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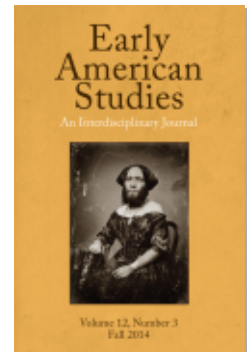
Sex and “Unsex”: Histories of Gender Trouble in  
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# Sex and “Unsex”

## Histories of Gender Trouble in Eighteenth-Century North America

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**ABSTRACT** This article argues that residents of late eighteenth-century North America had access to a wide vocabulary for describing and experiencing variation in sexual behavior and self-presentation. Building on work in eighteenth-century science studies, this article reminds us that *gender*, a term that was used during the eighteenth century to describe groups of either sex, was increasingly understood as a way of characterizing men and women along specific behavioral or taxonomic lines. The article makes three claims: first, that the enormous body of scholarship on the relationality and contingency of eighteenth-century gender has not yet coalesced into an overarching narrative within eighteenth-century studies that reflects this understanding of the instability of gender during this period; second, that to center a historical narrative of the instability of eighteenth-century gender in our scholarship and teaching, we must center studies of gender that are theorized intersectionally (the history of gender in Caribbean colonies, rather than metropolitan spaces; the history of gender in working-class communities, rather than ruling-class communities; and so on) because this scholarship takes the relationality of gender as fundamental; and finally, that theorizing transhistorical “similarity” (as distinct from continuity) bears important potential as a framework for imagining a historically rigorous relationship between the politics of gender in the eighteenth century and the politics of gender today.

During a moment at which both queer theorists and historians of sexuality are returning to the history of gender—a term that, as many scholars have complained, has been critically underattended, especially when compared to the scholarly attention that sexuality has garnered over the last decade or so—this special issue bears commensurately special potential to return gender to the center of recent debates surrounding historiography and scholarly

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method in early American studies in particular.<sup>1</sup> Building on recent historical, theoretical, and critical work in feminist science studies, sexuality studies, women's studies, and, of course, early American studies, this issue asks an important question: To what degree, if any, did *gender*—a concept that, in its twenty-first century usage, is often differentiated from an ontological sense of “biological sex”—exist as a self-conscious technology of self-representation during the early American period?

In the long wake of the twentieth-century arrival of *gender* as a term distinguished from *sex*, the study of gender in the humanities has tended to understand gender as at least related to, if not entirely, a practice of socially required and socially constitutive performances.<sup>2</sup> Though this revised understanding of what Gayle Rubin described as “the sex/gender system” in 1975 arrived about two centuries after the long eighteenth-century subjects of our inquiries, scholars who work on the history of gender also know

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1. Early scholarship in queer theory (inclusive of early sexuality studies and queer historiography) has been persistently criticized for privileging the concerns, representations, and problems of white gay men over and above the antiracist and antimisogynist objectives that queer theory would claim to embody. For a discussion of the way that the study and theorization of sexuality and queerness came to eclipse feminist or antiracist objectives within academic culture, see the 2005 special issue of *GLQ* 23, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2005), edited by David Eng, J. Halberstam, and Jose Esteban Munoz, titled “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” In particular, see the editors’ introduction and J. Halberstam’s “Shame and White Gay Masculinity,” which appears in that volume (219–33).

2. For an overview of the twentieth-century development of an episteme of *gender*, see Joanne Meyerowitz’s article on the afterlives of Joan Scott’s “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis”; Meyerowitz, “A History of ‘Gender,’” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1346–56. Meyerowitz, alongside many other scholars of twentieth-century gender, credits John Money, Joan Hampson, and John Hampson with the development of a specifically psychological and medicalized understanding of the term over the course of their research on intersexuality beginning in the 1950s. Importantly, Money et al. distinguished gender from biological sex. See John Money, Joan G. Hampson, and John L. Hampson, “Imprinting and the Establishment of Gender Role,” *American Medical Association Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 77 (1957): 333–36. Poststructuralist theoretical understandings of the related-yet-distinct relationship between *sex* and *gender* began when Gayle Rubin coined the term “sex/gender system” in her essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press: 1975), 159. The later publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) crystallized and popularized poststructuralist understandings of gender as a performative practice and epistemologically distinguished gender from sex.

that during the long eighteenth century, in England and many of its colonies (including North America), a vast vocabulary for describing both sex-behavioral and gender variation among organic life forms (plants and animals, including humans) existed. Importantly for the purposes of this essay, some eighteenth-century cultural notions about the proper meaning, discipline, or performativity of gender share significant ideological terrain with some of the fundamental assertions of the contingency and mutability of gender that theorists such as Joan Scott, Judith Butler, Denise Riley, and others have advanced.

This article has three aims. The first is to call for a broad recognition of the paradigm shift in scholarly thinking about the history of gender in the eighteenth century that has occurred over the past ten years or so. I argue that despite fairly unanimous recognition among scholars of the eighteenth century of the deep cultural contingency and uniform unevenness of gender experiences, behaviors, social expectations, and significations, this understanding has not yet coalesced into a prominent (if not unanimous) historical narrative that provides us with a shared point of departure for further historiographic work or pedagogical training in eighteenth-century gender. The second aim is to suggest one way that we might enact this shift in thinking about the eighteenth century: by centering scholarship that theorizes eighteenth-century gender as a structure of relation or architecture of power, and thus as an intersectional or contingent formation, in both our own subsequent studies of gender as well as in our classrooms and syllabi.<sup>3</sup> I make this suggestion because in studies of the history of race and the history of colonialism, scholars tend to automatically think about gender in multifaceted and relational terms; central to these kinds of studies is the

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3. *Intersectionality* is at this point a long-established tenet within feminist thought, although this is not the only way that I use it here. I borrow this term from black feminist sociologists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, who used *intersectionality* to theorize the way that the differential distribution of power and oppression creates compound subjective experiences, such as “woman of color,” that are not simply reducible to that of a woman under patriarchy, or a person of color under white supremacy. I also use the term to refer to the fundamentally contingent and non-self-identical function of gender, in order to insist that gender is *always* a compound experience, always intersectional, including and especially during the eighteenth century in North America. See Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

notion that the conditions under which “normal” gendered behavior and experiences emerged would vary on the basis of race, geographic location, economic position, and situation within local social and economic hierarchies. I think especially of work by Felicity Nussbaum, Jennifer Morgan, Kathleen Brown, Kathleen Wilson, Kirsten Fischer, Sharon Block, Richard Godbeer, and Jonathan Goldberg,<sup>4</sup> and the way that all of these scholars approach the study of gender by means of inquiries into how the experience, practice, and meaning of gender change within the context of cultural and colonial contact zones. This scholarship thus is built on the assumption that cultural experiences or practices of gender are never cohesive or stable. This is not to suggest that scholars working on what might be considered more “traditional” sites of early American gender experience—northeastern American Calvinist communities, for example, which are also the focus of a great deal of my own research—often or always assume that eighteenth-century gender constituted a stable or cohesive epistemology during the period. Indeed, work by Katherine Binhammer and Susan Lanser, among

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4. For examples of this kind of scholarship, see Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Felicity Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Federico Garza Carvajal, *Butterflies Will Burn: Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Karen Graubart, *With Our Labor and Sweat: Indigenous Women and the Formation of Colonial Society in Peru, 1550–1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Jane Mangan, *Trading Roles: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Urban Economy in Colonial Potosí* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

others, has done much to demonstrate the degree to which gender experience was deeply contingent even within the context of metropolitan, ruling-class communities.<sup>5</sup>

The final objective of this essay is to theorize the possibility of transhistorical similarities *as distinct from* continuities in the historiography of gender, and to consider the implications of shifting the terms of the “alterity versus continuity” debates that have emerged out of queer theory and queer historiography toward a hermeneutics of similarity instead.<sup>6</sup> Rather than assuming, or outright rejecting, the possibility of historical continuities between eighteenth-century and present-day cultural awarenesses of the constitutive instability of gender, what might be gained, or what new questions might we ask ourselves, by committing to a methodology akin to Clifford Geertz’s “thick description,” wherein we note historio-cultural similarities without narrativizing them in a way that would assure their interrelation or continuity?<sup>7</sup>

This article offers less a reading of one specific text or set of texts than a synthesis of a range of historical theses surrounding the cultural significance of gender in the eighteenth-century Anglophone, trans-Atlantic world. I offer this précis of current scholarship on eighteenth-century gender in order to put it into conversation with some recent theoretical discussions surrounding feminist historiography and historical gender studies that have

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5. See Katherine Binhammer, “The Sex Panic of the 1790s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 3 (1996): 409–34; and Susan Lanser, “The Political Economy of Same-Sex Desire,” in Joan Hartman and Adele Seefe, eds., *Structures and Subjectivities: Attending to Early Modern Women* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 157–75.

