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Gender: A Melee

The king was pregnant.

URSULA K. LE GUIN,

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

6 It turns out the supply-side cheerleader George Gilder was more correct than not when he forecast, in the poignantly titled *Sexual Suicide* in 1973, that women playing at being men would spell the collapse of Western civilization and probably the social order itself. What he meant by sexual suicide was “the abolition of biological differences between men and women” — in his day, feminists demanding paychecks and forcing men to do housework, and thereby selfishly violating the pact they were supposed to be upholding with nature. Nature had endowed humankind with different sorts of bodies, from which different social roles followed: motherhood for

some, breadwinning for others. Nature did not intend men to clean toilets! Or women to go to work, needless to say. It wasn't just childbearing that society required from women; as the morally superior gender we were also meant to dragoon reluctant men into playing *patres familias*, according to Gilder, luring them into domestic cages like lion tamers at the circus, civilizing their beastly sex drives into socially productive ones. If we shirk the task, everything falls apart. Gay liberation was thus another sore spot in Gilder's catalogue of contemporary woe, a world where women's charms held no sway and male carnality thus ran amuck.

How vulnerable the “primacy of the biological realm” would turn out to be, how tenuous its hold on the species if each of us had to pledge fealty to the gender binary to keep civilization afloat. How confident can nature's defenders really be in the selling power of this story? After all, alarm bells aplenty have rung over the last half century yet have thus far failed to herd those renegade female factions back into their kitchens.

And look around now! Gender is more of a clusterfuck than ever, and yes, civilization's destruction indeed looms nearer: birthrates have dropped below replacement rates around the globe, down four percent in the United States in 2020 alone. Male breadwinner families are on the extinction watch list. And the damned liberationists still aren't happy. Today's gender vanguards — trans activists, the “genderqueer” — want to sever the link between biology and gender entirely, letting men become women and women men, surgically acquiring penises and cooches, rebranding important body parts with gender neutral language (“front hole” for vagina), not to mention poisoning innocent children with cross-sex hormones and puberty blockers. (Far more patriotic to mow

them down with assault weapons, at least according to the child welfare experts of the GOP.) Some members of the younger generation want to abolish gender entirely, demanding the whole English language be revised to accommodate them and their impossible-to-remember pronoun preferences.

Where gender distinctions blur, monsters seem to lurk, like those snarling creatures at the edge of the world on sixteenth-century maps warning sailors away from the abyss. I was thinking about the monster problem recently while reading an interesting history tracing the relation between the invention of endocrinology and the growing demand for gender reassignment treatments. Called *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Ides of Gender*, from 1995, it opens with the author, Bernice L. Hausman, a mostly lucid writer, confessing in the book's preface that she'd been pregnant while revising the manuscript, and was "perhaps one of few expectant mothers who worry they will give birth to a hermaphrodite." I was therefore not surprised when the book takes an anxious anti-trans swerve in its epilogue, though prior chapters provide fascinating facts about the discovery of glandular therapies in the late nineteenth century. This includes the story of a researcher named Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard, who in 1889 found, by injecting himself with canine (or possibly monkey) testicular tissue, that what would later be called testosterone had sexually rejuvenating effects in men. Thousands of men were soon arranging to have themselves likewise injected, though whatever rejuvenation followed was later thought to be a placebo effect — the testes don't actually store testosterone, it turns out.

If commentators as disparate as Gilder and Hausman are, in their different ways, a little panicky about the gender system collapsing, if both envision nature-defying creatures

(feminists, hermaphrodites) snapping at them from the abyss, then we're in the realm of what the fairy tale expert Marina Warner calls the monstrous imagination. Aroused by scenes of chaos and emergence, it mirrors our lack of understanding back to us in the form of menacing hybrids, typically depicted as scary inhabitants of dark underworlds. Among the chaotic emergent things no one much understands (especially these days) is gender, despite everyone supposedly having one. Yet what is it, where does it come from? Certainties abound, yet somehow they keep changing. With Western civilization itself a rickety boat navigating these tumultuous waters, perpetually about to sail over the edge into some posthuman future, no wonder the conversation gets a little shrill.

