

MEANINGS AS CORPORAL ACTS: WOMEN'S HISTORY BEYOND SEX AND GENDER

A paper to be presented at the 20th International Congress of Historical Sciences,
Women's History Revisited: Historiographical Reflections on Women and Gender in a
Global Context, Session 'Feminism and Feminist Theory'
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 8 July 2005

Marja Jalava

Researcher
University of Helsinki
Department of History
Unioninkatu 38 A, P. O. Box 59
FIN-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

Email: marja.jalava@helsinki.fi
Tel. +358 (0)50 361 2818

1. Gender trouble and the trouble with gender

In the late nineties, when starting my study on Finnish nineteenth-century men of letters and their definitions of selfhood, identity and the relationship between the self and others, I was soon struck by the fact how deeply gendered their way of being was. It was not only a question of mental attitudes and cognitive world views but of the whole corporal being-in-the-world. My study, initially meant to represent the history of ideas, in part turned into gender history for I was forced to look for better theoretical tools in order to get a handle on the field of my study.

After getting more acquainted with women's history and its theoretical background, I noticed that the discussion was strongly based on the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' and its derivatives 'female/feminine' and 'male/masculine', dominant in the Anglo-American feminist theory and reflected also in Western European literature on gender and women's history. In Finland, the best-known international forerunner of this standpoint has been the American historian Joan W. Scott, appearing in almost all Finnish studies on women's history. For Scott, gender is a social system of meanings, produced around the biological sex by cultural and social factors. With this idea, it has been possible to give up essentialist and socio-biological theories of 'woman' and 'man' as natural, unhistorical entities and examine gender as a social construction.¹

In her critical analysis *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler attacks the idea of "a natural sex" as a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders, says Butler. She argues that the seemingly prediscursive construct called "sex" itself is a gendered category, which means that gender ought not to be

¹ Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review* 91(5), 1986, pp. 1067–1068; for the influence of Scott in Finland, see also Pirjo Markkola, 'Suomalaisen naishistorian vuosikymmenet', *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 1/2003, p. 61.

conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex, but, instead, “gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.”² Extending her critique to the question of the subject, Butler also challenges the feminist theories assuming a “doer” behind the deed. Since the “doer,” according to Butler, is variably constructed in and through the deed, the substantive “I” only appears as such through a signifying practice, in a process of performative repetition of acts.³

However, there still remains a certain trouble with gender. Butler’s claim that there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of discursive practices has given cause for criticism on discursive monism. If everything is only and always language, the human subject is in danger of becoming reduced to the culture and considered as its effect, leaving no room for the tension between the subject and the culture.⁴ Moreover, despite her criticism of a natural sex, she still maintains a part of the structure of the sex/gender division. The metaphor of production implies the idea of bodily raw material being modified by the socio-cultural production process of gender, tempting us to see the relationship between the discursive practices and gender as causal – gender is produced by the discourse. Ironically, some Finnish women’s historical studies, based on discourse analysis and aimed at questioning the classical mind/body dichotomy, in fact strengthen this dualism by detaching discourses from the corporality of a human subject. Furthermore, when studying discourses regardless of their authors, it becomes impossible to understand why the authors in a certain historical situation identified or did not identify with the various subject positions constructed by the discursive practices.⁵

2. Toward a phenomenology of sexual difference

In my study on nineteenth-century men of letters, *Self and the Geist* (to be published in autumn 2005), my proposal for overcoming the sex/gender division is based on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and its interpretation by the Finnish philosopher Sara Heinämaa.⁶ While the body for Butler is above all a politicized object and an instrument of discursive practices, according to Merleau-Ponty, our body does not present itself as the object of external influences for we *are* our body-in-the-world and have no means of knowing the human body or the world other than that of living it.⁷ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty argues that our body is comparable to a work of art: “It is a nexus of living meanings, not the law for a certain number of covariant terms.” Correspondingly, the world is not primarily a practical world of ends and means but an aesthetic world, and our relation to it is dialogical.⁸ The emphasis on corporality does not mean that the body should be considered more original or authentic in comparison with culture. From the phenomenological viewpoint, the whole question is misleading for in a human being, everything is both manufactured and natural.⁹

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 6–7, for the explicit critique of Joan W. Scott, see pp. 10, 152n17.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 140–147.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 148; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 6.

