

Abstract:

What are the limits of the archive in representing queer gender in the eighteenth century? This is one question which I seek to explore through the archive of “female husband” narratives—a genre of newspaper stories published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries about people assigned female at birth who lived as men and legally married women. I engage with Sara Ahmed’s theory of queer phenomenology, which “emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.”<sup>1</sup> I consider two methods of queer phenomenology through two narratives of gender crossing from the eighteenth century—a mobility-based approach, and an object-based one—in order to develop a new methodology of *phenomenological speculation*. Phenomenological speculation acknowledges the inherent speculation involved in asking the phenomenological question what do objects *do* as well as the speculative elements of stories about gender crossers. This methodology, which is deeply indebted to Saidiya Hartman’s theory of critical fabulation, engages speculative fiction grounded in phenomenological thinking as a valid method of writing (hi)stories.

In chapter one, I consider the emergence of a binary sex system during the eighteenth century in order to contextualize my reading of Henry Fieldings 1746 narrative “The Female Husband.” Then, I use queer phenomenology to examine the extreme mobility of Charles Hamilton, the central gender crossing figure of that narrative. In chapter two, I turn to the most popular “female husband” narrative, that of James Howe, originally published in 1766. I adjust my phenomenological method, focusing not on mobility but on two conspicuous objects in the narrative which shaped James Howe’s life. Using these objects, I develop an analysis of the effect of James Howe’s class position and return to womanhood on the public reception and popularity of the narrative about them. I consider the speculative elements of their gender crossing and eventual detransition. In the third chapter, I turn in more detail to the methodology of phenomenological speculation, providing a critique of standard queer historiographical methods and advocating for the use of speculative fiction in writing queer history. To conclude, I discuss Jordy Rosenberg’s speculative historical fiction novel *Confessions of the Fox*, and José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, which reflect the possibilities of queer history and futurity.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

Crossing Gender:

Phenomenology and Speculation in the “Female Husband” Archive

BY:

Lucy James-Olson

Bachelor of Arts

Mount Holyoke College

South Hadley, MA

2022

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For George Hamilton, James Howe, and their wives.

## INTRODUCTION

*“I’m not saying this battle was fought for us. History is not that linear. And yet, because of it, and many others like it, now we inhabit our own skin.”*

– Jordy Rosenberg<sup>2</sup>

This project started in many places, and at many times—in my childhood bedroom the day after Christmas in 2019, curled in bed all day reading a book which changed the way I thought about my own identity; on a picnic blanket in Amherst, Massachusetts in the summer of 2020, listening to a Zoom talk about a book I had not yet read as ants crawled over my legs and mosquitoes buzzed in my ears; in a seminar called Race, Gender, and Sexual Aesthetics in the fall of 2020, staring out over the water stains on the table from which I attended Zoom class, puzzling over a reading. This project is also (probably) unfinished. I have spent the last year or so chasing down fleeting moments in digital archives, books, and articles—following an oblique line to find a new way of understanding an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century group called “female husbands.” This group of people assigned female at birth who lived as men offered me a way to think through and synthesize the myriad of theoretical and literary texts I had been (and still am) metabolizing over the course of my college career. They allowed me a glimpse of what it might have been like to occupy a nonbinary gender and sex position at another time in history. They told a story of gender nonconforming embodiment which felt both familiar and strange. And I wanted to know more.

On the day after Christmas in 2019, I devoured Jordy Rosenberg’s speculative historical fiction novel, *Confessions of the Fox*. The novel is a retelling of the life story of Jack Sheppard, a jail breaker and thief in eighteenth-century London. In the novel, Sheppard is re-imagined as a transgender person with a magical ability to literally *hear* commodities asking to be used or

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<sup>2</sup> Jordy Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox* (New York: One World, 2019), 315.

stolen. He is in a queer relationship with a Southeast Asian sex worker called Edgeworth Bess whose homeland in the Fens of the marshy countryside was devastated by enclosure. The novel also includes paratextual annotations from a fictional humanities professor who discovers and edits the manuscript—discovering along the way that it has been radically edited by a group of revolutionary archivists. On the final page of the novel, the professor writes

The body has two histories... There is the history that binds us all. The terrible history that began when the police first swarmed the streets of the cities and the settlers streamed down the decks of their ships, casting shadows on the world to turn themselves white. The second history is love's inscription. Some inscriptions we wear like dreams— fragments of a life untethered from this world, messages from a future reflected to us like light off broken shards.<sup>3</sup>

This second history is of primary interest to me. How do the relationships we have as queer and trans people change our relationship to the past, present, and future? How can relationships push the limits of what we are able to imagine? The stories of “female husbands” are the stories of a group of people who were criminalized, dehumanized, and brutalized because of their gender. However, through engagement with queer theory methodologies and the development of new ways of understanding queer history, they can be seen as stories which enable readers to speculate about that second history. “Female husbands” as a group provide a frame through which the relationship between the first and second history of the body becomes visible. As they are sensationalized in the press during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they are part of “terrible history that binds us all.” Their gender and sex are turned into public spectacle in order to support gender systems which limit the possibilities of embodiment and self-understanding. However, they are also defined by their position as “husbands.” They are inscribed with their relationships in the way that they are labeled. Their gender is defined by their wives as well as themselves. This relationship between the violence of categorization and sensationalism, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, 315.

defining and possibility-opening status of their love stories is a site of intervention where the historical status of queerness becomes visible. Through analysis of how contact with both systems of power and relationships of love shapes the lives of “female husbands,” a new way of understanding queer and trans history emerges. While the narratives of “female husbands” are often marked by the involvement of the husbands with police, courts, and carceral punishment, they are conversely stamped with love’s imprint as they hinge on the intimate sexual and romantic relationships between “female husbands” and their wives. Paying attention to the interaction between these two aspects of the narratives exposes the “first history of the body” while provoking speculation about the second.<sup>4</sup>

The second origin point of this work was a yellow floral picnic blanket, laid out over scraggly, ant-hill ridden summer grass outside of the first apartment I lived in, in Amherst, Massachusetts. After Mount Holyoke shut down in the spring of 2020, I moved in with my partner and three friends in a grimy apartment complex for the summer. It was outside of this apartment that I first heard the term “female husbands.” My father had shared with me a link to a talk by Amherst College professor Jen Manion, regarding their recently published book *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, which I watched on Zoom from my iPhone in the heat of the summer. During the talk, Professor Manion discussed the figures at the center of their book: “female husbands,” figures who “persistently circulated throughout Anglo-American culture for nearly 200 years to describe people [assigned female at birth] who....assumed a legal, social, and economic position reserved for men: that of a husband.”<sup>5</sup> They described the complex process of doing archival research about these people, and about their decisions to consider them as trans, rather than as lesbians or feminists as other scholars have interpreted them. Manion also talked

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, 315.

<sup>5</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.



about the role of public media like newspapers and pamphlets in circulating the stories of these “female husbands.” I received the full book for my birthday that year, and made my way through it slowly and carefully. While I appreciate the degree of care which Manion used to discuss a group who has been criminalized for their gender, I found myself taking issue with the confines of archival “truth” and “fact,” and with Manion’s reticence to employ speculation and look beyond what could be “proven” using archival sources in their text. A reliance on archival “truth” regarding gender non-conforming people was especially frustrating given the fact that these narratives were not first-person narratives and were most likely written by cis-heterosexual men. A clear example of this is Manion’s writing on the widow Mary Creed, in whose boarding house Charles Hamilton stayed and met Creed’s niece Mary Price. Their marriage to Mary Price resulted in their criminal trial and prosecution on account of their “fraudulent marriage.” Of Creed’s attitude towards her niece's fiance, Manion writes:

Creed had a duty to at least nominally vet her niece’s future husband. She must have felt good enough about Hamilton’s character and financial prospects to consent to her niece’s marriage. *Had Creed been a man*, such as the bride’s uncle or father, the court would have turned to them for testimony during the trial. *But no such record exists.*<sup>6</sup>

With this speculation “[h]ad Creed been a man,” Manion has the opportunity to indulge in a counter-historical exercise, imagining what might have changed if Creed were an uncle or father, or if women’s testimony was accepted in the courts. However, since “no such record exists” the possibilities are dismissed; there is no consideration of how this might have changed the result of Hamilton’s trial, or what this may have revealed about gender relations or gender ideology.

I wanted *more* from these stories than the archival record could provide, and I wanted to look beyond those aspects of the stories which could be “proven” or “disproven,” like the length

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<sup>6</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 20 (emphasis added).

of their relationships, their “legal” names, their criminal status, or their representation in periodicals and pamphlets. I wanted to speculate about that which could not be proven, like intimacy, sex lives, and the world-altering potentialities which queer contact reveals. These eighteenth-century narratives are so compelling because of these unanswered or unanswerable questions, which reveal an expansive history of queerness which might allow us to arrive at a different future than we have now. They provoke new ways of thinking about the “nonbinary” as a paradigm of understanding and being in the world which is resistant to the dimorphic divisions which structure social and cultural landscapes. I arrived at an understanding of “female husbands” as anti-binary, rather than non-binary, through my textual and critical encounters with the stories of their lives. While these potentialities and new understandings are essentially unprovable, they are still vital to understanding the lives of gender crossing subjects. Manion’s own project was vital not just in exposing me to the group of “female husbands,” but also in providing concrete primary sources through which to draw my own conclusions. The first two chapters of their book profile the same “female husbands” as the first two chapters of my thesis: “The Female Husband” by Henry Fielding, published in 1746 about the life, trial, and public whipping of Charles Hamilton; and “The FEMALE HUSBAND; or a circumstantial Account of the extraordinary Affair which lately happened at POPLAR; with many interesting Particulars, not mentioned in the publick Papers,” published in 1766 about the life, extortion, and eventual return to womanhood of James Howe.

This project also began as I sat at the dining table in that same Amherst apartment on a Zoom call for a Gender Studies seminar called “Race, Gender, and Sexual Aesthetics.” In it, we were reading “Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology” by Sara Ahmed, an essay which served as the foundation for her seminal book *Queer Phenomenology*. I was frustrated by it upon

my first read; as I stared down the water-stained teak table my grandparents had given me upon my move into the apartment, I could not understand Sara Ahmed's insistence that "The familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in the room...It is from here that the world unfolds."<sup>7</sup> However, this meditation on the table, on the effects of space, vision, and movement on "shaping bodies and worlds"<sup>8</sup> stuck in my head. I could not make sense of it, but I could not let it go either. I was fascinated by the question of what objects *do*. Sara Ahmed defines queer phenomenology as, "an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon."<sup>9</sup> Through my recursive and multiple encounters with these texts, all of which were "available within [my] bodily horizon," I began to develop my own history of "female husbands," consisting of a phenomenological readings of the narratives which draw attention to the shifting, mobile, and object-driven aspects of the texts, and the relationship of these texts to speculative modes of writing and reading which could be both good and bad.

### **Theoretical Approaches to "Female Husband" Narratives**

Ahmed's queer phenomenology asks us to think about the interactions of bodies and things outside of the bounds of cis-heteronormative structures of power and understanding. Ahmed writes "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward."<sup>10</sup> These apprehensions of the world shift and are shifted by our encounters with objects, things, and persons. Phenomenology emphasizes the agential *potential* of things, inviting a mode of

<sup>7</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology." GLQ 12, no. 4 (2006): 543-574. 546.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmed, "Orientations," 544.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, 543.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

speculative thinking which challenges understandings of gender or sexuality as essentialist or innate (that queer or gender transgressive people are “born this way”), making way for an understanding which emphasizes movements toward and away as sites and sources of queer potentiality.

Reading “female husband” narratives phenomenologically reveals two kinds of speculative thinking within and outside the narratives: hypernarrative authorial speculation and readerly speculation. Hypernarrativity is a mode of writing that I argue characterizes “female husband” narratives. In hypernarrative writing, authors use speculation (i.e. details and stories which move beyond or outside of truth) to produce narratives which are dense with details or plot, or are circulated widely beyond their original publication. These narratives paradoxically contain absences or omissions with regard to gendered embodiment, sex, and intimacy. These omissions, in turn, necessitate readerly speculation. Readers encounter the gaps in “female husband” archives and fill them in imaginatively, which can be generative of radical interpretations of queer embodiment or can reproduce social norms surrounding gender and sex, depending on the reader’s positionality. Generative readings result from phenomenological understandings about expansive orientation-based models of queerness. Queer phenomenology can rearrange or reinterpret the relationships between bodies and things to offer other kinds of queer speculation, such as the methodology I offer in the third chapter: phenomenological speculation. Phenomenology in its embodied and speculative forms thus both makes readers aware of the ways that hypernarrative forms of story telling can overwrite queer lives but can also offer an antidote to that very overwriting in the form of alternative stories and orientations which recognize, honor, and further the queer potential of contact between persons and things.

Throughout this thesis, using two “female husband” narratives —the narrative of Charles Hamilton from 1746, and the narrative of James Howe from 1766— I will develop a new method of reading queer and trans history from Ahmed’s queer phenomenology: to read narratives which could be considered queer or trans by some scholars outside the bounds of those modern identity categories, and to account for the role of speculation in those narratives through an analysis of “hypernarrativity.” Authorial speculation in the form of hypernarrativity serves to invite readerly speculation by including plot events which did not happen, or by making the text more sensational in order to provoke increased readership or circulation. For example, Henry Fielding includes in “The Female Husband,” stories of Hamilton seducing and marrying or attempting to marry five different women, when they were only tried and convicted in real life for one marriage to Mary Price.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Howe’s narrative is sparse with details, but changed over the course of its more than one hundred years in circulation throughout England and the United States, as new readers and new authors brought to bear new speculations about the Howes on the text.<sup>12</sup> Authorial and readerly speculations reproduce and co-constitute one another. Fielding’s narrative refers to the sex Hamilton had with their first partner as “transactions not fit to be mention’d”<sup>13</sup>—an ellipse which names its own refusal to produce factual descriptions in favor of inviting readerly speculation.

Phenomenology serves as an intervention into the relationship between hypernarrativity, authorial speculation, and readerly speculation by drawing attention to how hypernarrativity interacts with the speculative mode. Phenomenology is in and of itself speculative, but it can be

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Fielding, “The Female Husband: or, the surprising history of Mrs. Mary, alias Mr George Hamilton, who was convicted of having married a young woman of Wells and lived with her as her husband. Taken from her own mouth since her confinement.” London: printed for M. Cooper, at the Globe in Pater-Noster-Row, 1746. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>12</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 44.

<sup>13</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 3.

used to intervene into the places where hypertextuality claims to tell the reader everything, but is actually leaving things out or making things up. A phenomenological reading clues readers into the ways the authors of these narratives attempt to reorient the bodies of the “female husbands” within them through their use of authorial speculation and hypertextuality. Queer phenomenology further attends to the ways in which contact with people requires gender crossers to be infinitely mobile, and the ways that bodily orientation can be shifted by encounters with significant objects.

Acknowledging the triangular or co-constitutive relationship between hypertextuality, speculation, and phenomenology, I propose new possibilities for speculation in the form of a methodology I call “phenomenological speculation.” Phenomenological speculation combines a phenomenological reading strategy with an analysis of both the presence of speculation in gender crossing narratives and the queer potentialities of speculation for counterhistorical work. Phenomenological speculation engages with speculative fiction as a site of history-making, and as a mode of processing history which attends to phenomenological concerns of objects and space through the medium of fiction. Grounding speculation in phenomenology and finding moments where phenomenological orientations might offer speculative relations, I argue, produces thoughtful critique outside of the boundaries and structures of “truth” and “evidence,” which are so often privileged in historical research and writing. Rather than attempting to “prove” whether or not a historical figure was queer, I encourage the use of phenomenological speculation to ask the question “what would it mean if they were?” How would their orientations—and ours—be altered? Further, I hope this methodology clarifies how speculative fiction can meaningfully engage with the ways in which, as Ahmed puts it, “...the bodily, the spatial, and the social are entangled”<sup>14</sup> where “evidence-based” models of historical writing may not be.

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 181.

This formulation of phenomenological speculation is deeply indebted to the work of Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation”—a counter-historical method of encountering and understanding the lacunae and violent absence of the lives of enslaved people in archive of transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage. She writes “... in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.”<sup>15</sup> However, the “female husband” archive does not suffer the same bald silences and absences as the archive of Atlantic slavery, due to the whiteness and masculinity of “female husbands,” which renders them legible in the historical record. Phenomenological speculation as a methodology engages with the development of a counter-historical narrative, but it arises from an acknowledgment of a hypernarrative archive, rather than a missing, incomplete, or totally dehumanizing one.

Phenomenological speculation instead uses an Ahmedian understanding of contact and orientation to speculate beyond the boundaries of “female husband” archives—or their own speculations—in order to address the ellipses regarding sexual intimacy and personal understandings of gender crossing. Using the related theoretical and methodological keystones of queer phenomenology, hypernarrativity, and speculation, the thesis will close-read two “female husband” narratives with specific attention to the role of mobile bodies and objects in shaping gender crossing embodiment and relationships. These close readings will illustrate the hypernarrative and speculative aspects of the text which function to reveal emergent social norms, which act upon the “female husbands” in the narratives. Over the course of three chapters, using eighteenth-century contextualization regarding sexual and gender ideologies, phenomenological readings of “female husband” narratives, and an examination of

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<sup>15</sup> Saidiya Hartman. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (June 2008): 1-14, 11.

hypernarrativity and speculation, I will intervene on “female husband narratives” in a number of ways by shifting readers’ orientations to the narratives away from the sensationalism of the source material towards the queer potentialities unveiled by reading phenomenologically.

My first approach is to shift focus away from defining “female husbands” using categories like lesbian or transgender. In researching queer historiography for this thesis, a binaristic division became clear between ways of understanding historical figures who lived outside of the gender and sexuality norms of their periods. Some scholars, the essentialists, believe, “not only do all people have a sexual orientation, but that an individual’s sexual orientation does not vary across time or place,”<sup>16</sup> and they liberally apply modern gender and sexuality terms to historical subjects who lived in times before those categories came into existence. Take, for example, Rictor Norton, a widely cited and respected queer historian who wrote of the Howes: “surely they were lesbians.”<sup>17</sup> The other camp of queer historians falls into a more Foucauldian frame of understanding; they are social constructionists. They believe that it is inaccurate to call anyone gay or bisexual or transgender or nonbinary if those people lived before the social construction of those categories. A striking example that challenges one of the most widely accepted sexual norms is Jonathon Ned Katz’s article “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” which tracks the history of “heterosexuality” as a category and term that has its roots in the nineteenth century. Katz writes “rather than naming a conjunction old as Eve and Adam, heterosexual designates a word and concept, a norm and role, an individual and group identity, a behavior and feeling, and a peculiar sexual-political institution particular to the late nineteenth

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<sup>16</sup> Miliann Kang, Donovan Lessard, Laura Heston, and Sonny Nordmarken, “Social Constructionism” in *Introduction to Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830* (London: GMP Press, 1992).



and twentieth centuries.”<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault also offers a corrective to the essentialist approach, emphasizing the discursive construction of bodies<sup>19</sup> through disciplinary modes of power and norming discourses. Foucault writes that the central issue of making a history of sexuality is “to account for the fact that [sex] is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute all the things that are said...the way in which sex is ‘put into discourse.’”<sup>20</sup>

In reading the “female husband” archive, both positions were unsatisfying. I agree with the constructionists that contemporary gender and sexuality terms are inadequate but disagree that it is “wrong” to find identification with historical subjects whose gender and sexuality felt familiar. Wanting a third way (a nonbinary way, perhaps) to negotiate what Valerie Traub calls the “apprehension of similarity and difference in the history of sexuality,”<sup>21</sup> I chose to look outside of queer historiographical methods towards queer phenomenology, and outside of contemporary and historical categorizations of gender towards other terms. Queer phenomenology’s focus on things and relations helps to keep history and transhistorical feelings in play through its rejection of categorization in favor of “an approach to sexual orientation” which involves “rethinking the place of the object in sexual desire; by attending to how the bodily direction ‘toward’ such objects affects how bodies inhabit spaces and how spaces inhabit

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality” from *Routledge International Handbook of Heterosexualities Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020), 58-74, 70-71.

<sup>19</sup> See also: Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Valerie Traub, “Part I: Making the History of Sexuality” from *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 37-100, 82.

bodies.”<sup>22</sup> It provides more room to focus on relationships between things, bodies, and historical periods. It is less static in its conception of queer embodiment than historical approaches.

While previous scholarship has referred to the subjects of the narratives within this public media landscape as "female husbands," the term reflects only the lives these people as they were subject to power structures like binary sex and gender logics and carceral punishment. "Female husbands" as a term also solidifies binary sex and heteronormative relations through its oppositional framing of the biological sex term "female" and the gendered social term "husband." Hamilton and Howe, in their shifting and mobile embodiments, represent rejections of those binaries. Using the term "gender crossers" allows me to reflect an anti-binary position and refer to the subjects of the thesis outside of the binaries of both gender (male/female, femme/masc) and reproductive sexuality (husband/wife, and the two-sex dimorphic model). It also reflects the shifting gendered positions occupied by gender crossers over the course of their lives, which are not strictly "female" or "husband." For example, Hamilton defined their gender not just by their position as a husband, but by their work as a Methodist teacher and a quack doctor. Throughout the thesis, I refer to gender crossers using they/them/theirs pronouns. I do not do this to assert an understanding of them as nonbinary or genderqueer as we might understand those terms, but to provoke readers to speculate on the multiple and shifting genders that they inhabited throughout their lives, as evidenced by Hamilton's many gender roles.

Ahmed advocates for a way of understanding queer subjects through an orientation-based model. She writes "[i]f orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with."<sup>23</sup> Stories of "female husbands" are stories about gender crossing and its

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<sup>22</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmed, 1.

consequences, yes, but they are also stories of relationships, marriages, workplaces, and homes; they are stories of “how [gender crossers] inhabit spaces,” and “‘who’ or ‘what’ [they] inhabit spaces with.”<sup>24</sup> This way of understanding and reading “female husband” narratives releases me from the trap of queer historiographical method, and enables me to dwell in the spaces and persons of “female husband” narratives, rather than seeking to “prove” their belonging in one identity category or another. This method is more exploratory than conventional queer historiography and also encourages an analysis of multiple levels of ‘who’ or ‘what’ oriented the lives of gender crossers. This examination is multi-layered, including a consideration on the influence of institutions of power, emergent social norms (like the transition from a one-sex model to a two-sex model of “biological sex” during the eighteenth century), developing capitalist and commodity economies, and interpersonal relationships.

This intervention reflects a shift away from a historiographical method toward a critical theory methodology. Recognizing the limits of categorization-based approaches to queer historiography (which aim to evaluate which historical subjects were what kind of queer or trans) required me to look at other modes of making history and recognizing historical relationships through critical theory such as the work of Ahmed, José Esteban Muñoz, Traub, and others. Phenomenological speculation further reflects an interest in speculative fiction as a mode of (hi)story telling, as an engagement with phenomenology spurred my development of phenomenological speculation. The phenomenological is always already speculative in the ways it challenges “normal” object-person relations and invites analysis of the agency of objects, but Ahmed’s phenomenological approach was not quite enough for me to envision possibilities beyond the boundaries of what is represented in the narratives. Queer phenomenology revealed the relations which were present in the text, and enabled me to recognize the workings and

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<sup>24</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.

impacts of hypertextuality and authorial speculation, but did not account for the fields of possibility which opened as a result of the absences from the texts, and from my own textual contact with the narratives. Phenomenological speculation incorporates the two different approaches to phenomenology in the first two chapters of the thesis: mobility-based phenomenology, and object-based phenomenology. Phenomenological speculation also incorporates a further analysis of the role of speculation in the original texts of “female husband” narratives.

In these narratives, authors frequently resort to ellipses when describing sex acts or omit nuanced reasoning behind gender crossing decisions in favor of simplistic explanations that reinforce latent or emergent gender norms. However, implicit or explicit in these ellipses is an invitation for readers to envision those very things which the author is unable or unwilling to name. Even the events which authors describe cannot be objectively proven. These narratives are not concerned with fact, but rather with sensationalizing gender crossing stories in order to expose the public to new norms surrounding sex and gender. Phenomenological speculation proposes the use of speculation as a serious method through which to approach history—honoring the possibility of using speculative writing to gain a critical understanding of history—in order to develop a more expansive approach to understanding historical subjects who fell outside of the norms of the periods during which they lived. Ahmed’s emphasis on orientation paves the way for such a path. As Ahmed writes, “phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.”<sup>25</sup> This concern with how the world is shaped is also a primary concern for contemporary speculative fiction writers who use

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<sup>25</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2.

their understanding of the current shapes of bodies and worlds to extrapolate beyond the norms, boundaries, and borders that are taken for granted in their visions of different worlds. My methodology, then, seeks to start with what the presences and absences within “female husband” narratives and speculate beyond or against them.

### **Reading Gender Crossing Stories**

My analysis of gender crossing in the “female husband” narrative archive takes place over the body of the thesis, which is made up of three chapters. The first two chapters each consist of two phenomenological readings of different gender-crossing stories from the archive of “female husband” stories. The third chapter details a new perspective on queer phenomenology for use in reading historical figures whom we might understand as queer—developing both my understanding of hypernarrativity and of phenomenological speculation. In the conclusion of the work, I return to one of the earliest origin points of the work, Rosenberg’s *Confessions of the Fox*, in order to understand the importance of critical speculative fiction in conceptualizing and telling queer history. I also consider Muñoz’s work regarding queer futurity as I gesture towards the importance of reading queer history expansively in order to imagine more expansive futures.

The first chapter of the thesis, “‘Transactions not fit to be mention’d’: New Binaries, Queer Contact, and Criminal Gender,” consists of an examination of a nascent two-sex model that was increasingly shaping social norms during eighteenth-century England. This contextualizing information informs a phenomenological reading of what is widely considered the first “female husband” narrative, “The Female Husband” by Henry Fielding. This reading uses the eighteenth-century context to establish how the deviance of gender crossers was articulated by the society in which they lived. The animating question of this first section is not,

“were ‘female husbands’ deviant,” but more precisely “what were they deviant from?” This investigation is informed by the work Thomas Laqueur,<sup>26</sup> whose book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* explains that the binary (female/male) system of sex was being insantiated as a result of scientific advancements during the Enlightenment period. Gender crossers who were marked as “female husbands” posed a threat to this new gender system as a result of the discrepancy between their sex and gender. Sal Nicolazzo’s “Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband’ and the Sexuality of Vagrancy” serves as a foundation for this argument that this deviant gender position is connected to Hamilton’s position as “vagrant.” Further, I argue, this discrepancy was unintelligible to the media and publics of the time, which resulted in the construction of the gender crossing “female husband” figure as fundamentally indeterminate in terms of gender. This unintelligibility is illustrated by Fielding’s inability to represent the gender crosser at the center of the narrative—falling instead into ellipses and intentional lacunae when describing the sex and gender of the “female husband” in the narrative.

