

SALMACIS AND HERMAPHRODITUS:  
WHEN TWO BECOME ONE\*  
(OVID, *MET.* 4.285–388)

Like most passages in the *Metamorphoses*, the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus benefits greatly from a clear understanding of the traditions with which and against which it is working—such an understanding is not manifest in many recent discussions of the story. As a result, some scholars have been unable to recognize its humour, seeing instead only ‘ein interpretatorisches Problem’.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I hope to clarify the background to this episode, and then examine the story in the light of this clarification. I close by focusing on some specific problems of interpretation raised by recent scholarship.

I. SALMACIS AND HERMAPHRODITUS

*Salmacis*

Shortly before her own metamorphosis at the hands of Bacchus, Alcithoë recounts the tale of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, which she introduces as an aetiological myth to explain the ill repute of the spring Salmacis (4.285–7):

unde sit infamis, quare male fortibus undis  
Salmacis enervet tactosque remolliat artus,  
discite. causa latet, vis est notissima fontis . . .

Salmacis did indeed have a bad reputation, and the spring’s power was already *notissima*, it seems, by the time of Vitruvius, writing in the latter half of the first century B.C. (2.8.12 *sed haec opinio quare per orbem terrae falso rumore sit pervagata, non pigebit exponere*). But what exactly was the spring so widely reputed to do? Most modern discussions mention that the spring’s power could make a man effeminate, or *mollis*: some do not attempt to specify what this involves,<sup>2</sup> but among those that do, there is disagreement. Büchner’s article in the *RE* is suggestive but not explicit: ‘der aus der Quelle getrunken hätte, von krankhafter oder widernatürlicher Geilheit

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<sup>1</sup> F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso. Metamorphosen* (Heidelberg, 1969–86), on 4.274–388, vol. 2, p. 103. Henceforth this work will be referred to just by the author’s name, and all page references will be to the second volume, unless otherwise specified. The text from which I quote is the Teubner, ed. W. S. Anderson (Leipzig, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. H. Fränkel, *Ovid. A Poet Between Two Worlds* (Berkeley, 1945), p. 89; M. Haupt, *P. Ovidius Metamorphosen* (Zurich, 10th edn. 1966), on 4.274–388, vol. 1, p. 212. O. S. Due in *Changing Forms* (Copenhagen, 1974) mentions merely ‘an enervating effect’ (p. 129); so too does A. Ajootian in *LIMC* s.v. *Hermaphroditus*, 5.1.268–85; in ‘The only happy couple’, in A. O. Koloski-Ostrow and C. L. Lyons (edd.), *Naked Truths* (London, 1997), pp. 220–42, she describes Hermaphroditus praying to the gods that ‘the waters of the spring . . . emasculate any man who entered them’ (p. 229). Bömer (p. 104) may be suggesting that it in some way involves castration: ‘die homines molles (castrati), die das Wasser nach der Bitte des Hermaphroditus schafft’.

befallen würde'.<sup>3</sup> Delcourt suggests impotence.<sup>4</sup> Anderson talks of loss of masculinity and permanent sterility.<sup>5</sup>

So much for the modern commentators: but let us see what the ancient sources have to say on the matter:<sup>6</sup> cf. Strabo 14.2.16 καὶ ἡ Σαλμακίς κρήνη, διαβεβλημένη οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπόθεν ὡς μαλακίζουσα τοὺς πίνοντας ἀπ' αὐτῆς; Vitruvius 2.8.12 *is autem falsa opinione putatur venerio morbo implicare eos, qui ex eo biberint . . . non enim quod dicitur molles et impudicos ex ea aqua fieri, id potest esse . . .* [local barbarians began to drink water from the spring with the Greeks and] *e duro feroque more commutati in Graecorum consuetudinem . . . reducebantur. ergo ea aqua non impudico morbi vitio, sed humanitatis dulcedine mollitis animis barbarorum eam famam este adepti*; Ovid, *Met.* 15.319 *cui non audita est obscenae Salmacis undae?*; Festus 329 L. *Salmacis . . . quam qui bibisset, vitio impudicitiae mollesceret*; Vibius Sequester, *Font.* 152 *qui bibit mollescit, id est obscenus fit*. It is clear that whatever its precise nature, the rumoured effect of the spring has something to do with sex (*venerio morbo*), and involves making those who drink it *μαλακός*, *mollis*, *impudicus*, and *obscenus*.

Now all these adjectives are very familiar as words of abuse, all describing various aspects of effeminacy.<sup>7</sup> But what does this involve? The sting in the charge of being effeminate was not that one was homosexual as opposed to heterosexual, but rather that instead of the active, male role, one preferred the passive, female role.<sup>8</sup> Thus there are several aspects to the stereotype of the effeminate man, variously abused as *mollis*, *cinaedus*, *semivir*, *semimas*, *ἀνδρόγυνος*, etc. He may enjoy the passive, dishonourable positions of sex, that is being sodomized and irrumated;<sup>9</sup> he may also be unable to take the active role (either through impotence or castration);<sup>10</sup> since he 'plays the woman's part', he may have 'girly' hair<sup>11</sup> and talk in a high-pitched voice.<sup>12</sup> As with most stereotypes, the possession of any one of these qualities is enough to suggest the possession of them all: witness the ascription of all the above traits to the castrated *gallus*, whose character is perhaps most rigorously attacked in Apuleius, *Met.* 8.24ff. So powerful was this idea that Scythians who found themselves impotent would (according to Hippocrates) dress up and live as women.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Büchner, *RE*<sup>2</sup> 1.1977: 'Whoever drank from the spring would be overcome by a diseased and unnatural libido.'

<sup>4</sup> M. Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite. Mythes et rites de la Bisexualité dans l'Antiquité classique* (Paris, 1958) (English trans. J. Nicholson [London, 1961]), p. 81 (p. 54 in translation), and cf. Crahay (n. 57 below).

<sup>5</sup> W. S. Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses. Books 1–5* (Norman, 1996), on 4.271–388, p. 442.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the passages that follow, Salmacis is mentioned at Ennius, *Incerta Tragoedia* 347 Ribbeck (quoted at Cic. *de Officiis* 1.61); Philodemus, *A.P.* 7.222 (= *GP* 26); Stat. *Silv.* 1.5.19ff.; Mart. 10.30.10; Festus p. 329 Lindsay. It seems likely that the anonymous epigram *A.P.* 9.38 is an attempt by the spring to answer its critics.

<sup>7</sup> For *mollis* cf. *TLL* 8.1379.26ff.; for *impudicus* cf. *TLL* 7.1.711ff.; and for *obscenus* cf. esp. Livy 33.28; Juvenal 2.8f., 6.ox.1ff.; Seneca, *De Benef.* 2.21.

<sup>8</sup> For a recent discussion, with bibliography, cf. C. Williams, 'Greek love in Rome', *CQ* 45 (1995), 517–539. The terms 'active', 'passive', 'male', and 'female' are chosen to represent ancient views on the matter: cf. terms such as *pathicus*, or phrases used of the effeminate man such as *muliercula* (cf. Cic. *In Ver.* 2.2.192), and *muliebria pati* (cf. Sall. *Cat.* 13.3.2) or τὰ γυναικῶν πάσχω (cf. Suda s.v. ἀνδρόγυνος).  
<sup>9</sup> Cf. Catullus 33, 80, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Herodotus 1.105, where some Scythians are affected with the 'female sickness' (θήλεαν νοῦσον), and are referred to as ἀνδρόγυνοι at 4.67. This mysterious disease (some kind of impotence) is described in detail by Hippocrates (see n. 13). Cf. also Mart. 6.58.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Plaut. *Truc.* 610, *Asin.* 627; Cic. *Pro Rosc.* 135, *In Pis.* 23.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Apul. *Met.* 8.26.

<sup>13</sup> Hippocrates, *De Aer. Aqu. Loc.* 22ff., who mentions that when the Scythians find themselves

Thus an interpretation of *mollis* as 'impotent' or 'castrated' is over-specific: they are just some of the word's many associations. The fact that *mollis* is looking to the more general concept of 'effeminacy' is shown by the fact that those affected by the spring are also described as *impudicus* and *obscenus*, words which do not describe impotence or castration, but suggest rather the pathic element of effeminacy. Furthermore, this makes better sense of the context of Cicero's quotation from Ennius (*De Off.* 1.61): *itaque in probis maxime in promptu est, si quid tale dici potest: 'Vos enim iuvenes animum geritis muliebrem, illa virgo viri' et si quid eiusmodi: 'Salmacida spolia sine sudore et sanguine'*.<sup>14</sup>

To conclude: the effect of the waters of Salmacis was to make any man who bathed in them or drank them effeminate—to be effeminate was to become *mollis*, *semimas*, ἀνδρόγυνος, to play the woman's part, to be passive rather than active.<sup>15</sup>

### *Hermaphroditus*

Although the offspring of two Olympians,<sup>16</sup> Hermaphroditus is rarely mentioned in literature,<sup>17</sup> and though well-represented by statues, he has not been identified on any pots.<sup>18</sup> The earliest evidence, both epigraphical and literary, suggests that Hermaphroditus was originally worshipped as some kind of deity: two Athenian inscriptions (one from the fourth,<sup>19</sup> the other from the second<sup>20</sup> century B.C.) support the manuscript readings in Theophrastus 16.10 (the superstitious man) καὶ ταῖς τετράσι δὲ καὶ ἑβδομάσι προστάξας οἶνον ἔψειν τοῖς ἔνδον, ἐξελεθὼν ἀγοράσαι μυρσίνας, λιβανωτόν, πόπανα καὶ εἰσελεθὼν εἴσω στεφανοῦν τοὺς

repeatedly unable to make love, νομίσαντές τι ἡμαρτηκέναι τῷ θεῷ ὃν ἐπαιτιῶνται, ἐνδύονται στολὴν γυναικείην, καταγνόντες ἑωυτέων ἀνανδρείην· γυναικίζουσί τε καὶ ἐργάζονται μετὰ τῶν γυναικῶν ἃ καὶ ἐκείναι.

<sup>14</sup> It also makes more sense of Strabo's and Vitruvius' attempt to rationalize the power of the spring: Strabo blames the 'softness' of those who drink from it on luxury—associated with effeminacy, not impotence; Vitruvius sees in it the taming of the wild Barbarian spirit.

<sup>15</sup> We need not be surprised by the fact that the ancients ascribed such a power to the waters of a spring: a very similar effect is had on those who touch the waters of the river Gallus (cf. *Fast.* 4.361–6), described in a similar way to that of (probably) Salmacis at *Met.* 15.319–21. Such lists of *mirabilia fontium* are frequent in antiquity: cf. *Met.* 15.307ff., *Vitr.* 8.3.20–5, *Plin. N.H.* 2.224–34, and K. Sara Myers, *Ovid's Causes: Cosmogony and Aetiology in the Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor, 1994), pp. 147–55, esp. 151ff.

<sup>16</sup> This genealogy was certainly current by the time of Diodorus (cf. 4.6.4), and the exegetical scholia to the *Iliad* (cf. on *Il.* 21.498), but the name 'Hermaphroditus' allows few other possibilities for his parentage.

<sup>17</sup> Evidence before Ovid: the earliest attestation is found in Theophr. *Char.* 16.10, though the text is debated; Posidippus, a middle-comic of the third century B.C., wrote a comedy entitled *Hermaphroditus*, of which one couplet survives (fr. 11 Kock, cited in Stob. 4.24c.40); Gow–Page argue that the anonymous epigram *A.P.* 9.317 is Hellenistic; the next attestation is found in Titinius, fr. 115, writing in the third century B.C.; then Diodorus Siculus, 4.6.4f.

<sup>18</sup> For surveys of Hermaphroditus in literature and art, see the two articles by A. Ajootian cited in n. 2; M. Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite* (n. 4), and also *Hermaphroditea. Recherches sur l'être double promoteur de la fertilité dans le monde classique* (Brussels, 1966); and Jessen, *RE s.v.*, 8.714–21.

<sup>19</sup> Found on the base of what was probably a statue: [Φ]ανὼ 'Ερμαφρω[δ]ίτῳ εὐξαμένη. Cf. J. Kirchner and S. Dow, *AM* 62 (1937), p. 7–8, no. 5, pl. 4.3. This fourth-century attestation makes the name Hermaphroditus much earlier than other names beginning with *Herm-*, such as *Hermathena* (Cic. *ad Att.* 1.1.5) and *Hermeraclas* (Cic. *ad Att.* 1.10.3), which seem late: cf. Jessen (n. 18).

<sup>20</sup> Found in a list of deities in an Athenian gymnasium, cf. D. Clay, 'A gymnasium inventory from the Athenian agora', *Hesperia* 46 (1977), 259–267.

‘Ερμαφροδίτους ὄλην τὴν ἡμέραν.<sup>21</sup> Jessen (n. 18) and Delcourt (n. 4) argue convincingly that the figure of Hermaphroditus stemmed from a combination of the ithyphallic herm-Hermes with Aphrodite, representing sexual union. This idea gains support from the fact that Hermes and Aphrodite seem to have been regarded in some way as marriage deities,<sup>22</sup> which sheds interesting light on the reference in Vitruvius to a temple of Venus and Mercury, near to the spring Salmacis.<sup>23</sup> It is relevant too that Priapus, another figure closely associated with sex, was, according to Mnaseas (fr. 35 *FHG* III 155 Müller), a hermaphrodite.<sup>24</sup> Hermaphroditus also becomes associated with Silenus/Priapus (see below),<sup>25</sup> and inasmuch as he is often depicted holding a thyrsus, with Bacchus (another sexually ambiguous figure).

Hermaphroditus was represented in art as a female figure with male genitalia,<sup>26</sup> and as far as anyone considered his early life, it seems likely that he was thought to be born this way. This is certainly the implication of Diodorus 4.6.4f.:

παραπλησίως δὲ τῷ Πριάπῳ τινὲς μυθολογοῦσι γεγενῆσθαι τὸν ὀνομαζόμενον Ἐρμαφρόδιτον, ὃν ἐξ Ἑρμοῦ καὶ Ἀφροδίτης γεννηθέντα τυχεῖν τῆς ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν γονέων συντεθείσης προσηγορίας. τοῦτον δ' οἱ μὲν φασιν εἶναι θεὸν καὶ κατὰ τινὰς χρόνους φαίνεσθαι παρ' ἀνθρώποις, καὶ γεννᾶσθαι τὴν τοῦ σώματος φύσιν ἔχοντα μεμιγμένην ἐξ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικός·

Some writers of myths say that the so-called Hermaphroditus had a birth similar to that of Priapus, and being the son of Hermes and Aphrodite he acquired a name derived from both of his parents. Some say that this Hermaphroditus is a god and appears at certain times among men, and is born with a body made up of a mixture of male and female.

and (apart from the *Met.* passage and others influenced by it) there is no reason to think otherwise. A common type of the statues of Hermaphroditus is the ‘*ἀνασυρόμενος*’ pose: one which shows him lifting up his female clothing to reveal his male genitals. This illustrates the comic potential of a figure that looks like a woman in all but one respect, which may have been exploited in Posidippus’ play, but certainly was in some Pompeian wall-paintings (where Hermaphroditus reveals his masculinity to a Silenus figure), and also in various statues.<sup>27</sup>

An important tradition for our purposes is that in which Hermaphroditus is seen as extremely effeminate (rather than just physically feminine). This tradition was

<sup>21</sup> *Contra* Rusten, who argues in a note in the Loeb (*Theophrastus, Herodas, Cercidas* [London, 1993]), p. 110–11, that these Hermaphrodites refer not to statues of Hermaphroditus but to herms with male and female faces.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jessen (n. 18), pp. 717f. Cf. Proclus from scholia to Hesiod, *Opera* 798: ‘*Ἡ τετάρτη ἱερὰ Ἀφροδίτης καὶ Ἑρμοῦ, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο πρὸς συνοσίαν ἐπιτηδεία*, and Plutarch, *Conjugalia Praecepta* 138d4: καὶ γὰρ οἱ παλαιοὶ τῇ Ἀφροδίτῃ τὸν Ἑρμῆν συγκαθίδρυσαν, ὥς τῆς περὶ τὸν γάμον ἡδονῆς μάλιστα λόγου δεομένης, and the scholia to *Il.* 21.498 ὁ γὰρ Ἑρμῆς αἰτίαν ἔχει φιλογυναικίας καὶ ἔρωτικός νομίζεται· διὸ ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης συνέθεσαν τὸν Ἐρμαφρόδιτον.

<sup>23</sup> 2.8.11 in *cornu autem summo dextro Veneris et Mercurii fanum ad ipsum Salmacidis fontem*.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in the Scholia to Lucian, *Dial. Deor.* 21.6.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Delcourt (n. 18), p. 77f. (= p. 51f. in translation).

<sup>26</sup> Though of course, since most artistic representations are unnamed, it is often the case that the identification of representations only serve to support the criteria by which they were identified: thus a statue or painting of Hermaphroditus showing him as depicted by Ovid before his swim would not be recognized as a representation of Hermaphroditus.

