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Untangling (Un)Intelligible Transgender Characters in Contemporary American and British  
Fiction

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### Abstract

This thesis focuses on interrogating the manner in which trans individuals are portrayed in contemporary American and British fiction and what responsibility novels that deal in these themes have in creating narratives. The theoretical framework that guides these discussions comes from the field of transgender theory. The question that guides the thesis is: How do novels focused on representing trans experiences create their characters to be intelligible and fully realised? The discussion that this thesis is interested in is guided by first gaining an understanding of the theoretical debates around trans people before delving into the literary history of transformation, as that will inform the discussion of transitioning in the analytical chapter. The analytical chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* and Jeffery Eugenides' *Middlesex*. The analysis of these texts will explore how each novel characterises their protagonist and how they create intelligible depictions of the trans experience. This will allow for a conversation around the responsibility of the author in telling these often-unheard narratives. The overall work of this thesis is to engage with trans fiction and understand the effect that those narratives can have in understanding the real trans experience.

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## 1.Introduction

Fictional literary works about transgender experiences are becoming more mainstream and are beginning to gain large readership. Trans characters are not new to literature, with many novels exploring the experiences of trans lives dating back to the time of myth and legend, but there has been a steady rise in these narratives since the 1990s. Although, in many cases, when trans characters had featured in literature prior to the 1990s the discourse that dealt with them was largely mythologising, pathologizing and entrenched in fantastical stories, often treating them as abnormal and tragic spectacles. In many of these tales the role of the trans person rarely also situated them as the novel's narrator or predominant point of view. The more recent rise in contemporary trans stories has coincided with seminal academic and nonfiction, often autobiographical, texts that have sought out to undertake explorations of not only transgender lives but the construction of gender that impacts them. In these contemporary writing of trans lived experience there has been a move to create authentic and empathetic narratives that centre the experience of gender with the final word of the character. These accounts move away from "voyeuristic and sensationalizing, and in many cases dehumanizing - depicting gender non-conforming characters as monstrous or dangerous deviants" (Frotscher 253) to presenting narrators and protagonists whose gender is entirely of their own making often taking the lead in narrating their story. Regarding trans characters in literature this change has also allowed for a wider breadth of trans experiences to be written and read, there is no standard trans character in literature just as there is no standard in life but there is still a need to refrain from dangerous and harmful conceptions of trans characters.

This recent rewriting of the fictional trans individual in fiction can often be many people's first introduction to gender non-conforming people, which makes focusing on the construction of these characters and their personal approaches to conceptualising and building their gender

identities of paramount importance. This is not to say that fiction usurps nonfiction or academic works in importance, but rather it is to refute any belief that the conceptions of fictional characters have no effect on the real-world groups they belong to.

Art, especially literature, has a complex relationship in telling trans stories and has often shirked the responsibility of telling authentic narratives in fictional works. The importance of art in representing trans stories comes because art, for many, shapes a “larger symbolic order by which a culture imagines its relation to the conditions of its existence” (Matus 5). In doing this art also exposes the power relations that exist in nearly every facet of the world outside the fictional world that many texts create (6-7). It does this because literature, historically, has been seen as a holding place for knowledge that is not limited to psychological, sociological, political or historical traditions. It has been said by scholars like Fluck that literature, and other forms of art, appear to represent a privileged space for imitation of real life in such a way that it allows for broader cultural imaginations can be assessed through their work.

Another aspect of art that makes its impact of great importance is the influence that it manages to have on the construction of identity of its, in the case of literature, readers. Jonathan Culler has said that art, but in this particular example literature, has been “linked to the vicarious experiences it gives readers, enabling them to know how it feels to in particular situations and this to acquire dispositions to act and feel in certain ways” (113). This is because literature, in telling the stories of various characters encourages its readers to empathise and identify with them by putting the reader in their point of view, or in the case of side characters this is done by them revealing more intimate and vulnerable side to them. In this way literature is able to address their intended readership and find ways for them to identify with these characters and their stories. Literature allows for the “power of ontological disclosure” (James 200).

The power that literature innately has creates a sense of responsibility when it comes to portraying characters and telling storylines that differ from the culturally accepted norm. This is especially important when a text decides to write a character that is reflective of a marginalised group. As trans- characters are written into more novels it is important to consider how literature is deciding to write these characters. How is literature assuming the responsibility of being on the of the major art forms in shaping the cultural idea of being trans?

*Middlesex* by Jeffery Eugenides published in 2002 to bestselling and award-winning status, and *Girl Woman Other* by Bernadine Evaristo, published almost two decades later in 2019 - also to bestselling and award-winning status, both have narratives that occupy themselves with characters that transition genders. *Middlesex* and *Girl Woman Other*'s relative success in the mainstream reading population has contributed to the representation of trans characters in fiction. With both charting a character's coming of age that is marked with an issue in their initial gender assignment they explore the meaning of gender as both transgress into their eventual gender identity. The narrative strategies and understandings of gender differ in significant ways from each other and the manner in which they conform or dismiss the gender binary is one of the most obvious difference. Another difference between the two is in how they produce a coherent trans character.

Literature's ability to create intelligible trans characters is integral to this thesis' analytical work with *Middlesex* and *Girl Woman Other*. The ability of the narratives to articulate their transgressing characters to realising characters who are or are not intelligible is important as it grounds these characters in being fully realised subjects. Being or becoming an intelligible person is a framework that this thesis links to Judith Butler's analysis on gender. Butler sees intelligibility to repetitive performance of gender (22). The performativity is not a voluntary act but rather it is an act of regulatory norms through which a subject becomes a subject. There is no innate behaviour that assigns an individual to a particular gender, instead it is self-

regulatory practices of gender formation that constitute identity. Understanding the intelligibility of characters is also linked to the aforementioned reality, or believability, of the trans characters that are constructed within fiction. The ideas of intelligibility will also be aligned with the manner in which transgender theorists have understood gender to be created and constructed for trans individuals.

To fully explore how *Middlesex* and *Girl Woman Other*'s gender nonconforming characters are constructed to find and live fulfilled and intelligible lives as people who have transitioned this thesis will begin with a focus on understanding how trans is understood by different theoretical backgrounds. This interrogation will look to how feminist, queer and transgender theory have each sought to understand not only gender but also the place and construction of a transgender person. In looking to this history this will inform the arguments that will be made around Cal and Morgan respectively in the thesis. Secondly the thesis will look to understand the literary history of transgender characters, their roles, their intelligibility and the narratives that were used to bring them to life. While the focus of this thesis is not to be a historical account of the representation of trans characters in literature it will help to act as a comparison to the manner in which contemporary fiction has sought to readdress and write transgender characters as the availability and awareness of these individuals has become ever more present. Thirdly, and most importantly, the analysis of *Middlesex* and *Girl Woman Other* will begin. This discussion around both novels will involve a close look at the way in which Cal and Morgan's identity is constructed in their individual narrative, and as this thesis is particularly interested in their gender identities. This will involve understanding and deconstructing their individual comprehension of their gender at the start of their narrative to the moment that makes them question their position in that gender eventually leading them to transition and find solace in their gender identity at the end of their novel. There will also be discussion of how the characters conceptualise and understand gender, alongside their role in it, and whether they are

falling into problematic beliefs around the issue. This section will also involve a small diversion into discussions about authorial intent and right when writing trans focused narratives.

The thesis' preoccupation with the discourse around the intelligibility and authenticity of trans characters is important to building discussions in how literature portrays and chooses to use these narratives. It is the belief of this author that the impact of fiction on the wider world is important to consider and by interrogating these tropes it will contribute to analysing whether this impact is aligning with harmful discussions around gender or not. This is because there should be a distinction made between novels that accurately portray the trans experience and those that use it as a mere plot device because we can understand this to be a reflection of how the wider society views the place of real transgender people.



