



SECOND EDITION

LISA WADE • MYRA MARX FERREE

GENDER

IDEAS • INTERACTIONS • INSTITUTIONS

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GENDER

SECOND EDITION

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PREFACE

Writing a textbook is a challenge even for folks with lots of teaching experience in the subject matter. We would never have dared take on this project without Karl Bakeman's initial encouragement. His confidence in our vision was inspiring and kept us going until the project could be placed into the very capable hands of Sasha Levitt, who ushered the first edition to completion with her meticulous reading, thoughtful suggestions, and words of encouragement. Sasha has since become an invaluable part of the revision process, with a perfect mix of stewardship, cheerleading, and collaborative fact-checking. She has kept us on target conceptually as well as chronologically, challenged us to think hard about the points that first-edition readers had raised, and yet kept the revision process smoothly moving forward to meet our deadlines. Without her firm hand on the tiller, our occasional excursions into the weeds might have swamped the revision with unnecessary changes, but her attention to updating sources kept us cheerful with the new evidence we landed. The revision might have ballooned with the new material we identified, but her editorial eye has kept us in our word limits without sacrificing anything important. Sasha has become a true partner in the difficult process of adding the new without losing the old, and we could not have pulled it off without her.

Of course, Karl and Sasha are but the top of the mountain of support that Norton has offered from beginning to end. The many hands behind the scenes include project editor Diane Cipollone for keeping us on schedule and collating our changes, production manager Ashley Horna for turning a manuscript into the pages you hold now, assistant editors Erika Nakagawa and Thea Goodrich for their logistical help in preparing that manuscript, designer Jillian Burr for her keen graphic eye, and our copyeditor, Katharine Ings, for crossing our t's and dotting our i's. The many images that enrich this book are thanks to photo editors Travis Carr and Stephanie Romeo and photo researchers Elyse Rieder and Rona Tuccillo. We are also grateful to have discovered Leland Bobbé, the artist

whose half-drag portraits fascinated us. Selecting just one for the first edition was a collaborative process aided by the further creative work of Jillian Burr and Debra Morton Hoyt. Selecting a second was equally exciting and challenging. We're grateful for the result: striking covers that we hope catch the eye and spark conversation.

We would also like to thank the reviewers who commented on drafts of the book and its revision in various stages: Rachel Allison, Shayna Asher-Shapiro, Phyllis L. Baker, Kristen Barber, Miriam Barcus, Shira Barlas, Sarah Becker, Dana Berkowitz, Emily Birnbaum, Natalie Boero, Catherine Bolzendahl, Valerie Chepp, Nancy Dess, Lisa Dilks, Mischa DiBattiste, Erica Dixon, Mary Donaghy, Julia Eriksen, Angela Frederick, Jessica Greenebaum, Nona Gronert, Lee Harrington, Sarah Hayford, Penelope Herideen, Melanie Hughes, Miho Iwata, Rachel Kaplan, Madeline Kiefer, Rachel Kraus, Carrie Lacy, Thomas J. Linneman, Caitlin Maher, Gul Aldikacti Marshall, Janice McCabe, Karyn McKinney, Carly Mee, Beth Mintz, Joya Misra, Beth Montemurro, Christine Mowery, Stephanie Nawyn, Madeleine Pape, Lisa Pellerin, Megan Reid, Gwen Sharp, Mimi Schippers, Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer, Kazuko Suzuki, Jaita Talukdar, Rachel Terman, Mieke Beth Thomeer, Kristen Williams, and Kersti Alice Yllo, as well as the students at Babson College, Occidental College, Nevada State College, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison who agreed to be test subjects. Our gratitude goes also to the users of the first edition who offered us valuable feedback on what they enjoyed and what they found missing, either directly or through Norton. We've tried to take up their suggestions by not merely squeezing in occasional new material but by rethinking the perspectives and priorities that might have left such concerns on the cutting room floor the first time around. We hope the balance we have struck is satisfying but are always open to further criticism and suggestions.

Most of all, we are happy to discover that we could collaborate in being creative over the long term of this project, contributing different talents at different times, and jumping the inevitable hurdles without tripping each other up. In fact, we were each other's toughest critic and warmest supporter. Once upon a time, Lisa was Myra's student, but in finding ways to communicate our interest and enthusiasm to students, we became a team. In the course of the revision, we came to appreciate each other's strengths more than ever and rejoice in the collegial relationship we had in making the revision happen. We hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed making it.

Lisa Wade
Myra Marx Ferree

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“

A MAN IN HEELS IS RIDICULOUS.

—CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN

”





Introduction

Among the most vicious and effective killers who have ever lived were the men of the Persian army. In the late 1500s, under the reign of Abbas I, these soldiers defeated the Uzbeks and the Ottomans and reconquered provinces lost to India and Portugal, earning the admiration of all of Europe. Their most lethal advantage was the high heel.¹ Being on horseback, heels kept their feet in the stirrups when they rose up to shoot their muskets. It gave them deadly aim. The first high-heeled shoe, it turns out, was a weapon of war.

Enthralled by the military men's prowess, European male aristocrats began wearing high heels in their daily lives of leisure, using the shoe to borrow some of the Persian army's masculine mystique. In a way, they were like today's basketball fans wearing Air Jordans. The aristocrats weren't any better on the battlefield than your average Bulls fan is on the court, but the shoes symbolically linked them to the soldiers' extraordinary achievements. The shoes invoked a distinctly *manly* power related to victory in battle, just as the basketball shoes link the contemporary wearer to Michael Jordan's amazing athleticism.

As with most fashions, there was trickle down. Soon men of all classes were donning high heels, stumbling around the cobblestone streets of Europe feeling pretty suave. And then women decided



Shah Abbas I, who ruled Persia between 1588 and 1629, shows off not only his scimitar, but also his high heels.

they wanted a piece of the action, too. In the 1630s, masculine fashions were “in” for ladies. They cut their hair, added military decorations to the shoulders of their dresses, and smoked pipes. For women, high heels were nothing short of masculine mimicry.

These early fashionistas irked the aristocrats who first borrowed the style. The whole point of nobility, after all, was to be *above* everyone else. In response, the elites started wearing higher and higher heels. France’s King Louis XIV even decreed that no one was allowed to wear heels higher than his.² In the New World, the Massachusetts colony passed a law saying that any woman caught wearing heels would incur the same penalty as a witch.³

But the masses persisted. And so the aristocrats shifted strategies: They dropped high heels altogether. It was the Enlightenment now, and there was an accompanying shift toward logic and reason. Adopting the philosophy that it was

intelligence—not heel height—that bestowed superiority, aristocrats donned flats and began mocking people who wore high heels, suggesting that wearing such impractical shoes was the height of stupidity.

Ever since, the shoe has remained mostly out of fashion for men—cowboys excluded, of course, and disco notwithstanding—but it’s continued to tweak the toes of women in every possible situation, from weddings to the workplace. No longer at risk of being burned at the stake, women are allowed to wear high heels, now fully associated with femaleness in the American imagination. Some women even feel pressure to do so, particularly if they are trying to look pretty or professional. And there remains the sense that the right pair brings a touch of class.

The attempts by aristocrats to keep high heels to themselves are part of a phenomenon that sociologists call **distinction**, a word used to describe efforts to distinguish one’s own group from others. In this historical example, we see elite men working hard to make a simultaneously class- and gender-based distinction. If the aristocrats had had their way, only rich men would have ever worn high heels. Today high heels continue to serve as a marker of gender distinction. With few exceptions, only women (and people impersonating women) wear high heels.

Distinction is a main theme of this book. The word *gender* only exists because we distinguish between people in this particular way. If we didn’t

care about distinguishing men from women, the whole concept would be utterly unnecessary. We don't, after all, tend to have words for physical differences that don't have meaning to us. For example, we don't make a big deal out of the fact that some people have the gene that allows them to curl their tongue and some people don't. There's no concept of *tongue aptitude* that refers to the separation of people into the curly tongued and the flat tongued. Why would we need such a thing? The vast majority of us just don't care. Likewise, the ability to focus one's eyes on a close or distant object isn't used to signify status and being right-handed is no longer considered better than being left-handed.

Gender, then, is about distinction. Like tongue aptitude, vision, and handedness, it is a biological reality. We are a species that reproduces sexually. We come, roughly, in two body types: a female one built to gestate new life and a male one made to mix up the genes of the species. The word **sex** is used to refer to these physical differences in primary sexual characteristics (the presence of organs directly involved in reproduction) and secondary sexual characteristics (such as patterns of hair growth, the amount of breast tissue, and distribution of body fat). We usually use the words

male and **female** to refer to sex, but we can also use **male-bodied** and **female-bodied** to specify that sex refers to the body and may not extend to how a person feels or acts. And, as we'll see, not every body fits neatly into one category or the other.

Unlike tongue aptitude, vision, and handedness, we make the biology of sex socially significant. When we differentiate between men and women, for example, we also invoke blue and pink baby blankets, suits and dresses, *Maxim* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, and action movies and chick flicks. These are all examples of the world divided up into the **masculine** and the **feminine**, into things we associate with men and women. The word **gender** refers to the symbolism of masculinity and femininity that we connect to being male-bodied or female-bodied.

Symbols matter because they indicate what bodily differences mean in practice. They force us to try to fit our bodies into constraints that "pinch" both physically and symbolically, as high heels do. They prompt us to invent



Louis XIV, king of France from 1643 to 1715, gives himself a boost with big hair and high heels.



