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The Struggle for True Sex: *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B* and the Work of Michel Foucault

Avons-nous *vraiment* besoin d'un vrai sexe?

Michel Foucault

Le vrai ne dépasse-t-il pas quelquefois toutes les conceptions de l'idéal, quelque exagère qu'il puisse être?

Herculine Barbin

Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B is the story of a young hermaphrodite who lived, studied and taught in nineteenth-century France. Her story, which was assembled and edited by philosopher Michel Foucault, is a multifaceted one—one conveyed by not only the vivid memoirs of Barbin herself, but by the manifold records and reports of medical observers, legal officials and interested onlookers.¹ At once tragic and triumphant, Barbin's tale is an outstanding example of how power's many tactics and strategies were brought to bear on those whose bodies defied the rigid two-sex system of high modernity.²

- 1 It is difficult, when writing about a subject whose sexual identity is as unstable as Barbin's, to know which pronouns to use and how to use them. In what follows, I will respect the way in which Barbin herself manipulates the pronouns in question by referring to her as female up until the moment of her sex-reassignment and as male thereafter.
- 2 When Foucault uses the term "modernity" he understands a period in Western history—namely the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—when the discourses of law, science and medicine consolidated their grip on the subject and, in doing so, became increasingly bound up in the knowledge, production and experience of the body. Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, *Surveiller et punir* and *La volonté de savoir* are all informed by this far-reaching understanding of the term modernity. It is interesting to

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Herculine Barbin was, without a doubt, one of the most famous hermaphrodites of the nineteenth century (Dreger 51). While the fact that Barbin was among the first to be officially diagnosed with hermaphroditism certainly contributed to her near-legendary status among France's medical men, it was the extensive memoirs left behind in her small Parisian apartment on rue de l'Ecole-de-Medecine that truly set Barbin's case apart.³ In leaving behind these memoirs, Barbin gave to modern science what no other nineteenth-century subject would: a first-person account of the hermaphroditic experience.

In *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, Alice Dreger posits the Barbin case as one of the most important events in the medical history of human sexuality. "[The] publicity surrounding Barbin's memoirs, life, and death," writes Dreger, "instilled in medical practitioners an appreciation of just how troublesome and urgent—and potentially common—the problem of hermaphroditism was. [...] In many ways, Barbin shaped the biomedical treatment of human hermaphroditism for years to come" (28). Among the most significant historical accounts of the ambiguously sexed body, *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B* can be read as a rich and compelling chronicle of how

note, however, that Foucault's far-reaching understanding of this and other terms like the "West" and the "Occident" is in many ways at odds with what he sets out in the earlier works *Les mots et les choses* and *L'archéologie du savoir*. For instance, in *L'archéologie du savoir*, Foucault argues against what he calls "total" histories because they "cherche a restituer la forme d'ensemble d'une civilisation, le principe—matériel ou spirituel—d'une société, la signification commune a tous les phénomènes d'une période, la loi qui rend compte de leur cohésion—ce qu'on appelle métaphoriquement le Visage' d'une époque" (18). Instead, Foucault argues for what he calls "general" histories because they "problématisent les ruptures, les découpes, les limites, les dénivellements, les décalages, les spécificités chronologiques, les formes singulières de rémanence" (18). That Foucault continues to deploy such far-reaching understandings of terms like modernity, the West and the Occident—understandings which, of course, have universalising effects on his modes of enquiry—reveals, perhaps, an instance of "rupture" and "décalage" in his own work. For more on the problems associated with Foucault's use of these terms, see Dean (1994, 86-89).

3 More specifically, it was the combination of her readily available memoirs and her intact cadaver that made Herculine's case so accessible to and popular among those in the French medico-scientific community (Dreger 46-79).

sex—and particularly its so-called pathologies—would become one of the West's privileged objects of examination, adaptation and control.⁴

With the intricate workings of an emergent "biopower" everywhere in evidence, it is not surprising that Foucault would be the first to properly unearth Barbin's story. And while Foucault did no more than edit and introduce this story, its many points of convergence with and divergence from his more general theories of the subject are intriguing enough to merit a series of comparative reflections.³ Yet of what, exactly, do Foucault's more general

It is important to note that terms like "ambiguous" and "pathological"—when used in relation to the sexed body—are only meaningful within an epistemological framework informed by a dichotomously organised two-sex system and are, therefore, deeply problematic. For more on the historical nature of the two-sex system, see Laqueur (149-92) and Harrison and Hood-Williams (71-93).

Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B occupies an intriguing place in the Foucauldian oeuvre for a number of reasons that span beyond the conceptual. First, *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B* is one of the only texts to which Foucault pays prolonged attention that profiles female personages. Even if one opts not to view Barbin as a bona fide female, the fact remains that the story she recounts is one marked by the overwhelming presence of females: female teachers, female students, female clergy, female parents, female friends and female lovers. This is not to say that men are absent from Barbin's story: as will become clear, religious, medical and scientific men occupy a haunting and undeniable place in this narrative. Yet, if Foucault has been quite rightly criticised for marginalising women in his many histories of the modern subject (Hekman 1996; Ramazanoglu 1993), then it is precisely because of this marginalisation that scholars might address his rather atypical interest in the female-centred story of Herculine Barbin. Second, Foucault originally intended to write a sequence of six volumes on the history of sexuality, at least one of which was to address in more depth the phenomenon of hermaphroditism. Ultimately, however, Foucault wrote only two more volumes—*L'usage des plaisirs* and *Le souci de soi*—and neither of them focused on sexually ambiguous subjects. *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B* thus represents one of the only published works that relates to Foucault's original plan of research into the history of sexuality. Finally, this text can be seen as an intriguing and even enigmatic text within the context of the Foucauldian oeuvre when one considers some of the differences between its French and English versions. Indeed, in addition to the memoirs and the documentation included in the French text, the English text—entitled *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite*—includes a short work of fiction by a German psychiatrist and a more substantial introduction by Foucault himself. Interestingly, however, a French version of this important and, as I will show, contentious introduction was never included in Gallimard's subsequent editions of *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B*. Moreover, the French version of the introduction that does exist (Foucault 1994) omits a most provocative paragraph contained in the English version—one that in fact contradicts Foucault's well-known

