



“The Matter of the Mind in *Mrs. Dalloway*: How Woolf Reveals Gender Performativity Before Butler Reveals the Term”

by Nicole Renna

## Introduction

Judith Butler, in her work “Gender Trouble,” insists a need for a radical philosophical movement towards the understanding that gendered experience is internalized due to compulsory gender actions and conventions, which pursue a completely derived and ultimately unachievable ideal. Yet, despite such a claim, and ample discussion on how harmful and limiting this gendered experience is, she introduces no solution for revealing or disrupting such gender performativity; though the comedic performance of drag is a promising component in pushing the boundaries of gender norms in how it exposes the absurdity of idealized, distinct genders, Butler asserts that it is hardly sufficient in prompting a radical rethinking of such norms because of its dependence on context, reception, and successful subversion of conventions. Butler wonders—and prompts her readers to wonder about—what other sort of performance could surge such a radical philosophical movement.

Ironically, before Butler wondered such things, before Butler’s gender theories and her terms of gender performativity were even proposed, this performance, and demonstration of gender performativity, was, by Virginia Woolf, already achieved. Through

producing an entirely authentic performance of life (rather than a parody) in *Mrs. Dalloway*, its subversion of all conventions makes the consequential subversion of gender norms and binaries completely logical. In considering the major points of gender performativity outlined in Butler’s work, and then exploring the concept of internal versus performative identity in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this paper aims to indicate Woolf’s work as the gender performance that Butler demanded, despite its predating Butler’s gender theory, in the following way: Woolf, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, articulates the simple truth of internal ambiguity in experience, so that when those ideas apply to gender, and trickle in through the novel’s syntax and imagery, they are sufficient performance to reveal the discursiveness of gender, and essentially all other conventions.

## Mind over Matter: Gendering Performativity in Theory of Butler and Woolf

In “From Interiority to Gender Performance,” from Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Butler proposes some major points about gender theory by considering “the surface politics of the body” in the context of gender identity (Butler 2547-2548). In distinguishing between the internality and externality of

experience, she concludes that the externality of identity--such as “acts, gestures, enactments”--which can be understood as a performance of identity, when gendered, can be understood as a gendered version of this performance. In other words, these “acts and gestures” are illusory representations of some gendered “interiority or gendered core,” which is maintained by the “obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality,” and so is entirely discursive (2548-2549). In other words, our internal consciousness is not, by nature, gendered; it is only through the external cues obtained in human socialization, that we come to understand certain ideological and personal qualities as gendered, and then adapt our behavior and external persona accordingly to those molds. Butler asserts, then, that “if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if 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 true effects of primary and stable identity” (2549).

Explaining how gender performances, such like drag and cross-dressing, are parodies of this identity, which reveal that the identity that gender fashions itself as some imitation of is without origin, Butler nevertheless

recognizes that this comic disruption, entirely dependent on context, reception, and successful imbuelement of what Butler calls “subversive confusion,” is not sufficient in achieving a necessary radical reappraisal of gender. Naturally, Butler then questions what performance would be sufficient to reveal that rethinking. Specifically, she asks:

“What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire” (2551).

Yet, if one considers the majority of Butler’s assertions in the context of the work of Virginia Woolf, one finds that her novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway*, although published in years previous to Butler’s work, can be read as that very place that Butler wondered about.

The importance and deliberate sketch of consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the intention to remove the



construction of gender from the sketch, is made clear in Woolf's essay, "Androgyny," in which clear parallels to Butler's points already arise. In the essay, Woolf explains her theory that there exists both a masculine and feminine power in the minds of all people, yet in men the masculine is dominating and in women the feminine; she then asserts that "the normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two are in harmony together, spiritually cooperating" as when their fusion occurs "the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties" (Woolf 901). She explains this adept mind, in which this fusion occurs, as the "androgynous mind," explaining how it is "resonant and porous," "transmits emotion without impediment" and "is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided," in contrast with "single-sexed" minds; these points clearly align with Butler's notion that the "truth" of gender is completely derived, and therefore not the full, unrepressed, natural state of the interior mind. (Woolf 901). Moreover, in the same way Butler contends that a sort of construction of what gender should be infiltrated the natural interiority of the mind to produce a "fabricated inner truth of gender," Woolf contends that those that brought about "sex-consciousness," and so the awareness of discursivity of gender, are to

