

The Reinvention of Gender Identity in As You Like It from the Perspective of Gender Performativity

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How to cite this paper: Li, T. (2025). The Reinvention of Gender Identity in As You Like It from the Perspective of Gender Performativity. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 3(1), 20-27. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109
<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9093>
Published: 2025-10-09

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Abstract

This paper examines the reconstruction of gender identity in Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It* based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Set against the backdrop of rigid Renaissance gender norms, the play features characters represented by Rosalind who challenge the traditional gender binary by cross-dressing and performing alternative identities. Employing theoretical analysis and close reading of the text, this paper focuses on Rosalind's adoption of the male persona "Ganymede". And it explores how repeated gendered performances reconstruct self-identity and reshape power dynamics and emotional expression. The study suggests that gender is not a fixed biological essence but is continually constructed through social acts and performative behaviors. Although the characters ultimately revert to traditional social structures like marriage, the process of performance underscores the fluidity and plasticity of gender identity as well as its tension with societal norms. This analysis offers a contemporary theoretical perspective for understanding gender issues in Shakespearean drama by uncovering both the agency and limitations of performativity in the reinvention of identity.

Keywords

Gender Performativity Theory; *As You Like It*; Gender Identity; Identity Reconstruction

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is one of his classic comedies, which tells the story of Rosalind, the daughter of an exiled duke, and others who go through the trials of love and friendship in the forest, and finally come to a happy ending. However, beneath the surface of comedy lies a profound gender issue. For a long time, traditional gender concepts have fixed the roles and identities of men and women, restricting the free expression and development of individuals. However, in this play, female characters such as Rosalind and Celia hide their female identities by cross dressing and playing male identities, and such acts of cross dressing are a challenge to the traditional gender norms of the time. The plot of cross dressing abandons the

traditional definition of gender roles in the society at that time and reveals the variability and fluidity of gender in the social structure. In particular, Rosalind's behavior and language under the male costume not only confuses people about her gender, but also triggers the audience to think about gender identity.

Underneath the disguise of dressing as a man, the ambiguity and performativity of gender is revealed, thus leading to an important concept in gender theory - Gender Performativity Theory, which was proposed by the famous American scholar Judith Butler. According to her, gender identity is not innate or inherently unchanging, but rather a performative behavior expressed through a series of words and actions, and that traditional masculinity and femininity are formed through repeated social practices and institutionalization (Judith 5). In Butler's view, it is through the individual's continual "performance" of gender roles that gender becomes visible and socially acceptable. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare reinvents the characters' gender identities through gender roles, conveying the idea that gender itself is not fixed, but can be redefined through performance and practice. This deeply reflects Shakespeare's exploration and reflection on gender norms, power structures, and individual self-cognition in Shakespeare's time and even in contemporary society.

Butler's Gender Performativity Theory provides us with a new perspective in interpreting this work. Therefore, by using Gender Performativity Theory to analyze the phenomenon of gender identity reinvention in *As You Like It*, we can have a deeper understanding of how Shakespeare reveals the complexity of gender as a social construction and performance through the character's intertwined identities, gender transformations, and their challenges to gender norms. Such a study has important theoretical and practical significance. Through the new perspective provided by this theory, we are able to explore how Shakespeare's comedy reflects profound gender issues in its humor and satire, which helps us to have a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of this classic work and its gender cultural connotation, and is also conducive to the study of gender in contemporary society.

2. Introduction and Discussion of Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory

2.1. The Social Construction and Fluidity of Gender Identity

In Judith Butler's classic book *Gender Trouble*, she suggests that gender is not a fixed, natural identity or attribute, but is constructed through social norms and repeated performances of behavior. The conception that gender identity is formed and sustained through continuous social practices and performances is different from traditional conception of gender. For a long time, the dominant social conception of gender has been that it is an inherent and fixed trait that is determined by biological characteristics. Moreover, this intrinsic trait is often considered to be an external manifestation of an internal gender identity, which places gender under a binary gender framework, assuming that there are only two fixed and opposing categories

of gender: male and female (Judith 9).

