



Gender Performativity in Spenser's Faerie Queene and Ferdowsi's Shahnameh: A Comparative Feminist Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This analysis explores gender performativity in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) and Abolqasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (c. 1010), two major epic poems distinguished by temporal, cultural, and geographical differences, yet interconnected through their intricate representations of gender. This paper conducts a comparative feminist analysis utilizing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine how these epics establish, enforce, and occasionally disrupt gender norms within their cultural contexts. Analysis demonstrates both texts operate within patriarchal systems but have significant examples of gender fluidity and rebellion against standard interpretations. A comparison of Western and Persian literary traditions is made to explain the mechanics of performances of gender in both works through deliberate cross-dressing, martial power as a form of gender transgression, as well as the provisional support of feminine sovereignty. The findings illustrate that both works, despite their ostensible differences, utilize analogous confinement tactics to address gender subversion while unintentionally revealing the manufactured essence of gender. This cross-cultural feminist perspective challenges Western feminist frameworks and offers fresh insights into the performative aspects of gender within various literary and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Gender Performativity; Comparative Literature; Feminist Literary Criticism; Spenser; Ferdowsi; Epic Poetry; Cross-Cultural Feminism.

1 Introduction

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) and Abolqasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (c. 1010) are foundational works in each's literary canon but have seldom been compared directly. This research fills the void by analysing these works from the framework of gender performativity, one derived from the scholarship of Judith Butler, in which gender is theorised as "a stylised repetition of acts"; not as an essentialised characteristic (Butler). Both epics, though from overtly differing cultural and historical contexts, present significant grounds for investigating constructions of, performances of, and occasional undermining of gender in literary representation. Spenser's allegorical poem in Elizabethan England presents a rich dynamic of gendered roles through figures such as Britomart (the feminine knight), Radigund (the queen of the Amazons), and other male knights whose masculinity is constantly tested and redefined. Ferdowsi's

mediaeval Persian *Shahnameh*, composed in the context of a culture's golden age of flowering and in opposition to Arabs' dominance of the region, has several female characters who negotiate, complicate, and on occasion outdo constructions of gender. These range from warriors like Gordafarid and monarchs like Homa to prominent women like Rudabeh, Sindokht, Manizheh, and Katayun, who autonomously perform femininity in order to control the dynastic narratives of the epic.

Although prior research has analyzed gender in these works separately (Miller; Talattof), comparison studies are limited, especially those utilizing modern feminist theoretical frameworks. This review seeks to address this gap by analyzing how both works portray gender through performance, scrutinizing instances of compliance and resistance, and evaluating what a cross-cultural perspective elucidates regarding the functioning of gender norms in literary epics more generally. This comparative approach has two significant advantages. On the one hand, it denaturalizes beliefs of culture by foregrounding the culturally constructed nature of gender in diverse contexts. On the other hand, it lends vigor to rising transnational scholarship on feminism for decentering Western frames by engaging them with non-Western readings and texts (Bahramitash; Mohanty). However, certain scholars like Spivak and Mernissi have cautioned against the application of Western theoretical frameworks to non-Western texts on the need for careful attention to cultural uniqueness and power relationships. This research is aware of these issues while arguing Butler's theory of performativity if placed in appropriate context can help illuminate gender production in Western as well as Persian literary canons.

The following interconnected research questions inform this research, as it explores the multifaceted dynamic of gender performativity through these diverse epic traditions. The research examines how gender performativity operates through the narratives of *The Faerie Queene* and *Shahnameh*, with specific attention to the similarities and divergences between the manner in which these works establish, reinforce, and possibly undermine gender norms. The research also explores how examples of gender transgression or fluidity function in the larger ideology of these works and what cross-cultural comparison can illuminate about building gender in other literary traditions. Finally, the research considers the application of Butler's theory to these works of diverse cultures both to shed light on gender performance and to reveal the confines of Western theory in understanding non-Western settings. These issues related to each other confirm the cultural specificity of gender and concurrently strive for productive cross-cultural exchange between these masterworks of literature.

The research approach taken here is careful close reading of both epics' key characters and scenes with attention paid to both cultural and historical context. Reading these works through Butlerian theory with attention to cultural particularity makes this work both part of the field of comparative literary scholarship and transnational feminism. The research will exemplify how gender as performed is transversal and crosses cultural lines while being mindful of the specific cultural and historical conditions in which each of the epics developed in terms of gender roles and potential transgression.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gender Performativity

This research borrows the gender performativity approach as its main analytical tool. Gender Trouble (1990) and other works by Butler have profoundly redefined gender as "a form of ongoing impersonation which is taken as authentic" (Butler, and Trouble) and not as an essentialised essence or biological reality. Instead of gender as an essentialised thing or biological fact, Butler theorises it as "a stylised repetition of acts. Which are internally discontinuous. in such a way as to produce the illusion of substance is precisely that, an ascribed identity, a performative accomplishment on which the everyday social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to enact in the mode of belief" (Butler, and Trouble). This model is ideally well-suited to analysis of the kind found in epic poetry, where characters are sometimes used as ideological exemplars to present (or complicate) gendered virtues to audiences through their actions. Sedgwick has pointed out

that literary works not only present gender but also facilitate its production through repetitive performance in which certain acts become hegemonised as either masculine or feminine.

Several aspects of Butler's theory are particularly relevant to this analysis:

- The concept of gender is achieved through "sustained social performances" rather than as an expression of pre-existing identity (Butler, and Trouble).
- The notion that these performances operate within "a regulatory frame" that constrains and directs gendered behavior (Butler).
- The possibility for "gender trouble"—moments when performance fails or deliberately subverts normative expectations, revealing the constructed nature of gender itself (Butler, and Trouble).
- The understanding that performativity is not voluntaristic but constrained by cultural intelligibility—what Butler terms the "matrix of intelligibility" (Butler, and Trouble).