theories of the subject consist? In "The Subject and Power," Foucault makes clear that these theories are constituted by three modes of enquiry: first, "the objectivising of [both] the speaking subject in *grammaire générale*, philology, and linguistics" and "the productive subject [...] in the analysis of wealth and economics;" second, "the objectivising of the subject in [...] 'dividing practices'" whereby "the subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others" as in the cases of "the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys,'" and third, "the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject" through "the domain of sexuality"—that is, "how men have learned to recognise themselves as subjects of sexuality" (126). Focusing in particular on the last two modes of enquiry, I will show how Barbin's life-course—from her early placement in a state orphanage, to her time spent in a range of pedagogical establishments, through to her encounters with medical and legal authorities—crystallises a number of Foucault's key insights on the relationship between sex, power, knowledge and the body. Having looked closely at the memoirs, I will then show how Foucault's introduction not only crystallises but in many respects contradicts some of these insights. Indeed, by reading Foucault's well-known work on what he calls "dividing practices" and "the domain of sexuality" alongside and against *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B*, I hope to show that this relatively unexplored text offers up interesting ways of both understanding and interrogating many of the core constituents of Foucault's thought.⁶

Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B:
A Crystallisation of the Foucauldian Oeuvre

Herculine Barbin, known as "Alexina" throughout her memoirs, was born on November 8th, 1838, in the French village of Saint Jean d'Angély. At the time, Barbin's birth did not appear to be in any way extraordinary: she was deemed a member of the female sex without medical equivocation or suspicion, and went on to live a successful life as a member of that sex for over two decades.

views on sex and sexuality. I will address the implications of Foucault's introductory remarks in the second part of the paper.

6 I focus primarily on Foucault's work on dividing practices and the domain of sexuality as it is the most relevant to questions of sex, sexuality and the body. While questions of language and signification are important, in this paper I am more interested in exploring the concrete specificities of Barbin's embodied experiences.

In 1860, however, everything changed as Barbin was ordered to abandon her life as female and begin living as male.

While the dates associated with Barbin's transition from female to male may at first appear incidental, a Foucauldian reading reveals that they are, in fact, highly significant. According to Foucault, the mid to late 1800s saw the period in which the Occident's *volonté de savoir* (or "will to truth") around questions of sex and sexuality was at its most intense. An outgrowth of enlightenment epistemology, this will to truth was characterised by a scientific obsession with collecting, recording and typologising a vast spectrum of "facts" pertaining to the sexed body. The West's great incursion into the depths of the sexed body was, and still is, motivated by what Foucault views as a distinctly modern fixation on uncovering the "truth" of the subject—as though sex were the mysterious master key to the elusive inner-workings of human subjectivity. Hence, Barbin's encounter with the doctors and lawyers of her time is important precisely because it epitomises this modern fixation—this urgent scientifico-judicial need to assign a true sex to each and every individual.

In a Foucauldian framework, Herculine Barbin can be seen as both an object and a casualty of the West's ever-expanding will to truth: not only was her body made into an exemplary artefact of modern-day "sexual science," but her life unfolded—almost uninterruptedly from beginning to end—within the very establishments that enabled the spread of this science.⁷ From the orphanage in which she was placed as a young child, to the many pedagogical institutions in which she dwelled, studied and taught, Barbin spent most of her short life within the closely monitored walls of the nineteenth-century boarding school. Like the prison and the asylum, the boarding school is what Foucault calls a "regulatory system"; that is, a system that fixes within narrow physical parameters specific human populations in an attempt to better observe and manage them. For Foucault, then, these institutions can be viewed as formations of both power and knowledge; or, put slightly differently, as complex arenas in which social engineering and scientific enquiry are made one.

7 The Foucauldian notion of *scientia sexualis*, or sexual science, refers to a constellation of modern medico-scientific strategies that entreat subjects to tell, as verbosely as possible, the truth of their sexual beings in order to make sex more susceptible to systematic forms of analysis and control. See Foucault (1976, 69-98) for his elaboration of this concept.

Disciplinary Power at Work: Herculine Barbin and the Nineteenth-Century Boarding School

Herculine Barbin's long series of encounters with the power/knowledge formations of high modernity dates back to her early childhood. As I have already mentioned, Barbin's life began in a state orphanage—an institution which, in both its operations and effects, is not unlike the other regulatory systems profiled in Foucault's work. That is, the modern orphanage was created to quite literally contain potentially volatile cross-sections of the human population; once contained, these populations could then be monitored and, if necessary, adapted to specific normative requirements. Reminiscent of Foucault's descriptions in *Histoire de la folie* and *Naissance de la clinique*, the opening pages of Barbin's memoirs describe in vivid terms her first impressions of this new home: "Tout m'étonna d'abord; la vue de ces vastes cours, peuplées d'enfants ou de malades, le silence religieux de ces longs corridors trouble seulement par les plaintes de la souffrance, ou le cri d'une agonie douloureuse; tout cela m'émut le coeur, mais sans m'effrayer pourtant" (12).

