



# OEDIPUS & THE DEVIL

Witchcraft, sexuality and  
religion in early modern  
Europe

LYNDAL  
ROPER

ROUTLEDGE

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## Oedipus and the Devil

Early modern people drew the boundaries between body and soul differently. They had a lively sense of the interaction between supernatural power and the natural world. What did masculinity and femininity mean in a mental universe dominated by magic? What was the cultural impact of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation on this magical world and its images of gender? How were the boundaries between the rational and irrational drawn, and how did this affect the psychic life of men and women?

*Oedipus and the Devil* explores the psychological dimension of popular culture in early modern Europe. Based on detailed historical case studies, and using a combination of feminist theory and psychological analysis, the book explores sexual attitudes, masculinity and femininity, magic, concepts of excess, exorcism and witchcraft. Marking a shift away from the view that gender is a product of cultural and linguistic practice, the author argues that sexual difference has its own psychological and physiological reality, which is part of the very stuff of culture and must influence the way we write history.

This bold and imaginative book transforms our view of the relations between men and women, and marks out a new route towards understanding the body and its relationship to culture and subjectivity.

**Lyndal Roper** is Reader in History at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her last book was *The Holy Household: Women and morals in Reformation Augsburg* (1989). She was co-editor, with Jim Obelkevich and Raphael Samuel, of *Disciplines of Faith, Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy* (1987).

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# Preface

I'm one of those people for whom writing can never be the result of solitary labours. Writing, for me, always comes out of conversation. I want to begin with an acknowledgement of all the many friends who have argued, talked, written letters, commented on papers, helped me to think and supported me. They have shaped this book.

The essays contained here were written between 1988 and 1992, in Germany and Britain. They were written with both a German-and an English-speaking audience in mind, and they arose out of the experiences and debates I lived through in both places. As an Australian, I come from a migrant culture. The tension between these two languages and different cultures has not always been comfortable, but it has constantly forced me to rethink, to question the point from which I start. And it has also brought me the pleasure of being at home in more than one place. I would like to acknowledge here especially the warmth, hospitality and openness which I have received from my German friends: they have given me more than I can say.

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# 1

## Introduction

### I

In 1686, Appolonia Mayr, a jilted servantwoman, confessed that she had murdered her newborn baby. The Devil had promised that if she killed her child, her lover would marry her. She had strangled the infant at a little hill beyond the Lech bridge, just before the small town of Friedberg. She still knew the place and could find it. There was a tree not far away and she had walked into the fields, and it was midday that it happened.<sup>1</sup> Describing the birth and murder, she said ‘The Evil Spirit left her no peace. It was only a moment, the Devil touched it [the child] as if he were a midwife, it happened quite quickly that the child came out. She strangled it immediately with the hand, and she felt no pain in the delivery.’<sup>2</sup> Then Appolonia walked on: ‘She left it lying quite naked, uncovered, and unburied.... The Devil did not go with her, but remained staying by the child, and she did not look back.’<sup>3</sup>

What do we make of such a cultural fragment? Here a woman is apparently committing infanticide as a kind of love magic, in a crazed and hopeless attempt to force her lover to marry her. Alone on the path between the fields and the village, she has walked beyond human habitation—the sole tree which marks the spot is the only distinguishing mark of the landscape. She bears the child without female assistance. The Devil acts as midwife, and it is he who remains standing over the child. Appolonia herself hardly acts at all—she barely strains to give birth, she leaves the child uncovered in the bushes and keeps on walking. All the more stark is her single deed: the strangling of her newborn child with her hand. Appolonia Mayr was burnt as a witch. She lived in a world in which the Devil was a character one might meet on any lonely pathway, who might whisper whom to kill, how to control others.

How does one understand such a world? There has been a long line of attempts to do so, from the judges who first interrogated such criminals, to the publishers of broadsheets who turned such horrible cases into entertainment, to the nineteenth-century practitioners of cultural history,<sup>4</sup>

to historians of our own day. Then as now, much of this interest is animated by fascination with a foreign, yet familiar world. Such cases pose puzzles about our own identity, teasing us to specify in what the historical consists. They present us with a time which was apparently innocent of our notion of the person, when moral categories had a different shape, when the relation between the natural and supernatural was differently conceived. To analyse such a world, we have borrowed many tools. We have learnt from anthropology and from literary criticism to read our texts with an eye for symbol and ritual, to decipher kinship structures and, above all, to stress the otherness of early modern society.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach has enabled us to measure the distance which separates us from that other world, to make it 'historical' by reconstructing the collective nature of early modern society, viewing subjectivity itself as culturally constructed.

How will historical approaches based on these assumptions help us interpret Appolonia Mayr's story? One might see her as an exemplar of mid-Counter-Reformation womanhood, tormented by the sexual guilt imposed on her through Catholic re-education and social discipline. Her story about the Devil might be read as the hackneyed script which Baroque culture required women guilty of any female sin to recite. Like a good seventeenth-century Catholic, conscious—as historians would lead us to expect—of her religious confessional identity, Appolonia describes how she searched for 'Catholic people' in Augsburg at whose inn she might give birth.

