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Anarchic alchemists: dissident androgyny in Anglo-American gothic fiction from Godwin to Melville

Leeuwen, E.J. van

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CHAPTER 3

ANDROGYNY: FROM ROMANTIC MISOGYNY TO ALCHEMICAL DISSIDENCE

Within the cultural schema of alchemy, mercury is the most significant symbol. Described variously, as the hermaphrodite, the androgyne, the quintessence, or fifth element, and even “the mother of all metals,” Mercury stands at the beginning and end of the circular alchemical process and synergistically dissolves all earthly binaries into a third category which is neither male nor female and simultaneously both (Abraham 124). This symbol has influenced esoteric spiritual subcultures as well as some feminist theories of androgyny. By the end of the 1970s, however, Mary Daly wrote that androgyny was one of those words: “which appeared to be adequate in the early seventies, which feminists later discovered to be false words.”¹ Daly, who used the term androgyny in a positive sense in her early work, polemically argued that the word androgyny was “misbegotten – conveying something like ‘John Travolta and Farrah Fawcett-Majors scotch-taped together,’” a fusion of bifurcated western gender stereotypes one might say (Daly xi). This definition has become the privileged interpretation of androgyny. It is necessary, therefore, to briefly discuss the initial feminist enthusiasm for androgyny and its eventual rejection by most feminist theorists, before turning to the various views on alchemical androgyny specifically and showing how it can still be used in a positive sense to construct a theory of gender liberation.

Theories of Androgyny: from Utopia to Misogyny

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf presents her version of the Coleridgian (and later Jungian) hypothesis that ideally the mind should be androgynous. Woolf asks “whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness?”² Woolf continues “to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man’s brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman’s brain the woman predominates over the man.” For Woolf, “the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating” (Woolf 147). By defining the union between the male and female principles as the *normal* state of the individual psyche, Woolf undermines the dominant gender ideology of her day, which polarized male and female behaviour into essential binary categories with unequal social statuses. This dissident theory of androgyny has been

¹ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) xi.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; London: Hogarth Press, 1974) 147.

used by a number of cultural critics in their analysis of androgyny in Western literature, most specifically by Carolyn G. Heilbrun in *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (1973). Since the late 1970s, however, androgyny has become a gender category increasingly rejected by feminists as a fruitful alternative to polarized male and female gender identities.

Woolf's theory of the androgynous mind, as expressed in *A Room of One's Own*, was not her only engagement with androgyny as a gender ideal. Earlier, in *Orlando* (1928), Woolf had constructed a narrative in which an immortal protagonist moves between female and male gender identity. While often discussed in connection to theories of androgyny, *Orlando*, in fact, is a novel about the social constructedness of gender identity. While Orlando changes sex half-way through the novel, he/ she is never truly androgynous, since his/ her identity is either male or female. As Julia van Gunsteren-Viersen explains, "in *Orlando*, Woolf could glance satirically at the position of women of different ages and make fun of masculine pedantry."³ In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf presents the reader with a much more radical anti-masculinist critique of the existent social order. In this work, Van Gunsteren-Viersen argues, Woolf is "pleading her cause and laying much stress on woman's many grievances, in a language which may be registered as that of a feminist" (Viersen 244). Woolf's theory of the union of the male and female principle in the creative mind, as expressed in *Room of One's Own*, is not merely an androgynous ideal, it is a theory of creativity that allows also for the expression of a genuine critique of an ideology of gender polarization. While Woolf's writings have been superseded within academic feminism by theories of radical separatism (Daly), social constructivism (Bem) and post-structuralism (Butler), they can be fruitfully used to explain that androgyny has the potential to be interpreted as both utopian and misogynist, depending from which angle it is approached and in which cultural context it is discussed.

According to A.J.L. Busst the image of the androgyne in French culture, during the first half of the nineteenth century, was informed by the socio-political utopianism that initially followed the French Revolution and which was later articulated by utopian social philosophers such as Charles Fourier. In this context, Busst explains, androgyny is predominantly a positive image, one that

symbolized confidence in the future, if discontent with the present, and continuous progress towards ideal, absolute perfection. It symbolised above all human solidarity, the brotherhood of man, the unity and continuity of generations and civilizations; and consequently charity, the sense of social justice, sympathy for the downtrodden, for all those who are oppressed, whether women or men. It represented too the original and fundamental goodness and purity of mankind, the transitoriness of sin and of all forms of evil, individual or social; and if not always sufficiently religious, in the accepted sense of the term, to symbolize the future restoration of a transfigured mankind to the presence of God, it nevertheless constantly

³ Julia van Gunsteren-Viersen, "The Marriage of 'he' and 'she': Virginia Woolf's Androgynous Theory," *DQR* 6:3 (1976): 235.

represented man's arrival in some sort of Paradise, sometimes even the Paradise of universal industrialization or absolute social equality.⁴

Much of the positive nature of androgyny in the early nineteenth century, Busst explains, comes from the widespread adoption by utopian thinkers of philosophies that expressed the androgynous nature of primal man, such as the orphic legends, Gnostic mysticism, and hermetic philosophy. According to these utopians, a union with nature is a state to which mankind has been continually striving to return, ever since the fall, but which patriarchal Christian doctrine and scientific rationalism have made a difficult route to follow.

Britain and America were of course not immune to the social utopianism of French culture, or the general reformist temper of the age. The work of Fourier, as presented in Albert Brisbane's *Social Destiny of Man* (1840), in fact, would stand at the basis of much American radicalism in the antebellum period. M.H. Abrams has explained that at the same time British culture expressed a similar utopianism through Romanticism, which adopted a proto-Marxian philosophy in which

man, who was once well, is now ill, and...[T]he core of the modern malaise lies in the fragmentation, dissociation, estrangement, or (in the most highly charged of these parallel terms) "alienation." The individual (so runs the familiar analysis) has become radically split in three main aspects. He is divided within himself, he is divided from other men, and he is divided from his environment; his only hope for recovery (for those writers who hold out hope) is to find the way to a reintegration which will restore his unity with himself, his community with his fellow men, and his companionability with an alien and hostile outer world.⁵

This romantic philosophy is also analogous to that of the natural philosophers of old. The myth of androgyny in British Romanticism, within the context of Abrams' interpretation of the romantic ideology, has the potential to function as a symbol for the utopian reintegration of mankind with itself, society and nature. Androgyny in this light is not just a fantasy of ultimate male empowerment, but a philosophical and social utopian ideal.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun was the first feminist scholar to write a literary history of the concept androgyny as a metaphor for gender liberation. She applied the term as a socio-political concept to the study of western culture and presented androgyny as a hidden gender ideal running like an underground river from its source: the myth of the androgyne in Plato's *Symposium*, past the "re-entry of the 'feminine' principle as a civilizing force in medieval literature," through Shakespeare, who was "as devoted to the androgynous ideal as anyone who has ever written," and into the "Victorian androgynous novel" (*Wuthering Heights*). Heilbrun's idealism is anchored in the social context in which she wrote. She may well have been inspired by the psychological theories of Sandra Bem developed in the early

⁴ A.J.L. Busst, "The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth-Century" in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1967) 38.