## 2. Framing the Transgender Discussion, Conversations with Feminist Theory, Queer Theory and Transgender Theory

### 2.1 Introduction

Transgender narratives are not a recent emergence in literature. There are numerous literary takes on individuals who do not conform to the traditional gender binary of male and female. While there are a number of historical representations of these nonconformists, some of which will be mentioned in the following chapter to more richly contextualise the conceptualization of characters whose narrative arcs are fundamentally affected by their gender identity, it is not a commonly dealt with character detail. Even with the recent growth in transgender focused narratives in contemporary fiction they are still likely to stand out as an emerging narrative. It also raises questions on what exactly defines someone, in literature and beyond, as transgender. These questions, some of which will be dealt with in this chapter, ponder what the requirements are around the term transgender. Does this require a transition from one binary gender identity to another with a surgical conformation to that new gender identity? Does this transition require the fixed position within one gender, or does it allow for a more flexible interpretation of gender that still finds itself outside of the traditional gender binary? Is gender something that is biologically given and fixed or is it something that is achieved through repetition (Butler 22)? While this chapter cannot hope to give a definitive answer to most of these questions it will bring about a discussion of how transgender lives, bodies and realities are articulated in theory, and ultimately, fiction. This discussion will be guided by devolving into how prominent theories such as feminist and queer theory deal with discourse around the subject and where transgender theory is ultimately, more aligned with contemporary understandings of transgender life and experience as it focuses only on real and theoretical issues necessary to understand the trans experience. The discussions that are generated through approaching these

theories will also help to define some of the terms and language that will be used in later chapters of this thesis. In doing this work it will also set the framework that will be used to investigate the key issue in this thesis around transgender lives, identities, bodies and experiences in fiction. This framework will contribute to the understanding of what allows a fictional trans person to have both their gender and their own self-identity seen to be intelligible, or unintelligible through their respective narrative arcs.

## **2.2 Feminist Theory, Intersectional Feminism and Conceptualisations of Transgender Identities**

Feminist theory has used gender, as seen through both cultural and historical contexts as well as biological understandings, to tackle issues of sexism and the oppression of people based on their gender (Nagoshi and Brzyzy 432). Scholars that engage with many of the branches of feminist theories have seen to define gender in a number of ways to theorise how the patriarchy affects those who do not inhabit the privileges men have in their assumption as the standard in society (Annadale and Clark 19). The patriarchy can be seen to implement this through the various social and symbolic effects that the institutional powers that uphold it have in the world, whether this is legislatively or not, as these institutional powers have far reaching powers that often render it invisible.

Feminism, across most of the waves and changes that it has undergone throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, finds itself occupied with gender and its social processes. This has meant that many feminist explorations into gender have shown gender to be socially constructed (Annadale and Clark 19) and not something that is innate to biology. If we are to consider gender as a construction that is further constituted by society, feminists have wanted to show that the deficiencies innate to some aspects of gender expression, that the patriarchy and the other social systems that uphold and are upheld by this belief express, are as a result of

social constructions and misjudgements rather than a noted inferiority of the female body and mind. Gatens (132) also believes that within a feminist understanding gender is constructed through the discourses and practices that take the body as their target and vehicle of expression. In understanding gender in this way Gatens constructs the feminist understanding of gender to be contingent on the discourses that reinforce them.

While feminism is not united on how it conceptualises the relationship between gender and sex, and in this chapter, there is not enough space to engage thoroughly in such an important dialogue, it is important to concentrate on where feminist theory rests on gender as it informs many other theoretical debates. With some space devoted to this with which we can uncover some of the other conceptualisations of gender in varying types of feminism before undertaking a discussion of where transgender experiences are placed within some feminist conversations. Liberal feminists, for example, have been seen to find no intrinsic relationship between gender and their biological sex. Instead, there is a focus on women's access to positively valued male roles and experiences, making the body mute and passive (Jaggar 30). Whereas radical feminism looks to make a close relationship between the body and gender identity, it does this to undermine the patriarchal dismissive voice of women's bodies in favour of positively promoting the distinctive traits of femininity. Traits of which can be found both in biological sex and gender identity, meaning that the body is integral to their understanding of the female experience (Annadale and Clark 20).

Conversations within feminist theory that have concerned themselves with gender have been dominated by people who conform to the boundaries constructed by the conventional understandings of the traditional gender binary. Despite this feminist theorists have opened up discussions around gender identity and transgender experiences. In feminist theory, and especially in white Anglo-American feminist theories, there has been a growing dialogue around the "Transgender Question." The particular phrasing of this issue refers to how

transgender and transexual bodies can be integrated into conversation to answer their own theoretical questions around gender (Namaste 12). This interrogation of transgender bodies and how they differ from the accepted gender binary that has been the traditional idea of gender has allowed for some space for transgender people to explain their experiences through the lens of this established discourse. However, because of feminism's primary preoccupation with gender as a way to understand the operations of the patriarchy and maleness it upholds many of the traditional ideals of the gender binary (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 433). In most theories this means that there are limitations to the deconstruction of gender that is undertaken in most feminist theoretical constructions. While it can be said that some transgender people find that that feminism can satisfy some of their issues, this is especially true if they may conform to a fixed gender identity that may be close to the traditional understanding of the gender binary, it almost always fails to take into account the intersections that transgender people experience.

Feminist theory does not have the language or theoretical knowledge currently to expand covering the experiences of transgender people without fitting them into the theoretical customs that it has developed over many years. It is not to say that transwomen, and others who find refuge in feminist theories, are not also able to find meaning and understanding within feminist theory. Rather it is to say that there is little space within feminism to adequately address any of the intersections that transgender people deal with in their individual and shared experiences because feminism has, for so many years, been preoccupied with the female experience that still limits its accessibility to trans people.

### **2.3 Queer Theory, Sexuality and Transgender Identities**

Queer theory has been a prominent contributor to philosophical, sociological and political understandings of gender identity and sexualities that divert from the traditional understandings from heteronormative philosophies. These theoretical understandings developed from feminist

and deconstructive theories that theorised that the traditional understandings of both gender and sexuality were subjected to social constructs. Nagoshi and Brzuzy (434) asserted that in many ways queer theory sought to challenge feminist theory. This may be due to the belief that while feminism is a theory that is framed to answer and consider the issues brought up by gender oppression, where sexuality is assumed to be tied to gender identity, there should be a theory that offers a valid theory of sexual oppression (Rubin 103). In essence the early goal of queer theory was to create a discourse around these deviations from the traditional understanding of sexuality.

Queer is as much an identity as it a multidisciplinary theory and orientation that is to be understood. Being queer is an identification that aligns with individuals who are at odds with the dominant, traditional heteronormative social and thought schema (Halperin 20). The term queer can be defined as the “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 208). Queer as a term, and as a theory, allows from the questioning and subversion of those normative understandings of heteronormative theories. Queer theorists do not only challenge the assumption of heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality but also look to question lesbianism and gayness. Queer theory finds itself at odds with the construction and understanding of a binary system that is held by homosexuality and heterosexuality. Jagose (132) has noted that “Queer is not outside the magnetic field of identity. Like some postmodern architecture, it turns identity inside out and displays its support, exoskeletally,” this may be by exposing the aspects of social identities that we assume. While queer, as an identity, can allow for a collective identity (Nagoshi and Brzyzy 434) it has been critiqued by some theorists who believe that it is an “identity without and essence” (Halperin 62). While critics may say this because it lacks an understanding of the individual lived experience, there is little basis for this

argument as many have identified and continue to identify with a queer lived experience. The criticism of queer theory in this way seeks to diminish the identification of people to this term but, in the opinion of this writer, is a misjudgement of a valid theory. In some ways this criticism could be seen as way to invalidate it only to promote the, more widely accepted, heteronormative agenda.

Queer theory, as mentioned earlier, seeks to question the normative beliefs that have proliferated philosophical understandings of gender and sexuality, this makes it seem like an ideal space for the understanding and conceptualisation of transgender bodies, experiences and lives. However, queer theory, like feminism, struggles to really understand the delicate issues that are faced by those identifying as transgender. It falls short of describing, or becoming attune, with the trans experience because it conflates issues of gender identity with sexual identity. Which is likely due to its understanding of essentialism as a theoretical trap. While this rejection of essentialism and interest in sexuality and gender has promoted an interest in gender identities that go beyond the traditional binary that finds itself prevalent in many theoretical philosophies. Despite this queer theory is still seen to accept these traditional binaries while attempting to queer them (Nagoshi and Brzyuzu 74) a theoretical position that renders its interest in trans people as an aside to the primary belief within this theory. That is because there is still the assumption of a tension between the binary male and female gender categories. Hausman et al. (470) has argued that when queer theory is applied to transgender individuals it can still promote gender-role stereotyping in the way that is seems to accept gender categories even as it destabilises them. Where queer theory may allow for unconventionally feminine males and masculine females as well a multiplicity of gender expressions, but it is still operating on the presumption of male versus female gender categories (Nagoshi and Brzyuzu 435).

