

CHAPTER ONE

Monsters

In both Greek and Roman antiquity, people seem to have scanned their newborn children anxiously for signs that might indicate that the human race was no longer as it should be and was on the way to extinction. And no mutation was more radical than dual sexuality. For the possession of both sexes at once rendered all sexual reproduction impossible and undermined all life as a couple and a family—and even all social organization since, at the time, the latter rested upon a strict division of roles and functions that was, in the last analysis, founded upon the sexual difference.

Even if the fate reserved for beings endowed with both sexes became less cruel as time passed, there can be no doubt that, in antiquity, dual sexuality was, in truth, only marginally tolerated. This marginalization explains why the terms “androgyné” and “hermaphrodite” were considered shameful and were associated with the names of those in society who refused to play the tra-

ditional role of a man or a woman. It also explains why dual sexuality acquired an essential place in mythology.

AN OMINOUS PRODIGY

The story of Polycritus must be situated at the origin of that development. It was recorded by Phlegon of Tralles, and Proclus¹ summarizes it as follows:

For his part, Naumachius of Epirus,² who lived at the time of my grandparents, recounts the following: Polycritus of Aetolia, one of the most distinguished of the Aetolians and who had been appointed Aetolarch, died, then returned to life nine months after his death and attended the federal assembly of the Aetolians, where he made very wise recommendations relating to the affairs under deliberation. Hiero of Ephesus and other observers witnessed this event and wrote to tell King Antigonus³ and other friends of theirs, who had not been present at the event.⁴

Phlegon of Tralles,⁵ who also claimed a mysterious Hiero (of Alexandria or Ephesus)⁶ as his source, produced a full version of the story. It possesses a dramatic intensity as powerful as any fantastical tale, whether modern or contemporary:

Hiero of Alexandria or of Ephesus also relates that a ghost also appeared in Aetolia.

One of the citizens, a certain Polycritus, was voted Aetolarch for a term of three years by the people, who deemed him worthy among the citizens because of his and his ancestors' nobility. While in office, he took a Locrian woman as wife, lived with her for three days, and departed from life on

the fourth night. The woman remained at home as a widow. When the time for childbirth came she delivered a child with two sets of genitals, male and female, which constituted an extraordinary deviation from nature. The upper portion of the genitals was hard and manly, whereas the part around the thighs was womanish and softer.

Struck with astonishment, the child's relatives took it to the agora where they called an assembly, summoned sacrificers and diviners and deliberated about the child. Of these, some declared that a breach would come about between the Aetolians and the Locrians, for the infant was different from its mother, who was Locrian, and also from its father, an Aetolian. Others thought that they should take the child and the mother away to the countryside beyond the frontiers, and burn them.

As they were deliberating, Polycritus, the man who had previously died, appeared in the assembly near the child and wearing black clothing. The citizens were stricken with amazement at the apparition and many had begun to flee, when he called on them to take courage and not be thrown into confusion at the presence of a ghost.

After he had put a stop to most of the commotion and confusion, he spoke in a weak voice, as follows: "Citizens, my body is dead, but in the goodwill and kindness I feel towards you, I am alive. I am here with you now for your benefit, having appealed to those who are masters of things beneath the earth. And so I call on you now, since you are fellow citizens, not to be frightened or repulsed by the unexpected presence of a ghost. I beg all of you, praying by the salvation of each one of you, to hand over to me the child I begot, in order that no violence take place as a result of your reaching some other decision and that your hostility towards

me not be the beginning of difficult and harsh troubles. For it is not permitted to me to let the child be burnt by you, just because of the madness of the seers who have made proclamations to you.

“Now, I excuse you because as you behold so strange a sight you are at a loss as to what is the right course of action for you to take. If, moreover, you will obey me without fear, you will be released from your present fear as well as the impending catastrophe. But if you come to some other opinion, I fear that because of your distrust of me you will fall into an irremediable calamity. Now because of the goodwill I had when I was alive, I have also now in this my present unexpected appearance foretold what is beneficial to you. So I ask you not to put me off any longer but to deliberate correctly and, obeying what I have said, to give me the child in an auspicious manner. For it is not permitted to me to linger long on account of those who rule beneath the earth.”

After saying this he was quiet for a while, expectantly awaiting whatever resolution they would bring forth concerning his request. Now, some thought they should hand over the child and make atonement for both the prodigy and the supernatural being that was standing by, but most disagreed, saying that they ought not to deliberate rashly, since the matter was of great importance and the problem was not an ordinary one.

Seeing that they were not heeding him, but instead were hindering his desire, he spoke again: “At all events, citizens, if trouble befalls you on account of your irresolution, blame not me but the fate that thus leads you down the wrong path, a fate that, opposing me also, forces me to act unlawfully against my own child.”

The people had clustered together and were arguing

about the portent when the ghost took hold of the child, forced back most of the men, hastily tore the child limb from limb, and began to devour him. People began to shout and throw stones at him in an attempt to drive him away. Unharmd by the stones, he consumed the entire body of the child except his head, and then suddenly disappeared.

The people, vexed at these happenings and in a state of extraordinary perplexity, wanted to send a delegation to Delphi, but the head of the child that was lying on the ground began to speak, foretelling the future in an oracle.

O countless folk inhabiting a land famed in song,
Do not go to the sanctuary of Phoebus, to the temple
with its incense,⁷

For the hands you hold in the air are unclean from
blood,

The journey before your feet is defiled.

Renounce the journey to the tripod, and consider
instead what I say,

For I will recount the entire behest of the oracle.

On this day in the course of a year

Death has been ordained for all, but by the will of
Athena

The souls of Locrians and Aetolians shall live mixed
together.

Nor will there be respite from evil, not even briefly,

For a bloody drizzle is poured on your heads,

Night keeps everything hidden, and a dark sky has
spread over it.

At once night causes a darkness to move over the entire
earth,

At home all the bereaved move their limbs at the
threshold,

The women will not leave off grieving, and the
 children
 Shall no longer grow in the houses where their fathers
 are mourned.
 Such has been the scourge that has crashed down upon
 everyone from above.
 Alas, alas, without cease I bewail the terrible sufferings
 of my land,
 And my most dread mother, whom death eventually
 carried away.
 All the gods will render inglorious the birth
 Of whatever there remains of Aetolian and Locrian seed,
 Because death has not touched my head, nor has it done
 away
 With all the indistinguishable limbs of my body, but has
 left me on the earth.
 Come and expose my head to the rising dawn, and
 Do not hide it below within the dusky earth.
 As for you yourselves, abandon the land and
 Go to another land, to a people of Athena,
 If you choose an escape from death in accordance with
 fate.

When the Aetolians heard the oracle they brought their
 wives, infant children, and the very elderly to such places of
 safety as each man was able to arrange. They themselves re-
 mained behind, awaiting what would occur, and it happened
 in the following year that the Aetolians and Acarnanians
 joined battle, with great destruction on both sides.⁸

By situating his tale, which he too claimed to have learned from
 Hiero of Ephesus, in a very specific historical and geographical
 context, Phlegon hoped to win his readers' trust.⁹

His version of the Polycritus story comprises three episodes:

the birth of the androgynous child, the apparition of the ghost, and the pronouncement made by the child's head. The first episode contains three parts: the prodigy constituted by the androgynous birth, its interpretation, and the expected purification.

Polycritus, an Aetolian, is elected Aetolarch for three years and while in office marries a Locrian woman, sleeps with her for three nights, and dies on the fourth. His wife, who is pregnant, remains with her husband's family.¹⁰ After nine months, she "delivered a child with two sets of genitals, male and female, which constituted an extraordinary deviation from nature. The upper portion of the genitals was hard and manly, whereas the part around the thighs was womanish and softer." This description makes it possible to draw up the following table of opposites:

| | |
|---------|----------------|
| male | female |
| upper | lower |
| hard | soft |
| Aetolia | Western Locris |

The first three pairs mentioned by Phlegon of Tralles, which are to be found in the Greek tradition, may by simple deduction be completed by a fourth: the father of the child is Aetolian, the mother a Western Locrian.

Because this child has two sexes, it is a "monster" (*teras*), according to Aristotle's definition of the term in a biological context: "Anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type" (Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* IV 2, 767b).¹¹ Indeed, the diviners, consulted for an interpretation of the prodigy, declare, precisely, that Polycritus's child is

different from both its Locrian mother and its Aetolian father. It is different because it has two sexes, and this constitutes an extraordinary deviation from nature.

Because it is a monster (*teras*, in the strict sense), Polycritus's child is a prodigy (*teras*, in the wider sense).¹² But this prodigy is not, as might be expected, considered a private prodigy, that is, a prodigy to which the state pays no attention as it was produced in a private home (*in loco privato*) and purification for it falls to the proprietor of the place concerned (Livy, *Roman History*, XLIII 13, 6). This is a public prodigy (*prodigium publicum*) (Livy, *Roman History*, I 56, 5), as is proved by the reaction of Polycritus's family: "Struck with astonishment, the child's relatives took it to the agora (*eis tēn agoran*) where they called an assembly (*ekklēsian*), . . . and deliberated about the child." A public prodigy concerned the state, in that it constituted a sign sent by the gods to the community represented by that state. Thus, responsibility for purification fell to the state. In any case, Polycritus's family, struck with astonishment at the sight of the androgynous child, has taken it to the public square. At this point *extispices*¹³ and diviners¹⁴ specializing in the interpretation of prodigies¹⁵ are sent for. The diviners' interpretation of the prodigy is that there will be a clash between the Locrians and the Aetolians because the child is different from its Locrian mother and also from its Aetolian father. They then pronounce upon the type of purification to be carried out.

