



**The Androgyne:
Divine Intervention or Impossible Desire.**

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Introduction

From its Beginnings as The Supreme Being to the cultures of the world I propose to trace the incarnations and manifestations of the androgyne in an attempt to discover whether its origin of omnipotence has weathered the centuries and where its importance now lies.

There can be no escape from gender as a category of analysis in cultural discourse and discussion be it historical, anthropological, psychological, literary, artistic or media based. Since the advent of feminism any critique or reading of the humanities is deemed incomplete or irrelevant if it lacks at least a recognition of gender roles.

In language and the spoken word sexual difference is apparent at a rudimentary level. The French and German languages, amongst others, have male and female nouns. Animals and humans are the only things in English which incur this treatment, the masculine being the generic term and the feminine being generic plus suffix. It must be said, however, that in English things are changing. Gone are such creatures as the Actress and the Poetess. The fight for equality in the professional fields has seen to the gradual disappearance of the 'ess' which seems to detract from the importance of the generic and shove the terms it ends into the same derogatory niche as, say, 'women drivers'.

The case of gender in language, and thus in semiotics, has lead to a considerable outbreak of splitting of hairs amongst theorists and critics. For instance, the seemingly simple task of titling a book (of 'debates within gender studies, cultural theory and cultural studies'.) proved to be a labour of intricate dogmatic concern for Terry Threadgold as she writes in her introduction (as co-editor) to 'Feminine, Masculine and Representation.':

It occurs to me that when we formulated the title of this book in 1986, when we reversed the dichotomy masculine/feminine, when we put the feminine in front, on top of the bar, we were suggesting that the masculine might be defined in terms of the feminine, instead of the usual phallogentric definition of the feminine always in terms of the masculine, the other, what she is not. We were trying to make the taken-for-granted nature of the usual dichotomy visible, legible.

We also did something counterproductive. We merely reversed the terms, leaving the dichotomy, the opposition, potentially intact. (pp 6)

She goes on to talk about dichotomies and semiotics and the 'dangers of speaking, meaning, writing inside phallogentrism.' Although I do not intend to dwell on semiotics the idea of dichotomies will be important throughout the following appraisal of the Androgyne.

Perhaps, at this juncture, some definitions are in order. The Oxford English Dictionary (based on historical principles) has this to say.

- Androgyne**
1. A being of both sexes, A hermaphrodite.
 2. An effeminate Man; a eunuch (rare) -1742.
 3. An Androgynous plant, etc.

Androgyny, hermaphroditism

- Androgynous** 1. Uniting the characteristics of both sexes;
hermaphroditic 2. Hence effeminate etc.

Interestingly the Dictionary of Psychology differentiates between the terms Androgyne and hermaphrodite.

Androgyny From Greek andros (= man) and gyne (=female), the condition in which some male and some female characteristics are present in the same individual. The term is used with respect to both biological/physical and psychological/behavioural characteristics. In general, differentiated from Hermaphrodite since, except in rare cases a person displaying androgyny shows sexual differentiation and can be labelled as biologically male or female. Some authors [of psychology] restrict the term to biological males who display female characteristics while reserving *gynandry* for biological females with male characteristics. 1

In her essay, *The impossible Referent: Representations of the Androgyne*, Francette Pacteau notes the difficulty which occurs in defining androgyny. She suggests that androgyny is not a condition of being or of a being since the androgyne does not exist in the real. Androgyny is, rather, something that is conferred onto an entity or being 'not as entity, but as symptom - in the psycho-analytic sense of indicative of a repressed desire'. 2

The question here is what is this desire? From whence does it come?

I would suggest that the subconscious wish which created the androgyne stems from a number of aspects of human nature - a craving for omnipotence, aspirations to freedom from our enslavement by nature, narcissism, a tendency to fickleness, and envy of the 'other'. The first two of these traits are closely

linked desires and can be explored in studies of mythology, mysticism and religion. The deification of androgyny and the androgyne as demiurge will be looked at in chapter one. What is also interesting here is the dissolution of the androgyne in religion at certain stages of history and it's resurrection at others.

Gender ambiguous personae occur, throughout the last thousand years in Western literature and art. In identifying some of these instances Chapter Two will attempt to place the androgyne (the reality version) in a Modern context. The traits of narcissism and fickleness are important in this discussion which features the characters of Shakespeare and Wilde.

What was once a nice, compact whole mythical creature or idea has not so much mutated as refracted into a multitude of different creatures and ideas. Reactions to what the Androgyne was and has now become will be dealt with in Chapter Three.

Notes

1. *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*
2. From, *Formations of Fantasy*, Ed. Burgin, Donald + Caplin (Methuen, London + New York) 1986
3. *Oxford English Dictionary (based on historical principles)*,
Vol I

Chapter One

The Androgyny of the Divine

Only in Mythology, Mysticism or in the Realm of Fantasy can the essential or true Androgyne exist. Reality, on the other hand, is where we find flawed imitations, the bastard son/daughters of the Androgyne. In transcribing the dictionary definitions of the Androgyne I deliberately neglected to include the meanings connected with plants.

Androgyne....4. an androgynous plant...
having both stamens and pistils developed
into petals, as the double narcissus.

Yet here is where it starts; in nature, in creation. The earth itself can be seen to be comprised of all opposites and of all possibilities. It surges with life turning into death, light into darkness. That which is given life on the surface will inevitably go subterranean in death. Simplistically ,earth is androgynous.

Amongst the gods of ancient pagan civilizations there were those of the air and sky and those of the earth and sea. Stories of creation, however, are usually of beings omnipotent because they embrace all opposites. Like the double narcissi they reach into themselves to add to the universe. A power that can create every thing in existence must, by definition, *be* everything, self sufficient, self contained.

One such demiurge was the Egyptian god Khpera who created two other gods "by an act of masturbation" . "I had union with my hand, and I embraced my shadow in a love embrace; I poured seed into my own mouth, and sent forth from myself issue in the form of the gods Shu and Tefnut"¹

Other primeval deities which originated in the Mediterranean area, were the Great Mothers. Possessing both sexes they could procreate by parthenogenesis, self fertilization. The Virgin Birth in Christianity is a survivor of the cult of the Great Mothers virgin fertility. The goddess Net (again of Egypt) gave birth to Ra by this self-fecundation.

