles City County, Virginia. He received his education from live-in tutors and the College of William and Mary until he departed for England in January of 1747, at age eighteen, to study at the Middle Temple. William Byrd III's stay in England was brief; he was back in Virginia by April 14, 1748 for his marriage to Elizabeth Hill Carter. He assumed legal possession of his late father's estate when he turned twenty one in 1749. Within the next several years, he built two new homes- a reconstruction of Westover and a new house for his young family at Belvidere, located near Richmond. He and Elizabeth Byrd had five children born from 1749 to 1756: William IV, John Carter, Thomas Taylor, Elizabeth Hill,

and Francis Otway. As he became the owner of more impressive homes and his family expanded, William Byrd III established himself as a lavish spender within the Virginia elite, particularly on gambling and horse racing. Evidence also suggests that he travelled during the early 1750s, at least as far as to the Carolinas.¹²

Similar to other wealthy planters and his forefathers, William Byrd III was involved in colonial governance. From 1752 to 1754 he served as the Burgess of Lunenburg County. Like his father and grandfather, he was a member of the Council from 1754 until its termination in the beginning of the American Revolution. In addition to the position on the Council, William Byrd III also seemed to have inherited his forefathers' familiarity with Native Americans. He was among the Virginia representatives who negotiated a treaty with the Catawbas and Cherokees in 1755.

William Byrd III's return to Virginia from this trip proved to be a great turning point in his life. In 1756, he abandoned his wife, with whom he seemed to be incompatible, sent his three oldest sons to school in England, and volunteered for the Virginia militia. He left the management of his estate to several friends and his mother, Maria Byrd. He unsuccessfully tried to obtain a commission in the British army, but nonetheless served in Canada with Lord Loudoun during the beginning of the French and Indian War. In early 1758, he put his intimacy with Native Americans to good use by volunteering to recruit Cherokee forces in the southern Appalachians for the British cause. After this assignment, Byrd accepted the command of a Virginia regiment. He served under George Washington as they tried to capture the French Fort Duquesne. In early 1759, Byrd replaced Washington as

¹² Marion Tinling, "William Byrd III," *Correspondence*, 603-614; Alexander Ormond Boulton, "The Architecture of Slavery: Art, Language, and Society in Early Virginia" (PhD diss., The College of William and Mary, 1991), 133-134.

the colonel of the First Virginia Regiment and served in the area of the Great Lakes. His assignment moved southward the next year, as he participated in a frustrating campaign against his former friends, the Cherokees. In the summer of 1760, Byrd failed to relieve British forces at Fort Prince George in northwest South Carolina from a Cherokee siege, for which he received some criticism. William Byrd arranged for peace terms with the Cherokees, as he was likely the most qualified to do so among the British. Unfortunately, the peace that Byrd brokered could not be honored because representatives from the Carolinas were not present. Around this time, he also received word that his wife had died. Still smarting from the rejection of his peace terms, Byrd resigned from his command in late 1760.

Following his resignation, Byrd traveled to Philadelphia, where he married Mary Willing on January 29, 1761. Soon after the wedding, William Byrd III gave his military career one more attempt. The British planned another attack on the Cherokees, but Byrd's role in the campaign was doomed from the start. He did not receive any regular troops to command, and had to recruit his own soldiers. His recruits were very raw, moved slowly, and deserted frequently. Byrd was forced to purchase their provisions himself because supplies never reached him. Byrd and his force never made it to the battlefield. Instead, he resigned for good in September. Later in 1761, the British, colonists, and Cherokees signed the peace treaty that Byrd had drafted the previous year. In all, William Byrd III experienced far more frustration than distinction during his military career.

William Byrd immediately returned to his wife in Philadelphia. He ordered a new house constructed for them and their first child was born in late 1761. They did not reside in Philadelphia for long, however. William and Mary Byrd likely moved to Virginia in late

1762. Initially they lived at his home near Richmond- Belvidere- but quickly moved into Westover with Maria Byrd. From 1761 to 1777, the Byrds had ten children.

Although Byrd's financial situation had been bad for some time, his debts became much worse during the 1760s. His finances suffered greatly in 1766 when he was implicated in the money schemes of the late John Robinson, former Speaker of the House of Burgesses and Secretary of Virginia. He attempted to raise money by holding a lottery with tracts of his land as the prizes, but this venture proved to be a large failure. In his desperation for credit, Byrd mortgaged slaves and the Westover plate to English agents in 1769. He was further troubled by the death of his mother, Maria Byrd, and oldest son in 1771.

The impending Revolution in Virginia also served to embitter William Byrd III. He was initially offered a command of Virginia forces but chose to remain loyal to Great Britain, an alliance that garnered public censure. His devotion to England likely ended in November of 1775, when the royal governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom to any slaves who aided the royalists. Fifty slaves from Westover responded to this call and absconded from their increasingly miserable owner. William Byrd then offered his services to the colonists, but was rejected. Thoroughly demoralized and defeated, William Byrd III shot and killed himself on January 1, 1777.

Because of the social and political significance of the William Byrds, many different primary sources survive to illuminate the life of the Byrd family. The nineteen extant letters that Maria Byrd wrote to her son, William Byrd III, provide the most important information for understanding the ways in which she was a powerful widow, mother, and woman. Written from 1757 to 1764, the majority of the correspondence occurred while William Byrd III was away from Virginia fighting in the French and Indian War. The limited amount of her

surviving writing demands a very close examination, even down to the particulars of her word choice. Other letters from the rest of the Byrd family are useful for this study as well. For instance, the letters from Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd to her husband William Byrd III indicate the different ways that her authoritative mother-in-law controlled many aspects of her life, including household economy and child care.

Maria Byrd's husband, William Byrd II, was a prolific writer and many of his works survive today. Out of his three extant diaries, one dates from the time of his marriage to Maria Byrd, 1739 to 1741. This source primarily describes the daily life of William Byrd II, although it also gives a few clues as to the activities of those around him, including Maria Byrd. William Byrd II's several works of prose do not include any specific information about Maria Byrd, but they do provide his general feelings towards gender and family. Using the works of historian Kenneth Lockridge, this study assumes that William Byrd II obsessively tried to emulate a patriarchal model but ultimately failed to exercise complete control of everyone around him. Later in life, his personality mellowed and he became less uptight and rigid.¹³ The ways in which William Byrd II regarded his wife are therefore colored by these predispositions. Additionally, the wills of both William Byrd II and William Byrd III are crucial to understanding the transfer of family property and money that enabled Maria Byrd to act autonomously.

This work is arranged according to the greatest transformation in Maria Byrd's life: from wife to widow when William Byrd II died in 1744. The first chapter describes Maria Byrd's role as a wife. It employs a comparative model using the life of William Byrd II's

¹³ Kenneth A. Lockridge, *On the Sources of Patriarchal Rage: The Commonplace Books of William Byrd and Thomas Jefferson and the Gendering of Power in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 76, 86-88.

first wife, Lucy Parke Byrd, who represents an earlier phase in colonial women's history. The first chapter demonstrates that Maria Byrd was a rather submissive wife, although she exhibited a great deal of independence in choosing to marry William Byrd II. The second chapter describes Maria Byrd's role as a widow and mother. After her husband's death, she did not have a direct male authority to follow and effectively became a matriarch. She established a much more loving family environment and both assisted and coerced her son, William Byrd III. Maria Byrd was most powerful within her family, as illustrated by her protracted disagreement with her daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd. During her transition from wife to widow, Maria Byrd realized both her personal and social authority.

CHAPTER 1
“FEMALE PASSIONS REQUIRE TO BE MANAGED SOMETIMES”: MARIA BYRD AS
A WIFE

The most significant turning point in Maria Taylor Byrd’s life was the death of her husband in 1744. She came into her own as a widow, becoming the matriarch of her family and an individual who wielded significant financial power. However, a close consideration of her twenty years of marriage is first required to appreciate her transformation.

William Byrd II and Maria Taylor married in England on May 9, 1724.¹⁴ Maria Byrd was William Byrd’s second wife. Historians consistently overlook and ignore her, instead paying much more attention to the first wife, Lucy Parke Byrd. The comparative amount of historical consideration between the two women is less a reflection of significance than the availability of source material.

William Byrd II and Lucy Parke Byrd married at the Parke home of Queen’s Creek Plantation in York County, Virginia on May 4, 1706.¹⁵ William Byrd chronicled the years of their marriage in his surviving diary from 1709 to 1712. His writing style from these years, which spanned his thirty-fifth to thirty-eighth birthday, is vivid and almost compulsive in its detail as a record of events. For example, on July 30, 1710, William Byrd wrote: “In the afternoon my wife and I had a little quarrel which I reconciled with a flourish. Then she read

¹⁴ William Byrd II to Maria Taylor, in William Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, With Letters & Literary Exercises, 1696-1726*, ed. Maude E. Woodfin (Richmond, VA: The Dietz Press, Inc., 1942), 386.

¹⁵ Jo Zuppan, “John Custis of Williamsburg, 1678-1749,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 90, no. 2 (April 1982): 177-197. 177, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4248543>.

a sermon in Dr. Tillotson to me. It is to be observed that the flourish was performed on the billiard table.”¹⁶

Half a year earlier, on December 3, 1709, he recorded: “I rose at 5 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Cassius. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance. Eugene [a slave belonging to Byrd] pissed abed again for which I made him drink a pint of piss.”¹⁷ This voyeuristic perspective of eighteenth-century plantation life has therefore drawn the attention of many scholars.

The diary that survives from the time of William Byrd's marriage to Maria Byrd is a much different document. William Byrd was nearing the end of his life when he recorded the entries from 1739 to 1741. By the sixty-seventh year of his life, William Byrd was experiencing some physical deterioration and some emotional resignation to the fact that his greatest accomplishments were behind him. He seems to have found a greater sense of peace, as reflected in the shorter and less detailed diary entries. For example, on December 23, 1739, William Byrd wrote:

I rose about 6, read Hebrew and Greek. I prayed and had coffee. I danced. The weather was warm and clear, the wind southwest. About 11 we went to church and had a good sermon. After church nobody came home with us and I ate roast goose. After dinner we walked. My wife had a headache. At night I talked with my people and prayed.¹⁸

Therefore, there are not as many salacious details about Maria Byrd as exist about Lucy Byrd. While historians have always been willing to comment on Lucy Byrd, their treatment of Maria Byrd is much shallower. Scholarship focuses on Maria Byrd's connection

¹⁶ William Byrd II, July 30, 1710, in *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (Richmond, VA: The Dietz Press, 1941).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, December 3, 1709.

¹⁸ William Byrd II, December 23, 1739, in *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, With Letters & Literary Exercises, 1696-1726*, ed. Maude E. Woodfin (Richmond, VA: The Dietz Press, Inc., 1942).

to her famous husband or only considers her in the most superficial manner. One of the most pre-eminent scholars of William Byrd II, Kenneth A. Lockridge, does not attempt to understand her beyond her relationship to her husband. According to Lockridge, their marriage was practical and devoid of any passion. William Byrd's choice of Maria Taylor, a "weak" woman, as a marriage partner indicated that he had entered a more mature and stable phase of his life, according to Lockridge. Historian Paula Treckel also identifies a lack of passion in Maria Byrd and argues that she was more "conventional" than Lucy Byrd. According to scholar Pierre Marambaud, Maria Byrd was malleable and the superior housewife between the two women. Two historians, Daniel Blake Smith and Cynthia A. Kierner, even incorrectly attribute references of her in historical sources to Lucy Byrd, blending the two women into one and implying that the first wife is the only significant one. Michael Zuckerman, author of the popular article "William Byrd's Family," does not mention Maria Byrd at all, even though she was a part of William Byrd's family for much longer than Lucy Byrd and bore him more children.¹⁹ As a historical figure whose life demonstrates many significant trends in the lives of eighteenth-century women, Maria Byrd has been consistently denied serious scholarly attention.

Superficially, historians may consider Maria Byrd to be the boring wife, but consideration of a wider collection of sources and a broader social context reveal that this woman was more powerful than Lucy Byrd, particularly in the way that she exercised

¹⁹ Lockridge, *On the Sources of Patriarchal Rage*, 76; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life, of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674-1744* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia by The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 120-121; Paula Treckel, "The Empire of My Heart: The Marriage of William Byrd II and Lucy Parke Byrd," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 105, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 125-156. 154, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4249635>; Pierre, *William Byrd of Westover*, 47; Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 164; Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 54; Michael Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," *Perspectives in American History* 12 (1979).

significant personal autonomy in arranging her marriage to William Byrd. While the comparisons between Lucy Byrd and Maria Byrd are often unfair and inaccurate due to variations in the source material, their contrasting situations demonstrate different ways that eighteenth-century women coped with the patriarchal institution of marriage.

However, before considering the differences between Maria Byrd and Lucy Byrd in respect to their roles as wives, it is important to note what the women had in common, namely their marriage to the same man. William Byrd II approached his marriages, and all other relationships, through the practice of emotional restraint. In 1722 or 1723, William Byrd composed a sketch of his own character (in the third person), revealing his inner battle between emotion and restraint to a young woman he was trying to court.

Love broke out upon him before his Beard...Tis well he had not a Twin-sister as Osyris had, for without doubt like him he would have had an amourette with her in his mothers belly. Love was born to him so long before Reason, that it has ever since slighted its rebukes, as much as old Fopps do the good sense of a young man. However this Frailty has never been without some check...the Balance has commonly been held very even. And if the Love-scale has happen'd to be carry'd down sometimes, the Counterpoise had not fail'd to mount it up again very suddenly. The struggle...betweext the King and the Parliament in England, was never half so violent as the Civil war between this Hero's Principles and his Inclinations...neither wou'd yield and neither cou'd conquer. Like Cesar and Pompey one cou'd not bear an Equal nor t'other a superior.²⁰

According to William Byrd's belief system and accepted gender roles, men strove to achieve lives of balance and moderation. Moderation required the use of reason. The use of reason then in turn separated man from beast and woman.²¹ The concept of moderation was deeply ingrained in Byrd's life. His diaries are almost completely devoid of emotion. Instead,

²⁰ Byrd II, "Inamorato L'Oiseaux," in Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 276.

²¹ Richard Brathwait, *The English Gentleman, The English experience, its record in early printed books published in facsimile, no. 717* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1975), 306.

he expressed acceptance when events had undesired consequences. On June 3, 1710, William Byrd wrote in his diary that “I rose at 6 o’clock and as soon as I came out news was brought that the child [his infant son, Parke] was very ill...he died about 8 o’clock in the morning. God gives and God takes away; blessed be the name of God...My wife was much afflicted but I submitted to His judgment better, notwithstanding I was very sensible of my loss, but God’s will be done.”²² He feared uncontrollable passions and believed they were the cause of his failures. Moderation, on the other hand, would bring happiness and make him the ideal English gentleman and patriarch.²³

William Byrd II understood his world largely in terms of a Filmerian social system, espoused by the English theorist Sir Robert Filmer.²⁴ According to this form of social organization, the family was the basis of the state. The power of the state mimicked the strictly hierarchical authority of the husband and father over his wife, children, and dependents. The Filmerian system found in eighteenth-century Virginia was essentially a non-dichotomous theory of power. However, historian Mary Beth Norton argues that the southern colonies were not entirely ordered along this Filmerian system. Rather, the Chesapeake region was a testing ground for a new, Enlightenment-inspired system that regarded the state and the family as distinctly separate, which she terms a Lockean system. Under this Lockean understanding of gender, women absolutely did not participate in the state or broader society because the family was not the government’s basis of power. For evidence supporting the existence of a nascent Lockean social order in the Chesapeake,

²² Byrd II, June 3, 1710, in *Secret Diary*.

