

**The Doctor's Anatomy: The Androgynous Performance of Gender and (Neo-)Victorian Sexual Politics in Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry***  
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“Our bodies are the only things of any consequence.”  
(Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra* 573)

Patricia Duncker's 1999 neo-Victorian novel is a fictional biography of the legendary Victorian military surgeon, James Miranda Barry, at birth named Margaret Ann Bulkley. All “his” life, the doctor was rumored to be a hermaphrodite, who decided to live as a man in order to pursue a successful career as a physician—“You’d be wasted as a woman” (Duncker 60), his mother warns the young Barry in the novel. Duncker's postmodern feminist fiction recreates the medical discourse, as well as the body and sexual politics of the Victorian era, writing these nineteenth-century somatic ideologies onto the ambiguously gendered body of Barry. From Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), through Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) to Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987), and Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), queer and intersex characters have been a popular trope of (post)modernist British historical fiction, subverting gender roles, and problematizing the present-day consumption of nineteenth-century bodies.<sup>1</sup> By portraying gender identity as a performance, *James Miranda Barry* can be approached both as a neo-Victorian Bildungsroman and an androgynous biography juxtaposing professionalized public and sexualized private identities.

Here, I will focus on the gap between the representation of the doctor's private and public bodies as the somatic metaphors of the well-known “separation of spheres” in Victorian culture. As the fictionalized Barry puts it in the novel, “I have locks on all my doors, yet I am required to perform, with all the candles lit, day and night, upon the public stage” (141). By interrogating the poetic and political strategies of creating medicine as a masculinized profession from a cultural studies point of view, I also argue that Duncker's novel can be contextualized within a recent tendency in contemporary British fiction that could be hypothesized as medico-historical metafiction.<sup>2</sup> By showing Barry's often grotesquely perceived body through the eyes of other characters, and by giving voice to Barry's own troubled self-reflection, the novel's dominant metaphors of subjecthood appear to be those of objectification and doubleness, creating a sense of dislocated identity and alienation.

The novel consistently avoids pinning down the biological “truth” about Barry’s supposedly abnormal body—the available historical evidence shows that the doctor probably *was* a hermaphrodite—while the female supporting characters—Barry’s beautiful mother, Mary Ann, his/her lifelong friend and love, the working class actress, Alice Jones, and the spinster aunt, Louisa Erskin—represent available Victorian female subject positions as always already performed and pathological, uncannily reflecting Barry’s own claustrophobic experience of embodiment.<sup>3</sup> *James Miranda Barry*, as a neo-Victorian novel thus indirectly addresses current, twenty-first-century biopolitical questions about the cultural inscription of gender roles and bodily normality by (re)telling a Victorian narrative, which I examine from three aspects: the neo-Victorian historical novel as a feminist genre, the androgyne as a late-Victorian subtype of the grotesque freak, and nineteenth-century female identities as the reservoir of disempowering pseudo-choices.

### **The gendered corpus of neo-Victorian fiction**

The novel’s generic position as a postmodern, neo-Victorian and feminist fictional biography makes it just as hybrid on the textual level as Barry’s body might have been on the biological one.<sup>4</sup> As a reimagined life story of a historical character, *James Miranda Barry* belongs to a major trend in neo-Victorian fiction: Cora Kaplan points out in her monograph on neo-Victorian fiction that “biography has become the new novel” (36), and biographical fiction, as one of the most popular subgenres of Victoriographies, seems to be especially powerful in interrogating the obscure gaps of the historical past—much like Foucault’s logic of genealogy, preferring fissures to teleological narratives. Woolf also foreshadowed the rediscovering of the genre, when writing in her essay, “The Art of Biography”: “[b]iography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners.” Neo-Victorian fictional biographies seem to have partially occupied the discursive position of history writing in the second wave of British postmodernism (from the 1980s and 1990s); and Duncker argues quite the same in the afterword of the novel when emphasizing the significance of the narrative liberties she had taken with Barry’s story: “it is here that the novelist will always have the edge over the historian” (375).

