

# The Image of Women in “Jin Ping Mei” from the Perspective of Gender Performativity —Taking Pan Jinlian, Li Pinger as Examples

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**Abstract.** The many distinctive and controversial female characters portrayed in “*Jin Ping Mei*” have become the focus of academic research. Previous studies have mostly been limited to moral criticism at the socio-historical level, ignoring the inherent complexity and dynamism of how these characters, as independent individuals, form a gendered subject. This paper introduces Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, focusing on the formation process of this gender subject. This study argues that the feminine traits of characters such as Pan Jinlian and Li Pinger in the novel are not inherent, but rather gradually constructed through a series of repetitive and strategic social performances within the broader context of a patriarchal society. At the same time, this study pays attention to the instability in the process of constructing the female subject in the work, identifying certain traits exhibited by the novel's female characters during their gender construction that deviate from their biological sex. In essence, this research aims to offer a unique perspective on the gender studies of “*Jin Ping Mei*” through the theory of gender performativity.

**Keywords:** *Jin Ping Mei*; gender performativity; Judith Butler; portrayal of women.

## 1. Introduction

Based on the social reality of the late Ming Dynasty, “*Jin Ping Mei*” uses the story of the world as an entry point to describe in detail the life of the society of the late Ming Dynasty. The author's portrayal of women in the book is different from the traditional concepts of “chastity” and “virtue”, but it is an unprecedented subversion of the image of women expected by the general public at that time, showing a strong contradiction and complexity, which has made “*Jin Ping Mei*” an important text for Chinese and foreign scholars to study gender power and social issues.

This study introduces Judith Butler's gender performativity theory to analyse the women in “*Jin Ping Mei*” and to explore how women in the social context of that time distorted their true selves to complete the construction of their female identities through “gender performance”. This study combines Western gender theory with classical Chinese literature to explore the underlying thinking about gender identity in the late Ming society.

## 2. Literature Review

“*Jin Ping Mei*” has been the focus of the field of gender studies due to its unique writing object and subversive characterisation. At present, academic gender studies on “*Jin Ping Mei*” are mainly divided into three periods. Firstly, before 2010, scholars mainly focused on the analysis of the female figures in the novel and the interpretation of the view of women in the book. For example, Chen Jiansheng delineated in detail the character systems of the women in the book, exposing the tragic world in which women lived at that time [1]. Dong Fang, Hong Lu and Yao Zuozhou all interpret the female view of the work [2-4]. Secondly, during the period 2010-2020, with the emergence of feminist works and the rise of comparative literature, most of the studies in this period compare “*Jin Ping Mei*” with gender writing in other literary works. At the same time, with the continuous development of gender studies, scholars have further broadened their perspectives on “*Jin Ping Mei*”, analysing women's stories and their consciousness from more perspectives and at a deeper level. Some scholars have paid attention to the female imagery system in the book and explored the unique

lifestyle of women in the marketplace [5, 6]. Zhang Pengfei focuses his research on the life implications of female images and analyses the awakening of female life subjects' consciousness of resistance [7]. In addition, scholars such as Zeng Juanjuan, A Yang, Shen Shuxin and Tang Minli have compared the women's writing in "*Jin Ping Mei*" with other works to explore the differences in women's consciousness or women's writing in different works [8-11]. Finally, from 2020 to the present, the research angle has been further broadened and the theory has been enriched, focusing on women's living space and erotic writing, and providing a more detailed interpretation of women in the book [12-14].

Many overseas scholars have also focused on gender studies of "*Jin Ping Mei*". Ding published "*Obscene Things: Sexual Politics in Jin Ping Mei*", which provides a unique critical analysis of the gender structure and ideology in the text of "*Jin Ping Mei*", while He starts from the specific female role of Wu Yueniang, and provides a different critical reading of Wu Yueniang's image from the previous ones [15,16]. In recent years, McMahon published "*Saying All That Be Said: The Art of Describing Sex in Jin Ping Mei*", in which he refuted the common view of "*Jin Ping Mei*" as "sex" or "bad sex" He thinks that they are rich in thematic meanings and carry social and aesthetic purposes [17]. Beaudoin focuses on the religious practices of the women in the book, parsing the religious behaviours covered and arguing that some of the women gained autonomy through religious practices in the society of the time [18].

