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AMANDA CROSS AND ANDROGYNY

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***Abstract:** Amanda Cross is the pen name Carolyn Heilbrun used for her mystery fiction. In two of her novels she employed the theme of androgyny. She also wrote the non-fiction, 1973 Toward a Recognition of Androgyny in which she promoted androgyny as aspect of her approach to feminism, an intellectual denial of any significant differences between the sexes. While that thread of American feminism has lost favor in current feminist ideologies, matters of gender identity are rising in prominence in American social and political thought, reviving the debate on male and female roles and identities in the United States.*

***Keywords:** Amanda Cross, Androgyny, Carolyn Heilbrun, Feminism, gender identity.*

The novelist Amanda Cross (1964-2003) and the academician Carolyn Gold Heilbrun (1926-2003) had much in common. Both were feminists, both were social progressives and both were committed to the proposition of true gender equality. And no wonder; Amanda Cross is the pen name used by Carolyn Heilbrun for her mystery fiction.

Carolyn Gold was born on 13 January 1926. She grew up in New

York City and spent most of her life there. In 1945, while still in college at Wellesley, she married James Heilbrun, who “actively encouraged her academic and literary endeavors; indeed, the probability that her emotional needs were officially settled by the fact of her marriage might have enabled her to focus without distraction on her intellectual work” (Kress 1997:25). In her senior year Heilbrun began her career as a writer.

Earning her Ph.D. in English Literature from Columbia in 1959, Heilbrun assigned to herself the mission of revising the literary “canon” to recognize the contributions of women writers to literature, and in the process became an influential figure in American literature (Blain, Clements and Grundy 1990:508-509; Boken 1996; Cleveland 1980; Marshall 1994; Murphy 1999).

She emerged as a leading academic and feminist, and was the author or co-author of 11 non-fiction books. She also wrote 15 mysteries and a collection of short stories under her pen-name. These are distinctly different from both the classical murder mystery and from those of modern male writers because of her deliberate inclusion of women's issues in the plots (Pervushina and Kania 2000; Roberts 1985). Later women mystery writers have followed, notably Sara Paretsky (Kania 2006), but she was a pioneer in connecting criminal motivations to the women's issues of the times (Roberts 1985). Her writing, non-fiction and fiction alike, contributed substantially to women's literature, and her leadership helped advance the agenda of the women's movement in the United States, creating the image of “the new woman” of feminism (Pervushina 2000). As a tenured professor of literature at Columbia University and later as the president of the Modern Language Association (Kress 1977:4), she was a powerful advocate for women's issues, especially those bearing on the female identity in the academic world.

Heilbrun emerged as an important woman writer, as a theoretician of feminism, and as an advisor for other women scholars just as the “second wave of feminism” was rising. Each period - the beginnings of contemporary feminism, radical feminism and liberal feminism - affected the creative writing, the social views, and the outlook of this prominent author (Pervushina 2000; Pervushina and Kania 2000). She saw a tension between acting as a woman and “needing an identity not overdetermined by our gender,” creating a “place of liminality” for modern women (1999:86).

When she committed suicide (McFadden 2003) at age 77 her suicide also resulted in the deaths of Amanda Cross, her alter-ego, and Kate Fansler, her recurring character in the mysteries.

Collectively, the loss of these three women saddened her many fans. Amanda Cross had been part of the popular literary scene for almost forty years! Her first mystery novel, *In the Last Analysis* (1964), used the pen-name Amanda Cross to protect Heilbrun’s fledgling academic career. She feared that her novels would be viewed as frivolous and thus might block her path to tenure (Heilbrun 1988:110; Boken 1996:58). By the time her 15th novel, *The Edge of Doom*, appeared in 2002, her fiction and her scholarship were firmly entwined and mutually supportive.

Throughout her long career Heilbrun postured herself as a feminist. She was not one of the radical “bra-burning,” man-hating, “feminazis” that the American political right has enjoyed criticizing, but she was quite ideological just the same (Kania 2010:88-90). One of her ideological articles of faith was that of the potential for true gender equality, that gender really ought not to matter. Her answer to achieving this lies in her conception of androgyny.

In two of her fictional works the theme of androgyny is employed

specifically and in most others it is manifest more subtly. She also wrote one book of non-fiction on the theme, the 1973 *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, made available in paperback in 1982 with the same pagination. Her promotion of the concept of androgyny was as aspect of her approach to feminism, sometimes as a part of an intellectual denial of any significant differences between the sexes, and sometimes as a means of advocacy for a superior way for both men and women to function in society. Both threads of the complex fabric of American feminism have lost some favor in current feminist ideologies, which more frequently have accentuated either the superiority of women over men in selected ways, or major differences between them. Ultimately Heilbrun would seem to have agreed that the divide of male and female is real, powerful and not easy to overcome.

Conveniently, she explains her use of the term androgyny for us. She tells us first that the term comes to us derived from the Greek words for male and female, *andro-* and *gyn-*, and that it “defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned. Androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate” (1973:x).

