

Book Review - Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560–1640

Since the 1980s David Underdown and Susan Amussen have produced a series of publications in which gender is utilised to analyse early modern social, cultural and political history. This co-authored book (completed by Amussen after the death of Underdown from cancer) serves as the apotheosis of these projects. Based on research in national and local archives, and influenced by the work of literature scholars as well as historians, the authors argue that, counter to the arguments of Peter Lake, it was gender rather than sin which offers the key to understanding ideas about the world turned upside down, and that, counter to the arguments of Christopher Hill, such an inverted society was as much feared as it was desired by contemporaries. For Underdown and Amussen, the world turned upside down provided 'an integrative framework for thinking' (p. 19) which was vital to maintaining what the medievalist and feminist Judith Bennett has termed 'patriarchal equilibrium'.

Chapter one returns to themes first explored by Underdown in his essay on 'a crisis in gender relations', examining the early Stuart *querelle des femmes* and discussing concerns about scolds, shrews and unruly single women in local communities, before extending the analysis to include court politics. The authors argue that scandals involving women focused on issues of female agency in relation to sex, power and money, and escalated after 1603 due to the emergence of male anxieties about female power which had been suppressed under Elizabeth I. Chapter two focuses on fathers and husbands who proved unable to govern their households effectively, and Underdown and Amussen argue that the models of household governance outlined in advice manuals 'set men up for failure' (p. 53). The first part of the chapter is built around a series of case studies of elite men (the Earl of Sussex, Lord Chancellor Ellesmere, and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven), before the authors broaden the scope to discuss failed marriages more generally through adultery cases, libels and skimmingtons, with a particular emphasis on cuckoldry.

The remaining chapters explore gender inversion through drama, skimmingtons and witchcraft. Chapter three begins by discussing revenge tragedies in the form of John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* as well as Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women*. Section three turns to the domestic tragedies and tragicomedies *Arden of Faversham* and *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, and the final section examines city comedies in the form of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*; Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *The Roaring Girl*; and the lesser known *Amends for Ladies* by Nathan Fields. Chapter four focuses on a Star Chamber case brought in 1608 by John Hole, a clothier from Wells who was mocked by youths who alleged he had cuckolded his friend, John Yard. The charivari, and subsequent production of a libellous poem, took place during the annual May games of 1607, proceeds from which were being used to repair the tower of St Cuthbert's church, but which traditionally involved heavy drinking and sexual licence, both of which were anathema to local Puritans such as Hole and Yard. Ultimately Hole was awarded £100 in damages and the offenders were punished by a shaming ritual, an example of godly reformers using inversion to turn the world the right way up. In the final substantive chapter on witchcraft the authors argue that the period saw 'the commercialisation of the supernatural' (p. 132) as growing numbers of English people from all levels of society resorted to magicians and cunning folk. Countering previous scholarship by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane, they argue that

prosecutions resulted not only from tensions around poverty, but also women's communal roles, political power and age, and the remainder of the chapter explores these issues through discussions of representations of witchcraft in plays and pamphlets.

In the preface, Amussen regrets that, unlike Underdown, she lacked the expertise to extend the analysis beyond 1640, but the conclusion offers some thoughts about how the notion of the world turned upside down moved from being 'a familiar component of the social and political vocabulary' (p. 159) during the revolutionary decades, before losing resonance after 1660 as political stability increased and ideas about gender roles altered. These concluding statements are some of the most provocative in the book, and no doubt historians of the mid and later seventeenth century will seek to test the authors' claims in coming years. By contrast historians of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England will find little to quibble with here: familiar material is interwoven skilfully with new primary research and the end result is a persuasive account of the centrality of gender to understandings of society, culture and politics in which the reign of James I emerges as a point of crisis in which tensions and anxieties about unruly women and failed patriarchs bubbled like a witch's brew.