

James Barry's Corporeal Archive: An Hermaphrodite at the Cape

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Since today it is known that it is sometimes impossible to determine the true sex of a person from external characteristics alone, it is possible that Barry was a hermaphrodite (Kirby 1976:186).

How then to expose the causal lines as retrospectively and performatively produced fabrications, and to engage gender itself as an inevitable fabrication, to fabricate gender in terms which reveal every claim to the origin, the inner, the true, and the real as nothing other than the effects of *drag* ...? (Butler 1993:318).

Balzac's gothic story *Sarrasine*, published in 1830 (Barthes 1975), reveals the narrative power of sexual ambiguity. The narrator seduces a mistress with the tale of the Frenchman, Sarrasine, who falls in love with an Italian opera singer, La Zambinella. On discovering that 'she' is a male castrati, Sarrasine laments

To love, to be loved! are henceforth meaningless words for me, as they are for you. I shall forever think of this imaginary woman when I see a real woman.

Sarrasine is condemned to an awareness of sexual artifice, a knowledge with which he cannot live. La Zambinella embodies the constructed and illusory nature of femininity itself, which is the source of a mysterious aura. His existence accuses women of being fictions. This unsettles the possibility of romantic narrative as the only closure in La Zambinella's love story is precisely the revelation of his fabricated gender.

Fictions of duplicitous sexual identities, whether gay, transvestite or transsexual are a recurring theme in modern literature and media since the nineteenth century. James Barry, renowned as a surgeon and administrator of nineteenth century colonial medical institutions at the Cape, is the protagonist in a range of such fictions, which

pursue the question of whether Barry was man, woman or hermaphrodite¹. His anatomy is enshrouded in stories which lay claim to his sexed body as both their motivating mystery, and their point of closure. Journalists and biographers 'deduce' the doctor's biology, from the documents of his history—colonial records, letters, popular accounts, medical hypotheses constructing a narrative in which all biographical background becomes secondary evidence to the primary question of his biological sex. The feminist diagnosis of Barry's womanhood wishes to vindicate a place for women in both history and science, whereas the medical approach demonstrates the powers of science to reveal the truth behind the anatomy of this 'feminine' medical man. But both approaches have the same aim. They point to the mutual construction of narrative pleasure and the 'scientific' exposure of the sexed body, a body lost in the weight of documents that order it².

James Barry is described in Gelfand and Laidler's *South Africa: Its Medical History 1652-1898* as 'one of the most outstanding medical practitioners to have ever practised in South Africa' and, they argue, 'one of the foremost social reformers' (Gelfand & Laidler 1971:132). He is famous for performing the first successful Caesarean section operation in British history in 1826 and for his influence on Cape medical institutions during his posting from 1816—1828. He structured and organised the makeshift existing colonial medical institutions, as well as prisons, leper colonies and food and drug dispensers³. But 'he' is also known in feminist biographies and in

¹ I take my license to treat Barry here as a 'fictional' protagonist partially from Hayden White's comments about the narrative similarities between 'scientific' forms of investigation (including historical) and works of the 'imagination'. White acknowledges the obvious point that hypothetical or imaginary events interest the literary writer, whilst the historian is limited to observable events. But, as he notes, 'both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same' (cf. White 1978:121).

² Barry's body can be read as a documented artefact, stored and ordered within the colonial, medical and journalistic archives. Foucault argues that history has become a process of insistent and self-conscious questioning and ordering of the document. The concern with the place of the record belongs to the impulse to create a 'continuous history' in the face of the decentering of origins inaugurated by the anti-theological nineteenth century theorists. Thus the archive itself substitutes the memory of origins, for '[c]ontinuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity ...' (Foucault 1972:12).