Among the thematic features of neo-Victorian biographies, questions of gender, sexuality, and embodiment belong to the most formative preoccupations of the second wave of postmodernism in British literature. Commenting on the text, Duncker also emphasizes the intergeneric and interdisciplinary nature of her fiction: “[r]einterpreting masculinity in history is a fascinating, subversive thing to do. It may even be a backhanded method

of revenging ourselves upon the histories from which we have been so zealously excluded” (qtd. in Funke 222). This passage evokes Woolf again, who, in *A Room of One's Own*, famously argues that “[i]t would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lopsided; but why should they not add a supplement to history?” (47). Feminist historical fiction is especially conscious of the telling omissions in dominant narratives:

if historical fiction provides a space for women to enter history, women writers of historical fiction might have a greater investment in representing history than Hutcheon's model of ironic inscription and subversion pattern allows for. Women's historical novels have never been interested in recuperating history as unproblematic presence, they have always been aware that it only tells a partial truth. (Mitchell 27)

Accordingly, the neo-Victorian biographical fiction of *James Miranda Barry* creates a life narrative Woolf would definitely count among the so-called “obscure lives” of the past. By focusing on Barry's secretive gender identity, the book also touches upon a major element of present-day obsession with nineteenth-century sexuality and the interplay of competing discourses of sexuality, such as repression and perversion.<sup>5</sup> As, according to Fredric Jameson, historicity in the postmodern era is, by definition, “a perception of the present as history” (284); the markedly gendered contemporary narratives of the Victorian era seem to respond to twenty-first-century needs:

this interest in Victorian sexuality is based on both a nostalgic perception of the Victorian past as a time of sexual innocence and a paradoxical belief that the Victorians were “just like us” beneath their repressed exteriors. While the treatment of sexuality in these novels is informed by these contradictory impulses, it is also explicitly connected to the novels' concern with biographical narratives and participates in Victorian debates concerning the “proper” sphere of investigation for a biographer. (Hadley 46)

The fact that *James Miranda Barry* also engages with the subgenre of historiographic metafiction becomes especially emphatic on the last pages, when, following Barry's death, various fictitious letters are inserted into the text. These pseudo-paratexts show an utter lack of a coherent narrative concerning Barry's sexual identity. Some letters written by Barry's friends, admirers, and colleagues confidently claim that s/he was a “perfect

gentleman” (Duncker 365), while others suspect that s/he might have been “an imperfectly developed man” (364). The seemingly definitive version of the past is, eventually, delivered by Alice, who unscrupulously overwrites various facts: she invents stretchmarks for Barry’s body, and describes the doctor’s death in strongly euphemistic ways, for “[d]iarrhoea is decidedly unpicturesque” (370). Moreover, she recounts all this to an up-and-coming American woman journalist wearing boots, much foreshadowing the figure of the New Woman. Since the reader learns from Duncker’s afterword that Alice’s character is her own creation, narratives *by* women *of* women appear to be completely and intentionally unreliable, which can be read as a subversive enactment of the misogynistic notion that women are always already unreliable. At other times, Duncker recycles, in an ironic manner, the formula of the good old omniscient narrator, for instance, when carefully recounting an anecdote full of sexual innuendo from Barry’s colonial past, introducing the incident by claiming that “[t]his is what actually happened” (229). Narrative gestures like this seemingly provide the reader with the insider’s initiated knowledge they all crave for concerning Barry’s body—and still, the text makes sure that readers never acquire it.

*James Miranda Barry’s* treatment of the insufficiency of nineteenth-century gender categories points out several current uncertainties about queer identities, as well as the inadequacy of the stereotypical view of the age Foucault criticizes as the “repressive hypothesis,” that is, the argument that the Victorian era was predominantly characterized by a lack of sexual outspokenness, making the period appear as the dark double of a sexually liberated twentieth century: “this narrative of Victorian repression is a pervasive cultural myth that functions to cast the twentieth century in the role of enlightened liberator” (Mitchell 46). From this perspective, Duncker’s novel fits the Foucauldian challenging of the concept inasmuch as it is a narrative of what the Victorians would have definitely seen as “perversion.” In order to explore the representation of Barry’s gender and professional identities as reflections on today’s dilemmas of sexual transgression and the biopolitical techniques of normalization, I will now read him/her with reference to the philosophical discourse of androgyny and the medical conceptualization of hermaphroditism, as well as the grotesque body of the nineteenth-century freak.

