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A midwife? By this light, the boy's with child!
A miracle! Some woman is the father.
The world's turned upside down. Sure if men breed
Women must get; one never could do both yet.
No marv'l you danced close-knee'd the cinquepace
Put up my fiddle; here's a stranger case.
—Thomas Middleton's, *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1614)

But mostly just don't make assumptions. That's the main thing, if you would just not make assumptions. And I guess that sounds kind of weird to probably a lot of people who treat pregnant women. Because they're like, what do you mean? If someone's pregnant, then they must be a woman. I'm like, no, that's actually not true. So I think like if you could get people to grasp that, then you'd have made a lot of progress.

—“From Erasure to Opportunity: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Transgender Men around Pregnancy and Recommendations for Providers” (2017).

The first epigraph is taken from the climactic scene in Thomas Middleton’s play, *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1614), in which a Page swoons and calls out for a midwife after rigorous dancing lessons. Cinquepace, the speaker, assumes a miracle, an upside-down world, a strange case, and that a woman must have impregnated the Page—all of which allow for the possibility a young man could be pregnant (5.2.224-29). The audience has more insight into this moment, however. In the first scene of the play, Lactantio recognizes the Page as a former lover in disguise, and the Page informs Lactantio they are “with child” (1.2.142). (Because the Page is given no names other than Page or Antonio in the play, I refer to them throughout this piece with they/them pronouns.) Over the course of *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, the Page waits in vain for Lactantio to marry them, while the other characters perceive the Page as “sweet a breasted page as ever lay at his master’s feet in a truckle-bed” (1.4.100-3). Even after the Page goes into labor, Cinquepace is none the wiser and exits the stage “supporting the Page” (1069).

The second epigraph is taken from a recent study in which transmasculine people who had become pregnant and given birth were interviewed and surveyed. The authors conclude that transphobia, societal attitudes about gender, and institutional erasure create exceptional barriers to these individuals receiving perinatal care. As the interview quoted above demonstrates, the assumption that pregnancy is firmly located in the female body, and that we know a female body or a pregnant body when we see one, causes much of the violence pregnant transmasculine people endure. In Middleton’s play, Cinquepace is willing to relinquish these beliefs, no matter how miraculous and strange the alternative is to him.

I quote Middleton alongside the anonymous voice of a transmasculine person who has experienced pregnancy to conjure bodies across time that trouble how reproduction is culturally organized. The assumption that pregnancy is exclusively experienced by straight women is still alive in much of feminist and queer scholarship, particularly in the language used to discuss pregnancy and reproduction. For many feminist scholars, the very idea of queer pregnancy is a misnomer. In the introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), Susan Stryker traces the troubled relationship between feminist theory and transgender studies, in particular the view in second-wave feminism that “transsexuals were the visible symptoms of a disturbed gender system” (4) and the expelling of transgender women from women-only events (5). These violent responses to queer bodies and lives are still alive and well. I once had a feminist scholar tell me my project on queer pregnancy was “skewed”; in other words, I took pregnancy somewhere oblique, sideways, and distorted (“skewed, v.2” *OED Online*). The fact that pregnancy is already skewed, as both an aesthetic and as an embodied experience, is beside the point—queer people and men can and do get pregnant.

Even in queer theory, however, the pregnant body is subsumed into definitions of heteronormativity, lives scripted “by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (Halberstam 2). For many queer theorists, the pregnant body symbolizes heterosexual sex, desire,

and partnership—a passive, impregnated, female body. The anti-social thesis in queer theory, most notably articulated in Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), positions queerness as antithetical to reproduction and futurity and therefore in opposition to “the pregnant woman whose body has ceased to be ‘her own’” (Sanchez 264). But as Maggie Nelson asks in *The Argonauts*, “What about my pregnancy—is that inherently heteronormative? . . . How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity?” In one of the few pieces that considers trans and intersex pregnancy, Nadyne Stritzke and Elisa Scaramuzza observe that “queertheoretical scholars somehow seem to be unaware of their essential notion of procreation and tend to underestimate their obligation to deconstruct these socio-cultural conceptions” (146). In other words, the assumptions that only women get pregnant; that every pregnancy ends in the birth of a child; and that pregnancy always reproduces the family in a recognizable form are inherent in definitions of heteronormativity, and these assumptions erase so many people's lived experiences of pregnancy.

When it comes to queer pregnancy, consequently, the historical touches and the forming of communities across time that Carolyn Dinshaw calls for in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999) have yet to find a voice, and this failure of the imagination affects what can and cannot be said about the pregnant Page in *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, as well as representations of pregnancy in general. At the play's end, the Page enters un-breeched, holding an infant, and does not speak another word (5.2.214-23). Amanda Zoch argues that this moment reflects “maternal revision,” a cultural phenomenon most evident to Zoch in early modern women's writing: the “transformation of an unruly or fearful pregnant body into an idealized performance of motherhood” (163). In an article that beautifully attends to the pregnant body in *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, Zoch observes how readings of the play “solely about the page's and actor's body as an exemplary site of homosexual desire . . . necessarily diminish or erase the page's pregnancy and give little attention to the unusual circumstances that reveal her identity” (160). But what if the “necessarily” in Zoch's construction wasn't, in fact, necessary? What if, in Middleton's piece, there was an option for the homoerotic potential of the Page and the visibility of the Page's pregnant body to be read at once? Attending seriously to this possibility, as Cinquepace does, calls “into question both the stability of the material referent ‘sex’ and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and psychical categories of ‘gender,’” which, according to Stryker, is exactly what transgender phenomena does (9).

