CREATING SEX: FROM OVID'S HERMAPHRODITE TO THE GNOSTIC EVE

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Abstract:
Thomas Lacqueur's influential yet controversial study *Making Sex* has, in many ways, revolutionized our understanding of sexuality in antiquity. Yet, most of Laqueur's critics and supporters stressed the one-sex body, while the crux of his argument is the primacy of gender. Moreover, a systematic attempt to apply his work to mythical literature – in contradistinction to medical literature – has not yet been undertaken. This article thus traces the problematic reception of Laqueur's book and attempts a preliminary heuristic application of the concept of the primacy of gender to ancient mythical accounts of sexual origin. While such an application confirms, in broad terms, Lacqueur's paradigm, it also introduces many important nuances to the system. Most intriguingly, some of the myths seem to resonate with poststructural Butlerian analysis of gender and thus call into question the supposed rift between modern and ancient sexualities presupposed in Lacqueurian analysis, and challenged, on different grounds, by many of his critics.

Keywords:
Gender, sexuality, androgyny, Greco-Roman religion, Judaism, Christianity, Gnosticism, Ovid, Philo of Alexandria, Paul, Hippolytus of Rome, Naassenes, *On the Origin of the World*, Eve, Hermaphrodite, Attis.

Introduction

> Charles Jaco, Interviewer: What about the case of rape? Should it [abortion] be legal or not?
> Todd Akin, U.S. Congressman: Well you know, people always want to try to make that as one of those things, well how do you, how do you slice this particularly tough sort of ethical question? It seems to me, first of all, from what I understand from doctors, that's really rare. If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.

These words, spoken by American politician and (then) Congressman Todd Akin in 2012, effectively ended his congressional career. The troubling and repugnant phrase "legitimate rape", the questionable science on which the argument rested, and the misogynistic undertones of the statement were thought unfit for a public representative, and Akin received calls to resign from both sides of the political spectrum, including from the Republican Party nominee for president, Mitt Romney. Akin himself initially apologized for his comment, saying that he "misspoke" and underlining that "the fact is, rape can lead to pregnancy", yet in a book he published two years afterwards, he largely retracted his apology. As for evidence for his claim, he remarked: "Doubt me? Google 'stress and infertility', and you will find a library of research on the subject."[1]

While there is much to object to within Akin's comments – both concerning their misogynistic premises and the shaky to non-existent "science" on which they are purportedly based – my own initial response to these comments and the uproar they provoked was more historical in nature. It seemed to me that more than any "science", these comments were based on traditional ways of thinking about

[1] The full interview, given in a local Fox show hosted by Charles Jaco in St. Louis, can be found at http://fox2now.com/2012/08/19/the-jaco-report-august-19-2012. For his original apology, see Alexander Burns, "Akin's ad asks for 'forgiveness'", *Politico*, August 21, 2012, http://www.politico.com/blogs/burns-haberman/2012/08/exclusive-akin-ad-asks-for-forgiveness-updated-132648. For a retrospective review of the incident and its repercussions, as well as for Akin's statement in his later book, see Anna Palmer and Tarini Parti, "Akin un-apologizes", *Politico*, July 10, 2014, http://www.politico.com/story/2014/07/todd-akin-new-book-108745#ixzz3CIr617iC .

gender, which, according to Thomas Laqueur, was gradually (medicinally) eclipsed beginning in the eighteenth century: the one-sex paradigm.

One Sex versus Primacy of Gender

Thomas Laqueur's 1990 volume *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* effectively revolutionized our understanding of premodern sexuality. Even its fiercest and most able critic, Helen King, could only admit that it is "by far the most influential work on the history of the body, across a range of academic disciplines".[2] Laqueur's argument appears, on the face of it, deceptively simple: before the eighteenth century, people believed there was only one kind of body and its best manifestation, on the top of a vertical axis, was the overly male body in which, due to reasons such as higher internal heat, genitals were placed outside of the body. Near (but not at!) the bottom of the axis was the feminine body, a less developed, more porous, and colder version of the same body, in which the very same genitals are inside. Yet, Laqueur starts by illustrating his argument with a certain eighteenth-century case-study that sounds alluringly familiar to the above comments from Akin:

> A young aristocrat whose family circumstances forced him into religious orders came one day to a country inn. He found the innkeepers overwhelmed with grief at the death of their only daughter, a girl of great beauty. She was not to be buried until the next day, and the bereaved parents asked the young monk to keep watch over her body through the night. This he did, and more. Reports of her beauty had piqued his curiosity. He pulled back the shroud and, instead of finding the corpse "disfigured by the horrors of death", found its features still gracefully animated. The young man lost all restraint, forgot his vows, and took "the same liberties with the dead that the sacraments of marriage would have permitted in life". Ashamed of what he

[2] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1990; Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate 2013, 1.

> had done, the hapless necrophilic monk departed hastily in the morning without waiting for the scheduled interment.[3]

Just when her coffin was lowered to the grave on the next day, the girl started twitching. The coffin was immediately opened, and she was found alive, her previous "death" being only a temporary coma. And more: She was soon found pregnant and gave birth to a child, without being able to give any explanation as to the origin of her pregnancy.

As Laqueur clearly demonstrated, this story was interpreted based on very different premises during and after the eighteenth century.[4] Due to the prominent one-sex paradigm, in the eighteenth century it was widely believed that women could not conceive without orgasm, and unconscious women could not have orgasms. Therefore, at least during the sexual act, the girl could not have been in coma; she was just feigning it (read: "illegitimate rape"). After the eighteenth century, this was no longer considered a problem: in the two-sex paradigm it was completely accepted – indeed, even expected – that women could (and, sometimes, even should, to better conform to their "nature") conceive without orgasm.[5] Therefore, the girl was indeed innocent, since she was in a coma (read: "legitimate rape"). In other words, in the one-sex system a "legitimate rape" could not end in pregnancy; in the two-sex system, it could. Reading through the medicinal writings brought by Laqueur, one could not help but be stricken by how similar this debate is to the one regarding Congressman Akin's comments on rape: in both cases, the position is presented as based on empirical science, yet, in both cases, what seems to be functioning in the background are differing concepts on the primacy (or lack thereof) of gender. Indeed, while on the surface of it, the difference between the paradigms seems to be based on different conceptions of the body (i.e. the belief that, since women have the same bodies, they also need to have orgasm and ejaculate in order for pregnancy to occur), Laqueur is

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[3] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 1.

