Perversely Reading Kate Chopin’s “Fedora”

Kate Chopin’s “Fedora” is surely one of her most interesting and ambiguous stories. Published in 1895, under the pen name “La Tour” and the title “The Falling in Love of Fedora,” “Fedora” is a very brief story recounting the experience of its thirty-year-old title character, a rather stern, unmarried woman who is suddenly smitten with a twenty-three-year-old man, Young Malthers. She does not act on this passion but resorts to touching his hat or burying her face in the folds of his coat. When Young Malther’s sister is set to arrive for a visit, Fedora insists on driving to the station to meet her. She is delighted with the young woman, who bears a close resemblance to her brother, and after helping her into the carriage, Fedora puts her arm around Miss Malthers, bends down, and presses a “long penetrating kiss upon her mouth.”¹ She then quietly picks up the reins and drives her astonished guest home.

A traditional reading of the story has seen Fedora as a repressed old maid whose passion is awakened by a tall, good-looking young man. Unaware of what to do with such passion, she momentarily displaces it onto the sister and then, treating it like the “restive brute” she is driving, firmly takes it back in hand. She will hereafter continue to repress this new-found sensuality. Certainly, this is a possible reading. Chopin does describe Fedora as a woman who is “tall and slim, and carried her head loftily, and wore eyeglasses and a severe expression” (p. 467). Most of the young people “felt as if she were a hundred years old” (p. 467). Conversely, Fedora is uninterested in the young people and their merry-making. She is thus painted in stereotypical spinsterly terms. Her repression is also evident. One day Fedora looks up at Young Malthers and realizes suddenly “that he was a man—in voice, in attitude, in bearing, in every sense—a man” (p. 468);

“from that moment on he began to exist for her” (p. 468). Fedora begins experiencing conflicting emotions: “uneasiness, restlessness, expectation” and “inward revolt, astonishment, rapture” (p. 468). Clearly, her reaction to this young man has upset her otherwise uneventful life. At this point she begins to fondle his clothing and insists on going for his sister at the station. When she sees the young woman, who looks so much like the young man, her passion for him rises. Because Miss Malthers resembles her brother so closely and because Fedora’s avenues for acting on her desires for the young man are limited in the time in which she lives, the young woman is the recipient of Fedora’s outburst of passion. In “The Rexist Brute: The Symbolic Presentation of Repression and Sublimation in Kate Chopin’s ‘Fedora,’” the primary piece of criticism on the story to date, Joyce Dyer suggests that such outbursts will be the extent of Fedora’s expression of her sexuality: “[Fedora] may try to caress the clothing of Young Malthers (or of other men) and to press desperate kisses on the mouths of unacceptable surrogates, but in public she will forever stare straightly ahead—‘unruffled.’”2 Dyer goes on to characterize Fedora as a “perverse, pathetic, desperate woman” (p. 265).

While Dyer ultimately sees Fedora as the classic repressed spinster, she and other critics have recognized what early critic Robert Arner calls the “homosexual overtones of Fedora’s actions.”3 All view these “overtones” negatively. For example, Arner calls “The Falling in Love of Fedora” “a tale with strong overtones of sexual decadence manifest in the reticent lesbianism of Fedora” (p. 118), and Richard Arthur Martin, another early critic, deems the story an example of “the twisted paths sexuality can take.”4 More recently, Barbara Ewell, though sympathetic to the story’s critique of repression, speaks of Fedora’s “immature efforts at desexualization” and sees the kiss merely as an “uncontrollable outburst of repressed passion.”5

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presumably for Young Malthers. Dyer’s assessment, however, is the most troubling. She writes:

[T]here are suggestions of Fedora’s Sapphic tendencies in addition to the kiss; her clothes fetish might make some readers wonder if what she really desires is to become male and assume a man’s sexual role; Fedora’s obsession with her whip hints at the sexual dominance conventionally attributed to the male in a heterosexual relationship; even her unusual name itself, a word that commonly refers to a man’s soft, felt hat, might be meant to provide an indication of her male proclivities. (p. 264)\(^5\)