### **The doctor’s two bodies**

The fact that the novel never tries to diagnose the doctor’s body suggests that it does not mean to narrow down the symbolic meanings it conjures up. Insofar as “[t]he body is neither a purely natural given nor is it

merely a textual metaphor, it is a privileged operator for the transcoding of these other areas” (Stallybrass and White 192), Barry’s sex appears both as a case study of hermaphroditism in medical history and an iconic example of the literary representational tradition of androgyny. Moreover, the dominant aesthetic quality characterizing Barry’s uncanny appearance in the novel is that of the grotesque, as its metaphors of doubleness and objectification show. Firstly, s/he is often compared to machines: a “mechanical doll” (58), a “puppet” (323), a “mannikin,” a “toy soldier” (70), a “marionette” (29); secondly, s/he is repeatedly identified as a “fraud,” an “imposter,” a “masquerade” (357), a “maverick”; and, thirdly, s/he also shows mythological and/or freakish traits as a “mutant,” a “tomboy,” a “Wandering Jew,” a “performing dwarf,” an “intelligent midget,” or a Sphinx (368). On the whole, s/he appears as “a creature outside the boundaries of this world” (229). In this sense, s/he fits Mary Russo’s catalogue of grotesque female bodies, featuring such figures as “the Crone, the Bearded Woman, the Fat Lady, the Tattooed Woman, the Hottentot Venus, the Starving Woman, the Hysteric, the Female Impersonator, the Siamese twin, the Dwarf” (14). Russo also differentiates between the carnivalistic and the uncanny kinds of the grotesque (7), and Barry seems to belong primarily to the second category with his/her almost inhuman, unmanly gentleness and sharp-witted, cold-blooded professionalism. In a similar vein, the novel’s motto quotes the legendary professor of surgery, Sir Astley Cooper: “[a] surgeon should have an eagle’s eye, a lady’s hand and a lion’s heart,” and other characters describe Barry as precisely such a hybrid creature: “he had a woman’s delicacy and grace, but the courage and skill of a man” (227). These ambivalent images tie in with Alice’s metaphor of Barry as a Sphinx, that is, a cryptic monster, a freak of miraculous capabilities, whose disarming masculine and feminine virtues disrupt the carefully maintained separation of spheres in Victorian culture, creating anxiety. Thus, what Judith Butler calls the “persistence of the subject” and “cultural and/or gender intelligibility” (16) are radically denied to the doctor, as most of the time s/he feels like “floundering in a pool of ambiguity” (35), and “outside any system” (48). As time goes by, though, s/he learns to master the skill of deception, which would eventually win “him” a career, and cost him “her” emotional integrity.

Barry’s contained, educated, masculine, public, and professional body is, on the one hand, the perfect embodiment of the modern “Homo Clausus” (Lafferton 11), meticulously maintaining the hygienic and disciplined boundaries of the modern subject. Barry feels increasingly claustrophobic, however, and still all too exposed in this publicly acknowledged and efficient body: “I was left living inside the shell of the man I had once been” (Duncker

354). This split sense of identity is the result of his potentially hermaphrodite biological body and his androgynous presence as a person. There is an important difference between these two notions, as “[a]t stake in the difference between the androgyne and the hermaphrodite, critics have argued, is the visibility, the material fact of the body” (Hargreaves 6). To focus on the former term first, one could claim that with its emotionally nuanced depiction of the protagonist’s inner experience of his/her doubleness, the novel seems to recycle Romantic, modernist, and postmodern notions of androgyny at the same time. For example, when Barry asks “[w]hat does a man see in his sister? The lost female part of his own soul” (Duncker 350), s/he appears to echo the Romantic notion of androgyny, also praised by the modernist Woolf, who comments on Coleridge that “the great mind is androgynous” (*Room* 97), resulting in a “porous” and “resonant” self.<sup>6</sup> By today, however, the notion has mostly become *passé* with the theoretical elaboration of terms such as “transgender, gender preference, gender performativity” (Goodlad 217), and other current trends within LGBTQIA culture. Yet, the fictionalized Barry seems to be more of a conscious reflection on this literary/artistic trope than a queer hero(ine) for the twenty-first century.

