Consters, IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE Dana M. Oswald

# MONSTERS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Dana Oswald

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# Gender in the Middle Ages

#### Volume 5

# MONSTERS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Monsters abound in Old and Middle English literature, from Grendel and his mother in Beowulf to those found in medieval romances such as Sir Gowther. Through a close examination of the way in which their bodies are sexed and gendered, and drawing from postmodern theories of gender, identity, and subjectivity, this book interrogates medieval notions of the body and the boundaries of human identity. Case studies of Wonders of the East, Beowulf, Mandeville's Travels, the Alliterative Morte Arthure, and Sir Gowther reveal a shift in attitudes toward the gendered and sexed body, and thus toward identity, between the two periods: while Old English authors and artists respond to the threat of the gendered, monstrous form by erasing it, Middle English writers allow transgressive and monstrous bodies to transform and therefore integrate into society. This metamorphosis enables redemption for some monsters, while other monstrous bodies become dangerously flexible and invisible, threatening the communities they infiltrate. These changing cultural reactions to monstrous bodies demonstrate the precarious relationship between body and identity in medieval literature.

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# Gender in the Middle Ages

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This series investigates the representation and construction of masculinity and feminity in the Middle Ages from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. It aims in particular to explore the diversity of medieval genders, and such interrelated contexts and issues of sexuality, social class, race and ethnicity, and orthodoxy and hereodoxy.

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# LIST OF FIGURES

- Image 1: Blemmye, Wonders of the East, London, the British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 82r (© the British Library Board)
- Image 2: Donestre, Wonders of the East, London, the British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 83v (© the British Library Board)
- Image 3: Donestre, The Wonders of the East, London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv., fol. 103v (© the British Library Board)
- Image 4: Donestre, Wonders of the East, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 614, fol. 43r (© the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford)
- Image 5: Women: huntress and tusked woman, Wonders of the East, London, the British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 85r (© the British Library Board)
- Image 6: Huntress, Wonders of the East, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 614, fol. 44v (© the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford)
- Image 7: Women: huntress and tusked woman, *The Wonders of the East*, London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv., fol. 105v (© the British Library Board)
- Image 8: Tusked woman, Wonders of the East, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 614, fol. 45r (© the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford)

# CONTENTS

Aci	knowledgements	vii
Lis	t of Figures	viii
Int	roduction: Sex and the Single Monster	1
1.	The Indecent Bodies of the Wonders of the East	27
2.	Dismemberment as Erasure: the Monstrous Body in Beowulf	66
3.	Circulation and Transformation: The Monstrous Feminine in <i>Mandeville's</i> Travels	116
4.	Paternity and Monstrosity in the Alliterative <i>Morte Arthure</i> and <i>Sir Gowther</i>	159
Conclusion: Transformation and the Trace of the Monster		197
Bibliography		209
Inc	dex	221

# INTRODUCTION

# Sex and the Single Monster

The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination. – David Gilmore (1)

For all of the famed restrictions of Christian doctrine and medieval modes of social conduct, the Middle Ages was, perhaps paradoxically, a period that appears to have accommodated, in ways our liberal society does not or seems not to, what we might broadly call the rude, bawdy or obscene. But that does not mean that, at different times and in different ways, it was not contentious nor that it was devoid of the power to shock or offend, as well as to titillate and excite. – Nicola McDonald (2)

TOHANNES HARTLIEB's 1461 portrait of Alexander the Great shows us a surprising version of the Greek leader (as reprinted in Petzoldt and Neubauer 41). This Alexander wears an elaborate three-peaked crown and a well-cut tunic, neither unusual nor inappropriate attire. His nose is decidedly Roman and his eyebrows pinch together in consternation over light-colored eyes that look intelligent. Despite all the signs of royalty and refinement, this Alexander bears two signs of barbarity: slender tusks protruding from his cheeks and an unkempt beard and hair. His clothes tell us of his wealth and political significance, but his crude animal attributes interrupt and contradict this story. Hartlieb portrays Alexander as a man overtaken by the mysterious East he hoped to conquer. Just as the lands that he conquered were known as barbarous to medieval readers and viewers, so too does Alexander's physical form in this image reflect the perceived qualities of these lands. Contact with the savage lands of the East has changed a leader of civilization into the monster as represented by Hartlieb. Though dressed in the proper attire and still obviously human in his facial features, this Alexander cannot hide his corruption. It peeks through in tousled hair, an untidy beard, and, most strikingly, those intractable tusks.

