

SHAPE *Shift*

SHAPESHIFT

Reimagining the Androgynous Appearance

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Foreword

When strangers stop me in the streets the first thing they say is; “hello miss!” and it is often followed up by; “Oh I’m terribly sorry sir.” I can say with confidence that this confusion occurs on an almost weekly basis. It seems that to the eyes of others my appearance often resembles that of a woman. In fact, many have said that I am in touch with my “feminine” side, thus calling me androgynous. These interactions show that fashionable appearances continue to be perceived through gender associations, and they question the appearance I portray as a person identifying as a heterosexual man who enjoys wearing clothes that do not conform to gendered norms. I believe that this misidentification originates from our perception of the androgynous body, a hybridization of masculine and feminine attributes, which has been highly influenced by patriarchal norms thereby standardizing the appearance of such a body. While binary in the literal wording of androgyny (*andros*: man, *gyne*: woman), it seems apparent that the identification of individuals’ appearance becomes limited to two genders, which does not seem sufficient in a society evolving with identifications that behave in more fluid ways. Hence, I have resolved to ask why the androgynous appearance

needs to change, using this thesis to explain the reasons and necessity to shift the standard shapes of androgyny. As a fashion designer, I hope to become increasingly aware of the bodies I decide to design for, and what the clothes I make signify when that body wears them. When designing for an androgynous body, it quickly becomes clear that such a figure is mythical: it is a traditional story explaining a social phenomenon around gender, but it remains a symbolic narrative.

Preface

“They were cut as you would slice through an egg with horsehair twine.” Zeus turned androgyny into a myth, splitting what was once a single creature into what we know as “man” and “woman”. Far from their other half, androgynes roam the world through the eyes of others. The long-haired men and the small-breasted women are identified as such creatures, yet are they truly those deities that Zeus bolted in half? Could it be that the androgyne’s appearance has been chosen by stories of the past? Does the androgyne creature in Plato’s symposium still roam the world today? Myths have a strong symbolic power to explain cultural behaviors through a narrative filled with allegories and metaphors and the medium continues to help us visualize abstract concepts or ideals. I have therefore written this thesis in the form of a narrative non-fiction, where I explain the constructs of the androgynous appearance through the factual symbolism of mythical tales. In reading the myths that I have composed, I hope to create a deeper understanding of the characteristics of what makes an androgynous body today, which in my view, is itself a mythical body. Divided in three parts, these five myths you are about to read present concepts surrounding androg-

yny from a perspective of gender equality, which are exaggerated as fictitious narratives. The first part is manifested as *Creation Myths* which in traditional tales explains the origins of the world. Here, the creation myths define and explain the notion of appearance and the difference of the sexes, enabling a better understanding of the origins of the current perceptions of androgyny. In the second part, *Aetiological Myths* explain how concepts surrounding androgyny apply to the design of fashion and are thereby set in a more contemporary context. Gendered fashion through the terms of *womenswear* and *menswear* as well as the neutrality of genderless bodies are deconstructed. Finally, the third part is presented as a *Katabasis* where a hero visits death or the underworld in order to gain new insight. Here, gender performance is used as a conclusive argument to imagine the androgynous appearance. These stories will show how and why we once imagined these half-men half-women to appear and what they could truly be.

Comments and more in-depth analyses accompany the myths, enabling an even deeper understanding of the arguments and concepts that are presented.



GENESIS

The Myth of Appearance

Mythological tales must always begin with the creation of the world. The myth of appearance continues this tradition in proposing the beginning of the world through the personification of authorship, truth, and appearance. As the first myth of this thesis, it defines the notion of appearance as an idea and as a behavior. The story highlights how appearance is not a reflection of reality, but rather an interpretation of it. In this context, imagining what appearance as an idea represents and how it is defined, enables a deeper understanding of our perception of androgyny.

*Fig 1.
Christopher Testani for
The New York Times.
Food Stylist: Simon Andrews.*

AUTHOR LAID HER ONLY EGG

Authorship in the eyes of gender analysis is a powerful status that enables to create and establish ideas that will influence future perception.¹ In fact, through the action of composition, authors can manipulate the language of any medium to establish norms and common thoughts. Thus, authorship stands as the beginning of all realities and appearances (the egg).²

When darkness ruled over the universe, the divine white raven named Author laid her only egg. As the egg cracked, the shell divided to form the earth below and the constellations above. Then, hatched Truth and her fraternal twin Appearance. Similar in size, with eyes as reflective as mirrors and hair equal in length, the twins presented an uncanny resemblance. Differ they did however, in character. Truth was honest and pure, obedient to her mother's wishes, while Appearance presented himself as a cunning trickster, repeating his sister's sincerity with personal intent.

Once the raven's children came of age and she herself felt death creeping, she entrusted them with the creation of the first elements.

"My only children, as I have written you into existence, I leave you the task of creating the elements that shall narrate the history of Earth." Then, she sent them away and awaited their proposals.

Honest Truth retreated to her room and gazed at herself in the mirror. There she noticed her shining liquid eyes and crushed one to form Water.