Barbin's stay in the orphanage was short-lived. According to the memoirs, one of the nuns who presided over her and her peers ascertained fairly early on that Barbin was different from the other children: she was industrious and charismatic, and had taught herself to read and write. Both her character and her many scholastic talents made her the *enfant gate* of the orphanage and eventually inspired her guardians to have her moved to the nearby convent.

It is to her days in the "calme délicieux" of the convent and, later, the teacher's college and the private boarding school, that Barbin devotes the most prolonged written account (9). Among other things, this account reveals that Barbin's experiences in these institutions were conditioned by what Foucault calls "disciplinary power." Although Foucault's theory of disciplinary power grew out of his research into the birth and evolution of the prison system, he maintained nevertheless that this theoretical model can and should be applied to a range of other quintessentially modern institutions (like, as I explained earlier, orphanages and asylums). Indeed, for Foucault, all of these modern institutions are permeated by a micro-physics of power—a power characterised by manoeuvres, tactics and techniques that remain veiled, highly differentiated and in constant tension with one another. Disciplinary power, then, is a relation rather than a possession; it is not owned by the dominant or ruling class, and nor is it exercised through straightforward repression or

appropriation. Instead, this kind of power is the effect of a complex interweaving of strategic positions and articulations. As Foucault (1975) explains: "ce pouvoir [...] ne s'applique pas purement et simplement, comme une obligation ou une interdiction, a ceux qui 'ne l'ont pas;' il les investit, passe par eux et a travers eux; il prend appui sur eux, tout comme eux-mêmes, dans leur lutte contre lui, prennent appui a leur tour sur les prises qu'il exerce sur eux" (35). In modern Western societies, power is not simply a negative force—one that straightforwardly prohibits and "says no." It is, instead, a positive force—one constituted by an array of heterogeneous and, perhaps most importantly, fundamentally productive relations.

If the modern subject is disciplined by a variety of heterogeneous and productive power relations, then how exactly were these relations made manifest in and through Barbin's life-course? A close reading of the memoirs suggests that they were made manifest, at least in part, through a particular saturation of space and time. With respect to space, it is worth considering how the pedagogical institutions in which Barbin resided were structured by what Foucault calls "cellular" configurations; that is, by spatial arrangements that divide, isolate and contain the subject's movement and interaction. Spatial arrangements of this sort are omnipresent in Barbin's boarding school narrative: from the dormitory to the refectory to the classroom, her life can be seen as unfolding across a series of cells—that is, of geo-physical boundaries and institutionally-imposed frontiers. Barbin's adventurous romantic life, which transpired primarily at night in the closely monitored dormitory, was especially affected by this deployment of space. In what follows, the protagonist describes her stealthy negotiation of both the school's architectural design and the nuns appointed to guarantee its regulatory potential:

Un soir du mois de mai, je me rappelle, j'avais réussi a tromper [la] surveillance [de ma maîtresse]. La prière du coucher était faite; elle venait de descendre pour se rendre chez la mère Éléonore. Ne l'entendant plus dans l'escalier, je traverse doucement le dortoir, plus une grande salle qui servait aux élèves de musique. J'arrive au vestiaire, me munissant au hasard du premier objet venu, et la j'atteins sans bruit la cellule que je savais être celle de Léa. Je me penchai sans bruit vers son lit, et l'embrassant a plusieurs reprises [...] J'avais à peine achevé que je reprenais a la hâte le chemin par lequel j'étais venue. Mais je n'en avais pas fait la moitié que des pas bien connus me firent tressaillir. Ma maîtresse était derrière moi et m'avait vue. Je m'arrêtai interdite. (18)

Not only was Barbin's relationship to space mediated by disciplinary power relations, but so too was her relationship to time. Indeed, Barbin's narrative confirms the Foucauldian thesis that modern power induces subjects to govern both their minds and their bodies through highly rationalised time-management strategies: her days—in the teachers' college especially—were characterised by an incessant intellectual labour structured first and foremost by the workings of the clock. In fact, the following citation is so emblematic of Foucault's elaboration of the relationship between temporality and disciplinary power that it could be mistaken for an excerpt from *Surveiller et punir*. Barbin writes:

Les études pour les élèves-maitresses étaient réglées de la sorte: le matin, été comme hiver, le réveil sonnait à cinq heures. À six heures la messe, soit à la chapelle, soit à la paroisse, qui n'était qu'à cinq minutes à peine de la communauté. À sept heures l'étude, jusqu'à huit, heure à laquelle sonnait le déjeuner. À neuf heures la classe commençait. La matinée était consacrée aux exercices de français, de style, d'écriture et de géographie. À onze heures, le dîner, puis la récréation pour les jeunes pensionnaires et externes. Le temps qu'elle durait était pour nous à peine suffisant pour achever les devoirs du matin. De une heure à quatre heures et demie on s'occupait de mathématiques, de lecture et de français. [...] À partir de cinq heures nous étions libres, mais non pas sans travail. (37)

Thus far, my reading shows that Barbin's encounters with the nineteenth-century pedagogical institution were conditioned by both the spatial and the temporal tactics of disciplinary power. What my reading also shows, however, is that the overall efficiency of these tactics is underpinned and indeed underwritten by another tactic: surveillance. As I have already mentioned, disciplinary time and space rely on a particular kind of surveillance in order to do their disciplinary work. This particular kind of surveillance is, as Foucault puts it, "panoptic." As he explains in *Surveiller et punir* and extends in the lecture "La gouvernementalité," panoptic surveillance involves inducing the surveilled to absorb and ultimately reproduce the gaze of the surveillors. Indeed, insofar as the surveilled absorb and reproduce the gaze of the surveillors, they become participants in their own management and control—thereby making this kind of surveillance enormously efficient in terms of both its instruments and its effects. In this way, then, Herculine can be seen as at once *subject to* and the *subject of* a panoptic disciplinary power that seeks to "govern" in the most efficient way possible the body and its pleasures.