This fifteenth century German painting offers one perspective of the monstrous human body in medieval culture. The image suggests that congress with the dangerous lands of the East visibly contaminates the human body of Alexander – and indeed, in much early medieval literature, the monstrous exists only in distant places like the marvel-filled East. As the image also implies, humans like Alexander desire contact with the monstrous and find its very liminality fascinating and

inviting. These two problems are fundamentally related: humans are both fascinated and repelled by monstrous forms. Alexander's infamous desire to see, describe, and thereby possess the wondrous creatures of the East, as represented by his letters to his teacher Aristotle, has redounded upon him and he, at least in the Hartlieb image, becomes one of them. Like Alexander, humans want to witness strange bodies, but they also wish to control, to circumscribe these bodies, in order to keep them somehow at a safe distance. This control is enacted textually and visually through the representation and the erasure of the monstrous body. Through practices of erasure, the text allows both distance and proximity to the monstrous, standing in as a kind of protection for the viewer or reader that enables safe indulgence in the pleasure provided by the monstrous form.

#### MONSTROSITY DEFINED

Over halfway through the Middle English travel narrative, *Mandeville's Travels*, the narrator, Sir John Mandeville, defines the term 'monster' for his readers: Sir John tells us that 'a monster is a þing difformed a3en kynde bothe of man or of best or of ony þing elles & þat is cleped a Monstre' [a monster is a thing deformed against kind, both of man or of beast or of anything else, and that is called a monster] (Hamelius 30). A monster is therefore an outlier within its race or 'kind,' whether that kin-group is human or animal. The monster is always read against the bodies of those who are not monstrous – the so-called 'normal' humans or 'normal' animals.<sup>2</sup> I do not seek to reify the concept of normalcy here, but rather to point to the ways monstrous bodies represent the problems inherent in human bodies, particularly the problems of sex, gender, and reproduction. The term 'normal' holds a great deal of current political capital, particularly in disability studies. As Lennard Davis argues, 'even in texts that do not appear to be about disability, the issue of normalcy is fully deployed. One can find in almost any novel ... a kind of surveying of the terrain of the body, an attention to difference – physical,

The Alexander tradition in medieval England, and indeed medieval Europe, is well established. See especially the chapter, 'The Alexander-Legend in Anglo-Saxon England' in Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*.

<sup>2</sup> As Lennard Davis points out, the term 'normal' is one that does not come into popular use until the nineteenth century, after statistics, as a branch of knowledge, came to influence public policy in Europe (4). He sets the term against notions of the ideal and the grotesque, ultimately linking the notion of ideal or average to nationalism and politics. Davis ultimately wants to demonstrate that 'the very term that permeates our contemporary life – the normal – is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment' (15). While the term 'normal' does not exist in the medieval lexicon, the notion of uniformity and difference is certainly known and articulated, much as Mandeville defines creatures as being 'against kind.' Disability was often perceived in this period, and many following it, as a kind of monstrosity. I do not wish to perpetuate this perception, and note that there is much to be gained from an examination of medieval bodies through the lens of disability studies.

mental, and national' (15). While medieval responses to disabled bodies are hardly sensitive, medieval texts most certainly do explore 'the terrain of the body' and examine what it means for a body to appear different.

Monsters, because they do appear different, help humans define themselves.<sup>3</sup> In 'Man-Eating Monsters and Ants as Big as Dogs,' Susan Kim builds from the work of Bruno Roy to clearly articulate this philosophy:

... monster catalogues can reassure their readers. Roy follows Augustine in his argument that the depiction of monsters is an articulation of the fear of the loss of corporal integrity. As they provide a normalizing context for aberrant human births, monsters demonstrate what can happen to the human body – what can come off, what can be unnaturally added on. But with the same gesture the catalogue reassures: the articulation of the fear of disintegration allows that fear to be put to rest, because as the monstrosities define the norm, they confirm it, and thus quiet the fear of its dissolution. (40)

Monsters do more than provide a delicious terror for their viewers. They assure viewers that their humanity is more complete than that possessed by the monster, but they also notify viewers that variations are possible, and that humanity is available on a kind of sliding scale. Thus, they demand that viewers appraise the status of their own humanity, and the integrity of their bodies and identities. Monsters remind humans of what it means to be human – they may threaten the human body, but they also confirm notions of its relative cohesion.

