

## Introduction: "All that Glitters"

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Once regarded mainly as a philosophical topic—a kind of thought experiment or fanciful speculation about origins—androgyny has today attracted the attention of commentators from a wide variety of critical approaches and disciplinary orientations: psychology, linguistics/epistemology, anthropology/sociology, biology/medicine, religion/ethics. In providing this kind of meeting ground, the topic would thus seem to effect the kind of blending of differences that on the level of gender is entailed in the concept of androgyny, just as the concept itself is frequently seen as extending far beyond any matter of sexual issues per se and is seen instead as a kind of metaphor for the destabilizing of binaries of numerous kinds and at various levels: the realistic and the fantastic, the visual and the verbal, the comic and the serious, the natural and the supernatural, the artificial and the human, the self and the other, and ultimately good and evil itself.

Yet binaries do not dissolve so easily, and as much as androgyny has become this kind of harmonizing topic so much has it engendered a great deal of dispute, beginning with the question of how the very word should be defined and how it relates to terms like hermaphrodite, bi-sexual, transgender, transsexual. For some critics, androgyny refers only to a psychological configuration, whereas for others the concept becomes meaningless if the physical body and the social scene are left out of the picture. Another point of discord pertains to whether androgyny conceptualizes a transcendent or neutral category or whether it functions as a way of assimilating difference into a homogeneity, and one moreover whose orientation is patriarchal and heterosexual. Accordingly, whereas some critics see androgyny as a mode of resistance to established sexual norms and as a positive and liberating concept, for others it is a nefarious anodyne and a "myth" that must be resisted.

Ironically, however, instead of making the topic a "dead issue," this very discontent has served to keep it alive, bringing with it the question of whether it is the concept itself that is the problem or the way that it has been interpreted and implemented. Thus many discussions of androgyny focus on the inadequacy of prevailing psychoanalytic paradigms, while others focus on the blindspots of anthropological research and medical practices. Locating the problem in language itself, others have addressed the way that the gendering of pronouns makes it impossible to designate an androgynous being, and also the way that the sequential nature of the verbal medium makes it possible to depict androgyny only in a "serial" fashion. Escaping from the "prison house of language" thus becomes synonymous with escaping from the chains of gender restrictions, and while language can scarcely be avoided in critical discourse, attention can be drawn to linguistic inadequacies by invoking other modes of representation, as in the case of the whole visual and theatrical vocabulary of gesture, costume, and performance. Even more effective, perhaps, is the search for analogies for the androgynous condition in music (including voice in the aural/oral sense) and in color blending, and the focusing of attention on those features of the body which seem least gender specific (the eyes and mouth) and those stages of development that seem most to evidence androgynous or polymorphic perversity (childhood and old age).

All of these issues and possibilities are explored in the essays that follow, which collectively suggest that far from being a mere bauble for philosophers to play with, the concept of androgyny can function as something of a lens through which to see—sometimes brightly, sometimes darkly—a broad spectrum of issues pertaining to the human condition. And if in the process these essays sometimes seem to "tease us out of thought" and into "wand'ring mazes," they also suggest that the lure of the androgyne might ultimately be something more than a paper chase or academic attraction to fool's gold.