## 2.4 Transgender Theory: Going Beyond Feminist and Queer Theory

Transgender theory emerged as a critique of feminist and queer theory and has seen many of its fundamental literature to emerge from Roen's conceptualisations of gender. Roen's (256) ideas around transgender identities posits an understanding of gender as accepting a fluidity of gender identity that doesn't limit its conceptualisations in an either/or approach to both gender identity while retaining the gender binary. Roen considers that while transgender individuals can combine an either/or understanding of gender identity that is outside of the male/female binary so that it can be seen as transgressing the gender binary. This transgression does not necessarily need to be seen as a physical transition from one gender to another. Transgender bodies and the experiences that are encapsulated in their lives are also shown to be different from queer and feminist experiences because it is not based on a relation to something else, instead the transgender experience is "about identity – relating to oneself" (Bornstein 67).

Transgender theory looks to dismantle some of the categorical context that queer and feminist theorists find themselves concerned with. There are often some conflicting dialogues around biological sex and gender that transgender theory tries to rectify in order to explain and allow space for transgender experience. This brings a need to incorporate a fluid self-embodiment and self-construction of identity that dynamically interacts with social expectations while allowing for individual lived experiences (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 435). Tauchert (33) finds fault in discussions that have conceptualised gender as a primarily social construct because it denies a sense of identity to come from a body that exists as a seeming self between the social performances of gender. Instead, she proposes a "fuzzy gender" approach that sees the essential continuity between the body and mind where everything exists within shades of grey that allow for more fluidity between the physical and mental aspects of gender. The concept of "fuzzy gender" allows for variations in gender identity and gender related behaviours and does not promote a single understanding of any gender identity. Shotwell and

Sangrey (60) suggest that an individual's identity within social categorisation is understood as a continually dynamic interaction within three sources. The first source is an embodied aspect of the self that helps to generate bodily experiences and is essential for informing identity. Secondly, there is a self-constructed aspect of identity that gets meaning from the narrative of lived experiences. This self-construction takes some theoretical basis from queer theory's subversion of socially constructed and imposed identities. Thirdly, an autonomous self exists in relationship to and interacts with the self-constructed and socially constructed aspects of an individual's identity. If we are to see the contributions that Shotwell and Sangrey's theories add to a dialogue within transgender theory, we can see how feminism and queer theory failed to make space for in their conceptions of transgender. As both theories failed to incorporate aspects of gender that wasn't directly responding to the traditional gender binary. Whereas transgender theory allows for a discourse on gender that is not primarily in opposition or agreement with that gender binary, instead it allows for a dynamic understanding of gender that is especially constructed for trans individuals.

Transgender theory is still a relatively new theoretical discipline with new knowledge branches being added to its understanding the transgender experience. However, one of the fundamental aspects of the theory is that it allows for a complex understating in the way that gender is understood, allowing for the individual life of someone who identifies as transgender to move fluidly between identities. It is with this understanding of transgender theory that this thesis will guide its discussion of transgender narratives in a later chapter.

## **2.5 Defining Transgender Identities and Transitioning**

The transgender identity can be defined as a breaking of the heteronormative gender roles and gender identities that includes going across the boundaries of one gender to another (Green 70). The expression of this transgender identity can be accompanied with having gone under a



gender confirmation surgery or hormone treatments, but this identity marker is not dependent on this choice. Someone who identifies with this identity marker may be pretransition/operative, transitioning/in the process of transitioning with hormonal and/or surgical confirmation, post transition/operative or may not be thinking of making surgical or hormonal changes to their body (Hird 580). Within the transgender experience there are different understandings of the fluidity available within gender identity, while some accept some amount of fluidity others argue that there is only a switch between a gender identity (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 432). While some theorists may believe that there is no definitive acceptance of the fluidity between gender identities, this thesis takes the position within transgender theory that movement is possible and does not diminish the trans experience.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Transgender theory addresses many of the complexities and intersections that are faced by those inhabiting transgender experiences, bodies and lives. It comprises a comprehensive and integrated framework for understanding and empowering individuals with their self-realised identities. Its use in this thesis will integrate itself with literary theory to examine how these lives are constructed within fictional narratives. Applying transgender theory in this thesis will reveal the way in which contemporary literature approaches narratives that find themselves immersed in transgender identities. Transgender theory and its understanding of trans people will inform and allow this thesis to interpret characters' trans experiences as intelligible or unintelligible within their respective novels. In using theory and close reading the thesis seeks to understand how the trans character is placed in literature and, possibly, where literature is failing to represent these people.

### 3. Historical Conceptualisations of Gender, Gender Transformation and Gender Identity in

#### *Metamorphoses* and *Orlando*

##### **3.1 Introduction**

While the theories that support this thesis's understanding of transgender identities and how this manifest in fiction is relatively new, with queer and transgender theories only becoming part of the academic lexicon at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, depictions of transgender individuals are not a new feature of literature. These characters and their experiences, whether they are part of the main narrative arc or just feature in the storyline, have been a feature of many fictional novels that predate the contemporary novels that this thesis is focusing its examination on. While the language around these character's existence in fiction is not similar to the discourse we engage with in contemporary understandings of gender identity, we can still align these characters to ideas and interpretations of gender and gender transformation. As questions of gender identity, especially those that go beyond the binary ideas of male and female, continue to be the primary question in this thesis, it is of great importance to understand the origin of these identities in literature because these they have influenced trends in writing and narration style of trans lives that still affects the writing of these individuals in our current literary landscape.

The subject of this investigation into fiction that focuses on the narrative arc of characters who undergo gender transformations but are not transgender characters. It should also be noted that this chapter will not be an extensive representation of historical gender transformation narratives and characters as that goes beyond the space of this chapter. What this chapter does seek to do is distinguish the narratives of *Metamorphoses* and *Orlando* from transgender texts as they are not be considered members of the growing 'canon' of transgender novels. While they do deal with issues of gender transformation, that is not equivalent to transitioning and they do not centre themselves on representing the trans experience as this thesis seeks to

understand it. Instead, these narratives prompt an understanding of how literature has previously understood gender, and its negotiations beyond the traditional binary.

In exploring these historical narratives there is a belief that the influence that these early depictions of gender transformation can be seen in more contemporary writings of the trans experience. It is to say that the understanding of gender and transformation narratives resonate in current novels' approaches to gender and transitioning. This is not to make an equivalence between the two but rather to address how literature has and continues to make interpretations of these issues.

### **3.3 Ovid and the Mythology of Metamorphosis and Transformation**

One of the earliest depictions of characters that transform between genders is Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. This thesis would like to use as a starting point to our understanding of how transitioning is used by Ovid. While it is arguable that there were many more stories about transgender lives and experiences that involve transition that come before Ovid, especially when one considers oral histories as an ancient form of literature. However, its place in this thesis is because Ovid and other Greek myths have informed our understandings of literature and its history, therefore informing our understanding of the tropes that we see in narratives that focus on the trans experience in the twenty-first century. The value of using *Metamorphoses* as a starting point for understanding the conceptualisation of gender identity in fiction is also because it has been described by scholars such as Raeburn as the "encyclopaedia of myth" (5). There is also a mythological link of gender and transitioning that we will investigate in Eugenides' family saga, *Middlesex*, which also relies on mythology to tell a story of transition between genders.

There is a long history of transformations between identities being expressed in spoken poetry, prior to their written prosaic counterparts. This method of storytelling was especially

popular in creating Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which fits into the ancient tradition of literary epics. Unlike many of the other texts that will be discussed in the length of this thesis *Metamorphoses* is not focused on the transgender experience, nor is that one of the main complications of the text. It is difficult to even limit the text's conflicts to one story or myth as it tackles the history of the world from creation to the exaltation of Julius Caesar. In composing *Metamorphoses*, he painted a comprehensive and universal language for fiction that is still prevalent in the tropes and story concepts in contemporary fiction (Sakar 223) fact, the gender aspect of the poem is almost minute when compared to the other themes of the story.

