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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
Strategies of Cross-dressing and Gender-b(l)ending in
U.S. Speculative Young Adult Fiction:
Conformity or Transgression?

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Resumen

A literatura juvenil fue subestimada por un gran sector del mundo académico desde que, en la década de 1970, las bibliotecas estadounidenses (agrupadas a través de la American Library Association o ALA) comenzaron a usar esta etiqueta para designar un material que trataba de suplir las necesidades de un público lector adolescente. Este público juvenil adulto ya fue reconocido por primera vez tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, cuando las mejoras en la condición de vida (sanidad, economía, educación, etc.) permitieron su emergencia en la sociedad estadounidense. No obstante, este grupo lector no se sentía identificado con la literatura infantil ni con la adulta, y buscaba en su material de lectura el reflejo de su vida diaria y sus inquietudes. Las respuestas a sus peticiones encontraron su reflejo en una serie de lecturas que adoptaron como parte de la cultura adolescente poco antes de que la ALA decidiera adoptar una nueva etiqueta, conocida en el mercado anglosajón a día de hoy como Young Adult (YA). Neste momento, la etiqueta estuvo a usar masivamente para textos literarios y no para cualquier producto enfocado a una audiencia de entre 12 y 18 años, a pesar de que las edades exactas son una causa de disputa, como lo es la definición exacta del término mismo. Hasta hace relativamente poco tiempo, de hecho, la literatura juvenil en todas sus formas recibía escasa atención por parte de la crítica, y pocas obras de esta clase contaban con análisis que demostraran su valor literario y didáctico. Estos momentos, sin embargo, comenzaron a reflectir su importancia en diferentes estudios que reclaman la diversidad de una categoría cada vez más amplia tanto en títulos publicados cada año como en temas tratados. Su importancia, de hecho, a convertido en uno de los pilares que mantienen viva la industria editorial en producción y ventas.

Tomando como punto de partida este tipo de literatura y los estudios realizados desde la academia (entre ellos Cart 1996, Nilsen and Donelson 2006, como se relata en el capítulo primero), el objetivo principal de esta tesis doctoral es la análisis interdisciplinario de un corpus de narrativas en que las protagonistas se visten y actúan como mozas para acudir a una determinada meta, normalmente la aceptación en un espacio mayoritariamente masculino, sexa para estudiar o...
traballar. O estudo destas figuras trata de contrastar se o travestismo é realmente unha estratexia de empoderamento ou, pola contra, a decisión destas mulleres non serve para loitar contra a desigualdade nos seus mundos, que son abertamente patriarcais nas súas perspectivas cultural e social. Coa axuda de teorías feministas e queer (encabezadas polos traballos de Judith Butler e Jack Halberstam, entre outros), presto atención á maneira na que as heroínas destas narrativas (de)constrúen o xénero para crear un álter ego masculino que lles permite o acceso a lugares nos que as mulleres, polo normal, non son admitidas como suxeitos activos e iguais.

O corpus elixido está composto por unha serie de dez textos representativos de fantasía e ciencia ficción contemporáneas de tres autoras e dous autores estadounidenses. Inclúe a tetraloxia de Tamora Pierce The Song of the Lioness (1983-8), a triloxía Leviathan de Scott Westerfeld (2009-11), a novela de Lev AC Rosen All Men of Genius (2011), a novela de Kristin Cashore Graceling (2008; primeira entrega da soga Graceling Realms) e a primeira parte da triloxía Defy, Defy (2014), escrita por Sara B. Larson. Estas narrativas mostran diferentes perspectivas, dende puntos de vista máis feministas (The Song of the Lioness) ata outros máis comerciais (Defy) e representan un intento de aproximación ao tema pola miña parte.

A intención detrás da elección deste tema como obxecto de estudo ten en consideración a importancia destas novelas na educación das novas xeracións, pois están dirixidas a un público altamente influenciable nunha etapa crucial de desenvolvemento tanto físico coma intelectual. Mención aparte merece o auxxe que a literatura adiada á ficción especulativa está a ter nas últimas décadas (Wolfe 1986; Attebery 1992, 2004; James and Mendlesohn 2003, 2013; Mendlesohn and James 2009; como explico no capítulo 2), tanto no nivel editorial coma máis extensamente cultural (a través da adaptación de novelas ao cinema, por exemplo), especialmente notable tralo éxito de sagas que inclúen elementos fantásticos, como Harry Potter e Crepúsculo (dentro da etiqueta xuvenil) ou O señor dos aneis e Xogo de Tronos (para un público adulto).

No que respecta ao tema central da análise, o travestismo femininino (cross-dressing en inglés, estudiado a fondo no capítulo 3 da primeira parte) forma parte
da historia occidental (e doutras culturas), así como a ambigüidade de xénero que pode derivar desta estratexia. O seu auxe deixou tras de sí un gran corpo de literatura que inclúe dende mitos gregos a historias de santas, pasando por, máis recentemente, estudos antropolóxicos e históricos (Dekker e van de Pol 1989, Garber 1992, Bullough e Bullough 1993, Oram 2007). Se ben a tradición xudeu-cristiá censurou dende os seus inicios esta práctica e castigaba (e segue a castigar) aquelas persoas que tratasen de saltarse as barreiras impostas polos roles de xénero, estableceu un dobre estándar no que unha muller vestida de home considerábase aceptable para salvar o honor da súa familia ou porque desexaba alcanzar unha espiritualidade na que o corpo feminino, obxecto de desevo e fonte de pecado, debía ser deixado atrás. Por outra banda, o home que tomaba unha imaxe o uns comportamentos femininos era ridiculizado e castigado, porque non podía tomarse en serio que un home, superior por privilexios sociais, físicos e morais, quixese pasar por muller, considerada inferior en tódolos sentidos. Estas ideas afianzaban os roles de xénero e a superioridade masculina a tódolos niveis.

Co tempo, mentres que o travestismo masculino se condenou legalmente, o travestismo feminino aceptábase coma un desexo da muller de mellorar e alcanzar unha mellor posición social, aínda que se eran descubertas tiñan que volver a pórse a roupa que “coincidía” coa asignada para o seu xénero. As mulleres acudían a esta práctica co desexo de aumentar as súas posibilidades de supervivencia, pois lles daba a oportunidade de atopar un traballo ou estudar. Algunhas disfrazábanse para seguir a amantes ou maridos alá a donde foxen, e moitas delas traballaron a bordo de barcos como mariñeiros ou soldados, xa que os controis médicos non existían nos exércitos da época. Os historiadores (os homes historiadores) e incluso os propios gobiernos e institucións militares fixeron invisibles a moitas destas figuras, que case non se recordan hoxe en día. As súas historias, non obstante, foron recollidas ou ben en noticias e cancións populares ou ben en obras de ficción ou biografías que fixeron as delicias dun público lector cada vez máis amplo. O seu éxito chegou ata o século XX, e seguen aínda hoxe a incluírse en todo tipo de obras de ficción, biografías e estudos en todo tipo de medios. A dificultade de incluír a estas figuras en obras de ambientación contemporánea, debido á suposta igualdade de xénero, convérteas en
protagonistas maioritariamente nos xéneros da novela histórica e a ficción especulativa, etiqueta que é usada nesta tese para abarcar tanto a fantasía coma a ciencia ficción, xa que pon de manifesto as súas semellanzas máis que as súas diferenzas.

A inclusión de mulleres travestidas na ficción ten na maioría dos casos o obxectivo de facer visibles e condenar situacións de opresión e desigualdade entre xéneros. No corpus de novelas seleccionadas para a realización desta tese doutoral, por exemplo, os textos (descritos detalladamente no capítulo 4) introducen unha crítica contra as estruturas da sociedade patriarcal, que producen violencia (visible e invisible) contra a muller, un tema que analizo pormenorizadamente no capítulo 5. Así, nos mundos que se describen nestas narrativas as mulleres non son só consideradas inferiores, senón que son convertidas en obxectos e violentadas polas institucións no poder, incluíndo o goberno (sempre monarquía), o exército e a relixión. Esta violencia a nivel institucional esténdese, por suposto, a un nivel persoal, cando os homes e mulleres que rodean ás protagonistas demostran seguir esta perniciosa ideoloxía que divide os xéneros de acordo a un rol que privilexia aos homes (con liberdade e independencia) e oprime ás mulleres, deixándolas indefensas e tendo que depender de padres, tíos, irmáns ou maridos. Esta ideolóxica violenta vese incluso nos pensamentos da personaxe principal, que mostra prexuízos contra as mulleres do seu entorno ou contra comportamentos marcadamente femininos e desexa demostrar a toda costa que non comparte nada con elas, negándose a experiencía da feminidade. A misoxinia interiorizada das personaxes é unha consecuencia das características que normalmente se asocian aos “marimachos” ou “chicazos” (tomboys en inglés, que son as protagonistas do capítulo 6). Como tales, estas personaxes normalmente creceron coa ausencia dun modelo feminino (xa fora porque a súa nai morreu nalgún punto ou porque estaban distanciadas da figura materna) e rodeadas de mozos, xogando e encontrando pracer en actividades tradicionalmente masculinas (caza, xogos con armas, deportes, etc.).

Aínda que pode chamar a atención que os mundos de fantasía incluídos en novelas segan o mesmo patrón que sociedades occidentais en diferentes puntos da historia (xa que a literatura especulativa da a posibilidade de crear sociedades e...
estruturas completamente diferentes ás existentes), as autoras e autores desexan
dar visibilidade a problemas de xénero e marxinalización dunha forma máis
directa, tendo en conta a idade do seu público. As inxustizas plasmadas no texto,
ao fin e o cabo, reflecten o mundo no que vivimos, mostrando o inxusto sistema no
que os privilexios dividense segundo razas, clases e, por suposto, xéneros. Estes
mundos imaxinarios empurrán á protagonista a buscar formas efectivas e creativas
de eludir os obstáculos impostos pola súa sociedade e así poder acceder a esa serie
de privilexios que lles foron negados, tendo así a posibilidade de probar a
liberdade e a independencia. A solución á que chegan é a de travestirse, que neste
caso implica non só un cambio de vestimenta senón tamén a adopción de certas
conductas. Para crear unha versión masculina da súa identidade, como se defende
no capítulo 7, as mozas teñen que eliminar tamén aqueles elementos visuais que
poian delatalas, polo que se vendan os peitos e, nalgunas ocasións, modifican as
súas prendas para que adopten unha forma que os seus corpos non teñen,
escondendo a curva das cadeiras e facendo máis anchos ombreiros e lombo, á vez
que finxen o velo facial. Por suposto, están case obrigadas a cortar o cabelo e a
cambiar o modo no que falan e incluso camiñan, tomando un ton máis grave e
adaptando xestos e movementos esperados nun mozo. A todo isto hai que
engadirlle a necesidade de tomar un novo nome e unha relato persoale familiar
crible quepermita a súa entrada nos espazos maioritariamente masculinos, como
poden ser o exército ou certas institucións académicas.

Esta transformación segue na ficción, así como na historia, un patrón de
conductas que perturban as noicións de xénero coma algo natural. Deste modo, o
concepto de xénero se evidencia como a noición artificial que é e, polo tanto,
imitable, como afirma Judith Butler no seu coñecido tratado _O xénero en desputa_

Da mesma maneira que se fose unha actriz, a interpretación da travestí non só
depende do aspecto visual da personaxe que intenta representar (pese a que lle
axuda a que ninguén ao seu redor poida cuestionar a súa identidade, xa que se
tende a confiar cegamente en que a relación entre sexo e xénero é fixa e
incontestable), senón que tamén require que inclúan no seu papel as características
de personalidade que a xente tende a asociar coa masculinidade. Isto significa que
son forzadas a seguir un comportamento que xeralmente é aplaudido pola masculinidade tradicional e hexemónica. Estes trazos inclúen, entre outros, ser asertivo, ser valoroso, buscar a independencia en todo momento, e esconder os sentimentos. Non obstante, á hora da verdade, na súa interpretación a protagonista non se cingue a este modelo de masculinidade. Pola contra, elixe as características que máis positivas lle parecen e as mestura con aqueles trazos femininos que considera dignos de admiración, como poden ser a honestidade, a amabilidad e a compaixón. Desta maneira non só crea unha identidade que abrangue características supostamente adscritas a xéneros opostos (desestabilizando o binarismo existente), senón que tamén demostra que a heroína non é simplemente a contrapartida do heroe. A súa construcción do xénero masculino, ademais, é considerada polos homes do seu redor digna de halago, ata o punto en que moitos desexan secretamente ser como el (que é ela). A perfección desta fachada fai, en moitos casos, que as mozas soamente sexan descubertas por casualidade ou, incluso nalgúnsa novelas, non sexan descubertas xamais, coma sucedía en moitos casos de travestís reais, das que non se sabía o verdadeiro xénero que lles fóra asignado ao nacer ata que os seus corpos eran preparados para o seu enterramento.

A decisión de vestirse e actuar coma homes é toda das mozas protagonistas nestas novelas, mesmo se está condicionada por un desexo de superar a situación de inferioridade na que se atopan e que encontran sumamente inxusta. A través dela, teñen acceso a unha educación ou a un traballo, a amigos que comparten as súas inquedanzas e a experiencias que no seu mundo están claramente reservadas a mozos e homes, como brandir unha espada ou ser aceptadas como soldados nas forzas aéreas.

A cambio de romper as regras, no entanto, teñen que pagar un alto prezo, afrontando conxstricións tanto físicas como psicolóxicas, por non mencionar a constante presión que senten porque saben que poden ser descubertas e as graves consecuencias que iso pode supoñer. As conxstricións físicas se traducen en dor nos seus peitos mentres están a medrar, causado polas vendas coas caos que se envolven o tórax. Pero a peor parte, probablemente, a teñen que afrontar a nivel psicolóxico, pois algunhas delas identificanse co xénero masculino máis que co
feminino, rexeitando, como xa mencionei, calquera das características que cren que as pode facer parecer débiles aos ollos doutras persoas, un prexuízo común no que todas foron educadas. Na súa mente, así coma no imaxinario cultural provocado polo binarismo da sociedade patriarcal, as mulleres son fráxiles criaturas domésticas, pasivas, máis preocupadas pola súa beleza ou por encontrar pretendentes que por cuestións políticas ou intelectuais. Estes prexuízos serán rebatidos polas personaxes femininas que a protagonista encontrará durante a súa vixaxe (analizadas no capítulo 8), para que se dea de conta dos seus erros e aprenda unha lección importante para o seu crecemento, ao tempo que se reconcilia coa feminidade que se decidiu a deixar atrás e recapacita sobre como a ideoloxía misóxina contribúe á opresión das mulleres, creando odio contra e entre elas.

Nun primeiro nivel de análise, as novelas claramente traballan para a deconstrución do xénero como elemento natural e fan visible a idea de que os roles de xénero oprimen as mulleres, que se ve condenadas a un papel pasivo e submiso onde acadar privilexios está fora de toda posibilidade. Así a todo, tamén e posible facer unha lectura máis profunda destas historias e, sobre todo, da figura da travestí. Deste modo, a travestí feminina convértese nunha metáfora da situación das mulleres na sociedade estadounidense (e occidental, máis extensamente) contemporánea, na que para acceder a unha posición tradicionalmente considerada de éxito, ten que fragmentar a súa identidade en dúas persoas distintas que se dividen pola súa actividade profesional e a súa actividade privada. As mulleres como profesionais sempre sufriron duras críticas, e aínda hoxe son convertidas en obxectos se se mostran demasiado femininas ou, pola contra, consideradas masculinas se se mostran directas e claras. Aínda así, espérase de aquelas que traballan fora da súa casa se mostren eficientes e se cingan ás normas creadas por e para os homes, porque o masculino segue a ser o estándar nunha sociedade patriarcal que trata de apartar ás mulleres de situacións de poder.

As narrativas de literatura xuvenil que inclúen travestís femininas reflexan todo este sexismo, de tal maneira que pode animar ao publico lector máis novo a avanzar en dirección á igualdade. Amais, as novelas incluídas no corpus deste estudo tamén mostran a realidade do impacto dos roles de xénero sobre os mozos
e homes, pois recoñécese que son forzados a comportarse dunha determinada maneira. A masculinidade, ao fin e o cabo, está moi vixiada por outros homes (como se comenta na primeira parte do capítulo 8) e, a máis hexemónica, a do poder e os ideais máis tradicionais, é problemática e perigosa en mozos que non son ensinados a comprender e expresar os seus sentimentos, senón a contelos e recorrer, no seu lugar, á violencia como solución aos seus problemas.

Pese a moverse na linde entre o xénero masculino e feminino, as protagonistas destas novelas non son capaces de achar unha alternativa ao binarismo de xénero, que establece os confins entre os que se atopan atrapadas. De tódalas formas, os textos prefieren centrarse no feito de que un xénero non é un punto exclusivo no que non hai máis posibilidades, e que é posible atopar un equilibrio saudable na creación dunha nova identidade na que se desafien expresións de xénero tradicionais e heteronormativas. É nesta maneira que as figuras das travestís encontra unha verdadeira estratexia para empoderarse e desafian as estruturas patriarcais, rebelándose contra a opresión á que están sometidas por mor dos roles de xénero, que cuestionan. Tras pasar como alguén doutro xénero e mostrando a dura aprendizaxe que pode requerir volver a adquirir características ou comportamentos tradicionalmente femininos tras ser desenmascaradas (unha volta á femimidade que analizo no capítulo 9), expoñen a artificialidade das nocións de “masculino” e “feminino”.

Con todo, non demostran ser un verdadeiro perigo para o binarismo de xénero, xa que seguen a reproducir moitas das ideas estereotipadas asociadas a homes e mulleres: aínda que teñen o potencial necesario para ser consideradas revolucionarias, as ideas que predomian neste tipo de narrativas, en xeral, son bastante convencionais. Ao fin e o cabo, os beneficios do travestismo soamente afectan a unha persoa e o impacto que acada o descubrimento da súa identidade provoca máis sorpresa e confusión que un verdadeiro cambio na forma de pensar das persoas ao redor da protagonista. A iso hai que engadir o feito de que as mozas travestidas non tratan de mostrar as súas habilidades dende o principio dunha forma honesta, senón que buscan un camiño fácil no que están obrigadas a esconderse, e no que a súas diferenzas non son motivo de orgullo e non as mostran como tal, ofrecendo así unha mensaxe problemática para as novas
xeracions. Ademais, estas protagonistas tratan de adaptarse a ese estándar masculino, en vez de loitar por que se lles dea máis oportunidades a un grupo que sofre unha verdadeira opresión: buscan igualdade cos homes, non equidade para todas as persoas, o que abre eses espazos nos que só hai homes a un feixe moi reducido de mulleres que non son parte da norma, senón casos excepcionais.

Incluso se podemos considerar que estas novelas tratan de facer fronte a inxustizas relacionadas cos roles de xénero e desexan reflexar a necesidade de rebelión contra eles, é necesario ter en conta que estamos a ler sobre personaxes que poden entenderse de forma moi ambigua. Por unha banda, son loitadoras que se negan a aceptar o lugar que supostamente lles corresponde. Así, poderíamos pensar que desmontan completamente a ideoloxía patriarcal de xénero na que foron educadas. Por outra banda, pola contra, poden entenderse coma casos especiais que están a medio camiño entre a masculinidade e a feminidade e, por tanto, non representan ás mulleres e, cando o fan, é para concluír as súas narrativas no sitio no que non desexaban acabar dende o principio: nun final tradicional, cun matrimonio ou unha relación estable que restaura a súa figura dentro dunha sociedade heteronormativa na que a revolución das mulleres non parece ten cabida. Aínda así, estas novelas, se ben con certos erros na súa mensaxe, tratan de presentar ao seu público lector protagonistas fortes que, como mínimo, son tan capaces como a súa contrapartida masculina tanto en forza como en intelixencia, desbancando a eterna idea de que as mulleres nunca poderán estar á altura.
Introduction
Introduction

I have been passionate about reading since I can remember and, since I learnt how to do it, I have devoured one book after another, from children’s literature to the so-called “general” fiction. Nevertheless, I have probably found my favorite type of literature in the Young Adult (henceforth YA) section of libraries and bookshops. This is the same section that other people seem to look at with disdain and with the idea that the books shelved in such an area could not be but lesser reading, too close to the children’s section for their comfort (Yampbell 2005).

I have also had, even now, the luck of finding friends with my same literary tastes, and we have often swapped readings or recommended new discoveries to one another. With every new YA novel, I started to see some patterns that repeated themselves, especially when I spent too much time focused on a certain genre: of course, I then realized that authors tend to reuse (and overuse) those elements that call the attention of a large part of the readership to achieve the success of some bestsellers in the market. While some readers enjoy finding these same tropes once and again, I prefer to discover new elements in the plot, so I have always preferred to change kinds of readings quickly, even when I found (and still find) a special pleasure in reading fantasy fiction.

With time I passed from being just a reader to becoming a writer of this genre of YA literature myself, and I became even more interested in the deeper analyses of this genre. I found myself fascinated by its metaphors and symbols, its history and the steps authors are taking towards narratives more and more involved in social struggles for rights and equality, raising awareness on topics that had been overlooked by previous authors. YA literature of all genres is becoming a useful political tool to teach the next generations, as shown by many contemporary titles (including the ones in my corpus of study) that address all kind of issues in the spotlight and try to portray the experiences of communities that have been underrepresented in all types of texts. With this idea in mind, I decided to embark myself in the adventure of writing a doctoral dissertation on the topic of YA literature, although at first I was not going to focus on the fantasy genre but wished to include as many genres as possible. As much as I would have liked to
present a general perspective of the current situation of this type of literature, however, it would have been impossible to pay attention to all the genres that it encompasses in a research of this magnitude. Therefore, I decided to focus on a selected corpus of YA novels in the genres of fantasy and science fiction, as they have been two of the most neglected in academic studies for the time being.\(^1\)

Regarding the topic examined here, it was my intention to study YA literature from a gender perspective, focusing on female protagonists. Taking into account that these female characters often turn into role models for many young readers, I was interested in analyzing their behavior and testing to which extent YA fiction is sending positive messages to girls while trying to fight against the gender roles that oppress them. This dissertation examines recent changes in U.S. YA fiction, in which there has been a growing number of strong female characters as protagonists, especially in science fiction and fantasy. Many sources analyzing and informing about YA literature in general have noticed this trend, although most of them have focused on the positive impact that these figures have at a representational level (Scheurer 2017), as young generations of women are in need of role examples who fight and wish to acquire power. Nevertheless, not many sources have acknowledged the problems that are to be found at the core of most strong female characters, in general, as the messages they embody in relation to femininity, female friendships and romantic love are not specially healthy when analyzed from a feminist perspective.\(^2\)

I found myself, however, unable to analyze the figure of the strong female character in contemporary YA fiction in general, as I consider that it would be a project too ambitious for the sake of the length limits of this dissertation. Consequently, I decided to focus on which I consider a subcategory of this type of female protagonist: the female-to-male cross-dresser. Apart from being a very interesting figure from the point of view of gender studies, the situation in which a girl has to dress as a boy to pass unnoticed or to enter in male-only spaces—commonly referred to as “passing”—was a recurrent plot device in the cultural

\(^1\) I will explain in more detail the process of selection of the literary corpus in section 1 in this Introduction.

\(^2\) These aspects will be analyzed in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 respectively, as part of the postfeminism that has permeated Euro-American popular culture these last years.
materials I watched and read during both my childhood and adolescence. Examples of these can be found in William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* (even though it is not children or YA fiction), Disney’s 1998 film *Mulan*, and Andy Fickman’s 2006 romantic comedy *She’s the Man*. With all, these did not seem to me the sheroes that “[have] become a mainstay in youth-oriented television and literature in the new millennium” (Brown 2011, 142) and who “[gloss] over some of the very real challenges women still face in our society” (Brown 2011, 142-3), as it is frequently said of postfeminist protagonists (Gill 2007, Negra 2009, Butler 2013) who consider themselves to have overcome the injustice and imbalance of a sexist society. On the contrary, the passing women about whom I have chosen to write are fighting in worlds that do not allow women to pursue their dreams and are instead told to stay “hidden” in the domestic sphere, to where traditional gender roles have (dis)placed women. They struggle and, even though the final (and problematic) moral seems to be that women can do anything they wish, the message acknowledges the social constraints and barriers they must confront and the surveillance to which they are subjected. However, these characteristics of the stories about female cross-dressers exemplify how they have inherited the “complex and contradictory” (Brown 2011, 232) character of the female hero of contemporary popular culture, in which messages are often ambiguous and problematic, as I hope to demonstrate throughout my analysis.

0.1. Methodology

After having chosen the topic to research in this dissertation, the most difficult step was to select a corpus of study sufficiently coherent though simultaneously diverse enough to be compared so as to offer wider results. First I read a number of contemporary YA novels with a focus on female-to-male cross-dressers without taking into account the genre of the story or the nationality of the author, with the only premise that they had to have been first published in English. I did not expect to find such a vast amount of novels built over those foundations, so I decided to narrow my focus to the genres of science fiction and fantasy. This selection was triggered not only because of my taste for these genres, as I have already mentioned, but also because I found that these modes have received lesser
attention than more realistic or historical fiction in the scholarship devoted to YA literature. Although in fantasy targeted to an adult audience scholarship with a perspective on gender studies is common, and “[m]uch scholarship has been dedicated to studying the mediation of gender conventions within fantastic literature, especially the genre’s potential for re-visioning traditional power relations and binary constructions” (Kennon 2015, 54), this is not the case with YA fiction. This Ph.D dissertation intends to contribute to filling in that lack.

The preliminary readings made during the first months of research left my corpus with a total of twelve novels from six different authors (four female and two male), but I decided to limit my analysis to ten in order to focus on U.S. texts only. My decision has been favored by the fact that, due to globalization, U.S. culture has permeated into other countries as well, influencing the texts received by global readership. U.S. YA fiction is widely translated, for example, and there is a clear tendency to adapt it to audio-visual materials that are globally exported (a topic to which I will return in section 2 of Chapter 1). Nonetheless, although I center my analysis on the selected corpus, I address throughout the dissertation other novels from different backgrounds in order to further support my arguments.

The main corpus, then, contains ten novels by five different authors—three women and two men—, as listed below with a short summary of each plot (extended in more detail in Chapter 4):

- The Song of the Lioness quartet, by Tamora Pierce. A YA fantasy from the 1980s set in the imaginary realm of Tortall that includes Alanna: The First Adventure (1983), In the Hands of the Goddess (1984), The Woman Who Rides Like a Man (1986), and Lioness Rampant (1988). Alanna of Trebond, disguised as Alan of Trebond, swaps places with her brother so that she can enter the royal court to be trained as a knight.

- The Leviathan trilogy, by Scott Westerfeld. A science-fiction YA trilogy from the steampunk subgenre (to be defined in the first section of Chapter 2) with an alternative history of the First World War told through three different novels: Leviathan (2009), Behemoth (2010), and Goliath

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I have decided to leave in regular font the name of sagas and series, while the name of each of the novels is in italics so that when the name of the series coincides with the name of one of the novels, the distinction can be made: eg. Leviathan/Leviathan, Defy/Defy.
(2011). The female protagonist, Deryn, passes as Dylan to take the exams to access the Royal Air Force just before the conflict breaks out.

- *Graceling* (2008), the first installment in the Graceling Realm series by Kristin Cashore, is a fantasy taking place in a world where people with especial abilities (known as Graces) are born. Although this novel differs from the rest because the protagonist, Katsa, cross-dresses only when she needs her missions to be a secret, she shares many of the characteristics of the passing woman at a psychological level, as will be explained.

- *All Men of Genius* (2011), by Lev AC Rosen. A stand-alone science-fiction novel in a steampunk world set in an alternative Victorian London. Taking advantage of her father’s business trip to the United States, Violet Addams, disguised as Asthon Addams, applies to Illyria College, an all-male university, in order to show the world that women can also practice science and be successful.

- *Defy* (2014), the first installment of the Defy trilogy, by Sara B. Larson. In this fantasy set in a dystopian world at war, orphan girls are sent to breeding houses in which they are raped by soldiers to get impregnated and forced to give birth to more males for the king’s army. When her parents die, Alexa (the narrator and main character) decides to pass as Alex, a boy, in order to avoid such an inhumane fate.

Although these are not all the fantasy or science-fiction YA novels that fulfill the characteristics I was searching for in the composition of my corpus, they have been chosen according to their accessibility and the extent to which they could be considered landmarks in contemporary U.S. YA literature. For example, *The Song of the Lioness* has already caught the attention of several researchers (to be detailed in the next section), while Tamora Pierce is often praised for having helped to the development of fantasy in global YA literature (Stableford 2005, Hogan 2009, Mendelsohn and James 2009). Moreover, she is considered one of the first YA fantasy authors to have included a strong female protagonist in her novels (Dailey 2006; Scheuerer 2017).

The rest of the texts were included in an attempt to have as many different types of texts as possible, with different characteristics that could provide my
Strategies of Cross-dressing and Gender-b(l)ending

analysis with multiple elements for study. Thus, Westerfeld’s trilogy includes a double point of view, that of a male and a female protagonists; Rosen’s *All Men of Genius* presents a more feminine main character; Larson’s *Defy* uses most of the tropes that are included in YA fiction to produce bestsellers, such as the traditional development of the romantic plot. Cashore’s *Graceling*, on its part, presents an interesting counterpoint in its portrayal of the protagonist, since Katsa is a gender-b(l)ender figure without being a cross-dresser, although she shows many of the lait motifs that shape the passing girl/woman in other stories.

Throughout the analysis of these figures, it needs be taken into account that I have decided to use their “real” names and the feminine pronouns to refer to them: I do not consider them to be transgender, given that the narrators in all the stories, either through the first person or through a focalized third person, keep referring to the cross-dressers as “she” and “her.” This provides the reader the portrait of women that, even when clearly rejecting femininity, do not consider themselves male. Exceptionally, I will refer to them by their male and female names together (e.g. Alan/na, Ashton/Violet) when they are in disguise, in order to provide my reader with more context regarding the analyzed scenes.

In order to refer to these strong female characters I will use the word “shero”, a feminist term for a female hero, or for a woman that is taken as an example to follow by others. In words of Hélène Bower Raddeker, “[t]he coining of the term ‘shero’ in critical literature and amongst SF/F fans is partly meant to suggest that ‘women can be heroes without having to imitate men’, which recalls Spivack’s point about female protagonists who are not committed to ‘male [or, rather, masculinist] goals . . . of power and domination’” (2014, 157). Apart from taking into consideration the possibility of different notions of heroism, the term has also been used by feminist scholars to problematize the diminutive and negative connotations of the –ine suffix in the word “heroine” (Pearson and Pope 1981, Lipp 2004). In this dissertation, I have decided to avoid “heroine” and use instead alternatively the neutral term “hero” or the feminist coinage “shero” for the protagonists of the novels in my corpus. As I discuss their characteristics, however, I will point out how some of them differ from the concept of the s/hero,
as some of their behaviors and the message found in the texts are too problematic to validate these characters as role models.

With my selection of texts, I have intended not to offer a contrastive analysis of different cross-dressing experiences from works from a same context: masculinities as seen by the able, white, middle-class, heterosexual hegemony in the United States. Far from a random choice, the analysis of these texts tries to evidence that the ideas they provide about gender are quite similar, as close as possible in time and space, since the conceptions regarding gender are neither timeless nor unchangeable. That is, masculinities can be understood and valued in very different ways inside the same territory, and the disparities would be even more noticeable between texts from Western and non-Western cultures, for example.

As far as my theoretical background is concerned, I have turned to queer theory because of its concern with the deconstruction of gender and its acknowledgement that it is an artificial construction. Stephen Whittle described queer theory’s perspective as having its principles on “the deconstruction and the refusal of labels of personal sexual activity. . . . It concerns ‘gender fuck’, which is a full-frontal theoretical and practical attack on the dimorphism of gender- and sex-roles” (1996, 202). In other words, queer theory tries to destroy the conception of gender and sexual binaries that permeates society and the false premises that tie gender and sex, which is at the same time a strategy to keep oppressing women as inferior to men. Therefore, the link between queer theory and most feminist movements seems to me intimate. Moreover, queer theory shows in a new light how research becomes a political action, as it is closely linked with activism. In this particular case, it can be understood as a way of critiquing how gender as a construction has shaped power relations throughout history, since cross-dressing has been used as a political tool grounded in inequality to keep claiming that men were superior to women (as will be exposed in Chapter 3).

Judith Butler set part of the foundations for the development of this critical movement and this doctoral dissertation draws on her influential work *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she explored the performative construction of gender.
By focusing on the performance of drag queens, she revealed how gender is crafted and creates an identity, and the necessity to pay attention to gender from different perspectives, as it is “a phenomenon that has bodily, psychological and behavioural features” (Alsop et al. 2002, 14). Through Butler’s research, extended and reexamined in Undoing Gender (2004) as an answer to those who had criticized her theory on performativity, queer theory was able to “undermine the categories man/woman, replacing the fixed gender categories by gender fluidity” (Alsop et al. 2002, 161).

This challenge to the conventions about gender brings queer analysis of texts to the forefront when defying “the assumption that masculinity belongs exclusively to men and femininity to women” (Alsop et al. 2002, 132), which is still a common idea spread in Western societies that has been, nonetheless, extensively refuted. In this dissertation, apart from Butler’s work, I also take as a fundamental tool for my critical discourse the studies of Jack Halberstam (originally published under the name of Judith Halberstam) on female masculinity and masculine women, who are gender-b(l)ender figures themselves, showing that it would be wrong to consider that the female gender and femininity go hand in hand.

With these background texts in mind, my main aim is to offer a close reading of the novels in my corpus in order to analyze the figures of female-to-male cross-dressers (together with the rest of objectives detailed below, in section 3).

0.2. State of the question

As far as the previous research on this topic is concerned, it has to be said that the histories of YA literature have been centered on the more realistic genres. This perspective is evidenced by one of the most consulted texts to this respect, Michael Cart’s From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature (1996), a handbook that was published over twenty years ago but which is still being much used despite its lacks and its not being up to date. This is not the only theoretical text that has ignored the importance of all non-realist genres in the development of YA literature, as evidenced by Nilsen and Donelson’s Literature for Today’s Young Adults (2006). This tendency
expresses how YA speculative fiction (which in this dissertation I use in order to talk about fantasy and science fiction together) has been erased from history, largely due to biased and spread prejudices that associate fantasy and science fiction with a younger targeted readership (to be discussed in Chapter 2).

Only after the recent success of fantasy novels and sagas have scholars started to be interested in other types of YA literature, and a bulk of works focusing on very popular texts has started to appear. To put an example, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series has become a popular subject of study: in August 2017, there were at least 72 journal articles including the combination “Harry Potter” in their titles in the digital database JSTOR. These results widened to over 16,000 journal articles if the search was broadened to just any mention of “Harry Potter,” which shows the impact that a successful YA novel may have in the academic world (not to mention in the book market, an aspect that will be considered in Chapter 1, section 2, below).

In general, however, there is an important lack of research on YA literature, as this type of literature has been neglected by the critics for a long time, and even today many studies on the topic claim that they analyze children’s literature instead of YA. This problem hints to the lack of a separation between children and YA literature, especially since YA is a category that is still being developed and in constant change, while children’s literature has been around for a long time now.

For the sections on fantasy and science fiction, there are many sources that have been very useful for my research at a general level, in order to understand the characteristics and contexts of these genres. The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction (2003) and the Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature (2013), both edited by Edward James and Farah Mendelsohn, offer a solid basis to comprehend the history of fantasy and science fiction, and they give the researcher multiple points of view from different experts in the topics. A few of the sources listed among my bibliography include references to the importance of YA in the development of these two genres, such as the aforementioned Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature.
As far as the cross-dressing of girls/women⁴ is concerned, there is also a lack of available theoretical information. This situation has been denounced by those interested in the topic, who declare that “[m]uch of the available material on cross-dressing has a straightforward bias for male-to-female transformations” (Ferris 1993, 6) and that “research on men’s cross-dressing far exceeds that on women’s in quantity . . . [while] women’s cross-dressing is comparatively underexplored” (Drorbaugh 1993, 121). Joseph Harris has explained that this is the logical outcome of living in “a patriarchal society which denies women certain rights” (2005, 208). With all, there are some well-known key texts that have provided an insight into historical passing women, including Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (1992) and Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough’s *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (1993), both of them listed in almost any study of cross-dressing I have come across. I also find of the utmost importance a previous research by Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (1989). Although it is less broad in its account that Garber’s and the Bulloughs’, focusing on the Dutch Republic during the early Modern age, Dekker and van de Pol’s analysis pays attention to female-to-male cross-dressing alone and it is more thorough in its analysis. All these sources have provided me not only with information regarding the history of cross-dressing but also with a body of terminology to refer to these passing women, which I thoroughly describe in the first section of Chapter 3.

There is also an unexpected corpus of analysis of cross-dressing represented in literary texts, especially in the comedies by Shakespeare (Belsey 1985, Suzuki 2000) or in Victorian and Neo-Victorian novels (Heilmann 2000, Neal 2012). However, on the part of YA literature, there is a lack of scholarship focusing on this same perspective. Regarding the published studies on cross-dressing in YA fiction, I have to highlight that this dissertation is indebted to the analysis of passing in YA and children’s literature in English by Victoria Flanagan. Her

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⁴ In order to create a consistent vocabulary that may help my readers to understand the context of the novels I analyze, I will use the term “girl” to refer to the cross-dressers in their childhood, before puberty, while “(young) woman” will make reference to those female characters who have already reached puberty.
investigation on the topic, which includes the publication of an article from 2002 entitled “Reframing Masculinity: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing” and her 2008 monograph *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and the Gendered Body in Children’s Literature and Film*, use a similar methodology to mine, in her case so as to analyze different male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressers and transgender protagonists. Among the texts in her corpus, I was glad to find *Alanna: The First Adventure*, the first installment of Tamora Pierce’s *The Song of the Lioness*, which I had set myself to study as well. Nevertheless, although her work may have influenced my own and has helped me deal with Pierce’s tetralogy, I consider that my analysis is more in-depth and focuses on aspects that she has ignored, and at some points our readings of the text completely disagree (as will be evidenced in Chapter 7).

But Flanagan has not been the only scholar to focus on the character of Alanna: this is the passing girl in my corpus who has called the attention of more scholars, but a complete and in-depth analysis of the quartet does not exist yet. For instance, Flanagan analyzes the first installment of the series (with references to the second one), not paying attention to Alanna’s performance after she earns her title of knight at the end of the second novel, *In the Hands of the Goddess*. Jes Battis did also study Alanna in a 2011 article entitled “Trans Magic: The Radical Performance of the Young Wizard in YA Literature,” although I find her analysis erroneous in some aspects, as I will point out in Chapters 8 and 9 below. Finally, I need to highlight the importance of a recent article by Sarah Sahn entitled “Decolonizing Childhood: Coming of Age in Tamora Pierce’s Fantastic Empire” (2016), in which she takes a feminist and postcolonial perspective to analyze the tetralogy of *The Song of the Lioness*.

As for the other titles included in my corpus, none of them have been, to my notice, the center of much academic or even critical attention, which encouraged me to focus on them and share my own views on their construction of gender.

Taking into account such precedents, it is quite safe to assure that this doctoral dissertation attempts to offer an innovative point of view on a corpus of literary works that have passed largely unnoticed by scholars. The chosen topic, even if reviewed in critical studies on classic literature, has not been analyzed in
depth in academic works about contemporary fiction, and there is still a lot to add regarding the way in which these figures contribute (or not) to the empowerment of young adult women. The revision of the bibliography on the topic leads me to think that more attention should be paid to the strategies of gender performance and performativity in YA literature, and also to the way in which gender roles are portrayed. Another question that should be considered is whether this type of texts helps to break with the conventional ideas about gender that are so deeply ingrained in the heteropatriarchal Euro-American society.

0.3. Objectives

The main aim of this dissertation is to carry out an interdisciplinary analysis of the cross-dressing practices of female protagonists in ten YA fantasy and science fiction novels by U.S. contemporary writers, comparing the way in which the authors portray the diverse experiences of the protagonists. The study of this gender-b(l)ender figures will try to shed some light on the hypothesis that cross-dressing can be used as an empowerment strategy in YA fiction, explaining how the decision of the protagonists is a way to fight against inequality in their worlds, which are openly patriarchal in their cultural and social views. With the help of queer and feminist theories, I will pay attention to the way in which these sheroes (de)construct gender to create a male persona that grants them pass in places where women are not allowed to enter as active, equal subjects, such as the air forces or all-men schools. I will also consider the consequences of such a masquerade, both at the personal and social levels: does the cross-dresser’s actions leave an imprint in her society? Is she able to change anything? Does she really want to change anything, to start with, or is she acting upon individual, selfish desires?

I am also concerned with investigating the reasons that lead such a topic to still being addressed in YA literature when there are fewer and fewer cases in the twenty-first century of “traditional” cross-dressing (in the sense of simply passing but retaining your gender identity, not actual transgendering): why is the figure of the cross-dresser so fascinating? In order to clear up this issue, I will inquire into the link between literature and the real cases of female-to-male cross-dressing
throughout history, taking into account the historical testimonies that have
survived in order to draw parallels, explaining in which ways fiction drinks from
historical sources to portray such experiences. I also want to trace a historical
view of passing women and an account of their reasons and objectives to offer a
solid foundation to my analysis, making visible a practice as old as history itself
and which has been used as a political tool to convey certain counter-normative
ideologies on gender from different perspectives. By doing such a thorough
examination of the cases, I hope to find what cross-dressing stands for today, in a
society in which women are not supposed to have the need to wear the disguise of
a man neither to study nor to work (although wearing certain prototypically male
clothing may have a masculinized effect by which they are considered to be more
“serious” or “professional”).

Although cross-dressing and its existence as a literary and cultural
phenomenon are the main objects of study, it is also my purpose to draw a picture
of the contemporary YA literature in the United States, bringing forth innovative
perspectives that have been neglected by previous scholars. For this, it is
necessary to look at the history of this type of literature and its current relevance:
its wide audience and the fact that it has stopped to be just a literary product and
has become a phenomenon that is commercialized and spread through different
media, from TV series and cinema to merchandise of all kinds. In this way
products with a young target audience are being turned into a mass phenomenon
both inside and outside the United States. YA texts are already a part, no doubt, of
the contemporary globalized and capitalist culture in which we all live.

Even so, as I have exposed before, YA fiction is still marginalized in
academic contexts, in the same way that happens with fantasy and science fiction
(and specially when referring to them within YA literature in general), genres that
until quite recently were ignored as subliterature for their focus on “fictional”
worlds. Although I know that it is an over-ambitious part of my research, then, I
would like to reclaim the place these genres deserve by showing how they
criticize social realities through an estrangement from “reality,” while also
deconstructing social and cultural conventions, focusing on the topic of gender. I
also want to highlight their similarities rather than their differences, explaining
how both genres have interacted throughout history and how they have helped feminist activism as a political tool to tackle the debates within the successive feminist waves in the United States regarding women’s empowerment.

Finally, with this dissertation I hope to open new paths in academic research, specially in gender studies and in YA literature. I would like this work to offer a base for future projects, presenting a point of departure to study other types of fiction containing gender-b(l)ender figures of any kind, or other thematic concerns that are merely mentioned though not explored in more detail here due to the limited scope and length of my analysis.

0.4. Structure

This doctoral dissertation is shaped around two main parts, apart from an introduction and conclusions. In this Introduction, the bases for the research have been laid, including the reasons behind the selection of the topic and the corpus of novels to analyze. The methodology that I have followed has been settled as well as the objectives, which are in direct relation to the results that I have reached throughout the study, summarized in the section of conclusions.

In the first part, entitled “Genre and Gender”, I clarify the core terminology to be employed in the analysis of the literary corpus, examined in the second part of the dissertation and entitled “Blurring the limits or imposing them?” This is a question that refers to the gender-b(l)ender characters and to which the six chapters included in the part try to answer.

The first part offers first an overview of the concept of YA literature in Chapter 1, as I think it is impossible to understand the term without trying to define it and look at the short history that lies behind its development. This first chapter closes with an explanation of the current situation and the importance of YA literature nowadays, to understand not only its growing success but also to point towards the directions in which the studies on the topic are going. This chapter also considers the reasons why this type of literature has been undervalued by critics and educators, highlighting the most typical prejudices against it.

Prejudices will also open the next chapter, although with a different focus: the genres of fantasy and science fiction, which have also been attacked as
Introduction

subliterature by a supposedly critical elite. Taking into account the classic discussion on the antagonism between “realism” and “non-realism” in literature (and the arts in general), I will emphasize the differences and similitudes between these two genres. Taking into account that a lot of work has been done in an attempt to value the history of fantasy and science fiction, I will highlight the role of women authors and the topics they have addressed to connect it to concerns that I have seen developed in contemporary novels of YA fiction. I will argue that second-wave feminism opened the path to the exploration of gender and sexuality in this type of texts and broke with the previous tradition in which women occupied secondary positions and were never the (s)heroes.

Finally, Part 1 closes with a chapter dedicated to the study of gender, specially addressed to the figure of the female-to-male cross-dressers, as little is known about these figures and the history of the practice is unavoidably linked to the depiction of these gender-b(l)ender figures in fiction. Chapter 3 is also a necessary place to include a discussion of the terminology used in relation to these figures, and to revise notions that are often confused by the general public.

The second part of the dissertation is completely devoted to the analysis of the texts in the selected corpus and takes a more practical stance, in which I focus on the performance of masculinity and femininity. I start in Chapter 4 by contextualizing the work done by scholars in cross-dressing fictional narrative specifically. In the second section of the chapter, I focus in the novels of my dissertation and summarize the most important points of each work.

In Chapter 5, the attention shifts to contextualizing the worldbuilding of the novels and drawing parallels between current U.S. society and the fictional places in which the cross-dressers have grown up. I also wanted to highlight the types of violence to which women are subjected to consider the forces that influence the young protagonists to create their male personae.

After analyzing the background of these characters, I consider how they achieve the seamless performance of another gender. Chapter 6, then, focuses on their childhood and the characteristics of tomboyism fundamental to them. In Chapter 7 the attention moves towards the strategies that characterize the creation of the male persona per se and how these girls and young women initiate their
performance. Their disguise, after all, does not include only a visual component but also a behavioral one in which masculinity is constantly policed and constrained.

In Chapter 8 I turn to other types of masculinity and femininity, which are portrayed through the different characters that surround the protagonist. I have divided these femininities and masculinities according to types of characters and their relation to the protagonists, as they serve as a way to contrast their performances and their way of understanding gender.

Finally, Chapter 9 analyzes the different endings and how they can invalidate the message of the novel until that moment. I have considered that we can account for three different types of ending regarding the relation of the gender-b(l)ender to her femininity/masculinity and the ways in which they are reinscribed (or not) into the patriarchal institutions. Finally, I have devised section 2 in Chapter 9 as a conclusion to the chapter and, over all, a reflection on the gender-b(l)ender as transgressor.

I end with the Conclusions and Works Cited, which I hope can be considered a useful bibliographic source for those in need of information about this complex topic.
Part 1:
Genre and Gender
Chapter 1. Young Adult literature: an overview

1.1. Definition

A main difficulty to define what Young Adult literature comprises is the instability of what is understood as a *young adult*. The main difficulty to achieve a conclusion to this respect seems to be the fact that “young adult” is not a universal term, in the same way that YA literature does not have a world-wide tradition. In fact, not even adolescence itself is an experience shared by every culture on planet Earth, no matter what the central view of Euro-American countries tends to depict: “puberty may be a universal experience, but adolescence is not” (Cart 1996, 7). Therefore, since categories may change the focus considering the culture we are in, is it even possible to define “young adult” at all? How mutable is the term in a society that does not stop changing, and which develops every day to bring to the forefront new issues dealing with adolescents and their preoccupations? To what extent can we label the probably most unstable stage of development in human life?

To begin with, the idea of a stage between childhood and adulthood is “not a universal category of biology but a changing and cultural construct that appeared at a particular moment under definitive conditions” (Barker 2012, 426). Nonetheless, there are different opinions about when that “particular moment” was. Barker cites Parsons to explain that youth\(^5\) is a concept that derives directly from the emergence of capitalism in Euro-American culture:

> [Y]outh is a social category which emerged with changing family roles generated by the development of capitalism. In pre-capitalist societies . . . the family fulfilled all the major biological, economic and cultural functions of social reproduction. The transition from childhood to adulthood was marked by rites of passage and there was not an extended period of youth or adolescence. With the emergence of specialized, universalized and

\(^5\) After researching the definitions of *youth* used in cultural studies or world-wide organizations ascribed to the United Nations, I have decided to consider the term as a synonym for *young adult* and it is considered as such in this dissertation, especially taking into account that the latter has been expanded to include a much wider age-range.
rationalized occupational and adult roles in capitalist society, there was a discontinuity between the family and the wider society. Such a rupture needed a cultural space of transition, training and socializing for young people. (Barker 2012, 426)

This conception of young adults as being a consequence of the appearance of capitalism, however, is problematic, as the roots of capitalism are still being debated and placed at different points in time (Neal and Williamson 2014), while we cannot talk about a youth culture until fairly recently. This is the reason why other experts (Cart 1996, 4) have argued that the idea of this stage cannot be stated to have existed before the twentieth century, as the poor living conditions undergone by the majority of the population did not allow for the concept of “young adulthood” to arise. Once childhood passed (and even before its end), most people were forced to find a job in order to support their parents and siblings economically until they became independent or started their own families. As far as education is concerned, in the United States it was not regulated by the government until fairly recently6, and it was mostly reserved for children who, if ever schooled at all, found themselves educated differently depending on their class and gender. Only high and middle classes (especially those men interested in liberal arts education) were able to enter university (Malheiro 2014), while higher education was not the rule for women.

Alleen Nilsen and Kenneth Donelson (2009) sustain the idea that the nineteenth century was the time in which a different category between childhood and adulthood germinated in the United States (and with it, a literature for this age group) due to medical knowledge and the noticeable increase in their inhabitants’ life expectancy, so they did no longer need to work so early in their lives. However, the fight for laws against child labor lasted until the twentieth century, a proof that there were (and still are, for certain classes) hardships that forced very

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6 The earliest compulsory education laws in the U.S. go back to 1852, when Massachusetts became the first state to enact a law by which parents were forced to send their children to school. The last state to provide a law on school attendance was Mississippi, more than 50 years later, in 1917. However, these laws were highly ineffective, as it took a long time for people to be aware of how necessary education is (Thomson Reuters n.d.).
young people to work and grow up without enjoying their childhood (Clark-Bennett et al. 2011).

Consequently, it was only after the Second World War, due to new economic and social conditions for a larger part of the population, that this third group between childhood and adulthood started to emerge. The development of adolescence as a social construct brought to the attention of parents and educators the idea that teenagers had different intellectual and psychological anxieties from both children and adults. These necessities were soon to be acknowledged as well as studied in different fields such as psychology. At the same time, a new subculture appeared so as to meet the evolution from child to adult, and books, magazines, and audio-visual products targeted adolescents as their main audience, as there was a new awareness that a profitable new market was to be exploited. In general, the creation of youth marketing in the 1960s was paramount in the increasing consciousness about this age-group, and sellers of almost any product (including alcohol and tobacco) exploited the image of youth and promoted it as something desirable that was achieved by buying their brands.

The definition of what a young adult is, then, will depend on the starting point we take. In theory, young adults are individuals who have entered puberty but are not yet fully considered as adults, mostly due to their lack of economic independence and to their psychological and physical immaturity. The problem arises when we try to state the age range for young adults, which is prone to constant alterations within any given culture, in the same way that variations in the age range are to be expected according to different cultures and throughout history. For this dissertation, I will focus on the YA (fiction) book market within the U.S. society of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Back in 1966, the first institution to coin the term “young adult” for referring to both the collective and its literature was the Young Adult Library Services Association of the United States (YALSA), a department within the American

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7 This image of youth, however, began to be criticized by late 1960s feminists, as it was partial and focused on male interests and desires (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 1997, 293), objectivizing women and fostering traditional gender roles. Nowadays, this tendency has persisted and advertisements are still using the appeal of youth and desire (through a massive hypersexualization) in order to sell new products (O’Barr 2011).

8 This link between advertising and youth/young adults has been widely studied. For more information on this topic, see Frank 1997, Calvert 2008, and “Youth” 2012.
Library Association (ALA). A clear point of departure in order to shed light over this concept is their definition of the term as it was specified in their mission statement until 2016. This definition made reference to their objective of “[expanding] and [strengthening] library services for teens, aged 12-18” (ALA n.d.). In the half century since the term was first used by the ALA, many issues have changed, both in relation to young people and the literature they read: education has been reformed, the idea of the conventional family unit has been challenged, and some of the images of popular culture that were known at the time are not recognizable anymore. Consequently, taking into account that being young in the pre-Internet era and now are two different experiences, it seems legitimate that the definition set by the ALA needs to be revised⁹. In this regard, Michael Cart has correctly made a wakeup call to ALA’s services, pointing out that the cultural changes undergone by the United States are transforming the way young adulthood is conceived of.

Taking into account these alterations, Cart decided to widen the age range this concept embraces, and asserted that “the conventional definition of ‘young adult’ has expanded to include those as young as ten and, since the late 1990s, as old as twenty-five” (Cart 2008). Cart’s proposal seems to be sensible, since his definition allows to include those who are not considered teenagers but who have not been yet included as adults (or do not feel as adults themselves) due to circumstances that are mostly linked to a middle-class white capitalism: the main difference between an adult and a young adult seems to be their stability in life (job and career, stable income, etc.). Widening the age range to include 10 year-old children also allows to take into consideration the fact that we live in societies in which they are compelled to grow too fast. Children and young adults are bombarded with images that sexualize them (Olfman 2009) and push them towards consumerism from early ages (O’Barr 2008). Following such a tendency, there seems to be a threat that childhood may become increasingly erased and undistinguished from later stages of human development, since as Jennifer A. Hill warns us “[y]ounger children are being enticed, encouraged and seduced into

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⁹ The mission of YALSA was changed in July 2016, during the writing of this dissertation, and other statements were adopted (available in http://www.ala.org/yalsa/aboutyalsa/mission&vision/yalsamission ). Nonetheless, they still use the term teen as a synonym of young adult.
adopter une identité supérieure à leur âge de développement” (2011, 315). Et alors que les enfants sont adultes (surtout les filles qui sont constamment sexualisées via l'industrie de la mode, par exemple), les adultes sont progressivement infantilisés pour s'adapter à une société focalisée sur le jeune âgé, enracinée et renforcée par les médias (Bernardini 2014, Wade 2013)10.

Cart’s decision to include a wide age-range is backed by the definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary, in which a young adult is defined as “[a] person in his or her teens or early twenties”. However, when used as an adjective, it is defined as “[o]f or relating to a young adult; (now) esp. designating or relating to fiction, films, television programs, etc., intended or suitable for adolescents in their mid to late teens” (Oxford University Press n.d., italics mine). These characteristics associated with the term somehow fail to mark the difference between the concept of “young adult” and “teen” or “adolescent.” The word teen (short for teenager) refers to “someone who is between 13 and 19 years old” (Cambridge University Press 2004). In contrast, being an adolescent means being “a young person who is between being a child and an adult” (Cambridge University Press 2004). This definition is practical but loose, as it avoids explaining what an adolescent is or what the difference between them and young adults is, if any.

In other words, these differences between the definitions point at how the lack of agreement between experts roots from the usage of the term itself. This is the reason why many academics dealing with adolescence and its literature prefer to question the validity of any characterization, and argue that “definition continues to remain fluid” (Carrington 2009, 15). In a way, this is the natural process of any cultural construction: “[a]s a cultural construct, the meaning of youth alters across time and space according to who is being addressed by whom” (Barker 2012, 426).

10 As in many areas of our lives, however, this infantilization does not affect women and men in the same way: while men are allowed to behave in childish ways under the excuse that “boys will always be boys”, women are pressured to retain their girlish looks. This will of society to infantilize women responds to a desire for women to remain young and beautiful for the pleasure of the male gaze, “reinforce[ing] a power and status difference between men and women, where vulnerability, weakness, and dependency and their opposites are gendered traits: desirable in one sex but not the other” (Wade 2013).
The label “young adult” in itself may convey the wrong idea that this is a homogeneous, closed category, when this is a conception very far from reality. Individuals inside this category happen to be really different among them. In fact, although adolescence may be one of the shortest periods of life, it involves a great deal of physical and psychological transformations. The result of such fast alterations is that this type of literature is bound to call the attention of people whose tastes and necessities may change from one reading to the next. Dinah Stevenson, back in 1988, pointed at this problem and warned editors and scholars that YA literature may be doomed from the start, as “we can’t tailor a literature to the needs of a group if it isn't in fact a group, or if we haven't yet got a handle on what that group consists of” (88).

Other authors have problematized the concept even more. Pam Cole (2008), for example, contributes to the debate on the available terminology. According to her,

\[\text{young adult literature, adolescent literature, juvenile literature, junior books, children’s literature, books for teens, and books for tweens describe texts that bridge the gap between children’s literature and adult literature. Given the negative connotations of the words adolescents and teens, most experts today agree upon young adult literature. (49, italics in the original).}\]

To a certain extent, she is right to enumerate these terms as having been used by academics, publishers, librarians, and even writers. However, each of them has different connotations, although she does not seem concerned with defining them.

First of all, there should be no doubt that “children’s literature” characterizes a different type of texts from “YA literature” (Daniels 2016). However, some scholars still use them indistinctly and there is a tendency in some bookshops to mix both types of literature or to put them in adjacent shelves, an organization that not only may bring about misunderstandings about their natures but may deter young adults from visiting this section (Yampbell 2005). And though we may argue that today the limits between them are clearer than they were twenty years ago, prejudices persist, and both are often considered naïve and immature readings. What the association of YA fiction and non-fiction to children’s
literature is doing is perpetuating the myth that “child” and “adult” are exclusive, closed categories. As Dominic Cheetham (2013) has proved, this is a dangerous view that would give “the erroneous impression that each of these opposing groups has a significant degree of homogeneity” (20), and may imply “a fixed, normalising view of society, antithetical to any multi-faceted views of society, or any views which attempt to empower or emancipate un-empowered groups,” because it makes assumptions “with no reference to gender, social class, or race, and from this a highly unified, stereotypical view of society” (21).

Nevertheless, we have to admit that children’s and YA literature share some characteristics in the way both critics and the general public usually look at them. We can see both as “marked” fiction in contrast with “general” adult literature: in the latter, books are not specified as being marketed for a certain age. A romance, a mystery, or a historical fiction, without any other specification, would implicitly refer to a story about and for grown-ups, and it would be classified according to its literary genre. This is not the case with most children and YA literature and, in fact, these labels are sometimes incorrectly regarded as genres by the academic sphere, not to mention the general public: a YA novel can be historical fiction, a fantasy or non-fiction, just like adult books, and they should be reviewed accordingly.

As for the label “junior books,” this is an out-of-day term to refer to young adult literature. According to Michael Cart, the name “survived as a rather patronizing descriptor of adolescent fiction for decades” (1996, 17). Its adoption was linked to the fact that no other designation was available, since “it was not until 1966 that the term ‘Young Adult’ was finally used in connection with the ALA’s Best Book list” (Cart 1996, 17), as commented above.

The conclusion we may draw from this overview of the terms used to refer to this category is that it is difficult to be precise when talking about YA literature. In Young Adult Literature in the Twenty-First Century, Cole believes that “the best definition an expert in the young adult literature field can give is ‘I know it when I see it’” (2008, 50), a statement that has often been used with definitions of genres such as science fiction and fantasy (to be discussed in Chapter 2). The problem with this loose attempt of definition, however, is that every publisher
Strategies of Cross-dressing and Gender-b(l)ending

(and every author and reader) has a different conception of what a YA novel should be. This is one of the reasons why YA literature is so heterogeneous.

In such an ample body of works it seems almost impossible to find common characteristics that could help to describe or define the category from a literary point of view without relying on the target reader coveted by publishers. For example, there is a tendency to think that the main point of convergence in YA literature is that all narratives have a young protagonist, but this is not the case: particularly in fantasy, non-human (and even non-antropomorphic) creatures that may have lived for centuries come to the forefront. Moreover, this generalization has led to a wrong categorization of stories featuring adolescent protagonists but that cannot be considered as YA literature. In other words, searching for a set of common characteristics is problematic: after all, we are not before a genre, but rather a different kind of label under which we pin down stories as different as romances, adventures, retellings, memoirs, and even poetry or essays.

In order to pigeonhole such a large niche of the market, publishers and independent writers have added other categories to the existent YA one, creating such labels as “middle grade” and “new adult.” These divisions are supposed to answer to the different cognitive necessities young adults have as they grow and their brain develops (Thomson 1996, Sargent 2015). Thus, middle-grade literature (targeted to a readership of 8-12 year-olds) tends to have less psychological inside of the characters and a more naïve atmosphere. Jacinta Yanders (2014) explains that “it doesn’t seem to be given much attention outside of education-oriented circles” (11), and narratives from this group are often shelved together with children’s literature and, less frequently, with YA fiction. On the other extreme, far apart from middle graders and gapping the void between YA and adult literature, we find a new category that has been named “new adult” (NA). The label was coined by St. Martin's Press in 2009 (Strickland 2015) and it targeted an

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11 There are multiple examples of miscategorization, both in classic (fiction and non-fiction) works of literature and in contemporary works. For instance, J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye or Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird have been adopted by YA culture, and the same has happened with non-fiction narratives such as Anne Frank’s The Diary of a Young Girl. Contemporary titles that have been included as YA literature include Markus Zusak’s The Book Thief, which was conceived and first published as an adult novel in Australia but reassigned by American publishers as YA fiction. So as to refer to these texts which are not conceived (written or marketed) for young adults but that are largely read by them and adopted as part of their shared culture, YALSA introduced the term “novel for young adults.”
audience from 18 years old to roughly 25. NA novels (since they are texts in the novel format most of the time) tell stories with concerns about “the challenges and uncertainties of leaving home and living independently for the first time” (Williams 2014). It usually contains topics related to romantic/love relationships, including more explicit sex scenes that those allowed by publishers in YA fiction. Many voices have risen to question the necessity of this last type of fiction and there seems to be a relation between the emergence of these new novels with the attempts of publishing houses to appeal to a wider audience, in emulation of what some successful YA texts such as the Harry Potter novels12 have achieved (Yanders 2014, 3). However, no NA publication has been really successful at such levels, and Yanders critically comments on the (in)dispensability of the label, since if “the goal really is to make the works more accessible to everyone, why create another semi-impenetrable category that further seems to section off the works from everybody else?” (2014, 3-4). Moreover, due to the frequent inclusion of topics such as violence, sex, and drugs in YA literature, the limits between it and NA seem to blur, and publishers usually differentiate them by the age of the protagonists, a problematic characteristic that may be irrelevant to the subjects approached within the text.

The limits of YA literature have also been challenged by the so-called “crossover” texts, which interrogate the relation between this type of literature and the one marketed for adults. Crossovers can be defined as those works of fiction that appeal to all ages. Many of them have been published as YA novels and have won over the interest of grownups as well. Nonetheless, the label “crossover” undervalues YA assuming that it cannot, per se, appeal an adult reader, while it has been shown in recent studies that this is completely false. In September 2012 statistics revealed that more than half the buyers of this type of literature (a 55%) were, in fact, older than 18. According to this study, “the largest segment aged 30 to 44, a group that alone accounted for 28% of YA sales. And adults aren’t just purchasing for others — when asked about the intended

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12 I have chosen to categorize Harry Potter as a YA text, contrary to the general opinion, because although its first installment could be considered as children's literature, the evolution of the character throughout the series and the increasingly dark atmosphere from the fourth novel onwards make it more adequate for older readers.
recipient, they report that 78% of the time they are purchasing books for their own reading” (Publishers Weekly 2012; emphasis added).

