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Strategies of Ambiguity in Ancient Literature

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Part V: **Ambiguous Receptions**

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Half Heroes? Ambiguity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Abstract: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have a heroic image that is different from that of epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. The main character is replaced by a polyphony of heroes in about 250 individual narratives, which are linked to form a highly complex narrative structure. This paper attempts to analyze this aspect by integrating approaches from the Tübingen Research Training Group 1808 *Ambiguity: Production and Perception* and the Freiburg Collaborative Research Center 948 *Heroes, Heroizations, Heroisms.* In particular, at the intersection of literary studies and linguistics, it will be asked how ambiguity is generated linguistically in the *Metamorphoses*. It is therefore less about the evaluation of individual characters from the point of view of heroism, but rather about how, one level deeper, a language of ambiguity is constructed. A tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, serves as an example text.

Keywords: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, Stefan Zweig, modernity *versus* antiquity and pre-modernity, ambiguity, ambiguity resolution, vagueness, ambiguity and narrative, ambiguity and heroism, *semi*-adjectives in Ovid.

1 Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In the 1927 novella *Die unsichtbare Sammlung* (*The Invisible Collection)*, Stefan Zweig recounts the experiences of the Berlin art dealer and gallery owner K., who visits a valued customer residing in a provincial Saxon town. This customer is an elderly gentleman who has gone blind. He is a distinguished retired lieutenant with a long administrative career, and is owner of an exquisite collection of 27 artworks and engravings, including works by Rembrandt, Dürer, and Mantegna. But when K. arrives, it seems that his portfolios are completely empty! It turns out that during the great inflation at the beginning of the 1920s, his wife and daughter

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had been forced to sell all of his prints, piece by piece, in secret. Now the collection was a mere husk, consisting only of 27 protective portfolios. The works of art themselves existed purely in the imagination and memory of their former owner. All the same, the proud collector displays his collection one piece at a time to the gallery owner, who had been hastily apprised of the situation by the family, who begged him not to let the old man know that his beloved pieces were no longer a part of his collection. The old gentleman describes each individual piece in loving detail and with expert care. At the end of the story, the equally dismayed yet fascinated gallery owner reflects on his experience, summing it up with: "Was ich aber mitnahm, war mehr: Ich hatte wieder einmal reine Begeisterung lebendig spüren dürfen in dumpfer, freudloser Zeit, eine Art durchleuchtete, ganz auf die Kunst gewandte Ekstase, wie sie unsere Menschen längst verlernt zu haben scheinen." ("But what I ended up taking with me was much more. I was once again able to feel pure excitement, even in our dismal, joyless times; it was a kind of illuminated ecstasy, utterly beholden to art, the kind of ecstasy we as humans seem to have long forgotten." Transl. RK)

Literature's ability to shape its own realities is a timeworn topic that has occupied literary theory and discussion since antiquity — sometimes more, sometimes less. In *Die unsichtbare Sammlung*, Stefan Zweig explores this theme by employing a (strategic) ambiguity of being and not-being.[1] After all, the artwork and engraving collection in the 27 portfolios is both there and not-there. This ambiguous phenomenon is further exacerbated through the act of reception. The actualization of the artistic objects that were in reality lost doesn't just take place within the characters of the story, but also in the imaginations of the novella's readers. In his story, Zweig subtly examines fundamental questions of fictionality using the methods of literary ambiguity: the problem of presence in the state of absence, and the issue of referentiality and the 'reality' of unreal objects. The issues of 'fact and fiction' and the ambiguity of the world, both underwent a process of radicalization in the great wars and existential crises of the twentieth century. Zweig's literary realization in *Die unsichtbare Sammlung* offers only one, in some respects prophetic, example, since the narrative not only points to the imaginary and fictional status of artifacts in the art world, but also to the possibility of a complete loss of culture in the real world itself. In a particularly dramatic fashion, our current postmodern culture highlights the ambiguity and brokenness of existence as well as the inadequacy of human models of perception and interpretation of the world. It also confronts the epistemic consequences, an idea which Lyotard concisely expressed as *the end of the grand narratives*.

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1 Regarding 'strategic' ambiguity in texts, see Bauer *et al*. 2010, 23–26.

