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# Jana Funke

## OBSCURITY AND GENDER RESISTANCE IN PATRICIA DUNCKER'S *JAMES MIRANDA BARRY*

*Since his death in 1865, military surgeon James Barry has alternately been classified as a cross-dressing woman or as an intersexed individual. Patricia Duncker's novel James Miranda Barry (1999) poses an important challenge to such readings, as it does not reveal any foundational truth about Barry's sex. Resting on obscurity rather than revelation, the text frustrates the desire to know the past in terms of gender binaries and stable sexual identity categories. Drawing on feminist and queer theorisations of the relation between gender and time, this essay demonstrates that Duncker's use of obscurity opens up alternative strategies of gender resistance.*

**Keywords** Patricia Duncker; James Barry; gender; sexuality; transgender; feminist theory; queer time; queer history

Who was James Barry? The ambiguous sexual identity of the nineteenth-century military surgeon has not ceased to attract attention since his death in 1865.<sup>1</sup> Soon after Barry died, newspapers started to run stories claiming that he had been a woman. These revelations were followed by a series of biographies exploring the truth of Barry's sex. In 1999, Patricia Duncker joined the list of authors who have attempted to come to terms with Barry's life: written on the borders of biography, history and fiction, *James Miranda Barry* was advertised and reviewed as the story of a cross-dressing woman. The blurb on the back of the English paperback edition presents Barry's life as a success story, claiming that his 'greatest accomplishment of all' was 'to "pass" as a man for more than fifty years'. The novel itself, however, complicates the cliché of a woman choosing to resist the limitations of her gender and 'making it' in a man's world, as Barry's femininity and his own desires as a woman remain obscure. Indeed, one of Duncker's reviewers, Mary Hammond (2002: 106), takes issue with the novel's failure to provide an insight into the female protagonist's mind, complaining that the text 'shed[s] little light on the life of this extraordinary woman'.

This article argues that the novel's supposed shortcoming – its failure to provide insight into Barry's inner life as a woman – can also be read as one of the text's main achievements. Through the use of obscurity, the novel resists monolithic and romanticised notions of gender resistance. As the state of being difficult or impossible to understand as well as the temporal quality of being unknown to posterity or lost to the past, obscurity offers a means to think about gender in terms of time. The novel shows that obscurity can operate as a form of gender resistance: it affects both Barry's

self-knowledge in Duncker's text as well as the author's and readers' ambivalent relationship to the historical Barry.

### Obscurity as gender resistance

Gender resistance refers to the refusal to accept or comply with hegemonic norms governing sex, gender and sexuality. Recent arguments about gender resistance, rehearsed primarily by feminist and queer scholars, have sought to dismantle the notion of an autonomous subject that freely chooses to live in opposition to socio-cultural norms. Judith Butler's (1999: 158) influential theorisation of agency, for instance, draws on Foucault's account of the constitutive role of power to highlight that acts of resistance are always dependent on the subject's subordination. Postcolonial feminist scholars (Spivak 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990; Mahmood 2005) further challenge a limiting resistance/subordination binary. In particular, their work shows that it is important to rethink restrictive understandings of resistance that fail to take seriously resistant acts that are not univocally legible as active and liberating.

Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* speaks to these debates through its use of obscurity. The novel opposes the idea of a wilful and self-conscious subject of resistance, as Barry's assumption of a powerful masculine role is not presented as the outcome of choice. Moreover, the text does not assert whether Barry was born a man or a woman, highlighting that the truth of his sex is out of reach both for himself and for the writers and readers trying to make sense of his life. Instead of identifying Barry as a man, woman, cross-dresser, trans man or person with an intersex condition, the text shifts the focus to the frustrated desire to know the self and the past in terms of gender binaries and static sexual identity categories. This desire is shown to operate on two levels: first, the novel explores Barry's own struggle to come to terms with his sexual ambiguity, a struggle played out in the thwarted quest for his own origins. Second, the text exposes the difficulties involved in writing and reading Barry's life. Through this double move, the novel challenges understandings of resistance that rely on an autonomous and self-knowing subject. It demonstrates how the past can resist the desire to understand others and ourselves in terms of limiting gender norms.

