ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE CONCEPT OF GENDER

John M. Rist*

This essay is about the usefulness as well as the abuse of the term 'gender' (along with 'gender studies') in contemporary debates. My aim is to rescue something of the importance of 'gender' as a term of art in historical and literary enquiries from its various supposedly ideological corollaries. Before I can do that, however, I need to think, albeit briefly, about these corollaries, and more generally about how and why the modern distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' (hence the modern ideological use of gender-terminology) has arisen. As we shall see, reasons both good and bad are readily available.

Until comparatively recently 'gender' was a term of art to be found in grammar books, indicating masculine and feminine (and sometimes 'neuter') nouns, pronouns and adjectives. Obviously females are feminine (as *puella* in Latin) and males are masculine (as *ragazzo* in Italian), but the distinctions of grammatical gender are not limited to persons or animals but embrace the entire contents of the universe, perhaps reflecting some sort of one-time vitalist (and sexually differentiated) account of nature – or perhaps not. More important, however, is that, in historical times at least, the notion that *mensa* ('table' in Latin) is feminine had become a convention of the Latin language, the origins of which were long lost. So we can say that the femininity of *mensa* is the product of a particular group of language-users, and had, for most of them, little more significance than that – though in many languages things you ride on, like boats, are referred to as feminine! – except that it is necessary for native speakers (or others wanting to master the language) to learn which nouns, pronouns or adjectives are masculine and which are feminine.

Similarly the word 'sex' (and words with the same sense in other languages) referred to the biological and anatomical differences (*Vive la différence, cache-sexe*, etc.) between males and females of the varying species which are so differentiated. These differences, however, were not mere conventions of speech, but represented not only the physical differences (including, when identified, the hormone systems) between males and females – and their disputed but apparently real psychological differences – but more especially the

* University of Toronto. Address: 14, St Luke's Street Cambridge, CB4 3DA, UK. E-mail: johnmrist@yahoo.co.uk

functional differences between the sexes in the scheme of nature: thus males impregnate females and not *vice versa*, while females conceive, give birth and lactate while males do not. Of course how 'impregnating' is understood will vary in different cultures: many ancient Greeks, for example, apparently supposed that the male semen is or contains a homunculus which is then nourished by the female both before and after birth: indeed the Greek word for' female' (*thelus*) may be connected with the word for a nurse (*tithene*) – which seems to indicate such a belief among those who (originally at least) spoke the language (and also, incidentally, might make it hard to distinguish between contraception and abortion).

In those past times – that is, when the uses of 'sex' and 'gender' I have indicated were assumed rather than investigated – such assumptions were based on the belief that sexual differentiation was given by God, or at least by 'nature'. So it may now seem with hindsight to have been almost inevitable that when God began to 'die' and nature to become 'demythologized' – pantheism and vitalism thus disappearing eventually – or more or less – from the philosopher's table – the idea that all 'natural' distinctions, first in morals and aesthetics, now more strikingly 'sexual' differentiations, should be identified not as givens but as the construction of human beings: man is the measure of all things, as Protagoras put it – or at least of some of them, and the range of that 'some' has gradually expanded.

But the change in the interpretation of 'sex' and 'gender' is not only a partial result of the constructivist account of morals, aesthetics and political societies which saw its beginnings at least as early as Machiavelli. For from the discussion thus far we can already see that Western man is claiming to construct not only beliefs, but apparent facts: so we may find that we are not only claiming to invent right and wrong (or at least give some content to the words 'right' and 'wrong'), but also – indeed almost as a corollary – to be able to reinvent ourselves to commit the primal sin, according to Christian tradition, of claiming to be self-creators. In one sense, of course, that is nothing new: as far as we can see, human beings have always wanted to get better (or better *at*), and philosophers have naturally been in the forefront of such strivings: Socrates wanted us to make our souls as good as possible.

But that challenge points us immediately to the contemporary scene: for Socrates wanted to change himself and others 'for the better', which in some sense he also thought to be the more real or authentic, and the more in accordance with nature and our nature. It was not change for its own sake (or because we could choose it) that he sought, but change for the better: not, that is, that he wanted to choose anything he liked – which would be constructivism again rather than some rediscovery of reality – but only what he believed to be what is *really* best for us. It is perhaps worth noting that this Socratic distinction has been so far forgotten in the contemporary world that a

glossy magazine for the alumnae of Newnham College Cambridge is entitled *Changing Lives*. Perhaps those who edit it assume that means changing for the better (whatever they suppose that to be) but they do not say so, thus laying themselves open to the Socratic comment: 'Changing lives; very interesting, but a little point occurs to me: Do you mean changing them for the better or for the worse?'

