

## Frankenstein's Creature's Self-Portrait: Transgender Politics in *Man Into Woman* and *The Danish Girl*

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This essay aims to contribute to the contemporary transgender debate by using Lili Elbe's account of her life in *Man Into Woman* (1933), David Ebershoff's novel *The Danish Girl* (2000) and Tom Hooper's film adaptation of the latter (2015) as case studies. All three narratives explore biologism and medicalization as being closely aligned with the Frankenstein metaphor in terms of the conceptualization of trans bodies. However, this essay contends that Ebershoff's novel, although tending towards the much-criticized allegorization of such bodies as the exceptional locus of gender trouble, engages in a subtly political enterprise where an androgynous and liberating third space is made available to transgender identities.

Keywords: transgender; *Man Into Woman*; *The Danish Girl*; medicalization; androgyny; third gender

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## El autorretrato de la criatura de Frankenstein: Política y transgeneridad en *Man Into Woman* y *The Danish Girl*

El presente estudio se suma al debate actual en estudios de transgeneridad tomando como casos de estudio el relato autobiográfico de Lili Elbe en *Man Into Woman* (1933), la novela *The Danish Girl* (2000) de David Ebershoff y la adaptación cinematográfica de esta última de Tom Hooper (2015). Si bien los tres exploran la relación entre biologismo y medicalización a través de la metáfora de la criatura de Frankenstein en la conceptualización de los cuerpos trans, este estudio pretende argumentar que la novela de Ebershoff, aunque tiende a

alegorizar dichos cuerpos como ejemplos excepcionales de la problematización del género, se adentra en una sutil discusión política que ofrece a las identidades transgénero un tercer espacio andrógino y liberador.

Palabras clave: transgénero; *Man Into Woman*; *The Danish Girl*; medicalización; androginia; tercer género

## I. INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to contribute to the contemporary transgender debate by arguing that David Ebershoff's novel *The Danish Girl* (2000), unlike Niels Hoyer's *Man Into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex* (1933)<sup>1</sup> and Tom Hooper's film adaptation of *The Danish Girl* (2015), engages in a subtly political enterprise where an androgynous and liberating third space (Chare 2016) or third gender (Nataf 1996)—which Sandy Stone calls “genre” (1992) and will be the preferred term and concept in this study—is made available to transgender identities. This kaleidoscopic space is not, however, free from the idealization and aestheticized allegory of trans identities. Transgender studies has burgeoned in the field of literary studies over the past decade,<sup>2</sup> with Ebershoff's novel and its popularization through Hooper's homonymous film adaptation—both of them loosely based on the figure of Lili Elbe, also portrayed in Hoyer's *Man Into Woman*—at the center of the debate over representations of transsexualism and transgender.

In its “Publication History” section, *The Lili Elbe Digital Archive* explains the background of *Man Into Woman* (1933), the fictionalized account of Lili Elbe's life: “In March 1930 Danish artist Einar Wegener entered Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science (*Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*) in Berlin [...] to undergo what was then called genital transformation surgery” (2019, n.p.). As clarified by Pamela L. Caughie et al., the editors of *The Lili Elbe Archive*, Elbe's life story, initially published in 1931 as *Fra Mand til Kvinde*, is “the first full-length narrative of a subject who undergoes a surgical change in sex. We would now call this gender confirmation surgery, but Lili saw herself as a distinct person from Einar” (2019, n.p.). Caughie et al. further state that Lili Elbe was working on her<sup>3</sup> own manuscript with Ernst Harthern—her German friend in the narrative—, who eventually published the account as Lili's “confessions” under the pseudonym Niels Hoyer. This text would eventually result in “the Danish first edition, [which] is a collaboration of six individuals and a publishing house,” including, among others, Lili Elbe and Gerda Wegener, Ernst Harthern, and doctor Kurt Warnekros (2019, n.p.). Not only do the names of the characters change in the three narratives under consideration—Einar Wegener in the novel and film is Andreas Sparre in *Man Into Woman*; Greta in the novel and Grete in *Man Into Woman* become Gerda in the film—, but so do the stories, in spite of them all taking the figure of Lili Elbe as inspiration.

<sup>1</sup> *The Lili Elbe Digital Archive* brings together a German typescript and four editions of this narrative published in Danish, German, and English between 1931 and 1933, plus the first complete English translations of the Danish edition and the German typescript. The present study will use the British edition published in 1933.

<sup>2</sup> The “transgender phenomena” of Greek and Roman antiquity and of the nineteenth century “have taunted the social order in ways that have spurred the development of sexology, psychiatry, endocrinology, and other medical-scientific fields involved in social regulatory practices” (Stryker 2006, 13). For a detailed study on their evolution, particularly in the 1990s, see Susan Stryker (2006). According to Stryker, around 1995 there was an “astonishing rapid rise of the term ‘transgender’” (2006, 6), which crystallized in the 2010s.

<sup>3</sup> This essay uses the pronouns “he/his” for Einar/Andreas and “she/her” for Lili, as used by the editor/writer/director of the three narratives under consideration, and in order to highlight the gender binary that is under examination.

