

# Performing a Girl in *The Danish Girl*

Tanrada Lertlaksanaporn

Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Corresponding author's email: tanrada.l.mew@gmail.com

Received December 26, 2023; revised April 24, 2024;

accepted April 26, 2024

## Abstract

This paper analyzes gender performativity in *The Danish Girl* by David Ebershoff (2000, 2005), emphasizing the potential for identity reconstruction through performance. The novel has been criticized for portraying transgender women conventionally, focusing on a rigid sexual binary, depicting surgery unethically, and ending inauthentically. Contrary to these criticisms, this paper argues that the novel subverts traditional narratives by depicting a transformative process. More specifically, by utilizing Judith Butler's theory, the analysis shows how Lili's expression of femininity challenges the initial schizophrenia diagnosis, revealing it as a misinterpretation of her gender fluidity. This paper also suggests that, despite criticisms, sex reassignment surgery and other technological interventions can provide transformative opportunities for gender performances that challenge entrenched heteronormative limits.

**Keywords:** transgender, sex reassignment surgery, gender performativity, Judith Butler, heteronormativity

The term “transgender” has become increasingly prominent due to advancements in rights movements and scholarly contributions over the past decades. Judith Butler, a noted gender theorist, describes transgender individuals as those who transgress traditional gender boundaries, potentially through interventions like sex reassignment surgery or hormone treatment (Butler, 2004). Complementing this, Susan Stryker highlights how transgender individuals challenge culturally imposed gender norms from birth (Stryker, 2008). These insights illustrate that “transgender” covers a wide range of identities, each shaped by varied social and cultural understandings. The evolving nature of transgender identity mirrors shifts in social landscapes, displaying diverse manifestations worldwide. It also mirrors the long-standing beliefs of indigenous tribes, such as the Hijras in South Asia and Two-Spirit communities in Native American societies represent this diversity and complexity, navigating between cultural acceptance and marginalization. Such understandings of transgender identities set the foundation for analyzing their socio-cultural impacts and representations in media and literature, as seen in *The Danish Girl*.

Turning to the central character of *The Danish Girl*, Einar Wegener, the narrative depicts him as a renowned painter in Paris during the late 1920s. His transformation into Lili begins unexpectedly when his wife, Greta, asks him to wear women’s clothing for her paintings. This act of cross-dressing awakens Einar’s latent desire for femininity, catalyzing the emergence of Lili, an identity separate from his male self. As Lili’s presence grows stronger, Einar increasingly struggles to return to his original identity, resulting in a profound internal conflict. This narrative arc not only explores the complexities of gender identity but also illustrates the personal and societal challenges faced during such transformations. Einar’s struggle with his identity is compounded by the medical understanding of the time, which led to several misdiagnoses of mental illness during consultations with healthcare professionals. Despite these setbacks, Einar eventually finds a doctor who recognizes and supports his needs. This doctor agrees to perform sex reassignment surgery, facilitating Einar’s

transformation into Lili. This crucial support aims to align his physical body with his gender identity, offering him a chance at reconciliation between his inner self and outward appearance. This part of Einar's journey highlights both the historical misconceptions about transgender identities and the significant role of supportive medical care in the lives of transgender individuals.

*The Danish Girl* provides a rich narrative that includes detailed descriptions of the surgical processes and the varied societal attitudes towards them at the time. These details highlight the medical and social challenges transgender individuals historically faced. The novel intentionally leaves Lili's story with an open ending, inviting readers to reflect on the complexities of gender and identity. This approach not only sheds light on the personal struggles and societal hurdles experienced by transgender individuals in the early 20th century but also prompts a broader discussion on the nature of identity and societal acceptance. The historical depth and empathetic portrayal of Einar/Lili's journey provide insights into the transformative experiences of transgender individuals during a period less accommodating of their realities. This dynamic between cultural heritage and contemporary practice sets the stage for debates surrounding medical interventions like sex reassignment surgery, reflecting a broader discourse on the implications of these choices for transgender identity and societal norms. One viewpoint, for example, suggests that transgender individuals challenge existing societal norms (Butler, 1993). Conversely, some feminist critiques argue that SRS might inadvertently reinforce the binary gender system, which they believe perpetuates sexism ("Janice Raymond," n.d.). This perspective contends that SRS could sustain societal stereotypes about gender, as critics like Janice Raymond argue against reinforcing traditional gender roles through medical transitions ("Janice Raymond," n.d.). These debates highlight the tension between the transformative potential of SRS and its perceived role in maintaining established gender norms.

