‘The chick got in the way’, or The Woman is/as Queer: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Unlocking of Female Subjectivity in Early Modern Drama

One of the most egregious comments to emerge from the recent US engagement in Iraq appeared in the press shortly after troops entered Baghdad. An Iraqi civilian woman was accidentally killed by a US soldier as he was preparing to kill someone else. When asked by reporters why he shot and killed the woman, he replied, ‘The chick got in the way.’ This statement has haunted me for many reasons and I want to use it to begin thinking about the intersections of feminist and queer theory.

Calling any woman a ‘chick’ is, of course, sexist. ‘Chick’ is a term we have all heard often, a term that is so much a part of the ordinary male vocabulary that it is ubiquitous and, therefore, often ‘unheard’. ‘Chicks’, ‘babes’, ‘broads’, (fully adult) ‘girls’ – not to mention their more obscene counterparts – are everyday markers of the Self/Other dichotomy that necessitates feminist criticism and feminist theory. A man in a heterosexual male/patriarchal culture defines himself as Self to the exclusion of Others – women, children, aliens, and homosexuals – through the use of derogatory terms to define those who are not as he is, for whatever reasons. The woman killed by the US soldier was a ‘chick’ because she was a woman to this male patriarch.

The fact that this ‘chick’ had the temerity to ‘get in the way’, therefore somehow eliminating the necessity of any remorse from her killer, provokes me to look more deeply into her situation. Picture, for a moment, this woman as target. She is identifiable as female or she would not have been labelled ‘chick’. But as an Iraqi, she may have been wearing a hijab or a burqa. Either of these two items of clothing would have clearly marked her as Muslim, Middle Eastern, non-western, non-Christian. To western eyes, the covering of these garments might also seem to make her invisible, to deny her humanity
and her identity. Absent the sexualized and sexualizing clothing of many western women – especially that of the US soldier’s female contemporaries? – the Iraqi woman as Other also becomes ‘object’ since her femaleness is so hidden. She is also an enemy civilian, a citizen of a country governed by a demonized dictator, purported terrorist, and organizer of weapons of mass destruction. As ‘chick’, the Iraqi woman may simply be Other to the US soldier’s Self. As almost invisible covered object, Muslim, Semite, Middle Easterner, non-western, non-Christian woman, she is much more than simply Other; she is ‘queer’.

Critical alliances within the world of early modern studies can probably best be defined as sporadic or fraught. Scholars become defined as one kind of critic and either have trouble breaking out of that mould, or are viewed askance when they do. Two of the most fraught areas are those in which I work: feminist theory and queer theory. Feminist theory has probably the longer history of disagreements and outright arguments, since it has produced, to my reckoning, at least three ‘generations’ of scholars since my initial involvement in the discipline in the 1980s.

Feminist critics in the 1960s and 1970s were not focused on theory but were occupied with locating women authors in the early modern period and comparing their ‘images’ of women with ‘images of women’ in the works of male authors of the period. As a result of the general movement toward theory in literary studies, feminist criticism became more theoretically focused to the point of relying upon other theoretical paradigms, such as Marxist and cultural materialist theory, in order to expand the possibilities of feminist analysis. However, there are feminist critics who avoid theoretical analysis, judging it to be patriarchal. While queer theory can be seen as an equally fraught discipline, the ‘problems’ derive from a different source. Queer theory did not ‘arrive’ until after the poststructuralist influx of theory. Hence, it has always already been a highly theoretical mode of analysis. The fact that it developed in response to texts by avowedly ‘queer’ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and so on) authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries presents a problem for analyses of early modern texts that are not as ‘visibly’ queer as later ones. One major split operating within queer theory in early modern studies occurs along the gay/lesbian binary. How can queer theory – or gay studies – be applied to texts of a period that had few women authors and even fewer ‘avowedly’ lesbian ones?

