A COMPANION TO GENDER HISTORY

Edited by

Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks
A Companion to Gender History
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Introduction

TERESA A. MEADE AND MERRY E. WIESNER-HANKS

On the international stage, gender is everywhere. Political analysts and politicians pore over the “gender-gap” in attempts (sometimes futile) to design ways of pitching campaigns to win the women’s vote while still holding onto the men’s. One of the most significant movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Islamic fundamentalism, builds its appeal in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia on the basis of an intense anti-Western rhetoric, buttressed by the imposition of severe restrictions on women’s freedom. Fundamentalist movements within other world religions, including Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity, lay out sharply distinctive paths for male and female adherents. There is today a widespread market for girls and women from many of the world’s poorest countries to work as forced laborers outside their homelands, as sexual commodities for procurers from some of the richest countries, and as subjects for pornography on internet sites worldwide. Recent protests against the World Trade Organization zeroed in on the exploitative strategies of industrialists who profit from the use of primarily women and girls as sweatshop laborers in Southeast Asia, Latin America and hidden in the back alleys of European and North American cities. Finally, as we discovered when attending the international Women’s World Conference in Kampala, Uganda, in 2002, feminist opposition to women’s oppression is by no means centered in Europe and North America. In Uganda, not only does the main national university have a whole building devoted to “the department of women and gender studies” (while few universities in the West accord women’s studies departmental status or even separate offices), but a major division of the government bureaucracy is the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development.

The prominence of gender in historical scholarship matches its visibility on the world political stage. Almost twenty years ago Joan Wallach Scott argued in the pages of the American Historical Review that history was enacted on the “field of gender.” Scott defined gender there as “a social category imposed on a sexed body,” and stated, in a line that has since been quoted by scholars in many fields, that “gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power.” She was indebted, as she noted in the article’s many footnotes, to the pioneering work of scholars before her who were...
opening a path into the investigation of women’s history, and she acknowledged that
the very process of recovering the role of women in the formation of human society
was still in its infancy. Scott’s essay, however, gained considerable attention because
it articulated the centrality of gender, not simply women, as a subject of historical
inquiry, an argument that was being made by many other historians at the same time.
Both of these inter-related fields of inquiry, women’s history and historical gender
analysis, have exploded over the last twenty years, and gender – understood as a cul-
turally constructed, historically changing, and often unstable system of differences –
has become a standard category of historical analysis for many younger historians,
and a fair share of older ones as well.

What has also happened in the last twenty years is that in the same way that current
gender issues have assumed a global scope, women’s history and historical gender
analysis have increasingly become international enterprises, both in terms of scholar-
ship and scholars. While the footnotes in Scott’s article – and most other theoretical
discussions of gender from the 1980s – were numerous and wide-ranging, almost all
of them referred to studies focusing on the United States or Europe. This was not
the result of any narrowness of vision, but of what was available at the time. In some
ways this imbalance continues, and can be seen in the fact that another volume in
this series of Blackwell’s Companions to History is devoted solely to American
women’s history, understood primarily as the history of women in the United States.
For some parts of the world in some periods, we are only beginning to gain basic
information about the lives of women, the relationship between males and females,
and the interconnection between socially accepted masculine and feminine ideolo-
gies. However, new research has begun to challenge understandings of gender
derived primarily from the western experience, and there is now enough material
from all over the world to make this Companion to Gender History truly global.

This collection of essays seeks to contribute to the history of women, to study
their interaction with men in a gendered world, and to posit notions of the role of
gender in shaping human interaction over thousands of years. When thinking about
how to organize such an enormous project, we decided that it would be useful for
readers to have both thematic enormously essays that provide conceptual overviews of the ways
in which gender has intersected with other historical topics and categories of analy-
sis, and more traditional chronological-geographic essays that explore gender in one
area of the world during a specific period (though these are of necessity very broad).
We assembled a group of authors that was similarly wide ranging, including scholars
from most of the English-speaking world, including Canada, Britain, Australia, India,
New Zealand, and the United States, as well as scholars for whom English is not
their first language. We also gave the authors a relatively free hand to explore their
particular topic in the way they saw fit, recognizing that investigations of some
societies or pertaining to given historical epochs are only beginning to see descrip-
tive studies about women, while others are rich in highly theorized and sophisticated
analysis of gender. Rather than bemoan these differences, we see them as providing
a good example for you as readers to see how a new historical field is developing and
assess the ways in which insights in one area can challenge received wisdom and
standard generalizations in another.

