

Gender Occasionalism: Towards a Deconstructive Gender History

The frequent undertaking of interpreting historical gender relationships is always beholden to a series of hermeneutical presuppositions and necessities. Not only do uncritical readings inherently operate within the context of modern gendered categories, but they also contribute to an epistemic and discursive privileging of the “male” signifier and the entrenchment of its primacy as culturally necessary. Thankfully, the study of gender relationships also provides room for a critical praxis that treats historical dynamics as contingent and culturally constituted; a self-reflexive methodology that simultaneously *learns from* and *operates under* these premises of arbitrariness. This essay will draw on queer/feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial theory, particularly the works of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida, to set forth a deconstructive method of gender study that actively interrogates the necessity of the frameworks within which it operates. Primarily a meta-theoretical critique of praxis, I will be focused more on methodology than source analysis, investigating the limits of what *can* be “learnt” from gender relationship study.

Derrida and Butler are both ultimately concerned with the contingency and non-essentialism of signs, their existence as *polysemic* and *constructed* identities constantly in flux. To Derrida, signs in discourse are constantly in a state of *différance*; having no concrete, inherent meaning. Meaning is always unstable, temporally ‘deferred’ to an unattainable stable end, while being defined only in relation to other signs. He proposes the central meaning as ‘*not a fixed locus but a function*’ where ‘*an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play.*’¹ Therefore, the structuralist view of gender identity had presumed a central ‘transcendental signified’, a male or female *essence*, which enters into relations within the male/female binary. To ‘deconstruct’ these signs, one must consider their meaning (or lack thereof) as, instead,

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. 1967

synchronically dependent on these relations, and diachronically dependent on the *change* of these relations over time – “*the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely.*”² Non-deconstructive studies of gender relationships³ thus unwittingly affirm an unchanging, atemporal essentialism, taking examples of relations as *representing* the interplay of concrete signs and their meanings instead of *constituting* the constructed meaning of the signs themselves.

All histories certainly acknowledge temporal variation in gender meanings, but only with respect to changes enacted on this fictive ‘essence’, which is *always presumed to exist*. “Woman” has purportedly traversed a path towards equality – the contemporary woman and the Neolithic woman are presented as both “women”, merely at varying levels of emancipation. Surprisingly, even classical feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Gerda Lerner affirm this – their seminal genealogies of patriarchal oppression (*The Second Sex* and *The Creation of Patriarchy*, respectively) posit “woman” as a universal class struggling against another universal class, and moreover, trace this genealogy of relations to the modern day. What the latter does is reify the relations of men and women in the *modern day* with recourse to a false teleology of historically concrete relation-periods, *causally linked* to each other and thus *necessarily* engendering the current dynamics. A retroactive genealogy of sign-relations can only serve to entrench the position from which they are being studied, endlessly searching for the ‘transcendental signified’ that stabilises the floating meanings of the signs. Both of these habits – essentialisation and historicization – inscribe, to borrow Butler’s words, “*an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations.*”⁴ With gender relationships studied as such, what room is there for *other* subjects and dynamics?

² Ibid.

³ For example, the 20th century works of Structural Anthropology, such as those of Claude Levi-Strauss. See in particular: Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. 1969. This text is sourced frequently in gender histories (e.g. *The Second Sex*) and is critiqued for essentialism by Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990).

⁴ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2006.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault contends that the deployment and control of sexual categories in discourse is a way for power to alter the positions which subjects can take on *within* that discourse. Furthermore, he states in *Society Must be Defended*: “*The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning.*”⁵ – the contingency of gender identity is predicated on a contingency of hierarchy. The feminist tradition has long established the privileging of the male signifier within the binary – the woman always constituted as ‘Other’ within gender relations. Phallogocentrism – the privileging of masculinity within signification – is relevant especially to historical study when considering the automatic privileging of those in power within historical information. Signification, according to Luce Irigaray, “*is the systems of representation of a meaning and a praxis designed to the precise specifications of the (masculine) "subject" of the story*”⁶. To take historical representations at face value is to ignore the traces of patriarchy that persist within all examined dynamics. This is not searching for the existence of some concealed historical instances of female dominance – what is being attested to is the fact that the historical phenomena that historicization would *base* current dynamics on are not just constituted by *contingent* dynamics, but their very modes of historical representation are predicated on a *contingent* elision of feminine subjecthood. Anomalies are treated as such – relationships outside the purview of the patriarchal Law (eg. matriarchal societies) do not negate the presence of this law but rather strengthen its necessity by positing these occurrences as Other to the norm, outside the teleology.

