

Simone Chess. *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations.* New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp xi, 196.

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Simone Chess's *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature* revisits a topic that had its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s when the cross-pollination of feminism and new historicism produced a wealth of critical interest in Shakespeare's disguised heroines, real-life transvestites like Moll Cutpurse of *The Roaring Girl*, and antitheatrical diatribes about the erotic dangers of cross-dressed actors. These studies, as Chess notes in her introduction, tended to fall into certain binary patterns: female-to-male (FTM) crossdressing was typically empowering, benefitting the disguised heroine while raising enlightening questions about the constructedness of gender; male-to-female (MTF) crossdressing, conversely, spoke to cultural anxieties about effeminacy, seduction, and degeneration. Crossdressed erotic activity was examined in similarly binary terms of homoeroticism — eg, a male character attracted to a male-disguised stage heroine as an instance of male-male desire — or heterosexuality, if one took the stage's fictions at face value. As Chess observes, however, our own contemporary landscape of gender and sexuality has changed since then in ways that may be bringing us closer to our early modern counterparts, with their ways of thinking about anatomical sex as a spectrum and no fixed concept of sexual 'orientation' (15). Invoking 'recent moves in the contemporary trans*, queer, and genderqueer communities to broaden the discourse that surrounds queer and genderqueer individuals' lived experience' (13), Chess describes her work as being 'informed and enabled by contemporary trans* and genderqueer theory', even as it focuses on 'a type of queer gender play that is culturally and historically specific to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries' (14). In particular, the book is concerned with questions of 'relational' gender expression — 'how MTF crossdressers constitute their gender *with* and *through* their relationships with other characters' (9) — and with recovering representations of queer gender that are positive and beneficial, rather than shaming, for the crossdresser.

Chapter 1, 'Doublecrossdressing Encounters', opens with a description of the 'Machine to be Another', an ongoing (as of 2016) interdisciplinary research project in which virtual reality allows users 'the immersive experience of seeing themselves in the body of another person' (39). In one instance, the research

collective engineers a ‘gender swap’, in which a male and a female, outfitted with Oculus Rift headsets, perform simultaneous movements while looking down to see their ‘own’ bodies as those of the opposite gender. Examining texts that stage encounters between MTF and FTM crossdressers, the chapter sets out to argue that such encounters, in which ‘one queer gender facilitates another’, not only ‘reveal the construction and maintenance of the more normative genders that surround them’ but can also accomplish one of the stated goals of the Machine: a shift in perspective that enables empathy. As with each of the subsequent chapters, the chosen texts are a heterogeneous lot: the anonymous pamphlets *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir*; the episode in book 5 of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* in which Britomart encounters the crossdressed Artegall in Radigund’s service; Chapman’s 1611 comedy *May Day*; and a mid-seventeenth-century ballad titled ‘Robin Hood and the Bishop’. That the encounters depicted in these texts work to facilitate — for both the characters involved and the audience — ‘improved understandings of how sex and gender work in their world’ (50) is aptly demonstrated; that they ‘provoke cross-gender empathy and identification’, however, is a claim that the chapter struggles to prove, leaving its concluding claims about ‘empathetic cross-identification’ and ‘empathetic gender exchange’ ringing rather hollow: the attempt to find empathy often obscures the extent to which these early modern texts view gender as a zero-sum game, in which any power achieved by women comes at the expense of men.

Chapter 2, ‘Crossdressed Brides and the Marriage Market’, examines Middleton’s *A Mad World, My Masters*, Jonson’s *Epicoene*, and two versions of the narrative ‘Phylotus and Emelia’. Focusing on scenarios where ‘the MTF crossdresser puts himself in relationship to a male suitor or husband, because s/he stands to gain from the queer dynamic of that encounter’, Chess uses Gail Rubin’s model of the ‘traffic in women’ to argue that such scenarios unexpectedly reveal the potential for power in the position of the trafficked ‘goods’, and thus the ‘possibility [for empowerment] for cisgender women who generally occupy those trafficked positions’ (72). The question of why it takes a man in women’s clothing to show women ‘that there are potential benefits, however limited, and points of subversive strength, however tenuous, available from within the traffic economy’ (73), could be much more fully addressed here; the strongest argument for this claim is that the crossdressed bride’s secret — that beneath her clothes is a man — stands in for the various empowering secrets a woman might bring into her marriage unbeknownst to her husband (82, 88), but such points form only a small part of the chapter.

