General Introduction to Theories of Gender and Sex

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AS WITH MOST OF THE OPENING INTRODUCTIONS in this Guide to Theory, we must begin the introduction to this section with the caveat that this area of study is incredibly complex, perhaps more so than any of the others, given the tendency of such theorists to employ the strategies of other critical schools in their analysis of gender and sex. As a result, sex and gender theorists can be divided into various sub-schools that bring together the insights of disparate approaches (eg. materialist feminists, Foucauldian theorists of gender, postmodern and poststructuralist theorists of gender, and psychoanalytical feminists; psychoanalytical feminists can, in turn, be divided among Freudian, Lacanian, and Kristevan thinkers). As discussed in the Narratology section, theorists of gender and sex (especially those of a Lacanian stripe) have also been hugely influential in the study of narrative, particularly in the area of film theory. Our task here is even further complicated by the decision to call this section "Gender & Sex" rather than "Feminism," since that designation further opens up the scope of this section to the highly influential set of theorists that are often referred to as "queer theorists."

Before we turn to a quick overview of the theorists discussed in the Modules and to help put all these thinkers in context, we here provide a timeline of the history of gender and sexuality, one that is similar to the timeline provided in the General Introduction to Postmodernism. You will note that the section on the nineteenth century is particularly full, largely because we are both primarily nineteenth-century scholars.

The Social History of Western Sexuality

Ancient Greece and Rome

Sappho (c. 613-570 B.C.)

Ancient Greece and Rome:

Of particular interest to theorists of gender and sexuality is the apparently greater acceptance of same-sex relations in ancient culture: between men, between men and boys, and between women. For feminist theorists, the figure of Sappho (from the isle of Lesbos) has been particularly influential, given her continuing influence on the notion and expression of lesbian desire through the ages. Sappho, born sometime between 630 and 612 BC, was a lyric poet (i.e. in the classic sense: she wrote her poetry to be accompanied by a lyre). She is one of the few female voices in the literature of ancient Greece and thus served as a model for future female writers. Her sensuous poetry also often took as its subject the love between women.

This is not to suggest that the Greeks could not be exceptionally misogynistic, as the infamous passages against women in
Hesiod's *Theogony* and
Homer's *Odyssey* attest.[note]

Another influential critic is Thomas Laqueur, who, in *Making Sex*, explores how sexuality from the ancients through the Renaissance was structured quite differently than it was in the nineteenth century or is today: specifically, he illustrates how science prior to the mid eighteenth century tended to perceive men and women as versions of one sex, so to speak: women were seen, that is, as lesser men, with the clitoris and the uterus but reduced or inverted versions of the penis and scrotum. Such a one-sex model, as Laqueur terms it, meant that the differences between men and women were not clear (or even so important) in these early medical texts: both men and women were seen as parts (if unequal parts) of a larger cosmological order. Given such a historical record, Laqueur concludes that sexuality itself

(rather than just gender) is something that is historically determined. As he puts it,

This book, then, is about the making not of gender, but of sex. I have no interest in denying the reality of sex or of sexual dimorphism as an evolutionary process. But I want to show on the basis of historical evidence that almost everything one wants to *say* about sex—however sex is understood—already has in it a claim about gender. Sex, in both the one-sex and the two-sex worlds, is situational; it is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power. (11)

Laqueur thus places himself in the camp of a group of critics following in the wake of Foucault and poststructuralism who contest even the traditional feminist distinction between nature (one's bodily sex) and nurture (one's acquired gender).

Renaissance (1550-1660)

Renaissance:

In 1533, the English parliament passed the first civil injunction against sodomy, which was basically defined as any form of non-procreative sexual activity (buggery, bestiality, etc). The sexes of the partners were not defined. Sodomy remained a capital offence in England until 1861; the last execution for sodomy took place in 1836.