6. On alterity-continuity debates in the historiography of sexuality, see Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 21–39, as well as Traub, “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” in G. E. Haggerty and M. McGarry, eds., *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay, eds., *Sex before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2011); Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon, “Queering History,” *PMLA* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1608–17; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); and Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

7. See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30. On the recent “descriptive turn” in literary studies more generally, see Heather Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 371–91.

gained momentum in feminist philosophy and criticism over the past few decades. My objective in so doing is to demonstrate the degree to which poststructuralist theorizations of gender, and recent interventions into the historiography of gender, might be mobilized in a historically rigorous way to reshape the ideological relationships we envision between eighteenth-century gender, and especially late eighteenth-century gender *trouble*, and the radical instability of gender in our own moment.

#### EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY “GENDER”

The conversation that this special issue endeavors to initiate about the historicity of gender shares a great deal with recent conversations among queer theorists and historians of sexuality, especially those working within the relatively new field of queer historiography and queer time. One of the fundamental concerns of this subfield of queer studies is how— or whether—we can name, describe, theorize, and historicize what is putatively a “modern” formation (sexuality) in the pre-, early, or middle modern periods. Whereas *gender*, as a term and an ideological formation, appears very widely—although also bearing very different uses than it does in current discussions of sex, performance, and subjectivity—in pre-twentieth-century scientific, legal, linguistic, religious, and legal grammars, the long-reaching shadow of midcentury sexological, feminist and women-of-color feminist, and poststructuralist discussions about gender that have appeared over the past thirty years still largely define our understanding of the epistemological nature or content of *gender*.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the modern ideologies of gender and sexuality that discussions of historical “gender” tend to evoke, in eighteenth-century North American

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8. The term *gender* in the eighteenth century was widely and very commonly used to distinguish between the sexes (men and women), and also referred to women or men in groups—for example, “the masculine gender” and the “feminine gender.” Before the early modern period, the use of *gender* in English appears primarily in philological discussions pertaining to classes of nouns, and perhaps as a result, eighteenth-century uses of *gender* often bear a certain implicit categorizing function that we now associate with scientific taxonomy. *Gender* seems to have been used fairly interchangeably with *sex* during the eighteenth century, and the two terms could carry both anatomical and nonanatomical (cultural, behavioral, social) implications. Similarly, both terms could be used to refer to sexual intercourse, as well as simply the categories *men* and *women*. See “gender, n.,” *OED Online*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/77468?rskey=9EYilu&result=1&isAdvanced=false](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77468?rskey=9EYilu&result=1&isAdvanced=false) (accessed January 10, 2014).

culture, and the 1790s in particular, traditional notions of acceptable gendered behavior were changing rapidly.<sup>9</sup> Sexual inequality, a persistent item of discussion within the trans-Atlantic tradition of Anglophone belles lettres throughout most of the eighteenth century, increasingly became figured as related to, and sometimes an allegory for, inequities between the ruling classes and the poor, hierarchies dividing the colony and metropole, orientalist notions of the superiority of Christianity over Islam, or the problematic disparities between monarchic versus democratic styles of governance.<sup>10</sup> Scholarship that focuses on changing social values regarding clothing, co-educational mingling, coeducation writ large, men’s and women’s roles in marriage, and endless other related concerns is widely available and generally concludes that this was a time of a generalized, multicultural evaluation of sexed norms in both North America and Europe. In short, the conclusion of much of the scholarship analyzing the social significance of manhood or womanhood during the last quarter of the eighteenth century is that the standards for sexual behavior (behavior assumed to be appropriate to one’s sex, inclusive of expectations for both bourgeois and wealthy men and women) were changing, quickly and often dramatically.

Though much scholarship has appeared since the publication of Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex* (1990) that has offered critique or correction of his argument that the modern “two-sex” model of human sexual differentiation emerged to prominence during the eighteenth century, scholars nonetheless generally do concur that both colloquial and scientific understandings of the nonidentical “nature” of manhood and womanhood crystallized in new and more formal ways during this era. This kind of scholarship on the history of sex and gender has laid crucial foundations for scholarship on the historiography of gender today, but too often it was unable to recognize eighteenth-century cultural patterns of what we now think of as “unconventional” ways of thinking of sex as precisely *conventional* during their own time. Specifically, Laqueur and others have been criticized for assuming that

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9. See, for example, scholarship by Katherine Binhammer, Cathy Davidson, Susan Lanser, Susan Branson, or Kristina Straub.

10. See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, 1792); Susanna Rowson, *Slaves in Algiers; or, A Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 1794); and Humberto Garcia, “Letters from a Female Deist: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Muslim Women, and Freethinking Feminism,” in Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).



“the emergence of a ‘two-sex’ model of sexual differentiation in eighteenth-century science necessarily gave birth to a ‘two-gender’ model of gender differentiation in eighteenth-century culture as well.”<sup>11</sup>

Randolph Trumbach offers an important correction to this narrative of the emergence of gender, arguing that “the paradigm that there are two genders founded on two biological sexes began to predominate in Western culture only in the early eighteenth century . . . But the new paradigm of the early eighteenth century was not really one of two genders. There was a third illegitimate gender, namely, the adult, passive, transvestite effeminate male, or molly, who was supposed to desire men exclusively.”<sup>12</sup>

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11. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Importantly, Laqueur argues that before the eighteenth century, one’s social gender (a behavioral category including clothing, manners, comportment, and the like) could differ significantly from what one’s genital arrangement might indicate without social or legal censure. Mary Fissell and Elizabeth Reis both concur with this assessment in their work on early American medicine. Laqueur describes the historical emergence of the two-sex model as a shift in cultural epistemologies of gender whereby men and women became radically differentiated, understood not as organisms epistemologically oriented within a singular category of “human,” but rather as newly oriented toward two separate biological entities, “man” and “woman.” “Sometime in the eighteenth century,” Laqueur contends, “sex as we know it was invented. The reproductive organs went from being paradigmatic sites for displaying hierarchy, resonant throughout the cosmos, to being the foundation of incommensurable difference: ‘women owe their manner of being to their organs of generation, and especially to the uterus,’ as one eighteenth-century physician put it” (149).

12. Randolph Trumbach, “London’s Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture,” in Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, eds., *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 112. A revised version of this essay appears in Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Third Sex/Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 111–36, 518–28. While I do not agree with Trumbach’s argument that the eighteenth-century “molly” existed as a wholly separate category of gender experience within popular cultural understandings of human sexual differentiation, I do agree with him that Laqueur and some subsequent scholars assumed a degree of self-identity to inhere in the emergent “two-sex” model between biological and social forms of being. See Mary E. Fissell, “Hairy Women and Naked Truths: Gender and the Politics of Knowledge in Aristotle’s Masterpiece,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003): 43–74; Elizabeth Reis, “Impossible Hermaphrodites: Intersex in America, 1620–1960,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 2 (2005): 411–41; and Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Aren’t Enough,” *Sciences* (March–April 1993): 20–24. On criticisms of Laqueur, see Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Lorraine Das-

Here Trumbach makes an important point regarding the way that scholars have read eighteenth-century sex *as* eighteenth-century gender: in a continuous and closed epistemological circuit whereby one is able to accurately predict the other, despite the overwhelming amount of evidence within eighteenth-century literature that suggests that sex, and the presentation thereof, could be radically unaligned.