A whole series of Greek and Roman laws ordered parents to expose abnormal children.¹⁶ In antiquity, the father, or in his absence the mother, had the right to expose a newborn child. Generally, they would be wanting to get rid of the child but

would hope that it survived, so they would expose it in a much-frequented place, protecting it as much as possible. This type of exposure was also lawful when it was prompted by social causes:¹⁷ when a girl had been seduced, a poor family had too many children already, or a more or less well-to-do family wanted only one son. Exposure by the state was a different matter¹⁸ and was essentially explained by religious reasons. Abnormal children, such as Polycritus's, were regarded as ominous signs, and the state had to get rid of them by ejecting them from the city territory, once the meaning of their appearance had been interpreted. However, although the city territory had to be carefully purified, it was important not to kill such abnormal children directly or to bury them. If they were killed they might turn into angry, harmful *biaiotbanatoi*¹⁹ or *aōroi*;²⁰ and if they were buried the children's bodies would be restored intact to the earth, which was *kourotrophos*,²¹ so they might be reborn in the same form. Accordingly, they were exposed, submitted to the will of the gods, who could do as they wished with them. But in the case we are considering, the circumstances are different. The diviners decide that "they should take the child and the mother away to the countryside beyond the frontiers, and burn them." This way of proceeding presented two "advantages": it made it possible both to purify the Aetolians' territory and at the same time to avoid burying the monster. But two anomalies complicated the situation. To burn Polycritus's child would be to kill it with violence, and as a result the will of the gods would be thwarted. Furthermore, Polycritus's wife was condemned to the same fate as her child. These two anomalies appear to account for the apparition of Polycritus.

In the second episode, which tells of the ghost's apparition, three sequences may be distinguished: the description of the ghost, his demands, and his sarcophagy.

The ghost is characterized by two features:²² he is clad in black garments²³ and he speaks in a weak voice.²⁴ It is with the permission of the masters of the underworld that Polycritus returns to the world of the living, and only for a limited period of time, so he cannot afford to wait while the Aetolians make up their minds. Polycritus leaves the world of the dead in order to save his child, who, because it is held to be a prodigy, is to be taken beyond the frontiers and there burned, along with his mother.²⁵ Quite apart from any paternal sentiments (and it is worth noting that none are mentioned), there are two reasons why Polycritus cannot accept their decision, one religious, the other political. First, the destruction of a living being by fire constitutes a violent death. And this first sin of the Aetolians is compounded by another, the burning of a child.²⁶

When Polycritus demands that his child be handed over to him, he receives no satisfaction. Pressed by the shortage of time allowed him by the masters of the world of the dead, and confronted by a crowd intent upon acting upon its decisions, he grabs his child, tears it to pieces, and consumes it, except for the head. How should this be interpreted? Strictly speaking, it does not seem to be an act of cannibalism, as it involves a dead being eating a living one.²⁷

This episode may be linked with another story, also told by Phlegon of Tralles. After the battle of Thermopylae, in which Antiochus was vanquished,²⁸ a Syrian officer by the name of Bouplagus, who had been killed, came back to life to tell the Romans

that Zeus would be exacting vengeance for their crimes. Shortly after, the Roman general Publius was struck by madness and predicted great calamities and bloodthirsty invasions. To prove the truth of this oracle, he climbed up into an oak tree and announced to his troops that he was about to be devoured by a red wolf.

After he had uttered this he fell silent, and proceeding outside the camp, he climbed up a certain oak tree. The crowd followed and he called to them: "Romans and other soldiers, it falls to me to die and be devoured by a huge red wolf on this very day, but as for you, you know that everything I have said is going to happen to you: take the imminent appearance of the beast and my own destruction as proof that I have spoken by divine intimation."

Saying this, he told them to stand aside and not to prevent the approach of the beast, saying that it would not be to their benefit to drive it away. The crowd followed his bidding, and presently the wolf came. When Publius saw it, he came down from the oak tree and fell upon his back, whereupon the wolf ripped him open and devoured him while everyone looked on. Having consumed his body except for the head, it turned away to the mountain. When the crowd now approached, wishing to take up the remains and give them proper burial, the head, which lay on the ground, proclaimed these verses:

Touch not my head. For it is not right
For those in whose hearts Athena has placed wild anger
To take hold of a sacred head. But stop
And listen to the prophecy by means of which I shall
declare the truth to you.

To this land will come a great and powerful Ares,
 Who will dispatch the armed folk to Hades in the
 darkness below and
 Shatter the stone towers and the long walls.
 Seizing our wealth, our infant children, and our wives,
 He will bring them to Asia, crossing over the waves.
 These sure truths Phoebus Apollo has spoken to you,
 The Pythian, who sent his powerful servant and
 Led me to the abode of the blessed and of Persephone.

When they heard this, they were extremely upset. After constructing a temple to Apollo Lykios and an altar at the place where the head lay, they embarked on their ships, and each person sailed to his own land. Everything foretold by Publius came to pass.²⁹

Polycritus seems to have behaved toward his child just as the wolf did toward Publius. By devouring his child, he made it a part of his own body in order to convey it to the world of the dead. The violence that he was forced to commit then rebounded onto the heads of the Aetolians whose fault it all was, just as the head of Polycritus's child announced in an oracle in verse.

The Greek and Roman world also produced other examples of prophesying bodiless heads,³⁰ and we should examine them in order to understand the role of this episode within the framework of the story of Polycritus.

The most famous and probably most ancient example is the head of Orpheus. Ovid relates how Orpheus was torn to pieces by Thracian women³¹ and goes on to say: "The poet's limbs lay scattered all around; but his head and lyre, O Hebrus, thou didst receive, and (a marvel!) while they floated in mid-stream the lyre gave forth some mournful notes, mournfully the lifeless tongue

murmured, mournfully the banks replied. And now, borne onward to the sea, they left their native stream and gained the shore of Lesbos near the city of Methymna" (*Metamorphoses* XI, 50–55).³²

Philostratus adds that Orpheus's head was famed for its oracles, which were consulted particularly frequently during the Trojan War (Philostratus, *Heroicus* 28, 8–9). And he is careful to point out that these oracles were eventually suppressed by Apollo, who reckoned that Orpheus was encroaching upon his prerogatives. The god is said to have bent over the head and told it: "Stop interfering in what is my business; I have already put up with enough on account of your singing" (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* IV 14). A number of iconographical documents illustrating this scene have also come down to us.³³

Orpheus is not an isolated case. Where both Orpheus and Publius are concerned, an opposition to Apollo is involved. For Publius initially climbs into an oak, a tree consecrated to Zeus, within the framework of divination.³⁴ After this the general is devoured by the wolf, an animal consecrated to Apollo. Those who witnessed the event were in no doubt about the matter, for it was to Apollo Lykios (= the wolf) that they built a temple on the spot where Publius's head lay. Elsewhere, in Aristotle, we read that in Caria,³⁵ the head of the priest of Zeus, struck from its body, named its murderer, who was then arrested and brought to justice:

[The tales they tell] of how a man's head speaks after it is cut off! Sometimes they cite Homer in support, who (so they say) was referring to this when he wrote: "As it spake, his head was mingled with the dust" (not "As he spake . . ."). And in [Caria] this kind of thing was once so firmly believed

that one of the inhabitants was actually brought into court on the strength of it. The priest of Zeus *hoplismios* [armed like a hoplite] had been killed, but no one knew who had done it. Certain persons, however, affirmed that they had heard the man's head, after it had been cut off, repeating the following line several times: "Twas Kerkidas did slaughter man on man." So they set to work and found someone in the district who bore this name and brought him to trial. Of course, speech is impossible once the windpipe has been severed and no motion is forthcoming from the lung. And among barbarians, where they cut heads off with expedition, nothing of this sort has taken place so far. (Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* III 10, 673a19 f.)³⁶

Pliny the Elder, for his part, relates:

In the Sicilian war³⁷ the bravest man in Caesar's navies, Gabienus, was taken prisoner by Sextus Pompeius, by whose order his throat was cut and almost severed, and so he lay a whole day on the shore. Then, on the arrival of the evening, a crowd having been gathered to the spot by his groans and entreaties, he besought that Pompey should come to him or send one of his personal staff, as he had come back from the lower world and had some news to tell him. Pompey sent several of his friends, who were told by Gabienus that the gods below approved Pompey's cause and the righteous party, so that the issue would be what Pompey desired; that he had orders to bring this news, and a proof of its truth would be that as soon as his errand was accomplished he would expire. And this so happened. (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* VII 178-179)³⁸

In all the above cases, a violent death occurs, and at least three of them (Orpheus, Polycritus's child, and Publius) involve an opposition to Apollo. But let us return to the story of Polycritus.

After seeing Polycritus devour his child's body, leaving only the head, the Aetolians want to send an embassy to Delphi. But the head of Polycritus's child dissuades them, on the grounds of their being defiled by the violence that they forced upon Polycritus. The head itself would pronounce an oracle in the place of an oracle from Apollo.