<sup>27</sup> A good example would be the statue of the sleeping Hermaphroditus in the Louvre. From behind, the sleeping figure appears to be female, and it is when one walks round to the front that one discovers that the sleeping maid is not all that she seems.

well-developed by the time that Lucian was writing in the second century A.D.:<sup>28</sup> at this point, *ἀνδρόγυνος* and *hermaphroditus* had become synonymous certainly as a technical term,<sup>29</sup> and probably as a term of abuse also.<sup>30</sup> But how early is this tradition? How quickly did the word *hermaphroditus* acquire overtones of effeminacy? Such a tradition would naturally arise soon after the depiction of Hermaphroditus as a very feminine figure—then it would be but a small step from being a literal *ἀνδρόγυνος* to being a metaphorical *ἀνδρόγυνος*. The anonymous epigram *A. P.* 9.317, which Gow–Page argue convincingly to be Hellenistic,<sup>31</sup> seems to be the first attestation of Hermaphroditus in such a pathic role, describing a situation similar to one frequently depicted in art, where Hermaphroditus is attempting to flee from a satyr or Silenus figure.<sup>32</sup> The epigram takes the form of a dialogue (in an exchange very similar to Theoc. *Id.* 5.41–4) between Hermaphroditus, an anonymous goatherd, and an unnamed deity, perhaps Priapus or Silenus:

Χαίρω τὸν λακέρυζον ὄρων θεὸν εἰς τὸ φάλανθον  
βρέγμ' ὑπὸ τὰν ὄχρᾶν, αἰπόλε, τυπτόμενον.—  
Αἰπόλε, τοῦτον ἐγὼ τρίς ἐπύγισα· τοὶ δὲ τραγίσκοι  
εἰς ἐμέ δερκόμενοι τὰς χιμάρας ἐβάτευν.—  
Ὅντως σ', Ἑρμαφρόδιτε, πεπύγικεν;—Οὐ μὰ τὸν Ἑρμᾶν,  
αἰπόλε.—Ναὶ τὸν Πᾶν', αἰπόλε, κάπηγελών.

*Hermaphroditus*: I take great pleasure in seeing this yelping god struck on his bald head by the pears, goatherd. *Silenus*: Goatherd, I buggered this chap three times: and the young he-goats, watching me, mounted the she-goats. *Goatherd*: Did he really bugger you, Hermaphroditus? *Hermaphroditus*: No, goatherd, I swear by Hermes. *Silenus*: I swear by Pan I did, goatherd, and I was laughing all the time.

Closer to home, we find the word 'hermaphroditus' in a fragment of the *Setina* of Titinius, a writer of *fabulae togatae*, who was active at the end of the third century B.C. The fragment is cited by Nonius (301 L), as an example of *frons* in the masculine: *quasi hermaphroditus fimbriatum frontem gestas feminae*<sup>33</sup> (fr. 115). The word *fimbriatum* and its cognates are rare, and one of the few other attestations of these words comes in a passage of Cicero, in which he derides the effeminacy of Gabinius (*In Pis.* 25): *erant illi compti capilli et madentes cincinnorum fimbriae et fluentes purpurissataeque buccae*.<sup>34</sup> Whether *hermaphroditus* is a noun or an adjective in this passage of Titinius is not clear, but it is not important—what matters is that the tradition of an effeminate Hermaphroditus and the association of Hermaphroditus with effeminacy are both attested well before the *Metamorphoses*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Dial. Deor.* 3.1 ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἦλθες καὶ ἡμίανδρος καὶ ἀμφίβολος τὴν ὄψιν· οὐκ ἂν διακρίναις εἶτ' ἐφ' ἑβός ἐστιν καὶ παρθένος.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Plin. *N.H.* 7.34 *gignuntur et utriusque sexus quos hermaphroditos vocamus, olim androgynos vocatos et in prodigiis habitos, nunc vero in deliciis*. For *androgynos* used technically, cf. Cic. *De Div.* 1.98, Livy 27.11.4f.; for *hermaphroditus* used thus, cf. Pliny, *N.H.* 11.262 (of Nero) *ostentabat certe hermaphroditas subiunctas carpento suo equas*.

<sup>30</sup> For *androgynos* in an insulting sense, cf. Plat. *Symp.* 189e2ff. *ἀνδρόγυνον . . . νῦν δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀλλ' ἢ ἐν ὀνειδείᾳ ὄνομα κείμενον*; Lucilius, *Sat.* 30 (v. 1058) *in<b>erbi androgyni, barbati moechocin<a>edi*. For *hermaphroditus* in such a sense, cf. Suda s.v.: *Ἑρμαφρόδιτος*: ἢ τὸν ἀμφοτέρα ἔχοντα τὰ μόρια ἀρρένων καὶ θηλειῶν φασιν· ἢ τὸν αἰσχρῶς καὶ ποιοῦντα καὶ πάσχοντα, and s.v. *ἀνδρόγυνος*: . . . ἄνανδρος, καὶ ἑρμαφρόδιτος.

<sup>31</sup> *A. P.* 9.317 = Anon. 54 (3890ff.), in A. Gow and D. L. Page, *The Greek Anthology. Hellenistic Epigrams* (Cambridge, 1965).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ajootian in *LIMC* (n. 2), pp. 278f. (satyrs) and 280f. (Silenus).

<sup>33</sup> This is Lindsay's conjecture for the MSS's nonsensical *feminas*.

<sup>34</sup> Insults based around one's effeminate hairstyle are also frequent in comedy: cf. n. 11.

It seems, then, that Ovid's story is engaging with the following traditions: Hermaphroditus is thought of as a female figure with male genitals, and to the extent that anyone considered his early years, it is likely that he was thought to have been born this way. As a religious figure he represented sexual union, but owing to the fact that he was *ἀνδρόγυνος* in a literal sense, he came to be represented in literature and art as *ἀνδρόγυνος* in a pejorative sense, that is effeminate and pathic. A reading of the *Met.* passage against this background shows the text to be full of misdirection, constantly playing with our expectation.

