Patriarchal Norms and Gender Paradigm: A Critical Examination of William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*

Tuo Wandja Fatoumata
Université Alassane Ouattara
Wandjita5@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Drama as a dynamic form of artistic expression both reflects and shapes understanding of gender roles, gender equity, power dynamics, and social hierarchies. Across different historical and cultural contexts, Playwrights have created female and male characters, stages and dramatic plots which interrogate the complexities of gender politics in our societies. Thus, this study attempts to show how female protagonists' subversion of the patriarchal narratives in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* conducts to the deconstruction of the gender paradigms in order to have an equitable society. The study builds on Judith Butler's feminist theory of Gender Trouble. It focuses on the concepts of Gender Trouble and Gender Performativity, to provide insightful tools for analyzing the construction of gender roles and the subversion of patriarchal norms in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Homecoming.* The findings underscore the presence of resilient female characters in these plays who defy patriarchal norms and lay bare the unnaturalness of such norms. The actions of these female characters, highlights the possibilities for challenging and reshaping conventional gender expectation not only in their time period but also in contemporary society. Ultimately, the success of their strategies of subversion is the expression of the change that is occurring with regard to women's freedom of choice.
Keywords: Equity, Gender, Performativity, Roles, Subversion.

RESUME
Le théâtre, en tant qu'une forme dynamique d'expression artistique, reflète et façonne la compréhension des rôles genrés, de l'équité entre les sexes, de la dynamique du pouvoir et des hiérarchies sociales. Dans différents contextes historiques et culturels, les dramaturges ont créé des personnages féminins et masculins, des scènes et des intrigues dramatiques qui interrogent les complexités de la politique de genre dans nos sociétés. Cette étude tente donc de démontrer comment la subversion des récits patriarcaux par les protagonistes féminins dans *The Merry Wives of Windsor* de Shakespeare et *The Homecoming* de Harold Pinter conduit à la déconstruction des paradigmes de genre pour une société plus équitable. L'étude s'appuie sur la théorie féministe du « Gender Trouble » de Judith Butler. Les concepts de « Gender Performativity » et de « Gender Parody », qui sont au cœur de la théorie du « Gender Trouble », se révèlent être des outils perspicaces pour analyser la subversion des normes patriarcales dans les deux pièces. Les résultats de l'analyse révèlent la présence de personnages féminins résilients dans ces pièces qui défient les normes patriarcales et mettent à nu le caractère non naturel de ces normes. Elles remodèlent les attentes conventionnelles en matière de genre, non seulement de leur époque, mais aussi de notre société contemporaine. En fin de compte, La réussite des leurs stratégies de subversions est l'expression du changement sociale qui s'opère en ce qui concerne la liberté de choix des femmes.
Mots-clés : Equité, Genre, Performativité, Rôles, Subversion.

INTRODUCTION

England has witnessed two great periods in the history of its drama. The first being Renaissance or Shakespeare's age, and the second confusingly called the Renaissance of the British Drama featuring Harold Pinter and the 'New Drama'. Ironically, as the history of English drama testifies, we do not find any woman actress on stage up to the Restoration period, during which they appeared on stage playing limited roles. Women were not allowed to perform on the stage in the miracles or the moralities, neither in the Greek drama nor in the Shakespeare's times. It was not proper for her to appear in such a state in public. When female characters were to be enacted, they were performed by men dressed up as women. This was a direct outcome of social and political power being primarily in the hands of men, with concomitant taboos against women appearing in public, outside the confines of family life.

Thus the British theatrical landscape has long been a reflection of societal norms and expectations, including those related to gender roles. Two plays that stand out in this regard are William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. While separated by centuries and distinct theatrical styles, these works share a common thread of challenging patriarchal norms on stage. They provide valuable insights into the social constructions of gender and power dynamics and also into the evolving role of women on the British stage. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Homecoming* not only reflect the patriarchal norms prevalent during their respective time periods, but also challenge these norms to varying degrees.