Speaking about the film, Maria San Filippo concludes that it “reasserts and advocates for the maintenance of a sexual binary that more radical trans\* formations have the potential to dismantle” (2016, 404).<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, in his analysis of the three texts under study, Nicholas Chare problematizes the “crafting” of a submissive and gender-fixed Lili by doctors who adopt the role of artists and sculptors (2016, 348). Oindry Roy reads Ebershoff’s novel as “conventional” and, even though she perceives an unfamiliar pattern in the non-conformity to gender roles in one of the partners and the passionate loyalty of the other, she reads Lili’s “gender-reassigned self” as a “challenge to the socio-clinical perceptions about the fixity of gender” (2016, 134, 139). Sergio Campbell (2016) and Iñaki Robles Elong (2016), in turn, question Hooper’s film adaptation, considering that it aligns with normativizing transsexualism. Indeed, all three of the works studied here have frequently been read as bleak pictures of a transsexualism that reshapes the body to conform to gender expectations.

## 2. THE FRANKENSTEIN METAPHOR: BIOLOGISM AND MEDICALIZATION

As stated by Stryker, transgender studies focus on questions of embodiment and identity more than on desire and sexuality (2006, 7). Attuned with Frederic Jameson’s “mirror theory of knowledge,” Stryker considers that “[t]ransgender phenomena call into question both the stability of the material referent ‘sex’ and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and psychical categories of ‘gender,’” thus concluding that “‘sex’ is a mash-up, a story we mix about *how* the body means” (2006, 9; italics in the original). In the three narratives under consideration, Einar and Lili are systematically portrayed as victims of what Judith Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” (2004, 9), which gives coherence and stability to gender and, according to Adrienne Rich (2003, 27), is devised as a “political institution” that promotes male dominance and the perpetuation of patriarchy through heterosexual models. Drawing on Monique Wittig’s notion of the “heterosexual contract” as a “political regime which rests on the submission and the appropriation of women” (1992, xviii), Butler concludes that “gender not only designates persons, ‘qualifies’ them, as it were, but constitutes a conceptual episteme by which binary gender is universalized” (2004, 28). This binarism conceals, in Butler’s words, “a discursive production of nature and, indeed, a natural sex that postures as the unquestioned foundation of culture” (2004, 48). This is the starting point in Einar’s exploration of a transgender identity. The biologism implicit in this heterosexual matrix leads to Einar’s recurrent confusion of

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<sup>4</sup> “Trans\*,” where the asterisk is “a symbol with multiple meanings” that can mark “a bullet point in a list, highlight or draw attention to a particular word or phrase, indicate a footnote, or operate as a wildcard character in computing and telecommunications,” is another label that “signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities” (Tompkins 2014, 26). The present study opts for the equally inclusive term “transgender” which, although a buzzword in the early 1990s, “has established itself as the term of choice, in both popular parlance and a variety of specialist discourses” (Stryker 2006, 3).

the cultural construction of gender, as epitomized by clothes and femininity, with a biological projection: “he liked the dress, and he could nearly feel the flesh beneath his skin ripening” (Ebershoff [2000] 2015, 9).

Eventually biologism materializes in Einar’s frequent nose bleeds, which are read as an intersexual manifestation: “the buried female organs of the hermaphrodite hemorrhaging irregularly, as if in protest” (148). Einar both dreaded and welcomed this bleeding because it stands for the biological reassurance of justifying a physical transition; he “recognized the duality” in himself, “the lack of complete identification with either sex” (138). However, rather than embracing his gender fluidity, he clearly perceives this sexual intermediacy as a “sexual pathology” (138). As such, medicalization ensures that, as stated by Stephanie S. Turner (1999, 471), gender identities remain fixed by “correcting” genitals to match sex and gender.

Einar’s (or Andreas’ in *Man Into Woman*) obsession with accommodating his gender identity to society’s standards takes him to different doctors in an attempt to make sense of what is perceived as pathology.<sup>5</sup> His visit to Dr Hexler confirms Einar’s “delusion that he is a woman” (Ebershoff [2000] 2015, 99) as being a pathology that the doctor demonizes and stigmatizes as asocial: “you and I, as responsible citizens, cannot let your husband free to roam as Lili [...]. I trust you’ll agree with me that we should do whatever it takes to get this demon out of him” (99-100). Medicalization stands as a case of violence to transgender people through its use of genital status (Stryker 2006, 10). In line with the aesthetic discourse of the novel, where the protagonists are in fact painters, the doctor becomes a sculptor who indulges himself in “aesthetic adventure” (Connell 2012, 869). In contrast, Nicholas Chare (2009, 348) detects the Pygmalion myth in Kreutz, the doctor in Hoyer’s *Man Into Woman*, an idea that is also developed by Sandy Stone in her analysis of this text. Likewise, in Ebershoff’s novel, Professor Bolk becomes the spokesperson for ideologically marked medicalization and, after allegedly proving Einar’s “hermaphroditism” ([2000] 2015, 209), he justifies the castration of one of the two identities (210),<sup>6</sup> particularly when “Bolk the Blade” is described as “[a]lways ready to open a girl up with his knife” (198). The violence of this patriarchal heteronormativity is symbolically projected onto the surgeon, whose eyes and voice in *Man Into Woman* are described as “penetrat[ing] into the innermost recesses of [Andreas’] soul” (1933, 23).