It is also appropriate in this summary of contemporary positions to point to the new relevance and perceived modernity — indeed 'postmodernity' — of an author like Ovid, whose main work *Metamorphoses* does not revolve around a great hero, such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. Instead, it astutely captures the ambiguity and fragmentation of our human existence in a highly complex, narrative structure of 250 individual stories in which the various components of the world become fluid and in which gods, heroes and humans are equally dethroned, deheroized, and displaced from their central role.[2] Though it may be rather daring to compare Stefan Zweig with Ovid, it does evoke the fundamental question of the diachronic transferability of cultural and literary phenomena perceived as modern (in the broadest sense) to ancient and pre-modern conditions. In his fundamental work *Die Ästhetik der Ambiguität* (1988), Christoph Bode takes a clear stance regarding ambiguity and identifies it as an essential characteristic of modernity in contrast to antiquity and pre-modernity. Bode takes a decidedly aesthetic approach:

> Die Moderne bevorzugt [...] offensichtlich Erzählverfahren, die einer platt mimetischen Lesart entgegenstehen, ja sie absichtlich erschweren, mit dem Ziel, zwischen den [...] dislozierten Elementen einen Deutungsraum zu öffnen, den aufzufüllen Aufgabe des 'aktiven' Lesers wäre. (8)

> Antike Kunst wäre demnach [...] ambiguitätsfern. (279)

It is made quite clear here that ambiguity represents a special challenge for the study of literature and art, in synchronic-analytical as well as diachronic-comparative respects. Unlike Bode, the following observations propose that ambiguity is

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2 The term postmodernity is used here in an epoch-spanning sense. According to Welsch: "'Postmodern' ist, wer sich jenseits von Einheitsobsessionen der irreduziblen Vielfalt der Sprach-, Denk- und Lebensformen bewusst ist und damit umzugehen weiß. Und dazu muss man keineswegs im zu Ende gehenden 20. Jahrhundert leben, sondern kann schon Wittgenstein oder Kant, kann Diderot, Pascal oder Aristoteles geheißen haben." (Welsch 2008, 35). For postmodernism see also e.g. Marquard 1984, McHale 2015, Zima 2014; for more limited definitions of overly broad postmodern terms, see Welsch 2008, 41; Fowler 2000, 3–33; Wiseman 2002, 449 (s.v. "postmodernism"). Zima 2014, 25 and 36–46 considers modernism and postmodernism "problematic" in contrast to purely chronological, ideological or stylistic categorizations. Building upon Hassan (1994, 49–55) he cites the following features for postmodern literature: "uncertainty, fragmentation, dissolution of the canon, irony, carnivalization", 25; cf. also McHale 2015, 8–13 ("Post-modernism and its Precursors," beginning, among others, with Nietzsche and Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*).

no less characteristic of ancient than it is of modern literature.[3] The story of Hermaphroditus & Salmacis (Book 4, vv. 271–388) from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* serves as a test case when it comes to applying currently discussed literary theories of ambiguity to pre-modern texts.[4] The story of the young hero who encounters the nymph Salmacis while on his journey instantly displays features of an ambiguity narrative. Its narrative and aetiological vanishing point lies in the creation of the intersexed, androgynous nature of the hermaphrodite. Using the fundamental positions in modern ambiguity studies as a guideline, we will first examine the extent to which Ovid's narrative can be deemed an 'ambiguity narrative.' Secondly, we will consider what conclusions can be drawn from such an analysis regarding the aspect of the heroic, and to what extent the text can also be understood as a 'heroic narrative.' This analysis poses the following thesis: not only does the metamorphosis merge the physical bodies of the two characters, but it also blends together two distinct heroic configurations. The phenomena of the ambiguous and the heroic seem particularly suitable for interdisciplinary and diachronic study, for they are both dynamic phenomena that can be found in many different times, discourses, sign systems and communicative situations. They also play a major role in a multitude of social and cultural processes of change and differentiation.

2 Hermaproditus & Salmacis: An Ambiguity Narrative

The starting point for modern ambiguity research is the 1930 work by William Empson *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. In his introduction, Empson gives the following definition of ambiguity:

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3 Here, reference is to be made primarily to the (potentially ambiguity-producing) concept of *mimesis* from ancient theory. See in particular Bauer *et al.* 2010, 37f., here 37: "In der Wahrnehmung von Strukturen der Welt wird Ambiguität konstatiert und dementsprechend literarisch präsentiert." On ambiguity in the Middle Ages, see the volume published by Auge/Witthöft 2016, especially 4 and 11.

