

## Hermaphrodites and the understanding of sexual difference in the early seventeenth century

### Os hermafroditas e a compreensão da diferença sexual no início do século XVII

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I compare the ways in which three seventeenth-century physicians, Rodrigo de Castro, Caspar Bauhin and Jean Riolan, dealt in their works with the anatomical and social problems posed by the hermaphroditic body. I show that early seventeenth-century medical discourses on hermaphrodites have recourse to a diverse synthesis of theories, sources and medical cases and that they are influenced by cultural anxieties over the disruptive power of sexual ambiguity.

**Keywords:** hermaphrodites; history of medicine; Rodrigo de Castro; Caspar Bauhin; Jean Riolan.

#### Introduction

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, hermaphrodites were frequently exhibited in public and represented in books on monsters and prodigies<sup>2</sup>. Their ambiguous sexual appearances attracted the attention of both popular and learned audiences. Similarly to other beings with physical deformities, they evoked curiosity and wonder.<sup>3</sup> Hermaphrodites were also prone to raise horror and fear in a society that was neatly delineated according to the male-female dichotomy. In particular, sexual ambiguity could be associated with imposture and the transgression of gender roles and therefore be potentially disruptive of the legal and social order.

The hermaphroditic body challenged also interpretations for the generation of living beings. Moreover, it challenged the role of medical expertise in the understanding and ordering of sexual difference. Rodrigo de Castro was not indifferent to the subject and devoted one of the chapters of his

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<sup>2</sup> Books on monsters discussing also hermaphrodites include BOAISTUAU *et alii.* (1598), PARÉ [1573] (1971), LICETI (1616) and ALDROVANDI (1642).

<sup>3</sup> For an history of monsters and wonder, see DASTON e PARK (1998).

treatise to hermaphrodites since they were “rarely mentioned in Hippocrates, Galen and in the *Gynaeciorum*”<sup>4</sup>. He provides a short account of them but considers the main topics approached in medical literature: causes of generation, classification, physical criteria of identification and a glimpse into the problematic status of hermaphrodites in society. Around the same year this chapter was first published, two works specifically concerned with hermaphrodites appeared: *De hermaphroditorum monstrosorumque partum natura* (Oppenheim, 1600, 2ed. 1614) by Caspar Bauhin, Professor of Anatomy and Botany at the University of Basel and *Discours sur les hermaphrodites* (Paris, 1614) by Jean Riolan, the Younger, Professor of Medicine at the University of Paris<sup>5</sup>. In this paper, I would like to address the importance of hermaphrodites in early seventeenth-century medicine and society by focusing on these three works<sup>6</sup>.

### The generation of hermaphrodites

As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have pointed out, early modern writers on hermaphrodites were heirs to two distinct traditions concerning their generation, the Hippocratic and the Aristotelian<sup>7</sup>. On the one hand, in the Hippocratic tradition, sex existed along a continuum from extreme male to extreme female and hermaphrodites were considered beings with a truly intermediate sexual nature<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, within the Aristotelian interpretation of sexual difference, male and female corresponded to polar opposites

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<sup>4</sup> CASTRO (1617) Parte 1, Liv. III, Cap. 12, 144: *Hermaphroditi (...) de quibus tamen exigua aut fere nulla et parum sufficiens in libris Hippocratis, Galeni, ac in ipsis gynaeciorum uoluminibus facta est mentio*. All translations into English are my own, made from the Portuguese translation by Dr. Cristina Pinheiro.

<sup>5</sup> Other seventeenth-century works on hermaphrodites include DUVAL (1682) and VENETTE (1687).

<sup>6</sup> For the understanding of hermaphrodites in Iberia during the early modern period, see CLEMISON & GARCIA eds (2013).

<sup>7</sup> DASTON & PARK (1995) 420-423.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Hippocratic model, the sex of the foetus was determined by the male and female ‘seeds’ and the place of conception in the left or right side of the womb. Depending on which seed and which parent was dominant and the position of the foetus in the womb, the offspring would occupy one of a number of possible points on a sexual spectrum ranging from unambiguous male to wholly female. On Hippocratic and Aristotelian conception theories, see BOYLAN (1984).

admitting no meaningful intermediate states and hermaphrodites were viewed as beings with doubled or redundant genitalia. According to this model, their sex was only apparently ambiguous. Therefore, only the Hippocratic model allowed for a spectrum of intermediate sexual possibilities and the formation of true hermaphrodites.

During the sixteenth century, there is a clear resurgence of interest in Hippocratic theories concerning generation and sexual difference, in great part as a result of new humanist translations and editions of this author. To what extent did early seventeenth-century medical literature on hermaphrodites reflect this interest? Both Castro, Bauhin and Riolan invoke an Hippocratic interpretation for the generation of hermaphrodites. Nevertheless, there are some noticeable differences. Castro simply states that Hippocrates considers that hermaphrodites are formed “when the two seeds, male and female, have the same strength and abundance”<sup>9</sup>. In turn, Bauhin provides a more complex model of sexual difference based on Hippocratic theories of generation. He considers the possibility of the formation of a range of sexes, from the very masculine male, through the more average male, then the hermaphrodite, to viragos and “bold strong” women and, finally, “soft and effeminate” female<sup>10</sup>. In what concerns Riolan, he asserts that according to Hippocrates, an hermaphrodite will be formed if the male and female seeds are equally abundant but one is stronger than the other. The hermaphrodite would look more like a male or a female according to the strength of the corresponding seed<sup>11</sup>. Yet, in another part of his work, Riolan alludes also to the Aristotelian interpretation of hermaphrodites<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, there were differences in the interpretation of the origin of hermaphrodites according to the Hippocratic model and sometimes an uneasy synthesis between this model and the Aristotelian.

