

TRANSCENDING TRADITIONAL GENDER BOUNDARIES

Defining Gender Roles Through Public and Private Spheres

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CONTROVERSY OVER GENDER ROLES IS A MAJOR ISSUE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY. THE DEBATES SURROUNDING GENDER AND SEXUALITY HAVE EXTENDED TO ARENAS FAR BEYOND THE HOME; POLITICAL PLATFORMS AND RELIGIOUS VIEWS HAVE INHERITED THE TORCH, CONTINUING THE ARGUMENT INTO THE 21ST CENTURY. THIS ESSAY WILL SHOW THAT THE DISCOMFORT ARISING FROM THE BLURRING OF TRADITIONAL BOURGEOIS GENDER ROLES WHICH ALLOCATED PUBLIC LIFE TO MEN AND PRIVATE LIFE TO WOMEN IS AT THE HEART OF THESE DEBATES. BY FOLLOWING THE HISTORICAL PROGRESSION OF THESE ARGUMENTS AND TRACING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GENDER ROLES BACK TO THEIR ROOTS, THIS ESSAY INTENDS TO BETTER THE UNDERSTANDING OF BOTH THE ORIGINS OF THIS DISCOMFORT AND THE APPLICATION OF GENDER ROLES TODAY.

For centuries, the roles of men and women have been changing, but not until recently have women demanded such equal treatment in the form of the right to choose abortion, the right to vote, and the ability to work in the business world. With these demands, women are reaching outside their traditional domains of home and family life, a shift that disrupts traditional patterns of gender distinction in the Western world. The correlation between the men's and women's spheres of influence and the spheres of the public and private is strikingly apparent in European history. It is the blurring of these spheres that sparks the controversy evident in present-day Europe.

The traditional image of the Western European bourgeois male was that of a public figure. In the Christian world, the head of each family was the father, who enforced the practice of Christianity in his home and ensured his family's church attendance. The churches themselves were primarily a man's world, with all leadership positions occupied by males. In business, men conducted financial transactions, handled the family's money, and entered into the job market either by opening his own business or by working as a laborer or tradesman. Additionally, men in the family were often formally educated, gaining access to resources that women were denied.

A woman's sphere, in contrast, was far more limited in the traditional bourgeois society. She was instructed to remain home so she could raise her children and provide their education. Her involvement in politics was nearly nonexistent, as she was forced to identify herself with her husband's

political stance. In business, her presence was felt very slightly, if at all; perhaps she helped her husband by handling the money that circulated around the house for the purchasing of food or furniture. Beyond the reach of the home, however, a woman was rarely seen, save in a marketplace or walking with her children. Her education focused around the maintenance of the home, rarely extending beyond her mother's knowledge, who educated her daughter in domestic tasks from a young age.



THE TYPICAL FEMALE SPHERE

These spheres were well defined: the stereotypically stronger figure handled the potentially harmful outside world, while the milder, gentler figure maintained the home. Uneasiness accompanied any attempt to cross these spheres—an uneasiness that sparks discussions about the genders, their roles, and whether to maintain or break these spheres of influence. Men and women have been engaged in this discussion for generations.

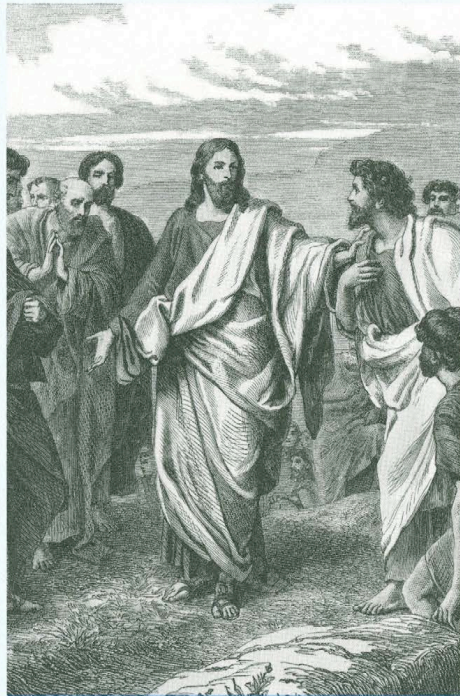
Before entering into that discussion once again, however, the assumption that forms the foundation of this argument must be discussed—namely, the establishment of gender-specific spheres of influence as a basis for

European society. The gender roles outlined in this paper are not a natural establishment; they were created outside of nature as Western society “modernized.” In addition, these roles are clearly not inflexible, as demonstrated by the Celtic community, which involved both men and women in its religious society, as well as the African tribes today that are matriarchal. Thus, these spheres have a deeply rooted history but are not universal because they are taken solely from the views of middle-class society in modern Europe.