4 In 1995, a verse inscription from the 2nd century B.C. was discovered near Halicarnassus, telling the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis. However, it differs in many respects from Ovid's version. The *editio princeps* of the epigram is by Isager 1998. See also the annotated and translated edition by Merkelbach/Stauber 1998, 39–44; for an interpretation see Romano 2009, as well as the literature quoted in ibid., 543 n. 2; for further ancient written sources see Robinson 1999, 212–217.

> 'Ambiguity' itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. (5–6)

Empson's definition raises two fundamental questions, which later studies regarding ambiguity have approached and dealt with differently. On the one hand, it poses the question whether ambiguity — and more specifically lexical ambiguity — should only refer to phenomena that have a 'double meaning' or also to denote phenomena that have 'multiple meanings'. Bauer *et al.* refer to this fundamental distinction in their 2010 work *Dimensionen der Ambiguität* (27). On the other hand, it asks whether we should think of 'double meaning' itself as the sum of several simultaneously given meanings (as Empson assumes), or whether 'double-meaning' should be understood as bi-valence in the sense of mutually exclusive alternatives (ibid.). Along these two lines, research has treated ambiguity either as an open concept of 'multiple meaning' or as a narrow concept of antagonistic bi-valence. The previously mentioned study by Bode, for instance, is a perfect example of understanding ambiguity as an open concept. The second train of thought — and the much narrower definition of ambiguity — is represented by a 1977 work by Rimmon that is one of the cornerstones of ambiguity research in literary studies. Rimmon perceives ambiguity as the connection of non-connectable elements, as a "conjunction of exclusive disjuncts" (21). In their 2009 work, *Amphibolie — Ambiguität — Ambivalenz: Die Struktur antagonistisch-gleichzeitiger Zweiwertigkeit,* Berndt/Kammer argue along the same lines as Rimmon.[5]

If we apply the abovementioned definitions of ambiguity to Ovid's narrative of Hermaphroditus & Salmacis, it immediately becomes unequivocally clear (if one is allowed to use such a term in this context) that the character of Hermaphroditus is not ambiguous in the sense of an antagonistic bi-valence, for his essence is based precisely on the *coexistence* of both sexes. This androgynous nature is the result of a transformation in which both beings merge with one another. The metamorphosis is provoked by the violent and rape-like embrace of the boy by the nymph Salmacis, which is so strong that the two end up irreversibly uniting into a single hybrid form.

Upon taking a closer look at the narrative, however, things start to get more complex. The beginning of the story (vv. 288–301) consists of a striking description of the setting (*ékphrasis tópou*); the hero of the story has left his home in the

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5 Furniss/Bath 2007, 272f. also point out the danger that otherwise an immense number of multiple meanings would fall under the definition of ambiguity.

Troas and has set out to explore the world. In this respect he is comparable to the Homeric figure of Odysseus. It is not by chance that the verb *errare* (v. 294) has been chosen for this excerpt, for it clearly signals the intertextual reference to the pretext of the *Odyssey* and refers to the typical heroic moment of the transgression of space and norms. At some point on his journey, the boy reaches Lydia and Caria, regions in Asia Minor, and there he finds a quiet pool (*stagnum*), whose water is extraordinarily clear (vv. 297–298): *videt hic stagnum lucentis ad imum / usque solum lymphae.* ("He looks upon a pool whose clear water shimmers to the bottom"). But the purity of the water is rendered ambiguous, for the spring is so pure that it lacks any plant growth. The reader begins to feel a sense of foreboding that the *locus amoenus* will soon become a *locus terribilis* (vv. 298–300): *non illic canna palustris / nec steriles ulvae nec acuta cuspide iunci. / perspicuus liquor est.* ("A place where neither swamp reeds, nor infertile reed grass, nor spiked bulrush grows. The water is crystal clear"). The water of Salmacis' spring is thus given two distinct meanings within the same passage — purity and sterility — which are inherently antagonistic. Yet they coexist with one another. The purity of the water reflects the boy's character, and is how he 'sees' the pond, i.e. from his perspective (*videt*), while, the ominous adjective *sterilis* is from the perspective of the omniscient, authoritative narrative voice.