Because human monsters are in part human, authors and scholars demonstrate significant concerns over their position in the spiritual hierarchy. When considering the nature of monstrous humans, most scholars of medieval monsters turn initially and immediately to Augustine's admonition in book sixteen of *De Civitate Dei*:

Verum quisquis uspiam nascitur homo, id est animal rationale mortale, quamlibet nostris inusitatem sensibus gerat corporis formam seu colorem sive motum sive sonum sive qualibet vi, qualibet parte, qualibet qualitate naturam, ex illo uno protoplasto originem ducere nullus fidelium dubitaverit. (42–5)

For example, Lesley Kordecki argues that 'Animals in discourse for the most part show the shaping of human subjectivity, and the lost monsters of the mediaeval text demonstrate what we do not want to be, but perhaps, as in Marie's fable, we realize we are not so far removed from them after all' (36–7). For studies of medieval monstrosity, see Cohen, 'Monster Culture'; Daston and Park, Wonders, Orchard, Pride and Prodigies; Tolkien, 'Monsters and the Critics'; Roy, 'En Marge'; Thompson, Freakery, Wittkower, 'Marvels of the East'; Bildhauer and Mills, Monstrous Middle Ages; Bynum, Metamorphosis, Williams, Deformed Discourse; Olsen and Houwen, Monsters and the Monstrous; Bovey, Monsters and Grotesques, Verner, Epistemology; Kline, Maps, Jones and Sprunger, Marvels; and Knoppers and Landes, Monstrous Bodies. Other studies of monstrosity, particularly those related to film, are Creed, Monstrous Feminine; Schildrick, Embodying the Monster; Saunders, Imps, Lant and Thompson, Imagining, Benshoff, Monsters in the Closet, and Kirkup et al., Cyborg.

[Yet whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or colour or motion or utterance, or in any faculty, part or quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one man who was first created.]

Augustine writes to assure his readers that the races of monsters, at least those that are 'rational,' have the potential to be saved, and thus are human. According to Augustine, a body that is 'formed against kind' is not counted out of the human race, just so long as the being inside of it is capable of higher thinking. However, if the idea of rationality separates human from animal, monsters continue to occupy a difficult middle ground - how and when do we decide if monstrous humans are rational? Does it have to do with their ability to speak? To live in communities? Must all monstrous humans act rationally - and do, indeed, all humans act rationally? If monsters do not act in a way that is perceived to be rational, are they to be considered beasts, even if their bodies seem to be human? The animal is distinguished from the human, according to Joyce Salisbury, following Thomas Aguinas, by the ability to reason: animals act according to instinct where humans act according to reason (5). In her book, The Beast Within, she elucidates the complicated medieval understandings of animal behavior - and the lengths to which philosophers would go to deny animals' rationality. 4 Jan Ziolkowski also demonstrates the difficulty of distinguishing human from beast, saying 'the line between human and animal in the Middle Ages was at once sharply drawn and porous' ('Literary' 22).5

If the line between animal and human was problematic for medieval thinkers, despite the oft-cited Augustinian injunction concerning rationality, then the divisions among animals, monsters, and humans were considerably more troubling. As Salisbury notes, monsters were largely understood as hybrid creatures, a comment that serves as an 'example of the growth of the idea (and fear) of the blurring of the lines between animal and human' (145). Monsters are particularly difficult to categorize, Augustine acknowledges, because their appearances can be

Salisbury argues that sharp delineation began to decline after the twelfth century. Because animals were a way to think about the nature of human identity, this shift required an altered understanding of humanity: 'When early Christian thinkers established what they believed to be clear categories that separated animals from humans, they were not only making a theological statement of humanity's dominance over the natural world, but they were actually defining what it meant to be human. ... The increasing popularity of the metaphoric linking of humans and animals seems to have opened the possibility for redefining humanity in a way that eliminated the categoric separation of the species' (Salisbury 149).

