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Transforming Coverture: Contesting Personal and Political authority in early modern England and America

This paper will disentangle the ways that coverture (the legal idea that husbands and wives were “one” in the eyes of the law) was a much narrower concept in the law books of the seventeenth century than it would be by the early nineteenth century. I trace not only how the common law changed but how it was contested and how--strangely--so many social and cultural historians look to Blackstone, who introduced so many changes and increased the authority of husbands so significantly in the late eighteenth century--as the source of earlier common law norms. This paper grows out of a chapter in a book I'm working on for Cambridge called “Transforming the Common Law: Authority in the Early Modern Anglo-Atlantic.” It is a think piece that raises many questions and opens possibilities for research for both early modern England and early America.