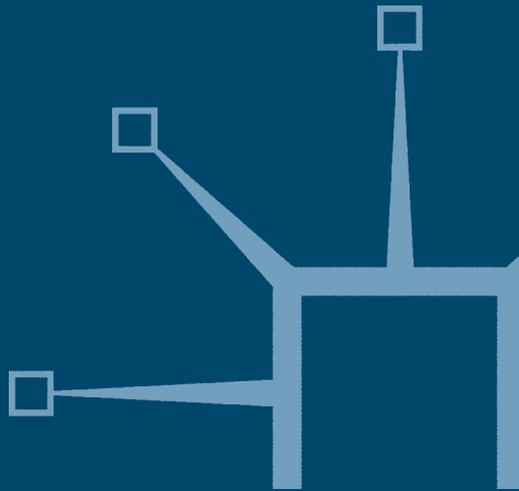


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# Androgyny in Modern Literature

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Tracy Hargreaves



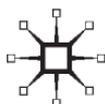
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# Androgyny in Modern Literature

Tracy Hargreaves  
*School of English*  
*University of Leeds*

palgrave  
macmillan



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*This is for my mum – for teaching me to read*

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# Introduction

Cal, the narrator of Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, sets the record straight at the beginning of his narrative:<sup>1</sup> 'Something you should understand: I'm not androgynous in the least' (p. 41).<sup>2</sup> Cal rejects androgyny in favour of scientific exactitude: '5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome allows for normal biosynthesis and peripheral action of testosterone, in utero, neonatally, and at puberty' (p. 41), There is no ambiguity: 'I operate in society as a man' (p. 41). His repudiation of androgyny is a refusal to live with gender or sexual ambiguity, and once his hermaphrodite status has been revoked, his (masculine) femininity can be sloughed off. Cal, as Calliope, was biologically hermaphrodite, and towards the conclusion of his story, Plato's *Symposium* is cited by Cal's new friend, Zora, who offers him an alternative explanatory narrative to the scientific category '5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites':

There have been hermaphrodites around forever, Cal. Forever. Plato said that the original human being was a hermaphrodite. Did you know that? The original person was two halves, one male, one female. Then these got separated. That's why everybody's always searching for their other half. Except for us. We've got both halves already.<sup>3</sup>

This equation, in which sexual difference is always already transcended, is offered as a consolatory narrative at a particularly low point in Cal's life. Having run away from home, Cal makes a living as Ovid's Hermaphroditus, swimming in a water tank to better display a patent hermaphrodite body, a living fetish for paying customers to ogle. Two significant, but different, myths of a violent metamorphosis sit side-by-side – one of complement, one of competition.<sup>4</sup> One is Aristophanes'

story as it is told in Plato's *Symposium*. Originally, there were three sexes, not two, and we were doubly formed, not individual: male and male, female and female, and male and female. Zeus split the spherical creatures in two as punishment for their arrogance, causing each to experience the loss of the other – a loss that we long to redeem through sexual union, as the once androgynous couple become the procreative heterosexual couple. The other myth is Ovid's story of the female nymph Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Salmacis forces and welds herself to the unwilling male body of Hermaphroditus, a suture that suggests the violent and unusual rape of a man by a woman, leaving him weakened by an unsought, and unwanted, femininity, 'a fantasy of unity', as Hélène Cixous described it: 'Two within one, and not even two wholes.'<sup>5</sup> Neither myth entirely fits Cal, raised as a girl, biologically hermaphrodite, surgically re-assigned to maleness in adulthood: '[t]he idea,' Eugenides has said, 'was to write a fictional book about a hermaphrodite, and I wanted it to be medically accurate – to be the story of a real hermaphrodite, rather than a fanciful creature like Tiresias or Orlando who could shift in a paragraph; to avail myself of the mythological connections without making the character a myth.'<sup>6</sup> What the 'real' hermaphrodite demonstrates in *Middlesex* is the cultural and psychic necessity to have one gendered and sexual identity, not two, rather than an exploratory fantasy of speculating what it might be like to have or be both.

