

Desiring Hermaphrodites

The Relationships of Hermaphroditus in Roman Group Scenes.

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Akademisk avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i Antikens kultur och samhällsliv vid Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av humanistiska fakultetens dekanus kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 27 november 2015, kl. 13.00 i Lilla hörsalen, Humanisten, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg.

Academic dissertation in Ancient History and Classical Archaeology, to be publicly defended, by due permission of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at University of Gothenburg, on November 27, 2015, at 1 p.m., in Lilla Hörsalen, Humanisten, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg.

Abstract

Linnea Åshede, 2015: *Desiring Hermaphrodites: The Relationships of Hermaphroditus in Roman Group Scenes*.

Ph.D. Dissertation, in English, from the Department of Historical Studies, University of Gothenburg (Box 200, 405 30 Göteborg), Sweden.

As an embodied transgression of binary gender, Hermaphroditus has fascinated and troubled audiences ever since Antiquity. Because of the scarcity of extant literary sources, this mythological figure has primarily survived in the shape of images, often fragmentary and of uncertain provenance. Based on these fragments, the current scholarly consensus maintains that Hermaphroditus was represented as an attractive but erotically disabled figure, whose dual sexual characteristics were intended to provoke surprise and possibly laughter.

This dissertation challenges these assumptions by analysing how Hermaphroditus could and could not be portrayed in relation to other figures. The primary source material consists of twenty-four separate group scenes, five of which survive in multiple replicas. The artworks are dated from the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE, originating in the Roman era and area. They are analysed using a theoretical framework focusing on materiality and on identity as something constantly re-created through relationships, based on the writings of Sara Ahmed, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad.

The first analytical chapter reappraises Hermaphroditus' unique gender role, concluding that the figure is not portrayed as half man, half woman but, instead, presents an amalgamation of elements from conventional representations of beautiful women and boys. Through thematic analyses of the group scenes, the study further concludes that, firstly, Hermaphroditus enjoys high status among the companions and, secondly, is pursued as a legitimate object of desire by satyrs, Pan and Silenus. It is only in the cases where Hermaphroditus misbehaves by actively initiating contact that the bestial males respond negatively. Hermaphroditus, thus, upsets modern expectations of atypically sexed bodies as unhappy and disabled. Because the figure can be represented as simultaneously desiring and desirable, it also challenges Roman expectations of normative erotic behaviour.

Hermaphroditus' confinement to the world of myth and the artworks' original contexts of display in spaces devoted to leisure simultaneously suggest that Hermaphroditus' norm-critical potential was limited. Therefore, the group scenes should be understood as always containing the potential for both destabilisation and reinforcement of normative constructions of gendered bodies.

Keywords: Hermaphroditus, Roman art, materiality, gender, relationships, desire, queer, Sara Ahmed, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad