

## INTRODUCTION: EXTRAORDINARY LIVES

**I**N 1746, CHARLES HAMILTON OF GLASTONBURY, England found what they were looking for – Mary, a curious young woman who was taken by their charms. With the approval of the girl’s aunt, the pair were joined in marriage and set off on a honeymoon. Hamilton had little money and no family. But they were resourceful, determined, and charismatic. They offered Mary companionship and adventure. As someone who was assigned female at birth, Hamilton became known as a female husband. Nearly one hundred years later and across the Atlantic, the *Journal of Commerce* ran a story called, “Extraordinary Case of a Female Husband.” Scottish immigrant George Wilson was found passed out on the streets of New York’s Lower East Side. A policeman took them into the station. Wilson was just another poor laborer who drank too much after a long day of work. But as someone who was raised as a girl and now lived as a man, they were incredibly vulnerable to harassment, violence, and punishment at the hands of the authorities.

Hamilton, Wilson, and dozens of others like them were designated “female husbands” – a term that persistently circulated throughout Anglo-American culture for nearly 200 years to describe people who defied categorization. Though assigned female at birth, female husbands assumed a legal, social, and economic position reserved for men: that of husband. Female husbands were presented as shocking and controversial figures, often with headlines featuring the word “extraordinary.” By their very existence, they challenged essentialist understandings of sexual difference. They demonstrated by their actions every day that gender was malleable and not a result of one’s sex. In their ability to flirt, charm, and attract female wives, they threatened the stability of the

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institution of heterosexual marriage. They lived lives that in contemporary terms might be described as transgender, nonbinary, butch, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual. They were often said to have assumed the “character of a man.”

*Female Husbands: A Trans History* follows the category of the “female husband” from its origin in 1746 through its demise just before World War I. The book highlights the very fact that people assigned female at birth chose to trans gender and live fully as men, in small towns and big cities, in the UK and the US. They found joy and love in intimate partnerships with women, often entering into legal marriages recognized by the state. These relationships set them apart from the numerous other groups who transed genders for work, war, and adventure. Female husbands were defined by both their marriages to women and their chosen occupations. People persisted in living as men despite tremendous risk, danger, violence, and punishment. Punishment often involved the forced surrender of one’s gender expression – even if just momentarily until they were in a new town, outside of the gaze of local authorities. When husbands were outed as being assigned female at birth, newspapers were often the first to spread the word throughout the community. The press reported such accounts enthusiastically and frequently, exposing dynamic, contested, and varied stories of love, courage, risk, loss, and sadness. I utilize these accounts to offer a rigorous social history of the lives lived by female husbands as well as a cultural history of the category of the “female husband.”<sup>1</sup>

*Female Husbands* shows how the meaning of what seemed like a self-evident category changed over time. Beginning in England in the mid-eighteenth century, female husbands lived full time as men and entered legal, seemingly heterosexual marriages with women. One of the most celebrated and stable relationships was that of James and Mary Howe who together ran the White Horse Tavern in the Poplar neighborhood of London’s East End for decades. While the couple were held in great esteem by the community and acquired significant wealth for working people, even James shared the same fate of every female husband featured in this book: none were permitted to continue going about their lives in their chosen gender expression once the community determined they were assigned female at birth. Gender

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conformity itself was the punishment required by authorities and neighbors alike.

While much was made about why and how people assigned female at birth transformed themselves into men, the female lovers who married them are equally intriguing. Female wives were sometimes portrayed as innocent victims of deception, though they were often active participants who knowingly and happily chose to enter these unconventional partnerships. Sometimes female wives disavowed their husbands, declaring ignorance about their lovers' sex. Female wives of female husbands are often overlooked and neglected as queer figures of the past. The newspaper record of such relationships has shaped this sexism, as accounts often don't even include the wives' names. Despite this public erasure, female wives held a tremendous amount of power in their marriages (especially for the time) because they could publicly denounce their husband's gender at any time. Wives were known to do this under two circumstances: when they were surprised to find out their husband was female or when their husband denied them a divorce on favorable terms. There is no denying that female wives gave legitimacy and stability to the gender of female husbands in the eyes of co-workers, friends, and society.

Female husbands were primarily viewed through the lens of gender – given their claim to manhood – until the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Around mid-century, views and representations of female husbands began to change. The UK press largely lost interest in such stories, possibly because they occurred less frequently but probably because the concept had run its course as an attention-grabbing headline that sold papers. The US press grew by leaps and bounds during this era and adopted this longstanding British custom as its own. In US newspapers in the 1840s and 1850s, female husbands were seen as a part of the growing women's rights movement. In the 1870s, they were associated with poverty and vagrancy. By the 1880s, they were cast as precursors to and legitimizers of same-sex relationships. Accounts of female husbands in the news increasingly emphasized sex over gender – arguing that those assigned female were really women and therefore could not be husbands.