The phrase “Sapphic tendencies” trivializes Fedora’s potential lesbian desire, and Dyer’s conflation of lesbian desire with the desire to be a male traffics in a traditional negative and usually untrue stereotype. More importantly, once Dyer raises the possibility of Fedora’s lesbian desire, she erases it:

However, as I’ve attempted to show, there seems to be perhaps even more substantial evidence to suggest that Fedora is transferring her emotion for Young Malthers to Miss Malthers—an inappropriate displacement, certainly, but nevertheless, a transference that Fedora, in all her rigidity and repression, can find socially acceptable. Chopin works hard and carefully to stress Fedora’s intense attraction to Young Malthers’ masculinity—his voice, his attitude, his bearing, his face and form. And she works with equal intensity to help us understand that it is Miss Malthers’ physical similarity to Young Malthers that attracts Fedora, not the girl herself. (p. 264)

My belief is that both a reading of the story that sees Fedora merely as a repressed spinster and Dyer’s with its negative dismissals of the kiss suffer from a sort of heterosexual tunnel vision; they do not adequately explore the lesbian element of the text. I would like to propose that adopting a lesbian reading strategy allows us to read Fedora and the kiss more complexly; it also allows us to see the story as yet another instance of Chopin’s expression of the varieties of desire and sexualities in her works.

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\(^5\)One may want to take into consideration that Dyer’s piece was published in 1981, a time in which there was less discussion and acceptance of gay and lesbian issues, and certainly gay and lesbian studies were in their infancy. However, the inclusion of “The Restive Brute” in Alice Hall Petry’s 1996 anthology *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin* is an indication that it is still regarded as the seminal piece of criticism on the story.

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Such a reading strategy has been described as “perverse reading” by Bonnie Zimmerman. Drawing on Judith Fetterley’s seminal theory of the “resisting reader,” Zimmerman suggests that lesbian readers often find their own way through ostensibly heterosexual texts, “resisting” the heterosexual prescription and constructing alternate meanings out of textual hints and clues. She writes, “There is a certain point in a plot or character development—the ‘what if’ moment—when a lesbian reader refuses to assent anymore to the heterosexual imperative; a point in the narrative labyrinth where she simply cuts a hole and follows her own path.” The lesbian reader, she says, will pay particular attention to the ways women relate to each other in texts, often “see[ing] and emphasiz[ing] the sexual, romantic, and/or passionate elements of this relation” (p. 138), as well as noting and investing with meaning communities of women within texts. Zimmerman chooses to name such readings “perverse” to rob the word of its traditional negative meaning, especially as it has been applied to lesbian sexuality; she instead wishes “to reclaim a word defined by the dictionary as ‘willfully determined not to do what is expected or desired’” (p. 139).

Zimmerman makes two crucial points designed to ward off the protests of those who might decry such a reading practice as textually destructive and grossly limited in its usefulness. The first is her assertion that applying a perverse reading is not the same as imposing one:


Let me emphasize that the lesbian resisting reader, reading perversely, is not merely demanding a plot or character study that the writer has not chosen to create. She is picking up on hints and possibilities that the author, consciously or not, has strewn in the text. A text that manifests certain symbolic elements—perhaps the absence of men, of women’s attention to men, or of marked femininity; perhaps the presence of female bonding, or of strong and independent female characters—may trigger the act of lesbian reading. The reader is simply bringing to the text an understanding of the world as she has learned to read and thus to know it. (p. 144)

In other words, a perverse reading does not do violence to a text by demanding elements that are not already inscribed to some degree. And while Zimmerman acknowledges that part of the value of perverse reading is that it makes texts "more personally meaningful to lesbian readers" (p. 142), a goal many scholars would see as theoretically weak and outdated, she also points out that its meaning for the larger critical arena is undeniable. "Perverse reading," Zimmerman says, "reveals subtexts of female friendship previously unrevealed; it also leads to the rewriting of cultural stereotypes and literary conventions by reversing the values attached to the idea of lesbianism" (p. 142), a project she believes should appeal to "literary critics who understand that no single interpretation of a text is complete without reference to many others" (p. 146). Moreover, reconsidering cultural stereotypes and the biases that helped create them can not only lead to a destruction of such stereotypes but can also help us "see new complexity in women’s past and contemporary lives" (p. 142).  