The ambiguity becomes even more complex when it comes to the character Salmacis, for it is both the name of the pool and of the nymph who dwells within it.[6] This ambiguity of referring to either the pool or the personage tied to it is maintained throughout the story. There are thus two meanings of 'Salmacis' which also seem to be antagonistic and mutually exclusive, and which challenge the reader's imagination even if one allows the laws of the narrative world of metamorphoses to take hold. The impression that the text calls for an almost metapoetic reflection on aspects of ambiguity is strengthened if we consider that liquid water, with its formless essence, clearly brings to mind the phenomenon of vagueness, which is a close cousin to ambiguity.

Charles Segal had already called attention to the symbolic correlation between landscape and character in 1969. As extraordinary as the pool is due to its clarity and the absence of fauna, equally extraordinary is the personage of the nymph belonging to it. Salmacis, as expressly stated in verse 304, is the "only" (*sola*) nymph who is not part of Diana the goddess of the hunt's retinue. She is not interested in the hunt, not even at the urging of her sisters, and prefers to

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6 Cf. Fränkel 1956, 88: "He pictures the translucent waters of the Salmacis pool as embedded in green meadows [...], and soon afterward he similarly describes the naiad Salmacis as clad in a transparent dress and reclining on soft grass [...]". See also Keith 1999, 217.

spend her time bathing (vv. 306–307).[7] Because Salmacis is at once water and water nymph (*lympha* and *nympha*), spending her time bathing in the pool can be interpreted as a form of narcissism (v. 310 *sed modo fonte suo formosos perluit artus* — "but she soon bathes her lovely limbs in her spring").[8]

With the narrative of Hermaphroditus & Salmacis, we have so far only dealt with ambiguous phenomena at the level of individual characters, events, and settings. Often, however, the focus is not on the limited ambiguity that can be detected here or there in the narrative, but rather on the question of whether literary texts — and even other works of art — can be characterized in their entirety by an 'ambiguity' that includes and influences all narrative subsystems. In such cases, one can speak of a 'narrative' or 'textual ambiguity'.[9] Rimmon (1977) discusses such forms of narrative ambiguity in detail:

> When the narrative is truly ambiguous, the enigma remains unsolved, not because the text provides no answer, but because it provides two mutually exclusive yet equally tenable answers. Searching for a solution, the reader gropes for clues and realizes that they balance each other in the deadlock of opposition. (45)

Jens Mittelbach argues along similar lines in *Die Kunst des Widerspruchs. Ambiguität als Darstellungsprinzip in Shakespeares Henry V und Julius Caesar* (2003):

> Textuelle Ambiguität soll hier, bis zu diesem Punkt Rimmon entsprechend, als eine Eigenschaft bestimmter literarischer Texte verstanden werden, die bewusst so vertextet sind, dass sie an der Textoberfläche mehr als eine Lesart unterstützen, wobei diese Lesarten sich zwar gegenseitig ausschließen, ihre gleichzeitige Realisierung im Rezeptionsprozess vom Text aber gefordert ist. (23)

Applied to works of the Augustan period, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Virgil's *Aeneid*, an opportunity opens up to establish whether, and to what extent, these two major epic narratives exhibit ambiguities that affect the interpretation of the respective text. Such narrative ambiguities emerge when, in addition to the pro-Augustinian surface structure, a second, anti-Augustinian deep structure, or secondary structure is identified. This debate has been an ongoing discussion —

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7 Regarding the exceptionality of the nymph Salmacis, see Robinson 1999, 217f.

8 Cf. Segal 1969, 25: "The Salmacis-Hermaphroditus episode is perhaps the most elaborate use of the ambiguous symbolism of water"; and: "It is directly after the description of the clear 'pool [...] that' we are given the sensuous details of the nymph's life [...]. She 'washes her lovely limbs' (*formosos perluit artus*) in her own fountain."

9 On 'narrative ambiguity', see also Bauer *et al.* 2010, 27; Münkler 2011; Potysch 2018, 183–195.

known as the *further-voices theory* — within classical philological research since the 1960s, first in the USA and then also in Europe.