The inclusion of Plato's and Ovid's foundational myths in *Middlesex* reinforces their status as explanatory narratives, invoked by Eugenides, as by many of the writers included in this book, in accounting for the inter-sexed, intermediate body. Less obviously, it speaks to the ways in which they may be appropriated to meet the requirements of the storyteller. Whether the original human beings were hermaphrodites or androgynes depends on which translation of the *Symposium* you read, though the difference between them amounts to more than a matter of lexical choice.<sup>7</sup> As signifiers, and in the history of their representations, the androgyne and the hermaphrodite have twinned and shadowed each other (reviewing *Middlesex*, Mark Lawson makes the familiar slippage, referring to 'the possibility of androgyny' rather than hermaphroditism).<sup>8</sup> Darwin (*Descent of Man*), Freud ('The Sexual Aberrations', 'Leonardo da Vinci'), Havelock Ellis (*Studies in the Psychology of Sex*) and Richard von Krafft-Ebing (*Psychopathia Sexualis*), as well as Earl Lind (*Autobiography of an Androgyne*) all made the terms interchangeable and synonymous, and though they all have different issues at stake in their various representations of androgyny (or the androgyne) and the hermaphrodite, there is agreement<sup>9</sup> that

the dual-sexed figure is atavistic, a throwback to an earlier age when vertebrates appeared to be a mixture of both anatomical sexes.

Cal's certainty about himself ('I'm not androgynous in the least') is unusual – at least, in the long history of androgynous representation. The cumulative, prismatic effect of that history suggests that 'androgyny' belongs to, or indicates, no secure or transcendent ontology, but is always in the process of being made in relation to the various requirements of history, culture and the literary imagination. Androgyny is not a stable or a transcendent category, but is subject to historical and cultural change. Foucault's insights suggest to us that the emergence of a homosexual identity was a product of Victorian taxonomies of sexual and criminal behaviour, never an immanent identity, and whilst representations of androgyny also emerge from intricate sexological taxonomies, they are never limited to those categorisations. From the late nineteenth to the twentieth century, androgyny has been produced as a shifting category, mobilised in different discourses – literary, sexological, psychoanalytic, sociological, feminist. The meaning of androgyny depends on its function in a given discourse. It can appear in many forms: a sensibility, a pathology, as symptomatic of a repressed desire (as Freud argued in his psychoanalytic biography of Leonardo da Vinci), the embodiment of an identity defined through usually same-sex sexual orientation and/or cross-gender identification, an emblem (or fantasy) of a behaviour where positive traits, identified as masculine and feminine, work harmoniously in a single individual. Even as androgyny was revised during the late 1960s and 1970s in feminism's second wave, it still remained a problematic symbol, one that eschewed femininity in prioritising masculinity. More recently, androgyny has been criticised, by Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* and Chris Straayer in *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*, as a too generalised identity that effaces the sexual politics of specific embodied female-masculine identities. When Judith Butler argued (in *Gender Trouble*) that 'Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being', the reifying principles of masculinity and femininity that secure androgyny as the balanced equation of binary gender constructions come to seem naive and misconceived.

'Aristophanes' playful recounting of the story of primordial union and its collapse into fragmentation ... sets in motion a powerful cultural narrative about the origins of human sexuality.'<sup>10</sup> Catriona MacLeod's observation is borne out by the evidence offered by early twentieth-century literature. Aristophanes' account of androgyny in

