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## AFTER ANDROGYNY: THE DIALECTICS OF GENDER

Nandita Batra

*Androgyny* today is a household word for all generations. As a staple of the quotidian diet of Western popular culture and media it manifests itself in a plethora of lyrics, advertisements, films, TV sitcoms, and fashions. In an equally pervasive way it has often been exalted politically and ideologically as a remedy for a wide range of so-called ills and by a variety of different groups. As Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty pointed out in her 1980 book *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, "people are 'into' androgyny,"<sup>1</sup> and the observation is as true of this *fin de siècle* as it was a decade and a half ago.

As is obvious, the word *androgyny* implies a fusion of the masculine and the feminine. What is less obvious is that when exalted the term usually denotes a concept rather than the biological manifestation of this fusion: physiological hermaphroditism, which is extremely rare, is usually treated as grotesque rather than sublime. As Marie Delcourt puts it in her study of the hermaphrodite through history:

L'androgynie occupe les deux pôles du sacré. Pur concept, pure vision de l'esprit, elle apparaît chargée des plus hautes valeurs. Actualisée en un être de chair et sang, elle est une monstruosité, et rien de plus . . . on se débarasse le plus vite possible des malheureux qui la représentent.<sup>2</sup>

And despite the proliferation of hermaphroditic Greek deities, records revealing the ancient Greek practice of leaving children born with hermaphroditic features to die indicate, as Mircea Eliade has

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1980), p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> Marie Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), p. 68.

[The androgynie occupies two poles of the sacred. Purely conceptually, as pure vision of the spirit, the androgynie appears imbued with the highest values. Embodied in a being of flesh and blood, it is a monstrosity, nothing more . . . one whose expulsion must be immediate because of the calamity that it represents.]

shown, that biological hermaphroditism was regarded by the Greeks with superstitious abhorrence and dread.<sup>3</sup>

As a symbol for a perfect synthesis of the dialectic of gender conflicts, androgyny might be a hot issue today, but it hardly originated with us. As A.J.L. Busst has noted, "the androgyne is a myth; and like all myths it is constantly reinterpreted since its meaning or value must agree with the widely varying preoccupations and experience of different eras and individuals."<sup>4</sup> It manifests itself most prominently in creation myths but also reappears as a recurring motif in cultures as diverse as the Scandinavian, the Babylonian, the Hindu, and the Native American. Some of its appearances are as the Greek Teirisias, "old man with wrinkled female breasts,"<sup>5</sup> the Navajo *nadle*, and the male North American Trickster who bears children.

Dual-sexed divinities, deities, and supreme beings are a prominent feature of Eastern religions.<sup>6</sup> The Hindu *Ardhnari* ("man-woman") is a fusion of Shiva and Parvati, while Taoism posits Tao as an ultimate principle that fuses Yang, or the male principle, with the Yin, the female principle.<sup>7</sup> Buddhism also posits a supreme principle that is a fusion of male and female. Western cosmogonies contain several dualsexed divinities, the most famous of whom is Hermaphroditus (the offspring of Hermes and Aphrodite), but who also include the bearded Aphrodite and the six-breasted Dionysus. Several of the goddesses of fertility, such as Cybele and Isis, were able to procreate without coitus; this procreation was considered symbolic of their masculine powers rather than of an immaculate conception.

As the mythic dream of primal oneness, and hence symbolic of totality and universal harmony, androgyny appears in numerous creation myths, a number of which suggest that a debased world resulted after the disintegration of a superior state of primordial unity into two polarized (and inferior) principles. Various cultures have therefore seen the universe as divided into these ensuing polarities,

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<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne: Studies in Religious Myth and Symbol* trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> A.J.L. Busst, "The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century," *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. Ian Fletcher (New York: Barnes and Nobel, 1967), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (Faber and Faber: London, 1969), p. 68. (*The Waste Land*, line 219.)

<sup>6</sup> Alan Watts, *Two Hands of God: The Myths of Polarity* (New York: Collier, 1969), pp. 45-66.