As the citations presented above and the memoirs in general make clear, Herculine Barbin's life in the nineteenth-century boarding school was governed by the tactics of disciplinary power. I will now show, however, that these same tactics enabled her to in some ways resist the very grip of power they were meant to secure.

Là où il y a le pouvoir, il y a résistance: Rare Reprieves in the Fractures of Power

Despite claiming in the introduction to *L'usage des plaisirs* that he had focused too much on techniques of domination and not enough on techniques of the self (such as resistance, pleasure and self-stylisation), Foucault does demonstrate—in both *Surveiller et punir* and *La volonté de savoir*—that power can be, and indeed is, frequently destabilised by a range of individual practices. In *Surveiller et punir*, for example, Foucault shows that despite its quiet and ever-present coercions, power is nevertheless at constant risk of fracture and breakdown. Because, as I stated earlier, modern power is a relation rather than a possession, it generates within its own networks essential tensions and contradictions. More specifically, these polymorphous relations of power produce "des points innombrables d'affrontement, des foyers d'instabilité dont chacun comporte ses risques de conflit, de luttes, et d'inversion au moins transitoire des rapports de forces" (Foucault 1975, 35). Hence, it is in precisely these "foyers d'instabilité" that one can turn power against itself. While one can never get outside power, one can subvert its strategic orientations and ultimately benefit from the effects of such subversions.

The fact that a sexually ambiguous subject like Herculine Barbin was able to produce herself as a woman—and a lesbian woman at that—in a range of Catholic boarding schools, suggests that even the most controlled settings offer the potential for certain forms of agency and resistance.⁸ Though deemed a female at birth, Barbin quickly realised that she was unlike most of her female peers. As she got older, she developed increasingly "masculine" features; she developed neither breasts nor hips and became more hirsute than her friends at the convent and the teachers' college. These physical differences

8 There can be no doubt that Barbin's hermaphroditism complicates her relationship to the categories of heterosexual and homosexual, as these categories are themselves dependent on a sexually dimorphic conception of the human body. The fact remains, however, that within the boarding school environment Barbin was viewed as female and, because of this, her assignations with fellow students would have been construed as homosexual.

were the object of constant solicitude and anxiety on her part, though neither the solicitude nor the anxiety appear to have dashed what she continually describes as the most exquisite period of her life. While I will further develop the question of Barbin's sexual ambiguity below, what I wish to emphasise here is simply that the convent—despite its disciplinary organisation of power and its admittedly patriarchal discourses of sexuality—served as somewhat of a sanctuary for this particular subject. Indeed, if a convent is, in many ways, the radical incarnation of Christianity's most repressive elements, then it is worth considering how it actually functioned to shelter Barbin from the regime of sexual surveillance operating in nineteenth-century France.⁹

To understand how a convent could have served as a site of resistance for a young hermaphrodite, one must examine the sorts of discourses that pervaded it. In the convent, there were two sorts of discourses in operation that—when considered concomitantly—might be said to have had a positive impact on Barbin's life-course. First, the convent was saturated by the discourses of Western Christianity. These discourses defined "woman" in terms related primarily to her goodness of character, her willingness to attend to religious work, and her devotion to God and God's representatives. Of course, these discourses were not particularly preoccupied with how the female body could and should be elaborated; if anything, they were more preoccupied with denying the female body than with elaborating it. Thus all women, no matter how "unwomanly" they appeared, would be accepted in the convent as long as their service to God was deemed stalwart and sincere. This said, however, the convent was also marked by the presence of nineteenth-century discourses of femininity—discourses that pertained more specifically to how a woman should look and act. These discourses were imported from secular culture and were more invested in the workings of the female body—especially where marriageability and reproductive capacity were concerned—than those of Western Christianity.¹⁰

9 While, in what follows, I will be discussing how the convent enabled Barbin to resist hegemonic norms of sexed embodiment, I view the other pedagogico-religious institutions in which she resided (that is, the teacher's college and the private boarding school) as similar to the convent in terms of how they shielded her from secular norms and values around sex. My remarks here, then, apply equally to all of the homes in which Barbin lived, studied and taught.

10 For a useful work on discourses of femininity as they relate to both Western Christianity and modern secular society, see Wolf (86-131).

While there can be no doubt that nineteenth-century discourses of femininity affected Barbin's boarding school trajectory in many important ways, these discourses were to a large extent subordinated to those of Western Christianity. In fact, it was precisely because Christian discourses denied the body, its sex and its sexuality that Barbin was enabled to live a life of relative peace in the convent. In other words, Barbin's bodily ambiguities were able to remain hidden because in this setting the body itself was expected to remain hidden. The body-denying discourses of Western Christianity can thus be said to have collided with, and ultimately trumped, the body-obsessed discourses of nineteenth-century femininity."

