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# Performativity Confounded
## Agency, Resistance, and the History of Politeness

**Soile Ylivuori**

*Abstract*

This essay compares Judith Butler's and Erving Goffman's theoretical contributions to performance and performativity with the goal of bridging their approaches, usually seen as mutually incompatible. Using eighteenth-century women's politeness as a case study, it argues that politeness is a practice that is essentially both performed and performative and that analysing it as such offers us valuable new information on eighteenth-century subjectivities. Building on this, the essay suggests that combining performance and performativity can be used to reconceptualize agency and thereby find a way out of the Butlerian impasse of the impossibility of resistance. In this way, performance has the potential to confound the paralyzing non-agency of performativity.

*Keywords*: identity performance, performativity, subjectivity, agency, resistance, British history, politeness, Erving Goffman, Judith Butler

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> The life of a young lady … too much resembles that of an actress; the morning is all rehearsal, and the evening is all a performance.
>
> Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799, I.105)

Erving Goffman and Judith Butler are both central figures in academic endeavours to investigate questions related to subjectivity, identity, agency, and autonomy. Both have used performances of selfhood as their starting point, but gone off to very different directions: while Goffman advocates the notion of an active actor who stages performances to draw the acceptance of their audience, Butler maintains that social performances are a part of discursively preconditioned iterative practices that deeply make the unwitting individual. Thus, despite the fact that both Butler and Goffman engage in theories of subjectivity through the vocabulary of performance, their theories of performance have often been represented as incommensurate, mostly because of their differing understandings of the self as either pre-existing or discursively constituted (Jagger 23–5; Lawler Ch. 6). When similarities between the two have been explored, most scholars have focused on framing Goffman as an early precursor of Butler's thought in the fields of performance studies and embodied knowledge, thus presenting Butler as a more sophisticated development of Goffman's theories of performance and selfhood (Denzin; Hancock & Garner; Smith, 'Reconsidering'; Birrell &

Donnelly; Gilleard & Higgs 7–11; Brickell). This essay challenges these readings by fitting Goffman's performance and Butler's performativity in a more equally complementary and organically interactive framework. According to my reading, both Goffman and Butler essentially agree that the subject is produced by discursive and social power, which individuals internalize through bodily practices. Rather than two separate and differently valued theoretical systems, Butler's and Goffman's thought should be seen as organically linked to each other. Combining these two traditions holds political significance, as Goffmanian ideas of performance have particular potential in solving the main criticism aimed at Butler's notion of performativity—the impossibility of true agency and individual resistance.

A reinterpretation of performance and performativity has also relevance in the field of historically informed academic research and the approaches we take when examining the past. Unlike most disciplines in humanities and social sciences, history as a broad field has been slow to integrate postmodernist theoretical insights into its 'mainstream' methodology. Accordingly, historical research examining the performance of social roles has—even decades after the linguistic turn—been mainly focused on analyzing active individual actors and their motivation, goals, meanings, and agency, as well as the methods they use in their everyday social performances (on this critique, see Ermarth, *History*; Clark; Scott, 'After History?'). In other words, historical interpretations of the past have tended to see historical individuals as conscious actors operating more or less in a Goffmanian tradition—a trend criticized by many history theorists who have called for a profound reformulation of agency as discursive, creative, non-binary, and fluid (e.g. Raddeker Ch. 4; Scott, 'Evidence'; Scott, *Only Paradoxes* 15–16; Ermarth, 'Agency'; Ermarth, 'Beyond'). Therefore, a consideration of the relationship between Goffman's and Butler's stances, as well as a recognition that 'pure Goffmanianism' is, in fact, impossible in the sense that all conscious performances inevitably end up creating performative subjectivity, could help shift the focus of historical research towards a wider engagement with the performative. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth reminds us, if we as historians want to 'keep up with ourselves in any vital or creative way', our postmodern discursive condition requires us to radically rethink the very tools of thought which we employ when writing history instead of clinging to tools that were forged for modernity, many of them several centuries ago (*History* xi–xii).[1] At the same time, utilizing interdisciplinary theoretical approaches in historical research can provide fruitful historical contextualizations to and nuanced new readings of theoretical concepts that are too often dealt with as ahistorical.

I have chosen to approach performance and performativity through the case study of English eighteenth-century women's politeness not only to maintain an intelligible empirical basis, but also because politeness offers a perfect case study for examining discursive and social practices as both performed and performative. Eighteenth-century polite society has been extensively researched as an example of a meticulously codified stage of social interaction where performances of social status and gender constantly intermingled (see e.g. Bryson; Carter; Klein, 'Liberty'; Klein, 'Politeness'; Pocock). Politeness was simultaneously a blatantly theatrical social phenomenon, compiled of intricate rules of interaction and self-

[1] I am choosing to read Goffman here as a part of the modernist tradition, despite some suggestions that his writings can be interpreted to have early postmodernist resonances as well (e.g. Greg Smith, 'Introduction' 5; Battershill; Schwalbe).

fashioning, while it also had close connections to internal, 'authentic' virtue of the private self. Moreover, practicing politeness was aimed at internalizing these gendered social rules, and therefore deeply performative—and particularly so in women's case, as they were seen as the gendered Other (in contrast to men as the universal norm) and had to be taught to assume 'proper' polite femininity as a part of their internal selfhood. Women's politeness therefore serves as an illustrative example of the sort of fruitful historical analysis these two theorists can be put to use to produce; since politeness was simultaneously engaged with both performance and performativity, both aspects need to be investigated in order to fully understand eighteenth-century elite women's subjectivities. Moreover, this eighteenth-century case study provides a new and highly relevant perspective on ongoing present-day discussions which have, also on the pages of *TPQ*, investigated the ambiguity surrounding identity performances—whether they should be read as 'real' or 'play' (e.g. Grindstaff & West; Shugart). Through an examination of women's politeness, I suggest that performances essentially are simultaneously both.