In her groundbreaking work entitled *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, scholar Juliet Dusinberre explores the portrayal of women in Shakespeare's plays. She challenges traditional interpretations, arguing that Shakespeare's female characters are more complex and empowered than commonly perceived:

> Shakespeare saw men and women as equal in a world which declared them unequal. He did not divide human nature into the masculine and the feminine, but observed in the individual woman or man an infinite variety of union between opposing impulses. To talk about Shakespeare's women is to talk about his men, because he refused to separate their worlds physically, intellectually, or spiritually. Where in every other field understanding of Shakespeare's art grows, reactions to his women continually recycle, because critics are still immersed in preconceptions which Shakespeare discarded about the nature of women. (J. Dusinberre, 1996, p. 308)

Like Juliet Dusinberre's feminist approach to Shakespeare plays, Elizabeth Sakellaridou in *Pinter's Female Portrait: A Study of Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter*, also analyses and challenges the assumptions that Harold Pinter's plays are misogynist plays or plays which encourage sexual discriminations against women. She argues:

> The transformation of Pinter's heroines from mutilated and often disparaged or silent creatures into integrated, dynamic, conscious and articulate human beings has been a slow, controversial process, frequently interrupted and often regressing to earlier formulae… His later heroines are full-blown, three-dimensional women with a dearly-defined feminine ideology and discourse. They are not just mirror-images of men nor men's fantasised wishful projections. They exist for

themselves, not for the satisfaction of men's wishes and inadequacies. (E. Sakellaridou, 1988, p. 12-13)

Actually, in the light of what the aforementioned scholars argue, it is observable that from the Shakespearean to the Pinteresque stage, female character/actress is portrayed as a subservient and powerless individual. Their status and the way they are depicted on stage and off stage, from Shakespeare to Pinter, evolve but not enough to be totally free from the patriarchal yoke. However, challenging the gender limitations imposed on women during their different times, Shakespeare and Pinter succeed in creating women characters who in their richness, transcend the limitations of the time. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Homecoming*, the two playwrights gave their female characters more complex, in-depth personas than that of the subordinate wife. 'The merry wives of Windsor,' Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, and Ruth of *The Homecoming* are female characters endowed with the dual roles of the loving, docile wife and the free-thinking, independent self-motivated individual exerting power over their male counterpart. Both plays present female characters who assert their power and agency in various ways, challenging traditional gender norms. Mistress Page and Mistress Ford emphasize female solidarity and wit in outsmarting Falstaff, the male character who made sexual advances towards them, while *The Homecoming* offers a more subtle and enigmatic portrayal of Ruth, the female character who transforms from apparent submissive wife to a powerful figure who manipulates the male characters.

Through a comparative analysis, this study intends to explore how *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Homecoming* subvert patriarchal social structures of their different time period and also of today. What I am focused on is that Shakespeare's and Pinter's works helps to examine gender roles in British society and how women succeed in challenging and reshaping these traditional gender roles. The primary concern identified by this article is to highlight the subversion of the patriarchal yoke based on Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity. In her groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble*, she introduces several key concepts that challenge traditional notions of gender and its construction. In practice, Gender Performativity, Gender Troubling and Gender Parody are concepts which provide insightful tools for analyzing the construction of gender roles and the subversion of patriarchal norms in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Homecoming.*

1. Contextual Analysis of Patriarchal Norms in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Pinter's *The Homecoming*

In the Elizabethan England society (1558-1603), women's status was generally subordinated to men. Authoritative and patriarchal norms were prevalent. Although Queen Elizabeth I ruled England, men held dominant positions of power and women were expected to adhere to prescribed gender roles. In his article entitled ''Gender on Shakespeare's Stage: A Brief History'', L. Garcia explains:

During the time of Shakespeare and the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, English ideas of sex and gender, the legal rights of women and social expectations of femininity all played a significant role in the way that theatre was performed, the stories it told and who told them. In addition to other legal restrictions on the rights of women, there was considerable social pressure on women to behave according to specific social roles. They were expected to

be subservient, quiet and homebound, with their primary ambitions entirely confined to marriage, childbirth and homemaking; granted, social status and economic class played into what degree these expectations manifested, with the chief example being Queen Elizabeth I herself. (2018, p 26)

Thus, they had limited legal rights, couldn't vote, and were expected to fulfill traditional roles as wives and mothers. Education opportunities were restricted, and societal expectations placed emphasis on modesty and obedience. Noble women had slightly more opportunities and influence, but overall, gender roles were deeply ingrained in Elizabethan society. This dynamic is explored in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the roles played by the female characters fitted but also questioned the roles that women played in Elizabethan society.
In the play, Sir John Falstaff, a knight "almost out at heels", attempts to seduce the married women, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, in order to secure his financial position and also to indulge his sexual fancy. However, the wives are portrayed as intelligent, assertive, and capable of outwitting the male characters who attempt to exploit them. Through their witty and clever actions, they reject the traditional passive role assigned to women and assert agency over their own lives. Indeed, critics have often noticed that Shakespeare's male and female characters often embody the other sex's virtue. "His women prove more 'manly' than their lovers." (P. S. Berggren, 1983, p. 22)

In Act II- scene1, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page enter with the news that they have received identical letters from Falstaff, pledging his love to each. Needless to say, they are both outraged.