One of the key points emerging from this collection is that no generalization about
gender has applied to all times or all places. Indeed, even Scott’s definition of gender
as “a social category imposed on a sexed body,” while acceptable twenty years ago when scholars were asserting the difference between “cultural” gender and “biological” sex, is today highly contested. Biological markers such as genitalia and chromosomes are not perfectly dichotomous, but may involve ambiguous intermediate categories; generally individuals in such situations are “assigned” a sex at birth, sometimes with the aid of surgery to remove or reconfigure the inappropriate body parts. Thus their sex is determined by the cultural notion that there are only two acceptable categories, so that in these cases gender determines sex rather than the other way around.

Historical and anthropological research from around the world has also provided evidence of societies in which gender was not based on body parts or chromosomes, but on a person’s relationship to reproduction, so that adults were gendered male and female, while children and old people were regarded as different genders, and one’s gender thus changed throughout one’s life. Then again, in some societies gender may have been determined by one’s role in production or religious rituals, with individuals who were morphologically (that is, physically) male or female regarded as the other gender, or as members of a third gender. Barbara Andaya provides examples of such a third gender when she discusses the bissu of Southeast Asia, and Deirdre Keenan when she notes the presence of two-spirit people among some Native American groups. Such historical instances of non-dichotomous gender systems occasionally provide examples, as Robert Nye notes, for those in contemporary society who are increasingly critical of the standard schemata of binary sex and gender roles.

Much of such criticism of the binary gender system and a further contestation of the meaning of gender has come from the transgender movement. Individuals whose external genitalia and even chromosomal and hormonal patterns mark them as male or female may mentally regard themselves as the other, and choose to live and dress as the other, a condition the medical profession calls “gender dysphoria.” In the 1950s sex-change operations became available for gender-dysphoric people who could afford them, and they could become transsexuals, thus making their physical sexual identity fit more closely with their mental gender identity; by the 1980s more than forty clinics in the United States were offering such operations. (This enterprise is shaped by gender in complex ways, as the vast majority of those who undergo sex-change operations go from male to female.) But at what point in this process does a “man” become a “woman”? When he loses his penis? Gains breasts? Or is she a woman before the process begins because she self-identifies as a woman? In the 1980s some people also began to describe themselves as “transgendered,” that is, as neither male nor female or both male and female, and resisted efforts to limit the possibilities to two. But should such individuals be allowed in spaces designated “women only” or “men only”? Such questions are not simply academic speculation, nor do they relate solely to public restrooms. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which has been held for more than thirty years and draws about ten thousand attendees, has been deeply divided about the question of transsexuals and transgendered persons. Are “real” women – those who will be admitted – only (in the words of the festival organizers) “women-born-women”? Or is excluding transsexuals and transgendered persons an example of the very type of sexist discrimination the festival opposes?
Transsexuals and transgendered persons highlight the nebulous boundaries and permeable nature of the categories “women” and “men,” and challenge us to think carefully even when using these common words. The enormous differences among men and women based on factors such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, and region have also led scholars to question whether the term “women” (and by extension “men”) is a valid analytical category, or whether these differences are so great that there really is nothing that could be labeled “woman” whose meaning is self-evident and unchanging over time. Not only in the present is gender “performative,” that is, a role that can be taken on or changed at will, but it was so at many points in the past, when individuals challenged existing gender roles or when, based on the individual’s class or racial status, he or she was not viewed as included in category of “men” or “women.” Many of the essays in the collection discuss high-status women, for example, who ruled over men despite cultural norms that decreed female inferiority and subservience, as well as low-status women who were never included in ideas about women’s purity and weakness. Similarly, they discuss men whose class status allowed them to engage in behavior that would in other men be judged “effeminate,” such as wearing cosmetics, or whose class or racial status kept them from being regarded as manly. Nupur Chaudhuri, for example, discusses the intertwining of gender and racial understandings in colonial India, where colonial authorities viewed Englishmen as vigorous and “manly” while Bengali men were dependent, soft, and “feminine.”

