

# Declining Divisions: Non-Binary Gender Identities and American Cultural Consciousness

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Those persons we refer to as transgender or gender non-confirming have existed cross-culturally and throughout history. These individuals took on social roles and behaviors that differed from those expected for their apparent sex designation at birth. Among many Native American tribes, for example, elders observed gender variance within children and performed initiation ceremonies to honor them in appropriate social roles for their nature (Williams, 1986). In many cases, gender variance was treated as a sacred gift, and its recipient was marked for additional gifts, such as dreams, visions, and healing.

Much of this changed, however, under the influence of European Christianity, as missionaries and explorers imposed their own gender essentialist views upon native peoples (Williams, 1986). Gender variant individuals were punished, persecuted, and ultimately murdered, falling victim to the unforgiving forces of religious colonization. As a result, much of Western culture inherited a strictly binary system of gender, thought to be inherent. Even today, many conservative Americans insist that humans come in only two types, male and female, identified by genitals and unchangeable.

The initial resurgence of non-binary gender identities in the United States is difficult to trace, simply because of this binary hegemony (McNabb, 2018). Americans have historically lacked language or societal constructs which would allow for the possibility of non-binary gender identities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, sexual orientation and gender identity were readily confused, such that lesbians who did not conform to social expectations of femininity were sometimes referred to as a “third sex” (Leng, 2014, p. 227).

Transgender activist Kate Bornstein (1994) experienced this lack of understanding during her own journey of transition during the mid-1980s. Describing her thought process, she wrote:

I know I'm not a man—about that much I'm very clear, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm probably not a woman either, at least according to a lot of people's rules on this sort of thing. The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists we be one or the other—a world that doesn't bother to tell us exactly what one or the other is. (p. 8, emphasis in original)

As a result, Bornstein experienced deep shame for her own confusing feelings, ultimately transitioning to a female identity simply because doing so was less painful than continuing to falsely present as male. Later, her 1994 memoir was provocatively titled *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*.

The term “genderqueer” is analogous to non-binary, referring to persons who identify as neither male nor female, or some combination of the two. The first known usage of genderqueer appeared in the Spring 1995 issue of the newsletter “In Your Face: Political Activism Against Gender Oppression.” In the same brief note, editrix Riki Anne Wilchins (1995) presciently referred to persons “transgressively gendered” and “those of us whose gender expressions are so complex they haven't even been named yet” (p. 4). Two years later, Wilchins (1997) went on to argue that strictly binary gender concepts were rejected by Americans specifically because they threatened the machinery of heterosexism. “The unstructured multiplicity,” she wrote, “the sheer creativity of queer genders strike at the very foundations of heterosexuality, and this is exactly why queers have historically been targets for straight prejudice, bashing, and outright hatred” (p. 68).

The concept of non-binary gender identities remained obscure in American culture for another two decades. The ubiquitous search engine, Google, allows users to trace the frequency of search terms over multiple years. Google searches for the term, “non-binary,” remained almost nonexistent until 2013, when they began to escalate significantly. Another indicator of this rapid change is its appearance within official documents. No form of government identification existed in the United States for non-binary persons until 2017. Now, in 2021, eighteen states and the District of Columbia offer driver’s licenses with an “X” gender designation. Thirteen states currently allow corrected birth certificates with the same marker.

This increased attention, however, has failed to translate into unanimous acceptance. When Oregon pioneered gender-neutral driver’s licenses, social media generated a plethora of angry comments, disparaging transgender persons as mentally ill and declaring that gender could not exist beyond the male/female binary (KOB-TV NBC 5, 2017). More recently, when Joseph R. Biden Jr. became the first U.S. President to officially recognize the Transgender Day of Visibility, thousands of Americans vilified transgender persons and insisted that non-binary genders were a religious and natural impossibility (Biden, 2021). The vehement and irrational nature of these reactions marks the existence of what I have elsewhere called the “Pentheus complex.”