It is my view, then, that labels such as “crossover” do not benefit YA narratives, even when people publicly acknowledge reading them and praise them. Instead, they diminish their merits: only a few works receive the “crossover” label, minimizing the importance of other narratives that could be enjoyed by the young and the adult alike. Furthermore, as Yanders points out, the difference between YA and adult literature is not as noticeable as it was when the former was first established:

Some have noted that less and less today separates YA texts from those written for “adults.” All the same genres are represented, and while in the past YA books may have been lighter fare, YA works now depict a wide range of problems faced by teenagers and adults alike. Perhaps because of this breadth of subject matter . . . the actual audience of YA is more expansive than ever. (2014, 15)13

After having surveyed all these variants of the concept of YA literature, it seems that a conclusion cannot be reached. There is no simple way to define a term that continues to evolve every day. This logical resistance to definition springs from the fact that the notion it conveys is predisposed to historical and cultural changes. And since our societies are moving faster than ever, there is no doubt that the label would remain, at least for the moment, without a satisfactory description.

Despite the difficulty, however, a definition needs to be provided for the purpose of this dissertation, in order to delimit the corpus to be analyzed. Consequently, to my purposes, I consider that YA literature is targeted to an audience of twelve year olds onwards. Although it has an appeal to adolescents due the style of the narratives, it does not exclude an adult readership, since the topics it tackles are widely shared, such as growing up, the necessity of finding a

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13 There are many books that bring forwards topics and situations that attract both young adults and adults and which, in fact, discuss issues that were taboo in YA literature some decades ago. Famous examples would include Philip Pullman’s trilogy His Dark Materials (1995-2000) which was on the spotlight for its strong criticism against religion, or Louise O’Neill’s novel Asking for It, in which issues regarding rape culture and the social and political situation of rape victims is openly discussed.
place in society, and developing an identity while fighting for the power to control one’s life.

1.2. History of YA literature and current situation

If we cannot agree upon a definition for YA literature, how can we trace its history? Which is its starting point and which the main events that led to the construction of YA narratives as we know them nowadays?

Its point of departure has also led to disagreements among experts in multiple occasions, as it has already been hinted. I have already mentioned that there was a tendency to believe that YA literature starts in the nineteenth century with narratives such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* or the texts of Robert Louis Stevenson, but many scholars have stated that they can only be considered predecesors, as we cannot really talk about the emergence of young adulthood until the twentieth century. Cart, for example, considers that “it would not be until the 1930s—some would say the forties—that a new *type* of book began to emerge, one published (though not always consciously written) for young adults” (Cart 1996, 13; emphasis on the original). Caroline Hunt, on the other hand, pushes the dates ahead and asserts that nobody “seriously suggests that young adult literature as a separate category begins before World War II (Seventeenth Summer\(^\text{14}\)) or, alternatively, the late 1960s (The Outsiders\(^\text{15}\))” (1996, 5). I find it convenient to follow this claim that it was not until the Second World War that we can start to think about a literature consciously written for and about young adults as such.

Most critics will agree with Hunt’s assertion that Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* helped to the establishment of the category. Published in 1942, the novel was neither written nor published with young adults in mind, but it was soon embraced by them. This led to the introduction by editors of the label “junior book” (as explained in section 1.1), a term that nonetheless Nilsen and Donelson have dated from almost a decade before, with the publication of Rose Wilder Lane’s *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933). Lane’s narrative had been

\(^{14}\) By Maureen Daly (1942).

\(^{15}\) By S[usan].E[loise]. Hinton (1967).
supposedly marketed by Green Longmans “as the first of their series of ‘Junior Books,’ as they termed them” (Nilsen and Donelson 2009, 58). Whatever the starting point of the label was, anyway, it seems that after this first contact with the new label, “[t]he development of publishing house divisions to handle books lying in limbo between children’s and adult books grew” (Nilsen and Donelson 2009, 59).

As it is often the case when a particular topic or narrative mode is successful, imitators abounded after the publication of Seventeenth Summer. With the affluence of new writers who were trying to take their own share of the new market, contemporary romance became very popular in the United States during the forties and fifties among publishers and readers, and it has remained popular since then, as YA romance is still being published and largely consumed. The contents of these novels, however, have changed to become more daring and open to certain subjects such as sex and sexuality, among others, as will be discussed further on.

The consolidation of the genre was achieved through two important touchstones: on the one hand, the already mentioned creation of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association, YALSA, in 1957; on the other hand, critics started to analyze the phenomenon behind this new type of literature, presenting their first insights on these literary products. In general terms, the romance of the forties and fifties offered a glance into a decaffeinated, middle-class U.S. youth, with writers that inscribed moral fables in their texts for the benefit of the younger generations. They were trying to educate American teenagers while protecting them from controversial subjects that were often censured or completely banned from high schools and libraries: “we particularly don’t – or didn’t then – like books that reveal the bleak and sometimes sordid side of the world to young readers” (Ridge 2011). In contrast, this tendency towards didacticism was not cherished in other English-speaking countries and remained as an isolated phenomenon in the United States: “[t]hough in Britain since the mid-1950s many books have been written with older children or teenagers in mind, there has not been the same concentration of adolescence itself as subject-
matter, nor the same shrill tone of voice in writing about it” (Carpenter and Prichard 1999, 519).

The mid-century’s narratives gave way to a new generation of writers and ideas in the sixties and seventies that tried to problematize and challenge previous texts. Authors started to portray what they thought were “real” adolescent problems, with a wide variety of characters from other social and cultural realities, including immigrants and characters from lower classes. However, the texts were still protagonized by a vast majority of middle-class heterosexual white characters. Most of these protagonists were also male, even in narratives of female authorship, as is the case in S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*. This preference for a male lead seems to have its origins in the conventional wisdom that “males will not read books with female protagonists but that females will read about male characters and themes” (Vandergrift 1993, 26). This trend is emphasized by the fact that academic curricula widely focus on Eurocentric male canons, forcing girls to identify with male main characters in required texts (Vandergift 1996). This discussion regarding the androcentric stance of (YA) literature is still an ongoing issue that worries educators, theorists and writers. Thus, Kay Vandergrift (1993) proposes that the feminist research agenda should focus on dismantling this perception. YA feminist writers such as Shannon Hale have claimed the necessity to break stereotypes of women’s stories being for girls and the necessity that boys learn to relate and sympathize with female characters (Hale 2015). This segmented perspective inside YA narratives was even more noticeable in the mid-twentieth century by the messages of rejection towards any deviant behavior, which was to be punished by the author before the closing of the narrative.

In this sense, the sixties meant, if not “a full-blown eruption of realism, a transition from a literature that had traditionally offered a head-in-the-sand approach to one that offered a more clear-eyed and less flinching look at the often unpleasant realities of the lives of adolescent Americans” (Cart 1996, 62). This was also the time when taboos such as homosexuality or the possible consequences of sex during adolescence started to be written about (too often in a condemnatory tone).
Cart considers that the success of these realistic, over-dramatic books is due to the fact that “kids do overstate their emotional life; for them the possibility of tragedy exists in everything” (1996, 61). The statement is certainly patronizing, and even when it is undeniable that adolescence may be an emotionally turbulent stage, texts in which feelings of any kind are taken to the extremes are enjoyed by adults as well. In fact, the most successful contemporary fiction has exploited this taste for melodrama and extreme violence.

This trend of realism and drama brought to the forefront in the sixties the so-called “problem novel”, in which protagonists had to face struggles that came into their lives by surprise. This subgenre still tended to include a didactic or moralistic tone, charged with the ideology of their authors in not-too-subtle ways. Topics such as adolescent pregnancy, suicide, or parents’ divorces grew popular among writers and readers, just as they started to be discussed in the public scene. Some of these topics are still being talked about, and some of the views held in those days (condemnation of abortion or of single-parent families) are still being defended by some sectors of society.

Despite the success of the problem novel, the seventies, and not the sixties, are generally considered by experts (Cart 1996) as the golden age of YA fiction, although it has to be taken into account that the market after the turn of the century is yet to be studied and analyzed in depth. Works from the seventies are especially interesting from the scholarly point of view because they dealt with new topics that had been overlooked until that moment, such as lesbianism and drug abuse. Judy Blume’s popular Forever (1975), for instance, deals plainly with the experience of sex by adolescents. Controversial and banned from many libraries, its most remarkable achievement is its detachment from the cautionary tales full of moralistic opinions that had been filling the market until that moment. In this way, authors such as Blume herself or Robert Cormier (well-known for his 1974 novel The Chocolate Wars) paved the way to make people question and problematize conventional views on adolescence, education, sexuality, and gender.

Although realist narratives were particularly successful, there was also a space in the market for YA fantasy and science fiction, to which neither Cart
(1996) nor Nilsen and Donelson (2009) pay due attention in their histories. In the United States, in the wake of J.R.R. Tolkien’s success, Ursula Le Guin, actively publishing in the seventies, was one of the most important figures in writing stories for children, adults, and young adults. Moreover, both her literary and academic writings continue to be highly popular for their outstanding quality. She was one among others that opened the space for fantasy in the YA section of libraries and bookshops, and also allowed the success of later authors such as the British Philip Pullman, whose trilogy *His Dark Materials* contributed to the critical recognition of the YA fantasy literature. The last installment of his series, *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), was “the first children’s novel to be on the Booker Prize longlist” (Pender 2013)\(^\text{16}\). Science fiction, on the other hand, was not as successful among the readers of YA fiction, at least in comparison with fantasy, as Farah Mendlesohn has pointed out (2004).

After the Golden Age of the seventies, the eighties are often considered a step backwards in the development of YA literature, due partially to the massive publication of the paperback romance, a tendency that had already begun back in the mid-1960s and “had become a part of young adults’ lives” (Nilsen and Donelson 2009, 61). While fiercely criticized for their low literary quality, paperbacks (cheaper to produce by the publishing houses and therefore more affordable for the reader) “offered what readers have always, not unreasonably, wanted: escape from life’s cares and woes” (Cart 1996, 100). Moreover, they were likely to be adapted into audio-visual material (television series or films), as in the case of, among others, Francine Pascal’s series Sweet Valley High (1983-2003), later turned into a television series (1994-1997); or Ann M. Martin’s The Baby-Sitters Club (1986-2000), which had both a television series (1990) and a film (1995).

Despite such criticism towards the low literary quality of bestsellers, the eighties also offered novels with serious and progressive content. The American youth started to show their concern with global problems and authors began to

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\(^{16}\) Though it has been considered a children’s novel, the label seems to be wrongly used: the deep political message and the criticism to powerful institutions over which the trilogy is built could hardly be understood by children. The assignation of this label could also be interpreted as a rejection by some literary sectors to acknowledge YA literature as a category in its own right, as I have already mentioned in the previous section.
Strategies of Cross-dressing and Gender-b(l)ending

write about them, presenting different points of view and creating moral dilemmas for the reader to think about. The nineties were especially concerned with challenging previous narratives farther away. Consequently, there is a wider set of topics that were addressed, such as discrimination and belonging. Moreover, the traditional middle-class white heterosexual (generally male) protagonist began to be displaced by characters that fell outside the traits associated with YA fiction’s lead, such as people of color, disabled teenagers, queer individuals, etc. This attention to diversity “encourages young people to look sympathetically at those who have been marginalized or portrayed negatively” (Vandergrift 1996, 28) and has been welcomed by feminist scholars such as Victoria Flanagan (2008), Angela Hubler (2000), or Beth Younger (2009).

In general, the nineties were a period of lights and shadows. On the one hand, the decade started with the news of decreasing sales of YA literature, and many saw this falling in the numbers of readers as a foreshadowing of the future situation in the market (Cart 1996, 161). The quick spread of new technologies such as computers and the arrival of the Internet, together with the idea that children and adolescents preferred television and videogames to books (Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, and Short 2011) led editors to think that this type of literature was about to disappear.

This decline of YA literature was accompanied by the fact that, before the nineties, it was a more localized phenomenon: young adults from different countries did not share cultural or literary referents as widely as they do in the Internet era, a fact that threatened the survival of this type of literature (Cart 1996, 161). Furthermore, books did not appeal to teenagers in the same way that the audio-visual media did. Consequently, the market of the nineties tried to change the target towards younger readers and publishers focused their efforts on middle-grade students, who were more likely to read —forced by the school curricula—and enjoy both realistic and speculative fiction.

It was undeniable, then, that a transformation was needed if YA literature were to survive and, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, a series of circumstances changed the way in which this type of literature was being
consumed. Apart from the globalization of the book market, which made possible a new, shared experience by readers all over the world, new ways of publishing, commenting, and marketing fiction and non-fiction were about to be created. Book Fairs (and, more specialized, YA literature conventions) and international book tours allow writers to meet some of their readers. Apart from the creation of multinational publishing houses, it is remarkable the appearance of electronic commerce platforms (such as Amazon or Book Depository) that allow the distribution of literary works otherwise unavailable.

The accessibility of e-books is also helping to the growth of an international market, due to their immediate availability in any chosen electronic device provided with an Internet connection. The electronic format, in fact, has become so popular that some people regard it as a threat to physical books. This argument can be backed by statistics that show the growing number of electronic titles, which increased in more than a 3000% from 2002 to 2012. In the case of YA literature, the sales of fiction titles in electronic format ascended in a 117% in one year (from 2011 to 2012), in contrast with the adult fiction titles, which were able to rise just in a 42% (figure 1).

![Figure 1: An analysis of the growing YA book market in the United States (Whitford and Vineyard 2013).](image)

E-books and online stores have also made possible the growing numbers of self-published authors: writers are now able to market their own work, setting
lower prices and sharing their stories without having to resort to the traditional publication process.

If new ways of distribution and alterations in the market are important, so is the change that transformed YA fiction at its core, and which is yet to be thoroughly analyzed: the influence of fantasy and science fiction in the YA literary sphere. Although I have already mentioned some names that have brought the YA panorama to the spotlight, attracting critical attention, it was not until J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series appeared that YA literature became a real economic and cultural success. This saga’s accomplishments had never been seen before among YA novels: the last book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, not only had “a record-breaking first print-run of 12 million copies in the USA”, but it also sold “8.3 million copies in the first 24 hours making it the fastest selling book in history” (Scholastic n.d.). The series has been “distributed in over 200 territories, [it has been] translated into 68 languages and [has] sold over 400 million copies worldwide” (Scholastic n.d.), not to talk about the excellent reception of its filmic and video-game adaptations and the fact that it was able to catch the attention of innumerable critics and academics. In the words of Cindy Lou Daniels, these books “opened up a whole new arena of respectable scholarly debate” (2006, 79).

This does not mean that YA literature stopped being undervalued by the academia, but some scholars started to realize that literary analysis and criticism should focus on this type of literature too and explore the different possibilities it offers, as it “awaits an opportunity to not only expand our knowledge of the young adult genre, but also to expand our knowledge of literature as a whole and to challenge the restrictions of the traditional canon” (Daniels 2006, 81). Other critics have remarked that real artists “try to perceive human life as deeply and clearly as they can every time they tell a story, and every time they tell a story they try to present their perceptions in the best—the most vivid—prose they can craft” (Davis 1997, 7) and therefore all their narratives, regardless of their target audience, should be considered in the same way. Moreover, the wide appeal of YA literature has been remarked extensively, as it does not focus on adolescent issues only, but “speak[s] to the human condition” (Daniels 2006, 79).
This new recognition of YA fiction by some academic sectors goes hand in hand with the recognition that YA literature received when the *New York Times Book Review* announced in July 2000 a restructuring of its bestseller list (Fitzsimmons 2012, 78). The increasing appearance of Rowling’s YA novels on the general fiction list was translated into a demand for a children’s book list, so as to separate readings for younger audiences from adult fiction and non-fiction. Finally, the *New York Times* decided to change the different categories in the children’s bestseller list so as to differentiate between middle-grade fiction and YA fiction in August 2015 (Gilmore 2015).

From the publication of the first Harry Potter novels onwards, many writers have tried to imitate Rowling and create stories that could catch the attention of readers of different ages simultaneously. Publishers took advantage of the new trend too, and this situation was translated into a rise in the amount of available fantasy novels, including the ones in this Ph.D. thesis’ corpus (except for Tamora Pierce’s series, which foreran Rowling’s for almost a decade). Science fiction writers also enjoyed the new readers’ crave for speculative fiction, which translated into a trend of dystopian novels such as Suzanne Collins’ trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) or Veronica Roth’s series *Divergent* (2011-2014), both globally successful. The raise of these genres, however, does not mean that realism abandoned the market: it just allowed YA literature to be as diverse as adult literature was, with publishers, bookshops, libraries, and readers paying attention to a wider variety of genres.

But the ones that were really able to change the situation of YA novels and brought scholarly attention to them were the readers. The establishment of the Internet as a new means of communication allowed people to make their opinions visible and to create discussion groups. The fandom, as the fans of a particular work of fiction (books, TV series, games, etc.) are called, and its own vocabulary had been well-known in the circles of fantasy and science fiction for decades. Words such as “fanfic” (stories written by fans featuring fictional worlds or characters created by another author), “fanart” (drawings and illustrations made by fans), and RPG (role playing games) are now usual in social media. We can even find platforms devoted to the publication of fanfics, such as Fanfiction.net.
Despite the questionable legality\(^{17}\) that surrounds these stories written by and for fans, they are really popular, and scholars have focused on them in some recent studies such as Anne Elizabeth Jamison’s *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World* (2013).

An in-depth analysis regarding the way in which the Internet is changing our ways of reading and looking at literature could be enlightening, but it should suffice to mention how YA fiction has been boosted by new intermediaries, such as the activity of literary blogs\(^{18}\), and social platforms for readers (for instance, Goodreads). Furthermore, both publishers and writers use social media to design advertisement campaigns. As Eleanor Pender points out, “[s]preading the word on Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and other online communities fuels debate and discussion” (2013), but it also publicizes narratives in an indirect though effective way.

To the rise of the Internet and the appearance of new platforms of communication among readers, the interest of Hollywood in YA literature should be added. Novels have always been an endless source of ideas for film scripts, television series, and plays, but the number of YA novels adapted to cinematographic products on average per year has been increasing recently (figure 2).

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\(^{17}\) Fanfictions are stories created by fans that take as a point of departure the world and/or the characters of a fictional work (which could be a novel, a TV series, a film, etc.). Thus, fanfiction’s writers are generally violating copyright laws that protect the original material from any derivative work (Kelly 2010).

\(^{18}\) During recent years, many amateur reviewers have opened their blogs, and we can find people who read and rate any kind of books, both in blogs and videos in Youtube. For this reason, online directories with literary blogs have been created, in many cases taken into account the type of literature they choose to review. An example can be found in Yabookblogdirectory (online).
Chapter 1: Young Adult literature

The new ways of advertisement, the new distribution and publishing methods and the relation between reader and writer have led to the increasing popularity of YA literature. As commented above, during the last decades there has been an increasing quantity of adults buying YA novels for themselves in the United States (figure 1). It has been estimated that in 2014, the rise in the sales of children’s and YA literature in that country was a 20.8 percent more than the year before (1.9 billion dollars). This data (figure 3) is only a sample of the attention this type of literature has been able to attract since the turn of the century, and it shows a movement from the margins of cultural acknowledgement to the center, even though prejudices against it are still being fought.

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<td>TOTAL TRADE*</td>
<td>$7,184.3</td>
<td>$6,919.7</td>
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<td>Adult Fiction/Non-Fiction</td>
<td>$4,743.9</td>
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<td>Children’s/Young Adult</td>
<td>$1,886.7</td>
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<td>$2,556.5</td>
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<td>Total Trade Paperback</td>
<td>$2,111.7</td>
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*Total Trade includes all formats in Adult Fiction/Non-Fiction, Children's/Young Adult and Religious Presses.

Figure 3: Reports of the Association of American Publishers for the book market in the United States during the years 2013 and 2014 (Hofelder 2015).

The growth of YA literature’s sales and its recognition goes hand in hand with an updating in the topics that worry teenagers today. Taboos are no longer avoided, and sex, violence, death, etc. are included in stories as a normal part of teenagers’ lives. YA literature has also turned into a tool to reflect upon questions of gender, feminism, and the body, as shown in the analyses scholars are producing (Vandergrift 1993, 1996; Younger 2009) and in the novels that shape the corpus of this dissertation. These questions are frequently treated in different, non-traditional ways too, defying the conventions established in previous decades,
like lineal narration or happy, closed endings (DeLuca 1975). This turn to a more unconventional style may also be the reason why there is a change in the way this type of literature is seen by the literary and critical communities, as the literary value of YA novels, as I have already commented, has started to be recognized. One of the recent triumphs for this type of literature is the insertion of YA titles in high-school curricula, side by side with canonical texts in English. Rose Flahive (2014) has pointed out the necessity of high-school education to include contemporary YA readings, since they provide representations for all the students but are also a good tool for acquiring critical thought and opening debate in the classroom:

[W]hen a student reads a YA novel or a fantasy novel, they can enter worlds that feature and focus on characters who feel on the outskirts of society for the same reasons a student might: differences ranging from race, religion, sex, gender identity, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, to name a few. . . . By including YA and fantasy novels into our English curriculum, we can offer students these voices and thus students’ own literary mirrors that will be far more engaging to them as a good read. (274)

The normalization of this type of literature in the classroom and its appreciation as a pedagogical instrument constitutes an enormous step, together with the acceptance of its value by scholars and readers alike. Since, as it has been discussed during this section, major changes in communication are altering the YA literary scenery as well, it does not seem strange to find a revaluation of certain stories by both critics and readers alike. In general, the history of YA literature tells us how it has been developing and the way it was able to survive to changes in young adults’ life style, widening their concerns to appeal to all kinds of audiences.

All the changes acknowledged in these pages have revealed how YA fiction has been brought to the spotlight, but also all the possibilities for the future that this literary sector has to offer, as it changes continually to adapt itself to new circumstances. In general, YA fiction has a lot to offer, and many authors, as history has revealed, are always ready to face the problems and challenges that young adults may throw into their way.
Chapter 2. Fantasy and science fiction: towards a definition

In literature, certain genres are considered by the academic opinion to have less quality than others. This belief can be seen in how critics and scholars differentiate between highbrow and lowbrow literature: while the former is acclaimed for its literary value, the latter is dismissed as mass-market literature. Ironically enough, this so-called lowbrow fiction is widely sold, read, and enjoyed (Fitzsimmons 2012, 81), even when its messages and values are frowned upon by educators, academics, and certain sectors of society. I have already pointed at this contrast when talking about YA fiction, which has been frequently discarded educationally for its apparently low literary quality (see section 1.2), while adult (or “general”) literature was supposed to be worthier of attention and study. In the same line, certain genres have acquired more respect from scholars and critics than others. Thus, while realism has been “regarded as a marker of a ‘good’ novel” (James 2009, 75), any genre departing from reality, as it happens with fantasy or science fiction, has been considered to be “a minor form, suitable for children or as light reading for adults, but not really ‘literature,’ not really serious” (Scholes and Rabkin 1977, 5). Consequently, they have undergone the prejudice of being described as shallow, escapist, childish narratives. These ideas have biased the way in which they are looked at by the general public. Other genres such as romance and mystery have also been included in this category, since they have frequently been seen as formula (sub)literature, a type of narration in which authors follow a series of steps to write their stories, so that, in essence, a whole genre can be summarized by sharing a structure. All these texts have often been overlooked by critics, academics, and “erudite” readers as well. Nonetheless, these genres are widely read, and their rejection among certain circles does not mirror their popularity among the general readership. Thus, it should not surprise anybody that the romance section of the book market, for example, manages to generate about one billion dollars in sales every year just in the United States (RWA n.d.), while mystery and detective stories represented in 2014 a 10% of the sales in the e-book market, only in second position after romance (Tappuni 2015).
In recent years, however, there has been a shift in the academic attention towards genres that depart from the premises of realism. Thus, during the last decades we have witnessed the publication of academic texts dealing with fantasy and science fiction from a less prejudiced point of view, enhancing the history, quality, and possibilities of these two formerly neglected genres (Wolfe 1986; Attebery 1992 and 2004; James and Mendlesohn 2003 and 2013; Mendlesohn and James 2009).

In spite of their differences, science fiction and fantasy have gone a long way hand in hand and that is why, in this dissertation, I use the term “speculative fiction” as a label to encompass both science fiction and fantasy at certain points in which I find it necessary to remark their similarities rather than their points of deviation.¹⁹

Fantasy and science fiction, then, share part of their history and the same prejudices have been held against both of them, undermining their reputation throughout history. Their departure from reality and the construction of (speculative) worlds has led readers to think that there is no actual link between these genres and past and contemporary events. Erroneously, many people tend to believe that realistic fiction (which uses as a point of departure our world but does not have to be inspired by any real incident) depicts actual problems and situations. This misconception has been associated to the idea that realism and speculation are contraries, as Brian Attebery remarks in Strategies of Fantasy (1992):

> Once the realistic novel was invented, it claimed kinship to history and denied its ties to romance. Hence, the gulf opened between histories true or feigned, on the one hand, and fantasies, on the other. Accordingly, the more history-like a novel seemed, the more highly it was regarded, and the less incentive writers had to exploit the romance-like potential of the form. (x)

Contrary to such prejudices, fantasy and science fiction do convey reality, although they do it in different ways, according to the strategies of each genre.

¹⁹ Regardless of my decision, “speculative fiction” is a term that remains fluid in its definition and which many scholars prefer not to use at all. For more information regarding the different uses and meanings of this concept, see Collins n.d., Lilly 2002, and Nicholls and Landford 2015.
Attebery believes that the difference between the two relies on the fact that “[s]cience fiction has a lot to say about the universe outside ourselves; fantasy about the inner one” (1992, 117). But whatever the way they portray our world (and despite the fact that Attebery’s affirmation is a generalization that may be transgressed by many narratives), we must accept that they generally attempt to show the authors’ view about the societies they live in. For example, utopias and dystopias deal mainly with political ideas; futuristic stories involving technology can warn about the dangers of letting machinery control our lives; alternative histories (as is the case of Westerfeld’s trilogy, Leviathan) are able to show the reader the fragility of our present and the construction of time (see section 1 in Chapter 5 below). In the same way, the construction of alternative universes in speculative fiction may question the social and cultural conventions related to sex, gender, language, or beliefs. Social and cultural critiques are offered within these texts, reflecting our world even among inexistente artifacts and magic, as Haraway has stated by writing that “the boundary between science fiction [and, I would add, fantasy] and social reality is an optical illusion” (Haraway 2004, 8).

Rosemary Jackson sees this denial over the quality of fantasy literature as a way to silence otherness and difference:

The dismissal of the fantastic to the margins of literary culture is in itself an ideologically significant gesture, one which is not dissimilar to culture’s silencing of unreason. As an ‘art’ of unreason . . . , fantasy has persistently been silenced, or re-written, in transcendental rather than transgressive terms. . . . Otherness is transmuted into idealism by romance writers and is muted, made silent and invisible by ‘realistic’ works. (1995, 173)

Jackson’s focus on the unreason (and otherness) brings to the forefront questions of gender, as this term has been frequently associated with femininity in the system of binaries set by the patriarchal imaginary. This pernicious system associates certain characteristics to male and female beings, not only creating prejudices but also backing a hierarchical opposition in which “one term is more privileged, accorded more status, more power, and more desirability than the other” (Robbins 2000, 169). These binary sets of characteristics (activity/passivity, culture/nature, subject/object, etc.), associated to the masculine
or feminine gender respectively, privilege men and disempower women, and should therefore be challenged and overcome from our social constructs. Fantasy and science fiction are transgressive genres that, departing from history and its possibilities, have the potential to transgress these binaries and create worlds and societies in which the gender roles and their destructive values can be rewritten. Moreover, by considering these types of narratives unreasonable, fantasy and science fiction have been associated with women and therefore undervalued, minimizing their impact as a tool of expansion for political and social ideologies (McDowell 2014; Hines 2015).

The lower status given to science fiction and fantasy is also connected to their cultural and publishing circumstances. Apart from being published massively in paperbacks, a book format that has been widely criticized as pertaining to a lower form of literature (see section 2 in the previous chapter), fantasy and science-fiction texts were mostly published in pulp magazines, which were also marginal forms of literature (Attebery 2014, 95). And although the alleged low quality of these writings has been refuted by authors, publishers, and even scholars, prejudices have survived. Attebery has mentioned that these preconceptions arose due to the massive presence of “tales of mystery and marvel [in] pulp magazines, dime novels, children’s books, and the movies” (2014, 95), which were considered unimportant or low-quality media: this is the reason why they “have been labeled nonliterature, paraliterature, even subliterature” (2014, 95).

Due to their close connection to the fairy-tale tradition, fantasy and science fiction have been considered childish. Although easily refutable, this stereotype has rooted deeply in our society because of the visual adaptations U.S. audiences have grown up with, especially those by the Disney factory. In them, gorish details, such as the stepsisters’ cutting off parts of their own feet in “Cinderella” (as it happened in the Grimm brothers’ version) or the Red Riding Hood being eaten by the wolf (as in Perrault’s “The Little Red Riding Hood”), for instance, were conveniently censored in order to provide supposedly innocent, harmless readings. This tradition of watering down the darker aspects of life is still alive in

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20 While the connection between fairy tales and fantasy literature is of common knowledge, some scholars have also remarked the link between science fiction and classical fairy tales as the base over which this genre has been built (Scholes and Rabkin 1977).
contemporary narratives designed for children, but YA and adult fiction have shown that they do not avoid including highly social and political content. Violence and sex are also common in these narratives, even in novels targeted at young adults.\footnote{Pierce’s quartet The Song of the Lioness is an example of this: the four books contain battles and violent deaths, and they offer an inside into the sexual decisions of Alanna, the main character. These topics will be discussed in detail in the second part of this dissertation, even though some issues have already been hinted in Chapter 1, when explaining the current situation of YA literature (section 2).}

One of the problems that arise from trying to explain fantasy and science fiction and to recognize their similarities and points of divergence is the fact that there is a myriad of definitions, with multiple scopes and even more perspectives. This situation makes the task of differentiating these genres especially difficult, and that is why we can still find the concept of fantasy used when referring to science fiction, and even to horror (Wolfe 1986, 38). Many scholars do not risk to state what these terms mean to them, as they argue that these genres are still under development and, since new subgenres appear every now and then, “the redefinition of fantasy [and science fiction, as I will explain] is a constant process, driven by the intelligent engagement of writers with the changing world around them” (Martin 2009, 235). Other theorists have indicated that there is no possibility of including in a definition all the unlimited possibilities speculative fiction provides to writers, readers, and critics alike. In other words, they assert that all definitions we could think of are exclusive (Hume 1984, 8): “If we seek an absolute definition of fantasy we have to be content with the idea that fantasy is the author’s claim to fantasy, to the announcement that he or she is writing fantasy” (Plank 1985, 81). The same has been argued by Heather Urbanski (2007), who warns that “[s]uch a seemingly simple task as defining science fiction and/or fantasy frequently falls under the ‘I know it when I see it’ category” (7). This statement makes us conscious of the endless number of subgenres we can find inside any large category, as well as of the fact that more subgenres are still to appear in order to face the new challenges literature has to confront.

In other words, two different trends can be taken into account: the one which searches for a closed, restricted definition, and the one that leaves the
characterization of the genre open enough so as to include all the subgenres that may appear in the future.

2.1. Fantasy

In general terms, fantasy has been declared to be a genre in which the impossible is included or, at least, in which elements that cannot be explained by applying reason are inscribed (Wolfe 1986, 38). In spite of this being the prevailing description of fantasy, this position has revealed to be conflictive. Wolfe has pointed out that relying on the concept of the impossible “places too great an emphasis on reader response and not enough on structural or thematic characteristics” (1986, 38). His argument relies on the idea that “impossible” is a fluid term, and its conception may change from one culture (the reader’s culture) to another, and, of course, from time to time. Attebery prefers to define the impossible as a “violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law” (1992, 14), burdening the writer, and not the reader, with the task of deciding to which category the text should ascribe. Despite disagreements, academics have brought together the value of the impossible as “essential to fantasy” (Attebery 1992, 15), in spite of the fact that they do it without specifying who is the agent in charge of deciding what is to be considered as impossible. What they all seem to agree upon is that this idea of the impossible in fantasy has different levels or manifestations, which Attebery himself categorizes by degrees into “the improbable, the implausible, the highly unlikely, and the as-yet-nonexistent” (Attebery 1992, 15).

Another way of looking at fantasy relies on the genre as a depiction of the inner life of human beings. Philip Martin poses that “fantasy looks inward, not to rules of social or personal behavior but into our beliefs. In fantasy, wonder and wishes overcome knowledge and explanation. Belief rules over science” (Martin 2009, 22). He also declares that “[it] takes one giant step inward. It is rooted in inner beliefs and values, in a sense of wonder. Fantasy is about good and bad, right and wrong” (2009, 23). These comments on the definition of fantasy show

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22 The “as-yet-nonexistent” about which Attebery talks could be also associated with science fiction, as it can be deduced from section 2 below in this chapter.
not only a generally-agreed main characteristic of the genre, but place fantasy in direct opposition to science fiction (which is usually defined as a literature linked to the outside, to the society we live in). Nevertheless, this generalization should be dealt with carefully, as it does not seem to take into account the work fantasy writers do on world-building, which affects both to the suspension of disbelief (by helping the story to be “believable” or, at least, solid within the fantastic frame), and the way in which readers establish connections with their own reality. Authors know the importance of creating worlds that appeal to the reader, but also sceneries that are consistent and speak about our political or social situations, and magic does not make this connection disappear (see Cahill 2012), as the analysis of the selected novels in part 2 will reveal. Instead, they offer a critical view of a society not far from our own, in which women are marginalized from public spaces for being considered less capable than men, as well as a result of the establishment of patriarchal regimes (see Chapter 5). This tendency to offer social and cultural critiques is not excluded from other fantasy novels, and thus the concerns of the inner self are put in relation with the outer world, paying special attention to the ways in which we are shaped by external forces and conventions.

To avoid a strict, closed categorization that may stir disputes, Attebery has recently proposed a new way of conceiving genres that allows the limits between them to keep blurred. His solution is to establish descriptions relying neither on boundaries nor categories, but on resemblance “to a single core example or group of examples” denominated “fuzzy sets” (2014, 33). Attebery’s suggestion allows for flexibility in the qualities we ascribe to genres, widening the spectrum of fantasy (or any other genre we can think about) and giving space for the appearance of subgenres that have not been created yet. According to him,

the qualities of the category depend on the prototypes one chooses. One difference between these two ways of thinking about genres is that fuzzy sets involve not only resemblances but also degrees of membership. Instead of asking whether or not a story is science fiction (SF), one can say it is mostly SF, or marginally SF, or like SF in some respects. Allowing for partial membership in genre categories helps explain how genres can hybridize. (2014, 33; emphasis in the original)
Attebery also allows, by this way of working with narratives, the inclusion of texts that blend different characteristics traditionally attributed to other genres. In this sense, he does not seem as concerned about rising boundaries (as he did in his 1992 theoretical work, *Strategies of Fantasy*) as about destroying such limits, making evident that complex texts cannot be easily categorized. In the same way, by proposing this classification he also admits the possibility of genres changing and evolving with the societies that create them. In the case of fantasy, this view means the recognition of subgenres that did not exist or were not especially prominent a few decades ago. Among these, we can identify urban fantasies (fantasies set in an urban space), or steampunk fantasies (stories in which elements or aesthetics are inspired by the steam-powered machines of the Industrial Revolution), which can be either fantasy or science fiction (as is the case of Westerfeld’s Leviathan trilogy and Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*, both included in the literary corpus of this dissertation).

Departing from Attebery’s conception of fuzzy sets, Farah Mendlesohn has established a series of four (sometimes expanded to five) categories that depend on the relation between the supernatural and the real/fictional world. These modes are defined by the way in which the fantastic enters the text. . . . The four categories are the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusion and the liminal. In the portal-quest, the protagonist enters a new world; in the immersive, the protagonist is part of the fantastic world; in the intrusion, the fantastic breaks into the primary world (which might or might not be our own); and in the liminal, magic might or might not be happening. (Mendlesohn 2013, 2)

Although a fifth category mixing the four previous modes was included in her work *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008)\(^\text{23}\), the most interesting of these modes for the purpose of this dissertation is the immersive, since all the fantasy novels analyzed are part of this subdivision: this is to say, all the fantasy protagonists within the object of study belong to the fantasy world. This means that there is no

\(^{23}\) For more information on the modes of fantasy, see also Mendlesohn’s article “Towards a taxonomy of fantasy” (2005).
process of assimilation to a new world nor any doubt about the story being far from real. At the same time, the concept of the immersive brings about Hume’s idea of the “consensus reality,” in which the story “knowingly departs from a shared model of reality” and “allows us to account for cultural differences and historical changes in the boundary between the fantastic and the real without getting tangled in the thickets of epistemology” (Attebery 2014, 140-1). That is to say, by building fantasy worlds we are able to depict reality from a safe distance. This allows readers to gain a different perspective of the societies they live in and allows them to deconstruct and question constructions and ideas that have been taken for granted. That is precisely why Rosemary Jackson considers fantasy the literature of subversion, since “[f]antasy re-combines and inverts the real [even if] it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (1995, 20). Being impossible for fantasy to completely escape our world (contrary to the prejudices previously mentioned in the introduction to this chapter), it is therefore bound to revolve around and comment on problems and situations that resonate with authors and readers alike. Furthermore, by writing fantasy and science fiction, the author can avoid the “demands of realism in the contemporary or historical novel” (Merrick and Tuttle 2016), which put limits to the imagination and to the construction of societies and characters. It is logical, then, that these genres have “a potential recognized by the women writers drawn to it in the 1960s and 1970s” (Merrick and Tuttle 2016), and have since then become part of the political agenda of feminist writers in order to challenge assumptions and conventions related to the inequality between sexes, as I will explain in section 3.1.

The fact that fantasy seems to resist any closed categorization is clear, after all the proofs that have been laid. For the sake of our object of study, I will define fantasy here partially: my work is only concerned with novels of the immersive mode, in which a magical world is set up and the shero is familiarized with it from the beginning. All of the fictional spaces in which the fantasy novels of my corpus are set (Tortall, the Seven Kingdoms, and Antion) are places in which supernatural elements are incorporated as part of the lives of the main characters.
In a way, this is the most traditional type of fantasy, in the sense that it departs from our general conception of what it may be possible at the same time that creates an “unexisting” world without completely detaching it from our own experience. In other words, these writers’ new landscapes and societies “however new or strange, [are] linked to the real through an allegorical association, as an exemplification of a possibility to be avoided or embraced. The basic relation is a conceptual one, a linking through ideas and ideals” (Jackson 1995, 43). In the case of the analyzed texts, this basic relation is recognizable to any attentive reader, and it sustains the critique of patriarchal societies, in which women are left ostracized from power positions and have to fight to move from the margins of society into spots where they can be in charge of their own lives, even if that displacement means hiding their identities temporarily.

### 2.2. Science fiction

If defining fantasy is problematic, setting the boundaries of science fiction is not any easier, as no agreement has been reached among scholars. Even though many options have been proposed, none of them seems to enclose all the possibilities this mode has to offer.

At first glance, the term may seem unproblematic enough: science fiction is the narrative of science, the fictional account of what science could be. But science is normally associated with facts, while fiction builds over a “what if,” a possibility. Thus, as Margaret Atwood has pointed out in *In Other Worlds* (2011), one term seems to cancel the other:

> [Science fiction] brings together two terms you’d think would be mutually exclusive, since science . . . is supposed to concern itself with demonstrable facts, and fiction . . . denotes a thing that is invented. With science fiction, one term is often thought to cancel out the other. Thus such books may be judged as factual predictions, with the fiction part . . . rendering them useless for anyone who really wants to get a grip on, say, space travel or nanotechnology. (56)
In other words, the fictional part of the story normally overshadows the factual side of it, and science is left as a background detail, if not completely out of the text when it is only used as the base of the discourse, just trying to create a link between the reader’s present situation and a hypothetical construction of our world. Thus, it is important to be aware of the existence of at least two different categorizations of science fiction that have been widely used since the seventies (Stableford 2005, Nicholls 2015): “hard science fiction,” in which scientific and technological details become indispensable for the narrative to exist (or, at least, for the style of the narration); and “soft science fiction,” which emphasizes other aspects of the writing, such as a concern with human feelings (Nicholls 2011). Soft science fiction is normally considered less probable or realistic, because the storyline is not worried about being as logical or thorough in the construction of its world, and it puts the emphasis on the so-called “soft” sciences, those centered on human behavior, such as psychology, anthropology, or political sciences. Examples of soft science fiction may be found in contemporary YA dystopias, which are more engrossed in commenting upon political issues and the fight for power, focusing on the sociological level. Some scholars have used different labels to set these two strands apart, such as the term “speculative fiction” to refer to hard science fiction, as in the case of Atwood, who refers with this label to “things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (Atwood 2011, 6).

The heterogeneity of science fiction (just as it happened with fantasy) led many critics to believe in the fact that it is impossible to create a definition because it seems to be no way of putting boundaries on the label “science fiction” itself:

The difficulty with identifying science fiction—and proceeding from that to definition—is that science fiction isn’t just one thing. It has no recognizable action, . . . or recognizable milieu, . . . or recognizable relationship. . . . It is

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24 The term “hard science fiction” dates back to the 1950s, when P. Schuyler Miller used it in a 1957 review of a science fiction novel in the magazine *Astounding Science-Fiction* (1930-1963). As an analogy to this concept, and to designate a different type of stories, the idea of a soft science fiction appeared during the 1970s.

about the future—except when it is about the past or the present. It can incorporate all the other genres: one can have a science-fiction detective story, a science-fiction western, a science-fiction romance. . . . It is the literature of change, the literature of speculation, and more. And because it is the literature of change it is continually changing; if it remained constant, it would no longer be science fiction. (Gunn 2005a, x-xi)

Before Gunn, Scholes and Rabkin had already called attention to this problem in their history of science fiction, declaring that “[t]he designation science fiction means one thing to a literary critic and quite another to a publisher or bookseller” (1977, 97). They assumed that this was one of the main reasons why science fiction was (and continues to be) unable to be reduced to a definition that could please everybody. According to them, the different fees to authors depending on the genre they write have led to the denial of certain publications as being part of the science-fiction category. Such prejudices meant an on-going undervaluation of the genre, together with a disagreement over its characteristics, hindering the development of the genre and the associated terminology.

Other causes that may have led to the inability to reach a definition are believed to have been born in the theoretical bases that were established in order to study the genre:

On the one hand, concepts from traditional literary discourse often seem inadequate to describe the peculiar techniques and effects of the fantastic, while, on the other, terms coined specifically to describe such literature frequently appear eccentric or esoteric. Few branches of modern literary study have yielded as many neologisms, specialized definitions, attempts at identifying subgenres, and appropriations from other scholarly vocabularies as has the study of fantastic literature26. (Wolfe 1986, vii)

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26 The use of “fantastic literature” as a label may lead to confusion with “fantasy literature.” The first has frequently been used as a synonym for “speculative fiction” or, in general, to refer to any non-realistic narrative (as is the case in Wolfe’s quotation). In this dissertation, “fantastic literature” is used to refer only to texts in which the supernatural element is presented as ambiguous, and therefore I consider it a subgenre of fantasy. Examples of this type of literature can be found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, or Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland.
One of the recurrent features of the available definitions is that they put too much emphasis on the *science* part of the science-fiction label. They resist to take into account that the genre is not only concerned with the future and technological advances, but it is also about the past, about the power of history, and about humanity. An example of this trend may be found in Stableford’s *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Fiction*, which defines science fiction as a kind of fantasy that mimics the method of science in extrapolating rationally plausible consequences from empirically licensed premises. This method is particularly useful for the generation of hypothetical technologies and for constructing plausible images of the near future; consequently, almost all fantasies featuring imaginary machines or set in the future are generally reckoned to be sf, even if their claims to rational plausibility are derisory. (2005, 362)

Although Stableford does not assert that science fiction is familiar with the future and technology, he does not exemplify what other scenarios the genre can picture. However, his acknowledgement that science fiction uses reason and plausibility to create a world that does not completely mimic reality conveys science fiction’s true sense as, for example, it can be applied to past, present, and future. Science fiction is not only concerned with science itself, but with the study of possible outcomes to situations that are constructed on logical premises (Mendlesohn 2003, 4).

Stableford’s definition differentiates itself from others by mentioning that what really distinguishes science fiction from fantasy is not this look into the future or its concern with the outside and how it shapes the human existence, but its “rational plausibility.” Taking Barney Warf’s words, “science fiction differs from fantasy in that the former is obliged to conform to the known laws of nature” (2002, 20). This means that while in fantasy it is possible to awake the dead by saying a few words, or to avoid the rules of gravity, science fiction is (or should be) concerned with explaining the way in which we may overcome these problems in a “logical” manner, constrained by the workings of science and natural laws (Roberts 2002, 8; Gunn 2005b, 9). This distinction, however, does not remain free of confusion, as some fantasy narratives may pass as science
fiction, since their premises are logical and supernatural elements are used in a believable way, explained by a series of rules that we can relate to our knowledge of the world. In the same line, some works of science fiction may stretch the limits of what it is thought possible and challenge them in a way that make them look like fantasy (Scholes and Rabkin 1977, 170). Attebery's categorization (2014), which I have already used above when trying to define fantasy, would be a perfect way to overcome the line that separates genres. As proved above, the idea of a core of works that everybody agrees to be from a specific genre would help to categorize a corpus around it, according to their similarities. In this way, we could assort science fiction narratives in relation to their level of scientific specialization, or even to the degree of speculation going on in the story.

In spite of the difficulties to pigeonhole science fiction, then, there are still ways of delimiting the genre. For this dissertation, Stableford’s definition above turns out to give a well-thought and complete description: in science fiction, logical responses are given to “what if” situations. In the case of my object of study, the two science-fiction works included (the Leviathan trilogy and All Men of Genius) have a similar starting point: what if the application of steam-powered engines during the Industrial Revolution had gone a step further? If fantasy is the “literature of subversion,” as Rosemary Jackson affirms, then science fiction must be the literature of questioning our history and the possibilities of human technological, social, and cultural development, no matter if the narrative is set in the past, in the present, or in the future.

2.3. A short history of fantasy and science fiction

Fantasy and science fiction have shared a great deal of their history and development, achieving similar status for both scholars and the general readership. These points of concurrence are a consequence of the media they were published in, but also of the fact that writers have been taking their chances on both genres, especially until the 1950s, “the last period in which writers appear to write both science fiction and fantasy, without this being considered worthy of comment” (Mendleshon and James 2009, 61). As these two genres have converged at different points in time, their mutual influence is undeniable. Since
they developed in similar ways, and parallels between them can be easily drawn, trends and movements have been shared. Nowadays, both genres come together frequently, not only due to the development of subgenres in between, as it is science fantasy, but also due to their inclusion under the label of speculative fiction in general, which translates into sharing shelves in libraries and bookshops, and spaces in conventions.

It is not my aim to offer a comprehensive vision of these genres, as this is not a history of fantasy or science fiction, as it has been already offered in the Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction (2003), A Short History of Fantasy (2009) or Cambridge Companion to Fantasy (2013), all of them by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James; or in Scholes and Rabkin’s Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision (1977). Nevertheless, some events in the history of speculative fiction should be considered for the sake of this dissertation: I want to address the role of women inside fantasy and science fiction and the current situation and its relation to YA literature.

### 2.3.1. Speculative gender: women in speculative fiction

Although speculative fiction has been related to women throughout the centuries and no contribution should be diminished, one of the most important moments in its history was Mary Shelley’s publication of Frankenstein (1818), which has been pointed out by almost all critics as a before and after in the creation of fantasy and science fiction. The importance of Shelley’s novel is remarkable, and it has been analyzed from multiple perspectives, including feminist interpretations that take into consideration themes such as “maternity, reproduction, and the female body” (Yousef 2002, 199). Shelley explored the creation of life without the necessity of insemination and commented upon the dangers and the ethical issues of science, two strands that have been treated in science fiction throughout the twentieth century and are still being addressed by both male and female authors, most of the times in the form of cautionary tales about bioethics (Chan 2009). Shelley’s interest in philosophy and her critique of education “responds directly to eighteenth-century philosophical conceptions of human nature that have themselves lately become the objects of feminist revaluation in the fields of
philosophy and political theory” (Yousef 2002, 200). Such statements show that *Frankenstein* not only addresses the same concerns that are still haunting the minds of (especially) science fiction writers nowadays, but also helps to pinpoint the importance of this genre as a feminist mode in which women find a place to explore and express themselves.

It was at the turn of the twentieth century that a change affected speculative fiction to the point of altering the way in which it was received by its audience. This change had to do with the appearance of pulp magazines, a new type of publication that transformed the genres under this label. Pulp magazines, however, also helped to differentiate the American from the European book market of the first half of the twentieth century: “in England and Europe we must consider individual authors. But when we turn to America during this period we find ourselves considering not the writers themselves but the magazines they wrote in and the editors who shaped them” (Scholes and Rabkin 1977, 26). In this line, U.S. editors became paramount in the development of both fantasy and science fiction, being Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell the most influential

When most pulp magazines disappeared in the 1950s with the fall of the American News Services, their primary distributor, the market was severely damaged (Attebery 2003, 46). Likewise, the link between science fiction and fantasy was broken: pulp magazines, after all, provided a meeting place for both genres in a way that no other visible platform could offer at the time.

With the disappearance of the majority of pulp magazines, short stories stopped being the predominant mode and a preference for longer narratives began. At the same time, other formats started to become increasingly popular. This tendency had started with the radio and the more visual narrative mode of comics and was followed by adaptations to audio-visual media, calling and

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27 The Hugo Awards (or Science Fiction Achievement Award) and the John W. Campbell Award were named after these two figures. They are two of the most prestigious prizes a science-fiction writer (writing in English or having been translated into English) can win. More information about these awards is to be found on the Hugo Awards website.

28 Radio shows were less used to adapting science-fiction narratives, or to creating original scripts, because it was difficult to convey the images usually depicted by these stories, more compelling in prose or visual forms than when presented on the radio. However, Well’s *The War of the Worlds*, under the direction of Orson Welles, showed the possibilities that a radio program could have. This show is considered one of a kind, since it was not only successful, but has gone down in history due to the effect it had on the program’s audience, who believed the story to be real.
maintaining the attention of new audiences (Scholes and Rabkin 1977, 100; Larbalestier 2002, 7). For example, it is believed that the television series Star Trek (1966—) attracted a large body of women into the ranks of science-fiction fans in a way that had never been seen before due to its social focus, which included “recurring interests in accepting difference and some half-hearted representations of women in professional roles” (Jenkins 2016). Women’s implication from this moment onwards is exemplified by the large body of fan material (fanarts, fanfiction, fanvids, etc.) which has been created by them on this and other science fiction and fantasy audio-visual narratives (Roberts 2002, 93-95).

Many theorists have commented on the fact that science fiction had been until the 1960s distinctly written and published for middle-class white, heterosexual men, normally in their teens (Hartwell 2005, 272)29. This tendency generated a negative vision of science fiction as a genre not only obscure but childish, as there was a common belief that “the natural and healthy movement over the period of maturation was from science fiction to literature” (Delany 2005, 116), as if science-fiction narratives were not to be taken seriously.

These alterations contributed to conceive the sixties as a decade for the development and transformation of both this genre and fantasy to shape them into the way we know them nowadays. This change was mainly possible due to two events: on the one hand, the publication of Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings; on the other, the second wave of feminism that began in the United States and spread through Europe in the 1960s and which embraced this genre as a useful tool to spread feminist messages and ideologies.

Regarding the first, J.R.R. Tolkien’s academic and literary works meant a transformation in the way of looking at fantasy (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 48). The Lord of the Rings (1954-5), established a new way of writing speculative worlds, encouraging “more world building and grander plotting” (Attebery 2014, 101). Colin Manlove also points out that the way in which Tolkien’s novels were

29 Regardless of their target audience, and curiously enough, these stories were not considered by their publishers as YA fiction, as at that moment it was a type of literature solely concerned with the realistic genre.
understood in the United States led to the vindication of social and political issues, because

against the background of the Vietnam war, fantasy-making became an almost political act. The American market was soon filled with imitations of Tolkien’s antique world by writers who saw it less as a golden age to be mourned than as a utopia to be cultivated. (Manlove 1999, 57)

As a response to all these admirers of the style and structure of Tolkien’s novels, as well as a rejection to previous pulp fiction, some English writers started a new movement called the New Wave, which searched for a rupture with the styles and stories used until that moment in speculative fiction (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 78; Scholes and Rabkin 1977: 88). This new movement arrived later to the United States, brought to the spotlight at the end of the 1960s by critic and editor Judith Merril (Landon 2002). While pessimist in their view of the world (sometimes depicted through dystopian narratives), the New Wave invigorated science fiction bringing in

imagist and metaphorical styles and entering an ongoing flirtation with experimental writing. Science was no longer an end in itself, but was used as a metaphor. However, despite the gain in literary experimentation and shift in content, New Wave writing did not turn away from the androcentric and ethnocentric worldview of male sf. (Mohr 2005, 43)

The change from masculinist genres to more egalitarian ones was enhanced by the appearance of both female and male writers who wanted to express their views on gender and race, using their stories as an educational tool to make people think about social and cultural situations. This connection between non-canonical writings (speculative fiction) and women’s literary production, has been frequently pointed out by academics who have studied the connection of otherness (in the form of the machine, the alien, the monster, or the magical creature) with women:

[O]therness makes the fantastic resemble another noncanonical literary category: women’s writing. The ability or inability to read fantasy with pleasure divides educated readers nearly as sharply as does gender.
Moreover, the deliberate act of “reading as a woman” disrupts some of the same hierarchies of value and conventions of form that the strategies of fantasy deconstruct. What seemed necessary becomes contingent; what was excluded or occluded is brought into view.

The parallel is reinforced by looking at the number of women writers who have found fantasy congenial to their interests as readers and their needs as writers. (Attebery 1992, ix)

Until this moment, women as characters in speculative fiction were often found in secondary roles, “cast as quintessential other, as toys, robots, alien threats, enigmas, or love interest, blatantly tacked on to the story only to validate the masculinity of the male hero” (Mohr 2005, 44), an assertion that shows the conservative, masculinist view that permeated speculative writing. This transformation, however, helped by the feminist movement and the visibilization of women writers, was not a sudden change and has its roots in the women who were already writing science fiction and fantasy (and many other genres) under pseudonyms or initials in order to avoid their gender to be exposed. This continuous participation of women in the creation of speculative worlds translated into more female characters on the shelves, even if they have been overlooked by critics for decades. Alec Davin, for instance, highlights the importance of female characters in the fifties and the fact that “women writers were, in fact, writing more and more from a female point of view” (2006, 258).

Regardless of the inclusive nature of speculative fiction in general and its connection with subversion and the questioning of social and cultural constructions (as I will exemplify in the second part of this dissertation), there was still a majority of male writers that were not concerned with changing the patriarchal status quo, and they did not often bring about the subjects “of male/female relationships, sexual roles or the idea of ‘woman's place’ prior to the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement” (Merrick and Tuttle, 2016). This would partially change with the feminist movement of the sixties, as it has already been indicated, when even more feminist writers and/or writers of color started to make their way into speculative fiction and other types of literature. These authors saw the opportunities offered by speculative fiction to speak about race, gender,
and sexuality, as this type of literature “has always had sympathies with the marginal and the different” (Roberts 2002, 29). They also tried to raise awareness about the pressing topics of the time, such as political and social forces. And though still being a minority in the field, both as writers and readers, critical attention was paid to their work by means of awards and the analysis of their contributions to the genre. Some of these women writers also contributed to the genre with their academic works, as is the case of Ursula K. Le Guin and Joanna Russ, who were especially concerned with the link between feminism, gender, and the possibilities that speculative fiction in general offered for the expression of oppressed identities.

Le Guin and Russ are examples of all the critics that, beginning in the 1960s and more extensively in the 1970s, resorted to feminism in order to offer interpretations of science fiction and fantasy narratives, but also of all the women that, in both genres, started to create strong sheroes to populate their worlds, escaping from the constraints of realism or historical fiction. In order to establish a stronger contrast with their male counterparts, some authors “played with stereotypical reader expectations with regard to a character’s sex and gender role” (Mohr 2005, 45), exposing the prevailing patriarchal ideology and helping readers to deconstruct it. This strategy could be more or less subtle, ranging from the inclusion of female characters with stereotypical “masculine” skills or jobs, to complete cross-dressing or even to the use of ambiguous gender identities throughout the narrative. In a way, this kind of experimentation with gender seems to me to establish the antecedent of the novels analyzed in this dissertation, as the sheroes included in the chosen novels would not probably exist without the interest of the writers of the 1960s and 1970s in portraying a wide range of strong female protagonists that helped to widen the views of authors of posterior generations. From a scholarly point of view, the irruption of feminist authors constitutes nowadays “one of the most exciting and most vigorous aspects of the mode, in terms both of actual SF texts and of criticism” (Roberts 2002, 91), with their fight for inclusion and their achievements in the genre.

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30 A close account of the number of women writers and readers at the different decades of the first half of the twentieth century, together with a detailed analysis of their participation in the different pulp magazines, can be found in Davin, 2006.
2.3.2. YA speculative fiction: current situation

All the aforementioned connections between speculative fiction and political and cultural movements such as feminism, together with a positive public opinion, have helped to the movement of speculative fiction from its position as a “lowbrow” literature towards being recognized as worthy of critical acclaim. Although this does not mean that it has abandoned its marginal status, it seems that more and more theorists, writers, and readers have shown interest in speculative worlds in recent decades. Even educational curricula are more interested than ever in including courses about the critical reception and analysis of speculative fiction, and some American universities are offering resources to help their students and researchers, exemplified by The Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Database of the Texas A&M University or the “Science Fiction & Fantasy: A Research Guide” of Cornell University Library. Moreover, the Internet has become a platform for divulging fantasy and science fiction to other audiences and a platform for research for those academics interested in genres that have given rise to an immense amount of fan material.

Some of these materials and many of the theorists are focusing their attention on YA speculative fiction. In spite of the long trajectory of speculative fiction in general, its YA subsection started to grow like never before in the final decades of the twentieth century. Writers and editors began to massively exploit it, although we have already seen that the speculative fiction would only be really successful after the nineties, when it became popular enough so as to displace the success of YA realistic fiction. Previously, YA speculative fiction had developed in different ways, bringing together the already known characteristics of the genre with the fresh perspective of targeting a younger reader. Instances of this tendency in fantasy are to be found in the animal story (successfully used outside children’s literature in Richard Adam’s 1972 YA novel Watership Down); the retelling of fairy tales (especially successful nowadays, as shown by Marissa Meyer’s science fantasy series The Lunar Chronicles), or the paranormal romance, which rose as a separate, new publishing category in the dawn of the twenty-first century, encouraged by the success of Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 198).
Science fiction, on the other hand, had been historically more connected to readers in their teens than fantasy (which was considered for children, with its fairy tales and its magical lands). The first editors of science fiction magazines were especially conscious of their younger audiences, and therefore asked their authors to include a didactic component in their narratives. Although later science fiction was (and still is) mostly published with an adult audience in mind, the close connection between the genre and YA fiction survived throughout the twentieth century, and it is still vivid today, reinvigorated by subgenres that seem to be particularly close to young adults’ concerns. This is the case of dystopias, for example, which have been a trend lately in the YA fiction market, given the repercussion of works such as Lois Lowry’s The Giver Quartet (1993-2012) and Suzanne Collins’ trilogy The Hunger Games (2008-2010). Their appeal to adolescents lies in how these stories deal with characters that defy society and its expectations and seek power in a world controlled by adults who try to subjugate them. The protagonists’ fight for freedom and a place in society is an especially appealing plot for teenagers (and recurrent in YA fiction), and they are usually set in dark, postapocalyptic, constricted sceneries, just as many young adults think that their world is (Young 2011).

The didactic aim that editors such as Gernsback promoted in the early days of speculative fiction has not disappeared, although it has definitely been transformed. While the didactic part is less explicit than in the early twentieth century, it is still possible to find it in the implied criticism to capitalism or to social constructs of beauty, gender, race, and proper behavior. These counter-teachings would have not been possible without the work of feminist authors and/or writers of color, as we have seen. The didactic component is even more explicit in alternate histories31, for example, where historical details are often provided and have a significant weight in the plot. This is the case of the novels included in the corpus of this dissertation, which give importance to historical facts and may attract young readers and engage them in searching specific

31 The importance of alternate history as a didactic tool has been studied extensively, and it has been introduced in the classroom as a practical exercise in which the students have to use their knowledge to create counterfactual situations (Pelegrín 2010). YA alternate histories allow young readers to expose the frailty of history as a human construction (as seen in section 1 of Chapter 5), but they also provide an entertaining teaching tool.
information about a period or another, at the same time that they question gender and class as social constructions that need to be revised.

Summarizing, speculative fiction, as well as YA literature in general, has been overlooked in academic circles for many years, and only nowadays does it start to get the critical attention it deserves. Scholars seem to have left their prejudices aside and have started to look differently at the discourses fantasy and science fiction convey in relation to our societies, our cultures and politics, but also about the inner world of every human being. This switch of attention was favored by speculative fiction tendency to be a platform for political activism and its inclusion of the different. The second wave feminism at the end of the 1960s and the third wave more recently have changed the way in which authors (and, by extension, readers) deal with gender, sexuality, and the roles of men and women within society. According to my reasoning, then, it seems absurd to leave genres as fruitful and interesting as these are outside the study of literature, although it is clear that the YA current of speculative fiction has been certainly marginalized until recent decades. Consequently, I have set myself the objective of bringing to the forefront speculative fiction for young adults, as it is an influential source of social commentary for large parts of our societies, and there is much insight to be gained from its analysis.
Chapter 3. Cross-dressing and gender-b(l)ending women: historical and fictional accounts

3.1. Cross dressing, gender b(l)ending, transgender: beyond binary terms

Clothing is a cultural construct that defines people at the same time that lets humans express themselves. For centuries, the way people dress has been a means of presenting themselves to the rest of the world. As Terry Castle indicates,

> [L]ike language, clothing is after all a system of signs, and a means of symbolic communication. Like speech acts, different costumes carry conventional meanings; clothing opens itself everywhere to interpretation by others, in accordance with prevailing systems of sartorial inscription. Clothing inescapably serves a signifying function within culture; it is in fact an institution inseparable from culture. (1986, 55-56)

Simply by looking at a picture we may recognize from the garments depicted a period of time or the social class of a person within that era. Even in our democratic societies, poor and rich people do not dress in the same way. The quality of the fabric, the cut, the brand of the item, and even its color tell a story about the person wearing an article of clothing. Thus, people working in certain places are recognizable by their uniforms; people in mourning dress in black in Western culture; people belonging to a subculture often dress in a style that allows the observer to make a quick association, etc. In other words, clothes label people, and as such, they can be used to transgress social and cultural expectations. As Victoria Flanagan states in her work *Into the Closet*, “[c]lothing is a potent cultural symbol of gender and sexual difference, and the wearing of the clothes deemed socially appropriate for the opposite sex is generally considered to be a transgressive provocative act” (2008, xv). Nowadays, this transgressive act is less striking in the case of women, since men’s clothes (or what has been considered traditionally associated with men, such as trousers, shirts, or suits) are somehow
considered as “unmarked” or “neutral,”\footnote{An example of this can be found in how some organizations supporting non-binary (gender) collectives consider that what is being sold in the male department of clothes shops can be considered as unisex or androgynous fashion (Nonbinary.org, 2012).} and they have also been “glamorized in the world of high fashion. . . . Removing any hint of sexual or gender subversion from masculine dress, and re-presenting it as meaningless chic is a peculiarly postmodernist act” (Macdonald 1997, 217). Nonetheless, women are still forced by hetero-patriarchal expectations to look feminine, even in masculine attire, marking their bodies, appearance and behavior as belonging to the feminine gender.