Most Gods in Egypt were Androgynous. Illustration 1. shows an Egyptian deity identified with the Nile in which case its bisexuality would also stress the Niles character as world axis and unifier of the country. ²

The Egyptians in their art, developed new archetypes, a new aesthetic. A feline sleekness glides through each graceful figure. That pleated sheeny material worn by Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra is a

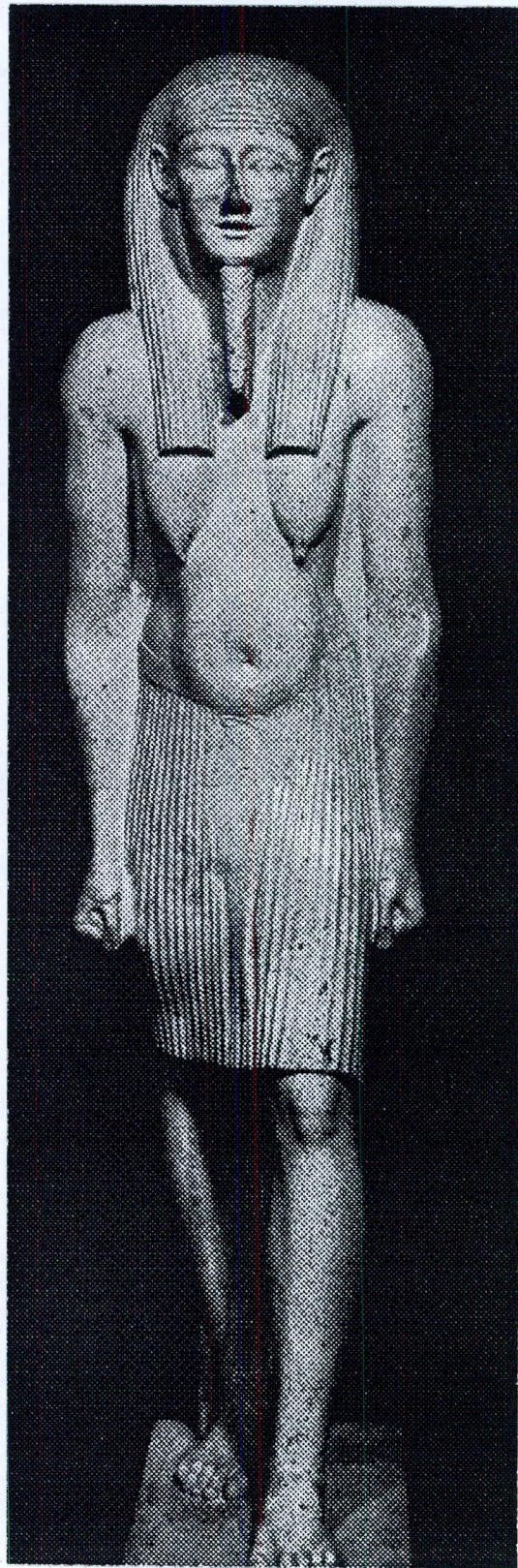
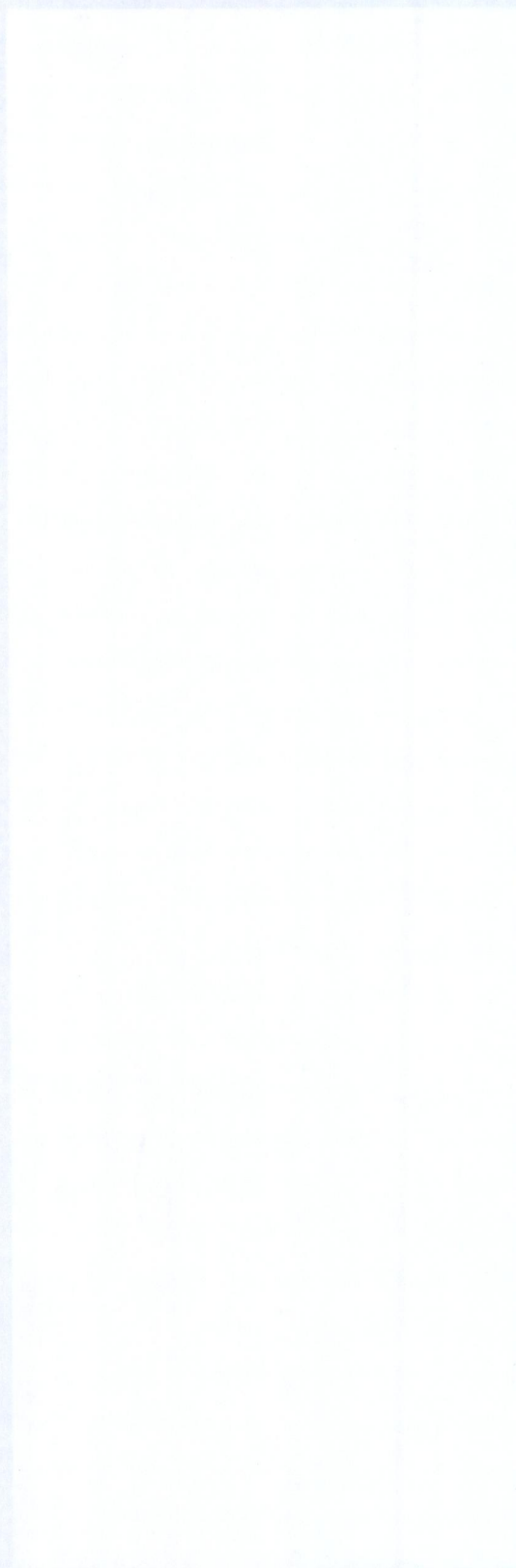


Illustration 1. Egyptian deity? Roman copy of an original statue



modern imitation of a cloth actually worn by deities and monarchs of Egypt and depicted in elegant linear glyphs and engravings. Their graceful if stylized demeanour seems to give figures such as that of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, in illustration 2, an impression of inner balance. Akhenaten is shown here offering libations to the sun disc Aton. There is a certain strength in the ease of the Pharaoh's stance. Even his ample breasts and voluptuous hips serve somehow to balance him as with slender fragile arms he reaches up as in prayer for merger with Aton.

This is Androgyny as transcendence. Akhenaten has accrued qualities of maleness (the phallus which symbolises military prowess) and femaleness (female wisdom represented by the cobra goddess of wisdom posed upon his forehead) plus some of the main physical attributes and now stands in homage to Aton seeking to be joined with the sun god in ultimate wholeness. This wholeness, it would seem to me, is a kind of end to which mortals must strive in order to be fit to have truck with the gods. Adepts in ancient religion adopt androgyny in their rituals. Males would 'acquire' femaleness through actual physical union with a woman or through fantasy. Various Egyptian initiation ceremonies had androgyny as an aim.

Another way to explain this need to attain androgyny is to ponder further exactly what the implications of the encounter with the Androgyne are. If the body of Egyptian theological scripture tells us of a God all powerful, all-encompassing, Androgynous, how then should one prepare for the inevitable meeting? Does one waver from side to side uneasy with this God's amalgamation of male and female? One must somehow identify with this. One must therefore be like this omnipotent wholeness.