Taking a look back at Ovid's Salmacis, and our description of the ambiguity of water and water nymph, element and personage, we briefly mentioned another issue regarding the definition of two concepts: the relationship between ambiguity and vagueness. The fundamental difference between the two terms is usually derived from the view that vagueness is essentially characterized by borderline cases, whereas ambiguity is characterized by the clear demarcation of distinct meanings. Take a landscape for example: the transition between a mountain and the valley from which it rises may be blurred by the gradual transition of the mountain's slopes, so that it is nearly impossible to define a clear boundary between mountain and non-mountain.[10] In Ovid's narrative, the vagueness of 'water' creates an even more complex ambiguity between personage and element, thereby provoking a further increase in reader-response activity.

The narrative's ending provides a remarkable example of the resolution of ambiguity. For when both figures merge, Salmacis' ontological ambiguity, which after all was both water nymph and water, acquires an ironic clarity. By becoming part of the new androgynous being Hermaphroditus, she sheds her other being — the element water — and transforms completely into a single personage. Admittedly this transformation comes with the price of a renewed ambiguity, for she is dissolved into the twofold nature of the new hero Hermaphroditus. The opposing and dynamic processes of ambiguation and disambiguation overlap and intertwine in this Ovidian narrative, in many ways much like its characters.

3 Hermaphroditus & Salmacis: A Heroic Narrative

The story of Hermaphroditus & Salmacis contains a number of ambiguous phenomena which in their narrative density and semantic complexity ultimately prompt us to consider the heroic status of the two characters. The following thoughts regarding a heroic narrative are based on a heuristic typology that identifies five characteristics as essential features of heroism. Schlechtriemen (2016) describes them as follows:

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10 On the distinction between vagueness and ambiguity, see also Kennedy 2011, 507; Mittelbach 2003, 9; Sorensen 2019, 2; Tuggy 1993, 275.

1) they are *extraordinary*, 2) they are *autonomous* and *transgressive*, 3) they are *morally* and *affectively charged*, 4) they have an *agonistic character* and, 5) they have a high degree of *agency*. (17, emphasis in the original text)

When applying this model to an ancient text like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, two limitations are inherently apparent. Firstly, these are fictional characters, objects, and events in a fictional heroic narrative, in which moral and aesthetic categories may be different from those in factual texts, such as in Livy's historical work *Ab urbe condita*, also written in Augustan times.[11] In addition to this synchronic-analytical difference, there is also the possibility of diachronically comparative epoch-specific differences in the underlying moral and aesthetic norms and expectations, as well as the hero semantics specific to the epoch and culture from which they derive.[12]

When it comes to Ovid's narrative, the structure of the plot — in which the agency is predominantly in the hands of the female character — plays a vital role.[13] For it is the nymph Salmacis who notices the boy, it is she whose sexual desire is awakened, she who speaks to him, and it is she who — in a reversal of the traditional gender roles prevalent in stories within the *Metamorphoses* — approaches the boy both verbally and physically. And it is she who finally rapes him in such a way that a new being, the two-sexed Hermaphroditus, emerges from the blending of both bodies.[14] Therefore one can safely say that the character of Salmacis exudes a high degree of exceptionality (an extraordinary hero), a character trait that is emphasized in the introductory part of the story when it is said that she alone among the nymphs does not belong to the retinue of the Goddess of the hunt Diana (v. 304 *solaque Naiadum celeri non nota Dianae;* triple negation *nec ... nec ... nec* in vv. 302–303; see also above, p. 162). At the same time, the place-bound nature of Salmacis is a significant contrast to the ideal of agency and exceptionalism. In most ancient epics, highly mobile, 'journeying' male heroes such as Ulysses, Jason, or Aeneas are juxtaposed with female figures who, in contrast, are immobile and often serve the function of a delaying moment when they prevent the hero from carrying out his actual quest (e.g. Calypso, Kirke,

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11 De Jong 2014, 171f. points out the similarity of ancient historiography to narrative text forms like the epic.

12 For diachronic aspects, see von den Hoff *et al.* 2013, the *Merkur* booklet "Heldengedenken. Über das heroische Phantasma", ed. Lau 2009, with contributions on antiquity by Neiman 2009 and Schmitt 2009, as well as Weinelt 2015, 17f.

13 For more on *agency*, see Schlechtriemen 2016.

14 Regarding the reversal of gender roles, see also Bömer 1976, 114f., 118, and n. 15; compare also the haste with which Salmacis desires the boy (v. 317 *properabat*).