Plato's *Symposium* has been influential in representations of androgynous unity and sexuality throughout the twentieth century, from Freud's (mis)reading of Aristophanes' story to account for pathological models of sexual behaviour in 'The Sexual Aberrations' (1905), to John Cameron Mitchell's rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* in 2001 (Hedwig's song, 'Origin of Love', is a faithful re-telling of Aristophanes' story of androgyny; the film itself follows Hedwig's quest to find his/her other half)<sup>11</sup> and Eugenides' *Middlesex* in 2002. When 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome fails to explain Cal's biology, Plato and Ovid (though they offer such different accounts of desire and its embodiment) provide reassuring explanations. The *Symposium* in particular has proved an important resource in literary imagination. James Joyce is said to have kept a copy of Shelley's translation of the *Banquet* (as the *Symposium* was then translated) on his bookshelves. In *Woman and Labour* Olive Schreiner directed her readers to Benjamin Jowett's translation (1871) to underline her point about the natural compatibility of men and women, which, she argued, had been corrupted by the organisation of labour: 'The two sexes are not distinct species but two halves of one whole, always acting and interacting on each other through inheritance and reproducing and blending with each other in each generation.'<sup>12</sup> Diana Collecott has argued that 'Aristophanes' fantasy in the *Symposium* offers models for the heterosexually inflected notion of bisexuality that we encounter in HD's *Bid Me To Live*, as well as the homosexual coupling of Midget and Josepha into a "perfect whole" in *Paint It Today*.<sup>13</sup> For Havelock Ellis and for Freud, Aristophanes' speech functioned as an explanatory narrative that might enable an understanding of humanity's latent bisexuality, a bisexuality which, for Ellis, was somatic rather than erotic:

The conception of the latent bisexuality of all males and females cannot fail to be fairly obvious to intelligent observers of the human body. It emerges at an early period of philosophic thought, and from the first was occasionally used for the explanation of homosexuality. Plato's myth in the *Banquet* and the hermaphroditic statues of antiquity show how acute minds, working ahead of science, exercised themselves with these problems.<sup>14</sup>

For modern writers like Lawrence and Hardy, however, androgyny, as Plato has Aristophanes conceive it, was a politically oppressive myth, to be greeted with scepticism. In *Women in Love*, Birkin meditates on 'the old age, before sex was, [when] we were mixed, each one a mixture'<sup>15</sup>

before repudiating this thesis: 'Why should we consider ourselves, men and women, as broken fragments of one whole? It is not true. We are not broken fragments of one whole. Rather we are the singling away into purity and clear being, of things that are mixed.'<sup>16</sup> Hardy rejected Aristophanes' myth in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by de-romanticising its sentimental assumptions:

completeness is not to be prophesied, or even conceived as possible. Enough that in the present case, as in millions, it was not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment; a missing counterpart wandered independently about the earth waiting in crass obtuseness till the late time came. Out of which maladroit delay sprang anxieties, disappointments, shocks, catastrophes, and passing-strange destinies. (p. 83)<sup>17</sup>

In Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, Tristessa, the male-to-female transgendered subject, and Eve, the male-to-female transsexual subject, consummate their relationship, forming, momentarily, Plato's perfect hermaphrodite (as it is described in the text); but as that narrative demonstrates, the Platonic androgynous can only exist transitorily as a mythical construction that is damaged through contact with the real. The perfect couple is brutally demythologised and sundered, not by Zeus but by the military Children's Crusade who kill Tristessa. For Gore Vidal's legendary Myra Breckinridge, psychiatrists are *passé* and the index of that is the outmoded belief in androgynous unity: 'Dr Montag still believes that each sex is intended to be half of a unit, like those monsters mentioned in Plato's *Symposium*,' she tells Rusty; but sexual relations are a wrangle for supremacy for her, and in *Myron*, the sequel to *Myra Breckinridge*, Myra rejects Plato altogether: 'Those gorgeous hemispheres, crying to be wrenched apart in order that one might create the opposite to Plato's beast by substituting that dumb Greek's trendy ideal of the unnatural whole to my truer vision of forcibly divided and forever separated parts. No monist Myra!' (p. 291).

