Sex before Sex
FIGURING THE ACT IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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Robert Herrick's "The suspicion upon his over-much familiarity with a Gentlewoman" is, as its title implies, a poem in which the speaker responds to rumors about the nature of his relationship with "a Gentlewoman." The speaker reassures his beloved—and anyone who happens to read the poem—that they do not have to worry about their behavior because they know that they have been "innocent" (5) and "faultless" (11): as he puts it, "where no sin / Unbolts the doore, no shame comes in" (12–13). In the following lines, the speaker claims that even though he and his beloved have "embrac'd" (26), they have not been "for that uachaste" (27). He also suggests that he and his beloved have engaged in the act of chin chucking. He justifies this behavior by exclaiming, "Love makes the cheek and chin / A sphere to dance and play in" (21–22). Chin chucking is a gesture in which one person gently strokes or pinches the chin or cheek of another. It was generally considered a sign of affection or a form of erotic persuasion. As Gordon Williams puts it in A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature, it was a common "amatory signal."

I begin with Herrick's allusion to chin chucking for two reasons. First, I simply want to call attention to the existence of this gesture. Most people today have never heard of chin chucking and will therefore be surprised to find that there are almost a hundred different texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that make reference to it, as well as many different erotic paintings and illustrations from the same period that depict it (see Figure 5.1). This remarkable archive is the basis for my analysis here. My argument is that in the aggregate, these
texts worked to socialize chin chucking. That is to say, they helped to produce and circulate information about the practice, including how it was performed and who should perform it. In addition, they helped to establish the gesture’s meanings or connotations.

Second, I begin with Herrick’s allusion to raise a question: was chin chucking considered a “sexual” act? Herrick’s speaker insists that his “desire” is “chaste” (33), even though he also acknowledges that others would disagree; after he states that “Love makes the cheek and chin a sphere to dance and play in,” he quips that “Suspicion questions every hair” (23). Moreover, the speaker himself admits that chin chucking is amorous or flirtatious (something people do when they are in “love”). Other writers from the period made similar claims about the amorous nature of the act. John Bulwer states in his seventeenth-century study of gestures titled *Chirologia: or The Natural Language of

Figure 5.1. Giulio Romano, *Jupiter Seducing Olympia*, fresco, 1527, Palazzo Te, Mantua, Italy. Courtesy of Comune di Mantova.

the Hand* that “we... stroke them gently with our hand whom we make much of... or affectionately love.” He explains that the gesture of chin chucking is performed by “drawing our Hand with sweetening motion over the... face of the party to whom we intend this insinuation.” He then goes on to say that “lovers, I know not by what amorous instinct... [are wont to] direct their passionate respects to the [face] of those they love.”

But if both Herrick and Bulwer depict chin chucking as an amorous gesture, the question remains about whether it was considered to be sexual. We might ask, too, what counts as sexual in the first place. Even though Herrick insists that chin chucking is “chaste,” others certainly saw it as much less innocuous. Indeed, the Puritan clergyman Daniel Rogers warns people about this act in his 1642 treatise *Matrimonial Honour*. As the title implies, Rogers’s text offers advice about “the right way to preserve the honour of marriage unstained,” and one of the things that he insists husbands must refrain from is “stroking [women’s] cheeks... with Wantonness.” According to Rogers, “whatsoever savors of carnall and sensuall desire... cannot... but threaten mischeefe.” Rogers insists that this type of behavior not only stains the “honour” of marriage but will eventually bring “judgment,” either “from man, or just with God.”

This wasn’t an idle threat. Chin chucking did help to bring judgment in cases of adultery from the period. David Turner points out that witnesses sometimes mentioned this gesture as evidence of infidelity. He notes that the witnesses described a wide range of “freedoms” and “familiarities,” and when viewed together, the testimonies in these cases give us some insight into what people understood “adulterous conduct” to be. For my purposes, the crucial point is that chin chucking is one of the types of “over-familiarity” (to return to Herrick’s phrase) that defendants mentioned. In a case from 1690 in Hillsden, Buckinghamshire, for instance, Alexander Denton sued for separation from his wife, Hester, alleging that she had “conversed scandalously and incontinently” with their neighbor, Thomas Smith. During the trial, one of the Dentons’ maidservants, Martha Ryland, testified that Thomas Smith had visited the house when Alexander was away and that he and Hester had gone into the parlor and shut the door behind them. Ryland said she peered through a hole in the door and observed the following scene:
Hester Denton [did] set her selve in a chair and the said Mr Smith came p[re]sently to her And standing over her with his face towards hers seated himself in her lap and continued... a quarter of an hour in that posture kissing and stroking her upon ye face and sometimes [h]ucking her under ye chin.  

Hester Denton and Thomas Smith allegedly engaged in other types of overly familiar behavior as well, including "kissing and embracing." Ryland also noted that Smith put his "arms sometimes about her neck and at other times about her waist," and one witness even imputed that they may have had intercourse in the house of a friend in London. In the end, all these different acts served as evidence of their affair; the two were eventually found guilty, and Alexander Denton was granted a separation.

There are other cases of adultery from the period that mention chin chucking. One is the case of John Jopling and Elizabeth Myres of Durham City from 1674. Jopling was married and had been entrusted with helping Myres manage her affairs after the death of her husband. One of the servants in Myres's house, Eleanor Green, testified that she witnessed Myres and Jopling kissing and embracing "like man and wife." This included one occasion on which Green saw Myres "go unto [Jopling] and sit upon his knee and kiss him and stroke his cheeks and call him her dear and her Joy and Comfort." On another occasion, Green testified that she saw Jopling join Myres in her bed. The servant slept in a truckle bed in her mistress's bedchamber, and Jopling apparently came into the room and had Green help him "pull off his shoes" before he went "onto the bed where [Myres] was lying ... and pulling the curtains close[s] hath stayed there all the night, during which time this examinee ... hath heard very kind words and expressions of Love pass between them."

