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Rachel Mesch, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 360 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $30.00 U.S. (cl). 9781503606739. $30 U.S. (eb). 9781503612358.

Review by Anna Kłosowska, Miami University

"A Trans-Feminist History: Gender Exile, Rage, and the Archive"

Rachel Mesch's compelling new book, *Before Trans*, is a literary biography of three nineteenth-century figures assigned female at birth. I devoured the entire book with great relish in a few summer days. Especially the first one hundred pages and the capable introduction and conclusion will be a success in an undergraduate class. The book has much to recommend it, and may also be a great present for someone who is not reading for work: it was shortlisted for mainstream prizes.

Because it is planned as a successful crossover academic/mainstream book, there is no jargon, and the book is an easy and pleasant read. The careful, extensive documentation and expert discussions are hinted at in the footnotes. The downside for TSLGBTQ+ readers is that one has to silently "translate" the pronouns, which follow mainstream conventions of a few years ago, something that students have to be warned about. Every book on trans studies was already dated before it was page-set; the mainstream books more so.

The three literary life trajectories of Mesch's protagonists could not be more different—the contrasts make the book even more interesting—but they shared the condition that Mesch calls "gender exile" (p. 216), a phrase worth retaining. The book "recovers gender variance in the past" (p. 285) and shows that being trans or gender creative is, emphatically, not a new or historically unprecedented phenomenon— indeed, the book's title alone might be worth a class discussion. The three figures, to borrow the words of the contemporary Canadian author and educator Ivan Coyote, were "not trapped in the wrong body," they were "trapped in a world that makes very little space for bodies like" theirs (cited by Mesch, p. 276).

The convincingly proven main thesis is that gender creative figures are often writers or artists, and that they are preoccupied and sometimes obsessed with autobiography and self-fashioning, because there is no ready-made or easily accessible language for their experience. Instead, they mine history and produce fiction to create that language and enable that access. Because this pattern is so amply documented by Mesch in these three literary biographies, Mesch's book constitutes an important answer to a puzzle we have all encountered as readers of trans archives—their volume and their historical nature. Allow me to explain. Take, for example, the figure of Eon (also known as Chevalier or Chevalière d'Eon, 1728-1810), French soldier and spy, exhibition fencer and author who lived as a man and a woman and later (when forced) as exclusively a woman. Both Havelock Ellis's eonism and the Beaumont society are named after this figure. Eon's papers—more than 3,500 pages—constitute an impossibly vast holograph and print archive. Now in the Brotherton Special Collections at the University of Leeds, UK, the archive was written and

assembled by Eon. When I say assembled, I mean that literally: Eon used clothes' pins to hold various documents together, the practice at the time. It is as if the sartorial and the auctorial are a continuum, working in concert to satisfy the necessity and compulsion to self-document and find ancestors. Eon's abiding concern is to contextualize their gender creativity by finding a historical precedent in the light of which gender creativity is justified, sanctioned, heroic. We see Mesch's protagonists at work on the same project.

Language (she/he) shoehorns these people's experience into terms that are inadequate—here's a euphemism!—although precise. By contrast, narratives and storytelling, document hoarding and archiving, enable gender creative authors to elaborate and inhabit stories of gender that better express their experience and assume their rightful place in a glorious cortège of history and genealogy: the Desert Saints' lives, Jeanne d'Arc, Timoléon de Choisy, Eon, and others.

The three nineteenth-century authors portrayed by Mesch—Jane Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Marc de Montifaud—were assigned female at birth, but as we mentioned, their relationship to that designation is different in each case. Mesch's specialism is literary history of nineteenth-century feminisms, and thus she is able—perhaps better than anyone else—to make an irrefutable case and demonstrate that each of these three authors in their specific way and for different reasons rejects being categorized, including as women or feminists. As Mesch puts it: "to examine these figures productively requires feminist and trans studies approaches working together, in order to account for both the affinities and the differences, and to allow for depth"; these figures demonstrate "hidden dimensions within earlier acts of resistance" and their resistance is "not always about advocacy…for women," but rather a part of the fight for "freedom from gender determinacy": a trans-feminist history, as she calls it, as some of them created a "unique brand of feminism, which was predicated on *not* identifying with… women" (p. 286). Explicitly not feminists, and in some cases or at some periods in their life not women, or men, each of the three protagonists is a different gender creative and trans ancestor.

The three figures inhabit very different milieus—elite Catholic, *avant-garde* bohemian, upper-class—but all engage in recognizably similar storytelling, make important sartorial and pronoun choices, and privately amass and annotate a historical archive of predecessors. These activities throw into relief the fact that there is no preexisting mainstream language or vocabulary, sartorial or otherwise, that expresses an adequate notion of gender for each of these figures. Archiving, writing, and self-fashioning—what we now call gender creativity or transness—and not feminism or being a woman are the optic through which each figure understands themselves, says Mesch.