2.2 Cross-Cultural Feminist Analysis

This research draws on cross-cultural feminist methodologies, specifically in the form of analysing the operation of gender in many cultures without naivety in the application of Western paradigms to non-Western works. Comparative feminist analysis should then strive for equilibrium between acknowledging global women's shared experiences and respecting the specifics of localised context, according to Ahmed. The comparison between a canonical Western and foundational Persian epic requires awareness of what Mohanty terms "the politics of location"—recognising how differing cultural, historical, and political locations condition both the texts and readings of them. This way avoids treating either work as representative of an essentialised "Eastern" or "Western" account of gender and instead considers how each work forges gender norms in its particular cultural and historic context (Mohanty). Cross-cultural feminist methodologies have also been made more complex by advanced scholarship. Agency and resistance should be understood in specific cultures and in specific histories as opposed to universalised frames of Western feminist traditions (Mahmood). Moghadam, et al. argue Iranian gender systems have specific pedigrees and complexity which do not lend themselves to reduction in terms of Western thinking. This research accepts these criticisms while suggesting meticulous comparisons can still yield helpful knowledge of gender construction across cultures (Moghadam, et al.).

2.3 Epic Poetry and Gender Construction

This analysis draws on scholarship surrounding the relationship between epic poetry and gender construction. Epics are nation-forming narratives expressing cultural customs and gender ideals as well as cultural values (Quint). Lowry suggests that the epic form has traditionally been associated with masculinity and thereby makes women's presence in them particularly significant and often controversial in terms of the conventions of the form itself (Lowry). Both *The Faerie Queene* and *Shahnameh* operate within such traditions as well as complicate them in significant terms. Zarandi and Moghaddasi point out in their more recent treatment of women in Persian epics that women in the *Shahnameh* tend to be bearers of cultural memory and dynastic inheritance and in doing so are afforded significant but limited powers of action in the patriarchally organised text (Zarandi and Moghaddasi). Cavanagh argues that women in *The Faerie Queene* capture the complexity of Elizabethan gender thought in both affirming and exploding classical gender categories (Cavanagh).

3 Methodological Approach

This review utilizes a comparative literary approach grounded in feminist critical theory. The analysis advances through the subsequent steps:

1. Contextual analysis of each text within its historical and cultural setting, with particular attention to gender norms and expectations of the periods.
2. Identification of key episodes and characters that demonstrate gender performativity.
3. Close textual analysis of these episodes using Butler's theoretical framework.
4. Comparative analysis examining patterns, similarities, and differences between the texts.
5. Synthesis of findings to address the research questions.

The choice of characters and scenes to examine follows Felski's "significant representativeness" by choosing examples which clarify general tendencies of the texts while acknowledging the limitation of using any chosen approach (Felski). In analysing *The Faerie Queene*, this research focuses primarily on Book III, which centres on Britomart, and Book V, which focuses on Radigund, as these passages most explicitly deal with gender performance and its reversal. This study examines characters in the *Shahnameh*, such as Gordafarid, Tahmineh, Hoday, Rudabeh, Sindokht, Manizheh, and Katayun, to offer a thorough understanding of gender performativity across the epic's three divisions: mythical, heroic, and historical. The principal texts examined are Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* utilising the Longman version edited by Hamilton and Abolqasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* employing the Dick Davis translation, acknowledged as the most thorough and scholarly English rendition (AC Hamilton). The secondary sources were found through extensive database searching of scholarly journal articles and books produced between 1990 and 2024 and centred on cross-cultural critiques of both texts from a feminist viewpoint, cross-cultural feminist theory, and the application of the theory of performativity in pre-modern texts. This approach also identifies some limitations. Akbari and Darani assert that translation inherently mediates non-Persian readers' access to the *Shahnameh*, potentially hiding language subtleties associated with gender (Akbari, and Darani). The extensive length of both epics (exceeding 36,000 lines in *The Faerie Queene* and approximately 60,000 couplets in the *Shahnameh*) requires a selected rather than comprehensive study.

4. Historical and Cultural Context

4.1 Spenser's England: Gender in Elizabethan Society

The Faerie Queene was composed during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), which was characterized by considerable gender concern due to the presence of a female monarch in what was otherwise a patriarchal society. Elizabeth's reign required delicate negotiations of gender roles as she habitually employed what academics have come to identify as "strategic androgyny" in alternatively foregrounding her feminine form and masculine authority as circumstances required (Levin; Montrose). The Elizabethan gender philosophy was significantly shaped by classical and Christian traditions that deemed women inherently inferior to males. Medical views originating from Galen characterized female bodies as flawed replicas of male bodies, whilst religious narratives highlighted women's heightened vulnerability to sin due to Eve's transgression (Fletcher). Legally, women largely existed under the authority of fathers or husbands, possessing little independent legal standing due to the idea of coverture.

This era also experienced challenges to strict gender hierarchies. Elizabeth's extended reign necessitated theoretical adjustments to recognize female sovereignty, but the religious turmoil after the Reformation facilitated greater female involvement in spiritual matters, if not in institutional power (Hackett). Recent research by Shephard indicates that women in Elizabethan England had greater agency than previously recognized, especially in literary and courtly domains where performance—in both theatrical and Butlerian contexts—facilitated the strategic manipulation of gender norms (Shephard). The literature of the period, especially Spenser's epic, embodies these conflicts, both affirming and challenging traditional gender classifications.