Previous studies in China and abroad mostly focus on the critique of feudalism or feminist perspectives to reveal the distorted persecution of women by irrational social systems and feudal ideologies. However, they seldom construct and deconstruct the women in the works from the perspective of gender studies. Therefore, this study aims to explore the construction process of female subjects in the work, providing new perspectives for the research on female images in "*Jin Ping Mei*".

### **3. A Brief Introduction to Judith Butler's Theory of "Gender Performativity"**

In gender studies, the relationship between sex and gender has been a topic of constant academic discussion, and the concept of social gender was first formally proposed by the American anthropologist Gayle Rubin. His elaboration of sex-gender system provides a clear explanation of the concept of gender. He argued that gender, as a social construct, is a cultural attribute that distinguishes biological sex, and that differences between sex and gender are constructed from social culture [19]. This theory has gained the acceptance of many scholars in gender studies in subsequent generations and has been continuously developed on this basis. Beauvoir's work "*The Second Sex*", a classic work of feminism, similarly distinguishes between sex and gender, and she makes it clear that gender is gradually constructed by the individual in the course of his or her social activities, as she states in her work, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" [20].

When the theory that gender is a socially constructed was widely accepted by academics, Judith Butler raised the question of "in what ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts". She argues that bodies are transformed into gender through a series of acts, during which they are constantly renewed, modified and consolidated to become their own gender. Butler provides a detailed definition of acts - the process of constructing meaning or the way of performing, enacting. In addition, she emphasises that such acts exist before an individual enters society, which means that they are agreed upon in a particular social context and are reinforced and convinced by repeated performances by different individuals. At the same time, Butler points out that such acts are explicitly strategic and purposeful [21]. Judith Butler compares the process of gender formation to an actor performing on stage according to a script within the rules and framework of performance. Just as bodies play out their roles in society, they interpret and perform within established boundaries. In sum, Butler argues that gender is a product of repetitive acts, which are formed when bodies repeatedly act out behaviours that conform to social expectations. In her theory, there is no 'prototype' of such acts to imitate - it is not an imitation of sex, but of an 'ideal model'. This ideal pattern is a

product of self-design and imagination that does not actually exist anywhere and is never fixed; it is only repeated over and over again in each act [21].

In subsequent developments, Butler elaborates on this theory in greater detail. She distinguishes between subject and body, performance and performativity. Performance often involves a subject, meaning the subject precedes the performance, whereas performativity comes before the subject, with the individual repeating performative acts to constitute the subject. Moreover, these repeated acts do not always follow the same pattern; they are influenced by various discourse systems. This leads to the second key element of Butler's perspective: gender identity is always in process, is indeterminate and unstable, i.e., gender is fluid [22]. Judith Butler's 1990 book "Gender Trouble" offers a comprehensive and detailed overview and explanation of these elements. In short, her theory of gender performance explores how gender is constructed, arguing that gender is a process or action rooted in socially regulated performative behaviours.

## 4. Construction and Deconstruction of Gender

### 4.1. Discipline and Performance

Judith Butler argues that the process of gender construction begins when people say "this is a girl", introducing the theory of performativity and redefining gender in "Gender Trouble" in 1990: "Gender is not inherent. Rather, it arises under disciplinary pressure - a pressure that disciplines our manipulative behaviour" [22]. At the same time, she stresses that "the act of performing must be repeated to be effective" [22]. Furthermore, for Butler, gender is not performed by choice, but is forced by the inherent mechanisms of social discipline, which are the very mechanisms that construct the cultural sense of gender.