Take, for example, the Reverend John Bennett’s popular conduct book, *Letters to a Young Lady, on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects*, first published in England and then widely republished and circulated in North America starting in 1791.<sup>13</sup> After a long invective against the wearing of makeup, or “paint,” Bennett addresses “effeminate” men, writing, “It would be cruel to add any thing to the punishment of the *men* who can have recourse to such *effeminate* artifices. They have *already* the scorn and ridicule of one sex, and the stern contempt and indignation of the other. They are poor, amphibious animals, that the best naturalists know not under what class to arrange.”<sup>14</sup> This description of effeminate men as “amphibious animals” reflects contemporary naturalist vocabularies that made their way into colloquial speech. In particular, metaphors of biological plasticity and classification—the amphibious, the dually sexed or hermaphroditic, and so on—were frequently invoked in conversations about gender and sexual behavior during this era. Think, for example, of when Horace Walpole famously referred to Mary Wollstonecraft as a “hyena in petticoats,” a pejorative quip that invoked contemporary scientific interest in the hyena’s putative ability

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ton and Katharine Park, “The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature: Sexual Ambiguity in Early Modern France,” in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 117–36; Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Katharine Park and Robert A. Nye, “Destiny Is Anatomy,” *New Republic*, February 18, 1991, 53–57; Katharine Park, “The Rediscovery of the Clitoris,” in David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, eds., *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 171–94; Katharine Park, “Cadden, Laqueur and the ‘One-Sex Body,’” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 46, no. 1 (2010): 96–100; Michael Stolberg, “The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” *Isis* 94 (2003): 274–99; and Valerie Traub, “The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris; or, The Reemergence of the Tribade in English Culture,” in Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 188–228.

13. The earliest American printing of this text is the 1791 edition; see John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady, on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1791).

14. *Ibid.*, 156; emphases in original.

to change sex; or Wollstonecraft's own nervous self-assessment as "the first of a new genus" of woman.<sup>15</sup> When Bennett describes effeminate men as "amphibious animals," impossible to scientifically "class"—echoing the descriptions of mollies that Trumbach discusses—he is nonetheless assessing them as *men*, albeit of a feminine "class." Despite his obvious disdain for these "poor, amphibious animals," this passage fully acknowledges effeminacy in men as a clear and recognizable possibility.<sup>16</sup> Bennett exhibits an explicit familiarity with, and perhaps even a social taxonomy for, the possibility of plasticity and variation within discrete categories of sex.

Bennett also discusses masculinity in women, a subject that he treats with only slightly less disgust. There is a large body of work on the history of female masculinity, female soldiers, and cross-dressing women in early American studies and eighteenth-century studies more generally, and Trumbach adds to this historiography with his work on "tommies" and "sapphists," which he notably reads as cultural terms describing gendered

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15. See Letter 2956 of Horace Walpole in *The Letters of Horace Walpole: Fourth Earl of Oxford, 1703–1797* (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2009), vol. 15; and Mary Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, London, November 7, [1787], in *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 163–65. Furthermore, see Greta LaFleur, "Precipitous Sensations: Herman Mann's *The Female Review* (1797), Botanical Sexuality, and the Challenge of Queer Historiography," *Early American Literature* 48, no. 1 (2013): 93–123; Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); and Fredrika J. Teute, "The Loves of the Plants; or, the Cross-Fertilization of Science and Desire at the End of the Eighteenth Century," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 319–45, for discussions of the way that various social reform movements incorporated late eighteenth-century botanical theories of gender and sexual variation in plants and animals to theorize gender and sexual behavioral variation in humans.

16. Thomas Foster notes in *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007) that "Massachusetts was not home to a visible subculture of fop-pish men; nor was it the location for a large number of prosecutions for rape or sodomy. It wasn't even a place with an especially diverse ethnic and racial population. Still, in the early eighteenth century 'fops' and 'sodomites' were culturally significant figures or types—so much so that we can speak of a discourse of effeminacy and a religiously based discourse of sodomy in Massachusetts. Similarly, though prosecutions for rape and other violent sexual crimes were low, narratives of sexual assault had cultural resonance and were at times linked to a discourse of racialized sexuality. Thus, it did not require a visible local subculture of effeminate men or sodomites or a high incidence of rape or interracial sex to make such subcultures and behaviors the object of cultural concern" (xv).

behavior as well as a predilection for certain sexual behaviors.<sup>17</sup> Trumbach notes that “by the end of the eighteenth century there is some evidence that there was beginning to appear a role for women which was parallel to that of the molly for men. At least one source called such women *tommies*, but the more usual term was sapphist—with sapphist and tommy being the high and low terms for women, as sodomite and molly were for men.”<sup>18</sup> The figures of the sapphist and the fop frequently appear together in discussions of gender during this era. Bennett similarly discusses male effeminacy and female masculinity in the same, albeit extended, breath. In discussing women’s fashion, he admonishes:

Ladies are certainly injudicious in employing so many *male* friseurs<sup>19</sup> about their persons. The custom is indelicate; it is contrary to *cleanliness*, and all their manoeuvres cannot equal the beauty of natural, easy ringlets, untortured and unadorned.

The nearer you approach to the masculine in your apparel, the further you will recede from the *appropriate* graces and *softness* of your sex. Addison, in his day, lashed, with a delicate vein of *irony*, this absurd *transformation*. The present age wants such an inimitable censor. The riding habits, particularly, that have been so fashionable, and even made their appearance at all public places, conceal every thing that is attractive in a woman’s person, her figure, her manner, and her graces. They wholly *unsex* her, and give her the unpleasing air of an Amazon, or a virago. Who likes the idea? or if you would be more struck with the *absurdity*, tell me what you will think of *petit-maitres* in muffs? You immediately despise the ridiculousness of the one; we daily *feel* the *unnaturalness* of the other. We forget that you are *women* in *such a garb*, and we forget to love.<sup>20</sup>

Bennett clearly does not imagine his audience *themselves* to be “Amazon[s]” or “virago[s]”—but he warns his readership of the consequences of dressing or acting in such a way as to be mistaken for one. For Bennett a hierarchy

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17. See Diane Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Daniel Cohen, *The Female Marine and Related Works: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America’s Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); and Susan Lanser, “Mapping Sapphic Modernity,” in Jarrod Hayes, Margaret Higonnet, and William Spurlin, eds., *Comparatively Queer: Crossing Time, Crossing Cultures* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 69–89.

18. Trumbach, “London’s Sapphists,” 112–13.

19. A *friseur* was a hair stylist or hair artist.

20. Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady*, 154–55; emphases in original.

of gendered ridiculousness exists here; he defines the “*petit-maitres* in muffs” as explicitly more despicable and ridiculous than women dressing in masculine fashions, but both bear the potential to “unsex” the body and trim one’s person with an “unnaturalness” that bears clear social consequences. The “*petit-maitre*” (literally, minor or little master) was an expression that described a culture of foppish, effeminate, fashionable men in eighteenth-century England. Certain sartorial trappings tended to be associated with the *petit-maitre*, notably muffs and gloves. Bennett asks his readers to identify with the ostensibly male gaze here, and to understand their experience of “despis[ing] the ridiculousness of the” “*petit maitres* in muffs” as the same disgust as that which men experience when looking on a masculine woman. The attending experience is one of forgetting; Bennett writes that “we forget that you are *women* in *such a garb*, and we forget to love.”