She believed in the potential equality of men and women, but it would have to be on her terms, on feminist terms. While not a radical “feminazi”, she was antagonistic toward men behaving in traditional masculine ways. For her the androgynous ideal was one of men being more feminine, but not of women being more masculine.

Clearly she viewed the male attributes of action, assertiveness, and certainly use of violence, as unworthy of emulation by the ideal androgynous woman, or the androgynous man. She reconsidered the meaning of androgyny as “the re-entry of the ‘feminine’ principle as a civilizing force

[...] ” (1973:21) when writing of medieval literature, a body of writing in which male and female roles were even more strongly defined than in Victorian times.

The development of a fictional character such as V. I. Warshawsky by Sara Paretsky, another outspoken feminist and author of mystery fiction, probably would have not pleased her. Warshawsky was a Philip Marlowe-Sam Spade “knock-off” in designer pumps and chic suits (Kania 2006). She carried a pistol, was adept as a “second-story” woman, and could both take and give a punch. She was therefore a woman who had taken on many of the masculine attributes of the private detective. She was drawn in a way totally different from the Amanda Cross character, who retained her femininity in every dimension while challenging male dominance of her chosen field.

This was not the sort of merger of male and female Heilbrun had in mind. But what does that leave us if women truly desire to assume roles traditionally taken by men? Heilbrun rejects the heroic virtues of manly behavior (1973:55) but offers no realistic options for confronting crime, oppression, injustice, abuses of rights, or the wrongful applications of violence against the innocent.

Looking to Heilbrun’s many examples in *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (1973), we will not find a contemporary model a man could follow. And even the better-known models from Greek myth and literature and other early fiction she cites are not adaptable to modern analogues. Moreover, her assertions of androgynous attributes in many of her chosen models can be debated, and fit her model only if one is willing to accept her post-modernist interpretations. The stories do not mean what they say – Oedipus does not really blind himself after he discovers his incest with his seduced mother; in her reinterpretation, he castrates himself (Heilbrun 1973:

12). This is not a model most men would follow to excise their unwholesome male lusts!

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* presents a model of androgyny which one can quickly recognize, on the model of Tiresias. The central character, Orlando, is born male, but wakes one morning as a woman, thus living lives as both. Yet Heilbrun challenges the model of androgyny that is implicit in *Orlando*, finding better examples of androgyny in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, a view accepted by Elisabeta Zelinka (2011), or in the description of a couple getting into a taxi in her 1929 novel *A Room of One's Own* (Heilbrun 1973: 164-167; Popova 2015.):

For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxicab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion. The obvious reason would be that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate. One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? (Woolf 1998:623).

How might a modern American male adapt to a major androgynous transformation? The question brings to mind the Mel Gibson film of a few years ago, "*What Do Women Want?*" [2000], in which the protagonist is given the task of developing a marketing program for several traditionally women's products: nail polish, lip gloss, panty hose, etc. Accepting the challenge, he tries each of these products in the privacy of his flat, only to have first his daughter, then his housekeeper, find him so adorned. An

accident electrocutes him and renders him mentally telepathic. Possessed of the ability to hear the thoughts of women, he becomes aware of how his co-workers and associates view him, what women think about their work, etc. (*IMDb* 2016). Initially the Mel Gibson character would seem to have the ability to truly understand women as no man has since the time of Tiresias, who in the Greek myth was born male but as an adult became a woman for seven years before becoming a man again (Heilbrun 1973:11; *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2015), or as Orlando did in Virginia Woolf's book of the same name (Heilbrun 1973:165).

The potential arises for Gibson's character to achieve the androgynous ideal. But his masculine side still dominates. He uses his new power to outmaneuver his new boss, a woman, and later, after redeeming himself with her, rushes to the rescue of a despondent and suicidal co-worker. It could be wished that Carolyn Heilbrun had written a review of this film, so we could see her reaction. Many men initially took the film for a "chick-flick," but after watching how Mel Gibson's character abuses his new power, came to see it as a classic male fantasy. It ends with Gibson doing the right thing, redressing the wrong he has done to his boss and saving a life. But the "white-knight-to-the-rescue" scenario would not have pleased Heilbrun all that much. She despised the role of man as the seducer, and she disdained the heroic ideal, although a time or two she used the same scenario in her fiction to save Amanda Cross or another character from danger or death.

For Heilbrun androgyny does not involve sex change. Males remain male, females remain female. But masculine and feminine need to evolve. Hence the models of Tiresias and Orlando do not apply. Rather, androgyny is a conjoining of male and female personality and psychological attributes, while the genetic and biological attributes need not change. Men, in her view,

need to be far less violent, less aggressive, less competitive, and less defensive. Women do need to be more assertive in promoting the desirable feminine traits of gentleness and lovingness.

True to this model, an Amanda Cross tale only occasionally involves a brush with violence or death. The cases are solved by intellect, reasoning and a bit of intuition on the part of Kate Fansler. Violence is rare in the fifteen novels and when it does appear is not the device for resolving the tale. This clearly sets Cross apart from the “Hard-Boiled” tradition of detective fiction, as manifest in a Sara Paretsky novel.