However, these views on gender, while more widely disputed, are still evident in our own middle-class culture. This is clear by our continuing debates over the roles of women in the world of business and the home, as well as the role of a homosexual male in a woman's sphere. Once one is able to examine these gender roles in their historical context, one is able to trace their development and their impact on the 21st century.

JESUS AND GENDER ROLES

Uncertainty of gender began even with the icon of the Christian religion. In response to male dominance in the Church, some depictions of Christ in art took on a more ambiguous tone. These images of “modern gay Christs were serious attempts by homosexual men, and more rarely, women to find a way in to the fortress of Christian dogma.”ⁱ Women and gay men, who were alienated and feminized by many Christian ideologues, tried to break into the predominately male-oriented world of Christianity. These interpretations, as would be expected, were greeted with indignation and anger from many, if not most, in the Christian community. The adverse reaction to this interpretation was spurred by post-Biblical ideals of the position of masculinity in Christianity. In addition, as Graham Robb writes in his chapter entitled “Gentle Jesus,” many “still widely assume . . . that Jesus condemned homosexuality.”ⁱⁱ At the same time, however, Robb explains several ambiguous passages in the Bible that imply a certain homosexuality in Christ's relationship with his apostle John.ⁱⁱⁱ



JESUS GATHERS HIS MALE COMPANIONS

The idea of a homosexual Jesus evoked more of a negative reaction than did a sexually ambiguous Savior, because “a sensual, heterosexual Jesus was preferable to any sort of homosexual Christ.”^{iv} In the case of Christ, the fear that “men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another”^v overrode any fear that a man may have been depicted as a womanly man, as long as he remained heterosexual. The sexual sphere of a woman being the receiver was usurped and blurred by the homo-

sexual relationship, therefore the possibility of Christ's homosexuality was denied vehemently by those who upheld society's traditional gender spheres. Instead, Jesus was generally depicted as a gentle figure who crossed the boundaries of public and private life but remained heterosexual.

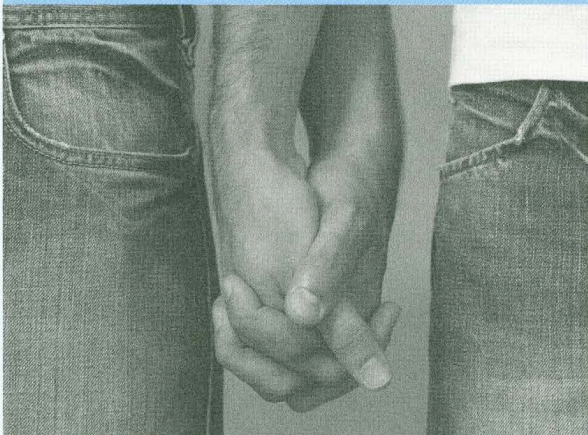
MALE FRIENDSHIPS

The power of public and private gender spheres can also be seen in male friendships. The friendships described in Alan Bray's *The Friend*, which would, with a modern perspective, appear homosexual, were conducted “in a public sphere,”^{vi} and are thus made more masculine in the context of the male's sphere of influence. In the case of William Neville and John Clanvowe, their entombment together was a “hint of the formal and *public* context for their friendship,” of which the monks in the church where they are buried were fully aware.^{vii} The acceptance of the practice of “sworn brotherhood” was based on the fact that it was a public affair; by asserting a masculine love for another man, one was not necessarily asserting homosexuality if one did so in a public milieu.

Political involvement also created a space for sworn brotherhood. Bray explains that “friendship was *dangerous*, and it was so because [of what] friendship signified in a public sphere.”^{viii} The words *dangerous* and *public* together show a respect toward these relationships, particularly those made to further political alliances. Friendships made based on political advantage existed precariously due to the lack of true love seen in relationships like that between William Neville and John Clanvowe. Furthermore, these friendships often led to betrayals of trust and a false sense of camaraderie.^{ix} Because of the tight bonds seen in the sworn brotherhoods between men with real affection and trust, political maneuvers attempted to capture that union and create strong alliances. This shows the general acceptance of the practice in politics, which gave “the *appearance* of friendship in the public eye that was itself a kind of currency that could be turned to advantage.”^x

In the 17th century, with the elimination of the public theater in the great houses of gentlemen and the invention of hallways “screening the sharing of beds at night from view,”^{xi} the friendships and bedfellows that had previously been accepted now became private matters. What was considered vital in establishing a loving relationship between male friends, such as serving one another and having intellectual debates while together in bed, now became censured by the same people who would have previously

