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"I Am in Control": Strategic Gender Performance and Agency in Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya: A Life*

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Abstract—**This article examines gender performativity as a strategic mode of agency in Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya: A Life* (1986), focusing on the production of female scholarly identity within patriarchal academic institutions. Existing criticism has largely interpreted Marya's development through psychological trauma, maternal reconciliation, or inner healing, tending to locate agency in psychic resolution rather than in the negotiation of institutional power. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this study argues that Marya's agency emerges through calculated gender performances rather than through the attainment of a coherent or authentic identity. Through close textual analysis, the article traces three interconnected stages in Marya's trajectory. It first examines her adoption of masculinized behaviors as strategies for academic legitimacy, revealing the limits of masculinity when performed by a female body. It then analyzes her tactical switching between masculine assertion and feminine vulnerability in interpersonal and institutional encounters, showing how gender functions as a situational resource. Finally, it conceptualizes Marya's later position as a feminist intellectual as a form of "meta-performance," in which scholarly authority and feminist critique coexist within the same institutional framework. By foregrounding the performative construction of scholarly authority, this study reframes *Marya: A Life* as a critical exploration of how gendered agency is negotiated and rendered intelligible within patriarchal academic culture.**

Index Terms—**Joyce Carol Oates, *Marya: A Life*, gender performativity, feminist criticism**

I. Introduction

As one of America's most prolific contemporary writers, Joyce Carol Oates has long been recognized for her unflinching attention to violence, power, and gender in American life. Among her extensive works, *Marya: A Life* (1986) stands as a particularly compelling examination of female intellectual ambition and survival within patriarchal academic structures. Unlike Oates's more Gothic or sensationalist works, *Marya: A Life* adopts a quieter bildungsroman form. The novel chronicles Marya's struggles with poverty, her ambivalent relationship with femininity, her intense intellectual hunger, and her fraught romantic entanglements; most notably with her married academic mentor, Maximilian Fein. What distinguishes this novel is Oates's nuanced portrayal of a female academic who refuses conventional feminine passivity while repeatedly confronting gendered limitations. Marya is neither victim nor heroine. Instead, she emerges as a complex figure who must constantly negotiate her identity to survive in spaces not designed for women like her. This ambiguity makes *Marya: A Life* an ideal text for examining how gender operates as a performed, strategic practice rather than a fixed identity.

II. Literature Review

Taken as a whole, existing scholarship reveals a sustained critical interest in Joyce Carol Oates's engagement with American society and women's experience, examined through psychological, historical, formal, and feminist lenses. These studies offer useful critical tools for reading individual works within her expansive oeuvre.

A. Past Studies on Joyce Carol Oates

Joyce Carol Oates has been the subject of sustained critical attention for several decades. Scholars have approached her work from a wide range of perspectives, responding in particular to what Johnson (1987) describes as her continuing engagement with "the phenomenon of contemporary America: its colliding social and economic forces, its philosophical contradictions, its wayward, often violent energies" (p. 8). Existing criticism on Oates may be broadly

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grouped into four interrelated approaches: psychological and spatial readings, historical and political criticism, postmodernist interpretations, and feminist analyses.

(a). Psychological and Spatial Readings

Early critical work on Oates tended to concentrate on questions of psychological disturbance and spatial organization in her fiction. Johnson (1987) observes that Oates portrays an America "in which individual lives are frequently subject to disorder, dislocation and extreme psychological turmoil" (p. 8). Approaching Oates from the tradition of tragedy, Grant (1978) argues that her protagonists construct a sense of identity through acts of self-striving (p. 159). Focusing on *The Rise of Life*, Tamilmani and Nagalakshmi (2021) read the characters' fragmented psyches through the lens of postmodern textual space, linking this fragmentation to broader patterns of social decay (p. 242). Humann (2013) connects representations of domestic violence with adolescent agency, suggesting that Oates repeatedly presents trauma as a paradoxical site of empowerment rather than pure victimization (p. 84). Yuan (1993) examines female characters across lower-, middle-, and upper-middle-class positions, showing how patriarchal and class structures leave women economically marginalized and exposed to neurosis, violence, and even death.