Understanding the history of gender norms is essential for analyzing Lili Elbe's portrayal in *The Danish Girl*, set in the 1920s and

1930s. This period was marked by stringent societal norms, including strict regulations on clothing appropriate to each gender. For example, laws against cross-dressing were common in the United States, with cities like Columbus, Ohio, enforcing ordinances as early as 1848 that prohibited individuals from wearing clothes not assigned to their gender (News Desk, 2015). Such historical contexts underscore that clothing was more than a personal choice. It was a regulated expression of identity and gender. These restrictive laws reflected the rigid binary gender norms prevalent during Lili Elbe's time, deeply impacting her and others like her. Indeed, for Elbe, adopting female attire was not merely a personal choice but a necessity for aligning her external appearance with her gender identity in a heteronormative society. This requirement to conform through clothing highlights the complexities of gender performativity, where the enactment of gender roles, especially through dress, was intricately linked to societal acceptance and legal conformity. This historical insight enhances our understanding of the significant challenges faced by transgender individuals like Elbe and the transformative nature of their quests for authentic gender expression.

A consideration of the historical context of sex reassignment surgery is critical for understanding both its perception and the associated stigma in the early 20th century, as depicted in *The Danish Girl* (Ebershoff, 2000). Authored by David Ebershoff, the novel is inspired by the true story of Lili Elbe, originally known as Einar Wegener. Elbe was one of the first individuals to undergo sex reassignment surgery during a time when such desires were frequently pathologized and labeled as signs of mental illness. This backdrop highlights the significant challenges faced by those desiring to align their physical bodies with their gender identities and sheds light on the perceptions of transgender identities and medical practices.

Examining Stryker's (2008) research sheds light on how early attempts at sex reassignment surgery in the mid-19th century coincided with the nascent field of anesthesia, enhancing the potential for successful outcomes. Despite these advancements, the societal and medical perspectives of the time still pathologized transgender desires

as mental illness, leading to widespread misdiagnosis and mistreatment of transgender individuals. This prejudiced medical treatment is reflected in Lili Elbe's harrowing experiences, as documented in *The Danish Girl*. Elbe was subjected to various stigmatizing labels such as "homosexual," "delusional," and "schizophrenic" (Ebershoff, 2005, pp. 57, 115, 168, 171). These historical prejudices underscore the challenges faced by early transgender individuals.

The history of sex reassignment surgery is closely linked to pioneers such as Dora Richter and Lili Elbe, who were among the first individuals to undergo these procedures in the early 20th century. In 1931, Dora Richter became the first known transwoman to receive surgery that altered her genital organs. The surgery was performed by Ludwig Levy-Lenz and Felix Abraham. These historical figures highlight the early medical advancements and challenges faced in the field of transgender healthcare, and are significant as they illustrate the early challenges and milestones within the transgender community. They reflect a gradual shift in medical perceptions and societal attitudes from misunderstanding and stigmatization to a more understanding and supportive approach towards transgender rights and health. By documenting these transitions, we can appreciate the progress made and recognize the ongoing efforts needed to sustain and enhance support for transgender individuals across various aspects of society.

Building upon the above understandings and issues, this study explores the layers of gender performativity in *The Danish Girl* through the lens of Judith Butler's theoretical frameworks. The research question is as follows: How does Einar's transformation into Lili in *The Danish Girl* exemplify Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, if at all? The analysis examines how Lili's performative acts, such as dressing and behaving in ways traditionally associated with femininity, not only express but also actively construct her identity. It questions whether these acts contribute to a broader understanding of gender as a fluid and dynamic concept rather than a fixed binary. Additionally, the role of medical interventions, like sex reassignment surgery, in shaping perceptions of transgender identities within heteronormative

limits is investigated. Through this analysis, the study aims to offer a better understanding of gender performativity, contributing to ongoing discussions in transgender studies and broader gender theory.

## **Literature Review**

The literature on gender performativity, particularly within transgender studies, has been greatly enriched by critical studies and theoretical frameworks that challenge traditional narratives and medicalized interpretations. These contributions provide a nuanced understanding of transgender identities, highlighting the dynamic interplay between biological, psychological, and societal factors. This review delves into various seminal and contemporary studies that dissect the complexities of gender performativity, tracing how interpretations have evolved from a narrow medical focus to embrace more comprehensive personal and cultural dimensions. By examining these shifts, this review seeks to illuminate the changing perceptions and treatments of transgender identities.

Chu and Drager's (2019) advocacy for the independence of transgender studies as a discipline and their proposal of a satirical approach are relevant to understanding the evolving theoretical frameworks within transgender studies. Their call for independence challenges the perception that political optimism is a prerequisite for developing a robust theoretical framework, suggesting that a more nuanced and satirical approach can better capture the complexities of transgender experiences. This method allows for a deeper exploration of these experiences without being restricted by the limitations of overtly political narratives. This perspective is valuable in the context of gender performativity, as it encourages scholars to approach the subject with a critical yet creative lens, potentially leading to new insights and understandings of transgender identities beyond conventional frameworks. Lertlaksanaporn's (2023) study of Lili Elbe's autobiography, *Man into Woman*, examines a foundational text in transgender studies that has significantly influenced contemporary portrayals, such as David Ebershoff's novel *The Danish Girl*. This novel, which was also