My personal critical agendas are feminist, and I explore the various ways gender is construed in the early modern period. I examine the avenues of power open to women, the ways in which marriage allowed or restricted a
woman’s power, and the extent to which women formed alliances with other women.¹ When feminist critics consider how women react/interact with other women, they sometimes skirt the issue of affective/erotic congress. At this point I see alliances between feminist and queer theory. Marxist/cultural materialist inspired feminist theory looks at women as Other within all aspects of patriarchal society. Queer theory looks at all the ‘others’ who are not sexually active heterosexuals. My critical alliances, therefore, include Marxist/cultural materialist theory along with feminism and queer theory so that, by examining the various kinds of Others upon whom these theories focus, I can gain a more nuanced picture of how female subjectivity is presented/revealed/questioned/challenged/demonized within early modern dramatic texts.

In ‘Theorizing and Repoliticizing Feminist Theory in Early Modern Studies’, chapter 1 of my book Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama, I looked at how the various strains of feminist criticism at the end of the twentieth century both assisted and restricted literary analysis of early modern texts.² My project was to analyze the representation of women rulers in early modern plays in terms of how they utilized inherited power and how such utilization differed from that of male rulers. Much feminist criticism at that time relied upon essentialist archetypes or Freudian psychoanalysis,³ or was profoundly anti-theory,⁴ so that it was difficult to analyze women ruler characters. Not only were archetypes of women rulers non-existent, but Freudian analysis was based upon the concept of the late nineteenth-century upper middle-class family, a structure remarkably different from the early modern family. Theorizing gender development from such a different construct seemed impossible. Yet patriarchal societies at all times and places do depend upon the power of those whom the society defines as ‘male’ over those whom it defines, for whatever reasons, as ‘non-male’. In terms of twentieth-century psychoanalytic criticism, therefore, the concept of (male)Self/(female)Other was useful for looking at early modern texts and characters. Even more helpful were the methodologies of new historicism and Marxist/cultural materialist theory which examined the sociopolitical and cultural implications of patriarchal society and the power relationships between its various binaries of Self and Other, notably the relationships between classes in power and those on the margins. Feminist theory now became richer as a result of these alliances. What I, as an early modern scholar, could not do because of the focus of feminist theory on nineteenth- and twentieth-century societies and texts, I could do by allying feminist theory with new historicism and Marxist/cultural materialist theory. Queer theory, however, was prob-
lematic for understanding women-women eroticism in the early modern period.

Queer theory developed in response to nineteenth- and twentieth-century gender positions of literary characters. To ‘organize’ theoretical discussions of gay or lesbian or bisexual authors or characters, Teresa de Lauretis suggested: ‘In a sense, the term “Queer Theory” was arrived at in an effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions [of lesbian, gay, etc.] in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them.’ De Lauretis here indicates one of the paradoxes of queer theory, namely that while critics may want to ‘organize’ the various ‘parts’ of the theory, the overall concept of queer theory acts as a means by which the critic can ‘transgress and transcend’ any restrictive characteristics of a particular ‘part’ of queer theory. As Alexander Doty maintains, the concept of ‘queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories’. Both de Lauretis’s and Doty’s theoretical positions ultimately challenge the regime of heterosexuality. Yet as much as we may believe that such a regime ‘existed’ during the early modern period, it is impossible to attach such a construct to a period that did not distinguish between people who took same-sex or other-sex lovers, and whose catch-all term ‘sodomite’ had a remarkably shifting definition. To use queer theory to examine early modern texts I needed two other theorists to help complete the bridge to earlier centuries: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Penelope Englebrecht. Sedgwick defines ‘queer’ in an extremely inclusive way: ‘one of the things that “queer” can refer to’, she writes, is the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunts, wanna-bes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or ... people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.

Despite the fact that Sedgwick does not indicate a place for virgins or celibates in her list of sexual practices, its very inclusivity allows its use for exploring
early modern sexual relationships that were both unnamed and unconceptualized. Penelope Englebrecht helped to complete my bridge.

