



Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500-1800

Anthony Fletcher

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Men and women in early modern England lived their lives within a social and gender framework inherited from biblical times. Patriarchy—the social and cultural dominance of the male—has long been a fundamental feature of western civilization yet has only recently begun to be systematically investigated by historians. This book is the first attempt to provide a rounded portrait of its workings over a long stretch of the English past. Anthony Fletcher's account draws from a vast range of sources—literary, medical, religious, and historical—to investigate the mechanisms through which men and women interpreted and understood their social worlds. He explores the early modern view of the body, of sexual desire and appetites, and of gender difference. He looks at the nature of marital relationships and shows how subordination was implemented and consolidated through church, school, home, and community. And in a text that is poignant, humane, and beautifully written, he exposes patriarchy's tragic consequences: smothered opportunity, crushed sexuality, and a pall across many women's lives. Yet, over these three centuries, the conventional foundations of male superiority came under acute pressure. Fletcher reveals the depth of male anxiety in the face of women's volatility, verbal assertiveness, and alleged vibrant sexuality, and he shows how the gender system began to be transformed as men sought to detach it from its biblical foundations and inculcate gender identities on something like their modern ideological basis. This revolution in the entire premise upon which gender was grounded is fundamental to an understanding of the structure of English society today.

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