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Often called the first woman doctor, James Barry lived a mysterious life. Yet to suggest, as many have, that he should be remembered as a woman who cross-dressed to pursue a career in medicine mischaracterizes him and diminishes the complexity of his life.

Dr. James Barry, Victorian colonial surgeon and medical inspector, has fascinated Britons since his death when Sophia Bishop, a maid attending to his corpse, told Barry's estate and the media that Barry was a woman. But this was not Barry's first appearance in newspapers. While stationed in South Africa in 1824, he was publicly accused of being in a sexual relationship with the governor of Cape Colony, Lord Charles Sommerset, a scandal that traveled the globe to London. It was after his death, however, when Bishop took to the media, that Barry became an intriguing literary subject as writers attempted to reconstruct his life through essays and fiction, trying to make sense of how he succeeded to pass as a man for so long. Drawing on the few letters and testimonials left of Barry,

novelists, journalists, and medical historians have used Barry's legacy for entertainment but also to inform discussions of pioneering women in medicine.



Portrait of James Barry, painted circa 1813–1816, artist unknown. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.

Such was the approach by Bryan Hurwith and Ruth Richardson in 1989 when they published an article about James Barry in the *British Medical Journal* titled, "Inspector General James Barry MD: putting the woman in her place." Their article perpetuates accounts that Barry was clearly a woman by repeatedly referring to him as "her." Hurwitz and Richardson characterize Barry as a cross-dresser, a woman passing in a man's world because of a love for practicing medicine: "Throughout her career," they say "Barry used, with varying success, techniques to describe her real sex," and "Barry asserted an apparent masculinity."¹ At times using terms like "concealment of femininity," Hurwitz and Richardson align Barry with trailblazing women in

the medical field, the likes of Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth Blackwell, and they locate Barry's life within a constellation of crossdressers, performance artist, and capitalist narratives about ambitious proto-feminists escaping domesticity in search of financial stability. As they write:

"Her life embodied a well used strategy that many women adapted to their own purposes in different epochs. The adoption of male identity was a compromise that some ambitious women historically were prepared to make to achieve what contemporary norms of femininity precluded. Vestiges of the same strategy survived in the adoption of male pseudonyms by nineteenth century writers such as the Brontës and Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot)."¹

While comparisons between Barry's life and that of Charlotte Brontë, for example, may have held value for readers in 1989, it would not be because of Barry's choice to present as a man. In fact, he was believed to be a man. While seemingly progressive, this article and many more since that describe Barry as a cross-dresser² downplay the complexity of Barry's lived experience. Such biographies have the potential to naturalize the notion that women can be successful physicians just like men, but they overlook the fact that, from all accounts we have, Barry succeeded in living as a man in a male profession and did so until his death. In other words, he was more likely trans than a cross-dresser.

Instead of looking to Barry's life to reaffirm hegemonic sexual binaries as so many writers have done, Barry's story should be reclaimed in the promotion of what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner call queer world-making when they say, "The queer world is a space of entrances, exists,

Photograph of Dr James Barry, approximately late 1840s. Photograph sourced from *Scanty Particulars* by Rachel Holmes; original photographer unknown

unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.”³ Barry’s career as a colonial surgeon, medical reformer, and humanitarian, his relationships, friendships, and actions extend far beyond the notion that he was simply cross-dressing to pass as a woman in a man’s profession and speak more to an individual who created a space for himself that called into question popular notions about gender and sexuality. Barry attended medical school and practiced medicine as a man; he also made a career in the military as a surgeon; therefore, although he undoubtedly encountered many personal obstacles, his career bares little resemblance to that of the first women doctors and it is time to stop referring to him as such.



References

1. Hurwitz, Brian and Ruth Richardson. “Inspector General James Barry MD: Putting the Woman in Her Place.” *British Medical Journal* (1989): 298-305. Web. 13 Dec 2015.
2. See also, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/10/dr-james-barry-a-woman-ahead-of-her-time-review>, <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/margaret-ann-bulkley-james-barry-17891865>, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/features/the-anatomy-of-a-lie-the-irish-woman-who-lived-as-a-man-to-practice-medicine-277445.html>, and <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/dr-james-barry-the-irishwoman-who-fooled-the-british-empire-1.2781260>, to name a few.
3. Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 547-566.