

# Gender

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If it was customary even 30 years ago to describe the topic of women and the English Renaissance as “gargantuan” (Woodbridge 1984, 1), then the size into which it has since grown can only defy hyperbole. Indeed, questions of the historical, cultural, and literary role that women played in the period – and the issues of gender politics, and sexuality to which these gave rise – have had a directive, defining, and arguably field-shaping impact on the discipline. It was the women’s movement, of course, and academic feminism of the 1960s and 1970s in particular, that brought the question of gender in Renaissance literature fully out of the closet and positioned it center stage (Greer 1970; Millet 1971; Mitchell 1971; Moi 1985). Since then, the un-self-consciousness with which an earlier critic such as C. S. Lewis could present the literature of the English Renaissance as an almost entirely male preserve – of the 150 authors he listed, 149 were male (Lewis 1954) – has come to stand as a cautionary marker of the distance traveled, never to return. Indeed, it has become something of a rhetorical gesture to cite such older readings – in which Renaissance literature was presented as the depiction of some kind of universal human experience, addressed to and appreciated by a readership blithely generalized as “we” – in order to “measure the full distance” between a world view in which gender was effectively rendered invisible and “the one we inhabit today” (Garner and Sprengnether 1996, 4). This way of looking, in which gender has come to assume its central position in determining questions of canon-formation and the interpretation of literary texts, has depended in large part on the immense work of recovery – undertaken by generations of critics and still, of course, ongoing – by which material written by women hitherto “lost” or considered unworthy of attention has been brought back into view and, by means of scholarly editions, anthologies, and archival resources, made widely accessible (Bogin 1976; Greer 1989; Stevenson and Davidson 2001;

Pulter [1645–1665?] 2014).<sup>1</sup> Since much of this material previously existed only in manuscript, its availability has also contributed significantly to the new bibliography and its important re-negotiation of the relation between manuscript and print in the early modern period, one effect being to revise the very notion of what a “text” might be said to constitute in the first place (e.g. Heale 2012). At the same time, the introduction of material such as recipes, prescriptions, health manuals, commonplace books, letters, translations, personal memoirs, diaries, and religious confessions – alongside what might be identified as more traditionally “literary” material – has, in re-balancing the canon, altered it beyond recognition (Graham *et al.* 1989; Masson and Vaughan 1974; Spurling 1986; Herbert [c.1588–1600] 1998; Moody 1998). The process of recovery, moreover, has extended to the inclusion not only of women as writers but, as part of the larger imperative of establishing a corrective women’s history, to the study of women as readers (e.g., Lucas 1989; Hackett 2000), as playgoers (e.g., Findlay 1999), and as the addressees of and respondents to a culture whose models and prescriptions they may have received and been shaped by but did not necessarily absorb passively or adopt without challenge.

That it was feminism that first put gender decisively at the center of critical attention brought with it, in turn, the necessity for certain accommodations and adjustments. One example that might be cited was the need to balance the importance of extending the canon by including more female writers within it against the competing view that the “author” as such was well and truly dead or at best existed only as a disembodied “author function” (Barthes [1967] 1977; Foucault [1969] 1977). “[O]ne effect of the project to revalorize women’s writing and to reclaim forgotten or neglected texts,” writes Kate Chedgzoy, “has been a reaffirmation – against the grain, as several feminists have noted, of some influential strands of literary theory – of the significance of the author as subject of her own writing” (Chedgzoy, Hansen, and Trill 1996, 1). That is to say, there is a (fundamentally political) decision to be made if not traded between any skepticism that might be harbored toward the notion of an autonomous, sovereign, self-identical, and ontologically stable author, on the one hand, and the merits of celebrating women writers whose previous invisibility or relegation to the margins testified to nothing so clearly as a repressive regime of silence and subordination, on the other. I use this as an example because the issue has been a critical one in feminist studies of gender in the early modern period, where scruples about methodological practice registered from early on. While the hugely important work of recovery serves to restore women to their rightful place in history and to give a voice to what has been silenced for centuries, it can also run the risk (if they are left unexamined) of perpetuating certain assumptions about authorship – notions of autonomy, ownership, privilege, mastery, agency, authority – that had led to canon-formation of the most traditional and institutionalized kind in the first place (Ezell 1993). As Danielle Clarke articulates the dilemma, “[e]ither women can be situated as historical subjects, or we interrogate gender in such a way as to negate not only the specificity of the female subject, but its very possibility” (Clarke and Clarke 2000, 10). The aim of much feminist criticism concerned with issues of gender in the Renaissance has thus been to find a

