

# ON THE REPRESENTATION OF ANDROGYNOUS FIGURES IN THE RENAISSANCE ART

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## **Abstract**

For Renaissance thinkers, the ancient idea of the androgyny –a variant of the metamorphosis’ myth– conveyed the ideas of perfection and completeness, as a way to overcome the opposition of the female and male natures. This paper shows the origin of the motif and its development according with the interests, beliefs and concerns of theologians and thinkers, from the one hand, and artists on the other.

**Keywords:** Metamorphosis, androgyny, perfection, completeness.

# SOBRE LA REPRESENTACIÓN DE FIGURAS ANDRÓGINAS EN EL ARTE DEL RENACIMIENTO

## **Resumen**

La antigua idea de la androginia –una variante del mito de la metamorfosis– transmitía en la opinión de los pensadores renacentistas las ideas de perfección y plenitud, como medio para superar la oposición de las naturalezas femenina y masculina. El presente trabajo muestra el origen del motivo y su desarrollo según los intereses, creencias e inquietudes de teólogos y pensadores, por un lado, y artistas, por otro.

**Palabras clave:** Metamorfosis, androginia, perfección, plenitud.

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## Introduction

In the ancient Greek religion, one of the most common rites of passage is that of metamorphosis, willingly made or not by its protagonist. Although our most known collections of metamorphoses are those gathered by authors living in the Hellenistic Age, such as Nicander of Colophon and Boios, later on repeatedly alluded to by Antoninus Liberalis and other compilers of the Imperial Age, it would be a plain mistake to ascribe the metamorphic act to a later stage in the development of the Hellenic culture<sup>1</sup>. As a matter of fact, metamorphosis brings to the Hesiodic poetry, especially to his *Catalogue*, one of its central subjects (Hirschberger 2008). Otherwise said, the broad use of cases of metamorphosis in literary texts, as a reflect of a popular anthropological discussion incorporated to the domains of mythology and religion, was not a post-Classical creation, but a very ancient theme for whom we should probably look for an inherited tradition, that is to say, Indo-European. Having this in mind, it is important to understand that the metamorphosis theme was not borrowed to an exogenous culture in the Hellenistic or the Imperial Age.

Our paper will deal with the androgynous' theme in some sculptural, pictorial and graven representations of the Renaissance art. The attention to the contemporary literary sources and to the influence of the humanistic culture in some geographical areas will cast light on the spread of this artistic motif.

## The overcoming of oppositions in the Renaissance culture

The aim for filling the gap between the Antiquity and the present led the intellectuals of the Italian Renaissance to an exercise of contrast executed by means of reflection and debate. The Aristotelian syllogism was not

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<sup>1</sup> Buxton 2009: 110 alludes to theurgeon of the metamorphic narrations in the Hellenistic Age. But he does not devote a monographical chapter of his diachronic exposition of the genre to Hesiod, so that he jumps from the Homeric *Odyssey* to the Athenian drama.

enough for their purposes because of its limitations, but the Platonic gnoseology provided them with an alternative method: knowledge was not only possible within the frame of reality, but it was also in a superior cosmos where the ideas were able to neutralize the contradictions revealed by the senses. Hence, harmony of contraries became one of their preferred mechanisms to make progress.

In a similar way, Renaissance literature and art were fond of mixing characters and values initially opposed, as for instance love and war. When the poet Angelo Poliziano –dead in 1494– wrote his epigram “Εἰς Ἀφροδίτην ὀπλισμένην”, that is to say, *In Venerem armatam*, he was actually following a well-known literary tradition<sup>2</sup>, but at the same time he was anticipating an artistic topic. The almost contemporary painting *Venus Victrix* of Marco Zoppo, now at the British Museum and dated between 1465 and 1474<sup>3</sup>, seems to reproduce in a pictorial composition what Poliziano was telling in his poem: war actions, armours and struggle are counterbalanced with delicacies, love beds and desirable weddings. Similar antithetical plays were based on the pairs sweetness / bitterness, wisdom / ignorance, love / hate, sexuality / chastity, and so on<sup>4</sup>.

