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

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Narrative Context




- **Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette***
- **Nineteenth-century novel**
 - Engages with the complexity and stability of identity
 - Close link between identity and gender performance
- **Specific sites of examination**
 - Schoolteacher Lucy Snowe's unexpected drag performance in her boarding school's amateur theatrical production
 - Professional actress Vashti's onstage performance



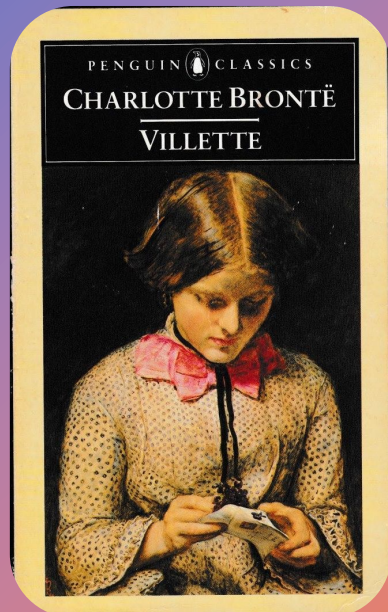
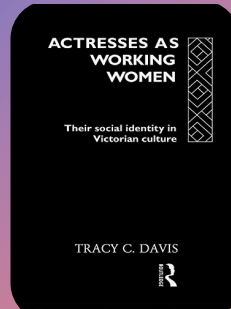
Thesis

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.





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Methods

- Close readings of relevant passages from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*
- An application of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity
- An application of historical context surrounding nineteenth-century theatre and dress



Hand-colored fashion engraving of a woman's wedding dress and a man's frock coat and trousers, published in Paris in 1829. From the digital collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Lucy Snowe's Costume

- Lucy rejects both male and female costume, focusing on “that which is [her] own” (Brontë 236)
 - Keeps her feminine dress and adds elements of the male costume
 - Use of both prescriptively male and female costume destabilizes gender categories and proposes gender identity as a societal construct, rather than an inherent core of identity
- Accepting the full male costume would have erased subversive potential of her performance
 - Women's cross-dressing costumes and male clothing during the 1820s



Portrait of professional actress, singer, and theatre producer Lucia Elizabeth Vestris dressed for her theatrical male role of Don Giovanni, issued in London between 1824 and 1831. From the digital collection of the New York Public Library.



Implications

- **New historical, theoretical, and critical lens**
 - Specific insight into how Brontë's characters destabilize gender
 - Specific literary insight into how we read and interpret identity and gender in other nineteenth-century novels
 - Enhanced understanding of sociological and theatrical context of the nineteenth century
 - Can be used to analyze drag, costume, and the stability of gender and identity throughout *Villette*

Works Cited

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Davis, Tracy C. *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, 10th anniversary ed., Routledge, 1991.

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