Obscurity is central to key debates in feminist and queer scholarship. Indeed, Butler (1993: 176) points out that 'obscure origins' and 'obscurity' used to be among the many meanings of the ambivalent term 'queer'. Though Butler does not offer a systematic theorisation of obscurity, her concept of performativity describes how gender is naturalised through the fantasy of a stable and knowable origin. In this framework, obscurity can serve to challenge gender norms by problematising the very fiction of an origin. Recent scholarship on queer time has produced more sustained investigations into the connection between gender and temporality. Queer, in this context, is rearticulated as a relation to time, in particular, the feeling of being asynchronous or 'out of time' (Freeman, 2007: 159). Of particular relevance to an understanding of obscurity in *James Miranda Barry* is Judith Halberstam's work, which investigates the temporal paradoxes underlying representations of transgenderism in contemporary culture. Halberstam (2005: 77) explains that, in order to pass successfully, 'the transgender character . . . [has] to create an alternate future while rewriting history'. This indicates that passing is dependent on the effacement of a

gender role assumed in the past. That this process of reinventing one's past is not simply a matter of choice is a point acknowledged by Halberstam and developed by Duncker in her depiction of Barry's assumption of a masculine gender role. Halberstam also shifts the focus to the problem of transgender history and biography, asking how one can do justice to transgender figures of the past.<sup>2</sup> Here, as in Duncker's novel, queer time seeks to challenge the knowledge of the past, raising the question of what is at stake when we desire to know the past in terms of static and possibly anachronistic identity categories that do not necessarily apply to or hold meaning for the subjects described.

Pointing to the possible collapse of certain forms of knowing and relating to the past, obscurity is far removed from accounts of resistance that rely on an autonomous and masterful subject. Obscurity always contains within itself the possibility of a failure to understand the self and others. It is through this potential failure that obscurity offers a different understanding of resistance that does not rely on an active subject of resistance and moves beyond an oppositional understanding of resistance and subordination. At the same time, obscurity is not necessarily the same as subversion, the privileged form of resistance in Butler, since there is no guarantee that obscurity will open up gender norms to resignification. Instead, obscurity relates to gender resistance in at least three different ways: it can help to diagnose limiting forms of resistance that continue to rely on the ideology of choice; it opens up the possibility to move beyond such accounts and to consider more ambivalent and less triumphant acts of resistance that may include passivity, loss and forgetting; finally, obscurity reveals how gender norms shape and determine an understanding of self, other and the past and shows that the past can resist the desire to understand it fully.

### Obscuring sex

Cross-dressing and other non-normative forms of gender behaviour and identification have often been read reductively in terms of free choice. Thus, the cross-dressing woman appears as a free subject choosing to resist the limitations of her feminine gender role to gain a more powerful and assumedly desirable masculinity. Similarly, there is a long tradition of associating transgender and intersex subjects with intentional deception or fraud. Such readings of passing are at risk of relying on the fiction of a subject capable of reinventing his or her gender and rewriting the past at will. Duncker's Barry fails to fulfil these clichés, as he does not choose to assume a masculine role. Moreover, the novel questions whether Barry fully knows his own origins, thus radically undermining the notion of an autonomous subject that can reinvent his or her own history.

Raised as a girl, Barry resists feminine stereotypes through tomboyish behaviour. At the same time, however, his mother, Mary Ann, instructs him not to pursue what appears to be the only future available to him as a woman, a future that includes marriage and submission. Thus, Barry is told not to become a woman from the very beginning of his life. In an essay, Duncker (2002: 149) observes that mothers rarely tell their daughters 'how not to be women, how to get out'. Mary Ann's instruction to be a man rather than a woman might be seen as empowering, but it is also made clear that Barry has no say whatsoever in defining his own gendered future.

