

ONE

Of Language and the Flesh

The first thing that strikes the careless observer is that women are unlike men. They are “the opposite sex” (though why “opposite” I do not know; what is the “neighboring sex”?). But the fundamental thing is that women are more like men than anything else in the world.

DOROTHY L SAYERS
“THE HUMAN-NOT-QUITE-HUMAN”

An interpretive chasm separates two interpretations, fifty years apart, of the same story of death and desire told by an eighteenth-century physician obsessed with the problem of distinguishing real from apparent death.¹

The story begins when a young aristocrat whose family circumstances forced him into religious orders came one day to a country inn. He found the innkeepers overwhelmed with grief at the death of their only daughter, a girl of great beauty. She was not to be buried until the next day, and the bereaved parents asked the young monk to keep watch over her body through the night. This he did, and more. Reports of her beauty had piqued his curiosity. He pulled back the shroud and, instead of finding the corpse “disfigured by the horrors of death,” found its features still gracefully animated. The young man lost all restraint, forgot his vows, and took “the same liberties with the dead that the sacraments of marriage would have permitted in life.” Ashamed of what he had done, the hapless necrophilic monk departed hastily in the morning without waiting for the scheduled interment.

When time for burial came, indeed just as the coffin bearing the dead girl was being lowered into the ground, someone felt movement coming from the inside. The lid was torn off; the girl began to stir and soon recovered from what proved not to have been real death at all but only a

coma. Needless to say, the parents were overjoyed to have their daughter back, although their pleasure was severely diminished by the discovery that she was pregnant and, moreover, could give no satisfactory account of how she had come to be that way. In their embarrassment, the innkeepers consigned the daughter to a convent as soon as her baby was born.

Soon business brought the young aristocrat, oblivious of the consequences of his passion but far richer and no longer in holy orders because he had come into his inheritance, back to the scene of his crime. Once again he found the innkeepers in a state of consternation and quickly understood his part in causing their new misfortune. He hastened to the convent and found the object of his necrophilic desire more beautiful alive than dead. He asked for her hand and with the sacrament of marriage legitimized their child.

The moral that Jacques-Jean Bruhier asks his readers to draw from this story is that only scientific tests can make certain that a person is really dead and that even very intimate contact with a body leaves room for mistakes. But Bruhier's contemporary, the noted surgeon Antoine Louis, came to a very different conclusion, one more germane to the subject of this book, when he analyzed the case in 1752.² Based on the evidence that Bruhier himself offered, Louis argues, no one could have doubted that the girl was not dead: she did not, as the young monk testified, look dead and moreover who knows if she did not give some "demonstrative signs" in proof of her liveliness, signs that any eighteenth-century doctor or even layperson would have expected in the circumstances.

Bruhier earlier on in his book had cited numerous instances of seemingly dead young women who were revived and saved from untimely burial by amorous embraces; sexual ecstasy, "dying" in eighteenth-century parlance, turned out for some to be the path to life. Love, that "wonderful satisfactory *Death* and . . . voluntary Separation of Soul and Body," as an English physician called it, guarded the gates of the tomb.³ But in this case it would have seemed extremely unlikely to an eighteenth-century observer that the innkeepers' daughter could have conceived a child without moving and thereby betraying her death.⁴ Any medical book or one of the scores of popular midwifery, health, or marriage manuals circulating in all the languages of Europe reported it as a commonplace that "when the seed issues in the act of generation [from both men and women] there at the same time arises an extra-ordinary titillation and delight in all members of the body."⁵ Without orgasm, another widely

circulated text announced, “the fair sex [would] neither desire nuptial embraces, nor have pleasure in them, nor conceive by them.”⁶

The girl *must* have shuddered, just a bit. If not her rosy cheeks then the tremors of venereal orgasm would have given her away. Bruhier’s story was thus one of fraud and not of apparent death; the innkeepers’ daughter and the monk simply conspired, Louis concludes, to escape culpability by feigning coma until the last possible moment before burial.

In 1836 the tale was told again, but now with a new twist. This time, the reality of the girl’s deathlike comatose state was not questioned. On the contrary, her becoming pregnant under these conditions was cited by Dr. Michael Ryan as one among many other cases of intercourse with insensible women to prove that orgasm was irrelevant to conception. (In one story, for example, an ostler confesses that he came to an inn and had sex with, and made pregnant, a girl who was so dead asleep before the fire that he was long gone before she awoke.) Not only need a woman not feel pleasure to conceive; she need not even be conscious.⁷

Near the end of the Enlightenment, in the period between these two rehearsals of the tale of the innkeepers’ daughter, medical science and those who relied on it ceased to regard the female orgasm as relevant to generation. Conception, it was held, could take place secretly, with no telltale shivers or signs of arousal; the ancient wisdom that “apart from pleasure nothing of mortal kind comes into existence” was uprooted.⁸ Previously a sign of the generative process, deeply embedded in the bodies of men and women, a feeling whose existence was no more open to debate than was the warm, pleasurable glow that usually accompanies a good meal, orgasm was relegated to the realm of mere sensation, to the periphery of human physiology—accidental, expendable, a contingent bonus of the reproductive act.

This reorientation applied in principle to the sexual functioning of both men and women. But no one writing on such matters ever so much as entertained the idea that male passions and pleasures in general did not exist or that orgasm did not accompany ejaculation during coition. Not so for women. The newly “discovered” contingency of delight opened up the possibility of female passivity and “passionlessness.”⁹ The purported independence of generation from pleasure created the space in which women’s sexual nature could be redefined, debated, denied, or qualified. And so it was of course. Endlessly.