> Mrs Page: One that is well-nigh worn to pieces with age to show himself a young gallant.
> Mrs Ford: I shall think the worse of fat men as long as I have an eye to make difference of men's liking… What tempest, I trow, threw this whale, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor? How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease. (W. Shakespeare, II. 1)

They determine to "be revenged on him" and set off with Mistress Quickly to lay the plot. A plot in which male and female characters negotiate their gender through performative acts. According to Judith Butler, gender is not a stable identity but rather a set of acts that are performative, meaning gender is constructed through repeated behaviors and societal expectations. In *Gender Trouble* she states:

> Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (J. Butler, 1990, p. 191)

Thus, in an analysis based on this framework, the action of Sir John Falstaff which consists in seducing Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, offers a rich example of performative masculinity. He presents himself as a confident, desirable man who embodies an irresistible masculine charm. However, he fails to seduce the merry wives of Windsor who, publicly present themselves as loyal housewives and pillars of the community, while secretly crafting their

schemes against him. His failure to seduce the merry wives of Windsor and also the wives double role playing to outsmart him reveal that masculinity, like femininity, is a performance that can be mocked and dismantled. This interplay between the overt manifestations of gender and the underlying subversion of these roles illustrates the fluidity of identity, suggesting that both masculinity and femininity are not fixed essences but rather dynamic constructs shaped by societal expectations and individual agency.

In the Modern and Postmodern England of Harold Pinter, although patriarchal norms have evolved to some extent, they still persist in various aspects of life, including power dynamics masculinity, and female objectification. And, this is highlighted in *The Homecoming*. Indeed, the play is published in a period of significant cultural and social -transformation in Britain. It debuted during the second wave of feminism, which began in the 1960s. In his thesis entitled "I Laughed until I Cried: The Tragicomedy of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*", K. Garner (2012, p.2) situates *The Homecoming* within this socio-political upheaval which was challenging entrenched gender roles and the patriarchal structures that sustained them:

The Homecoming was written on the cusp of second-wave feminism, the movement focusing mainly on the legal and social equality of women, and it seems as though Pinter sensed a shift in paradigm in which feminist theorists called into question the phallogocentric language with which they were attempting to describe their subjects. A post-structuralist feminist reading of the play recognizes the problematic ways in which men are considered to have essential qualities, too… Pinter's *The Homecoming* encourages its audience to reconsider their conditioned perception of gender in society because the play induces the audience, in our real-life roles as conditioned observers, to misread the play; through undermining the false binary of humor and tragedy, Pinter asks the audience to reassess the supposed binary of male/female as it occurs in the play.

Thus, her reading suggests that Pinter was attuned to this cultural change, and that his play responds, not overtly politically, but through subversive theatrical form and language. The play does not simply depict patriarchy through the physical and verbal violence of male characters (Max, Lenny, Joey) but interrogates it, unsettling the audience's conditioned assumptions about what constitutes males and females roles. Indeed, the male characters in *The Homecoming* embody various aspects of dominance and authority, with Max, the patriarch, representing the archetype of male power. His interactions with his sons, Lenny and Joey, reveal a hierarchy that is both competitive and oppressive. Max's need to assert his dominance often leads to verbal and emotional abuse, showcasing the toxic aspects of masculinity. This is observable through this following scene in Act one:

> Joey. I've been training down at the gym.
> Sam. Yes, the boy's been working all day and training all night.
> Max. What do you want, you bitch? You spend all the day sitting on your arse at London Airport, buy yourself a jamroll. You expect me to sit here waiting to rush into the kitchen the moment you step in the door? You've been living sixty-three years, why don't you learn to cook?
> Sam. I can cook.
> Max. Well, go and cook!
> Pause