From this contextual understanding, I proceed to a phenomenological reading of Fielding’s narrative,<sup>27</sup> using phenomenology to understand what becomes visible or possible to reach once one has made contact with a place, an object, or a person within the story. Hamilton's narrative is hypermobile, made up of a series of episodes of gender crossing. These episodes are helpfully illuminated by Ahmed's notion of queer orientation as being "off line" in terms of geographies, relationships, and gender and sex positions. Sara Ahmed writes that

[t]he discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go ‘off line’ to reach such objects. To go ‘off

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<sup>26</sup> I also take into account criticisms of Thomas Laquer’s work in this section. His critics argue that his argument is too simplistic and fails to account for the nuanced temporality of the two-sex systems’ emergence.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Hamilton is a semi-fictional version of a real person named George Hamilton, who was convicted of vagrancy in 1746 after their gender crossing and marriage to a young woman.

line' is to turn toward 'one's own sex' and away from 'the other sex.' To turn away from 'the other sex' is also to leave the straight line.<sup>28</sup>

This phenomenological mobility emphasizes the importance of gender crossing as a spatial concern, the shifts that alter a subject's field of vision and possibility. This approach allows a development of Ahmed's theory beyond sexual orientation towards a new way of understanding gender as itself a phenomenological orientation. Through phenomenological readings, I begin to recognize and define my theory of hypernarrativity: a paradoxical relationship between the text and the gender crossing central character. While the narrative is heavy with plot and circulated widely, there are still absences with regard to gender and sex which serve to either invite or foreclose upon readerly speculation. This overwritten-ness can show up in various ways, but primarily involves an author inviting readerly speculation or speculating themselves about details in the text. These conventions in Fielding's narrative are the first in an emergent "genre" of "female husband" narratives.

These concerns with generic traits continue in the second chapter of the thesis, "'An unblemished character': Constructing Gender with Class, Coins, and Clothing. This chapter concerns "The FEMALE HUSBAND; or a circumstantial Account of the extraordinary Affair which lately happened at POPLAR; with many interesting Particulars, not mentioned in the publick Papers." This is the narrative of the life of James Howe,<sup>29</sup> the most popular "female husband" narrative which circulated in England and the North American colonies from its

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<sup>28</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> "The Female Husband; or a Circumstantial Account of the Extraordinary Affair Which Lately Happened at Poplar; with Many Interesting Particulars, Relating Thereto." in *The Merry Droll, or Pleasing Companion. Consisting of a Variety of Facetious and Engaging Stories; and Familiar Letters. In Which Several Entertaining Adventures Are Truly Related; And Divers Instances of Love and Gallantry, Elegantly Displayed. Including Also, Some Poetical Recreations; Being a Collection of Merry Tales, Diverting Fables, Pleasing Pastorals, and Other Select Pieces. The Whole Moral, Instructive And Entertaining*, (London: C. Parker, 1769).

original publication in 1766 until the early twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> It serves as foil to Hamilton's, as Howe is established not as a deviant vagrant, but as a law-abiding "pillar of the community"<sup>31</sup> who was not convicted of a crime following their gender crossing, but rather gave up their gender crossing in order to bring a criminal case against someone who was extorting them for money on the threat of revealing their gender. Howe's narrative takes place largely within the context of the tavern which they owned. The stability offered by their property ownership and domesticity exempt them from the hypermobility of the picaresque Hamilton.

Howe's narrative differs from Hamilton's because of their class position, which necessitates a shift in phenomenological focus. Rather than maintaining a focus on spatial mobility, I turn towards an object-based phenomenology. Instead of focusing on "off slant" movement, I direct my attention to two objects which alter and shape the life of James and their wife Mary, and which are integral to their gender crossing. The critical focus on these "conspicuous objects" is informed by Ahmed's writing in "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," in which she "offer[s] an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon."<sup>32</sup> Howe's narrative differs from Hamilton's because of their class position, which necessitates a shift in phenomenological focus.

Reading the conspicuous objects of this narrative (the halfpenny and the habit<sup>33</sup>) produces an engagement with Judith Butler's performative theory of gender, as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theorization of "habitus." The idea of the "habitus" provides a lens through which to understand the effects of Howe's wealth on their gender expression, understanding "the

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<sup>30</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Manion, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology." *GLQ* 12, no. 4 (2006): 543-574. 543.

<sup>33</sup> Habit here refers to a suit of clothing, or outfit.



body as a mediator of the world.”<sup>34</sup> It also provides a corrective to Butler, whose theorization of gender performativity is limited in its ability to account for gender crossing, which the narrative presents as instantaneous, not honed or practiced over time. These theoretical pillars support an analysis of the moments of “transition” and “de-transition” in Howe’s narrative which take on a magical quality, in which the mechanics of gender transition are not revealed, but presented as instantaneous, while the moment of detransition is more prolonged. The transition and detransition challenges conventional views on gender as an immutable biological reality. It also provokes questions about just what makes up a gender, and how one can both inhabit it and leave it behind, furthering an understanding of the speculative elements of phenomenology, and of gender crossing narratives in general, which I turn more firmly toward in the third chapter.

When I began writing this work, I intended for my third chapter to discuss Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation—a methodology developed to read the archives of transatlantic enslavement, specifically Black women and girls whose lives are traces within it. This methodology is developed first in “Venus in Two Acts,” and then further in Hartman’s full-length books, *Lose Your Mother* and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*. Critical fabulation involves “playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view” in order to attempt to “jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.”<sup>35</sup> I was drawn to this methodology from the first time I encountered it, but when I began attempting to write the third chapter of my thesis using this framework, I kept butting up against a fundamental tension

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<sup>34</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 146.

<sup>35</sup> Saidiya Hartman. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (June 2008): 1-14, 11.

between my work and Hartman's. Namely, the white masculinity of "female husbands" rendered them visible in a way that runs entirely counter to the invisibility and absence of enslaved Black women in the ship's log.

Hartman, trained as a historian, writes, "[h]istory pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror."<sup>36</sup> It is by formulating counter-histories and reading against the archive that critical readers can transgress the limits of fact and evidence, and understand the investments that the archive holds in systems of power and violence. It was not just this resistance to "truth" and archival power which drew me to critical fabulation, but specifically to the formulation of counter-histories. Hartman's critical fabulation enacts narrative restraint to emphasize the impossibility of telling the stories of enslaved people in the Middle Passage, but my method of phenomenological speculation explicitly seeks to tell a fuller, kinder, and more loving story about gender crossers which exceeds the limits of the archive. Counter-history was the point at which I could focus my attention in order to think through the complexities of the "female husband" narrative archive without appropriating critical fabulation for a project about white masculine subjects. I say all of this in order to be honest about the process of writing this thesis, and the changes under which it went throughout. Critical fabulation is still one of the most fundamental roots of this work, and I do not want to understate its importance to my thinking about archives and to my approach to this work even though I am not utilizing it in the way I expected to when I began writing because it is not appropriate for a white queer archive.

Locating my focus on counter-history encouraged me to interrogate what it was about counter-history that I found important. I had to think about the "problems" and absences I saw in the archive of gender crossers known as "female husbands" in order to understand how

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<sup>36</sup> Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 9.

counter-history could be useful in identifying, resisting, and feeling alongside the affect of loss I identified in the gender crossing archive. It was this line of thinking which led me to develop a theory of hypernarrativity, which I see as a central feature of both Hamilton and Howe's narratives and other stories that I have read from the "female husband" archive.<sup>37</sup> This hypernarrative aspect results from the speculative dimensions of the narratives. Without a concern for truth, and with an interest in encouraging readerly speculation, authors of gender crossing narratives pack the stories with plot that necessitates readers' consideration of norms. Chapter three develops this understanding by examining the primary hypernarrative qualities of the Hamilton and Howe narratives from the first two chapters.

This speculative element is harmful in the original "female husband" narratives, but I also see its potential for counter-historical readings. In the third chapter, "And go with her": Refusing Hypernarrativity with Phenomenological Speculation," I turn toward an examination of what I term speculative phenomenology, which synthesizes phenomenology, hypernarrativity, and speculation. This method identifies and develops the fundamentally speculative aspects of phenomenological thought that asks "what do objects *do*." In line with new materialist focuses on agential objects, I identify mode of speculation as a possible site of intervention into conventional historiographical methods, which I critique in this chapter using Jean Bessette's work "LOVE IN A HALL OF MIRRORS: Queer Historiography and the Unsettling In-between." I entangle this understanding of phenomenology with a definition of speculative fiction which focuses on technology. Informed by the work of Donna Haraway, I engage an understanding of gender as a technology which can be expressed and explored through speculative fiction to speculate on new and old ways to rethink gender.

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<sup>37</sup> Some other stories: James Allen (1829), John Haywood (1829), and the Countess Sarolta Vay (1890).

I refer to the final section of the thesis as a “backward glance” rather than a “conclusion,” to emphasize the relationship between history and future possibilities using José Esteban Muñoz’s conception of queerness as “a backward glance which enacts a future vision.”<sup>38</sup> In it, I discuss Jordy Rosenberg’s *Confessions of the Fox* as an example of the efficacy of speculative fiction in relation to queer and trans histories. I also further engage with Muñoz’s theorization of queer futurity and queer horizons to generate new phenomenologically speculative possibilities for writing queer history and making queerer futures.

### **Speculative Futures**

This work, more than anything, serves to open new questions regarding queer and trans history, the limits of archives, and the importance of literary strategies for examining primary source documents. Following Foucault<sup>39</sup> and Butler<sup>40</sup>, I recognize the discursive construction of the categories which we take for granted. Using literary strategies to read history, then, can help to identify the rhetoric of those discourses in order to open new avenues for resistance, sometimes even using authorial speculation against itself to encourage readerly imagination centuries later. I do not attempt, in this thesis, to answer every question which I pose. Rather, I hope that this work prompts readers to ask new questions about how they understand history, and how their own lives and orientations might be shaped by phenomenology and speculation. As a young trans person, looking backward into history was one of many ways in which my identity was formed. I developed a strategy of reading against archives early in my life subconsciously — through an embodied knowledge that what I was reading could not possibly represent the fullness of queer and trans life before my own. I do not wish to uncover a certain

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<sup>38</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011).

“truth” about gender crossing subjects represented in the “female husband” archive, because to do so would fall into the trap which historiography has set. Rather, I want to enact, as José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*, a “a backward glance that enacts a future vision.”<sup>41</sup> By looking critically at archival presences, we might gain a sense of how we want to live.

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<sup>41</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 4.

## CHAPTER ONE

“Transactions not fit to be mention’d”<sup>42</sup>: New Binaries, Queer Contact, and Criminal Gender

“Of these unnatural lusts, all ages and countries have afforded us too many instances; but none I think more surprising than what will be found in the history of [Charles Hamilton].”<sup>43</sup>

Henry Fielding wrote this about the “carnal appetites” of Charles Hamilton, the central figure in Fielding’s 1746 pamphlet “The Female Husband.”<sup>44</sup> Hamilton was convicted of the crime of vagrancy after marrying a woman named Mary Price. Hamilton’s conviction and the presence of their story in the media occurred because Hamilton, who was assigned female at birth, lived and was married as a man. Their story presented a fundamental challenge to an emerging gender ideology in the eighteenth century: that there are two sexes which are constituted biologically. Hamilton’s narrative poses problems for queer history as well. While their life allows contemporary readers to understand how eighteenth-century English people thought about gender, Fielding’s representation of Hamilton’s complex life story is not easily categorizable.

Fielding’s narrative served to establish a speculative<sup>45</sup> genre called “the female husband narrative” and, I argue, it also began a public media attempt to instantiate a two-sex model by rhetorically disciplining Hamilton’s narrative by marking them as deviant, deceptive, and criminal. I further contend that this attempt to popularize the two-sex model was ultimately undermined by the indeterminacy and undefinability of Hamilton’s gender, and Fielding’s unwillingness to examine their gender crossing within a narrative that was itself indeterminate in

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<sup>42</sup> Henry Fielding, “The Female Husband: or, the surprising history of Mrs. Mary, alias Mr George Hamilton, who was convicted of having married a young woman of Wells and lived with her as her husband. Taken from her own mouth since her confinement.” London: printed for M. Cooper, at the Globe in Pater-Noster-Row, 1746. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 2.

<sup>44</sup> Fielding, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Here, I use speculative to mean a fictive text marked by authorial or readerly conjecture rather than empirical fact or provable truth.

form. It is structured by a blend of fact and fiction which are not distinguished from one another. Furthermore, it is marked by hypernarrativity: a mode of storytelling marked by a paradoxical relationship between the text and the gender crossing central character. Fielding overwrites the narrative by including multiple episodes detailing contact between Hamilton and the women they court, despite Hamilton's real-life conviction only including evidence of one "fraudulent marriage." Despite this, there are still significant absences with regard to gender and sex. This hypernarrativity is a central feature of the emergent genre of "female husband" narratives which were popular in Europe and the American colonies throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This hypernarrativity is a result of and produces speculation regarding the lives of gender crossing subjects. The stories in this genre invite readers to speculate about gender deviance and expose them to new ideas about sex and gender.

Reading Fielding's "The Female Husband" using queer phenomenology might help us understand the role that the story of Charles Hamilton, as told by Fielding, played in terms of the construction of "normative" gender as well as gender deviance, when —I believe— the question which animates "The Female Husband" is not "in what ways is this person deviant," but rather "what is this person deviant from?" Sara Ahmed's theory of queer phenomenology accounts for the ways in which offers "the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies."<sup>46</sup> Fielding's narrative takes place over many cities and spaces throughout England and Ireland, and the spaces which Hamilton inhabits throughout the narrative shape not only their proximate relationships, but also the broader contours of social and discursive space during the period. The publication of Fielding's "The Female Husband" in 1749 served as a mechanism through which new ideas about binary

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<sup>46</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

sex were discursively transmitted. Further, Hamilton's own indeterminate gender position disrupted those ideas about binary sex. The phenomenological mode offers readers a way to focus on this concept of orientation, showing how bodies are in relation so that hypernarrativity is revealed. The phenomenological mode offers readers a way to focus on this concept of orientation, showing how bodies are in relation so that hypernarrativity is revealed, and a relationship between Hamilton's embodiment and mobility and the narrative's pace and structure beyond Fielding's narratorial position and claims to factuality becomes visible.

### **Enlightenment Gender, New Normativities, and Escape**

One of the foremost works of scholarship regarding the instantiation of binary sex and gender norms is Thomas Laqueur's 1990 book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. In it, he writes that "[s]ometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented."<sup>47</sup> He goes on to explain that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of transition from an older model of sex wherein gender was constituted by social role but bodies were not differentiated by sex (i.e., everyone was of one sex), to a newer model which categorized bodies into one of two sexes which supported their social genders. The older one-sex model persisted until the Enlightenment period in Europe, when embodiment was renegotiated by the relatively new field of natural science. The Enlightenment, which began in the early eighteenth century, brought into being a new system of thought, characterized by an emphasis on reason, categorization, "empirically-based" science including anatomy and physiology, and reductionism. This reductionism left many philosophers to make binary lists of "opposite" things: mind/body, good/evil, male/female. Laqueur argues that this new epistemology was

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 149.



shaped by a need to “discover” a biological difference between men and women to explain the superiority of men and their “natural” power.<sup>48</sup> The two-sex model, according to Laqueur, was invented in service of patriarchal power and Enlightenment thought. The idea that what had previously been a socially defined role (i.e. “man” or “woman”) could be reduced to a biological fact (i.e. penis or vagina) was powerful in its ability to explain social constructions as immutable facts of life. If, as the newer two-sex model suggested, people with vaginas were invariably women, and women were invariably weaker than men (who invariably had penises), then there was no need to examine the fact that men held power in politics and the home. In this way, according to Laqueur, the true context for the new two-sex model model was

neither a theory of knowledge nor advances in scientific knowledge. Their context was politics. There were endless new struggles for power and position in the enormously enlarged public sphere of the eighteenth and particularly the postrevolutionary nineteenth centuries...When, for many reasons, a preexisting transcendental order or time-immemorial custom became a less and less plausible justification for social relations, the battleground of gender roles shifted to nature, to biological sex. Distinct sexual anatomy was adduced to support or deny all manner of claims in a variety of specific social, economic, political, cultural, or erotic contexts.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, the two-sex model in the early and mid-eighteenth century was the domain of the politicians and philosophers who were seeking to instantiate their power through notions of a biological incommensurability which was foundational to gender and gender roles. Philosophers

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<sup>48</sup> For more on the transition of women out of positions of power within their communities in service of patriarchal and capitalist power, see Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2014) and Maria Mies *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 152.

like John Locke,<sup>50</sup> Thomas Hobbes,<sup>51</sup> and Jean-Jacques Rousseau<sup>52</sup> who were interested in social relationships and structures of government turned to the idea of biological difference<sup>53</sup> to defend their beliefs that men were “abler and stronger”<sup>54</sup> than women.

It is important to note that in the thirty two years since the publication of *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, many scholars have pushed back against the simplicity of Laqueur’s argument regarding the transition from a one sex to a two sex model. In 2013, Helen King released a book-length refutation of *Making Sex* titled *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence*. In the preface to this book, she writes “the main issue with Laqueur’s work is his selective use of ‘evidence,’ and his lack of close reading of the material he does use.”<sup>55</sup> King further argues that Laqueur’s work suffers from oversimplification, and that the transition from the one sex to two sex model is marked by a complexity which Laqueur fails to examine.

King contends that both sex and gender models were ambiguous, and both were circulating culturally and being (re)created. “The Female Husband” is one example of an ecosystem of public media about sex and gender whose production and consumption instantiated

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<sup>50</sup> Locke’s monumental work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) is an early defense of empiricism (William Uzgalis, "John Locke", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 4 April 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/locke/>).

<sup>51</sup> Hobbes most famous work, *Leviathan* (1651), discusses religious and political philosophy. (Stewart Duncan, "Thomas Hobbes", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 4 April 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/hobbes/>).

<sup>52</sup> Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1752) sets forth an idea of general will as an organizing principle of society (Christopher Bertram, "Jean Jacques Rousseau", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 4 April 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/rousseau/>).

<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that these ideas of biological difference as determinate of social power or social role extended beyond gender — the two-sex model was emerging at the height of British empire, and biology sat at the nexus of white supremacist notions of race as well as gender. Laqueur writes that “scientific race...developed at the same time and in response to the same sorts of pressures as scientific sex.” (Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 155.)

<sup>54</sup> John Locke, quoted in Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 156.

<sup>55</sup> Helen King, *The One-Sex Body on Trial: The Classical and Early Modern Evidence*. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), xi-xii.

the two sex model during this transitional period. Another was through the criminalization of deviance that was then publicized through new media outlets such as crime ledgers and histories of criminals. The text was affordable, accessible, and exciting — it billed itself as a picaresque narrative of a rogue-ish adventurer and their antics, but it actually carried new ideas about sex and gender to be transmitted to its readers. Jen Manion, in their book *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, writes of Fielding that “[he] took the real life criminal case against Charles Hamilton and interwove it with a variety of views about sexual difference and sexual intimacy that were both serious and absurd.”<sup>56</sup>

Fielding’s “The Female Husband,” when printed in 1746, was sold for sixpence —the price some taverns during the period would charge for one to drink all day, according to an article written by the British Royal Mint.<sup>57</sup> The sixpence, in other words, was the coin of the working person.<sup>58</sup> It was a small value, indicating that the pamphlet was meant to be affordable. Manion writes that “the actual pamphlet itself was a hit, selling out two runs of 1,000 copies each in November 1746 alone. Priced at sixpence, it would have been available to nearly all but the poorest of London’s inhabitants.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the magazine in which it was originally published was, according to Manion, “known for publishing provocative pieces that debated women’s place in society,” written by men for a multi-gendered audience.<sup>60</sup> All of this indicates that “The Female Husband” was uniquely positioned to transmit ideas about sex and gender to its audience who would be unlikely to have access to or be interested in a formal scientific education, but who would be likely to buy the literary equivalent of penny candy, especially if

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<sup>56</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 32.

<sup>57</sup> “Coin Names and Nicknames,” The Royal Mint, accessed December 10, 2021, <https://www.royalmint.com/stories/collect/coin-nicknames/>.

<sup>58</sup> For context, according to “A History of Prices...” Volume 1, by Thomas Tooke, published in 1859, the average daily wage for an English agricultural worker was twelve pence.

<sup>59</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 32-33.

<sup>60</sup> Manion, 32.

they thought it would be provocative. Fielding was a well-known author and public figure during his life and, furthermore, his writing was entertaining and popular. “The Female Husband” blends a number of popular literary styles and tropes during the period: travel narratives,<sup>61</sup> fictionalized (auto)biographies,<sup>62</sup> gossip, epistolary narratives, conversion narratives, captivity narratives, and court reportage. This blend of popular literary styles, combined with the magazine’s price point, indicates that its intended audience was laborers and the rising middle class of lawyers, shopkeepers, and wives, not intellectuals. It was a platform from which new ideas about sex could be launched to people who were unlikely to access the works of philosophers and politicians explicating the new gender and sexual ideology which Laqueur discusses (i.e. that “the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ were opposite and incommensurable biological sexes”<sup>63</sup>).

Fielding reveals his investment in the newer two-sex model through the very narrative structure of “The Female Husband.” In the narrative, Hamilton has relationships with at least five women. Three of these relationships end with the discovery or near discovery of Hamilton’s “true sex,” and some version of the sentiment ‘I have been deceived, my husband who I thought was a man is *actually* a woman’ (not a quote from the text). This repetition applies not only to Hamilton’s pattern of marrying women and then fleeing town once their gender crossing is discovered, but to the very phrasing of these discoveries themselves. Fielding often patterns these discoveries first with a statement of what the woman thought was happening (i.e. that they were married to a man) and then a negation of that understanding (i.e. my husband is actually a woman). Mrs. Rushford screams, “I am married to one who is no man. My husband? A woman,

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<sup>61</sup> Fielding himself published a travel narrative in 1755 titled “Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon.”

<sup>62</sup> See Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* from 1744, a epistolary narrative which tells the fictionalized story of a young woman named Pamela from her perspective, widely considered to be one of the first novels.

<sup>63</sup> Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 154.

a woman, a woman;”<sup>64</sup> Ms. Ivythorn, in shock, whispers, “You have not — you have not — what you ought to have.”<sup>65</sup> Mrs. Price learns of her husband’s gender crossing through a retelling of Ms. Ivythorn’s story by someone who recognized Hamilton from their time in Ms. Ivythorn’s city. Furthermore, these utterances are rooted in primary and secondary sex characteristics; Hamilton does not have a penis, they do have breasts, and they do not have facial hair. Mrs. Rushford discovers Hamilton’s genitals when she attempts to give them a handjob, and Mrs. Ivythorn pulls back the covers while Hamilton is asleep and sees their naked body and dildo. These episodes not only rely on a model of sex where “man” and “woman” are incommensurable opposites, but they rely on an understanding of that incommensurability which is rooted in the body. However, Fielding’s understanding of binary sex is revealed before the narrative of Hamilton’s life even begins.

Fielding, in his preface to the narrative, writes of “[t]hat propense inclination which is for very wise purposes *implanted in one sex for the other*” which is “necessary for the continuance of the human species.”<sup>66</sup> Here, he explicitly refers to an understanding of sex which is predicated on a binary model: *one sex* is made, by nature or some other force, to desire *the other sex*. Further, this desire results in reproduction. Here, Fielding advocates for binary sex system that is implicitly heterosexual and biopolitical.<sup>67</sup> The “natural” thing to do is have penetrative, penis-in-vagina sex and produce children. Anything else, he goes on, are nothing but “carnal

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<sup>64</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 12.

<sup>65</sup> Fielding, 14.

<sup>66</sup> Fielding, 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>67</sup> In an essay delivered at the Collège de France on March 17, 1976, Michel Foucault defined biopower and biopolitics main domain as “control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live.” In short, biopower establishes an “ideal subject” in order to control who lives and who is allowed to die. (Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 245.)

appetites” which, when indulged, produce “excess and disorder.”<sup>68</sup> These excessive carnal appetites, he says, are “*monstrous and unnatural*.”<sup>69</sup> In *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Jack Halberstam writes, “the monsters of the nineteenth century metaphorized modern subjectivity as a balancing act between inside / outside, male / female, body / mind, native / foreign, proletarian / aristocrat.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, monstrosity metaphorized binaries — constructing not only opposition between paired concepts, but serving to *other* those subjects who rejected or fell outside of these binaries. Therefore, the positioning of Hamilton’s desires (or “appetites”) as “monstrous” is significant, because Fielding intends for it to shape the reader’s experience of the entire narrative. He writes this first, before even introducing Hamilton. When he does introduce Hamilton, he introduces them as a prime example of the “monstrous” urges he discusses in his preface. He writes “of these unnatural lusts, all ages and countries have afforded us too many instances; but none I think more surprising than what will be found in the story of...[Charles] Hamilton.”<sup>71</sup> Hamilton not only represents the lusts Fielding seeks to demonize through his work, but they also represent the worst of the worst when it comes to deviance. They were a gender crosser who had (as the narrative positions it) “Sapphic” sex out of wedlock with numerous women, practiced Methodism, and made their money as a quack doctor. They not only transgressed new gender norms, but also norms surrounding sexuality. Furthermore, their association with Methodist religion — a Christian sect which was critical of the Church of England and eventually separated from it entirely— marked

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<sup>68</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 1.

<sup>69</sup> Fielding, 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>70</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>71</sup> Fielding, 2.

them as in another way outside of the norms of British society during the period.<sup>72</sup> Their profession as a quack doctor also marked them as distrustworthy in the eyes of some, but not all, eighteenth-century English people.<sup>73</sup> With all of these details, Fielding constructs an image of Hamilton as a dishonest figure whose life, ideals, and embodiment diverges from the ideal British subject.

The term “unnatural” is particularly important in these passages, especially as it relates to the two-sex model which I argue Fielding was supporting through his writing. Proponents of the two-sex model sought to “naturalize” gender difference by appealing to the foundational difference of binary sex. Before the two-sex model was theorized, what would come to be known as the vagina was seen as simply the opposite of the penis and testicles—the ovaries were known as “female stones”—or, in Laqueur’s words “an interior version of the male’s [genital anatomy].”<sup>74</sup> However, even by the beginning of the eighteenth century, some anatomists began differentiating the shape of the vagina, uterus, and ovaries from that of the penis and testicles. “Indeed,” writes Laqueur, “‘vagina’ or equivalent words...standing alone to designate the sheath or hollow organ into which its *opposite*, the penis, fits...only entered the European vernaculars around 1700.”<sup>75</sup> However, this change signalled that in order to reproduce, humanity must “naturally” have two distinct sexes, and these sexes must reproduce only through penetrative sex. The rhetorical differentiation of the reproductive organs served to provide physiological bases to cement the gender binary.

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Leonard Tucker, *The Separation of the Methodists from the Church of England* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1918).

<https://divinityarchive.com/bitstream/handle/11258/2298/cu31924029470683.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>73</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 20.

<sup>74</sup> Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 86.

<sup>75</sup> Laqueur, 159.

The consequences for infringement upon the “natural” order of sex were criminal. Whether that meant anal sex (sodomy, buggery), bestiality, or cross dressing, these sex acts all infringed upon the two-sex model by their rejection of the myth that the penis and the vagina were paired opposites. Fielding writes that Hamilton was criminally charged for their gender crossing after a legal consultant suggested that “[Hamilton] should be prosecuted at the next sessions, under a clause in the vagrancy act.”<sup>76</sup> Prosecution under the Vagrancy Act<sup>77</sup> and its various permutations was one of the most prominent ways in which gender and sexual deviants were prosecuted in England in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries. While Fielding is deliberately opaque about many of the specifics of Hamilton’s trial, the details he does offer are telling in understanding how vagrancy as a charge was linked to gender and sexual deviance. Fielding gives the reader the following: one piece of evidence, and a snippet of Mary Price’s testimony against Hamilton.

The piece of evidence produced against Hamilton is simply described as “something too vile, wicked, and scandalous a nature”<sup>78</sup> (a dildo<sup>79</sup>) which was found in Hamilton’s trunk. Hamilton’s conviction seems to hinge on the discovery of this dildo, which serves as a representation of vagrancy as it acted as an instrument by which Hamilton could “deceive” their partners — ostensibly in service of the desire to defraud them. Sal Nicolazzo, in “Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband’ and the Sexuality of Vagrancy” privileges an analysis of Fielding’s narrative focus on the connection between Hamilton’s dildo and their history of

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<sup>76</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 21.

