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**Book Review: Amussen, S., & Underdown, D. (2017). *Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560–1640* (D. E. Underdown, Ed.; 1st ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.**

**By Katya Tapia Becerril**

*Gender, Culture, and Politics in England, 1560-1640* by Susan D. Amussen and David Underdown is a collaborative study that began with David Underdown who was a historian of 17th century English politics and culture, and subsequently completed by Susan D. Amussen, a specialist on the history of Modern Britain and the Atlantic World at the University of California, Merced. Throughout Amussen's and Underdown's conversations, it became clear that debates about gender and politics were deeply intertwined, and thus, their collaborative study focuses on unruly women and failed patriarchs and how it affected families and politics.

*Gender, Culture, and Politics in England, 1560-1640* is organized into five chapters. Throughout the first chapter, "Unruly Women" Amussen and Underdown expose the discourse surrounding women in early modern English society. The common discourse surrounding women portrayed them as irrational, disorderly, dishonest, idle, excessive talkers, and lacking in sexual self-control. In contrast to their male counterparts who were seen as rational, virtuous, prudent, and capable of self-control. To support this, Amussen and Underdown effectively examine Joseph Swetnam, the author of the pamphlet *The Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women*, who held misogynistic views of women. Swetnam's rhetoric was intended to be used as a way to warn husbands of the importance of controlling their wives and what they could expect of them. In the second chapter, "Failed Patriarchs" Amussen and Underdown effectively argue that patriarchal authority in household governance sets men up for failure. Traditionally marriage marked a transition into full political adulthood which meant that marriage provided men with the authority to govern a household. While husbands and fathers were held accountable for the conduct of their families, they lacked the means to fully control

them. Amussen and Underdown point out that family members often had duties that took them outside of the household, which then granted them a certain level of independence that made total patriarchal supervision impossible.

The third chapter, “Performing Inversion: Theatre, Politics and Society,” the authors provide insight into how unruly women and failed patriarchs were visible across society and were central to the theatrical world. For example, John Webster’s play *The Duchess of Malfi* includes messages about the contrast between good and bad patriarchs and unruly women. In Webster’s play when the Duchess asserted her independence, it led to the Duchess, her husband, two children, and two brothers all dying. The rest of this chapter goes into depth on other theatrical comedies and plays to show how stage performances acted as examples of contemporary social events. In the fourth chapter, “Performing Inversion in Civic Pageantry and Charivari” Amussen and Underdown draw attention to a case study that occurred in Wells, Somerset. The case consisted of a complaint made by John Hole to the Star Chamber because a group of young people were celebrating the traditional May festivities with the support of their elders. After Hole tried to stop the festivities, the young people still put on two pageants with the support of the elders. One of the pageants made fun of Hole and his friends and made them seem like poor men, rather than the wealthy merchants and tradesmen they were. Lastly, in the fifth chapter, “Witches, Magicians and the Upside Down World” Amussen and Underdown effectively argue that witchcraft was seen as a threat to stability. They explain how witchcraft led people to believe that it, “not only involved the use of satanic powers which turned the entire moral order upside down, but it also provided an explanation for unruly women’s actions.”<sup>1</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup> Amussen, S., & Underdown, D. (2017). *Gender, Culture and Politics in England, 1560–1640* (D. E. Underdown, Ed.; 1st ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 174.

labeling witchcraft as a way to manipulate the world it allowed people to accuse unruly women of being witches.

Overall, both Amussen and Underdown's effectively show us how the established gender order in early modern English society was contradictory. They emphasize in chapter two, "Failed Patriarchs" that men had authority in marriage but could not control their families because people went outside for work. This is a powerful example of how men did not have total authority in the household. It's also important to know that the wife was also important in making sure the household ran smoothly. Both Amussen and Underdown successfully use multiple sources such as theater plays, court records, witchcraft trails, and pamphlets to support their argument. By piecing all of this together both Amussen and Underdown emphatically demonstrate how gender and politics are deeply intertwined in Early Modern English society.