But there is something which is deeper and more disturbing in her behaviour. When Appolonia returned to the city of Augsburg some months later, it was her demand to the Franciscan friars that they give her the baptismal certificate for her dead baby which set the whole case in train. In her first interrogation, Appolonia hotly denied having killed her baby, telling how 'nearly one hour after the birth she desired to see her child', only to be informed that it was already dead after having been taken to the Franciscans for baptism. The lost record of the infant's baptism—proof that it had eternal life—comes to stand for the loss of the child itself. As Appolonia put it, 'she just wanted to see her child again; she could not live thus any more'.<sup>6</sup> There is a suicidal desperation in her attempts to obtain the piece of paper: her search for it ensnared her in the web of bureaucracy which would inevitably uncover her crime and expose her tissue of lies about its death. This speaks not so much of confessional identity and sexual guilt—Appolonia made no secret of her pregnancy—as of the sheer agony of the loss of her baby, pain which is not the product of Counter-Reformation religiosity. The various, indeed inconsistent, accounts she offered of where and how she gave birth make the historian (and her interrogators) despair of ever uncovering the 'truth', but they may tell us other things.

Appolonia's fantasies about the Devil have little to do with ritual. They are so tangibly located and speak of such individual misery that it is inadequate to speak of collective beliefs and symbols. The process by which Appolonia came to describe her pain through talking about the Devil is far more complex than a mere recapitulation of cultural stereotypes. It is certainly true that the plausibility of her testimony to both her interrogators and herself depended on a shared belief in the powers of the Devil, but Appolonia created her own story about motherhood and guilt. And it was a story with its own sacrilegious, Marian inflection: as she told it first, she spoke of how, as a stranger, she asked to be taken in at an inn, and how she gave birth in a lonely room with a bed of straw.

It was stories such as that of Appolonia Mayr which first began to make me uneasy with the way I had been constructing the relationship between individual subjectivity and culture. In this book, I want to argue against an excessive emphasis on the cultural creation of subjectivity, and to argue that witchcraft and exorcism, those most alien of early modern social phenomena, or courtship and ritual, those seemingly irreducibly collective early modern social events, cannot be understood without reference to their psychic dimension. My claim is that early modern people had individual subjectivities, characterized by conflicts which are not entirely unfamiliar. I am not claiming that there is no historical gulf between our time and the early modern period: that would be absurd. But I want to suggest that the supposed gap between ourselves and the past, which we use to justify a particular way of dealing with that past world, is less complete than we sometimes suppose, and that the assumption of difference is not always a useful heuristic tool. Indeed, I think it has hampered our understanding of the complexity of early modern people as individuals.

This book has three implicit preoccupations: first, the importance of the irrational and the unconscious in history; second, the importance of the body; and third, the relation of these two to sexual difference. The subjects with which it deals are the nature of masculinity and femininity, the cultural impact of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and the central role of magic and witchcraft in the psychic and emotional world of the early modern period and in what we take to be 'rationality'. These chapters document a shift on my part away from the conviction that gender is a product of cultural and linguistic practice, towards the view that sexual difference has its own physiological and psychological reality, and that recognition of this must affect the way we write history. The task with which I have been engaged is how to write a cultural history of early modern Germany in which sexual difference will not just be added on as an afterthought, a further variable, but will be genuinely incorporated. This means that courtship, the history of motherhood, witchcraft, possession and masculinity—all fields in which gender is at issue, and where the

relation of psyche and body are at stake—are central cultural areas. It means that, far from being an incidental matter, sexual difference, both as physiological and psychological fact and as social construction, is part of the very stuff of culture. This consequence is still only haltingly acknowledged in early modern cultural history, which largely continues to treat the issue of gender as if it were a question of women's participation—or lack of it—in popular and élite culture.

Yet, central as I believe sexual difference is to conceiving of culture, I found I could no longer simply apply the tools which I had acquired from feminist history to the study of early modern Europe. As I shall go on to argue, along with other feminists writing now, I have come to think that feminist history, as I and others used to practise it, rested on a denial of the body. These chapters represent an attempt—often not fully articulated—to think out a different route towards understanding the body, culture and subjectivity

## II

For historians, the problem of subjectivity in the past has primarily presented itself as a question of explaining how large movements of historical transformation (the rise of capitalism, the Reformation, the development of the state) altered individuals' self-perceptions. Here, the work of the sociologists Max Weber and, later, Norbert Elias has been deeply influential, particularly among those who study Europe in the period 1500 to 1800. Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*<sup>7</sup> still shapes the way we see the early modern period, even as historians dispute its empirical detail. We owe to Weber the vision that the changes connected with the rise of Protestantism were linked with the origins of capitalism because these transformations valued new qualities in lay people, promoting the rational, calculating, disciplined individual, a kind of person who could cope with the regimen of the market. Luther's doctrine of the 'calling' was new because of its 'valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume', giving 'everyday worldly activity a religious significance'.<sup>8</sup> 'Rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling'<sup>9</sup> was thus born of Protestant asceticism. Norbert Elias's work offers the prospect of linking psychoanalytic insight with historically informed sociology.<sup>10</sup> As his ideas have been taken up by historians of the early modern period, they have tried to show how such abstract, general historical transitions as the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, or the growth of bureaucracy and the state, had effects not only on politics but on those much less tangible dimensions of human history, the constitution of human subjects themselves, their emotions, perceptions, behaviour and even their gestures. And recently, in a powerful philosophical synthesis,