However, gender performativity theory revisits the conception of “gender” as a dynamic, variable process rather than a constant state determined by natural physiological features or biological sex. The theory criticizes traditional conceptions of gender, arguing that the seemingly taken-for-granted definition of gender is actually an artificial construction of social culture, and that such an understanding of gender ignores the complexity and diversity of gender identity. Butler’s theory of gender performativity, on the other hand, breaks the direct link between biological gender and gender identity. Gender identity is not determined by biological features, nor is it merely a product of cultural labels, but is constructed through repeated behaviors in a social and historical context. These repetitive behaviors solidify gender identity and help maintain the assignment of social roles. Every time we act according to social expectations, we are repeating and confirming a gender identity.

The idea that gender is constructed by repetitive performances suggests that gender identity is fluid and changeable. This means that gender identity is not static, but can change with individual performance. Individuals can reconstruct their gender identity by changing their behavioral patterns, altering their understanding of gender roles, or even rebelling against traditional gender norms. This perspective challenges the conception in traditional gender theory that gender is fixed and reveals the socially constructed nature of gender identity.

2.2. The Repetitiveness and Normativity of Gender Performance

The repetitiveness and normativity of gender performance is the second important aspect of Butler’s theory of gender performativity, and the “repetitiveness” of gender performance is key to understanding the theory. According to Butler’s theory, gender is not determined or accomplished at a certain point in time, but is maintained through constant, repetitive behavior. At the same time, these repetitive behaviors need to conform to social and cultural norms and requirements of gender roles. In other words, gender is a normative performance, and society is normative and obligatory for individuals to perform gendered behaviors. For example, social expectations of men and women behave differently, where males are expected to exhibit qualities of decisiveness and bravery, while females are expected to be gentle and obedient. Individuals must follow these gender norms and consistently perform these behaviors in order to be identified as male or female. If an individual’s behavior deviates from these social norms, they may be ostracized or punished by society. This makes it difficult for individuals to break out of the traditional gender framework in their daily lives, and they can only “perform” gender within the framework, even though the performance itself may not be fully consistent with the individual’s true inner feelings. Therefore, the repetitive nature of gender performance is not only a behavioral manifestation of individual’s daily life, but also a complex social and cultural process, which also profoundly affects individual’s identity. Identity is generated and evolved by individuals in continuous gender perfor-

mance, and it is a process of continuous construction, in which the individual's self-cognition and external gender expectations intertwine and influence each other. This identity is not static, and it will change in response to changes in the social environment, the accumulation of personal experience, and challenges to gender norms. This also exposes the contradictions in gender identity brought by the repetitive nature of gender performances. For example, an individual born into a male body may not identify as male, yet he still has to act "male" in social situations and experience these repetitive gender performances. The social normativity of such gender performances may put the individual in a gender identity dilemma because these social norms are not in line with the individual's true feelings, so that the individual's external performance and internal identity are not always able to be fully aligned.

2.3. The Subversive Potential and Identity Reconstruction of Gender Performance

Gender performance is potentially subversive, as evidenced by the way it challenges and redefines traditional gender roles. Traditional conceptions view gender as a biological distinction. However, the gender performativity theory suggests that gender is not merely a product of biology but also a product of socialization. This conception poses a challenge to the traditional binary conception of gender, proposing that gender should be viewed as a fluid, expressive process rather than a biologically determined label. By engaging in behaviors that go against traditional gender expression, individuals can challenge the limits of gender norms, break down stereotypes, and create new forms of gender identity and expression. Traditionally, for example, a woman in a dress was considered a sign of "femininity" while a man in a suit was seen as a sign of "masculinity". However, as society and culture evolve, more and more transgender people and queer groups are challenging these norms and breaking the traditional boundaries of gender through the way they dress, act and express themselves. For example, some women wear suits and short haircuts to challenge the traditional "feminine" image, while some men choose to wear dresses and makeup to express their soft and diverse gender identities. These behaviors demonstrate the fluidity and diversity of gender performances and challenge social stereotypes of gender behavior. This shows that everyone can shape their gender identity through different behaviors, languages and expressions.

3. The Reinvention of Gender Identity in *As You Like It* from the Perspective of Gender Performativity

3.1. Gender Fluidity and Identity Performance: Rosalind's Cross-Dressing and Role Exploration

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the heroine Rosalind's father is framed and forced into exile in the forest (Shakespeare, 88). Rosalind has no choice but to flee into the

Forest of Arden after being banished. In order to escape from her father's enemies, Rosalind and her cousin Celia protect themselves by cross dressing. Rosalind cross-dresses as a young boy named Ganymede, and in terms of storyline, this is a decision made by the heroine to respond to an external threat and protect her life and that of her cousin Celia. But on a deeper level of the play, cross dressing involves a profound exploration of gender identity and gender roles.

