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Judith Butler on Gender Performativity

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Abstract

This article examines Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, a pivotal concept in contemporary feminist and queer theory. Originating from Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and further developed in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), the theory challenges traditional distinctions between sex and gender by arguing that both are socially constructed through performative acts. Butler critiques the binary notion that biological sex pre-determines gender identity, instead proposing that gender is continually constituted through repeated social performances within a regulatory framework Butler calls the "heterosexual matrix". Drawing on J.L. Austin's speech act theory and Jacques Derrida's concepts of citationality and iterability, Butler asserts that gender is not an inherent trait but an effect produced through iterative acts. The article also explores Butler's engagement with Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation to explain how individuals are assigned gender identities at birth. It highlights how normative gender constructs are maintained through social rituals and coercive mechanisms, but also how these norms can be destabilized through subversive repetitions, such as parody and drag. The discussion underscores Butler's view of agency as emerging within the discursive constraints of gender norms, offering a pathway to challenge and transform these structures through performative resignification.

Keywords: *Judith Butler, Gender performativity, citationality, iterability, interpellation*

In 1990, the American philosopher Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*,¹ a work whose deconstruction of biological sex and exploration of the performative construction of gender identity was to have a profound impact on feminist thought and politics. As Athena Athanasiou notes, this book laid the groundwork for a “feminist queer politics that transgresses the normative boundaries of identity politics”.² Three years later, in 1993, Butler published *Bodies That Matter*,³ in which they further developed the concept of gender performativity as an ongoing process, linking it to the ideas of “iteration” and “citationality”. The following article seeks to explore Butler’s views on the performative construction of gender.

The distinction between sex and gender

An important aspect of feminist critique is the distinction between sex and gender. In contrast to sex, which is seen as an innate biological characteristic of human beings, gender is understood as a socially constructed concept. Gender refers to the cultural meanings assigned to the biologically differentiated body, categorized as male and female, within a particular society (*BM*, xiv). This distinction is crucial because it opens up the possibility of redefining gender. As a result, the roles and attitudes traditionally associated with the male sex—and which constitute the cultural myth of “masculinity”—can be challenged, deconstructed and abandoned, in contrast to the “femininity” attributed to the female sex (*GT*, 10). Feminist theorists of the 1980s have shown that gender is not inher-

¹ Butler J., *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990) (henceforth: *GT*).

² Athanasiou A., “Επίμετρο: Επιτελεστικές αναταράξεις: Για μια ποιητική της έμφυλης ανατροπής” [Afterword: Performative Disturbances: Towards a Poetics of Gender Subversion], in Judith Butler, *Αναταραχή φύλου: Ο φεμινισμός και η ανατροπή της ταυτότητας* [*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*], trans. Karabelas G., ed. Kantsa V. (Athens: Alexandria, 2009), p. 217.

³ Butler J., *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) (henceforth: *BM*).

ently given, but is rather the product of complex social relations based on the structures of male domination.

For Butler, however, even when gender is understood as socially constructed, the distinction between sex and gender is underpinned by a “belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex, whereby gender mirrors sex” (*GT*, 10). In fact, gender norms “institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (*GT*, 23), by establishing a “compulsory order” between the categories of biological male, social masculinity, and heterosexual practice and desire. The same “compulsory order” also exists between the female sex, social femininity, and heterosexuality. Desire thus reflects or expresses gender through heterosexual practice, while gender similarly reflects or expresses heterosexual desire.

Essentially, gender as a binary relation is maintained and regulated through the establishment of “compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality [...] in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (*GT*, 30). The internal cohesion or unity of each gender, both male and female, thus requires a stable heterosexuality. Gender is not a stable essence, an identity in itself, but its internal cohesion or unity is the result of a “regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality” (*GT*, 42). The gender norms that regulate gender identities are socially constituted within what Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” (*GT*, 36)

Deconstructing Biological Sex

Furthermore, in the distinction between sex and gender, sex is often treated as “given”, without considering how it is ascribed to an individual, by what means, whether it has a particular “history”, or whether it is produced and sustained by various scientific discourses. In other words, it overlooks the fact that sex itself is a discursive construct shaped by a matrix of knowledge and power in Foucauldian terms. As a

result, the distinction between sex and gender ultimately serves to maintain the stability of the gender binary by securing an unquestionable, pre-discursive existence for sex. For Butler, it is essential to question the immutability of biological sex in order to show that “this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender”, and thus to show that the distinction between the two does not exist at all. Therefore, it makes no sense “to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex if sex itself is a gendered category” (*GT*, 11)—that is, if sex is also a cultural construct, like gender.