Revolutions are threatening, and what Hausman calls the "new forms of being human" that emerged in the twentieth century were revolutionary, especially once "hormones" — so named in 1905 — were extracted (from glands) and then synthesized, leading eventually to new possibilities in gender reassignment procedures. Oddly — though maybe this is just the usual blinkers of an academic with nose pressed to his own research subject (in this case, transsexualism) — Hausman fails to mention that the ability to synthesize hormones also led to the development of birth control pills, first marketed in the United States in 1960, which prevent ovulation in women. It strikes me as weird that Hausman doesn't see that far more widely implemented gender-altering technology as part of the same story, also ushering in new ways of "being human" for roughly a hundred million women worldwide. (Estrogen both figures in hormonal contraception and feminizes men who wish to change sex.) Maybe her pregnancy made her less attuned to this aspect of the narrative, but it's hard to think of anything more consequential for natal females than the ability

to effectively control fertility, which radically contested the existing gender regime, not to mention fundamentally transforming the experience of heterosexual sex. (See under: Sexual Revolution, The.)

But how did the old regime manage to uphold itself in the first place when it disadvantaged so many? Conservatives will tell you that gender comes from nature and sits firmly on top of biological sex; these sexual differences are imagined to be binary. But this binary was always rather imaginary — the incidence of intersex babies was always higher than was generally acknowledged. Doctors made capricious medical decisions and interventions to assign those babies to one sex or the other, precisely because gender ideology dictated that binary gender had to be preserved. (Apparently intersexed babies are as common as red hair.)

In other words, a certain bad faith seems to come with this territory, by which I mean a refusal to know what you know. Look at Gilder, famous for touting the very economic policies which crushed the single-paycheck family that *Sexual Suicide* was trying to corral America back into. The signature program of these guys (the *Bell Curve* author Charles Murray was another of the big guns) — suppressing wages and cutting taxes for the rich, shifting income shares from workers to capital — was a program so successful we're still living with the consequences. Everyone's seen the stats about upward redistribution of wealth in the last half century, and the gap keeps widening. As Gilder must know, it wasn't feminism that catapulted women into the labor market in the 1970s, it was stagnant male wages, post-industrialism, and the expansion of the service sector; and then came the economic hits of Reaganomics. When labor was winning, as it had been before 1973 (a bad year, between an oil crisis and a recession), a middle-class household *could* survive on

one income, not the two or more that are now the norm for vast swathes of the country, often sans benefits.

But why not finger-point at feminists, those sexual gargoyles, chewing up men and spitting them out, though between the union busting and the job exports, capitalists were doing a lot more chewing and spitting than women ever managed, not that we wouldn't have enjoyed it. Oh, and the declining birthrates? The majority of those recently surveyed in the United States cite childcare costs as the foremost reason not to procreate, along with climate change, another of free market capitalism's great accomplishments. (France, the EU country with the highest birthrate, also funds eighty percent of childcare.) Obviously blaming women, homosexuals, and pornographers for macroeconomic shifts is a better yarn. Behind the monsterring process lies an appetite for thrilling perversity, Marina Warner observes, for "lurid scenes of other people's sins" — titillating even while they purport to condemn. (Speaking of titillation: along with feminists Gilder has a peculiar animus about sexologists, who come up frequently, though they can, admittedly, be creepy.)