John Cowper Powys, writing to Frances Gregg in 1919, found the *Symposium* to be on target for an account of heterosexual love: 'I've just been reading in the *Symposium* what that old comedian Aristophanes says about love and I'm damned if he doesn't hit the mark with his one person cut in half or how two half-people hunting about for each other and begging Hephaistos to hammer them together ...'<sup>18</sup> Powys echoes a sentiment nursed by the narrator in Baron Corvo's *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*: 'And, as far as I know ... I really do think that Plato

has touched the spot' (p. 13). By the mid-twentieth century, Lacan still claimed sovereignty for Aristophanes' story as an account of the formation of subjectivity; it was, he asserted, 'a defiance to the centuries for it traverses them without anyone trying to do better'.<sup>19</sup> For American feminist critics like Catharine Stimpson writing in the mid-1970s: 'To reassure them of their humanity, to remind themselves that they have a tradition, both the androgyne and the homosexual look back to Plato's *Symposium* for an endorsing myth.'<sup>20</sup> Aristophanes' androgyne turns out to be a trope with multifarious possibilities, an index not only of sexual orientation, but also of cultural and social relations.

At stake in the difference between the androgyne and the hermaphrodite, critics have argued, is the visibility, the material fact of the body: 'What sets the androgyne apart,' says Francette Pacteau, 'dwells in one gesture: the uncovering of the body.'<sup>21</sup> It is that display 'that positions the hermaphrodite on the side of the visible'. The androgyne is, then, the 'impossible referent', a sign (despite what Aristophanes argues) indicating a fantasy that unfolds along the axis of the gaze. 'I do not encounter an androgyne in the street,' Pacteau suggests, 'rather I encounter a figure whom I "see as" androgynous.'<sup>22</sup> Pacteau's reading of the androgyne shifts the focus from an embodied androgynous object to a subject whose narcissistic or fetishistic gaze fantasises a given figure as androgynous and who must, at the same time, function as the index of disavowal: I know this is really a man *or* a woman, *but* ...<sup>23</sup> If the hermaphrodite body (as we're supposed to picture it in *Middlesex*) doesn't leave all that much to the imagination, the apparent body of the androgyne annuls it: disembodied, the androgyne leaves everything to the imagination. In Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*, the androgyne represents a figure denoting secrecy and invisibility: 'Pran wonders if ... the power to remove oneself from sight is merely a deeper form of androgyny.' But the hermaphrodite is tangible: Pran, now reinvented as Bobby, 'shows them the hermaphrodite figure of the God, man on one side, woman on the other. He stands back as the women titter and the men make ribald jokes. Then discreetly, when they are not looking, he reaches forward and touches the stone for luck.'<sup>24</sup> The hermaphrodite marks a limit of sexual knowledge in Roth's *The Human Stain*: 'one of the boys was so innocent he didn't know what a hermaphrodite was.'<sup>25</sup> But then, the androgyne has been everything to the imagination, from the *fin de siècle*, in modernist and contemporary literature and film, androgyny has been consistently re-imagined and re-embodied, 'at once a real, empirical subject and an idealized abstraction, a figure of universal Man'.<sup>26</sup>

The double-sexed figure shifted in terms of its representation from classical mythology to discourses of medicine and psychiatry in nineteenth-century sexology. Although some practitioners within the field saw the unified double-sexed figure as emblematic of an atavistic and primitive civilisation, others like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Vienna, constructed the androgyne as the womanly man, a pathologised identity that he placed as a sub-section in the category of 'Cerebral Neuroses' in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Freud adapted the 'popular view of the sexual instinct' taken from the 'poetic fable' as the basis for understanding 'sexual aberrations' in the first of his 'Three Essays on Sexuality' (1905), but was famously selective in his reading of Aristophanes' story, making the androgynous couple central to an understanding of hetero-normative desire so that, as Kari Weil suggests, 'Plato's theory will not conflict with Freud's presentation of homosexuality and lesbianism as "deviations"'.<sup>27</sup> His use of androgyny was modified, however, to fit a different theory in his psychoanalytic biography of Leonardo da Vinci in 1910. Freud's representation of androgyny found expression in the pre-Oedipal boy's fantasy of the imaginary embodiment of the androgynous/hermaphrodite mother (Freud doesn't distinguish between the two terms) and in an idealised sublimation of the androgyne, which was bound up in Leonardo's painterly aesthetic.

