

Rewriting the intersex body: On the opera adaptation of Herculine Barbin's Memoirs

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ABSTRACT

Herculine Barbin's memoirs, published by Foucault in 1978, are considered the first testimony of an intersex person. Barbin's story has been adapted several times, including in a 19th-century German short story and in a 1985 French film. In addition, the translation of the memoirs has been analysed from queer perspectives (Rose, 2021) due to the protagonist's gender undecidability. This undecidability surfaces not only in translation but also in the memoir's audiovisual rewritings, including most recently, the opera *Alexina B.* (García-Tomás, 2023) which premiered in Barcelona. This paper analyses the rewriting process in this multimodal (textual/audiovisual) and intralinguistic (French) translation/adaptation. *Alexina B.* was created after a research process not only on the historical character, but also on the (historical) intersex experience. This article's analytical framework is based on queer and feminist approaches applied to Translation Studies, and on the notions of rewriting and translation as adaptation, practices through which the ethos is reworked (Spoturno, 2022). This framework serves to analyse the different adaptations (story, film and opera) and to argue that the opera presents a more queer-conscious narrative and a character who, despite being a victim of the social constraints of her time, was also master of her non-normative sexuality and desire.

KEYWORDS

Intersexuality, translation, adaptation, queer theory, audiovisual translation, ethos.

Re-vision —the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction— is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival (Rich, 1972, p. 18).

1. Introduction

The memoirs of Herculine Barbin (1838–1868) were published in 1860 by Doctor Auguste Tardieu in *Question médico-légale de l'identité dans ses rapports avec les vices de conformation des organes sexuels, contenant les souvenirs et impressions d'un individu dont le sexe avait été méconnu* (Tardieu, 1874). Her story is considered the first published account of an intersex person. The memoirs were found next to the body of the then legally Abel Barbin, who committed suicide in her/his apartment in Paris with charcoal smoke. Although Barbin ended her life legally as a male, and while some authors use non-binary pronouns (Holmes, 2008; Rose, 2021) “to allow the recognition of multiple sex and gender identifications” (Rose, 2021, p. 75), I will be using feminine pronouns as this aligns most with what is known of Barbin's self-conception during her lifetime, and to avoid contemporary identity categories. As suggested by Gomolka (2012), placing her in the umbrella term of *trans* could also be considered anachronistic as this would not be coined until a century after Barbin's death. After reading her memoirs, I contend that she struggled when being obliged to socialise as male and that it was, in great measure, her (homo)sexual orientation what led her to the legal and social sex change.

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The more contemporary publication of the story of Herculine, or Alexina in the memoirs, is the volume edited by Foucault (1978), *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.*, that contains the memoirs, *Mes souvenirs*. He discovered them during his research for his *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976–1984). Foucault adds the medical reports by Chesnet, the first doctor to examine A. B. (Barbin), and E. Goujon, the doctor that conducted the autopsy of Barbin’s body (Foucault, 1978), both diagnosing her as a *hermaphrodite*. It was not until the fourth edition of the volume that Foucault introduces a preface (1980): *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite*. The preface, “Introduction” in English and “Le vrai sexe” in the later French translation (1994), deals with discussions of sex and sexuality. This preface is considered an important contribution to the scholarship of queer theory, and, notably, Butler devoted part of her famous *Gender Trouble* (1990) to Barbin and Foucault’s preface.

Since its publication, Barbin’s story and myth has been adapted across the years. A German adaptation written in 1893 by psychiatrist Oskar Panizza, *Ein skandalöser Fall* [A scandalous case] was published in 1914. Years later, a French film, *Mystère Alexina* (1985), was directed by René Feret, with cartoonist Philippe Vuillemin starring as the main character. In addition, Barbin’s memoirs have been translated into different languages and studied from queer translation perspectives in recent works (Rose, 2021) due to the gender mutability of the protagonist, who swings from male to female pronouns and embodiments throughout its pages. By adopting a queer approach, this undecidability can be maintained in multiple linguistic adaptations not only in the form of translations but also in the rewriting of her intersex body and narrative in other texts such as audiovisual texts. In February 2023, the story of Barbin was adapted for the opera at the Gran Teatre del Liceu by composer Raquel García-Tomás, librettist and poet Irène Gayraud, and stage director Marta Pazos, in what I contend to be its most queer-conscious adaptation.

This article aims to analyse the rewriting of the original memoirs (already mediated by Tardieu in their first publication) through the multimodal and intralinguistic translation that is the operatic adaptation. I contend that it is the most queer-conscious and most ethical adaptation (cf. Spoturno’s *collective ethos*, 2022) of the original text, particularly in comparison to Panizza’s short story and Féret’s film, which base the rewriting on the concepts of mystery, unveiling, and scandal. Contrarily, the opera *Alexina B.* (García-Tomás, 2023) is the fruit of a long process of investigation into not only the historical character, but also the intersex (historical) experience, and the potential social and cultural message that this opera could offer. This framework of analysis springs from the application of queer and feminist translation postulates to the adaptation practice, as well as the notion of rewriting of the bodies through translation linked to the individual and collective ethos in translation (Spoturno, 2022). Such a framework provides the theoretical ground to approach the work of García-Tomás, Gayraud and Pazos, who are able to distance their work from stereotypical images and present an intersex character who, despite being a victim of the strict social constraints of her time, was also an agent of her own dissident sexuality and desire.