politically acceptable way of negotiating this double bind: a means by which it is still possible to celebrate women and their writing – and to accord them their due place within literary and cultural history – while at the same time fully acknowledging the constructedness of gender and the evanescence of the author function.

One advantage of shifting the debate from a discussion of “women writers” to one of “women written,” so to speak – that is, to an understanding of gender as an ideological discourse in which the definition, role, and social function of women (not to mention men) is inscribed by means of norms, custom, and law – is that it neatly sidesteps any danger of essentialism. Another benefit, equally important, is that it respectfully acknowledges the limits of recoverability. That is to say, the actual experience of so-called “real” women (or men) in the historical past is manifestly not recoverable. The discourse of gender, however – which can be traced and analyzed in a myriad materials from literary texts to historical documents to cultural practices and events – is not only most definitely recoverable but, more to the point, links the past with the present in an unbroken historical continuum. Contemporary critics (female and male) are no less inscribed within an ideological discourse of gender in the twenty-first century than men and women were in the Renaissance, even if the terms of that discourse may have changed over time. The unalterable otherness of that past can be fully acknowledged and respected, therefore, while the structures that shaped the worldview, experience, and self-understanding of its inhabitants can at the same time be fully scrutinized by critics equipped with all the know-how that issues from being no less shaped by ideological structures themselves, however different those structures might be. The critic’s sense of his or her own “self-fashioning” by the ideological discourses of their own time – discourses within which they live, move, and have their being – is, consequently, a major asset in their analysis and understanding of the past. As Gary Waller noted, this was something that feminist studies of gender in the early modern period acknowledged early on:

this particular kind of feminist criticism is not only determined to discover, revive, and publish writing by Renaissance women, but also to raise questions related to women’s own discourse, the linguistic and discursive structures of women’s writing, and even the gender-specific nature of our own scholarly or critical discourse. (Waller 1985, 238–239)

Seen thus, the question of gender in the early modern period becomes something that can be read – as a discourse inscribed within the inexhaustible material that historians and literary critics continue to unearth from the past, it is perfectly legible – by readers who have every reason to be fully apprised of the mechanics of ideological interpellation themselves. In her now foundational essay, for example, Joan Kelly-Gadol noted that “the relations between the ideology of sex roles and the reality we want to get at are complex and difficult to establish,” not least because “[s]uch views may be prescriptive rather than descriptive” (Kelly-Gadol 1977, 176–177). The point, however, is that prescription and description are both equally “scripted”

and, as such, eminently readable. Only the most naïve of readings would assume that either kind of script could open a window onto “reality,” whatever that is, or somehow make such a thing miraculously accessible centuries later. Rather, those scripts provide the raw material for analyzing the workings of ideology in action: in this case, the ideological discourse of gender. In his study of sex and gender in the Renaissance period – which, as he acknowledges, is heavily indebted to didactic and prescriptive material such as sermons, conduct manuals, and advice literature – the historian Anthony Fletcher writes that “[t]he necessary link between ideology and experience or practice is prescription”, and concludes that “[t]he best hope we have of testing the relationship between prescription and practice in the life and conduct of adult women is through the study, which is beginning to be properly undertaken, of writings by women themselves which are personal and reflective” (Fletcher 1995, 98, 409). Many literary critics would, I think, balk at such a description of “writings by women” – or anyone else, for that matter – and would opt, rather, for the more nuanced version of the job in hand such as that offered, for example, by James Grantham Turner:

The task of the literary historian, then, seems to involve a balancing act between empirical history and a discourse-centered rereading of the past. She appeals to demonstrable historical reality when it proves real violence and injustice, when it supports a suspicious reading of masculine writing and a realistic or transparent reading of the female-authored text. But such documentation must not undermine the fundamental belief that discourse and language play a supremely important role. Consequently, the appeal to context normally involves not archival evidence, but prescriptive treatises, a form of discourse midway between traditionally “literary” and “historical” realms and presumably accessible to both. (Turner 1993, 4–5)

Properly speaking, then, the focus of discussion about gender is not “women” as such but rather ideology: the structures of definition and difference, that is, by which a section of the population, classified according to characteristics of a largely biological and morphological nature, come to be written into and largely erased by the dominant ideological discourse of the time, namely, patriarchy. From this perspective, the object of inquiry becomes a relational one: a question, first, of how a group categorized according to gender comes to be positioned as politically and culturally subordinate, and second of the ways in which individuals categorized as such may (or may not) submit to, negotiate, or contest the various roles and models assigned to them. To Turner’s mind, scholars of the Renaissance still remained “profoundly divided . . . between a history of empowerment and a history of victimization” (7), with some affirmative, proto-feminist studies celebrating ways in which the patriarchy had been overcome in that period, citing examples of “strong” women or high-value cultural discourses such as humanism or Neoplatonism that appeared to prize female virtue and learning (e.g., Dusinberre 1975; Davies 1986; Berry 1989), while others – generally more pessimistic in tone and inclined to take a distinctly skeptical view of such discourses – argued that the patriarchal oppression of women was all too much in evidence and remained, therefore, the legitimate target of

ongoing correction and protest (e.g., Kelly-Gadol 1977; Jardine 1983; Callaghan 1989). For the most part, however, studies of gender in the Renaissance period tend to take a position between these two poles, analyzing ways in which the poles are themselves mutually constitutive, and tracing if not negotiating the dialectical relations that operate between them. Ann Rosalind Jones, for example, proposes a highly mobile mode of analysis that takes on board the entire “range of interpretative positions through which subordinated groups [might] respond to the assumptions encoded into dominant cultural forms and systems of representation”: a gamut that extends from positions of passive non-resistance at one end (an unthinking absorption and reproduction of the cultural *habitus*) to those of forthright and public opposition at the other (a wresting of the ideological message from its dominant frame and re-appropriating it for subversive if not revolutionary effect). Depending on the numerous other factors that affected the Renaissance women writers of her study (education, class, and so forth), Jones demonstrates just “how variously they negotiated their subordination to men’s social power and masculine orders of language”: a flexibility that extends to the literary critic’s own *modus operandi* itself (Jones 1990, 2, 10). Such dialectical reasoning has the advantage of moving away from supposedly fixed constituencies (“men” and “women”) to more abstract considerations of the dominant and subordinate positions through which power operates and within which the very designation of such constituencies is itself a strategic ploy. To be sure, gender comes to be one if not *the* primary instance of how such power relations operate in action – “[o]nce we begin to investigate all relationships of power (‘political’ in its broadest sense),” writes Merry Wiesner, “we find that gender was a central category in the thinking of early modern Europeans” (not to mention moderns) – but thinking about the matter dialectically in this way avoids simply replicating those power relations by presupposing them within the terms of the argument (Wiesner 1993, 252). Such dialectical thinking, moreover, has the added benefit of extending the reach of the topic exponentially. For, as Wiesner concludes (5), if gender remains a key way of signifying relationships of power, then men are no less legitimate an object of study – since they too, after all, were (are) no less immune to the dynamics of domination and subordination, and nor were (are) gender roles any the less prescribed for them – thus justifying, as a corrective to the corrective, the development of what was still, at that time, the relatively new field of “men’s history” (e.g., Breitenberg 1996; Foyster 1999; Shepard 2003).

