Feminist and Queer Theory
Importance of Gender

• All cultures in all time periods make gender distinctions
• We start thinking more intensely about gender at times when gender configurations undergo changes or shifts
• For instance, “Woman Question” in the 19th Century
  – Is gender innate and biological or the product of socialization and environment?
  – Is the family structure natural, divinely ordained or socially constructed and variable?
# Social Construction vs. Essentialism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essentialism</th>
<th>Social Construction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Biological view</td>
<td>• Environmental view</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Gender is natural</td>
<td>• Difference between “sex” and “gender”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We’re born with innate gender differences</td>
<td>• We’re taught gender differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Women are naturally “feminine”; men are naturally “masculine”</td>
<td>• We “perform” the gender roles our society teaches us to perform</td>
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“Universal” Experience

• What used to be called “universal” experience equated “universal” with “male”

• *Hamlet* example

• Judith Fetterley and *The Resisting Reader*
But...on the other hand...

• In the wake of the conclusion that there is no “universal” subject, we can place too much emphasis on difference

• We find another cliché: “men and women are different”
Klages’ Definition of Feminism

1. A feminist is someone interested in studying gender as a system of cultural signs or meanings. These signs have a direct effect on how we live our individual lives and how our social institutions operate.

2. A feminist sees the gender systems currently in place as structured on a basic binary opposition in which one term, “masculine,” is privileged. This gives more social power to men.

3. A feminist thinks points 1 and 2 are wrong and should be changed.
Political Dimensions

• Q: But why do we even have to talk about politics? Shouldn’t academic subjects be free of politics?
• A: Reading literary texts or studying philosophy not so academic or ivory tower
• They can determine the conditions and terms on which our daily lives and social institutions are based
  – Rousseau’s and Locke’s ideas, for example, made possible the concept of individual rights and freedom and led to revolutions
Queer Theory

• Named as a discipline since 1991
• Grew out of gay/lesbian studies, which in turn grew out of feminist studies
• Feminism challenged idea that gender is essential or natural; queer theory challenges the idea that sexuality or sex acts are an essential, unchanging aspect of identity (or that they are “naturally” moral or immoral).
A word about language...

• Why “queer”?
  • Term “homosexual” linked to pathologizing discourse?
  • Reclaiming a pejorative term
  • Challenges notions of normative sexuality (retains meaning of “odd” or “unusual”, thus interested in sexuality that is labeled “queer” or non-normative)
Gender vs. Sexuality

• More difficult to think about sexuality as being socially constructed than gender?
• We can look around and see that ideas about gender are evolving (even in matters of style and dress)
• Sexuality *seems* to be about biology, the ways our bodies operate on a physical level.
Klages: Two ways our society defines sexuality

1. In terms of animal instincts (hormones, seasonal cycles, etc.) over which we have no control
2. In terms of moral and ethical choices (coded as good and evil) over which we’re supposed to have complete control

1. Problem with first, biological view, is that our sexuality doesn’t function like animal sexuality. In humans, reproduction often separated from sexuality
2. Second category often takes the form of moral statements about what is good or bad sexual behavior. These judgments have shifted over time, which is one of showing that these categories are social constructs.
Binaries

- Queer theory sees problems with viewing sex acts in a strict binary: heterosexual/homosexual; normal/abnormal. Interested in the way these binaries are transgressed.
- Idea that gender and sexuality aren’t essential parts of identity, but rather “performative” discourses
Linguistics/Speech Act Theory

**Constative Utterances**
- These speech acts state facts or describe a state of affairs that’s already assumed to be true.

**Performative Utterances**
- Speech acts that actually make something happen through language:
  - “I now pronounce you man and wife.”
  - “I promise to pay back the $100 I borrowed.”
Questions Queer Theory Asks

Interested in:

• How sexuality has been historically defined
• How various cultures or time periods enforced ideas about what kinds of sexuality are “normal” and which are “abnormal”
• Looking at all kinds of sexuality deemed “queer” or non-normative, including gender-bending
• How sexual behavior is a social construct