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Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge University Press, 2020)

In trans history, it can be all about the pronouns. In the past, scholars have sometimes shifted between “he” and “she” based on a historical subject’s self-presentation. Jen Manion made what I think is the better choice in using the generic “they” for the subjects of this book, regardless of what sex they were assigned at birth, how they presented themselves, or how others perceived them. At the same time, this usage has the potential to create another problem, which is that the pronoun “they” can evoke a transgender subjectivity, in the contemporary sense, when in reality we do not know much about how these female husbands thought of themselves.

All of which is to say that Manion is sensitive to these issues, using generic pronouns to signal the “gender transing” involved in becoming and being a female husband, a person assigned female at birth who presented themselves as a man and married a woman assigned female at birth. Manion focuses on such individuals in the United Kingdom and United States from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century, the period during which the term was in use in newspapers and court documents and public discourse, although its meaning changed over time and place. Responses to female husbands shifted as well, from the public whipping of the first publicly recognized female husband to a public association of female husbands with the women’s rights movement in the mid-nineteenth century United States and, at the end of the story, an understanding of female husbands as essentially partners in same-sex marriages.

Many of the individuals Manion discusses are mentioned in the existing literature on transgender and queer history, but some are not, and even those whose names are known are much more fully fleshed out here. That is in part, as Manion tells us, because of the advances in

digital archiving. The level of detail that Manion provides, having tracked down census records and court documents and newspaper reports, is astonishing.

Female husbands stand out from others assigned female at birth who transed gender by marrying women, raising the specter of sexual activity between the couple, which made geographical and occupational mobility not the only possible motivations for the move. The marriages also raised uncertainty about what the wives knew and wanted, another question not at all easily answered. Manion excels at telling us everything we can know from the record, speculating with “perhaps” or “may have” hedges or asking pointed questions along the way, and only in one instance going beyond the record. In this case, Manion tells us that Charles Hamilton in the 1740s “did something that made [their wife] Mary feel so good that she did not question Hamilton’s manhood for *two entire months*” [p. 22]. It is not out of the question that this was the case, but we do not really know how Mary felt.

Manion uses these fascinating stories to show how the case of female husbands reveal societal shifts in thinking about gender, sex, and the relationship between the two. *Female Husbands* is a persuasive argument for why trans history offers central insights into not just our contemporary world of gender and sexuality but also the complex ways that gender is fashioned, over time, through the acts of individuals, responses of communities, and dissemination of stories.

Leila J. Rupp