Barry's lack of choice and limited self-understanding are reinforced in a pivotal scene in the first chapter, in which the 10-year-old Barry is confronted by a servant girl, Alice Jones. Alice is fascinated with the odd child, asking Barry to prove that he is 'really a girl' (Duncker, 1999: 35). With characteristic determination, Alice takes matters into her own hands and thrusts her fingers into Barry's trousers. Feeling Barry's sex, Alice 'burst[s] out laughing' and kisses him before delivering her verdict (35): 'Well, you're sort of a girl, I suppose. But definitely not like me. Perhaps you're a girl dressed up as a boy? Or a boy that's got enough girl for it not to matter too much either way' (35). The ambiguity of Alice's judgment is reinforced by her laughter, which indicates the collapse of gender binaries. In contrast to the affirmative and liberating laughter of Cixous's (1976: 888) Medusa, however, there is a violent quality to Alice's response. It is because Alice cannot reconcile Barry's sexual difference and her own desire for Barry with the idea that he might be a woman that she settles on reading him as a boy.

Feminist critics (Garber, 1997; Vicinus, 1999) have explored the aesthetic and erotic utility of the 'boy' as a potentially empowering category of identification for women. In Duncker's novel, however, it remains unclear whether Barry consciously embraces the role of the boy or whether it is assigned to him to fulfil his mother's and Alice's desires. Indeed, Barry's initial reaction to Alice's verdict is a negative one: he starts to cry and feels as if he is '[f]loundering in a pool of ambiguity' (Duncker, 1999: 35). Here, Barry resembles Hermaphroditus, whose transformation in Ovid's version of the myth is not one of conscious gender resistance but the result of rape by the nymph Salmacis. Barry does not intentionally transgress gender norms and his assumption of a masculine role is not accomplished by choice. Moreover, the sexual truth of Barry's body remains obscure. His body never ceases to be the invisible and unsubstantiated other of Alice's fleshly femininity. At the same time, his masculinity fails to signify his body and leaves Barry 'outside every system' (48).

Barry's sexual indeterminacy does not lead to a triumphant celebration of sexual fluidity, but functions as a means of undoing the ideology of choice. While the assumption of a masculine role allows Barry to gain an education and have a career as a doctor, he appears like a marionette and acknowledges his disabling lack of choice: 'my life, my profession . . . were chosen for me' (121). As a result, Barry troubles clichéd forms of resistance: he does not fit the mould of the cross-dressing woman choosing to be a man to gain power nor does he satisfy the fantasy of the transsexual deceiver and intersex trickster profiting from his or her sexual fluidity. Hammond (2002: 105) explains that reading *James Miranda Barry* left her with 'a disappointing sense that . . . Barry had no choice in the matter [of masquerading as a man] and didn't care one way or the other'. This line of criticism is indicative of the refusal to recognise forms of resistance that do not rely on an active and autonomous subject. Drawing on the work of the postcolonial feminist scholars mentioned above, Halberstam (2011: 178) calls for a feminist form of resistance that 'does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing'. Duncker's text approximates such a feminist politics: Barry's resistance relies on the refusal or inability to make a choice and calls into question the very demand for an active subject of resistance capable of making such a choice.

## Searching for origins

Barry's 'unbecoming' takes place through his thwarted search for his own origins. Rather than embrace the fluidity of the self, Barry initially searches for a positive genealogy, a point of origin that would allow him to make sense of his strange existence. Here, obscurity takes on a more overtly temporal meaning, referring to an uncertain relation to the past. Barry's search for self-understanding does not centre on the desire to uncover the sexual truth of his body; rather, his desire for knowledge is projected onto the search for his father. The riddle of Barry's paternity is already indicated by the novel's title: *James Miranda Barry* does not point to Barry's sexual ambiguity – even though Miranda can easily be misread as a woman's name. Instead, the incongruity of Barry's name refers to his uncertain paternity. Among his mother's lovers are the Venezuelan general Francisco de Miranda; his uncle, the Irish painter, James Barry; and the elderly aristocrat David Erskine. Shifting the emphasis onto the question of Barry's paternity and his relation to the past rather than his sexual identity, Duncker's novel opens up important alternative means of thinking about gender resistance in terms of the relation between gender and time.

