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## Review of Female Husbands: A Trans History, by Jen Manion

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## Review of Female Husbands: A Trans History, by Jen Manion

### Abstract

This review evaluates Jen Manion's *Female Husbands: A Trans History*.

### Keywords

trans studies, trans history, gender nonconformity, female husband

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Jen Manion. *Female Husbands: A Trans History*. Cambridge University Press, 2020. 342 pp. ISBN: 9781108652834

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Within the past decade, the emergence and import of trans\* studies have been difficult to miss, especially for those committed to reviving intersectional queer, gender, and sexuality studies approaches. Trans\*ing as an epistemological and methodological tool kit, and trans history have become urgent topics among myriad humanistic fields, especially following the influential work of Susan Stryker, whose *Transgender History* has become a staple in undergraduate and graduate course offerings, and who continues at the joint helm of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*. Jen Manion's *Female Husbands: A Trans History* cultivates and enriches the terrain of trans history. The successes of Manion's book hinge on its ability to chart a collective premodern and modern history of trans livelihood and archival presence. While *Female Husbands* navigates the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries by locating the female husband as an elastic yet formidable figure within each of these time periods, the first section (from 1740-1810) contributes to the scholarly explosion in premodern trans\* studies, which is now readily recognizable in journal special issues, calls for papers, conferences, and publications of all sorts.

For example, in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern*, Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska write, "The archeology of knowledge production is central to transgender studies, and archival silences, gaps, and erasures bear a uniquely structuring influence on the landscape of the [premodern] field, especially when it comes to trans history and historiography" (2). Manion's deft handling of print cultures (primarily newspapers and magazines) documents how archival and trans studies can avail complementary new archaeologies of knowledge that resist the staid heteronormative violence cast upon the archive: that is, the presumption that intimacies, relations, and gendered compartments reiterate a virulent hetero-repro-normativity.<sup>1</sup>

Manion's exploration of the ostensibly fixed category of the female husband addresses *a facet of* trans history rather than the Sisyphean task of addressing all

premodern trans history. This strand of trans history speaks to, with, and in constructive tension with other premodern trans histories (as work by C. Riley Snorton; Hil Malatino; Jolene Zigarovich; Kit Heyam, and Simone Chess, Colby Gordon, and Will Fisher evidences) that expose different audiences, narrative arcs, and media by which to elucidate or deracinate the trans project. Manion's engagement with print culture and lasered attention to the term female husband suggests an important textual-conceptual pairing that can bolster a trans historical methodology. The aperture offered by *Female Husbands* prevents the reliance upon both an exceptionalism of the trans individual and a universalization that says something along the lines of, "Ta-da! That's (all of) trans history in premodernity." By rejecting this reduction, Manion locates a branch of trans history as one that runs parallel and entangled with that of the female husband.

*Female Husbands* is divided into two concentric geographies and historical periods: the first traces British husbands from 1740-1840 and the second follows American husbands from 1830-1910. In what follows, I prioritize descriptions of the first five chapters that may appeal most widely to readers of *ABO*, given the journal's historical benchmarks of 1640-1830. In full disclosure, I taught an excerpt from the monograph before I was invited to write this review. The book had recently been published, and in my excitement for innovative pedagogy following my remote teaching tribulations during the pandemic, I sought to introduce students to the field of premodern trans studies: something I know most graduate students aren't invited to explore let alone a small seminar of liberal arts students at a Predominately White Institution with a public (ongoing) record of anti-queer harassment and violence. I disclose this fact here because in re-reading Manion and having previously taught *Female Husbands*, I feel I can more effectively speak to the book's central tenets and goals.