On the issue of sexual difference, Thomas Laqueur has illustrated in *Making Sense* that the differences between men and women were not as important to Renaissance scientists as they would be to the scientists of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Indeed, according to the scientists of the sixteenth century, anatomy itself "displayed, at many levels and with unprecedented vigor, the 'fact' that the vagina really is a penis, and the uterus a scrotum" (79). Laqueur insists throughout his book that the

difference in perception when it came to anatomy was not because of the stupidity of the observers but because of a different way of conceiving sexuality, just as our current perceptions about sex are being determined as much by political and epistemological structures as by "reality." As Laqueur writes,

The absence of a precise anatomical nomenclature for the female genitals, and for the reproductive system generally, is the linguistic equivalent of the propensity to *see* the female body *as* a version of the male. Both testify not to the blindness, inattention, or muddleheadedness of Renaissance anatomists, but to the absence of an imperative to create incommensurable categories of biological male and female through images or words. Language constrained the seeing of opposites and sustained the male body as the canonical human form. And, conversely, the fact that one saw only one sex made even words for female parts ultimately refer to male organs. (96)

Laqueur also suggests that the one-sex model persists in various strange ways well into the nineteenth century, citing anti-masturbation tracts as an example. An example in this Guide to Theory of the persistence of the one-sex model is Freud's theories about psychosexual development, which are explained in the Modules under Psychoanalysis.

18th Century (1660-1789)

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

Restoration/ Enlightenment:

By most scholarly accounts, the eighteenth century was a transitional period in understandings of gender and sexuality. It was during this period that the groundwork was laid for the "naturalization" of gender categories, which became especially important in the nineteenth century and which provided for the belief that gendered behavior was a matter of biology—that, in short, biology was destiny. Eighteenth-century medical science paved the way for a strictly binary system of gender by "discovering" the incommensurable differences between male and female bodies. As Laqueur puts it, "[s]ometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented" (149). He continues, writing,

All the complex ways in which resemblances among bodies, and between bodies and the cosmos, [formerly] confirmed a hierarchical world order were reduced to a single plane: nature. In the world of reductionist explanation, what mattered was the flat, horizontal, immovable foundation of physical fact: sex. (151)

Under this new system of sexual dimorphism, women and men were taken to be one another's opposites in most things. Whereas women were increasingly taken to be passive and passionless, for example, men were taken to be aggressive and sexually charged. Many of the truisms about gender behavior that contemporary sexuality studies works to dismantle (e.g. "boys will be boys") date from this period.

The assumption of binary gender did not happen overnight, however. Some critics argue that eighteenth-century culture's emphasis on public display and ceremony meant that people accepted gender categories as performative rather than inherent or "natural," thus opening

up spaces for the contestation of these categories. As Terry Castle has shown in *Masquerade and Civilization*, for example, the enormously popular masquerades of the eighteenth century (huge costume parties in which revelers often dressed in transvestite disguise) demonstrated the fluidity and artificiality of gender categories.

Of particular importance in this period is the rise of Enlightenment values of equality, fraternity, and liberty, which many female thinkers argued needed to be applied to all humanity, including women. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is an influential example of how Enlightenment values began to influence the call for women's own inalienable rights. Indeed, the French Revolution, which was greatly influenced by Enlightenment philosophers, included numerous calls for the liberation of women.

Unfortunately in England the eventual war against France led many to dismiss early feminist thinkers like Wollstonecraft as overly radical because of their association with the dangerous French. Women's liberation was thus from an early age tied to other issues such as class, politics, imperialism, and also race (for Evangelical women and radical feminists were particularly outspoken and influential in the fight to abolish slavery in commonwealth Britain).

Of particular interest on the sexuality front were the ever-increasing caveats in the period about masturbation, which, according to Samuel-Auguste-David Tissot (one of the most influential doctors of the period) could lead to everything from gonorrhea to blindness to painful and shameful death. The new fears about masturbation (which hardly existed before the eighteenth century) set the stage for the nineteenth-century fascination with the disciplining of the private body and its desires. Much of the rhetoric directed at the Onanist (the common term in the period for a masturbator)

would later be re-directed to the homosexual after the medicalization of homosexuality at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth Century

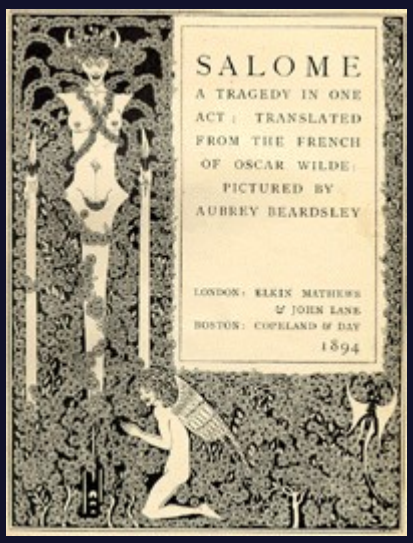
William Holman Hunt's The Awakening Conscience (1853)

Nineteenth Century:

The nineteenth century was dominated by the idea of "natural" gender distinctions and by a conception of normative sexuality that was centered largely on the middle-class family. There were, of course, many expressions and forms of *non*-normative (i.e. non-procreative, non-heterosexual) sexuality, but these fell under increasing scrutiny and discipline from a variety of institutions, including medicine and the law.

