Embodying the Other: Hermaphroditism in Gorodischer, Vonarburg, and Delany

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Re-considering Both/And

In our own world, the hermaphrodite – an individual who possesses the reproductive organs of both sexes – immediately destabilizes normative, binary notions of "male" and "female." Such individuals are ontologically problematic, as they are often seen as somehow being both a woman and a man, while at other times they are interpreted as being neither. Indeed, hermaphrodites occupy a place of having too many gender signifiers, or not enough. Such an ontological dilemma is often surgically "corrected" at birth when physicians assign a gender identity to an ambiguously gendered infant. For the audience of this essay, it hopefully suffices to say that the concept of medical, or later psychiatric, institutions choosing another person"s gender for them has troubling implications.

At the same time, if the notion of a hermaphrodite demands, as a dramatic policing gesture, coercive surgery, it is clearly a site of philosophical and political meaning.

In their way, hermaphroditism and the intersex movement represent a particularly radical form of gender insubordination. While transgender identities question the notion that gender identities are fixed, hermaphroditism asks the more profound question as to whether such identities are discrete. When one"s gender cannot be named, it destabilizes this identity category as somehow essential to being. That is, the hermaphrodite can still be a person without being identifiable as either male or female. This troubles conventional models of sexual dimorphism because the hermaphrodite"s *being* as a gendered person seems to be in-flux, waiting to be defined as either one gender or the other.

The Hermaphrodite and the Fantastic

Science fiction and other fantastic narratives offer new contexts to explore these profound issues of gender identity. Beings who are simultaneously male and female appear in a variety of manifestations within the genre, and offer new points of entry to understand the nature of such identities and their relationship to larger society.

This paper will examine the implications of the imagined hermaphrodites in three works: Angélica Gorodischer"s *Kalpa Imperial*, Élisabeth Vonarburg"s *The Silent City*, and Samuel R. Delany"s *Phallos*. The layered – and often fluid – genders of the characters in each of these narratives problematize notions of polarized gender identities and profoundly depict, as Judith Butler has put it, "the experience of *becoming undone*" (*Undoing* 1).

Butler and the Notion of Becoming Undone

I"d like to begin by discussing Judith Butler"s notion of "becoming

undone" as outlined in her most recent book on gender theory, *Undoing Gender*. Butler‟s analysis in this volume is very much focused on the transgender and intersex communities of our own world, but her arguments have important implications for the imagined beings that I will describe later in this essay.

One of Butler‟s key points is that:

> "The question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also, as Michel Foucault makes plain, a question of power." (27)

Here, Butler is discussing whether sexual minorities are conferred the same degree of recognition – and in turn the full rights associated with citizenship – as non-minorities. Similarly, I am interested in the extent to which the act of *recognizing* (whether the perceiving subject is a government institution or a desiring human) assumes a certain kind of power.

Butler goes on to argue that:

> "… if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that „undo‟ the person by conferring recognition, or „undo‟ the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced." (2)

Here, Butler is describing the degree to which an essential humanness can be conferred or proscribed by regulatory systems and how deeming a group as non-normative makes their lives somehow less grievable. In turn, an individual who is perceived as less than human is more vulnerable to discrimination or attack. I think there is something else at work here, in the power dynamic alluded to in Butler‟s statement. In terms of the hermaphrodites, individuals often try to understand them as "essentially" one gender or the other, as if their additional set of gender signifiers were, well, secondary. And, by assigning a primary gender to the hermaphrodite, the perceiving subject reinforces the familiar and reassuring system of gender dimorphism.

Seeing/Believing

In order to elucidate several of the operating principals of the hermaphrodite identity and how the fantastic context uniquely dimensionalizes its implications, I would like to begin my discussion with a close reading of a scene from Angelica Gorodischer‟s *Kalpa Imperial*. Gorodischer‟s book (her first to be translated into English) collects a series of short stories about a fictional empire that appears at once medieval and also post-apocalyptically far-future. One story, "The Siege, Battle, and Victory of Selimmagud," focuses on a captured thief‟s encounter with the empire‟s greatest general, Sabirtowol.