The critical discourses that, it is probably true to say, have dominated the field of Renaissance studies for the last 30 years – namely new historicism, cultural materialism, and various adjuncts thereof – fairly embraced, popularized, and perfected this dialectical mode of argument, and one of the reasons it has held the critical stage for so long is that it shows early modern culture to be a field of dynamic, fluid, reciprocal, reversible, plural, and constantly changing relationships through which power, far from hardening into fixed or rigid formulations, operates in all directions and at all times by means of flows or, more famously, “circulations” of social energy. As a result, this mode of argument opened up for analysis a capacious, indeed, almost infinitely elastic field in which any aspect of Renaissance culture might be

examined in complex and mobile relation to any other. In the area of gender studies, for example, this dialectical thinking made it possible to move more nimbly between the paradigms of victimization, on the one hand, or empowerment, on the other, so that it no longer became a question of men oppressing women or women defying men but, rather, of individuals – who might line themselves up on one side or the other of the gender divide – freely trading culturally produced and culturally recognized models of “maleness” or “femaleness,” “masculinity” or “femininity,” precisely in order to negotiate those models, whether the effect of that negotiation was to reinforce the status quo or to demonstrate its vulnerabilities, or (not uncommonly) both. Thus, to cite one example that must stand for many, Wendy Wall describes her project in *The Imprint of Gender* as follows:

I first articulate how the new literary marketplace inspired writers and publishers to define reading, writing, and publishing by generating various representations of women. The “feminine,” it seems, often provided the unauthorized ground on which authorship could be established. But in order to prevent the category of “woman” from becoming visible in this work solely as a metaphor for the insecurities of a patriarchal order, I conclude with an exploration of how women writers themselves tackled both the gritty problem of publication and the fact that cultural expressions of that problem relied on women as *tropes*. Gender thus provides a focal point throughout this work for querying the issues of authorship, privacy, and class energized by the spread of print technology. (Wall 1993, 7)

For all this flexibility, however – for all the dizzying possibilities that are opened up for critical analysis by individuals (whether persons or literary personae) being shown to cross gender borders, to assume alternative gender characteristics, or to occupy a multiplicity of possible positions within a constantly mobile field – for all this, in those studies that identify their critical position as broadly new historicist or cultural materialist, a particular model of power relations nonetheless remains stubbornly intact: one that, once the dialectical nature of its functioning has been duly acknowledged, remains thereafter strangely unexamined. Even if, to continue this example, such studies of early modern gender no longer theorize patriarchy in terms of “men” oppressing “women” in any straightforward way, and even if individuals so named are shown to be all too capable of occupying positions of dominance or subordination or both, it does not change the fact that, within this dialectical model of power relations, these positions of domination and subordination remain fixed in polar opposition. Flexible this dialectical model of power relations may be – and it has certainly proved itself thus – but within the terms of its dominant/subordinate binary, those relations are, in being reciprocal and self-constituting, always the same and destined ever to remain so. This model of power – derived from Foucault and ultimately, of course, from Hegel and Marx – may well have opened up for critics a hugely spacious field for analysis but, expansive as it may be, that field remains a thoroughly closed one in which (regardless of what or who occupies them) the positions of dominance and subordination are locked in permanent combat: in the “perpetual battle” that was Foucault’s chosen model for how power should be

conceived (Foucault [1975] 1977, 174). One effect of this circular enclosure is to make that field, spacious as it is, feel at times distinctly claustrophobic, and for the critical operations undertaken within it to run the risk of becoming repetitive, predictable, and ultimately even boring. It is not just that within this model subversion is effectively “contained” – an objection made and dealt with long ago (e.g., Sinfield 1992) – but rather that the entire field of relations, subversive or otherwise, is effectively bounded and enclosed, as if by some un-disprovable law of physics the dialectical structure of dominant and subordinate, master and slave, constituted the sole model for all relations, the sum total for all possible ways in which human interactions might occur.