⁵ For discourse analysis of this kind in women’s history, see e.g. Arja-Liisa Räisänen, *Onnellisen avioliiton ehdot* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1995), English Summary, p. 260.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Trans. Colin Smith. London and New York: Routledge, 1996 [1945]); Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

⁷ Merleau-Ponty 1996, pp. 93, 141, 198–199.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151; Heinämaa 2003, p. 63.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty 1996, p. 189.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the subject as the living body allows us to understand the self and identity as something more than the resulting effect of a rule-bound discourse, and yet, without returning to the substantive, metaphysical "I." Crucial here is the notion of the sedimentation of our lives: "An attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favored status for us." Thus, although our existential project cannot be fixed in advance, after living in a certain manner for years, it is less probable that we shall change. From this angle, the embodied subject is a giver of meanings but also their sedimentation: an ongoing process of repeated corporal acts forming structures which, in a new situation, tend to lead us to live in a certain manner. Even if some people are more weighed down by their sedimentation than others, sedimentation in itself should not be seen as an obstacle to freedom, for, in Merleau-Ponty's view, our freedom can have its real roots only in our social and personal history in relation to futures which are never firmly fixed.¹⁰

For feminist theory, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology opens a new way of discussing sexuality and the relations between women and men. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is at all times present like an atmosphere and, as such, co-extensive with life. Hence it follows that sexual behavior is not a manifestation of a more profound existential situation, but neither is it the other way around. All elements refer to each other and are understandable only in terms of each other. What is sexual in a person's life or in the life of a community can be seen and understood only by studying the whole of behavior. From this angle, sexual identities, maleness and femaleness, are variations of our basic way of relating to the world. It is not a question of *what* we are but *how* we are – 'woman' and 'man' are modal, relational, and dynamic concepts. This does not mean that sexual identity is a question of choice, for even if we may be able to change our manners of doing, this is often a slow and laborious process in which we are also dependent on others.¹¹ In part, despite her criticism of Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler's idea of gender as a stylized repetition of acts is indebted to this phenomenological account.¹² However, Merleau-Ponty pays more attention to our corporality, historicity, and intersubjectivity as well as allows us more latitude in relation to the world.

3. From phenomenology to historiography

In my own study, I used phenomenology as a heuristic method, which allowed me to study sexual identities on an extended scale. Hence I was not only interested in explicit statements concerning man and woman or maleness and femaleness but my purpose was also to find out how even seemingly neutral ideas, activities, and passions were perceived or imagined as womanly or manly, female or male. In general, I wanted to challenge the idea that gender issues were some short of "speciality" which could be passed over in silence by mainstream historical studies, instead of interlacing sexuality with the historical narrative as a whole.

As an example, we may take here the Finnish national philosopher Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881), the leading Finnish advocate of the Hegelian philosophy and the ideological leader of the Finnish nationalist movement. On the explicit level, Snellman, as countless other academic men of his era, claimed that women and men were essentially different, which he articulated in terms of a complementarity between distinctively female and male characters. Besides the usual public–private distinction, almost all modes of

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 441–442, 453–456; see also Michael Hammond, Jane Howarth and Russell Keat, *Understanding Phenomenology* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 250–260.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty 1996, pp. 168–171; Heinämaa 2003, pp. 66–69.

¹² Compare to Butler 1990, pp. 139–141, 152n15.

behavior were gendered. By doing ‘manly’ things, such as participating in politics, working on a building site, writing tragedies, playing brass music or swimming, women became ‘manly’ both mentally and physically at the same time.¹³ While women had to avoid numerous actions to preserve their femaleness, the ‘status of manhood’ was something a male person had to attain in the homosocial battlefield by the logic of ‘implicit misogyny’, the negative exclusion of women.¹⁴

Snellman’s principal philosophical work, *Versuch einer speculativen Entwicklung der Idee der Persönlichkeit* (1841), represented the ideal of sexless knowledge. The study on personality took part in the discussion between the ‘old Hegelians’ and the ‘young Hegelians’ concerning the question of whether God was included in the world or if God had an independent, transcendent existence.¹⁵ On a more practical level, the controversial question was how autonomous Reason was in relation to authorities. On closer examination, however, the story of the progress of Reason both as the development of individual self-consciousness and as the development of forms of social organizations turned out to be the story of masculine emancipation from the ‘immature’ stages of consciousness to the universal self-consciousness which transcended the subjective, the particularity, and partiality of feelings – all essential for ‘feminine,’ less enlightened forms of consciousness.¹⁶