The old valences were overturned. The commonplace of much contemporary psychology—that men want sex while women want relation-

ships—is the precise inversion of pre-Enlightenment notions that, extending back to antiquity, equated friendship with men and fleshliness with women. Women, whose desires knew no bounds in the old scheme of things, and whose reason offered so little resistance to passion, became in some accounts creatures whose whole reproductive life might be spent anesthetized to the pleasures of the flesh. When, in the late eighteenth century, it became a possibility that “the majority of women are not much troubled with sexual feelings,” the presence or absence of orgasm became a biological signpost of sexual difference.

The new conceptualization of female orgasm, however, was but one formulation of a more radical eighteenth-century reinterpretation of the female body in relation to the male. For thousands of years it had been a commonplace that women had the same genitals as men except that, as Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in the fourth century, put it: “theirs are inside the body and not outside it.”¹⁰ Galen, who in the second century A.D. developed the most powerful and resilient model of the structural, though not spatial, identity of the male and female reproductive organs, demonstrated at length that women were essentially men in whom a lack of vital heat—of perfection—had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without. Indeed, doggerel verse of the early nineteenth century still sings of these hoary homologies long after they had disappeared from learned texts:

though they of different sexes be,
Yet on the whole they are the same as we,
For those that have the strictest searchers been,
Find women are but men turned outside in.¹¹

In this world the vagina is imagined as an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the uterus as scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles. The learned Galen could cite the dissections of the Alexandrian anatomist Herophilus, in the third century B.C., to support his claim that a woman has testes with accompanying seminal ducts very much like the man’s, one on each side of the uterus, the only difference being that the male’s are contained in the scrotum and the female’s are not.¹²

Language marks this view of sexual difference. For two millennia the ovary, an organ that by the early nineteenth century had become a synecdoche for woman, had not even a name of its own. Galen refers to it by the same word he uses for the male testes, *orcheis*, allowing context to

make clear which sex he is concerned with. Herophilus had called the ovaries *didymoi* (twins), another standard Greek word for testicles, and was so caught up in the female-as-male model that he saw the Fallopian tubes—the spermatic ducts that led from each “testicle”—as growing into the neck of the bladder as do the spermatic ducts in men.¹³ They very clearly do not. Galen points out this error, surprised that so careful an observer could have committed it, and yet the correction had no effect on the status of the model as a whole. Nor is there any technical term in Latin or Greek, or in the European vernaculars until around 1700, for vagina as the tube or sheath into which its opposite, the penis, fits and through which the infant is born.

But then, in or about the late eighteenth, to use Virginia Woolf’s device, human sexual nature changed. On this point, at least, scholars as theoretically distant from one another as Michel Foucault, Ivan Illich, and Lawrence Stone agree.¹⁴ By around 1800, writers of all sorts were determined to base what they insisted were fundamental differences between the male and female sexes, and thus between man and woman, on discoverable biological distinctions and to express these in a radically different rhetoric. In 1803, for example, Jacques-Louis Moreau, one of the founders of “moral anthropology,” argued passionately against the nonsense written by Aristotle, Galen, and their modern followers on the subject of women in relation to men. Not only are the sexes different, but they are different in every conceivable aspect of body and soul, in every physical and moral aspect. To the physician or the naturalist, the relation of woman to man is “a series of oppositions and contrasts.”¹⁵ In place of what, in certain situations, strikes the modern imagination as an almost perverse insistence on understanding sexual difference as a matter of degree, gradations of one basic male type, there arose a shrill call to articulate sharp corporeal distinctions. Doctors claimed to be able to identify “the essential features that belong to her, that serve to distinguish her, that make her what she is”:

All parts of her body present the same differences: all express woman; the brow, the nose, the eyes, the mouth, the ears, the chin, the cheeks. If we shift our view to the inside, and with the help of the scalpel, lay bare the organs, the tissues, the fibers, we encounter everywhere . . . the same difference.¹⁶

Thus the old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis

whose telos was male, gave way by the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence. An anatomy and physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of woman in relation to man.

By the late nineteenth century, so it was argued, the new difference could be demonstrated not just in visible bodies but in its microscopic building blocks. Sexual difference in kind, not degree, seemed solidly grounded in nature. Patrick Geddes, a prominent professor of biology as well as a town planner and writer on a wide range of social issues, used cellular physiology to explain the “fact” that women were “more passive, conservative, sluggish and stable” than men, while men were “more active, energetic, eager, passionate, and variable.” He thought that with rare exceptions—the sea horse, the occasional species of bird—males were constituted of catabolic cells, cells that put out energy. They spent income, in one of Geddes’ favorite metaphors. Female cells, on the other hand, were anabolic; they stored up and conserved energy. And though he admitted that he could not fully elaborate the connection between these biological differences and the “resulting psychological and social differentiations,” he nevertheless justified the respective cultural roles of men and women with breathtaking boldness. Differences may be exaggerated or lessened, but to obliterate them “it would be necessary to have all the evolution over again on a new basis. What was decided among the pre-historic Protozoa cannot be annulled by an act of Parliament.”¹⁷ Microscopic organisms wallowing in the primordial ooze determined the irreducible distinctions between the sexes and the place of each in society.

These formulations suggest a third and still more general aspect of the shift in the meaning of sexual difference. The dominant, though by no means universal, view since the eighteenth century has been that there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are somehow based on these “facts.” Biology—the stable, ahistorical, sexed body—is understood to be the epistemic foundation for prescriptive claims about the social order. Beginning dramatically in the Enlightenment, there was a seemingly endless stream of books and chapters of books whose very titles belie their commitment to this new vision of nature and culture: Roussel’s *Système physique et moral de la femme*, Brachet’s chapter “Etudes du physique et du moral de la femme,” Thompson and Geddes’ starkly uncompromising *Sex*. The physical “real” world in

these accounts, and in the hundreds like them, is prior to and logically independent of the claims made in its name.

