



**Constructions of women in relation to the politics and
ideals of androgyny in some of the works of Virginia
Woolf, Doris Lessing, Joan Barfoot and Angela Carter**

By

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SUMMARY

This thesis looks at the traditional role of androgyny in regard to sexual politics and the use of the concept in the works of four twentieth century women writers.

Viewed in an historico-political context in Chapter 1 androgyny, like gender, is seen to have worked in favour of the patriarchy with its binary system of male and female, which always operates to the advantage of the male. In fact, a concept of androgyny relies on this dyadic structure to have meaning itself. The compulsory heterosexuality upon which society is based depends upon rigid gender definition, yet must account for a surplus which is inexplicable without a concept of androgyny. Androgyny therefore becomes the repository of all that gender excludes. This inevitable outcome of gender definition is given transcendental status by its seeming wholeness and completion.

Such characteristics, which accorded with the liberal humanist philosophy, are thrown into doubt by Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Both the given nature of the self and sexual difference, crucial considerations in a reading of androgyny, are challenged by Freud's positing of the constructed self. This has been the focus of my reading of Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse in Chapter 2 and The Waves in Chapter 6. Rather than viewing the two novels as Woolf's valorisation of androgyny I believe they represent her exposure of the patriarchal ideology implicit in the concept. I also suggest she indicates a 'new' androgyny based on a recognition and articulation of female sexuality

which bears striking similarity to much current French feminist thought.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a re-emergence of interest in androgyny generated by the feminist movement and the political push for material equality. The most influential work at this time was Carolyn Heilbrun's Towards a Recognition of Androgyny which implied that androgyny was 'natural' to both sexes, and had the potential to resolve gender conflict. In relation to the material conditions of women assuming androgynous roles in society at this time I have discussed Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook and Joan Barfoot's Gaining Ground in Chapter 3. Both raise the assumptions and problems which adhere to such emancipated roles for women, not least their conflict with traditional role models and the guilt associated with their rejection.

In revealing the constructed nature of gender I have discussed Virginia Woolf's Orlando and Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve in Chapter 4. Though written over 50 years apart the novels are comparable in their exposure of the arbitrary nature of gender and sexuality. Both disrupt historical models, Woolf through her displacement of time and space, Carter through a characteristic intertextuality which forces a re-reading of the canon of patriarchal discourse. Carter's rewriting of phallogocentric myths, in order to challenge the roles which women are ascribed historically, is discerned in two novels, Heroes and Villains and Nights at the Circus. Here the Amazon warrior-woman is rewritten from a feminist perspective. This is the

focus of Chapter 5, where I have discussed how the marginalised and alienated figure of the Amazon comes to be centralised and positively determined as a female model in Carter's texts.

I have concluded my thesis with a reading of Virginia Woolf's The Waves and its involvement with identity in Chapter 6. I have placed this novel out of historical order because it is apparent to me that Woolf still has much to say that informs current feminist thinking on the articulation of the female subject and the androgynous ideal. Woolf's insistence that women should write themselves into history is relevant to the *écriture féminine* of theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. She points the way to a new kind of androgyny, freed of patriarchal ideology, where both sexes are articulated in difference, or alterity, and the opportunity to aesthetically transcend such difference becomes possible.

STATEMENT

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university; nor, to the best of my knowledge and belief, does it contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text or notes.

I consent to the thesis being made available for photocopying and loan, if accepted for the award of the degree.

signed

Hettie Tinsley.

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For my mother, for whom Lacan does not exist.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION		1
CHAPTER 1	Defining androgyny within an historico-political context.	6
CHAPTER 2	Complementary gender and sexual difference, the neuter, and possibility in Virginia Woolf's <u>To the Lighthouse</u> .	23
CHAPTER 3	Female essence, the fragmentation of self and the quest for a unifier in Doris Lessing's <u>The Golden Notebook</u> and Joan Barfoot's <u>Gaining Ground</u> .	49
CHAPTER 4	Specular misrecognition and the politics of cross-dressing in Virginia Woolf's <u>Orlando</u> and Angela Carter's <u>The Passion of New Eve</u> .	71
CHAPTER 5	Rewriting the Amazon-warrior myth in Angela Carter's <u>Heroes and Villains</u> and <u>Nights at the Circus</u> .	93
CHAPTER 6	The lady writing: identity, discourse and the androgynous dialectic of <u>The Waves</u> .	

CHAPTER 7	Feminism, alterity and androgyny.	148
CONCLUSION		152
ENDNOTES		158
BIBLIOGRAPHY		173

ABBREVIATIONS

TL	To the Lighthouse
GN	The Golden Notebook
GG	Gaining Ground
O	Orlando
PNE	The Passion of New Eve
HV	Heroes and Villains
NC	Nights at the Circus
TW	The Waves