Jockel on Manion, 'Female Husbands: A Trans History'

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This year, anti-transgender legislation reached an all-time high in the United States. By the late spring of 2021, thirty-eight state legislatures across the country had already introduced more than a hundred bills to restrict trans rights. A record-breaking seventeen of these regulations have been in enacted into law.[1] But this moral panic and the resulting politicization of trans people and their bodies is not an unprecedented phenomenon. Jen Manion’s new book, Female Husbands: A Trans History, demonstrates that gender-nonconforming people and the prejudices toward them have a long and complex history in the United Kingdom and eventually, the United States. The impressive study covers over two hundred years, from the origin of the term “female husbands” in 1746 through its decline just before the First World War. By detailing changing attitudes toward female husbands, the author highlights how the systematic policing of gender and sexuality through socially constructed binaries intersected with wider economic, political, and cultural forces in the Western world.

In exploring the category of female husbands, Manion grapples with the immense methodological challenges “of documenting the pasts of those subjects who are beyond categorical recognition and language” (p. 10). This recovery of queer identities and experiences from the past, especially of those people living before the twentieth century, is a point of contention in the history of sexuality. Over the last fifty years, constructivism has gained particular traction in the field. The constructivist view holds that homosexual identities have only come into existence over time, coinciding with the emergence of the language to express them, such as “gay,” “lesbian,” “trans,” “nonbinary,” and “queer.” Constructivists thus caution modern scholars against attaching these ahistorical labels to historical figures, who would not have recognized such terms themselves.

Yet Manion asserts that this approach has produced a series of limiting, traditional methodologies that render LGBTQ histories invisible. She instead seeks to provide an alternative that locates historical actors who challenged heterosexual norms, “without claiming to understand what it meant to that person or asserting any kind of fixed identity on them” (p. 11). Manion specifically defines “female husbands,” as people assigned female at birth who “transed gender” and “assumed a legal, social, and economic position reserved for men: that of a husband” (pp. 2, 1). The author’s use of trans as a verb rather than a noun is an important distinction that places concentration on process and action rather than an unknowable sense of self.

For while the private experiences and motivations of Manion’s subjects remain difficult to access, she
successfully draws on print sources to create a robust cultural and social history of female husbands. Most of the subjects in this book began transing gender in their teenage years, often living as men and assuming the legal role of husband for decades. It was generally only when some accident or incident befell them that their complicated past was revealed and committed to record. Manion uses the highly sensationalized accounts of exposed female husbands found primarily in newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets to analyze representations and changing understandings of this group as well as broader conceptions of gender. She specifically reveals how cultural attitudes towards female husbands transformed in relation to changes in gender politics and women’s rights. Manion also does the impressive work of wading through print sources which attempted mainly to scandalize to pull out the more ordinary facts regarding the everyday lives of female husbands and their wives.

This reconstructive work is perhaps best exemplified in the second chapter, about female husband James Howe and their wife, Mary. As the chapter title, “The Pillar of Community,” suggests, the couple were well respected in the neighborhood of Poplar, London, where they owned and operated the popular White Horse Tavern. Manion explains that the Howes lived a stable and content life until their security was disrupted by a woman named Mrs. Bentley who recognized the pair from childhood and threatened to “out” them as female. Mrs. Bentley extorted the Howes from 1750 until 1766, when James Howe decided to “undo their own public gender” (p. 46). By this time Mary had died, and Manion posits that James’s new status as a widower did less to reinforce their gender than their previous role as husband. Furthermore, James was fed up with Mrs. Bentley’s increased demands for money and her escalating methods. She had recently recruited people to intimidate and physical assault Howe. Thus, the former James Howe made the decision to publicly identify themselves as female and began using the legal name Mary East. When Howe sued Mrs. Bentley and her associate William Barrick for harassment and extortion, they dressed in women’s clothing for court.

Manion details how the trial was covered in the local, regional, and international press, with much made of the “Mistress of the White Horse at Poplar (who for many years kept the said house), dressed in man’s cloaths” (p. 47). James Howe quickly became the most famous female husband of the eighteenth century. However, the woman they built and shared a life with was never mentioned by name. Manion sees the failure to recognize Mary as a “radical actor in the newspaper accounts or the scholarship” as calculated rejection of her agency (p. 54). Mary was unique in the fact that she knew, without doubt, when she entered in her relationship that her husband’s gender was different than their assigned sex. The two had come up with the plan to live as husband and wife when they were teenagers. This differed significantly from the many wives of female husbands that the newspapers portrayed as ignorant women tricked into their marriages. Mary purposefully and knowingly rejected a relationship with a cisgender man and the possibility of children, choosing instead to create a life, business, and respected reputation with a female husband. In this, Manion explains Mary challenged “all laws and expectations governing women” and was, therefore, perhaps an even greater threat to social order than James Howe (p. 55).

The case of the Howes is also unique in that it was written about for more than a hundred years. The development of the articles over time reflects a transition in which the press turned on female husbands. Manion notes that contemporary articles roundly asserted that James Howe was a man. Thirty years of living as a man and a husband solidified this status. Reports of the trial even commented on how awkward Howe appeared wearing women’s clothes in court. Manion argues that the community’s and press’s affirmation of Howe’s male embodiment “reminds us that late
eighteenth-century theories of gender have much in common with those of the twenty-first century. Gender was presented as something malleable that was shaped over time” (p. 55). Yet as coverage extended into the nineteenth century, editorial commentary came to mock the couple’s relationship and James’s gender, with writers increasingly telling Howe’s story without referencing their male identity or pronouns at all. Manion explains that this phenomenon, which she documents elsewhere, was linked to a growing concern over feminism and women’s potential independence.

*Female Husbands* offers important interventions into the historiography of gender, sexuality, print culture, and transgender studies. However, it should be noted that the book is primarily focused on white, working-class people, who lived and labored in industrial urban centers. Manion is sensitive to this and clarifies that white gender-nonconforming people had the privilege to legitimize themselves through working-class respectability and nuclear family in way that was not readily available to blacks. She explains that this contributed to the fact that “there were no African American female husbands designated as such in the press” (p. 156). Manion also recognizes that white female husbands contributed not only to heteronormative standards but also to the shoring up of white imperialism by participating in settler-colonial projects such as the genocide of American Indians and the enslavement of Africans and African Americans. Despite these acknowledgments, those looking for a fully fleshed history of nonwhite LGBTQ actors or queer people in rural spaces will still need to look elsewhere. In terms of geographical coverage, some scholars may also be disappointed with the seemingly uneven concentration in the United Kingdom. The majority of the reported cases of female husbands occurred in England, with only a handful of documented incidents in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Though a seemingly fruitful topic for analysis, the author does not address possible reasons for this disparity. This is a slight oversight in an otherwise deeply thoughtful text.

Note


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