Sex is not a “bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed”, but rather “a cultural norm that governs the materialization of bodies” (*BM*, xii). It is not only something permeated by cultural constructs; it is itself a construct. In this sense, sex is a political construct, just like gender. However, the exclusion of sex from the process of gender construction is necessary for this construction to maintain its power. Without this exclusion, gender construction would lack its basis of legitimacy and, consequently, its necessity (*BM*, 4).

According to Butler, the longstanding dominance of gender norms produces the specific phenomenon of a “natural sex”. These “sedimented” gender norms are associated with a “set of corporeal styles”, which, by concealing their cultural origins, appear as a natural consequence of the sexed dimension of bodies. Thus, instead of sexed subjects producing a set of gendered bodily styles (masculine or feminine), as is commonly assumed, the opposite happens: a “set of corporeal styles”, stereotypically ascribed to the male or female sex, produces coherent gendered subjects (*GT*, 178). For Butler, then, the “being” of gender is an effect rather than a generative cause (*GT*, 43). There is no “essence” or “identity” that gender expresses or externalizes. Gender is not a “locus of agency from which various acts follow”, but an effect (*GT*, 179).

Gender as Performativity

If there is no inherent gender identity underlying gender expressions, how is our sense of gender constituted? According to Judith Butler, gender is formed through performative acts—that is, through the process of performativity. Gender identity does not exist prior to or independently of behavior; rather, it is behavior itself that “performs” and actively produces what we recognize as gender. Thus, what is traditionally perceived as an “expression” of gender is, in fact, the very process through which gender is created, manifested, and brought into existence.

Butler adopts the concept of “performativity” from J.L. Austin, who, in his groundbreaking book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), distinguishes between two types of linguistic utterances. The first, “constative” utterances, are statements that describe, record, or assert something, such as “The cat is on the mat”, and can be evaluated as true or false. The second, “performative” utterances, are about doing something through the act of speaking itself.⁴ For example, if a mayor declares during a wedding ceremony, “I pronounce you husband and wife,” this statement itself brings about the marital union. In the case of performative utterances, the spoken word is not merely descriptive but an integral part of the action it triggers.

Similarly, for Butler, gender is not something whose existence is merely affirmed by language. Instead, gender is the result of a continuous series of performances. There are no inherently male or female bodies; a body becomes male or female through the performance of acts, gestures, or expressions that hegemonic discourse associates with these genders. Gender is thus constituted through “discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex” (*GT*, xxix). In this sense, gender is an act (*GT*, 179).

The body is gendered through the repetitive and compulsive performance of certain gendered behaviors. As Butler

⁴ Austin J. L., *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 5.

explains, “[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (*GT*, 178). Gender is not a timeless essence but an identity constructed over time through a “*stylized repetition of acts*” that includes “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds”. This ceaseless repetition produces the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (*GT*, 179). For Butler, what we perceive as an “internal” feature of our identity is something actively anticipated and produced through bodily acts; “at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (*GT* xv).

The foundation of gender identity lies in “the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity” (*GT*, 179). For instance, behaviors or gestures that appear to signify “masculinity” are not mere expressions of an underlying male identity. Instead, these actions, through their repeated performance, actively generate that identity. Male identity, therefore, does not pre-exist its effects; it is itself an effect.

Some of the ways in which we perform our “gender” are inherent to discourse (grammar, linguistic style and code, etc.), while others are explicitly or implicitly imposed on us by institutions such as the family, school, work, the media, and our environment. However, the most effective way in which gender is imposed on us is that it feels “natural” to behave in a certain way, for example, “as a boy.” Being a “boy” is taken as absolutely for granted, as something that speaks for itself and bubbles up from within. As Butler notes, the performance of gender is “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization” (*GT*, xv). Gender is a construct that generally “conceals its genesis” (*GT*, 178).

Consequently, there is no such thing as a “real” or “true” gender. Gender is an imitation without an original, a “citation” without a definitive source. Since gender is merely the result of repeated acts, there is no “pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured” (*GT*, 180). Thus, there are no inherently true or false, authentic or fabricated acts of masculinity or femininity. The assertion of a

true male or female identity turns out to be a “regulating fiction”—a constructed narrative that, although fictional, serves to regulate and shape the behavior of bodies (*ibid.*).