‘Nor does one have to be a lesbian to apply this kind of reading strategy. In their introductory essay to Lesbian Texts and Contexts, Joanne Glasgow and Karla Jay draw on reader-response theory to confront the difficult questions of what is a lesbian text, who is a lesbian writer, and who is—or can be—a lesbian reader. Borrowing from Jonathan Culler, Glasgow and Jay suggest that anyone can adopt the strategy of “reading as a lesbian.” In “Reading As a Woman,” in On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). Culler argues that “since for years women have been taught to read texts “as men,” often having to identify against themselves in the process, men could and should be trained to read “as women.” In doing so, they would “avoid reading as a man” and seek “to identify the specific defenses and distortions of male readings and provide corrections” (p. 54). Similarly, Glasgow and Jay suggest that straight people be trained to read “as lesbians,” a strategy that would allow one to recognize the “defenses and distortions” of heterosexual readings and open up other possible interpretations. Echoing Zimmerman’s reasons for the value of such a reading strategy, they write, “Reading with a lesbian consciousness can make us alert to ‘coded’ texts and enable us to read them in radically altered ways… [and] can also enable us to deconstruct the heterosexual surfaces of seemingly ‘straight’ forward texts” (p. 5).
Before proceeding with my own perverse reading of "Fedora," it may be necessary to note the potential tension between my primary desire to apply a reader-response theory in which historical context does not matter very much at all and a secondary desire to show that applying such a theory, in this case, is not necessarily at odds with the story's historical context. What I mean is that Zimmerman's practice of perverse reading is based on appropriating texts so they are in accordance with the reader's view of the world; in such a reading, it matters little if the term "lesbian" is historically accurate. For example, a perverse reader might deem the poems eighteenth-century writer Anna Seward wrote to Honora Sneyd as frankly lesbian, even though the term does not begin to be used widely until the late nineteenth century. Similarly, the reading I want to propose of "Fedora" is valid and valuable, according to Zimmerman's theory, regardless of the period in which the story was produced. However, I also want to show that because Chopin was writing in the 1890s, a time in which, as we will see later, much medical and psychological discussion about sexual identity was beginning to take place, a perverse reading is not only a valid reader-response approach to the story but also a historically appropriate one.

Instead of seeing Fedora as a classic repressed spinster, the perverse reader is more likely to see her as having qualities of, in twentieth-century parlance, a classic "butch." As Zimmerman notes, the lack of "marked

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10 The Oxford English Dictionary Online notes the earliest use of "lesbian" to describe a female homosexual in 1890 from a medical dictionary; the earliest use of "lesbianism" to describe female homosexuality is slightly earlier, 1870. Interestingly, though most scholars hold to this timeline for the use of the term "lesbian,'' Emma Donoghue, in Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801 (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), notes a 1732 reference in a mock-epic by William King to sexual relationships between women as "Lesbian Loves" and, in a later 1736 edition of the text, a reference to these women as "Tribades or Lesbians" (p. 3).

11 Obviously, the application of the term "butch" here is anachronistic, as the use of the term to refer to a type of lesbian originates in the mid-twentieth century. My choice to use it reflects the reader-response foundation of perverse reading. It is worth noting, however, that there was an equivalent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century term to describe a "männisch" woman who sought sexual companionship with other women. Donoghue points out that as early as 1773, "Tommy" was a "home-grown slang word for a woman who had sex with other women" (p. 5). She notes the term's derivations from "'tom boy,' 'tom lad,' or 'tom rig,' all names for boyish uncontrollable girls, or indeed from other phrases in which 'tom' suggested masculinity" (p. 5); it continued to be used throughout the nineteenth century (p. 5). In Gay American History (New York: Avon, 1976), Jonathan Katz includes an 1892 medical report about
"femininity" is one detail that may trigger the act of perverse reading. Fedora’s physical description—tall, angular, "severe"—and characterization as an avid and skilled horsewoman are clues that mark her as standing outside conventional notions of femininity, especially in the late-nineteenth-century South. The lesbian reader will note such clues and rather than reading them negatively, she will see Fedora as a strong, athletic, determined woman, one who resists the traditional gender dictates in her society. Dyer’s brief characterization of Fedora as a sort of dangerous, whip-wielding dominatrix, intended to be negative, might in fact please the perverse reader. As such, Fedora is an even more transgressive figure, and while Dyer sees Fedora as wanting to “become” a man, the lesbian reader will be aware that “performing” or “playing” male roles does not necessarily mean one wishes to relinquish being a woman. Of course, suggesting that Fedora is some nineteenth-century version of a leather-clad, queer theory-declamating lesbian is untenable; what is valid is that Fedora is portrayed in

