

SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE INTERSEX BODY IN OVID'S METAMORPHOSES: A PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS

Maria Laura Barros da Rocha¹. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8857-4591>

Luciano Domingues Bueno¹. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7861-7092>

Adélia Augusta Souto de Oliveira^{1 2}. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5635-1510>

ABSTRACT. The term intersex refers to people whose genetic factors and/or anatomical characteristics differ from the typical male or female genital, gonadal, and chromosomal characteristics. In this study, we aimed at constructing – through art and discussions mediated by it – broader understandings less guided by patterns of binarity as the only form of human experience. Therefore, we aim to reflect on the meaning of the social function of the intersex body in art, based on Book IV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For this study, we draw on Historical and Dialectical Materialism, Vygotsky's *Psychology of Art*, and our previous academic and clinical experiences. The discussion is structured around two axes: 1) the absence of choice and external intervention in the intersex person's body and 2) the experience of the intersex person's body and its relationship with the binary. The intersex body presents itself as an objective obstacle to understandings of the human body that rely solely on a binary view. Therefore, as presented in Ovid's work, intersexuality achieves a social function that makes explicit the diversity of human experiences of corporeality. Finally, the analysis reveals a social and aesthetic functionality of the intersex body, as it allows for the materialization of contradictions inherent in existence and denounces the limitations of social classification systems that do not encompass alternative ways of being and existing in the world.

Keywords: Intersexuality; gender; art.

FUNÇÃO SOCIAL DO CORPO INTERSEXO EM METAMORFOSES DE OVÍDIO: UMA ANÁLISE PSICOSSOCIAL

RESUMO. O termo intersexo diz respeito às pessoas cujos fatores genéticos e/ou estrutura anatômica diferem das características genitais, gonadais e cromossômicas atribuídas ao sexo masculino ou feminino. Neste estudo, empreendemos a tarefa de construir – por meio da arte e de discussões mediadas por ela – compreensões ampliadas e menos norteadas por padrões da binariedade como única forma de vivência humana. Para tanto, objetivamos refletir sobre a significação da função social do corpo intersexo na arte, a partir do livro IV da obra *Metamorfoses* de Ovídio. Tomamos como base para o estudo o Materialismo Histórico e Dialético, a Psicologia da Arte de Vigotski e experiências acadêmicas e clínicas anteriores. A discussão estrutura-se em dois eixos: 1) ausência de escolha e intervenção externa no corpo da pessoa intersexo e 2) vivência do corpo da pessoa intersexo e sua relação com a binariedade. O corpo da pessoa intersexo apresenta-se como obstáculo objetivo para compreensões acerca do corpo humano que se apoiam somente em uma visão binária. Portanto, a intersexualidade, como se apresenta na obra ovidiana, alcança uma função social que explicita a diversidade das experiências humanas de corporeidade.

¹ Universidade Federal de Alagoas, Maceió-AL, Brazil.

² E-mail: laurabarrosrocha@gmail.com



Por fim, a análise anuncia uma funcionalidade social e estética do corpo intersexo, pois permite materializar contradições inerentes à existência, bem como denunciar os limites de sistemas de classificação social que não contemplam outros modos de ser e estar no mundo.

Palavras-chave: Intersexualidade; gênero; arte.

