Review of *Sapphic Crossings*, by Ula Lukszo Klein

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Review of *Sapphic Crossings*, by Ula Lukszo Klein

Abstract

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Ula Lukszo Klein’s *Sapphic Crossings: Cross-Dressing Women in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (2021) seeks to fill a significant gap in eighteenth-century queer and feminist studies: the previous lack of a “book-length study … on the role of the female cross-dresser in British literature in this time period – or any other time period” (7). Drawing together examples of cross-dressed women from a range of genres, Klein argues that the popularity of this figure in literature from the period illustrated and influenced crucial debates about gender and sexuality throughout the eighteenth century. In particular, she claims that the female cross-dresser served as a tool that taught readers to recognize women’s same-sex desire as something “tangible, visible, and embodied” rather than something apparitional, as described by Terry Castle (2). Questions of embodiment anchor the book’s analysis and organization: rather than grouping texts by genre or moving chronologically, *Sapphic Crossings* catalogs body parts, with each chapter centering upon a specific section of the cross-dresser’s physical form. Through her focus on discrete body parts, Klein gestures towards an understanding of bodies and desires that embrace fluidity and variety. While her readings generally emphasize lesbian or sapphic potential, she acknowledges other trans and queer possibilities to illustrate how the eighteenth-century female cross-dresser challenges boundaries around heterosexuality and cisgender identity. Considering the cross-dressed woman in the context of a broad range of literary genres, Klein emphasizes the period’s fixation with representations that challenged developing notions of identity that were invested in producing normative heterosexuality and inflexible gender roles.

Klein’s use of “sapphic” as an organizing principal places her in conversation with a range of scholars who have highlighted women’s same-sex desires in literature from the period, including Terry Castle, Emma Donoghue, Susan S. Lanser, Lisa L. Moore, and Valerie Traub, who have challenged the anachronism of using the term “lesbian” to describe these women and their desires. Klein argues that the period’s fascination with the female cross-dresser and her relationships with other women—explicitly sexual or otherwise—“functioned to construct a lesbian-themed canon of literature and propagated lesbian representations that constructed lesbian desire as between women, for the pleasure of women—even as such representations contain important moments for reading...
gender fluidity and transness in the past” (15). Highlighting reflections of contemporary lesbian culture through “butch-femme” dynamics, one of Klein’s most innovative contributions to the discussion about the female cross-dresser is the attention paid to the “femme” cisgender women who were attracted to and desired the “butch” cross-dresser. She argues that the femme was often essential to the cross-dresser’s ability to pass, illustrating how same-sex attraction was utilized to shore up one’s performed gender, challenging assumptions about heterosexuality and masculinity.

Organized around the beard, the breast, the penis, and the leg, each chapter of Sapphic Crossings carefully walks the reader not only through the representations of these body parts as they relate to the female cross-dresser, but their broader cultural relevance during the eighteenth century. Chapter one, “Eighteenth-Century Female Cross-dressers and Their Beards,” utilizes the dual meaning of the beard to explore not only the importance of facial hair in defining masculinity during the eighteenth century but also its metaphorical use referencing “a woman who appears with a gay man to disguise his homosexuality or refute allegations of it” (32). In the context of the cross-dressed woman attempting to pass as a man, her lover serves as a replacement for the beard that the cross-dresser cannot grow: while the “ability to grow a beard was thought to be a sign of white, male European intelligence and exalted position,” and thus a crucial mark of appropriate masculinity, the cross-dresser’s ability to attract a feminine woman served a similar purpose (39). Examining The Female Husband (1746), The Female Soldier (1750), and A Journey through Every Stage of Life (1754), Klein convincingly argues that, more than a prop for a disguise, the “beard’s” attraction to the beardless cross-dresser illustrates both the ambiguity of the figure’s gender presentation and its appeal to women, placing same-sex desire at the forefront of such narratives.

Chapter two, “Sapphic Breasts and Bosom Friends,” moves from the beard as a marker of masculinity to the breast as a marker of femininity. Noting the slippage of the term during the period, Klein highlights the ways in which the breast was simultaneously marked as feminine—identifying the maternal breast, the sentimental breast, the erotic breast, and the sapphic breast—and emptied of gender as a reference to the chest of any gender or as “the body part that contains a person’s deepest emotions, regardless of gender” (65). In opposition to the beard, which the female cross-dresser must attain in order to pass, her breast must be hidden, and many texts from the period rely upon the revelation of the breast for dramatic effect that reinforce the gender binary. However, in her readings of narratives about Mary Snell, Mary/George Hamilton, Christian Davies, Anne Bonny, and Mary Read alongside Maria Edgeworth’s Belinda (1801), Klein
successfully illustrates that “rather than functioning unilaterally to reinforce patriarchal expectations and normative gender divisions, the breast reinforces female bonding and sapphic possibilities” (61). Like a smooth face, the breast has the potential to disrupt the disguise and endanger the cross-dresser and proves to be an attraction for other women, as well as a potential site of gender ambiguity.