<sup>77</sup> For an introduction to the perceived social threat vagrancy (the policing of impoverished persons without employment) see, *The Vagrancy Act of 1744* Tim Hitchcock, Sharon Howard and Robert Shoemaker, “Vagrancy”, *London Lives, 1690-1800* ([www.londonlives.org](http://www.londonlives.org), version, 1.1 17 June 2012).

<sup>78</sup> Fielding, 21.

<sup>79</sup> For more on the critical potentiality of dildos for sexual and gender deviants, see



deception which uncovers “how sexuality shapes and is inflected by economic concerns.”<sup>80</sup> I believe, however, that Hamilton’s conviction under the Vagrancy Act reveals the ways in which carceral systems seek to normalize the populations which they govern by any means necessary, regardless of the burden of proof. Ownership of a dildo is proof of nothing but Hamilton’s gender crossing, yet they were convicted of a crime which “was most centrally concerned with poor-law administration, the policing of lower-class social and economic behavior, and widespread anxiety about the threat of idleness.”<sup>81</sup> Nicolazzo argues that gender deviance and poverty were viewed at the time as entangled or mutually constitutive. In other words, Nicolazzo claims that Hamilton’s gender crossing was seen as enabling their alleged fraud. However, I believe that the carceral punishment of Hamilton’s gender crossing was the primary aim of those involved in the legal and social systems surrounding Hamilton, and that concerns over fraud were the excuse which enabled that punishment. Fielding writes “[Hamilton], having been convicted of this base and scandalous crime, was by the court sentenced to be publicly and severely whipt.”<sup>82</sup> The “base and scandalous” in question was “having by false and deceitful practices endeavoured to impose on some of his Majesty’s subjects,”<sup>83</sup> in this case by using a dildo to have sex with their wife. This, combined with the narrative space afforded to Mary Price’s testimony, in which she assures the judge that she had no idea that her husband was a gender crosser (or was using a dildo) —which is supported in-text by affirmations of her virginity prior to her marriage<sup>84</sup>— enforces an image of sex and gender transgression marked as

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<sup>80</sup> Sal Nicolazzo, “Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband’ and the Sexuality of Vagrancy.” *The Eighteenth Century* 55, no. 4, (2014): 335–53, 338.

<sup>81</sup> Nicolazzo, “Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband’ and the Sexuality of Vagrancy,” 338.

<sup>82</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 22.

<sup>83</sup> Fielding, 21.

<sup>84</sup> “Then the council asked her, whether during the time of this cohabitation, she imagined the Doctor had behaved to her as a husband ought to his wife? Her modesty confounded her a little at this question; but she at last answered she did imagine so.” (Fielding, 22.)

not simply deviant, but actively criminal because it was deceptive. This in and of itself re-inforces the two-sex model which Fielding otherwise supports within the text, as it marks lives beyond binary gender as associated with crime and thus worthy of punishment. Two distinct and empirical categories (male and female) are needed to establish what is considered deception. Hamilton, in short, exemplifies a fracturing of the nascent two-sex model because their gender was incompatible with a binaristic ideology — a fracturing which had to be punished not only by imprisonment, but by imprisonment as a woman. Part of that criminal punishment was the exposure of their gender crossing and their forced return to femininity. An illustration of their public whipping reprinted in Manion’s book shows Hamilton stripped to the waist with their breasts exposed — a public revelation of their “true sex” which served to reinforce that their gender crossing was an act worthy of punishment.

After telling Hamilton’s story in all of its indeterminate and sexy glory, Fielding makes one last-ditch effort to discipline Hamilton’s narrative — enacting the rhetorical equivalent of the public whippings and hard labor to which the real life Hamilton was subjected. As in his preface, Fielding takes the space in his conclusion to explicitly address the sex and gender ideology which animates the narrative portion of the text. Fielding makes explicit what the reader should take away from the text: that gender is founded on biological sex and people who disrupt that relationship should be punished for their deviance. Fielding writes of femininity and the female sex that while “unnatural affections are equally vicious and equally detestable in both sexes...if modesty be the peculiar characteristic of the fair sex, it is in them the most shocking and odious to prostitute and debase it.”<sup>85</sup> According to Fielding, Hamilton debases not only modesty —by having sex outside of the bounds of heterosexual marriage— but also “the fair sex” itself, through their gender crossing. They are a slippery figure in terms of just *how* they have debased

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<sup>85</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 23.

the “fair sex” because they not only have had sex with women, they have (in the eyes of the narrative) deceived those women — and they have done so after transgressing their own “femaleness.” These concerns all become entangled at the tip of Fielding's quill.

To debase modesty is to debase gender. To debase gender is to debase sex difference. This relationship between sex and gender was relatively new at the time, but Laqueur argues that the two-sex model, from its inception, had a mutualistic relationship with gender. He writes “[t]wo sexes, in other words, were invented as a new foundation for gender.”<sup>86</sup> This foundation enabled new stereotypes about femininity, which seemed to be irrefutable because of their newfound “biological” basis and reinforced patriarchal control over how women were seen in society and what media were appropriate for women to consume. Women's purported passionlessness was one of the many possible manifestations of this newly created sex. “Passionless,” here, serves a similar rhetorical function as “modesty” does in Fielding’s conclusion to “The Female Husband” — it is a defining trait of womanhood *and* the female sex, and it is distinct from manhood and male gender. It is furthermore distinct from the gender crossing position Hamilton occupies, which is deviant even beyond the boundaries of masculinity. In some sense, gender was needed to secure sex. Men, as vital creatures, have access to a kind of sexuality that women, according to new patriarchal models of sex and gender which Fielding espouses, do not.

Hamilton, in their gender-crossed desire for women, transgresses that sexuality even further. If women are modest and passionless and men are vigorous, then Hamilton’s actions constitute depravity beyond both genders. In his conclusion, Fielding cautions female readers about the content of the narrative as if they have not already read the entire work, writing:

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<sup>86</sup> Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 150.

in order to caution therefore that lovely sex, while they preserve their natural innocence and purity, will still look most lovely in the eyes of men, the above pages have been written, which, that they might be worthy of their perusal, such strict regard hath been had to the utmost decency, that notwithstanding the subject of this narrative be of a nature so difficult to be handled inoffensively, not a single word occurs through the whole, which might shock the most delicate ear, or give offense to the purest chastity.<sup>87</sup>

Here, again, Fielding explicitly links femininity with decency and modesty, and links those attributes with biological sex. In some ways Fielding must not only discipline Hamilton's deviance, he also has to discipline the female readers (who he has been titillating with stories of Hamilton's deviance) for the transgressions against "passionlessness" and "modesty" that they have committed by reading "The Female Husband."<sup>88</sup> However, this passage's presence at the end of the text reveals Fielding's simultaneous project: revealing deviant queerness *and* disciplining that deviance into systems of heteropatriarchy. Therefore, Hamilton's deviance transmitted a new Enlightenment focus on internalized natural binaries which was on the radar of lawmakers but would not have been accessible to Fielding's readers at this time. However, Fielding is on shaky ground here, as he espouses beliefs regarding sex which stand in direct contrast to the style in which he fashions Hamilton's story, and furthermore, their gender. This is where Fielding, I believe, ultimately fails in his work to use public media to support the instantiation of the two-sex model. Hamilton refuses to be interpellated into this model. Fielding's narrative does not simply position Hamilton as a man or a woman; their gender is blurry and indeterminate as Fielding blends feminine pronouns and masculine nomenclature over the course of the narrative, and as he reverts to an opaque narrativization of sexual acts and deeds. The pace and hypernarrativity of the story both necessitates authorial speculation about

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<sup>87</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 23.

<sup>88</sup> Notably, this epilogue includes an endorsement of heterosexual coupling, noting that Fielding's omission of scandalous details in the text ensures that "that lovely sex...will still look most lovely in the eyes of men" after reading. (Fielding, 23)

the aspects of the narrative which cannot be proven, and invites readerly speculation in the moments when Fielding refuses to be explicit about Hamilton's gender. Despite his insistence on using Hamilton's birth name and female pronouns, Fielding calls them "he" when referring to their period as a doctor, implying that their social gender is in fact male. The first woman<sup>89</sup> to graduate medical college was Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, who graduated in 1849 — a full century after Fielding wrote "The Female Husband."<sup>90</sup> Fielding also refers to Hamilton in the subtitle of the pamphlet as "Mrs. Mary," which lends validity to Hamilton's marriages to women, since Fielding does not reference a heterosexual marriage between Hamilton and a man. These inconsistencies ultimately undermine Fielding's work throughout the pamphlet to expose the public to a two-sex model, as the Hamilton who Fielding depicts lies somewhere outside of it.

Fielding works throughout "The Female Husband" to present Hamilton as a spectacular example of how depraved one becomes if they transgress "natural" boundaries of binary sex. However, Fielding does very little to imagine Hamilton's transgressions, saving his authorial speculation for the sheer number of episodes in the text where Hamilton courts and is exposed by a new woman. Fielding places the onus of speculation regarding sex and sexuality onto the reader. He omits any description of the intimacy between Hamilton and Anne Johnson, their first sexual partner named in the narrative. He refuses to name the dildo which Hamilton supposedly used to "trick" their wives during sex. He seems embarrassed to name queer desire. And this is precisely where, I argue, Hamilton resides within the fabric of their own story and can be found

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<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, Dr. James Barry, another gender crossing figure who was assigned female at birth practiced medicine in the early nineteenth century, but did so living as a man. For a fuller account of his life, listen to *Queer As Fact*, #124 and #125, "James Barry, Pt. 1" and "James Barry, Pt. 2" aired 1 October and 15 October 2021, on PodBean, <https://queerasfact.podbean.com/e/dr-james-barry-part-1/>.

<sup>90</sup> Debrah A. Wirtzfeld, "The history of women in surgery." *Canadian journal of surgery. Journal canadien de chirurgie* 52 no. 4 (2009): 317-320.

using phenomenological speculation<sup>91</sup>: in these gaps and the things Fielding refuses to name. If the two-sex model was invented to support a binary gender model wherein one's sex always coincided with and supported one's gender, then to assume the gender which "corresponded to" the "opposite" sex was a nearly unimaginable transgression against law and nature. These moments are where a phenomenological reader might find Hamilton, and where we might see how Hamilton manages to escape the system for which Fielding uses them to establish the need.

The "female husband" as a figure, and Hamilton particularly, disrupts normativity around the body and gender. What Fielding is able to write is an image of Hamilton as a person incapable of sustaining relationships who is only interested in defrauding their intimate partners. In the conclusion of the work, Fielding goes so far as to write of Hamilton: "so little effect had the smart of shame of punishment on the person who underwent it, that the very evening she had suffered the first whipping, she offered the goaler money, to procure her a young girl to satisfy her most monstrous and unnatural desires."<sup>92</sup> Here, we see Hamilton as totally devolved — their monstrosity necessarily undoes gender by associating them more closely with the nonhuman. One can imagine them sniveling and begging as they grasp the shirt collar of the prison guard and thrust coins into his palm. This image results from Fielding's authorial speculation throughout the hypertextual story regarding the "truths" of sex, gender, and deviance. The image is so effective that the truth of it does not really matter. This is the climax of Fielding's characterization of Hamilton, or perhaps the rock bottom. This, Fielding purports, is what happens when one crosses gender. This is what happens when one defies the "'natural' 'laws'" of

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<sup>91</sup> This methodology, which I define and advance in the third chapter, concerns using the speculation inherent to phenomenological thinking (acknowledging the agency of bodies and objects) to develop counterhistories regarding queer and trans subjects which attend to the gaps and fissures left behind by hypertextuality.

<sup>92</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 23.

sex by merging that which is incommensurable. One cannot be both female and a husband, Fielding seems to say, without becoming a wretched perverted monster.

Over the course of the narrative, Hamilton's gender crossing enables them to have a mobility which was atypical for people who were assigned female at birth during the period. They worked as a Methodist minister and a quack doctor, and they lived in at least five cities according to Fielding's story. This would have been less possible if they did not live a cross gender life. Hamilton's very existence is proof positive that one can undertake a gender crossing and live a life with a career, with love, and with sex. One can live a life, in other words, not defined by criminality, deviance, and vagrancy, despite the efforts of the press to posit otherwise. While the pacing of the text makes it seem like Hamilton has only "successfully" lived as a gender crosser for a short period, the text, published in 1746, cites their birth year as 1721. While it offers no distinct date specifying when Hamilton's gender crossing began, it refers to their youth often. Manion writes that the real Hamilton first began gender crossing at age fourteen, which would mean that Hamilton lived a full ten years as a gender crosser before their conviction following their marriage to Mary Price. The hypernarrativity of Fielding's "The Female Husband" is evident in the pacing of the text, the brevity of their relationships, and the sheer number of episodes in which Hamilton is married and "found out." These techniques illustrate that Fielding willfully emplots the story using speculation within "The Female Husband" in order to construct a narrative which made gender crossing seem like an itinerant and impossible life.

Especially crucial to Fielding's hypernarrativity is his omissions of sex and intimacy. When discussing Hamilton's relationship with Johnson, he writes "their conversation, therefore, soon became in the highest manner criminal, and transactions not fit to be mention'd past [sic]

between them”;<sup>93</sup> he writes of Hamilton’s courtship of Mrs. Rushford that Hamilton aimed to “...marry the old woman, and deceive her, by means which decency forbids me to even mention”<sup>94</sup> and of the proof of gender crossing produced at Hamilton’s trial, Fielding describes “something of too vile, wicked and scandalous a nature”<sup>95</sup> which was found in Hamilton’s trunk. Fielding, through these turns of phrase, seems to offer his readership a sanctioned way in which to imagine queer sex without acknowledging that queerness might actually exist. In other words, he invites his readers to speculate about the contents of the trunk in his explicit refusal to name it. If, for example, Hamilton simply omitted these details from the story—if he did not mention that Hamilton had a particular plan in mind for deceiving Mrs. Rushford, or if he did not disclose the evidence from the trial—the reader would have no reason to imagine any possibilities. However, by naming his own inability to include certain details, Fielding is suggesting to his readers that there are details worthy of imagining. By writing about that which he cannot name, he reveals queerness as a possibility in the same sentences wherein he forecloses and denies its potential.

But where does this leave Hamilton in terms of queer subjectivity and history? I argue that they are left somewhere the text is incapable of discerning. In other words, they are able to slip out of the grasp of the condemnations of the text because of Fielding’s investment in both intimating and limiting the exposure of queer (as in non-normative) embodiments and forms of desire to his audience. Hamilton cannot be fully represented because Fielding explicitly marks as queer and then refuses to represent some of the most crucial aspects of their gender crossing embodiment and identity: the ways in which they are able to enact sexual desire (their dildo) and the possibility that their partners reciprocate their desire (i.e. that the women Hamilton courts

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<sup>93</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 3.

<sup>94</sup> Fielding, 10.

<sup>95</sup> Fielding, 21.



may in fact know they “have not what [they] ought to have” and in fact love them better for it). This simultaneous marking of and refusal to unpack queerness leaves the readers to do so for themselves. Fielding’s inability and unwillingness to represent Hamilton ends up undermining his project of exposing the public to a new model of sex, because he is unable to make clearly visible that which he positions as deviant,<sup>96</sup> but he is also unable to make visible what is supposedly natural— i.e. Hamilton’s supposedly “female” body.

Fielding is able to faithfully (if misogynistically) represent women, and he is able to do the same for men within the text. The women in the text are strongly characterized, with no ellipsis applied to their behavior outside of their contact with Hamilton. The captain and Mr. Ivythorn are established characters whose actions are defined and line up with their masculine characterizations. The only figure who escapes Fielding’s narrative representation is Hamilton. In her essay “You Have Not What You Ought: Gender and Corporeal Intelligibility in Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband,’” Emily Bowles writes that “Fielding emphasizes the malleability of Hamilton’s body while simultaneously forcing her sexuality to conform to a set of institutionally and textually prescribed values that make her legible.”<sup>97</sup> Bowles goes on to describe the various gendered terms which Fielding ascribes to Hamilton, and concludes that “[e]ach of these labels is a form of interpolation; each is also insufficient and ultimately meaningless in conjunction with Hamilton’s sexual fluidity and her gender ambiguity.”<sup>98</sup> Hamilton’s gender is insufficiently represented by the terms Fielding uses because these are all entrenched in his understanding of a binary sex model. In other words, while Fielding is

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<sup>96</sup> For more on eighteenth century male authors simultaneous interest in and inability to represent lesbian sex in their writing, see Andrew Elfenbein, “A Sight to Dream of, Not to Tell.” *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 177-203.

<sup>97</sup> Emily Bowles, “You Have Not What You Ought: Gender and Corporeal Intelligibility in Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband,’” *Genders* 52 (2010), 21.

<sup>98</sup> Bowles, “You Have Not What You Ought,” 21.

implicitly interested in telling a story which could be radically queer for the time in which it was written, his unwillingness to represent any models of gender or sexuality beyond the two-sex model he espouses foils his ability to fully represent Hamilton. Fielding constructs manhood and womanhood as exclusive opposites throughout the text. He writes that Mrs. Rushford's friend believed that Hamilton "looked more like a woman than a man."<sup>99</sup> Mrs. Rushford later says herself "I am married to one who is no man. My husband? A woman, a woman, a woman."<sup>100</sup> This pattern continues throughout the text, Hamilton's masculinity is inherently at odds with their "female sex," and the combination of the two is "wicked." Therefore, Hamilton is either reduced to their wicked masculinity, or to their "biological sex." For Fielding, the two cannot coexist, and he expresses this incompatibility rhetorically.

However, looking beyond Fielding's narrative hand, we may examine the ways in which Hamilton was able to resist the disciplining of their gender identity because of the inability of Fielding and readers to understand their gender crossing fully. As a result, Hamilton does not appear as an interlocutor within the text. They are not quoted except in letters, and their perspective is omitted from the story. While this invisibility elides Hamilton's humanity, it also enables Hamilton's escape from the rhetoricity of the text. Their unrepresentability leaves Fielding without any discernible evidence for his narrative claims, leaving him only with license to speculate about Hamilton and their gender, and further offering the reader the ability to speculate as well — in both nonbinary and problematic ways. Even in "The Female Husband," a story devoted to the exposition of a person with a subversive and transgressive gender, Hamilton's "precise" gender is indiscernible. This is partially due to Fielding's persistent use of

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<sup>99</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 11.

<sup>100</sup> Fielding, 12.

narrative ellipsis to discuss Hamilton's intimate life, but it is furthermore due to the fact that Hamilton's gender is, in some ways, uninterpretable through the two-sex system.

Fielding vacillates in his description of the degree of agency which Hamilton had in their decision to cross gender, as well as the "success" of their presentation. The first time Hamilton crosses gender, Fielding writes: "...the strangest thought imaginable suggested itself to her fancy. This was to dress herself in mens [sic] cloaths [sic], to embarque for Ireland, and to commence Methodist teacher,"<sup>101</sup> positioning Hamilton's gender crossing as a decision in which Hamilton's agency is expressed as irrational. Hamilton does not appear to desire to do this of their own free will, rather it is a "flight of fancy" born of rage following their rejection by their first female lover. This origin story transforms over the course of the narrative, until it becomes a tool by which Hamilton deceives women in order to gain access to their fortunes. Fielding writes of Hamilton's relationship to the widow Mrs. Rushford "...a device entered [Hamilton's] head...and this was actually to marry the old woman, and to deceive her by means which decency forbids me to even mention."<sup>102</sup> In this moment, we can read into Fielding's ellipses Hamilton's active decision not only to live a cross gender life, and, furthermore, to use a dildo in order to convince their female lovers of their gender — this is the "device" which "decency forbids [Fielding] to even mention."<sup>103</sup> This decision making contrasts with the fanciful idea which first enabled Hamilton to leave town after a breakup. This narrative inconsistency speaks to the development of Hamilton's criminality which is linked to the indeterminacy of Hamilton's gender. This inconsistency leaves Fielding's narrative vulnerable to gaps and confusion, and ultimately to phenomenological speculation. Fielding not only refuses to write about Hamilton's gender, even

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<sup>101</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 5.

<sup>102</sup> Fielding, 10.

<sup>103</sup> Fielding, 10.

when he tries he is unable to do so. Hamilton is slippery. They are variously a rogue, a villain, a “beautiful youth,” a debauched criminal, and a poet.

The only moments of first-person perspective the reader is allowed access to is the “reproduction” of a letter from Hamilton to Mary Price. This letter reveals only that Hamilton is interested in Price. They write, “do let me once more have the opportunity of seeing you, and that soon, that I may breathe forth my soul at those dear feet, where I should willingly die...”<sup>104</sup> Even in the moments where the reader ostensibly gains access to Hamilton’s thoughts, it is only to further the narrative that they are motivated solely by a desire to corrupt women, which Fielding furthers by including Price’s response in all of its innocent spelling errors and illiteracy. This way of writing dialogue reinforces Fielding’s narrative of Hamilton’s life as the only viable source, one attempts to tell us only that Hamilton was a hypermobile, hyper-seductive person whose gender was undefinable in the terms of the period. Yet, this narrativity further produces a speculative mode of storytelling which is compounded by the pace and plot structure of the story: an increase in speculation by both writer and reader that adds to the text’s hypernarrativity. This hypernarrativity relates to and necessitates a queer phenomenological reading, which allows the reader to notice not just what Hamilton is deviant from, but how their deviance is produced by their contact with people and their mobility throughout the narrative. This positive readerly speculation reveals the impact of contact in shaping bodies and worlds, rather than attributing all body-altering power to disciplinary devices like the Vagrancy Act and the pillory which are represented in the narrative as the things which ultimately end Hamilton’s gender crossing and “correct” their embodiment.

Fielding sets himself the difficult task of explaining a relatively novel sex and gender system by attempting to exposes Hamilton as a criminal of a type which was yet unestablished: a

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<sup>104</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 16.

deviant from that novel binary sex and gender system. Fielding's inability to fully discipline Hamilton within the narrative ultimately leads to Hamilton's escape from the confines of the gender ideology of the text and of the time. This escape is revealed through a phenomenological reading, as the reader follows Hamilton off the line of cis-heterosexuality by noticing the relationships that reproduce Hamilton's deviance and queerness. Fielding, in his attempt to strategically censor the story for publication ends up bolstering that very escape; Hamilton's story is not fully told, their gender is not fully represented, and thus the reader is left with a murky picture of what that gender is and how it impacts the story Fielding tells. Readers are left with license to speculate about those gaps. Their indeterminate gender escapes Fielding as he works toward a public media story which seeks to expose the working public to the nascent two-sex model, and ends up telling a story of one person who, in their transgression, exposes the public to a way of living beyond that model. Fielding offers his readers an elliptical view of queerness which is tantalizing in its opacity, and Hamilton escapes into these ellipses. These ellipses occur at moments of highly charged queer contact and produce Hamilton's coerced mobility after repeated discoveries of their gender crossing. Queer phenomenology is attentive to these moments and movements, and enables a view of the text beyond its hypernarrative aspects.

### **Mobility and Contact in "The Female Husband": A Queer Phenomenological Reading**

Before they needed to escape, Charles Hamilton was led astray. Henry Fielding depicts the story of Hamilton's youth as one of unwitting corruption rather than inborn deviance. However, this metaphor also enable a reading of "The Female Husband" using a vital queer theory methodology that reveals the very moments of queerness which Fielding's hypernarrativity obscures and elides: queer phenomenology. Queer phenomenology enables an analysis of how coming into contact with non-normativity and queerness can open new

possibilities for subjects — allowing them to see ways of living which are unavailable or aslant to normative subjects, constituting a positive speculation which exceeds the boundaries of the text. Sara Ahmed writes

[t]he discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go ‘off line’ to reach such objects. To go ‘off line’ is to turn toward ‘one’s own sex’ and away from ‘the other sex.’ To turn away from ‘the other sex’ is also to leave the straight line.<sup>105</sup>

Reading Hamilton’s life using queer phenomenology involves paying close attention to the many moments in the text which spur movement for Hamilton — moments where their contact with women either enables or forces their mobility. The rhetorical movements of the text reinforce the hypernarrative framing of the story, in which Hamilton’s physical movements serve as metaphorical movements “off line” from womanhood and heterosexual coupling. They enable Hamilton to become more confident and practiced in their gender crossings, which in turn create more moments of queer contact, drawing Hamilton further off line. A phenomenological reading allows us to understand Hamilton’s hypermobility as a result of the hypernarrativity in “The Female Husband,” and the relationship of that mobility to their gender crossing. It also encourages a reading of Hamilton outside of contemporary identity categories, instead focusing on what how their gender crossing impacted their movement in the world and what relationships it produced — both romantic and sexual relationships, and relationships of power.

*Anne Johnson, Being Led Astray, a Monstrous Transition*

According to Fielding, Hamilton’s youth offered no signs that they would end up crossing gender, having relationships with women, and eventually being prosecuted for those acts.

Fielding writes that their early life gave no “cause of suspicion that she would one day disgrace

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<sup>105</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, and Others*

her sex by the most abominable and unnatural pollutions.”<sup>106</sup> Rather, Hamilton was raised religiously and piously, despite their mother’s numerous marriages.<sup>107</sup> Fielding locates the origin of Hamilton’s eventual gender crossing in a single affair with a Methodist woman named Anne Johnson. From a queer phenomenological standpoint, this serves as the moment when Hamilton goes “off line” (i.e. transgresses the “line” of cisgender heterosexuality by engaging in deviant sexual behavior). Fielding writes of the initial virtuousness of Hamilton’s relationship with Johnson, describing a childhood friendship that irrevocably changed after “the ardour of enthusiastic devotion” was corrupted “into a different kind of flame.”<sup>108</sup> He writes of Hamilton: “Mrs. Hamilton declares her love, or rather friendship, was totally innocent, till the temptations of Johnson first led her astray.”

The rhetorical device of being led astray does powerful work here, allowing the reader to imagine that a once pure young person has been taken by the hand and dragged off the “normative line” of heterosexuality that Ahmed defines in the second chapter of *Queer Phenomenology*. She writes of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to perception “the normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time, which produces what we can call the bodily horizon, a space for action, *which puts some objects and not others in reach*. The normative dimension can be redescribed in terms of the straight body, a body that appears ‘in line.’”<sup>109</sup> In a narrative like Fielding’s, which is the first text to establish a speculative genre to tell the stories of gender deviants defined as “female husbands,” the specific rhetorical turns of phrase become essential to understanding not only the

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<sup>106</sup> Fielding, “The Henry Fielding,” 2.

<sup>107</sup> The inclusion of this detail is relevant because it positions Hamilton’s mother as deviant — a widow who had been married multiple times and may have a negative impact on the “piety” and morality of her child.

<sup>108</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 2.

<sup>109</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 66 (emphasis added).

story being told, but the way that story is in conversation with cultural and social trends and ideas of the time. They also become vital to critical analysis of the story and its effects. In “The Female Husband,” the ideological position is clear— deviance is constituted by (repeated) actions which transgress the boundaries of either emerging or instantiated social norms. Therefore, this “leading astray” or “pulling off track” is revealing of Fielding’s attitude towards sexual orientation: it is something which exists “naturally” in a heterosexual form, and people can be seduced to abnormality or unnaturality by corrupting forces.