Shamans are the practitioners of rituals employed in order to transcend earthly forms in order to adopt a spiritual consciousness and to communicate with greater mystic forces. They must place themselves at the centre of the interplay between opposites, they must stand at the cross-roads, in order to absorb both fields of energy where they join.

In her book *Sexual Personae* 3, Camille Paglia proposes an interesting dichotomy between chthonian and Apollonian. The Chthonian is by definition that which is 'dwelling or beneath the earth' (O.E.D.) Paglia elaborates. It is 'the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk and ooze. It is the dehumanising brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and rot we must block from consciousness to retain our Apollonian integrity as person.' (pp 5)

The Apollonian is that which compels us to control nature (as represented by the chthonian) by naming, categorising and thus distancing and detaching ourselves from it. The Western Apollonian mind is a creature born of the fear of chaotic nature.



Illustration 2. King Akhenaten offering libations to the Sun, Egypt 14th century



'The westerner knows by seeing. Perceptual relations are at the heart of our culture and they have produced our titanic contributions to Art. Walking in nature, we see, identify, name, *recognize*. This recognition is our apotropaion, that is our warding of fear. Recognition is ritual cognition, a repetition - compulsion. We say that nature is beautiful. But this aesthetic judgement, which not all peoples have shared, is another defence formation, woefully inadequate for encompassing nature's totality. What is pretty in nature is confined to the thin skin of the globe upon which we huddle. Scratch that skin and nature's daemonic ugliness will erupt.'(pp 5)

The culture of ancient Egypt embraced both the Chthonian and the Apollonian. There were earth cults as well as sky cults. The dead were mummified and enshrined in Pyramids - man's challenge to nature's mountains. Animals as well as humans, were deified - from the cat to the scarab(dung) beetle. Greek Gods and Greek culture dwelt almost exclusively above the surface of the Earth thereby deamonising the Chthonian.

From their mountainous headquarters high in the clouds the Olympians ruled and presided over a burgeoning civilisation. Greek sky cult kept nature in her place. These altitude loving deities were formed in the image of man (except that they were more beautiful) instead of the other way round as in the Judeo-Christian religions. In most cases they created each other and in a number of cases the act of creation conforms with the previously noted Androgynous self-fecundation methods. Egyptian Khepera, mentioned earlier is depicted as curled around to meet himself - feet touching head like the uroboros, the snake eating its own tail. Zeus also has the power of self insemination. That Athena sprung from his brow and Dionysus from his thigh are myths which were later explained thus.

In the case of Athena, Zeus was warned that Metis his wife was bearing a child who would grow to be more powerful than he was so he swallowed Metis whole. At the time of the end of Athenas gestation Zeus was hit by a blow from a hammer in combat and out of his brow came Athena.

Similarly Dionysus was born of an aggressive envy of woman. When his mother Semele expressed disbelief that Zeus was who he claimed to be and demanded that he prove it he burned her to a frazzle using her own lightning. Rescuing the foetus she had carried Zeus implanted it within his own thigh until it came to term.

Dionysus, we can see was given Androgynous birth, first of female, then of male but also, interestingly, of violence which was to surround him throughout his existence. Zeus' sister/wife Hera, jealous at Dionysus birth ordered him to be ripped to shreds and boiled in a cauldron. He was rescued and reconstituted by his grand mother Rhea. He was raised by nymphs but on reaching manhood Hera recognised him and sent him mad. With an army of satyrs (mischievous wood-genii) and Maenads (mad

women) he roamed the world warring and revelling. On his many adventures he crossed from Syria to Damascus and across to India to which he brought vineculture and civilisation. He was hearty in his revels but cruel to those who would not acknowledge his divinity usually driving them to madness.

Dionysius always remained reverent to his mother (in his own way). He wore her clothes as is depicted in Illustration 3. His androgyny can be seen in his identification with his mother and motherhood. His effeminacy, which Zeus attributed to his time spent in India, and his transvestitism have been well documented in mythology. But further interpretations of the attributes and names of Dionysus are there for the taking with regard to his androgyny.

He was first regarded as the God of wine and vine-culture but later acquired such names as Dendritis, 'Tree-Youth', Eriphus, ('Kid' as in Goat). He appeared as god of Pleasures, God of civilisation, God of vegetation and warm moisture. The Chthonian, elements seem to have seeped into the personality of Dionysus to a significant degree. His madness is Chthonian, his orgiastic festival too. But also the part of him that is inextricably entangled in the earth's vegetative cycles.

A god of warm moisture - of damp swampy undergrowths. Dionysus nurtured all that grew in dank recesses of the world, all that seethed and spread in the dark belly of the Earth. One figure in Dionysian retinue was the rotund and perpetually drunk Silenus. This 'snub-nosed', 'fat old man' ⁴ was the God's tutor and followed him everywhere balanced precariously on the back of an ass. Silenus had infinite wisdom and knowledge and was said to be the son of Hermes and the Earth. Interestingly the word Silenus comes from rural divinities of Phrygia who were genii of springs and rivers. Silenus seems to mean 'Water which bubbles as it flows'

Here, again is the connection to the fluvial, the liquid, the murk of Dionysus. The hidden humidity of the womb is his. He is a divinity of fecundity. ⁵ His childhood was a chain of death and regeneration of dismemberment and reconstitution. His milieu was madness, hysteria and all that is irrational to the Apollonian Western mind with its black and white perceptions. Perhaps this is a model for the contemporary 'Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll' lifestyle which has its own Androgynes. Rock stars like David Bowie and Mick Jagger can be seen as unwitting light weight mortal disciples of Dionysus.

In Egypt death nature and the Chthonian were amalgamated with life Art and the Apollonian to form culture and belief systems. All was of spiritual significance. The interplay of opposites was accepted as the norm. The Androgynous Egyptian Gods took their strength from chaotic as well as ordered forces, from the dark mysteries of the Earth as well as empirical truths.



Illustration 3. Dionysus and Maenads, Attic red figured Amphora ca 500 BC



The Greeks chose to deny the value of that which was extant beneath the surface of their contextualised gaze. Dionysus was the rebel, the agent provocateur opening doors of taboo, displaying the dark side.

I would not hasten to draw parallels between the dichotomies Apollonian/Chthonian and Male/Female. Suffice to say that femaleness can be seen and understood perhaps more lucidly in the Chthonian. The Apollonian is humanity's interpretation of Earth and Nature manifest in architecture, art and the sciences. That endeavours in these fields are chiefly the domain of men is perhaps too tenuous an argument for the remaining connection. 6

The primeval need for androgynous deities, we have seen, sprung from a belief in the inimitable power of the fusion of the sexes. There is no proof of a matriarchal society ever having existed. Even in the realm of the Great Mothers patriarchy, it seems, was always the rule. Yet there was great willingness among the ancient pagan peoples of the Mediterranean to acknowledge the special powers of Femaleness and meld them with maleness (to a greater or lesser degree) in order to envisage their creators and ruling mystical forces.