Slick Appearance looked to the stars and saw the powerful light that brightened the universe. As he

YOU HAVE CREATED TRUE
BEAUTY MY CHILD,
PROUDER I CANNOT BE

This line presents the misconception that beauty is understood as a fixed reality or in other words truth, hence standardizing characteristics of beauty. Translated in the context of androgyne standards Rebecca Arnold explains in her book *Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality* that “Since the earliest times the images of the androgyne had shown only male genitalia, and the flat, waistless figure of the masculine adolescent,”³ Supposing that one should doubt the omniscient perception of the androgyneous body, whose visualization has been standardized as a reality when it could be seen otherwise.

approached the brightest orb, almost blinded, he picked it from the sky to design Fire.

Days later, the twins returned to their mother with their respective elements held in eggshell bowls. Truth stretched out her arms and said, “Mother, I extend to you Water. It is clear as our eyes, it can carry life and heal our skins.”

Upon seeing, what her daughter presented, Author began to cry with joy at the very element Truth had created. Never had she seen a thing so pure and honest as the clear liquid in front of her.

“You have created true beauty my child, prouder I cannot be.”

Next, Appearance presented his bowl to his mother and announced, “I propose to you mother, the power of the stars itself, I named it Fire. It has the power to illuminate earth and reshape it. With it, life will never freeze.”

Hypnotized by the passionate movement of the flames, Author became tempted to feel the element her son had created. As her longest feather grazed the nearest flame, the flame spread and grew all over Author’s divine body! her eyes bulged in terror,

“Pain! Pain! Death creeps with Fire!”

In haste, Truth cleverly threw her Water onto her mother, whose healing power extinguished Fire. Author was saved, but her feathers scarred forever in a black soot left behind by Appearance’s creation. The darkened white raven turned to Truth, “My daughter, your heroism shall not be forgotten. Your Water will save many lives on earth. Tomorrow, I shall entrust you with the power of Existence itself,” then approached Appearance and said,

*MY SON, YOUR FIRE IS A
DECEITFUL CREATION,
ITS ILLUSORY BEAUTY
WILL HARM MANY*

By contrast, appearance is a powerful tool question the standards of beauty and reality. Deceitful by nature, appearances are far more malleable in presenting realities and fantasies simultaneously. R. Arnold mentions this nature to prove that “androgyny has often functioned as a conservative, if not a misogynistic, ideal {and} is evident in the long and learned tradition of dual sexed beings.”⁴ She highlights that the patriarchal society in occidental Europe has shaped a reality of the androgyne as a binary truth when in fact through the fluid potential of appearance it can be far more.

*APPEARANCE HAS
BEEN DECEIVING.*

Bertrand Russell summarizes in *Appearance and Reality* that “what we directly see and feel is merely ‘appearance’, which we believe to be a sign of some ‘reality’ behind. But if the reality is not what appears, have we any means of knowing whether there is any reality at all? And if so, have we any means of finding out what it is like?”⁵ Conclusively, one should understand reality as a standardization of norms which can be questioned and changed when exploring appearance, which itself is understood as a mythical form of truth.

“My Son, your fire is a deceitful creation, its illusory beauty will harm many. I cannot trust you in shaping the future of Earth.”

By Nightfall, Appearance became poisoned by envy towards his sister, wishing her reward would be gifted to him. Being the cunning trickster, he wasted no time planning his next machination. In the morning, he awoke earlier than all, and used his advantage to lock his sister in her room. When the time had come for Author to gift the power of Existence, Appearance materialized in front of his mother in the image of Truth.

Through his guile mimicry of his sister, Appearance acted in duplicity seeming indecipherable from who he claimed to be.

Author, unable to recognize her son, gifted the power of existence with the joyous hope that she meant for Truth.

From then, Appearance has been deceiving, hiding truth as he creates existence.



SCULPTURE

The Myth of the Sexes

A tale of power and cultural dominance. This creation myth presents current interpretations of what is understood as a “natural body”. Through the allegory of creation, the current power dynamics of the sexes and the expression of identity in western culture are highlighted to determine the origins and influence of norms that define our perception of the androgyne appearance. The myth consequently shows how heteronormative dominance affects our perception of sexes overall and what risks it brings in imagining the androgyne body.

*Fig 2.
Hans Arp, Torso-Sheaf, 1958 (detail)
Marble (Santelli / Malakoff, 1959)*

*THEY SHALL BARE THE
CHILDREN OF MY MEN,
AND YOU WILL CALL
THEM WIFMEN.*

The act of naming sexes is a dominating measure. In this myth, that action is shown by the male sculptor naming the female sex. In fact, « woman » is a nomenclature originating from the old word *wifman*, a combination of *wife* and *man*⁶ suggesting that the female sex belongs to men, and thereby existing as the second sex. Such an act creates a social reality that constructs body perceptions based on sexual differences.⁷

*SHE SHAPED THE WIFMEN IN
THE IMAGE OF HERSELF*

Sex is recognized as a combination of physical traits through the labelling of the sexual parts of the body. This recognition reduces the erogenous body to those parts and consequently limits the consideration of the body in its totality,⁸ here understood as the sculpture. In this line and the description of the creation of those physical traits that follow, the apparent premise of sex as logical reason is shown, belonging to the natural order of sexual existence. However, what we believe to understand as a direct physical perception of the body is in fact a mythical construction of associating sex to the body's appearance.⁹

The world had barely been born when Argile, the experienced sculptor, molded all living creatures from his hands and clay. From his genius mind he carved feathers for birds in the sky, scales for the fish, and fur for the animals on land. His most important creation however were men, whom he had shaped in the image of himself.