adapted into a film, enriches Elbe's narrative by emphasizing themes of identity, transformation, and the complexities of living as a transgender individual in the early 20th century. Both the autobiography and the novel explore gender performativity, albeit through differing lenses and narrative techniques. Lertlaksanaporn (2023) utilizes Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to analyze the historical and personal transformation of Lili Elbe, positioning these changes as active performances that challenge rather than conform to traditional transsexual narratives. This approach provides an important reference for understanding how transgender identities have historically been shaped and perceived, marking a shift from predominantly medicalized narratives to more personal stories. Building upon this framework, my research extends this analysis to *The Danish Girl*, arguing that the performative acts depicted not only represent personal identity transformations but also serve as a broader commentary on evolving gender perceptions within society. By applying Butler's theory, this study aims to demonstrate how these acts of performativity extend beyond mere representation.

*The Danish Girl* has received considerable scholarly attention, particularly regarding its exploration of gender performativity and sex reassignment surgery. Filippo (2016) criticizes the film for its conventional depiction of transgender women, pointing out several issues: the lack of orientation flexibility in Greta and Einar, the reinforcement of binary sexual identities, the moral ambiguity of the depicted surgery, and the omission of organ rejection as the cause of Lili's death. Despite these criticisms, my research presents an alternative interpretation, suggesting that *The Danish Girl* significantly contributes to the discourse on transgender identity through its portrayal of performativity and transformation. The film's open-ended conclusion and the depiction of surgery not only reflect the ongoing struggles and possibilities within transgender narratives but also provide a platform for deeper discussion on the transformative potential of such experiences.

In contrast to Filippo's critique, which highlights perceived shortcomings in *The Danish Girl*'s portrayal of transgender women,

Pratiwi (2018) and Majidah (2018) offer complementary perspectives on Einar Wegener's gender transition, focusing on its underlying factors and implications for gender identity formation. Pratiwi (2018) analyzes Einar Wegener's gender transition, suggesting it results from an incomplete sexual development, influenced by biological, parental, and environmental factors. This interpretation emphasizes the multifaceted nature of gender identity formation. Majidah (2018) adds another layer by proposing that Einar's transition from a masculine to a feminine identity is driven by the predominance of feminine aspects within him, leading him to engage in a series of performative acts to become a woman. My research builds on these perspectives by applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which provides a framework to understand how Einar actively constructs a new female identity through deliberate performances. This approach highlights the role of performative acts in transcending traditional gender binaries and shaping one's identity in alignment with one's intrinsic gender self-perception.

The portrayal of Einar/Lili in *The Danish Girl* has been positively received by several critics for its nuanced depiction of gender fluidity and identity transformation. Hooper, as cited by Seloodeh (2015), appreciates the critical role of performance in expressing the fluid and ephemeral nature of identity. Similarly, Berman (2015) recognizes the character of Gerda in film, a working painter who challenges gender norms simply by existing professionally in a male-dominated era. He notes that Gerda's independence and career are integral to Lili's understanding of her own identity. Steward, in another review cited by Debruge (2015), comments on the deep, internal sensations that are vividly portrayed in the film, noting how repeated actions and adjustments can gradually solidify new identities. This film captures the essence of gender performativity as described by Judith Butler, illustrating how repeated enactments of femininity can reshape one's identity. My study aligns with the insights of Hooper, Berman, and Steward, embracing the concept of gender fluidity and the transformative power of performative acts. By applying Butler's theory more rigorously, I aim to delve deeper into the mechanisms

through which Lili's performances of femininity act not just as expressions of identity but as active constructions that challenge and redefine gender boundaries.

In contrast to the positive reception by Hooper, Berman, and Steward, Assawapanishwong's (2019) study takes a more critical stance, focusing on the potential influence of biological factors on Einar's gender performance and highlighting the limitations of a narrow focus on cross-dressing as a form of gender performativity. Assawapanishwong's (2019) utilizes Judith Butler's concept to argue that "biological sex does not determine gender" (p. 15). While the study aligns with Butler's view that gender is a social construct, Assawapanishwong also notes biological aspects, such as Einar's chest resembling a girl's breast, suggesting that physical appearance could influence perceptions of gender. This interpretation might inadvertently imply that Einar's gender performance is partly dictated by biological factors rather than solely by a conscious defiance of gender norms. Moreover, Assawapanishwong primarily focuses on cross-dressing as a form of gender performance, potentially overlooking other performative aspects. In contrast, my study expands the examination of Einar's gender performativity, exploring a broader range of actions and behaviors that contribute to his identity construction as a woman. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Einar actively shapes his gender identity through various performative acts, challenging and transcending conventional gender boundaries more explicitly.