Charles Taylor has argued that the origins of the modern western sense of individualism and identity are to be located in the rise of what he terms 'inwardness' in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. This was accompanied by a move away from an older, magical world-view in which the boundaries between oneself and the natural world were essentially permeable. As he puts it, 'Disenchantment was driven by and connected with a new moral/spiritual stance to the world.... It was connected to a new piety, and what we see emerging is a new notion of freedom and inwardness, which this piety fostered,' By contrast:

The decline of the world-view underlying magic was the obverse of the rise of the new sense of freedom and self-possession. From the viewpoint of this new sense of self, the world of magic seems to entail a thralldom, an imprisoning of the self in uncanny external forces, even a ravishing or loss of self. It threatens a possession which is the very opposite of self-possession.<sup>11</sup>

Such syntheses have the merit of opening up new areas of human experience to historical investigation. However, illuminating as these accounts of the relation between historical change and psychology are, I want to argue that they are based on a problematic account of subjectivity, and that when historians draw upon Elias or Weber, we run the risk of schematizing the experience of historical subjects. Following Weber, the early modern period is often held to see the birth of the ideal of the rational, economic man, or, as Taylor might put it, of the rise of a new sense of 'self-possession', of individual identity. But, as the challenge of psychoanalysis to models of rational behaviour might suggest, human behaviour is not solely determined by conscious consideration, and identity is not a secure possession but a piecemeal process of identifications and separations. So far from ushering in the birth of the rational ascetic individual, the early modern period saw a renewed interest in magic and the irrational, and this is a central component of the subjectivity which we now like to view as 'rational' or 'modern'. Magic and the irrational are integral to it, and not mere teething problems concomitant with a 'crisis arising in the transition between identities'.<sup>12</sup> Our own attachment to the story of the rise of individualism and rationality is, I think, part of the reason that we so often associate the witch-craze with the intolerance and so-called irrationality of the middle ages, even while we know that witch-hunting was an early modern, not a medieval phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> As such, its history belongs to our own era.

Elias's narrative of the rise of civilization seems at first to offer greater respect to the irrational and to those areas of human experience which elude the familiar categorizations of historical narrative. And his work has indeed been enormously fruitful for historians of early modern Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Elias presents an account of the rise of *civilité*, the progressive disciplining of the unruly body, a curbing of natural human drives, and shows how these processes are linked to social and political change. The human being learns to control the natural functions through the fabric of manners, while 'society is gradually beginning to suppress the positive pleasure component in certain functions more and more strongly by the arousal of anxiety'.<sup>15</sup> During the sixteenth century, Elias argues, people of the aristocracy gradually acquired a new set of manners and began to hedge their natural drives about with social taboos and inner discipline, a process which was mimicked by their social inferiors. The court society of Louis XIV saw the culmination of this discipline of the body, which was a crucial component of the development of absolutism:

During the stage of the court aristocracy, the restraint imposed on inclinations and emotions is based primarily on consideration and respect due to others and above all to social superiors. In the subsequent stage, renunciation and restraint of impulses is compelled far less by particular persons; expressed provisionally and approximately, it is now, more directly than before, the less visible and more impersonal compulsions of social interdependence, the division of labour, the market, and competition that impose restraint and control on the impulses and emotions.<sup>16</sup>

This is a conception of human psychology strongly influenced by early Freudianism, with its emphasis on the power of the drives.<sup>17</sup>

Elias's debt to psychoanalysis, however, has taken a particular form. In his work, the psychic is seen to be socially variable and historically contingent, since there is a 'connection between social structure and personality structure'.<sup>18</sup> The organization and balance of the different elements within the psyche is not held to be universal nor ahistorical. Thus Elias claims that in the later middle ages control over the drives was less assured: it was a world in which 'people gave way to drives and feelings incomparably more easily, quickly, spontaneously, and openly than today, in which the emotions were less restrained and, as a consequence, less evenly regulated and more liable to oscillate more violently between extremes', so that their 'drive controls' 'were not of the same degree as in later periods, and they did not take the form of a constant, even almost automatic self-control'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, 'because emotions are here expressed in a manner that in our own world is generally observed only in children, we call these expressions and forms of behaviour "childish"'.<sup>20</sup> Throughout his work, civilization is counterposed to instinct, and the body is conceived as an anarchic collection of drives which civilization, even in its most 'advanced' form, keeps under tenuous control. In much historical writing influenced by Elias, this view of the period before the rise of the bourgeois,

disciplined individual finds its counterpart in a picture of the free, undisciplined culture of pre-Reformation carnival, a vision which owes much to the work of the Russian cultural theorist Bakhtin on the writings of Rabelais.<sup>21</sup>

As a result, it becomes possible for historians to employ theory which historicizes the unconscious while at the same time paradoxically evading the challenge that psychoanalysis poses to a traditional historical perspective. (Similarly, when historians write about the history of gesture, clothing or cleaning, they appear to be writing about the body but are actually often writing about discourse about the body; an important subject in itself, but, as I shall argue below, one whose formulation as discourse precisely takes the sting out of the problem of subjectivity as both a corporeal and psychic phenomenon.) Despite its radical potential, this psychoanalytic incorporation of the irrational, derived as it is from Elias and others, is essentially Weberian in form: it harnesses the rise of the modern subject to the rise of the rational, the 'adult', tying subjectivity to the rise of the modern. For Charles Taylor, it is also the 'disenchantment of the world', the loss of the magical world-view, which is the precondition for the rise of the sense of self as we know it in the modern world.<sup>22</sup>