Earlier writers from the Greeks onward could obviously distinguish nature from culture, *physis* from *nomos* (though these categories are the creation of a particular moment and had different meanings then).¹⁸ But, as I gathered and worked through the material that forms this book, it became increasingly clear that it is very difficult to read ancient, medieval, and Renaissance texts about the body with the epistemological lens of the Enlightenment through which the physical world—the body—appears as “real,” while its cultural meanings are epiphenomenal. Bodies in these texts did strange, remarkable, and to modern readers impossible things. In future generations, writes Origen, “the body would become less ‘thick,’ less ‘coagulated,’ less ‘hardened,’” as the spirit warmed to God; physical bodies themselves would have been radically different before the fall, imagines Gregory of Nyssa: male and female coexisted with the image of God, and sexual differentiation came about only as the representation in the flesh of the fall from grace.¹⁹ (In a nineteenth-century Urdu guide for ladies, based firmly in Galenic medicine, the prophet Mohammed is listed at the top of a list of exemplary women.²⁰ Caroline Bynum writes about women who in imitation of Christ received the stigmata or did not require food or whose flesh did not stink when putrifying.²¹ There are numerous accounts of men who were said to lactate and pictures of the boy Jesus with breasts. Girls could turn into boys, and men who associated too extensively with women could lose the hardness and definition of their more perfect bodies and regress into effeminacy. Culture, in short, suffused and changed the body that to the modern sensibility seems so closed, autarchic, and outside the realm of meaning.

One might of course deny that such things happened or read them as entirely metaphorical or give individual, naturalistic explanations for otherwise bizarre occurrences: the girl chasing her swine who suddenly sprung an external penis and scrotum, reported by Montaigne and the sixteenth-century surgeon Ambroise Paré as an instance of sex change, was really suffering from androgen-dihydrotestosterone deficiency; she was really a boy all along who developed external male organs in puberty, though perhaps not as precipitously as these accounts would have it.²² This, however, is an unconscionably external, ahistorical, and impoverished approach to a vast and complex literature about the body and culture.

I want to propose instead that in these pre-Enlightenment texts, and even some later ones, *sex*, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or “real.” Gender—man and woman—mattered a great deal and was part of the order of things; sex was conventional, though modern terminology makes such a reordering nonsensical. At the very least, what we call sex and gender were in the “one-sex model” explicitly bound up in a circle of meanings from which escape to a supposed biological substrate—the strategy of the Enlightenment—was impossible. In the world of one sex, it was precisely when talk seemed to be most directly about the biology of two sexes that it was most embedded in the politics of gender, in culture. To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to *be* organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category.

How did the change from what I have called a one-sex/flesh model to a two-sex/flesh model take place? Why, to take the most specific case first, did sexual arousal and its fulfillment—specifically female sexual arousal—become irrelevant to an understanding of conception? (This, it seems to me, is the initial necessary step in creating the model of the passionless female who stands in sharp biological contrast to the male.) The obvious answer would be the march of progress; science might not be able to explain sexual politics, but it could provide the basis on which to theorize. The ancients, then, were simply wrong. In the human female and in most other mammals—though not in rabbits, minks, and ferrets—ovulation is *in fact* independent of intercourse, not to speak of pleasure. Dr. Ryan was right in his interpretation of the story of the innkeepers’ daughter in that unconscious women can conceive and that orgasm has nothing to do with the matter. Angus McLaren makes essentially this case when he argues that, in the late eighteenth century, “the rights of women to sexual pleasure were not enhanced, but eroded as an unexpected consequence of the elaboration of more sophisticated models of reproduction.”²³ Esther Fischer-Homberger suggests that a new understanding of an independent female contribution to reproduction accompanied the devaluation of procreation. Its status declined as it became, so to speak, exclusively women’s work. Thus, one might argue, new discoveries in reproductive biology came just in the nick of time; science seemed nicely in tune with the demands of culture.²⁴

But in fact no such discoveries took place. Scientific advances do not entail the demotion of female orgasm. True, by the 1840s it had become clear that, at least in dogs, ovulation could occur without coition and thus presumably without orgasm. And it was immediately postulated that the human female, like the canine bitch, was a “spontaneous ovulator,” producing an egg during the periodic heat that in women was known as the menses. But the available evidence for this half truth was at best slight and highly ambiguous. Ovulation, as one of the pioneer twentieth-century investigators in reproductive biology put it, “is silent and occult: neither self-observation by women nor medical study through all the centuries prior to our own era taught mankind to recognize it.”²⁵ Indeed, standard medical-advice books recommended that to avoid conception women should have intercourse during the middle of their menstrual cycles, during days twelve through sixteen, now known as the period of *maximum* fertility. Until the 1930s, even the outlines of our modern understanding of the hormonal control of ovulation were unknown.

In short, positive advances in science seem to have had little to do with the shift in interpreting the story of the innkeepers’ daughter. The reevaluation of pleasure occurred more than a century before reproductive physiology could come to its support with any kind of deserved authority. Thus the question remains why, before the nineteenth century, commentators interpreted conception without orgasm as the exception, an oddity that proved nothing, while later such cases were regarded as perfectly normal and illustrative of a general truth about reproduction.

