

FROM ANDROGYNOUS TO GENDER-FLUID FASHION

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Abstract

This Fashion Lexigraphy traces the historical development and shifting meanings of gender-fluid, unisex, and androgynous fashion from antiquity to the present. Anchored in a critical etymological analysis of terms like androgyny, unisex, and gender fluidity, it explores how fashion has continually negotiated, subverted, and reimagined gender categories. From the myth of the androgynous to the *garçonnes* and flappers of the 1920s, the unisex movements of the 1960s and 1990s to the post-postmodern aesthetics of the 2010s, this lexigraphy examines the cultural, political, and aesthetic forces that have shaped gender-bending styles. Rather than a passing trend, gender-fluid fashion emerges as a vital and visible form of resistance and self-articulation, reflecting broader societal movements toward inclusivity, complexity, and the dismantling of restrictive norms within both fashion and gender systems.

Keywords: *Non-binary identities; Gender performativity; Unisex fashion; Queer style; Post-postmodern.*

INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen an unprecedented exploration of gender-fluid and non-binary fashion design in the industry and its discourse. From Alessandro Michele's Gucci, which has been described as a revolutionary brand that 'helped usher gender fluidity into fashion' (Hirschberg, 2020), to high-fashion brands and retailers like Selfridges combining their menswear and womenswear collections, and numerous fashion campaigns featuring genderqueer and transgender models. While these examples might be dismissed as purely marketing campaigns to profit off the trend of gender-fluid fashion, the language used to describe fashion has undergone a profound shift: discussions of everyday gender identity

and expression have become increasingly central to both design and cultural critique.

Terms such as 'gender-fluid', 'non-binary', and 'genderless' have entered the mainstream and are now regularly employed to describe both garments and the people who wear them.

These shifts reflect broader societal movements and reconsiderations of the gender binary and the limitations this imposes.

Within this context, gender-fluid and non-binary fashion has emerged as a site of negotiation, visibility, and resistance. As mainstream brands adopt more inclusive policies and aesthetics, and as independent designers champion trans and queer representation, the fashion industry finds itself once again at the forefront of debates about

identity, visibility, and cultural change (Beyer, 2025, pp. 4–5). Indeed, there is a long history of fashion challenging and renegotiating gender identities and representations, one that is marked by differing levels of resistance and acceptance.

Mapping the historical development of gender-bending fashions and the etymology of relevant terminology – from *androgyny* to *gender fluidity* – this fashion lexicography offers a critical study of the ongoing changes and debates of the language of fashion and gender.

Here, language of fashion refers to two levels of meaning: One is the non-verbal, symbolic codes and communicative system that creates and challenges gender signifiers.

The other is the language and terminology used to describes these fashions and styles.

Therefore, a critical etymological analysis is used, to not only examine the linguistic and historical definitions, but to consider their usage and shifts in specific social and cultural contexts.

ANDROGYNY

The term *androgyny* derives from the Greek words *anēr* (ἀνὴρ), meaning ‘man’, and *gynē* (γυνή), meaning ‘woman’. Literally translated, the term signifies a blending or union of male and female characteristics within a single body or identity.

Historically, androgyny has denoted both physiological hybridity and symbolic duality, serving as a metaphor in philosophical, religious, and aesthetic contexts.

Although the contemporary usage of ‘androgyny’ in fashion and gender discourse gained particular prominence in the twentieth century, the conceptual roots of the term reach back to antiquity (Doan, 1998).

In ‘western’ culture, one of the earliest and frequently referenced mythological articulations of androgyny appears in Plato’s *Symposium*, more specifically in the speech of the comic playwright Aristophanes.

Therein, Aristophanes offers a creation story in which humans originally existed as spherical beings with four arms, four legs, two faces, and dual sexual organs – categorized into three types: male, female, and androgynous.

The latter being composed of both male and female elements. As punishment for their arrogance, Zeus split them in two, condemning them to wander the earth in desperate search for their other halves (Plato, 1999, pp. 22–24).

In Aristophanes’ speech, the androgynous figure becomes an embodiment of unity – a state prior to the division of gender and bodies – and a symbol for the human desire to battle their own incompleteness. This early philosophical metaphor laid a foundation for later conceptions of androgyny as both a myth, a utopian ideal, and a descriptor for gender-blurring fashions.

However, while androgyny became a recurring theme in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ‘western’ art and literature (often associated with classical ideals of beauty, balance and unity), gender-bending fashions were yet to be described as androgynous.

Rather, dress practices that challenged and subverted binary sartorial signifiers were framed as effeminate, ostentatiously perfect or conflated with homosexuality. Such was the case with eighteenth-century macaronis, whose flamboyant dress style and exaggerated wigs were considered decadent and effeminate (Rauser, 2004, p. 103), or with the figure of the dandy, strolling through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe in exaggerated elegance and perfectly kept attire (Vainshtein, 2023).

Nonetheless, figures such as the androgyne were idealized in allegorical paintings, poetry, and philosophical treatises, where the blurring of gender served as a metaphor for aesthetic perfection or divine unity. Although, as Patrick Mauriès notes, ‘of the three types ... that made up the primordial human race in Aristophanes’ take, the androgynous type was the least perfect because of its hybrid nature’ (Mauriès, 2017, p. 12).