The first of the three goals I'd like to spotlight contextualizes and texturizes the term "female husband," which, Manion avers, maintains a type of definitional disclarity. Female husbands "lived lives that in contemporary terms *might* be described as transgender, nonbinary, butch, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual" (2, italics added). The conditionality that I have highlighted emphasizes how *Female Husbands* as a trans history avoids the slippages, laminations, and clumsiness of bringing our contemporary identifications and experiences to bear on a historical past. As the book moves from eighteenth-century to twentieth-century examples,

Manion documents the malleability of the term and its circulation among British and American reading publics. Case studies that historicize female husbands such as Charles Hamilton (Chapter 1); James Howe (Chapter 2); James Gray, Samuel Bundy, William Chandler and Robert Shurtliff (Chapter 3); James Allen and Henry Stoake (Chapter 4); and George Wilson, Charles Williams, and George Johnson (Chapter 5) demonstrate the various purposes (social standing, class ascension, safety, civic duty and travel, and loyalty to the state), vocational aspirations (soldiers, sailors, spouses, tavern keepers), successes, and failures (“We must never forget that *no one* who was found out to be assigned female and living as a man [...] was allowed to continue doing so” (103)) that accompany the transing of gender these individuals modeled. The female husband “exposed what was to remain hidden and revealed the incoherence of something that was supposed to be clear,” which of course resulted in social disenfranchisement, humiliation, and, oftentimes, violence (7). Female husbands, Manion contends, resist ontological stability in service of trans histories that similarly endeavor to upheave any concretization of sex, gender, or sexuality.

Secondly, the book speaks to how a trans history coincides with and simultaneously questions the legality of marriage. The husband is of course a figure whose role is sanctified by socio-cultural institutions that legitimate hetero-repro-normativity. Manion underscores the plasticity of the term female husbands, but also zeroes in on individuals, categorized as such, whose gender nonconformity mocks the strictures of marriage. Manion poses a series of questions to consider the policing and legal loopholes of those who either identified or were branded as female husbands: “Was it because someone assigned female lived as a man? Or because the marriage legitimized sexual relations between the two? Or because two women were not allowed to marry?” (4). As these questions reveal, the female husband *de facto* questions the premises and legalities of marriage as a social and religious contract; at the same time, these figures take to task the authorization of heteronormativity as a yardstick by which the jurisprudence of marriage is measured.

The collected histories also reason that individuals like Charles Hamilton were outed and vilified for their seeming transgressions against the institution, especially as the state sought to uphold marriage as a means of safeguarding white womanhood.<sup>2</sup> Others, such as James Howe and Samuel Bundy, were not tried for

vagrancy or fraud and found their gender nonconformity welcomed by the arms of a cis-gendered woman/wife. And other marriages, like the one between James and Abigail Allen, reveal a palpable irony in which marriage “served to uplift, legitimize, and verify the manhood of female husbands,” and simultaneously jeopardized the safety and sociality of their wives—figures Manion identifies as repeatedly overlooked in queer histories and rife for further investigation (114). Manion’s pursuit of this second goal identifies a residual concern that underlines trans history: the recourse to marriage as a social and legal institution that has been and continues to be under threat.<sup>3</sup> If, as Manion notes, “female husbands were defined by both their marriages to women and their chosen occupations,” then the “extraordinary” female husband makes messy the constraints of marriage and the naturalization of its hetero-repro-normativity (2; 1).

The book’s third goal is worth lauding the most: making the case for inclusive pronouns for historically marginalized figures whose own gender nonconformity rejected the putative stability of a (false) gender—and pronoun—binary. Manion convincingly writes, “gendered language and pronouns are a tremendously powerful force that dramatically influence how we see and understand a person” (13). To that end, Manion successfully deploys they/them pronouns for all discussed female husbands to highlight “a powerful, gender neutral way to refer to someone whose gender is unknown, irrelevant, or beyond classification” (14). Manion continues, “using ‘they’ also allows me to minimize disruption and avoid a false sense of stability when writing about a person over a long period of time, marked by varied gender expression” (14). And this commitment and methodology is abundantly clear from the monograph’s first line throughout the eight chapters, conclusion, and epilogue.