As the plot progresses, cross dressing gradually becomes an extremely important element in the plot that drives the development of the plot, especially in the development of Rosalind's relationship with Orlando. In the forest, Rosalind interacts feeling with Orlando as Ganymede. In her encounter with Orlando, Rosalind does not directly reveal her identity, but instead takes on a new stance in interacting with Orlando through this boyish appearance and identity. On the surface, Rosalind plays a male role, but she still maintains a female identity inside, which is a classic expression of gender performativity. Rosalind "acts out" her masculinity by altering her external dress and behavior. In this way, Rosalind is not only able to maintain her love for Orlando, but she is also able to interact with him in a freer and more active manner, as she is no longer bound by the gender norms of society. This shift in gender identity actually provides Rosalind with a broader space of freedom to express her feelings and manipulate her love relationship. Meanwhile, Celia, who also disguises herself as a male in order to keep Rosalind company and takes the name Aliena, similarly demonstrates that gender identities are fluid in nature through her cross-dressing behavior.

Shakespeare demonstrates the fluidity of gender through the character of Rosalind in *As You Like It*. According to Butler's theory of gender performativity, gender is not inherent but is constructed through constant performance and repetitive behavior. In this works, the gender identities of Rosalind and Celia are not fixed as "male" or "female," but are an ongoing process of interpretation, emphasizing that gender is not naturally predestined, but can be shaped and changed through external cross dressing and changes in behavior. Rosalind's cross-dressing provides her with the opportunity to gain a foothold in a male-dominated society and creates a space for her to explore and challenge gender norms. Even though she acts out of cross dressing, this act highlights the fluidity of gender norms and the demands society places on gender roles. This not only allowed Rosalind to survive in a patriarchal society, but also enabled her to reflect and dramatize gender roles.

Through this role, Shakespeare reveals the flexibility and subjectivity of gender identity and explores the impact of gender identity on personal freedom and love relationships in humorous and witty plots. Rosalind's identity as Ganymede and Celia's identity as Aliena are not only strategies for survival, but also a profound reflection on gender roles. Through this setting, Shakespeare demonstrates the performativity of gender in a particular social context, challenging traditional gender boundaries and showing that gender is not fixed but a social role that can be changed and

performed.

3.2. Gender Performativity and Multiple Identities: Rosalind's Masculine Role and Feminine Essence

In Butler's theory, gender performance is a social behavior that shapes an individual's gender identity through the repetition of "gender norms" (Judith, 14). The repetition of gender performances not only constitutes an individual's gender identity, but also reveals the social expectations of gender roles. In *As You Like It*, the cross dressing of Rosalind, is not a short-term disguise, but a constantly repeated behavior. Through this repetitive "performance," she displays masculine traits while maintaining the core of her female identity. Therefore, Rosalind's identity and gender roles are manifested through this repetitive performance. By dressing in male attire and appearing to others as a male identity Ganymede, she not only demonstrates the behavior patterns that are alien to her biological gender, but also challenges the fixed definitions of gender and gender roles in society at the time.

Rosalind's relationship with Orlando is a major plot line in the play. In the early days, Rosalind meets Orlando as Ganymede, and through this role she engages in a great deal of conversation and interaction with Orlando. She is now as Orlando's friend, and as a male in his life. Through this repetitive "performance," she not only displays masculine traits, such as voice, behavior, and clothing, but also demonstrates her deep affection and care for Orlando (Xin, 7). However, Rosalind never completely abandons her identity as a woman, which gives her gender performances a multiplicity and complexity. For example, in the Epilogue of *As You Like It*, Rosalind mentions:

"If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not. that I defied not" (Shakespeare, 197). In this conversation between Rosalind as Ganymede and Orlando, she suggests how she views love and the differences between males and females in the expression of feelings. Even though she communicates with Orlando as a man, her feelings as a woman can still be felt in her language, which reveals her multiple identities and the complexity of her gender performances. Rosalind's "performance" is both a submission to gender roles and an assertion of her female identity. It is this repetitive performance of gender that shapes Rosalind's unique identity. Her identity is a multiple and dynamic construction, with a female identity at its core and a male performance on the outside.

