
H-France Review Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 226

Marian Rothstein, *The Androgyne in Early Modern France: Contextualizing the Power of Gender*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. viii + 256 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). \$74.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-1375-4136-9.

Review by Marc Schachter, University of Durham.

Marian Rothstein's *The Androgyne in Early Modern France: Contextualizing the Power of Gender* makes two key interventions. First, Rothstein contends that the androgyne should be understood as a figure for human plenitude in contradistinction to the hermaphrodite whose bodily excess, understood as unnatural, tends to incarnate weakness and lack. Second, she proposes a model, called "functional gender," to describe how men and women in traditional societies can take on roles usually associated with the other sex. In a series of readings that culminates in a dazzling concluding chapter on female sovereigns, Rothstein combines both insights to argue that the figure of the androgyne facilitated access by men and women to gendered capacities and roles linked paradigmatically to the sex they were not.

The first chapter, "The Sources of the Androgyne," offers an overview of influential primary and exegetical background materials including: passages from Genesis 1 and 2; Aristophanes's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, often understood as having derived from an imperfect understanding of the biblical androgyne; the *Corpus Hermeticum*; various church fathers; Cornelius a Lapide's *Commentaria in Pentateuchum Mosis*, seen as a helpful critical repository of earlier interpretations; Ficino's hugely influential *Symposium* commentary; Louis le Roy's *Symposie de Platon*; and Leone Hebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore*. Rothstein observes that the Hebrew and Greek sources were both construed as offering a primordial androgyne endowed with powers that would later be lost—"immortality in the biblical account and great strength and satisfaction for Plato" (p. 25)—but which might also be recovered through, for example, the "marriage androgyne" (p. 25) according to which men and women joined in matrimony become one flesh.

Before moving on with my summary of the content of the volume, I would like to mention one misleading detail in this first chapter that reappears at various points later in the book. Discussing Ficino's account of Aristophanes's speech from the *Symposium*, Rothstein characterizes *all three* of the primordial beings in the Greek text as androgynes when in fact only the "mixed" male-female one is so-named, both in Plato's original Greek and in Ficino's Latin translation. Rothstein is not alone among scholars I admire in making this mistake, which I take to be a symptomatic misprision; its ubiquity should not authorize repetition but rather be subjected to critical analysis.

In the second chapter, Rothstein elaborates her theory of "functional gender," which she glosses as "a mode of gendering that can be seen to allow all humans potential access to the functions or roles that in traditional societies were customarily attributed to a single sex" (p. 27). For Rothstein, the androgyne—as a figure of human plenitude—offers a particularly rich way for men and women to access honourably roles they might otherwise be denied. Lurking behind this observation seems to be a frustration with a tendency on the part of recent scholars to identify too readily as subversive individuals who do not

conform to standard gender expectations. Rothstein notes that “[t]he imputation of transgression that might be expected to attach itself to such breaches of decorum is not applicable; often rather the effect is just the opposite, moving the perception of the person who performs these actions towards human perfection, towards the *imago Dei*” (p. 27). She offers several clear examples to illustrate this point, observing in one particularly striking case that when Jean Dorat refers to the “androgynously” smart (male) and beautiful (female) Camille de Morel as a “[m]onstrum...novum” [a new kind of prodigy] (p. 33), this is clearly a compliment.

A short third chapter, “Picturing the Androgyne,” considers representations of the Marriage Androgyne, the Androgyne Christ, and Prudence as Androgyne. Continuing her focus on the androgyne as a way of representing or accessing human plenitude, Rothstein notes that if such images were to be “taken literally in a corporeal sense” then they “would immediately be grotesque” (p. 49). The point here is precisely that these images were *not* grotesque to early modern viewers—and Rothstein helps us understand why this should be the case.

