

Intersex Identity and Intersectionality: Representations of Hermaphroditus from Ovid, Vitruvius,
and Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*

Typically portrayed in Greek and Roman literature and art as having both male and female anatomical characteristics, the mythological figure Hermaphroditus has long been famous as a symbol of androgyny and ambiguous sexual physiology. Ovid famously depicts Hermaphroditus as an effeminate boy whose body merges with the river nymph Salmacis, producing “a two-fold form, with the result that it can be called neither woman nor boy; it seems not either and yet both” (*forma duplex, nec femina dici / nec puer ut possit, nec utrumque et utrumque videtur, Metamorphoses* 4.378-379). As scholars such as Williams note, Ovid portrays Hermaphroditus' transformation as a disempowering experience, underscored by morally-tinged language of “softening”. In another account, the architectural writer Vitruvius questions the standard Hermaphroditus narrative, dismissing Salmacis' associations with anatomical emasculation, while reinforcing Salmacis' reputation for transforming other aspects of identity, for example causing ‘barbarians’ to be “changed from harsh and wild habits to the customs of the Greeks” (*duro feroque more commutati in Graecorum consuetudinem, De Architectura* 2.8.12). Although scholars have closely examined these narratives' representations of biological sex and gender identity, less attention has been given to how those matters are interconnected with other facets of identity. Addressing this scholarly lacuna, I analyze how these narratives interlace Greco-Roman perceptions and anxieties concerning androgyny and ambiguous biological sex with other components of identity, including social status, cultural identity, moral prestige, and personal health. Performing close readings focused on language usage and rhetoric, I argue that these interconnections expose overlapping systems of marginalization and othering. My readings are rooted in the sociological interpretative framework known as intersectionality, by which I

illustrate the value of a holistic examination of Hermaphroditus' identity in these ancient narratives.

Next I turn to the reception of Hermaphroditus in Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex* (2002). In this coming-of-age story set primarily in 1950s-70s Detroit, the narrator and protagonist is raised as a girl named Callie Stephanides until early adolescence, when it is discovered that the character is biologically intersex (thereafter the character uses masculine pronouns and goes by the name Cal). At various points in the novel, Cal/lie makes references to Hermaphroditus and sometimes even self-identifies as a "hermaphrodite" (often ironically, considering the word's potentially offensive and dehumanizing undertones). I examine how Eugenides utilizes the figure of Hermaphroditus and related language in fashioning the identity of a fictional intersex character living in the twentieth century, and I argue that Eugenides, like Ovid and Vitruvius, links the ambiguity of Hermaphroditus' biological sex with other elements of personal identity. I also show that Eugenides pursues these interconnections even further than the ancient sources, employing Hermaphroditus to symbolize multiple forms of liminality and alterity exemplified by Cal/lie and family, including their ethnic and national identity (with Greek, Turkish, and American roots), their racial identity (generally perceived as white but sometimes passing as black), and their socioeconomic status (alternating between poverty and affluence). Further dualities can be observed in Cal/lie's narrative voice, which embraces high-flown poetic language alongside the more emotionally-neutral discourse of science and medicine, and which distorts time by shifting back and forth between familial generations, even conjuring the Ovidian image of Hermaphroditus in referring to "the polluted pool of the Stephanides family" (4). Cal/lie's multifaceted narration also interweaves numerous other references to Greek and Roman mythology (the Minotaur, Antigone, Tiresias, et al.) alongside

experiences that are presented as contemporary and “real-life”. I demonstrate that Eugenides employs Hermaphroditus as an emblem of wide-ranging hybrid identity in ways that exceed the representations of Ovid and Vitruvius. At the same time, I show how an intersectional understanding of Eugenides’ Hermaphroditus can offer insight into the ancient representations.

Classicists have given surprisingly little attention to the reception of Hermaphroditus in *Middlesex*, and to my knowledge no previous scholarship has applied an intersectional framework to the analysis of intersex identity in the ancient narratives involving Hermaphroditus. Although Black notes the pervasiveness of liminal identities in *Middlesex*, she leaves room for consideration of Hermaphroditus as a metaphor for liminality. Zajko inspects the representation of Hermaphroditus in Graeco-Roman and post-modern literature, but she only briefly touches upon *Middlesex* and she does not discuss how intersex status is linked with aspects of identity beyond gender and sexuality in either the ancient narratives or *Middlesex*. This paper addresses these issues while striving to bolster awareness and sensitivity toward the experience of intersex people, who have often been misunderstood, pathologized, and stigmatized from antiquity to more recent times.

Bibliography

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