The merger of antithetical entities was a consequence of this search for harmony within a steady world ruled by mathematical laws. As misogyny or homophobia were two current ideological trends of the Middle Age – probably because of their deep rooting in some mystical and cenobitic traditions with a large influence of the veterotestamentarian culture–, the Renaissance art was open to show the integration of both genders in an only physical body. Therefore, under the image of an androgynous creature lies the reversal of the former ideological system, as a part of the Renaissance programme. Needless to say, religious beliefs were also at work behind this operation, whose artistic representation involved also a defiance towards the Church authorities more bound by their commitment to the Mosaic law and its Christian continuation.

In principle, the androgynous’ theme is independent from that of the feminization of the image of crucified Jesus Christ, as this one appeared

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<sup>2</sup> The motif was already attested at the *Palatine Anthology* (16.174) and was later imitated by Ausonius in his poem LXIV. Cf. Herrera 1998.

<sup>3</sup> An alternative view is that of Wittkower 1939, according to whom the goddess should be interpreted as Minerva.

<sup>4</sup> Attention to this Renaissance aim for blending opposite concepts is largely paid in the book of Wind 1958.

formerly in central Europe and had a quite different origin, not related with any belief of the ancient religions; not featured with the objective of overcoming through their integration the opposition between female and male; and not linked to a complex discourse found in theological, philosophical and literary texts as well as in the artistic creation, but to a vindication which aimed only at opening a new time not ruled by the patriarchal concept of gender relationship<sup>5</sup>. Already in the 14th century, Pierre Bersuire, author of the so-called *Ovide moralisé*, tried to give a mystical sense to the Hermaphroditan metaphor as a symbol of the double nature of Jesus Christ himself, masculine and feminine as well as both divine and human<sup>6</sup>. The theme has of course some implications with the androgynous representation<sup>7</sup>, but the abovesaid reasons make preferable not to include it in our present contribution.

Last, the feminization of divine masculine characters was in fact no restricted to the sole Jesus Christ, for it is attested in the representation of saints and biblical heroes as well<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Clague 2005, Friesen 2001, Newman 1995, Nightlinger 1993, Schweizer-Vüllers 1997, Zänker 1998.

<sup>6</sup> P. de Bersuire, *Metamorphoseos Ovidi moralizatae I* 12.322-323: *Mercurius incantator, qui aliquando, secundum poetas, de masculo in feminam se mutavit* etc.; XIII 348-349: *Sed Mercurius, id est Christus, qui de masculo factus est femina* etc.

<sup>7</sup> A first commentary on the androgyny of this painting was made by Stefaniak 1992: 713: “Assuming that Christ’s body was incarnated in the common condition of humanity about 1525, including cultural attitudes towards sexuality, then as a wounded hero, he was like a woman. At the same time, as an embryo in the process of being born again at the moment of the Resurrection, still in the same wounded body, he was surely destined to be reborn feminine. This viewpoint should be also applied to the *Ignudi* of Michelangelo.” A more detailed analysis is that of de Halleux 2011a: 131: « L’androgynie pourrait alors être l’un des symptômes d’une tendance religieuse, d’autant qu’il est bien connu que dans le courant mystique (on pense entre autres à Angèle de Foligno ou Julienne de Norwich) figurent précisément des allusions à la féminité du Christ. . . . Si les représentations androgynes du Christ se développent à la Renaissance dans une mesure si importante, c’est sans doute parce qu’elles correspondent non seulement à un idéal esthétique mais également à l’orientation de la spiritualité contemporaine. » Their views have been rejected by other scholars: cf. Nova 2006: 323 and 331-332.