Unlike the demise of orgasm in reproductive physiology, the more general shift in the interpretation of the male and female bodies cannot have been due, even in principle, to scientific progress. In the first place, “oppositions and contrasts” between the female and the male, if one wishes to construe them as such, have been clear since the beginning of time: the one gives birth and the other does not. Set against such momentous truths, the discovery that the ovarian artery is not, as Galen would have it, the female version of the vas deferens is of relatively minor significance. The same can be said about the “discoveries” of more recent research on the biochemical, neurological, or other natural determinants or insignia of sexual difference. As Anne Fausto-Sterling has documented, a vast amount of negative data that shows no regular differences between the sexes is simply not reported.²⁶ Moreover, what evidence there does exist for biological difference with a gendered behavioral result is either highly

suspect for a variety of methodological reasons, or ambiguous, or proof of Dorothy Sayers' notion that men and women are very close neighbors indeed if it is proof of anything at all.

To be sure, difference and sameness, more or less recondite, are everywhere; but which ones count and for what ends is determined outside the bounds of empirical investigation. The fact that at one time the dominant discourse construed the male and female bodies as hierarchically, vertically, ordered versions of one sex and at another time as horizontally ordered opposites, as incommensurable, must depend on something other than even a great constellation of real or supposed discoveries.

Moreover, nineteenth-century advances in developmental anatomy (germ-layer theory) pointed to the common origins of both sexes in a morphologically androgynous embryo and thus not to their intrinsic difference. Indeed, the Galenic isomorphisms of male and female organs were by the 1850s rearticulated at the embryological level as homologues: the penis and the clitoris, the labia and the scrotum, the ovary and the testes, scientists discovered, shared common origins in fetal life. There was thus scientific evidence in support of the old view should it have been culturally relevant. Or, conversely, no one was much interested in looking for evidence of two distinct sexes, at the anatomical and concrete physiological differences between men and women, until such differences became politically important. It was not, for example, until 1759 that anyone bothered to reproduce a detailed female skeleton in an anatomy book to illustrate its difference from the male. Up to this time there had been one basic structure for the human body, and that structure was male.²⁷ And when differences were discovered they were already, in the very form of their representation, deeply marked by the power politics of gender.

Instead of being the consequence of increased specific scientific knowledge, new ways of interpreting the body were the result of two broader, analytically though not historically distinct, developments: one epistemological, the other political. By the late seventeenth century, in certain specific contexts, the body was no longer regarded as a microcosm of some larger order in which each bit of nature is positioned within layer upon layer of signification. Science no longer generated the hierarchies of analogies, the resemblances that bring the whole world into every scientific endeavor but thereby create a body of knowledge that is, as Foucault argues, at once endless and poverty-stricken.²⁸ Sex as it has been

seen since the Enlightenment—as the biological foundation of what it is to be male and female—was made possible by this epistemic shift.

But epistemology alone does not produce two opposite sexes; it does so only in certain political circumstances. Politics, broadly understood as the competition for power, generates new ways of constituting the subject and the social realities within which humans dwell. Serious talk about sexuality is thus inevitably about the social order that it both represents and legitimates. “Society,” writes Maurice Godelier, “haunts the body’s sexuality.”²⁹

Ancient accounts of reproductive biology, still persuasive in the early eighteenth century, linked the intimate, experiential qualities of sexual delight to the social and the cosmic order. More generally, biology and human sexual experience mirrored the metaphysical reality on which, it was thought, the social order rested. The new biology, with its search for fundamental differences between the sexes, of which the tortured questioning of the very existence of women’s sexual pleasure was a part, emerged at precisely the time when the foundations of the old social order were shaken once and for all.

But social and political changes are not, in themselves, explanations for the reinterpretation of bodies. The rise of evangelical religion, Enlightenment political theory, the development of new sorts of public spaces in the eighteenth century, Lockean ideas of marriage as a contract, the cataclysmic possibilities for social change wrought by the French revolution, postrevolutionary conservatism, postrevolutionary feminism, the factory system with its restructuring of the sexual division of labor, the rise of a free market economy in services or commodities, the birth of classes, singly or in combination—none of these things *caused* the making of a new sexed body. Instead, the remaking of the body is itself intrinsic to each of these developments.

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.

To a great extent my book and feminist scholarship in general are inextricably caught in the tensions of this formulation: between language on

the one hand and extralinguistic reality on the other; between nature and culture; between “biological sex” and the endless social and political markers of difference.³⁰ We remain poised between the body as that extraordinarily fragile, feeling, and transient mass of flesh with which we are all familiar—too familiar—and the body that is so hopelessly bound to its cultural meanings as to elude unmediated access.

The analytical distinction between sex and gender gives voice to these alternatives and has always been precarious. In addition to those who would eliminate gender by arguing that so-called cultural differences are really natural, there has been a powerful tendency among feminists to empty sex of its content by arguing, conversely, that natural differences are really cultural. Already by 1975, in Gayle Rubin’s classic account of how a social sex/gender system “transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity,” the presence of the body is so veiled as to be almost hidden.³¹ Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead further erode the body’s priority over language with their self-conscious use of quotation marks around “givens” in the claim that “what gender is, what men and women are . . . do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological ‘givens’ but are largely products of social and cultural processes.”³² “It is also dangerous to place the body at the center of a search for female identity,” reads a French feminist manifesto.³³

But if not the body, then what? Under the influence of Foucault, various versions of deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism generally, it threatens to disappear entirely.³⁴ (The deconstruction of stable meaning in texts can be regarded as the general case of the deconstruction of sexual difference: “what can ‘identity,’ even ‘sexual identity,’ mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?” writes Julia Kristeva.³⁵) These strategies have begun to have considerable impact among historians. Gender to Joan Scott, for example, is not a category that mediates between fixed biological difference on the one hand and historically contingent social relations on the other. Rather it includes both biology and society: “a constitutive element of social relationships based on *perceived differences between the sexes* . . . a primary way of *signifying* relationships of power.”³⁶

But feminists do not need French philosophy to repudiate the sex/gender distinction. For quite different reasons, Catharine MacKinnon argues explicitly that gender is the division of men and women caused “by

the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission"; sex—which comes to the same thing—is social relations “organized so that men may dominate and women must submit.”³⁷ “Science,” Ruth Bleier argues, mistakenly views “gender attributions as *natural* categories for which biological explanations are appropriate and even necessary.”³⁸ Thus some of the so-called sex differences in biological and sociological research turn out to be gender differences after all, and the distinction between nature and culture collapses as the former folds into the latter.

