

## **Acting Woman, Acting Human: Gender and Performativity in C.L. Moore's Fiction**

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C.L. Moore (1911–1987) is a relatively little-known writer from the so-called “golden age” of the science fiction (between the 1930s and the 1950s). Her stories, published mainly in popular science fiction and fantasy magazines, were a success among readers but failed to receive wider academic recognition. However, Moore deserves attention as both an author and a feminist whose representations of sex and gender strikingly anticipate Judith Butler’s ideas of gender as performance more than fifty years later.

Butler challenges the notion of a “true” gender identity, the essentialist concept of a “true” woman or man that is buried beneath the social manifestations of gender. She calls “gender” “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1999: 179) - in other words, a set of practices which are repeated over and over again, gaining credibility through the repetition itself. “Gender” is then further validated through belief and, what is more, the punitive consequences of failing to ‘perform’ it correctly. Butler points out that gender is a “strategy of survival within compulsory systems” and that “we” (apparently meaning society at large) “regularly punish those that fail to do their gender right” (Butler 1999: 178). “Gender” is thus partly a compulsory norm that the hierarchical (and, in Butler’s view, patriarchal) society demands that we obey in fear of consequences, and partially a self-induced illusion or fantasy; in any case an ideal that simply cannot be embodied.

I would like to stress the point that these acts are not confined to the realm of physical action. Rather, the repetition of norms - and, in a way, their performance as well - also takes place in literature, art and popular culture. I would also propose that by studying, say, the evolution of literary archetypes, we can see how this sedimentation functions: old archetypes, or stereotypes, take on new meanings, slowly shed the previous ones and create new standards of “realist representation” or “accuracy”. Literature offers a chance to study both the performance and the system of

punishment in action. We can see what kinds of performance have been considered improper and why, how the punishment takes place - and most importantly, how it is justified.

### **From Alien Women to Performative Women**

In her earliest stories, Moore examines gender in more traditional terms of male-female juxtaposition, but she quickly moves on to challenge the very existence of “real” gender or sex, and eventually reduces even species to a kind of an act or performance.

Previous studies of Moore’s texts have, for the most part, focused on her first and probably best-known story, “Shambleau” from 1933. “Shambleau” is a fairly straightforward adventure tale of a space outlaw Northwest Smith and a mysterious alien girl, the Shambleau, who turns out to be a dangerous and erotic predator. What makes “Shambleau” stand out from other similar tales is the eventual role-reversal of the macho spaceman and the apparently helpless and submissive girl; the male is utterly powerless before the girl’s hypnotic and erotic powers and becomes the victim of a sexual assault. The Shambleau, on the other hand, is an entirely non-human entity, who has only taken on the shape and demeanour of the girl as a disguise.

In their examinations of “Shambleau”, previous scholars have focused on the non-archetypal roles of the male and the female (Villani 1983) and the fact that they are depicted literally as different species (Gamble 1991). At the end of the story Smith’s companion manages to free Smith and kill the Shambleau, an outcome which has caused Gamble, for instance, to suspect that Moore sees the feminist power struggle as hopeless (Gamble 1991: 44). She finally comes to the conclusion that Moore’s characters are “archetypal figures in an eternal battle, in which the male force (singular) is continually beset by an abstract erotic female principle manifested in a variety of different forms (plural)” (Gamble 1991: 44).

However, Gamble also criticises Moore’s tendency to depict powerful females as loners, oddities or otherwise rare occurrences. It is true that there is a streak of pessimism in Moore’s works and she does seem to advance the view that most females are trapped in the prefabricated image of women while those who try to break free face punishment. But while her works are dystopian, they are still fundamentally feminist in their critique of existing gender norms.

The notion of femininity, gender or even biological sex as a disguise, illusion, or act is a recurring theme in nearly all of Moore's stories. The story that best illustrates Moore's notion of gender as fundamentally a performance is "No Woman Born" in 1944. This is a provocative early cyborg tale, centred on a talented singer and dancer Deirdre, who loses her body in a fire and is restored to life as a living brain in a metal body. She must learn to live with her new metallic form, without normal human senses and with only her brain to rely on. She learns that her new body comes with new advantages and powers as well as new and frightening consequences - and she also learns that even humanity is simply something she can perform at will.