Although this mode of thinking continues, by and large, to hold sway, alternatives were proposed from the beginning and in particular by critics who were chary of its apparent love affair with “power” and alert to the risk that the dominant/subordinate binary could all too readily be mapped back onto the gender divide and its “perpetual battle” simply entrench the old battle of the sexes or *querelle des femmes* that had been the object of critical inquiry in the first place (in Wall’s case, for example, the “feminine” is still identified with weakness and vulnerability, even if it is a trope that male or female writers might utilize or reject). Critics who are anxious to avoid such duplications, by contrast, draw for the most part on (generally French) schools of poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, and feminist thinking that sink their philosophical roots in Nietzsche and Freud as much as Hegel and Marx. For Alice Jardine, for example, whose work draws in particular on Derrida, Kristeva, and Barthes, a wholesale “redefinition of the dialectic” and a thorough dismantling or deconstruction of its mode of argument is a political necessity, for – since negotiating, moving between, or even reversing the stated positions of dominant and subordinate have no effect on the system’s overall “economy of violence” – then that systemic violence can only be tackled by means of a resolutely “non-dialectical” mode of thought in which positions are no longer conceptualized in binary or oppositional terms (Jardine 1985, 120, 139). Naturally enough, a logical consequence of this move is to eliminate the question of gender altogether – or at the very least to “throw both sexes, and their sexual organs, into a metonymic confusion of gender... [in which both] ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’ bodies become truly cut up, fragmented bodies” (139) – a step which has predictable consequences for any feminist thinking that takes the existence of women as its starting point. Indeed, as Marguerite Waller illustrates in a reading of *Richard III*, the modes of feminist and deconstructionist inquiry prove to be fundamentally incompatible with one another, or asynchronous at best. For her, “the dream of a female self that appears to itself as autonomous and authoritative as the male selves of Shakespeare’s Lancastrian and Yorkist courts would sustain rather than undermine the kinds of position the male characters in the play are portrayed as occupying,” for it is precisely such an essentializing and ultimately illusory discourse – a belief that the self is a given (can be “strong,” grounded, invincible, and so forth) rather than a rhetorical construct that is equally prone to deconstruction – that brings about the destruction of Lady Anne and Richard alike (Waller 1986, 166). As Danielle Clarke similarly observes, the

difficulty of “regarding the notion of difference, as used gynocritically as opposed to deconstructively, is that it leaves the very binarism it is designed to displace or unsettle wholly intact” (Clarke and Clarke 2000, 8).

The accommodations and adjustments between feminism and gender studies that I mentioned earlier, therefore, can, when it comes down to it, be distinctly uncomfortable if not acute. Choosing to analyze the discourse of gender ideology as opposed to writing by “women” may solve the problems entailed in too pat an assumption of a sovereign, integral, writing self, but the dialectical thinking that makes this solution possible at the same time risks enshrining the dominant/subordinate binary and with it – since gender has proved a/the key means by which that binary has operated historically – the oppression of women. The most “feminist” position of all, therefore, would arguably be to opt for what promises to be the most effective way of abolishing that dialectical thinking for ever – namely, deconstruction – even if the latter necessarily brings with it the elimination of gender as a category of difference (in which case, feminism and women would also disappear as valid categories of debate). This is, admittedly, a high price to pay, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is not alone in fearing that to split feminism apart from gender would be to ignore the fact that “gender analysis per se became possible only under the pressure of the most pointed and political feminist demand”: a political demand that undeniably continues and needs to be made (Sedgwick 1992, 272). Nevertheless, it is the development of queer theory (something she, of course, is largely responsible for leading) that has pointed the way out of these various dilemmas and double binds perhaps most effectively: its rethinking of the relation between sex and gender showing that the latter need not be conceptualized only in binary terms and that political engagement – the most sincere desire to uphold the rights of the “subordinate” – can therefore be preserved intact while the self-made trap of perpetuating the oppression of a definitionally gendered group can be avoided (Butler 1990; Halperin 1990; Lauretis 1991; Sedgwick 2008. See also Jagose 1996). For her part, Sedgwick effects this solution by combining a default “Marxist feminism” with what she calls “radical feminism” – which in turn includes “French” feminism, itself an amalgam of “deconstructive and/or Lacanian-oriented feminism” (Sedgwick 1985, 11) – and one might say that it is the influx of the latter that makes a break from those otherwise endlessly dialectical “circulations” of power possible. Similarly, as Bruce Smith notes, where new historicism analyzes the ideology of a given historical period by reading its cultural texts (with a view to recording and understanding that ideology), it still operates, by and large, “within traditional discourse.” Queer theory, by contrast, takes a deconstructive approach that analyzes how ideology comes to be constructed in the first place (with a view to exposing the manipulations and manifest contradictions internal to that ideology), and for that reason “establishes an adversarial position ‘outside’ traditional discourse” from the outset (Smith 1994, x). Although Smith seeks to combine both approaches in his own work, it is clear that, politically, the latter methodology carries the more radical agenda of the two, and it is this agenda that promises, in turn, to lead toward a re-appraisal of the prevailing view of Renaissance culture that has become otherwise all but institutionalized