Despite this seemingly small aspect of the epic being geared towards gender and gender identity reading and understanding how these two aspects fit along with Ovid's myth is still an important starting point for a thesis devoted to understanding the transgender experience in literature. While Ovid is not a clear member of transgender theory, it has contributed to arguments around gender that affect contemporary narratives. The plotline that this chapter is preoccupied with is in the story around Iphis and Ianthe. This story has been of interest of many scholars within the gender and transgender studies in literature not only for its approach to gender identity but also in the way that it explores ideas of transformation and, more informs the manner in which literature approaches transitioning (Beek 51) in more grounded fictional work.

In the story Telethusa is introduced, by Ovid, as a pregnant woman whose husband is only able to financially care for a boy. The pregnant woman's husband tells her that if she is to give birth to a baby girl then he will have the child killed if she gives birth to a girl. When Telethusa gives birth to Iphis, who is a girl, she decides to raise her as a boy after Isis comes to her and instructs her to raise the child regardless of their gender. The years pass and Iphis, who has been successfully raised as a boy, becomes betrothed to Ianthe – a woman. Telethusa is sure that her secret will be found out as the wedding draws closer, which causes her to beg Isis to

fix their problem. Isis does this by transforming Iphis into the man that she had been pretending to be for years. Isis, essentially, forces Iphis to ‘transition’ from female to male.

The conclusion of Iphis’ story is among one of the few ‘happy endings’ found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* with some critics proclaiming that while the ending of the story is odd, it is also unusually happy (Hallett 263, Nugent 153). For these scholars the oddness of the ending lies predominantly in the happiness of the ending instead of its content. The ending is decidedly happy because not only does Iphis get his ‘happily ever after’ in romantic terms (Anderson 469) but the transition itself is believed to be a happy and simple shift (Hallett 263). These sentiments that describe the ending as Iphis’ story as largely happy, even beyond the romantic sentiments between him and Ianthe, also group this happiness as being linked to Iphis’ gender transition. As Beek (51) argues that these proponents of the simple happy ending are “unnatural, combined with the reluctance of society at large to accept such sentiments as valid, should raise questions about the ease with which Iphis accepts her transformation from female to male”. While *Metamorphoses*’ framework allows for such spontaneous and magical transformations it does not necessarily reflect the wishes of those being transformed. This, while appearing to be similar to the transitioning narratives the thesis will explore later is not the same. Where there Ovid is concerned with exploring the limits of gender transformation he is not occupied with the psychological, physical, or self-actualised behaviours that inform transformation in the same way that transgender focused narratives are. In essence the exploration of Ovid is not to make a linear point to trans literature, but rather to explore literature’s history of gender transformation. The characters of Ovid are not intelligible in the same way that trans narratives will later allow their protagonists to be in their gender. *Metamorphoses*’ characters that experience transformation are fantastical, impossible and, much like the genre they were conceived in, mythological. *Middlesex*, while leaning to these

mythological themes negotiates them in a different way that allows for self-actualisation and self-construction with his narrator.

The myriad of myths that Ovid tells in *Metamorphoses* do have a common theme of transformation and changing of form (Sarkar 224). In many of the other stories in his epics these transformations are of the characters own will, while, as aforementioned, this is not the case in Iphis' story. In their story there seems to be little consideration for their own conception of their gender identity. It appears that aside from the threat of violence of her mother's deception being found out at the wedding there were few indications of a sense of difficulty with their conception of their own gender. In Iphis' soliloquy, where they describe her love for Isis, it should be noted that there is no denial of the gender of her birth. Instead, there is an insistence that they identify as a woman who loves another woman as they proclaim, "no female is seized with a desire for another female" (Ovid). There even seems to be a reluctance for Iphis to accept their identity as a male, as they have been masquerading as since birth, as they say later in the soliloquy that "Pay attention to what you were born" (Ovid). This continued acceptance of their identity as female appears to counter the simplistic ending that Ovid gives Iphis. It does this by undermining the role a person's perceptions play into their gender identity.

Iphis' struggle with their feelings for Ianthe seems to come more from an issue with her identification of her sexuality rather than her gender identity. In the aforementioned soliloquy Iphis does not call to their gender identity as one of the barriers in expressing desire for Ianthe. Scholars like Beek believe that when looked at from a modern perspective, Iphis' struggle is due to their inability to accept their female homosexuality (56) rather than an issue of gender identity as Ovid's ending seems to suggest. This is because there is no desire on Iphis' part to change sex. Changing their sex does not answer Iphis' internal struggle but rather is a solution to the external problem of revealing her mother's secret.

Ovid's erasure of Iphis' thoughts and understanding of her own gender identity differs starkly contrasted in the way that most psychological, queer and even contemporary literature's understanding of trans- identities. Ovid seems to see transforming as a solution to a problem. As referenced earlier transformation is not transitioning in the way we understand it within transgender debates, essentially this allows a reading of transformation in this way but the reason for discussing transformation is still integral to understanding transgender fiction tropes later because literary history informs contemporary writing. In this regard it may be to move away from these harmful beliefs that many may confuse within a trans rhetoric.

In Iphis' case the problem is the revelation of their mother's story and the solution is to align their identity to the one Telethusa has been showing. While, in many, contemporary understandings of gender identity as being the choice or understanding of the individual (Horlacher 14). This is a major difference to the understanding of transgender identities than the one given to us by Ovid.

While this section has been devoted, largely, to Iphis' story it is not the only story in the *Metamorphoses* that involve a character changing sex. In those other stories the person requests to have their sex changed, whereas Iphis had no desire to do that, it was instead forced up them. This force is then validated by the happy ending that finishes off their story. The ending ignores Iphis' internal desires so that it can conform to a more conventional family model.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is also a story that offers us a narrative that, while bringing up tropes and ideas that contrast and inform transgender literature, is also centred around transformation. However, unlike Iphis' story we see the protagonist taking a much more active role not only in their transformation but also in their self-identification within their new gender identity. The thesis also moves towards a reading of the gender issues brought up by Woolf in order to understand how mainstream literature has sought to understand the role of gender in a character's arc. This understanding is interesting in informing later readings of *Middlesex* and

*Girl, Woman, Other* as much of trans writing hinges on an understanding of gender, and how gender is malleable or fixed. The understanding of gender also informs narratives around intelligibility that will also come to play in a later chapter.

### 3.3 Orlando and Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's mock-biographical novel, *Orlando*, published in 1928 tells the story of a young nobleman's fantastical life that begins in the sixteenth century. The young man does not express any thoughts that might hint to an uncomfortable feeling in reference to his gender. Instead, he goes about life and falls in love with a young woman without any issue. It is early in the novel when Orlando transforms into a woman. After this change from male to female, Orlando still manages to live through the Elizabethan age, even managing to see the modern era. Throughout her lifetime she still manages to circulate, publicly, in men's clothes while pursuing romantic relations with other women.

Unlike the Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or other contemporary novels, that will be written about later in this essay, this change does not come because of someone asking to change their gender identity. It is in the middle of chapter three in the novel where Orlando sleeps for seven days and when they wake up, they find that their body has been transformed from male to female. "Orlando had become a woman there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been" (Woolf 67). This chapter will explore this transition and how Woolf conceptualises Orlando's transition and how this fits our understanding of gender and the narrative arcs that we see repeated in the emergence transgender genre in the 1990s.

While *Orlando* was well received by the literate public in 1928 both critically and commercially it was largely ignored by the scholarly public (Smith 77). When the novel was given some scholarly attention there was very little discourse around the titular character's gender identity. The bulk of the novel is not focused on Orlando's gender identity, in many



ways the novel is much more focused on the extraordinary exploits that she gets into. Despite this the ideas around gender identity that the novel sets up set the stage for the rest of the narrative arc and the lack of early investigation of this is surprising. There is also some belief amongst some scholars that *Orlando* cannot be classified as a novel that engages with transgender subjects because the transition happens under fantastical means, rather than through a conscious choice (Prosser 168). This thesis has chosen to interrogate *Orlando* and its narrative interest in gender transformation narratives because as discussions around transgender representation emerged in the 1990s were cited by feminist and queer scholars as an example of a fictional text's ability to experiment and explore the fluidity of genders (Coffman 4).