The general is introduced as "The bravest man in the whole world" (66). This statement immediately applies a fixed gender category ("man") to the general, his status as an unparalleled military leader seems to reinforce this gender identity with a legacy often associated in fantasy narratives with men. That is, in Gorodischer‟s empire, military might is demonstrated by hordes of soldiers on horseback fighting other armies and storming towns. What more classic image of male identity in fantastic literature is there than that of the hulking, undefeatable, male general at the head of an empire‟s army? Gorodischer uses a bit of narrative sleight of hand by invoking an iconic fantasy archetype before undermining the false assumptions on the part of some readers. These icons rely on their familiar trappings, just as Judith Butler has argued gender itself is merely comprised of "the reality-effects of gender practices, performances, repetitions, and mimes" (*Inside/Out* 23).

When Rabavt-tuar, a common thief, is captured by the army and brought before Sabirtowol, the general offers him a chest full of gold in exchange for having sex. In reality, the general gives him little choice by suggesting he will be tortured if he refuses. Again, Gorodischer conjures a familiar archetype: the large, overweight man who is, in all aspects, voracious. His huge body connotes a profound appetite, as if his physically demonstrated lust for food also necessarily suggests similarly limitless desires for power and, as so often the case in literary narratives, sex. As Rabavt-tuar (already established as heterosexual) considers how to make sex with the general palatable, he attempts to shift his perception of the encounter by thinking of a girl he saw earlier:

> "The thief approached. He thought as hard as he could about Sonora‟s daughter, without looking at the general. He knelt down between the general‟s legs." (68)

Here, the text implies that the thief will try to heterosexualize his encounter with the general. While the physical interaction between them will be (the reader assumes at this point) inescapably homosexual, the thief will fantasize about a woman he has seen, creating a dissonance between his fantasy of the situation and the actual physicality of it. However, the oral sex act implied by the thief‟s kneeling between the general‟s legs leaves little room for Rabavt-tuar to imagine he is having sex with a woman. However, it would seem that in his mind, the general will not only be female, but also an ideal female love object.

The narrative continues:

> "As the general was a hermaphrodite, to the extent that it‟s said that at twenty he impregnated himself and bore a child as androgynous as himself, the thief‟s task presented considerable

> difficulties. He had to arouse the general‟s masculine organ in order to get at the general‟s feminine organ.” (68)

The description here reveals that the general is, in actuality, female *and* male, though the thief continues to refer to him as “he.” The revelation that the general is a hermaphrodite seems to mirror the phastasmatic process that the thief was implied to be about to embrace. Sabirtowol‟s male identity and sex organs are somehow precursors to his female identity and sex organs. More interestingly, male arousal is a required step before female arousal. The encounter will be confusedly both homosexual and heterosexual, even without the added layer of Rabavt-tuar fantasizing of being with another woman.

The unique dilemma in which Rbavt-tuar finds himself sheds light on the imperative to assign a discrete or predominate gender to the hermaphrodite. The prisoner‟s attempts to imagine Sabirtowol as a woman indirectly suggests that the being of a woman is not intrinsic to a given gender but rather lies within the perceiving/imagining subject.

But the complex interplay between Rabavt-tuar‟s fantasy and the real situation unravels:

> “Little by little, he stopped thinking about Sonora‟s daughter and remembered his dream about the snakes tearing up the cloth sack from Threeworlds. By now, he was convinced that slimy little creatures with wedge-shaped heads were hiding between the general‟s legs. He collapsed onto the pillows, sobbing.” (68)

The thief‟s reaction here closely resembles a form of sexual panic. It is not clear whether Rabavt-tuar‟s fear of the snakes is related to the menace of the general‟s power in the form of the phallus, or simply the thief‟s fear/repulsion of performing oral sex on a penis. Or, rather, it could be the unknown nature of the general‟s genitalia. The necessary folds through which the thief must pass to arouse both the general‟s male and female sexuality represent a dangerous journey into the unknown.

