At first glance, the manuscripts written by Marx in London in 1857 and 1858, collectively known as the *Grundrisse*, seem to pay but scant attention to the issue of gender. As feminists have long observed, the issue of gender seems, simply, to have been an afterthought for Marx during these and subsequent years, an afterthought ultimately to be elaborated only by Engels, and then with great prejudice. To the Marx scholar, the exclusion of gender from the *Grundrisse* appears differently. Why, given the famous presence of meditations on gender in Marx's early works, and the return to the topic in *Capital* and other later works, has gender seemingly disappeared from the manuscripts of the late 1850s?

To answer these issues of interpretation, we will first have to detour through two questions, one philosophical and one historical. First, the philosophical question: under what concepts was the idea of gender investigated by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century minds, and for what reasons and ends? Second, the historical question: what was Marx's relationship to the study of gender in the 1850s, and how does this appear in both his more and less polished texts? Having answered both of these questions, we will then be in a position to see what the *Grundrisse* has to offer on the question of gender, both historically and conceptually, and to relate its offerings to contemporary debates in Marxist-feminist theory and in feminist theory more broadly.
Gender and the nineteenth-century mind

When we say gender today, what we mean is a complex, historically embedded, performative enactment. This enactment shapes how we experience ourselves – and others – as men and women, or as exceeding these categories, and it codes the meaning of this experience with a particular, though variable, significance or content. The concept of gender was crafted in opposition to the idea that biological sex was essentially determinative of one’s behaviour and character. The concept has been especially effective against misogynist stereotypes of women’s essence, such as the exclusive identification of women with reproduction or the emotions. Lately, the idea of gender has also been used to investigate the less visible structures of masculinity. A developing tradition of gender-theory has thus been a part of feminist theory for at least the last twenty years.¹

To use the concept of gender to decode a figure like Marx, who wrote in the nineteenth century, may thus seem to be an anachronism. I will hope to show, in this chapter, that it both is and is not such. While Marx is hardly on the cutting edge of contemporary gender-theory, he already has the insight that our biological natures undergo social shaping, even prior to being conceived as natures. Ultimately, this is to push the distinction between gender and biological sex a step deeper, since even the latter cannot be conceived of as unambiguously natural.

Nonetheless, gender was not the category through which the nineteenth-century mind investigated concepts like women, sexual difference, family-role, sexuality, and the like. Instead, most nineteenth-century minds remain firmly circumscribed by one or both of two discourses: the *querelle des femmes* and political economy. Both discourses took woman as a fixed object with an essential nature, a nature rooted in reproduction. Though they drew different consequences from this essential nature, both discourses remained, for the most part, committed to it, and so had nothing like an insight about gender.

I will argue that Marx is ultimately able to exceed both of these discourses, and especially that he does not take woman to be a fixed object with an essential nature rooted in reproduction. But in order to see where Marx ended, we will have to start where he began. Marx’s inquiries into what we today call gender are the product of the intersection, and then the supersession, of both the *querelle des femmes* and political economy.

Not well known today, the *querelle des femmes* was a conversation about women’s proper roles in early modern Europe. Parts of the *querelle* were clerical in origin, bound up with discussions of whether marriage was appropriate for clergy, or with more general discussions of women’s roles in Christianity. Other

¹. See especially Butler 2006.