

**Enlightenment Gender, Womanhood, Manhood, Sexualities
& Personhood:
Thematic Overview**

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Consult also three associated essays in same volume, *Section II: Gender:*

Gina Luria Walker,

**'Women's History: Galvanizing Marginality' (pp. 107- 22),
also attached within this website as [Walker, Women's History' pdf;](#)**

Philip Carter,

**'Masculinity: Towards Experience and Embodiment' (pp. 123-38)
see also <https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/9276;>**

Julie Peakman,

**'Understanding Eighteenth-Century Sexualities' (pp. 139-54)
see also [www.juliepeakman.co.uk.](http://www.juliepeakman.co.uk)**

As both individuals and societies gleefully explore the full intricacies of gender and sexual identifications, so do historians. It makes for stirring times. The recent flowering of research into the long eighteenth century (c.1660-1850), also known as the Age of Enlightenment, has created a veritable 'exploding galaxy'.¹ New specialisms are decisively overthrowing the older focus upon 'kings, queens, bishops and battles'. Investigations into past 'gender', 'identities' and 'sexualities' have led the way, broadening and deepening the field.

At the same time, the giving of justified praise needs to be done with a sense of perspective. In the 1970s, some over-excited researchers claimed that new explorations of women's history in particular would revolutionise the entire discipline. They argued that existing knowledge was the product of traditional 'old' rationality, which was, allegedly, cool, calculating, and far too 'male'. Studies of and by women would create a new epistemology, instituting new ways of knowing. Those would be warm, empathetic and 'female'. Hence there would be a fundamental shift in epistemology. '*His-tory*' would yield to '*Her-story*'. All historical practice would be reconceptualised.² And a wider intellectual liberation would follow.

Well, no such euphoric outcome ensued. It is much easier to call for a new epistemology than to introduce one. The study of history, while magnificently enriched, remains an exceptionally broad and eclectic church. It does not change its nature suddenly.³ Instead, the discipline continually renews and extends itself by adding/debating/adjusting/shedding new sources, new issues, new concepts, new approaches, and new methodologies. There is no need to over-hype the contribution of historical gender studies. They are vitally important in their own right, without claiming to have generated a new epistemology, based upon a binary distinction between male and female intellectual capacities, which most (not all) experts now reject.⁴

Moreover, there are often changes within change (as the many examples of unexpected developments within political revolutions have shown). In the case of women's history, its new approach triggered further new approaches in its wake. Opening one door resulted in opening many. Men's history followed. The concept of gender history was refined. And the history of sexualities emerged as a separate field, which is not subordinate to gender history but co-exists in close parallel.

And yet further, alongside these forms of differentiation, historians are also coming to appreciate that there are human commonalities. Powerful as are

gender and sexual affiliations (and societal beliefs about gender and sexuality) in forging people's identities, these factors do not tell the whole story. An individual can just be a 'person' as well as a woman or man or bi-gender. (The same point applies to the experience of ethnic differences. An individual can just identify as a member of the one human race, as well as with one or more ethnic groups within the species *homo sapiens*).⁵

So it is a fair prediction that the complexities of 'identity' will eventually be accompanied by a parallel study of 'personhood'. Not only differentiation but also communal characteristics can be acknowledged. In some circumstances, it is not always relevant to enquire whether an individual is a man or a woman. Being a person is enough. One clarion statement of that view came in 1849 from the young author Charlotte Brontë, who first published as Currer Bell – deliberately choosing a name which concealed her sex. Writing to her (male) publisher, she urged him to forget the conventional courtesies between the sexes. Those niceties too often implied condescension from the 'superior' male to an 'inferior' female. She wanted to be judged on fair terms. So Brontë urged upon him that:

to you, I am neither Man nor Woman – I come before you as an Author only – it is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me – the sole ground on which I accept your judgment.⁶



Charlotte Brontë (c.1834)
in detail from portrait of
his three sisters
by Branwell Brontë:
© Original in
National Portrait Gallery
NPG1725.

