



Hermaphrodites in and around Diderot's Encyclopédie

For the *longue durée* history of hermaphrodites, the *Encyclopédie* and Diderot's works are of paramount importance; they have been and will continue to be the subject of various posts on this blog (<https://intersex.hypotheses.org/tag/encyclopedie>, <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/tag/diderot>). In this post today, I simply gather a few key texts (both in the original and in English translation), with short comments on the authorship. For a slightly fuller comment, see the various other posts on the *Encyclopédie* and Diderot or, for an overview (in German), <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/365>.

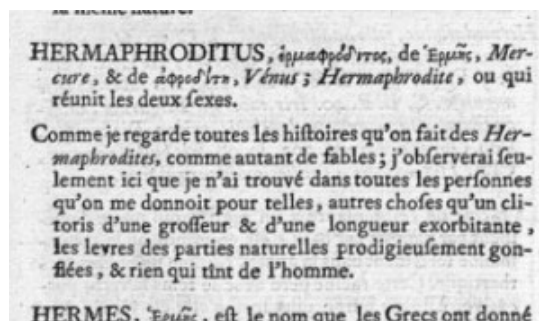
James' Medical dictionary s.v. Hermaphroditus

Already before the *Encyclopédie* was published, three of the later editors (Denis Diderot, Marc-Antoine Eidous and François-Vincent Toussaint) had translated James' Medical dictionary. The entry on hermaphrodites already contains many elements that would be widely disseminated by the *Encyclopédie* itself:

“HERMAPHRODITUS, ἑρμαφρόδιτος, from Ἑρμῆς, Mercury, and Ἀφροδίτη, Venus. An Hermaphrodite; that is, one who partakes in both Sexes.

As I look upon all the Histories related of Hermaphrodites to be merely imaginary, I shall only observe, that of many I have seen who have been reported to be so, I have met with none who were any more than mere Women, whose *Clitoris* was grown to an exorbitant size, and whose *Laba Pudendorum* were preternaturally great.”

http://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histoire/medica/resultats/index.php?dico=dico&chapitre=hermaphrodit*&p=3&do=page



The French translation of James' article on hermaphrodites. Source:

http://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histoire/medica/resultats/index.php?dico=dico&chapitre=hermaphrodit*&p=4&do=page. Public domain.

This was translated into French by the Encyclopedists as follows:

“HERMAPHRODITUS, ἑρμαφρόδιτος, de Ἑρμῆς, *Mercur*e, et de Ἀφροδίτη, *Venus*; *Hermaphrodite*, ou qui réunit les deux sexes.

Comme je regarde toutes les histoires qu'on fait des *Hermaphrodites*, comme autant de fables; j'observerai seulement ici que je n'ai trouvé dans toutes les personnes qu'on me donnoit pour telles, autres choses qu'un *clitoris* d'une grosseur & d'une longueur exorbitante, les levres des parties naturelles prodigieusement gonflée, et rien qui tint de l'homme.”

http://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/histoire/medica/resultats/index.php?dico=dico&chapitre=hermaphrodit*&p=4&do=page



The *Encyclopédie* itself

The first edition of the *Encyclopédie* itself has a very long article on hermaphrodites, or rather a very long article on the anatomy of the (supposed) hermaphrodites and a short one on mythology; both are signed "D.J." (= Louis de Jaucourt). The full version is easily accessible [online](#), I only give a few excerpts here:

“HERMAPHRODITE, sub. & adj. (*Anat.*) personne qui a les deux sexes, ou les parties naturelles de l’homme & de la femme.

[...]

Cependant ce prodige de la nature, qui réunit les deux sexes dans un même être, n’a pas été favorablement accueilli de plusieurs peuples, s’il est vrai ce que raconte Alexander ab Alexandro, que les personnes qui portoient en elles le sexe d’homme & de femme, ou pour m’expliquer en un seul mot, les *hermaphrodites*, furent regardés par les Athéniens & les Romains comme des monstres, qu’on précipitoit dans la mer à Athènes & à Rome dans le Tibre.