The androgyne also exists on the other side of the creation myth. Humankind, according to Plato, started off as rolling spherical beings comprising two sexual halves of a perfectly complete and, I dare say, content whole. There were three different combinations into which the beings were divided, male plus male, male plus female, and female plus female. As a punishment for having angered the gods (perhaps by being too perfect) Zeus split each of them in two and to this day the halves roam the world in search of their counterparts. It is said that Apollo took pity on the humans freshly rent in twain and turned their heads to face the wound which he closed in the individuals' midriff to form the navel. Zeus was initially pleased with the split. He had rendered humanity weaker and yet they were greater in number, the ideal exploitable subjects. However the disharmony and discontent resulting from the loss incurred by each human was too tragic for the gods to bear and Zeus eventually conceded each of the beings a sexual organ.

And after the transposition the male generated in the female in order that by the mutual embraces of man and woman they might breed, and the race might continue; or if man came to man they might be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life.7

In this tale we can see how human aspirations to perfection are thwarted by the gods in the same way that Adam and Eve's thirst for knowledge was their eventual undoing. In fact I would surmise that the Biblical birth of humanity is a modified survivor of Plato's pagan parable. (Christianity's reappropriation of the androgyne is discussed at the opening of Chapter Two.)

To recapitulate: the dawning of civilization was brought about by cultures and societies who's belief systems were rich in androgyny. Priests, adepts and shamans were wont to conjure dual sexualities for themselves in order to identify closer with their gods. Greek civilization borrowed heavily from Egyptian art, architecture and sciences, such as they were, while rejecting their earthy mysticism. Self fecundation, Greek style, could, therefore, be seen as a denial of the sexual procreative act in all its messy chthonian glory. Dionysus had a nature-in-the-raw androgyny which is to say that all sexuality is there, undisguised, stripped bare and unapologetic. His was a delirious rebellion in the ever more cloistered ranks of the Olympian gods 8. This chapter seems to point up a gradual blotting out of the androgyne as a being of power. Human paranoia seeks the lowest common denominator as a safe bedfellow. The disparate attributes that comprised the omnipotent archetypes are split apart (like Platos spherical androgynes by the hand of Zeus) by a fear that any sexuality other than that which is mortal and male was a threat.

Early civilization's 'innocent' belief in androgynous deities was eventually put in its place by western Christianity which divided so that it might conquer.

Notes

1. Budge, 1904, pp. 279
2. Zolla, 1981, pp. 58
3. Paglia, Yale University Press, 1990
4. *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 1987
5. Eros was the God of the new birth and Artemis the Goddess of fecundity. I attribute fecundity to Dionysius.
6. In her book 'Sexual Personae', Camille Paglia makes these comparisons. Any questioning or discussion of this would comprise a further and longer thesis.
7. Plato, 'The Symposium', in *The Portable Plato*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982, pp. 145 - 6
8. In *Moralia*, Plutarch says Dionysius is the 'many' where as he calls Apollo the 'One', "denying the Many and abjuring multiplicity".

Chapter Two - Finding the Mortal Androgyne

What, with us, crops up only in dreams and fantasies was once either conscious custom or general belief. But what was once strong enough to mould the spiritual life of a highly developed people will not have vanished without a trace from the human soul in the course of a few generations. We must remember that a mere eighty generations separate us from the golden age of Greek culture. And what are eighty generations? They shrink to an almost imperceptible span when compared with the enormous stretch of time that separates us from Neanderthal or Hiedelberg man.

C.G.Jung

There now follows a short Greek lesson. *Gnosis* is a Greek word meaning knowledge in the sense of insight or understanding. It is intuitive knowledge rather than that which is got from information gathered (*epistimi*). The Greek word *sophia* means wisdom.

I give this lesson because in Gnostic Christianity we find the only Christian manifestation of the androgyny of the divine. Gnosticism had its roots in Alexandria the great city founded by Alexander the Great in 328 BC. Here Jewish, Egyptian and Greek cultures coexisted in a climate of tolerance. After the murder of James, so called Brother of Jesus, the early Christians fled to Alexandria to find that their teachings, the Gospel, was readily accepted and assimilated with the beliefs of the Alexandrians. A foundation had been built of spiritual movements, alchemy and other religions. Christianity fell on this prepared ground and became easily enmeshed in metaphysical, psychic and alchemical traditions and thought.

Gnostic Christianity, therefore, was the teachings of Christ with less emphasis on worship and beliefs; more on searching for the innate divinity of the self, an awakening of one's inner wisdom and powers. The surviving cult of the Great Mothers was adapted into Christianity. We saw the cobra on the head of Akhenaten, the female symbol of wisdom. Sophia was the Gnostic goddess of wisdom, the Great Mother who in Christian Gnosticism sat with the Great Father. They had a daughter, also called Sophia who was the sister of Jesus. This passage by the Gnostic teacher Valentinus expresses the creative 'dyad'

I desire that you know that the first man is called 'Begetter, Mind who is complete in himself.'
He reflected with the great Sophia, his consort and revealed his first begotten, androgynous son. His male name is called 'First Begetter Son of God'; his female name is 'First Begetress



Illustration 4. St Sophia, icon of Novgorod school Russia, 16th century AD



Sophia, Mother of the Universe'. Some call her 'Love' . Now the first begotten is called 'Christ'.¹

How, then, did the Orthodox Christian image of the deity come to be conceived as uniquely male? The answer may lie in language. Some languages, I said earlier, denote gender in their nouns and others do not.

'The aspect of the Godhead as Holy Spirit - as Hokmah [Hebrew] and Sophia - was feminine in Hebrew and Greek until it became assimilated to the masculine concept of Logos [sayings/word of God] and then to the Latin Spiritus Sanctus, which also had a masculine gender. In English there is no gender distinction between nouns so there is no means of conveying the gender of something by means of the spelling of the word. One can say "God is truth", "God is beauty", "God is wisdom", and so on, but there is no way of knowing whether these qualities are imagined as masculine or feminine in character, as there is in earlier languages.'²

It is then up to the translators, the first readers of scriptures to interpret and pass on the intended meanings. Orthodox Christianity which took hold in Rome founded on the Pauline Gospels did all in its power to suppress Gnosticism. Gnostic ways did not give much opportunity to the formation of a male hierarchy since many of its devotees and ministers were women and, as I said, belief systems and worship as such were not integral to its teachings. Eventually no-one but the persecuted Gnostic sects held the memory of Sophia (Illustration 4) and her aspect in the Godhead.