Upon the thief‟s failure to perform, Sabirtowol exclaims, “Imbecile…useless fool.” (68)

There is a profound failure in the thief‟s inability to arouse – relate to, understand – the general as a sexual being. In response, Rabavt-tuar takes the general‟s sword and kills him. While it may be his only chance of escape, it also seems to parallel so-called homosexual panic defenses where heterosexual men are so overwhelmed by the repulsion of a sexual overture by a gay man that they are driven to violence.

In order to cover up his murder of the general, the thief dons Sabirtowol‟s armor and leads the army into battle. Again, this invokes issues of perception. The empire‟s troops believe Rabavt-tuar is the general because of the costume,

while the enemy does not strike the thief down out of some perception that he is the surrendering General Sabirtowol. Taking the general‟s identity seems to reinforce these issues about the performative nature of identity. By physically costuming himself as the general, the thief becomes the general. *Being* “the general,” it would seem, is as much a matter of costume, performance, and perception as is *being* one gender or the other.

The Silent Other

Readers of Elisabeth Vonarburg‟s fiction will know that she is concerned with the larger problems of philosophy, particularly the questions of multiple selves. Vonarburg, like Roland Barthes, is interested in whether there can truly be a unique being understood as “me” or “you.” [1] A key point of philosophical debate is whether each of us is comprised of multiple selves, both in terms of the past iterations of us represented by our younger selves and also in terms of how we are perceived differently by those who know us, creating different versions of us in other individuals‟ minds.

In *The Silent City*, Vonarburg turns her attention to this issue of whether there is truly one, unique self and then goes on to consider the implications of this polemic for gender identity. The novel‟s story centers around the experience of Elisa, a genetically engineered woman who is gifted with both the ability to change her physical form and also a strong empathic sense that borders on telepathy. Vonarburg explores the intersection between desire and gender identity as Elisa learns how her physical form is influenced by the thoughts and emotions she senses from others. Later, Elisa‟s own children add a new dimensionality to this exploration.

Elisa is created by Paul, one of only a few people on a future earth who live in “the City” – a technologically advanced refuge from the primitive, war-ravaged world outside. Earth‟s population is threatened by a virus that prevents women from bearing male children, and Paul is attempting to engineer a new breed of human that could be resistant to the virus. Paul himself is extremely old, though he is kept healthy and youthful through the use of technology.

He raises Elisa from an infant and they eventually become lovers.

During one instance of lovemaking, Elisa is stunned when she catches her reflection in the mirror. She sees not herself staring back, but rather the face of Paul‟s deceased lover, Serena. Elisa, being extraordinarily empathic, has sensed Paul‟s unspoken sexual fantasy and her body has physically responded. This blurring of lines between Paul‟s thoughts and Elisa‟s physical experience of the world invokes similar sentiments to Freud's description of romantic love. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he characterizes it as the one instance where ego boundaries dissolve, and the "I" and "You" become one. In Paul‟s case, the act of desiring has literally transformed the erotic object to reflect his subconscious experience of her.

Elisa‟s physical appearance is defined by the observer, the desiring subject. However, this fluidity calls into question Elisa‟s own identity as she has been created by Paul. Indeed, her changing physical form seems to underscore that she is a phantasmatic representation of Paul‟s desire in the external world.

This turning point in the story underscores the themes of duality that course through the novel. She is both Elisa and Serena, just as Paul himself is simultaneously young and old, her father and her lover.

After their lovemaking, Elisa exclaims,

> "And that wasn‟t me in the mirror. But it *was* me all the same. You were making love with *me*." (50)

Thus, we‟re introduced to the problematic nature of Elisa‟s identity. Even Elisa‟s own reflection cannot truly indicate who she is. Her appearance – the mechanism by which she is perceived to exist by the external world – is that of Serena. The perceiver‟s desire – Paul‟s – so affects her identity that she *becomes* the erotic object.