Through this repetitive gender performance, Rosalind came to realize that gender is not a static social label, but can be created through performance and practice. Her gender identity is not only the result of social expectations, but also changes and develops in her interactions with others.

3.3. Gender Challenge and Social Norms: Rosalind's Ganymede and the Redefinition of Love and Power

During the Renaissance era in which Shakespeare lived, gender roles were strictly defined, and men were often thought to be in leadership and wield power, while women were viewed as vulnerable and in a passive and subordinate position. Rosalind's tomboyish roles disrupt this gender framework, and her male performance, though "performative," allows her to challenge and redefine these societal norms to an extent. Rosalind's masculine performance, although "performed", allows her to challenge and redefine these social norms.

As the hero of the play, Orlando represents the traditional image of a male hero. He is brave, loyal, and deeply in love with Rosalind. But in his conversations with "Ganymede", Orlando does not realize that Ganymede is actually Rosalind, and this confusion of identities allows Orlando to unconsciously challenge his own conventional understanding of female identity (Xuelai, 25). In front of "Ganymede", Orlando is forced to put aside his gender stereotypes and start a dialogue with Rosalind, who presents herself as a man, and gradually accepts her advice and help. Rosalind, as the heroine of the play, is intelligent, witty and courageous, a character that is different from the traditional image of a gentle, weak and submissive woman (Shakespeare, 214). In order to protect herself, she disguises herself as a man under the name of "Ganymede" and goes deep into the forest, interacting with various characters and pursuing love. In her love interactions with Orlando, Rosalind is not passive and waits to be loved, but takes the initiative in love by testing and guiding Orlando in ingenious ways. As "Ganymede", Rosalind is not only able to move freely, but is also able to participate in a new social relationship as a man, breaking the traditional gender constraints.

Rosalind's performance as "Ganymede" challenges the image of the male hero and reinvents the image of women. The intelligence, determination and independence she displays in her male identity breaks society's expectations of women, forcing both Orlando and the audience to reexamine the role and influence of gender in love and social roles. In addition, the interaction between Rosalind and Orlando demonstrates that gender identity does not determine the sincerity and depth of love, as Rosalind helps Orlando resolve his confusion about love as a man, which not only makes Orlando have deeper feelings for Ganymede, but also prompts him to reexamine his understanding of women. Orlando eventually falls in love with "Ganymede" without realizing that it is Rosalind he is in love with. Through humor and confusion, this plot breaks the framework of the gender binary and conveys the idea that the truth and depth of love are not limited by gender identity.

However, Rosalind's male role is not a permanent act. Although she gains more freedom and power as a man in the play, her female identity never completely disappears. Rosalind can express herself freely through cross dressing as "Ganymede" and avoid social restrictions. After she regains her female identity, she still needs to complete the final "belonging" of her self-identity through the traditional structure of marriage (Doré, 8). This transformation of gender identity reflects the per-

formativity of gender identity, and also reveals society's reliance on, and constraints on gender correctness. This shift shows that even if one can temporarily escape from the constraints of gender norms through repetitive gender performances, the individual still has to return to the socially expected gender roles in the end.

4. Conclusion

Through the Gender performativity theory, the construction of gender identity in *As You Like It* reveals the fluidity and malleability of gender as a social performance. Through disguise, cross-dressing and identity play, the characters in the play not only challenge the traditional gender binary, but also demonstrate the fluidity and complexity of gender identity. Butler's theory of gender performativity helps us to understand that gender is not a fixed biological trait in these renditions of gender identity, but is constantly constructed and expressed through social behavior and performance. Nonetheless, the social normativity of gender remains, and the characters eventually regain their "legal" gender identities through the traditional way of marriage. This process demonstrates the fluidity of gender identity and reveals the complex relationship between gender and social structures.

Acknowledgements

This article owes a profound debt of gratitude to Professor Cheng, whose captivating course on English Drama Studies sparked the initial interest for this research. The exploration of gender identity reinvention in *As You Like It* from the perspective of gender performativity would not have been possible without the foundation laid by her inspiring teachings.

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