## II. OVID, SALMACIS, AND HERMAPHRODITUS

The story is introduced in 285 as an *αἴτιον* for the mysterious enervating power of the spring Salmacis, and *causa latet* in line 287 may suggest that Ovid's audience would have little idea as to what explanation was coming. In the next line, we are introduced to a figure described as *Mercurio puerum diva Cythereide natum*,<sup>35</sup> a clear indication of Hermaphroditus, reinforced by line 291 *nomen quoque traxit ab illis*: however, although we have good clues as to his identity, it is important to note that he is not actually named until line 383, after the metamorphosis (on the significance of this, see below). Nothing so far would tell against the usual understanding of Hermaphroditus as a entity with a female head and torso and male genitals; indeed, the text encourages this understanding in 290f. *cuius erat facies, in qua materque paterque cognosci possent*.<sup>36</sup> At this point, we may be expecting something akin to the motif common in art, in which Hermaphroditus is mistaken for a woman, only to be found to be a man.<sup>37</sup> With the introduction of a nymph in line 302, the outline of the story seems clear—most of the nymphs we have seen thus far in the *Met.* have been of the 'virgin huntress' variety,<sup>38</sup> and the virginity of all of these nymphs has been threatened, with varying degrees of success. Thus we may reasonably expect this nymph to be another virgin huntress, and like the others before her, to suffer an attempted rape: perhaps she will mistake Hermaphroditus for a woman, and be lulled into a false sense of security (much as Callisto was by Jupiter disguised as Diana),<sup>39</sup> only to realize her mistake too late (there were also representations in art of Hermaphroditus as the aggressor).<sup>40</sup>

However, as the line continues, we discover some troubling information that suggests that all is not quite how we had imagined: Salmacis, it seems, is *not* like the other nymphs we have seen thus far—indeed, although there were nymphs in antiquity

<sup>35</sup> Ovid has recently told the tale of Aphrodite's adultery with Ares (4.171ff.), in which an anonymous god (*aliquis de dis*) quips that he would happily change places with Ares (187–8). This is bound to recall the passage in the *Odyssey* (8.339ff.), in which the same quip is ascribed to Hermes. Having been invited to recall this passage, there is a strong temptation to link it with the appearance of a child of Hermes and Aphrodite, suggesting that Hermes' interest in Aphrodite did not go unnoticed. The fact that the same *aliquis* appears in the *Ars* version of the story (2.585) is not relevant.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson (n. 5) sees this as referring to 'that special age of adolescents when, to the poet and lover, it was hard to decide whether they were male or female'. This would be the first suggestion of the complex gender play in this passage.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ajootian in *LIMC* (n. 2), p. 276f.

<sup>38</sup> Daphne (1.472ff.), Io (1.588ff.), Syrinx (1.689ff.), Callisto (2.409ff.). Echo is the exception (3.356ff.), and her forwardness is one of the many parallels between our passage and the story of Narcissus (3.341ff.).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Met.* 2.425ff., and compare also Sol's disguise as Leucothoe's mother (4.218–320).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ajootian in *LIMC* (n. 2), p. 279.

who were not obsessed with hunting and virginity (cf. Echo in *Met.* 3.356ff., or the nymphs that rape Hylas in Ap. Rhod. 1.1228, Theoc. *Id.* 13, and Prop. 1.20.43ff.), the way in which Salmacis is here described opposes her specifically to the virgin-huntress nymphs: *sed nec venatibus apta nec arcus / flectere quae soleat nec quae contendere cursu, / solaque naiadum celeri non nota Dianae*.<sup>41</sup> The description that comes somewhat later is again working directly against the common picture of the virgin nymph: Salmacis is seen combing her hair (311) and spending time on her appearance,<sup>42</sup> quite unlike nymphs such as Daphne and Callisto;<sup>43</sup> and she is dressed in light gauzy material, rather than wearing something less comfortable.<sup>44</sup> Her polar opposition to the life of hunting suggests a similar opposition to the life of virginity.

Our initial ideas as to the direction of the plot have become problematic: this nymph seems to be deliberately distanced from the classic 'raped nymph' figure. We are at a loss as to what will happen next. We then learn that this nymph frequently picks flowers (315), and what is more *et tunc quoque forte legebat, cum puerum vidit . . .* (315f.). Now, while picking flowers is an activity often pursued by young girls, it is an activity fraught with danger, as it almost invariably precedes their rape.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps Salmacis will turn out to be a 'raped nymph' figure after all. However, with the completion of line 316, we discover that things are in fact very different: *cum puerum vidit visumque optavit habere*—Salmacis is playing the part of the lustful deity,<sup>46</sup> lusting after what we suspect now to be a male-looking Hermaphroditus. We are in the midst of a complex play with gender roles,<sup>47</sup> more complex than the mere reversal of roles noted by many commentaries: for even before their combination into one androgynous being, both Hermaphroditus and Salmacis are playing the male and female part. The play continues: in 317–19, Salmacis composes herself before approaching Hermaphroditus, which is on the one hand part of her feminine concern for her looks, but also echoes the actions of Hermaphroditus' father before seducing Herse (2.732ff.); she gives a speech which echoes that of Odysseus to Nausicaa very closely (cf. *Od.* 6.149–185), yet is in spirit more an extreme form of Nausicaa's sly suggestions of marriage.<sup>48</sup> Hermaphroditus blushes like Daphne at the mention of

<sup>41</sup> For these aspects presented without negation, cf. *Aen.* 1.315ff. [Venus disguised as a virgin huntress] *virginis os habitumque gerens et virginis arma . . .*

<sup>42</sup> She looks at her reflection, rather like Aphrodite in Call. *Hymn to Athena* 21f.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. 1.477 [of Daphne] *positos sine lege capillos*, and 1.497 *inornatos . . . capillos*; [of Callisto] 2.412 *nec positu variare comas*, and 2.413 *neglectos . . . capillos*. Cf. also *Aen.* 1.319 *venatrix dederatque comam diffundere ventis*.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Aen.* 1.323 *maculosae tegmine lyncis*.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. e.g. Proserpina at 5.391ff., *Fast.* 4.442. For others cf. N. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 61f.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Fast.* 3.21 [Mars raping Ilia] *Mars videt hanc visamque cupit potiturque cupita*, 4.443 [Pluto and Persephone] *hanc videt et visam patruus velociter aufert*, and 6.119 [Janus and Cranaë] *viderat hanc Ianus, visaeque cupidine captus*. In all these passages we see a return to the original motif of 'lust at first sight' (cf. *Il.* 14.293 [Zeus of Hera] *ὥς δ' ἴδεν, ὥς μιν ἔρωσ πυκινὰς φρένας ἀμφεκάλυψεν*) from pastoral's use of this motif for 'love at first sight' (cf. *Ecl.* 8.41). Cf. thus far in the *Met.*: 1.490 (Apollo), 2.409f. (Jupiter), 2.574 (Neptune), 2.726f. (Mercury), and Echo (3.370f.).

