

Gender and Sex

To the Editor:

In “Hardy Ruins: Female Spaces and Male Designs” (105 [1990]: 1055–70), U. C. Knoepfelmacher 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 un-hypersophisticated 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,