The Pentheus complex seeks to guard an archetypal core that I believe is best represented by the encounter between the god Dionysus and Pentheus, King of Thebes. Euripides’ epic poem, *The Bacchae*, tells the story of Dionysus returning to the city of his birth to publicly lay claim to his divinity (Woodruff, 1999). Years earlier, his mother had been impregnated by Zeus, yet few in the village believed her story (Kerenyi, 1951/1980). Semele implored Zeus to prove the truthfulness of her tale by revealing

himself in glory, but when he did so, both she and her house were destroyed. Zeus rescued Dionysus from Semele's womb, and sewed the fetus into his own thigh until it could be fully formed. As a consequence, the young god was called twice-born, delivered first from a female, but second from a male. For his safety, Dionysus was entrusted to mortals who raised the child as a girl. This unusual origin would foreshadow Dionysus' own peculiar nature.



*Image 1 Second century Roman statue of Dionysus, Louvre Museum*

Typically depicted as male, yet notably effeminate in body and manner, Dionysus became the subject of scorn. The young god was given names in reference to the phallus, yet also called “the man without true virility,” “the womanish,” “the man-womanly,” and even “the hybrid” in an intersex (what used to be termed hermaphroditic) sense (Kerenyi, 1951/1980, p. 273). Dionysus appears in various artworks flaunting a rejection of gendered cultural expectations, wearing feminine clothing and hairstyles. Even the early Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, condemned Dionysus’ “feminine nature,” including the habit of “decorating himself with cymbals, and garlands, and female attire” (Martyr,

150/1868, p. 281).

In modern terms, Dionysus could be seen as non-binary in terms of gender identity. Early rituals represented this essence of the god by means of a vertical pole, upon which hung a bearded mask and a woman's robe, a combination of explicitly

masculine and feminine referents (Evans, 1988). Dionysian rites involved men dressing in women's clothing, and women wearing exaggerated faux phalluses made from red leather (Evans, 1988). Karl Kerényi (1976) noted that according to at least some sources, these rites appear to have involved the castration of some male-identified followers, again blurring simplistic, binary gender distinctions.

Upon his return to Thebes, villagers refused to recognize the mature Dionysus' divinity and took him before Pentheus, their king (Woodruff, 1999). Here, the story becomes especially interesting. Dionysus was taken before King Pentheus, who likewise scoffed at Dionysus' claims to divinity. It was not enough, however, for Pentheus to simply regard Dionysus as fully human. Rather, Pentheus began to inventory the god's androgynous features:

Well, well. Not bad. You're actually quite good-looking.  
I mean, to women. Of course, that's why you came to Thebes.  
This long hair of yours—you're no wrestler, are you—  
These curls along your cheek—oh, they'll swoon for you—  
And this fine complexion—you had to work on that,  
Staying out of the sun, in the shadows, hunting,  
With your pretty face for sex. Aphrodite's business. (Woodruff, 1999, p. 17)

Knowing that *The Bacchae* was written as a stage play, readers can imagine how this scene would be staged. Pentheus slowly walks around Dionysus, stroking the god's long hair, touching the god's smooth cheeks. The king describes the body of Dionysus in erotic terms. He acknowledges the beauty of Dionysus, but then rushes to reassert his own heterosexuality, claiming to only notice what the *women* of Thebes might appreciate. At the same time, Pentheus highlights Dionysus' feminine qualities to exclude the god from stereotypically male roles such as wrestling, hunting, and outdoor labor.



*Image 2 Alan Cumming as Dionysus, Tony Curran as Pentheus, from [alancumming.com](http://alancumming.com).*

Queer readers, in particular, can see both revulsion and arousal in Pentheus' peculiar attention to a body that transgresses social norms. The king's reaction to Dionysus illustrates a cluster of associations, experiences, and memories linked to gender, revealing his own anxiety at feeling forced to maintain the norms of cisgender, heterosexual men. Martha Nussbaum (1990) wrote of Pentheus:

He mocks the soft, sinuous, feminine form of Dionysus; his long curls, "full of desire," his untanned skin, suggestive of the indoor world of women, his womanly form. For this aspect of the god threatens the hard boundaries between categories on which Pentheus insists. But he himself is drawn in complex ways to that womanly condition—both sexually attracted ("you're not impossible to look at") and drawn through identification and longing. He desires the condition of womanly passivity, even while he scorns it. He desires the dissolution of boundaries, even while he insists on them most firmly. (pp. xxxvii-xxxviii)

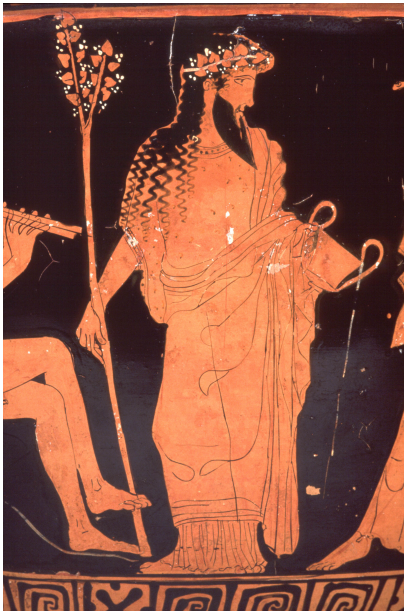


Image 3 Attic Red Figure,  
Harvard Art Museums

Pentheus' simultaneous revulsion and arousal mirrors the response of many modern Americans to the ambiguity that transgender and gender non-conforming persons present. As Patricia Berry (2008) explained, we as humans construct hard gender dichotomies (among others) in order to avoid feelings of inferiority, even while we remain privately enthralled by the violation of such markers.

I would like to reframe the scene between

Dionysus and Pentheus. Pentheus is the king of Thebes—a privileged person of wealth, education, and power. He holds the authority to declare whether society will recognize Dionysus' true nature. This power differential mirrors the relative position of Jungian analysts, therapists, or scholars with regard to transgender and non-binary persons. They, along with medical professionals, represent what members of the transgender and non-binary community refer to as *gatekeepers*—persons to whom society has given authority to either grant or deny access to the mechanisms of gender transition. Dionysus reflects the divine androgyne, a non-binary figure whose identity is subject to the king only due to society's default of rejection and disaffirmation.

Jungian analysts and scholars are not immune to preconceived prejudices in this arena. The first time I spoke on the subject of gender identity at a Jungian conference, one analyst confidently proclaimed that every transgender client he had worked with had an anima or animus that stood opposite to their gender assigned at birth. From his



gender-essentialist perspective, this invalidated the reality of his clients' stated gender identity. This analyst's declaration went unchallenged by the other analysts and scholars present.

Another analyst uses her Jungian credentials to support an active career in anti-transgender activism, arguing in professional journals, podcasts, and popular media that young transgender or non-binary persons should not be allowed to transition, because their gender identity is the illusory image of a "psychic epidemic" (Marchiano, 2017, p. 145). In one interview, she expressed that a minor's declaration of transgender or non-binary identity should be treated no differently than their longing for the newest model of iPhone (Murphy, 2017). With perhaps her most callous tone, she dismisses the fact that over forty percent of non-affirmed transgender teens report suicide attempts (Haas, 2014), arguing that the existence of transitioning adults proves that transgender teens can (and should) survive their dysphoria without gender-affirming treatment (Marchiano, 2017). This analyst's extreme views make her a popular voice within *Fourth Wave Now*, an organization of parents who adamantly refuse to accept their transgender or non-binary children's gender identity, let alone provide proper medical and therapeutic treatment.

The fact that such outmoded views exist in contrast to the vast majority of medical and psychological professionals should not be surprising in a world that seems increasingly polarized and torn apart. Most recently, even one of the world's most popular children's authors has inexplicably chosen to raise her voice against transgender persons, particularly transgender women. The damage created by these views is incalculable when it comes to disaffirmation, rejection, exclusion, denial of treatment, and in too many cases, murder.