Alice Mitchell, who stood trial for murdering her female lover in Memphis, Tennessee. In the report, Dr. F.L. Sim links Mitchell’s “masculine” characteristics with her lesbianism when he recounts her penchant for boyish things and notes, “To the family she seemed a regular tomboy” (p. 83).

One might question whether being an avid horsewoman marks one as transgressing gender dictates. While admittedly many women took part in equestrian activities, often a particular interest in riding, driving, or racing horses suggested a woman’s nonconformity. Certainly, Chopin uses equestrian interests to designate rebellious women; one need only think of Edna Pontellier’s knowing racehorses better than nearly any man at the track and of the “trouserlet”-clad Charlie Laborde’s wild galloping astride her big black horse in “Charlie.” Chopin biographer Emily Toth, in Kate Chopin (New York: William Morrow, 1990), also connects Chopin’s own horseback riding with her nonconformity (p. 141). My suggestion here is not that being a skilled horsewoman means one is a lesbian, but that those skills might be a “clue” that helps propel a perverse reading.

Judith Butler, in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), refutes the notion that lesbian butch-femme identities are merely a replication of heterosexual roles. She argues that because gender itself is an unstable, socially constructed category, to say that butch-femme roles are “‘replicas’ or ‘copies’ of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled” (p. 123). See also Judith Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Less academic but still useful analyses of butch roles appear in Joan Nestle’s The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader (Los Angeles: Alyson, 1992) and Joann Loulan’s The Lesbian Erotic Dance: Butch, Femme, Androgyny and Other Rhythms (Duluth, Minnesota: Spinsters Ink, 1990).
a way that, even by nineteenth-century standards, allows us to see her as a woman marked by gender difference and to read that difference sympathetically.

If Fedora violates her culture’s notions of feminine physical appearance, she also has violated its notions of how women should respond to men. They should, of course, desire and seek male attention. That Fedora is unmarried at thirty is another clue the perverse reader will note and invest with meaning. We are told that Fedora “too early in life formed an ideal and treasured it. By this ideal she had measured such male beings as had hitherto challenged her attention and needless to say she found them wanting” (p. 476). Even when she becomes attracted to Young Malthers, she does not seek his attention or approval, though she notices him more often and wants to spend time with him. Perhaps even he does not measure up to her ideal. We, in turn, might have questions about what exactly that ideal is.

In this regard, Fedora resembles Mademoiselle Reisz in The Awakening, another of Chopin’s “butch” women and one who has been read as a lesbian.14 In the conversation Edna has with Mlle. Reisz about men, Reisz asserts that she could only be in love with a man if he were some “grand esprit” (p. 964); a “man of ordinary caliber” would never be “worthy of [her] devotion” (p. 964). As far as we know, no man has ever met those standards for Mademoiselle Reisz, though her interest in Edna is quite apparent. So while we may have no concrete evidence that Fedora harbors desire for women prior to the kiss, the lesbian reader, already inclined to see Fedora as bending conventional gender roles, is thus more apt to read such gaps in the text as evidence of lesbian desire, or even identity.