In doing so, *James Miranda Barry* anticipates Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex* (2002). Unlike Barry, Eugenides' protagonist, Cal, is an individual with a medically diagnosed intersex condition: 5-alpha-reductase deficiency. Similar to Duncker, however, Eugenides also projects Cal's search for an understanding of his sexually ambiguous self onto a desire for a meaningful genealogy. Combining immigrant family saga and *Bildungsroman*, *Middlesex* interweaves the genealogical narrative of Cal's family history with the protagonist's search for self-knowledge. More specifically, Cal's narrative traces the history of the recessive gene responsible for his intersex condition, the 'roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time' (Eugenides, 2002: 4). The mutant gene carries the story of Cal's life, linking his body to time and providing a linear and coherent structure. Some critics have taken issue with the supposedly essentialist logic that drives the plot of Eugenides' novel. The text appears to affirm an origin of development – the incestuous relationship between Cal's grandparents – thereby offering a deterministic genetic reading of sexual dissidence. For Rachel Carroll (2010: 190), this 'narrative logic . . . serves to fix the indeterminacy of the intersexed identity by reference to a founding origin', making the novel complicit with a linear and teleological heteronormative temporality.

The present meaning of Cal's body is intertwined with a past that precedes and exceeds the realm of conscious self-signification. His ability to resist the pull of the past is severely limited, giving the lie to dreams of radical fluidity. At the same time, however, Cal's ability to lay claim to an origin and experience a stable relation to the past provides him with the very ability to resist the force of abjection. After he is diagnosed with his intersex condition during puberty, he feels as if someone is pulling him 'out of line, saying "Stay there. Don't move"' (Eugenides, 2002: 424). In this moment, his continued sense of self is facilitated by his body and its link to time: 'Time itself, the unstopability of it, the way we're chained to our bodies, which are chained to Time' (294). The body, 'that elephant', remembering 'what humans forget' becomes available as a mnemonic medium that limits the subject's agency while also offering an important sense of affirmation (99). While Eugenides' evocation of a monolithic Time (with a capital 't') works against postmodern and queer concerns with

multiple and intersecting temporalities, the novel also reveals Cal's linear, coherent and teleological story to be a narrative strategy rather than an essential truth. Cal explains: 'I'm the final clause in a periodic sentence, and that sentence begins a long time ago, in another language, and you have to read it from the beginning to get to the end, which is my arrival' (20). Here, the linear and teleological history Cal lays claim to is not motivated by the deterministic thrust of genetics, but rendered in linguistic metaphors, so that the essentialist logic of Cal's narrative is itself revealed to be a rhetorical strategy. That Cal claims a masculine identity once again sits uneasily with a queer focus on the dispersion or even negation of stable identity categories. However, as Halberstam (2005: 21) argues, it is important to move 'beyond the binary division of flexibility and rigidity'. In this sense, Cal's narrative can be read as an attempt to 'make "room" [and "time"]' for a marginal subject position, which can be understood as a strategy of resistance in its own right (20).

Duncker's novel goes further than *Middlesex* in dispersing the very desire for an origin and revealing that the linear time Cal is invested in is already gendered. Indeed, the engagement with temporality in *James Miranda Barry* is heavily influenced by feminist conceptions of time that predate recent work on queer time. Julia Kristeva (1981) famously argues that women are excluded from a masculine time that is historical, linear and progressive. Instead, women come to be associated with a feminine time that is prehistorical, circular and archaic. The potentially essentialist opposition of feminine and masculine time appears outdated and has been challenged by later theorisations of queer temporality.<sup>3</sup> Duncker's text rehearses this opposition between feminine and masculine time, but also points to its unravelling.

Barry's search for his father and a place in patriarchal history initially alienates him from a feminine time represented by the female characters in the novel. He perceives women as oppositional to the masculine time he partakes in, for instance, when he views a Madonna figure that reminds him of Alice and associates it with the 'self-contained, remote . . . incorruptible, eternal [feminine] body' (Duncker, 1999: 249). Duncker's novel poses a challenge to this idealised feminine time, as the women in her novel are anything but autonomous, distant and timeless. Mary Ann and Alice present an alternative temporality, but their resistance to patriarchal legacy and history is only accomplished at the cost of their submission to a masculine time that renders them obscure.