<sup>8</sup> Just to limit our data to the Valencian country, we must take into account early artworks as the altarpiece of Saint Martin, saint Ursula and saint Clement by Gonçal Peris Sarrià (monastery of Porta Coeli, 1443) and the painting of saint Michael by Miquel Esteve –under a probable influence of the Saint Michael (Oriola, after 1490)

### **The androgynous representation in the Renaissance art. An exceptional model**

Androgyny as an artistic matter became so frequent as it was in literature. Of course, the artistic representations needed something else than the short descriptions given by Plato and other literary authors, so that the ancient sculpture and engraving became a relevant paradigm for the Renaissance artist. Maybe the best model was the so-called Modena relief, in which Phanes, the Pythagorean Eros, appears just after his birth from an egg. This hermaphrodite god was the only one in the ancient pantheon that assumes both genders as a natural androgynous being. The relief, which is made in marble, has as measures 74 x 48.7 x 5-6 cms., and is dated in the second quarter of the second century AD, was purchased in the 18th century for the art collection of Francesco III Marquis d'Este at his palace of San Martino in Rio, close to Modena, and it is nowadays exposed at the Museo Lapidario Estense di Modena. It was there where it got the appreciation of the scholars after a notice published by Celestino Cavedoni (1863), who rightly suggested the Orphic frame of the piece. His view was later on confirmed by Franz Cumont (1902), who recognised the Mythraic god Chronos. Eisler (1910: 400), however, rightly identified the figure as Phanes' and took for granted the Roman origin of the piece. Yet Cumont changed opinion after comparison with other archaeological pieces and replaced his former identification of Chronos by a new one based on the character of Phanes, the Orphic Eros (Cumont 1934). The syncretic cult of both Mithra and Eros was however kept by Guthrie (1934: 254-255), who tried to suggest a double reflection of both Orphism and Mithraism. The same syncretic religious of the piece, both Mithraic and Orphic at least, was underlined by Pettazzoni<sup>9</sup>. In a recent paper, nevertheless, Ewa Osek (2018) rejects this syncretic view and gives support to the sole consideration of the Orphic character of Phanes.

What is important for our point is that nearly a century ago Panofsky already argued for a perfect interpretation of the relief both by the Renaissance artists and by their *committenti*<sup>10</sup>. This means that the

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by Paolo di san Leocadio, an Italian painter trained at Ferrara—. In both cases the faces of saint Martin and saint Michael show feminine stylized traits.

<sup>9</sup> Pettazzoni 1949: 274 suggests that the relief “rappresenta una combinazione di idee mitriache con idee orfiche ed altre”.

<sup>10</sup> Panofsky 1930: 9, n. 2. The Modena relief was imitated, for instance, by Girolamo Olgiati in the 1569 engraving entitled by modern scholars *Allegory of*

purchaser of the piece was perfectly aware of the philosophical and religious sense of the androgynous representation. The Modena relief had formerly been part of the collection of Sigismondo IV d'Este (1433-1507), lord of San Martino in Rio and fellow of the Catalan king Alphonse the Magnanimous between 1445 and 1460. At the Napolitan court of this Catalan Renaissance sovereign, Sigismondo and his elder brother Ercole received a complete political, militar, literary and artistic education. Later, in the year 1473 Ercole was given as spouse the elder daughter of the king Alphonse, Eleonora, and this way the duchy of Ferrara was strongly linked to the Aragonese kingdom (Manca 1989). Ercole has attracted much more attention than Sigismondo, although both of them shared the same spiritual and cultural instruction and the same political training.

Even if it is an ancient piece instead of a contemporary artistic creation, this image of the Orphic Phanes must be understood as an exceptional witness to the interest of the Renaissance for harmony of contraries to understand the cosmos, both divine and human. And its influence had its pole in the sophisticated culture of the House D'Este at Modena and Ferrara, from where it inspired very signified art works, as we will try to expose.

### **Evidencies of a strong influence of the motif**

A short examination of a selected sample of artistic works will help to understand how the above theories inspired the Renaissance artists. The iconic representation of androgyny is clearly shown by sculptures, paintings and graven icons and medals. Some of them will help to understand how the motif of androgyny expanded and evolved. One of the first examples of our artistic subject is the magnificent statue of victorious David by Donatello, a masterpiece dated towards 1440. It is indeed an explicit androgynous sculpture, where the nudity of the character is also underlined by physical and psychological features expressing delicacy and, therefore, effeminacy; even the reduced scale of the piece, 158 centimeters tall, conveys the impression of looking at a female body; the personal erotic trends of the author should have been also at work, according with some views<sup>11</sup>. Of

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*Alchemy*, now exhibited at the British Museum; this piece was in turn imitated by a painting with this same title by Bartholomaeus Spranger (1546-1611), as reminded by Panofsky 1939: 73, note 7. On Spranger see also de Halleux 2011b.

