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GENDER, BIOLOGY, AND POWER: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND WOMANHOOD

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Abstract:

For decades, feminist scholars engaged in discourses surrounding women as a biological and social identity. Scholars unpacked normative ideas of womanhood and gender, often drawing very different conclusions from one another. They theorized that womanhood was a social construction to ensure their subservient status to patriarchal institutions. The line between biological and social identity was and still is contentious between scholars. Writers like Judith Butler, Caroline Smith-Rosenberg, and Natalie Zemon Davis analyzed gender constructs in both a theoretical and historical sense and formed their analysis in different ways. Their work breaks down how medical orthodoxies created biological ideas of womanhood and how biology was used as a method to effectively enforce normative ideas of gender. This work seeks to compare the approaches of each scholar and their analysis of womanhood.

The field of gender and women's studies was shaped and reshaped by vanguard scholars and activists, and that legacy continues to shape the way we analyze ourselves and the society around us. Within a few generations, countless scholars have developed their own theories about gender and power in society, but have yet to reach a consensus on one question: what is gender? There is nothing more terrifyingly personal than the body and identity. It is so frightening and vulnerable, exposing the way the body is scrutinized, picked apart, and observed. It asks us: are we more than what's beyond our skin, and beyond our organs? Or are we nothing more than flesh and DNA, our will and self-determination nothing more than the constant interplay of nature and nurture? Women's historians and gender theorists were interlocutors in a debate about the nature of womanhood, and what that meant for how power and cultural assumptions defined gender. Feminist scholars theorized that notions of gender were constructed by culture and could adapt over time to changing power structures. The constructionist arguments over gender altered a conversation dominated by bio-essentialism, though even the constructionists themselves differed in their analysis. Some often conflated sex and gender, while some suggested that sex itself could also be constructed. After decades of the debate, there still are no clear answers. Scholars like Judith Butler, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Natalie Zemon Davis incorporate similar ideas of gender into their works, but even those who find common ground as feminists demonstrate differences in their arguments. The way theorists and historians grapple with these questions vary, even among those who incorporate constructionism into their analysis. This work intends to compare the approaches each scholar takes in regard to social constructs and womanhood.

OF GENDER AND THEATRE: JUDITH BUTLER AND *GENDER TROUBLE*

Feminist discourses on gender had been developing for decades without a clear consensus on the realities of womanhood. The question of nature and nurture and its relationship to gender had not been resolved, and scholars continued to argue amongst themselves. The theory that sex and gender were different and that gender was socially constructed, whilst sex was biological was a common argument by feminist scholars. The social expectations and behaviors placed on women through this construction is referred to as normative womanhood. These academics did not fully reject a naturalistic argument, which younger scholars like Judith Butler had developed contentions with. Butler intended for her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* to be a critique of certain forms of feminism she fundamentally opposed; and to add to the already existing body of feminist theory. Upon its release in 1990, *Gender Trouble* became much larger than she had intended. Now considered a formative piece of feminist literature and queer theory, Butler's work shaped the debate on sex and gender. She both developed and critiqued the constructionist theory; accepting some ideas posited by other feminist scholars and pushing the terms of the debate in a more radical direction - outlining her theory of performativity and arguing that even sex was a construction reified by gender.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* began to outline some central contentions that had arisen amongst feminists and their struggle to define womanhood and sex distinctions. She raises several contentions with other feminist scholars about fundamental formulations of gender. In order to make the gender and sex distinction, gender theorists posited that gender was culturally established, whilst sex and sex distinctions were a product of biology and natural phenomena. Butler contests this idea. She instead suggested that biology itself is a variable construction of culture and that genealogy and binary options of sex may also be a construct. Therefore, to suggest that sex is a natural occurrence is to suggest that sex is a politically

neutral categorization. To argue that sex is a concept that predated culture means that there is no need to break down or question how binary sex is categorized in the first place. Butler argues that "Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established." Butler explicitly suggests that the debate [1]on gender and sex distinctions are tautological. Binary conceptions of gender therefore create sex distinctions, just as sex distinctions create gender: gender and sex are one and the same.