**Politeness Contextualized**

Historical politeness studies are much indebted to Norbert Elias's idea of a civilization process which establishes civility as a measuring stick to identify between (a usually Western, white, male, elite, wealthy) Us against a subordinate and abject Other. As Joan Scott explains in her essay on civility and campus thought policing, Elias's theory contends that whether it was Christians against barbarians, or court aristocrats against the rising middle class, or the upper bourgeoisie attempting to distinguish themselves from the lower orders, 'civilisé was … one of the many terms … by which the courtly people wished to designate … the specific quality of their own behaviour, and by which they contrasted the refinement of their own social manners, their "standard", to the manners of simpler and socially inferior people' ('New Thought Police'). Elias's theory has been used in scholarship examining manners and civility in the context of gender, class, and ethnicity from Renaissance to the present day, and its influence in the social, cultural, and intellectual history of early modern Europe has been particularly pronounced. In eighteenth-century England, scholars have argued, the language of civility was expressed in terms of politeness—a culture that provided the eighteenth-century social elite the vocabulary for not only smooth interaction but also for social differentiation through refinement and taste. In practice, the discourse of politeness was focused on refining people's manners, speech, appearances, and deportment, as well as communicating to them what spiritual or moral characteristics they should aspire towards in order to be considered 'polite', 'well bred', or 'genteel'. These discursively idealized manners and characteristics were also extremely gender- (as well as race-) specific; apart from some basic principles, women were supposed to follow a very different code of behavior from men (Klein, *Shaftesbury* 4; Bryson 46–7; Carter 21–3), while non-white subjects were overwhelmingly excluded from a membership in polite society altogether (Gikandi).

Politeness was often described and discussed in terms of theatricality and performance. There were, in fact, two different interpretations of politeness at play in the highly debated eighteenth-century English politeness discourse: one that linked politeness to men's internal

moral virtue and another that based it on their theatrical self-representation.[2] John Locke addressed the former in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), grounding good behavior on moral character and inner goodness. Locke thought true politeness sprang from 'inward Civility', not from studying to polish external good manners, claiming that inner refinement was enough to make an individual's external actions pleasing (126). Locke's views were shared by several early eighteenth-century writers, most notably the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, and Richard Steele, who saw good manners as an immediate and natural result of a virtuous mind (Peltonen 401).

However, this idea of inward politeness competed with another interpretation of politeness—one that had its origins in the courtly etiquette of the Renaissance, where the ability to establish oneself through calculated self-representation was considered a necessary element of the courtier's repertoire (Carter 57). This interpretation saw politeness as an external performance, an artificial show put on in order to please—the goal of pleasing being forwarding one's own interests. These writers saw humans as essentially flawed and selfish; therefore, virtue was a mask of calculated behavior that could be used to hide one's true self. In this tradition, politeness was seen as a set of carefully practiced external appearances, gestures, and postures—not something that flowed effortlessly from within (Kekäläinen 21; Carter 55; Peltonen 402–3). Seeing politeness as a dissimulative performance was, in many ways, conditioned by eighteenth-century urban modernity; many scholars have argued that public life in eighteenth-century metropolises was essentially a play of social masks based on theatrical principles (Kekäläinen 5; Withington). Whereas inward politeness had strong connotations of morality, openness, honesty, and transparency, in addition to being rhetorically branded as a particularly English and, to some extent, middling sort version of politeness, external or theatrical politeness was generally criticized for its opaque dishonesty and associated with the immoral aristocracy, courtly culture, and Frenchness. For these reasons, inward politeness was also discursively deemed to be the more suitable of the two traditions for women, as the female nature was traditionally seen to be intrinsically moral and guileless. Women's high morals were also deemed vital to the British nation, not least because a patriarchal society was, in many ways, dependent on female transparency (Ylivuori, *Women* Ch. 2).