In keeping with the association of obscurity and femininity, these female characters thwart Barry's genealogical quest. For a start, Mary Ann's promiscuity is the cause of Barry's displacement. Moreover, when his mother commits suicide by drowning, she takes the secret of Barry's paternity with her to the grave. Alice also plays her part in guarding the secret of Barry's paternal origin: she withholds a note written by Barry's uncle and potential father expressing his pride and telling Barry that he should know everything. Upon reading the note almost 50 years after it was written, Barry visits Louisa Erskine, the sister of the third paternal candidate, David Erskine, in a bid 'to uncover the past' (342). Confirming that Mary Ann did have affairs with all of Barry's three possible fathers, Louisa only deepens the mystery surrounding his birth.

What Barry learns from Louisa is that it was his mother who encouraged the paternal triumvirate to enable him to go to university and to live as a man. Rewriting the Oedipal myth, Duncker shows that Barry's masculinity is not secured through the

identification with his father(s), but facilitated by his mother. At the end of the novel, Barry returns to the labyrinth in Erskine's garden, the place where his fathers agreed that he should be raised as a man. The entrance to the maze is lined with statues of male gods, but Barry remembers that there were female statues 'hidden within' the labyrinth (357). Upon reaching the core, Barry finds that the statues have disappeared: 'No trace remained. Instead, there was an unmarked paved square in the last box, at the heart of the puzzle. . . . The scene was blank' (357). The absence of the female statues from the place of rebirth indicates that women's interventions in patriarchal history are obscured. Obscurity enables a feminine form of resistance to patriarchal time, but it is a form of resistance that results in the effacement of the subject of resistance. Mary Ann's primary act of resistance is not deciding that her child should live as a man, but resisting the masculine time of history by obscuring Barry's paternity and by embracing her own obscurity when she commits suicide by drowning.

Barry himself comes to realise the futility of his search for paternal origins towards the end of the novel: 'The truth lies beyond my grasp. . . . I have no answers to the past' (352–53). Giving up the search for his father, Barry's relationship to the past changes and he starts to shift his attention to his mother: 'Who is James Miranda Barry? No one but her mother knows. And she has gone to her grave without telling. . . . She remains unforgiven' (297). As the feminine pronoun indicates, Barry's masculinity unravels and he starts to assume a feminine gender role. Importantly, however, Alice refutes this wish, telling Barry that it is impossible to 'suddenly become a woman. It takes years of practice' (368). Again, Barry's gender resistance does not result from a decision to change gender, but rather stems from the undoing of his masculinity together with his failure to become a woman.

At the very end of the novel, Barry makes peace with his mother and accepts that his 'home' might be by her side underneath the water's surface (362). Instead of a secure place in patriarchal history, Barry now desires joining his mother as she sinks into obscurity. Barry's wish is reminiscent of the psychoanalytic commonplace of a nostalgic longing to return to the womb, an idealised space where binaries of self and other and masculinity and femininity are unsettled. The idea that Barry finds himself through his mother can also be read as the feminist desire for a non-patriarchal lineage and form of transmission, which Halberstam (2011: 174) critiques through an astute reading of Woolf's (1993: 69) feminist imperative to 'think back through our mothers'. Importantly, however, Barry does not desire to resolve his sexual ambiguity through the return to a maternal origin; nor does he wish to think back through his mother to define himself as a feminine subject. Instead, it is the desire for obscurity that connects Barry with Mary Ann. This obscurity does not offer a triumphant escape from the binaries of masculinity and femininity or masculine time and feminine time, but opens up the possibility of a refusal to belong fully to either one or the other even if this refusal comes at the cost of the undoing and forgetting of the subject.