The middle-class culture that came about in Britain and America as a result of urbanization, industrialization, and strong economic growth (which is to say, that could not have happened without the enlightenment) imagined itself as existing in two complementary but separate spheres: the public and the private. These spheres were roughly commensurate with the binary gender distinctions discussed above. The public sphere belonged to men: it was the sphere of business and money-making, of politics and

Oscar Wilde with Lord Alfred Douglas (summer 1853)



Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, with illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley (censored version)

empire building, of industry and struggle. The private sphere, on the other hand, was considered to be a feminine preserve: it was the space of the home and the hearth, of sympathy and nurture, of simple piety and childrearing. Men obviously crossed into the private sphere when they left their business for their homes—where they were to be "softened" by the gentle ministrations of their dear home angels—but women had limited access to the public sphere.

This double system underwrote a capitalist economic system—by creating the home as a sphere of consumption rather than production and by creating the middle-class wife as a leisured consumer—and it underwrote the middle-class ideal of a private domestic sphere that was untouched by the ravages of commerce. (You will immediately see the paradox in this.)

The middle class's claim to cultural authority hinged on their claim to moral superiority: the middle-classes were represented as being more human and better feeling (and acting) than their aristocratic counterparts. As Nancy Armstrong has argued in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, much of the transfer of cultural power from the aristocratic world to the middle-class world happened through cultural imagery—it was basically a matter of good public relations. Armstrong argues that we cannot undervalue the work of the novel in providing representations of middle-class life, behavior, and superior feeling. The domestic novel, in particular, portrayed the middle-class woman as the ultimate symbol of middle-class domestic virtue.

A primary figure of the period, one that was supported by the conservative female domestic novelists, is the "Angel in the House," the perfect self-sacrificing and self-disciplining domestic housewife, who is implicitly or explicitly contrasted to the demonic whore-figure. The woman in Hunt's painting, "The Awakening Conscience" (on the left), is poised between these two possibilities for female

subjectivity. Such a situation did not prevent many female novelists from questioning aspects of domestic ideology, as explored, for example, by the groundbreaking study, *Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

The domestic ideal came under increasing fire towards the latter half of the nineteenth century, fueled by a public debate about women's roles that the Victorian's called "The Woman Question" and by a series of high-profile scandals and court cases. During the 1860's, when sodomy was removed from the list of capital crimes, laws governing sexuality were being rethought in England due to a number of factors, which include the following: the 1857 Marital Clauses Act, which created a secular Divorce Court and made it possible for women to divorce their husbands, thereby intensifying the commensurate desire to regulate female sexuality; the growing visibility and economic power of the working classes, aligned throughout the nineteenth century with unregulated sexual drives; the strange fact of "surplus" women, which forced women into the workplace and again intensified scrutiny on women's roles and sexuality; the increasing panic over prostitution, which might have been the "oldest profession" but gained a new power over the cultural imagination due to an increase in population and urban poverty (among other things).

In response to this panic over sexuality and its regulation, parliament passed the "CD Acts"—the Contagious Diseases Acts—in 1864, 1866, and 1869 (the same year that Cambridge University first opened a college for women and the year before the Married Woman's Property Act gave married women legal identity). The CD acts were—nominally—acts meant to shield the population from the vice of prostitution. In truth, they gave communities the right to regulate and police working-class women. Here is what the acts provided for: the arrest of women who looked like they could be prostitutes; the forced physical examination of

women who were suspected of being prostitutes; the incarceration of women who carried a contagious venereal disease.