Several of the essays thus provide evidence of more fluid gender roles – whether positive or negative – but others point to ways in which many types of historical developments served to rigidify existing notions of masculinity and femininity. According to Verena Stolcke, the history of European exploits abroad and of colonization schemes may not have included large numbers of women, but notions of masculinity underlay the participants’ sense of conquest. Whereas conventional history has given us the positive view of the masculine legend, a gendered account might divest masculinity of its rugged individualism and, in the case of the imperial project abroad, connect masculine imagery with racism and exclusivity. Sean Redding’s essay demonstrates how Europeans colonizing Africa sided with the most retrograde aspects of the colonized, and imposed male domination in ways it had not previously existed. The frontier narrative, from crossing the great plains of North America to forging into the jungles of Africa to subduing the Indian subcontinent, has been a mainstay of triumphalist historical narratives and the core of the western literary canon. Linda Kealey, Patricia Grimshaw, and Charles Sowerwine question the heroism of the American frontier mythology that credits the backwoodsman with single-handedly clearing the forest, building the roads, and, eventually, paving the way for the rise of industry and national unity at home, and neo-imperialist pre-eminence abroad.

As they provide evidence for both fluidity and rigidity in gender structures, the essays also provide evidence on both sides of the debate about women’s agency and oppression. Merry Wiesner-Hanks and Susan Besse document the ways in which the family served simultaneously as an institution protecting and supporting patriarchy, and a location of real female power. Ursula King notes the ways in which religious doctrines and institutions were both restrictive and liberating for women, while Guity Nashat and Judith Tucker explore this in greater detail with regard to Islam. According
to Anne Walthall, Chinese women created a rich literary culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, despite Confucian ideas about women’s inferiority. Barbara Clements highlights contradictions in Russian and Eastern European gender ideology and movements for women’s “emancipation” in the twentieth century, which resulted in a double burden of paid work and housework for women, while holding out an—often illusory—promise of leadership and advancement for men.

Women’s history began in some ways as a branch of social history, and many of the essays include extensive discussions of issues that matter to social historians: the family, work and leisure experiences, marriage patterns, class differences. In Africa, for example, as Marcia Wright discusses, kinship systems adapted to dramatic social and economic change and women were important as entrepreneurs. Julie Hardwick finds similar adaptation in early modern Western Europe, but notes that the impact of economic development, as well as other social and political changes, was very different for elite urban dwellers than for peasants. The same was also true in early modern Eastern Europe and Russia, where Nancy Kollman traces relations within nuclear and extended families in terms of gender ideology and actual behavior. According to Deborah Valenze, complex and conflicting gender ideologies in the modern era intersected with industrialism and urban development.

The scholarship of the last twenty years has made clear, however, that the centrality of gender is not limited to social issues, and many of the essays examine themes that have traditionally been the province of political, diplomatic, and even military historians. Though some mainstream national history—the accounts that legitimate nations and their governments—remains cut off from the interpretative richness gender analysis provides, building and ruling societies have always been carried out according to gendered principles. In societies fraught with differences—between nationalities, languages, cultures, races, and even behaviors—gendered legal statutes, court decisions, and legislation have served often as the thread through which a unified national code has emerged. As Susan Kingsley Kent observes in her review of gender and the law, legislation governing the right to vote, own property or retain an inheritance, laws determining the ownership of slaves, statutes preventing foreigners from gaining citizenship, and so forth, have always rested on the intersection of gendered assumptions of race and class. David Schoenbrun traces the multifarious ways in which gender and elite status were intertwined in pre-modern Africa, noting the prominent role of queens in dynastic development and epic histories.

