Mesh
The Tale of the Hermaphrodite
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“...the center of myself where I stand as a holy spider on the major threads of my soul and with which I will weave at the crossways a few lace which I guess already exist in the heart of Beauty.”

Mallarmé, July 28, 1866

I. OVID’S METAMORPHOSIS TALE OF THE HERMAPHRODITE, 7 AD

According to Ovid, the daughters of King Minyas weave, telling stories. They have locked themselves indoors to avoid the ecstatic displays of woman and girls for the feast of Bacchus, a god they neither revere nor believe in, saving all that for Athena, goddess of war and weaving. In their seclusion, after several stories, the oldest of the daughters of Minyas, Alcithoe, begins the tale of the hermaphrodite. She runs her “shuttle swiftly through the threads of her loom,” and speaks about “a little son of Hermes and Aphrodite.” “In his fair face mother and father could be clearly seen; his name also he took from them.” Until the age of fifteen Hermaphroditus, however, was a boy.

One day while he was wandering through the land of Lycia, now modern-day Turkey, he came across “a pool of water crystal clear to the very bottom.” Hidden from his sight, gathering flowers at the edge of the pool, was Salmacis, a young naiad of Diana, goddess of the hunt. More in love with beauty than hunting, Salmacis often stayed behind at the pool to look at her reflection in the water. On this day instead of herself she saw Hermaphroditus and “longed to possess him.” When she approached him full of her desire, the “boy blushed rosy red; for he knew not what love is.” When she tried to kiss him, Hermaphroditus cried, “have done, or I must flee and leave this spot—and you.” Salmacis promised to leave him swim in peace, but hid quietly in the bushes to watch this fair youth.

Hermaphroditus, clearly more intrigued by the cool water than the desirous naiad, “threw aside his thin garments” and dove into the water. Enflamed by the sight of his naked body in the water, Salmacis could control herself no longer. “Casting off all her garments,” she dove in after him, grasping Hermaphroditus to her against his will.

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 sea-polyp holds its enemy caught beneath the sea, its tentacles embracing him on every side.

While holding him in this violent embrace Salmacis called out to the gods to make her and Hermaphroditus into one being. The gods acquiesced, making the 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.” After this sudden transformation, when Hermaphroditus felt that he had become “but half-man” and “enfeebled,” he cried out to his powerful parents Hermes and Aphrodite to curse these waters, so “whoever comes into this pool as man may he go forth half-man, and may he weaken at touch of the water.” His parents granted his wish, and cursed the pool, known from then on as the dangerous uncanny waters of Salmacis, that would turn each man who swam or drank there into a hermaphrodite.

Many stories in the Metamorphosis are about the violence in love that results in the origin of species—human, plant or otherwise. Narcissus becomes a flower when he chooses his own reflection in a pool of water while rejecting the advances of Echo, who herself is transformed into the longing echo of her unrequited love. Daphne is transformed into the laurel tree to avoid the unwanted advances of Apollo, and the death of Pyramus and Thisbe, star-crossed lovers, turns the white fruit of the mulberry tree red. For Hermaphroditus this transformation into a half-man half-woman is the result of erotic trauma, one that he laments, the trauma and the transformation. He, who has become he/she, now can only see this change as a loss of manhood, a weakening of self. Motivated by vengeance, he pleads with his parents to curse the waters so that he will not be alone in this new state of dual sexuality. Could he not see this transformation any other way? Could hermaphroditism be a fulfillment rather than a loss? Was he not, as Ovid writes, both Hermes and Aphrodite, male and female from the beginning?

Myths, however, do not create states of mind or body; they rather represent them with embedded meanings that trace the mark of fears or hidden desires that sleep within us.

II. SLEEPING HERMAPHRODITE
20TH CENTURY AD ROMAN MARBLE SCULPTURE, COPY OF A LOST GREEK BRONZE SCULPTURE

Roman sculptures, like the Roman poet Ovid, re-worked ancient Greek ideas, often making copies of Greek sculptures. One such work is the Sleeping Hermaphrodite, sculpted in marble in the 2nd century AD, thought to be a copy of a now lost Greek bronze by Polykleitos from the 2nd century BC. The Sleeping Hermaphrodite was found in Rome near the ancient baths of Diocletian in 1608. At the time it was found, it easily came into the auspicious collection of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the nephew of the seated Pope Paul V. Once this sculpture was in his collection, the Cardinal commissioned the baroque sculptor Bernini to make the sumptuous mattress and pillow that the full-length reclining figure still rests upon today. Two hundred years later, in 1807, Napoleon bought the Sleeping Hermaphrodite from his well-placed brother-in law Prince Camillo Borghese. It would become part of
the collection of the Musée de la République, later known as the Louvre.

