Feminist Theoretical analysis of “The Lady of Shalott” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Overview
I saw it as the journey of a dissatisfied woman in her tower or womanhood. She sees the lovers, the dichotomy of the sexes in one place, and is suddenly "half-sick of shadows" and dissatisfied with her life. She leaves the realm of her womanly weaving in her tower, and heads off towards the many-towered (phallic and manly) Camelot. She is unable to complete the journey (she dies!) and is ultimately dismissed as having "a lovely face" by the epitome of masculinity, Lancelot, because she does not complete her journey. Her death could be symbolic: the Lady must die for the Lord to exist.

Outline
I. Introduction:
   A. Gender is traditionally seen as binary: male or female. Until recently (the half century or so), the roles of each gender has been seen as binary, too. When Alfred, Lord Tennyson, wrote "The Lady of Shalott," gender roles were very binary: men had male roles and women had female roles. The Lady starts off in a very female role, but at the end, she leaves that role. Traditional feminist theory says that the Lady leaves the tower to break with the traditional gender roles of society.
   B. I will argue a similar view: The Lady leaves the tower to break with the traditional role prescribed to her, but not solely to break with the role. She leaves the tower because she wishes to explore a totally different gender role; she wishes to change the gender that she performs.
II. Establish the gender theory (Judith Butler) – Gender Performance
   A. define how gender is performative:
      -“To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the “appearance” of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other.” (Butler, i)
      -“Gender… is not the conceptual or cultural extension of chromosomal/biological sex…, but an ongoing discursive practice currently structured around the concept of heterosexuality as the norm for human relationships” (Spargo, 54)
- Gender is be performed regardless of biological identity
  - “We do not behave in certain ways because of our gender identity, we attain that identity through those behavioural patterns, which sustain gender norms.” (Spargo, 57)
  - People behave in “female” and “male” roles because of the norms of the society they are in.
  - “There is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines.” (Butler, i)
  - Gender can be redefined; remade along new lines.

III. Tie into Lady of Shalott reading and feminist theory of it

A. The Lady’s gender performance
  - Lady of Shalott raises tension between “the representation of gender difference in the poem, raising … the question of its sexual politics. Feminist criticism maintains that the categories of gender… are not naturally or self-evidently given but instead ideologically produced by society or culture.” (Plasa 249)

B. Establish feminine nature of first part
   - weaving, isolation

C. “Half sick of shadows”: the turning point
   - “Far from signaling a desire for marriage, the declaration ‘I am half sick of shadows’ comes to seem symptomatic of a suggestive—and subversive—demystification of the institution of marriage as adequately expressive of female desire.” (Plasa 252)
   - Heteronormative view of marriage: women marry men
   - Lady of Shalott unhappy with that possibility; doesn’t express desire

D. The gaze
   - “For patriarchy, the difference between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ sexuality is articulated in terms of a difference between ‘activity’ and ‘passivity.’” (Plasa 255)
   - Lady watches all
     - from window
     - from mirror where she sees the shadows of the world

Comment [7]: meaghan.dressel: Does Plasa talk about this story, or are you connecting this source to the story itself? I'm a bit confused to where your thesis is headed in your connection portion (III.)

Comment [8]: john.pennington: Now you need to be careful that you aren't just adding concepts to your essay that don't really connect to the overall focus of essay. How, for example, does the gaze connect with gender performance?
-lines 109-117; she is ACTIVELY watching all – she is masculine
-watching the others leads to the mirror cracking/realizing that she is
cursed.