As several of the essays note, such histories also need to explore and problematize the experience of men as men in war, and to investigate the centrality of masculine (often hyper-masculine) imagery in training and fielding an army. War, long viewed as the most masculine of historical inquiry, has a documented gendered history. For example, Barbara Molony discusses sex slavery in Asia, which came into the headlines in 1991 when Korean and Chinese women who were forced into prostitution to serve the Japanese imperial army during World War II as so-called “comfort women” came forward to demand reparations. Comfort women’s memoirs thus deepen our understanding of World War II in the same way that the accounts of Holocaust survivors, refugees, and other war victims have. Because sex slavery, rape as a tool of combat, and similar practices are not, nor have ever been, unique to Japan, the history of war can be better understood when it incorporates these deeply troubling issues.
Along with tracing the actual experiences of women and men, many of the essays discuss symbolic and metaphorical uses of gender as well as other topics that have been central in the new cultural history over the last several decades. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera traces the way in which notions of honor served to gender space in colonial Latin America, with interiors characterized as feminine and the street as masculine. As Temma Kaplan explains, women were used as symbols in emerging nationalist discourses of the modern era, particularly in their role as mothers. By contrast, Pavla Miller’s essay on education discusses contradictory images of the school as a household led by a wise father, an all-male army unit, or a place of nurture headed by a “mother made conscious.”

As is evident, the essays range widely in terms of approach as well as chronological and geographic coverage, and also in terms of theoretical perspective, in the same way that historical scholarship as a whole does. Laura Frader and Barbara Winslow draw on Marxist feminist theory in their emphasis on the intersection of gender and class, while Nupur Chaudhuri and Deirdre Keenan develop insights drawn from post-colonial theory to explore the gendered construction of race. Mary Sheriff and Paul Halsall discuss the implications of queer theory for the fields of art history and ancient history, noting the ways in which recent works emerging as part of gay and lesbian studies have dramatically altered approaches to canonical images and texts, along with introducing new types of sources. In their explorations of societies that have left no or very few written texts, Marcia-Anne Dobres and Rosemary Joyce weave in anthropological theory, while observing that gender bias has skewed the interpretations of the material record. All the authors have what we would term a feminist perspective in their work – indeed, this book and everything else in women’s and gender history would not exist without feminism – but, like gender, they all define feminism somewhat differently and vary in the level to which it emerges as an explicit theme.

Women’s history is now almost four decades old, and those of us who have been involved with it for a long time sometimes become depressed at how difficult it has been to insert women – to say nothing of gender – into the traditional historical narrative. As the Latin American historian Donna Guy observed in a recent reflection on the place of women in Latin American history textbooks prior to the end of the twentieth century, “women were not subjects, women were not objects, women simply were not.” A number of the essays in this collection note similar omissions, absences, and invisibility, but the overall impression we hope the essays convey to you – as they did to us – is that from the earliest human cultures until today, the process of defining societies, ruling them, settling them and building them has been a gendered task, one done by both men and women, but likewise one motivated by and carried out according to gendered principles. There is no aspect of human existence – labor and leisure, family and kin groups, laws, war, diplomacy, foreign affairs, frontier settlement, imperialism, aggression, colonial policy and the resistance to it, education, science, romance and personal interaction, the construction of race and ethnicity – that is untouched by gender.

The scope of this volume is daunting, as is the coverage of each essay, for every author struggled to keep her or his essay to a manageable word limit and worried about over-generalizing. Nonetheless, these broad strokes give meaning to the social construction of gender, illuminate its variations according to time and place, and demonstrate its complexity in relation to far-reaching historical epochs. We are
indebted to our contributors for the depth and range of their efforts. In addition we would like to thank Tessa Harvey and Tamsin Smith at Blackwell for their encouragement and assistance at every stage of the process. Deanna Collins and Kathy Miller-Dillon provided useful comments and valuable editorial suggestions. Jane Earley kept track of addresses, logged in the essays, and corresponded with contributors while Maria Carrizales provided additional administrative assistance. Janey Fisher was our able and understanding desk-editor and Ann Rutter helped with the indexing and proofreading. Funds were provided by the Union College Internal Education Fund to pay for staffing and editorial assistance. Finally we would like to thank our contributors, many of whom set aside other pressing research to provide these essays in a timely way. The process has taken far longer than either of us anticipated and we are very grateful for the patience of many of our authors.

