

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016). xi + 196 pp.

ISBN 978 1 1389 5121 1

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There are a large number of male-to-female (MTF) crossdressers in early modern literature, such as Falstaff from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; despite this, much of the scholarship has focussed on female-to-male (FTM) crossdressing.¹ Simone Chess, in this monograph, aims to draw attention to MTF crossdressers and how these characters present queer gender and desire.

The introduction sets out the previous scholarship on crossdressing in early modern literature and explains the theoretical framework of the project. This study is informed by queer studies, trans studies, and relational gender theory. In particular, Chess seems to have found much of use in work on relational gender theory, such as that by Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West, which proposes that we define ourselves and our genders in and through our relationships with others. Chess argues that it is fruitful to examine MTF crossdressing in this way. Another of this monograph's stated aims is to show how MTF crossdressing was depicted positively in early modern sources, rather than focus on violent responses to or repression of crossdressing. This serves not to deny the existence of such responses, but rather emphasises the diverse representations of crossdressing.

The first chapter addresses examples of doublecrossdressing in which a FTM and MTF crossdresser are found in a single text. Chess explores the encounters between crossdressers and how they present instances of (direct or indirect) gender swapping revealing gender to be relational, with most of this first chapter dedicated to the pamphlets *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir*. These texts show clothing and other gender

¹ This review uses terminology as used and defined by Chess.

signifiers to be subject to exchange and suggest that masculine or feminine identifiers can be transferred as long as balance is found. This concept of balancing masculinity and femininity is similarly discussed in the context of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and George Chapman's play *May Day*. The ballad 'Robin Hood & the Bishop' receives less attention but the analysis of woodcuts that illustrate the narrative reveals how doublecrossdressing can be represented visually. In the examination of each text, Chess notes that whilst the texts end with normative conclusions the crossdressers' gender often remains unstable.

The second chapter focusses on texts that show MTF crossdressers entering the marriage system as brides in Thomas Middleton's *A Mad World, My Master*, Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*, and two versions of the Phylotus and Emelia story. Chess shows how these texts explore gender and power within the marriage economy and looks specifically at the position of the trafficked woman. The texts present young men with anxieties regarding inheritance using crossdressing to ensure financial security, but they also reveal the reactions of women to the marriage system. In the examples discussed by Chess, the MTF crossdresser demonstrates that this system is vulnerable to manipulation. The crossdressers also reveal the areas of potential power that exist for women within this system, with an emphasis on using wealth and sex to gain power and status. These narratives explore the marriage economy from a range of perspectives and, through the MTF crossdresser, the social and economic concerns of contemporary society are revealed to the reader.

The third chapter is focussed on the representations of the cisgender lover's desire for the MTF crossdresser. Chess argues that the lover is attracted to the crossdresser because of their queer gender and consequently that this desire is neither homosexual nor heterosexual, but queerly heterosexual. Of particular interest is the analysis of Giovanni Battista Guarini's tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido* and the visual interpretations of the story by the artists Van Dyck, Breenbergh and van der Lisse, as Chess explores how the sexual encounter is represented in text and image. Many of the texts included in this chapter are romances. The author suggests that the conventions of this genre, such as the theme of disguise and the setting within fictional worlds, allow for an exploration of crossdressed desire and sexuality. Genre is mentioned throughout this monograph but, considering the range of texts and genres in this corpus, a more sustained discussion of if/how it affects the portrayal of MTF crossdressing would be useful.

The final chapter of this book considers the portrayal of 'gender labour' in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*, John Lyly's *Gallathea* and the ballad 'The Male and Female Husband'. Chess draws on Jane Ward's research on gender labour in

relationships between transgender and cisgender individuals. Chess shows how the three aspects of gender labour (the labour of being “the girl”, the labour of forgetting, and the labour of alliance) can be seen in early modern literature and how a partner or community can help to produce, support, and sustain an individual’s gender. Chess’ argument is most persuasive in the case of *Gallathea*, a play which shows two FTM crossdressers who co-create each other’s gender through their queer relationship. This chapter focusses on a smaller corpus of texts, allowing the author to provide detailed analyses of the narratives and their representation of gender labour.

Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature concludes with a discussion of the debate regarding the use of queer and trans* studies in relation to the past and its literature, showing Chess’s own response and those of others to this debate. This comparative study makes an important contribution to the scholarship on early modern literature in two ways: first, its interpretation of early modern material is informed by scholarship from queer, trans, and gender studies; and second, it showcases the lesser-studied MTF crossdresser, their queer gender, and their relationships. The scope of this monograph is ambitious, and a large number of texts are analysed within its four chapters. A disadvantage to this approach is that there is, occasionally, an imbalance, with some texts receiving more attention than others. I would have liked to have seen the ballads explored in more depth with greater consideration of the role that genre may play in the representation of MTF crossdressing. However, the monograph’s wide-ranging corpus also serves to highlight the variety of crossdressing narratives written in the early modern period and the plots, characters, and ideas that can be found in these texts. This monograph would be of interest to a wide audience not only for those working on early modern literature but also to any working on gender and sexuality across historical periods and geographic boundaries.