We might consider Hamilton’s body to be straight, as in “in-line,” before their encounter with Johnson. The affair with Johnson puts a sort of non-normative sexuality within Hamilton’s reach, and thus produces an effect of “off line”-ness with regard to Hamilton’s body. In other words, Hamilton’s embodiment is shifted by their relationship with Johnson, and as a result of their sexual encounter and relationship with a woman, gender transgression moves into the field of possibility for their life. Jen Manion emphasizes “[t]he association between gender nonconformity and homosexuality”<sup>110</sup> was instantiated by sexologists at the turn of the twentieth century. While this post-dates the Fielding text by nearly 150 years, it also reveals attitudes which were emergent during Hamilton’s lifetime. If desire for women was the domain of men, then desiring women in some ways made one a man. And, despite Fielding’s reluctance to include any genuine expressions of desire in his text (privileging narratives of sex rooted in Hamilton’s extortion and deception of unknowing women), Fielding invites readerly speculation that Hamilton’s desire for women is what made them a gender crosser by constructing a plot which locates the beginning of Hamilton’s gender crossing with their relationship to Johnson. However, he refuses to name that their relationship was sexual explicitly and is unable to complete the inversion of Hamilton. This desire put new things into Hamilton’s path, namely the

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<sup>110</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 5.



possibility of gender crossing which would not have been accessible if Hamilton never had sex with Johnson and instead was courted by men as a woman. Ahmed puts it this way: “The discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go ‘off line’ to reach such objects.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, Hamilton must leave the line of normative desire to land in a sexual relationship with Johnson, which also grants them access to a new possible gender position aligned with masculinity, or eventually what we might call the non- or anti-binary.

Their affair produces the first description of Hamilton (in Fielding’s narrative) as aligned with a male gender position. The story goes that, after spending time with Hamilton as a bed-fellow and amour, Johnson meets a lovely and devoted Methodist man and accepts his marriage proposal. Hamilton is enraged when informed of Johnson’s disloyalty and “...became almost frantic, she tore her hair, beat her breasts, and behaved in as outrageous a manner as the fondest husband could, who had unexpectedly discovered the infidelity of a beloved wife.”<sup>112</sup> Here, Hamilton’s gender is defined by their relationship to Johnson. Fielding does not refer to Hamilton behaving in the manner of a man, but rather of a husband. This points to a construction of gender as social. By being in a sexual and romantic relationship with Johnson, Hamilton has gone off line, and the social gender of that of a “husband” (i.e. someone in a committed and contractual intimate relationship with a woman) has been put into reach. In Ahmed’s terms “[t]he body acts upon what is nearby or at hand, and then gets shaped by its directions toward such objects...”<sup>113</sup> so, in acting sexually with Johnson, Hamilton’s body is shaped into that of a husband—it is aligned with a particular masculine social position defined by an intimate romantic and sexual relationship with a woman.

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<sup>111</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 71.

<sup>112</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 4.

<sup>113</sup> Ahmed, 91.

The quote about Hamilton's discovery of Johnson's affair is also the first moment in the text where Fielding explicitly refers to Hamilton's body. Tellingly, he refers to a series of actions (tearing of the hair, beating of the breasts) which refers to Hamilton's attempts, inadvertent or not, to masculinize their body. Hamilton, in this quote, moves from femininity to masculinity by shortening their hair and flattening their chest—not through conventional means such as a haircut or chest-binding, but through the force of their rage. In this moment, Hamilton seems more than human—monstrous by virtue of their “remarkably mobile, permeable, and infinitely interpretable body.”<sup>114</sup> Ahmed writes “when one thing is ‘out of line,’ then it is not just that thing that appears oblique but the world itself might appear on a slant, which disorientates the picture and even unseats the body.”<sup>115</sup> Hamilton's reaction to Johnson's affair slant begins to illustrate the ways in which Hamilton's initial movement “off line” begins to shape their body, which then shapes their phenomenological world and their movements within it.

Once Hamilton's relationship with Johnson ends, Hamilton begins to follow the oblique line of queer desire in earnest. They begin living as a gender crosser full time, and they move away from their home in service of this way of living. Fielding's telling of this part of Hamilton's story is fast-paced and high tension. The reader is pulled along the queer slant as Hamilton (according to Fielding) goes on sea voyages, courts numerous women, abandons them, and is revealed as a gender crosser time and time again. These moments are the most recurrent pattern within the hypertext: moments when Hamilton's breast is touched and the softness of their body is seen as out of joint with their masculinity, or when a woman they have been sleeping with moves to touch their cock and finds it to be absent. The text turns hypertext, with moments of discovery or near discovery stacked on top of one another at a breakneck pace,

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<sup>114</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 21.

<sup>115</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 67.

leaving very little time for a reader to consider the first episode before another comes hurtling from the page with new authorial speculation. Hamilton becomes a picaresque figure at Fielding's garrulous hand; they are constantly in motion, and barely scraping by as their mobility is forced by the possible consequences of the discovery of their gender crossing. However, where these many moments risk losing meaning because of their sheer frequency in the text or complete overwriting of any budding queer subjectivity, when read through a phenomenological lens, they form the basis for fleeting moments of queerness that continuously put Hamilton "off track" following multiple queer slants. Each of these episodes, in a sense, serves as a case study for a slightly different model of gender and sexuality, or a different moment wherein sexuality and gender orientations are formulated, or to borrow phrasing from Fielding's introduction to "The Female Husband," *invented*.

*The Methodist Man, Contact, and Contagious Queerness*

Hamilton's first act after their initial gender crossing is to leave England. They depart on a ship bound for Ireland, and here they meet another Methodist. Hamilton becomes friends with this man on their voyage, until the "He-Methodist" accidentally touches Hamilton's chest, at which point Hamilton "gave so effeminate a squawl, that it reached the Captain's ears as he was smoaking [sic] his pipe upon deck. Hey day, says he, what have we a woman on the ship!"<sup>116</sup> This moment is the first point in the narrative at which Hamilton's gender crossing is vulnerable to being undone—the discovery of their "true sex" is imminent. This passage proposes the idea that Hamilton is vulnerable to "discovery" because they are unpracticed in their gender. They have not been off track long enough to fully embody the type of masculinity expected of them when they are taken by surprise. The Captain's surprise and the expectation of revelation

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<sup>116</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 5.

regarding Hamilton's gender that it produce, read phenomenologically, reveals the way that Hamilton has trouble conforming to one normative (masculine) gender, and the process by which Hamilton creates a particular kind of indeterminate gender is as they move toward the new possibilities uncovered during their affair with Johnson. Furthermore, it shows that this gender is something which must be practiced. Following the line of desire is not foolproof—it simply brings new possibilities into Hamilton's field of vision. However, at this point in the narrative, the line of "normative" sexuality is still visible in Hamilton's line of sight. The unpracticed nature of their gender is even more clearly visible in Fielding's narration of what happens between Hamilton and the Methodist after he assures the captain that there is no woman on board and leaves their cabin:

He was no sooner gone, than the Methodist man gave farther tokens of brotherly love to his companion, which soon became so importunate and troublesome to her, that after having gently rejected his hands several times, she at last *recollected the sex she had assumed*, and gave him so violent a blow in the nostrils, that the blood issued from them with great impetuosity<sup>117</sup>

The use of the words "recollected" and "assumed" are of particular interest because of how they allow the reader to understand gender as a practiced set of behaviors which are constantly (re)negotiated by social contact with others. Judith Butler writes "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time."<sup>118</sup> Hamilton, at this point in the story, is new to gender crossing and also because their gender is constantly in flux. On the shifting ground of the ship's deck, Hamilton's gender is vulnerable to discovery because of the ways in which it must be constantly recollected and reconstituted by Hamilton. This passage not only reveals Fielding's image of what masculinity "means" (i.e. violence,

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<sup>117</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 6 (emphasis added).

<sup>118</sup> Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, No. 4 (Dec. 1988), p. 519-531, 523.

unwillingness to be violated), and what femininity “means” (i.e. weakness, desire for masculine sexual advances), but how Hamilton is disruptive of both of those things by virtue of their experience with both. They cannot be purely feminine, because they are crossing gender and living as a man, but nor can they be purely masculine, because Fielding wants the reader to remember that they once lived as a woman through his use of feminine pronouns and the term “assumed” sex. Hamilton’s gender is incompatible with the terms of Fielding’s narration—it is incompatible with the very terms of sex during the eighteenth century (as discussed earlier in the chapter).

Nowhere in the text is this clearer than in the above quote, specifically in the way Fielding writes the Methodist man’s desire for Hamilton. He writes “the Methodist man gave farther tokens of brotherly love to his companion...”<sup>119</sup> indicating that the man sexually desires Hamilton. However, the specific description of this desire as “tokens of brotherly love” indicates a possibility that the Methodist desires Hamilton as a man, not as a cross-dressed “woman.” Fielding is frustratingly unspecific in this section: it is hard to tell if the “He-methodist” has “figured out” Hamilton’s gender crossing and comes onto them thinking that they are a woman, or if the Methodist’s desire for Hamilton is positioned as a queer desire for another man. This ambiguity brings into sharp relief the necessity of phenomenological speculation to uncover queerness in “female husband” narratives. The queerness to be found between Hamilton and the Methodist man can only be uncovered through critical engagement with the queer possibilities produced by the interpersonal contact in this moment, by looking beyond the text at what Fielding leaves unsaid. I will discuss this perspective on speculation and its relation to developing eighteenth century genres of the novel and “fiction” in detail in the third chapter, but regardless, this moment produces a contagious queerness. Hamilton is not just deviant, but other

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<sup>119</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 6.

people involved who become queered by being in relation to them. Here, it may be helpful to re-formulate the understanding of queer phenomenology which I have developed so far in the text.

The body of *Queer Phenomenology* is thick with metaphors— of going off-line, and of the slant— but none of those metaphorical ways of understanding queer desire and behavior explain the moment of the Methodist man’s desire for Hamilton. Taking into account Hamilton’s experience with Johnson (which Fielding formulates as the origin point of their gender crossing) might shift an understanding of phenomenology. Ahmed writes “queer[ness] engenders moments of contact; how we come into contact with other bodies to support the action of following paths that have not been cleared.”<sup>120</sup> Here, she focuses on the effect that moments of contact have on a queer individual. However, in reading Fielding’s “The Female Husband,” it is clear that Hamilton is not the only person in the narrative whose orientation is shifted as a result of queer contact. Just as Johnson oriented Hamilton towards queer embodiment, Hamilton seems, in this episode, to orient the Methodist man towards a form of queer sexual desire.

It becomes possible, through this episode, and through a reinterpretation of Ahmed’s reading of “contact,” to understand Hamilton’s queerness as a sort of contagion with both positive and negative connotations. The contagion metaphor brings into focus the phenomenological effects which Hamilton’s gender crossing had on the people they came into contact with, rather than just the impact those interactions had on Hamilton himself. This metaphor is not invoked specifically in either *Queer Phenomenology* or “The Female Husband,” but I believe it accurately reflects how Fielding conceptualized and wrote of Hamilton’s queerness. To see this in full, we should return to the introduction of “The Female Husband,”

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<sup>120</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 170.

which I discussed in section one of this chapter— and specifically to the language of “invention.”

Fielding writes that “once our carnal appetites are let loose without those prudent and secure guides, there is no excess and disorder which they are not liable to commit...there is nothing monstrous and unnatural, which they are not capable of *inventing*.”<sup>121</sup> Not only does Fielding personify “carnal appetites” (sexual desire, and specifically deviant sexual desire), but he gives them the agency to *invent* new forms of desire. Hamilton’s gender crossing, by this logic, results in some way from Johnson’s sexual desire for them. Hamilton’s gender crossing then invents a new form of queerness within the Methodist man— a queer male desire for another queer man. Hamilton’s gender crossing, in effect, multiplies the queerness or queer potential of those with whom they came into contact.

This phenomenological interpretation highlights how the multiplying of queer potentiality shifts the landscape of Hamilton’s life and brings them into contact with new experiences and forms of desire and deviancy. In the case of the Methodist man, his queer desire for Hamilton solidifies Hamilton’s masculinity. Fielding writes of Hamilton that, after the Methodist man’s “tokens of brotherly love” became too intense, Hamilton “at last recollected the sex she had assumed, and gave him so violent a blow in the nostrils that blood issued from them with great impetuosity.”<sup>122</sup> Hamilton’s gender crossing is affirmed by their contact with the Methodist man’s queer desire for them. They are able to practice their new gender as it is socially constructed: through violence. As I stated earlier in this section, this quote reveals Hamilton’s need to practice their gender. It is particularly interesting that this happens as a result of queer contact. Their gender is one again affirmed by contact with queer desire, just as it originated with

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<sup>121</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>122</sup> Fielding, 6.

Johnson's desire for Hamilton (and subsequent disavowal). For Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, "the bodily, the spatial, and the social are entangled."<sup>123</sup> This passage from "The Female Husband" affirms that. In the space of the ship, as a result of queer sociality, the gender crossing body is affirmed and strengthened. In other words, desire instigates gender crossing in Hamilton's story, but that gender crossing then opens the field of possibilities to include queer sociability that affirms queerness and iterations of gender crossing. Hamilton's hypermasculine performance of gender, not their biology, reaffirms their ability to cross gender and live as a man. This undermines binary assumptions that what makes a person a man is their biology by enabling Hamilton's continued gender crossing through a show of hypermasculinity. By following Hamilton off-line, the queer possibilities which their gender open become visible in the gaps and uncertainties left in hypernarrativity's wake.

*Contagious Affairs, and the Wickedness of Dildos*

Hamilton continues to queer others throughout the narrative, and they continue to practice their gender at the same time. This "queering" or contagion narrative is even explicitly recognized by at least one of Hamilton's partners: Ms. Ivythorn. After discovering that Hamilton is not what she thought they were (i.e. that they are a gender crosser), Hamilton attempts to convince Ms. Ivythorn to stay with them, to which she replies "no, no ... you shall not persuade me to that, nor will I be guilty of so much wickedness on any account."<sup>124</sup> This is an explicit acknowledgment within the Fielding text of the ways in which contact with Hamilton serves to shift the orientations of their partners. Hamilton, here, attempts to bring Ms. Ivythorn "off-line" with them, but is foiled by her recognition of the possible meaning of her involvement with them (i.e. that she would become queer in some way or that she already is), as well as her threat of law

<sup>123</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 181.

<sup>124</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 14.



enforcement involvement. She recognizes that “persuasion” and refuses it and the attachments that “persuasion” promises. Hamilton’s queer contact fails here, but is still evidenced by the rhetoric of the text.

However, not all of Hamilton’s partners are so self-assured in their recognition and refusal of queer modes of sexuality. In fact, some of his female lovers appear queer even before Hamilton’s gender crossing is revealed. The queerest among them is the sixty-eight year old widow Mrs. Rushford. By even entertaining the idea of marriage at her age, Mrs. Rushford marks herself as non-normative. She furthers this image by being apparently sexually rapacious. While Hamilton transgresses the boundaries of conventional (i.e. heterosexual reproductive) sex by living as a gender crosser and having intimate relationships with women, Mrs. Rushford does so by desiring and pursuing sex after she has lost her ability to bear children. Fielding highlights this transgressive sexual position by detailing Hamilton and Mrs. Rushford’s wedding vows—bringing the reader’s attention in particular to the fact that “[Mrs. Rushford] insisted on the parson's not omitting the prayer in the matrimonial service for fruitfulness.”<sup>125</sup> In the context of Hamilton’s gender crossing and Mrs. Rushford’s age, this prayer is presented as a comic moment. I argue that it conveys another formulation of queer gender and sexuality produced by Hamilton’s gender crossing: the impossibility of conforming to biopolitical heterosexual reproductive mandates of the period.

Here, again, we can return to the effect of the dildo on Hamilton’s gender and their sexual relationships. The dildo is presented by Fielding as the lynchpin in Hamilton’s conviction for Vagrancy because, in the sexual and gender formulations of the period, it represented an ultimate falsehood. It was not just that Hamilton was a gender crosser, but that in doing so they incited their lovers to a form of queerness as a result of the perceived “conflict” between their assigned

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<sup>125</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 10.

sex and their lived gender. Despite Hamilton's life as a man, their use of a dildo produces a Sapphic effect on their sexual relationships.<sup>126</sup> Since Hamilton is using a dildo rather than a "real" penis, they are engaging in same-sex relations with the women they have intercourse with in the eyes of the Fielding text and the sexual norms of the period. The dildo is a way in which Hamilton's abnormality (queerness) is enacted, *and* a way that their partners are queered by contact with them. Ahmed invites a reading of lesbianism wherein "we might become lesbian because of the *contact* we have with others as well as objects, as a contact that shapes our orientations toward the world and gives them their shape."<sup>127</sup> However, this quote does not account for the ways in which one's lesbian identity might shape the orientations of others. Shifting focus away from the central individual towards those who they come into contact with clarifies Hamilton's the ways that gender crossing was a site of contact which queered others. Applying this reading to Hamilton might give us a sense of the ways in which their partners became queered through contact with Hamilton, and specifically through contact with their dildo (as a figure of their queer gender and non-normative sexuality).

Ahmed writes "[phenomenology] can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds."<sup>128</sup> By the time Hamilton courts and marries their final wife, the young Mary Price, Hamilton is living a very queer life (according to Fielding's speculative

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<sup>126</sup> Dildos were often tied to Sapphics in the 18th century. One famous example is that of the "Sappho-an," "An Heroic Poem, Of Three Cantos. In the Ovidian Stile, Describing the PLEASURES which the FAIR SEX Enjoy with Each Other. According to the Modern and most Polite Taste. Found amongst the Papers of a Lady of Quality, a great Promoter of JACONITISM." from the mid eighteenth century, possibly between 1735-1749. The second canto, which describes sex between women, discusses how it "'Twoud tire the muse to mention all the toys, / With which they *imitate* substantial joys"—referring to dildos as a technology for "imitating" the "joys" (i.e. the penetration) of cisheterosexual sex.

<sup>127</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 94 (emphasis added).

<sup>128</sup> Ahmed, 2.

representation of it). Interestingly, Hamilton's first courtship after their initial gender crossing, and their courtship with Mary Price are very similar. In both instances, Hamilton courts the women via letters. However, after Hamilton's first gender crossing, the woman they attempt to seduce via letters is not receptive, refuses Hamilton, and marries a soldier within days. Fielding writes "[b]ut what of the gallant's surprize [sic], when in return to an amorous epistle, [Hamilton] read the following sarcasms, which it was impossible for the most sanguine temper to misunderstand, or construed favorably."<sup>129</sup> What follows is a letter which compares Hamilton to an opera singer, specifically a castrato (a male singer who has been castrated in order to maintain a high tenor voice). Bowles cites the comparison to the castrato Farinelli as one of the ways in which Fielding shows that Hamilton's gender crossing was obvious, and that they did not meaningfully inhabit masculinity this early after their initial crossing.<sup>130</sup> However, in the final episode of "The Female Husband," Hamilton's courtship of Mary Price and subsequent trial and imprisonment, Hamilton writes another letter, and this one is favorably received.

Through a phenomenological reading, it becomes clear over the course of the text how important "the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds" really is to Hamilton's gender crossing. The letters bookend the narrative, and illustrate the growth, maturation, or solidification of Hamilton's gender. The first time they send a letter, they receive a response which clearly alludes to Hamilton's non-normative embodiment and possible queerness by comparing them to a castrato. The second time they send a letter, it is received with awe and admiration, and it results in a wedding to a woman who insists on the stand that she did not know about her husband's gender crossing. In his representation of the trial, Fielding writes "Mary Price the wife, was produced as a witness, and being asked by the council, whether she had ever

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<sup>129</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 7.

<sup>130</sup> Bowles, "You Have Not What You Ought."

any suspicion of [Hamilton's] sex during the whole time of the courtship, she answered positively in the negative."<sup>131</sup> The parallel structure of the text is one of the ways in which the reader is able to see Hamilton's gender crossing become firmer and more practiced, and therefore harder for their lovers to identify. This narrative technique might show that Hamilton's seductive techniques have not grown or changed, and that the only reason Price accepts Hamilton's letter is because of her illiteracy (which Fielding shows by "reproducing" Price's letter in response, which is rife with spelling and grammatical errors<sup>132</sup>).

Mary Price's youth and virginity is used in Hamilton's trial as proof of Hamilton's degeneracy and their compulsion to seduce innocent women and extort them. During Hamilton's trial "the council asked [Mary Price] whether during the time of this cohabitation [with Hamilton], she imagined the Doctor had behaved to her as a husband ought to a wife? Her modesty confounded her a little to this question; but at last she answered she did imagine so."<sup>133</sup> Mary Price's "modesty," her age, and her lack of knowledge about the world served as proof, for the court, that Hamilton had been attempting to corrupt her. "As [Hamilton] was conveyed to Bridewell," Fielding writes they were "attended by many insults from the mob."<sup>134</sup> For Fielding, however, "what was more unjustifiable, was the cruel treatment which the poor innocent wife received from her own sex."<sup>135</sup> In other words, abuse leveled at Hamilton for their gender crossing was acceptable, even encouraged. However, to impugn Price was unacceptable — after all, her only crime was her contact with a contagiously criminal queer. After their relationship with Price, Hamilton was convicted for Vagrancy and sentenced to be "publicly and severely

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<sup>131</sup> Fielding, 22.

<sup>132</sup> "Sur," Price apparently writes "I haf received boath your too litters and sur I ham much surprise hat the loafe you priten to haf for so pur a gal as mee." (Fielding, "The Female Husband," 17.)

<sup>133</sup> Fielding, 22.

<sup>134</sup> Fielding, 22.

<sup>135</sup> Fielding, 22.

whipt four several times, in four market towns within the county of Somerset, to wit, once in each market town, and to be imprisoned, &c.”<sup>136</sup> While Hamilton’s trial offers a view into what the disciplining forces of 1846 thought of their gender crossing (namely that it was a criminal act and fit to be punished with bodily violence), it is their contact with their lovers that reveals the queer movement of their life. I believe that through a phenomenological reading, Hamilton’s life story provides an understanding of gender as a practiced performance which Hamilton has become more confident in over the course of their life. Furthermore, it is evidence of the ways in which, through contact, queerness can bloom and grow.

*The Genre of “Female Husband Narratives”*

Fielding’s “The Female Husband” provides a foundation for not only the emerging sexual and gender norms of the eighteenth century, but also into the “genre” of “female husband narratives” as they would come to be known. According to Manion, this style of narrative that follows the gender crosser persists in one way or another until the early twentieth century, and spread not only throughout Great Britain and some parts of Europe, but across the Atlantic to what would become the United States. The “female husband” as a figure would be written about in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and books. The “female husband” would be adopted by feminists, lesbians, trans men, and nonbinary people who read into their stories identitarian claims which the text, in its condemnation of gender crossers, did not make clear. These stories are primarily punitive in tone and served as examples of what happened to people who transgressed gender and sexual lines during their lives. To make claims about gender crossers’ personal identities using terms which would not come into use until long after their lives and deaths, using texts which served to scandalize readers and make sordid the lives of their subjects

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<sup>136</sup> Fielding, 22.

is inappropriate. Fielding's "The Female Husband" is the archetypal text of the genre I will continue to examine throughout this thesis, and these narratives show encounters with systems of power that left gender crossers without access to their families and communities. Through the hypernarrativity of these texts, authors and readers speculate over and over about the sordid details of non-normative lives while affirming those social systems which caused the subjects of the texts harm. Queerness is simultaneously revealed and concealed by writers of texts in the archive of "female husband narratives," while the very subjects of those narratives are publicly humiliated and/or criminally punished for their gender crossings.

Queer phenomenology can provide a view of these stories which tracks contact and relationships rather than identity, but even that is limited in its ability to fully represent the lives of those gender crossers who were textually transformed into symbols of deviance and criminality. For a fuller understanding of how the writing of "female husband narratives" affected the lives of people represented within it, and contemporary understanding of them, it is necessary to turn towards a methodology which is particularly attendant to a positive role for speculation about the narratives of "female husbands": phenomenological speculation. I put this methodology forth to further examine the relationship between hypernarrativity, speculation, and to engage with the possibilities that relationship opens for the writing of queer histories. Before undertaking that, however, it is necessary to examine another "female husband narrative" and the figures at its center to understand the genre and the textual practices represented therein and how "The Female Husband" by Fielding set a mold that was both reinforced and broken by other authors— and the effect that reinforcement or breakage had on the gender crossers whose stories so fascinated the reading public.

## CHAPTER TWO

“An unblemished character”<sup>137</sup>: Constructing Gender with Class, Coins, and Clothing

Originally printed twenty years after the narrative of the life of Chares Hamilton was made famous by Henry Fielding, the story of James Howe would quickly eclipse that of Hamilton. Howe’s story would become famous, remaining in circulation from its origin in 1766 until the early twentieth century.<sup>138</sup> It would be re-printed across the Atlantic Ocean in the newly minted United States of America. The narrative of the life of Howe, “female husband,” would become the most popular narrative in its genre, according to Jen Manion’s book *Female Husbands: A Trans History*.<sup>139</sup> Howe’s story is incredibly different from Hamilton’s. It does not share the same rotating cast of lovers, nor the breakneck speed and episodic plot. With the exception of a few moments that have the reader speculating on Howe’s choices, namely the coin toss which will be addressed in this chapter, the Howe narrative is characterized by hypernarrativity which shows up in the circulation and popularity of the narrative, rather than in the narrative structure as in Fielding’s “The Female Husband.” While the Hamilton narrative was marked by the authorial speculation of Henry Fielding which resulted from its hypernarrativity, the Howe narrative is marked by readerly speculation which occurred after the story’s publication.

The story of Howe is one of hard work, wealth, and, paradoxically, honesty. Unlike Hamilton, Howe returned to womanhood by the end of their story. They received the fruits of their labor — the money they earned during their married life. Their narrative ends “[Howe] intends retiring into another part to enjoy with quiet and pleasure *that fortune...acquired by fair*

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<sup>137</sup> Rictor Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband", *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook*. 6 December 2003.

<sup>138</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 44.

<sup>139</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 44.

*and honest means*, and with an unblemished character.”<sup>140</sup> They were a tavern owner who was blackmailed regarding their gender for some time before they sued their blackmailers and stood in court in a dress and gave up their gender identity in pursuit of their wealth. They titillated readers while confirming their values and assuring them that gender crossers did not pose a threat to the supposedly natural status of heteronormativity and binary gender. I believe that their class position as a business owner and their coerced detransition allowed for their story to be circulated across England, the early United States, and across a century. These facets of Howe’s life, which mark it different from Hamilton’s, allowed for readers to read Howe’s story and speculate about their life without deviating from their values and beliefs in wealth and binary gender, because Howe returned to womanhood and received their wealth “with an unblemished character.”<sup>141</sup> As a result of these numerous differences, I will have to approach Howe’s story differently from Hamilton’s.

In the first chapter, I structured my phenomenological reading around the hypertextual episodic structure of Henry Fielding’s “The Female Husband.” I followed Charles Hamilton through their life, through their relationships, by following them as they veered increasingly off track from cisgender heterosexuality. We can call this a mobility-based approach to phenomenology, which focuses on the movements of bodies. While phenomenology as an approach does have to do with the possibilities which are uncovered through the act of going off track—or what comes into the field of possibility as a result of certain choices—it also has to do with what is “ready-to-hand.”<sup>142</sup> It is shaped by objects and the physical environment. In the article out of which Sara Ahmed’s book *Queer Phenomenology* grew, “Orientations: Toward a

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<sup>140</sup> Rictor Norton. Ed. “Mary East, the Female Husband” (emphasis added).

<sup>141</sup> Norton. Ed. “Mary East, the Female Husband.”

<sup>142</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.



Queer Phenomenology,” Ahmed writes “I offer an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon.”<sup>143</sup> Howe’s story centers on a few key objects, which I will explore in order to understand how the objects that were near to hand for Howe shaped their life as a gender crosser, property owner, and eventually widow. We can call this *object-based phenomenology*. It is informed not only by Ahmed’s queer phenomenology but also Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conception of *habit* as that which happens when “when the body allows itself to be penetrated by a new signification, when it has assimilated a new meaningful core.”<sup>144</sup> Object-based phenomenology signals more of an inter-penetration rather than a phallic penetration. To use Karen Barad’s term, objects and people *intra-act*<sup>145</sup> in order to shape new associations and significations of gender. These significations of gender, we can understand through Merleau-Ponty, can be adopted and shifted in order to produce a different relationship to the world. The penetration of gender becomes visible in Howe’s life through an engagement with the objects prominent in their story.

