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“Neither of woman nor of man”: Gender, Drag, and Theatrical Costume in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

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In Charlotte Brontë’s 1853 novel *Villette*, schoolteacher Lucy Snowe unexpectedly dresses in drag, wearing both masculine and feminine articles of clothing to perform a male role in her boarding school’s amateur theatrical production. Through this scene and others involving construction of character, this nineteenth-century novel brings a new attention to the complexity and stability of identity, which for this novel, like many other nineteenth-century works, is closely linked to gender performance. This research analysis paper examines the subversive effects of drag and costume on gender through a multi-faceted analysis of theatrical costumes in *Villette*. I argue that during the theatrical performances of the main character Lucy Snowe and the contrasting theatrical scenes spotlighting the professional actress Vashti, the novel’s use of prescriptively masculine and feminine elements of costume transgresses the binary system of gender and proposes gender as a societal construct, rather than an inherent core of being. I use three main strategies to complete this analysis: (1) close readings of relevant passages from Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, (2) an application of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, and (3) an application of historical context about nineteenth-century theatre and dress. This paper challenges interpretations of Lucy and Vashti’s theatrical performances that ignore the historical context surrounding their costumes and the implications of their use of both prescriptively masculine and feminine costume. My proposed historical and theoretical perspective on these characters’ onstage performances will not only give specific insight into how they subvert gender, but also provide the reader a historical, theoretical, and critical lens through which they can read and analyze drag, costume, and the stability of gender and identity throughout the novel *Villette*.