Later, Elisa learns that her ability to change her bodily form not only extends to other female identities but to male ones as well. As she becomes a man for the first time, she attempts to understand her new body:

> "Hesitantly, she touches her penis. When will she get used to this strange lump between her thighs? When, if ever, will her brain make the adjustment? When will that hypothetical and diffuse image of self that is ego take it all in? Who knows: perhaps she‟ll get so accustomed to it that her penis will actually work. She considers the idea, amused yet repelled. Make love again? Make love with women? She can‟t imagine it right now. Later. When she‟s used to her maleness. She‟s got to get used to it." (60)

The prospect of sex with a woman presents itself as awkward. Is it because of the newness of the penis? Or, rather, the perceived homosexuality of her intrinsically female self making love to another woman? Will her sex become heterosexualized by her being a man physically when making love to a woman? Though Vonarburg leaves these questions largely unanswered, these are the important points of entry for understanding the interrelationship between desire, internal identity, and perceived identity.

In order to help the human race become resistant to the virus that threatens it, Elisa plans to introduce her own, healthy genetic material into society in the form of the next generation of children. This can be more

effectively done by her impregnating many women, rather than bearing men‟s children one at a time.

> “They‟ll see a man and I‟ll be a man. The image of a man. But I won‟t be a man. I can be anyone. I am everyone, no one.” (60)

Image, and in turn perception, becomes the primary means by which her gender identity will be established. And thus, Elisa‟s essential identity has come further into question. However, once she becomes comfortable with the nature of her being-in-the-world, she realizes she can be anyone she (or her perceiver) pleases. In fact, there is a Beckettian logic at work here where she can be everyone and no one at the same time, where apparent opposites can co-exist.

Elisa can make the ontological claim that she is a woman, despite the fact that she later takes a man‟s name and is perceived as a man by the public. This destabilizes not only the binary opposition between *man* and *woman*, but also the usefulness of such distinctions.

Indeed, when she meets a woman on “the Outside” (Vonarburg‟s capitalization), she finds herself attracted to her and involuntarily develops an erection. Elisa wonders, “Is she so used to her male body that she‟s beginning to *think* like men on the Outside?” (77).

In fact, Elisa‟s later ability to impregnate a local woman and become a father destabilizes the notion of essential gender difference being necessary for reproduction. Further, seeing the world Outside where men are extremely dominant and possess the majority of social power -- despite the fact that they are outnumbered by women -- only makes clearer the unhealthy nature of her relationship with the strange and controlling Paul. She sees now how controlling Paul has been, and also that she does not need him in order to carry on their mission to save humanity. Empowered by her ability to define her own identity now, Elisa decides to leave the City.

A Gender Utopia

Escaping the confines and menace of Paul‟s City, Elisa establishes her own village in the wilderness. Here, still separate from the savage world, she raises a new generation of children created from her own genetic material. Elisa devises a system for raising them so that they will be comfortable as either gender: spending alternating periods as girls and then as boys until they become eighteen and join the Outside world as males.

As her children grow older, she begins to question this logic. Noting that they behave the same regardless of their current gender, she realizes that she should not be surprised, “after all, character has nothing to do with sex” (116). Gender and personality are separate. Among Elisa‟s children, one does not affect the other. In Elisa‟s sanctuary, no one is perceived as either female or male, rather simply as individuals. Thinking of one of her children, Elisa thinks

the phrase, "Whenever he‟s a girl …" (117). The bizarre nature of the statement gives her pause, but then she asks why there is even a distinction between genders and "Why have different names for boys and girls?" She decides, "What a stupid custom, anyway. … But that‟s how it is Outside" (117).