RULES OF GENDER FORCE SCRUTINY OF MALE RELATIONSHIP



supported sworn brotherhood. The services brothers would willingly have bestowed upon each other were “regarded not as indicative of intimacy but as menial or degrading” because they became associated with a woman’s gender role.^{xii} With the privatization of the home, a woman’s sphere began to take shape; the affairs of the household, like cleaning, caretaking, and child-rearing were now under her jurisdiction. This distinction threw sworn brotherhood into a different light because the bedroom became the private realm of a man and his wife and was no longer a place for a man and his male friend. The implications of this arrangement were serious, and accusations of sodomy became a threat for many as the crime of sodomy required the penalty of death.^{xiii}

A new ideal of friendship, then, had to be defined distinguishing those gestures two men could perform without any homosexual implications from those they could not. Contrary to past relationships, kisses and displays of affection had to be curbed because they now became private. These actions, in conjunction with the development of a private space in the home, defined a place for the wife. Sworn brotherhoods came too near this threshold to be acceptable.

WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE

This newfound sphere of the home as a private space is perpetuated in Natalie Zemon Davis’ *Women on the Margins*. Davis finds, in Maria Sibylla Merian and Glikl Bas Judah Leib, two women who successfully broke the bourgeois expectations of their sex in the 17th century. The first, Maria Sibylla, was a natural painter, both in a sense of skill and of subject. In pursuing her artistic schooling, “Merian was a pioneer, crossing boundaries of education and gender to acquire learning on insects” while still remaining at home to take care of her daughters.^{xiv} After leaving the Lbadist colony, which she joined after leaving her husband, Merian and daughter Dorothea traveled to Suriname to study new insects. With only a loan, she did not have the extensive funding a man would have received in her place.^{xv} Maria Sibylla became the scientific and

artistic expert for the insects of Suriname, despite not having the male benefits of being a Royal Botanist or a Fellow of the Royal Society.”^{xvi} Her habits were “anomalous, traveling without men on strange business,” painting insects throughout her journeys.^{xvii}

The wider community did not censure her choice of occupation, however, as would be expected. “Only her status as a woman divorced under unusual circumstances seems to have been hard for her to present to the fallen world,”^{xviii} Davis writes. In fact, her work was praised and respected in the scientific and artistic community, even by men in the field.^{xix} The divorce of her husband was perhaps made less reprehensible within her community because it was done with religious inspiration and because she took her children with her. Her sphere extended from a private home life to an integral role in a religious society, in which women were allowed to participate. From this community, Merian entered the public sphere through travel, education, and scientific and artistic publications. Davis’ title, *Women on the Margins*, emphasizes the unusual success Merian gained by breaking the traditional gender norms.

The second woman mentioned, Glikl, is representative of a nearly complete joining of both the public and private sectors of her life. She is also an example of a non-Christian woman; she was Jewish. In Jewish society, women were known for their strength of character and assertiveness in both their private and public lives. While her husband Haim was alive, Glikl was an active participant in his business, so much so that when he died, he felt no need to name a successor to his business because, as he said, “My wife knows about everything” related to his trade.^{xx} Davis writes, however, that “among the German Jews, it was expected that women would work,”^{xxi} so Glikl was not alone in her involvement in the business world. She was unique in her amount of travel, but for German Jews, “traveling around to fairs did not detract from a woman’s reputation.”^{xxii}

Owing to her extensive travel, Glikl was highly educated, unlike many Christian European women. There is evidence she knew at least Yiddish, Hebrew, French, and German, and was aware of political situations throughout Europe.^{xxiii} Because Glikl was so worldly, she was able to gain a reputation as a successful businesswoman. This achievement earned her a great number of suitors, whereas a Christian woman in the same situation would most likely have been treated by men with spite and anger. Christian women remained mostly within city walls and had limited exposure to business. If a Christian woman had performed the same acts as Glikl, she would have been met with displeasure and social discomfort. Glikl, on the other hand, was greatly respected and actually desired by Jewish men.

Glikl’s role as a mother exemplifies one similarity between Christian and Jewish expectations for women. She composed stories that were meant to educate her children and future generations. While Christian women may have aided in the education of their children, they rarely wrote down their lessons for their progeny; instead, they relied on their children to pass on lessons to future generations. Regardless of the method, however, both Jewish and Christian women were responsible for the education of their children.