In essence, Herculine Barbin was able to live as a legitimate and accepted woman in the convent because there was a fissure in its discourses of and on the sexed body. This is not to say that the normative and indeed normalising features of Catholicism were altogether absent, or that the discourses of nineteenth-century femininity were completely unfamiliar to those living within the walls of the single-sex boarding school; it is merely to say that the somatophobia of Western Christianity—a phobia generally understood as repressive—actually functioned to make life liveable for an individual whose body would ultimately be deemed pathological in a secular context.¹²

Pleasure-Producing Powers: Homoeroticism and the Sexual Saturation of Pedagogy

If I have argued that the somatophobia of Western Christianity enabled Barbin to produce herself as a woman in a socio-historical moment that might have otherwise rejected such a production, then it is worth considering how the homosociality of the schools in question also functioned to induce a host of sensual pleasures that Catholicism itself would persistently condemn. On a discursive level, there is no disputing the fact that Western Christianity both advocated and enforced a profoundly heteronormative ethos. Yet for those who lived and worked in the inner sanctums of Christian institutions, lived experiences seem often to have conflicted with discursive imperatives. Indeed, despite their unwavering devotion to a Christian God, both the nuns and the students who figure in Barbin's memoirs can be seen as participating in a

11 Foucault (1976) makes clear that the female body was a site of particularly intense discursive investments and saturations. See his remarks on the "hystericisation" of the female body (137).

12 I borrow the term "somatophobia" from Grosz (1994).

broad and heady spectrum of homoerotic behaviour. To make sense of how this behaviour could have permeated a highly controlled setting like the Catholic boarding school, I will consider a number of Foucault's key insights on the relationship between sex, power and pleasure.

In the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité*, Foucault refused the myth that sex became increasingly repressed in the Victorian age. Sex was not relegated to the margins of modern society, according to Foucault, but was, instead, constantly incited to express itself through a range of medico-legal discourses. This compulsive expression resulted in a proliferation of sex-related narratives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, by extension, produced vast catalogues of knowledge conditioned by the workings of power. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, modern power is productive: it produces knowledge, it produces discourse, and perhaps most importantly for the purposes of the present analysis, it produces pleasure. Foucault (1976) explains:

Plaisir et pouvoir ne s'annulent pas; ils ne se retournent pas l'un centre l'autre; ils se poursuivent, se chevauchent et se relancent. Ils s'enchaînent selon les mécanismes complexes et positifs d'excitation et d'incitation. Il faut donc sans doute abandonner l'hypothèse que les sociétés industrielles modernes ont inauguré sur le sexe un âge de répression accrue. Non seulement on assiste à une explosion visible des sexualités hérétiques. Mais surtout—et c'est le point important—un dispositif fort différent de la loi, même s'il appuie localement sur des procédures d'interdiction, assure, par un réseau de mécanismes qui s'enchaînent, la prolifération de plaisirs spécifiques et la multiplication de sexualités disparates. (66-67)

Foucault's conceptualisation of the power/pleasure nexus is relevant here for it offers a systematic way of thinking the clandestine eros that saturated the pedagogical spaces in which Barbin resided. Foucault's rejection of a strictly repressive power in favour of a productive power—a power that induces pleasure rather than inhibiting it—provides a way of understanding how Harbin's pedagogical experiences could have been so "delicious" when set in an institutional context of strict regulation. Hence, while one might be tempted to think that the ideal disciplinary institution conquers bodily pleasure, Foucault (1976) argues that exactly the opposite is true:

Les institutions scolaires ou psychiatriques, avec leur population nombreuse, leur hiérarchie, leurs aménagements spatiaux, leur système de surveillance, constituent, à côté de la famille, une autre façon de distribuer le jeu des pouvoirs

et des plaisirs; mais elles dessinent, elles aussi, des régions de haute saturation sexuelle, avec des espaces ou des rites privilégiés comme la salle de classe, le dortoir, la visite ou la consultation. Les formes d'une sexualité non conjugale, non hétérosexuelle, non monogame y sont appelées et installées. (64)

From a Foucauldian perspective, then, it is entirely to be expected that Barbin's boarding school experiences would be invested by the forces of both a normalising power and an illicit erotic pleasure since, for Foucault, these two forces work and travel in tandem.

So how exactly did the workings of power condition the erotic pleasures of Barbin's boarding school life? A close inspection of the memoirs reveals that many of these pleasures were constituted in and through the asymmetrical power structure of the teacher/student relationship. Narratives describing passionate, albeit chaste, teacher/student encounters recur continually throughout the text, leading the reader to surmise that homoerotic energy flowed regularly and abundantly between those who taught and those who studied at the pedagogical institutions in question." And while there can be no doubt that encounters of this nature are manifestations of a mutually reinforcing relationship between power and pleasure, what I would like to examine here pertains more to how the erotic relations between students were both stimulated and excited by the unrelenting surveillance of the modern boarding school. In the citation presented below, for instance, Barbin's erotic exchanges with another female student unfold within the context of constant supervision by the school's officials. She writes:

Je me liai bientôt d'une étroite amitié avec une charmante jeune fille nommée Thécla, plus âgée que moi d'une année. [...] L'été on faisait l'étude dans le jardin, nous y étions l'une près de l'autre, les deux mains enlacées pendant que l'autre tenait le livre. De temps à autre le regard de notre maîtresse s'attachait sur moi au moment où je me penchais vers elle pour l'embrasser, tantôt sur le front, et, le croirait-on de ma part, tantôt sur les levies. Cela se répétait vingt fois dans une heure. (35)

This last citation is significant for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it brings into relief the ease with which students participated in apparently lesbian relationships in a preserve purportedly devoted to biblical conceptions of sexuality. On the other hand, this citation reveals the extent to which the character of the convent's surveillance was at once unrelenting and strangely

13 See the memoirs (12, 14, 16) for poignant examples of these encounters.

tolerant of what would have been seen as deviant behaviour in nearly all other social situations. Both of these facts seem to corroborate Foucault's contention that modern pedagogical institutions, despite their manifold tactics of management and control, are in fact the highly charged sites of what he calls a "non-conjugal," "non-heterosexual" and "non-monogamous" form of erotic pleasure.