Notes


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PART I

Thematic Essays on Gender Issues in World History
As a field of scholarly investigation, the history of sexuality is about as old as gender history in its modern, social constructionist form, dating from the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike gender history, whose roots reach back into a variety of disciplines and scholarly fields, the history of sexuality was long regarded as at best a catalogue of anthropological curiosities and at worst a pornographic amusement for social elites. In the 1880s medically informed writers such as Iwan Bloch, Paolo Mantegazza, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing tried to fit the spectrum of human sex expression into an evolutionary scenario, but the foundations of the field’s contemporary respectability were laid in the 1920s by British-trained social anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and the American Margaret Mead, who studied sexuality in social context and speculated on its relationship to socially ascribed gender roles. Though many of the early medical and anthropological works on sex and society as well as the first academic histories were devoted to the variety of sexual behavior and values in human history, many of their authors were also sex reformers who often used this information as weapons in the long cultural struggle with traditional Western sexual ideology. Gordon Rattray Taylor, whose *Story of Society’s Changing Attitudes to Sex* (1954) was one of the first serious histories of the subject, was unapologetic about his aim of undermining the vestiges of Victorian sexual beliefs. The Western scholars who have studied the historical and global varieties of sexuality are still tempted to look at the subject through a critical and relativizing lens. Historicizing a topic that has been used both as a “natural” universal to command conformity and as a radical tactic of social rebellion has proven difficult indeed.

As numerous authors have pointed out, a remarkable proportion of contemporary writings on sexuality and its history have taken body dimorphism and male/female gender difference as “givens” and explained variations as exceptions to this rule. Though historical accounts of sexuality, particularly in the West, clearly confirm the prevalence of dimorphism and gender difference, much recent work has opted in favor of far more complex schemes for understanding sexual and gendered bodies and practices in the West and elsewhere. This has resulted in an important corrective to the temptation to see sex and gender in exclusively binary terms, endlessly
reinvented as a series of polar oppositions. Third sex and third gender models and even more complicated schemata have been developed recently to account for the great diversity of body types, gender identities, and sexual practices that have thrived in the West and throughout the world.

Nonetheless, though we are increasingly critical of the old schemata, the historic persistence in most cultures of binary sex and gender categories, which have also been replicated in religion, culture, language, and science requires some explanation. It seems clear enough that the mammalian model of reproduction has served as the template for male/female dimorphism in human societies. It seems equally certain that human groups have made powerful investments in fertility in order to ensure survival in a world of conflict and competition for resources. A rich archaeological record of fertility rites and goddesses and the regular equation of planting and harvest activities with human reproduction is testimony to the urgency of these beliefs. However, there is evidence that suggests that even very ancient societies acted to limit fertility when population outstripped prospects. Since in either case the management of procreation was the key to assuring the prosperity of individuals, kinship groups, and entire societies, a high premium was placed on the procreative capacities of males and females and on the sexual practices that ensured or regulated births.

No doubt, genitalia and sexual function have always figured prominently in assessments of these capacities, but though erection and ejaculation in males and menstruation and pregnancy in women have been necessary features of cultural assessments of reproductive ability, they are only a part of the huge variety of ways that human societies characterize males and females as men and women and as more or less masculine or feminine versions of their gender. It might appear in this schema that sexual capacity is biologically primordial and gender is a secondary, cultural effect, but in fact the opposite is more nearly the case. Despite the many forms it has assumed in human societies, gender appears to be the stable and persistent category while sexuality has been more changeable and adaptive. The gender arrangements of most societies have dictated what is valued and permitted in the domain of sexual identity and sexual behavior and have done so for the most part within binary male/female orders that have reproduced themselves as systems of male dominance. Though they can be studied on their own terms, sexual ideologies, sexual practices, and representations of the sexualized body are deeply influenced by the gendered norms that prevail in political, cultural, and economic life. In a sense, gender makes a social virtue out of the necessity of biological sex, policing the boundaries of the sexually permissible, nourishing ideals of sexual love, and dictating norms of sexual aim and object.

