

## INTRODUCTION

*Gender Revolution Before Intersex or Transgender*

In 1867, Dr. Basile Poppesco examined a wealthy 25-year-old complaining of “suffering in the genital parts.” A man later revealed to be the patient’s lover had arranged the visit for “one of his male friends.”<sup>1</sup> Upon arriving, the doctor observed a “magnificently ornamented” apartment scattered with “innumerable perfumes,” in which “everything revealed the most effeminate coquetry.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, to Poppesco’s surprise, the “young man” he had expected arrived “attired as a young girl” whose long, flowing locks framed a “remarkable physiognomy,” and who swore Poppesco to secrecy in a “perfectly feminine voice” (38–39). The doctor was at a loss to determine the sex of his intriguing patient: “There was a slight something in the manners and carriage of the person, such as led me to demand unexpectedly if he was a man or a woman” (38). Even a thorough medical examination could not resolve the mystery, revealing only an “excessively developed” “clitoris,” of nearly two inches, “quite suggestive of the glans” (38). No gonads – testicles or ovaries – could be found. At home, the patient always dressed as a woman, but chose male garments to wear around town. A bewildered Poppesco further reported: “This person had not the slightest predilection for women” but “retained in his service a *personnel* of male domestics” (39). The good doctor was baffled because his patient challenged everything he believed about the differences between men and women. In the end, he reluctantly determined that his case offered “an instance of hermaphroditism in which it is impossible to define the sex” (39).<sup>3</sup>

Much of the history of sexuality has been marked by the Foucauldian claim that the belief in “true sex” – that each body has only one sex – is one product of the nineteenth-century moment which, in many ways, continues to hold sway even now, and is only just beginning to show signs of change.<sup>4</sup> Until very recently (2015 in the United States and 2013 in France), marriage could only take place between a man and a woman, gender-inclusive bathrooms remain a contentious subject, and countless forms and official

documents still require us to identify ourselves as members of either one or the other gender, despite increasing challenges to such rigid binary social organization. This was even truer in nineteenth-century France, and a wealth of historiography testifies to the ways in which medicine worked to reify as “natural” the distinctions between men and women.<sup>5</sup> This book presents archival findings calling for a revision of part of that longstanding narrative. While it may be true that nineteenth-century doctors and laypeople believed in the fundamental differences between the sexes, when they encountered cases of intersex, then known as “hermaphrodisism,” they were often forced to admit that identifying the nature of those fundamental differences was not nearly so evident. Doctors vehemently disagreed with one another about what characteristics mattered the most, what methods were the most likely to produce guaranteed results, and even to what sex a given individual belonged. Many acknowledged that sex could not be determined during the lives of some people, and that only autopsy might yield definite results. Sometimes, even autopsies failed to solve the riddle.<sup>6</sup> More often than previously thought, doctors like Poppesco were forced to admit that they could not determine the sex of an individual at all.

During the nineteenth century, words like “intersex” and “transgender” had not yet been invented to describe individuals whose bodies or senses of self challenged binary sex. But that does not mean that such people did not exist. “Intersex” is an umbrella term for a range of naturally occurring bodily variations, so intersex people have always existed. In nineteenth-century France, those like Poppesco’s anonymous patient – whose biological sex could not easily be determined and who *might* describe themselves today as intersex – were called “hermaphrodites,” and for the first time there was such widespread anxiety about what to do with these gender “outlaws” that both doctors and novelists scrambled to write on the subject in skyrocketing numbers.

Hundreds of case studies appeared in wide-ranging medical journals, high-profile trials captured headlines, and doctors staked their reputations on sex determinations only to have them later reversed by colleagues. Some patients sought out doctor after doctor in order to attain the outcomes they desired, while others wanted nothing more than to be left alone. But that is only part of the story: while doctors quarreled about what separated a man from a woman, novelists increasingly began to explore debates about binary sex in their fiction, describing the experiences of gender-ambiguous characters and even writing entire novels in which the mystery of a protagonist’s sex became a page-turning motor for plot. Canonical fiction by some of the most important French writers of the nineteenth

century – from Honoré de Balzac, architect of *La Comédie humaine* (*The Human Comedy*), to Émile Zola, the figurehead of French naturalism – shifted its focus to the enigma of unknown or unknowable gender, and was joined by now-forgotten popular authors writing marginal novels and medical erotica, sometimes posing as doctors themselves.