While I do not want to make too much of Bennett’s largely figurative statement about the possibility of “forgetting” someone’s womanhood in the absence of feminine garb, this statement is not meaningless, either. The ability to *forget* the sex of the person whom one regards or, perhaps even more problematically for the turn-of-the-century subjects of this article, the *inability* ever to clearly identify sex in others was an issue of increasing cultural concern during this era, a trend that is evidenced by the popularity of what Daniel Cohen calls “cross-dressing narratives,” like those of Hannah Snell, Deborah Sampson, and Lucy Brewer–Eliza Baker.<sup>21</sup> These cross-dressing narratives not only serve to demonstrate the degree to which gender was popularly understood to be labile during the eighteenth century; they also serve as a reminder of the way that social, religious, and racial positioning inflect cultural expectations surrounding specific gendered behaviors, etiquettes, and dress. It is not a coincidence that the cross-dressing narratives that Cohen and Dugaw describe, and that scholars such as Judith Hiltner and Katherine Binhammer also address in their work, tell the (often “true,” or based on the lives of real people) stories of what we

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21. Eighteenth-century works belonging to this tradition include the story of Hannah Snell, a British woman who famously disguised herself as a man, joined the marines, and successfully both served in the military and earned a military pension, which was printed and probably written by Robert Walker (*The Female Soldier; or, The Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell* [London, 1750]) and circulated widely in both England and the North American colonies, and Herman Mann, *The Female Review* (Dedham, Mass., 1797). Also see Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

would now call “working-class” women who lived and labored as men; indeed, one of the prevalent explanatory narratives for the aberrant gendered behavior of historical figures such as Hannah Snell and Deborah Sampson that circulated during their own lives was that Snell and Sampson dressed as men and joined the military to secure better-paying labor.<sup>22</sup> Outside their context as female laborers—Sampson, for example, was hired out as a servant as a child and remained as such until the age of twenty-two—Sampson’s and Snell’s decisions to join the military would not necessarily have been culturally comprehensible, or might not have been widely socially celebrated in the way that they eventually both were.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, historians of race have consistently pointed to the way that social expectations of gendered behavior and presentation change within different racial and colonial contexts. Jennifer Morgan, for example, offers a compelling analysis of Richard Ligon’s account of his time as a planter in seventeenth-century Barbados to demonstrate the way that protoracialist rhetoric in the seventeenth century relied on depictions of sexual difference to shore up the ideological stability of theories of racial difference. She writes:

As these and other scholars have shown, male travelers to Africa and the Americas contributed to a European discourse on black womanhood. Femaleness evoked a certain element of desire, but travelers depicted black women as simultaneously unwomanly and marked by a reproductive value dependent on their sex. Writers’ recognition of black femaleness and their inability to allow black women to embody “proper” female space composed a focus for representations of racial difference. During the course of his journey, Ligon came to another view of black women. As he saw it, their breasts “hang down below their Navels, so that when they stoop at their common work of weeding, they hang almost to the ground, that at a distance you would think they had six legs.” For Ligon, their monstrous bodies symbolized their sole utility—their ability to produce both crops and other laborers.<sup>24</sup>

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22. See Judith Hiltner, “‘The Example of Our Heroine’: Deborah Sampson and the Legacy of Herman Mann’s *The Female Review*,” *American Studies* 41, no. 1 (2000): 93–113.

23. Both Snell and Sampson were well-known public figures in London and Boston after each was discovered to be or classified as anatomically female, and both Snell and Sampson participated in lecture and performance tours in the wake of their newfound celebrity.

24. See Jennifer Morgan, “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (January 1997): 168. See also Kim F. Hall, *Things*

This quote discusses a seventeenth-century British planter in Barbados, but Morgan argues that European genealogies of the significance of racial difference were inherited by Anglo-European immigrants to North America. Pointing out that “new World and African narratives that relied on gender to convey an emergent notion of racialized difference had been published in England and Europe,” Morgan contends that “by the time English colonists arrived in the Americas they already possessed the trans-European ethnohistoriographical tradition of depicting the imagined native in which Ligon’s account is firmly situated.”<sup>25</sup> Morgan’s assessment of Anglo-European vocabularies for describing black womanhood—which often relied on compounded images of strength and labor capacity, beauty and fecundity, animality and monstrosity—offers a firm reminder that early modern and eighteenth-century ideologies of womanhood and manhood, masculinity and femininity, were constitutively shaped by race. The importance of this kind of scholarship, by scholars whose research takes as axiomatic the shifting and contingent character of early gender, is that it allows us to shift our attention from determining what gender *is* or *was* to examining how gender *worked* in a variety of different cultural locations and structures of power. By turning away from the project of writing the social history of gender as a form of cultural expression, we are freed to consider gender as it functioned as a structural practice or episteme, the way that gender as a way of knowing bore the potential to shape or structure other conditions of existence.

Historians such as Elizabeth Reis have remarked on the existence of a growing cultural “anxiety” surrounding the legibility of gender during the eighteenth century, and I think that we need to read this widespread cultural concern with and interest in the legibility of gender for what it implies: that gender was, at least to a degree, understood within culture as contingent and constantly at risk of being undermined by this fundamental incoherence.<sup>26</sup> Incoherent or contingent gendered behaviors and presentation,

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*of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

25. Morgan, “Some Could Suckle,” 168.

26. See Reis’s work on the history of medical understandings of hermaphroditism; she argues that “in the nineteenth century especially, worries about gender deception and fraud merged with apprehension over racial constancy and the stability of bodies. Whether it was to ensure the legal status of men or women or to show that sex, like race, should be something uncomplicated, permanent, and easy to determine, nineteenth-century doctors insisted on certainty rather than ambiguity in gender designation”; Reis, “Impossible Hermaphrodites,” 412. I am skeptical of the degree to which Reis sees cultural concerns over racial and sexual legibility as

however, were not always understood as problematic, which indicates another historical narrative about gender in the eighteenth century that needs to be revised. Though variation in gender presentation was certainly not typically or consistently well received, it was not unequivocally derided, corrected, or punished, either. Londa Schiebinger, Lorraine Daston, and Katharine Park have all offered important insight into the scientific discourse of the natural “wonder,” and I have argued elsewhere that female masculinity was, at times, characterized in terms of the “wonderful” or “exceptional” in nature in late eighteenth-century North America.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, advocates for women’s education and political enfranchisement often admonished women to become *more* masculine, thereby endeavoring to raise the status and reputation of womanhood to the level necessary to be recognized as bearing the intellectual and moral capacity for rational political participation. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, writes in the introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

I am aware of an obvious inference:—from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attachment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennoble the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind;—all those who view them with a philosophical eye must, I should think, wish with me that they may every day grow more and more masculine.<sup>28</sup>

While Wollstonecraft takes care to draw a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of masculine behavior in women (which she, at times, seems to contradict in other parts of *Vindication*), the defining features of an idealized, republican masculinity, for her, are capacities to which anyone could aspire.<sup>29</sup> She asserts later in the introduction, “Indeed the

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analogous, but her assessment of the increase in cultural interest in clear sexual distinction is an important observation.

27. See Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001); Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body*.

28. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, xiii.

29. Despite Wollstonecraft’s quite vocal consternation over certain forms of female masculinity, she was lambasted by her critics for what they perceived to be her own masculinity. See, for example, Richard Polwhele’s *The Unsex’d Females* (1798), the first American edition of which was printed by William Cobbett in New York in 1800.



word masculine is only a bugbear: there is little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude; for their apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength, must render them, in some degree, dependent on men in the various relations of life; but why should it be increased by prejudices that give a sex to virtue, and confound simple truths with sensual reveries?"<sup>30</sup>

And finally, masculine women, who along with effeminate men frequently appear as favorite subjects of eighteenth-century satirists, are often featured in our primary sources as less disparaged or socially problematic than they do in the assessments of them that appear in our scholarship. John Wolcot, an English doctor and satirist who wrote under the pseudonym Peter Pindar, and who frequently satirized Hannah More and other bluestocking writers, briefly takes up the status of masculine women in the 1789 American version of *The Poetical Works of Peter Pindar, Esq., a Distant Relation to the Poet of Thebes*. While Peter Pindar himself cannot bear a masculine woman, he tarries unexpectedly on the fact that there are men who can:

Love! When I marry, give me not an Ox—  
I hate a Woman like a Sentry-Box;  
Nor can I deem the DAME a charming creature  
Whose hard face holds an *oath* in ev'ry feature  
In Women—Angel's sweetness let me see—  
No Galloping Horse-Godmothers for me.  
I own, I cannot brook such manly *Belles*,  
As Mademoiselle d'Eon and Hannah Snells.  
Yet Men are there, (how strange are Love's decrees!)  
Whom vulgar, coarse, Jack-Gentlewomen please.<sup>31</sup>

30. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, xvi.