1.1. The life of Herculine Barbin

Herculine Barbin was born in 1838 in Saint Jean d'Angély, France, and was identified as female at birth. Her father died soon after, and her mother was left to live in poverty. As a result, Herculine was brought to an orphanage as a young girl before being moved to a girls boarding school, where she continuously excelled in her studies. Once there, she received the attention of female schoolmates, a phenomenon that persisted at the Catholic teachers college where she finished her studies and later at the private school where she began to teach. In her memoirs, Herculine discusses her anxieties about her own ambiguous body and abnormal sexuality. While teaching at the private school, she became involved both emotionally and physically with another teacher, Sara, the daughter of the school's owner. They shared a clandestine but fulfilling relationship. Herculine regularly suffered pain in her genital area and, when her condition worsened, was forced to consult a doctor. The doctor's inevitable revelation of her uncertain sex would tarnish the life she had crafted over the years.

Herculine's happiness would completely dissipate following legal and medical interventions. She was compelled to undergo a transition from living socially as a woman to navigating the world as a man. She was obliged to leave her school, part ways with her lover, Sara, and could no longer teach. While living as a man, Abel Barbin struggled to keep jobs that were appropriate for her 'new gender'. Barbin took her own life shortly after the transition. Herculine's story posed a complex challenge to the cultural-religious contexts of her time, as her ambiguous sex intersected with her sexual orientation. After her confession to the school's priest and the medical examinations that followed, she saw the change of her registered sex as the only way to openly live out her sexuality. As a devout Catholic, she saw it as the only way of 'correctly' experiencing her desire for Sara.

From the 18th century onwards, with the advance of science, biological theories of sexuality emerged which were distinct from approaches to gender and sexuality in previous centuries. During the Middle Ages, sex and gender fell into a continuum and the hermaphrodite was considered to be doubly sexed (Dreger, 2019; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). With the onset of modern history, there is a rejection of any such mixture of the two sexes, with sex made to be singular and fixed (Laqueur, 1991). In the case of intersex persons, doctors were concerned with deciphering the 'true' sex hidden beneath the non-conforming elements of the other sex, which were "accidental, superficial or even quite simply juxtaposed" (Foucault, 1980, p. viii). This was reinforced by the broader study of sexuality during the 19th century, when research on sexual identity was not only concerned with "hermaphroditism" but also sought "to classify and characterise different types of perversions" (Ibid., p. xii). Under the light of science, this "sexual irregularity" or "error" was seen as "belonging to more or less the realm of chimeras" (Ibid., p. x), producing in this way "terror-inspiring monsters" (Ibid., p. vii), a concept that also haunted the hermaphrodite in 19th-century Gothic imaginary (Webb, 2019). In the case of Barbin, the monster emanates from the space of rightness and protection, the Catholic religious environment, instead of coming from outside to haunt or corrupt what is right. Even if Barbin's sex was medically and legally dictated, she constitutes one of "those fortunate heroes of the quest for identity" (Foucault, 1980, p. xii).

1.2. Barbin from Foucault to Butler

From the first registered account of Herculine Barbin, her life has featured “a constellation of doctors and lawyers who scramble to render intelligible her sexed corporeality, of the public observer who textualises collective fantasies of her sexual deviance, and of the philosopher who foregrounds her narrative” (Lafrance, 2002, pp. 119–120). Barbin’s memoirs represent a key text in the history of sexuality and have attracted the interest of many scholars, with philosophers Foucault and Butler at the forefront. Such dialogue between both readings of Barbin’s memoirs has attracted much scholarly work (Artvinli, 2021; Hakoda, 2014; Koopman, 2019; Lafrance, 2002; Repo, 2014; Webb, 2019). Dreger (2019) considers Barbin’s case as one of the most significant events in the medical history of human sexuality. Barbin stands as an intersex icon: her birthday, 8 November, is commemorated by the Intersex Day of Remembrance or Intersex Day of Solidarity all around the world (Intersexday.org: n.d.).