But now we have stumbled on a second and deeper problem. In an increasingly godless and substantive-value-free Western world (or at least in a Western world where we each want our own desires and our own preferences – which we may choose to designate goods or rights), what increasingly matters is not a choice for the good (viewed as we have seen as something natural or God-given, for such does not exist) but the mere choice (or preference) itself. For the power to choose reflects the autonomy which, willy-nilly, we think we need in a universe where our values are constructed, not found. Hence although by 'nature' we may be male or female we may prefer to be the other, and set about trying to re-make ourselves along those lines. But the metaphysical implications of that are that our original form (male or female) is merely a chance happening, and there is no reason why we should not prefer to change it if we can. Nevertheless, changing it must imply a very different account of what 'sex' is about – hence the more current way of speaking of our sexual differences not as reflecting significantly 'opposite' sexes (which might seem the derivative of a bogus god or mother nature) but as largely conventional, and cultural, like those of grammatical gender.

A more extreme and more logical variation on this idea is that even if sexual differences are *conventional*, that is no reason to accept them, since they infringe on our autonomy and our 'right' to choose. Yet all this together might seem to add up to two conflicting conclusions. On the one hand in a world in which everything can be treated as constructed or constructible, there is nothing to inhibit us from trying our hand – even if futilely – at self-creation. On the other hand the elimination of basic differences, even that between males and females, would seem to point towards not an individualized but an egalitarian, or rather homogenized, humanity. Presumably in the ideal of an atomic and solipsistic individual the two might seem to merge in a post-human vision whereby we are all substitutable units, like soldiers in the army of a totalitarian state. Indeed in the behaviour of many of those pursuing such goals we see the totalitarian mentality dressed up in liberal clothing, leaving us to wonder how long it will be before the construction of a world along these lines will call for the use of force and fraud – if social pressure fails to be effective – both to compel the ideological principles and more especially to suppress dissent.

The origins of the substitution of talk about 'gender' for talk of sex and sexual differences being a little clearer, and the underlying axioms of the change

being more or less in place – the apotheosis of choice, the 'legitimate' desire for whatever autonomy we can get (for what else could possibly matter), the unimportance of nature, let alone of God, the egalitarian vision of man – we may well ask whether the sex-gender distinction has any function at all, except for ideologists. Indeed many more conservative thinkers are inclined to reduce talk of 'gender' to talk of 'gender-ideology'. But that is a serious mistake – and not only because gender-ideology can be defeated only if the good reasons as well as the bad for its emergence on the intellectual scene are thoroughly aired.

So if we anathematize the concept of 'gender-*theory*', at least as it is currently deployed, what function is left for the concepts of 'gender' and 'gender-studies? To answer that we need to reflect on the successes and failures of the science of history, as it has been developed in the West since the time of Herodotus and Thucydides, its first practitioners. A frequent and challenging, if over-simplifying, comment on Western (indeed on all) history is that it has been written by the victors: the nature of past events is rewritten, even reconstructed, in the light of what we, as current top-dogs, wish to present to our descendants, both to justify our behaviour and that of our 'friends' in the past (which will normally have been at the least morally ambiguous) and hopefully to ensure the perpetuation of the 'right' social mentality – hence the 'right' society – in the future. As recent critics have pointed out, however, this approach, especially if normal, needs to be corrected, and it is now widely challenged (though often, unfortunately, by exaggerated accounts of the splendours and merits of the under-dog, recent writing on medieval Cathars being a good example).

That being as it may, however, it is simple fact that (for example) the 'glory that was Greece' (as much else of genuine worth) can be seen not only to be glorious but to have a sinister under-belly, in this case normally since the Renaissance kept out of sight of those who begin to study it: Nietzsche was one of the earliest to recognize just how misleading many of the depictions of Greek society and beliefs actually are. And although victorious Protestantism and its secular descendants have nurtured the so-called 'Whig history' of England since the time of Elizabeth I, we have learned from more recent and less ideological research what a barbarous, if successful, police-state it was that Elizabeth actually ran: 'Merry England' in that extraordinary period is construction, not fact, often built on direct lies and the wilful disregard of available evidence, much of which, it was often claimed (and sometimes still is, as about Shakespeare), either does not exist or has been fabricated.