4.2 Ferdowsi's Persia: Gender in Medieval Iranian Society

The Shahnameh was written between around 977 and 1010 CE, during a time of Persian cultural resurgence after the Islamic conquest. Ferdowsi's epic signifies a deliberate effort to maintain Persian cultural identity and pre-Islamic traditions, while also integrating Islamic principles and being composed within an Islamicate framework (Davis). The cultural hybridity of the concepts of gender present in the text is reflective of pre-Islamic Persian customs as well as Islam's gender conventions. Gender roles in medieval Persian society were organized mainly on patriarchal systems of kinship in which women's status and identity were in most cases defined in relation to male kin. The systems of law in Islam did grant women rights of inheritance and property protection while preserving male dominance in domestic as well as kinship situations. Historical accounts and literary works indicate some inconsistencies in women's real-life experiences and choices especially in higher social classes (Najmabadi). According to the recent history research by Rahimi and Shams, high-level women in medieval Persian culture exercised significant informal power through kinship networks, managing households, and savvy alliances (Rahimi and Shams). In addition, pre-Islamic Zoroastrian traditions informing cultural context for the Shahnameh gave women certain religious and social benefits that sometimes survived after the Islamic conquest. Amin (2020) argues that the Shahnameh presents an interconnected complexity between conventional Zoroastrian definitions of gender structures and emergent Islamic social conventions.

The Persian literary traditions, encompassing both pre-Islamic heroic tales and Islamic romances, portrayed women in diverse roles, ranging from passive beauty to active participants. The Shahnameh features various notable female characters who wield governmental authority, exhibit martial skills, or shape events via intellect and cunning (Davidson). Both works originated from patriarchal communities characterized by intricate and perhaps contradictory attitudes toward gender. This contextual commonality renders their comparative analysis especially valuable for exploring how literary works negotiate, reinforce, and at times disrupt prevailing gender ideologies.

5 Gender Performativity in The Faerie Queene

5.1 Britomart and Martial Femininity

Britomart's female knighthood of Chastity presents the most detailed exploration of gender performativity in *The Faerie Queene*. In Book III, Britomart performs masculinity by wearing male armor, displaying martial skills, and claiming knighthood as her identity, while maintaining her female form and heterosexuality beneath it. Cavanagh suggests that "Britomart's martial adventures blur gender categories, testing the limits of appropriate feminine behavior while also reinforcing heteronormative conclusions" (Cavanagh). Britomart's gender performance is also unusually complex since not only does it involve her dressing as male (unlike the cross-dressing heroines of Shakespeare's plays), but it also has her representing knighthood ideals and actions construed as masculine in Spenser's terms. She performs masculinity so well that other characters persistently imagine her being masculine until her gender is ultimately revealed. The narrator accounts for how "all the power of her feminine grace she had restrained unto that end / that nothing thereon might mischance betide". The description presents her masculine performance as deliberately and calculatingly created as opposed to being natural. When Britomart strips off her armor in the Castle Joyeous, and "The blazing brightness of her beauties beame, / And glorious light of her sunshyny face" appears, the text stages what Butler would refer to as the "regulatory fiction" of the steady gender identity beneath performance.

This revelation does not explain her gender ambiguity but instead highlights her state of being at the intersection of disjunctive expressions of masculine and feminine. In Book III, Britomart continually exhibits duplicity, fighting as skillfully as male knights but periodically revealing her female nature in homosocial settings. Her eventual destiny—to marry Artegall and give birth to the heir of the British line—suggests her gender transgression will ultimately be placed within the confines of a heteronormative framework. However, as Villeponteaux contends, "Britomart's

martial prowess is never fully domesticated; her performance of masculinity permanently changes how readers understand her femininity" (Villeponteaux). This disjuncture is an illustration of what Butler terms as performances' ability to "reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness" of what appears to be fixed gender categories (Butler, and Trouble). For Houlbrooke, Britomart's performance serves several functions in Spenser's larger allegorical project: it represents Elizabeth I's deliberate performance of masculine power, demonstrates the constructed nature of gender roles in Elizabethan culture, and suggests certain feminine virtues like chastity can coexist with masculine power (Houlbrooke). Britomart's gender performance is essential to the exploration of Elizabethan gender ideology within the epic because of its multifaceted applicability.

5.2 Radigund and the Amazon Challenge

While Britomart illustrates a form of gender performance ultimately reinforcing heteronormative systems while resisting fixed gender definitions, the Amazonian queen Radigund represents more overt opposition. Introduced in Book V, Radigund rules over a society in which gendered hierarchies are fully inverted: men are subordinated and required to do traditionally feminine work dressed in women's attire. When male knight Artegall is defeated by Radigund, she "caused him to be disarmed quite / And in womens weedes.with womens worke to feed his idle need" (V.v.23.1-7). This forced cross-dressing and gender role-reversal is what Butler could call "parodic performance," laying bare gender role construction. Radigund's Amazonian culture forces men to become feminine and thereby blurs the natural association between biological sex and gendered behavior. However, the story presents this reversal as unnatural and in need of correction. Even more significant is the fact that Britomart is the one who defeats Radigund and restores the proper gender hierarchy, suggesting that some female borrowing of masculine traits is within bounds but wholesale gender reversal is not.

According to Hamilton, "Spenser uses Radigund to probe the radical potential of gender performativity only to ultimately contain that potential in Britomart's reassertion of patriarchal structure" (Albert Charles Hamilton). This method of containment signals the limits of permitted gender subversion in accordance with Spenser's moral code—a limitation which concurs with Butler's argument that gender performances take place in finite systems of regulation which contain their subversive potential. Rambuss moreover observes that the Radigund occurrence exposes Spenser's apprehension regarding the ramifications of Elizabeth's authority (Rambuss). Through Britomart's victory over Radigund, Spenser symbolically reconciles the contradictions of female authority within a patriarchal framework, implying that a female ruler must uphold rather than subvert conventional gender hierarchies to sustain her legitimacy. This political aspect introduces further intricacy to the text's exploration of gender performativity.