This literature review highlights the diverse scholarly approaches to understanding gender performativity in the context of transgender studies. Each study contributes uniquely to the discourse: Chu and Drager (2019) emphasize the potential of a satirical approach to transcend political narratives, while Lertlaksanaporn (2023) applies Judith Butler's theory to dissect the performative acts of Lili Elbe, focusing on the transformative potential of such performances. In contrast, Assawapanishwong's (2019) analysis underscores the interplay between biological factors and social constructs, though it may inadvertently suggest that biological attributes partially dictate gender

identity. My research aims to bridge these perspectives by providing a comprehensive analysis of Einar's gender performativity, examining a wider range of performative acts that challenge traditional gender norms more thoroughly. By comparing these varied approaches, we see a dynamic field where the interplay of biological, social, and personal factors is continually being renegotiated and redefined.

## Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is important in my research for two primary reasons. Firstly, Butler articulates a perspective on gender that emphasizes performativity as a key mechanism in establishing identity. This view shifts the focus from gender being a static attribute to being a dynamic and ongoing act of performance. Secondly, her theory explores the potential for reconstructing and transforming gender identities through acts of subversion. This aspect of her work examines how individuals can challenge and potentially reshape traditional gender norms by leveraging their capacity for subversive actions. These provide a theoretical framework for analyzing how gender identities are formed and transformed.

Judith Butler introduces a groundbreaking perspective on gender by applying the concept of performativity, originally rooted in J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1975). She also engages with Jacques Derrida's critique in *Signature Event Context* (1998) which challenges Austin's ideas. From these foundations, Butler adapts the notion of performativity to gender, emphasizing repetition as its core mechanism. Butler (1998) states, Gender is not a stable identity or a source of agency from which actions originate. Instead, it is an identity formed over time, established through repeated stylized behaviors. This definition highlights the fluidity of gender, which is continuously constructed through repeated performances by an individual and expressions aimed at being perceived in particular ways. Butler (1999) argues that Gender is performative, as it forms the identity it is said to represent. Here, gender is conceptualized not as an innate attribute but

as an active doing—an ongoing project that an individual constructs through repetitive actions. This view shifts the focus from gender as a static state of being to a dynamic process of becoming, emphasizing the performance aspect over mere existence.

Judith Butler deepens her analysis of gender performativity by examining the role of drag performance. She challenges the conventional view that cross-dressing merely reinforces heteronormative standards, arguing instead that drag exposes and subverts these norms. Butler (1993) describes drag as reflective of the “mundane impersonations” that uphold idealized gender roles, simultaneously undermining their assumed naturalness by highlighting their performative nature (p. 176). This exposure reveals that gender, typically seen as an inherent identity, is actually an ongoing act—even those conforming to heterosexual norms engage in a form of performance. Drag becomes a mirror, showing that all gender expressions, including heteronormativity, are constructed and repeated, rather than original or authentic. Thus, drag does not simply mimic gender. It questions and critiques the very basis of gender identity and roles. According to Butler, such questioning has the power to transform, creating spaces for more fluid and diverse gender expressions that challenge the binary constraints of traditional gender roles (1999). By destabilizing these categories, drag encourages a reevaluation of what constitutes normal or abnormal, real or imitative gender expressions. This makes drag a potent tool for redefining gender itself, not just an act of imitation but a critical inquiry into the foundations of gender norms.

In my analysis of *The Danish Girl*, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is crucial for understanding Lili’s enactment of femininity. Butler’s concept elucidates why Einar adopts feminine attire and behavior—not simply as an act of imitation but as a performative process where gender identity is continually constructed through repeated actions. According to this framework, gender is not an inherent attribute but is dynamically built through social interactions and performances. Consequently, Einar’s repeated actions of dressing and acting as Lili are not just attempts at imitation but are performative acts that affirm

and reshape his gender identity. This ongoing performance challenges the notion of an original or true gender, suggesting that all gender expressions, including those conforming to heteronormative standards, are constructs rather than natural categories. In Lili's case, her performances carry a transformative potential that questions and potentially dissolves rigid gender boundaries. By engaging in what Butler might describe as "drag," Lili does more than cross-dress: She challenges and redefines the norms that dictate gender roles. Thus, her actions are not merely subversive but are part of a broader process of gender identity reformation, highlighting how performativity can lead to significant personal and social transformation.

## Performing a Girl

Einar's transformation into Lili in Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* serves as a vivid illustration of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, where gender identity is constructed through repeated, stylized acts rather than innate characteristics. Initially, Einar's encounter with feminine attire, described with vivid emotions such as excitement and a sense of ripening skin, marks the beginning of his gender exploration, emphasizing the performative nature of gender as not just an act of wearing clothes but as an embodiment of an emerging identity (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 6 and 11). This transformation progresses from external encouragement to a deeply personal journey, as Lili independently selects and purchases feminine garments like tartan skirts and drop-waist dresses, illustrating her active participation in the construction of her gender identity (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 120 and 140). Her autonomous actions and the thrill of freedom she experiences highlight the liberating potential of transcending conventional gender roles, aligning with Butler's view that gender is continuously constituted through acts that both conform to and challenge existing norms (Butler, 1999). Moreover, the social affirmation Lili receives, such as being recognized as beautiful by Greta, underscores the societal aspect of gender performativity, where individual identity expressions gain validation through community interactions (Ebershoff, 2005, see

page 50). Overall, Einar's active reiteration of feminine expressions and societal interactions as Lili not only underscores the performative nature of gender but also illustrates the transformative potential within these performances, challenging and reshaping traditional gender boundaries.