There are two conspicuous objects in Howe’s narrative. The halfpenny is one of those objects. Coins, in effect, would follow Howe (and their wife) from the moment they decided, by the toss of a coin, to trans gender and live as a man. It shapes the story of James Howe; it is near to hand and mentioned explicitly in the narrative at least twice. It structures the shape of the story throughout, by lending it a double-sidedness that characterizes the narrative’s conceptions of

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<sup>143</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology.” *GLQ* 12, no. 4 (2006): 543-574. 543.

<sup>144</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 148.

<sup>145</sup> Barad writes: “In contrast to the usual ‘interaction’, the notion of intra-action recognises that distinct entities, agencies, events do not precede, but rather emerge from/through their intra- action. ‘Distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements. Importantly, intra-action constitutes a radical reworking of the traditional notion of causality.” (Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come.” *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010): 240-268, 267.)

gender, marriage, and wealth. The binary phenomenology of the coin flip comes to represent gender crossing, marriage wealth, extortion, inheritance, and the return to assigned gender. It seems to stand in for a number of binaries; there are two sides to the coin of Howe's life: male and female, husband and wife, Sapphic and heterosexual, transition and detransition. It lives at the heart of this narrative, shaping Howe's actions as a gender crosser, and as "an unblemished character."<sup>146</sup> The other object which structures Howe's life and gender crossing is their "habit"<sup>147</sup> — their set of clothing. This habit is what defines Howe's public gender, not their secondary sex characteristics which are so often the focus of Fielding's perspective on Hamilton's gender in "The Female Husband." This might reveal the vestiges of the one-sex model of gender which was still in circulation through the eighteenth century. It establishes their transition and their eventual detransition. As opposed to Judith Butler's conception that "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time,"<sup>148</sup> Howe's narrative paints a picture of a gender which is redefined in an instant through the occupation of a new habit or habitus. Their suit of clothes defines their gender in the view of the public and it shapes what they are able to access— it structures what they are able to reach for, what is available on their "bodily horizon." The narrative, however, starts with the halfpenny, and the moment of the coin flip allows for some analysis of the ways that Howe's narrative differed from Hamilton's in ways that enabled its profound popularity. So, we will begin with the flip of a coin.

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<sup>146</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>147</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary habit is defined as "To dress, clothe, attire. (Usually in past participle)" "habit, v.". (OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press.) <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/82980?rskey=Ac4aiQ&result=3> (accessed March 25, 2022.)

<sup>148</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, No. 4 (1988), p. 519-531, 523.

## The Halfpenny

*Clink!* A halfpenny lands on the table, showing the figure of Britannia draped in fabric, with one arm raised, clasped around a three-pronged triton. A decision has been made with this simple motion that will drastically alter the life of two people around 1732. The halfpenny would become a motif in their lives—a symbol of the moment of their transgression, of their occupation, and of their eventual wealth. The original publication of the narrative describes the situation this way:

About 34 years ago a young fellow courted one Mary East, and for him she conceived the greatest liking, but he... was tried for a robbery and cast... this so affected our heroine, that she resolved ever to remain single. In the same neighbourhood lived another young woman, who had likewise met with many crosses in love, and had determined on the like resolution; being intimate, they communicated their minds to each other, and determined to live together ever after; after consulting on the best method of proceeding, they agreed that one should put on man's apparel, and that they would live as man and wife in some part where they were not known; the difficulty now was who was to be the man, which was soon decided by the *toss up of a halfpenny*, and the lot fell on Mary East, who was then about 16 years of age...<sup>149</sup>

Upon a first reading, this passage may indicate an origin point of gender crossing which is similar to that of Hamilton's: a Sapphic or lesbian relationship that transforms the gender of one of its participants. However, the mechanism of their gender crossing is in fact very different. Hamilton becomes so furious at the end of their first Sapphic relationship that they are physically transformed by the forces of rage (they tear their hair, beat their breast). This is a gender crossing origin marked by animality and madness—by a monstrosity that in Jack Halberstam's terms, renders their body “infinitely mobile, permeable, and impenetrable.”<sup>150</sup> This impermeability is underscored by the final scene in “The Female Husband,” where Fielding writes, “so little effect

<sup>149</sup>Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband" (emphasis added).

<sup>150</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 21.

had the smart or shame of punishment on the person who underwent it, that the very evening [Hamilton] had suffered the first whipping,” they offered their guard money to find a girl to “satisfy [Hamilton’s] most monstrous and unnatural desires.”<sup>151</sup>

By contrast, Howe and their partner are rational actors and community members, who bear little resemblance to the wild rogue of Fielding’s narrative. The Howes make a mutual decision out of necessity, and Howe’s gender is transformed not by a moment’s passion or emotion but by a rational choice and ensuing chance (heads or tails). Howe seems to have no predilection for gender crossing—no youthful flirtations with horseback riding or hunting<sup>152</sup>—they rather have a desire to live with a woman supposedly as a result of being spurned by a heterosexual relationship. Even the reason for Howe’s gender crossing is grounded in a defense and naturalization of heterosexuality. This defensiveness occurs in the first paragraph of the life narrative of Howe, where Howe’s gender crossing is explained this way:

About 34 years ago a young fellow courted one Mary East, and for him she conceived the greatest liking, but he...was tried for a robbery and cast...*this so affected our heroine, that she resolved ever to remain single.* In the same neighbourhood lived another young woman, who had likewise met with many crosses in love, and had determined on the like resolution...<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Henry Fielding, “The Female Husband: or, the surprising history of Mrs. Mary, alias Mr George Hamilton, who was convicted of having married a young woman of Wells and lived with her as her husband. Taken from her own mouth since her confinement.” London: printed for M. Cooper, at the Globe in Pater-Noster-Row, 1746. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 23.

<sup>152</sup> This distinguishes Howe’s narrative from other cross-dressing stories of the period, such as that of the actor Charlotte Charke, whose childhood is marked by skill and enjoyment of riding and hunting, and whose later life and career was shaped by their crossdressing. (Charlotte Charke, “A narrative of the life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke, (youngest daughter of Colley Cibber, Esq;) Containing, I. An Account of her Birth, Education, and mad Pranks committed in her Youth. II. Her coming on the Stage; Success there; and sundry Theatrical Anecdotes. III. Her Marriage to Mr. Charke, and its Consequences. IV. Her Adventures in Mens Cloaths, going by the Name of Mr. Brown, and being belov’d by a Lady of great Fortune, who intended to marry her. V. Her being Gentleman to a certain Peer. VI. Her commencing Scrolling - Player; with various and surprizing vicissitudes of Fortune, during nine Years Peregrination. VII. Her turning Pastry Cook, &c. in Wales. With several extremely humourous and interesting Occurrences. Written by herself.” London: printed for W. Reeve and E. Cook, at the Royal-Exchange, 1755. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.)

<sup>153</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

They decide to flip a coin not because they are already in a romantic and/or sexual relationship with their future-wife, but because they have both had their hearts broken in heterosexual relationships. It is not a prior queer relationship itself which causes Howe's transition, it is the coin flip which was compelled by the end of heterosexual relationships. Howe and their partner, in this narrative, make a mutual decision out of necessity, which requires them to take a chance and flip a coin. While the concepts of rationality and chance might seem like opposite sides of a coin, so to speak, the Howes made a rational decision that one of them would cross gender, but left it up to chance *which* one of them would do so.

In a sense, the coin flip creates an image of an instant transition, as if Howe's gender is transformed at the very moment the coin lands. The narrative notes: "[w]ith this they set out, and [Howe], after purchasing a man's habit, assumed the name of James Howe."<sup>154</sup> Nothing more is needed to transform gender, in the eyes of the text, than the landing of the coin and the new suit of clothes. This purchase also seems instantaneous in the direct and swift narration, and in the fact that Howe has enough money to buy new clothes, rather than resorting to theft from a sibling, father, or stranger as is common in other gender crossing narratives. When Howe, later in the narrative, reverts to womanhood, the process is much more fraught and is afforded more narrative space in the work. This difference in detail between Howe's "transition" and "detransition" illustrates that the initial moment of gender crossing is enabled by the coin flip and clothes and nothing more, implying that gender is highly and instantaneously mutable. The mechanism of gender crossing also diverges from Hamilton's narrative, where the reader sees Hamilton refine their gender over numerous episodes of the narrative. This contrast of temporalities produces an effect that Hamilton is worthy of punishment because they used their ever-shifting gender to extort "innocent" women, while Howe's gender was stable throughout

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<sup>154</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

their marriage (i.e. was not in the process of refinement) and they only had queer contact with one woman (avoiding the contagious queerness which characterizes Hamilton's narrative. Further, their gender enabled their accumulation of wealth. This difference is life or death, in a sense. Hamilton is whipped within an inch of their life and left in jail, while Howe is able to access their accumulated wealth and move on after their interaction with the legal system.

### *Phenomenology of the Coin Flip*

The coin flip also demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of gender by Howe and their partner Mary. They were "determined to live together ever after" and "after consulting on the best method of proceeding, they agreed that one should put on man's apparel."<sup>155</sup> They knew that they would be unable to live together as women, and that in order to gain access to the stability of marriage, they would have to appear to be heterosexual. The narrative is unclear about the nature of their relationship before Howe's gender crossing, saying simply that they were "intimate." It is not even clear whether the Howes were sexually or romantically involved. What is clear, however, is that both James and Mary were willing to cross gender in order to continue their partnership. They flipped a coin not to decide *if* one of them would trans gender, but to decide *which one of them* would do so. According to the narrative "they agreed that one of them should put on man's apparel, and that they would live as man and wife...the difficulty now was *who was to be the man*, which was soon decided by the toss up of a halfpenny."<sup>156</sup> This arrangement implicates Mary in the gender crossing as much as it does James. As Manion points out "this is a crucial point that neutralized the agency of both parties. It was chance that Howe would become a man, not desire; it was chance that the wife would have a female husband rather

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<sup>155</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband"

<sup>156</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband" (emphasis added).

than become one herself...” However, Manion goes on to say that Howe’s gender crossing “was a response to structural heteronormativity, not a challenge to the gender roles that anchored it.”<sup>157</sup>

This second point is where I believe Manion’s argument loses its shape. Deciding to cross gender based on a coin flip is a challenge to the gender roles which anchor structural heteronormativity because it constitutes an understanding of gender as mutable, as transformable, and, in some ways, irrelevant or contingent. Howe and their partner were able to take their understanding of gender stability as the exclusive territory of heterosexuality and use that understanding to develop a way of living which constituted a rejection of that dominance in the intimations of queerness their story nonetheless offers. They did not flip a coin because they accepted the dominance of heterosexuality, they flipped a coin because their partnership was important enough to them to maintain despite that dominance. Gender crossing was not a decision to be made flippantly—it required Howe and their wife to understand the importance of the *appearance* of heterosexuality. Because of this, the heterosexual couple is a much more present figure in the narrative of Howe than it was in Hamilton’s.

According to the narrative, Howe wants to avoid a relationship with a man after being spurned by a heterosexual relationship, and Mary has come up with a similar goal separately from Howe. Together they develop a plan for one of them to cross gender in order to live together. However, separate their resolutions “ever to remain single” predates their relationship to one another.<sup>158</sup> The narrative is ambiguous about the status of James and Mary’s relationship, merely describing their “resolution” to avoid more grief produced by heterosexual coupling. The narrative says that the criminal trial and hanging of a man who courted Howe “so affected” them,

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<sup>157</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 52-53.

<sup>158</sup> Norton, Ed. “Mary East, the Female Husband.”

that they “resolved ever to remain single.”<sup>159</sup> It goes on to say that “[i]n the same neighbourhood lived another young woman, who had likewise met with many crosses in love, and had determined on the like resolution.”<sup>160</sup> By contrast, Hamilton’s gender crossing is motivated by their involvement in and the failure of a non-heterosexual relationship. Their “many crosses in love” causes James and Mary to flip the coin, but it does not account for their mutual willingness to cross gender.<sup>161</sup>

The narrative<sup>162</sup> is rhetorically inclined to support the cisheterosexual binary, and for this reason that the heterosexual couple features so prominently, both as the initial problem which motivates gender crossing, and the “solution” to James and Mary’s mutual grief over the loss of their “true” heterosexual love matches. Instead of viewing this plot point as evidence for the claim that the Howes merely responded to heterosexual dominance rather than challenging it, we might examine the ways that the incipient queerness of James and Mary’s relationship is revealed and encouraged, and then foreclosed upon as it is interpellated into the framework of the heterosexual couple.

The figure of the “proper” heterosexual couple haunts Howe’s narrative from beginning to end. It is the supposed source of Howe’s dissatisfaction with their sexual and gender position, and it is the solution to that same dissatisfaction. The presence of heterosexuality in the narrative reflects its privileged status in the dominant society, but it does not necessarily mean that James and Mary were heterosexuals just because they appeared to be so. The heterosexual interpretive

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<sup>159</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>160</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>161</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>162</sup> I emphasize the agency of the narrative, rather than the agency of a single author because of the circulation to which Howe’s story was subject after its original publication. Single authorship is difficult to pin down with the Howe narrative in a way that it is not with Hamilton. My assumption, regardless, is that the people who authored or edited Howe’s narrative contemporaneously were cisgender and heterosexual. This is based on their general affect of confusion, condemnation, and sensationalism with regard to Howe’s gender crossing.



frame allows for an imaginary of the Howes' relationship in which there was little intimacy and no sexual contact, as the narrative treats the Howes coupling as a mechanism through which they will be able "ever to remain *single*."<sup>163</sup> While they are a domestic couple, they are each single because they are not in heterosexual relationships. This supposition of each individual's heterosexuality competes with historian Rictor Norton's claim that "surely [the Howes] were lesbians."<sup>164</sup> The co-existence of both of these claims gestures at a fundamental "both-and" quality to the Howes' relationship because their supposed heterosexuality enables their supposed Sapphism, or their domestic partnership which appears Sapphic actually exists to maintain their heterosexuality. Therefore, I speculate that it is more accurate to consider both James and Mary as figures who rejected the very binaries into which they were forced during their lifetimes and into which historians continue to attempt to categorize them today through their prolonged relationship to one another and their mutual willingness to cross gender to maintain it. They were not heterosexual women, but lesbian or Sapphic desire does not map easily onto their relationship either. A phenomenologically speculative approach evinces this image: the coin flip which began their relationship remains forever unresolved, forever spinning, a rejection of binary logics and ways of living despite their presumed heterosexuality: a field of infinite possibility.

### *Sapphic Paradigms and the Public/Private Split*

Historians have attempted to answer the question of the Howes' intimacy with a fantasy that the the pair were either straight women appearing as a heterosexual pair to avoid the grief that "real" heterosexual relationships caused them or that they were lesbians appearing as a heterosexual pair to enable their Sapphic relationship. However, both of these frameworks rely

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<sup>163</sup> Norton, Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband" (emphasis added).

<sup>164</sup> Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830* (London: GMP Press, 1992), 237.

on a clean split between public and private life which Howe's gender crossing necessarily challenges. The narrative states that the Howes took no servants as proof that Howe was a woman all along, and that their public gender crossing was nothing more than a disguise. The conclusion to the narrative reads:

It is remarkable that it has never been observed that they ever drest a joint of meat in their whole lives, nor ever had any meetings or the like at their house. They never kept either maid or boy, but Mary East, the late James How, always used to draw beer, serve, fetch in and carry out pots always herself, so peculiar were they in each particular.<sup>165</sup>

Norton, who edited and published a version of the Howe narrative in his "Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England Sourcebook," repeated a popular claim that "this emphasis on their privacy was obviously designed to prevent anyone discovered [sic] Mary East's real sex."<sup>166</sup> The ubiquity of this argument in discussions of the Howes illustrates the role of public/private division in constituting expectations for gendered embodiment. In the same way that the coin flip serves to neutralize the Howes' agency, this division of public and private serves to ensure that Howe's gender crossing did not appear too subversive. Reading through a trans interpretive lens, however, requires us to challenge this fantasy division of life and understand the ways that trans embodiment is incompatible with a neatly compartmentalized split between public and private.

The impossibility of a binary division between public and private is true of nearly all kinds of gendered embodiment, but particularly that of trans subjects. In public, people are expected to perform our gender in a way that, to some extent, serves to broadcast our "biological sex." Transgressions of that expectation are permitted (to some extent) in private in the form of differing relationship roles or kink. However, many trans or gender nonconforming people refuse this expectation, instead broadcasting or performing their gender, rather than their sex. They

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<sup>165</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>166</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

bring the private into the public in a way that challenges the norms surrounding what is to be kept to oneself, and what is meant to be done in public. Think of the common anti-gay talking points which saturate the cultural landscape: “I’m okay with gay people, but don’t shove it in my face.” Think of historical legislation regarding sodomy, such as the Labouchere Amendment to the British 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, which included a provision regarding “any male person who *in public or private* commits or is a party to the commission of or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person.”<sup>167</sup> The foundation of these talking points and pieces of legislation is an understanding that public and private spaces are each other’s opposites. However, trans and gender non-conforming people collapse this understanding through their presence in the highly gendered public landscape, and through their insistence on their gender in private as well. This collapse of the public and private, I suggest, is transhistorical, considering the importance of public/private distinctions in anti-sodomy and buggery legislation, particularly the LaBouchere Amendment of 1885 mentioned above.<sup>168</sup>

There can be no easy division between what one does in private and what one does in public when one’s gender is at stake, because gender is a requirement for navigating both public and private spheres. Think about bathrooms and other gendered spaces, and sexual preferences which dictate who is present in one’s private life. Howe presents a further challenge to this easy division, because according to scholars like Norton, Howe crossed gender in public and abided

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<sup>167</sup> Carol E. Neumann, “The Labouchère Amendment (1885-1967),” qlbtq Encyclopedia, GLBTQ inc., 2004, [http://www.glbtcarchive.com/ssh/labouchere\\_amendment\\_S.pdf](http://www.glbtcarchive.com/ssh/labouchere_amendment_S.pdf)

<sup>168</sup> For more queer criticism on the public/private split, see: *Challenging the Public/Private Divide: Feminism, Law, and Public Policy* edited by Susan Boyd (University of Toronto Press, 1997), “Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queer Memories” from *Cruising Utopia* by José Esteban Muñoz (Duke University Press, 2009), *Publics and Counterpublics* by Michael Warner (Zone Books, 2005), “Publics as Spheres” by Byron Hawk from *Resounding the Rhetorical: Composition as a Quasi-Object* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), and “Sex Zones: Intimacy, Citizenship, and Public Space” by Phil Hubbard in *Sexualities* 4, vol. 1 (2001).

by their assigned gender in private — turning the expectations of sexual and gender transgressions on their head. These unanswered questions regarding the Howes' relationship and the possibility of Howe returning to femininity in their private life with Mary are rooted in speculation which is opened by the paucity of detail in the text.

Unlike the Fielding text, the story of James and Mary Howe does not make any specific reference to their sexual intimacy — not even through the kinds of ellipses to which Fielding resorts. The narrative states “[i]n the same neighbourhood [as Howe] lived another young woman, who had likewise met with many crosses in love, and had determined on the like resolution; *being intimate*, they communicated their minds to each other, and determined to live together ever after...”<sup>169</sup> However, the intimacy which is mentioned here is not necessarily sexual intimacy, but the intimacy of two “women” who had been spurned by their lovers. Rather than verging into sexual or Sapphic tropes, it verges into tropes of female friendship constituted by intimacy of minds. Regarding intimate female friendship, Harriette Andreadis writes “while a public discourse of female same-sex trespass is available, it seems not yet to have become clear exactly whether, when, and how it might disrupt the familiar traditional ideologies of friendship.”<sup>170</sup> At least in the beginning of Howe’s narrative, before the pair’s gender crossing and long domestic relationship, James and Mary’s relationship did not seem to “disrupt traditional ideologies of friendship,”<sup>171</sup> however as they began a thirty-four year marriage, the boundaries of female friendship were transgressed. The absence of detail surrounding their possible sex life or the precise nature of their intimate bond at the beginning of their relationship leaves more room even than Fielding’s story for readers to speculate.

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<sup>169</sup> Norton. Ed. “Mary East, the Female Husband” (emphasis added).

<sup>170</sup> Harriette Andreadis, “Re-Configuring Early Modern Friendship: Katherine Philips and Homoerotic Desire” in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46, No. 3 (2006), 523-542, 527.

<sup>171</sup> Andreadis, “Re-Configuring Early Modern Friendship,” 527.

While in Fielding's "The Female Husband," readers' license to speculate was somewhat hindered by Fielding's own authorial speculation, in the narrative of Howe's life, the authorial perspective is more obscured. Therefore, the reader has more room to speculate, and more to speculate about. They were provided no details about the Howes' relationship except for the fact of James and Mary's cohabitation, which resulted from their nebulous "intimacy," leaving the question of whether that intimacy was sexual unanswered by the text. A phenomenological reading exposes the readerly speculation invited by "female husband" narratives, and provides an opportunity to take up the questions left unanswered by the text more expansively through the use of phenomenological speculation.

The text itself also supports a speculative possibility that Mary could have been the one to trans gender and occupy the male role in their spectrally heterosexual partnership. It is precisely because of James and Mary's coin-toss-chosen-heterosexual-appearance that this speculation is possible, and there is in fact a sort of transing of heterosexuality itself as it is revealed to be as contingent as gender—something which is able to be occupied after a simple coin flip. Mary's own gender contingency furthers the phenomenological metaphor of "contagion" offered in the previous chapter. Her "intimacy" with Howe produced the coin toss which redefined their gender, but it could have just as easily resulted in Mary crossing gender. The halfpenny mediates their queer contact, but produces a similar result; contact with someone of non-normative gender multiplies queer potential, in this case going so far as to leave the possibility open for not just queer sexual contact but queer gender. The halfpenny's role as mediator continued throughout the Howes' life together, serving as a narrative explanation for Howe's gender crossing, and for the pair's thirty-four year inhabitation of a domestic relationship which enabled their access to wealth and status.

*Tracing the Impact of Class on Howe's Narrative Through the Halfpenny*

The halfpenny which sits at the center of the Howe's life is the object around which their life took shape—the object toward which they were oriented, and which shaped their orientations to come. Ahmed writes: “phenomenology makes orientation central in the very argument that consciousness is always directed toward objects and hence is always worldly, situated, and embodied.”<sup>172</sup> By directing themselves toward a halfpenny, Howe situated themselves in pursuit of a mode of privilege unavailable to them and Mary in their assigned gender, and thus embodied a new one. They oriented themselves to a life of safety and security, which only lapsed upon threat of financial ruin, and after the death of the wife to whom they were committed to for more than three decades.

Just before the events which inspired the publication of Howe's narrative (namely their extortion by a childhood acquaintance and subsequent court case against their extortioner), Mary died. The author of the article writes

One particular I have neglected, which is, that before the supposed wife of James How died...she went to her friends in the country awhile for her health, but finding herself much worse, she sent for her supposed husband to come down to her, which he not doing, on her death-bed she discovered the secret to her friend, who after her death came up, and insisted not only on their share of the whole effects, but more. [James Howe] was always from the first willing they should have *half to a halfpenny*, but is determined they shall have no more.<sup>173</sup>

In this excerpt, the author reveals that the halfpenny shaped not only the beginning of Howe's life with their wife, but the end of it as well. They agreed, at the beginning of their partnership, to split their money. They would each have “half to a halfpenny” of the wealth earned at the White Horse Tavern. This is one of the first moments in the story where we get a sense of Howe and

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<sup>172</sup> Sarah Ahmed, “Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology,” 544.

<sup>173</sup> Norton. Ed. “Mary East, the Female Husband” (emphasis added).

their wife's relationship beyond concerns about heterosexual appearance— we get a sense of how Howe's wife might have understood Howe's gender and how that might have shaped her life. She kept the secret of the coin flip and Howe's subsequent gender crossing for their entire life together. Before Howe's wife's death, the pair shared thirty-four years of marriage. This quote would indicate that this entire life was an economic prospect, a bid to secure half of the wealth produced at the tavern. However, is it not also possible that they were so committed to their relationship that they were both willing to endanger themselves by crossing gender? They wanted to live together so much that they were willing to pursue any possible avenue by which they could do so?

This speculation might sound fanciful, but keeping someone's secret until you are on death's door when you could have punished them in order to extort their wealth indicates a depth of intimacy which is not explained simply by an argument that takes only economics into account. Mary only reveals her husband's gender crossing after James decides not to visit her on her deathbed. The text says of Mary, "she sent for her supposed husband to come down to her, which he not doing, on her death-bed she discovered the secret to her friend."<sup>174</sup> My own interpretation of this, informed by my phenomenological reading of their story and the impact of the halfpenny on it, is that Mary felt hurt by her husband's absence in this moment, when they had shared nearly their entire life until then — living and running a business together. Mary did not "discover the secret" to anyone for more than thirty years, and only did so when the person for whom she was keeping it failed to appear in her moment of need. Her revelation to her friend is not necessarily vengeful, but an action made out of hurt.

This toss of a coin which may seem, on first look, a flippant approach to gender crossing may in fact indicate a serious commitment which could not be understood by the newspapers of

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<sup>174</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband"

the time, which did not have an interpretive frame for a relationship which was neither Sapphic nor heterosexual. Both Mary and James were willing to trans gender for the other. According to the papers, Howe and their wife-to-be “agreed that one should put on man’s apparel, and that they would live as man and wife in some part where they were not known; the difficulty now was who was to be the man, which was soon decided by the *toss up of a halfpenny*.”<sup>175</sup> It is certainly possible, as Manion suggests, that this plot device was invented in order to neuter Howe and remove their agency in their gender crossing so that they appeared as less of a threat, but that does not change the narrative effect of that invention— to implicate Mary directly in the gender crossing and present both James and Mary as anti- or non-binary figures willing to cross gender for their relationship.

While the coin flip may have been invented in order to attempt to “neuter” Howe, they still ended up a respected member of their community after their gender crossing. According to Norton’s telling of the story<sup>176</sup> in his book *Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830*, Howe was so well-known and respected in their life as a husband that they were called to be a foreman on juries and serve in parish offices.<sup>177</sup> This might call for us to return to the halfpenny, this time not as a figure of a passive decision to cross gender, but as a symbol of wealth and professionalism. After their initial gender crossing, Howe and their wife moved to London and became tavern-keepers at the White Horse Tavern. The “circumstantial account” notes that at the time of the coin toss, “the sum [Howe and their partner] were then

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<sup>175</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband" (emphasis added).

<sup>176</sup> As referenced earlier in this chapter, Norton ascribes a simple lesbian identity to Howe, referring to them by their assigned name and using the pronouns “she” and “her” throughout the section of the book he dedicates to their story. Norton concludes Howe’s story by saying “[Historians] probably fabricated this explanation [of Howe’s husband-to-be being hanged for highway robbery] in an effort to account for what would otherwise be inexplicable for the conventionally-minded; *surely* they were lesbians.” This is simplistic and, I believe, inaccurate. (Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, 237.)

<sup>177</sup> Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, 237.



possessed of together, was about 30l,<sup>178</sup> or thirty pounds sterling. This amount in 2022 U.S. dollars amounts to about \$6,000.<sup>179</sup> From the outset of their lives together, Howe and their wife occupied a very different class position from the quack doctor and first “female husband” Hamilton.