<sup>7</sup> June Singer, *Androgyny: Towards a New Theory of Sexuality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

and have constructed them as binary oppositions such as light/dark, good/evil, body/spirit, and—the most important in the quotidian context—male/female.<sup>8</sup> The obvious conflicts and flaws in the world are then attributed to the strife created between these opposed polarities, and this attempt to recapture primordial unity is the triadic paradigm of most worship. This paradigm of worship posits, therefore, a dialectic based on a vision of primordial harmony followed by a division (or “fall”), with the objective of worship being to regain the wholeness of the original condition.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Joseph Campbell has drawn attention to the pervasiveness of androgyny in creation myths from China to Greece. In the Hindu Upanishads Atman “caused his self to fall into two pieces, which became a husband and a wife.”<sup>10</sup> The androgyne’s first documented debut in Western philosophy seems to be circa 385 B.C. in Plato’s *Symposium*. Through the character of Aristophanes, Plato wittily articulates the myth of the prelapsarian androgyne, whose splitting into two genders was a direct cause of the fall of humankind:

The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost, and the word “androgynous” is only preserved as a term of reproach.<sup>11</sup>

Although (according to Aristophanes) these three types of being had the same spherical appearance and method of movement (rolling), each had a different descent: the males from the sun, the females from the earth, and the androgynes from the moon (which comprised both earth and sun). Their self-sufficient independence produced a sense of arrogance that led to their challenging of the gods, whose reaction was to deprive them of their self-sufficiency by splitting each sphere in two. In this divided state, each being’s life was now no more than a search for its missing half, and without any means of reproduction, extinction seemed to be just around the corner. Zeus, however, decided to save the day and enabled reproduction to take place by the intercourse of the male with the female, but each split being still seeks its original missing half. Thus homosexuals are the split halves of the original male being, lesbians of the female, and heterosexuals of the androgyne. It is the pursuit of the

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<sup>8</sup> According to Hélène Cixous (see below) all hierarchical oppositions ultimately stem from gender difference.

<sup>9</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 419.

<sup>10</sup> O’Flaherty, p. 311.

<sup>11</sup> *The Portable Plato*, ed. Scott Buchanan, trans. Benjamin Jowett. Penguin, 1976. pp. 143-144.

opposite half that manifests itself in sexual desire, and the pursuit of the original half that manifests itself in sexual love.

Campbell also draws attention to the appearance of androgyny in Judeo-Christian myths of creation, locating it in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."<sup>12</sup> Although less overt than the Platonic account, this description has been justifiably interpreted to include an androgynous supreme being, and because of a conflicting account of creation in Genesis 2:21-22 the possibility has often been overlooked.<sup>13</sup> In addition, as Louis Ginzberg points out, rabbinical tradition as well as several early Jewish interpretations of Biblical texts postulated an androgynous Adam.<sup>14</sup> Likewise Jung posited an androgynous Christ, a view revived and idealized in the Victorian age.<sup>15</sup>

The myth of an androgynous state of perfection persisted in Western philosophy and was transmitted to later ages not only through religion and myth, but also through astrology and alchemy, which divided the universe into polarized forces; these polarities included the masculine and the feminine. The goal of alchemy was an ultimate search for the philosopher's stone through the transmutation of base metals into gold by the "marriage" of male and female elements; this hypothetical philosopher's stone was a symbol of wholeness whose essence was androgynous. The prevalence of the notion of an androgynous conception in the cosmological speculations of Gnosticism has been noted by Thomas McFarland, who also records its importance in the philosophy of the Renaissance philosopher Paracelsus.<sup>16</sup> Paracelsus' theories postulated androgynous fusion in the *rebis* or bisexual (i.e. dual-sexed) creature, who thus became a representation of totality. McFarland states:

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<sup>12</sup> *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 152-153.

<sup>13</sup> "So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man he made into a woman and brought her to the man." See Theodore Reik, *The Creation of Woman* (New York: McGrawHill, 1973), pp. 17-23.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold. Vol. 5. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1925), pp. 88-89.

<sup>15</sup> William Veeder, *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 325-326.

