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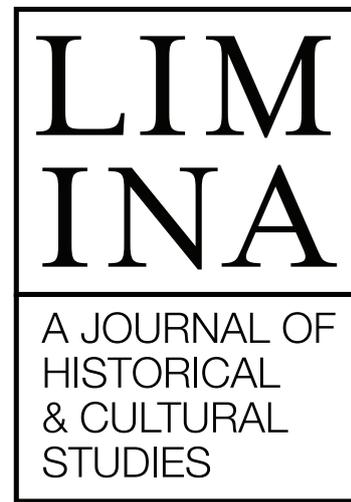
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Cover Image

UWA Japanese Garden, Perth, Western Australia. Photograph by Rebecca Repper.



Parisa Shams, *Judith Butler and Subjectivity: The Possibilities and Limits of the Human*, Palgrave Pivot, London, 2020; pp. 92; RRP \$90.21

There is something to be said about a contemporary critique that can contribute a fresh and complex perspective to the enduring legacy of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. During the thirty odd years since Butler proposed their theory of performative subjectivity, later developing it to consider an ethics of alterity, countless responses engaging with their conceptualisations have emerged. Navigating the contentious terrain of Butler's philosophies, and the debates they have spawned within feminist philosophical scholarship alone, is no simple feat.

Readers will find a welcome addition to Butlerian philosophy in Parisa Shams' *Judith Butler and Subjectivity: The Possibilities and Limits of the Human*. Writing with impressive intellectual fervour and an unwavering dedication to elaborate upon Butler's formulation of subjectivity as an ethical and performative process, this study provides insight into how feminist philosophy can be brought into dialogue with dramatic texts. Shams uses Howard Barker's plays *The Castle* and *The Fence is in Its Thousandth Year* as examples to apply Butler's understanding of subjectivity, examining how the forces that affect identity and agency can also be a site for transgression.

The study is composed of five tidy chapters. That it is based on Shams' Ph. D. thesis, completed at The University of Western Australia, is reflected in the first three chapters and their meticulous and sustained engagement with Butler's work. Chapter One acts as the study's introduction, setting up Shams' dual interests by asking:

How did the 1980s intellectual debates on identity and representation find their way into theatre studies, and how did Butler's work on subjectivity contribute to the development of a conceptual framework for the study of subjectivity in theatre and performance? (5)

Shams uses these questions to guide her research and situate the significance of feminist theory and Butler's performative view of subjectivity within theatre studies. The historical account Shams provides engages with feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s, exploring how Butler's critique of subjectivity came to the fore. Shams finds that Butler's thinking about gender and identity gained traction within theatre studies because it prompted performance critics to question how theatrical practices represented gender and bodies as social constructs and sites of contestation. Chapter Two develops in greater detail Butler's theory of performative subjectivity arguing that gender and identity are constructed through a citational process of 'acts', brought about by the norms that condition its articulation (3). After mapping the contours of this proposition, Shams surveys the major criticisms of *Gender Trouble*. Of relevance to Shams' discussion here is Butler's inability to 'address the relation between norms and acts as well as between constitution and agency' (16). This critical overview is crucial in laying the groundwork for the next chapter and its consideration of how Butler's 'turn to ethics' signals an extended engagement with norms and their effect in shaping the subject (39). In Chapter Three, Shams accounts for how Butler conceives subjectivity as ethical, largely through the subject's inevitable entanglement with others. Through this 'ek-static and relational' entanglement, the subject comes into being (40). In thinking through the intricacies of the ethical aspects to Butler's theorisation, Shams effectively sets up the parameters of the study's engagement with subjectivity. The result is sure to be appreciated by readers who may have no prior knowledge of Butler's work and yet

elect to come to each of the first three chapters individually or appraise them together.

Shams utilises a feminist ethical perspective to guide the analysis of Barker's plays *The Castle* and *The Fence* in Chapter Four. The examination of *The Castle* focuses on Ann and how her sexual transgressions lead to her death which Shams reads as 'an act of corporeal resistance. It is a triumph of the will that drives the destruction of the castle' (62). The study then shifts its focus to *The Fence* where Shams forwards that Algeria's sexual 'engagement with the thieves is an indication of how ecstatic relationality and vulnerability are concomitant to her social existence and constitute her responsibility for the other' (67-68). In this chapter, the characters' sexual and bodily interactions are vital in instigating a revisioning of their constitutive forces (66). Shams concludes the discussion in Chapter Five by reflecting on how the characters are affected by regulative discourses and through their ecstatic relation to others. Their desires however inspire them to challenge and transgress the external and structural limitations acting upon their existence.

At first glance, this is a slim study. However, I would caution readers against mistaking the size of the volume for an assessment of Shams' ability to trace Butler's theoretical trajectory. It is most impressive that Shams can wade through the polemics of Butler's oeuvre whilst balancing this discussion with relevant feminist theatre scholarship. For instance, the reference to Jill Dolan's study in Chapter One and their call to question the representational capacity inherent in staged performances is acutely taken up in Shams' treatment of *The Fence* which focuses on 'the subtexts of subjectivity and transgression through stage directions and voices of characters, working with dialogues that create character, narrative and conflict' (70). In this approach, Shams threads the critical perspective offered earlier in the study throughout and constructs a unified analysis. With this methodology, Shams delineates a way for scholars interested in feminist philosophy, theatre, or literary studies to situate their own thinking about theories of subjectivity and apply them to literary or dramatic texts.

There appears to be very little in the way of academic shortcomings that prevents *Judith Butler and Subjectivity* from attaining its overarching thesis. In the study's examination of *The Fence*, Shams locates the play within other scholarly criticism on it to account for how sexuality has been discussed. Shams' subsequent analysis of the text builds on these insights, enhancing its reading. On a minor note, contextualising *The Castle* in the same manner would have strengthened the feminist perspective that is utilised.

Judith Butler and Subjectivity successfully contemplates the conditions that influence the subject's emergence. The study presents a thoughtful approach to Butler's work and exhibits a thorough understanding of how desire and transgression work to challenge the restrictions placed upon the human subject. If readers were to take anything away from this book, let it be the fixed commitment *Judith Butler and Subjectivity* exemplifies in testing the social and moral limitations posed to furthering intellectual inquiry.

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