Androgynous divinities, The Great Mothers and Gnostic thought came to resurgence once again in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the rise of the Cathars in southern France and northern Italy and in the Order of the Knights Templar. Gnosticism flourished in the tolerant and pluralist Cathar sects and infiltrated the beliefs of the warrior monks on their pursuit of a deeper understanding of God. Pope Clement VI harboured intense intolerance towards the Cathars and their heretical beliefs as well being jealous of their lands and wealth. He also desired control over the Knights Templar and so he set one against the other resulting in almost total annihilation of the Cathars. The remaining factions were branded heretics and hunted by the Holy Roman Inquisition.

Gnosticism's veneration of Androgyny was the sole survivor of its kind in western civilization. Christianity's breaking down of the divine into separate male and female beings was instrumental in the death of androgyny as a mystical force. It marks a turning point. The dismantling of the androgyne 'Christ/Sophia' and the enthronement of a male Godhead in the consciousness of the faithful serves to relegate the androgyne to the realms of fantasy. Together with its more 'Physical' cousin, the hermaphrodite, the androgyne now inhabits a world of freaks and oddities. It is reviled as the work of the

devil due to it's Pagan origins and it's fusion of male and female which goes against the teachings of the Bible. 3

At this juncture one must take a leap from the world of myth and mysticism to the real world with real people to find the androgynes amongst us. The ones that are now known as transvestites, hermaphrodites, eunuches and castrati seem to be the ones to look to now for further study of the androgyne. There are also various epicene personae who turn up in literature and art who embody some of the essence of the archetype. I have referred to them as the bastard son/daughters of the archetype but where, if at all, is the relationship manifest?

In a sense, the idea of the androgyne as model of perfection or a signifier of a utopia is untenable to modern society 4 because it is the creation of the imaginations of mystics and poets. If one takes the renaissance as the birth of modernity it becomes apparent that advances in the sciences, medicine, communications and the shrinkage of the planet due to circumnavigation of the globe and the discovery of the new world would give rise to the search for more empirical answers to such mysteries as creation, Procreation, gender and sexuality.

The figure of the androgyne as symbol of spiritual perfection or transcendence was, however, given expression in renaissance art - Donatello's 'beautiful boy' sculpture of David, Michaelangelo's disquieting depictions of the Sybils and Nymphs, female figures for which he used brawny male models, and, in literature, some of the sonnets of Shakespeare addressed sexually ambiguous desires. 5

"A womans face with natures own hand painted
Hast thou the master - mistress of my passion;
A womans gentle heart but not acquainted,
With shifting change as is false womans fashion
An eye more bright than their's less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals mens eyes and womens souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created;
Til Nature as she wrought thee fell adoting,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she picked thee out for womens pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy loves use their treasure."

Here is portrayed one of the most sexually charge of androgynes, the beautiful boy. "The privileges of beauty are enormous".⁶ The beautiful boy possess all the graceful oblique lines of the female form without being lumbered with her fleshy trappings and biological hardships. He has her detachment and serenity, her skin and her hair, her eyes and her voice but not her incumbent female reproductive paraphernalia and all the agony, hysteria and misunderstanding it can cause. The youth or "kouros" of ancient Greek sculpture (Illustration 5) stood alone and aloof, progenitors of a persona still idolised, albeit illegally, when personified in young boys today. The beautiful boy is a construct of the eye. Just as androgyny is an abstract property we project onto those we see as sexually ambiguous so the beautiful; boy is a figment of the desirous imagination that cannot exist in the real. The beautiful boy of Greek sculpture, Shakespearian sonnet and the pens of Wilde and Cocteau is no more than a mannequin of heart-stopping beauty. He exists separate and insular in an aura of enigmatic disdain for all that is of Nature. His milieu is sanitised sanity, and languorous self-containment (Illustration 6). No real boy, however beautiful in appearance, could affect or live out the personality that is exuded from these idols unless he was mentally impaired. Female equivalents of the beautiful boy can be seen in the insipid melancholia of Dante Gabriel Rosetti's female figures or perhaps the cold majesty of Greta Garbo on film.

The beautiful boy is the androgyne concocted for the masochistic pleasure of the beholder. It can be called a boy and given an heroic title, the name of a God for instance, but it is really no more than a tantalising ideal, *sans merci*. This kind of androgyne makes its appearance in times of decadence. Surfacing at the outset of the renaissance only to be sent back into hiding during the Reformation. The French Revolution and Napoleonic era with the Neo-Classicists saw a brief emergence. The pre-Raphaelites heralded its next appearance which was to lead us to the era of Huysmans and onto Oscar Wilde. Dorian Grey was perhaps the epitome of this persona; his eternal beauty and youth 'created' by an artist, Basil Hallward, and nurtered by the mannered rogue Lord Henry Wotton. He has no personality of his own and is given it by those who are fascinated by his 'remarkable personal beauty'.

Earlier I described the fascination with the beautiful boy as masochistic. It is so because the desire which created this figure cannot ever be fulfilled. The graceful youth of antiquity and the Renaissance almost always looks away from his beholder with downcast eyes or a facade of knowing sorrow. The aesthetes and artists who dream up these beautiful, empty creatures know that this desire taken to it's logical conclusion would result in self-destruction akin to that which befell the tragically obsessed artist Basil Halward in The Picture of Dorian Grey.

The beautiful boy is a kind of 'safe' model onto which latent homosexual or homoerotic desires can be projected. Homoeroticism can be coyly hidden in other qualities attributed to the 'Youth' - they are described as having magnetic personalities, enigmatic allure, people are 'puzzled' at the strong feelings this boy can draw from them. This is all, of course, a thinly disguised sexual attraction but in the days of Oscar Wilde and before, it was the love that dare not speak its name. The artist could play on it's enigmas



Illustration 5. Bronze Kouros from Piraeus 530 BC





Illustration 6. Ferdinand Khnopff, Silence, 1890



thus giving a boost to the seductive powers of his work. The seducer is ultimately the destroyer. Forbidden love, once known, must be punished. The heavy price which must be paid is all part of the attraction and the risk of fatality must be taken in the pursuit of perfection.

There are three androgynous personae who, along with the beautiful boy, have come to us from the minds of Poets and artists. Camile Paglia refers to them, respectively, as the Mercurius,⁷ the Court Hermaphrodite ⁸, and the Androgyne of Manners. ⁹ Although none of these can be given direct expression in the visual arts literature has painted a full enough picture for us to find representations of them in paintings and consequentially Hollywood film is teaming with them.