Authorities remained uncertain about how to react to those who transed gender and often struggled to determine if any laws were

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broken. Countless people who were arrested for transing gender later explained that they were released because they had not broken any law. Female husbands presented a particular conundrum for authorities charged with determining the basis of their wrongdoing. 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? Even when authorities weren't clear about the exact wrong committed by a female husband and their wife, they knew it was up to them to get to the bottom of a situation and decide. In this process, they reveal to us how they understood sexual difference and why the social conventions of gender were important to them.

In the 1880s and 1890s, accounts of female husbands exploded in the US, as those assigned female at birth who lived as men and married women were increasingly visible. The press still found these stories newsworthy. The catchy "female husband" headline, however, was used in reference to a wider range of people and circumstances, diluting its meaning. For instance, someone assigned male at birth who lived as a man was accused by their wife of being a "female husband" in an attempt to secure a divorce. Another writer wondered, given the rise of heterosexual married women in the workforce, if in fact "females" made good husbands and could be entrusted with such duties. One-half of a couple who lived openly as women in a same-sex relationship also earned the designation, as the concept lost its association with female masculinity, conflict, and duality. By the turn of the twentieth century, female husband was no longer a clear signifier of manhood and transing.

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I came out as a lesbian in 1994. It was something I had recently figured out and felt excited about sharing with others. To my surprise, several people said they "had suspected" as much or had "always known." How could they have known it when I didn't? It quickly became clear that the basis for their remarks had nothing to do with my sexuality, per se, and everything to do with gender. When I came out as a lesbian, it *seemed* to explain my lifelong refusal to conform to expectations for people raised

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as girls. For as long as I can remember, I was interested in the activities and clothes that were generally reserved for boys. I was largely met with judgment, shame, and punishment for these tendencies, yet I persisted. But in 1994, my gender nonconformity was seen as proof or evidence of my homosexuality; I made sense.

The association between gender nonconformity and homosexuality was argued by numerous sexologists around the turn of the twentieth century. They used the phrase “sexual invert” to describe people who were attracted to members of the same sex while also exhibiting gender characteristics of the other sex. It was anchored in a heteronormative framework, presuming that for someone to have same-sex desire, they had to shift (or invert) their gender identification. In this model, as I often tell my students, people like me were seen as “true” homosexuals while those who conformed to gender norms were not seen as homosexuals. Feminine and/or femme women were thought to be victims of circumstance, deception, or seduction.

My students generally find all of this shocking, hilarious, and/or upsetting, for a variety of reasons. When I offer open acknowledgment of my gender in this way, it gives students permission to laugh and sigh; *to know what they see, but have been taught not to see*. Somewhere along the way, most of them determined that anyone could be gay (regardless of gender expression) and that it was stereotyping and homophobic to equate female masculinity with homosexuality. There is a view that homosexuality transcends – rather than incorporates – gender. Gender conversations are increasingly relegated to self-disclosing transgender and nonbinary subjects.

In the one hundred and some odd years since sexologists fused gender nonconformity with homosexuality, we have learned the limits and bias of this view. LGBTQ organizations now argue that gender is distinct from sexual orientation, one having no bearing on the other. This allows that transgender people might be straight – or gay, bi, pan, or queer. It allows that people who *seem to conform* to gender norms can still be queer – or lesbian, gay, bi, or pan. This logic fights against centuries of stereotyping that conflates male effeminacy or female masculinity with homosexuality. It resists the privileging of trans people who identify as

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straight after transitioning over those who identify as gay. Scholars and activists have challenged and shown the flaws in this early research by sexologists. How does this book speak to these questions?

