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Prescriptive Masculinity:

The Fallacy of Heteronormative Reality in Joyce's *Ulysses*

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Abstract

Characterized by Joyce as the “new womanly man,” the feminine traits of Leopold Bloom are a fascinating anomaly (Joyce 465). A marked departure from the hypermasculinity of classic epics, Bloom and his empathy and passivity have been studied for a century. Scholars have been quick to label Bloom as androgynous, noting his maternal relationship towards Stephen Daedalus, his role as the cuckold in his marriage, and an incident in which Bloom is transfigured into a woman by a dominatrix. Critical gender studies, however, have evolved rapidly in the last century. Instead of situating male and female in binary opposition, this paper entertains the modern idea that both biological sex and gender identity exist on a spectrum. This entails deconstructing not only the unconscious societal attempt to designate certain physical and intellectual characteristics as wholly masculine or feminine, but also the idea that a person’s self-reflexive thoughts about gender and sexuality always perfectly reflect what they identify as (Shilt and Westbrook 535). Without these concepts, which uphold heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality, critical discussion of Bloom’s expression of sex and gender can be much more nuanced. The radical depiction of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* lies not in his gender identity, but in Joyce’s depiction about how we self-reflect on gender.

Keywords: Masculinity, Ulysses, Gender, Sexuality, Androgyny, Heteronormativity

Leopold Bloom, characterized by James Joyce as the “new womanly man,” is a marked departure from the hyper masculinity of the traditional male hero (Joyce 465). He performs several behaviors classically ascribed to femininity, such as empathy and submissiveness. In 1922, when *Ulysses* was first published, these qualities made Bloom an outsider, an anomaly that needed to be studied and understood. Critics were often quick to wed the term androgyny to the hero, a practice that is still employed by modern scholars. The critical study of gender, however, has evolved rapidly since the publication of *Ulysses*. With the consideration of new scholarship, Bloom is perhaps not as alone as he once was. The fallacy of heteronormative reality limits critical discussion of Bloom’s expression of sex and gender, and without this barrier, Bloom seems much more commonplace. The radical depiction of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* lies not in his gender identity, but in Joyce’s depiction of how we self-reflect on gender.

For the purposes of this paper, heteronormative reality is operationally defined as the presumption that one’s self-reflective thoughts regarding gender and sexuality *always* perfectly reflect the identities they inhabit (Shilt and Westbrook 535). I shall also use this term to convey the unconscious societal attempt to designate certain physical and intellectual characteristics as wholly masculine or feminine (Shilt and Westbrook 535). Furthermore, the term androgyny will be defined as having characteristics of both sexes, to the point of indeterminate sex. Note that this definition inherently acknowledges the narrow window of what explicitly qualifies as androgyny.

Before analyzing the text, it is important to examine the modernist perception of androgyny. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, “the great mind is androgynous.” Virginia

Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, expands upon this statement: “Coleridge ... meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (97). This idolization of androgyny is typical of modernism and was further bolstered by the sexological studies of Freud and others. By casting Leopold Bloom as the artistic androgyne, Joyce declares that the modernist hero has a balanced brain, the grace of a woman combined with the strength of a man. This idea of androgyny, however, relies on essentialist conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, it relies on a binary construction of gender many current queer theorists disavow.

Let us begin our dissection of Leopold Bloom's gender with his feminine characteristics. One of these qualities is his profound empathy which allows him to connect to many characters through sympathetic feeling alone. After hearing of Mina Purefoy's troubles with giving birth at lunchtime, Bloom feels so moved that he visits the maternity hospital that evening in order to provide comfort, even though they are not by any means close. Later on in the novel (and in Bloom's day), after leaving the hospital without actually seeing Mina (instead tasking the nurse with the delivery of well wishes), Bloom manages to give birth during the surreal events of Circe, directly after a parade of doctors declare him the “new womanly man” (Joyce 465). Together, these events illustrate Bloom's apparent femininity; giving birth is one act that is often considered to be exclusively feminine. This brief, figurative event can also be interpreted as an act of empathy. Bloom is performatively experiencing the pain of motherhood, empathizing with Mina's extended labor process. It is also likely that Bloom is reliving the brief life of his own son Rudy. This act of empathy extends towards both Mina and his wife Molly, showing that Leopold Bloom can attempt to understand and emulate feminine feeling.

Another of Bloom's feminine characteristics is his submissiveness. This can be observed in some of his sexual behaviors and in his relationship with Molly. To begin with the latter, Leopold is certain that Molly is having an affair with Hugh 'Blazes' Boylan, the latest in a series of extramarital tristes. Although we learn from Molly that he is wrong about other affairs, there is clear evidence of Molly's transgression with Boylan in their bed when Leopold finally returns home for the evening. Instead of reacting with traditional masculine anger, Bloom reconciles with Molly through attempting to feel what she has felt. Bloom cycles through "envy, jealousy, abnegation, equanimity" as he reflects on his wife's adultery, rationalizing that of all sins and crimes adultery is one of the least "calamitous" (Joyce 685).