The term 'mercurius' comes from a name used by alchemists for a hermaphrodite figure integral to their processes. The God Mercury lent his name to that which is quick (quick silver). The mercurius Androgyne is the spritely, zestfully clever and witty creature embodied in Peter Pan or Shakespeare's Ariel in *The Tempest*. There is a combination of eternal youth and an ageless wisdom. This character's sexual ambiguity stems from its ability to flit from one personality to another when it suits him or his ends. The mercurius is a magical outlet for the artists or writers more fickle passions. It can be used as a ready solution to problems arising - a change of appearance for this androgyne can throw new light on matters. The mercurius' *raison d'être* can be seen as problem solver by addressing all possibilities, whether in the service of a master, as in the case of Ariel, or for themselves. Rosalind in *As You Like It* is of the mercurius persuasion. She dresses as a man to achieve her final goal.

The fact that boys played women on the Shakespearian stage lead the playwright to load his more interesting female characters with volatile, ever changing personalities. At some points the ambiguity reached a dizzying density - boys played women playing men playing women ad infinitum.¹⁰

The renaissance saw the appearance of what Paglia calls 'history's most repellent androgyne', the 'Court hermaphrodite'. That she employs the term hermaphrodite here, as opposed to androgyne, is pertinent. The subject of hermaphroditism flooded scientific and medical discourse in the renaissance and one must surmise that that which was initially perceived as an entity of wonder and fascination was inevitably reviled, scorned, and sneered at as a freakish mistake of nature. The hermaphrodite (Illustrations 7, 8, and 9) in theory, evoked notions of arcane power, but the treatment of persons whose genital make-up was somewhat muddled, tended to be less than lenient. There are numerous accounts of the life and times of various persons who were not what they seemed to be (gender wise), emanating from this period:- persons who suffered at the hands of the church because of their 'deformities'.

The 'Court hermaphrodite' is not physically confused but unlike the 'real' hermaphrodite he deserves the ridicule he incurs. The Courts of Renaissance Princes were swarming with minions and

sycophants, the court hermaphrodite being the most unctuous. He was, one minute, loyal subject, bending over backwards to please and flatter whichever royalty employed him, and the next he was turncoat and in the service of another he deemed fashionable enough for his attentions. His androgyny stems from his malleability in the hands of wealth and power, and his spineless lack of a true identity. He was a sponge for soaking up gossip, a cushion for sitting on. Here is where androgyny equals fickle obsequiousness. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the 'court hermaphrodite' divided in two as a device used by Shakespeare to illustrate its two faced nature. Contemporary examples would include some gossip columnists and 'kiss and tell' fortune hunters.

The 'Androgyne of Manners' is the stylish aesthete, the drawing room or dinner conversationalist. An arbiter of taste, many aspire to this kind of irresistibly suave personality, which has a coolness akin to the beautiful boy, but few can match the glittering wit and effortless panache that this androgynous character possesses. An ideal of aristocracy (nowadays somewhat dated) is the essence of it's being. It's appearance is sleek, manicured, coiffured perfection in slender undulating recline. It's speech is peppered with bon mots always self referential. It's environment is wherever high fashion preens itself. There is a certain fickleness in androgyny of manners - last weeks 'thing' will be dropped like a hot potato, while this weeks is already beginning to seem passe. There is nothing as vulgar as the court hermaphrodites toadying in the androgyne of manners however. It's androgyny is in its lack of real sexuality. One would wonder 'Is (s)he or isn't (s)he?' followed by 'does it really matter?'. The commonest real examples of this androgyne are homosexual men - Wilde, Quentin Crisp and perhaps Gore Vidal, those in fiction and film are usually epicene English types played by the likes of Rex Harrison and David Niven.

The 'mercurius', the 'court hermaphrodite' and the 'androgyne of manners' are literary androgynous character types named by Camille Paglia and given expression here to illustrate how a fusion, or indeed negation of both sexes, as seen by the poetic mind, can result in the creation of personalities which are both indispensable to the narrative and, in themselves, vehicles for the authors insight and intellect. Being androgynous they can espouse all possibilities. They are able to portray opposite sides of the authors arguments and ideologies while maintaining credibility as protagonists. Unlike the 'beautiful boy' which makes no secret of it's erotic function they have very little to do with sexual desire. They are, rather, mouthpieces for ideas and articulations about love and desire, the first with its wisdom, the second with its 'devastating' witty observations. They contextualise emotion, love and desire, frame them as own objects and present them to us as art work fit to be reproduced.

The Phoenix rising the ashes of the Divine androgyne which Christianity laid to rest was mortal and subject to the whims of humanity. They were given powers and special graces by poets, only to have them snatched away by the arbiters of morals and social mores and even theorists and philosophers engaged in debunking their mythology as we shall see. If the androgyne is indeed a fusion of the sexes