As Ed Cohen has demonstrated in *Talk on the Wilde Side*, outrage over the CD Acts brought together a strange coalition of people: feminists, radical working-class men, and evangelicals. These groups protested the Acts' prejudicial treatment of women, prejudicial treatment of the working-class body, and effective endorsement of "safe" prostitution, respectively. Their coalition led a long campaign for the repeal of the CD Acts, a campaign that included demands for legislation that governed male sexual propriety. The CD Acts were finally suspended in 1883 (before being repealed in 1886), and in 1885 a new Act was put in place. Described as "An Act to make further provision for the protection of women and girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes" (and spurred on by the 1885 Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon scandal), the Criminal Law Amendment Act focused on male sexual treatment of women. It included, however, a section that for the first time legislated sexual acts that took place specifically between men. Section 11—the Labouchere Amendment, as it is called after its author—reads like this:

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labor.

Notice that the "indecent" acts are left vague, while the sex of the partners (male) is the only specific point. This makes quite a change from the country's original sodomy law, which specified the acts but not the actors.

It is necessary to understand this change—from

a law regulating specific acts to one regulating specific actors—within the context of several things: the crisis in gender (i.e. a perceived crisis in the late-Victorian period about masculinity and a related crisis regarding femininity, both of which have very clear ties to fears about class and empire); an increasing hysteria about "public health," brought about, in part, by the fact that the "public" was growing in ways that seemed unmanageable; and the rise of Victorian sexology, which reflects the medicalization and psychologization of sex, as well as the Victorian passion for taxonomy (naming sexual "types").

Oscar Wilde, who was famously prosecuted under the Labouchere Amendment because of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, agitated these various crises in a number of ways: he was an aristocrat; he was a socialist; he was Irish; he was fond of both upper-class and working-class men; and he was an artist—a type that had for a long time seemed sexually suspect.

Also of importance at the end of the nineteenth century is the rise of the New Woman as a recognizable type. The "New" Woman saw herself as overturning a number of the stereotypes associated with the "old" Victorian model for femininity: the New Woman is intellectual (as opposed to emotional); quite public (as opposed to private and domestic); active (as opposed to passive); and, in most cases, non-reproductive (as opposed to maternal). She caused a stir not only because she rejected the traditional female role but also because she seemed to appropriate a male one.

As the previous list illustrates, any discussion of the New Woman lands us immediately in the Victorian territory of binary gender: it is difficult to think about the "New" female without thinking about the male. And so it was for the Victorians, who associated the New Woman with her male counterpart, the Decadent—and, especially, the Decadent figure that

rejected and inverted most (but not all) Victorian codes of masculinity: the effeminate Dandy. In her influential essay, "The Decadent and the New Woman," Linda Dowling calls these two figures "the twin apostles of social apocalypse," and this is largely how the Victorians understood them: the beginning of the end. So it was feared that the genders were switching places in a way that would imperil the home, the nation, the empire, and the very race.

The New Woman spelled trouble because she refused to occupy the feminine position that anchored an entire national ideology. We should recall that an entire empire and economy (in England) ran on the assumption that the home was the center of the universe, that the woman was its chief guardian, and that this world must be financed and shielded by the public world of men. The home, in return, served the public realm by (re)producing good young Englishmen, by offering a softening "influence" to the vicious male world of capital, and by providing that vicious world with a cover story and *raison d'être*. ("We must do it for the women, because they couldn't bear it.") When women claimed that they could, indeed, bear it, and were quite willing to do things for themselves, things began to slip.

Although the New Woman was a threat on pretty much every level (political, economic, imperial), she was perceived above all as a sexual threat. So she was frequently portrayed as dangerously asexual or, more commonly, ravenously sexual, as in Oscar Wilde's notorious version of *Salome* (which was illustrated by another one of the fin-de-siècle's great dandies, Aubrey Beardsley, at left).

It is important to note that the position of "New Woman" was really no more coherent than the modern label, "Feminist." There were, in fact, all kinds of New Women, and they did not make up an ideological monolith. So, for example, some New Women were also socialists, while others were stridently bourgeois; some New

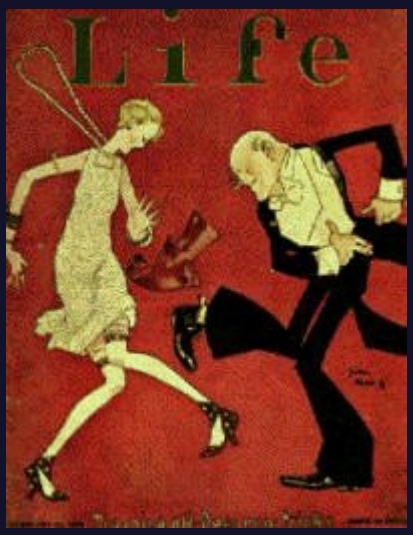
Women championed maternity, while others rejected it; some wanted to remake the world according to "female" values, while yet others found those values oppressive; some localized identity and moral superiority within female biology, while others longed only for the apparent freedom of androgyny. The view from within, then as now, was in no way as coherent as the view from without.

