

Jessica Kirwan // Stories about Victorian surgeon James Barry encourage a re-examination of our own limitations in understanding gender and sex. In fiction and non-fiction, Barry's transgender body has prompted discussions about the ideologies thought necessary for societal acceptance of non-traditional bodies practicing medicine.

Insofar as historians and writers have tried to piece together Barry's life and thus reveal the "truth" of his sex and gender, there has unfolded over the last century and a half an archive of literature by and about Barry, including not only some personal letters, official historical documents, and witness testimonials, but also seemingly factual and partially fictionalized biographies and novels. Since his death, there have been many works on James Barry. The index to Rachel Holmes's biography *The Secret Life of Dr. James Barry: Victorian England's Most Eminent Surgeon* provides a compendium of what we might refer to as the archive of James Barry, comprised of papers, letters, and other works by Barry as well as secondary military documents, private letters and public correspondences with journals, and other articles in periodicals. These include testimonials, history books, and novels published after Barry's death and far into the twentieth century. I would argue that also part of Barry's archive are more recent journal articles and blog posts, published after Holmes's book and more than a century and a half after Barry's death, that attempt to understand some fundamental essence of his gender and sexuality.

The narratives that refuse to accept Barry as a man do the ideological work of negating the performativity and flexibility of gender. In this sense, "the transgender body confirms the enduring power of the binary gender system" (Halberstam 96). Yet when we attempt to understand Victorian views of Barry, views which we have carried into the present, we find that, although non-normative multi-sexed bodies can be re-imagined to fit heteronormative narratives, these narratives defy themselves in favor of the unclassifiable. In defining James Barry as trans, I am evoking J. Jack Halberstam's characterizations of "transgender bodies" and "subcultural lives" in *In a Queer Time & Place*. Here, the trans figure has "the potentiality of the body to morph, shift, change, and become fluid" (Halberstam 76). Further, "the transgender body represents a utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities" (Halberstam 96). By relying on cultural gradations of hierarchy and sexual economy, stories about Barry elucidate the instability of gender.

We cannot categorize the genre and nature of the relics that follow in James Barry's wake, and biological labels also fail to fit within their own constraints when describing Barry, suggesting just how important it has been in our modern era to understand Barry's biological status in order to understand his social status. Despite the paucity of source material in Barry's archive, and the lack

of evidence as to whether he was intersex or trans, the continual production of literature on Barry has taken on its own materiality. Instead of trying to understand whether Barry was born a woman and why he lived as a man, reading literature about him can reveal changes in our understanding of the relationship between sex and gender. Descriptions of Barry by his contemporaries reveal that, like transgender characters in more recent fiction, Barry “surprises audiences with his/her ability to remain attractive, appealing, and gendered while simultaneously presenting a gender at odds with sex” (Halberstam 76).



Miniature portrait of James Barry via Wikimedia Commons

Victorians were intrigued by people who challenged hegemonic standards of heterosexual normativity, yet they showed little compassion for them. As spectacles in freak shows, medical subjects, or literary characters, the marginalized bodies of non-normative persons in Victorian England served as deviant objects on which to project and reify heteronormative expectations through a language of negation. This included the medical discourse surrounding hermaphrodites, which relied on describing what was “unnatural” about intersex bodies to reaffirm what was “natural” about single-sexed bodies [1]. Although hermaphrodites, as they were called, were not part of the British freak show until the twentieth century, they were a popular topic of study within the medical community and, as such, interest in hermaphrodites would have entered popular culture. In the case of James Barry, journalists and writers wove narratives from the most scandalous gossip they could find for an increasingly literate populace. In my next two posts, I will explore depictions of Barry in popular Victorian literature to understand why Victorians came to describe Barry’s gender and life as they did.

## References

Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time & Place*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005. Print.

Holmes, Rachel. *The Secret Life of Dr. James Barry: Victorian England’s Most Eminent Surgeon*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2007. Print.

[1] See Dreger, Alice Domurat. “Doubtful Sex: The Fate of the Hermaphrodite in Victorian Medicine”. *Victorian Studies* 38.3 (1995): 335 – 370, and Dreger, Alice Domurant. *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*. Harvard University Press, 1998. Tromp, Marlene, ed. *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. Also, Craton, Lillian. *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance of Disability and Physical Difference in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Fiction*.

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