The late 1970s perception of transgender as a case of “boundary violation” leading to the Frankenstein phenomenon of “necrophilic invasion” of women’s bodies (Daly 1978, 71) was later questioned by critics such as Susan Stryker. In “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” Stryker reclaims words like “creature,” “monster,” and “un-natural” for the transgendered as, by embracing and accepting them, “we may dispel their ability to harm us” (1994, 240). Echoing Mary Shelley’s creature, Stryker presents the transsexual

<sup>5</sup> When Einar visits Professor Bolk, it is significant that his laboratory is in the “pathology building” (Ebershoff [2000] 2015, 189).

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to *Man Into Woman*, Norman Haire takes Andreas Sparre’s “hermaphroditism” for granted (1933, x). This condition is confirmed on page 278.

body as “an unnatural body”: “It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (1994, 238).

Lili’s body is “carved into existence” by Professor Bolk (Ebershoff [2000] 2015, 211): “She’s become so hollow, a nearly weightless girl emptied out by both illness and her surgeon’s knife” (219). Professor Bolk’s boundless ambition is evidenced in his experiment with Lili. Similar to Victor Frankenstein, Bolk suggests medical intervention beyond nature’s limits, a “final metamorphosis” that “would make [Lili] even more of a woman than she already was” (243). In Hooper’s film Lili is not Professor Bolk’s first guinea pig. There was another, a man, but he ran away at the very last moment, which leads the viewer to think that maybe the doctor has strategically used hermaphroditism to persuade Lili. In *Man Into Woman* doctor Kreutz is seen as Lili’s “miracle-man, [...] to bring her to proper life” (1933, 138), and as “a god” of the Women’s Clinic, “whom all feared, whom all revered” (176), “a wizard” who hypnotizes Lili—she is pictured as a “sleepwalker” who inevitably “let[s] herself be led into the Professor’s room” (272).<sup>7</sup> Lili, whose life can be described as the doctor’s work, eventually objects to the term “phenomenon” (1933, 152), which suggests that she is not human, or at least not a woman. Echoing Stone’s idea that “[t]he female is immanent, the female is bone-deep, the female is instinct” (1992, 292), there is an obsession with the foundational myth in Genesis in that Lili is illusorily presented as an organic creature made of “clay which others had prepared and to which the Professor has given form and life by a transient touch” (Hoyer 1933, 165). The Garden of Eden, mentioned several times by Lili, is ultimately and paradoxically materialized in the Women’s Clinic (213), where Lili feels at home—even though she was initially rejected by it and had to live temporarily at a hotel (163). She does nothing without seeking the doctor’s approval and she gives him a painting of her heart to hang in the clinic (265). She ultimately confesses to Danish painter Crete Sparre: “I must go back to the hospital, where I belong. There is no one elsewhere who loves me and takes me for what I am” (226). Lili’s understanding of her identity is still, however, far from the later transgender tenets of moving from the clinics to the streets (Stryker 2006, 2).

Although the result of the medical intervention is a woman with no gender fluidity anymore, the outcome is far from normative. In *Man Into Woman* Lili is ultimately presented as not womanly but “childish, fumbling with a thousand questions in the dark” (1933, 133). In *The Danish Girl* she is presented as “a freak of some sort” ([2000] 2015, 242)—a “phenomenon,” as seen before in *Man Into Woman*—or a monster that makes the Frankenstein metaphor more convincing, like when Lili feels ashamed of her new physical condition (219) or is consumed by “self-doubt” when “she [sees] a man-woman” in the mirror (242). Lili thus seems to experience Janice Raymond’s idea that “[i]nstead of developing genuine integrity, the transsexual becomes a synthetic product”

<sup>7</sup> In *Man Into Woman* the image of the sleepwalker also appears on pages 24 and 270. In all three narratives the doctor resonates with Mary Shelley’s lines: “‘More, far more, will I achieve,’ thought Frankenstein. ‘I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation’” ([1817] 1965, 47).

(1979, 165). All in all, Lili seems to betray herself when she apparently implies that her transition is the result of external imposition rather than an innate desire to get rid of Einar: “To prove to the world—no, not to the world but to herself—that indeed she was a woman, and that all her previous life, the little man known as Einar, was simply nature’s gravest mishap, corrected once and for all” (Ebershoff [2000] 2015, 243). She seems to exemplify Stone’s idea that “woman” can be used “as male fetish, as replicating a socially enforced role, or as constituted by performative gender” (1992, 291).