(b). Historical and Political Readings

More recent criticism has turned to the historical and political dimensions of Oates's writing. As Gates (1990) notes, "a future archeologist equipped only with her oeuvre could easily piece together the whole of postwar America" (p. 27). Oates herself has described her position as belonging to "the school of the writer as witness to history and society" (Germain, 1989, p. 177). Rather than reconstructing historical events directly, her fiction often attends to their aftermath, tracing the ways historical memory unsettles individual lives. Tromble (2015) shows how Oates incorporates moments of public crisis—such as the Chappaquiddick incident in *Black Water* (1992) and the Love Canal environmental disaster in *The Falls* (2004)—into narratives shaped by private trauma (p. 2). Recent studies also reflect growing interest in Oates's political imagination, particularly her engagement with war. Olson (2022) exposes the disturbing logic of perpetual, profitable warfare and its repetitive cycles of trauma, while Bryla (2022) draws on the concept of liminality to read Oates's depiction of Eastern Europe as a space that appears both familiar and alien, echoing Cold War power relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this vein, Yusupova et al. (2025) propose the concept of "Tragic America" in Oates's fiction, contending that her use of violence and the portrayal of marginalized groups serve to deconstruct the illusion of the American Dream and expose deep-seated systemic inequalities (p. 1).

(c). Postmodernist Interpretations

Oates's use of postmodern narrative strategies, such as metafiction, intertextuality, parody, fragmentation, and narrative decentering, has been a recurrent focus of critical discussion. Rather than adopting these techniques in a celebratory manner, critics generally note that Oates employs them to interrogate historical knowledge, cultural memory, and moral responsibility. McLennan (2020) argues that *The Accursed* simultaneously invokes and dismantles the conventions of historical romance, reading the novel as a cautionary reflection on America's unresolved cultural anxieties entering the twenty-first century (p. 108). From a postsecular perspective, Ghosal (2020) interprets *The Accursed* as a reconfiguration of American history that fuses documented events with religious confession, thereby unsettling the boundary between faith and historical rationality (p. 14). Horváth's (2022) study of *The Wonderland Quartet* shifts attention to aesthetic survival, suggesting that Oates's fragmented narrative form responds to a world marked by the loss of transcendental meaning and echoes Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God". Miceli (2021) further emphasizes Oates's formal experimentation by proposing that she adopts "a Fourth Way to tell the story" (p. 1) through the fictional memoir in *Black Water* (1992), *Blonde* (2000), and *My Sister, My Love* (2008). Taken together, these studies show that postmodern form in Oates's fiction is inseparable from her ethical engagement with history and politics, rather than a purely aesthetic choice. Cologne-Brookes (2025) further observes that Oates's postmodern "process-oriented" narratives often blur individual personality to challenge male-dominated discourses, suggesting that the meaning of her work remains a dynamic site of reader response rather than a fixed certainty.

(d). Feminist Criticism

Feminist interpretations of Oates's fiction have undergone significant re-evaluation over the past four decades. Early scholarship, particularly prior to the 1990s, often hesitated to classify Oates as a feminist writer, largely because her early novels depict women as psychologically damaged, socially constrained, or subject to repeated violence (Gates, 1990, p. 28; Greene, 1991, p. 25; Zimmerman, 1986, p. 177). Goodman (1977) observes that female characters frequently attempt to reshape their destinies through marriage, sexuality, or motherhood, yet these strategies rarely result in meaningful liberation (p. 18). Daly (1996) offers a more developmental reading of Oates's career, identifying shifts in authorial stance across decades: from "anxious authorship" in the 1960s, marked by violent father figures and threatened daughters (p. XVII), to "dialogic authorship" in the 1970s, when female characters begin negotiating agency (p. 70), and finally to "communal authorship" in the 1980s, as Oates constructs collective narrators and increasingly positions herself as a spokesperson for women's experience (p. 125). By the 1980s, critical attitudes toward Oates's feminism began to change. Showalter (1987) was among the first to recognize the feminist significance of Oates's sustained attention to women's lives, arguing that her fiction constitutes an important archive of female experience (pp.

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137–142). Creighton (1992) similarly contends that Oates's later works foreground feminist concerns by examining how women are defined through male power and how they struggle to construct autonomous identities (p. 4). Parrott (1983) characterizes Oates as a progressive feminist who refuses to oppose women's liberation to motherhood, instead distinguishing between maternal identity and individual subjectivity in order to revise traditional gender relations (p. 2).