While the witnesses in these cases allude to a range of activities—from kissing and embracing to sharing a bed and engaging in intercourse—the fact that they mention chin chucking alongside these other types of behavior implies that they considered the gesture to be erotic and therefore inappropriate. At the same time, it is also significant that the witnesses in these cases mention chin chucking in conjunction with these other sexualized behaviors, as this conjunction suggests that it might not have been considered adulterous on its own. In fact, we might say that what counts as "unchaste" behavior in these cases is somewhat contextual: the entire constellation of activities seems to determine whether the behavior was deemed adulterous.

There is, however, one text from the seventeenth century that suggests that chin chucking alone might be enough to convince someone that his or her spouse had been unfaithful. This text offers a history of the Brome family of Warwickshire during the sixteenth century. It recounts an incident that occurred during the life of Nicholas Brome, one of the heirs of the family. Brome apparently came home one evening and "found the Parish-Priest in the parlor of the family home "chocking his wife under the chin." He was "so enraged" by the priest's behavior that "he presently kill'd him." Afterward, Brome was forced to "obtain ... the King's pardon" for his actions, and "he was joyfull'd to do something toward the expiation thereof."

Literal texts tend to figure chin chucking as a much more ambiguous gesture. Some of them certainly do suggest that it is "erotic" and that it is an indication of adultery. Indeed, some of the incidents in plays and poems mirror the incidents in the court cases quite closely. In Thomas D'Urley's A Fond Husband, one of the characters, Ranger, tries to convince his friend, the fond husband of the play's title, that his wife, Emilia, is having an affair with a man named Rashley. The husband, however, is "A credulous fond Cuckold" and refuses to believe him. Thus, as "evidence," Ranger tells the husband that he has seen Emilia "kiss him, play with his Nose, and clap his cheeks, and laugh till her whole Frame shook with Titillation." Later in the play, Ranger claims to have witnessed still another scene that he says he cannot "be silent" about: he says that he "discovered" the adulterous couple at the "Backside of the Kitchin into the Parlour" and that the wife had "with a fond passion strok'd [Rashley's] Cheeks, and dall'd with his hair."

Still, literary texts do not always figure chin chucking as such a serious infraction. In Shakespeare's works, the gesture is portrayed as problematic in some instances and completely innocuous in others. Hamlet, for example, admonishes Gertrude not to "let the bold King tempt you again into bed" or "Pitch wanton on your cheek" (3.4.166–67), whereas in Venus and Adonis, Venus "stroke[s] [Adonis's] cheek" (45) the first time she sees him. Although her actions are amorous, they are hardly
wanton or indecent. Interestingly, however, Venus repeats the gesture later in the poem, and this second chin chuck is more erotic: Venus begins by “kneel[ing]” down next to Adonis “like a lowly lover” (350), and with one hand she “heave[s] up his hat” (351) and with “Her other tender hand...his fair cheek feels” (352). Moreover, “His tenderer cheek receives her soft hand’s print, / As apt as new-fall’n snow takes any dint” (353–54). The receptivity of Adonis’s cheek here is significant, for later in this scene, Adonis responds for the first time to Venus’s overtures, and the two engage in a “sweet embrace”—“incorporate they seem; face grows to face” (540–41).

It is worth pointing out that there are instances in which chin chucking is performed in same-sex contexts as well. Although there do not seem to be any visual representations of same-sex chin chucking in early modern English sources, there are certainly examples from the continent. In his Jupiter and Cupid fresco in the Villa Farnesia (1518–19), Raphael depicts Jupiter chucking Cupid’s chin. Rubens paints Jupiter as a woman doing the same to Callisto (Figure 5.2). Moreover, quite a few literary texts from early modern England show the gesture being performed between partners of the same sex. In Marlowe’s Hero and Leander, for instance, Neptune “clapp[ed Leander’s] plump cheeks, and with his tresses played / And smiling wantonly, his love betray’d” (449). Likewise, in Marlowe’s Edward II, Isabella complains that Edward “claps [Gaveston’s] cheek and hangs about his neck” (1.2.52). Finally, in James Shirley’s The Doubtful Heir, Queen Olivia attempts to seduce Rosania, who is disguised as a male page. During their initial encounter, Olivia “playes with [Rosania’s] hair, and smiles...[and] strokes [her] cheek.” Later, Olivia arranges an assignation in her bedchamber, where she continues her seduction; she proposes that they kiss and “finde out pleasure by warm exchange of souls from our soft lips” (40). The connotations of chin chucking in these scenes vary, just as they do in the scenes where the gesture is used in a heterosexual context. Although the interactions of Neptune–Leander and Olivia–Rosania are relatively playful and decorous, Isabella’s complaints about Edward’s behavior with Gaveston resonate with the complaints of wronged spouses from the adulteries trials.

I want to discuss one final instance of chin chucking to illustrate

the point about the ambiguous eroticism of the gesture. It comes from Samuel Pepys’s diary. Pepys actually mentions stroking the cheeks of three different women in his diary, but I want to focus on one of these women here because Pepys goes on to develop an adulterous relationship with her and charts its progress in some detail. Pepys refers to this woman only as “[B]agwell’s wife.” He had apparently known both Bagwell and his wife for some time and admits as early as July 1663 that he thought that the wife was “very pretty.” In fact, he says that he purposefully sought out her husband so that he might contrive some “occasion” to “forc[e] her to come to [his] office” (4.222). He eventually managed to do just that, and on February 27, 1664, Bagwell’s wife paid a visit to Pepys in his office to speak with him on behalf of her husband. Pepys notes that during her visit, he “strocked her under the chin.” He adds that he did not “offer her” anything “uncivill” because he did not want to offend her—“she [is],” as he puts it, “a very modest woman” (5.65–66). Nevertheless, a couple of months later, when the woman came to visit Pepys again, he took her “into the office” and this time he “kissed her.” She apparently “rebuke[d] [him] for doing [so]” (5.287), but she continued to come see him because he was “getting her husband a place” at sea (5.301–2).
still another visit, Pepys says that he "caresse[d] her" (5.333). Finally, on November 15, 1664, they ate and drank together in a "blind alehouse" and afterward consummated their relationship. As Pepys says, "I did arrive at what I would, with great pleasure" (5.322). The two went on to become lovers, with their affair continuing for three years.

