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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.

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In 2018, a bitter controversy pitted the United Kingdom's York Civic Trust against members of the U.K.'s "rainbow alliance"—a loose consortium of individuals from the British LGBTQ+ community. It also fractured bonds within the community itself. The fuse that lit the fire concerned the first commemorative rainbow plaque to honor a queer person from British history. The object of this honor, Anne Lister, is often described as either "the U.K.'s first modern lesbian" or as a cross-dressing "marriage equality pioneer." [1] The controversy over the Lister plaque offers a particularly cogent entry into the wider debates about identity, language, and historical memory that lie at the heart of the book under discussion here, Rachel Mesch's beautifully written triple biography, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France*.

Anne Lister (1791-1840) was a gender-nonconforming English landowner, businessperson, mountaineer, and scholar from West Yorkshire whose erotic exploits with other women came to light after decrypted excerpts from Lister's diaries were published by Helena Whitbread in 1988. The diaries are considered so significant that they were added to UNESCO's "Memory of the World" historic register in 2011. In recognition of Lister's international importance, the York Historic Trust decided to commemorate the consecration of Lister's union with Ann Walker in 1834 at York's Holy Trinity Church Goodramgate. When the Trust posted a plaque memorializing this event outside the church entrance, they unwittingly collided with an issue that perplexes the writing of non-normative histories more broadly: the problem of naming. In short, what are the consequences of imposing modern identity categories on non-normative historical subjects? For the York Civic Trust, it was not their decision to recognize Anne Lister, but the words that they used to do so, that incited outrage.

The first plaque the York Civic Trust produced read: "Anne Lister / 1791-1840 / Gender non-conforming entrepreneur. Celebrated marital commitment, without legal recognition, to Ann Walker in this church. Easter, 1834." The plaque's text emphasized two points: first, Lister's cross-gender presentation (also highlighted in the 2019 Netflix mini-series based on Lister's life, *Gentleman Jack*); and second, Lister's marriage to a person of the same gender. It was the absence of the word "lesbian" from the original plaque that triggered impassioned arguments between radical lesbian feminists and transgender activists. The York Civic Trust was caught in the crossfire.

After acrimonious debate, the York Civic Trust replaced the first plaque with a second one that read: "Anne Lister / 1791-1840 / of Shibden Hall, Halifax. Lesbian and Diarist; took sacrament here to seal her union with Ann Walker / Easter 1834." Before producing this new—and final—

iteration, the Trust made several assertions. First, they acknowledged that retrospectively applying current terminology to Lister's sexual practices and gender performance was necessarily fraught. Second, opposing those who argued that the term "gender-nonconforming" erased Lister's sexuality, they claimed that sexual practices and gender performances are not mutually exclusive, stating "trans people can be lesbian, and lesbians can be trans." [2] (Why they nonetheless chose not to identify Lister as a "gender-nonconforming *lesbian*" on the first plaque remains unclear). Third, they reiterated that the plaque was intended as a tribute to Anne and Ann taking sacrament together at Holy Trinity. Finally, fourth, they committed to rewriting the text of the plaque such that it would reflect Lister's own sense of sexual and gender identity, as expressed in diaries and letters.

In his assessment of the Lister plaque controversy, Simon Joyce pinpoints inconsistencies at the core of the Trust's multi-part response. Most importantly, Joyce remarks that the Trust's quest for "historical fidelity" founders on "a set of [anachronistic] presuppositions" that reveal "an impossible standard of accuracy"; i.e., the Trust presumes that a close reading of Lister's writings will reveal that Lister *had* a sexual and/or gender identity, and that—this being so—the Trust will be able to name it. In contrast, Joyce argues that whilst such identifications may make sense today (when our sexual and gender expressions are believed—following Foucault—to divulge "unimpeachable truth[s] about ourselves"), the very concept of sexual or gendered subjectivity "made no sense" in the U.K. in the early nineteenth-century. [3] As Rachel Mesch is acutely aware, such anachronistic presuppositions also pose problems when applied to non-binary historical actors in late nineteenth-century France. In *Before Trans* she nevertheless proposes that a "trans framework" can be used to "shine a light on earlier figures who resisted gender norms" (p. 8). Mesch is not claiming that her subjects *were* trans, but rather that a modern trans framework can help us make sense of gender variant performances that have, to date, been explained as evidence of eccentricity, feminism, or queer desire, and *not* primarily as forms of gender trouble. But such trouble existed and its manifestation, Mesch maintains, was shaped by linguistic lacunae: in nineteenth-century France there were simply no words for gender expressions that fell "beyond the binary poles of male and female" (p. 8). How then, do we access these experiences? Mesch argues that the answer lies in stories.