(Greenblatt 1980; 1988; Ferguson, Quilligan and Vickers 1986; Strier and Dubrow 1988; Veese 1989). Richard Strier, for example – who has his own frustrations with the way the trademark dialectical argument that new historicism has made its own appears to stifle any bid for perversion or radicalism that might appear in Renaissance texts with a countering anxiety and conservatism – notes that the parallel field of gay and queer studies has served as a happy exception to this rule (Strier 2011). And, if this is the case, it is largely because deconstruction has been the strategy of choice in those studies of Renaissance sexuality and gender that have contributed to queer theory and that have kept in sight, at the far end, the radical possibility that gender might one day disappear from the critical and ideological lexicon for good. The self-confessed goal of Gregory Bredbeck's project, for example, is "not so much to establish the place of homoeroticism in a critical practice as it is to use homoeroticism as a way of forging a critical practice that finally effaces the manifest validity of gendered and sexualized meaning altogether"; the aim being, however idealistic or still far-off, an imagined future that might be "free from the tyranny of gendered meaning in general" (Bredbeck 1991, 22, 23).

That studies of gender in the early modern period should arrive at or at least look ahead to a point at which gender would all but disappear as a category of meaning may seem a surprising outcome, but – when competing theories of gender are submitted to rigorous analysis and the various compromises or self-contradictions to which they can give rise put to the test – it is a logical result. In addition to Sedgwick's celebrated analysis of homosocial relations, Judith Butler's work on gender melancholy has been a crucial intervention here. Her argument is extraordinarily rich and subtle, but put most briefly her analysis bases itself on the view that gender formation, such as it is, emerges from complex processes of identification and desire (Butler 1990, 1993). The Oedipus complex serves as the starting point: that is to say, the "complete" version of the complex as Freud came to theorize it in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), whereby the familiar scene in which the child comes to identify with the parent of the same sex and to desire the parent of the opposite sex is argued to exist alongside an alternative scene in which the child simultaneously identifies with the parent of the opposite sex and desires the parent of the same sex. The former is said to constitute the "positive" version of the complex insofar as it serves the ideological end of heteronormative gender construction (and to that extent is socially approved), while the latter is said to constitute the "negative" version insofar as its counter-identifications work in the opposite direction (and to that extent is for the most part socially tabooed). A basic contradiction internal to the "positive" version, however, means that its "negative" counterpart is always in play, for where desire for the parent of the opposite sex might meet with the demands of heteronormative gender construction, it also comes up flat against the incest taboo. The "positive" complex, that is to say, requires the "boy-to-be" (although this gendered outcome is thereby thrown into question) to direct desire toward a maternal object that the injunction against incest at the same time requires him to renounce, while the same fate awaits the paternal object-choice of the "girl-to-be" (a gendered outcome now no less in doubt). For Butler, these contradictory requirements are typically met by means of a

melancholy compromise. The desired parent of the opposite sex is duly renounced but it is not completely parted with (as in the supposedly “healthy” process of mourning in which a loss is eventually accepted and can be replaced by substitutes). Rather, through a process closer to the contrastingly pathological melancholia, that lost object of desire is somehow held on to – preserved, taken into, absorbed by, installed within, in a word, identified with – thus opening up a permanent absence or lack within the subject that, un-mourned, un-substitutable, and therefore incurable, bears all the hallmarks of melancholia. Thus, if becoming a “boy” requires identifying with the father and desiring the mother, then the demand that the desired mother also be renounced is met by means of identifying with her – and vice versa in the case of the “girl” – contingencies that have already been fully prepared for in the form of the “negative” complex. In this tortuous model of heteronormative gender formation, then, male gender identity seems to rest on the simultaneous existence of a female-identification, while female gender identity, conversely, rests on a male-identification.