FUNCIÓN SOCIAL DEL CUERPO INTERSEXUAL EN METAMORFOSIS DE OVIDIO: UN ANÁLISIS PSICOSOCIAL

RESUMEN. El término intersexual se refiere a personas con los factores genéticos y/o estructura anatómica diferentes de las características genitales, gonadales y cromosómicas atribuidas al sexo masculino o femenino. En este estudio, asumimos la tarea de fabricar – a través del arte y su discusión mediada – entendimientos más amplios y menos guiados por estándares binarios como única forma de experiencia humana. Por ello, pretendemos reflexionar sobre el proceso de significación de la función social del cuerpo intersexual en el arte, a través del libro IV de la obra *Metamorfosis* de Ovidio. Tomamos como base para el estudio el Materialismo Histórico y Dialéctico, la Psicología del Arte de Vygotsky y experiencias académicas y clínicas previas. La discusión se estructura en dos ejes: 1) ausencia de elección y intervención externa en el cuerpo de la persona intersexual y 2) experiencia del cuerpo de la persona intersexual y su relación con el binario. El cuerpo de la persona intersexual se presenta como un obstáculo objetivo para las comprensiones sobre el cuerpo humano que se basan únicamente en una vista binaria. Por tanto, la intersexualidad, tal como la presenta la obra de Ovidio, logra una función social que hace explícita la diversidad de las experiencias humanas de la corporeidad. Finalmente, el análisis anuncia una funcionalidad social y estética del cuerpo intersexual, ya que permite materializar las contradicciones inherentes a la existencia, así como informar los límites de los sistemas de clasificación social que no contemplan otras formas de estar en el mundo.

Palabras clave: Intersexualidad; género; arte.

Introduction

The terms intersex and intersexual refer to people born with genetic factors and/or anatomical structure (genital or gonadal) that differ from the traditionally constructed and disseminated models as belonging to the so-called ‘male sex’ and ‘female sex’ (Marchi-Costa & Macedo, 2016; Santos, 2012). Other terms have historically been used to refer to this phenomenon, including androgyny, disorders of sexual differentiation (DSD), disorders of sex development (DSD), and hermaphroditism.

In short, our choice of the term intersexuality, as opposed to the other terms mentioned above, stems from our understanding that it highlights psychosocial dimensions – psychological, socio-affective, and cultural factors – that are not limited to designations of congenital organic anomalies, originating from medical vocabulary (Santos & Araújo, 2003). Furthermore, choosing the term intersexuality/intersex highlights the production of meanings and senses present in the self-identification and self-naming processes of intersex people. In this sense, it can also be understood as a way of valuing this group's psychosocial production.

In this direction, we should distance ourselves from terminologies based on ‘anomalies’ and ‘disorders’ to move away from the notion that intersexuality is not a valid identity or self-identification for a subject. This notion relegates intersexuality to something

‘correctable’ and ‘repairable.’ From a biomedical perspective, this ideological system fails to consider the possibility that intersexuality might be part of who a subject *is*, and not merely something they ‘have,’ or a condition they have been afflicted with.

Furthermore, we emphasize that the word *intersex* is used as a form of self-identification by activist groups, such as interACT³ and Abrai (Brazilian Intersex Association), and by the LGBTQIAP⁺⁴ community. In other words, the aim is to understand intersex existence as one of the many human possibilities and not as an outlier, which subjects it to the idea that it must fit into other configurations. This process of adaptation often involves actions guided by biomedical knowledge that violently and irreparably impact the body.

Throughout this article, we undertake the task of – starting from art and interpretations mediated by it – constructing broader understandings, less guided by patterns that establish as the only way of human experience that which conforms to the configurations of normality directed towards a binary perspective of sex, which silences the experience of intersex people. Our analysis deconstructs the limited perspective of human corporeality to the female and male sexes and proposes an alternative committed to human diversity that moves away from the ideal of a supposed normality reduced to the masculine or feminine. Our approach is supported by a dialectical perspective of totality that remains open and does not restrict itself to watertight categories. This perspective seeks strategies to overcome these categories by including the qualitative diversity that makes up a given reality under study (Konder, 1981).

In this study, we explore the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis and their depictions throughout history and art to understand how bodies that could not be classified as entirely feminine or masculine were perceived at different historical moments. This form of corporeality is present in the stories of other mythical and religious figures, such as Ymir from Norse mythology, the Hindu deity Ardhanari, and Adam, whose reference to the creation of Eve can be understood as if they initially belonged to a single body (Sasso, 2018). Nevertheless, the myth of Hermaphroditus holds unique historical significance as it marks the origin of terminology adopted by medicine and common sense, undergoing transformations throughout history.