Caring Vitreous observed her master's sense of craftsmanship with admiration and emulation. She also wanted to contribute to the creation of men, and so she pleaded with Argile to let her contribute. As Vitreous had worked respectably as his apprentice, Argile suggested to Vitreous, "I will allow you to sculpt a man of your own, an opposite to mine, that shall act as a wife to my creation. They shall bare the children of my men, and you will call them Wifmen."

Filled with excitement, Vitreous began sculpting her own human. As her master had done himself, she shaped the Wifmen in the image of herself. To the insides she added a system that could stretch and house a child. To the hipbones she created space for them to grow. To the breasts she poured milk that would nourish them. When she had

*TOOK IT UPON HIMSELF TO
SEW HIS TRAINEE'S
MOUTH SHUT.*

Here, masculine dominance has been threatened by the opposing sex thus motivating Argile to protect his creation from this perceived threat. The interpretation that the decline of a masculine dominance in society is a threat, is a direct reflection of the conception that women are second to men. In fact, Luce Irigaray highlights that the binary relationship between the sexes, meaning the hierarchization of the sexes, is a masculine ruse seeking to exclude femininity as a natural incarnation of a body.¹⁰ So, as the myth symbolizes literally, women are silenced in a society built by men.

assured that the body was well formed, Vitreous improved the Wifmen's minds; to gather food, hunt animals and nourish their offspring. With the same clay, she built tools that she offered to her sculptures; sharing knowledge and teaching them how to build homes and communities out of the same clay she had created them with.

Upon her task completed, Vitreous enjoyed listening to the songs her creations sang for her and replied through whispers in the wind. Her sculptures as it seems, had surpassed the quality of the master's own. Through their future baring gift, the Wifmen, ruled over the men who offered their seeds with obedience.

As Argile saw Vitreous' sculpture, he was quite impressed with the quality of the work. However, when he saw the change in power among the humans, his jealous mind infected his gaze. Of all his creations, Argile loved men most, and he would not allow his work to live in his trainee's shadow. With new insight, Argile sought the talent of his trainee. From her master's sudden shame, Vitreous could not hide the pride she felt in having surpassed her teacher's talent.

As night fell, and Vitreous slept peacefully to her sculpture's songs, Argile's mind became clouded with jealousy and took it upon himself to sew his trainee's mouth shut. He knew that without Vitreous' whispers in the wind, her Wifmen would be powerless.

*IT IS THEM WHO MUST SERVE
YOU AND SEEK YOUR SEED!*

Moreover, the binary discourse that creates an unequal difference between the sexes has naturally created a hierarchy between the *feminine* and *masculine* genders which have been in understood within heteronormative colloquies as attributes of the *female* and *male* sexes.¹¹ Thus, to shape an androgynous body that is equal to all gender and sex appearances, the binary discourse needs to be eliminated. In other words, as L. Irigaray explains, "Making equal opportunities for women possible does not mean that women should simply model themselves on masculine ways of being and doing."¹² In fact, that only further motivates the discourse that men are more valued than women.

THE GIFT OF CREATION ITSELF

Creation or synonymously design, is a powerful tool to manipulate the gender conversation towards multiple directions. Historically however, design has been used as a strategy to stop women from occupying a position of speech wherein they are able to express their own point of views.¹³ The attribution of the power of creation is reflective of design in fashion, where the importance of creation and the people involved in it need to be considered in order to create a gender equal androgynous appearance through the medium of clothes.

At Dawn, Argile descended to earth and educated his men, "My favorite oeuvre, you have no need to serve the Wifmen, they are but another sculpture of your own. They may carry your offspring, but you must not forget, without your seed they cannot. It is them who must serve you and seek your seed!"

Then, in a declaration of war to his own trainee, Argile molded weapons out of the clay of his own and ordered his men to dismantle the power of the Wifmen.

When Vitreous finally awoke, her yawn was stopped by the seams between her lips. Her attempts at screaming proved pointless. Muted by her own master and unable to whisper her advice to her art, Vitreous watched how her creations fell into the servitude of Argile's men.

Vitreous knew that without speech the Wifmen could not be equal to the men's new dominance. In spite of the cruel nature of Argile's punishment, caring Vitreous tempted the clay master's ego by offering a second gift to the Wifmen. This time, she offered them the gift of creation itself, to produce art and communicate in ways beyond the spoken language. As the years passed, the wifmen communicated with themselves through the subtle medium of imagery. Art became a form of exaggeration of their internal thoughts, sculptures of their own presented their bodies in new ways, and clothes became a code for their suffrage. In time, this new language began to liberate the Wifmen of their endless servitude to men.

When Argile saw that the Wifmen created in the same way he did, he controlled the fury within him. With subtle laughter, he planned his next punishment for Vitreous.