Woolf seems to use gender in *Orlando* to defy realism as the protagonist moves from one gender to another without any sense of limits, this also seems to effect how time acts in the novel. The gender change that Orlando experiences from male to female happens in an unconventional and unexpected manner. Orlando's initial change was instigated with no desire from Orlando to become a woman, and in the portions of the novel that are dedicated to her life as a man there is little to assume that she was not comfortable while living with a male gender identity. Despite this content with her male gender identity Orlando does not face much internal struggle when she conforms to her new identity as a woman. Woolf's text seems to tell the reader that regardless of the gender that Orlando occupies there is little difference to them. "After being unambiguously male, Orlando becomes unambiguously female, without any of the physical features that would characterise" (Coffman 10) her to as someone who has transitioned from male to female. Woolf's novel's approach to gender as irrelevant to the overall plot may allow for a discussion around gender that informs some understanding of transgender themes, but it is ultimately what renders it as not being relevant to transgender studies. However, her novel does offer us an experimentation in the limits of identity, a theme

that will find itself integral to the reading of trans fictions that will be explored later into this thesis.

Woolf's *Orlando* does introduce a gendered element to its narrative, but it does little more than that. The novel sets an interesting perspective about what it would be like to transition from male to female as there she gives Orlando's transition with very little examination. Woolf does not interrogate the psychological effects of transitioning because that was not what the novel was interested in. Reading Orlando's fantastical transformation for the sake of this thesis is because while it may not be a trans narrative nor is it a text that sets up new standards for understanding gender or the gender binary it is more interesting for the notes of reading fluidity in characters and how Orlando is not set up to be the other because of their gender transformation.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter only briefly touched the surface of some of the more influential literary texts that have dealt with issues of gender and, more specifically, transgender identities. While the introduction of this chapter attempted to address the difficulties in analysing the manner in which historical texts dealt with transgender characters when using contemporary research into transgender identities, it should be reiterated that this is a limitation of this chapter. Despite this limitation of these texts, they strongly influenced the texts that will follow in this essay.

The aim of this chapter was to offer a foundational literary background to offer a reference point as the thesis moves towards the contemporary that are at the central debate of this thesis. Throughout this chapter there were alignments made between the fantastical nature of the texts and how this allowed the texts to engage in spontaneous transitions between genders. This was often countered as point of contention by scholars as this removed these historical texts from being novels about transgender identities as we understand them in the growing scholarly

conceptions of transgender literature. It should be acknowledged that fantastical elements of a text are not limited to these historical texts, nor do they exclude them from dealing with issues around gender as some would lead us to believe. Rather, these historical texts act as a comparison to the contemporary trans focused novels and show how far literature has come in understanding gender identity.

#### 4. Constructing Trans Characters in Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* and Jeffery Eugenides' *Middlesex*

##### 4.1 Introduction

The recent increase in fictional literature that centres its narrative on trans characters has been noticeable from the 1990s through to the twenty-first century. While, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the focus on characters that undergo a gender change is not new there seems to be a change in the way they are being written. Frotscher (253) notes that the “underlying tone seems to have changed from merely voyeuristic and sensationalising [...] to being more realistic and empathising”. This is likely helped by the mainstream awareness of trans rights activists, theorists and people. This growing accessibility to trans narratives in society whether it is through television, film, literature or other media has brought up questions of how these trans narratives are told. What aspects of their stories gain the most prominence? Who does the narrative give credibility to when identifying these individuals as trans? How is transitioning used in the narrative to conceptualise the trans individual? The textual conversations that this chapter uses *Girl, Woman, Other* and *Middlesex* to engage with are particularly invested in engaging with these questions around the trans experience.

Another question that arises within trans narratives is about a character's intelligibility and this is an area that this chapter is explicitly exploring as it focuses in on the characters of Cal in *Middlesex* and Morgan in *Girl, Woman, Other*. The understanding of intelligible characters arises from Butler's seminal text on gender, *Gender Trouble*, which understands intelligibility to be one of the important aspects of a believable and realised life despite their subversion of traditional gender norms. Gender, as the earlier look to transgender theory recognises, and its traditional binary system is not something that must be dictated by one person but rather it is a more fluid system that allows for individual nuance.

This chapter builds on the understanding established in the previous chapter of the ability for fiction to establish narratives around transgendered individuals and the necessity for study of these narratives. Where previous chapters sought to establish the histories and traditions of understandings of characters who undergo gender transformations, this chapter focuses on more contemporary novels that are interested in trans issues. Using two distinct novels, this chapter will seek out how contemporary narratives conceptualise and establish their transgender character's particular conceptualisation of their gender identity. In doing this work to look at how these characters, and the narrative beats that facilitate the discussion of their gender identities, this chapter will interrogate how these character's experience their transition, whether it be medically assisted or not, to their identity. One of the major interests in this chapter will be the exploration of how contemporary novels that centre trans characters interpret the space for fluidity between genders and the self-identification that allows trans characters to exist without needing to conform to the traditional gender binary. As previously discussed, there is not one conception of a trans individual and this multiplicity of being is interesting to the argument of this thesis that seeks to question how self-identification and transitioning sit within the trans narrative. How has literature responded to the transgender theories that have gained academic traction since the 1990s? In looking at the contemporary texts in the chapter how do they align with the growing academic literature of transgender theory?

The novels selected for this interrogation have been selected because they both engage in a shared pool of questions that often surround transgender literature, their individual approaches to the transgender experience and the act of transitioning each have different processes as well as results. The novels selected for this interrogation, *Girl, Woman, Other* and *Middlesex* have been selected because of their success and their careful constructions of trans characters that allows for an exploration of the questions around trans representation that this thesis is

interested in. The two novels grapple with questions of gender identity, their struggles with their initial gender and/or sex assignment, and their journeys in discovering their chosen gender identity. There will also be a discussion of the problematic aspects of the narratives that will undergo critical inspection. The focus of the analysis of these novels within the framework of this thesis will also lean on how each respective novel creates an intelligible character and their construction of their position as a gender nonconforming person.

Before attempting to construct the arguments necessary for discussion of these novels' narrative arcs with their trans characters it is important to, again, take a brief turn into the role of literary fiction in telling these stories. This question was brought up previously in discussion of earlier trans writings, but it is important to reconsider in the contemporary context of this chapter as these texts find themselves situated amongst more academic and nonfictional depictions of trans individuals that were not as prominent prior to the 1990s. Fictional writing has been seen, in comparison to nonfiction writing, to allow for a wider reimagining of trans lives and for many readers can be the first realised representation they have of trans lives. This frees them from needing to do activist or theoretical work to support their trans narrative lines that is often unavailable to nonfiction work. While this is not a unique feature of contemporary fiction, as some of these features are also present in other mediums such as film and television, it is one that is interesting in light of the literary world's relationship to the growing theoretical and activist writing of trans experience.

In writing about trans experiences fiction can offer a nuanced individualised focus on characters whose stories are often told in less accessible news stories that erase the individual, research papers that look to analyse the larger picture or autobiographies that, especially due to a lack of trans stories, become a call for activist work. Fiction can be reliant on transposing real lives into fictional stories, especially when the author's life closely mirrors that of their protagonists, but this is not necessary or common and raises an important issue. That issue is

whether non-trans writers have an obligation to tell stories of trans experiences in line with contemporary debates around them, in this case especially what duty do they have to have their stories align with transgender theory? Amato (161) makes an argument that mirrors the one this thesis would like to ask of trans writings in her approach to intersex fiction. She asks what authenticity do writers need to achieve in representing the lives of these under-represented, in literary terms, individuals? Her stance is that in both intersex and trans writing there is a need to move away from disrespectful, insensitive and sensational misrepresentations of these groups. In writing these experiences literature should allow itself to be accountable if it continues to perpetuate inaccurate descriptions of trans people that rely on the traditional gender binaries.

Considering the role of literary texts in this way this chapter's analysis will also touch on how the texts analysed contribute to cultural conceptions of trans characters and their experiences. This will also devolve into a brief discussion on how the two non-trans writers of Eugenides and Evaristo have constructed their protagonists in line with this thinking. While there has been a significant move away from interpreting the role of authorship in interrogating literature since Barthes' proclaimed death of the author. There is still some responsibility that the author becomes privy to when it comes to writing text that deal with carefully constructing characters who come from marginalised people groups. There is a need for a fair and realistic portrayal of these individuals, and this is an issue that is navigated by the author through their writing. While the discussion of the right of authorship is not one of the primary questions in this thesis it does give weight to the overall discussion on the representation of trans lives and experiences through fiction.

