

Book Reviews

Pre-1800

SUSAN D. AMUSSEN and DAVID E. UNDERDOWN. *Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560–1640: Turning the World Upside Down*. Cultures of Early Modern Europe. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. 226. \$114 (cloth).
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During his long scholarly career, David Underdown, who passed away in 2009, offered new interpretations of the nature of English revolutions, civil war, regicide, popular politics, puritans, communities, and gender. Never one to shy away from big topics and grand theories, Underdown intended this book, based on more than thirty years of archive work, to be his “mental world” book, a work that not only would connect his interests in politics, skimming-tons, and drama but also, by merging social, political, and cultural perspectives, would supply a more integrative approach to the study of early modern history. Inversion as a cultural, political, and social trope, he believed, was the key to understanding early modern English society. Underdown had created an outline, written 40,000 words, and partially drafted all the chapters by the time of his death. His wife, Susan Amussen, built on this, clarifying and expanding the argument and situating it within a more overt theoretical framework. The book, as much hers as his, is intended to bridge the divide between social, political, and cultural history and propose fresh ways to think about old questions.

The argument is derived from a series of insights and assumptions. The tension between the hierarchical, orderly ideal and its inversion was a central component of the mental world of early modern individuals. English society was obsessed with order, all too fully aware how fragile it was but at the same time lacking clear guidelines on when order was either achieved or disrupted. Gender was an essential component of the world turned upside down and gendered thinking, especially about unruly women and failed patriarchs, was one of the main ways of conceiving politics and articulating political conflict. Uncovering this gendered and inverted world brings to light how social, political, and cultural history work together and reveals the broader contexts in which ordinary people understood concepts and implemented actions. The

performance, understanding, and ramifications of inversion are examined through five separate chapters on unruly women, failed patriarchs, drama, civic pageantry and charivari, and witchcraft.

Women, despite expectations, were not always under the governance of a patriarch. Unruly women—lusty, idle, proud, gluttonous, extravagant, scolding, and defiant—abounded in English society: on stage, at court, in families, and in communities. A witch, through her alliance with Satan and her undermining of the normal rules of behavior, inverted and challenged both the social and gender order. Even worse: women were enabled in their offenses by men who did not keep them compliant. Not all men were capable of governing well, even though this was a recognized male duty. Those who failed to regulate their households effectively were much more of a threat to ideals of order than were insubordinate women. Obedience was given in return for good governance and thus disorderly women were a visible proof of patriarchal failure. Unfortunately for men, however, they were responsible for the behavior of people—wives, children and servants—whom they could never fully control. Both men and women balanced subordination in some relationships with authority in others and in everyday life ensuring the proper patriarchal order depended on women as well as men. These two primary paradigms of gendered inversion—unruly women and failed patriarchs—posed problems for families, communities, and political authority, and they constituted a central dynamic of early modern theater and popular literature. Social structure and hierarchy were overturned by men who ignored or were unsuccessful at fulfilling their roles as good governors and by women who, rather than being under masculine guidance, followed their own desires.

The concern with disruptive women and ineffective men in the period, from 1560 to 1640, was not new, but the way such concerns were connected to politics and culture was. Political virtue for this period was aligned with patriarchal households. Cheap print and theater amplified isolated events to create an image of crisis. Festive life was used to comment on politics. Inversion performed in the streets and fields intersected with local structures of power to challenge and destabilize authority. To many, the civil war was irrefutable evidence that the world was indeed turned upside down.

Amussen and Underwood succeed admirably in their aim to intertwine different historical approaches—every chapter discusses politics, social practice, and literary culture. But I could not help feeling they were skimming the surface, not delving into the framing and expression of early modern mindsets, not probing their sources, and not fully teasing out their interpretations. The argument is supported by detailed case studies of people and plays, but these, for the most part, are well-known examples. The gender imagery of early modern drama is effectively highlighted but the approach taken relied too much on plot summaries rather than nuanced readings. Amussen and Underwood could also have pushed their interpretations. What enabled the unrepentant Lady Ros, for example, to defy the authority of church and state over her adultery and illegitimate child? Pexhall Brocas, rather than lamenting his failure as a patriarch, celebrated his rejection of the standards by which he was judged. These two were not so much turning the world upside down as refusing to abide by social conventions. One chapter is devoted to the intriguing case of Wells in 1607, in which an illicit church ale was combined with the city guilds' midsummer pageants to raise money to pay for repairs, despite the objections of some residents. The investigation and interpretation of this was forced into too much of a gender-and-inversion straightjacket. The development of events from May games to a church ale, followed by a skimmington ride, play, and libelous poem about the constable, and concluding with a court case binding over the churchwardens for holding an illegal church ale clearly shows the difference of opinions that existed in early modern communities—along with the limitations of the world-upside-down concept—and merits a more in-depth and wide-ranging investigation.

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