⁵ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971; New York: Norton, 1972) 145.

1970s. Bem's experiments were "designed to locate masculinity and femininity in the discourse of the culture rather than in the personality of the individual" (Bem 120-1). Heilbrun argues that "those youths so often seen almost anywhere in the world – their long hair and costumes making uneasy, in both senses of the word, the immediate identification of gender, suggest a new homage to androgyny."⁶ For Heilbrun, who echoes the utopian gender theories of the counter-culture, androgyny is a physical fact of life that highlights the performative nature of gender identity and symbolizes sexual emancipation.⁷

From the classic western literature she investigates, Heilbrun constructs a structural androgynous principle. She argues, "it is the more important to perceive that it is in those works where the roles of the male and female protagonist can be reversed without appearing ludicrous or perverted that the androgynous ideal is present" (Heilbrun 10). Unfortunately, her theory of androgyny, while it seemingly urges for a more equal distribution of specific social roles, is undermined by its focus on the role-reversal of fictional characters. This trope of gender-role-reversal in fictional characters imprisons the androgynous ideal within the social structures these fictions represent. As such it actually reinforces the ideologically polarized gender roles that play such an important part in the construction of individual identity. In Heilbrun's scheme, male and female gender roles are offered up for exchange, not for fusion or eradication. Heilbrun's book remains a pioneering study that campaigns for the necessity to "free ourselves from the prison of gender and, before it is too late, deliver the world from the almost exclusive control of the masculine impulse" (Heilbrun xiv). It suffers, however, from a focus on the potential of role reversal in specific works of literature and tropes such as opposite-sex twins in which such role-reversal becomes apparent, but in which gender status is never questioned.

Bram Dijkstra takes a more political approach and argues that the proliferation of the androgyne in late nineteenth-century culture was "the culmination of a slowly developing, ideologically based, counteroffensive among artists against the economic motivations behind the sexual stereotypes which had become established in the social environment with the rise of bourgeois industrial society."⁸ Dijkstra poignantly highlights the presence of androgyny not in canonical literature, but in the popular literature of the Romantic and Victorian period, especially the gothic novel. He argues that authors such as M.G. Lewis and Charles Nodier "came to see the notion of an androgynous world as a more natural alternative to the universe of absolute opposites proposed by the middle classes" (in this he echoes the Godwinian critique of gendered economics, which will be discussed in chapter four). Foreshadowing Gayle Rubin's and Eve Sedgwick's theories of women as exchange commodities between men, Dijkstra argues that "with the rise of capitalism, the function of sex was becoming more and more a matter of economics" (Dijkstra 63). According to Dijkstra, the material basis for sexual difference under capitalism became increasingly apparent and "society could conveniently shape the relationship of man to woman as one of owner to thing owned" (Dijkstra 64). A pure

⁶ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Towards Androgyny* (New York: Harper Collophon Books, 1974) xii.

⁷ See Theodore and Betty Roszak, eds., *Masculine/Feminine: Readings in Sexual Mythology and the Liberation of Women* (New York: Harper, 1969).

⁸ Bram Dijkstra, "The Androgyne in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art," *Comparative Literature* 26 (1974): 62.

woman became the ultimate commodity, embodying the human values that the commercial market place could not incorporate into its system. In fact, the two became inextricably linked, as the commercial man bought his salvation through marriage. As woman became property and man owner, androgyny became dissident because “it would, in effect, destroy the structure of polarities, the endless pattern of ‘either-or’ configurations, which is the motive force behind the property system” (Dijkstra 68). Dijkstra explains, “these artists’ adherence to variously developed concepts of the androgynous nature of the soul of man” was not a spiritual ideal, but “became the affirmation of a balanced personal identity beyond the artificial contrasts created by industrialized bourgeois society to make its system of dominance and submission, struggle and the externalisation of selfhood, a self-perpetuating one” (Dijkstra 63). Significantly, Dijkstra argues, it is in gothic fiction that the human psyche’s attempt at returning to an androgynous state finds its clearest expression, even if it is always struggling under pressure of the socio-economic forces that rely on strict binary principles for their validation.

William Patrick Day counters Dijkstra’s argument about gothic fiction as the androgynous genre, par excellence. He writes that “the Gothic fantasy ...dramatizes both the necessity and the hopelessness of androgyny.”⁹ Dijkstra’s analysis has shown, however, that the gothic is significant in highlighting the material struggle between the sexes. According to Dijkstra, mental androgyny materialises in the gothic as “the central symbol of revolt” against “the society of exchange values and the polar oppositions which the bourgeoisie had fostered,” and as such can be activated in a more utopian project of reform (Dijkstra 73). While he discussed Lewis’s *The Monk* at some length, he also singled out the work of Poe as a precise expression of this theme.

Since the late 1970s, however, androgyny has become an increasingly problematic term with regards to gender politics and its relation to literary criticism. These views need to be addressed critically before moving on to the theory of dissident androgyny in the schema of alchemy. In an essay on androgyny in science fiction literature Pamela J. Annas points out one reason for interpreting androgyny as misogyny. She writes: “for women writers the concept of androgyny itself has a problematical history, since most of its proponents have been male.”¹⁰ This is also a problem in Woolf’s theory of androgyny. Woolf incorporates the feminist critique that androgyny is a gender concept constructed by men and for men because she identifies only canonical male authors as individuals who possess an androgynous mind. In fact, Woolf undermines her own androgynous idealism by expressing her frustration at the inadequacy of these men to fully integrate their androgynous mind into a progressive emancipatory social practice. Even though Coleridge speaks of the androgynous nature of genius, Woolf writes, “he did not mean...that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation.” Of the Bard, she writes, “it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women” (Woolf 148). Even though Woolf recognizes that “it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-

⁹ William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 132.

¹⁰ Pamela J. Annas, “New Worlds – New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies* 15/ 2 (July 1978), 21 July 2004 <www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/15/annas15art.htm>

womanly,” her version of mental androgyny is undermined by its relegation into a purely metaphysical realm in which it can have no effect on the social statuses of men and women within society at large (Woolf 157). The apparent ineffectiveness of Woolf’s androgynous ideal allowed Elaine Showalter to write in a rather cynical tone: “androgyny was the myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition.”¹¹

An historical factor that weakens this negative interpretation of androgyny, however, is that within western cultural history, up to and including much of the twentieth century, men have been the articulators of most social, political, scientific or philosophical theories. Women before Woolf did not often express an enthusiasm for androgyny because the customs of their culture had not made it possible for them to do so in a recognised fashion. It is no coincidence that an individual like Virginia Woolf became the first major female theorist of androgyny. Her cultural background – as a member of the Bloomsbury group of intellectuals – made it possible for her to write and publish and raise a voice in the culture of her time. It can be argued that by using the concept of androgyny in her feminist writings, Woolf hijacked it from its masculine privilege and made it available for re-appropriation in a new context. The science fiction and fantasy author Ursula Le Guin, in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), in some ways also reappropriated androgyny as a utopian gender theory. Since the 1970s women in various academic contexts have engaged positively as well as critically with the term. This shows that androgyny is not entirely a concept created by men for men. Like other cultural concepts, it is open for redefinition, re-appropriation, and re-use in various cultural and theoretical contexts.