Their position as a property owner also lends a different cast to the coin flip— it signals the mutual control the Howes established over their lives through their mutual control of their money and property. Their coin flip enabled them to establish a life of stability. Howe owned property, and their job did not require them to have the mobility that Hamilton’s did. The Howes were able to stay in one place and accumulate wealth as the owners of a business. Hamilton was a vagrant, someone without a career or property forced into hypermobile labor which often included criminal activity. This class position shaped the lives of the Howes. The narrative of Howe’s life says: “With this they set out. In the progress of their journey... a quarrel happened between James How and a young Gentleman, on what account I cannot say; however, it was of such a nature, that James entered an action against him, and obtained damages of 500l<sup>180</sup> or \$101,000.<sup>181</sup> This enabled them to buy a public-house which they ran for several years before purchasing the White Horse Tavern, where they would live and work until their wife’s death. The stability that the Howes were able to secure via Howe’s gender crossing was also constantly put at risk by that gender crossing. The life the Howes constructed together was not precisely stable

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<sup>178</sup> Rictor Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband" *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook*. 6 December 2003.

<sup>179</sup> For context, a federally produced document entitled “Labor in Europe and America, a special report...” cited the average earnings of a family of agricultural laborers in Huntingdonshire (near London) in 1792 as twenty two pounds. (Edward Young, *Labor in Europe and America: A Special Report on The Rates of Wages, the Cost of Subsistence, and the Condition of the Working Classes in Great Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, and Other Countries of Europe, Also in the United States and British America*. (Philadelphia: S.A. George & Company, 1875); Eric W. Nye, *Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical Conversion of Currency*.;

<sup>180</sup> Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>181</sup> Nye, *Pounds Sterling to Dollars*.

nor hypermobile. The truth of their life lay somewhere between those binary choices because of the simultaneous privileges and risks accrued by Howe's gender crossing.

Reading phenomenologically, the impact of the coin flip on the Howe's relationship is clear: it both enabled and made precarious the life that the Howes lived. This both/and logic is present throughout the text, from the coin flip to the precarity *and* privilege imbued by Howe's gender crossing. The relative stability in which the Howe's lived would be threatened by the reappearance of an acquaintance from James Howe's childhood who threatened to reveal their gender crossing. This blackmailer recognized her contact with queerness as an asset with which she could enrich herself. The narrative of Howe's published in the papers stated that "...one Mrs. B. who... was acquainted with James in her younger days, and knowing in what good circumstances she lived in, and of her being a woman... sent to her for [money] at the same time intimating that if she would not send it, she would discover her sex..."<sup>182</sup> The "circumstantial account" published in 1766 states that the extortion from "Mrs. B" frightened Howe— they did not want to lose the respect of their community and they did not want to lose their social standing because they were revealed to be a gender crosser, so they "complied with [Mrs. B's] demand, and sent the money..."<sup>183</sup> This is a crucial point in the story where Howe strays from the archetype of "the female husband" as established by Fielding's narrative of the life of Hamilton. In this story, Howe is vulnerable to extortion because of their gender crossing. In Fielding's "The Female Husband," Hamilton *was* the extortioner.

A dichotomy could be neatly placed onto the differences between Howe and Hamilton: extorted vs. extortioner, honest work vs. criminality, "unblemished character" vs rogue; however, this is a reductive framing which elides the role of other social factors such as class, community,

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<sup>182</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>183</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

and intimacy in both of their lives. It also does not acknowledge the differences between Howe's vulnerability to extortion and Hamilton's supposed proclivity for it. Hamilton was already gender crossing before they began to use their gender position to gain the assets of their paramours; Fielding writes "a device entered [Hamilton's head]...this was actually to marry [Mrs. Rushford]" who "intended to disinherit her poor great-grandson"<sup>184</sup> on Hamilton's account. Hamilton's gender crossing predated their decision to extort women. By contrast, Howe's class position shaped their ability to gender cross, the social roles they were able to occupy as a gender crosser, and their vulnerability to public exposure of their gender crossing. It is significant that Howe's extortioner decided to blackmail them, not because of their gender crossing alone, but because of the combination of their gender crossing and their wealth. Mrs B. was not merely "acquainted with James" as a young person, but she knew "what good circumstances [Howe] lived in."<sup>185</sup> Howe's class also shaped their response to this extortion. They did not want to lose their social standing, nor their property, nor their assets.

However, Mrs. B was as invested in obtaining a portion of Howe's wealth as Howe was in retaining the whole of it, and she continuously extorted them for greater sums of money. The narrative recounts that Mrs. B extorted Howe twice, for ten pounds each time. However, Howe refused to pay the full sum upon Mrs. B's second demand, sending only five pounds. This led to a drastic escalation on Mrs. B's part. Rather than simply send for more money with idle threats, Mrs. B enlisted the help of two men who impersonated police officers and went to Howe's door and told them "that they came from Justice Fielding<sup>186</sup> to take her into custody for a robbery [sic] committed by her thirty-four years ago, and moreover that she was a woman."<sup>187</sup> Luckily (or

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<sup>184</sup> Henry Fielding, "The Female Husband," 10.

<sup>185</sup> Norton., Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>186</sup> No, not that Fielding. The Justice Fielding mentioned here was our esteemed novelist's brother, though!

<sup>187</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

unluckily) for Howe, a neighbor witnessed this exchange. Howe called to him and admitted to their gender crossing, apparently saying “I am really a woman, but innocent of their charge” at which point, the neighbor “on this sincere confession...told her she should not be carried to Fielding, but go before her own bench of Justices.”<sup>188</sup>

Howe ended up taking this advice and was so committed to retaining their status—and all of their halfpennies—that they brought a court case against Mrs. B and one the men whom she hired to threaten Howe, a mixed-race man named William Barwick whose narrative presence I will discuss further in the third chapter. Not only that, but they appeared in court “dress’d in the proper habit of [their] sex.”<sup>189</sup> In effect, they returned to womanhood in order to retain those assets which they had accumulated as a gender crossing man. According to “The FEMALE HUSBAND; or a circumstantial Account of the extraordinary Affair which lately happened at POPLAR; with many interesting Particulars, not mentioned in the publick Papers,” “during the whole course of their cohabiting together as man and wife, which is 34 years, [the Howes] lived in good credit and esteem, having during this time traded for many thousand pounds, and to a day punctual to their payments; and had by honest means saved up between 4000 [ £ ] and 5000 [ £ ].”<sup>190</sup>

Howe’s life continues to be marked by coins even after their coerced return to womanhood as their story was circulated in papers and pamphlets across England and the American colonies. Their story was the most popular of the “female husband” narratives, being circulated as late as 1902.<sup>191</sup> The story of their life was literally available for purchase with a few coins. Howe’s life was marked by coins in an extremely literal way, even beyond their own use

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<sup>188</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>189</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>190</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>191</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 44.

of the coin in their gender crossing story. This outside imposition of the coin onto their story, and the commodification of their narrative indicates another way we might understand how hypertextuality operates in “female husband” narratives, as well as the impact of relations of capital and commodity in the eighteenth century. This understanding of hypertextuality is rooted not so much in the narrative itself, i.e. the authorial hand —Howe’s narrative is relatively dry in comparison to the picaresque romp of Fielding’s “The Female Husband”— but its circulation, i.e. in the hands of the readers. This hypertextuality refers to a literal hyper-ness of physical copies of the text. This profusion and republication of Howe’s story indicates that there was something exciting about Howe’s gender crossing narrative, despite the quotidian nature of the story itself.

I think that “something” was the flexibility of the narrative and the opportunities it presented for readerly speculation and a confirmation of readers’ ideas about gender and sex. Howe’s story was not straightforward. They both crossed and confirmed gender roles and their purposes by inhabiting the role of the ideal subject: property-owning man. They both confirmed and denied the immutability of gender by deciding to transgress gender by tossing a coin, but becoming a breadwinner in a seemingly heterosexual relationship. The binary logics invited by the coin flip are steadily refused by the Howes throughout the narrative, both provoking challenges to social norms and conforming to them publicly. I will discuss this more in the third chapter of the thesis, but it is important to note the ways that this hypertextuality reveals the gender ideology of the text. Namely, this narrative envisions gender as something which can be done and undone quickly, something which is necessary to occupy certain social positions, but flexible in the case of shifting ones. And furthermore, by the text’s logic, these shifts ultimately

result in a return to the “natural” sex and gender positions which a person is innately meant to occupy.

The coin flip is a moment of magic, but the ending of the narrative reframes it as an inevitably fleeting moment — albeit a thirty year fleeting moment. Ahmed writes “if the spaces we occupy are fleeting, if they follow us when we come and go, then this is as much a sign of how heterosexuality shapes the contours of inhabitable or livable space as it is about the promise of queer.”<sup>192</sup> The end of the fleeting moment reveals the other side of the gender crossing coin: the detransition, but one that leaves in its wake the flexibility of gender. The Howes “were determined to live together ever after; after consulting on the best method of proceeding, they agreed that one should put on man’s apparel, and that they would live as man and wife in some part where they were not known.”<sup>193</sup> However, their decision to undo their own gender crossing was upon pain of extortion and fear of imprisonment. They made a “sincere confession” to their neighbor that they were “really a woman, but innocent of [the extortioners] charge [of a robbery thirty four years earlier].”<sup>194</sup> While this confession was made to protect their assets, it was also made suddenly and without forethought. Furthermore, they show up in court looking “awkward...in [their] new assumed habit”<sup>195</sup> of femininity.

Their assigned gender is a threat, but it is also (in the eyes of the narrative) an inevitability. While they had to make a concrete decision in order to inhabit the “opposite” gender, their gender was undone by coercive means — it was a surprise. Therefore, the narrative reveals gender crossing as an unsustainable choice which will result in trauma. The role of heterosexuality in shaping the life of Howe is undeniable. Their gender crossing was spurred

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<sup>192</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 106.

<sup>193</sup> Norton, Ed., “Mary East, the Female Husband.”

<sup>194</sup> Norton. Ed., “Mary East, the Female Husband.”

<sup>195</sup> Norton. Ed., “Mary East, the Female Husband.”

(according to the narrative) by the failure of their heterosexual relationship, and the appearance of heterosexuality in their relationship with Mary enabled them to achieve the social role and wealth they did. Wealth was the domain of heterosexual couples, and in order to achieve the wealth which would force Howe to “detransition” they had to make the initial coin flip decision. This foreclosure of gender crossing moves us to think about the habit as the other phenomenological object of gender in the narrative.

### **The Habits of Gender**

The narrative of Howe’s life is bookended by clothing, which is explicitly mentioned twice in the story, and which marks the doing and undoing of their gender. In this way, the narrative positions their gender crossing as constituted entirely by clothing—they are done and undone by the clothing they wear. Howe’s body or face is never described in the narrative, and the only reference to their embodiment occurs when they appear in court in women’s clothing and exhibits “awkward behaviour.”<sup>196</sup> This sparsity of embodiment starkly contrasts with the Hamilton narrative, which includes numerous references to Hamilton’s body. Hamilton’s gender is transformed when they “tore [their] hair, beat [their] breasts;”<sup>197</sup> a woman Hamilton attempts to court compares them to Farinelli (a castrato opera singer) on account of “the great resemblance between [their] persons;”<sup>198</sup> Mrs. Rushford is enraptured by “the beauty of her new husband, [Hamilton];”<sup>199</sup> Ms. Ivythorn remarks upon seeing Hamilton’s sleeping body “you have not — you have not — what you ought to have” and admits that she “always thought

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<sup>196</sup> Norton, Ed., “Mary East, the Female Husband.”

<sup>197</sup> Henry Fielding, “The Female Husband: or, the surprising history of Mrs. Mary, alias Mr George Hamilton, who was convicted of having married a young woman of Wells and lived with her as her husband. Taken from her own mouth since her confinement.” London: printed for M. Cooper, at the Globe in Pater-Noster-Row, 1746. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 4.

<sup>198</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 8.

<sup>199</sup> Fielding, 10.

[Hamilton's] shape was somewhat odd;"<sup>200</sup> when Hamilton courts Mary Price, they "lost no opportunity in shewing [sic] his fondness, as well by his tongue as by his hands;"<sup>201</sup> Hamilton gets in a bar fight and their "breast was discovered, which, tho' beyond expression beautiful in a woman, were so different from the bosom of a man" that it "caused some whispers;"<sup>202</sup> Hamilton's public whipping punishment is so severe that their "back was almost [flayed]." <sup>203</sup> This striking contrast between the focus on Hamilton's embodiment and the absence of any mention of Howe's body underscores the importance of clothing to Howe's gender.

A phenomenological approach using clothing is different from one concerning coins. Whereas the coin toss marked an instantaneous shift from one gender to another, and then came to represent the wealth the Howes gained as a result of that shift, the "habit" or set of clothing represents Howe's public performance of their gender, as well as the way that public perceived them. Their clothes transmitted their gender to the patrons of the White Horse Tavern, and to the community more broadly. A change in their clothing signaled a change in their public gender, and the relationship between the public and Howe (the stuff of their "habitus") drastically shifted as a result.

The first mention of clothing happens early on in the narrative, right after the episode which we have spent so long investigating: the flip of the halfpenny. The author writes of Howe and their soon-to-be-wife, "they set out, and [Howe], after purchasing a man's habit, assumed the name of James How[e]." <sup>204</sup> This plot point may seem minor. There is no description of the clothes they wore, no vivid imagery which allows the reader to picture Howe dressed in their masculine finery. It simply states that the couple, at the outset of their life together, used their

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<sup>200</sup> Fielding, 14.

<sup>201</sup> Fielding, 16.

<sup>202</sup> Fielding, 19.

<sup>203</sup> Fielding, 23.

<sup>204</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."



modest savings to purchase a “man’s habit.”<sup>205</sup> “Habit”<sup>206</sup> once referred to a specific style of men’s coat, but by 1766 it came to describe the whole ensemble that a man might wear: coat, vest, shirt, and breeches.<sup>207</sup> It seems reasonable that Howe would have had to purchase all of the items that constituted masculine attire in order to cross gender full time. The clothes, in effect, made the man. This investment serves as an interesting object through which the stuff of masculinity is visible —while the binary gender model was in the process of instantiation as I discussed in the first chapter, it wasn’t just biology which constituted gender— it was presentation. The way one dressed, appeared, the social roles one inhabited would all make up the material of gender. Their transitions between male and female habits are motivated in some sense by a need to adhere to social standards of heterosexual coupledness, capitalistic normativity, bio-reproduction, and others. Social, cultural, historical, and presentational expectations coagulated to form what Maurice Merleau-Ponty would call a “habitus” of manhood or masculinity. In order to be perceived as a man, Howe had to look the part.

Semantically, “habit” is an interesting way to think about the relationship between clothing and gender. One might argue, as Judith Butler has, that gender is a habit: something that one compulsively *does* in order to produce an effect. Clothing is the material of this habit; it is how one might demonstrate their adherence to a certain habit over another. It is a repeated action. The emphasis on “doing” gender is not a new concept for queer and trans scholars; Butler’s *Gender Trouble* explores in detail a performative theory of gender which is based on the

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<sup>205</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>206</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary habit is defined as “To dress, clothe, attire. (Usually in past participle)” “habit, v.” (OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/82980?rskey=Ac4aiQ&result=3> (accessed March 25, 2022).)

<sup>207</sup> Merle Walter, “The Elegant: Men’s Fashion of the 18th and 19th Century - Google Arts & Culture,” Google Arts & Culture (Google, 2014), <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-elegant-men%E2%80%99s-fashion-of-the-18th-and-19th-century-kunstgewerbemuseum-staatliche-museen-zu-berlin/HAUBDcK7Fj0Lg?hl=en>.

“expression” rather than the “reality” or “material” of gender.<sup>208</sup> For Butler, we are always already in performance; repetitive iterations of the idioms of gender incrementally change one’s gender. This does not map quite as neatly onto Howe’s transition as the term “habit” might suggest, but it does help to develop an understanding of how gender is constituted, and the role that clothing may play in that.

Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of habit might provide a correction to Butler here when considering Howe’s instant moment of transition through the coin toss, emphasizing not iterative gender performance which has existed and will continue to exist beyond the life of any one individual, but the power of the individual in shifting their own phenomenological relationship to their surroundings, including objects, the environment, and other people. Merleau-Ponty writes “habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments.”<sup>209</sup> In donning a new “habit” of clothing, Howe dilates their being in the world, and shifts their relationship to it by incorporating a new instrument of gender. Merleau-Ponty posits that habit shifts not the actual body, but produces a change in “the body as a mediator of the world.”<sup>210</sup> In other words, habit changes the way an individual encounters the world through their senses and relationships. It also changes the way the world encounters them. Understanding the body as a mediator of gender might also provide a different way of thwarting a developing two-sex-gender system where biological sex gives rise to gender. Phenomenological readings similarly push back against this sex-gender system, emphasizing the relations *between* bodies as foundational to gender formation. Ahmed writes: “[q]ueer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by

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<sup>208</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, second Ed.. (Milton Park: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>209</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 145.

<sup>210</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 146.

the lines of conventional genealogy.”<sup>211</sup> The bodies made reachable by “the lines of conventional genealogy”<sup>212</sup> are those bodies whose biological sex is in accordance with their gender and gendered embodiment. Other kinds of bodies, the ones which work as active mediators of the world, can only come within reach through queer orientation. However, one aspect of gender crossing which both Butler and Merleau-Ponty’s formulations account for is the way that Howe’s transitions between male and female habits are motivated in some sense by a need to adhere to social standards of heterosexual coupledness, capitalistic normativity, bio-reproduction, and others.

The shift which “habit” produces is significant because the other time which the narrative refers to Howe’s clothing, Howe bring their extortioners to court: “James How [appeared], dress’d in the proper habit of her sex; now again under her real name...the alteration of her dress from that of a man to that of a woman appeared so great, that together with her awkward behaviour in her new assumed habit, caused great diversion to all.”<sup>213</sup> Again, the word “habit” appears. Howe shifts their gendered habit in order to be presentable to the court, reclaim their stolen assets, and clear their name. Following Merleau-Ponty, we can understand that Howe is coerced into making a choice to shift the relationship between themselves and the legal apparatus, and they do so by changing the body through which that relationship is mediated. More significantly, the focus on the “alteration” of their clothing is remarkable, according to both the author and the assembled crowd. The change in clothing signals a complete transition in Howe’s gender “from that of a man to that of a woman.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 107.

<sup>212</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 107.

<sup>213</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>214</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

Even more interesting is Howe's obvious discomfort in the "habit" of womanhood. While "female husband" narratives often employ the term "assumed" to refer to the gender crosser's masculine gender (i.e. their "assumed" rather than "true" or "proper" gender), here it is used to describe their appearance in women's clothes. In other narratives, the word "assumed" signals an unnatural occupation, a deviant and deceitful act. How then, are we to read its use in this narrative to apply to Howe's assumption of womanhood? Is this also unnatural? Are they being recognized for deceiving the court by appearing as a woman? This question is further complicated by the author's note that they appeared in court using their "real" name, i.e. their assigned name which corresponded to their assigned gender. What is real and what is assumed in this context?

Significantly, Howe is unable to re-don femininity with the same quickness as they were able to don masculinity at the beginning of the narrative. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the coin toss seems to change Howe's gender in an instant. This almost magically immediate quality to their transition complicates the Butlerian formulation of iterative gender performance, in that Howe does not have to perform—or learn to perform—masculinity in order to become a man. They are able, by contrast, to immediately inhabit masculine social roles and masculine appearance, which do not lapse until their appearance in court. Their movement back to femininity or womanhood—we might call this a de-transition—is not nearly as immediate. It brings back into the field of possibility Butler's notion that gender is something that is done or enacted, practiced. As with everything in Howe's narrative, there is not one easy answer, but a sense of "both-and" which governs the narrative. Howe resists interpellation into any binaries. Their gender can be shifted in an instant, but it can also demand the need for practice. One possible explanation of this is age and length of time spent in one gendered position. When

Howe flipped a coin and became a man in a magical instant after putting on a new suit of clothes, they were thirty-four years younger than when they were forced to appear in court in women's clothing. Another possible way to understand this difference is through the impact of grief; Howe had just lost their wife, and was at risk of losing their livelihood, which included their money, job, and home. Their movement back into womanhood was stilted as time shifted around the grief, slowing and speeding up, contracting and dilating and stretching out. These speculative explanations are not provable by the archive, but they draw attention to the ways that Howe and their gender is in some sense uninterpretable through existing frames of thought, or perhaps more precisely, must be interpreted through multiple frames at once.

Regardless, they behave awkwardly in court in their feminine dress. Their “habit” has been masculinity, and femininity does not come back to them easily. This tells us that their relationship to the world has undergone a prolonged period of change, one which cannot be undone in an instant. Their relationship to the world —what is “near-to-hand” and what fields of possibility are visible— has fundamentally changed. To go back on line, as Ahmed might conceptualize it, required Howe to unlearn the “habitus” of masculinity which they had acquired over the course of their life—something they did not have time to do if they were to clear their name in court. If gender is something which shapes one's life, then to occupy a different gender for thirty years would produce a different life — one which could not be undone in an instant.<sup>215</sup>

This also further disrupts the public/private split fantasy which I began addressing earlier in the chapter. The speculation that Howe undid their public gender in private is based on the idea that “[the Howes] never kept either maid or boy<sup>216</sup>...the late James How[e], always used to

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<sup>215</sup> Significantly, Howe's awkward appearance in feminine clothing signals that they had to learn femininity, in the way that they did not have to learn masculinity. The Butlerian frame of performance may be the wrong lens for Howe's transition, but not the detransition moment.

<sup>216</sup> Rictor Norton's authoritative footnoting is once again notable here. He adds a note after this passage that says “This emphasis on their privacy was obviously designed to prevent anyone discovered Mary

draw beer, serve, fetch in and carry out pots always herself, so peculiar were they in each particular”<sup>217</sup> because Howe would re-don feminine dress and habits in private. Howe’s reversion to womanhood in the domestic space would squarely place the Howes’ relationship in a Sapphic paradigm by asserting that James and Mary’s private relationship (one which may or may not include sexual intimacy) was between two women. This Sapphic paradigm would replace a trans or nonbinary one, or something even less determinate. I believe that the very awkwardness of Howe’s appearance in their “female habit” gestures towards the unlikelihood of this possibility. If Howe were truly going home each night and removing their “male habit” in order to maintain a Sapphic relationship with Mary, why would their moment of detransition appear so awkward? Would they not be accustomed to the constant back and forth of transition and detransition?

Their perceived inability to re-don femininity swiftly should challenge this conception outright, and point readers toward an understanding of Howe as someone whose relationship to the world had profoundly shifted as a result of their inhabitation of masculine gender roles. Their gender, which had been changed in an instant thirty-four years before, had changed the way they related to the world, and the way the world related to them. They only took on a new habit in the face of extreme duress and the threat of the loss of their livelihood. They were oriented towards masculinity, and they were used to the world being oriented towards them as a man in part by way of their male habit. They were oriented towards a relationship with someone who would support and understand their gender, and who would not expect them to cross gender multiple

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East’s real sex.” Norton is incapable of interpreting the Howes as anything but a lesbian couple, and asserts this as if it is “obvious,” neglecting the complexity of Howe’s gender crossing and the social constructionist understanding that modern identity terms do not directly correlate with the lives of historical subjects. Unfortunately Rictor Norton remains a staunch essentialist, and has a nasty habit of believing that gay and lesbian people have always existed and that these labels are neatly applicable to historical subjects living before the invention/construction of their terms. (Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, 237.)

<sup>217</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

times a day. Judging by Howe's discomfort in feminine clothes when in court, where their "awkward behavior in [their] new assumed habit, caused great diversion to all,"<sup>218</sup> Howe had not been used to dressing in women's clothes, as a Sapphic formulation of their relationship would suggest.<sup>219</sup>

While the narrative does prepare the reader in many ways to understand gender as contingent and highly mutable (after all, it shows that one can be a woman one moment, then flip a coin and become a man the next), it also engages seriously with the realities of gendered life—that gender is constituted not only by "habits" of performance and clothing, but also by social role and by class (by habitus). The Howes rejected heteronormativity by building a life simultaneously within and outside of it for themselves, but they did not do so because of Sapphic desire. Their relationship relied on a simultaneous rejection of heterosexuality and the maintenance of the appearance of heterosexuality. They did not love one another because they were both women, as the label Sapphic would suggest, they loved each other because they were both "so peculiar...in each particular."<sup>220</sup>

This "peculiarity" is what led them to make the mutual decision that one of them would cross gender, and what led them to make that decision with the flip of a coin. It is what led Howe to take up the habits of masculinity which would only lapse after the death of their beloved wife, and due to an extremely stressful and potentially dangerous situation. Howe's detransition should not be read, as the papers suggest, as a redemptive story of a "woman" whose "economically motivated" decision to live as a man was excusable because they detransitioned "voluntarily." It

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<sup>218</sup> Norton, Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

<sup>219</sup> It is important to note that any women's clothing Howe might have had been wearing in private, would have been far less restrictive and cumbersome than the corseted and skirted clothing required of women in public. As with all parts of Howe's narrative, there are many possible explanations for each question which the text demands readers ask.

<sup>220</sup> Norton, Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

should be read as a decision motivated by grief and fear, and made with an acknowledgement of the conditions of the world which punished Hamilton so severely for their gender crossing. There is little doubt that, as a person with a higher class status and an active place in the community, Howe had read Fielding's "The Female Husband." Speculating on their reactions to this text might enable a revisioning of the Howes' partnership as a mutual exercise in trust and love — a vision which falls outside of the exploitative paradigm of the narrative itself and of likely readerly reactions to it. What had Howe thought when they read "The Female Husband?" Had they shared it with their wife in hushed tones after the White Horse Tavern closed for the evening? Were they afraid that their life would come crumbling down if they were discovered? Did they think of Hamilton when they stood in front of the court, shifting uncomfortably in their petticoats and looking straight at the woman who ruined their life through her extortion? Did they see Hamilton as a kindred spirit? As a traitor? How did they see themselves? A phenomenological reading of Howe's story clarifies Ahmed's assertion that "the body acts upon what is nearby or at hand, and then gets shaped by its directions toward such objects,"<sup>221</sup> but questions about Howe's life which fall outside of the purview can only be answered through an analysis of the speculation which Howe's narrative invites from readers — both good and bad.

### *Circulation and Speculation*

Clearly, while Howe's story is somewhat dry, especially compared to Hamilton's, it invites significant speculation. This invitation to speculation does not mark it as distinct from other "female husband" narratives, as the hypernarrativity which inflect both Hamilton and Howe's narrative both relies on and produces speculative modes of writing and reading. However, the method by which it invites this speculation is distinct. In comparison to Hamilton's

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<sup>221</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 92.



story, Howe's narrative seems almost spare. It reads not as an account of an "extraordinary Affair" with "many interesting particulars," as the 1766 version suggests, but as a relatively unembellished, seemingly factual list of events in order, with a fair amount of detail, particular into financial issues. It is not a racing, exciting, conflict-driven picaresque romp, but a defense of someone who broke social norms, but ended up being re-interpellated into the social systems which constructed those same norms. Howe gave up their gender crossing life and lived according to their assigned sex for many years before their death. They were never imprisoned for their transgressions against gender and sex because of their willingness to show up in court in a dress, bearing their legal name.<sup>222</sup> In fact they were the complainant, not the defendant, in the legal case that involved their gender crossing. They were not publicly whipped, as Hamilton was. They were not accused of vagrancy; in fact, they were in some ways the victim of vagrancy. Howe was, ultimately, a "respectable" citizen. The narrative of their life published in 1766 concludes this way: "After her house is lett or sold, and her affairs settled, she intends retiring into another part to enjoy with quiet and pleasure that fortune she acquired by fair and honest means, and with an unblemished character."<sup>223</sup> Why, then, was it so often reprinted and for so long? This narrative invites speculation through the authorial choice of what to include or not include. What is there in this narrative? And what is conspicuously not there?