It was a spirited invention from a budding novelist to an established figure in the world of publishing. Charlotte Brontë's claim thus falls within the history of Personhood, and within the history of meritocracy too. These are themes of great and continuing relevance. Hence studying human differences may eventually come full circle to studying their shared Personhood.

1: Women's history

Women's history has a long, long history of its own.⁷ Yet, in its revived guise in the West, it was an intellectual offspring of the 1970s and 1980s. The dominance of old-style political history had been challenged from the early twentieth century onwards by the advent of economic history. Over time, however, that field came to be seen as too abstract and overly mathematicalised. It had also lost, to its disadvantage, its initial close link with social history. Thus to the horror of economic historians who were genuinely devoted to their subject, they experienced in the 1970s and 1980s a sudden eclipse at what they thought to be the height of their success.⁸ Interest in economic history became restricted to smaller numbers of mathematically trained cliometricians (just as the study of economics took the same ahistorical turn towards mathematicalised models – a turn which is now being contested within the discipline of economics itself).⁹

Emerging from the eclipse of economic history came a new research popularity for urban history and social history. And those two amorphous fields proved congenial not just to the renewal of women's history but to its intellectual burgeoning. There was a great air of excitement and intellectual liberation. Bliss, for researchers in Women's History, was it to be alive in the 1970s.

The new focus was encouraged by wider social changes. Thus women's history was particularly boosted by second-wave feminism, especially in

France, Britain and the USA. And feminists in turn were heartened by discovering from historians that women had a memorable past. The title of studies like Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* (1973) said it all – especially when her sub-title announced: *300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight against It*.¹⁰ By contrast, senior male academics were initially very dismissive of this new field. That point was noted in 1984 by the freelance historian and public intellectual Antonia Fraser. When encountering in central London a distinguished (male) historian, she told him that she was writing on *Women in Seventeenth-Century England*. In response, he asked, crushingly: 'Were there any?' And Fraser reported dryly: 'He did not stay for an answer, but vanished up the steps of his club'.¹¹

Intellectual rejection of that sort, however, crumbled relatively quickly. Many neutral academics were alienated by the initial (male) sniggering and laughter from some noisy traditionalists, who scoffed at the advent of women's history. The tide changed quickly, with new publications, new courses, and strong interest from students and the wider public.

Broadly, the thematic emphasis within women's history then shifted over time from viewing women as victims in need of salvation to interpreting women as defiantly resisting their oppression. Differences also came into the intellectual foreground, since differences quickly became apparent within organised women's movements too. There were tensions between mothers and non-mothers; between stay-at-home 'housewives' and employed workers; between old and young; between 'straight' and lesbian; between those who were 'pro-men' and those who were 'anti'; and so forth, in overlapping categories.

Accordingly, women's history became one of complexity. It was difficult to argue that there was but one template for all those of the feminine gender. As a result, too, there was no one easy, overarching narrative – other than the triumphant moment of winning the campaign for female suffrage.¹² Getting the

vote was one achievement, at least, of which men and women alike could eventually approve. Yet, like many moments of ‘progress’, it ended some old debates whilst opening the way to many more (such as equal access to work, equal pay, maternity rights, freedom from sexual harassment and violence). Not only are women’s bodily experiences being re-evaluated but so are their minds, and their often concealed contributions to social, cultural and intellectual life – a theme explored with passion by Gina Luria Walker (in her companion essay, noted above p.1).

2: Men’s history

One key point to note was that, from the start, some men as well as many women researched and published women’s history. Hence the would-be philosophical rhetoric about this field producing a new epistemology, based upon a different ‘female’ way of thinking (as noted above), was negated by the fact that the subject was the product of shared endeavour.

