This chapter has two purposes. The first is to build upon the argument in the previous chapter that modern state sovereignty identifies a symmetry between state and individual but takes an analogy between the liberal individual and liberal state as an ontological reality. The second is to use that analysis to examine the economy of explanation that discloses the metaphorical architecture of modern sovereignty more generally, and thus to discuss, as a case study, the implications of metaphorical thinking for our conceptualising of gender relations.

The previous chapter criticised the vision of the universal, rational, rights-bearing, free and choosing, and so figured as male, person of mainstream liberal political theory. The modern liberal conception of sovereignty has contained a strong gender coding, and the liberal public/private split has identified the public with male qualities, and the private with bodies and child-rearing. The picture is made more complex by the resurgence of liberal, now neo-liberal ideas and processes in the private realm of work and economics, and by the way the welfare state straddles the public and private divide. By a metaphorical process the public realm is associated with gender (choosing, separate from bodies) and the private domestic realm is associated with sex (biology and corporeality typified by child-bearing). What this chapter adds to the post-state proposal developed in Chapters 1 and 2, is to reinforce the relational rather than dichotomous character of post-states.

The chapter first outlines and celebrates elements of the philosophy of metaphor within an interpretivist framework which forms the basis for the discussion of the metaphorical status of sovereignty. Then, after setting out three forms of mapping, the chapter argues that in the modern conception, sovereignty has operated concurrently and interactively at three distinct levels – to define the state form of the political community, to signal liberal democratic citizenship, and to indicate the inviolability of the private individual. This section of the chapter revisits some of the line of argument discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 but from a different perspective. The
consequences of Locke's description as literal of what Hobbes took crucially to be metaphorical, plays a key role in the argument. The chapter then goes on to critique and reconceptualise the covertly gendered dimension of the metaphor of sovereignty. In introducing the idea of metaphor, the argument here does not thereby psychologise politics nor reduce politics to psychology. Metaphor is an important general mechanism for the way socially and culturally constructed values underpin political ideas, concepts and practices. Neither does this insight detract from the critique of the specific way liberal principles have reinforced the orthodox modern conception of sovereignty, described in the previous chapter.

The possible scope of the metaphor of sovereignty in politics and epistemology is very broad, from sovereign as identifiable person, king, or ruler (personal sovereignty), to sovereign as office-holder (impersonal sovereignty), to a sovereign meaning setting up a general A/not-A dichotomy as a thinking strategy, to a sovereign meaning which performs a dominant, hegemonic, or absolute role (for example, 'sovereign definitions'), to sovereign knowledges which exercise a certain kind of power (for instance as found in Foucauldian discourse). Ashley and Walker are referring to the potent metaphorical force of the idea of sovereignty in these latter meanings when they warn us to regard 'every historical figuration of sovereign presence – be it God, nature, dynasty, citizen, nation, history, modernity, the West, the market’s impartial spectator, reason, science, paradigm, tradition, man of faith in the possibility of universal human community, common sense, or any other – as precisely a question' (Ashley and Walker 1990, 368). The target of Ashley and Walker’s attack, quite validly, is the unacknowledged metaphorical reach of (modern state) sovereignty expressed in grand theories, totalitarian interpretations and universal explanations.

Edkins and Pin-Fat outline the insight that the notion of sovereignty acts as a key concept to fill the gap between the messy world of social antagonisms and the constructed world of social reality, achieved through the imposition of meaning. Thus, sovereignty ‘informs conventional notions of what political power might be’, and the examples they give are ‘the relationship between sovereign and subject within the absolutist kingdom, or the sovereignty of a government over the lives of its citizens in the modern nation-state’, and in international politics sovereignty ‘also plays a foundational role in discussions of international autonomy: the sovereign state is a bounded unit in the international system’. The centrality of the concept of sovereignty leads Edkins and Pin-Fat to attribute to it the place in the social order of ‘master signifier around which a particular symbolic order is constituted’ (Edkins and Pin-Fat 1999, 6). Further, they refer to ‘the totalising part played by sovereignty in stabilising the semantic field’ (Edkins and Pin-Fat 1999, 12).

In a later work Edkins and Pin-Fat go further, arguing plausibly that sovereignty is not ‘a form of power relation [to which resistance is possible] but rather a relationship of violence’, on the grounds that because ‘it seeks