Pepys's diary entries are helpful because they place the gesture of chin chucking in the context of a developing relationship. Moreover, the diary entries reinforce the point I have been making here about the ambiguous eroticism of the gesture. On one hand, Pepys implies that chin chucking is simply an innocent form of flirtation since he claims that when he stroked the woman's chin, he didn't "offer" her anything "uncivil." It is impossible to know what Bagwell's wife thought of Pepys's actions (especially considering that the whole relationship developed under extremely coercive circumstances), but it is interesting that she did not rebuke Pepys for stroking her chin in the way she later did when he kissed her. The absence of rebuke suggests that chin chucking might have in fact been viewed as relatively innocuous. But at the same time, when we look at diary entries together, they situate the gesture along an erotic continuum. Pepys's "seduction" begins with him stroking the woman's chin, and then he kisses and caresses her, before he finally "arrives" at "what [he] would." It is also worth pointing out that the "freedoms" that Pepys mentions in his diary are remarkably similar to those mentioned in the adultery cases. In the end, chin chucking may not, therefore, seem as chaste or "civil" as Pepys implies.

When the references to chin chucking in Pepys's diary are viewed in relation to the references to the gesture in court cases, literary texts, and books on gesture, it is clear that the social meanings of chin chucking were at least somewhat ambiguous or contested. As a result, it is impossible to give a definitive answer to the question about whether chin chucking was imagined to be a "sexual" act. Still, these collective references demonstrate that the boundaries of "the sexual" were always in the process of being defined or negotiated. This process is apparent in many of the texts I have discussed. In the trials for adultery, for instance, the verdict often hinged on whether an act like chin chucking or embracing was defined as chaste or unchaste. Likewise, the rebuke that Bagwell's wife gave to Pepys was a way of defining his behavior as "immodest" or "uncivil." Finally, the rumors that Herrick mentions in his poem were also an attempt to define the couple's behavior as "overfamiliar," while the speaker's response to those rumors attempts to contest that definition. Printed texts like Bulwer's book on gesture or Herrick's poem are particularly important in this regard because they did not simply reflect ideas about the meaning and performance of this gesture but actively helped to shape them.

Once we acknowledge that categories like "the sexual" or "the chaste" are socially constructed, three important points follow. First, despite their constructedness, these categories nevertheless served important social-regulatory functions. As we have seen, labeling a couple's behavior as "sexual"—or more precisely as "unchaste" or "adulterous"—could have severe consequences, and the threat of these labels undoubtedly led people to restrict their own behavior. Second, we need to resist assuming that we know what counts as sexual, whether in early modern English culture or in our own time. Third, behaviors that are considered sexual or amorous at one historical moment are not necessarily viewed that way in others. The gesture of chin chucking illustrates this third point quite well because today, it is not generally considered to be a sexual act. In fact, one of the interesting things about chin chucking is that it is not really recognized as an act at all. This absence of notice suggests that not only is the category of "the sexual" subject to transformation but erotic behaviors themselves are as well. The art historian Leo Steinberg makes an analogous point when he claims that chin chucking "has suffered gradual debasement since the seventeenth century" and that today "modern lovers [no longer] . . . localize [their] erotic fantasies at the chin."220 While it is an overstatement to say, categorically, that modern lovers no longer "localize their erotic fantasies at the chin," it is nevertheless true that the gesture and its corresponding erotic fantasies are no longer socialized today in quite the same way as they were in earlier eras.

In the remainder of this essay, I want to explore how the texts from the seventeenth century construct the act of chin chucking. How did they imagine the gesture to be performed? Were there any social rules or conventions that governed its performance? At first glance, there do not appear to have been any such rules. Chin chucking seems to have
been performed by all sorts of different people and on all sorts of different people. With regard to gender, for example, we have already seen instances in which males chucked the chins of females, females chucked the chins of males, males chucked the chins of other males, and females chucked the chins of other females. But if the gender of the participants does not seem to have restricted or enabled the act, there does nevertheless appear to be a logic underlying these representations. For starters, the chuckers generally seem to be portrayed as the active or dominant partner. In the visual representations, the chucker stands over the person who has his or her chin chucked. Moreover, the person who receives the gesture is generally portrayed as passive or subordinate. Bette Talvacchia similarly remarks that the chucking gesture is usually "allotted to the seducer."²⁵

Virtually all the literary depictions that I have mentioned figure the act in this way. Claudius is the one who pinches Gertrude's cheek, Neptune claps Leander's cheek, Edward claps Gaweston's cheek, and Olivia strokes Rosalind's cheek. Shakespeare's Venus is particularly interesting in this regard because she offers an example of a woman who takes the active role. Indeed, Venus's sexual assertiveness is one of her defining characteristics. It is established in the opening lines of the poem, which describe how "the bold faced suitor" begins to "woo [Adonis]" (6). Venus's dominance is then reinforced later in the poem, when Venus positions herself over Adonis as she strokes his cheek. This positioning corresponds with many of the visual representations of the act.

If the seventeenth-century depictions of chin chucking thus tend to construct it as an act in which an active partner attempts to seduce a more passive partner by stroking his or her chin or cheek, then these depictions might be seen as giving credence to Lisa Jardine's argument that activity and passivity were the main conceptual rubrics that people used to understand sexual relations at the time. As Jardine puts it, "eroticism in the early modern period, is not gender-specific, is not grounded in the sex of the possibly 'submissive' partner, but is an expectation of that very submissiveness."²⁶ In my opinion, scholars working on sexuality in early modern England have not adequately considered Jardine's thesis, especially given that historians focusing on other European countries have insisted on the centrality of these rubrics.²⁷ Michael Rocke, for instance, contends that "Florentines... were very alert to the [active–passive] oppositions in sexual roles... and to the conventional links between these roles and age," despite the fact that they "showed little concern about distinguishing sharply between 'heterosexuals' and 'homosexuals.'"²⁸