Finally, from a different philosophical perspective, Foucault has even further rendered problematic the nature of human sexuality in relation to the body. Sexuality is not, he argues, an inherent quality of the flesh that various societies extol or repress—not, as Freud would seem to have it, a biological drive that civilization channels in one direction or another. It is instead a way of fashioning the self “in the experience of the flesh,” which itself is “constituted from and around certain forms of behavior.” These forms, in turn, exist in relation to historically specifiable systems of knowledge, rules of what is or is not natural, and to what Foucault calls “a mode or relation between the individual and himself which enables him to recognize himself as a sexual subject amidst others.” (More generally, these systems of knowledge determine what can be thought within them.) Sexuality as a singular and all-important human attribute with a specific object—the *opposite* sex—is the product of the late eighteenth century. There is nothing natural about it. Rather, like the whole world for Nietzsche (the great philosophical influence on Foucault), sexuality is “a sort of artwork.”³⁹

Thus, from a variety of perspectives, the comfortable notion is shaken that man is man and woman is woman and that the historian’s task is to find out what they did, what they thought, and what was thought about them. That “thing,” sex, about which people had beliefs seems to crumble. But the flesh, like the repressed, will not long allow itself to remain in silence. The fact that we become human in culture, Jeffrey Weeks maintains, does not give us license to ignore the body: “It is obvious that sex is something more than what society designates, or what naming makes it.”⁴⁰ The body reappears even in the writings of those who would turn attention to language, power, and culture. (Foucault, for example, longs for a nonconstructed utopian space in the flesh from

which to undermine “bio-power”: “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.”⁴¹

In my own life, too, the fraught chasm between representation and reality, seeing-as and seeing, remains. I spent 1980–81 in medical school and studied what was *really* there as systematically as time and circumstances permitted. Body as cultural construct met body on the dissecting table; more or less schematic anatomical illustrations—the most accurate modern science had to offer—rather hopelessly confronted the actual tangles of the human neck. For all of my awareness of how deeply our understanding of what we saw was historically contingent—the product of institutional, political, and epistemological contingencies—the flesh in its simplicity seemed always to shine through.

I remember once spending the better part of a day watching doctors and nurses trying vainly to stem the flow of blood from the ruptured esophageal varices of a middle-aged dentist, who that morning had walked into the emergency room, and to replace it pint by pint into his veins as they pumped it out of his stomach. In the late afternoon I left to hear *Don Giovanni*—I was after all only an observer and was doing the patient no good. The next morning he was dead, a fact that seemed of an entirely different order from Mozart’s play on the body or the history of representation that constitutes this book. (“I know when one is dead, and when one lives. / She’s dead as earth,” howled Lear.)

But my acquaintance with the medical aspect of bodies goes back farther than 1981. I grew up the son of a pathologist. Most Sunday mornings as a boy I went with my father to his laboratory to watch him prepare surgical specimens for microscopic examination; he sliced up kidneys, lungs, and other organs preparatory to their being fixed in wax, stained, and mounted on slides to be “read.” As he went about this delicate carving and subsequent reading, he spoke into a dictating machine about what he saw. Bodies, or in any case body parts, seemed unimpeachably real. I remember reading his autopsy protocols, stacked on the kelim-covered divan in his study, resonant with the formulas of what to me seemed like medical epic: “The body is that of a sixty-five-year-old Caucasian male in emaciated condition. It was opened with the usual Y-shaped incision.” “The body is that of a well-nourished fifty-seven-year-old female. It was opened with the usual Y-shaped incision.”

Three months before my father died of cancer, and only weeks before

brain metastasis made it impossible for him to think, he helped me in interpreting the German gynecological literature cited in Chapters 5 and 6, some of which was by his own medical-school teachers. More to the point, he tutored me on what one could actually see, for example, in the cross section of an ovary with the naked eye or through the microscope. “Is it plausible,” I would ask, “that, as nineteenth-century doctors claimed, one could count the number of ovulatory scars [the corpus albicans] and correlate them with the number of menstrual cycles?” My father was the expert on what was *really* there.

But he figures also in its deconstruction. As a recent medical-school graduate, he could not continue his studies in Nazi Germany. In 1935 he took a train to Amsterdam to ask his uncle, Ernst Laqueur, who was professor of pharmacology there, what he ought to do next.⁴² Some difficulties with a German official made my father decide not to go back to Hamburg at all. Ernst Laqueur presumably secured for him the position at Leiden that he was to hold for the next year or so. I knew little of what he did there, and nothing of what he published until I went through his papers after he died. (This was well after I had completed much of the research for this book.) In his desk I found a bundle of his offprints; the earliest one, except for his “Inaugural Dissertation,” is entitled “Weitere Untersuchungen über den Uterus masculinus unter dem Einfluss verschiedener Hormone” (Further Studies of the Influence of Various Hormones on the Masculine Uterus).⁴³