This tendency was even more pronounced in the past, as the gender binary was much more noticeable and men and women were separated in all spheres of their lives. The consequence of this separation was that, throughout history, cross-dressing has been an activity punished both in moral and social terms. Cross-dressers were (and still are) often punished by the law in Western societies (see section 2 in this chapter), and their activities were usually associated with deviation from the heteronormative behavior expected from all members of Euro-American cultures. Men were in a riskier position, as the feminization of their acts or appearance was associated with homosexuality, which was considered as a crime until quite recently. Alison Oram (2007) points at the different treatment men and women received from the authorities when cross-dressing in England and the United States in the first half of the twentieth century:

> While women’s cross-dressing stories remained largely unaffected by suggestions of lesbianism, men masquerading as women were increasingly clearly associated with homosexuality in press reporting, especially from the 1930s. Male homosexuality was illegal . . . while sex between women was not. (81)

The fact that sex between women was not illegal in the twentieth century in England or the United States, however, did not mean that it was not socially chastised. In fact, it was enough to be marginalized and considered as deviant as homosexual men, although there were sectors in society (especially back in Victorian times) that did not believe women to be able to have sexual desires at all.
Moreover, women’s bodies and behaviors were (and still are, in our media-saturated era) eroticized and turned into entertainment for the male heterosexual gaze (Puhl 2010), considered objects without agency.

Oram’s statement does not only point towards the difference between male and female cross-dressers, but hints at the fact that there is a connotation regarding sexuality in the clothes we wear, as a consequence of social constructions that keep femininity and masculinity strictly separated, and which reached the highest point during the nineteenth century (Neal 2012, 15). Nonetheless, it seems that these connotations are increased or partially erased depending on the word we use to describe those who cross the limits of gender imposed by society. It seems paramount, then, to become acquainted with the terminology used to talk about women who decide(d) to impersonate men in order to free themselves from social and cultural constrictions. Different (more or less appropriate) labels have been proposed in the literature dealing with this topic, and others are simply mentioned here due to their connection with gender and sexual identities, and because they can be easily confused.

One of these debatable terms is “transvestism” (Latin for “cross dressing”), coined by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910. While it is a relatively recent word, it has been used widely in different contexts, as shown in the title of Rudolf M. Dekker and Lotte C. van de Pol’s 1989 study about passing women: *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe*. However, Hirschfeld’s usage of the term in his studies related it mainly to men donning women’s clothes as an uncontrollable urge or fetish (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 207-212). Nowadays, the connotations ascribed to the term follow this line of thought, and transvestism is widely associated with the man who dresses as a woman, and not the other way round (Altenburger 2005, 170). Flanagan supports that the term is unfit for the study of literature targeted to young audiences, as the label is “imbricated with issues of sexuality and eroticism,” due to its consideration as an adult fetish (2008, 3). In addition, Dekker and van de Pol have pointed at the problem of using the same term to define present cases with the historical figure of the woman who changes her clothes and attitude in order to masquerade as a man: “[m]odern male transvestism . . . is an essentially different phenomenon from female cross-
dressing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The former is episodic, undertaken for a short time and meant to satisfy personal desires” (1989, 54); in the latter, they add, in many cases women dressed as men until their deaths.

While it has been wrongly associated with transvestism sometimes, “transsexuality” presupposes an identification of people with a sex that is not the one they have been assigned at birth. This term was also a twentieth-century coined concept (by David Cauldwell in 1949), popularized during the decade of the 1960s by Harry Benjamin (Dekker and Pol 1989, 64). Historically, a number of the women who passed as men may have felt identified with their male personality, but there is not enough information so as to conclude which percentage would have gone through surgical and hormone transitions if given the opportunity (or lived as men without transitioning at all). Nonetheless, this is not the case of the sheroes of the YA novels here analyzed, since none of these main characters really believes to have been born in the wrong body: although some of them regret at some point their being female, this situation is a reaction to the gender inequalities they feel trapped in (as I explain in Chapter 7). Consequently, they do not wish to change their bodies but, as Allison Neal affirms of cross-dressers, “[seek] only a surface change in order to express [their] gender or to achieve social, political, or economic success” (2012, 20).

“Drag” has also proved to be an unfit term due to its associations “with female impersonation and homosexuality in a contemporary cultural context” (Flanagan 2008, 4). Although it has not always been linked to homosexuality, the figure of the drag queen and the less popular character of the drag king are connected with performance purposes, as drags assume the clothes and mannerism of another sex, often in an exaggerated way, but without disguising their biological sex (University of Victoria, 2016). This makes the performance more striking and, in a way, more challenging to the conception of gender fixed by society (Butler 1990).

“Gender reversal” has been proposed as a term that conveys behavioral deviations from what hetero-patriarchal societies consider acceptable regarding sex and gender. However, the concept seems to be stuck to the binary idea of gender, giving just two possibilities from which individuals can move back and
forth. As it has been asserted by Flanagan, “[t]his notion does not recognize/acknowledge that in many cultures cross-gendered persons were perceived as ‘other’ to the conventional categories of man and woman” (2008, 4). Examples of this are to be found among Indigenous peoples from North America, who accept the existence of a third gender, or the Inuit, who accept the socialization of children as a gender and a later change during puberty (Sonne 1992, 171; Briggs 2000). Furthermore, the examination of the protagonists in my corpus leads to the invalidation of this term to label them, as their performance is not just based on a shift on what behaving as a male or female is, but rather a mix of the two that creates a new gender identity (see section 2.4 in Chapter 7).

“Cross-dressing” is the most widely used term to talk about people that change the clothes assigned to them due to their gender, and choose to wear items of clothing that are traditionally associated with another gender. Flanagan considers this concept neutral enough to be “dissociated from the popular presumption that it is inherently entwined with the issue of sexual, rather than just gender, identity” (2008, 5). The term leaves room to explain whatever the nature of the decision that leads to cross-dressing is, accepting any justification from plain deception to a misidentification of the person with the gender assigned to them by society. Although it seems to fail to acknowledge that there is more than a change of garments in the performance of the cross-dressers in order to pass\textsuperscript{33}, scholars from different disciplines have been using this label to talk about impersonators. In this way, they have widened the meaning of the term to include behavioral patterns associated to other genders, allowing a complete impersonation and not only a reference to the change of garments. Examples of this use are to be found in Garber (1992), Bullough and Bullough (1993), and Oram (2007), which are considered main works of reference for the purposes of this dissertation. In the case of male impersonators, they use the label “female-to-male cross-dresser”, which I also replicate here, though a more accurate concept would be “feminine-to-masculine cross-dresser”, which would refer to a change of gender roles rather than a change of sex. Nonetheless, since sex and gender are

\textsuperscript{33} Definitions given by dictionaries (Merriam Webster, Dictionary.com, or Collins English Dictionary, for example) often fail to acknowledge that the masquerade requires more than clothes to create another gender identity.
still intrinsically connected in Euro-American culture, to pass as a gender means, to a certain extent, to pass (in the eyes of society) also as the sex that is generally associated to that said gender.

Other terms that have proved useful to convey the situation of these literary characters as well as the cases of many real women who lived their lives as men in the past are “cross-gender” (or “gender-crossing”) and “passing woman/girl.” Both labels imply that there is more than a change of garments attached to the performance of the individual. In the former, all or most of the characteristics associated with another gender are taken by the person. The term also allows considering gender as an open category, defying social expectations and leaving room for resistance: sometimes, cross-gendered individuals are thought to be neither male nor female, since “in many cultures cross-gendered persons were perceived as “other” to the conventional categories of man and woman. They were often considered to belong to a ‘third’ sex” (Flanagan, 2008: 4).

Bullough and Bullough believe that the label “cross-gender” suggests a rejection of the socially-assigned gender by the individual and, therefore, that s/he identifies with another: “they either feel they do not fit neatly into either the male or female box or their behavior is not totally congruent with the rules and expectations of the society they live in” (1993, 313). Although they include within this spectrum of behavior people’s sexuality as a mark of difference, thus linking sexuality to gender, in this dissertation gender and sexuality are considered separated premises. However, following Bollough and Bollough’s theories, none of the protagonists of the novels included in our object of study are permanently cross-gendered: although they do not fit in the “feminine” roles society has tried to force upon them, they do not identify as males.

In the case of the term “passing woman/girl,” it stresses the idea of a woman/girl being a conscious impersonator that tries to deceive society by the concealment of their real identity. It suggests the idea of an actor playing a (gender) role, thus emphasizing Judith Butler’s (2007) idea of gender as performative, since the appearance, gestures, and even the language they use to mask themselves are a reinterpretation of how they envision traditional masculinity and femininity. The use of this label is reminiscent of the conception
of crossing boundaries that have been imposed over the individual: “traversing the boundary from female-to-male also involves *tress-passing* onto the terrain of another class” (Garber 1992, 283; italics mine).

“Gender-blending” is a term popularized by Holly Devon in her 1989 work *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*. While cross-gendered people do not feel comfortable as part of the gender society has imposed on them, gender blending individuals’ sex and gender coincide but their “gender role patterns incorporate elements which come from both the standard masculine gender role and the standard feminine gender role” (viii). This blend of different gender roles sometimes makes people think that a woman is a man or the other way round: “[g]ender blending people report that they do not consciously attempt to project confusing or misleading gender impressions, although they may . . . allow mistakes to stand uncorrected” (viii). Some of the protagonists in the YA novels of this dissertation are mistaken for men even after stopping their impersonation, but in general their return to femininity serves to erase any ambiguity that may have been caused by their cross-dressing (this will be explored in Chapter 9).

“Gender blending” was also used by Richard Ekins and Dave King in a collection of essays entitled *Blending Genders*, as “an umbrella term . . . to include cross-dressing and sex-changing and the various ways that such phenomena have been conceptualised” (1996, 1). Accordingly, the term “provides a benchmark for those interested in exploring the complex issues concerning social and cultural constructions of gender raised by cross-dressing and sex-changing” (1996, 1). In a way, such definition really encompasses the sense of what the cross-dressers in my literary corpus do and summarizes the spirit of the novels that I have decided to analyze.

Another similar label that is frequently used by scholars to talk about passing women is “gender-bending.” This term can be understood either as dressing and behaving as another gender, as most dictionaries do (Dictionary.com, Cambridge Dictionary, Merriam Webster), or as many scholars seem to consider it, as an umbrella term for any type of action that goes against social expectations related to gender and gender roles, as many scholars seem to consider it. In this line, Michelle Abate (2008) believes tomboys to be gender-bender figures that
destabilize the gender expectations, with their “proclivity for outdoor play (especially athletics), a feisty independent spirit, and a tendency to don masculine clothing and adopt a boyish nickname” (2008: xvi). Most tomboys in literature abandon these “masculine” attitudes during adolescence, but there is no doubt that they challenge gender roles and, in a way, they could belong to the cross-gender category as long as they keep behaving in such a way.

Bullough and Bullough, on the other hand, consider that “gender-bending emphasizes . . . a confusion of costume whereby the illusion of assuming the opposite sex is not intended to convince the viewer of authenticity but to suggest ambiguity,” which epitomizes “a challenge to traditional gender concepts but also to cross dressing” (1993, 46). Gender-bending figures may or may not pass as members of another gender, but allow people to question the limits of socially-constructed roles. Again, as in the case of the cross-gendered individual, this term leaves room for the rupture of the gender binary by creating new identities, but the person may not feel uncomfortable with the gender that was assigned to them at birth.

Of the mixture between these last two concepts I have constructed my own: gender-b(l)ender. A term like this conveys both the possibility of blending genders and their roles to create new identities and, at the same time, it expresses the ways in which such a behavior would bend the limits of the construction of gender in itself. Such a label, moreover, leaves the door open to new potential genders outside the binary and the representation of identities that challenge traditional roles and representation of masculinities and femininities. On the other hand, we can understand the gender-b(l)ender as a category that encompasses, among others, the cross-dresser, so it can be used even when the protagonists are not in disguise.

Finally, we need to consider the label “transgender” (or trans*), which may embrace in itself all the previously mentioned terminology, as it is “a marker for all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender

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34 Some famous tomboys in literature for children or young adults are Jo (Josephine) March from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, Scout from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* or George (Georgina) Kirrin from Enid Blyton’s *The Famous Five* series. The characteristics of the tomboy are analyzed in depth in Chapter 6.
normativity” (Halberstam 2005, 55). In words of Stryker, who popularized the term, it is used as an umbrella term to represent a political alliance between all gender-variant people who do not conform to social norms for typical men and women, and who suffer political oppression as a result.

As such, the term encompasses . . . transvestites and transsexuals . . . , androgynes, butch lesbians, effeminate gay men, drag queens, people who would prefer to answer to new pronouns or to none at all, non-stereotypical heterosexual men and women, intersex individuals, and members of non-Western European indigenous cultures who claim such identities. (Stryker 2004)

Victoria Flanagan (2008) rejects this term as unfit to refer to children’s literature because “the political agenda to which Stryker refers is absent. As a general rule, the cross-dressing undertaken . . . is temporary and brief, enacted out of necessity rather than nonconformity with (or alienation from) normative gender categories” (6). I do not agree with Flanagan, as it is clear that most of the main characters of the YA fiction I analyze feel alienated by the limited roles available and their decision to crossdress responds not only to necessity. Flanagan herself, in fact, accepts that YA fiction provides readers with a representation of cross-dressing that embraces the complexity of transgendered subjectivity. Rather than shying away from the issues of gender and sexual non-conformity as they relate to cross-dressing, these texts confront and explore such concerns, as well as acknowledging the social obstacles and discrimination that transgendered individuals often face within the wider community. (214)

In the case of this dissertation, the selected novels present protagonists that try to show their abilities and fight the gender inequalities that persist in their worlds. They do not agree with their position as subordinates simply for being born female, and therefore decide to show men that they are as capable as any boy or even more. Furthermore, they are alienated by society due to the fact that they do not conform to the gender roles expected from them, deviating from the
“common” traits associated with femininity and thus not being completely accepted by those surrounding them at the beginning of their narratives. Their aim to prove themselves useful to their societies and to challenge social conceptions of gender force them to enact a male persona for variable periods of time. The duration of the imposture ranges from one school year (as in the case of Violet in Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*) to a decade (the time needed by Pierce’s Alanna to earn her shield) and in at least one case (Deryn from Westerfeld’s trilogy *Leviathan*), the main protagonist’s masquerade is not revealed at the end. After the discovery and acceptance of their feminine identities, they are still in a position that defies gender conventions, and it is to expect that they will continue to challenge the gender binary in the way the societies they live in conceive it. Therefore, it would have been useful to make use of the term “transgender” to refer to the cases of cross-dressing included in our literary corpus, as it accounts for all the ways in which the female protagonist’s behavior puts into question gender normativity and consequently uncovers the fallacy (or self-deception, according to Judith Halberstam) of gender being “consistent with [one’s] sex and the relation between the two [being] ‘natural’” (2005, 50). However, I have decided not to use this umbrella term and focus, instead, on more specific terminology surrounding the practice of cross-dressing.

The terms that have been thought fit for use in this dissertation, then, have been chosen taking into account previous literature on the topic, the meaning these terms convey, and how they affect the description of the characters analyzed. It is important that these concepts do not only include the possibility of a masquerade in their meaning, but also a deviation from the traditional gender roles. Accordingly, I am especially concerned here with employing terminology that allows us to think about gender outside the constricted binaries imposed by heteronormative patriarchy and to question those supposedly fixed labels, which have already been challenged throughout history by diverse figures, including the one of the female-to-male cross-dresser.
3.1.1. The possibility of the third gender

When *Female Masculinity* was published in 2003, Jack Halberstam reviewed the idea that gender and sex were not linked, and that gender, as Judith Butler had stated in *Gender Trouble* (1990), was not even natural, but an artificial concept created on the grounds of heterosexuality to sustain the domination of men over women. In this groundbreaking study Halberstam examined the reason why our societies still “operate in a world that assumes that people who are not male are female, and people who are not female are male” (2003, 20). But the concept of binarism is so rooted in U.S. society that it has become almost impossible to avoid it, as Antonia Young proclaims:

> we find it very difficult to break away from the basic dichotomy of male-female in our analysis of gender. Even within the homosexual community we tend to see a breakdown according to traditional gender stereotypes, with one member of a partnership taking the “active”, the other the “passive” role. (2000, 117)

The impossibility of having other categories outside the concepts of masculine and feminine is a consequence of their “failure . . . to exhaust the field of gender variation,” according to Halberstam, “because virtually nobody fits the definitions of male and female, the categories gain power and currency from the impossibility” (2003, 27), thus closing the door to other options. This seems to be, in fact, the case of passing women, who though they do not fit into the stereotypes of femininity, still identify themselves inside the binary. By doing so, by considering themselves from the feminine gender while replicating behaviors and attitudes that have been associated with both men and women, I find that they are trying to break the notion of one gender as exclusive in the binary, but they are not yet at the point of creating new categories.

While there is little doubt that (at least in my corpus) female-to-male cross-dressers will be considered inside the binary as girls performing masculinity, in her study on cross-dressing and gender, Marjorie Garber considers that it would be a mistake to simply label this figure as male or female. Instead, she rejects the
binary and considers that these figures are groundbreaking in the way in which they create a new category or “third” gender:

This tendency to erase the third term, to appropriate the cross-dresser “as” one of the two sexes, is emblematic of a fairly consistent critical desire to look away from the transvestite as transvestite, not to see cross-dressing except as male or female manqué, whether motivated by social, cultural, or aesthetic designs. And this tendency might be called an *underestimation* of the object. (Garber 1992, 10; italics in the original)

For Garber, the action of cross-dressing becomes a challenge to traditional notions of gender, “putting into question the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male,’ whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural” (Garber 1992, 10) and she supports the idea of a third gender, as the notion “questions binary thinking and introduces crisis” (Garber 1992, 11). Cross-dressing is therefore, according to this line of thought, a site for the destabilization of the binary in its traditional form to a certain extent, and even a critique of sexism, the artificiality of gender roles and segregation (Heilmann 2000, 106).

Garber’s statements have been backed by Allison Neal in her PhD dissertation on Neo-Victorian cross-dressers. She declares that the transvestite escapes categorization, being “in the avant-garde of the destruction of the masculine and feminine labels . . . by opening up a third space in which gender can be expressed” (Neal 2012, 29). However, the transvestite (a term that she uses to encompass the cross-dresser, the drag king, and the female actor playing male roles) does not define a new form of gender but a performance that transforms masculinity to fulfill an objective. After all, we do not consider a masculine woman part of another category, even when she is clearly defying the expectative on gender.

Garber’s statements (and by extension, Neal’s) were contested by Halberstam, who considered that a third gender would not be enough because “‘thirdness’ merely balances the binary system and . . . tends to homogenize many different gender variations under the banner of ‘other’” (2003, 28). This campaign of the third gender as a portmanteau for all “kinds of gender perverts who do not clearly identify as male or female or even as a combination of the two”
(Halberstam 2003, 118) is what Bornstein (qtd. in Halberstam 2003, 118) called the “compulsory gendering.” This necessity to gender everyone is one of the problems that denies us the possibility of leaving gender behind.

Probably the most accurate representation of the gender status of the passing girl/woman has been considered by Victoria Flanagan, who used the term “omni-gendered” to describe the female-to-male cross-dresser as a person that can be any of the (existing) genders at the same time. This is a more accurate term than the use of “ungendered” she had made in previous studies on cross-dressing (2002), which did not convey the experience of the performance of both genders and the necessity to learn the attitudes and behaviors that are labelled by society as either masculine or feminine. Instead, in Into the Closet (2008) she considers that their ability to “traverse the boundaries of gender is one of their most remarkable achievements, and the key to their success as an ‘omni-gendered’ subject—with whom readers of either sex can empathize on a multitude of gendered levels” (2008, 106). This omni-gendered individual can perform as male and female, blending the two by “rework[ing] and reconstitut[ing] the very idea of gender, appropriating it for her own purposes” (Flanagan 2008, 106). This is precisely what I have called “gender-b(l)ender”: the possibility that a performance can counter limited views of gender roles while, at the same time, proposes, through the actions of bending and blending, that the concept of “gender” itself is never stable nor reducible to two exclusive, extreme points in a scale labeled as “feminine” and “masculine”.

3.2. History of the practice: when fiction and non-fiction collide

When talking about the history of cross-dressing, a first difference should be established between Western and non-Western societies. In general, Western societies (and I focus here especially in Europe and the U.S.) have rejected the crossing of the boundaries associated with gender, and the social rules and laws have chastised any behavior that could jeopardize the distinction between men and women. Although in ancient times this transgressive behavior was accepted during certain religious ceremonies, such as those dedicated to the god Dionysius in Greece (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 26-29), the arrival of Judaism meant the
disappearance of this type of events, as it condemned “any manifestations of gender confusion, both male and female” (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 39). This tendency was followed by Christianism later on, and therefore it will mark the ideology in Europe for the whole Middle and Modern Ages, when cross-dressing was strongly linked to homosexuality (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 16) in the case of men. In the case of women, however, it was understood as a comment about their sexual availability, criticized by seventeenth-century pamphlets such as *Hic Mullier* (Garber 1992, 31).

In other societies, however, there were different conceptions surrounding cross-dressing. Cultures all around the globe had rites in which women and men put on the clothes of the other with the belief that the practice could heal an ill child or change the luck of a person (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 17). In Inuit culture, a girl could have been brought up as a male due to different reasons, including a mismatch between the (masculine) name given to her and her sex upon birth or simply by her parents’ wishes (Sonne 1992, 171; Briggs 2000).

Cross-dressing has been reported to be an element of different religions, and some cultures accept, tolerate, and even revere it, normally either in terms of mysticism or just as a proof that a third gender exists outside the binaries firmly established in Western culture. Its function is respected and ritualistic, and “cross-dressers not only occupy an intermediate position between the genders, but also between the natural and the supernatural, as can be seen in the positions of shamans and berdaches” (Dekker and Pol 1989, 43). Cross-dressing and the breaking of gender roles also also prove the beliefs of some societies that every individual is formed by both masculine and feminine elements, as exemplified by the Chinese concept of yin yang (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 16) or the case of the figure of the xanith35 in Islamic Oman (Garber 1991, Bullough 2016). In China, the success of folkloric cross-dressing stories (especially the legend of Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo)36 led to the development of a literary subgenre known

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35 A xanith is a trans woman in the Omani community. For more information on the role of the xanith, see Wikan 1977 and 1978.

36 "The Zhu Yingtai narrative, more commonly known as ‘The story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai’ . . . is among the most widely circulated . . . topics of folk literature in China and beyond, in much of East and South East Asia” (Altenburger 2005, 166). In the story, Zhu Yingtai is a young woman that decides to cross-dress in order to get an education. During the time she lives as
as the “scholar-beauty romance.” These stories followed the trope of a “woman [who] disguises herself as man in order to get an education . . ., or to meet face-to-face with the man she hopes to marry” (Altenburger 2005, 173).

Judaism presents us with another example of how the boundaries between genders are can be crossed. As it has been mentioned, although it opposes to cross-dressing, it does so as a rejection of “trans customs that were connected to pre-class matrilineal beliefs” (Feinberg 1996, 71) and to ancient cults to other gods and goddesses that survived the arrival of this monotheistic belief. Thus, this behavior was still accepted under certain circumstances, provided that it helped to strengthen the rules and morals it tried to perpetuate. Consequently, while men were to cross-dress under no other circumstances than to ridicule women (for femininity in a man was considered a sign of weakness and homosexuality), women were given certain freedom to this account. Therefore, complete masculine disguises were accepted when the motive was protecting women’s virtue, as when travelling, or in places where the only company were men (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 40). In these situations, cross-dressing was even encouraged, as it was considered valuable for the woman in disguise to protect her family’s honor from any attack (instead of teaching the aggressor to be respectful, as it still happens in rape culture nowadays).

This double standard of prohibition and encouragement is also present later in Christianism. While there is a biblical prohibition in the Deutonomy that says that “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God” (Deut. 22:5), there are many Christian stories that present women cross-dressing in order to escape from men’s desires. Hagiography has collected many accounts of female saints who escaped their fates by dressing as men and entering abbeys as monks to undergo a life of obedience and praying. Herman Userner believes these legends regarding female-to-male cross-dressing saints to be a “survival of the beliefs surrounding the [bearded] goddess Aphrodite of Cyprus, . .

a man, she falls in love with her roommate, Liang Shanbo. After she is discovered, even when the couple is in love, Zhu Yingtai is betrothed to another man and Liang dies from grief. The day of her wedding, the bride is mourning the loss of her true love when her dead lover’s tomb opens and she jumps inside, dying as well.
Strategies of Cross-dressing and Gender-b(l)ending

. wherein women sacrificed to the goddess in men’s clothing and men in women’s” (quoted in Feinbeg 1996, 69). Although Userner’s theories have been the source of disagreement among experts (Bullough 2000, 229), it is undeniable that cross-dressing was still a possibility, and the cross-dressing saints were revered albeit their breaking of social norms. Their act, in these cases, was not seen as a rebellious choice but a commitment to religion and a resolution to forget their physicality to better serve the cause of spirituality. In this way, as Sarah Bond notes, “chastity had to be vowed along with the male garments in order for the cross-dressing to be viewed positively” (2015). Furthermore, these saints were praised for their wanting to escape the past concerns of their lives, turning their passing into a symbol of “break[ing] with a former existence”:

The list of these female transvestites is long, and their stories follow a familiar pattern: Saints Perpetua, Anastasia, Apollinaris or Dorotheus, Euphrosyne, Anastasia Patricia, and others all don male clothing at a time of personal crisis . . . and in doing so fulfill the words of St. Jerome, that a woman who “wishes to serve Christ more than the world . . . will cease to be a woman and will be called man.” (Garber 1992, 214)

These female saints are hardly to be considered a threat to the establishment of patriarchy and religion, though their mere existence may disrupt our conception of the gender binary. St. Jerome’s assertion that a woman “will cease to be a woman” accepts and reinforces the idea that gender is a malleable concept, and states its character as a social construction that can be changed or disregarded. However, as it has already been mentioned, the only possible change seems to be that of a woman turning into a man, and not the other way round. This way, the masculine status is seen as a desirable one, something to aspire to, morally and intellectually superior, while the feminine status is unjustly exposed as an inferior, subordinate position.

In a way, the struggle between genders in certain societies is not so different from the hierarchy established for class that divided peasants from the nobility before the emergence of the middle classes. Following this concept, there was one inferior stratum and a superior one to which people normally wished to belong (Altenburger 2005, 170-1). These aspirations, however, were not allowed to be
fulfilled, providing that there were exceptions controlled by the law and with the blessing of the higher ranks:

A female who might try to pass as a man was not considered abnormal. That a female might desire to be a male, in fact, seemed to be a healthy desire, a “normal” longing not unlike the desire of a peasant to become a noble. This did not mean that either women or peasants were allowed to cross the status lines in great numbers but that the desire to do so was accepted as a norm. . . . [W]omen who were successful in changing their female identities were not stigmatized but instead accepted, and not a few became saints. (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 67)

In fact, Garber sustains that both gender and class boundaries remains linked, and that the attempt to break the rules of one of the two categories means the challenging of the other as well. Although the connection may be put into question, because breaking the boundary of class does not imply a change in gender, it is undeniable that a transgression in the gender binary facilitates class mobility, as it often gives women the chance to study and to achieve economic independence:

Transvestism was located at the juncture of “class” and “gender,” and increasingly through its agency gender and class were revealed to be commutable, if not equivalent. To transgress against one set of boundaries was to call into question the inviolability of both, and of the set of social codes —already demonstrably under attack— by which such categories were policed and maintained. (Garber, 1992 32)

But women might not have been aware of this when they cross-dressed in the past, as their worries were more pressing. Being considered as inferior forced them to challenge the limits of gender so as to access a job or profession, and the ones who tried to follow their vocation often struggled against misconceptions and the rejection of society. In the light of such events, to pass as a man in order to get a job seemed a plausible option, as earning a salary would have meant more independency, which gave them, at the same time, the possibility to escape from marriage or poverty.
Apart from that main reason, women might have cross-dressed in order to “find a place in a man’s world” (Garber 1992, 69), which brings us back to the rejection of women in public spaces and in political and cultural institutions. Marginalized not only from working spaces but also from education (women did not receive the same education as men, and were not able to enroll in university degrees until fairly recently37), women had to conceive a way to achieve their ambitions, even if sometimes it required the creation of new identities, either for a period of time or throughout their whole lives, as some women lived long-life deceptions. It is also possible to include as a main reason the “patriotic fervour” which Dekker and Pol (1989, 2) mentioned as an important motive for cross-dressing, and that led many women to take male identities to enter the army or the navy. As only men were able to enlist as soldiers, women who were interested in these jobs would have been forced to cross-dress and adopt new identities. Whatever their motivations (either money, love for a male relative or lover, or patriotism, or all at the same time) many of them were able to take an active part in the war, this being the only way to fight arm in arm with their countrymen.

Another motive that could lead a woman to disguise herself as a man seems to be her own sexuality. This drive probably has to do with personal preferences regarding both sex and sexuality. Although the labels “transgender” and “transsexual” are fairly recent, people unhappy with their sex or gender have always existed throughout history. Some people may have also felt unsatisfied with heterosexuality. They were oppressed and denied the possibility of exploring their desires, and were convinced that their fantasies of other bodies, behaviors or any attraction that deviated from the norm was inappropriate. These acts of insubordination were punished and judged by society, leaving people either ostracized or unsatisfied with their lives. The only way to be respectable and accepted was to devise a deception of their identities, so that they could not be judged by external third parties.

The main problem to decide which term would apply to each of those passing women, however, is that we cannot ascertain their motives unless there is a

37 Just to put an example, in the United States the first woman to earn a bachelor’s degree was Catherine Brewer in 1840 (Cater-Steel and Cater 2010, 303).
personal testimony of their lives. Dekker and Pol have stated that it is impossible to “know how many cross-dressers left no trail behind them in written source-material. We can make a guess that this especially concerns those women who transformed themselves so successfully that they were never unmasked” (1989, 3). Some of them, however, were found and reported as cross-dressers in different ways, through “papers, diaries, or similar surviving sources” (97) and even in biographies, which gave way to a fascination with the female cross-dresser as a theme that was used in “fictionalized biographies and memoirs, in prints, and in plays and operas” (2). But one of the most reliable sources we have on passing women is court records. Women could be legally punished for dressing as men, but this crime was frequently related to others, as male apparel on women (and dresses and skirts on men) were seen “as a stratagem that facilitated theft or other crime” (Garber 1992, 29), thus equating the masquerade with criminality (in stark contrast with the saint cross-dresser of Christianity). The male garments on women were also widely associated with prostitution, as many posed as boys as an erotic masquerade (Dekker and van de Pol 1989, 39), and “having a bastard child and going in men’s apparel” were sometimes seen as related transgressions (Garber 1992, 30). Studies on the topic have shown that prostitution and cross-dressing were normally “alternative social strategies for social and economic survival” (Garber 1992, 30, italics in the original), but they did not always have to go hand in hand.

Real stories of passing women that were soldiers or sailors abound in the literature on the topic, and many have been collected in histories of cross-dressing (Garber 1992, Bullough and Bullough 1993). Dekker and Pol (1989) counted at least 83 women that passed as warriors or sailors (as there was no previous medical check to enroll) in a study of 119 discovered cases in the Netherlands during a span of time of less than three centuries (1550-1830). Their work shows that it was easier to hide one’s real identity in the army than at sea, as is indicated by the fact that two-thirds of our known land soldiers had been in service for extended periods of time. . . . A stable civilian’s life on shore offered the best possibility to hide a female identity. . . . Most of these were
discovered under extreme circumstances, such as the examination of the body after death, or not discovered in this disguise at all. (10)

In order to pass as men, these women had to prepare themselves, as “[t]he gender role change was not only very drastic but also very abrupt: the entire transformation had to be accomplished between one moment and the next” (Dekker and Pol 1989, 25). They took a male name, which could be “the male version of their own name, or a male first name taken together with the old patronym or last name. . . . Other women clung to their father’s name” (Dekker and Pol 1989, 14). They also dressed in traditional male apparel, with especial attention to the necessity of hiding their breasts, which were bounded. Some women used especially clothes: Loreta Janet Velazquez, a soldier in the Confederate Army, “had a New Orleans tailor make her a half-dozen wire-net shields which she wore in order to disguise her true form” (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 157), and others “padded the waists of their trousers” in order to hide their shape (Blanton 1993). All of them cut their hair short and, in order to explain the lack of facial hair, they often told others that they were younger than they really were. Some women wore false moustaches or beards, and all of them seem to have adopted stereotyped masculine behaviors in order to impersonate new identities: Velazquez, for instance, modified her gait and learned to smoke (Blanton 1993). Other women swore as “part of the whole masquerade of masculinity”, and participated in “sports and drinking, frequently carried over from the workplace to the neighbourhood” (Oram 2007, 25). All these changes women had to undergo when trying to pass as men underline the performative quality of gender, and the relative ease with which a subject marked by society as female can turn into a male subject. These strategies used by historical cross-dressers are the same used by the fictional sheroes of the YA novels that constitute the corpus of this dissertation (as will be explained in more detail in Chapter 7).

If they were careful enough, many of these women soldiers might have returned to their “feminine” lives after the battle. Some others, however, might
have preferred to carry on their deception, and even got to marry and start their own families as men, with or without their partners knowing their real identities.\(^\text{38}\)

Their reasons for enlisting were varied, from following the men they loved (fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers) to achieving economic independence, from seeking adventures to fighting out of a patriotic feeling. Although a minority, the participation of women in military conflicts has been stated by many sources. During the American Civil War, Mary Livermore, a nurse working for the Union Army, estimated that there were four hundred of such women only on the Union side (Blanton 1993; Bullough and Bullough 1993, 158). Taking into account this historical relation between passing women and the military establishment, it does not seem to be coincidence that the YA literature included in this study, and many of the speculative (and even romance) adult fiction about cross-dressing women, have an important component linked to armed conflicts.

When female-to-male cross-dressers were discovered, their challenge was neutralized. All of them were forced to abandon the army, and their feminine roles (and clothes) were restored. For example, an Irish woman known as Christian Davies (1667-1775), exposed due to a bad injury, was allowed to continue “to travel with the army, cooking for the regiment and acting as courier and nurse” (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 103). Sometimes, their bravery was even awarded, and the government allowed a pension to be paid to them (Blanton 1993). In these cases, the impersonation is a temporary transgression that is forced to end, so that the patriarchal order is finally restored.

In general, the way these women challenged gender constructions is problematic, as they were reinforcing the values instituted by a male-dominant society too: in creating their masculine identities they followed the already-established gender roles. Jean Marsden (1993) has pointed how, in most cases, cross-dressing was only allowed “when it could be comfortably explained by laudable or appropriately feminine motives such as love for a husband or love for country” (23). In this way, society was sure that these women did not seek power.

\(^{38}\) Many women declared that they did not know that their partners were assigned female at birth until they were discovered (sometimes after their death). Billy Tipton, for example, avoided intimacy by telling his partners that he had suffered an accident that had damaged his ribs and genitals, and consequently could not have sexual intercourse (Garber 1992, 203; Bullough and Bullough 1993, 159).
to unbalance the status quo, but rather that they wanted to fare better in life, as the status of a (white, heterosexual) male was the most desirable position. Roland Altenburger argues that, in general, “[w]omen in male disguise . . . tended to be regarded by men as nothing particularly threatening, but rather as a forgivable deviation, as long as the temporary transgression of the border-lines of gender would finally be corrected” (2005, 171), and that is why they were not severely punished. Nevertheless, to ensure that cross-dressers were not a threat to the established institutions, their attitudes were criminalized when they could not be explained by such laudable motives (for instance, in the case of criminals or any reason that deviated from the expected heteronormative behavior) and their figures were sometimes invisibilized by the organizations in power. This was the case of the U.S. Army, which “tried to deny that women played a military role, however small, in the Civil War” (Blanton 1993).

Some of those discovered women were punished or taken to jail for several days, depending on the laws regulating cross-dressing. In general, nonetheless, sartorial regulations focused only on men. An example of this can be found in a 1944 law imposed in the city of Detroit, which specifically forbade men from publicly or privately appearing in women’s clothes. In the United States this kind of ordinances began to be instituted in the mid-nineteenth century (1848), when in Columbus, Ohio, a prohibition of cross-dressing was adopted, and other fifty-seven cities in the United States followed its example, “[reveling] that cities of every size and in every part of the country adopted gender-normative sumptuary rules” (Eskridge 2002, 27).

While cross-dressing became popular among women as a way to escape from the confines of femininity and the domestic sphere, it was also popular among those who enjoyed this type of stories (Dugaw 1985). Apart from the development of the cross-dresser in literature, this figure could be found in the nineteenth-century music hall, in which women masqueraded as men and entertained the audiences. Male impersonators (such as Hetty King or Vesta Tilley) became

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39 The number of women soldiers involved in the American Civil War, although irrelevant according to Blanton (1993), was in fact quite significant, as several written testimonies reveal: “In the letter of one [female disguised as a male] prison guard, it said that there were three [other] women in the prison, one of whom was a major in the Union Army” (Righthand 2011).
popular during the Victorian period because, as Garber states, “gender roles and
categories are most vulnerable to critique when they are most valorized, when
their rules, codes, and expectations are most ardently coveted and admired” (1993,
51). Not surprisingly, then, the Neo-Victorian novel has become a popular genre
to explore female cross-dressing and its relation to the disruption of the gender
binary (Neal 2012).

From the nineteenth century onwards, in fact, the increasing taste for stories
related to cross-dressing was also reflected in the news offered in the media.
Allison Neal estates that “various instances of female transvestites in the
nineteenth century were regularly reported in newspapers” (2012, 15), and Alison
Oram (2007), in her research on cross-dressing women in two English newspapers
from 1910 to 1960, found over 200 articles that expose the number of women in
disguise. These stories did not only account for cases in the United Kingdom, but
featured women from other parts of Europe, the United States, and Australia. The
articles were exhaustive in details, as depicted by the large space occupied by at
least half of them, and they usually contained photographic material. In general,
Oram concludes that there is a changing conception of passing women over the
five decades her corpus of study encompasses. During the first decades of the
twentieth century, they were something to marvel at and the press showed
sympathy for them: “[n]ewspapers represented them as exciting, sensational
figures, yet applauded them for successfully following what were quite
conservative ideals of masculine behaviour” (Oram 2007, 18). However, after
World War II, the public attitude changed completely, due to “a widespread social
anxiety about the family,” which led to a more conservative atmosphere (Oram
2007, 140). Furthermore, the stories of passing women were not exciting
anymore: unlike the male-to-female impersonator, the disruption created by
passing women was not appealing after the mid-twentieth century, as women
wearing trousers became a more commonplace sight. Thus, these stories lost their
appealing in newspapers (Oram 2007, 152), even when they survived in literature.

This situation did not lead to the disappearance of cross-dressers, but there
seems to have been a change in the way they were perceived by society, as they
started to be considered as transgender during the last decades of the twentieth
Strategies of Cross-dressing and Gender-b(l)ending

century. Nowadays, cisgender women also cross-dress in other situations, such as on the stage (women actors, drag kings) or even for social experiments (as was the case of Norah Vincent)⁴⁰, but they do not try to pass as men due to the gender inequality in Euro-American countries, and their transgression cannot be compared to those of historical cross-dressers. Does this mean that U.S. culture is fairer than one hundred years ago and, therefore, women do not really need to trick others in order to get education and a job? Although we all would like to believe so, girls and women are still subjected to gender bias in the classroom (Sadker and Zittleman 2013; see section 2.1 in Chapter 5) or at work, through the gender pay gap or discrimination in relation to their professional possibilities (Institute for Women’s Policy Research n.d.).

G. G. Bolich argues that women’s “open entry into occupations once exclusively the domain of men . . . has eliminated the need for outright disguise” (2007, 45). What has not been erased, however, is the “desirability of some gender mimicry—itself a form of transgender behavior. . . . In essence, [women] must project masculine qualities while preserving their femininity. . . . Women must mimic men, but not in too obvious a way” (Bolich 2007, 45), a clue that men are still the standard that women are pressed to imitate. Bolich also includes the increasing acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality as a reason for the disappearance of masquerade, as two women (at least in theory) do not need to maintain the façade of a heterosexual relationship (2007, 45).

Cross-dressing is also disappearing in other cultures, as shown in the imminent loss of Balkan sworn virgins, women that accepted to remain chaste and wore male clothes in order to become men in all concerns (Young 2000, Grémaux 2003), but remains a reality in other contexts. For example, Afghanistan still preserves the practice in the figure of girls, known as bacha posh, who are sometimes dressed and educated as boys, although there is no estimated account of how many girls have been (and still are) disguised in this way (Nordberg, 2010). In their case, having one gender identity until puberty and being forced to adopt another one afterwards has been reported to create gender dysphoria, as the

⁴⁰ American Journalist Norah Vincent decided to pass as a man, Ned, for eighteen months so as to study the differences between being socially male and female. She exposed her story and conclusions in Self-Made Man: One Woman’s Year Disguised as a Man (2006).
Chapter 3: Cross-dressing and gender-b(l)ending women

girls learn the possibilities given to boys only to be deprived of them later on (Hashimi 2014). Until gender equity is reached, however, this seems to be the only way for them to taste the rights that are reserved for males only.

It is evidenced from the review of the history of cross-dressing that there have been different attitudes towards the female cross-dresser at different times, and the image people had of her has been manipulated by the institutions in power. From the relative freedom in pre-Judaic religions there was a big change towards the stricter morality of Christianism, which only allowed the rejection of the “proper” dress code when necessary for preserving women’s virtue in the name of her family’s honor. This gender-b(l)ending strategy was also accepted when it exalted the sanctity of women who decided to leave behind their necessities in order to devote their lives to religious purposes. This image contrasts with the one of the female villain who masqueraded for erotic reasons or in order to commit crimes and even with the heroic figure of the woman soldier. In general, cross-dressing was neither at one extreme nor the other, and women decided to create male alter egos as a way to gain their individual independence and participate in all the activities and spaces that were banned to them. Even if there is a lack of information about the number of existing passing women and the real concerns that led them to cross-dress, it was an action that in some cases was perfectly planned beforehand, as it is shown by the changes women had to make consciously over their behavior in order to acquire a prototypical masculine performance.

These cross-dressing figures are not part of contemporary Western culture in the same way that they were in the past, and reports about present day male impersonators are rarely found. This does not mean, however, that society is not fascinated with passing women anymore: once in a while, a novel, a biography, a film, or any other piece of art reminds us of the appeal of someone who defies social and cultural expectations and achieves power in a world in which females are not supposed to enjoy it. Through their inventiveness and performance of masculinity, they make us question cultural constructions of gender, the base
which sustains the social, legal, economic, and political systems in Western and non-Western countries alike. In the following Part of this dissertation, I will try to identify the elements that characterize these disruptive figures in the selected corpus of YA novels and how their rebellion puts into question the same rules their cultures have taught them to respect.
PART 2:
Blurring the limits or imposing them?
Chapter 4. Composing the background: analysis of cross-dressing in literature

4.1. Introduction to Part 2

As it has already been pointed out in Chapter 2, the tension between realism and imaginative speculation is paramount for the construction of the fantasy and science-fiction genres, because the fictional worlds presented in these genres are directly linked to the societies and cultures where both authors and readers alike live.

In the case of the novels of my corpus of analysis, the construction of characters undergoing female-to-male cross-dressing is strongly linked to the situation of women throughout the history of Euro-American patriarchal societies. That is, cross-dressing was conceived as a strategy that allowed women to actively participate in the privileges reserved to white men by disguising the gender they were assigned at birth (as explained in section 2 in the previous chapter). As Victoria Flanagan has concluded after examining children and YA fiction, “these narratives cohesively employ cross-dressing as a unique and effective strategy through which to interrogate gender stereotypes” (2008, xv).

Thus, it is possible for authors to engage readers in questions regarding the nature of gender (Harper 2007), such as the ones that Judith Butler presents in Gender Trouble: “Does being female constitute a ‘natural fact’ or a cultural performance, or is ‘naturalness’ constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?” (1990, viii).

Even when these novels are targeted to young audiences, the depiction of inequalities between genders and of the injustice they imply is clearly addressed, and there seems to be an interest in encouraging the breaking of unfair social restrictions and the fight for the empowerment of women. Consequently, in this Part 2 of the thesis, the diverse interpretations of the act of cross-dressing will be examined, focusing on how we read these ambivalent figures, taking as a point of departure one possible analysis of the novels that constitute my corpus of study.
One source of debate when dealing with the use of cross-dressers in this ideological and political fight has been the questioning of whether the adoption of a male persona does really mean a disruption of the status quo or simply reinforces the idea that only men can enjoy privileges. This enquiry springs from the fact that, as commented above, female-to-male cross-dressers do not seem as concerned with demanding more rights for women as they are with their own well-being. However, cross-dressing (when used as a way to achieve power) may be understood as a challenge to the boundaries of the gender binary and a call of attention towards the unjust relation between power and the sexes. These issues have been mentioned before in studies of passing women in different literary and historical accounts, and different opinions regarding this topic have been defended. Catherine Belsey, for example, has stated its ambiguity by asserting that the tradition of female cross-dressing “reaffirms patriarchy,” at the same time that “challenges it precisely by unsettling the categories which legitimate it” (1985, 180). Myra Macdonald, on the other hand, believes that the female-to-male cross-dressing is not challenging enough, and she explains that the “power hierarchy ensures that it is more transgressive and unsettling for men to dress in female clothing than the other way round” (1997, 215). In her dissertation on passing women in the Neo-Victorian novel, Allison Neal follows Belsey’s argumentation and conceives female-to-male cross-dressers “in a constant state of ambiguity” (2012, 14). This ambiguity originates from the fact that there is always a way to understand the cross-dressing either as an attempt to displace the gender of a person and to demand rights for women or as a way “to reveal a form of flattery by imitation” of the masculine ways (Neal 2012, 14). Moreover, Neal reminds her readers that there are scholars who “claim that cross-dressing reinforces existing structures of patriarchal power” (Neal 2012, 14). Other academics on the field have pointed out, though, that the “[s]tories of female cross-dressers demonstrate the limitations that normative gender categories can impose upon individuals. They use the cross-dresser’s masculine success to promote a more liberatory and fluid conceptualization of gender” (Flanagan 2008, xv).

I personally agree with the idea that the reading of the female-to-male cross-dressing story as ambiguous is unavoidable, at least in my novels of study, as I
will try to explain throughout this part with my analysis. However, it is hard to deny that the existence of passing women deconstructs notions of gender and underlines its artificial nature (Butler 1990, 6), not to forget the fact that, contrary to the heteropatriarchal mainstream ideals, “females can be masculine and males can be feminine” (Kornfield 2011, 220). More than that, cross-dressing puts into question the idea that genders are static and unchangeable, therefore showing that the creation of non-binary genders and the reinscription of masculinity and femininity are completely possible. As a result, I truly believe that the cross-dressing act always leaves a margin for reading it as transgression and subversion against the establishment, a revolution, a gender-b(l)ending strategy. As a logical consequence of any attempt to break with the rules, “the state had [and still has] an interest in controlling it” (Howard 1993, 29).

Dekker and van de Pol argue that passing women were truly revolutionary in Europe because “[t]he crossing of the barrier between the sexes obviously eased the transgression of other norms, and vice versa” (1989, 101). As it has already been commented on section 3.2, Garber (1992) believes that the destabilization of the gender construct leads to the inquiring of other social constructions embedded in our society, including class. In other words, the passing girl or woman is a symbol that “incarnates and emblematizes the disruptive element that intervenes, signalling not just another category crisis, but—much more disquietingly—a crisis of ‘category’ itself” (Garber 1992, 32).

Such notions of destabilization have already been addressed in multiple works about Shakespearean comedies that include passing women among their characters, including Twelfth Night and Much Ado about Nothing. After studying both plays, Mihono Suzuki has argued that class and gender, for example, were considered analogous, so “the displacement from one set of categories to another seeks to contain anxieties concerning both” (2000, 140). Following this line of thought, and taking into consideration that “Shakespearian comedies provide a basic template for U.S. gender-bending stories” (Kornfield 2011, 219)41, it is

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41 I would extend this comment beyond U.S. fiction to Euro-American cross-dressing fiction in general, in which Shakespeare is part of a common culture. In the case of my corpus of analysis, there is an undeniable link between Rosen’s All Men of Genius and Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, with clear references to the play’s plot, including the reimagining of the kingdom of Illyria as a
undeniable that there is a force for subversion in the practice of cross-dressing in fiction, as it may suppose the destabilization of the whole social order.

This challenge to the boundaries and the social order may nevertheless be undermined by the way in which cross-dressing is treated, explained, and explained away, sometimes in very sophisticated and theoretically ingenious ways. Whatever discomfort is felt by the reader or audience . . . is smoothed over and narrativized by a story that recuperates social and sexual norms, not only reinstating the binary (male/female) but also retaining, and encoding, a progress narrative. (Garber 1992, 69)

Garber’s affirmation seems to me especially true in (mainstream) children’s and YA literature, in which the threat of revolution and the reversal of power finally collapses in endings that restore the status quo and reinforce the heterosexuality of the cross-dressing character, as shown also in studies of filmic cross-dressing narratives (Straayer 1996, Horak 2013). This turn of events is what Halberstam has called “the project of rationalization,” one of the “three different and often competing sets of motivations for the representation of a transgender life by nontransgender people,” together with the project of stabilization and the project of trivialization (2005, 54–5). According to him, the project of rationalization is carried on in order to explain a “behavior that seem dangerous and outrageous at first glance,” thus “[placating] mainstream viewers by returning the temporarily transgender subject to the comforting and seemingly inevitable matrix of hetero-domesticity” (2005, 55). The rationalization with which the author imbues the narrative transforms the transgression of the shero into what Sarah Kornfield (2011) considers a reassertion of “gender boundaries and norms, offering audiences an escapist fantasy that resolves into a happy affirmation of current social norms” (214). This reassertion is implicit in the structure she has

42 He considers as transgender individuals “all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity” (Halberstam 2005, 55; my italics). Such a conception of a transgender person widens its focus to include even those people who are not conscious of their challenge, or who may not consider themselves as going against gender normativity (for example, actors who play male roles in an all-female troupes).
outlined when dealing with the female cross-dressing narrative, in which she considers that “storylines maintain basic patriarchal structures as women cross-dress in order to gain access to masculine power, reestablishing the basic hierarchy in which masculinity is privileged and femininity is an unwanted gender and a disempowered class” (Kornfield 2011, 219).

According to Kornfield, the gender-b(l)ending themes that prevail in U.S. narratives come directly from Western (especially Greek) mythology and literature. Consequently, she has come up with a list of features shared by cross-dressing narratives in the United States that speaks volumes about what the audiences can find in this kind of stories:

(1) women cross-dress in order to achieve masculine power; (2) audiences always know who is biologically female and who is male; (3) women always return to their natural “femininity” after achieving their goals through masculinity; (4) heterosexual romances are predominantly featured; and (5) women experience some form of punishment for having passed as a man. (Kornfield 2011, 219)

All the narratives that constitute my object of study meet these main characteristics, as I will show in depth in the following chapters. It is interesting to notice that, although women in cross-dressing narratives hide their “real” identities to achieve power, their trespassing into the male sphere does not mean an everlasting change in the status quo in their world or in the status of the protagonist in question, as I will develop in Chapter 9. At the same time, their endings reinforce the heterosexuality of the sheroes in order to suppress any ambiguity regarding their sexuality, which could have endangered the power structure. Nevertheless, there is still a site for ambiguity, a whole world of possible readings and ways of undermining the social and cultural constructions of U.S. culture and the fictional worlds the authors selected for study have created.

Marjorie Garber has used the term “progress narrative” to refer to this type of stories in which a woman is “[c]ompelled by social and economic forces to disguise . . . herself in order to get a job, escape repression, or gain artistic or political ‘freedom’” (1992,70). Thus, cross-dressing turns into “an instrumental
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strategy” (Garber 1992, 70) to achieve the power that has been denied to them. She claims, however, that it is the heterosexual romance what forces the unmasking of their identity, turning the exceptions to this rule into something “fascinat[ing] by their aberrance” (Garber 1992, 70). The revealing of the identity of the gender-b(l)ender can be restricted to a limited number of people or could attempt to be a vindication of women’s rights, and both options are included in the novels I have decided to analyze, as shown in Chapter 9. Garber also considers these narratives as

both unconvincing and highly problematic, . . . because the consequent reinscription of “male” and “female,” even if tempered (or impelled) by feminist consciousness, reaffirms the patriarchal binary and ignores what is staring us in the face: the existence of the transvestite, the figure that disrupts. (Garber 1992, 70)

I consider Garber’s view of the progress narrative incomplete, because the masquerade also means a disruption and the possibility of breaking gender roles. Although I do not agree with the message that women should compare themselves with men instead of creating new models of achievement, it is important to spread the message (especially among young readers) that girls and women are able to study or pursue a career in whatever field they decide in the same conditions as boys and men. Likewise, it is unjust for them to face sexism or to be undervalued due to their life choices.

Attending to these initial cautions regarding the cross-dressing narrative, it is my objective in this Part to highlight the imprint of the subversive character of cross-dressers in the works of fiction that I am going to analyze in depth, but I am also concerned with the way in which the disruption of the status quo is portrayed. The questions guiding my analysis are the following: are the narratives I have chosen truly feminist, with an empowering message to their readers, or are they simply replicating the same unjust heteropatriarchal system in which Euro-American women of all races still live nowadays? In which way are the female characters showing their capacities and their wish to free themselves from oppression? How are the male personae adopted by the sheroes of these narratives
constructed and in which way do they suppose a threat to the power establishment?

In order to understand the narrative decisions of the authors and the struggles that these characters go through, the first step is to offer a short review of the novels in my corpus. A section with the key for the characters and plots is necessary to help the reader of this dissertation to understand the point of departure of the main characters, their motivations and their journey towards empowerment. In Chapter 5, I will analyze the setting of the stories and the environment in which the sheroes studied here have grown, as I firmly think that it shapes the lifestyle of these girls/young women before taking the decision to cross-dress, together with the process of adoption of their alter ego. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I will pay attention to the portrayal of the transformation of the cross-dressers to play the role they have set themselves to perform, but also to the conceptions of femininity and masculinity that the chosen novels may transmit to their readers. The last chapter in this part, Chapter 9, will focus on the return to femininity and the endings of the narratives, which are paramount to establish the way in which the message of the novels can be read and how these literary works may or may not depart from Kornfield’s characteristic’s commented above.

4.2. My corpus: a brief overview

In the introductory sections to this dissertation, I have mentioned who the main characters of the selected narratives in my corpus are and the reason why they could be considered as gender-b(l)enders (see section 1 in the Introduction). However, those short summaries were only concerned with the premise of the series and stand-alones that I have decided to analyze. I consider, then, that a more thorough account is necessary to understand the motivations of cross-dressers, but also in order to briefly introduce the reader to their worlds and to explain the characters surrounding them. Consequently, I will focus on the different protagonists, the situation that leads them to create a male persona and the most important secondary characters that interact with them. I will not try to present here an in-depth study of anything that happens in the novels, but just an account of the relevant information over which I will construct my argumentation.
in the following chapters, trying to be as clear and concise as possible. This decision to include here an account of the novels is linked to my resolution of addressing the different topics related to gender-b(l)ending instead of focusing on a different text in each of the following chapters. In this way, I hope to bring together the different narratives and reach collective conclusions regarding the trends in this type of U.S. YA speculative fiction.

It has already been pointed out that these are five different works, and though some of the matters addressed are similar, the point of view from which they are dealt with are unique in each of the cases. This responds to the fact that, although I have tried to create a corpus as homogeneous as possible, they have been written at different moments in the last decades (from the 1980s to 2014) by authors with different gender experiences, which I think shape how the sheroes are depicted in relation to their female bodies (as I will explain in section 7.1).

4.2.1. Tamora Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness: Alan/na

The tetralogy written by Tamora Pierce takes place in the fictional kingdom of Tortall, in which the readers do not only find a pseudo-medieval political order and society but also a fantasy place in which magic is given at birth to some people and goddesses and gods walk among mortals.

In Alanna: The First Adventure, the protagonist of the quartet is introduced: Alanna of Trebond, the daughter of a nobleman who has retired himself from the life at court after the death of his wife. 8-year-old Alanna is about to be sent to the convent to learn how to be a noblewoman (according to traditional views of gendered nobility), while her twin Thom is going to be carried to the castle, where he will start his training to be a knight. However, brother and sister are both unhappy with the fate that their father has chosen for them, since they do not conform to the roles that others expect from them: she loves riding, hunting, and fighting; Thom enjoys his studies and is clumsy and physically weak. Alanna’s reasonable solution to this problem is to swap places: Thom will go to the convent, in which boys are taught magic to prepare themselves to be sorcerers, and Alanna will go to the castle, pretending to be a boy (Alan) so that she can earn her shield. At court, Alan/na meets different people that will shape her education
and the decisions she takes: Myles of Olau, an old knight that acts as a father for
her; Prince Jonathan, who befriends her and turns into her lover later on; George,
a thief that earns her trust; and Roger of Conté, an evil sorcerer that tries to usurp
the throne.

All the installments of the tetralogy follow Alan/na’s life and her struggles to
come to terms with her identity as both a woman and a warrior gifted with magic.
Thus, the reader has the opportunity to witness Alanna’s growth as a person, from
her ten years to her twenties. This development shows the reader the problems
that she has to face in a world in which a female knight (a title that she achieves
by the second installment) is not only a rarity but a problem for the traditional
spheres of the society she lives in.

4.2.2. Scott Westerfeld’s Leviathan: Dylan/Deryn

If The Song of the Lioness presented a pseudo-medieval world, the events of
Leviathan develop during the First World War in an alternate history belonging to
the steampunk subgenre (see section 1 in Chapter 2). The alternative universe
introduced by Westerfeld is constructed on the basis that scientific research has
 branched into two different trends: biology and technology. On the one hand, the
countries that research on biology believe in Darwin’s theory of evolution, which
has allowed scientists to mix genetic material of different species (and even
lifeless matter) in order to modify creatures (as I will explain in detail in section 1
in Chapter 5). As a consequence, artificial animals populate the sceneries of the
Brisith Empire (and its allies) so as to serve human purposes, which range from
“traditional” practices such as carrying people to new ways of using these
creations as weapons. In contrast with these genetic developments, the Central
Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary have developed their technology to
create steam-powered machines to help both their population and their army.
Although most of the political alliances and situations are true to the conflict of
the First World War as the readers may know them, they are only a background to
tell the story of the two protagonists, who see themselves involved in the conflict
in different ways.
One of these two leading characters is Deryn, a young woman with a taste for flying that has decided to trick everybody into thinking that she is a man (Dylan) so as to enter the British Air Forces. Deryn/Dylan passes her exams and enrolls in the *Leviathan* (a flying whale that acts as a ship for the Air Forces) just days before the outbreak of the First World War. Stuck in the *Leviathan* as a midship(wo)man, Dylan/Deryn meets Dr. Nora Barlow, a scientist with a diplomatic mission that will change her conceptions regarding women and Alek, a prince of the Austo-Hungarian Empire persecuted by the German troops.

Though Dylan/Deryn’s secret is not discovered by Alek and Dr. Barlow until the last instalment of the trilogy, her relationship with them will shape her attitudes and the decisions she takes. Moreover, the topic of fictionality and artificiality is ever present in the novel, highlighting the effort Deryn has to do in order to create that male persona.

### 4.2.3. Lev AC Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*: Ashton/Violet

The world depicted by Rosen’s *All Men of Genius* is an alternative universe of a Victorian London in which the development of steam-powered engines have changed the ways in which science is practiced and considered. In many ways, there is a clear relationship between this novel and Westerfeld’s trilogy *Leviathan*, but the world that Rosen has created is more concerned with the tradition of the school story and it has direct influences of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, to which the novel pays homage.

The most part of the narrative is set at Illyria College, a school for gifted young scientists that does not accept applications by women. However, Violet Adams, a brilliant young woman who loves science, decides that the rules are not going to stop her and applies to enter Illyria under the guise of her twin brother, Ashton. Her aim is not only to learn from the best teachers that she can find in London, but also to show the whole world that women can excel at anything, including sciences.

The treatment of the protagonist’s cross-dressing in this novel is different from the rest of the corpus because Violet leads a double life in which her male persona Ashton is restricted to her stay in London. When she goes back to her
family’s countryhouse for her holidays she turns back into a young lady instead of keeping her disguise. This situation leads to her being very conscious of her body both when she is wearing her “normal” clothes and when she is cross-dressing, and leads her to embrace her femininity in the end in ways in which the other gender-b(l)enders do not (see Chapter 9).

4.2.4. Sara B. Larson’s Defy: Alex/a

Sara Larson’s Defy is the first installment of a trilogy set in the kingdom of Antion, in which orphan girls and boys are taken away to serve their king: while boys are trained and turned into soldiers, girls are imprisoned in the breeding houses. The breeding houses are places that resemble brothels for the army, in which women are raped by soldiers night after night to get them pregnant and give birth to more children that will feed a system of captivity and extreme inequality.

When Alexa Hollen and her twin brother Marcel lose their parents in the war, they decide that she cannot become a servant in the breeding houses and they create a male persona for her: Alex. Under disguise, the twins are forcefully enlisted in the army and enter the service of Prince Damian. However, after Marcel dies protecting the prince, Alexa discovers that the prince is in alliance with the rebels to overthrow his father and avenge those who have suffered under both his and his sorcerer’s tyranny.

While the rest of the novels show young women or girls that are ready to become a male persona to achieve different goals (to become a knight, to fly, or to become a scientist), Alexa is reluctant to leave behind her femininity from the very first page. There is no doubt that all the girls are somehow forced by their contexts to cross-dress, but in the case of Alexa it becomes a survival strategy, so the relation with her male persona is a bit different from other protagonists.

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43 The fact that twin brothers are a recurrent trope in the cross-dressing narratives of my corpus will be commented in detail in Chapters 7 and 8, as I consider the existence of these characters paramount for the construction of the identity of the passing women.
4.2.5. Kristin Cashore’s *Graceling*: Katsa

*Graceling* is the first of a series of stand-alone novels that portray the world of the Seven Kingdoms, a fantasy universe in which some people are born with gifts or magical powers, known as “Graces”. Although Graces may manifest at different points in their lives and may be from different natures, ranging from mind-reading to the capacity to make any mathematician operation, Gracelings (as they are called) are always recognizable by their heterochromia (different colored eyes).

