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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 Dorothy Kelly, Boston University

Before Trans is a fascinating biographical study of three French women writers who dressed as men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The methodology of the book is the collection and interpretation of information—dates, photos, literature, other written work, press reports—that provide insight into the reasons for this exceptional behavior. I had written on gender artifice and fluidity in Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus*, one of the texts analyzed here, in my first book published in 1989.[1] At that time theory dominated critical readings, and the trend was to reject the antiquated literary-historical criticism of the past, just around the time when the growing popularity of Walter Benjamin would radically change that negative perspective of the relation between history and literature. Mesch’s far-reaching biographical and historical study complements previous work on Rachilde and fleshes out enlightening and interesting information about the lives of the three women writers Jane Dieulafoy, Rachilde, and Marc de Montifaud, while emphasizing their exploration of their own gender identities, and most important for those of us in literary studies, the relation of their writing to that exploration.

Mesch shows that a number of things unite these three women, and here I use the word “women” as a convenience because they contested the very definition of what it means to be a woman. The most interesting of their similarities in my view is that of the rejection of what “femininity” was at the time, which meant the rejection of one’s sex, as it was defined then and assigned to them. They still retained much of their identity as women, while pushing against parts of it. All three were attracted to men and were married, two of them had children, and two were or may have been attracted to women as well. However, Mesch reveals that if they were attracted to men, they also identified with masculinity, as well as with men who dressed as women or identified with femininity. Thus, in their lives they experienced their sex/gender identity as fluid, which they express in their fictional and other writings.

One of the most basic questions that Mesch addresses is, of course, why they wore men’s clothes, and there are varying answers. One reason was that it was simply easier for them to do the work they wanted to accomplish if they did not dress as a woman: easier to travel to less-safe sections of Paris, easier to ride a horse and fight with men in the war, easier to travel as a woman in Muslim society without the veil. These women had important goals and work that could be hindered literally and figuratively by their clothing. Indeed, who would not prefer to wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothes without a confining corset? Mesch also notes that Dieulafoy, in one of her works, represents the military uniform that the female character wears as having a transformative power that actually changes that character, and as Mesch notes, this is most likely the case for Dieulafoy as well when she fought in the war alongside her husband. Here the

performance of identity through the wearing of clothes would complement one's inner identity and express it.

The other significant similarity that Mesch identifies in the experience of these women is that having models was important to them, in the sense of models of gender that fit their being, and of course the idea of gender at the time was not available with the meanings that we give it today. There was only contemporary biology, with its errors and accompanying biases and social prescriptions. Indeed, words to describe these women did not exist, and Mesch shows that this missing language is in part what these women seek to explore in their fictional writing. Creating fictional others who were different allowed them to experiment with what we call gender in creating characters that were similar to and different from themselves. In this way they did not create types but rather imagined profoundly individual identities—they created models of difference.

I greatly admire the way in which Mesch represents these women. It is a combination of appreciation, tact, respect, and imagination that draws us in to each individual life and its struggles. The photographs add so much to the text, and the women's expressions poignantly reveal different emotions in their different attire, particularly one image of Montifaud in female attire and who looks terribly sad. And Mesch does make some ventures into speculation about what is behind the text or image, while always noting that it is an interpretation, and frequently providing more than one fact to justify that interpretation. One notable example is the young Rachilde's nightmare about a drowned man who emerged from a pond outside her window and told her not to speak. This dream occurred after her engagement, which Mesch reads as symbolic of her not having a say in her marriage or in the future domesticity it would most likely dictate. On its own, this is speculation, an interpretation, and is identified as such. However, Mesch comes back to the drowned man later in the chapter when she discusses a story written by Rachilde in which the male character throws himself into the Seine to drown himself, but then writes a novel. This double resurrection of the drowned man and his link to speaking and writing then does seem like a symbolic representation of Rachilde herself, who was drowning in the conventions of femininity, but resurfaced as a "man" who writes, as she signed "Rachilde, homme de lettres." The fact that Rachilde brings up this dream several times, when added to the two instances discussed by Mesch, supports this interpretation.