The power of the procreative model of sex has been so great that we are encouraged to think of sexuality as an innate force or drive favoring heterosexual sexual relations. Religious prescription and scientific opinion alike have generally endorsed this view. However, the notorious unruliness and apparent unpredictability of sexual desire has continuously destabilized the heterosexual model, producing contrary effects: it has provoked societies to favor theories and moral regimens that channel or repress sexuality in behalf of accepted norms, but it has also made sexual freedom or emancipation a cause and justification for individual or social rebellion. However, while there is no dismissing the entrenched belief that sexual desire is a natural drive with innate aims and objects, historians of sexuality have found it far more fruitful to think of sexual desire, following the ideas of the French philosopher, Michel
Foucault, as a kind of cultural discourse implicated in the “games of power” played by competing discourses of law, religion, folk beliefs, and science. In this view sexuality is a set of negative sanctions and positive incentives enshrined in language, images, and other cultural representations that do not repress or channel desire so much as express it in the form of cultural ideals of love, family, and heterosexual propriety, and as revulsion or distaste for aberrations from these norms. Foucault’s aim here is to historicize and denaturalize sex, to make us think of it not as an irresistible drive that owes its truth to an inherent quality it possesses naturally, but as a product of cultural tactics that makes it continuous with power and politics.

Foucault’s strategy of thinking about sex as cultural discourse rather than universal instinct allows us to appreciate better the permutations, both subtle and dramatic, that mark the difference in sexual expression between cultures and within cultures over time. It allows historians to analyze sexuality as a form of power that operates on and through individuals, exhorting them to culturally admissible ends, but also occasionally arousing in them resistance to or rejection of mainstream norms. This way of thinking about sexuality does not dismiss the biological and material origins of sexual desire, but it does demand that we consider how individuals experience physiological events – their own and others’ – through the lens of culture. One woman’s pleasure might be another’s pain; an experience of sexual ecstasy at one moment might be a humiliating debacle at some other time. Finally, discourse analysis reveals the connections between the deeply personal experience of sex and the public domain of state and society. It shows us how sexuality reflects changes in government, citizenship, social life, science, and technology and influences these things in turn.

Much of the evidence we have about the early history of sexuality is deduced from what we know about demography and patterns of marital fertility extending back into human prehistory. Marriage and kinship alliances are ubiquitous institutions in human societies, providing the immediate context for procreation, child rearing, and the transmission of wealth. Historical demographers are convinced that ancient peoples had sufficient understanding of birth control to shape family fertility in significant ways, limiting or spacing births when necessary, expanding family size when prospects improved. The quantity and nature of sexual relations were certainly influenced by the vicissitudes of marital fertility, and we can presume that women’s sexual experience and health, in particular, were directly affected by the need to resort to abstinence, prolonged breastfeeding, abortifacients, or abortion to limit births, or by life-threatening multiple pregnancies in times of abundance. In historic times, in the ancient West and Far East alike, knowledge of contraception was widespread and presumably widely employed. Knowledge of body function circulated in official medical practice and oral culture based on theories of humoral dynamics in the West, and in the East on notions of the balance of Yin and Yang. In both East and West, medical knowledge was a precious resource for understanding methods of avoiding pregnancy or birth, ensuring fertility or the birth of a boy, and enhancing or anesthetizing sexual feeling. In ancient China and classical Greece and Rome, sexuality was aligned with profoundly patriarchal gender systems that favored viable male heirs and, with some exceptions, regarded women merely as reproductive vessels. The most prosperous Chinese, Greek, and Roman men fulfilled their conjugal duties but took their sexual pleasures elsewhere, with prostitutes or boys in Greece and Rome, or concubines in
China. Marriage was foremost an arrangement between men for producing (male) heirs and transmitting property to the next generation of patriarchs.