[4] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 2–3.

[5] This two-sex concept, according to Laqueur, was also the source of the modern idea that "men want sex while women want relationship", which was diametrically opposed to the premodern concept that equated true friendship with men and often portrayed women as sex-crazed creatures (Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 3–4).

quick to stress that this was not the crux of the issue; the important difference is that before the eighteenth century, the body was no more than the epiphenomenon of what really mattered, which was *gender*:

> … in these pre-Enlightenment texts, and even some later ones, *sex*, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category was primary or "real". Gender – man and woman – mattered a great deal and was part of the order of things; sex was conventional, though modern terminology makes such a reordering nonsensical. At the very least, what we call sex and gender were in the "one-sex model" explicitly bound up in a circle of meaning from which escape to a supposed biological substrate – the strategy of the Enlightenment – was impossible. In the world of one sex, it was precisely when talk seemed to be most directly about the biology of two sexes that it was most embedded in the politics of gender, in culture. To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to *be* organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category.[6]

Unfortunately, many of Laqueur's supporter and critics seems to have missed or misunderstood this crucial point, and proceeded as if the one-sex *body* was in the heart of the premodern system, when it is clearly only its epiphenomenon. This could be the result of both the complicacy and unintuitiveness of the premodern system, as well as the very term chosen by Laqueur, the "one-sex model", which is, in effect, a misnomer. It would have been much more accurate to describe the premodern system as "the primacy of gender". Indeed, Laqueur was to stress this point once again, in responding to one of his earlier critics, Michael Stolberg. Stolberg produced medical evidence to argue that the change from one-sex to the two-sex models occurred earlier, in the sixteenth century. While Laqueur did address Stolberg's evidence, he underlined that the "quarrel" between him and Stolberg was not about dating, for "over the millennia, what is a century or two?" The

[6] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 8.

larger question was over the epistemological revolution of the enlightenment, which we have now come to take for granted:

> Facts about difference did not, and do not, entail a one- or a two-sex model. What changed in the Enlightenment to produce the two-sex model was epistemology: biology as opposed to metaphysics became foundational. As cultural and political pressures on the gender systems mounted, a passionate and sustained interest in the anatomical and physiological dimorphism of the sexes was a response to the collapse of religion and metaphysics as the final authority for social arrangements. … [T]he Age of Reason witnessed the triumph of a new reductionism, a new epistemology grounded in the natural world that produced a view of sexual difference in which the body was the final arbiter and not an imperfect sign, in which biology was said to entail gender roles rather than merely reflect them.[7]

Yet, the recent book-length rebuttal of Laqueur by Helen King surprisingly falters on this issue once again. Aptly termed *The One Sex Body on Trial*, King marshals a wealth of evidence – from antiquity up until early modernity – demonstrating that medical sources did not always, or only infrequently, found the female body a one-for-one negative/inferior version of the male. On the contrary, as King demonstrates, some of the sources argue for a different female body, which can be "perfect" in its own way. Although to a large extent this responds to some of the later uses of Laqueur by supporters (and critics), it fails to address the most crucial argument he himself promoted: the primacy of gender.[8] While the primacy of gender can, or is even likely to result

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[7] Thomas Laqueur, "Sex in the Flesh", *Isis* 94 (2003), 300–306 (306). He is responding to Michael Stolberg, "A Woman Down to Her Bones: The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries", *Isis* 94 (2003), 274–299.

[8] King's direct reference to this issue comes in a footnote, which is in itself puzzling: "I am not using 'sex' and 'gender' in the traditional sense of biological difference versus social roles", King writes, "as I no longer find it useful to distinguish between biology and society" (King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial*, 22 n. 82). Our own theoretical predilections aside, it remains unclear how one can historically evaluate Laqueur's claim from such a methodological viewpoint (which, ironically, actually parallels the one-sex sys-

in a one-sex body system, it is by no means a necessary outcome. In this sense, King and other critics are of course right that Laqueur may have over-argued his case. At the very least it can be said that prior to the eighteenth century, there was very little interest to search or argue for essentially different female bodies or genitals, for this "essential" difference was secured elsewhere. That being said, it must be admitted that much of the evidence that King brings actually corroborates Laqueur in principle. Thus, when King argues that the Hippocratic *gynaikeia* treatises argue that "women are like unprocessed fleece, men like a closely woven garment" or that "a virgin's internal structure differs from that of a childbearing woman, and the body of a widow has needs different from those of a married woman",[9] this sounds like an exact corroboration of Laqueur's claim that there are different "way[s] of saying, with Aristotle, that woman is to man as a wooden triangle is to a brazen one or that woman is to man as the imperfect eyes of the mole are to the more perfect eyes of other creatures" for, "anatomy in the context of sexual difference was a representational strategy that illuminated a more stable extracorporeal reality. There existed *many genders* but only one adaptable sex."[10] After all, the body was not considered a location for truth, but a mere epiphenomenon of it; anatomy was not destiny, destiny was anatomy. Or, as one should more cautiously phrase this, destiny could have an imperfect correlation in anatomy.