*INVISIBLE TO
THE EYES OF MEN*

The suppression of the *Other*, meaning the sex that is second, serves to rationalize the power of masculinity and its dominance in culture.¹⁴ Thus, femininity symbolises the sex that is missing, made invisible by a masculine homogeneity. Consequently, by the simple lack of feminine recognition, the male body is interpreted as the most natural and normative form. Hence, the current androgynous appearance cannot effectively represent the blend of genders since it is constructed from the norm that is masculine.

With water for his clay, he soaked Vitreous' flawless Wifman sculpture, and as the water seeped through the clay, the sculpture turned translucent. Soon the Wifmen on Earth felt the poured water on their original effigy, and saw their skin turn clear as glass. Eventually the wifmen were completely transparent seeming invisible to the eyes of men. Thus, the men's power remained unquestioned and the Wifmen's revolt unseen. From then on, man's body became the most natural sculpture, and the Wifmen's the forgotten.



HAIR

The Myth of Gender

A tale of disobedience and rebellion, this myth explores why the androgyne confuses established notions of appearance. Influenced by norms of femininity and masculinity, the way the androgyne body is dressed is the source of that confusion. Through the allegory of gender distinctions in hair and clothing, the myth demonstrates why the existence of gender norms creates confusion when seeing an androgynous body. The dominant masculine norm becomes uneasy by the ambiguity created when that norm is defied. Moreover, the myth places itself into a more familiar context, as opposed to the two previous creation myths, by situating it within the sphere and semiology of fashion and its design processes.

*Fig 3.
Beatrice Oettinger
Raumkleider series
Flax dress*

*NORM HAD PRIDEFULLY
BUILT HIS EMPIRE*

Foucault suggested that the norm, fabricates expectations through disciplinary or subconscious discursive practices. In the myth, those practices are reflected in the empire the character Norm has built, where the practice of maintaining a large business parallels to the practice of maintaining an established status quo of appearances and behaviours.¹⁵

On the shores of the British Isles, where white waves clashed against white cliffs, there lived a successful businessman named Norm who controlled many clothing shops along the shore. Norm had pridefully built his empire with his unchanging determination, sense of duty and discipline to the cause. All could recognize him in his meticulously cut three-piece suits, a uniform he managed with poise and powerful class.

The businessman had a young adult son, who the deceased mother had wished to call Ambi. It seemed to the eyes of most, that Ambi presented in his free spiriting rebel nature, the opposite of his father's character. Found among youngsters roaming the streets with incongruous styles, Ambi stood out as the man with hair. With it he confused other boys' seductions and hid from his father's anger among groups of girls.

Soon Norm felt his own hair turn paler colours and noticed his strength receding, and having but one child as successor, decided to introduce Ambi to the business.

"My slippery son, soon your rebellious act must come to an end, as I tire and need a successor. To

*AN ACT OF SECRET
INSUBORDINATION*

“At both ends of fashion’s spectrum, couture and subcultural style, there is space for experimentation, for transgression and revolt. In Both, those who feel alienated from the mainstream can use visual codes as fantasy and provocation, where appearance is power and style the currency.”¹⁶ Through this narrative, one can understand Ambi’s disobedient act of cross-dressing clothes to appropriate the appearance of femininity and gaining power by opposing the norm. In his alienation, the character provokes the supposed conformity of genders by using the fluidity of clothes as a trigger.

you the business will belong and its success you will prolong.” He told Ambi.

While thankful for a promised future, Ambi hid his feeling of entrapment, wishing he could instead concern himself further with leisure and delights.

To himself he thought:

“Trapped I am in the traditions of the powerful Norm! All I wish is to cut and fashion the hairs of others as I do with my lengthy crown.”

Powerless to the word of Norm, Ambi followed his father’s footsteps and grew familiar with the business. Norm showed him the shops he owned, the fashions he sold, and the books he kept, but Ambi proved disinterested at every display his father made. Mostly, the boy would escape to find his friends whose hair he would fashion and with whom he felt free the most.

Bothered by his son’s defiant spirit, Norm made sure to control his succession by posting Ambi to a shop, where he could not leave until he had sold a thousand clothes. For weeks, Ambi remained confined among feminine clothes, and soon he grew bored and lonely.

Yet, the rebellious son of Norm soon found ways to entertain his lengthy postage, and in an act of secret insubordination, when no customers approached, Ambi wore the clothes his father sold. To his surprise, Ambi discovered that with his flat body he could fit in all of the women’s clothes and exclaimed:

“The clothes of women are no different to that of men. While cut in ways my eyes had not seen before, I fit in them as I would fit in my father’s suits!” and looking at his hair from the corner of his eye he turned to the mirror and called with laughter, “A woman I appear!”

*PANICKED BY
THE INCONGRUITY*

Sybil DelGaudio wrote of the ambiguity of Dietrich's image in 1993; "In highlighting difference, incongruity becomes another way of suggesting that things are not as they seem, Cross-dressing disguises one's sexual identity and presents an outer appearance that does not match the inner reality of one's sexual self"¹⁷ As suggested in an earlier myth, appearances can be deceiving, thus enabling a play of established notions and realities. Consequently, it suggests that androgyny can exist outside the binary gender norm, or even without any genders.