### Writing Barry's life

Highlighting Barry's desire for obscurity, *James Miranda Barry* is a paradoxical text written about a subject that resists being written. The novel addresses this conflict by



revealing the process through which Barry's legend is forged. After Barry's death, the task of inventing his life for posterity is left to Alice, who decides to sell out his story to a journalist. Consciously shaping Barry's posthumous reputation, Alice 'exposes' that he was not only a woman, but a woman who had born a child. Her decision to commodify Barry and rewrite his story is presented as an act of self-promotion, opportunism and revenge: 'Alice had invented the stretch marks. She had them on her own belly and did not see why James should get away with being so handsomely preserved at nearly seventy. After all, they weren't going to dig him up now to find out' (Duncker, 1999: 370). That Alice retrospectively labels Barry as a cross-dressing woman when it is she who passes most successfully in any given role – as part of her career as an actress and, finally, by unknowingly rewriting Barry's life – is one of the many ironies of the novel.

In an essay on historical fiction, Duncker echoes the idea that rewriting the past can act as a form of revenge for women: 'Reinterpreting 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' (2002: 49). In *James Miranda Barry*, Duncker engages critically and playfully with a patriarchal history that has no place for women like Alice when she invents her character to complement Barry's life. Paradoxically, the fictional Alice appears more real than the historical hero of the novel, who remains obscure. Giving Alice a life and a career that can rival Barry's and presenting her as the author of his life, Duncker's feminism is expressed in the reparative and revengeful use of historical fiction.

Revealing that Barry's life is written by Alice, *James Miranda Barry* points to a feminist model of authorship and resistance: since women are peripheral to the masculine time of history, they can rewrite the lives of men without leaving a trace. Importantly, however, this feminine resistance is always predicated on subordination: Mary Ann and Alice survive by selling their bodies and submitting to men. Moreover, they are never placed outside of masculine time, but have to submit to it to have any agency at all. As a result, Mary Ann dies obscure and Alice's role as the author of Barry's life is effaced. If the text restores Alice's authorship, Duncker (1999: 374) also informs her readers in her afterword that Alice's character is entirely made up, so that the most conventionally resistant character in the novel is shown to be 'entirely fictional'. Like Mary Ann, Alice ultimately comes undone. Once again, *James Miranda Barry* poses the challenge to acknowledge forms of resistance that are only made possible through submission, obscurity, loss, and, in Mary Ann's case, death.

### **Don't touch me!**

The story Alice tells the journalist after Barry's death begins with the words: '*Noli me tangere* [don't touch me] said the doctor. I am not for human hands' (369). Barry's lines are those of Christ spoken to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection. This resistance to the touch of others constitutes one of the main differences between Barry and women like his mother and Alice, whose survival partially depends on their promiscuity and physical availability to men. Of course, the idea that Barry is untouchable is Alice's fabrication and is intended to make her story even more scandalous and to exonerate her from the possible suggestion that she was complicit in

Barry's disguise. Ironically, given that Alice is the one character that has an intimate knowledge of Barry's body, her fabrications further remove him from view, giving rise to the legend that Barry was to become. Foucault (2001: 162) maintains that 'the legendary is nothing else . . . but the sum of what is said about it'. If a person really existed in the past, 'the legend covers them with so many wonders, embellishing them with so many impossibilities, that it's almost as if they had never lived' (162). The same applies to Barry, as the multiple stories woven around him by his mother and Alice lock him into a 'chrysalis of ambiguity' (Duncker, 1999: 294) that renders him obscure at the same time as it secures his status as a legend.

It is because of Barry's resistance to touch that the riddle of his sexual ambiguity remains unsolved. *James Miranda Barry* does not seek to pin down Barry's gender or sexual identity, but shows how Barry eludes the reach of writers and readers today, thus raising important questions regarding the way in which we come to understand and relate to the past. In her review of Duncker's novel, Hammond (2002: 105) complains that Barry is viewed 'through the opaque lens of a history that is infuriatingly non-specific, and a writing style which hints at but seldom illuminates the motivations of its subjects'. The lack of insight into Barry's life is not a sign of Duncker's failure as a writer, but constitutes another self-conscious use of obscurity. Her opaque style works against the realism of historical fiction, which 'gives the illusion of truth through the intensity of detail' (Duncker, 2002: 43). Instead of revealing the truth of Barry's life, Duncker deepens the opacity of her narrative. As one of the many retellings of Barry's story, the novel exposes that the past opens up opportunities for story telling precisely because it is unknown. At the same time, the text shows that the past ultimately resists being brought into the present, as Barry remains untouchable. In this sense, the novel is less about recovering Barry's story and more about the possibility of losing him to the past.