What if we were to put it as a question instead of an answer: why *has* the traditional gender order lost so many adherents these days? A less hysterical version of Gilder's laments may be found in Francis Fukuyama's account in *The Great Disruption*: in his telling, late capitalism no longer required gender differentiation for the technology and knowledge-based jobs that a post-industrial economy needed to fill. Women didn't suddenly rise up and demand economic independence — Fukuyama goes so far as to call feminism an epiphenomenon of the information society, a symptom of social disruption and not its driver. The explosion of late twentieth-century liberation movements — the sexual revolution, second wave

feminism, gay liberation — that freed individuals from the tethers of traditional norms and morals were likewise sparked by the transition to a post-industrial society.

Capitalism smashes things while ushering into existence all sorts of new human freedoms. (Economic equality unfortunately not among them). If the male-female binary is losing its grip on the human psyche as a social organizing principle, and the premise that gender roles are rooted in nature has been crumbling for the last century, the causes are obviously multiple: an increasing focus on personal fulfillment, the decline of patriarchal authority that accompanied men's declining economic fortunes and women's economic independence, and resulting changes in the family structure. Or go back further: as Eli Zaretsky points out in *Capitalism, The Family, and Personal Life*, the gender order has been breaking down since Freud unwittingly hastened its demise by undoing the "knot that tied the sexual instincts to the difference between the sexes."

My point is that maybe feminism and transgenderism aren't separate stories. Maybe the rising reports of gender dysphoria and plummeting birth rates aren't separate stories either. There have always been people who did not fit easily into normative categories but were herded in by threat and force, and who are increasingly breaking loose. Because yes, the old structures are ever more enfeebled, unable to demand fealty. Conformity to their dictates is waning. For some that spells catastrophe, for others it's a circus of possibility. Paul B. Preciado, author of *Countersexual Manifesto* and *Testo Junkie*, billed by *Vice* as a "punk trans philosopher," says that "we're transitioning from being a society which is organized by sexual difference." We're moving from a binary gender and sexuality regime "to a new and different regime that has yet

to be named. "In other words: if endocrinology makes bodies malleable, and families instill (slightly) less repression this century than in previous ones, why not explore those possibilities instead of bemoaning the situation? Preciado suggests regarding gender disobedience as a model for social transformation. Why not start implementing "A Day Without Gender" in schools, hospitals, homes, museums and see what happens?"

Gilder obviously wasn't wrong that paychecks and the sexual revolution gave women more access to what had traditionally been male prerogatives. (As to whether these were or are "freedoms" is a more complicated discussion.) But the question that Gilder and followers never get around to is this: if capitalism no longer requires gender differences (and soon will barely require workers at all, except for really shitty or "public-facing" jobs), why is it up to the rest of us to keep upholding these differences? What's in it for us?



That the snarling creatures at the edge of the gender abyss were once feminists now sounds quaint, since for today's gender liberationists (trans activists, "enbys," intersectionalists) the feminists are toothless and mainstream, also complicit in monstrous historical crimes. At least four books with "white feminism" in the title were published in 2021 alone; the term is not used with approbation. In the updated version of the story, white women are the ones responsible for electing Donald Trump — even those who voted or worked for Bernie — and will forever be saddled with the humiliating label "Karen" as payback.

In another twist, weirdly it's now feminists — well, a certain breed of feminist, mostly the dreaded white ones —

wielding the “nature” card, demanding that the old binaries be kowtowed to, otherwise monsters will get us. In Gilder’s iconography of gender catastrophe, the monsters were women in pants; in the updated version they’re wearing skirts, but disaster still beckons. J.K Rowling has been mounting alarms about the monsters in skirts — that is, trans women (assigned male at birth but who identify and live as women), who are supposedly haunting women’s bathrooms and changing rooms, intent on sexually assaulting natal females. None of this has been great for her brand, but she seems undaunted. Among Rowling’s fears are that if gender self-identification laws go into effect in the United Kingdom, trans people will be allowed to change the gender on their birth certificates without going through the previous gauntlet of psychiatric diagnosis and permission, and then any man who says he identifies as a woman would be able to get a Gender Recognition Certificate and state sanctioned access to gender-segregated facilities.