In the historical common sense which has developed around this issue, there is a simple transparency about the move from a rowdy, carnival, Bakhtinian culture to a modest organization of the disciplined person: historical transformations occur, and individual subjectivity follows suit. But it is far from clear that this is the appropriate way to conceive of how social change interacts with individual subjectivity. When, for instance, we can identify a movement of moral reform or a project of disciplining, this does not tell us what its effects may be on the psyche or the body it is meant to historicize. As the French theorist Michel Foucault has taught us, such movements may undermine rather than bolster the values they uphold. A different deployment of psychoanalysis would enable us to see the dynamic between repression and libido as crucial to the modest comportment of the bourgeois citizen. At the same time, the licence of the Bakhtinian subject has its own superego formations. The Rabelaisian literature which, translated by the Calvinist Johann Fischart, became such an important part of sixteenth-century German writing, cannot be understood as pure carnival. It is a product of Latinate, literate, moralist culture. The carnivalesque is not a survival of an older, more libidinous, rustic era, caught in Fischart's writing like a fly in amber. Or, as Horst Bredekamp has shown, when fifteenth-century Florentine followers of Savonarola burnt images on the carnival bonfire of vanities, repudiating a society they believed to be a political tyranny, their own moralist destruction of art itself took on the character of a fetish.<sup>23</sup>

This becomes particularly apparent if we think about repression itself, the notion so fundamental to historical work based loosely on Elias's



psychological theory. It would be possible to view discipline ordinances as a gigantic project of repression, and, indeed, this is largely how they have been viewed. Protestants, so this line of argument might run, became 'confessionalized' as prostitution was banned, dancing cleaned up, rowdy behaviour brought under control and the family learnt to pray together. Sexual modesty increased and sexual behaviour became more subject to restraint. Making rules, however, does not guarantee conformity. Behavioural prohibitions, as Foucault has stressed, can create, even in their advocates, their own compulsions and transgressive possibilities. When Protestant divines preached vigorously against the evil of dancing and fulminated against the erotic temptations of touch in dance, their ornate rhetoric also helped to sexualize what they termed 'venereal dancing'. Instead of seeing repression as a simple imposition of control, we need to see it as an active part of the formation of sexual identities. The unconscious is not a kind of inefficient psychic sewer for negative urges, which eventually fills up and starts to pollute the clean upper reaches of the mind. We need rather to employ a dynamic model of the unconscious—the vision which can also be found in Freud's mature work—so that we can see the constant interaction between desire and prohibition.<sup>24</sup>

The underlying difficulty here is that neither Weber nor Elias offers a satisfactory explanation of the way social change affects individual psyche. Indeed, we still lack such a theory. In the meantime, as historians, we often write as if social change impinges directly and uniformly upon the individual's mental structure, as if the psyche were a kind of blank sheet for social processes to write upon. This is partly why sexual, racial or class differences are not the key dialectic in Elias's work—changes tend to trickle down from the upper to the lower classes and popular culture lacks dynamic—and why the state shoulders such a weight in historical explanations influenced by Elias's ideas. Changes in the structure of the state become the explanatory black box, the reasons for changes in manners, social comportment, even perception. Ironically, such history restores the primacy of the political to historical explanation, precisely at the moment when social and cultural history are seeking to establish their independent legitimacy.<sup>25</sup> And the political history on which it draws is often based on the old abstractions such as 'absolutism' which current revisionist historians are increasingly jettisoning. At the same time, historical work which attempts to deal with subjectivity finds it hard to allow space for the irrational or for fantasy in the subject: if for no other reason, the illogic of the unconscious offends against our own sense of what makes for rationally persuasive, satisfying explanation. A rationalist account of subjectivity can only be partial; yet the imperative of historical synthesis pushes us to simplify, to present the conscious rationalizations of the subject, or to produce a clear, sketch-map psychology in which the logic of political change provides the contours of narrative.<sup>26</sup>

The dilemma is not Elias's alone. Any use of a psychoanalytically-influenced theory faces the difficulty of how to apply to an entire society a model which is designed to uncover the unconscious mental processes of an individual. This is why psychoanalytic insights have fared better in biography.<sup>27</sup> Whereas psychoanalysis can show the infinitely varied, imaginative use individuals can make of the materials of their predicaments, creating their own symbolic language and symptoms,<sup>28</sup> psychogenetics of the Elias type proposes a historical, but identikit kind of psychology in which individual psychic creativity has little place. A historically useful application of psychoanalysis, however, must allow for individual agency and the possibility that individuals can think and feel against the social grain—a goal that is easier to specify than to achieve.

### III

So far, we have considered how approaches influenced by Elias and Weber have dominated the way subjectivity is conceptualized for the early modern period. But there are other traditions which have also dealt with the issue of the historical formation of subjectivity, taking their cue from post-structuralist discussion of the death of the subject. The work of the French thinker Michel Foucault, with its emphasis on the power of language and the importance of discourse in the constitution of the individual subject, has proved enormously influential.<sup>29</sup> It has enabled us to explore the construction of sexual desire through language, broadly interpreted, and it has opened the way to a far more sophisticated and varied understanding of the body and sexuality.<sup>30</sup> For historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, Foucault's work places them in something of a quandary. Foucault, whose project was a pessimistic re-evaluation of the rationalist legacy of the Enlightenment, locates the major historical transitions in the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> But the ambivalent effects of sexual regulation about which Foucault wrote so persuasively can be dated well back before the eighteenth century. As a result, writers who are influenced by Foucault but whose period is the early modern era use methods adopted from Foucault while frequently resting their narrative on a historical scheme which is borrowed from Elias.