One may wonder why, in all these cases in which an individual is torn to pieces and/or devoured, the head alone remains and proceeds to deliver an oracle. W. Deonna has tried to resolve this question by referring to cephalomantics, a type of divination in which the head of an animal is placed on a fire. The heat makes the jaws crack and move so that they appear to be speaking, and the sounds that they make are interpreted. But this attractive hypothesis is undermined by the fact that no example of this type of divination has been found in ancient Greece. So it seems advisable simply to bear in mind two facts. First, the human head contains the rational part that in particular presides over the elaboration of thought and language, which is expressed through the mouth. Therefore, it constitutes the particular instrument of inspired oracles, which explains how it is that oracles delivered from human heads challenge Apollo's oracular power.

The oracle pronounced by the head of Polycritus's child falls into two parts, the second of which is twice further subdivided. In the first part the head explains why, defiled as they are by the violence that they have provoked, the Aetolians must not go to Delphi but must, instead, listen to the head of the child. In the

second part, it announces what is going to happen. First, the head of the child predicts that in the coming year the majority of the Aetolians and the Locrians will encounter a death that is described in the somberest of terms. So the distinction that is made between the death of the body and the survival of the soul cannot but surprise us. It is expressed in the first words Polycritus utters: "Citizens, my body is dead but in the goodwill and kindness I feel towards you, I am alive." The words might have been expressly designed to provide a theoretical explanation, possibly inspired by philosophy, for the three apparitions that Phlegon describes in the first three chapters of his *Mirabilia*.

The head of Polycritus's child then speaks of other survivors and above all links his fate with that reserved for the Aetolians and Locrians. Just as, in his case, only the head remains, the rest of his body having been torn apart and devoured by his father, the greater part of the Aetolians and Locrians are to be annihilated, even if just a few survive. So it is understandable that the head recommends that it be left in the light of the day, on the surface of the earth, and not buried in its shadowy depths, in the darkness and consequently in death. We may now draw up another table of oppositions:

| | |
|--|--|
| Aetolians and Western Locrians, survivors | Aetolians and Western Locrians, victims |
| the head | the rest of the body |
| life | death |
| light | darkness |
| upon the earth | beneath the earth |

To demonstrate the whole set of oppositions around which the various pairs of opposites that compose this story are orga-

nized, it may be useful to show how the two tables set out above interact (see figure 1).

What emerges is that the story of Polycritus constitutes a particularly interesting piece of evidence for inclusion in a file on the history of dual sexuality, as it introduces a political dimension.

The story of Polycritus contains all the themes associated with dual sexuality: the child with two sexes is produced by a marriage between "foreigners," an Aetolian man and a Locrian woman; divination plays an important role, but stands in opposition to the type of divination over which Apollo presides; any clear frontier between life and death vanishes once a ghost is involved.

Although the adventures of Polycritus seem to belong to fiction, this story must have referred to practices that were followed in real life. For it would certainly appear that one particular collection of sixteen descriptions of the behavior of Romans faced with androgynous beings refers to historical reality.³⁹ These prodigies all occurred in a period spanning just over a century, from 209 to 92 B.C., years fraught with wars and crises of all kinds. The more frequently disturbing events occurred, the more complicated the purification ceremonies became.

As the Romans saw it, prodigies constituted an infringement of the *pax deorum*⁴⁰ and therefore required a process of purification that consisted of expiatory rites. Historians of the Roman Republic have produced two different interpretations of these ceremonies. For some, they constituted a way of cynically exploiting the state religion for political ends; for others, they represented factual testimony of the superstitious panic that gripped the masses in times of intense crisis. In truth, prodigies and the purificatory ceremonies they occasioned may well have fulfilled

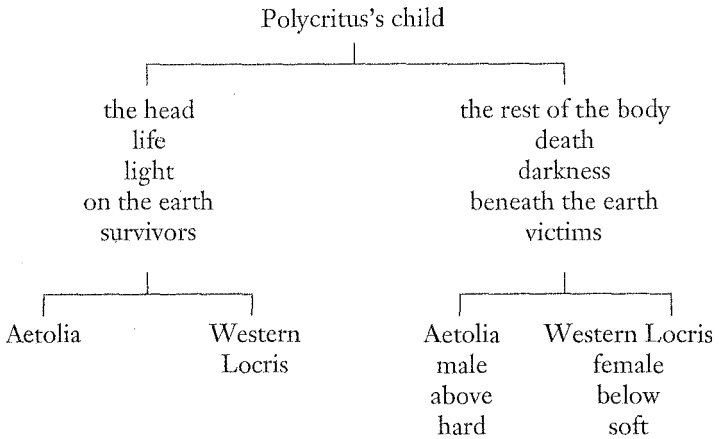


Figure 1. Polycritus's child and its oppositions.

both functions simultaneously. By recognizing the prodigies that occurred in the villages of Italy, outside Rome, and by setting in motion purificatory ceremonies, the Roman Senate proved that it was sensitive to the anxiety that had taken hold of populations that were not Roman but that, because they lived in Italy, found themselves subjected to considerable military pressures⁴¹ and that it recognized the existence of other religious sensibilities. Furthermore, by having Roman priests in Rome conduct expiatory ceremonies for prodigies that occurred outside the city, the Senate manifested its temporal hegemony over the entire territory of Italy by religious means.

Table 1 lists the sixteen prodigies relating to beings said to possess both sexes, all of which occurred between 209 and 92 B.C. on Roman territory. This list of prodigies is drawn from Livy (59 B.C. to A.D. 17, or 64 B.C. to A.D. 12), who wrote a history of

Rome *ab urbe condita*, and from the *Liber prodigiorum* by Julius Obsequens, who was writing in the fourth century A.D., using Livy's history as his source for a list of prodigies supposed to have occurred between 249 and 12 B.C. This list is incomplete and includes a number of apocryphal entries as well as a number of duplications.⁴²

In three cases, the prodigies constituted by the birth of an androgynous being were interpreted by *haruspices*, who also determined its fate. In three other cases, the Sibylline books were consulted.⁴³ These were initially placed in the care of the *duumviri*, then, from 367 B.C., in that of the *decemviri*, and finally, under Sulla, in that of the *quindecimviri*. In 83 B.C. the whole collection of books was destroyed in the Capitol fire.

Subsequently, a new collection was produced by Augustus and placed in the temple of Apollo.⁴⁴ It contained at least two oracles relating to the discovery of androgynes, extensive extracts from which were preserved for us by Phlegon of Tralles (*De mirabilibus*, chapter 10).

The presence in Rome of Etruscan *haruspices*, who were consulted by the Senate on the interpretation and purification of prodigies,⁴⁵ constituted a unique phenomenon in Roman history. The Romans were certainly impressed by the Etruscans' divinatory techniques, which were recorded in books known as the *Etrusca disciplina*.⁴⁶ But the *haruspices* were also aristocrats, members of, or related to, their city's local oligarchy. So when the Romans required the *haruspices'* intervention for the interpretation of prodigies, they were thereby supporting those local oligarchies on both a political and a religious level. At any rate, the *haruspices* were often associated with the *decemviri*, who, in a way, operated as their Roman patrons.

TABLE I
Sixteen Prodigies Related to Dual-Sexed Beings

| Case | References | Date auc | Date B.C. | Place | Age | Consultation | Purification | Expiation | Other Observations |
|------|--|-------------|--------------|----------------------------|----------|-------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | T.L., XXVII, 11 4-6 | 545 | 209 | Sinuessa | n.b. | — | — | Sacrifices and prayers | — |
| 2 | T.L., XXVII, 37, 5f. | 547 | 207 | Frusino | n.b. | Etrurian <i>haruspices</i> | Sea | 3 × 9 girls Other ceremonies | Ominous and shaming portent |
| 3 | T.L., XXXI, 12, 6f. | 554 | 200 | Sabina | n.b. | Sibylline books | Sea | 3 × 9 girls Other ceremonies | o.p. |
| 4 | T.L., XXXI, 12, 6f. | 554 | 200 | Sabina | 16 years | Sibylline books | Sea | 3 × 9 girls Other ceremonies | o.p. |
| 5 | T.L., XXXIX, 22. 3-5 = J.O. 3 | 568 | 186 | Umbria | 12 years | <i>Haruspices</i> | Sea | — | — |
| 6 | J.O. 22 = Orosius, V, 4, 8 | 612 | 142 | Luna | n.b. | <i>Haruspices</i> | Sea | — | Epidemic Famine |
| 7 | J.O., 27a | 621 | 133 | Territory of Ferentinum | n.b. | — | River | 3 × 9 girls | — |
| 8 | Phlegon, <i>De mirab.</i> , chap. 10 | 629 | 125 | Rome | n.b. | Sibylline books | — | 3 × 9 girls Other ceremonies | — |
| 9 | J.O., 32 | 632 | 122 | Forum Vessanum | n.b. | — | Sea | — | — |
| 10 | J.O., 34 | 635 | 119 | Territory of Rome | 8 years | — | — | 3 × 9 girls | — |
| 11 | J.O., 36 | 637 | 117 | Saturnia | 10 years | — | Sea | 3 × 9 girls | — |
| 12 | J.O., 47 | 656 | 98 | — | — | — | Sea | — | — |
| 13 | J.O., 48 | 657 | 97 | Rome | — | — | Sea | Prayers | — |
| 14 | J.O., 50 | 659 | 95 | Urbinum | n.b. | — | Sea | — | — |
| 15 | J.O., 53 | 662 | 92 | Arretium | — | — | — | 3 × 9 girls Other ceremonies | — |
| 16 | J.O., 53 | 662 | 92 | Arretium | — | — | — | 3 × 9 girls Other ceremonies | — |

Abbreviations: T.L. = Livy; J.O. = Julius Obsequens; *auc* = *ab urbe condita*; n.b. = newborn; o.p. = ominous portent

SOURCE: Luc Brisson, "Aspects politiques de la bisexualité. L'histoire de Polycrite (Phlegon, *De mirab.*, ch. 2; Proclus, *In Remp.*, II, 115. 7-15 Kroll)," in *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren*, edited by M. B. de Boer and T. A. Edridge, *Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain*, edited by M. J. Vermaseren, vol. 68 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), p. 110.

