

# Is astrology gender biased?

## Erin Sullivan about gender, identity and sexual orientation in the horoscope

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Erin Sullivan pleaded for keeping our ideas about gender out of the horoscope very early on. She recommends that we, in the tradition of western astrology, allow our collective psyche to be more differentiated and acknowledge that there are more possibilities for shaping interpersonal relationships than the model "heterosexual man loves heterosexual woman". Meridian wanted to know how exactly she meant that, and asked Erin Sullivan for an interview. The interview was conducted by Holger A. L. Faß.

**Meridian:** *I am a man. Do you consider this fact when I come to you for astrological counseling? Or is my gender irrelevant to the consultation?*

**Erin Sullivan:** Of course, yes, it is important to know 'who' my client is, and being a man or a woman is important – especially in counseling and understanding the psychic make up and biological nature. Whether my client is man or a woman, regardless of his or her sexual orientation and identification, they need the same kind of understanding from me about their inner life, patterns, habits, relationship experience and more – the horoscope itself doesn't have a gender signature. It shows characteristic aspects of an individual that may be typed as more feminine or masculine, as we define it now, but both men and women have these factors.

Having said that, knowing if my client is a man or a woman, or a transgender or 'other', is not irrelevant to the consultation at all, it is in fact important to know. Then the horoscope takes on the life of the individual, becomes a real map for their unique personhood inclusive of all aspects of his or her body, mind and soul.

*Is it necessary to look for certain factors of sexual orientation in the horoscope?*

There is a small trend toward doing "research" to look at a horoscope and see if it indicates being other than heterosexual. However, to compare charts of a gay person to heterosexual horoscope is likely to be quite unproductive. There are as many ways of being gay as there are human beings in the world. Also both men and women have a masculine/feminine polarity in their psyches as well as in their genes. Ultimately, then, yes, I do take into account if my client is a man or a woman.

*What does this mean for our astrological practice? Can we leave everything as it is or do we have to approach charts in a new way with the knowledge about the diversity of sexual identities?*

It is important to understand that astrology as I practice it in the Western Tropical tradition does not need to be revalued, in the sense of gender. Astrology is millennia old, and the sophistication of astrology dates back to the Babylonian, Akkadian, Sumerian period in Mesopotamia. The naming of the planets and the relationship with the contemporaneous gods was and remains exactly as it was all those millennia ago!

So there is a synchrony with the planets, the culture, the epoch and the intellectual hierarchy of "naming". When we look at a contemporary horoscope, we are looking not just at NOW but at a timeless content of symbol, myth, intellectual sophistication and evolution. The question of genderism in the horoscope is relatively modern, and as we morph and change, evolve and alter, astrology too, will want to incorporate open thinking in these areas. But right now, I think we are at the very beginning, if it is going to shift at all.

*Where could a reassessment be necessary?*

For example, 'intersex' is a group of conditions where there is a discrepancy between the external genitals and the internal genitals (the testes and ovaries). The older term for this condition is hermaphroditism. This name is not politically (or current medically) correct. I have only one client-chart of a person who is intersex, so I won't comment with any authority. However, that could be a legitimate area for serious study. Too, think of the operatic "castrati", there are birth data for many of those men-boys. However, that could be an exceptional area of study, and though I know little about opera, it was very real to castrate talented boys prior to puberty so to sing at an angelic level of vocal reach forever.

Shape-shifting, morphing and transitioning are as old as humankind . . . this interview doesn't allow to go into the rich history and ancient mythologies (of all cultures) where gender is definitely a bendable feast.

Another story: Hermaphroditus was the son of [Hermes](#) and [Aphrodite](#) in Greek mythology. He was born as a boy, and was raised by naiad nymph on Mount Ida. When he reached the age of fifteen, he decided to explore further from his surroundings and eventually reached the forest of Caria near Halicarnassus. There, he met the nymph Salmacis in a pool, who was overcome with desire for the boy. However, she was rejected by him. Then, when Salmacis had left, he undressed and entered the pool. Salmacis then suddenly appeared and wrapped herself around him. While he was trying to evade her, she asked the gods to be forever united with Hermaphroditus and the gods listened to her wish. As a result, their bodies were blended into one and became a creature of two sexes.

Since the ancient Mesopotamian and originally mythic time, astrology has changed and developed with the times. It is quite amazing that the interpretations of the nature of their gods have survived to this day . . . with contemporary clothes, if you will. The gods that underlie the naming of the planets are no coincidence, but more a synchronicity with the times and culture.