<sup>11</sup> Schneider 1973: 213 explains this artistic work as a blend of the Neoplatonic influence and “the evident homosexual aspect of Donatello’s character”. In the later

course, the Modena relief had nothing to do with this marvellous representations of a new kind of beauty; but we suggest instead that the new ideas put into discussion in contemporary Florence pulled Donatello to take this step forward. Neoplatonism and Orphism, in the years to come settled at the headquarters of the Accademia Neoplatonica, seem to provide the soundest arguments for a correct evaluation of the innovations accomplished by Donatello.

The link between the representation of androgyny and homosexuality has been also proposed in other cases. It has been applied to some paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, namely *The last supper* (1495-1498) and especially *Saint John the Baptist* (1513-1516), whose model was the young lover of the painter. This interpretation was supported by Péladan<sup>12</sup>, and in our time has obtained the plain favour of many scholars. In our opinion, however, this kind of explanations does not contribute a valid analysis of our data because of their exogenous methodology and their dependence on subjective appraisals<sup>13</sup>.

After Donatello and Leonardo, it was Michelangelo to follow this artistic tendency. He certainly gave a conspicuous androgynous character to some of his *Ignudi* at the Sixtine Chapel, namely to those numbered 4 and 6, painted in the year 1509, and 2, 3 and 7, painted in 1511. Butler Wingfield cogently argues for the theological basis of this androgynist artistic rhetoric, where female and male features merge in an only human body (Butler Wingfield 2009: 272).

The artistic circles of Ferrara and Modena –a single one in fact, as both belonged to the court of D’Este– were the scenario in which showed his high skills the Ferrarese Girolamo da Carpi (1501-1556), author of the paintings *Ganimedes* (1544) and the undated *Kairos*, this one executed by

years this queer interpretation has gained intensity and space in contemporary criticism. On the homoerotic Florentine culture, see Rocke 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Péladan 1910 is one of the studies devoted to Da Vinci by this French unconventional thinker. Some years before Péladan had published the essay entitled *De l’androgynie. Théorie plastique*, Paris 1891.

<sup>13</sup> For a more nuanced and accurate interpretation, see de Halleux 2011c and 2012a. Just for a short statement, see de Halleux 2011c: 39: « Si, à la Renaissance, les délateurs de l’homosexualité confèrent souvent un caractère efféminé au partenaire ‘passif’, on ne peut pour autant avancer que, réciproquement, l’androgynie signale nécessairement l’homosexualité. » It goes the same for the opposite application of the idea, insofar as the homosexual habits of an artist does not imply or even explain any androgynous bias of her/his work.

order of the Marquis Ercole d'Este (de Halleux 2012b). Both artworks can be called examples of the mannerist style, an artistic trend to some extent developed by da Carpi himself (Antal 1948, Dauner 2005).

Not directly related to the Ferrarese court, albeit he occasionally worked for it and of course was under the influence of the new tendencies in vogue there, Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola, called il Parmigianino (1503-1540), is the following author to be considered here. The wonderful *Cupido carving his bow*, painted by Parmigianino towards 1533-1534, deserves a special recognition. Its androgynous matter has been of course recognised<sup>14</sup>. A second, even more noteworthy work by this author is his *Apollo playing the cithara*, a ca. 1525 drawing now exhibited at the Louvre Museum after a statue which the artist saw at Rome and can be now admired at the National Museum of Naples. Here the god is given only male genitals, while every detail of his, rather her, body constitution has the volume, the texture, and the gesture of a woman.

Towards 1549 Giovanni da Cavino designed and coined a bronze medal in honour of Marcantonio Passeri (1491-1565), professor of philosophy at Padova, a piece now exposed at the British Museum (Altwood 2003: 194-195). The inscription *philosophia comite regredimur*, "we come backwards under the guidance of philosophy", casts light on the image of two human beings united by their front part, with of course two heads, four legs and arms; their bodies are slightly different, for the left one is thinner in complexion and shows evident breasts. It is therefore an androgynous representation where philosophy is allegorized as a perfect human being which is not damaged by the defaults of either female or male individuals, as it includes both natures perfectly integrated in one single body.

Last, attention will be paid to some of the paintings by Michelangelo Merisi, il Caravaggio (1571-1610). The androgynous representation dominated a complete period of the late Caravaggio, between the years 1595 and 1608. In many of his extant pictures we can notice the presence of naked young boys provided with gentle, feminine expressions and gestures. The series includes the paintings *Bacchus* and *The musicians* (1595), *The lute player* (1596), *Victorious Cupid* and *John the Baptist and the ram* (1602), and *Supper at Emmaus* (1601), where nakedness of the character of Jesus had to be excluded, but his young age, suggested by his beardless face, and the composure of the gesture offer a sharp contrast with his partners, three adult individuals, severe in attitude, bearded in aspect, and

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<sup>14</sup> See Thomas 1988, Viola 2007: 71, Kingsley-Smith 2010: 138.



provided with a clearly male physiognomy. The 1602 first version of the painting entitled *Saint Matthew and the angel*, also quoted as *The inspiration of saint Mathew*, continues this trend of representing religious scenes through pagan motifs. A last example of the motif was painted by Caravaggio in 1608 in his *Sleeping Cupid*.

### **The philosophical and religious sources of the theme**

The nature of the Renaissance conceptualization of love and gender has been the object of a recent highly valuable contribution by Webb (2018), in which she offers an accurate and extensive argumentation on the matter. She explains how Plato as well as the Neoplatonist thinkers Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and Leone Ebreo promoted the development of a revaluation of love and lovers, where androgyny was established as a state of perfection. Webb exemplifies her conclusions by referring to the *Portrait of Bindo Altoviti*, by Raffaello (1514).

More precisely, on the matter of androgyny one of the axiomatic biases of the Renaissance was the aim for change in a Heraclitean way, as it was proclaimed by Pico della Mirandola in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, conceived as the introduction to his main treatise, published in 1484. His defence of the principle of change took as emblem the character of Proteus:

Quis hunc nostrum Chamaeleonta non admiretur? Aut omnino quis aliud quicquam admiretur magis? Quem non immerito Asclepius Atheniensis versipellis huius et se ipsam transformantis naturae argumento per Protheum in mysteriis significari dixit. Hinc illae apud Hebraeos et Pythagoricos metamorphoses celebratae.

Who among us could not admire this Chamaleon? Otherwise, who will rather admire anything else? Not without reason the Athenian Asclepius said that in mysteries he was known under the image of Proteus with the help of his changing nature. Hence were so celebrated the metamorphoses among the Hebrews and the Pythagoreans<sup>15</sup>.

The ancient character of Proteus was already attested at the Homeric poems. The *Odyssey* shows him as a servant of the marine god Poseidon, as an old man endowed with the power of transforming himself (Hom. *Od.* 4.384-386, 417-418 and 455-458). This god –maybe as important in older times as it was Thetis, which in the Homeric poems is given a minor role as

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<sup>15</sup> G. Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, 32-35 (our translation).

a nymph— is not, however, the only one being able to change nature: also Periclimenos, son of the King Neleus, received the gift of the metamorphosical faculty; as Proteus, he was also given this power from Poseidon, something that must be kept in mind. Yet it should be a big mistake to think again of Periclimenus as a result of a Post-Classical culture, just because many scholars grant a preponderant role to the Ovidian *Metamorphoses*, where this character features prominently (Ovid. *Met.* 12.536-579). Some scholars will remind the brief mentions to Periclimenus in Apollodorus' *Library* (Apol. *Bib.* 1.9.9 and 2.7.3). But the first literary author who often had Periclimenus in mind was Hesiod, since his *Catalogue of Women*, even if fragmentally transmitted, quotes the name of the hero four times at least<sup>16</sup>.