## 4.2 Constructing Trans and Intersex Protagonists' Relationship to the Gender Binary in *Girl, Women, Other* and *Middlesex*

Evaristo's Booker Prize winning text, *Girl, Women, Other*, is not entirely focused on the transgender characters of Morgan or Bibi. The text is an amalgamation of twelve short stories that have each of the characters moving into each other's narrative lines in, largely, an inconspicuous manner. Evaristo's third person, poetic narrative is predominantly focused on the lives of Black, British women a largely underrepresented group in British fiction. She grapples with sexuality, class, mental illness and gender identity amongst other unique complications that her characters experience. In many ways *Girl, Women, Other* feels like it is attempting to address almost all segments of the Black British group she writes about. The attempt to address all of these segments of the Black British experience is likely why one of her chapters also revolves around exploring the life of a character who subverts the expected ideas of gender. Her inclusion of these narrative path in her attempt to represent and write those who are often forgotten in mainstream literature helps to show Morgan as an intelligible, fully realised person just like the others in this novel. Each of Evaristo's characters are used to show the breadth of the human experience and Morgan is a part of that experimentation.

The interest of this chapter is with Morgan and, to a lesser but still significant extent, Bibi who are central characters in *Chapter Four Megan/Morgan*. While these characters are not the only ones of Evaristo's to challenge the gender binary or ask questions of its necessity, they are the ones whose identity seems contingent on not conforming to that assumed understanding of gender. Their narrative arc in their chapter is also reliant on exploring their relationship with gender whereas some of the other protagonists in *Girl, Woman, Other* are preoccupied with issues related to family, relationships or other aspects of their lives.

When first encountering Morgan, we are introduced to them as Megan. This initial presentation sets up the narrative to have some sense of movement in identity that is particularly



focused on the transition from a feminine identity. While this is not a certainty from the first page it is clearly set up by Evaristo to be a hint to what this chapter's protagonist will deal with in their chapter as the title also hints to a transition to Morgan. Although at the opening lines of the chapter the reader could also see the chapter title to be read initially as a suggested duality of identity this assumption can be refuted after reading over the chapter.

Evaristo approaches the disruption of an assumed heteronormative understanding of gender quickly in this chapter. She does this by immediately introducing this to be an issue of contention between Morgan, who at this point in their narrative is called Megan, and their mother who is "unthinkingly repeating patters of oppression based on gender" (307). Evaristo writes this difference between mother and child as being started by Morgan's preference of pants it is not the sole reason for their differing conceptualisation of gender. While the choices in clothing do not make an equivalence to identifying as a girl, a fact that Morgan points out by likening her mother's need to dress her in traditionally feminine clothing as treatment as though she were in the "nineteenth century and not the nineteen-nineties" (Evaristo 307) it is not the only issue of gendered living that Morgan is opposed to. The rejection of feminine clothes can be read as Morgan's first major objection to fitting neatly into the male and female gender binary that society, and especially their mother, pushes onto them.

Morgan's mother, despite being characterised as liberal, is used in this chapter as a stand in for societies' (mis)understanding of gender identity and the role of femininity and masculinity in presenting and preserving those gender identities. By acting in this way Morgan's mother is set up as the character who reinforces the traditional gender binary and its limited understanding of gender. As mentioned earlier, she insists on attempting to enforce a feminine aesthetic onto Morgan through her clothing choices and even in her toy choices for Morgan she tries to instil a hyperfeminine type of play. Morgan's mother uses Barbie dolls to try and reinforce feminine play by punishing Morgan's misuse of the dolls, which is shown through

her defacing the dolls, cutting their hair and limb removal by sending her to bed without dinner. The use of behavioural tactics to attempt to remind Morgan of their place within the gender binary as a woman is the character's formative introduction to gender identity and this is what aids in creating a sense of othering of Morgan. Butler's understanding of the performative nature of gender explains what Morgan's mother is forcing onto her mother, she explains that "the conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female, thus performs the very naturalisation that the notion of gender is meant to forestall" (43). The feelings they express about their "problematic childhood" are largely viewed in these negative terms not because of their understanding of their identity, but instead of the othering and judgement from their mother. The self-construction of identity that Morgan is undertaking, even at this young age, is not something that they feel uncomfortable with but rather it is other people's reactions to them. At this point the self-constructed placement of Morgan allows her to, even at her mother's objections, seem to hint towards her own agency towards her understanding of her own gender identity. This agency allows her to be an active participant in her chapter, her behaviour is not unusual to her. In the years preceding the start of puberty for Morgan the character has not yet conceptualised their ideas around gender but there is a noticeable and apparent strain on their connection to experiencing life in a female gendered experience. Gender, and their understanding of how they view their own gender, is not yet conceptualised in the jargon that Bibi will later introduce to them, but it is apparent in her discomfort with the manner in which their mother seems to be attempting to socialise them that they will subvert the traditional expectations of gender.

Questions around the relationship towards their body and their identity in Morgan's chapter find themselves focused on a rejection of feminine physical traits once they reach puberty. The narrative moments that highlight the dissonance between the identity aspects that she has expressed through childhood and her physical appearance are focused on their breasts. This is

expressed repeatedly, “the womanly curves [...] didn’t feel right, it wasn’t what she felt herself to be”, she describes her breasts as “two amphibian mounds” (Evaristo 312). Morgan expresses contempt for these feminine features, even going as far as to situate them as alien in relation to their body. This othering of female features is driven solely by Morgan, like her earlier rejection of traditional expectations feminine play. Where others appreciate these features, especially the boys at their school who being to like them for their traditionally feminine body, it is Morgan’s self-perception that places her as other, someone who is at odds with the traditional gender norms. The reader, as someone who has understood the trajectory of the chapter through Morgan’s perspective, are also pointed to interpret the gender politics introduced throughout in line with their active protagonist. At this time these narrative hits of Morgan’s life are situating them within a gender non-conforming role without giving it a name.

One of the major issues with narratives that have framed trans and gender nonconforming characters previously in literature is that there has been little power given to trans characters in naming their experiences. This is something that Evaristo’s narrative flips on its head as we see Morgan’s introduction into rhetoric that reject the heteronormative gender binary online with the help of trans individuals, the most important being Bibi. Bibi identifies as a transgender woman, she has always felt like a woman and transitioned from male to female. Their conversations on online forums are what thwart most of the misunderstandings Morgan, who has wondered “if she should really have been born a man because she sure as hell didn’t feel like a woman” (317), has about gender identity. Evaristo’s use of Bibi as a knowledge source of gender is in line with transgender theories understandings of the power that trans voices have in describing their own experience. Bibi, as a character, appears to represent a more conventional experience of the transgender experience in that she was born male but having always felt female she transitions from male to female, also undergoing gender conforming surgery to affirm her identity. She does not dismantle Morgan’s experience as a

gender nonconforming character, instead Bibi validates it. There is no space in the narrative where she pushes one understanding of being trans but rather her openness to share knowledge with Bibi is inclusive of other gender experiences.

There are spaces in the narrative that overlap the experiences that Bibi had with her body identity with Morgan not feeling entirely comfortable in her body, but Bibi more equates body to being female and in turn goes through a medical transition. Morgan, on the other hand, does not feel explicitly like a man, rather their rejection of the traditions of femininity find them at odds with the gender binary so does not need all of the feminine aspects of her body to be changed.

Morgan's story, while being centred around gender and their unease with their female gender identity, does not make transition the crucial moment of the chapter. This is not to say that there is not some sort of transition in the narrative, but rather that it subverts some of the more expected narrative beats of a story that centres itself on gender. The change from Megan to Morgan, which has been anticipated by the reader since the chapter began, is not made into a long section of the text. Instead of meandering with Morgan through the reconstruction of their self-identification the reader is welcomed to Morgan's new gender identity at the end. They are rid of Megan simply, as Evaristo starts a section within the chapter having written "Morgan (no longer Megan) has self-identified as gender-free for six years now". The processes of transitioning from female to gender free is not the important aspect of the narrative, rather it was the self-discovery that Morgan underwent to facilitate this move to a fluid sense of gender. As this analysis has emphasised, it is the agency and self-identification that allows readers to see Morgan's story through the transgender theory lens. As Nagoshi and Brzuzy have expressed, one of the most important features in transgender theory is the self-embodiment and self-construction of identity of gender (435). Morgan, as a testament to the narrative work that Evaristo has undergone, may not fit into a singular gender identity but they

are self-realised. While transgender theories and identities may often be conflated with a transition from one gender binary to another despite this not being one of the major markers of trans individuals used by transgender theorists.

