

REVIEW

What if Michel Foucault was Alive or Herculine Barbin was in İstanbul?

Fatih ARTVINLI 

Department of History of Medicine and Ethics, Acibadem University School of Medicine, İstanbul, Turkey

ABSTRACT

In 1976, the eminent philosopher Michel Foucault encountered a work written by the 19th century forensic scientist, Auguste Ambroise Tardieu, in the archives of the French Department of Public Hygiene. Tardieu's *Question médico-légale de l'identité* (1872) discusses the role of forensic science in the assignment of sex. The second edition of the book, which consists of fragments from the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, an intersex person (known as "hermaphrodite" at the time), was published in 1874, accompanied by the full text of Barbin's handwritten memoirs. In the wake of his discovery of Tardieu's work and Herculine's memoir, Foucault edited the book, *Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B.*, consisting of the medico-legal documents, results of medical examinations, court documents, and press reports pertaining to Barbin's life in 1978. Two years later, when Foucault wrote an introduction to the book that was translated into English, Herculine's life reached a larger audience. Today, hundreds of books and articles in various disciplines, notably in queer

and gender studies, refer to Herculine Barbin's name.

The book edited by Foucault was published in Turkish last year, which was 41 years after its original publication. The Turkish edition of the book is significantly important because it introduces the reader to another forgotten name, Dr. İbrahim Şevki. İbrahim Şevki, an Ottoman physician, had already discovered the memoirs of Herculine Barbin about a hundred years ago before Foucault, and published it along with Tardieu's work in Turkish in 1885.

This article aims to evaluate a 150-year-old story, within its historical context, and present Dr. İbrahim Şevki whose work was discovered by the historian, Ebru Aykut, and introduced to the field of neuropsychiatry.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Herculine Barbin, İbrahim Şevki, gender assignment, intersex, history of neuropsychiatry

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INTRODUCTION

Last year, a book was quietly translated into Turkish (1). In Turkey, every year, thousands of fictional and non-fictional books are published. It is only natural for some books to make no significant impact, even if it was discovered by the eminent French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and resonated with so many people before.

I think *Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B.*, a 150-year-old compelling story that has largely remained unnoticed, will awaken the interest of people who are interested in the histories of sex assignment and neuropsychiatry. Through this story, the article aims to explore the subject of gender identity, which has been discussed more and more in Turkey in the recent times. In addition, the idea is to look at the story within its historical context, to present Dr. İbrahim Şevki, whose work was discovered by the historian Ebru Aykut, and introduced to the field of neuropsychiatry.

The story in the book goes back as far as 1838, when a *hermaphrodite* child, named as Adélaïde Herculine, was born in a French village and assigned the sex of *female*. After spending the first 22 years of her life under this assigned sex, she was legally compelled to change her sex to *male* following an affair, and a series of events. She was then called *Abel*. In 1868, leaving a farewell letter to her mother and her memories behind, Herculine Barbin, or Alexina B., put an end to her life in a small room on the street of Ecole-de-Médecine in Paris. As Marc Lafrance puts it, "Leaving behind these memoirs, Barbin gave to modern science what no

other nineteenth-century subject would: a first-person account of the hermaphroditic experience" (2).

We can summarise the discovery of the memoirs of and writings about Herculine Barbin as follows:

In 1860, Dr. Chesnet who assigned the "true" sex of Herculine wrote a report on this exceptional case (3) and the autopsy report conducted by Dr. Goujon after Herculine's death was published in 1869 (4). Following these medical reports with the detailed description of Herculine's anatomy of the internal and external genitalia, Auguste Ambroise Tardieu (1818–1879), a renowned forensic scientist of the time and a professor at the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Paris, published a comprehensive text, including Herculine's life story and her memoirs. Editing her memoirs first, Tardieu published them in a chapter of a monograph titled *Question médico-légale de l'identité* (Medico-legal Question of Identity) in 1872 (Figure 1). The monograph consists of opinions on the role of forensic science in the assignment of sex, and the cases of hermaphroditism. The second edition of the monograph was published in 1874, accompanied by the handwritten memoirs of Herculine Barbin under the title of *Memoirs and Impressions of an Individual Whose Sex is Misidentified* (5). Published by a press, specialising in medical and surgical books, the work was read by a few readers and remained forgotten for a hundred years or so.