Butler mentions that gender is determined through the stylised body and is therefore understood in an everyday way: bodily gestures, movements, and various types of enactments, among others, construct an enduring gendered self-fantasy [21]. Within the traditional gender norms, women have been known to shape their bodies to meet male expectations and demands. Such expectations can be divided into external and internal ones. Both internal and external ones are specific forms of the "ideal model" mentioned earlier, which is the standard of reference for individuals in constructing the gender subject. The most typical example of external expectations is "foot-binding", which refers to the artificial breaking of women's feet in order to create a weak, submissive and dependent femininity to contrast with men's masculinity and strength. This aberrant behaviour was the social discipline for women at that time, Xi Mengqing clearly indicated that he liked to see women wearing "red shoes", "don't you know, I only like women wearing red shoes, seeing her in them fills my heart with affection." [23]. "The value of a pair of red shoes even beyond the value of Pan Jinlian as a human subject [24]". When "three-inch golden lotus" becomes the aesthetic standard under the universal discourse, they have to destroy their own bodies and strengthen their own physical characteristics to win the favour of their husbands, which is entirely a performance and catering to the image of women expected by men in the male-dominated society, rather than an independent choice of personality. In "Jin Ping Mei", the heroine Pan Jinlian was called Jinlian (in Chinese Jinlian means a pair of beautiful small feet) because she had a pair of small feet since she was a child, and she herself had specially composed a song comparing her small feet to "like lotus roots sprouting buds, like lotus unloading flowers", and she also used it as a physical capital to show off to Xi mengqing, "I have a pair of small feet, please do not make fun of me!" [23]. In addition, when Pan Jinlian's own desires cannot be satisfied, she will also use these small feet as her own weapon "This woman would send Wu Da out every day, then sit by the curtain—deliberately showing off her tiny bound feet, luring those men over" [23]. Pan Jinlian, as an individual, through the continuous strengthening of the "small feet" as a gender characteristic, catering to the male aesthetic demand, and gradually completes the construction of social gender, to become the subject of social expectations of women. In addition to the external discipline of women, the individual woman is also subjected to a constant behavioural and spiritual discipline that she performs day in and day out. Ban Zhao wrote the "*Commandments of the Woman*"

to instruct women. The book mentions Pan Jinlian in Wang Zhaoxuan House as a maid when she learnt how to play traditional Chinese instruments and women's handiwork. In other words, Pan Jinlian has been unconsciously moulding herself into a wife who meets the requirements of a patriarchal society and a woman who meets the expectations of society. As another major character in the novel, Li Pinger also performs as a normative woman at all times. In the book, Li Pinger's meek character is emphasised many times, and after she marries into the Ximen Mansion, Li Pinger is contented and consistent, restrains herself strictly, tries to make herself a wife that meets the expectations of the society, and expresses her wish to keep the family line alive many times, and even exhorts Xi Menqing to be more favourable to other concubines in the Mansion. In the face of Pan Jinlian's repeated provocations, she not only bears her anger and repays her grudges with kindness, but even seeks reconciliation on several occasions. She hopes to serve her husband and take care of her son by acting out the traditional social rules of gender as much as possible, and this kind of repetitive performance gradually constructs the gender of the character Li Pinger.

As Butler puts it, "Gender is a survival strategy, a performance with explicitly punitive consequences" [21]. Whether it is Pan Jinlian or Li Pinger, both of them have learnt how to become a standard "woman" through their "training". By imitating the so-called virtuous wife and mother, which is the ideal female gender state stipulated by the male discursive power, they gradually construct themselves as a qualified subject with the characteristics of this gender to avoid punishment or survive.

#### 4.2. Failed Attempt to Resist Gender Performance

In "Gender Trouble", Butler states, "If gender is an object that an individual aspires to (but can never become), then gender is a process or action. Gender should not be seen as a noun (an essential being) or a static cultural label, but as a repeated behaviour [22]. "That is, in Butler's view, both men and women do their best to imitate the correct gender as they grow and develop themselves. In this process of imitation, there is inevitably a certain rupture in people's unchanging performances of social norms and inherent order, and as Butler puts it, "we must think of gender as a constructed temporary state of society" [22]. In short, in Butler's view, gender is fluid and unstable, and the so-called "stable gender" is only an illusion; no matter how hard the subject tries to obtain a permanent gender identity, the construction of gender always remains open or in process, and all construction practices are contextual, uncertain and shifting. All constructive practices are contextual, uncertain and fluid.