As I indicated, feminist critics who base their theories on the patriarchal family accept the premise that the Self – the organizer, power-holder, social creator and definer – is always male and always defines the Other. Usually that Other is female, but Other may also encompass any category of persons who are ‘not-yet male’ – for example, male children – or those who ‘never-can-be male’ – for example, women, sexual others, racial others, aliens, and so on. If we accept this formulation, then any sexual Other is necessarily a social Other, denied the primary social positioning of the Self. How then can we examine the relationships between sexual Others within patriarchal society? Englebrecht addresses this problem in her formulation of Subject-Other/self to describe relationships between lesbians. Her formulation is useful because it gestures toward the Self/Other binary of patriarchal society, in which straight women and lesbians are Other, yet it also indicates a relationship that differs from the heterosexual Self/Other division to which straight women are pointed. While I feel that Englebrecht’s Subject-Other/self formulation still privileges one partner – I would prefer a formulation such as ‘Subject-Other/Subject’ or ‘Self-Other/Self’ – she does break ground in theorizing a way for non-normative sexual relationships to be schematized within patriarchal society and explained in early modern terms.

As an example of how I use the alliances of these various theoretical modalities, I will consider Thomas Dekker’s *The Honest Whore*, which allows me to analyze the often-demonized whore in concert with two other early modern female character ‘types’. Part I of the play, co-authored with Middleton, presents us with three main women characters: Infelice, Viola, and Bellafront. The first two are recognizable character types which have been explored by many critics. Infelice is, against her will, the ‘dutiful’ daughter who has been mewed up by her farther to prevent her marriage to an unacceptable suitor. Her appearances are brief, and she demonstrates the role of, especially, upper-class women of the period. Viola, the city wife, represents the opposite end of the spectrum of female behaviour: the shrew. Not content to have a kind, hard-working linen-draper husband whose flourishing business can support three apprentices, Viola cannot accept her husband’s patience. At times she is justified, as when some courtiers buy a minuscule amount of fine linen cut from the centre of her willing husband’s bolt; but otherwise she is presented as a foolish, noisy woman whose goal is to make her husband angry. She represents the extreme of Infelice’s compliance, and
shows how unacceptable female behaviour causes problems for good men – such as being confined to Bedlam.

I realize that a feminist analysis can reveal much about these characters. However, combining feminist theory with Marxist/cultural materialist theory can reveal much more about the cultural milieu of the early modern period and specifically about social attitudes toward daughters and wives. Feminist criticism has made important observations about prostitutes and cultural attitudes toward them, but I do not want to consider the eponymous Bellafront solely as the demonic cultural opposite of the ‘chaste, silent, and obedient’ daughter and wife. While feminist critics have indicated that the category ‘whore’ is a patriarchal attempt to contain a specific type of sexual Other, they have often not considered the socially constructed nature of the term/category ‘whore’, nor considered these women, as I do, to be queer. Additionally, they have not considered how whores relate to the marketplace and the development of capitalism in early modern England. Combining queer theory with feminist and Marxist/cultural-materialist theory provides a multi-faceted way to consider the character Bellafront and to allow for a more profitable ‘unlocking’ of her subjectivity.

We usually see Bellafront entertaining groups of men, rather than individual ‘customers’, or being pressured to embellish a dinner sponsored by court gallants. While she teases and provokes these men, it is unclear whether she engages in sexual intercourse with them. She clearly receives remuneration, or she could not support herself as a privileged potential companion. Yet she seems not to be bound to comply with all of her guests’ wishes. For example, she is bidden to dinner by a group of gallants, yet never appears. They deride her absence, yet do not hint that her failure to appear will diminish either her desirability or their ‘patronage’ of her. If whores in general are perceived as opposing early modern culture’s mandate that women be chaste, silent, and obedient, how is it that Bellafront can live so well – in a material sense – in this culture?