As for how the androgynes were eliminated, in eleven of those sixteen cases the androgyne was committed to the water (the sea in ten cases, a river in one) in an open trunk or box that would soon overturn. In one other case it is known that the androgyne was destined to die, but no details are given. In the remaining cases the fate of the victim is not known. Death by drowning was a characteristic Etruscan technique.⁴⁷

The expiatory ceremonies recommended by the first of the oracles are as follows:⁴⁸

1. A collection of money to offer to Demeter
2. The sacrifice of 3×9 bulls (possibly for Zeus)
3. The sacrifice of white cows by 3×9 girls and prayers to be said by the same girls, according to a Greek rite in honor of Hera Basilissa (= Juno the Queen)
4. An offering made by matrons (a daily libation)
5. An offering of torches for Demeter
6. Another offering by matrons, with a triple libation for Demeter
7. A similar offering for Persephone, with prayers recited by girls
8. A collection of money for an offering.

The second oracle, the beginning of which is missing (as is the end of the first oracle), recommends a number of other expiatory ceremonies:

1. An offering of garments for Persephone
2. A gift of whatever is most beautiful and best in the world for Persephone
3. A prayer to Demeter and Persephone

4. The sacrifice of a black ox for Hades-Pluto; a sacrificial procession in which festive clothing is worn
5. A sacrifice of white goats to Apollo
6. Prayers to Apollo, whose head is crowned
7. The sacrifice of a white cow to Hera Basilissa (= Juno the Queen)
8. A hymn sung by girls
9. The consecration of a *xoanon* (a statue of cypress wood) to Hera
10. A libation and daily offerings to Hera
11. A sacrifice of lambs to the chthonic gods.

In nine cases out of sixteen, the expiatory ceremonies occasioned by the discovery of an androgyne consisted of a hymn sung by 3×9 girls, in honor of Juno the Queen. As Livy declares explicitly in the text cited below, Juno the Queen was the patron of matrons, married mothers who gave birth to children. In six of those cases the ceremony was completed by other rites. Finally, in two cases prayers and sacrifices are mentioned in very general terms.

For a more precise idea of the purification and the various expiatory ceremonies that followed the discovery of an androgyne in 207 B.C., it is worth reading the following long passage from Livy, which refers to the second case in table 1:

Relieved of their religious scruples, men were troubled again by the report that at Frasino there had been born a child as large as a four year old, and not so much a wonder for size as because, just as at Sinussa two years before, it was uncertain whether male or female. In fact, the soothsayers summoned from Etruria said it was a terrible and loathsome

portent; it must be removed from Roman territory, far from contact with the earth, and drowned in the sea. They put it alive in a chest, carried it out to sea and threw it overboard. The pontiffs likewise decreed that thrice nine maidens should sing a hymn as they marched through the city. While they were in the temple of Jupiter Stator, learning that hymn, composed by Livius the poet, the Temple of Juno the Queen on the Aventine was struck by lightning. That this portent concerned the matrons was the opinion given by the soothsayers, and that the goddess must be appeased by a gift; whereupon the matrons domiciled in the city of Rome or within ten miles of it were summoned by an edict of the curule aediles to the Capitol. And from their own number they themselves chose twenty-five, to whom they should bring a contribution from their dowries. Out of that a golden basin was made as a gift and carried to the Aventine, and the matrons after due purification offered sacrifice.

At once a day was appointed by the decemvirs for another sacrifice to the same goddess; and the order of procedure was as follows: from the Temple of Apollo two white cows were led through the Porta Carmentalis into the city; behind them were carried two statues of Juno the Queen in cypress wood. Then the seven and twenty maidens in long robes marched, singing their hymn in honour of Juno the Queen, a song which to the untrained minds of that time may have deserved praise but now, if repeated, would be repellent and uncouth. Behind the company of maidens followed the decemvirs wearing laurel garlands and purple-bordered togas. From the gate they proceeded along the Vicus Jugarius into the Forum. In the Forum the procession halted, and passing a rope from hand to hand the maidens advanced, accompanying the sound of the voice by beating

time with their feet. Then by way of the Vicus Tuscus and the Velabrum, through the Forum Boarium they made their way to the Clivus Publicus and the Temple of Juno the Queen. There the two victims were sacrificed by the decemvirs and the cypress statues borne into the temple. (Livy, *Roman History* XXVII 37, 5 f.)⁴⁹

This text provides an excellent synthesis, complete with details, of all that has been said above concerning the purifications and the expiatory ceremonies occasioned by the discovery of an androgyne. We are bound to conclude that in the sixteen cases mentioned above, no violence was done to the androgyne, who was disposed of by being exposed beyond the frontiers, and neither buried in the earth nor consigned to fire. Seen in this perspective, the diviners' recommendation that Polycritus's child be burned seems aberrant, for it assimilates a human being to a dangerous animal.⁵⁰

AN ERROR OF NATURE

All the cases mentioned so far occurred under the Republic, precisely during wars or periods of crisis. Quite soon, however, there was a reaction against the cruelty of the fate reserved for human beings possessed of both sexes. A good example of this reaction is to be found in Diodorus Siculus.⁵¹ Diodorus, who was an eclectic rationalist, frequently resorts to allegories inspired by Euhemerus or the Stoics in order to render myths less scandalous. This was his way of combating superstition. But where androgynes are concerned, he adopts a different strategy: he interprets the phenomenon as a simple error of nature, an anatomical malformation that is rare but perfectly explicable.

Likewise in Naples and a good many other places, sudden changes of this sort are said to have occurred. . . . At the outset of the Marsian War⁵² at any rate, there was, so it is reported,⁵³ an Italian living not far from Rome who had married an hermaphrodite similar to those described above. He laid information before the senate, which in an access of superstitious terror and in obedience to the Etruscan diviners ordered the creature to be burned alive.⁵⁴ Thus did one whose nature was like ours and who was not, in reality, a monster, meet an unsuitable end through misunderstanding of his malady. Shortly afterwards there was another such case at Athens and again, through misunderstanding of the affliction, the person was burned alive. (Diodorus Siculus, XXXII 12, 1–2, according to Photius, *Library*, codex 244, 379a)⁵⁵

The story that follows, also recounted by Diodorus Siculus, involves far less serious consequences for the human being who “changes sex,” even if the abnormal situations that result from the discovery of the androgyne’s state provoke dramatic reactions from those close to him/her.

It would be a mistake to omit the strange occurrence that took place before the death of Alexander,⁵⁶ even though it is a thing so marvellous that it will not, perhaps, be credited. A short while before the time of our present narrative, as King Alexander was consulting an oracle in Cilicia (where there is said to be a sanctuary of Apollo Sarpedonius), the god, we are told, replied to him that he should beware of the place that bore the “two-formed one.” At the time the oracle seemed enigmatic, but later, after the king’s death, its sense was learnt through the following causes.

There was dwelling at Abae in Arabia⁵⁷ a certain man named Diophrantus, a Macedonian by descent. He married an Arabian woman of that region and begot a son, named for himself, and a daughter named Herais. Now the son he saw dead before his prime, but when the daughter was of an age to be married he gave her a dowry and bestowed her upon a man named Samiades. He, after living in wedlock with his wife for the space of a year, went off on a long journey. Herais, it is said, fell ill of a strange and altogether incredible infirmity. A severe tumour appeared at the base of her abdomen, and as the region became more and more swollen and high fevers supervened, her physicians suspected that an ulceration had taken place at the mouth of the uterus. They applied such remedies as they thought would reduce the inflammation, but notwithstanding, on the seventh day, the surface of the tumour burst, and projecting from her groin there appeared a male genital organ with testicles attached. Now when the rupture occurred, with its sequel, neither her physician nor any other visitors were present, but only her mother and two maidservants. Dumbfounded at this extraordinary event, they tended Herais as best they could, and said nothing of what had occurred. She, on recovering from her illness, wore feminine attire and continued to conduct herself as a homebody and as one subject to a husband. It was assumed, however, by those who were privy to the strange secret that she was a hermaphrodite, and as to her past life with her husband, since natural intercourse did not fit their theory, she was thought to have consorted with him homosexually.⁵⁸ Now while her condition was still undisclosed, Samiades returned and, as was fitting, sought the company of his wife. And when she, for very shame, could not bear to appear in his presence, he,

they say, grew angry. As he continually pressed the point and claimed his wife, her father meanwhile denying his plea but feeling too embarrassed to disclose the reason, their disagreement soon grew into a quarrel. As a result, Samiades brought suit for his own wife against her father, for Fortune did in real life what she commonly does in plays and made the strange altercation lead to an accusation. After the judges took their seats and all the arguments had been presented, the person in dispute appeared before the tribunal, and the jurors debated whether the husband should have jurisdiction over his wife or the father over his daughter. When, however, the court found that it was the wife's duty to attend upon her husband, she at last revealed the truth. Screwing up her courage, she unloosed the dress that disguised her, displayed her masculinity to them all, and burst out in bitter protest that anyone should require a man to cohabit with a man. All present were overcome with astonishment and exclaimed with surprise at this marvel (*paradoxon*). Herais, now that her shame had been publicly disclosed, exchanged her woman's apparel for the garb of a young man.⁵⁹ And the physicians, on being shown the evidence, concluded that her male organ had been concealed in an egg-shaped portion of the female organ, and that since a membrane had abnormally encased the organ, an aperture had formed through which excretions were discharged. In consequence they found it necessary to scarify the perforated area and induce cicatrization: having thus brought the male organ into decent shape, they gained credit for applying such treatment as the case allowed.