²³ Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life*, 29; Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*: 37.

²⁴ William Byrd II was distantly connected to Sir Robert Filmer. The mother of William Byrd II and wife of William Byrd I was Mary Horsmanden Filmer Byrd. She was a widow when she married William Byrd I; her first marriage was to Samuel Filmer, older brother of Sir Robert Filmer. Marion Tinling, ed., “Appendix: Genealogical Notes,” in William Byrd II and William Byrd III, *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684-1776* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1977), 827.

Norton points to a lack of government direction of heads of households and a lax policing of individual morality.²⁵

However, the Filmerian system provides a more accurate model for the life of William Byrd II than the Lockean model. Evidence indicates that he did not understand his world as though it were divided between his family/home and the government/society. It is a common misconception to apply a dichotomous theory of power to eighteenth-century Virginia. The common historical understanding of gendered power was of a separated masculine public sphere and a feminine private sphere. Historian Anne Firor Scott's work, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, is perhaps the most renowned explication of this dichotomous theory. However, the marriage between William Byrd and Lucy Byrd demonstrates that this model, while valid for the nineteenth century, was not applicable for the majority of the eighteenth century. As the wife of a wealthy, white elite man in early eighteenth-century Virginia, Lucy Byrd was hardly powerless and confined to a home that was a private retreat.²⁶ Rather, she was a public asset to William Byrd's authority. A slow transformation towards the relegation of women to the home began within Maria Byrd's lifetime, but it was hardly complete, and will be considered in the next chapter. The rest of this chapter will examine Maria Byrd's role as a wife, using Lucy Byrd as a comparison.

The marriage between William Byrd II and Lucy Parke Byrd likely did not begin because of love, although tender emotions eventually developed in the relationship. William

²⁵ Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 4-8, 13-14, 51, 341-342.

²⁶ Although she was a pioneer in the study of early southern women's history, historian Julia Cherry Spruill was also among the first to inaccurately apply the concept of dichotomous gendered power to the colonial era. She argues that a woman's primary functions were to bear children and manage a household, superimposing a separation between the public and private that eighteenth-century contemporaries would not have understood. Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 44, 64-65, 164.

Byrd II viewed marriage primarily as a means for him to get ahead in the world, either financially or politically. According to historian of the English family, John Gillis, traditional English culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stated that, “[m]arriage was not then, as it is now, an individualized legal procedure... Instead, it was a social drama involving family, peers, and neighbors in a collective process aimed at making things right economically, socially, and psychologically, as well as legally.”²⁷ To judge his prospects with a particular woman, William Byrd looked to her father, although in both of his marriages he felt the impact of his mother-in-law as much as, if not more than, his father-in-law.

Under William Byrd’s first marriage, his father-in-law was Daniel Parke II and his mother-in-law was Jane Ludwell Parke, who lived at Queen’s Creek Plantation in York County, Virginia. Lucy Byrd was the couple’s second child, born in 1685. Her father was politically well-connected, serving in Virginia’s House of Burgesses and on the governor’s Council, but he was also prone to outrageous behavior stemming from his violent temper. He brought his mistress, a woman named Mrs. Berry, to live at Queen’s Creek, which is likely where she gave birth to his illegitimate son, Julius Caesar Parke, near the turn of the century. In 1697, Daniel Parke left Virginia for London, taking Mrs. Berry with him, but leaving Julius Caesar for his wife to raise. In addition to the responsibility of her husband’s illegitimate child, Jane Parke was also left in charge of all of the Parke lands in Virginia. Daniel Parke II essentially abandoned his family; he never returned to Virginia and he provided them with very little financial support.²⁸ Once in England, Daniel Parke became an

²⁷ John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 17.

²⁸ Jane Ludwell Parke’s management of her husband’s Virginia plantations generated income for him, but under the colonial mercantilist economy, planters shipped their tobacco to merchants in England. Rather than ever

aide-de-camp for the duke of Marlborough. He was lucky enough to be the messenger who brought news of the English army's victory at Blenheim to Queen Anne, for which he was rewarded with the governorship of the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean in 1705.²⁹ The personal qualities that made Daniel Parke a terrible father and husband also failed to bring him success as a governor. In 1710 insurgents organized by local assemblymen murdered Daniel Parke for his abrasive behavior and heavy-handed mismanagement.³⁰

William Byrd II returned to Virginia from England in the early spring of 1705. By the fall of that year at the latest, he began courting Lucy Parke. Her feelings about this development must have been conflicted. It is likely that she was anxious to leave her scandalous and isolated living arrangement, but she had also witnessed the pain of her parents' failed marriage. Lucy Parke probably wanted to find a new home, but her eagerness may have been tempered with a desire to choose a responsible mate. Initially in the courtship, nineteen-year-old Lucy Parke was somewhat undecided about the thirty-two-year-old William Byrd. It was probably late in 1705 when he wrote her a distressed letter, asking "[h]ow cou'd my dearest Fidelia [Lucy Parke] counterfeit Indifference so perfectly on Sunday last; that even a Lovers eye which is apt to see every thing it hopes for, cou'd not discern y^e least symptoms of Inclination?"³¹ There is also evidence to suggest that she turned away another suitor before she married William Byrd on May 4, 1706.³²

exchange hard currency, the planters earned credit for their tobacco in England. Daniel Parke maintained control of his credit, and therefore effectively financially cut off his wife and children.

²⁹ Nancy Ehrich Martin, "Lucy Parke Byrd: Inside the Diary and Out" (Master's thesis, University of Rochester, 1994), 14-42; Treckel, "'The Empire of My Heart,'" 141.

³⁰ Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va., by the University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 144-146.

³¹ William Byrd II to Fidelia [Lucy Parke], Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 216.

³² William Byrd II to Fidelia [Lucy Parke], *Ibid.*, 219.

While Lucy Parke considered one of the most important transitions of her life— marriage— William Byrd wrote a letter to Daniel Parke to ask for his approval of the match and to inquire as to how much money he would give his daughter upon her nuptials. William Byrd wrote “I think it my duty to intreat your approbation, before I proceed to give her the last testimony of my affection. [A]nd the young Lady her self...will agree to nothing without it.”³³ It is most likely that Lucy Parke Byrd did not have a very significant amount of control concerning her arrangements for marriage. Her isolation at Queen’s Creek and financial deprivation (relative to her social peers) denied her the opportunity to visit and interact with many other young people. The typical courtship experience among elite eighteenth-century Virginians was not overly strict; young people spent a good deal of time dancing together at family homes and were even permitted to speak in private.³⁴ However, Lucy Parke was largely excluded from this experience. She must have been at least a bit impressed that the wealthy and powerful William Byrd was paying attention to her. Additionally, William Byrd’s communication with her father demonstrated that although a woman’s preferences were acknowledged, marriage was still a broader matter concerning family and finances. In this particular situation, William Byrd was most desirous of a connection with the Parke family because of Daniel Parke’s political success. William Byrd was extremely ambitious; he coveted the governorships of Virginia and Maryland throughout his entire life. He thought that being the son-in-law of one of the few colonial-born governors in the British Empire would help him similarly achieve that goal.³⁵ Therefore, financial and political matters likely eclipsed the hesitation that Lucy Parke felt concerning the marriage.

³³ William Byrd II to Don Altiero [Daniel Parke], *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁴ Robert Bolling, *Robert Bolling Woos Anne Miller: Love and Courtship in Colonial Virginia, 1760*, ed. J.A. Leo Lemay (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 2-13.

³⁵ Treckel, “The Empire of My Heart,” 131-132.

As a married couple, Lucy and William Byrd fought frequently. William Byrd's constant attempts to control all aspects of their life caused the majority of arguments. He explained his authority to a friend in England as such:

I have a large family of my own...Like one of the patriarchs, I have my flocks and my herds, my bond-men and bond-women, and every sort of trade amongst my own servants so I live in a kind of independence of everyone but Providence...I must take care to keep all my people to their duty, to set all the springs in motion, and to make everyone draw his equal share to carry the machine forward.³⁶

In William Byrd's mind, the people on his plantation- his wife, children, servants, and slaves- were not just his dependents and his workers; they were an extension of him. They existed in his mind only in their relation to him.

William Byrd made very few distinctions between those he perceived to be his people. Although Lucy Byrd was white and of a high social class, he still did not want her to direct the management of slaves. He reprimanded her, for instance, for mistrusting slaves with alcohol and guns.³⁷ On May 22, 1712 Byrd recorded: "My wife caused Prue to be whipped violently notwithstanding I desired not, which provoked me to have Anaka whipped likewise who deserved it much more, on which my wife flew into such a passion that she hoped she would be revenged of me."³⁸ The slaves Prue and Anaka had to obey him in the same way that his wife did. Given her race and social class, Lucy Byrd probably felt that it was within her rights to discipline slaves, who occupied the lowest social order. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that nineteenth-century slaveholding women did not feel any sort of camaraderie or bond of mutual subjugation with their slaves. Wealthy, white women

³⁶ William Byrd II to Charles, Earl of Orrery, Virginia, July 5, 1726, in "Virginia Council Journals, 1726-1753. Vol. 605-1418," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 32, no. 1 (January 1924), 1-64. 27, <http://www.jstor.org/wncn.wncn.org/stable/4243947>.

³⁷ Byrd II, June 2, 1709 and December 19, 1710 in *Secret Diary*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1712.

accepted that their privileged status originated from the racial inequality entrenched in the slave society.³⁹ These sentiments were likely similar to those felt by Lucy Byrd in the early eighteenth century. She probably did not realize that a connection existed between herself, Prue, and Anaka based on their common subjugation to the head of the household.

William Byrd did not make the same distinctions amongst his household as his wife did. He made it clear that authority belonged solely to him. Slavery, as one of the defining characteristics of the social organization of eighteenth-century Virginia, constituted one of the primary topics of disagreement between this husband and wife. While white women as a whole were able to pursue roles of domestic leisure because of slavery,⁴⁰ in this particular instance William Byrd used slavery to emphasize his wife's subjugation to him. It is interesting to note that the sole surviving portrait of Lucy Byrd also contains the image of a young male slave who is handing her a piece of embroidery work. It is uncertain if she, her husband, or the artist was responsible for the content of the portrait. However, if the slave's presence in the painting was a result of Lucy Byrd's wishes, she used this portrayal to try to assert some of her own authority over her husband's "bond-men."⁴¹

William Byrd's disdain for women who directed slaves was not limited to his wife. In 1733, he embarked on a trip to visit the land he recently purchased in south central Virginia, a tract that he called the Land of Eden. In William Byrd's written account of the journey, he described his anger at an unnamed landlady due to her discipline of slaves. She "could not forbear discovering some broad signs of the fury, by breaking out into insolent and

³⁹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 34-35.

⁴⁰ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 368-369.

⁴¹ Treckel, "The Empire of My Heart," 132. The painting is in a private collection, but is also printed in Treckel's article.

passionate expressions against the poor negroes.”⁴² He sought to correct her style of management to agree with his own. Because she was a tenant on his lands, William Byrd considered her an extension of himself in the same patriarchal attitude that defined his relationship with his wife. Just as he believed that Lucy Byrd’s race and status did not qualify her to hold authority over slaves, he also criticized this woman’s methods of exerting her power. The vast social disparity between the landlady and Lucy Byrd showed that William Byrd deplored female control over slaves, regardless of social status.

The concept of relegating authority to his wife as a second in command did not follow William Byrd’s belief system. Such an ordering of power incorrectly assumed that William Byrd separated his home from the wider world, with his wife given domestic authority. William Byrd held ultimate control over the management of his household and frequently reprimanded his wife for not completing domestic tasks to his liking. On April 4, 1709, he reproached his wife “with ordering the old beef to be kept and the fresh beef used first, contrary to good management, on which she was...very angry and this put me out of humor.” Three years later, he argued with her over the dirtiness of the nursery.⁴³ While these issues were traditionally seen as the wife’s prerogative, William Byrd considered everything at Westover to be under his authority alone. On her part, Lucy Byrd grew up in a home where her mother did not answer to her husband over daily activities. She may have been unprepared and unwilling to obey her husband in every minute detail. Indeed, the regularity of arguments between the couple is strong evidence that Lucy Byrd stifled and rebelled against William Byrd’s authority. William Byrd undoubtedly anticipated receiving many political benefits from his alliance with Lucy Parke Byrd’s father, Daniel Parke II. However,

⁴² William Byrd II, *A Journey to the Land of Eden and Other Papers*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Macy-Masius, The Vanguard Press, 1928), 271.

⁴³ Byrd II, April 7, 1709 and June 13, 1712 in *Secret Diary*.

he may have more acutely felt the influence of his mother-in-law, Jane Parke, through his wife's inexperience with patriarchal control.

Therefore, neither Lucy nor William Byrd saw any clear distinctions between a private home and a public world. Lucy Byrd was used to her mother holding authority over the home and the family plantations due to her father's absence. William Byrd similarly did not believe that Westover was separated from its broader society. The idea of separate spheres in the eighteenth century is largely disproved through William Byrd's diary entries from February of 1711, when Governor Spotswood held a ball in honor of the Queen's birthday. Reflecting its reputation as the biggest social event of the year, William Byrd wrote the longest entry in all of his diaries to fully describe it. Lucy and William Byrd began to prepare for the party the day before. On the fifth of February, William Byrd wrote: "My wife and I quarreled about her pulling her brows. She threatened she would not go to Williamsburg if she might not pull them; I refused, however, and got the better of her, and maintained my authority."⁴⁴ Lucy Byrd was not even master of her own personal appearance.

William Byrd was particularly concerned about her appearance because he was about to publically display her at a very important social gathering. William Byrd undoubtedly felt justified by his strong stance against eyebrow plucking the next evening when "the Governor opened the ball with a French dance with my wife."⁴⁵ Governor Spotswood gave William Byrd a very large compliment when he chose to begin the dance with Lucy Byrd. Intensifying this act's importance, all of the Virginia elite were present to witness this high honor bestowed upon William Byrd. This dance took on further political significance years later when William Byrd's relationship with Alexander Spotswood soured over the latter's

⁴⁴ Byrd II, February 5, 1711, in *Secret Diary*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, February 5-6, 1711.

attempts to limit the power of the Council, of which William Byrd was a member.⁴⁶ This compliment represented one of the high points of their political interaction.