The Concept of Interpellation

To describe how gender is assigned to a newborn (or even in the prenatal period), Butler uses the concept of “interpellation.”⁵ One meaning of the verb *interpellate* in English is “to address a person in a way that presupposes a particular identification and assigns them an identity,” such as “the interpellation of a person as an Americanasian.” According to Butler, the medical interpellation that declares to an infant’s parents, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” shifts the infant’s status from an indeterminate “it” to a gendered “she” or “he.” This act assigns the identity of girl or boy and introduces the child “into the domain of language and kinship” (*BM*, xvii). In essence, we are conscripted into gender at or even before birth; we are recruited into this system before we are aware of it.

To return to Austin’s distinction between *constative* and *performative* utterances, this particular act of interpellation is not merely *constative*. It does not simply describe or determine the biological sex of an infant on the basis of whether it has a penis or a vagina. The fact that an infant has certain physical characteristics does not automatically make it a “boy” or a “girl”. Assigning gender on the basis of physical characteristics lacks any naturalness. The distinction between the two genders—“male” and “female”—and the association of the first with the penis and the second with the vagina is neither prediscursive nor “natural.” Rather, it is an arbitrary or contingent construct that exists exclusively within the framework of discourse.

⁵ Butler draws this idea from Louis Althusser (1918-1990), who uses the term “interpellation” to describe the “calling” of an individual to his social and ideological position by an authority figure (see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Trans. Brewster B. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 173-183.

Butler, in line with other poststructuralist philosophers, argues that our perception of reality is inextricably linked to language; reality itself is constituted by language. For example, only speakers of languages that distinguish between “hill” and “mountain” can and do perceive reality according to this distinction. Similarly, the distinction between man and woman, and its association with certain physical characteristics, is not a self-evident truth, but a linguistic construction. Consequently, it is not the materiality of the body that determines its gender, but the way in which this materiality is shaped and defined by language. As Butler states, “what is material never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified” (*BM*, 38). Sara Salih underscores this point, noting that “Butler is not refuting the ‘existence’ of matter, but she insists that matter can have no status outside a discourse that is always constitutive, always interpellative, always performative.”⁶ In this context, the interpellation “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” is not merely a constative or descriptive statement; it performs the very reality it names. By invoking and repeating a recognized social convention, the interpellation “produces” the infant as a “boy” or “girl”.

This founding performative interpellation, which marks the infant’s body as male or female, functions as a guideline that determines which of the two genders the individual should embody and perform in the course of their life. For example, the interpellation “It’s a boy!” forces the “boy” to constantly “cite” or “repeat” the norms exclusively associated with male gender and thus incessantly perform his gender. In Butler’s words, the “boy” or “girl” is forced to “cite” these norms “in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (*BM*, 177). This constitutive performative act not only defines the body as gendered, but also sets limits on what this body can and cannot do in the future. The gendered interpellation thus functions both as a framework of identity and as a restriction on the possibilities of existence.

Masculinity or femininity is not a matter of choice, but rather the result of the “forcible citation” of a norm with a

⁶ Salih S., *Judith Butler* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 80.

“complex historicity,” intricately tied to “relations of discipline, regulation, [and] punishment” (*BM*, 177). The performance or enactment of gender is not something a subject freely chooses; it occurs “through certain highly regulated practices” (*BM*, xii) and “under and through the force of prohibition and taboo” (*BM*, 60). The threat of ostracism or even death controls and compels “the shape of production” of the gendered subject. But, as Butler emphasizes, this does not “determine it fully in advance” (*ibid*).

Beyond the Mere Constructivism of Gender

It has already been mentioned that the gendered subject is a construct for Butler, a position that seems to align her with the constructivist perspective. However, as she notes, this construct is not an act that “happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed” (*BM*, xviii).⁷ Furthermore, gender performance functions through the exclusion and erasure of acts and gestures that do not fall within the realm of acceptable gender and are “strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (*BM*, xvii). Those bodily forms that cannot be assigned to either of the two accepted genders, such as intersex or transgender bodies, are negated, excluded from the category of the human, and relegated to “the domain of the dehumanized and the abject”—the outcast (*GT*, 142). Naturalized gender “operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality” (*GT*, xxiii). Consequently, the performative interpellation “It’s a boy!” is actually a command (“You are a boy!”) and a threat: “If you want to be a real subject with a real identity, you should behave like a boy!”