blame for the meagerness of androgynous minds, transcendent of the sort of "fabricated inner truth of gender" Butler describes. Woolf blames those that brought about "sex-consciousness" for the lack of androgyny in literature, insists that "the whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get at the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness," and explicitly states it her intention to do that in her own work (Woolf 904).

Since Woolf contends that she herself is writing with both these minds, and recognizes that the acknowledgment of both minds is severely lacking in society, it makes sense that *Mrs. Dalloway* outlines a clear distinction between the external experience of the character Clarissa Dalloway and her natural conscious experience. Woolf produces this through significant alterations of syntax, grammar, and imagery, which mirror the significant alterations of a need for gendered identity, between the distinct internal natural state and external contrived one. This distinction, then, can be understood as the performance Butler deems necessary for a "radical rethinking" of gender, as it is a performance which necessarily inverts the "inner/outer distinction" of fabricated and fantasy gender, reconsiders the "place and stability of the masculine



and feminine,” and reveals “the performativity of gender itself” through its side by side outline of interior and exterior individual identity and experience in an explicit way, rather than in the circumventing and parodied way of something like drag.

### **Mind and Matter: *Mrs. Dalloway* at a Glance**

*Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf details a day in the life of the character Clarissa Dalloway, a lady of high society in post-WWI London, as she makes preparations for a party she is hosting in the evening. The limited external plot, a radical point of the novel, is an intentional quality of the work, as the novel has a deeply interior perspective, traveling forward and back in time and in and out of Clarissa’s and other characters’ minds in order to portray an expansive impression of Clarissa’s life, mind, and identity in the span of a single day. The novel, allowing such a deep experience of Clarissa’s internal experiences, creates a space of intrigue where the internal musings of a high society woman--eternally dominated and restricted by heteronormative social conventions and patriarchal idealism of female image and propriety--may be considered at its unfiltered and unstructured basest. This affords an opportunity to make key

observations about what modern gender theorists, such as Judith Butler, are very preoccupied with: the existence of gender as a construct of the external social order, rather than an innate state of internal being.

The unique subversion of gender norms in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in contrast with all that came before it, is the emphasis on perfect internal androgyny paired with classical and mainstream external gendered performance; this insists that instances of gendered subversion or androgyny are not occurrences on the margins or in the minorities of society--such as those of drag and/or LGBTQ communities--but rather inherent truths to the identities of the full spectrum of class, wealth, and psyche. Clarissa Dalloway, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is the image of a perfectly feminine and mannered English socialite, while her internal experience is as muddled, indefinable, and androgynous as Septimus Smith, a mentally-ill and war-traumatized man completely out of tune with high society. This allowance for seamless flow in and out of the minds of different gendered bodies, by way of their shared, unbounded human experience as ungendered and underived persons, allows a transcendence from all cultural restraints of externality, such as gendered performance, in a much more complex

way than a simple subversion of genders and gendered qualities, such like might be seen in a work by Shakespeare. The presentation of the characters Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, as externally opposite by societal definitions of class, gender, and sanity, but--through Woolf's unique narrative composition of human consciousness — internally fluid, figurative, and similarly unstructured, allows Woolf to paint a unique and unprecedented picture of internal sameness by way of a shared internal androgyny among all stations, and performed identities, in external existence.