One of the important aspects of transgender theory and its approach to defining trans individuals is that it does not hinge on the necessity for an individual to undergo a medical transition from one gender to another. It allows for a more nuanced and individual alignment with gender that is focused on self-actualisation as the crucial part of gender identity. This also feeds into the intelligibility of the character and their gender expression. Morgan becomes an intelligible character because they have come to be a fully realised and coherent person in their chosen gender. The narrative beats that Evaristo uses never seek to undermine Morgan's position as a gender-free person which allows them to be intelligible in the context of the novel. The work that Evaristo did to achieve this was helped by placing Morgan as the protagonist and not finding or worrying over a reason for the discomfort Morgan felt when identifying as a woman. There was no sense that Morgan had to be any particular gender other than one that felt coherent to their own understanding of their own gender identity. When their mother tried to take authority over positioning Morgan's gender this was thwarted by writing Morgan's mother to be lacking in understanding of not only her daughter but also gender as a greater concept.

*Middlesex* is unlike *Girl, Women, Other* in that the trans narrative that it creates seems to oppose any gender identities outside of a male or female expression for Cal who is the protagonist of the novel. Eugenides' narrative has been argued to reaffirm conservative gender hierarchy by constructing a narrator who is unambiguous in their understanding of their own gender, moving to a place of being totally male after a period of identifying as totally female (Mendelsohn 18). The use of a transition between two fixed points of gender does not necessarily undermine the trans aspects of the novel but its clinging to maintain or fit within

the traditional gender binaries sets it apart from other writings that focus on the trans experience. The novel also appears to introduce issues of sexuality to affirm Cal's correct gender identity in ways that transgender theory would ordinarily reject. The novel seems almost to be a sanitised expression of trans experience for the sake of appealing to a wider population of society.

*Middlesex* revolves its plot around the family saga of the Stephanides family, who live in the United States after immigrating from Greece in the early twentieth century. The story takes on some aspects of an epic with its exploration of Greek mythology throughout the length of the novel with nods being made to how events in the family's life echo beats in myths. One of the more important, and complicated, links from the mythological to the family is found with Cal. It is the portrayal of Cal that will set it at odds with the many ways that transgender theory allows us to read trans characters and this opposition is what interests this chapter's perusal of *Middlesex*. The construction of Cal as a trans character is not entirely at odds with transgender theory, as it does reaffirm aspects of that theory, so it makes for a thought-provoking text for exploration in this chapter.

One of the first aspects that seems to complicate a transgender theory reading of Cal is the narrative's rejection of gender ambiguity that fits outside of the traditional heteronormative binary. Cal starts out life as Calliope understanding himself to be a girl, an identity that only becomes challenged when the character is supposed to be going through puberty which leads to the discovery of an intersex condition. This narrative line is introduced in the opening lines in the novel: "I was born twice: first as a baby girl, a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974" (Eugenides 3). The story, like Cal's understanding of himself, appears to be told in two parts, one that focuses on the family's story as a whole from their life in Greece to their newfound home in the United States while the other half occupies itself

within Cal's coming of age. The dual narrative structure has led the novel being seen in a hybrid structure. Alongside this hybrid nature *Middlesex* also integrates mythological narratives both into Cal's discovery of his intersex body and the events of his family's life that the novel seems to suggest led to his birth in this deviation from the 'normal' body. Frotscher (262) sees this narrative structure being used to justify and explain Cal's intersex condition through Eugenides' retelling of the grandparent's incest. This sets up Cal's intersex condition to not be normal, rather it becomes a literary motif in its link to the incest and Greek mythologies that explain the appearance of the condition in the family. Cal's intersex condition is not allowed to be a normal feature of the character, instead it becomes linked to the grander family epic narrative. Cal's narration sets up this link early on in the narrative, well before the diagnosis of intersex is introduced as he tells of his grandparent's immigration story: "Without their knowing, my grandparents, on their way to America, were each carrying a single mutated gene on the fifth chromosome" (Eugenides 79). Researchers, like Frotscher, have read this link as a narrative line that deems Cal's intersex condition to be illegitimate because its existence hinges on this epic plot (262). It makes Cal's intersex diagnosis something that needs to be overcome, it becomes a motif that while enhancing the family saga of *Middlesex* is complicated in its relation to the protagonist.

Puberty is the push for an examination of Cal's gender identity, as prior to this the protagonist has gone through life seeing themselves as a girl with no questions or examinations around this. Their development seems to neatly slot into the gender binary that society has constructed, one of the ways this is shown is in comparison to Cal's brother, Chapter Eleven. Where Chapter Eleven is skilled in maths, she is skilled in verbal skills, he is handy with tools, where she is imaginative. Cal's comfort in being a girl and the expressions that underlie this appear to be linked within a performative aspect of gender. The habits and traits that are associated with female bodies and identities become on in the same in the novel. The use of

traditional gender roles is played throughout the novel and they are interlinked with the family's Greek origins. In most modern approaches to gender, it is understood that gender identity is not inherently linked to these habits or traits. While this is a widely accepted position in literature around gender, society itself has not completely reframed its relationship between gender and these traditional roles. As mentioned in the analysis of *Girl, Woman, Other* in this essay the family of the protagonist often acts as an intimate mirror of society's values conception on gender identity. In *Middlesex* we see these ideas of feminine roles and gender explicitly in the set-up of the Stephanides family. The women are relegated to the house, cooking, cleaning and child-rearing while the men are found to be working to support the family. Eugenides does not undermine this traditional setup, he makes no moves to question it but seems to prize it as normal and expected.

Cal comes to their gender transition due to medical interventions that are pushed when he learns that he is an intersex person. The novel's construction of his intersex diagnosis is explained medically by the specialist he and his parents see in New York. It is this situation that sets up the "possibility of non-fixed, unstable and shifting gender conceptualisations, while it simultaneously reproduces the heteronormative gender binarism with its two legitimate and mutually exclusive genders" (Amato 166). We see how *Middlesex*'s narrative interrogates, or conforms, to this perspective on gender in Cal's reaction to finding out that he is intersex and how this early position on the construction of gender is validated by his transition from a teenage girl to a teenage boy. Once Cal discovers that he has a gene mutation on his fifth chromosome he visits the library to learn more about this and coming to the definition of hermaphrodite. This definition seemingly shifts the manner in which Cal sees himself as up until this time he sees himself as a girl, in body and in traits. This shift is helped by the violent and marginalising link between the word hermaphrodite and monster.



The point of transitioning for Cal seems to come as an inevitability instead of the result of self-reflection work. His transition seems to come because his reassessment of himself as not a girl, but an intersex person that makes the “female position impossible to stay in” (Frotscher 263). The narrative does not allow Cal much space to explore the ambiguities and spectrum of gender, instead he is pushed into being a boy – a position that even previously was made clear to always be the only gender he could occupy. He moves into this gender without the narrative allowing for much questioning for Cal personally, he is a boy from the moment he puts on the suit and cuts his hair. While there is no set way to transition, nor is this argument implying that this transition invalidates Cal’s place in the male gender, it does limit the nuance that he experiences personally in his gender identity. It is a clear, move from one gender to another. There is even explicit clarity from the adult Cal that he was always meant to be a man and that the female identity he lived with for so many years is not relevant to his current life. He says, “I’m not androgynous in the least [...] I have lived half my life as a male and by now everything comes naturally” (Eugenides 42). When memories of Calliope and his life as a girl arise, he likens it to being possessed and unnatural to him. In this narration there is little question of gender identity for Cal. It is very black and white for him. He was once a girl, but he was always meant to be a man because of the genetic abnormality. This rhetoric also seems to deny the role of being intersex in his gender discovery to little more something that led him to realise his male place. Frotscher reads his intersex identity as being “only an unruly phase but not a liveable identity” (265). In settling into this ‘liveable identity’ Cal is intelligible. While the rhetoric around gender that Cal has constructed seems in contention with some of the work in transgender theory it does not mean that his ultimate expression is invalid. In the logic that Cal uses he becomes coherent and self-realised, even if that is done by seemingly conforming to traditional gender standards.