The construction of the female subject in "*Jin Ping Mei*" inevitably follows this developmental pattern - the construction process invokes gender norms, performs, fails, and performs again, and in this process of repetition, the subject is inevitably detached from a solid gender identity. Under the traditional patriarchal system, the "good wife and mother" who carries out a man's orders without complaint is the ideal gender state prescribed for women by the patriarchal discourse, but the illusory nature of the ideal itself makes the performance and imitation in the construction of gender possible to fail. This is reflected differently in Pan Jinlian and Li Pinger, who, before marrying into Ximen's household, presents characteristics that do not conform to the ideal state of being a "good wife and mother," and when Hua Zixu and Jiang Zhushan are unable to satisfy her desires, she throws herself into the arms of Xi Menqing without hesitation, taking control of her own bodily desires instead of being a woman who can only serve as an object of male sexual desire, as the inherent precepts suggest, and presents the image of a vicious shrew. In addition, Li Pinger in this period also has some qualities that society expects from men, such as in her first two marriages, she reverses the inherent family status, occupies the dominant position that should be occupied by men, assumes non-female responsibilities, holds the financial power of the family, and has a certain degree of say in the relationship between the two parties. The phenomenon of rupture in the performance process is more obviously reflected in Pan Jinlian. First of all, she faces her own body and desires, deviates from the traditional social requirements and gender norms of female chastity, and subverts her own gender in an invisible way. She either pursues excessive sexual gratification and commits unethical behaviours

such as seducing son-in-laws and Qin tong (male servants in Xi Menqing's household), or is unwilling to resign herself to her subordinate status, and competes for favours among the concubines. In addition, some scholars believe that Pan Jinlian's masculinity is also reflected in the repeated use of the imagery "tiger". The scholar argues in detail that "tiger" is a projection of masculine power and that the imagery of "tiger" is repeatedly associated with Pan Jinlian [25]. Some later scholars think that this kind of argument is a bit far-fetched, so the author will not explain it in detail in this paper.

In "*Jin Ping Mei*", Pan Jinlian and Li Pinger are first and foremost the faithful executors of gender norms, and they constantly imitate and perform the "ideal model", moulding themselves as much as possible into a social female subject through gender performance. Since the purpose of such performances is to conform to social acceptance or to avoid social punishment rather than from the heart, there will always be some deviations, and the inherent repetitive performances are gradually weakened, and a subject contrary to social gender norms is gradually constructed. However, it is undeniable that despite their attempts to break the inherent norms, such behaviour can only be regarded as a monstrous resistance under the long-term suppression of the patriarchal society rather than a conscious attempt. Therefore, this short-lived subversive gender performance is also doomed to failure.

## 5. Conclusion

Judith Butler's Gender Performance Theory provides a new perspective to analyse the portrayal of women in the work and to better analyse the complexity in these characters. Through the theory of gender performance, we can see that there are many female individuals who are persecuted and suppressed. They have to imitate the so-called "femininity" and perform the image of women expected by men to complete the shaping of their subjects, gradually losing their original self-consciousness and subjectivity. At the same time, in the process of gender construction, the construction behaviour of these female individuals cannot help but show a certain degree of deviation, and they are eager to break free from the constraints of the gender framework, but what they are facing is not just an individual, but a powerful patriarchal social gender system. Therefore, this unconscious struggle to question the traditional authority can only end in failure. In addition to focusing on the tragedy of individual women, it also gives a glimpse of the plight of women's survival and identity in society at that time.

In the future research, scholars can extend more to the specific social discourse underlying the "performance" in a particular historical context, for example, by analysing the social background of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the development of the commodity economy, etc. to study the causes of the specific discourse of power at that time, to provide more references for the study of the image of women in ancient Chinese literature.

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Yes no changes	Yes with minor revisions	√	Yes with major revisions	No
<b>Please expand on any weak areas in the checklist and offer specific advice as to how the author(s) may improve the paper.</b>				
<p>This paper applies Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to analyze how the female characters in <i>Jin Ping Mei</i>, particularly Pan Jinlian and Li Pinger, construct their gendered identities through repeated performance of socially imposed norms. It highlights how these women both conform to and resist patriarchal expectations, revealing instability, rupture, and eventual failure in their attempts to maintain a fixed female subjectivity. The study ultimately offers a new interpretive framework for understanding the complexity of women’s images in <i>Jin Ping Mei</i> beyond traditional moral or feminist critiques.</p> <p>The abstract and formatting issues need to be revised.</p>				