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## Introduction

### *Latin Grammatical Gender Is Not Arbitrary*

In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl. See how it looks in print—I translate this from a conversation in one of the best of the German Sunday-school books: “*Gretchen*. Wilhelm, where is the turnip? *Wilhelm*. She has gone to the kitchen. *Gretchen*. Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden? *Wilhelm*. It has gone to the opera.”  
(Mark Twain, “The Awful German Language,”  
Appendix D of *A Tramp Abroad*)

To a speaker of Latin, the table at which I sit (*mensa*) is feminine, the cup from which I drink (*poculum*) neuter, and the eyes with which I see (*oculi*) masculine. Every aspect of an ancient Roman’s life was populated with nouns that possessed at least one of these three genders. This linguistic phenomenon, of course, hardly characterizes Latin alone. Grammatical gender is in fact so widespread that it takes the satire of a Mark Twain to remind us of the inherent oddness of these categories. In explicitly drawing attention to a turnip’s presumed sex, Twain questions the logic—and wonders about the origins—of one of the basic categories that humans have used in the organization of language.<sup>1</sup> Part of the humor of Twain’s remarks lies in the fact that, presumably, the oddness to which he draws attention goes unnoticed in the daily usage of a German speaker. The grammatical gender of inanimate objects, we are taught, is a convenient linguistic convention, having no correspondence with any sort of imagined sexual characteristics of those objects in the real world. I propose in this book to offer some ancient evidence that runs contrary to this claim. In the world of Latin grammatical gender, I will argue, the sex and sexuality behind a given gender was always available for exploitation by the learned speaker.

According to the book of *Genesis*, the first act of Adam was to name the animals that God had assembled before him (2: 19–20). The author of this account

<sup>1</sup>Corbett 1991 has the best general discussion.

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does not relate what principles the first man adopted in deciding upon the names that he chose, but apparently Adam's choices met with God's approval. For the Latin language, a story of the originary act of naming circulating in Rome of the late Republic offers a little more detail about what was thought to inform the decisions of these first speakers. From the extant books of the treatise *On the Latin Language* (*De lingua Latina*) by the scholar Marcus Terentius Varro, a coherent—albeit tantalizingly incomplete—narrative can be reconstructed concerning the origins of Latin vocabulary.<sup>2</sup> A group of “first-namers,” guided by nature, generated a set of basic Latin nouns that were somehow expressive of the objects or ideas that they described in the real world. Verbal signifiers, in other words, had a perceptible relationship with their signifieds. Even at this elemental stage of the language, however, Varro suggests that mistakes may have been made. Among the types of mistakes committed is the occasional misapplication of grammatical gender—the apparently feminine noun for eagle (*aquila*), for example, confusedly designates both the male and the female bird (*ling.* 8.7). To Varro, then, not only the shape and sound of a word, but its grammatical gender as well, stem from some characteristic that inheres in the thing named, and it is this characteristic that these wise first-namers perceived by dint of their understanding of the natural world. So perhaps the feminine turnip deserves, if not overwrought reverence, at least serious scholarly consideration.

### HUMAN LANGUAGE AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN REALITY

Much of my discussion in this book is predicated on a particular set of grammatical rules—those of grammatical gender—and attempts to demonstrate in detail how the Romans continually applied gender's apparent logic to an understanding of the world around them. A principle shared by many of the Roman scholars and grammarians who offer the bulk of my evidence is that the Latin language can both limit and determine the ways in which a person thinks about and perceives the external world, a notion now generally encompassed by the term “linguistic relativism.” The most basic version of the modern manifestation of this view has become closely identified with the work of Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, and the areas of language to which this principle is applicable have been the subject of extensive speculation and controversy among scholars since the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, linguists and cognitive scientists have become increasingly interested in demonstrating

<sup>2</sup>Varro presumably offered a fuller account in the lost portions of the treatise; for possible Stoic background see Allen 2005. Chapter 1 below goes into more detail concerning the reconstruction offered here, including evidence from the later grammatical tradition.