**Goffman and Selfhood**

Thus, performance was a much-used—though morally ambivalent—metaphor for politeness. Eighteenth-century English elite was well aware of the social roles they were playing in their everyday interaction and the conscious self-fashioning they were required to engage in to create and maintain their status as members of polite society. This sort of thought resonates deeply with modern social theorists' notions of everyday social life as a performance, most notably put forward by Erving Goffman in the 1950s and 1960s. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman formulates his famous theory of all human interaction being essentially based on performance. Goffman argues that individuals engage in performances to abide by social norms; by manipulating their appearance, manner, and setting, they communicate

[2] The conflict between the virtues of honest, transparent sincerity and prudent, dissimulative theatricality was not new, but, instead, had long roots in Renaissance self-fashioning (see e.g. Martin 1333–4).

appropriate fictional identities to their audience (1–8, 22–30; see also Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*). Goffman approaches the performance through a dramaturgical metaphor, using such concepts as stage, actor, audience, front and back regions, and props. In eighteenth-century society, the actor—say, a genteel female—would have aimed to fashion herself according to the normative ideals of polite femininity to perform adequately enough to maintain and possibly enhance her social status. She would have been educated by governesses, boarding schools, didactic literature, and peer observation to emulate certain bodily postures, manners, ways of speaking—in short, inhabiting her body in a certain way. The culture of politeness placed a considerable emphasis on the fashioning of the exterior frame—or, in Goffmanian words, honing the execution, props, and staging of the performance. Perfecting the performer's exterior shell was crucial, because politeness was a very visual culture (Klein, *Shaftesbury* 76–80). True politeness was not only manifested through pleasing turn of speech, but it was thought to reveal itself through multiple ways of standing, walking, gesturing, dressing, and facial expressions, and thus had a distinct visual dimension. In fact, the polite society believed it could evaluate an individual's level of politeness merely by looking: 'How is the whole Woman expressed in her Appearance! Her Air has the Beauty of Motion, and her Look the Force of Language' (*Spectator*, 20–7). Especially women as the beautiful sex were seen to have been born to be watched. Elite women thus grew up knowing that the polite society observed their every move, word, and action, and they were also taught to constantly observe themselves in order to perform to their best ability.

The rules of politeness were heavily gendered. According to general eighteenth-century views, from women's 'natural character and place in society, there arises a certain propriety of conduct peculiar to your sex' (Gregory 5). Indeed, both a supposed 'female nature' and women's subjugated place in society were appealed to as the natural causes that dictated what was considered appropriate or proper female behavior. 'Modesty, meekness, prudence, [and] piety' were often described as the 'chief ornaments' of the female sex, which 'will render them truly lovely as women' (Fordyce I.13).[3] In addition, women were most often connected with sensibility, softness, chastity, kindness, delicacy, and gentleness, whereas men were viewed in terms of bravery, boldness, strength, and power. Thus, the culture of politeness was intricately connected to gender construction; it was not enough just to *be* a woman, one needed to *act* woman. This, of course, still rings true today for everyone looking to 'pass' as a (heterosexual) woman, even if the performative norms of womanhood have changed (albeit they may have changed less than one would expect!) (Shugart 34–43). Much like present-day women's magazines and self-help books, eighteenth-century didactic texts were filled with all sorts of rules of behavior that supposedly reflected proper, polite femininity, urging women to follow them in their social encounters. Women received (often very detailed) advise to cover all areas of their polite persona, from the proper way of standing or walking (as displayed below) to dancing, speaking, dressing, eating, playing the harp, and so on.

[FIGURE 1:] '1. Hold up your Head without any stiffness. 2. Keep your whole person upright. 3. Let your shoulders fall easily. 4. Drop your Arms easily and gracefully down to the waist. 5. Then place the Hands on one another, with the Palms turning upward, and a little inward. 6.

[3] For similar passages, see also e.g. Fordyce I.88; Gregory 17; *Polite Academy* xi.

Take short steps and do not lift up your Feet too high. 7. Let the Foot that was up, be brought down slowly, and with an easy Motion' (*Polite Academy* 49).

How calculating were these genteel female fashionings of the body? In terms of subjectivity and agency, many scholars have interpreted Goffman's analysis to implicate an actor who is active, deliberate, and conscious of their performance (Gregson & Rose 433). In other words, Goffman seems to have an understanding of a self that is an active participant in the formation of their subjectivity and can choose the manners and modes of her various performances, thus consciously formulating a deliberate and carefully fashioned selfhood. According to Goffman, the individual can famously be divided into two parts—a performer, 'a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance', and a character, 'a figure, typically a fine one, whose spirit, strength, and other sterling qualities the performance [is] designed to evoke' (*Presentation* 244). For Goffman, selfhood or subjectivity consists of the latter: the self is 'a performed character, … not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented'. Now, even though this character is produced by the individual, Goffman argues that 'this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses'; in other words, the self is 'a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it' (*Presentation* 244–5).

Goffman is somewhat vague when analyzing the performer part of the individual—the one putting on the performance of the self, as well as the relationship that performing individual has with the character she performs. He notes that the attributes of the performer are 'of a different order' from the attributes of the character, and that an analysis of selfhood must focus on the character, not the performer, since 'he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time' (*Presentation* 244). Indeed, this is one of the established criticisms addressed against Goffman—that 'his actors are hollow shells, that he offers no account of the formation of selfhood and only a cynical account of motivation' (Jenkins 92. See also Hollis 72, 80–4; MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 37–8; Miller 369). The individual performer thus appears as a ghost-like empty body and a primitive mind that only waits to be given full rational powers and subjectivity through social intercourse:

> He has a capacity to learn, this being exercised in the task of training for a part. He is given to having fantasies and dreams, some that pleasurably unfold a triumphant performance, others full of anxiety and dread that nervously deal with vital discreditings in a public front region. He often manifests a gregarious desire for team-mates and audiences, a tactful considerateness for their concerns; and he has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure (Goffman, *Presentation* 245–6).