Nausikaa, Dido — a notable exception is Medea, whose agency is so high that she follows Jason to Greece). In an allusion to Odysseus, the male character in Ovid's narrative is explicitly described as 'roaming through unknown lands' (v. 294 *ignotis errare locis*). Alison Keith conducted a gender analysis of the Hermaphroditus & Salmacis story looking specifically at the relation of characters and space and describes Salmacis as an "immobile female obstacle(s)".[15] This interpretation is particularly fitting in the case of Salmacis because, as a toponymic water nymph, she is both an individual figure and a part of the landscape, and thus the epitome of place-bound and immobile (cf. v. 338 *simulatque gradu discedere verso*). This dual nature is directly reflected in Ovid's play on words *lympha — nympha* 'water — nymph', vv. 298–302).[16] It is not just Salmacis' personage which is exceptional; her act of raping the boy is highly *transgressive* in regards to the extradiegetic world, but also according to the norms of the narrative world of *Metamorphoses*.[17]

Exactly the opposite is true for the male character, who is characterized by an almost complete absence of agency. The only exceptions can be found at the beginning and end of the story, where he is described once as a 'travelling hero' and once as the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, to whom he turns pleadingly. Much like Salmacis, where a balance is struck between her strength of agency and her place-boundedness, the boy's divine parentage creates a counterweight to his weak agency.[18] Still, a number of direct and indirect characterizations make the character's overall lack of agency within the actual narrative clear. Like many other protagonists of the *Metamorphoses*, our hero is still young, standing on the threshold between childhood and young adulthood. In the introductory part, he is called *puer* ('child, boy') by the internal narrator Alcithoe. The reader even

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15 Keith 1999, 217: "Until the moment when Salmacis sees Hermaphroditus, then, the Ovidian narrative proceeds on a gendered narrative trajectory that distinguishes the male epic hero from the feminized site of his labours [...]. The very framework of the tale encodes the gendered dichotomy of 'male-hero-human' on the side of the subject; and female- obstacle-boundary-space, on the other' identified by De Lauretis as intrinsic to western narrative." On gender aspects in Ovid, see also Sharrock 2002, and Salzman-Mitchell 2005. In the context of the heroic see Hauck *et al.* 2018; Rolshoven *et al.* 2018; regarding the concept of space in the Hermaphroditus & Salmacis narrative, see Kirstein 2018.

16 Regarding the use of wordplay, see Zirker/Winter-Froemel 2015; the role reversal is also reflected in the grammatical subject-object structures, including the reversal of *seeing* and *being seen*, see Kirstein 2018, 110 with notes 23 and 139.

17 Romano 2009, 559 also refers to this in his comparison to the Salmakis inscription.

18 In the Salmakis inscription (see n. 4 above) Hermaphroditus is described as 'quite outstanding' in the sense of an extraordinary hero.

learns his exact age: fifteen years old (vv. 292–293 *is tria cum primum fecit quin-quennia, montes / deseruit patrios* [...]). He is repeatedly described as *puer* throughout the text, both by the superordinate narrative voice and directly by Salmacis herself:

> et tunc quoque forte legebat,   315
> cum *puerum* vidit visumque optavit habere.
> nec tamen ante adiit, etsi properabat adire,
> quam se composuit, quam circumspexit amictus
> et finxit vultum et meruit formosa videri.
> tunc sic orsa loqui: '*puer* o dignissime credi   320
> esse deus, seu tu deus es, potes esse Cupido,
> sive es mortalis, qui te genuere, beati [...].'

> and she chanced to be gathering flowers when she saw this glorious boy and wanted at once to possess him. Keen as she was to approach him, she didn't move closer until she had made herself pretty. She cast a careful eye on her dress and arranged her expression. Nobody now could have questioned her beauty. At last she spoke: 'Magnificent boy, one could easily take you to be a god! If you *are* a god, you must surely be Cupid. If only a mortal, why then, your parents are wonderfully blessed! [...]' (transl. Raeburn 2004, 146f.).