The work *Metamorphoses*, published in 8 AD by the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC-18 AD), is a collection of Greek and Roman myths involving metamorphoses (Santos, 2010). The work is divided into 15 cantos, or books, whose stories are independent of each other. Carvalho (2010, p. 19) refers to Ovid as a master of recreation, since *Metamorphoses* is “[...] a long tapestry of stories and myths drawn from the most varied sources and skillfully stitched together by the poet to appear as a continuous flow.”

Book IV of the work *Metamorphoses* evokes the mythical figures of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, and we take these verses as the object of discussion because we understand that aspects represented in the poem are capable of encapsulating interpretations historically linked to intersex bodies and promoting new reflections on intersexuality today.

In Vygotsky's theory, which we use as a reference, considering dialectical movement and the conception of the study of the phenomenon as a process (Vygotski, 2007), we can understand art as a *product* of a context, but also as a *producer* of subjectivity, with a role in the transformation of its environment (Vygotski, 1999b).

³ InterACT, or Advocates for Intersex Youth, is a non-profit organization that aims to expand intersex visibility by promoting laws and policies that protect intersex youth. (<https://interactadvocates.org/>).

⁴ Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender/Transsexuals/Transvestites, Queer, Intersex, Asexuals, Pansexuals, and the plus sign encompasses other sexualities and gender identities that are not represented in the letters.

From a Vygotskian perspective on the psychology of art, the focus is on analyzing the work itself rather than its authorship. Rather, the focus is on its structure and the relationship between form and content, as well as its potential impact on the viewer. In other words, it is about the timeless force that gives art its permanence (Vygotsky, 1999a, 1999b). Based on the Belarusian author's statements, we understand human cultural productions to be a privileged point for studying the constitutive relationship between the intra- and interpsychic spheres.

Within the research group 'Epistemology and Psychological Science', work has been developed that focuses on Vygotsky's early writings on art, creation, and imagination. Studies by group members have demonstrated the potential of psychosocial investigation through graffiti and tagging (Bueno et al., 2020), as well as literature, film, and television series (Rocha et al., 2020).

In this article, we aimed to reflect on the meaning and social function of the intersex body in art, taking as our object of discussion Book IV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Following a similar approach to Gomes (2020), who used a painting by Salvador Dalí as a meaning-producing image to discuss public policies in higher education, we use the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis to reflect on different perspectives of intersexuality and how the intersex body challenges the socially prescribed binarity. It is important to emphasize that we do not intend to reduce intersex people to their bodies, nor do we intend to deny the subjective constructions that lie beyond the patterns of corporeality established by the denial of human sexual diversity. In this study, however, the focus is on the meanings of a body outside this binarism based on its artistic and mythological representations and their possible social, historical, and cultural repercussions.

The relevance of this study lies in the understanding that the discussion of issues raised by intersex corporeality can denounce the invisibility of a human condition experienced by many people and, conversely, announce other possibilities for bodily expression, not captured by a framework restricted to a dichotomous logic of gender.

Method

From a methodological point of view, Vygotsky demonstrated his commitment to the principles of dialectical materialism (Doria, 2004). Through his studies of art as a source of scientific knowledge, Vygotsky sought to overcome dichotomous and reductionist perspectives on artistic production that were restricted to aspects of form or content (Vygotsky, 1999b). Starting from a dialectical perspective, phenomena are investigated in their constant state of change (Konder, 1981). In the same vein, Vygotsky (2007) proposes the analysis of the 'process' as opposed to the analysis of the 'static object.' For the author, "[...] studying something means studying it in the process of change; this is the basic requirement of the dialectical method" (Vygotsky, 2007, p. 68).

An essential aspect of art is its polysemic potential, since "[...] given the inexhaustible diversity of symbols, the work is a source of multiple interpretations" (Vygotsky, 1999a, p. 9). The critic must affirm their interpretation without claiming it to be unique and exclusive (Vygotsky, 1999a). Thus, we emphasize that our interpretation does not intend to elucidate or constitute the only truth about the work, but rather to question its social functionality to discuss psychosocial aspects of the presented theme. Furthermore, the interest lies in analyzing the work and not the author, based on Vygotsky's assertion that the finished work of art separates itself from the author and becomes dependent on the reader, who "[...] reproduces, recreates, and elucidates it" (Vygotsky, 1999a, p. 21).