Indeed, Goffman's notions of the formation of the performing self are vague and somewhat contradictory. However, he does take a decisive step away from the Enlightenment tradition of the self as an authentic, autonomous actor; this is implied in his thoughts on how selfhood is connected to private (internal) space. For Goffman, the 'front region' presents the external

personhood, the social stage where the performed character comes to life, while his concept of 'back region' or 'backstage' is connected to the individual performer. The backstage is quite literally a space for Goffman—a place where 'the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character', usually in some way cut off from the place of the performance. The backstage is the place where the performance is 'painstakingly fabricated' and its 'illusions and impressions are openly constructed' (*Presentation* 114–15). In other words, it is here where the performer appears as her 'true', prior self and readies herself for the performance, which—puzzlingly enough—however is the act through which her very selfhood is forged, according to Goffman. Thus, the individual as a performer has no original or prior selfhood, but nevertheless somehow pre-exists the self as the persona making the decision to put up the performance. This formulation has become known as the 'two selves' view (Smith, 'Reconsidering' 171). In Richard Jenkins's interpretation, Goffman's understanding of self-as-performer is only partly autonomous; despite being partly 'a psycho-biological creature'—that is, pre-discursive—the individual performer is nevertheless also partly a product of the 'contingencies of staging performances' (Jenkins 96; Goffman, *Presentation* 245).

In other words, the individual is in part shaped through the roles she plays—a stance foreshadowing later, more extreme, postmodernist definitions such as Butler's, where the individual is perceived as *wholly* constituted through the performative acts she engages in. While Goffman seems to be occasionally arguing that 'there is no self apart from the parts which it acts, that the self has no lines of its own'—a very Butlerian view—he does in the end always veer back towards some sort of pre-existing actor (MacIntyre, 'Self as Work' 334). Then again, Greg Smith, for example, has argued that Goffman refines his stance in his later work and moves more firmly towards acknowledging the determinative effect of social and cultural frames ('Reconsidering' 172. See also Green 30–2). Thus, even though Goffman does not take his argument quite as far as to say the individual has no unified core or selfhood, he certainly destabilizes the Enlightenment idea of the autonomous self. This makes Goffman's position on the autonomy and interiority of the self somewhat ambiguous.

**Butler and the Body**

Politeness was extremely focused on fashioning the body into discursively normalized shapes and behaviors through practice and discipline. Similarly, both Goffman and Butler share an interest in the role the shaping of the body plays in the production of subjectivity. For Goffman, fashioning and rehearsing the body is to be done in the backstage as a necessary step for adopting a character: 'There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props. … The self is a product of all of these arrangements, and in all of its parts bears the marks of this genesis' (*Presentation* 244). In Butler's thought—as well as in poststructuralist feminist thought in general—the body is specifically the means through which discursive power creates (gendered) subjectivity. The body is seen as a symbolic surface on which discursive normativity is inscribed; more than a physical entity, it is a set of actions, routines, and exercises that reflects discursive ideals imposed on it as performative deeds, postures, gestures, and appearances (Bordo 90). Thus, body in the poststructuralist sense is entirely fictional, actively produced 'by various cultural narratives and discourses … not

always or even usually transparent to themselves' (Grosz 118). In other words, unlike Goffman, Butler argues against any pre- or extra-discursive body; according to Butler, the (gendered) body has 'no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (*Gender Trouble* 185).

For Butler, the repeated fashioning of the body congeals with time into an internalized normative subjectivity. The acts, gestures, and desires the individual engages in 'produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause' (*Gender Trouble* 185, 45).[4] The culture of politeness is an emblematic example of this process of discursive power producing normalized bodies through rhetoric of naturalness and divine authority. Indeed, the manners and appearances that elite women were supposed to painstakingly imitate to their best ability were commonly presented as 'natural' for gentlewomen, originating from their sex. Women failing to perform in discursively appointed manners were chastised for being not only unfeminine but also unhuman; they were called monsters, apes, and beasts, and likened to dogs (Ylivuori, *Women* 73, 85). In other words, politeness was not only a series of Goffmanian performances; it was also a Butlerian performative set of norms and practices, actually constituting the imagined internal identity it supposedly expressed. In this sense, politeness as a performative identity differs fundamentally from politeness as a voluntary theatrical performance, since assuming a gendered polite identity was not a voluntary or individual choice, but a discursively regulated necessity. Indeed, normative female politeness was actively produced through a discursive process that manifested itself in these different didactical texts women were supposed to study and internalize to the extent they felt it to be their own autonomous self. The correct polite subjectivity was to be forged mainly through rehearsing and disciplining the body in carefully monitored way—indeed, through internalizing, for example, the 'correct way of walking' displayed above (Ylivuori, 'Polite Foucault' 172–7).