Only once is the term *iuvenis* ('young man') used to describe him. This occurs precisely at the point in the narrative where Salmacis clasps him close in an act of physical violence, 'stealing kisses' and 'touching his chest' against his will:

> 'vicimus et meus est!' exclamat nais, et omni
> veste procul iacta mediis inmittitur undi
> pugnantemque tenet luctantiaque oscula carpit
> subiectatque manus invitaque pectora tangit
> et nunc hac *iuveni*, nunc circumfunditur illac.   360

> 'Victory! He's mine!' the naiad shouted. Then stripping off all her clothes and tossing them wide, she dived in after her quarry, grabbed hold of his limbs as he struggled against her, greedily kissing him, sliding her hands underneath him to fondle his unresponsive nipples and wrapping herself round each of his sides in turn (transl. Raeburn 2004, 148).[19]

The boy does not yet know the meaning of love, and blushes as soon as Salmacis speaks to him (v. 330 *nescit, enim, quid amor; sed et erubuisse decebat*). A fateful consequence of the final transformation, a merging of both beings, is that the

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19 On *iuvenis*, see also Nill 2019.

male half will never reach true adulthood, but will pass directly from adolescence — *puer* — to a permanent state of *semivir* or *semimas* ('half-man').[20] Contextually it is particularly noteworthy that the boy's name remains undisclosed to us at first. The Minyad Alcithoe, who is telling the story to her sisters to pass the time (vv. 274–275), introduces him quite anonymously with the demonstrative pronoun *ille* (v. 296), while the name of the female character, Salmacis, is given at the very beginning of the story (v. 306). The name Hermaphroditus, however, is not mentioned until the very end of the story (v. 383), in a moment of narrative logic when the metamorphosis is completed and Hermaphroditus has become 'half-man' (*semi-mas* or *semi-vir*). At this point of the story he beseeches his divine parents that from now on anyone who touches the pool should be transformed into a half-being like himself:

> Ergo, ubi se liquidas, quo *vir* descenderat, undas   380
> *semimarem* fecisse videt mollitaque in illis
> membra, manus tendens, sed iam *non voce virili*
> Hermaphroditus ait: 'nato date munera vestro,
> et pater et genetrix, *amborum* nomen habenti:
> quisquis in hos fontes *vir* venerit, exeat inde   385
> *semivir* et tactis subito mollescat in undis.'

> And so, when he saw that the pool which his *manhood* had entered had left him only *half of a man* and this was the place where his limbs had softened, Hermaphroditus stretched out his hands and appealed, *no more with a masculine voice*: 'Dear father and mother, I pray you, grant this boon to the son who bears the names *of you both*: whoever enters this pool as a *man*, let him weaken as soon as he touches the water and always emerge *with his manhood diminished*!' (transl. Raeburn 2004, 149f.).

Even more striking than the initial omission of the proper name is the use of *semi-* ('half'), to build two compound words: *semi-mas* in verse 381, and *semi-vir* ('half-man') in verse 386, both stylistically stressed by their parallel positioning within the verse. In Ovidian texts, the concept of the 'half' is used quite frequently: simply consider the poem *Amores* 1.5 in Ovid's *Elegies of Love*. With this book the young poet rose to distinction early in his career. In *Amores* 1.5, the curtain rises on the stage of Ovidian romantic poetry to reveal his beloved Corinna for the first time. And even though the poet's much desired union is attained, the atmosphere

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20 Robinson 1999, 220 discusses the question of whether, in the Ovidian representation, both bodies merge into the new body in equal parts or whether the male part predominates ("[...] Hermaphroditus is also described with terms more appropriate to effeminacy than to androgyny," with reference to Bömer 1976, 131 on *semimas*).

of the poem is charged with copious ambiguities: it is midday, the sunlight illuminates the bedchamber through shutters that are half open and half closed; Corinna is exposed, yet also clothed. The readers are at once present within the room, and not present, as "voyeurs at half distance".[21] Therefore, the reader is not surprised when in the next poem of *Amores* (1.6), the lover is found languishing in front of the closed door of his beloved, now an excluded lover (*exclusus amator*), begging the slave guarding her door to open it just a crack. The reasoning here is that he is so emaciated by lovesickness that his body could easily pass through the narrowest of gaps.[22] Once again, the concept of 'a half' is present, this time in relation to the door which the slave is supposed to open 'halfway' (*ianua ... semiadaperta*). Ovid's preference for semi-adjectives creates word usages such as: *semideus, semihomo, semivir, semimas, semiaderpetus, semifer* ('semi-beast'), *semicrem(at)us* ('half-burned') and *semilacer* ('half-torn').[23]