In her book *Androgyny, the Denial of Difference* (1992), Kari Weil gives another reason to view androgyny as a form of misogyny. She explains that as early in 1973 certain speakers at a special forum on androgyny argued “that androgyny is essentially a masculine ideal and one inappropriate for women wishing to advance themselves or to promote the new discipline of women’s studies in the academy.”¹² Barbara Gelpi and Cynthia Secor argued that “androgynes are always feminised men, never masculine women.” Consequently, “within the androgynous tradition, even women are brought to see their most glorified image as that of man.” Gelpi’s and Secor’s argument is a hasty generalisation to say the least. The classical myth of the Amazons is just one famous counter example. Lady Macbeth is another literary case in point. Her traditionally masculine traits are never glorified as virtues, but rather castigated as vices. Geertje Mak has recently written a PhD thesis on the representation of manly women in nineteenth-century western culture.¹³ The 1920s saw the rise of the flapper, described by Billie Newman as “the female as androgyne, a figure characterised as sexless but libidinous; infantile but precocious; self-sufficient but demographically, economically and socially superfluous; an emblem of modern times yet, at the same time, an incarnation of the eternal Eve.”¹⁴ A recent product of contemporary pulp-horror culture, John Carpenter’s *Ghosts of Mars* (2001) utilizes the concept of the

¹¹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 264.

¹² Kari Weil, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1992) 151.

¹³ Geertje Mak, *Mannelijke Vrouwen: Over Grenzen van de Sekse in de Negentiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1997).

¹⁴ Billie Newman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988) 1.

female androgyne and the idea of a future matriarchy to investigate alternative social gender roles. A close analysis of mythic, canonical as well as popular Western culture will show the presence of a wide variety of androgynous women as well as men. Androgyny's potential as a tool for misogyny cannot therefore be attributed to a one-sided representation of the androgyne as by definition always a feminised man.

Another argument often made in defining androgyny as a misogynist gender identity, Weil explains, concerns its effect on sexuality. Weil argues that the myth of androgyny "is not only sexist but heterosexist, focusing on the complementarity of genital differences and promoting the oppressive institution of marriage" (Weil 151). Mary Anne Warren countered this specific critique as early as 1980. She states that "far from implying that homosexual relationships are in some way inferior, androgynism," as she calls it, "undermines one of the primary rationales for heterosexuality – i.e., the notion that a viable sexual relationship requires that the parties be of different sexes in order that the 'masculine' virtues of the one may complement the 'feminine' virtues of the other."¹⁵ What the juxtaposition of Weil and Warren's argument shows is that androgyny does not promote a fixed sexual politics. Instead, like all signifiers, it relies on a specific ideological viewpoint and cultural context to give it its meaning.

Androgyny has been most widely discussed in literary criticism within the context of Romanticism. Warren Stevenson argues that "psychic androgyny [is] the only one worth writing about."¹⁶ Since this is the type of androgyny dominant in late-eighteenth, early-nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture, it is worth spending greater critical attention on it. Dianne Long Hoeveler argues that this form of Romantic androgyny, a merger of the masculine and feminine psychic principles, is in fact a "radical metaphoric tradition of literary absorption/ cannibalisation" of women by male poets.¹⁷ Hoeveler utilizes the concept of *the Other* to point out how "male poets self-consciously employed the feminine as 'Other' and as an alternative source of value in order to engage in a fictional completion of their own psyches" (Hoeveler, *Androgyny* xiv). Feminists have justly argued that within the dominant androcentric social structure woman functions as *the Other*, as object against which the masculine subject defines itself and as that human quality which the masculine psyche needs to incorporate into itself to become whole. According to Hoeveler,

there can be no denying the fact that the English Romantic poets adhered to...an ideology of sexual and sexist polarization, and that their use of androgyny as a psychic goal was a poetic technique designed to merge the fictional masculine and feminine in one new and redeemed being – the androgynous male poet (Hoeveler, *Androgyny* xv).

In Romantic androgyny, the eternal feminine in the mind of the poet became a muse, a facilitator of masculine art, which in turn repressed and ultimately erased its feminine

¹⁵ Mary Anne Warren "Is Androgyny the Answer to Sexual Stereotyping?," in *Femininity, Masculinity, and Androgyny, a Modern Philosophical Discussion*, ed. Mary Vetterling-Bruggin (Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1982) 180.

¹⁶ Warren Stevenson, *Romanticism and the Androgynous Sublime* (London: Associated UPs, 1996) 10.

¹⁷ Diane Long Hoeveler, *Romantic Androgyny* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1990) xiv.

origins, “the Romantics cannibalistically consumed these female characters, shaped them into ideal alter egos, and most of the time destroyed them by the conclusion of the poem” (Hoeveler, *Androgyny* 9). Hoeveler’s stress on the Romantic poet’s exertion of control over his poetic subject, says more about Hoeveler’s interpretation of how the male Romantic poets used a mental concept of androgyny than about androgyny itself. Romantic androgyny as gender cannibalization returns the concept to a purely metaphysical realm, an ideal of complementarity that is unrealisable in practice because the dominant gender ideology and the language through which this was expressed excluded the possibility of unifying male and female principles. As such it becomes “an ideal that speaks on the surface of love, unity, social balance and reconciliation of the sexes,” while simultaneously it hid “a stronger voice of conflict and tension about the irreconcilable divisions between man and woman, mind and matter, culture and nature (Hoeveler, *Androgyny* 23).

Hoeveler does acknowledge that “the male Romantic poets envisioned an ideal political realm.” According to her, however, this ideal can never be realised because “the role and function of women in this utopia were never clearly defined.” This is a somewhat paradoxical statement because it has been exactly this rigid categorisation of masculinity and femininity into complementary but separate practical social roles that has ensured the lower socio-political status of women. In this light, a lack of definition of gender roles can have a liberatory effect. According to Hoeveler, however, the lack of a definition of an actual material role for women results from the fact that within the romantic androgynous ideology “woman was not viewed as an equal partner in ‘real’ social, economic, and political reform.” Instead, she argues, “her identity as a spiritual essence and an ‘ideal’ internal component of the male psyche was too strong and persistent to allow the ‘real’ to interfere with the poetic ‘ideal,’ manifested in the poetic language we recognize as ideology” (Hoeveler, *Androgyny* 266). Romantic androgyny seems to be founded on a model of conflict. Within a model of conflict, different minds, ideas, characters, cultures, or genders for that matter, are perceived as inherently incompatible, contradictory even. When such opposites clash a conflict breaks out that is not solvable by means of compromise or mutual adaptation. It comes to an end only through the victory of the one over the other – Hoeveler’s concept of cannibalisation. Because Romantic androgyny, as a form of cannibalisation, excludes the possibility of mutual recognition and cooperation, it buttresses a patriarchy equally reliant on fixed binaries and methods of exclusion.