I had already written about how Freud the doctor severed familiar connections between the manifest evidence of bodies and the opposition between the sexes. I had read Sarah Kofman on the power of anatomy to “confuse those who think of the sexes as opposing species.”⁴⁴ But my father’s contribution to the confusion was a complete revelation, genuinely uncanny. It was hidden and yet so much of the home—*heimlich* but also *unheimlich*—the veiled and secret made visible, an eerie, ghostly reminder that somehow this book and I go back a long way.⁴⁵

There are less personal reasons as well for wanting to maintain in my writing a distinction between the body and the body as discursively constituted, between seeing and seeing-as. In some measure these reasons are ethical or political and grow out of the different obligations that arise for the observer from seeing (or touching) and from representing. It is also disingenuous to write a history of sexual difference, or difference generally, without acknowledging the shameful correspondence between par-

ticular forms of suffering and particular forms of the body, however the body is understood. The fact that pain and injustice are gendered and correspond to corporeal signs of sex is precisely what gives importance to an account of the making of sex.

Moreover, there has clearly been progress in understanding the human body in general and reproductive anatomy and physiology in particular. Modern science and modern women are much better able to predict the cyclical likelihood of pregnancy than were their ancestors; menstruation turns out to be a different physiological process from hemorrhoidal bleeding, contrary to the prevailing wisdom well into the eighteenth century, and the testes *are* histologically different from the ovaries. Any history of a science, however much it might emphasize the role of social, political, ideological, or aesthetic factors, must recognize these undeniable successes and the commitments that made them possible.⁴⁶

Far from denying any of this, I want to insist upon it. My particular Archimedean point, however, is not in the real transcultural body but rather in the *space* between it and its representations. I hold up the history of progress in reproductive physiology—the discovery of distinct germ products, for example—to demonstrate that these did not cause a particular understanding of sexual difference, the shift to the two-sex model. But I also suggest that theories of sexual difference influenced the course of scientific progress and the interpretation of particular experimental results. Anatomists might have seen bodies differently—they might, for example, have regarded the vagina as other than a penis—but they did not do so for essentially cultural reasons. Similarly, empirical data were ignored—evidence for conception without orgasm, for example—because they did not fit into either a scientific or a metaphysical paradigm.

Sex, like being human, is contextual. Attempts to isolate it from its discursive, socially determined milieu are as doomed to failure as the *philosophe's* search for a truly wild child or the modern anthropologist's efforts to filter out the cultural so as to leave a residue of essential humanity. And I would go further and add that the private, enclosed, stable body that seems to lie at the basis of modern notions of sexual difference is also the product of particular, historical, cultural moments. It too, like opposite sexes, comes into and out of focus.

My general strategy in this book is to implicate biology explicitly in the interpretive dilemmas of literature and of cultural studies generally.

“Like the other sciences,” writes François Jacob, winner of the 1965 Nobel Prize for medicine,

biology today has lost its illusions. It is no longer seeking for truth. It is building its own truths. Reality is seen as an ever-unstable equilibrium. In the study of living beings, history displays a pendulum movement, swinging to and fro between the continuous and the discontinuous, between structure and function, between the identity of phenomena and the diversity of being.⁴⁷

The instability of difference and sameness lies at the very heart of the biological enterprise, in its dependence on prior and shifting epistemological, and one could add political, grounds. (Jacob is of course not the first to make this point. Auguste Comte, the guiding spirit of nineteenth-century positivism, confessed that “there seems no sufficient reason why the use of scientific *fictions*, so common in the hands of geometers, should not be introduced into biology.”⁴⁸ And Emile Durkheim, one of the giants of sociology, argued that “we buoy ourselves up with a vain hope if we believe that the best means of preparing for the coming of a new science is first patiently to accumulate all the data it will use. For we cannot know what it will require unless we have already formed some conception of it.”⁴⁹ Science does not simply investigate, but itself constitutes, the difference my book explores: that of woman from man. (But not, for reasons discussed below, man from woman.)

Literature, in a similar way, constitutes the problem of sexuality and is not just its imperfect mirror. As Barbara Johnson argues, “it is literature that inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals. Literature is not only a thwarted investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality.”⁵⁰ Sexual difference thus seems to be already present in how we constitute meaning; it is already part of the logic that drives writing. Through “literature,” representation generally, it is given content. Not only do attitudes toward sexual difference “generate and structure literary texts”; texts generate sexual difference.⁵¹

Johnson is careful to restrict the problem of sexuality to “us speaking animals,” and thus to rest content that, among dumb animals and even among humans outside the symbolic realm, male is manifestly the opposite sex from female. But clarity among the beasts bespeaks only the very

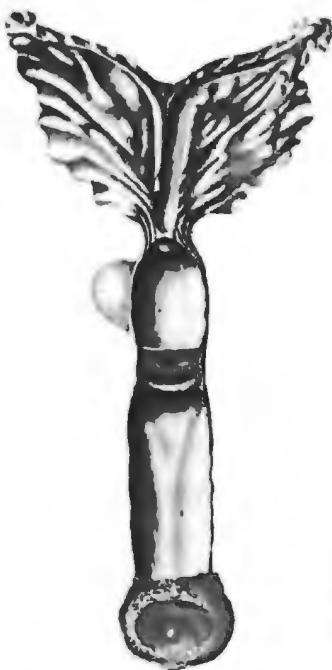


Fig. 1. Genitalia of a female elephant drawn from a fresh specimen by a nineteenth-century naturalist. From *Journal of the Academy of Natural Science, Philadelphia*, 8.4 (1881).