5 See both 'Literary Genre and Animal Symbolism' and *Talking Animals*. Other studies also examine the relationship between humans and animals, including Cohen's *Medieval Identity Machines*, which theorizes the intimate relationships, for example, between horse and rider. Susan Crane, too, has spoken of the nature of animals through a study of the hunt, and particularly dogs' behavior in the hunt as intermediate between human and prey ("Medieval

Hunting").

misleading; this difficulty is exacerbated when monsters are animal-human hybrids. The inclusion of animal parts on a recognizably human form, however, seems not to have led to a monster being classified as an animal. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon listing of monsters, Liber Monstrorum, carefully divides its monsters into three categories: monstrous men, monstrous beasts, and monstrous serpents. Included among the humans are the person of both sexes (Orchard, "Liber" I.1), fauns (I.5), sirens (I.6), hippocentaurs (I.7), Ethiopians (I.9), Cyclops (I.11), Hercules (I.12), and the Cynocephali (I.16). Among the beasts, we find the lion (II.1), leopards (II.6), chimaera (said to be a 'bestiam triplicis monstruosa corporis foeditate terribilum' [terrible beast of triple body with monstrous hideousness] (Orchard 294-5)) (II.11), the two-headed dog Cerberus (II.14), horse-fishes (II.28), and fox-sized mice (II.29). These lists reveal that both monstrous humans and monstrous beasts can be hybrid, but that those creatures that possess both animal and human features, like fauns, sirens, hippocentaurs, and the Cynocephali, are still considered human. Moreover, the lists imply that Hercules, a man of excessive strength, is just as monstrous as a creature that is half goat and half man, or that a crocodile is as monstrous as a chimaera. It seems that monstrous humans are not to be identified as animals; they are, rather, incomplete or over-determined humans.

According to Augustine's definition as well as to the divisions of *Liber Monstrorum*, humans who possess animal parts are not to be classified as animals, but as monsters; however, by virtue of their animal parts, they are also not entirely human. John Block Friedman, in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, claims that monstrous humans were not conceived of as truly human: 'it was not possible to grant full and equal humanity to an alien race ... As long as the definition of "man" was based upon a Western model, the monstrous races could only be assigned a subordinate place in the Chain of Being' (196). Thus, for most medieval thinkers and writers, humanoid and rational monsters had the possibility of salvation as Augustine claimed,<sup>6</sup> but they existed somewhere between human and animal in the spiritual and social hierarchy.

Common among all of these writers and thinkers is the notion that monstrous bodies are those that exceed human norms. Physical norms, however, are not built on subtle differences, but rather on visible ones — ones that help a community decide who fits the norm, and who exceeds it. Consequently, I argue that monstrosity is a primarily physical and visible category: in order to be monstrous, one must manifest a clear and usually visible physical difference from that which is 'normal.' Some critics delimit the category by declaring that monsters only exist in fantasy or imagination (Gilmore 6), while others focus on more amorphous qualities, such as 'inherent evil [sic], that is, unmotivated wickedness toward humanity'

For a discussion of a hierarchy of salvation, see Austin, 'Marvelous Peoples or Marvelous Races? Race and the Anglo-Saxon Wonders of the East', discussed at greater length in chapter one.

(Waterhouse, quoted in Gilmore 6), or that 'they are dangerous objects of fear, but that this fear includes "the primal fear of being eaten" '(Andriano, quoted in Gilmore 6). These vague definitional concepts are problematic; how shall we decide what is evil, or, indeed, unmotivated? How does our fear of being consumed define what is monstrous? Is this the only human fear that monsters invoke? Even Joseph Campbell turns to hard-to-quantify qualities: 'By a monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all of your standards for harmony, order, and ethical condition' (quoted in Gilmore 7). Standards for harmony, order, or ethical condition are not only socially constructed; they differ at individual levels. I propose a physical and therefore more concrete boundary for monstrosity, in concert with Mandevillian, and, I would argue, medieval tenets.

