

Performativity and Performative Utterances: More than Skin Deep

People often say that actions speak louder than words. However, words are far more powerful than people believe. Words are often forgotten and misunderstood as common terms that need not be offered a second glance. Such ideology assumes that vocabulary only breaks down into jargon, diction, and emphasis which once strung together create such wonders from idle chatter to literary masterpieces but cannot perform what they claim to say. However, throughout life there are various statements that do more than just declare a creative truth. These expressions bring their words into existence by performing an action through the simple release of language. Declarations such as, “I do” top the list of comments that simultaneously state their meaning and produce an action. Very few terms can qualify under such strict parameters that J.L. Austin pronounced, performative utterances. And even more rare are stories based around such theories. The narrative that portrays Austen’s concept best is William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in which the characters use performative utterances to reinforce their proclamations. In Shakespeare’s tale his main character Viola conceals herself as a man and by stating she is male formulates a truth no one can deny. Not only does she create an utterance that defines her identity, but Viola additionally performs her gendered declaration in such a way that Judith Butler, the mother of performativity could only commend her for. Butler argues that gender is a societal process and the blind acceptance of Viola’s counterpart Cesario solidifies this claim. Throughout the play, Viola testimony about being a man successfully enforces that Austen’s performative utterances can be used to validate a fallacy by expressing it as fact as well as reaffirming the idea Butler formulated regarding gender performativity in society.

Judith Butler annotates several discussions on gender and sexuality basing the majority of her claims off her education about Michele Foucault and his comments about society and sex. The main point that circulates within all her work accumulates in her article, “Gender Trouble” where she argues about the process and performance around the construct of gender. This relates precisely to J.L. Austin’s performative utterances. His concept puts forth the idea of words that act while Butler initiates the claim that gender is also an act. As seen in her work she explains that, “gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. The repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established,” (Butler 2500) since claims of promises and truths must be previously represented and acknowledged by society as legitimate. As stated beforehand, the concept of “I do” is only seen as an everlasting promise because the repetition and continuity of weddings have deemed it so. In order for both these concepts to be effective, repetition must be used for Viola to verbally and behaviorally convince people she is a man.

The details of this accomplishment are revealed after the purported death of Viola’s only family member, Sebastian, causes her to resort to extreme measures of protection by creating a complicated lie to preserve her family’s name. In order to properly gain access to Duke Orsino’s court, Viola must disguise herself as a man. By behaving as a man and dressing in male attire Viola will create an ‘act’ as Butler calls it. She explains how, “gender [is] a corporeal style...intentional and performative,” (Butler 2500) used by Viola to essentially dawn an all encompassing costume to pass as male. Furthermore, she must convince everyone of her new identity through words. As Austin explains Viola will not declare herself a man in a hesitant manner, “These are not going to be utterances which contain curious verbs like ‘could’ or

'might'...They will be perfectly straightforward utterances," (Austin 1432). Putting this point into action, she states, "Viola: Conceal me what I am; and be my aid For such disguise as, haply, shall become The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke; Thou shalt present me as a eunuch to him...Captain: Be you his eunuch" (Shakespeare 7). By announcing her plan with words such as "shall" and "shalt" she is "straightforwardly" vowing to herself she will execute this arrangement without faltering. Such a powerful announcement proves Viola has embraced the performance of being a man, intending to transform herself in the eyes of society in any way necessary. Her behavior as the Duke's servant presented as a eunuch will be the main basis upon which her male performance will derive. Led by the example of many other youths whom have passed through Duke's court sustains the pre-existing requirements for Viola's plan to succeed.

However, after being introduced to other characters, Viola's new persona, Cesario, has become suspect to inquiry, "Duke: That say thou art a man: Diana's lip Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound, And all is semblative a woman's part," (Shakespeare 11). In spite of the Duke's curiosities comparing Cesario to the beauty of a goddess, Viola's previous affirmation of her 'manhood' "that say thou art a man" as well as her masculine demeanor take the option of her deceiving him off the table and rather that the Duke's attendant is youthful enough to emulate feminine characteristics. But much like reality, if one side of the male/female binary is not fully expressed it will spawn questions. Much like when Olivia questions his masculine legitimacy, "Olivia: What kind of man is he?...Malvolio: He is very well-favoured, and he speaks very shrewishly; one would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him," (Shakespeare 15) and once more Viola's declaration is questioned, however she quells any suspicions with the restatement of, "Viola: I am a gentleman," (Shakespeare 17). As Austin explains in proper relation to the turmoil of *Twelfth Night*, "It is obvious that the conventional procedure which by our utterance we are purporting to use must actually exist," (Austin 1433). Since such statements are announced, one can only conclude they are the truth which furthermore allows Viola to easily deceive her surrounding characters. Moreover, the act of gender as Butler suggests is that:

...the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse primary and stable identity. (2497).