<sup>3</sup>For convenient overviews of the debate, see Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 2003; Deutscher 2010: 1–22.

those varied areas of human experience in which perception does indeed seem affected by the observer's native language, such as in the interpretation of the color spectrum or the ways in which spatial relationships are expressed.<sup>4</sup>

I intend to provide a historical perspective to this ongoing debate over the extent to which the structure of language affects perception of the world. Using as my laboratory the stable data of the Latin language and Latin literature, I will be focusing on understanding a single pervasive but often neglected aspect of the Latin learner's world: Roman attitudes toward grammatical gender. Grammatical gender forced speakers of Latin, beginning from when they first learned to talk, to classify all the objects and concepts encountered in, or invented for, the external world into one (and, occasionally, two) of three categories: the masculine, the feminine, or the neuter. This linguistic process of sexing the universe, of providing gendered categories for each of its elements, assisted the native speaker in turn by providing labels through which that named universe could be further interpreted and understood. To offer two clear and especially prominent examples: positing the earth (*terra*) as feminine, and reinforcing this conception through daily usage, contributes to the notion that the natural world reproduces itself in ways analogous to the human; positing the powers of fertility as having both male and female grammatical gender, as with the native Roman deities Liber and Libera, extends that same analogy to the workings of the gods. In these two instances, grammatical gender works to organize the realms of both the human and the more-than-human.

The system of grammatical gender in a given language often strikes even native speakers of that language as serving no obvious purpose. Indeed, a language such as English seems to function perfectly well as a means of sharing information even though its gender system has largely disappeared, and on the daily occasions when non-native speakers communicate in a gendered language, errors of gender rarely cause their basic points to be misunderstood.<sup>5</sup> Such uncertainty over the function of genders among contemporary language users renders attempts to reconstruct their origins all the more difficult.<sup>6</sup> But if gender possesses no obvious pragmatic function in rendering communication more efficient, why do gender systems survive in so many of the world's languages? A possible answer explored in this book is that grammatical gender, whatever its origin, persists for underlying cognitive reasons, ones that have little to do with making speakers mutually intelligible. Numerous studies in linguistics have shown that, even though native speakers are no closer than scholars to being able to account for the purpose of grammatical gender, this

<sup>4</sup>Deutscher 2010: 25–98, 217–232 (color); Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 2003: 7–8 (space).

<sup>5</sup>Examples in Yaguello 1978: 92–93.

<sup>6</sup>The two basic approaches to origins are associated with Grimm 1890: 307–555 (gender arises from personification) and Brugmann 1889 (gender arises from morphology and analogy, with biological sex playing only a minor role). For later refinements to each side of this dichotomy see Yaguello 1978, citing in particular the work of Sapir, Meillet, and Jakobson.

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ignorance does not prevent them from seeing gender, either consciously or not, as a “reflection of a vision of the universe.”<sup>7</sup> I will be citing numerous examples from both ancient and modern languages of this fundamental desire of human beings to “make sense” of everyday speech by relating it to the external reality that that speech attempts to describe. In particular, I will be exploring rationalizations of grammatical gender by speakers and writers of Latin, rationalizations that I do not necessarily claim have any correspondence with the actual historical origins of the gender system, but that can tell us much about Roman attitudes toward not only grammatical gender but also biological sex.

I have no doubt that, by the classical period, Latin scholars and speakers both sensed and exploited a relationship between linguistic gender and physical sex. Perhaps seduced by the need to see a more-than-human logic at work in the creation of their language, they used grammatical gender to create a world that is divided, like language, into opposing categories of male (masculine) and female (feminine).<sup>8</sup> This drive toward rationalization exposes a problem inherent in the antiquarian reconstructions that have pervaded Roman scholarship since the late Republic. In their desire to attribute meaning to grammatical gender, scholars of ancient Rome reconstruct an ideal prehistory, one in which Latin’s original speakers sex the world by assigning specific genders to nouns, both inanimate and animate. In creating such an early etiology of grammatical gender, the Latin grammarians established assumptions that necessarily restricted contemporary and future perceptions about what grammatical gender can mean.<sup>9</sup> I intend to make this potential for confusion into a virtue. The tendency to seek an originary function in gender creates a self-reinforcing circuit, as a natural world filled with the dichotomy of masculine and feminine is constructed to correspond with the grammatical world of masculine and feminine.<sup>10</sup> The workings of genesis amnesia can also contribute to this circuit: if a given noun, though not “born a woman,” assumes a grammatically feminine gender, over time this gender can facilitate the process by which the thing named accrues sexed qualities that speakers ultimately choose to identify as socially “feminine.” A recent survey of laboratory research on grammatical gender shows that the mere creation of categories causes human subjects to create meaningful similarities among the members of each category. For example, when learning that an unfamiliar word for “violin” was feminine, English speakers chose as descriptors of the word adjectives such as “beautiful,” “curvy,” and “elegant”; when told that the unfamiliar word was masculine, sub-

<sup>7</sup> Yaguello 1978: 93 (“Le genre est-il le reflet d’une vision de l’univers?”).