### **Matter over Mind: Exteriority as the Performance in *Mrs. Dalloway***

Woolf introduces the notion of an outer performance through the style of her work, which insists that the external picture of a person in the world is a filtered and spliced version of their internal truth. This performative role character Clarissa Dalloway plays externally, where conventions and expectations exist, is mirrored by Woolf's style in expressing Clarissa in the outside world. For example, in conversations, such like that when Peter, a previous love interest for Clarissa, comes over to speak with Clarissa while she sews her dress for the party, Woolf draws a clear contrast between the style of the internal reality

and external performance through syntax, grammar, and imagery. Over the course of two pages, if the external relations between part of the conversation between the characters is isolated, their interaction reads as follows:

Clarissa: “Well, and what’s happened to you?”

Peter: “Millions of things!... I am in love...In love..”

Clarissa: “‘In love!’ she said...‘And who is she?’” she asked.

Peter: “‘A married woman, unfortunately...the wife of a Major in the Indian Army...She has... two small children; a boy and a girl; and I have come over to see my lawyers about the divorce (44-45).’”

In these lines of dialogue, Woolf uses only declarative syntax, never using conditional or figurative language; questions are posed, and answered immediately and certainly in the following lines. Moreover, the phrases are succinct and factual; Peter expresses he is in love, that the woman he loves has two kids, and that he is going to speak to a lawyer about her divorce in short, direct sentences or fragments. This style, syntactically brief and figuratively void, directly



communicates the obligatory niceties of catching up with a person basely. This mimics perfectly the world of exteriority that Butler insists frames and infiltrates our internal experience. In this interaction, the fact that after years apart the topic of their conversation is heterosexual love, clearly falls thematically into the “obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality,” which Butler insists compels our experience. Moreover, the fact that the language used to express this topic is direct and to the point, and not at all representative of their natural and incensed reaction to being around each other, contrasts so profoundly with their internal experience-- be it that Clarissa is overwhelmed, reactionary, and emotional in her internal experience of this conversation, and the fact that they both have very strong feelings for each other, be it love, lust, regret, or resentment--makes the conversation, and her very brief responses in it, definitely a performance which speaks to the domination of external conventional coherence over what was internal and natural.

Such concise, clinical language in their relations implies a similar directness and reductiveness to the society they operate in, especially when compared to the internal expansiveness of Clarissa’s internal existence over the

course of these two pages of conversation. While asking Peter her initial question of how he had been she is thinking, “So before a battle begins, the horses paw the ground; toss their heads; the light shines on their flanks; their necks curve. So Peter Walsh and Clarissa, sitting side by side on the blue sofa, challenged each other,” the symbolic and metaphorical language, presenting the energy and ferociousness of their engagement, outside of the performed civility of conventional interaction. While Peter says he is in love, twice, Clarissa simply parrots the phrase back, yet internally her reaction is expansive beyond the two words; she thinks: “That he at his age should be sucked under his little bow-tie by that monster! And there’s no flesh on his neck; his hands are red; and he’s six months older than I am! Her eye flashed back to her; but in her heart she felt, all the same, he is in love. He has that, she felt; he is in love (Woolf 45).” While, externally, the same simple concept of Peter’s love is fixated on, and vocalized explicitly thrice, internally, Clarissa’s mind races through several vague and ambiguous thoughts, without reiteration or explanation: when Clarissa refers to “that monster!” does she mean the new girl in Peter’s life or love itself? What does she mean by “there’s no flesh on his neck?”



why is she commenting that his hands “are red” or that he is older than her? What is she feeling when she thinks “he has that, she felt...” Such external and internal distinctions as these characterize the interactions of the novel as a whole, and are only supported more by other trends of external versus internal difference which serve to further fracture the world of fluid and unbound internal experience and conventional and structured external performance.

Aside from the ambiguity of the internal, Woolf also produces a lot internal inconsistency. Reacting further to the knowledge that Peter is in love, Clarissa thinks “all his life long Peter had been fooled like that; first getting sent down from Oxford; next marrying the girl on the boat going out to India; now the wife of a Major in the Indian Army--thank Heaven she had refused to marry him!” which completely contradicts earlier thoughts, and future thoughts, in which she questions if she made the right choice not marrying him--questions which, internally have no and need no explicit answer like they would in the external.

