“And so they kissed again”: Early Modern Crossdressing and Queer (hetero?) Sexualities

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This paper considers the interplay between desire, sexuality, and convention in early modern literary and dramatic instances in which male-to-female (MTF) crossdressed characters are involved in sexual or erotic exchanges with normatively-gendered female characters. One major anxiety about crossdressers (both early modern and modern) is that their sexuality is ambiguous or unknown; the texts themselves, and their readers, focus intensely on this issue. But what are we to make of the partners (usually women) who are seduced by, or who seduce, MTF crossdressers? I argue that the queered desire that female characters feel towards MTF crossdressers is because of, not in spite of, their gender presentation. This pattern of sexuality is technically heterosexual (between a man and a woman), visually homosexual (between two seeming women), and undeniably queer. Despite cultural, religious, and ethical regulations of sex and desire, these characters find pleasure in selecting and enjoying genderqueer (that is, neither male nor female, but explicitly neither and both) love objects. A queer reading of these often-overlooked textual instances (which include Sidney’s Arcadia (1580), Wroth’s Urania (1621), Day’s Isle of the Gulls (1606), and ballad and sonnet poetry) creates space for considering the rules of pleasure and pleasurable representation in the early modern period.

Simone Chess is an Assistant Professor in English and an affiliate of the Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies Program at Wayne State. Her research interests are in Early Modern literary and cultural studies, with emphases on gender and sexuality, ability, and the body. She has published articles and book chapters on the topics of bathroom activism, cheap print, ballads and Shakespeare, and on the role of oath-making in “murderous wife” ballads. She is currently completing a book project entitled, “Where’s your man’s heart now”: Male to Female Crossdressing in Early Modern Literature.

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