By the end of the nineteenth century, then, the domestic ideal so cherished by the Victorians had begun to unravel. It had never been more than an ideal—it is worth remembering that prostitution and pornography flourished during the Victorian period—but its political importance cannot be underestimated. Nineteenth-century views on "natural" gender and sexuality, with their attendant stereotypes about "proper" gender roles and "proper" desires, lingered long into the twentieth century and continue, somewhat fitfully, to inform the world in which we live.

Modernity and Postmodernity (1898-the present)

Modernity and Postmodernity:

What was often referred to in the nineteenth century as the "woman question" was in the modern period driven from theoretical debate to an insistent demand for political change, particularly when it came to the issue of enfranchisement. The next generation of New Women in the modern period, then, were the suffragettes of the first two decades and then the flappers of the twenties. This was a period when women finally saw the political implementation of a number of equal-rights issues, particularly the vote, which was not extended to women in England until 1918 and was not extended to women in the United States until the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.[note] The Jazz Age of the twenties



John Held Jr. , *Life* cover

Barbara Kruger, Untitled (your body is a battleground), 1989 photographic silkscreen on vinyl

followed, a time when women began to rebel against earlier conventions for proper female behavior, a rebellion exemplified in both changing fashions (see the John Held illustration on the left for an example) and changing manners (smoking, drinking, sexual experimentation, etc.).

Also of note in the modern period are the large number of women writing difficult modernist works that they defined against the market (and the traditional novel, which had formerly been the accepted outlet for female creativity). In literature, Virginia Woolf, H. D., and Gertrude Stein are particularly notable figures.

After the second world war, feminists continued to struggle to implement equal rights and benefits in all areas of society, which continues today in the effort to break the "glass ceiling" that separates women from their male colleagues when it comes to high-level administrative jobs of various sorts. As has always been the case with feminist struggles over the last few centuries, feminists are not always in agreement about the best way to achieve their objectives. Warren Hedges at Southern Oregon University provides a helpful "Taxonomy of Feminist Intellectual Traditions," which includes the following positions: 1) liberal feminism, which seeks equal rights for women via political and civil channels; 2) cultural feminism, which seeks to recover lost female voices from the past, thus expanding the canon of works taught in schools. (We could also add here those critics who critique literature by men for its representation of women.); 3) separatism, which seeks to establish female-only spaces and fora where women can determine their own values and beliefs; and 4) "queer theory," which explores the marginalization, radicalism and value of marginalized sexual identities (eg. homosexuality). Hedges also mentions anti-pornography and pro-porn theorists as well as a number of hybrid feminisms that build on the insights of other theoretical schools, including

"French" or poststructuralist feminism, psychoanalytical feminism, and materialist feminism. The situation is, then, to say the least, rather complex. One important distinction we can make, though, when it comes to theories of gender and sexuality is that between 1) those critics who accept the distinction between gender as nurture and sex as nature and are, therefore, more interested in exploring the value of marginalized subject positions (including those determined by race); and 2) those critics who follow the poststructuralist and postmodernist position, whereby everything (even sex and race) is determined by language and ideology. The first position has been labeled by some as "identity politics," and has been extremely influential in the last two decades, growing hand in hand with "cultural studies" (the study of past cultures in all their historical and social minutiae, including the recovery of marginalized voices). The second position conforms more to the postmodern position, which is explained in the General Introduction to Postmodernity. In short, these critics remain critical of scholars attempting to establish naturalized conceptions of gender or sexuality, arguing that we must always be conscious of the performative and contructed nature of all identity. (Judith Butler has been particularly influential with this group of feminists in the 1990s.) Postmodern feminist art, like that of Barbara Kruger (on the left), follows those elements associated with postmodernity (irony, parody, self-reflexivity, and a rejection of hard distinctions between "high" and "low" cultural forms) in order always to problematize and keep in play questions of gender and sexuality.