Before too long, furthermore, women’s history nurtured in its slipstream a new partner field of men’s history. Again, its practitioners included both male and female historians. No doubt for that reason, there was, in this case, no overblown talk about the field generating a new ‘male’ epistemology. All the same, there was a lot of pioneering enthusiasm and intellectual excitement, as at the start of women’s history.

Overwhelmingly, from the 1990s onwards, fresh research interest and attention explored the different cultural roles that were historically open to men, as analysed by Philip Carter with true participatory enthusiasm (in his companion essay, noted above p.1). Difference was embraced. Thus fops, dandies, rakes, libertines, men-about-town, sportsmen, businessmen, labourers, sailors, soldiers, explorers, and so forth offered a gamut of ‘masculinities’.¹³

In particular, serious research attention was at last focused upon the history of male homosexuality.¹⁴ Many of the pioneers of this particular field were gay

men. Yet it is clearly not obligatory for people to practice what they study. (If that were required, then it would be hard to find scholars willing to research warfare, torture, criminality, or madness). In this case, the central point was that experiences, previously associated with subterfuge, criminal accusations, and lurid exaggerations, were now being researched matter-of-factly, as part of history's seamless web. For experts in men's history, this development not only constituted an intellectual breakthrough but simultaneously offered psychological liberation. Themes could be debated and challenged, as part of wider debates, without accusations of betrayal or feelings of defensiveness. Like women's history before it, men's history soon became 'normalised' and confident. It too did not generate one single narrative story about men – but celebrated differences.

Context for these intellectual changes came from the prolonged trend, particularly in the West, towards a more individualised culture and society. The study of social classes was becoming relatively muted, although by no means discarded. Instead, individual 'identities' became a hot research topic. The aim was to study personal and societal perceptions of the diverse roles embraced by individuals in their daily lives. It matched with what is termed « identity politics », when voters align themselves not with broad class-based political parties but with groups defined by special commitments or specific personal attributes (such as religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so forth). Many established political parties in the West have found themselves stranded by this shift. The arrival of 'identity politics', now a matter of hot contention,¹⁵ was thus part cause and part effect of the rise of historical 'identity studies'.

3: Gender history

While women's history broadened into the history of male and female identities, a new term arrived. 'Gender' signals a socio-cultural identity, rather than

merely biological sex (especially as biological sex is more complex than commonly assumed). This new usage had its critics. Some pioneers of women's history feared that their hard-won special field was being down-graded by incorporation into a wider 'gender history'. There were also languages which did not have a word or near synonym for socially-mediated gender as opposed to biological sex. (In such cases, the usual solution was to adopt 'gender' as a neologism). Overcoming such difficulties, the novel terminology spread rapidly, powered by inclusivity and brevity. Instead of 'the historical roles of men and women', the subject became Gender History.

Intrinsic to this new nomenclature was a shift away from the idea that there were 'essential' distinctions between the biological sexes, other than those of their reproductive systems. Instead, gender roles were represented as more fluid, diverse and performative than conveyed by the old stereotypes. 'Feminine' men and 'masculine' women were thus allowed their due historical space. In that regard, historical studies became much more realistic about the actual recorded behaviour of women in the past, although it still remained difficult to access what women believed internally about their roles. (The intellectual acceptance of this 'performative' approach dealt a massive blow to the 'essentialist' models of male/female differential brainpower, which had underpinned earlier feminist hopes for a new, warmly intuitive, female 'her-story' to succeed to the old, coldly rationalist, male 'his-tory' – as already noted above).

Particularly crucial in providing intellectual leadership for the performative viewpoint were the writings of Michel Foucault on the history of sexuality.¹⁶ He himself was not interested in the history of women as such. Yet he stressed the potential plasticity of gender roles. Those are not innate, in Foucault's view, but socially 'constructed' through discourse. Such an approach had clear implications for the study of socio-cultural roles undertaken by both men and women. So Michel Foucault, a complex and controversial intellectual,¹⁷ became a gender history figurehead. In the 1980s and 1990s, historians in this field were

prone to mention his name with some reverence, even if they did not endorse all his views. And a widely repeated mantra was that historical studies must henceforth be ‘gendered’.