Historians and literary scholars have long singled out nineteenth-century France as the high point of representations of “hermaphroditism,” but *Unmaking Sex* is the first book to explore why through an investigation of both medicine and literature. It is also the first to reconstruct the role popular fiction played in disseminating cultural beliefs about gender ambiguity across science and high-brow literature. This examination of new sources yields new findings: this book marks a departure from the traditional Foucauldian argument that “true sex” was firmly entrenched by the nineteenth century. Rather, it reveals that in many instances, both literature and medicine use narrative as a means to unmask “true sex” as mere fiction.

Until now, literary androgyny has generally been seen as a reflection of mythology’s enduring influence, while historians of intersex have not considered how fictional narratives were informed by and even influenced contemporary medical case studies. This book argues that literary representations of “hermaphroditism” are not just throwbacks to mythology, as critics have long argued, but are, in fact, awash with the same cultural and historical anxieties as medical case studies. Fiction engages with the terms of medical and legal debates surrounding nonbinary sex in previously overlooked ways that can transform our understanding of the French canon. Secondly, based on an analysis of over 200 medical case studies throughout the length of the nineteenth century, it demonstrates that medical representations of intersex, which rarely convey consensus, often reveal similarities between the sexes. These findings nuance the popular claim that throughout the nineteenth century, amid the great cultural shifts that saw women entering the workforce and demanding education, science sought to reinforce the clear, biological differences between men and women that would naturalize male social domination and reify traditional notions of family.

### The Power of Naming

Today, “intersex” describes many differences in sex traits or reproductive anatomy, some of which had not yet been identified in the nineteenth century, and even today, exactly what counts as intersex is debated.<sup>7</sup> Partly

for this reason, the relative frequency of intersex is also contested, although another important factor is that medicine has systematically underrepresented it since the twentieth century via treatments and surgeries designed to engineer its invisibility. Estimates range from 1 percent of births (the likelihood of being born with red hair) to 1 in every 2,000 births. After an exhaustive review of contemporary medical literature, Anne Fausto-Sterling determined that about 1.7 percent of children are born intersex, which is relatively common, when compared to the 0.3 percent chance of having identical twins.<sup>8</sup> Activists working to raise awareness about intersex argue that the false perception that they represent a minuscule fraction of the population has been used to deny them the recognition and basic human rights that they deserve. The Epilogue explores contemporary intersex and the intersex movement as well as the completely different, but also related trans movement in regard to the nineteenth-century roots of the resistance to “true sex” that this book documents, but the following chapters study historical “hermaphrodisism” in nineteenth-century literature and medicine. For this reason, I use the historical terms “hermaphrodite” and “hermaphrodisism” when citing nineteenth-century materials. Today, neither word is used in a human context, and because both have been perceived as traumatic and/or offensive to many contemporary intersex people, quotation marks further indicate that I am referring to nineteenth-century usage.<sup>9</sup> For ease of readability, quotation marks are omitted when clearly referencing historical use. Because it is important to recount this story compassionately, and not to perpetuate cycles of violence, I have replaced historical terms with contemporary ones in my own analysis.

Just as “intersex” can signify differently, and will continue to change over time, what counted as “hermaphrodisism” was highly contested and in constant flux in the nineteenth century, in spite of persistent efforts to pin it down to a single definition or set of bodily attributes. We shall see that in fin-de-siècle France, “hermaphrodisism” became entangled with homosexuality in the nebulous discourse of degeneration theory, whereas it is understood today that intersex has no bearing on sexual orientation. Intersex people have all the same sexual orientations as everyone else. In other words, if it’s generally true that in nineteenth-century France “intersex” was called “hermaphrodisism,” there are also important differences between the meanings of both words, and neither should be thought of as stable or monolithic.

