



#3.2
2013
ISSN 2161-0010

Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature

Casteel, Jessie. "Infectious Revolutions: Gender, Science, Identity and Humanity in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite*." *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 3.2 (Spring 2013): 130-139. PDF.

Jessie Casteel

Infectious Revolutions: Gender, Science, Identity and Humanity in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite*

To begin, I will warn you that I'm going to use zir, zie, and zirsself, gender neutral pronouns that have never, alas, really caught on; they're indispensable here. *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite* is a collected dossier published by Foucault containing a memoir and associated legal and medical documentation. It follows the story of Herculine, born in 1838 as female and reclassified as male in 1860. Throughout the narrative, Herculine is increasingly concerned about being both physically and psychologically different from the women who surrounded zir in the convents and schools in which zie lived and worked. Eventually Herculine falls in love with a fellow teacher, Sara, and confesses to a priest in confusion. This priest starts Herculine on the juridico-medical path to reclassification as male in order to marry Sara, a process that eventually sees Herculine cast as a freak, ostracized from society, and unable to find decent work or companionship. Herculine finally commits suicide in despair. In his introduction to the dossier, Foucault points

out that before this historical moment, hermaphrodites in medieval Europe found more acceptance, and were allowed to choose the gender they wanted to inhabit, so long as they picked one and stuck with it. Inarguably, *Herculine Barbin* is quite blatantly centered around the question of gender identity. I believe that Herculine zirsself embodies a binary, existing as both genders rather than neither and slipping across the dividing line in a way that presents a threat to zir society by the very implication of fluid possibilities of identity. This existence of fluid, performative identity along one axis raises the unsettling idea of the potential existence of other such axes, a notion to which the nineteenth-century mind was especially sensitive.

As fascinating and complex as Herculine's gender identity is, I think it is equally interesting and important to explore the perceptions of zir tangle of gendered identity in the context of the historical moment in which they occurred. Foucault details the way “[n]ineteenth-century 'bourgeois' society...was a society of blatant and fragmented perversion” due to increasing attention given to, and therefore exercises of power on, sexuality (“From *The History of Sexuality*” 1519). He asserts that during this era sexuality was obsessively typified, quantified, studied, monitored, and discussed, leading to a proliferation of discourse on sexuality. This, in turn, led to a vast profusion of multiplicity in sexuality. The exhaustive array of discourses on sexuality sprang largely from scientific, particularly medical, sources, as “sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness” and “especially doctors brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination” (1513). Increasing legal discourse, as we can certainly see from Herculine's legal experiences, based itself on the foundation of such scientific discourses. The doctors who supply Herculine's peritexts and upon whose testimony zir reclassification as a man is based are explicitly set up as the sole, incontestable authorities on discerning sexual identity: “it became the task of the medical expert to decipher...the one true sex of the so-called hermaphrodite”

(Foucault, *Herculine Barbin* 20). These nineteenth-century medical professionals were imbued with all the perceived authority of science, and therefore earlier conceptions of hermaphroditism as a more personal issue for individual choice gave way to decisive, impersonal, scientific determination. Thus the assumption, by both Herculine and everyone else in her memoirs, that “the real proofs of sex are to be found in the anatomical structure of Barbin's sexual organs,” because medical science had become the ontological referent in dealing with sexuality (*Barbin* 19). While I am indebted to Foucault for pointing out these channels of the operation of power, I think he fails to fully explore the causes that precipitated this shift in scientific discourses on sexuality. Foucault explains the shift as arising from issues of increasing populations, economics, and urbanization, about which he is no doubt correct. What I think he misses, however, is the role played by nineteenth-century anxieties about human identity brought about by the scientific advancements of the era in motivating discourses on sexuality.

To me, this fear surrounding human identity suggests the connection between such fear and essentialized gender. First, I think it will be useful to address the basis and nature of this fear before attempting to draw the connection with unsettling notions of essential gender identity. Naturally, this raises the question of what anxieties might draw forth fear and uncertainty about the essentialism of human identity. A salient clue to answering this question is the centrality of science to Barbin's narrative; on the subject of nineteenth-century fiction, Hurley points out the fact that when “scientific premises are central to — even dictate the logic of — the entire narrative, and these premises are outlined in great detail,” a closer examination of the power wielded by science in the narrative is definitely mandated (191). She goes so far as to specify that nineteenth-century fiction “negotiated a cultural moment within which traditional constructs of human identity were breaking down on all fronts... The evolutionary sciences emphasized the

changeable and chaotic nature, and the regressive tendencies, of the abominable human body,” thus linking fiction of this era directly to anxieties raised by the evolutionary sciences (203). To specifically shed light on how evolutionary anxieties produced the shift in nineteenth-century attitudes about hermaphroditism away from the earlier, more relaxed approach that Foucault outlines to a more monstrous model, I think it is fruitful to include Webb's suggestion that

the key point in this change in attitude comes with Charles Darwin's 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Significantly, in this work, Darwin saw the cross-fertilisation of a hermaphrodite plant as an abnormality of nature which may have helped to alter the meaning of the word to something that is an error. More specifically with regard to Herculine Barbin, Camille's reclassification as a man occurs in 1860, only a year after Darwin's groundbreaking research into evolution. (6)