As opposed to the near-extinct discursive position of androgyny, hermaphroditism has had a longer history in the medical humanities. Before the arrival of twentieth-century endocrinology, hermaphroditism was a very problematic diagnosis, ultimately posing the question whether the difference between the sexes was one of essence or degree. Its meaning definitely narrowed down with time:

[s]tudies of hermaphroditism in the Renaissance and early modern period tend to concentrate on the wider, metaphorical meanings of hermaphroditism as both a spiritual ideal and a symbol of political and social ambiguity and instability. In contrast, studies on late nineteenth-century hermaphroditism and twentieth-century intersex are much more inclined to question how the relation between a doubtful bodily sex and psychological sex was dealt with in individual cases, and how (individual) sexual ambiguity was repressed or “resolved” in the process. (Mak 13)

In the novel, Barry shows signs of the latter approach: even though s/he enjoys his/her professional success, the doctor repeatedly comments on a certain sense of dislocation and dividedness: “[a]nd now I feel like two people. One of them is true and the other one is a charade” (Duncker 94). Thus, out of these metaphoric realms of objectification, doubleness, and monstrosity, s/he identifies himself primarily as a double.<sup>7</sup> His/her frustrating

experience of duplicity culminates in a scene of traumatic narcissism, showing that Barry's existential experience is very far from the Renaissance idealization of hermaphroditism:

I catch sight of myself in a long, ruffled sheet of sea water and I am fearfully humiliated. There stands a small, peculiar figure, dressed in a scarlet jacket and grey trousers, with a full-length overcoat trailing across his narrow shoulders. The coat is too long and the figure looks grotesque, a puppet dressed in a carnival costume, a caricature of the Evil Barn. [. . .] The dwarf is crying [. . .] when I stare down I see a yellow face, mouth open, the sweat streaming down either side of his nose. The face gapes back. I know that I am seeing two things at once, but neither will disperse in the pool's reflection. [. . .] It is only seaweed. (113-14)<sup>8</sup>

The young James recognizes himself/herself as a muddled freak here, an unreadable surface, a tragic monster, who cannot accommodate himself/herself in the culturally inscribed body s/he has to live in. Even though s/he sees himself as a grotesque figure wearing a carnival costume, his/her grotesqueness is still rather uncanny in the Russoesque sense, as his/her experience of his/her own embodiment is totally void of the Bakhtinian carnivalistic relief: it is but the disturbing masquerade of the freak show novelty act. By showing the inner torment of the protagonist, *James Miranda Barry* also connects the representational tradition of androgyny to the Victorian discourse on degeneration, freakishness, and monstrosity. This approach, on Duncker's part, is all the more unique as it goes against the celebratory rhetoric of Foucault's introduction to the book *Herculine Barbin (Being the Recently Discovered Journals of a Nineteenth-century Hermaphrodite)*: "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" (xiii)—a view also heavily criticized by Butler in her interpretation of the story: "Herculine can never embody the law precisely because s/he cannot provide the occasion by which that law naturalizes itself in the symbolic structures of anatomy" (106). Even though the well-known medical historian, Georges Canguilhem claims that "diversity is not disease; the anomalous is not the pathological" (137), the Victorian construction of normalized biopolitical bodies necessitated the marginalization of Otherness. As Susan Stewart argues, "[o]ften referred to as a 'freak of nature,' the freak, it must be emphasized, is a freak of culture" (qtd. in Russo 79). If illness as such is defined by Simon J.

Williams as a “biographical disruption” (95), one can point out that for Barry, his/her biological and social condition is an unceasingly tormenting one.

The novel, thus, portrays the perceptual shift in the nineteenth-century understanding of androgyny from an idealized state to a demonized and pathologized one. This conceptual shift is also connected to the scientific and popular reception of Darwin’s ideas on race and reproduction, and was supposedly catalyzed by the emerging empowerment of women towards the end of the century. Frank Mort points out the interconnection between the masculinization of professional medicine and the gradual feminization of the public sphere in the course of the century: “[i]t was not an accident that medical misogyny, with its powerful definitions of moral and immoral female behaviors, reached a peak at precisely the moment when middle-class women were beginning to challenge the hegemony of the male professions” (63). Parallel with this, George Mosse describes the demonization of the androgyne in the late-Victorian period: “[i]n the first half of the century, the androgyne was still being praised as a public symbol of human unity. But by the end of the century the image, with its confusion of sex roles, had turned into a monster” (qtd. in Kaivola 241). In this sense, Barry as an androgynous Victorian freak denaturalizes nineteenth-century notions of normality, gender, and humanity in a twenty-first-century context. Moreover, the increasing pathologization of hermaphroditism paved the way for the damnation of homosexuality as not (only) a bodily but a mental and moral abnormality or insanity: “it cannot be a coincidence that at the same time Michel Foucault and other historians find the emergence of the homosexual, I find the virtual extinction of the true hermaphrodite,” as Domurat Dreger has argued (364).<sup>9</sup> Thus, when Barry quotes Jesus’s sentence “Noli me tangere” (Duncker 369), that is, “do not touch me,”<sup>10</sup> near the end of the novel, the words sound as an involuntary freak’s desperate *ars poetica*, for his/her untouchable and unmentionable bodily reality makes all kinds of intimacy socially and emotionally impossible for him/her. As s/he puts it, s/he is dreading sex as “it would be the moment of his unmaking” (102), while his/her “making,” that is, his/her social identity, depends on the continuous denying of his/her sexual identity, a continuous performance of professional perfection. Eventually, Barry loses all the people s/he has ever loved, and ends up with a never-ending series of white lapdogs, all called Psyche, in a “system of eternal replacement” (238)—another grotesque (simultaneously tragic and comic) masquerade of the same.



