

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY: FEMININITY, POWER, AND FEMALE INTELLIGIBILITY IN *MACBETH* AND *OTHELLO*

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ABSTRACT

*Gender in Shakespearean tragedy is not merely a biological or fixed category but a socially constructed and performative identity shaped by cultural expectations and power relations. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and the framework of social constructionism, this paper examines how Shakespeare's female characters negotiate, resist, and reconfigure normative gender roles within patriarchal structures. Focusing on Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and Desdemona in *Othello*, the study explores how these characters perform femininity in contrasting yet equally subversive ways. Lady Macbeth's rejection of traditional feminine passivity and her invocation of masculine authority reveal the instability of gender binaries, while Desdemona's obedience, loyalty, and moral integrity complicate the association of femininity with weakness or submission. The paper demonstrates that both characters expose gender as a performative act rather than an innate essence, thereby unsettling dominant masculine power structures. By situating Shakespeare's tragedies within Butlerian gender theory, this research highlights the playwright's nuanced engagement with the social construction of gender and the constraints imposed on women in early modern society. The study contributes to feminist and Shakespearean scholarship by revealing how Lady Macbeth and Desdemona embody different yet intersecting forms of gender performance, offering insight into the complexity of female agency and resistance within patriarchal discourse.*

Keywords: *Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, Social Constructionism, Shakespeare.*

Introduction

Gender has long functioned as a central organizing principle within literary representation, particularly in early modern drama where social hierarchies and power relations are intricately tied to constructions of masculinity and femininity. Early modern England emerges as a sociocultural context in which gender roles were rigidly codified yet inherently unstable. Patriarchal ideology positioned men as rational, authoritative, and publicly active, while women were associated with silence, obedience, and domestic containment. These expectations were reinforced through legal, religious, and cultural discourses that regulated female behaviour and identity. In Shakespearean tragedy, female characters are frequently situated within restrictive patriarchal frameworks that define women in relation to obedience, chastity, passivity, and moral restraint. However, the theatrical space of Shakespearean drama complicates this ideological rigidity by staging gender as a visible and contested construct. The performance of female roles by male actors on the Elizabethan stage further destabilized assumptions of gender authenticity, revealing femininity itself as an effect of representation rather than an essential truth. Shakespeare's plays also reveal moments of resistance that complicate these normative expectations, exposing gender not as a fixed or natural category but as a socially constructed and culturally regulated identity.

Feminist literary criticism has increasingly emphasized that gender operates through performance rather than biological determinism. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges essentialist understandings of gender by arguing that gender identity is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and behaviours sanctioned by social norms. Within this framework,

masculinity and femininity are not innate qualities but effects of social regulation and power. Applying this theoretical lens to Shakespearean drama enables a critical reevaluation of female characters who appear to conform to or deviate from prescribed gender roles, revealing the instability of patriarchal gender binaries.

Macbeth and *Othello* provide particularly rich sites for examining the performative nature of gender because both tragedies stage female identity within moments of extreme moral, political, and emotional pressure. Lady Macbeth and Desdemona occupy contrasting yet equally constrained positions within patriarchal structures that regulate women's access to authority, speech, and ethical agency. Lady Macbeth's pursuit of power is articulated through a conscious repudiation of conventional femininity, as she aligns herself with masculine ideals of ambition, violence, and sovereignty in order to intervene in a political sphere that excludes her. Desdemona, by contrast, initially appears to conform to idealized feminine virtues of obedience, chastity, and loyalty; however, her moral autonomy, rhetorical confidence, and unwavering ethical stance complicate such reductive readings. Although their modes of action differ, both characters unsettle dominant gender norms by revealing femininity not as a stable or natural identity but as a socially regulated role that must be continually performed, negotiated, and disciplined. Their respective trajectories expose the fragility of patriarchal gender binaries and underscore how gendered behaviour in Shakespearean tragedy is shaped by cultural expectation, power relations, and social surveillance rather than intrinsic essence.