Since Butler argues that this performative fashioning of the body *is* subjectivity, this naturally also means that there is no pre- or extra-discursive self, either. In this way, Butler takes a radical step away from the Goffmanian concept of performance. Indeed, Butler herself has positioned her own work as 'opposed' to Goffman's view of the self as one which 'posits a self which assumes and exchanges various "roles" within the complex social expectations of the "game" of modern life'. Instead, Butler maintains that the self is not only fundamentally 'outside' since it is fully constituted through social discourse, but that the idea of interiority itself is a discursive form of 'essence fabrication' ('Performative Acts' 528). Butler's performative subject is brought to life by her very performances, outside of which there is no subjectivity (Gregson & Rose 436; Butler, *Bodies* 3,15). In other words, Butler's and Goffman's stances regarding performed identity and the self seem to be at odds, and are indeed often represented as such by scholars (Smith, 'Reconsidering' 171–2). However, this interpretation is, in my view, too simplistic.

[4] On iterability, see also Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 95.

**Bridging Goffman and Butler**

Politeness can thus be examined as a Butlerian process of performative gendered identity construction that is focused around iterative bodily practices. At the same time, however, it cannot be entirely separated from voluntary theatrical performances that individuals engage in willingly and strategically to indicate their status as gentlewomen and to enforce a difference between the polite and the non-polite. Politeness should, in fact, be seen as simultaneously engaged in both practices, (partly) voluntary Goffmanian social performance and involuntary Butlerian performativity, that feed into each other. How is an act of curtseying, for example, neatly categorized as one or the other, when it is impregnated with both conscious meanings of politeness and social identity as well as subconscious meanings of gender, both expressed in terms of gracefulness, elegance, and easiness? Thus, when individuals choose to perform politeness to distinguish themselves as members of a social elite, they simultaneously engage in an involuntary process of constructing a gendered self. Everyday social intercourse and individuals' bodily performances thus always fall under both categories; they are simultaneously both goal-oriented, (half-)conscious performances in a Goffmanian sense, and Butlerian involuntary performative practices that create and maintain discursive power/knowledge through the creation of docile bodies. Performance and performativity unfold as structurally different but simultaneous levels of action; they create a circle where individuals' performances are discursively conditioned to only include the desired, ritualized, and regulated forms of identity. By stepping into a character, even with conscious deliberation, the individuals end up affirming, reconstructing, and further maintaining the discursive ideality that they enact. Performativity 'becomes the everyday practice of *doing* what's *done*' (Pollock 43. See also Gregson & Rose 441). In other words, the relationship between performance and performativity is essentially co-dependent. Since performativity saturates performances and performers with power and with particular subject positions, there cannot be performance outside performativity—just as there cannot be subjectivity outside performativity. Thus, on the one hand, Goffmanian performance collapses into Butlerian performativity. On the other hand, performativity similarly needs performance—the individual subjects' words, acts, movements, and appearances—to reproduce discourse and to maintain and collate power.

One of the key obstacles in the way of a peaceful marriage between Butler and Goffman seems to be their supposedly heavily differing takes on the possibility of autonomous agency. Butler certainly is very adamant in both *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) in insisting that the practices the subject engages in are discursively conditioned and that, in this sense, there is no possibility of voluntary agency. Goffman, then, seems to be advocating the individual as a conscious actor, but at a closer inspection, his stance proves to be more ambiguous. Goffman states that the performing individuals can be dispersed onto a line where, at the one end, 'one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality', while at the other end 'we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine' (*Presentation* 28). He further envisions situations where the individual sometimes 'will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case', or consciously fashions her performance according to some social tradition with no specific aim of evoking a particular response in the audience (*Presentation*, 17–18). Therefore, Goffman seems to argue that a

performance is often at least partly unconscious—and this unconscious acting is ultimately the realm where performativity takes place.

Another important distinction Goffman makes is separating intentionality from sincerity. For him, sincerity—or at least an appearance of it—is vital to the success of the performance; to believe in the show, the audience, at least, needs to believe it is sincere or 'true'. The requirement of sincerity of the performance does not, however, exclude its intentionality. Accordingly, even though, for Goffman, performance is intrinsically linked to the desire to draw out a particular response from the audience or to advance one's goals in different ways, he nevertheless maintains that the individual is generally unaware of the masquerade-like nature of her selfhood, and sincerely believes her character to be her true self. Again, this seems to imply performativity. While performers may, in some cases, be wholly insincere in their performance, Goffman insists that they nevertheless 'usually are what they appear to be'. According to Goffman, there is, at least, 'a statistical relation between appearances and reality', if not 'an intrinsic or necessary one' (*Presentation*, 77). Goffman thus seems to approach performance as a subjectivity-constituting practice in a Butlerian sense; if the individual is not aware that her performed character is, in fact, entirely fictitious, but believes it to be her true self, can that not be interpreted as performativity?

Moreover, it is also evident that Butler does not, in fact, categorically deny all possibility of conscious and deliberate agency. This much is shown by her short treatment of drag and gender parody. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that performativity aims at creating internalized and naturalized selfhood while strictly separating it from the possibility of external influence by rhetorical means. In other words, even though subjectivity is, in reality, fictive and constructed from the outside, the aim of the discursive power is to create an appearance of a natural, timeless, non-discursive interiority. According to Butler, 'inner' and 'outer' are 'tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control'. Their juxtaposition constitutes a 'binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject'—or, in other words, creates normative identities and produces docile bodies. However, as Butler notes, individuals can resist this process of normalization by shaking the authority of this inside/outside-division in different ways—for example, by means of parody. Butler then uses drag as an example where performing gendered identities from an ironic position reveals the naturalized authenticity of these identities to be fictive (*Gender Trouble* 182). Ironic performances, of course, require intention and deliberateness from their performer—or, in other words, recognition of the performed character and its fictitious nature, as well as conscious agency (Gregson & Rose 437).