4 Conclusion

Was Ovid the poet of halves? Such a poetic substructure appears to be a fitting representation of a 'postmodern' *Grenzgänger*, a man who reflected upon the crises of the outgoing republic and Augustus's new order, which was marked by success but at the price of political freedom, in highly complex poetry, perhaps not unlike modern writers such as Stefan Zweig.[24]

A similar intertwining process regarding ambiguation and disambiguation emerges when the text is read as a heroic narrative, for both characters display distinctly heroic qualities. At the same time, these qualities are not fully realized until both are transformed into the new unified character of Hermaphroditus. In a way, one can observe at a meta-poetic level how the text, or the ideal author

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21 In accordance with Wertheimer 2014, 270f.; see also Kirstein 2015, 274f.

22 Cf. Ovid, *Amores* 1.6.1–6: *Ianitor (indignum) dura religate catena, / difficilem moto cardine pande forem. / quod precor exiguum est: aditu fac ianua parvo / obliquum capiat semiadaperta latus. / longus amor tales corpus tenuavit in usus / aptaque subducto pondere membra dedit.*

23 Cf. Ovid, *Met.* 1.192; 12.536; 2.633; 12.287; 7.344; Bömer 1976, 131 on *Met.* 4.381. In *Ars amatoria* 2.24 Ovid refers to the hybrid form of the Minotaur with: *semibovemque virum semivirumque bovem* (Sharrock 1994, 128–133). Regarding the *semi*-composita in Latin see Hübner 1980; Thomas 2002; Lucarini 2010.

24 Cf. von Albrecht 2000, 305: "Aber Ovid trägt zugleich typische Züge eines 'letzten' Vertreters einer Epoche." For more on the concept of a 'Grenzgänger' see Fludernik/Gehrke 1999.

embedded within the text, not only forms and transforms the characters, but also the textual hero images that these characters represent.[25]

The story of Hemaphroditus & Salmacis is a perfect example of how Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or parts of it, can be read both as an ambiguity narrative as well as a heroic narrative, and that both aspects are intimately connected with one another. For it is precisely within these fictional heroic narratives, with their aesthetic quest to gain independence, that all facets of the heroic, including aspects of deheroization, can be acted out with far greater license than appears to ever be possible in factual texts (or other media).[26] Thus, ambiguity phenomena are particularly suitable as textual strategies with this purpose in mind, for heroic narratives are based on processes of attribution which, in a non-essential sense, are unavoidably polyphonic, ambiguous and perceptually dependent.[27] Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with its myriad of mutually relativizing individual narratives, provides an ideal laboratory for the study of ambiguity and heroization phenomena.[28]

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25 Here is a parallel to the "removal" of the heroes that Nill 2019 elaborates on in his contribution to the study of Antaeus and Hercules in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. But whereas the "convergence of the two combatants via their similarity" destabilizes and even neutralizes the dichotomous antinomy between the paradigmatically 'good' hero Heracles and the monster Antaeus, the merger-metamorphosis of the nymph Salmacis with the boy has a stabilizing effect.

26 For more on the aspect of deheroization, see Gelz *et al.* 2015.

27 Cf. Schlechtriemen 2016, 17.

28 *Pace* Bode 1988 (see also p. 159). The topic of ambiguous heroes illustrates once again that ambiguity phenomena are not simply a threat to the success of communication (e.g. Chomsky 2002, 107: "If you want to make sure that we never misunderstand one another, for that purpose language is not well designed, because you have such properties as ambiguity"), but can also be quite productive, see for example Piantadosi *et al.* 2012, 281: "[the Chomskyan view] on ambiguity is exactly backwards. We argue, contrary to the Chomskyan view, that ambiguity is in fact a desirable property of communication systems [...]. We argue for two beneficial properties of ambiguity: first, where context is informative about meaning, unambiguous language is partly redundant with the context and therefore inefficient; and second, ambiguity allows the re-use of words and sounds which are more easily produced or understood." This is similar to Winkler 2015, 1: "[A]mbiguity is constitutive of communication [...] and productive in legal, political and philosophical discourse [...], as well as in literature [...] and the arts [...]." On October 13, 1953 Thomas Mann noted in a diary entry: "Heitere Ambiguität ist im Grunde mein Element." (Jens 1995, 127).

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