But what of Young Malthers? If we are to see Fedora as having lesbian desire or identity, is not her attraction to the young man contradictory and problematic? Without a doubt, she begins to desire him, but we should look carefully at that desire, how it is characterized, and the possible reasons for it. Dyer says that Chopin “works hard” to stress Fedora’s attraction to Young Malthers’ masculinity (p. 264). While Fedora does have

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a “sudden realization” that he is a man (p. 468), his physical description is not overly masculine. He has “earnest” blue eyes; his face is “brown from the sun, smooth, with no suggestion of ruddiness, except in the lips, that were strong, firm, and clean” (p. 468). Certainly his brownness marks his masculinity since it speaks to not having to shield his skin from the sun as women were expected to do, and the adjectives “strong” and “firm” have traditional masculine associations. However, the smooth skin, the rosy lips, and the fact that there is no mention of a beard or mustache can just as easily suggest androgyny rather masculinity.15 These qualities are what Fedora finds attractive. We should also look at the conflicting emotions Fedora feels for the young man:

She wanted him by her, though his nearness troubled her. There was uneasiness, restlessness, expectation when he was not within sight and sound. There was redoubled uneasiness, when he was by—there was inward revolt, astonishment, rapture, self-contumely; a fierce swift encounter between thought and feeling. (p. 468)

While these conflicting feelings may be attributed to Fedora’s discomfort and confusion over this new passion for Young Malthers, especially since she has prided herself on her sternness and control, they might also be explained by her uncertainty about those feelings in themselves. When he is near there is “redoubled uneasiness,” an indication that his closeness disturbs her as well as excites her, and while she is attracted to him, she never acts on her feelings. Dyer believes that “Fedora’s fear of social disapproval and her own impulses” are responsible for this inability to act (p. 262). But perhaps Fedora simply does not wish to express her passion for him any further. In a perverse reading of the story, the “fierce encounter between thought and feeling” she experiences might indeed indicate a conflict between what she truly desires, women, and what society says she must desire, men. Thus, a possible reason for Fedora’s “sudden” passion for Young Malthers is that she succumbs, at least momentarily, to finding an acceptable object of desire in the heterosexual world in which she lives, but

15 Robert’s physical appearance in The Awakening is worth recalling for comparison. His androgyny, especially compared to Léonce Pontellier’s more traditional masculine appearance, is emphasized, as are his similarities to Edna: “In coloring he was not unlike his companion. A clean-shaved face made the resemblance more pronounced than it would otherwise have been” (p. 883).

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one androgynous enough to meet her tastes. Moreover, one does not have to discount Fedora’s desire for young Malthers in order to validate her desire for his sister, especially for an understanding of Chopin’s views of desire. By the evidence we are given in the story, Fedora does indeed seem to be undergoing her first experience with sexual desire; it is not unusual for such an experience to be marked by a sort of fluidity or bisexual imperative. In a recent article drawing on French feminist theory, Karen Day offers brief commentary on “Fedora,” arguing just this point. She believes the story might be read as “signifying a continuum of sexuality and desire, not bound by social constructions.” One need only recall Chopin’s portrayal of Edna Pontellier’s sexual awakening and the role that Adèle Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz arguably play in it to see that she has some level of awareness of such multiple desires. Consequently, Fedora’s attraction to the young man, for whatever reasons, does not discount the possibility of her lesbianism.

Fedora’s encounter with Miss Malthers is primary, of course, in considering this lesbianism; the kiss is the prime trigger for perverse reading. Dyer says that Chopin is careful to show that it is Miss Malthers’ resemblance to her brother and not the girl herself which attracts Fedora (p. 262) and results in the “long, penetrating kiss” (Chopin, p. 469). But, if we again recall Young Malthers’ androgynous features, it is no surprise that

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16Peggy Skaggs, in Kate Chopin (Boston: Twayne, 1985), recognizes Chopin’s emphasis on Fedora’s attempt to reconcile “the spinster’s conflicting needs for a place where she feels that she belongs and for sexual love” (p. 48), but she still sees heterosexual desire at the heart of the story, criticizing Arner for not giving enough attention to Fedora’s lust for Young Malthers. Skaggs notes that “[Fedora’s] attitude toward the small girl who looks like the man for whom she yearns seems to be an attempt to recognize these conflicting forces” (p. 48). My own argument is that Fedora’s supposed desire for Young Malthers might just as easily be seen as an attempt to reconcile those two conflicting forces.


