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Intersex Day of Remembrance: Adélaïde Herculine alias Alexina alias Camille alias Abel Barbin

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<https://intersex.hypotheses.org/4501>

Today is the birthday of [Adélaïde Herculine Barbin](#) – celebrated as Intersex Day of Remembrance around the world. Barbin was raised as a girl in 1838 but declared male at the age of 30, and committed suicide soon afterwards. It is very plausible to assume that the medical enquiry, the media coverage and the (unwanted) change of legal gender played a crucial role in Barbin's decision to commit suicide. Having, involuntarily, become a cause célèbre already in his/her lifetime, Barbin's sex and gender have continued to attract both scholarly and public attention. His/her biography is mainly known from the autobiography written shortly before the suicide; it was published first in 1872 and again, more than a century later, by [Michel Foucault](#).

Herculine Barbin
dite Alexina B.
présenté par Michel Foucault



Cover of the French edition (Foucault 1978).

„Remembrance“ is tied to remembering [names](#), so my contribution today is dedicated to Barbin's names. As Fabienne Imlinger in [her paper at the *Zwischen* conference](#) observed, the multiplicity of Barbin's names (and the association of the story with Foucault's rather than Barbin's name) is quite significant. On a more mundane level, the multiple names continue to confuse readers, and are likely to do so in the future – for example, Wikipedia entries in different languages vary as to which name they use.

Yet „Remembrance“ for me as a historian is also a question of getting the textual history right, so let me first comment briefly on the transmission of the autobiography.



The *Mémoires*: manuscript, editions, translations

The autobiography was written in Paris in 1868, after the gender change and shortly before Barbin's suicide. The original manuscript is lost; one [often reads](#) that Foucault „discovered the autobiography in the archives“ (this is how his book was advertised) but this in fact refers to Tardieu's book. There are quite a few copies of the latter in Paris libraries (see <http://www.sudoc.fr/005644828>), so I assume that the „archives“ Foucault searched was the rare books room of one of these libraries.

In any case it was Tardieu, who printed the text as we know it, asserting that he only had omitted a few passages (Tardieu 1872, 49). I assume that it was Tardieu who eliminated most proper names in Barbin's account, and it was certainly him who gave it the title „Mémoires d'Alexina B.“ (Tardieu 1872, 48). He seems to have possessed the original manuscript already in 1868 (Goujon 1869, 4 n. 1) and is the owner I know of. His book appeared in 1872, a second edition (more widely spread) in 1874. Having „rediscovered“ it, Foucault published Tardieu's version first in 1978 together with other materials relating to Barbin's case; the English translation appeared in 1980. An important difference between the French and the English version is the addition of the famous introduction (much more widely read and quoted than the rest of the book) on „true sex“. This introduction was absent from the original French version, and apparently Foucault only wrote it in preparation of the English translation. However, he also published a slightly different French version of the introduction in 1980. (See the bibliography below for full bibliographical details.) Translations of the *Mémoires* into other languages are, as far as I can see, always translations of Foucault's edition.



Adélaïde Herculine *alias* Adélaïde-Herminie *alias* Alexina *alias* Camille *alias* Abel

So what are the multiple (given) names of Barbin? At birth, she was called *Adélaïde Herculine*, and this was the name officially registered. The name *Alexina*, which Foucault used to refer to Barbin (and which appears on the cover of the French, but not the English version of his book) was not officially registered, but apparently used by her friends and family when she was young. It is also used by Tardieu and one of the medical records he quotes (Tardieu 1872, 49 and 130-133); in the same report, the birth certificate is said to refer to Barbin as *Adélaïde-Herminie* (Tardieu 1872, 130 n. 1), but this seems a mere error. *Abel* was the male name given to her, and officially registered, at the occasion of the change of legal gender in 1868; perhaps it was chosen (by whom? we don't know) because of its similarity to *Adélaïde*. Yet none of these names figures in the autobiography, where both the narrator and his/her environment use the name *Camille*. Equally importantly, it is an unisex name; unlike the English name *Camille* today, it was not rare as a male name in 19th c. France (see, for example, the [German Wikipedia entry](#)). It has sometimes been suggested that the name was only introduced by Tardieu, but this seems unlikely; he would have had to change more than the name do do this, as the name *Camille* is indeed commented upon in the autobiography itself. According to Barbin, the physician who performed the inspection that finally led to the change of gender observed that the name was fitting for its very ambiguity; the passage also suggests that the name was used from Barbin's birth (ed. Tardieu 1871, 120):

« Franchement, me dit le bon docteur, votre marraine a eu la main heureuse en vous appelant Camille ! Donnez- moi la main, mademoiselle; avant peu, je l'espère, nous vous appellerons autrement. En vous laissant, je vais me rendre à l'évêché. Je ne sais ce que décidera Monseigneur, mais je doute qu'il vous permette de retourner à L... De ce côté-là, votre position est perdue; elle n'est pas tolérable. Ce qui me



surpasse, c'est que mon confrère de L... se soit com- promis jusqu'à vous y laisser aussi longtemps, sachant ce que vous êtes. Quant à Madame P..., sa naïveté ne s'explique pas.» Il adressa ensuite quelques paroles d'encouragement à ma pauvre mère, dont la stupeur était à son comble, « Vous avez perdu votre fille, c'est vrai, lui dit-il; mais vous retrou- vez un fils que vous n'attendiez pas. »

“Frankly,” the good doctor said to me, “your godmother had a stroke of luck when she called you Camille. Give me your hand, *mademoiselle*; before long, I hope, we shall call you differently. When I leave you, I will go to the bishopric. I don't know what Monseigneur will decide, but I doubt that he will permit you to return to L. There, your position is lost; it is not tolerable. What amazes me is that my colleague at L. compromised himself to the point of letting you stay there for so long, knowing what you are. As for Madame P., her naïveté cannot be explained.” He then addressed a few encouraging remarks to my poor mother, whose stupefaction was at its height. “It's true that you've lost your daughter,” he said to her, “but you've found a son whom you were not expecting.”

tr. from Foucault 1980, 78 (Source: <https://books.google.de/books?id=GxFjeOf02rgC&pg=PA78>).

Sources and literature

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