More focused feminist studies have addressed specific dimensions of gendered experience in Oates's fiction. Caliskan (2011) reads women's madness as a symptom of spiritual emptiness produced by a male-dominated capitalist society. Wesley's (1992) Father-Daughter Incest as Social Transgression examines *The Molesters*, them, and *Angel of Light*, arguing that incest functions not merely as personal trauma but as a transgressive disruption of patriarchal order. Creighton and Binette (2006) analyze mother-daughter relationships, suggesting that daughters' reinterpretations of their mothers' lives signal an emerging awareness of social inequality and gendered expectations. As Boileau and Tromble (2025) conclude, the literary representation of sexual violence in Oates's oeuvre is not a simple linear path from victimhood to empowerment, but a complex negotiation that mirrors the shifting political and cultural landscape of feminist thought over the last sixty years.

B. Past Studies on Marya: A Life

Critical studies of *Marya: A Life* have most often approached the novel through psychological frameworks. Within this body of work, the mother–daughter relationship is repeatedly identified as central to Marya's development. These studies offer valuable accounts of Marya's traumatic childhood and emotional formation. At the same time, they tend to interpret her agency primarily in terms of inner healing and psychic reconciliation, leaving her engagement with broader gendered structures less fully examined. Larson (1995), drawing on reader-response criticism and trauma theory as well as her personal experience, reads Marya's sadomasochistic tendencies as survival strategies shaped by domestic violence and childhood abuse. Larson (1995) argues that "adopting a masculine behavior alone will not enable her to find herself," and that reconciliation becomes possible only when Marya "acknowledge[s] and embrace[s] the hidden femininity and motherhood within her" (p. 79). Working within Freudian, Kleinian, and Lacanian frameworks, İleri (2009) likewise foregrounds the role of maternal love, concluding that reunion with the mother represents Marya's only route to inner peace. From this perspective, female empowerment emerges through a reaffirmed maternal bond that enables resistance to male-dominated society. Kealey (2015) follows a similar line of reasoning, suggesting that genuine self-understanding requires Marya to confront and accept her past, including her mother's presence within it. Approaching the novel from a different angle, Cologne-Brookes (2005) locates Marya's emotional reserve toward friends and colleagues in unresolved family trauma, arguing that her inability to achieve security and fulfillment stems from persistent inner conflict rather than from external constraints (p. 142).

Taken together, these psychologically oriented readings shed important light on Marya's interior life. Yet they also share a tendency to situate agency almost exclusively within the realm of psychic resolution including maternal reconciliation, acceptance of femininity, or the cessation of internal conflict. Such an emphasis risks downplaying the ways Marya actively negotiates male-dominated academic environments. By privileging interiority and familial repair, these studies often leave unaddressed how femininity and masculinity function as social codes that Marya learns to mobilize rather than inherent identities she must ultimately reconcile.

Nagalakshmi's (2021) study complicates this pattern by situating Marya within postmodernism and trauma theory, identifying her as "a postmodern survivor of desensitized familial and societal relationships in 1980s America" (p. 231). Nagalakshmi (2021) highlights two principal coping strategies: denial and emotional detachment from traumatic events, and the use of Catholicism and writing as forms of therapy. This approach productively brings social context into view and recognizes Marya's active efforts to survive. Even here, however, critical attention remains focused on coping and recovery rather than on the question of how Marya performs gender in order to obtain intellectual legitimacy or renegotiate power within academic and intimate relationships.

As a result, an important dimension of *Marya: A Life* remains insufficiently theorized. Although critics acknowledge the patriarchal constraints surrounding Marya, few explore gender performativity as a mode of agency in its own right. Little attention has been paid to Marya's tactical movement between masculine and feminine roles, including her calculated displays of vulnerability, her adoption of intellectual authority, or her manipulation of intimacy, as strategies shaped by institutional power. By reading *Marya: A Life* through Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the present study argues that Marya's gendered performances function not simply as mechanisms of survival, but as strategic interventions that expose the constructed nature of gender norms and open limited but consequential spaces for female agency within patriarchal academic culture.

III. Methodology

This study combines close textual analysis with feminist theory to examine how gender operates as a performative and strategic practice in Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya: A Life*. Grounded in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis treats gender not as an inner essence or stable identity, but as a series of acts shaped by social norms, institutional expectations, and relations of power.