limited purposes for which we generally make such sexual distinctions. It matters little if the genitals of the female elephant (fig. 1) are rendered to look like a penis because the sex of elephants generally matters little to us; it is remarkable and shocking if the same trick is played on our species, as was routine in Renaissance illustrations (figs. 15–17). Moreover, as soon as animals enter some discourse outside breeding, zoo keeping, or similarly circumscribed contexts, the same sort of ambiguities arise as when we speak about humans. Then the supposedly self-evident signs of anatomy or physiology turn out to be anything but self-evident. Questions of ultimate meaning clearly go well beyond such facts. Darwin in 1861 lamented: “We do not even know in the least the final cause of sexuality; why new beings should be produced by the union of the two sexual elements, instead of by a process of parthenogenesis . . . The whole subject is as yet hidden in darkness.”⁵² And still today the question of why egg and sperm should be borne by different, rather than the same, hermaphroditic, creature remains open.⁵³

Darkness deepens when animals enter into the orbit of culture; their sexual transparency disappears. The hare, which figures prominently in so much myth and folklore, was long thought to be capable of routine sex change from year to year and thus inherently androgynous. Or, as the

more learned would have it, the male hare bears young on occasion. The hyena, another animal with prolific cultural meanings, was long thought to be hermaphroditic. The cassowary, a large, flightless, ostrich-like, and, to the anthropologist, epicene bird, becomes to the male Sambian tribesman a temperamental, wild, masculinized female who gives birth through the anus and whose feces have procreative powers; the bird becomes powerfully bisexual. Why, asks the ethnographer Gilbert Herdt, do people as astute as the Sambia “believe” in anal birth? Because anything one says, outside of very specific contexts, about the biology of sex, even among the brute beasts, is already informed by a theory of difference or sameness.⁵⁴

Indeed, if structuralism has taught us anything it is that humans impose their sense of opposition onto a world of continuous shades of difference and similarity. No oppositional traits readily detected by an outsider explain the fact that in nearly all of North America, to use Lévi-Strauss’s example, sagebrush, *Artemesia*, plays “a major part in the most diverse rituals, either by itself or associated with and at the same time, as the opposite of other plants: *Solidaga*, *Chrysanthemus*, *Gutierrezia*.” It stands for the feminine in Navaho ritual whereas *Chrysanthemus* stands for the masculine. No principle of opposition could be subtler than the tiny differences in leaf serrations that come to carry such enormous symbolic weight.⁵⁵

It should be clear by now that I offer no answer to the question of how bodies determine what we mean by sexual difference or sameness. My claims are of two sorts. Most are negative: I make every effort to show that no historically given set of facts about “sex” entailed how sexual difference was in fact understood and represented at the time, and I use this evidence to make the more general claim that no set of facts ever entails any particular account of difference. Some claims are positive: I point to ways in which the biology of sexual difference is embedded in other cultural programs.

Chapter 2 is about the oxymoronic one-sex body. Here the boundaries between male and female are primarily political; rhetorical rather than biological claims regarding sexual difference and sexual desire are primary. It is about a body whose fluids—blood, semen, milk, and the various excrements—are fungible in that they turn into one another and whose processes—digestion and generation, menstruation and other

bleeding—are not so easily distinguished or so easily assignable to one sex or another as they became after the eighteenth century. This “one flesh,” the construction of a single-sexed body with its different versions attributed to at least two genders, was framed in antiquity to valorize the extraordinary cultural assertion of patriarchy, of the father, in the face of the more sensorily evident claim of the mother. The question for the classical model is not what it explicitly claims—why woman?—but the more troublesome question—why man?

Chapter 3 is the first of two chapters that examine explicitly the relationship between a model of sexual difference and scientific learning. It shows how the one-flesh model was able to incorporate new anatomical knowledge and new naturalistic forms of representation. Chapter 4 concentrates on the cultural interests that various writers had in what seems to us a manifestly counterintuitive model of sexual difference. It exposes the immense pressures on the one-sex model from the existence of two genders, from the new political claims of women, and from the claims of heterosexuality generally. I suggest through readings of legal, juridical, and literary texts that it is sustained by powerful notions of how hierarchy worked and how the body expresses its cultural meanings. At stake for the men involved in this struggle was nothing less than the suppression of the basis for a genuine, other, sex.

Chapter 5 gives an account of the breakdown of the one-sex model and the establishment of two sexes. Like Chapter 3 it maintains that these constructions were not the consequence of scientific change but rather of an epistemological and a social-political revolution. Again, the negative argument—that the scientific is not natural and given—is more forcefully put than the affirmative, in part because I am reluctant to frame my story in terms of a specific set of causes for the increasing prominence of the two-sex model. My strategy instead is to suggest, example by example, the ways in which particular struggles and rhetorical situations made men and women talk as if there were now two sexes. These contexts were of course the results of new social and political developments, but I do not draw out the connections in great detail. More detailed studies are needed to create a locally nuanced account of “Politics, Culture, and Class in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Body.”⁵⁶

Chapter 6 functions much like Chapter 4 in that it engages the science of sex—two this time—with the demands of culture. I show specifically how cornerstones of corporeally based sexes were themselves deeply im-

plicated in the politics of gender. But in this chapter I also present evidence for the continued life of the one-sex model. It lived on even in the midst of the most impassioned defense of two sexes, of ineradicable “organic difference . . . proved by all sound biology, by the biology of man and of the entire animal species . . . proved by the history of civilization, and the entire course of human evolution.” The specter of one sex remains: the “womanliness of woman” struggles against “the anarchic assertors of the manliness of woman.”⁵⁷ In some of the rhetoric of evolutionary biology, in the Marquis de Sade, in much of Freud, in slasher films, indeed in any discussion of gender, the modern invention of two distinct, immutable, and incommensurable sexes turns out to be less dominant than promised.⁵⁸ (Here I differ from Foucault, who would see one *episteme* decisively, once and for all, replacing another.) I illustrate the openness of nineteenth-century science to either a two- or a one-sex model with a discussion first of how denunciations of prostitution and masturbation reproduced an earlier discourse of the unstable individual body, open and responsive to social evil, and then of Freud’s theory of clitoral sexuality in which efforts to find evidence of incommensurable sexes founders on his fundamental insight that the body does not of itself produce two sexes.

