

REDRESSING ANDROGYNY:
HERMAPHRODITIC BODIES IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

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“The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous.”
– S.T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 1 September 1832

During the course of his short career, Aubrey Beardsley drew two radically different pictures of a double-sexed being (fig. 1 and 2). The early picture is of a figure draped in cloth, listlessly gazing out at its public. The figure of the later picture is winged, with the mark of both sexes clearly stamped on its body. The adolescent breasts on the early picture seem misdrawn and downright awkward. The androgyne could be both sexes, or either, or perhaps even neither: its flesh and sex seem irrelevant to the artist. The sex of the later picture, however, is clear. Unlike the early figure wrapped in cloth, this body defiantly opens its arms, demanding that its audience examine its body. As candles are lit to worship its sterile, super-sexual body, the reflection becomes both monster and god, both deformity and possibility.

This essay will argue that these two pictures are emblematic of the figure's doubleness throughout the century. The poets could dream of utopian wholeness; yet their worst nightmare was that the figure might shed the limp robes and challenge the social norms. On one hand, at the close of the eighteenth century the countless revolutions – both political and intellectual – seemed to suggest that the march towards unity was nearing an end. Kings would lose their power; gods would become human; men and women might become equal. Leaders like Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767-1825) and Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776-1847) initiated a movement that tied the reconstruction of French society to sexual equality. These Saint-Simonians advocated that, politically, society should be androgynous.¹ Tangentially related to this movement, Romantic poets called for merging between opposites. As late as 1832 Coleridge could call for androgynous minds, and in *The Friend* he writes: “EVERY POWER IN NATURE AND IN SPIRIT *must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: AND ALL OPPOSITION IS A TENDENCY TO RE-UNION*” (Coleridge 94).

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