To inject a bit of reality into this anxious morass, the fact is that no one is stationed at the changing room entrances and public bathrooms checking birth or gender certificates now, so how would banning gender self-identification keep trans people out of non-state-run segregated spaces? There are, to be sure, no shortage of vigorous informal policing mechanisms not infrequently inflicted on trans people who don’t sufficiently pass muster (are “clocked” as the wrong sex) in civic spaces, gender-segregated and not. Among the pernicious things about Rowling’s statements is the likelihood of them empowering other women to make scenes when in proximity to anyone whose gender presentation is not to their standards, people who just needed somewhere to urinate when out for the day.

In a statement articulating these anxieties, Rowling revealed that she was herself a survivor of domestic abuse and sexual assault, citing this history as a reason for opposing gender reforms. She regards herself as a vulnerable party in the emerging gender order. Yet she doesn’t appear to have been assaulted by a trans woman or a man masquerading as a woman. Then why shift responsibility for male violence against women onto trans people who, it is widely acknowledged, are disproportionately victims of violence and harassment themselves, especially when forced into facilities that don’t align with their chosen gender? Rowling did acknowledge that the majority of trans-identified people pose no threat to anyone, yet the gender self-recognition movement was still “offering cover to predators like few before it.”

Are there really legions of roving trans women predators out there attacking other women, aside from “problematic” Brian De Palma homages to Hitchcock? (*Dressed to Kill* is the *locus classicus* — spoiler alert: the psychiatrist did it.) Like Rowling, the feminist philosopher Kathleen Stock seems to think so. Until recently a professor at University of Sussex, Stock voluntarily resigned her post in 2021 saying that she had been subject to bullying and harassment because of her views on transgender identity, and indeed, there had been a student campaign calling for her dismissal. Even her receipt of an OBE — Officer of the Order of the British Empire — was protested by over six hundred fellow philosophers, though a counter petition signed by two hundred philosophers supported her, or at least supported her academic freedom to say what she wanted about gender.

Reading Stock’s essay, “Ignoring Differences Between Men and Women is the Wrong Way to Address Gender Dysphoria,” from 2019, it’s easy to see why she is controversial. Things start

out reasonably enough, with Stock delineating the difference between what she calls “sex eliminationists” — those who argue there’s no difference between biological women and trans women because biological sex isn’t a meaningful category — and “gender eliminationists,” who hold that distinctions between men and women aren’t meaningful, and we should treat all humans the same. From there things become, to my mind, exceedingly fuzzy. Stock argues that because “there will always be some social stereotypes about the sexes that remain programmed in our minds, if only because they correspond to statistically recurrent empirical truths about biological men and women,” then the most we can reasonably hope for, when it comes to damaging social stereotypes, is to be “gender critical” — “consciously critical of the particularly damaging social stereotypes we collectively uphold, aiming to replace them over time with better and more socially useful ones.”

This slides rather fast from social stereotypes to empirical truths. I find myself wondering how Stock, a lesbian active in LGB organizations, can speak so confidently about the empirical realities of gender, while mysteriously oblivious about how recently so-called experts defined a reality in which homosexuality was a pathology — psychological in origin and thus, notoriously, “fixable.” Or one where women were unsuited to the professions. Nothing is less stable (or empirical) than social stereotypes about gender, as anyone who reads a work of history or anthropology knows. The traits associated with one or another gender bounce around and reverse over the centuries and between cultures: sometimes men are the more sentimental ones, elsewhere women; men are the lustier ones, no actually it’s women (amoral and multi-orgasmic); and so on.