Even among approaches which attempt to question theories of the subject based loosely on Weber or Elias, however, and which turn instead to a creatively eclectic use of anthropology or to discourse theory, the concept of subjectivity with which we are presented is often a determinedly collective one. This collective subjectivity is then inscribed on the individual. Consequently, the dimension of the psychic is missing here, as, indeed, it is in the work of Foucault. Some of the appeal of, for instance, Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* is the way it teases us with the possibility that the imposter Arnaud du Tilh might indeed have

succeeded in passing himself off as Martin Guerre had not the 'real Martin' unexpectedly returned from the wars: in what more, then, does identity consist than in the sum of the collective testimonies and expectations of the villagers?<sup>32</sup> Or in Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*, where it is the world of the journeymen we are asked to enter, their consciousness is a group product; strangely enough, one which can be read, not from what they say, but from a literary product of one of their number. As Harold Mah has argued, the semi-fictionalized autobiography of Nicolas Contat on which Darnton draws for his description of symbolic life in the printers' workshop is a highly literary production, structured around neat narrative reversals.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar vein, I think the current fascination with the history of perception—of time, of the senses, of the materiality of daily life—both further strengthens us in the conviction of the absolute otherness of the past, and allows us, when we think about the consciousness of early modern people, to substitute the level of immediate sensory perception for that of the psyche. It is as if, once we grasp that early modern people heard and smelt things differently, or inhabited a 'visual culture' (as we do not?), we know what makes them different from ourselves. There is a host of current German syntheses of early modern 'daily life', a genre which is almost totally absent from AngloAmerican historiography, in which the culture of the 'little people' is presented by means of analysis of popular ritual and festival.<sup>34</sup> These constitute attempts to restore the common people to history, and to burst the bounds of what we term culture: to write about weddings and carnival, gossip and slander, attitudes to time and the calendar instead of the 'high' culture of the élite alone. This has immeasurably enhanced our understanding of early modern culture and has helped us imaginatively to recreate the sensory as well as the discursive, and to think about the detail of early modern life, the objects people used, the habits of their daily lives.<sup>35</sup> But so far as people's psychic lives are concerned, there is a danger that such studies may present a cast of rustic characters whose simple mental lives are all the same, a history where the sensory substitutes for the psychic and, with it, a history which, despite its ambition, sometimes serves to reinvolve the historical condescension towards *das Volk*, the common people.

In much of the writing influenced by Foucault, by contrast, which does claim an interest in the individual and the atypical, psychoanalysis is viewed as yet another regulatory narrative, a discourse produced by a particular concatenation of late nineteenth-century developments which constituted yet another deployment of power through a new fascination with sex. The conviction that psychoanalysis could not therefore have anything to say about a pre-Freudian world has been very strong in early modern history.<sup>36</sup> Even when psychoanalysis is drawn upon to dredge the murkier waters of Renaissance writing, a post-structuralist-tinged

conviction of the death of the subject is used to guarantee historicity. So, subjectivity, in Stephen Greenblatt's work, rests on articulation. In Greenblatt's view, language is not the medium of the self but is its fabric, and language's permeability to convention and power is the prism of the way in which the self can never be free.<sup>37</sup> In a brilliant article, Greenblatt argues that psychoanalysis proposes at some level a notion of the self which is simply foreign to Renaissance culture, and, in consequence, psychoanalysis itself testifies to the distance which separates us from early modern understandings of the self.<sup>38</sup> In other words, we know that we are dealing with early modern, historical subjects because they do not evince a concept of the individual—this is what their historical distance consists of—and yet it is the post-structuralist critique of the subject and of psychoanalysis which is drawn upon to read our evidence in this manner.

Indeed, this is the supposed location of the early modern world's otherness: its characteristic cultural collectivity and the absence of the concept of the individual self. Symbols, rituals, collective corporations—these are the early modern historian's stock in trade. The use of anthropology, which allows us to stress the exoticism of this society, enables us, oddly enough, both rationally to grasp the otherness of this world, while furnishing us with a written guarantee of the modernity of our own time. There is of course a circular argument here. The means we use to interpret the society also allow us to shunt off all that puzzles us about early modern society into the realm of the 'pre-modern' while using the very concept of the peculiarity of the early modern to deny the usefulness of psychic categories. As a result, early modern people can threaten to become dancing marionettes, tricked out in ruffs and codpieces, whose subjectivities can neither surprise nor unsettle.