I would argue that views such as these are not ultimately Jungian, regardless of the gender-essentialist framework which many have attributed to C. G. Jung. For Jung, the androgyne or hermaphrodite (a word that has fallen out of favor since, replaced by intersex) was an important symbol of psychic development. From his words, I believe we can see non-binary persons as a harbinger of cultural change—not just in what is increasingly accepted, but what is taking place psychically on a collective level, despite the resistance we see nightly on news broadcasts.

As we can see from the medieval writings the primordial idea has become a symbol of the creative union of opposites, a ‘uniting symbol’ in the literal sense. In its functional significance the symbol no longer points back, but forward to a goal not yet reached. Notwithstanding its monstrosity, the hermaphrodite has gradually turned into a subduer of conflicts and a bringer of healing, and it acquired this meaning in relatively early phases of civilization. This vital meaning explains why the image of the hermaphrodite did not fade out in primeval times but, on the contrary, was able to assert itself with increasing profundity of symbolic content for thousands of years. . . . As civilization develops, the bisexual [i.e., bi-gendered, or non-binary] primordial being turns into a symbol of the self, where the war of opposites finds peace. In this way the primordial being becomes the distant goal of man’s self-development, having been from the very beginning a projection of his unconscious wholeness. Wholeness consists in the union of the conscious and the unconscious personality” (Jung, 1951/1969, pp. 174-175).

Writing elsewhere about the alchemical production of the famed Philosopher’s Stone, Jung (1959/1969) noted that “everything separated must be united again” (p. 170) making the long-suffering distillation of the stone a symbol of individuation.

While I would not presume for a moment to misconstrue Jung by arguing that non-binary persons are somehow further along this project of self-development as

individuals, I wish to suggest that the rapid rise of non-binary visibility since 2013 speaks to something happening in the broader American culture—that even as we are fighting what seems like ideological civil wars, something is taking place on a deeper level.

A recent Pew Research Center (Dimock & Wike, 2020) report discussed the unique degree to which Americans are divided along political lines. “America’s relatively rigid, two-party electoral system stands apart by collapsing a wide range of legitimate social and political debates into a singular battle line that can make our differences appear even larger than they may actually be” (para. 7). Certainly, both news and social media highlight what seems like an insurmountable polarization within American culture.

Regardless of how vociferous American political divisions may seem, however, the majority of Americans desire compromise and unity. In a survey just prior to the 2020 presidential election, Pew Research Center found that 86% of Trump supporters, and 89% of Biden supporters believed that if their preferred candidate was elected, he should “focus on addressing the concerns of all Americans, even if it means disappointing some of [their] supporters” (Dimock & Wike, 2020, para 10). Jennifer Wolak (2020), an associate professor of political science at the University of Colorado at Boulder, found that 78% of Americans prefer members of Congress who show willingness to compromise with their fellow legislators. While political views may represent a limited view of division and unity, these studies suggest that Americans yearn for wholeness and healing.

Jung (1933/1970) wrote that “all art intuitively apprehends coming changes in the collective consciousness” (p. 83). In recent years, non-binary persons such as Sam Smith (singer), Jonathan Van Ness (stylist), Ruby Rose (actor), and Indya Moore (actor)

have become increasingly prominent in the arts and media. In 2019, Merriam-Webster declared singular “they,” a pronoun used by many non-binary persons, as their Word of the Year. The American Civil Liberties Union (2021) has recently launched an effort through petitions and other means, advocating for federal identification such as passports to be issued with accurate gender markers for non-binary persons. The growing prominence of these signals, whether in the arts of performance, writing, or self-representation, herald a change in the collective consciousness toward what Jung (1951/1969) acknowledged as a symbol of future healing, conflict resolution, and wholeness.

Might I suggest, then, that as we analysts and scholars fill the role of privileged Pentheus, we welcome the divine Dionysus who enters our spaces? However, they might present as individuals—be it androgynous, femme, masculine-of-center, or whatever they might choose—let us see them as not only beautiful individuals, but also as messengers of the *anima mundi*, calling us to a collective unity that will advance psyche. As we do so, we may all find greater freedom to become ourselves.

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