PLAYERS

MICHEL FOUCAULT has been hugely influential on gender theory, largely due to his two-volume *History of Sexuality*, a work that is monumental in scope although it remains unfinished due to Foucault's untimely death in 1984. His critique of Freud's "repressive hypothesis," which I explain in the Foucault module of that name, allows us to consider the ways that theorists of gender and sex rework Freudian concepts (which can, as we saw in the Freud modules, sometimes appear notoriously misogynistic). Then again, Foucault himself has been accused of not addressing women as much as he does men, which I try to correct in the modules by suggesting further reading.

JUDITH BUTLER has, along with Sedgwick, helped to make "queer studies" one of the important and transformative areas of theoretical discussion of the last decade. She has also taken queer studies in new and exciting directions (Marxist philosophy, theories of justice, hate speech, etc.). Her popularization of the concept of performativity (which she borrows from speech-act theory and applies to the problem of gender and sex) has also had an important influence on what we might term the postmodern or poststructuralist generation of feminists that have followed in her wake.

ACCORDING TO FOUCAULT it may well be that many of the sexual issues of Christian culture can be found in various pagan texts, including a fear of masturbation and of excessive sexual activity, a demand for self-restraint, a valuation of heterosexual monogamy, and a negative representation of homosexuality; however, what is lacking in ancient culture is the pervasive, rigid, and enforced "codification" of sexual behavior that is common from approximately the eighteenth century on, a codification and enforcement that is made possible because of various new strategies of social control: science and its principles of rational organization, the contemporary penal system, the medicalization of the subject's private and public acts, the interiorization of disciplinary rules. According to Foucault, "moral conceptions in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity," by contrast, "were much more oriented toward practices of the self and the question of askesis than toward codifications of conducts and the strict definition of what is permitted and what is forbidden" (2.30). Instead of emphasizing the moral rules enforced by hegemonic institutions, "The accent was placed on the relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from being carried away by the appetites and pleasures, to maintain a mastery and superiority over them, to keep his senses in a state of tranquillity, to remain free from interior bondage to the passions, and to achieve a mode of being that could be defined by the full enjoyment of oneself, or the perfect supremacy of oneself over oneself" (2.31). The goal in ancient Greece was "a strategy of moderation and timing, of quantity and opportunity; and this strategy aimed at an exact self-mastery—as its culmination and consummation—whereby the subject would be 'stronger than himself' even in the

power that he exercised over others" (2.250). This self-discipline "was not presented in the form of a universal law, which each and every individual would have to obey, but rather as a principle of stylization of conduct for those who wished to give their existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible" (2.250-51).

For this reason, according Foucault, our very idea of sexuality does not exist in ancient Greece, at least not as a single, monolithic entity applicable to all. He instead refers to the rather loosely defined Greek term, *aphrodisia*, and to multiple forms and aesthetic uses of pleasure. The ancient Greeks were not concerned with a "hermeneutics of desire," with our tendency to want to interpret and discuss sexuality; to codify proper sexual behavior; and to define certain acts as perverse. Instead the key was moderation and self-control, with less concern on the specific sexual acts one engaged in. In contrast to our contemporary "hermeneutics of desire," Foucault terms this approach to sexuality the "aesthetics of existence," by which he means "a way of life whose moral value did not depend either on one's being in conformity with a code of behavior, or on an effort of purification, but on certain formal principles in the use of pleasures, in the way one distributed them, in the limits one observed, in the hierarchy one respected" (2.89).

In general, and as a result of such differences, Foucault accepts that the Greeks treated the subject of sexuality differently than people in post-Christian eras: "One can grant the familiar proposition that the Greeks of that epoch accepted certain sexual behaviors much more readily than the Christians of the Middle Ages or the Europeans of the modern period; one can also grant that laxity and misconduct in this regard provoked less scandal back then and made one liable to less recrimination, especially as there was no institution—whether pastoral or medical—that claimed the right to determine what was permitted or forbidden, normal or abnormal, in this area; one can also grant that the Greeks attributed much less importance to all these questions than we do" (2.36).

d in a general way, if not in every society, most certainly in our own?" (1.10); 3) "Was there really a historical rupture between the age of repression and the critical analysis of repression?" (1.10).