Moving from the external manifestations of gender exploration to a deeper engagement with gender identity, Einar's method of constructing femininity through the use of avocado stones wrapped in silk handkerchiefs to mimic breasts, as described in Ebershoff's narrative, serves as an example of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 78). This act extends beyond mere simulation, actively engaging with the performative construction of gender identity by transforming everyday materials into powerful symbols of femininity. This transformation blurs the lines between biological sex and gender performance, effectively illustrating Butler's argument that gender reality is constructed through repetitive performative acts. The incident where Greta momentarily perceives these fabricated breasts as real underscores the capacity of performative acts to alter perceptions and challenge the assumed naturalness of gender binaries (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 78). By using these markers, Einar not only asserts a female identity but also engages with societal expectations of femininity, moving beyond imitation to a transformative redefinition of gender norms. This creative use of gender markers elucidates the fluidity of gender as a dynamic interplay between individual identity expression and cultural constructs, thereby reinforcing the idea that gender expressions are culturally fabricated and not inherently natural.

Transitioning from the use of physical objects to the application of cosmetics as tools for gender expression, Einar uses cosmetics not merely as tools for beautification but as instruments of gender expression, aligning closely with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. His transformation into Lili through makeup is depicted as an act of artistic creation: Einar refers to his makeup box as a "palette," indicating that his face becomes a canvas for expressing his gender identity (Ebershoff, 2005, p. 86). This comparison to painting emphasizes

the performative nature of makeup application. Each application of makeup—described as “brush-strokes to the brow, light dabs to the lids, lines on the lips, blended streaks on the cheek”—is a deliberate act, reinforcing the constructed nature of gender identity (Ebershoff, 2005, p. 86). Through these detailed descriptions, Einar’s actions underscore Butler’s assertion that gender is an active doing, a continual performance that both constructs and communicates identity. By engaging in the performative act of applying makeup, Einar not only shapes how others perceive him but also how he perceives himself, challenging the conventional boundaries of gender through the visible manifestation of his internal identity transformation. This performative approach to gender presentation through makeup artistically blurs the line between the real and the constructed, illustrating how deeply embedded and influential performative acts are in defining and expressing one’s gender identity.

From the use of cosmetics as tools for gender expression to her participation in gendered activities, Lili’s engagement in crocheting, traditionally considered a feminine activity, serves as a nuanced example of Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. As Ebershoff (2005) describes, Lili not only crochets in the privacy of her home but also publicly in Kongens Have, integrating this activity into her daily routines (see page 62). This extension of a gendered activity into public spaces highlights how performative acts reinforce and communicate gender identity beyond private confines. By choosing to crochet—a behavior coded as feminine—Lili actively constructs and reaffirms her female identity, illustrating Butler’s concept that gender is not an innate trait but a series of performed acts that are recognized and legitimized through repetition in social contexts. The act of crocheting in public places, where it becomes a visible part of her gender expression, emphasizes how such performances are crucial in the ongoing creation and affirmation of Lili’s femininity. This example underscores the performative nature of gender as a visible, continuous enactment that shapes not only personal identity but also public perception, further

blurring the lines between performing for oneself and performing for societal acknowledgment.

Moreover, Einar's ability to convincingly perform femininity, to the extent that Greta and Henrik do not recognize him, further underscores Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Einar's transformation into Lili involves adopting traditionally feminine attire and mannerisms—such as wearing a blue dress, adjusting a scallop-laced camisole, and gracefully managing his appearance with accessories like a strand of pearls (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 23 and 55). These actions, rooted in the social expectations of femininity, allow him to navigate public spaces without betraying his male origins, illustrating Butler's assertion that gender is a construct, reinforced through repeated performances. The instances where Greta and Henrik fail to recognize Einar as Lili highlight the efficacy of performative acts in constructing a believable gender identity, blurring the lines between perceived authenticity and performed identity. This success in gender performance challenges the static notions of gender and reinforces the idea that gender identity can be fluid and is continuously shaped by social interactions and self-presentation. Einar's transformation, therefore, not only questions the rigidity of gender binaries but also demonstrates the power of performative acts to redefine personal identity and challenge societal norms (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 54–55). This interpretation accentuates the performative nature of gender as a dynamic and socially enacted phenomenon that goes beyond mere disguise to genuinely shape how individuals are perceived and perceive themselves.