Lenny. What the boys want, Dad, is your own special brand of cooking, Dad. That's what the boys look forward to. The special understanding of food, you know, that you've got.
Max. Stop calling me Dad. Just stop all that calling me Dad, do you understand?
Lenny. But I am your son. You used to tuck me up in bed every night. He tucked you up, too, didn't he, Joey?
Pause
He used to like tucking up his sons.
Lenny *turns and goes toward the front door.*
Max. Lenny.
Lenny. (*turning*). What?
Max: I'll give you a proper tuck up one of these nights' son. You mark my word.
They look at each other.
Lenny *opens the front door and goes out.*
Silence.
Joey. I've been training with Bobby Dodd.
Pause.
And I had a good go at the bag as well.
Pause.
I wasn't in bad trim.
Max. Boxing's a gentleman's game.
Pause.
I'll tell you what you've got to do. What you've to do is you've got to learn how to defend yourself, and you've got to learn how to attack. That's your only trouble as a boxer. You don't know how to attack. (H. Pinter, 1965, p 16-17).

Lenny and Joey, while attempting to carve out their identities, remain ensnared in their father's shadow, illustrating the pervasive influence of patriarchal expectations. The power dynamics within the family are further complicated by the arrival of Ruth, who disrupts the established order and challenges the male characters 'authority. Ruth, the only female character in the play, undergoes a significant transformation that challenges traditional gender roles. Initially presented as a passive figure, her character evolves as she asserts her agency within the male-dominated household. Ruth's interactions with the men reveal her ability to manipulate power dynamics to her advantage, ultimately positioning herself as a figure of authority. This transformation not only subverts the expectations of femininity but also raises questions about the nature of power and control in a patriarchal society. Ruth's role becomes a focal point for examining the complexities of gender identity and the potential for women to reclaim agency in oppressive environments.

2. Subversion of Patriarchal Norms Through Gender Performativity in Both Plays

In Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Ruth's transformation from an apparently passive wife to a figure of power represents one of the most striking subversions of patriarchal norms in modern drama as mentioned by critics. Indeed, When Ruth first enters the male-dominated household with her husband Teddy, she seems to conform to traditional gender expectations. However, as the play progresses, Ruth demonstrates a profound understanding of gender performativity, strategically adapting her behavior to gain control over the men in the household.

A pivotal scene occurs in Act Two when Ruth engages in a sexually charged verbal exchange with Lenny:

Lenny: Just give me the glass.
Ruth: No.
Pause
Lenny: I'll take it, then.
Ruth: If you take the glass... I'll take you.
Pause
Lenny: How about me taking the glass without you taking me?
Ruth: Why don't I just take you?
Pause
Lenny: You're joking.
Pause
You're in love, anyway, with another man.
Ruth: Yes.
She stands.
But I've been a whore.
Pause
Lenny: Eh?
Ruth: You ask me questions. I've...been a model for the body.
Lenny: Really?
Ruth: A photographic model for the body. (H. Pinter, 1965, p. 57-58)

This scene dramatically illustrates Ruth's understanding of her power as she performs various aspects of femininity. Rather than submitting to Lenny's aggression, she reverses the power dynamic by embracing and weaponizing her sexuality. Her action, here, aligns with Butler's theory that gender is not an inherent quality but a performance that can be strategically deployed. In *Gender Trouble*, she states that 'gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time (J. Butler, 1990, p 101). This observation of Butler reveals that gender is not a fixed category but rather a fluid and evolving construct influenced by social practices. This understanding challenges traditional notions of gender identity as stable or innate, advocating instead for a view that recognizes continual change and adaptation.

Thus, Ruth consciously manipulates traditional gender expectations to her advantage, performing roles that simultaneously conform to and subvert patriarchal norms. By the end of the play, she has negotiated her position within the household, agreeing to stay as both a maternal figure and sexual partner to the men, but on her own terms:

Lenny. We'd get you a flat.
Pause.
Ruth. A flat ?
Lenny. Yes.
Ruth. Where ?
Lenny. In town.
Pause
But you'd live here, with us.
Max. Of course you would. This would be your home. In the bosom of the family.
Lenny. You'd just pop up to the flat a couple of hours a night. That's all.
Max. Just a couple of hours, that's all, that's all.