³ Gelfand & Laidler thus devote one chapter to 'The Barry Period 1816-1826' and another to the topic 'Barry continues his Reforms'.

popular media⁴ as 'the first woman doctor in the world' (Rose 1973). Burrow's (1965:80) medical history introduces the him as:

one of the most romantic figures in the annals of medical history as well as an enduring enigma to all would-be biographers On his death ... Barry was found to be a woman or so, at any rate, states the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Taylor's *Medical Jurisprudence* refers to Dr Barry's case as one of the most extraordinary cases of concealed sex on record, and *The Lancet* of 1895 contains letters bearing the testimony of at least half a dozen high-ranking army officers (some medical) who had known personally that he was a woman. One had shared a cabin with him on a ship, another *had actually examined him* and been sworn to secrecy in Trinidad where Barry had a bout of fever ... a third had known him in Malta and yet a fourth as a student in Edinburgh, *where Barry was aloof, always refused to be drawn into pugilistic contests and habitually wore a long surtout*.

Since his death in 1865, popular anecdotes have appeared in the press delighting in the irony that this exemplary nineteenth century 'medical man' was a woman. These accounts tend to emphasise Barry's worldly demeanour, which seems to obscure a conflicted inner life. This anecdote, which appeared in *Personality* magazine almost a hundred years after his death, implicitly invests its cartoon protagonist with a 'personality':

It was cool before dawn, that morning in 1817, for the south-easter blew strongly through the garden; but the small knot of people on the lawn did not notice it, for they were witnessing a duel.

Back to back the two principals stood. One was good-looking, tall and broadshouldered; the other, short and slightly built, the rather effeminate face dominated by a large nose. Ill-matched physically, the equalising factor was the pistol each carried in his right hand

The cause of the encounter was an incident a few days before. A pretty, buxom lady called to see the Governor on private business, and was closeted alone with him. Dr Barry, who was in the ante-room, was a privileged person and a favourite of the Governor, but was also renowned for a sharp wit and a biting tongue. After the interview had lasted for some considerable time, Barry observed, in a sneering tone: 'I say Cloete, that's a nice Dutch filly the governor has got hold of ...'.

Advancing on the doctor, he (Cloete) pulled Barry's long nose, saying: 'Retract your vile expression you infernal little cad ...' (Burman 1962:25).

⁴ One relatively recent article describes Barry as 'the most eminent Women's Libber [She] was a Cape Surgeon who beat distinguished men at their own game, and, best of all, shut up about it' ('Snuff King was first Caesarean' *The Argus* Monday, November 11, 1974).

Barry's opponent was Captain Josias Cloete, aide de camp to governor Lord Charles Somerset at the Cape. Rumour has it that Cloete became a life-long friend of Barry's, and was heard to boast after his death that he was the only man in the British service to have fought a duel with a woman. Mr. McCrindle reports that Barry himself claimed he had killed a man in a duel, thus breaching his dandyish reputation⁵. The story magnifies the absurdity of the doctor's bravado, given his feeble physique. The mark of his masculinity is not his bodily stature, but rather the pistols and his sexual innuendo. But his 'vile expression' of male salaciousness reveals itself to be a feminine jealous pique once we discover that it was 'a woman who fought the duel'. The narrative implicitly resolves this offensive, petulant and absurd caricature of a 'gentleman' into a romantically self-styled woman, preserving her incognito through exaggerated beligerence⁶.

It seems that Barry was seen as deviant by his peers. A placard placed in Dreyer's corner in Longmarket Street, insinuated an 'unnatural' homosexual relationship with the governor, referring to Somerset as 'Barry's little wife' (Gelfand & Laidler 1971:161)⁷. Commentators frequently refer to the untoward influence that Barry had with Somerset as 'mysterious', especially as their views diverged considerably on matters of public interest. Barry harangued officialdom about the neglect of hygiene

⁵ Isobel Rae (1958:111) recounts that when Barry was in Jamaica in 1860 'he' told his friend Mr McCrindle 'about a duel in which she had killed her opponent'.

⁶ Barry stories tend to revel in his macho intolerance and bravado. One correspondent describes his arrest on St. Helena Island in these terms: 'He dared anyone to touch or lay a finger on him, so that the grim visages of the guard actually, so far as the rules of the service of their stiff leather stocks allowed, tittered at the little diminutive woman-man making use of such bombastic words. However, the upshot was that he would not give up his sword to anyone but the Governor himself, and they were actually obliged to get horses and rode up to Longwood, Dr. Barry's sword being buckled to his side as impudently as possible'. 'The Soi-disant Dr. Barry' in *The South African Advertiser and Mail*, 21/10/1865, p. 2, Col. 5.