With classical models as their source, writers could look to antiquity to give authority to the hypotheses they were making in connecting sexual desire with creativity and genius. In his *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, Earl Lind suggested that he was giving the 'inner history' of ancient Greek hermaphrodite sculptures, and obligingly posed in his book as the statue of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite in the Louvre. The English writer Edward Carpenter claimed distinguished and heroic figures from Greek and Renaissance histories (Michaelangelo, Alexander the Great, Sappho) to secure lofty precedents for the modern 'intermediate type', artists and educators who combined positive elements of traditional male and female characteristics. His cultural regenerators were similar to those envisaged by socialist-feminist writers like Edward and Eleanor Marx-Aveling and Olive Schreiner. In *The Woman Question*, the Marx-Avelings had endorsed Kant's belief that 'man and woman constitute, when united, the whole and entire being; one sex completes the other':

But when each sex is incomplete, and the one incomplete to the most lamentable extent, and when as a rule, neither of them comes into real, thorough, habitual, free contact, mind to mind, with the other, the being is neither whole nor entire.<sup>28</sup>

But if such androgynous union was deployed as contributing towards the social good, rather than the pursuit or realisation of love, it was also part of a sub-cultural erotic, European imagination. In France, decadent writers like Rachilde scandalously incorporated the androgynous figure into stories that rummaged in the margins of erotic desire, teasing conventional heterosexual relations: in *Monsieur Vénus*, aristocratic women 'pass' as men; peasant men dress and behave as women in order to satisfy and disrupt social and sexual desire. Wilde gestured towards French decadence in his portrait of the bisexual sybarite Dorian Gray, described by Camille Paglia as the charismatic, Apollonian androgyne,<sup>29</sup> but such decadence appeared degraded and moribund by the time Radclyffe Hall came to represent a noble 'intermediate type' in the often pious spaces of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. The association of androgynous or intermediate identity with creative genius was part of the discursive representation of androgyny in the early twentieth century, rebutting sexological categorisations that saw androgyny as degenerative and injurious. Famously, Virginia Woolf thought that the writer should have an androgynous mind, and her sixth novel, *Orlando*, engaged with androgyny as both an oscillatory identity (Orlando is first a man, then a woman, and, cross-dressing, is able to re-inhabit masculinity) and as the product of complementary union. When Orlando marries, she recognises that her husband is also a woman, just as he recognises that Orlando is also a man. From pathology, to ideal, to fantasy, to sensibility, androgyny resurfaced in the late 1960s and 1970s as an achievable ontology before it was rejected as limiting and conservative: a trope, category, identity and fantasy that reinforced the characterisations that it challenged.

This book presents a chronology of representations of androgyny, beginning with the translation and subsequent proliferation and metamorphoses of Plato's *Symposium* from the mid- to the late nineteenth century onward. Two speeches from the *Symposium* – those of Aristophanes and of Pausanias – proved to be instrumental in constructing narratives of same-sex desire, from Xavier Mayne's *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexuality* to Edward Carpenter's popular writings on the 'intermediate sex'.

Through readings of Freud's psychoanalytic biography of Leonardo da Vinci, Earl Lind's *Autobiography of an Androgyne* and Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, chapter 1 explores constructions of androgyny that posit it, variously, as the sublimated expression of repressed sexual desire, the pre-Oedipal male child's fantasy of a specific maternal embodiment, the story of the androgynous, homosexual 'womanly-man'. Each of these

versions of androgyny foreground the androgyne's power to disrupt and disturb hetero-normative relationships, a power that seems at once desirable and to be feared. The figure of the androgyne, the fantasy of the androgyne, as it is constructed in literary (and psychoanalytic) imagination always presents us with an impasse. This is partly because the figure is shown to test the limits of the respectable and permissible in social and sexual life, and is therefore often seen in powerless retreat or isolation, and partly because the androgyne (or more generally, androgyny) is always bounded by the binary categories it also seeks to challenge. If there are similarities in the construction of the figure (as a category or as a subject, androgyny or the androgyne tends to be secretive, liminal, wavering, private) there are also intriguing differences: as a category and an identity, it has been pejorative, degenerative, embodied, projected, artistic, spiritual, regenerative.