*Middlesex*, while seeming to prefer for Cal to maintain the boundaries of gender allowed by the traditional binary does have characters that explore more gender nonconforming lived experiences. When Cal runs away from home, he has decided that he is a man, after deciding not to undergo the feminisation surgery offered to him at the clinic. He begins to work in a burlesque in San Francisco when he meets Zora and Carmen who do not fit the traditional binary, with the former being intersex. It is with Zora that readers experience the most likeable depiction of an intersex character; she is beautiful and has an “affirmative self-identification as an intersex person” (Amato 191). While being intersex and openly admitting to this identification she also harbours no desire to fit herself neatly into the female gender. The perception that the narrative, as a result of Cal’s descriptions, gives of her is someone who while not desiring to fit into the normative gender binary does. She easily passes as female and is even described as the “perfect woman” (Eugenides 489) despite being an activist for intersex subjectivity and identification.

The other gender nonconforming person that Eugenides introduces to is Carmen who is a transgender woman but unlike Zora she does not meet the traditional standards of femininity. While Zora easily accesses a genuine female appearance Carmen does not, she overdoes the performative acts of female identity and as such is inauthentic. Amato sees this as perpetuating the “notion of trans women not being ‘real’ women, who need to exaggerate cultural codes of normative femininity in order to be recognized as female, iterates transmisogynist language and reasoning” (195). This harmful reproduction of dangerous stereotypes of transwomen is reaffirmed by the novel by not offering Carmen any self-reflective narration. While this can be noted as a production Cal’s narration on one character and not transwomen as a group it is a dangerous rhetoric for a novel that is so concerned with gender identity to get wrapped up in. This is an especially curious choice when Carmen is one of the only transwomen the reader has access to within the confines of the narrative. This othering of gender nonconforming

characters by the eye of a gender nonconforming character feeds into the heteronormative agenda that *Middlesex* perpetuates.

Transgender theory limits the link between gender and sexuality because sexuality is not important in informing gender identity. *Middlesex* seems to conflate the relationship between sexuality and gender with Cal. It posits that one of the contributing reasons to Cal's innate maleness is his sexuality. When Cal still identifies as a girl, he has a crush on another girl who the narrative calls Obscure Object, this is something he fails to admit to anyone when he is still female. It also seems to be one of the only ways that Cal does not fit in as a girl. This lesbian desire is rewritten in the novel to become male heterosexuality (Holmes 93) and is dangerously used as one of the justifications for why Cal cannot remain female. In the novel this sexual desire for women is seen as an "inkling of her true biological nature" (Eugenides 333). The conflation of sexuality and gender identity have no need to be connected as one is not reliant on the other, as reading through transgender theory proves. Rubin states "it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence" (33). The novel also validates the correct position of Cal as a heterosexual man when it allows his relationship with Julie to see success that was never possible for him as a girl with lesbian desires. Amato sees this as the "novel's privileging of heterosexuality" (178).

*Middlesex* like *Girl, Women, Other* does not prize the act of transitioning medically as he true turning point for the character's new gender identity. Neither narrative subjects its readers to read about the long processes many trans people undergo to pass as the gender they identify with. In negating these narratives both novels allow for the self-identification of their narrators to have the final word in deciding their identity and place in the world. In *Middlesex* the transition is written off as, in hindsight, being "far less dramatic than the distance anybody travels from infancy to adulthood" (Eugenides 588). Cal is a man and how he became a man is not something that the novel lays much importance upon, this helps to build into the self-

identification that transgender theory recognises as an important aspect of defining one's gender. The narrative closure on Cal as a happy heterosexual man who shirks off his intersexuality as a means to masculinity seems to neutralise the queer aspects of himself in order to fit in with a conservative heterosexual world (Lee 45) is a narrative end that benefits from not showing the transitioning process in detail. In not including these narrative details it cements that Cal was always meant to be male.

### **4.3 Moral Obligations of Writing Gender Nonconforming Characters and the Role of the Author**

One question that this chapter posited was the role of literature in representing and telling stories of trans characters, what accountability do they have in writing these narratives especially when the author is a cis gender person. While there is not inherent moral obligation for any fictional text to accurately and realistically concern themselves with representing any group there is still some power that literature has in adding to the discussion of marginalised and underrepresented groups that make incorrect depictions of them questionable to engage with. When novels of trans people are written with contradictory statements and negative or damaging narrations there is harm done to a community that is still battling for acknowledgment in the world. This is because literature does not exist within a vacuum it is as much a reflection of the world around it as it effects the world. This is especially true of bestselling and prize-winning novels like *Middlesex* and *Girl, Women, Other*. "Books have the ability to open up new possibilities and options of being where perhaps none had existed before" (Frotscher 270) and if literature has this power there must be some responsible writing to go alongside it. Amato argues that "harmful (mis)representations of a group of people [...] who are subjected to violations that have become acknowledged as human rights violations, have necessarily an ethical dimension" (199). While we expect fiction to entertain it can also

engage critically with theory that has been created by people of these marginalised groups. The lack of fiction that deals with these narrative arcs also puts a stress on the few novels that do deal with these issues to create responsibly.

The need for literature to be authentic also raises questions of who is able to tell these stories. As a broad idea fiction does not need to be written out of real-life experiences. Roland Barthes' post structuralist argument on the supposed death of the author and position that there is no need to use author-based analysis and interpretation onto a text. Which is a position that this thesis agrees with as fiction is inherently a work of the imagination, it is a creation but when the topics that the author is engaged in have real life consequences for pathologized groups of people it does seem pressing to consider the author. In considering the author it is to hold them accountable for their narratives and the authenticity they should try to achieve.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The exploration of the life of characters who undergo a transition between genders is a complicated endeavour for any author. In *Middlesex* and *Girl, Women, Other* there was a display of the possibility of those narratives to conform or to reject the gender binary that their characters find themselves at odds with. Both novels engage with these gender narratives by focusing closely on a character who transgresses the binary to ultimately find themselves content in their chosen gender. The characters in these stories become intelligible in their narratives due to the self-actualisation of their relationship to their own gender identity and both are happy at the close of their narrative arcs.

The analysis of these two novels was to explore some of the ways that contemporary literature is conceptualising characters who do not conform to gender norms and charting how they became intelligible in their narrative arcs. The work of this analysis was also to compare how contemporary novels have moved the trans characters to the forefront in giving them fully

realised lives within fiction. When compared to the narrative arcs that were seen in *Metamorphoses* and *Orlando*, we can see that these movements between genders no longer has to exist in the realm of fantastical narratives but can find a grounding in realistic tales that show gender to be a nuanced and complex identity. In both narratives there is an understanding that transitioning between genders does not have to be seen as a violent or forced act but rather it is a movement that allows for fulfilled and happy characters. This is not to say that transitioning or the life of a transgender individual is inherently happy but rather it is not indicative of unhappiness and pain. A trope that has been used by people who see gender as inherent and set. The novels are not a finite look at transgender literature, nor are they indicative of transgender literature cannon in its entirety. Rather they give a glance into what is being widely circulated and the thematic discourses that are happening around transgender narratives.

## 5. Conclusion

The thesis aimed to contribute to the growing analysis of transgender literature by forming an argument that centred on the authentic representation of transgender characters in fiction. It explored the complexities that is unique to each trans character's experience of their gender identity and noted how literature framed these experiences. It looked to older representations of transformation between genders to form a background to narrative styles and arcs that resonate in contemporary narratives that involved transitioning. The framework of transgender theory that was used by the thesis was important to grounding the fictional depictions to real world theoretical debates. In deconstructing characters who transitioned and the rhetoric that informed their narratives the thesis argued that there is not one way for a transgender character to be. There is no formula or rulebook for how transgender characters are conceptualised but argued that they should be conceptualised in a way that does not make them objects and offers them their own subjectivity and nuance. This subjectivity contributes to making them coherent characters who are demonised for subverting the imagined gender binary that still colours discussions about gender identity. The characters are not others and their conceptions give them agency to have the final word in their identity.

Writing transgender narratives in this accepting and welcoming manner allows for literature to mirror the growing awareness of trans lives done by activists by having fully realised characters. Transgender fiction and its move into the mainstream reading public's awareness is not only a positive thing but it is also necessary. This thesis hopes to have shown the potential of transgender fiction and opens the door to more explorations in the genre, anticipating the new and exciting fictional takes on gender. The texts explored here are not the beginning nor are they the end, but they are a slice of the growing engagement with transgender narratives.

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