*Before Trans* draws on a rich trove of novels, essays, memoirs, photographs, illustrations, sketches, journals, scrapbooks, and letters to tell the stories of three nineteenth-century French writers: Jane Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Marc de Montifaud. Despite the ideological and political differences that divided them, all three shared important traits. White, educated, and economically privileged, all three were assigned female at birth. All three married men. All three left copious written sources (whether of a fictional or factual nature) that contravene traditional gender boundaries. And all three cross-dressed for some or most of their adult lives at a time when doing so was patently illegal unless one possessed a *permission de travestissement* or "pants permit" from the Paris Prefecture of Police. All three also either referred to themselves with masculine pronouns or created female characters who did so. While insisting that "we should stop thinking about [these writers] exclusively as women," Mesch refers to her gender variant protagonists with female pronouns (p.16). In this, I follow Mesch's lead.

*Before Trans* is divided into three sections, one dedicated to each writer. Mesch begins with archeologist, soldier, journalist, novelist, and public intellectual Jane Dieulafoy (1851-1916).

Despite her gender-bending career choices, Dieulafoy appears the most conservative of the three. A good bourgeois Catholic, Dieulafoy married young—at nineteen. Although childless, Dieulafoy and her husband Marcel were purportedly extraordinarily devoted to one another. A staunch opponent of divorce (newly legal as of 1884), Dieulafoy was vocal in her defense of the family. Traditional mores notwithstanding, in 1870 when not yet twenty, Dieulafoy served in male uniform as a sharpshooter by her husband's side during the Franco-Prussian War. By 1881 the pair embarked on the first of a series of celebrated archeological expeditions to Persia. For these Dieulafoy again adopted masculine dress. The habit stuck; service to country on the battlefield and in the Empire became the justification for sartorial habits that persisted for the rest of her life. Mesch argues that male dress enabled Dieulafoy to pass unnoticed in both metropolitan homosocial and colonial heterosocial environs; it also reified the appearance of feminine modesty while simultaneously endowing Dieulafoy with the symbolic power of the imperial male gaze, a gaze that Jane turned on foreign women and men alike. The Dieulafoy's illustrious archeological finds—the Frieze of the Archers, the Lion Frieze—earned Jane the Legion of Honor in 1886 and are visible to this day at the Louvre in a room that bears the couple's name.

The second section of *Before Trans* is devoted to Marguerite Vallette-Eymery, known as Rachilde (1860-1953). A prolific author—notably of the scandalous decadent novel, *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), which sparked a lawsuit for pornography—Rachilde wrote for the literary journal *Le Mercure de France*. Unlike Dieulafoy and Montifaud, Rachilde's cross-dressing—authorized by the Prefecture of Police in view of her journalistic pursuits—ended following her marriage at twenty-nine to Alfred Valette. Although the couple apparently agreed to forego conjugal relations, Rachilde bore a daughter four months after the wedding. Mesch is silent on the father's identity. She further argues that Rachilde (like Dieulafoy and Montifaud) was “comfortable in what appeared to be a heterosexual paradigm” (p. 23). And yet Rachilde clearly defied gender conventions in her behavior and her writings. The latter are filled with transvestites like *Monsieur Vénus'* freakish Raoule, who—dressed alternately as a man or a woman—ravishes a wax effigy adorned with the hair, eyelashes, and teeth of her effeminate, dead husband. Mesch also maintains that we must not read Rachilde—despite her cross-dressing, her careerism, and her dislike of marriage—as feminist because Rachilde did not identify as a woman. To that end, Mesch further argues that, whilst most scholars have interpreted Rachilde as a publicity monger whose gender exploits were simply stunts aimed to attract attention, this writer's “abnormal” behavior is better understood as a manifestation of what we might now term gender dysphoria.

The woman known as Marc de Montifaud, born Marie-Amélie Charroule (1845-1912), is the focus of section three. Montifaud's anti-clerical often erotic writings were frequently deemed an offense to public decency. Repeatedly charged, condemned, fined, and sentenced (unjustly, in her eyes, to the women's prison that housed female prostitutes and violent criminals rather than to the men's prison reserved for male writers), Montifaud regularly fled to Brussels. She justified her cross-dressing as a necessary protection from the long arm of the law. Like Dieulafoy, Montifaud married at nineteen. She had a beloved son and remained married for life. Montifaud—whose writing reflects little about her own gender identity or sexual proclivities—is the only one of Mesch's protagonists with a known history of affairs with both women and men.

Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Montifaud's gender variance, Mesch maintains, is generally explained as either an expression of eccentricity or a form of proto-feminism, the latter understood as an

attempt to appropriate male privilege without identifying as, or seeking to “be” male. Mesch’s book aims to give the lie to these assumptions by arguing that if we read these women’s writings carefully, we see individuals “for whom the appropriate gender designation remains an open question” (11). And indeed, Mesch’s engaging book has much to teach us about “trans before trans.” I cannot help but question, however, whether her work falls into the same trap that the York Civic Trust did in its first attempt to characterize Anne Lister: in privileging what we might call “misfit gender,” Mesch’s analysis largely minimizes what Michael Lucey has characterized as “misfit sexualities.”[4] It is Mesch’s emphasizing of queer gender over queer sexuality that gives me pause.