*What exactly do you mean by this?*

In the last few years, I hear and read such things as: ". . . if you have Venus in hard aspect to Uranus or Pluto or Neptune . . .", then you are gay or have perversions and weird sexual needs, et cetera! First, homosexuality is not a perversion, and there are heterosexuals who are deeply twisted morally and sexually and dangerous, as we know only too well. This always has been and likely always will be. The hypothetical aspect example I use here is not gender specific.

Another quick example is the mid 1960's Uranus/Pluto conjunction. This is a far reaching, generational aspect, and if there is a personal planet (Sun – Mars) intimately involved by aspect to that stamp, then we see how the person works through the generational demand for radical and unorthodox social change, in his or her own way. It would be absurd to say everyone born between 1965-67 with Uranus and Pluto aspected by a personal planet is morally perverted and sexually deviant. Now, having said that, in that generational stamp of sexual freedom, and gender identity (among many other revolutionary activities) there was a major breakthrough globally . . . women's rights, racial issues, and so on.

For an individual who has this aspect, I would suggest to the client that it does mean that his or her relationship needs and tendencies are deep, powerful, and lean toward the unconventional and he or she may be attracted by a whiff of 'danger' – and exploration, experimentation and fluidity in relationships . . . this has nothing to do with gender. Nothing! If the hypothetical client tells me he or she is gay or was born intersex or otherwise, then and only then, do we address any issues from that perspective. If for example, the person needs rituals in sex as a sexual experience, then that is about the person, not the astrology . . . but the astrology can help a person who is concerned about their private life come to better accept his or her orientation and sexuality.

And, yes, I have both men and women as clients, and some of them do talk to me and ask me whether their needs and habits are ok – meaning “not weird” . . . I ask them if it is ok with them, or is it not ok because it is dangerous, or socially off the charts, or simply that they have a guilt problem – and THAT is what I would be talking about with them. I would ask how they feel about themselves, and in relation with their sexuality. In actual fact, my gay clients don't have issues with their orientation, but often will present problems with their family's acceptance, their cultural alienation, their own unwillingness to accept the stereotypical “gay” label, and so on. Relationships are really complex situations, and I do a lot of relationship work . . . and there's very little I haven't seen or heard or experienced in some vital way.

Going back to the hypothetical Venus opposite Uranus/Pluto conjunction: if someone has that planetary signature – and billions do – then they are born into a generational situation in which major shifts in consciousness in all areas will be taking place.

And, harking back to the Uranus/Pluto conjunction of the '60's: we are currently in a critical juncture where what was seeded in the Uranus/Pluto conjunction, has reached the critical aspect of the first quarter square of Uranus to Pluto. So, closet doors are flinging open every second – and this includes everything, not just the amazing opening of the door of gender flexibility! It is a time of questioning morality, ethics, integrities, principles, and values, indeed, both of truth and consequences!

The ethos we are in now, invokes a liberation from the standards that are conventional constructs – and in fact, there is a distinct confusion about standards now. These standards help keep some sense of order in things, but do NOT make people “do things” . . . the horoscope is a moment in time, a quantitative quality of time, a katarche, and it could be for anything, a book launch, a bomb going off, a car accident, a marriage between people – anything. However, when a person embodies a horoscope, it becomes a living depiction of the evolution of that individual.

*You are an expert in the astrology scene in Canada, the US and the UK. What role does queer astrology play in these countries?*

Well, I am a bit uncomfortable about the use of the term “queer astrology”, not because of queerness, but because it limits astrology to a “typology”, and astrology is unlimited. It also limits individual personal nature as a “type”, but that will change and morph as people and society evolve – and this will occur over a long revolutionary and evolutionary time.

What does come into question is the safety and freedom for non-heterosexuals in their birth culture. There are many cultures and religious constructs that prohibit or regulate many types of behaviours, such as homosexuality or any sexuality outside that cultural context, including sex itself – or even dress code – in any form. Those rules, by the way, are forever being challenged and broken by the very lawmakers! However having travelled in many countries, where dress and sexual codes consistently appear to apply primarily to women, I find the problem lies primarily in a masculine dominated Zeitgeist.

Therein lies the real problem. Social constructs change and evolve over decades, centuries, and epochs. There are still powerful societies and belief systems that regulate sexual identity and behaviour – wherein punishment is dire and even deadly. There does not seem to be any real sense of what is “normal”!

So again, it is not astrology that has to change, it is people and ideologies that must and can change. I work with so many clients from all nations, and all cultural groups, and I really have never found that it is about the individual that is “wrong” but the culture that is prohibitive. THIS is a problem, not gender nor sex.

Astrology encompasses a much bigger world than that of gender – it is a universal cosmic picture of a moment in time. It cannot describe a gender specific or gay or bi-sexual person. IF however, a person IS queer, then that's fine, we just still do the chart as it is for that person. They still have the same needs, basic traits, human longings, and goals and so forth as anyone does. (I remember when queer simply meant you were a bit odd or eccentric. But, queers could call themselves that, but “straight” people cannot call gay people queer. It think that is still true.)