<sup>47</sup> Foreshadowed in the Narcissus story (*Met.* 3.341ff.): there, at the beginning of the story, Echo is the active pursuer, and Narcissus the virginal figure who likes hunting. By the end of the story, Narcissus becomes both the pursuer and the pursued, *ἔραστής* and *ἐρώμενος*.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Od.* 6.244ff. [to her friends] *αἱ γὰρ ἐμοὶ τοιούσδε πόσις κεκλημένος εἶη*, 275ff. [to Odysseus] *καὶ νῦν τις ὧδ' εἴπῃσι κακώτερος ἀντιβολήσας: / τίς δ' ὅδε Ναυσικάα ἔπεται καλὸς τε μέγας τε / ξείνος; ποῦ δέ μιν εὔρε; πόσις νῦν οἱ ἔσσεται αὐτῇ . . .*

'marriage' (*Met.* 1.483ff.), but also like the ἐρώμενος,<sup>49</sup> and his blush is described with some significant similes.<sup>50</sup> He rejects Salmacis' advances, who retreats only so far as the bushes, where she lies hidden to watch Hermaphroditus undress. The situation now resembles not only the typical 'bath of a goddess' motif (cf. Teiresias and Actaeon),<sup>51</sup> but also that of the 'revelation at a bath' (cf. Callisto),<sup>52</sup> since at this point, we wonder whether Ovid's innovation is to make Hermaphroditus have a male body with female genitals. The narrative reaches a peak of suspense at 345f. *mollia de tenero velamina corpore ponit. tum vero . . .* What will Hermaphroditus' nudity reveal? Nothing, it appears, that displeases Salmacis: her eyes ablaze with desire,<sup>53</sup> and showing a divine inability to resist the sight of Hermaphroditus swimming in the water,<sup>54</sup> she leaps in, and after a lengthy struggle described with some more significant similes,<sup>55</sup> prays to the gods to join them together.<sup>56</sup> They hear her prayer, and their two bodies are merged into one: *nec duo sunt et forma duplex, nec femina dici / nec puer ut possit, neutrumque et utrumque videntur* (378f.). We then read:

ergo ubi se liquidas, quo vir descenderat, undas 380  
semimarem fecisse videt mollitaque in illis  
membra, manus tendens, sed iam non voce virili,  
Hermaphroditus ait: 'nato date munera vestro  
et pater et genetrix, amborum nomen habenti:  
quisquis in hos fontes vir venerit, exeat inde 385  
semivir et tactis subito mollescat in undis.'  
motus uterque parens nati rata verba biformis  
fecit et incerto fontem medicamine tinxit.

This brings us on to an aspect of the story that has caused difficulty for some scholars: Crahay, in an article discussing various inconsistencies in Ovid's narrative,<sup>57</sup> is troubled by the difference between Salmacis' prayer and its fulfilment:

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Plat. *Charm.* 158c, Theoc. *Id.* 30.7ff, *A.P.* 12.8.5, Tib. 1.4.13f., *Met.* 3.482. Salmacis also compares Hermaphroditus to Cupid: for similar comparisons involving the ἐρώμενος, cf. *A.P.* 12.76, 78, 56, 57 (Meleager) and 12.75, 77 (Asclepiades).

<sup>50</sup> The comparison to rosy apples recalls a simile used of Narcissus (3.482–4), a figure who similarly fulfils two gender roles. The comparison to painted ivory recalls the simile describing the blush of the female Lavinia at *Aen.* 12.63–9, but also its model in the *Iliad* 4.141ff., describing the wound of the male Menelaus. The comparison to the moon is significant as the moon was thought to be bisexual: cf. *Hymn. Orph.* 9.1ff; Plat. *Symp.* 190b; Plut. *De Is. Et Os.* 43; Laevius, fr. 26 Morel.

<sup>51</sup> For Teiresias, cf. Call. *Hymn.* 5.70ff.; for Actaeon, cf. *Met.* 3.155ff.

<sup>52</sup> *Met.* 2.453ff..

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *Met.* 4.347 *flagrant . . . lumina*: the virginal Daphne's eyes are also fiery, though presumably for different reasons (*Met.* 1.498f.).

<sup>54</sup> *Met.* 4.350 *vixque moram patitur, vix iam sua gaudia differt* with 2.863f. [Jove] *oscula dat manibus; vix iam, vix cetera differt*.

<sup>55</sup> The inversion of the eagle and snake simile is often commented on, but there may be some importance in the fact that Salmacis is compared to an octopus: the octopus was not only reputed to be ferocious in its attacks upon humans in the water (Plin. *N.H.* 9.91), but was also thought to change its appearance according to that to which it was clinging (Plin. *N.H.* 9.87; [Ovid], *Hal.* 33 *semper ei similis quem contegit*); furthermore, the male was thought to weary himself so much in the act of copulation that he would roll over and die at the end (cf. Opp. *Hal.* 1.537 *ξυγὸν δὲ τέλος θανάτοιο καὶ εὐνῆς*). For more information see D. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Fishes* (London, 1947), s.v.

<sup>56</sup> Perhaps one of the nicest points of comparison with the Narcissus passage, for Narcissus prays that he might be split in two (3.467 *o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem*).

<sup>57</sup> R. Crahay, 'La vision poétique d'Ovide, et l'esthétique baroque', *Atti del Convegno Internazionale Ovidiano* 1 (Sulmona, 1958), pp. 91–110.



La récit de la métamorphose d'Hermaphrodite juxtapose d'une manière éclatante deux conceptions différentes et peut-être deux récits différents. Nous voyons d'abord Hermaphrodite et Salmacis, conformément au vœu de la nymphe, réunis en un seul être qui sera bisexué. . . . Puis, sans avertissement, la fable est reprise d'une manière toute différente. Hermaphrodite, et Hermaphrodite seul . . . est transformé par la vertu de l'eau, en un homme depouillé de sa virilité, *semimas*, *semivir*. . . . Il n'est plus fait mention de Salmacis. . . . La différence est grande dans le résultat, et la deuxième version est évidemment sans rapport avec le vœu de la nymphe. Elle suppose une autre motivation psychologique: celle de la castration par défense.