This stylistic regard for the external versus internal experience is true to Clarissa Dalloway's experience. Externally, she exists in the world of conventions and appearances, despite her

converse internal existence. This world is where the bell tower chimes every hour in the chronology of her day, where she gets flowers to bring back for a party she is hosting, and where she converses explicitly with other characters. The language which she can use in it is similarly void of eccentricities, figurative language, and expansiveness. The fact that, through this role, she is, externally, developed to be the perfect picture of a female socialite, speaks to Butler's world of gender performativity; she is the epitome of what is expected of the wife of a wealthy conservative politician such as herself: a well-spoken and well-dressed heterosexual female, conscious of her role in London high society (Woolf). In fact, Woolf based the character off of a woman in her life who was the proper type of society woman that Woolf was expected to be, Kitty Maxse, who was the gentile wife of an affluent man (Taylor). Explicitly, Clarissa and other characters seem to be aware of this truth of the external shallowness and performance. Clarissa is described as “the great hostess,” by an old friend Peter, and reflects on herself, thinking, “since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party” (Woolf, 16). In these lines, it is clear that



her external identity be it by description of Peter or by familial obligation to Clarissa, is tied to the performance of party giving. Moreover, she is described as someone whose “life was a tissue of vanity and deceit,” by her daughter’s tutor, and thinks of herself, “now this body she wore...this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing -- nothing at all;” descriptions such as these assert that the body in external life is a fabrication for Clarissa (Woolf 16).

Acknowledging this, it makes perfect sense that internally, where things are allowed to be fluid, and ambiguous, and indistinct, gender performativity would be lost and androgyny would follow. Clarissa’s performance of the elitist feminine ideal is completely void in her internal; in fact, there is a considerable amount of phallic imagery which marks her abstracted and true self-image, beyond the physical show, and significant internal monologues which portray feelings of intimacy towards women beyond any expressed in the external performative world. Clarissa’s internal self-image is described as both masculine and feminine: on multiple occasions she “stiffens,” sitting upright, she cuts “like a knife through everything,” she thinks “if she could have had her life over again...she would have been interested

in politics like a man; very dignified,” she describes her face as “pointed, dart-like, definite,” while Peter wields a pocket knife, she wields her own phallic objects, needles to mend her dress (Woolf 4, 8, 10, 37, 76, 44).

Her internal experience of the memories and interactions she has with women are, also, completely opposite to everything she experiences and puts forth in the world of men. Firstly, her memories of her childhood friend, Sally Seton, are declared to be ones of “purity” and “integrity” but she never similarly categorized her ones about men, including ones of her past love with Peter Walsh and her current husband Richard Dalloway, as such. When Clarissa first saw Sally she thought:

“...if it were now to die ‘twere to be most happy.’ That was her feeling - Othello’s feeling, and she felt it, she was convinced as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it, all because she was coming down to dinner in a white frock to meet Sally Seton” (36).

Furthermore, she remembers a kiss she shared with Sally, when she was but a girl, as “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” when “the world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared...she uncovered, or the

radiance broke through, the revelation, the religious feeling!” (Woolf 35). Such descriptions contrast starkly with her life as “Mrs. Richard Dalloway” in which she is in a stable and unimpasioned marriage, in which “not for a moment did she believe in God,” and her heterosexual love with Peter Walsh, whom “she had to break up with or they would have been destroyed, the both of them ruined” (Woolf 29). The fluidity of her never having to name her love, or logically determine the sexual implications of such love in the internal, are what allows the impressions to rise and fall without consequence; the “exquisite moment” of her kiss with Sally, after all, simply rises to the surface in the early pages of the novel and never explicitly arises again, or is otherwise analyzed.