Foucault (1980) suggests that the taxonomy of living beings takes place in modernity, meaning that female and male sexual organs, previously placed on the ends of the axis of sex, are considered two different categories and given their own names. According to Repo (2014) such sexual ordering of things was central to Foucault’s biopolitics as a “means by which life would sustain itself: through the sexual reproduction of the human species and disciplinary access to the body” (p. 83). In this light, the most important criticism to Foucault’s preface is his understanding of Barbin as living in a “happy limbo” where sexuality does not exist, making Barbin an entity without a gender when she is a young and adolescent girl. It is only later that her “material body is subjected to the biopolitical gaze and its discourse of sex” (p. 81). Butler criticises Foucault by categorising him in “the existentialism, structuralist and psychoanalytic traditions whose ontological authority he fervently contested” (p. 79). However, as suggested by Koopman (2019, p. 484), Butler’s stand can also fail to see that “Foucault is not endorsing, let alone romanticising, some happy limbo” rather, it is Barbin who presents those years in her life as such. Butler’s argument revolves around the notion that even a “non-identity” remains connected to the structures that facilitate the formation of identity. Foucault’s earlier perspective challenges this stance by suggesting that while individuals may never fully extricate themselves from power dynamics, they can discover means to subvert it. Such past and ongoing debates make Barbin’s testimony a cornerstone in the development of human sexuality and queer history.

2. Barbin and the intersex body in translation

Martínez Pleguezuelos (2018) notes the parallelism in the development of Queer Studies and Translation Studies in the overcoming of prescriptivist postulates that led towards more descriptive approaches. Translation becomes the ideal space to identify the discursive power dynamics that contribute to the formation of minority sexualities. For Kedem (2019) the exploration of queer translation is framed as “an object of immanent critique” (p. 159), which serves to challenge established conceptions pertaining to both the concept of queerness and the concept of translation. For queer theories to effectively function as critical modes of thought, it is imperative that they incorporate a self-critical dimension. This self-critical dimension plays a pivotal role in

maintaining the flexibility of queer theory as a political practice, ensuring its dynamism, and accommodating its diverse manifestations, thereby equipping it to effectively address critiques, as articulated by Butler (1990).

Rose (2021) published a monograph dedicated to the translation of trans identities. She divides the book in three main parts, devoted to trans, intersex and agender texts and their translation. For each of the sections, she presents case studies and then proposes translation strategies for the translation of what she calls “undecidability”. To the best of my knowledge, Rose’s academic work is the most complete account of the intersex body and narratives, and their translation. She discusses two main texts, namely Barbin’s memoirs (Foucault, 1978) and the fiction novel *Middlesex* (Eugenides, 2002), with an intersex narrator. She starts by situating the conceptualisation of gender and “hermaphroditism” in the early modern period, and how it evolved until present day to “consider how my intersex texts were viewed and translated in the past and how they could be translated today” (Rose, 2021, p. 69). She argues that both language and translation have the power to reinvent and to create more flexible and less binary identities. The protagonists of both stories present a ‘sexual undecidability’ that is reflected in textual undecidability. Failing to identify this would result in missing the potential of the queer text to be given a new life through translation, and, in the present case, adaptation.

The two texts analysed by Rose are subject to the search for an authenticity that rejects the “undecidability” of intersex bodies. Rose argues that critics are trying and have tried to find that moment that marks the discovery of the anterior and posterior identity of the intersex protagonists. According to her, the translation of these texts should capture both textual and identity plurality, and it is with this aim in mind that the author proposes hypertexts as a tool to show the inter-, intra- and metatextual universe surrounding translations. In contrast to the relationship between hypotext and hypertext, which presupposes a linear hierarchy, the author sees the hypertext (Genette 1989), the translation that is written from the original, also from alternative texts, information, notes, influences, and so on. This concept is embodied in annotated translations created as blogs or websites that provide access to the texts and references that have influenced translation decisions.

3. Translation as adaptation, adaptation as translation

Rich (1972, p. 24) identified revision as “‘an act of survival’ for women seeking their place in history”. What was non-existent, then, what was hidden or latent in a time, can be brought to life, and in fact, survive, thanks to the power of revision through adaptation and translation. As shown by feminist and queer translation, retranslations of texts can provide more complete portrayals of their narratives (Baer & Kaindl, 2018; Rose, 2021). Likewise, adaptations can “go beneath the surface of canonical classics to dig up subtexts that had either been overlooked or conveniently forgotten as the text entered cultural memory, the school syllabus, or global fandom” (Schwanebeck, 2022, p. 2).

I use Venuti’s work (2004; 2007) to draw a parallel or intense interconnection between the translation and adaptation processes. He suggests that language can be conceived in two different ways: as “expressive of thought and representing reality”, it



is a channel of “univocal meaning inherent to the source text”; on the other hand, adopting a more hermeneutical approach, as “constitutive of thought”, that will lead to understanding language as an interpretation “that fixes a form and meaning in the source text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations in the translating language and culture” (Venuti, 2007, p. 28). Therefore, translation is one of the multiples interpretations of a source text because any correspondence in relation to form and semantics are subject to the target context. Translation is a great gain opportunity for the source text that, by undergoing “various degrees of formal and semantic loss” (Venuti, 2007, p. 30), can develop an interpretation, fostering cultural difference in order for the translation to make sense on the receiving ending. Adaptation, according to Venuti, goes a step further because it is more likely to decontextualise materials in a more complex way due to the change in medium and the licence taken by their creators.