When one enters the ancient sculpture gallery at the Louvre, this figure is prominently displayed in the center of the room on a floor of black and white tiles. At first, seen from the back, this reclining elegant figure appears to be a naked woman, one leg bent over the other, with her left foot slightly animated, as if dreaming or about to stir. Her poise is complex, with a twist at the waist and her head turned all the way towards us, typical of Hellenistic compositions meant to show bodies that carve the space around them, as the figures of the famous *Loaocon* do. When one walks around the sculpture one sees the back of the figure’s hair, the gentle curve of the left breast and an erect penis under the curve of the slightly bent left leg. The composition itself sets the viewer up for this unexpected duality in the sexuality of the sleeping figure. We are meant to think this is a woman; the title, once read, therefore becomes a provocation to either interpret or search for the maleness which at first is not apparent. Hermaphroditism here is a dormant riddle meant to startle or delight us with the unexpected, as if only while sleeping could we double ourselves into male and female.

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**III. NADAR, PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE HERMAPHRODITE, 1861**

In 1854, 47 years after Napoleon brought the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* to Paris, Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, opened his first photography studio at 11, Boulevard des Capucins. Until his death in 1910, Nadar would be one of the most widely sought after portraitist of his time and place. He photographed Baudelaire, Bernhardt, Delacroix, Berlioz, Georges Sand, Michelet, Daumier, Dore and others who until then had mostly been known by their works. Now, they would also be known by their faces, as Nadar and this new technology would define them in countless reproductions. These photographs were a new kind of icon that created a new kind of irreplaceable personality in the 19th century.

Alongside Nadar the portraitist was Nadar the inventor and scientific observer. In this capacity he experimented with new light-sensitive chemicals and photographed the first flying balloons. In 1861, upon the request of Dr. Armand Trouseau and his colleague, the surgeon Jules-Germain Maissonneuve, Nadar took nine photographs of a hermaphrodite. These were the only photographs he ever copyrighted, explicitly naming them for scientific research. Two of these images, now in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, depict a person who has been instructed to remove their clothes, all but a long white opened frock shirt that falls to the side and white knee high stockings. The figure has agreed to recline, legs bent at the knees and spread open, while the hand of the surgeon Maissonneuve spreads open the inner labia to reveal the female genitalia. In another image in the series, the same person partially reclines with one leg up while Maissonneuve pulls the edge of the penis forward over the vaginal opening. In both images the figure places his/her hand over their breasts with the other hand obscuring their face. Unlike the images of luminaries Nadar usually photographed, these images are not of a face or a personage, nor of a personality; they are of a body and specifically of the genitals of this body, this hermaphrodite. Why weakened, why sleeping, why faceless—what are we, over three thousand years, afraid of, what are we running away from?

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IV. FREUD, 1933

In 1933, while still living in Vienna, Freud gave and published a lecture entitled “Femininity.” In this piece he identifies the *idée fixe*, or unconscious obsession, of penis envy as a central motivating factor of female sexuality. He argues that the effect of this *idée fixe* causes “physical vanity of women, since they are bound to value their charms more highly as a late compensation for their original sexual inferiority.” In the following passage, he justifies this interpretation based upon another theory, the theory that woman, who invented so few things, invented plaiting and weaving as a way to conceal the absence of a penis. Freud writes:

> It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented—that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together. If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of the lack of a pe-

nisc on the configuration of femininity as an *idée fixe*, I am of course defenseless.

Like a link in a chain, Freud perpetuates the perspective of the tormented and vengeful Hermaphroditus who felt weakened by his femaleness. We must not carry this doom any further, nor should our deep and dual sexualities be relegated to a sleeping or faceless state. Like Mallarmé, let us be spiders and poets who “weave at the crossways a few lace which I guess already exist in the heart of Beauty.”

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2 In France in the 1860s, when these photographs were taken, it was illegal to remain an adult hermaphrodit. A specialist, such as the surgeon Jules-Germain Maisonneuve, whose hand we see revealing the sex organs of the reclining figure in the Nadar images, would determine the “true” sex and operate accordingly, since dual sexuality was not recognized or tolerated as a possibility. The pretext for these nine images may have been the beginning of such an inquiry and subsequent surgery. Foucault writes about this web of legality and the resulting trauma of state-required surgery in the introduction to *Herculine Barbin*, the memoirs of a 19th-century hermaphrodite who lived as a woman, but ultimately was made into a man, a transformation she/he did not psychically survive. See *Herculine Barbin*. Introduction by Michael Foucault, translated by Richard McDougall. New York: Pantheon, 1980.