While allowances must be begged for so drastic a foreshortening of Butler’s thesis, its predication of identity on something that is absent or other clearly signals its allegiance to the anti-foundationalist principles of French psychoanalytic (specifically, Lacanian and Laplanchean) thought. These principles put paid to any sense that a stable or “consolidated” gender identity – female or male – is something that might be achieved since, as Lynn Enterline writes, “[t]he only mechanisms available for negotiating the losses necessary to the cultural regulation of desire produce a fissured, contradictory ‘ego’ that saves itself, maintains itself, at the price of the very unity and disposition demanded of it” (Enterline 1995, 23). At the same time, of course, these psychoanalytic principles also definitively deconstruct as a sentimental illusion the notion of an authentic or “centered” self and thereby sweep away the idea that identity per se might lay claim to any kind of ontological stability. In other words, as Butler is at pains to point out, there is no “voluntarist” subject lurking behind the free play of gender roles: no at-bottom male or female subject who, for a reason or a season, might take the trope of the “feminine” upon him- or herself (to continue with this example), the assumption being – as the model of ventriloquism, fashionable in some quarters of Renaissance gender studies, could appear to imply – that they would revert to their natural self thereafter (Harvey 1992; North 2003). Similarly, identity cannot be grounded or stabilized by any reference to the body. On the contrary, far from serving to guarantee some kind of fixed and authentic gender identity, appeals to the “body beneath” those transvestite disguises that appear so regularly in Renaissance texts more often than not prove nothing of the kind but “only the limited relevance of empirical facts” (Schwarz 2000, 181, referring to Pyrocles’ disguise as an Amazon in Sidney’s *Arcadia* [1581]; see also Stallybrass 1992). Congruent with this, moreover, the model of identity formation here described also stretches the gender binary to breaking point and with it, in turn, the dialectical thinking that is its traditional companion. Thus, while it may appear from the preceding paragraph – with its references to boy and girl, mother and father, male and female, positive and negative, hetero- and homosexual – as if the

gender binary has been well and truly reinstated, such references serve the purposes of explanation only (and make the risks of too glib a summary all too manifest). In fact, the “mother” and “father” misleadingly presented there as the objects with which the subject-to-be identifies are themselves the product of no less complex and convoluted identificatory processes. A more accurate account of the case would state that what the subject-to-be actually identifies with are the equally enigmatic and asymmetric identifications (positive/negative, male/female, hetero/homosexual, and so forth) of the beings socially marked as its parents: such that the “mother” with whom a “boy-to-be” might identify, for example (being the product of her own “negative” and “positive” complexes), would include, among other things, a “lesbian” identification with her “father”; the latter in turn being an amalgam of his cross-identifications with his own parents, they with theirs, and so on ad infinitum (Bates 2007). In these circumstances, the hope that anyone might achieve a stable gender identity of any kind is remote indeed. That chimera, rather, disappears down ever receding and exponentially branching paths that effectively dissolve for good binary distinctions that might be kept in play in a bid for some kind of temporary theoretical coherence so long as it is recognized that a scene of radical gender incoherence is, logically, where that theory ends up.

### What to Read Next

Davis (1998); Gold, Miller, and Platter (1997); Knoppers (2009); Poska, Couchman, and McIver (2013); Sanchez (2011).

### Note

- 1 See also the *Perdita Project*. This database comprises over two hundred manuscript texts by women writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries: <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/m-collections/collection/perdita-manuscripts-1500-1700/> (accessed March 3, 2017).

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