Katsa, the protagonist of this story, is a Graceling that seems to have the power to kill. She works for her uncle, king Randa, but she is not happy about it: her uncle uses her as a thug, to threaten and kill those noblemen who have disobeyed or simply crossed him. Nevertheless, behind his back, Katsa also runs a secret organization created to help and protect those in need.

In one of her missions, she rescues the grandfather of Prince Po, who goes after Katsa to ask for help, as he needs to find out who wishes to harm his family. She decides to go with him and leave her life as an executioner behind, thus freeing herself from her uncle’s tyranny and discovering in the process that her power is not to kill but to survive.

Katsa is an interesting character to analyze in this corpus because her cross-dressing is sporadic and she disguises herself just as a way to hide her real identity (and not be underestimated by her opponents) in the missions for the organization she has created. Cross-dressing is for her an anecdotic strategy to which she does not really pay much attention. However, she is an interesting gender-b(l)ending character that tries to find herself while fighting against (and bending) gender roles and who poses attitudes and questions that seem to me inherent to the discussion of womanhood and feminism.

The creation of these five different protagonists speaks volumes about the situation of women in the U.S. and about how we decide to read these novels in a moment in which women still have to fight against inequality, regardless of what post-feminism tells us. Their problems, their doubts, and their battles are, I think, not far from the real concerns that many of us still have to face. And, at the same
time, the worlds in which their stories have been set are a mirror of Euro-American societies, both throughout history and at this exact moment. The speculative part of these places, the fantasy element, is but a way to distance the readers from their own worlds and to give them a new perspective on the issues around them, as I will develop in the next chapter.
Chapter 5. “I didn’t ask to be born a girl”: repressing femininity in sexist worlds

As it has already been mentioned, the sheroes of the novels in my corpus of study live in worlds that do not resemble our own: Antion, Tortall, The Seven Kingdoms, and the parallel Londons in which automata and flying whales exist are fictional spaces that provide a background to tell the stories of Alexa, Alanna, Katsa, Deryn, and Violet respectively. However, the situation of the young women in these stories parallels in many ways the struggles girls and women all around the globe have to face in their everyday life. The discrimination to which Violet is subjected in Rosen’s All Men of Genius because she likes mechanics resembles the current situation of girls who, regardless of their being interested in sciences, are discouraged to pursue a career in an almost all-men area. The sexualization of young women in Larson’s Defy mimics the situation to which children and young adults are exposed in the media and the never-ending fight for reproductive rights for women, including forced pregnancy and the current debate over surrogate motherhood. And all of the novels portray the condition of millions of women throughout history, highlighting the necessity to challenge and change hetero-patriarchal Western constructions that link power to white, heterosexual masculinities.

This association of power with being male has been constant throughout European and American history, which has led to an invisibilization of women in different spheres and a general acceptance that men and their achievements are more important. Monique Wittig stated that there are not two genders but, in fact, “only one: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general” (1992, 60). This same idea has been mentioned by Butler, who considers that “[t]he universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men” in a “criminal act, perpetrated by one class

44 Pierce 1992, 155.
45 To combat the prejudices against women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), there have been different initiatives in recent times trying to promote these studies among girls and young women, both in the U.S. and Europe. Among these we can find a Chicago non-profit organization called “Girls 4 Science” (http://girls4science.org) and the European campaign “Science: It’s a Girl Thing!” (http://science-girl-thing.eu/en/splash).
The narratives about female cross-dressers under scrutiny here, however, seem to disrupt the notion of the masculine as generic and question what is hidden behind the conception of the universal. By means of deception, the feminine subject gets to occupy a space among men and acquires their rights and privileges, showing the fragility of a socially-constructed status that is only maintained through a performance that can be imitated.

The fact that maleness is considered the universal has also as a consequence that it has been conceived to be more “genuine” than femaleness (and, by extension, femininity). Mainstream contemporary culture makes masculinity seem a “state one achieves by resisting societal norms and being one’s true self” (Nodelman 2002, 2) and, therefore, a more appealing status than the constraints of femininity, whose performance is “organized in direct opposition as marked and significant in public space if only as a transgression” (Harper 2007, 514). By being more natural and appealing, “masculine attributes are viewed more positively and consequently lead to greater social rewards” (Burn, O’Neil, and Nederend 1996, 2). All these prejudices induce people to think that the most “desirable solution to gender inequality is the adoption of traditionally male assumptions for everybody,” with women “reject[ing] the feminine role, tak[ing] off the costume and becom[ing] free to be themselves, supposedly natural and nonrestricted” (Nodelman 2002, 2). Following Wittig’s ideas, these beliefs and actions are what end up turning the masculine into the universal, something worth achieving, while the performance and performativity that sustain it remain hidden: “From this popular viewpoint, the artifice and repression implicit in our current constructions of masculinity remain invisible” (Nodelman 2002, 2).

At the beginning of their narratives, the perspective of the sheroes I analyze is built on such a premise: they think women do not have freedom, and all of the protagonists mention the constriction they feel when they are forced into female apparel (such as dresses, skirts, corsets, etc.). In contrast, boys are supposed to be freer to do (and wear) whatever they want. However, the construction of a male alter ego will show them that their conduct is constantly policed by other boys and men (see section 2 in Chapter 7) and some behaviors are to be avoided or they could be chastised by those around them. If playing a male role already shows that
masculinity can be a masquerade, the fact that there are restrictions regarding the way they enact their masculinity (from the way they move or dress to the expression of their feelings) highlights the idea of a regulated construction that has to be learnt and internalized in order to be successful.

For this conception of gender to apply, the authors need to build their fantasy or science fiction worlds following the same ideas that have been embedded in our culture. Instead of creating worlds that take as a point of departure equality between genders (or erasing the idea of gender completely), they decide to denounce our current situation by creating a background in which femininity is undervalued and masculinity is considered the universal. Males are conceived in these fictional societies as holders of power, while women are relegated to the domestic, private space. Victoria Flanagan declares that this is the onset for children’s literature engaging female cross-dressers, because in this way, they can “occupy subjugated feminine positions, their capacity for agency limited by pervading patriarchal practices” (2011, 14). This is the only way in which the act of cross-dressing can be triggered with the objective of achieving more power, as “[t]he societal norms that generally govern feminine behavior are temporarily displaced by the masculine disguise, allowing the subjectivities of these heroines to evolve through a dialogic exchange between masculine and feminine subject positions” (Flanagan 2008, 14). If femininity were valued as much as masculinity or it stood in a more respected position, women would not need attempt deception and “discard her femininity temporarily in favor of masculinity” (Flanagan 2008, 21).

This belittlement of the female gender (and with it, of women in general, and also of effeminate men) is grounded in patriarchal power structures, which systematically exert their violence against girls and women (Rich 1980). Violence, which has been normalized as part of Euro-American culture through insistent representation in the arts (including cinema) and the media, seems to have “become the norm, filling our world with acts of disruption, oppression, and alienation that underscore our need for security” (Franzak and Noll 2006, 662).

YA literature in particular has addressed violent acts in many different ways, including gender violence, offering new perspectives to readers and allowing
them to become acquainted with them. This inclusion has raised a debate in the educational community. On the one hand, many educators deny the quality of stories full of violence and have them banned in high schools and libraries (see section 2 in Chapter 1) or even censored during their translation to other languages, as editors may adapt or completely erase contents that they consider harmful for young people’s sensibilities (Wright 2016). On the other hand, other critics argue that the inclusion of sensitive material in readings targeted to young audiences is simply a strategy to mirror the world where adolescents live nowadays, in which sex, drugs, and violence are often an active part of their lives, both at school and at home (Cart 1996).

In my opinion, these readings should not be censored, as it is important to visibilize situations of violence, especially those that speak about the dangers of gender discrimination: making this violence disappear from novels will not stop the violence around us. On the contrary, by depicting it young people can be aware of the dangers of sexism and structural violence, and to include examples in the fiction (and non-fiction) targeted to young readers could be a way to make them think and recognize problems that could go unnoticed in other ways. Consequently, I am interested in showing how the real world is portrayed in the speculative worlds in my corpus and how these places hold a potential to set the story of the gender-b(l)ender character that realistic fiction may not achieve. Moreover, these new contexts created as background for telling the adventure of the shero have also the capacity to blur the thin line between fictional societies and the reader’s society by portraying a patriarchal system that tries to hinder the sheroes’ dreams while denouncing the institutional violence that sustains sexism.

5.1. Blurring the lines: fiction or reality?

Throughout Chapter 2 I have revealed the importance of speculative fiction to address issues from other perspectives, creating a space for criticism and revolution that “realist” texts cannot describe, since they are rooted in what is “logical” in our world. While realism is attached to a series of rules about what is possible and what is not, speculative fiction is free to create worlds in which magic is a factual everyday experience or where science has been developed to
the point that even the conception of “life” turns into a construction. The creation of such worlds highlights the artificiality of categories that appear to be mutually exclusive and which cannot be challenged in our world. In a way, as Judith Butler points out in *Undoing Gender*, fantasy (and science fiction, by extension) challenges the limits of reality and “allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (2004, 29). In other words, speculative fiction questions the “real” and blurs the line between fiction and reality, reminding us that these are human perceptions and, therefore, human-created concepts. Ideas such as time, religion, or language are constructions that have been reinforced throughout human history, and are therefore brought to the forefront when trying to talk about gender itself, another artificial feature that we have been forced to conceive as compulsory and fixed. However, I have already shown that different societies have had different notions of gender, and even the boundaries between the binaries have been blurred at certain points in history.

Consequently, it should not come as a surprise that the approach to gender in narratives about cross-dressing is closely linked to the artificiality of other aspects of human life, such as time, race, or the concept of nation. The literary genres in which these texts are inscribed are in itself an artifice that has to be taken into account in the analysis. And although speculative fiction could create societies in which the binaries were erased or in which female and male characters were treated equally, it has been proved that the gender inequalities in literature for young adults, together with the sexual stereotypes that these novels try to dismantle, can fuel the discussion of these issues among readers of any gender. In fact, these texts make adolescents realize that it is necessary for them to stand their ground and be assertive regarding their rights (Sprague and Risher 2002).

Apart from stimulating the debate on gender issues by keeping the depiction of current attitudes of discrimination, the texts manage to offer role models for young people. According to Jane Tolmie, speculative fiction authors use “strategies of analogy [that] enable insights into contemporary culture and gender politics, and that is one of the reasons why there is so much heavy-handed symbolism . . . and so many discourses of feminine dissatisfaction” (2006, 151).
Scholars seem to agree that the female role model is especially invested upon in “[b]oth the fantasy and young adult/children's markets” (Tolmie 2006, 150).

Keeping in mind these ideas, then, one may claim that the genre is more important than the setting: speculative fiction works at the symbolic and analogic levels, regardless of the location the story takes place in. I would like to argue, however, that by inserting their protagonists in worlds that resemble (but are never exactly like) past times, the authors are reinforcing the idea of constructiveness and artificiality that is inherent to the cross-dresser. In the case of my corpus of novels, this tendency can be seen in how authors use medieval or feudal settings (The Song of the Lioness, *Graceling*, and *Defy*) and Victorian/Edwardian (Leviathan and *All Men of Genius*) ones in order to underline the way in which time and gender are human creations internalized through the reiteration of a series of values.

In the case of the (pseudo)medieval setting, it has become the favorite background for fantasy stories. Feudal systems and the Middle Ages have become recurrent traits of a genre that drinks directly from the epic romances that conform the Matter of Britain, for instance, and which became a trend after the success of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolmie 2006, 148). This trilogy, as mentioned above (see section 2.3.1), established itself not only as a bestseller and renowned fantasy text but an example to be imitated by following generations of writers. Nowadays, the success of Mediavelism has permeated from adult fantasy into YA and children’s fiction, and has become, as Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl expound, “a locus for the coming-of-age story . . . as the traditions of the quest narrative merge with those of the bildungsroman” (2013, 8; italics in the original). In this way, “medieval literature . . . becomes an opportunity to investigate avenues of making one’s own way in the world and constructing one’s own family. If the innocence of childhood is preserved in literature for younger children, the Middle Ages also becomes a place to lose that innocence and find one’s self” (Pugh and Weisl 2013, 8). In other words, the setting and the tropes related to the epic fantasy (such as the discovery of one’s abilities or the journey through foreign lands) turn out to be an excuse for the exploration of the protagonist’s identity and the focus on the main character’s development.
In the case of Alanna, from Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness, her becoming a knight is an excuse not only for the critique of gender roles and their impositions on what girls and boys should aspire to, but also for Alanna herself to discover who she really is. In the same vogue, when she is finally knighted and starts to travel through Tortall and its neighbor kingdoms, she discovers the world around her and becomes acquainted with the fact that her experience is just a part of the whole picture. The Song of the Lioness is, all in all, the text of my corpus that remains closer to the notion of the Bildungsroman, since the reader follows Alanna’s growth along the quartet.

Larson’s Defy and Cashore’s Graceling also embrace the idea of finding oneself. Both protagonists, Alexa and Katsa, lose their innocence to the horror of war and violence, and are subjected to feudal systems in which their lives are worth less than those of the kings they serve. Both young women are set into a journey of self-discovery in which the “truth” about their identities is to be discovered: Katsa puts her powers to test and realizes that she has not been gifted with the ability to kill only to inflict pain, but to survive; Alexa learns that she has a supernatural ability for fighting, and that her family’s origins were a lie, a finding that changes her conceptions regarding the world she knows.

This development in the main characters is not new, however: the quest of the (s)hero has been around for centuries. The fantasy genre has not changed significantly since the times of Beowulf or Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Far from that, “[t]he fantasy genre has conservative tendencies: it sells fast, moves fast, repeats itself. Individual authors return again and again to the same theme or the same series. In some respects this market is slow to absorb new story-lines and ideas. It is often about popularity, not originality” (Tolmie 2006, 155). In other words, authors are reproducing the same ideas and strategies that were laid down by the epic romance, in part due to the “profitability and popularity” of the genre (Jakovljević and Lončar-Vujnović 2016, 100).

Nevertheless, the genre does not seem to be getting old-fashioned, because the topics with which fantasy deals still resonate with people: questions of identity, morals, violence, and gender are repeated because humans “are still governed by the same urges, needs, desires, and fears” (Jakovljević and Lončar-
Medievalism thus becomes a source for the construction of fantasy worlds, using the foundations of (European) history as “building blocks of . . . fantastic worlds, populated by characters not very different from those found in mimetic fiction or present reality, even when they wield swords, practice magic or fight unnatural creatures and opponents” (Jakovljević and Lončar-Vujnović 2016, 101). Some scholars have even stressed the special connection of medieval fantasy and adolescence, which turns such a time and place into a wise choice for setting YA fiction, as “[t]he medievalist fantasy world becomes a setting where the conflicts of the developmental ‘middle’ of adolescence can be safely negotiated in the ambiguous temporal ‘middle’ of the Middle Ages” (Sahn 2016, 150).

Yet the reader should not expect to find a close portrait of the Middle Ages in fantasy texts. Authors use these “building blocks” in the way they wish: they discard those which do not fulfill their objectives and include others that defy historians’ concept of truthfulness. Jane Tolmie has addressed this issue by explaining how fantasy is gradually changing the reader’s conception of history by decontextualizing historical data: “Ideas about the thing come to displace the thing itself, and in some sense come to be the thing itself: after all it is in the nature of medievalism to inspire forms of creative re-enactment” (2006, 149). A loose re-enactment that, according to Sarah Sahn, offers “an opportunity for counternarratives of dominant discourses of power” (2016, 150).

In a way, such means of building worlds could be comparable to the construction of masculinities that is carried out by female cross-dressers, in the sense that their performance is not a perfect copy of the hegemonic masculinity “grounded in domination, physical assertiveness, and egocentric individualism which still predominate in media images” (Romøren and Stephens 2002, 217). Instead, passing girls and women in these novels appropriate some of those traits that are said to be “masculine” and do not only create their own view and performance of masculinity, but alter them by “indiscernibly incorporating . . . attributes and behaviors deemed feminine in order to produce a unique gender performance that challenges the limiting boundaries of traditional masculinity and femininity” (Flanagan 2008, 44-5; see section 7.2.4 below).
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Allison Neal has noted that the intention of using a particular setting to recreate our history in a way or another “is synonymous with the transvestite act. Both assume an alternative disguise and covering for their performative expression and in doing so highlight that the performative itself is merely another performance” (2012, 32). Although she applies her statement to Neo-Victorian fiction, I think it can be extrapolated to all literature and its “quest for the pretence of the authentic” (Neal 2012, 32), which turns out to be a deception in which the reader participates through the suspension of disbelief. Neal asserts that “[t]o employ a cross-dresser or transvestite as a character or theme in a text allows the reader a dual perspective on both history and its adaptations and gender and its variations” (Neal 2012, 32). In other words, the act of setting a story of a cross-dressing (female) character in a world that resembles our own (with or without the fantasy element) enhances the artificial nature of story-telling, history, and gender.

Gender, however, has not always been a concern to depict in (pseudo)medieval settings. I have already explained how fantasy and science fiction did not portray many female characters in the past (see section 2.3.1 above), although this is not a problem of the genre per se but a problem in literature in general, a consequence of that understanding of “man” as the center of humanity itself. It comes as a surprise to nobody, then, that the first epic fantasies did not have the presence of female protagonists. There are some cases of women in main roles in romances, such in the Romance de Silence (first half of the 13th century, attributed to Heldris of Cornwall), the story of a woman who is educated and dressed as a man, but this example seems almost anecdotic in comparison with the number of heroes included in the literature from the same period.

Nowadays, it is easier to find female characters as main characters of fantasy novels, especially those addressed to a young adult audience, since it is widely accepted that young girls read more than young men and there are many authors focusing on this female readership. Consequently, authors (increasingly female in this genre) create sheroes and try to portrait them in positive ways so as to provide young readers with model figures. These sheroes, as Jane Tolmie explains,
“remain at their best when rising above external conditions that are against them in gender-based ways. They dress up as men to escape restraints on their freedom, run away from abusive fathers, escape unwanted marriages, avoid, avert or survive rape, or take up arms” (2006, 148). In other words, they “reject the status quo and forge new realities for themselves – magical, sexual, martial, religious and political” (Tolmie 2006, 153), providing a pleasurable experience for the female reader, a catharsis for those who have been alienated from society at any point because of their sex and/or gender.

Although Tolmie exemplifies her point by referring to Alanna, this could be made extensive to any of the female protagonists in the novels of my corpus. All of them, after all, are subjected in psychological and physical ways, and all of them escape appalling fates (rape with or without marriage, and a life of abjection and oppression) by dressing and behaving as men, a symbol of the privileges that we still find attached to masculinity.

Contemporary feminism becomes in these texts one of those building blocks that authors insert in order to get the message through, even though this means reinventing the conception of the Middle Ages that the reader may have. As a result, the patriarchal systems that oppress women in these worlds of fantasy are frowned upon by both authors and characters, inserting a voice that encourages the reader to disapprove such sexist attitudes. And it is precisely the inclusion of this ideological perspective that “makes it possible, and palatable, to continue to recreate” this type of stories (Tolmie 2006, 154).

Apart from this new point of view that allows authors to reuse the same tropes that have been around for centuries, the reinvention of the medieval under the light of fantasy acts as a positive setting for feminist topics in the sense that it provides “many compelling modes of escape from patriarchal structures,” including

- the development of magic/mind powers as a female escape from oppression (magic as the new cross-dressing);
- the thematization of female-to-female bonding and love-affairs as legitimate and desirable alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality;
- the frequent erasure of the hero as a necessary
aspect of the representation of the heroine; and overtly anti-Christian commentaries. (Tolmie 2006, 151-2)

There are many other strategies, but these are probably the most recursive, and are to be taken into consideration when analyzing the works in the corpus of this dissertation. However, the stratagems to portray strong female characters free from the boundaries of sexism are sometimes the very source of their oppression. For instance, in the following section I will comment in more detail on the fact that women with magic powers are subjected to even more violence due to the portrait of the supernatural as a racial/ethnic trait that may lead to discrimination against one sector of society. Furthermore, fantasy novels with a medieval setting tend to tell the story of just one liberation: the one of the main character. This is a dangerous message to the new generations, imbued in the ideology of neoliberal discourse and postfeminism (Gill 2007), by which “[women] are led to understand their own experience of successes and failures as a product of their individual effort,” never of the inequalities in the system (Gonick 2006, 6).

As it is expected, the actions of the shero and her individual success do not usually mean a deeper change in society. As Tolmie explains, the emphasis on the shero in contemporary fantasy fiction “remains on the individual woman rising above a system that keeps her down – triumphing over it, reversing expectations – rather than in cultural revolution or innovation, and oppressive structures continue to provide the basis for representation” (Tolmie 2006, 147). In a way, this is a reiteration of what has happened throughout history: a passing woman could not change the society where she lived because she remained a man to everyone until her death and, if she was discovered, she was considered an exception to the rule. Women who created a male alter-ego did not seem to be openly vindicating the rights of the rest, but were rather assuring their own individual comfort and the way to improve their lives. This is the same impact that the actions of female characters tend to have in fantasy worlds, as shown by the speculative-fiction novels analyzed here (see Chapter 9).

Finally, the medieval setting has been considered by some scholars as “an endeavour to take their readers into the time when the differences between imagination and reality were blurred and not so easily, so willingly, or so readily
noticed and accepted” (Jakovljević and Lončar-Vujnović 2016, 104). Such an understanding diverges from our contemporary conceptions of fantasy and reality, which are noticeably separated by common Euro-American notions of science and what is and what is not possible. In such worlds, magic is a fact, and anything can happen. And since fantasy becomes the objective reality of the characters, readers are forced to question their own reality through the suspension of disbelief that these stories require (Jakovljević and Lončar-Vujnović 2016, 109). Even more, the creation of a world in which current ideologies and different conceptions of gender are mixed with elements of the Middle Ages and components from the fantasy genre (such as magical forces, supernatural creatures, or enchanted artifacts) defies both the limits of reality and the fallacy of time, the traditional notion that past, present, and future are divided in a natural way.

But the deconstruction of the reader’s “reality” through speculative fiction and the challenge to our notions of time and history are even more noticeable in the case of science fiction, since it takes as a base for world-building our contemporary world. Alternative histories are especially interesting since their premise takes historical events as background for fictional stories. In the subgenre of steampunk, additionally, science is taken out of context so as to play a paramount role in the construction of the world. Westerfeld’s trilogy Leviathan and Rosen’s All Men of Genius, set in the First World War and the Victorian Era respectively, are good examples of how the authors mix real and fictional characters and situations in order to make readers conscious about the rewriting of history and the fallacy of time. And time is, precisely, a dominant leitmotif in the construction of Rosen’s narrative. It is interesting to realize to what extent the author highlights the concept of time as human-made, as in the case of Violet’s father traveling to the United States “to help decide where time should begin” (Rosen 2011, 17). And as the reader witnesses the possibilities of science enhanced to the point that the scientist achieves an almost god-like status, even biology and the concept of naturalness are challenged, a topic that brings us near to the discussions on posthumanism (Halberstam and Livingston 1995, Hayles 1999, Haraway 2004, Braidotti 2013) and even on interspecies research (Bonnicksen 2009).
The posthuman, which Elaine Ostry (2004) ascribes to the “lines crossed between organic and inorganic, and the human and animal” (222), blurs concepts that seemed fixed and clearly differentiated. Posthumanism, especially linked to science fiction, allows to rethink the possibilities of humanity, since “[w]hat it means to be human has never been more flexible, manipulated, or in question” (Ostry 2004, 222). Donna Haraway (2004), one of the most important theorists on posthumanism, has also drawn attention to the difficulty of defining the human in relation to what surrounds us and the instability of the line that separates categories such as “animal”, “machine” or even “physical” and “non-physical”: “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. . . . the relation between organism and machine has been a border war” (8). And if all these classifications are put into question, if “the certainty of what counts as nature—a source of insight and a promise of innocence—is undermined, probably fatally” (Haraway 2004, 12), why should not gender befall the same fate?

In Westerfeld’s Leviathan, naturalness is defied by the creation of animal species by the scientists (or boffins), who have used Darwin’s discoveries “to weave new species from the old, pulling out the tiny threads of life and tangling them together under a microscope” (Westerfeld 2009, 101). Artificial creatures (or “transgenics”, in the terminology of Bonnicksen [2009]) are engineered with the purpose of serving human beings, displacing machines to the point that “the great coal-fired engines had been overtaken by fabricated beasties, muscles and sinews replacing boilers and gears” (Westerfeld 2009, 66). In this world where all the engineered animals have a function, even the ships used by the British air forces are fabricated creatures, like the Leviathan itself, a whale full of hydrogen with the ability to float, and around which a whole ecosystem is maintained: “a vast web of life in ever shifting balance [with] a hundred other species were tangled into its design, countless creatures fitting together like the gears of a stopwatch” (Westerfeld, 2009, 71).

This comparison of the animals with the gears and the ecosystem that they sustain with an artifact enhances the idea of artificiality, and the thin line that separates what is natural and what has been created or modified in a laboratory.
Blurring the limits leads to people not being able to discern anymore if an animal is “artificial” or “natural.” Dylan/Deryn, for instance, assumes that Dr. Barlow’s pet has been artificially created and therefore has a purpose, a guess that the owner dismisses: “Tazza isn’t fabricated, and he isn’t for anything” (Westerfeld 2009, 154; italics in the original). Dylan/Deryn is not convinced even after this statement, and thinks that “[t]he creature didn’t look natural in the least” (Westerfeld 2009, 155). Such a thought is especially ironic as it comes from the point of view of a passing young woman, and readers may be forced to ask themselves what is the criteria used by her to proclaim what can or cannot be placed under the “natural” label, as her male persona is an “artificial” identity. That is, in the same way that all the animals are artificial (except for Dr. Barlow’s pet, Tazza), so it is the male persona Deryn has created, Dylan. The link between the creatures and Dylan/Deryn underlines the human-made constructions that surround us, from the recent advances in genetic engineering (symbolized by the Darwinian creatures kept by the Allies), to the mechanical work that creates “walkers” (anthropomorphic vehicles that are used in the war by the Central Powers), to the performance of gender (by Deryn), and class (by Alek, the other main character), to be analyzed in Chapters 7 and 8.

The humanization of non-human entities also presents a situation in which the limits between animal and human and between organic and inorganic almost disappear. It is not surprising to find then that one of the newest creations by the Darwinists is a loris (a type of primate that really exists, although in the novel it has been genetically modified to serve a purpose) that can draw conclusions to a given situation in a very human-like fashion. Dr. Barlow names them “perspicacious loris,” and they seem to be able to bond with humans (one bonds with Alek; the other with Dr. Barlow herself) and to exchange information with members of their own species. Although they do not speak fluently, lorises can repeat key words that they have learnt from humans, and they seem to understand their meaning, as they make logical connections:

“Revolution,” Bovril announced. . . .

The new beastie repeated the word, rolling it around on its tongue happily, then said, “Balance of power.”
Bovril chuckled at the phrase, then dutifully parroted it.

As Deryn watched with growing astonishment, the creatures began to jabber, each repeating what the other said. The single words became a torrent of phrases in English, Clanker, Armenian, Turkish, and half a dozen other languages. (Westerfeld 2010, 471-2).

These beasts show a behavior that seems almost human, but its existence is in itself a redefinition of cultural and social constructions, including gender and sex. When Lilit, a young woman belonging to the rebels of Istanbul, asks Alek if his loris is “a boy or a girl,” Alek answers that Darwinist creatures are not referred to by a masculine or feminine pronoun, they are just “it”: “Perhaps they’re neither” (Westerfeld 2010, 295). Although this reaction may signal a decision to denaturalize these creatures (he even denies them the possibility of having a name), there is a tension between Alek’s initial decision to see the loris as an object and his affection for the creature later on. At the same time, the reader is unable to see the loris (Bovril) just as a tool or an animal, as we all share information that is hidden to the other characters of the trilogy. For instance, Bovril is one of the first to know Dylan/Deryn’s secret, which creates a complicity between them. The fact that the loris’ gender or sex, then, is never commented upon, not even by the narrator, seems to be opening the ground for breaking the binaries, a fact that is reinforced by how the character of Deryn is depicted: in the end, she is forced to keep her male persona while also being acknowledged as a woman (analyzed in Chapter 9).

The collision between human and non-human qualities is also evident in the existence of anthropomorphic walkers. Although the ones belonging to the Central Forces look more mechanical, as shown by the different illustrations of them (Westerfeld 2009, 9, 177) and are far from reminding the reader of real people (figure 4), the Iron Golems driven by the rebel forces in Istanbul are a different case. One of them has a pilot’s cabin that looks “like a woman’s face, which seemed to be staring down at them, absolutely still” and a facial expression that “seemed to hint at a smile” (Westerfeld 2010, 219). Although the walkers do not really have conscience or a mind of their own and cannot be considered human, they diffuse the line between artificial and “natural” bodies when they
become an extension of their pilot’s bodies. When Alek asks Lilit how to know what the walker’s arms are doing, since he cannot see them properly from his place, she just tells him: “You just know where they are, as if they were part of your own body” (Westerfeld 2010, 296; emphasis in the original). She reiterates this idea of intuition later on, highlighting the notion that the pilot should become one with this cyborg exoskeleton: “The trick is to forget your own body. . . . Pretend that the walker’s hands are yours” (Westerfeld 2010, 298).

Figure 4: “The S.M.S. Beowulf”. Reproduced with permission of the artist.
On a smaller scale, the human body can also be modified in Leviathan’s world. For instance, Deryn and Lilit both use artificial wings, which I cannot help but read as a symbol of their privileged positions (one as a passing girl, the other as a leader of the revolution) in a world dominated by patriarchal forces (figure 5). On another instance in the novel, the reader meets Nene, an old woman who is forced to stay in bed, since she cannot walk. In order to help her to overcome her
disability, her bed has been designed to carry her around, therefore substituting the inferior half of her body, which is always hidden in the pictures that accompany the text. By deciding to portray her in this way, with only her head and one hand showing, Westerfeld and Keith Thompson, the illustrator, create the illusion that her body merges with the machine (Westerfeld 2010, 284, 287). In a way, Nene’s bed somehow looks like an exoskeleton itself, thus paralleling the mechanical golems that are going to be used to start the revolution.

This postanthropocentrism that questions the line between the natural and the artificial is also depicted in the way in which an injured human body can be healed by using a fabricated beast. When Deryn is wounded in her knee, the surgeon gives her one of these living beings, which “[attaches] itself to her skin like a barnacle, its tendrils creeping inside to heal the ligaments torn in the crash” (Westerfeld 2011, 379). Even though its origins are unknown, the creature has to be fed “on sugar water and a bit of sunlight every day,” (Westerfeld 2011, 379) a piece of information that makes the girl think that it may be “half plant and half animal, most likely” (Westerfeld 2011, 379).

The other science fiction novel in my corpus, Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*, shares many of the characteristics of world-building that I have already mentioned regarding Westerfeld’s Leviathan. Thus, both resort to the notions of naturalness and artificiality and put it in relation to the question of gender, even though the result is quite different.

In the same way that happened in Leviathan, *All Men of Genius* presents a world in which biological research has developed to unimaginable lengths. In this case, the scientists and students do not exploit genetic engineering, but they alter animals and mix species in surprising ways, creating chimeras that do not (yet) exist in our world. In one of the first experiments at Illyria College, students are asked to “gild a lab rat with snakeskin” (Rosen 2011, 120), which turns out to be a cruel demonstration of the power of human beings over animals. The teacher in charge of the experiment does not seem to have any kind of morals regarding the wellbeing of the animals, as he knows the result beforehand: most of them die when “their hearts give out” because “they don’t realize that the snakeskin is
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theirs now, just think it’s another snake that they can’t escape from” (Rosen 2011, 121).

Experiments with living animals are not only permitted in Illyria College but also encouraged, and some characters keep on working to create new creatures. While in Leviathan such animals were created in laboratories with the idea of fulfilling a task for humans, in All Men of Genius they do not have another purpose than entertaining people or being beautiful. In fact, the line between animal and human is never crossed, although Jack, one of Violet’s friends, develops “a working theory on transplanting organs between species” and hopes to “one day be able to use a chimpanzee to save a human life” (Rosen 2011, 421). Nevertheless, the scenes in which the bodies of animals are manipulated keep addressing the question of how thin the line between the natural and the artificial is. The question is reiterated by a scene in which the Duke creates a mechanical puzzle for Violet that, when solved, turns out to be a violet, “to show [her] the beauty of [flowers],” as he considered that she “would see it more clearly if [she] built one for [her]self” (Rosen 2011, 367). In this way, the artificial flower substitutes the real one and, through it, Violet is taught to appreciate nature in the same way that she appreciates the sciences and mechanical contraptions.

Another instance that blurs the thin line between the natural and the artificial is found in the rabbit that always follows Cecily, Shakespeare, which is covered in fur “carefully molded” and with seams “barely noticeable” (Rosen 2011, 127). In fact, everything in the College seems to be alive, even though sometimes it is only in a mechanical way, as Ernest tells Violet: “The inside of the building is constantly clanking with the sound of gears, like living inside a giant mechanical contraption” (Rosen 2011, 45).

It is also interesting to notice how the line between the human and the mechanical is crossed by the automata and the cyborg exoskeletons. Violet, the protagonist, decides to build an exoskeleton that could help humanity by lifting heavy burdens and doing tasks that cannot be easily carried out by individuals. She is especially concerned about women not having the same strength than men, and she thinks that female workers would especially benefit from her creation. Consequently, she decides to give the bronze automaton a female body and has it
dressed in female clothes. The exoskeleton, named Palas after the classic name for Athena, is close to the cyborg that Donna Haraway has imagined in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, the “hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (2016, 5). The facts that Violet chooses bronze to do it and that she sets as a target user working women are also noticeable, as Haraway’s cyborg identity finds its potential in women of color, “the preferred labor force for the science-based industries, the real women for whom the worldwide sexual market, labor market, and politics of reproduction kaleidoscope into daily life” (2016, 54).

The potential that is inscribed in Palas to destabilize gender and gender roles that could be inscribed in Palas is thwarted, however, by the presentation of the exoskeleton. This is a consequence of the fact that the mechanical body is not only given a female-shaped body but is also made feminine: “She wore a corset with silver lace patterns over it, and the hem of her dress fell low to the ground... Her face was inmaculate, looking heavenward, and coils of golden hair fell around her face from the loose bun they had been pinned into” (Rosen 2011, 423). While the exoskeleton in Westerfeld’s Leviathan was seen as a powerful goddess, Palas is a Victorian lady, beautiful and shaped according to patriarchal femininity. Moreover, Ashton/Violet decides that she is going to make a show of her presentation, changing from her male attire to a corset and skirts inside *Palas* and coming out as Violet. This moment symbolizes Violet’s (re)birth into femininity, as Palas has been crafted after her mother (Rosen 2011, 445). Choosing a conventional feminine aspect for her invention reveals the drastic change undergone by Violet during the novel and the message inherent to Rosen’s story, in which the female protagonist finds pleasure in femininity after having dressed in men’s clothes (as will be discussed in section 9.1.3).

Just as Ashton/Violet designs and builds Palas, Volio, another student, creates an automaton that resembles the features of Duke Ernest and dresses like him. When Ashton/Violet finds it at night she mistakenly confesses both her feelings for the Duke and her ruse, and she thinks that he has rejected her because she sees him (it) leave. The next morning, students and teachers see the contraption throwing itself from the astronomy tower to the river, leaving the
inhabitants of the College mourning for the Duke. This scene may echo the act of cross-dressing itself, and how appearances (especially the clothes) are a main component of the performance that helps to make it believable. According to Terry Castle, clothing “has always been a primary trope for the deceitfulness of the material world” (1986, 56) because we believe in a dressing code by which we tacitly agree to wear certain clothes depending on our gender, age, social class, or our religious affiliation, as commented in Chapter 3. Consequently, we expect everybody to follow the code and “we naturalize sartorial signs, treat them as a perfectly readable script—indeed, as the fulfillment of a comforting tautology” (Castle 1986, 57). In this way, clothing may blur the line between genders, as it happens with cross-dressing, but it may also challenge the border between the human and the mechanic, as seen in the aforementioned scene of All Men of Genius.

As explained in this section, then, the lines that we may have considered as fixed can be blurred in many different ways. Speculative-fiction genres seem to be, according to what I have pointed out, perfect tools to highlight the ways in which we can erase the barriers that separate supposedly exclusive terms. In this fashion, natural and artificial, human and non-human, organic and non-organic, physical and non-physical, and even the gender binary can be disrupted and reimagined. Thus, speculative worlds have also the potential to portray our contemporary world and comment on it, bringing to the forefront questions that may worry the reader. The representation of gender is especially important, as the gender-b(l)ender character often feels constrained by her society to adapt herself to the gender roles expected from her. These gender prejudices that the sheroes have to face are embedded in the social structure and exert a kind of violence over them that sometimes goes undetected because it is interiorized by society.

5.2. Institutional violence: when sexism is the norm

In order to analyze the violence exerted against women in the fictional worlds in the novels of my corpus, I would like to follow in this section the same conceptual model that Judith Franzak and Elizabeth Noll (2006) used in their analysis of contemporary YA fiction, taken from Van Soest and Briant (1995), which
considers that violence works at three different levels: individual, institutional, and structural-cultural. The first level refers to the violence exerted by and over individuals, while the other two “are the substrata of violence that underpin and support the presence of individual violence” (Franzak and Noll 2006, 663). I am not going to focus in this section on individual violence, as I will refer to specific cases during the analysis of the novels in my corpus (see Chapter 8) but on the way in which society in general or the establishment in particular wield violent acts and their power over women through structural-cultural and institutional violence. While the former works over principles of prejudices and cultural conventions, the latter is acted by official and powerful institutions within the state such as the “military, the police force, the church, and the educational system” (Curtin and Litke 1999, xii). Both types are intimately linked, and they sustain each other while supporting views on gender and race (plus other markers of difference) that lead to individual violence.

Although this type of violence is clearly overt in the use of military force (especially at times of war), most acts of institutional violence are accomplished in covert ways, with the consequence that they are interiorized and even tolerated by the population as part of the norm and the normal. Taking many different forms, it has acted upon oppressed people in different ways throughout history. And as part of the subjugated and marginalized, women have always been thought of as easy victims. They have been discriminated and held away from power positions throughout history, and their fight against male domination continues nowadays at different levels in diverse parts of the globe.

Women have been subjected to physical and psychological violence by the institutions in power for millennia, a situation aggravated in the United States and Europe when they also belong to other oppressed communities, including people of color, queer collectives, or any other person that diverges from what the power spheres consider “apt.”

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46 Another terminology on the topic was developed by the sociologist Johan Galtung (1990), in which the triangle shaped by individual, structural-cultural, and institutional violence used here turns into direct, cultural, and structural violence. Pierre Bourdieu also developed his own terminology, in which the structural-cultural violence was known as “symbolic violence”, which he explains at length in *Masculine Domination* (2001).
By including institutional violence not only in the plot of their novels but as a trigger for the desire to cross-dress, authors are clearly denouncing a biased and unjust system that has to be questioned and challenged if we want to eliminate sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. By creating a world in which girls and women are not able to study, work, or hold power, authors draw a parallel with our own world and its gender inequalities, and thus denounce situations in which covert institutional violence has become the rule.

Regarding this topic in the YA novels studied here, I will distinguish three different types of violence exerted towards women regarding the institutional organisms from which it comes: educational, military and religious. Given that religion is normally not discussed in (U.S.) YA fiction, as many scholars have pointed out (Kramer 2011, Rawson 2011, Hartzler 2014), I have included in that section questions regarding users of magic.

5.2.1. Education and the military institutions

In the majority of the chosen novels, education and the military establishment are interconnected, as at least three of the authors deal with worlds at war: in Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness there is a conflict between two kingdoms that ends up in several battles; in Westerfeld’s trilogy Leviathan, the First World War has just erupted; and the plot of Defy revolves around a rebellion against a tyranny. Thus, part of the education the main characters receive deals with the use of swords and other weapons, objects that are either forbidden to women or simply thought to be inadequate for them.

In The Song of the Lioness quartet, the protagonist, Alanna, has to trick everybody into thinking that she is a boy if she wants to get trained as a knight: girls are forbidden to study at the castle, and the idea of a noblewoman learning the code of chivalry is inconceivable. Knighthood, after all, is an occupation only allowed to males from noble families, evidencing a form of discrimination also in terms of class. This discrimination comes from a separation in education that affects girls and boys. Thus, during the initial pages of Alanna: The First Adventure we are told that noblemen and noblewomen are educated differently, just as it happened in the medieval days of the novel and, to a certain extent,
continues to be so nowadays, when many classrooms are still subjected to gender bias (Sadker and Sadker, 1994; Sadker and Zittleman, 2013).

Alanna complains to her brother that if she goes to the convent to study, following her father’s desires, “I’ll have to learn sewing and dancing. You’ll study tilting, fencing—” (Pierce 1992, 4). Furthermore, noblewomen are not given any other option of subjects to study, while noblemen can choose between different branches of knowledge:

All girls from noble families studied in convents until they were fifteen or sixteen, at which time they went to Court to find husbands. Usually the oldest son of a noble family learned the skills and duties of a knight at the King's palace. Younger sons could follow their brothers to the palace, or they could go first to the convent, then to the priests' cloisters, where they studied religion or sorcery. (Pierce 1992, 10)

The prohibition on women to study sorcery, religion, or knighthood at the same level as men leaves them defenseless and dependent on their families and husbands to take care of them. This educational system, consequently, favors the idea of female submission and passivity that allows the patriarchal institutions to hold all the power while subjecting women to the will of the men around them, either fathers, brothers, or husbands.

Only those women who devote themselves to religion are allowed to handle weapons, as Alanna glimpses in her first trip to the city, when she sees “a troop of women dressed in armor, the guard of the Temple of the Great Mother Goddess. These women were armed with great double-headed axes and they knew how to use them” (Pierce 1992, 22-3). However, these women are bound to a religious cause and, therefore, are not free to do their bidding, as they are “confined to temple grounds” (Pierce 1992, 23), whereas men can roam about and set out on adventures.

Education, or the lack of it, is one of the pillars that sustain privilege in patriarchal societies. By leaving women uneducated and defenseless, they are kept away from power positions, at the same time that it makes them vulnerable to abuse. In contrast, “educated women are less likely to marry early and against their will; less likely to die in childbirth; more likely to have healthy babies; and
are more likely to send their children to school,” therefore helping “break the cycle of poverty” (UNICEF, 2015).

However, it is as interesting to notice who are receiving this education as it is to notice who are teaching these notions. In the world created by Tamora Pierce, magic has been institutionalized in a religious educational system, and it seems that the Daughters of the Goddess (female priests) are given the role of initiators to magic to both girls and boys who have chosen the study of sorcery. Nonetheless, although women are the ones teaching the basis of the art, the ones controlling the most powerful magic are, unsurprisingly, men (male priests and sorcerers). This educational system does nothing but support the idea that women are not allowed into the higher ranks, in a reflection of what is still happening in universities all around the world, in which women are not only paid less but have difficulties to achieve the highest positions (Hannum et. al 2015).

The defenselessness of girls and women and the need to educate them are two of the topics that are dealt with in Kashore’s *Graceling*. As Katsa, the protagonist, travels through the seven kingdoms, she becomes aware of the unjust situations girls undergo, in which their protection always depends on their male siblings:

“Does anyone teach the girls of the inn to protect themselves? . . . Do you carry a knife?”

“Our father protects us, and our brother,” the girl said, simply. . . .

[She] wondered if other girls in Sunder, and across the seven kingdoms, carried knives; or if they all looked to their fathers and brothers for every protection. (Kashore 2008, 149)

Contrary to those girls, Katsa has had a training on weaponry in her uncle’s castle and has grown up with a magical power for violence and survival. Thus, she has never thought about the situation of other girls and women outside her circles, and this encounter opens her eyes and triggers her decision to spend her life teaching girls self-defense. Martha MacCaughey (1998) has acknowledged how “girls do not develop a relationship with their bodies as agents, as instruments of action,” (280) and thus they unwillingly participate in the roots of rape culture, as their “physical incompetence relative to men . . . [helps] men win verbal and physical fights with women . . . Male dominance is inscribed in the bodies of
women and men, and thus imposes itself as self-evident and natural” (McCaughey 1998, 281). In a way, it is even possible to read Katsa’s will to learn and teach self-defense as a type of performance similar to gender, in which women must interiorize their training as a “reprogramming regimen for the body” (McCaughey 1998, 281), an incorporation of a “new bodily disposition, but not from a natural state of passivity and helplessness” (McCaughey 1998, 292), in the same way in which cross-dressers learn that masculinity brings agency and autonomy.

Education, in Katsa’s world, does not really equal knowledge, but a way of fighting sexism in a physical way, overthrowing the idea that men have power over women and turning the female body into “a potential locus of resistance” instead of being “the locus of patriarchal power, ideology, or brutality” (McCaughey 1998, 281). By helping girls and women to defend themselves without external male aid, Katsa is displacing the long held stereotype that female individuals are passive and helpless, and she is consequently rebelling against the gender binaries and associated prejudices, not only questioning them but contesting them: “How absurd it was that in all seven kingdoms, the weakest and most vulnerable of people . . . went unarmed and were taught nothing of fighting, while the strong were trained to the highest reaches of skill” (Cashore 2008, 287). However, at the same time, Katsa’s wish to include women in the rhetorics of violence is problematic, as I will explain in section 1.2.2 in Chapter 9.

By forcing women to remain objects instead of subjects with agency, the government makes sure that females can be used for its own purposes: in Graceling and The Song of the Lioness, this purpose is to keep them away from power and to ensure that they marry and have children. In Larson’s Defy the inclusion of women in educative environments or the military is out of the question. In this way, the king makes sure that they cannot fight back when they are captured and imprisoned in the breeding houses for reproductive goals. In a scene that faintly echoes Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), we discover that orphaned children are being taken captive to be repeatedly raped in order to supply the country with even more soldiers to send to the war. Trying to escape such a fate, Alexa passes as a boy, although the horror of what would have happened to her haunts her throughout her deception: “I watched helplessly as the
girls followed the guards’ nudges and shouts, most of their faces resigned. This could have been me, forced into a life of rape, attempting to breed as many new soldiers for the king’s army as possible before my body gave out” (Larson 2014, 18). However, while Katsa in *Graceling* decides to use her advantageous position in order to end with the objectification of girls and provide them with a chance against violence, Alexa cannot do anything for the girls and women in the breeding houses because her male alter ego does not hold enough power: “There was nothing I could do to stop this — there was nothing I could do to keep these girls from their fate. No matter how badly I wished I could” (Larson 2014, 18).

In contrast with the world presented in *Defy*, the institutional violence in Westerfeld’s *Leviathan* is subtler. It seems, at least, that there is no legalized physical mistreatment of girls and women by the government, although they are forbidden from accessing any military institution. Deryn may identify this prohibition as an injustice, but she does not question the rules and instead considers that the problem generates in her own body: “It just wasn’t *fair*, her being born a girl! She knew more about aeronautics than Da had ever crammed into Jaspert’s attic. On top of which, she had a better head for heights than her brother” (Westerfeld 2009, 24; italics in the original). By changing the focus from the educative (because aeronautics is not taught to girls) and military system to being born a female as the perpetrator of the injustice, Deryn is inscribing herself as an unwilling oppressor in the patriarchal system. This is one of the pillars that sustain this institutional violence, as Bordieu indicates in *Masculine Domination*, because this type of repression is based on “the relation of complicity that the victims of symbolic domination grant to the dominant” (2006, 41-2), a paradigm from which it is difficult to escape without the necessary conscience and education. Thus, it should surprise nobody that there are several instances of Deryn expressing sexist thoughts that reproduce gendered behaviors, linking femaleness to madness (Westerfeld 2010, 94) or to flirting and romance (Westerfeld 2009, 388).

But she is not the only one that falls into these dangerous prejudices and binaries. Alanna from *The Song of the Lioness* and Katsa from *Graceling* commit the same mistake, to the point of looking down on femininity and all the girls and
women around them that may embody what societies generally consider feminine qualities (see Chapter 7). These comments are always contested by other characters that are set as role examples for both the gender-b(l)ender and the reader. Consequently, the protagonists’ acceptance of these binaries should not be understood as an attempt to perpetuate these prejudices but as another consequence of the sexist education they receive and a critique of the education readers get at school, at home, or out in the world. Education does not start or end in the primary, secondary and higher education institutions, but it is a cumulative experience of what we are taught and what we learn on our own. Accordingly, people are shaped not only by the institutional violence women undergo throughout their education, but also by the structural-cultural violence that permeates U.S. society. And though there is a general misconception that this ideology is only sustained by men, because they are the ones that hold the power and benefit the most from the perpetuation of this system, women “can be as wedded in patriarchal thinking and action as men” (hooks 2004, 23). As bell hooks poses, the importance of recognizing and highlighting “the role women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture” is necessary “so that we will recognize patriarchy as a system women and men support equally, even if men receive more rewards from that system” (2004, 26). Far from limiting ourselves to this recognition, though, it is also important to realize the role education plays in changing our views, and the necessity of a feminist education to avoid such preconceptions.

Finally, to this respect, it is necessary to mention the background situation of Rosen’s All Men of Genius. The protagonist, Violet, resolves to enter Illyria College, which is supposed to be “the best scientific college in the world” and to accept “students upon proof of their scientific genius alone” (Rosen 2011, 25). Since they do not accept women’s applications, she is forced to pass as a boy to fulfill her dream of being a scientist and with the hope of making people realize that women and science are not incompatible. While Deryn in Leviathan or Alanna in The Song of the Lioness create their male personae for individual, selfish reasons at first (although they reconsider their role in relation to other women afterwards), Violet is concerned with both her personal growth and with
setting an example that would let women have complete access to higher education: “She would have to toughen up if she was going to prove herself. If she were to abandon the plan without its success, she would not just be letting herself down, but, in the most melodramatic sense, all the women of the world” (Rosen 2011, 135-6).

Regardless of Violet’s desire to help all women to have an opportunity, she is already privileged by birth, and her high status as a noblewoman is pointed out by one of the other female characters (Fiona), who reminds her that her possible success will only benefit women who can afford a basic education: “you can keep your scheme going until the very end, when you win a victory for rich girls who finished school and want to go on to college” (Rosen 2011, 297; italics mine). Fiona, a poor actress that has difficulties to survive, is defending the necessity of intersectional feminism, a point that is reinforced by the different female characters that appear in the novel, from different backgrounds, all of them marginalized and with diverse strategies to overcome the injustices of a society in which the rich, white man is the one in power.

*All Men of Genius* is also the only novel in which a precedent passing woman is mentioned. However, as the marginalization of women is institutionalized and legal, trying to go against the rules ends up in punishment for her. Thus, Violet and her brother, Ashton, discuss the case of an Oxford student who was discovered to be female:

> “Dressing in a man’s clothing is illegal. . . . More likely, you would just be sent to prison for upwards to twenty years. . . . And that is just if the duke finds you out. I hope I need not dwell on the… unpleasantness that can befall a young lady surrounded by men. I just read of a Beth Kindly, who, when we were children, tried to disguise herself as a man and enter Oxford.”

> “I know,” Violet said quietly. She had read of her as well. There had been an article in the paper two nights ago, following her release from prison.

> “Her roommate discovered her and took gross advantage—.” (Rosen 2011, 38)
Whereas Beth Kindly did not exist (in contrast with other women mentioned in the novel, such as Ada Byron or Queen Victoria), her fate reproduces the situation of passing women at the time. Being in all-male communities (in the army or at university) meant a double threat for them. On the one hand, if they were spotted by the men in charge, they would lose their privileged position and would be sanctioned for their deception (most likely, as Ashton points out in the quotation above, with a prison sentence). On the other hand, they were vulnerable to blackmail and abuse, as their bullies knew that if their secrets were to be disclosed, women would be condemned to social ostracism (see section 2 in Chapter 3). Cross-dressing, then, appears as a risk, a transgression of the established rules or, as Victoria Flanagan states, “an act of social rebellion” considered “synonymous with agential subjectivity in children’s literature” (2008, 22). However, going back to the fifth point of Sarah Kornfield’s traits shared by American cross-dressing stories (listed in Chapter 4), this rebellion is equally punishable because it crosses the boundaries between genders and, according to patriarchal laws, this behavior should be corrected to prevent women from taking power.

After this preliminary analysis, I consider that the institutional violence to which the protagonists are subjected shows a trend regarding the genre of each of the narratives. Thus, in fantasy worlds (The Song of the Lioness, Defy and Graceling), the attacks against women as part of the campaign of institutional violence are partially overt: the educational system and the patriarchal society have left them without possible defense against physical harm or abuse, even though they have to face physical violence frequently. Moreover, there is institutionalized rape as part of the government’s program in the case of Defy, and the complete absence of women in power positions in all of them. Although those who take advantage of their positions to abuse women in a physical way are clearly labelled as villains (such as King Hector and the master of the breeding house in Defy, or the kings Randa and Leck in Graceling), the covert violence is less noticeable, just included in the lives of girls as a disadvantage for being born female. Nonetheless, institutional and structural-cultural violence is not completely invisible, and it is contested by the cross-dressing act, evidencing that
women (and the men that sometimes help them) are not satisfied with the roles that their societies have designed for them. In contrast, in the science-fiction works (Leviathan and All Men of Genius) there is covert institutional violence that forbids the presence of women in certain spaces and subject them to gender roles and prejudices, but the readers do not get to witness acts of physical gender violence.

The educational systems depicted in the novels maintain the low consideration men have of women and make women despise their own bodies and believe in their lower status, thus leaving them powerless to fight against injustices. Women are left without public or political influence from early ages, and new generations are taught to follow the same harmful system that segregates them in their adolescence and adulthood. This sexist education perpetuates individual and cultural violence, aiding to hold a system of traditions that needs to be disrupted. Consequently, I read the act of cross-dressing as a transgression, a call of attention to educational institutions, denouncing the need of the establishment to focus on the necessities of girls. For me, moreover, the critique does not end in the necessity to transform education to include girls, but to consider their needs and not simply create a so-called universal standard that fails to be inclusive and is rather recognizable as masculine. Such a standard does not allow girls to be themselves, but shape them and forces them to follow a criterion based on a biased design, so that we will never find equity in these (either fictional or historical) societies.

Following this line of thought, the metaphor of the female cross-dresser, forced to be a boy (and not simply to be like a boy), is a reflection of what the educational system (and later on our working career, or any public space) asks from women: to imitate men in their ways, but compelling us not to abandon also our “duties” as women. Society coerces women to “enter the professional track on terms created according to a male standard while completely cordoning off their role as women in the private sphere” (Rottenberg, 2014, 150) and if we want to end this systematic rejection of femininity as something inferior, we should challenge and transform the institutions that teach us to replicate these prejudices.
5.2.2. Religion and magic

If education and the army in speculative-fiction worlds recall the same problems that pervade our world—given that YA literature authors tend to build systems which are recognizable to their readers— the religions depicted are not an exception. In fantasy novels, magic is included along with religion and it tends to be linked to religious rites and divine powers, so that most of the time the reader finds echoes of cults and ceremonies taken from past or present societies. In the case of the corpus of this dissertation, the novels present religions and magical systems that support the sexism in their societies, creating inequalities between the sexes and fueling stereotypes instead of dismantling them. While such construction of the world allows authors to make discrimination visible in all spheres of life, it may be argued that the same could be achieved by contrasting a just society and the situation of the reader in her or his everyday life.

Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness is the case in which the magic system and religion are most clearly linked. Though I have already hinted that magic is institutionalized and therefore included in the education given to both girls and boys, women are apparently always gifted, and thus “[m]agic is consistently associated with femininity” (Flanagan 2008, 47). Flanagan has noted how the “[s]upernatural power is not always constructed as a feminine attribute in fantasy literature, but Pierce frames Alanna’s ‘gift’ within a feminine discourse” (Flanagan 2008, 47). Even so, men are the ones allowed to have power and those who turn into sorcerers with positions at court (as explained in the previous section) while women who develop their powers and use them on a regular basis (witches) seem to be allowed to take jobs only as healers, reinforcing the stereotype of the woman as caregiver of others or as maternal figures.

Alanna is the only woman in the quartet that uses both magic and her fighting skills, two different ways of approaching violence that in her world seem to be mutually exclusive: there are sorcerers and there are soldiers, but no one is doing both things at the same time except Alanna (see Chapter 7). In fact, magical powers are distrusted by some characters such as Liam, who does not consider that warriors could be honest in combat if they use their Gift. More than that, sorcerers are not allowed to learn Shang (the type of martial art that he practices),
because they are said to be undisciplined (Pierce 1998c, 57), a statement that Alanna understands as an insult: “We cheat, you mean” (Pierce 1998c, 57). Liam finally explains that the source of his distrust is his own fear, but Alanna feels that she has to explain herself for being something she cannot change (just like her not being born a boy): “I can’t change what I am. . . . I never asked to be half witch and half warrior” (Pierce 1998c, 59). I will not explain here Alanna’s relationship with her own magic, as it is closely linked to her femininity and plays a major role in her coming to terms with her identity, a topic that will be developed in Chapter 7, but I find it of paramount importance to mention that magic seems to be more of a drawback for her (and for women in general) than an advantage, particularly when her success is put into question due to “some sort of supernatural cheating” (Tolmie 2006, 153).

In contrast to Alanna’s situation, in which she is distrusted for achieving power, the rest of the women in The Song of the Lioness quartet are presented as vulnerable, even when they know how to use magic. In the type of magic they use, violence is out of their possibilities, and they turn into sacrifices to the cause or martyrs that die at the hands of men. An example of this can be found in the third volume of the tetralogy, The Woman Who Rides Like a Man, when Alanna is asked to see a healer to check if the woman is safe. When she arrives to the small town where the sorceress lives, Alanna discovers that the woman is about to be burnt at the stake by her neighbors, who have been instructed by a priest to get rid of her. Alanna (who is now a sworn knight and does not try to pass as a man anymore) rescues the woman, who explains that she has been stoned and is about to die. Nevertheless, she is not angry or even upset about the treatment she has received and worries only about her neighbors:

“They stoned me yesterday. . . . My poor children, who will look after them now?”

“Ye’re sorry for them?” Coram asked, astounded.

“It has been a terrible winter. . . . The food was running out. Yahzed’s priest told them it was because of me: that the foodstores would renew themselves if they had me killed. They were hungry.” (Pierce 1998b, 220-1)
Apart from the obvious link that could be established between this (symbolically) nameless woman and motherhood, a connection that is reinforced by the expression “my poor children” and the selflessness that has turned into a stereotyped characteristic of motherhood, the woman is a victim of religious fanaticism. She is a scapegoat that turns the mind of the population from their own hunger and their sense of being abandoned by their divinities and governors towards the act of violence. As the woman fulfills the characteristics of being elderly and having neither family nor someone who may intercede on her behalf, the priest uses her to his own advantage. This scene accurately reproduces the events of the witch hunting in Europe and its colonies:

By concentrating on the female sex and the ‘old crone’ in particular, owing to her idiosyncrasies, the elite easily sold to the masses . . . the correctness of blaming this minority for social inadequacies. . . . Any female scapegoat chosen by the establishment was either feared or an ‘easy target’ (no power, no money, physical weakness etc.). The other characteristic shared by these ‘labelled witches’ was these authorities successfully made them acceptable victims to most of the general public by manipulation of facts and distortion of reality. (Dawson 2007, 59)

Without the institutional forces paying attention to the necessities of women, we are doomed to go back to this stage in which girls and women are both the most vulnerable targets not only for the lack of physical force and training, which are denied to them, but for the lack of legal protection. The most extreme application of this idea is portrayed in Defy, as it has already been mentioned, in which orphan girls are the target for rapes endorsed by the government.

Curiously enough, in The Song of the Lioness quartet we find a balanced, equalitarian pantheon of gods and goddesses, where, in fact, the main divinity is a goddess. However, once again she is ascribed characteristics that have become stereotypes of femininity, such as motherhood, healing, and a strong connection with nature.

The contrast between magical abilities and feminine behaviors is taken a step farther in Graceling, as some people develop a gift or magic power that makes them special but there are some concerns over the gender of the holder.
Gracelings (as they are called) are forced by law to serve the king of the land they live in. Stigmatized by their magic and by the law, which considers them different from the rest of the citizens, they are recognizable by their heterochromia, a peculiarity that resembles a racial sign that makes them stand out in any crowd. Deprived of their freedom and marginalized as outcasts, Gracelings are objectified for the purposes to which their gift can be used (if the people in power consider that they are useful at all) and are held as possessions that can be shown by their proud owners to the rest. This is the situation in which the reader finds Katsa at the beginning of the novel, when her uncle boasts about her gift as if she were an animal in a menagerie: “Randa kept his distance from her. He preferred to look down on his lady killer and call out to her, because his yelling brought the attention of the entire room to his niece, his prized weapon” (Cashore 2008, 47).

Gracelings, however, are still subjected to the same stereotypes that everybody else suffers. According to these prejudices, girls are usually thought to be in possession of harmless powers. When Katsa’s gift had not revealed itself yet, people supposed that she would develop inoffensive abilities: “What is your Grace, my sweetness? Storytelling? Mind reading? I know. You’re a dancer” (Cashore 2008, 7). Consequently, when she is discovered to be supposedly Graced with the ability to kill, she is considered a monster, unnatural even among the marginalized, because society has marked that the power of violence is not adequate for a woman: “It was fine to eat the meals of the king’s chef, who was Graced with cooking, or send their horses to the king’s Graced horse doctor. But a girl Graced with killing? This one was not safe” (Cashore 2008, 7; italics mine).

This is not an issue isolated to Cashore’s fantasy world. The relation between women and violence has been studied in depth, showing that women who commit violent acts are accused of a double transgression, according to Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, in the sense that “a violent woman has committed two crimes: her violence and defying gender stereotypes that deem her incapable of that violence” (2008, 7). These are the same stereotypes which render them as “vulnerable sex objects—objects that brave and physically capable men protect, save, and have sex with” (McCaughey 1998, 279-80), a part that neither the main
character of *Graceling* nor the other protagonists in my corpus are happy to perform.

The fact that people in Katsa’s world insist that she is not normal reinforces the sexist views towards the agents (men) and objects (women) of violence that Katsa herself is trying to change by teaching girls to fight. However, being subjected to the fear and loathing of everybody around her, Katsa starts to believe that she is the real problem: the idea that she is abnormal, an abomination, becomes grounded in her mind. Moreover, as she does not conform to femininity, she sees herself as even more of an outsider: “She wasn’t normal. A girl Graced with killing, a royal thug? A girl who didn’t want . . . perfectly handsome and thoughtful men, a girl who panicked at the thought of a baby at her breast, or clinging to her ankles. She wasn’t natural” (Cashore 2008, 24). The matter of (un)naturalness is here reinforced by the question of what is and what is not accepted by the institutions in power, which is proven to sustain patriarchal values of compulsory heterosexuality and the myth of maternal instincts. Under these premises they label a person as (ab)normal in different contexts, and can oppress those who are not conforming to predetermined looks or behaviors.