Given the longstanding representation of the rigidly polarized binary in nineteenth-century France, it is perhaps surprising that the most-cited definition of hermaphrodisism with the longest staying power throughout

the entire period was also its broadest. Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire defined hermaphroditism in the early 1830s as “the coexistence in the same individual of both sexes or of some of their characteristics,” which meant that, like the umbrella term “intersex” today, a range of bodily variations would count.<sup>10</sup> Jack Halberstam, following María Elena Martínez, argues that because contemporary models of sex and gender are incompatible with historical uses, we should not use terms like “gay,” “transgender,” or “intersex” when referencing figures from other eras. Doing so both aligns itself with a “genealogy of power” that “imposes, distorts, or forecloses certain desires, identifications, and experiences,” and also might entail “missing an opportunity to discover in the past human possibilities and imaginings that were suppressed or left unfulfilled but that can provide guidance in the present for creating better worlds in the future.”<sup>11</sup> Another important distinction between the historical use of the outdated term “hermaphroditism” and contemporary “intersex” is that by the time “intersex” had replaced “hermaphrodite/ism” in the medical nomenclature in the twentieth century, medical technology had changed to such a point that the “medical management” of intersex involved hormone treatments, surgeries, and a team of specialists including endocrinologists, pediatric surgeons, urologists, and gynecologists, some of whom did not exist before the twentieth century. By contrast, during the period that this book examines, surgery was highly risky, anesthesia was not widespread before the second half of the century, human chromosomes were not mapped out, and hormones had not yet been identified or experimented upon. While one finds occasional surgeries on adults, they are comparatively rare, and there was no formal practice of transforming the bodies of babies or young children to align with cultural beliefs about binary sex. Whereas hermaphroditism was increasingly visible in the nineteenth century for a number of reasons explored in this book, once standard protocol involved changing the body to make its appearance “harmonize” with social standards for binary sex in the twentieth century, it began to methodically conceal intersex. Little was communicated to parents, and children were often subjected to unnecessary and irreversible surgeries that caused lasting trauma. The grassroots intersex movement in the 1990s brought intersex back into the spotlight and galvanized change in medical practice, although much work remains to be done. Finally, during the nineteenth century, the binary was largely unquestioned, so sex also determined gender (which was not yet its own soon-to-be problematized category) and sexuality (heteronormatively).<sup>12</sup> This means that distinctions between intersex (those whose bodies differ from what science deems typically male and

female) and *transgender* (those whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth) had not yet been made or named.

But just because the critical framework for understanding sex and gender was different in the nineteenth century, that does not mean we cannot look to the past. In *Before Trans*, Rachel Mesch explores nineteenth-century precursors of trans identities and acknowledges historical differences while arguing that “certain modern critical frameworks can illuminate what was not fully articulated in the past” by “lessening alterity.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Jen Manion uses they/them pronouns to describe the historical subjects in *Female Husbands* who had been assigned the female sex at birth, and who later married women.<sup>14</sup> Even when the binary was in many ways unquestioned, it is still imperative to look at it, perhaps even more acutely, because tiny moments of resistance forged in an environment without so much as the vocabulary needed in order to define that resistance are the forebearers of the present.<sup>15</sup>

As someone who believes in the importance of preferred personal pronouns for intersex people, trans people, nonbinary people, and others, I endeavor whenever possible in this book to use the pronouns that were used by the individuals themselves. In nineteenth-century France, gender-neutral pronouns did not exist, but even in the highly gendered French language, authors, doctors, and patients sometimes indicate unstable or contested gender in nuanced and fluid ways in their writing, often by alternating between masculine and feminine gender agreements in French. Whenever possible, I have attempted to render this instability in my translations.<sup>16</sup>

### Literary “Hermaphrodites”

This book began, as do many, with a question: why is it, I wondered, that so many nineteenth-century novelists describe their characters as “hermaphrodites”? Charles Baudelaire identifies Samuel Cramer, the androgynous anti-hero of his novella, *La fanfarlo* (1847), as “the god of impotence – a modern and hermaphroditic god” (39). Zola calls Maxime (among the many androgynous characters populating *La curée*) a “strange hermaphrodite.”<sup>17</sup> Epicene characters span the century.<sup>18</sup> They appear everywhere in Balzac’s fiction. Lucien de Rubempré, hero of *Les illusions perdues* (1837–43), resembles “a disguised young girl” or a “wannabe woman” (*femme manquée*).<sup>19</sup> Henri de Marsay, the chiseled Adonis of *La fille aux yeux d’or* (1835), has “a young girl’s skin” and “his smooth face would not have marred the most beautiful woman’s body” (5: 1057, 1058). Auguste de Maulincour in *Ferragus* (1833) has “a half-feminine soul” (5: 803). Neither does nineteenth-century

literature want for strong and independent women who look and act “like men,” according to nineteenth-century cultural beliefs. Balzac’s eponymous Béatrix and Cousine Bette could count among their number, along with a host of Rachilde’s characters.<sup>20</sup> Gender-bending forms a central plot element in George Sand’s fiction, critics have long observed.<sup>21</sup> Sexual ambiguity and mutability are recurrent themes. In Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), while androgyny plays such a decisive role in Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly’s *Le Chevalier des Touches* (1863) that the gender of nearly every character reads as uncertain in some way.