Nevertheless, the implications of this radically different paradigm seem not to have been fully appreciated, even in studies that largely reproduce Laqueur's results. Thus, Rebecca Flemming censured Laqueur for his "use of the term 'ontological' (e.g. *Making Sex*, 8 and 29) [which] is particularly unfortunate in this respect, since he is only prepared to see a modern, materialist ontology as properly ontological,

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tems portrayed by Laqueur). It is then even more puzzling when, a few pages later (26), King remarks that "In a one-sex model, a range of body temperatures from hot to cold makes possible a range of gender identities on a spectrum from the very masculine man to the highly feminine woman" which seems to be the exact opposite of what Laqueur was claiming for the one-sex model, in which it is *gender* that would affect the body temperature, and not vice versa.

[9] King, *One Sex Body on Trial*, 44; 45.

[10] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 35 (my italics).

and thus fails to understand that it is often when ancient authors are being least materialist that they are, on their own terms, being most ontological."[11] Yet, in her conclusion of this very book she unequivocally stresses that in Roman medicine, "Man has an absolute hold on humanity, while woman is concomitantly relegated to a position of inferior relativity, and this hierarchical symmetry tacitly orders all the texts analyzed here". Furthermore, all the texts she so meticulously studied – from Celsus to Galen – exhibit an "aetiological inversion", in which women's bodies exhibit pre-conceived female inferiority, rather than an inferiority deduced from the body.[12] This, of course, completely corroborates both Laqueur's paradigm of a one-sex body and its causal subjugation to the primacy of gender, yet Flemming only indirectly, partly and implicitly admits this correlation.[13]

That being said, I do believe that, methodologically, one should adhere to King's well-founded advice to treat Laqueur's paradigm as an "ideal type" and to try to apply it to non-medical texts.[14] After all,

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[11] Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, 16 n. 32. This appears to be a misunderstanding of Laqueur, since, as Brooke Holmes rightly stresses, he is certainly *not* ascribing to any of the systems as the "true" one, but aims to show that "*Ideas* about the body are always constructed culturally and historically" (Brooke Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and Its Legacy*, New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. 2012, 48). His point in the text cited by Flemming is that the *Enlightenment strategy* (and thus, "our own") is to see ontology on materialist terms, while premodernity *indeed saw* ontology in social and metaphysical terms. I will be discussing Holmes's important contribution to this debate in the context of my analysis of the ancient mythical sources below.

[12] Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 361; 365.

[13] Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 371. It is quite remarkable that in her conclusions Flemming can still note with indignant surprise that "the notion that sexual difference might be just that, might be a reciprocal relationship within which the questions of value do not arise, was never entertained for a moment" (361). Reading Laqueur, as she obviously did, one could hardly have expected that the ancient sources would entertain the idea that "sexual difference might be just that", since this modern concept of sexual difference (which, incidentally, is never "just that") seems not to have existed before the Enlightenment.

[14] King, *The One-Sex* Body *on Trial*, xi. See also, in this regard, Holmes's important cautioning that "we can't assume that ancient medical and biological texts played the same role in their societies that their modern counterparts do in our own" (*Gender*, 27).

our attempt to prove or disprove Laqueur's thesis by almost exclusively addressing medical sources ironically reproduces the very mistake of which he warned. It is precisely the epistemology of the Enlightenment to ground social truths in materiality, and it was precisely the old paradigm that grounded them in social arrangements, metaphysics and religion. Therefore, I would like to propose here a preliminary attempt to evaluate Laqueur's argument by its application to a selection of mythical Greco-Roman Pagan, Jewish, and Christian texts. In many ways, as we shall see, mythical texts may more easily betray concepts of the primacy of gender than medical ones, precisely because their interest in the details of the physical body is less accentuated, while their concern with foundational truths is exemplary. The myths themselves are indeed meant to serve as heuristic specimens to test Laqueur's argument, but for that very reason, they have not been chosen arbitrarily. Each of the myths I will discuss describes sexual origins, and, in doing this, addresses bodies, sexual practice, social standing, and metaphysics – that is, all the amalgam of factors that could be used to test for the applicable sex/gender paradigm. Moreover, the liminal position of three of the chosen myths, as Jewish and Christian in the world of Greco-Roman religion, may contribute an additional hue of complexity and intelligibility to this alleged cultural premise that primed gender. I will not, however, provide a detailed discussion of any of these texts in their historical, literary and religious context; the reader can easily find such discussions, some of which will be cited and engaged with in the notes. Instead, each of the four texts I have chosen – Ovid on Hermaphroditus, Philo of Alexandria on the Sodomites, a gnostic Naassene sermon on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and the Nag Hammadi document *On the Origin of the World* – will serve as a specimen to test Laqueur's one-sex/two-sex hypothesis.[15]

[15] Remarkably, attempts to apply Laqueur to mythical and religious literature have been few and far between. Some of the exceptions will be discussed in the notes below. While Holmes has discussed both Hesiod and Ovid, she did not directly engage with Laqueur in these readings (Holmes, *Gender*, 17–22; 76–79). An interesting and highly illuminating application of Laqueur outside the medical and related literature has been performed by L. Stephanie Cobb on early Christian martyrological texts in her book *Dying to Be Men:*

Ovid's Hermaphrodite

Metamorphoses, the fifteen-book Latin hexameter poem written by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE), is usually considered to have set the standard according to which many Greco-Roman myths were told. This is especially true for the myth of Hermaphroditus, which Ovid reformulated and reworked from many divergent sources.[16] In the fourth book of his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid details the myth of Hermaphroditus and the related tale of the spring of Salmacis, infamous for its powers to make men effeminate. Hermaphroditus, we quickly learn, was so named since he was the son of the gods Hermes and Aphrodite. His condition as "Hermaphrodite", or, as one who is "nor man, nor woman – one then that neither seemed and both" (*nec femina … nec puer … neutrumque et utrumque*) as Ovid termed it, resulted from his unfortunate encounter with a love-crazed Nymph. This nymph, who herself carried the name of Salmacis, was no ordinary nymph:

> Many a time her sisters chide her: "Come, Salmacis, get out your spear or painted quiver; vary your hours of ease with hardships of the chase". Yet never spear she took nor painted quiver, nor would vary her hours of ease with hardships of the chase; but in her pool would bathe her lovely limbs, and with a comb of box-wood dress her hair, and, gazing long, take counsel of the waters what style were best. Now on the soft green grass or on soft leaves in gauzy dress she lay; now gathered flowers – and, gathering, chanced to see the boy and seeing, saw her heart's desire.