For nineteenth-century bohemian artists and writers, however, the figure of the androgyne offered an escape and a natural and balanced alternative against the artificial binary of masculinity and femininity (Dijkstra, 1974, p. 62).

In particular, the androgynous body came to signify a rarefied, intellectual form of beauty that transcended the mundane and bourgeois reality (Dijkstra, 1974; Wilson, 2003, p. 240).

The 1920s, then, marked a critical moment in the visual and fashionable history of gender: The figure of the *garçonne* in France and the flapper in North America emerged as iconic figures of female masculinity and early twentieth-century androgyny in fashion.

In the aftermath of World War I, shifting gender roles and urban modernity destabilized traditional ideals of femininity, giving rise to a new ‘boyish’

silhouette marked by cropped hair, flat chests, and garments borrowed from the masculine wardrobe, such as tailored suits, monocles, ties, and smoking jackets.

This gendered ambiguity was not just sartorial but symbolic of broader cultural anxieties and freedoms: a reaction to the trauma of war, a renegotiation of women's social roles, and an embrace of youth, modernity, and emancipation. While the *garçonne* and flapper styles disrupted binaries of gender, they also operated within the constraints of fashionability, often requiring high-maintenance grooming and thinness (Steele, 1985, p. 241). For some, like the artists Gluck (born Hannah Gluckstein), Radclyffe Hall (born Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe-Hall) and Una Troubridge or Marlene Dietrich, masculine dress became a form of queer self-expression (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013, pp. 24–32), while for others it remained a fashionable mode of rebellion (Doan, 1998, pp. 663–700).

These androgynous fashions offered a brief but powerful moment of visibility for female masculinities, leaving a lasting impact on fashion history and serving as a recurring source of reference for future androgynous styles, for instance, Yves Saint Laurent's infamous *Le Smoking* design in 1966. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a revival and redefinition of androgynous fashion, driven by the cultural upheavals of the time, including the women's liberation movement, sexual revolution, the gay liberation movement and a growing rejection of rigid gender norms.

Youth culture, pop music, and subcultural aesthetics played a key role in reshaping the visual language of gender at the time.

Simultaneously, male performers like David Bowie and Mick Jagger embraced flamboyant, feminized styles – tight trousers, makeup, frilled blouses –, thus contributing to the visibility of gender-bending in mainstream fashion (Mauriès, 2017, pp. 115–121). However, in 1968, the term androgyny began to be replaced by another term for dress styles being worn by both sexes: unisex.

UNISEX

In the 21 June 1968 issue of American magazine *LIFE*, Helen Carlton described the latest fashion trend as a 'Uniworld of His and Hers'.

Accordingly, she writes: 'This is the year that what's his is hers and what's hers is his – in a word, unisex', describing the fashion designers who

create 'a bright new world where both sexes get to play the peacock' (Carlton, 1968, p. 87). A few months before, in March 1968, *The New York Times* connected the 'ugly', bulky shoes sold at department stores to 'the new wave of fashion thinking: unisex clothes' (Bender, 1968).

Despite its early association with 'Monster' and 'Brute' styling, according to *The New York Times'* article, unisex fashion spread across genders and ages, from avantgarde designers like Rudi Gernreich, or Pierre Cardin to the dissolving distinction between the clothes hanging from the racks, including unisex styles for toddlers and babies (Davis, 1994, p. 35; Paoletti, 2015, p. 6). The unisex fashion of the 1960s and particularly the 1970s became an important political and aesthetic statement, while also offering designers a way to market their clothes to a wider audience (Jenkinson, 2010).

Nonetheless, unisex style challenged traditional binaries and offered new modes of self-expression across the gender spectrum, particularly within countercultural, feminist and queer communities. The term unisex, then, describes fashion styles and appearances that are indistinguishable or neutral, combining the Latin *unus/a/um* (meaning 'one') with *sexus*, referring to biological categories. Coined in the context of 1960s counterculture and gender experimentation, the term gained renewed prominence in the early 1990s alongside the rise of queer theory and critical gender studies, which began to challenge the binary understanding of sex and gender. In particular, Judith Butler's introduction of the concept of gender performativity offered new ways of understanding and speaking about gender expressions. In fashion, this coincided with the launch of Calvin Klein's *CK One*, a unisex fragrance marketed with minimalist, black-and-white campaigns featuring androgynous models. These campaigns promoted a sleek, pared-back aesthetic rooted in menswear codes – white tank tops, jeans, and workwear – that emphasized neutrality through simplicity.

While unisex fashion appeared to blur gender lines, it often leaned toward masculinized silhouettes and styling, highlighting how mainstream interpretations of gender neutrality have historically privileged male-coded forms of dress while marginalizing overt femininity (Beyer, 2025, pp. 59–60).