Moreover, recent writers have argued that Butler reformulates her views on subjectivity towards a more positive view on conscious agency in her later texts. According to Kathy Dow Magnus, while Butler in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* sees agency as essentially negative, she shifts her stance in her Adorno Lectures, published in German as *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* (2003). In Butler's early work, the subject is constituted solely by a social discourse, which inevitably reduces her agency to 'resistance and action to reaction'—or, the performance of subversive speech acts within a discursively preconditioned framework (Magnus 87). However, Magnus suggests that in *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* Butler develops this stance by claiming that the subject is 'not simply produced by an abstract power or law, but comes to be in and through her concrete relations to others' (Magnus 95). The subject is

brought into being through mutual recognition in her encounters with others—through being called and through her own actions of calling. This notion of subjectivity being born in a dialectical interaction between an individual and society is certainly a very Goffmanian (as well as Bourdieuan) idea. Moreover, within this framework of the interpellated subject, discourse no longer 'appears as an abstract entity to which subjects must submit. It now formulates the space in which subjects may stage their communicative interaction' (Magnus 100). The subject becomes an active participant in the discursive processes that define its existence rather than essentially subjected to discourse, which, according to Magnus, opens up at least the possibility of active agency, perhaps even intentionality. Again, smells like Goffman.

**Reconfiguring Agency**

Thus, Butler's and Goffman's stances on agency are perhaps not as incompatible as they seem at first glance. More crucially, Goffman's social notion of agency can be used to complement Butler in fruitful ways—especially when it comes to the possibility of resistance. The question of the subversive potential embedded in the performative production of subjectivity has been a vexed issue ever since Butler first published *Gender Trouble*, and it is connected to a broader scholarly endeavor to map out the possibilities for individual autonomy and resistance in discursive identity production (see e.g. Nealon Ch. 1; Oksala; Magnus). Butler has been criticized for advocating a passive vision of agency and making resistance and political activism in the real world impossible, as her views of resistance have generally been seen to focus around irony and parodic re-enactment of discursive norms—and criticized for failing to move beyond that (e.g. Nussbaum; Barvosa-Carter; Nelson). As Butler's critics point out, even ironic citations of the norm are, in the end, citations all the same, and therefore they reinstate the norm. Moreover, even though the discursive production of subjectivity is not a deterministic or mechanistic project that culminates in a set of fixed effects, but rather a process that is full of instabilities and ambiguities which both produces and destabilizes identity, the subversive potential performativity offers seems, in the end, limited. Even if the act of iteration is, as Joan Scott writes, echo-like in the sense that it is always an incomplete reproduction of the original, it seems a very meagre means of active resistance (Scott, 'Fantasy Echo' 291).[5]

To avoid this standoff, we should move to reformulate agency and resistance in new, more fruitful ways. One possibility would be to separate agency into two different levels: one 'structural' and one 'dynamic'. Structural agency is doomed to always being restricted by the power of the discourse, to operating according to the inherent rules of the language, and to constituting subjectivity that is not volitional and agency that is restricted to subversive variation of iterative practices. However, there is room for dynamic agency other than irony within these bounds—and this is where Goffman becomes useful. Indeed, if we accept that agency does not need to mean freedom from a social or discursive superscript, but can be viewed as an individual's ability to gain some form of relative freedom or strategic advantage, either through conscious or unconscious acts, we can escape the negative impasse that is the

[5] On drag and camp as extreme versions of iterative subversive practices, see e.g. Hutcheon; Babuscio; Butler, 'From Interiority'.

logical consequence of the Butlerian definition.[6] As Joan Scott argues, agency is produced by and within discursive processes rather than existing outside them as some sort of innate human will (*Only Paradoxes* 16). In this way, even if our selfhood is constructed externally and we only have preconditioned tools available, we can choose to use those tools consciously for our own personal, sometimes subversive, ends. Moreover, this interpretation brings agency back to a social context—the lack of which Butler has been widely criticized (e.g. McNay, 'Subject'; McNay, 'Agency'; Schwartzman). What we are able to achieve with our subversive acts is solely dependent of those around us; in the eighteenth century, if a servant girl's dress was fashionable enough and her curtsey elegant enough, she could be mistaken for a gentlewoman by her observant audience, thus breaking social boundaries set to keep her in her place. Discursive power operates through individuals—it does not exist on its own. Thus, any agency an individual can have must come out of her ability to negotiate herself leeway among her fellow individuals.