Deirdre's outward appearance is sexless; her body looks vaguely like a knight in armour, her face having no distinct features, and in place of her eyes there is a visor-like mask. However, she is not stiff-jointed or clumsy; she can move with inhuman grace and agility. She wishes to go back on stage, where she thinks she belongs, in order to prove to her "doctor" (the maker of the body) and her old friend and manager that she is still herself and can do everything she could before. Her performance is, indeed, a success:

And she was a woman now. Humanity had dropped over her like a tangible garment. No one who had ever heard that laughter before could mistake it here. (No Woman Born, 265)

At first it would appear that the mind is all that is needed to restore her; and she is, in fact, able to convince a whole audience that she is really herself despite the metal body. The "force of her personality" as conveyed through her voice and her motions is so strong that none can doubt her, and she can go on singing and dancing again, as Deirdre, and put on a perfect show of humanity:

"I'm human," she repeated, her voice humming faintly and very sweetly. "Do you think I'm not?" she asked, straightening and facing them both. And then suddenly, almost overwhelmingly, the warmth and the old ardent charm were radiant all around her. She was robot no longer, enigmatic no longer. Harris could see as clearly as in their first meeting the remembered flesh still gracious and beautiful as her voice evoked his memory. She stood swaying a little, as she had always swayed, her head on one side, and she was chuckling at them both. It was such a soft and lovely sound, so warmly familiar. "Of course I'm myself," she told them, and as the words sounded in their ears neither of them could doubt it. (No Woman Born, 279)

But later it turns out that the mind, or the self, cannot stay the same with the human body removed. Her friends soon find that she is moving further from humanity; her voice, the main part of her appearance of humanity or of “Deirdre”, begins to acquire a metallic tone. Eventually her friend Harris, from whose point of view the story is narrated, begins to suspect Deirdre’s appearance of humanity is not entirely real:

He did not wonder, now, if it were real. Later he would think again that it might be only a disguise, something like a garment she had put off with her lost body, to wear again only when she chose. (No Woman Born, 279-280)

But Deirdre is not becoming handicapped or something less than she was; her new body gives her strength and powers beyond all human abilities. She can move faster than the eye can see. She is strong enough to catch and save her friend who attempts to commit suicide by jumping through a window. And her voice is powerful enough to shake buildings with its vibrations. She finally explains that the reason she wants to go back on stage is to keep in touch with humans while she can, before her new body changes her too much. Her only grief is that she is lonely, for there are none others like her and probably never will be, either.

So Deirdre, the woman, even humanity, is something she can simply perform. Her body, while being basically humanoid, is not female any longer, so she is not bound by the limitations of biology or her gender. However, even her sexless cyborg body can repeat the mannerisms - perform the stylized repetition of acts - needed to make her appear female, what she in a biological sense is not.

### **From Performative Women to Performative Species**

It is never revealed what else Deirdre becomes. At the end of the story she is left wondering what new and potentially frightening things her new body might bring with it:

“There is only one limit I can think of,” she said, almost inaudibly. “Only one. My brain will wear out in another forty years or so. Between now and then I’ll learn... I’ll change... I’ll know more than I can guess today. I’ll change - That’s frightening. I don’t like to think about that.”

(...)

“I wonder,” she repeated, the distant taint of metal already in her voice.  
(No Woman Born, 287-288)

However, her new form is asexual and therefore neutral ground in the sense that no prefabricated norms or assumptions have been imposed upon it, and therefore she is able to recreate herself totally free of any old limitations she might have faced in her old body, and being what has been thought of as “Deirdre” or even “human” is reduced into an act.

So despite the fact that there is more than fifty years between them, Moore and Butler have common themes and cast a reciprocal light on one another. But in a sense Moore goes even beyond Butler’s ideas, suggesting through the science fiction genre that even species and humankind can be transcended. In addition to performative gender, Moore has introduced the concept of a whole performative identity.

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