Mais y a-t-il de véritables *hermaphrodites* ? On pouvoit agiter cette question dans les tems d’ignorance ; on ne devoit plus la proposer dans des siècles éclairés. Si la nature s’égaré quelquefois dans la production de l’homme, elle ne va jamais jusqu’à faire des métamorphoses, des confusions de substances, & des assemblages parfaits des deux sexes. Celui qu’elle a donné à la naissance, & même peut-être à la conception, ne se change point dans un autre ; il n’y a personne en qui les deux sexes soient parfaits, c’est-à-dire qui puisse engendrer en soi comme femme, & hors de soi comme homme, *tanquam mas generare ex alio, & tanquam fœmina generare in se ipso*, disoit un canoniste. La nature ne confond jamais pour toujours ni ses véritables marques, ni ses véritables sceaux ; elle montre à la fin le caractère qui distingue le sexe ; & si de tems à autre, elle le voile à quelques égards dans l’enfance, elle le décele indubitablement dans l’âge de puberté.

[...]

Concluons donc, que l’*hermaphrodisme* n’est qu’une chimère, & que les exemples qu’on rapporte d’*hermaphrodites* mariés, qui ont eu des enfans l’un de l’autre, chacun comme homme & comme femme, sont des fables puériles, puisées dans le sein de l’ignorance & dans l’amour du merveilleux, dont on a tant de peine à se défaire.

Il faut pourtant demeurer d’accord, que la nature exerce des jeux fort étranges sur les parties naturelles, & qu’il a paru quelquefois des sujets d’une conformation extérieure si bizarre, que ceux qui n’ont pû en développer le véritable génie, sont en quelque façon excusables.”

https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/L%E2%80%99Encyclop%C3%A9die/1re_%C3%A9dition/HERMAPHRODITE

An English translation (by Naomi J. Andrews) of these passages reads as follows:

“Hermaphrodite. A person who has both sexes, or the natural parts of man and woman. Nevertheless, this prodigal of nature, who united the two sexes in the same being, was not favorably welcomed by all, if we believe the account of Alexander ab Alexandro, who says that the people who bore the sexes of both man and woman, or to use a single word, the *hermaphrodites*, were regarded by the Athenians and the Romans as monsters, and thrown into the sea at Athens and at Rome into the Tiber.

But are there true *hermaphrodites* ? One could raise this question in the times of ignorance; one should no longer propose it during the enlightened centuries. If nature wanders sometimes in the production of man, it does not go as far as metamorphoses, confusions of substances, and perfect assemblages of two sexes. That which is given at birth, even, perhaps, at conception, does not change into another; there is no person in whom the two sexes are perfect, that is to say who could reproduce in herself as a woman, and also outside himself as a man, *tanquam mas generare ex alio, & tanquam*



foemina generare in se ipso [...for as much as the male to produce out of another and the female to produce in her own self...] in the words of one canonist. Nature never permanently confuses these true signs, nor its true marks; nature ultimately shows the characteristics that distinguish sex; and if from time to time these are hidden in infancy, they are definitively revealed in puberty.

[...]

We conclude, therefore, that hermaphroditism is nothing more than a chimera, and that the examples that one hears of married hermaphrodites, who have both had children, each as man and woman, are childish fables, drawn from the heart of ignorance in the love of marvels, so difficult to dismantle.

It is necessary, nevertheless, to concede that nature plays very strange tricks on natural parts, and that there have appeared a few times subjects of an exterior appearance so bizarre that the inability to distinguish their true nature is, in some way, excusable.”

English translation by Naomi J. Andrews

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0000.208?view=text;rgn=main>

Supplements to the *Encyclopédie*



The first of three plates on Hermaphrodites in the *Recueil de planches*. Source: <https://archive.org/stream/SuitedurecueildXII#page/n311/mode/2up>. Public domain.