In this study, we use as analytical material the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis from Ovid's poem, more specifically the translation by Carvalho (2010), through which we reflect on intersexuality. This reflective exercise is supported by Dialectical and Historical Materialism, Vygotsky's Psychology of Art (1999b), and previous experiences with the theme of intersexuality, based on academic research and clinical work in the genetics service of a university hospital, during the first author's mandatory psychology internship.

Our methodological approach begins with reading the poem and recording our initial interpretations and impressions, as well as sharing this process with the other authors of the study. Based on the reflections and dialogues sparked by reading the chosen poem, two discussion axes were constructed: 1) absence of choice and external intervention in the intersex body, and 2) the experience of the intersex body and its relationship with binary logic. These categories allowed us to return to the work and articulate its elements in relation to the theme of intersexuality. Our goal was to generate syntheses that support critical reflections on social, historical, and cultural processes concerning the intersex body.

Results and discussion

Hermaphroditus, the story goes, was a young man of rare beauty who enchanted everyone, whose face bore the features of his mother Aphrodite/Venus (the goddess of love and beauty), and his father, Hermes/Mercury (the messenger of the gods). At the age of 15 he decided to venture into the cities of Lycia and Caria, leaving the care of the Naiads on Mount Ida behind. While walking along the shores of a crystal-clear lake that served as the dwelling place of the nymph Salmacis, Hermaphroditus was spotted by the nymph, who was immediately captivated by his beauty and fell in love with the young man.

Then, she spoke:

"Boy, you really deserve to be thought of as a god. If you are a god, you could be Cupid. If a mortal, then those who bore you are blessed. How happy is your brother. And how truly lucky your sister, if you have one. And the nurse whose breast you sucked. But far, far more blessed than these is that girl, if there is one, who is engaged to you - if there is any whom you think deserves a wedding torch. If there is such a one, then let my desire be secret. But if there is no one, let me be she! Let us enter the marriage bed together" (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, p. 122).

She tried to seduce him but was rejected, so she pretended to leave the lake. Then, Hermaphroditus undressed and entered the water to bathe, but he was not alone, and the nymph jumped into the lake, intertwining their bodies, to the misery of Hermaphroditus, who tried to free himself. Salmacis immediately cried out to the gods that she and Hermaphroditus might never be separated. The gods granted her wish, merging the two into one body: "The gods agreed. And the mingled bodies of both were fused and took on a single appearance" (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, p. 124).

Hermaphroditus then prayed to his parents, asking that anyone who bathed in the same waters undergo the same transformation.

"Grant this service to your son, my father and mother, both of whose names I bear. Whoever enters this pool as a man, let him leave it as half a man. Let him grow suddenly weak when he touches its waters." Moved by their bi-form son, the parents mixed an incestuous potion into the pool (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, p. 124).

The story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis ends here, but its impact is not confined to the pages Ovid wrote. The work's impact on culture and the popularization of the myth are undeniable. It has inspired paintings and sculptures and has been used for centuries to designate the phenomenon of intersexuality. The work encapsulates interpretations historically linked to intersex bodies, and through an understanding of its elements, it has

the potential to challenge hegemonic patterns that deny existence outside binary thinking, as we can observe below.

“Even if you fight, you wicked one, you will not escape me”: absence of choice and external intervention in the body of an intersex person

Finally, even though he struggled to escape her [...] She seized him like a royal bird holding a serpent high above [...] She oppressed him and, united, body to body, just as they were, said: [...] even if you fight, you wicked one, you will not escape me. Therefore, ordain, gods, that he may never be separated from me and I from him' (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, pp. 123-124, author's emphasis).