<sup>8</sup> Yaguello 1978: 91–113 offers a fascinating account of how this dichotomy in modern French plays itself out in French society.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Butler 1990: 46–47.

<sup>10</sup> For efforts in antiquity and beyond to construct “nature” in ways that match the perceived realities of the social world, see Flemming 2000: 1–28.

jects described the object as “difficult,” “impressive,” and “noisy.”<sup>11</sup> Experiments such as this show how the grammatical categories of “masculine” and “feminine” can help reinforce a normative dichotomy of “masculine” and “feminine” in society at large. One particularly visible consequence of these associations is that a number of inanimate nouns come to acquire anthropomorphic features associated with animal, and particularly human, sexuality. To cite one familiar example, the American Statue of Liberty ultimately owes its female manifestation to the grammatical gender of the virtue that it personifies, the Latin feminine noun *libertas*. In this context, I will explore how Latin grammatical gender, regardless of origins, allows the Romans to create order by sexing their world.

### SEX (*SEXUS*) AND GENDER (*GENUS*)

The consistent overlap, and even occasional identification, of grammatical gender with biological sex by speakers in ancient Rome finds an analogue in the Latin nouns commonly used to denote “gender” and “sex.” In a distinction that prevails throughout Latinity, *genus* is the normal Latin noun for the grammatical category, while *sexus* indicates the biological division of male and female humans and animals. Variations within this basic distinction, however, do occur. Unsurprisingly, from the beginnings of their literature Latin speakers have no qualms about applying the more general noun, *genus*, meaning “type” or “category,” to the particular categories of “male” and “female” human beings and animals—to “sex,” in other words—and this practice continues across a broad range of texts and genres throughout Latinity.<sup>12</sup> The word *sexus*, by contrast, has a history that is both more circumscribed and more revealing. In Varro’s *On the Latin Language*, the earliest formal discussion of Latin grammar, the noun *sexus* denotes grammatical gender. In introducing those properties that characterize the various parts of speech, Varro writes that three features mark each noun and pronoun: gender (*sexus*), number, and case (*ling.* 8.46). As Roman grammar develops a more specialized vocabulary after Varro, *genus* entirely replaces *sexus* as the default term for referring to grammatical gender, but *sexus* does make its appearance in these philological texts when the writers choose to echo a preexistent tradition—one that seemingly dates back to Varro—in affirming that grammatical gender and biological sex are to be closely identified.<sup>13</sup> Hence, even as *genus* develops a specialized meaning for the

<sup>11</sup>Boroditsky et al. 2003; this example, one of several offered, is from 71–72.

<sup>12</sup>ThLL vol. VI, 2 1895.32–72 (O. Hey).

<sup>13</sup>Serv. *gramm.* IV 408.1, Serg. *gramm.* IV 493.8, Cledon. *gramm.* V 10.19, Frg. Bob. *gramm.* V 652.9. For details, see the discussion in chapter 1 of Consent. *gramm.* V 343.7–344.37.

grammarians, the notion of biological sex as an explanatory principle is never too distant to access.

This tendency for the scholarly tradition to identify grammatical gender with biological sex explains in part the grammarians' neglect of the neuter gender as an active participant in their worldview. It is here that another etymology comes into play. In deriving the word for grammatical gender (*genus*) from the verb that denotes human procreation (*genero*), Varro leads later grammarians to assume that there must be only two "proper" genders, the masculine and the feminine. The neuter, as inherently non-procreative, becomes viewed as a non-integral part of the gender system.<sup>14</sup> This neglect of the neuter receives further impetus from the restricted semantic range of those Latin words categorized as neuter. The types of words that tend to be marked with this gender include those describing classes or collections of objects and ideas (such as the neuter noun *genus* itself), those with functions perceived as passive (the internal organs), or those that are the product of becoming (e.g., neuter fruits are normally conceived of as the product of feminine trees).<sup>15</sup> Such classes would account for a relatively small percentage of those Latin nouns in active daily use. More importantly, however, none of these classes of the neuter is understood to bifurcate or to be actively involved in production in the same ways as those Latin nouns that fluctuate between masculine and feminine (see further chapter 2). An ancillary indication that the neuter may have had less powerful semantic connotations than the other two genders resides in its gradual disappearance during the final centuries of Latin's existence as a living language, a development for which traces survive from as early as the beginning of the second century AD.<sup>16</sup> The consequences of this development are most readily visible in the fact that none of the modern Romance languages has a morphologically distinct neuter gender.<sup>17</sup> This neglect by the grammarians—and by native speakers of the language—carries over into the other major areas upon which I focus in my final three chapters: the manipulation of grammatical gender by poets, its role in naming deities, and the treatment of hermaphrodites. As a result, I will follow my sources in treating the neuter only occasionally throughout the following pages, with emphasis placed instead on the role of the grammatical genders of masculine and feminine in creating and reaffirming the role of the male and female in the Roman world.