In fact, Rocke says that one of the "central argument[s]" of his book "is that these conventions mattered... greatly to Florentines."²⁹ These conventions seem to have mattered greatly to the English as well. The terms that were generally used to refer to the active and passive partners were "agent" and "patient." (The terminology that Jardine uses—"dominant" and "submissive"—is drawn from the modern BDSM movement, and while this terminology was not used in the seventeenth century, it is not entirely inappropriate either.) Thus the popular legal writer Giles Jacob explains in his discussion of the Henrican sodomy statute that sodomy "is Felony both in the Agent and the Patient consenting."³° The influential jurist Sir Edward Coke had stressed this same point earlier; he notes that "both the agent and the consentent are felons."³¹ It was not just same-sex relations that were viewed this way, however. Medical writers consistently figured heterosexual intercourse in precisely these terms. Thus the physician John Sadler notes that "in the act of conception there must be an Agent and a Patient... he is the agent, she is the Patient."³² Jane Sharp echoes this logic in The Midwives Book when she writes that "man in the act of procreation is the agent and tiler and sower of the ground, woman is the patient or ground to be tilled."³³

But if erotic relations in early modern England were frequently imagined to involve an active and passive partner in a way that seems to corroborate Jardine's argument, I believe that her thesis nevertheless needs to be revised in several important ways. First, Jardine implies that the distinction between agents and patients was the only one through which desire gained cultural intelligibility. Thus she seems to imagine that there was a notion of sexual orientation in place in the earlier period that is similar to the modern notion of sexual orientation, but that the former was organized around the agent–patient distinction as opposed to the homosexual–heterosexual distinction. In other words, she seems to envision people's activity or passivity defining them in a way that is similar to the way that homosexuality or heterosexuality defines people today. I propose instead that desire was structured by a range of different distinctions, all of which were central or constitutive.
Activity-passivity was certainly one of these, but other important rubrics included gender, age, and status. Moreover, these distinctions often worked together and were mapped onto one another so that the active partner, for instance, was regularly portrayed as being male, older, and of higher status. At the same time, fault lines regularly emerged in these ideologies, since sexual role, gender, age, and status were not mapped seamlessly onto one another. As we’ve seen with Shakespeare’s Venus, for instance, women were sometimes imagined to be sexual agents, although in her case, she is also older and of higher status than her partner. Finally, I would revise Jardine’s thesis by suggesting that these definitional vectors appear to be more relational than ontological in early modern texts. That is to say, people’s desires were not generally seen as being fixed exclusively on individuals of a particular gender, role, age, or status because all these things were at least to some extent defined in relation to others and could change over time or with different partners or circumstances.

Pepys’s chin chucking conforms to what we might call the “dominant” model. As a male, he consistently takes the active role with his female partners and strokes their cheeks and chins. In addition, he is invariably older and of higher social standing than his partners. The distinctions of social status permeated his relationship with Bagwell’s wife, but these permutations were also present in his relationships with two other women whose chins he chuckled—they were both young servants in his household. Literary texts, too, often figure the gesture according to this dominant model, and unlike Pepys’s diary, they would have helped to reinforce the social logic of the act through their publication and performance. Marlowe’s account of Neptune stroking Leander’s cheek offers one example. Even though this encounter involves two males and therefore does not seem to be structured by issues of gender, it does reinforce the hierarchies of age and status insofar as Neptune is both older than Leander and of higher social standing. When Leander resists Neptune’s advances by saying that he is not a woman, the god responds by telling him a story of love featuring a “shepherd … [that] played with a boy so lovely fair and kind” (449–50). Critics have noted that Neptune’s speech here is meant to alert Leander to the possibilities of male–male love by alluding to the homoerotic pastoral tradition from classical antiquity paradigmatically expressed in Theocritus’s Idylls and Virgil’s Eclogues, but in doing so, Neptune also invokes a very specific type of homoerotic relationship: one based on age and power asymmetries, where the older shepherd actively “plays” with “a boy so lovely [and] fair.” This asymmetry is further reinforced by the fact that Neptune mistakes Leander for “Ganymede” (413)—a figuration that again emphasizes Leander’s youth as well as his subordinate place in the social hierarchy.

If Marlowe’s description of the gesture of chin chucking in Hero and Leander follows—and would have helped to (re)produce—some of the dominant social logics that I outlined earlier, not all the literary representations did so. A number of texts from the period, for instance, portray women taking the active role and chucking the chins of their male partners. Shakespeare’s Venus is particularly important in this regard because she seems to have become an archetype of the female seducer. Indeed, when the narrator of a late-seventeenth-century ballad describes how an alehouse hostess would “chuck [him] under the chin, / and perhaps . . . give [him] a kiss,” he adds that she did this “As Venus drew Adonis in.” Likewise, Queen Olivia from James Shirley’s The Doubtful Heir compares herself to Venus during her seduction of Tiberio. This scene is complicated by the fact that Tiberio is really the character Rosanta in disguise, but the crucial thing for my purposes is that Olivia is positioned as the wooer in the encounter; she not only “strokes his cheek” but also invites him to her chamber, where she kisses him and declares her love for him.

These literary depictions literalize Natalie Zemon Davis’s notion of “women on top” and seem to transgress the assumptions about men taking the active role in performing the gesture (and in wooing more generally). Put differently, we might say that they socialize the gesture in an alternate way, opening up fault lines in the social logic governing its performance. There are at least two possible explanations for this alternative socialization. One would be that the gender transgression was somehow “offset” by the fact that these representations simultaneously reinforced the assumptions about the older, more elite, partner (Venus, Queen Olivia) being active. Shirley consistently highlights the distinctions of age and status underwriting the Queen’s relationship with
her page. Olivia refers to Tiberio as “pretty youth” at one point and as a “proud boy” at another. The king also views their relationship in this way. After observing the queen stroking Tiberio’s cheek, he says that she seems to “want / A Ganied” (36). This comparison does not simply emphasize that the queen is besotted with Tiberio; it also emphasizes the asymmetries of age and status between the two in much the same way that Neptune’s mistaking Leander for Ganymede does in Marlowe’s Hero and Leander. It may at first seem odd that the king makes this comparison given that the queen’s relationship with Tiberio is ostensibly “heterosexual.” Possibly, the king’s comment hints at the underlying homoeroticism of the scene, but it is also possible that he is using the term “Ganymede” in a heterosexual way. Other texts from the period use the term in reference to a young male who is the servant—and erotic object—of an older, more powerful woman.37