Foucault points out that the rise of repression that is generally believed to begin in the seventeenth century leads not to silence but to "a veritable discursive explosion" (1.17). Yes, the discussion of sexuality was restricted in certain areas (the family, the school, etc.) but that restriction was accompanied by "a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex—specific discourses, different from one another both by their form and by their object: a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward" (1.18). Far from silence, we witness "an institutional incitement to speak about [sex], and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through

explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail" (1.18). The effect of all this rational discourse about sex was the increasing encroachment of state law into the realm of private desire: "one had to speak of [sex] as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered" (1.24).

Our continual call to speak of sexuality in the present age (on television, in popular music, etc.) is, therefore, not significantly different from the ways state power imposed its regulations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: through the continual demand for discourse.

Foucault also argues that censorship is not the primary form through which power is exercised; rather it is the incitement to speak about one's sexuality (to experts of various sorts) in order better to regulate it. Indeed, silence itself can be read as caught up in a larger *discourse* about sexuality:

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (1.27).

Foucault gives the example of eighteenth-century secondary schools. Sex was not supposed to be spoken of in such institutions; however, for this very reason, one can read the preoccupation with sexuality in all aspects of such schools: "The space for classes, the shape of the tables, the planning of the recreation lessons, the distribution of the dormitories..., the rules for monitoring bedtime and sleep periods—all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to the sexuality of children" (1.28). And a whole industry of experts (doctors, educators, schoolmasters, etc.) were, indeed, consulted regularly on the matter of sex in order to regulate all the times, spaces, and activities of the school.

Foucault does not question the fact of repression; he questions, rather why sexuality "has been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it" (1.11). His goal is to "define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world" (1.11), what he terms the "polymorphous techniques of power" (1.11).

JUDITH BUTLER questions the belief that certain gendered behaviors are natural, illustrating the ways that one's learned performance of gendered behavior (what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity) is an act of sorts, a

performance, one that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality. Butler thus offers what she herself calls "a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts" ("Performative" 270). In other words, Butler questions the extent to which we can assume that a given individual can be said to constitute him- or herself; she wonders to what extent our acts are determined for us, rather, by our place within language and convention. She follows postmodernist and poststructuralist practice in using the term "subject" (rather than "individual" or "person") in order to underline the linguistic nature of our position within what Jacques Lacan terms the symbolic order, the system of signs and conventions that determines our perception of what we see as reality. Unlike theatrical acting, Butler argues that we cannot even assume a stable subjectivity that goes about performing various gender roles; rather, it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are (see the next module on performativity). Identity itself, for Butler, is an illusion retroactively created by our performances: "In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*" ("Performative" 271). That belief (in stable identities and gender differences) is, in fact, compelled "by social sanction and taboo" ("Performative" 271), so that our belief in "natural" behavior is really the result of both subtle and blatant coercions. One effect of such coercions is also the creation of that which cannot be articulated, "a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies" (*Bodies* xi) that, through abjection by the "normal" subject helps that subject to constitute itself: "This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against, which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life" (*Bodies* 3). This repudiation is necessary for the subject to establish "an identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex'" (*Bodies* 3), but, because the act is not "natural" or "biological" in any way, Butler uses that abjected domain to question and "rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" (*Bodies* 3). By underlining the artificial, proscribed, and performative nature of gender identity, Butler seeks to trouble the definition of gender, challenging the status quo in order to fight for the rights of marginalized identities (especially gay and lesbian identity).

Indeed, Butler goes far as to argue that gender, as an objective natural thing, does not exist: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" ("Performative" 278). Gender, according to Butler, is by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction, one that, therefore, is open to change and contestation: "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender

at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" ("Performative" 273). That genesis is not corporeal but performative (see next module), so that the body becomes its gender only "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" ("Performative" 274). By illustrating the artificial, conventional, and historical nature of gender construction, Butler attempts to critique the assumptions of normative heterosexuality: those punitive rules (social, familial, and legal) that force us to conform to hegemonic, heterosexual standards for identity.