Lady Macbeth articulates a mode of female agency that operates through strategic self-fashioning, reconfiguring the cultural meanings attached to ambition, authority, and bodily identity within a patriarchal order that systematically excludes women from political power. Her desire to be "unsexed" articulates a strategic attempt to detach power from biologically determined femininity, thereby foregrounding gender as mutable, contingent, and performative rather than innate. By aligning herself with traits culturally coded as masculine violence, ambition, and political resolve Lady Macbeth exposes the constructed association between masculinity and authority. In contrast, Desdemona's apparent submission operates as a subtler yet equally destabilizing form of resistance. Rooted in moral conviction and emotional autonomy, her steadfast loyalty and ethical clarity complicate patriarchal assumptions that equate feminine obedience with passivity. Desdemona's refusal to internalize imposed narratives of female guilt reveals the limits of patriarchal control over female subjectivity, demonstrating that conformity to feminine virtue can itself become a site of disruption.

By analysing Lady Macbeth and Desdemona in contrast to one another, this study shifts attention away from binary classifications of Shakespearean femininity, transgressive versus submissive and instead foregrounds the structural conditions under which female identity is produced, authorized, and constrained. Both characters operate within patriarchal systems that regulate women through moral judgment, emotional discipline, and social surveillance, yet they negotiate these constraints through markedly different strategies. Examining these strategies in tandem reveals how Shakespeare's tragedies expose gender not as an essential attribute but as a relational position shaped by power, language, and social expectation. Such a comparative approach complicates inherited critical hierarchies and demonstrates how divergent performances of femininity can simultaneously unsettle patriarchal authority while remaining vulnerable to its disciplinary force. Critical scholarship on gender in Shakespearean tragedy has undergone a significant shift from early moralistic and character centred interpretations to theoretically grounded feminist and poststructuralist analyses. Earlier criticism frequently approached female characters through

essentialist frameworks, reinforcing patriarchal ideals that defined women primarily in terms of obedience, chastity, and moral subordination. Such readings often treated femininity as a fixed moral category rather than a historically and culturally mediated construct. The emergence of feminist literary criticism in the late twentieth century challenged these assumptions by reconceptualizing gender as a dynamic site of power negotiation, shaped by ideology, discourse, and social regulation rather than biological determinism.

Early feminist scholars such as Juliet Dusinberre argue that Shakespeare frequently grants his female characters intellectual depth and moral agency that complicate patriarchal authority. In *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, Dusinberre contends that Shakespeare exposes the contradictions of gender hierarchy by allowing women to articulate desires and ethical positions that resist male dominance (Dusinberre 5–7). Conversely, Lisa Jardine cautions against reading Shakespeare as unequivocally progressive, emphasizing that female transgression is often contained within tragic or punitive outcomes (*Still Harping on Daughters* 9-11). Together, these studies establish a critical foundation for understanding Shakespearean women as figures operating within tension between resistance and social constraint.

The theoretical shift toward understanding gender as performative is most significantly articulated by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is not an innate identity but a performative construct constituted through repeated acts sanctioned by social norms (Butler 25). The reconceptualization of gender as performative has fundamentally altered critical approaches to identity, agency, and power within literary studies. Rather than treating gender as an expressive manifestation of an underlying essence, Butler foregrounds its production through iterability, citation, and regulatory discourse, whereby repeated acts both constitute and police the boundaries of intelligible identity. Within this framework, the seeming naturalness of gender emerges not from biological inevitability but from the successful concealment of its construction through social normalization. Such a model is particularly resonant for dramatic literature, where embodiment, repetition, and role-playing are not metaphors but material practices. Applied to Shakespearean tragedy, Butler's insights enable a shift from moral or psychological readings of female characters towards an analysis of how gendered identities are enacted under conditions of surveillance, coercion, and constraint, revealing female subjectivity as a site of strategic negotiation rather than passive inscription.

Shakespearean critics have extended Butler's insights into early modern drama by foregrounding the material and ideological conditions of theatrical performance itself. Stephen Greenblatt's account of the Elizabethan stage emphasizes how cross gender casting practices destabilized assumptions of gender authenticity, rendering femininity visible as a form of imitation rather than a naturalized essence (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*). Such theatrical conventions expose gender as a product of cultural scripting and self-fashioning, shaped by social expectations and institutional power. Jean E. Howard further develops this line of inquiry by arguing that Shakespeare's dramaturgy actively exploits the instability generated by theatrical cross-dressing, enabling female characters to contest patriarchal authority through linguistic agency, embodied performance, and narrative intervention ("Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle"). Taken together, these perspectives illuminate how Shakespearean drama embeds gender performativity not merely at the level of character but within the structural logic of performance itself, positioning the stage as a site where dominant gender norms are both enacted and interrogated.

