

Hermaphrodite Reconsidered: Destigmatizing Intersex Bodies in Greco-Roman Art

In 2017, Grace Gillies published an article in *Eidolon* titled “The Body in Question: Looking at Non-Binary Gender in the Greek and Roman World.” While describing their experiences navigating the world of Greco-Roman art as a non-binary Classicist, Gillies reflects briefly on the sculpture of the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite” in Rome. Gillies summarizes thus: “the statue is a succinct commentary on sex, gender, and the presentation of bodies. It is also a joke” (Gillies, 2017). As a bisexual woman, I found this article frustrating to read, both because I feel for Gillies’ struggles as a fellow member of the LGBTQ community, and because I am disappointed that, despite the apparent beauty and eroticism of the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite,” the general interpretation of this sculpture is that it is, as Gillies frankly states, a joke. As so-called “jokes,” sculptures such as the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite” are imputed with expectations of disgust and shame from their viewers. What is most infuriating about this assessment is that it is not the only way to perceive the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite,” yet it has nevertheless been accepted as the prevailing interpretation of this sculpture and of other artistic representations of this intersexual being.

The perception of Hermaphrodite as the embodiment an unsettling and off-color joke is a product of the art historical discourse created by some of the most prominent scholars of Hellenistic art. For instance, Brunilde Ridgway describes the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite” as “ominous” (Ridgway, 1990). Mary Beard and John Henderson suggest that the sculpture could be “a technical joke on sculptural design,” a “clever play on mythology – an uncanny encounter with that strangest of mythological characters,” an “erotic provocation that disturbs the familiar components of desire,” or a “kinky exploitation just made for an art market with money to burn”

(Beard et al., 2001). Andrew Stewart gives a description of what it would be like to encounter the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite,” stating that in “approaching the figure from the back, we see only a beautiful young woman...tempted to check out her charms from the other side, and perhaps to sample them for ourselves, we immediately recoil in shock: Breasts, OK, but a boner, too!” (Stewart, 2014). It is clear that none of these art historians interpret Hermaphrodite’s intersexuality as something positive, let alone beautiful or pleasantly arousing. Stewart’s description is especially illustrative of how the experience of surprise and amusement can be closely associated with derision and disgust: you thought you were admiring a beautiful woman, but in reality, you were tricked into feeling attracted to a sexual aberration. Similar interpretations appear when the same scholars describe the “Dresden type” *symplegmata* sculpture of Hermaphrodite and a satyr. Stewart treats this *symplegmata* as another example of the “raunchy humor” of the Hellenistic period, an artistic joke which generates a “double take” from the viewer (Stewart, 2014). Beard and Henderson describe the hermaphrodite’s male genitalia as “the last thing that the satyr is looking for” and a “visual horror” (Beard et al., 2001). These scholars’ interpretations have led to the general understanding that all artistic representations of Hermaphrodite – and by extension, all intersex bodies – were conceptualized by the ancients as shameful and unpleasant.

However, in this paper, I offer alternative interpretations of the “Sleeping Hermaphrodite” and the “Dresden type” *symplegmata*, emphasizing Hermaphrodite’s erotic qualities in order to demonstrate that ancient Greeks and Romans did indeed view Hermaphrodite in a more positive light. I will also discuss how Hermaphrodite appears in literature and various other forms of artistic media, such as figurines and vase painting, as a being associated with fertility, protection, and the retinue of Dionysus. This is not to say that

ancient viewers of Hermaphroditic art never reacted with disdain or unease, as some of the prominent scholars mentioned above have argued, but I believe that this is not the only possible way that ancient audiences could have reacted, and the fact that it has been presented as such is both inaccurate and harmful. Inaccurate because it likely reflects a modern fear of intersex bodies more than an ancient reality; harmful because it prevents present-day intersex, genderqueer, and nonbinary people, like Gillies, from seeing positive representations of people like themselves in history.

Bibliography

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