The magic system in Larson’s *Defy*, in contrast with those in The Song of the Lioness and *Graceling*, have been less developed throughout the text. Magic is mentioned, as it is the presence of sorcerers, who are disliked in Antion as part of the king’s propaganda to extol nationalist feelings and the necessity to fight against the adjacent kingdoms, which are blamed for the continuous attacks to Antion’s citizens. This demonization and otherization of the sorcerers, however, is a trick to restrict magical activities and to generate hatred against potential enemy nations. Sorcerers within Antion are either kept hidden (willingly or unwillingly) or join the rebel forces that want to overthrow King Hector and his tyranny. In this climate, it is not until the very end of the novel that Alexa discovers that she has been gifted with the power of fighting, and the reader may wonder how many other women and children have been left in the dark about magical abilities that could have helped them fight against the violent acts to which they are subjected. In other words, magic is here used as a means of empowerment that is, however, restricted from those in need, in order to avoid their sublevation.
Finally, we cannot talk about magic systems in Westerfeld’s Leviathan and Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*, as science fiction does not allow the supernatural element to be included. However, we can turn to religion, which has little repercussion in the plot but is still there in *All Men of Genius*. Religion is only mentioned to highlight the problems of the Other, the immigrant: Miriam, the governess that lives in Illyria College, is an Arab Jewish woman who remembers quite clearly the anti-Semitism to which she has always been subjected. Although I will comment on Miriam in later sections (see section 8.2.3), I find worth commenting here the fact that her Jewishness is used to highlight the otherization of the character and to open a gap between her and the rest of Rosen’s characters. Consequently, in the same way that masculinity is considered the norm while femininity is marked and repressed, belonging to a minority religion spots you as different, whereas traits such as being an atheist, Christian, or Anglican remain invisible, because they are among the expected features in Euro-American countries.

According to this analysis, then, both religion and magic turn out to be characteristics that contribute to the discrimination of the characters, and they help to tighten the already constrained gender roles. Thus, in these novels, characters with magic gifts are marginalized from society and either loathed or feared due to the misinformation and the political campaigns that aim to dispossess these (mostly female) individuals of power. In a way, the characters that I have described in this subsection are subjected to a dehumanization by the institutions in charge that leaves them completely defenseless. I understand their situation as symbolic of the situation of all the people who are left out of the welfare state and also those who are fighting against race and gender discrimination in governmental policies.

As Judith Butler declares in *Undoing Gender* in relation to the battle for gender rights, “when we struggle for rights, we are not simply struggling for rights that attach to my person, but we are struggling to be conceived as persons” (Butler 2004, 32). This is the case of the female characters I have mentioned: they are not only fighting to be admitted within their own society, but to free
themselves from gender roles and to be treated with the respect they deserve as human beings.

In summary, all the strategies that have been mentioned in this subsection seem to highlight the idea of constructiveness that always surrounds cultures and societies, and they help to question the establishment of barriers, including the gender binary, questions of what is and is not natural or artificial or even fictional. The dichotomies, the terms that we have been taught to conceive as fixed and exclusive, can be examined through fantasy and science fiction. For example, the cyborg and the chimera/hybrid question the limits between the natural and the artificial, between the organic and the inorganic, between the human and the non-human. In the same way, the gender-b(l)ender character helps us to reconceptualize gender, so boundaries cease to be clear and the paradigm becomes more complex. A reconceptualization in which, in fact, we may not need to be either male or female.

The speculative worlds also become a place to portray the injustices of the patriarchal powers from the distance of the “fictional” account. These structures are sustained through systematic institutional violence against women, exerted through education, the army, and religion, at the same time that it fans all other types of violence against them. Thus, by denying a feminist educational system in which girls are given the same opportunities than boys, the system supports from the beginning the inequalities they suffer, at the same time that it forces them to acquire an androcentric point of view that makes them back this culture of sexism. The educational institutions portrayed in the novels in my corpus present a segregational system that does not allow women to receive the same education as men, opening a gap between them that is sustained by the power spheres. In the same way, women and girls are left completely unprotected due to the fact that they are kept away from any means of defense, thus leaving them at the mercy of men. Moreover, the magic systems included in the fantasy novels and the religious identities serve to alienate women even more, as they are considered as Others, different and marginalized, the ones to be feared and ostracized.
This legalized and constant violence against women is what leads young women to develop survival stratagems. One of them is cross-dressing, which in these cases serves to gain rights or privileges and which Alejandra Zúñiga Reyes has identified in her study on cross-dressing as “strategic transvestism” (2003, 41-2). As such, the adherence to a male persona seems a licit way to critique the establishment and fight against the gender binary and the inequalities it brings. However, the depiction of the cross-dresser could undermine the potential for subversion of this figure. In the next chapters, then, I will analyze the construction of the male persona to ascertain if novels focusing on gender-b(l)ending can be part of the literature to which Monique Wittig referred as war machines, the Trojan Horses that “pulverize the old forms” (1984, 69) or, on the contrary, they simply reinforce harmful gender stereotypes.
Chapter 6. One of the boys: tomboyism and childhood experiences

Cross-dressing is a motivated activity. Either because the gender assigned at birth and the gender lived by the passing person do not match or due to circumstances imposed by their culture or society (discrimination and its consequences over social or personal circumstances), female cross-dressing has been depicted as a liberatory experience (Harper 2007, Flanagan 2008) that appears as “the most practical way to achieve something else” (Kornfield 2011, 220).

I have already analyzed how the sexist structures that govern the worlds in which the passing women in these novels live force them to deceive everyone around them in order to have the “male” privileges of studying and working. The passing women that fight for these opportunities are always aware of the obstacles put in their way just for being born female, and this situation forces them to take such a course of action, even when they know the dangers of being discovered. Every one of them is conscious of the punishments awaiting them for challenging the social order. Although none of them fears social ostracism, the idea of being thrown into a cell after being molested (as in the case of the protagonist of Rosen’s All Men of Genius, Violet) or becoming part of the breeding houses (the most terrifying potential outcome for Alexa in Larson’s Defy) scares them and makes the girls aware of the fact that being discovered is even more dangerous for them than simply having been born female. However, they still think that passing as men is worthy because they are given more freedom, more power, and a juster treatment than when they present themselves as women.

Despite these women being externally motivated to cross-dress by patriarchal sexism, they share a series of traits even before deciding whether to carry on their deceit. These characteristics are closely related to the fact that they are already considered tomboys or, at least, gender-b(l)enders in their behavior: all of them like activities that have been considered “for boys.” That is, they prefer playing with swords or with engines, fighting, and running to sewing, talking about dresses, and worrying about beauty; activities that have been traditionally related
to femininity or, rather, enforced on women as the proper behavior that is expected from them.

6.1. Child’s play: tomboyism

In order to analyze in depth the concept of tomboyism and the characteristics associated with it, I will make use of Burn, O’Neil, and Nederend’s list of twelve attributes of the tomboy, registered in the first person as follows:

(1) preferred shorts/jeans to dresses; (2) preferred traditional boys' toys (e.g., guns, matchbox cars) over girls' toys (e.g., dolls); (3) resembled a boy in appearance; (4) wished I was a boy; (5) preferred traditionally boys' activities (e.g., climbing trees, playing army) over traditionally girls' activities (e.g., ballet, playing dressup); (6) had girl friends that were tomboys; (7) participated in traditionally male sports (e.g., football, baseball, basketball) with boys; (8) was loud or boisterous in my play with others; (9) preferred rough and tumble play; (12) played with many different peer groups (e.g., tomboys, non-tomboys, boys). (1996, 4)

Although there is not enough material about the protagonists in our corpus so as to carry out a meticulous analysis of the way their behavior relates to all these traits, there is a significant tendency for them to feel attracted to these characteristics. Although the term is explicitly used only in Westerfeld’s *Leviathan*, where Deryn “reckoned herself a tomboy, between Jaspert’s bullying and Da’s balloon training” (Leviathan 2009, 102), all of these girls fulfil, nevertheless, the 12-item list to some extent.

6.1.1. The style of a tomboy

First, they clearly prefer to dress in comfortable ways, and they despise the use of dresses. Katsa in Cashore’s *Graceling* loathes female clothing and finds it burdensome to the extent that she has to “[fight] the urge to tear off the sleeves that widened at her wrists and hung over her hands and dragged across her plate if she wasn’t careful” (Cashore 2008, 47). Her long hair is also an issue: she wishes “to cut it all off” because “[i]t’s not worth the nuisance” of having to untangle it (Cashore 2008, 46) and she does not like the hairpins that “[dig] in her scalp”
every time she has to tie it up (Cashore 2008, 47). Although Graceling is the novel that pictures the most powerful scene regarding the rejection of feminine (and female) clothing, with Katsa running through the gardens while she gets rid of all the female apparel that she abhors (Cashore 2008, 50-1), some of the other female characters despise clothing in a similar way.

For Deryn, for example, dresses represent the lack of freedom, and she associates them with the gender roles that her mother and aunts try to force upon her: “Her mother and the aunties were waiting [back at home], certain that this mad scheme wouldn’t work and ready to stuff Deryn back into skirts and corsets” (Westerfeld 2009, 24). She states that she prefers her airman’s uniform, which she finds “miles better than any girl’s clothes” (Westerfeld 2009, 103). She really seems to like the power it brings her and how useful this clothing happens to be: “The boots clomped gloriously as she stormed to signals practice or firefighting drills, and the jacket had a dozen pockets, including special compartments for her command whistle and rigging knife” (Westerfeld 2009, 103).

Of course, this rejection of skirts and dresses is also a rejection of the constraints that female apparel constitutes. Pierre Bourdieu refers to the ways in which clothes designed for women are part of their domination and are designed to restrain their movements. The skirt in particular “prevents or hinders certain activities (running, various ways of sitting, etc.), or . . . allows them only at the cost of constant precautions” (Bourdieu 2006, 29). The tomboy will clearly reject such a prison for her body due to the activities she enjoys, and therefore would prefer to wear trousers, which are more convenient for running around, tree-climbing, and fighting with others.

It is frequent to find that the women around them are the ones that rejoice the most when girls decide to wear conventional feminine attires, or to subject themselves to roles that are traditionally associated with women, such as worrying about their looks. An example of this is Mrs. Wilks, the housekeeper in All Men of Genius, who takes under her responsibility Violet’s care. Before starting her cross-dressing experience, Violet is described as disheveled in comparison to her twin brother, who is said to be “as carefully dressed as Violet was careless” (Rosen 2011, 18). Unlike other cross-dressing female characters, she does not
fancy wearing male clothes, but she has a clear disinterest for her looks and favors simplicity, since she prefers “not to wear any hat, let alone her gloves or the small jacket or the dress” (Rosen 2011, 41). She is used to “the simple white dresses that she wore in the heat of her laboratory” (Rosen 2011, 41), where she confines herself most of the time.

Female-to-male cross-dressers’ taste for simplicity and usefulness in clothing may also be considered in relation to their looks. The fact that they are all alike to boys in their physical appearance is reflected in their ability to pass, as I will analyze in section 1.2 in Chapter 7.

6.1.2. Rough-and-tumble play

Most of the traits of the tomboys addressed by Burn, O’Neil, and Nederend more or less allude to prototypical masculine behaviors of violence, agency, and activity, to which the passing women in my literary corpus adhere to a great extent. Thus, in Leviathan Deryn refers to the fights with her brother, who used to bully her, and to her taste for flying. The latter is what really compels her to enter the British air forces, which subjects her to a training that is harder than she imagined: “running with the other middies was more than just punch-ups and tying knots” (Westerfeld 2009, 102). Violet from All Men of Genius, on her part, enjoyed catching frogs and creating artifacts (Rosen 2011, 52), which in her world (and in ours as well) remain activities linked to boys and to which girls are rarely associated. Alanna from The Song of the Lioness likes sword-fighting, riding, and hunting, and she envies her brother for his opportunity of becoming a knight, while she is being sent to the convent: “Why do you get all the fun?” (Pierce 1992, 4). In Graceling, Katsa has been trained in different fighting styles since she developed her Grace, and she is believed to have violent ways, a reason why most people avoid her (Cashore 2008, 42). Last but not least, in Defy Alexa remarks to have always been fond of sword-playing and, although at first she only looked from afar when her brother and father practiced, she finally decided to give it a chance and came to be the best soldier in the prince’s guard: “I told him how I’d asked to train with my brother, and how I grew to be a better fighter than he was.
Better than anyone else in the village, even though I was only a girl of fourteen when our parents were killed” (Larson 2014, 142).

The agency of these girls clearly unsettles the statement that “girls do not develop a relationship with their bodies as agents, as instruments of action” (McCaughey 1998, 280), and it is for this reason that tomboyism can be considered a disruptive behavior, a tool to fight against male dominance. Furthermore, it contests negative views on “feminine hesitancy and perceptions of women’s physical incompetence” that have been inscribed onto the bodies of women throughout history (McCaughey 1998, 281).

6.1.3. Befriending tomboys

The question of friendship is an interesting one when talking about these protagonists. None of the main characters in the books have girlfriends, and almost no one talks about friends in their childhood excepting other members of their family. Alanna (Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness) just has a twin brother with whom to play, and she only starts to befriend other people when she enters the castle as a page. Deryn (Westerfeld’s Leviathan) does not mention any affective relationship she had in Scotland, apart from the one with her family. Katsa (Cashore’s Graceling) was too scared of her powers to search for friends, and nobody wanted to be near her because they were afraid of what her magic may have done to them. In the end, she only had her cousin, with whom she grew up, exploring the castle together (Cashore 2008, 59-60). Alexa, from Larson’s Defy, mentions her relationship with other children in the village where she lived when she runs into one of them after a long time, but there seems to be no real fondness between them: “I hadn’t known her well” (Larson 2014, 61) and no other link to her past life, apart from her twin brother, is mentioned. Finally, Violet (Rosen’s All Men of Genius) is the only one that has an attachment to someone outside her family. She remembers playing with her brother and Jack, the son of their state manager, who “[b]eing the same age as Violet and Ashton, he and they have grown up together, playing together as children, catching frogs and making small toy omnibuses to carry their reptilian captives about” (Rosen 2011, 52).
The lack of friends of these gender-b(l)ender figures could be explained away by considering that any attachment could be counter-productive when being in disguise, as it happened with real cross-dressers, who were under the threat of being discovered at any moment by an acquaintance. However, the lack of female friends does not seem a plot device to help maintain the ruse in a believable way. To find the reason for this lack it is necessary to analyze the absence of girls and women’s relationships in YA fiction, especially in the genres with which I am dealing.

Rivers of ink have been spilled by YA writers, journalists, and readers in blogs and webpages dedicated to literature about the difficulty of finding female friendships in speculative fiction in general, but above all in YA novels (see Spotswood 2014, Sumner-Smith 2014, White 2014, Sheather-Neumann 2016). However, the academic work on the matter has devoted little attention to this question, apart from some remarkable exceptions that have tried to analyze the portrait of sorority and affective relationships between girls outside the family sphere in YA fiction (Litton 2009). To this respect, I find particularly interesting Ann Childs’ 2014 essay on female friendship in YA dystopias, in which she explains the compulsion of patriarchal societies to value heterosexual romance over the connection between women, and how this force permeates literature in a way that incites many YA fiction authors to keep on portraying “males as the most important social connections” (Childs 2014, 188). This is the reason why readers may find female protagonists befriending boys instead of girls, who are presented as “shallow, competitive creatures incapable of camaraderie” (Childs 2014, 188). The consequence of creating such attachments between characters leads young female readers to get the impression that female friendships are less valuable than (heteronormative) romance. That is, once again, the importance of the links between women, the lesbian continuum that Adrienne Rich wrote about in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” is invisibilized by history and culture in order to control the consciousness of women (1980, 640). The erasure of such relations is a consequence of the male-identification to which women are subjected since childhood, in which they are forced to sympathize
with male characters, thus “internalizing the values of the colonizer” and “[placing] men above women” (Barry, qtd. in Rich 1980, 646).

Due to this erasure, which I think is unconsciously adopted by authors, strong female protagonists are presented without attachments to other female figures because of the gender roles they try to embody. Masculinity has been associated with independence and assertiveness (see section 7.2), and so it is to expect that (female or male) masculine characters will also be portrayed in this way. Thus, there is a tendency to present the main character as a lonely, unconventional, individualistic person, even feared or ostracized in her way of life (for example, in the case of Katsa in Graceling or Violet in All Men of Genius).

Jane Tolmie has explained that the fact that the “romance heroine [is] often described as independent, strong, feisty, and passionate” (2006, 146) only makes sense when they are inside a system in which the other female characters do not hold any of these characteristics. In this way, the shero is singled out as exceptional, showing that the “representation of a heroine, just as much as that of a hero, depends on strategies of reversal, contrast, and struggle” (Tolmie 2006, 146). In other words, by differentiating her from the rest of female characters, the shero turns into the focus of attention, and this includes the lack of connections that would make her a “normal” girl.

In the case of the passing girls in my selection of texts, their acquaintance with boys and the fact that they have grown up without female friends become even more important than in other types of stories. In a way, it seems to me part of the formula of these novels: in this way they are familiarized with male behavior, so that they can take these friends as examples to create a male persona. Their inclination to befriend boys is also paramount to differentiate these characters from “other” girls, and thus create their “predisposition” towards gender roles that are usually associated with masculinity. Furthermore, if they had had other strong female influences showing them possible ways in which women can control their own lives and achieve power, the protagonists would have never been forced to resort to cross-dressing. After all, it is only once in disguise that they get to know other female characters that do not need to disguise themselves to hold power, and the girls learn to admire them for that: Miriam and Cecily in All Men of Genius,
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Dr. Barlow and Lilith in Leviathan, and Mrs. Cooper from The Song of the Lioness are examples of resourceful women that earn respect and gratitude from the passing girls, and who present alternatives by fighting their own battles without cross-dressing (all of them to be commented in section 8.2).

Michelle Abate in her monograph *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (2008), adds that tomboys do not only befriend boys but preferably effeminate boys (Abate 2008, xvi-xvii). This idea seems to come together with the fact that the gender-b(l)enders are surrounded by male characters that “rarely fulfil the conventional expectations of masculinity” (Flanagan 2008, 104). In The Song of the Lioness quartet, *Graceling*, and *All Men of Genius*, this parallel between the masculine girl and the feminine boy is especially relevant, because the parallelism is marked by blood connections, which are analyzed in detail in subsection 8.1.1.

**6.1.4. Family ties**

In her monograph on tomboyism Abate includes another aspect that has not been mentioned by Burn, O’Neil, and Nederend’s list: the lack of a relationship between the girls and their mothers (xviii-xix). Abate argues that the “absence of the mother stems from a physical or psychological source,” and that it has been widely associated with “the cause or impetus for tomboyism in many narratives” (2008, xix), supposedly because the girl does not have a feminine role model to imitate.

In the case of the cross-dressing narratives I am examining, all protagonists lack a mother during their childhood and/or a good part of their adolescence. This mother figure, however, is reinstated in time to help the passing girl to learn femininity once (and if) they feel prepared to do so (that is, after their crossdressing has already taken place or, at least, once their secret is known by some people). These maternal figures are paramount for the psychological growth of the cross-dresser, and become essential for the girls to come to terms with their female bodies and their feminine gender. These are the women I have mentioned in the previous section, which serve as examples of empowerment without the necessity of cross-dressing but, at the same time, present traditional traits of
femininity that the gender-b(l)ender will incorporate to their own performance (see section 7.2.4 below).

It is curious, however, how the tomboyism of the protagonists of my corpus is also shaped by their fathers and paternal figures, who (unwillingly) participate in their decision to dress as boys and in their development as sheroes. At the beginning of their novels, after all, most of these young women have lost at least one of their parents, if not both, and they do not seem to be able to overcome their loss. The frequent absence or death of parents in YA fiction is a tendency that has been acknowledged by scholars as “a plot device designed to place children in new, often precarious, situations—or to free them for adventures” (Gibson and Zaidman 1991, 232). This is exactly what happens in the novels in my corpus of study, in which the cross-dressing plot could not be developed if it were not for the dead, absent, or careless parental figures at the beginning of the stories. In fact, this is one of the characteristics that links these fictional passing girls or women with past historical cross-dressing figures, as the latter tended to have lost one or both parents as well (Dekker and Pol 1989, 11; Bullough and Bullough 1993, 98). This absence, which always leads to a tough life for the girls, makes them resort to tomboyism as a survival tactic: “Hailing from homes in which they had been abandoned emotionally and/or physically by their parents, they did not have the luxury of being femininely passive, delicate and naïve” (Abate 2008, 197).

Along these lines, readers will find that Alanna’s father has never paid attention to his children since the death of his wife. Such a situation allows Alanna to dress as a boy and take the place of her brother in the castle. This plan would never have been successful had the Lord of Trebond worried about the future of their children. Instead, he stays at home while the twins are sent away, and he never visits and only once writes to the castle asking after Thom, a threat to Alanna’s deception that she solves by lying and reminding the person in charge how careless his father is, to the point that he never presented his “sons” at court (Pierce 1992, 59). It seems that Alanna knows perfectly how her father is going to act when she says to her brother, in the very first pages of the first instalment that “[h]e’ll forget us, once we’re gone” (Pierce 1992, 5). Nonetheless, she still feels
“like crying” when she understands that her father will never discover her ruse, because he “[does]n’t care what she [does]” (Pierce 1992, 60).

The attitude of Alanna’s father is a result of the loss of his wife, an event from which he never recovers. The fact that Alanna does not like her magic and does not want to use her powers comes from this paternal rejection, as she explains to the King: “Father was angry—he thought their magics should’ve saved [mother]. So he said he wouldn’t ever use his Gift again, and we weren't to use ours. We weren’t even to be taught how to use it; but Maude, the village healer, taught us in secret” (Pierce 1992, 108). But the rejection of her father towards magic has left a deep impact on Alanna, and not even Maude, the teacher of magic she had during her childhood, is able to make her overcome her fears. Moreover, Alanna’s powers seem a metaphor of her own femininity, which she rejects and tries to erase from the moment she decides to cross-dress and “turn” into a boy. Thus, her “somewhat unhealthy attitude to [her] own magic” (Brooke 2014, 99) turns also into an unhealthy attitude to her own body, which she despises. Magic (just as the changes in her body) is something that she cannot control or from which she cannot escape, but her father taught her to hate it.

The relation she has with her parents has also affected her in other ways. Thus we find that her fear to fall in love is also rooted in the state in which the Lord of Trebond was left after the loss of his lover: “Look at my father. He never really got over my mother's death. They told me when he died last month he was calling for her. He gave her part of himself, and he just never got it back. That's not going to happen to me” (Pierce 1998a, 12). As Catherine Brooke reflects in her analysis, her father’s situation leads Alanna to be “afraid of intimacy, both emotional and sexual” (2014, 99).

Despite the psychological constraint to which she is subjected, in the end she will come to terms with her femininity, her powers and the loss of her parents. To this respect, the appearance of new parental figures is crucial, as sir Myles (a knight that teaches her History at court) will act as the concerned father that she has never had and Eleni Cooper (a healer in town and the mother of her best friend) will teach her what Alanna needs to know about her body. From the
couple she receives the love, support, and understanding that she has never had at home.

In the case of Deryn, from Westerfeld’s trilogy Leviathan, her mother is alive but remains in Scotland while her daughter dresses as a boy and tries to deceive the British air forces into accepting her as a midshipman. The reader is not given much more information about the mother or Deryn’s family in general, apart from her father. When she thinks about her mother, in fact, she is not an isolated figure but always mentioned together with the girl’s aunts, who are trying to “stuff Deryn back into skirts and corsets” (Westerfeld 2009, 24) and who attempt “to turn her back into a proper girl” (Westerfeld 2009, 377) after the death of her father, which Deryn resists as hard as she can. The seldom references to the mother and the lack of communication between the two are indications of a distant or cold relationship, an idea that is supported by the fact that the young woman only speaks warmly about her home when she is remembering her father.

Regarding her father, at first the reader only knows that he has perished in an accident before the beginning of Leviathan, but later on Dylan/Deryn tells Alek (her best friend) the story about how one of the kerosene tanks exploded when she and her father were inside a hot-air balloon about to take flight. Her father had the time to throw her to the ground, but in doing so, the ropes tying the balloon snapped and it ascended into the air, making it impossible for him to escape. The accident was witnessed and the government recognized his courage, giving him “the Air Gallantry Cross, the highest honor they can give a civilian for deeds in the air” (Westerfeld 2010, 90). The accident shocked Deryn deeply, to the point that she did not “[speak] for a whole month afterwards” (Westerfeld 2010, 88) and she was unable to sleep without nightmares during the first year after the incident. Once she is inside the Leviathan, the reader discovers that she keeps her father’s posthumous medal with her, and that she is quite conscious of how with her dreams of flying she is trying to emulate her father’s steps: “Don’t you think it’s daft? Like I’m trying to burn to death, same as he did?” (Westerfeld 2010, 91).

Deryn is a good example of Judith Butler’s considerations about the repercussions of the loss of a dear one, and how “the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and
‘sustaining’ the other through magical acts of imitation” (1990, 57). Through an act of identification, then, a person may internalize attributes of the dead. In the case of Deryn, she attempts to follow her father’s path, trying to imitate his deeds and, over all, his heroism. Consequently, she puts herself in danger to save other people, risking her wellbeing in a scene which she admits is a reminiscence of her father’s death: when the life of one of the other midshipmen is threatened by fire, she decides to help, even at the risk of her own life. She does not only survive but earns her own Air Gallantry Cross. The scene where she is given the medal is a touchstone for Deryn’s development, for she realizes that she has accomplished “the same medal her father had won. And unlike him, she was still alive” (Westerfeld 2010, 231). At this moment she understands that she has really survived her father, and she is thus freed from all her nightmares.

This scene is also a moment of realization when she recognizes how strange it is that she gets the medal without anyone’s knowing that she is a girl, and it disturbs her like never before: “another part [of her] wanted to shout aloud that this was madness. She was . . . a girl, for heaven’s sake” (Westerfeld 2010, 231; italics in the original). The fact that she mentions her gender in this very scene is significant because it hints toward the imitative character of her performance, which is questioned by herself when she realizes that her father’s life will not seal her own fate.

In the case of Violet, from Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*, she has grown up without her mother, who died at childbirth. Though her father has taken care of her and her brother for seventeen years, the time of the novel starts when he is ready to leave for America. Violet and her twin brother Ashton are left under the care of Mrs. Wilks, “their governess since birth and their mother’s maid and friend before that” (Rosen 2011, 19). Mrs. Wilks acts as a mother figure for the twins, although they prefer to “[regard] her as they would a maiden aunt who loved them nearly to the point of suffocation” (Rosen 2011, 19). However, they are able to escape her care during the academic year by moving to London, where Violet applies to Illyria College while Ashton is free to attend artistic parties and live like a dandy. It is worth noticing that just as Deryn’s aunts are considered by her disagreeable because they try to force her into femininity, the same
relationship is established between Violet and Mrs. Wilks. However, unlike Deryn, Violet becomes increasingly feminine, until she turns into the lady Mrs. Wilks had expected of her all the time. And unlike Deryn’s mother, Mrs. Wilks also transforms herself during Violet’s story, being able, at the end, to understand her protégée and her passion for science.

In Larson’s *Defy*, the loss of the protagonist’s parents does not only free Alexa for adventure, but is the primary reason that leads her to cross-dress. Without her parents, Alexa and her brother Marcel are left without any protection. Forced to pass as a young man in order to avoid the breeding houses, Alexa keeps the memory of her parents close to her heart. However, not both of them have the same importance in her life. While her father has taught her sword fighting and shown her how proud he is of having her as a daughter, the opinions of her mother remain a mystery: “I imagined sparring with Papa while Mama watched us, her expression hooded. I never knew if she was proud of how good I became or ashamed” (Larson 2014, 48). The perhaps disapproving mother figure is put in contrast with a father that supports what his daughter is doing and who enjoys training her at sword-fighting. His love and admiration for her are symbolized by her nickname: zhànshì nánwū, which she is explained that roughly translates to “champion fighter” and “sorcerer” in the Blevonese language (Larson 2014, 265).

In general, it seems that her father was the only one to have left an imprint on her. Her mother, on the contrary, is portrayed as an almost forgotten figure, whom she remembers only with distress and sorrow for her own discarded femininity, which she cannot celebrate under her disguise: “Rather than feeling joy — planning a party with my mother and friends to celebrate my coming into womanhood — I glared at the breasts that had doubled in size in the last few months” (Larson 2014, 37).

Finally, Katsa from Cashore’s *Graceling* also lost both her parents when she was little, and that is the reason why she is living with her uncle, King Randa. In her case, the loss of her parents does not seem to affect the protagonist, as no comment is made on her feelings regarding them. Due to the fact that her powers scare everyone in the castle, she hardly has women around until she meets Helda, one of Randa’s servants. Having a son that is also Graced, Helda knows how
isolated and feared Gracelings are, and so she feels sympathy towards the king’s niece. She is worried about Katsa’s not having any female caretaker to look after her, so Helda is finally made the girl’s chambermaid. Like the other maternal figures commented above, Helda believes in Katsa’s potential femininity, and forces her to show it at court, trying to prove her that it is not bad to be noticed as a woman. Katsa remarks that Helda “couldn’t fathom a lady who didn’t want to be beautiful, who didn’t want a legion of admirers” (Cashore 2008, 46).

Regardless of the fact that all the protagonists of the novels in my corpus share elements with tomboys and they even recognize themselves as such (as in the case of Deryn), the scholars who have study tomboyism have all agreed that the tomboys are undergoing a stage of their feminine lives. Normally, that is the only reason why girls are allowed to depart from femininity: because they are expected to behave differently (as “proper” women) as soon as they enter puberty, especially “because of the intensification of gender-role pressures” and the “social rewards for traditional female-role behavior” (Burn, O’Neil, and Nederend 1996, 2). However, it is worth remarking that this does not happen in most of the cases of this study. Except for Alexa and Violet, all the rest continue to behave in a so-called “masculine” way during their adolescence and adulthood, even when they are not disguised as boys anymore. Alexa and Violet, in contrast, develop their femininity even during their time as cross-dressers and state their desire to be recognized as girls (Larson 2014, 37; Rosen 2011, 262).

6.2. “[A] pathetic unsoldierly fate”47: self-loathing and displacement

I think it is of the utmost importance to this tomboyism, and to the ability to keep their disguises, that these sheroes are fully aware of the disadvantages women face in the sexist worlds they live in. In a way, they associate their drawbacks to their experience, and develop a view towards the common notion of femininity (and the conventional physical realities that are associated with it) that make them reject their sex and gender: although they identify as female, there is a clear

47 Westerfeld 2010, 98
rejection of their body and of the gender roles they are forced to perform as females.

Consequently, Alanna claims that she does not want to be a girl, and she is utterly disturbed by her physical changes during puberty (see section 7.1.2 in the next chapter). Her negative feelings in connection to her femininity, together with the aforementioned dependency and sorrow in her parents’ relationship, keep her away even from love, and she is determined to avoid physical contact or any interaction that may make her dependent on a man: “I don't want a man's touch! . . . I just want to be a warrior maiden and go on adventures. I don't want to fall in love, especially not with George or Jon. They'll ask me to give them parts of me. I want to keep me for myself” (Pierce 1998a, 11-2).

Deryn states similar ideas, and links femininity to being in love and doing stupid things. She laments the possibility of falling in love with her friend Alek by considering it “a pathetic unsoldierly fate for Deryn Sharp” (Westerfeld 2010, 98), and she relates the concept of love to “some village girl, her fists twisting in her skirts whenever a certain boy walked by” (Westerfeld 201, 97-8). Moreover, like Alanna, she finds unfair that she has been assigned a gender at birth that prevents her for doing what she desires. In a similar fashion, Katsa refuses her inscription to feminine roles, even when her uncle forces her to wear dresses and parade in front of his guests during dinners (Cashore 2008, 47). Her rejection towards anything feminine is, just like in Alanna’s, taken to the extreme by the rejection of romantic or sexual relationships with men.

One cannot help but notice, then, that there is a tendency for these women to put the blame of their fates not on the institutions in power, but on themselves and on their having been born female, a misogynistic statement that they will learn to dismiss only as time goes by. Such attitudes towards their own bodies may be ascribed to a gender confusion or gender dysphoria (especially noticeable in the case of Alanna), which has been frequently associated with transsexuality. Jack Halberstam, however, has pointed out the dangers of considering this dysphoria as pertinent to transsexual bodies only (2003, 119), and the fact that this line of thought “ensures that transsexual and pathology remain annexed” (2003, 162). In other words, it is possible for girls to feel gender dysphoria and to question and
put under scrutiny their own gender, and for them to “produce new and fully functional masculinities, masculinities, moreover, that thrive on the disjuncture between femaleness and masculinity” (Halberstam 2003, 119). Additionally, their dysphoria is a direct consequence of the societies they live in and of the institutionalized violence they suffer, which I have already addressed in the previous chapter. These characters have been taught to internalize self-blame for the place they occupy in society, a fact that leads them to see their own bodies as a burden or mistake, instead of realizing that the real culprits are the institutions in power. Their rejection of femininity is also often linked to a distorted view of themselves as aberrations or monstrosities that break the gender roles and expectations of society and who deserve to be ostracized, as they do not feel a sense of belonging. Furthermore, this sense of displacement is often highlighted by the fact that they do not only swerve away from a given gender categorization through cross-dressing (Garber 1992, 70; Neal 2012, 14), but they also stand in a liminal space regarding their race, age, and in the case of the fantasy protagonists, their magical abilities as well.

As far as race is concerned, I have already explained in section 5.2.2 the way in which magical powers can be considered a racial trait that may lead sheroes to be feared and treated as Others. This is because magic users often develop a trait that differentiates them from “normal” people. In the case of the Gracaelings, their heterochromia is a sign to recognize them: Katsa has “one eye green as the Middluns grasses, and the other eye blue as the sky” (Cashore 2008, 16). In the case of Alexa, from Defy, her magic is also related to her racial traits, but in a different way. She is said to have been born from parents from different and rival countries (and races), which leaves her in an awkward space regarding her loyalties. Though she was born in Antion, her father is a Blevonese sorcerer, and she has inherited her magic from him. Being Blevon an enemy country, she states that her origins were a problem at the beginning, as she and her brother are subjected to prejudices:

The fact that we were half Blevonese didn’t make us many friends once the war started. I’d heard whispers that we were enemy-lovers. But I didn’t love Blevon — I just loved my family. It didn’t matter to me where my parents
Chapter 6: One of the boys

were born. After a Blevonese sorcerer took them away from me, though, any love I had for my heritage had turned to hatred as strong as anyone else’s. (Larson 2014, 47) Regardless of her heritage, she does not understand the Blevonese language and thinks of them as enemies until she discovers that her parents had been murdered by Antion’s king in an effort to deceivingly blame the Blevonese sorcerers.

Alanna’s case deserves more attention. Her purple eyes are also connected to her magic, as it always manifests itself as a purple fire, but no one seems to suspect her magical abilities at the beginning, so there is nothing in her appearance that makes her special. Nonetheless, her magic makes her stand in the threshold because of her contact with both humans and supernatural creatures. She is visited more than once by the Mother Goddess, both in her physical and spiritual forms, and Alanna is used by her to destroy the Ysandir, vestiges of a tribe of evil gods. Moreover, her role as healer puts her in a position between life and death. Her symbolic status on the threshold between existence and non-existence is, in fact, made clear in a scene in which she tries to rescue Prince Jonathan from the hands of Death: “She was on the edge, between the world of the living and the Underworld. She drifted between Life and Death” (Pierce 1992, 115).

Alanna, who lives in the margins, who is not recognized in the kingdom she lives after the discovery of her ruse and is “stared . . . with some kind of horror” (Pierce 1998a, 206), is read by Sarah Sahn as “both complicit with and subjugated by normalizing discourses of whiteness and masculinity” (Sahn 2016, 152). This paradigm has led Sahn to analyze Alanna from a postcolonial perspective, arguing that “Alanna’s quest for recognition is an attempt to argue meaning and change out of her world as a colonized figure” (2016, 151). Alanna claims that only in the tribe of the Bhazir (the tribes of the dessert, which she visits once she has earned her shield and does not need to pass as Alan anymore) she can find herself and reconcile with her identity, which is out of place at court. Her link with the tribe and its inhabitants, represented by her being adopted by them and her decision to wear her clothes, puts Alanna in a half-way point between the East and the West, between an insider to the practices of both cultures and an outsider who
does not really know where she belongs. And that is one of the traits of the
gender-b(l)ender, after all: the multiplicity of possibilities and identities.

Another aspect in which the protagonists seem to be in a liminal space is their
ages. They are not children, but they are not adult women yet. Although in the
Medieval Ages or in Victorian England the concept of young adulthood had yet to
be developed, I have already shown that the settings of these stories do not
replicate the actual circumstances of history, and the authors of these novels seem
to take into account current conceptualizations of adolescence. This treatment of
the main characters as if they were contemporary adolescents is partially a
consequence of the school-like places in which they live. In this way, Alan/na
finds herself training at court, which may remind the reader of a boarding school
where the characters have to get along with their fellow squires and pages.
Although they are trained in sword-fighting and horseback riding, they also
receive lessons on arithmetic and history, and they have to learn to write and read.
As in school, she forges bonds of friendship with the boys around her and readers
are taught a lesson on camaraderie when they help each other on both their studies
and their personal lives. A similar case is portrayed in All Men of Genius.
Although in this case the protagonist is older when she enters Illyria College, the
story is set in a boarding school in which Violet has to live together with other
students. Once again, they share lessons and the bonds they develop exemplify the
importance of (male) friendship during school years.

Both Alanna and Violet learn new things about themselves and others during
their stay at “school,” and the understanding of the world given to them by these
experiences is crucial in their personal development. In a way, these places of
learning are themselves in a threshold between being part of society and being
outside of it: while at school, the characters interact almost exclusively with the
people that live with them, and although they are not isolated from society and are
allowed to go outside, the castle and Illyria College have rules of their own,
following a different hierarchy of power than the one in the outside world. For
instance, the teachers that surround these two main characters are not important
“outside,” because they do not have titles or are not well-known apart from the
scientific community, but while they remain in the castle or at the academy, they
have power over the students. Similarly, these students can be more powerful outside the school because their families hold noble titles or are owners of important businesses, but while they remain alumni of an educational institution, they are supposed to be treated in the same way, regardless of their status.

Young adulthood is also a stage of life in which people are looking for a place in the world. Topics of belonging and finding one’s identity are persistent in YA literature. The question of identity is intermingled with the question of gender identity, which, as Myra Macdonald reminds us, “is a developmental process that is virtually complete by the time we reach adulthood,” and therefore “the impact of media representations [of gender] on children and young people” (1997, 16) needs to be analyzed. I find problematic to assert such a linear view of gender identity, as it implies that children unquestionably follow the gender they are assigned at birth, and that, in their adulthood, they keep on accepting this identity.

The truth is, however, that according to other scholars, it is impossible to conceive an identity before the idea of gender itself, “for the simple reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler 1990, 16). There is no doubt that in the cross-dresser’s story, the link between both gender identities is highlighted, and all the actions of the novels I am analyzing would not have the same significance if the protagonists did not cross-dress or experiment with the performative aspect of gender, recognizing it, to a greater or lesser extent, as a “regulatory fiction” (Butler 1990, 141). And such experimentation with the notion of gender, such development and search for their legitimate place in the world is symbolized by the journey all of them undertake. Katsa decides that she needs to detach herself from the castle in which she has been a slave for her uncle and sets off on an adventure with Prince Po; Alexa goes through the jungle and decides to participate in the revolution; Alanna abandons her home and becomes a page and a squire, and then sets on an adventure to find herself; Deryn leaves Scotland and travels around the globe as the events of the First World War evolve; and Violet moves away from home to go to college. All of these adolescents are at unstable moments in their lives in which anything can happen, and their futures are yet to be decided, since they have not chosen yet who they would like to become.
As it has been shown in this chapter, the potential cross-dresser in YA fantasy and science fiction has traits that link her to the figure of the tomboy. As such, she likes activities associated with boys and displays masculine attitudes. In the sexist world she lives, she is left alone by her parents, who are either dead or absent, and has almost no friends except for her siblings, who often present in contrast traditionally effeminate behaviors. During her childhood, she rejects her femininity and the feminine attitudes that society (and gender stereotypes) tries to force on her, although she is subjected to a gradual transformation by which she may accept to negotiate and perform some traits of femininity after her cross-dressing experience. In this way, the passing woman is portrayed as a subversive entity before taking the clothes of the other gender, disrupting feminine normativity and resisting gender roles and stereotypes. Nevertheless, in doing so she is also narrowing the idea of what it means to be a woman, and her categorical rejection of anything feminine further stigmatizes her gender as the most undervalued and disadvantaged one.

The fact that these gender-b(l)ender characters fall outside traditional categorizations even before they decide to create their male personas predisposes them to stand outside the norm, and most of the time they are aware of their exclusion and of how different they are. Anne Kaler considers this element of ostracism a valuable part of the creation of sheroes in fantasy, because in this way, the alienation they suffer works as a mirror image of the problems undergone by women for centuries: “autonomy, survival in a hostile world, injustice” (1991, 52). It is important in terms of representation, then, that these main characters are able to overcome the difficulties they have to face, which they do “by rejecting society’s norms, by asserting autonomy, by preparing for battle, and by accumulating adventures” (Kaler 1991, 52). Moreover, and as a consequence of their experiences, these protagonists adopt a “self-consciously denaturalized position” that shows the reader “how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted” (Butler 1990, 110). In other words, they disrupt the traditional views on gender that society has internalized and uncover them to show their
constructedness. And if they already destabilize concepts of gender before acquiring their male persona, it is then crucial to analyze in depth the way in which they (re)create gender through their cross-dressing, both through their external appearance and in the ways they perform a new identity.
Chapter 7. The boy in the mirror: masquerading gender

There is a scene in Westerfeld’s *Leviathan* in which Deryn looks at London from the air and thinks about all the pollution emitted by the factories and how the butterflies in the area have adapted to that situation in order to survive: “During the worst of the steam age so much soot and ash had decorated the nearby countryside that butterflies had evolved black splotches on their wings for camouflage” (Westerfeld 2009, 65-6). In a way, I find this moment a symbol of what the female-to-male cross-dressers are trying to achieve: they have to survive in a male’s world, so they decide to play the role of men, and in order to do that, the first step is their transformation to look like them. Normally, this change means that they have to have their hair cut, to change the shape of their bodies (usually through tailoring and/or chest bindings), and any other ruse that may make them look the part. These changes are accompanied by the search of new names and, of course, a change in the way they speak (changing their tone and their linguistic idiosyncrasy) and move, which may be taken as “an internal core or substance” not only artificial but produced “on the surface of the body” (Butler 1990, 136; italics in the original). These alterations that shape the base of their performance are accompanied by a modification of their behaviors and a series of consequences which I will analyze in the second section of this chapter.

It is interesting to notice that in Western culture there is a tendency to think about femininity as a masquerade, a part that women play consciously. This link between femininity and pretense, constructed by the patriarchal society that keeps on selling women make up, plastic surgery, and all kind of products and services that will shape and change their bodies, “tries to establish ‘woman’ as artefactual, gestural, a theatrical creature who can be taken apart and put back together” (Garber 1992, 373). And, since femininity and masculinity “are often organized as a binary, a highly polarized binary in which the terms gain meaning only in relation to the other, such that what is feminine is not masculine, what is masculine is not feminine” (Harper 2007, 509), it is only logical, according to this train of thought (as I have already noted in Chapter 5), that masculinity will be as “real” or “natural” as femininity is constructed. Thus, Western society has
internalized that femininity is a masquerade, while masculinity is considered, as Perry Nodelman has noted, the act of “being one’s true self” (2002, 2). Of course, once again, it has been shown that this conception of gender is dismantled by the cross-dresser’s construction of their chosen gender, as they have to teach themselves to be masculine in the same way that they must re-learn to be feminine after their deception (see Chapter 9).

7.1. Reshaping gender: trying to look the part

Although Victoria Flanagan considers that “[t]he majority of children’s texts that feature a female cross-dressing theme spend little or no time describing the newly adopted attire of the cross-dressing character” (2008, 27), the novels in our corpus contradict such a statement. Most of the narratives include a detailed description of the ways in which they achieve their new look, and it is not “simply assumed that the female character does look convincing, and the narrative proceeds from this point,” as Flanagan complains (2008, 27). Instead, there is always at least one scene that explains the transformation, which is followed by comments of the cross-dresser’s discomfort throughout the novel and how careful they have to be in order not to be discovered. Moreover, Marjorie Garber has also mentioned the phenomenon Flanagan marks as a flaw, and she explains that it is recursive not only in children’s texts, but in all types of literature. Passing easily is a consequence of “the habit of looking through rather than at the cross-dresser” (Garber 1992, 187; italics in the original), which is a powerful way of conveying how we do not usually question gender and accept it as something natural, taking for granted that there are sartorial laws that prevent people from misleading us. Moreover, there is a tendency in our society to associate gender and sex without questioning that they are in fact two different though interrelated concepts.

7.1.1. Grasping masculinity by the hair

The preparation to become full-time cross-dressers normally involves a haircut. Human hair, as one of the components that play a part in gender roles “is never a straightforward biological fact, because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally worked upon by human hands” (Mercer 1994, 100).
As such, hair has been “constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and value” (Mercer 1994, 101). Hair has therefore been infused with different notions of gender, from the “concealment of the woman’s face and hair as a token of modesty” (Mercer 1994, 101) requested by many religions to the traditional view that it is more feminine to wear long hair, while short hair is associated with masculinity (both in stereotypical images of contemporary Euro-American men or masculine women or butches).

Short hair represents a rejection of femininity, and deciding to have one’s hair cut is established as a way to exert control over one’s body. It is not strange, then, that the only woman in our corpus of novels who does not need to cut her hair in order to pass because she has her head covered at that moment, Katsa from Cashore’s *Graceling*, does actually want to have her hair cut because she thinks it is cumbersome. She finds it a nuisance when she is fighting, and tells her maid that she would like to get rid of it. In response to that complaint, Helda washes and untangles Katsa’s hair, and recommends her to brush it every day. She complains again to Po when they are travelling together, and asks him to cut her hair for her, not because she wants to disguise herself as a man, as Po suggests, but because “it drives me mad, and I’ve never wanted it, and I’d be so much more comfortable if I could have it all off” (Cashore 2008, 133). Unsurprisingly, this statement can be applied to the other feminine practices and conventions that are forced upon her, including dresses, jewels, female shoes and any kind of adornment.

As there are two pairs of twins in the texts under study, Alanna and Thom in Pierce’s *The Song of the Lioness*, and Alexa and Marcel in Larson’s *Defy*, it is interesting to notice how the hair acts as a symbol of difference between them. In the case of Alanna and Alexa, their hair is, at the beginning of their stories, the only thing that really distinguishes them from their twin brothers, as they are too young to be told apart by their body shape. Consequently, the fact of having their hair cut appears as a loss of their identity, something that affects them in different ways. In the case of Alanna, she is surprised but happy to discover that she can transform so easily into another person, because it means that she will fulfil her wish of being trained as a knight: “Alanna stared at herself in the mirror. Her twin
stared back, violet eyes wide in his pale face. Grinning, she wrapped herself in her cloak” (Pierce 1992, 12).

*Defy*’s Alexa, in contrast, loves her long hair. When her brother cuts it off so that she can pass as a boy and save herself from the breeding houses, she regrets the loss: “I had to choke back a sob. It was stupid and vain, but my hair was the one feature that had truly been *mine*. Looking so similar to my twin brother had been fun as a child, but as we grew older, it became irritating” (Larson 2014, 3; italics in the original). In fact, she confesses that she “mourned the loss of [her] hair for a year after Marcel cut it off” (Larson 2014, 37), and when she finally can uncover her secret, she is overjoyed to discover that she will be able to have long hair again and braid it: “In the many weeks of traveling, it had grown a few inches, nearly reaching my shoulders now. Tears pricked my eyes again, and I smiled hesitantly” (Larson 2014, 312). In general, Alexa has a traditional and limited view of gender, as shown by her association of femininity with dressing in skirts, having long hair, or being “soft.” This view, however, is always more positive than the ones expressed by other sheroes when they begin to cross-dress, as they tend to despise such traits.

Although in all cases the long hair becomes a link with whom these young women were before and their wish to break with their previous lives and situations, in the case of Alexa’s haircut the symbolism is especially explicit. In the scene, she throws her hair into the flames, destroying it completely, and with it completely destroying Alexa’s individuality and normal life: “The long strands, years’ worth of growth, curled up and burned away in moments. Gone. Like my parents. Like my home. All taken, burned, hewn down, and turned to ash” (Larson 2014, 3).

In contrast to this situation, in Westerfeld’s *Leviathan* there is no more than a passing comment on the fact that Deryn’s hair is “shorn” (Westerfeld 2009, 23). Likewise, in Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*, having her hair cut is not a problem for Violet, who simply considers that “[h]air grows back” (Rosen 2011, 52). The first time she dresses as a man, however, she only “tied [her hair] back and tucked [it] into her shirt collar so it appeared much shorter” (Rosen 2011, 67). Only when she is finally admitted into Illyria College does she have it cut, although there is no
mention to that when it happens. As she is cross-dressing without anyone except her brother being aware of it, when she has to dress as a woman for the Christmas holidays she is forced to put hair extensions on to conceal that she has been passing as a boy.

I think that the fact that Violet and Deryn only give a passing comment to having their hair cut is related to the gender of the authors of both narratives. Although subtle, there are details that may hint to a different treatment of the cross-dressing experience due to the fact that they (cis males) have not gone through the embodied experiences of being a young woman. If we take this detail into account, it should not strike us as a surprise that Rosen’s *All Men of Genius* and Westerfeld’s trilogy *Leviathan* are the only of these narratives to mention facial hair. Thus, Dylan/Deryn pretends to shave herself in a scene that is not new in gender-b(l)ender stories (and which is often used with comic purposes), in which she is depicted “waiting for someone to pass the open cabin door and witness the deception” (Westerfeld 2009, 187). On the other hand, Ashton/Violet applies sideburns to her face in order to pretend that she has facial hair. All the other cross-dressers seem to simply rely on the fact that some boys are naturally beardless, and no other thought is spared on this situation.

### 7.1.2. Constraining the body, shaping its curves

In all the previous cases, modelling their hair is a tool for the protagonists to pass as boys, and quite often there is no need to do anything more, because in most of the novels they disguise themselves when their bodies are not yet fully developed. However, as they grow they will have to alter their female body shape to fit what is expected from a male one. Mostly, this requires from them the binding of their breasts, an action that can be quite painful, as they are restraining them just when they are developing. In some of the novels, putting boundaries and restrictions to their bodies and being able to control them becomes an obsession for the protagonists, a practice that resembles the patriarchal insistence on women shaping their bodies to meet society’s beauty standard. The female cross-dressers soon discover, nonetheless, that the (female) body cannot be regulated at their will, and that the appearance they are looking for is difficult (if not impossible) to
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achieve, a situation that faithfully depicts the struggles of women, who “are condemned constantly to experience the discrepancy between the real body to which they are bound and the ideal body towards which they endlessly strive” (Bourdieu 2001, 67).

In the case of Alanna, her body changes lead to “horror and anger” (Brooke 2014, 98) when she understands that her breasts are growing and hastily calls for her servant, “her eyes stinging with tears of fury” (Pierce 1992, 118). Then, she tries to put bandages around her chest as tightly as she can. Her breasts, after all, are the first hint that she is turning into a woman, and she believes that womanhood is inextricably linked, in the minds of people, to being “soft and silly,” even when her servant reminds her that she “can be a woman and still be a warrior” (Pierce 1992, 119). It is ironic that both Alanna and Alexa (from Larson’s Defy) use the adjective “soft” to talk about women and femininity, when their own behavior and their fighting skills contradict this association. In the case of The Song of the Lioness, moreover, such statements are always rejected by older people around Alanna, who try to show her that she is wrong about her preconceptions of gender, which she has learnt and internalized from society and needs to learn how to overcome.

Alanna is also annoyed at her body because she has to be careful to hide it and this prevents her from enjoying the same activities the other boys carry out in the castle. The narrator mentions the difficulties of living with the bandages around her, not only because her constrained chest hurts, but because she has to be “twice as careful now about how far she opened her shirt, and that summer the boys tried their best to get her to take it off entirely. . . . All summer Alanna refused to go into the water, no matter what persuasion was used” (Pierce 1992, 120). I see this image as a metonymy for the whole set of constraints that are forced upon women, and which compel them to look and behave in certain ways. The cross-dresser is another victim of a system that tries to control female bodies, but also teaches women that they should keep their bodies under control for themselves.

As she grows, the reader discovers that Alanna has changed the bandages for “a special corset” that binds her breasts flat (Pierce 1998a, 9), but no more
information is given on the subject, although it is clear that the quartet is concerned with explicitly talking about Alanna’s body and the physical changes she is undergoing. Thus, the shero is also depicted as shocked in the scene in which she has her first period, which fills her with the fury of having to deal with another “drawback” that could hinder her wish to be a knight: “It's bad enough my chest keeps growing. Now something like this [her menarche] happens” (Pierce 1992, 154).

Victoria Flanagan has commented upon this point when analyzing Alanna’s cross-dressing, stating that

Alanna . . . is one of the few female cross-dressing narratives that attempt to deal specifically with the issue of physicality. Pierce refers, on more than one occasion, to the way that Alanna binds her breasts, in order to conceal them [and the scene of her first menstruation] is relatively exceptional among other examples of female cross-dressing, most of which choose to ignore the physical realities of a girl masquerading as a boy and the pubescent difficulties such a situation presents. (Flanagan 2008, 28)

Regardless of Flanagan’s statement, ignoring “the physical realities” of women is not only a problem of the gender-b(l)ender narrative, but an issue shared by most YA literature (and even adult literature), which tends to systematically ignore the need of their female readers to come to terms with their womanhood. Some scholars (Evins 2013, Backe 2014) have already drawn attention to this predisposition to conceive the onset of puberty and its consequences (menstruation, breasts, and body hair, among other things) as a taboo, a clear heritage of a culture that considers such aspects of the female body a dirty topic and chooses to invisibilize the physical (and psychological) realities that may disrupt women’s objectification and sexualization.

48 Although Pierce was alone when talking about the facts of puberty in YA fantasy in the 1980s in relation to cross-dressing, I have found instances of other (women) authors that have decided to talk about the discomfort that cross-dressing may imply. Just to put one example outside my corpus, the YA fantasy novel by the Australian Alison Goodman, Eon: Rise of the Dragoneye (2009), begins with the protagonist (a young woman forced by her master to dress as a man) rushing back home “before the blood showed,” so that she does not stain her clothes when menstruating (Goodman 2008, 5). Menstruation is rarely mentioned as a problem for the cross-dresser is rarely mentioned, and I think it could be an interesting topic for research in a wider corpus.
But even if menstruation is not being mentioned in most fiction (Showalter and Showalter 1970, McCraken 2003, Bermúdez Montes and Sant’Anna 2016), the binding of the breasts is a common subject in YA novels dealing with female cross-dressing. In Larson’s *Defy*, Alexa mentions how she tries to reshape her body by flattening her breasts with bandages, and she even mentions how she conceals the strips of cloth: “My shirt stuck to my body, but luckily the leather vest hid the binding I’d wrapped around my breasts earlier that morning” (Larson 2014, 7-8). She also has to deal with the development of her body. While Alanna was furious at her growing bust, Alexa is only sad that she cannot celebrate her femininity and hopes not to be discovered: “I glared at the breasts that had doubled in size in the last few months. . . . I took a long strip of cloth and bound it around myself, as tightly as I possibly could. It hurt, but there was no other choice” (Larson 2014, 37). Even though she describes her breasts as small, she recalls that “anything was too big for a boy” (Larson 2014, 37), thus denying the validity of any body that does not fit in the prototypical view imposed by heteronormative societies, in which the fat body or the trans body are unacceptable49.

There are also mentions to physicality in the Leviathan trilogy, although, as commented above, the fact that the author is male seems to affect Deryn’s relation to her body. That is to say, the corporeal has not as much relevance in the narrations as the psychological concerns of the main female character. Only a passing comment is given to her body at the beginning of *Leviathan* to explain that she can look the part easily: her physiognomy resembles that of a boy and she is “taller than most boys of midshipman’s age” (Westerfeld 2009, 22). Afterwards, any reference to the processes of the female body are dismissed simply by her conditions inside the ship: “Water was heavy, so bathing on an airship was done quick with rags and a pail. And the toilets aboard the *Leviathan*. . . . were in the dark gastric channel. . . . So hiding her body was easy” (Westerfeld 2009, 102).

49 The disabled body could also be included here by extension, as disability narratives are also constructed by “impulses to regulate, normalize, and regiment the (human) body” (Markotić 2016, 3), just as patriarchy try to do by regulating people into the masculine/feminine and male/female dichotomy.
In the same way that other protagonists use bandages or special garments, Deryn has arranged her brother’s clothes to alter the shape of her body, which also benefits her ruse. However, when she looks into the mirror for the first time as Dylan (her male persona), she is unable to see a man, but her reflection is “[h]er usual self . . .: female and fifteen” (Westerfeld 2009, 22). In contrast with Alanna, who found her twin in the mirror, or with Alexa, who lost her identity after having her hair cut, Deryn seems to find in her image a monster, “queerly skinny, not so much a boy as some tattie bogle set out in old clothes to scare the crows” (Westerfeld 2009, 22).

This abnormality, this monstrosity, strikes as false when she asks her brother if she looks like a boy: “Aye, I suppose you’ll pass. It’s just lucky you’ve no diddies to speak of” (Westerfeld 2009, 22). The breasts, the shape of the pre-pubescent female body, turn again into the difference that draws the line between sexes and genders. Jean Noble talks about this type of body and its relation to the phallus in *Masculinities Without Men?* (2004), a critical study in the wake of Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*. Noble explains that “[i]n an economy where power is not synonymous with possessing a penis but with possessing the phallus, then transsexed or intersexed bodies – that is, bodies that make the impression of a man – challenge that economy without reinscribing a penis” (2004, 127). In other words, the lack of breasts (or simply the impression of a flat chest) gives the cross-dresser the power and status that is normally associated with the male body and, in my cases of study, the white, heterosexual male body: “No other feature of the body will perform gender as quickly as the presence or absence of breasts” (Noble 2004, 86).

### 7.1.3. Appropriating and performing phallic masculinity

In Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*, the common act of “[tightening] the bindings around her chest till she ached” (Rosen 2011, 135) that Violet has to execute is one of the steps to make her exterior appearance “passable”. The other one is putting a pair of rolled socks inside her trousers to “embellish certain areas” (Rosen 2011, 51). The penis being substituted for a pair of socks is a humoristic...
means to introduce the appropriation of the phallic symbol at the same time that the character exposes how easily replaceable it is.\textsuperscript{50}

Jes Battis has also pointed out that phallic power in The Song of the Lioness quartet is inscribed through the protagonist’s sword, which turns into “the most important piece of artifice in her performance as a male knight” (2011, 320). The sword as a phallic symbol, however, is detachable and not inscribed on the body, and it is not especially linked to the female cross-dresser, but to any of the genders. However, I find it interesting that the image of a girl or woman wielding the sword is a trend in YA fantasy covers\textsuperscript{51}, as they portray the female subject in a position of power: this is the active fighter that has been at the center of the post-feminist movement that has permeated contemporary American popular culture (Gill 2007, Perea 2015). Such strategies show that “having” the phallus is not exclusive of men, and that, in fact, sex and gender are neither bounded together nor to the power that is always associated with masculinity.

There is no doubt that the feat of turning into a man in the eyes of people is not only a question of having an adequate body for such a purpose, but also a question of the effort the cross-dresser has put into performing her male persona convincingly. Thus, the narrator in Westerfeld’s Leviathan tells the reader that Deryn has been staying in London for a month, studying to prepare her exams but also observing young men in the streets in order to copy their gait and their movements (Westerfeld 2009, 22). Deryn transforms during this period into an actor that is preparing herself to play a role in front of an audience, therefore hinting at the component of acting that is inherent to the concept of gender. Apart from observing others, moreover, she is helped by her brother, who corrects her and gives different pieces of advice that, however, she finds useless and superficial: “Last night Jaspert had demonstrated how a proper boy checked his fingernails—looking at his palm, fingers bent, whereas girls looked at the backs of

\textsuperscript{50} Rosen is not the only author writing about cross-dressing characters with this trope, and I consider especially remarkable the way in which Terry Pratchett laughed at masculinity and the construction of gender in his novel Monstrous Regiment (2003), in which all the stereotypes of the gender-b(l)ender novel are used by a group of women cross-dressers who have enlisted in the army for different reasons.

\textsuperscript{51} Some examples of this trend, which I personally think is worth of study, are the covers of many of the editions of Pierce’s Alanna and Kashore’s Graceling and, more recently, the covers of the paperback US edition of the successful Throne of Glass series (2012-17) by Sarah J. Maas or the US cover for Lady Midnight (2016) by Cassandra Clare.
their hands, finger splayed” (Westerfeld 2009, 25). Jasper’s advice points towards the fact that for the female cross-dresser it is not enough to pass as a boy in the physical looks, but she has to act as a proper boy, with the right clothes and the right behavior, so that nobody suspects her “real” identity. Curiously enough, Michael Kimmel, one of the scholars that has helped to develop Masculinity Studies, makes reference to the act of checking one’s nails as a way to uncover someone who is not performing masculinity in the “correct” way:

One of the favorite tricks when I was an adolescent was to ask a boy to look at his fingernails. If he held his palm toward his face and curled his fingers back to see them, he passed the test. He’s looked at his nails ‘like a man.’ But if he held the back of his hand away from his face, and looked at his fingernails with arm outstretched, he was immediately ridiculed as a sissy. (Kimmel 2005, 36)

The adoption of the gender performance as a theatrical act, as shown in Westerfeld’s Leviathan trilogy, emphasizes the cultural (and personal) construction of gender (Andermahr et al. 1997, 195). In other words, the female-to-male cross-dresser is exposed as almost an actor or, at least, an imitator of “real” boys, even if in the end, cross-dressers become more “properly masculine” (according to society’s expectations) than men, who perform flawed hegemonic masculinities.

Ashton, from All Men of Genius, makes a similar comment in relation to theatricality and the performance of masculinity when he is trying to get his sister to talk “as a real man” and complains about her habit of speaking too quickly. When she reminds him that he does the same, Asthon simply recalls his privileged position: “I am a man. I don’t need to pretend to be one” (Rosen 2011, 64). Violet is convinced that she cannot be the same type of man he is (a feminine dandy), but has to be “the sort of man society calls plain. Brilliant, to be sure, but average in all other respects” (Rosen 2011, 64).

Ashton considers that the way of being a successful cross-dresser lies in being convincing during the first weeks, “[a]fter that, no one will suspect anything, because to do so will mean they were tricked in the beginning” (Rosen 2011, 65). Such statement seems to respond to Flanagan’s view of cross-dressing
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protagonists in YA fiction, in which she considers that “once the female character assumes a masculine gender identity, there is a general textual acceptance of this fact” (2011, 27). Despite Flanagan’s statement, nonetheless, the passing women in my corpus of study quite frequently have to deal with the fear of being discovered. Normally, if the female character encounters someone new at any point of her story, there is always the possibility that she is going to be discovered, sustaining part of the narrative tension. Alanna passes without question because she started to cross-dress when she was a child, and it is difficult to suspect that a ten year-old girl would develop a plan like that; however, Myles finds the truth about her identity nonetheless. Deryn is discovered at several points of her story, and different characters find out her masquerade. Violet is uncovered on her very first day by Ada Byron, a female scientist visiting Illyria College; and Alexa is discovered on her first day too, by a guard, and she is later told by Prince Damian that he knew that she was a woman long ago.