There are at least two possible ways to understand the popularity of Howe's narrative. One way, which we might call the hetero way, is to understand that the popularity (digestability?) of this narrative is a result of the limited contact Howe had with women—they married their wife

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<sup>222</sup> It is worth noting that the press reported James Howe's appearance in women's clothing this way: "James How, dress'd in the proper habit of her sex; now again under here real name...the alteration of her dress from that of a man to that of a woman appeared so great, that together with her awkward behaviour in her new assumed habit, caused great diversion to all." (Rictor Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband")

<sup>223</sup> Norton. Ed., "Mary East, the Female Husband."

at a young age and stayed with her until her death. They stripped themselves of their transgressive gender shortly thereafter. In the phenomenological terms which I proposed in the first chapter, the “contagion” of their queerness was “contained.” It was even, eventually, “cured.” Howe’s narrative titillated readers with its discussion of gender crossing and the possibility of a Sapphic reading, but it ultimately confirmed the social codes and norms which insulated heterosexual society, particularly upper class heterosexual society, from the deviant behavior of the working class. It condemned the parts of Howe’s life which were unsavory and affirmed the importance of stable “heterosexual” marriage as a source of wealth and privilege. By contrast, Hamilton (a quack doctor and itinerant traveler) is consistently othered and outed from these norms for their failure to embody heterosexuality correctly.

The other way to read, the queer or “slanted” way, is to understand that this simultaneous exposure to and condemnation of broken social codes around gender does not represent the full story of James and Mary Howe. There are almost certainly aspects of the Howes’ life which have been excised or elided from the narrative in the name of respectability. The objects which shape the narrative, provide one way into this slantwise reading. The conspicuous objects which are so present in the narrative are mundane. They are objects of normal life: money and clothes. However, the narrative evacuates the status of Mary and James’ relationship, their friendships in the community within which they were so entrenched, and the reason why Mary might have revealed her husband’s secret on her deathbed. These are profoundly speculative questions, left unanswered and inviting the reader to imagine the possibilities. The phenomenological reading of the objects which are so *present* in this narrative simultaneously reveal the absences which occupy so much of my own speculation. In this way, phenomenology itself orients the reader towards speculation in order to understand and explore these absences. The Howe narrative,

furthermore, is shaped by speculation in numerous ways: speculation about the initial moment of gender crossing, speculation about the Howes married life together, speculation about their trial. The narrative is open-ended in many ways — Howe is left to “[retire] into another part to enjoy with quiet and pleasure that fortune she acquired by fair and honest means, and with an unblemished character.”<sup>224</sup> There is no neat narrative pin in this story, Howe is not locked up or killed, and the reader is left to wonder to which part they retired, and what they did with their fortune. They are left, in short, to speculate.

In the next chapter, I will address what this speculation produces versus how it works in the narratives of the lives of gender crossers. To do so, I will articulate a methodology of phenomenological speculation, and discuss the role I believe it can play in developing a more expansive understanding of history, particularly of queer and trans history. This will rely on my understanding of the co-constitutive or triangular relationship between hypernarrativity, phenomenology, and speculation, which I described in the introduction to this work. Using the understanding that authorial speculation in the form of hypernarrativity provokes readerly speculation, into which relationship phenomenology can intervene, I will articulate a methodology of phenomenological speculation, and discuss the role I believe it can play in developing a more expansive understanding of history, particularly of queer and trans history. Phenomenological speculation allows readers to find those pieces which are being left out and ethically imagine beyond the limits of the text. To formulate this phenomenological speculative methodology, I will return to the stories of Hamilton and Howe in order to explain the speculative aspects of their stories, which I have hinted at throughout the first two chapters in more detail, from questions of eighteenth-century associations regarding dildos as they pertains to Hamilton’s narrative, to the function of racialization in Howe’s story.

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<sup>224</sup> Norton, Ed., “Mary East, the Female Husband.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“And go with her”<sup>225</sup>: Refusing Hypernarrativity with Phenomenological Speculation

*“If gender normativity is in fact a fiction, then it has centuries of fiction that refuse it too.”*<sup>226</sup>  
- Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, Anna Kłosowska

How does speculation work in “female husband” narratives? How might it work beyond them? Throughout the body of this thesis, I have been using the terms hypernarrativity, phenomenology, and speculation (both authorial and readerly). In the introduction, I began to explain what I see as the co-constitutive, triangular relationship between these concepts. Hypernarrativity relies on authorial speculation, as a mode of storytelling. Hypernarrative stories are dense with plot or narrative, or circulate and are consumed widely beyond their original publication. However, they contain absences regarding gender, sex, and intimacy. Authors, like Henry Fielding, saturate the narratives of gender crossers with details and plot elements that reach beyond the boundaries of fact. Despite, or in fact because of, this overwriting the subjectivity of the gender crossing central characters is occluded. The occlusions produced by this authorial speculation and hypernarrativity then require readers to fill in absences with their own speculation.

This speculation can either continue to deprive gender crossing subjects of their personhood, or can be a source of reimagining the possibilities of queer embodiment.. This double-sidedness gestures toward the relationship between speculation and phenomenology as well. The phenomenological method of reading which I used in the first two chapters draws attention to the hypernarrative elements of “female husband” narratives. It was through these phenomenological readings that, for instance, Fielding’s narratorial assertions regarding

<sup>225</sup> Jordy Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, (New York: One World, 2019), 315.

<sup>226</sup> Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, Anna Kłosowska. *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 13.

protecting the “modesty” of female readers because visible as a tactic with which Fielding forcibly oriented his readers towards privileging a binary and heterosexual frame when reading “The Female Husband.” It was through this attention to phenomenology that James and Mary Howe’s coin flip became visible as a site of speculation; what if the coin had landed on the other side and Mary became a gender crosser? What if the coin never landed? What if it spun for eternity, producing infinite fields of queer possibility?

Phenomenology not only reveals the speculative elements of “female husband” stories which are produced by hypertextuality, but is itself a speculative mode of reading. Sara Ahmed writes “[b]odies are hence shaped by contact with objects and others, with ‘what’ is near enough to be reached. They may even take shape through such contact or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do and in turn affects what bodies can do.”<sup>227</sup> In this quote, she emphasizes not only the agency of bodies acting upon objects, but of objects acting upon bodies. This *mutual* contact is what produces shifts in orientations. In drawing attention to the agency of objects, Ahmed encourages a speculative mode of reading which looks beyond standard ideas of agential potential and action.

If hypertextuality enacts the need to conceal the humanity of gender-crossing subjects with relentless plot events and the circulation of individual narratives, then phenomenology draws attention to the orientations that produce those narratives. Ahmed asserts that “...the bodily, the spatial, and the social are entangled.”<sup>228</sup> Phenomenology, then, exposes the social dimensions which are revealed by the narratorial focus within “female husband” narratives on bodies in space. Through an analysis of the bodily and spatial dimensions in the first two chapters of the thesis (mobility-based and object-based readings of gender crossing narratives),

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<sup>227</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology.” *GLQ* 12, no. 4 (2006): 543-574. 552.

<sup>228</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects: Orientations, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 181.

the need for a technique beyond phenomenological readings becomes clear, as phenomenology enables readers to uncover the limits of “female husband” narratives, but cannot fully provide a view beyond them.

In order to look beyond the boundaries of the “female husband” narratives, I propose a new methodology called phenomenological speculation, which acknowledges the speculation inherent to phenomenology, and extends it. Phenomenological speculation uses the inherently speculative questions posed by phenomenological readings (what do objects do? what agency do they have?) to engage speculative fiction writing as a mode of writing queer history. From an analysis of the problems and absences produced by authorial and readerly speculation in the hypernarrative mode, phenomenological speculation aims to find a generative use for speculation, which acknowledges the limits of archives and of insistence on archival “truth” to uncover new possibilities regarding gender crossing embodiment and relationships. Where the speculation of hypernarrativity is defined and produced by a sensationalism surrounding deviance, phenomenological speculation draws the reader’s attention back towards the movements of objects and people within a given text. In other words, rather than using the text to suggest *how* a reader should speculate, a phenomenological grounding enables readers to imagine the results of contact which may be elided from the story itself. If hypernarrativity is the “bad” side of the coin, where a heterosexual author overwrites the stories and beings of gender crossers, then phenomenological speculation might be seen as a “good” side where readers are allowed to freely imagine gender transgressive existences.

The framework of phenomenological speculation is one that is informed by Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation, but is necessarily different from it because of the fundamental tension between Hartman’s original theorization of critical fabulation and the white queer archive

that shapes this thesis. The archives with which I am working in this thesis are fundamentally different in terms of the violence being inflicted on their subjects. In Hartman's archive of transatlantic enslavement and the Middle Passage, that violence is racial and gendered; in the archive of "female husband" archives, the primary axis of violence is a gendered axis, and the subjects are assumed to be un-raced because of their whiteness. A turn to critical fabulation would involve attention to the absences within the "female husband" archive. However, because of the popularity of the genre, as well as the hypernarrativity entrenched within it, the figures of gender crossers are not absent, but spectacularized.

They are hyper-surveilled due to their deviance from the cis-normative whiteness that they are proximate to and regulated by, and this surveillance is narrativized in a way that the stories of Black gender nonconforming or gender crossing people may not be. Hartman's methodology of critical fabulation was developed in order to offer not only a counterhistory of the archive of transatlantic enslavement, but to address the violent archival traces produced by anti-Black racism and sexism. There is a fundamental difference between the representation of gender crossers as people, although they are deviant, and the bald silences of the ship log with which Hartman works in "Venus in Two Acts." Furthermore, she writes of "the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure," which is a requirement of critical fabulation, "as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the non-sense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man."<sup>229</sup> Whiteness operates within the "female husband" archive as it constructs white gender crossers as worthy of representation, or notable—even if that representation is disciplining and dehumanizing. The hypernarrativity of these "female husband" narratives compels authors and readers to fill in the

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<sup>229</sup> Saidiya Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (June 2008): 1-14, 12.

gaps and opacities, rather than exercise Hartman's "narrative restraint." By contrast, the archives of transatlantic enslavement do not treat the lives (or deaths) of enslaved Black people as worthy of representation. This produces the archival absences that Hartman traces using critical fabulation. The absences within the "female husband" archive are produced by the gaps left in the wake of hypernarrativity, the lack which hypernarrativity both obscures and relies upon through its relationship to speculation.

### **Counterfactuals and Technologies of Gender, Race, and Hypernarrativity**

The technology of speculation already shapes the hypernarrative "female husband" archive, but it remains in service of reinforcing dominant social and cultural ideas in opposition to gender deviants. Therefore authors of gender crossing narratives far too often misrepresent their speculation as the truth. The mode of authorial speculation shapes the "female husband" narratives in vital ways: authors speculate about the reasons behind gender crossings, whether or not the wives of "female husbands" knew about their partners' gender crossings, and how they managed to have sex at all, if even they did. These particular modes of cis-heteronormative speculation control not only the public reception of gender crossing narratives, but also reproduce notions of deviance and normality for readers. What were the boundaries of "normal" in the eighteenth century and exactly how much did they need to be transgressed to produce a "freak?" A "criminal?" A "vagrant?" In a sense, normativity is a kind of speculation in and of itself; it is not stable or fixed but relies on shared practices of speculation as gender surveillance. People are invited to speculate about the genders of others based on ever-shifting social codes and norms which produce an "ideal subject" to aid in the exclusion of deviants. This lack of stability, however, produces normativities which are based in speculation. Rather than any factual analysis of what constitutes deviants, the speculation of normativity is based in fears



about the possible results of accepting deviants into broader society. Phenomenological speculation as an intervention offers a speculative mode shaped not by fear, but possibility.

Some context is necessary to understand the role that speculation might play in the archive of “female husband” narratives. The eighteenth century, according to scholars like Catherine Gallagher and Adam Roberts, saw some of the earliest examples of speculative fiction, science fiction, and counterfactual narratives. Roberts writes that “[i]n the [eighteenth] century science fiction expanded from a small-scale literary sub-culture of scientific and utopian-social speculation into something more substantial and imposing,”<sup>230</sup> while Gallagher asserts that in 1710, Gottfried Leibniz “advocate[d] the use of counterfactualism for judging...”<sup>231</sup> While Gallagher defines the counterfactual mode as “a past tense hypothetical conditional conjecture,”<sup>232</sup> its inception in the eighteenth century reveals the importance of speculative modes of storytelling to the development of narrative forms like the novel and the “female husband” narrative. The European world was expanding through colonization and the establishment of empire.<sup>233</sup> New places and ways of being dominated the minds of authors and philosophers alike. Valerie Traub contends that the early modern relationship between anatomy and cartography in “Anatomy, Cartography, and the New World Body.” Traub writes “different as they were in their intended purpose and modes of production, both anatomy and cartography were committed to empirical tools of investigation and a new ‘science of describing.’”<sup>234</sup> The

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<sup>230</sup> Adam Roberts, “Eighteenth Century: Big and Little” in *The History of Science Fiction*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). 85.

<sup>231</sup> Catherine Gallagher, “Telling It Like It Wasn’t,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 45 (2010): 12-15. 13.

<sup>232</sup> Gallagher, “Telling It Like It Wasn’t,” 12.

<sup>233</sup> In his book *Black People in the British Empire*, Pete Fryer tracks the expansion of the British empire from Ireland in the twelfth century, to the Caribbean in the seventeenth, and the Indian subcontinent in the eighteenth century. He further explains the impact of triangular trade routes between Africa, the Americas, and England as a source of wealth for the British empire which further enabled its expansion. (Peter Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 3-4.)

<sup>234</sup> Valerie Traub, “Anatomy, Cartography, and the New World Body” in *Geographies of Embodiment in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 76-78.

expansion of the British empire and its concomitant expansion of cartographic representations and understandings of the world impacted British understandings of embodiment. The body was another thing to be measured, tracked, and made empirical. As the empire expanded, urban areas within England became more dense. This density brought with it new fears which could be mapped in order to be solved.

We might understand the development of urban areas and the concomitant concentrations of people as new developments which were the cause of fear— fears of contamination, of illness, of vagrancy, and of deviance. In *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830*, Rictor Norton profiles an emergent urban subculture of cross dressing and sodomy in the eighteenth century, asserting that London urban areas offered pockets of protection for queerness and queer embodiment.<sup>235</sup> These pockets of queer community, as Norton positions them, provide a window in to one of the ways that the new urban city was a breeding ground for new phenomena (like cross dressing, sodomy, buggery, interracial relationships) which challenged previous understandings of the world. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the narratives of the lives of Hamilton and Howe take shape around English and Irish cities like Bristol, Dublin, and London. The expansion of the British empire, the Transatlantic slave trade, and new industrial urban environments necessitated and produced new systems of power and control to deal with population increases, illnesses, and rapidly widening class divisions.<sup>236</sup> These drastic shifts in the relationship between countries, continents, and the people living upon them spurred the development of new fictions which speculated about the results of these shifts.

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<sup>235</sup> Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830* (London: GMP Press, 1992).

<sup>236</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

Along with colonialism and social fears, Roberts also plays close attention to the importance of “technology” to early science fiction in his *Critical History of Science Fiction*. Following poststructuralist scholars like Teresa de Lauretis, Michel Foucault, and Donna Haraway we might also make use of a broader understanding of “technology” as those structures which mediate our understanding of the world around us, which mediate the limits of speculation. Gender, by this logic, is a technology in and of itself; it structures our understandings of the world and of other people inside of it, which in turn structure our own imagination. In *Technologies of Gender*, de Lauretis writes, “a starting point may be to think of gender along the lines of Michel Foucault’s theory of sexuality as a ‘technology of sex’ and to propose that gender, too...is the product of various social technologies...institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as the practices of daily life.”<sup>237</sup> Technologies are those semiotic and institutional apparatuses which uphold an understanding of gender as immutably connected to biological sex. These technologies structure our world in much the same way that new factory technologies restructured capitalist relations of production during the Industrial Revolution. Also in the eighteenth century, the technology of fiction writing arose.<sup>238</sup> Using this understanding as a frame through which to view speculative fiction produces an understanding of speculation as a mode of writing and thinking which focuses on technologies as a site of intervention and imagination. “Female husband” narratives work through new technologies of gender as they process and reflect ideas about deviance and normativity through stories about gender crossing. The technology of gender itself is speculative, it has shifted and continues to shift over time, and these shifts are visible through analyses of literature and history.

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<sup>237</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, “The Technology of Gender.” In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). 1-30. 2.

<sup>238</sup> Ian Wyatt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

*Speculation, Race, and Gender*

Gender, however, is not the only speculative technology at work in the archive of “female husband” narratives. Howe’s narrative reveals the impact of circulation and republication (results of the literal technology of mass production), as well as emerging racial logics (results of the technology of racialization) on the boundaries of speculation. The original title under which Howe’s widely reprinted narrative was published was “The FEMALE HUSBAND; or a circumstantial Account of the extraordinary Affair which lately happened at POPLAR; with many interesting Particulars, not mentioned in the publick Papers.”<sup>239</sup> The language of “extraordinary affair” lets the reader know that they are being prepared for something both novel and scandalous. This novelty and scandal might also explain why, despite the relatively lesser degree of authorial speculation in Howe’s narrative, it circulated for more than a century across the British island and the Atlantic. Was this because it invited readerly speculation into its narrative reservation? Perhaps it induced readers to speculate about whether or not the successful tavern owners in their lives were also gender crossers. Perhaps they wondered why Mary revealed James’s secret on her deathbed, as I do.

At first glance, Howe’s narrative appears less speculative than Fielding’s narrative of the life of Charles Hamilton. As I addressed in my chapter on the Howe narrative, the story is altogether much drier, less plot-driven, and has fewer events. However, it ends with speculation

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<sup>239</sup> “The Female Husband; or a Circumstantial Account of the Extraordinary Affair Which Lately Happened at Poplar; with Many Interesting Particulars, Relating Thereto,” In *The Merry Droll, or Pleasing Companion. Consisting of a Variety of Facetious and Engaging Stories; and Familiar Letters. In Which Several Entertaining Adventures Are Truly Related; And Divers Instances of Love and Gallantry, Elegantly Displayed. Including Also, Some Poetical Recreations; Being a Collection of Merry Tales, Diverting Fables, Pleasing Pastorals, and Other Select Pieces. The Whole Moral, Instructive And Entertaining.* (London: C. Parker, 1769).

about the Howes' private life from those who knew James as a tavern-keeper or, as Jen Manion refers to them, a "pillar of the community."<sup>240</sup> The narrative ends with this comment:

It is remarkable that it has never been observed that they ever drest a joint of meat in their whole lives, nor ever had any meetings or the like at their house. They never kept either maid or boy, but Mary East, the late James Howe, always used to draw beer, serve, fetch in and carry out pots always herself, so peculiar were they in each particular.<sup>241</sup>

This brief passage gives the reader a sense that the Howes were noticeably different from others of their class and profession, that they were, in the words of the text, "peculiar." This "peculiarity" serves a function — to assure the reader that if their tavern-keeper or anyone else in their close community was a gender crosser, they would certainly notice their abnormality and peculiarity long before the gender crosser was extorted and had to reveal their "true sex" on pain of bankruptcy. However, it was not just the contents of the text that influences my understanding of it as hypertext and speculative.

Speculation and hypertextuality also influence the Howe narrative in terms of its re-publication and resulting reach across the span of more than one hundred years and two continents. Manion writes of Howe's narrative that it "took on a life of its own in the press for well over a hundred years."<sup>242</sup> This life, however, never included additions to the story which explicitly speculated on "questions of gender in relation to physical embodiment."<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, "[n]one even hinted at the question of sexual desire or relations between the [Howes]."<sup>244</sup> How then do I identify the role of speculation in this un-sensational narrative? To

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<sup>240</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 44.

<sup>241</sup> Rictor Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband", *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook*. 6 December 2003.

<sup>242</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 50.

<sup>243</sup> Manion, 50.

<sup>244</sup> Manion, 50.

do so requires another divergence from Manion's impression of the narrative of Howe's life.

Manion writes:

One reason for the longevity of Howe's story was its powerful depiction of a husband who embraced civic duty and recognized 'the social good of the polity among their own responsibilities.' Howe's commitment to their community earned them respect, which later provided a buffer against their critics. A lifetime of responsible management of household resources, a successful business, beloved friendships, and selfless community service all served to minimize the likelihood that Howe would even be charged with being an imposter of a fraud.<sup>245</sup>

While I understand this perception of Howe's altogether dry story, I think the "respectability" of the Howes serves a dual function—neither of which is to defend a gender crosser outright from claims about their "fraudulence."

The first function of the "respectability" of James Howe is explicitly to invite readerly speculation. There is something fantastical about the "discovery" that your parish councilor is "actually a woman." It provokes the reader to ask a hypothetical question; "how could someone *like that* live unnoticed in a community for so long?" A question like this can become endlessly fascinating, and when the details of the story from which a reader receives about the gender crosser are so sparse, they are given license to imagine the details of their gender crossing. The reader is not grounded by facts or details in a text marketed as "a circumstantial account" of "extraordinary circumstances," and theories about the contents (or elisions) from the text can proliferate without any recourse to fact or evidence.<sup>246</sup> In this sense, the reader gains agency over the very telling of the story. Further, the reader might fall victim to the queer contagion of the narrative which I discussed in the first chapter via their textual contact with a "female husband." Regardless, a narrative like Howe's can be populated by imaginary details. The further it gets

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<sup>245</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 50.

<sup>246</sup> "The FEMALE HUSBAND; or a circumstantial Account of the extraordinary Affair which lately happened at POPLAR; with many interesting Particulars, not mentioned in the publick Papers." *The Merry Droll*, 1766.

from its original location and time (i.e 1766 London), the less grounded in experience or reality those theories can become. A gender crossing narrative can be transformed from a story about a real life court case that happened in a certain community at a certain time to a collection of vague generalities, lessons, and rumors. In the end it functions similarly to gossip, a constructed or imaginary encounter much like gender itself.<sup>247</sup>

The other purpose which I believe Howe's "innocence" and "respectability" serves is more insidious than a compulsion to gossip. Howe, in the narrative, returns to womanhood or detransitions because of their extortion by Mrs. B—someone who knew them when they were a child. Over the course of her escalating extortions, she hired two men to impersonate a constable and a "member of Justice Fielding's"<sup>248</sup> gang."<sup>249</sup> One of these men was not white. He is described in the 1766 text as "a mulatto," and his name was William Barwick. According to Manion, "Barwick was sentenced to stand on the pillory three times and serve four years in Newgate Prison."<sup>250</sup> Significantly, in the newspaper publication about Barwick's arrest of which Manion includes the text, "there is no mention of Mrs. Bentley, who led the extortion of James Howe for sixteen years. Barwick was a pawn in her larger scheme, but in this story of his trial he was at the center."<sup>251</sup> Furthermore, of the three participants in the extortion scheme who were brought to trial, "Barwick was named in all three indictments. Bentley was only named in one. John Charles [a white man] was named but never appeared before the court."<sup>252</sup> Because of all of these judicial

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<sup>247</sup> This alignment of "Female husband" narratives with gossip is not necessarily a bad thing, and I will return to it later in the chapter.

<sup>248</sup> "Justice Fielding's gang" likely referred to the Bow Street Runners, a police force formed by Henry Fielding (yes, that Henry Fielding) and taken over by his younger half-brother John to deal with "vice" in London. (Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, "The development of professional policing in England," modified Dec 17, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/police/The-development-of-professional-policing-in-England>)

<sup>249</sup> Rictor Norton. Ed. "Mary East, the Female Husband"

<sup>250</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 47.

<sup>251</sup> Manion, 47.

<sup>252</sup> Manion, 47.

proceedings, I believe that the secondary function of Howe's narrative positioning as "respectable" despite their gender crossing was to heighten the sense of his racialized extortioner as a criminal.

In the Fielding narrative of Hamilton's life, Hamilton is criminalized because of not only their gender deviance, but also because of their alleged sexual promiscuity and vagrant economic and social position. In Howe's narrative, criminality is assigned along class and racial lines rather than along lines of gender transgression. It is here that readers might understand the ways in which Howe's whiteness, class position, and possibly their masculinity allowed their life to be examined and judged differently than their extortioners. Discussing Howe's masculinity in this way does not refer to their gender-deviant masculinity as much as their masculine social role as a respectful and well-mannered provider for their family. Howe, as a "pillar of the community,"<sup>253</sup> was placed in opposition to the "nonwhite criminal" Barwick in such a way that it shielded them from the criminal implications of their gender crossing. Their potential criminality was in some senses deferred, refracted, or transferred onto Barwick because of his racial and class difference.

This shifting of criminality from a gender deviant onto a racialized subject is significant in an examination of the speculative nature of "female husband" narratives because speculation and speculative fiction are used to understand new social systems and conditions. Race and gender are both social systems which were in the process of being co-constituted throughout the eighteenth century (as well as before and beyond).<sup>254</sup> It is also significant that over the course of the profusion and circulation of Howe's narrative, according to Manion, Barwick was

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<sup>253</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 44.

<sup>254</sup> For more on this, see C. Reilly Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), Zakkiah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in *Diacritics* 17, vol. 2 (1987): 64-81, and Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).



transformed from a mixed race figure into a Black figure. I interpret this as a shift which corresponded with the social construction not only of Blackness as a discrete category of person, but also the association of persons from that category with criminality.

“[T]he history of Britain and the history of the British Empire are two sides of the same coin,”<sup>255</sup> writes Peter Fryer in *Black People in the British Empire*. This conception of British history lends a new cast to discussions of the racialization of Black people in Britain, extending theorizations of this racialization beyond England to the colonies. While, in England and Europe, “[m]ixed race marriages tended not to be seen as problematic to the English because they primarily occurred among the lower working classes,”<sup>256</sup> in the colonies the lives of Black people were more “severely controlled,”<sup>257</sup> as “scientific classification of various species were employed in a bid to establish a racial hierarchy.”<sup>258</sup> It is difficult to summarize the mechanisms and impacts of criminality on racialization in eighteenth-century Britain, because of the country’s relatively early abolition of slavery, and because of new understandings of “crime” in London, and the transportation of criminals to the penal colony of Australia. However, Sal Nicolazzo offers a perspective that the “expansion of vagrancy law not only racialize[d] blackness as a threat, it also help[ed] to constitute colonial *whiteness* as the prerogative to enact police measures in anticipation of this threat.”<sup>259</sup> The vagrancy law which was responsible for the imprisonment of Hamilton gravely impacted the lives of Black people in Britain and the British colonies, as

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<sup>255</sup> Peter Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 4.

<sup>256</sup> Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>257</sup> Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 7.

<sup>258</sup> Otele, *African Europeans*, 9.

<sup>259</sup> Sal Nicolazzo, *Vagrant Figures: Law, Literature, and the Origins of the Police* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 210.

Nicolazzo suggests that the entire category of Blackness in Britain is constituted by vagrancy and therefore criminality.<sup>260</sup>

Barwick as a mixed-race figure, therefore, has a place in lower working class London, but his racial hybridity was not transferable to other locations in which the Howe narrative was being rewritten, republished, and recirculated. In British colonies, the relationship between Blackness and criminality became solidified in a way it was not necessarily in England itself, as proslavery men “figure[d] blackness as a permanent, intractable sign of vagrancy.”<sup>261</sup> Barwick, as a criminal figure in Howe’s narrative, slotted neatly into the vagrant position, which was necessarily a Black position, in opposition to Howe as a white property owner and respectable member of society.

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton draws on Claire Colebrook’s argument that “transitivity” — a quality of changeability or changefulness — “is the condition for what becomes known as the human.”<sup>262</sup> He does so to develop his proposal that “‘blackness’ is an apposition to Colebrook’s theory of ‘trans’...inasmuch as blackness articulates the paradox of nonbeing.”<sup>263</sup> He goes on, “tracing the circulation of ‘black’ and ‘trans’ as they are brought into the same frame by the various ways they have been constituted as fungible, thingified, and interchangeable.”<sup>264</sup> Snorton works in the context of the United States, where systems and mechanisms of racialization were somewhat different than in the British context, but given that Howe’s narrative was circulated in the U.S. during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Blackness was being constituted with and through criminality

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<sup>260</sup> Nicolazzo, *Vagrant Figures*.