For instance, in discussing Robert Shurtliff (aka Deborah Sampson), Manion contends, “my attempt to minimize the intrusiveness of normative gendered language presents an altogether different kind of intrusion, forcing the reader to distance themselves from a historic figure seemingly well known” (95). The conclusion further justifies this grammatical choice: “I wanted to allow for a trans reading of their lives without foreclosing on the idea that some may have identified with the category of woman. I also wanted to hold gender and sexuality as a web of desires and experiences that might develop, conflict, and change over time” (265). What Manion provides us here and throughout is an epistemological

methodology that can inclusively revise how we (should) do trans history. It likewise places on the pyre our lingering commitments to gendering historical figures whose identities are often relayed to us from other interlocutors, narrators, or authors: a point that Manion directly responds to in the desire to, as a historian, “understand how female husbands *understood themselves* and were perceived by others” (11, emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> In short, the types of gender fucking that something as simple as “they” can provide for us as scholars of historical fields is a breath of fresh air and elucidates a way of doing queer history—one that functions at both the grammatical and conceptual level—that can serve as a guiding light because it refuses to accommodate a historical (and enduring) legacy of social violence simply because one pronoun may be more comfortable for a scholar or reader.

My constructive criticisms of *Female Husbands* are scant: they do however meditate on moments of sunny trans historical optimism. “By reading against the grain and approaching the material and above all the subjects with compassion,” Manion concludes the introduction, “we can see the full humanity and vulnerability of those who have gone before us. And in their struggle, courage, and resilience, may we find hope for a better future” (14). Given that this is largely targeted to a general, albeit educated, audience, a powerful recuperation underlines these words. Indeed, queer recuperation has long been a flavor of queer studies. My scholarly doubt though raises questions about the types of trans futurity this imagines as they are informed by “full humanity.” A trans future predicated on *hope* concerns me because it requires a eutopic overture that is always future facing (*pace* José Esteban Muñoz).<sup>5</sup> It’s clear to me that trans futurity is not exclusively the horizon by which to access liberation, bodily autonomy, gender-affirming care, and socio-legal security. Manion documents a historical past where some of these accessibilities also live.

Moreover, in conversation with critical race and trans studies intellectuals such as C. Riley Snorton (whose work is channeled in Chapter 5), Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Sylvia Wynter, Mel Chen, and Eva Hayward, I am leery of any appeal to “full humanity” because, and Manion readily documents this, trans histories and histories of queer, gender nonconforming, and trans erasure remind us that we are always beneath or coming up short in “humanity.” I wonder, then, why we continue to admit it within our aspirational purview? If the female husbands that

Manion animates are outed and persecuted because they sidestep or transgress against a type of normative humanity in which they fail, then might we perhaps *hope* for a trans future that allows us to disavow “full humanity”? That is, if humanity has become weaponized against trans and queer people, to which the book speaks implicitly, then perhaps we can *hope against* reiterating such appeals?

Lest these constructive criticisms be considered too pointed, I’ll echo an aperçus Neel Ahuja has shared with me: *critique is a form of care*. Manion models *trans care work* (as Hil Malatino might say) in *Female Husbands* as it further legitimates and makes known trans pasts, presents, and futures.

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<sup>1</sup> By hetero-repro-normativity, I intend to pinpoint how the pernicious establishment of heteronormativity relies on procreative, penetrative sex in which hetero-reproduction is vital to and requisite for the maintenance of heteronormativity.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 5 effectively discusses how the term female husband likewise encodes and remains complicit with hegemonic whiteness, especially when Black sailors, for example, are disallowed this same nomenclature. Manion writes, “There were no African American female husbands designated as such in the press” (156).

<sup>3</sup> This point is made even starker to me as I initially write this on the day *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned by the US Supreme Court, which legal scholars have suggested will force a domino effect that makes even more precarious and defiles the rights of women (*Griswold v. Connecticut*) and queer people (*Lawrence v. Texas*; *Obergefell v. Hodges*).

<sup>4</sup> Manion later concedes the “futility of trying to parse individual feelings and motivations” considering the archive (259).

<sup>5</sup> I distinguish between the homophones utopic (literally meaning a “non place”) and eutopic (literally meaning a “good place”) because despite their sonic similitude and repeated conflation, they are not, in my mind, identical. Eutopia is always attended (and realized) by rose-colored, saccharine-sweet, optimism; utopia may be colored that way but is realized oppositely.

## Works Cited

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