Alchemy, significantly, is founded on a model of symbiosis, rather than conflict. Within a symbiotic model, opposites are different, alien, but not by definition mutually exclusive. When opposites clash, what follows in this case is a period of struggle, conflict even, in which both opposites are modified, modify each other, until both are fully fluid, malleable and open to change. This brings about a stage of possible symbiosis, where two initially opposing forces form a new force that is more vital than both the two halves of which it is composed. Within the context of gender identity, alchemical androgyny, as will be explained below, is a form of dissident utopian idealism; Utopian because it seeks to foreground concepts such as synergy, cooperation and inclusiveness; Dissident because it offers an alternative to the dominant patriarchal order, founded on a model of conflict in

which binary categories are at best complementary, but mostly mutually exclusive, and in which concepts defined as masculine are inherently privileged.

Alchemical Androgyny: from Misogyny to Dissidence

In her search for the feminine face of science, Linda Jean Shepherd found in the cultural schema of alchemy an outlook that values the feminine as an active part in science (see Shepherd 29-32). Shepherd attended Stephan A. Hoeller's lectures on alchemy. She learnt about the historically based oppositional position of alchemy and how this practice has been connected to an androgynous ideal. Not only Gnostic scholars recognise this connection between alchemy and a positive form of androgyny. Roszak and Merchant underscore Shepherd's belief in the value of the schema of alchemy as a metaphorical system that allows its user to view culture through an anti-androcentric critical lens. In various strands of thought, the alchemical androgynous ideal lives on as a powerful gender symbol discussed in light of both repression and freedom. The following section continues this argument in more detail, paying attention to three major symbols in alchemy, the figure of Mercurius (the androgyne, fifth element, quintessence), the Uroboros (the tail-eating serpent) and the concept of the Chemical Wedding (the union of masculine and feminine principles in the alchemical experiment), as metaphorical vehicles that have the potential to articulate a dissident androgyny that challenges the hegemony of gender polarization.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) has been dubbed the hero of modern scientific rationalism, the founder of empirical scientific investigation into an objectified natural world.¹⁸ Merchant reads his work through a feminist lens, however, and explains that, he "transformed the magus from nature's servant to its exploiter, and nature from teacher to slave," (Merchant, *Death* 169). While Bacon's work has been of paramount importance in developing modern scientific practice, Merchant explains that "from the perspective of nature, women, and the lower orders of society emerges a less favorable image of Bacon" (Merchant, *Death* 164-165). From an analysis of Bacon's metaphorical language, Merchant concludes that Bacon "treats nature as a female to be tortured through mechanical inventions" which "strongly suggests the interrogations of the witch trials and the mechanical devices used to torture witches" (Merchant, *Death* 168).¹⁹ Bacon's time was indeed characterised by a witch-hunt craze, which suggests that the rise of scientific rationalism was paired with the marginalisation, even criminalisation of magic in society, projected onto the *Other* in society: women. Bengt Ankerloo explains that "the overwhelming majority of those convicted and punished for witchcraft were women" and although the results of his research kept him from wholly affirming the feminist conclusion

¹⁸ It is important to note that science within the context of this argument is approached as an institution in the way that Roszak approaches it in his book *The Gendered Atom* (Foxhole: Green Books, 2000). Roszak explains that when speaking of a dominant masculine, scientific rationalism, science is approached as a "collective identity, meaning that which can be assessed by its methods, guiding paradigms, protocols, and underlying presumptions...science as an institution" (Roszak, *Atom* 18).

¹⁹ Roszak points out that Francis Bacon was not the only scientist who employed sexual imagery when describing the scientist's method of inquiry into nature. Robert Boyle, Roszak shows, equally believed that "the task of the natural philosopher...is to 'probe,' 'penetrate,' and 'pierce,' nature in all her 'mysterious,' 'secret,' and 'intimate recesses'" (Roszak, *Atom* 101)

that this was caused by “the vicious response of a patriarchy in crisis,” he did acknowledge that a growing tension between traditional masculine authority and an increasingly autonomous femininity played its part.²⁰ Interestingly, while magic had been an affair for both sexes up to that time – witches, natural philosophers and students of the occult all playing their part in constructing a culture of magic – it was increasingly deemed the sole province of women. This was understandable from the viewpoint of the rational scientist whose attempt to control an unruly (female) nature was projected onto gendered social relations, in which unruliness became associated with femininity.

Importantly, in Bacon’s time a worldview alternative to Bacon’s ideas was still residually present. Merchant explains that “the natural magician saw himself as operating within the organic order of nature – he was a manipulator of parts within that system, bringing down the heavenly powers to the earthly shrine.” However, the natural magician, or alchemist, from Bacon’s time onward, has become a marginal, even criminal, and clearly feminised individual. Merchant writes that those who adhered to the old magical science of the alchemists also adhered to a dissident gender ideology. For Merchant, alchemy undermines the androcentrism that informs Baconian scientific rationalism:

in alchemy, permeated by male-female dualism, the hermaphrodite Mercurius symbolized the androgynous unity of opposites. The unification of male and female principles, represented by the alchemical marriage of the sun and the moon and by the union of the male mineral agent mercury and the female material prima (prime matter), resulted in the male-female hermaphrodite (Merchant, *Death* 19).

The mechanistic metaphors of science that would replace the organic worldview, Merchant argues, “would reject this radical dialectical vision of change as internal to the cosmos, the body, and the body politic, by substituting external forces and a new set of cosmic and social hierarchies for the old” (Merchant, *Death* 117). Active mother earth, in the writings of Bacon and the Royal Society became a passive female nature, dissected and transformed by the male scientist for the benefit of the economy of the state that he represented.

Evelyn Fox Keller further expands and refines Merchant’s thesis. She recognizes that even though Bacon still used the metaphor of marriage to describe the scientist’s relationship to nature, this marriage became a union between scientist and God alone not male and female generative principles. Keller explains that “when nature becomes divine, not only does ‘she’ become ‘he,’ but by implication...the scientific mind becomes more nearly female.”²¹ Keller shows that in Bacon’s writing the scientist is feminised in his relation to God so that “cleansed of contamination, the mind can be impregnated by God and, in the act, virilized: made potent and capable of generating virile offspring in its union with Nature” (Keller 38). Consequently, “nature becomes indubitably female: the object of actions” (Keller 39). The scientist becomes the patriarch. Keller’s investigations into the

²⁰ Bengt Ankerloo, Stuart Clark and William Monter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 4: The Period of the Witch Trials* (London: The Athlone Press, 2002) 70.

²¹ Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 37.

metaphors of science, like Merchant's, show that the rise into dominance of the Baconian scientific viewpoint resulted in the marginalisation of natural philosophy and alchemy, which eventually became an oppositional scientific discourse:

In the hermetic tradition, material nature was suffused with spirit; its understanding accordingly required the joint and integrated effort of heart, hand, and mind. By contrast, the mechanical philosophers sought to divorce matter from spirit, and hand and mind from heart (Keller 44).