Even though neither Shakespeare nor Shirley demonize their female protagonists for their chin chucking (or for their sexually assertive behavior), other writers from the period certainly did. These writers often, for instance, revile prostitutes for their behavior in stroking the chins of their prospective clients.38 In the ballad A New Ballad of a Finical Mon-sieur (circa 1685–88), the titular Frenchman describes how his “whore” would “chuck a my chin” and “kiss a my Cheek,” and he adds that “Her Impudent actions do make a me sick.”39 Likewise, in Strange Newes from Bartholomew-Fair, or the wandering-whore discovered, the eponymous character reveals the ploys she would use to “entic young punys.” She says she would give them “a wink, a smile and a chuck under the Chin” and that she would “clap...[her] hand on...[her] market-place, and say...here’s your Ware boys.”40 In both these cases, the women’s behavior is implicitly condemned. While this may be on account of their sexual assertiveness, it is also significant that these women are both imagined to be of lower social standing than their partners. Thus these female characters do not simply transgress gendered hierarchies by taking the role of the seducer but also transgress the hierarchies of status in doing so. This transgression is complicated even further in the example from Strange News because the prostitute refers to her potential customers as “boys,” thus emphasizing—or imagining—a distinction based on age. Perhaps for this reason, the “wandering whore’s” behavior is not so harshly condemned as that of her counterpart in the ballad: her behavior is certainly portrayed as crass (even grotesque), but it is also portrayed as somewhat comical. A number of different relational vectors thus appear in these two examples, but both texts suggest that it is inappropriate for women to take the active role in performing chin chucking. As a result, the representations of chin chucking in the texts differ in their overall effect from the representations of Shakespeare and Shirley. The former would have socialized the gesture of chin chucking in a much more “normative” way than the latter.

There is, however, still another possible explanation for why Shakespeare and Shirley do not stigmatize their female protagonists’ behavior to a greater degree. It is possible that women’s sexual agency—and their chin chucking—was accepted to a certain extent, or at least in certain circumstances. Given the patriarchal nature of early modern English culture, this might seem somewhat surprising, but it would help explain why the texts that socialized chin chucking did so in such a conflicted or contradictory way. A seventeenth-century ballad seems to address this issue directly. In it, the male narrator states, “If my Lady...bidd mee Kisse and play, Shall I shrinke? Cold Foole away. If Shee clap my Cheekes and spye little Cupids in my eye, grip my hand and Stroke my haire, shall I like a faint heart feare? No, no, no.” The narrator here assumes that many people find women’s “kissing” and “clapping” troubling and “shrinke” from it or “feare” it, but he insists that he finds it attractive and that others ought to do so as well. Yet if the speaker thus advocates the acceptance of women’s sexual agency, there are some limits to this acceptance. He does not, for instance, imagine himself as completely passive—so he is not describing a complete role reversal along the lines of what happens in Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis. In the final line of the poem, he says that “Hope makes me Hardy, and so does Shee.” The speaker’s formulation here is carefully calibrated: he figures himself as a “hardy” lover (read “active,” with the obvious bawdy pun), but at the same time, he acknowledges that the sexually aggressive behavior of “his lady” helps to make him that way.41

A remarkably similar dynamic appears in one of the pornographic prints appended to Nicholas Chorier’s Satyra Sotadica de Arcanis Amoris et
Veneris (Figure 5.3). One of the best-known works of pornography from the seventeenth century, Satyrata Sodatica was first published in 1660, and this particular image is one of twenty-eight woodcuts that were added to the 1690 edition of the text. The woodcuts illustrate a range of different erotic practices and positions and are somewhat reminiscent of Aretina’s I Modi (The Ways), which describes sixteen different “ways” of making love. For my purposes, the first thing to say about the engraving of the woman chucking her male partner’s chin is that the male in the scene is plainly coded as the active partner: he is not only about to penetrate the woman, he is also situated above her, and she lies in a precarious position with her legs on his shoulders. Given that the woman is visually subordinated, it is surprising that she is the one who chucks his chin rather than vice versa. The act creates a secondary power dynamic, stressing her active participation in the encounter. The overall active–passive dynamics are therefore virtually identical to those presented in the ballad. In both cases, the woman’s sexual agency is accepted or even embraced, but it is also situated in a context where the man is still ultimately dominant. Indeed, the women’s agency and their chin chucking may be intended to make their partners—or indeed some male viewers—more “hardy.”

At the very least, these representations of women chucking the chins of their male partners would have potentially expanded the accepted ways that the gesture could be performed. It is likewise possible that women’s erotic agency as chin chokers was condoned to some extent and that condoning was more likely if the act ended up reinforcing other social hierarchies such as those of age and status. Lisa Jardine’s thesis that early modern eroticism was structured around “expectations of submissiveness” is thus to some extent corroborated by the depictions of chin chucking that I have surveyed, although other sexual dynamics structure them as well. These depictions foreground the importance of age and gender hierarchies. Jardine’s thesis usefully distinguishes early modern eroticism from a modern notion of sexual orientation that is grounded on the sex of the person one desires (if not exactly the sex of the submissive partner), but her formulation is also potentially misleading because the active–passive distinction was not the only basis on which erotic interactions were structured.