Lady Macbeth occupies a critical position in Shakespearean scholarship precisely because her pursuit of authority destabilizes the gendered logic through which power is traditionally legitimized in early modern culture. Rather than framing her ambition as moral aberration or psychological excess, feminist critics have emphasized how her appeal to be “unsexed” articulates a conscious effort to suspend the cultural constraints attached to femininity in order to access political agency. This moment exposes the extent to which authority in *Macbeth* is predicated upon the exclusion of women from the realm of action and decision-making. As Janet Adelman argues, Lady Macbeth’s transgression does not dismantle the association between masculinity and power but instead renders its operations visible, revealing the psychic and social costs exacted from women who violate patriarchal boundaries (“Born of Woman” 130-32). Her eventual psychological collapse thus functions less as individual failure than as an indictment of a system that permits female agency only at the expense of self-annihilation.

In contrast, Desdemona has long been read within Shakespearean criticism as an idealized figure of chastity and obedience, a reading that tends to confine her to the position of passive victim within a masculine tragic economy. Such interpretations privilege innocence over agency and reduce her role to a function of Othello’s jealousy rather than an expression of her own ethical subjectivity. Feminist scholarship has complicated this view by foregrounding Desdemona’s capacity for decision making, rhetorical self-possession, and moral resolve, particularly in her choice of Othello as her husband and her refusal to concede to unjust accusation. As Karen Newman argues, Desdemona’s loyalty operates not as submission but as a form of ethical agency that destabilizes patriarchal narratives equating femininity with silence and guilt (“Feminist Rereadings” 148). Her steadfast refusal to internalize blame, even in the face of mortal violence, exposes the fragility of masculine authority and underscores the limits of patriarchal power over female interiority.

Comparative readings of Lady Macbeth and Desdemona have frequently relied on oppositional categorization, casting one as transgressive and power-driven and the other as compliant and virtuous. Such binary models, however, risk obscuring the structural conditions under which both characters negotiate gendered identity. Social constructionist perspectives offer a productive alternative by conceptualizing gender as a socially enacted practice rather than a fixed essence. As West and Zimmerman assert, gender is something individuals actively “do” through socially regulated interaction rather than something they inherently “are” (“Doing Gender” 126). Applied to Shakespearean tragedy, this framework reveals that Lady Macbeth and Desdemona do not simply embody contrasting forms of femininity but enact distinct gendered strategies shaped by surveillance, expectation, and constraint. Reading these characters together thus exposes how divergent performances of femininity emerge from the same patriarchal system, each revealing different vulnerabilities and limits within the gendered order they inhabit.

By bringing Butler’s theorization of performativity into dialogue with social constructionist accounts of gender, this study frames Shakespeare’s female characters as participants in historically specific regimes of power that regulate identity through repetition, surveillance, and normative constraint. Rather than treating femininity as a stable category, the analysis foregrounds gender as a relational and situational practice shaped by institutional authority, cultural expectation, and discursive control. Situating Lady Macbeth and Desdemona within this framework allows for a comparative reading that resists reductive oppositions and instead illuminates the distinct strategies through which each character navigates, contests, and is ultimately disciplined by patriarchal structures. In doing so, the paper extends feminist

Shakespearean scholarship by demonstrating how divergent performances of femininity expose both the possibilities and limits of female agency within early modern dramatic discourse.

Lady Macbeth: Gender Transgression and the Performance of Power

Lady Macbeth's significance within Shakespearean tragedy lies not simply in her transgression of feminine norms, but in the way her pursuit of power exposes the gendered conditions under which authority is made intelligible in early modern culture. Rather than functioning as an aberrant figure who rejects femininity outright, Lady Macbeth operates within a symbolic economy that equates agency, political efficacy, and resolve with masculinity. Her desire to intervene in the realm of sovereign action thus necessitates a reconfiguration of the self, one that reveals femininity as structurally incompatible with power rather than inherently passive. Lady Macbeth's gendered self-fashioning is way less a rejection of womanhood than a response to the exclusionary logic of patriarchal authority.