Methodologically, it first considers Marya's early alignment with academic masculinity, intellectual discipline and emotional restraint as strategies to gain recognition within patriarchal institutions. The discussion then turns to moments

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in which femininity operates not as an essential identity but as a tactical practice, with vulnerability and desire functioning as negotiated resources rather than signs of passivity. Finally, the study examines Marya's emergence as a feminist intellectual who works from within academic structures to interrogate their normative assumptions. Together, these readings frame gender performativity as a way to claim agency through which Marya navigates institutional constraint, contests authority, and produces critique without presuming a position outside power.

IV. Results and Discussion

Building on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the following discussion examines how Marya's agency takes shape through situated and strategic engagements with gendered norms. Instead of treating masculinity and femininity as stable positions, this analysis approaches gender as a repertoire of socially intelligible practices that Marya selectively mobilizes in response to institutional constraint. By tracing her movement from masculinized academic performance, through tactical gender switching, to a reflexive form of feminist scholarly authority, the discussion highlights how agency is negotiated within patriarchal academic structures.

A. Strategic Masculinization: Performing for Academic Legitimacy

Marya's engagement with masculinity first takes shape through her bodily difference, a physical presence that repeatedly places her at odds with conventional expectations of femininity. From early adolescence, Marya becomes acutely aware that her body and manner do not align with the feminine norms embodied by the other girls around her: "Marya was one of the tallest girls in the eighth grade: not precisely big-boned, not stocky, but solidly muscular, with long legs and narrow hips and alert nervous mannerisms" (Oates, 1986, p. 45). Butler (2011) argues that gender construction begins through performative language; when authorities say "This is a girl," it initiates what she calls "a setting of boundaries and an inculcation of norms" (p. xvii). To be named a "girl," in Butler's sense, is to be repeatedly trained into recognizable gender norms, learned not through explicit instruction but through everyday codes of appearance and comportment. However, Marya systematically refuses these normative performances. She remains completely indifferent to her appearance, unmoved even when a teacher comments that she looks "like a horse." Her physical presentation actively challenges stereotypical constructions of femininity:

> Marya Knauer was too tall for her age, too long-waisted and angular; that her chest was flat; that her mouth reflected discontent when she believed herself in a neutral mood; that her cheekbones were too prominent, and her brows thick and dark and straight—indeed, they grew across the bridge of her nose and might almost have formed one single censorious brow if, in rage and self-loathing, she didn't pluck them every few weeks. (Oates, 1986, p. 75)

Her angular, unfeminine appearance does not simply mark difference; it gradually becomes the site through which she resists, and reworks, the meanings attached to femininity. Yet her "rage and self-loathing" during grooming reveals the internal tension of performing gender within regulatory structures. In high school, where "everything female depended upon being pretty or not-pretty" (Oates, 1986, p. 75), Marya's refusal to conform becomes more deliberate. She cuts her hair and wears short pants, which Marilyn identifies as symbolic rejection of "feminine identity" and "an attempt to evade victimization" (Oates, 1986, p. 128). She vows "not to be the kind of idiotic girl who worries constantly over her appearance," resisting becoming like her aunt Wilma, who "visibly warmed when paid a compliment" or "complained aloud about getting older".

Marya's masculine performance extends beyond appearance into behavioral and emotional realms. Her performances are always contingent upon situation and context. She appears invulnerable when encountering criticism from teachers, never crying in class like her "weaker classmates." Even at Father Shearing's hospital bedside, she restrains herself from assisting him with heavy books, as this would appear "too womanly, too solicitous" (Oates, 1986, p. 81):

> Since the early days of her catechism class she had learned to suppress certain aspects of her personality in his presence: above all, any hint of weakness. She might be sinful in thought, word, and deed, but she was not going to be weak. (Oates, 1986, p. 77)

The sustained effort to suppress vulnerability suggests not emotional absence but a learned discipline, through which Marya fashions a posture of strength associated with masculine authority. Labeled "savage" by those around her, she embodies what Butler would describe as a failure to perform normative femininity, yet this failure is strategic. When her teacher Mr. Schwilk calls her a "savage beast" after she openly questions his authority, her defiance of the traditional submissive women results in punitive grading. Yet she confronts him directly, challenging his decision until he reluctantly raises her grade from B+ to A.