<sup>14</sup>Varro frg. 245 in Funaioli (1907), who provides testimony from the later tradition; cf. too Don. *gramm. mai.* IV 375.20 (Keil): *vel principalia vel sola genera duo sunt, masculinum et femininum*. For more details, see chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup>LHS 8–10.

<sup>16</sup>Adams 2013: 428–431.

<sup>17</sup>Adams 2013: 383–384; for Romance languages, see Maiden 2013: 167–174.

## THE LATIN LANGUAGE AND THE ROMAN SOCIAL WORLD

Monique Wittig, in her 1985 article “The Mark of Gender,” discusses the role of grammatical gender in contemporary French and English as “a sociological category that does not speak its name.”<sup>18</sup> Her discussion concentrates principally upon the absence of a commonly agreed upon epicene third-person singular pronoun in English—that is, the failed attempts to replace the common-gendered “he” or the cumbersome “he or she” with something equivalent to the French “on,” such as that pariah of English grammar teachers, the pronoun “one.” Her argument will be familiar because of its subsequent influence. By using simply “he” to refer to an indefinite grammatical subject, regardless of that subject’s biological sex, language becomes constructed daily as a site for reinforcing sexual hierarchies in the real world, even in a relatively genderless language such as English.<sup>19</sup> This phenomenon, by which the masculine represents the default gender for groups of mixed sex, also receives attention in Roman antiquity, as do the consequences of the practice. In his commentary on Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Servius promotes the use of the masculine default on the grounds that the masculine constitutes the “better sex,” a formulation that reaffirms the ease with which the artificial rules of grammar can be applied to real-world relationships between the sexes.<sup>20</sup>

I would like to suggest that Wittig’s approach can be applied to grammatical gender in Latin, but not in order to claim that the inherent structures of Latin allow it to serve as a tool for sexism. Rather, I would like to suggest that the tendency of orthodox Latin grammar to explain a noun’s gender by reference to the corresponding biological sex combines with the daily usage of writers and speakers to succeed in heterosexualizing Roman culture’s worldview.<sup>21</sup> As I discuss fully in chapter 1, the division of the world into male and female begins with how Roman scholars etymologize the very Latin word that means “gender.” *Genus*, Roman students were told repeatedly and at an early stage in their education, derives from the verb *genero*, the verb describing the act of sexual reproduction. Furthermore, the invariable listing of the genders in antiquity—with masculine first, followed by feminine and neuter, an order so familiar to modern language learners—was constructed by the ancient grammatical tradition as “not merely a traditional order in which to treat the genders, but a natural linguistic order.”<sup>22</sup> The stability of this grammatical organization through

<sup>18</sup> Wittig 1985: 4.

<sup>19</sup> Corbett 1991: 219–221 provides, with bibliography, an interesting analysis of the issue from a historical and linguistic point of view.

<sup>20</sup> Serv. *Aen.* 2.457: *meliori sexui . . . id est masculino*; other examples in Vaahtera 2008: 257–259.

<sup>21</sup> Butler 1990: esp. 11, 45–48.

<sup>22</sup> Vaahtera 2008: 248; her entire discussion is relevant to this point.



the millennia informs other types of orderliness that arise from the creation of categories along the lines of sex/gender.