Biologism is further developed in the film version. In Lili’s last conversation with Henrik Sandahl—the first man she meets at a party and with whom she has a romance—he concludes that the doctor made Lili a woman, but she clarifies: “No. God made me a woman, but the doctor is curing me from the sickness that was my disguise,” to which Henrik adds: “A real woman” (2015, 1:37:08-22). Hermaphroditism is thus approached as a malformation that needs to be cured by medicalization. One of the additions made in the film to endorse biologism is a dream Lili has: “Last night I had the most beautiful dream. I dreamed that I was a baby in my mother’s arms. She looked down on me and she called me Lili” (1:49:27-54). While in Hoyer’s and Ebershoff’s narratives Lili is clearly Greta and Anna’s—the opera singer—playful invention (1933, 65; [2000] 2015, 11), the film reveals Lili’s obsession with embracing her biological nature, which is a mirage that exposes the problematization of what a “true” woman is.

Einar’s progressive dissolution is linked to Lili’s artificial construction of a hyperbolic femininity that is projected onto the body, which becomes “a vital arena of contradiction and change” (Connell 2012, 866) and will eventually lead to frustration and loss. As Connell states, “transsexuality is [socially] embodied” (2012, 866-8). The body is endowed with a gendered dimension that transcends sexuality and, in Lili’s case, it artificially constructs a woman who performs as an aesthetic, passive recipient. In Raymond’s words, “transsexuals move totally in the realm of the body while thinking that they are transcending the body. To use Daly’s terminology, they are ‘possessed’ by their bodies [...]. We are, of course, our bodies, but we are not dominated by them” (1979, 169). Lili and Einar in *The Danish Girl* are completely dominated by the body until this biologist discourse is superseded—as will be argued later in this study. Particularly at the brothel in Paris, Einar imitates a feminine behavior that he cannot dissociate from sexed bodies: “He visited Madame Jasmin-Carton’s to examine women, to see how their bodies attached limb to trunk and produced a female” ([2000] 2015, 105). His gender performativity goes beyond cross-dressing and is linked to corporeity. The behavior that he copies comes from prostitutes stripping and dancing (105), which is paradoxically read as reputable when performed by Lili in the honorable space of Parisian pools and tearooms (108).

This is indeed the model of femininity that Lili strives to imitate in order to feel herself part of the gendered binary.<sup>8</sup> As Lili, she feels she has to give up Einar’s painting and the agency that it entails. Following the heterosexual matrix, Lili systematically

<sup>8</sup> In *Man Into Woman*, when Lili is among Grete’s lady friends and artists, she feels “the most feminine of them all” (1933, 76).

awaits signification from men and lives within what Raymond calls “hetero-reality,” that is, “the world view that woman exists always in relation to man” (1986, 3). Her first conversation with Henrik reveals the latter’s engulfing masculinity. He allows Lili to flourish in the context of fairy tales, but then, immediately after, he tells the story of a Polish prince who freed every woman in his country, thus following the model of the rescuing hero (Ebershoff [2000] 2015, 46). Lili sees her father in Henrik and reveals a hidden masochism that exposes her veneration of and almost erotic attraction for the law of the father and its intrinsic violence against women: “the handsome slap of [Henrik’s] foot on the cobble eerily similar to the flat punch of Einar’s father’s hand to his cheek when he discovered Einar in his grandmother’s apron as Hans’s lips pressed toward his neck” (51). With Henrik, as she did with Einar, she rejects painting as a way to condone Henrik’s own agency as a painter (230). She then embraces marriage and maternity within a religious and conservative atmosphere (241, 251), which is replicated similarly in Hoyer’s and Hooper’s narratives—actually in *Man Into Woman* Lili dies when she undergoes another surgical procedure before marrying Claude Lejeune to enable her to become a mother.

Lili thus accommodates to what Butler theorizes as “intelligible” genders, that is, “those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (2004, 23). Thus, in the three narratives Lili’s obsession with appropriating the past and getting rid of Einar/Andreas is a symptom of her anxiety for ontological independence rather than gender fluidity. A dual identity is frequently acknowledged as an example of an androgynous mind. However, rather than indulging in this fluidity, the transgender body becomes “a battlefield” (Elliot 2016, 3), “a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal type” (Stone 1992, 294). Thus, Lili initially aims at controlling Einar so as to ultimately dispose of him: “little Lili had filled up inside Einar, like a hand filling a puppet” (Ebershoff [2000] 2015, 44). Particularly with Hans, Einar’s best childhood friend, she tries to replace past memories by rewriting them as Lili’s, not Einar’s. This body is indeed a constant battlefield, as, in spite of Lili’s seeming control, it is Einar who is described as “the remote owner of the borrowed body,” while Lili just “floated above like a circling ghost” (50). However, on the train to Dresden, Einar’s sex is described as “parasitically worthless” (173) with a suggestion that Einar is the parasitic identity, not Lili.