Marya's masculine performance extends beyond bodily demeanor into the intellectual sphere, where authority is tacitly aligned with masculinity. Her reading practices are telling: she immerses herself in an overwhelmingly male canon—"SCHOPENHAUER, DICKENS, MARX, Euripides. Oscar Wilde. Henry Adams. Sir Thomas More. Thomas Hobbes. And Shakespeare—of course" (Oates, 1986, p. 152). This list does not function merely as a record of intellectual curiosity; it marks Marya's early recognition that intellectual legitimacy is mediated through gendered traditions of authorship. That recognition surfaces explicitly when she reads Clifford Shearing's essay and pauses to wonder whether linguistic and intellectual proficiency might be "an entirely masculine skill, an art of combat by way of language, forever beyond her" (Oates, 1986, p. 95). The moment is less an expression of self-doubt than an

acknowledgement of the gendered economy in which knowledge circulates. Intellectual authority, as Marya comes to understand it, is not distributed neutrally but encoded through masculine norms that precede her entry into academic life.

Rather than withdrawing from this recognition, Marya responds by staging intellectual authority as a public performance. Her high school valedictory address—constructed through quotations from Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Dostoyevsky, and Teilhard de Chardin—operates as a deliberate intervention into a gendered field of recognition. Standing on stage, she does not simply demonstrate learning; she claims visibility within a space where intellectual display remains implicitly masculine. The narrative underscores her awareness of the audience, describing her as relishing "the astonished gazes of men" as she deviates from expected norms of feminine modesty.

Emmett's reaction crystallizes the stakes of this performance. His response is not admiration but injury: he feels that his superior male status had been offended, retreating into silence for days. What unsettles him is not Marya's intelligence per se, but the ease with which she inhabits forms of intellectual authority tacitly reserved for men. Her performance exposes the fragility of masculine intellectual privilege precisely by demonstrating that its codes can be learned, cited, and enacted.

Marya's immersion in the literary canon also sharpens her awareness of exclusion. She recognizes "the absence of women's voices in literary tradition," yet responds not with resignation but with what the narrative pointedly names as arrogance: "she told herself she would change all that" (Oates, 1986, p. 152). This ambition signals a refusal to treat intellectual space as a permanently male domain. At the same time, it reveals her belief that access might be secured through mastery of existing norms rather than their immediate transformation.

Read through Butler's (1999) notion of cultural intelligibility, Marya's intellectual performances can be understood as attempts to render herself legible as a legitimate knowing subject within male-dominated educational institutions. Importantly, intelligibility here does not denote mere visibility or competence, but recognition within an already established symbolic order—one that equates authority with masculinity even as it disavows doing so.

Yet Marya's carefully staged masculine performances never result in full recognition. As Butler argues, those who fail to conform to recognizable gender norms are denied cultural intelligibility through exclusion and repudiation. Marya's experience gives this abstraction a concrete social form. However fluently she performs intellectual masculinity, she remains marked as excessive and deviant—described as "horse-like," "savage," and fundamentally out of place within binary gender expectations. These descriptors do not simply insult Marya; they function as classificatory tools, reinscribing her difference as something unintelligible rather than oppositional. Her masculinity is not read as authority but as aberration, a misalignment between performance and body that cannot be resolved within existing norms.

In high school, even academic excellence fails to dislodge Marya from social determinism. She remains reducible to family identity—"Marya was a Knauer, after all" (Oates, 1986, p. 83)—and to gendered expectations that anticipate marriage rather than intellectual ambition. The contradiction at the heart of her position becomes increasingly apparent: performing femininity excludes her from intellectual legitimacy, yet performing masculinity renders her a failed woman, an incoherent figure who fits neither category without remainder.

This structural impossibility reveals the limits of singular performative strategies. Masculinity alone cannot secure Marya's place within academic institutions because those institutions require not merely masculine performance but male embodiment. Her female body performing masculinity produces not recognition but cognitive dissonance, positioning her as the "savage" who cannot be assimilated into established classificatory schemes.

Marya's persistent unintelligibility complicates any straightforward reading of gender performativity as a strategy of access. Rather than confirming the efficacy of masculine performance, her experience exposes its limits within institutions that conflate authority with embodied masculinity. Gender performance, in this context, does not function as a stable route to legitimacy but as a volatile and context-dependent negotiation.

