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## Shelley and Androgyny: Teaching "The Witch of Atlas"

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## Shelley and Androgyny: Teaching "The Witch of Atlas"

*Diane Long Hoeveler*

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I have taught "The Witch of Atlas" on both the graduate and the undergraduate levels as an interesting variant on Shelley's mythic quest for union with the ideal; however, in that poem the Shelleyan hero has been replaced by a woman, a Witch, and her ironically ideal creation takes the form of a hermaphrodite. Shelley seems to be gently poking fun at himself, his poetic obsessions, his idealizations, and his failures to achieve erotic apotheosis. Or perhaps he is suggesting that any attempt to make external what must be internal is doomed to fail, his own ideals notwithstanding. He sought a selfless self on the one hand; on the other hand, he idealized the notion of merger with a feminine other who would complete his identity. He knew on a deep and intuitive level that his personal and poetic quests were bound up with the permutations and limitations of sexual identity; neither sex can escape its gendered consciousness long enough to accept the other as a complement to the self, rather than as a threat.

I have developed a method of teaching "The Witch" through a series of heuristics. Rather than present my theory on the meanings of the poem and the androgynous, I present the pieces of evidence that I have used as a scholar to interpret the poem and then ask the students to interpret, supplement, and in various ways respond to the data.

The first piece of evidence I present is the general notion of androgyny as distinctly different from hermaphroditism, a distinction that Shelley understood and accepted (see Brown; Veeder). The androgynous union of masculine and feminine principles in a psyche has long been confused with the presence of male and female sexual organs in one person. Hermaphroditism produces a physical monstrosity that merely accentuates the differences between the sexes. Androgyny, by contrast, is a merger of psychic characteristics within the imagination. The image of the androgyne expresses the restoration of the psyche to its original, asexual wholeness, while the hermaphrodite represents an earthly and physical parody of that state.

The second large category of evidence I present is the mass of contradictory critical discussions of the poem by various literary critics. (The critics I cite include Knight 228-29; Grabo, *Witch* 22; Baker, *Shelley's Poetry* 211; Holmes, *Pursuit* 605; Bloom, *Mythmaking* 100, 197; Rubin 223; Reiman, *Shelley* 118-19; and Rosenbaum 40.) Students see from those varying interpretations that criticism of "The Witch" is divided; some see Shelley's hermaphrodite as an ideal spirit, and others see it as an attack on that ideal. The exercise also helps students realize that there is no one right interpretation. At the same time, the nature of textual and extratextual evidence or the lack of it becomes a crucial topic of class discussion.

The third piece of evidence I present to the students is a picture of the visual source for the Witch's creation, the statue of the sleeping hermaphrodite that Shelley saw in the Borghese Palace in Rome, where he wrote short pieces on several classical subjects. Supplementing the illustration is his response to the hermaphrodite as recorded in the rejected fragments of *Epipsychidion*; he compares Emily to a hermaphrodite: "Like that sweet marble monster of both sexes, / Which looks so sweet and gentle that it vexes, / The very soul" (Ingpen and Peck 6: 378). Similar in tone is Shelley's most serious charge against Elizabeth Hitchener—that she was "a hermaphroditical beast of a woman" (F. L. Jones, *Letters* 1: 336). On the basis of these two statements, Shelley's translation of Aristophanes's speech in Plato's *Symposium* (also given to the students as another piece of evidence) and Shelley's familiarity with the classical tradition, the students generally conclude that Shelley's use of the hermaphrodite has been misread; he was using a pagan image with a negative meaning, but contemporary literary critics have been inclined to interpret the image as its opposite, a Platonic ideal.

We now have our first premise, and the students are ready to extrapolate from it to interpret the two major poetic personae in the poem, the Witch and her creation, the hermaphrodite. At that point I introduce the notion of true and false copies of love objects, imagery that Shelley drew from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. I contend that it is most plausible that Shelley intended the Witch to be an androgynous foil to the hermaphrodite she created. The Witch is Shelley's True Florimell, the true love object who is androgynous and immortal, while the hermaphrodite is the false copy, a purely physical love who lures the poet into the limiting realms of self.

"The Witch of Atlas," we conclude, contrasts the two forms that love and women have assumed throughout Shelley's poetry. The Witch, in the tradition of Asia and Cythna, is an idealized anima figure who holds the promise of androgynous reintegration. Like them, the Witch lives for a time "Within a cavern by a secret fountain" (56) to gain the wisdom necessary for her redemptive activities. Like Asia, she is also veiled and brilliantly beautiful (151). Like Spenser's Una, the Witch can tame the savage, although the source of her power seems to be both her intellect and her spirit (104, 89–91). She is similar to the poet described in the preface to *Alastor*, who unified the wonderful, wise, and beautiful, the functions of the imagination, the mind, and the heart. But, like the hero of *Alastor* and like Shelley himself, the Witch is not content with her own self-integration; she must have a double to reflect her own integration.

The Witch's creation of the hermaphrodite (321–36) is closely examined in class as a piece of textual duplicity and self-irony by Shelley the poet. On the surface (which is how students initially tend to read), we have an idealized

portrait, but the tone and the action or lack of action make it clear that the hermaphrodite is a parody, a sterile "Image" and "shape," a physical anomaly, a "sexless thing" (326,327,329). The Witch was earlier described as the embodiment of "gentleness and power" (96); so now is the hermaphrodite described (332). The immediate allusion is to the creation of the False Florimell, for the creation of the hermaphrodite stands as a mockery of the Witch's androgynous perfection. Further, the hermaphrodite's qualities are phrased in tentative terms: "It *seemed* to have developed no defect" (330; my italics), but the poet implies some uncertainty on the point. Finally, the superficially ideal hermaphrodite exists in a perpetual state of lethargy, spending most of its time reclining in the Witch's boat "with folded wings and unawakened eyes" (362). It unfurls its wings only once, causing the boat to journey upstream against the current, a suitably ambiguous gesture, because the journey upstream can lead nowhere.

Only when the hermaphrodite disappears from the poem—its exit marked with considerably less ceremony than was its entrance—does the Witch begin to use her powers seriously. After the hermaphrodite's departure, the Witch, like a poet, uses her eyes to see the "naked beauty of the soul," and she is able through "a charm of strange device" to "Make that spirit mingle with her own" (571-76). That achievement resembles the goal of the alchemist, who seeks the essential form in an attempt to rejoin it and thereby redeem himself and his world. The Witch's power ultimately has poetic and spiritual implications, for she attempts to rejuvenate a dead man by transforming his lifeless, mortal body into a body that is "Mute, breathing, beating, warm and undecaying . . . And living in its dreams beyond the rage / Of death or life" (610-14). Of course, the Witch cannot return the man to life, but she can instill the dreams of imagination that have their own immortality. The poet can hope for no more from his art.