At the same time, the literary turn creates particular problems for cultural history. It is striking that Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, one of the roundest portraits we have of early modern subjectivity, should find it possible to write only about men—a strategy into which he is forced by his understanding of self-identity as consisting of what can be expressed in one's own written words. But early modern Europe was still an oral culture, a culture which, as the work of Norbert Schindler shows, offered peasants, beggars and vagabonds a host of complex forms of expression and cultural creativity. In an extraordinary essay on nicknames, Schindler is able to bring to life the merciless inventiveness of oral culture's creation of public personae; in a reconstruction of the mental world of Salzburg boy beggars accused of witchcraft, he shows how the impossible longings of one boy were expressed in his fantasies of a *Zauberer-Jackl* who would fulfil his deepest wishes, teaching him to read, write and shoot.<sup>39</sup>

The literary, moreover, was predominantly a male culture. Even when, for instance, we try to reconstruct the mental world of the peasant woman

Bertrande de Rols, wife of Martin Guerre, we are actually reliant upon the text of the male lawyer Jean de Coras who chose to write about the case. It is his wry, sophisticated reflections on certainty and the nature of wifely fidelity which ultimately prove more riveting and more nuanced than the subjectivity of the inscrutable Bertrande. Despite all our intentions, the feminine is once again of interest in so far as it illumines what men thought about it.<sup>40</sup>

Considerations about the distinctively collective nature of early modern culture, and the foreignness to it of our notion of the person, go some way, I think, towards explaining the particular reluctance early modern historians have expressed towards using psychoanalysis more directly. Psychoanalysis, it is often argued, is a product of the nineteenth century, a world characterized by the nuclear family of the Viennese upper middle class. But the claim is stronger than simply the recent origins of the theory: it is that 'family' as we now know it, the unconscious and individuality are so radically different that this precludes the use of psychoanalytic categories altogether. Consequently, the claim that psychoanalysis cannot be used to study early modern societies reaches to the very heart of what makes the study of early modern Europe distinctive. It touches the constitution of our field itself. It concerns the extent of historical change, the concept of the subject, the role of religion and ritual; in short, the justification for our rejection of terms such as 'family' and 'individual' to apply to the early modern world. In these essays, by contrast, these are precisely the terms I have found myself drawn to use in order to approach an understanding of early modern people which does more than treat them as colourful psychic primitives from a carnival world; which takes individual subjectivity seriously enough to be able to pose the difficult question of what, precisely, is historical in subjectivity.

In this sense, the project of this book is somewhat different from the ways in which psychoanalysis has more often been used. Where psychoanalysis is deployed in discursive analyses within history, the relationship is more often a flirtation than a marriage. Linguistic analysis is combined with psychoanalytic insight to support a view of human personality as intrinsically contingent, changing as language changes. The problem with this account is that there is no compelling explanation in psychological terms as to why these contingent changes should take the form they do: the explanatory claims of psychoanalysis are simply set aside. By contrast, from the moment of its own original self-understanding as a science, psychoanalysis claimed to offer a universal account of human psychological functioning. It thus seems inimical to any historical account of subjectivity.

Let me summarize the dilemma which seems to confront us. On the one hand, psychoanalysis is itself an antique, a historical creation of the nineteenth century. On the other, psychoanalysis makes universalist claims

about human psychological functioning which seem irreconcilable with the study of history. However, I think we simply need to refuse this apparent dilemma. All theories have their histories, and psychoanalysis, like Marxism, another child of the nineteenth century, is constantly changing. It does not endanger the status of the historical to concede that there are aspects of human nature which are enduring, just as there are aspects of human physiology which are constitutional.<sup>41</sup> The hard part—as much a subject of debate within psychoanalysis itself—is to specify what precisely is historical about subjectivity. What I want to avoid is a developmental account of collective subjectivities which turns individuals into mere exemplars of a narrative of collective historical progression. What sets this project apart from many of the uses which have been made of psychoanalysis is that I want to take the explanatory claims of psychoanalysis seriously, so that it provides a way of accounting for meaningful behaviour and individual subjectivity in particular historical circumstances.

#### IV

For many historians, feminists and non-feminists alike, ‘gender’ was the category through which it looked as if women’s history might have the potential not only to enter history as a respectable historical field, but to reshape the historical narratives themselves. The axiom that gender identity was not a biological given but a historical creation was immensely liberating: the historian’s task was to lay bare the precise historical meaning of masculinity and femininity in the past, thus relativizing the content of these constructs in the present. We were able to show, for instance, that early modern men delighted in fashion and clothes, that medieval women were to be found working in practically all sectors of the economy, that motherhood, when infants were sent to wet-nurses, must have constituted a different bond from the relationship we know today.

At the same time, the anthropology of early modern societies cried out for some incorporation of a female perspective. One only has to turn to a classic text such as Clifford Geertz’s analysis of the Balinese cockfight to be confronted with the absence of women from the cultural theatre.<sup>42</sup> Partly because discourse theory, psychoanalytic ideas about masculinity and anthropology are woven together into an apparently seamless whole, women’s restriction to walk-on parts gives us more of a jolt. Most accounts of popular culture are actually about men’s culture, often about courtship ritual in another guise. The rage to which this kind of exclusion gives rise—the worse because it is a true mirror of the society which produced this culture—has led to some powerful feminist work of reconstruction. It has also enabled feminists to insist on a cultural anthropology which will include women. But how is this to be done?

The problem here is very deep and its origins lie within cultural history itself. Because cultural history traditionally sought to create a unified object of study for itself, it naturally inclined to see culture as uniform within a particular bounded group and as shared. This is as true of Sebastian Franck's wonderful sixteenth-century ethnography of regional identity<sup>43</sup> as it is of the work of the great nineteenth-century cultural historians and sociologists. It is no accident that *Gemeinschaft*, that hardly translatable term of shared cultural and communal identity, should have been such a crucial term for German nineteenth-century attempts to grasp pre-modern societies, just as the equally elusive sixteenth-century term, *Gemeinde*, ambiguous between church congregation, communal unit and group of subjects, was to prove such a powerful mobilizing term in the Peasants' War.<sup>44</sup> But nearly always, the leading ideas of this shared culture are those of men. The terms on which women have access to this culture are either as a cultural resource or else as creators of a separate, female culture. This latter view, however, undermines the idea of culture—or indeed of language—as a unified whole, and challenges the terms on which the project of cultural history might be possible.