Butler takes her formulations even further by questioning the very distinction between gender and sex. In the past, feminists regularly made a distinction between bodily sex (the *corporeal* facts of our existence) and gender (the *social* conventions that determine the differences between masculinity and femininity). Such feminists accepted the fact that certain anatomical differences do exist between men and women but they pointed out how most of the conventions that determine the behaviors of men and women are, in fact, *social* gender constructions that have little or nothing to do with our corporeal sexes. According to traditional feminists, sex is a biological category; gender is a historical category. Butler questions that distinction by arguing that our "gender acts" affect us in such material, corporeal ways that even our perception of corporeal sexual differences are affected by social conventions. For Butler, sex is not "a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but... a *cultural* norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (*Bodies* 2-3; my italics). Sex, for Butler, "is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (*Bodies* 2). Butler here is influenced by the postmodern tendency to see our very conception of reality as determined by language, so that it is ultimately impossible even to think or articulate sex without imposing linguistic norms: "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body" (*Bodies* 10). (See the Introduction to Gender and Sex for Thomas Laqueur's exploration of the different ways that science has determined our understanding of bodily sexuality since the ancient Greeks.) The very act of saying something about sex ends up imposing cultural or ideological norms, according to Butler. As she puts it, "'sex' becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access" (*Bodies* 5). Nonetheless, that fiction is central to the establishment of subjectivity and human society, which is to say that, even so, it has material effects: "the 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves" (*Bodies* 7). That linguistic construction is also not stable, working as it does by always re-establishing boundaries (and a zone of abjection) through the endlessly repeated performative acts that mark us as one sex or another. "Sex" is thus unveiled not only as an artificial norm but also a norm that is subject to change. Butler's project, then, is "to 'cite' the

law in order to reiterate and coopt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity" (*Bodies* 15).

JUDITH BUTLER is influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, George Herbert Mead, etc.), structural anthropologists (Claude Levì-Strauss, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, etc.) and speech-act theory (particularly the work of John Searle) in her understanding of the "performativity" of our identities. All of these theories explore the ways that social reality is not a given but is continually created as an illusion "through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" ("Performative" 270). A good example in speech-act theory is what John Searle terms illocutionary speech acts, those speech acts that actually *do* something rather than merely *represent* something. The classic example is the "I pronounce you man and wife" of the marriage ceremony. In making that statement, a person of authority changes the status of a couple within an intersubjective community; those words actively change the existence of that couple by establishing a new marital reality: the words *do* what they say. As Butler explains, "Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (*Bodies* 13). A speech act can produce that which it names, however, only by reference to the law (or the accepted norm, code, or contract), which is cited or repeated (and thus performed) in the pronouncement.

Butler takes this formulation further by exploring the ways that linguistic constructions create our reality *in general* through the speech acts we participate in every day. By endlessly citing the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us, we enact that reality; in the performative act of speaking, we "incorporate" that reality by enacting it with our bodies, but that "reality" nonetheless remains a social construction (at one step removed from what Lacan distinguishes from reality by the term, "the Real"). In the act of performing the conventions of reality, by embodying those fictions in our actions, we make those artificial conventions appear to be natural and necessary. By enacting conventions, we do make them "real" to some extent (after all, our ideologies have "real" consequences for people) but that does not make them any less artificial. In particular, Butler concerns herself with those "gender acts" that similarly lead to material changes in one's existence and even in one's bodily self: "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well" ("Performative" 272). Like the performative citation of the conventions governing our perception of reality, the enactment of gender norms has "real" consequences, including the creation of our sense of subjectivity but that does not make our subjectivity any less constructed. We may believe that our subjectivity is the source of our actions but Butler contends that our sense of independent, self-willed subjectivity is really a retroactive construction that comes about only through the enactment of social conventions: "gender cannot be

understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" ("Performative" 279).

Butler therefore understands gender to be "*a corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were" ("Performative" 272). That style has no relation to essential "truths" about the body but is strictly ideological. It has a history that exists beyond the subject who enacts those conventions:

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again." ("Performative" 272)

What is required for the hegemony of heteronormative standards to maintain power is our continual repetition of such gender acts in the most mundane of daily activities (the way we walk, talk, gesticulate, etc.). For Butler, the distinction between the personal and the political or between private and public is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo: our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies.

Butler underscores gender's constructed nature in order to fight for the rights of oppressed identities, those identities that do not conform to the artificial—though strictly enforced—rules that govern normative heterosexuality. If those rules are not natural or essential, Butler argues, then they do not have any claim to justice or necessity. Since those rules are historical and rely on their continual citation or enactment by subjects, then they can also be challenged and changed through alternative performative acts. As Butler puts it, "If the 'reality' of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized 'sex' or 'gender' which gender performances ostensibly express" ("Performative" 278). For this reason, "the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations" ("Performative" 278).