⁷ In fact, according to Athena Athanasiou, Butler’s perspective “marks the epistemological shift from a theory of social construction to a theory of the performative materialization of gender” (Athanasiou A., “Εισαγωγή: Υλοποιώντας το έμφυλο σώμα” [Introduction: Materializing the Gendered Body], in Butler J., *Σώματα με σημασία: Οριοθετήσεις του “φύλου” στο λόγο* [*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*], trans. Marketou P., Athens: Ekkremes, 2008, p. 10).

In short, constructivism often fails to account for the violent exclusions and abjections inherent in the construction of gender. Individuals who do not conform to normative gender constructs are treated as anomalies, denied subjectivity, and stripped of the possibility of a livable life. Gender functions as one of the norms that make a “subject” viable, qualifying a body “for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” and, ultimately, as human (*BM*, xii). Failing to “do” gender “properly” often entails violent and punitive consequences. As Butler observes, “indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (*GT*, 178). The coercive nature of sex imposes upon individuals the obligation to perform the gender assigned to them at birth—a performance they are compelled to repeat indefinitely. Gender, Butler argues, is a “cultural fiction” (*GT*, 178), akin to religion, with harsh and violent repercussions for those who refuse to conform. We are all familiar with the denigration, bullying, violence, and exclusion of those who do not conform to the prevailing gender norms. Therefore, it is not enough to simply assert that gender is constructed; its construction actively produces both the intelligible and acceptable forms of gender, as well as the unintelligible forms that are rejected and excluded.

Identification with the normative “ghost” of male or female gender is achieved through the rejection of anything that deviates from it. As Butler notes, “the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern the regulation of identificatory practices such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed” (*BM*, xiii). The “outside” implied by “abjection” acts as a “threatening specter” for the subject—a constant reminder, a “bugaboo,” that ensures the subject remains aligned with prescribed norms. The fear of the consequences of engaging in actions or gestures that contradict the assigned gender serves as a powerful deterrent against non-conforming gender practices.

For Butler, constructivism falls short when it comes to the role of a constitutive “outside” in the formation of the gendered subject. In particular, it overlooks the “constitutive force” of “exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, [and] abjection” both in the creation of gender identities and in the

questioning or undermining of their legitimacy (*BM*, xvii). As Butler notes, “the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as ‘bodies’” (*BM*, xxiv).

Iterability and Citationality

The process of the infant’s “boyification” or “girlification” does not end with the initial performative interpellation “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” Instead, “that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and at various intervals over time to reinforce [...] this naturalized effect” (*BM*, xvii). Daily life demands the constant performance of gender through specific acts and gestures—how we speak, dress, interact, and even whom we love or how we express that love. Gender is not a static effect, but a recurring and iterative one. In this context, Butler extends the concept of gender performativity by introducing the ideas of “iteration” and “citationality,” inspired by Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of J.L. Austin’s work. As Butler states in *Bodies That Matter*, “[i]t is in terms of a norm that compels a certain ‘citation’ in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought” (*BM*, 177).

Let us now examine what Derrida means by the terms “iterability” and “citationality.” For Austin, not all utterances in the form of performative speech acts are “felicitous.” Two key elements are crucial to the success of a performative speech act: the presence of the “right” context and the intention that animates the utterance. Thus, “a performative utterance, for example, [can] be in a peculiar way hollow or void if it is said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy.”⁸ For instance, an actor’s declaration “I pronounce you husband and wife” cannot effect a marriage because it lacks the appropriate context required for such a performance. In his essay *Signature, Event, Context*, Derrida challenges Austin’s view by arguing that the decoupling of a performative utterance from a particular context or

⁸ Austin J. L., *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 22.

intention—as in the case of theatrical performances or other creative appropriations—is not a sign of “infelicity” or failure. Rather, it reveals a structural feature inherent in all linguistic signs. A sign functions as a sign precisely because its existence does not depend on a fixed context, a specific intention, or a particular sender or receiver. It can be repeated, reproduced, or appropriated across countless contexts by an infinite number of people.⁹ A sign that could only be used once would, by definition, not be a sign. This detachment of a sign from a central, controlling context or intention allows for its infinite reinterpretation in different contexts. This process ensures that its “citation” is never merely a repetition but is always determined by difference. Derrida uses the term “iterability” to describe this inherent coupling of identity and difference in the act of citing or repeating a sign.