### 3. TRANSGENDER POLITICS: TOWARDS AN ANDROGYNOUS MODEL

The political impact of sex reassignment theory has been frequently questioned in the transgender debate, thus problematizing transsexualism in favor of more inclusive transgender politics. David Valentine wonders if it is not “politically retrograde [...] choosing to reshape a body to conform to societal expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman” (2012, 186), and concludes that “resistant transgenderism is consciously political and reflexively critical of binary gendered norms. If ‘transsexuality’ can be seen



to reinstantiate binary gender, then ‘transgender’ carries the possibilities for its exposure and perhaps even its dissolution” (2012, 202). Katrina Roen, in turn, clarifies that transgenderism is “a political positioning that draws from postmodern notions of fluidity (for both bodies and gender),” while transsexualism is “a state of being that assumes the preexistence of two sexes between which one may transition” (2002, 501-2).<sup>9</sup>

A consistent political agenda in transgender studies would therefore demand a fluid space that *undoes* gender. Candace West and Don Zimmerman define the process of “doing gender” as involving “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (1987, 126). Studies such as those carried out by Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook show that “doing gender in a way that does not reflect biological sex can be perceived as a threat to heterosexuality,” which is the reason why normatively gendered strategies are implemented in order to “reify gender and sexual difference” and “negate the authenticity of transmen and transwomen’s gender and sexual identities” (2009, 442).<sup>10</sup> In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler exposes the medical diagnosis of “gender identity disorder” as a strategic stance for gender normativity (2004, 97-8).

The problematic perception of transsexualism has marked the feminist agenda. As contended by Patricia Elliott, “[t]ranssexuals pose a challenge, intentionally or not, to mainstream feminist conceptions of sex as a stable and immutable basis of gender, a challenge which raises questions about the presumed ‘authenticity’ of identity and about the inclusiveness of feminist politics” (2004, 15). In the late 1970s, there was a potent feminist reaction against transsexualism led by Mary Daly, as previously mentioned, and Janice Raymond, who spoke of *The Transsexual Empire*, considering “medicalized transsexualism” as “only one more aspect of patriarchal hegemony” (1979, 177). In the new millennium some feminists still speak of transsexualism as a “colonizing enterprise” that “can never challenge the social relations of gender” (Wilton 2000, 239, 250) or as “a hyperbolic performance of gender” (Hird 2002, 51), which proves that this debate has yet to be settled (Connell 2012, 863). In radical contrast, Raewyn Connell recognizes the increasingly disruptive political effect of transsexualism by considering that “[w]ith many more transsexual women making open transitions and with a wide range of bodily effects being visible, sexist stereotypes are now perhaps more disrupted than enforced” (2012, 873), and she acknowledges a transsexual practice concerned with “social solidarity rather than individual identity, normativity, or passing” (Connell 2009, 108).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Roen, however, problematizes the strong assertion of transsexualism as apolitical. She mentions a more liberal transsexual politics that accounts for trans people’s legal rights (2002, 502). This idea contrasts with the generalized opinion that transsexuals and cross-dressers do not challenge the gender order because “their goal is to be feminine women and masculine men” (Lorber 1994, 20).

<sup>10</sup> For the threat of transgenderism to blur or erase the sexual differences on which patriarchy is founded, see Carolyn G. Heilbrun (1973, xi) and Barry Nass (1990, 49), among others.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of the relationship between transgender and feminism, read Cressida J. Heyes (2003) and Raewyn Connell (2012).

Accordingly, some critics have attempted to theorize a fluid gender space for trans people. In contrast with Raymond's neglect of the androgynous ideal in transsexualism (1994, 166), Zachary I. Nataf theorizes "the third gender category" as "a space for society to articulate and make sense of all its various gendered identities, as more people refuse to continue to hide them or remain silent on the margins" (1996, 57).<sup>12</sup> Instead of presenting transsexualism as a problematic third gender, Sandy Stone sees trans bodies as "a genre," that is, "a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (1992, 299-300). She envisions a counter-discourse where "the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body" is turned into "a reconstructive force" and thus, the position occupied is "nowhere, which is outside the binary oppositions of gendered discourse" (1992, 299). Since for Stone the only way for a transgender person to generate an effective counter-discourse is "to speak from outside the boundaries of gender" (1992, 299), her proposed fluidity and indeterminacy is similar to Nataf's concept of a third gender category. In order to perpetrate an effective political agenda, transgender people must not construct "a plausible history" in order to lie effectively about their past and erase themselves, since that would be "expensive, and profoundly disempowering" (1992, 298). This act of passing as the other sex is perceived as "the denial of mixture" (1992, 300) and as "the ultimate sell-out" (Roen 2002, 501).<sup>13</sup>

The key, then, for a politically empowering transgender space points at a flowing androgyny—a dominant theme in Western culture since Plato. Arturo Schwarz speaks of the "golden understanding" that leads to the reconstitution of "the unity of the divided self" (1980, 58-9). Other critics, such as Bernice Hausman, prefer the term "intersexuality," which disrupts the notion of "true sex" and opens a fluid space from which to reinvent both sex and gender (1995, 78).<sup>14</sup> However, this trans genre or third space can also be perceived as celebrating the transgression of gender whilst ignoring the realities of dealing with transphobia, thus erasing actual trans lives and experiences. In 2000 Viviane K. Namaste asserted that many transgender studies focus on the social construction of transgender but ignore "their material, discursive, and institutional locations" (15). "Our lives and our bodies," she contends, "are made up of more than gender and identity, more than theory that justifies our very existence, more than mere performance, more than the interesting remark that we expose how gender works [...]. Our lives and our bodies are constituted in the mundane and the uneventful" (2000, 1).