Keller explains that this philosophical difference was underscored by a marked difference in gender ideology: one based on fusion, the other on polarization. The mechanical scientist – the subject – foreshadowing the role of the husband in domesticity, sought to tame and dominate nature – the object – to which he was married in his research. The relationship became one of subject and object. “By contrast,” Keller argues, “the root image of the alchemists was coition, the conjunction of mind and matter, the merging of male and female.” Echoing Merchant, Keller finds that this philosophical opposition expresses itself symbolically: “as Bacon’s metaphoric ideal was the virile superman, the alchemist’s ideal was the hermaphrodite.” Instead of a relationship between subject and object, two subjects come together actively to produce a higher form. The symbolism of the scientific rhetoric informs the ideological gendered power matrix: “whereas Bacon sought domination, the alchemists asserted the necessity of allegorical, of not actual, cooperation between male and female” (Keller 48). Her interpretation foreshadows Marshall’s idea of the male/ female cooperation in the practice of alchemy.

Roszak’s eco-psychology is a recent academic expression of the alchemical worldview that Merchant and Keller invoke in their feminist interpretations of the gender politics of science. It stands in similar opposition to scientific rationalism and is equally characterized by a reappraisal of the schema of alchemy as a fruitful and more benevolent and egalitarian scientific paradigm. Roszak argues that since the scientific revolution “for us the ‘macrocosm’ has become the province of the exact sciences” and, as a consequence, “‘microcosm,’ the sphere of the mind, soul, emotion, means psychology,” the science of the mind one could argue. Roszak seconds Merchant’s and Keller’s anti-Baconian thesis:

for the better part of two hundred years, keeping these two realms [macrocosm and microcosm] divorced and not even on speaking terms had been the signal endeavor of rational thought and sound science. Matter to one side, mind to the other. *Out there*, the objective; *in here*, the subjective.

Roszak turns to alchemy because in this ancient cultural schema he found a utopian endeavour that is analogous to his own attempt, in his book, to “reconnect the two realms of being, big and little, high and low, outer and inner” (Roszak, *Voice* 16). Like the New Alchemists in the late 1960s and 1970s and Merchant and Keller in the 1980s, Roszak identifies enlightened scientific rationalism with a patriarchal ego and alchemy with an androgynous ecological vision. Echoing Marcuse, his compatriot theorist of the counter-

cultural movement in the 1960s, Roszak believes that contemporary ills are caused by the repressive nature of a male dominant civilization. Roszak draws further attention to the link between ecological politics and feminism – he even foreshadows Judith Lorber’s gender theory (discussed in the introduction) – when he concludes: “there will be no peace in the battle of the sexes and no ecological sanity until we finally have done with the nonsense of sorting human virtues into masculine and feminine bins” (Roszak, *Voice* 243).

Not all science and gender theorists consider the schema of alchemy as a source for dissidence in the way that Merchant, Keller and Roszak do. Rosi Braidotti criticizes alchemy as “a reduction ad absurdum of the male fantasy of self-reproduction,” the ultimate expression of “womb envy.”²² Braidotti analyses the alchemical legend of the homunculus, the human microcosm who comes to life in the alchemical vessel. From her description of this myth – for which she curiously lists no sources – Braidotti comes to the conclusion that “the test-tube babies of today mark the long-term triumph of the alchemists’ dream of dominating nature through their self-inseminating masturbatory practices” (Braidotti 88). While much of Braidotti’s book is illuminating to the student of gender issues in western culture, her instant rejection of the schema of alchemy as a misogynist tool is too hasty and based on too narrow an interpretation of the vast, multi-cultural, esoteric and often paradoxical legends that make up the schema of alchemy, which have their ontology as much in folklore as in fact, in art as in science.

Lyndy Abraham acknowledges that “alchemists believed that it was possible to create little creatures in the image of man by artificial means in the womb of the alembic,” but showed also that this is not always a masculine child. She wrote that in the Rosicrucian manifesto, *The Chemical Wedding*, “Christian Rosenkreutz takes part in the making of the king and queen homunculi” (Abraham 102). The most well-known recent representation of the male and female homunculi probably is that in James Whale’s film *Bride of Frankenstein* (1932). It is in fact impossible to confine the schema of alchemy to a single unified myth, which is what has made it such a potent and long-lasting cultural schema utilized in various ways for various purposes by gothic novelists, Jungian psychologists, feminist theorists, Gnostic scholars and eco-philosophers.

Nancy Tuana has published a more balanced critique of alchemy as a vessel for a positive androgynous ideal. Her arguments, therefore, need to be given more precise critical attention. Her essay is a corrective of Merchant and Keller’s enthusiasm for alchemy and shows that it cannot be taken for granted as a utopian system invoking an androgynous gender ideal, useful to all feminists in their struggles against the dominant androcentric patriarchal order. Tuana agrees with the spirit of Merchant’s and Keller’s enterprise. Unlike Braidotti, she concedes that “there are, from a feminist perspective, some attractive aspects of alchemy” and that “alchemists indeed respected nature at least to the extent that they believed that they could learn from following its guide.”²³ Her thesis is that the feminist potential in alchemy is actually false when the practice of alchemy is looked at in more detail. The problem with Tuana’s arguments, however, is that while she acknowledged that

²² Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 87.

²³ Nancy Tuana, “The Unhappy Marriage of Alchemy and Feminism,” in *Prairie Home Philosophy* (Moorhead State UP, 1987) 120.

“alchemy was a secret art, often passed on orally,” she goes on to write about it as a scientific practice rather than a cultural myth (Tuana, *Unhappy* 111). Tuana identifies three distinct stages in alchemy, nigredo, albedo and rubedo, and identifies this as “*the* alchemical process,” leading to a specific goal, which is apparently practiced by “*the* alchemists,” who either “attempted,” or “insisted that,” or “believed,” or “thus view” their experiment in the way she describes. This leads Tuana to acknowledge the privileged reading of the myth as a masculine will to power and erasure of the feminine principle. Unsurprisingly, she sees “*the* marriage metaphor of the alchemists” as “a marriage in which the female will literally be destroyed” (Tuana, *Unhappy* 115; my emphasis).

In her analysis of the marriage metaphor of alchemy, Tuana identifies rightly that the masculine principle Sol, the sun king, is identified with dryness and heat and is a fixed principle in the experiment “embodied in sulphur” and that Luna, the moon queen, is cold and moist and volatile and “embodied in the purified form of mercury” (Tuana, *Unhappy* 112). Other commentators on the alchemical experiment, however, like Hoeller, argue that Luna is embodied in salt, that, the partnership is between salt and sulphur that can be unified only by using a purified form of mercury. Hoeller suggests,

the alchemical paradigm...envision[s] two polar opposites (often called ‘king and queen,’ ‘sun and moon,’ ‘sulphur and salt’) emerging from the mass of prime matter. The creative and intricate interaction of these opposites eventually brings forth the end result of the alchemical process: the Stone of the Philosophers. The facilitator of this process is a third power, the alchemical mercury, the medium of the conjunction, without which the final phase of transformation could not take place (Hoeller 223).