The very real, lived experiences of pregnant people call audiences, scholars, physicians, and people alike to attend to both possibilities at once, in Middleton's play and beyond. Responses to the Page's body in *More Dissemblers Besides Women* complicate the supposedly exclusive bodily states of pregnancy and masculinity: The Page is described as “pretty” (4.3.62) and “thick i'th'chest” (4.3.84), for example, descriptions that gesture to the Page's femininity and pregnant body yet do not negate their presentation as male. The Page's pregnancy is also in conversation with the (hyper)reproductive figure of the Gypsy: “doxies” and “dells” who “swell” in the subplot of the play (4.2.166-70). And as Sydnee Wagner argues in her forthcoming project, *Outlandish People: Gypsies,*

Race, and Fantasies of National Identity in Early Modern England, the play at large seems concerned with transgressive modes of reproduction.

Today, however, as Alexis Hoffkling et al.'s recent study demonstrates, transmasculine people who experience pregnancy find it nearly impossible to marry two conflicting identities: being masculine and being pregnant. Despite their lived experience of this cultural impossibility, participants reported being read as either fat men or pregnant women—and that both identities required self-erasure (10). As Stritzke and Scaramuzza point out, the very language used to describe pregnancy erases the experiences of countless pregnant people (145). At the very least, we can begin to make a deliberate and conscious effort to refer to pregnant people instead of pregnant women when making generalizations about pregnant bodies.

I put Middleton's *More Dissemblers Besides Women* in conversation with transgender studies not to make an argument that the pregnant Page is a trans man or that Middleton was somehow ahead of his time. Wagner's work draws attention to the pervasive, racist fantasies about Gypsies in the period and this play, beliefs that continue to incite violence of all kinds against Romani people. Lactantio's responses to cross-dressing women in *More Dissemblers Besides Women* reflect the notion of "female masculinity as deceit," in some ways reinforcing "the division between cultural surface and biological depth"—between performance and the body (Mills 101). And, as Jack Halberstam observes in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, transgender lives are too often reduced to a form of counterfeiting (47-75). Although the Page makes use of the prosthetics and clothing available to them to socially present as a male, thus demonstrating some self-determination, they have little corporeal autonomy in the play—the pregnancy itself is a bodily betrayal, and they go into labor after forced exercises the Duchess believes will make a man out of them. Cinquepace's response to the pregnant Page is, in fact, quite the opposite of how best to respond to transmasculine and gender non-conforming people who are pregnant. Normalization of the prospect of male and masculine patients is one of the most important recommendations in the recent study; they are not miraculous, strange, or an inspiration (18). And, finally, Cinquepace's assumption that "some woman is the father," in some ways, upholds the gender binaries through which we make reproduction intelligible (5.5.225).

For transmasculine and gender non-conforming people who experience pregnancy—we have never been modern. In her graphic memoir, *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag* (2014) A. K. Summers writes that the "bottom line" in the few books available for queer people on pregnancy and childbirth is to prepare "for a profound and unsettling process . . . which will not be celebrated by the community-at-large . . . which will draw the curiosity and hostility of many" (20). The specific needs of pregnant transgender people, in particular, span the biomedical, psychological, and structural, but the recent study reports that even communities for queer parents are "ill-equipped to support transgender parents" (Hoffkling et al. 10). Beyond lack of inclusive language, "Some jurisdictions have required that individuals be sterilized in order to attain legal recognition of their gender," and transgender men "avoid seeking care or avoid disclosing medically relevant information" (8). To summarize their study, Alexis Hoffkling et al. write, "Overall, participants felt

that these combined conditions conveyed the message that their lives could not exist within the system, and their identities did not matter” (13).

I conjure Cinquepace’s response to a pregnant Page, still, as a moment from the past that calls audiences to make intelligible “the potential of every person, regardless of hir sex/gender, to become pregnant or impregnate other people”[i] (Stritzke and Scaramuzza 143). And, in doing so, to convey the message that transmasculine pregnant people’s identities do matter. As Stryker argues, taking transgender theory seriously in literary criticism is, in part, taking representations of cross-dressing as more than “merely symbolic” (2), and the pregnant Page, a young boy playing a pregnant maid who cross-dresses, resists representations of male pregnancy that are, still, “presented as either (patriarchal) male omnipotence or as a feminist revolution” (Stritzke and Scaramuzza 152). Cinquepace’s observation that, although male and female sex organs are required for pregnancy, “one never could do both *yet*” (5.2.227), gestures to the “then and there” space José E. Muñoz argues “certain performances of queer citizenship contain” (189). This “yet,” this pause, this possibility, is inspired by the pregnant Page. Cinquepace is able to “see otherwise,” and, consequently, we might, as Simone Chess calls for in her reading of male-to-female crossdressing in Shakespeare’s plays, “push past the joke” in order to “showcase the work of making and maintaining gender” (“Male Femininity” 232). We might read Cinquepace’s lines, this brief moment, as urging audiences to desire more for pregnant people instead of as simply evidencing Cinquepace’s obtuseness. At the very least, the pregnant Page, and Cinquepace’s acceptance of them, offers an opportunity to reflect on queer pregnancy, an opportunity to make the argument that pregnancy—in all its myriad and ephemeral iterations—can *skew* our ideas of gender and provide direct challenges to the relationship between pregnancy and femininity, and that this is a needed and necessary shift in thinking to begin to fashion a world in which all pregnant people feel supported and safe.

Featured Image

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[link to Will Fisher and Simone Chess’s shared working bibliography on Early Modern Trans* Studies](#)

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[i] The gender-neutral third-person pronoun “hir” is used when a) the gender of a person is unknown or b) when someone is neither male nor female in gender, making she / he (or some conflated version of these pronouns) inappropriate.