Turning from the beard and the breast, two body parts which, within these narratives, cannot be fully imitated or removed, chapter three considers a part that can be replaced with a prosthesis: the penis. “Penetrating Discourse and Sapphic Dildos” examines not only the dildo as a prosthetic device, but the penis as a prosthetic as well, arguing for “the possibility that no body and no appendage can be represented clearly in terms of gender” (101). Klein effectively contrasts the pleasure produced using dildos in female husband narratives featuring Hamilton, Davies, and Catherine Vizzani with the ways in which penises in Fanny Hill (1748) become prostheses and the potential source of queer pleasures disconnected from cisgender masculinity and heterosexuality. This contrast furthers the argument that Klein has built over the first three chapters of Sapphic Crossings, claiming that “these narratives suggest that female cross-dressers use their knowledge to offer women what they most desire: men who are actually women” (52). While she acknowledges the possibility of reading figures like Hamilton as transgender men, Klein’s reading centers upon the idea that cross-dressed women are capable of performing masculinity better than the cisgender men who compete with them for other women’s affections.

Where the beard, breast, and penis/dildo have specific and often opposing attractions for those of different genders, chapter four, “Putting on Gender, One Leg at a Time,” argues for the broader sexual appeal of the cross-dressed woman’s legs. While acknowledging the obvious titillating spectacle of the cross-dresser’s leg and its appeal to the male gaze, often on display on stage through breeches parts, Klein pushes back against this common reading to consider the queerer aspects of these performances, using Charlotte Charke and Margaret “Peg” Woffington as her primary examples. Rather than considering the plays which placed these performers in breeches, she looks to Charke’s autobiographical account of cross-dressing in a variety of contexts—including her seduction of other women—and the various tales of Woffington’s popularity to establish the ways in which “the leg seduces both genders even as it belongs to either or both, and the cross-dressed actress’s legs double and triple the sexual possibilities in their appeal to both men and women” (163). These staged instances of cross-dressing are brought together with readings of Elizabeth Inchbald’s A Simple Story (1791) and Edgeworth’s Belinda to further Klein’s claims that it is specifically the ambiguity of the exposed leg that feeds desire and
attraction for spectators of all genders as it provides sapphic possibilities for female audiences.

While *Sapphic Crossings* makes compelling arguments about the female cross-dresser’s relationship with her femme counterpart and the ways in which her body was utilized to explore same-sex desire and pleasure, Klein’s exploration of the cross-dresser’s potentially fluid gender is, at times, contradictory and underdeveloped. In her introduction, Klein reference’s Marjorie Garber’s notion of the “third sex” or “third term”—a conception that has met criticism from trans scholars – as a means of understanding how female cross-dressers act “as a third category of gender representation that challenges our understanding of gender and its relationship to desire and the body” (3). There is a distinct tension, however, between the introductory claim that “it is the cross-dresser who overtly … illustrates the exciting possibility of female same-sex desire and nonbinary gender expressions” and Klein’s descriptions and analysis of the people she studies (5). While she gestures to the possibility of reading various figures, such as Mary/George Hamilton and Charlotte Charke, as transgender, such readings are generally displaced in favor of a focus on these individuals as women who experiment with gender in order to indulge in same-sex desires. Klein writes in chapter four that “sapphic possibilities arise through the apparatus of transgender performance” and many of her readings follow a similar pattern: gender non-conformity and trans potential is often framed as a means to an end for women’s same-sex desires rather than as a challenge to the binary through alternative genders (138). For readers seeking further engagement with the transgender potential of cross-dressed figures during the long eighteenth century, I would recommend Jen Manion’s *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (2020), which reads historical accounts of cross-dressed individuals, including George Hamilton, through a distinctly transgender lens. Additionally, *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (2021), edited by Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klósowska, provides a wide-ranging view of transgender embodiment leading up to and through the eighteenth century.

*Sapphic Crossings* presents a wide-ranging and thorough consideration of how the popularity of the female cross-dresser in the eighteenth-century imagination challenged the movement towards rigid models of heterosexuality during the period and provided audiences with space to imagine same-sex desire between women. While Klein’s focus upon discrete body parts occasionally undermines her aim to break down binaries, this organizational model provides the reader with significant context about how bodies were understood during the period and how they in turn influenced conceptions of gender and sexuality, many of which were challenged by the act of cross-dressing. As such, this book would be useful
in a range of classroom settings at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Individual chapters can be assigned in tandem with the texts they reference in an eighteenth-century survey, or a course focused on the novel, while “Putting on Gender, One Leg at a Time” would provide useful context in a drama course considering the way theatrical cross-dressing expanded beyond the stage. At the graduate level, I could easily see assigning the entire book for a class focused on the history of sexuality and how gender developed over the course of the period. Engaging and highly readable, *Sapphic Crossings* makes an important contribution to feminist eighteenth century studies and serves as a useful resource to a range of readers interested in queer embodiment during the period.