### **The masquerade of femininity**

The novel subtly reflects on the symptomatic traits of Victorian femininity via the supportive characters of Barry's beautiful but vulnerable mother, Mary Anne, his/her smart, spinster aunt, Lousia Erskine, and the doctor's best friend and only confidante, the ambitious actress, Alice Jones. When James's black-clad aunt, whom s/he, as a child, sees as fearfully serpent-like and "not really female" (48), ironically comments that "[w]omen of forty cannot cause public scandals, however hard we try" (69), she voices the frustration of generations of Victorian women. As opposed to the invisibility and insignificance of the spinster, the mother—the embodiment of the Angel in the House—along with the professional woman, the actress, are both described as leading double and spectacular lives of gender performance. As Butler notes, referring to Joan Riviere's 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade," "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names (2). Barry articulates a seemingly similar view when saying to him/herself in a reassuring but, also, slightly misogynistic way: "I sigh with relief that I will never have to learn how to play with such fragile objects, whose purpose is largely decorative concealment" (Duncker 147). The doctor here interprets and underrates femininity as the mere repetition of useless ornamental rituals, performing precisely by this dismissive rhetoric his/her own public male persona.

All three women represent gender resistance in their own ways, however, insofar as the notion "refers to the refusal to accept or comply with hegemonic norms governing sex, gender, and sexuality" (Funke 216). Barry's mother, his/her first love, "My Beloved," whose angelic, soft, feminine aura completely determines the infantile perspective of the early chapters, quickly loses her charm for the adolescent Barry, when s/he recognizes the feminine games dominating Mary Anne's life: "My mother is a woman who is performing a part" (Duncker 143), "[t]his woman had a double existence. She lived entirely in her own reflection" (297), or "when I stepped away from her, across the margins of my sex, I saw her anew and ceased to love what I saw" (296). Barry even blames Mary Anne for his/her fate: "Yet she gave me an identity within which I could never be anything other than an imposter" (297). The child Barry is deeply disappointed when voyeuristically gazing at the naked Mary Anne posing for his brother, the famous painter, James Barry—potentially the doctor's incestuous father—in a primal scene-like situation. At the same time, his mother is constantly worrying about her child's feminine vulnerability, and uses the male pronoun to refer to Barry as an adolescent girl soon getting her first period: "I'm terrified that he's going to

start while I'm away and not there to help or show him how to organize the cloths" (85). But what the young Barry detests, the older Barry grows to respect in his/her mother, and learns only after her death why Mary Anne wanted Barry to be a man. Mary Anne believed that "women's bodies are always for sale, to the highest bidder" (268), and this is why she wanted another kind of life for her only child, to whom she refers as a woman: "[s]he will be respected, remembered. My child will have the freedom I never enjoyed. My child will be a gentleman, well-educated, well-travelled" (277). The emotional ebb and flow of Barry's relationship with his/her mother is symbolized by the novel's opening scene and the doctor's visit to her grave many years later, at the end of the story. In the first chapter, we see the infant Barry with his/her mother and the South American General Miranda, her married lover, taking a walk in the symbolic space of the general's luxurious garden, where the child stumbles upon something, and thinks it to be a grave-like place of "dead babies" (7), however, his mother reassures him that it is just a mole. Decades later, Barry visits his mother's grave in the faraway, exotic country where she lived with the general and probably drowned herself at sea.<sup>11</sup> Barry is melancholically gazing into the cracked tombstone, damaged by an earthquake, a psychoanalytic echo of the uncanny space of the open wound of the womb/tomb, the source of his/her own troubled maternal origins.