Androgyny was a specific and recurrent feature of the thought of Paracelsus. Thus he speaks of the *rebis*—the bisexual creature—that makes gold out of silver and out of other metals.” His commentator Yoland Jacobi glosses the term as follows: “REBIS: The hermaphrodite, a bisexual being; in its unity, that is to say, by combining the two antitheses, the male and the female principle, it represents, in accordance with an old alchemistic idea, the highest and most desirable degree of the process of transmutation—totality.”<sup>17</sup>

Closer to our own time there has even been a religious cult based on the principle of androgyny. Called Evandisme, a cult in nineteenth-century France, its name was a combination of Adam and Eve, with Eve preceding Adam to compensate for centuries of the opposite phenomenon. *Le Mapah*, the name given to the prophet-priest of this new religion, was a synthesis of the first syllables of *Maman and Papa*.

Throughout the ages human beings have used abstractions to approach the totality of androgyny. For just as long, however, this totality has been approached in less than abstract ways. For many early societies one way of achieving androgynous wholeness was through orgiastic rituals, while other systems experimented with ascetic means to the spiritual (and consequently physical) transcendence of the polarities of gender. More readily available practices, such as ritualistic transvestism and incest, were also adopted as a means to the androgynous end.<sup>18</sup> (Both incest and transvestism frequently appear as symbols, especially in the nineteenth century, of the transcendence of the polarized and therefore incomplete psyche.)

Androgyny became the focus of close examination by anthropology and psychology. It is a key concept in the Jungian theory of individuation, which requires the integration of unconscious aspect of the psyche. For the psychological completion of the male, integration of the feminine *anima* is therefore necessary, as is the equivalent for the female: the integration into her psyche of the male *animus*.<sup>19</sup> Freud’s views on androgyny have been interpreted less definitively. While he stated that there was a “distinction” or “distinctness” (*Entscheidung*) between the sexes, he also spoke of a biological cause for androgyny, which manifested itself in behavior:

The mystery of homosexuality is therefore by no means so simple as it is commonly depicted in popular expositions—“a feminine mind, bound therefore to love a man, but unhappily attached to a masculine body; a

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<sup>17</sup> McFarland, pp. 325-326.

<sup>18</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*, pp. 112-114.

<sup>19</sup> Jung *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

masculine mind, irresistibly attracted by women, but, alas! imprisoned in a feminine body.” It is instead a question of three sets of characteristics, namely—

Physical sexual characters  
(physical hermaphroditism)  
mental sexual characters  
(masculine or feminine attitude)  
kind of object-choice ...

Psychoanalysis has a common basis with biology, in that it presupposes an original bisexuality in human beings, as in animals.<sup>20</sup>

Anthropology has recognized two types of androgyne: the negative or failed androgyne, whose androgyny is achieved through splitting, and the positive androgyne, whose androgyny is produced by fusion. In both cases, androgyny itself is linked to chaos. The former would correspond with Freud’s belief in the death wish, with the androgynous dream representing the desire to return to undifferentiated chaos. In the latter, androgyny would correspond to the Jungian celebration of individuation, the merging of two selves into one.<sup>21</sup>

Androgyny—in all its manifestations—has been a topic of intellectual debate for centuries. Not new to the scholarly scrutiny of psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, theologians, and historians, it has relatively recently become a central concern of literary critics and feminists—in the broad sphere of social roles as well as in the sphere of literature, and the place of the writer vis-à-vis both.

It is not hard to see why androgyny had its appeal for the woman writer. Historically an outsider in an arena exclusively dominated by the phallic pen, the woman writer (even if she was able to achieve educational or intellectual parity with men) was often viewed as a freak of nature, a blue stocking, an aberration or monstrosity who had to disguise her identity under a male pseudonym.

Virginia Woolf’s 1929 *A Room of One’s Own* is often considered the bible of androgynist poetics. Like Coleridge before her (who declared that “a great mind must be androgynous”<sup>22</sup>) Woolf asserted that “truly great literature . . . must be androgynous.” Stating that great writing must transcend gender, she predicts that androgynous writing is the only sort of writing which will last. Shakespeare, Keats,

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<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 Vols. Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974). Vol. XVIII. pp. 170-171.

<sup>21</sup> O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*.

<sup>22</sup> 1 September 1832, *Table Talk and Omniana of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed. T. Ashe. London, George Bell and Sons, 1888.