Peter Marshall’s research on alchemy has confused the situation further. He studied more alchemical texts than any of the above scholars and agrees with Tuana that Sol and Luna are often used as symbols for alchemical Sulphur and Mercury; but he also agrees with Hoeller. He writes that actually some alchemists represent Sol and Luna as symbols for Gold and Silver, which only with the addition of hermaphroditic Mercury, the simultaneously volatile and fixed substance, can be transmuted into the philosophical gold. In the second option, alchemy is characterized as a synergistic transformation of imperfect binary principles into a single substance being in androgynous perfection. A modern alchemist, Marshall writes, divided the three principles up into male sulphur and female mercury, which is the “spirit of things...the key to alchemy,” and salt, the matrix (Marshall, *Stone* 448). In this division the feminine principle becomes the most important principle. The inconsistencies in alchemical theory presented by Marshall in his exhaustive study of alchemical writing, practice and legend are proof of what Patrick Harpur calls the existence of a “mass of contradictions in the recipes” of alchemy.²⁴ Marshall’s book shows that abundant evidence can be found to underscore Tuana’s interpretation of alchemy as well as Merchant’s and Keller’s, Hoeller’s, or Roszak’s, depending on which tradition of alchemy one focuses. The one thing that all these theories have in common, significantly, is the

²⁴ Patrick Harpur, *The Philosopher’s Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination* (London: Penguin, 2002) 146.

dissolution of gendered polarized opposites into a third ever-fluid multi-gendered symbol, variously known as Mercurius, the stone, the quintessence, the hermaphrodite or androgynous principle, neither male nor female and simultaneously both.

Another argument Tuana's offers against alchemy as cultural schema harbouring androgynous idealism is the fact that within the three-stage alchemical process "the female stage, the albedo, is a stage of lower imperfection" and that the red stage, the rubedo, symbolized the masculine victory over the feminine (Tuana, *Unhappy* 113). For Tuana, alchemy is not based on a model of symbiosis, but conflict. However, the many books that attempt to explain alchemy show that some texts present the experiment as a five-, seven- or twelve-stage process, in which not always the red king stage is the desired end product, but the preliminary stage in a circular motion toward eternal perfection. The various colour-coded stages are almost never fixed results in themselves, but represent processes through which the experiment moves, leading towards no eventual goal, because the goal is simultaneously the beginning of a new experiment.

The alchemical experiment is pictured by its defenders as a never-ending spiral process of refinement. It is this sense of upward movement that simultaneously means also a return to earlier stages – a vision of progress that in looking forward is always simultaneously conscious of the past, that attracted Merchant, Keller and Roszak to alchemy as a metaphorical system that could bring about equality between men and women, as well as mankind in general and in mankind's relationship with earth.

Abraham's *Dictionary of Alchemical Symbolism* is probably the most thoroughly researched and complete guide to alchemical symbolism around. Abraham points out that alchemical gender symbolism is characterised by the fusion of the masculine Sun/ King/ Sulphur and feminine Moon/ Queen/ Mercury. Merchant and Keller emphasise the marriage stage as the most significant utopian moment in the experiment in which male and female are deemed equally important. Tuana distrusts this stage because, according to her, the ultimate goal is the victory of the male principle over the female. Abraham is more nuanced in her discussion of this process. She emphasises that, in fact, "alchemy is based on the Hermetic view that man had become divided within himself, separated into two sexes, at the fall in the garden of Eden and could only regain his integral Adamic state when the opposing forces within him were reconciled" (Abraham 37). What is significant here is that man's ideal state is seen as un-sexed, and thus, un-gendered existence. The perfection of matter, in opposition to what Tuana suggests, is not a victory of masculine forces over the feminine. It is in essence the erasure of the very gender system that was brought about after the fall within the dominant patriarchal Christian myth. As such it challenges traditional patriarchal authority. This is part of what made alchemy a heretical philosophy from the Catholic Church's viewpoint, during the age of the inquisition, leading to the imprisonment and execution of several notable alchemical scholars of the age.

According to Abraham "metaphysically, the chemical wedding is the perfect union of creative will or power (male) with wisdom (female) to produce pure love (the child, the stone)" (Abraham 37). Echoing Merchant and Keller, Abraham argues that "alchemists were ultimately concerned with the union of substances, the reconciliation of opposites," that is, not the domination of the one over the other (Abraham 35). From this viewpoint,

the feminine albedo stage is primary and equally important to the masculine rubedo stage. It is the metaphorical marriage between the two stages that produces the philosopher's stone, which allows the experiment to be repeated in turn. Significant is not the end result (which is a significant stage in the experimental process within scientific rationalist thought) but the infinite spiralling character the experiment, of which the end is defined equally as a new beginning. In fact, within this alchemical system of thought, there is no end to the experiment – a final conclusion can never be drawn – it is a never-ending process, an eternal movement towards greater perfection (Godwin echoed this idea in *Political Justice* and so would Clifford Pyncheon in Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*.²⁵

The Uroboros, the tail-eating serpent, is a significant alchemical symbol because, as Abraham explains, it represents “the circular nature of the transformative process” (Abraham 207). The centrality of the concept of infinite cyclicity should not be forgotten. It is this sense of infinitely repeated cycles that makes alchemy such a fruitful alternative to more linear, result oriented thinking within the ideology of scientific rationalism.²⁶ It manages to erase the hierarchical structure of the experiment. In alchemy, in which the end is also the beginning, there is a clear goal, the attainment of the philosopher's stone, but no clear end, since all stages are merely processes in a never ending upward spiral. The creation of the philosopher's stone is merely the beginning of a new cycle. Importantly it is this myth of the Uroboros within the cultural schema of alchemy, as metaphor for the infinite return of the stage of the chemical wedding, that has survived through the ages, not the nitty-gritty details of specific alchemical texts and the colour-coded stages of the experiment that Tuana uses to counter Merchant's and Keller's argument.

Helen Haste draws attention to the radical potential invested in the introduction of “the metaphor of cyclicity” in a culture dominated by androcentric polarized binary and

²⁵ In certain ways alchemical science foreshadows chaos theory, a scientific viewpoint that was developed in the 1960s and 1970s as an alternative to classical scientific rationalism. In the prologue to *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987), James Gleick describes how one of the early chaos theorists, Mitchell Feigenbaum, was considered somewhat of a mad scientist by his colleagues. Significantly, Feigenbaum stood out because “as willing as he was to do impromptu magic...he did not seem interested in devoting his own research to any problem that might pay off” (Gleick 2). Feigenbaum seemed uninterested in publishing his work and “thought about” his theories concerning chaos “quietly and unproductively” (Gleick, 3). Gleick explains that “where chaos begins classical science ends.” Chaos theorists are interested exactly in studying what according to classical science are “monstrosities” (Gleick 3). Where classical science seeks to explain how things are and to systematise in an orderly fashion the way the world works, chaos theorists study the processes at work in the natural world. Within the world of chaos theory, the ordered mechanical universe is transformed into world of continual chaotic flux (see Gleick 5). Roszak explains that “Chaos Theory had to wait until the gender bias of modern science had weakened sufficiently to allow a shift in perception” (Roszak, *Atom* 44). He argues that even though chaos theory has drastically altered the way the natural world is perceived to work, “science still aspires to an objectivity that outlaws the irrational” (Roszak, *Atom* 6). The positive effect of chaos theory, Roszak argues, is that “chaos in this sense no longer refers to an absence of order, but rather a hidden interconnectedness where we once saw merely random events” (Roszak, *Atom* 122). By changing the way we approach the concept of chaos in science, from something to fear into something to embrace (in the same way that anarchist utopianism changed the meaning of anarchy from socio-political chaos to the ideal of an uncoercive and free social order), chaos theory allows its student to change his or her attitude towards nature and ultimately towards his or her relationship with a wider community. Roszak calls this developing scientific insight into the communal structure of the natural world and its analogy in human society, “deep community” (Roszak, *Atom* chapter 9).