<sup>261</sup> Nicolazzo, *Vagrant Figures*, 214.

<sup>262</sup> Claire Colebrook, “What Is It Like to Be a Human?,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (2015), 228.

<sup>263</sup> C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>264</sup> Snorton, 6.

through the Black Codes, his work is relevant.<sup>265</sup> The relation between Barwick and Howe is one place where ‘black’ and ‘trans’ are brought into the same frame, and their transversal relationship reveals the logics of both race and gender during the period. The social landscape shifted over time, and understandings of race became increasingly empirical and scientific in the nineteenth century. Howe’s whiteness necessitated that any oppositional figures in the narrative were not only mixed-race, but Black, because Barwick’s “hybridity” might somehow enable Howe’s non- or anti-binariness. In this sense, the role of speculation enabled by hypernarrativity in “female husband” narratives demands a white-Black binaristic lens through which readers are required to categorize the people within the stories. It is not just that speculation allows readers to speculate infinitely, or that authors engage in speculation without limits — rather, it is argued here that the limits of speculation are indeed shaped by the reader’s understanding of the world. As I noted earlier in the work, social norms themselves are in some sense speculative and speculative practices are a reflection of social norms. Because of this reflexive relationship, speculation can reinforce norms of both Blackness and criminality, just as it works to reproduce norms around gender and sexuality. There are no strict biological basis for any of these categories, rather they are constructed in order to confirm relations of power. Therefore, the speculative mode of understanding maps onto social norms; they are not based in fact, but alter the fields of possibility that are visible from any given position. Speculation as a practice both shapes and is shaped by the social landscape while taking on the appearance of empirical fact, but in the end such manifestations are no more based in fact than Howe’s coin flip or Hamilton’s multiple marriages might be.

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<sup>265</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

*The Technology of Hypernarrativity*

If speculation both shapes and is shaped by the social landscape, its co-constitutive relationship to hypernarrativity takes on new meaning. Technologies are those things which mediate our understanding of and interactions with the world around us. Therefore, we might understand hypernarrativity as a narratorial or rhetorical technology that mediates our relation to fact and imagination. This thesis has argued through phenomenological readings that “female husband” narratives themselves mediated their readers’ relationship to emergent norms of gender and sex. Phenomenology, while it allows us as readers to begin to glimpse the technologies of hypernarrativity and speculation in the “female husband” genre, does not go far enough in asking the question: what speculation is present in the archives and what is absent? How do the limits of speculation limit our understandings of the world? In Hamilton’s narrative, speculation is present when it comes to their number of relationships, but absent with regard to sexual intimacy within those relationships. Fielding not only speculates about Hamilton’s relationships, but in some instances invents them out of whole cloth. However, in this invention, Fielding himself never names the “vile, wicked, and scandalous” instrument found in Hamilton’s trunk which Hamilton, in the language of the story, used to “impose on some of his majesty’s subjects” by “false and deceitful practices.”<sup>266</sup> Despite this narratorial refusal, speculation remains the operative mode of understanding in the text. While Fielding, at this moment, refuses to speculate himself, he implicitly invites his readers to do so. What can they imagine that would be so “scandalous” as to be absolutely “unnameable?” In addition to inviting eighteenth-century readers to speculate about the use of dildos in queer relationships, Fielding’s narratorial refusal also invites the contemporary reader to speculate, although Fielding certainly could not have anticipated that.

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<sup>266</sup> Fielding, “The Female Husband,” 21.

Reading from the modern perspective, we might wonder about the familiarity of the average eighteenth-century reader with sex toys like dildos.<sup>267</sup> Would readers even know what to speculate about? Would they have seen or heard of a dildo before? Would they have identified this as an object used by deviants or queers if they had known what it was? Speculation shapes “The Female Husband” at numerous levels. Fielding relies on it not only to generate the plot of the pamphlet, but to shape the readerly reception to it.

“The Female Husband” does not simply encourage speculation from the narrator and the reader, however. It is also shot through with speculation about Hamilton’s gender from the people who come into contact with them over the course of their travels. Firstly, there is the episode with the Methodist man en route to Dublin which is examined in chapter one. Hamilton gives “so effeminate a squawl”<sup>268</sup> that the ship’s captain comes into their cabin and demands to know if there is a woman on board. Then, the first woman who Hamilton attempts to court compares them to *Farinelli*, a well known castrato opera singer in the eighteenth century, citing their physical similarity.<sup>269</sup> This implies that Hamilton is recognizably not quite a man, similar to Farinelli who was castrated in order to preserve his high singing voice. There is something, in essence or embodiment, recognizably queer about Hamilton. While the woman does not outright name this queerness in her response to Hamilton’s affections, her comparison of them to Farinelli constituted a sort of hint embedded in the hypernarrative story which would have (in phenomenological terms) oriented readers toward a queer reading of Hamilton. Then, a few days after Hamilton’s marriage to Mrs. Rushford, the elderly widow, an unmarried friend of

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<sup>267</sup> This speculation takes wonderful, sexy shape in Jordy Rosenberg’s novel *Confessions of the Fox* wherein the eighteenth century trans protagonist is handed a “horn” by his sex worker partner and “would’ve known what it was even if she didn’t whisper ‘for screwin’ in his ear” (Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, 110).

<sup>268</sup> Fielding, 5.

<sup>269</sup> Emily Bowles, “You Have Not What You Ought: Gender and Corporeal Intelligibility in Henry Fielding’s ‘The Female Husband,’” *Genders* 52 (2010), 21.

Rushford's remarks that the widow's new husband "looked more like a woman than a man."<sup>270</sup> Before the ultimate exposure of Hamilton as a gender crosser, their breasts become exposed during a bar fight and, "tho' it did not bring the Doctor's sex into absolute suspicion...caused some whispers."<sup>271</sup> Speculation about their gender follows them from location to location, and Hamilton is never able to be completely secure in their gender crossing.

Hypernarrativity is the controlling paradigm of the narrative, and exists in co-constitutive relation to the speculation which was part of Hamilton's life during the period covered by the plot of the pamphlet. Fielding's "The Female Husband" is sensational precisely because it is speculative; the moments which provoke speculation are the moments when Fielding is "forced" to elide details specifically about sex and sexuality. Rather than telling readers that Hamilton has sex with their wives using a dildo or strap-on, he calls it "a device,"<sup>272</sup> or "something too vile, wicked, and scandalous a nature,"<sup>273</sup> inciting his readers to wonder just what could be so sensational and deviant that it is not fit to print. The feigned modesty which was common in texts of the times serves in "The Female Husband" to reinforce social norms by using hypernarrativity to construct the confines of acceptability in the text, leaving everything which was "scandalous" for the reader to speculate about.

### **The Double-Sided Coin of Speculation**

In narratives of the lives of "female husbands," hypernarrativity and speculation can play a damaging role, shaping readerly responses and enforcing structures of power. However, speculation, as modern queer and trans speculative fiction authors have shown, can be a tool of resistance to power as well. Having addressed the role that hypernarrative speculation plays in

<sup>270</sup> Fielding, "The Female Husband," 11.

<sup>271</sup> Fielding, 19.

<sup>272</sup> Fielding, 10.

<sup>273</sup> Fielding, 21.

“female husband” narrative texts, we can now look toward the role that phenomenological speculation might play in constructing a counter-history of gender variance and gender crossing. Instead of asking speculative questions like “how did this gender crosser trick a woman into thinking they were a ‘real man,’” phenomenological speculation asks “how did this gender crosser orient their gender in relation to that of their partner, and how did this change both of their lives?” Phenomenological speculation uses a phenomenological framework to emphasize the power of speculating positively, or queerly, or expansively, about the relationships between people and between things and people that phenomenological thinking reveals. It engages modes of counter historical fiction writing and speculative questions to imagine how contact might have shifted a person’s embodiment and relationship to the world. It is informed by both queer phenomenology and hypernarrativity, but looks beyond both to construct generative histories of queerness which do not shy away from unanswerable questions.

In their chapter on the Howes, Manion writes “[e]ven with an abundance of records from the court and newspapers about a particular female husband and wife pair, we still have virtually no access to their inner thoughts and feelings.”<sup>274</sup> This sentence expresses the central affective absence of “female husband” narratives. Dwelling on this affect, Manion poses a series of questions:

What motivated them? Were they happy? Did they have friends who knew all of their truth? Were they lonely? Did they belong to a community of others like them? Did they despair over their difference? Did they feel a sense of triumph about the lives they carved out for themselves...How would they have felt about the “female husband” moniker? would they have chuckled, knowingly? Or felt offended?<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Manion, *Female Husbands*, 67.

<sup>275</sup> Manion, 67.

Manion's writing actually offers a nascent moment of speculation which, under the right circumstances, could bloom into full on phenomenological speculation by imagining the answers to one of these questions. How might the conversation about the "female husband" moniker gone? What could that dialogue have been like? How might their intimacy as a couple be represented? However, because of Manion's position as a historian, their willingness to engage in speculation is limited. Historian's general reticence to treat speculation as a valid mode of history-making is a flaw in queer and trans historiography: it is limited by adherence to archival and historical "truths" which can be "proven" in some "objective" way. Because of their adherence to "evidence," historiographical models of understanding historical genders and sexualities are limited in their ability to read through the complexities of both the archives from which these subjects might be recovered, but also the complexities of the subjects themselves. Manion might begin to speculate, but they never engage speculation as a method with serious potential for understanding gender crossing figures in history.

In "LOVE IN A HALL OF MIRRORS: Queer Historiography and the Unsettling in-between," Jean Bessette encourages scholarly readers to resist the impulse to attempt to "prove" the queerness of historical figures. Rather, Bessette says, the aim of examining historical subjects who might appear to be queer from a contemporary lens, should be to "ask what someone's being queer means and does in the public sphere."<sup>276</sup> Through this lens, the questions we ask of historical subjects shift from "is this subject queer (enough)?" to "what does queerness mean, and how do queer subjects relate to power and to each other?" These questions provoke the need for a methodology beyond queer historiography. In this essay, Bessette repeatedly cites José Esteban Muñoz and his formative writing on gossip and ephemera as related to queer

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<sup>276</sup> Jean Bessette, "'LOVE IN A HALL OF MIRRORS: Queer Historiography and the Unsettling In-Between,'" in *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methods, Queer Projects*, ed. William P. Banks, Matthew B. Cox, Caroline Dadas (Boulder: University Press of Colorado), 95-11, 96.



history and culture. In the section of “LOVE IN A HALL OF MIRRORS” where Bessette cites Muñoz the most often, she writes that ephemera and gossip are valuable because of “what relations gossip reveals and produces.”<sup>277</sup> We might extend this understanding to speculation, because gossip is often speculative. In “Ephemera as Evidence,” José Muñoz calls for a disruption of “rigor” as an epistemological foundation for the archive, arguing that the archives of queerness are “makeshift and randomly organized,”<sup>278</sup> and therefore incompatible with conventional conceptions of history, archives, and truth.

While Bessette advocates at the end of “Love in a Hall of Mirrors” for a “promiscuous methodology,”<sup>279</sup> these methodologies or ways of thinking do not go far enough in exposing the relationship between power and queer subjectivity. Bessette recognizes the discursive and disciplinary power of the archives, but not the systems of power like criminal law, policing, and sensationalist media which accounts for the presence of queer subjects in the archive in the first place. If the only reason a gender crossing subject is present in the archive is because of a hypernarrative story of their life, which insisted on their being disciplined back into normative gender relations, then their contact with power precedes the ways that institutions shape archives, reaching back to and preceding the first moment of archiving when the stories were published and circulated. It precedes the archiving of the material. It precedes even the writing of the story.

In employing a methodology of phenomenological speculation, we can look toward the relations between people and power structures — policing, criminal prosecution, gender, racialization, and capitalism (among others) — revealed by what kinds of contact gender crossing or queer figures had in the public sphere to envision how those relations iteratively

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<sup>277</sup> Bessette, “LOVE IN A HALL OF MIRRORS,” 102.

<sup>278</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. “Ephemera As Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts.” *Women & performance* 8, no.2 (1996): 5-16, 7.

<sup>279</sup> Bessette, 104.

created their worldview. As Ahmed writes: “phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.” This “shaping” can take various forms: from the monstrous chest-flattening of Hamilton after the end of their relationship with Anne Johnson, to the coin flip which generated Howe’s gender crossing.

Phenomenology invites us to pay attention to contact, and historiography insists upon a focus on the relationships between people and institutions of power that are proven by recorded events in historical archives. Phenomenological speculation asks what kinds of people came into contact with what kinds of power structures, and what possibilities for gender expression and definition which were opened up or foreclosed upon as a result of those contacts — even if they aren’t explicitly present in the historical record or the archive. We might turn to Muñoz, who Bessette cites repeatedly, for an understanding of what this *might* look like.

Muñoz writes “[e]vidence’s limit becomes clearly visible when we attempt to describe and imagine... identities that do not fit into a single pre-established archive of evidence.”<sup>280</sup> Gender crossers, when named and understood outside of the confines of the “female husband” label and archive, exceed the limits of the stories which claim to represent them. In order to describe and imagine them beyond the restrictions of the texts to which they were confined (and I use that word deliberately), we must accept phenomenological speculation as a way of reading queer and trans lives throughout history. This is not so much because “female husband” stories speculate positively about gender crossing lives. Clearly the specious claims and sensationalism of the Hamilton and Howe narratives negatively impacted their lives, whether by making them into criminals and publicly humiliating them (in Hamilton’s case) or stripping them of their

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<sup>280</sup> Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 9.

gender (in Howe's). However, speculation allows us as contemporary readers to come into (phenomenological, if fictive) contact with their lives in the first place. Looking for truth is not what matters when examining historical stories of people we might consider queer; but that identification is possible.

For me, as a young queer and trans person, my identity was shaped in large part by my interest in and contact with queer and trans history. Queer and trans history my understanding of how non-normative subjects have navigated their worlds, relationships, and systems of power throughout time. These understandings enabled me to formulate my own identity and to understand how my life was impacted by my contact with systems and people. This identificatory impulse, which Valerie Traub investigates in detail in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, shapes what we as queer and trans people envision as our history and how we are able to imagine our future. We can speculate, as well, based on queerness that is different or non-identificatory. Speculation is only shaped by what we consider to be possible, so we must expand what is, as Ahmed might put it, visible from where we sit, or near-to-hand in our lives. The presence of non-normative figures in historical stories allows us to speculate positively about the contents of their lives outside of the scope of the narratives, and to envision new possibilities for ourselves.

This phenomenological method enables an understanding of how physical and textual contact creates new fields of possibilities for queer subjects. When connected with speculation, this methodology might enable a narrative counter-history to be constructed which considers how speculation has played a role in history and might play a role in reshaping it critically. In phenomenological terms, speculation and history touch each other, and history reshapes our understanding of always already shifting social norms surrounding gender, race, class, and

embodiment. These norms then touch each and every one of our lives, limiting or expanding our fields of possibility based on just how we come into contact with them. In understanding the phenomenology of speculation, we can understand the controlling norms of a given period, and how they both shifted and were shifted by “non-normative” subjects. We can further understand how these norms are shifting, and as I suggested above, speculative in and of themselves. In following gender crossers as their fields of vision opened to new possibilities, we can understand how their lives were impacted by the power of hypernarrative rhetoric, medical insistence on the two-sex model, criminal law, for example. Speculative stories counter these methods of discursive power and provide a means by which means they might escape it.

A BACKWARD GLANCE<sup>281</sup>The Second History of the Body<sup>282</sup>

“The body has two histories,” writes Jordy Rosenberg in the final footnote of *Confessions of the Fox*. “There is the history that binds us all. The terrible history that began when the police first swarmed the streets of the cities and the settlers streamed down the decks of their ships, casting shadows on the world to turn *themselves* white.” And what of that second history? “The second history is love’s inscription. Some inscriptions we wear like dreams— fragments of a life untethered from this world, messages from a future reflected to us like light off broken shards.” In the introduction, I used this quote to describe my goals for this thesis project: to reveal the first history of the body through phenomenological readings, and to enable a speculative imagining of the second history. Authorial speculation and hypertextuality instantiate the first history of the body in the context of “female husband” narratives, while my methodology of phenomenological speculation offers one method through which to explore the second.

This passage, above all else, is what has shaped this work. This passage distills what might be learned from phenomenology, from the study of speculative fiction in nonfiction writing and the archive into an understanding of the profound impact the body and history have on one another. Bodies do not exist in a vacuum; they are inscribed by the social discourses and institutional systems of power which impact their lives. In the context of gender crossing stories within the archive of “female husband” narratives, this inscription is legible in the interactions between gender crossers, the court, and carceral systems. It is also legible within the texts

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<sup>281</sup> This quote comes from José Esteban Muñoz’s seminal work *Cruising Utopia*, where he writes that queerness is “a backward glance that enacts a future vision.” In lieu of a conclusion, I offer a backward glance which enacts a vision of the possibilities which have been offered over the course of the thesis. (José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 4.)

<sup>282</sup> Jordy Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, (New York: One World, 2019), 315.

themselves, from the descriptions of Charles Hamilton as a monstrous figure, to the fantasy that James Howe's gender was a public facade they removed in private. The impacts of these systems often happen or become visible within or upon the body. However, phenomenology posits bodies as able to move outside of these inscriptions, or aslant to them.

The impact of power on the body is one reason why I have neglected the physical description of Hamilton and Howe in this work. Partially, the lack of description is a result of the limits of the archive; there are few illustrations of them which I can access. There is one illustration of Hamilton, breasts bared against a brick wall, hands locked in a pillory, crying out as they are whipped, back already covered with lashes. This one picture, which I will not reproduce for reasons which hopefully are obvious, reflects only that first history, the one that "binds us all." Hamilton, bound, is stripped to the waist to reveal the "truth" of their gender to a jeering crowd. No one intervenes. No one saves Hamilton. The history of love's inscription would look different. How did Mary Price's love, or the love of their other wives, change the shape of Hamilton's body from something monstrously deviant, to something monstrously or wickedly loved? What history did the Howes create when they touched one another in the apartment above the White Horse Tavern?

The second history of the body is the one which queer phenomenology reveals— through the phenomenology of following a lover off-slant, or encountering a "female husband" in a text and finding a resonance with one's own gender or way of life. The second history of the body concerns the possibilities which are revealed by queer contact. They take place within the fields of possibility that are accessed beyond the limits of the archive. The relationships and embodiments which queer contact reveal provide a window onto a new kind of speculation; one which is not limited by systems of power or authorial voices, but instead asks phenomenological

questions about things and bodies and how their relationships produce generative changes. They take place in the domain of phenomenological speculation, where a counter-historical imagination can unfold an understanding of those “fragments of a life untethered from this world.”<sup>283</sup>

With this perspective, it is clear that it is no coincidence that this project began with a work of speculative fiction, and with one that imagines a revolutionary re-visioning and revising of the archive. Jordy Rosenberg, in an interview with Andrea Lawlor says,

What I’d noticed about that archival material was that it repeatedly presented Jack as very genderqueer—he was generally described as very lithe and effeminate and impossibly sexy. I came to feel that this genderqueer sexiness was a way for writers at the time to conceptualize the appeal of a life lived outside of the regular rhythms of the capitalist workday...I wanted to run with this connection I found in the archives between gender queerness and hatred of/escape from capitalism, and sort of literalize it as an explicitly fictional—actually almost science fictional—trans origin story.<sup>284</sup>

Finding the resonances between genderqueer embodiment and resistance to capitalism and other disciplinary modes of power in the archive of the eighteenth century was a vital part of my own research. Why are “female husbands” presented as desirable and desired if their gendered embodiment is so detestable? Jen Manion’s writing evokes a similar question in their chapter on Hamilton: “Hamilton *did something that made Mary feel so good* that she did not question Hamilton’s manhood for two entire months.”<sup>285</sup> What escape did these narratives offer to their readers? What was so enticing about being given license to speculate about gender crossers? What was the *something* that Hamilton did to their wife? These questions do not require readers

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<sup>283</sup> Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, 315.

<sup>284</sup> Jordy Rosenberg and Andrea Lawlor, “Jordy Rosenberg and Andrea Lawlor on Exploding Narrative Structure and Theory Posturing.” *The Millions* August 10, 2018, <https://themillions.com/2018/08/jordy-rosenberg-and-andrea-lawlor-on-exploding-narrative-structure-and-theory-posturing.html>.

<sup>285</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 22 (emphasis added).

to remain grounded in the context of the text, but rather offer a way to escape the boundaries that structure the texts of “female husband” narratives. For me, this involves looking back to the future, to imagine what eighteenth century gender crossers can tell us about the possibilities of embodiment beyond contemporary constructions like “nonbinary” or “trans” or “passing.”

Rosenberg says: “I wasn’t aiming for historical verisimilitude. Actually I was aiming for something explicitly anachronistic.”<sup>286</sup> Rosenberg here provides a vision of queer history which specifically acknowledges and honors the resonances and “uncanny familiarity”<sup>287</sup> between the queer past and the queer present. This animating and enriching work (*Confessions of the Fox*) acknowledges the importance of history, but refutes any sense of a linear liberal progressivism which envisions history as a long march towards an ever-more-perfect society for the marginalized. Discussing Stonewall, Rosenberg writes, “I’m not saying this battle was fought *for* us. History is not that linear. And yet, because of it, and many others like it, now we inhabit our own skin.”<sup>288</sup> The events and people from queer history fought for themselves. Some, like Hamilton, stood at the pillory as they were whipped for their transgressions. Others, like Howe, were coerced into normative gendered embodiment at the violent hands of the court and capital, all the while highlighting the contingency of gender altogether; just as the narrative overspeculates *and* lends more license to imaginative speculation, it reveals gender coercion *and* gender flexibility. Because of these doubled and indeterminate and flexible historical presences, possibilities for genders like mine emerge.

This project is in some sense not about me at all. In other senses, it represents a long engagement with people whose genders resemble my own. My gender has been defined by my

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<sup>286</sup> Jess Arndt, “Jordy Rosenberg on Writing a Queer 18th-Century Love Story.” *Electric Lit*, July 18, 2018, <https://electricliterature.com/jordy-rosenberg-on-writing-a-queer-18th-century-love-story/>

<sup>287</sup> Valerie Traub, “Part I: Making the History of Sexuality” from *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 37-100, 84.

<sup>288</sup> Rosenberg, *Confessions of the Fox*, 315.



relationship to queer history. It has been shaped by the hands of friends and lovers. My thinking about myself owes great debt not only to my lived experiences, but also to the speculative and imaginative work of people like Rosenberg. This work explicitly acknowledges the presence of people whose gender was not simply oppositional to the dominant culture throughout history, but shows how resistance might constitute a form of contact and imagination that supersedes simple opposition. It shows that speculation can become something other than a binary opposite to normative. Phenomenological speculation resists resorting to simple categorical discursive construction of historical genders and embodiments which makes space for the gender freaks and queers of the present. My gender is more anti-binary than nonbinary. My gender is more aligned with people like Hamilton, whose queer presence upended the lives of their lovers and the readers of their narrative, than it is with people like Elliot Page, whose six-pack abs confirm models of masculinity which are not transgressive or subversive in the slightest because they reinstate masculine gender norms which are foundation to the binary gender system. My contact with historical figures becomes legible on my own body and my own identity.

History, the present, and the future become entangled in trans and queer bodies. Queerness, José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, “is is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”<sup>289</sup> Ahmed writes “these differences in how one directs desire, as well as how one is faced by others, can ‘move’ us and hence affect even the most deeply ingrained patterns of relating to others.”<sup>290</sup> Our nonlinear histories as queer and trans people move us toward a horizon

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<sup>289</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>290</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 101.

of potentiality; we tend toward it in our bodies and in our relationships. We seek the warm light of queerness; we follow its pull off the track of heterosexual cisgender embodiments toward the possibility of love's second touch.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I am writing these acknowledgements on the day after submitting my thesis to my committee of readers, a week in advance of my thesis defense. I am sitting at a picnic table looking out over the two oldest dorms on Mount Holyoke College's campus. Students are crowded on Skinner Green taking part in the last major tradition before commencement week. The sun is shining in my eyes. I can hear the wind rustling the branches of the trees, most of which are starting to bud and bloom after a long winter. In less than a month, I will graduate. I have spent the last year working on the thesis project which you just read. It has given me a new depth of appreciation for a lot of things: for the queer possibilities offered by expansive readings of history, for the way the light shines through the skylight in the library atrium, for the sounds of mourning doves, sparrows, and cardinals, for the profound love and support which my community has offered me as I've variously struggled and sailed through my thesis, AND for the campus of Mount Holyoke which I returned to this fall after a long year and a half away. Writing this work would not have been possible without that particular cluster of people and of places.

My first thanks goes to my thesis advisor, Professor Kate Singer. Thank you for living inside of this thesis with me for the past year. Thank you for your generous and thoughtful answers to my most panicked emails, and my most rambling questions. Thank you for your depth of knowledge, for your genuine interest, and for always being able to parse what I actually *meant* to say from what I manage to write down.

Thank you, also, to Andrea Lawlor, whose vital perspectives on writing queer stories and the power of speculative fiction have changed my world in more ways than I can think of. Thank you for giving me the best writing advice I've received in my life so far: "scrap it." Thank you, more personally, for being a role model for me as a young trans butch.

Thank you to Professor Ren-Yo Hwang for asking me the really hard questions, and challenging my perspective on my own work throughout the writing process. Thank you for inviting me to recognize the limits of my perspective, and to think critically about them.

To Sara Ahmed, Saidiya Hartman, Jen Manion, and Jordy Rosenberg for doing the work which made my own work possible.

I want to give an enormous and massive thank you to the people who read the first draft of this thesis: Sabryna Coppola, Maggie Kamb, Declan Langton, Cait Mallery, Lily Nordheimer, Lily Reavis, and Casey Roepke. You all volunteered to read my work without a second thought, and offered me the most kind, attentive, and careful feedback I could have asked for. I am beyond grateful for your comments— especially the ones which just said “<3.”

To the people who sat and worked with me day after day, week after week, and supported me with laughter and encouragement over coffee, tea, and breakfast sandwiches: Anneke Craig, Kylie Gellatly, Declan Langton, Liz Lewis, and Michela Marchini. I truly and genuinely would not have been able to finish this project without your presence and support.

Thank you to Zoë Fieldman and Vincent Finch-Brand for showing me the power and joy which comes from loving friendships with other trans people.

To Olivia Brandwein, with whom I had weekly dinner dates which were a constant source of delight. To Myla Brilliant, my friend from home and from school, who always makes me feel heard. To Tatum Durand, who I can always count on to listen to me complain. To Chris Felizzi, who has taught me so much. To Katherine Kain, whose laugh is the most joyous sound in the world. To Evelyn Kirby, whose unmatched skill in cooking beans sustained me. To Maren McKenna, my fantasy boyfriend and real life best friend, who turned me into a poet. To Ali Meizels, who always waves to me the same way, which always brings me delight. To Clare

Messina-Fitzgerald, who always brightens my day. To Ayu Suryawan, who notices lovely things in the world.

To everyone else who helped me at any point during this process, in any small or large ways — thank you.

To Buffy, the most perfect cat in the world, who cannot read.

To Kate Turner, my partner in all things. Learning from and with you is the greatest gift of my life. Thank you for steady and constant presence, and for knowing I could do this project before I did. You inspire me and you make me proud. I love you.

And to my family, who made me the person I am today, and loves me for it.

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