Herais, changing her name to Diophantus,⁶⁰ was enrolled in the cavalry and after fighting in the king's forces accompanied him in his withdrawal to Abae. Thus it was that the

oracle, which previously had not been understood, now became clear when the king was assassinated at Abae, the birthplace of the "two-formed one."⁶¹ As for Samiades, they say that he, still in thrall to his love and its old associations, but constrained by shame for his unnatural marriage, designated Diophantus in his will as heir to his property, and made his departure from life. Thus she who was born a woman took on a man's courage and renown, while the man proved to be less strong-minded than a woman. (Diodorus Siculus, XXXII 10.2 [= Photius, *Library*, codex 244, 377b])⁶²

One of the correctors of the manuscripts in Photius's *Library*, where this story was preserved,⁶³ a thirteenth-century Byzantine by the name of Theodore Skutariotes, noted in the margin of the manuscript that an androgyne had also been born in his lifetime and had had sexual relations: "A monster of this kind appeared in our own times. He was believed to possess both sexes at the same time, and to play now an active, now a passive role in sexual relations. What is more, it is said, he could not prevent himself from making love, even when he was playing the passive role, not of his own volition, but as a result of the force of things."⁶⁴ This testimony is particularly valuable as it is totally unexpected. It tells us of reactions to the appearance and behavior of an androgyne more than a thousand years after Diodorus Siculus, and in an exclusively Christian context.

Diodorus goes on to tell of another, similar case, that of a woman of Epidaurus named Callo who, following surgery, turned into a man known as Callon.

A change of sex under similar conditions occurred thirty years later⁶⁵ in the city of Epidaurus.⁶⁶ There was an Epidau-

rian child, named Callo, orphaned of both her parents, who was supposed to be a girl. Now the orifice with which women are naturally provided had in her case no opening, but beside the so-called *pecten* [pubis] she had from birth a perforation through which she excreted the liquid residues. On reaching maturity she became the wife of a fellow-citizen. For two years she lived with him, and since she was incapable of intercourse as a woman, she was obliged to submit to unnatural embraces.⁶⁷ Later a tumour appeared on her genitals and because it gave rise to great pain a number of physicians were called in. None of the others would take the responsibility for treating her, but a certain apothecary, who offered to cure her, cut into the swollen area, whereupon a man's privates were protruded, namely testicles and an imperforate penis. While all the others stood amazed at the extraordinary event, the apothecary took steps to remedy the remaining deficiencies. First of all, cutting into the glans, he made a passage into the urethra, and inserting a silver catheter drew off the liquid residues. Then, by scarifying the perforated area, he brought the parts together. After achieving a cure in this manner he demanded double fees, saying that he had received a female invalid and made her into a healthy young man.⁶⁸ Callo laid aside her loom-shuttles and all other instruments of woman's work, and taking in their stead the garb and status of a man, changed her name (by adding a single letter, N, at the end) to Callon. It is stated by some that before changing to man's form she had been a priestess of Demeter,⁶⁹ and that because she had witnessed things not to be seen by a man, she was brought for trial for impiety. (Diodorus Siculus, XXXII 11 [= Photius, *Library*, codex 244, 378b])

Diodorus found a strategy for undermining the superstition that surrounded the appearance of androgynous beings. On the basis of the cases of Herais and Callo, he showed that androgyny is a natural phenomenon that can be resolved by means of surgery and that it is possible for the being who changes sex following such an intervention to find a place in society again, although that is not a foregone conclusion. Diodorus Siculus was well aware of all that was at stake, and declared:

Not that the male and female natures have been united to form a truly bisexual type, for that is impossible, but that Nature, to mankind's consternation and mystification, has through the bodily parts given this impression. And this is the reason why we have considered these shifts of sex worthy of record, not for the entertainment, but for the improvement of our readers. For many men, thinking such things to be portents, fall into superstition, and not merely isolated individuals, but even nations and cities. (Diodorus Siculus, XXXII 12, 1 [= Photius, *Library*, codex 244, 378b-379a])

He could hardly have been more explicit.

We shall be returning to many of the elements in these stories, but for the moment, here is a list of them: the connection established between "mixed" marriage and dual-sexed offspring (Herais is the product of a marriage between a Macedonian man and an Arab woman,⁷⁰ just as Polycritus's child was produced from the union of an Aetolian man and a Locrian woman); Diodorus Siculus's mention of a hermaphrodite; the cross-dressing leading to a confusion of tasks (household tasks for the man who used

to be a woman and military service for the woman who becomes a man); and, finally, the disruption of family relations (Diophantus is the name not only of Herais but also of her father and her brother).

A PHENOMENON

Under the Empire, abnormal children continued to be committed to the waters to drown,⁷¹ but “hermaphrodites” appear no longer to have been considered as terrifying prodigies, no doubt thanks to a rationalist reaction against superstition, of the type manifested by Diodorus. Beings with both sexes were now regarded as freaks of nature in the same way as, for instance, dwarves, as Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23/24–79) explicitly remarks in his *Natural History*: “Persons are also born of both sexes combined—what we call ‘Hermaphrodites,’ formerly called ‘*androgyni*’ and considered as portents, but now as entertainments.”⁷² An illustration of this remark is provided by another anecdote that Pliny refers to elsewhere and that relates to the animal world:

In a few women there is a curious resemblance to the male organ, as there is in hermaphrodites of either sex, a thing that I believe first occurred with the class of quadrupeds, also in the principate of Nero; at all events Nero used to show off a team of hermaphrodite mares that he had found in the Trier district in Gaul, harnessed to his chariot, apparently deeming it a very remarkable spectacle to see the Emperor of the world riding in a miraculous carriage. (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* XI 262)

At any rate, it seems that the apparition of a dual-sexed being no longer provoked superstitious panic.

In a similar context, although on a somewhat different level, since here it is not a matter of the simultaneous possession of both sexes, Pliny does not hesitate to cite cases of sex-changes.

Transformation of females into males is not an idle story (*non est fabulosum*).⁷³ We find in the Annals that in the consulship of Publius Licinius Crassus and Gaius Cassius Longinus⁷⁴ a girl at Casinum⁷⁵ was changed into a boy, under the observation of the parents, and at the order of the augurs was conveyed away to a desert island. Licinius Mucianus⁷⁶ has recorded that he personally saw at Argos a man named Arescon who had been given the name Arescusa and had actually married a husband, and then had grown a beard and developed masculine attributes and had taken a wife; and that he had also seen a boy with the same record at Smyrna. I myself saw in Africa a person who had turned into a male on the day of marriage to a husband; this was Lucius Constitius, a citizen of Thysdritum. . . . [He is still living as I write this.] (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* VII 36)⁷⁷

Pliny's reaction is certainly in line with the trend toward combating religious superstition and the cruelest of its effects.

In antiquity, the apparition of a human being possessing both sexes unleashed such terrible passions because it called into question the organization of society and the survival of the human race.

On this particular point, our information depends upon the transmission of collections of *Mirabilia* and lists of *Prodigies*, but

it does seem that people's attitude toward human beings with both sexes underwent considerable modification in the course of two centuries, in both Greece and Rome.

Whether they were exterminated, considered to be beings suffering from an anatomical malformation, or regarded as strange phenomena, dual-sexed beings did not find a place in any ancient society because they represented a more or less threatening deviance from the norm, and that norm implied a clear biological differentiation that was the foundation for a differentiation of roles not only in sexual relations but also in social tasks.

Any uncertainty that affected the clear biological differentiation between the sexes was seen as threatening. It was to be a long time before the fear provoked by such uncertainty ceased to lead to the destruction of beings considered to possess both male and female sexual organs.

CHAPTER TWO

Dual Sexuality and Homosexuality

In antiquity, a precise rule governed sexual relations. To be a man was to play an active role; to be a woman was to play a passive role. Despite the fact that homosexuality as such had nothing to do with dual sexuality, both passive homosexuals and homosexual women who behaved like men were assimilated to androgynes. In Rome, that rule was absolute, but in the Greek world, it was rather more flexible.