Sterne, Cowper, Lamb, and Coleridge were, according to her, androgynous. On the contrary, in the case of the novel *Jane Eyre* “anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Bronte” as a novelist. Woolf believed that it was “fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.”<sup>23</sup> In the 70’s, *androgyny* became a buzz-word as an ideal among feminists, and in a later but similar vein Carolyn Heilbrun, in her 1973 book *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, called for gender-neutrality in literature, social roles, and language. She defined androgyny as a “condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned . . . a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; . . . a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom,” manifesting itself in those works of literature “where the roles of the male and female protagonist can be reversed without appearing ludicrous or perverted.”<sup>24</sup> Heilbrun’s theories seemed validated by Sandra Bem’s research and experiments on psychological androgyny and gender schema regarding boys and girls.<sup>25</sup>

As might be expected, androgyny is not everybody’s idea of either a prelapsarian paradise or panacea for all gender tension. Androgyny might have been accepted as an ideal in myth but not in biological manifestation and seldom in actual conduct; historically Western civilization has frequently displayed masculinist discomfort about behavior that society construes as effeminate. This masculinist uneasiness is not unexpected; it is the feminist uneasiness with androgyny as a goal that might be less obvious. For entirely different reasons from the more usual masculinist ones, androgyny poses a threat to the separatism that many feminists have selected as the only acceptable alternative. Androgyny is seen by some feminists—male and female—as perpetuating hierarchical divisions instead of erasing them; for Daniel Harris (*Women’s Studies*, 1974) the concept of androgyny, which puts male (*andro*) before female (*gyne*) is “just

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Hogarth Press: London, 1929, 1991), p. 94, 68, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Heilbrun, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973), p. x-xi, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Sandra Bem, “The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, April 1974, 42 (2), pp. 155-162; “On the Utility of Alternative Procedures for assessing Psychological Androgyny,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, April 1977, 45 (2), pp. 196-205; “Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing,” *Psychological Review*, July 1981, 88 (4), pp. 354-364.

another age-old patriarchal device of control” and little more than the “sexist myth in disguise.”<sup>26</sup>

Closer scrutiny of some promotions of the ideal of androgyny reveals that in selecting the best qualities of male and female in making up the perfect androgyne its champions fall back on the essentialism of gender division that they claim to reject. In several paradigms of androgyny, the feminine becomes represented by the age-old negative stereotypes of femininity that androgyny purports to reject, and the androgyne becomes simply a derogatory term referring to *male* “effeminacy.” Even in cases where the negative stereotyping is less apparent, the normative principle continues to be the male. For instance Coleridge’s proclamation of the androgynous nature of all great minds was accompanied by his observation that “something feminine” could be discovered in the countenance of “*all men of genius*” (italics mine).<sup>27</sup>

The goal of equity would, many feminists believe, be better served by an open assertion of separatism. One of these separatist positions is that of *sexual difference*, which seeks to inscribe femininity while deconstructing the traditional hierarchical and negative associations of difference.<sup>28</sup> Many feminists exhort women writers to focus on aspects of experience exclusive to women, such as menstruation, menopause, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, as well as abortion and mastectomy. Elaine Showalter, for instance, has asserted that the “denigration of female experience” is destructive for the female tradition, and that “theories of the transcendence of sexual identity, like Woolf’s theory of androgyny, are at heart evasions of reality.”<sup>29</sup> The direction for the female tradition lies, Showalter believes, “beyond fantasy, beyond androgyny, beyond assimilation.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Harris, “Androgyne: The Sexist Myth in Disguise” in *Women’s Studies* 2 (1974).

<sup>27</sup> Coleridge, pp. 150-151.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance. *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980); Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minuit, 1984); Deborah Rhode, *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992); Rosi Braidotti, “Sexual Differences,” *Hypatia* 8 (1) Winter 93, 1-13; Drucilla Cornell, *Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual* (New York: Routledge 1993).

<sup>29</sup> On the other hand Toril Moi (*Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London: Methuen, 1985) defends Woolf from Showalter by claiming that Woolf’s concept of androgyny was an attempt to dismantle rather than transcend gender divisions (pp. 13-15).

<sup>30</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: English Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 318-319.