The biography of Jane Dieulafoy, for whom the ancient Persian collection in the Louvre is named, opens the book. Dieulafoy was a *salonière*, a lecturer, a Catholic, and a fearless soldier in the war of 1870: she joined her husband on the frontlines immediately upon getting married. Later, the couple excavated Darius's palace in Susa, in Khusistan, southwestern Iran. As directors of this famous archeological exploration, the Dieulafoys were aided and abetted by the typical architecture of surface legalities resting on deeply unethical foundations. Persian governments and intellectuals in the 1890s and 1900s protested against these abuses; at the time, their corrupt government officials were bought off. The artifacts now in Tehran and in the Dieulafoy collection in the Louvre can give us some idea of the magnificence of the palace of Darius, who united Egypt and Persia under his rule. Darius's gigantic statue, now in Teheran (discovered in 1972), was

quarried and carved in Hammat, near Thebes in Egypt, and transported around the Arab Peninsula, via the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf and on to Susa. Perhaps best known is the palace's polychrome, glazed brick frieze that presents powerful and handsome marching archers against a Tiffany blue backdrop—Dieulafoy called them "my sons" and treated them with anxious care and deep love the name implies. Similarly iconic are the massive kneeling bulls that constitute the upper part of a seventy-foot limestone column, one of the thirty-six in the *apadana* or audience hall of Darius's fifth-century BCE palace (now in the Louvre). It is a great but missed opportunity, given the public's current interests in ethics of museum collections, postcolonial, and critical race studies, that Mesch only briefly hints at the unethical provenance of that collection and the abuses perpetrated by the Dieulafoys, but one hopes that she will explore that important archive, which she masters so well, in future publications. A *Légion d'honneur* recipient and a celebrity in a conservative, intellectual, elite Catholic milieu, Dieulafoy invariably wore men's clothing in public. It is what women did at the time, it was their work uniform—recall Rosa Bonheur wearing men's clothes to sketch *The Horse Fair*, her gigantic painting (1852-55, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York)—but there is much more to this than a practical solution, as Mesch compellingly shows. Dieulafoy published historical novels on trans and gender creative characters—one is set at the time of the French Revolution, the other is medieval—and privately collected and annotated an archive of publications about gender creative figures initially assigned as women.

The second protagonist, Rachilde grew up an isolated child in a violent, abusive family. As Mesch notes, Rachilde switched between gender designations since early childhood. Rachilde was also a product of a spiritist milieu, which enabled nineteenth-century women, including women with disabilities, to be considered equals of men, assume important leadership roles, and publish: Rachilde is the name of the eighteenth-century Swedish nobleman whose voice the author mediated in séances as a teenager. Having arrived in Paris in late teens and struggling to make a living as a writer, Rachilde published a successful and promptly censored novel, *Monsieur Vénus*, whose protagonists are a married couple who trade gender roles. The groom later orchestrates the murder of the bride but continues to make love to her effigy. Improbably enough, the lurid tale was presumed to be autobiographical. Describing Rachilde's sexual life and gender creativity on the basis of an archive of personal correspondence and other documentation, Mesch points out that Rachilde presented as a boy and dressed in women's clothes for costume balls, a configuration Rachilde also projected onto fictional protagonists. Rachilde's personal correspondence reveals a number of other elements reflected in Rachilde's fictions: sexual assault, fear of pregnancy, autoeroticism, and erotic frustration rooted in gender dysphoria. Rachilde's fictions, Mesch writes, are "a lifelong effort to theorize gender" (p. 154). Rachilde distinguishes between the gender of the body vs. the soul and projects multiple, fluid combinations that result from such a split onto contrasting fraternal pairs of fictional characters, transforming both their souls and bodies—through surgery and other means. Rachilde also experimented with fictional animal hybrids. In these and many other ways, Rachilde's fictions reflect what Eva Hayward or Jack Halberstam may describe as "the desire for forms of embodiment that are necessarily impossible and yet deeply desired" (Halberstam, cited by Mesch, p. 162). After a period when Rachilde presented as a young man, Rachilde permanently transitioned to wearing dresses, starting from the time of marriage and maternity. Mesch suggests that Rachilde is best understood through repeated rejection of feminism—"because I am not a woman" (p. 190)—and through the description of one of the fictional characters who "would have been a man," except that the character was not attracted to

women (p. 174). Similarly, although Rachilde had both gay men and straight women as friends and mentors, with only one exception, all of Rachilde's liaisons, crushes, and obsessions were identified as men.

All three figures portrayed by Mesch were married. It seems that these marriages helped the three authors assigned as female at birth to more easily establish themselves as literati, sometimes in collaboration and always with the support of their spouses, but in other ways their three partnerships were completely dissimilar. Dieulafoy's marriage was a love match of intellectual and archeologist collaborators; Rachilde's was a marriage of convenience, although a romantic marriage for the husband; Montifaud's was a society marriage of intellectual peers—Montifaud was countess of Quivogne. Rachilde had a daughter. Montifaud, much more comfortably situated, had a son named Marc (an exclusively masculine name in French) after his parent.

Marc de Montifaud and Paul Erasme were the professional names of the art historian and historian. Free-thinking and anticlerical, Montifaud authored the *Life of Mary Magdalene* in the wake of Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus*. Montifaud was also the author of a titillating edition of *Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, an admirer of Sappho, a painter; an editor of Choisy and other libertine fiction, and a novelist who specialized in humor and erotic fiction. Initially, the masculine attire served as a protection when Montifaud was fleeing a conviction for pornography, but it became permanent. Mesch emphasizes two aspects of Montifaud's literary production shared with gender creative and trans authors—the first is the shared situation of diaspora or exile, the second is the shared emotion of rage. Montifaud was prescient in that this author and others understood, ahead of their time, that "the problem was not with [Montifaud] but with everybody else" (p. 276). Travel, exile, and diaspora are "fitting metaphors for a sense of gender exile," in the words of the contemporary American author Jennifer Finney Boylan: "making a difficult…crossing. Arriving at last in a new world, the land of promise, the land of freedom. But never quite fitting in, in the new land, always speaking with a trace of a foreign accent" (cited by Mesch, p. 272).

Contrasting and complementary, Mesch's three literary biographies form a remarkable and lasting contribution to the fields of nineteenth-century French, trans, gender, and feminist studies. The book frees its three protagonists from their previous feminist *avant la lettre* category to show how, each in their own way, these three authors embodied, researched, archived, and narrated gender creative lives.

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