On a social level, the opposition between activity and passivity in sexual relations inspired a second rule. To be a man was to be a warrior, and to be a woman was to be a wife and a mother. To reject one's role, to challenge it or play it badly, led to more or less ironical doubts being cast upon one's possession of the biological sex that was traditionally associated with that role. So it is not hard to see why the initiation ceremonies that marked an individual's definitive entry into the life of a man or woman fleetingly incorporated a regulated inversion of roles, which took the form of either cross-dressing or fictional battles.

THE MYTH OF HERMAPHRODITUS,
AS TOLD BY OVID

The myth of Hermaphroditus, told by Ovid in Book IV of the *Metamorphoses* (285–399), sets out to explain the origin of passive homosexuality.

At the age of fifteen, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite left his birthplace, Ida. His travels took him to Caria (a mountainous region in southwest Asia Minor, south of the Meander River, with Greek cities, such as Halicarnassus) and a wonderfully beautiful lake. The nymph of the spring that fed the lake, Salmacis, who always avoided the hard exertions of hunting and devoted all her time to strictly feminine occupations, fell in love with him and made advances to him. Hermaphroditus, who did not know what love was, tried to avoid her. But while he was swimming in the lake, Salmacis dived in and clung to him, praying to the gods that their bodies be never again separated. The gods heeded her prayer, and as a result the two of them came to form a single body that seemed “to have no sex and yet to have both” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV 379). Hermaphroditus, for his part, persuaded the gods to make any man who thereafter bathed in the lake lose his virility.

Much has been said about Hermaphroditus, but the hundred or so lines in which Ovid recounts the misadventures of the young god are seldom read. The interest of this passage in the *Metamorphoses* lies in its total originality. Ovid was the first to recount the myth of Hermaphroditus and the only writer to establish specific links between dual sexuality and masculine homosexuality of the passive kind.

The *Metamorphoses*,¹ most of which were probably completed

by the time Ovid was exiled to Tomis,² during the last quarter of the year A.D. 8, are composed of fifteen books, written in hexameters. The work constitutes a collection of myths of Greek or Middle Eastern origin, the formal unity of which stems from three factors: most of the myths describe or allude to a change of form; the myths are gathered into compositions linked to one another by extremely elaborate literary procedures; the work follows a chronological order, beginning with the transformation of Chaos into Cosmos and ending with the apotheosis of Julius Caesar.³

Book IV of *The Metamorphoses*, in which Ovid tells the story of Hermaphroditus, together with Book III, makes up a long section devoted to Theban legends. The literary interest of Book IV lies in the fact that, in it, the daughters of Minyas are at once protagonists and narrators. Like Pentheus (see *Metamorphoses* III 511-563), they refuse to take part in the cult of Dionysus. During one of the festivals held to honor the god, they refuse to interrupt their domestic activities and, continuing with their wool work, they take turns telling one another stories. Arsippe relates the adventures of Dercetis, Semiramis, and one of the Naiads, and also the story of Pyramus and Thisbe; Leuconoe recalls the loves of Mars and Venus, and tells of Clytie's jealousy of Leucothoe; then Alcithoe, after recounting the stories of Daphnis, Sithon, Celmis, the Couretes, and Crocus and Smilax, tells the tale of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus. To punish them, Dionysus turns the three sisters into bats.

The idea of transformation, or metamorphosis, can be traced a long way back in Greek literature. Already present in the *Iliad* (see *Metamorphoses* II 309-319), the *Odyssey* (see *Metamorphoses* X 237-281), and Hesiod (*Theogony* 183-206, 280-281), it persists

in both the poetry and the figurative art of the fifth and fourth centuries. But in the Alexandrian period the idea took on a new dimension. Under the influence of scientific records—biography, geography, and astronomy—the idea of metamorphosis acquired a veritable autonomy. A number of authors, including Antoninus Liberalis, compiled collections of myths and stories on this theme.⁴

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which are inspired, either directly or indirectly, by those collections, human beings may be transformed into a number of other beings: mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, insects, fabulous creatures, plants, stones, metals, elements (water, air, constellations). Conversely, beings of every kind, whatever they are, may be changed into human beings or other creatures. To this list must be added other transformations, of a rather special kind, such as apotheosis, metempsychosis, changes of sex, returns to youth, and resurrection. Finally, it is important to remember that the appearance of the Cosmos and of certain of its parts are also the result of a metamorphosis. Certain gods can even assume other forms temporarily, and a single character may undergo several successive metamorphoses.

Ovid mentions six changes of sex in the *Metamorphoses*:⁵

| Character | Ovid | A. Liberalis |
|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Tiresias | III 316-338 | XVII 5 |
| Sithon | IV 279-280 | XVII 5 [Siproites?] |
| Hermaphroditus | IV 285-388 | — |
| Mestra | VIII 843-878 | XVII 5 [Hypermetra?] |
| Iphis | IX 666-797 | XVII 1-4 [Leucippus?] |
| Cainis | XII 169-209 | XVII 4 |

Tiresias and Sithon are changed from men into women as a result of coming unexpectedly upon a naked goddess enjoying a bath.⁶ From being a woman, Iphis becomes a man when the prayers of his mother, who had raised her daughter as a boy so as not to have to expose her, are answered by the goddess Isis. Mestra, a woman, becomes a man on several occasions.⁷ Cainis changes from a woman into a man, Caineus, and is eventually transformed into the Phoenix.⁸ It should be pointed out that Hermaphroditus, or rather the being formed by the fusion of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, is the only one to possess both sexes simultaneously rather than successively. As neither Antoninus Liberalis nor, consequently, Nicander, appear to have mentioned the myth concerning Hermaphroditus, its origin remains a mystery.

Our ignorance on this score adds to the fascination of this story of great literary beauty and to the emotions that it arouses.

How the fountain of Salmacis is of ill-repute, how it enervates with its enfeebling waters and renders soft and weak all men who bathe therein, you shall now hear. The cause is hidden; but the enfeebling power of the fountain is well known. A little son of Hermes and of the goddess of Cythera (Aphrodite) the Naiads nursed within Ida's caves.⁹ In his fair face mother and father could be clearly seen; his name also he took from them. When fifteen years had passed, he left his native mountains and abandoned his foster-mother Ida, delighting to wander in unknown lands and to see strange rivers, his eagerness making light of toil. He came even to the Lycian cities and to the Carians, who dwell hard by the land of Lycia. Here he saw a pool of water crys-

tal clear to the very bottom. No marshy reeds grow there, no unfruitful swamp-grass, nor spiky rushes; it is clear water. But the edges of the pool are bordered with fresh grass and herbage ever green. A nymph dwells in the pool, one that loves not hunting, nor is wont to bend the bow or strive with speed of foot. She only of the naiads follows not swift Diana's train. Often, 'tis said, her sisters would chide her: "Salmacis, take now either hunting-spear or painted quiver, and vary your ease with the hardships of the hunt." But she takes no hunting-spear, no painted quiver, nor does she vary her ease with the hardships of the hunt; but at times she bathes her shapely limbs in her own pool; often combs her hair with a boxwood comb, often looks into the mirror-like waters to see what best becomes her. Now, wrapped in a transparent robe, she lies down to rest on the soft grass or the soft herbage. Often she gathers flowers; and on this occasion too, she chanced to be gathering flowers when she saw the boy and longed to possess what she saw.

Not yet, however, did she approach him, though she was eager to do so, until she calmed herself, until she had arranged her robes and composed her countenance, and taken all pains to appear beautiful. Then did she speak: "O youth, most worthy to be believed a god, if thou art indeed a god, thou must be Cupid; or if thou art mortal, happy are they who gave thee birth, blest is thy brother, fortunate indeed any sister of thine and thy nurse who gave thee suck. But far, far happier than them all is she, if any be thy promised bride, if thou shalt deem any worthy to be thy wife. If there be any such, let mine be a stolen joy; if not, may I be thine, thy bride, and may we be joined in wedlock?" The maiden said no more. But the boy blushed rosy red; for he knew not what love is. But still the blush became him well. Such col-

our have apples hanging in sunny orchards, or painted ivory; such has the moon, eclipsed, red under white, when brazen vessels clash vainly for her relief.¹⁰ When the nymph begged and prayed at least for a sister's kiss, and was [about] to throw her arms round his snowy neck, he cried: "Have done or I must flee and leave this spot,—and you." Salmacis trembled at this threat and said: "I yield the place to you, fair stranger," and turned away, pretended to depart. But even so she often looked back, and deep in a neighbouring thicket she hid herself, crouching on bended knees. But the boy, freely as if unwatched and alone, walks up and down on the grass, dips his toes into the lapping water, and his feet. Then quickly, charmed with the coolness of the soothing stream, he threw aside the thin garments from his slender form. Then did he truly attract her, and the nymph's love kindled as she gazed at the naked form. Her eyes shone bright as when the sun's dazzling face is reflected from the surface of a glass held opposite his rays. Scarce can she endure delay, scarce bear her joy postponed, so eager to hold him in her arms, so madly incontinent. He, clapping his body with hollow palms, dives into the pool, and swimming with alternate strokes flashes with gleaming body through the transparent flood, as if one should encase ivory figures or white lilies in translucent glass. "I win, and he is mine!" cries the naiad and casting off all her garments dives also into the waters: she holds him fast though he strives against her, steals reluctant kisses, fondles him, touches his unwilling breast, clings to him on this side and that. At length, as he tries his best to break away from her, she wraps him round with her embrace, as a serpent, when the king of birds has caught her and is bearing her on high; which, hanging from his claws, wraps her folds around his head and feet and entangles his

flapping wings with her tail; or as the ivy oft-times embraces great trunks of trees, or as the octopus holds its enemy caught beneath the sea, its tentacles embracing him on every side.¹¹

The son (descendant) of Atlas resists as best he may and denies the nymph the joy she craves; but she holds on, and clings as if grown fast to him. "Strive as you may, wicked boy," she cries, "Still shall you not escape me. Grant me this, ye gods, and may no day ever come that shall separate him from me or me from him." The gods heard her prayer. For their two bodies, joined together as they were, were merged into one, with one face and form for both. As when one grafts a twig on some tree, he sees the branches grow one, and with common life come to maturity, so were these two bodies knit in close embrace: they were no longer two, nor such as to be called one, woman, and one, man. They seemed neither, and yet both.