Einar's regular adoption of female attire, as detailed by Ebershoff, also exemplifies Judith Butler's theory that gender is a construct maintained through “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1999, p. 191). This repeated engagement with feminine clothing and accessories—such as the routine donning of a blue scarf, a brown skirt, and a pink spring coat—serves not merely as a disguise but as a way for Einar to articulate and reinforce his identity as Lili (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 59, 62, and 129). These acts of dressing are performative, contributing to the perception of Lili as a woman both to herself and to others.

Particularly telling is the variety of contexts in which Lili adopts feminine clothing—from daily activities to special occasions, and even in private moments, emphasizing that her gender expression is a continuous and pervasive element of her existence, rather than a temporary or superficial layer (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 67, 79, 97, and 222). By consistently choosing garments and accessories culturally associated with femininity, Lili engages in a performative process that challenges and reshapes the boundaries of her gender identity. This ongoing commitment to performative acts illustrates Butler's argument that gender is not an innate attribute but an ongoing project, shaped and reshaped through visible, repeated interactions with the world. Lili's story, thus, not only underscores the performative nature of gender but also highlights how these performances can fundamentally alter one's identity and social reception.

Another performative aspect of gender as theorized by Judith Butler is seen in Lilli's consistent use of makeup. The application of cosmetics, ranging from the routine use of powder and lipstick for outings to the preparation of her appearance before undergoing sex reassignment surgery, underscores makeup as a tool for affirming and presenting her feminine identity (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 67 and 229). This ritualistic enhancement of her features with “muted orange powder, pink lipstick, and brown wax for her eyebrows” not only aligns her external appearance with her gender identity but also symbolizes the ongoing effort required to sustain this identity (Ebershoff, 2005, p. 229). The visibility of her makeup items, such as the “coral lipstick and Rouge Fin de Théâtre,” laid out in her room at the clinic, further illustrates the essential role these items play in her life—not just as beauty products but as integral components of her gender expression (Ebershoff, 2005, p. 304). By continuously engaging in this performative act, Lili does not merely mask her original identity; she actively constructs and reconstructs her femininity, challenging traditional notions of gender as a fixed attribute and emphasizing its fluid, constructed nature. This ongoing process of self-styling and presentation highlights

the performative basis of gender identity, demonstrating that what is often perceived as inherent can indeed be an active creation.

Moreover, Lili's engagement in shopping serves as a practical demonstration of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Lili's transformation includes adopting shopping, a traditionally feminine activity, which she integrates into her daily routine, signifying a shift in her gender expression (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 24, 84, 129, and 259). This habitual activity is not merely about purchasing necessities but becomes a medium through which Lili affirms her female identity. Greta's observation that Einar, now Lili, is shopping—a task she seldom associated with him—suggests a noticeable shift in behavior that aligns with Lili's new gender role (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 24). This change illustrates Butler's idea that gender identity is constructed through repeated performances that conform to societal expectations of a particular gender. By consistently engaging in shopping, Lili not only reinforces her feminine identity to herself but also to those around her, making it a recognized and accepted part of her new identity. Such activities underscore the performative nature of gender, as they contribute to the ongoing construction of Lili's femininity, demonstrating that gender is not an inherent attribute but something continuously enacted and perceived through everyday actions.

Additionally, Lili's embodiment of traditionally feminine gestures vividly illustrates Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Ebershoff details how Lili's delicate mannerisms, such as the tender way she holds her hands or her shy demeanor, are not merely passive traits but active performances of femininity (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 27, 88, 99, 181, 182, 223, and 239). These gestures, laden with cultural significance, are consciously repeated and displayed, contributing significantly to the social recognition of her gender identity. For example, Greta's comparison of Lili's hand movements to those of a pianist underscores the perceived gracefulness associated with femininity (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 181). Moreover, Lili's consistent display of shyness and quietude, particularly in public settings like the Café Axel and the Clinic, reinforces her identity in the eyes of others,

reflecting Butler's idea that gender is an ongoing, repetitive act that constructs reality through its performance. These acts of femininity are not just personal expressions but are also ways that Lili negotiates her social space, shaping how others perceive and interact with her. Through these performances, Lili's gender identity gains coherence and legitimacy, highlighting how gender performativity is both a personal and social phenomenon that crafts one's identity in continuous interaction with societal expectations.

In contrast to Lili's embodiment of femininity, Einar's visits to Madam Jasmin-Carton's highlight a deliberate, observational approach to gender performativity, aligning with Judith Butler's theories. Unlike other patrons, Einar's purpose at the venue is not sexual gratification but a study of feminine behaviors and physical attributes (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 121). His intent to "watch the girls strip and dance" and to "examine how their bodies attached limb to trunk and produced a female" represents a strategic effort to understand and replicate gender-specific traits (Ebershoff, 2005, p. 121). This act of observing and mimicking goes beyond mere surface imitation: It is a critical part of Einar's transition into Lili, where he uses these observations to refine his performances of femininity. The regularity of his visits, turning into a near-daily habit, underscores the performative nature of gender as something that must be learned and practiced continuously (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 142). Through these visits, Einar engages in what Butler might describe as the iterative acts of gender formation, where gender identity is not discovered but constructed through a series of performances that are rehearsed and embodied over time. Einar's systematic approach to learning femininity not only highlights the constructed nature of gender but also shows his dedication to authentically performing his gender identity, reinforcing the concept that gender performativity is both an act of expression and a method of self-realization.