31. Peter Pindar, *The Poetical Works of Peter Pindar, Esq., a Distant Relation to the Poet of Thebes* (Philadelphia, 1794), 225. The Chevalier d'Eon was a French diplomat and spy who had been renamed the *Chevalière* (the French feminine) d'Eon and was living as a woman; Pindar's reference to "Hannah Snells" refers to Hannah Snell (see note 22, above); and regarding "Jack-Gentlewoman, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists several eighteenth-century definitions of "Jack-Gentlemen," as "a man of low birth or manners making pretensions to be a gentleman, an insolent fellow, an upstart." See "Jack, n. 1," *OED Online*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/100485?redirectedFrom=jack-gentlewoman](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/100485?redirectedFrom=jack-gentlewoman) (accessed January 11, 2014). Female masculinity during the eighteenth century was frequently conflated with class-crossing, in both directions, perhaps owing to the enormous body of popular narratives surrounding cross-dressing female soldiers, marines, sailors, and so on. Thanks

Importantly, these “Jack-Gentlewomen” are neither universally distasteful nor even particularly aberrant in their “manly” comportment, a fact that reflects a degree of ideological flexibility about gender that is echoed in eighteenth-century discussions of bachelors, fops, and macaronis as well.

As unmarried men who paid perhaps a suspicious or undue amount of attention to the adornment and carriage of their persons, bachelors, though nonetheless understood within the logic of conjugality (they are defined by their unmarried status), occupied a space that allowed for the possibility of an oft-criticized but generally tolerated feminine masculinity within the popular imagination. The narrator of the anonymously authored satire *Causidicus: A Poetic Lash: In Three Parts*, printed in London in 1779 and loosely based on the popularity of the story of the gender-switching Chevalier d’Eon, muses:

If what the proverb says is true,  
They *handsome* are who *handsome* do,  
Then sure it must be truth and fact  
That they are *men* who like *men* act.  
And I in action have done more  
Than modern men could by the score:  
Behold my shoulders, twice as brawny  
As those of fluttr’ring Macaroni;  
These *puff-paste fellows*, slim and fine,  
Without one jot’s that’s masculine.<sup>32</sup>

The narrator, a young aspiring lawyer, distinguishes himself as more masculine than “modern men,” gesturing toward the cultural interest in men’s fashion and, more important, the fact that expressions of masculinity are trend-driven, and that standards for masculine comportment change over time. Significantly, though, in this passage—and in the rest of the third “part” of *Causidicus*, which is entirely focused on the issue of gender ambiguity—the femininity of “*puff-paste fellows*” and their “Macaroni” similars is not figured as a failure of their potential for marriageability or even as a

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to Rachel Hope Cleves for pointing out that Anne Lister (1791–1840), a British aristocrat and masculine woman whose explicit, coded diaries have earned her the appellation “the first modern lesbian” was referred to as “Gentleman Jack” in her community.

32. *Causidicus: A Poetic Lash: In Three Parts* (London, 1779), 41.

failure of gender coherence, but instead merely as a failure to embody an older style of masculinity that is not stylish, “slim” or “fine.” The narrator is quite explicit about the multiple possibilities for embodying manhood and masculinity that exist for himself and his audience, although he also quite clearly hierarchizes certain forms over others, in a defensive mode that understands a certain effeminacy in men to be fashionable, perhaps even dominant.

Neither was gendered ambiguity consistently understood in binary terms during the period. A persistently understudied story of eighteenth-century gender-bending with which residents of late eighteenth-century North America appear to have been widely familiar was that of the aforementioned Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Timothée d’Éon de Beaumont, better known as the Chevalier d’Eon. He was eventually embroiled in a conflict between England and France over international espionage in Russia, but he is better known for performing his spy duties disguised as a woman (“Lea de Beaumont”) and eventually switching genders about half-way through his/her life, living as a man from his birth in 1727 until 1777, and then living as a woman until she died in 1810 (she was retitled the Chevalière d’Eon). The story of the Chevalier(e) d’Eon only very rarely appears in scholarly discussions about the history of gender in North America, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that the Chevalier(e) d’Eon was a fairly common cultural referent in France and England by the 1790s, and also in North America—Philadelphia, in particular—by the first decade of the nineteenth century. The Chevalier d’Eon’s memoirs, *Les Loisirs du Chevalier d’Eon* (1779), as well as several subsequent biographies of his/her life, are listed in the catalogs of Philadelphia area booksellers in the 1780s and 1790s.<sup>33</sup> In fact, cultural familiarity with the figure of the Chevalier d’Eon persisted into the first half of the twentieth century, when the

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33. Biographies of the Chevalier d’Eon have appeared with relative frequency in the two centuries since the Chevalier(e)’s death in 1810, and biographies of his/her life began to appear as early as 1779, when d’Eon himself wrote the autobiographical *Les Loisirs du Chevalier d’Eon*. This text, in particular, appears with great frequency in both Francophone and Anglophone booksellers’ catalogs in Philadelphia during the 1780 and 1790s, and would have rendered the Chevalier(e) a familiar personage even before his/her gender change, especially to Philadelphia-area readers. See, for example, the booksellers Daniel Boinod and Alexander Gaillard, who ran a bookstore on Second Street in Philadelphia and who published the *Catalogue des livres qui se trouvent chez Boinod & Gaillard* (Philadelphia, 1783). See also Thomas Stephens’s catalog of books, *Stephens’s Catalogue of Books, &c. for 1795* (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1795); and *Mathew Carey’s Catalogue of Books, &c.* (Philadelphia, 1794). All these catalogs list *Les Loisirs du Chevalier d’Eon*. It is not surprising

sexologist Havelock Ellis published a study of male transvestitism, titled *Eonism and Other Supplementary Studies*, in 1928 (Ellis derives the diagnostic term *eonism* from d’Eon’s name). D’Eon may have even provided ideological content for Julia Ward Howe’s *The Hermaphrodite* (ca. 1840), which tells the story of an effeminate boy, later a woman, named Laurence, whom the novel describes as not either “man or woman . . . he is rather both than neither.”<sup>34</sup>

I emphasize the widespread circulation of the story of the Chevalier d’Eon to offer more evidence of the proliferation of examples of what today we would call “gender nonconformity” within late eighteenth-century North American print culture. To put this body of print culture alongside

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that these French-language texts would have found their greatest audience in early national Philadelphia. The city had long-established mercantile, social, and political connections to both Paris and the French colony of Haiti. During and after the yellow fever epidemic in the 1790s, many French people migrated to Philadelphia from Haiti as well.

Additionally, the Chevalier(e) d’Eon is referred to frequently around the turn of the century, especially in encyclopedias of popular biographies of famous personages, such as in Tobias Smollett, *The History of England, from the Revolution to the End of the American War, and Peace of Versailles in 1783*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia: Robert Campbell & Co., 1796–98), and the anonymously authored *Eccentric Biography; or, Memoirs of Remarkable Female Characters, Ancient and Modern* (Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, 1804). Further memoirs and biographies of the Chevalier(e) include Fortelle’s *La Vie militaire, politique et privée de demoiselle Charles-Geneviève-Auguste-Andrée-Thimothée Êon ou d’Êon de Beaumont* (Paris, 1779), and Frédéric Gaillardet’s *Mémoires du chevalier d’Êon* (Paris, 1836). Casual references to the Chevalier(e) d’Eon appear frequently in popular narratives and dramas during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, especially in Philadelphia (probably because of the concentration of Francophone publishers, readers, and people in the area), including August von Kotzebue’s *False Shame: A Comedy, in Four Acts* (New York: Thomas S. Arden, 1800), Pindar’s *Poetical Works*, and, I would argue, the entirety of K. White, *A Narrative of the Life, Occurrences, Vicissitudes and Present Situation, of K. White* (Schenectady: Printed for the authoress, 1809). Thanks to Jen Manion for pointing me in the direction of this piece. The Chevalier(e) d’Eon, as a figure, was used to describe gender-switching behaviors into early twentieth century; Havelock Ellis wrote *Eonism and Other Supplementary Studies* in 1928 (which was, interestingly, published in Philadelphia, by the F. A. Davis Company). And finally, though the play itself seems to be lost or unavailable, the Library Company of Philadelphia holds a broadside advertising a play entitled *Two Strings to Your Bow; or, The Female Chevalier*, which played at the New Theatre in Philadelphia on February 27, 1799.

34. Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 195. The novel remained unpublished until 2004; it was never finished.

the popular narrative, balladry, sermons, medical literature, conduct and hygiene manuals, and fiction that is *also* replete with both recurring and unique images of gender nonconformity paints a picture of eighteenth-century, and particularly late eighteenth-century, reading and nonreading cultures that would have frequently considered gender in dynamic terms. This collection of representations and discussions of masculine women, effeminate men, and individuals who did not easily or clearly fit into either category suggests a certain level of widespread cultural familiarity with the possibilities for gendered behavior that existed outside a singular, consolidated, and requisite manhood or womanhood. And this is not merely to say that “manhood” and “womanhood” were formations bearing significant potential for plurality during this era; it is also to point out that manhood and womanhood are permanently contingent, even within the “same” culture, at the same time, and among people of the same social class.

There was, however, a high degree of cultural emphasis on both men and women maintaining their “natural state.” And though this cultural interest in the “natural state” of men and women maintains a rather muscular presence in the archive, the last decades of the eighteenth century in particular saw a great deal of political strife over what, precisely, the “natural state” of women or men really entailed, and it would be difficult to argue that any consensus existed. For Wollstonecraft—who provocatively questions in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, “Is woman in a natural state?”—women were culturally prevented from sustaining their natural state owing to what we might now term patriarchy; being prohibited from exercising and pursuing a serious education, among many other things, rendered women perhaps rightfully subject to the common critiques of their contemporaries, namely, that women were childlike, irrational, and unsuited for participation in civic life. Similarly, countless criticisms of women’s predilection for makeup or face painting on the part of advocates *against* women’s equality—who read makeup as a technology of deceit—admonish women to maintain as close a relationship as possible to their natural state.<sup>35</sup> But between the sex-based

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35. In Cotton Mather’s *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1692), for example, he argues against the practice of women painting their faces, because the practice renders women less honest and thus less virtuous. He writes, “The beauty whereof a *Vertuous woman* hath a Remarkable Dislike, is that which hath *Artificial Painting* in it. The usage of *Artificial Painting* is practiced by many women, who think whereby to be valued for a *Beauty* which they are not Really the owners of: But a *Vertuous woman* will not be guilty of such a *Vanity*. There is a wicked Book that pleads for this ungodly practice. . . . Although it be not Unlawful for a Person

reforms suggested by politically progressive organizations such as New York’s Friendly Club, and a concomitant rising cultural interest in the science of sex differentiation, even the concept of man’s (or woman’s) “natural state” came under scrutiny and was frequently exposed to be as dynamic in biological terms as gendered expectations were understood to be situationally contingent.<sup>36</sup>

What these prolific and persistent discussions—most if not all of which seem to be wrought with concern—over the increasingly distant relationship among manhood, womanhood, and naturalness suggest is that in the late eighteenth century in North America, there was in fact a widespread cultural awareness and recognition of the fact that gender was not necessarily or even often “natural”; that socially acceptable womanhood and manhood could assume plural and sometimes aberrant forms; and that there was a wide, but not universal, degree of tolerance for individual deviations from conventional gender behaviors or presentations. Thus, it should not be surprising that research on eighteenth-century gender has demonstrated that an incredibly wide vocabulary existed to describe different forms of socially recognizable gender, including terms such as macroclitorides, sapphists, tribades, amazons, female husbands, mollies, bachelors, macaronis, viragos, fops, tommies, effeminate men, *petit-maitres*, “unsex’d females,” and masculine women, to name only a few.<sup>37</sup> All these formations designate what

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Transiently to Preserve or to Restore her Native *Complexion*, by Convenient Medicines, when she is in any special Danger of Loosing it; Yet for a Person to *Paint* herself, that She may make some Ostentation of a Complexion which God has not made her the Owner of, is a thing that has heard ill among the most Godly Christians; nor will a *Vertuous Woman* Easily be Reconcil’d unto it: lest when the Saints Rise, as *Artullian* wished *he* might, at the Resurrection of the Righteous, *To see whether the Angels are then Carrying any Painted Ladies, in their Arms to meet the Lord Jesus Christ with Joy*, there will be no such sight then to be me withal” (16–17; emphases in original).

36. On New York’s Friendly Club, see Bryan Waterman, *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On early modern and eighteenth-century cultural beliefs in biological diversity (including gender-based biological diversity) in humans, see Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*.

37. See Binhammer, “The Sex Panic of the 1790s”; Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry*; Lanser, “The Political Economy of Same-Sex Desire”; Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” and “The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris”; and Trumbach, “London’s Sapphists.”

were generally understood to be a socially interruptive set of behaviors or morphologies—or both—although at times these terms emerge out of radically different discourses, despite being frequently, but not always, understood in relation to one another.<sup>38</sup> This etymological unevenness notwithstanding, as the eighteenth century came to a close, this rich and variegated Anglophone vocabulary for gender differentiation, though often used in judgmental, critical, or disparaging ways, appears to have been widely understood and available to readers and writers across a wide range of geographic, educational, and religious backgrounds.

#### EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GENDER TROUBLE

It is clear, then, that eighteenth-century North American popular culture negotiated periodic moments of “gender trouble,” and that these historical moments of cultural contest over the significance of gender were as variegated, and as regionally, racially, and economically specific, as they are in our own time. What is less clear is to what degree, if any, moments of eighteenth-century gender trouble might be related to the kinds of modern gender trouble that are said to have initiated the development of queer theory, as well as poststructuralist critiques of the subject more generally. Despite the incredible importance of Judith Butler’s work, and the intellectual genealogy on which it is built, its enormous critical influence has perhaps at times served to render the understanding of the radical instability or performativity of gender an idea ineluctably entwined with political and theoretical movements of the 1990s and later. That is to say, the powerful and, in many ways, paradigm-shifting significance of Butler’s work and its afterlives has also had the unintended effect of making the possibility of the existence of complex and textured theorizations of gender before the 1990s seem historically unlikely; *Gender Trouble* saved gender studies from what it had eternally before been.<sup>39</sup> This notion, in which cultural notions of gender are inevitably bound to postmodernity, is one that is both intentionally and unintentionally reproduced in many of the critical and theoretical histories that we teach our students—in which the critique of the gendered subject

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38. The figure of the fop, for example, is often invoked alongside that of the macaroni, but fops and macaronis are not generally invoked alongside or within discussions of sapphism or female husbands.

39. Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, alongside Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex,” and a host of other texts, are frequently identified as the beginnings of queer theory within intellectual histories of the field. See Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

arrives with poststructuralism—which is understandable but that nonetheless has ramifications in terms of thinking about the meaning and import of gender during the eighteenth century in both North America and elsewhere.

At risk here is the possibility of inadvertently insisting on the deep alterity of the past, without acknowledging the ways that (a) past practices and cultural understandings of gender variation have perhaps made possible later understandings of the meaning of gender, or (b) rendering a modern or postmodern account of gender that is somehow outside history.<sup>40</sup> This kind of flawed critique is, in fact, precisely what feminist theorists and historians all insist is *crucial* that we *not* do; in *Gender Trouble*, for example, is one of Butler’s earliest refusals of a certain universalism on which she argues that modern feminism is built: the notion that the subject of feminism is a generalized *women*.<sup>41</sup> She writes: “Apart from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem

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40. Ironically, for Joan Scott the tendency of feminist historians to understand *woman* as a stable, self-same, or coherent category has actually ideologically added the project of feminist history; as Scott puts it, “Paradoxically, the history of ‘women’ kept women outside history”; *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 10. She writes, “In much of the historical literature that used the notion of cultural construction, ‘gender’ referred to these representations, to the traits and roles assigned to women (and men), but not to the category of women (or men) itself. I think this had a lot to do with feminist history’s ties to the feminist movement and its resulting aim of producing a political subject based on identification with a collectivity of women. There was enormous tension between a theory that stressed the productive work of representation (and so its various articulations) and a political movement that mobilized women on the basis of a universal experience of subordination.