I am arguing that Bellafront lives so well because she is queer. To begin with, she is a successful capitalist. All workers commodify themselves on the labour market by selling their labour for less than it is worth to their employer. The surplus profit thus enriches the capitalist who hires them. Common whores who service numerous customers ‘sell’ (actually ‘rent’) their bodies out at a profit for their ‘owners’, pimps, or bawds. Like labourers, they receive less for their ‘labour’ than the labour is worth, the profit going to their employers. Bellafront differs from these whores in that she labours solely for herself. No bawd or pimp appears to control her, so she earns the profit
generated by her labour. And that labour may be primarily the rental of the 'presence' of her body for conversation, dinner parties, and so on, rather than the actual physical use of it.\textsuperscript{15}

I also want to argue that the concept of ‘queer’, one that challenges the regime of heterosexuality, can (and should) be used to examine women characters like Bellafront who appear to occupy one place in society – in this case ‘whore’ – but who in reality occupy a much more radical subject position. There may be many reasons why a woman becomes a whore, but in a conversation with Matheo, Bellafront indicates that she became one as the result of one sexual encounter with him:

You were the first
Gaue money for my soul; you brake the Ice,
Which after turnd a puddle: I was led
By your temptation to be miserable:
I pray seeke out some other that will fall,
Or rather (I pray) seeke out none at all. (3.3.94–9)

Matheo replies: Ist possible, to be impossible, an honest whore! I haue heard many honest wenches turne strumpets with a wet finger; but for a Harlot to turne honest, is one of \textit{Hercules} labours’ (ll. 100–3). The description of Bellafront represents the true cultural circumstance. ‘Breaking the ice’ is the same as ‘de-flowering’, and refers to the fact that a woman’s first experience of sexual intercourse with a man moves her irrevocably out of the category of virgin.\textsuperscript{16} The man’s identity, and the circumstances under which the penetration occurs, determine the future direction of the woman’s life. If the virgin is penetrated by her husband, the act moves her into the category of chaste wife. If the man is not her husband, the act moves her into the category of whore. That a woman’s first penetration by a man is irreversible is evident in Matheo’s speech quoted above; it is easy to make a virgin a whore, impossible to make a whore chaste. Or so it seems. Bellafront realizes that there is one way:

You [and all men] gladly seeke our sexes ouerthrow,
But not to rayse our states; for all your [Matheo’s] wrongs,
Will you vouchsafe me but due recompence,
To marry with me? (3.3.112-5)

Matheo’s response demonstrates the cultural impossibility of making a whore honest:
Math. How, marry with a Punch, a Cockatrice, a Harlot? marry
foh, Ile be burnt thorow the nose first.
Bell.: Why la? these are your othes: you loue to vndo vs,
To put heauen from vs, whilst our best hours waste:
You loue to make vs lewd, but neuer chaste. (ll. 116–20)

Despite Matheo’s reply, Bellafront articulates a way to resolve the culturally
impossible: how to make the unchaste chaste.

I have chosen to focus on Bellafront because her character can best be
understood through the combined use of feminist and queer theory. If the
character were simply a woman who made the wrong choice and was
condemned to a life on the fringes of society, it would be easy to analyze her
using feminist theory alone. But Bellafront cannot easily fit into feminist
theoretical paradigms. Entirely aware of how her culture constructs the
unchaste woman, this character creates a sexual and social role for herself that
is contrary to social expectations of women: it is queer. Not content to accept
the position of ‘whore’, Bellafront creates herself as a capitalist courtesan who
is the sole beneficiary of her labour. In a culture in which virtually no women
were capitalists in the world of trade, Bellafront is a capitalist in the world of
sex work. Granted, there have been pimps and bawds before Bellafront, but
she is both bawd and whore profiting from her own body, not someone else’s.