Perhaps as a result of women like Glikl, who were successful in taking over their husbands’ businesses and integrating into the traditionally male sphere, Jewish men were often depicted in a more feminine light within the Christian bourgeoisie. Daniel Boyarin observes in his *Unheroic Conduct* that Jewish women “have enjoyed rather astonishing freedom, probably a result of their active role in business and other public professions.”^{xxiv} Because of their heavy involvement in the financial world, Jewish women were seen as powerful figures in their culture, while men were “retiring to private spaces.”^{xxv} The reversal of the typical Christian bourgeois gender spheres may have contributed to the marginalization of the Jewish community within Europe. Jewish “male ascetics were feminized through their rejection of the most basic cultural

“The reaction of the European bourgeois society to the reversed gender roles within the Jewish community led to an overcompensation and the creation of the ‘muscle Jew’—the Zionist movement’s proof of Jewish masculinity.”

expressions of male identity”—the public sphere.^{xxvi} Within the Jewish community, this arrangement was accepted, and, in Glikl’s case, desired. In contrast, “the bourgeois ideology . . . disenfranchised women even more by insisting that their *only* functions were to be decorative and reproductive, while earlier, more traditional Jewish cultures stipulated a wide range of important public, economic activity for women.”^{xxvii}

ZIONISM AND DEFINING THE JEWISH MALE

In the case of Bertha Pappenheim, her public appearances on behalf of women’s rights in the Jewish circle and beyond greatly threatened the sphere of the bourgeois man. While the wider European community upheld its traditional gender boundaries of women in the home and men in the public sphere, Pappenheim’s main crusade was to return Judaism from its Zionist habits to its traditional roots of powerful women and passive men. Her acts of hysteria, assumed to be a woman’s disease, and her public oration were an example of the Jewish woman’s power in the public sphere.

The transition from a passive male population in Judaism to a fervent Zionism began as Jews started to assimilate with the rest of Europe and as it became clear to them that a strong female and a passive male is not the typical practice of gender differentiation in bourgeois Europe. “The Zionist is gendered male for Freud,” Boyarin writes, showing in Freud’s analysis of the Jewish man the under-

current of the bourgeois reaction to the ambiguously gendered male.^{xxviii} The militant action of Judaism’s crusade to gain its own nation was precisely what Jewish males thought masculinity was. They defined themselves as masculine through the amount of danger and publicity gained by acts of radicalism. Zionism, then, became “a masculinizing of the allegedly feminized—queer—Jewish male.”^{xxix} The reaction of the European bourgeois society to the reversed gender roles within the Jewish community led to an overcompensation and the creation of the “muscle Jew”—the Zionist movement’s proof of Jewish masculinity. Bertha Pappenheim’s revolt and vocalizations against the shift in gender roles show the response of a traditional society that is being changed—and perhaps corrupted—by the modern European male ideal.

SODOMY AND GENDER ROLES

Male ideals are particularly prominent—and perhaps most sensitive—in regards to sex. As explained earlier, the invention of the private space created the “women’s domestic sphere,” limiting a man’s acceptable interactions with other men. The “unacceptable” interactions are further explored in Mark Jordan’s book, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*. According to Jordan, homoerotic desires become particularly evident in the vehement reactions against same-sex attraction. When Peter Damian attempts to condemn sodomy in the congregation, “he cannot know who among his official readers will be guilty of the very sin he enjoins them to punish.”^{xxx} The overarching fear of sodomy is the confusion of gender in the

sexual act, because a man is put in the receiving place of the woman. The spilling of a man's semen for something other than procreation is considered the sin, however, not necessarily the attraction or desire for the same sex.^{xxxix} It seems that the inability to procreate in same-sex coupling is graver than the act itself.

Attraction can lead to the sin of sodomy, exemplified by the story of Pelagius, a boy known for his exceptional beauty, who drew the attention of the caliph where the boy was imprisoned. This beauty was at first physical in its manifestations, yet holy, with God's power so ingrained in Pelagius that God performed a "miracle of preserving Pelagius' physical beauty" even after he was dismembered and burned.^{xxxix} The feminized depictions of Pelagius also encouraged a confusion of gender, sparking the potential for same-sex desire. As with Christ's homoerotic imagery, Pelagius was increasingly feminized to encourage the sin of the caliph. However, "a mark of the caliph's depravity" was shown in his attraction to Pelagius before God's gift of eloquence could be heard.^{xxxix} Here, to avoid a complete effeminizing of a Christian saint, Pelagius' beauty was transformed from God's presence in his body and face to God's blessing of the boy's speech. Public speaking was also within the realm of the man's sphere, so Pelagius, while cautiously regarded as being an object of male desire, maintained a proper amount of masculinity to warrant his worship as a saint with the gift of speech. This closed off enough of the female sphere to avoid controversial interpretations.