I think the labeling has arisen out of the social need for the individual person to make a strong statement for equality and acceptance. This is how the collective consciousness evolves, one individual at a time. This is what queer astrology is . . . it is an assurance that the gay or LGBTQ (Q can be for questioning or queer) individual actually exists. It is not a secret. It is a real and valid status. However, it does not affect one's horoscope. There is no gay chart. If anything, people who have a concept of 'queer astrology' are limiting astrology, and not really doing any favours for anyone – it is a much bigger arena than the socio-political arena . . . this does NOT mean I do not want LGBTQ people to fight and stand up for their rights.

So, if we try to “genderize” astrology, we do limit it . . . rather we should look at gender issues through the eyes of the horoscope, and how the individual person can come to terms with his or her individuality and simply be a healthy person!!! The chart tells us what kind of a person is this, and in what way are they inclined toward what areas. If transgenderism or other-ness is involved, then the chart tells us how he or she is dealing with any issues that can and will arise with making this “normal” instead of a cultish thing. This will happen, it is meant to happen, there will come a day when there is no issue with gender, BUT there will always be issues with being a human being!

*This reminds me that a while ago, you wrote in 'The Astrological Journal of Great Britain' (1): "astrology is not gender-biased". Is this what you mean by that?*

What is interesting to me is that I wrote that in 2001. And, it is still a work in progress. Astrology is pure in itself, it does not need to be “branded”. . . it is a system of planets around a focus (the Sun, the hearth-fire) that never repeats its Gestalt – ever – and has no consciousness or intent. It is our home, our family of planets.

*In this planetary family, there are more masculine than feminine planets however . . .*

True, there are not a lot of feminine planets by name, but the inclusion of the four main asteroids helps give a more balanced gender in horoscopes, and many astrologers use them. Again, this is part of the evolutionary aspect of an ongoing enquiry.

*In the astrological tradition there are planets that are described as male or female: Venus, Mars, Sun or Moon. Let's take the Sun and Moon as symbols for the parents. What do you say to your clients when you no longer interpret the Sun as father and the Moon as mother? How else can you tell from the chart what is the significance of the parents for the horoscope-owner?*

I don't always think of Sun=Father and Moon=Mother. So, when interpreting a person's horoscope for its psychological dynamics, there are as many “Moons” as there are people – my Moon in Libra is not played out exactly as everyone's Moon in Libra (which is good ) . . . and “Suns” . . . well, that is even more at question. Sun is core power, not dad, father, or even male! Nor does it describe a person's character. It is a life force, not a personality type.

The aspects that the planets make to each other are the most important factor in “reading” a chart! The conversation between a person's Moon and the other planets and the Sun and its aspect/conversation to other planets may actually suggest a role reversal in the parental archetype.

So, I think the brief answer to this is: I am not a convention-bound astrologer, my practice and my teaching is archetypal, pragmatic, solid and never stereotypical. At this point in my work, I am quite fluid with my interpretations and I have no model or template of terms or types or meaning. I am somewhat unique in that way . . . again, having said all that, I am prone to see Sun as a father/male type parent: a rising, culminating, setting archetype as a mythic reality; while the Moon as the menses, birthing, goddess, phase-based parent as the mother. It's complicated.

*And it gets more complicated: Recently we have seen more and more children of rainbow families, that is, children who grow up with two mothers, for example. How do you deal with the charts of these children? After all, they don't have two Moons in their charts.*

I haven't had an actual client (yet) who has grown up with same gender parents (which is interesting in itself, since I have many gay and otherwise clients). However, I do know younger people (late teens, twenties) who have had same sex parents, and I have talked about their chart with a few of them. And, they found it hard in some ways, particularly having their biological parents divorced or in conflict with each other. They seem to have more conventional issues such as the divorce itself, arguments, separation from one or the other parent, having step-siblings, feeling abandoned and so forth, like most kids whose parents split up and re-bonded. The issue most commonly and naturally arising during the teenage years of hormonal explosion and experimentation is primarily psychological, then sexual; some have questioned their sexuality where they really didn't need to do so.

Clients who had a parent who "came out" after they came of age or during adolescence, have totally personal issues . . . there is no "one story". I find that the biggest problem in any family dynamic is the "Secret" . . . it is the secrets that make you sick.

So, yes, it may be a bit of a shock for an adolescent that his or her mother or father is actually not conventional – this is far more common than most of us realize. Young children, like my seven year old neighbour boy, seem to adjust pretty quickly to the unique sex change/identity switch, but it will become an important factor in the child's adolescence. No child wants to lose his or her parents – that is one of the primal terrors of childhood.