A monstrous body can differ from a human body in three ways, and we see across medieval literature examples of each of these kinds of difference: they can be more than human, less than human, and human plus some other element not intrinsic to an individual human body. Thus, three types of monstrous humans exist: monsters of excess, monsters of lack, and hybrid monsters. Monsters of excess include the giants of Middle English romance, whose bodies are excessively large, excessively hairy, and usually excessively violent. The sciapods (one-footed men) and blemmye (men with no heads and faces in their chests) featured in both Wonders of the East and Mandeville's Travels, are monsters of lack - they do not have all the body parts expected of normal humans. Finally, monsters of hybridity combine attributes of different creatures, different species, or even different sexes into one body. They most often combine animal and human body parts, as the Hartlieb portrait of Alexander depicts him as a human man with tusks like those of a boar. These elements can be more complex, as with the tusked, hooved, and tailed women of Wonders, or the horse-footed and fanged men of Mandeville. This type of monster also includes sex hybrids, such as the hermaphrodites in Mandeville or the bearded huntresses in Wonders. Each of these types of monster may present a different kind of commentary, culturally and contextually contingent, regarding the human body. However, at a more abstract level, we can perhaps see the monsters of lack indicating the vulnerability of the human body (for what happens to us if we lose a leg, or worse still, our head?), while those of excess demonstrate its inadequacies. The monsters of hybridity, however, represent a more complex problem; they show the permeability of the human body: the very lack of integrity that permits it to be taken over by parts of other creatures, creating a whole that is neither one thing nor the other. The hybrid monster shows the instability of the categories and organizational principles that drive human societies.

While physical aberration is the primary attribute of monstrosity, deviant behavior can serve to emphasize or exaggerate monstrosity. Monstrous behaviors help to mark the monster as a cultural as well as a physical Other. Some such behaviors include habits of eating, grooming, and dressing, reactions to human approach, use of human language, and transgressing gender roles. For example, a particular group of enormous men in *Wonders* catch fish with their hands and

consume them raw, while another group of large lion-headed men consume passing travelers, luring them with human speech. A community of bearded women, hybrid because they possess male and female physical attributes, also engage in transgressive gender roles because they hunt, whereas another group of monstrous women – the Amazons – lack a breast and thereby function as both creatures of lack and also potentially as hybrid because they attempt to take on a male physical characteristic (breastlessness), perform their monstrosity in that they govern themselves, and act as warriors. Grendel's mother, too, a monster of excess like her son, performs a hybrid kind of monstrosity when she takes on the male privilege of getting revenge for her son's death. While these behaviors certainly oppose social norms, they do not make women into monsters *unless* they are accompanied by a physically different body.

Monstrous action or behavior alone does not make the actor a monster. In order to be a monster, one must possess a monstrous body, largely because actions are temporary and can be changed. Aberrant behavior holds the possibility for reform, whereas a monstrous body allows far less possibility of such modification. Women with transgressive behaviors but human bodies may be reformed, as is true of Thryth in *Beowulf*, or even of the Amazons in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* (who seem to possess both breasts). Reform is considerably more problematic, however, when a woman possesses a tail or tusks. Like their female counterparts, many male monsters, particularly giants, transgress gender roles through excess sexuality in addition to their already excessively large bodies. Thus, transgressive behaviors, when linked with aberrant physicality, reinforce human allegorical or metaphorical interpretations of the monstrous body. However, these actions alone cannot identify a person as a monster.

If this definition of the monster seems to rely on essential categories, that is because it does. A monster, in the Middle Ages, is a creature with a body that differs from the norm in significant ways. The category of the monster implies that there is a set of characteristics that defines the bodies of humans. If a creature possesses more of, less of, or different from this essence, then the creature is a monster – but the category of monstrous humans depends upon its relation to the category of humanity. Lisa Verner explicates Mandeville's definition of 'deformed against kind,' suggesting that it means 'deformed against the nature of the general category of creature under consideration' (5). Thus, this definition requires a certain level of agreement regarding what it means to be human.