Lenny. And you make enough money to keep you going here.
Pause.
Ruth. How many rooms would this flat have ?
Lenny. Not many.
Ruth. I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom.
Lenny. You wouldn't need three rooms and a bathroom.
Max. She'd need a bathroom.
Lenny. But not three rooms.
Pause.
Ruth. Oh, I would. Really.
Lenny. Two would do.
Ruth. No, Two wouldn't be enough.
Pause.
I'd want a dressing-room, a rest-room, and a bed-room.
Pause.
Lenny. All right, we'll get you a flat with three rooms and a bathroom.
Ruth. With what kind of conveniences ?
Lenny. All conveniences.
Ruth. A personal maid ?
Lenny. Of course.
Pause
We'd finance you, to begin with, and then, when you were established, you could pay us back, in instalments.
Ruth. Oh, no, I wouldn't agree to that.
Lenny. Oh, why not?
Ruth. You would have to regard your original outlay simply as a capital investment.
Pause.
Lenny. I see. All right. (H. Pinter, 1965, p. 76-77)

Ruth's final position in the household appears outwardly to fulfill patriarchal expectations; she will assume the roles of mother, housekeeper, and prostitute; yet she has maneuvered herself into a position of power, determining the financial arrangements and conditions of her stay. Through this paradoxical conformity, Ruth troubles the gender paradigm, revealing how women can subvert patriarchal systems from within by strategically performing expected gender roles while simultaneously undermining them.

This strategy of subversive gender performance is similarly evident in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, though in a more comedic context. Mistress Page and Mistress Ford demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of gender performativity as they plot against Falstaff:

> Mrs. Ford: I think the best way were to entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease. Mrs Page: Letter for letter, but that the name of Page and Ford differs... I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names, sure, more, and these are of the second edition. (W. Shakespeare, II.1)

The wives understand that to outsmart Falstaff, they must initially perform the role of interested, flirtatious women, conforming to his expectations. However, this performance is tactical, allowing them to orchestrate his downfall. Their scheme involves multiple layers of gender performance: they appear as dutiful wives to their husbands, potential lovers to Falstaff, while maintaining their true identities as intelligent, autonomous women to each other and the audience.

The buckbasket scene in Act III epitomizes this complex performativity:

> Mrs. Ford: What shall I do? There is a gentleman my dear friend; and I fear not mine own shame so much as his peril: I had rather than a thousand pound he were out of the house. Mrs Page: For shame! never stand 'you had rather' and 'you had rather:' your husband's here at hand, bethink you of some conveyance: in the house you cannot hide him. O, how have you deceived me! Look, here is a basket: if he be of any reasonable stature, he may creep in here. (Shakespeare, III.3)

In this scene, the wives perform distress and anxiety for Falstaff's benefit, convincing him to hide in a laundry basket, which they then have carried to the river and dumped. Through this performance, they assert their agency and intelligence, turning the traditional dynamic of male seducer and female seduced on its head.

3. Gender Trouble and Parody as Tools of Subversion

The concept of Gender Trouble, as articulated by Butler, refers to the disruption of conventional gender categories and the revelation of their constructed nature. She puts that 'when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice' (J. Butler, 1990, p.6). Here in Butler's view, if gender is viewed as an independent construct, it becomes liberated from the constraints of biological determinism. This radical independence suggests that traits traditionally associated with masculinity or femininity could be attributed to anybody, regardless of its sex. Such a view challenges entrenched societal norms and invites a re-examination of how differences are classified and understood. Thus, both plays engage in gender troubling by presenting characters who destabilize traditional gender roles and expectations.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the final scene in which Falstaff is humiliated by the entire community represents the ultimate act of gender troubling. Falstaff is made to dress as Herne the Hunter, with horns on his head; a symbol traditionally associated with cuckoldry, or a husband whose wife has been unfaithful. This gender parody inverts the traditional dynamic: rather than the wives being shamed for infidelity, it is the would-be seducer who is publicly humiliated. The wives orchestrate this public ritual of shaming: Mrs Page: Against such lewdsters and their lechery Those that betray them do no treachery. Mrs Ford: The hour draws on. To the oak, to the oak! (Shakespeare, V.3). Through this elaborate performance, the wives not only protect their own reputations but also challenge the entire system of gender relations that positions women as objects of male desire and conquest. The public nature of Falstaff's humiliation serves as a communal rejection of patriarchal entitlement.