At the Governor's ball, Lucy Byrd acted in a very public and political forum to enhance the social prestige of her husband. Lucy Byrd and her female peers helped to create a new concept of gentility in eighteenth-century Virginia, where women participated in civic and social rituals that created and reinforced the social authority of their husbands. Although there is no evidence to confirm Lucy Byrd's attendance, other female members of the gentry attended events such as horse races and election celebrations, in addition to balls.⁴⁷ The constant stream of visitors to Westover also placed Lucy Byrd in a public role, as hospitality augmented the social stature of her husband. Therefore, the idea that Lucy Byrd was relegated to the home- where she presided over purely domestic activities- is quite inaccurate. Eighteenth-century women held great public and even political importance, and moved between the home and the wider world with great ease.

One final important aspect of Lucy and William Byrd's marriage to note is that they were not always at odds with each other. Both Lucy Byrd and William Byrd initiated reconciliation after arguments. After a particularly severe fight in which Lucy Byrd threatened to kill herself, she and William Byrd "resolved to live for the future in love and peace." William Byrd comforted Lucy Byrd as best as he could when she was sad, such as after the deaths of their son and her father. She helped to nurse William Byrd when he was ill. Their relationship had the potential to be pleasant, despite William Byrd's frequent treatment of his wife as if she were a child. They took walks and played games together. William Byrd noted several times that he played games with Lucy Byrd when she was ill to

⁴⁶ Louis B. Wright, "Introduction II," in Byrd II, *Secret Diary*, ix.

⁴⁷ Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 40-44.

distract her. When Lucy Byrd's life was in danger during one of the most traumatic events of her life, a particularly bad miscarriage, William Byrd wept for her and was very attentive during her recovery. Their sexual relationship could be mutually gratifying and they often had fun with each other. While on a walk, William Byrd once noted that his wife "burst herself with laughing."⁴⁸ Although William Byrd's primary concern in life was maintaining patriarchal control, he was not entirely emotionless.

It was partly as a result of the legacy of his marriage to Lucy Byrd that he met Maria Taylor Byrd in England. In his will, Lucy Byrd's father, Daniel Parke II, left his lands in the Leeward Islands to his illegitimate daughter, born of a Mrs. Katherine Chester. His estates in England and Virginia became the property of his oldest daughter, Frances Parke Custis. Lucy Byrd received a paltry £1,000, which was the sum he promised to give her upon her marriage but never paid.⁴⁹ William Byrd must have been upset by this slight because he arranged with John Custis IV, Lucy Byrd's brother-in-law, to take ownership of the lands willed to Frances Custis in exchange for responsibility of Daniel Parke's debts. William Byrd was anxious to assume the legacy of his father-in-law. Unfortunately, within several years William Byrd realized that this was a poor decision because Parke's debts were far more numerous than initially projected.⁵⁰ William Byrd departed Virginia for England in 1715 to deal with these financial issues caused by Lucy Byrd's father and also to advocate for Virginia's Council in its feud with Governor Spotswood. Once in London, William Byrd sensed that his business there would be of a longer duration than he originally believed, so he sent for Lucy Byrd to

⁴⁸ Byrd II, January 31, 1711, June 5, 1710, April 12, 1711, June 27-28, 1710, July 9, 1711, September 6, 1711, July 27-August 1, 1709, August 30, 1709, August 14, 1709, November 21, 1709, December 16, 1709, January 6, 1710, April 6, 1710, June 25-26, 1711, April 30, 1711, February 10, 1712, in *Secret Diary*.

⁴⁹ "Virginia Gleanings in England," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 20, no. 4 (October 1912): 372-381. 372-373, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4243226>.

⁵⁰ Marambaud, *William Byrd of Westover*, 28.

come stay with him there. She left Virginia in 1716, after she recovered from the birth of her daughter, Wilhelmina, in November of 1715. Her stay in England was cut short by her death from smallpox, which occurred in November of 1716.⁵¹ William Byrd spent the majority of the next ten years in England, leaving for good only after he married Maria Taylor.

Following Lucy Byrd's death, William Byrd primarily spent his time in London lobbying against Governor Spotswood and searching for a wealthy heiress to marry. He experienced many failures in the latter endeavor, although not for lack of trying. His proposal of marriage to a young lady named Mary Smith of London was rejected by her father, who said that Byrd's lands in Virginia were no better than an estate on the moon.⁵² Clearly Byrd aimed a bit above his social station, as a colonist, in his search for a wife.⁵³ During this time of his life, William Byrd struggled with continual rejection from women, financial debt, and complex political struggles.

There is no documentation of how or exactly when William Byrd met Maria Taylor. She was born November 10, 1698. Her parents were Thomas and Sarah Taylor of Kensington, Middlesex. She had a brother and two younger sisters, Anne and Sophia. When Thomas Taylor Sr. died in 1716, he left a home in Middlesex to his widow; £2,000 to each of his daughters, Anne and Sophia Taylor, at the time of their marriage or twenty-second birthday; £500 to his oldest daughter, Maria Taylor, six years after his death, with an additional £500 "if she be dutiful and obedient to her mother;"⁵⁴ and the remainder of his properties to his son, Thomas Taylor, Jr.

⁵¹ Treckel, "The Empire of My Heart," 154; Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life*, 79-83.

⁵² Marambaud, *William Byrd of Westover*, 34-36.

⁵³ See the collection of letters written by William Byrd to various women whom he courted for particulars on his attempts to woo women. Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 191-386.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Marion Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Note," *Correspondence*, 834.

The fact that Maria Taylor received significantly less money than her sisters is puzzling. Similarly, in the case of Daniel Parke's daughters, he left a majority to his oldest daughter, although there is some evidence to indicate that Frances Parke Custis was his favorite child between her and her sister, Lucy Parke Byrd.⁵⁵ The provision in Thomas Taylor's will that stipulated that Maria Taylor could receive more money if she stayed in her mother's good graces indicates that there was some type of rift between this daughter and her parents. At the time of her father's death, Maria Taylor was only nineteen years old, yet it appears that her actions somehow offended both her mother and her father, as seen by the cooperation between Thomas and Sarah Taylor in the execution of his will. Twenty years later, in a letter to his brother-in-law, William Byrd referred to his then-wife's mistreatment at the hands of her mother. He wrote: "God forgive our Honoured mother for having in the abundance of her Good Nature been the cause that Mrs. Byrd has less than the rest. Who knows but this may some time or other bring a Qualm over her Stomach?"⁵⁶

Maria Taylor's treatment evidently brought a qualm to the stomach of her brother, Thomas Taylor, Jr., because in his will he awarded her £1,000 of what was then his own estate to balance his sisters' portions. He died a young man in 1720. There were likely some complications with his estate and will because four years passed before the matter even began to be settled. On May 1, 1724, an English court began an accounting of the estate. Eight days later, on May 8, 1724, Maria Taylor and William Byrd married.⁵⁷ The close

⁵⁵ See the two letters Daniel Parke II wrote to his daughter, Frances Parke Custis. The deep emotions that Daniel Parke expressed in the letters is rather unusual given that he had abandoned his family and that family emotions were typically more restrained during this time. There is no surviving communication between Daniel Parke and his younger daughter, Lucy Parke Byrd. "Virginia Gleanings in England," 375-377.

⁵⁶ William Byrd II to Mr. Pratt, Virginia, June 24, 1736, in "Letters of William Byrd 2d, of Westover, Va. (Continued)," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 9, no. 3 (January 1902): 248, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4242436>.

⁵⁷ Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Note," *Correspondence*, 833-834.

occurrence between these two events was likely not a coincidence. Maria Taylor and William Byrd probably viewed this pronouncement as a promising development in her future financial situation, allowing them to marry. Did William Byrd become more interested in Maria Byrd because of the possibility of a favorable ruling in the case of her family's estate? It is possible, though the short amount of time between the court ruling and the wedding indicates that an understanding between the two likely existed earlier than the first of May. In the year of 1715, William Byrd earned an income of £1,716;⁵⁸ therefore, the £1,000 in question was not a particularly compelling amount to him.

Sarah Taylor remained a strong advocate for her favorite daughter, Sophia Taylor, who she wanted to receive the majority of the estate. According to William Byrd, Sarah Taylor employed delay tactics, such as withholding necessary paperwork, to prevent a final and fair decision regarding the estate's dispersal.⁵⁹ The court's report concerning the complications did not emerge until February 14, 1743. This court ruling evidently was not forceful enough to end the matter, however, because a private act of Parliament was passed in 1747 concerning the Taylor estate. It is possible that the more significant date to the final resolution was 1746, the year that Sarah Taylor died. It is not known how much money the forty-nine-year-old, widowed Maria Byrd received in 1747.⁶⁰

Although no sources survived to indicate exactly how the teenaged Maria Taylor offended her parents, it was certain that Sarah Taylor did not approve of her daughter's choice of husband. William Byrd copied some of his correspondence, probably those letters that he felt possessed the greatest literary quality, into a letterbook. This collection included a

⁵⁸ William Byrd II to Vigiltante [John Smith], Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 322.

⁵⁹ William Byrd II to Francis Otway, in "Letters of William Byrd 2d, of Westover, Va. (Continued)," *Virginia Magazine* 9, no. 3, 250.

⁶⁰ Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Note," *Correspondence*, 834.

letter that he wrote to Sarah Taylor, whom he refers to as Medusa, on May 26, 1724. William Byrd began by stating that “I had the honour to marry your Eldest Daughter about a fortnight since, & can assure you it shall be the greatest business of my life to make her happy. She tells me that she acquainted you with it soon after it happen’d, & begg’d your blessing.” Their marriage was clearly an elopement. Their decision to marry in secret showed that they were afraid of what Sarah Taylor would do to disrupt their plans. Evidently, Maria Taylor and William Byrd did not underestimate the Widow Taylor’s power and authority. William Byrd also referred to the reasons Sarah Taylor disapproved of him: “I am sensible Madam how cruelly I have been misrepresented to you both in my character & circumstances.” He asked her permission to allow him to wait upon her and dispel the rumors about him.⁶¹ Given the continued legal issues over Maria Taylor Byrd’s inheritance and the lack of any further surviving communications between them, it is likely that William Byrd did not successfully defend himself to Sarah Taylor. Again, William Byrd’s mother-in-law had a prevailing and significant impact on his life. William Byrd’s fear of Sarah Taylor demonstrates that it was possible for women to possess a great deal of power, particularly if they were widowed and controlled the family’s wealth.

William Byrd was no stranger to unsanctioned marriages. Although he pursued his first marriage in the socially correct manner, seeking the prior approval of Lucy Parke’s father, he was not as concerned with proper protocol in his later relationships, probably due to the assumption that parental consent would not be granted as readily. William Byrd conducted his extended pursuit of Mary Smith from 1717 to 1718 without the approval of her father. He often relied on the help of Mary Smith’s brother-in-law, Lord Dunkellen, and a

⁶¹ William Byrd II to Medusa [Sarah Taylor], May 26, 1724, Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 386.

mutual friend, Mrs. B-r-n, who were both sympathetic to William Byrd's suit. However, in the end the lady chose to marry another man, a decision she justified with her father's disapproval of Byrd.⁶²

Ironically, less than a year before he eloped with Maria Taylor, William Byrd wrote a letter to his daughter, Evelyn, forbidding her to marry against his will. "Tis therefore high time for me to reproach you with breech of duty & breach of faith, & once more to repeat to you, my strict & positive Commands, never more to meet, speak, or write to that Gentleman, or to give him an opportunity to see, speak, or write to You. I also forbid you to enter into any promise or engagement with him of marriage or Inclination." He threatened that if she married against his wishes, "you are not to look for one brass farthing, if you provoke me by this fatal instance of disobedience. Nay besides all that, I will avoid the sight of you as of a creature detested."⁶³ William Byrd viewed Evelyn Byrd's disobedience as a threat to his authority as a patriarch. She was an extension of him, so William Byrd was baffled and furious by her threat to defy him. To Evelyn Byrd's potential suitor, William Byrd wrote: "You are deluded if you believe that any part of my Estate is settled upon Her, or that she has any thing independent of my Pleasure."⁶⁴ It was incongruous at best and hypocritical at worst that William Byrd forbade his daughter from committing the same act that he tried to convince Mary Smith to do six years earlier. When it did not suit his best interests, William Byrd violated the tenets of patriarchy that he upheld almost compulsively in Virginia.

⁶² William Byrd II to Sabina [Mary Smith], January 22, 1718, Mary Smith to Veramour [William Byrd II], January 23, 1718, William Byrd II to Lord Tipparari [Lord Dunkellen], Mary Smith to Veramour [William Byrd II], March 11, 1718, William Byrd II to Sabina [Mary Smith], May 6, 1718, Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 315, 324-325, 329, 354-356; William Byrd II, December 22, 1717, February 2, 1718, February 17-18, 1718 in *The London Diary, 1717-1721, and Other Writings*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁶³ William Byrd II to Amasia [Evelyn Byrd], July 20, 1723, Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 381-383.

⁶⁴ William Byrd II to Erranti, July 20, 1723, Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 384.

The elopement between Maria Taylor and William Byrd required great personal courage and autonomy on her part, a fact that all historians have overlooked. Where Lucy Parke lacked the personal authority or ability to act upon her hesitations concerning marriage, Maria Taylor was a primary agent in arranging her marriage. Maria Taylor's father died years before and therefore did not direct this marriage at all. Additionally, Sarah Taylor, Maria Taylor's mother, did not support the couple. During William Byrd's earlier pursuit of Mary Smith, the lady's brother-in-law served as a convenient messenger between the couple because Lord Dunkellen was a member of the same social circles as William Byrd. At the time of her wedding, Maria Taylor's brother was dead and neither of her sisters had yet married, denying the couple any help with a connection to the Taylor family. William Byrd made no mention in his diary, kept from 1717 to 1721, of ever associating with any member of the Taylor family.⁶⁵ Maria Byrd was quite alone in her decision to marry William Byrd. She took advantage of her uniquely independent situation, without a father or brother, and made a choice based on what she perceived to be in her best interest. The decision belonged to her because William Byrd lacked a male Taylor family member with which to collude and coerce her.