Her invocation to be "unsexed" and filled with "direst cruelty" (*Macbeth* 1.5.39-41) articulates a recognition that political agency is mediated through culturally sanctioned performances of masculinity. Crucially, this appeal does not imagine power as gender-neutral; instead, it acknowledges masculinity as the dominant register through which action and legitimacy are conferred. The language of the soliloquy underscores the extent to which gender operates as a regulatory framework governing bodily affect, emotional expression, and moral capacity. By seeking to suspend the affective markers associated with femininity—compassion, hesitation, maternal attachment; Lady Macbeth exposes gender as a disciplinary system that scripts certain modes of action as intelligible while foreclosing others.

Lady Macbeth's manipulation of Macbeth further demonstrates how gender functions relationally rather than individually. Her repeated appeals to "manliness" do not dismantle patriarchal gender binaries but actively reproduce them in order to mobilize action. When she equates hesitation with emasculation, "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (*Macbeth* 1.7.49) she reveals that masculinity itself is contingent, precarious, and dependent upon continual performance. Power, in this configuration, is not possessed but enacted, sustained through rhetorical coercion and affective pressure. Lady Macbeth's authority thus emerges not from transcendence of gender norms but from her strategic deployment of them, illuminating the instability at the core of masculine sovereignty.

However, the tragedy makes clear that such strategic performances are neither sustainable nor socially permissible for women. Lady Macbeth's subsequent psychological disintegration is not merely a consequence of personal guilt but a manifestation of the structural limits placed on female agency within a patriarchal system that allows women proximity to power only through self-erasure. As Adelman observes, Lady Macbeth's collapse marks the point at which the cost of transgression becomes insupportable, revealing the psychic violence exacted by a system that binds authority to masculinity (Adelman). Her compulsive hand-washing, "Out, damned spot!" (*Macbeth* 5.1.30) functions as a somatic return of the repressed, where the body registers what the performed identity can no longer contain.

Conclusively, Lady Macbeth's tragedy does not lie in her ambition but in the impossibility of sustaining agency within a gendered order that equates power with masculine embodiment and renders female authority inherently unstable. Her fate underscores the paradox at the heart of patriarchal governance: while women may momentarily inhabit positions of influence, the structures that enable such access simultaneously ensure its collapse. Shakespeare thus presents

Lady Macbeth not as a cautionary figure against female ambition, but as a critical exposure of the gendered architecture of power itself.

Desdemona: Ethical Femininity and the Limits of Patriarchal Authority

Desdemona's dramatic significance lies not in her conformity to idealized femininity, but in the way her actions reveal how patriarchal systems authorize and discipline female virtue. While she initially appears to embody early modern ideals of obedience, chastity, and loyalty, such traits function less as innate qualities than as socially legible performances through which female identity is recognized and regulated. Desdemona's femininity is thus not passive but strategically situated within a moral economy that demands female compliance while denying women interpretive authority over their own actions and desires.

Her decision to marry Othello against her father's will marks a crucial moment of self positioning within this economy. When she declares, "I do perceive here a divided duty" (*Othello* 1.3.180), Desdemona does not reject patriarchal obligation outright; rather, she articulates a rational negotiation between competing forms of masculine authority. This speech situates her agency within ethical deliberation rather than defiance, demonstrating how femininity can function as a site of reasoned judgment even as it remains constrained by social expectation. Desdemona's agency, therefore, operates through articulation and moral reasoning rather than domination, exposing the narrow terms under which female choice is rendered acceptable.

As the tragedy unfolds, Desdemona's performance of femininity increasingly takes the form of ethical steadfastness. Her loyalty to Othello is not a sign of submission but a principled refusal to accommodate false narratives of female guilt. In a dramatic structure that equates accusation with truth and female silence with complicity, Desdemona's insistence, "I never did offend you in my life" (*Othello* 5.2.61) constitutes an act of resistance that challenges the epistemological authority of masculine judgment. By refusing to internalize the charge of infidelity, she exposes the fragility of a patriarchal order that relies on the presumption of female moral opacity.