The feelings of loss and negation evoked by Duncker's rendition of Barry's life can be explored further by drawing on recent scholarship on queer history that seeks to conceptualise the encounter with radically different and possibly unrecoverable past sexualities. In her work on medieval sexualities, for instance, Carolyn Dinshaw produces a queer history of the untouchable. Dinshaw picks up on the same biblical reference as Duncker, *noli me tangere*, Christ's imperative against touch. She queers this resistance to touch and turns it into a form of connection, arguing that, irrespective of inevitable historical difference, it is possible to create affective relationships across time between subjects excluded from sexual categories now and in the past. In doing so, Dinshaw (1999: 39) shows that even the untouchable can yield 'a history of things touching'. Speaking of connection instead of identification, she offers an erotics of history that consists of touching rather than knowing the past. If there is an affective connection between the reader and Barry, a point where the present and the past can touch, it is the experience of obscurity itself. Barry's quest for a paternal origin and his desire for a stable relation between present and past mirror the reader's search for a singular sexual truth that makes sense of Barry's strange life in the present. As Barry cannot locate himself in the past, it is the shared failure to grasp his ambiguous identity that allows present-day readers to connect with him.

The feeling of alienation resulting from the break between present and past also points to an unrecoverable loss that might work against any such feeling of connection. Heather Love criticises Dinshaw's reading of Christ's words for failing to

take them at face value and trying to reach back to a queer subject of the past that might desire to remain obscure. Instead, Love (2007: 40) insists on ‘the resistance of such figures to the touch of contemporary queer historians’ and points to the necessity to accept the losses of queer history. If some queer subjects of the past do not want to be found, Barry might well be one of them. The reader of Duncker’s novel might share an affective investment in the past with Barry and participate in the latter’s struggle with obscurity; yet Duncker’s text also calls into question the epistemological validity of any identification with the past. Most importantly, Barry’s resistance to the touch of the present defeats the use of transhistorical identity categories and understandings of gender transgression and resistance, including those associated with cross-dressing and intersexuality. In her more recent biography, Holmes (2002: 319) maintains that, in writing his thesis about hernias, Barry anticipates current concerns with intersex, arguing that he ‘was willing to leave a document that spoke to the future’. Duncker resists the fantasy of a past that mirrors the present and renders problematic the desire to pin down past sexualities using present-day identity categories, favouring obscurity over historical truthfulness and specificity.

Taking seriously the possibility of losing Barry to the past, Duncker’s text resists the use of limiting gender and sexual identity categories of the present and points to the possible unknowability of the past. If *James Miranda Barry* disappoints some feminist readers, it is because the alterity of the past involves the undoing of the very category of ‘woman’. However, the queer experience of being out of time also aligns with feminist concerns regarding women’s exclusion from history. It is through the use of obscurity that the queer undoing of identity categories can begin to speak to the feminist resistance to the workings of patriarchal history.

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## Notes

- 1 As my essay makes clear, it is impossible and arguably undesirable to make essentialist claims about the identity of either the historical James Barry or the protagonist of Duncker’s novel. My decision to use male pronouns throughout should therefore be understood as a strategic bid to try and do justice to the masculinity claimed and lived by the historical Barry whoever this might have been.
- 2 Halberstam’s (2005: 56–61) discussion of Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* (1998) is of particular interest as the novel bears important similarities to *James Miranda Barry*.
- 3 Work on queer temporality often relies on a different yet equally problematic binary of queer and straight time, as Davies and I (2011) have discussed elsewhere.

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**Jana Funke** is an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Medical History at the University of Exeter. She has published several chapters and articles on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and sexology. She is the co-editor of *Sexuality, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture* (Palgrave, 2011) and editor of *The World and Other Unpublished Works by Radclyffe Hall* (Manchester University Press, 2014). She is currently working on a monograph on modernist sexualities and time and is co-authoring a book on uses of the past in the construction of sexual knowledge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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