Miss Malthers seems equally attractive to Fedora. The fact that the sister, like the brother, has “blue, earnest eyes,” the same “firm, full curve of the lips” (p. 469) emphasizes the androgyny of both figures and stresses again that these qualities are the ones that attract Fedora.19 We are also told that Fedora “could hardly explain to her own satisfaction why she wanted to go herself to the station for Young Malthers’ sister. She felt a desire to see the girl, to be near her” (p. 468). Fedora is obviously more comfortable with the idea of being near Miss Malthers than she is being near the brother. She is also, for some reason, motivated to act where the sister is concerned—something she is not willing to do with Young Malthers; the fact remains that it is Miss Malthers whom Fedora passionately kisses. The perverse reader might note, too, that the kiss is one of the easier, more “natural” of Fedora’s actions in the story; she gives the kiss very calmly and gracefully, as if it suits her. Even the pastoral setting, a “long, quiet, leafy road into which the twilight was just beginning to creep” (p. 469), adds to its naturalness. The scene also marks the only time Fedora speaks in the text. Addressing the young woman as “dear child” she says, “Come to me freely and without reserve—with all your wants; with all your complaints, I feel that I shall be quite fond of you” (p. 469). The words here are a curious mix of the parental and the romantic, which might indicate Fedora’s own confusion and anxiety over the soon-to-follow outburst of desire. Most important, however, is that the young woman is the impetus for both speech and action on Fedora’s part. To the perverse reader, the kiss may seem a momentary release of Fedora’s true desire.

Traditional readings have not seen the kiss in this way but rather as a “twisted” (Arner, p. 118) displacement of Fedora’s heterosexual desire for Young Malthers. Such readings, as I acknowledged earlier, are possible, but they might also be questioned. For example, Joyce Dyer asserts that the sister

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19We might consider again how Chopin’s emphasis on androgyny here matches that in her characterization of both Edna and Robert in The Awakening. Edna, unlike Adèle, is not voluptuous and feminine but is rather described as handsome and angular. She also sprawls on a hammock, drinks brandy from a glass “as a man would have done” (p. 962), and knows horses and horse-racing better than any man at the track. Robert, too, blurrs rigid gender lines. He is clean-shaven, smokes cigarettes rather than cigars, prefers the company of women, and is described as resembling Edna in height, hair color, and skin tone. Chopin suggests that each finds these androgyrous features attractive in the other. While the suggestion can lead to a discussion of narcissism, it can just as easily lead to a discussion of same-sex desire.
“somehow” (p. 263) provides “a socially acceptable release of Fedora’s passion” (pp. 263-264), but the assertion is unsupported. Certainly, Dyer may be thinking of the tradition of romantic friendships and of “the female world of love and ritual,” detailed by Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, in which intense professions of love and physical expressions of it were common among women during the nineteenth century. Such relationships, as Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, and others have shown, were not only common but also socially condoned. However, while it may be more acceptable for Fedora to express herself physically with women rather than men at this time, such a passionate kiss on the lips of a woman one has just met seems rather different than the developed relationships that were at the heart of romantic friendships. Miss Malthers’ shock and displeasure at Fedora’s kiss is a testament that her behavior is unusual. One should also remember that Chopin penned the story in 1895. Richard Von Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis appeared in 1886, and Havelock Ellis’s Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Sexual Inversion in 1897, though his ideas were beginning to appear in print before then. These men, the most famous of the sexologists that emerged during the last decade of the nineteenth century, began carving out a theory of homosexuality, studying men and women whose gender characteristics were often untraditional and who professed desire for same-sex relationships. Ellis, drawing on the earlier work of German psychiatrist Carl von Westphal, famously designated such people sexual “inverts,” and though he was not unsympathetic, his theories did mark these “inverts” as abnormal. One result of these two men’s views was that the once-accepted romantic friendships began to be scrutinized in a new way, a way that began to invest them with sexual meaning. Chopin biographer Per Seyersted notes that William Reedy, the editor of the St. Louis Times Mirror and a friend of Chopin’s, devoted space in his newspaper

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23For a thorough discussion of the influence of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis on attitudes towards romantic friendships, see Faderman, pp. 239-253.