Honesty and understanding in all cases, is the primary issue . . . the parents are still the parents, and need to nurture the child, and not shock it – but talk, introduce, explain (all age-appropriate, of course!) and love the child.

It would bear to keep in mind that one's first real sexual exposure is most commonly shared with a child-friend of their own gender. It is more convenient to explore sex with a kid your own gender, one's best friend and so on, boys and boys and girls and girls . . . it is actually more unusual not to have had a same-sex encounter at some point in most people's lives!

I have a friend (my age, a bit older) for example, whose dad would cross-dress at home. He'd have his morning coffee in a nice housecoat and ladies' slippers and a lovely wig, with her mom and her, and then put on his business suit and head off to the office. She had and has no problem with that. Never did, still doesn't. This is not, by the way, as uncommon a situation as you may imagine.

*Let's go back to planetary positions: Isn't Mars in the chart of a woman a symbol for her boyfriend?*

No. In a woman's horoscope, Mars is the capacity for her use of her innate drive, desire, passion, ambition, cultivation, focus, direction; and ability to really get her life out there and done. The sign and aspects to anyone's Mars will tell us the manner for extroverting herself in ways that are productive. If she keeps her Mars function stifled and projected onto "men", then, she can introject her own anger, and become passive aggressive, thus unable to complete or finish ideas or projects. And, become a rather difficult partner – for anyone!

Women and Mars are natural "mates" – the animus is "the man we all would love to be" (and the anima, the woman we all would love to be) and both can be projected out onto an actual guy or "men" as a collective (or a woman). In classical myth, Ares and Aphrodite mated, and produced a girl child, and her name is Harmonia. So the God of War and the Goddess of Passion/Love can bring Harmony to us.

*Astrologers agree that it is impossible to know the (biological) sex by looking at the chart.*

This is absolutely true. We don't even know if a horoscope is, in fact, of a person. But if it is, no we don't know the gender of the individual who bears it, and cannot tell.

*How about the (social) gender, that is, how someone feels? Can you read this from the chart - and if so, how?*

Yes, definitely! We can do a lot of good work helping someone to really meet him or herself as a unique and valid person. It means that the work of an astrologer will be changing, in that we will be needed to talk with a client who is LGBTQ who needs to come to terms with problems they might be having with their gender and identity. That is what we do, we help people find a sense of identity as who they really are, not what their gender is.

If gender expression is a problem for a client, then we go there, to the problem he or she may be having with self-acceptance, social acceptance, family acceptance, goals – basically, a normal, typical depth consultation will go into any area for a person LGBTQ of any age.

If a gay person has some sexual issues personally (as opposed to socially) – well, most people have some sexual issues – that is normal, so we talk about how those problems or concerns can be re-viewed and perceived in new ways, to help the client be more fulfilled and fulfilling! In my book, "Retrograde Planets", I have a wonderful case story about a man I named "Oscar" . . . who by day was an important theatre figure, gay and brilliant; who by night became his opposite: a leather bound skin-head who indulged in "gay bashing" . . . he came to see me in his last months of life, as a person with AIDS wanting to come to terms with the "split" in his psyche (this was in the early 1990's when HIV was bound to morph into AIDS and certain death). His was a fascinating situation in which I was honoured to work with someone several times who was so self-honest. His primary goal in his personal work with me, and another therapist, was to achieve as much self-honesty and individuation as possible before he died. (2)

A really important fact: as long as we are honest with ourselves, we may well be ok with being who we are!

Yes, there is a stigma, still these days, and it does need to be addressed with clients so they can feel confident and free in themselves, to be who they are and in appropriate ways to their true nature. Which is what the chart shows us! I am saying that there is a major stigma that will take several more generations to break – and the world is large and full of "others" – and the fear of "others" is what will have to change.

*Do we need a special astrology for LGBT-people?*

No. I don't think so. Astrology is all-inclusive. There is no gender bias evident in astrology, none. Pure astrology is archetypal, mythic, and, in some good hands, scientific – but not stereotypical. It is millennia old and has moved with the times (even the bad times) to be a universal and global truth. It is just the most astounding thing I have ever come across to make sense of everything!

I think astrologers need to keep their minds open first to the person and secondly the gender or sexuality, thus keeping the universal archetype active and not stereotype the person. And, we must stop trying to confine the symbol to some kind of human trait. Astrology is a much more fluid and profound construct than identifying and typecasting.

As astrologers, we have the potential to look at the phenomenon of life as a whole; a unique hieroglyphic and symbol-based philosophy – we have, in fact, a Weltanschauung.

*Thank you very much for this interview.*