The complex production of pleasure in settings structured by and through the logics of disciplinary power is evidenced once again in Barbin's narratives pertaining to Sara. Barbin met Sara in teacher's college and, shortly thereafter, entered into a romantic relationship with her. In the citation that follows, Barbin describes the furtive route she had to take in order to see Sara before they went to sleep. She writes:

Par une étrange fatalité nous étions placées au dortoir, moi au n°2, elle au n°12. Mais cela ne m'embarrassait guère. Comme je ne pouvais me coucher sans l'embrasser, je marioeuvrais de façon à me trouver encore debout quand tout le monde était au lit. Marchant sur la pointe du pied, j'arrivais jusqu'à elle. Mes adieux terminés, je fus surprise quelquefois par ma maîtresse, dont je n'étais *séparée* que par le n°1. Les prétextes que je donnais à mes escapades furent admis dès l'abord; mais il n'en pouvait toujours être ainsi. L'excellente femme m'aimait réellement, je le savais, et ces façons d'agir l'affligeaient tout en la surprenant de ma part. D'un autre côté, comme nous n'étions pas des enfants, elle nous prenait par le cœur et non pas par des punitions. (36)

This imagistic account of Barbin's late-night encounters suggests that the spacio-temporal organisation of the college, along with the constant surveillance of its regulatory onlookers, actually intensified the erotic liaisons unfolding within it. Barbin's narrative in this instance thus serves as another exemplification of the Foucauldian thesis that despite its attempts to quash transgressive pleasures, the modern pedagogical institution is in fact saturated with incitements to them.

Confession, *Scientia Sexualis* and the Struggle for True Sex

Herculine Barbin was a bright, courageous and passionate individual. Though not without a good deal of personal industry and commitment, Barbin worked her way out of poverty and ultimately attained the necessary training to teach in an esteemed private boarding school for girls. In this boarding school, she divided her time between a rewarding career and a secret relationship with Sara—the young woman whom she met in teachers' college.

While, for most of her life, Barbin's sexual ambiguities do not seem to have interfered with her erotic relations, this changed when she became more serious about sharing a future with her new partner. Indeed, as Barbin's relationship with Sara intensified, she grew increasingly uncomfortable with her body and its so-called abnormalities. While the onset of acute abdominal pain no doubt contributed to this discomfort, it was Barbin's desire to consolidate her affective ties with Sara that appears to be what truly triggered within her an irrepressible desire to discover her true sex. And for Barbin, being a devout Catholic, this discovery could only be accomplished through confession. As she herself declares: "Mon projet était de m'ouvrir, en toute franchise, à ce confesseur inconnu et d'attendre son arrêt!" (72).

Determined to understand who and what she was, Barbin set out to explain her concerns to the religious men in her community. The first priest to whom she "confessed" her bodily abnormalities was sternly dismissive of her concerns: he advised Barbin to become a nun and to speak to no one of her physical afflictions. This, however, was unsatisfactory to Barbin. Some time later, she went to visit another priest—still with the hope of making sense of her sex. Unlike the first, the second priest was anything but dismissive; he insisted, in fact, that Barbin consult a doctor straightaway and that she allow him to thoroughly assess her situation. Though not without reservation, Barbin eventually agreed to a complete medical examination.

In a Foucauldian framework, 'the post-enlightenment proliferation of sex-related discourses can be tied directly to confessional trajectories like the one upon which Barbin would ultimately embark. More specifically, Foucault argues that the confessional techniques of the Christian pastoral were in fact appropriated by the burgeoning apparatus of *scientia sexualis*, and that the will to knowledge around sex and sexuality was—by means of this appropriation—reconstituted in scientific terms. Once in the service of medical science, the confession became linked to the truth of the sexed subject—it became the register through which he or she was made knowable and intelligible to the agents of Western knowledge production. For the reader interested in Foucauldian formulations of sexuality, then, Barbin's search for her true sex is of interest because it confirms his assertion that "des qu'il s'agit de savoir qui nous sommes, c'est [la confession] qui nous sert désormais de clef universelle" (1976, 103).

Foucault's contention that modern power is enabled by and sustained through confessional tactics is confirmed by a number of Barbin's encounters with the late nineteenth-century's *hommes de science*. In the following passage, for instance, the reader sees one of the doctors charged with Barbin's

examination advising her to entrust him with all of the most fundamental features of her being—urging her to view him as not only a man of medicine, but a man of God:

Ici, me clit-il alors, vous ne devez pas seulement voir en moi un médecin, mais un confesseur. Si j'ai besoin de voir, j'ai besoin de tout savoir. Le moment est grave pour vous, plus que vous ne le pensez peut-être. Je dois pouvoir répondre de vous en toute sécurité, à Monseigneur d'abord, et sans doute aussi devant la loi, qui en appellera à mon témoignage. (89)

Here the doctor's utterances point to an intimate relationship between scientific enquiry and confessional practices, suggesting, as Foucault does, that the modern science of sexuality was in fact grafted on to a complex, quasi-ecclesiastic hermeneutics of the self.

