Suzanne Gruß (Erlangen): “Refracturing Victorian Masculinity: The Curious Case of Dr James Miranda Barry”

Abstract

Dr James Miranda Barry (1795-1865) was an eminent medical figure – as a military army surgeon, Barry served in many parts of the British Empire; as a medical pioneer, he performed one of the first successful caesareans. Dr James Miranda Barry was also, it became known after his death, a biological woman (and the mother of a child). Barry has since become a cause célèbre, a case study in passing as male and, quite possibly, transgender, featured in a variety of biographies, novels, a play, and academic as well as (pseudo-)scientific publications. In this paper, I am neither interested in the ‘truth’ about Barry’s biography nor in his (or her?) elusive sexual identity. Rather, I want to show how Barry’s case refractures our understanding of hegemonic Victorian masculinity as a culturally specific construction on the one hand, and challenges biographical, literary and academic figurations of transgender on the other. Looking at the most recent biography (Michael du Preez and Jeremy Dronfield’s Dr James Barry: A Woman Ahead of Her Time, 2016), Patricia Duncker’s neo-Victorian novel James Miranda Barry (1999) and Marjorie Garber’s study Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (1992), which dedicates a chapter to Barry, I will explore how Barry became a case study for the de/construction of (Victorian) masculinity. In a monograph on Barry pertinently subtitled A Study in Transgender and Transgenre (forthc. 2018), Ann Heilmann argues that Barry (and his/her gender identity) is constituted anew in each individual publication. Taking my cue from Heilmann, I will depict the ways in which Barry’s precarious masculinity is constructed and reconstructed, and try to shed light on the narrative function of these different masculinities – biographical, fictional, academic – within their specific contexts of production and reception.