Butler questions if the body is simply a medium in which gender is created, which then creates philosophical questions of free will and fixed ideas about gender. Since culture creates gendered laws that one must follow, therefore biology does not determine destiny, culture does. Thus, as an extension of this, one's culture must define how gender regulates the body and its forms. Butler suggests that the discourse between fixed and free ideas of sex simply limit the terms of the debate about gender. "The locus of intractability, whether in "sex" or "gender" or in the very meaning of "construction," provides a clue to what cultural possibilities can and cannot become mobilized through any further analysis...These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality.[2]

The terms of the debate are limited by language, as the use of womanhood and manhood as terms already limits ideas about future gender formulations. Questions about what gender 'is' are always constrained by the cultural context in which they are asked and

[1] Judith Butler, "Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 11
[2] Butler, "Gender: The Circular Ruins", p. 13

our already limiting conceptions of gender. Rather, "...gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations." [3] The concept of normative womanhood and masculinist oppression that some feminists had suggested is therefore ignoring racial, class, and other forms of oppression that are much more variable than universal. The universality of female identity must be therefore called into question and calls for unity and coherence between women as an oppressed category must consider the cultural and political intersections in which the category of 'woman' is formed.

For Butler, gender identities must have been formulated after there became a recognizable standard of "gender intelligibility."[4] All of the standards and norms created by a [4] society must coalesce into a functional meaning in order to create a functional identity; or at the very least an identity that is recognized as functional within a society. It is relative to culture what regulations, boundaries, and divisions create a fully formed gender. Therefore, a society must generally agree on some sort of gendered coherence; thus normative sex, gender, and sexual practices are formed. However, "Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined."[5] For this reason, gendered and sexual 'incoherence' must therefore be prohibited. Through this, the 'natural' sex is created out of the rules and regulations manufactured by coherent gender norms. Those who fall outside

[3] Butler, "Gender: The Circular Ruins", p. 15.
[4] Butler, "Identity, Sex, and Metaphysics of Substance," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 22.
[5] Ibid, p. 23.

intelligible constructs of gender are deemed a logical impossibility, perhaps even an indicator of developmental failure or a sexual disorder. Without the categories of 'man' and 'woman,' human beings become a dissonant mass of gendered features. The gendered self is created from a carefully developed regulation of these features.

Butler argues then that "In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence."[6] Not only does Butler suggest that gender is an act of performance, she goes on to argue that there is no gender identity behind the expression; that the identity is simply the result of the display. Gender essentialism and its power dynamics create the realities and unrealities of womanhood. Gender is reified by the performance, the theatrical set of gesticulations that create gendered coherence. She believes that this gendered coherence is bound to fail, as what is repressed is bound to rupture and reemerge. *Gender Trouble* does not argue that the performative nature of gender makes it frivolous or artificial. Butler suggests that normative gender, in its attempt to create gender coherence, must draw lines of what is 'real' gender and what is truly 'authentic.' To expand its authority, there must be a rigid boundary between the real and unreal. The only way to regulate what the hegemony deems 'unreal' and unacceptable is to firmly regulate the behaviors of those within the culture.

THE FEMALE ANIMAL: CARROLL SMITH-ROSENBERG AND WOMEN'S HISTORY

When discussing the study of womanhood, it is critical to outline the effect of feminist

[6] Butler, "Identity, Sex, and Metaphysics of Substance," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 33.

discourses on historical scholarship. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg deals with the pathologized woman, with much of her work analyzing how biological and medical ideas of womanhood were used to justify their place in society. Like Butler, she also breaks down notions of the 'normative woman'. However, Smith-Rosenberg sought to understand its place in the historical canon rather than dealing with the theoretical or philosophical. Central to much of Smith-Rosenberg's work deals with how the medical and biological sciences have defined traditional sex roles. Though the body of her work began in the decades prior to Butler's *Gender Trouble,* there are echoes of similarity between the works. Both make note of sexual laws that were used to simultaneously regulate normative gender roles and attempt to justify the normative gender roles already in place. Smith-Rosenberg does not entirely reject the role of the universal woman, however. Nor does she fully question sex as a construct, though she suggests that sexual norms were created as a response to gendered constructions that already existed. Despite these differences she is firmly in the constructionist camp, and her work largely reflects this idea.