The closest the special flash of homosexual love between Clarissa and Sally ever comes to being relived is when they have their reunion at the party. The original moment was as follows:

“Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that

she had been given a present wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it....(35)”

Yet, at the party, as the elitist “Mrs. Richard Dalloway” this moment of fluidity, this lapse in “cohesive coherence” and “obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality,” to borrow Butler’s terms, is completely subverted to exist in her external identity. When Clarissa sees Sally again, they stop to greet each other, as women of their class do at parties, with kisses on the cheek, as is customary, and the flowers that are present are those gifted and set in a proper bouquet from Clarissa’s prominent husband. Moreover, while kissing Sally as kids, before conventions and identities are formed, the world fell away and they accessed a perfect intimate connection; however when they greet conventionally the physical world is prominent and present, from the full rooms, to the “roar” of conversations, to the “curtains.” It reads as follows:

“The lustre had gone out of her. Yet it was extraordinary to see her again, older, happier, less lovely. They kissed each other, first the cheek then that, by the drawing-room door, and Clarissa turned, with Sally’s hand in hers, and saw her rooms full, heard the roar or

voices, saw the candlesticks, the blowing curtains, and the roses which Richard had given her (Woolf 171).”

The style in *Mrs. Dalloway* alternating between factual and direct when producing the external, and vague and abstract when producing the internal, perfectly mimics the notions of interiority and exteriority which Butler distinguishes between in her argument about gender performativity. As such, the moments of gender fluidity which intervene in characters’, such a Clarissa’s internal experience, make perfect sense in the performance of that world, and perfectly reveal the performative derivation of gender along with all other conventions outside of the natural and internal.

### **The Matter of the Mind in *Mrs. Dalloway*: How Woolf Presents Butler’s Gender Performativity**

A consideration of androgyny and subversion of gender norms in literature is not novel; however, the expression of the internality of human consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway* which, transcendent and unconstrained, is liberated from the need to perform with respect to such norms of gender in order to expose, implicitly, the truth of androgyny and the derivativeness of gender associations, is an unprecedented triumph in literature. While Judith Butler touches, explicitly,

on some of the same ideas of androgyny and gender performativity that Woolf does, in her apt and compelling argument in *Gender Trouble*, she is not correct to say that a proper example, a clear portrayal, of the existence of gender performativity and internal androgyny has not yet emerged in such a way to revolutionize the subversion of these norms. As expressed earlier in this essay, Butler, after evaluating drag performance as a powerful but insufficient mode of exposing the arbitrary and contrived nature of gender performance, contends the following:

“What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire” (2551).

Woolf’s work, *Mrs. Dalloway*, preceding the work of Butler by years, through implicit and narrative means, does all these things that Butler demands. Woolf, in creating similar images,

syntactical flow, and figurative liberty to be fluid and vague, in both the minds of externally female and male characters, does “invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality;” Woolf, in creating clear distinctions between external and internal identity--and presenting the external world as being the place for constraints, labels, and societal norms of class, gender, and sanity, while the internal is unstable, unconstrained, and removed from all notions of social order--does “compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine” as being entirely subject to the external world. As such, Woolf, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is the “kind of gender performance” that “will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire,” because it presents, unequivocally, the existence of all such categories, labels, and impressions as beholden to the external world of identity and desire, not the internal. It makes sense then, that *Mrs. Dalloway* is described on its back cover as being an “inspired novelistic outline of human consciousness,” as it, implicitly, confronts the falsity of the cultural understanding of gender at the time that man and woman have

distinct and opposite personhoods, and therefore experience the world as one or the other (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1990; Woolf 1922).

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butler , Judith. “Gender Trouble.” The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, by Vincent B. Leitch, W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

Taylor, David. “The Real Clarissa Dalloway – TheTLS.” TheTLS, The Times Literary Supplement, 16 July 2015, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/the-real-clarissa-dalloway/>.

Woolf , Virginia. “Androgyny .” The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, by Vincent B. Leitch, W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

Woolf, Virginia. Mrs. Dalloway. First ed., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990.

Woolf, Virginia. Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf. First ed., Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003.