Indeed, Darwinism, along with other evolutionary theories such as Lamarckism, was very present in the nineteenth-century consciousness: “the late nineteenth-century produced an entangled bank of evolutionary theories. Darwinism mutated in a variety of ways, rival evolutionary theories struggled against its dominance, and various hybrid varieties appeared” (Glending 577). I think Hurley's work in this area is valuable to gain a clearer picture of the relationship between nineteenth-century thought and the evolutionary sciences:

The proliferation of Gothic representations at the *fin de siècle* may be partially attributed to the destabilizing effects of nineteenth-century Darwinian science. This science understood species to be impermanent, metamorphic, and liable to extinction. It assumed an uncomfortably intimate relation between ‘animal’ and ‘human’...The theory of evolution described the human body not as an integral wholeness, but as a kind of Frankenstein monster, patched together from the different animal forms the human

species had inhabited during the various phases of its evolutionary history. It posited that natural history (and by extension human history) progressed randomly, moving toward no particular climax, so that bodies, species, and cultures were as likely to move ‘backwards’ as ‘forwards’, degenerating into less complex forms. It destroyed a comfortably anthropocentric worldview: human beings were just a species like any other, developed by chance rather than design, and given the mutability of species, humans might well devolve or otherwise metamorphose into some repulsive abhuman form. (Hurley 195)

Certainly Hurley makes an excellent case for the troubled — and troubling — central position of evolutionary ideas in nineteenth-century fiction. The proliferation in the 19th century of texts such as Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* or Kipling's “Mark of the Beast,” for instance, marks a deep concern with the eroding boundaries of human identity. Nor is this anxiety confined to the fiction of this era. In fact, a few years before writing *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Wells himself had written a series of essays on Darwinian evolution in which he “challenged Victorian complacency by arguing that humans are no less immune to extinction, and no more significant for the universe, than any other species” (Glendening 580). Darwin’s theories and other evolutionary science were thus not simply sources of fascination, but also sources of preoccupation and anxiety for people in the nineteenth century expressly because evolutionary science inevitably raises uncomfortable doubts about the essentialism of human subjectivity. Darwinian and Lamarckian ideas about evolution both unsettled firm ideas about human identity, and destabilized accepted notions of the boundary between human and animal. This led to anxieties about identity, and left performance as one of the last definitive markers of humanity in a distressingly uncertain paradigm. The neo-Lamarckism that arose during the nineteenth century was explicitly performative, positing that characteristics were “acquired through use and disuse”

and inscribed on the body through practice (Glendening 579). Lack of practice, or failure to continue performing the actions of humanity, was believed, therefore, to lead to degeneration. Although this neo-Lamarckism was considered to be an opposing theory to Darwin's, the concept of performative identity is still discernible in Darwinian ideas. At the heart of Darwinism is the idea that humans are one more kind of animal, intimately related to and descended from other animals. Our evolution was a matter of natural selection, and therefore dependent upon chance rather than any innately non-bestial qualities. The division between human and animal therefore became problematized. As Glendening astutely observes, "evolutionary theory complicates the distinction between [human and animal]; because humans evolved from animals and bear innumerable traces of this ancestry, there can be no absolute or essentialist gap between them" (575).

By complicating notions of human identity in this way, Darwinism also raises the specter of devolution just as Lamarckism does; if our identity as a species is our own construct rather than essential, then it is, as all performative identities must be, fluid – and that means it could just as easily flow back the other way. Indeed, as Butler's explication of drag performance proves, fluidity is integral to the very concept of performativity and antithetical to essentialism. Concerned about this fluidity, "late Victorian society witnessed a spread of concern about degeneration or decay — of society, races, species, even the cosmos itself" (580). Though all of this is excellent substantiation for the fluidity and social construction of identity, it might yet be posited that a socially constructed, fluid human subjectivity does not necessarily have to be tied to performativity. However, this notion would fail to take into account the very mechanism by which Darwinian evolution works. For example, as Marxist theorist Fredrich Engels explains, "the hand is not only the organ of labour, *it is also the product of labour*" (3). He goes on to

explain that it is “only by labour, by adaptation to new operations” that the human hand evolved from the ape’s (3). Thus, as Engels makes clear, it is actions and reactions to environment that shape bodies in Darwinian evolution; this process simply takes considerably longer in the Darwinian model than it does in the Lamarkian. Though the explicit concept of performative identity was not proposed during the nineteenth century, it thus existed within the subtext of evolutionary science. I therefore suggest that *any* destabilization of the fast-disappearing markers of essential human identity in the nineteenth century rocked this already crumbling edifice even further. It is consequently not a surprise that evolution-inspired anxieties over the fluidity of human subjectivity could manifest as a fear and persecution of hermaphrodites such as Herculine, whose destabilization of ideas of essential gender created fault lines that ultimately logically extended to essential humanity itself. As Herculine zirsself observes, zir situation “overturns all the laws of nature and humanity” (Foucault, *Herculine Barbin* 99).