To this fear of being discovered (and its psychological toll) it is necessary to add the surveillance to which the cross-dressers are subjected. Although the sheroes are not often suspected by other characters and the subject of physicality is not openly discussed through dialogue, there is a leitmotif in the texts related to the eyes and to being the object of the others’ scrutiny. If they were to be uncovered before the achievement of their initial goal and presented as women to the world, the disruptive potential of the message would be lost. It is necessary for them to be able to pass as boys in order to disturb the reader’s conception of gender and prove that it is a construction, a performative act and not a natural fact inseparable from one’s sex. If the cross-dresser fails and is exposed, or if she does not play her masculine role convincingly, the conceptualization of gender as a malleable construction would be thwarted.

In order to do this, the relatively simple disguise that these young women decide to wear and the enactment of traditional “masculine” behavior is not enough. If gender is a construction that is attached to a specific body, which is labelled by patriarchy inside the binary male-female, then in order to act according to the norms of these given genders, the characters should think about developing a particular type of body. This is especially true of those protagonists
that have to show physical strength in battle, and therefore build muscles in arms and legs and develop resistance. Alanna is the clearest example of this trend, and the narrator highlights the pains she takes so as to be as dexterous with the sword as any “natural” (those with remarkable skills for fighting). While in Larson’s *Defy* Alexa is supposed to have magical skills that allow her to be the best fighter almost without training, Alanna has to work very hard in order to proof herself the best of the squires in the palace and, later on, the best of the knights at the service of the king. This means that she is always training during her free time, getting up at sunrise and going to bed late at night: “Alanna occupied all her time with lessons, working every extra hour she had so she could be as good as, if not better than, the boys” (Pierce 1992, 186). Although it seems that her persistence is a message for those young women who are struggling to stand out in fields in which they are surrounded by men, at the same time, since the reader cannot see the boys going through the same obstacles, it looks as if she has to work harder than them to acquire the same level. Could this be considered a critique towards the fact that the masculine standards are always the standards for everyone by default? That we may reach equality but there is no equity? If so, the message is not clear enough and, in fact, novels featuring female cross-dressers do not explicitly raise acknowledgement in relation to this concern. Instead, they focus on proving that young women can reach the masculine standard rather than campaigning for the necessity to create a *new* standard that takes into account the needs of more than a half of the world’s population.

7.1.4. “What’s in a name?”52: baptizing the male persona

Finally, I cannot end this section before taking into consideration the kind of persona that the cross-dresser creates. The identity of these alter-egos is important because they are a reflection of what the protagonists are at the beginning of each of the novels and what they want to be in the future. It is particularly interesting how they choose their male names and how they try to keep as much of their female self and their previous lives in their new façade as possible. To this account, then, a question may arise as these new personae are analyzed: to which

52 Shakespeare 2007, 198.
extent are their masculine identities “really” artificial, and to which extent are the
cross-dressers “really” just playing a part? There is no doubt that they have to lie
about certain facts of their lives, but when the passing girls or women are forced
to talk about their previous life, they prefer to omit details rather than inventing
new ones. And even though they perform the role that is expected of prototypical
men, they seem at ease, confident in their new selves or, at least, happier than they
were when they had to face “feminine” responsibilities.

As far as their names are concerned, they are really meaningful in the creation
of the characters, and they are directly related to the act of cross-dressing. Names,
in the same way that clothes themselves, appear as “an arbitrary signifier of
gender identity” (Heilmann 2000, 95), a mask that the passing girl or woman
takes in order to reinforce the male persona she creates with another feature that
society has linked to the construction of gender53. While the change of name has
been closely associated with a wish for a change in the identity of people, as
stated by Emilia Aldrin (2016), there are different trends that may lead to such a
decision. In the case of the cross-dressers, it is only a logical undertaking, as it is
part of their attempt to pass: they cannot interact and have a life as male
individuals if they do not have a masculine (or at least, unisex) first name.

The act of naming is in itself a powerful activity through which, as Judith
Butler has argued, someone is “brought into social location and time” (1997, 29).
By pointing out that “one is dependent upon another for one’s name” (1997, 27),
Butler is also reaffirming the agency of the cross-dressers, who do not need
someone else to name them, but manage to give themselves another identity. They
choose their new names, even if more often than not they decide to keep a
reminiscence of their past female identities by choosing a male version of their
feminine name. I understand this renaming action as a political act, a reaffirmation
of their individuality and a response to the tradition of taking a father’s or
husband’s name, which symbolizes that women “go through life without named

53 In some cultures, the name is so important that it decides to a certain extent the gender of a
newborn, and not the other way round. As commented in section 3.2, for instance, Inuit parents
may decide upon a male name before knowing that the baby is going to be assigned as female at
birth. For the first years of her life, before puberty strikes, she will be raised as a boy (Sonne 1992,
171; Briggs 2000).
identities of their own, but instead with names that indicate their status as objects: daughter, wife” (Walker 1990, 55).

As the name “installs gender and kinship” (Butler 1993a, 72), to name oneself means to take the reins of a body and an identity, a form of disruption and insubordination from the subject with agency. However, the action of naming their male persona is as ambiguously empowering as the act of cross-dressing itself, because these young women are “depriving” themselves of their feminine name and, through this decision, they seem to be silencing their female identity. In a way, being called by another name seems to me a symbol of the dispossession of their femininity. It is true, however, that their invisibilization as women is not complete: their names are repeated by the narrator (either a third person focalized through the main character or a first person) with a certain frequency, together with the association with the feminine pronouns, although the reader may also find male pronouns in the text referring to the gender-b(l)ender. This situation creates an interesting continuum between genders that collaborate to the blending of supposedly exclusive perspectives. Thus, we can find a clash of pronouns that account for both the male and female personae embodied in the cross-dressers. On the one hand, if there is a first person or an omniscient third person narrator, we find that the protagonist is always referred as “she,” even during the time of the masquerade, which discards the possibility of a complete identification with maleness and, therefore, rejects the possibility of full transgenderism. Nevertheless, her performance convinces all around her that she is a boy or a man, so that every other character in the narrative will refer to her as “he.”

I would like to highlight the work of Westerfeld’s trilogy Leviathan to this respect, as it takes the point of view of the two main characters (Deryn and her friend Alek) with a subjective third-person narrator that allows a depiction of Dylan/Deryn’s ability to cross the boundaries between genders: during the first and second novel, Alek believes that “Dylan” is a man, which leads to the use of the masculine pronouns and her male persona’s name in the chapters from Alek’s perspective; in the chapters from Deryn’s point of view, however, she is assigned female pronouns.
This ambiguity regarding gender is reinforced by the fact that the cross-dressers have two different names: the one that they received at birth and another one that they have chosen on their own. It is worth commenting that two different tendencies can be identified when they choose their new name: in some of the cases girls simply take the male counterpart of their own name. In other cases, however, there are significant changes that give the names new meanings, and which provide a symbolic representation to the situation the characters are going through.

Alanna and Alexa simply choose the masculine form of their names in order to create their new identity. This was a standard procedure of the historical female cross-dressers that are known, according to some scholars (Dekker and Pol 1989, 14; Bullough and Bullough 1993, 98), and a method to keep the cross-dresser’s new identity bounded to their old self. Curiously enough, etimologically, Alan and Alex are names that came first and were simply added a feminine latinized ending (Hanks et al. 2016). In the case of Alanna, this masculinization of her name is also the name of her father. Although by choosing this name she seems to be claiming her roots and heritage, the fact that she is completely different to her father speaks volumes about the irony of her preference. Symbolically, when she is adopted by Myles of Olau, she is left with a name that reminds her of her biological father but the surname of her foster father, which she has taken freely on her own will. In this way, her masculine name becomes a reflection of her identity, a mixture of her origins and the new life she decides to create for herself with whom she really feels as her family, although she is still attached to the law of the father.

The fact that both Alanna and Alexa have chosen the names of the male persona as a reflection of their original names is for me a way in which the narratives create a gender fluidity that accounts for the cross-dresser’s mastering of both masculinity and femininity (see section 7.2.4 below). At the same time, it questions notions of “reality” and “artificiality” and the thin line that sometimes separates them: as asserted by Allison Neal, after all, “[c]ross-dressing has the ability to transgress not just the gender boundary but the whole idea of gender ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’” (Neal 2012, 27). This situation is highlighted by the literary genre of the stories themselves, in which facts and fiction are constantly
being blurred and transformed (as explained in the first section in Chapter 5), a perfect parallelism of the protagonists of these novels, who “show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality become instituted” (Butler 2004, 29).

In the other cases, the change of name is more suggestive, an alteration that also works at another symbolic level. These are the circumstances of Deryn and Violet, whose names have no possible masculinization. Even though there is an attempt in both cases to invisibilize their feminine identity, they use different strategies to create their new identities. In the case of Deryn, her name is a direct reference to her free spirit and her love for flying, as it means “blackbird” in Welsh (Hanks et al. 2016)54. Her masculine name, Dylan, makes reference to a character of Welsh mythology, a god of the sea. Although it may strike as curious that she changes her name to one related to the sea, when her purpose is to study inside a flying beast —though she ends up as a midship(wo)man in one called Leviathan, just like the sea monster— going back to the myth that serves as a source makes clear the connection: Dylan is, after all, supposed to be able to swim from his birth, and once he is baptized, he goes away to live in the sea. In the same way, Deryn is said to have a special talent for flying, and she decides to abandon her family in order to devote her life to flying.

The case of Violet is completely different to the rest because it responds to a question of being practical. She is forced to hand out her application to Illyria College with the name of her brother because she does not want anybody at home to suspect her ruse, and the only way in which she can achieve it is by having the College addressing her mail to her accomplice in the deception. And while Alexa and Alanna had to deal with being almost identical to their brothers when they have their hair cut, in the case of Violet, she even takes her brother’s name. This causes the real Ashton Addams to change his identity and turn into Cousin Ashton, leading to humorous situations characteristic of the nineteenth-century comedy of manners to which the novels tries to pay homage.

54 The choice of putting a Welsh name to the character springs from the fact that Deryn/Dylan is Scottish, and there seems to be an explicit authorial intention to include a mixture of referents from different mythologies.
7.1.5. Staring at the body: the mirror scene

All the physical characteristics that I have examined in the previous subsections tend to come together in a scene that is repeated in most cross-dressing narratives: the mirror scene. At that moment, the passing girl or woman looks at her reflection and sees herself either as a successful or unsuccessful attempt to impersonate a boy. The reader is given at this point a description of the protagonist’s male persona and the ways in which “he” may depart from the traditional image of a young man. In the case of Deryn, for example, I have already mentioned that she conceives her reflection as a monster, more like a scarecrow than a human being. In other instances, the cross-dresser does not find herself in the reflection but sees another person altogether that has taken over her identity: Alanna, for example, sees her brother in the mirror, erasing her existence. I consider this a proof of her family’s influence over her self-esteem, and her necessity to come to terms with her past. As she grows, however, she learns to distance herself from her family’s history and is able to overcome her fears regarding her magic, gender, and sexuality.

According to Rosemary Jackson, the mirror is a space that allows the person to look at herself or himself from a distance. Consequently, it turns into a place “both familiar and unfamiliar” that “provides versions of self transformed into another, become something or someone else” (1995, 87). Ruth Robbins also comments on that link between the self and the other that is brought into being in the mirror, and she refers to “the process of the creation of oneself” (2000, 226), which is the idea that people are always a product, a persona that is created through a performance that is meant to fit in a specific community. In this way, gender would be probably the most important of the articulations that we, as social individuals, create (or with which we are imposed) in order to interact with other people. This mask is shaped by the culture in which we live, and we are all under pressure to model it in relation to certain conventions and norms. And although both men and women are subjected to these regulations and are forced to follow them, women are always being scrutinized in a more visual, physical way, which translates in their “[gazing] obsessively at their own images” (Robbins 2000, 226). Symbolically, then, mirrors are not simply a place to observe
ourselves and the personae we create when trying to follow culture and society’s rules, but “act as a metonym of femininity, frames in which both culture and nature are inscribed” (Robbins 2000, 226).

The mirror is, in my opinion, another tool of surveillance of the self, a way in which (female) characters scrutinize themselves and compare their aspect to what falls inside and outside the canon of femininity and, in the case of cross-dressers, the canon of masculinity as well, as their passing depends on it. Women, who have internalized the male gaze through culture, learn from early ages to objectify their bodies (Macdonald 1997, 31; Noble 2004, 48), as they “are simultaneously looked at and displayed with, their appearance coded to strong visual and erotic impact, so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 2006, 346; italics in the original). Consequently, in the mirror scene cross-dressers are participating in the same behaviors that criticize and constrain them, and are forcing themselves to create a persona that would fit in the (binary) gender performance that Western society expects. Although we may argue that when the passing woman is looking at her male persona in the mirror they help to disrupt society’s expectations through the fact that they are not acting as feminine subjects but masculine ones, it is true that the masculinity that they perform at the beginning of their deceit is still the traditional, hegemonic masculinity that is expected from heteronormative males.

As a way of controlling the body and gender of the sheroes, the mirror and the scenes that take place in front of it are paramount in the development of the characters. In Rosen’s All Men of Genius, Violet is not concerned with the mirror in her bedroom at the beginning of the novel, as made clear by the fact that she has “many books piled in her dressing table” (Rosen 2011, 24). The vanity is not used for its original purpose, and by deciding not to use it, she is escaping the scrutiny to which other young women may subject themselves. However, the first time she puts herself in front of the mirror, there is a change in the way she looks at herself, a feeling that is enhanced by the perspective of the third person narrator, a voice reinforcing canonical femininity through the idea that the protagonist should dress “properly” more often: “Violet seldom dressed up so nicely, and when she did, she appeared a real, sophisticated woman instead of
some awkwardly large girl with too-fierce eyes” (Rosen 2011, 32; my emphasis). The narrator takes advantage of the mirror scene to exalt Violet’s potential beauty when she takes care of her aspect, and the moment is a touchstone for her interest in femininity. Part of the narrator’s discourse is grounded in the idea that clothes have an impact on people, and all “enjoy the look of themselves in well-tailored clothing” (Rosen 2011, 32), but such a statement does only reinforce sartorial rules in which those people ascribing to a gender have specific clothes that differentiate them, at the same time that it supports gender roles and traditional looks.

The second time Violet stands in front of a mirror she has dressed as a boy for the first time and awaits her interview at Illyria College. At this moment, she looks for the first time to her new persona and discovers that she can pass as male. However, she does not look completely masculine at this moment, as she is carrying a woman’s bag. This disruption symbolizes clearly the combination of feminine and masculine attributes that gender-b(l)enders use to create their masculine identity (see section 7.2.4). In this mirror scene, Violet sees her image as “quite striking, if only because she saw a man holding a handbag, which seemed rather odd” (Rosen 2011, 68). The handbag does not only represent her resourcefulness and femininity, but it also epitomizes her desire to help women through her inventions and to change the world for those whom her society has deemed as weak and vulnerable.

The third mirror scene is a point of no return for Violet and her femininity. After being a boy for months at Illyria, Christmas comes and she is willing to go back to her skirts and corsets, even if she had despised them before. When she looks at her reflection after dressing herself and after having her hair and makeup done, “she could see [that the discomfort she felt] was worth it. She looked like a gentlewoman in a play or painting” (Rosen 2011, 260; italics mine). The connection of art and femininity that Violet sees in her reflection reinforces the conception of gender as performance, but this comment is lost among Violet’s sudden desires to look beautiful. Even though the character clearly acknowledges the suffering women have to deal with in order to fit the beauty standard —the self-surveillance and discipline of the body about which Rosalind Gill (2006)
talks—she is willing to do it, and in fact discovers that “it’s good to be a woman again” (Rosen 2011, 262), uncritically associating femininity with being attractive. She enjoys the compliments of those around her, and at this point she starts to resent that she has to dress as a man, because she does not like lying to others and does not enjoy playing the part anymore. She confesses to her brother that she is “attached” to her femininity, “or at least to the honesty of being [her]self” and discovers that she feels “quite at ease” when looking at her reflection dressed as a woman (Rosen 2011, 262). If the first mirror scene was the first contact with her potential femininity (and being a real woman, as the narrator has told the readers), this moment turns into a decision to return to her female self and to act the performance that society expects from her.

Violet is not the only one that gazes at the mirror at a critical point in her story. Mirrors are inextricably linked to identity, so the moment in which the cross-dresser looks at her reflection turns sometimes into a real epiphany regarding the outcome of their cross-dressing activity. Alexa, just as Violet, faces the mirror thrice throughout Larson’s *Defy*. The first time, she has just lost her brother while defending their prince, and her reflection reminds her of all the risks that she now has to face alone, because her brother cannot protect her anymore from being discovered if something happens. Her reflection is, however, a way to feel that her brother is still alive, and when she looks at herself in male attire, she is also looking at Marcel. In the looking-glass she also finds her “traitorous body” (Larson 2014, 37) and not only the possibility of her secret being discovered, but also the femininity that has been denied to her by having to survive in masculine disguise.

The second time she has to confront her reflection, almost at the end of the novel, she is holding a hand mirror to inspect the injuries in her face. They are proof of what she has done (and achieved) for her country, including the freedom of all the women that were kept in the breeding houses. This critical moment is presented as the final farewell to Marcel, because she will never look like him anymore: “The face I saw now didn’t look a thing like Marcel. The right side, yes. But the left… My tears spilled out and run down my cheeks, leaving wet streaks on the silvery, ridged scars that covered my left cheek” (Larson 2014, 306). If her
“traitorous body” did not allow her to completely pass as a boy and put her in danger of being discovered, turning her into an abnormality that disrupted the control of the king over their subjects, now she takes herself for “a monster — made by the hand of the true monster” (Larson 2014, 306). Once again, the traditional, hegemonic femininity that she was willing to embrace has been taken away from her, and she feels disgusted to have these scars, despite their being marks of her sheroism.

Alexa’s final encounter with her reflection is the moment when she decides to accept herself. She has thought about what has happened and decides to agree with Lisbet (a mother figure for her) that her “scars are nothing to be ashamed of” (Larson 2014, 313). She learns that beauty lies on the inside, while her scars in just half her face become a cruel symbol of the blend between the feminine woman and the dangerous warrior. She even manages to recognize her brother and father in her face, despite the wounds, as she still has their same eyes. While her body was once for her a problem and she was constantly threatened to be discovered due to her breasts and feminine body shape, she is in the end proudly showing her curves and letting her hair grow, at the same time that keeps wearing her uniform, in an image that may remind us of the character of the postfeminist sexy warrior (Ruthven 2015). At this point, Alexa is amazed at her reflection and feels powerful and comfortable, regardless of her previous desire of being just a young woman: “As I stood there, becoming familiar with my new reflection, an unexpected peace flowed over me. . . . For the first time since the day I’d had to chop off my hair and pretend to be a boy, I smiled at my reflection” (Larson 2014, 314).

Examples like these are repeated throughout the books of my corpus. Alanna looks at the mirror after cross-dressing to find that she looks exactly like her brother. Years later, when she dresses as a lady and is re-learning to act in a traditional feminine way, she seems to find herself and her potential femininity in her reflection. She is surprised to notice that she has become a “lady” in terms of the proper behavior and aspect for her class (Pierce 1998a, 125). Although I will be dealing with their return to femininity in more detail in Chapter 9, it is interesting to realize that the process of passing as a young man and the later act of turning
towards femininity could be considered as specular processes themselves, since they are presented in similar terms: femininity is not easier for girls for having been born female; instead, it is displayed in most novels as being a process of (re)learning how to speak, walk, dress, and seeing the world from a different point of view. In this way, the two genders are treated as a set of conventions that are neither natural nor easy to put into practice, and which are determined by the culture in which the protagonists live.

If the sheroes decide to stop their performance it is not only because they have accomplished their goals, but because the male persona is a burden that erases their complex selves. In some cases (such as Violet’s and Alexa’s) their affiliation to femininity makes them wish to stop dressing and behaving like men. But apart from their femininity, these characters often wish to discover their “real” identity to everyone because they feel uncomfortable lying to those around them. There is no doubt that these female-to-male cross-dressers, regardless of their intention to perpetrate a ruse, have a strong moral side that often makes the burden of the masquerade unbearable. Although they fear the different punishments that they could face if they are discovered (from being sent to prison or the possibility that they may be raped to the simple idea of being sent back home), they are especially afraid of ostracism and of losing their friends’ respect. And, interestingly enough, remorse goes hand in hand with the romantic subplot, in which they feel bad because they cannot tell the boy they like about their truth and, therefore, cannot confess their love. As it is going to be discussed in section 7.2.1, this romantic subplot keeps them away from being read as queer for their cross-dressing activities, while the remorse and compulsion to remember the truth is a way to remind the reader that the cross-dresser is female and thus there is no real homosexual relationships that could bring into question the (hetero)normativity of the main characters.

The conclusion to this section could be summarized in an idea that was explained by Ann Heilmann in her article “(Un)Masking Desire” (2000), where she stated that “cross-dressing exploits demonstrated that it was costume, not the
body, which inscribed gender and assigned social power to the wearer” (83). The female protagonists in the novels in my corpus of study exemplify how easy it is to pass as boys simply by wearing the adequate outfit and looking like boys. Although behaving in a masculine way is important, as I will show in the next section, their looks constitute the first obstacle girls and women have to overcome, and they are conscious of their appearance. The mirror becomes, in all these novels about cross-dressers, a way for these characters to both detach themselves from their bodies first and then come to terms with an important part of their gender identity.

While their personae are being constructed, then, female characters are unconsciously discovering to the reader the different layers that construct an identity from the point of view of U.S. society: their clothes, their hair, or their name are crucial bricks for the creation of an identity, but they are also just another type of mask that could be as easily put on as taken off. The body thus could become either a site of acceptance of and submission to patriarchy, or a place where these young women inscribe a male persona in order to resist traditional notions of gender. However, this contestation to patriarchy and to the gender binary is not always achieved by remaining in male disguise, as some of them regret the creation of their male identity in the end and prefer to recover their female self with all the constrictions that femininity may put upon them but still fighting for their legitimate place in society.

7.2. “[T]he sort of boy [he] would have wanted to be”55: masculinities under examination

In her study “It’s Never Too Late to Switch: Crossing Toward Power,” Alisa Solomon (1993) examines the fact that femininity has been said to be best performed by men56 and therefore asks: “why isn’t masculinity best performed by women?” (1993, 145). The answer has already been pointed out in previous sections, and it lies on the fact that masculinity has not been considered an

55 Westerfeld 2009, 327.
56 Solomon’s debate is based on a much-discussed assertion by scholar and critic Jan Kott regarding cross-dressing that “[f]emininity can only be acted by a man” (qted. in Solomon 1993, 145).
artificial construction until very recently. This is a consequence of the binaries that have permeated Euro-American societies, which have set masculinity and femininity as two opposite, exclusive points instead of acknowledging that they are part of an axis with different levels. Therefore, while femininity is accepted as a masquerade, Western culture has failed to recognize masculinity as such, and therefore it is “presumed universal” and “more invisible in its artificiality” (Solomon 1993, 145).

Cross-dressing, as it has already been hinted, denaturalizes both the gender binary and sex “by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler 1990, 138). However, once again, cross-dressing does not seem to mean the same for women and men. As Solomon has asserted, “[i]f men dressed as women often parody gender, women dressed as men, on the other hand, tend to perform gender” (1993, 145). This has been already exposed in the way in which masculine cross-dressing is specifically associated with transvestism, either as an activity charged with eroticism or as a parody to femininity (see Chapter 3).

By placing masculinity and femininity as two opposite, exclusive extremes, then, we face a binary in which one of its elements is defined by the absence or presence of the other element, as it happens with masculinity, defined as “the flight from women, the repudiation of femininity” (Kimmel 2005, 31). Following this idea, prototypical masculinity will try to stand as far apart from femininity as possible, and it would be traditionally described in the very terms that patriarchy denies to female individuals: in the Euro-American imagination the masculine subject (normally symbolized by the heterosexual, white man) is portrayed as rational, powerful, violent, active, courageous, and autonomous, while the feminine subject is irrational, subjected to others, peaceful, passive, weak, and dependent.

Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons, and Kathleen Lennon, consider that the characteristics of this hegemonic masculinity include “hinging on heterosexuality, economic autonomy, being able to provide for one’s family, being rational, being successful, keeping one’s emotions in check, and above all not doing anything considered feminine” (2002, 141). This type of masculinity (as it is embedded in
U.S. mainstream culture) would be synonym of success and power, and only attainable for a minimum percentage of the population, since only medium or high class, working, heterosexual, able men could fulfil all these traits.

But satisfying these elements is not enough to be considered a “real man”. Although it is indeed vital for being portrayed and recognized as such, masculinity is “presented as a process which needs constantly reaffirming [sic]; one’s status as a man is never secure but in perpetual need of validation by other men” (Alsop et al. 2002, 143). This idea derives directly from Butler’s conception of gender itself, which is based on both performance and performativity. That is, gender is not only a role that we play according to social and cultural standards but a process in which certain behaviors and deeds have to be repeated by the subject and validated by other people. The problem with hegemonic masculinity, as well as with the performance of gender itself, is that it becomes the pursuit of an ideal, the imitation, as Butler warns us, of a chimera that has no genesis, because “[i]f gender attributes and acts . . . are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; . . . and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction” (1990, 141).

This fiction, however, permeates society in a way that forces us to embrace the concept of gender, since it punishes those who are unable to ascribe themselves to the ideal, leaving them subjected to different levels of social ostracism. Take into consideration, for example, the protagonists of the novels in this corpus: most of them are subjected to criticism by society due to the fact that their behavior goes outside hegemonic conceptions of femininity. Thus, we find characters who are forced to change their ways to please others or who are seen as a threat because they do not present themselves in a traditional feminine way. Probably, Katsa in Cashore’s Graceling’s is the one that best embodies this problematic, as she is neither able to feign a prototypical feminine behavior nor does she want to, a fact that makes her especially dangerous for the status quo.

Female cross-dressers’ conceptions of masculinity, curiously enough, are always quite hegemonical at the beginning, and they try to act in the most “manly” way they can think of. Probably their conceptions originate from the fact
that the type of femininity that they are taught at home is definitely traditional, too: the femininity of a white, high/medium class in which women are goods to be exchanged between men at the time of marriage. Thus, most of the female leading characters in the novels in my corpus hold a high position in society: Alanna is the daughter of the Lord of Trebond; Katsa is the niece of a king; Violet’s father is a scientist, but prosperous enough to have a position that allows his son to sit at the dinner tables of the English nobility; Deryn’s family seem to be accommodated, as women do not work and she has inherited enough money for living in London for a while; and Alexa may not be part of the ruling class, but her job in the guard of the prince ensures her some freedoms that others cannot enjoy. In general, then, the protagonists are definitely in a privileged position that guarantees them power even before they cross-dress, which seems to go hand in hand with Halberstam’s thesis that, in history, “[m]asculine identification with social impunity required money and social status” (2003, 87). Halberstam refers here to the fact that women (but not necessarily passing women) with fortunes were allowed to behave and assume masculinity with a certain liberty. Thus, it is not strange to discover the trope of the rich woman performing masculinity or some of its elements in YA fiction, strengthening the link between the cross-dressing characters and power.

There are two different trends that emerge from this trope: in one of them, the girl is already from a wealthy family when she decides to cross-dress, underlying the privileges and constraints associated with gender within a certain class. In the second trend, the girl’s decision to cross-dress arises from necessity, which will show the act of passing not only as a way to claim the privileges of the male gender, but also the ones that derive from a higher class.57

The struggle for power is a recurrent topic in cross-dressing narratives and in YA literature in general: adolescence is always portrayed as a stage in which the

57 Other novels outside my corpus, from different genres inside YA literature, have portrayed the relationship between cross-dressing and power from these two different points of view. In Alison Goodman’s *Eon* (2008) and *Eona* (2011) the protagonist ends up as a counselor for the emperor at court; A.C. Gaughen’s *Scarlet* (2012) tells the story of a noblewoman who decides to escape from an arranged marriage; Patricia Wrede’s protagonist in *A Matter of Magic* (2010), Kim, is a street urchin adopted by a nobleman; and Celia Rees’s historical fictions *Pirates!* (2005) and *Sovay* (2008) present main female characters that are well-bred ladies who have been engaged in advantageous alliances for their families.
teens fight for the power to make their own decisions and get free from the control of parents. And power itself is part of the gender performance. Michael Kimmel, in one of his multiple studies on masculinity, relates inextricably one concept to the other, as he considers that “[m]asculinity . . . was defined by the drive for power, for domination, for control” (2012, 5). Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon also note that power lies in the inequality between genders, following Foucault and Butler: they remind us that it is not a question of who has the power in itself, but how much power individuals can have (Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon 2002, 201). In other words, it is not a question of women not having power, but about them having less power than men. And regardless of their performance of gender, there is always “certain dominant ideals which reinforce the power of certain groups, e.g. men, heterosexuals, over the others” (Alsop et al. 2002, 99).

But since gender is a disguise, a girl or woman may earn the privileges of a white, heterosexual, middle-class man without actually being one. Consequently, the (white) cross-dresser has the opportunity to dismantle such social constructions by taking part in the dominant discourse without really having the power to do so. And, as Dugaw points out in her analysis of female cross-dressers in English and American ballads, by fooling those around them and “[c]ommandeering the signifiers of masculine identity, [the passing woman] becomes both hero and heroine [i.e. sheroe] in an equivocal playing of roles which upholds them while simultaneously exposing them as mutable social forms” (1989, 143).

What is more, the cross-dressing protagonists in literary works and other forms of art show the fallacy of the hegemonic ways of constructing gender. Even though at the beginning of their performance they try to follow hegemonic masculinity, in search of praise and the recognition that they are real boys, their actions and behaviors tend to vary from that set of attributes and become somehow different, creating a new type of masculine gender performance that is not only more truthful to whom they are but that is widely praised by those around them, to the extent that they become, ironically, a role example for other boys or men. I will analyze in more detail in section 2.4 the way in which their deeds and behavior are a reason for praise, but for the moment, I would like to begin by
looking at the way in which their performance uses the concept of hegemonic masculinity and how the idea of female masculinity is also embedded in the way in which these young women carry themselves.

7.2.1. Compulsory heterosexuality

In general, YA fiction tends to depict a male hero that “more often than not reaffirms hegemonic masculine traits, including unproblematized heterosexuality” (Duggan 2017, 39). As a consequence, the female character that tries to pass as a male without being suspected has to shape her performance to this same exemplary role. Consequently, the link between hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality is undeniable. The ideal of the masculine gender is naturally attached to heterosexuality because, as Judith Butler reminds us, heterosexuality is a force that benefits from the construction of the gender binary, as masculinity and femininity seem to be “maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (1990, 136). Thus, the purest ideal of masculinity would retain this binary and reinforce it, or else the concept of masculinity itself may collapse.

It should not take us by surprise, then, that everybody around the cross-dresser expects her male personae to show their heterosexuality, although the young women behind their mask do not really have a romantic (or sexual) relationship with any women, nor they want to consciously have one. In general, however, heterosexuality is a compulsory requisite in order to perform a traditional, hegemonic masculinity. Real boys do not fall in love or expect to have a sexual relationship with another boy, as Michael Kimmel points out, because “of what guys think being gay means: It [sic] means not being a guy. That’s the choice: gay or guy” (2009, 77). Thus, homosexuality is erased from normative constructions of masculinity and is acknowledged, in contrast, as something to avoid. In fact, homosexuality is considered almost an insult in the context of the white, middle-class, American adolescent: “After all, the most common put-down in American high schools today is ‘that’s so gay,’ or calling someone a ‘fag’” (Kimmel 2009, 76).
As heterosexuality is set as the default desire, it is only logical to construct masculinities in such societies around this compulsion. In this way, “to score with a woman” (Kimmel 2009, 169) becomes a compulsory rite of passage for those who wish to turn into a real man. Being with a woman, then, “indicates both [a boy’s] desirability and his virility, and proves that he’s succeeding in the often complicated task of attaining manhood” (Kimmel 2009, 169). Except Katsa (who is cautious not to discover herself when she is in male attire) and Alexa (who never gets to interact with a woman long enough), the rest of the cross-dressers find themselves being the romantic interest of a woman, even if they do not show any interest in being suitors to someone. After all, if they have cross-dressed as males is because they have tried to avoid an arranged marriage or the inequalities that permeates patriarchal societies. This is why sometimes passing women do not seem to understand that, as part of the construction of their male personae, they should show a little more interest in women, as heterosexuality is a requisite of U.S. hegemonic masculinity to completely pass as men. Alan/na, for example, is not expressly concerned with women either romantically or sexually, and she never thinks about this part of her construction of masculinity, but it is Jonathan, who knows her secret, who forces her “to dance with all the ladies, as he does, even though no one else has to” (Pierce 1998a, 123).

In relation to this type of compulsory heterosexuality, I would like to highlight the figure of Ashton/Violet, in Rosen’s All Men of Genius, who does not realize that Duke Ernest’s niece, Cecily, is in love with her male persona until it is too late and she ends up breaking Cecily’s heart. In the case of Violet, it is especially important to take into account that Cecily is not only the niece of her own love interest, but the only young woman that can set a foot inside Illyria College and, as a consequence, most desired by the students. Cecily’s status and the fact that she is attracted to Ashton/Violet is particularly significant for the male persona’s construction of masculinity because “a woman’s desirability may serve to define a man’s masculine status with other men” (Smith 1990, 194). That is, the evidence that Cecily prefers the company of Ashton/Violet and rejects the attention of the other (male) students has, in my opinion, a double significance, because it does not only assert Ashton/Violet’s masculinity, but it also comments
upon the desire of women to be treated as intelligent people with feelings. This is, after all, the real reason why Ashton/Violet catches Cecily’s attention from the beginning: while the boys and men around her objectify Cecily for her beauty, Ashton/Violet treats her as an equal and shows real interest for her scientific experiments.

Compulsory heterosexuality, however, permeates the performance of the protagonist during the whole narrative and, though open to potential queer readings (Halberstam 2003; Kornfield 2011), the (female) character of the gender-b(l)ender remains essentially heterosexual. Ann Heilmann criticizes that “while the cross-dressing plot served to destabilise the category of gender, many feminist writers went to extraordinary (and never wholly convincing) lengths to clear their heroines of any suspicion of deviance, sexual desire or even heterosexual awareness in their intimate friendships with men” (2000, 93). Although Heilmann’s analysis of female-to-male cross-dressers is concerned with novels published at the beginning of the twentieth century, this tendency has survived to our days. Halberstam considers this necessity to avoid queerness a consequence of the construction of the female (masculine) character, because “female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire. . . . Heterosexual female masculinity menaces gender conformity in its own way, but all too often it represents an acceptable degree of female masculinity as compared to the excessive masculinity of the dyke” (1998, 28).

7.2.2. Dominance and violence

Apart from heterosexuality, another main characteristic of hegemonic masculinity is dominance over others. A dominance that, more often than not, may derive into violence and the need to reassert one’s autonomy. Therefore, the masculine character is somehow forced by patriarchal social conventions to show physical, mental, and emotional strength, which is accepted by their peers as the way to assert their independence and to defend themselves.

In the case of the sheroes in my corpus, violence and the necessity to defend themselves and establish a physical dominance over others is present in almost all the novels. I have already mentioned the importance that authors give to the
ability of their female protagonist to defend themselves without the help of men around them (see section 5.2.1), but violence and the use of weapons is also depicted as a means to assert their physical superiority as boys and over other boys, and therefore to earn their place as “real” males and as members of a group of male friends. Far from being punished by their fights by adults around them, these disputes are considered acceptable, sometimes leaving the harmful message that violence can be fought with violence.

This is exactly what happens in the first instalment of Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness. Alan/na is there subjected to the physical power of Ralon of Malven, who is pictured as her antagonist from the very beginning. Ralon is described as an unpleasant boy that enjoys annoying other pages and who seems to have fixed ideas about who the dominant class must be (that is, those nobles who live in the city/castle). When Alanna answers to his insults calling him a pig, he decides to change from verbal to physical violence, to which Alanna knows how to contest as well: “Ralon threw her against the wall, hard. Alanna charged, ramming into his stomach and knocking him to the floor” (Pierce 1992, 32). As Alan/na acts in self-defense, when Prince Jonathan (Jon) and his comrades enter the scene, she is appraised for her behavior to the point that Jon decides to make one of his friends sponsor her. Since nobody likes Ralon that much, Alan/na’s response to his dominance leads her to be considered one of the boys, with an autonomy for which she is going to fight. In fact, when her friends say that they would protect Alan/na from Ralon if necessary, she reclaims her agency and the fact that she knows how to win her own battles: “I do my own fighting, thanks” (Pierce 1992, 64). Alanna thus interiorizes a hegemonic view of masculinity in which violence and masculinity go hand in hand, as Michael Kimmel explains: “a man had to be ready to fight to prove himself in the eyes of others,” so boys learn to “use violence when necessary to test and prove their manhood, and when others don’t measure up, they make them pay” (2009, 57).

However, Alan/na really struggles to get out of the situation of bullying to which Ralon subjects her. As the other strong boys in the castle take her side, the bully decides to act when she is alone, using his physical superiority as an adolescent to torment the child. Interestingly enough, although at least one adult
knows about Alan/na’s problem, he does nothing because she denies being the subject of abuses and rejects his help: “I'm not a crybaby or a telltale. . . . I have to handle this myself” (Pierce 1992, 67). When Ralon breaks her right arm, she keeps on repeating that her injuries are just a consequence of a bad fall: “Nobody whipped me. I fell” (Pierce 1992, 73).

All those boys and men who are not doing anything against Ralon, who are not speaking up to stop the bullying against Alan/na, are accomplices in the culture of silence which helps to sustain reprehensible (masculine) behaviors (Kimmel 2009, 61-2). Alan/na is also participating in this culture by not daring to raise her voice and asking any adult to stop Ralon’s abuses. She is so stubborn regarding this topic because her autonomy is paramount to her, and the ability to do everything alone, without others solving her problems, becomes vital in the definition of Alanna as a character. However, she always listens to others’ advices, and accepts, to a great extent, help when she needs someone to teach her how to defend herself. In order to face Ralon, for example, she resorts to George (a city thief) and her servant Coram, who teach her how to fight so that she will not be at the mercy of her oppressor.

Alan/na therefore seems the embodiment of all those notions that heteropatriarchal society imbues in the mind of boys who want to turn into “real” men: do not be a telltale, face your own problems, do not show weakness in front of others… Alan/na suffers when she decides to follow this code of behavior and nobody wants to intervene, even when she is severely beaten. In a way, she is ashamed of being bullied, and considers herself weak, which makes her think that if she is not able to beat Ralon, she needs to leave the castle on the grounds that “[s]he couldn't be a knight” (Pierce 1992, 84). Eventually, she faces her aggressor and irks him to get into a fight in front of all the other boys, so that everyone can see that she is, after all, a “real” boy that fights his own battles.

In the end, when the adults hear about the fight, she is punished by Duke Gareth, the person in charge of the boys, who makes her write a formal “apology to Ralon's father” and grounds her by restricting her “to the palace for two months” (Pierce 1992, 90). However, although she is punished and given a long talk about the duties of a knight, the punishment has less of an impact on her
because she realizes that “he was pleased that she had beaten Ralon, not angry” (Pierce 1992, 90). In a way, therefore, her behavior and the use of violence as a way to contest violence is encouraged rather than condemned, which seems to me a poor message for the young readers who may skim through the novel with the idea that this is the correct way of facing bullies or of constructing a healthy masculinity. The problem of this message is only solved three novels later, in the fourth and last instalment of the tetralogy, when Ralon of Malven comes back to Alanna in search of revenge. Only at this point is there a clear lesson that violence only causes more violence as a result, and that bullies do not learn anything from being beaten, because it does not help them to understand their mistakes, only to fill themselves with more hate.

Alanna’s response to other difficulties in relation to her physical strength always follows the same pattern: she realizes that she is not able to do something and, after being frustrated by the experience and thinking about herself as useless, she decides to ask for someone to be her tutor and overcome the initial feeling of defeat. Although she is especially concerned with being the best knight, as shown by her willingness to excel in sword fighting (*Alanna*) and the style of fighting used by Shang warriors (*Lioness Rampant*), this wish could be connected not only to her goal of being a well-known errant knight, but also to the fact that she does not feel she is good enough. Ironically, Alanna tries to follow the principles of the knightly code (*a masculine* code created by and for men), keeping close to the idea of being truthful and honorable, strong and compassionate with those in need, and taking into consideration the “masculine ethics of camaraderie, honesty, and honor” (Battis 2011, 320). However, as Jes Battis has pointed out in her analysis of the tetralogy, “Alanna is able to fulfill the code in every aspect without actually being honest about her ‘real’ gender”, a fact that serves to “entirely undermine Pierce’s knightly code itself” (2011, 320). Because women are not supposed to participate in it nor to surpass men in their adherence to the laws, the fact that Alanna is able to get her shield shows not only that “Alanna is actually more masculine than any biological male within the knightly institution” (Battis 2011, 320) but that the behavior they expect from a knight is a construction of masculinity to which anyone can be attached.
Knighthood is not the only occupation that has been traditionally associated with masculinity. Deryn wants to enter the air forces, an only-men institution. The construction of the masculinity inside the British air force depicted by Scott Westerfeld is not far from the one the readers can find in the knights that populate Tortall in The Song of the Lioness. In fact, the principles of both institutions are exactly the same: honesty, honor, hard work, resourcefulness, and courage, which are vital in any soldier, but more so in those who want to be awarded for their services. Once again, readers find a female protagonist that shows all these characteristics and is able to stand out over her peers as someone more valuable. Again a protagonist is able to convince everyone around her that she is a legit male and an adequate midshipman, even when she is lying about her identity and, thus, undermining the construction of the profession by being neither truthful nor from the expected gender identity.

Both Alanna and Deryn are especially concerned with power and dominance. In the case of Alanna, as I have already explained, her dominance over others relies on her physical force and her fighting ability, together with her necessity of being the best among the pages, squires, and knights as she grows older. In the case of Deryn, her masculinity is not a question of physical superiority but rather mental power, together with a characteristic that, in her world, is mostly associated with males and masculinity: having a “head for heights” (Westerfeld 2009, 24). Even though she is not exceptionally strong and she knows it (she has to put a double effort in keeping up with her comrades), Deryn shows everyone that she can fly and keep calm even in the worst situations: when she is trapped in a storm, for example, or when she has to face the German troops. Her resourcefulness, her intellectual abilities and the way in which she applies logic (all of them characteristics stereotypically associated with males) make her the perfect midshipman.

Though apparently contradictory terms, as we tend to associate violence with irrationality, rationality and violence are intimately linked in patriarchal and capitalist thought, where violence is instrumentalized in the rational interest of the patriarchs. They are also set as two characteristics that give value to the protagonists in their worlds. These two features serve the gender-b(l)enders to
establish a link between themselves and the other men around them, which at the same time is depicted as an incentive to carry out their cross-dressing. Violence (and particularly, recurrent, autonomous violence), as I have already mentioned in section 5.2, is almost never associated with femininity, as it gives agency to bodies that are meant to be objectified and victimized and unable to defend themselves. In this context, then, “[v]iolence is often the single most evident marker of manhood” (Kimmel 2005, 36). This leads violent girls to be seen as tomboys, and violent women to be depicted as violators of the gender roles, abnormalities that divert from the heteronormative expectations, especially when they show their muscles and boast about their strength. The aberration of these characters will be considered even greater if they show a queer sexuality as well, and that is why I agree with other scholars (Kornfield 2005, Straayer 1996, Horak 2013) that the authors of these novels take the trouble to make clear that their characters are heterosexual and not a real threat to the power establishment (as discussed in the previous section).

Alexa and Katsa, the protagonists from Larson’s Defy and Cashore’s Graceling respectively, are part of the group of women who are related to masculinity through violence. In the case of Alexa, her hegemonic masculinity is reinforced by her job as a bodyguard for the prince, which gives her privileges and power. In the case of Katsa, her masculinity is secured by being the most feared guard in the castle, both for her “unfeminine” ways and for her physical dominance over any other soldier. The fact that she is used by the king as an assassin (and an instrument to sow terror and respect for him) subtracts autonomy to her situation and objectifies her, a matter that can also be seen in the way the king wishes her to be feminine and wear pretty dresses and jewels. His eagerness to display his niece as a trophy makes Katsa a symbol of his reign of terror and power over other men, because he uses her “monstrous” powers of violence to frighten them. Patricia Kennon has also noted how she is a sight for others for her use of violence in contrast with her “deceptively young, apparently vulnerable and ‘innocent’ body,” highlighting that “Katsa’s unarmed practices of fighting against older, armed human warriors and other Gracelings are a popular ‘spectacle’ for the royal court” (2015, 55). However, she is not the only protagonist in my corpus.
that is used in this way by her king: the same statement could be repeated when talking about Alex/a. Although her importance within the government is less noticeable and she belongs to a group (the escort of Prince Damian) rather than being an individual working alone, she is a symbol, as a soldier, of the power of the king: a way to oppress the weak and to have control over the population, but also to conquer other countries.

The case of Violet is somehow different. At the beginning of the novel, her intelligence and her use of reason turn her into a strange woman in the eyes of others. She prefers male company and enjoys intellectual conversations which, in the world she lives, is considered a masculine inclination. Although it is worth noticing that in the rest of novels of the corpus Violet would not have been considered a proper bearer of hegemonic masculinity, the world in which she lives considers her perfectly acceptable as a young man. This has to do with the fact that, in general, none of the characters (not even the protagonist) in this narrative is an image of the hegemonic masculinity. The performance of such type of masculinity, violent and without feelings, is embodied by the automats, regardless of their lack of rationality and free will. In practice, they behave like soldiers, following orders and subjugating others by means of their physical power. And, in a way, as the automats themselves, those men who show excessive masculinity can be dangerous, as they try to devoid themselves of emotions and use brute force to subjugate those that suppose a problem to their ideologies. Next to them, all the characters in Illyria College that are presented as antagonists to the ideals of Violet or her friends offer concepts of masculinity that seem oppressive and dangerous. Although they cannot resort to physical force because it seems incompatible with the figure of the intellectual, they exert dominance over those they consider weak or unapt around them, showing sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, racist, and classist ideologies. These lines of thought are clearly condemned in the text and it does condemn, by association, forms of masculinity that try to exert abuse over minorities and oppress them (see section 8.1.3 in the next chapter).
7.2.3. The suppression of emotions

In this section about hegemonic masculinities I would also like to mention a characteristic that is widely shared by hegemonic conceptions of this gender construction. As I have already pointed out, masculinity tries to distance itself from femininity. Leslie Ferries reminds her readers that “[e]motions are gender-identified as feminine” (1993, 12), which means that masculine men will try to avoid them, for they are rather associated with the rational instead of being linked to the emotional and the physical (Alsop et al. 2002, 16-7). Expressions such as “boys do not cry” are recurrent in a society that tries to repress men’s feelings, and which insists that “real” men do not show how they feel, especially when these emotions imply sadness, shame, or fear (although they are allowed to express fury, anger, or hatred).

In his study of masculinity, Guyland, Michael Kimmel (2009) summarizes the answers men give to the question of “what sorts of phrases and words come to mind when they hear someone say ‘Be a man!’” (44), which, unsurprisingly, talk about the necessity to hide their emotions, be aggressive and competitive, and never surrender: “The face you must show to the world insists that everything is going just fine, that everything is under control, that there’s nothing to be concerned about” (Kimmel 2009, 45). Boys are routinely educated to repress tears, for example, and to avoid any behavior that may deviate from the image of men as “rational and capable of universally valid thought” (Alsop et al. 2002, 17). In other words, like women, they must make an effort to control their bodies and their thoughts in order to be accepted. Cross-dressers, as they try to pass, interiorize this conduct to the extent that they are always trying to silence any emotion, especially sadness and love, which have been widely associated with women. On the other hand, they get frustrated when they are not able to control their bodies, as they might expose them as women, an aspect already discussed in section 7.1.2 above.

Regarding the repression of their feelings, most of the passing girls and women are concerned with keeping them for themselves, and even when they do this, some of them feel angry or frustrated for just having them, which is a common male thought, as Kimmel states: “from an early age boys are taught to
refrain from crying, to suppress their emotions, never to display vulnerability. As a result, boys feel effeminate not only if they express their emotions, but even if they feel them” (2009, 53; italics in the original). This feeling of self-rejection comes from the association of these emotions with their conceptualization of femininity. And as they associate femininity mostly with the idea of being weak, it is not strange that they try to escape from emotions. The problem is that this necessity to hide their feelings is considered the base for a posterior aggressive behavior, because turning “to anger and violence . . . they believe, perhaps rightly, [is] the only acceptable [form] of emotional expression allowed them” (Kimmel 2009, 54).

Masculine emotional repression is known both by men and women, and the later use it as part of their masquerade when trying to pass, therefore creating male personae that remain stoic and do not show sadness or anxiety, even when they are indeed anxious at the possibility of being discovered and irritated for not believing themselves as good as the boys around them. Apart from the oppressive control they exert on their bodies to hide them, the passing women are forced to hide their emotions, especially those related to love and unhappiness. But the truth is that these feelings do not disappear, and they in fact grow despite their desires and, sometimes, they turn into something else: either shame or annoyance, both at themselves (for having them) and others (for triggering them).

I have already mentioned some of these feelings in relation to what they associate with femininity (see section 6.2). Dylan/Deryn, in particular, has some strong notions regarding masculinity and believes that men should not show their feelings. She is clearly ashamed that women are obvious about their emotions when they fall in love, for example (although she is clueless when Lilit starts to feel attracted to her). Moreover, regarding sadness, though she comforts Alek when she sees him crying and promises not to tell anybody, she does not mention having cried even once when her father died and, in fact, her answer to sadness is fleeing her home and going to London in order to enter the air forces. Her masculine attitude is reflected at this moment, in a sentence that may remind the reader of the tough behavior that is expected from middle-class white men: “That was the trick—to keep punching, no matter what” (Westerfeld 2009, 377).
If Deryn’s feelings were transformed into strength to “keep punching” and fighting for her dreams, in the case of Alanna they are transformed into frustration. She does not cry, but gets angry at herself and others, and she channels this through fighting: every time she does not feel to be enough as a male she redoubles her efforts and trains her wrestling or sword-fighting abilities. When she feels useless, she gives everything she has to help everyone, even at the risk of her own health. This is what happens in a military campaign in which she forces herself to cure everyone until she collapses. When she kills a sorcerer in a duel after he tries to assassinate the royal family, she feels devastated but, far from crying for her deeds, she decides to exile herself for some time. Travelling and distancing herself from others seems to be her way of escaping the feelings of defeat and sadness, and she uses this strategy at several moments during the tetralogy: when she (not hiding her gender anymore) and Prince Jonathan decide to follow separate ways after a turbulent relationship, she leaves the place where she was living and goes back to the city with George. In the same fashion, when her brother and her cat Faithful die at the end of Lioness Rampant she goes back to the dessert in order to forget about what has happened: she retreats into “the daily routine of the tribe [of which she is part], hunting lions with the young men and hearing the legends of the Bazhir from the shamans. She took her turn at sentry duty, enjoying the quiet and the clearness of the stars” (Pierce 1998c, 300).

In Larson’s Defy, Alexa feels especially ashamed of every “feminine” feeling or thought that she has. She constantly polices herself and regrets reactions as simple as blushing, as she considers that a “real” boy would not blush out of modesty, such as when Prince Damian mentions that they are going to be “practically bedmates” (Larson 2014, 69). Other similar scenes happen throughout the novel, and Alexa is always reminding the reader that she is a woman, breaking the fantasy of gender-b(l)ending and repeating what feelings are appropriate for a boy and what are “incorrect.” Ignoring the homophobic undertones of those statements that make invisible homosexual or homoromantic relationships between men, Alexa’s construction of masculinity is clearly traditional and taken from a white, patriarchal U.S. culture, even though the characters in the novel have black or olive skin and are part of a world that does not resemble Europe or
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North America. Alexa performs a masculinity that does not seem as “natural” as in the case of Alanna or Deryn, and when she loses the reins of the situation, she has to remind herself to act as a boy in order to keep her self-control. “I cleared my throat and tightened my grip. Act like a boy, act like a boy” (Larson 2014, 104; italics in the original) or “I drew on all of my training, all of the practice I’d had over the years pretending to be a boy to maintain my composure” (Larson 2014, 155) are examples of this tendency. Such comments do not only underline Alexa’s heterosexuality and reinforce binary gender roles, but make the reader especially aware of the fact that Alex is a fictional persona that masks a woman’s identity.

In Violet’s case (in Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*), she does not consider herself particularly feminine at the beginning, but once she is dressed as a boy, she has to remind herself to avoid certain behaviors, such as taking somebody’s hand as a way to comfort a friend: “Violet wanted to squeeze his hand to reassure him, but knew that this was a feminine inclination” (Rosen 2011, 71). The problem in analyzing the character of Violet is that she becomes more and more feminized with time, and neither does she seem to mind nor do her classmates notice, because they have already taken for granted that she is a boy, as her brother expected that they would do (Rosen 2011, 65). And unlike in the other narratives about cross-dressing, she can talk about her emotions with those around her that know her secret, including her roommate and her brother. Moreover, neither she nor her friends at Illyria College find it problematic to show that they are afraid of the automats they find in the basement, for example, and although they seem frustrated when their experiments do not go well, none of them resort to violence or hide such feelings. This accounts for the fact that we should not talk about a single, homogeneous masculinity, but that the decision of portraying one masculinity or another is consciously undertaken by the author, and it responds to a question of worldbuilding. Thus, in a sword-and-sorcery fantasy, the characters need to know how to defend themselves, and therefore the writers will resort to either the dexterous knight or the muscular warrior. Nevertheless, in some science-fiction stories in which physical strength does not assure someone’s success, intelligence is far more precious, and therefore masculinity must be...
constructed around it. In some cases, masculinity includes both intelligence and physical power at the same time, especially in fantasy, where the threats are often supernatural: it is not enough to be able to outmatch your enemy in a duel, it is also necessary to use cunningly all the resources you have.

Finally, in Cashore’s *Graceling* the protagonist is torn between the masculinities and femininities that are imposed on her and the ones she wants to perform. On the one hand, although I have already mentioned that her uncle insists on her dressing up and showing her as an objectified doll that marvels his visitors, he also wants her to carry out tasks in which she has to show her physical strength and her fighting abilities. In the same way that the character of Volio builds automatons in *All Men of Genius* and uses them as an army because he does not have any physical power, King Randa lacks this force as well, so he uses Katsa as a tool to enforce both his authority and his masculinity. This masculinity, which is hegemonic, assumes that brute force is the best way to ensure that his subjects will not disobey, so he bases his reign on feelings of terror and oppression. Such a situation encourages Katsa to isolate herself and to think about herself as an instrument, interiorizing the idea that she is only good for obeying orders and that she will not be able to escape her uncle’s tyranny. Because she has internalized the attitude her king expects from her, she does not allow herself to feel certain emotions and she believes she is “[a]n unthinking and unfeeling brute” (Cashore 2008, 131).

Katsa rationalizes every mission she has to accomplish and her relationships to other characters in such a way that she feels really betrayed when she discovers that Po is a kind of mind-reader: “This was what it felt like to be betrayed by a friend. No. By a traitor pretending to be a friend. . . . Po was not to be trusted. People must know, and she would tell everyone” (Cashore 2008, 104). More than that, she feels frustrated when she discovers her real feelings for him, because love is not something she has ever expected, and because, just like Alanna in *The Song of the Lioness*, she understands love as a situation in which one person is subjugated to the wishes of another. This leads her to violence when she does not understand what is happening to her (Cashore 2008, 165), just as she does every time she feels confused, and to sadness and frustration later on:
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She couldn’t have him, and there was no mistaking it. She could never be his wife. She could not steal herself back from Randa only to give herself away again – belong to another person, be answerable to another person, build her very being around another person. No matter how she loved him. (Cashore 2008, 167-8)

Following the genre conventions demanding a happy romantic ending, this rejection will be dismissed afterwards, when Po shows her that he does not want her to change who she is, and that love does not mean acting against one’s own desires (see Chapter 9).

Although it is clear that the cross-dressers have emotions, they try not to show them in front of certain people. I consider this desire to hide what they really feel a strategy that shows how homosocial behaviors operate. Although there is a constant policing campaign by the sheroes in relation to their own actions and what they decide to show to others, the most important part of this surveillance is always carried out by other men that hold their male comrades under continuous scrutiny: “[f]rom fathers and boyhood friends to teachers, coworkers, and bosses, the evaluative eyes of other men are always upon us, watching, judging” (Kimmel 2012, 5). Michael Kimmel has published widely on how homosocial relations and homophobia work (2005, 2009, 2012), an interesting subject matter that reverts the patriarchal prejudices that point at women as judgmental and under continuous scrutiny, always in danger of being the center of gossiping or ostracized for their behavior. This policing is also undertaken by men on other men (and women), and someone can be discredited as a “real” man for not being able to keep their performance of normative masculinity at all times, challenging traditional ideals of masculinity that deny their artificiality. This constant policing keeps the gender binary intact and preserves the boundaries between femininity and masculinity, so nobody can step outside their place. And even if the cover is kept, men live with the constant threat of being unmasked as “feminine, as sissies” (Kimmel 2009, 278), and the contrary applies to women. Therefore, gender (and not only masculinity, as Kimmel claims) is recognized as “a constant test—always up for grabs, always needing to be proved” (Kimmel 2009, 51).
Such policing behaviors set those around us as enemies, as potential threats. In the case of the passing women, such actions lead them to avoid relying on others, which isolates them under the threat that a mistake would uncover their real gender. In this way, we can read the performance of the cross-dressers as a metaphor of how boys may feel in performing their own masculinity, pretending a part for most of their lives, trying to “pass” and feeling that they could be exposed at any moment. The distress and frustration of the women in the stories of my corpus seem to replicate the same fears and anguish that are felt by male young adults when trying to adhere to masculinities in which they are asked to be powerful, violent, and to hide their emotions, together with a compulsory heterosexuality in which the woman turns into an exhibition of their own power and desirability, promoting unequal relationships where his wishes and wimps are considered more important. If this is the case, if the gender-b(l)ender functions as a metaphor of masculinity and of the socially-oppressed man, then the ending of such narratives, with the revelation of the cross-dresser, can be seen from a different light: it is an attempt to encourage boys to accept themselves as they are and, more importantly, to create their own masculinities, in the same way that the women in these novels have created their own.

7.2.4. Grafting genders

Women can not only perform masculinity, but they change it and put its limits to test, making masculinity both a part of themselves and a way to defy the gender roles that have been traditionally assigned to them. Jack Halberstam has written at large about the masculine woman and his Female Masculinity (2003) has turned into a key text to study the performance and creation of masculinities by women. Although he was not concerned with analyzing female masculinity in fantasy works, and even less concerned with YA literature, his work has backed the analysis of those who have studied cross-dressing in all areas, including YA fiction, as it has to be noted in the studies of Victoria Flanagan, to put just an example. Moreover, the theories on female masculinity seem to be inseparable from Butler’s reflections on the performance of gender and gender as a malleable, artificial concept tied to heterosexuality.
Thus, the construction of female masculinity by the cross-dressers is not simply the female replication of hegemonic masculinity and it is not “the opposite of female femininity” (Halberstam 2003, 29), in the same way that we cannot talk about the shero as simply mimicking the acts of a female hero. According to Halberstam, the masculine woman “is much more likely to transform the mechanisms of masculinity and produce new constellations of embodiment, power, and desire” (2003, 276), distancing themselves from the toxic masculinity of the “man in power, . . . with power, and . . . of power” (Kimmel 2005, 30; italics in the original). For example, while scholars have labeled kindness and compassion as emotions or actions that have no place in traditional forms of masculinity, the women in these novels feel sorry for others and believe in solidarity and altruism. Although they do not always do what is correct, they show strong empathy for others, especially for those carrying out a duty or who are in need. Even though they use violence, they prefer never to kill without a motive, and they often decide to spare the life of their opponents in order not to shed unnecessary blood. Sometimes they consider themselves to be weak for doing this, as it can be seen as a feminine attitude (the woman as the caring entity, always worrying about the rest and forgetting about her own desires). However, in the end it feels as the correct behavior for any kind of s/hero, either male or female.

This high regard for kindness and compassion is portrayed in the texts not only through the female protagonists but through other characters as well. In some cases, there is a maternal or paternal figure that teaches the female cross-dresser to be kind to others. This is the case of Maude in Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness, who tells her to think about “lives taken and families without fathers and sorrow” (Pierce 1992, 11), before killing someone. Considering that there is a balance in the world to be kept, Alanna is asked to “pay for those lives you do take” (Pierce 1992, 11) by using her powers to heal: “Use it all you can, or you won’t cleanse your soul of death for centuries. It’s harder to heal than it is to kill” (Pierce 1992, 11-2). Although Alanna almost laughs when she is asked to do this, she remembers her instructions and never kills for pleasure or glory. Victoria Flanagan reads the inclusion of such elements associated with femininity in her
performance as a benefit that makes Alan/na stand out among her peers. Flanagan considers that Alanna draws what she considers to be positive attitudes from both genders to “[benefit] from her knowledge of each” (2008, 36), which gives this character a sort of privileged double perspective: “She combines sensitivity and acute perception . . . with the masculine values of strength, courage, and determination” (Flanagan 2008, 36).

The same happens with the other gender-b(l)ender figures in the selected corpus. In Westerfeld’s Leviathan Dylan/Deryn does not hesitate to console Alek and help him, and she even takes part in the revolution of the Ottoman Empire against their ruler. She saves other men on board the Leviathan and puts her life in danger not for glory but because she feels that it is her duty as a soldier and as a human being. In Rosen’s All Men of Genius Violet designs an automat that thinks would benefit everybody, and although her project is going to be exhibited together with the ones from the other students of Illyria College, she is doing so to show that she can help humanity with her ideas “despite her being a girl”. Her attempt to stand out is not a question of fame or recognition, but rather an effort to send the message to the world that women deserve the same opportunities for education that men already have in her world.

Compassion (and empathy) is also a characteristic of Alexa, who cannot stand the view of the girls who are confined to the breeding houses and fights for revolution in order to bring justice to the realm. And regardless of Katsa’s despite for feminine attitudes, she believes that there is no point in using one’s power to inspire fear in those around her, an ideal that leads her to feel divided when following her uncle’s orders regarding the use of torture, and which finally brings her to dedicate her life to teach girls and women how to protect themselves from the will of men.

Considering such behaviors, I must agree with Flanagan, who asserts that, in general, “[t]he success of the female cross-dresser in [YA and] children’s literature and film is contingent upon her ability to differentiate herself from conventional masculinity” (2011, 43). This is achieved through a distinctive performance of female masculinity, an amalgamation and b(l)ending of both genders instead of simply adhering to hegemonic or traditional masculinities or
femininities. Such a view, according to Flanagan, “highlights the constructedness of gender stereotypes, destabilizing masculinity and femininity as stable categories of identity” (2011, 44). What is more, this (re)construction by the gender-b(l)ender conceptualizes gender as malleable, with a potential to be shaped individually, thus breaking with the traditional stereotypes that tie women and men to rigid roles, demonstrating “the limitations that normative gender categories can impose upon individuals [and] promot[ing] a more liberatory and fluid conceptualization of gender” (Flanagan 2008, xv).