This overly feminine nymph, then, meets Hermaphroditus when he is at the precarious age of fifteen, and immediately desires him. Hermaphroditus, however, rejects her advances. She feigns retreat, yet actually hides nearby for the right moment to attack:

Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts, New York: Columbia University Press 2008.

[16] For discussion of Ovid's use of earlier sources in this episode, see Matthew Robinson, "Salmacis and Hermaphroditus: When Two Become One", *Classical Quarterly* 49 (1998), 212–223.

> "I've won, he's mine!" she cried, and flung aside her clothes and plunged far out into the pool and grappled him and, as he struggled, forced her kisses, willy-nilly fondled him, caressed him; now on one side, now the other clung to him as he fought to escape her hold; … The youth fought back, denied the nymph her joy; she strained the more; her clinging body seemed fixed fast to his. "Fool, fight me as you will", she cried, "you'll not escape! Ye gods ordain no day shall ever dawn to part us twain!" Her prayer found gods to hear; both bodies merged in one, both blended in one form and face. As when a gardener sets a graft and sees growth seal the join and both mature together, thus, when in fast embrace their limbs were knit, they two were two no more, nor man, nor woman – one then that neither seemed and both (*nec duo sunt et forma duplex, nec femina dici nec puer ut possit: neutrumque et utrumque videntur*). So when he saw the waters of the pool, where he had dived a man, had rendered him half man (*semimarem*) and his limbs now weak and soft (*mollita*), raising his hands, Hermaphroditus cried, his voice unmanned, "Dear father and dear mother, both of whose names I bear, grant me, your child, that who so in these waters bathes a man emerge half man (*semivir*), weakened (*mollescat*) instantly." Both parents heard; both, moved to gratify their bi-formed (*biformis*) son, his purpose to ensure, drugged the bright water with that power impure.[17]

As is usual with Ovid and with his tendency to relish in contradictions and reversals, there is much to discuss in this text regarding the configuration of gender, sex, and sexuality. While Luc Brisson, for instance, flatly and somewhat woodenly suggests that "the myth of Hermaphroditus, told by Ovid … sets out to explain the origin of passive homosexuality",[18] S. Georgia Nugent in her more nuanced treat-

[17] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.305–314; 356–387. Translation from A. D. Melville (*Ovid Metamorphoses*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986, 83–85), with emendations.

[18] Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, translated by Janet Lloyd, Berkeley: University of California 2002, 42. In the same vein of interpretation, although providing a much more detailed philological dis-

ment argues that "the myth of the hermaphrodite seems to flirt with the possibility of introducing a third term, of voicing feminine desire, of imagining androgynous potency".[19] From our perspective, however, we would ask which sexual system is premised in this text: one-sex or two-sex? While it is pretty clear that Ovid (and Hermaphroditus himself, according to his enraged curse) sees the body on a sliding scale, with the male body occurring at the top of this hierarchical pole, the *mollis* inhabiting the middle area, and the female body occurring towards the bottom, the more interesting question should not be about the body itself, but rather whether the body is the source of "truth", or an imperfect epiphenomenon of sociological or metaphysical "truth" (what we would call "gender" and usually think of as being secondary). From this perspective, it may seem at first that this myth actually subscribes to a modern view of the body. After all, due to the intermingling of the nymph's feminine body with Hermaphroditus's adolescent male one, the latter changes. This then seems to take precedence to and result in his new inferior gender (if the *mollis* are implied), or in him becoming just a deformed half-man (if they are not). Yet, this would be only a superficial reading of the myth. As Holmes incisively notes, Hermaphroditus is "at an age … when boys were believed to be especially vulnerable to competing influences" and then "Salmacis

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cussion, is Matthew Robinson, who carefully notes that "the effect of the waters of Salmacis was to make any man who bathed in them or drank them effeminate – to be effeminate was to become *mollis*, *semimas*, ἀνδρόγυνος to play the woman's part, to be passive rather than active" (Robinson, "Salmacis and Hermaphroditus", 214). For more on the *mollis*/*cinaedus* which is usually understood to refer to free, adult men who wished to be, and enjoyed being, penetrated, as well as for the complex question regarding their historicity and whether they were understood as a gender category or a quasi-sexual type, see the discussion in Holmes, *Gender*, 93–104.

[19] S. Georgia Nugent, "This Sex Which Is Not One: De-Constructing Ovid's Hermaphrodite", *Differences* 2 (1990), 160–185 (177). Quite intriguingly, Nugent's study, which was published in the same year as Laqueur's, notes that the text fails in this endeavor since "the masculine entity (in some form) survives, while the feminine entity simply disappears, reduced perhaps to a set of secondary sexual characteristics appended to a male body" (177). In the world of the one-sex body, this, of course, could have been all but expected.

ends forcing [him] into a passive role".[20] The myth portrays Hermaphroditus as being overcome by Salmacis, who subjects him to her will. He is unable to resist her, and she quite literally penetrates him. As an adolescent male being penetrated (and, what is more, by an overly feminine female as we have seen), his social position deteriorates, which only then affects his body as an outcome.[21] Moreover, the mythical flourish of the story portrays Hermaphrodite's transformation in almost metaphysical terms, and ascribes the change of his body to divine intervention, yet, at the same time, does not fail to parallel social norms regarding the effect of penetration and/or being penetrated. In both cases, the transformation of the body follows the change of gender, the latter being understood in both metaphysical and social terms. And this Laqueurian view, in which change of social practice and its correlative metaphysical position would necessarily affect the body, could easily be corroborated by an at first unlikely source of comparison to Ovid's elegant poetry — Philo of Alexandria's description of the sin of the Sodomites.