Where I have some sympathy for Rowling and Stock is that the political interests of sexual minorities (gay people),

gender minorities (trans people), and feminists (Stock and Rowling are both speaking as feminists) do not always align. While you might be a trans lesbian-feminist, some trans-identified people are also quite attached to the kinds of binary gender distinctions that some feminists would like to abolish. Natal women and trans women have different health and reproductive issues. I don’t think natal women need to hold onto some proprietary definition of womanhood, but there are political reasons, in the current political climate and with abortion rights under threat, to acknowledge that biological womanhood disadvantages biological women in ways that will always defeat equality if not addressed. (Trans men, too, can get pregnant and require abortions.) In any case, no one has to be monstered. Nor does cisgender (not being trans) need to be a slur, or “cishet” a synonym for clueless, nor “older generation,” though no doubt these disagreements are generationally inflected. But even lumping “cis” women (a term I don’t love) into one pile overlooks a lot — for instance, pro- and anti-abortion cis women see their interests very differently. Race complicates things even more.

Trans men and trans women are also not always allies. In fact, the age-old war between the sexes has lately been transposed to intra-trans disputes, with trans women calling out trans men for transmisogyny on Twitter. A trans man I know recently accused certain trans women in our circle of being “hard core bros until like a year ago” and moving through the world expecting the same privileges while moaning about being victims of institutional sexism. The intra-trans tensions broke into public in 2020 in the academic journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, when trans theorist Jack Halberstam reviewed trans theorist Andrea Long Chu’s book *Females: A Concern* (in a piece funnily titled “Nice Trannies”) and accused

her of being the Allan Bloom of trans studies, while having “a deep antipathy” to trans men and butches. (Chu was recently appointed book critic at *New York* magazine.)

Personally I’m more interested in political alliances than in gender- or identity-based ones. Clearly identity doesn’t in itself predict anyone’s political affiliations or savvy. A surprisingly high percentage of trans people surveyed — 36% — were Trump supporters in 2016, according to a peer-reviewed study a year later in the journal *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, to choose one of many available examples. Trying to make sense of this, the study’s authors explain that one of the unifying themes in Trump support was anti-feminism; a big way that the GOP has attracted adherents is by signaling that rejecting feminist positions is part of what it means to be a Republican.

The trans versus feminist tensions are hardly new: open warfare was long ago declared between the brand of feminist some label TERFs (“trans exclusionary radical feminists”) and the trans community. (Stock and others regard TERF as a slur and insist on “gender critical” as the correct label.) This often unpleasant standoff commenced with a vicious little tract published in 1979 by the radical feminist Janice Raymond titled *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which argued that trans women are closet patriarchs who want to colonize women’s bodies by parading all the worst stereotypes about them. In the decades since, trans women were often excluded, in not particularly kind ways, from feminist spaces, because feminists such as Rowling declared themselves vulnerable parties, at risk of assault by trans women who came equipped with inborn male aggression despite presenting as women.

Natal men may indeed perpetrate the majority of the violence in the world (though it’s been argued that female

violence takes more hidden forms, for instance violence against children), but the majority of men are *not* violent. It’s men, in fact, not women, who are far more often the victims of violence. The week that everyone was talking about the Gabby Petito murder case (the missing travel blogger who turned out to have been killed by her fiancée) and the grim prevalence of missing women, the FBI annual murder statistics for the previous year were released, according to which roughly seventy-five percent more men were murdered than women (14,146 men, 3,573 women, 35 gender unknown). Obviously women are subject to violence by men, frequently their husbands, boyfriends, and exes, but men are vulnerable to violence by men, too. (As are trans women, especially sex workers, assaulted by straight men who can’t own up to attractions that might make them, in their minds, “gay.”) Somehow we prefer telling stories about endangered cis women.

Stock, along with Rowling, also seems bent on shunting blame for male violence onto trans women. Stock offers the case of a pre-operative trans woman named Karen White who sexually assaulted two female inmates while housed in a British woman’s prison. Described by her neighbors to *The Guardian* as “volatile and violent,” White was also a convicted pedophile on remand for grievous bodily harm, burglary, multiple rapes, and other sexual offenses. Does Stock think White is a typical trans woman? Is this even typical cisgender male behavior? Stock seems to think yes. Arguing against those who say that excluding trans women from women-only spaces is analogous to excluding lesbians from women-only spaces, Stock counters that there’s no “analogous pattern” of lesbian aggression comparable to patterns of male violence. In other words: trans women *are* men and must shoulder the blame for male violence. And one violent trans woman is a pattern.