Take Mesch’s analysis of Dieulafoy’s sexuality. Mesch seemingly disregards the possibility that Dieulafoy was anything but heterosexual. Thus, for example, after stating that Dieulafoy and her husband never had a child “for reasons that may or may not have been medical,” Mesch refrains from probing farther (p. 35). Given Dieulafoy’s pronatalist politics, childlessness seems an odd choice if the reasons behind it were *not* medical. Had the Dieulafoys agreed (as had Rachilde and Alfred) to a marriage without sexual intercourse? Was the marriage queer in ways we cannot know? Could Dieulafoy’s husband have been attracted to her because of, and not despite, her boyish presentation? Mesch herself remarks on but then passes over the couple’s “homosexual bonds” (p.109). Mesch likewise presumes that “as a devout Catholic” Dieulafoy was unlikely to have acted on any illicit sexual fantasies (p. 72). True, Dieulafoy rejected divorce and celebrated marriage. But the Catholic church is renowned for its sexual excesses; many Catholic clergymen have denounced homosexuality from the pulpit while seducing altar boys. And given both socio-cultural constraints and the capacity of writing to dissimulate, on what basis does Mesch reject arguments advanced by others that Dieulafoy might have desired women (p. 55)? Why is the “male-identified woman” necessarily *not* a lesbian (p. 72)? I say this not to imply that Dieulafoy *was* but rather to question whether Mesch reads some sources as reliable and others as not simply because queering Dieulafoy’s sexuality would complicate the clarity of Mesch’s argument about the primacy of gender.

And what of Rachilde? When Mesch notes that Rachilde told journalist Maryse Choisy at least four times “But as for me, I’m a man,” Mesch does so to underscore Rachilde’s gender variance (p. 191). Mesch further insists that notwithstanding a lesbian liaison with Gisèle d’Estoc, “there is simply no evidence to support” the conclusion that Rachilde was a lesbian (p. 22). As my forthcoming work on lesbian life in twentieth-century France will show, however, by the 1930s Rachilde was a regular presence in Paris’ sapphic cabarets—and a particular friend of lesbian cabaret artist Sidonie Baba.[5] Moreover, to return to the York Civic Trust and Anne Lister, is it not possible that “trans people can be lesbian, and lesbians can be trans”? [6] The famous cabaret artist Suzy Solidor, who likewise referred to herself with male pronouns and whose lesbian exploits were legion (and whose cabaret Rachilde also attended), is surely a case in point.

As for Montifaud, Mesch admits that only Montifaud was known to have been consistently attracted to women. But Montifaud, like Rachilde, also bore a child. While this fact tells us nothing about desire, it is nonetheless proof positive that she slept with a man—likely her husband—at least once. So where does this leave us? Although Mesch refers to the “nascent field of sexology” and states in passing that during the late nineteenth-century gender nonconformity was increasingly “linked to sexuality through what was known as the inversion model” (p. 17), I sensed

that once again Mesch’s book downplays sexuality in favor of gender. I cannot help but think that, had Mesch been on the board of the York Civic Trust, she would have favored the first Lister plaque, which named Lister as gender-nonconforming, over the second, which identified her as a lesbian. But given Mesch’s admirable larger agenda—to push us to think beyond normative historical categories—it is perhaps worthwhile asking whether not just Lister, but also Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Montifaud might be more fully understood from the perspective of the present simply as *queer* in all its glorious gendered *and* sexual manifestations? For if the meanings of modern identities “accrue over time” and “shift, and evolve,” so too (to riff off Mesch herself) it seems likely that nineteenth-century stories of both gender *and* sexuality can “be told and undone, and then retold, in relation to stories and models encountered elsewhere” at one and the same time (p. 11).

## NOTES

[1] Simon Joyce tracks this controversy in his article, “The perverse presentism of rainbow plaques: memorializing Anne Lister,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 41, 5, (2019):601-610.

[2] See the York LGBT History Month's July 21, 2018 reply to its critics, reposted at [https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/womens\\_rights/3318306-Anne-Lister-was-not-a-Lesbian-but-Gender-Non-Conforming](https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/womens_rights/3318306-Anne-Lister-was-not-a-Lesbian-but-Gender-Non-Conforming) accessed Sept. 22, 2021.

[3] Joyce, p. 604.

[4] Michael Lucey, *Someone: The Pragmatics of Misfit Sexualities from Colette to Hervé Guibert* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[5] Tamara Chaplin, *Becoming Lesbian: A Queer History of Modern France* (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press, 2022).

[6] ] See the York LGBT History Month's July 21, 2018 reply to its critics, reposted at [https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/womens\\_rights/3318306-Anne-Lister-was-not-a-Lesbian-but-Gender-Non-Conforming](https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/womens_rights/3318306-Anne-Lister-was-not-a-Lesbian-but-Gender-Non-Conforming) accessed Sept. 22, 2021.

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