This is also a project in which women's politeness becomes an enlightening case study. Eighteenth-century women can be analytically thought to have had three possible options for dealing with gendered scripts or discursive norms. Firstly, they could be submissive and work to internalize them in a way Arlie Russell Hochschild calls 'deep acting'—trying to change how they see their self (286–7). They could become the moral, chaste, pious, frugal wives and mothers the culture of politeness expected of them. Secondly, they could outwardly conform to gendered norms but perform them 'tongue-in-cheek', from an ironic distance, and in this way safeguard a feeling of separate selfhood in a way Hochschild terms 'surface acting' (288). This is, in fact, what several eighteenth-century intellectual women ended up doing; for example, bluestockings and other literary women were extremely aware of the performative nature of the feminine roles they were expected to play as members of polite society, and often acted them out in ironic, even camp-like ways, thus preserving their sense of uncompromised inwardness (even though this sense would ultimately have been fictitious) (Ylivuori, *Women* 195–200). In this way, they also created covert group solidarity by performing an outwardly normative role while secretly winking at each other. Indeed, as Laura Grindstaff and Emily West argue, ironic performances provide individuals a buffer through which they can engage in identity play without being accused of adopting these identities 'for real' (155–6).

The third and most openly subversive option would have been for women to rebel outright and refuse to play by the established rules. Even though this would not constitute the sort of radical subversiveness called for by Butler simply because that would require operating outside frames or discursive knowledge systems altogether—something which within Butler's parameters is simply impossible—does this not still count as resistance? Eighteenth-century elite women did engage in acts of open resistance, which shows that there are ways to move away from the problematic of only a negative, reactional resistance towards active and creative agency. As, for example, author Mary Wollstonecraft's sexually and intellectually subversive life and her profound impact on the development of feminism shows, these acts of transgression did contribute to the slow historical change of social and gender norms (Kaplan). Women's subversive acts thus had social consequences, but they often came at a personal cost. Transgressive women—those crossing gendered behavioral borders through acts of sexual

[6] This idea comes to close to Mark Bevir's concept of 'weak intentionalism' (Bevir 166–76).

misconduct, violence, political or religious activities, or simply through their 'non-feminine' manners and dress—could end up getting slandered, shamed, shunned, excommunicated, and occasionally incarcerated in prisons or madhouses. Therefore, women needed strategies to negotiate their subversive behavior in the eyes of polite society. In fact, this is where Goffman again comes in with a solution with his theatrical roleplay.

Women of polite society had various strategies to provide themselves with subversive freedom—and one crucially important strategy was deliberately assuming multiple roles to adapt their persona to different circumstances. Politeness was effectively based on the discursive ideal of adapting one's self to one's surroundings and company; it required, quite literally, obliterating one's self in order to please others. As John Bennett wrote in one of the most popular women's conduct books in 1789, politeness consisted in 'accommodating ourselves, as well as the conversation, to [present company's] particular tastes, habits, and inclinations; … in *annihilating*, as it were, ourselves, and as studiously exalting all that are about us' (Bennett II.8-9). Even though this sort of advice was meant to encourage women to become more pleasing companions to men and, thereby, intended ultimately to maintain normative femininity, this theatrical ethos of politeness also offered women a possibility of using it 'against the grain' through advocating a plurality of the self—a utilization of multiple identities which could be tried on and put aside at will. Women could, in fact, engage in creative role play by deliberately manipulating the self and strategically posing in different roles (such as the coy, the moral, the modest, the sensitive) to facilitate their navigation in polite society. Arguably, these questions of gender, power, and roleplay that were so ubiquitous in polite society are behind present-day fascination with costume dramas, which as a genre focus on elite women's maneuvering their ticklish social position as simultaneously privileged and subjugated. Filmatizations from *The Favourite* (2018) to *Belle* (2013), *The Duchess* (2008), and most recently the Netflix show *Bridgerton* (2020–) all explore, in historically more or less accurate settings, women's possibilities to perform (often duplicitous) roles in order to negotiate themselves social, political, intellectual, or religious power in a patriarchal society—or simply power to make their own life choices.

In real life, Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800), the famous bluestocking, is a good example of this strategic adaptability of the self. First of all, she recognized the fact that polite society itself offered women an increasing number of social roles other than the traditional wife, mother, and mistress of the house; indeed, as Amanda Vickery, among others, has shown, the culture of politeness accompanied a veritable explosion of social activities and venues that expanded the scope of women's lives in the eighteenth century (Vickery 287–8; Tague 214; Ylivuori, *Women* 162–3). This multiplication of polite roles available required certain skill and adaptability which Montagu acknowledged: 'Happy the animal that can live in all elements, though it dignifies, or is dignified by none!' she exclaimed, revering those who 'are at liberty to add themselves to a gay assembly, a philosophical lecture, be present at a reasonable conversation, or go with the crowd to see Harlequin in a bottle' (Montagu to Gilbert West, 21 January 1753, Montagu IV.227–8). She herself excelled in the London social life which required her to 'steer "from grave to gay, from lively to severe"' at a moment's notice, and took a self-consciously ironic attitude towards her various roles, ranging from 'a country Joan' to a fine lady with 'vapours' (Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, [n.d., 1759?], Montagu IV.220-1;

Montagu to Gilbert West, 5 November 1754, Montagu III.276). She described one particularly fake social encounter as a 'farce':

> I was at Mrs. —'s; we were both so courteous, complaisant, and something so like loving, it would have surprized you. What farces, what puppet-shows do we act! some little machine behind the scene moves us and makes the puppet act Scrub … Madam, contrary to her usual manner, acted the part of the obliging; I, as much against my former sentiments, personated the obliged. Alas! I fear the first mover in the one case was not generosity, nor in the other gratitude (Montagu to Sarah Robinson, [n.d., 174-?], Montagu I.127-8).