When he now saw that the waters into which he had plunged had made him but half-man, and that his limbs became effeminated (*mollita*) there, stretching out his hands and speaking, though not with manly tones, Hermaphroditus cried: "O grant this boon, my father and my mother, to your son who bears the name of both: whoever comes into this pool as man may he go forth half-man, and may he become effeminated (*mollescat*) at the touch of the water."¹² His parents heard the prayer of their two-formed son, and charged the waters with that uncanny power. (*Metamorphoses* IV 285-388)

A systematic study of the 104 lines in which Ovid tells the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus raises three important questions: How is Ovid's account organized? What is known of

Salmacis and Hermaphroditus apart from what Ovid tells us?
How should this story be interpreted?

The Structure of the Story

Ovid's account is organized as follows:

Introduction (l. 285-287)

Story

Description of the protagonists

Hermaphroditus (l. 288-297)

Salmacis (l. 297-315)

The spring (l. 297-301)

The nymph (l. 302-315)

The plot. The fusion of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus
(l. 315-379)

Preliminaries

The advances of Salmacis (l. 315-335)

The rejection of Hermaphroditus (l. 336)

The withdrawal of Salmacis (l. 337-340)

The action, in the strict sense

Hermaphroditus's bath (l. 340-355)

Salmacis's attack (l. 356-370)

Salmacis's prayer and its realization (l. 370-379)

In the three lines (285-287) that serve as an introduction, Ovid provides an etiological justification for telling his tale. The power (*uis*) of the Salmacis spring is well known, but nobody knows the origin of its notorious reputation (*unde sit infamis*). So Ovid will disclose the unknown cause (*causa latet*).

The main body of the story falls into two parts, each with two episodes. First the protagonists are described: Hermaphroditus (288–297) and Salmacis, the nymph attached to the spring of the same name (297–315). Then follow the twists and turns of the plot: the fusion of the nymph Salmacis with Hermaphroditus (315–379) and the curse pronounced by the young god, Hermaphroditus, against the waters of the Salmacis spring (379–388).

The action is thus doubly triggered. The waters of the Salmacis spring possess a devitalizing property, as is well known, because Hermaphroditus, who became a dual-sexed being as a result of his fusion with the nymph of the spring in whose waters he was bathing, prayed to his parents, Hermes and Aphrodite, to avenge him in this fashion.

Salmacis and Hermaphroditus before Ovid

To understand Ovid's purpose in writing these hundred-odd lines, let us first discover what the names of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus suggested to a Roman of the early Empire.

Salmacis, a name of non-Indo-European origin, refers to three things: a locality, a spring, and the nymph attached to the spring.

In about 900 B.C., colonists from Argos and Troezen settled on the small island of Zephyra and the neighboring isthmus. A city developed there, absorbing its small indigenous neighbor, Salmacis. Two inscriptions from the mid-fifth century (SIG³ 45 and 46) testify to the fact that the process of integration was well advanced, although Salmacis seems to have retained a measure of autonomy. Later, at the time of Alexander, Salmacis was the

name of a strongly fortified hill at Halicarnassus (Arrian, *Anabasis* I 23, 3).

Our sources on the Salmacis spring are more recent, and all allude to the devitalizing effects of the water on males. The first to mention the subject is Ennius, whose testimony has come down to us via Cicero:

We must realize, however, that while we have set down four cardinal virtues from which as sources moral rectitude and moral duty emanate, that achievement is most glorious in the eyes of the world which is won with a spirit great, exalted and superior to the vicissitudes of earthly life. And so, when we wish to hurl a taunt, the very first to rise to our lips is, if possible, something like this:

“For ye, young men, show a womanish soul, you, maiden, a man’s”,¹³

and this:

“Thou son of Salmacis, win spoils that cost nor sweat nor blood.”¹⁴

And, on the contrary, in eulogies, . . . ¹⁵

If this information is correct, the first literary reference to Salmacis dates from the early second century B.C.

The first Greek to write of this spring is Strabo, a contemporary of Ovid, who reacts against its infamous reputation and explains the feminization provoked by the spring by, not a physical cause, but rather a psychological and social one:

Then to Halicarnassus, the royal residence of the dynasts of Caria, which was formerly called Zephyra. Here is the tomb of Mausolus, one of the Seven Wonders, a monument erected by Artemisia in honour of her husband; and here is

the fountain called Salmacis, which has the slanderous repute, for what reason I do not know, of making effeminate (*malakizousa*) all who drink from it. It seems that the effeminacy (*truphē*)¹⁶ is laid to the charge of the air or of the water; yet it is not these, but rather riches and wanton living that are the cause of effeminacy. (Strabo, *Geography* XIV 2, 16)¹⁷

Vitruvius, another contemporary of Ovid, also reacted against this unfortunate reputation in his *On Architecture*, in which he describes the architectural wonders of Halicarnassus:

On the right wing at the top is a temple of Venus and Mercury against Salmacis' fountain itself. This fountain, however, by a mistaken opinion, is thought to afflict with a sexual disease those who drink of it. And why this opinion has wandered over the world through mistaken rumour it will not be inconvenient to set forth. For this cannot be because, as it is said, people are made effeminate and shameless by that water (*molles et impudicos ex ea aqua fieri*);¹⁸ the virtue of the spring is clearness and its flavour is excellent.

Now when Melas and Arevanias led thither a joint colony from Argos and Troezen, they cast out the barbarians, Carians and Leleges. But these, being driven to the hills, gathered together and made raids, and by brigandage they devastated the Greeks cruelly. But afterwards one of the colonists, for the sake of profit, fitted up an inn with complete supplies, near the spring, on account of the goodness of the water, and running the inn, he began to attract the barbarians. So coming down, one by one, and mixing with society, they changed of their own accord from their rough and wild habits to Greek customs and affability. Therefore this water obtained such a reputation, not by the plague of an immodest

disease, but through the softening of savage breasts by the delights of civilization. (Vitruvius, *On Architecture* II 8, 11-12)¹⁹

This anecdote enabled Vitruvius to transfer the "softness" from the body to the character, on two counts: first, it shows that, in Ovid's day, the Salmacis spring had the unfortunate reputation of making men effeminate and turning them into passive homosexuals (active homosexuality was not a matter of opprobrium in the Roman world);²⁰ and second, above all, it tells us that the spring was close to a temple of Hermes and Aphrodite. It thus incorporates two features that are essential to Ovid's tale.

The spring is, naturally enough, associated with a nymph, but she is not mentioned anywhere before Ovid (*Metamorphoses* IV 302). As for the question of Hermaphroditus, here matters are far less clear. Two interpretations have been suggested for his name.

Some scholars consider *Hermaphroditos* to be a determinative compound of the common noun *herma* and the proper noun *Aphroditos*. Originally the term *herma* designated a heap of stones regarded as a demarcation sign. Whoever passed by it announced his presence by adding a stone to the mound: the territory that he was about to pass through was in this way acknowledged and delimited. At some point that it is impossible to determine, wooden representations of the *phallos* were placed upon these cairns. Stone equivalents of *phalloi* were introduced in Athens in about 520 B.C., under Hipparchus, the son of Pisistratus. They were set up alongside roads, halfway between the various demes and the agora of Athens. They took the form of stone pillars on each of which a *phallos* was represented, topped with the head of a bearded man.²¹ Later, these boundary stones became known as

“Hermes,” thanks to the linguistic link between *herma* and Hermes, and also to Hermes’s association with frontiers.²² It was such statue-pillars as these that Alcibiades and his friends mutilated during the night before their departure for the expedition against Sicily.²³ In the Roman period, these statue-pillars were much in demand for their decorative value. At this time, a pillar might be surmounted by deities other than Hermes. Cicero mentions a Hermathena (*Letters to Atticus* I, 1, 5; I, 4, 3) and a number of Hermacles (*Letters to Atticus* I, 10, 3 = frag. 325, *Poetae Comici Graeci* [hereafter, *PCGr*] III, Z Kassel-Austin), and Pliny refers several times to Hermeros pillars (*Natural History* XXXVI, 33).