One of these people is not like the others. We perform gendered distinctions like the one shown here every day, often simply out of habit.

ways around bodily limitations, as eyeglasses do. They are part of our collective imaginations and, accordingly, the stuff out of which we create human reality. Gender symbolism shapes not just our identities and the ideas in our heads, but workplaces, families, and schools, and our options for navigating through them.

This is where distinction comes in. Much of what we believe about men and women—even much of what we imagine is strictly biological—is not naturally occurring difference that emerges from our male and female bodies. Instead, it's an outcome of active efforts to produce and maintain difference: a sea of people working together every day to make men masculine and women feminine, and signify the relative importance of masculinity and femininity in every domain.

Commonly held ideas, and the behaviors that both uphold and challenge them, are part of **culture**: a group's shared beliefs and the practices and material things that reflect them. Human lives are wrapped in this cultural meaning, like the powerful masculinity once ascribed to high heels. So gender isn't merely biological; it's cultural. It's the result of a great deal of human effort guided by shared cultural ideas.

Why would people put so much effort into maintaining this illusion of distinction?

Imagine those aristocratic tantrums: pampered, wig-wearing, face-powdered men stomping their high-heeled feet in frustration with the lowly copycats. *How dare the masses blur the line between us*, they may have cried. Today it might sound silly, ridiculous even, to care about who does and doesn't wear high heels. But at the time it was a very serious matter. Successful efforts at distinction ensured that these elite men really *seemed* different and, more importantly, *better than* women and other types of men. This was at the very core of the aristocracy: the idea that some people truly are superior and, by virtue of their superiority, entitled to hoard wealth and monopolize power. They had no superpowers with which to claim superiority, no actual proof that God wanted things that way, no biological trait that gave them an obvious advantage. What *did* they have to distinguish themselves? They had high heels.

Without high heels, or other symbols of superiority, aristocrats couldn't make a claim to the right to rule. Without difference, in other words, there could be no hierarchy. This is still true today. If one wants to argue that Group A is superior to Group B, there must be distinguishable groups. We can't think more highly of one type of person than another unless we have at least two types. Distinction, then, must be maintained if we are going to value certain types of people more than others, allowing them to demand more power, attract more prestige, and claim the right to extreme wealth.

Wealth and power continue to be hoarded and monopolized. These inequalities continue to be justified—made to seem normal and natural—by producing differences that make group membership seem meaningful and inequality inevitable or right. We all engage in actions designed to align ourselves with some people and differentiate ourselves from others. Thus we see the persistence of social classes, racial and ethnic categories, the urban-rural divide, gay and straight identities, liberal and conservative parties, and various Christian and Muslim sects, among other distinctions. These categories aren't all bad; they give us a sense of belonging and bring joy and pleasure into our lives. But they also serve as classifications by which societies unevenly distribute power and privilege.

Gender is no different in this regard. There is a story to tell about both difference and hierarchy and it involves both pleasure and pain. We'll wait a bit before we seriously tackle the problem of gender inequality, spending several chapters learning just how enjoyable studying gender can be. There'll be funny parts and fascinating parts. You'll meet figure skaters and football players, fish and flight attendants and, yes, feminists, too. Eventually we'll get to the part that makes you want to throw the book across the room. We won't take it personally. For now, let's pick up right where we started, with distinction.

“

THE ONES WITH EYELASHES ARE GIRLS;
BOYS DON'T HAVE EYELASHES.

—FOUR-YEAR-OLD ERIN DESCRIBES HER DRAWING¹

”



2

Ideas

Most of us use the phrase “opposite sexes” when describing the categories of male and female. It’s a telling phrase. There are other ways to express this relationship. It was once common, for example, to use the phrase “the fairer sex” or “the second sex” to describe women. We could simply say “the *other sex*,” a more neutral phrase. Or, even, “*an other sex*,” which leaves open the possibility of more than two. Today, though, people usually describe men and women as *opposites*.

Seventeenth-century Europeans—the same ones fighting over high heels—didn’t believe in “opposite” sexes; they didn’t even believe in *two* sexes.² They believed men and women were better and worse versions of the same sex, with identical reproductive organs that were just arranged differently: Men’s genitals were pushed out of the body, while women’s remained inside. As Figure 2.1 shows, they saw the vagina as simply a penis that hadn’t emerged from the body; the womb as a scrotum in the belly; the ovaries just internal testes. As the lyrics to one early song put it: “Women are but men turned outside in.”³

Seventeenth-century anatomists were wrong, of course. We’re not the same sex. The uterus and fallopian tubes of the female body come from an embryonic structure that is dissolved during male fetal development. Conversely, men’s internal sexual and