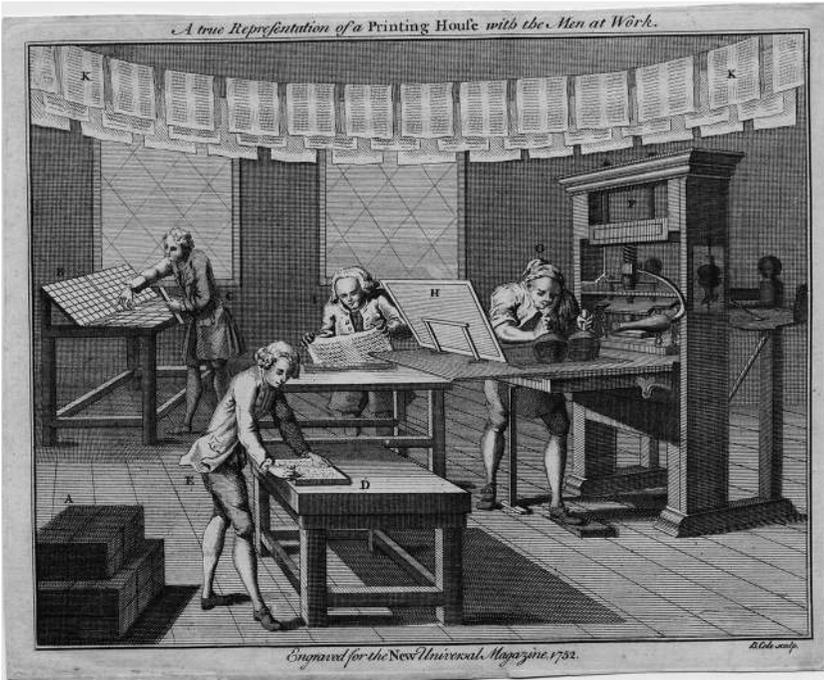
Anyone reading old newspapers with some frequency will eventually run into one or more accounts of people transing gender. For years, friends and colleagues sent me such clippings, knowing of my interest in learning more about gender nonconformity and same-sex desire in the past. I knew there were many such accounts in nineteenth-century newspapers that are filled with contradictions. At the very least, I suspected they would offer ample evidence of a wide variety of gender variant experiences and expressions. I was not sure how sexuality would figure in such accounts, but I knew there was a “pre” story to be told about the argument that gender nonconformity was the sign of same-sex desire in women.

Because most people assigned female at birth had so little access to economic advancement, educational achievement, or legal autonomy, no one was surprised when they claimed the rights and privileges reserved for men – especially white men. This idea was logical to men who believed themselves to be superior to women; they could easily reconcile why – in their eyes – a woman would want to be a man.<sup>2</sup> In this equation, being a man meant social, economic, and political power. Some men accepted this, others mocked it, and still others rejected it, but they had a clear framework for understanding why someone assigned female at birth might want to live as a man. This explanation, however, is too simple.

As we shall see, by centering the lives of female husbands and contextualizing them in relation to accounts of others who transed genders, new patterns emerge. In the case of female husbands in particular, it is impossible to isolate economic and social power from gender and sexual freedom. Sexual freedom – including the freedom to have sex with women, to not have sex with men, or to not have sex at all – was at the heart of the vast range of social powers that accompanied manhood. And, tragically, it was a key practice for which female husbands were punished.

Female husband accounts offer us a window into the historic construction of sexual difference as well as precious evidence about what it meant for someone assigned female at birth to live as a husband.<sup>3</sup> Female husbands invite us to grapple with what exactly gender is.<sup>4</sup> Female

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**Figure I.1** B. Cole, “A True Representation of a Printing Houle with the Men at Work,” 1752. The expansion of the popular press facilitated the spread of stories of female husbands.

Image courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

husbands challenged notions of sexual difference, refusing total coherence and stability for both heterosexuality and the categories of “male” and “female.” They exposed what was to remain hidden and revealed the incoherence of something that was supposed to be clear. For this, they were deemed social outliers and marginalized historic subjects.

It turns out that newspapers played a crucial role in the circulation of information about female husbands (Figure I.1). In the eighteenth century, they reported a wide variety of local, regional, and even international news. In choosing the tone, length, and section for any given story, editors crafted narratives that gave meaning to events. The newspaper became even more influential than books or theater in the nineteenth century with the rise of the daily paper. The public life of print culture was expansive, as people shared copies of papers and read stories aloud in pubs, coffee houses, reading circles, boarding houses, boarding

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schools, shop floors, and lending libraries. There is no reason to believe that cost presented a barrier to working and poor people's access to the news, given this very public and collective nature of news consumption.<sup>5</sup>