Feminist criticism has underscored the disruptive force of Desdemona's virtue, reading it as an ethical counterweight to the violence of masculine suspicion. As Karen Newman argues, Desdemona's moral clarity destabilizes the logic of male jealousy by revealing its dependence on the silencing of female truth ("Feminist Rereadings" 148). Her death, while structurally tragic, does not signify acquiescence but rather marks the catastrophic consequences of a system incapable of accommodating female integrity. Desdemona's final act of defending Othello even as she dies, (*Othello* 5.2.124-25) functions as a devastating indictment of patriarchal authority, exposing how feminine virtue is rendered intelligible only when it ceases to threaten masculine power.

Comparative Reading: Performing Femininity within Patriarchal Limits

When examined in relation to one another, Lady Macbeth and Desdemona reveal not opposing models of femininity but complementary exposures of the mechanisms through which gender is regulated and policed within Shakespearean tragedy. From a Butlerian perspective, femininity in selected Shakespearean tragedies does not precede action; it is constituted through repeated performances that are continually evaluated against patriarchal expectations of coherence, legibility, and obedience. While critical tradition has often positioned it at opposite ends of a moral and behavioral spectrum transgressive ambition versus virtuous submission such binaries obscure the structural conditions that shape their actions. Both characters, Lady Macbeth and Desdemona operate within patriarchal systems that authorize female identity only as it remains legible to masculine authority. Their differing strategies illuminate not the freedom of choice available to

women, but the narrow and highly regulated pathways through which femininity may be performed without immediate reprisal.

Lady Macbeth's performance of masculinity seeks to appropriate the symbolic language of power in order to intervene in a political domain from which she is structurally excluded. In Butler's terms, Lady Macbeth's gender performance becomes unintelligible within the prevailing regime of truth, resulting in her pathologization and eventual expulsion from the social order. Her breakdown thus marks the punitive consequences of inhabiting a gendered position that cannot be sustained through social recognition. Desdemona, by contrast, performs an ethically grounded femininity that refuses to relinquish moral coherence even under violent scrutiny. From a Butlerian standpoint, Desdemona's refusal to reiterate the expected script of guilt disrupts the normative repetition through which femininity is stabilized. Her ethical insistence on innocence exposes the fragility of a gender regime that depends upon women's acquiescence to masculine interpretation. Their trajectories thus demonstrate that femininity, whether reconfigured or rigorously upheld, remains vulnerable within structures that deny women epistemic and political legitimacy.

From a performative perspective, both characters expose gender identity as contingent upon repetition, recognition, and social validation. Lady Macbeth's failure underscores the impossibility of sustaining masculine performance for a woman within early modern ideology, where power remains tethered to male embodiment and lineage. Desdemona's death, conversely, reveals the fragility of ethical femininity in a cultural order that equates female virtue with silence and interprets resistance as transgression. In neither case does gender function as an internal essence; instead, it emerges as a socially enforced script whose disruption invites disciplinary violence.

Shakespeare's juxtaposition of Lady Macbeth and Desdemona thus anticipates feminist critiques of essentialist gender ideology by dramatizing the performative constraints under which women navigate identity and agency. Their tragic outcomes do not negate their resistance but instead expose the rigidity of the systems that contain it. By staging femininity as enacted, contested, and continually subject to surveillance, Shakespeare offers a critique of patriarchal governance that extends beyond individual character studies to interrogate the cultural logic of gender itself. In doing so, the plays reveal how divergent performances of femininity whether confrontational or ethical ultimately converge in their vulnerability to patriarchal power.

Conclusion

The cumulative evidence from analysing *Macbeth* and *Othello* through the lens of gender performativity reveals that both the tragedies stage gender not as an expressive identity but as a normative framework through which power, authority, and moral legitimacy are unevenly distributed. By examining Lady Macbeth and Desdemona within a Butlerian understanding of performativity, the analysis reveals how femininity is produced through constrained repetitions that demand coherence while foreclosing female control over meaning and action. Lady Macbeth's appropriation of masculine authority and Desdemona's ethically grounded femininity do not represent divergent paths to agency but rather expose the same structural limit: the inability of patriarchal systems to accommodate female subjectivity without recourse to discipline or erasure. Shakespeare's tragedies thus anticipate feminist critiques of gender as a regulatory norm, revealing how both transgression and conformity are rendered untenable when they threaten masculine interpretive dominance. In foregrounding this paradox, the paper situates Shakespearean tragedies as a critical site for understanding the enduring relationship between gender, power, and the conditions of social intelligibility.

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