Gender and *Sex*

To the Editor:

In "Hardy Ruins: Female Spaces and Male Designs" (105 [1990]: 1055–70), U. C. Knoepflmacher mentions a "child (whose gender remains unspecified)" (1066).

Why the grammatical term *gender* for the physiological term *sex*? Formerly, dictionaries labeled this use of *gender* colloquial or jocular. Has the jocular colloquialism now made its way into scholarly writing? And will it spread thence into the world of reality? My California driver's license has the headings SEX-HEIGHT-WEIGHT. Are these headings in the future to read GENDER-HEIGHT-WEIGHT? Have the words *gender* and *sex* interchanged places, so that the professor of German must now explain that *der Löffel* is male, *die Gabel* is female, and *das Messer* is freemartin?

What is wrong with *sex*, I suppose, is that the word has been appropriated by illiterate teenagers: "I met a great guy last week, and we had sex. . . ." Even so, it is ludicrous in scholarly writing to use the grammatical term for the physiological one. The Victorians had a handy expression: *crim. con.*

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Reply:

Anne Lohrli's dissatisfaction with *gender*, even when the word is correctly used to designate a cultural construction of biological attributes, strikes me as excessive. Would she want us to rename our Gender Studies programs in order to conform to Victorian practices and her California driver's license?

As Lohrli's German example suggests, the attribution of sexual identity is always highly arbitrary: why *should* a fork be feminine, a spoon be masculine, yet a knife (that male weapon appropriated by Hardy's Tess and Conrad's Winnie Verloc) remain neuter? Or, even more incongruously, why should the German word for the moon, the celestial body feminized in all Romance languages—and traditionally associated with the feminine in English literature from Spenser to Lawrence—be masculine *Mond*? Indeed, it might be argued that even the assignation of sexual identity to animals and plants remains a purely human construction that would greatly puzzle a gnu or sea anemone.

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Ben Jonson at Table

To the Editor:

These are humorless times, and the importance of being earnest is certainly displayed in Bruce Thomas Boehrer's "Renaissance Overeating: The Sad Case of Ben Jonson" (105 [1990]: 1071–82). Boehrer starts many frisky hares, but let me confine myself to the centerpiece of his argument, a discussion of "Inviting a Friend to Supper."

Cheekily eschewing the usual view of the poem as a forthright occasional piece intended to amuse, charm, and cajole, Boehrer reads behind and between the lines with the squint eyes of a Malvolio. Indeed, he seems to look down from a great height on a disingenuous, morally compromised, conspicuously consuming Ben Jonson rather as Malvolio views Sir Toby Belch. Thus Boehrer terms the poem an "eleven-course exercise in literary dyspepsia" (1077); for him, Jonson describes "immoderate, even hypersophisticated pleasures" (true, Tacitus is now seldom encountered at dinner parties) but seriously tries to palm them off as "simple and poor" (1074); and Jonson becomes a table tyrant "occupying an absolutist position within his poem" (1075). This leads in due course to a climactic assertion of "the wholesale transformation of Jonson's moral and aesthetic ideals" under the pressure of "Jacobean absolutism" (1081).

This approach is heavy on the *gravitas*, to say the least. One can imagine Jonson reacting to it rather as another rotund party, Falstaff, reacts to Prince John: "a man cannot make him laugh." Sustaining such a solemn thesis in the face of the poem's many witty gambits, however, requires much strain. Consider the menu-concluding line ("Of this we will sup free, but moderately") on which much of Boehrer's argument hangs. There are several unhypersophisticated ways to paraphrase this promise: we shall choose freely from the variety; we shall eat our happy fill ad libitum, but not to the sodden point of pain; no one will count the servings or cups (a freedom Jonson extols at Penshurst); our ingestion will mimic the "liberty" of our conversation. Boehrer, however, contorts "free" to mean "gluttonously" and asserts that the "extended oxymoron" thus invented "encompasses the instability of Jonson's rhetoric" (1073).

In order to bolster this invention of gluttony so crucial to his thesis, Boehrer must exaggerate the menu. He says it includes "eleven flesh or fowl courses, together with cheese, fruit, pastry, salad, eggs, and large quantities of wine." In fact, there are eleven *choices* of flesh and fowl (but one meat and several tiny species of bird) and only four *courses*—salad, mutton, fowl,

and cheese and fruit—or perhaps five, if the "pastry" is filled with sweets rather than with meat. "Large quantities" of wine are nowhere mentioned: there is only some canary and not even a hogshead or magnum of that—merely a synecdochic "pure cup" (and a little to sauce the short-legged hen). Boehrer refers to the "Rabelaisian expansiveness" of the menu, but this is surely an insult to Rabelais. To be sure, we have here a full festive board, but it is clearly more akin to a holiday spread—Fourth of July or at most Thanksgiving—than to wretched Trimalchian excess. That Jonson could evoke gluttonous excess when need be is memorably shown by Sir Epicure Mammon in *The Alchemist*.