In the secret civilization that Elisa has built, inherent gender differences dissolve and everything seems to make an immediate kind of sense. Individuals‟ intrinsic identity is not connected to their appearance or their gender. The "Outside" represents the larger world of human distinctions where binary gender identities and designations are socially constructed. In this way, we can imagine Elisa‟s safe haven to be a kind of Lacanian Real, where questions about the necessity of the external world with its language and distinctions seem unnecessary.

As Elisa‟s children mature, they grow to demand to choose their gender. Elisa eventually agrees, seeing that their gender is largely inconsequential. Indeed, she worries briefly at the presence of homosexual coupling within the group, but dismisses these concerns as well, seeing irrelevance of gender in defining normative relationships.

Thus, the hermaphroditic Elisa and her children in *The Silent City* not only suggest the fluidity of gender identity but also work to "undo" claims that social power and sexual roles are "naturally" aligned according to gender. Indeed, as Elisa‟s children go on to carry their utopian worldview into the Outside, they act as catalysts for over-arching social change. By revealing themselves as multi-gendered individuals to the intensely anti-feminist culture that surrounds their sanctuary, they lead the vehement pro-male and pro-female parties to question the basic foundations of their conflict.

In Pursuit of the Phallos

In the Gorodischer and Vonarburg narratives described above, static gender identities become unfixed. Both the narratives‟ hermaphrodites are not simply people born with both female and male sex organs. Rather, they are individuals whose complex gender identities are defined by both the contexts in which they are perceived and also by their own self-determined notions of what comprises their Self.

The final narrative I‟ll discuss is that of Samuel R. Delany‟s *Phallos.* Like most of the author‟s science fiction and fantasy work, *Phallos* questions notions of normative gender identities, and looks at the intersection between desire and personal identity.

The primary storyline in *Phallos* traces the adventures of a young man named Neoptolomus during the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian. In his search for a missing jewel-encrusted "phallos" that has been stolen from the statue of a nameless god, Neoptolomus travels across the ancient world, engaging in numerous sexual exploits and glimpsing insight into the nature of desire.

After unsuccessfully seeking the phallos for most of the narrative, Neoptolomus comes to "face the dreadful absence, uncloaked and unmitigated, at the center of all and everything" (87). Not only does he realize that inevitably the phallos "has always-already-been stolen by someone else," he also comes to believe that his own lust for continual adventure reflects a profound emptiness within him.

When he does find what he believes to be the phallos in the possession of a high priestess of an obscure religious cult, she informs him that he is mistaken:

> "„It is a simulacrum, a distraction, an image –‟ and here she turns it around to show him, once more, that it is empty – „a scabbard without a sword. It holds no secrets, no wisdom – either of magic or of history.‟" (57)

With this revelation, it seems that the phallos becomes devoid – or emptied – of power. It is easily replicated and holds none of the fabled secrets rumored to be hidden within. By announcing that the phallos has no power, the high priestess herself seems to be claiming its strength. Indeed, she then uses the replica to demonstrate another kind of widely understood form of social power: the penetrative role in sex. Using the phallos as a dildo, the high priestess penetrates Neoptolomus.

Within this moment, two important points emerge from the narrative:

1) The phallos is transferable. Either a man or a woman can wield its power (and take the too-often-called male role in sex). The high priestess is able to claim a male role and male genitalia by wielding a replica of the phallos, transforming herself into a kind of hermaphrodite.
2) The phallus itself possesses no real power except that given by those who seek it. Like the gender identity of the desired Other in both Vonarburg‟s and Gorodischer‟s narratives, the power and meaning of the phallos must be derived from the subject that perceives it.