In the myth, the cries of the nymph Salmacis are heard by the gods, uniting her with Hermaphroditus into a single body that cannot be divided. The nymph's voice is active in this choice, while Hermaphroditus's only dialogue prior to their forced union is a plea for her to leave him alone, so this union is carried out against his will. From this point of view, the young man comes to inhabit a body that no longer fully belongs to him. The decision to modify the body was made by someone else and carried out without his consent.

Although the path followed in history is the opposite of fusing feminine and masculine characteristics in one body, instead of insisting on conforming to only one, this lack of choice is reminiscent of something that has marked (and still marks) the reality of intersexuality: the 'reconstructive' surgeries performed on intersex children without their knowledge or consent.

In this context, Machado (2005) points out that medical professionals are seen as possessing a diagnostic perspective that, in turn, is authorized to point to the distinction between male and female sexes as dichotomous categories, since their answer is unquestionably established in a context where sex itself emerges as a medical-diagnostic category. Therefore, there is a search to understand where the difference between the sexes lies, as well as a need to reaffirm it through diagnosis.

Sex as a diagnostic category stands out even more in relation to the body of an intersex person, as it challenges the idea of sex as an absolute and dichotomous category. This highlights that the category of 'sex' is also discursive and historically and socially constructed rather than solely natural and biological (Machado, 2005; Mélo & Sampaio, 2012). In this sense, both gender and sex are constructed within culture, questioning the natural/cultural and real/constructed antagonisms on which the argument that sex is natural and biological and gender is constructed was based (Mélo & Sampaio, 2012).

Therefore, it is possible to draw a parallel between the myth of Hermaphroditus and the pressure to perform interventions on intersex bodies within a system that demands modifications and prescriptive frameworks of 'normality' for sex, gender, and the body. In other words, the blending of bodies in the myth, through violence against one of the parties (Hermaphroditus), is similar to the often violent way in which the 'disunion' of parties that, in their integration, compose the intersex body occurs. In both cases, the claim of one party to a higher authority that intervenes in the body of a third party remains. Instead of divine intervention in response to the nymph's cries, in contemporary times, there is biomedical intervention in response to historically constructed normative standards.

Throughout the centuries, the phenomenon of intersexuality has been conceived socio-culturally from different perspectives. At times, it was revered and considered a divine gift; in other historical contexts, it was seen as the result of divine punishment, as errors of nature, and as monstrosities. Different religions and regions established rules to regulate land inheritance and social roles.

Meanwhile, the issue of intersexuality belonged to the moral and legal sphere; however, with the rise of medical authority over bodies in the 19th century, it came to be

understood as a medical emergency, something that persists to this day. During this first milestone of medicine in relation to intersexuality, called the 'Gonad Era,' it was the presence of testicles or ovaries that indicated an individual's 'true sex' (Méllo & Sampaio, 2012).

In the 1950s, with the emergence of anesthesia techniques and surgical advances, it was no longer sufficient to classify what was considered the 'true sex' of intersex individuals based solely on the presence of testicles or ovaries as the determining factor (Méllo & Sampaio, 2012). In the 'Surgical Era,' the prevailing classification method, present since the 19th century, gave way to an interventional need. Classifying individuals was no longer enough; doctors needed to intervene so that individuals could appear as they had decided.

Studies by researcher and psychologist John Money on gender in childhood have been cited as the main incentives for performing procedures on newborns, as he claimed that sexuality was neutral until 18 months of age and that gender identity was still subject to change during this period (Santos & Araújo, 2003; Méllo & Sampaio, 2012). The researcher argued that children should be raised according to the gender corresponding to their 'reconstructed' genitalia, without knowledge of the surgeries (Méllo & Sampaio, 2012).