The third chapter turns to ‘queer heterosexuality’, defined as the attraction to and desire for an MTF crossdresser by a ‘normatively gendered’ female character, who is ‘depicted as being attracted to the very queerness of the entire gender presented to them — attracted to the idea and the appeal of a genderqueer individual’ (104). As Chess points out, erotic encounters between men in dresses and women who believe them to be women are typically analyzed for what they reveal about early modern lesbian sexuality; to do so, she suggests, is to overlook the ways in which texts such as Sidney’s *Arcadia*, Day’s *Isle of the Gulls*, and Wroth’s *Urania* depict ‘sexual playfulness and joyful queer exploration queer renaissance sex acts [that] stand to inform our own approaches toward and assumptions about hetero and queer sexualities, desire, and sexual practice’ (129).

The fourth and final chapter reads three texts — Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*, Lyly’s *Gallathea*, and a late-seventeenth-century ballad, ‘The Male and Female Husband’ — to focus on questions of ‘gender labor’, the caretaking and support offered by a partner who ‘co-creat[es] his or her partner’s queer gender for those around them’ (138). Arguing for the relevance of research on contemporary subjects to the early modern period — in this chapter, Jane Ward’s 2010 article ‘Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression’¹ — Chess unpacks the extent to which Lady Happy’s relationship with the MTF Princess, and Phyllida and Gallathea’s relationship with each other, depend on their willingness to perform the work of suspending disbelief and of creating structures of language and behaviour to nurture the crossdressed partner’s gender presentation. What proves a thought-provoking approach to Cavendish’s and Lyly’s plays, however, leads into an oddly celebratory interpretation of what is arguably a virulently phobic ballad: when Mary Jewit, born with ‘Male-parts as well / as Female twixt the thighs’ is depicted in the ballad as a rapist, called a ‘both-Sexed thing’ and a ‘Monster’, and accused of heading off to London to ‘set up a wicked trade’, the ballad-writer’s choice of ‘it’ as a pronoun for Jewit strikes me as more dehumanizing than gender-neutral.

‘The Male and Female Husband’, unfortunately, is not the only text for which Chess’s effort to find positive representations highlighting the benefits of MTF crossdressing leads to some rather tendentious readings. An interpretation of the second woodcut accompanying ‘Robin Hood and the Bishop’ that hinges on misidentifying (I’m reasonably certain) the Bishop as the Old Woman is likely an honest mistake, but the argument about *Mad World* in the chapter on crossdressed brides and the marriage market is a more serious case in point. To demonstrate that ‘MTF crossdressing, queer gender, and male femininity are productive presentations that can be rewarded, rather than shamed’, Chess frames the play’s

main plot as a narrative in which ‘a courtesan and a crossdresser each attempt to insert themselves into the marital economy in an effort to leverage themselves into the bride’s position of financial access’ (74). Readers familiar with Middleton’s play will be surprised to hear that the Courtesan fakes a pregnancy in an attempt to secure her prosperity with a place in Sir Bounteous’s household as the mother of his child (she doesn’t — her pregnancy is his own momentary delusion), or that Follywit dresses as the Courtesan only after a series of *failed* disguises and schemes (they’re actually quite successful) ‘in a final effort to access his grandfather’s wealth as a woman and a bride’ (nowhere does Sir Bounteous contemplate marrying the Courtesan, nor she him) (76). This determinedly positive analysis of Follywit’s crossdressing, moreover, overlooks the thoroughgoing misogyny that animates his disguise and the way that the play shrewdly undercuts his separation of womankind into pure virgins and diseased, dishonest whores by turning his elevation of female chastity into his comic downfall. Similar objections may be made to a reading of *Epicoene* that concludes by celebrating the ‘triumph’ and ‘power’ of the boy who has posed as Morose’s bride, whom Chess surprisingly describes — on the basis of Truewit’s final, mocking remarks to the Collegiates — as ‘a potential vindicator for women, a trustworthy gentleman, and, most powerfully and importantly, a holder of secrets’ (85). These are texts that I know well; such claims leave me wondering how persuasive — or, indeed, accurate — Chess’s arguments may be about the ones that I do not.

The next decade or so should tell whether the ongoing contemporary shift to more fluid concepts of gender and sexuality will produce a significant new critical approach in early modern gender studies. This book’s efforts to spearhead such an approach illuminate both the promise and the potential pitfalls.

Notes

- 1 Jane Ward, ‘Gender Labor: Transmen, Femmes, and Collective Work of Transgression’, *Sexualities* 13.2 (2010), 236–54 <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1363460709359114>.