Beside his/her mother, James's other great love is the actress of low origins, Alice Jones. According to Rita Felski, the figures of the prostitute, the actress, and the mechanical woman were all symbols of modern desire in the nineteenth century: "the motif of the female performer easily lent itself to appropriations, a symptom of the pervasiveness of illusion and spectacle in the generation of modern forms of desire" (20). While James's mother comes across as a tragic mixture of a seductress and a beautiful doll, always dependent on her male admirers, Alice appears as the brave embodiment of lived desires—and not only those of her eager audience. She easily and unashamedly accepts the performed nature of identity and makes the most of it. We learn early on that "Alice did not believe in the truth of the body" (Duncker 94)—her carnivalistic, ambiguous laugh when she puts her hand into the child Barry's breeches to find out about his/her biological identity is an early turning point of the text. As an adult, she tells James that "[y]ou are who the world says you are" (359),<sup>12</sup> and says this indignantly when the elderly, retired James shocks her with wanting to come out as a woman in the last chapters of the novel.<sup>13</sup> She admits, in a Beauvoirian fashion: "I'm always on stage. We all are. It's all a performance" (358), and that one "can't suddenly become a woman. It takes years of practice" (368), echoing the oft-quoted statement of *The Second Sex*: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."

The last scene of the novel, where Alice recounts Barry's life to the American woman journalist, also acknowledges Alice's subversive nature: "Alice Jones was a professional performer. And no one should ever give their best performance for anything less than the highest possible price" (371). On the whole, the happy-go-lucky Alice "was born into the right century" (355), and thus, provides a powerful counterpoint to Barry's dislocation.

When it comes to gender performance and resistance, however, Barry himself seems to be the most "feminine" out of these women, based on his capacity for performance, even though the very first word of the novel is "the man," when Francesco is seen by the infant Barry with his big mouth, smoking cigar, and his thick moustache (3). Moreover, the child Barry's tantrum convinces his mother to allow him to wear a military uniform instead of a girly dress at a ball, as "costume was more acceptable than disguise" (Duncker 55), and then, when a circle of adults—the mother's influential male admirers—decide about his fate as a man, the keyword is the same: "It was a wonderful idea. A trick, a masquerade. A joke against the world" (60). For the adult Barry this joke, however, becomes a painful and unacknowledged performance. On the one hand, it makes him/her extremely gifted at reading others: "My own disguise made that of others so simple to detect" (294)—a traditionally feminine gift that Athena Vrettos calls "emotional ventriloquism" (33). On the other hand, s/he is tormented by this doubleness, as s/he repeatedly mentions: "[t]he mask has become the face" (281), "I've spent my life in disguise" (359), and, most of all: "But perhaps the most subtle performances are never detected, and cannot therefore be admired" (361). The fact that it is not only Barry's biological sex but also the identity of his/her father that is concealed, even from him/her, underlines his/her freakish position as a so-called "natural son." As a medical student, s/he also feels a kind of aversion to the sight of the female body: "but when he was faced with a living woman's bodily abandonment in the unselfconscious and bestial act of giving birth to monsters, Barry recoiled into himself" (81). On the other hand, Barry is very sensitive to female problems: as a child, he asks James Barry "What is rape?" (31), and later notices that one of Alice's luxurious tapestries has a disturbing pattern as it shows women being raped or abandoned. When revisiting the maze in the above mentioned garden, s/he finds that all the female statues which used to be there when s/he had been assigned the male gender many years before have disappeared. Butler has called attention to the topological dimension of identity formation, describing the psychological process of metaphorical identification with available images and subject positions (3). In the case of Barry, it seems that the gendered tropes of self-reflection faced by him/her essentially create a

traumatic legacy of femininity, from which s/he wants to escape at all cost, by performing masculinity.