Is this intellectually honest? I don't think so. As someone pithily tweeted about the sorts of fears circulated by Rowling and Stock, "The reason predatory men aren't becoming trans to prey on women? It's a lot easier to become a cop." In other words, we panic selectively. Reports not infrequently surface about mothers doing violence to, sometimes even murdering, their children. To date there are no attempts to ban motherhood. We see those episodes as anomalies, though non-anomalous enough that there are laws and (generally understaffed) child protection agencies, and of course a thriving memoir sub-genre devoted to abusive mothers. But motherhood is also supposed to be the "natural" condition of things, thus maternal abuse, no matter how many cases a year surface, is always an exception. Whereas an isolated case of a violent trans woman is a pattern.

Let me press a little harder on the maternity analogy. Both Rowling and Stock worry that transness is contagious, and young girls will get the idea that changing genders is a good solution to the inherent problems of being female. But *all* our ideas about gender are contagious — that's how culture works — including deep seated ideas such as "maternal instinct." Except that it's not an instinct, it's a concept that arises at a particular point in history, circa the Industrial Revolution, just as the new industrial-era sexual division of labor was being negotiated, the one where men go to work and women stay home raising kids. (Before that everyone worked at home.) A new story arose to justify the new arrangements: that these roles were handed down by nature. As family historians tell us, it was only when children's actual economic value declined, because they were no longer necessary additions to the household labor force, that they became the priceless little treasures we know them as today. The romance of the child didn't get underway for the middle classes until the mid-nine-

teenth century (it was well into the twentieth that child labor laws went into effect). It also took a decline in infant-mortality rates for mothers to start regarding their offspring with much maternal affection. When infant deaths were high, maternal attachment ran low. It was only as families began getting smaller — birthrates declined steeply in the nineteenth century — that the emotional value of each child increased, which is where we find the origin of contemporary ideas about maternal instincts and fulfillments.

All I'm saying is that what we're calling a "biological" instinct is a historical artifact and a culturally specific development, not a fact of nature. An invented instinct can feel entirely real. I'm sure it can feel profound. As can the kinds of fears and vulnerabilities that Stock and Rowling are leveraging. But if we're getting empirical, let's acknowledge that childbirth has killed far more women than murderous trans women ever did, though I suppose the sentimental premise is that all those dead mothers died fulfilling their gender destiny, not defying it. The point is that a lot of behind-the-scenes conceptual labor goes into establishing the "naturalness" of gender, not to mention the vulnerability of gender critical feminists.

As far as nature goes, the reverence for it is pretty selective. We're happy to take cholesterol blockers, mood elevators, and erection enhancers as needed without worrying whether it's what nature intended. The other day a pig kidney was transplanted into a human. Technological possibilities on the horizon include uterine transplants for sterile women, which raises the possibility of uterine transplants for trans women — maybe eventually for cisgender men too. Why not? Humans have always made it their business to conquer, alter, and repurpose nature — and then to invent monsters lurking at the crossroads.



Not surprisingly, Rowling's and Stock's brand of panic-mongering soon became fodder for the fringe right in America. In July 2021, QAnon followers staged two weekends of violent protests in Los Angeles after a customer at a Koreatown spa (Instagram handle: "CubanaAngel") filmed herself complaining vociferously to the manager about a trans woman supposedly using the jacuzzi in the woman's area of the spa. "He's a pervert," shouts Cubana, "waving his penis and testicles around!" The sight was traumatizing for her. "His dick is out!" says Cubana's friend, voice trembling. "His dick is swinging left and right!" She repeated the word "swinging" so many times it led me to wonder if these were rehearsed lines. "What about women's rights?" shrieks Cubana, as the manager patiently tries to explain that California's Civil Code prohibits businesses from discriminating against anyone on the basis of gender identity or expression. "We're concerned about women's safety," yells Cubana. "We're gonna take it worldwide!"