The fourth chapter is an updated version of a 2003 article, “Mutations of the Androgyne,” published in the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, which I have assigned to students repeatedly over the years because of its wide-ranging and lucid account of the figure’s career in sixteenth-century French literature.[1] The chapter establishes that there are three broad literary manifestations of the androgyne, “physical, spiritual, and marital” (p. 53), through which “the androgyne became available to figure the love of God, the love of man (or woman), charity, lust, human longings, human failings, and human fulfilment” (p. 94). It surveys some important Italian precedents (Ficino, Bembo, and Castiglione) before ranging widely through French examples (drawn from Rabelais, Heroët, Des Periers, Marguerite de Navarre, Du Bellay, Pasquier, Béroalde de Verville, d’Aubigné, Labé, Tyard, Ronsard, Baïf, Jodelle, Ronsard, Sebillet, and Du Bartas, among others). Rothstein’s engagement with this almost comprehensive set of works enables her to make some general observations about how familiarity with and the uses of the androgyne evolved through the course of the sixteenth century.

The fifth chapter focuses on collections of lives of famous women. Noting that the genre is often a particularly misogynistic one, Rothstein remarks that women are frequently celebrated in it for being “chaste, pious, modest, silent, submissive” (p. 99), a tendency that “does not bode well for the joys of reading women’s biographies” (p. 100). She observes however that another group of women—including Semiramis, Zenobia, Artemisia, Dido, and Penthasilea—is “regularly described in terms we associate with masculinity” (p. 100). Such women “are to be admired for reaching a condition of plenitude within the limits of one female body/androgyne spirit” (p. 100). Rothstein goes on to examine numerous accounts of Semiramis, exploring how they balanced celebrating her military exploits with condemning her legendary reputation for insatiable lust. Here and elsewhere in the volume, I wish Rothstein had more directly addressed her sometime application of the idea of androgynous “plenitude” to descriptions of individuals in which traits negatively coded as womanly seem to be offset by exceptional and positive manly characteristics. For example, in the next chapter, Rothstein considers Elizabeth I’s famous assertion that “I know that I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king” (p. 111) as exemplifying androgynous plenitude. This seems to me to be a claim about a lack overcome rather than an account of plenitude.

The remarkable sixth chapter explores how four women—Anne de Bretagne, Marguerite de Navarre, Catherine de Médicis, and Jeanne d’Albret—deployed the figure of the androgyne to facilitate their access to political power against traditional limitations. I will mention two particularly illuminating examples, of which there are many. Anne de Bretagne’s second coronation as Queen of France, following the death of her first husband Charles VIII and four years after her marriage to Louis XII, included a remarkable innovation: upon being crowned, she was presented with the ring from her wedding to Louis. In a noteworthy reading, Rothstein argues that Anne thereby exploits the marital androgyne to assert that she has wedded the realm, a symbolic prerogative normally reserved for male

monarchs. Catherine de Médicis similarly deployed the marital androgyne through an enigmatic emblem she cultivated after Henri II's death. In Rothstein's deft interpretation, the emblem reveals itself as an argument for Catherine's continued sovereignty since their mystical union continues in her. Particularly intriguing here--and worthy of further elaboration--is the way in which the androgyne intersects with other metaphysical conceits such as that of the king's two bodies to facilitate women's access to political authority.

Scholars of early-modern French literature interested in gender have long been waiting for this volume and it does not disappoint. Marked by Rothstein's characteristic wry wit, expansive engagement with sources canonical and barely known, and distinctive account of early modern gender, the volume details the variety of ways in which the androgyne facilitated access to what she calls human plenitude. I did wonder more than once about instances in which it might function in a more ambivalent mode or be vulnerable to discursive resignification into its opposite. But I think part of what Rothstein is resisting is a critical tendency--to which I admittedly conform--to take ambivalence and resignification as predominant. Instead, she argues persuasively for the prevalence and impact of positive deployments of the androgyne in French Renaissance philosophy, theology, literature, visual representations, and, most powerfully, manipulations of political symbols and discourses by female sovereigns. I fully expect that her wide-ranging interventions will elicit elaborations, refutations, and deliberations for years to come in conferences, publications, and classrooms.

NOTE

[1] Marian Rothstein, "Mutations of the Androgyne: Its Functions in Early Modern French Literature," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 34.2 (2003): 409-437.

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ISSN 1553-9172