The problem is that Ovid, in spite of what he says at 378–9, seems to present the result of the metamorphosis not as a seamless combination of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis (*neutrumque et utrumque videntur*), but rather as just Hermaphroditus alone, angry at the loss of his masculinity: Salmacis has been removed from the narrative. Furthermore, although described as *biformis* at 387, Hermaphroditus is also described with terms more appropriate to effeminacy than to androgyny (381 *semimarem*,<sup>58</sup> *mollita* . . . *membra*; 382 *non voce virili*), almost as if he himself were a victim of the curse he is about to put on the spring (386 *semivir*, *mollescat*). Crahay's own solution to the problem ('la castration par défense') is unhelpful and implausible. Fränkel sees the situation as resulting from two different motifs (Hermaphroditus bathing in effeminizing waters, Hermaphroditus having a woman grafted onto him) 'reconciled by the identification of pool and woman and by making the metamorphosis of Hermaphroditus into an action for the peculiar powers of the water'.<sup>59</sup> Bömer, on the other hand, attempts to ease the difficulty by keeping the metamorphosis separate from the *αἴτιον*, though he himself admits that this is not entirely successful. He wonders if perhaps Ovid was reluctant to depict a hermaphrodite (thought by the Romans to be something of a monstrosity) as resulting from the union of two gods, or if his usual lack of concern for detail led him to take 'androgynous Körperbildung und *mollitia* der *semimares* . . . für nahe verwandt oder identisch' (pp. 103–4). Anderson explains the disappearance of Salmacis by means of her fluctuating identity between spring and nymph: once the metamorphosis is complete, she returns to being 'the merely watery spring of the subsequent aetiology';<sup>60</sup> as for Hermaphroditus, Anderson argues that a lack of vocabulary to describe androgynous beings explains why the narrator uses 'some of the terms of effeminacy, as well as of eunuchs, to describe the special quality of the hermaphrodite' (on 4.380–2), forcing the meaning of the words 'to apply to the special physical nature of the hermaphrodite' (on 4.383–6).

However, from the conclusions reached earlier in this paper, it should be apparent that Ovid's use of 'terms of effeminacy' to describe Hermaphroditus after his metamorphosis has nothing to do with a lack of vocabulary or lack of concern for detail. As we have seen, the word *hermaphroditus* (like the Greek *ἀνδρόγυνος*) had both a technical sense ('androgynous') and also an abusive one ('pathic', 'effeminate'). In addition, it was also the name of an androgynous deity. This entire episode is an excuse for an extremely neat Ovidian pun, whose punchline comes when our hero is named for the first time in line 383, and all three senses of the word are united: he enters the (soon-to-be) effeminizing waters an unnamed deity, and emerges *herma-*

<sup>58</sup> Bömer points out that *semimas* never means 'androgynous' in Ovid (p. 131), though it does have that meaning elsewhere in Latin: cf. Livy 31.12.8. However, its primary connotations are of effeminacy.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Fränkel (n. 2), p. 217, n. 49.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Anderson (n. 5), pp. 441–2. For more on the unity of nymph and spring, cf. Fränkel (n. 2), pp. 88–9.

*phroditus*—as Hermaphroditus, as a hermaphrodite, and as a pathic effeminate.<sup>61</sup> Salmacis' disappearance from the narrative is required for this joke to work, but it also draws attention to the fact that on a linguistic level, the metamorphosis and the αἴτιον are indeed the same: Salmacis the nymph has turned the boy into a hermaphrodite, who prays that Salmacis the spring might make anyone who bathes in it *hermaphroditus* (pathic).<sup>62</sup> The combination of adjectives indicating effeminacy (381 *semimarem*, 381f. *mollita* . . . *membra*, 382 *iam non voce virili*) and those indicating androgyny (387 *biformis*) merely play with the two concepts inherent in the word *hermaphroditus*. For this reason, I would be inclined to read *incesto* (with M<sup>1</sup> and N<sup>1</sup>) for *incerto* in line 387. The word has a similar tone to *impudicus* and *obscenus*, and the sense of *incesto medicamine* would be 'medicine that made one incestus', much as at *Met.* 15.317 *obscenae Salmacis undae* means 'waters that make one *obscenus*'.<sup>63</sup>

There is one more interpretational difficulty contained in this passage, for which I would like to offer a more tentative solution. Many of metamorphoses contained in the *Met.* occur in answer to prayers delivered by various characters to various gods: frequently these gods are named, though this is not always the case (cf. Thisbe's prayer at 4.164, Myrrha's at 10.488f.). Often the gods are called upon for assistance by a nymph about to be raped: they hear her prayers, and she escapes violation by being metamorphosed into a tree, or reeds, or whatever.<sup>64</sup> Here, however, unnamed gods assist not the victim but the author of the rape, and their assistance is all the more marked in that the object of the rapist's attention is none other than the child of two Olympians, Mercury and Venus. Kenney, in his notes to Melville's translation,<sup>65</sup> remarks on the striking decision of the gods to fulfil this request:

What gods? And why did they grant the prayer? As arbitrary is Hermaphroditus' wish and his parents' assent to it. But having willed the end—the metamorphosis and the aition—the poet must will the means. Even for Ovid, who does not much regard plausibility except when it suits his poetic purpose . . . this is somewhat cavalier. However, conscious irony may be at work . . .

Kenney then goes on to suggest that there may be a contrast drawn here between Alcithoë's readiness to believe that the gods can do this kind of thing, and her failure to recognize the deeds of Bacchus, manifest in her own city. Anderson too notes the strange fact that Salmacis' 'perverse and selfish prayer' (n. 5, pp. 441f.) is granted by some 'weirdly amoral gods' (p. 454): his explanation is that attributing such actions to the gods reflects badly on Alcithoë as a narrator, 'giving us a tale that makes us consent to her coming punishment' (p. 441). I would like to offer another explanation for this 'weirdly amoral' divine behaviour.