Maria Byrd's motivations to choose William Byrd were not spelled out in any historical source, but they can be surmised through consideration of their relative situations. There is no compelling evidence to indicate that any great amount of affection existed between the couple. For example, William Byrd transcribed correspondence and short writings into a notebook, all of which date from the early eighteenth century. The notebook includes over seventy letters that he wrote to women, many of which had romantic intent, yet

⁶⁵ Marion Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Note," *Correspondence*, 833-834; Mary Smith to Veramour [William Byrd II], January 23, 1718; William Byrd II to Lord Tipparari [Lord Dunkellen], Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 315, 324-325.

only one of these letters was addressed to Maria Taylor. He spent pages waxing poetic over Mary Smith, who he called Sabina, but the single letter to Maria Taylor is a scant eleven printed lines long. He wrote the letter in Greek in response to a missive she wrote him in that same language. “When I thought you knew only your mother tongue, I was passionately in love with you: but when indeed I learned that you also spoke Greek, the tongue of the Muses, I went completely crazy about you,” he wrote.⁶⁶ Although this statement conveyed much sentiment, it was still weak when compared to the expressions of love in the letters to Mary Smith or even Lucy Parke. Perhaps William Byrd wrote more letters to Maria Taylor but did not consider them to be of high enough literary merit for inclusion in his notebook and thereby ensuring their destruction, although his standards were low enough to include a poem entitled “Upon a Fart.”⁶⁷ William Byrd closed the letter to Maria Taylor by saying “[i]f you deem it to send any reply, you will write it in English,”⁶⁸ indicating that he was not overly pleased with his future wife’s unusually high degree of education. Perhaps her intelligence made her somewhat less romantically appealing to him.

This one extant letter between the couple is not enough evidence to decidedly prove that theirs was a love match. Furthermore, writing produced by William Byrd during their marriage, including correspondence, essays, and his diary, never illustrated any strong emotional attachment between them. In 1745, Maria Byrd wrote a letter to her friend in England, Mrs. Kein, upon hearing of the recent death of Mr. Kein. Widowed herself only the year before, Maria Byrd did not elaborate on the difficulty or emotional distress in losing a husband. Rather, she quickly began discussing her son, which remained the topic for the

⁶⁶ William Byrd II to Maria Taylor, Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 387.

⁶⁷ The first stanza began: “Gentlest Blast of ill concoction,/Reverse of high-ascending Belch:/Th’ only stink abhorr’d by Statesmen,/Belov’d and practic’d by the Welch.” Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 245-246.

⁶⁸ William Byrd II to Maria Taylor, Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, 387.

majority of the rest of the letter.⁶⁹ Maria and William Byrd were never madly in love with each other.

It is more likely that Maria Taylor hedged her bets and planned for her future in her decision to marry William Byrd, considering both finances and her potential for some degree of control over her own life. The financial dynamic of her choice involved an ability to see beyond the superficiality of William Byrd's reputation in England. William Byrd struggled to prove to both Mary Smith's father and Maria Taylor's mother that he was wealthy. Perhaps Maria Taylor was one person William Byrd was able to convince of his affluence and she perceived that his financial status rose as he moved westward across the Atlantic Ocean.

While in England, William Byrd's English peers stigmatized him because of his identity as a colonist.⁷⁰ Unlike his situation in Virginia, William Byrd was not among the highest of the social elite in London. In the place of his birth, however, William Byrd was significantly more powerful. In 1708, William Byrd was appointed to Virginia's Council, the upper house of the colonial assembly, making him one of the twelve most influential men in the colony.⁷¹ Maria Taylor's father did not rank among the extremely wealthy class in London either. It is possible that Maria Taylor understood that marrying William Byrd brought her more relative prestige in Virginia than marrying an English man of her social equivalent. Also, Maria Taylor may have considered the age of her potential husband relative to her own. On their wedding day, William Byrd was exactly twice her age, fifty years to her twenty-five. She possibly speculated that she would outlive him, allowing her to live her life according to her wishes alone as a widow.

⁶⁹ Maria Byrd to Mrs. Kein, September 6, 1745, (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society).

⁷⁰ Lockridge, *The Life and Diary*, 14-18.

⁷¹ Richmond Croom Beatty, *William Byrd of Westover* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1970), 63-64.

It is impossible to ascertain exactly what motivated Maria Taylor to marry William Byrd. The most unlikely incentive was love. The timing of the marriage according to the court ruling concerning her father's estate and all sources that described their relationship indicated that practicality, rather than strong affection, was the predominant influence. Perhaps Maria Taylor entered into the marriage to anger or seek revenge against her mother, who did not like William Byrd. However, Maria Taylor was then twenty-five years old, presumably old enough to have gained some real-world experience, and well-educated, as evidenced by her knowledge of the Greek language.⁷² The idea that Maria Taylor would make the most important decision of her life based on spite or willfulness is dubious. It is much more probable that she was unhappy with her life in England, perhaps due to an unharmonious family environment or the lack of potential social advancement, and made a calculated maneuver to improve her situation.

Maria and William Byrd began a family soon after their marriage. Their first daughter, Anne, was born on February 4, 1725 in England.⁷³ Within a year, William Byrd chose to move back to Virginia, likely for financial reasons, as he faced the new expense of a growing family.⁷⁴ He continued to rent his apartments at Lincoln's Inn in London until 1729, at the earliest, indicating that he intended to return to England at some point.⁷⁵ However, these plans did not come to fruition; Maria and William Byrd never saw England again. Ever the pragmatist, she adapted to Virginia well. Soon after their arrival in early 1726, her husband wrote to a friend back in England:

⁷² Maria Byrd also knew French. See Byrd II, August 16, 1739 in *Another Secret Diary*.

⁷³ Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Note," *Correspondence*, 828.

⁷⁴ Beatty, *William Byrd of Westover*, 116.

⁷⁵ Maude H. Woodfin, ed., "Introduction," in Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary*, xxxviii.

The beautifullest Bloom of our Spring when we came Ashore, gave Mrs. Byrd a good impression of the Country. But since that the Weather is grown Warm, and some days have been troublesome eno' to make Her wish herself back in England. She now begins to be seasoned to the Heat, and to think more favorably of our Clymate. She comforts herself with the thought that a warm Sun is necessary to ripen our fine Fruit, and so pays herself with the Pleasure of one Sense, for the Inconvenience that attends the others.⁷⁶

Stunned with the difference between Virginia and her home country, Maria Byrd rationalized a solution for herself, again proving her intelligence and personal courage.

Maria Byrd quickly became pregnant once in Virginia and gave birth to a daughter, Maria, on January 16, 1727. A year and a half later, on September 6, 1728, she bore a son, William Byrd III. Her final child, Jane, was born October 13, 1729.⁷⁷ Fertility was not an issue, as seen from her three pregnancies that took place in thirty-four months. The couple likely planned at least some of these pregnancies, probably by abstaining from sex. For example, the nearly two year gap between their first and second child was likely intentional because of their plans to move to Virginia during that time. After having three children in rapid succession, her years of childbirth abruptly ended with baby Jane, indicating that Maria and William Byrd probably discontinued their sexual relationship at that time. A letter that William Byrd wrote to his wife's sister-in-law in England reveals that Maria Byrd used her pregnancies to exert control over her husband and that it was likely William Byrd who was more intent on ending sexual intercourse. When describing his wife, he wrote:

I know nothing but a rabbit that breeds faster. It would be ungallant in a husband to diswade her from it, but it would be kind in you, to preach her upon that chapter as a friend. She was delivered of a huge boy in September last and is so unconscionable as to be breeding again, nay the learned say she is some months gone. The truth of it is, she has her reasons for procreating so fast. She lives in an infant country which wants nothing but people. Then she

⁷⁶ William Byrd II to Charles, Earl of Orrery, Virginia, July 5, 1726, "Virginia Council Journals, 26.

⁷⁷ Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Note," *Correspondence*, 828.

is apprehensive I should marry again, if she should start first out of this world, but is determined to prevent [that] by leaving me to[o] great an encumbrance. Is not this a little spiteful, to en[...] my happiness when she can be no longer a sharer in it?⁷⁸

In his previous marriage, William Byrd recorded sexual encounters with Lucy Byrd 102 times in the 1709-1712 diary.⁷⁹ In his 1739-1741 diary, he never mentioned any kind of sexual relationship with Maria Byrd. Disinclination or age did not prohibit William Byrd's sexual activity during this time, as evidenced by his mentions that he "played the fool with Sally [most likely a slave], God forgive me."⁸⁰ Maria and William Byrd probably practiced abstinence from sexual intercourse except for means of procreation. This decision was an effective birth control method, but it also showed a lack of passion or love in their relationship.

Maria Byrd's decision to marry William Byrd showed that she exercised a great amount of personal autonomy, as elucidated above. However, all sources that originated from the time period of her marriage (none of which are by her hand), indicate that she was subservient to and obedient of her husband. Whereas the diary from 1709-1712 was full of instances where Lucy Byrd challenged her husband's authority, the 1739-1741 diary did not describe any situations where Maria Byrd ever argued with or contradicted her husband. All of William Byrd's references to her make her appear very docile. On April 1, 1740, William Byrd wrote that "[a]fter dinner I played billiards with my wife and walked about the garden."

⁷⁸ Quoted in Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 164.

⁷⁹ Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," 271n33.

⁸⁰ Byrd II, May 26, 1740, August 11, 1740, May 9, 1741, June 24, 1741 in *Another Secret Diary*.

On January 25, 1740, “Mrs. Byrd had the headache pretty much.” William Byrd recorded on April 1, 1741 that “[a]bout 7 my wife and I went to Hanover in the chariot.”⁸¹

Full appreciation of these mentions requires an understanding of the differences between the earliest and latest diary. According to historian Kenneth A. Lockridge’s psychoanalysis of William Byrd, he was still defined by the trauma of his childhood when he penned the 1709-1712 diary. Sent to England for his education at the tender age of seven, William Byrd was stigmatized by his fellow students because of his colonial origin. As a young man, he desperately tried to mold himself into the perfect English gentleman and feverishly sought positions of political influence. The 1709-1712 diary shows his anxiety over losing any power or authority, as seen in his refusal to allow Lucy Byrd to pluck her eyebrows or have a book out of his library.⁸² However, around the time of his marriage to Maria Byrd, William Byrd’s personality matured, as it was no longer defined by his childhood. His life became more stable and he was no longer as anxious.⁸³ The diary of 1739 to 1741 therefore represents a matured and mellowed William Byrd. He likely did not feel as threatened by his wife anymore, so he may not have felt compelled to record the ways in which Maria Byrd infringed upon the patriarchal system. Additionally, William Byrd was much older during the time of his final surviving diary. From the ages of sixty-five to sixty-seven, William Byrd was much less active and his entries were shorter. Again, this situation indicates that he did not record all of his wife’s activities.

Even after consideration of the changes in the diaries of William Byrd, Maria Byrd was still a rather subservient wife. William Byrd even used his domination over his wife as a

⁸¹ Byrd II, April 1, 1740, January 25, 1740, April 1, 1741 in *Another Secret Diary*.

⁸² Byrd II, February 5, 1711, December 30, 1711 in *Secret Diary*.

⁸³ Lockridge, *The Life and Diary*, 6-11, 120-121.

motif in his written works, *A Journey to the Land of Eden*, *The History of the Dividing Line*, and *A Progress to the Mines*, to illustrate the broader theme of man's civilization of the wilderness. Just as William Byrd conquered his wife, so too did he conquer the virgin wilderness of North Carolina and western Virginia in his various expeditions. As with Lucy Byrd, Maria Byrd represented the social authority of the ruling gentry class, which William Byrd contrasted to the social chaos of the wilderness.⁸⁴

The institution of slavery was the crux of William Byrd's ability to keep Maria Byrd subservient to him. One of the primary ways that Lucy Byrd challenged his authority was through her attempts to direct or punish the household slaves at Westover. According to William Byrd, his slaves belonged to him just as his wife did, so it did not make sense for one to exert power over the other. Lucy Byrd, however, was born in Virginia and grew up in a slave society. She was familiar with the system. Maria Byrd, on the other hand, lived in England for the first twenty-six years of her life, where she had little to no exposure to slavery. Although she likely witnessed her English mother managing servants, Maria Byrd did not have any examples of how white women worked with slaves. Newly arrived in Virginia, Maria Byrd's ignorance of colonial power structures gave William Byrd even more of an upper hand over his wife. Lacking an understanding of slavery, she was unable to challenge the household authority of her husband. Maria Byrd's unfamiliarity with the climate of Virginia may have made her physically uncomfortable, but her unfamiliarity with slavery rendered her powerless in comparison to William Byrd.

Rather than challenge her husband in a struggle that she would inevitably lose, Maria Byrd instead chose to exert her authority over the next generation of Byrds. She was always a

⁸⁴ Ibid., 132-141.

much more powerful mother than wife. One of the few moments of domestic discord that William Byrd recorded in his 1739-1741 diary involved an argument between Maria Byrd and her stepdaughter, Wilhelmina Byrd. On May 21, 1741, William Byrd and his young son were away from Westover for the majority of the day visiting. When he returned home in the evening, he found a “great quarrel between my wife and Mina which made me retire.”⁸⁵ Significantly, the start of the argument began when William Byrd was absent. If Maria Byrd was the aggressor or instigator in any manner, she likely chose that time for action because the person to whom she acquiesced was not present. William Byrd’s retreat from the scene possibly indicated that he found the situation too insignificant for his participation. There are no more details that provide any more information about this particular argument.⁸⁶

Maria Byrd made many independent decisions concerning the direction of her own life. She chose her marriage when many other women acted upon liberal input from their families. Once married, Maria Byrd also chose her battles wisely, focusing her efforts to exert her will upon her children rather than her powerful husband, as is discussed further in the next chapter. Above all, Maria Byrd was not powerless and has been inaccurately portrayed by historians.

⁸⁵ Byrd II, May 21, 1741 in *Another Secret Diary*.

⁸⁶ This conflict between Maria and Wilhelmina Byrd seemed to have lasted for another twenty years. In 1757 and 1758, Maria Byrd wrote in a letter to her son that she had not heard anything from Wilhelmina Byrd Chamberlayne, even though she had invited her stepdaughter to stay at Westover during Mrs. Chamberlayne’s (unexplained) “deplorable condition.” Maria Byrd again remarked in 1760 that she had not received any word from Wilhelmina Chamberlayne in over two years. Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, December 24, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd II, ca. February 20, 1758, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, July 18, 1760, *Correspondence*, 634, 636, 700.

CHAPTER 2

“LIKE A HIGH-METTLED HORSE, FROM RUNING AWAY WITH THEIR OWNER”: MARIA BYRD AS A MOTHER

There were three primary ways in which women challenged the colonial organization of power, which followed the beliefs of English theorist Sir Robert Filmer. First, women were mothers and through this role they wielded some authority within the family. According to Filmerian thought, the family was a direct representation of the state; therefore, through the family, women could influence broader society. Second, women became widows when their husbands died, leaving them relatively independent. Third, women received their social status from that of their husbands or fathers; thus, elite women occupied a higher social standing than low-status men.⁸⁷ From 1744, the year of her husband’s death, until her own death in 1771, Maria Taylor Byrd satisfied all three of these contentious criteria. She was a wealthy, widowed mother who entered this last phase of her life with confidence and assurance that she was in control of her own life, in addition to her ability to influence those around her. Maria Byrd provided compelling evidence that eighteenth-century women were not powerless or entirely subservient to male authority.