Another anecdote typically emphasises his intolerance of fools. The next entry in the *Advertiser* recounts Barry's treatment of a clergyman who had requested the doctor to draw his tooth. He apparently sent a farmer in his place who reported to the reverend that he had been instructed by the doctor to 'draw the tooth of a donkey'. 'Dr Barry', in *The South African Advertiser and Mail*, 30/10/1865, Col. 3.

⁷ A rhyme mocking Barry's 'unnatural' devotion to the Governor apparently sprung up in the 1820s: 'With courteous devotion inspired/ Barry came to the temple of prayer,/ But quickly turned round and retired/ When he found that *his* Lord was not there'. Cited in *The South African Advertiser and Mail*, 21/10/1865, p. 2, Col. 5.

and good diet and the misuse of the treadmill and beatings in the prison⁸. Gelfand and Laidler present him as relentless in exposing corrupt administrators, and his consequent commitment to a free press, tackling the Governor to reverse his order to suppress the *South African Commercial Advertiser*. Paradoxically, however, his 'deviant' influence makes sense if he is actually a woman. He mysteriously took leave in Mauritius in 1819, and as this is the only unrecorded period of his life, June Rose (1977:46) speculates that he may have left the Cape to have Somerset's child. This suggestion would make 'her' relationship with Somerset sexually 'natural', if taboo.

Accounts that name Barry as a 'woman' try to infer her motives from her biology and the more intractable record of colonial service. Olga Racster and Jessica Grove (1935), for example, create a fictional romantic narrative for the young, female doctor who flees to the colonies to escape an abusive husband. I have heard rumours that a Hollywood film is currently being produced that presents Barry as a liberatory and transgressive female cross dresser, taking on a male world. These accounts explain away his affected machismo and naturalise his hypermasculinity as a defensive feminine facade. More than this, however, they gesture towards the unknown histories, the feminine impulses and experiences, the stories uncovered by delving, through gender⁹, for psychological depth within the external codes of his public identity.

I have suggested that as an administrator of the developing administrative and classificatory order produced for and magnified by colonial administration¹⁰, Barry regulated the professional and the physical body by producing quantities of official documents, labels, lists and letters. But the mysteries surrounding his own body are symptomatic of the unsettling vacuousness of the document. Both June Rose and Isobel Rae cannot definitely establish her parentage, birth-date or familial relations. Rose suggests that Barry was the 'daughter' of Mrs Bulkeley, the sister of the artist, the elder James Barry (1977:18), who is in turn described as the child's uncle by Kirby (1970). Parentage becomes a key to the mystery of his sex. Rose (1977:20) implies

⁸ Cf. Gelfand & Laidler (1971:190f). The authors describe the filth, disease and injury that prevailed in the prison when Barry inspected it in 1824, and Barry's continual complaints to the Governor about those responsible. He had to insist that no children be put on the treadmill with older people, as they risked rupture. He found prisoners without beds, with untended broken bones and insubstantial diet.

⁹ I use the term 'gender' here, because commentators on Barry equate sex with gender, assuming for narrational purposes, that female anatomy would make Barry a 'woman'. However, following Butler, I regard gender as a performance, separate from biology. Accordingly I have used the pronouns for Barry that are appropriate to the particular discourses under discussion.