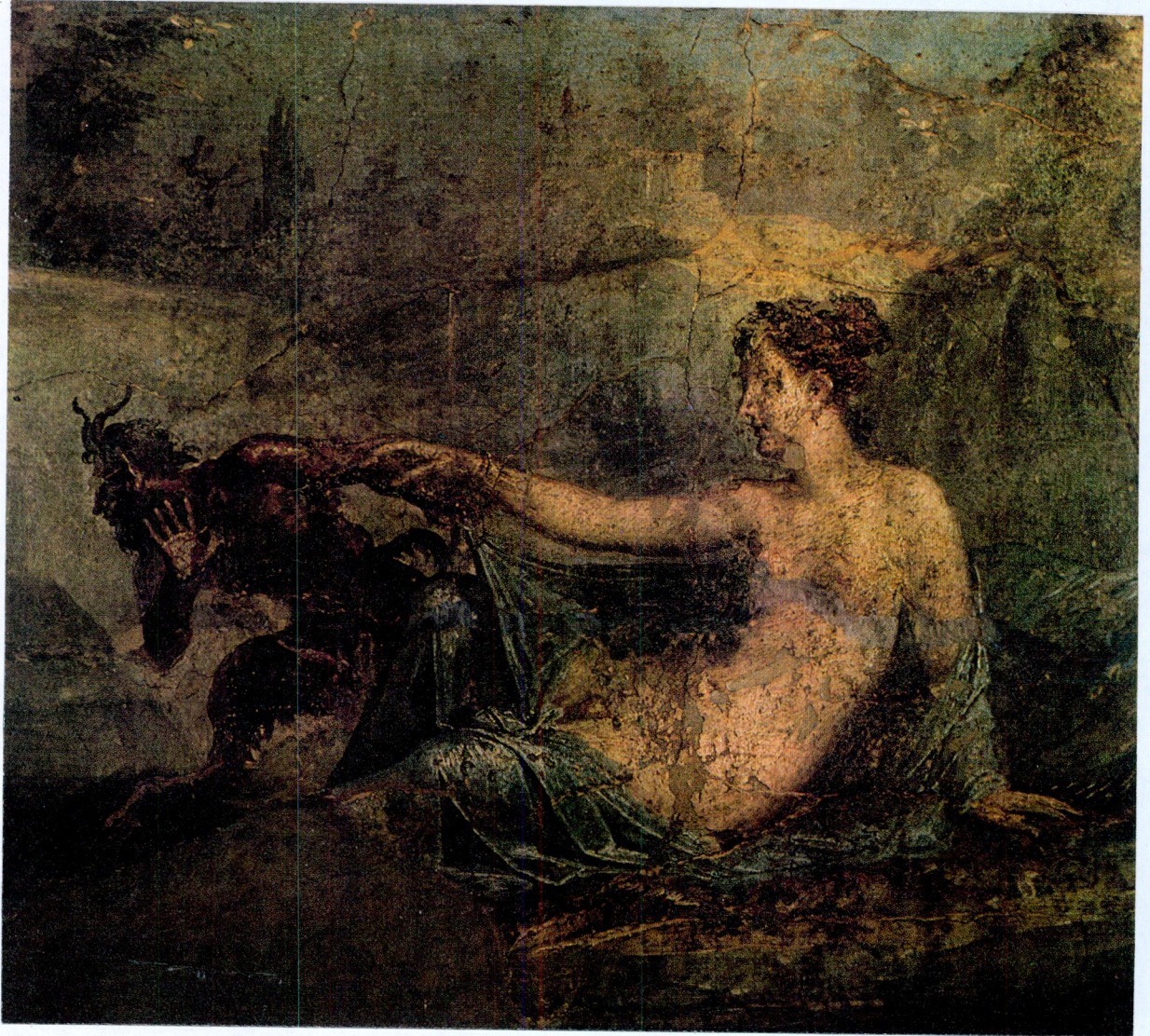


Illustration 7. Pan uncovering Hermaphrodite, Pompeii 1st century BC





Illustration 8. A small Roman bronze statuette of Hermaphrodite,
1st - 2nd century AD

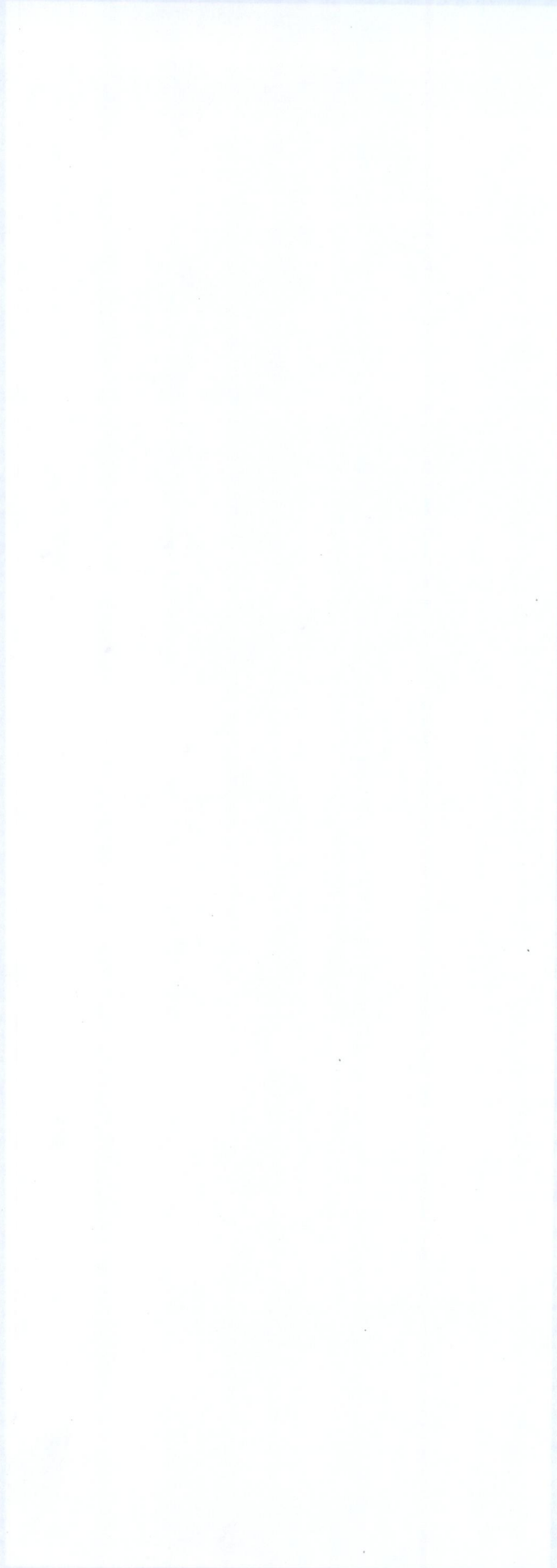




Illustration 9. Picture of a frontispiece, Thomas Artus, 1605



or an entity composed of 'essential' femaleness plus 'essential' maleness 12 then to understand its workings and its effects on our psyche it must undergo another split. Ideals of these essences must be defined as far as possible, in order to ascertain why and how the Androgynous entity was born.

Notes

1. From *The Myth of the Goddess*, Baring + Cashford, 1991
2. Ibid
3. e.g. Profanation of marriage and other sacraments is implied if androgynes/hermaphrodites partake.
4. This meaning since the outset of the renaissance.
5. Sonnets 54 + 144
6. Jean Cocteau
7. *Sexual Personae*, Paglia, pp. 88
8. Ibid, pp. 142 - 44
9. Ibid, pp. 531 - 35
10. In 'As You Like it', Rosalind dressed as her male alter ego, Ganymede imitates her female self in self mockery.
11. In Europe sentences ranged from public whipping to death.
12. The 'Enlightenment' was responsible for a complete differentiation between the sexes and each was attributed its own 'essences', femininity and masculinity.

Chapter Three

Defrocking the Androgyne

'To be a human creature is to be a legion of mannequins. These mannequins can become animated according to the choice of the individual creature. He or she may have as many mannequins as they please. When the creature steps into the mannequin he immediately believes it to be real and alive and as long as he believes this he is trapped inside the dead image, which moves in ever increasing circles away from Great Nature. Every individual gives names to his mannequins and nearly all these names begin with "I am" and are followed by a long stream of lies.'

Leonora Carrington

Looking at personae such as the beautiful boy, the mannered epicene or the obsequious minion we see some of the gender ambiguous archetypes, which have gone into forming our perceptions of the Androgyne. They still hold a power over us as can be seen in reactions to those that are now perceived as gender ambiguous. Homophobic insults are a common reaction from those who are offended by what they do not, initially, understand. But is it the actual sexual fusion which causes the confusion or is it a lack of understanding of each separate element?