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Herdt (1996) uses "third sex" and "third gender" indistinctly. Other critics, like Eva B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan, prefer the term "third gender" and attribute it to M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorthies, who in 1975 "employed it to draw attention to ethnographic evidence that gender categories in some cultures could not be adequately explained with a two gender framework" (Towle and Morgan 2002, 472).

<sup>13</sup> The general tendency of critics is to perceive passing in transsexuals as "contrary to the gender-transgressive ethic of transgender politics" (Roen 2002, 501). See also Marcia Yudkin (1978, 103), Sandy Stone (1992, 300), Stephanie S. Turner (1999, 468), Douglas Schrock, Lori Reid and Emily M. Boyd (2005, 327) and Raewyn Connell (2009, 106).

<sup>14</sup> For further investigation of intersexual identities, see Turner (1999).

She concludes that Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber defined the terms of transgender studies in the 1990s “wherein transvestites and transsexuals function as rhetorical figures within cultural texts; terms wherein the voices, struggles, and joys of real transgendered people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent” (2000, 16). More recently, in 2019, Gabby Benavente and Julian Gill-Peterson use Emma Heaney’s 2017 study, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory*, to perceive queer theory as “reducing trans people and, especially, women to a figuration that places a question mark over their material being and its power as a so-often erased source of knowledge” (24-5).<sup>15</sup> They conclude that “[t]he critique of queer theory’s allegorization of trans people as the exceptional locus of gender trouble [...] still feels as relevant to us today as it was over a decade ago” (2019, 25).

It is from this fluid space, but without ignoring its allegorical and mystifying dimension, that this study approaches the portrayal of transgender identity in the three narratives under consideration. The central role of medicalization in forging Lili’s transsexual body and her deep assimilation of a traditional feminine identity seem to substantiate Daly’s and Raymond’s perception. Hoyer’s and Hooper’s narratives do not manage to transcend this apolitical cliché and ultimately condone the disempowering transsexual stereotype. Ebershoff’s novel, however, *undoes* gender and progressively weaves a structure that leads to an androgynous ideal or resistant transgenderism.

*Man Into Woman* starts with the acknowledgment of a dual androgynous identity: “for Andreas was, in fact, two beings: a man, Andreas, and a girl, Lili. They might even be called twins who had both taken possession of one body at the same time” (1933, 20). A reference to Plato’s *Banquet*, which becomes Lili’s “refuge,” however, revises the androgynous myth from a medical angle when Lili herself admits: “here in my sickly body dwelt two beings, separate from each other, unrelated to each other, hostile to each other, although they had compassion on (*sic*) each other, as they knew that this body had room only for one of them” (113). Subsequently in the narrative, Andreas is systematically described as being dead. By turning Lili into Stone’s “nowhere,” Ebershoff envisions Nataf’s third gender category, a transgender political agenda that, following Connell’s idea, involves social solidarity rather than individual identity, normativity or passing. Lili becomes the blank canvas where male characters—and even women like Greta—project their artistic creation. However, rather than merely acting as a passive recipient, Lili evolves towards Stone’s textual embodiment, which is not erased, but remains part of her life experience, and she eventually takes control of her own kaleidoscopic canvas. There is then an evolution from “castrated hermaphroditism” to fluid androgyny based on a collaborative identity between Einar and Lili.

Although the predominant idea is that of the body as a battlefield, from the beginning of Ebershoff’s novel there is a suggestion of androgyny not as a threat but,

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<sup>15</sup> Benavente and Gill-Peterson (2019, 26) revise “queer theory’s history of abstraction,” which has been criticized by Stryker (1994, 2006), Prossner (1998) and Namaste (2000).