Having established an important connection between the Christian techniques of confession and the development of a specifically Western *scientia sexualis*, I should like now to return to a consideration of Barbin's medical assessment. When Barbin first met with the doctor in charge of her examination, she was for the most part confident that it would provide her with some form of increased self-understanding. As the examination proceeded, however, this confidence was eroded by discomfort and humiliation. In her memoirs, Barbin admits that she was not expecting the examination to be as intrusive as it was and that, at times, the doctor's interventions were more aggressive than she could bear. A glance at the medical reports from Barbin's examination brings into relief the invasive nature of the procedure. In an almost jubilant tone, the doctor recounts the many ways in which he penetrated and explored Barbin's body—how he inserted fingers, specula and fluids into her body and watched their course and mutation, and how he explored every orifice, every protrusion and every gland related to the sexual organs. Indeed, if Barbin was not able to provide the answers sought by the doctors, then her body would be made to provide them; her body, in other words, would be made to confess. "On avoue," writes Foucault, "ou on est forcé d'avouer. Quand il n'est pas spontané, ou impose par quelque impératif intérieur, l'avoué est extorqué; on le débusque dans l'âme ou on l'arrache au corps" (1976, 79). Once again, then, Barbin's story confirms the Foucauldian idea that in its quest for the truth of human sexuality, modern science will wrest even the most elusive confession directly from the flesh of the body.

The doctors and scientists involved in Barbin's examination decided, based on the evidence they had collected, that Barbin was male. Their lengthy and meticulous reports are, however, at pains to demonstrate convincingly that Barbin was more male than female. The reports show, in fact, that Barbin displayed just as many male traits as she did female traits. Even one of the physicians assigned to Barbin's case—a Docteur Goujon—admitted that "il est difficile de rencontrer un mélange des sexes porté plus loin" (1978, 153). So what, exactly, prompted these doctors to diagnose Barbin as male? The testimonies of the consulting physicians show that their decisions were based on two major factors. First, Barbin possessed testicular gonadal tissue rather than ovarian gonadal tissue, and this—in a late nineteenth-century context that deemed gonads to be the absolute proof of true sex—had an important impact on the outcome of Barbin's assessment.¹⁴ There was, however, another factor at work in this medical decision-making process—one that persuaded the doctors of Barbin's maleness despite the contradictory physical evidence: her sexual biography. That is, it was because Barbin was an active sexual subject, and exhibited love and desire for women, that the doctors were so resolute about understanding her as male. Again, Docteur Goujon corroborates this claim:

Il se révèle en effet à [un âge plus avancé], chez des gens qui ont été victimes d'une erreur, des penchants et des habitudes qui sont ceux de leur véritable sexe, et dont l'observation aiderait considérablement à marquer leur place dans la société, si l'état des organes génitaux et de leurs différentes fonctions n'était pas suffisant pour arriver à ce but. (1978, 149-50)

It would appear, then, that for the agents of nineteenth-century biopower, it was preferable to adapt Barbin's sexuality to a heteronormative ethic—and thus have her undergo a very public "sex change"—than it was to sanction a complicated form of lesbian sexuality. A look at the critical literature on turn-of-the-century medical practices around sex and sexuality reveal that this claim is not far-fetched. As Dreger writes:

After even a cursory study of the phenomenon of sex-sorting, one soon discovers that a significant motivation for the biomedical treatment of

14 What constitutes the "proof of true sex" has fluctuated enormously throughout the ages and remains a contentious issue to this day. For more on how gonads came, in the nineteenth-century, to supersede traits such as genitalia and the other secondary sex characteristics in the determination of true sex, see Dreger (15-46 and 139-67).

hermaphrodites is the desire to keep people straight. That phrase—keeping people straight—should be taken figuratively, but literally as well; medical doctors, scientists, hermaphrodites' parents, and other lay people have historically been interested in sorting people according to their sexes to avoid or prevent what might be considered homosexuality. (8)

Yet again, these facts appear to corroborate the Foucault's contention that, in modern Western societies, dominant discourses of sexuality precede and in fact produce the phenomenon of sex.

After the maleness of her sex had been "discovered" and "decided," Barbin was compelled to change her legal status from female to male, and to present herself as a man from that point forward. While this conversion from femaleness to maleness was, in the press and in the medical reports, represented as a medico-scientific triumph of truth, Barbin's new life was anything but triumphant. Forced to abandon her career as an educator and her life in the tranquil setting of a Catholic boarding school, Barbin moved to Paris and began working as a low-paid clerk at the railroad office. While for weeks Barbin searched for higher paid employment, this newly-made male was told at every turn that he was too slight and frail to do the work suited to those of his sex. As the months passed, his financial savings disappeared and he became increasingly destitute.

The memoirs from this later period in Barbin's life are characterised by what can only be described as a profound sadness. No longer the successful young pedagogue who enjoyed regular forays into an exhilarating world of sensual pleasure and delight, Barbin grew solitary, resentful and depressed. As the weeks passed, his sense of himself became increasingly confused until eventually he found it impossible to live in the new identity chosen for him by those determined to "correct" his place in the order of things. According to Barbin, his only comfort in this period was derived from frequent trips to the cemetery; there, in the presence of the deceased, Barbin was at peace. Several years later, at the age of thirty, Barbin committed suicide.

Foucault's Introduction to *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B*: A Contradiction of the Foucauldian Oeuvre

While in the first part of the paper, I used Foucault's texts to both illuminate and complicate Barbin's text, I will in this section do the reverse—that is, use Barbin's text to both illuminate and complicate Foucault's texts. In doing so, I will show that while Barbin's memoirs confirm a number of Foucault's

insights on sex, power, knowledge and the body, his introduction to these memoirs appears to in some ways contradict the very same insights.