In an era when, in Miriam Bailin's words, "[t]he sickroom was often the only available room of one's own" (20), when Nightingale argued, in her *Notes on Nursing*, that "every woman is a nurse" (iv),<sup>14</sup> and when the *Lancet* identified the first woman doctors as "the advanced guard of the Amazonian army" (Mort 63), Duncker's ambiguous protagonist decides to be in charge of the sickroom instead of occupying it. The androgynous military surgeon, who inspired the novel, appears as a liminal figure not only for cultural studies but for the medical humanities as well: s/he died in 1865, the very year the first female medical doctor, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson graduated (Bashford 94).<sup>15</sup> In the light of these insights, it seems that the power of *James Miranda Barry* lies in its contemporaneous addressing of Victorian dilemmas concerning embodiment and otherness, and, by doing so, showing neo-Victorian fiction at its best: "rather than a simply seamless continuity or smooth evolution between Victorian culture and our own, it is an uncanny presence that somehow produces both alterity and recognition" (Mitchell 61). Although the old, sick, and lonely Barry desperately asks at the end of the novel "What difference have I ever made?" (Duncker 282), his/her twentieth-century fictionalized life story delineates various ways in which s/he made all those differences really matter.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In American literature, Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002), and Aaron Apps's *Dear Hercule* (2015) are other well-known examples of hermaphroditism in contemporary fiction, while the Hungarian author, Zsuzsa Rakovszky's novel, *V.S.* (2011) retells the fictionalized life story of a cross-dressing nineteenth-century Hungarian poet, Sándor/Sarolta Vay.

<sup>2</sup> Instances of medico-historical metafiction include *Ingenious Pain* (1997) by Andrew Miller, *Master Georgie* (1999) by Beryl Bainbridge, *The House of Sight and Shadow* (2000) by Nicholas Griffin, *An Imperfect Lens* (2006) by Anne Roiphe, and *The Nature of Monsters* (2007) by Clare Clark, all of which are set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, featuring mostly male doctors as their troubled protagonists.

<sup>3</sup> I will refer to the protagonist with the hybrid pronoun s/he, for the novel consciously underlines Barry's double gender identity.

<sup>4</sup> The label "postmodern" is applicable to the text due its use of the Hutcheonian historiographic metafiction, and its conscious treatment of the competing narratives of the past as an act of recollecting cultural heritage.

<sup>5</sup> While the cover of the edition used for this essay claims that Duncker's story is the first to address this obscure life, there have been several other retellings of Barry's life since Duncker's publication, for instance, Anne and Ivan Kronenfeld's *The Secret Life of Dr. James*

*Miranda Barry* (2001), and Rachel Holmes's *The Secret Life of Dr. James Barry: Victorian England's Most Eminent Surgeon* (2007). But even before Duncker, in the 1880s, the doctor inspired a triple-decker potboiler, *The Modern Sphinx*—penned by Colonel Edward Rogers—who had once met Barry—and Barry also featured in Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928), cited as an example of the “homosexual diathesis” (Moulds). Duncker herself had initially used the story in her very first piece of published writing, which appeared in a 1989 anthology of short stories, however, her subsequent attempt to write a novel based on the character stalled after a hundred pages, when she could not resolve the problem of using “him” or “her” in the narration (Wroe).

<sup>6</sup> Androgyny has often been an idealized state for creation and leadership in art and political history: Elizabeth I called herself the nation's husband (Laqueur 137), Shelley elaborated on his twin fantasy in “Ephitalamium,” and Darwin argues in *The Descent of Man* that “the progenitor of the vertebrate kingdom was androgynous” (qtd. in Moscucci 182).

<sup>7</sup> According to witness accounts, the “real-life” Barry did not appear very masculine either: each morning, his servant laid out six small towels for Barry to wrap and conceal his/her curves, and broaden his/her shoulders, also, s/he wore three-inch heeled shoes (Young).

<sup>8</sup> This painfully self-reflexive passage is, again, markedly Woolfian: “There was the moment of the puddle in the path; when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle” (*Moments* 78).

<sup>9</sup> The notion of hermaphroditism has a long and well-researched history. In philosophy, Antiquity is partly characterized by the Hippocratic tradition, which taught that hermaphrodites are sexually intermediate beings, in whom the distribution of maternal and paternal seed is balanced, while Aristotelian views suggested that a body with doubled genitalia represents the imbalance of male and female principles (Tidd 76). In terms of political identity, in the Middle Ages, one could freely decide about their own gender, but this all changed by the eighteenth century, when it became the doctor's prerogative to make that decision on a scientific basis. Theories of sexual dimorphism still dominated in the 1840s-80s, when Sir James Young Simpson's system differentiated between spurious and true hermaphrodites (Domurat Dreger 358). Concerning art history, Pacteau has argued that “the common representation of the hermaphrodite is that of a figure endowed with breasts and a penis; the female genitalia do not figure. The male infant does not acknowledge a sex other than his own. Seen in this light, the hermaphrodite appears less as a woman with a penis and more as a man with breasts—the reiteration in the post-Oedipal of a primitive condition of early childhood which passed into the unconscious through repression” (qtd. in Hargreaves 30).