The Provocation of Gaps and Fissures through Repetition

Derrida’s insights into “iterability” and “citationality” have proven particularly influential for Butler. According to Butler, the performance of gender norms operates through citationality and iteration. As mentioned earlier, gender performativity is not a singular act but a persistent reiteration of a gender norm—or set of norms (*BM*, xxi). Norms materialize sex through their “forcible reiteration” (*BM*, xii). This ritualized practice of iteration produces the “naturalized effect” of sex (*BM*, xix). As Butler eloquently puts it: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*BM*, 43–44). Reiteration stabilizes gender by creating a “gender effect,” similar to how the repetition of a sign establishes it as a sign—something cannot be a sign if it cannot be

⁹ Derrida J., “Signature Event Context”, translated by Alan Bass, in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 12. Cf. Kakoliris G., “Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: The Early Years”, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 4, 2017, pp. 43–62.

repeated. At the same time, however, repetition destabilizes gender, since no iteration is ever completely identical to another. In this sense, while repetition consolidates the regularity of the norms of “sex,” it also brings this regularity into a “potentially productive crisis” (*BM*, xix).

Although the gendered self is structured by “repeated acts”, these acts lack a coherent foundation that connects them “internally” and are characterized by “occasional discontinuity”. According to Butler, “[t]he possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition,” which reveals the illusion of an indissoluble identity as a “politically tenuous construction” (*GT*, 179). As Sara Salih observes, “hegemonic racial and sexual norms may be destabilized by subjects who do not fit neatly into the categories of white heterosexuality.”¹⁰ Since gender is neither “real” nor “natural,” it remains mutable and open to revision. This existing reality of gender could be “made differently and, indeed, less violently” (*GT*, xxiii). Current gender arrangements are not inevitable and can be transformed.

Subversive Citations

While Butler acknowledges that it is impossible to completely escape gender norms, she emphasizes that they can be changed through iterative or citational processes. When gender norms are inserted into new contexts, their meanings shift. For example, masculinity or femininity, when removed from a heterosexual context, can be “re-enacted” and “re-signified” in gay or lesbian contexts, such as in the case of butch or femme lesbians. Instead of viewing butch identity as a simple adoption of masculinity that reintegrates lesbianism into heterosexual norms, it redefines “masculinity” or “manhood” by linking it to a culturally recognized “female body.” Furthermore, the “dissonant” coexistence of masculinity with-

¹⁰ Salih S., *Judith Butler*, p. 95.

in a “female” body challenges “the very notion of an original or natural identity” (*GT* 157).

An illustrative example of the subversive aspect of iteration and citationality is also exemplified by the appropriation of the term “queer” by those very individuals against whom the term was used as a taunt, a way of incriminating, pathologizing and insulting. Through its citation, the term was detached from its original context of utterance, which was one of exclusion and denigration, resulting in a social and political re-signification that offers new possibilities of existence. In this case, a performative interpellation that had been used to exclude and dehumanize a population was able to be transformed into a linguistic sign of affirmation and resistance (*BM*, xxviii). As Butler notes: “the subject who is ‘queered’ into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds *takes up* or *cites* that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition” (*BM*, 177). A different order of values, a political affirmation came about and was acquired “from and through the very term which in a prior usage had as its final aim the eradication of precisely such an affirmation” (*BM*, 176). This example explains why “citationality” holds, for Butler, some political promise in our time (*BM*, xxviii).

In both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler refers to parody and drag as forms of queer performance that expose the performative nature of all gender identities. Just as drag operates as an (often exaggerated) imitation of one of the sexes, the realization of gender by individuals similarly involves an act of “imitation”. Through their stylized and exaggerated performances, drag queens and drag kings do not merely replicate the femininity or masculinity of the two supposedly natural sexes. Instead, they reveal “*the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*” (*GT*, 175). Drag is therefore not a “secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender”. Rather, gender itself is “a constant and repeated attempt to imitate its own idealizations” (*BM*, 85).

The mimicry of women and men in drag demonstrates that gender is a form of obsessive, imposed imitation: “all

gender is like drag”. Drag not only mimics gender but also “dramatizes” the signifying gestures through which gender is enacted. By thematizing gender through parody, drag reveals the *performative* construction of what is often assumed to be a natural, “original, and true sex” (*GT*, 85). Drag does not reproduce a prototype; rather, it exposes the absence of one altogether, demonstrating that gender consists solely of layers of performance. As a production grounded in imitation, “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (*GT*, 175). In this way, the “parodic proliferation” of gender undermines hegemonic discourse and its claims about the naturalness or essentialism of gender identities (*GT*, 176).