The category of human is one often perceived as complete and independent, in no need of being propped up by external supports. The monster, however, takes the category of humanity, and exploits its boundaries and explores and challenges its integrity. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monster always manages to escape (being caught, being killed) because its body cannot be easily categorized or understood – 'the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions' ('Monster Culture' 6). Because monsters contest cultural categories of 'normality,' they help to rewrite cultural beliefs. However, Cohen states that the monster simultaneously 'prevents mobility, delimiting the

social spaces through which private bodies can move,' under threat of those creatures that serve as 'border patrol' (12). Monstrous humans, then, reify what it means to be fully human, but they also delimit the possibilities for the human body. Because they are simultaneously human and not human, their very indeterminacy makes the monstrous a location for displacing fears about bodies that are all too human.

#### SEX, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND REPRODUCTION

While monsters are depositories for all kinds of human fears and anxieties, the nexus of many of these fears is sexuality. Judith Halberstam argues that 'Where sexuality becomes identity, other "others" become invisible and the multiple features of monstrosity seem to degenerate back into a primeval sexual sludge. Class, race, and nation are subsumed, in other words, within the monstrous sexual body' (*Skin Shows* 7). This is not to suggest that issues like race, class, or nation do not contribute to the meaning or function of the monster; rather, sexuality can be a focal point at which these various concerns meet. Racial and social concerns can be carried out through the medium of the sexualized monstrous body.<sup>7</sup>

However, sexuality remains an elusive term, one which theorists struggle to define. As Eve Sedgwick claims, 'Sex, gender, sexuality: three terms whose usage relations and analytical relations are almost irremediably slippery' (27). The difficulty in pinning down sexuality stems from the troubled relationship between categories of sex and gender. The biologist and feminist scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling notes that

In 1972 the sexologists John Money and Anke Ehrhardt popularized the idea that sex and gender are separate categories. Sex, they argued, refers to physical attributes and is anatomically and physiologically determined. Gender they saw as a psychological transformation of the self – the internal conviction that one is either male or female (gender identity) and the behavioral expressions of that conviction. (3)

Sex, then, is biological, supposedly indisputable, while gender is more amorphous, and perhaps more culturally constructed – or at least can be defined in relation to cultural constraints. Sedgwick states that sex differences:

include (or are ordinarily thought to include) more or less marked dimorphisms of genital formation, hair growth ..., fat distribution, hormonal function, and reproductive capacity. 'Sex' in this sense ... is seen as the relatively minimal raw material on which is then based the social construction of *gender*. Gender, then,

Although Halberstam's concerns are with monsters in Gothic novels and their specific social and historical context, her description of the literary experience of monstrous bodies is similarly apt for medieval audiences.

is the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors. (27)

Sedgwick, and most cultural scholars, treat sex as an easy-to-identify category, placing gender as more difficult to identify or categorize. However, Fausto-Sterling argues that even the basic physical facts of human bodies are complex and contradictory: 'Our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference. The more we look for a simple physical basis for "sex," the more it becomes clear that "sex" is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender' (4). In other words, what we expect to see because of our socialized notions of gender affects what we will identify as sex characteristics. Thus, while our expectations about gender are based on sex, so too are our expectations of sex based on gender. Moreover, as Judith Butler rightly reminds us, gender extends

beyond that naturalized binary. The conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female, thus performs the very naturalization that the notion of gender is meant to forestall. Thus, a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a *regulatory* operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption.

(Undoing Gender 43)

In other words, to rely only on categories of masculinity and femininity as options for gender is as reductive as conflating sex and gender.

When the lines between sex and gender are difficult to draw, definitions and understandings of sexuality become necessarily culturally contingent. Sedgwick struggles to define sexuality in a way that removes from it elements of gender. She claims that sexuality is 'the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them' (29). Sexuality is not just about what is done, but what is desired, expected, preferred, and known. Because of our binary systems of both sex (male/female) and gender (homo-/heterosexual),<sup>8</sup> it becomes almost impossible to discuss sexuality without invoking these categories and turning sexuality into merely a question of 'object-choice' (30), that is, who or what one desires to engage with sexually. Sedgwick does her best to eschew this means of thinking about sexuality, stating 'sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren't well described in terms of the gender of object-choice at all' (35). Thus, untangling the web of sex,

<sup>8</sup> As Sedgwick argues, although bi-sexuality and hermaphroditism are alternate categories, they rely upon these binary systems because they must define themselves in relation to them. Without the binary system, these concepts possess no meaning (though, of course, the bodies and behaviors they describe continue to exist).