Those of Einar's behaviors underscores Judith Butler's concept of gender as a performative act, challenging traditional notions of gender binaries. Filippo (2016) argues that *The Danish Girl* appears to

support a binary view of gender. However, Einar's observation and replication of female gestures and movements at Madam Jasmin-Carton's signify more than mere imitation. They represent a strategic effort to embody femininity authentically. Butler suggests that such drag performances, by mimicking heteronormative gender roles, reveal and potentially subvert the constructed nature of these roles (Butler, 1993). Einar's engagement in drag is not just a replication but a subversive act that questions the authenticity and stability of gender identities, positing that gender can be fluidly recreated through performative acts (Butler, 1999). This approach not only highlights the artificiality of gender norms but also illustrates how individuals can creatively negotiate and redefine their identities outside the constraints of traditional gender expectations. By adopting these feminine behaviors, Einar does not just conform to a female identity; he actively constructs it, challenging the very foundations of gender perception and the binary system itself.

In the context of Einar's linguistic shift to Lili, this strategic choice of pronouns not only reinforces the separation of his female identity from his male origin but also exemplifies the performative nature of gender through language, as theorized by Judith Butler. By consistently using "she" to refer to Lili, Einar reinforces the separation of his female identity from his male origin, exemplifying the performative nature of gender through language (Butler, 1999). This deliberate choice of pronouns is not merely a linguistic preference but a critical component of gender performativity, where the consistent use of "she" helps to solidify Lili's female identity in the social context. Butler argues that gender is an act, an ongoing performance that is continuously enacted through various means, including speech. Thus, Einar's use of female pronouns is a performative act that challenges the conventional understanding of gender as a fixed category, emphasizing that gender identity is constructed through repeated social interactions and self-representations. This subtle yet powerful use of language not only constructs but also validates Lili's femininity, demonstrating how performativity extends beyond physical appearance to include the ways individuals are linguistically represented and recognized.

Moving from the linguistic to the social realm, Einar's transformation into Lili involves a complete redefinition of social identity, exemplifying Judith Butler's concept of performativity. By adopting the name "Lili" and distinguishing it from Einar, he reinforces the existence of his female identity as separate from his male origin (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 83). Furthermore, Lili adopts "Elbe" as her last name, distancing herself from Einar's identity and aligning her new persona with a new lineage (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 223). This separation is further emphasized in her career choice: Lili leaves behind Einar's career as a painter to become a salesgirl, a role stereotypically associated with femininity. Her employment at Fonnesbech's department store, where she excels and is recognized as the top salesgirl, not only reinforces her identity within a female-centric role but also validates her performance within a socially recognized feminine space (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 267, 273, and 274). These changes are not merely superficial but are integral to her gender performativity, manifesting her femininity in socially recognizable forms that extend beyond personal identity to public acknowledgment. Through these acts, Lili does not just perform femininity, she also constructs and solidifies her identity through continuous engagement in activities that society associates with being female, demonstrating the fluid and constructed nature of gender.

In addition to these changes, Einar's transformation into Lili also involves adopting traditionally feminine characteristics such as long hair and a soft voice. As Ebershoff notes, Lili's hair grows progressively longer during her stay at the clinic, symbolizing her increasing commitment to her female identity (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 135 and 223). This physical transformation complements her adoption of a soft, whispery voice, which Greta lyrically compares to "the breeze that floated up through the papery petals of the Iceland poppies" (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 181–182), highlighting the performative aspect of femininity that Lili embraces. These characteristics are not merely aesthetic but serve as critical signifiers of gender, reinforcing Judith Butler's concept that gender identity is constructed

through a repeated performance of acts perceived as gender-specific. Lili's intentional modulation of her voice and careful maintenance of her hair demonstrate how gender performativity extends beyond visual cues to include sensory and auditory expressions, thus enriching the authenticity of her female persona in social interactions.

Furthermore, Lili's use of feminine perfume, specifically the scent of mint and milk, also becomes an important aspect of her gender performativity, highlighting how sensory experiences contribute to gender identity construction. This unique scent becomes synonymous with Lili's presence. For instance, Greta identifies Lili by the scent before visually recognizing her, indicating how deeply this fragrance is interwoven with Lili's identity (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 23–24). This olfactory signature not only marks Lili's physical space but also persists as a reminder of her presence, even in her absence, such as when Greta finds the scarf imbued with the scent (Ebershoff, 2005, see page 99). This strategic use of perfume exemplifies Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where gender identity is not merely a visual enactment but involves a multi-sensory engagement. The fragrance acts as a performative declaration of Lili's femininity, continuously reaffirming her gender identity beyond visual representation, and subtly challenging the notion of gender as solely a visual or anatomical experience. It underscores the performative nature of gender as something that can be invoked through the senses, thereby contributing to the social recognition and personal reaffirmation of Lili's gender transition.

