

Diana Rose Newby //

My place was not marked out in this world that shunned me, that had cursed me. (Barbin 3)

Content Warning: suicide, sexual abuse

Herculine Barbin was twenty-one when she was forced to change her sex. Assigned female at her birth in 1838 in southwestern France, Barbin grew up identifying as such until the “ridiculous inquisition” that ended her former life (Barbin 93). After a series of medical examinations determined Barbin’s “true sex” to be male, she became, unwillingly, he (90). “So, it was all over,” Barbin recounts in her memoirs, *Mes souvenirs*:

According to my civil status, I was henceforth to belong to that half of the human race which is called the stronger sex. I, who had been raised ... in religious houses, among shy female companions, was going to leave that whole delightful past far behind me, like Achilles, and enter the lists, armed with my weakness alone and my deep inexperience of men and things.
(89)

Barbin's sexual reassignment conscripted her to war on multiple fronts. She lived her remaining years at odds not only with her new identity, but also with the "criticism and slander" that followed her transition (90). Newspapers printed "treacherous" reports of the "event"; acquaintances told Barbin that she "had brought shame and dishonor everywhere" (90). At twenty-five, impoverished and living in Paris, she began chronicling the story of her profound alienation: "I have suffered much," she writes, "and I have suffered alone"(3). At age thirty, in 1868, Barbin committed suicide.

Barbin hails from a century whose medical and legal treatments of intersex persons were at least as diminishing as those of our own. When her memoirs were discovered and translated by Michel Foucault in 1980, they opened a window into a period of rigid fortification of sex as binary and heightened suspicion toward gender ambiguity. Reread in 2018, they also shine a light on historical precedents for the U.S. federal administration's recent push to cruelly and unscientifically disenfranchise an already marginalized group.

In the Western world, intersex status—today understood as anatomical, hormonal and/or chromosomal variations that do not "fit the typical definitions of male or female"—was treated with comparative cultural permissiveness well into the Renaissance (Intersex Society of North America). As Foucault explains in his introduction to Barbin's memoirs, throughout the Middle Ages, adult intersex persons were "free to decide for themselves if they wished to go on being of the sex which had been assigned to them, or if they preferred the other" of the two available options (viii).

By the nineteenth century, however, intersex people's freedom to choose their sex had been revoked and the "very idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body" roundly rejected (Foucault viii). The 1860s and 70s especially saw a movement in the Western sciences at once to establish normative sex as dimorphic and to "identify, classify, and characterize" any and all sexual "perversions" (Foucault viii, xi):

Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory. From the medical point of view, ... [the doctor] had, as it were, to strip the body of its anatomical deceptions and discover **the one true sex** behind organs that might have put on the forms of the opposite sex. (Foucault viii-ix, emphasis mine)

To be sexually indeterminate was indeed viewed as "deception," and as Barbin's memoirs and medical dossier attest, her diagnosis took on the cast of a criminal investigation. Barbin's attraction to women, coupled with her physical androgyny, was treated by those around her as a sign that her "one true sex" might not be female, and after the "inquisition" she was seen as a sexual predator—a "real Don Juan" who "had profited brazenly from [her] situation in order to engage secretly in love affairs with women" (Barbin 90). Accordingly, inspections of Barbin's body by a court-appointed physician, Dr. Chesnet, treated her anatomy as largely "illusory": a mystery to be solved, a secret to be revealed.

Both Barbin's memoirs and her medical dossier detail the painful and invasive scrutiny to which she was subjected. In an effort to definitively taxonomize Barbin's body, Chesnet "palpat[ed] and "pressed" her "sensitive" testicles (126), "thrust [his] finger far up into the rectum," forced her to "urinate in [his] presence," attempted to insert his finger into Barbin's vagina and—when she shrank back in obvious pain—instead pushed a probe into her vaginal canal while using a finger to press "the tip of the probe" through the "recto-vaginal" walls (Chesnet 127). Barbin recalls pleading with Chesnet to stop—"leave me alone. You are killing me!" (79)—but ultimately feeling forced to acquiesce to the exam: the "doctor," she reflects, "enjoys certain privileges which no one thinks to deny him" (78).

In cataloging Barbin's anatomical ambiguity, Chesnet's report is as dehumanizing as the examination itself. He muses, for instance, that her "little member" (126), which he calls an "imperforate penis," could alternatively be "a monstrously developed clitoris," although the presence of "ovoid bodies and spermatic cords" present what he arbitrarily determines are "the real proofs of sex" (127, 128). Chesnet tellingly juxtaposes this invocation of sexual monstrosity with the rhetoric of scientific "proof." According to his classificatory schema, "real" sex was theorized as natural, as empirically verifiable, and as opposed to what was seen as the unnatural subhumanity of sexual indeterminacy.

What is perhaps especially disturbing about the White House memo leaked last week is the degree to which it resembles, in language and in logic, Herculine Barbin's nineteenth-century medical dossier. In proposing to define sex under Title IX as "a person's status as male or female based on immutable biological traits identifiable by or before birth" (Green et al.), the Department of Health and Human Services relies on the very rhetoric and outdated science that drove the disenfranchisement of intersex people over 150 years ago.

The department's emphasis on the "immutable" singularity of sexual identity is simply another riff on the myth of the "one true sex": a fiction that modern biology has debunked, yet one that lingers nevertheless, manifest in the intersex community's ongoing fight against "nonconsensual hormonal and surgical interventions that position our natural traits as problems to be fixed" (Tobin et al.). And the department's plan to require genetic testing to resolve "[a]ny dispute about one's sex" risks further subjecting intersex people to invasive and abusive procedures of paranoid classification (Green et al.). Indeed, it risks erasing them from medical and legal classifications altogether.

Barbin's memoirs serve as an archive not only for the impact of such precarity, but also for the embodied truth of a life that transcends reductive boundaries. In the later pages of her *souvenirs*, Barbin tells her reader, "You are to be pitied more than I ... for, as you have said, my place is not in your narrow sphere. You have the earth, I have boundless space" (99). Now as ever, her memoirs read as a call to create that space for others: to unbound the restraints that fetter our increasingly narrow world.

Featured image: Roman fresco of Hermaphroditus via [@HerculaneumApp](#)

Works Cited

- Barbin, Herculine. "My Memoirs." *Herculine Barbin*, edited by Michel Foucault, Vintage Books, 1980, 3-118.
- Chesnet, M. "The Dossier." *Herculine Barbin*, edited by Michel Foucault, Vintage Books, 1980, 119-154.
- Foucault, Michel. "Introduction." *Herculine Barbin*, edited by Michel Foucault, Vintage Books, 1980, vii-xvii.
- Green, Erica L., et al. "'Transgender' Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration." *The New York Times*, 21 Oct. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/21/us/politics/transgender-trump-administration-sex-definition.html>. Accessed 28 October 2018.
- Tobin, Harper Jean, et al. "Intersex People #WontBeErased, Support Their Trans Friends." *Advocate*, 26 October 2018, <https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2018/10/26/intersex-people-wontbeerased-stand-trans-friends>. Accessed 28 October 2018.
- "What is intersex?" *Intersex Society of North America*, http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex. Accessed 28 October 2018.