Two lurking problems, however, continue to stir debates within this buoyant new field. There is a rumbling debate over what exactly is being studied. How exactly are concepts of gender formed? Do they respond, in whole or in part, to biology? Or entirely to socio-cultural constructions, which Foucault defined as « discourse »? Or by some combination, which may furthermore change over time? And, if concepts are chiefly or even substantially formed by socio-cultural expectations, how can those best be studied? Can public rhetoric about the standard roles of men and women be taken as direct proxy for communal beliefs? Or, conversely, did the official discourse (as reflected in, for example, clerical admonitions against sin) represent the inverse of people’s actual behaviour? Experts who study reader responses offer pertinent reminders that conduct books and advice literature are far from invariably followed by those at whom the advice is directed. These are complex research questions, not easily answered.

Accompanying such evidential problems, there is too a deeper philosophical issue, posed by Foucault’s specification of ‘discourse theory’. He implied that socio-cultural formulations about gender took a unitary form. Yet social attitudes, especially in open, pluralist, and commercial societies, were often diverse and contested. It cannot be assumed that there was always a single set of ideas about the proper social roles for men and women. In every different historical case-study, the issue needs to be addressed. Otherwise, it is best to remove from gender history all references to a singular ‘discourse’, especially when that ‘discourse’ is assumed to be inscribed in literary texts and nowhere else. And, quietly but evidently, that change is happening.

Also intimately connected with the surge of research interest into historical sex, gender, and sexualities has been the refining input of new

theories of knowledge. These have rightly encouraged historians to develop a more sophisticated analysis of sources, assumptions, methodologies and interpretations. In the long run, however, these theoretical debates have not eroded the core viability of historical studies. Nor have they abolished the discipline, as some postmodern theorists hoped would transpire and others feared. Studying the past is a resilient human reflex, not easily deflected or discouraged.

A relatively small number of feminist theorists and historians initially embraced the so-called ‘postmodern turn’, as an exciting way of rejecting past ‘malestream’ ideas in the name of conceptual diversity. And postmodernist critics of historical knowledge posed a good challenge.¹⁸ Theorists such as the delphic Jacques Derrida drew from Foucault’s concept of ‘discourse’ to argue that there is no independent reality. Everything is interpretation. The impish literary historian Hayden White further added that historical studies are fictive works of literature.¹⁹ History books are thus classifiable as comedy, tragedy and so forth (though, actually, virtually none are truly comic). The result is an intellectual free-for-all. ‘Anything goes’.

Yet ... if there is no independent ‘reality’, however complex to interpret, then there can be no basis for testing the validity or otherwise of any proposition. One viewpoint is as good as any other. A feminist denouncing women’s oppression has no more authority than a man glorying in male dominance.²⁰ Holocaust deniers cannot be refuted.²¹ Theories of evolution have as much (but no more) justification as do literalistic accounts of literal Biblical ‘creationism’. Indeed, there would be nothing to prove that postmodernist ideas are any more valid (or less) than any others. The ‘postmodern turn’ thus did not actually get anywhere.²² True, its media after-life still lingers in these alleged times of ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake news’. But, after all, even the concept of ‘fakery’ implies the acceptance of some criteria for judging.

4: Historical sexualities

Meanwhile, from the 1970s onwards, the surge of interest in gender history was matched by a new probing of the history of sexuality, under the general aegis of social and cultural history. But, throughout, these research fields of gender and sexual history kept a certain intellectual distance. Experts on the history of sexuality tend to highlight links with studies of biology, medicine, technologies of contraception, the art and philosophy of erotica, and so forth, rather than simply with gender. Their focus is upon the human theories and the interactive practices of sexuality in the round, rather than upon exclusively ‘male’ or specifically ‘female’ features.