Foucault's introduction to *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B* consists of a series of provocative reflections on the complexities of Barbin's sexual identity. "Les souvenirs de cette vie" writes Foucault "Alexina les a écrits une fois découverte et établie sa nouvelle identité. Sa 'vraie,' et 'définitive' identité. Mais il est clair que ce n'est pas du point de vue de ce sexe enfin trouvé ou retrouvé qu'elle écrit. Ce n'est pas l'homme qui parle enfin, essayant de se rappeler ses sensations et sa vie du temps qu'il n'était pas encore 'lui-même'" (1994, 120). I concur with Foucault on this point and would add that had Barbin identified substantively with a masculine subject position, she would have experienced a certain liberation in being accorded a bona fide male identity. While Barbin suffered from frequent and multiple forms of discomfort in her pre-male period, her memoirs make clear nevertheless that she was in some very fundamental way invested in living as a woman—even if this womanhood was characterised by constant complication and breakdown. Not only is my claim affirmed by Foucault's remarks, but it is also affirmed, it seems to me, by the extreme unrest and desperation that overcame Barbin after she began living as a man. Indeed, Barbin's narratives do not resemble the narratives of other individuals who feel the need to change sex. Transsexuals, for instance, tend to speak exultantly about their feelings of finally "being at home" with their bodies after having completed various forms of transition (Prosser 1998). In Barbin's account, however, there is no glory associated with her sexual conversion; there is but bereavement and regret.

As the introduction proceeds, Foucault's reflections on Barbin's pre-male identity become more contentious. Foucault writes (and here I cite the English version of the introduction as it contains a number of provocative remarks that the French version, for a reason I have been unable to discern, does not):

One has the impression, at least if one gives credence to Alexina's story, that everything took place in a world of feelings—enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness—where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centered, had no importance. It was a world in which grins hung about without the cat. [...] What she evokes in her past is the happy limbo of a non-identity, which was paradoxically protected by the life of those closed, narrow, and intimate societies where one has the strange happiness, which is at the same time obligatory and forbidden, of being acquainted with only one sex. (1980a, xiii)

Here Foucault is making two assertions of particular interest to me: first, that the sexual identity of Barbin's partners "had no importance"; and second, that Barbin possessed no sexual identity until one was forced upon her. These assertions strike me as implausible on a number of counts. First, I submit that the identity of Barbin's sexual partners was highly significant: Barbin desired women. She did not desire men, she desired women and all of the womanly traits that dominant discourses produce and present as inherently female. To assert that the sexual identity of Barbin's partners was insignificant is, it seems to me, to dismiss the many passages that reveal Barbin's desire for what Western society has come to associate with the prototypical woman: breasts, soft skin, long hair, etc. In brief, the matter of the bodies to which Barbin was attracted mattered a great deal.

Second, Barbin does not, as Foucault posits, narrate her pre-male period as a "happy limbo of non-identity." In fact, it strikes me that the very possibility of a non-identity must be interrogated, especially if one subscribes to Foucault's formulations as they are set out in works like *La volonté de savoir* and a wide range of lectures and interviews (e.g., Foucault 1980b, 1988). In these texts, Foucault makes clear that he understands sex to be produced through an intricate and all-encompassing network of discursive formations. That is, one's sex is not simply a natural object or a pre-social bundle of drives and energies along the lines of which the two sexes are defined. Instead, sex is "a heterogeneous ensemble [...] completely overlaid by the apparatus of sexuality, which [...] produced, as the keystone of its discourse and perhaps its very functioning, the idea of sex" (Foucault 1980b, 210). If one subscribes to the Foucauldian notion that there is no such thing as a pre-discursive or "natural" sex—and, consequently, that sex is materialised by and through a vast apparatus of sexuality—then one's sexual identity is inevitably embedded in technologies of power. And though one can resist the effects of power, one can never—according to Foucault—inhabit a subjective space outside power. It seems strange and indeed contradictory that Foucault conceptualises Barbin's pre-male sexual identity as in some way absent given that his previous understandings of power foreclose the possibility of this absence. In my view, it would have made more sense for Foucault to conceptualise Barbin's sexual identity as a "counter-identity" rather than a "non-identity," for not only would this conceptualisation have been more congruent with his theories of sex and sexuality, but it would have been more in keeping with Barbin's experiences of being similar to her female peers in some respects while being different in others. Indeed, the fact that Barbin felt both similar to and different from her female peers, combined with the fact that these feelings

were the source of unrelenting worry and concern on Barbin's part, suggests that her pre-male period was far from a "happy limbo of non-identity."

Equally problematic is Foucault's assertion that, in Barbin's pre-male world of pleasures, "the grins hung about without the cat." In this instance, Foucault appears to be positing that the pleasures ("the grins") of Barbin's early years were played out independently of the apparatus of sexuality ("the cat"). Once again, this contention is inconsistent with the arguments that pervade *La volonté de savoir* concerning the dynamic and productive relationship between power and pleasure. If, as previously discussed, Foucault understands both the body and its pleasures to be invariably produced and mediated by relations of power, then it seems odd that he should frame Barbin's experiences as unaffected by these relations. In Foucault's somewhat romanticised interpretation of Barbin's pre-male trajectory, then, he posits the possibility of pre-discursive bodies and pleasures—a position that effectively contradicts many of the fundamental underpinnings of his well-known theoretical work.

Ultimately, Foucault's introduction to *Herculine Barbin dite A-lexina B* can be seen to diverge from the theories of sex and sexuality most often associated with him. As I have shown throughout the paper, these theories are characterised by the view that bodies, pleasures, identities and sexualities are always already produced by networks of power and discourse. In his introduction to the texts in question, however, Foucault contradicts this view by framing Barbin's pre-male identity as in some way unaffected by the apparatus of sexuality and, consequently, relations of power. Thus, while *Herculine Barbin dite A-lexina B* provides the student of Foucauldian thought with an outstanding crystallisation of his views on sex, power and knowledge, it also provides that student with a unique and meaningful opportunity to read Foucault against himself.

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