This paper will explore situations in early modern texts in which disorderly eating and its bodily effects enable characters to articulate asexuality as a sexual and romantic preference. Frequently coded as feminine (and, accordingly, overlooked), anorexia and asexuality have generally been read and understood as inherently negative. Instead, the paper will argue that, while the stakes of these eating disorders are high risk, the acts of starving to the point of wasting is a way for characters to articulate a queer preference for asexuality, and to model, however briefly, how that asexuality might be put into practice in a culture so oriented toward (hetero) sexuality, marriage, and reproduction. The paper first makes a disability studies intervention by arguing that representations of self-starvation might be read as a manifestation of disability and illness. But then, using the model of “disability gain,” I will argue that, if anorexia is a disability, it is a disability that enables queer practice; I find that these situations are in fact sites for unconventional, queer, practices and arrangements.

Simone Chess is an Associate Professor of English and an affiliate of the Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies Program at Wayne State University in Detroit. Her book, Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations (Routledge, 2016) argues that representations of male-to-female crossdressers in literature show models of queer male femininities that are both relational and beneficial. In addition to the book, she has published articles and book chapters on topics including male femininity in Shakespeare, crossdressing and gender labor, broadside ballad culture, and early modern disability.