



Herculine Barbin

Michel Foucault

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With an eye for the sensual bloom of young schoolgirls, and the torrid style of the romantic novels of her day, Herculine Barbin tells the story of her life as a hermaphrodite. Herculine was designated female at birth. A pious girl in a Catholic orphanage, a bewildered adolescent enchanted by the ripening bodies of her classmates, a passionate lover of another schoolmistress, she is suddenly reclassified as a man. Alone and desolate, he commits suicide at the age of thirty in a miserable attic in Paris.

Here, in an erotic diary, is one lost voice from our sexual past. Provocative, articulate, eerily prescient as she imagines her corpse under the probing instruments of scientists, Herculine brings a disturbing perspective to our own notions of sexuality. Michel Foucault, who discovered these memoirs in the archives of the French Department of Public Hygiene, presents them with the graphic medical descriptions of Herculine's body before and after her death. In a striking contrast, a painfully confused young person and the doctors who examine her try to sort out the nature of masculine and feminine at the dawn of the age of modern sexuality.

"Herculine Barbin can be savored like a libertine novel. The ingeniousness of Herculine, the passionate yet equivocal tenderness which thrusts her into the arms, even into the beds, of her companions, gives these pages a charm strangely erotic...Michel Foucault has a genius for bringing to light texts and reviving destinies outside the ordinary." Le Monde, July 1978

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