So it is not true that history is always written by the victors, though often they get away with writing it for decades if not centuries. Nevertheless, as we shall see, there is enough truth in that thesis for it to shed light on questions of 'gender'. That said, then, we turn to a second claim, seemingly even more

challenging: namely that all history is the history of élites. There are many examples of and variations on this proposal: such as that when we write about ancient Christianity we find it hard to discover the views of the average bloke in the pew; what we find much more readily are the views of the authority figure in the episcopal chair or of some moralist – the two may be identical – who tells us less what his Christian community believes than what he, as enlightened, thinks they ought to believe. And his surviving comments may range from bland wishful thinking through objectivity to vindictive malignity.

And it is an urban myth that in more democratic times the élites have disappeared: an obvious example to the contrary is the current predilection of a considerable portion of the population of the United States (whether Republican or Democrat) for quasi-royal clans: Kennedys, Clintons, Bushes. More generally, 'democratic' élites are normally formed and maintained from those who as children and students have the best educational advantages. In any case, they are self-perpetuating; you are normally inducted, or co-opted, into the system. In less democratic times the Romans used the device of adoption to secure the similar survival of ruling families when legitimate (or natural) children were insufficient or ineffective.

So how do these two axioms – about the role of victors and of élites – about the writing of history relate to questions of 'gender'? Most obviously in that discussion of male and female behaviour in historical times easily (and often reasonably) collapses into the study of the position of women in a (normally) male-dominated society (though other supposedly deprived groups, such as homosexuals, may succeed in jumping on the same or some similar bandwagon). For there is no doubt that Western society from its origins has been patriarchal, and that 'patriarchs' therefore largely, until recent times, have been its historians as well as its rulers both nationally and domestically. And here the relevance of my historical and historiographical 'axioms' comes into view: whatever élites there have been in the West have been almost entirely composed of socially victorious men. And in many areas of life they still are.

These facts contribute not only to the obvious truth that generally in the past historians have written little about the activities of women (except, of course, when they want to be titillating or lubricious, or when the women are princesses or other members of the élite class, shown as serving their turn in the dynastic marriage-market): for as Jane Austen wryly implied at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is a truth universally understood that the fortunes of women have normally been tied to the fortunes or misfortunes of the wealthier men who select them as wives (or in some cases as mistresses). Or as the Stoic Epictetus told his Roman audience: what expectation other than that of a husband can young girls have; it is no surprise that from early years they therefore devote themselves almost exclusively to pleasing men.

And if the *generalities* about women's social situation that have traditionally appeared in the history books have tended to imply that that situation is of little historical interest, so too can the misfortunes (often to a greater degree than the fortunes) of women's lives be so very easily neglected – while romantic (and 'edifying') historical novels may feed the wishful-thinking and ignorance of the normally male readers – that these readers are hardly if at all aware that they exist: nor frequently have they wanted to know much about them. Thus how many students of the Roman Empire or of the military exploits of famous Greek commanders are aware (let alone disturbed) that it was (and for that matter still is) normal for the women in a captured city to be raped (often gang-raped). (Berlin 1945 provides a fairly recent example on a large scale, and in Bosnia, the Sudan and widely in the Middle East the practise continues, rape being not only an act of lust but a planned military and political tactic.)

So enduring has been the inadequate picture of women's sufferings that when a poet, or other writer (Perhaps the best example, from antiquity, is Euripides in *The Trojan Women*) points to the reality, we normally manage to recognize only a *general*, certainly not a very *specific* misery which quite conventionally is to be inflicted (for example) on female prisoners of war. More accurate discussion of such topics has only been taken seriously in very recent times. And although it is true that such historical omissions can be considered as part of the more general problem of the bowdlerized and sanitized history with which we – whether 'victors' or 'vanquished' – are often fed, the sanitizing is often much the more extreme in relation to the misfortunes of the 'second' sex. Of course, Augustine understood history very much better, and told it 'like it was', and happily one can point to modern revisionist treatments of the general sanitizing, as that in Giampaolo Pansa's disturbing investigations of Italy 1943-1945 in Il *sangue dei vinti*.

Nor, with only few exceptions, have philosophers helped females very much. Some have tended to think that all individuality – and therefore individual biography and variation – is something to outgrow, or transcend, as humanity marches on towards the production of an apparently more or less identical perfect human specimen. Admittedly Plato and Mill urged that society simply wastes its female talent, and that so far as has been shown empirically, women can perform many, indeed most, of the important jobs normally done by men.