The tradition of blending male and female positive characteristics has been around for centuries. In the Middle Ages, for example, Cistercians made the distinction between “female sexuality, conceived as a biological given, and femininity, a gender quality” (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 66) and “many later medieval writers recognized the value of some feminine qualities and tried to incorporate them into their masculine personae” (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 67). Although such views seem to have “had little effect on the roles or everyday lives of women or men, or even on clerical attitudes toward females, . . . it serves to emphasize that the separation of gender qualities from sexual aspects has a long history and tradition in the West” (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 67).

The inclusion of both masculinity and femininity as part of the gender performance in heroes and sheroes could be explained taking Laura Doan’s notion of “grafting,” which is described by Jean Noble in her study *Masculinities Without Men?* (2004). Doan takes her concept from the natural world, as it initially referred to “an organic reproductive process, where a new shoot might be inserted into a slit of stock from which it receives enough nourishment to generate a new entity, produced by but not reducible to either of the two constitutive elements” (Noble 2004, xxvi). However, the term has been reappropriated in Gender Studies to mean “insert something into, on, upon, or together; to insert or fix in or on so as to produce a vital or indissoluble union; to sew together; to attach on to make a new thing out of the two” (Noble 2004, xxvi). In other words, this concept allows us to speak about the adoption of stereotypical masculine traits as part of a grafting process: “a process of self-making and reproduction outside of (beyond) a heteronormative model” (Noble 2004, xxvii). In this way, the
concept accounts for a kind of hybridity, helping to denaturalize the gender dichotomy and the false correlation between sex and gender.

The grafting process references to a progressive action, to which I already drew attention when analyzing the performance of some of the cross-dressers and how they needed their time to adjust themselves to their new persona (see section 7.1.3. in this chapter). As I have pointed out, Flanagan criticizes the fact that girls and young women in narratives on cross-dressing do achieve a flawless performance without having had the time to practice it, considering this circumstance as an imaginatively fictionalized dimension to Butler’s gender thesis, because while Butler argues that gender is naturalized over time through the repetition of particular behaviors and actions (giving the appearance of authenticity), these texts take the liberty of following their heroines to effect a flawless masculine performance with only minimal practice. (Flanagan 2008, 30)

Rather than agreeing with Flanagan’s explanation, however, I consider that there is an obvious link between the masculinity inherent in these tomboyish figures and their performance, which may be related to Halberstam’s concept of “layering.”

Halberstam postulates that there are two different ways in which drag kings perform masculinity, by either “allow[ing] her femaleness to peek through” or “perform[ing] the role almost seamlessly” (2003, 261). In the latter, there is an additional reason that makes the performance more “real”: “if the audience sees through the role at all, they catch a glimpse not of femaleness or femininity but of a butch masculinity. So the male role is layered on top of the king’s own masculinity” (Halberstam 2003, 260). The same happens with the cross-dressers, as shown in the chosen texts: although it may give the impression that the passing women are at risk of being discovered due to the mistakes in their performance (high-pitched screams or attitudes that may be considered as “weaknesses” by males), the truth is that their underlying masculinity makes them pass without problem. Thus, Flanagan’s critique of the ease with which women pass seems to me invalid or, at least, worthy of being interpreted under a new light. In my view,
it is easy for these cross-dressers to perform masculinity because prior to their taking male apparel they are already tomboys or masculine in their manners and behaviors, distant from the gender stereotypes associated with women. It would be more difficult to “transform” a feminine woman in order for her to masquerade, because the layer behind the part she is playing would be feminine.

But at least as important as the layering itself are the preconceptions of the boys around these cross-dressing figures. Because the cross-dresser has already been “labeled” as masculine and male, her peers consider the passing woman as one of them, and thus they read her comments from this point of view, turning remarks that could betray her into an assertion of her masculine role. Of course, the texts play with these bits of dialogue and exploit the knowledge of the readers and the cluelessness of the other characters to create comic relief. This is especially remarkable in Rosen’s All Men of Genius, a novel with many humorous moments. For instance, when Violet/Ashton’s male friends ask “him” about “his” experiences with women and what helps “him” to unlace a woman’s corset, her answer, “I’ve never really needed any assistance. I can loosen a corset with my own two hands” (Rosen 2011, 123), has different meanings for those within and outside the narrative.

In a less direct way, the same convention of humor applies in those scenes in which a cross-dresser talks about “someone of her family” that happens to be herself, which tends to create misunderstandings about the identity of those surrounding the cross-dressers. Continuing with the example of Violet in All Men of Genius, she poses as Ashton, her twin brother, who at the same time is turned into “his” cousin.

The problem with the question of misunderstandings is that rather than comic, those scenes in which they address femaleness and femininity are pretty misogynistic, as they all seem to consider femininity and those women around them under a negative light. On the one hand these attacks against women could be taken as a way to critically highlight the view of young men who are educated in all-male spaces and the threats of patriarchal society, which teach people (especially young people) to criticize and undervalue femininity. On the other hand, I have already mentioned the dangers of portraying these behaviors in YA
Strategies of Cross-dressing and Gender-b(l)ending

fiction, because together with the invisibilization or rejection of the protagonists’ close female friendships for the protagonists (as commented in section 6.1.3 in the previous chapter), may perpetuate stereotypes about women.

A woman with so called masculine thoughts and the amalgamation of two genders’ attitudes is part, nonetheless, of the ambiguities about which Halberstam writes when explaining the performance of drag kings. He effectively shows how “role playing reveals the permeable boundaries between acting and being; the drag actors are all performing their own queerness and simultaneously exposing the artificiality of conventional gender roles” (Halbertam 2003, 261). In other words, readers may ask themselves where the performance of masculinity or femininity starts and ends. I find this uncertainty fascinating, especially in the cases of very young women (such as the ones in the chosen narratives). In their circumstances, to what extent is masculinity or femininity simply a part of a conscious role? What parts of their performance are simply interiorized concepts that have been learned from society and are now inextricably linked to them through the repetitive (physical) acts that Butler considers the performative component of gender (1990, 136)? These questions are difficult to answer, and they would require a smaller corpus to be able to analyze every detail of the cross-dresser’s performance. What it seems clear to me is that these characters have been able to the direct association of gender with sex and not only to deliberately learn the behaviors and attitudes from another gender, but to shape their performance to adapt it to their own needs, being faithful to their own values while achieving their objectives. By doing so, they are reaffirming Judith Butler’s conception of gender parody, by which “gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction” (Butler 1990, 138).

As it has been exposed in this chapter, the creation of a male persona is a continuous process that requires preparation for the performance on a supposedly
seamless role. To start with, female-to-male cross-dressers take as point of
departure a tomboyist childhood that influences their behavior with traditional
masculine characteristics, but the impersonation process really begins with a
series of physical changes that will give them the aspect of young men, from the
haircut to the (re)shaping of the body. On the one hand, to have their hair cut has a
special symbolism in cross-dressing narratives, as the long hair is probably the
most visible marker of femininity in girls who do not have developed their bodies
yet. On the other hand, as they grow and develop, the constriction of their breasts
through corsets or bandages and the reshaping of their bodies through the use of
special clothes to imitate normative male figures is paramount to help them pass
in their adolescence. And although they may not recognize the new personality
that they see in the mirror for the first time, the male persona really comes into
being when they are renamed by their creators, an act of agency that gives them
the power over their new lives.

Although femininity may seem to have been discarded, the gender-b(l)ender
figures never get completely rid of it, as their performance is imbued with its
influence. Although at the beginning they reject anything feminine to the point of
being misogynistic, and even when they take many characteristics of hegemonic
masculinity and make them their own (including compulsory heterosexuality, the
use of violence and the suppression of feelings), what makes their performance
really stand out is the inclusion of traditionally feminine traits. Thus, they include
kindness and selflessness, together with humbleness and mercy, in the character
of their male persona, which earns them the admiration of those men around them.

It is this construction of the male persona through the inclusion of
characteristics from these two genders what creates a s/hero that both men and
women can respect, and which finally breaks with the boundaries that separates
the two poles of the gender binary. In this way, the gender-b(l)ender character is
able to challenge assumptions of gender stereotypes and defies a paradigm that
was based on the adherence to just one gender.
Chapter 8. Comparisons are unavoidable: characters around the gender-b(l)enders

Although I have been discussing and analyzing the sheroes’ performance in comparison to U.S. understanding of hegemonic masculinity, many other masculinities deserve our attention. As in the case of female masculinity, some of them have been ignored and even disregarded throughout history. Among these we can include gay masculinities or black masculinities, because Euro-American societies considered homosexuality a deviation from the “normal” and normative heterosexuality, while racialized people were not even considered human, as shown by the arguments that racist people have used to support slavery. Both groups of men have been highly feminized by the culture that supports that hegemonic masculinity, a fact that defends Kimmel’s view that “[a]ll masculinities are not created equal; or rather, we are all created equal, but any hypothetical equality evaporates quickly because our definitions of masculinity are not equally valued in our society” (Kimmel 2005, 30). This assertion also means that no conception of masculinity is either universal or unchangeable, and the ideal gender performance changes from one cultural context to another.

Since all the works in my corpus are inscribed in this Euro-American culture, the predominant view of masculinity they present corresponds to Kimmel’s assertion that “white, middle-class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting” (Kimmel 2005, 30). Nevertheless, academics and writers have seen the dangers of portraying only one type of masculinity in YA literature, as it is harmful for the new generations, who may believe that this is the only valid performance of the masculine gender. Kathryn Jacobs, in writing about gender stereotypes, expressed her worries that “[s]toic, macho and aggressive behavior is presented as natural to all boys, maybe even celebrated. This does not benefit boys, but only furthers stereotypes and discourages other behavior” (Jacobs 2004, 23). Contrary to this, I agree with her that “[l]iterature might do well to expand the definition of masculinity to include more positive characteristics” (Jacobs 2004, 23).
It would surprise nobody, then, that the novels in the selected corpus—given that they play with the predominant conceptions of gender and try to question and reshape them—are concerned with the inclusion of other masculinities that may diverge from traditional views. Thus, I have already mentioned at large the gender construction done by the protagonists, who amalgamate those characteristics from male and female that they believe to be “positive” or that can help them to overcome the problems and dilemmas they face. Their recreations of masculinity awake the admiration of the boys and men around the main characters, to the point that some of them find in the cross-dressers behavioral role models. This view of the cross-dressers from outside constrasts deeply with the sheroes’ own perception of their performance, since they never feel to be “manly” enough. Nevertheless, this is a common trait in passing women, as Susan Gubar exposes when analyzing one of the most famous novels about cross-dressing, Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 *The Well of Loneliness*: “the woman who feels the need to turn herself into a man is haunted by the feeling that, if judged as a man, she is inadequate” (Gubar 1981, 191).

### 8.1. Boys will be boys: comparing masculinities

Regardless of their own opinion of themselves, the cross-dressers usually manage a better performance of masculinity that those men around them, who in comparison “rarely fulfil the conventional expectations of [their gender]” (Flanagan 2008, 104). This is a circumstance that helps, once again, to denaturalize gender and “[to highlight] the artifice of supposedly ‘natural’ masculine traits” (Flanagan 2008, 104).

#### 8.1.1. Siblings: effeminate men

In some cases, the boys around the protagonists have the role of emphasizing her masculine traits, because they appear feminized in contrast, with a distaste for violence or “manly” activities that strikes as completely different from the tomboyish attitude of the girls. This is the same strategy used in most narratives portraying a tomboy, in which her best friend was usually an effeminate boy whose behavior would diverge deeply with the ways of the protagonist (Abate
Examples of such contrasts are to be found in the cases of Alanna, Violet, and Katsa, who seem to be even more masculine if we compare them to their siblings (Thom, Ashton, and Raffin, respectively).

In all these examples, the novels try to account for the existence of other masculinities that may split from traditional concepts and to break away from the idea that a taste or distaste for certain activities will make you more or less of a man than other people around you. Thus, Thom expresses his dislike for fighting and hunting, for which he is disastrous, “enough to make a soldier cry” (Pierce 1992, 18-9). His instructor compares him to his sister (Alanna), who “had a feel for the fighting arts . . . that never could be learned” (Pierce 1992, 19). Thom’s rejection to follow the path his father has chosen for him is comparable with his sister’s, but she seems more willing to do whatever it takes to achieve her goals: while he seems resigned to go to the castle, she plans a way out of their father’s fate for them. Thus, she is depicted from the very first pages to have an active role, with agency, while her brother simply follows suit. In fact, this sense of passivity is reinforced by the way in which Thom is absent from the action for at least the first installment of the quartet. With time, however, he turns out to be a source of information and, when Alanna visits him, she discovers that he is unruly and does not follow his master’s advice. His ill-curiosity (a behavior that has always been considered part of women’s sins in patriarchal societies, as in the myths of Pandora and her box/jar and Eve in the Garden of Eden), his irresponsibility and his pride lead him to abuse his own power. In the end, his faults are his doom and Thom is turned into a moral lesson for the readers regarding those attitudes that should be avoided. Moreover, readers cannot avoid comparing him to Alanna, who is portrayed as the real s/hero: while he awakes the corpse of Duke Roger, an evil sorcerer, she is the one in charge of returning him to the grave, keeping the safety and peace of the realm.

A different approach is given to the character of Ashton, Violet’s bother in Rosen’s All Men of Genius and an obvious tribute to the young Oscar Wilde. While Thom’s sexuality is never mentioned, Ashton is openly homosexual. He is also the embodiment of the dandy, and his taste for clothes and decoration strikes in comparison with Violet’s disinterest regarding such concerns, to the extent that
she cannot even combine her new hat with a dress without help (Rosen 2011, 31-2). The clothes here may be a symbol of the beliefs of nineteenth-century England, when the garments could be considered a reflection of a man’s mind to a greater extent than they are nowadays. That is, on the one hand, there was “something morally reprehensible in a man who paid too much attention to his own clothes” (Laver 1968, 80). On the other hand, the colors and textures chosen by men were a way to show their thoughts and attitudes towards life: “A man might suggest the purity of his thoughts by clean linen but they must also show the seriousness of his mind by the somber line of his clothes” (Laver 1968, 80). In the novel, Ashton’s garments are a way to express his personality, to call the attention of others towards him, standing in the crowd even when “preoccupation with appearances is traditionally considered a feminine trait” (Nelson 2015, 41). While the male scientists in the novel express themselves through their inventions and experiments, manipulating living creatures, creating new chemicals, or developing machines, Ashton is a man of arts who enjoys London’s cultural pulse. His figure contrasts with the brilliant minds that study science at Illyria College, particularly since he is depicted as an stranger both by staying outside the setting of the College and by his looks and hobbies.

Finally, in Cashore’s Graceling we find Raffin, who is not attuned with the concept of normative masculinity shared in the Seven Kingdoms. As the son of a king, he is expected to have an interest in ruling the realm and dealing with noblemen and noblewomen. However, he is nothing of what his father expects from him: instead of being concerned with politics, he is devoted to his botanical and Chemistry studies. Once again, although he has had an important role in the protagonist’s growth as her playmate, and although he is one of the small group of people who are not afraid of Katsa, his part in the story is quite passive: he stays at court, under the shadow of his father, while Katsa goes away with Po. Even in the missions that are planned by the secret Council he remains in the background, more of a doctor or an informant than a real agent of action. His romantic relationship with Bann, the boy that helps him in his experiments and who is always around him, is not made explicit in Graceling, but their affection is obvious and it is explored in the third part of the series, Bitterblue (2012).
As it has been shown, then, all these characters contrast deeply with the protagonists’ female masculinity, and consequently function as a counterbalance to their performance of gender.

**8.1.2. On the background: other masculinities**

There are other characters who also fail to achieve the standard of performance of gender that society would expect from them. Jes Battis has already examined how the boys and men around Alanna fail the test of traditional masculinity while the shero excels at it:

In comparison to Thom, her feminized brother who rejects knighthood in order to become a wizard, Jonathan, whom she must save from a fatal illness, and Roger [sic]58, who has no magical or knightly abilities at all, Alanna herself stands out as the most visibly masculine character in the series. (Battis 2011, 321; my emphasis)

I would add even more characters to the list: her father has never recovered from the death of her mother and remains unaware of his children’s deeds; Myles, her foster father, seems to like alcohol too much; Liam, one of her lovers, is afraid of any kind of magic; and the king is considered a weak man by his enemies. These men, all masculine figures of power, the kings and knights of legends, are generally used as role models for the young generations to imitate, but in these novels they are portrayed as problematic, unable to fulfill the expectations that are put on them. This is the core of Lacan’s concept of “male parade,” as Yvone Tasker explains it, “in which the accoutrements of phallic power, the finery of authority, belies the very lack that it displays” (1993, 129). In other words, these characters embody a masculinity empty of the ideas that it tries to inculcate, so that it is clear that the ideal of gender is impossible in its “purest” form. This impossibility is the consequence of imitating an inexistent ideal: “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that

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58 Battis refers here to George (not to Roger, although she keeps on confounding them throughout her article), the King of the Thieves, who in fact has magical abilities, although less developed than Alanna’s: “I thought you’d guess. You have the Gift,” says Alanna to him when he is surprised to find out that she is a woman (Pierce 1992, 150).
produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself” (Butler 1993b, 313; italics in the original).

Almost the same happens in Westerfeld’s Leviathan. Dylan/Deryn is supposed to be surrounded by “great” men, soldiers at the service of different empires. However, none of them are depicted doing any great deeds. All of them are in passive roles, with the captain taking his decisions because he is left with no other options or because he has been convinced by Dr. Nora Barlow, who is not supposed to have the power to intercede in a war situation. In the end, the soldiers, scientists and the captain on board the *Leviathan* are left in a background position, while the action and agency of the story is passed on to Deryn and his friend Alek, the real protagonists, even when they are the youngest and less experienced of the crew. The other men that appear in the novels of the trilogy *Leviathan* are most of the time “villains” or obstacles that the protagonists have to overcome. Eddie Malone, for example, is a journalist that has decided to uncover Deryn when he discovers the truth regarding her gender; and Tesla, the scientist, tricks Alek to help him destroy a whole city so as to get revenge from what Germany has been doing to other countries.

Of course, the question of not developing some of the characters is inextricably related to the motifs of YA literature, in which most of the times the focus is set on the youngest characters, who are responsible of deeds and actions that make them outstand among the adults. These adults, in turn, are relegated to the “mentor” figure or to trivial positions in the plot. This is part of the attraction of this type of literature, of course: young readers can feel that they are the protagonists in a society in which they are often overlooked as unimportant. Thus, most fiction in YA literature tends to focus on the construction of gender of young characters, being the adults just role examples or oppressive figures that embody the rulers of their society and try to force young adults into the image that Euro-American culture expects from them. As it can be perceived in the novels about cross-dressers, this means the reader never gets to see the masculitiny of the adults fully developed, so we can only compare the performance of the cross-dresser with the ones from the other boys their age.
In the case of Deryn, the only boys that surround her in the *Leviathan* are Alek and Newkirk, and both of them are in need to be saved more than once throughout the trilogy. Alek particularly expresses his admiration for Dylan/Deryn and believes she is more of a boy and more of a soldier than he will ever be:

Alek might have trained in combat and tactics his whole life, but Dylan was a real soldier. He swore with an effortless extravagance, and during lunch had thrown a knife three meters and hit an apple square in its heart. He was skinnier than most boys his age, but could work alongside men and be treated as their equal. . . .

In a way Dylan was the sort of boy Alek would have wanted to be, if he hadn’t been born the son of an archduke. (Westerfeld 2009, 327)

Interestingly enough, Alek could be, to a certain extent, understood as a cross-dresser himself, though not in terms of gender. Just as Deryn, he tries to pass for something he is not, but in his case he decides to disguise himself as an ordinary boy to hide that he is, in fact, the Prince of Austria-Hungary. He tries to pass two times: first in the town of Lienz and later on when he keeps his identity hidden from the crew of the *Leviathan* to elude being captured and used as a war prisoner. But unlike any of the passing women in my corpus, his goal is not to achieve a position of power but, on the contrary, to hide his birth privileges. Unlike the women as well, he is unable to play the part. Instead, he is discovered almost immediately by a merchant in Lienz, not because of his aspect but due to his performance of class: he has interiorized the behavior of a prince, so it is almost impossible for him to behave in any other way. He is unable to hide his knowledge and, what is more, to change the way in which he moves. Consequently, when he feels insulted, he makes the attempt of unsheathing his sword, a detail that betrays his origin: “Alek’s hand went instinctively to his side, where his sword would normally have hung. The man’s eyes tracked the gesture” (Westerfeld 2009, 122).

While Deryn performs her role seamlessly and has had a lot of practice before putting on her disguise, Alek’s mistake is to think that impersonation could be achieved easily. Nevertheless, what is even more interesting is the way in which the text deconstructs both gender and class as performative and as social
constructions. Class, just as gender, is constructed socially and is neither timeless nor unchangeable. Framed by its own vocabulary, gestures, behavior, and, of course, its own sartorial code, to pass as someone from a certain class means to adequate oneself to its rules.

What is also paramount in the construction of the character of Alek is the way in which he regards himself in comparison with Deryn. Although she may think that she is going to be discovered and at a certain moment in the narrative she wishes to finish with the charade, she never considers herself invalid. She wants to achieve her goals and has the self-esteem to claim the job of her dreams, even if she is aware that the regulations surrounding the air forces will never accept her for being a woman. However, in the case of Alek, after the death of his parents and having had to flee his country, he finds himself responsible for World War I and laments more than once being a “waste of hydrogen, as the crew called anything useless” (Westerfeld 2011, 3).

His guilt leads him to take the weight of the conflict onto his shoulders, trying to end the war by his own means. When he finally understands that he is undertaking a fool’s errand, he decides to renounce to his title: “It was my past, I lost that world the night my parents died” (Westerfeld 2011, 533). By rejecting the power of his title, Alek is transgressing hegemonic concepts of masculinity, which relate men to power: it is desirable that men move up the social ladder, and no one would voluntarily leave his position. By rejecting his title, therefore, Alek is also turning down the U.S. white hegemonic masculinity that states that “one must aggressively and competitively pursue career success and wealth at any cost” (Mora 2018).

If the masculinities surrounding Alanna and Deryn are “problematic” and going outside the expected performance, the ones portrayed in All Men of Genius are even more “flawed” and different. Although there are a multitude of characters, the author has tried to give each of them a distinctive voice and a different background. Apart from Violet’s brother, Ashton, she surrounds herself with the students and teachers of Illyria College, and all of them seem to have at least one detail of their personalities that challenges the norm. The teachers are all eccentric characters: Valentine pays too much attention to his looks and finds
pleasure in wooing old ladies, which is shown as deviant and ridiculous; Curio lives in the liminal space of the post-human, a Dr. Jekyll who transforms into a beast and has to restrain himself by night; Bunbury represents the cyborg, a broken and incomplete body whose parts have been replaced by mechanical pieces; and, finally, Bracknell abuses his power and enjoys making his students suffer, showing a complete disregard for kindness and authority alike, as he also shows his hatred for the director of the College.

The students are no better than the adults teaching them. I have already mentioned the character of Volio, for example, who goes after Cecily and constructs an army of automata to exert control over others (see section 5.1). His ideas are clearly sexist, classist, homophobic and anti-Semitic. He does not show any regard for authority and is doomed by his wish for power. He bullies Miriam, Cecily’s governess, and tries to bribe her to get her charge to love him. Of course, the plan does not work and, in a reminiscence of Malvolio’s fate in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, he is mocked by Violet’s friends, who write letters under Cecily’s identity.

Violet’s male friends, Jack, Toby, and Drew may defend Miriam from Volio’s bribes (though through tricks, never in a face-to-face confrontation), but their characters remain morally ambiguous, as the readers are aware of both their virtues and defects. And they are, by no means, closer to the traditional idea of masculinity. Drew, for example, is described as “[falling] asleep unless he’s constantly excited. He likes bright shiny objects and strange smells” (Rosen 2011, 297). He is like a big baby, always in need of something that catches his attention. Jack is closer to what we may consider as stereotypical masculinity, but he is too eager to go after Cecily and tells Violet all the time how much in love he is for the Duke’s niece. The same happens with Toby, who even asks Miriam to marry him, and who is not really concerned with the life that is expected from a nobleman. However, these boys are probably the frankest depiction of contemporary young adults, even if they are set in a pseudo nineteenth-century London: they escape the College at night so as to drink in the pubs, talk about sex and women, and do not lose the opportunity of going on an adventure whenever they can. Even their final projects for the course tell a lot about them and the way in which they take science
as a game: Jack hopes to impress Cecily with a beautiful animal created to do something admirable (like singing or talking); Drew is concerned with developing a perfume that activates with sweat, so that he “never have to worry about smelling foul again!” (Rosen 2011, 124); and Toby wants a cure for hangover. Violet is the only one in the group that is taking her project seriously, because she knows that she is in a privileged position only while her masquerade lasts, and because she believes in science as a means to help others.

Moreover, the men in All Men of Genius, despite all their good intentions, have interiorized misogyny, and they exteriorize comments and attitudes that are discriminatory or simply stereotypical of the way in which society conceives of women. As Cecily recalls when talking to Jack: “You, just like all the others, who haven’t even bothered to speak to me as though I were anything other than a simple woman made to be stared at and appreciated for her hair and eyes and nothing else” (Rosen 2011, 194). A similar opinion is shared by Violet, who considers that Ernest is undervaluing her because he only talks to her about flowers and nature, taking for granted that she could not be interested in science.

Truth to be told, most of the male characters in the chosen novels have sexist views on women, as it can be appreciated by their opinions or actions. Prince Jonathan, in the Song of the Lioness Quartet, tries to control Alanna until she decides to break with him; Alek has the partial view of women of those who have never interacted with someone outside their own family, and he does not consider that girls or women could be as fast or as strong as males until he meets Lilit and discovers Deryn’s secret identity. These problematic perspectives are only contested in subtle ways, and none of the characters are punished by their comments or thoughts, which may perpetuate the message that these are harmless acts that do not sustain a myriad of other microviolences.

8.1.3. The tyrant: toxic masculinity

In general, there seems to be a direct relation between traditional ways of masculinity and dominance, labelling grown-up males who (ab)use violent ways of controlling their subjects as evil. They use terror and oppression as a system to ensure their power and, they normally represent a threat that the main character
must eliminate. Sometimes these threats take the shape of a superior that looms over the protagonist, as is the case of King Hector in Larson’s *Defy*. In other cases, such as in Pierce’s *The Song of the Lioness*, there is an enemy of the realm that tries to conquer it while mocking the good king who wishes to live in peace. The unjust and menacing enemy is, of course, defeated at the end.

In the first case, when the king is a threat to the freedom of the main characters due to his power, two things could happen: either the shero escapes (as Katsa in *Graceling*) or the tyrant has to die to be replaced by another person (most of the times from a new generation) who promises peace and a better life for her or his subjects. In *Graceling*, King Leck is killed and replaced by his daughter, the young Bitterblue, who has suffered under his rule and knows the wounds that her father had left in those around him. In *Defy*, King Hector is depicted as a tyrant and, while he is in power, Alex/a would never be able to be her female self, something that she wishes with all her might. He oppresses his subjects using them either for the army (men) or to breed more soldiers (women) and lies to them by feigning attacks to incite more hatred against the neighboring country. He asserts the dangers and wickedness of sorcery at the same time that he keeps Iker, his personal sorcerer, close to him. At the end, the threat is neutralized by killing the tyrant and leaving another figure on the throne: the legitimate heir, Prince Damian, who promises to turn Antion into a better place by discovering the truth, making peace with Blevon, and destroying the breeding-houses. He even acknowledges the importance of Alexa in the rebellion and the establishment of the new government, which would have been impossible without her power to kill the sorcerer.

By equating toxic masculinity and the figure of the tyrant, the novels in my corpus highlight the dangers of performing the masculine gender in such an oppressive way. Thus, they condemn the thirst for violence and domination that lies in these characters.

**8.1.4. Prince Charming: selfless masculinity**

In a different way to the figures of power, the “good” men in *Defy* present many characteristics that would also set them inside traditional views of masculinity.
Damian and Rylan, the two boys that we get to know the best because they serve as romantic interests for the protagonist, are strong, cunning, resourceful, and mysterious. Readers are told from the beginning, for instance, that something strange is happening around Damian, but it is not until almost the end that he confesses he has the powers of a sorcerer, having been forced to hide them in order to survive: his father, the killer of both his mother and his older brother, threatened to hurt him and those around him if he ever told anyone his secret. This kind of plot device and construction of character is used to highlight his kindness and selflessness, which appears as a resource to make him desirable and to fulfill the romantic plot. At the same time, it makes the protagonist, Alexa, even more masculine in comparison: she represses her feelings even after she has been discovered, and she shows that her physical competence is superior to the boys’. This superiority is given to her through her power of vanquishing sorcerers, an ability that makes her an indispensable agent in the plan to give the throne to Prince Damian after killing the tyrant.

It has to be taken into account, nevertheless, that even though these male characters are portrayed following alternative conceptions of masculinity, these traits seem to be part of their character development as a way to attract the attention of heterosexual female readers. These characters know Alexa’s secret from the beginning and let her know that they are in love with her, not to mention how frequently they are described in detail to highlight their (physical) desirability: “[H]e was almost painfully beautiful. His dark hair, olive skin . . . and his pale blue eyes were a striking combination. I couldn’t deny that he was attractive. Too attractive” (Larson 2014, 28). Such comments are often used in YA fiction to depict unattainably good-looking male characters, and it seems to be a consequence of the influence of adult romance fiction over YA literature: as the protagonist is female, the man turns into the object of desire, but also into an object of the female gaze. A female gaze that does not really empower women or contest the male gaze, however, as we may be tempted to believe, but which turns in fact into another tool that reinforces heteronormative relationships, through the sexualization of (both male and female) bodies. Comments like Alexa’s, uttered by female characters, support romantic heterosexual love without taking into
account how it recreates once and again the structures of oppression that sustain the relation between gender and power. After all, we must recall that these girls and women do not really feel they hold power over the male bodies of their romantic interests: those are described as unattainable from the beginning, as unfulfilled desires for bodies they cannot touch until _he_ decides to take the first step. In contrast, the female body is often touched without permission, an object of the action rather than an agent: they are the ones being kissed, the ones being caressed.

Prince Po, from Cashore’s _Graceling_, is also a male character inscribed inside this selfless masculinity, although he is not sexualized in the way in which the characters from _Defy_ are. He finds in Katsa not only an equal fighter to match his abilities, but also a friend and a lover. He shows Katsa the importance of self-esteem and of learning to love herself, and the necessity to disentangle herself from King Randa, who is using her and her powers to terrify his nobles. Po does not fit the type of hegemonic masculinity, because for him Katsa is not an object. He is sensitive and patient, and he resorts to violence only as a way of defending himself, never to impose his power over others.

Po is also mysterious and, in a way, he is living a masquerade of his own. Like Katsa, he was born Graced but, unlike her, he comes from a place in which magical abilities are revered instead of feared. However, when he and his mother discover that his talent is to sense the intentions of others towards him, and that he can know what those around them are thinking, they decide to hide his power. Instead, they claim that he has a Grace for fighting to shield him from the rejection of others, who may turn their backs to him if they discover what he can do. At the end of _Graceling_, however, he is forced to extend the masquerade to make everybody believe that he has not lost his sight, although a fatal blow in the head has left him visually impaired. His Grace adapts itself to his new situation, somehow evolving to make up for his visual deficit. In a way, this turn of events makes the point that the Gracelings are post-human, using their powers to fulfill their lacks and surviving thanks to the possibilities that they provide. The fact that Po is able to survive thanks to his especial sensibility towards other people—but also towards everything around him—is a call for attention to the need of human
beings to resort to empathy and to stop relying on violence and force to solve our conflicts. In fact, those who resort to terror and aggression as a means to control others, such as King Randa and King Leck, are presented not only as threats for the free will of the main characters, but also as a threat to the peace of their kingdoms and to the fulfillment of any human right.

The comparison between the passing women and the men around them reinforces the idea that a perfect performance of gender regarding the standards set by hegemonic masculinity is impossible, not to mention the toxicity that would be (in fact is) inherent to it. Thus, the novels condemn the types of masculinity that enhance violence and domination over the demonstration of feelings, empathy and friendship. The gender-b(l)ender figures embody a more positive view of the masculine gender, highlighting the necessity to keep the distance from traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Likewise, there is a positive view regarding the creation of new modes that do not reject some of the traits that have been traditionally associated with femininity, such as kindness, selflessness, or empathy, among others. These traits are replicated in the (comparably scarce) female figures that surround the gender-b(l)enders, who show different types of femininity as well and whose struggles have made them develop strategies for survival different from cross-dressing.

8.2. In the margins: femininities and empowerment

As important as masculinity is in the construction of the passing woman, most analyses and studies on YA fiction with cross-dressing characters tend to focus only on the performance of the male persona and other men, leaving outside the female characters that surround the protagonist. In my opinion, this is a mistake, as the women in the narratives (even though they are comparably less than the men) also help to shape the opinions and performance of the cross-dressers. As Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily assert in Gender, Youth and Culture, after all, “masculinity and femininity are better understood as mutually constitutive relations,” (2008, 190) and therefore it would be impossible to isolate one from the other. Although I have already mentioned that most of the times the link between women characters is weak and that sorority is substituted by heterosexual
relationships (see section 6.1.3), this does not mean that there are no female characters in the novels of my corpus who try to show other ways of empowerment and resistance against gender stereotypes, inequalities, and violence against them.

Just as male characters show different ways of performing masculinity, the same applies to women: there are always different female characters (of different ages, classes, religions, and races) that perform different femininities, both inside and outside the traditional roles that patriarchal structures demand from them. The appearance of these women and girls serve not only to make visible different types of attitudes towards and performances of gender, but, in the majority of cases, they also dismantle the prejudiced beliefs of the main characters, who present misogynistic prejudices due to the patriarchal systems that have biased their opinions (see section 5.2.1). These preconceptions, which sometimes even contradict themselves, include the notions that women are too protective, vain, too bossy, mad or prone to hysteria, weak, or coward. These misogynistic ideals have to be dismantled before the passing woman reconciles herself with her feminine self. Of course, this does not mean that all the female characters are honest, since some of them, just like the male characters, are portrayed as villainous, with the intention of establishing themselves in positions of power through deceitful means.

8.2.1. The villainess: seduction and revenge

The contrast between the moral values of the protagonist and those of another female character who defies her is a characteristic of the text with female-to-male cross-dressers, but also of the patriarchal narrative more generally, in which women are set as enemies or rivals to avoid the establishment of sorority between them. Curiously enough, the “evil” woman is presented in the texts of my corpus as the most feminine character according to gender stereotypes, thus creating a parallel with the male characters that perform a hegemonic masculinity, and she is considered evil and dangerous for the peace of the main characters as well.

In Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness quartet we can find two of this kind of antagonistic feminine female characters. On the one hand we have Lady Delia, the
woman who is behind Thom’s decision to bring the sorcerer Roger back from death: “She’d been after Thom since you left. Telling him that the really great sorcerers could raise the dead, playing off his pride” (Pierce 1998c, 151; emphasis in the original). She is said to have been Roger’s mistress (Pierce 1998c, 188), and after she gets Thom to revive him, the Duke reveals that the only thing she wishes from him is power. In fact, by the way she behaves in front of him, kneeling and touching his hand in an attempt to seduce him, and calling him “dear lord” and confessing that her plan was “meant to bring you to your rightful throne” (Pierce 1998c, 188) there is no doubt that she expects him to choose her as queen once he sits on the throne.

Unlike Alanna, she is as vain as she is pretty, a trait that has always been chastised in patriarchal narratives and associated with sexual empowerment. On the one hand, the conscious appeal women have over men is a problem for a society that tries to deny them any agency; on the other hand, to be proud of one’s body is not profitable for the neoliberal, capitalist society that tries to enforce surgeries and cosmetics on women. Thus, it cannot surprise anybody that female main characters, then, tend to be presented as pretty without being conscious of their appeal. And even though there can be an attempt in the narratives to support femininity and female characters, the stigma of the seductress is present in many contemporary narratives that keep punishing the sexual empowerment of women and vilifying them.

Delia is also too proud, and will not admit to her mistakes, traits that go against the patriarchal image of “the angel in the house”: the chaste, modest, selfless, and caring woman. All these characteristics come to the surface in a scene in which she confronts Alanna in the fourth installment of the quartet. In this scene, in which she is clearly depicted as an antagonist to the female knight, she mocks Alanna for posing as a man during her adolescence and adds that she had always suspected that something was wrong when Alanna danced with her. The protagonist, however, recalls that Delia “made a point of flirting with me, because the men said I was a woman-hater, and you wanted to make me fall in love with you” (Pierce 1998c, 250), showing not only that Delia wanted to
distinguish herself among the other ladies at court, but that she always desires what seems unattainable.

In the end, of course, Delia is punished for treason against the kingdom and, consequently, for all her vices, but instead of being executed, she is sentenced to life imprisonment (Pierce 1998c, 298) to highlight the kindness of King Jonathan, who “would not begin his rule with executions” (Pierce 1998c, 298). Thus, in the end her existence is solely defined by the masculine characters surrounding her: the page she wanted to seduce; her lover, who was to serve her to attain the throne; and the prince —now king— that she also tried to seduce at a certain point in the quartet and who has condemned her for the rest of her life.

Delia goes hand in hand with another female character that is the embodiedment of the vengeful woman: Princess Josiane of the Copper Isles. She is described by Prince Jonathan as being cruel, although “[s]he hides it well” (Pierce 1998c, 234). Even when at the beginning the heir to the crown tries to be interested in her, he soon gets tired of her company, only sought in order to make Alanna jealous. The princess knows it and seeks revenge, as Roger explains: “Jonathan courted you to spite Alanna of Trebond. Still, you might have kept him, with some restraint on your part. Now you want to punish him” (Pierce 1998c, 188).

In the scene commented above in which Delia confronts Alanna, Josiane joins Delia in her mockery of the shero and suggests that Alanna has got so far in the court only because she has been Jonathan’s lover: “I’m told you were Jonathan’s lover once . . . Is that why he made you Champion?” (Pierce 1998c, 250). Josiane thus expresses her doubts regarding Alanna’s merits and therefore repeats a stereotype by which women’s deeds are always put in relation to their sexual relations with important men.

In the end, her behavior and decisions are dismissed as the acts of a madwoman, from a family that “birth a mad one every generation. . . . It comes from being an island kingdom—too much inbreeding” (Pierce 1998c, 251). The harmful trope of the spiteful woman is here connected to the figure of the madwoman, full of anger, who resorts to violence and murder and can only be stopped by being killed, thus rationalizing Alana’s dislike for her as a
foreshadowing of the princess’ wickedness, which forces the shero to act: “With Faithful’s agonized cry, strength poured into [Alanna]. She crouched and lunged, drawing Lightning as she moved. With a single, brutal slash she cut Josiane down” (Pierce 1998c, 280).

Characters like Delia and Josaine are included in YA fiction as antagonists of the main female character and show behaviors that are severely chastised. This type of characters, according to Samantha Eichelberger in her analysis of Delia and Josaine, “use their beauty and their status to their advantage, utilizing the expectations of the people around them to achieve what they want. These . . . women are the most feminine . . ., and are the most vicious as well” (2014, 88). These women do not fight for any cause but their own, and they will decide their actions upon whatever benefits them the most, relying especially in their looks in order to achieve their goals (Eichelberger 2014,94). And this is, precisely, what is being criticized about femininity: the importance that patriarchal culture gives to the look of women and the problems that this emphasis on beauty can cause. In the end, this culture is creating the illusion that you can get anything thanks to your body, teaching women to objectify themselves. From this perspective, it seems that these YA novels are trying criticize this individualist and neoliberal postfeminism.

8.2.2. Empowered women: rebels and warriors

Not all the women surrounding the sheroes, however, are evil. Although they may adhere more or less to traditional traits of femininity, some of them become role models for the protagonists, and their part in the narratives is important, even though at the beginning the main characters are suspicious of them or tend to undervalue them. The objective of these female figures, apart from opening the eyes of the gender-b(l)enders to the possibilities of empowerment around them that do not require cross-dressing, is to present a comparison between the different performances of the feminine gender. This intention has been explained by Rebecca Bell-Meterau in her analysis of pre-1960s Hollywood films: “[t]he majority of these films define the character of the woman in terms of her
Chapter 8: Comparison are unavoidable

relationship to a man, but often she is also set in contrast to a woman who represents opposing values” (Bell-Meterau 1993, 68).

Some of these figures feel comfortable in the role that patriarchal society has chosen for them and do not realize that they are under oppressive structures of power. Instead, they try to lure other women to pursue normative femininity, evidencing the constraints to which they are subjected without realizing it. As I have already shown above, in section 6.1.4, Mrs. Wilks is one of those characters, and she repetitively attempts to turn Violet (from Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*) into a “real” lady, in the same way that Deryn’s aunts and mother in Westerfeld’s *Leviathan* try to force her into the performance of traditional femininity. In Cashore’s *Graceling*, this figure is embodied by Helda, who insists on Katsa’s wearing dresses, jewelry, and doing her hair.

In contrast with those more conventional maternal figures, however, there are others who take the cross-dressers under their protection and caring but leave them to decide what they desire to do regardless of gender restrictions. Alanna, for instance, is surrounded by two of these figures: Maude, the town healer of her childhood, and Eleni Cooper, her friend George’s mother and town healer as well. The former helps her to cross-dress and gives her advice about moral attitudes, but never forces her to behave in a certain manner; the latter helps her through the onset of puberty and instructs her about the physical changes brought about by adolescence. Eleni talks to her in an open, healthy way about sex and even teaches her how to avoid pregnancy (Pierce 1992, 155). In a moment of her life in which she is completely surrounded by boys and men, Eleni becomes Alanna’s bridge with femininity, a helper through the difficult moments of discovery of her own body and also a keeper of her secret. Both Maude and Eleni represent at large the traditional femininity of the kind, selfless caretaker, but both remain independent through their work as healers and seem to believe in the necessity to give young women their space to decide by themselves, rejecting common notions of imposing gender roles on them. They remain unprejudiced and helpful and they seem, in general, quite detached from society restrictions and expectations.

This important link between the shero and a middle-age woman is recurrent in the rest of the novels in my corpus. In Larson’s *Defy*, for example, Alexa and
Lisbet, one of the female rebels, seem to bond in the same way Alanna and Eleni do. Alexa has had no woman around her since she lost her mother, and therefore no maternal figure that might have helped her. Lisbet, on the other hand, shares with Alexa her hatred for the king, although her own reasons are different: while Alexa was able to escape from the breeding houses and no man has ever touched her, Lisbet was raped by King Hector and gave birth to a son. Her role as a healer (once again related to the image of the selfless caretaker) seems to make her a good confidant, and she gives constant advice to Alexa. Her empowerment comes with her alliance to the rebels and her decision to be an active subject in the revolution, instead of passively participating in the oppression exerted by King Hector.

Not all the women of older generations are maternal figures, however, though most of them challenge the patriarchal system in a way or another, even if small ways. And they do it without resorting to cross-dressing, as they have found means of struggling and rebelling against their positions as subordinates. Among them, I have to highlight the roles of the women in the Leviathan trilogy, in which they get themselves power by taking advantage of the conflictive situation they are undergoing and who are presented as leaders, not simply as characters in the background.

Historically, women have been leaders at wartime, since they have been defined as periods in which gender transgressions are easier for some women at such historical periods, especially in developed countries. During armed conflicts, as the men go to war, the women substitute them at home, which allow them more freedom. This is what happens with Dr. Barlow, for example, who is allowed to go on board the Leviathan only when the war is declared. Although she is supposed to be only a passenger, the reader soon discovers that she is in fact a governmental agent in a secret diplomatic mission. Deryn’s surprise when she discovers that the guest onboard the Leviathan is a woman evidences that she has never been told that women could be scientists, corroborating the invisibilization of women in power positions and particularly in science. Dr. Barlow herself is aware that her gender is sometimes the cause of her being treated differently to her male colleagues. When Deryn shows her astonishment, Dr. Barlow just
replies: “The subject [of me being a woman] has occasionally been debated” (Westerfeld 2009, 152). Nothing more is mentioned on the topic, but it is presumed that it has not been easy for her to enter in an all-men space. Regardless (or precisely because) of this background, she is portrayed as a confident, intelligent, and capable woman: she is not only a biologist, but also speaks English and German, and she knows about the ins and outs of politics.

Apart from one of the most prestigious scientists in England (and granddaughter of Charles Darwin himself), Dr. Barlow is the head keeper of the Zoological Society of London, “a force to be reckoned with” (Westerfeld 2011, 395). Although she asserts that the Zoological Society is “not a government agency” (Westerfeld 2011, 395), the link with the government is undeniable, as Dr. Barlow collaborates actively with the Empire during the war: when she is requested to carry a present for the sultan of the Ottoman Empire, she is turned into a diplomat, a representative of the whole British Empire. In other words, she is given a mission of peace, of stopping the sultan from making an alliance with Germany by giving him the new creatures the Society has created, in exchange for Ottoman help or, at least, their neutrality.

In spite of her initial orders, the reader soon discovers that she has planned her own moves: she arranges the events to provide Alek with one of the creatures that hatches from the eggs she guards, as she finds that his favor may be valuable for winning the war (at the same time that the action allows her to undergo behavioral experiments on the new creatures). Though she denies her scheme when Deryn points out the incident (Westerfeld 2010, 176), the power she holds is obvious, as she has enough so as to advice the captain who are to be kept onboard the Leviathan and who should abandon the ship.

As a woman who likes to control everything around her and who always manages to take advantage of the situation, the only thing that seems to come as a surprise for Dr. Barlow is Deryn’s “real” identity, though not even under these circumstances does she show her bewilderment. Her reply is full of admiration for what the midship(wo)man has done, and though she fears how higher ranks will receive the news (since she has mocked everyone), her opinion on Deryn’s aptitudes does not change. In this way, she awards Deryn for her courage and
seems to consider that her feat is positive for all women, as she can show the world that the value of a person is not related to one’s gender:

Don’t get me wrong, Miss Sharp, what you have done is quite brave. You are a credit to our gender, and you have my fullest admiration. . . . And if you hadn’t been caught, it would have been a pleasure working with you. Perhaps after this war is over, we can speak of this position [for the London Zoological Society] again. (Westerfeld 2011, 399-400)

Another female figure in the same trilogy that becomes more powerful with the proximity of war is Nene, an Armenian old woman living in Istanbul. As the head of the revolutionaries that lead an upheaval against the sultan, she receives all due respect, even though she is confined to bed (a situation that I have already mentioned as part of the post-human depictions in section 5.1). In a way, the revolutionaries mimic a matriarchy within the strict Ottoman society, and they are led by the oldest, more respectable woman. The fact that she is not called by her name but by her position within the family reinforces this idea of being the matriarch, since Alek gets to understand that “‘Nene’ wasn’t a name at all, but simply a word for ‘grandmother’” (Westerfeld 2010, 291).

Both Nene and Dr. Barlow, however, are devoid of part of their powers at the end of the war (or the revolution, in Nene’s case). This is only logical for Dr. Barlow, whose position on board the *Leviathan* was temporary to start with. At the end of the war, and once she has accomplished her mission, she leaves the ship and goes back to her position as part of the Zoological Society. As far as Nene is concerned, her status as head of the revolutionaries seems to disappear after the revolution, as she is no longer mentioned and she cannot intercede to keep her granddaughter, Lilit, in Istanbul.

These fluctuations of power have been historically acknowledged as one of the consequences of armed conflicts. Thus, though they may have brought certain freedom to some women, they also caused a backlash afterwards, with a harsh repression of rights and the return to a more traditional, patriarchal society in which women are kept at home and under the regained power of middle-class men. Higonnet and Higonnet have described this cyclical experience, which they have called “The Double Helix”: 
The social and economic roles of many women undergo rapid and radical transformation both at the onset of war and, in a symmetrically opposed direction, at its conclusion. . . . The radical changes for women precipitated by war are understood to be mere interruptions of “normal” gender relations. The nation calls upon women to change their roles only “for the duration.” (1987, 31)

Although Westerfeld’s trilogy is the only work in my corpus that portrays accurately this effect, it is used several times, not only in the characters I have already mentioned but also in the character of Lilit, whose name hints towards a non-conformist personality, in the wake of the apocryphal first wife of Adam 59. Westerfeld’s Lilit is probably the most affected by the regression to a more normative society in which women are deprived of power.

Lilit is Nene’s granddaughter and the closest to a female friend that Deryn has throughout the trilogy, not to mention that she is the one who challenges the most the expectations of both Deryn and Alek regarding femininity, since she does not follow the conventional gender roles expected in a woman. Even though her rejection of gender roles may remind the reader of Deryn, Lilit never attempts to hide either her identity or her opinions. In her first encounter with Alek, however, the prince thinks that she is a man in disguise because he considers her to be too fast and agile to be a woman: “He could outrun an old woman . . . And yet when he looked back, his pursuer was still there . . . This was no old woman, perhaps no woman at all . . . The black-robed figure jumped up onto the loading dock in a single bound, confirming that this was no woman” (Westerfeld 2010, 272).

Alek (and Dylan/Deryn, who has interiorized a misogynistic perspective) has difficulties to accept that a young woman could be as active and brave as any man. Although in the case of Alek he accepts Lilit’s value at the end, Deryn tries to explain away her attitude by linking it to the way Lilit has been raised: “You were raised to throw bombs. I wasn’t” (Westerfeld 2011, 448). Lilit, who already knows Deryn’s secret, questions Deryn’s actions as a response, since their

59 The myth of Lilith has been widely represented in the arts. Lately, feminist writers have used the character and her story, revisioning her as “a complex [s]hero belying the stereotypes that typically restrict female characters” (Osherow 2000, 68).
attitudes are not really that different, even when the male impersonator does not realize it: “Were you raised to wear trousers and be a soldier?” (Westerfeld 2011, 448).

One of Lilit’s traits that may strike the reader is that she can be easily recognized as a feminist figure, in contrast with the more ambiguous stance of Deryn, who fights an individualistic battle against the prejudices of men. Unlike the cross-dresser, Lilit declares that she is fighting for the women’s rights, as she wishes for a change in Istanbul’s political situation in general but hopes that the revolution will help in particular to achieve women’s suffrage in her country in particular. In fact, she and father write articles “on the subject of women being allowed to vote” (Westerfeld 2010, 358) and the Golems they have built for the revolution are shaped with the physical traits associated with the cis female body, which I think symbolizes perfectly their wish to empower women. Nevertheless, it seems that this empowerment of women is not in their hands regardless of the promises made to them during the revolution: after the sultan is expelled from Istanbul and the revolutionaries take control, Lilit appears once again and the reader discovers that her plans have been thwarted. The war brought a laxer conception of the gender roles only while it lasted. Dekker and van de Pol have also pointed the importance of this freedom during times of crisis, which allow “normal rules [to] be set aside [because w]hen the survival of the community demands it, women are permitted to assume masculine tasks” (1989, 31).

Even though female citizens of Istanbul in Behemoth have fought in the revolution in the same terms than men and they have been promised the same rights if they support the new regime, afterwards privileges are in fact denied to them. This leads Lilit to consider that political guarantees are invalid, a criticism not only towards the promises done during political campaigns, but also to the fact that minorities or unprivileged groups tend to be made invisible again once they are not needed anymore or when, as Uma Narayan points out, “[t]he sense of cultural anxiety created by rapid social change . . . results in calls for a return to and restoration of ‘our traditional way of life,’ a return that is to be accomplished by returning women to their ‘traditional place’” (1997, 20).
Lilit may be young, but the unfulfilled promises of the revolution have left her skeptical that changes are even possible. Thus, when Deryn states that “Dr. Barlow says that British women will get the vote, once the war is over” (Westerfeld 2011, 446), Lilit thinks that this is one more possibility to which nobody is going to pay attention: “The Committee [of the Revolution] promised the same thing, back when we were rebels. . . . But now that we’re in power, there seems to be no rush. And when I complained, I was sent five thousand miles away” (Westerfeld 2011, 446-447). Although she is given a job as a diplomat, she has no power over the country she helped to free, being sent away against her wishes. In this sense, she is a victim of the society she lives in, and the character of Lilit criticizes the structures that only change for the convenience of patriarchy, which will never accept the development of a more just ideology in which all humans have the same opportunities, regardless of their gender or race: “The world hasn’t changed” (Westerfeld 2011, 438).

Finally, it has to be said that Lilit is the only female character in the whole corpus that is openly queer (either lesbian or bisexual, we do not know). Although she never confesses to be in love with Deryn, she kisses her. Deryn is completely astonished, but Lilit simply excuses herself by saying that she “was curious” (Westerfeld 2010, 451; Westerfeld 2011, 448). At this point, the reader realizes that Lilit knows Deryn’s secret, especially when Deryn tells her that she knows nothing about her and Lilit answers “I know you better than you think, Mr. Sharp” (Westerfeld 2010, 452; emphasis in the original). Under Lilit’s humorous tone by emphasizing the title of Mr., there is a site for revolution, as she challenges the rules of the literature of the cross-dresser, in which we rarely see a girl consciously interested in the gender-b(l)ender character.

8.2.3. Liminality: women at the margins of society

If women are oppressed and vexed just for their gender, the repression and persecution suffered by women who are from different racial groups or minorities is even worse. Miriam, from Rosen’s All Men of Genius, is a case of study to this respect, as she is subjected to violence not only for her gender, but also due to her origins (both as Jew and Palestinian), which are made visible in the prejudices of
others and in the way she has been educated. From an early age, she has been told to be careful because she was a target for religious loathing and violence. One of her remembrances from her childhood is of her parents scolding her for having been found alone in the streets, dancing in the rain, in a liberating act that reflects her need to escape from the constrictions of her daily life. “They would have killed you!” they explain, referring to the situation of Jewish people in Arabian countries in the nineteenth century, different from the contemporary climate of Islamophobia: “To them, we are dirty. . . . It is because we are Jews” (Rosen 2011, 206). Miriam’s answer to this oppression is “Then I don’t want to be a Jew” (Rosen 2011, 206), a response that reminds me of Alanna’s complaint about her femininity and her body changes: “I didn’t ask to be born a girl” (Pierce 1992, 155).

Just like Alanna and the other gender-b(l)ender characters, Miriam treasures the freedom she so painfully manages to get and her double life: by day, she is Cecily’s cold, professional governess; by night she spends her time among male students and goes to places of dubious reputation, where she admits she feels more at ease. This is due to the fact that she is never questioned about her behavior nor her origins: “She loved her secret life, loved being outside society. It gave her freedom. As long as she crept along the lines between class and race, no one paid her any attention” (Rosen 2011, 146).

Miriam is an example of the characters that live at the margins of society whom the cross-dressers tend to befriend, and who serve as a link between the passing women and other forms of trespassing social barriers. This is another liminal space, between the legal and the illegal, between the high and the low classes. These people from the margins are mainly thieves and prostitutes who, nonetheless, are not portrayed as morally questionable (as otherwise this would taint the morality of the protagonist with whom they make their acquaintance): these “criminals” act following their own code, and the consequences of their acts, even if they are not selfless acts, in the end are positive for everyone, so they cannot be blamed for them. Therefore, it is not strange for the reader to find that Alanna makes the acquaintance of the Rogue, the King of Thieves, who helps her and her friends at the same time that he escapes from the Lord Provost (the local
authority) to avoid being jailed. In his own court, which parallels the castle and their knights, squires, and pages, there is a web of both male and female thieves, female prostitutes, spies, and thugs, although the reader has only a glimpse of its real magnitude, as the plot is centered on the relationship between Alanna and George. These criminals act on the margins of the law, but in the end, they are the ones that come to the rescue of the King of Tortall and his people during the battle inside the castle. This final action, carried out selflessly, earns them their freedom and George even gets a piece of land and a title, which ultimately makes him Alanna’s equal and allows him to marry her in “convenient” conditions.

Women who live their lives intermittently slipping inside and outside legality appear briefly in the story of Alanna (mainly as part of George’s “court”), but they are probably more prominent in their role in Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*. Apart from Miriam, Violet has the opportunity to meet prostitutes in their nights outside the College. These women stay mainly in the background, as part of the reality to the city that, nonetheless, is never addressed directly. No characteristic trait is given to these characters (apart from a name, if any) and no mention to their lives and difficulties in a society that discriminates and objectifies women is given. None of them have a real role in the story except for Fiona, an actress and prostitute that Violet's brother hires to play the role of her maid during Christmas as if Fiona had been with them in the city for the whole season, so as to show Mrs. Wilks, their caretaker, that she has been under constant supervision.

Fiona is not aware of Violet’s secret until she meets her during a show in which Fiona is performing the role of a “sexy pony” for an all-male audience. At this moment, the actress unveils herself as a fortune hunter, and bribes Ashton/Violet with the intention of making herself the mistress of one of his/her friends. She is never criminalized for her actions and, in fact, it is considered that she has her reasons for seducing men for their fortunes, because of the difficult situation in which she finds herself. At the end, she and Drew, the boy she has been seeing, fall in love, and that conclusion seems to be enough to answer for her actions. Sadly, in most of the novels in my corpus it is romantic love which moves most of the female characters, who find their happiness in a heterosexual
relationship, just as the protagonist does (as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9).

8.2.4. Damsels in distress?: women as victims

The gender-b(l)ender figures that populate my corpus are expressly aware of injustice and, above all, of gender inequality. Regardless of their motivation for cross-dressing, in the end they would do anything to help other women (especially after they start to come to terms with their own femininity) and empathize with their struggles even when (or probably because) they are living under a disguise that concedes them privileges that other women cannot achieve. Consequently, they are taken into consideration for their cunning and resourcefulness instead of for their beauty; they do not have to escape the country due to war because they have weapons and have been trained to use them; and they are not raped or subjected to gender violence because they are not recognized as women. They do not have to endure the judgement of the male gaze and perform femininity, but the cross-dressers know the pressure of normativity and establish links with other women, trying to help them and sometimes even becoming jealous of their strength and of the fact that they have decided not to hide under a masquerade.

In Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*, for example, Violet envies Cecily’s luck: she can be inside Illyria College the whole year because she is the niece of the owner and, moreover, she has made good use of her possibilities. Thus, Cecily has spent her childhood and adolescent life studying chemistry, turning into an intelligent woman acknowledged by the men around her (when they are able to see beyond her beauty). Cecily is also the perfect image of Victorian femininity, gentle and kind despite being surrounded by men all day. And precisely because this is an all-male space, both the relationship between Ahston/Violet and Cecily and the one between Violet and Ada Byron (who discovers that “Ashton” is in fact female and helps her to keep her secret) serve to reinforce the link between the women that are surrounded by men and, what is more, seems to be a call of attention to sorority in all-men fields.

Alanna (Pierce’s *The Song of the Lioness*) and Katsa (Cashore’s *Graceling*) help women in need and try to save those who are being harassed. Alanna acts as
a knight and defends the weakest, from a woman who is going to be burned at the stake for witchcraft (see section 5.2.2) to the girls of the Hawks tribe, who are despised by everyone until she teaches them how to control their powers and leaves them as shamans to help others in turn. She also helps the refugees from Sarain, all of them women and children, who are escaping from the war and from the tyranny of the king, who has colonized the lands of the K’mir tribe of women warriors and married their queen by means of promises of peace that were never fulfilled. By this union, the king ensured the control of the tribes, which was enforced by institutional violence through the signing of “laws forbidding us to meet in groups of more than five people at a time” (Pierce 1998c, 84), as one of the female warriors explains. Buri, who reminds the reader of Alanna due to her abilities and her performance of female masculinity, talks here about racial injustice related to a long list of crimes that show the institutional disregard for the safety of the K’mir, since the government does nothing to prevent the stealing of their horses and the taking of their people as slaves. In this way, their culture is being exterminated, and the only culture in Alanna’s world that allows women to hold power is invalidated by the male colonizer, who restrains freedom and allows unjust situations on the behalf of an elite that trades with the bodies of people, just as it happens nowadays with human trafficking, in which women (and children) are kidnapped to satisfy the sexual desires of males who can afford it.

As far as Katsa is concerned, she is especially disturbed every time she encounters a woman or girl being abused, as she herself had been subjected to the will of a man for too long. Apart from her wishes to protect other women and teach them to fight, she is particularly linked to the figure of Bitterblue, a princess that has been abused by her father, King Leck, and has seen her mother being tortured by him. Although these reiterated acts of violence against her have left Bitterblue incapable of trusting those around her, Katsa’s lessons and company help her to overcome her fears and turn her into a girl who is able to survive a journey throughout the Seven Kingdoms and return home to be crowned.

These are examples of moments of sorority that bring the cross-dressers to an understanding that they are not the only ones oppressed by the system, and they serve as a way to link the gender-b(l)enders to other female characters with
different femininities and different types of struggles against the traditional patriarchal system that prevents them from being independent.

The novels with cross-dressing characters, in general, present a narrow range of female characters, but they tend to be from of all conditions: some of them are outcasts, some of them are from the nobility, and some of them hold power in a way or another. They are scientists and witches, mothers and daughters, warriors and victims of an unjust system that place men’s interests over women’s security and independence. Although there is friction between the cross-dressers and some of these women, their presence is an accurate way of deconstructing internalized misogyny on the part of the passing women and also to challenge stereotypes regarding femininity that seem to be unavoidable in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, it presents different varieties of femininity, from the most conventional ones to the female masculinity, both with or without the masquerade component developed by the passing girls.

Both masculinity and femininity are sometimes portrayed in these narratives as different from the standards, challenging the conventions by considering the most normative performances of the gender as threats to the other characters. In these novels, hegemonic masculinity and certain types of femininity are portrayed as toxic, while traits related to kindness, selflessness, humility, and mercy are extoled in both male and female characters.

In many cases the people surrounding the shero serve the purpose of enhancing —through their flaws— the good qualities of the protagonists, to the point of turning these secondary characters into simple tropes. Nevertheless, by portraying different types of masculinities and femininities, these stories present a lesson to their readers: that there is no necessity of feeling ashamed of who we are, even if we cannot be defined through the standards set by the gender binary, and that the performance of gender can be reshaped to our purposes.
Chapter 9. Sites of ambiguity: problematizing gender

In Chapter 4, I have recalled Jack Halberstam’s critique of the portrayal of transgender lives by nontransgender authors from a normative perspective. He considers that this representation is sustained on three different projects, including the project of stabilization, the project of rationalization, and the project of trivialization. These three angles do not only undervalue the existence of all the individuals under the *trans* umbrella but help sustain the heteropatriarchal society by “forcing the transgender subject to make sense” (Halberstam 2005, 54), thus pinning transgender individuals to the rules and supposed “logic” of the cis, heterosexual person. In reference to the second of these projects, the one on rationalization, Halberstam comments on the authorial attempt to find “reasonable explanations for behavior that may seem dangerous and outrageous at first glance, . . . [placating] mainstream viewers by returning the temporarily transgender subject to the comforting and seemingly inevitable matrix of hetero-domesticity” (2005, 55).