It is precisely this failure that forces Marya toward more tactical deployments of gender. Unable to rely on masculinity as a singular solution, she must learn to shift between masculine and feminine codes in response to situational demands. Gender thus emerges not as a coherent identity to be perfected, but as a precarious resource to be managed—one that enables partial access even as it forecloses full recognition.

B. Subversive Repetition: Inverting Gender Hierarchies

The pen-stealing episode marks a moment in which Marya's earlier reliance on masculine confrontation gives way to a more unstable and opportunistic negotiation of gendered codes. After Mr. Schwilk initially assigns her a punitive B+, Marya confronts him with directness and rational insistence, a mode of address aligned with masculine norms of authority. This strategy proves effective: Schwilk revises her grade to an A. Yet Marya does not rest with this apparent victory. Instead, she immediately shifts tactics, adopting a markedly different performative register by fabricating a narrative of maternal illness:

> My mother is sick. She's been sick all semester. I know I shouldn't think about it much . . . I shouldn't depress other people . . . but sometimes I can't help it. She isn't expected to live much longer, the cancer has metastasized to the brain. . . . I'm sorry if I offended you. (Oates, 1986, p. 158)

This performance risks reproducing familiar tropes of feminine vulnerability, yet Marya deploys them with acute awareness of their affective force. By presenting herself as a filial, suffering daughter, she mobilizes a culturally legible script designed to evoke Schwilk's guilt and remorse. Crucially, this turn to vulnerability follows—rather than

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replaces—her earlier masculine confrontation. The sequence reveals gender not as a fixed identity but as a repertoire of socially intelligible practices that can be activated situationally. Masculinity and femininity here operate less as stable positions than as provisional strategies, calibrated in response to shifting power relations.

Marya's subsequent theft of Schwilk's pen adds a further layer of symbolic resonance. Long associated with authorship, authority, and masculine intellectual lineage, the pen invites a symbolic reading that recalls Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) account of the phallic logic of writing. Marya's appropriation of the pen does not simply replicate masculine power; it occurs through the very performance of vulnerability that disarms Schwilk. Gender performance thus functions less as open resistance than as a covert and situational means of leverage, allowing Marya to extract symbolic authority without direct confrontation.

This episode complicates Butler's formulation of gender as both chosen and constrained. As Butler observes, "One chooses one's gender, but one does not choose it from a distance which signals an ontological juncture between the choosing agent and the chosen gender" (Butler, 1986, p. 40). Marya tactically selects which performance to deploy—masculine insistence or feminine fragility—yet both remain socially available scripts rather than free inventions. Her agency operates within, rather than outside of, patriarchal norms. At the same time, by juxtaposing and sequencing these performances, she denaturalizes gender, exposing it as what Butler elsewhere defines as "the repeated stylization of the body… within a highly regulatory frame" (Butler, 1999, p. 45) rather than an expression of innate being.

The instability of gendered authority becomes more explicit in Marya's sexual relationship with her mentor, Maximilian Fein. At its outset, the relationship reproduces conventional hierarchies: Marya occupies the position of assistant and lover, while Fein performs the role of the dominant male intellectual. Yet this structure gradually erodes as Fein's sexual failures puncture the coherence of his masculine authority. Oates describes these moments with unsettling physicality:

> Sometimes he couldn't make love to her. Not in that way. He tried, he tried, half sobbing and clutching at her, pummeling her flesh, he tried and failed: she knew he despised her for his failure, she knew her breasts and belly and the insides of her thighs would carry the bruises for days. It doesn't matter, Marya consoled him, it doesn't matter. . . . But of course it did, to her aging lover it mattered greatly. (Oates, 1986, p. 218)

Read through a Lacanian framework, Fein's impotence signals a collapse of the phallus as a signifier of power, authority, and desire. His failure to perform masculine sexual dominance materializes the erosion of his symbolic position. Marya's response, however, is marked by performative complexity. Outwardly, she comforts him by saying "It doesn't matter" (p. 218). Internally, she recognizes that Fein's failure matters profoundly to him. This disjunction between performed reassurance and private awareness creates a space in which power quietly shifts.

Importantly, Marya's growing sense of control does not negate the violence enacted upon her body; rather, it emerges in uneasy proximity to it. Her agency develops not in the absence of harm but alongside it, complicating any straightforward narrative of empowerment. As Butler suggests, such disjunctions open space "for new, subversive performances of gender and sexuality," where repetition introduces difference rather than stability.