Boehrer also bolsters Jonson's sad case of gluttony by ignoring the obvious humor of so many promises made with contingencies attached (only mutton, cheese, and fruit are offered certainly). In these winking, elbow-in-the-rib lines from one friend to another Boehrer discerns a face stuffer's compulsiveness: "the poet, unable to control himself, lies about the food. (Or *does* he lie? . . .)" (1073). A reader who truly harbors doubt on this point and is so suspicious of ambush is a "grave sir" indeed.

Gravity likewise causes Boehrer to discern in the wild praise of canary's immortalizing properties not the exuberant wit of Falstaff's praise of sack but (unconscious?) delusional fantasy: "Tasting the cup of immortality, Jonson is no simple drunkard; in a very real [!] sense he is God, the deified contradiction of the bourgeois subject." And a knack for negative spin causes him to interpret the lines in which Jonson promises that no spies or gossips will be present and that the conversation will be—and stay—off the record as "a series of policing gestures" that establish "a process of rigorous surveillance instituted and controlled by the host" (1075). *Animal Farm* figures elsewhere in the essay; here allusion to *1984* would have seemed apt.

One would assume, from this reading, that Jonson supped alone on the appointed night. For, thus viewed, "Inviting" is a decidedly repellent performance. Or perhaps Boehrer wishes us to assume Jonson hadn't a clue of its enormous potential for misprision (or believed his friend would dull-wittedly take all at face value). At any rate, the bias here in favor of virtue—rather, Jonson's defect of virtue—over cakes and ale is extreme.

This unabashedly tendentious approach produces two ironies. The first is Boehrer's referring to Jonson as "occupying an absolutist position within his poem—seeing all, controlling all, and defining all." For this also describes Boehrer's vigorous critical inhabitation of the poem, practically to the exclusion of the author-speaker's voice of laissez-faire humanism (after all, the poem proffers an idyllic "safe house" holiday from Jacobean absolutism).

The second irony is that from so heterodox a reading should emerge such an orthodox conclusion, namely, that Jonson was—as Jonas Barish and David Riggs among many others have observed—brilliant at having things both ways. Nor can we gainsay Boehrer's view of the price paid by "James's chief metrical sycophant" for his success: his corruption, the loss of the "moral force" of his discourse.

Finally, though, it is unfair to identify this profound two-facedness as the "real tragedy" of Jonson's sad case alone, as if it were an anomaly and overeating were a dysfunction unique to him. Every arriver at the Jacobean (or Elizabethan) court was bound to feel, as Boehrer says Jonson felt, pressure to conform "revolutionary tendencies" to "royal conservatism" (1081). And virtually everyone—following the path of the Poet in *Timon of Athens* or Osric, say, rather than of Kent or Coriolanus—stooped under this pressure. Why single out Jonson's dubious facade of a "centered self" from all the rest (1080)? As Donne observes, *anyone* who came to court armed with only "silly honesty" and "neat integrity" was doomed ("To Sir Henry Wotton").

Nor should Jonson be singled out for his deeply oxymoronic assimilation into "the social formation of Jacobean absolutism" (1081). John Sellar doubtless published *A Sermon against Halting betweene Two Opinions* in 1611 because so many at the time were forced to confront antithetical desires. The pain of halting thus was the "sad case" for everyone pursuing ambitions amid the "smiling strife / Of climb-fall court" (Sidney, *Arcadia*). And this pain was often expressed by oxymoronic deployment of overeating imagery. Donne opens his sixth elegy with "Oh, let me not serve so, as those men serve / Whom honours' smokes at once fatten and starve." The pitiful thriver of Shakespeare's sonnet 75 confesses, "Thus do I pine and surfeit day by day, / Or gluttoning on all, or all away."

One wishes Boehrer had at least granted how perfectly aware *everyone* must have been that it was necessary to give out ambiguously and to maintain a Janus face at court—and that "by indignities we come to dignity" (Bacon, "Of Great Place"). Boehrer comes down pretty hard on Jonson for operating as many did under these oppressive conditions and for trying to have it both ways, as, for one example, Thomas Wyatt did: "take me as I am, / Though double in deeds, a inward perfect man" (Rebholz edition 226).

The sad case was in fact an epidemic.

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