So far, I have been exploring what these depictions of chin chucking tell us about the gendered conventions surrounding the active partner, but there seems to have been a similar set of conventions regarding the gender of the passive partner. It is true, of course, that both males and females have their chins chucked, but the males who are placed in the subordinate position are often beardless. In other words, they are coded as being boys or youths. Shakespeare’s Adonis, for instance, is explicitly described as having a “hairless face” (487), and Leander is also sometimes
portrayed as being "beardless." In Shirley's *The Doubtful Heir*, "Tiberto" is undoubtedly intended to be beardless, given that he is really a woman in disguise, and he is also repeatedly referred to as a "boy" or "youth." Arguably, the figures' ages help rationalize their subordination, but their genders do so as well. Another way of thinking about this rationalization would be to say that age and gender are so tightly linked that boys are almost a different gender from men.46

There are a few instances in which bearded men have their chins chucked and are placed in the passive role. These instances are quite rare, and when they do occur, they are usually marked as transgressive. In Edward Ward's *The Miracles Performed by Money*, for instance, the narrator describes the behavior of the young bride in a May–December marriage:

> With what Impatience have I often seen,
> A *Youthful Bride*, who never saw Eighteen,
> Running with nimble haste to opening Door,
> To meet her *Good Old Man* of Sixty four,
> Clap her *Warm*, *Soft*, *Plump*, *Rosy Check* to his,
> And nestle through his *Beard* to get a *Kiss*?
> Play with her *Hand* upon his *Grisly Chin*.
> And softly say, my *Dear where have you been*?47

These lines do not simply depict the young bride chucking the chin of her older husband; they also suggest that this behavior is somewhat ridiculous. In fact, the speaker purposefully juxtaposes the wife's "**Soft. Plump, Rosy cheek**" (which is eminently chuckable) with the "Grisly [bearded] Chin" of her "**Good old Man**" to highlight the preposterousness of the wife's actions.48 As with the earlier depictions of prostitutes chucking the chins of her male clients, this representation involves the transgression of both age and gender hierarchies. Moreover, the narrator's derision of the wife's behavior would likely have worked to discourage people from performing the gesture in this way.

If all the texts examined here helped to socialize chin chucking, and to shape or regulate its performance, my hope is that this examination has also provided some insight into the broader ways in which erotic relations were constructed in early modern England. This hope assumes, of course, that a seemingly insignificant gesture like chin chucking has encoded within it an entire "micro-physics of power" or that it has the ability to instantiate a range of different ideologies.49 In the end, the main thing that my analysis has suggested is that activity and passivity were indeed central terms through which desire gained cultural intelligibility but that they also intersected in complex and sometimes contradictory ways with distinctions based on age, status, and gender. As a result of these multiple and interlocking investments, the way the gesture of chin chucking is performed may, at first glance, appear to be completely arbitrary or fluid, especially when viewed from a modern perspective, but this fluidity can also be seen as the by-product of the conflicting investments. By comparison, the modern notion of sexual orientation seems much less polyvalent. It is, of course, organized around a single issue—the gender of the individuals to whom one is attracted. Eve Sedgwick calls attention to the peculiarity of this notion of sexual orientation in *Epistemology of the Closet*: "It is a rather amazing fact that, of the . . . many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another . . . precisely one, the gender of object choice, . . . [has become] the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation.'" Yet Sedgwick then goes on to list some alternate ways we think of sexuality being "oriented," including a preference for "a certain species," "a certain number of participants," or "a certain relation of age or power."50 She insists, moreover, that although these other possible ways of categorizing people's sexual impulses do not have the "diacritical potential for signifying [a particular type of sexuality]," they do nevertheless exert a "definitional force."51 As a result, sexuality should not be viewed as a "coherent definitional field" but as "a space of overlapping, contradictory and conflictual definitional forces"—one that is ultimately characterized by the "unrationalized coexistence" of different models.52

Building on Sedgwick's analysis, I want to point out that the early modern erotic logics that I've been analyzing here continue to exert some "definitional force" today. For instance, the early modern distinction between agents and patients might be linked to the modern distinction between "tops" and "bottoms" or "dominants" and
"submissives." Although today, these terms are used primarily by minority groups like gay men and members of the BDSM community, one could argue that they have a much more pervasive influence. Likewise, age and status continue to be part of the way people imagine their sexual preferences, although again, their "definitional force" is occluded—or rendered ancillary—by the hegemony of the homosexual–heterosexual model. The fact that these earlier models persist today is not surprising. David Halperin argues that what Sedgwick calls "the unrationaled coexistence of different models [of sexuality]" ought to be understood as "the cumulative effect of a long process of historical overlay and accretion... [in which] we have preserved and retained different definitions of sex [or ways of conceptualizing it] from our pre-modern past, despite the logical contradictions among them." Thus, according to Halperin, the "definitional incoherence at the core of the modern notions of [sexuality]" results from the way that our "modern" thinking has "incorporated—without homogenizing—[these] earlier models [of sexual relations], models that directly conflict with the [modern thinking about sexuality] that has nonetheless absorbed them." When seen from this perspective, what I have been exploring here is only a small piece of this much larger "process of historical overlay and accretion," but it is nevertheless a significant piece in that it offers a glimpse into the workings of these larger cultural and historical processes.

Notes


2. Leo Steinberg's The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) contains a fairly extensive discussion of this gesture (3–4, 110–16). Steinberg provides the following description of the act itself: "What I have summarily called the chin-chuck should be understood to include any reaching for... touching, lingering, pinching, caressing, cupping, or clasping [of the cheek or chin]" (120). Other art historians have also briefly mentioned the gesture. See, e.g., James Saslow, Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 132, and.

3. Gordon Williams, A Dictionary of Sexual Language in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone Press, 1994), 238. Leo Steinberg likewise states that the gesture was "a token of affection or erotic persuasion" and that "no... artist, medieval or Renaissance, would have taken this long-fixed convention for anything but a sign of erotic communion." Steinberg, Sexuality of Christ, 3.

4. There is a growing body of research on the history of gesture that seeks to examine the social meanings of these acts in light of theoretical work done by writers like Marcel Mauss, Norbert Elias, Mary Douglas, and Pierre Bourdieu. See, e.g., the collection A Cultural History of Gesture, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roofdenberg (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Adam Kendon, Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

5. John Bulver, Chirologia, or, The naturall language of the hand composed of the speaking motions, and the discoursing gestures thereof (London, 1644), 78.