When the so-called new cultural history broke with the idea of linear narratives, disrupting the unity of culture, it seemed to offer a new space for feminist history. If our cultural heritage was necessarily fragmented, if the fiction of a unified culture could be surrendered, then women were guaranteed a voice in the story. (Paradoxically, in fact, some of even the new cultural history does rely in the end on a unity of culture, based on the shared nature of language: a solution which simply replicates the problem of women's relation to culture at another, more intractable level.)<sup>45</sup> For feminist historians, the lure of cultural anthropology and discourse theory was its organizing power. If gender was created through discourse, or through social behaviour and interaction, the substance of sexual difference was historical—and therefore, it was something we could change. Gender as a concept consequently seemed to offer a way of giving feminists access both to anthropological history and to discourse history. Joan Scott's 1985 article resoundingly affirmed not only that gender *was* a historical category but that it was a category of historical analysis.<sup>46</sup> Deconstruction allowed feminists to juggle with the reversals and inversions, hidden meanings and endless contradictions of sexual difference—as if sexual difference were no longer a prison from which one could not escape but an ethereal substance, an endless play of light and shadow in which the intellect could delight.

Applied historically, however, deconstruction has the tendency to reproduce its own tricks and paradoxes. The contradictions of femininity in sixteenth-century Germany bear an uncanny resemblance to those of twentieth-century Britain. Indeed, Scott herself remains tantalizingly vague about the sense in which gender *is* a historical category. For while we have

learnt to discern the effects of gender in politics, war and business history—all the historical territories which historians once used to believe to be the preserve of real male history—what remains less clear is how gender itself effects historical change. Instead, we borrow from the state-and class-based narratives of historical transformation, leaving it vague what causal difference gender makes. Gender appears more often to be a matter of key, transposing the old familiar historical songs into soprano or bass registers: the tunes, however, remain the same.

If gender is to be a category of social explanation, it must bridge the gap between discourse, social formation and the individual sexed subject.<sup>47</sup> Just as cultural anthropological approaches and discourse theory seemed, in the end, to offer a somewhat flat account of subjectivity, so also, feminist history, because of its symbiotic critical relationship with these intellectual developments, remained caught in the limitations of the terms it criticized. In the final analysis, gender, for all its splendid play of discursive variegation, remains a category whose content proves elusive, and whose causal claims are a cypher.

Recently, feminist writers, too, have rejected the comfortable orthodoxy of the distinction between sex and gender.<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler has pointed out that the sex/gender distinction naturalizes sex, itself the product of culture, while reinstating the very binary distinction between nature and culture which we need to question.<sup>49</sup> This move robs historians of the sociological tools we once used to present sexual identity as a historical and social product. It turns out that the part of sexual identity which could once be neatly isolated as social creation, distinct from the ‘givenness’ of biological sex, reveals itself to be no more a creation than sex itself. ‘Gender’ as a sociological category is an illusion created by the terms of its own delimitation.

Yet history has not been done out of a job by post-modernism. Ironically, history and historians are very important to post-structuralist sceptics. For if sex, the person and sexual identities are contingent creations, not just at the level of detail, but as ontological categories, then it becomes crucial that there be ‘other worlds’ in which these categories did not organize experience. History seems to offer both such other possible worlds and an account of how we came by the categories with which we now live. Butler’s demolition of ‘sex’ and ‘person’ proceeds by demonstrating the contingency of those very categories and their embeddedness in the binary divisions they seek to critique. But it is an irony of her position that she introduces the very same pattern at the historical level, as she aims to ‘expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity’.<sup>50</sup> There is an implicit historical ‘before’ and ‘after’, defined by the presence or absence of the binary oppositions her argument reifies; the moment *before* ‘the category of “women”’, the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which



emancipation is sought'.<sup>51</sup> Historians, who are equally complicit in the search for grand moments of transformation around which to create narrative suspense—how, after all, do you organize a gripping history of emotion if you have no historical epochs around which to group your chapters?—then often reach for the chestnuts: it must be the Renaissance, the Reformation or Absolutism which explains change. The problem with this kind of work is that too much is made to follow from the historical. That a distinction looks different in different historical periods does not show that it is entirely contingent. History itself plays too great and yet too little a role in this kind of work: too much, because an overemphasis is placed on the degree to which human beings change; too little, because the stress on discursive creation oversimplifies subjectivities and foreshortens the range and complexity of historical determinants.