¹⁰ Carlo Ginzburg (1980:27) points out 'to the link between colonial administration and the rise of classificatory techniques, such as the fingerprint, which was pioneered in Bengal in 1860'.

that the elder Barry's patron, the well known feminist Lord Raglan, Earl of Buchan, may have brought up his own illegitimate daughter as a boy in order to educate her. Rae (1958) found letters of introduction from the Earl of Buchan to the younger Barry in 1810/1811, which may lend support to this theory. Rose (1977:18) speculates further that the child was the offspring of the artist himself, or of her mentor, the South American revolutionary, General de Miranda—both men were known as womanisers and may have shared a common mistress. Despite these speculations, interest in the doctor's unknown origins is made to serve the 'mystery' of her sexual anatomy. The question of his birth date plays a similarly instrumental role. Rae (1958:2) dates Barry's birth to 1797, which would mean that she registered at Edinburgh University at the age of thirteen. The headstone on her grave gives her age as '71' making her birth date 1794. Rose believes that Barry was born in 1799. She makes the suggestive observation that in Barry's own statement of his date of birth in army records, the words are smudged 'as if she chose to be known only by her public persona' (Rose 1977:17).

Both the record of Barry's life, and the subsequent interest in his biological sex can be seen in the context of the 'disciplinary regime' of modern society, described by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault suggests that the rising documentation of populations is part of an increasing control and regulation of human bodies, reflected by the obsessive interest in sexuality. Barry, born in a period where births are not recorded (Rose 1978:18), died in another episteme, where deaths are not only recorded, but require details about the individual corpse—not least of which is sex. The documentary and institutional regulation of populations in the nineteenth century generates an obsessive interest in 'individuality', but obscures the subjectivity signified by the marks of identity. As I hope to show in later discussion, it is the claim that Barry may be a 'hermaphrodite' that simultaneously gestures towards his uniqueness, and contains his otherness in a category that is, finally, not a mediator between the binaries of masculine and feminine, but a curious variation on masculinity¹¹.

In South Africa, Barry is recorded as a probable hermaphrodite in both *The South African Dictionary of Biography*, and the *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa* as Kirby is the biographer for these texts. Rae, however, sees to it that the *British National Dictionary of Biography* registers Barry as a woman. Both draw their interpretations from the same documentary evidence. In the same way, anecdotes published in the wake of Barry's death were mostly drawn from a single source—the

¹¹ Marjorie Garber suggests that in tranvestism and increasingly among transsexuals, the conversion from a man to a woman does not threaten the signification of the penis but ultimately confirms its power to resist the prospective threat. It seems that the biological form of intersexuality, hermaphroditism, serves the same purpose for some commentators (Abelove et al 1993).

article 'Dr Barry: A Mystery Still', in Charles Dicken's magazine, *All the Year Round*. Fragments in the *South African Mail and Advertiser* and the *Kaffrarian Watchman* derive from this account, the rhetorical play of obfuscation and revelation:

His Excellency spoiled him. He became a kind of tame imp, encouraged as amusing and harmless enough; but, like such imps, he took advantage one day of his position and was impertinent. He had the entree of the governor's private cabinet. One morning, sauntering in, he had the assurance to make some querulous remarks on an official document lying on the table. Finally he worked himself into such an offensive pet, that his Excellency resolved to give him a lesson; so, snatching the little fellow up by the collar of his uniform, he swung him over the window sill—a few feet above the grassy garden—and shook him. James screeched and cried peccavi. He was forgiven and never offended there in the same way again. Still, every one was persuaded that such *unwarrantable humours* as he exhibited were only tolerated by reason of certain influences that *remain a mystery at this day* (1867; c.a.).

These mysterious 'influences' that the writer refers to seem to be the same partially identifiable figures that provided the letters of introduction for Barry wherever he went. These letters, possibly those of Lord Buchan, or from a connection with the Somerset family, seem to have bought him the privacy that allowed him to keep his 'secrets', bypassing military medical examinations and gaining the governor's immediate support. What is interesting in this article, however, is that, despite the headline, the primary 'mystery' *is* resolved. The author claims that:

news reached the registrar-general of the discovery [that the body is female], and he at once called for a report from the proper authority. The report was 'that after a post mortem examination, it was found that Doctor James, of her Majesty's service, was not only a woman, but had at a very early period of life been a mother!' (1867:2).

While the question of Barry's sex is solved, the 'mystery' of his double life is preserved, infecting his whole being, from his behaviour to his social networks. But to arrive at its closure, this story flouts the evidence that there was no official interest in Barry's sex and, intriguingly, no post-mortem.