GONE WITH THE HAIR

"Since masculinity is held up as a signal of 'the norm' in Western Culture, any deviation from conventional male attire is viewed with great unease. Exaggeration within the dress of those men who wish to step outside these somewhat rigid definitions has a long history, and exaggeration itself need only be slight to provoke moral anxiety."¹⁸

In that moment, Norm whose worries for his son's rebellions had begun to fade, entered the shop, and provoked by his son's appearance and exclamation, turned pink in angst followed by red in anger.

"A woman you may not appear because a woman you are not! How dare you dress in the clothes I sell, have you no morals?" he screamed.

Panicked by the incongruity of his only son's appearance, Norm violently brought Ambi to his knees, and with a razor the gentleman always carried, he burst:

"A man you are and so a man you must resemble. Gone with the hair that blends you with the feminine!" Then in a single blow he shaved all the hair off Ambi's young head.

Punished, Ambi fell to the ground and from the corner of his eye again saw his hair executed on the floor. Norm, seeing his lesson well taught dropped his razor and left his son to his sorrow. For hours Ambi gazed at the loose hair and felt a part of himself disappear, but then in a moment of clarity, the boy put his hair styling talents to use. Cautiously he grabbed three strands of hair and braided them, then he took another three and wove that braid to the previous, and he repeated his action until a delicately thin dress was made. Ambi slowly clothed himself with his hair and in amazement saw in the mirror the garment dissolve into his body.

Soon, like weeds growing in Spring, Ambi's hair grew out of every pore on his skin forming a thick pelage. With the razor left behind, he fashioned his fur in intricate patterns and cuts, manipulating his hair in ways no man or woman had ever seen.

*AMBI APPEARED TO BE
NO MAN OR WOMAN*

This phrase reflects an established notion that one can be either one gender or the opposite, and when someone can't recognize any of them from the appearance, they understand it as genderless. Yet Entwistle highlights the "issue that ultimately should result in questioning how it can be possible to become genderless if everything we know is already marked by gender."¹⁹ In the next myth the idea of genderless or otherwise neutrality is further explored.

From that day Ambi appeared to be no man or woman, instead his enigmatic appearance of a wooly human confused others to identify him, and so they labelled him as a creature they would name **Ambiguous**.



MANNEQUIN

The Myth of Neutrality

Neutrality is a term that has been widely used in order to visualize androgyny. However, as this myth will demonstrate, the idea of neutrality limits the perception of the androgynous body by ignoring the fundamental characteristic of androgyny. In fact, neutrality attempts to eliminate all notions of gender identifications in order to propose a new standardized body, while androgyny, as the term suggests is a blend of genders. This myth takes heavy inspiration of Roland Barthes' syllogistic analysis of Balzac's novella "Sarrasine" where he highlights the fundamental problem of creating neutrality through a form of standardization as the standards naturally originate from pre-existing norms.

*Fig 4.
"Dynamic Mannequin."
Albert Ladenausstattung*

*WHOSE INDIFFERENT FACE
WAS UNKNOWN*

Naomi Schor: "Denied sexual difference shades into sexual indifference and following the same slippery path, into a paradoxical reinstatement of the very differences the strategy was designed to denaturalize."²⁰

In the bustling, fashion capital of Italy, lived the best tailors in all Occidental Europe, and among them, one of the most successful was Avid. He was one of the most skilled too and made the pursuit of beauty his life's purpose.

As Avid continued to construct and fit clothes, he grew tired of his craft. The tailor had seen all people and bodies and felt saddened by the idea that nobody could nourish his eyes with a surprising new kind of beauty. So, he expressed, "I have seen it all. I have made clothes for everyone, and none can blow me away with their enchanting body!" and announced,

"My next collection will be my last."

He grew used to his futile fate after a while, but then a new opportunity befell him.

There was an ambiguously beautiful youth called Zero, whose indifferent face was unknown to all tailors. Upon arriving to the capital with hopes of new beginnings, Zero began modelling and ventured through countless auditions.

As the model wandered through castings, many tailors looked upon him and desired him. But Zero could not be so enthralled, as Avid's clothes were the ones the model fancied to wear most.

*AN AIR OF PROVOCATION
AND RESERVE*

The syllogism of gendered appearance:

“All women present an air of provocation and reserve.

Zero presents an air of provocation and reserve.

Therefore, Zero is a woman.”²¹

With the collection underway, Avid finally began to audition. Still, as the models came and went, praying to be cast for the legendary tailor, Avid found no body to satisfy him.

Then, Zero appeared, whose presence prompted a terrible effect on Avid. Zero presented, in its entirety, all the excellence of a woman’s body, which in his experience as a tailor, he only saw partially on others, as details. Seized by a crazed passion, he decided that he would make of Zero his muse or end his work immediately.

Once cast, Zero would visit Avid’s studio daily, where she stood as the perfect template for the tailor’s clothes. Every measurement Avid took, and every pattern he drafted from Zero’s body were magical to his eyes. Never had Avid created clothes so powerful. Avid saw in Zero an air of provocation and reserve of which an extreme pusillanimity seduced him, because he saw in the model the truest essence of femininity. Anon, he fell in love and longed to possess her.