But Plato and Mill are exceptional, and can easily be written off as anti-family, which is both beside the immediate point and seriously misleading in the contemporary context. For the reasons for Plato's antipathy to the family in his society were understandable (even if, as Aristotle noted, he was right about the problem, wrong about the solution): families and family-loyalties, overriding those of the common good, as he knew from personal experience, caused

feuds, civil wars and the destruction of communities. After Engels, however, attacks on the family find quite other explanations: primarily that the family blocks the path to a totalitarian Utopia in a post-Marxist world where the 'people' have been succeeded as the group to be liberated, as recent feminism puts it, by 'women': it is urged that as Marxism demanded the destruction of the family to promote the arrival of the proletariat at absolute power, so women are to be relieved of the burden of child-bearing by a similar destruction backed up by the absolute necessity of undergirding the coming Utopia by the vigorous encouragement of abortion. Thus whereas Plato wanted to end the family to aid the citizens to produce more children desperately needed for the survival of the state, the current final-wave feminist wants to destroy the family in order to liberate women from any kind of duty to bear children: here again we see how choice demands the destruction of nature and of a family-based society if Utopia is to be achieved.

Plato (and Mill) apart, however, traditional philosophy has done rather little to develop an intelligent understanding of the proper place for women in society. Until recent times philosophical assumptions (rather than accounts) of female nature have more or less followed the sophisticated version of general prejudice offered by Aristotle (certainly accepted more or less uncritically by the scholastics), that since women are different from men in important respects relating at least to the mechanics of reproduction (a necessary activity if the society is to survive) – so far so good – it follows that because they are different they must be inferior and are rightly held by society to be so. One sex has to be inferior, and patriarchal society assured most of its thinkers that it could not be the males!

Reading such uninformed (but culturally 'necessary' or 'inevitable') material, we cannot but recognize one of the springs from which the often specifically anti-Aristotelian gender-ideology (with all its errors) flowed, though it must be allowed that life-expectancy being short (for women because of the hazards of childbirth, for men because of war both civil and foreign, for both from rampant epidemics), women in the past have often had little time for non-domestic activities and certainly needed protection: their 'liberation', it has been wryly suggested, has depended as much on the invention of the handgun as of the washing-machine and the varying techniques for spacing (or eliminating) pregnancies.

And in a strange way Aristotle formalized a further factor in the story of women's supposed unimportance – again as part of a wider difficulty for which he is the source though not the culprit. Aristotelian logic is a logic of sets (All men are mortal, etc.) and philosophy, as he tells it in the *Metaphysics*, can have nothing to say about the individual as such because of the individual there is no definition. That rule affected more than philosophical attitudes toward women; it meant that Aristotelians and others were inclined to be not

much interested in the reality of individual experiences (and *a fortiori* women's experiences) and to ignore the fact that these individual experiences are part of the sum of the contents of the universe. 'Scientific' philosophy thus tended – and still tends, like statistics produced by Departments of Health – to operate in the third-person. Again Augustine – and to some extent the Stoics, Plotinus, Duns Scotus, Descartes and others – knew better, but their awareness was either ignored or easily perverted (as with Descartes) into dualistic theories of human nature.

So the unfortunate developments of gender ideology derive from a general problem in historiography, which itself echoes a general problem in our understanding of human nature – especially female nature but also that of males insofar as it is itself hugely affected by the relationship (whether healthy, perverse or ignorant) between the sexes. For Mill got one more thing right: historically speaking, the relationship between males and females has often paralleled that between masters and slaves – which was good neither for the slaves nor the masters.

Ideology aside, however, we now turn to the concept of 'gender' itself, as currently deployed. As we have seen, women's history has always been rather neglected, so it is neither surprising nor unfortunate that in recent years there have been substantial attempts to rectify that deficiency. Unfortunately, however, the history of women is now regularly and excessively linked with the study of other groups who have suffered discrimination real or imagined – and that, of course, has tended to encourage the ideological approach to it. Such linkage, however, often harmful to the integrity of the subject of 'gender', is unnecessary. For the history of Western women needs to be and, to a greater degree than is often supposed, can be recovered, and as part of that recovery the concept of 'gender' will play a very useful role. For 'gender' should indicate the study not of what women are (which in any case is a more philosophical and psychological study), but of what they are perceived to be, first in the eyes of the men who (normally) have written about them, then in their own eyes, not least in order to recognize how their view of themselves – different of course in different epochs – may reflect, or fail to reflect, the male 'gaze'. Not least, as is apparent today, in that especially in Muslim countries, women have frequently (though gradually less so) learned to view themselves as inferior and subordinate, not only because of the ordinary social customs of their lives but also because in the various religio-judicial systems under which they live, their value is assumed to be – and as such insisted upon – substantially lower than that of males.