-What is that curse? Realizing she is masculine
-“The Lady enters the position of the desiring subject, so she enacts… the
crossing from ‘feminine’ to ‘masculine’ gender positions originally figured
in the
projected foray from Shalott to Camelot.” (Plasa 258)

-Lady is performing the masculine gender role as defined by that
culture

E. The crossing from feminine space to masculine space – the crossing of
gender
-“Disposition of social space in ‘The Lady of Shalott’… replicates… the
gender conventions informing Victorian society. On one hand, the
Lady is consigned
to a private and socially peripheral space,… while the public realm of
Camelot
is inhabited by ‘bold Sir Lancelot.’”(Plasa, 249)

-“private and public spaces are respectively identified with ‘femininity’ and
‘masculinity’” (Plasa 250)

F. What to make of her death?
-“While the central action in the text concerns the Lady’s attempted
performance of a crossing from private/feminine’ to public/’masculine’
worlds, this movement is one which … goes uncompleted or
is permitted to occur only posthumously.” (Plasa 250)

-She crosses; the “Lady” is dead and reborn as Lancelot’s mirror
image

-“The Lady constitutes a reflective surface by dint of which the one who
gazes into it (Lancelot) may behold himself.” (Plasa, 258)
-Lancelot sees himself in the barge
-Lancelot thinks person in the barge is beautiful; thinks he’s
beautiful

-“In the context of the crossing from Shalott to Camelot, the supervision of
death betokens… the reactionary orientation of the text.” (Plasa, 260)

-Re-orientation is reflective of the Lady’s sexual [reorientation]

Abstracts of 3 secondary sources
Butler, Judith. “Performativity, Precarity And Sexual Politics.” AIBR. Revista De
October 2013.

Comment [9]: john.pennington: Overall there’s great material here, but your
Overview seems tentative about the focus and
claim that you will be making. So much of the
information in our outline is difficult to
contextualize to the focus.

Comment [10]: Kaley Allard: You have a great outline which will help to
spearhead the writing of your essay. You have
a really cool idea and you take a unique
approach to this story.
The central concept to Judith Butler’s work is that of gender performativity. This paper evaluates the concept of gender performativity in regards to the concept of precarity. She examines how gender may be performed by those in dangerous situations. Some of the situations considered in this work include being threatened by violence or relocation and not being recognized by the power structure to which they belong. In such precarious situations, people may have to take more extreme actions to be able to perform a given gender. They may need to claim rights that they do not have the right to claim within the current power structure. They may be forced to observe norms while they work to create new norms and change the ones they are following. The actions of claiming rights and observing norms are not unique to gender-related issues, but they are particularly applicable in today’s political culture.


Carl Plasa evaluates Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” through the lens of modern feminist theory. Traditionally, the poem had been read as an allegory for the artist in seclusion, and Plasa draws on that tradition. He maintains that the text of the poem seems to both support and oppose patriarchal constructs, but through that, it explores issues of gender, sexuality, marriage and the roles of women. Plasa says that because the Lady of Shalott leaves her tower (feminine world) and goes to Camelot (masculine world), the poem is an example of crossing gender roles; it is “symbolically transgressive.” The poem continues its subversion gender roles when the Lady breaks with the convention of marriage because of her inability to identify with patriarchal ideology. Then, Plasa examines the structure of the poem; by changing where the Lady of Shalott refrain is located, it changes the gender of the refrain. Finally, Plasa evaluates the concept of gazing in Victorian society. *Men were the active gazers, women were gazed upon.* But the Lady actively looking upon the world, she takes a more masculine role.


In Tasmin’s *Foucault and Queer Theory*, he dedicates a chapter to the basic principles of Judith Butler’s views on performative gender in contrast to Foucault’s male-dominated views of homosexuality. Butler says that gender is important to sexuality. However, gender is performative, meaning that gender is defined attributes other than chromosomal make-up. According to Tasmin’s evaluation of Butler, gender is “an on-going discursive practice currently structured around the concept of heterosexuality as the norm of human relationships.” Gender is a cultural construct and people can behave as one gender or another. People do not perform one gender or another because of our biology, they perform their gender because of social norms.
Those social norms are what should be challenged through feminist theory, not norms based on biological difference.

Comment [14]: Laura Beckmann:
Overall idea is great but just needs to be connected in paper. Should be great!

Comment [15]: Kaley Allard:
I look forward to reading your essay! I think you have really strong ideas and once you clarify the essential feminist theory you are taking to this story you will have a very strong essay.

Comment [16]: john.pennington:
Sources are quite strong. It appears that the central theoretical apparatus will be Butler's notion of gender performance. Is that an accurate statement?

I really look forward to reading your essay. You have an original idea that has lots of potential.