Surrendering the distinction between sex and gender has certainly brought gains. There have been explorations of the history of biological sex itself. Thomas Laqueur has argued that until the eighteenth century, a one-sex model of the body predominated in which sexual difference was a matter of degree, not of two distinct sexes.<sup>52</sup> This is a powerful synthesis, which challenges our most basic assumptions about the naturalness of sexual distinction. Yet what Laqueur is actually describing is the discourse of medical theory. It is not apparent that it was by means of such theory that early modern people understood their bodies. Rather, their culture rested on a very deep apprehension of sexual difference as an organizing principle of culture—in religion, work, magic and ritual. It is a far easier task to investigate literate discourse on sexual difference than it is to get at the way early modern people actually conceived of sexual difference, because such structures are not fully conscious, and cannot be articulated with the same transparency as medical theory. Randolph Trumbach has argued for the rapidly shifting nature of the relation between the categories of sex and gender: eighteenth-century Londoners, he claims, had a model of three sexes—man, woman, hermaphrodite—and three genders, the third 'illegitimate gender' being 'the adult passive transvestite effeminate male or molly who was supposed to desire men exclusively'. By the late nineteenth century there were two sexes and four gender roles, 'man, woman, homosexual man, and lesbian woman'.<sup>53</sup> In much of this writing, sexual identity becomes a kind of masquerade for which the early modern period is the theatre; as if to have a sexual identity in early modern Europe was to participate in a permanent cross-dressing party. Indeed, by a curious sleight of hand, cross-dressers and transsexuals are often the examples to which historians turn when they consider the problem of individual subjectivity in general in early modern Europe.<sup>54</sup>

The challenge of the history of the body to discourse theory is that it confronts discursive creationism with the physical, with a reality that is only in part a matter of words. So, for instance, while Londa Schiebinger's

fascinating account of the development of the science of anatomy in the eighteenth century is able to show how gendered notions became written into perceptions of skeletal difference, one wonders naggingly whether there may not actually be differences between the skeletons of the two sexes which are not a creation of eighteenth-century science.<sup>55</sup> It is of course true that we experience the body through mediations of various kinds, and, because we want to emphasize the way notions of the body are constructed, the temptation is to write as if there were nothing *but* a historically constructed body. Our own terminology does not help: 'the body', after all, is itself an irritatingly non-physical abstraction.

Sexual difference is not purely discursive nor merely social. It is also physical. The cost of the flight from the body and from sexual difference is evident in what much feminist historical writing has found it impossible to speak about; or indeed, in the passionate tone of the theoretical work which most insists on the radically constructed nature of sexual difference. In my own work, this gap is most evident in the oldest of these essays, on will and honour. It is an essay about the social construction of gender through language and social practice—but its sources tell another story about the pain and pleasure of love. At its heart there is an absence: bodies. How indeed can there be a history of sex which is purely about language and which omits bodies?

I do not think I was untypical in seeking to escape femininity by a flight from the body and a retreat to the rational reaches of discourse. The pain, the frustration and the rage of belonging to the sex which does not even yet have its own history, and which is so often in the role of outsider in any intellectual context, make it tempting to deny sexual difference altogether—or to attempt to design one's sexual identity in any way one chooses. This is a wild utopianism. As Barbara Taylor has shown, it has its roots in the very beginnings of feminism, in the passionately ambivalent, even misogynist rhetoric of Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, about the failings of 'systematically voluptuous' women.<sup>56</sup> It is also a deeply creative force. It has enabled both men and women to envisage new ways of organizing relations between the sexes, and new fields of action for women and for men. Yet when utopianism becomes intellectual, and loses its imaginative relation to the givenness of bodies, it does so at great cost. We need an understanding of sexual difference which will incorporate, not fight against, the corporeal.

## V

These concerns are preoccupations of our own time; indeed, of a very particular moment in the history of feminism when we have had to part with some illusions about what can be made anew. But they are also issues with which early modern people were passionately engaged. The

Reformation, as I have argued elsewhere, drew much of its strength from its moralizing redeployment of an older, household-based utopianism, which had clearly defined roles for men and women, old and young.<sup>57</sup> By allowing and encouraging clergy to marry and form their own households, Protestants put the issue of the body firmly on the agenda. Was holiness incompatible with sexual expression? If the body were God's creation, what sin attached to sex within marriage? What were the distinct offices of men and women?

The first generation of reformers faced the question of the difference between the sexes in their daily lives, with little help from their libraries to make sense of what it was to be a married priest. It was not that clerics had not lived with women or were not infamous as womanizers, quite the reverse. But marriage meant that the first generation of Protestant clergy had to reach a conscious, articulated accommodation with sexual difference, shaped no longer by the ideal of a single-sex monastic community. Consequently, sexual difference emerged as an explicit theme in their conversation and writing, and sometimes in a disarmingly concrete sense of the disturbance that living with the opposite sex entails, as when Luther describes the shock of seeing a pair of plaits in bed beside him.<sup>58</sup> Sexual difference was, of course, anything but a new intellectual theme, but Protestant clergy had to develop a literature about marriage and womanhood which did more than align women with Eve and sexual temptation. The public estate of matrimony necessitated an accommodation with sexual difference—difficult as the monastic heritage of sexual suspicion was to overcome, and much as it still cast its shadow over what they wrote.

In what did sexual difference consist? It would be tempting to dismiss Luther's views on women as little more than the rantings of a particularly rabid patriarch, and regard Protestantism as the heir of his rigid sexual conservatism. But this would be to miss the peculiar tone of early Protestant understandings of sexual difference and the body, and to fail to catch its utopianism. For Luther, whose earthy rhetoric still has the power to take one's breath away, sexual difference was material, the stuff of the body itself. So he says, in a passage which earns its place in every anthology of misogyny, that

Men have broad shoulders and narrow hips, and accordingly they possess intelligence. Women ought to stay at home; the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon, keep house and bear and raise children.<sup>59</sup>

Sexual difference is natural fact, God's creation, and it dictates female fate: one follows from the other so directly that there is no intervening symbolic realm. Woman and house belong together not as metaphor but as fact. For