Adaptations will be mediated “by distinct styles of acting, directing and studio production, by the trajectory of a particular actor’s, director’s or screenwriter’s career, by economic and political factors, and by the hierarchy of values, beliefs and representations in the cultural situation where the adaptation is produced” (Venuti 2007, p. 30). Likewise, the translated text is not only decontextualised but also recontextualised by the target audience. Even if his theoretical approach is mainly applied to film adaptations, I apply it to opera, since this also involves a process of multimodal translation (or adaptation) and the rewriting of a narrative. In both practices, interpretation will be dictated by both cultural and historical contexts in which the adaptation/translation is produced, since the interpretation of the previous materials is performed “in a specific conjuncture of social relations” (Venuti, 2007, p. 27). As put by Azenha and Moreira (2012), a clear boundary between translation and adaptation, presenting these practices as mutually exclusive and closed to conflict or contamination, cannot be drawn. They suggest that from a theoretical point of view they are complementary and just “inherent to the practice of producing sense in language through translation” (p. 67).

What is of interest here are the opportunities that these two practices bring to a source text. I refer to the adaptative opportunities of translation and of the translative opportunities of adaptation when it comes to the rewriting and revision of bodies and narratives, particularly those of minority groups. Both translation and adaptation are interdisciplinary by their very nature because they discuss the phenomena of constructing cultures through acts of rewriting (Krebs, 2012, pp. 42–43). I contend that the rewriting — mutating, reshaping, and changing — allows space for revision, as positioned by Rich (1972). I take revision as a political and activist act. In this way, “revision” is identified with the idea of correction and of re-evaluation, of revising the narrative of a dominant culture “constructed and owned by cultural, patriarchal, or imperial/colonial power” (Schwanebeck, 2022, p. 3). Krebs (2012, p. 42) argues that Translation Studies has developed more “rigorous conceptual frameworks and perspectives” within which the phenomena of rewriting. Lefevere sees translation as “rewriting” (1992) and posits that translations can shape the afterlife of the source text, simultaneously revitalising their meaning across diverse cultures, spaces, and temporal contexts. Under a more contemporary light, artists adapt famous texts to highlight problematic issues, and thus in revising them, do more than rewrite them:

they extend the fictional universe (or scrutinise small segments closely) using the source just as a starting point (Schwanebeck, 2022).

The same discourses in the original, in this case Barbin's diaries, can be rewritten into a new medium, which is in this case opera. Based on Rich's idea of revision as an act of resilience in front of dominant culture agents, it is worth examining the rewriting of this intersex testimony. The opera, which is closely related to film and other audiovisual productions, offer a myriad of dimensions through which meaning can be conveyed. To duly deploy a revised rewriting through the adaptation of her memoirs and intersex history in general, the adapter, as much as the translator, is to avoid "viewing and reading committed to stereotypes of the Other crystallised in his/her culture" (Amorim, 2003, p. 28).

3.1. Barbin in adaptation: Rewritings in Panizza's short story and Féret's film

Before presenting the analysis proposed in this article, on the operatic adaptation of Barbin's memoirs, it is worth approaching previous adaptations set in very distinct periods of time. Foucault (1978) had already published the memoirs with Panizza's short story written at the end of the 19th century. Foucault explains in his preface that his decision to publish both texts together resides in the fact that they belong to the same period, "haunted by the theme of the hermaphrodite" (Foucault, 1980, p. xvii). Such adaptation was written by German psychiatrist Panizza, who transposed the story in time and altered many materials along with the whole atmosphere. Most importantly, as suggested by Foucault, Panizza removes the subjective mode found in the original memoirs to move the narration into the objective, written in a third person who observes the events from the outside, almost relating them as if they were written through journalistic lens. René Féret directed the film *Mystère Alexina*, which was released in France in 1985 and was starred in by actor Philippe Vuillemin, and is based on Foucault's publication of the memoirs in the edited volume together with Panizza's short story, and the medical reports by Dr Chesnet and Dr Goujon. Both adaptations present the same narrative, starting with the title: while Panizza introduces the story with a "scandal", the film opens with a "mystery".

According to Foucault, Panizza centres the narrative in the realm of shadow, where Barbin is located: she is described as "sister, mistress, disturbing schoolgirl, strayed cherub, male and female lover, faun running in the forest, incubus stealing into the warm dormitories, hairy-legged satyr, exorcised demon", demonstrating the "fleeting profiles [of Barbin] which others see" (1980, p. xvi). Although the film follows the memoirs more closely, the scenes are presented similarly fragmented, with the story based around the morbid curiosity of the 'sinful' clandestine sexual encounters and their terrible consequences. The film does take a closer look at the insights of the character and is less apathetic when conveying certain inner emotions of the protagonist. However, the camera seems again to observe only from the outside, presenting selected images of key dramatic events.