An excellent example of her work is *No Word from Winifred* (1986). This was Amanda Cross’s eighth novel, but it is not a murder mystery, although the reader is initially led to believe it will be. It is a missing person story, with no homicide. The missing person is an androgynous middle-aged white female who has no particular career, but is perhaps a “writer.” The homicide suspect is her former lover, a middle-aged, married, white male university professor. The assumed motive and the reason for her disappearance is his sexual jealousy and his suspicion of her betrayal.

The woman is able to disappear in plain sight by assuming the occupation and clothing of a male. Certainly history, literature and film offer numerous precedents for women in the disguise of men, but the point of the story is that the missing woman is not in disguise. She has simply taken upon herself a job typically done by men, and, wearing the clothing of her occupation, becomes gender-non-specific -- androgynous. Thus Heilbrun gives support to Woolf’s assertion in *Orlando* that “often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what is above” (Woolf, quoted in Heilbrun 1973:165). In her *Collected Stories* (1996) a second application of the same androgynous

principle appears, much like the first, suggesting that she still believed in the concept that “clothes make the androgyne.”

Androgyny is a more subtle theme in her other novels, notably, *The Theban Mysteries* (1971), but is still present. The androgynous principle applied here is behavioral rather than tonsorial, and is also harder to discover because the novel is so obvious an expression of her anti-Vietnam War sentiments. But clearly the noble male characters in this novel reject war and violent conflict as means towards the resolution of problems and are not overtly masculine in their behaviors. As with *No Word from Winifred*, there is no homicide in this story, but the pampered, difficult middle-aged mother of a child at the Theban School for Girls is found dead of a coronary at the school. An encounter group and the radical 30-ish teacher directing it are involved in evidence tampering and could be charged with obstruction of justice. Using *Antigone* as a theme, the story is far more about Vietnam War ethics and ethos than crime. The motive for the evidence tampering is simply left unclear. What is more clear is the message of the Greek play, recast in the novel, with its story of war, tragedy, family suffering and the role reversals of Antigone and Haemon in dealing with their family loss (Heilbrun 1973:9-10).

When Heilbrun wrote her academic text on androgyny, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, in 1973, she was not trying to claim that men and women are totally alike, but that the creative possibility exists for a merger of their better attributes. She praised authors who wrote gender-non-specific stories and who were able to create characters and plots in which male and female distinctions either do not exist or are of trivial consequence.

Many of her examples are unconvincing and are strained to fit her viewpoint. She uses an unreliable manner of argumentation, ignoring all evidence to the contrary and re-casting some of the negative evidence in an

alternative post-modernist interpretation that few without her perspective would accept. This is a biased argument which would only be convincing to one who already shares her points of view and ideology.

Heilbrun in both her personae, as the academician and as the novelist Amanda Cross, was committed to the ideological point of view that the innate differences of men and women are of minimal consequence, and that the more obvious differences are largely social and so can be changed. Her preference was that the changes would take the form of a shift towards the social behaviors of women rather than towards those of men, which she routinely characterized negatively. She praised men who were “ardent, intelligent, sweet, sensitive, cultivated, erudite” in her paraphrasing of Clive Bell (Heilbrun 1973:123). As the product of the achievements of the first wave of feminism, and ahead of the second wave, she wrote of a vision for women and men that she believed would come to pass.

By 2001 she may have lost some of that faith. Her last book, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Barzun, Fadiman, Trilling* (2001) has a subtle defeatist tone to it. She seems to be saying that she wanted to be one of the boys but never made it (Heller 1992; Leatherman 1992). Moreover, male behavior was such that only a rare few women could adapt to it or change it for the better. As if rejecting her earlier optimism, she professed a conflicting vision – of women apart.

Thus she came to the end of her career as an advocate for a focus on “women’s literature” and the women’s movement establishing its own cannon, honoring its own literary stars and models for emulation. Just a few of these were men, Henry James, W. H. Auden, and some others, many of whom were homosexual or bisexual in their orientation. It was this orientation which in her perception made those men more androgynous, more

likely to be “ardent, intelligent, sweet, sensitive, cultivated, erudite” men whom she could admire (Heilbrun 1973:100, 123, 126-129).

So how do her ideas on androgyny stand in light of recent social developments in the United States? The recent social and political emphasis on transgender issues suggests that some of her ideas are now passé, while others remain in good standing. The distinction between male and female, once viewed largely as a socially defined set of roles and a choice of clothes, for some now seems to require an Orlando-Tiresias transformation, or at the very least, a serious modification in traditional social-sexual roles. Androgyny now often involves surgical gender reassignment. Other social changes would mesh well with her progressive views on sex and gender. Homosexual behaviors, including same-sex marriages, are now legal, and transvestites have grown more acceptable, even fashionable in some circles. In the decade since her death, much has indeed changed with regard to the expression of sex roles and gender expectations. Yet she remains a pioneer in the discussion of androgyny and a blending of sexual roles.

Carolyn Gold Heilbrun, 1926–2003,
American Academician, Novelist, and Feminist

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