However, Butler acknowledges that citation is not inherently subversive. She warns that “drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (*BM*, 85). For instance, she points to Hollywood film parodies such as *Victor/Victoria* (starring Julie Andrews), *Tootsie* (starring Dustin Hoffman), and *Some Like It Hot* (starring Jack Lemmon). In these examples, drag is appropriated within the context of “high het entertainment,” effectively neutralizing its subversive potential. As a result, the boundaries between “straight” and “non-straight” identities are reabsorbed into the dominant discourse, leaving hegemonic norms intact (*BM*, 85).

Subject and Agency

By performatively constituting “the identity it is purported to be,” gender “is always a doing.” However, it is not the doing of a subject that “precedes the act” (*GT*, 33). Instead, “the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (*GT*, 181). The gendered subject does not exist “behind” the gender expressions it performs, acting as their cause or creator. Rather, it constitutes itself as a gendered subject through these performances (*GT*, 33). In this sense, the subject is not the author but the effect of its acts. Butler builds on Foucault’s notion that regulatory power not only governs subjects

externally but also operates as the normative and regulatory force through which subjects are constituted (*BM*, xxix). A “subject” does not consciously adopt or embrace a gender norm. Instead, the enforced, repeated enactment of that norm is necessary to make someone a viable, gendered subject—that is, to make someone “become” the gendered self that they “are.” The formation of the subject thus depends “on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms” (*BM*, 177).

Butler’s conceptualization of gender identity as a product of performativity has sparked significant critical debate, particularly regarding the notions of resistance and subversion. Her framework rejects the idea of a voluntaristic subject who acts as the agent of its own actions. This raises a pressing question: How can there be resistance to prevailing gender norms—and the possibility of transforming them—if there is no subject who consciously undertakes it? More specifically, how can resistance emerge if the subject is nothing more than the creation of those norms? Where, then, does resistance come from if “there is no ‘doer behind the deed’”?¹¹

According to Butler, the infinite process of iteration and citation creates the conditions for subversive repetition and, consequently, for agency. Even if “we”, as subjects, are inextricably linked to the discursive conventions that constitute us, this does not mean we are incapable of resisting or reformulating them. The subject’s relationship to these conventions—and their potential subversion—is not external to them. Butler rejects the idea of a universal, supra-historical, transcendental subject as an agent of action. Instead, aligning with Foucault, she argues that the subject is not only “grounded” in history and culture but also historically and culturally constituted.

The subject, traditionally understood as the origin and cause of action and the basis of knowledge, is, in fact, a thoroughly historical construct. However, this does not imply a form of historical and cultural determinism from which the subject cannot escape, as Seyla Benhabib seems to argue in her critique, when she asks: “How can one be constituted by

¹¹ Jagger G., *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative*, London & New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 35.

discourse without being determined by it?”¹² According to Butler, the very conventions that shape the subject also provide the possibility for their subversion through processes of iteration and citation. In her response to Benhabib in “For a Careful Reading”, Butler observes: “Gender performativity involves the difficult labor of deriving agency from the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose”.¹³ Agency, therefore, does not spring from an external source but is immanent to the discursive regimes that both implicate and enable it. As Butler argues, “the practice of ‘critique’ is implicated in the very power-relations it seeks to adjudicate”.¹⁴ Consequently, Butler rejects the notion of an “ontologically intact reflexivity”¹⁵ or any psychic resources existing beyond the subject’s discursive constitution that could serve as the basis for resistance and subversion. Agency does not emerge from an abstract, ahistorical “quasi-transcendent self”. Instead, it resides in the signifying and resignifying possibilities inherent within discourse itself. As Butler asserts, “‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (*GT*, 185). In this way, they shift the locus of agency from the subject to discourse, conceptualizing discourse as the “horizon of agency”.¹⁶ The potential for agency depends on the capacity for resignification through the reiteration and citation of the discourses that have constituted us as the subjects we are. As previously mentioned, the path to transformation lies in those “repetitions that subvert dominant gender norms in the hope of destabilizing and displacing these regimes”.¹⁷

¹² Benhabib S., “Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics: Reflections on the ‘Feminism/Postmodernism Exchange’”, in Benhabib S., Butler J., Cornell D., Fraser N., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, New York & London: Routledge, 1995, p. 110.

¹³ Butler J., “For a Careful Reading”, in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, op. cit., p. 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁵ Butler J., “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’”, in Benhabib S., Butler J., Cornell D., Fraser N., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, op. cit., p. 46.

¹⁶ Butler J., “For a Careful Reading”, p. 135

¹⁷ Jagger G., *Judith Butler*, p. 34.

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