In the next paragraphs I argue how the rewriting of Barbin's story has been approached in the opera (2023), which is taken as an opportunity to rewrite the intersex narrative through a process of revision and recontextualisation in



contemporary times. This new temporal and physical space offers room for a more queer approach. To pinpoint what makes the adaptation queer, and I contend, more ethical, I build on queer and feminist translation theories and the notion of the rewriting of body-texts (Martínez-Pleguezuelos, 2021), and the application of individual and collective ethos to translation (Spoturno, 2022).

4. Queering the adaptation from a translation perspective

Martínez-Pleguezuelos (2021) analyses the rewriting of queer bodies in audiovisual translation based on Foucault's assertion that each individual can only be defined in the terms in which others perceive them. The representations of each individual in a specific culture will define the ontological limits in which they will be perceived, and they will only be visible in the space that the rest of the society allocates for that Other, or in this case, the queer. The body is exposed to the whole society and is, thus, described in relation to the discourses attributed to that body. Non-normative stories will therefore be considered "monolithic categories", that should find "openings that allow for the overcoming (...) of preconceived ideas, irreflexive readings or inherited stereotypes" (p. 693). The discursive power, which Butler (1990) characterises as legitimising, permeates society and actively contributes to the (re)shaping of the subject. Butler emphasises the importance of acknowledging the indeterminate nature of the subject as a foundational aspect preceding language. In this view, the subject, its identity, and even the materiality of its body is construed as the discursive outcomes of signification (1990, pp. 143–144). Butler elucidates this perspective by adopting Foucauldian principles in her research, asserting that the regulatory power not only operates on an existing subject but also moulds and constructs the subject (Butler, 2004, p. 41).

The translator possesses the authority to (re)construct not just the identity but also the gender and sexuality of the subject. This capability enables a departure from essentialist assumptions rooted in a patriarchal societal perspective (Martínez-Pleguezuelos, 2018). The queer component of a text, what is defiant of the established and dominant, is to be maintained and resurfaced. Recent scholarly works underscore the promising trajectory of this research area, as demonstrated by publications including volumes authored by Baer & Kaindl (2018), Baer (2020), Epstein & Gillett (2017), and Rose (2021). The goal is to leverage the inherent potential in the fluid concepts of translation and sexuality, comprehending the practices and discourses entailed in negotiating identities (Baer & Kaindl, 2018).

Démont (2018) proposed three modes of translating the queer component of texts, which are easily transposed to the negotiations implied in the representation of queer narratives in adaptation. In the first mode, which misrecognises the queer, the translation is "subject to the normalising and 'straightening' power of translators" and "by being connected to a whole new set of semantic associations, the potentially subversive content is turned into a conservative strategy to hide a queer sexuality" (pp. 158–159). The second mode, which minoritises the queer, reduces the text's queerness "to the terms of the contemporary identity politics" suppressing "the potential discontinuities, associations, and uncouplings around which the original text, and its own sexual rhetoric, are organised" (p. 162). Finally, preserving the queer encompasses the recognition and transference of all the nuances that characterised



the queer essence in a text (Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023). Earlier adaptations of Barbin's life hide and minoritise the queer by replacing the subjectivity for an objective standpoint, by focusing the attention on secrecy, sin, and scandal, and rewriting the memoirs into a story of suffering and sorrow. Although the cinema adaptation presents a much more nuanced vision of Barbin's experience, its narrative, already embedded in the selection of a cis male actor, reinforces the idea presented in Panizza's short story of a man wrongly living among women and being sexually and romantically attracted to them.

The third mode described by Démont offers a more nuanced rewriting queerness. An adaptation which is able to bring the queer to the front results in a more ethical mediation of the original content by introducing a conscientious portrayal of dissidence, aiming to provide a critical perspective on traditional modes of representation of non-normativity. These processes of identity negotiation have been approached by works on the reworking of the ethos, defined by Amossy (2014) as the construction of identities within actual discourses of the discourse producer. Within the realm of translation, Spoturno (2022) deploys the concept of collective ethos, emphasising its significance in comprehending and depicting specific groups and identities through translation. As suggested in Iturregui-Gallardo (2023), this reworking of the ethos can positively contribute to critical analysis through the lenses of feminist and queer postulates.

4.1. Translating and adapting with ethos

Ducrot (1984) characterises ethos as the discursive image associated with a speaker. Simply put, it is the impression formed of the person responsible for the statement based on their enunciative commitment and activity. The ethos is not explicitly stated but rather demonstrated in discourse. Amossy (1999) adopts Ducrot's discursive definition, acknowledging its linguistic origin, and further articulates the concept within a specified institutional and cultural context (Spoturno, 2019). Undoubtedly, the category of ethos has been very productive in different disciplinary fields such as sociology and interactional pragmatics, literary studies, and also translation studies (Spoturno, 2019). Amossy (2010) discusses collective ethos as the image ascribed to a particular group and shaped through its discourse. The management of collective ethos involves the dynamic relationships of agreement and tension it establishes with individual ethos within a given discourse situation. Collective ethos is characterised by the social representations it evokes and its potential to persuade the audience to adhere to a staged image of the collective.