Even though all three women shared the same situation of not fitting into conventional social gender molds, Mesch shows how each experienced this situation in very different ways. All of them are interesting, and in the following paragraphs I outline some of the details that I find most compelling. Dieulafoy, the first of the women in the text, wore men's clothes, fought as a sharpshooter in the Franco-Prussian war alongside her husband and lifetime companion, and was Catholic and conservative politically. She wanted adventure in her life, and she pursued it. She wanted to work, to be part of a team, and working satisfied her. One image in the book shows her in a tent with her male coworkers wearing the same attire (p. 65), which, as Mesch notes, normalizes her presence there with the other team members. At the same time, I would add that in the photo she is separated from the men as well, as the men's bodies in the two-dimensional image touch each other, while hers remains separate while she faces them, and they do not look at her. She is still a woman and different from them but with them in equal partnership and appearance.

Dieulafoy's personal gender choices would seem to conflict with her Catholic and conservative political beliefs. However, one of the most surprising of the revelations that Mesch provides is that Dieulafoy was in fact able to unite them by writing about women in the Catholic canon who were gender nonconformists—Joan of Arc and transvestite saints. It is striking that in her works Dieulafoy explores the way in which religious figures could reject femininity and validate dressing as a man, thus providing a kind of model similar to her own experience. As Mesch notes, Dieulafoy stated that a true woman is mother and warrior, and she embodies this definition because she works for the greater good as both soldier and archeologist to bring glory to France, like Joan of Arc. It is also somewhat ironic that she was able to pursue her freedom to do and be as she wished, while also pursuing the imperialist project of bringing Oriental treasures back to France.

As for Rachilde, I find the information Mesch provides on her childhood to be particularly interesting and significant for the understanding of her works. In adolescence, Rachilde sought ways to free herself from the restrictions imposed by her parents, as being female, she was not supposed to write, but did so in secret. She staged a séance and convinced her parents that a man, Rachilde, was speaking through her in her writing and whose name she later adopted. Her father had raised her as boy in the sense that she was taught to shoot, ride a horse, and fence, but at the same time, she had to be a social woman. Clearly, early on, gender fluidity was normal for her. Her novel, *Monsieur Vénus*, seemed incomprehensible to its readers, as gender identity is certainly fluid in this text. This work was written around the time that she began to dress as a man and crop her hair. However, that sartorial masculinity stopped when she married and had a daughter.

Mesch then shows how Montifaud followed some of the same paths as the others, alternating between male and female names and writing about topics normally taboo for a woman. She took on a man's name in her writings, Marc de Montifaud, at first in reviews of the Salon art exhibitions, as she had training in an artist studio. When she married, her husband took her name. Later, like Dieulafoy, she wrote about a religious figure in her first book, *History of Mary Magdalene*, a historical work that is, as Mesch notes, more of a male genre than art. Then she published works for which she was charged with offense to public morality and sentenced to prison, hence she fled to Belgium several times. Mesch reveals some of Montifaud's thinking on this matter, as Montifaud could not understand why her juridical sentence was different from the sentence that male authors received. Logic was with her when she asked if it should be the nature of the crime that determined the sentence rather than the sex of the offender. Also, her belief was that sexuality was ubiquitous and should be addressed in writing. At this time, many false rumors circulated about her, and she ended up slapping one of the authors of those rumors in public when she was dressed as a man. After this, she always wore men's clothes. As Mesch notes, wearing pants was a way for these three authors to stay true to themselves.

The book's conclusion is a pleasing first-person narration of Mesch's trip to Dieulafoy's living room, a space where there were two paintings, provided in the book, one of Dieulafoy as a man and one as a woman. This is an apt ending for this study, and Mesch concludes that these women were authors of their own identities, and writing provided a space to explore that identity.

NOTES

[1] Dorothy Kelly, *Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

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