Indeed, as the subject developed – and as wider socio-biological attitudes are also changing – the focus is no longer binary. Gone is a unitary ‘male’ sexuality, contrasted with a unitary ‘female’ one. Instead, pluralism reigns.

Hence the current focus upon ‘polymorphous sexualities’, to use a modish phrase. Big themes include everything from heterosexualities to homosexualities, to bisexuality, to cross-dressing – and not forgetting the condition of asexuality.²³ And the human bodies in question embrace every permutation, from mono-gender, to trans-gender individuals unhappy with their biological classification,²⁴ to intersex individuals, whose physical characteristics do not fit neatly into either purely male or purely female categories.

Given all that, it is no surprise to find that this field has not generated anything like a simple historical narrative. Instead, it reveals differences and complexities, but within various long-term trends, as Peakman’s specialist survey (in her companion essay, noted above p.1) admirably demonstrates

Influential ballast for this approach came again from Michael Foucault. His turn to the history of sexuality, complete with historical referencing, gave the subject intellectual traction, even fashionability.²⁵ Far from all in the field agreed with his schematic historical specifications. But that was not the key

point. He triggered heightened interest from both historians and social philosophers.

Above all, Foucault insisted that sexualities were not standard throughout time. Precisely how fluid they will prove to be, remains to be seen. So far empirical studies are lagging behind the media fuss and excitement. Much remains as yet unknown about past identities and behaviour. And sources are often rare to find and hard to interpret.

Nonetheless Foucault was one of the intellectual forerunners of the notable twenty-first-century preoccupation, especially in Western societies, with fluid gender and sexual identities. Men are finding their ‘inner womanhood’ or ‘alternative manhood’, and women *vice versa*. Polymorphous sexualities as well as the minority option of asexuality are here to stay.

5: Personhood

To assess the extent of diversity, however, depends upon understanding also the basic template. Alongside human diversity, there are common features. People’s identities are far from exclusively fashioned by differences based upon biological sex, cultural senses of gender, and sexual identities.

There are thus factors which promote divergence – and others that promote common identities. The arguments run productively in full circle, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the human generality as well as the gendered specifics.

Interest in individual personhood (or self) can be seen in debates over philosophy,²⁶ ethics,²⁷ theology,²⁸ politics,²⁹ psychology,³⁰ law,³¹ anthropology,³² social welfare,³³ economics,³⁴ even contemporary poetry.³⁵ In historical studies, the concept does not tend to appear under that precise label. Yet investigations of electoral and legal history, for example, are closely concerned with the activities of individuals acting as civic persons. (One

complaint about so-called ‘identity politics’ is that it may encourage electors to vote for personal causes rather than for wider civic considerations – although in practice voters always remain free to follow their own motivations).

Issues such as these all focus attention upon historical personhood, as does the history of meritocracy and of intellectual life. Charlotte Brontë’s call to be understood as neither man nor woman (cited above, p.3) was far from unique.

Men, women, gender, sexuality, all have a future, as does androgyny – and not just in the form of skinny models on the catwalk – and independent personhood. The mix of continuity/renewal in historical studies responds (and in turn helps to influence) to the ever-changing mix of continuity/renewal in human societies over time.³⁶ Themes of gender, sexualities, and personhood are therefore not just ‘sexy’ optional extras but are integral to both life and history.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹² MARLOW Joyce, *Suffragettes: The Fight for Votes for Women*, London, Virago, 2015.
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- ¹⁴ TRUMBACH Randolph, *Sex and the Gender Revolution, t. 1: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1998; HAGGERTY George E., *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999; COOK Matt and others, *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex between Men since the Middle Ages*, Oxford, Greenwood World, 2007.
- ¹⁵ WIARDA Howard J., *Political Culture, Political Science and Identity Politics: An Uneasy Alliance*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2014; LILLA Mark, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, New York, HarperCollins, 2017.
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