Philo and the Sodomites

Aptly termed "the inventor of the homophobic reading of Genesis 19" by Michael Carden, the Jewish philosopher and exegete Philo, writing in Alexandria during the early decades of the first century CE, presents us with a highly gendered interpretation of the Biblical account of the Sodomites.[22] In an original move for his times, he argues that the sin of the Sodomites was the betrayal of their proper (masculine) gender, which had deleterious consequences on themselves, and, even worse, on their surroundings:

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[20] Holmes, Gender, 78. Quite remarkably, Holmes does not overtly try to read the story in Laqueurian terms.

[21] As an aside, it should be noted that if indeed Ovid was thinking of the *mollis* / *cinaedi* when he wrote this myth, our reading through Laqueur would provide evidence that this group was considered as a *gender* category between women and men, and this affected their bodies accordingly.

[22] Micharl Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth*, London: Equinox 2004, 61.

> Incapable of bearing such a satiety, plunging like cattle, they threw off from their necks the law of nature (τὸν τῆς φύσεως νόμον) and applied themselves to deep drinking of strong liquor and dainty feeding and forbidden forms of intercourse. Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbors, but also men mounted males without respect for the sex nature which the active partner shares with the passive (τὴν κοινὴν πρὸς τοὺς πάσχοντας οἱ δρῶντες φύσιν οὐκ αἰδούμενοι) and so when they tried to beget children they were discovered to being incapable of any but a sterile seed. Yet the discovery availed them not, so much stronger was the force of the lust which mastered them. Then, as little by little they accustomed those who were by nature men to submit to play the part of women, they saddled them with the formidable curse of a female disease. For not only did they emasculate their bodies by luxury and voluptuousness but they worked a further degeneration of their souls (οὐ μόνον τὰ σώματα μαλακότητι καὶ θρύψει γυναικοῦντες, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς ἀγεννεστέρας ἀπεργαζόμενοι) and, as far as in them lay, were corrupting the whole of mankind. Certainly, had Greeks and barbarians joined together in affecting such unions, city after city would have become a desert, as though depopulated by a pestilential sickness. But God, moved by the pity for mankind whose Savior and Lover He was, gave increase in the greatest possible degree to the unions which men and women naturally make for begetting children (τὰς μὲν κατὰ φύσιν ἀνδρῶν καὶ γυναικῶν συνόδους γινομένας ἕνεκα παίδων σπορᾶς ηὔξησεν ὡς ἔνι μάλιστα), but abominated and extinguished this unnatural and forbidden intercourse, and those who lusted for such he cast forth and chastised with punishments not of the usual kind but startling and extraordinary, newly created for this purpose.[23]

Here again we must be well attenuated in order not to gloss over "nature" and "disease" and assume they would immediately carry the

[23] Philo of Alexandria, *On the Life of Abraham*, 135–137. Translation from Francis H. Colson, *Philo with an English Translation* (Loeb Classical Library, Volume 6), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1935, 71.

post-Enlightenment meaning which places both in the materiality of the body. When Philo speaks about "law of nature" (τὸν τῆς φύσεως νόμον) or describes sexual active/passive roles as natural, he is as far from the body as possible, and, even more intriguing, he is also above the soul. As a matter of fact, what he seems to refer to by these words is sociological position and a metaphysical essence in tandem. It is only when the Sodomites subverted this "law of nature" that, as a consequence, they "emasculated their bodies" *and* "worked a further degeneration of their souls". In other words, when this "law of nature" was violated by the male Sodomites through their unnatural *social* practice, which, in turn, also betrayed the male *metaphysical* position as ordained by God, the results materialized in their body (producing sterile seed) and in their soul (acquiring the female disease). And yet, since they did not stop and even accelerated the violation of their nature, and as the concomitant social position of the men in discussion continued to deteriorate ("they accustomed those who were by nature men to submit to play the part of women", says Philo), this unnatural practice resulted in their bodies and souls sliding down towards the female pole. As this condition was contagious (that is, other men would be tempted to join the practice) it could, according to Philo, result in the emasculation and thus the extinction of the whole human population. God's response was, of course, on a par; Philo implies that God found it necessary to fine-tune the nature of men and women to desire one another more passionately, while those who completely defiled their natural social position could only be exterminated, so as not to contract their disease with the rest of humankind. This tantalizing use of the idea of "nature", so seemingly similar but so utterly different, is an especially apt place to see how helpful the Laqueurian paradigm could be in order to understand the ancient mindset. How so? Let us review how Dale Martin tries to explain what Philo considers "natural" when it comes to sex. According to Martin, Philo differentiates between "natural" desire, excessive voluptuous acts which are "beyond nature", and certain aspects of same-sex intercourse which are "unnatural":

> The complex of desire and nature assumed by Philo is like that of other intellectuals of Greco-Roman culture: (1) male *attraction* to beautiful male is considered "natural" ("the natural offspring of satiety"), thus homosexual *desire* is not itself "contrary to

> nature"; (2) same-sex intercourse, however, may spring from *excess* of desire and allowing desire to exceed it bounds leads to actions "beyond nature"; (3) the aspect of same-sex intercourse assumed to be "unnatural" are (a) disruption of male-female hierarchy and (b) sexual intercourse that does not have procreation as it goal.[24]

The problem with such a formulation is that it again assumes the modern body as the basis of truth and thus, of what could be considered "natural". In Philo, who clearly subscribes to the one-sex system, sexual intercourse is not "unnatural" since it does not have procreation as its goal. On the contrary, it is because a person does not act according to his nature that he *will not be able* to procreate, his bodily seed becoming sterile, since his soul contracts the "female disease". Moreover, "desire" by itself (or, again, placed in the body) is meaningless in the one-sex system – it functions only as part and parcel of ancient gender. And thus, it is precisely because the desire to "mount other males" is considered by Philo to be unnatural to the masculine gender that turning it into a recurrent practice effeminated and destroyed the bodies and souls of the Sodomites. It is important to note that Philo does not seem to ascribe more liability to the passive partners than to the active – both, according to him, betray the male metaphysical and social position in the world by "unnatural" sexual acts, and it is actually the active partners who are directly blamed for the spread of the female disease, as "they accustomed those who were

