Hermaphrodite


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HEPATITIS
SEE Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

HERA
SEE Ancient Greece; Ancient Rome; Goddess Worship.

HERMAPHRODITE

Hermaphrodite refers to a being, human or otherwise, that possesses both female and male sexual organs. In humans that being is distinct from the androgyn, who may not have a double set of distinctly opposed sexual organs but whose overall physical appearance is so ambiguous that it makes sexual identification impossible. In contrast, the hermaphrodite may develop one set of sexual traits more than the other and pass for either male or female.

The term hermaphrodite derives from the Greek mythic tale eventually set down sometime between 1–8 CE by Ovid as Salmacis and Hermaphroditus. In this tale the adolescent son of Hermes and Aphrodite comes across a fountain that belongs to the nymph Salmacis. Upon seeing the boy the nymph falls in love with him and asks him to either marry her or to love her in secret. He rebuffs her so she pretends to leave him alone but hides behind a bush. When he takes off his clothes she cannot contain herself and runs back to him. She holds him fast with her entire body and begs the gods to clip him to her like this forever. The gods grant her wish and so “they grew one body, one face, one pair of arms and legs (…) so two became nor boy nor girl, neither yet both within a single body” (Ovid 1958 [1–8 CE], p. 122).

Alongside mythic literary renderings as in Ovid, European philosophical, medical, and legal conceptions of the hermaphrodite, from antiquity to the premodern era, can be traced back to two contrasting theories of dual-sexed beings: one originating with the Hippocratic writers and the other with Aristotle. The Hippocratic, or gender-spectrum, model conceived sexual identities along a continuum from ultramale to ultrafemale beings. In this view both maternal and paternal seeds could contribute maleness or femaleness. Sexual identity resulted from a combination of factors, including which seed dominated and whether it was implanted on the male or female side of the uterus. Along the spectrum of sexual determination, the hermaphrodite occupied the precise, and perfectly ambiguous, middle of that range.

In contrast, for the Aristotelian or gender-dichotomy model, no such ambiguity existed at the level of the organism. Beings were fundamentally either male or female. Sexual identity was determined by the heat of the heart, and any indeterminacy was strictly superficial. Aristotelians conceived of hermaphroditism as a deformity localized at the genitalia, a result of excess maternal matter that formed an additional sexual organ, according to Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park (1996).

Whereas the Hippocratic model has the potential to challenge the social and sexual order with various possibilities for sexual identity, the Aristotelian model tends to reinforce this order. Furthermore, the Aristotelian insistence on true and singular gender also laid the groundwork for later conceptions of the hermaphrodite as disseminator and deceiver, constructions that were critical to social and legal controversies of the premodern era.

THE MIDDLE AGES

Although medieval medical discourse through the twelfth century tended to be Hippocratic, the resurgence of Aristotelian texts in the thirteenth century complicated physicians’ views (Daston and Park 1996). For instance, Albertus Magnus, a friar and German philosopher in the late thirteenth century, betrays his uncertainties when he claims that the “complexion of the heart” should determine sexual dominance, but immediately acknowledges that there are times when this complexion “is so intermediate that it is hardly possible to determine which sex should prevail” (1996, p. 121).

Despite medicine’s difficulties in determining sexual identity in some hermaphrodites, medieval law still expected a person to adhere to the sexual identity he or she had been assigned at birth. Transgressing this law was not only morally condemnable but also a criminal act, for, as Peter de Chandler (d. 1197) argued in Verbum abreviationem, sexual alternation could be seen as a “sign of sodomy” (Miri Rubin 1994, p.103–104).

Other discourse on the hermaphrodite cited by Miri Rubin (1994) included reworkings of Ovid’s—interpretations that ranged from cautionary tales to young men regarding excess in worldly pleasure, to images of harmony and mutually beneficial contributions, to Christological allegories of Christ Hermaphrodite fusing with the nymph, Humanity, in the pool of the Virgin Mary.
EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Whereas the debate over the nature of the hermaphrodite in the early modern period seems to settle on the Aristotelian model, albeit with moments of Hippocratic resurgence, late-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discourse became increasingly sexually and morally charged, shifting from determining the nature of hermaphrodites to considering them preternatural (wondrous creatures worthy of discussion in medical treatises such as those published by Ambroise Paré in 1550, Jacques Duval in 1612, and Jean Riolan in 1614), unnatural (as sodomites were considered), or artificial (changing sex or having same-sex relations with the aid of devices) (Daston and Park 1996). Thus, hermaphrodites were subjected to more severe scrutiny and condemnation. Not only were the births and marriages of dual-sexed persons noted on the local town registries, but their livelihoods and, in fact, their lives were threatened when allegations of sodomy hovered over them.

This was the case for Marie le Marcis, who was accused of sodomy in 1601 for abandoning female dress and changing her name to Marin, with the intention of marrying a woman. She was saved from being hanged and burned when Jacques Duval testified that Marie/Marin possessed a male organ that "emerged from her leg to her vagina only when aroused" (Daston and Park 1996, p.124). Another case was that of Marguerite Maloure, a maid servant who, in 1686, had been identified as a "predominantly male hermaphrodite." (Daston and Park 1996, p. 125). She was forced to take male dress and the name of Arnauld Maloure, thus losing her livelihood. Marguerite was jailed when she tried to reassert her female identity, and it was not until she beseeched the king that she was ultimately reinstated as a woman.