However, there also seems to exist an anxiety in Bloom about confronting Molly or Boylan. Bloom avoids his own household all day because he (rightfully) assumes that his wife is having an affair, and then also avoids Boylan in public instead of confronting him. Furthermore, this anxiety has been plaguing him for weeks, as Molly reveals in "Penelope" that he has sent his daughter Milly away due to his belief that his wife's affair might begin soon. Where Ulysses would have assassinated the intruder in his marriage bed (as Leopold very briefly considers), Leopold allows the affair to exist, passively reconciling the issue.

Another scene, presented in "Circe," reveals that Bloom might actually enjoy being a cuckold (which reflects the semi-autobiographical nature of the text as "James Joyce wanted Nora [his wife] to cheat on him, so that he could feel for himself what a cuckold feels") (Chiasson par. 6). When Bloom is dominated by Bella Cohen, Joyce queers their established genders with little warning. However, before Bloom is brought to heel, he has a conversation with Bella's fan, where the fan acknowledges he is married and that Molly is in charge, insinuating their marriage is ruled by a "petticoat government" (Joyce 495). It is the fan that then

subjugates Bloom into the feminine, while Bella transforms into a hulking beast of a man. Bloom's fantasy being dominated by Bella (now called Bello) includes being made to be "violated" by a long list of men and women. As this is Bloom's fantasy, the depravity yearned for here explains some of his permissive, passive attitudes towards Molly. He likes being submissive to her, and he likes when she does thing against his will.

Bloom is also characterized as feminine due to his inability to sexually pleasure his wife, thereby fulfilling the duties of the husband in the traditional matrimonial bed. It has been "10 years, 5 months, and 18 days" since Leopold and Molly last consummated their marriage (Joyce 687). When contrasted with the "reputed virility" of Boylan, there is no contest; Boylan is the "conquering hero," more fit to represent the classical Irishman in some dramatic epic (Boone 81). It is clear, in the Dublin painted by Joyce, that virility and conquest are important to the structure of masculinity.

His lack of marital sex makes Bloom less of a man in Dublin's society; however, Bloom does not live without having sexual thoughts or potential sexual liaisons. Bloom takes several opportunities throughout the novel to fantasize about having standard, heteronormative sex with many women. The reader sees him fixated on observing women's behinds, including his wife's. Bloom masturbates to completion while observing Gerty McDowell at the beach. Bloom's erotic correspondence with 'Martha Clifford' also adds to his intellectual promiscuity, and hints at his masochistic tendencies. In 'Penelope', Molly even reflects on Bloom's suspected infidelities, revealing him to have been quite promiscuous in their youth and even insinuating that "Poldy has more spunk" than Boylan does (694). In this light, it is easier to consider Bloom as a normal man with several taboo fantasies. Joyce is certainly groundbreaking for his depiction of these thoughts, which we all have, that don't exactly line up with the gender identities and sexuality

we align ourselves with. Joyce truly taps into an unfiltered narrative, that includes Leopold's unshared, private thoughts; Molly seems completely oblivious to most of her husband's feminine fantasies, although certain aspects of their relationship are presented as "fetishistic comedy" (Devlin 83).

While considering Leopold Bloom's masculine attributes, one must also consider that while he never acts with violence towards Boylan, it is often his natural instinct, a 'gut reaction.' It is as if Bloom knows what society expects him to do and must think of it first, if only to throw it away. As seen in "Penelope," Bloom is a fan of the *The Wife of Scarli*, which features a cuckold and a cuckolder, both of whom Bloom impersonates in a sexual fantasy he once described to Molly (Devlin 84). His fetishization of this conjugal betrayal suggests he is a fan of the genre, and perhaps the trope of the spurned lover, the bloody passion of the revenge plot common in this narrative is what leads him first to aggression. Still, there is a certain jealousy that Bloom expresses when thinking of Boylan. This compulsive thought process seems connected to the masculine objectification of women as property to be guarded.

This erratic blend of masculine and feminine characteristics in Bloom's unfiltered narrative are why Bloom is often labeled as androgynous in the critical study of *Ulysses*. As Dr. Cheryl Herr of the University of Iowa writes, "the text may be undermining the easy cultural assumption that one is 'really' of a certain gender" (265). Similarly, University of Southern California professor Dr. Joseph Allen Boone ascribes the "desire to experience a wider spectrum of sexual behavior than is traditionally acceptable, one that includes both active and passive principles" to Bloom, with the passive experiences being exclusively characterized as feminine (71). Finally, Irish scholar Dr. Piotr Sadowski postulates that Leopold Bloom's expression of biological sex makes him more susceptible to performing and fantasizing about these feminine

behaviors (such as masochism), diagnosing him with an androgynous brain (143). The problem with these assertions is the conflation of the extremely interconnected but ultimately separate concepts of sexuality, sex, and gender identity. There is, definitively, a certain anxiety towards Bloom's expression of his gender identity; however, to diagnose Bloom with atypical expression may be a step too far.