FREUD, EROTIC DESIRE, AND RELIGION

In contrast to the effeminizing of both Jesus and Pelagius, Freud's theory of the origin of religion has less to do with the threat of the female gender as it does with the threat within the male's own sphere. Freud's invention of the Oedipal complex extends to the creation of religion as its primary motivation. "Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity," he writes, "like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father."^{xxxix}

The father figure is manifested as a supreme being, a guardian in response to "man's helplessness and need for protection."^{xxxix} The fervent worship of religion, then, according to Freud, is an acceptance of this desire for the father, a desire that is against society's attempt to crush man's instinctual wishes—"incest, cannibalism, and lust for killing."^{xxxix} Despite the establishment of society in order to control these natural urges, religion is in itself a manifestation of the desire for incest. "The strength of the incestuous wishes can still be detected behind [civilizations'] prohibition against them," Freud writes, and this is most strikingly found in religion.^{xxxix} It was Freud's reaction against this attraction to religion that established the war within the male sphere. In maintaining the masculinity of self, it seems that dedication to religion (using Zionism or the predominantly male Church as examples) is entirely within the male sphere, if not integral to it. This dedication, however, is what Freud considers an incestuous, homoerotic desire because it is a desire for a man's own father. His denunciation of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* is a reaction against homosexual desire, but also against what many would consider an important part of masculinity.

HOMOSEXUAL MARRIAGE AND GENDER ROLES

The internal battle with religion extends to the present-day in the issue of homosexual marriage. In Stephen Schloesser's letter to Congresswoman Marian Walsh, he defends homosexual marriage by examining the progression of marriage through its existence. Contrary to arguments professing the eternal sanctity of marriage, Schloesser explains that there is very little that is *eternal* about the institution. The transition of marriage from an economic to an emotional union comes when "bourgeois women stayed at home in the 'private sphere' and made it a cozy refuge for their husbands to return to."^{xxxix} With the division of men's and women's spaces came the creation of heterosexuality, and consequently, the invention of homosexuality. The idea of same-sex marriage infringing upon the sanctity of the home deeply concerns many people, just as the accusation of sodomy concerned those who

may have participated in sworn brotherhood, and just as effeminacy in the eyes of the bourgeoisie turned Jewish males to Zionism. The idea of men filling the position that is traditionally female is highly disconcerting, even with today's more liquid associations with sexuality. Simultaneously, a woman in the workplace is not unusual until she is the breadwinner for another woman. The double standard of women in the man's sphere versus men in a woman's sphere is confusing, but the adamant fight against the effeminacy of men seems to extend to female couples as well. Schloesser argues that in light the changing nature of marriage, homosexual religious union should not be banned because of the claimed sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman. The establishment of male and female gender roles creates the apprehension associated with same-sex marriage.

CONCLUSION

The public and private spheres traditionally assigned to men and women have roots in religious, cultural, and sexual traditions in bourgeois society. This paper has demonstrated instances in which these spheres were challenged, and how society reacted to these challenges. The sexual ambiguity of sworn brothers, St. Pelagius, and even Jesus Christ caused a discomfort within the bourgeoisie. Much of this discomfort is still present today. Current discussions of homosexual marriage continue to reflect this same uneasiness regarding the confusion of gender roles and spheres of influence, whether public or private. If women's suffrage, abortion rights, or Massachusetts's ruling on same-sex marriages are any indication, however, the rigidity of gender roles is on its way out, and perhaps Western society is gaining speed in the progression toward sexual and gender equality.

ENDNOTES

- i. Robb (236)
- ii. Ibid.
- iii. Robb (235)
- iv. Robb (246)
- v. Robb (234)
- vi. Bray, (2)
- vii. Bray (19)

- viii. Bray (59)
- ix. Bray (63)
- x. Bray (54)
- xi. Bray (210)
- xii. Ibid.
- xiii. Bray (195)
- xiv. Davis (155)
- xv. Davis (169)
- xvi. Davis (179)
- xvii. Davis (168)
- xviii. Davis (166)
- xix. Davis (182)
- xx. Davis (13)
- xxi. Davis (14)
- xxii. Davis (15)
- xxiii. Davis (27-28)
- xxiv. Boyarin, (330).
- xxv. Boyarin (6)
- xxvi. Ibid.
- xxvii. Boyarin (321)
- xxviii. Boyarin (271)
- xxix. Boyarin (272)
- xxx. Jordan (50)
- xxxi. Jordan (128-129)
- xxxii. Jordan (23)
- xxxiii. Jordan (21)
- xxxiv. Freud (55)
- xxxv. Freud (29)
- xxxvi. Freud (13)
- xxxvii. Ibid.
- xxxviii. Schloesser (5)

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