As the collection approached completion, Zero returned to Avid’s studio for a final fitting. The tailor, whose love for Zero’s beauty now preceded his passion for clothes, put forward the best corset he had ever made, and as he wrapped the garment around his muse he cried with joy:

“I must confide in you my love most beautiful Zero, your perfect body has given my work purpose again and I profess that I wish to make you mine.”

Zero stood still in embarrassment, quickly turning a discomforting red. He replied impartially:

“Thank you skillful Avid, the honor is mine.”

Avid slowly moved to Zero’s back and began elegantly tying the corset which formed the model’s

*THREW OUT ALL MALE
AND VITAL ORGANS*

Castration stands as a powerful symbol of neutrality where gender is eliminated.²² However, it continues the notion that sex is related to gender. Neutrality proposes that symbolic castration is a necessary action to become genderless, but it aligns itself with the binary thought that sex is equal to the gendered appearance.²³ By contrast, androgyny does and should oppose the notion of castration as it associates itself to the expression of hybridized genders, thus disassociating sex from gender.

THE CORPSE COULD STAND

Neutrality exists in absent form, where through elimination the neutral body cannot express gender, hence it is an inanimate body.²⁴ In this myth, this inanimate characteristic exists under the form of death that is taxidermized to become the subject of others who are through their gendered expression, animated beings.

*ZERO BECAME THE
STANDARD BODY*

Understanding neutrality as an inanimate body also suggests that it gets used to propose a new standard wherein gender does not exist. This may suggest a sense of equality but soon presents a false utopian dream²⁵ as the inanimate stands in opposition to the animate, creating in fact simply a new norm of body ideals. That ideal is reflected in the normalization of mannequins that designers use to design in order to dress utopian body shapes.

body perfectly. He subtly continued his speech:

“I have outdone myself with you, in this corset you will truly be the most desirable woman of the world!”

With a sudden look of amazement, slightly offended by the tailor’s compliment, Zero corrects:

“The most desirable woman you say. Avid, a woman I am not, but a man is what I have always been!”

Shocked by this new perspective, Avid pulled the corset strings violently, crushing with his divine corset Zero’s fragile organs. The ambiguous model choked and died at the hands of the artist who desired him most.

The murder was impervious to Avid’s mind which had been numbed by his muse’s revelation. In fact, upon noticing the magnificent carcass below him, he saw a chance to transform his yearning into reality. Thus, he reflected:

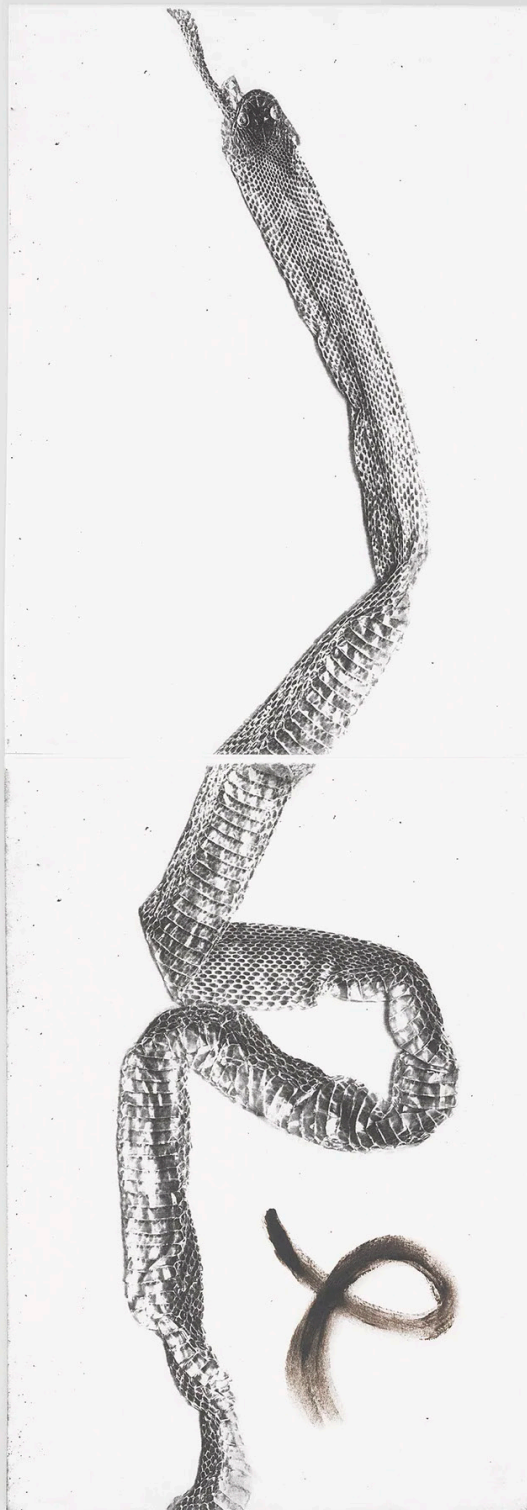
“The woman I love most lies dead in front of me, but her beauty may still live with my clothes.”