6. Ibid., 117. What Bulver actually says is "lovers, I know not by what amorous instinct, next to the face, direct their passionate respects to the Hand of those they love." Implicit is the idea that lovers first direct their attentions to the face and secondarily to the hand, so I've transposed the words to make the meaning clearer for my purposes.

7. In addition to claiming it is not "unchaste," Herrick links it rhetorically with "non-sexual" activities like "danc[ing]" and "play[ing]." The kinds of rhetorical linkages that Herrick makes in his poem are by no means universal, however. In one of his other poems, "On Himselfe," Herrick discusses the gesture in a much more sexualized context: "Young I was, but now am old; / But I am not yet grown cold; / I can play, and I can twine / Bout a Virgin like a Vine; / In her lap too I can lyse / Melting, and in fancie die; / And return to life, if she / Claps my cheek, or kisseth me / Thus, and thus it now appears / That our love out-lasts our yeares." Herrick, Hesperides, 15. Other authors from the period also associate chin-chucking with much more explicitly sexual activity. In the ballad A New Song, Call'd the Old Man's Wish (1691), for instance, the titular character laments, "O that I were but Young again, / Then I would chuck her under the Chin; / Under the chin, and tother Thing too; / Oh that I were but Young for you," Likewise, in another ballad from the period, The
Roman princess and a ward of Maximianus, who ends up falling in love with her. Maximianus is led to believe, however, that she has been seduced by Hortensia (the gardener). Thus, the spies of Maximianus "informed [him] that they had seen them as good as naught together" and that "they had seen them count one another extremely." The spies admit that "the conditions...they could not hear well, but their actions were too palpable." They point out, for instance, "that she stroked him under the Chin, clapt his Cheeks, thrust her fingers into his Bosome, smild him in the Face."

With this information "being so confidently related by so many witnesses" to Maximianus, it "made him believe (as did too many others) that it had been so indeed." But in this instance, the narrator makes it clear that Maximianus's spies are mistaken and that they have "misdread" the gestures and relationship of Honoria and Hortensia. So when Honoria supposedly strokes the gardener's cheek and "thrust[s] her fingers into his Bosome," for instance, what actually happens is that Honoria spies "an Earwig ready to creep into Hortensius ear, endeavouring to strike it off with her hand, she strikes it into his Neck; and perceiving it to be there, thrust her fingers into his Coller to take it thence" (28).

All references to Shakespeare are from The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). Another example of this gesture from Shakespeare's works is Cressida stroking the cheek of Diomedes in Troilus and Cressida (5.2.49).


[References to other works and sources are also included in the text.]

20 Steinberg, Sexuality of Christ, 110–11. The medieval practice of wearing wimples and chin bands (also known as a “chin-cloths” or “chin-clouts”) strikes me as an important testament to the erotic power of the chin, though an analysis of this phenomenon lies outside the purview of this essay.

21 Talvacchia, Taking Positions, 44.


23 Even the best studies of early modern English (homo)sexuality have tended to downplay the cultural significance of the active–passive rubrics and, by extension, the importance of age-graded relationships. Alan Bray’s Homosexuality in Renaissance England (1995; rev., New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) is still arguably the best introduction to this subject, but as Michael Rocke points out, Bray “curiously fails to emphasize the predominance in Renaissance England of the adult–boy model, even though a great deal of the evidence he presents points in this direction.” Rocke, Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 281. Bruce Smith acknowledges the existence of these rubrics to a much greater degree than Bray, but he, too, tends to downplay their significance in literary texts, ultimately contending that “age-graded homosexuality” and “egalitarian homosexuality” were both equally “possible ways of enacting male bonds among Shakespeare and his contemporaries.” Smith, Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England: A Cultural Poetics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76.

24 Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 13. Rocke explains that these conventions “were tightly bound up with what it meant to be a male... The ‘active’ and usually penetrating role substantially conformed to the behaviors and ideas that were defined as virile, and consequently a man’s sexual relations with a boy, when enacted within these conventions, did not call into question his status as a ‘normal’ and masculine male. To take the ‘passive’ role in sex with a male, however, was deemed ‘feminine’ and dishonorable, but since this role was in effect limited to the biological period of adolescence it was only a temporary and wayward turn on a boy’s path to full-fledged manhood” (13).


29 I am focusing on these particular rubrics here because they are the ones that emerge most clearly in the sources that discuss chin chucking, but I do not mean to imply that they were the only terms structuring desire in the period. Race, religion, and species (to name but a few) were also extremely important.

30 Another way of making this point would be to say that although these factors were constitutive and shaped individuals’ sexual relations, they do not seem to have coalesced to form any kind of erotic identity. The schema that I am imagining here might be compared to the one that David Halperin maps in How to Do the History of Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), although the terms that he uses are somewhat different.

31 The dynamics in the relationship between Edward and his minion, Gaveston, in Marlowe’s Edward II are similar, although a little more complex. Edward is the one who allegedly “claps [Gaveston’s] cheek and hangs about his neck,” and while this gesture might be understood to reinforce the gulf in social status between them, this reading is complicated by the fact that Edward also “hangs” about Gaveston’s “neck.” This particular posture could be understood to imply a kind of overattachment that is inappropriate for someone of his status. My reading of this relationship differs somewhat in its emphasis from Jonathan Goldberg’s. Goldberg contends that Gaveston and Edward are “equals” and that “Gaveston has been raised from his lower-class position to Edward’s equal.” Goldberg, Sodomy Sites: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 121. What matters to the Mortimers, according to Goldberg, is not that Edward is having sex with Gaveston but that Gaveston is not Edward’s subordinate. Although I find Goldberg’s analysis fascinating, I think more attention still needs to be paid to the complexities of the active–passive dynamic in Edward and Gaveston’s relationship.

32 Of the eighty-five representations of the act that I have examined, forty-four depict women chucking the chins of men, and thirty-three depict men chucking the chins of women. (The others depict same-sex couplings.)
In approximately half of the instances in which women take the active role, however, they are criticized for this behavior (either explicitly or implicitly). In the aggregate, I would therefore still maintain that the primary way that these texts socialize this gesture is with men taking the active role.