Besides Proteus and Periclimenus, a third ancient mythological character is featured with the power of metamorphosis: it is Mestra, whose myth was also extensively dealt with by Hesiod<sup>17</sup>. That is to say, metamorphosis was at the very core of many old mythical stories and gender shift was one of its variants. Consequently, the alleged Oriental origin of the motif as a borrowing dated in the Hellenistic and Imperial Age is an illusion that must be taken out from our interpretation of the androgynous theme.

In the ancient Greek culture, long before any influence of Oriental religions in the frame of the Alexandrian empire, its epigones and finally the Roman empire, the androgynous as a character has often been specifically linked to the Pythagorean theogony, since already the comedy-writer Aristophanes gives us a short account of the birth of Eros as the firstborn son of Night; yet he was not issued as a human being from the womb of his mother, but from an egg. This feature is expressed by means of the epithets *ᾠογενής* 'egg-born', and *διφυής* 'provided with a double nature'. Also Plutarch assigns to the Orphic and the Pythagoreans the symbol of the egg as the origin of life (Plu. *Mor.* 635 d-e). This means that the motif of androgyny was given a central role in the Pythagorean theology, as featured in the Modena relief.

A parallel, non-philosophical use of the term itself *ἀνδρόγυνος* was that used by the common people, and therefore bare of any transcendental connotation, be it religious, legal, or political. It is with the simple sense 'effeminate, womanish', that it is used by Herodotus on the Scythian seers

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<sup>16</sup> Merkelbach & West 1970, fr. 33a ll. 12 and 33, 33b, 35 ll. 2 and 4.

<sup>17</sup> Merkelbach & West 1970, fr. 43a, ll. 4, 54 and 66, 43b l. 3, c l. 11.

called ἀναρεῖς, *anareis*, i.e. *unmanly* (Hdt. 4.67.2)<sup>18</sup>, and by the *Hippocratic Corpus* (Hipp. *Vict.* 1.28) without any pejorative connotation, which is not the case for the orator Aeschines, who chose the term in order to blame Demosthenes in the worst possible way<sup>19</sup>. The comedigrapher Eupolis (Eup. fr. 46 KA), the *Septuaginta*<sup>20</sup> and the *Palatine Anthology* (AP 6.254) also used the term as a pejorative indictment against men, as well as Artemidorus and Lucian applied it to women (Artem. 2.12, Luc. *Am.* 28). This slanderous meaning was also that collected by the ancient lexicographers: Hesychius explains the term as ‘those who have woman’s heart’ (Hesych. α 4745), and the Byzantine *Suda* gives it as a synonyme of ‘weak’ (*Sud.* α 2177). In short, there was a double reception of the androgyny as a concept, and here we should keep only one of them, that related to the philosophical and religious thought<sup>21</sup>.

Actually, the Orphic cosmogony and theology offer a cogent ideological frame for the presence of androgynous creatures in Renaissance art<sup>22</sup>. Still, the artists were just following the tracks of their literary colleagues. Already in 1425 Antonio Beccadelli (1394-1471), also in strong relation with the Catalan court at Naples, composed an epigrammatic collection entitled *Hermaphroditus*, although later the book was condemned by the Vatican censors because of its alleged obscenity. Therefore, the contemporaneous Catholicism stated a complete refusal of the androgynous bias, and its strong condemnation could explain why prominent humanists as Lorenzo Valla, Francesco Filelfo and Guarino da Verona rejected any support to the lecture of the book and denied any prestige to its author. Modern criticism

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<sup>18</sup> The Greek term Ἐνάρεες is unsound, for it should be substituted with the etymological Iranian formation \**a-nar-*, that is to say, an adjectival compound with a negative prefix, derived from the term ‘man’.