“A symptom of this tension was that, even as it gestured to gender as mutable, the historical work done by many feminists assumed a fixed meaning for the categories of ‘women’ and ‘men,’ or at least didn’t problematize them. Instead, it most often took the physical commonality of females as a synonym for the connective entity designated ‘women.’ Gender was said to be about the relationship between women and men and assumed to be not only hierarchical, but invariably so: a permanent antagonism that took different forms at different times. And, despite much innovative research on sexuality, gender—at least in historians’ writing—most often referred to sexual difference as if it were a known and enduring male/female opposition, a normative (if not distinctly biological) heterosexual coupling, even when homosexuality was the topic being addressed” (9).

41. See Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*; Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender Still a Useful Category of Analysis?” *Diogenes* 57, no. 7 (2010): 7–14; and Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?” *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Houndmills, U.K.: Macmillan, 1988).



that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity . . . the term fails to be exhaustive . . . because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different *historical contexts*, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.”<sup>42</sup>

What Butler is describing here is the problem of basing a movement on an assumed unity or integrity, both intra- and intersubjectively, within the group, organized around gender. What is lost in that assumption of sameness, consistency, or integrity within the category *women* is the specific ways that race, ethnicity, location, class, religion, and *historical moment*, did and *do* inflect, change, and at times radically destabilize what that term (*women*) means and how it signifies. Butler’s exhortation for scholarly attention to the specificities of the historical moment has received less attention than her enjoinder to pay better attention to the intersectional specificities of “racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities,” although Scott has repeatedly insisted on the dangers of understanding *women* as a coherent or stable historical category.<sup>43</sup> What is important about this early moment in *Gender Trouble*, and this early moment in poststructuralist gender theory more generally, is that it unexpectedly offers a prescription for how to produce a historically rigorous account of “gender” in the sense that Joan Scott understands it: gender as a formation, a pattern of relationality, and an approach to the problem of sexual difference.<sup>44</sup> Thinking in these terms

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42. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3; emphases added.

43. See Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*.

44. Scott insists on thinking through the history of gender in these terms, arguing that “gender, then, is the study of the relationship between the normative and the psychic. Gender consists of the historically specific and finally uncontrollable articulations that aim to settle the confusions associated with sexual difference by directing fantasy to some political or social end: group mobilization, nation building, support for a specific family structure, ethnic consolidation, or religious practice” (ibid., 20–21). Whether readers are compelled by psychoanalysis as an epistemology or methodology in the way that Scott clearly is, and whether readers are interested in Freud’s theories of the incorporation and negotiation of sexual difference, we can nonetheless follow Scott in the methodological shift she is advocating, from thinking about gender as a specific formation (“man,” “woman,” “masculinity,” “femininity,” and so on) to thinking about gender as a structure of relation *that makes visible what is ultimately unknowable about the past*. Aiming critical attention at historical unknowability concomitantly allows our own investments in producing certain kinds of histories—Scott calls these investments “fantasies”—to come into focus.

allows us to sidestep the historiographic problem of writing the history of gender as the history of masculinity or femininity, or men or women, and instead reorganizes the history of gender into a project of tracing the intersections of vectors of historical power. This poststructuralist methodology for theorizing the historicity of gender is, of course, not a new approach within early American history or literary studies; scholars have been producing work that theorizes gender in these terms for decades.<sup>45</sup> Yet despite the huge body of scholarship that considers gender as a structure of relation rather than an a subject position, we have not yet adequately accounted for the effect this paradigm shift has had on our methodologies, or the potential it might bear to shift the narratives that we derive from our research and introduce to our classrooms about the meaning of gender in the early Americas. My hope is that this special issue of *Early American Studies* will emphasize the continued need for scholarship that conceptualizes gender in these terms, remind us of the importance of supporting the development of this kind of scholarship, and exhort us to recenter the ideological foundations of our own subsequent research and teaching around scholarship that theorizes gender as a structure of relation rather than a contingent internal quality.

My aim for this article is thus not to offer a close reading of one particular usage or formation of gender variation within late eighteenth-century North American culture, but to ask a series of questions that will contribute to the process of reframing the way that we think about the historicity of gender, and also suggest new questions that we might ask. For example, what if the radical contingency of gender is not even a twentieth-century idea? I am consistently struck, while reading work in feminist historiography and queer theory, by the degree to which each of these fields is intellectually indebted to a much older philosophical tradition of inquiry, much of which often exists contemporaneously with (or simply predates!) the questions about the status of gender in the eighteenth century that I consider above. An important reason for *Gender Trouble's* success and relatively quick canonization within critical theory, for example, was the intellectual and political climate of the moment at which the book appeared, which was crucially shaped by pioneering earlier studies by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga on the intersectional and thus fundamentally unstable realities of gender experience in the early 1980s.<sup>46</sup> Butler's work on the performativity of gender and the

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45. See note 4 for a list of recent books that have historicized gender in these terms.

46. See Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981), and

critique of the subject (and its implied gendered integrity) very explicitly draws on the work of G. W. F. Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and French psychoanalytic feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, and Luce Irigaray, to only name a few.

Has our understanding of Butler's indebtedness to these philosophers at times implicitly also supposed a contemporaneity of these intellectuals and their ideas? That is, when Butler cites Hegel or de Beauvoir, it becomes somehow easy to forget that she is citing thinkers from the turn of the nineteenth century and from the middle of the twentieth, because Hegel and de Beauvoir provide the ideological scaffolding on which Butler's post-structuralist theorizing of gender is built, at least in part.<sup>47</sup> Temporarily, Hegel and de Beauvoir can feel like modern writers and thinkers, as their ideas are being put to use in the service of the construction of an exciting, innovative, relatively radical and politically timely theoretical intervention into epistemologies of gender; in a sense, in the context of queer theory, these writings (Hegel, de Beauvoir, et al.) can lose their historicity. It can be a challenge to refrain from associating Butler's ideas with a postmodern moment—the 1990s, for example, or poststructuralism—and, because of the influence of her work, understand that moment as representing a radical ideological break with the thinking about gender that came before it (a statement with which I doubt Butler would agree). While I do not want to insist on an even continuity between gender trouble in the eighteenth century and gender trouble in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, it is nonetheless important to consider certain intellectual or philosophical continuities that constitute ideological links between the two eras.

Further questions: What might be the stakes of locating the origins of the idea of gender as a culturally and historically contingent epistemology

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Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1984).

47. Furthermore, where Butler does *not* cite Anzaldúa and Moraga, it becomes easier for the dominant intellectual historiography of “gender trouble” to *begin* with Butler, rather than beginning with women-of-color feminism, which is where most scholars of women's gender and sexuality studies tend to date the earliest ideological foundations of the idea that gender is unstable, incoherent, and based on sociocultural context. I hope that, in my attention to Butler's work in this article, I have not inadvertently reified *Gender Trouble*, or Butler as a scholar, as the “founder” of these ideas. *Gender Trouble* provides an interesting example for a discussion of eighteenth-century gender, as Butler so explicitly engages with a philosophical tradition that is contemporary with some of the subjects of my own late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century inquiries.

in the late eighteenth century rather than the late twentieth? Can we locate the history of this vein of thought about gender in the eighteenth century while simultaneously acknowledging that eighteenth-century understandings of the contingency of gender do not share all or even very much ideological territory with those of the twentieth century? Can we describe similarities in cultural attitudes toward gender in disparate historical periods without assuming their continuousness? I hope that this special issue will prompt all these questions, while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of somehow positing the poststructuralist conviction of the instability of gender (or poststructuralism writ large) as a telos or an inevitability.