What modern scholars have identified as an increased fascination with hermaphrodites in the early seventeenth century may have been a reaction to the political and religious turmoil affecting France in the second half of the sixteenth century. In addition to the above-mentioned medical treatises, a sudden flow of political pamphlets and literary satire on the part of religious extremists demonized Catherine de Médici (1519–1589) and her sons Charles IX (1550–1574) and Henri III (1551–1589) for their behavior at court. Some portrayed Catherine as a virago, Charles as a king castrated by his mother, and Henri as a sodomite. All of these seem to reflect a desire to reestablish the order of sexual dichotomy at court as well as in the nation. However, this desire may have been complicated by the resurgence of the works of Sextus Empiricus (second and possibly third centuries CE), such as his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, which was translated by Henri Estienne in 1562. As Kathleen P. Long (2006) suggests, the revival of Sextus's ideas on suspending judgment about reality initiated a phase of questioning of fundamental truths that pervaded much of the epistemological thought of the late sixteenth century and is reflected in satirical texts such as that of Thomas Arus's Description de l'île des Hermaphrodites, Nouvellement Découverte [Description of the island of Hermaphrodites, newly discovered] (1695 [1605]).

Published sixteen years after the death of Henri III, infamous for cross-dressing, Arus's text sets up a realm populated by men who dress as women. Despite its title the focus of the text is on their accoutrement: dress, hairstyle, makeup, gestures, speech, and even the laws by which they constitute and identify themselves. The absence of direct references to these men's anatopies indicates that, to the author, hermaphrodites are not the product of nature but are the result of counterfeit appearance and performativity (Long 2006). To the extent that these markers are also those of the transvestite, sodomite, and of any deviant behavior; Arus's text may read as a conservative satire of Henri III's court and an attempt to denounce boundary transgressions that threatened the fabric of the social order. Nevertheless, contemporary readings note carnivalesque potential in the fact that, in the text, gender is not grounded in anatomy but rather oriented around language and performativity and thus vulnerable to the play of signification. For instance, the section titled "Articles of Faith of the Hermaphrodites" declares that "from now on and forever we abolish those names of father, mother, brother, sisters, and others, and only want to use those of Monsieur, Madame, and others of similar honor, according to the customs of the countries" (Aurus 1695, p. 68). Here and elsewhere the text signals the disruption of social hierarchies and traditional familial relations. Moreover, gender roles, such as Madame and Monsieur are put on and taken off as easily as clothing: "each one may dress according to his/her whim, as long as it is done bravely, superbly, and with no other distinction or consideration for his/her rank or privilege ... because on this Island, the clothes make the monk, and not the other way around" (Aurus 1695, p. 88). Arus's text is indicative of the pyrrhonic crisis that began with the revival of Sextus. In this brief period, prior to the Enlightenment (1600–1800) quest for singular scientific certainty, the hermaphrodite became emblematic of a perpetual undecidability that resonates with postmodern relativity and the principle of uncertainty.

SEE ALSO Androgyny; Body. Theories of; Gender, Theories of; One-Sex Theory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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The Aristotelian model of gender and the sexual body posited maleness at the core of the human person and defined women as an accidental deviation or defective male. But women would then be justified in returning to "natural maleness" by shedding all their "womanly" functions, in particular, having sex with men and conforming to the imperative of procreation. Some medieval women could thus "renounce" their inferior status as women, and, acquiring a "manly" status, could rule, lead troops, or be included in the praying order. In the early eleventh century, women still had opportunities within the Church, but women ruled convents while secular canonesses of cathedral chapters shared the functions of male canons, except for sacramental activity. In the early Middle Ages, celibacy was the purview of women as a virtue of sexual abstinence leading to sainthood. Now, men were claiming celibacy as their own. As monks rose in the clerical hierarchy and the monastic orders were clericalized with the co-option of monks into ordained priesthood, nuns were disqualified from access to higher orders of learning, and, beginning in 1059, then in the 1120s, canonesses were attacked and chapters dissolved (McNamara 1994).

Yet some saw sexual renunciation as a means to free all, men and women, from traditional gender roles. The number of women hermits, anchoriesses, and recluse multiplied, including repentant prostitutes and abandoned priest's wives. For men, abstinence was a way out of the burdens and corruption of government (McNamara 1994). Hermann of Tournai, regarding women adopting the Cistercian rule, said women were fit for the hardest ascetic practices and manual labor, and in 1131 young women gathered around Gilbert of Sempringham (c. 1083–1189) to cultivate a piece of land so unyielding that monks had abandoned it (McNamara 1994).

The Breton priest Robert of Arbruscel (c. 1047–1117) renounced his former sins, became an apostle for celibacy and purity (Dalarun 2006), and, in 1095, went to the desert in the forest of Craon, at the Anjou-Brittany border, to implement his own doctrine of ministering to women, including the most destitute (Dalarun 2006). He formed a mixed monastic community at Fontevraud where men and women were separated by walls, and women became leaders, ruling over men (Venarde 2003). He also spearheaded a bold syncretic experiment in which a mixed community lived side by side. This term refers to women and men living chastely together for religious purposes, or more precisely, cohabitating to test their chastity (Ranft 1997, p. 1445). As Duby puts it, "at night: the men slept on one side, the women on the other, and the leader in between, presiding over an exercise in self-control that had spread to France from Britain." This was a community "in which men slept near women in order to defy the lusts of the flesh" (Duby 1983, p. 157). However, Robert was fiercely attacked and had to desist.

A letter to him from Bishop Mathieu of Rennes lambastes