The suffering experienced by intersex individuals is not related to an inability to perform their daily activities (Canguçu-Campinho et al., 2009), or only to an internal conflict, but also to social stigma, discrimination, prejudice, and social condemnation of people who differ from the majority or from tradition (Oliveira, 2012; Pereira, 2018). With the exception of some cases, such as the salt-wasting form of Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia, intersexuality does not threaten the patient's life or cause serious damage to physical health. In very rare cases (bladder exstrophy, urethral valves, atresia, imperforation, among others), a specific urological or urogynecological intervention is justified. However, as endocrinologist Magnus Dias da Silva points out, many genital surgeries are not necessary from a biomedical perspective.

In all other intersex conditions, which comprise the vast majority, it is evident that the apparent urgency for surgical intervention to correct the external genitalia in childhood is motivated by social or cosmetic reasons rather than an eminently clinical indication (Silva, 2018, p. 392).

Furthermore, early surgeries contribute "[...] to the subject's misinformation, since after the procedure, the topic is rarely brought up again by the family" (Santos & Araújo, 2004, p. 26). What is silenced in the body extends to discourse, promoting a chain of silences, analogous to that experienced by the hermaphrodite in the mythological narrative. The interventions are objectifications about a body, subjectifying it, constructing objective-subjective-objective chains that can imprison people in a choice that is not theirs, just as the mythological figure is imprisoned.

In this sense, recent literature (Fraser & Lima, 2012; Fux, 2018; Gonçalves & Vieira, 2018; Silva, 2018) and intersex activists advocate for postponing interventions that are not medically necessary and whose objective is solely aesthetic (Côrrea, 2020; Méllo & Sampaio, 2012). In this direction, the goal is not to prohibit surgeries, but to postpone them until one can make these decisions can be made freely and consciously, with support based on a biopsychosocial and multidisciplinary approach (Canguçu-Campinho et al., 2009; Santos & Araújo, 2003).

Consistently, Resolution No. 1,664 of the Federal Council of Medicine [CFM] – a reference document for monitoring cases of intersexuality in the Unified Health System (SUS) – points out that "[...] the patient who presents the conditions must actively participate in defining their own sex" (CFM, 2003, p. 02). Nevertheless, the resolution is written in a way

that presupposes the need for sexual definition and possible cosmetic surgeries for these bodies to conform to societal norms.

We question what material conditions are available for constructing other possible norms, in terms of what Canguilhem (2014) proposes. None of the medical documents analyzed in Mélo and Sampaio's (2012) research permits non-intervention in cases of intersexuality. According to this view, "[...] there is no possibility of living with a body 'without a defined sex'" (Mélo & Sampaio, 2012, p. 14, author's emphasis). Therefore, we highlight the importance of psychosocial interventions constructed and governed by aspects that prioritize the autonomy and active participation of subjects and take into account the different components of their reality, as discussed below.

"Neither boy nor woman, and resembling neither": experiencing the intersex body and rejecting binary thinking

The gods agreed. And the mingled bodies of both were fused and took on a single appearance. Just as two branches are grafted onto bark, in time they grow together into a single branch; so, when their limbs united in a strong embrace, they are not two, but a duplex form, neither boy nor woman, and resembling neither (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, p. 124).

Let us move on to the second axis of discussion, which reflects on how exclusionary and pathologizing perspectives on intersexuality, based on binary thinking, relate to the experience of the intersex body. Therefore, it is necessary to consider whether the intersex body disrupts the naturalistic logic based on the supposed clear division between feminine and masculine. This fissure allows spectra⁵ of human experience to pass through, arising from the dissolution of reductionist patterns and perspectives.

Canguçu-Campinho et al. (2009, p. 1146) point to how "[...] the organic differences or those related to the peculiarity of this experience are almost always highlighted as limitations and seldom as potentialities." According to the authors, while in the West, intersex is confined to biomedical logic, some non-Western societies prevail with an androgynous perspective.

From this perspective, the hermaphrodite is considered androgynous, that is, a being that embodies the unity of opposites. In this way, the 'hermaphrodite' is not perceived as a 'pseudo-man' or a 'pseudo-woman', but rather as a being in which all genders coexist (Canguçu-Campinho et al., 2009, p. 1152, author's emphasis).