Marya always encourages herself by saying "MARYA WAS ALWAYS thinking, These days, these weeks, I am in control of the situation. I am in control, in control, of the situation" (Oates, 1986, p. 219), which marks a moment of conscious appropriation. This is not a rejection of the heterosexual script but a reworking of it through what Butler terms subversive repetition. Marya continues to perform the outward signs of feminine submission while internally occupying a position of control. In doing so, she unsettles the presumed alignment between masculinity and dominance, femininity and passivity, revealing these roles as contingent rather than natural.

Marya's negotiation of gendered power finds its most overtly physical expression in the cycling scene with her colleague Gregory. Historically, the bicycle has functioned as a symbol of female mobility and emancipation—a "freedom machine" that challenged norms of feminine dependence (Wånggren, 2017, p. 124). Yet it has also been a site of anxiety, with women cyclists often framed as gender deviants or sexual transgressors (Joans, 2001, p. 142). As Marya and Gregory await tenure decisions, their shared ride initially reproduces internalized hierarchies. Marya measures her body against Gregory's, admiring his "thin but strong legs" while doubting her own physical capacity. The male body functions as an implicit standard, reinforcing what Butler identifies as the performative maintenance of bodily hierarchies. Gender here is sustained not through explicit prohibition but through habitual comparison and self-surveillance.

This dynamic begins to fracture as the ride progresses. Marya's physical exertion—marked by anxiety, exhilaration, and "a muscular sort of rage"—condenses her professional frustration and her resentment toward male authority. When she reaches a downhill stretch and allows herself to accelerate, the scene shifts register:

> With a thrill of satisfaction she knew she was speeding faster than she'd ever sped before; and accelerating every second… Now you can all go to hell, she thought. (Oates, 1986, p. 264)

The act of speeding becomes a symbolic rejection of the male figures who once disciplined and intimidated her. When Gregory suggests stopping to rest, Marya refuses, asserting her endurance against his caution. In this reversal, Oates destabilizes heteronormative binaries that associate masculinity with risk-taking and femininity with restraint. Marya's recklessness and Gregory's conservatism expose these traits as performative conventions rather than natural dispositions.

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Rather than functioning as a phallus per se, the bicycle enables Marya to access forms of mobility, risk, and bodily assertion historically aligned with masculine power. Through physical performance, she claims authority over movement and danger without mediation by male approval. The cycling scene thus extends Marya's tactical use of gender into the realm of embodied action, demonstrating that even physical capacity is neither biologically fixed nor symbolically neutral.

C. Meta-Performance: Constructing Feminist Scholarly Identity

Marya's later intellectual practices cannot be separated from the bodily and relational strategies through which she first learned to negotiate authority. Early in her academic career, she actively suppresses non-academic writing, fearing that it might expose a "sensitive nature" culturally coded as feminine and therefore incompatible with scholarly authority. Her hesitation reflects an internalized understanding of legitimate academic voice as detached, impersonal, and implicitly masculine.

While serving as Fein's assistant, Marya publishes a non-academic essay in the prestigious magazine *The Meridian*. This publication marks a tentative attempt to insert a personal voice into public intellectual discourse. However, when she shares the piece with Fein, "hoping for his approval," his response is marked by disdain rather than encouragement. Deeply affected by his indifference, she declines the editor's invitation for further contributions. At this stage, Marya remains largely compliant, rarely challenging Fein's authority or asserting her own intellectual priorities.

At the same time, this period of apparent subordination quietly equips her with institutional knowledge unavailable through formal training. Acting as Fein's assistant grants her access to academic networks, critical vocabularies, and professional practices typically monopolized by male scholars. Rather than functioning solely as a position of dependency, the assistantship becomes a site where Marya accumulates intellectual capital while outwardly conforming to hierarchical expectations. Compliance, in this context, operates less as submission than as a provisional tactic.

When Marya leaves her teaching position and relocates to New York, she trades institutional security for professional uncertainty. Her choice—cultural criticism and journalism over a stable academic post—performs the risk-taking and ambition that academic institutions often discourage in women. Like her earlier bicycle ride, this geographic relocation registers as refusal, signaling her unwillingness to remain within the subordinate institutional roles typically available to female academics.