Obviously, I am setting forth the proposition that the concept of performativity be extended to human identity, and that any form of performative identity implies the possibility of others. I believe that our understanding of ourselves as human subjects is certainly a cultural construct, just as gender is. How we define the meaning of human, as opposed to what we construct as bestial or monstrous, nature does, after all, vary across eras and cultures; the very fact that such variations can exist reveals that the definition of humanity is not an external, objective truth that may be discovered. Instead, many nineteenth-century texts, especially those from the Gothic tradition like the novels of Stoker or Stevenson, construct humanity as a shifting identity that is rooted in performance. As theorist Kelly Hurley notes, texts like these “describe human bodies that have lost their claim to a discrete and integral identity, a fully human existence. They are in contrast liminal bodies: bodies that occupy the threshold between the two

terms of an opposition, like human/beast, male/female, or civilized/primitive, by which cultures are able to meaningfully organize experience” (190). Herculine’s narrative is best understood as existing in this matrix of fear and uncertainty, and zir tragic experiences are representative of a larger terror of the problematization of human subjectivity that expressed itself by representing the marginal as monstrous in order to shore up the vanishing boundaries that defined humanity. I suspect that this is an unconscious development; certainly the concept of performativity would not be explored for many years yet, and social theories of the era supported more essentialized views of identity. But whether or not this is a conscious construction is irrelevant; that it exists at all tells us a great deal about how social anxieties of the time affected the formation of subjectivity. The very fact that humanity is a performance reveals, as Judith Butler asserts drag performance does, that the concept of a human identity is mythical, existing only as a social mechanism which we use to police identity construction. In texts such as *Herculine Barbin*, performative identity is thus a signifier of inhuman monstrosity. As Webb alleges, “when examined in relation to various manifestations of monstrosity, the narrative is packed with allusions to [Herculine's] position as human mutant” who possesses “the same predatory and homoerotic elements that characterise Gothic creations like the vampire” (1, 3). When Herculine is revealed to be performing zir gender, this places zir outside not only essential gender, but therefore outside of essential humanity altogether. Because zie lies outside what society defines as the fundamental human binary of gender, zie is considered as monstrous, subtly dangerous, and unfit for human company. In the fragmented, almost delirious portion of zir memoirs that follows reclassification, Herculine explicitly defines zirself as existing outside of humanity, declaring that zir “ties to humanity have been broken” (Foucault, *Barbin* 99). Tellingly, Goujon, the doctor who performs Herculine's autopsy, confidently proclaims that what appears at first

observation to be hermaphroditism never really is, because “hermaphroditism does not exist in man and the higher animals” (139). As a fluid, performative subject, Herculine must be a monster; if zie is regarded as human, zie acts as an agent of identity destabilization with which zir contemporaries were ill-equipped to deal, and also serves to further complicate the already disturbed definitions that safeguard cherished notions of humanity as essential.

Understanding the way identity is constructed and conceived within *Herculine Barbin* allows for a deeper and more nuanced insight not only into Herculine's experiences and the attitudes which shaped the treatment zie received, but also into the mechanisms and development of performative identity. Conceiving of Herculine's subjectivity within a performative framework also allows us to better grasp the precise ways in which nineteenth-century ideas about evolutionary science unsettled the basis upon which people defined human identity and rendered the boundaries around that constructed definition as ultimately dependent upon harsh policing. The fear and ostracizing revulsion that Herculine suffers from zir contemporaries after zir reclassification can be directly tied to the nineteenth-century social anxieties raised by the evolutionary sciences, and the concomitant debilitating terror of the fluid, performative nature of human subjectivity is apparent in the reactions and observations throughout the texts Foucault gathers together. Herculine's narrative thus reflects the dawning of a horrified apprehension that identity is a construct, and the resulting embryonic fear that our very humanity lies only on shifting and subjective ground.

Works Cited

- Engels, Fredrich. *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*. (1876) Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1952. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. Print.
- . "From *The History of Sexuality, Volume I, An Introduction*." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Leitch, Cain, Finke, Johnson, McGowan, Sharpley-Whiting, and Williams. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. 1502-1521. Print.
- Glendening, John. "Green Confusion: Evolution and Entanglement in H. G. Wells's 'The Island of Doctor Moreau'." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30.2 (2002): 571-597. *JSTOR*. PDF file.
- Hurley, Kelly. "British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Ed. Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.
- Webb, Jessica. "Herculine Barbin: Human Error, Criminality And The Case Of The Monstrous Hermaphrodite." *Hosting the Monster*. 153-162. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2008.