With this in mind, this perspective materializes, as in the myth of Hermaphroditus, a condition of existence that occurs in the union of elements, which, given the existence of this unified body, becomes radically non-belonging to one or the other pole of binary logic. To point to the new being, created from the union of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, as someone who is "[...] neither boy nor woman, and resembling neither" (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, p. 124), is to establish a new place. This body is not fragmented, incomplete, or partial, but unified and complete in itself. This body signals a capacity to live in the world without the need for physical definitions—a body that cannot be divided or, at least, does not require division to exist.

Intersexuality is characterized as a condition that transcends simple associations with 'disorder', 'disturbance', and 'disease' (Santos & Araújo, 2003). Thus, "[...] understanding intersexuality from this other perspective gives it a positive connotation and promotes the

⁵ Here, we consider the term 'spectrum,' from the perspective of optical physics, referring to a phenomenon from which a diversity of colored rays is obtained, in the dissolution of an initial and monochromatic beam.

integral adaptation and social inclusion of individuals [...]” (Santos & Araújo, 2003, p. 31). When intersex individuals are considered “[...] abnormal, ambiguous, or incomplete, simply because they are different, the judgment of a life through a fragmented and prejudiced vision is perpetuated” (Canguçu-Campinho et al., 2009, p. 1156).

Amiel Modesto Vieira (2018), an intersex individual and social science researcher, argues that perspectives based on the ‘adequacy’ of bodies and the denial of the intersex body as a possibility of lived experience constitute a form of violence masked as care. This perpetuates the pathologization of the body and establishes medicine as the one capable of assigning who men and women are (Vieira, 2018).

The perception of intersexuality as an illness or deviation stems from the cultural view of modern Western society, which stigmatizes bodies that do not conform to so-called masculine or feminine standards as distorted, abnormal, or strange bodies. Within this tradition, there is an assumption that individuals with intersex conditions cannot develop fully or experience complete satisfaction (Canguçu-Campinho et al., 2009, p. 1154).

In this way, the argument shifts from simply defending the postponement of cosmetic surgical interventions until puberty (Fraser & Lima, 2012; Silva, 2018) to questioning, if this is the subject's wish, the supposed need for intervention (Canguçu-Campinho et al., 2009; Mélo & Sampaio, 2012). While previously we addressed this position of the choice made by others regarding medical intervention on the body of an intersex person, in this section, we explore a new type of choice: If the only options are those offered by the binary system, can one choose not to choose and keep their body as it is?

The German poet and painter Paul Klee stated that “[...] works of art not only vividly reproduce what is seen, but also make visible what is secretly glimpsed” (Klee, 2014, p. 16). Through a reading based on Vygotskian assumptions, it is possible to understand that this ‘making visible’ relates to what Vygotsky (1999b) calls the social function of art. Works of art enable the experience of what they make visible. Similarly, the intersex body reveals one of the potentialities of human beings that may lie outside prescriptive notions of normality, but is a reality for one in every 2,500 people born (Bellesa, 2017).

From this perspective, the question arises: Is it normal for all of us to fit into a binary biological pattern, or can some of the population break with this logic? Intersexuality announces and denounces biological diversity, pointing out flaws and causing the exclusive, binary logic that imposes dichotomous patterns as the only form of existence to crumble.

In systems that dismiss the possibility of intersex experiences as possibilities for existence, a choice is made about which parts of a person's identity live and which die — or must be silenced. What is also silenced in bodies is erased from culture. In these established cycles of silence, art emerges as a means of making the concrete reality of many people visible (Bellesa, 2017) and breaking with the historical erasure of this human experience from culture.

“Just as two branches are grafted onto bark, in time they grow together into a single branch”: symbolism, dualities, and contradictions

Duality and unity are intensely present aspects in the poem. The dual nature is evident in Hermaphroditus's own name, derived from the combination of his parents' names, Hermes and Aphrodite; or even in his appearance, which before his metamorphosis was already considered beautiful and possessed features of both his mother (typically feminine) and his father (typically masculine): “[...] in his face the features of his mother and father can be seen; he also took their name” (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, p. 121).