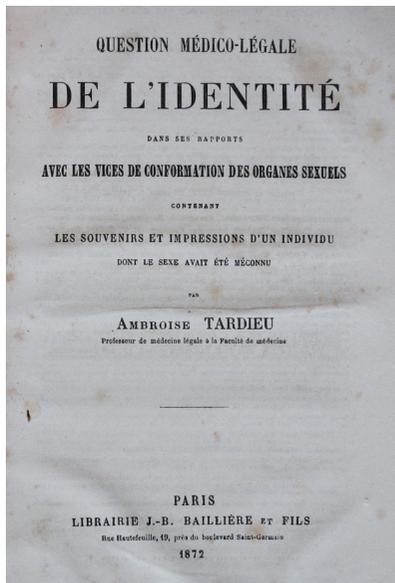


Figure 1. Title page of Ambroise Tardieu's 1872 book in which excerpts of Herculine Barbin's memoirs were first published.

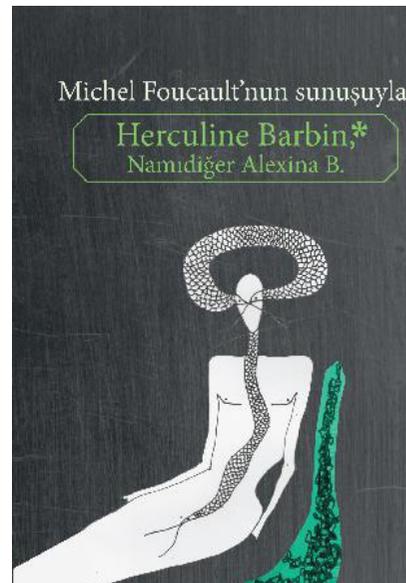


Figure 3. Front cover of Turkish translation Herculine Barbin, Nam-ı diğer Alexina B. İstanbul: Sel Yayıncılık, 2019.

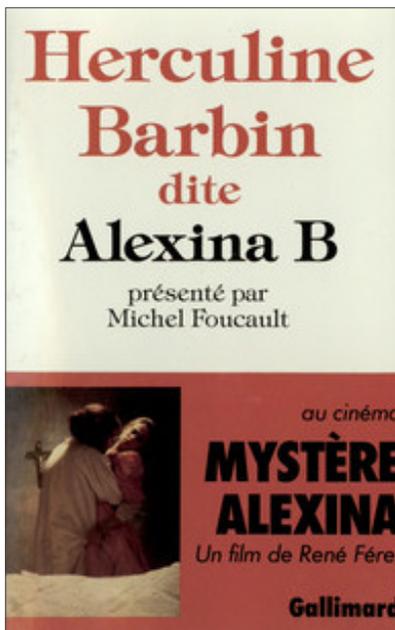


Figure 2. Front cover of Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B. Paris: Gallimard, 1978.

At the time of the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (6), the eminent French philosopher Michel Foucault discovered Tardieu's book, as well as Herculine's memoirs during his research in the archives of the French Department of Public Hygiene. Foucault edited the book, *Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B.*, consisting of medico-legal documents, the results of medical examinations, the court documents, and the press reports pertaining to Herculine's life and it was published in 1978 (7) (Figure 2). Two years later, when Foucault wrote an introduction to the book that was translated into English, Herculine's life reached a larger audience (8). Today, Herculine Barbin's name is referenced in hundreds of books and articles in various disciplines, notably in queer and gender studies.

HERCULINE BARBIN OR ALEXINA B.

The Turkish translation of the Herculine Barbin's memoirs (Figure 3) is composed of two chapters. The first chapter consists of Foucault's introduction, covering Herculine Barbin's memories titled *My Memoirs*, in addition to *The Dossier*, which contains the medical reports and the

documents, as well as the short story titled *A Scandal at the Convent* (1893). The story is based on Barbin's memoirs by the German psychiatrist, the avant-garde author and the playwright, Oscar Panizza, and Eric Fassin's postface, *The True Sex*. Sezin Boyabatlı translated all of these from French to Turkish. We can briefly discuss the memoirs and their importance before moving on to the second chapter.

The memoirs written by Herculine Adélaïde Barbin, Alexina B., or Abel Barbin after she was assigned the *male* gender are *historical documents* with Foucault's words. They demonstrate how medicine, law, and the society questioned and judged the sexual identities in the 19th century, and how the search for gender identity became an issue, providing a wider point of view, particularly about hermaphroditism. Dr. Goujon, who performed the autopsy of Herculine Barbin noticed this "exceptional case" as early as 1869, and describes it as follows:

"The observation that I am reporting here is certainly one of the most complete science possesses of this kind, since the individual who is the object of it could be followed, so to speak, from his birth until his death, and since the examination of his corpse, as well as the autopsy, could be performed with all the care to be desired. This observation is especially complete because of the exceptional fact that the person in question took the trouble to leave us long memoirs, through which he initiates us into all the details of his life and all of his experiences during the different periods of his physical and intellectual development. These memoirs have all the more value because they come from an individual who was gifted with a certain education (he had a teaching certificate and had come out first in the normal school's competitive examination for obtaining this diploma), and he made efforts to describe the particular circumstances of his life." (English edition (Eng. Ed.) p. 129-130, Turkish edition (Tr. Ed.) p.136).