Then, with the sharp fabric scissors he opened the corpse, vigorously threw out all male and vital organs, and stuffed the body with the finest duck feathers. After, the tailor, whose actions resembled that of a taxidermist, fashioned a strong crinoline which he would place under the cadaver’s skin.

Now, the corpse could stand, and upon stitching the body to a close, Avid painted it white.

Finally, Avid fashioned from a man he lusted for, the beauty he always desired. The tailor created a mannequin, whose inanimate form would serve as a template for all his designs.

And so, as fashion continued, Zero became the standard body for all tailors to create from.



SHAPESHIFT

The Myth of Performance

Fig 5.
“Mute” Guiseppe Penone,
Published by Yvon Lambert, 2018

The final myth explores the notion of gender performance that writers such as Judith Butler have heavily demonstrated as powerful actions to influence the characteristics of gendered behavior. In this story, gender performance is rather literally paralleled to the exertion of acting and the acquisition of roles that are performed. Curiously, as actors prove themselves capable of performing multiple personas, gender performance equally suggests that it can escape the binary gender norm. Applied to the sociology of fashion, one can also see similarities to the constant re-negotiation of identities and standards of the bodies we dress. This myth is written similarly to the typical Katabases or Nekyias of Ancient Greek mythologies, where the hero meets the dead and returns with new insight. In this case, the hero gains insight through the narrative of method acting whereupon she gains insight on the character she is to embody as an actress and physically becomes that persona.

THE RIGID ACTRESS ALTER

Feminist theorists often suppose that cultural behaviors originate from “actors” who through their gestures embody personas and characters. Judith Butler famously put forward the idea of performance, where identity and thereby gender is a role played by the individual actors in a society.²⁶ Gender inequality was created by such actions which manifest themselves throughout all myths presented. But as actors adapt and change roles, performance is also a means to reaching equality among genders.

In the center of the most central city of France, pridefully sat the great theatre company known as the Comedy where a troupe of actors dramatized tales of the past in fantastical ways. There, as Spring season approached, the Director composed his next play.

Elsewhere in the city slept the rigid actress Alter, a girl whose nature was of obedience and calculation. That night, she experienced the most hopeful dream: she embodied the director’s next main character and excelled in her newfound fame.

When she awoke, she wasted no time to prepare and arrived at the company, where she would find the Director and her fellow actors and actresses gathered around the stage.

There the Director announced their next play which had none of the exaggerated speeches and hyperboles Alter was accustomed to, instead it was to be realistic and true. Then to her surprise, the Director informed all that Alter would play the star role and described the character:

“A snake-like queen, whose fluid personality overwhelms her courtier’s minds with temptation and lust,” he said.

*THE METHOD YOU
MUST FOLLOW*

To Butler, these performed acts reveal themselves through cultural and bodily actions, that require a new vocabulary that resists the binary performances imposed on gender.²⁷ In the case of this myth, method acting represents this resistant vocabulary. In opposition to the hyperbolized type of acting, Alter uses method acting to deeply understand the identity she is expressing. In feminist studies, this would be reflective of the deconstruction of one's identity.

ALTER SWALLOWED THE PILL

In swallowing the drug and hallucinating, Alter is capable to escape past acts that shaped her and, in her inebriation, enacts new gestures and desires that while have always existed within her, permeate outwards into a new uncontrolled performance.²⁸ Yet through the hallucinations, the elaborate fabrications of such enactments are highlighted too.

Alter's shock turned to jubilation as the actors gathered around her in celebration. Although her recent dream seemed to be coming true, the rigid's actress wondered why she of all the talents in the troupe should play this character that seemed so distanced from her nature.

The following days, Alter's wonderment turned to worry as the Director expressed regret, claiming the new star was too controlling and merely read the lines instead of performing them.

"You must embody the character, obedient Alter, your skin must become the Queen's, only then will you truly perform." The Director taught, and with his wise voice he sustained, "to be the Queen you must first abandon your rigid nature, then you must feel tempted by another, and you must lust for one more, that is the method you must follow."

As the days neared the opening of the play, Alter failed to apply the Director's method. Her concern manifested in rashes on her skin that she had scratched into existence. As dead skin began to peel, she could feel her body slowly morph into something else.

By the eve of the opening, the actress fell into tears and surrendered. Thereupon came Anxiety, who observed Alter's desperate rehearsing, and offered Alter to escape to a bar and relax. Desperate in her capitulation and pained by her rashes, Alter went against her nature and accepted.

And so, the two actresses drank until their senses defected, Alter participated in the habits of her apparent opposite and felt her past behavioral genre fade. As she sat inebriated, Anxiety offered her a pill and promised her a journey to another world where her identity would change. Tempted to escape, Alter swallowed the pill and allowed her

*FEAR OF LOSING HER
ROLE TO ANXIETY*

If gender is imposed by clear acts of fabrication, then the appearance of gender is itself also a constructed identity, a performative role that actors happily desire to play. Hence, when Anxiety threatens to steal the role from Alter, it is in fact a fear of having appearances being taken away. In the case of Androgyny, the suppression of anxiety in the performances of identities and genders enables the actor(s) to blend them together.