Which is exactly what happened: the video went viral. Tucker Carlson aired a segment about it, the first of seven on Fox over a week. Antifa showed up to protest the QAnon protesters, evangelicals and the Proud Boys showed up, a reporter was clubbed, protestors threw smoke bombs at cops and pepper sprayed each other, riot cops fired projectiles and beanbag rounds into the crowd. Amidst all this, reports appeared in *Slate*, *The Guardian*, the *L.A. Times*, and other liberal outlets suggesting that the report about a trans woman in the spa was likely a hoax, and according to a spa employee there had been no trans patrons with appointments that day.

But the story turned out to be more complicated. According to the journalist Jason McGahan, who tried to

untangle it five months later in *Los Angeles Magazine*, there actually was a (possibly) trans person in the spa that day. Police issued a warrant for 52-year-old Darren Merager for indecent exposure; Merager does have a penis and is a convicted sex offender. But is Merager actually trans? It's unclear — he or she seems to have a female driver's license, though until recently was identifying as male, according to acquaintances, and McGahan isn't sure which pronouns he or she uses. Is Merager a predator? He/she has a criminal record for theft, but it appears that his/her previous sex crime arrests were for exhibitionism which, according to the psychoanalytic view, typically does entail wanting to be caught. (Robert Stoller calls these scenarios "scripts" in *Observing the Erotic Imagination*.) In this view, exhibitionism is a pathology of gender identity, not a sexual behavior. The motive is courting humiliation and punishment, not getting off sexually. It's a (not very successful) remedy for gender dysphoria, not predation.

Still, there it was, a penis in the woman's pool. Did this put natal women at risk? It is the case that many (or most, or lots of) cis women have been socialized in ways that can make the sight of an exposed penis in non-private settings feel alarming. Perhaps that will someday change, though I don't imagine such feelings are exactly voluntary — any more than gender dysphoria or compulsive exhibitionism is voluntary. But once again, to what extent is it possible to be intellectually honest about the distinction between an anomaly and a pattern? Perhaps it's not, especially when there are competing interests and clashing vulnerabilities at stake. Especially when titillating monsters hover — and Merager made a wonderfully convenient one — feeding the "appetite for thrilling perversity."

Why *is* gender such a melee? Can't it be a comedy instead of a tragedy, a playground and not a police state, with room

for experiments and transformations? You don't have to be some sort of pomo-structuralist to think that no one knows what gender is or where it comes from. Clearly all we have are stories about gender and sexual difference, which shift with the winds, the centuries, and political-economic contingencies. Why not see gender the way we do other human variables — personality for instance, capacious enough for thousands of permutations and infinite mutability?

“Smash the family!” feminists used to declare. Look around: it's smashed. As far as who done it, it's not that big a mystery — could Gilder and cohort not see its demise up ahead when they tanked wages and trashed the safety nets? They were so caught up in their deregulatory zeal that they couldn't imagine the S&L crisis, the housing bubble and evictions, Enron, and the opioid epidemic. No, the only thing they wanted to regulate was gender!

Yes, capitalism breaks things while ushering in all sorts of great new personal liberties — expressive individuality, your very own idiosyncratic unconscious, unisex clothes. It brings whatever you want right to your door at all hours (if you're among the lucky “haves”). Shopping for things, including identities, is the great modern consolation. Is having a gender identity — another recent development in the annals of modern selfhood — a trap or a freedom? Yes.

To those who fear trans women in the ladies room: make sure to pee before you leave the house. Those immutable laws of nature you're attempting to enforce today will be dust tomorrow, and soon enough so will you.