Among the myriad characters described as “hermaphroditic” or “androgynous,” a number of novels rely on unknown or mysterious sex to generate plot. In Henri de Latouche’s *Fragoletta* (1829), Balzac’s *Sarrasine* (1830) and *Séraphita* (1834), and Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), the desire to “figure out” the gender of central characters motivates each novel’s entire plotline. A year of archival sleuthing in Paris allowed me to identify still more. These were strange, long-forgotten novels melding fiction and medicine, with titles such as *Clémentine orpheline et androgyne* (1820), *L’hermaphrodite* (1885), and *L’hermaphrodite au couvent* (1905). The storyline of such popular novels centers on the life and trials of intersex people and their struggles to integrate into society. Often, they rehearse scenes bearing an uncanny resemblance to established classics. Yet, unlike the androgynous characters in the French canon, these popular characters are described as physiological “hermaphrodites,” and doctors or medical sex determinations almost always play a central role in the plot development.

While sifting through archives for lesser-known novels, I was also culling hundreds of case studies of doubtful sex from the medical record, and finding intriguing parallels. Doctors faced with cases of “hermaphroditism” achieved little enduring consensus about how best to determine and assign sex in nineteenth-century France. Their attempts to locate a set of attributes that could identify ambiguous bodies unequivocally as either male or female increasingly unmasked the idea of any indelible, “pre-scribed” bodily truth as cultural fiction. In the absence of compelling scientific findings, they often resorted to imaginative narratives in order to support their arguments. What did it mean that, at precisely the same time that a profusion of androgynous characters debuted in fiction, surgeons, lawyers, clinicians, and scientific popularizers were all clamoring to publish on the identical subject?

This book traces the previously untold medical and literary history of hermaphroditism during the highpoint of its visibility, in nineteenth-century France, when legal cases made splashy headlines, medical publications



skyrocketed, and even novelists scrambled to write on the subject. For the first time, it reveals the profound influence that intersex had on contemporary writers and its central place in debates about science, social order, morality, and sexuality that are still with us to this day. In what follows, I argue that novelists explored prescriptive medical debates about sex in their own way by experimenting on them in fiction with gender-nonconforming characters, storylines, and even medically inspired fictional case studies. In these novels, authors harness the power of unknown sex to drive the plot, and, much like their medical counterparts, often reveal blurred gender boundaries even as they claim to endorse heteronormative values.

### Literature and Science

In nineteenth-century France, efforts to classify and categorize bodies reached a frenzied pace spurred by the rising power of medicine and the nascent field of the social sciences. Along with the invention of new technologies, the social sciences established and differentiated categories for the purpose of statistics and surveys. Meanwhile, authors such as Balzac and later, Zola, pursued their own investigation of social “types” through fiction. Both Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine* and Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* cycle of novels are deeply invested in the representation of social categories, and both realism and naturalism share origins that can be tied to the scientific discourse of the time.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, naturalists had already confirmed that while no human being could possess complete male and female reproductive systems, individuals did exist who presented with a mix or blend of attributes that were commonly considered to be male and female. Contemporary novelists were certainly aware that such people existed because they wrote about them in their fiction, and not merely the “hermaphrodites” of imaginative myths. A short story falsely attributed to Guy de Maupassant described a “hermaphrodite” so terrified of being outed that s/he preferred to die rather than to submit to medical treatment, lest the secret be revealed.<sup>22</sup> Under the entry for “hermaphrodite” in Gustave Flaubert’s satirical *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, one reads: “Piques curiosity. Try to see some.”<sup>23</sup> The appearance of “hermaphrodite” in Flaubert’s spoof dictionary confirms its cultural cachet and ironically mimics the longstanding scientific tradition of attempting to define and redefine hermaphroditism, while simultaneously evoking the voyeuristic desire latent in many nineteenth-century narratives, raising the specter of the “freak show.”<sup>24</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, some intersex



people traveled around Europe displaying themselves at fairs, medical schools, or in private consultation for a fee. Madame Gauthier, a “hermaphrodite” under police surveillance for suspected illegal prostitution, was allegedly slated to appear in the Exposition universelle for all of Paris and the world to behold. Divorce cases claiming hermaphroditism made the front page in French newspapers, and sometimes crossed the Atlantic. Jurists, psychologists, clinicians, surgeons, patients, and even novelists had something to say about “hermaphroditism.”