5.3 Masculine Performance and Anxiety

The Faerie Queene deals most centrally with female expressions of masculinity, though it also explores the performative nature of masculinity itself. Masculine knights consistently prove themselves to be masculine by way of ritualized combat performance, fulfillment of quests, and heterosexual desire. These performances break down or fail, laying bare masculinity as a constructed position, not an inherent identity. The Red Cross Knight illustrates that masculine virtue requires constant demonstration and affirmation. His encounters with Duessa and his consequent imprisonment show his susceptibility to feminization as well as to ethical vulnerability, pertaining to a requirement of elaborate means of purification and re-performances to regain his chivalric identity. Guyon's striving to preserve temperance and Artegall's subjection by Radigund highlight the vulnerability of masculine performance. The Faerie Queene deals most centrally with female expressions of masculinity, though it also explores the performative nature of masculinity itself. Masculine knights consistently prove themselves to be masculine by way of ritualized combat performance, fulfillment of quests, and heterosexual desire. These performances break down or fail, laying bare masculinity as a constructed position, not an inherent identity. The Red Cross Knight illustrates that masculine virtue requires constant demonstration and affirmation. His encounters with Duessa and his consequent imprisonment show his susceptibility to feminization as well as to ethical vulnerability, pertaining to a requirement of elaborate means of purification

and re-performances to regain his chivalric identity. Guyon's striving to preserve temperance and Artegall's subjection by Radigund highlight the vulnerability of masculine performance.

As Berger contends, "The male knights of *The Faerie Queene* unmask the fiction of stable masculinity through their ongoing efforts to enact knightly virtues properly" (Berger). This argument echoes Butler's contention that all gender identity, not only non-normative identity, hinges on "a stylised repetition of acts" instead of presenting an essential self (Butler, and Trouble). The apprehension regarding masculine performance intensifies in Book IV when male relationships are consistently jeopardised by effeminacy and homosocial attraction. Bailey and Bray illustrate that Spenser's portrayal of male friendship exposes profound apprehension regarding the demarcation between acceptable male camaraderie and forbidden homosexual inclination—an apprehension that is evident in compulsive displays of heterosexual courtship interspersed with same-sex conflict and reconciliation (Bailey and Bray). The volatility of these performances further emphasises the fabricated essence of masculinity throughout the epic.

6 Gender Performativity in *Shahnameh*

6.1 Gordafarid: The Woman Warrior

One such case of gender performativity in *Shahnameh* can be seen in Gordafarid's story as a female fighter who, similar to Britomart, assumes masculine martial skills to safeguard her people. When the Persian fortress comes under attack from Sohrab, a youth who personifies his masculine identity as a warrior, Gordafarid assumes the identity of a male fighter: She concealed her tresses in her helmet / And rode to battle like a warrior. (*Shahnameh*, Davis translation) Gordafarid's exhibition of masculinity is first persuasive and impactful. Her combat skills are on par with Sohrab's until her helmet is dislodged, exposing her gender. In contrast to Britomart, whose unveiled femininity harmonizes with her martial persona, Gordafarid's revealed female identity alters her engagement with Sohrab, transitioning from combat to the prospect of love entrapment. This episode showcases gender performance's effectiveness as well as its reliance upon social acknowledgment. Szklarz, and Moradi points out, "Gordafarid's short but notable cameo in the *Shahnameh* reflects how gender performance can temporarily challenge but not permanently upend established gender structures" (Szklarz, and Moradi). Her story thus exemplifies Butler's observation that subversive performances operate within constraints and often face containment. Gordafarid's performance is particularly significant due to its placement in the text's heroic phase when masculine identity is most stringently delineated through martial skill. Yaghoobi contends that Gordafarid's appearance at this pivotal narrative juncture—during the initial clash between Iran and Turan that ultimately culminates in the tragic Rostam-Sohrab confrontation—places the performance of the female warrior at the core of the epic's investigation of national and gender identity (Yaghoobi). Her tactical embrace of male traits to protect her homeland indicates that gender stereotypes may be momentarily suspended for the sake of national preservation.

6.2 Gender and Sovereignty: Homay Chehreh-Azad

The *Shahnameh* analyses gender performativity through female monarchs who adopt masculinized forms of sovereignty. The most notable instance is Queen Homay Chehreh-Azad, who ruled thirty years after her father, King Bahman. The text outlines that "She placed the crown upon her head / And ruled with justice and with wisdom" (*Shahnameh*, Davis translation). Homay's exercise of governance—historically a male-dominated function in Persian culture—entails the adoption of symbols of sovereignty, such as the crown and throne, the wielding of military power, and the administration of justice. In contrast to the covert displays of warriors such as Gordafarid, Homay overtly embodies masculine authority while preserving a feminine identity. This engenders a gender ambiguity akin to that historians have seen in Queen Elizabeth I's self-representation (Levin).

Homay's reign is positioned as largely successful but ultimately ephemeral. The text presents that order once again follows her accession to the throne by her son Darab, reinforcing the

patriarchal idea that female rule is unconventional as opposed to standard. Milani states, “Ferdowsi allows Hōmay great agency while ultimately holding her power within traditional gender constructs” (Milani). More recent studies by Mahmoudi contrast Hōmay’s reign with those of other female monarchs in the *Shahnameh*, e.g., Pourandokht and Azarmidokht, in a historic context (Mahmoudi). This comparative study reveals a pattern: female rule in the text consistently works as able but temporary, in that order holds until male power can better be restored. This pattern indicates medieval Persian concerns about female rule similar to those of Elizabethan England, though with far more dissimilar cultural contexts. The approach by Butler explains in which ways both works treat these concerns by means of containment methods that legitimize female agency yet retain its temporary nature.