In ancient Greece and republican and imperial Rome, remarkably similar sex and gender systems set the foundations for all later developments in the West. The Greek and Roman male citizen exercised complete legal and material dominion over everyone else in society: women, slaves, and minors. Women were regarded as inferior beings and enjoyed little autonomy and few rights. Rigid codes of sexual conduct based on concepts of penetration and “active” or “passive” sexual practices paralleled this hierarchical gender system. An adult male was permitted to penetrate but he risked losing his personal honor if he either allowed himself to be penetrated orally or anally, or willingly assumed the passive, inferior position in intercourse. In ancient Greece an adult male could exercise his right as penetrator on slaves and with boys who did not yet possess their manly honor, especially if the man was a distinguished citizen and the boy from a good family. Scholars have argued that ancient pederasty shared nothing with our modern concept of homosexuality, in which reciprocal penetration occurs between peers, a notion that would have been unthinkable to a Roman vir or a citizen of a Greek city-state.

The concept of ancient pederasty and its putative difference with modern homosexuality spawned an important epistemological debate in the 1970s about the meaning and historicity of same-sex love. Historians who favored a social constructionist position, in which the meaning of sexual experience derives from the historical situation, argued it is misleading to apply the word “homosexual” to same-sex sexual relations before the nineteenth-century invention of the term (Halperin, 1990: 29–33). Men or women in such relationships would not have understood the pleasures, the dangers, or the sense of identity of modern homosexuals. “Essentialists,” though they concede a host of historical variations, were willing to assume that homosexuals and homosexual love has always been pretty much the same. This debate has now moved into more subtle terrain, but it continues to inform the field by requiring historians to probe beneath the linguistic conventions of sex and situate sexual experience in historical context. This debate is different from, but often conflated with, the debate about whether individuals are genetically or otherwise predisposed to a particular sexual nature. Here the issue is the degree of determinism in biological or environmental influences that confers a sexual identity on individuals which carries corresponding rights or legal sanctions. The philosopher Ian Hacking has tried to bridge both these debates by proposing a way of thinking about individual actions, identity, and linguistic classifications that stresses reciprocal interaction and rejects caricatural voluntarist or determinist explanations (Hacking, 1995: 239).

Sexuality in the ancient world was constrained and sanctioned by social expectations and legal codes, but religion did not play an important role in shaping sexual beliefs or practices. The period in world history that followed the flowering of classical antiquity was dominated by the rise of the great world religions: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. In varying degrees, and often in the absence of strong central governments, religious elites intervened forcefully to regulate sexual behavior, particularly as this related to marriage and legitimacy, but also to acceptable norms of sexual activity. On the whole the great religions undergirded patriarchal gender orders, subordinated or segregated women, devised rituals of purification surrounding menses, and proscribed sexual deviations, especially same-sex sexuality and
adultery. From the millennium through the fifteenth century, in both Chinese and Western medicine, special attention was given to women’s reproductive disorders in deference to their special status as progenitors.

Holy orders in all religions attempted to seal off devotees to sexual temptation, but Latin Christianity in particular drew on classical ascetic philosophy and the Pauline tradition to nourish an ideal of sexual renunciation that sought to extinguish desire altogether and prepare the body for spiritual salvation. Marriage and procreation, in this perspective, were a reluctant concession to the laity, a way of confining and channeling sexuality so that neither the clerical nor the secular hierarchy was threatened. Ecclesiastical courts in Islam and in Latin and Byzantine Christianity accused and punished sinners, judging adulterers, fornicators, and sodomites according to the rigorous standards of Qur'an or canon law. Religious and medical authorities also attempted to specify orthodox forms of sexual intercourse that were healthful, procreative, and that positioned women on the bottom. It was not doubted that women experienced sexual pleasure, even orgasm, but medical authorities preferred to think this was not necessary for the release of “seed” and therefore for fertilization. Notwithstanding the necessary cooperation of sinful men, womenfolk were regarded as the gravest threat to the sexual order of the medieval era, tempting husbands and engaging in prostitution. Though we have evidence that non-marital sex occurred with some regularity, even in the confessional, marriage became an increasingly popular institution in the course of the Middle Ages, serving as a growing bulwark against sexual disorder.