Maria Byrd proved to be most historically significant in her role as a mother because her intense emotional devotion to her children was a marked deviation from the traditional reserved family life. Similar to the manner in which William Byrd II lived his entire life, colonial Virginians believed that emotional restraint was of utmost importance within the

⁸⁷ Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 10.

family. Without restraint, chaos ensued. These early white Virginia families found domestic happiness through peace rather than deep affection.⁸⁸ A cohesive movement towards the modernization of family values emerged in the late eighteenth century. These new ideals embraced increased maternal influence, personal autonomy, and emotionalism.⁸⁹

Maria Byrd's life showed glimmers of this new family dynamic, primarily in her close relationship with her only son, William Byrd III. She noted that her "sincere and tender affection" for her son was "beyond every other human soul that breathes upon the earth."⁹⁰ Although a thorough examination of pre-modern motherhood is lacking, the limited historical understanding of this subject contrasts sharply with the warm sentiments Maria Byrd expressed for her son. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, parents felt that it was more important to give their children material and financial benefits than love. Historian Julia Cherry Spruill notes that historical sources from this time period yield much more information about child-bearing than child-rearing. Most notably in the seventeenth century, it was not uncommon for a tension to exist between mother and child after a difficult childbirth that reflected the ever-present struggle for survival in the nascent colony. Particularly resentful mothers saw babies as "demanding and dangerous," according to historian Daniel Blake Smith. Parental relations, including motherhood, were radically different by the early nineteenth century. As historian Jan Lewis argues, by this time period, parents were distinguished by "their insistence that their little darlings were their only comfort in life, their sole source of happiness, their only reason for being."⁹¹ The eighteenth century was an amorphous era that witnessed the foundations for many of these radical

⁸⁸ Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 11, 36.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 285-291.

⁹⁰ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, April 28, 1760, in *Correspondence*, 686.

⁹¹ Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 174-175, 184; Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 55; Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 34.

changes in values. An examination of Maria Byrd's role as a mother helps to bridge this gap, as her life incorporated both seventeenth and nineteenth-century ideals.

As a wealthy, widowed mother, Maria Byrd presented a real threat to the gendered order of power in eighteenth-century Virginia. The two most important prerequisites that allowed her to reach this status were the conditions of her husband's will and the familiarity she developed with the slave society of Virginia. William Byrd II left ample resources to his wife in his will, exceeding the legally required one-third of his estate, both real and personal.⁹² William Byrd II wrote in his will that

my will and intention is, that my dear wife Maria Byrd remain in possession of my whole estate till my sons full age, as well for the maintenance of herself and my children that are unmarried...And so soon as my son William Byrd shall come to the full age of twenty one years, or if it shall please God that he die before that time, then my will is, that my said wife shall have out of the produce of my estate, the yearly summ of two hundred pounds sterling in lieu of her dower dureing her natural life, and so long as she shall continue in this country and remain unmarried, my will and intention is, that she have the use of my plantation of Westover, as likewise of all the working slaves that shall remain upon it at the time of my death, and also the use of all my plate, linnen, household-goods, and other personal estate remaining on my said plantation. All which shall fall to the use of my heir, if she shall think fit to marry, or remove out of the country.⁹³

He also granted Maria Byrd the ability to approve the marriage of his only single daughter at the time, Jane, and thereby award the young woman with the promised 1,500 pounds sterling. Additionally, William Byrd II named his wife as one of the executors of his will, along with his two sons-in-law, Charles Carter and Landon Carter.⁹⁴

⁹² Linda E. Speth, "More Than Her 'Thirds:' Wives and Widows in Colonial Virginia," *Women, Family, and Community in Colonial America: Two Perspectives in Women and History*, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 10.

⁹³ "Copy of the Will of William Byrd Esq. of Westover in Virginia," *Correspondence*, 598-600.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 598-600.

While the execution of wills by widows was a common trend in the seventeenth century, it gradually faded in the eighteenth century. Demographic changes in Virginia near the end of the seventeenth century greatly increased life expectancy and survival rates. This development allowed kin networks to expand and made it more likely that children survived to adulthood. Therefore, men began to have more male options when choosing an executor. Although there was a movement against a husband selecting his wife as the executor of his will in the eighteenth century, Maria Byrd demonstrated that at least some women continued to gain this authority. Men endowed these women with executorships primarily due to their roles as mothers to underage children, a reasoning that included the Byrd family at William Byrd II's death in 1744.⁹⁵ Thus, the wealth that Maria Byrd received from her husband's will because of her motherhood made her relatively independent. Motherhood was a route to power for eighteenth-century women.

Maria Byrd was able to become a powerful mother because of slavery. The concepts of slavery and race helped to define elite white womanhood. While patriarchal forms of authority attempted to keep white women subordinate to men, corresponding methods of control employing race gave white women social positions above all black members of society.⁹⁶ In colonial Virginia, the pervasiveness of slavery increased the standard of living for elite families and freed white wealthy women from hard physical labor. Because white wealthy women in Virginia often had many slaves performing domestic labor in their home, women like Maria Byrd increasingly turned their focus to child care.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Speth, "More Than Her 'Thirds,'" 23-24.

⁹⁶ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 368-369.

⁹⁷ Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 295.

As argued above, Maria Byrd's husband was able to assert effective control over her because of her lack of familiarity of slave society. As a mother (and grandmother) she showed much more efficiency in the management and direction of slaves. In 1760, Maria Byrd worried about the negative influence that slaves had on her young granddaughter, called Betty or Betsey. Maria Byrd was concerned because the girl's

chief time is spent with servants & Negro children her play fellows, from whom she has learnt a dreadfull collection of words, & is intolerably passionate. She was at play with a girl, who I order'd to call somebody to me, which made her so extremely angerry that she curs'd me in the bitterness of her heart...Poor dear girl I deplore her bringing up & pity her from my heart & soul, seeing nothing but ruin attend such an education, for the child is not to be blamed so much as them that have the care of her.⁹⁸

Showing that she now keenly understood the social order of white over black, Maria Byrd attempted to teach her granddaughter the same social system that she herself had to learn in order to assert her own authority as an elite white woman. Perhaps the five-year-old Betty Byrd already comprehended the objectification of human life that was a prominent feature in this slave society because she became upset when her black playmate (or plaything) was taken away from her. It was through slavery that Maria Byrd was able to find her own place in society. However, her comprehension of slavery does not imply that she wielded complete control over her slaves. Slaves resisted their condition of bondage in many ways and at many different times. As revealed in an advertisement in the April 10, 1764 edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, Maria Byrd's slaves harbored a fugitive slave named Tom Baker, who had recently run away from a plantation in New Kent County.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 1760, *Correspondence*, 682.

⁹⁹ The advertisement requested that Tom Baker should be returned to Col. Daniel Parke Custis, who was the son of John Custis IV and Frances Parke Custis. The latter was the sister of William Byrd II's first wife, Lucy Parke Byrd. At least some of the slaves belonging to the Custis and Byrd families likely originated from the estate of

The most significant aspects of Maria Byrd's role as a mother were her intensely emotional devotion to her children (particularly her son), her willingness and ability to conduct business for the family, and her power to coerce and manipulate her family members. She successfully asserted herself as a matriarch of her family in a patriarchal society. While her maternal love and coercive authority were harbingers of nineteenth-century family life, her involvement with finances and business were reminiscent of women's economic power in seventeenth-century Virginia, a system that historian Edmund Morgan termed a "widowarchy."¹⁰⁰ Contrary to the common dictates of women's history, eighteenth-century Virginia women were not powerless against male authority.

As seen from the series of nineteen surviving letters written by Maria Byrd to her son, William Byrd III, while he was away from home performing military duties, it is readily evident that she loved her son a great deal. She did not express much of the emotional restraint that characterized pre-modern family life. Maria Byrd closed a letter to him in 1757 by saying that "no absense, distance of place nor time can make any alteration in the breast of my dear son your most sincere fond and affectionate mother M.B." Maria Byrd's son was the driving force in her life. She wrote: "[b]e assured my most dear son that there is nothing that you can ask and that is in my power to grant that I will ever deny." Motherhood was not a personal or individualistic condition for Maria Byrd. Rather, she lived for her son. She used the power that she gained from her status as a wealthy, widowed mother in a Filmerian system to advance the interests of William Byrd III. "My whole thoughts are employ'd upon your southern expedition day & night," she wrote in 1760. A year later, as his military career

Daniel Parke II, the father of Frances Custis and Lucy Byrd. It was therefore probable that Tom Baker took refuge with family or friends at "Madam Byrd's Quarters."

¹⁰⁰ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 165-166.

began to draw to a close, Maria Byrd complained: “I wish I knew the exact time I might expect you, for I talk & think of little else.”¹⁰¹

It is possible that Maria Byrd’s love for her son rendered her unable to chastise him for inappropriate behaviors. Historian Julia Cherry Spruill argues that Maria Byrd spoiled and flattered William Byrd III and used gifts of money to manipulate him.¹⁰² This flow of money from mother to son possibly encouraged William Byrd III’s development into a gambling addict, a reputation for which he was infamous both during his lifetime and in historical study. In 1765, a French traveler to Williamsburg, Virginia recorded in his journal:

I got a room at mrs. vaubes’s tavern, where all the best people resorted. I soon got acquainted with severals of them, but particularly with Colonel Burd, sir peton skiper...and others, which I soon was like to have had reason to repent, for they are all professed gamesters, Especially Colonel Burd, who is never happy but when he has the box and Dices in hand. this Gentleman from a man of the greatest property of any in america has reduced himself to that Degree by gameing, that few or nobody will Credit him for Ever so small a sum of money. he was obliged to sel 400 fine Negroes a few Days before my arrival.¹⁰³

Although untrue, another story asserted that William Byrd III gambled away in a card game 10,000 acres in Lunenburg County to Peyton Skipwith.¹⁰⁴ Generations later, a Byrd family historian, Elizabeth Byrd Nicholas, recounted that William Byrd III “doubtless” learned to gamble while studying in England as a young man.¹⁰⁵ While high-stakes, risky gambling contributed to his financial ruin, this social ritual served both to bond wealthy, elite men

¹⁰¹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, December 24, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, September 21, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, July 13, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, February 17, 1761, in *Correspondence*, 633, 629, 697, 715.

¹⁰² Spruill, *Women’s Life and Work*, 60.

¹⁰³ “Journal of a French Traveller in the Colonies, 1765, I,” *The American Historical Review* 26, no. 4 (July 1921): 726-747. 741-742, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/1836736>.

¹⁰⁴ Boulton, “The Architecture of Slavery, 117n4.

¹⁰⁵ “Letters of the Byrd Family (Continued),” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 37, no. 4 (October 1929): 302, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244297>.

together into a cohesive ruling class and to distinguish them from lower classes of Virginians who could not afford to participate.¹⁰⁶ Maria Byrd was likely complicit in her son's gambling addiction because of her control and distribution of money within the family. Her devotion to her son may have prevented her from addressing the growing problem, but Maria Byrd may have also seen that William Byrd's gaming was somewhat required in order to maintain his social position.

William Byrd III was clearly Maria Byrd's favorite child. She had three daughters: Anne, born in 1725; Maria, born in 1727; and Jane, born in 1729, but it was William Byrd III, born on September 6, 1728, who was the most important child to her.¹⁰⁷ In 1757, Maria Byrd wrote a letter to her absent son, informing him that his sister, and her daughter, Jane Byrd Page, had recently delivered a child. The new mother, however, was "in a very low condition." At the time she wrote the letter, Maria Byrd had not yet received word about her daughter and she was beginning to "fear the worst. But whatever misfortunes are to befall [us] in this life I shall not think my self miserable so long as it shall please the Author of our being to protect & preserve danger from my only son."¹⁰⁸ Although Maria Byrd was concerned for her daughter's welfare, she expressed an emotional resignation to her fate, reminiscent of William Byrd II's response to the death of his then-only son in 1710 (as described in the previous chapter). Maria Byrd's acceptance of her daughter's illness was typical of the restrained family life of the seventeenth century. On the other hand, her belief that her son was the primary purpose of her life corresponded to modern familial relationships that fully emerged near the beginning of the nineteenth century.

¹⁰⁶ Boulton, "The Architecture of Slavery," 115-116.

¹⁰⁷ Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Notes," *Correspondence*, 828.

¹⁰⁸ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, March 15, 1757, *Correspondence*, 623.

The fact that Maria Byrd preferred her son over her daughters is understandable, though not an automatic impulse. Although women held power in eighteenth-century Virginia, it was still a society that valued men over women. As the son of one of the most powerful men in the colony, William Byrd III possessed the potential to wield a vast amount of authority. Maria Byrd's son probably held the most potential to distinguish himself and to make her proud out of all of her children. However, the parental preference of a son over a daughter was not a foregone conclusion. Her husband's favorite child seemed to have been his eldest daughter from his first marriage, Evelyn Byrd. This claim is supported by the fact that William Byrd II occasionally referred to the girl by her given name in his diary, a rather rare treatment of his family members.¹⁰⁹

Although Maria Byrd strongly favored William Byrd III, she was an affectionate mother and grandmother to all of her family. Her oldest child, Anne, married Charles Carter in 1742 and died in 1757. Maria Byrd referred to her death as a "dismal catastrophe... which is a great trouble to me." Three years later, she professed "inexpressible joy" when she heard that Charles Carter's next choice of a wife refused his marriage proposal, demonstrating a great deal of loyalty to her departed daughter.¹¹⁰ Maria Byrd's second daughter, also named Maria, married Charles Carter's brother, Landon, in 1742. Maria Byrd Carter died as a seventeen-year-old mother in 1744. Maria Byrd took custody of her young granddaughter, a third Maria, though she was called Molly, who spent much of her childhood at Westover. Maria Byrd appreciated Molly Carter's companionship; she wrote to her granddaughter that

¹⁰⁹ Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," 264-265. William Byrd II typically referred to his family members only in relation to himself, such as "my wife" or "my young son." For examples of when Byrd called his daughter "Evelyn" or "Evie," see Byrd II, January 12, 1710, July 16, 1709, May 23-27, 1710 in *Secret Diary*.

¹¹⁰ Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Notes," *Correspondence*, 828; Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 5, 1760, *Correspondence*, 632-633, 707.

“I have a true and sincere affection for my beloved namesake.”¹¹¹ As noted above, Maria Byrd also worried about the health of her youngest child, Jane Byrd Page, who was the wife of John Page of Gloucester County. In a 1758 letter, Maria Byrd expressed thankfulness to God that Jane Page and her family were well after the delivery of another child.¹¹² Grandchildren were also important to Maria Byrd. In addition to Molly Carter, Maria Byrd enjoyed hosting her other grandchildren at Westover. Of her grandchildren from Anne Carter’s family she wrote: “I love ‘em from my soul.”¹¹³ However, despite her affection for and enjoyment of the rest of her family, William Byrd III remained her darling. She professed her adoration in a letter to him in 1758:

[M]ost solemnly I do declare there is not one upon earth that come’s in competition with an only son: but by words I desire not to be justify’d: but by my future actions, which insignificant as they may be, shall nevertheless be to the extent of my ability. My affections are strongly center’d in one son alone, whereas those that have several, their’s is divided in many branches so cannot judge what I suffer by a separation: but so long as I can continue in full possession of his esteem and affection I shall think my self blessed.¹¹⁴

True to her word, Maria Byrd was quite active in the ways that she demonstrated her love for her son, primarily by conducting his business while he was away from home. When William Byrd III volunteered for military service that took him far away to the Indian frontier in 1756, he charged his friends and peers John Robinson, Peter Randolph, Presly Thornton, Charles Carter, John Page, and Charles Turnbull with the duty of monitoring his

¹¹¹ Tinling, ed., “Appendix: Genealogical Notes,” *Correspondence*, 828, 624n1; Maria Byrd to Maria Carter, December 24, 1763, in “Letters of the Byrd Family (Continued),” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 37, no. 4 (October 1929): 309, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244297>.