In the context of this hypothesis, Hermaphroditus becomes confused with Aphroditos, the bearded Aphrodite, a statue of whom was found in Cyprus and who was known already to Aristophanes, according to Macrobius (late fourth century A.D.), who writes in his *Saturnalia*:

In Cyprus, there is even a statue that represents Venus with a beard but wearing feminine clothing, equipped with a sceptre and masculine sexual organs and she is thought to be at once both male and female. Aristophanes calls her Aphroditos.²⁴ And Laevius²⁵ also writes as follows: “Worshipping Venus the nurturer, both male and female, just as she is the nurturer Noctiluca.”²⁶ Philochorus,²⁷ in his *Atthis* also says²⁸ that she is confused with the Moon and that, when offering her a sacrifice, men wear women’s clothing and women men’s clothing, because she is considered to be at once both male and female. (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* III 8, 2–3)²⁹

Two objections have been raised to this interpretation. Composite figures such as Hermathena, Hermeracles, and Hermeros

that give their names to statue-pillars date from the Latin period and are almost never attested except by Latin authors. Besides, such an interpretation rules out any link between Hermes and Aphrodite.

Most frequently, the name of Hermaphroditus is interpreted as a copulative compound, the first term in which is *Hermes*, the second *Aphrodite*, which takes on a masculine gender in accordance with the rule for constructing this type of compound. Diodorus Siculus³⁰ writes as follows on Hermaphroditus:

Some myths recount that the origins of the figure named Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, whose name is a combination of the names of his parents, are similar to those of Priapus.³¹ Some say that he is a god, that he manifests himself from time to time among human beings, and that he was born with a body marked by a double nature, both masculine and feminine, in the sense that his body has the charm and delicacy that befit a woman, and the virility and energy of a man. Others say that those who display natures of this kind are monsters that rarely make an appearance and that herald sometimes misfortunes, sometimes good things. (*Library* IV 6, 5)³²

Let us leave aside the second interpretation proposed here, as I have already given a list of the prodigies constituted by the apparition of a dual-sexed being, who, in the Roman world, was eliminated either by being burned or by being abandoned to the waves, or was put on display as a freak.³³ Let us now concentrate on the first explanation, to which Ovid subscribes (*Metamorphoses* IV 288), and which is corroborated by the testimony of Vitruvius, who situates the Salmacis spring in the immediate neighborhood of a temple consecrated to both Hermes and Aphrodite.³⁴

The matter would become clearer if we knew for certain that a cult devoted to Hermaphroditus ever existed anywhere in Greece. A few indications suggest that it did,³⁵ but none of them are conclusive. However, in his description of the Superstitious Man, Theophrastus writes: "On the fourth and seventh days of every month he has wine mulled for his household, and goes out to buy myrtle boughs, frankincense, and a holy picture, and then returning spends the livelong day doing sacrifice to the Hermaphrodites and putting garlands about them."³⁶

The interest of this passage is, however, somewhat diminished by inextricable textual difficulties: in particular, the accusative plural *Hermaphroditous* is no more than a conjecture. All the same, the reference to the fourth day of the month is very interesting. In his *Works and Days* (line 800), Hesiod writes: "On the fourth day of the month, bring home your bride"; and, commenting on this line one thousand years later, Proclus explains: "The fourth [day] is consecrated to Hermes and Aphrodite and, on that account, is excellent for setting up house together."³⁷ A few centuries earlier, Plutarch, in the preface to his *Conjugal Precepts*, recommended:

Pray that the Muses may lend their presence and cooperation to Aphrodite, for it is . . . fitting for them to . . . provide that the harmony which concerns marriage and the household should be well attuned. . . . Indeed, the ancients gave Hermes a place at the side of Aphrodite, in the conviction that the pleasure in marriage stands especially in need of reason; and they also assigned a place there to Persuasion and the Graces, so that married people should succeed in attaining their mutual desires by persuasion and not by fighting and quarreling. (Plutarch, *Moralia* 138c-d)³⁸

All these testimonies are in agreement in suggesting that on the fourth day of the month a double cult was devoted to Hermes and Aphrodite.

Finally, it is worth remembering that, in *Works and Days*, Aphrodite and Hermes work together on Pandora's attributes: "He [Zeus] bade golden Aphrodite to shed grace upon her head and cruel longing and cares that weary the limbs. And he charged Hermes the guide, the slayer of Argus, to put in her a shameless mind and a deceitful nature" (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 65-68).³⁹ According to Hesiod, at any rate, the association of Hermes and Aphrodite thus goes right back to the beginnings of the human race.

Ovid's Treatment of the Myth

In Ovid, the myth of Hermaphroditus receives a treatment at once traditional and original. The poet takes over the well-known mythical theme of beings endowed with both sexes simultaneously but is innovative in that he gives the myth of Hermaphroditus an etiological function, using it to explain why the waters of the Salmacis spring in Caria turn men who enter into contact with them into passive homosexuals.

TRADITION Hermaphroditus, a son of Hermes and Aphrodite, was bathing in those waters when the nymph attached to the spring threw herself at him and embraced him with such force that the two bodies fused into a single being that, sexually, was both double and neuter. The fusion of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis produced a double being, at once male and female. From

that time on, Hermaphroditus, who initially had been a boy (*puer*), was no more than half a man.⁴⁰

By granting Salmacis's prayer, the gods thus allowed a reversion in the domain of anthropology, for the new being that emerged from the waters of the Salmacis spring was akin to the androgyne, one of the three species of double beings from whom, according to Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, the human beings of the present day were produced. Furthermore, the wish pronounced by Salmacis, "Grant me this, ye gods, and may no day ever come that shall separate him from me or me from him" (*Metamorphoses* IV 371-372) is reminiscent of the request that could be addressed to Hephaestus by lovers yearning for their original, permanent union (*Symposium* 192 b-e). What is more, on a cosmological level, the fusion of Salmacis with Hermaphroditus evokes the excessive embrace of Sky (Ouranos) and Earth (Gaia), the permanence of which blocked any process of generation—a situation resolved by Cronos when he castrated his father (Hesiod, *Theogony* 154-210).

The being formed by the fusion of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus thus calls to mind the primordial beings—principles or prototypes—from whom everything else originated and who either fell short of or were beyond all differentiation, including sexual differentiation. Myths of engendering habitually proceed from confusion toward ever greater differentiation, as is well illustrated by Hesiod's *Theogony*. So the myth of Hermaphroditus reverses that movement. The fusion of Salmacis with Hermaphroditus establishes a state of indifferenciation that blocks all activity, hence all generation, and arrests everything in a union that is permanent and so, perforce, sterile. The very notion of sex disappears, for to have both sexes is to have neither.⁴¹

Given the status of women in Graeco-Roman societies, it must be said that, for Salmacis, this fusion with Hermaphroditus constitutes a promotion, since she becomes half a male. On the other hand, it is because he is degraded and becomes half a woman⁴² that Hermaphroditus takes his revenge on Salmacis and asks his parents, Hermes and Aphrodite, to give the waters of the Salmacis spring the power to unman all males who come into contact with them: they will become mere half-males like himself. In these circumstances, it is quite natural, though shocking, that it is Salmacis who makes advances toward Hermaphroditus, thereby reversing the roles ascribed, in Rome, to men, who were supposed to be active, and to women, who were supposed to be passive.

Salmacis is one of the nymphs in the retinue of Diana (= Artemis), a goddess described as *bagnē*, the adjective applied to an unviolated and inviolate virgin. So she ought to tend toward if not war then at least hunting, which both in Greece and in Rome was considered as war, a war between man and the wild beasts. However, as Ovid explains, that is not the case with Salmacis (*Metamorphoses* IV 302–309): she is entirely on the side of the feminine and is interested in nothing but her own physical appearance (*Metamorphoses* IV 310–315). She may accordingly be considered to be a woman of exaggerated femininity. It is worth noting that Salmacis then disappears from the myth and also from the imaginary world of Ovid's readers; only Hermaphroditus continues to concern them. Hermaphroditus, for his part, has barely reached the age of puberty,⁴³ for he is only fifteen years old. He knows nothing of love and is not yet a warrior, in other words not a real man. As an adolescent, he is not yet included in the man/woman opposition, for his is still a state of

disturbing indistinction. When Ovid describes Hermaphroditus's naked body, he stresses the whiteness of his limbs, which he compares to ivory and to lilies (*Metamorphoses* IV 354-355; see 335), just as if this was the body of a woman. So it is natural enough that the double being who results from the union of an excessively feminine being and a being of understated masculinity should appear as effeminate, only half-male.

INNOVATION Ovid goes even further, for he describes a Hermaphroditus who, having lost part of his virility, begs his father and mother to arrange that all males who come into contact with the waters of this spring are made effeminate, and become passive homosexuals. Ovid does this in order to explain the existence, in Halicarnassus, close to a temple consecrated jointly to Hermes and Aphrodite, of a spring whose waters are reputed to render men effeminate and turn them into passive homosexuals. Unlike Strabo and Vitruvius, Ovid does not react against this rumor but claims to know the cause of the harmful powers of the waters of Salmacis.

In order to understand these explicit consequences, we must inquire into what it was that defined masculinity and femininity in antiquity and also into the attitude that was adopted with regard to homosexuality. Both in Greece and in Rome, what marked the difference between a man and a woman was active or passive behavior in society in general and in sexual relations in particular. Consequently, blame and mockery were attached not to masculine homosexuality in general but only to the passive role accepted by one of the partners in a homosexual relationship.