Womanhood and the gendered construction of power in certain cultures play a key role in both Butler's and Smith-Rosenberg's analysis, but the latter's work considers what it meant beyond the theoretical. Women's historians used social constructionist theory to break down ideas of gender when bio-essentialism was previously the norm. In doing so, they opened the field of history to a new analytic framework. Women's historians "became myth decipherers, skeptical of all institutions and processes that presented themselves as 'natural.'[7] Historians like Smith-Rosenberg criticized the field of history, where the social processes that characterized women's lives were often overlooked, oversimplified, or outright ignored. Understanding of family life, religion, and labor in relation to gender were no longer rigid

[7] Carol Smith-Rosenberg, Hearing Women's Words: A Feminist Reconstruction of History. (Oxford University Press, 1986.), p. 14.

and unchanging institutions; they were analyzed as a product of social and cultural influences. Early women's historians first looked to gendered divisions of labor and its historical role. When removing previous assumptions about what was 'natural,' this skepticism allowed for a more complex understanding of the workforce. For example, gendered division of labor in the nineteenth century did not seem to develop alongside increased mechanization, which piqued the interest of scholars. Smith-Rosenberg noted that "Mechanization, by minimizing the importance of brawn to production, had opened a host of new areas to the potential of female employment. Certainly, it was to the economic advantage of the entrepreneurial class to expand the labor force. Why, then, did entrepreneurs bar women from most areas of manufacturing?"[8] Cultural assumptions about women's abilities prevented women from becoming laborers, rather than biological reasons. If divisions of labor were natural, women would be able to join the labor force en masse with increasing mechanization. It was the gendered assumptions of women's place in society that prevented them from doing so, not biology.

If gender is not purely a biological phenomenon, the way 'gendered' diseases are studied must be altered. Smith-Rosenberg raised questions about medical history in her study of hysteria, largely considered a disease of the female sex. She sees hysteria as a phenomenon of gendered socialization altering biology, instead of biology altering gender. She suggests that hysteria "can be seen as an alternate role option for particular women incapable of accepting their life situation."[9] Women often had to balance two difficult and often contradictory roles: the weak [10] and demure wife and the strong and stable mother. As women's place in society

[8] Carol Smith-Rosenberg, Hearing Women's Words, p. 12-13.
[9] Carol Smith-Rosenberg, The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th-Century America. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 655.

developed throughout the nineteenth century, these contradictory positions placed an undue amount of stress on married women. Patterns in nervous behavior were not uncommon for urban middle class and working-class women alike, and "Physicians reported a high incidence of nervous disease and hysteria among women who felt overwhelmed by the burdens of frequent pregnancies, the demands of children, the daily exertions of housekeeping and family management."[10] Falling ill to a nervous disease was a way out of this oppressive environment. [11] The hysterical woman was given a sudden sense of power over the household, as children were no longer her responsibility and the husband had to nurse her back to health. The hysteric could use her illness to assert autonomy in the domestic sphere. For this reason, one of the main suggestions to 'cure' hysteria was to remove the woman from the household entirely. Overt aggression in women was strongly discouraged in young girls from a young age, [12] and this socialization required them to assert themselves and reject their established role by embodying the most extreme form of femininity. By exaggerating the emotional and infantilizing behaviors that were impressed upon her, a woman was able to assert her will in a male-dominated space. Rather than hysteria being a disease of the sex, Smith-Rosenberg posited that hysteria was a product of gendered socialization - a way out of the established order.

The nineteenth century was a landscape of constant change and development. As medicine and science progressed at an unprecedented pace, women began to contest their traditional role in society. Just as society's understanding of the natural world began to develop and change, scientists also sought to justify existing roles and social structures. Women's physiology had long since developed a medical and biological literature that had attempted to justify their subservient roles within society. Medicine and the study of sex was used to legitimize women's role in the home and as caretakers.

[10] Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman," p. 657.

Smith-Rosenberg believed these normative roles "exist rather as a formally agreed upon set of characteristics understood by and acceptable to a significant proportion of the population.... Such social role definitions, however, have a more than platonic reality; for they exist as parameters with which and against which individuals must either conform or define their deviance."[11] During the nineteenth century, however, these roles engendered increasing anxiety and conflict as American society began to enter the modern age. In Victorian society, women's roles as inherently passive, affectionate, and nurturing were deeply entrenched in the medical and scientific fields. It formed a deeply fixed and unchanging set of values that supported traditional female roles; this ideological framework was legitimized by the scientific literature of the era. This scientific orthodoxy defined the two sexes as strikingly different from one another. Women's skulls were smaller, their muscles frailer, and the nervous system more irritable and neurotic. Women were enslaved by their emotions, and it was natural that women were to show more affect. They were enslaved by their reproductive systems; creatures of the internal organs that greatly limited their intellectual capabilities. "Few if any questioned the assumption that in males the intellectual propensities of the brain dominated, while the female's nervous system and emotions prevailed over her conscious and rational faculties."[12]