Sadowski's assertions about Leopold Bloom's sex and gender rely on a self-reported study of certain behaviors. Said study found "greater competitiveness, aggressiveness, display of material achievements, and tendency towards sexual promiscuity and polygamy in men; and a more conciliatory and empathetic disposition, display of physical attractiveness, better social and character reading skills, and monogamic tendency in women" (Sadowski 142). Sadowski goes on to say that these characteristics can, of course, be found in both sexes. Essentially, this study is using the idea that there are two biological sexes and that gender identity lies on a spectrum based on this fundamental difference, influenced by how genes involving sex express themselves. In other words, the psychological identity is fluid while the biological identity is static. This construction allows for the existence of binary transgender people, whose gender identity may not align with their assigned biological sex. The problem then lies within the assertion that Bloom is an "androgynous man"; androgyny implies that one has characteristics of both sexes, which Sadowski asserts Bloom's brain has but his body doesn't. By divorcing the brain from the body, Sadowski attempts to reconcile a binary construction (male or female) with an anomaly (androgyny, supposedly both male and female, which would then create a new category and deconstruct the idea of the binary in the first place). This ideology falls in line with Herr's assertion that Joyce is deconstructing the assumption of gender based on physical characteristics; in this method of perceiving gender identity, the brain is divorced from the body.

While one can think they know the gender of someone based on physical characteristics, this is not the case, as what is going on in the brain may not be reflected in the body.

Sadowski's assumptions, however, rely on a perfect binary of biological sex. That is, sex that can be determined through physical attributes and be easily characterized as male or female. This is part of a belief in a heteronormative reality, where male and female are easy distinctions to make, whether through gender identity or biological sex. This is reinforced by commonplace, minute societal processes that reinforce the idea of a gender or sex binary, such as survey questions about gender and sex that only include two options (Westbrook and Saperstein 535). One of these societal reinforcements is the proclamation of gender and sex by a doctor when we are born.

As his contemporary Virginia Woolf (whose writing has been characterized by Gillet as the "feminine version" of Joyce's) does in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* through the character of Septimus Smith, Joyce criticizes the control medical authorities holds over the average person's autonomy (Slote 29). In "Circe," when Bloom is proclaimed the "new womanly man," it is directly after being physically examined by several doctors, including a surreal cameo experience from "sex specialist" Malachi Mulligan (Joyce 465). Dr. Mulligan declares Bloom to be "bisexually abnormal," and having analyzed his genitals extensively declares him to be a virgin (Joyce 465). It is then through other mock physical examinations that Bloom is declared the "new womanly man."

Joyce is deconstructing the idea that gender and sex are easily determinable through sight alone. This passage could be interpreted as Bloom's sexual deviancies and feminine characteristics figuratively transmuting his physical form (as other events have shown, in "Circe" this is no obstacle within Joyce's fantasy). However, it could also be read through the lens that

Bloom's biological sex is not quite male or female, and that is why he has feminine tendencies and masculine tendencies. In this interpretation, Bloom doesn't fit into a binary based on gender identity *or* a binary based on biological sex, deconstructing both of these ideologies and subverting the notion of a heteronormative reality. If a binary construction cannot be made of sex nor gender, androgyny cannot exist as a label, due to its reliance by definition of existing between two and only two categories.

One subset of human identity that does not fall neatly within the binary of biological sex are people who are born intersex. These people can be born with masculine and feminine physical characteristics, while potentially having a mind that is more determinedly male or female (the inverse of Bloom as dissected by Sadowski). The expression of biological sex by their sex chromosomes is not decidedly masculine or feminine, and they do not fall neatly within a binary of biological sex. When they are born, they are often diagnosed like Bloom in "Circe"; by a collection of 'sex specialists' who attempt to use their physical characteristics in order to classify them as male or female. Intersex activist Emily Quinn, in her TED talk "The Way We Think About Biological Sex is Wrong," pushes back against the idea of sex existing in a binary context. She asks the audience to imagine that "you can either have Nose A or Nose B, no other options" (Quinn). Just as noses come in a variety of shapes and sizes, gender and sex expression vary from individual to individual, based on factors such as genitalia and hormone levels. Sex, like gender, exists on a spectrum.

When considering Bloom's gender expression in *Ulysses* using these facts, it becomes clear that though Bloom has feminine tendencies, his potential 'otherness' is ultimately a diagnosis wrought by the ideas of gender essentialism heavily present in the era. He exhibits all the physical characteristics of a normal man. He is also very comfortable self-identifying as a

man and has no dysphoria about his body, with his mild transvestitism seemingly linked more to his fetishistic proclivities. The depiction of Leopold Bloom's gender, however, is noteworthy for Joyce's acknowledgement that these feminine characteristics can reside both comfortably and uncomfortably in a man who, in all other aspects, is quite exceptionally normal.

Throughout the text of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom expresses anxiety about his performance of masculinity. This anxiety is then further expressed through his mystical transfiguration and sexological examination in Circe. Because neither sex nor gender can be easily separated into only two categories, this anxiety arises from the inability of any person to perfectly display all of the characteristics ascribed to their gender. Joyce's inclusion of these thoughts is one of many impressive aspects of *Ulysses*'s stream of consciousness narrative style and is revolutionary not only for the 1920s but also for the present. Like Joyce, scholarship surrounding *Ulysses* should aim to challenge outdated assumptions regarding gender and sexuality while also critically examining the societal context they arise from.

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