But the most queer aspect of Bellafront’s character involves her desire to
challenge her culture’s sexual mores, to reverse the accepted trajectory from
virgin to whore. By demanding marriage from Matheo she attempts to erase
all subsequent sexual encounters with other men after her deflowering. Her
queerness is obvious not only in her reversal of cultural expectations, but in
her use of sexual knowledge of Matheo to force him to comply. Prostitutes
‘normally’ possess only a demonic power in early modern plays. Bellafront’s
power seems ‘unnatural’, in that it reverses the social order, yet it is honest in
that it removes her ‘criminality’ and restores her to social acceptability.
Bellafront demands an end to the unfairness of male control of female bodies
by insisting that her deflowerer marry her and change her from unchaste to
chaste woman. I would also argue that Bellafront’s ‘criminality’ results
primarily from socially imposed definitions. Society is, in fact, ‘criminal’ in
creating the ‘outlaw’ category of ‘whore’ for women who disobey social
strictures. The power that allows Bellafront to succeed in her transformation
to chaste woman is the result of her queerness. Despite her ‘fall’, Bellafront
has managed to maintain her economic independence as well as her personal
integrity. Unlike other whores in early modern plays – Kate Keepdown and
Doll Tearsheet, for example – Bellafront controls her body, chooses her customers, and keeps her substantial profits. She also persuades Matheo to marry her, thus re-defining and re-creating herself as a chaste wife. All of these tasks are outside of the usual capabilities of most women in early modern society or of women characters in the early modern theatre. Queer theory, a methodology that looks at how non-normative sexuality can be examined and theorized, allows me to examine these unusual character traits and produce a nuanced reading of Bellafront.

Part II of *The Honest Whore* becomes an interesting ‘corrective’ to Part I. Of the three main characters in the first play, the dutiful daughter, Infelice, is rewarded with the husband she desires; and the shrewish wife, Viola, is taught the foolishness of her ways and the value of her husband. Such traditional outcomes cast Bellafront’s queer dénouement in Part I in a very strange light. What began as a traditional city comedy, Part I became instead a radical play that allowed for a successful challenge to the social status quo by an unchaste female character. Part II, on the other hand, seems a reaction against the challenges of the earlier play, one that works judiciously to restore an accepted social framework in which women characters occupy predictable positions. The shrewish wife, Viola, is killed off in the interval between the two plays, and Candido remarries. And Infelice discovers – as do most women who marry, even those who marry for love – that her husband is intent on cheating on her.

The most interesting character development in Part II, however, is Bellafront’s. From the courtesan who controlled her life and refused direction by anyone, Bellafront becomes an abject, obedient wife. Such a change can be viewed, as new historicist critics might, as a recuperation of the queer power evidenced in the character in Part I. Rather than leave at large a character so determined to challenge social protocols regarding the role of women and the definition of chastity, in Part II Dekker reins her in. That is a valid reading of the relationship between the two Bellafronts. But I want to suggest a variant of that reading, one that rescues Bellafront from being interpreted as a ‘Patient Griselda’ figure. In addition to being a courtesan, Bellafront in Part I is intelligent, witty, and autonomous. She is also ‘honest’ in that she deals in a straightforward manner with her clients. Her honesty is also evident, I would argue, in her falling in love with Hippolyto. Although that relationship is never consummated, both characters discuss its implications openly and with respect to and for each other. As a result of these discussions, and Bellafront’s realization that Hippolyto will not give up his love for Infelice, she decides to become socially honest and marry Matheo.
If we accept ‘honesty’ as one of Bellafront’s main character traits, and not just as a synonym for ‘chaste’, we can better understand her behaviour as Matheo’s wife. Once she becomes a wife, the honest Bellafront accepts the social definition of the role of wife as ‘chaste, silent, and obedient’, and she obeys Matheo in all, including pawning her clothes while she is wearing them. But while the character is willing to do whatever she can for her husband, she does not violate her chastity, especially when Matheo suggests that she should supplement the grocery money by turning the occasional trick. Her honesty is also apparent as she tries to keep the servant Pacheco (her father Orlando Friscobaldo in disguise) from leading her husband astray, and Hippolyto from cheating on his wife Infelice. But in order to accomplish these things, Bellafront needs to employ the intelligence she demonstrates in Part I. Thus while the Bellafront of Part II is a boringly honest wife, it is still necessary that she be intelligent to protect her honour, her husband’s life, their dwindling finances, and Hippolyto and Infelice’s marriage. That she manages to reconcile herself with her father and earn a financial reward shows how necessary intelligence is in a wife. That intelligence is more important than patience also raises once again the issue of the queerness of this character. Early modern marriage theory does not demand intelligence or courage in a wife, though clearly they are characteristics that can aid any woman in managing a household and a recalcitrant husband.