For many the promise of androgyny is too superficial to deliver the goods it promises. Luce Irigaray, for instance, asserts that

The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine must be horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and heavenly. As Heidegger, among others, has written, it must forge an alliance between the divine and the mortal, such that the sexual encounter would be a festive celebration and not a disguised or polemical form of the master-slave relationship. Nor a meeting in the shadow or orbit of a Father-God who alone lays down the law, who is the immutable spokesman of a single sex.<sup>31</sup>

One of the hypotheses of sexual difference is *parler femme* postulated by Irigaray: a “woman’s language” that would reject the dualistic distinctions of the phallogocentric nature of language as we have it. This difference is embodied in the principle she terms women’s *jouissance*, which may be loosely translated as orgasmic pleasure; just as the sexuality, sexual organs, and orgasms of women are more diffuse than those of men, so is and should be their articulation.<sup>32</sup>

A similar concept of sexual difference is advanced by Hélène Cixous. In her earlier writings she speaks of two types of bisexuality: an ideal “vatic” type of bisexuality and bisexual writing that would replace the “classic” one, which promotes phallogocentrism:

Ovid’s Hermaphrodite, less bisexual than asexual, not made up of two genders but of two halves. Hence, a fantasy of unity . . . To this bisexuality that melts together and effaces . . . I oppose the *other bisexuality*, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogocentric Performing Theater, sets up his or her erotic universe . . . that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual.<sup>33</sup>

But it is for her concept of *écriture féminine* or women’s writing that Cixous is better known. She demolishes the possibility of a gender-neutral language; to pursue it would be to pursue an illusion and to ignore the hierarchical and phallogocentric nature of language that we have inherited. More effectively than neutrality, *écriture féminine* would reject the masculine ideals of logic, linearity, and coherence in favour of rhythm, sound, fluidity, and incompleteness. She emphasizes the need to accept the concept of sexual difference before women’s writing can be seen in its proper perspective, and she

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<sup>31</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), P. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), pp. 28, 77, 110-112.

<sup>33</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, “Sorties,” in *La Jeune Née* (1975), trans. *The Newly Born Woman* by Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 84-85.

exhorts the woman writer to “write the body” and to reject the phallocracy of the pen, replacing it with the “white ink” of her milk. Without restricting itself only to writing done by women *écriture féminine* would recognize the sexual difference between men and women. She has developed her theory of *écriture féminine* into a theory of “libidinal economies” and has, more recently, defined *écriture féminine* as “a writing said to be feminine” or “of a decipherable libidinal femininity which can be read in writing produced by a male or a female,” but she emphasizes the fact that the word “feminine” should be “put between 150 quotation marks to prevent it from being used in the mode of a ‘feminine woman,’ as in fashion magazines.”<sup>34</sup>

While these positions have sometimes been charged with perpetuating the essentialism of gender, with running the risk of being marginalized, and with perpetuating rather than transcending the stereotypes of femininity, it is clear that sexual difference hopes to inscribe the feminine only through dismantling the hierarchical oppositions that have made it inferior, and that its champions recognize that it is a viable but not a facile solution. Sexual difference must entail, as Irigaray puts it:

the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry and language: the creation of a new *poetics*...

A revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relationship between the subject and discourse, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. Everything, beginning with the way in which the subject has always been written in the masculine form, as *man*, even when it claimed to be universal or neutral.<sup>35</sup>

It is clear then that androgyny is not totally without value and has perhaps seemingly taken us a step closer to equity, but unfortunately it has not attacked the fundamental hierarchies that persist even in the last years of this millennium. Luce Irigaray’s prophetic pronouncement is that sexual difference could be our intellectual redemption: “sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our salvation if we thought it through.”<sup>36</sup> It is quite possible that for the remainder of this millennium and for the beginning of the next, sexual difference will displace essentialism and dismantle

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<sup>34</sup> Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 129-161. Conley’s book includes an appendix, “An Exchange with Hélène Cixous” (pp. 129-161), a conversation that took place in January 1982.

<sup>35</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> Irigaray, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

hierarchies, and will be a more legitimate alternative than androgyny in the dialectics of gender.

Nandita Batra  
English Department  
University of Puerto Rico  
Mayagüez, Puerto Rico 00681