¹¹² Tinling, ed., “Appendix: Genealogical Notes,” *Correspondence*, 828; Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 5, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. June 1758, *Correspondence*, 623, 658.

¹¹³ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. June 1758, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 20, 1758, *Correspondence*, 658, 636.

¹¹⁴ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 20, 1758, *Correspondence*, 636.

business affairs.¹¹⁵ Much of the day-to-day operation of the Byrd plantations undoubtedly fell to Maria Byrd. Her competence in this task was confirmed over a decade earlier when her husband willed her the possession of his entire estate until William Byrd III came of age.¹¹⁶ She was highly motivated to maintain the family holdings in the best possible condition until her son's return. In one of the earliest letters that Maria Byrd wrote him during his extended absence, she proudly noted that "at each of your habitations every thing continues in the same posture without the least variation as when you left us." In the same letter, she continued: "Nothing in the universe do I so much wish & pray for as your return... towards your home & your native land, where no man was ever more loved, respected & esteem'd by all ranks & degrees of people in general."¹¹⁷ The task of plantation management was not one that she coveted for herself; she felt that her son was the proper head of the estate.

Maria Byrd's correspondence with her son showed that she was very involved in the shipment of tobacco, even to the extent that she sent the crop to England under her own name rather than his because it would likely receive a higher price. She was aware of his financial troubles, but remained optimistic that he would rectify the situation. Late in the year of 1757, she reported to her son that "Mr. Turnbull is a man I deem most zealous in your interest, has very lately made a state of your affairs, which he shewed me- & by that calculation 'tis plain to a demonstration that your estate will be cleared of all incumbrances in four or five years at the furthest, barring accidents. I love the man, because I am sure he loves you sincerely; and did I know that soul that did not, I should have a secret abhorance to 'em."¹¹⁸ Unfortunately,

¹¹⁵ Tinling, ed., "William Byrd III," *Correspondence*, 606.

¹¹⁶ "Copy of the Will of William Byrd Esq. of Westover in Virginia," *Correspondence*, 598.

¹¹⁷ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 5, 1760, *Correspondence*, 623.

¹¹⁸ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, *Correspondence*, 632.

William Byrd III's finances never improved. In the postscript of a 1760 letter, Maria Byrd seemed to hint at the increasingly seriousness of the estate's economic condition.

Col. Harrison repents that he ever had a wind-mill built because it dont answer, & after that wretch Walker undertook to build one here, he said he would not do it unless the money was paid down before hand & this affronted me & I am glad of it now, as his mills are good for nothing, that he did not build one here. Poor old Milles is in a very bad way ocasion'd by a fall, so I sent him up last week to Dr. Willes at Richmond for advice: but he would do nothing for him as I did not send the pay before hand.¹¹⁹

Evidently, the builder named Walker and Dr. Willes understood that William Byrd III's credit was no longer reliable and demanded upfront payment. Walker's refusal to accept credit was particularly offensive to Maria Byrd because he ("that wretch") had significantly less social authority than she and her son. William Byrd III's money problems had become commonly known amongst all social classes of Virginia, not just his wealthy friends. Maria Byrd's inclusion of these two incidents in a postscript may have been her way of alerting her son to his worsening financial problems.

Maria Byrd's intelligence made her properly suited for conducting family business. Her neighbors Colonel Harrison and Will Randolph clearly respected her aptitude because they requested that she find a replacement parson for the Westover parish. She kept abreast of current affairs and related them to her son in their correspondence. Maria Byrd told her son that Ferdinand II recently suffered a military defeat and that the Englishman George Sackville was facing a court martial. She was aware of the threats that privateers presented along the American coast and worried about insuring the items she shipped. From her correspondence with her English family and friends, Maria Byrd learned that their country's

¹¹⁹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, April 28, 1760, *Correspondence*, 686.

enemies were quite persistent, and therefore the military conflict in which William Byrd III was engaged would likely not end soon. She frequently worried about his safety. “I am not so ignorant as to be unacquainted with your danger,” she wrote in reference to her son’s campaign against the Cherokees. She desperately wanted him to return home, but she rationalized that “the reasons you give me carry so much weight for your not returning soon.” Maria Byrd’s intelligent perspective of the situation compared favorably to the pinnings of her daughter-in-law, who rarely mentioned in her letters a subject other than the pain she experienced upon the separation from her husband.¹²⁰

Maria Byrd wielded a significant amount of authority due to her wealth and her positions as a mother and a widow. She became very adept at controlling her son, who likely possessed a somewhat weak character. Soon after William Byrd III left to pursue a military career, Maria Byrd told him: “I do most humbly & heartily address myself to heaven for your preservation in your new enterprize *to which I do at your request give my consent.*”¹²¹ William Byrd III seemed to rely on the approval and advice of his mother. Maria Byrd also manipulated him using his emotions for her as his mother and her ability to provide him money. However, her ability to break apart her son’s marriage is one of the most significant examples of Maria Byrd’s maternal authority, as will be explained below. Rather than concede familial power to her son’s new wife, Maria Byrd maintained her ability to direct William Byrd III.

¹²⁰ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, May 13, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, September 23, 1759, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, April 28, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, August 25, 1761, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, April 28, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, July 13, 1761, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, *Correspondence*, 688, 679, 685, 752-753, 686, 696, 632.

¹²¹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, September 21, 1757, *Correspondence*, 629. Emphasis added.

The Byrd family, under the influence of Maria Byrd rather than William Byrd II, was likely more affectionate than colonial families of the seventeenth century. A loving family life that focused on children in a more private environment became a hallmark of nineteenth century society,¹²² but Maria Byrd's family showed the tentative shifts to these new ideals.

As argued previously, the Byrd family was decidedly pre-modern while under the patriarchal control of William Byrd II, who promoted the exercise of emotional restraint and did not distinguish between a public and private sphere. In William Byrd II's lifetime, Westover operated under an open door policy. During the years that spanned his first diary, 1709 to 1712, Westover contained visitors nearly two out of three days.¹²³ William Byrd II and his people at Westover (wife, slaves, and other dependents) were public displays of his social authority. Westover seemed to be much quieter when Maria Byrd lived there while William Byrd III pursued his military career. She described her living condition as a "lonely situation" and remarked that "Westover is now become so solitary."¹²⁴ It is possible that Maria Byrd viewed her home as a private haven from the world, particularly in regards to her son. After hearing about a Native American attack near William Byrd III's camp on the western frontier, she wrote: "O merciful heaven grant you may return in safety to your dear children, to your own home, and to your mother, whose heart is intirely yours, and whose happiness is inseperable."¹²⁵ Both the constant threat of physical danger in a war zone and William Byrd III's long distance separation led Maria Byrd to view Westover in a very different manner than her late husband. Maria Byrd's power and authority did not require

¹²² Smith, *Inside the Great House*, 22.

¹²³ Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," 290.

¹²⁴ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 20, 1758, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, September 23, 1759, *Correspondence*, 636, 679.

¹²⁵ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, August 15, 1761, *Correspondence*, 701.

public display or affirmation; rather, she held most authority within the confined circle of her family.

Maria Byrd used familial emotion to bend others to her will. She explicitly stated this strategy in a 1760 letter to William Byrd III after she heard that his son (and her grandson), eleven-year-old Johney, was not performing well in school in England. She told her son, “I will...write to Johney, entreating him in the tenderest manner to be indefatigable at his improvements, if he desires that his papa & the rest of us should love him.”¹²⁶ She also worked this emotional manipulation on her son by reminding him of her old age and mortality. She wanted her grandchildren to visit her at Westover more often, “now that I carry such a load of years upon my shoulders.” “[O]ld as I am,” she confessed, “I think I could be of service to those dear creatures.” Her son’s return to his home was her earnest desire, “but this is a distant thought for me, who now often feel the infirmitys that attend those so far advanced in life.” Upon hearing about his second marriage in 1761, Maria Byrd wrote to her son: “I pray heaven to bless you with a continual series of uninterrupted happiness, which while I am an inhabitant of this world I shall take to my self a large share.”¹²⁷ William Byrd III’s second marriage held the potential to alter power relations within the family. Aware of this possibility, Maria Byrd likely wanted to guilt her son into recognizing her authority. Although historian Jan Lewis does not identify these maternal coercions laced with hints of mortality until the nineteenth century. In 1826, Virginia mother Eliza Blow wrote a long letter with many strong suggestions to her son. To reinforce her message, she told him that soon “the head and heart that dictates it may be in the cold grave,

¹²⁶ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, April 28, 1760, *Correspondence*, 685.

¹²⁷ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 20, 1758, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, May 13, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, February 17, 1761, *Correspondence*, 635, 682, 689, 714.

and for this reason I would have you have this letter which may animate your exertions and encourage you.”¹²⁸ The affectionate atmosphere that Maria Byrd brought to her family relationships augured the impending modern family structure.

Love and money were intertwined in the mother/son relationship of Maria and William Byrd. Just as Maria Byrd used her son’s love of her as his mother to coerce his behavior, she also exerted some control over William Byrd III through money. Often couched in terms of loving support, her financial contributions hinted that she was glad to have her son rely on her. In a 1757 letter, she wrote: “I must beg a favor of you, which is never to mention an equivalent for any-thing that is in my power to serve you, for the pleasure of doing it is more than a sufficient repay.”¹²⁹ She was particularly desirous to provide financial aid for the education of William Byrd III’s three oldest sons, who he sent to England in 1756. The boys, William IV, John, and Thomas Byrd, were under the custody of Maria Byrd’s sister, Anne Taylor Otway, and her husband, Colonel Francis Otway.¹³⁰ Maria Byrd likely saw to the provision of the majority of the money paying for their stay and education in England. Understanding that the other pupils at the Byrd boys’ school came from wealthy families, Maria Byrd wrote that “’tis my desire to have them supported like the best people of fashion’s children in England.”¹³¹ She ordered that her share of money (possibly from her family’s estate in England, although the source is unclear) pay for her grandsons’ expenses for the year of 1757. Demonstrating her intelligence and forethought, Maria Byrd also requested that “a handsome present to be made in my name to Mr. Cawthorn the Turnbridge school master [where the boys attended], to the ushers, & to every menial

¹²⁸ Quoted in Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 183.

¹²⁹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, *Correspondence*, 632.

¹³⁰ Tinling, ed., “William Byrd III,” *Correspondence*, 606.

¹³¹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, *Correspondence*, 632.

servant something, that have the care of those dear little souls.”¹³² William Byrd III almost certainly felt some sense of indebtedness to his mother for her diligent care and financing of his sons. In this aspect of her role as a mother, Maria Byrd reflected the old, seventeenth-century style of parenting that placed the most emphasis on the material or tangible connections between a parent and child.¹³³ Although she professed some progressive ideals, particularly in regards to family affection, Maria Byrd demonstrated the family’s gradual transition from pre-modern to modern. She was essentially a hybrid, and her financial relationship with William Byrd III was representative of the old order.

One of the greatest impacts that Maria Byrd had on her son’s life was through a long, protracted disagreement that she had with her daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Hill Carter Byrd. In this battle between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, Maria Byrd was decidedly the victor. It is very likely that Maria Byrd supported William Byrd III’s abandonment of his wife, Elizabeth Byrd, in 1756. After William Byrd III left for an extended military sojourn that year, Maria Byrd and Elizabeth Byrd continued to argue over financial and material matters. Ultimately, the children of William and Elizabeth Byrd were the source of the most significant conflict. Maria Byrd continually exerted her dominance over the family and William Byrd III, in particular. After losing control of her husband and children and having lived on an estate that operated under the thumb of her mother-in-law, Elizabeth Byrd died unhappily in the summer of 1760, possibly by suicide. William Byrd III quickly remarried a woman named Mary Willing, who was likely a more capable opponent in a power struggle with her mother-in-law. Maria Byrd died in 1771 and her beloved son committed suicide in 1777 as he faced an increasingly serious financial debt. The drama of this story reveals not

¹³² Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, September 21, 1757, *Correspondence*, 629-630.

¹³³ Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 174-175.

only the individual characters of these strange Byrds, but it also shows how effectively Maria Byrd wielded power within her family and her odd juxtaposition between pre-modern and modern family life.

The subject of Maria Byrd's pointed dislike, Elizabeth Hill Carter was born on October 13, 1731 to an impressive lineage. Her grandfather was Robert "King" Carter, one of the most influential men in the history of colonial Virginia; her father was John Carter, who served as the Secretary of Virginia; and her mother was (also) Elizabeth Hill Carter. Maria Byrd may have resented the younger Elizabeth Hill Carter because she had the support of a very powerful family, while the older woman had no family in Virginia other than her children. However, all four of Maria Byrd's children married descendants of Robert "King" Carter. In 1742, seventeen-year-old Anne Byrd married Charles Carter, son of Robert "King" Carter. That same year, fifteen-year-old Maria Byrd married Charles Carter's brother, Landon Carter. In 1746, seventeen-year-old Anne Byrd married John Page, whose parents were Mann Page and Judith Carter Page, a daughter of Robert "King" Carter. Therefore, it may have seemed natural for William Byrd III to also marry a member of the Carter family. The wedding occurred on April 14, 1748 when the groom was nineteen years old and the bride was sixteen years old.¹³⁴ The young age of both William Byrd III and Elizabeth Byrd likely contributed to their marital unhappiness. The several extant letters written by Elizabeth Byrd indicate that she was quite immature and spoiled, which was certainly Maria Byrd's opinion of her. William Byrd III, her husband, could not have been a much better mate. He

¹³⁴ "Letters of the Byrd Family (Continued), *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 38, no. 1 (January 1930): 52, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244312>; Tinling, ed., "William Byrd III," *Correspondence*, 604; Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Notes," *Correspondence*, 828; "History: Robert "King" Carter of Corotoman (1663-1732)," Historic Christ Church, http://www.christchurch1735.org/history/robert_carter.html.

was probably spoiled because of his mother's coddling and possessed a large sense of his own importance because of his obvious position as Maria Byrd's favorite child.