6.3 Tahmineh and Feminine Performance

The *Shahnameh* features significant instances of women undertaking typically masculine responsibilities, while simultaneously examining the performative nature of conventional femininity. The figure of Tahmineh, who pursues the hero Rostam to conceive her child, exemplifies the calculated enactment of feminine desire and allure. The moment she enters Rostam’s quarters, she undergoes typical beauty rituals: “Her countenance was as shining as a moon, her tresses as a moonless night / Her stature as high as cypress trees / And her eyes as narcissus blooms in spring” (*Shahnameh*, Davis translation). This representation of feminine beauty adheres to Persian poetic formulas; however, Tahmineh defies conventions by actively pursuing Rostam instead of getting pursued. This feminine beauty projection together with self-assertive action constructs a nuanced gender performance that reinforces as well as subverts conventions. Tahmineh’s narrative exemplifies Butler’s notion of operating under normative limitations while discovering avenues for agency. As Talattof argues, “Tahmineh performs conventional femininity while pursuing unconventional goals, demonstrating how performance can simultaneously reinforce and subtly undermine gender norms” (Talattof). Tahmineh’s tactical enactment of femininity parallels that of other female characters in the epic, who likewise utilize traditional feminine roles for strategic purposes. Rudabeh’s pursuit of Zal entails intricate displays of beauty and modesty as she strategically orchestrates their encounters. Sindokht, the mother of Rudabeh, employs diplomatic femininity to safeguard her daughter and mediate between conflicting factions. Their narratives illustrate Butler’s understanding that even ostensibly conformist gender expressions may include subversive components.

6.4 Additional Female Characters: Strategic Feminine Performance

The *Shahnameh* features various female characters whose strategic gender performances warrant examination. Manizheh, the offspring of the Turanian monarch Afrasiyab, utilizes her nurturing and healing abilities to liberate her beloved Bizhan from her father’s prison. Through the execution of anticipated feminine care, while undermining parental authority, Manizheh illustrates how traditional gender presentation can conceal political dissent. Katayun, a Byzantine princess married to the Persian prince Gushtasp, navigates Byzantine as well as Persian gender expectations by adeptly taking up a variety of feminine roles. Byzantine princess Katayun, who was married to a Persian prince, Gushtasp, deftly negotiates Byzantine as well as Persian female expectations by graciously executing multiple feminine roles. The facility in performing her role beyond cultural boundaries positions her to be an actor in both worlds, highlighting the cultural specificity of gender performance that is underscored in Butler’s subsequent works. These female protagonists, as argued by Kia and Marashi, illustrate “strategic performativity.” —The conscious transformation of gender expectations in order to achieve goals otherwise unavailable to women in a patriarchal environment (Kia and Marashi). This theme in the *Shahnameh* signals Ferdowsi’s sensitivity towards the performative nature of gender, in contrast to the lack of modern theoretical vocabulary. Their research concurs with Butler’s conceptualisation of performance as constraining as well as potentially empowering agency.

6.5 Rostam and Sohrab: Performing Heroic Masculinity

Like *The Faerie Queene*, *Shahnameh* explores masculinity as a performance, most obviously in its

central hero Rostam, but also his son Sohrab. Both characters repeatedly realize heroic masculinity in ritualized combat, showings of bodily strength, and strict obedience to the code of warriors. The ghastly encounter of son and father, in ignorance of each other's identity, points up the way in which individuals can be trapped by performance of masculinity, compelling them to resort to deadly behavior in order to live up to their self-presentation as warriors. When Sohrab, upon his mortal wounding, reveals his identity, Rostam's masculine performance collapses into deep mourning. The text describes how "He rent his clothes and tore his hair / And poured dust upon his head in mourning" (Shahnameh, Davis translation). This pivotal transformation from military heroism to paternal grief illustrates constructed and dependent components of heroic masculinity. According to Hillmann, "The Rostam-Sohrab scene reveals masculine identity in the Shahnameh to rely upon iterated performances of heroic values, performances which drive towards tragedy insofar as they conflict with other identity components" (Hillmann). This reading concurs with Butler's perception of gender as "a construction which consistently covers up its origins" (Butler, and Trouble), since tragic resolution indicates what otherwise remains hidden.

Kashani's current research broadens this premise by considering the multiple forms of masculinity in the epic (Kashani). The royal masculinity, represented by kings, heroic masculinity, represented by heroes like Rostam, and wisdom masculinity, represented by counselors like Zal in his old age, serve as distinct yet interdependent performances. The narrative most often looks at conflicts among different expressions of masculinity, especially in cases where rulers must negotiate their power by that of more obviously dominant heroes. The multiplicity of male performances challenges a binary understanding of gender and aligns with Butler's latter research on multiple and sometimes competing gender expressions.

7 Comparative Analysis

7.1 Parallels in Female Martial Performance

A notable resemblance between *The Faerie Queene* and *Shahnameh* is their depiction of female warriors who temporarily assume masculine identities through cross-dressing and martial skills. Britomart and Gordafarid both demonstrate what Butler would term "the radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender" (Butler, and Trouble) by performing masculine behaviours while maintaining female identities. However, there are great differences in the way these performances function within their narratives. Britomart's military identity persists throughout the epic and forms a deep part of her personality, while Gordafarid's short presence exists only to emphasise Sohrab's heroic identity. Britomart's gender performance ties in with prophecy and national destiny, while Gordafarid's emerges from short-term strategic necessity.