Indeed, Herculine Barbin wrote about her short life quite thoroughly, which ended with a suicide. As sociologist Eric Fassin says, "The text carrying the traces of the style of a 19th century novel" (T. Ed. p. 196) has a deeply sincere, detailed and a gripping language. Expressing that a lot of people might think of the peculiarities of her life and what she has been through as "incredible nonsense", Barbin remarks, *"There is only one thing that I can ask of them: that they be convinced of my sincerity above all."* (Eng. Ed. p.15; Tr. Ed. p. 34).

Approximately a hundred-page *My Memoirs* opens with the following lines:

"I am twenty-five years old, and, although I am still young, I am beyond any doubt approaching the hour of my death.

I have suffered much, and I have suffered alone! Alone! Forsaken by everyone! My place was not marked out in this world that shunned me, that had cursed me. Not a living creature was to share in this immense sorrow that seized me when I left my childhood, at that age when everything is beautiful, because everything is young and bright with the future." (Eng. Ed. p. 3; Tr. Ed. p. 23).

Spending her childhood and youth in religious institutions, Herculine grew restless with both female and male genders, and was obliged to leave her loved ones, and the environment she felt that she belonged to. Undoubtedly, the incidents that befell Herculine whose relationship with her lover Sara caused rumors, reminds us of the similar sad stories today, compelling us to rethink the issue of gender identity:

"Society, that pitiless judge, could sully with impunity the holy affection of two loyal souls who had been cast together upon the edge of a secret abyss and whose inevitable fall had been the mysterious bond between them. Stupid blindness of the crowd, which condemns when it should absolve!" (Eng. Ed. p. 92; Tr. Ed. p.104).

In his introduction, Foucault writes, "Neither Alexina's case nor her memoirs seemed to have aroused much interest at the time." (p. xiv). However, as Aykut mentions (p. 232), "There is a great surprise awaiting the reader of the Turkish translation of the book, or rather, a discovery that would astonish Foucault if he was alive. It turns out that another person, the Ottoman physician, İbrahim Şevki, discovered the memoirs of Herculine Barbin about a hundred years before Foucault discovered and translated Tardieu's work, thereby translating Herculine Barbin's memoirs to another language for the first time."

İBRAHİM ŞEVKİ, A FORGOTTEN OTTOMAN PHYSICIAN

The scholar that discovered İbrahim Şevki and his translation is the historian Ebru Aykut (9), known for her accomplished works in various research areas, such as gender, crime, and forensic medicine. Aykut not only did the transliteration of the text from Ottoman Turkish to modern Turkish, but also discovered a literally "forgotten name" of the neurologist and the forensic scientist, Dr. İbrahim Şevki, restoring his place in the history of medicine (10). This begs the question, who was İbrahim Şevki and how did he come across the memoirs of Herculine Barbin?

Graduating from the Imperial School of Medicine (Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Şahane) whose language of instruction was French in 1871, Doctor İbrahim (Yusuf) Şevki was sent to Paris by the government to specialise in neurology and forensic science. He studied at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris (Sorbonne) for three years (1873-1876) under the mentorship of Doctor Auguste Ambroise Tardieu. In other words, at the time *Question médico-légale de l'identité* was published or reprinted for the second time in 1874, İbrahim Şevki was at the University of Paris, working there with Tardieu. After his return to Istanbul, İbrahim Şevki started working at the Toptaşı Bimarhanesi, the period's leading asylum whose chief physician was Dr. Luigi Mongeri (11). He worked there for three years beginning from 1880. At the same time, he was an assistant professor of forensic science at the Faculty of Medicine. He translated significant works and articles from French to Turkish throughout 1880s.

It would be enough to mention the two of his translations on neuropsychiatry, namely an article by Dr. Foville about the criminal liability of mental patients, and a biography published two years after the death of the prominent French psychiatrist and neurologist Ernest

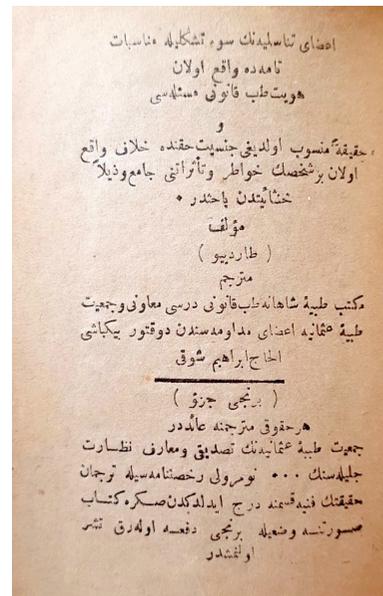


Figure 4. Title page of İbrahim Şevki's Ottoman-Turkish translation of Herculine Barbin's memoir in 1885.