There is not much information to illuminate the couple's early life. Their first son, William Byrd IV, was born on August 2, 1749. Their two next sons, John Carter Byrd and Thomas Taylor Byrd, were born January 27, 1751 and January 17, 1752, respectively. Elizabeth Byrd gave birth to Elizabeth Hill Byrd on November 29, 1754. A year and a half later, on May 8, 1756, she had her final child, Francis Otway Byrd. It is possible that the young couple initially lived with Maria Byrd at Westover, which her husband left for her use for the rest of her life in his will. This house, likely built by William Byrd II and located on the banks of the James River in Charles City County, burned to the ground on January 7, 1749, according to a report in the *Virginia Gazette*. However, family historian Elizabeth Byrd Nicholas provided a conflicting date in her 1876 account that said the fire occurred on the day of young William Byrd IV's baptism, more than eight months after the newspaper story. Although the *Virginia Gazette* likely provides the correct date, Elizabeth Byrd Nicholas's description indicates that William Byrd III's young family lived at Westover at some point.¹³⁵ Additionally, in 1755 George Washington wrote to William Byrd III that he was "sorry it was not in my power to wait upon you at Westover last Christmas."¹³⁶ The family of William and Elizabeth Byrd therefore probably lived at Westover until he left on his military campaigns in 1756, a time period during which the later evident conflicts between Maria Byrd and Elizabeth Byrd undoubtedly built to a crescendo. Severe marital discord must have also developed during these years. By 1756, the couple's unhappiness was widely known

¹³⁵ Tinling, ed., "Appendix: Genealogical Notes," *Correspondence*, 829; Mark R. Wenger, "Westover: William Byrd's Mansion Reconsidered" (Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1980), 42; Fiske Kimball, *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 291.

¹³⁶ George Washington to William Byrd III, April 20, 1755, *Correspondence*, 615.

amongst their social peers. On August 14 of that year, John Kirkpatrick wrote in a letter to George Washington: “Col. Bird I am told has repudiated his wife, who is now in a delirium for his behavior, and is resolved to make a campaign under Lord Loudon- he has committed his estate to the charge of some friends, & settled all with a design never to return to Virginia.”¹³⁷ A 1757 letter from Elizabeth Byrd to her husband is addressed from Belvidere, located on the Byrd family’s land near Richmond and the falls of the James River.¹³⁸ Belvidere remained Elizabeth Byrd’s home for the rest of her life.

The homes at Westover and Belvidere are a fitting metaphor for the historical misunderstanding of Maria Byrd as well as the relationship between the Byrd mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Historians and Byrd family members have always attributed the surviving Westover mansion, one of the best examples of Georgian architecture in Virginia, to William Byrd II. Based on very scant documentation, scholars believed that construction of the house began around 1731 and ended by December of 1735.¹³⁹ According to historian William Pierson, “the house is the essence of the man. Serene, gracious, and thoughtfully conceived, it is one of the most thoroughly English houses now extant from the eighteenth century in America.”¹⁴⁰ This glorification of William Byrd II as a gentlemanly cavalier is perhaps most fully elucidated in historian Richard Croom Beatty’s 1970 biography, *William Byrd of Westover*. The house and the man were viewed as one, both magnificent products of colonial Virginia’s “Golden Age.” William Byrd II overshadowed all of his other family members, including Maria Byrd and her son. William Byrd III was more difficult to glorify than his father. The cavalier’s son squandered the family fortune, sided with the British

¹³⁷ Quoted in Tinling, ed., “William Byrd III,” *Correspondence*, 606n11.

¹³⁸ Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, May 13, 1757, *Correspondence*, 624-625.

¹³⁹ Wenger, “Westover,” 9.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Wenger, “Westover,” 1.

during the colonies' move towards independence, and then committed suicide. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand how observers connected Westover's architectural beauty with William Byrd II rather than his son.

However, dendrochronology, or tree ring dating, recently shattered the myth of William Byrd II's connection to the present Westover mansion. The surviving house was built using timbers that were cut in 1750, six years after the death of William Byrd II.¹⁴¹ The impetus for this construction was likely the fire that occurred the previous year. In 1750, William Byrd III was twenty one or twenty two years old and recently received legal possession of his late father's estate. The construction of Westover may have been his first chance to properly demonstrate his full wealth and power. There are no surviving records of this process, but the same woman who emotionally coerced him and conducted his business almost certainly played a role in the construction of this "serene, gracious...thoughtfully conceived...thoroughly English" house. Architectural historian Mark Wenger argues that Landon Carter and Charles Carter assisted William Byrd III with his building enterprise, evidencing their position as his brothers-in-law and co-executors of his father's will.¹⁴² Wenger disregarded the educated and highly capable third co-executor of William Byrd II's will, Maria Byrd, who was also the most influential person in William Byrd III's life. Unless new evidence comes to light, historians will never know exactly how Westover was built, but Maria Byrd was almost certainly at the center of the activity.

Cultural landscapes, such as Westover, expressed power and authority in eighteenth-century Virginia. White, male colonial elites chose prominent sites for their homes along

¹⁴¹ Camille Wells, "Dendro-Dating the Domestic Architecture of Colonial Virginia: Exploring the Potential of Certainty," *Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Construction History* 3 (Cambridge: Construction History Society, 2006), 3274.

¹⁴² Wenger, "Westover," 76.

rivers and hills to increase their visibility. Almost all of these houses employed a three-part plan in which the big house was symmetrically flanked by dependencies, or smaller buildings where slaves worked and lived. The large, central mansion represented the patriarch, or head of the household, and the smaller dependencies represented the deference and subordination of all of the other members of the household. Westover is one of the best surviving examples of this manipulation of the cultural landscape. In constructing Westover, William Byrd III sought to display the social authority of white, wealthy men.¹⁴³ William Byrd III, however, was largely a failed patriarch. Debt and a gambling addiction consumed him. He failed to win any glory (or even a commission in the British army) during his military career. He did not grasp the changing political tides and clung to old allegiances. Frustrated with his lack of control and authority, he killed himself. Rather, the steady and authoritative figure at Westover was Maria Byrd.

Westover's architectural beauty and significance as the family seat demonstrated Maria Byrd's dominance over Elizabeth Byrd, who was relegated to her husband's mansion at Belvidere. Belvidere was probably built around the same time period as Westover in a similar style, though not as grand.¹⁴⁴ In addition to being materially inferior, Belvidere was also located further west on the fringes of colonial Virginia society. Elizabeth Byrd probably felt particularly isolated from her other family and friends who lived in the Piedmont. Her mother, with whom she was emotionally close, lived at Shirley Plantation, located less than seven miles from Westover, but twenty-two miles from Belvidere.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, Elizabeth

¹⁴³ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 36-39.

¹⁴⁴ Boulton, "The Architecture of Slavery," 115.

¹⁴⁵ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, December 24, 1757, *Correspondence*, 634-635.

Byrd also probably saw Maria Byrd's continued residence at Westover as evidence of her husband's preference for his mother over his wife.

Maria Byrd's surviving letters to her son, spanning from 1757 to 1764 when he was largely away from Westover pursuing a military career, continually reinforced William Byrd III's decision to abandon his wife. The kindest sentiment Maria Byrd ever expressed about her daughter-in-law was pity ("poor woman").¹⁴⁶ She often criticized the younger woman's management of household economy. In 1757 she wrote to her son:

I have told Mr. Cary that what money is paid to him...may help to pay for Mrs. Byrd's [Elizabeth Byrd] invoice, for I hear she has writ one which orders her underclothes to be made & ruffled in England. I cant but think, she had better make them her-self it would be some employment for her. I am sure it is the most extravagant fashion in the world to have them made in that manner.¹⁴⁷

Elizabeth Byrd demanded supplies from Westover (her note to Maria Byrd tersely said: "Send me twelve pair of stockings out of the store for my Negro's E. Byrd"), but did not reciprocate by sending produce from Belvidere to Maria Byrd. The older woman wrote to William Byrd III:

I sent her [Elizabeth Byrd] a present of 4 pounds [of tea] & to this day have needle work done both for her & her children: but I have reason to think for all that, that I am quite out of favour. The Falls [Belvidere] courier came down very late the other day & I asked him the cause, he said he had been to carry veal to Shirley...I will positively pay no regard, to her continual & perpetual demands for all things that this plantation affords; for notwithstanding I have sent her an abundance of things, none of her presents ever once came here.¹⁴⁸

The constant barrage of complaints that she leveled at her son about Elizabeth Byrd indicate that this was a long-standing dispute between the two women. Maria Byrd probably helped

¹⁴⁶ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, March 15, 1757, *Correspondence*, 623.

¹⁴⁷ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, *Correspondence*, 632.

¹⁴⁸ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, December 24, 1757, *Correspondence*, 634.

convince William Byrd III to effectively end his marriage. Although her definite emotions and involvement before 1757 are largely unknown, Maria Byrd certainly supported her son's decision to leave his wife after the fact. This collusion between mother and son explains Elizabeth Byrd's coldness towards her mother-in-law.

Maria Byrd and Elizabeth Byrd often argued about the Byrd children, the offspring of William and Elizabeth Byrd. Since the three oldest boys resided in England for their education and were under the guardianship of Maria Byrd's family, she had an edge of control over Elizabeth Byrd. In addition to financially supporting the boys, Maria Byrd also directed much of their management. Young William Byrd IV wrote to his grandmother, not his mother, for permission to be inoculated for smallpox. Maria Byrd also took the initiative and began a direct correspondence with Mr. Cawthorn, the boys' teacher. Mr. Cawthorn gave her updates on the boys' progress. In a 1759 letter to his mother, Elizabeth Byrd, ten-year-old William Byrd IV wrote: "I will not repeat how much we are grown, as I have already told my Grand Mama Byrd in her letter."¹⁴⁹ Despite their youth and far removed distance, even the Byrd children ascertained that Maria Byrd was in charge, not their mother.

Maria Byrd also found Elizabeth Byrd to be an unfit mother for the two youngest children, Betsey and Francis, who lived at Belvidere. In early 1760, Elizabeth Byrd sent her mother-in-law a message that said the two young children "were both ill & that the Belvidere aer did not agree with 'em." Maria Byrd noted to her son that "[f]or my part I rather believe 'tis the odd management of them. Glad should I be to have the care of 'em, old as I am because I think I could be of service to those dear creatures which are descended from a

¹⁴⁹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 6, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, December 24, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. June 1758, *Correspondence*, 682, 632, 634, 658; William Byrd IV to Elizabeth Byrd, River Hill, England, May 29, 1759, "Letters of the Byrd Family (Continued)," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 37, no. 3, 251.

father that is far more to me than all the inhabitants of the earth besides, either male or female.”¹⁵⁰ Many of the disagreements over the young children concerned visitation. Maria Byrd was upset by the lack of visits she received from her grandchildren. On September 21, 1757, Maria Byrd complained to her son that “[s]he has never once been to see me tho I offered her [t]he chariot whenever she pleased.” Later that year, on December 24, Maria Byrd again commented on the absence of little Betsey and Franke. “If I am not suffer’d to see those dear little souls, I will positively pay no regard, to her continual & perpetual demands for all things that this plantation affords.” In February of 1760, Maria Byrd implied that Mrs. Cocke, Elizabeth Byrd’s mother, was complicit in the attempt to keep the Byrd children away from Westover. Maria Byrd wrote: “[w]hen I was last in Gloucester I bid an everlasting adieu to my friends, resolving never more (now that I carry such a load of years upon my shoulders) to go any where; excepting to church & I have told as much to Mrs. Cocke in hopes she would have prevailed upon her daughter to have come & brought those dear pledges...but in my opinion is she rather prevents than forwards their coming to see me. I wish they may not be brought up with an abhorance to me.” Additionally, Maria Byrd noted that Elizabeth Byrd and the children were currently visiting Shirley, Mrs. Cocke’s home.¹⁵¹

Sometime in early 1758, William Byrd III heeded his mother’s pointed hints and ordered his wife to take the children to Westover. Elizabeth Byrd was undoubtedly upset to have taken away from her the only power she held over her mother-in-law: the management of her two youngest children, since her three oldest sons were already taken from her home. In a May 12, 1758 letter to her husband, Elizabeth Byrd wrote: “[y]our commands as to the children’s visiting their grand mamma Byrd shall be punctually obeyed. Whenever I visit my

¹⁵⁰ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 1760, in *Correspondence*, 682.

¹⁵¹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, September 21, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, December 24, 1757, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. February 20, 1758, *Correspondence*, 630, 634, 635.

mamma, they shall be carryed to Westover.” She registered her disagreement in a passive aggressive manner (flagrant disobedience was not going to bring her husband back to her home, which seemed to have been one of her greatest wishes) by implying that the children’s visits to Maria Byrd would then deprive Mrs. Cocke. Additionally, although the children would visit Maria Byrd, she would not go to Westover herself. Five days later, Elizabeth Byrd wrote to William Byrd III and hinted more strongly that she did not want to send her children to Westover. “I am very sorry, you have limmited poor, sweet Otway [their son, Francis Otway] so short a time to stay with me poor dear babe he is a weaklin he has been sickly for such a number of months, that he is incapable of walking without being supported, but Sir your orders must be obeyed, whatever reluctance I find there by, if the infant, lives, which God only knows for at present the child, is much indisposed. I design to send him to his pleasant old native air, next week.” True to her word, Elizabeth Byrd sent her son to see his grandmother Byrd. In June of 1758, Maria Byrd noted in a letter to her son that “I have lately been so happy as to have had sweet dear Franke with me for upward of a fort night.” Later, after Elizabeth Byrd’s death, Maria Byrd assumed full custody of the two children.¹⁵² In this battle of wills between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, Maria Byrd was the clear winner because she had the support of William Byrd III.