So the study of 'gender' is an important part of the recovery of the story of the position of women in society more broadly. And it should be further noted that to study not what women are but what society supposes them and wants them to be, is part of a larger type of historical investigation which,

while flourishing in antiquity, has often been lost sight of in more recent times. For ancient historians, from Thucydides to Tacitus insofar as they were not mere chroniclers, were equally or more interested in what people *thought* was the case, supposed were the realities of their world, than in what actually happened. Thus a modern historian of Greek antiquity will be interested in the causes of the Peloponnesian war, while his ancient counterpart will be equally (or more) concerned not with what we might think of as the underlying causes, which may often be recognized only vaguely by the participants, but by what the participants themselves *supposed* to be the cause of the outbreak of fighting in 431 B.C.

A most illuminating case of this phenomenon is provided by a fascinating and much misread passage of Tacitus' study of the Roman general Agricola. Agricola, having achieved considerable success in completing the conquest of Britain, was recalled to Rome by the current Emperor (Domitian) who seems to have been nervous of the excessive fame that his commander had won. So Agricola returned to Rome and shortly afterwards died. Then comes Tacitus' interesting comment: 'Some spoke of poisoning'. But although many have read this passage and drawn the conclusion that Agricola was poisoned by imperial command, Tacitus does not say that: what he records is the *rumour* – itself of course an important historical phenomenon which affected subsequent events – that he had been poisoned.

These parallels show that the new 'gender' studies, when historical rather than ideological, far from being an undesirable novelty on the academic scene, are in some respect part of a recovery of certain historical realities which can very easily be left aside by the 'scientific' historians. For just as the 'scientific' philosopher will talk about what humans do (or ought to do) rather than what they think about what they are doing and the world in which they live, so the guild of historians is also prone to neglect this 'first-person' approach whereby we record not only events which take place but the view of contemporaries about these events which are taking place around them and in which, to a greater or less degree, they themselves participate and experience.

So we should welcome 'gender' as a tool for advanced historical research while avoiding using it as a tool for ideological misconstructions. That risk, of course, pervades other varieties of history too: those who have recorded the end of feudalism and the beginning of capitalism in its various versions, can easily be led not to history but to historicism: planning the future as a result of an ideological reading of the past. In this respect the abuse of 'gender studies' must be seen as a part of our tendency to abuse historical investigations more broadly. For the fact that males portray females in certain (often demeaning) ways, and not only when writing history, has in itself no immediate connection with the nature of females as such. Nor can the fact that 'gender' history reveals mistreatment of women in the past be used to justify non-historical,

non-philosophical and non-scientific claims about the capabilities of women in the future and the best role that, in their different ways, they can play in the parade of societies of which they are an essential part. If we can eliminate the ideological virus from 'gender' studies we can the more effectively understand more of that still so little understood subject: the complementarity of men and women. For that there is such is obvious enough to the non-ideologist, though what is not obvious is how that complementarity is best played out in human societies. And for a start we should recognize that there is no reason to suppose that it will always be cashed out in exactly the same way: as the role of women in wartime, for example, must inevitably differ – however it is planned for- from what it is in times of peace.

And here a final caveat: since males are not females (though 'masculinity' and 'femininity' will vary with different individuals), it is an easy error to suppose that a man can think about the same material (especially if it has emotional content) in the same way as does a woman. I, that is, as a male, cannot 'feel' what a woman does about her new-born baby. But there is nothing surprising about that. It is a serious philosophical problem how far I view similar items and events in the world in exactly the same way as does *anyone* else. All of us can recognize that X is my friend; only I can experience what about X makes him my friend. And even then I cannot express what I 'feel' or 'experience' propositionally; which does not mean that I do not experience it.

ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to distinguish 'gender ideology' from a legitimate and needed study of the perception and expectations of women in historical societies. It would be a serious – and unfortunately common – mistake to dismiss the latter because of a contempt for the former.*

KEYWORDS: *sex, gender, grammar, moral constructivism, political élites, patriarchy, over-abstract philosophizing.*