At the end, sex reassignment surgery is portrayed as a crucial step in Einar's transition to Lili, highlighting a transformation that transcends physical changes to embody her identity as a woman (Ebershoff, 2005, see pages 238, 244, and 251). This surgical change is not just about altering physical attributes but is deeply tied to Lili's sense of self, as evidenced by her inquiries about her new identity post-surgery. Judith Butler's concept of performativity is particularly relevant here, suggesting that gender identity is continually constituted through repeated acts, including those as radical as surgery. The narrative does not dwell on the medical details or the risks involved, such as the

organ rejection cited by Filippo (2016, p. 403), instead it focuses on the potential for personal realization and the fulfillment of Lili's long-held desires. This deliberate omission in the narrative shifts the focus from the physical to the performative and transformative aspects of gender identity, underscoring the surgery's role in enabling Lili to live authentically as herself. The open-ended conclusion of the novel serves not just to maintain a narrative suspense but to emphasize the ongoing process of identity formation, inviting readers to contemplate the transformative possibilities of embracing one's true self, beyond the constraints of societal determinism.

## Conclusion

In *The Danish Girl*, Einar's transformation into Lili exemplifies Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, illustrating how gender identity is crafted through continuous and deliberate acts. From adopting feminine attire and cosmetics to engaging in activities like crocheting and shopping, each element of Einar's behavior reinforces his identity as Lili, underscoring the constructed and performative nature of gender. Furthermore, Einar's strategic use of a new name and undergoing sex reassignment surgery highlight the depth of his commitment to his female identity, challenging traditional notions of gender as fixed or innate. This narrative not only deepens our understanding of gender performativity but also encourages a broader societal recognition of the fluid and evolving nature of gender, advocating for greater acceptance and support for transgender individuals. Future studies could investigate the impact of various cultural, social, and legal contexts on the performance of gender and identity construction. Additionally, this work suggests a need to examine the long-term psychological and social outcomes of gender performativity on individuals, offering a more comprehensive understanding of its implications in everyday life.

## References

Arundel, R. (n.d.). *Gender shift: Promoting fairness, respecting difference*. Gendernetwork. <https://www.gendernetwork.com>

Assawapanichwong, Y., & Udomlamun, N. (2019). Gender performativity in David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl*. [Master's thesis, Srinakharinwirot University]. DSpace. <http://ir-thesis.swu.ac.th/dspace/bitstream/123456789/467/1/gs581130016.pdf>

Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Harvard university press.

Berman, E. (2015, November 19). *The Danish Girl* reflects on love's power to transform. *Time*, 128–129. <https://time.com/4119978/the-danish-girl-reflects-on-loves-power-to-transform/>

Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.

Chu, A. L., & Harsin Drager, E. (2019). After trans studies. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 6(1), 103–116. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7253524>

Debruge, P. (2015, September 5). Venice Film Review: “The Danish Girl”. *Variety*. <https://variety.com/2015/film/festivals/the-danish-girl-film-review-eddie-redmayne-1201586696/>

Derrida, J. (1988). *Signature event context*. na.

Ebershoff, D. (2015). *The Danish Girl* (2nd ed.). Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Filippo, M. (2016). Female trouble: Representing transwomen in *The Danish Girl* and *The New Girlfriend*. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 16(3), 403–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2016.1227016>

Janice Raymond. (n.d.). In *AZQuotes*. [https://www.azquotes.com/author/35811-Janice\\_Raymond](https://www.azquotes.com/author/35811-Janice_Raymond)

Lertlaksanaporn, T. (2023). Becoming a woman in *Man into Woman Journal of Studies in the English Language*, 18(1), 39–52. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jsel/article/view/261301/179556>

Majidah, H. N. (2018). *The struggle of Einar Wegener to reconstruct his gender identity in David Ebershoff's The Danish Girl: A queer analysis*. [Doctoral dissertation]. Diponegoro University.

News Desk. (2015, May 31). Arresting dress: A timeline of anti-cross-dressing laws in the United States. *PBS NewsHour*. Retrieved September 14, 2017, from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/arresting-dress-timeline-anti-cross-dressing-laws-u-s>

Pratiwi, A. (2018). *David Ebersoff's The Danish Girl: Framing gender identity*. Universitas Pamulang. <https://repository.unpam.ac.id/4811/>

Seloodeh, R. (2015). *A film for our times*. Penske Business Media, LLC. <https://www.penskemediacorp.com>

Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender history*. Seal Press.