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to Krafft-Ebing and Ellis,24 thus, it is quite possible that Chopin knew of their work. She may indeed have been aware that the kiss between Fedora and Miss Malthers would now be regarded as a sexual act, not merely the “harmless” expression of emotion in a world that condoned women’s romantic friendships. Emily Toth, Chopin’s most recent biographer, does not believe that Chopin was trying to conceal her authorship by choosing to publish the story under the pen name La Tour, but she does believe that the story’s ending made it hard to publish (p. 289). Thus, simply to say that Miss Malthers presents a more acceptable recipient of Fedora’s desire is historically arguable, and the kiss itself remains delightfully ambiguous.

Finally, we should look at the image of Fedora with which we are left. After the kiss, Fedora, “with seemingly unruffled composure, gathered the reins, and for the rest of the way home stared steadily ahead of her between the horse’s ears” (p. 469). This image is usually connected to the symbolism of the “restive brute.” At the beginning of the story we are told that Fedora determined to go to the station herself because “the brute was restive” (p. 467). Most critics see the horse as a metaphor for Fedora’s awakening passion, her heterosexual passion. For someone of Fedora’s disposition—severe, stern, repressed—such passion, like the spirited horse, must be kept carefully in check. In a perverse reading, the “restive brute” remains a symbol of her passion, but it is a passion particularly regarded as “brute,” as something unruly and ugly, by a society which does not understand or accept it. Consequently, it must be kept under tight rein, under complete control. If the story is to be read as one of sexual repression, then it is an understandable repression. Fedora will continue to squelch her desires because she must; there is no place for them in the world in which she lives. In this regard, one may then question whether Dyer’s characterization of Fedora as “a perverse, pathetic, desperate woman” is entirely accurate or just.

I might also suggest, however, that this final image of Fedora does not have to be limited to a further indication of her repression. To be sure, the story offers ample evidence that Fedora has learned to control her emotions; for example, even in the midst of the sensuous wonderland of the


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station’s nook when we’re told that “Fedora loved it all—sky and woods and sunlight; sounds and smells,” her “bearing—elegant, composed, reserved—betrayed nothing emotional” (p. 468). Thus, Chopin’s choice to have Fedora take up the reins again with “seemingly unruffled composure” and to stare between the horse’s ears the rest of the way home can be seen to fit with the stern, controlled characterization of Fedora she has created earlier in the story. But the image might also be seen as much more open-ended, one that invites the reader to wonder about Fedora’s thoughts as she stares so intently between the horse’s ears. That Chopin chose to say Fedora is “seemingly unruffled” (emphasis mine) is quite possibly an indication that she is not. Of what or whom is she thinking? Young Malthers? The young woman and the long, penetrating kiss she just delivered in the lush setting of the country road? Both? Is she contemplating the difficulty of her situation, what to do with this new-found desire, whatever its nature? Is she feeling free after having kissed Miss Malthers? A perverse reading invites us to see this closing image of Fedora as one that is just as ambiguous as the kiss itself; it also allows for a more hopeful, less “pathological” ending to the story. Perhaps Fedora will find a way to be who she is and to fulfill her desires.

For lesbian readers, the spinster/old maid has often been a figure of identification. Unmarried and often independent, seeking out the company of women or living in a community of women, the spinster is a woman in whom the lesbian reader can recognize herself. Unfortunately, the positive qualities of the spinster are usually overshadowed by the negative. Writers and critics are quick to emphasize the sexual repression, the comic neuroses, and the frightful undesirability of the old maid. The lesbian reader often reads “against the grain” of these qualities to try to salvage a dignified, desiring portrait of the unmarried woman. This is precisely what a perverse reading of “Fedora” seeks to do—in Zimmerman’s words to “rewrite a cultural stereotype.” I am not suggesting that Fedora be championed as a sort of super-lesbian of the late-nineteenth century, utterly admirable and well-adjusted; to do so would indeed do damage to the text. But she can be read more positively and more complexly than she has been in the past.

