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Haunted by the Gynander: Disruptive Genders

The androgyne ... is the virginal adolescent male, still somewhat feminine, while the gynander can only be the woman who strives for male characteristics, the sexual usurper; the feminine form aping the masculine! ... The first originates in the Bible and designates the initial stage of human development; the Graeco-Catholic tradition has consecrated its use, whereas I have taken the other from botany, and with it I baptize not the sodomite but any tendency on the part of woman to take on the role of a man

(Josephin Peladan The Gynander, 1891, cited in Dijkstra 1986, p. 273)

‘Feminine’ was a test, like some witch trial she was pre-ordained to fail.

(Barbara Kingsolver Prodigal Summer)

Josephin Peladan was a Rosicrucian whose book The Gynander was, as Dijkstra points out, written in the closing years of the nineteenth century and thus ‘inevitably full of Darwinian cliches’ (Dijkstra 1986, p. 273). One of a substantial body of texts produced in that era in response to the first wave of the women’s liberation movement, it is representative of the genre in its anxious attempt to recruit all the authoritative voices of the age to its cause. By appropriating both religion (Catholic Christianity) and science (albeit botany!) and tying these together with historical fantasies about classical Greece (a cultural ideal for his peers), Peladan is laying claim to the most unyielding of foundations for discourses of inversion. As we have seen, contemporary science has yet to outgrow this intellectual legacy of the nineteenth century.
It is also noteworthy that Peladan, writing as the twentieth century approached, distinguishes so clearly between androgyne (effeminacy in male persons) and gynandry (masculinity in female persons) and that he regards the former as a superior way to be male and the latter as an inferior way to be female. Gender and its variations here plays out very differently for men and for women. Interestingly, this is so precisely because the conjunction of two men doubles, as it were, the available amount of masculine ‘essence’ (something of high positive value), whilst that of two women doubles the amount of femininity (something of strongly negative value). Dijkstra explains the logic of the time thus: ‘a physical encounter between males, unlike the encounter between a man and a woman, results in a strengthening of the male’s higher faculties, of his “soul-force”’. Peladan’s view of lesbianism simply follows this logic:

Since she has no more reason or brain than a child of thirteen, the gynander will, in her conjunction with another woman, be no more than an idiot joined with a fool, and no elevation, no amelioration, can ever be expected to come from such detestable mixtures. (Dijkstra 1986, p. 273)

It is clear that the operations of masculinist ideologies, here expressed as bitter misogyny, produce precisely gendered forms or kinds of homophobic discourse which construct homosexualities as distinctly and distinctively gendered. This is not a new observation (Connell 1987, Lucia-Hoagland and Penelope 1988, Pharr 1988, Edwards 1994) but it is one which biomedical science has failed to acknowledge and account for and it is something which I intend to draw attention to here.

In tracing discourses of gender inversion through the self-fashioning of contemporary women, therefore, several points must be borne in mind. Firstly, gender is not an unmodifiable variable; the ‘masculinity’ putatively observed in certain women is not comparable with the ‘masculinity’ proper to men (otherwise female inverts would be ‘better’ than their non-invert peers, for they would exhibit positively valued masculine ‘soul-force’). Secondly, discourses of inversion contain an internal contradiction, in that lesbians are at the same time excessively feminine and unnaturally masculine. Finally, such discourses have traditionally elided sexuality and gender in specific ways such that ‘masculinity’ stands for (pun intended) a bundle of characteristics to do with the presence of erotic capacity, whilst ‘femininity’ signifies a putatively ‘opposite’ bundle of characteristics to do with the absence of that