Marya's trajectory, however, is not one of permanent exit. She neither fully assimilates into academic norms nor rejects them outright. Instead, she leaves when institutional structures constrain her agency too tightly and later returns when she can occupy a position that affords greater discursive authority. This movement away and back underscores a strategic negotiation with institutions rather than a binary choice between complicity and resistance.

By the time Marya assumes the role of feminist scholar lecturing on contemporary feminist theory, her performative strategies have undergone a qualitative transformation. Whereas she previously deployed masculine or feminine performances to navigate specific institutional contexts—performing masculinity to gain academic legitimacy and tactically switching between gender scripts to manipulate power relations—her scholarly position turns performativity itself into an object of analysis. Her position thus operates as a reflexive mode of performance in which enactment and critique coincide. She occupies an institutional position whose authority depends on norms she explicitly interrogates; rather than merely navigating gendered expectations, she teaches their construction. Crucially, meta-performance designates not a higher or purer form of agency, but a specific configuration in which scholarly authority and feminist critique are mutually constitutive. Marya performs academic authority—a role historically coded as masculine—while arguing that such authority is produced through repeated institutional practices rather than grounded in inherent intellectual legitimacy.

The analytical force of this configuration lies in its specificity. Because Marya's authority as a lecturer depends on credentials, institutional recognition, and professional legitimacy—all conditions shaped by male-dominated institutional structures—her critique emerges from within the very framework it interrogates. As Kim (2007) suggests, identities may sustain conventions while simultaneously generating subversive effects. Marya participates in academic life—publishing, lecturing, holding institutional roles—while exposing the gendered assumptions that organize those practices.

This reflexivity becomes especially visible when the content of Marya's teaching is read alongside her biography. Her lectures on feminist theory presumably address how women are positioned by patriarchal discourse, how subordination is reproduced through normative repetition, and how female intellectuals navigate male-dominated institutions. These are not abstract problems for Marya; they are the conditions through which her own authority has been negotiated. She lectures on the very processes she has lived through and continues to enact. Teaching feminist theory thus becomes inseparable from performing the role of "feminist scholar," a role attained only through earlier tactical accommodations to gender norms. When she discusses Butler's theories of gender performativity, she simultaneously occupies a position of scholarly authority while drawing attention to the conditions that made that position intelligible in the first place.

In this sense, Marya's position resonates with Butler's (1997) description of subjectivity as "a site of . . . ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency" (pp. 14–15). Marya's identity as a feminist intellectual is shaped by institutional power: her position exists because patriarchal academia has authorized such roles, often as circumscribed spaces for women's

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voices. Simultaneously, she uses that position to contest institutional power by making its operations visible. Performance and critique remain entangled; there is no external vantage point from which she can speak. Meta-performance names this paradox without resolving it, insisting that situated, embedded critique remains both constrained and consequential.

V. Conclusion

Marya's development traces a progression in how gender performativity functions as a resource for agency within patriarchal institutions. Initially, she adopts masculine-coded behaviors to gain intellectual legitimacy, only to encounter persistent unintelligibility. She then learns to switch tactically between masculine and feminine performances to negotiate power in interpersonal and institutional contexts. Finally, she occupies a scholarly position that enables her to examine gender performativity from within academic authority itself.

This study contributes to feminist readings of Oates by shifting attention from gendered behavior alone to the construction of scholarly identity as a performative process. Marya's significance lies not simply in her resistance to masculine dominance, but in how her authority as a feminist intellectual is produced through—and constrained by—the same institutional norms she critiques. Her agency does not transcend structure; it operates through calculated engagement with it.

Rather than offering a narrative of either liberation or defeat, Marya's trajectory illustrates how feminist agency in academia takes shape as ongoing negotiation. Her meta-performative position as a feminist scholar does not dismantle patriarchal structures from the outside, but inhabits them critically, exploiting their instabilities. This progression—from masculine performance through tactical switching to meta-performance—reveals a crucial insight: feminist intervention often proves effective not through refusing institutional roles, but through inhabiting them in ways that expose their performative construction. In doing so, Oates's novel presents a nuanced account of how gendered authority is both reproduced and contested within academic institutions, framing performativity not merely as a theory of gender, but as a constitutive condition of intellectual authority in patriarchal academic culture.

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