It is also worth considering that a strategy of perverse reading is not limited to “Fedora”; along with The Awakening, other Chopin stories could.
usefully be read through this lens. Certainly "Charlie," with its cross-dressing, gun-toting heroine who decides to try conventional femininity and heterosexuality on for size only to reject them and re-assume her "butch" persona at the end of the story is a potential goldmine for the perverse reader, especially since, as Emily Toth speculates in her biography of Chopin, there was a real-life inspiration for Charlie—Ellis Glenn, a dashing young "man" engaged to a young woman who was himself revealed to be a young woman three days before the wedding (p. 376). Even more ripe, and worth brief examination, is "Lilacs." The story of *chanteuse* Adrienne Farival's yearly return to the convent where she was once a student and her subsequent banishment from that convent once the Mother Superior discovers her "immoral" life in Paris becomes, when perversely read, not only a parable about the clash between the physical and spiritual life but also a sorrowful lesbian love story. Chopin emphasizes, from the first paragraph of the story, the bond between Adrienne and a particular nun at the convent, Sister Agathe. Sister Agathe, described as "more daring and impulsive than all" (p. 355) the other nuns, lives for Adrienne's visits. "If you should once fail to come," she says, "it would be like the spring coming without the sunshine or the song of birds" (p. 358). The two women greet each other with fervent passion and spend their days together strolling the grounds of the convent, reveling in the sensuous pleasures that the natural world offers. After Adrienne returns one spring to find the lovely gifts she had given the convent over the years thrust through the front door to her and that door then shut against her. Chopin closes the story with two images: the final symbolic image of a lay sister sweeping away the lilac petals that Adrienne had let fall upon the front steps and the heartbreaking image of Sister Agathe kneeling upon the bed in which Adrienne had slept, "her face . . . pressed deep in the pillow in her efforts to smother the sobs that convulsed her frame" (p. 365). For the perverse reader, the story is very much about the love between these two women and the severing of the passionate bond between them, and while ostensibly the reason Adrienne is banished from the convent is that the Mother Superior, presented as the voice of a rigid, flesh-hating, patriarchal religion, has learned of her dalliances with male lovers in Paris, the perverse reader wonders whether
the real reason is the even more dangerous liaison she has with Sister Agathe.  

That stories like "Lilacs," "Charlie," and "Fedora" lend themselves so readily to the strategy of perverse reading provides additional evidence that Kate Chopin was aware of, and inscribed in her writings, a wide spectrum of gender and sexuality; conversely, our understanding of her work and her views of gender and sexuality can only be enhanced by perversely reading them. Bonnie Zimmerman finally suggests that the worth of perverse reading lies in the way it adds to our understanding of literary texts. In seeking an analogy for the way her reading strategy can work, she recalls an encyclopedia section that was one of her favorites as a child, the section on anatomy in which transparencies were used to illustrate each system of the body: "Each system could be viewed separately with complete attention to its use and meaning in the body. But viewed together, one through the other, the transparencies created a three-dimensional image of the body as a whole" (p. 148). Like one of the transparencies, she concludes, perverse reading can add richness to our interpretation of texts. It is not meant to replace other readings, or assert its superiority over other readings; it can, however, along with those other readings, give us a fuller, more complete view of the whole.

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"Thomas Bonner in an early article, "Kate Chopin's European Consciousness," American Literary Realism 1870-1910, 8 (Summer 1975), 283, notes the possibility of a "growing carnality in [the] affections" between Adrienne and Sister Agathe and suggests that the Mother Superior was really motivated to reject Adrienne because of the changes she has wrought in Sister Agathe. Little had been made of this possible interpretation until 1994 when Jacqueline Olson Padgett discussed the story in "Kate Chopin and the Literature of Annunciation, with a Reading of 'Lilacs," Louisiana Literature, 11 (Spring 1994), 97-107. Padgett speaks of the "emerging sensuality" and "passion in the two women and their relationship with each other" (p. 102), though her focus seems to be more on showing how the bonds of "sisterhood" are disrupted in the course of the story, which in turn prevents women from achieving "wholeness and well-being, redemption and salvation" (p. 106).