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[24] Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation,* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2006, 58–59. Martin is referring to Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.43. However, the sentence he quotes is about *wantonness*, and "the natural offspring of satiety" is ὕβριν γὰρ κόρος γεννᾶν πέφυκεν in the Greek. Thus, it is unclear whether Philo is specifically thinking of male same-sex attraction here, or even whether he is referring to the abstract idea of "nature" at all. It may just be the case that Philo wishes to note here that extreme "satiety" can be *expected* to lead to extreme wanton sexual acts (he actually specifically mentions bestiality in this case, and goes on to discuss Pasipha, the wife of Minos). As we saw above in *On the Life of Abraham*, Philo can be very explicit when he is interested to speak about φύσις and male same-sex acts and desires. See also the following note.

by nature men to submit to play the part of women".[25] And thus, when Holmes in her evaluation of Laqueur notes that "[t]he story we get in *Making Sex* – first gender, then sex – implies that the whole history of thinking about sexual difference in the West has been structured by the tension between sex (nature, physical bodies) and gender (culture, malleable traits) just like our own",[26] we can respond, building on evidence from Philo and Ovid, that the ancient system is not only reversed but reformulated. Sex is conventional and gender is primary, and thus there are *many* genders possible; ancient gender is natural (like modern sex) but is malleable and affected or sustained by social practice (like modern gender), and then there are bodies, which are no less sexually malleable by social practice but only secondarily so (completely outside the modern system). Thus, the whole modern "binary" loses its meaning in the ancient system. Moreover, in the following two mythic specimens, we shall see that the ancient system was rigid enough to sustain itself even when the valuation of genders change, and that, if we are willing to forgo the Enlightenment for a minute, an interesting bridge can be drawn between the ancient and the (post)modern system.

The Naassenes, the Emasculated Attis, and Paul's Epistle to the Romans

In Hippolytus of Rome's *Refutation of All Heresies*, one finds a highly intriguing Naassene sermon.[27] The Naassenes, who took their name from the Hebrew word for serpent, *nahash*, were a Christian sect active during the third century CE. Hippolytus says that they called themselves "gnostics", boasted of knowing "the depths", and claimed

[25] Philo is even more explicit regarding the guilt of an (active) pederast in *On the Special Laws* 3.39. He considers such a man to be worthy of death since he pursues a *pleasure* which is contrary to nature (τὴν παρὰ φύσιν ἡδονήν) and in that also becomes a teacher of the worst of all evils (προσέτι τῶν μεγίστων κακῶν).

[26] Holmes, *Gender*, 55.

[27] On the shrouded figure of the author of *Refutation of All Heresies*, here conventionally referred to as "Hippolytus of Rome", see M. David Litwa, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Atlanta: SBL Press 2016, xl–xlii. According to Litwa, the most that we can say is that this person exercised episcopal authority over a Roman Christian community during the third decade of the third century.

that their tradition was handed down by James through Mariamne.[28] The Naassene sermon Hippolytus preserves captivatingly engages with two unrelated origin accounts. The first is the myth of Attis and Cybele, in which Attis is said to have been emasculated;[29] the second is Paul's contention in his Epistle to the Romans that same-sex activities (both male and female) are a punishment from God on the Gentiles who knowingly and intentionally refused to worship him.[30] The Naassenes, however, believed that the original human being was not gendered, and gendering is part and parcel of the evil archons' conspiracy to hide humanity's true origin from itself.[31] This conditioned their reading of both myths in a most intriguing manner:

> For (the Naassene) says, the human is masculo-feminine (ἀρσενόθηλυς). According to this account of theirs, the intercourse of woman with man is demonstrated, in conformity with such teaching, to be an exceedingly wicked and filthy (practice). For, says (the Naassene), Attis has been emasculated, that is, he has passed over from the earthly parts of the nether world to the everlasting substance above, where, he says, there is neither female or male, but a new creature, a new person, which is mas-

[28] Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 5.6.4; 5.7.1. Hippolytus is our only source for the existence of the Naassenes.

[29] For Attis, Cybele, and the importance of the latter's castrated priests, the *galli*, in the self-fashioning of Roman masculinity, see Jacob Latham, "'Fabulous Clap-Trap': Roman Masculinity, the Cult of Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the *galli* at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity", *Journal of Religion* 92 (2012), 84–122.

[30] *Romans* 1:18–32. A detailed and comprehensive commentary of this text, with special attention to its sexual implications, is provided by Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996, 195–302.

[31] This idea was common among different Christian gnostic groups: see my detailed discussion of the evidence in Jonathan Cahana, "Androgyne or Undrogyne?: Queering the Gnostic Myth", *Numen* 61 (2014), 509–524. I have also provided a more detailed discussion of the Naassene sermon – which was most probably a baptism sermon – and its sexual implications in Jonathan Cahana, "Gnostically Queer: Gender Trouble in Gnosticism", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41 (2011), 24–35 (28–29). For this sermon, see also the detailed comments in Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 338–343.