Most importantly, the works differ in their resolution of such gender transgressions. Arguing, as Anderson does, "Spenser integrates Britomart's martial femininity into a reformed vision of gender complementarity, while Ferdowsi represents Gordafarid's warrior performance as temporary and ultimately circumscribed by traditional gender expectations" (Anderson). This contrast mirrors that of the works' differing cultural contexts and ideology. This contrast can point to differing cultural attitudes toward gender transgression. Elizabethan society, McNamara asserts, reflected a double fascination with and anxiety over gender ambivalence, as seen in both anti-cross-dressing legislation and in frequent appearances of cross-dressed heroes in stage performances (McNamara). The Persian literary tradition featured strict gender dichotomies together with mythologised accounts of a woman temporarily taking up a masculine guise. Both authors approach these cultural concerns by allowing circumscribed gender transgressions but then upholding traditional gender boundaries.

7.2 Female Sovereignty and Its Limitations

Both works investigate female sovereignty—Gloriana (*The Faerie Queene*) in Spenser's epic poem, as well as queens like Hoday in Ferdowsi's poem. With each, female rule requires insistent working through of gendered presumptions about authority. Miller writes, "Both works imagine the possibility of female sovereignty but contain it in masculine structures that make such rule

exceptional, not normative" (Miller). Elizabeth I's image certainly informed Spenser's presentation of female rule, providing a living exemplar of feminine identity's accommodation of sovereign power. Ferdowsi, writing centuries earlier, had no immediate exemplar to draw upon; however, his presentation of Homay similarly looks at the institution of monarchy through a feminine vessel. Both works present female sovereignty as authentic but in most cases temporary or circumstantial. Gloriana exists largely offstage in *The Faerie Queene*, her rule narrated through male knights, while Homay eventually transfers power to her son. These constraints enact what Butler terms "the regulatory practices that produce coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms" (Butler, and Trouble)—structures that can tolerate some transgression but in the end support traditional gender hierarchies.

The two books masterfully examine female autonomy in complementary representational ways. As Gross and McGoey note in their comparative analysis, both epics preserve gender hierarchy not by excluding female rule, in fact, but by exceptionalising it—redefining it as temporary, transitional, or incomplete (Gross, and McGoey). This approach allows works to describe historic reality (female rulers in both environments) yet preserve patriarchal beliefs in terms of the natural order of gender. Butler's theory explains such a mechanism of regulation that restrains gender transgression by defining it as exceptional, rather than normative.

7.3 Narrative Containment Strategies

Both epics utilize analogous techniques to suppress potentially disruptive gender performances, albeit with varying emphases that reflect their respective cultural settings. The strategies encompass:

- Temporary transgression: Both texts depict the majority of female adaptations of masculine duties as transient rather than enduring, implying a forthcoming reinstatement of the traditional gender hierarchy.
- Reproductive resolution: Both often conclude female narratives through marriage and children, encapsulating gender uncertainty inside heteronormative structures.
- Moral differentiation: Both delineate acceptable from intolerable gender transgressions, often depicting moderate violations of gender norms as commendable, while severe challenges to gender hierarchy, such as Radigund's Amazons, are shown unfavorably.

These containment strategies point to what Butler characterises as the "disciplinary production of gender" that circumscribes subversive potential (Butler, and Trouble). But as Bahramitash points out, "The very fact of these containment strategies indicates an awareness by the texts of gender's potential instability" (Bahramitash). By working to repress gender transgression, both epics inadvertently identify their subversive potential. In the *Shahnameh*, these containment strategies most often operate by way of narrative trajectories that initially grant agency to female agents before reintegrating them into patriarchal structures. As Loveimi points in their analysis of female agency in Persian epics, "Ferdowsi creates fleeting zones of feminine power which in turn serve higher narrative ends which reinforce traditional social hierarchies" (Loveimi). This can be seen in alignment with Skupniewicz and Maksymiuk's more recent analysis of Gordafarid, who asserts that the woman warrior's fleeting presence operates largely as "a controlled depiction of gender transgression which heightens the dramatic force of the Rostam-Sohrab narrative rather than destabilising gender hierarchies" (Skupniewicz, and Maksymiuk). In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser contains gender violations in allegorical frames which control their disruptive power. Recent studies by Anderson show that "Spenser's use of allegory allows him to negotiate gender fluidity but retain it in a moral framework which ultimately reinforces traditional hierarchies" (Anderson). This points to what Gross, and McGoey have identified as the "controlled transgression paradox" in early modern literature, in which "moments of gender disturbance serve to reinforce normative boundaries precisely by illustrating the consequences of their breaking" (Gross, and McGoey).

7.4 Cross-Cultural Patterns and Divergences

Despite originating from vastly different cultural contexts separated by nearly six centuries, *The Faerie Queene* and *Shahnameh* exhibit notable parallels in their examination of gender as a performative construct. This indicates certain cross-cultural trends in the portrayal of gender construction and its inversion within literary epics.

Both documents:

- Recognize the performative nature of both masculinity and femininity
- Explore gender ambiguity through characters who cross conventional boundaries
- Link gender performance to national/cultural identity and continuity
- Ultimately reinforce heteronormative frameworks while acknowledging their contingency

Nonetheless, significant disparities illustrate their unique cultural contexts:

1. *The Faerie Queene* demonstrates greater interest in allegorical explorations of gender, consistent with its Christian framework and allegorical structure.
2. *Shahnameh* places stronger emphasis on maternal influence and lineage in its gender constructions, reflecting Persian cultural traditions.
3. *The Faerie Queene* more explicitly theorizes gender relations as part of its moral framework, while *Shahnameh* presents gender performance more as narrative elements within its heroic stories.
4. As Najmabadi has recently argued, the *Shahnameh* presents women's gender performances within a more explicitly political framework connected to questions of national identity and resistance to foreign influence, while *The Faerie Queene* frames gender performance more within individual moral development and allegorical religious frameworks (Najmabadi).
5. Stump points to divergent narrative patterns in how transgressive gender performances are resolved, noting that "while Spenser tends to incorporate transformed gender identities into new social arrangements, Ferdowsi typically restores conventional gender boundaries after momentary transgressions" (Stump). These differences highlight what Mohanty identifies as the importance of cultural specificity in feminist analysis, while the similarities demonstrate possibilities for cross-cultural feminist dialogue.