Emancipation was crucial also in the realm of religion, for Snellman insisted that an adult man had to emancipate himself from the humble devotion and the cult of the heart natural to uneducated people, women, and children in order to grasp Christian Faith by reason. In fact, the Hegelian philosophy itself was the highest form of absolute knowledge, expressing the same content as religion in the form of conceptual thought. As a result, the emancipation of man brought the discovery of his true self as a vehicle of *Geist* and showed the ultimate identity of God’s self-knowledge with man’s knowledge of the universe. This was called by Hegel and Snellman a ‘reconciliation’ (*Versöhnung*), which implied that the two, man and *Geist*, remained, but that their opposition was overcome (*Aufhebung*). Unlike the radical spokesmen of the Hegelian left, such as Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), Snellman did not abandon Christianity altogether. However, by understanding it as the contemplation of man’s identity with cosmic spirit, he left out the very essence of Christian faith: God’s love and grace (*agapē*), creation, revelation, and salvation.¹⁷ From this viewpoint, the whole process of secularization in the nineteenth century expressed a manly way of being-in-the-world, aiming at rational self-sufficiency instead of emotional dependency.

Emancipation from dependency to self-government was also in a central position in Snellman’s social philosophical main work, *Läran om staten* (1842). By equating a male individual’s emancipation with the national struggle for independence, even the foreign policy of a nation-state became gendered.¹⁸ For example, when Snellman in the 1850s harshly opposed the plan of restoring Finland back to its old *mother* country Sweden, it

¹³ See, for example, J. V. Snellman, *Samlade Arbeten IV 1844–1845* (Helsingfors: Statsrådets Kansli, 1994), pp. 314–315; J. V. Snellman, *Samlade Arbeten VII 1850–1856* (Helsingfors: Statsrådets Kansli, 1996), pp. 425–428.

¹⁴ For the concept of implicit misogyny, see David Tjeder, *The Power of Character: Middle-Class Masculinities, 1800–1900* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2003), pp. 281–283.

¹⁵ For the discussion in general, see, for example, Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 72n1.

¹⁶ J. V. Snellman, *Samlade arbeten II 1840–1842* (Helsingfors: Statsrådets Kansli, 1992); see also Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (Second Edition. London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 70–73.

¹⁷ Snellman 1992, pp. 262–263, 269, 278, 284, 341–342; Taylor 1975, pp. 119, 480–509.

¹⁸ J. V. Snellman, *Samlade arbeten III 1842–1843* (Helsingfors: Statsrådets Kansli, 1993), pp. 487–488.

was not only a question of practical politics but also of the defense of national manly self-consciousness which was in danger of regressing back to a lower, more feminine stage.¹⁹ Correspondingly, in economic life, Snellman equated national and individual self-sufficiency. When he during his senatorial office pushed through the currency reform which, in part, made the great famine of 1867–1868 worse, even there he opposed the masculine independence of the foreign power against the childish surrender to the mercy of others.²⁰

On the whole, for Snellman, the manly way of relating to the world was marked with instrumentality, possession, and control. As spirit, man could ascend his body and master it as a ‘second nature’ (*zweite Natur*), which made man “the lord of the creation.”²¹ Work played a crucial role in man’s struggle, for man had to come to recognize himself in his surroundings by ‘working them up’ with his own project.²² Significantly, despite Snellman’s close connection with German Idealism and his personal liking of the works of Friedrich von Schiller, the aesthetic education of man was unimportant in his pedagogic system. For Schiller, the aesthetic experience was the opposite of work, for instead of domination and exploitation, it required an ability to be responsive and let the world become manifest to man.²³ As this kind of “passivity,” in the eyes of Snellman, was an expression of the childish and feminine way of being, it is no wonder that he spoke about an aesthetic education only in connection with girls and women. At the same time, he subordinated all knowledge to the dominant masculine reason, thus confining man to the one-dimensional world of production.

¹⁹ J. V. Snellman, *Samlade arbeten VIII 1857–1858* (Helsingfors: Statsrådets Kansli, 1996), pp. 196–203.

²⁰ For the famine as an instrument of “the training of Finnish nationalism,” see also Juha Siltala, *Valkoisen äidin pojat* (Helsinki: Otava, 1999), pp. 167–172.

²¹ Snellman 1992, pp. 291–293, 298–299, 302.

²² For the Hegelian concept of work, see, for example, Taylor 1975, p. 156.

²³ Friedrich von Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992 [1795]), twenty-fifth letter and twenty-seventh letter; Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (London: Abacus, 1973 [1955]), pp. 120–123, 132–140.