Explaining the process of gender as the formulation of an identity, Butler's theory resultantly gives Viola credit for developing a new persona due to her situation. It is not out of the ordinary or suspect. She says that, "gender can be neither true nor false" because people play into the mold of masculine and/or feminine but in reality their true beings are not subject to either categorization. In Viola's case, she has neither a true nor false identity because she balances between each binary following expected behavior to reinforce either ideal. Similarly, as per Viola's comments, Austin states that, "...although these utterances do not themselves report facts and are not themselves true or false, saying these things does very often *imply* that certain things are true and not false," (1433) giving further credence to the improbability of Cesario (Viola) lying in the eyes of other characters. Since such utterances "imply" factuality, Orsino and Olivia are both fooled into believing Viola's statements that establish her as a man just as they assume by her male company and male attitude that she is in fact a man.

Austin clearly notes that in proclaiming a performative utterance a truth is created through active language. Such language allows for stringent lies to be classified as viable and an authentic means for executing a falsehood. These terms are why, “The explicit performative verb is evolved— to make clear exactly which it is, how far it commits [one] and in what way,” (Austin 1438) so that Viola is able to fabricate a lie to the point where her persona has overshadowed her true identity. The performativity Butler speaks of is fully represented in this passage by Viola’s flawlessly performed masculine identity. She has so strongly convinced the other characters of the existence of Cesario that her inner personality cannot break through no matter her trials. This battle between inner and outer identities harkens back to the movie, Ma Vie en Rose in which young Ludovic struggles between behaving as the boy people perceive him to be and the girl he knows to be inside. Viola is faced with a similar struggle throughout the play battling between herself and Cesario. It is under such comparisons that one can see the full extent of gender across the cultural spectrum. Despite writing in different periods, Austin’s theory of utterances as well as Butler’s gender process runs its course in Shakespeare’s play when Viola realizes she has committed herself to a long-term involvement in the lie and thus has blended her with the alter-ego Cesario:

Viola: I am the man; --if it be so,--as 'tis,-- Poor lady, [Olivia] were better love a dream. As I am man, My state is desperate for my master's love; As I am woman, now alas the day! What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe! O time, thou must untangle this, not I; It is too hard a knot for me to untie! (Shakespeare 19-20).

Caught between two people within the same body, Viola’s performative utterance declaring herself a man has resulted in severe repercussions that include gender processing. Such role-playing has declared her a man to the community much in the way her statements have reinforced these perceptions. Not only is she “desperate for [her] master’s love” but the woman she plans to woo for him has fallen in love with “a dream”. This conundrum demonstrates the potency of how dangerous lies as well as gender performativity can be, and how the implication of their truth intensifies the dilemma. Unfortunately, Viola is forced to manage the existence of Cesario who has since commandeered her own life, repressing her truth desires. The tangled web comes to a precipice when Viola begins to reveal the truth of her deception:

Olivia: Stay; I pr'ythee tell me what thou think'st of me.

Viola: That you do think you are not what you are.

Olivia: If I think so, I think the same of you.

Viola: Then think you right; I am not what I am. (Shakespeare 34).

However, given the previous validations of her male guise, in this instance Olivia does not interpret Cesario’s statement, “I am not what I am” as fact but rather a play on words. The initial lie Viola successfully passed has subsequently discredited her later admissions of truth. As formerly stated, Austin’s concept of the “implication of truth” allows such confusions in the practice of his theory to arise. Although a performative utterance suggests the enacting of a truth, the comments themselves are neither true nor false much in the way her gender is portrayed and as such are up to the interpretation of the receiver. Due to the nature of interpretation, the correct meaning of a statement (as noted above) is not always properly understood but rather often mistaken. In *Twelfth Night* one performative utterance counteracts another demonstrating this unique condition in Austin’s theory. Under such circumstances, Viola is unable to subtly convince Olivia or Duke Orsino regarding her true self and it will take a direct action to repair.

Nevertheless, as Viola explains, “O time, thou must untangle this, not I; It is too hard a knot for me to untie!” (Shakespeare 20) she is forced to continue living as Cesario stuck in a quandary between two separate but identical forms of forbidden love that “is too hard a knot for me to untie” displaying the risk of using performative utterances that can authenticate lies and how easily gender is constructed based upon the mannerisms of a socially accepted grouping. Once more a comparison arises between Viola’s troubles within *Twelfth Night* and those of Ludovic from Ma Vie en Rose, each must battle against the person society has imprinted upon them.