It is vital to appreciate, however, that such a comparative method necessitates sensitivity to what Khezri refers to as the "hermeneutic asymmetry" in imposing Western theoretical paradigms upon non-Western literature. They advise caution in "applying Butler's theory of performativity to Persian classical literature with sensitivity to unique cultural constructions of self, embodiment, and social performance that might not perfectly correspond with current theoretical expectations in the West" (Khezri). This proviso follows from Dabashi's larger argument against uncritical imposition of Western critical theory upon non-Western literary histories, in favor of methods appreciative of the "situated production of knowledge" unique to a given cultural and historic context (Dabashi).

8 Theoretical Implications

8.1 Premodern Performativity

This analysis of *The Faerie Queene* and *Shahnameh* uncovers that the concept of gender performativity, while articulated in terms available to modern theory, can powerfully illuminate premodern literature. Both epics illustrate a sophisticated grasp of gender as a product of habitual performances rather than a representation of essential categories—one that antecedes but concurs with Butler's theoretical viewpoint. As Lochrie argues, "Premodern texts often demonstrate a more complex understanding of gender's constructedness than modern scholars have typically acknowledged" (Lochrie). This analysis substantiates that assertion, demonstrating how both

Spenser and Ferdowsi investigate the instability and contingency of gender categories centuries before Butler's theoretical formulation. Applying performativity theory to premodern texts necessitates meticulous contextual grounding. Both epics function within theological and cultural paradigms that assume fundamental distinctions between men and women while simultaneously examining the performative construction of gender.

This essentialism-constructionism tension produces productive ambiguity in both texts, which generates what Sedgwick called "definitional excesses" that cannot be contained (Sedgwick). More recent criticism has complicated further the use of performativity theory in premodern texts. Arruzza suggests that "premodern gender performances exist in different epistemological modes than those which underlie Butler's theory, which requires theory adjustments that take account of historically specific modes of understanding embodiment and performance" (Arruzza). Likewise, Giorgio detects a "performative paradox" in taking current theory to premodern texts, wherein "the very process of recognising performativity in these works involves acknowledging basic disparities in conceptions of identity itself" (Giorgio). Despite this, as Scheibe argues convincingly, it is these tensions and disparities that make comparative analysis worth doing: "The productive tension among current theoretical modes and premodern textual representations provides insights not available from historical contextualisation by itself or current theory by itself" (Scheibe). This methodological stance determines the approach of this study in terms of both texts.

8.2 Cross-Cultural Feminist Analysis

The comparative method used here supports Ahmed's argument that cross-cultural feminist studies can identify similarities in gender production in ways that respect cultural specificities (Ahmed). The similarities among the discussions of gender performativity in these works from diverse traditions support common traits in negotiating gender standards in transcultural contexts. This method supports (Mohanty)'s criticism against universalising orientations in feminist critique. The different ways *The Faerie Queene* and *Shahnameh* account for female agency, resolve gender ambiguity, and theorise interplay among gender and other identity aspects emphasise cultural as well as historical specificity. Comparative feminist critique, as Bahramitash reasons, must "identify patterns without flattening difference" (Bahramitash). This method illustrates both works as contributing to the performance of gender construction while respecting their different cultural systems as well as their unique historic contexts.

New developments in feminist literary theory in a cross-cultural context provide key methodological contributions to such a comparative analysis. Frazier suggests a "dialogic comparative approach" in which works from multiple traditions, as equal contributors to theoretical understanding, engage in dialogue rather than forcing theories from a single tradition upon works from outside (Frazier). Wang, and Huang suggest "contextually grounded comparison", which "recognises the inherent cultural logics of each text yet reflects theoretical connections among traditions" (Wang, and Huang). This research attempts to evade these methodological challenges by engaging with each text in its terms while uncovering gender performativities that cut across cultural boundaries. However, as seen by Twiss, "Even the most carefully contextualised comparative analysis runs a risk of reinscribing power imbalances by bringing together works from different traditions into theoretical debates controlled by paradigms from the West" (Twiss). This warning marks the tentative nature of a number of comparative claims to be found in this research.

8.3 Literary Epics and Gender Norms

This analysis deepens understanding of literary epics in terms of gender norms. *The Faerie Queene* as well as *Shahnameh* simultaneously reinforce yet subvert traditional gender categorisations, suggesting that epic verse, in a traditional association with masculinity, provides a forum for exploring gender fluidity. Quint suggests that epic poetry in general aims to reinforce national or cultural identity, often through gendered representations of valour and virtue (Quint). This research suggests that consolidation is impossible to achieve; the process of defining cultural identity through gender performances inherently lays bare manufactured essence in those performances. The two works illustrate what Butler describes as the "temporal and contingent groundlessness" of gender categories (Butler, and Trouble) as they seek to create stable cultural and moral constructs.

This tension provides a supportive environment for feminist critique, illustrating how literary works create gender, making visible its constructed status. She suggests that “epic poetry’s role in making national identity necessarily involves negotiating gender borders, making textual space where gender norms both affirm and destabilise each other”. Likewise, Stump remarks in her exploration of early modern English epics that “the very monumentality of these works obliges them to incorporate and negotiate gender ambiguity as part of their totalising efforts” (Stump).