rather, as a source of true creativity. It is not only present in Einar/Lili, but also in Greta/Carlisle—Greta’s twin brother—and in Anna, the opera singer. Anna’s androgyny is presented as connected with real passion. Her voice “wasn’t a beautiful voice [...] somehow male and female at once. Yet it had more vibrancy than most Danish voices, which were often thin and white and too pretty to trigger a shiver” ([2000] 2015, 7). Ebershoff uses the opera as a metaphorical space for exploring androgyny, which can be easily extrapolated to Einar/Lili: “[Anna] was used to men dressing in women’s clothes. And women in men’s, the *Hosenrolle*. It was the oldest deceit in the world. And on the opera stage it meant nothing at all—nothing but confusion. A confusion that was always resolved in the final act” (5). This metaphor explores a third gender category that is, however, not allowed to flourish: the gender confusion of the opera is invariably resolved in the final act, when Anna’s androgynous fluidity is ultimately ruled by the conductor’s baton (7-8). In the novel, all androgynous identities are systematically controlled by invisible lines, just like the thin silver chain imaginarily connected to the tip of the conductor’s baton, which seems to control Anna’s performance in the opera, or the lines of the symbolic kite in Einar/Lili (see below).<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Einar and Lili’s collaborative identity is ultimately suggested. As illustrated before, Lili systematically copies the role of submissive woman. The novel opens with the image of a sailor’s wife, who is verbally abused and denigrated by her coarse husband by calling her “a whore” (3, 11). The sailor’s wife metaphorically stands for Lili, who blushes every time the word “whore” comes out of the sailor’s mouth (20) and who, by imitating the poses of prostitutes, is linked with them. It is Einar who symbolically liberates her from the victimizing figure of the sailor through art: “When Einar painted the gray curl of each wave, he imagined the sailor drowning, a desperate hand raised, his potato-vodka voice still calling his wife a port whore. It was how Einar knew just how dark to mix his paints: gray enough to swallow a man like that, to fold over like batter his sinking growl” (3). This is the clearest example of painting being linked to agency. When Lili ultimately rejects Einar’s paintings as a way to satisfy Henrik’s artistic ego and fulfill the role of a submissive woman, she feels “she was making a mistake” (253). It is then that she realizes she has erased a part of herself: “she shuddered, for suddenly it felt as if everything around her belonged to someone else [i.e. Henrik]” (254). Her obsession with destroying Einar in fact gives way to her connection with him through the artistic agency that she tries to recover at the end of the novel. The initial disappearance of the chauvinistic sailor is symbolically materialized: “The sailor below was out at sea, probably caught in the roll of the storm that very minute, and there was a clap of thunder, and then the giggle of the sailor’s wife” (255). This marks the change in Lili.

At the end of the novel, Carlisle and Anna take her, “against the rules” (267), in her wicker wheelchair to the clinic’s back-park to see the sun and the Elbe. At first, she

<sup>16</sup> In the film, Anna is named Ulla and is not an opera singer but a ballet dancer and is far from androgynous.

could feel Carlisle's and Anna's hands on the back of the chair, but then she is left alone "at the balcony of Europe," which stands for "the balcony of the world, of *her* whole world" (269; italics in the original). This symbolic self-control leads to her final agency:

And for once Lili stopped thinking about the misty, double-sided past and the promise of the future. It didn't matter who she was once, or who she'd become. She was Fraulein Lili Elbe. A Danish girl in Dresden. A young woman out in the afternoon with a pair of friends. A young woman whose dearest friend was off in California, leaving Lili, it suddenly felt, alone. She thought of each of them: Henrik, Anna, Carlisle, Hans, Greta. Each in his own way, partially responsible for the birth of Lili Elbe. Now she knew what Greta had meant: the rest Lili would have to undergo alone (269).

Lili stands for Stone's embodied texts represented by the list of friends who are partially responsible for who she is now. However, the final touch is missing and is provided by Lili herself, by the artist that she has ignored so far. She seems to be aware that marriage is not the solution—neither Henrik nor Greta is there with her. The answer to the riddle of her agency is the symbolic kite that Einar used to fly with Hans as a child and which opens and closes the book. Hans "tried to teach Einar to get it aloft, but Einar was never capable of finding the right current of air" (31). The suggestion, as with Anna, is that androgynous identities are not allowed to fly free and are restricted by thin, often invisible lines. In the final scene, Lili reconnects with the kite and the memory of Einar that she has been trying to erase. The kite now flies "higher than the city [...] up over the Elbe, a white diamond" until the line "snap[s], and the kite sail[s] free" (269-70). The novel then closes with the following description:

But she had heard a muffled shriek somewhere; where had it come from? The boys were jumping up and down in the grass. The boy with the spool received a punch from one of his pals. And above them, the kite was trembling in the wind, swooping like an albino flat, like a ghost, up and up, and then down, rising again, crossing the Elbe, coming for her (270).

The suggestion is that, although Lili is going to die as a result of the professor's intervention on her body, she finally manages to fly Einar's kite. It is crossing the river of her name as an indication of how she finally embraces her own chosen identity, which inevitably involves Einar in the process, as represented by the kite that he used to fly. The controlling lines are broken and the kite flies free and allows Lili and Einar to fly together.

The film closes by replacing the symbol of the kite with Gerda's scarf which, throughout the movie, signifies an asphyxiating femininity. Both Hans and Gerda let the scarf fly in Einar's childhood place, but the powerful connotations of the kite are lost. The focus changes from the kite, as a symbol of Einar, to the scarf, as a symbol of Gerda, who steals the film. In the novel, Lili dies alone embracing Einar; in the film,

the feminine symbol of the scarf as the woman that Lili has become seems to erase Einar. Indeed, in the movie Einar's agency in painting is transferred to Gerda, who symbolically disposes, not of the misogynist sailor, who is absent in the film, but of Einar, a clear indication that in the film the androgynous duality of the characters is sacrificed in favor of gender binarism. When Gerda tells Einar: "Sometimes I think you're going to slip through painting and vanish into the bog like your friend's kite when you were a boy" (2015, 0:14:01-11), not only does the film ignore the subversive potential in Einar to remove patriarchal abuse, but that force is indeed transferred to a weakened Gerda at the end of the film.