I have already mentioned the importance of the masquerade as a *temporary* strategy in cross-dressing narratives, and how the protagonist is forced (in most cases due to the inequalities of their sexist worlds) to dress and act as a man. The agency of the passing woman, however, is “invariably abandoned once the disguise has served its purpose thus reinforcing the message to any female [readers] that gender roles cannot be usurped permanently” (Harris 2005, 111). Following this line of thought, I would like to focus, in this section, on what happens once the deception is over (if that is the case) and the girls are restored to their feminine performance. In which way does the masquerade criticize contemporary situations of inequality? Are the protagonists really critical with the situation they are forced to live? In which way could the text be encouraging the normative view of the hero as male, and the female just as a victim? The reader may even ask: are they really sheroes or are they an apology for postfeminist ideologies in which they are reclaiming that women are already free to do their bidding? Are they even breaking with the male identification to which women are subjected (Rich 1980, 646)? Or are they an extension of a canon in which female
readers are forced to handle texts where the masculine is set as the norm and therefore required to understand and empathize with the masculine subject? And although we may argue that the narratives definitely break with the traditional perspectives on masculinity and femininity, do they leave any space for any other possibilities outside the normative gender binary?

By focusing on their return to femininity and the compulsory heterosexual romantic relationship at the end of the narratives, I attempt to answer in this final chapter this set of questions and other concerns regarding queer subjectivities and gender trouble, not to mention the role of speculative YA literature as an adequate means of triggering new debates among young readers.

9.1. Happily ever after?: analyzing the endings of the novels

In her analysis of male impersonation in films before and after the 1960s, Rebecca Bell-Metereau comments on works that both support and fight the status quo and the thin line that sometimes serves as a barrier between performances of masculinity and femininity. She considers that, before the 1960s, the way to distinguish those movies that “offer alternatives” to normativity was asking “whether the masculine woman is allowed to survive as such” (1993, 68). But the fact that one woman is allowed to maintain her masculinity is only a partial victory in worlds in which women are systematically oppressed. Historically, as explained in Chapter 3, one woman may have been allowed to show masculine traits and go against normative gender roles. Some women were even allowed to act and dress as men, and there was at least one instance of a woman who received a papal permission that allowed her to dress in male garments and change her name to Antonio de Erauso (Bullough and Bullough 1993, 96). These women, however, were exceptions. Most masquerades were kept in secret, and only discovered at the end of the cross-dressers’ lives.

When analyzing literary texts portraying gender-b(l)enders, it is relevant to consider in which circumstances is the masculine woman allowed to perform gender in her own way. The endings of the narratives provide us with a lot of hints to discover if they are allowed to survive as rebels to the gender binary or if they are forced to re-establish a feminine role. In general, in the analyzed corpus
we can find three different trends: the possibility of keeping the male persona, the survival of female masculinity, and the adoption of femininity.

### 9.1.1. Keeping the masquerade: “you may need your disguise until the world catches up with you”

It is strange for a cross-dressing narrative to end in a situation in which the main character decides to keep her male persona because passing is considered in these texts as a *temporary* strategy. Thus, the ending of Westerfeld’s trilogy *Leviathan* is probably one of a kind, as no other YA speculative fiction about gender-b(l)ender characters have, to my notice, ended in a similar way.

The story of Dylan/Deryn concludes after she has been threatened with exposure by an American journalist that has discovered her “real” identity. The journalist, Malone, is more than willing to write an article in the newspaper about the young woman who deceived the high ranks of the British air forces. Although at first Deryn does not seem to be conscious of all the problems that the uncovering of her deception would cause the uncovering of her deception, Dr. Barlow reminds her that there is more than a personal question at stake. Deryn’s masquerade, which has been in her eyes an individual decision to achieve a post at the British air forces, becomes clearly political at levels that she had never expected, because it could turn into “a boon to [the Germans’] propaganda efforts!” (Westerfeld 2011, 399). Only at this point does Deryn realize that “the crushing truth was that Dr. Barlow was right. . . . Deryn had thought only about what Malone’s revelation would mean for herself, not for her captain and shipmates, much less the Air Service and the British Empire” (Westerfeld 2011, 399).

I find this scene between Dr. Barlow and Deryn, where they are thinking about the consequences of her masquerade, especially enlightening regarding the feminist cause and the real meaning of cross-dressing. Because every personal act is also political, according to the slogan used by Second-Wave feminists, to try to pass, even for selfish reasons, turns into a message concerning oppressive structures and unjust systems. After all, if Deryn cross-dresses is because she is

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60 Westerfeld 2011, 532.
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forced to do it by the patriarchal institutions that do not allow girls to be educated in the same way as boys do; the same institutions that do not allow women to get jobs in all-male spheres such as the army.

To have been discovered, then, would have been a revolution for all those who are fighting for the women’s cause, as Deryn guesses when she considers that the suffragettes would be glad to use her as an example to gain the female vote (Westerfeld 2011, 399). However, her secret is finally never discovered, thus thwarting the political (and feminist) impact that the news would have had: Deryn’s friend Alek decides to trade his own secrets in exchange for the journalist’s promise that he will not uncover the midship(wo)man. However, we should not read Alek’s rescue as if he thought that Deryn is a damsel in distress, but as a repayment for all the things that she has done for him during the rest of the narrative. In fact, the mutual care and love is, in the end, what really makes their bond unbreakable: “‘We save each other,’ Deryn whispered. ‘That’s how it works’” (Westerfeld 2011, 533).

Regardless of her new relationship with Alek (as part of the compulsory heterosexuality of the gender-b(l)ender), her ending is quite bitter from a feminist point of view, even if the narrator (and the illustration that accompanies the text) tries to portray it in an idyllic way, with both of them at the top of the ship, kissing while the Leviathan sets course for home: “An end and a kiss” (Westerfeld 2011, 535). In this conclusion to the trilogy, however, Deryn is still in disguise, and there is no foreseeable future in which she is going to be free of it. She has to keep being Dylan, in the same way that the other women in the story have to go back to their positions before the onset of the war: they are neither freer nor with more agency than in the first pages of the trilogy.

There is no doubt that the masculine woman is allowed to survive as such at the end of the narrative, but being forced to keep a masquerade makes a positive reading of this ending difficult. For me, in fact, the closing pages of this story fulfill exactly the fifth point in Sarah Kornfield’s list of tropes in U.S. cross-dressing narratives (see section 4.1): “women experience some form of punishment for having passed as a man” (Kornfield 2011, 219). In this case, Deryn is chastised for her creation of a male persona by having to keep disguising
herself: she cannot disclose her “secret” identity under threat of imprisonment, and she decides to give up her dream of being part of the air forces because now that her female persona has almost been disclosed, she cannot risk another close call. Luckily, she does not have to renounce completely to fly, because she is going to accept the position at the Zoological Society of London that Dr. Barlow has offered her, but she will not live in the air anymore (Westerfeld 2011, 465).

The realization that Deryn is being punished for her transgression is striking given the nonchalant tone of the narrator in the final scene. However, I believe that the problem resides in the perspective from which Deryn is portrayed, as Scott Westerfeld does not seem concerned throughout the narrative with the psychological (and physical) toll that passing has on his cross-dresser. It is taken from the text that maintaining her charade is not considered for Deryn a real punishment according to how the character has been created, as she agrees with Alek’s idea to “keep some secrets, for a while. And you may need your disguise until the world catches up with you” (Westerfeld 2011, 532).

The promised potential for revolution in the disclosure of Deryn’s gender identity is therefore thwarted, as her story remains a secret. She may disclose the truth with time, but she will never help the world change its opinion of women: instead, there is a (vain) hope that the world will change, as if it has a mind of its own. How can we talk about a feminist reading of the narrative, then, if Westerfeld’s Leviathan seems to contradict, in the end, that the personal is not political? Deryn is going to keep silent and stand still regarding the injustices that have led her to passing as a man, and she will not serve as an inspiration for other girls in the same situation. She may be “a credit to our gender” (Westerfeld 2011, 399-400), as Dr. Barlow asserts, and may destabilize the gender boundaries through her performance, but her attitude is in the end one of passivity, as she does nothing to assert her value as both a young woman and a soldier.

9.1.2. Keeping masculinity: “I hated lying to you”

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61 Pierce 1998a, 204.
Deryn decides to stay in her disguise, but the majority of the women in my corpus do not follow that path. Alanna from Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness and Alexa in Larson’s Defy leave their disguises behind and turn into openly female warriors but, at the same time, they do not drop the masculine traits of their performance. Katsa, on the other hand, keeps her gender-b(l)ender performance as well, even if all of them are finally able to come to terms with their feminine side.

9.1.2.1. Alanna in Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness

Alanna is probably one of the most interesting examples because her character mixes different tropes that appear in other narratives, both historical and fictional and because she is opened to many readings (sometimes contradictory), as the scholars who have studied the text have shown (Tolmie 2006, Flanagan 2011, Battis 2011, Sahn 2016). She is discovered to be a girl quite early in Pierce’s quartet, at the end of the second volume (In the Hands of the Goddess), which allows the character to develop without her disguise in a way that no other cross-dresser can do.

Even before she is discovered, Alanna has decided to embrace her femininity and to learn how to behave and look as a noblewoman, things that nobody has ever taught her, even during her childhood as a tomboy. Thus, when she starts feeling comfortable in her adolescent female body, she turns to her friend’s mother, Eleni Cooper, and asks her for help.

Those scenes in which she tries to learn the ins and outs of femininity have been used by scholars to explain the inherent artificiality of genders and the “relationship between sex and gender” (Flanagan 2008, 34). These lessons on “proper” manners portray the struggles that the protagonist must face to turn her performance of masculinity into ideal femininity. At the same time, they depict how easily one can move back and forward through gender roles, making clear that the binary is in fact a continuum and not simply two rigid and exclusive concepts:

The difficulty Alanna experiences when attempting to resume her feminine subjectivity shifts the narrative’s focus from the discourse of masculinity . . . back to femininity, exposing the constructedness of both genders.
Pierce’s novels self-reflexively refute the supposition that sex and gender are the same, drawing the reader’s attention to the ways in which gender is a series of “learned” behaviors and gestures. (Flanagan 2008, 34)

Alanna realizes through this training (not so different from her training as a knight), that trying to pass as a woman can be as difficult to try to pass as a man. In the conversation that follows this moment, Eleni remarks the artificiality of gender and the ways in which behaviors have been constructed to differentiate clearly the poles of the gender binary:

[m]ost girls don’t have to unlearn being a boy. And now you have two sets of Court manners to master. . . . Do you know the different kinds of curtsy? . . . How to write invitations? . . . How do you accept an offering of flowers from a young knight, or a married man? (Pierce 1998a, 126)

Alanna spends months practicing before she considers herself prepared to appear at one party in the castle and, even so, her performance is not flawless. Instead, she is discovered by Prince Jonathan, who has recognized her by her gait. Alanna’s answer highlights the impossibility for her to completely get rid of gender roles by saying “Mistress Cooper tries to cure me of walking like a boy, but it doesn't seem to take” (Pierce 1998a, 138; italics mine). The verb Alanna chooses to talk about her way of walking strikes as meaningful, as if to have traits of the other gender were for her part of a disease.

At the same time, Alanna’s confession on how hard it is for her to walk as a woman is also a way of showing that even when she tries to feminize herself, she is never going to be the prototype of the woman that others expect from her. Far from regretting it, however, she keeps on fighting and fulfilling her duties as a knight, even when she is despised by some people around her. Regardless of the resistance to include her inside certain social spheres, however, it is true that the gender-b(l)ender figure is always accepted as a woman again almost immediately, no matter how flawed her performance of femininity is. This trait of the cross-dresser has been pointed out by Victoria Flanagan, who asserts that she “is equally capable of returning to her former gender position without needing any strategic reiteration of her femininity in order to render her an authentic woman once
again” (Flanagan 2008, 21). In other words, there is not any doubt about her “real” gender when she decides or is forced to show her “real” persona, even though she may be mistaken for a man in certain occasions due to the social prejudices of certain looks (her short hair, her muscular body, and the clothes she dons) and gender traits (being aggressive or assertive).

When she is finally uncovered in a fight with the sorcerer that commits treason against the royal family, it is disappointing how “the court and the king are considerably more interested in the revelation of Alanna’s feminine body” than in her confrontation to defend the kingdom (Sahn 2016, 155). She is even asked to explain herself before finishing the combat, which she wins in a bittersweet way: she kills the evil sorcerer, but the horror that permeates the audience after her discovery makes her feel unwelcomed in the castle that had been her home for almost ten years.

At the end of this second instalment in the quartet, just after this event, Alanna decides to leave the country and set on an adventurous journey. Although the cause of this departure seems to be the need to think about what she has done (and come to terms with the idea that she has killed a man), Sara Sahn points out that “her actions against Roger simply add another layer to her sense that she cannot be recognized—or recognize herself—in Tortall” (Sahn 2016, 155).

Her following adventures make her grow both as a person (a woman, now without the disguise) and as a warrior, and it serves as a way to come to terms with her identity. Both her masculine and feminine parts are put to test and she becomes acquainted with experiences that she had never undergone due to her education in the castle as Alan. For example, during her stay with one of the desert tribes (who adopt her as part of the community), Alanna is taught how to weave. This is an activity that she would have despised in her younger years, but now she values it and remains thrilled by its use as an enhancer of the magic skills of those people with power. She even “compares the process of learning to weave to her training as a knight . . . [and] places the magical and mundane on an equal footing in their importance, . . . [allotting] masculine and feminine skills equal respect” (Sahn 2016, 157).
Although she does not really learn how to weave and spin and her attempt to do so is disastrous, Alanna keeps on mixing masculine and feminine stereotypical traits and abilities in her person. Though this clearly challenges the boundaries of the gender binary, her behavior presents a problem for those around her, especially for Jonathan, who has a relationship with her during this period and even asks her to marry him, and Liam, a warrior whom she meets during her adventures and who eventually becomes her lover. On the one hand, Jonathan becomes furious with her rejection to act feminine and submit to his expectations of femininity. On the other hand, Liam is confused by her femininity, when he sees her in a dress, and mocks her with shallow comments regarding her appearance. Jonathan and Liam clearly despise the masculine (warrior) and feminine (woman) side of Alanna respectively, and their prejudices regarding gender roles and the “ease with which she can move back and forth between masculine and feminine behaviors” (Sahn 2016, 160) prevent them from loving Alanna as a person.

At the end, Alanna chooses the man that loves her completely, with all her lights and shadows: George Cooper, her childhood friend, who has always accepted her performance of both femininity and masculinity and, in fact, has helped her in several occasions, even though he knew both her identities. Alanna’s acceptance of George’s marriage proposal, however, seems to contradict everything in which young Alanna believed. She had always declared that she wanted neither to get married nor to have children, but in the end she changes her opinion. Sahn asserts that this change of mind is linked to the marriage plot (normally inseparable from the ending of the cross-dressing story), which “demands that she accede to the imperatives of her essential womanhood by accepting marriage and motherhood” (Sahn 2016, 161-2).

Although the reader never gets to read about George and Alanna’s wedding, the final wedding ceremony has been widely used as a narrative device that restores the social order after the transgressions of the cross-dresser (and other characters’ as well). This assertion has been pointed out by Joseph Harries, who has analyzed female-to-male cross-dressing in drama:
The marriage . . . frequently symbolizes the characters’ reintegration into the social order; in transvestite texts, as several commentators emphasize, this reintegration into the social order requires the restoration of all gender roles. This stock marriage conclusion thus plays an important ideological role by positing normative heterosexuality as the teleological goal of all narrative action. Since order is generally restored only with the cross-dresser’s concomitant reintegration into the social order through marriage, the teleological direction of most transvestite narratives works . . . towards reasserting the validity of the heterosexual/patriarchal order. (Harris 2005, 102)

I will not elaborate further on the fact that many contemporary authors are still resorting to the same endings that were being written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but I would like to underline the fact that literature is still reproducing the same patterns and normative resolutions that sustain romantic love and its toxic dominant structures. No matter how independent the protagonist may seem and how much she detests the idea of being in a heterosexual relationship, the plot will find the way to chain her to a man and make her reconsider her aspirations to pursue a normative romance and a conventional family. In other words, while their conception of gender may swerve away from the binary constructions, the literary depiction of female-to-male cross-dressing is far from sexually subversive, as it is “from the very start channelled into heterosexuality” (Harris 2005, 102).

This reading of the ending as redirecting the challenge to and defiance of oppressive gender roles and patriarchal institutions towards conformism is turned, in The Song of the Lioness, into “another moment in which acceptance emerges as its own form of mastery” (Sahn 2016, 164). Alanna’s decision to marry George, in other words, challenges expectatives regarding class as he was both a commoner and a thief, although to a certain extent only, given that he has received a nobility title. Sahn states that “[i]n marrying George, Alanna changes her mind about marriage without fully acceding to the social structures that would restrict her to the role of a mother and manager of her husband’s estate” (2016, 164). In fact, when George boasts that he has “tamed” a Lioness, she answers by saying
Chapter 9: Sites of ambiguity

that she will never be tamed: “I wouldn’t call it tamed, laddy-me-love. The lady of Pirate’s Swoop shouldn’t be tame” (Pierce 1998c, 308; italics in the original), a hint towards the fact that she does not want to change her ways or behavior.

Thus, it is undeniable that her masculinity is allowed to survive in her and, in contrast with Deryn in Leviathan, she does not have to hide her female self. More positively, although at the beginning Alanna was cross-dressing to achieve her own selfish goal, she opens the path for women to follow a career as knights, as it happens in the series following to The Song of the Lioness, Protector of the Small, in which the protagonist can train at the castle in the wake of Alanna’s example. In this way, although it does not seem so, “Alanna transforms the institutions she enters even when she must accede to their parameters” (Sahn 2016, 165).

1.2.2. Alexa in Larson’s Defy

Throughout Larson’s Defy, the protagonist, Alexa, misses behaving as a woman. As I have already pointed out, she mourns her femininity and the life she would have enjoyed with her family in a free country, and she enforces (a hegemonic) masculinity on her body and thoughts. She does not realize that, however, some of the men around her know about her “real” identity. None of them say anything to her before it is completely necessary and, in fact, they do not seem to mind her motivation for deciding to cross-dress. In general, she is rarely questioned regarding her choice. The text does not explore enough the oppression that women suffer in the kingdom of Antion: the breeding houses are there, in the background, but little is known about them and as the plot develops, there is little to no mention of them. At the end, when the tyrant king is deposed and Prince Damian starts his reign, the breeding houses are closed, but Alexa does not have anything to do with it: it is solely the decision of Prince Damian, who decides to change his politics to create a juster place to live. We do not have enough information in these final pages, however, to ascertain that women are empowered by Damian’s ascension to the throne. The disappearance of the breeding houses does not guarantee a new, egalitarian society without prejudices and gender roles.

Alexa is left, after the final battle against the kingdom’s sorcerer, completely scarred (see section 7.1.5), but she keeps her position as guard at the castle.
Nevertheless, she seems to be an exceptional case, allowed to serve as a guard because she already did it before, because she has a magical power that is sought-after, and because Damian desires her. Even when Alexa says to him that she will be uncomfortable and “it may be difficult for me to be so close to you” (Larson 2014, 309), he enforces her to be his guard: “as your king . . . I order you to continue to serve on my personal guard” (Larson 2014, 310). This command is a punishment for Alexa, who has decided to reject his marriage proposal, on the grounds that she does not believe herself to be enough to become a queen: “No one would respect [Damian] if he made his scarred, former guard his wife. He needed someone powerful, someone who could help him rule and heal his nation” (Larson 2014,310). Alexa clearly rejects the marriage proposal for his own good, considering that she is not enough. Damian, on his part, does not force her to marry him, but the obligation he sets over her compels Alexa to keep living and working in the palace, having to follow the man she has rejected wherever he goes. Curiously enough, she does not blame Damian for keeping her at his service, and the only thing that worries her is that people may gossip about her rejection.

Alexa’s female masculinity, by staying as a guard, is kept through the amalgamation of the masculinity that she had to adopt during her time as a cross-dresser and the femininity that she always wanted to recover during her masquerade. When she goes back to her position as a guard, she decides to dress in the same clothes as the men (a uniform with the insignia of the king) though allowing her figure to show. She asks everyone to call her Alexa once again and decides: “I’m not hiding who I am anymore” (Larson 2014, 312). The pride of her feminine self, which was her hair, is also starting to grow again and she smiles when her friend Lisbet tells her: “you’ll be able to braid it when you’re on duty” (Larson 2014, 312). In general, in comparison with Deryn and Alanna, Alexa is more than happy to embrace her femininity all the time, even when she is going to maintain her masculine traits in her performance. The mixture of behaviors prototypically considered masculine and feminine is symbolized by the scars that divide her body in two and which, according to Lisbet, make her look “fierce and lovely” (Larson 2014, 313; italics in the original). The scars, however, seem to be
her retribution for having challenged the gender binary (in the same way that Deryn’s punishment was to remain as Dylan): in this way, a dichotomy is inscribed in her own body, and she will never conform to normative beauty, something that Alexa wished during her years in disguise.

The final chapter in *Defy* is meaningful for several reasons. The character of Alexa is not only accepted at court as her “new” self, but praised and adored. Damian’s coronation shifts from a perspective in which he was going to be the protagonist to focus on Alexa, who is given the recognition she supposedly deserves. After Damian is proclaimed king, he points out Alexa’s role in the revolution and considers that “we owe our new freedom to one person” (Larson 2014, 321). At this moment, instead of having to bow to her new king, Damian reverences his guard and the audience hails Alexa for having accomplished her mission. The truth, however, is that the scene may underline the importance of Alexa, but throughout the novel she has been quite passive: she goes to see the rebels as a secret mission for Damian and crosses the jungle later on because she is taken prisoner. Alexa lets herself be carried away by the events and the only conscious decision she takes is that of killing the sorcerer who helps the tyrant in battle. Consequently, the final scene with everybody bowing to Alexa is not really a moment of empowerment, but rather a foreshadowing of her future: in the next novels of the trilogy, Alexa decides to marry Damian and she is turned into the rightful queen.

Alexa may participate in the changing of her world, but her gender is nothing more than a lure for suitors and not a site of resistance. She is not an active agent, but a passive object of desire and a tool for her king, who asks her to kill a sorcerer with her power to handle weapons and then, when he is rejected, decides that he wants to keep her as his guard. Sadly, I do not think that *Defy* shows an inspirational female character that can be called a shero, but rather a woman forced to survive and accepting a violent and villainous regime until others decide to rebel for her.

1.2.3. Katsa in Cashore’s *Graceling*
In Cashore’s *Graceling*, Katsa feels that her female masculinity makes her a monster at the beginning of the story, but she learns to become comfortable with both her body and her decisions once she understands that her opinions have been shaped by the expectations of those around her. While in the previous texts the gender-b(l)ender was forced to hide her real self or to adapt it to the culture in which she lived, Katsa does not change and, in fact, becomes freer when she starts to confront those who are trying to control her. People begin to accept her once she opens to them and they have the opportunity to discover that she is more than her Grace and that she likes to help people. Actually, Katsa is the young woman who uses her power and skills to help others the most. In order to accomplish these missions, she uses traditional masculine traits mixed with more feminine ones: thus, she may use force and intimidation, but she is also kind and has mercy with those who deserve it. These traits allow her to achieve her objectives, among which she gets to save Po’s family and Princes Bitterblue. Her selfless actions are applauded by those around her, and consequently she is allowed to keep her masculinity as part of her performance. Moreover, she becomes a sisterly figure to Princess Bitterblue, the first of the girls to whom she teaches personal defense. At the end, in fact, she is about to travel around the seven kingdoms that conform her world in order to teach girls and women to defend themselves, so that they can have a little bit more of independence in a world that is too violent for them to be completely disarmed.

Her decision to include girls and women in the dynamics of violence in which she has been living is highly problematic. It presents, to a certain extent, the postfeminist vision that women are completely free to act as men and continue with their politics of violence, and that there is empowerment in acting in violent ways and holding a weapon. I do not think, however, that Katsa pretends to empower women through violence, but through self-defense, as she believes that, in this way, women would be more independent. After all, if they are prepared to defend themselves, they may stop harassment against them and the power that men enforce on them in a society where females are objectified. However, the tension of using violence to stop violence is still inscribed in the message. In fact, all the novels, to a certain extent, present at a certain moment the topic of violence
as something justifiable, a compulsion that comes from the fact that the gender-b(l)enders see the world through a male perspective. To a certain extent, though they identify themselves as women, they have grown up in all-men spaces, surrounded by men and with the default of the male gaze in education as in all the spheres of their lives. The texts, however, do not criticize this compulsion completely. It may happen in The Song of the Lioness when the topic of puberty is addressed, but except for that moment, the androcentric point of view is not judged. And, definitely, Graceling’s characters do not conceive the possibility that the change has to be made from the base, attacking the institutional violence in which harassment is allowed without punishment, which would be a more empowering change.

If the narratives are androcentric in their views, the female characters are definitely male-oriented. With this adjective I refer to the fact that the gender-b(l)ender starts the story with more masculine than feminine traits (abhorrning femininity, in fact) and that a great part of the plot is dedicated to the development of a relationship with a potential love interest. This love story can end in a marriage proposal (The Song of the Lioness), in a formal relationship (Leviathan), or even in a wedding (All Men of Genius).

Catherine Belsey considers that these endings in which heterosexuality and gender roles are reinstated (with or without marriage) should not be taken in isolation nor considered as a way to erase women’s previous achievements, since “the heroines become wives only after they have been shown to be something altogether more singular – because more plural” (Belsey 1985, 187-8). Diane Dugaw, in a similar consideration, asserts that the “final orderly marriage just barely belies the subversive implications of her commandeering of both seemingly contradictory sides of a bipolar gender system” (Dugaw 1989, 5; emphasis in the original). However, both Belsey and Dugaw wrote their essays in the eighties, in the wake of the second-wave feminist movement, and the endings of this type of novels could have looked more daring back then. In contrast, I find these conclusions to the narratives clashing with the independent and adventurous spirit of the female protagonist, both in the YA novels that shape my corpus of study and in other literary texts (both past and contemporary) that do not only reassure
female-to-male cross-dressers as feminine women but also as part of a heterosexual couple. This situation takes them back to a sphere of domesticity in which they are only left in most cases with “seafaring or soldiering adventures upon which [they reminisce] with pride” (Dugaw 1989, 5), an outcome which seems to be rather dull in comparison with all the adventures they have lived until this moment.

In *Graceling*, the trope of the heterosexual relationship is not avoided, but the liaison between Katsa and Po is treated in a different way to other novels. Like Alanna, Katsa fears falling in love because she does not want to depend on anyone, and she detests the idea of being married to anyone or becoming a mother. When her friend Giddon proposes to her, in fact, her answer is a direct rejection: “I won’t marry, not anyone, and I won’t bear any man children” (Cashore 2008, 100).

Her resolution does not falter throughout her story, but when she starts to feel something for Po, once she is on the road with him to visit the kingdom of Monsea, she is fearful of the consequences. Her education is traditional and it seems to her that the only outcome for love must necessarily be a wedding. However, Po reminds her that she has the power to decide over her body and actions, and that a relationship between two people should be an agreement between them: “It strikes me that heartbreak isn’t the only alternative to marriage. . . . I’ll give myself to you however you’ll take me” (Cashore 2008, 168).

The relationship between Katsa and Po is established from this moment as one of equality, with mutual love and support. Consequently, while they are together, they preserve their independence as well. Thus, though they are separated by the circumstances (Po is hurt during a combat and Katsa has to carry Princess Bitterblue to a safe haven), it does not imply a difficult situation for them. In fact, their relationship is strong enough that they can remain apart for large periods, as shown by Katsa’s going away, at the end of the novel, to fulfill her goal of going around the seven kingdoms as a self-defense teacher. While in other narratives the protagonist is bound to a place or to her lover, Katsa decides to live independently once she understands that love is never possession or oppression.
Although Po and Katsa do not marry, there is, however, an engagement between them that is even stronger than a marriage. In Po’s culture, men and women wear rings from the other people of their family, which symbolizes the union between them. More than that, the rings represent the identity of the ones who have gifted you with the jewel, a beautiful symbol of how our identity is shaped by the identities of the people around us. Before Katsa departs from Monsea to save Bitterblue, Po gives her one of his rings without explaining that the object epitomizes everything he is and gives Katsa complete access to his belongings and his castle. The ring signifies his engagement in the relationship, even though Katsa does not give him anything in exchange and the reader does not really know the meaning of the gift until much later, when another character explains it to Katsa and Bitterblue:

> It’s very rare for a Lienid to give away one of his rings, and almost unheard of for him to give away the ring of his own identity. To give the ring is to forsake his own identity. . . . If Prince Po had truly given her that ring, it would mean that he’s abdicated his princehood. He’d not longer be a prince of Lineid. He’d make her a princess and give her his castle and his inheritance. (Cashore 2008, 280)

Although Po’s gesture is a way to give her everything he has and make her his heir, she decides to reject his ring, which seems to me once again a metaphor of their relationship: taking his house and his money, his identity, would be to turn into a passive object of his affection. And, of course, to have accepted his ring, in a way, would mean the erasure of Katsa’s identity in exchange, paralleling the change of the wife’s surname after the wedding in many cultures and the acceptance to be dependent on the husband’s income.

Katsa is probably the only gender-b(l)ender that has a real happy ending, because she is neither forced into patriarchal institutions nor compelled into changing her ideals. On the one hand, her happiness arises from being able to understand and accept herself: once she leaves her uncle’s castle and his tyranny, she is free to explore the possibilities of her power and, in this way, her feelings and the people around her. On the other hand, her cross-dressing, which was more irregular and in shorter periods than that of the rest of protagonists from the novel.
in my corpus, or the inclusion of traditionally masculine traits in her performance are not punished at the end either. Instead, she is able to begin to work in her dream of giving the women in her world a chance to defend themselves and she is surrounded by friends, so she can finally overcome the loneliness that has haunted her for the most part of her life.

9.1.3. Embracing femininity: “a proper lady underneath it all”62

While Deryn in Westerfeld’s Leviathan is forced to remain in disguise and has to keep playing the role of Dylan, at the other end of the axis we would have the ending in which the protagonist ends her masquerade and even her gender-b(l)ending and adopts the most feminine stance. This is the case of Violet, from Rosen’s All Men of Genius, the only “shero” that decides to leave the masculine traits of her male persona behind and embraces femininity completely. While the other gender-b(l)enders decide to keep their breeches on, Violet does not only return to her dresses, but reaches the end more feminized than she was at the beginning, showing a concern regarding her looks that she had rejected in the first chapters. Although she had always thought that beauty and looks were completely useless and she was too busy and rational to worry about them, her experience as Ashton makes her change her mind. When she returns home for the Christmas holidays (in female apparel again), the pressure of passing as a man starts to take its toll, and she discovers herself more comfortable without having to wear a disguise. From loathing dresses and corsets, she begins to see their appeal; from not having looked at herself in the mirror, she changes to sit herself in front of the vanity every morning.

The final chapter celebrates the peak of her feminization by describing her in a wedding dress, “a long gown of white silk” (Rosen 2011, 458), with a train so long that has to be carried by Miriam. She also wears a veil, “long, but as transparent as possible, as she had felt that being veiled was not something she wanted to do much more of in her life” (Rosen 2011, 458). The whole description of the ceremony and the wedding day is not only a reminder of Violet’s feminization, but also of the fact that everything is back to its “proper” place.

Once again, the reader finds the trope of the girl who does not want to marry or fall in love at the beginning of the novel but who begins to change her mind throughout the narrative. Violet seems to be quite asexual and aromantic when she thinks about marriage before being accepted at Illyria College. Her only interest at that moment is science and carrying out her ruse in order to enter the academy:

[S]he imagined that one day, after she was recognized as a scientific master, she would find another scientist, and they would collaborate on so many inventions and projects together that after a while they would marry out of habit and mutual respect. . . . Spinsterhood didn’t matter much to her; she was already married to science. (Rosen 2011, 49)

In this quote, there is a clear realization that marriage is a compulsory institution in her social circles (and her culture) and she is resigned to the prospect of marrying even though she does not feel entirely convinced about the idea. Her love and passion for science is what really moves her to accomplish her objectives, together with the idea that she needs to show the world that women are as valid as scientists as men. Thus, she seems to be happy to defy the conceptions of femininity that those around her try to force upon her.

Violet’s wish to show the world that women can contribute to science does not disappear, but her “asexuality” and her ideals for the future change progressively through the months she studies at Illyria College (and this goes hand in hand with her desire to embrace femininity). The most important cause for her change of attitude is her attraction to Ernest, a feeling that comes to displace her love for science to the point that she realizes that “gears and springs would never be enough to satisfy her ever again” (Rosen 2011, 454). Sadly, while their relation becomes more important than science and a source of growing anxiety for Violet, Ernest feels fulfilled with a renewed interest in making science. Their relationship becomes his strength to step outside the long shadow of his father’s desires and inventions, under which he has always felt undervalued.

During this period of discoveries, Violet also finds that she has been wrong about her decision of not participating in society. She becomes less obsessed about work and tries to befriend new people and do things that she has never done before. In a way, her change may be understood as the necessity of balance
between isolation and socialization in one’s life, and the impossibility of completely alienating ourselves from the society and culture we live in. On the other hand, it is problematic that this socialization of the character brings as a result that Violet conforms to the established gender roles, instead of allowing her to defy the norms. Moreover, she is the only character that has to face this change: her brother is not forced to submit to social expectations, although he was clearly at the other side of the axis, preferring social gatherings to any other activity. In the same way, Ernest may be more self-confident at the end, as well as more open to support the role of women inside his institution, but he has not made any change regarding how he interacts with others, nor does he modify his habits. Violet is the only one that goes through this alteration, and I cannot help but asking to which extent her accommodating attitude is conditioned by her gender. Moreover, it is curious how the narrative takes place the same year that she becomes eighteen, as if her changes were a proof that she has matured out of a stage of her life in which she rejected anything feminine.

Even so, the changes that she undergoes throughout the narrative does not detain her from accomplishing her initial objective: showing her ability for mechanics so that people reconsider the skills of women. However, things do not go as planned because she is forced to discover herself after a battle inside the Crystal Palace, in front of the queen and of the rest of her classmates and teachers and an audience that includes her father and brother. Her punishment is the social opprobrium that the scandal brings, which she thinks that is going to destroy the life that she was creating: “by now she had resigned herself to her new life. No more Illyria, no more letters from the duke. Just back to her lab in the basement of their country home. . . . But it was not going to be the same” (Rosen 2011, 453). Her resignation and defeat are palpable, but that seems to be all her punishment: a scene in which she believes that Ernest hates her and her friends will never trust her anymore. Afterwards, however, she will discover that, in fact, everybody is proud of her and has decided to forgive her and that “the scandal Violet had expected wasn’t as bad as anyone had feared” (Rosen 2011, 454).

Violet can proudly say that her cross-dressing has had some impact in those around her and that she has found support in other women. For example, Queen
Victoria, who was in the Crystal Palace when Violet appears without her disguise congratulates her for Palas, her exoskeleton (Rosen 2011, 444). And while Cecily is furious at her and feels like a fool because she was in love with Violet’s male persona, she finally forgives her friend. This change of heart is propitiated by Ada Byron, who knows Violet’s identity from the beginning and who reminds Cecily that she is a privileged woman because no other can set a foot inside the College: “You are truly lucky, Cecily, to be a genius, and a woman, but to still be allowed in this place. Violet had to disguise herself as a man to take what your birth gave you. I supported that” (Rosen 2011, 450). In the eyes of Ada, then, Violet’s statement is not only about gender, but also about class and about the exceptions that patriarchy makes in order to give a feeling of “equality” that does not really exist. And the fact that there is one woman in an all-men field or sphere does not mean that there is an inclusion: we just need to think about the role of women in politics, in science, or in high positions in powerful institutions and organizations, where women are still a rarity.

But, is it the strategy of cross-dressing what really helps Violet to achieve her objective? While it is true that Ernest, the director of Illyria, decides to change the application rules of the College, he does not do it because of Violet’s ruse. She changes Ernest’s mind as Violet, when they start to send letters to each other (without disguises) and Ernest understands that Violet has the knowledge and skills of a scientist. He even devises the new policy before he knows that Ashton and Violet are the same person. But she is not the only influence he has towards this decision, as the real catalyst seems to be what he finds in his father’s old laboratory. In a conversation with Ada Byron, he tells her that when he entered the lab he discovered that he was treating the memory of his father as if the late duke had been a god, and the understanding that he was not one gives Ernest the strength to break with tradition and open the College to more people. Despite this fact, Ernest’s first thought is not to accept female students, but males from other social classes and, only in the long term, to start considering women as applicants:

When I found everything in my father’s lab . . . I realized that he was just as human as I am. . . . Illyria is mine, isn’t it? To do as I please? . . . Then yes, I think we should begin admitting more students. And your were
right when you said we don’t admit students without social graces—we should. . . . Perhaps I could let in women, at some point. Did you know there’s a girl from one of the Spanish colonies who has been applying to Illyria every year for the past five? And she’s quite brilliant, too. Her stellar cartography theories and skills are finer than mine . . . than anyone’s, I think. (Rosen 2011, 425; my emphasis)

In a way, the text leaves us to think that Violet’s intervention in the story would have not affected this outcome, and her only real contribution to the plot is that she is able to stop Volio’s automats and to serve as Ernest’s romantic interest. All Men of Genius, in a way, is inevitably linked to those films of the thirties and forties that Bell-Metereau describes as “attempts to reconcile the masculine woman to her role in society” (Bell-Metereau 1993, 73).

In the end, however, Violet is able to study at Illyria as any other student, both by the intervention of Ada and by Ernest’s decision, who comes to admit that he “would never dream of denying [his] school her brilliance” (Rosen 2011, 459). Ada’s question regarding her studies in the final page of the novel is a clear nuptial vote applied to Violet’s passion: “And you, Violet? Do you plan to remain true to science and stay a student of Illyria?” (Rosen 2011, 459). Finally, it seems, Violet is bound to both Ernest and science, but at the cost of her masculinity.

9.2. The debate is open: sheroes or conformists?

Cross-dressing narratives leaves us with an ambiguous message, as I have been pointing out throughout this dissertation. On the one hand, they open the possibility for a queer reading that destabilizes gender by exposing it as a performance. On the other hand, however, there seems to be a reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes in certain traits shared by the narratives. Thus, we find a persistent compulsory heterosexuality that erases any possible outcome outside the fulfilment of the romantic plot, either through marriage (at the short or long term) or through an established relationship. Moreover, although the performance of masculinity by the gender-b(l)ender is seamless, once they leave their disguise there is an immediate (and problematic) recognition of them as
female. This situation reveals how breasts and reproductive organs are taken as unquestionable evidence of femaleness, which reinforces stereotypes that link sex and gender. And although the majority of the gender-b(l)enders in my corpus are allowed to keep their masculinity and to mix the traits of both genders in a performance that is praised by some of the people around them, there are a lot of expectations put onto them to conform to gender roles.

In a way, these young women are a reflection of the (seemingly) eternal attempts to conciliate the private and the public spheres by many contemporary Euro-American women. These women, who are asked to choose between their families and their jobs (Rottenberg 2014, 149), are subjected to a double shift in which they have in fact at least two jobs: one with a salary and an unpaid one at home, performing as mothers and wives in a more traditional sense (that is, taking charge of the housework, spending time with their children and their husband, etc.). This double shift has been studied by Catherine Rottenberg, who has noted that women “have had to enter the professional track on terms created according to a male standard while completely cordoning off their role as women in the private sphere” (Rottenberg 2014, 150). The professional masculinization of these women is paralleled by the gender-b(l)ender character, who tries to conciliate the traits of two genders in an attempt to fit in a society that, more often than not, undervalues their achievements. If we opt for this reading, the outcome there seems to be a possibility for hope: the female-to-male cross-dresser is able, more often than not, to unveil her gender while keeping at least part of the privileges she has achieved in her male persona. Thus, we can say that Alanna keeps her shield, Alexa remains in her previous position as guard, and Violet finally enters in Illyria officially as its first female student.

The metaphor of the cross-dresser also resonates with the experience of the adolescent girl as described by Mary Pipher in Reviving Ophelia (1994), in which she explains that girls are pushed towards change in order to fit into what society expects from them. Marnina Gonick describes, in an article on the neoliberal girl subject, how “[t]he crux of Pipher’s argument is that due to pressure from U.S. culture, adolescent girls are coerced into putting aside their ‘authentic selves’ splitting what was, in their younger days, a healthy and united individual, into true
and false selves” (Gonick 2006, 12). In other words, girls become impersonators in order to please a society that sells them the cultural image of the perfect girl, which they will seldom achieve. Although Gonick criticizes Pipher for “making use of the concept of an ‘authentic’ self,” which means that she believes in “an unchanging and unchangeable self” (2006, 12), I consider that we could take Pipher’s thesis and apply it here to talk about the “previous” selves of the gender-b(l)enders, hidden under the persona they create in order to be accepted. This does not mean that the first identity is unchangeable, but that they are unable to present themselves without a mask, as they are afraid of being rejected by the societies where they grow up if they do not earn approval in the first place.

Having arrived to this point of ambiguous messages and dubious empowerment, some critics have considered in their studies of the narrative of the female-to-male cross-dresser the impossibility (or difficulties) of reading these texts as feminist. Joseph Harris has pointed out that they “[suggest] that women can only acquire agency ‘as’ men,” since “the driving force behind narrative agency remains masculine in nature when heroines adopt a masculine stance and masculine attire in order to become appropriate protagonists” (Harris 2005, 111). This view has been shared by other scholars such as Gubar, who considers that cross-dressing “implicitly accepts the inevitability” of a stratification in which women stand beneath men, as passing girls and women most of the times create their persona to benefit from male privileges. Instead of calling to revolution the practice “simultaneously assumes that, as a female, woman is necessarily condemned to inferiority” (1981, 485).

Although I understand Gubar’s complaints against the characters’ deciding to cross-dress instead of fighting for their rights (a decision that sometimes goes hand in hand with the author’s choice of creating sexist speculative worlds), I believe that narratives with cross-dressing characters may serve to vindicate female empowerment and to (re)present the sad experience of a male-oriented world. In androcentric societies, after all, women are forced to pass as men (either visually or behaviorally, or both) in order to gain agency.

In U.S. contemporary society, women may not need to pass completely as men, but they are told that certain traditionally gendered attitudes or looks will
lead them to success, undervaluing and disempowering femininity. Thus, gender-
b(l)enders in literature use these masculine attitudes and try to make them their own. The final objective is not anymore, as Harris noted in seventeenth-century literature works, to abandon the agency after the temporary cross-dressing (Harris 2005, 111). Instead, contemporary narratives are trying to show that there is no need to turn into passive subjects once the male persona is revealed as a fraud and that female masculinity can survive in the end. In fact, although there is an undeniable compulsory heterosexuality attached to the figure of the passing woman, marriage and her relationships remain open to another reading. After all, as Judith Butler explains, if gender and heterosexual normativity go hand in hand, it seems logical that heterosexuality is a site for performance, as it would be marriage itself (Parker and Sedgwick 1995). Marriage, according to this view, is the performance of heteronormativity for the eyes of others. As Marjorie Garber states, it “might . . . be argued that in a way all marriages, even heterosexual marriages, are ‘mock marriages,’ in their dependence upon certain aspects of sartorial tradition and ceremony” (Garber 1992, 142).

As Flanagan explains, the final victory of the gender-b(l)ender figure “is her ability to bridge the distinctive literary traditions of masculine and feminine success, ingeniously weaving them together in order to deconstruct and interrogate their modes of operation” (2008, 21). That is, the way of looking at the binary deconstructs the conception of gender itself and the ideal of “masculinity” and “femininity” as it is, turning it into a transformative experience in which any individual has the agency to create a self that defies gender boundaries.

Are therefore these figures sheroes? Are they inspirational for young women? Are they even feminist? It seems to me that the answer to each of these questions should be “no”. Although they have feminist traits and a growing awareness for the well-being of other women, not to mention a remarkable awareness of the struggles of gender and class, the characters are not really concerned with collective empowerment in all the spheres of life and when they do, their ways are questionable. Furthermore, although there are some characters that seem to be concerned with achieving equality (Violet, Katsa and, to some point, Alexa), they do not take into account the need for equity. Women and men, after all, due to
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structural and institutional oppressions, do not have the same opportunities from the beginning, and thus it is important that women (and other excluded groups) could receive help to have the same opportunities.

However, I also believe that they have feminist potential in the critique of questions regarding class, racism, xenophobia, and androcentrism in the texts. But the deconstruction of the boundaries between the genders, which the main characters in the novels in my corpus effectively challenge, is not inherently feminist if you do not use it to reclaim women’s rights.

The gender-b(l)ender character may show masculinity and femininity as complementary instead of exclusive but, in the end, they are still inscribed inside the binary. At least, that seems to indicate the way in which they fluctuate between masculinity and femininity and the way in which their endings seems to tie them to compulsory heterosexuality and the patriarchal institutions that they embrace without questioning.
Conclusions
Conclusions

In 1980, Michael Foucault wrote the introduction to the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century intersex individual whose journals had been found. Foucault decided to start this introduction with a question that has haunted people for centuries: “Do we truly need a true sex?” (vii). I would rather change the question to “Does a true sex or gender really exist?” And more than that, as Foucault was introducing an autobiography about a hermaphrodite who rejected the sex that had been assigned to them: “Do we truly need a true sex or gender?”

The novels that have been examined in this dissertation put these notions about gender into question, interrogating its boundaries and destabilizing the confines of the masculine and the feminine and its existence as an artificial concept. In a world without genders, or at least without the conception of gender we have at this moment, there would be no prejudices regarding masculinity and femininity. We would have achieved the concept of “postgender” that Donna Haraway has proposed, not “in a utopian, beyond-masculine-and-feminine sense, which it often is taken to mean. It is the blasting of necessity, the non-necessity of this way of doing the world” (2004, 329). This is a new conception of gender in which we would be able to escape the imitation of the ideal to which Judith Butler refers in Gender Trouble and get rid of a construction that has haunted us for too long, achieving the so-much-awaited equality among humans.

The problem, as Butler presents it, is that the binarity of gender is both sustained by and sustaining the heteronormative and patriarchal establishment, which is too rooted in our society. In order to change our current relation with the concept of gender, then, we need to detach ourselves from all the constructions that are taught to us from the cradle and even before that, as the act of gendering the individual occurs now even as we are still in the womb. Alsop, Fitzsimmons, and Lennon expose these ideas and propose that the change should start at the core of the relationships between human beings, so that “[i]f women and men become women and men by their social relationships, by changing these relations we can also modify gender identities and their current inequalities” (Alsop et al. 2002, 68).
The narrative of the female-to-male cross-dresser, in a way, proposes this same revolution, changing the way in which other people see and treat the gender-b(l)ender by her taking a male persona. When the masquerade ends, she remains in a position of relative power and her value as a person is recognized, even if she is going to be questioned and harassed by those who take the conservative view fostered by patriarchal society. However, apart from those who reject the cross-dresser and her message of insurrection, these accounts normally present problems, as the cross-dresser is not only taken as the exception that confirms the rule (therefore not really changing the world balance) but even reproducing, in the end, the same misogynistic structures that lead to inequality in our world. Through the analysis of a group of YA novels with a gender-b(l)ender main character, I have attempted to prove how ambiguous these figures can be, as they challenge some concepts at the same time that they repeat old literary tropes based in a heteronormative society in which the cis, white, heterosexual individual is still the main focus of the narrative text.

To start with, the choice of novels framed inside YA literature has represented my attempt to revalorize this type of literature, which is nowadays consumed massively by the young and the not so young. As I explain in Chapter 1, YA literature is a relatively new concept introduced in U.S. culture during the twentieth century, after the World War II, to meet the demand of a young readership that did not find literature responding to the needs of their psychological development and their concerns, which publishing houses viewed as a niche in the market to be filled. As expected, the literary sphere took advantage of this new target audience and, what is more, all kind of literary and audio-visual narratives were created to meet their demands. Although with time the whole culture would shift to youth-oriented consumerism, it is undeniable that YA literature has become one of the pillars that sustain the publishing world. However, for a long time, the academia neglected it as shallow and without interest from a literary point of view. Only in the last decades a new wave of awareness has arisen to analyze YA fiction and non-fiction and, even so, this field of study is yet to surmount the prejudices that are still permeating literary theory and finding a common ground for terminology and basic definitions. Moreover,
the studies on YA literature and culture have only recently become more daring, allowing studies such as this one, with a feminist and queer perspective, to be taken into account.

Contemporary YA literature has become a forum for diversity and has fought to bring forward topics of identity and belonging, racism, sexuality, gender inequality, and even psychological and physical illnesses and disorders. YA fiction and non-fiction have focused on those topics that may interest the young generations. Consequently, it has brought under the spotlight situations from the life of young adults all over the world, at the same time that many authors have tried to bring to the forefront the experience of previously silenced communities. Especially from the 1990s onwards, YA literature has aimed to swerve away from the most common protagonist in Euro-American stories: the white middle-class adolescent boy. Instead, they began to present female characters in lead positions, people of color, individuals from the LGBTQ+ collective, etc., showing a compromise with depicting many different experiences and points of view. Moreover, female authors have shown an especial interest in this type of literature (as girls and women conform also a vast majority of the readership) and have tried to depict the everyday struggles of young adult girls and women all over the globe.

Such a trend is not new: the second-wave feminism that flourished in the U.S. had already seen the increase of female authors asking for their rights and expressing their ideology in texts back at the end of the 1960s. This trend appropriated the literary genres of fantasy and science fiction (mostly written by men and male-oriented until that moment) to convey their messages, turning them into political tools for women’s feminist revolution. The oldest of the authors in the corpus of my novels, Tamora Pierce, is clearly a successor of such movement, and she imbued the story of her protagonist, Alanna, with a set of feminist messages that continue to be relevant today.

Regarding fantasy and science fiction (which I extensively analyze in Chapter 2), just as YA literature, they have been widely ignored by some academic spheres, as seen in the curricula taught in Euro-American universities. There are still many prejudices attached to it, as it has been considered for a long time as
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subliterature, together with other popular genres that were also underestimated, such as romance or detective fiction. Although all these genres have been analyzed lately and are receiving lots of critical attention, they are still being belittled by many literary critics, and many harmful stereotypes have survived to our days. Thankfully, just like YA literature did in the last decades, science fiction and fantasy have become a great place for debate for different sectors of society, including the feminist movement.

Due to these matters, science fiction and fantasy (and particularly in the intersection with YA) have provided a space for rethinking gender and the barriers imposed by binary gender roles. It is not strange, then, that readers can find, in this context, figures that try to explore and/or defy traditional constructions of gender. In this space for challenge in regard to the breaking of boundaries, we find the figure of the gender-b(l)ender, in this case depicted as a cross-dresser.

In Chapter 3, I have set the terminological bases to clarify the types of characters examined, taking into account the previous literature on the topic. Although the terminology to talk about gender and cross-dressing in general is really wide, I have selected the concepts that best adapt to my interests. Thus, I wanted to highlight the performance acted by the sheroes when they create a male persona (cross-dressing/passing) and the way in which they transcend the traditional gender roles inscribed in patriarchal societies (gender-b(l)ender). I believe that this last label is particularly useful to talk about those individuals that destabilize gender roles by performing gender in different, non-traditional ways, and I use the term as a portmanteau that includes the experience of the cross-dresser before, during, and after their period in disguise.

As the figure of the (female-to-male) cross-dresser is an old figure, I wanted to briefly explore it from a historical and cultural point of view in section 4.2. After all, women have cross-dressed in both history and fiction. Their reasons were many: most of real-life cross-dressers fought to find their place, trying to survive in a world that kept most professions/jobs for men, and where they were not allowed to study. They cross-dressed to find jobs, or to get into the army or the navy. Sometimes they followed a patriotic impulse, as we know from the stories of the hundreds of women that took a part in different wars around the
world. Some did put on the garments of men to follow a loved one going to war or a distant country, and some did commit crimes with the impunity of being disguised. Cases like these have been feeding the imagination of all kind of artists, including writers, biographers, painters, screenwriters and directors, among others, and we are still finding texts of all types portraying both past and contemporary situations through the figure of the female-to-male cross-dressers. But while cis heteronormative female cross-dressers have been inspiring the creation of works of art, trans and lesbian (or bisexual) women have been made invisible, as we must remember that people who decided to don the attire of the masculine gender may have done so because they were men or simply because they wanted to live their sexuality in a world in which two women alone were hardly able to be autonomous.

Unsurprisingly, then, the mixture of the figure of the gender-b(l)ender and the fantasy and science fiction genres in YA literature provides a meeting point to talk about gender, marginalization and otherization, but also to put into question the existent connections between artificiality and naturalness, the animal and the human (topics that are considered in Chapter 5). They even highlight most of the human constructions, including time, reality, logic, and, of course, gender, as shown by the novels in the examined corpus. In science fiction, the question of creation, the unnatural and the post-human are brought to the forefront by placing the narrative in a historical period recognizable by the reader but including mechanical and biological innovations that question the frontiers between what is natural and what is artificial.

Curiously enough, we may consider that, given that we move around literary fictions in which the authors can build their own worlds from scrap, it could also be a good space to create places in which civilization has overcome sexism, racism, and other problems of alienation. Nonetheless, more often than not, the worldbuilding reflects constructions taken from our own societies and cultures, and although all the authors are from the United States, except for Larson’s Defy the inspiration is clearly European (either pseudo-medieval or Victorian). These worlds, however, show the injustices we women live with and the privileges of certain races and classes (and, of course, gender) over others. In the corpus of
novels that I have chosen, the texts introduce a critique of patriarchal structures in which women are not only considered inferior, but are the objects of violence from the government (including the military and an educational system), religious institutions, and in any area of their lives. They are raped (Larson’s *Defy*), segregated both academically and professionally (Pierce’s *The Song of the Lioness*, Westerfeld’s *Leviathan*, and Rosen’s *All Men of Genius*), and left without protection in a world in which they are the target of violence and objectification (Cashore’s *Graceling*, Pierce’s *The Song of the Lioness*, Larson’s *Defy*).

The worldbuilding of the patriarchal systems within these worlds, however, is a stratagem that allows the story to bring the character of the cross-dresser to the forefront. The injustices to which the protagonists are subjected force them to dress in male attire and to create a masculine persona that can access those male-only spaces, and in this way the girls have the opportunity to taste the kind of life that has been denied to them. Ironically, they are so submerged in this misogyny that even the female protagonists mirror the ideas they have been taught, creating a tension between their prejudices and the women around them, who are different from what the main characters may consider when they meet for the first time.

Although all the protagonists have different reasons to disguise themselves, the process of getting themselves used to the role seems to follow a pattern that starts in their childhood, in which they show characteristics associated with the figure of the tomboy (analysed in Chapter 6). From their taste for traditionally masculine games (catching frogs, fighting, hunting) and looks (short hair, rejection of skirts and dresses) to the spaces they occupy (mostly all-male spaces), the gender-b(l)ender figures are masculinized from their childhood. This trait of their characters does not disappear during their adolescence, as it happens in the majority of the classic tomboy narratives. Instead, to follow their dreams and to maintain their masculinity they begin a performance that forces them into male attire, neutralizing the visual elements of the body that may reveal the gender they were assigned at birth (breasts, lack of facial hair, or even their reproductive organs). Moreover, they also have to cut their hair, change their names (to either the masculine version of their own or to a complete new one), and even change
the way they walk or speak. This procedure (which is analyzed in detail in the first part to Chapter 7) reveals how similar to impersonate other gender could be to the way in which actors take over a role in theater, highlighting the artificiilaty of supposedly “natural” gender behaviors. By following these same steps, the gender-b(l)ender emphasizes the constructiveness of gender and how the action of “being” a man in the eyes of society can be replicated.

Of course, the performance of the cross-dresser, like that of the actor, does not only rely on the visual aspect of the role they try to impersonate (although it helps them to remain unchallenged by those around them, who consider the relation between sex and gender natural and fixed). It also requires them to include in their act the traits people associate with masculinity. This means that they are asked to follow the behaviors that are praised by conventional, hegemonic masculinity, including assertiveness, courage, independence, or the suppression of their feelings (as examined in the second part to Chapter 7). However, their performance does not confine them to this series of conducts. Instead, gender-b(l)enders seem to choose the most “positive” of the masculine traits and mix them in their performance with those feminine qualities that they consider worth of praising, including kindness and compassion. In this way, they create a male persona that does not only stick to their principles, but that in many ways becomes better at masculinity than their male friends and superiors. Such mastery in their performance is acknowledged not only by the fact that they pass without problems in all-male spaces, but they are also praised as men: in Westerfeld’s Leviathan, for example, Dylan/Deryn earns a medal that is only given to men who carry out an act of courage.

The act of becoming a young man is in most cases a decision of the girls (though triggered by their surroundings), and it shows a will to overcome a situation of inferiority that they find unjust and which does not allow them to develop their skills, either physical and/or intellectual. In exchange for the adoption of the male persona, they get access to an education or a job, to friendships, and experiences that in their worlds are reserved to boys and men. However, they are asked to pay a toll in exchange: they have to face both physical and psychological constraints, not to mention the constant threat of being
discovered and its consequences. On the one hand, the physical constraint causes them pain in their growing breasts, which they have to bind in order to pass. Psychologically, they may develop an identification with the masculine gender, which may develop into gender dysphoria, turning their adolescence into a traumatic experience. In fact, there seems to be a tendency for gender-b(l)enders to reject anything that may resemble femininity in one way or another, a consequence of the prejudices in which they have been educated.

The fact that most of their relations with other people are with men and boys (as a consequence of the overvalue of male-oriented relationships), together with the lack of a maternal figure (who appears later on in their lives, becoming particularly important during the time of the narrative), seem to have left in them the idea that femininity really is inferior to masculinity. Throughout their narratives, however, they will deconstruct these misogynistic conceptions, especially thanks to the appearance of friends that show them other strategies of resistance: the figure of Lilit in Westerfeld’s Leviathan or the character of Miriam in Rosen’s *All Men of Genius* are examples of this. In general, the female characters in my corpus may seem scarcer than male ones, but there is a wide representation of women from different classes and backgrounds, with different experiences, ages, and even sexualities (as in the case of the character of Lilit). The same applies to male characters, as seen in Chapter 8, who are introduced in contrast with the shero and display many distinct types of masculinities.

The attitude of the gender-b(l)enders and their prejudices regarding other women show the way in which society fosters hatred against and among women. Scholars such as Heilmann have already pointed at this kind of morals underneath the literature involving female-to-male cross-dressing, asserting that these novels “frequently carry a warning, implying that society should be more attentive to women’s healthy desire to lead full and purposeful lives, and less tolerant of men’s wrong-doings” (Heilmann 2000, 85-6).

For me, as I have pointed out in my analysis in Chapter 9, these novels represent a metaphor for the position of women in contemporary Euro-American societies, and how they are asked to split into two personae according to their double shift, in which they have to reconcile both their professional and their
private lives. In their professional lives, traditional masculine traits are praised, since femininity is not only seen as a weakness but an “invitation” to be objectified. Women that try to conciliate both spheres are requested to do much more than men to excel in these areas, and they have to follow rules that have been created by and for men. The male standard is the only standard in a patriarchal society in which women are the others, and cross-dressing stories teach this to a targeted young audience that could take another step towards equality, even if they do not give them any possible alternative to create a more just standard for everyone.

Furthermore, these fictions portray the way in which sexism does not only affect women, but also men, and the dangers of hegemonic masculinity, in which boys are also constrained and constantly policed by all men around them, even when the behavior of these adults is clearly also problematic. They are asked to suppress their feelings, to never show their sadness or frustration, resorting to control and violence instead, which turn into the bases for hegemonic masculinity. In my reading of the novels, this taste for hegemonic masculinity is contested and there seems to be a message that warns young men not to suppress those attributes that have been traditionally considered as feminine. On the contrary, the narratives ask to embrace them, in the same fashion that the cross-dresser embraces common feminine and masculine traits to create a male persona that is not only successful and admired but also respectful and kind.

There is, however, a problematic perspective in the novels in my corpus regarding violence. On the one hand, Pierce’s The Song of the Lioness presents a questionable message concerning the use of violence to confront violence and to face bullying. On the other hand, Cashore’s Graceling addresses the question of empowering women through the use of weapons and violence, which puts the novel too close to conforming to the postfeminist idea that the liberation of women means also their access to war and brute force. Almost all the novels in my corpus have used this last trope, as they unquestionably relate women’s independence with violence, a problem that I have considered as inextricably related to the androcentric view that these novels take, but also to the fact that
these imaginative worlds have been built to be as violent and cruel as the real patriarchal worlds.

As groundbreaking as they may seem, the protagonists do not conceive, however, any possible alternative to the gender binary: they always move between the confines of masculinity and femininity. Even so, these are texts concerned with showing that genders are not exclusive slots, and that it is possible to defy the boundaries between them and to create gender identities to place oneself outside the traditional heteronormative expression. The gender-b(l)ender rebels against the oppressions at the roots of gender roles, destabilizing them and revealing the artificiality of the notions “masculine” and “feminine”, showing that anyone could pass as a member of one gender or another. However, the novels, in the end, present an ambiguous message: the gender-b(l)ender may destabilize the gender categorization and the gender roles, but once they leave their male personae behind, there is an instant recognition of their gender through their bodies, falling into the dangerous prejudice that certain bodies are inherently linked to certain genders.

In any case, not all the gender-b(l)enders are presented in the same way and their transgressions are not always comparable. To this regard, the endings of the novels present a good example of the different perspectives taken by the narratives, in which the reader can find that the protagonists decide either to embrace femininity, to keep their disguise, or to continue to defy the gender roles by openly performing female masculinity.

The action of cross-dressing as a way of female empowerment, as a result, can be put into question, because they do not have the same opportunities in the end. In some cases it is not as revolutionary as it may appear, because they do not achieve the equality they seek by changing the world (as seen in Chapter 9), but by deceiving those around them. In general they are not doing it for the benefit of all women (as in the cases of Alexa, Alanna, and Deryn), although, at large, it may affect them, opening new spaces for them, even when the standard is still masculine and men are the ones that set the rules. It has to be noted that these protagonists are seeking equality (not equity) between genders, attempting to show those around them, as well as their readership, that they are, quite literally,
the same as boys. Instead of celebrating their difference, they are forced to hide it, a problematic message that permeates these novels. Although I consider that these novels try to fight injustices and desire to portray the necessity to rebel against established gender roles, it should be borne in mind that we are considering characters who are shrouded in ambiguity. After all, they can be read either as figures that try to revolt against what others have assumed that is their “natural” place, or as characters that are shown as “especial” cases that link femininity and masculinity and therefore, cannot be considered as representatives of other women.

The fact that (YA) novels with female-to-male cross-dressers are still being written and published seems to speak volumes about Euro-American society, in which inequality between genders is still an issue, ranging from economic problems such as the salary gap to sexual violence against women. Speculative fiction that includes gender-b(l)ender figures criticizes this unjust system and brings to the forefront the idea that, even nowadays, feminisms are fighting for basic human rights for women in a masculine world and that there is still a long way to go. If anything, the rise of feminist movements has changed the way in which we fight this battle: they help us fight together, as a political, mass force, instead of just attending to our own concerns.

Personally, I see cross-dressing as a first step in a long way of reclaiming the rights of women inside YA fiction. Although flawed and with endings that reinstate heteropatriarchal normativity in most cases, these narratives try to engage their readers in the debate that women can be as capable as men or better than them, on physical, intellectual, and moral grounds. Nevertheless, they should encourage that, without helping women to achieve their goals, they will always lose in patriarchal systems that favour one gender over others.
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