

Course Rationale

Gender Passing and the Body in Nineteenth Century Britain

In October 1859, Harry Stokes was found dead in the sluice of the River Irwell in Manchester, supposed suicide. Harry was popular in his community and was known as a 'master bricklayer' and he also held positions as a public house land lord and Special Constable. Yet, when Harry's body was prepared for interment, it was revealed that he was biologically female. Harry had in fact been living as man for fifty years.

Gender Passing and the Body in Nineteenth-Century Britain explores the lives of historic people whose biological identity did not correspond to their gender identity. This course considers how female to male gender passing individuals gendered themselves through their appearance focussing on how they manipulated their bodies, concealed their female bodies and engaged in typically masculine employment.

This course encourages you to think critically about gender performativity in nineteenth-century Britain and considers how gender is unstable and can be manipulated. You will be introduced to two gender passing case studies namely Harry Stokes and James Allen. Using contemporary newspaper reports, pamphlets, street literature and death certificates you will build up a narrative about them.

This narrative will then be used as part of your final assignment that asks the question 'How did Gender Passing Individuals Gender their Bodies in Nineteenth Century Britain?' You will need to incorporate your primary source analysis that we will have discussed in your tutorials and choose appropriate secondary material that supports your argument.

This course allows you to explore a current but under-researched area of history and will offer a different perspective on identity politics that you may not have considered before. Together, we will also challenge the notion of nineteenth century men being the primary breadwinners and women being the primary caregivers and consider their separate roles in society. You will be required to construct arguments and counterarguments relating to gender issues that we are facing today and present your findings to the rest of the class. Through these debates, you will be exposed to critical thinking, source analysis, close textual reading and academic writing which are all skills that are expected of you at university.