<sup>10</sup> The expression is the Latin version of a phrase spoken by Jesus to Mary Magdalene, when she recognizes him after his resurrection. The original Koine Greek phrase, *Μή μου ἅπτον* (mē mou haptou), is better represented in translation as “cease holding on to me,” or “stop clinging to me” (“Noli me tangere”).

<sup>11</sup> *James Miranda Barry* is also a subtle colonial story of degeneration: Barry spends most of his/her adult life serving in the colonies, and witnesses the flipside of the Empire's wealth, as if the Mother Country also had a darker, secret side to it, just like the doctor. Barry sees the wretched hygienic conditions of the outposts, recognizes all the weaknesses of the colonizers—“the Creoles were deeply inbred” (Duncker 285)—refers to reading the Rights of Man, and lives through the end of slavery, sees sodomy, incest, black children being abused by white men, and, eventually, learns to see the tropics for what they really are: “the tropics

may resemble paradise, at a glance, from a great distance, but living here I can never rid my nostrils of the smell of putrefaction” (284).

<sup>12</sup> The significance of Shakespeare, in Duncker’s words, the “master gender-bender” (qtd. in Wheelwright) is unmistakable in the novel: the child Barry fails to play Puck in a country house performance, as an adult, he reads out the line “unsex me here” from *Macbeth* at a dinner party, while Alice successfully plays Rosalind from *As You Like It* (Duncker 201).

<sup>13</sup> Barry’s coming-out plan is very shocking for Alice partly because transitioning to masculinity was much more manageable in the nineteenth century than the other way round. Domurat Dreger recounts an anecdote from 1899 about two sisters, aged nineteen and twenty-one, who were taken to the doctor for never having their periods, and were found to be males: “Many formalities had to be gone through; questions with regard to their father’s will had to be adjusted, and new names had to be given to the young men, who donned men’s attire, left this country, and are now pursuing useful vocations in the Far East” (342). The opposite, however, could easily cost someone their life, as Lawson Tait points out: “if . . . no genital orifice can be discovered, let the patient be considered as a male, for if brought up amongst males but little harm can come to him. If, however, an individual were brought up amongst girls who turned out to be a semi-competent male, no end of mischief might accrue, as is amply proved in the case of Madelaine Mugnoz, the nun of Ubeda, who suffered death for rape” (352).

<sup>14</sup> Nightingale is seen today “as either the self-sacrificing ministering angel to the troops during the Crimean War or as the stern, unforgiving bureaucrat who professionalized nursing” (Penner 147). The legendary nurse is a controversial icon in women’s history because of

her continuing resistance to the enfranchisement of women, and to the certification of nurses. These changes would declare on the one hand the possibility of direct participation in government rather than the oblique “influence” that she practiced with such skill and determination, and on the other, the professionalization of the work which she continued to wish to be considered “a calling”—a matter of character, not of knowledge. (Bailin 35)

In connection with Barry, it is also known that Nightingale met the doctor in person, and referred to him/her as “the uncivilized brute, Barry,” while “Barry considered Nightingale a meddling amateur who would upset her carefully thought-out procedures. Nightingale saw the surgeon-general as a threat to her recently acquired fame” (Hanlon 17). Thus, in a cruelly ironic way, maybe the only view they shared is this: “Nursing,” Nightingale wrote, “is the only case, queens not excepted, where a woman is really in charge of men” (Bailin 28).

<sup>15</sup> Not without major fights: when, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Sophia Jex-Blake and her fellow female students tried to enter medical classes at the University of Edinburgh, the gates of the school were slammed in their faces by “rowdies.” After a sympathetic medical student wrenched open the gate, and the women gained entrance to the anatomical classroom, a sheep was pushed into the classroom by the rioters outside. On the way out of the classroom, mud was hurled at them (Wilson Carpenter 171).

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