> culo-feminine (ἀρσενόθηλυς). … And this they say is made quite clear by the saying: "… for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature (παρὰ φύσιν)." What, however, the natural use is, according to them, we shall afterwards declare. "And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly (ἀσχημοσύνην)" – now the expression "that which is unseemly (ἀσχημοσύνη)" – signifies, according to these (Naassenes), the first and blessed substance, figureless (ἀσχημάτιστος), the cause of all figures to those things that are moulded into shapes, "and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was met". (Romans 1:20–27) For in these words, which Paul has spoken, they say is comprised their whole secret and the ineffable mystery of the blessed pleasure. For the promise of baptism is not anything else according to them than the leading to unfading pleasure him who is baptized according to them in living water and anointed with another ointment.[32]

Two aspects of this sermon are remarkable. First, Paul is read completely against himself in that both "against nature" and "unseemly" are revaluated as positive terms. Since, according to the Naassenes, the original human was not gendered nor sexed, and the myth of Attis exemplified how one should act to regain this blessed condition, what the world defines as "against nature" and "unseemly" should be reversed as well, and be evaluated positively; indeed, here and in another place Hippolytus seems to imply that the Naassenes were explicit about seeing (what was usually considered as) natural as being against (true) nature.[33] Second, and even more important from our perspective, the body in this value reversal is still considered the very last in the train of effects. The Naassene sermon starts by arguing that the original nature of the human is "masculo-feminine". And, if so, the social practice of men/women intercourse is found out to be

[32] Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.7.14–19; I cite the translation of Frances Legge, *Hippolytus Philosophumena or the Refutation of All Heresies*. London, UK: SPCK 1921, 124–125, which I have revised and altered on some points.

[33] Cf. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 5.8.12.

completely wrong-headed, in an almost mirror-image of Philo's Sodomites, for whom it was *same-sex* male intercourse that could be considered "extremely wicked and filthy practice". While Attis's myth portrayed him as being (physically) emasculated, and his priests, the *galli*, are said to have (physically) emasculated themselves in their devotion to him, the Naassene sermon offers, or perhaps precedes, a metaphysical reading to the physical description. Then, to conform to this ideal, people (both men and women) must change their social sexual practice and go through transformative baptism; that is, they are to take care of both their social and metaphysical gender position. Only then the body will be affected (through "blessed pleasure") and they would be able to receive the appropriate "recompense in themselves", which, one may presume, includes some bodily change effected through no-less bodily baptism and anointment. In other words, Ovid, Philo, Paul, and the Naassenes all agree that change on the metaphysical and social scale will always precede any change in the body, or, to phrase it differently, the latter will always be an imperfect reflection of the first. The contention is only whether such a slide from masculine to feminine nature (and vice versa, according to the Naassenes!) is abhorrent (Ovid, Philo, and Paul) or blessed (Naassenes). On the other hand, in its equal (positive) evaluation of both male and female same-sex activities, the Naassene sermon does highlight a problem in the Laqueurian paradigm, which cannot be discussed here in detail but should be mentioned. If there is a pole at the top of which the masculine body is located and towards the bottom, the feminine body, it is very clear why the *cinaedi*—effeminate men who prefer the passive position in sex—will be faced with derision. Yet, we could have expected, theoretically at least, that the *tribades*—masculine women who preferred the active position—would be seen as having climbed up the ladder. Yet, the *tribades* are treated as even more abhorrent than the *cinaedi*, and, strangely enough, this condition is thought to be the result of the same debauched excessive behavior which effeminates men but masculinizes women. Moreover, in what seems like an exact mirror image, The Naassene reevaluates *both* gender transgressions positively.[34]

[34] For discussion of the *tribades* within the Laqueurian paradigm, see Diana M. Swancutt, "*Still* Before Sexuality: 'Greek' Androgyny, the Roman Imperial Politics of Masculinity,

On the Origin of the World and the Truth about Eve

Yet another mythical text – the untitled Nag Hammadi document known as *On the Origin of the World* – presents us with an even more subversive stance. In the following excerpt, the evil archons who created Adam notice Sophia's creature, Eve. As aptly described by Benjamin Dunning, the archons, in encountering Eve's difference, feel the boundaries of their creation have "begun to leak" and have "to be subdued immediately".[35] This they plan to do both through sexual violence, and by the concomitant drawing up of another layer of their deception plan against humanity:

> They came to Adam. When they saw Eve talking to him, they said to one another, "What sort of thing is this luminous woman? For she resembles that likeness which appeared to us in the light. Now come, let us lay hold of her and cast our seed into her, so that when she becomes soiled she may not be able to ascend into her light. Rather, those whom she bears will be under our charge. But let us not tell Adam, for he is not one of us. Rather let us bring a deep sleep over him. And let us instruct him in his sleep to the effect that she came from his rib, in order that his wife may obey, and he may be lord over her."[36]

On the face of it, it may seem as if this text evinces a sharp divergent view from the Laqueurian "one-sex" orthodoxy we were evaluating. After all, the evil archons' plan was precisely to base sociological truth

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and the Roman Invention of the *tribas*", in: Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (eds.), *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourse*, Leiden: Brill 2007, 11–61, who mention this paradox (29; 32), but do not quite find a way to solve it within the one-sex paradigm. It may again be a case in which we should accentuate the primacy of gender, and relegate the one-sex body to its proper places as a possible, but not necessary, outcome.

[35] Benjamin Dunning, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2011, 91.

[36] *On the Origin of the World* 116.12–26; translation from Hans-Gebhard Bethge, Bentley Layton and the Societas Coptica Hierosolymitana, "On the Origin of the World", in: Bentley Layton (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7, Volume 2: On the Origin of the World, Expository Treatise on the Soul, Book of Thomas the Contender*, Leiden: Brill 1989, 29–93 (67–69).

on "biological" origin, and the intended audience of this work, who was familiar with the biblical book of Genesis, was expected to realize that the archons' plan did largely succeed, and their lie – at least as far as the origin of Eve's body is concerned – was indeed taken as truth. And yet what was actually to happen (at least as far as the archons' intentions are considered) *is* according to the Laqueurian paradigm in which social practice is the basis of the "real". The archons' plan to rape Eve was meant to change her social (and, since we are discussing divine beings, also her metaphysical) status, and one should note that the archons believe their act would change both her and her descendants's status from now onwards. Moreover, it is unclear to what level their purported explanation of what happened, in which Eve's status is to be based on the way her body was formed, was designed to sound not only false but also preposterous, and whether we, in the world of two-sexes, may be missing an ironical level of the story here. Yet that is exactly the rub that would not only nuance Laqueur's purported dichotomy between the one-sex and two-sex paradigms, but would also force us to address challenging similarities between antiquity and (post)modernity.