The early 2000s then continued to challenge masculinities, with a range of designers such

as Hedi Slimane, Raf Simons and Nicolas Ghesquière creating a unisex aesthetic that challenged traditionally masculine norms of ‘aggression, dominance, and invulnerability’ (McCauley Bowstead, 2018, p. 146), while an increasing number of products began to be marketed to the new ‘metrosexual’ man (Simpson, 1994). However, with the new millennium and the increasing visibility of genderqueer and transgender people, as well as the theoretical underpinnings of queer theory and gender studies, unisex and androgynous styles and their discourse began to change once again. As Mauriès writes, ‘the nature of androgyny itself began to ... evolve into a higher state’, now claiming ‘to have escaped from the idea of polarity altogether’ (Mauriès, 2017, p. 121).

GENDER FLUIDITY AND BEYOND

As recent theoretical work suggests, in the context of the post-postmodern condition, *androgyny* has undergone a significant conceptual and aesthetic shift, reflecting broader transformations in contemporary culture marked by fragmentation, plurality, and intensified self-performance.

While postmodern androgyny was largely defined by the blending of masculine and feminine traits into an ambiguous middle ground, recent theoretical discourse suggests a move towards a more assertive and performative articulation of gender (Barry & Reilly, 2020; Karaminas & Taylor, 2022; Mauriès, 2017; McCauley Bowstead, 2018, pp. 146–153; Morgado, 2021).

Drawing on frameworks such as Raoul Eshelman’s performatism, Marcia Morgado argues that traditional cultural categories – including gender – are no longer merely destabilized but actively reconfigured through heightened visual and embodied contrasts.

As Morgado contends, post-postmodern androgyny does not dissolve gender signifiers but rather juxtaposes them, combining archetypal markers of masculinity and femininity within a single presentation (Morgado, 2014, 2021).

This shift is echoed in Ben Barry and Andrew Reilly’s concept of ‘gender more’, which describes an androgyny that celebrates excess rather than neutrality, foregrounding the multiplicity and simultaneity of gender expressions (Barry & Reilly, 2020). Within this discourse, contemporary androgyny becomes less about ambiguity and more about the deliberate amplification of difference and multiplicity – an approach that underpins

the exploration and proliferation of new gender taxonomies as well as gender-fluid, non-binary and antigender fashions of the 2010s and beyond (Beyer, 2025).

The term *gender fluidity*, first coined by gender theorist Kate Bornstein in her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (1994), to describe a non-binary identity that is not fixed, gained momentum in relation to fashion in the 2010s, with fashion designers like Jonathan Anderson and Alessandro Michele for Gucci creating extravagant and striking fashions that play with sartorial gender codes.

As Paul Jobling, Philippa Nesbitt and Angelene Wong write, ‘it was not until the 2010s that the popularity of genderless or agender fashion began to blur the lines between what was male, what was female and what was truly in-between’ (Jobling, Nesbitt, & Wong, 2022, p. 74).

Thus, fashion media, designers and department stores embraced ‘the notion of gender fluidity’ (La Ferla, 2015) by buying regardless of the womenswear or menswear tag, showing both collections together or depicting genderqueer, transgender and nonbinary models in advertising campaigns and fashion spreads.

Prior to transgender activism and the transgender movement gaining momentum in the 2010s, scholars had sought to challenge the ‘western’ binary gender system.

While gender fluid fashion is often discussed within the framework of ‘western’ binary understandings, it is crucial to recognize that neither fashion nor non-binary gender identities are exclusively ‘western’ concepts. Many cultures around the world have long embraced gender diversity outside the male-female binary, such as the *hijra* in South Asia, two-spirit individuals in Indigenous North American cultures, or the *māhū* of Hawaiian and Tahitian societies.

Indeed, the imposition of the binary gender system was a fundamental tool of ‘western’ colonialism, used to suppress, erase and delegitimize non-‘western’ identities. As Greg Thomas argues, the binary was produced in contrast to – and in the process, dehumanized – Black and Indigenous people by labelling their perceived gender ambiguity as ‘savage’ (Thomas, 2007, p. 28).

In the current political climate that is marked by rising global conservatism, fascist formations and emerging authoritarian regimes, queer and transgender people have once more become

the target of political attacks (Butler, 2024). It is all the more important to continue the conversation of gender fluid fashion beyond its subversion of 'western' norms of dress – it must also engage critically with the colonial legacy of gender itself, to include broader, more inclusive, and culturally diverse expressions of identity, to offer a site of resistance and field of negotiation. In light of these historical trajectories – from early mythologies of androgyny and the *garçonnes* of the 1920s to postmodern unisex aesthetics and the post-postmodern turn toward gender fluidity – we now witness the continuation of renegotiating the landscape of gendered fashion. Gender fluid and gender-bending styles are increasingly shaped by digital platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram: From new masculine archetypes such as the 'performative male' trend, a somewhat ironic stereotype of 'feminist men' experimenting with feminine style codes and aesthetics, to masculine-presenting lesbians and queer women showcasing their appropriating and reinterpreting of traditionally male-coded styles. These expressions and discourses reflect an unwavering refusal to be confined by binary structures or essentialist notions of identity. Instead, they offer new possibilities for dressing beyond the limits of binary classification.

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