Spoturno (2019) deals with the reworking of the ethos (Amossy, 2001, 2010, 2014) by basing ethos on a previous ethos. This reworking encompasses a series of discourse operations used by the producer of discourse based on the previous existing images of themselves in relation to the requirements presented in a given discourse exchange. The reworking can aim at reinforcing an established positive image, restoring a forgotten image, or repairing and transforming a damaged image (Spoturno, 2019). As pointed out by Orkibi (2008), this reworking must consider the stereotypical representations of a certain group as well as the images cast by the same group about itself. Furthermore, the reworking is connected to the social and institutional status,

and reputation of the producer of discourses, which will determine and authorise their message (Spoturno, 2019).

The ethos in the case of Barbin can be analysed from two main points of view. Firstly, based on the individual ethos of the character, and secondly, based on the collective ethos of intersexuality. The memoirs, as mentioned in Foucault's preface (1980), are written from a personal and subjective point of view. The first publication of the memoirs in the 19th century presented such account as a part of a medical study, moving the attention from the personal experience to sexual characteristics of her body in a science-based approach to hermaphroditism. Furthermore, Panizza's short story and Féret's film get rid of the closeness to the readership and adopt an objective and less intimate approach to Barbin's account, rewriting the story as a matter of scandal and mystery.

Contrary to these interpretations, the opera seems to rework this ethos to locate Barbin at the centre of her own rewriting, in this way recovering the sense of intimacy developed within the pages of the memoirs. Likewise, García-Tomás' adaptation reworks the collective ethos attached to the intersex identity, an intention of the production which was made possible through research and consultation with associations and persons of the intersex community. The creative team were always aware of the political opportunity of their work: a queer story put on the stage of an opera house, the epitome of 'high culture' and, as put by Spoturno (2022), itself a producer of discourse of high institutional status and reputation.

5. The opera *Alexina B.*

Víctor Garcia de Gomar, art director at the Liceu in Barcelona, describes the opera as "a message in a bottle to be picked up in a different world, but still with the same gestures, 155 years later" (Fundació Gran Teatre del Liceu, 2023, p. 26). He also refers to the effort of the creators to maintain Barbin's existentialist suffering by highlighting how she loved and was loved. Musically, the opera combines references to the 19th century France, adapted and reformulated with "intelligence, sensibility and a feminine gaze" (ibid., p. 25). When composing the opera, the creators were concerned with their own capacity as endosex¹ women to tell this story, resulting in a very respectful approach. They tried to create a piece of art sprung from a place of humbleness, addressing these topics in an "elevated art" format that also provides beauty to the story (ibid., p. 65). The opera, through its plasticity and musical beauty, as well as the thoroughly thought-out references to the past, reflects on the silenced and marginalised minorities, on human cruelty, on the value of life and the right to freedom (ibid., p. 62).

The opera contains several aspects that show the intention of the creators/adaptors/translators when translating the memoirs to operatic text. Their main objective was to portray the vast array of feelings and experiences undergone by the protagonist, whose story is told through her subjectivity. This purpose then indicates a great deal of willpower to rework the ethos, both individual and collective, by means of the handling of discourse.

5. 1 Libretto

According to Gayraud (Gran Teatre del Liceu, 2023), the libretto is subject to a double limitation: firstly, the greatest respect towards Barbin’s tone, vocabulary, and content, and secondly, the production of a contemporary opera aware of the current advocacy for intersex people. An example of this is the repetition of the expression *mon enfant* [‘my child’] throughout the opera, precisely selected for its non-gendered nature. Interestingly, the French expression was also maintained in the Catalan surtitles due to the difficulty of producing a similar non-gendered translation.

The presence of the paratexts accompanying the memoirs (Foucault, 1987) is noticeable since the reading of Barbin’s story for the purpose of this adaptation happens based on the perspectives already provided by doctors and scholars. This is seen in Dr Chesnet’s explanation in the opera, when he says that no perfect hermaphrodite exists and that science “through a detailed exam, allows us to determine the real sex of a person” (García-Tomás, 2023, n.p.; my translation). This reflects the context provided in Foucault’s preface regarding the study of body tissues to determine a ‘real’ sex. Foucault’s view that Barbin’s sexuality forced her to a gender transition is seen in Alexina’s own words within the opera, when she says:

*Aujourd’hui, mon amour pour Sara me rend à moi-même.
C’est étrange pourtant... rien ne me pousse du côté des hommes...
Mais si j’aime Sara, c’est bien que je suis homme.
Je voudrais que nous soyons l’un à l’autre,
devant les hommes et devant Dieu, par le mariage...*

[Today, my love for Sara has brought me back to myself.
It’s strange though... nothing pushes me towards men...
But if I love Sara, it’s because I’m a man.
I want us to be each other,
before men and before God, through marriage...]