Thomas Heywood presents a vignette of Venus wooing Adonis that echoes Shakespeare's poem: 'Pr thee be wonton; let vs toy and play. / Thy icy fingers warme betweene my breasts; / looke on me Adon with a stedfast eye. / That in these Christall glasses I may see / My beauty, that charmes Gods, makes men amaz'd, / And stound with wonder: doth this roseate pillow / Offend my love? come, wallow in my lap, / With my white fingers I will clap thy cheeke, / Whisper a thousand pleasures in thine ear.' Heywood, The Brazen Age (London, 1613), sig. C3r.

The ballad, A Caveat for Young Men (Pepys 2.22.), is intended as a warning to young men not to be lured in by the advances of such women. The narrator describes his own "downfall": "She'd chuck me under the chin, / and perhaps would give me a kiss, / As Venus drew Adonis in, / my Hoastis would never miss: / She'd tell me it was too early, / or else it was too late, / until by the Oyle of Barely, / they had gotten my whole estate." Unlike Venus, the hostess here seems to be of the same rank as her "customer," and this fact may help to explain why her behavior is implicitly criticized. At the same time, she does seem to be older and more affluent than the young man, as she takes advantage of him.


This type of behavior was not just something presented in literary texts. In the court case of Elizabeth Myers from 1674, Myers is the one who allegedly "stoked" the cheeks of her lover John Jopling. Interestingly, she was a widow of one of the aldermen from the city of Durham and thus seems to have been of slightly higher status than Jopling, who was nevertheless, according to the court documents, a "gentleman."

In The Seven Deadly Sins of London (London, 1606), for instance, Thomas Dekker personifies money as a queen and imagines "riot" as her "smooth-faced Ganimed" (sig. C3v). An even more interesting example is the satire of a Puritan wife, Mistress Simula, in Richard Corbet's 1611 The Times Whistle (London: Early English Text Society, 1871). Simula is a typical religious hypocrite. Although she is "ready to faint if she an oth but hear," in reality, she is "Living in sinne & sensual delight": "For, would you think it? she was ta[ke]ne in bed / With a yong, tender, smoothfaced Ganimed, / Her husbands prentice" (733–41). This passage emphasizes that Mistress Simula's "Ganimed" is both younger than her ("young, tender, [and] smoothfaced") and also subordinate to her (by virtue of being "her husbands prentice"). Although Corbet uses the term "Ganimed" here in a heteroerotic context, Corbet was certainly aware of its homoerotic usages, too, for later in the book, there is a satirical portrait of "Sodomeo" who finds "all his joy ... in a rarely featured lively boy, / With whom (I shaine to speake it) in his bed / He playes like love with Phirigian Ganime" (2467–70).

As Ruth Mazo Karras argues in Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), prostitutes were defined less by the transactional–economic nature of their relationships than by the inordinate nature of their desires. Karras makes this point about prostitution in the Middle Ages, but I believe that it holds true for the early modern period as well.

The Difficult French-Man's Unsuccessful Adventurers; Or, A New Ballad of a Finical Monstre (Pepys 3.136). There are many examples of prostitutes behaving in similar fashion. A 1620 ballad warns men to "take heed" not to "trust ... a whore," detailing the methods they use to lure men in: "Shall stroke your cheeks she'll stroke your chin, / She'll fling her arms about you. / And she shall protest with vows and oaths, / She cannot die without you." A Caveat or Warning. / For all sorts of Men both young and old to avoid the / Company of lewd and wicked Women / To the tune of Virginia (Pepys 1.46–47). In The Rogue or The Life of Guzman de Alfarache. Written in Spanish by Matheo Alemán (London, 1623), the rhetoric condemning the prostitute's behavior is even more vituperative. The main character explains that he told the woman he was "of Seville," and "with that, she came neerer unto me, and giving me a chocke under the chin, she said unto me, Now you little wanton foole, whither wander you?" He later comments that "her stinking breath" annoyed him and that "with her very touching of me, I thought ... that the utmost of evils had now lighted upon me in meeting with such a filthy unsavoury Slut" (31).

Strange Newes from Bartholomew-Fair, or the wandering-whore discovered (London, 1661), 3.

Cheerfull ayres or ballads first composed for one single voice (London, 1660), 73–75.
THE EROTICS OF CHIN CHUCKING

I argue in “His Majesty the Beard” that one of the ways that this gendered distinction was materialized was through facial hair. More recently, Bloom, “Squeaky Voices,” has discussed the way that this distinction was materialized through the voice.


A passage in Thomas Carew’s masque Coleum Britannicum (London, 1633) resonates with this one. The character Momus, the god of mockery, describes how all the Roman gods have reformed their adulterous behavior after being inspired by the relationship between Charles I and Henrietta Maria. Momus claims that even “Venus hath confess all her adulteries, and is receiv’d to grace by her husband, who conscious of the great disparity betwixt her perfections and his deformities, allows those levities as an equal counterpoise; but it is the prettiest spectacle to see her stroaking with her Ivory hand his collidèd cheeks, and with her sinowy fingers combing his sooty beard” (8). In this passage, Venus’ act of stroking Vulcan’s “collidèd” cheeks and sooty beard is clearly meant to be seen as unorthodox, but, as I noted earlier, Venus is often held up as the archetype of the sexually agential woman, and in this instance, her chin chucking is certainly meant to be an index of her libidinal nature (which Vulcan has agreed to tolerate, along with her adultery).

“Micro-physics of power” is Michel Foucault’s phrase in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Random House, 1979), 26. My second formulation echoes a point that Pierre Bourdieu makes in Outline for a Theory of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), namely, that “injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or ‘don’t hold your knife in your left hand’ can inculcate a whole cosmos, an ethic, a metaphysic, or [a] political philosophy” (94).


Ibid., 9.

Ibid., 45, 48.

Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, 12. I have adapted Halperin’s point here. He’s talking specifically about homosexuality, but as my adaptation demonstrates, his point can applied to sexuality—and especially the modern notion of sexual orientation—more generally.