The period from 1500 to 1800 was a great period of dynastic state building in world society. With respect to matters of sexuality, the rise of secular authority did not free sexual regulation from the thrall of religion so much as intensify it in the interest of state authority. In the new Western monarchies and in the Chinese and Ottoman empires, ruling patriarchs exercised absolute sway. Family patriarchs were regarded as virtual extensions of royal power and were given new legal instruments to control their women and children. Rebellious Protestants, meanwhile, went further still in the European and North American domains they controlled, trying and imprisoning adulterers, prostitutes, and (unmarried) fornicators, and burning sodomites at the stake for their crimes. Sodomy was a catch-all term that covered all forms of non-vaginally intermissive sex, including masturbation, bestiality, and especially anal intercourse. Hundreds of putative sodomites were executed in this way during moral panics in the Netherlands between 1690 and 1711. That this absurd word survives today in criminal indictments is testimony to the timorous reluctance of legal officers actually to specify the sex act of which defendants are accused.

The Spanish and Roman branches of the Catholic Inquisition, with the support of Catholic monarchs, were scarcely less harsh in the policing of their own congregants. In the midst of the profound political and religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sexual deviance became a symptom of social rebellion. The long-term effect of these attempts to purify sexual morality in the early modern West was a deeper reinforcement of the only permissible form of sexual expression – marital, procreative intercourse – and a new interest in populations and families by nation-building political elites as key elements in the expansion of state power.

Until about the eighteenth century it could be argued that the factors that shaped human sexuality were similar in most human civilizations. Governments were mostly
too weak to influence behavior or attitudes effectively. Marriage and sexual relations were still closely linked to the business of making heirs and having children, to economic conditions and family survival, and the transmission of property. Love in its modern, companionate form did not yet exist; indeed, strong expressions of physical or emotional passion were regarded in all cultures as debilitating and disruptive forms of madness or love-sickness. In effect sexuality was more a public than a private matter, policed by communities and kin, governed by an economic logic, and divided everywhere into two great categories: procreative and non-procreative.

At some point during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a schism appeared that would separate Western and Eastern sexualities for much of the next two centuries. In Europe and North America rapid economic development expanded and diversified prosperous elites, particularly the urban middle classes, causing rapid population growth and improved prospects throughout all levels of society. With sufficient assets couples could choose careers, marry, and plan families with greater certainty. As child and maternal mortality rates finally began to decline, couples were able to make emotional investments in one another and in their children which strengthened the affective bonds of family life. Romantic love took flower from this more stable soil, and new forms of individualism emerged that encouraged people to cultivate personal distinctiveness in feelings and attachments.

Ironically, as individual and private selves, including sexual selves, became more common, scientists and doctors were busy discovering universal laws that ordered and regulated sexual bodies. In this way too Western and Eastern societies diverged. Scholars have shown that anatomical and physiological representations of male and female bodies in Western and Eastern medicine relied on a common, androgynous body with differently positioned but homologous reproductive organs in each sex, the vagina being an inverted and internalized penis and so forth. Physiological differences were explained by relative humoral balances, heat, or measures of yin or yang. In the eighteenth century, however, Western scientists amassed evidence that women and men’s bodies were decisively different, particularly in skeletal structure and in reproductive function. Women’s wider hips, menstrual cycles, and weaker musculature, their changeable emotions and putatively weaker reasoning were regarded as naturally determining women’s domestic and procreative functions, while men were believed better equipped for the rigors of social struggle. Male and female bodies were described as incommensurable but complementary, with physical attraction depending on the relative differences in masculine and feminine traits.

The rather sudden appearance of a “two-sex” system essentially locked men and women into a form of biological determinism that experts, and, increasingly, individuals throughout society believed to be their sexual destiny. Coincident with this materialization of gendered bodies, women and men’s sexualities were held by medical specialists to be markedly different. Unless overcome by abnormal uterine furer, women were characterized as passive, inorgasmic beings, men as aggressive, opportunistic ones. These views confirmed and legitimated women’s confinement to the domestic sphere at a time when greater numbers of middle-class folk could live on the husband’s income alone. Though punctiliously discreet, far from repressing discourse about sexuality, middle-class people were obsessed with sexual health and hygiene, wrote manuals and tracts, and spoke endlessly about the ways that sexual excess, masturbation, or, contrarily, a misguided abstinence, could lead to weakness,