Elizabeth Byrd did not compare favorably to her mother-in-law, Maria Byrd. Considering their letters to William Byrd III as evidence, Maria Byrd’s correspondences are long, well-written, and cover a variety of topics. Conversely, Elizabeth Byrd’s letters to her husband are short, poorly written, and rarely remark upon any subject other than her unhappiness to be separated from her husband and children. She did not seem to have

¹⁵² Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, May 12, 1758, Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, May 17, 1758, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, ca. June 1758, *Correspondence*, 653, 654, 658.

received an education equal to that of Maria Byrd. Also, Elizabeth Byrd was nine years younger on her wedding day than her mother-in-law was in 1744 when she married William Byrd II. The younger woman likely did not have much education or life experience to make a sound decision regarding her marriage partner. Her letters to her husband are self-centered, as she is mostly concerned with the pain that others' actions are causing her. In 1757, soon after William Byrd III abandoned her, she wrote: "I hope my dear Mr. Byrd will fullfill his promise when he returns, to carry me to England to visit my dear children." The next year she noted that some gentlemen were travelling up to Winchester to visit him. "If I thought I should have met with a kind reception, I would willingly have accompanied them to have had the satisfaction of seeing you once again and not have thought the journey the least fatiguing," she noted. Her greatest wish was to have her family with her again. "Oh should I ever be so happy as to see their dear pappa, and our sweet frey, all together once more I shall fancy myself in the Elisium Fields." In 1759, she wrote: "I am affraid my youth and life will be buried in retirement and dissatisfaction." Desperation and depression are evident throughout all of her surviving correspondence. A little over two weeks before her death, she wrote to William Byrd III that "If I should ever be bless'd with seing you, you allways may depend that I will do, every thing in my power, conducive to your satisfaction."¹⁵³

Elizabeth Byrd never had the opportunity to demonstrate her obedience to her husband. She died on July 25, 1760. The circumstances of her death are unknown to this day. One story states that she committed suicide by overturning a large chest or other piece of

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, May 13, 1757, Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, May 12, 1758, Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, May 17, 1758, *Correspondence*, 624, 653, 654-655; Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, August 16, 1759, in "Letters of the Byrd Family (Continued)," *Virginia Magazine* 37, no. 3, 247, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244289>; Elizabeth Byrd to William Byrd III, July 8, 1760, *Correspondence*, 695.

furniture upon herself.¹⁵⁴ The original source of this explanation is uncertain. The physical possibility of committing suicide by crushing oneself with a large piece of furniture is rather implausible. An accidental fatality in this manner is somewhat more believable. However, it is not a stretch to infer that Elizabeth Byrd had suicidal tendencies from her extant letters. The Byrd family historian, Elizabeth Byrd Nicholas, stated that the cause of her ancestor's death was "a brain fever brought on by the distress of mind at the separation from her boys." As a descendant of Elizabeth Byrd (she was the granddaughter of Thomas Byrd, Elizabeth Byrd's third son), Elizabeth Byrd Nicholas may not have provided the most accurate of information because she had a vested interest in making her family appear in a good light.¹⁵⁵ If Elizabeth Byrd died of some type of illness, it would have had to set in quickly because on July 18, 1761 Maria Byrd noted that her daughter-in-law and grandchildren were currently visiting Corotoman, Elizabeth Byrd's family home in Lancaster County.¹⁵⁶ It was a relatively long journey from Belvidere to Corotoman and Elizabeth Byrd likely would not have gone if she were sick. Regardless of how Elizabeth Byrd met her end, she certainly died unhappy, partially due the harsh treatment she received from both her husband and mother-in-law.

Maria Byrd reacted to her daughter-in-law's death in a very pragmatic manner. She quickly gathered and accounted for the items at Belvidere (some of which Mrs. Cocke had taken) and brought young Betsey and Francis Byrd to Westover from their temporary stay at Shirley. She did not express any sadness over the event in her surviving writing, other than a reference to Elizabeth Byrd as "poor Mrs. Byrd," a term that she also labeled her years

¹⁵⁴ Tinling, ed., *Correspondence*, 702n1.

¹⁵⁵ "Letters of the Byrd Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 38, no. 1 (January 1930): 52-53, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244312>; "Letters of the Byrd Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 35, no. 3 (July 1927): 221, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244140>.

¹⁵⁶ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, July 18, 1760, *Correspondence*, 699.

earlier.¹⁵⁷ William Byrd III's response to Elizabeth Byrd's death showed his own immature nature. Although it does not survive today, William Byrd III seemed to have written a very mournful letter on the occasion of his wife's death. Maria Byrd wrote to him soon after the incident that Molly Carter (Maria Byrd's granddaughter and William Byrd III's niece) "was heartily afflicted for the loss of her aunt & shed many a tear upon that account; as she did yesterday at your pathetick letter." It is feasible that William Byrd III expressed regret, guilt, or sadness over the failed relationship with his wife and the possible role he played in her death. However, it is more likely that his sad letter conveyed his self-pity more than any other sentiment. During the summer of 1760, William Byrd III and his force of colonial recruits were unable to relieve his British army counterparts in southwestern South Carolina, where the Cherokees had orchestrated a siege of Fort Prince George. He experienced some criticism for this failure. Frustrated with his military career, William Byrd III spent the winter of 1760 to 1761 in Philadelphia. Here he met Mary Willing, daughter of Philadelphia's former mayor and descendant of the successful Shippen family.¹⁵⁸ William Byrd III probably did not suffer over his first wife's death for very long because he and Mary Willing married on January 27, 1761, only six months after Elizabeth Byrd's decease.

William Byrd III's second marriage signaled a turning point in his relationship with his mother. This wedding was perhaps one of the few major actions in which William Byrd III did not seek his mother's prior approval, or at least give her warning. On February 17, 1761, she wrote to her son:

¹⁵⁷ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, August 15, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, November 5, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, July 18, 1760, Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, March 15, 1757, *Correspondence*, 701, 708, 700, 623.

¹⁵⁸ Tinling, ed., "William Byrd III," *Correspondence*, 608-610; "Letters of the Byrd Family (Continued)," *Virginia Magazine* 38, no. 1, 53, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244312>.

Your express came here very early this morning and before I had time to open your letter, I was so surprized as to cry out good God is my son married & never acquainted me with it! But when I was a little composed & read...your letter...I was not only pleased but charmed with the ladys character. I pray heaven to bless you with a continual series of uninterrupted happiness, which while I am an inhabitant of this world I shall take to my self a large share.¹⁵⁹

Along with the letter to her son, Maria Byrd also sent a short letter to her “daughter Byrd,” an endearing term that she never called Elizabeth Byrd. She added that “ I do most impatiently long for your return to your own habitation, accompanied with my new daughter, whom I will endeavor to oblige & that will be no difficult matter with a reasonable & sensible lady, as I take her to be.”¹⁶⁰ Clearly Maria Byrd was inclined to think well of Mary Willing even before she met her. William Byrd seemed to have with Mary Willing at the very least a much better marriage than his previous relationship. It seems likely that true affection existed between the new couple. William Byrd III wrote in the family Bible: “I was married on the 27th of January 1761 to Miss Mary Willing of Philadelphia...A lady whose eminent virtues and obliging behavior render her beloved by all who know her, and the joy of her husband, children, servants, and neighbors. This dear lady was born on the 10th of September, 1740.”¹⁶¹ Their marriage produced ten children, born from 1761 to 1777.¹⁶²

Maria Byrd’s initial relationship with her new daughter-in-law was positive. After he resigned from his military career, William Byrd moved with his wife and their one-year-old daughter, named Maria, from their home in Philadelphia to Virginia in the fall of 1762. At first they lived at Belvidere, but they probably moved to the family seat at Westover relatively quickly, perhaps as soon as it became apparent that Maria Byrd and Mary Byrd

¹⁵⁹ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, February 17, 1761, *Correspondence*, 714.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 714.

¹⁶¹ “Letters of the Byrd Family,” *Virginia Magazine* 38, no. 1, 53.

¹⁶² Tinling, ed., “Appendix: Genealogical Notes,” *Correspondence*, 829-830.

could peacefully coexist. William Byrd III was likely living in Westover by the end of 1762 or beginning of 1763, around which time he had fashionable rocaille ceiling plaster work installed in the passage and drawing room.¹⁶³ Around this time, Mary Willing wrote in a letter back to Philadelphia that Maria Byrd was “a most sensible, cheerful woman, always gay and amiable.” “My mother Byrd is very fond of me...She is the only person I dare open my heart to. They are all brothers, sisters, or cousins; so that if you use one person in the colony ill, you affront all; except the governor’s family, and my mother.”¹⁶⁴ Perhaps Maria Byrd was so welcoming of Mary Willing Byrd because she remembered the feelings of isolation that she experienced when she moved to Virginia as a young bride. The warm relationship between Maria Byrd and Mary Byrd showed that Maria Byrd was not irrationally jealous of all other women in her son’s life. Maria Byrd likely wanted William Byrd to be happy, and his marriage was an acceptable path to this happiness as long as she approved of his wife. By 1764, Maria Byrd was still kindly referring to Mary Byrd as “my daughter Byrd.”¹⁶⁵

Unfortunately, the last decade of Maria Byrd’s life remains much of a mystery. With William Byrd III living at Westover during this time, she no longer had to write him letters. There are no other sources that illuminate the last part of her life. She died on August 28, 1771.¹⁶⁶ The August 29th edition of the *Virginia Gazette* included a short notice of her death: “Yesterday Morning died at Westover, in an advanced Age, Mrs. Maria Byrd, Mother of the Honourable William Byrd, Esquire. She was a Lady endowed with many rare Accomplishments, and of a most amiable and benevolent disposition.”

¹⁶³ Wenger, “Westover,” 21-24.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Tinsling, ed., “William Byrd III,” *Correspondence*, 610.

¹⁶⁵ Maria Byrd to William Byrd III, June 4, 1764, *Correspondence*, 769.

¹⁶⁶ Tinsling, ed., “Appendix: Genealogical Notes,” *Correspondence*, 833.

Maria Byrd's will does not survive, though later references to its provisions provide a basic understanding of its contents and indicate a breakdown in her relationship with her son. Judging from an 1838 court case, U.S. Circuit Court, Virginia District, *Byrd vs. Byrd*, Maria Byrd seemed to have deeded the £200 annuity left to her by her husband to her grandson, William Byrd IV and the other four children of Elizabeth Byrd. William Byrd was very angry over this bequeathal because he had apparently been accumulating this money for some time. As a result of Maria Byrd's will, the already debt-ridden William Byrd III owed approximately £5,000 to his five oldest children. It does not appear that Maria Byrd left anything to her grandchildren by Mary Byrd.¹⁶⁷ Perhaps Maria Byrd felt emotionally closer to her grandchildren by Elizabeth Byrd because she had a very prominent role in their upbringing. It is also possible that she wished to slight her other grandchildren because she had changed her mind about their mother, Mary Willing Byrd. Her motivations are not clear, but she was surely aware of the injury that the provisions would cause her son.

Maria Byrd did not entirely cut her son out of her will. She probably left him some type of estate in England. Some of William Byrd III's business correspondence with his English agents from 1774 to 1775 refers to "leasehold estates" bequeathed to him in Maria Byrd's will. However, these letters also indicated that Maria Byrd did not name her son as the executor of her will. In 1774, Robert Cary & Co. wrote to William Byrd III that Maria Byrd's will "cou'd be of no service to...any here, as you was not the executor." Rather, they directed him to obtain a power of attorney from Edward Carter and Charles Carter, who appear to have been the co-executors. Evidently William Byrd III's attempt to provide this documentation failed, because in 1775, Robert Cary & Co. told him that "[t]he certificate you

¹⁶⁷ Tinling, ed., "William Byrd III," *Correspondence*, 612.

obtain'd for taking out letters of administration, may so far operate as to answer you to do the business in Virginia, but the courts here will take no cognizance of it."¹⁶⁸ Therefore, his mother's will placed him further into debt and embarrassed him through the long, difficult process of assuming control of the English estate because he was not an executor. Perhaps the will was Maria Byrd's belated attempt to reprimand her son, enacted after her death so that she did not have to deal with the consequences of it. Her will certainly questions her supposedly blind love and devotion for her son.

Lost in debt and the changing sociopolitical tides of Virginia, William Byrd III shot and killed himself on January 1, 1777. His will, written in 1774, revealed a great deal of animosity towards Maria Byrd. He lamented that his estate, "which thro' my own folly & inattention to accounts, thro' carelessness of some interested with the management thereof & the villany of others, is still greatly incumbered with debts, which imbitters every moment of my life." It is possible that he referred to his mother's management of his estate in his attempt to share the blame for his situation with others. He ordered that after the death of his "dearest and best of wives," his estate was to be sold and the proceeds divided amongst his children, "deducting from the share of those I had by my first wife such sums as they may claim under the wills of my Deluded & superannuated Mother." For example, he deducted £500 from the share of his daughter, Elizabeth, "having paid her husband, Mr. Farley, that sum under the unjust will of my insane mother." He threatened to leave his son Francis Otway Byrd only one shilling if he quit the Navy. He also promised his son Thomas Byrd the

¹⁶⁸ Robert Cary & Co. to William Byrd III, London, November 17, 1774, Robert Cary & Co, London, June 20 1775, in "Some Unpublished Correspondence of William Byrd III," *Virginia Magazine* 88, no. 3, 294, 299, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4248406>.

same amount if he married Susannah Randolph.¹⁶⁹ Evidently, William Byrd III was quite bitter towards his mother and children from his first marriage.

After Maria Byrd's lifetime, the social constructs of the home and the family underwent dramatic changes that presented significant implications for the role and status of women. By the early nineteenth century, many male heads of households began to find work outside of the home as a result of the industrialization revolution. This phenomenon was most prevalent in the northern United States, where there were more factories. However, broad developments such as commercialization and increasingly complex and interdependent economies also impacted Virginia and the southern United States. Although the South remained largely agricultural, with economic production and family homes remaining in the same location, the farm or plantation, the concept of the home and family became idealized as Americans (including southerners) gradually viewed the wider world as complicated, problematic, and amoral. In the nineteenth century, Virginians no longer saw the home as a microcosm society in the way that William Byrd II considered Westover. Rather, the home became a haven from a threatening public sphere. The home also became a refuge for personal feelings, where loving familial relationships and self-conscious reflection flourished.¹⁷⁰

In addition to economic developments, new political and religious ideas also impacted the concepts of the family and home, and therefore influenced gender. Republicanism and liberalism both essentially required that public and political participation was exclusively the duty of men. These theories emphasized property and arms ownership,

¹⁶⁹ "The Will of William Byrd III," in "Letters of the Byrd Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 38, no. 1 (January 1930): 59-63, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/4244312>.

¹⁷⁰ Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 210-228.

personal independence, and competition within the public arena, all of which were decidedly masculine traits. With the public sphere so well defined, the idea of a private sphere developed as its antithesis. Post-Revolutionary Protestant evangelism stated that virtue existed in the home. These new, hardened lines between the public and private spheres changed women's significance. Rather than publically displaying their gentility in support of their husbands' social authority like eighteenth-century women, nineteenth-century women became the guardians of morality and virtue in the home. Under this new system of separate spheres, women used their supposedly natural unique piety and morality to wield increased influence within the domestic sphere. Although southern women in the nineteenth century continued to participate at least somewhat in public life, most notably through benevolent and religious organizations, the overwhelming understanding of the role and status of women was defined by their relegation to the private sphere.¹⁷¹

Maria Byrd's life sheds light on these transformations in family life and women's status. As a wealthy, widowed mother, she possessed a great amount of control within her family. In contrast to Lucy Parke Byrd, women like Maria Byrd began to see the family, rather than broader society, as their specific realm of authority. However, Maria Byrd did not feel limited to the private sphere and asserted herself in her family's business affairs. Emotionally, her son seemed to be the meaning of her existence, yet she did not bequeath him all of her money. In terms of her deep affection for William Byrd III, Maria Byrd was a harbinger of the modern family style that took hold in the early nineteenth century. But at the end of her life, material and financial aspects defined her relationship with her son, as seen in their wills. Maria Byrd was therefore a hybrid between pre-modern and modern family life.

¹⁷¹ Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 212-218.

She represents historically significant social change, which proves the existence of her power and authority.

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