On the 25 July 1865, Barry, at this point Inspector General of Hospitals, died in London of diarrhoea, caused by sewage problems in the city. The following day his death was recorded and his age entered as 70 years, his sex as 'male'. Sophia Bishop, the charwoman who laid him out, put her mark next to this record. She also informed Barry's doctor, McKinnon, that the body she had laid out was that of a 'perfect female'. Later that year, Doctor McKinnon wrote to George Graham, the Registrar-General, to give an account of his conversation with Sophia Bishop:

She then said that she had examined the body and that it was that of a perfect female and further there were marks of her having had a child when very young. I then enquired 'how have you formed that conclusion'. The woman pointing to the lower part of her stomach, said from marks here (i.e. striae gravidarum). I am a married woman, and the mother of nine children and I ought to know.

The woman seemed to think that she had become acquainted with a great secret and wished to be paid for keeping it. I informed her that all Dr Barry's relatives were dead and that it was no secret of mine and that *my own impression was that Dr Barry was a hermaphrodite*.

But whether Dr Barry was male, female or hermaphrodite I do not know, nor had any purpose in making the discovery as I could positively swear to the identity of the body as being that of a person whom I had been acquainted with as Inspector General of Hospitals for a period of 8 or 9 years ... (in Gelfand & Laidler 1977:136).

In McKinnon's account 'identity' refers to the doctor's official title of 'Inspector General of Hospitals'. Similarly for Burrows 'the question of Barry's sex is unimportant, apart from providing human interest' (1958:81). P.R. Kirby suggests that the War Office held the same attitude. That it never officially denied that Barry was a woman is 'hardly surprising, since the matter must have been regarded there as quite unimportant ...' (Kirby 1965:233). Yet Kirby himself, and the medical historians, investigate the question in some detail. Having spent a good deal of energy proving that Barry was a hermaphrodite, Kirby concludes, paradoxically, that he was male. However he was

unfortunately feminine in appearance. This handicap made him irritable and intolerant and yet he managed to become a 'distinguished medical man' (Kirby 1965:237).

His personal foibles, such as his peevishness, high voice, vegetarianism, white poodle and fondness for umbrellas, suggest his unique and individual sexual status, yet he remains essentially masculine. Kirby's conclusion dramatises the desire to both name indefinite gender and to disavow its significance as a question of private 'curiosity'.

Biological sexual definition, then, drives a narrative which seeks to close the gap between public identity and private character, the archival document and the mysterious and unfathomable history it indexes. Eve Sedgwick's work on the 'Epistemology of the Closet' (Abelove et al. 1993) suggests that in the twentieth century, homosexuality occupies this impossible space between the discursive fields that structure knowledge. The discourse of 'coming out of the closet', as she observes, is subject to 'contradictory constraints', in which

the space for simply existing as a gay person ... is in fact bayoneted through and through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden (Abelove 1993:47).

This impossibility points to the fact that gayness is a matter of public concern, regulated by law, whilst the offence of 'coming out' is precisely that of speaking publicly about one's 'private' life. Whilst Barry himself seemed to be under no such discursive constraints, it could be argued that his body is¹².

Yet his colleagues decline to resolve the question by examining his body. Foucault's (1980) account of another hermaphrodite, Herculin Barbin, who died three years after Barry, forms a striking contrast. Barbin's body is scrutinised in detail by one doctor during her life, and at least three after her death in Paris in 1868.

In her own narrative, Herculin, or Alexina, is raised in several convents as a young woman, and is educated to be a school mistress. During her adolescent years, she has strong, unnamed feelings for her fellow students, later having an extended sexual relationship with her female colleague, Sarah. However, after an illness, a doctor discovers her genital anomalies, and she returns to her home town to be examined in more detail by her doctor, Chesnet. Chesnet decides that 'Alexina is a man, hermaphroditic, no doubt, but with an obvious predominance of masculine sexual characteristics' (Foucault 1980:128). It is the presence of ovoid bodies and spermatic cords in the divided scrotum that are the 'real proofs of sex'. Alexina, or Herculin, is then reclassified male at the age of 22. This ends her arguably lesbian relationship and sends her on a search for a man's work in Paris. After six lonely years of being unable to retain a job, or to master the codes of male existence, she commits suicide in a tiny room in Paris. As Auguste Tardieu describes the tragedy, this 'error' in civil status led Barbin to live for twenty years 'in the clothing of a sex that was not his own, at the mercy of a passion that was unconscious of itself' (Foucault 1980:122).