However, the transition is portrayed as a source of sorrow; this is seen in one of the final passages of the opera, when Barbin is almost pointing towards a much more contemporary non-binarity, translated into the symbol of the angel:

*Le monde a fait de moi une femme,
puis l’amour et mon désir ont fait de moi un homme...
mais je ne veux aucun de ces noms!*

[The world made me a woman,
then love and my desire made me a man...
but I don’t want any of those names!] (García-Tomás, 2023, n.p.).

A great difference between the cinematic and the operatic adaptations is the role of Sara in the story. While in the film Sara is merely a love interest with little agency and psychological depth, the opera provides Sara with a voice, clearly positioning her as the protagonist of scene 17. Sara is no longer a passive accessory to the story, but a very invested character who develops feelings of love and desire towards the ‘abnormal’ body of Barbin.

5.2 Mise-en-scène

In the realm of the *mise-en-scène*, it is also easy to identify aspects that aim to convey a queer representation of Barbin's life. The translation from the written memoirs is captured in different codes that configure the aesthetics of the opera. Stage director Pazos explains her interest for intermediate spaces and times, and how she aimed to work in an intertime and interspace (Fundació Gran Teatre del Liceu, 2023, p. 29). She describes the opera as a four-colour palette: Barbin's material body, marked by a pain that increases until reaching delirium, and the understanding of the body as erotic and desired; Barbin's emotional body, swimming in uncertainty and the ecstasy of the first love; Barbin's symbolic body, in which lights and shadows are manifested through the angel (innocence, childhood) and the ghost (fear, pain, rejection, impossible love). The angel, present in the beginning and in the end, functions as a non-gendered symbol: limitless, but at the same time a monster (cf. Webb, 2019).

Barbin's surroundings in the opera also provide meaningful symbols. Lichen green is the main colour in the scenes; this is a colour that is present in nature, in romantic paintings, but also in schools, sanitary spaces, prisons, and courts. This green is also cast upon characters belonging to the oppressing system which include doctors, priests, judges, and police (ibid., p. 30), drawing a strong contrast to Alexina, Sara, and the young girls, who are dressed in vibrant colours symbolising acts outside of the norm, Alexina's and Sara's romance, and the ungendered childhood years. Such visual translations that so drastically draw an opposition between the two worlds — that of infancy, innocence, "happy limbo" (Foucault, 1980, p. xiii), love, desire, and romanticism, and that of violence, pathologisation, and repression — offer a new understanding of the story and takes advantage of revision to include a contemporary understanding of Barbin's testimony.

5.3 Composition

Musically, this opera also demonstrates the intention to maintain the nuances of queerness. This is heard, for instance, in the selection of voices. The lead role of Alexina/Abel was designed precisely for the mezzosoprano Lidia Vinyes-Curtis, whose vocal characteristics allow for a duality of high and low sounds, used particularly in the last moments of the opera when Alexina starts living as a man (ibid., p. 59). The play with high and low sounds is also portrayed in the countertenor register of Xavier Sabata, who plays all of the male roles. Here, masculinity, symbolically related to the oppressive system surrounding Barbin, is creatively altered by using a very high register, normally attributed to femininity.

In comparison to the portrayal of sex in the film adaptation, which depicts the sexual encounters of the protagonists but in a sinful and clandestine way, Barbin and Sara's desire represents a central aspect of the opera. The composition establishes a musical leitmotiv to represent their love based on Liszt's *Sposalizio* ['Wedding'] inspired by Raphael's homonymous painting, that is related to queer sex, which is here rendered sacred. Sex between the two lovers is captured in a long scene in which they are in the bed, throughout which the music builds on an ascending infinite scale that symbolises a path to the unknown and elevated, providing in the composer's own words "a representation of the divine through the body" (ibid., p. 61), and matches the

poetic language in the description of the feminine body, thus constructing a Sapphic narrative between two sexed individuals.

All these movements are evidence of the intense effort made to keep the hidden, the (through a 19th-century gaze) ‘perverse,’ and ultimately the queer, afloat. By introducing what is learnt through paratexts into the verses of the libretto, transforming leitmotifs into symbols and music, and reinterpreting the historical context into colour, the memoirs are translated and adapted through a contemporary reading by preserving their queerness (Démont, 2018). As pointed out by Foucault, even as Barbin’s life was steered by social and cultural constraints, she managed to experience love and sexual pleasure. A critical analysis demonstrates that this is the central tenet behind the production of *Alexina B.*, which aims to depict Barbin not only as a victim but also as possessor of her own desire and pleasure. By analysing Barbin’s testimony, taken from her own writing and rewritten in the adaptations presented here, I demonstrate how her individual ethos is reworked to cast a different image informed by temporal and social contexts as well as the mediating power of the adaptors.