#### CONCLUSION

Formations such as *womanhood*, *manhood*, or *gender* in general bear a fundamental mischievousness in terms of the way that they appear in the eighteenth-century archive, inasmuch as these terms operate by assuming a certain universal recognizability—they are putatively understandable and familiar to *all* readers—while simultaneously asserting a context-based particularity. For literary scholars, the payoff of “close reading” is the ability to identify these contradictions in meaning, and to be able to offer an ideological critique of the way that assertions of the significance of gender, within culture, at a given historical moment, are almost always going to be flimsy and contradictory. But at this point in the evolution of scholarship on the history of sex and gender, in historical and literary studies and in many more fields, we actually need to be approaching our primary sources with a different methodology—and I say this as a literary critic, and one trained in close reading.

We have arrived at a moment that demands an adjustment of the narrativization of what gender was and what gender meant during the middle modern period, and a recognition of what scholars have been arguing again and again over the past decade: that gender, in eighteenth-century England and North America, was probably understood very similarly to the way that we understand it now: as flexible, contingent, and non-self-identical. This is not to say that there were not forms of gendered behavior that were socially supported over other forms, or that there were not forms of gendered behavior that were criminalized and socially aberrant and that bore significant social and juridical consequences for those who participated in them; that was certainly true of the eighteenth century, as it still is today. During the eighteenth century there was undoubtedly quite heavy social pressure to conform to the norms of femininity or masculinity appropriate to one’s social class, religion, race, and geographic location, but that is

certainly also the case in the world today, and we nonetheless have an understanding of the radical possibilities for the way even the social disparagement of certain forms of gendered behavior can inadvertently expand popular perceptions of the possible.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes our very noble intentions toward scholarly rigor, and approaching the past on its own terms, leave us unable or even unwilling to see similarities. Furthermore, it is possible to notice, consider, and discuss similarities in social formations between two radically different historical moments and still not understand those similarities as indicative of continuities. And finally, it is possible to note that two social formations from radically different historical moments perhaps resemble each other more than they differ, while simultaneously recognizing that the etiologies of these formations in their own time bear no resemblance whatsoever.

I am in no way arguing that cultural understandings of gender in late eighteenth-century North America were identical to our understanding of gender today. We need, however, to amend, or perhaps add texture to, our narrative of the sea change wrought by the onset of queer theory and gender studies on cultural understandings of the significance, or nonsignificance, of gender. Though theorizing gender as a form of sociocultural “drag” changed the vocabulary through which we theorized the nature (or lack thereof) of subjectivity—in both popular and academic parlance—broad cultural understandings of the fundamental lack of integrity of gender were already lived, on-the-ground realities within a range of specific North American cultures by the time that gender and queer studies gained traction in the North American academy.<sup>49</sup> I mention this to suggest that the problem with our analysis of eighteenth-century gender is *not* that scholars are reading Butler’s work and applying it anachronistically to texts and cultures that flourished more than two hundred years before *Gender Trouble* was published, but rather that we are reluctant to study, document, and acknowledge the existence of nonnormative and non-self-identical cultures of gender far before the arrival of the twentieth century, and thus we cannot

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48. To offer an example of this phenomenon from another context, one cannot say something homophobic without simultaneously talking about homosexuality. On examples of the way that homophobic reading practices might contribute to historiographies of socially aberrant sexualities, see Jonathan Crewe, “Sodomy Revisited in Marlowe’s *Edward III*,” *Criticism* 51, no. 3 (2009): 385–99.

49. Throughout *Gender Trouble*, Butler, in her analysis of the performativity of gender, continually attributes ideas to both a long institutional-intellectual tradition, and a broad degree of queer cultural invention and participation, such as queer politics, drag shows, bar culture, and the like.

see the ways that earlier epistemologies of gender may have in fact contributed significantly to the intellectual lineages that would later allow for the evolution of poststructuralist scholarship that theorized the performativity of gender.

One of the many things that has been interesting about writing this article has been surveying the research and noting just how many times, and how many scholars, from so many different disciplines, have already made this argument.<sup>50</sup> Yet the significance of these arguments has not been sufficiently internalized and put into practice in our studies of the history of gender and sexuality during the eighteenth century, nor do I think we have taken proper account of the implications of this change not only in our analysis itself, but also in our analytic method. I hope that this special issue will not only provoke thought about what we envision gender to have meant or been in eighteenth-century North America, but also encourage all of us, as scholars of the early Americas and of the eighteenth century more generally, to ask ourselves what commitments—political, ideological, fantasmatic, or otherwise—we have invested in producing and reproducing certain narratives about early gender, or in committing to a specific historiographic method that allows us to find only the narratives that we are looking for. It is worth considering whether the narratives surrounding the history of gender that we are looking for *are* narratives that enforce dominant, though hotly contested, notions of gender as stable, coherent, internal to subjectivity, and so on. Might this reflect a commitment to understanding gender in this way in our own time, or alternatively, a desire to relegate the quotidian, patriarchal strictures of the policing of gender to the (preferably distant) past?

To conclude, I turn to the eighteenth-century term that initially provided the inspiration for this article: *unsex*, a word that gained currency in the late seventeenth century and that continued to be used, especially in late eighteenth-century anti-Jacobin critiques of women’s education, until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> *Unsex*, in its verb form, is unique because it

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50. See, for example, Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*; Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); and Jeanne Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis,” *Gender and History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 558–83.

51. *Unsex* appears in a variety of contexts, perhaps the most famous of which appears in Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which was performed widely in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century North America. It also appears in the first edition of John Ash’s *New and Complete Diction-*

almost always referred to an action one performed on *oneself*; women might unsex themselves by pursuing a scientific education, for example, and in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth famously calls on the spirits to "unsex me here,/ . . . Come to my woman's breasts,/And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers."<sup>52</sup> To be "unsexed" was not, importantly, to *change* sex; it was to elect to relinquish the typical qualities associated with what eighteenth-century speakers would have termed "the masculine gender" or "the feminine gender."<sup>53</sup> Though it is not a term that is neutral toward or unconcerned with gender, eighteenth-century uses of *unsex* do not simply imply a tending toward the masculine or the feminine. Rather, contemporary uses of *unsex* tend *away* from marked masculinity or femininity; *unsex* expresses a relationship to both male and female, masculinity and femininity, but a phobic one.

I turn to this eighteenth-century vocabulary to further encourage the unsexing of *gender* as a vein of historical inquiry. This is not to suggest that we abandon our research on masculinity, femininity, intersexuality, men, or women, but, rather, that we understand all these terms relationally, as relative in their own time; constituted in relation to a number of other vectors of historically distinct conditions (race, religion, location, relationship to labor); and always in inevitable relation to our twenty-first century political and affective investments in the production of specific types of narratives about the past. In a way, the unsexing of the history of gender echoes early moments in queer and gender theory wherein "sex" and "gender" became radically uncoupled, but to note this parallelism is to mark another similarity that is not necessarily a continuity. The unsexing of gender history permits the simultaneous consideration of eighteenth-century gender politics within their own moment, *alongside* a critical relationship to both the content and the motivation of the historian's backward gaze. Unsexing the history of gender will produce history animated by "a quest for understanding that is never fully satisfied with its own results . . . one in which critical reading replaces the operations of classification, in which the relationship between

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*ary of the English Language* (London, 1775). Another use of *unsex* is Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females* (New York, 1800). The word appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "un'sex, v.," *OED Online*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/217804?redirectedFrom=unsex](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/217804?redirectedFrom=unsex) (accessed January 13, 2014).

52. *Macbeth*, 1.5.31–38.

53. Lady Macbeth illustrates her wish to be unsexed by referring to her breasts, asking the spirits to "take my milk for gall." She figures unsexing as a conversion of her perhaps archetypal feminine features (breasts, milk) into courage, but importantly, *not* into a more corporealized form of masculinity.

the past and present is not taken for granted but considered a problem to be explored, and in which the thinking of the historian is an object of inquiry along with that of her subjects.”<sup>54</sup> It is to cultivate a phenomenological relationship to the study of history, while nonetheless taking gender seriously as a dynamic historical phenomenon.

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54. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, 22.