²⁶ Roszak comments on the effect of the ideology of scientific rationalism on the scientist. He explains that “scientists have done such a thorough job of portraying themselves as the guardians of rationality that many of them may believe they – uniquely – have no psychology at all” (Roszak, *Atom* 5).

linear thinking.²⁷ Haste argues that “women’s lives are experienced in so many areas in terms of cycles” while “the lives of modern industrial men can be metaphorically constructed in terms of finite, achievable tasks” (Haste 6). No matter what the personal attitude of alchemists may have been, by making the cyclic experience a central metaphor in its philosophy alchemy is a dissident science in stressing the process instead of the goal and valuing androgynous fluidity over fixed genders.

What becomes clear is that Tuana’s thesis and that of Merchant and Keller diverge when they address the exact purpose of alchemy. Tuana is very clear in her argument that she believes “the hermaphrodite,” or Mercurius, the philosopher’s stone, “is not, as Merchant and Keller suggest, the goal of the alchemical process” (Tuana, *Unhappy* 114). But is she entirely correct? According to Abraham’s reading, based on extensive research into alchemical symbolism, Mercury “is the central symbol of alchemy” because “Mercurius is a symbol for the alchemists’ magical Arcanum, the transformative substance without which the opus cannot be performed.” She points out that “Mercurius or Hermes is also the name of the divine spirit hidden in the depths of matter, the light of nature, the anima mundi, the very spirit of life which must be released in order to make the philosopher’s stone” (Abraham 124-5). While Tuana argues that the hermaphrodite, “represents a necessary but imperfect stage of the transmutation process” (Tuana, *Unhappy* 114), Abraham argues, “Mercurius is present everywhere and at all times during the opus.” She explains that “Mercurius is not only the prima materia (the ‘mother’ of metals) which is sought at the beginning of the work, but also the ultima materia (the philosopher’s stone).” In fact, she argues, “he is simultaneously the matter of the work, the process of the work, and the agent by which all this is effected” (Abraham 125). Mercurius is characterized “as a dual natured, ambivalent force, both destructive and creative” (Abraham 126). Abraham uses the adjectives “protean, elusive, duplicitous, inconstant, teasing,” to describe this alchemical symbol (Abraham 126). Mercurius is represented as a hermaphrodite or as an androgynous principle because “as prima material, the hermaphroditic Mercurius contains the male and female seeds of metals.” The wedding of Sol and Luna, the red and the white tinctures, “according to most alchemical texts,” Abraham argues, “may not take place without the presence of a third mediating principle” which is “Mercurius, the substance which contains both male and female seeds and unties them” (Abraham 127). Tuana criticizes Merchant’s and Keller’s optimism because she approaches alchemical symbolism as a scientific experiment with a finite purpose, with real scientific results. In her case, the female stage is indeed once removed from the ideal, but Abraham’s research into alchemical symbolism underscores that of Merchant and Keller, because it shows that in fact the metaphor of eternal cyclicity is the central organising principle of alchemy.

Androcentric western culture, Toril Moi argues, is founded on “the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the father, or the phallus, as its transcendental signified.”²⁸ On a psychological level, alchemical androgyny rejects this law and instead hails Mercurius as transcendental signified, the one and only ever-present essence in man and nature, from which all other identities attain meaning. Because

²⁷ Helen Haste, *The Sexual Metaphor* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 6.

²⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003) 9.

Mercurius is neither male nor female and simultaneously both, neither gender can be identified as a lack, that which is lost at the entrance into the symbolic order. Both gain their identities in a positive recognition and identification with Mercurius who becomes a protean figure expressing dissidence towards dominant ideologies that are underscored by gender polarization such as the medieval Church.

In the same year that Elaine Showalter published her critique of Woolf's androgyny, the Jungian psychologist June Singer devoted a chapter to alchemy in a larger psychological study devoted to androgyny. In her chapter on alchemy, Singer draws a parallel between alchemical androgyny and oppositional politics. She argues that from the point of view of the medieval authorities, "there was something surreptitious about this art, for was not the task of spiritual perfection the special providence of the priests and ministers designated by the Church?"²⁹ Significantly, Singer highlights that part of what made the alchemist so threatening to the dominant order in medieval times was the androgynous philosophy that underscored his material practice. Echoing Mary Daly's early work (which still views androgyny as a positive alternative) she explains that "the androgyne," a major symbol of alchemy, "has been nearly totally expunged from the Judeo-Christian tradition, for it apparently threatens the idea of a patriarchal God-image." In fact, she places herself with a feminist tradition that sees "male dominance [as] the keystone of the Judeo-Christian civilization" (Singer 6). The surreptitious nature of alchemy, therefore, lies in part in the power of its symbolism to undermine the traditional patriarchal order that has relied on the propagation of a gender ideology to naturalize the lower gender status of women, keeping them from actively participating in their own right in the male dominated public world of religion, politics and economics.

Maaïke Meijer follows Singer in constructing a theory of androgyny as a symbol that could bring about material revolt. She argues that androgyny is not only an inner spiritual union of opposites but can function as "a cultural guerrilla opposed to the dominating norms of the patriarchy."³⁰ Meijer argues "that various attempts at counterculture in the west from the days of ancient classics onwards contained the concept of androgyny" (Meijer 21). By stressing its difference to the dominant culture, Meijer takes

²⁹ June Singer, *Androgyny: The Opposites Within*, 1976 (New York: Nicolas Hays, 2000) 98.