The degenerative and regenerative potential of the androgyne is explored further in chapter 2 through readings of Rose Allatini's pacifist novel, *Despised and Rejected*, first published in 1918 and immediately banned under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act. The novel seeks to revise internalised homophobia by drawing on Edward Carpenter's construction of the noble 'intermediate type', homosexual and artistic, who *could* be the regenerators of a boorish and moribund national culture, but who are never given the chance. The imprisonment of Dennis at the end of the narrative and the banning of the book speak eloquently to the limits of democracy and toleration at the end of the First World War. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* also retrieves the 'invert' from its pathologised incarnation and re-presents Stephen Gordon as another noble intermediate, a writer apparently blessed with an 'androgynous writing mind' (Puddle, her governess, tells her that she can 'write with a curious double insight – write both men and women from a personal knowledge'). Whilst Hall explicitly rewrote sexological constructions of inversion, contemporary writers like Woolf and Lawrence appeared to turn away from them: Carpenter, important for Allatini and for Hall, was rejected by Lawrence as being 'not in my line', and he dismissed the idea of a third or intermediate sex as perversion in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. His distaste for the intermediate type was expressed in *The Rainbow* in his construction of Ursula's uncle, Tom Brangwen, and her teacher, Winifred Inger: the effeminate industrialist and the mannish, educated woman lose themselves entirely in the world of the mind, at great cost to the redemptive sexual experience offered by the body. Lawrence, formulating a philosophy of writing from 1913 in 'The Study of Thomas Hardy', had been

looking for an androgynous aesthetic that addressed a pure and transcendent sexual union devoid of social consciousness, and his exploration of a symbolic androgyny in *Women in Love* was partly expressed through Rupert Birkin's bisexuality. In these texts, same-sex orientation tended to be marked upon the body by masculinity or boyishness for women, femininity for men: when such individuals are located in the social, their fates are marked by trauma – imprisonment, exile, alienation.

Chapter 3 pays particular attention to Virginia Woolf, and considers her much-maligned representation of the 'androgynous writing mind' in *A Room of One's Own*. Hall, Woolf and Lawrence intersect in *A Room of One's Own*: Woolf, as Jane Marcus has pointed out, draws attention to the trial of *The Well of Loneliness* which took place at the same time that she was giving the speeches at Cambridge that she revised as *A Room*, and Woolf later wrote to Desmond MacCarthy that Lawrence was probably the writer she had in mind when she criticised Mr A the novelist. The chapter situates Woolf's call for the androgynous writing mind in different contexts: first as the culmination of the arguments she has been making in *A Room*, then among other images that she uses to try to net a symbol for the creative process, and finally more generally in the context of literary modernism. Woolf explores dual sexual identity as the location of sexual difference as it is marked on the body, in culture, through marriage and, crucially, in writing.

Chapter 4 explores the resurgence of interest in androgyny during feminism's second wave, and examines the renewed faith in androgynous ontology displayed in the work of writers of this period. If anything, androgyny became even more protean during the late 1960s and 1970s, serving as the expression of a range of sexual identities, social possibilities and imaginative freedoms. Androgyny thus came to figure asexuality, bisexuality, a credible force within culture or a purely imaginary concept; we might aspire to be androgynous by embracing masculine or feminine qualities, or we needn't bother since, according to the Jungian analyst June Singer, we already are androgynous: the archetypes of the anima and animus that lurk inside us ensure that. Literary representations of androgyny moved between sincerity (Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*) and parody. Gore Vidal's *Myron*, the 1974 sequel to *Myra Breckinridge*, made an oscillatory androgyny the site of civil war as Myron and Myra struggle to take control of a body both think of as their own. Their endless, fruitless struggle points to the futility of a desire to unite 'femininity' and 'masculinity': in *Myron*, femininity and