However, this orthodoxy began to be challenged as more women sought out higher levels of education. As income mobility grew and the middle class widened, more affluent women no longer had to rely on subsistence work to survive from day to day. With more free time, middle class women began to grow agitated with their roles within the home and sought

[11] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 333.
[12] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 333.

increased access to education. The medical field met the prospect of women seeking higher education with grim predictions about America's future. Physicians were certain that education would bring about a great deterioration in American women. Medical orthodoxy posited that "The girl who curtailed brain work during puberty could devote her body's full energy to the optimum development of its reproductive capacities. A young woman, however, who consumed her vital force in intellectual activities was necessarily diverting these energies from the achievement of true womanhood."[13] A developed brain would lead to an underdeveloped uterus; and intellectual [15] activities could perhaps even lead to sterilization, or at least the birth of sickly and neurotic offspring. Physicians predicted these unnatural roles for young girls attending school would surely lead to the death of the human race. Biology and medicine adapted as a response to changing social roles, justifying and responding to challenges against traditional roles. Medicine and biology reified gender in their theories of sex. Scientific orthodoxy was used as a justification of gender well after those roles were established, and its legitimacy was weaponized to maintain women's place in the hierarchy. Scientific and medical ideas of sex were more influenced by constructed ideas of gender, which changes in Victorian society began to threaten. Smith-Rosenberg's work analyzed how medical orthodoxies and broader society used biology as a tool to enforce normative gender roles. However, she does not fully question the boundaries of sex and gender distinctions, and her work largely focused on white womanhood. As Butler later criticized, the idea of universal womanhood breaks down when introduced to a racial and class analysis, which is largely missing from Smith-Rosenberg's work.

SOCIETY IN FLUX: NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

[13] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal." p. 340.

The work of Natalie Zemon Davis and her work as a historian diverges from the ideas of Butler and Smith-Rosenberg, but she is still a vanguard historian in her own right. Her work as a historian was highly innovative; she specialized in the art of storytelling and a cross-disciplinary approach to issues that were previously overlooked by other historians. Often her history making describes a process of 'history from below,' documenting the lives of ordinary people, and especially gender and women's history, from this perspective. One central difference between the works of Butler and Smith-Rosenberg compared to Davis is the way they frame womanhood. Davis often refers to sex and sex roles; the role of women and the female sex are often used interchangeably in her work. Though her work draws upon some aspects of the constructionist theory, it is apparent that her scholarship does not focus on this. Davis does not draw a rigid line between gender and sex, as she more often focuses on archival research. However, she does draw from these ideas to evaluate ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality in the early modern period. Her work reflects her belief that "the study of the sexes should help promote rethinking of some of the central issues faced by historians - power, social structure, property, symbols, and periodization."[14] Sex roles and sexual symbolism are a large segment of her study of how these [16] forms either maintained social hierarchies or created change. Central to her historical analysis is the idea "…that sexual economies and matters of gender vary over time as political economies change."[15]

In Davis' discussion of the early modern period, the pathologizing of womanhood took a different form than the nineteenth century, largely due to the lack of available scientific information. This did not stop scientists from theorizing about the nature of the body, and often

[14] Natalie Zemon Davis, '"Women's History" in Transition: The European Case." in Feminist Studies. (Feminist Studies, Inc, 1976), p. 90.
[15] Roger Adelson and Natalie Zemon Davis, Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis, in The Historian Vol. 53, No. 3.(Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1991), p. 415.

those theories were used to develop and justify existing power structures. For women, their place in society was founded in their physiology. During Europe's early modern period, humoral theory was the predominant medical justification for these gender roles. A woman "was composed of cold and wet humors (the male was hot and dry), and coldness and wetness meant a changeable, deceptive, and tricky temperament."[16] She was controlled by her "wandering [18] womb," and by her sexual juices. If her sexual desires were not satiated, she would fall victim to fits and hysteria (note the similarities here and developing medical theory in the nineteenth century analyzed by Smith-Rosenberg). Humoral theory was applied to women and their labor in sixteenth-century Lyon. Because of their humoral temperaments, women were considered more adaptable to change which led to more variable employment, with "the women's energies available to be shifted into other work channels if the situation demanded it."[17] For this reason, [19] women often moved and labored in many different fields during their lifetime. Even as medical theory developed to include theories of animal spirits, pioneering physicians "still maintained that the female's mind was more prone to be disordered by her fragile and unsteady temperament."[18] As the medical field progressed, physicians continued to justify women's inferiority as a purely natural phenomenon. Ideas of sex were used to prevent women from having access to positions of power that men typically maintained. While women's physiology was a justification for female subordination, women were able to use these sexual theories to assert themselves and improve their condition. Davis notes that women in the fifteenth century would use the language and sexual conventions of the time to advocate for women's interests. For example, historian Christine de Pizan argued in 1405 that "with their delicate bodies and