In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s post-colonial work she critiques the modes of ‘representation’ (recall the term in Irigaray’s phrase) that marginalised groups receive in scholarly discourse, contending that their only mode of expression is through a *hegemonic* discourse; the

⁵ Foucault, Michel. *Society Must be Defended*, 1975-76

⁶ Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. 1974

‘subalterns’ cannot truly ‘speak’. In this sense, history is a (patriarchal) hegemonic discourse through which a feminine or queer subaltern cannot speak, not directly due to historical praxis, but *furthered* by the praxis insofar as it re-presents the discourse as *necessarily existing*. The system is phallogocentric on both ends of the hermeneutic circle. At one end, *past* gender relationships are constructed as privileged hierarchically towards the male, and signifyingly towards two binary gender essences. On the other, *modern* historical praxis uses these constructed notions to inherently affirm themselves by investigating only within the context of (presumedly natural and necessary) gender dynamics.

This dichotomy comports with Spivak’s dichotomy of “representation”⁷, taken from Marx, as *Darstellung* (representing, expressing) and *Vertretung* (re-presenting, speaking for). The representative issue in the *past* has primarily been heteronormative male *Darstellung*, where female and queer voices are, for numerous reasons, elided within historical discourse. Because the large part of history has involved gender relationships that are outwardly oppressive to female and queer identities, their only ability for social constitution is through discourse as a subject, studied through historiography. But financial, social, epistemic and educational barriers have prevented women from doing so, to say nothing of the queer identity, which is outright denied existence at all. Virginia Woolf elucidates this in her 1928 lectures⁸, giving an account of the historical prevention of women from writing – who must, at minimum, ‘*have money and a room of one’s own*’. On top of societal stigma, there is the epistemic suppression of lack of education, worldly experience, and research capabilities. The feminine subject that appears within historical discourse is a neutered one, either re-presented (*vertreten*) by males, suppressed by them, or mediated by their presence. ‘*By no possible means could middle-class women with nothing but brains and character... have taken part in any one of the great*

⁷ viz. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. 1988

⁸ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. 1929

*movements which... constitute the historian's view of the past.*⁹ Female and queer *Darstellung* is hardly anywhere to be found until the 20th century at the very least.

This becomes an issue when gender is viewed on a timeline, circumscribed by ‘cultural intelligibility’, which is retroactively constituted by this recourse to historical relations. This is the representative issue in the *present*, on the other end; the *vertreten* of historical subjects by modern historians in the context of modern relationships. When every aspect of gender relations is constructed, in *différance*, that construction only exists in the present; and only exists inasmuch as it can be drawn from history. When historians *causally* link historical subjects to modern categories, identities that do not actually comport with the positions within historical discourse which they have taken on, subalterns concealed by patriarchal discourse, have their cultural repression perpetuated. Thus, the contemporary bigotry against queer identities (and their very designation as ‘queer’) originates in their absence from historical discourse. Likewise, every push for female rights is countered by a lack of historical precedent. Only with recent revisionist studies¹⁰ has some repression been alleviated; but this only furthers the point that historical study can only study subjects deemed contemporarily existent.

Hence, historians can only “learn” within the context of their contemporary signification. The only way to consider *différance* and constructedness is to approach from the viewpoint of a cultural phenomenology – studying the relationships as they appear, factoring in contingency while analysing their construction. Identity signification *is* causally linked, but only through (contingent) cultural memory. The historian can learn of the production of signification within historical discourse, *or* enact a “subaltern study”, searching for suppressed examples of discursive identities contemporary to them. However, both must be done with the caveat of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For example, the belief that Caravaggio was homosexual (<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/bersani-caravaggio.html>) or the reclassification of Elagabalus as transgender (<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-67484645>)

différance, critically analysing the modes of cultural-historical representation, the influence of power structures, and the acknowledgement of their contingency. This synthesizes with Butler's theories on gender performativity¹¹ – one can historicize about the *roles* performatively inhabited in discourse, but through a deconstructive framework that investigates the construction of these roles while denying necessity or an essentialist “transcendental signified”. Whether this manifests itself in new avenues of study, or simply a gestalt-switch critical approach to existing texts, this method would “learn” from the study of historical relationships while ensuring what *is* learnt does not become the cultural chains of contemporary relationships.

¹¹ viz. Butler, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. 1988 or Butler, Judith. *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*. 1993