The doctors are unanimous in their agreement that the subject is male. As she is infertile, and cannot clearly be excluded from either sex, the question is how do they make this determination? Goujon, the doctor who performs the autopsy, notes:

The formation of the external genital organs of this individual permitted him, *although he was manifestly a man*, to play either the masculine or the feminine role in coitus, without distinction ... (Foucault 1980:131; e.a.).

¹² Monique Wittig makes an analogous argument that the female subject is forced to speak her gender in language, whilst gender in language is rendered 'natural and invisible. As an ontological concept that deals with the nature of Being, along with a whole nebula of other primitive concepts belonging to the same line of thought, gender seems to belong primarily to philosophy It is no longer questioned in philosophy, though, because it belongs to that body of self-evident concepts without which philosophers believe that they cannot develop a line of reasoning and which for them go without saying, for they exist prior to any thought, any social order, in nature' (Wittig 1986:63f).

Moreover, the very identification of genitals becomes a problem, as male and female parts dissolve into metaphorical equivalents for one another. Both Goujon and Chesnet feel that the 'organ' could be an enlarged clitoris as well as a penis. Goujon's account makes an even more interesting unintentional parallel. He argues that her 'vaginal cul-de-sac is nothing other than the canal of the urethra'. Later, however, he describes the urethra as a 'vaginovulvar canal adapted to urine' (Foucault 1980:131).

The need to escape this self-referential descriptive world forces the doctors to assert difference, to choose one sex. As Goujon states, 'the fact is that *hermaphroditism does not exist in man and the higher animals*' (Foucault 1980:139; e.a.)—there are only malformations. As Foucault notes, hermaphroditism and the concept of a 'true sex' becomes the arena in which the body is forced to yield its meaning:

Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals From the medical point of view, this meant that when confronted with a hermaphrodite, the doctor was no longer concerned with recognizing the presence of the two sexes, juxtaposed or intermingled, or with knowing which of the two prevailed over the other, but rather with deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances. He 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 1980:viii; e.a.)¹³.

Perhaps the difference in the treatment of these bodies by their respective medical establishments can be traced to the different discourses that these two figures inhabit in their lifetimes. Barbin's story comes to light in her biographical account which she leaves as a suicide note. This tale can be read as a domestic novel, which combines aspects of gothic and sentimental fiction with a modern presentation of the mysteries surrounding sexuality and feminine desire. As Tardieu himself comments, Barbin's 'struggles and disturbances' are 'not surpassed in interest by any romantic novel' (Foucault 1980:123). In Barbin's case, the sensual charge of her cloistered upbringing with young educated and pious women acquires a new dimension. Her passionate, but in many ways feminine sexual responses are at once ethereal and erotic. This ambiguity is later figured in the clinical question of whether she has an 'imperforate penis' or

¹³ Jonathan Dollimore also notes how 'An old and enduring model of sexual difference, developed most powerfully and resiliently by Galen in the second century AD, had stressed the homologous nature of male and female reproductive organs; women were said to have the same genitals as men, only inside rather than outside In the eighteenth century, this model gave way to another based on absolute differences of kind' (Dollimore 1991:251).

an enlarged clitoris; the impossibility of feminine desire, and especially desire for other women, is resolved by reclassifying her a 'man'. Scientific discourse tries to resolve the confusion of the narrator's deeply conflicting (but entirely 'normal' sounding!) struggle with her own sexuality and the narrator herself turns to scientific discourse to explain and contain the ambiguous story of multiple desire and complex biology¹⁴.