And yet, as Bourdieu says, “to bring order is to bring division, to divide the universe into opposing entities”; but any process of division simplifies, inevitably promoting misrecognition of the original reasons for creating that order.<sup>23</sup> A second etymology further contributes to naturalizing this process of division. The word dividing the physical sexes—*sexus*—likely originates from the verb meaning “to cut” (*seco*). Although there is no evidence that the Romans were aware of this particular etymology, they nevertheless recognize at work behind the noun the principle of mutually exclusive division: an earlier neuter form (*secus*) appears in its extant occurrences exclusively with adjectives meaning “manly” (*virile*) or “womanly” (*muliebre, femineum*). “Sex,” then, describes a “cutting” in two, a splitting of the human world into mutually opposing camps.<sup>24</sup> And yet, as has been aptly observed, these sorts of mutually opposing divisions in fact exaggerate the difference between a man and woman: “men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else—for instance, mountains, kangaroos, or coconut palms.”<sup>25</sup> The division by sex, then, would seem to serve as means to another set of ends. Beginning with the overtly innocent instances of etymologizing the nouns *genus* and *sexus*, one sees not only Latin vocabulary, but the dominant means by which Romans make sense of their world, divided into the categories male/female, masculine/feminine, active/passive, dry/wet, and so on. In this process of identifying grammatical rules with social categories, cultural divisions become naturalized, and there is created a normative view of the separation of the sexes, another step in the invention, so to speak, of heterosexuality.<sup>26</sup> These mythically stable oppositions constructed along the lines of sex contribute to the separation of male and female into exclusive areas, and the history of injustices arising from this separation need not be rehearsed here. But some of the implications of the situations in which these categories are played out, in the creation and reinforcement of what has been called the “heterosexual matrix,” will be examined in the following chapters.<sup>27</sup>

## OUTLINE OF BOOK

Saint Gregory the Great concludes the introductory epistle to his *Magna Moralia* with a famous assessment of the relationship between the rules of grammar

<sup>23</sup>Bourdieu 1990: 210.

<sup>24</sup>Szemerényi 1969: 977–978; Vaan 2008: 560–561.

<sup>25</sup>Rubin 1975: 179.

<sup>26</sup>I derive the phrase “invention of heterosexuality” from Katz 2007. For the invention of heterosexuality in the Augustan Age (and the concurrent abasement of homosexuality), see Habinek 1997.

<sup>27</sup>Butler 1990: 9.

and an understanding of the divine: “I consider it most unworthy to confine the language of the heavenly oracle within the rules of Donatus.”<sup>28</sup> At the time Gregory was writing in the late sixth century AD, the evolution of Latin into the various dialects that were to become the Romance languages had reached an advanced stage, and in opposition to this perceived decline there had been developing a full corpus of grammatical writings that strove to preserve and enforce the rules of classical Latin usage. In rejecting a strict adherence to this corpus, which he identifies here with one of its great exponents, the fourth-century grammarian Donatus, Gregory eschews rule-bound strictures and superfluous rhetoric in favor of a writing style that will accord with the needs of his subject matter in the *Magna Moralia*, an exposition of Christian morality through a thorough exegesis of the Book of Job. Judging in accordance with these standards, Gregory would deem the following pages, which depend heavily upon these “rules of Donatus,” eminently unworthy.

Chapter 1 begins by reconstructing how the Romans imagined that the earliest Latin speakers employed grammatical gender. From as early as Varro, scholars and grammarians occupied themselves with cataloguing the peculiarities of grammatical gender—instances, for example, when gender assignment seems counterintuitive, or where one noun can vary between masculine, feminine, and neuter. This scholarly activity, with little extant precedent in Greek tradition, finds grammarians consistently placing great importance upon the identification of grammatical gender with biological sex. I attempt to explain this fascination with “sex and gender” by examining the reasons posited for the fluid gender of nouns, and by considering the commonest practitioners of grammatical gender bending (in particular Vergil). By dividing the world into discrete sexual categories, Latin vocabulary works to encourage the pervasive heterosexualization of Roman culture.

Extant texts from the late Republic and early Empire attribute to poets writing in Latin a power that the Roman grammarians do not recognize either for writers of prose or for speakers of Latin in general: the ability to manipulate, apparently at whim, the standard gender of a noun. Vergil, for instance, uses the word for “tree bark” (*cortex*) in both the masculine and the feminine for no clear semantic reason; rather he does it, we are told by later commentators, because that is what Vergil does. In chapter 2, I survey eight different explanations—ranging from metrical considerations to the desire to allude to a Greek intertext—that scholars have suggested since antiquity for the literary phenomenon of the non-standard gender. In my conclusion I follow an assumption that lies unexplored in several of these explanations. Roman scholars attributed to poets the privileged knowledge of an early poetic language, one that had access to mythic and folkloric associations dating back to the period when the Latin

<sup>28</sup>Greg. *M. moral. epist. 5: indignum vehementer existimo, ut verba caelestis oraculi restringam sub regulis Donati.*

language was first coming into existence. During this period, grammatical genders were fluid, and could be applied to various items in the world in accordance with the privileged knowledge of these ur-speakers.