<sup>19</sup> Aesch. 2.127 Δημόσθενης, τοιαύτην δίκην δός· ὁμολόγησον ἀνδρόγυνος εἶναι καὶ μὴ ἐλεύθερος ἐναντίον τούτων, “Pay this fine, Demosthenes: confess in front of all these people that you are an effeminate, not at all a free man” (our translation).

<sup>20</sup> *Prov.* 18.8 ὀκνηροὺς καταβάλλει φόβος, ψυχαὶ δὲ ἀνδρόγυνων πεινάσουσιν, “Fear smashes lazy people, the lives of the effeminate will suffer hunger” (our translation).

<sup>21</sup> For a complete reassessment on the matter, see Brisson 1997. This monograph replaces with huge advantage the old and short report of Jessen 1913.

<sup>22</sup> Wind 1958: 199: “‘Composite gods’ became the rule rather than the exception in Orphic theology.”

has not overcome most of the ancient prejudgments against Beccadelli<sup>23</sup>. Of course the emblematic symbol of the book was Hermaphroditus, the feminine son of Aphrodite and Hermes having the aspect of a girl as well as male genitals. His/her myth was narrated by Ovid (*Met.* 4.285-388).

Again in Renaissance Florence, the diffusion of the Platonic theories by means of the translation and commentaries of Marsilio Ficino had a strong impact on his treatise *De amore. Commentarium in convivium Platonis*. This work was published only in 1489, alongside with the whole translation of the Platonic corpus, but the manuscripts were circulating already in 1469. Its influence can be recognised in a sample of treatises on love<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, although for a long time it has been taken for granted that the Catalan Napolitan court was mainly dominated by the Aristotelian philosophy, whose chief advocate was Giovanni Pontano, nowadays we know that the Florentine connections of the royal milieu had already constituted a circle of Platonic readers and followers (Soranzo 2011).

Back on the religious sphere, a concurrent Jewish background of the androgynous' theme was provided towards 1501-1502 by Judah Abranavel, also known under the name of Leon Hebrew, in his *Dialoghi d'amore*. This is the passage of interest for our present purpose:

Ancora nel fine, volendo narrare la progenie di Adam, dice (come hai veduto) che Dio gli creò in somiglianza di Dio, maschio e femmina creò quegli, e chiamò il nome loro Adam nel dì che furono creati: adunque pare che nel principio de la creazione sua di continente fussero maschio e femmina, e non di poi per sostrazione del lato o costa, come ha detto. . . . Di poi creando Dio Adam, e non Eva, solamente maschio creò, e non femmina e maschio, come dice. . . . Mira che dice che, creando Dio Adam, fece maschio e femmina, e dice che chiamò il nome di tutti due Adam, nel dì che furono creati, e di Eva non fa menzione, che è il nome de la femmina di Adam; avendo narrato già innanzi che di poi, essendo solo Adam senza femmina, Dio la creò dal suo lato e costa, e chiamolla Eva (Leon Hebrew, *Dialoghi d'amore III*, XVII).

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<sup>23</sup> Kidwell 1991; 4, considers the poem a *repulsive obscenity*. For a reappraisal of this view, see O'Connor 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Just for a short quotation, have in mind *Il Cortigiano* of Baldassarre da Castiglione, *Gli assolani* of Pietro Bembo, *Raverta, dialogo nel quale si ragiona d'amore e degli effetti suoi* of Giuseppe Bettusi, *Specchio d'amore* of Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogo d'amore* of Sperone Speroni, and many others. However, the *Amorum libri tres* of Matteo Maria Boiardo, published in 1469, belong to a quite different tradition, where medieval elements are blended with the Renaissance flavour contributed by the Petrarchan poetry.

Again, at the end of the narrative, speaking of the offspring of Adam (as you have seen), we read that God created man in the likeness of God, ‘Male and female created He them, and He called their name Adam in the day that they were created’. It would appear, therefore, that there was at once both male and female at the beginning of the Creation, and that the woman was not made subsequently by the withdrawal of the rib, as is narrated. (...) God, therefore, in creating Adam, and not Eve, only created a male, and not male and female as the text says. (...) Look it how it says that God, in creating Adam, made both male and female; yet he called them both by the name Adam in the day that they were created. And no mention is made of Eve, which is the name of the female part of man, although we have already been told how, Adam being alone and without woman, God created her out of his side and rib and called her Eve (Bacich & Pescatori 2009: 276).