Notions of gender have been, in turn, constructed, taken for granted, and then, deconstructed throughout modern history. In the nineteenth century biology became the methodological channel by which sex could be determined in the plant and animal kingdom. Prior to this distinction theories had been fuzzy. Medical and scientific theories in the Renaissance were unstable, contradictory and prone to intervention from superstitious and supernatural beliefs. The Galenic tradition, for instance, held that the only genital difference between men and women was one of *heat*, "the heat which causes the female vagina to 'pop out' into the morphologically identical male penis."¹ It was believed that if a woman was heated in a certain place or even if she jumped and danced vigorously enough, her womb, which was really a penis inside, would eventually hang outside her body. This strange theory takes something from Alchemy which points to fire as the primal mystery of life.

[Fire] enfolds in its fourfold flames the two essential opposites, the Sun and Moon, male and female, sulphur and mercury, which become the one androgyne at all moments of conception and birth in Nature. ²

It was also believed that sex was determined in the womb depending on which side of the foetus lay; males were begotten in the left side of the womb, females in the right, and hermaphrodites in the

centre. Hermaphroditism was seen by some theorists as a perfectly natural state and not considered deficient but, rather, plentiful as the condition was seen to result from an over abundance of 'seed' from both parents. 3 Contradictory to this, however, was the belief that hermaphrodites were caused by "Imagination of their parents" "the craft and subtlety of the Deville" and even by "The Cozenings and crafty Trickes of beggars". 4 It becomes obvious that gender and sex were mysteries of such unfathomable depth that 'Magicke' had to be called into the explanation. The Mercurious of Alchemy appears once again this time linked to evil forces.

The Reformation bred a fearful disdain for Hermaphrodites and Mixtures. Strange barbarisms symbolised everything ostentatiously foreign to and lying outside conventions, customs and norms. The castrato was a hermaphrodite created by men for the purpose of praising God with a beautiful singing voice. Their Eunuch secret was passed down through the ages from Pagan times and up until the end of the last century 'Press Gangs' from the Vatican would travel Europe in search of the sweetest voices in the all boy choirs. Once found the boys were castrated and sent to Rome for training.

The Castrati were fervently sought after in the courts of Europe for their magical voices and also for the powerful enigmatic attraction of their androgyny. They were adored and mobbed by flocks of fanatical followers in the same way as Rock and Film stars are, today, the targets of obsessive devotion. They were idolised as symbols of arcane mystery and aesthetic perfection in music but the sadness of their lives reflects the fact that as far as personal relationships went they were shunned as taboo. To their 'groupies' in aristocratic society they were irresistible man-made toys for exquisite purpose but they were also monsters, hybrid creations and therefore perverse. The belief was held that essential maleness was in having the where-with-all to sire children. A person lacking in that part of the anatomy intrinsic in the male procreative functions was not a man as such and no marital or sexual relationship could be entered into with him by a woman.

The castrati tenors led a cloistered existence in their Vatican cells only ever seeing the real world from the stage of a royal music chamber when requested to perform for the local aristocracy. No wonder they were considered such strange fruit with their eerily captivating falsetto vocals, their underdeveloped sense of society which was probably thought of as charmingly naive, and the fact that they worked for the Pope. The Catholic Churches employment of Castrati was a decadent barbarism left over from Paganism and anathema to Protestantism.

It appears that most of the androgynous personae here discussed and those belonging to that group of sexually ambiguous persons which would most readily spring to mind; (transvestites, some actors and rock and pop stars, etcetera) are Males - who have either espoused androgyny or had it foisted upon them by nature. For some reason females who are androgynous do not create quite as much of a stir as the males. Several explanations can be proffered for this phenomenon. Firstly, conditioning to macho

masculine conventions which have strengthened in their repression of anything perceived as female in the make-up of men, insures that any transgression of male norms will be greeted with astonishment, fear or scorn and may be seen as a threat to society founded on patriarchy. Secondly, as it is generally accepted that 'feminine' behaviour can be a number of different things, coquettish or modest, gentle or strong, and as conventions of femaleness encompass change and volatility then there is no real threat to society if a woman wishes to dress in a suit or if she is mannish in her occupation. This explanation is specific to historical reactions to the androgynous woman. Contemporary gender discussion would find that such naive sexual determinism was somewhat chauvinistic and patronising. Indeed androgyny has been looked to by some feminists as a symbol of a utopia, a state of being that transcends binary sex oppositions thus defeating male dominated gender ideologies. It becomes obvious, however that what we take to be the Androgyne is in fact a construct of those very ideologies.

I propose that men who are androgynous hold more interest for society than women who are androgynous because the conventions which bind masculinism are more rigid and if these are broken the ramifications are greater. Androgynes are the stuff of cults. The frenzied eroticism which the castrati created in their audiences helped to elevate them to a status of idolatry. Androgynes become cults because they are loved and loathed in equal measure. That is part of their androgyny. Cults are coterie worship. They seem to thrive on adversity to what they hold sacred - because it is against the norm it is special.

Notes

1. Anne Rosalind Jones + Peter Stallybrass, *Fetishising Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe*, pp. 81
2. Zolla, 1981, pp. 81
3. Pares, Works of Monsters and Prodigies as quoted in *Bodyguards*, Epstein + Straub, 1991
4. Ibid.

Conclusion

'Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic
orders? And even if one of them suddenly
pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the
strength of his
stronger existence. For Beauty's nothing
but beginning of Terror we're still able to bear,
and why we adore it so is because it serenely
disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrible.'
(from Rilke, 'First Elegy')

In this thesis there are a number of recurring themes. The professed omnipotence of androgyny, and the way in which humanity has created this entity only to destroy it again and again. This is inevitable. The Androgyne is the brainchild of an impulsive wish. It is a greedy and unattainable desire. It exists as a catalyst in fictions and as a font of wisdom in mysticism and religion.

Representations of the androgyne occur most frequently in so-called decadent times but decadence cannot be divorced from death. In decadence the androgyne appears as a symbol of our transcendence of our earthly roles in death. End of the millenium psychotics will latch onto a multiplicity of creeds and belief systems, spiritual and theoretical in an effort to imbibe from each of them something that will enable them to find some meaning to life. The androgyne comes in here as a panacea, a convenient solution to problems of identity. When we find our allotted gender role or sexual differences cause unwanted friction and personal hardship it is exciting to imagine, for a while, that we could somehow attain androgyny by either repressing or expanding a part of our sexual make-up. When this idea is followed to it's logical conclusion, however, it is tantamount to a denial of personality as our sexual differences give us our identities.

Contemporary theories and philosophies involving gender and sexuality are now too entrenched to warrant any serious discussion of something, which after all, means so many different things to different people. It is useful, however, to trace a history of the androgyne as it can throw up many questions on the subjects of gender and sexuality as well as being educational in itself.

So where does that leave the androgyne now? As long as there are pronounced differences in the appearances as well as the mentalities of men and women the androgyne will exist as the answer to the equation, the sum of both aspects of oneness : $+1 - 1 = 0$.

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