Charles Lasègue (1816-1883) (12). Lasègue, who defined and coined the term *anorexia nervosa*, and introduced *folie à deux* (shared psychosis or shared psychotic disorder) to medical literature with Dr. Farlet, was also one of the professors of İbrahim Şevki.

İbrahim Şevki's translation of Tardieu's *Question Médico-légale de l'identité* was first serialised in a daily newspaper, *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, in 1884-85. Shortly after this, it was published as a two-volume book with an introduction written by one of the leading authors of the time, Ahmed Midhat Efendi, and with a lengthy addendum on hermaphroditism penned by İbrahim Şevki himself (Figure 4). The second chapter of the recent Turkish translation of Herculine Barbin consists of İbrahim Şevki's translation, *The Adventure of Aleksina B* (Aleksina B'nin Sergüzeşti), and Ahmed Midhat Efendi's introduction *Identity or the Truth of Hermaphroditism* (Hüviyet yahut Hakayık-ı Hünsaiyyet). This chapter also includes a lengthy article by Ebru Aykut that introduces the *Ottoman Tardieu, Dr. İbrahim Şevki*, who meticulously worked on the transliteration of the texts from 1885.

As Aykut claims, "Herculine Barbin's memoirs must have reached a larger readership in Turkish in the Ottoman Empire, than it did in French as they were serialised in a popular Turkish daily newspaper." Aykut ends her article with an evaluation that highlights the personal background of İbrahim Şevki, and of the spirit of the period:

"İbrahim Şevki was both a physician, who gained clinical experience in Paris and followed medical trends of the period closely; and a translator, who had the command of Arabic and Persian as well as of French and Latin. He translated several textbooks in the Medical School into Turkish. This is also the background that is behind İbrahim Şevki's translation of his professor's book, Question Médico-Légale de l'identité, and Herculine Barbin's memoirs. There is personal background, as well as the zeitgeist that manifests in the interaction between Ottoman and European medical fraternity, and the globalisation of the flow of information in the period." (p. 252).

İbrahim Şevki lost his life in 1893, during the cholera pandemic when he worked as a volunteer. Both his name and his translation had been long forgotten. There remained his dusty books, and faded articles and translations in the newspapers and magazines until he, as well as Herculine Barbin, were reintroduced to Turkish readers about a hundred years later with an excellent edition of the work.

CONCLUSION

Herculine Barbin was a young *hermaphrodite* who lived and fell in love in the 19th century France. Her story was rediscovered and edited by Michel Foucault, telling us about the multidimensional nature of sexuality. Foucault begins his introduction to the book with a provocative statement: “Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?” (p.vii)

The first-person account of the *hermaphroditic experience* of Herculine Barbin is still one of the foundational texts in gender studies, presenting background for many productive debates. 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 (13). According to Aurora Laybourn-Candlish, “Herculine Barbin can be interpreted as the champion of Foucault’s theories and a tragic example of what it means to fall outside of intelligible norms” (14).

Marc Lafrance who claims that Foucault’s introduction to the Barbin’s Dossier can be challenged on the ground of his own ideas on sex and power also underlines the importance of the story. He opines, “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). Butler, on the other hand, criticises Foucault’s tendency to romanticise Herculine’s sexuality as the utopian play of pleasures prior to the imposition and restrictions of ‘sex’ (15).

The way we understand “intersex” has changed with time. International Consensus Conference on Intersex in Chicago proposed *Disorders of Sex Development* and its acronym *DSD* as a new umbrella term for “congenital conditions in which the development of chromosomal, gonadal, or anatomical sex is atypical” (16). One goal of the Chicago Consensus issued in 2006 was to replace “particularly controversial terms” such as *intersex*, *pseudohermaphroditism*, *hermaphroditism*, *sex reversal*, and *gender-based diagnostic labels*, which had been criticised as imprecise and stigmatising (17). Although the Chicago consensus aimed at replacing potentially stigmatising vocabulary with less controversial terms, the new terminology resulted in criticism (18). The term *disorder* has been seen as unnecessarily pathologising, and falsely implying that all persons with *Disorders of Sex Development* are in need of surgical or hormonal intervention, whereas some or all conditions labeled as *Disorders of Sex Development* could be considered as the variants of the normal (19). Although the term *Variations of Sex Development* has been proposed as an alternative, medical communities, individuals, families, and activists use different terms to describe the phenomena today (20, 21, 22).

In short, the translation of Herculine Barbin’s memoirs into Turkish helps the aforementioned discussions to reach a wider audience and brings a forgotten physician, İbrahim Şevki, and his utterly bold translation of the work with respect to its period into light.

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