[16] Natalie Zemon Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 124.
[17] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon", in Feminist Studies. (Feminist Studies, Inc., 1982.) p. 49.
[18] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Society and Culture," p. 125.

sharper minds, women might even do better" when understanding the nuances of the arts and sciences.[19] The roles were formed as a function of early modern society; and theories of medicine [21] were developed to legitimize those roles. Though social constructions of gender are not a focal point of Davis's analysis, her breakdown of women's roles demonstrate how culture uses sex to justify existing power relations.

Social construction is a function of Natalie Zemon Davis' analysis of gender in early modern France. Female disorderliness was considered an intrinsic quality of the sex, which women would sometimes exploit to disrupt the political order in early modern Europe. Despite this rigid definition applied to sex, womanhood was more than a natural role of humors or animalistic spirit. As Davis explains, womanhood was an act to create social upset - that was either to be controlled by men or would lead to a provocation of the established order. In fifteenth century France, to adopt unruliness was to adopt femaleness itself. For this reason, womanhood as a political role was temporarily adopted and discarded by men and women alike to galvanize rebellion. Sexual inversion, as Davis describes it, allowed for men to "hide behind that sex" to adopt the symbolic rebelliousness associated with womanhood. The seventeenth century was ripe[20] with examples of gendered inversion, of men dressing as women either to maintain the social order or push for change. Across Europe, both men and women alike donned female clothing to engage in political violence. A notable example took place in Ireland, where "For about a decade, from 1760 to 1770, the Whiteboys, dressed in long white frocks and with blackened faces, set themselves up as an armed popular force to provide justice for the poor, "to restore the ancient commons and redress other grievances."[21] Davis does not analyze the racial[22]

[19] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Gender in the Academy: Women and Learning from Plato to Princeton", in The Princeton University Library Chronicle Vol. 52, No. 1. (Princeton University Library, 1990), p. 127.
[20] Natalie Zemon Davis, "*Society and Culture,"* p. 147.
[21] Ibid, p. 149.
[22] Ibid, p. 147.

implications of the Whiteboys using blackface. The lack of analysis about the intersection of race and gender is what Butler sought to critique in *Gender Trouble.* Womanhood, though defined as a natural and unchanging sexual role in early modern Europe, was more a ritualistic expression of social agitation that transcended biology. Womanhood was a social category that could be adopted to maintain the established order or to alter it as society developed. Davis and Smith-Rosenberg took a narrower view in their approach to womanhood, analyzing normative roles without fully investigating gender and sex distinctions. They also do not fully question the intersection of race as it pertains to womanhood, which is an important critique in Butler's analysis.

CONCLUSION:

As society shifts and changes, it is a dance between breasts and beards, bodies intertwining and breaking apart. As the categories of sex and gender break down and meld into one another they then split apart, the people dance and sing and celebrate. The walls that separate us are being broken, there is no longer a ravine that splits the world into two. The beautiful tapestry of the human animal flows and shimmers like stars, billions hanging in the midnight sky; it is sex, and it is gender, it is both and it is neither. Perhaps there will never be a clear answer to what gender is and ought to be. Perhaps it should not matter. Ultimately, the human imagination is limited in its visions of the future, and how gender will develop alongside biological research is unclear. Maybe we as a species would better understand our own physiology if ideas of gender were abolished altogether - and develop for ourselves a new taxonomy. Perhaps if the medical field were to make hormones and gender-affirming surgeries more accessible to those who want them, we as a species would better understand the complexities of the body and how gender roles regulate appropriate sexual characteristics. The work of scholars and historians like Butler,

Smith-Rosenberg, and Davis are just small pieces of a vast and unfinished body of knowledge about women and their place in society and history. All three incorporate the constructionist theory of gender into their arguments but vary in their interpretation. In their breakdown of normative ideas of gender throughout time, all three give an insight into the world humans have created for themselves. And in doing so, they help develop a better framework for what gender may be as society develops alongside us.

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