Chapter 3 provides an opportunity for speculation about places in the poets where fluid grammatical gender has not received much attention. I begin with a survey of visual evidence from antiquity to demonstrate that, with only apparent exceptions, personifications in ancient Rome are depicted with the sex that corresponds to the grammatical gender of the noun that describes them (the masculine noun *honos*, for example, appears in representations only as a man, the feminine *virtus* only as a woman). After establishing this point, I examine poetic texts that offer an array of examples in which a poet plays with the notion of personification through the exploitation of a noun's gender. My approach builds on the conclusions of the previous chapter, as I show poets using grammatical gender as a shorthand to recall situations or episodes from the mythic past. I conclude with an analysis of Catullus 6, where sensitivity to grammatical gender contributes to the riddling nature of this short poem.

In chapter 4 I move from literature to a broader consideration of the role of grammatical gender in daily religious experience. Not surprisingly in light of the preceding chapter's discussion of personifications, the grammatical gender of a god's name matches the perceived sex of its imagined incarnation. I extend this observation to an analysis of the *indigetes*, a set of minor deities—nearly 150 are attested in our sources—who seem to have ruled every aspect of daily life, and to whom the Romans appealed, in particular at significant transitional stages such as birth, marriage, and death. There is detectible in the numerous extant allusions to these deities, as well as to other divine powers, a tendency to group gods in sexed pairs, such as that of the feminine goddess of purification, Februa, and her masculine consort, Februus. Further support for these pairings is found in ancient philosophical speculation that deities must encompass within themselves the characteristics of both sexes in order to best represent the nature of the physical world. I close by showing how this originary state of divine androgyny—whether historical or the product of intellectual speculation—collapses over time in ways analogous to the loss of fluid gender for nouns, as the relentless dichotomy of masculine and feminine drives different aspects of reality to become associated with one particular sex. Passivity and nurture become characteristic features of female deities, activity and culture of male.

My fifth chapter closes the book by looking once again at mixed sex, but this time as manifest in the human body. I begin by surveying the different attitudes toward human intersexuality in the Greek world in order to highlight the difference from Roman conceptions. During the Roman Republic the human hermaphrodite enjoyed a dual existence in more ways than the obvious. The slippery nature of its sexuality placed the hermaphrodite in the category of the religious sacred, capable of having unimaginable effects on the real world; at the same time its status as a prodigy of nature made it a concern of the political

elite. This divided existence was regularly resolved by a complex religious and political process employed to ensure the prodigy's banishment to outside the boundaries of the Roman state. Here again the combination of the sacred and the mysterious finds analogues with the fluid-gendered nouns and the androgynous divinities of the Roman past. And, just as those once fluid gods and nouns come to occupy over time the rigid categories of masculine and feminine, so too with the dawn of the Empire the treatment of the hermaphrodite as a prodigy ceases. Concurrent with the ending of the prodigy process, our sources also locate the end of the awe once felt for the hermaphrodite, as it devolves into a mere curiosity, a plaything for the privileged.

While each of these chapters can be read as an independent case study, I intend them together to present a diachronic narrative of the imagined development of sex and gender in ancient Rome. Latin's earliest stages are perceived as extraordinarily fluid regarding both grammatical gender and physical sex, and this fluidity is expressed in the practice of the vatic poets who have alleged access to this early stage of the language, and by the sex of the numerous minor deities who were created in order to watch over the daily life of the Romans. As time went on, however, grammatical gender and—by a necessary corollary—the roles associated with biological sex came to be reified into rigid categories, the violation of which was thus deemed an action contrary to nature. Nouns adopt fixed genders; the sex of gods correlate to fixed roles; the mysterious hermaphrodite no longer reflects a lost, sacred age of flux and fluidity. Unlike Saint Gregory, I believe that it is an eminently worthy enterprise, and one of continued relevance, to disentangle the ways in which speakers of Latin constructed their society in accordance with the “rules of Donatus.” Grammatical gender may have originated as an innocent accident of morphology. In practice, however, its system provided Latin speakers a means of organizing, categorizing, delineating—and in many cases marginalizing—features of the world around them.

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