Within the final pages of the play, Viola is faced with the complexity of retracting her initial statement that constituted her as a man. Given that such an utterance actualized her fraudulent claim, she must then only reveal herself by committing another performative utterance that will withdraw and effectively cancel what she said before. This proves difficult considering that Viola utilized her superior acting ability and society’s strict binary nature to swindle everyone into believing she is a man. Prior to her final admission confusion arises upon her brother’s unexpected return. Olivia insists the pair marry (believing him to be Cesario) and Sebastian in his own right creates a performative utterance in effect that Austin writes on, “When we say, ‘I promise’...we actually...do the promising,” (1436). They interact thusly, “Olivia: Nay, come, I pr’ythee. Would thou’dst be ruled by me! Sebastian: Madam, I will. Olivia: O, say so, and so be!” (Shakespeare 47) forming a bond that is solidified through Sebastian’s declaration of, “I will” and later when they marry, “Sebastian: I’ll... go with you; And, having sworn truth, ever will be true,” (Shakespeare 50) he reinforces his declaration as an active form of “sworn truth”. Such a promise complicated Viola’s attempt to rectify her previous mistakes. When she refuses Olivia the contradictory exchanges include utterances that convince Olivia she has been betrayed by their breach:

Priest: A contract of eternal bond of love, Confirmed by mutual joinder of your hands,
Attested by the holy close of lips, Strengthen'd by interchangement of your rings; And all
the ceremony of this compact Sealed in my function, by my testimony: Since when, my
watch hath told me, toward my grave, I have travelled but two hours. (Shakespeare 54).

The priest is a man of faith, appointed power by God to affirm the union of two souls. In the aforementioned case, he is a witness to the testimony Sebastian and Olivia performatively uttered regarding their wedding. He too is subject to believing in genders and as such he observed a man and woman marrying which to him in itself is legally binding. Olivia is subsequently concerned the vow was artificial due to Viola’s rejection of their marriage and uses the priest as leverage to prove its worth. Her nerves derive from a point as Austin explains, “We should not say that I didn’t in fact promise, but that I promised insincerely,” (1438) letting it be known this outcome is possible if the promiser’s intent was ill conceived. However, this fusion of situations creates disorder because the attendant of the wedding was not the man Olivia believed him to be. Instead of Cesario, it was Sebastian who indeed consensually agreed to the nuptial promise.

As a result, Viola has no choice but to reveal the truth about Cesario, “Viola: ...Of place, time, fortune, do cohere, and jump That I am Viola,” (Shakespeare 57). In this final utterance she swears to the truth that she is not a man but disguised, through the process of performativity and in reality Sebastian’s sister, Viola. She repairs the dilemma of her conflicted forms by announcing the truth, once more using the power of performative language to reset her situation. Ultimately, with her brother married to woman she wooed, in true comedic Shakespearean

fashion, Orsino declares his love for Viola in the play's final performative utterance, "Duke: And since you called me master for so long, Here is my hand; you shall from this time be You master's mistress," (Shakespeare 57). By announcing that Viola "shall..be [her] master's mistress" Orsino produces the vow to be so through such active language that previously drove the plot in curves until this point of resolution. From the words of Butler, this gender reversal is not inconceivable but rather easily produced if Viola is capable of mimicking the proper gender behavior expected of her in either form. As she states, "Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*," (Butler 2501) explaining how mystifyingly fascinating gender truly is given that it is more akin to movie magic than an inborn trait. This notion is chiefly seen within the featured play and its central character, Viola who performs her role of Cesario without a flaw.

Within William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Viola cleverly convinces all of the supporting characters of her male identity through the use of performative utterances, a concept created by J.L. Austin as well as the gender performativity Judith Butler highlighted from everyday life. These reports do more than state a truth; they actively produce one through words and behavior. By playing off these rules, Viola is able to invent a persona she calls Cesario knowing that people will accept the fabrication based upon her statement that directly contradicts it due to the manner in which she conducts this man. Throughout the play, Shakespeare's character Viola misguidedly lodges herself deeper into this lie by continuously restating its accuracy as well as retaining a masculine behavior. However, through this authentication Viola proves that a performative utterance can in fact validate a fallacy which later can only be retracted through another performative utterance. Not only this poignant verbal fact, but additionally her persona as Cesario further illuminated the caricature of gender in society. These circumstances are produced through the concept that by declaring a fact the utterance makes it so and one such "I do" can only be withdrawn by "I don't". Despite existing in separate eras, J.L. Austin's theory about performative utterances and Judith Butler's idea on gender performativity cross boundaries to demonstrate their authority over texts new and old. Words as well as behavior constitute an identity that society accepts as long as there was previous evidence of its authenticity and repetition throughout time that gives it credence to be real. As each theorist states, their concepts are neither true nor false. Fortunately or unfortunately for Viola, she utilizes these predetermined traits to exist within the realm of a validated falsehood as a woman performing as a man. And even at the end of the play, she continues her gender performance as Viola, promised wife of Duke Orsino. The involvement of performativity be it spoken or acted is prominent and inescapable in all lives: true or false.

Works Cited

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