6. Conclusions

This article presents the application of a Translation Studies perspective to the processes of adaptation. More precisely, and based on the inseparability of both practices, the article analyses such processes from a queer perspective, with the ultimate purpose of studying how the individual and collective ethos — referring to images attached to certain individuals and collectives — are rewritten throughout different formats and historical contexts. As posed by queer translation literature, translation is seen as an opportunity to restore the queer component of texts that might have been hidden, ignored, or misread. I understood Rich’s conceptualisation of revision (1972) as an opportunity for survival, which she applies to female writings and topics within a patriarchal system that has relegated minorities to the veiled margins.

Barbin lived in the 19th century mainly as a woman and was later considered a man under the gaze of oppressing bodies such as the church, medicine, or the law. Her romantic and sexual desire for women was the primary trigger for her contemporaries to consider her a male, placing sexuality and gender identity within the corseted norms of cisheteronormativity. The abnormality of her experience and what it meant within the historical moment, to be in-between, pushed her into a life of secrecy, suffering, scandal, and later, suicide. These are the topics brought to the fore in pre-existing adaptations of the memoirs. Medical and psychiatric reports centre on the ambiguity and abnormal functioning of her body, as well as her sexual attraction. Panizza’s story is told as a third-person account that acts as an omnipresent commentator on the scandalous case of a hermaphrodite in a convent; almost a century later, the film by Féret casts a male actor to play Barbin and constructs the narrative around pain and suffering. Disentangling the opera’s creative process through a translation studies lens demonstrates that it constitutes a more queer and ethical translation/adaptation of the memoirs. In such analysis, the original words written by Barbin are mediated into new forms of language in an intralinguistic translation for the libretto, in a reinterpretation



through colour and symbolism on stage, and in a musical narrative that stems from 19th century sounds with contemporary additions.

Gayraud's libretto has maintained the register and tone of the original memoirs, but in a more accessible French. The libretto has not only used revision as a way to update the text and reach a contemporary audience in terms of language; it also exudes the reading of paratexts, such as the medical reports, scholarly analyses, and pre- and postfaces. The selection of passages to be staged also highlights the inner universe of the characters such as Sara, who is merely an accessory in the film adaptation, as well as (Sapphic) sex and pleasure. I contend that the libretto encompasses a recent approach to the memoirs and all other textual interpretations of Barbin's life experience and myth in a retranslation that reworks her individual ethos and the collective ethos of the intersex identity.

In the opera's *mise-en-scène*, symbols and colours are great carriers of meaning. Pazo's concept uses them as a kind of intersemiotic translation of the written word. Leitmotifs such as the angel or the ghost, which encompass monstrosity, death, and non-gender/liberation, are used throughout the scenes. The palette of bright colours chosen for Barbin, Sara and the schoolgirls is placed on top of a green lichen cast on characters symbolising oppression, medicalisation and regularisation of identity and sexuality.

Finally, the composition by García-Tomás is informed by important musical works in the 19th century in combination with contemporary proposals by using synthetic sounds and new arrangements. As with the libretto, here the composer takes advantage of the possibilities of revision to retranslate not only a character but also a time period and story into a more comprehensible musical language. In this aspect, the adaptation is once again shown to be queer. The composer tailors the composition for the mezzosoprano Vinyes-Curtis, who plays Barbin and is able to move from a high to low register, navigating the feminine and masculine. She also brings all male characters to a countertenor range, so that these high notes are put in contrast with their respective masculine roles.

The opera *Alexina B.* plays an important role in the reworking of Barbin's individual ethos by restoring her image as the first intersex testimony. This can be asserted based on the contemporary activist approach of the creators/adaptors/translators that immersed themselves in a research process to explore not only the contextual aspects of Barbin's story, but also to approach the current intersex community. By translating Barbin's memoirs into the multimodal audiovisual possibilities of the operatic text, they provide visibility to hidden, nuanced and queer aspects in Barbin's story, thus impacting the collective ethos of intersex individuals in general. The analysis presented here is evidence of the strong connection between adaptation and translation practices (cf. Venuti, 2007). Such conceptualisation of both practices as boundaryless allows for the deployment of (queer) translation theories (cf. Démont, 2018; Spoturno, 2022) for the analysis of adapted materials that travel through media, time, and spaces. Such reading of adaptation and translation processes demonstrate a great activist and social potential when considering queer and other minority groups' representations. Referring back to the quotation which opened this article: the act of adaptation/translation allows for a process of revision that provides the text and the narratives in it an opportunity for survival.



Acknowledgements/Funding

Dr Gonzalo Iturregui-Gallardo is a Serra Hunter Fellow and a Bank of Montreal Visiting Scholar in Women's Studies at the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, University of Ottawa.

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Data availability statement

The original score and libretto can be purchased through the publisher's webpage, at: <https://editorialmondigromax.com/producto/alexina-b-raquel-garcia-tomas/>.

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¹ Endosex is a term used by Intersex activists and allies to indicate a person born with sex characteristics that are seen as typically male or female at birth, therefore not medicalised as intersex (Monro, 2019).