Later in the story, when another woman expresses to Neoptolomus her desire to find the phallus and her longing to "to be in its presence, to see it, to hold it" (77), Neoptolomus tells her, "Suppose I told you that a need such as yours, as it organizes the muddles and contingencies of your life, *is* in fact, the *phallos* –"(77). One‟s desire here, in this case the desire for meaning, is a necessary precursor to bring the phallos into being. Neoptolomus goes on to explain,

> "Power itself is fundamentally phallic, in that it is a concensus-illusion that stands in for a material strength most of the time not there." (65)

The phallos, like the phallus of psychoanalysis is not fundamentally male. Rather, it – like gender identity – is an illusion created by those who believe in its power. Still, the phallos, or its replica in the male penis, is thought to inherently possess some social power. What emerges is a sense that gender has no material basis. Rather, it becomes a psychic reality effect, powered by the force of fantasy. Likewise, the notion that the main components of social power somehow naturally aligned with the male gender – wealth and knowledge – is shown to be nothing more than myth.

I mention *Phallos* only briefly here because Neoptolomus' realization that the phallos (like the symbolic phallus described by psychoanalysis) does not truly exist in any material way liberates its power from men and poses larger questions about fixed gender identities and "norms." Indeed, Neoptolomus first believes that whoever possesses the phallos, whether man or woman, has access to legendary riches – wealth, power, knowledge – that are often imagined to be male-aligned. The result of his journey is to realize the inherent falseness of this widely held truth.

Putting It All in Context

The fantastic settings of each of these narratives allow them to explore unique elements of the hermaphrodite. In order to reconcile their relationships to this seemingly impossible being, the characters seek to choose one gender or another to understand the hermaphrodite. In some ways, the hermaphrodite is a true gender outlaw, but the reactions of those who perceive it suggests that its very ability to destabilize gender norms will inevitably invoke the power of the Law. For Foucault:

> "[A]ll [transgression] ends up doing is reinforcing the law in its weakness … The law is that shadow toward which every gesture necessarily advances; it is itself the shadow of the advancing gesture." (*Thought* 35)

The law is reinforced by what tries to transgress it, because the transgression acknowledges the law and so becomes a reflection of its power. In the case of the hermaphrodite, perceivers are time and again attempting to assign a gender to the entity, as if some sort of true and real intrinsic gender is only masked by a falseness, an illusion. When the perceiver assigns a primary gender to the hermaphrodite, he or she claims understanding and exercises a level of power over the hermaphroditic entity.

The hermaphrodite represents a threat to the sexual dimorphism that

helps the dominant hegemony make sense of the world; this threat seems to necessitate action. Indeed, ever-expanding gender categories in our own world have been attributed to a recent increase in violence against sexual minorities.[2] Further, these incidents are become increasingly more organized and increasingly more violent.

If the transgression of being a hermaphrodite only "ends up…reinforcing the law in its weakness" (*Thought* 35), then this should call for a deeper hermeneutics of the relationship between gender identity and social harmony. Elisa and her children, as well as Delany"s Neoptolomus, come to critical realizations about the immateriality of any necessary link between gender and social power. They see gender designations and their related gendered powers as largely constructed, and unnecessary. They decide for themselves how they want to be perceived and to what degree social power is necessarily aligned to one gender. This sort of attitude strikes at the heart of revolutionary thinking. More importantly, it strikes at what Michel Foucault has argued is at the heart of a certain kind of modernity and a precursor to enlightenment:

> "an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it." (*Reader* 41)

If we can, we should let the hermaphrodite remain what it is: an entity that exists just outside of gender. An idea that is defined by its context and can define itself within any context. Fantastic or otherwise, these contexts will always serve as a starting place for better understanding.

End Notes

1. Here, I am thinking specifically of Barthes *Camera Lucida*, in which he describes a photograph of an individual as "utopically, *the* impossible science of the unique being."
2. An annual report issued by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence programs, a network of over 20 anti-violence organizations that monitor and respond to incidents of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender bias motivated crimes, found a 4 percent rise in the number of incidents reported. In addition, there was a 14% increase in the use of weapons and a 273% increase in attacks committed by organized hate groups. Readers wishing to better explore the relationship between violence, sexual identity, and social power will enjoy both Butler"s *Undoing Gender* as well as Didier Eribon"s *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*.

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