In *The Homecoming*, gender parody operates more subtly but no less effectively. Ruth's adoption and subsequent subversion of various feminine roles; wife, mother, prostitute; constitutes a form of gender parody that reveals the arbitrary nature of these categories. In a particularly striking scene, Ruth offers herself to the family in terms that parody the language of commercial transaction:

> Ruth: You'd have to put down a bigger deposit than that.
> Max: Look... we'll pay you.
> Ruth: Oh, yes?
> Max: We'll pay you.
> Ruth: For what?
> Max: Just to... just to stay. Just... just to live with us. (Pinter, p. 89)

By explicitly negotiating her role in financial terms, Ruth parodies the implicit economic arrangement that underlies traditional marriage and family structures. This parody troubles the naturalized assumption that women's domestic and sexual labor should be freely given, instead highlighting the transactional aspects of gender relations in patriarchal society.

4. The Evolution of Female Agency: From Shakespeare to Pinter

Despite being separated by more than three centuries, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Homecoming* share remarkable similarities in their portrayal of female agency and resistance to patriarchal norms. However, the forms this resistance takes reflect the differing social contexts of their creation.

In Shakespeare's play, the wives' resistance operates within the boundaries of social propriety. They maintain their reputations as virtuous wives while secretly orchestrating Falstaff's downfall. Their victory represents a contained form of subversion that ultimately reinforces certain aspects of social order; they remain faithful wives and respected community members; while still asserting their intelligence and autonomy.

As Mistress Page states: ''We'll leave a proof, by that which

we will do, / Wives may be merry, and yet honest too'' (IV.2). This statement encapsulates the limited but meaningful form of agency available to women in Shakespeare's time: the ability to be 'merry' (intelligent, witty, self-determining) while remaining 'honest' (sexually faithful and socially respectable).

In contrast, Ruth's resistance in *The Homecoming* is more radical and ambiguous. Unlike the merry wives, Ruth does not operate within the confines of conventional morality. Her willingness to negotiate sexual arrangements with multiple men represents a more profound challenge to patriarchal norms, reflecting the greater possibilities for female agency in the context of second-wave feminism.

Ruth's final position is deliberately ambiguous; has she been exploited by the men, or has she skillfully manipulated them to secure power for herself? This ambiguity itself represents a form of gender troubling, as it resists easy categorization and moral judgment. As Sakellaridou argues, Pinter's female characters ''exist for themselves, not for the satisfaction of men's wishes and inadequacies'' (E. Sakellaridou, 1988, p. 12-13). Ruth's actions may appear to serve male

desires, but ultimately, she acts according to her own agenda and secures a position of considerable power within the household.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of female agency in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Pinter's *The Homecoming* reveals both continuity and evolution in the dramatic representation of women's resistance to patriarchal norms. Through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performativity, we can understand how the female protagonists in both plays strategically deploy and subvert conventional gender roles to assert their agency.

Mistress Page and Mistress Ford use wit, intelligence, and female solidarity to outsmart Falstaff while maintaining their social positions as respectable wives. Their victory represents a contained subversion that works within the system while still challenging male assumptions about female passivity and gullibility. Ruth, operating in a different social context, adopts a more radical approach, explicitly negotiating her roles as mother, wife, and sexual partner in terms that parody and expose the economic underpinnings of traditional gender relations.

In both plays, we see that gender is not a fixed essence but a performance that can be strategically deployed and subverted. The female characters demonstrate awareness of how gender is socially constructed and use this awareness to trouble the patriarchal paradigm. Their successful strategies of subversion highlight the possibilities for challenging and reshaping conventional gender expectations not only in their respective time periods but also in contemporary society.

The evolution from Shakespeare's contained subversion to Pinter's more radical troubling reflects broader social changes in women's status and agency. Yet both plays share a fundamental insight: that patriarchal norms can be resisted through strategic performance and parody of gender roles. By recognizing the constructed nature of gender, the female protagonists in these plays reveal pathways to greater equity and freedom of choice.

This comparative study thus contributes to our understanding of how drama both reflects and shapes gender politics across different historical and cultural contexts. The resilient female characters in these plays, who defy patriarchal norms and expose their unnaturalness, continue to inspire audiences and readers to question and challenge conventional gender expectations in their own lives and societies.

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