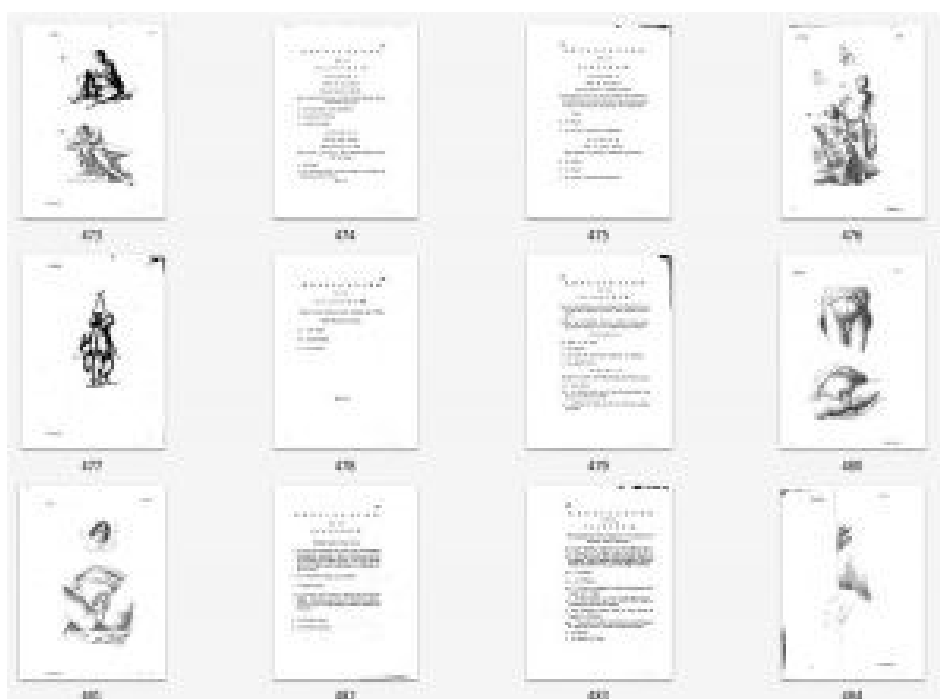
The giant project of the *Encyclopédie* was supplemented by several volumes, including a separate series of plates. The third of these *Supplément* volumes contained an article on hermaphrodites that was even longer than that of the *Encyclopédie*. It was written by Albrecht von Haller, Hugues Maret and Jean La Fosse; a long section for which no author is given is in fact lifted from the *Dissertation sur les hermaphrodites* by George Arnaud de Ronsil (Klöppel 2010, 174; for more details, see <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/365>).

As for the plates, volume 12 of the *Recueil de planches* (edited by Panckoucke, not the Encyclopedists themselves) contains three plates on Hermaphrodites (available online: [Planche 1](#), [Planche 2](#), [Planche 3](#); for comment, see McGuire 1991, Imlinger 2012, Stănică 2013). The plates are lifted from de Ronsil's book, too.

By and large, the article is faithful to the original article by Louis de Jaucourt quoted above, making time and again clear that there were no hermaphrodites and - perhaps even more importantly - that only experts (anatomists) could authoritatively on such cases. Yet there is an interesting oddity resulting from the reuse of de Ronsil's *Mémoire*. While the *Encyclopédie* is



rightly famous for its scepticism if not outright denial of the existence of hermaphrodites, de Ronsil in his book had quoted examples of what he thought to be true hermaphrodites, and his plates were meant to illustrate this. Yet in the *Supplément*, all references to true hermaphrodites are left out, and the new legends to the plates make clear that they only show supposed hermaphrodites (Klöppel 2010, 174; Imlinger 2013, 280). As Stănică argued, the style of the first plate - imitating classical Roman art - may also be read as a kind of comment, linking the figure of the hermaphrodite to Roman mythology and hence reducing the irritation the images may have caused (Stănică 2013, 160); but it is also important to note that de Ronsil had arranged the plates very similarly. While in his *Mémoires* the plates are dispersed over more pages, and the legends are different, the sequence of the plates is the same as later in the *Recueil de plates*:



The plates in the *Recueil de planches* are lifted from de Ronsil, where they are found in a slightly different arrangement, but already in the same sequence as in the later *Recueil*. Screenshot of a pdf version of de Ronsil's *Mémoires*, with a total of four empty pages deleted. Source: <https://books.google.de/books?id=iYNEAAAACAAJ>. Public domain.

Diderot's own writings

While the *Encyclopédie* and even more so the supplement volumes insist that there are no "true" hermaphrodites, it is also worth mentioning [Diderot](#) himself in his anatomical studies (published only posthumously) was much more willing to accept their existence than the relevant *Encyclopédie* articles did. Quoting von Haller, he noted that the combination of male and female genitals in one person was not impossible:

Il est peu d'exemples de la réunion des principaux organes de la génération dans un même individu, quoique la possibilité de cette réunion ne manque pas d'une certaine probabilité.

There are only few examples of the combination of the sexual organs [of both sexes] in one individual, but the likelihood of such a combination does not lack a certain probability.

Éléments, ed. Quintili, 269; own translation.

Likewise in his famous *Rêve*, Diderot even makes the physician Bordeu develop a theory how women could turn into men that is manifestly inspired by Galen's *De usu partium* - for text and comment, see <https://intersex.hypotheses.org/3620>.



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