In the eighteenth century, castrati and stage performers provoked general anxieties around gender instability. Jill Campbell observes,

The arguments of the antitheatricalists ... had used cross-dressing as a paradigm for the moral dangers of the theatre, making gender the ultimate preserve of natural identity to be broached, in its most scandalous extremity, by theatrical impersonation, and setting up the theater as the forum in which the boundaries of gender might be tested (Campbell in Nussbaum et al. 1987:65f).

But late twentieth century criticism, especially that which has emerged out of gay and lesbian studies, has come to celebrate the performative nature of gender:

If a regime of sexuality mandates a compulsory performance of sex, then it may be only *through that performance* that the binary system of gender and the binary system of sex come to have intelligibility at all (Butler 1993:318; e.a.).

And yet, if we follow Freud and Lacan, this performance is critical to our entry into subjectivity and language.

¹⁴ The narrator frequently finds herself physically and emotionally moved by the presences of the women around her. Her first such moment takes place in her convent school, when, terrified by a thunder storm, she jumps into the bed of her teacher: 'When my first moment of terror had been allayed, Sister Marie-des-Anges gently called to my attention the fact that I happened to be naked. Indeed, I was not thinking of it, but I understood her without hearing her.

An *incredible sensation* dominated me completely and overwhelmed me with shame. My predicament cannot be expressed

A total confusion reigned in my thoughts. My imagination was ceaselessly troubled by the memory of the sensations that had been awakened in me, and I came to the point of blaming myself for them like a crime ...' (1960: 32f).

What is interesting is that her affections for her fellow students and teachers are tolerated and enjoyed; they seem to be simply an exaggerated version of how the cloistered girls treat one another emotionally and physically. Yet for Barbin, her emotions only make sense with the hindsight about the cause of her unspeakable passions.

Do we truly need a true sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a 'true sex' in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures (Foucault 1980:vii).

Recent criticism has become increasingly concerned with the epistemological and ideological implications of gender difference (and its destabilisation) in Western thought since the Enlightenment. Nancy Armstrong argues that the Enlightenment breeds a new woman who is the 'guardian and guarantor of private life' and thus becomes 'the first example of modern psychology' (Armstrong & Tennenhouse 1987:11). Her work suggests that conduct literature produced a woman whose femininity resides in moral depth, rather than the surface glamour of the aristocratic woman. The household, a marriage of this private femininity with a public, active, progressive masculinity, helped to

generate the belief that there was such a thing as the middle class well before one existed in any other form (Armstrong & Tennenhouse 1987:12).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to interrogate the philosophical and ideological significance of gender division, this link between the household and both modern government and the modern idea of the subject suggests some of what may be at stake in defining a 'true sex', and with it supporting both an epistemology and a bureaucracy generated within and productive of the public/private divide¹⁵.

In the stories of James Barry and Herculin Barbin, hermaphroditism can be regarded as a trope that figures and resolves the anxiety around the threat to a stable, 'true' sex. It offers scientific substance to the hollowness of a gender discourse that cannot account for the contradiction between the doctor's masculine identity and his feminine body, or Barbin's complex subjectivity in which his woman's body experiences 'masculine' desire. The 'mystery' surrounding James Barry seems to stem from his gender but permeates his biographical record. His body itself could not resolve this mystery (Kirby 1976:186). In an era when medicine is enthralled by the biological possibilities of sexual ambiguity, the medical establishment refused to examine his body, perhaps knowing it would be futile to interrogate a body belonging to the im-

¹⁵ Cf. also Kaja Silverman (1992), who argues that modern western ideology is founded on the 'dominant fiction' that the phallus, the transcendental signifier which comes into being through a threat (that of castration) is commensurable with the penis.

penetrable, masculine world of examiners and classifiers. Perhaps the true mystery here, figured as sexual anomaly, is the irredeemable gulf between public code, and the private 'self', the classified body and its lived intensities. Thus as Kirby (1976:186) puts it:

Since today it is known that it is sometimes impossible to determine the true sex of a person from external characteristics alone, it is possible that Barry was a hermaphrodite.

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