The integration of the opposites also included a panoramic view of all the extant religious traditions in such a way that the ancient myths could afford some part of the truth to the complete history of mankind. Therefore, many theologians and thinkers should be interested in adding the Hebrew interpretation to the sample of sources for the androgynous motif. Again, it has been suggested that the *Love Dialogues* inspired to the painter Paolo Veronese his composition *Omnia Vanitas*, composed towards 1565, some thirty years after the publication of the treatise of Leon Hebrew (Pescatori 2006 and 2020). However, the direct, even indirect relationship between mystical literature and artistic representation is far from being accurately established.

As an offspring of this reappraisal, we will pay attention to another literary tribute to androgyny. Mario Equicola d’Alveto (*ca.* 1470-1525) was a humanist related to the Napolitan Catalan court, and later to the Ferrara circle of the family D’Este. That is to say, he frequented the same circles where the androgynous representation of the Modena relief was honoured and imitated. In 1525, the year in which he passed away, he published a treatise entitled *Di natura d’amore*, where androgyny is presented as the real nature of manhood and the authentic kind of beauty<sup>25</sup>:

Il volto della donna si loda se ha fatezza di uomo; dell’uomo il viso se ha fatezza femminile. Onde il proverbio quasi per ciascun luogo, femmina maschio, e maschio femmina hanno grazia.

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<sup>25</sup> A recent major contribution is Villa 2006.

The woman's face is praised if it has man's shape; man's face likewise, if it has woman's shape. From there comes the saying present in nearly every place, 'male female and female male possess charm' (Equicola 1607: 113).

A second passage exposes more explicitly, following the aetiological myth of the Platonic *Banquet*, the subject of androgyny:

Da quel tempo in qua fu innato l'amor dell'uomo al'uomo, sforzandose di due far uno. È adunque ciascuno di noi mezzo, e ciascuno cerca il suo resto, cioè quella stirpe donde fu separato. Se questo per caso si incontra, di quelli è amor vehementissimo, e quelli si amano per tutto il tempo della loro vita.

Since that time until now has been innate the love from a man towards a man, as they make their best to become a single being from the former two. So, each one of us is a half, and everyone looks for his remaining part, that is to say, this lineage from which he was separated. If casually this part is found, the love of these people is the strongest, and they love each other for all the time of their lives (Equicola 1607: 173).

Equicola should have exerted some influence on the matter, as shown by so much read books as Baldassarre da Castiglione's *The Courtier* (Venise 1528) (Kolsky 1991:103-226). The point now is nevertheless another one, namely the coincidence of literary sources and artworks around the poles of Ferrara and Modena.

## Conclusions

At the end of this paper some conclusions come to mind. First of all, the existence of a dual representation of the androgyne, sometimes as Eros, sometimes as an angel, could be at first sight explained as a transformation of a pagan subject in the way called in Spanish scholarship *a lo divino*. Yet the roots of this double insight can be traced back to the Antiquity, where also a contradictory judgment on androgyny conveyed two opposite notions, one of them frankly pejorative and damning. This means that the adoption of a sexual perspective for the analysis of a matter which is not at all biological is disturbing and elusive, and therefore negative.

Our following remarks have to do with the methodological scope of our research. As a result of it, we should emphasize the merely Hellenic and Indo-European origin of the theme, whose alleged 'Oriental' origin must be rejected; as a consequence of this fact, androgyny arises from very ancient times, not at all in the Hellenistic and Imperial Ages. The interference of the

sexually-oriented approach, in the ancient as in the modern times, has been also alluded to, no matter if many contemporary scholars think of it as a necessary input in modern research. Finally, the role of the Ferrara humanistic circle, as an offspring of the Catalan royal court at Naples, does not explain the whole diffusion of the motif, but constitutes a relevant factor of the spreading of the androgynous representation.

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