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# Male to Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations / Simone Chess

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**Simone Chess. *Male to Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations*. London: Routledge, 2016. 208 pp.**

Reviewed by JOHN GARRISON

Simone Chess' monograph, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature*, represents a vital contribution to the study of Renaissance literature and to gender studies more broadly. While considerable attention has been paid to literary depictions of female-to-male (FTM) crossdressing, little work has been done on depictions of male-to-female (MTF) crossdressing. This volume builds upon work by scholars such as Mary Bly and Stephen Orgel, who have analyzed the role of boy actors on the English stage. While the book does take into account boy actors, it diverges from previous studies in order to consider the implications of men dressing as women in literary depictions across plays, poems, and prose romances, as well as in ballads and pamphlets. By doing so, Chess embraces recent advances in queer studies and builds connections between early modern depictions of MTF scenarios and issues at work in our own contemporary trans\* communities. The result is a compelling volume that will be of interest to scholars working on a variety of areas, including early modern theatre, performance studies, and gender and sexuality studies.

Writing in concise and compelling prose, Chess addresses a wide range of case studies and brings to bear theories of gender identity and performativity to introduce new readings of both canonical and non-canonical texts. Part of what makes her analysis so unique is that, unlike previous studies that largely have focused on the ontological questions raised by the status of the FTM character or the MTF boy actor, this study includes consideration of the cisgender partner's desire in the encounter with the MTF character. By incorporating this dimension, Chess traces how "MTF sex and courtship scenarios allow an exploration of sexuality that, outside of the paradigms of male-female, male-male, or female-female erotic encounters, instead highlight the availability of an early modern eroticization of queer gender" (8).

The first chapter of *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature* signals the nuanced framework of the volume nicely, focusing on instances of "double crossdressing" where a character who FTM crossdresses is paired with a character who MTF crossdresses. Pairing depictions in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* with depictions in pamphlets and a Robin Hood Ballad, Chess combines incisive close-reading with deft command of gender theory to open new lines of inquiry into these texts. The book's second chapter takes Middleton's *Mad World, My Masters* and Jonson's *Epicoene* as its central case studies to explore the implications of an MTF crossdresser entering the marriage market. The third chapter deploys notions of "queer heterosexuality" in order to examine depictions of female characters who desire MTF crossdressers in prose romances by Sidney

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and by Wroth, as well as in pamphlets and sonnets. Chess shows us how, whether it is a male character or a female character who trains their desiring gaze upon the MTF character, such situations suggest that “crossdressing has an erotics of its own, a queer heterosexuality that is separate from same-sex or opposite-sex desire, encompassing *and* excluding both” (104).

Adding yet another layer of nuance to the study, the fourth chapter turns our attention to Lyly’s *Galathea* and Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*. In this chapter, Chess draws upon the concept of “gender labor” to examine the dynamics of relationships where one member is an MTF crossdresser. The term “gender labor,” a term from the social sciences typically used to interrogate our own contemporary culture, describes situations where a cisgender individual “participates in co-creating his or her partner’s queer gender for the benefit of those around them” (138). The analysis reminds us that identity is always relational and that participants in relationships often have unacknowledged power in shaping others’ self-identity.

The volume’s epilogue further concretizes the book’s connections to current efforts in trans\* studies and discusses the cost of excluding trans\* and genderqueer narratives from the study of literary history. Indeed, one realizes here (and perhaps much earlier in the volume), that *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature* is as much about the case studies that it discusses as it is about the many case studies that may have been overlooked in previous studies of gender identity in texts of the early modern period. With this volume, Chess has modelled for us several new approaches for identifying and analyzing trans\* narratives. Applying such methods to Renaissance culture and literature will provide much-needed new thinking in the field.

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**John Garrison** is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Center for the Humanities at Carroll University. He is the author of *Friendship and Queer Theory in the Renaissance* (2014) and *Glass* (2015). With Kyle Pivetti, he is co-editor of *Sexuality and Memory in Early Modern England: Literature and the Erotics of Recollection* (2016). He currently is completing a volume entitled *Shakespeare and the Afterlife* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).