This sort of deceitful roleplay that politeness necessitated Montagu ascribed to the patriarchal society which effectively forced women to 'have recourse to artifice to gain power' (Montagu to Gilbert West, 6 January [1753?], Montagu III.215-16). In other words, Montagu saw polite sociability as an exercise of chameleon-like adaptation of the self to a series of changing scenes, all of which were to be performed with skill—and none of which were to be given the power of transforming the innermost core of the self. Indeed, her letter to her cousin William Freind indicates that she saw her role play as a superficial event only—even though her imagined interiority was, of course, thoroughly conditioned by the discursive power that surrounded her:

> I don't know whether it is not conceited to imagine, you will like me better while I am most myself, than when I am moulded by fashion into other people's form; … I have always accustomed myself to appear to you without those disguises which we wear as ornaments with our acquaintance, and as armour with our enemies. But amongst friends, truth may appear with no other clothing than la bienséance (Montagu to William Freind, 29 December [n.d., 174-?], Montagu II.36).

Elizabeth Montagu also made expert use of her ability to accommodate her persona strategically. She was able to take on a plethora of controversial activities and act in roles traditionally viewed as masculine and therefore forbidden from elite women. As Emma Major has shown, Montagu was a celebrated literary scholar and critic, literary and religious patron, landowner and land developer, businesswoman, and coalmine owner—in addition to her more 'feminine' roles of a literary hostess, conversationalist, and overall fashionable lady (Major 75). She also relished her subversive masculine roles, self-identifying in her letters as a 'Farmeress', a 'learned lady', and 'great she scollard', and taking pleasure in 'the practices and profits of a savvy entrepreneur' (Major 75; Child 160).

Montagu managed to escape disciplinary measures from a society which normatively chastised masculine women as horrendous, unnatural, Amazonian beasts—not only because she was wealthy and well-connected, but especially through her strategic performances of feminine politeness. To retain the cloak of feminine softness and submission, she consciously represented herself as a pious, chaste, and impeccably moral, and made a point of rhetorically submitting her considerable intellect to her husband and male friends. For example, when corresponding with the scholar and clergyman Conyers Middleton, she begged her husband 'the favour to … take the trouble to read' her letters to Middleton before sending them, as 'it is with some uneasiness I correspond with the very wise'; Montagu, a woman of considerable

intellect and scholarly skill, humbly ascribed herself only with ‘an understanding of a middle size’ that had ‘a great deal of trouble in conversation between reaching to those above it’ (Montagu to Edward Montagu, [n.d., 1742?], Clemenson I.127). In other words, Montagu posed in traditionally feminine roles to appease her patriarchal superiors and polite peers and to be able to continue her subversive actions while avoiding getting excluded from polite society. In fact, she managed this remarkably well; Montagu ended up being celebrated as ‘an admirable patter of life and manners’ to all the female sex, thus effectively demonstrating the power of Goffmanian strategic roleplay (More, *Essays* [ii]). By putting on a mask of femininity, Montagu, much like the female academic in Joan Rivière’s famous essay ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’, managed to avert the anxiety and feared retribution of polite society (see also Craft-Fairchild).

**Conclusion**

By playing a skillful double game of careful performances, women like Elizabeth Montagu could successfully combine docile and subversive roles, challenging normative notions of elite womanhood and creating freedom and power for themselves. As an ultimate example of performance and performativity mixing ambiguously, Montagu’s case—and eighteenth-century politeness more broadly—forces us to re-examine our understandings of the nature of selfhood and agency through combining Goffman and Butler under the same examination. This approach benefits both historians who have neglected to examine eighteenth-century politeness as a Butlerian performative practice that was productive of identity, as well as poststructuralist feminist scholars who, in their turn, have tended to overlook Goffmanian performances as an inseparable aspect of (gender) performativity. Therefore, examining politeness as a case study of the interconnectedness of performance and performativity has the potential to reveal us unexpected connections between these two concepts which have generally been viewed as incommensurate. The Goffmanian-Butlerian analytical framework is applicable to a variety of social phenomena of both past and present, where performances hover ambivalently between artificial and selfhood-constructing (see e.g. Grindstaff & West; Rose).

Politeness also provides us a window to possible ways of reintroducing the possibility of active resistance back into performativity through a Goffmanian application of theatrical roles. Identity performances are simultaneously real and play, which is precisely what makes them powerful and agency-providing—while also normativity-producing on a structural level. As Grindstaff and West rightly point out, while using ‘the performance frame to deny their complicity in reproducing retrograde images of women in the public sphere’ remains a common strategy for women today, there is no denying that these performances in many ways reinstate gendered and racialized cultural scripts (156–60). However, on a dynamic level, such strategies do offer individuals radical agency with true potential for not only gaining control over their own lives but instigating change in those cultural scripts. This grassroot-level performance-bound resistance thus effectively confounds performativity’s paralyzing non-agency.

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