ALTER SHED HER BODY

Fashion is intimately implicated in this re-negotiation of identities, tied forever as it is to the body, revealing our desires and anxieties in an often-provocative way. Identity and morality are increasingly fluid, shifting self-consciously to create and then dismantle existing norms.²⁹

mind to travel.

Hallucinating, Alter saw Anxiety's spontaneous spirit in a new way, and craved to make love to her. Besieged by lust, Alter kissed her opposite and slept with her.

In the morning, Alter awoke late and sickened, then to her confusion noticed Anxiety had left. Upon her delayed arrival at the Comedy, she found the actress she had coupled with performing as the Queen and in her bewilderment confronted Anxiety.

"Why did you not wake me and why are you playing the Queen?" Alter said.

"Your absence drove the Director to pick me as your alternate and why would I have woken you, our ways had separated late last night,"

Anxiety replied.

Alter grew more perplexed and doubtfully stated:

"Last night you and I made love, did we not?"

Realizing that Alter hallucinated the coupling of the two, Anxiety succumbed to a frenzied laughter and told her the truth of the past evening, then Anxiety returned to her dressing room.

Alter saw no farce in her belief, and in a desperate fear of losing her role to Anxiety, culminated all her temptation and lust to end Anxiety's mockery. And so, Alter followed Anxiety to the dressing room and killed her. Distraught by her actions, Alter felt that she had behaved in ways that opposed her nature, but rather in ways that resembled the behavior of the role of the Queen. Soon, below her peeling skin, she felt her body transform. True to a snake molting, Alter shed her body and shape-shifted as the Queen. That night, Alter had gave the best performance the Comedy had ever seen, perfectly embodying another.

From that day forth, Alter shapeshifted with ease into her new roles and left behind her a trail of dead skin from performances of the past.

Conclusion

The androgyne first appeared in a myth, and it seems that it remains to this day a mythical body. While it seems impossible to truly visualize the androgyne appearance, it is perhaps exactly that ambiguous image of this body that makes androgynes so mysteriously intriguing. Taking away an idea of standardizing the androgynous appearance and instead maintaining it in a narrative imagination like a myth enables the androgyne to take any form through personal visions, in other words the androgyne is in fact a shapeshifter. Hence, as myths explain the unexplainable through fantasized phenomena, the mythical shapeshifting androgyne may explain the performances of our appearances which equally morph as our identities evolve.

In fact, as the *Genesis* highlighted, appearances can be deceiving and can thereby be played with or transformed. Similarly, as the *Myth of Gender* shows, clothes can fit on anybody and have the power to transform those appearances, enabling the wearer to change their outer appearance. Moreover, by accepting that our relation to appearances can shapeshift into anything, fashion design could evolve to escape the dual-gendered norm of clothes. This suggestion continues in the *Myth of Neutrality*, where the body we design

for can and must change to escape a standardization of appearances. As a designer, I can use this understanding to firstly develop clothes for individual bodies regardless of their gender, and secondly use the performative aspect of wearing clothes to transform bodies into new shapes. Returning to my own interactions demonstrated in the *Foreword*, through these myths I can understand that my own fashionable appearance is a role I choose to play to escape my gender's conforming characteristics. The androgynous appearance is an act of transformation and blending aesthetics and using the body as a medium to mystify and propose new shapes. Consequently, the androgyne is not limited to the binary of sex or gender, but rather a blend of all performative expressions. In that case, is the word "androgyne" itself even valid for this mythical shapeshifting body?

Endnotes

- 1 Monique Wittig within: Butler, Judith, *et al. Trouble Dans Le Genre: Le féminisme Et La Subversion De L'identité*. 2005. p.98
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.229
- 3 Arnold, Rebecca. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*, 2001. p.122-123.
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- 6 “Woman (n.).” Etymology,
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- 7 Butler, Judith, *et al. Trouble Dans Le Genre: Le féminisme Et La Subversion De L'identité*. 2005. p.229
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.228.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.97. (Monique Wittig,
« Paradigmes », p101.)
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- 11 *Ibid.*, p.85.

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- 13 Butler, Judith, et al. *Trouble Dans Le Genre: Le féminisme Et La Subversion De L'identité*. 2005. p.235.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.80.
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- 16 Arnold, Rebecca. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*. 2001. p.109.
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- 19 Enwtistle, *The fashioned body*, p.178 within Johansson, Karin. "Undressing the Androgynous Body." 2017.
- 20 Arnold, Rebecca. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*. 2001. p.121-122.

- 21 Marty Éric. *Le Sexe Des Modernes: Pensée Du Neutre Et théorie Du Genre: Essai*. 2021. p.161.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.299.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.161.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.304.
- 25 Arnold, Rebecca. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*. 2001. p.118.
- 26 Butler, Judith, et al. *Trouble Dans Le Genre: Le féminisme Et La Subversion De L'identité*. 2005. p.96.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.224.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.259.
- 29 Arnold, Rebecca. *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20th Century*. 2001. p.124.

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