The character Bellafront cannot be considered a ‘lesbian’ in twenty-first century terms. Nor, I expect, can the Iraqi woman I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, though I have no way of knowing that for sure. My point in using queer theory in analyzing Dekker’s ‘whore’ is not to suggest a homoerotic or homosexual aspect to her character, but to argue that the broad precepts of queer theory allied with feminist and Marxist/cultural materialist theory are valuable for critical analyses of characters who can be rendered one-dimensional when viewed through the lens of a single critical methodology. Considering Bellafront ‘queer’ because she does not fit the mould of the good early modern woman allows me to consider her radicalness and the ways in which her character challenges social and cultural expectations. Similarly, the unnamed Iraqi woman I have described as ‘queer’ manages to point out some very dreadful truths about the ‘democratic’ ‘liberators’ of her country.

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Notes


8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Queer and Now’, *Tendencies* (Durham, 1993), 8. See also Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), 25–6. Neither Sedgwick nor any other late twentieth-century theorist considers those who do not engage in genital sexuality – for example, virgins and celibates – as queer. Active sexuality, of whatever kind, is presumed in virtually all definitions of ‘queer’ except my own.

9 Penelope J. Englebrecht, in “‘Lifting Belly is a Language’: The Postmodern Lesbian Subject’, *Feminist Studies* 16.1 (1990), 85–114, argues for a rearticulation of the term Subject-Object for defining lesbian desire. She coins the terms ‘Subject and Other/self’ to indicate ‘two categories ... equal in power and value.... each lesbian [is] essentially complete in herself – hence, Self and Other/self. The Desire therefore multiplies our voices, rather than enscribes division.... The lesbian Subject Desires the lesbian Other/self who Desires her’ (92).

10 Part I of the play was first published in 1604. Part II was published in 1630; however, it was entered in the Stationers’ Register in 1608.


13 Along with many other scholars, I see capitalism beginning in England with the development of trading companies and the creation of urban class hierarchies based upon a person’s relationship to trade or capital (see my essay ‘Class Categorization, Capitalism, and the Problem of “Gentle” Identity in *The Royall King and the Loyall Subject* and *Eastward Ho!* forthcoming in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 18 [2005]). Some feel more comfortable using the term ‘proto-capitalist’ to refer to this period.

14 The city culture of the play’s ‘Milan’ is virtually indistinguishable from that of London, even to the name of its madhouse. Consequently, I want to divorce from this analysis the early modern idea of ‘Italy’ as an alien cultural milieu.
In act 2, scene 1, Fluello, Castruchio, and Pioratto invite Bellafront to dinner that evening. She refuses. While Matheo is the only one who believes he can command Bellafront’s obedience, the others are willing to change the date to achieve her presence, even if her acquiescence is the vague ‘Well’ (2.1.221) (Thomas Dekker, *The Honest Whore, Part I*, in vol. 2 of *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, Fredson Bowers [ed] [Cambridge, 1964]; all quotations from the play will refer to this edition). If we do not realize Bellafront’s independence in this interchange, her comment to Hippolyto, ‘I am in bondes to no man’ (2.1.258), should do so.

Mistress Fingerlock, defined in the cast list as ‘a bawd’, is a confusing character. She appears in only one scene (3.2), in which she and Bellafront’s servant, Roger, lament the financial losses they suffer from Bellafront’s exit from the profession. But since Bellafront lives alone in her own establishment, I question to what degree Fingerlock is her bawd. If Bellafront were bound to her, would not Fingerlock exercise more control? In the course of this scene, Roger and Fingerlock revise their financial arrangement, thus reinforcing the capitalist nature of prostitution in this patriarchal society.


The 2003–2004 war on Iraq, perpetrated in the wake of the 2001 attacks on the United States and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, emphasized for me more than any other event so far in my lifetime the need for activism, critical inquiry, and pedagogy that is rigorous, theoretical, and socially and politically engaged. Societies worldwide are rapidly becoming more interconnected through mass media, transportation, and commerce; and the means by which people compete and negotiate for resources and power are becoming progres-