³⁰ All quotation from Maaïke Meijer's, "Androgynie: Analyse van een Tegenvoorbeeld," in Maaïke Meijer et. al., eds., *Een Lesbisch Prachtboek* (1979), have been taken from Martha Hawley's unpublished English translation of the essay, "Androgyny: Analysis of a Counter Example," which the author kindly has made available to me. In a biographical introduction to her essay Meijer explains that she defines the androgyne as an "intermediate being" and as such a category of the abject (Meijer 11). Importantly, Meijer stresses that this idea needs to remain a secret to be successful in its guerrilla against patriarchy. Living within a patriarchal Catholic society, which represses any progressive thoughts about gender identity outside of the domestic ideal it propagates for women, Meijer explains, an adherence to androgynous principles is a punishable offence as it destabilized the seamless quality of the bipolar gender roles that define and in turn are underscored by the dominant ideologies. Sinfield argues, "persuading people to internalise subordination as their due is one of the most insidious and destructive effects of ideology" (Sinfield, *Subcultures* 27). As a counter-subordinate strategy, Meijer speaks of linking up with other "indefinite beings" and forming a subculture, with its own shared secret discourse through which their identity as "indefinites" can be strengthened, against the hegemony of the bipolar masculine and feminine gender roles that create "reality." Meijer's anecdotal thesis, by focusing on performing an androgynous gender in a society that condemns such performances as an act of gender terrorism and formulating a secret discourse with which to communicate this knowledge, is a clear example of how androgyny can be used as a concept to counter this destructive effect.

a large step in the direction of de-universalising and politicising androgyny, while retaining its progressive utopian optimism. In the biographical sketch that introduces her essay, Meijer explains that “androgyny was actually forced upon me” as a concept with which to define individual identity (Meijer, 1). The enforcer was the culture in which she grew up: “in our culture, which always polarises the sexes, it is not intended that one should be (in any way) both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (Meijer 2). Significantly, Meijer writes, “only through its complete absence can you derive the notion that androgyny could exist” (Meijer 2). As such, androgyny is inherently antithetical to the dominant order. It paradoxically represents what is deemed impossible to represent as a viable gender identity within the boundaries set up by the dominant ideology. While ultimately rejecting androgyny as a radical critique of how masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, Bem argues similarly that “androgyny provides both a vision of utopia and a model of mental health that does not require the individual to banish from the self whatever attributes and behaviours the culture may have stereotypically defined as inappropriate for his or her sex.” In her mind, “that revolution in the discourse of the culture was – and is – a worthy political accomplishment” (Bem 124).

Moi seconds Meijer’s thesis when she set about “rescuing Woolf for feminist politics” (Moi 9). According to Moi, “Woolf seems to practice a deconstructive form of writing, one that engages with and thereby exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse.” What is so important about *A Room of One’s Own*, Moi emphasises, is that “Woolf exposes the way in which language refuses to be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning.” According to Moi, Woolf’s androgynous theory “reveals a deeply sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity” (Moi 9). Woolf’s androgyny, Moi argues, “is not, as Showalter argues, a flight from fixed gender identities, but a recognition of their falsifying metaphysical nature. Far from fleeing such gender identities because she fears them, Woolf rejects them because she has seen them for what they are” (Moi 13). Moi here precedes Roszak and Lorber in advocating the removal of gender categories from social discourse in order to free up the potentially pluralistic gender identities potentially available to mankind, but as yet stuck in what Heilbrun calls “the prison house of gender,” built by the patriarchal social structures and the law of the father.

As Haste explains, “language is fluid and dynamic; meaning is constructed by both individual and social processes. The individual makes sense of the world through language and in interaction with others, but is active in this process” (Haste 10). Woolf’s work actively intervenes in the patriarchal discourse that built the prison house of gender, and as Moi writes, “any subject who tries to disrupt it, who lets unconscious forces slip through the symbolic repression, puts her or himself in a position of revolt against this regime” (Moi 11-12). Like alchemical androgyny, Woolf’s androgyny can still function as a source for revolt rather than an expression of imprisonment depending on the context in which it is read. Rather than taking a view of androgyny as a desired reality, Meijer, like Moi, takes the point of view that androgyny is “a fantasy, a counter-world” (Meijer 2). Androgyny is that which cannot be represented within the valid gender discourse under patriarchal ideology. It is a concept that elides binary categorisation. An androgynous identity does not constitute an effeminate man, or a masculine woman because it cannot be defined along

terms of masculinity and femininity, male and female. From both the dominant androcentric perspective it is a genderless identity that has no place in reality. As such, like Woolf's writing, it needs to be found in the world of unreality, the legendary and mythical reality of western culture in which it can be expressed. Instead of looking for it in dominant culture, ancient philosophy, or Romantic literary theory, Meijer explains, androgyny can be found in what she defines as the "subculture" of the mystical Orphici. Within the Orphic myth of creation, she identifies an androgynous philosophy that raises a dissident voice within the hegemonic Greek gender discourse, as represented by Aristotle's theories of human ontology that viewed women as deformed men.³¹

In her history of androgyny as a sub-cultural phenomenon, Meijer argues that alchemy is "the largest and most admirable system for the reconciliation of the opposites and for the restoration of the female to her proper place of worth" (Meijer 22). Singer explains how alchemy became a sub-culture. She asks the rhetorical question, "was it not understandable...that the alchemists should have carried on their activities under the cover of a practical and potentially useful operation, so that the real work – which might have appeared threatening to the authorities – could be pursued undisturbed?" (Singer 98). Like Meijer's androgynous subculture, with its social guerrilla tactics and secret gender discourse, Singer emphasises that "their teachings, consonant with their own beliefs, involved liberating the individual from false concepts and pre-programmed ideas" and that because of this the "alchemists required secrecy in order to ensure their political survival" (Singer 98). From Singer and Meijer's perspective, alchemy is a sub-cultural manifestation the metaphors of which express a world view that challenges traditional authority and is therefore always in danger of being punished for its nonconformist stance.

Haste explains that "metaphors underpin our taken for granted assumptions about the world" (Haste 11). Metaphors govern the politics of everyday life. The substitution of one metaphor for another can therefore potentially change the social structure in which men and women interact with each other and communicate with each other, and subsequently, change the way their identities are created. Since "metaphors permeate gender," it is possible to change dominant gender ideology by changing the metaphors used in speaking about gender. At present, Haste argues, "the primary metaphor of gender is dualism and polarity" (Haste 11). Other binary categories are mapped onto this structure such as active/passive, public/private, rational-intuitive, order/chaos etc. What makes androgyny a potentially dissident concept, as Moi argues, is that, as a metaphor, it has no tenor in reality, but only in myth. When "reality" is defined as the picture that is left over after everything that challenges a hegemonic ideology is erased, the appearance of androgyny on the edge of the picture's frame, which constitutes the boundaries of the validated social order, becomes a force of disruption. Haste argues that "the culture delineates and, indeed, limits what schemas are available; within the culture are repertoires of schemas and scripts to which the individual has access" (Haste 39). Alchemy can be read as a dissident metaphorical gender system rather than a scientific enterprise. In this context it can be used to change the way we speak about gender by substituting a neither/both ideology, based on the rhetorical paradox of diversity in unity, for the present either/or

³¹ See Bem's discussion of classical philosophy in *The Lenses of Gender*, 49-56.

gender ideology, founded on an ideology of essential difference. By bringing this perspective on alchemical androgyny to the analysis of Anglo-American gothic fiction in which the cultural schema of alchemy plays a structural and thematic role, the metaphors of alchemy can be shown to harbour dissidence towards dominant gender ideologies that polarized masculinity and femininity and underscored the fictional world as well as the socio-political context in which these fictions were created and read, as well as the context in which they are read today.