By printing news of female husbands, the press asserted the inclusion of this group in civil society. All types of British newspapers reported on female husbands, from late eighteenth-century dailies devoted to advertising, such as *Public Advertiser* and *General Advertiser*, to the established papers aimed at middle-class interests, including the *Morning Post*, the *Morning Chronicle*, and the *Standard*, to cheap late nineteenth-century weeklies, such as *Tit-Bits*. The North American press was no more discriminate. Features about female husbands can be found in eighteenth-century stalwarts the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and the *Pennsylvania Packet* and in every imaginable local and regional paper amid the mid-nineteenth-century press explosion. The *New York Times* ran stories in the 1870s that included more fiction and were less reliable than small-town upstate papers. Though the widely popular men's sporting tabloid the *National Police Gazette* began to regularly feature such accounts in the 1880s, they were no more detailed or scandalous than accounts published in mainstream dailies for over a hundred years. The nearly indiscriminate and continuous reprinting of accounts across colonial and national borders signaled both fascination and concern about sexual difference, gender roles, and marriage.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond newspapers, a variety of print sources made transing gender even more visible and normalized for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers. Books, pamphlets, and dime novels seldom referenced female husbands in particular, but these publications established context for gender transing generally. Political magazines and religious sermons expanded the conversation about acceptable gender by invoking the adjective "masculine" as a slur to criticize women involved in any number of activist endeavors, especially concerning the abolition of slavery and women's rights generally. Police reports featured those arrested for transing gender, raising broad public awareness of such practices while criminalizing them in the process. Together, these print sources both captured and further advanced a robust public debate about what kinds of gender expressions and rights were desirable, possible, or tolerable.<sup>7</sup>

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For better and for worse, the history of gender and sexuality has been shaped by modern concepts and categories. This has led to an abundance of powerful and important books documenting contemporary LGBTQ communities, especially when the subjects of study concern the post-1950s era. Histories of earlier periods are less legible as explicitly “queer” histories. Our contemporary belief that gender and sexuality are identities that individuals articulate has dramatically skewed our view of the long-ago past. We are less interested in the significance of rebellion against systemic gender norms in the absence of a declaration of selfhood. We are less able to even see such expressions when the words used to describe them do not line up with our current vocabularies.

For this reason, the origins of modern lesbian identities have long been debated. European historians generally point to the late eighteenth century, focusing on women who were sexually attracted exclusively to other women and adopted some “masculine behaviors” so that they might be noticed (think Anne Lister of the BBC/HBO show *Gentleman Jack*). This “sapphist” paradigm excluded feminine women who also had sexual involvement with men, as well as those who lived as men and were referred to as “passing women.”<sup>8</sup> There is no place for female husbands and female wives as queer ancestors in this sapphic paradigm. An important body of work in both British and US history charts intimate friendships between gender-conforming women throughout the nineteenth century as historic antecedents to modern lesbianism.<sup>9</sup> Somewhere along the line, it became common practice for scholars to *minimize* gender differences and to *elevate* same-sex attraction as the driving force behind such partnerships. If one person was masculine or seemed to embrace men’s clothing and character, this gender expression was seen as a means to an end – a relationship with a woman. The scholarship on female husbands follows this same logic, emphasizing sex and minimizing gender.<sup>10</sup> Just where female husbands stand on a lesbian to transgender continuum is unclear and in many ways depends on the particular case. Jack Halberstam wrote, “While it is true that transgender and transsexual men have been wrongly folded into lesbian history, it is also true that the distinctions between some transsexuals and lesbians may at times become quite blurry.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, it can be impossible to make accurate generalizations about the border between gender and sexuality or the border between genders.

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Until relatively recently, judges willfully refused to speak of same-sex intimacies, denying us legal verification in cases that were public; diarists and letter-writers self-censored and wrote in euphemisms and analogies, offering us suggestions easily disputed by historians; family guardians and archivists would further purge evidence that might scandalize a reputation when offering papers to a historical society. Records were never meant to provide information about illicit non-procreative sexualities. The fact that historians continue to argue that the absence of such evidence constitutes its nonexistence reveals the limits of historical method and the lie of objectivity. Maybe it is time that we embrace – rather than continue to fight – the ephemeral nature of sex, especially the way that illicit, non-normative, non-procreative sex eludes the archives’ reach, refusing any notion of certainty or permanence.

*Female Husbands* attempts to do just that, exploring the complex role played by the female husband in the changing understanding of sexual difference as well as the emergence of heterosexuality as an ideal relationship form. It principally explores the relationship between sex and gender, while examining sexuality secondarily. Throughout, I show that female husbands belonged to a category that was never simply woman or man. It was effectively a trans position, in one way or another, affirmed through accounts that move back and forth between masculine and feminine descriptors and male and female pronouns. Female husbands were put into a political category when they were outed; they did not control the narratives that were crafted about them. Gender is relational, external, and often out of our control. Female husband narratives attest to the importance of external recognition in defining and stabilizing gender.

Accounts of the past nakedly demonstrate this dynamic of external recognition. With each passing sentence about the men of this town or the women of that city, the categories are rendered natural and a simple gender binary is reproduced. Though often qualified by racial, class, occupation, and family status descriptors, man and woman still stand as the solid nouns, further obscuring the multiplicities and instabilities of the past.<sup>12</sup> This book aspires to grapple with the challenge of documenting the pasts of those subjects who are beyond categorical recognition and language, embracing the role of gendered