In Ebershoff's novel, however, although Greta initially uses Lili as her aesthetic model ([2000] 2015, 16), she is aware that Lili has developed "a will of her own" (63) and has the intuition that her approach to painting is not that of the narcissistic phallus, but rather a collaborative drive that does not allow her "to paint alone" (116).<sup>17</sup> Beyond biologism, Greta welcomes Lili to the women's club as when, after the operation, Lili asks: "Am I now Lili? Have I become Lili Elbe?" and Greta answers: "You've always been Lili" and, referring to her sex transition, she concludes: "That's not the only thing that makes you Lili" (206). Without men, Greta and Lili ultimately form a female artistic community of equals: "Greta sometimes believed that she and Lili could create a life for themselves on the top floor of the Widow House [...] and now she and Lili could paint and live peacefully, alone but together" (224).

This women's artistic association points at Lili's agency. Although the three narratives are mediated by cis men—Niels Hoyer, Doctor Warnekros et al. in *Man Into Woman*, David Ebershoff in *The Danish Girl* and Tom Hooper in the film adaptation<sup>18</sup>—in Ebershoff's text Lili, like Frankenstein's creature, accomplishes her resistance "by mastering language in order to claim a position as a speaking subject and enact verbally the very subjectivity denied it in the specular realm" (Stryker 1994, 241). Even when her words are mediated and fictionalized and the symbolism and allegory of the kite mystify her trans identity, Lili is not erased.

#### 4. LILI'S WORDS TO VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: CONCLUSIONS

The three narratives under consideration offer a bleak picture of transsexualism. However, while Hoyer's edition and Hooper's film adaptation systematically reject androgyny in favor of normative gender fixations, Ebershoff subtly underscores an alternative androgynous discourse that allows gender fluidity to flourish lyrically

<sup>17</sup> Even in the film, where Gerda loses the complexity of the character in the novel, she seems to indirectly encourage Lili to explore her artistic agency (2015, 1:38:11-28).

<sup>18</sup> In the film version, though, a woman (Lucinda Coxon) wrote the script and half of the film production team were women.

beyond stigmatized medicalization.<sup>19</sup> Doctor Kreutz's and Professor Bolk's intersexual discourse leads to the strategic manipulation and literal castration of the protagonist. Ebershoff's novel has proved to be an interesting locus for exploring the political impact of sex reassignment theory in transgender debate. While it apparently corroborates the general critical assumption that transsexualism conforms to gendered binaries, it finally consolidates a fluid space that *undoes* gender, where binary gendered identities are superseded. Daly's and Raymond's much feared "necrophilic invasion" of women's bodies in the name of patriarchal hegemony is dismantled when the Frankenstein metaphor in Doctor Kreutz (Hoyer's *Man Into Woman*), Professor Bolk (Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl*) and Warnekros (Hooper's film adaptation) leads to a more sympathetic creation myth in Ebershoff's Greta, who escapes from a resentful patriarchal model and embraces an artistic realm for women, where she and Lili become artistic agents in equality.

Nataf's third gender category is materialized, not only in Lili's symbolic final reunion with Einar, but also in Greta and her own gender fluidity with Lili. Thus, Stone's perception of the transsexual body as a set of embodied texts is endowed with a transgender political dimension. Lili ultimately abandons her obsession with passing and takes responsibility for all of her history, which implies the visibility, not erasure, of Einar's past. In contrast with Raymond's opinion that "the transsexual unwittingly settles for androgyny instead of integrity" (1979, 166), Lili gladly embraces Einar in this androgynous third space. Despite Professor Bolk's attempt to contain Einar/Lili's fluidity within the boundaries of restrictive transsexualism, an androgynous Frankenstein's creature manages to brush up their self-portrait. At the end of Ebershoff's novel Einar/Lili demonstrates the impact of a transgender politics that takes responsibility for all of its history. Stryker's words as a "transsexual-monster" to Victor Frankenstein strongly resonate: "You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine [...]. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself" (1994, 247). In spite of the allegorical and mystifying symbolism of the kite and of Lili's text being "a second-hand text" (Stone 1992, 290) filtered through cis men, transgender material locations are not ignored in these narratives, which open the door to giving them visibility through the production of knowledge. In contrast to the creature's self-perception in Mary Shelley's novel—"Increase of knowledge only discovered to me what a wretched outcast I was" ([1817] 1965, 125)—at the end of Ebershoff's novel, very timidly, Lili claims her position as a free speaking transgender subject. Frankenstein's creature's self-portrait haunts the reader like a kite flying free.

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<sup>19</sup> Ebershoff thus joins the cast of recent voices that oppose the categorization of transsexualism as pathology. Sam Winter et al. (2016, 1605-6) summarize the current controversy surrounding the approval of the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the World Health Organization International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11, 2018). While in ICD-10 (1992) transsexualism was classified in Chapter 5 as a mental and behavioral disorder, in the revised document it was categorized as "gender incongruence," which to many still implies an anomalous identity.

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