Bearing this in mind, when analyzing a work, would it be possible to find in it ideas and interpretations that oppose and contradict each other? After all, the two axes of discussion presented in this reflection start from distinct points that place the same event – the metamorphosis of a hermaphrodite – as something that, at the same time, can be interpreted and extrapolated to mean something harmful, following the idea of the hermaphrodite's passivity in making decisions about its own body; and as something that potentiates new forms of experience, with the conception of a body not limited by a binary logic.

These contradictions exemplify the dialectical questions present in Vygotsky's work, which are reminiscent of its Marxist and Hegelian roots, in which quantity transforms into quality, and there is a negation of negation (Doria, 2004). Overcoming occurs through incorporation. Contradictions are not excluded, but rather included and incorporated in such a way that qualitatively contrary aspects remain in a totality. This is only possible through the interpenetration of opposites, the second law of dialectics (Konder, 1981). These contradictory reflections and images, arising from our analysis, can coexist in a single argument, just as – borrowing Ovid's metaphor – “[...] two branches are grafted onto bark, in time they grow together into a single branch” (Ovid apud Carvalho, 2010, p. 121).

When investigating the early works of the Belarusian author, Marques (2020) highlights how contradictions and dualities are part of Vygotsky's artistic thought, revealing “[...] the deep roots of his dialectical thought” (Marques, 2020, p. 169). There is an indication of contradictions and oppositions scattered throughout, from which literary works will be analyzed by Vygotsky: day and night, spirit and body, material and form, silence and word, among others.

In his study of Hamlet, Vygotsky (1999a) highlights a qualitatively intermediate state of human experience with the world through the main character's experience between the end of the night and the sunrise. This moment marks an experiential condition of the between/inter, in which elements of both qualitative poles (day and night) are present. This state allows us to experience and reflect on the qualitative nature of intersex individuals.

The psychosocial implications of these discussions, mediated by art and especially from a psychological perspective that understands psyche as the internalization of social practices (Vygotsky, 2007), are relevant when considering art's power to reveal alternative ways of reconstructing reality (Klee, 2014).

Final considerations

The intersex person's body presents itself as an objective obstacle to understandings of the human body that rely solely on the naturalized dichotomy between feminine and masculine, and thus, this body, as presented in the work studied, achieves the social function of announcing human diversity. Reflections triggered throughout this discussion indicate that, both in the poem and in some biomedical solutions given to intersex existence, bodies are constructed, or reconstructed, by an 'other' and not by the one who is responsible for sustaining such choices and existence.

Finally, questions arise such as: Whose interests are served by erasing non-binary bodies and experiences? How far does autonomy in the construction of bodies extend, and when does it begin? How can we build practices and knowledge that promote a diversity of possibilities for experiencing bodies that are not necessarily conditioned by binary references? How can we construct socially possible ways of being for these bodies in less

restrictive and prescriptive ways that promote dialogue between the different instances that make up the set of issues raised by intersex existence?

Vygotsky points out that new answers to human impasses can emerge from the field of art, but new modes of expression must be established to overcome the limitations imposed on the achievement of human emancipation. In this regard, the studied poem seems to fulfill the social function of art (Vygotsky, 1999b) while explicitly demonstrating the social and aesthetic functionality of the intersex person's body. This poem materializes the contradictions inherent in existence and the limits of experiences that do not encompass the diversity of ways of being.

In short, as exemplified by Ovid's work, art seems to intervene in culture by constructing ways to sustain human diversity. This is contrary to how biomedical intervention acts: it intervenes in the body (and the diversity it sustains) to support sociocultural arrangements of normality. Thus, art points to a direction of intervention: cultural production. Through the sociocultural dimension, spaces for diversity can be produced: from the construction of narratives that share values that positively affirm the intersex experience, to social arrangements, such as the legal dimension, that enable the expression of diversity beyond binary configurations.

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Data Availability Statement:

The data supporting the findings of this study can be requested from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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