We have seen that Hermaphroditus was a god of sexual union, and represented in graphic form the union of Hermes and Aphrodite: this idea of two lovers merged into

<sup>61</sup> The position of the word is particularly effective: it comes at the beginning of the line, and after a series of words and phrases all suggesting effeminacy (*semimarem*, *mollita*, *voce non virili*).

<sup>62</sup> We might also be reminded of Aristotle's discussion of Aristophanes' *Symposium* speech at *Pol.* 1262b11, in which he remarks that were such a union of two lovers to come about, either both or one of the lovers would be destroyed.

<sup>63</sup> Anderson (n. 5), on pp. 387–8 says of the reading *incesto*: '[this] normally has the meaning of sexually criminal and perverse in behaviour, which is not the definition of a hermaphrodite'. However, I hope to have shown that in fact this is certainly a connotation of *hermaphroditus*, in one sense of the word.

<sup>64</sup> For instance, Daphne prays to her father (1.544ff.), and Syrinx prays to the water nymphs (1.704ff.).

<sup>65</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 1986), trans. A. Melville, with intr. and notes by E. J. Kenney, n. 383, p. 398.

one through their love is an elegiac ideal,<sup>66</sup> though also a common motif.<sup>67</sup> However, perhaps the most famous account of *ἔρως* as the desire of two beings to merge into one is found in Plato's *Symposium*, in the speech of Aristophanes (189c–193e), in which he describes the original nature of man, telling how it was split down the middle, and how as a consequence we desire to get back together with our other half.<sup>68</sup> The climax of Aristophanes' story is strikingly similar to that of Alcithoë's: she describes how Salmacis prays to the gods that she and Hermaphroditus be merged into one being, while Plato's Aristophanes relates how when two halves of an original whole have found each other, they do not want to be separated, not even for a little while (192b5ff.); they wish to spend all their time together, without really knowing what they want—however, we are soon to be acquainted with the object of their desire: for as if by magic, the god Hephaestus appears and makes the following offer (192df.):

καὶ εἰ αὐτοῖς ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ κατακειμένοις ἐπιστὰς ὁ 'Ηφαιστος, ἔχων τὰ ὄργανα, ἔροιτο . . . Ἀρά γε τοῦδε ἐπιθυμεῖτε, ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ γενέσθαι ὅτι μάλιστα ἀλλήλοις, ὥστε καὶ νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν μὴ ἀπολείπεσθαι ἀλλήλων; εἰ γὰρ τούτου ἐπιθυμεῖτε, θέλω ὑμᾶς συντῆξαι καὶ συμφυσεῖν εἰς τὸ αὐτό, ὥστε δύο ὄντας ἕνα γεγονέναι καὶ ἕως τ' ἂν ζήτε, ὡς ἕνα ὄντα, κοινῇ ἀμφοτέρους ζῆν . . .

And if Hephaestus were to stand by them as they lay together, with his tools, and say 'So is it this you desire, to become one with one another as much as possible, so that you are never apart from one another by day or night? If you want this, I am ready to melt you down into one so that although you are two, you become one, and for as long as you live, since you are one, you will both live together . . .'

Given that Zeus split the original human apart (190d6), and that it was Apollo that tidied up the resulting two-legged creatures (190e2), there may well be some point to the fact that rather than either of these, it is Hephaestus who offers to merge them back together: we may well be reminded of the way in which he bound together Ares and Aphrodite at *Od.* 8.274ff.<sup>69</sup>

The relevance of this should be clear: the offer made by Hephaestus to the two lovers is identical to the request made by Salmacis to the gods. The idea of some divine force actually physically merging two bodies into one is far from common, and this passage of the *Met.* cannot but recall the *Symposium*. The fact that Salmacis' perverse prayer is answered is extremely striking, and invites us to ask, with Kenney, what gods and why? The allusion to the *Symposium* presents us with the pleasing possibility that Hephaestus is one of the main architects behind the metamorphosis, and it is not hard to see why this should be so. Ovid has but recently recounted the tale of Aphrodite's

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Propertius 2.6.41f./7.1ff. *nos uxor numquam, numquam seducet amica: / semper amica mihi, semper et uxor eris / . . . quamvis diducere amantes / non queat invitos Iuppiter ipse duos*, echoed by *Met.* 4.370ff. *'pugnes licet, inprobe,' dixit, / 'non tamen effugies. ita, di, iubeatis, et istum / nulla dies a me nec me deducat ab isto'*.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *Lucr.* 4.1110ff. *ne quiquam, quoniam nihil inde abraderi possunt / nec penetrare et abire in corpus corpore toto; / nam facere inter dum velle et certare videntur*; cf. also Genesis 2.24 'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh', Matthew 19.5ff.

<sup>68</sup> The importance of the *Symposium* as a background text was suggested by Frécault (*L'esprit et l'humour chez Ovide* [Paris, 1972], p. 264), but only as an explanation for Salmacis' extreme passion (and given Hermaphroditus' lack of it, this theory does not hold water). Anderson (n. 5), pp. 452–3, also mentions this passage of the *Symposium* as the focus of a possible allusion, and sees Salmacis' prayer as a terrible travesty of the idea of union of male and female through love and marriage.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. esp. 8.274f. *κόπτε δὲ δεσμούς / ἀρρήκτους ἀλύτους, ὅφρ' ἔμπεδον αὐθι μένοιεν*.

adultery with Ares (4.171–189) and the reaction of her jealous husband, who binds the two together; and now, in the figure of Hermaphroditus, there is concrete evidence for further misdeeds on the part of Aphrodite, this time with Hermes. In response to this, an irate and cuckolded Hephaestus takes the opportunity to exact vengeance on the product of this union, Hermaphroditus, with a punishment exquisitely reminiscent of the vengeance previously exacted on his mother.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> There remains the slight problem that more than one god answers Salmacis' prayer (*vota suos habuere deos* 373), much as both Hermes and Venus answer that of Hermaphroditus at 387f.: perhaps Hephaestus is assisted by an equally jealous Ares.