Enlightenment Sex and its Discontents

From its very origin, critical theory was highly suspicious of the Enlightenment and its epistemology. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, for instance, hardly minced their words when they argued that the "Age of Reason" has become a system of mass deception.[37] It is only later, however, that the Enlightenment sexual strategy – to base truths on biology – was put into question by queer theorists working in this critical tradition, most thoroughly and influentially by Judith Butler. In her critique of what was in her time of writing not only Enlightenment orthodoxy but also a feminist one, she called for the reversal of the Gender/Sex paradigm:

> … "the body" is itself a construction, as are the myriad "bodies" that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot

[37] Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Seabury 1972, 120–167.

> be said to have signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?[38]

And indeed, scholars of the ancient world noted the similarities between Butler's poststructuralist reading and the ancient Gender/Sex system, and, more specifically, between Butler's and Laqueur's projects.[39] This has been addressed most incisively, if abruptly, by Flemming:

> For all its much-vaunted post-modernism, Butler's apparatus of gender, therefore, manifests a certain structural homology with the ancient ethical systems ... The difference is, of course, that while, in the classical context these procedures are openly followed, without challenge, they have now fallen into disrepute, and must be actively concealed. What was then a valid invocation of nature has now become invalid.[40]

While such a formulation is certainly helpful, I believe the evidence from the Naassenes and *On the Origin of the World* avails us a more congruent view of how these ideas about sex and gender are played out. What Butler can be imagined to say to Laqueur is that while the Enlightenment *claimed* to base sociological truths (gender) on the natural body (sex), it actually continued the ancient paradigm, yet much more slyly. Gender still produced the body, but, as a part of a mass deception plan (to paraphrase Adorno and Horkheimer) it was set in place to covertly construct an "objective" body which would then "prove" what it was meant to prove all along. Moreover, this was

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[38] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge 1990, 12 (emphasis original).

[39] It is rarely mentioned that Laqueur himself noticed these similarities with post-structuralism (*Making Sex*, 12–14) although, writing before the heyday of third-wave feminism, he had limited material upon which to draw. Notably, Butler's *Gender Trouble* was published in the same year as *Making Sex*.

[40] Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women*, 23. Cf. also Holmes, *Gender*, 70, who provides another interesting angle for the comparison, based on the understanding of materiality in each of the paradigms.

not an ethically neutral process. As Butler stresses, "this kind of categorization can be called a violent one, a forceful one, and … this discursive ordering and production of bodies in accord with the category of sex is itself a material violence" which produces the "very premises that have tried to secure our subordination from the start".[41] Therefore, two important qualifications must be put in place to Flemming's formulation, which contrives how different the "much-vaunted postmodernism" is from earlier systems. First, the invocation of nature has not become valid in the Enlightenment (and "invalid" in poststructuralism); rather, the Enlightenment based truths on a newly conceived *material* and seemingly objective nature. It is this newly founded – and, in a way, much more formidable – system that one needed to find a way to critique in poststructralism. Second, poststructuralist criticism had to find how and for whom the oppressive mechanism was working, when the critics themselves are the creation of this very system. And it is exactly here that Butler provides a quasi-gnostic critique of this system, from a quasi-gnostic objectivity. The difference remains, of course, that the source of this order is divine in the Naassene sermon and in the Nag Hammadi *On the Origin of the World*, but human according to Butler.

Conclusion

Our heuristic attempt to apply Laqueur's paradigm to mythical texts from three different traditions (Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian) has demonstrated that they are largely based on the one-sex system or, as it should be more accurately described, they admit the primacy of gender over sex. While variation on the theme certainly occurs, reading these traditional texts with the primacy of gender in mind avails a more complete understanding of their meanings in their original context, and the difference between these in comparison to the post-Enlightenment conception of body and materiality. Conversely, it

[41] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'", in: *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, New York: Routledge 1995, 35–57 (52; 54).

should come as no surprise, then, that conservatively inclined religious people, whose understanding of sexuality is largely effected by biblical and/or Christian and Jewish traditional texts, would also still subscribe – if more latently, considering our very different modern cultural and political climate – to the primacy of gender. Yet, the resemblance between poststructural theory on the primacy of gender and the traditional pre-modern one-sex paradigm relates to us that this is not simply a we/they dichotomy, in which we moderns are much more enlightened and advanced than the premodern primitives (and, inevitably, also to those who still ascribe authority to the texts they wrote).[42] On the contrary, texts like *On the Origin of the World* show us how "biological" claims could already be considered suspicious in antiquity, underlining that certain overlap between one-sex and two-sex paradigms could have existed then in the same way that it exists today. From this perspective, then, poststructural theory can be seen as building bridges for a better understanding – if not necessarily agreement – between the bitterly divided camps of religious conservatives and (often secular) liberals, as both can be seen as actively inquiring and searching for what Judith Butler termed "a sensical notion of the human".[43]

[42] As an aside, it is important to note here that Congressman Akin's rhetoric, in which "the female body has ways to" accomplish a pre-conceived (moral) aim is not only present in traditional one-sex paradigm thinking, but also reemerges in popular science and poststructural theory, which, more often than not, "push the embodied mind far enough away from the traditionally conceived body to reflect a distorted version of it back to itself": see the incisive discussion of this recurrent fallacy in Dana Carluccio, "The Cognitive Fictions and Functions of Gender in Evolutionary Psychology and Post-structuralist Theory", *Signs* 38 (2012), 431–457 (433).

[43] Judith Butler, "Afterward", in: Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St Ville (eds.), *Bodily Citations:* Religion *and Judith Butler*, New York: Columbia University Press 2006, 276–291 (283).