I have not written this book as an explicit attack on the current claims of sociobiology. But I hope it is taken up by those engaged in that debate. A historian can contribute little to the already existing critical analysis of particular experiments purporting to demonstrate the biological basis of gender distinctions or to lay bare the hormones and other chemicals that are meant to serve as a sort of ontological granite for observable sexual differences.⁵⁹ But I can offer material for how powerful prior notions of difference or sameness determine what one sees and reports about the body. The fact that the giants of Renaissance anatomy persisted in seeing the vagina as an internal version of the penis suggests that almost any sign of difference is dependent on an underlying theory of, or context for, deciding what counts and what does not count as evidence.

More important, though, I hope this book will persuade the reader that there is no “correct” representation of women in relation to men and that the whole science of difference is thus misconceived. It is true that there is and was considerable and often overtly misogynist bias in much biological research on women; clearly science has historically worked to “rationalize and legitimize” distinctions not only of sex but also of race

and class, to the disadvantage of the powerless. But it does not follow that a more objective, richer, progressive, or even more feminist science would produce a truer picture of sexual difference in any culturally meaningful sense.⁶⁰ (This is why I do not attempt to offer a history of more or less correct, or more or less misogynistic, representations.) In other words, the claim that woman is what she is because of her uterus is no more, or less, true than the subsequent claim that she is what she is because of her ovaries. Further evidence will neither refute nor affirm these patently absurd pronouncements because at stake are not biological questions about the effects of organs or hormones but cultural, political questions regarding the nature of woman.

I return again and again in this book to a problematic, unstable female body that is either a version of or wholly different from a generally unproblematic, stable male body. As feminist scholars have made abundantly clear, it is *always* woman's sexuality that is being constituted; woman is the empty category. Woman alone seems to have "gender" since the category itself is defined as that aspect of social relations based on difference between sexes in which the standard has always been man. "How can one be an enemy of woman, whatever she may be?" as the Renaissance physician Paracelsus put it; this could never be said of man because, quite simply, "one" is male. It is probably not possible to write a history of man's body and its pleasures because the historical record was created in a cultural tradition where no such history was necessary.

But the modern reader must always be aware that recounting the history of interpreting woman's body is not to grant the male body the authority it implicitly claims. Quite the contrary. The record on which I have relied bears witness to the fundamental incoherence of stable, fixed categories of sexual dimorphism, of male and/or female. The notion, so powerful after the eighteenth century, that there had to be something outside, inside, and throughout the body which defines male as opposed to female and which provides the foundation for an attraction of opposites is entirely absent from classical or Renaissance medicine. In terms of the millennial traditions of western medicine, genitals came to matter as the marks of sexual opposition only last week. Indeed, much of the evidence suggests that the relationship between an organ as sign and the body that supposedly gives it currency is arbitrary, as indeed is the relationship between signs. The male body may always be the standard in the

game of signification, but it is one whose status is undermined by its unrepentant historical inconstancy.

Although some tensions inform this book, others do not. I have given relatively little attention to conflicting ideas about the nature of woman or of human sexuality. I have not even scratched the surface of a contextual history of reproductive anatomy or physiology; even for scientific problems that I explore in some detail, the institutional and professional matrix in which they are embedded is only hurriedly sketched. There is simply too much to do in the history of biology, and too much has already been done on the condition-of-woman question or the history of ideas about sex, for any one person to master.

I want to lay claim to a different historical domain, to the broad discursive fields that underlie competing ideologies, that define the terms of conflict, and that give meaning to various debates. I am not committed to demonstrating, for example, that there is a single, dominant “idea of woman” in the Renaissance and that all others are less important. I have no interest in proving conclusively that Galen is more important than Aristotle at any one time or that a given theory of menstruation was hegemonic between 1840 and 1920. Nor will I be concerned with the gains and losses in the status of women through the ages. These are issues I must ask my readers to decide for themselves, whether the impressions they derive from these pages fit what they themselves know of the vast spans of time that I cover. My goal is to show how a biology of hierarchy in which there is only one sex, a biology of incommensurability between two sexes, and the claim that there is no publicly relevant sexual difference at all, or no sex, have constrained the interpretation of bodies and the strategies of sexual politics for some two thousand years.

Finally, I confess that I am saddened by the most obvious and persistent omission in this book: a sustained account of experience in the body. Some might argue that this is as it should be, and that a man has nothing of great interest or authenticity to say about the sexual female body as it feels and loves. But more generally I have found it impossible in all but isolated forays into literature, painting, or the occasional work of theology to imagine how such different visions of the body worked in specific contexts to shape passion, friendship, attraction, love. A colleague pointed out to me that he heard Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* with new ears after reading my chapters about the Renaissance. I have felt a new poi-

gnancy in the tragicomedy of eighteenth-century disguise—the last act of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, for example—with its questioning of what it is in a person that one loves. Bodies do and do not seem to matter. I watch Shakespeare's comedies of sexual inversion with new queries, and I try to think my way back into a distant world where the attraction of deep friendship was reserved for one's like.

Further than that I have not been able to go. I regard what I have written as somehow liberating, as breaking old shackles of necessity, as opening up worlds of vision, politics, and eros. I only hope that the reader will feel the same.