Strong ties bound science and literature in nineteenth-century France and what we think of today as two fundamentally and nearly diametrically opposed fields were not always considered so in the past. In his foreword to *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac cites the influence of several scientists on his goal of studying “social species” through literature. Foremost stands Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, a renowned naturalist whose contributions to embryology and anatomy extended to the study of “monstrosity.” As we shall see in the first chapter, his son, Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, followed in his father’s footsteps to become the reigning authority on hermaphroditism in the 1830s with the publication of his multi-volume magnum opus, *L’histoire générale et particulière des anomalies de l’organisation chez l’homme et les animaux* (1832–37). In it, the younger Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire offered the broad definition of hermaphroditism cited above that would exert incredible staying power throughout the century. At that time, positivistic medicine and science were engaged in reclaiming what had once been considered magical or marvelous as merely poorly understood expressions of the natural world. In his 1837 dictionary definition for “hermaphrodite,” Dr. Marc takes Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s new research into account: “we know, from M. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s father’s beautiful works on monstrosity, works on which his son has followed suit, [. . .] that often monstrosity is merely the persistence of one of the transitional phases of fetal development” (1837, 250). The advent of the field of teratology (the study of congenital variations, labeled “monstrosity” in the nineteenth century), combined with new medical specializations such as gynecology, now sanctioned by the creation of Chairs at the Faculté de médecine, and the ever-increasing array of medical publications, meant that all kinds of bodily variations, rare or not, were becoming increasingly visible in nineteenth-century France.

### Hermaphrodite Myths

Given the prevalence of androgynous characters and the importance of “hermaphroditism” as a plot device in so many major novels, the theme

could scarcely have been overlooked by recent literary scholars. Indeed, numerous critics have analyzed the role of androgyny in Balzac or Gautier's writing, or in various other authors' work. Comparative and broad survey studies also exist in which scholars trace the theme of androgyny from Romanticism to Decadence. However, these works predominantly discuss hermaphroditism in terms of "myth," and they often differentiate between conflicting representations of this myth in the first and second halves of the nineteenth century. Proponents of the "myth of the androgyne" explain "hermaphroditism" as part of our "universal imagination," claiming that it bears no relationship to living individuals. According to A. J. L. Busst's 1960s study of "hermaphroditism" in literature, for example, the "continuous and widespread interest focused on the hermaphrodite during the nineteenth century owes [...] almost nothing to observation of the natural world."<sup>25</sup> Rather than describing literary representations of "hermaphroditism" in terms of ahistorical myth, this book situates them within a specific, yet ever-evolving historical context. In so doing, it aims to avoid the pitfall of portraying representations of androgyny as either timeless or somehow detached from daily existence.

Through the inclusion of new sources, my approach impacts the accepted timeline of fictional representations of hermaphroditism. Literary critics often theorize a temporal and thematic separation between two different types of representations of androgyny: an idealized "romantic androgyne," and a damned, "decadent hermaphrodite," which allegedly divide the century roughly into halves. These distinctions do not hold up to scrutiny, especially when one considers popular fiction. Jane de La Vaudère's *Les androgynes* (1903), for example, posits two seemingly contradictory views of androgyny within a single work. The "androgyne" artist Jacques Chozelle is depicted as the last debauched expression of a society on the verge of extinction, much in the same way as was Huysmans's Des Esseintes in *À rebours*. Yet, the love between two young characters, André and Fiamette, is also described as a highly idealized "hermaphroditic" union. Joséphin Péladan's decadent work, *L'androgyne* (1891), which imagines an idealized "hermaphrodite" at the fin de siècle, also speaks to this contrast. The mirror image of La Vaudère's highly sexualized androgyne, Péladan conceives of a flawless, asexual creature that hearkens back to Balzac's *Séraphita*.<sup>26</sup> The third chapter discusses other novels that problematize distinctions between apparently opposing representations of androgyny.

When pressed, even the staunchest proponents of the "myth of the androgyne" admit that not all authors or even all novels permit easy