This comparison proves that, in terms of their chronological as well as cultural differences, both texts share common structural traits in handling gender performance. Just as Zeitlin posits in their seminal comparative research of gender in world epic traditions, “Literary epics in different cultures show striking similarities in their ambivalently constructed attitude toward gender conventions, promoting ruling ideologies as well as experimenting with narrative forms in which those same conventions turn out to be contingent upon context” (Zeitlin). This observation reveals unexpected similarities in which both Spenser’s as well as Ferdowsi’s handling of gender performativity occurs, despite crucial contextual variations.

9 Conclusion

This comparative analysis of gender performativity in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* reveals striking similarities as well as great contrasts in constructing and, at points, subverting gender conventions in these classic epics. Both works, despite their vastly different cultural as well as chronological origins, display an astute awareness of gender as performed, as opposed to reflecting inherent divisions. Coming to our original research questions, what we see in this research is a great deal of depth in terms of how gender performativity works in the narrative frame of each epic. Throughout both epics, gender exists as an intricate performance rather than a quality that characters naturally have. Britomart’s and Gordafarid’s martial performances and Gloriana’s and Hoday’s sovereignty, as well as other characters such as Tahmineh’s feminine tactics, illustrate in each case that gender identity needs to be repeatedly performed and acknowledged by society in order to feel natural. The research asserts that both epics explore gender performativity in the ways of (1) female characters taking up masculine performances (Britomart, Gordafarid) in a quest for martial excellence; (2) female monarchs (Gloriana, Hoday) negotiating ruler-gendered expectations; (3) the probing of normative femininity as strategic performance (Tahmineh); and (4) identification of masculinity as an attained status in constant need of reinforcement (knights, warriors).

Discussing similarities and dissimilarities in the way in which these epics create, support, and possibly subvert gender conventions, our argument reveals that both epics involve very similar containment strategies of temporary transgression, resolution by reproduction, and moral differentiation, yet those strategies operate within different cultural systems. That of Spenser often involves taking transformed gender identities over into new social configurations which eventually support Protestant English values, whereas (Ferdowsi) always reestablishes traditional gender boundaries after temporary breaches in support of Persian cultural continuity. Concerning ways in which moments of gender fluidity operate in these works’ overall ideological systems, we find that both epics deploy gender transgression in a strategic way—aesthetically to bring to attention unusual circumstances, to reaffirm national identity, or to underscore proper gender roles by illustrating what happens as a result of their breakdown. Neither work permits gender fluidity to upend their underlying social orderings, but both stage narrative realms in which gender’s constructed status briefly emerges. The similarities point to distinct cross-cultural patterns in gender construction and subversion in literary epics, and the dissimilarities—the ways in which these epics resolve, their moral systems, and their cultural specificity—point to contextual analysis as a central concern in feminist criticism.

Our comparative method reveals that building gender works in widely different literary traditions in strikingly similar ways, despite enormous cultural contrasts. Both works illustrate as well that literary representations of gender support cultural standards while bespeaking their contingency by way of characters who successfully perform across gender categories. Our comparative approach denaturalises gender in both works, illustrating in each case that

performance, not essence, forms gender identity across different cultural systems. At last, this project illustrates both the illuminating power and limitation of taking Butler to a variety of texts. Both epics, as Butler's framework successfully reveals, stage gender as performed, not as essence. Both, however, also show limitations in accounting for the unique religious, cultural, and historic contexts in which gender operates in a given tradition. The productive tension between current theory and premodern text produces a kind of intelligence that neither history of context alone nor theory alone can generate, reminding us along the way of the necessity of cultural specificity in feminist analysis.

This project theoretically applies Butler's performativity theory to premodern literature, affirming a sophisticated engagement with constructed gender centuries prior to current theoretical debates. It contributes to cross-cultural feminist studies by recognising patterns in a manner that honours cultural specificity. This research has many notable deficiencies that should receive mention. First, while it examines various notable female figures in the *Shahnameh*, it does not investigate the entire range of female characters in this massive epic, such as notable figures as Rudabeh, Sindokht, Manizheh, Katayun, and many more who might provide additional information about Ferdowsi's understanding of gender. Future research should extend beyond analysis to include these characters to develop a richer understanding of gender performativity in the *Shahnameh*. This methodology applies a theory developed in a Western context to analyse works in many cultural traditions. Even with efforts to contextualise research and account for cultural specificity, problems of cross-cultural theoretical transferability remain a fundamental concern.

Yazdi and Mozafari point out, "Applying Western theoretical paradigms to Persian classical literature demands a sensitivity to epistemological difference and to cultural specificity which may require theoretical adaptation." This research focuses predominantly upon the representation of cisgender male and female characters, with little attention to other forms of gender variation possible in these works (Yazdi, and Mozafari). Future research could extend this to also examine representations fundamentally at odds with traditional gender categories. Future studies can extend this comparative approach to more epic literatures or examine the influence of gender performativity in these landmark works upon subsequent works in their literatures. Additionally, extending the comparison to epics in different cultural literatures, like the *Mahabharata*, *Journey to the West*, or *Epic of Sundiata*, will give a more nuanced vision of gender performativity in epic literatures. As (Ferguson) advises, "Truly global feminist literary analysis requires moving beyond binary comparisons to consider multiple textual traditions simultaneously." One potential future area of research is a complete historicised account of the reception of these gender performances by modern and subsequent readings. Such a reception history would make clear how these works came to be interpreted, contested, or reinforced over time, thereby increasing historic understanding of gender norms and their development in different cultural environments.

This analysis intersects these works in terms of gender performativity, strengthening literary studies as well as feminist theory, and highlighting ways in which comparative methods can make richer understandings of gender relations in a variety of cultural as well as historical situations. As literary studies expand globally as well as transculturally, such comparisons create a rich potential for questioning cultural presumptions about gender in ways that respect diversity in many literary traditions.

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