Moreover, the medical literature on hermaphrodites shows that other explanations for their origin circulated in the period. Indeed, Castro’s first remark is precisely on the lack of agreement concerning their causes. After

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<sup>9</sup> CASTRO (1617) Parte 1, Liv. III, Cap. 12, 146: *quando duo semina, uirile ac femineum aequalia sunt uiribus et copia.*

<sup>10</sup> LONG (2006) 51.

<sup>11</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 122-123.

<sup>12</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 62.

this, and similarly to Bauhin and Riolan, he mentions other “common opinions”. One is the view that according to the number of days after which there is intercourse and the woman had her first day of menstruation, hermaphrodites would be formed after the 12<sup>th</sup> day<sup>13</sup>. He is, however, quick to refute this by stating that the male and the female sex are not determined by the interval of days and if we accept this opinion there would be more hermaphrodites being born<sup>14</sup>. Riolan uses the same argument to contradict this view but uses the occasion to refute Castro’s assertion that Avicena had denied it. His words are also indicative of how quickly the treatise of the Portuguese physician had an impact on medical literature<sup>15</sup>.

Rodrigo de Castro alludes to a series of other opinions for the cause of hermaphrodites. These include astrological influence —a topic particularly developed by Bauhin and also mentioned by Riolan—, intercourse performed in an immoral way when the woman lies on top —also used by Bauhin—, when the seed is united in the middle of the uterus —a cause refuted by Bauhin— and finally, when some part of the seed has the virtue of forming the two sexes.

Unlike the Aristotelian model of sexual difference, all these theories considered hermaphrodites as beings truly intermediate in sex and therefore as challenging the male-female dichotomy and the social order based on that dichotomy. Moreover, the significant diversity of causes potentially increased the number of hermaphrodites likely to be born.

### The Orders of Sexual Difference

The sexual ambiguity of hermaphrodites was socially disruptive and hence needed to be contained. Their medical categorization contributed to this. In Castro, as well as in Bauhin and previously in Ambroise Paré, they

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<sup>13</sup> CASTRO (1617), Parte 1, Liv. III, Cap. 12, 145: *In causa propter quam hermaphroditus generetur, uariatum est; nam aliqui scribunt, si mulier uiro congregiatur, a primo qua est menstruis purgata die, usque ad quintum, marem producit, a quinto ad octauum femellam, ab octauo ad duodecimum rursus masculum: post illum dierum numerum hermaphroditum.*

<sup>14</sup> CASTRO (1617) Parte 1, Liv. III, Cap. 12, 146.

<sup>15</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 117.

are divided into four classes according to what is thought to be their “predominant sex”:

1- Male hermaphrodite (the male sex is overall perfect and functional in generation);

2- Female hermaphrodites (the female sex is overall perfect and functional in generation);

3- They have characteristics of both sexes but they are incapable of forming seed and of being of any use in generation;

4- Male-female or perfect hermaphrodites (they have both sexes and the two are physically and functionally perfect).

In a society very much organized around the concept of reproduction, it is not surprising that the classification of hermaphrodites was primarily based on their capacity of generation and the degree of perfection of their genitals. That is not to say that all medical authors used the same guidelines in the identification of hermaphrodites. It is true that Riolan bluntly stated that “an observation of the genital parts is the most sure method of finding the nature of the hermaphrodite” (p. 125)<sup>16</sup>. However, Castro’s description of female hermaphrodites includes a detailed analysis of their genitals but also of other female traits: “it is a hermaphrodite of the female sex if the uterus/womb is complete in all respects and enables penetration by the virile member, if menstrual blood flows from it, if it lacks hairs, if the hairs are fine and delicate, if they are effeminate all over the body, if they have a weak and fearful nature, have a high voice, larger breasts and have no hair around the anus<sup>17</sup>. Other authors such as Paré and Bauhin followed this system. It should also be stressed that in Castro’s treatise on the medicine of women, the female hermaphrodite is precisely the one that is described in greatest detail.

The system of classification of hermaphrodites that Rodrigo de Castro published in his treatise was accepted by a majority of physicians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There was however one author who clearly

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<sup>16</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 125.

<sup>17</sup> CASTRO (1617) Parte 1, Liv. III, Cap. 12, 145: (...) *si uulua omnibus suis dimensionibus exacta sit, et adeo peruia, ut uirile membrum admittere possit, si menses illac profluant, si glabri sint, si promissi sint tenues ac molles capilli, si toto corpore effeminati, animi fracti, timidi, uoce acuta, et mammis elatioribus et iuxta anum crines nulli.*

departed from him. For Jean Riolan, the category of “perfect hermaphrodites” could not be correct. There could never be a being capable of performing both the male and female role in procreation<sup>18</sup>. He supports his view on Aristotle and Avicene but even more so in his argument that the two sexes could not be lodged in the same place and remain functional because the seed would not be perfect and sexual intercourse would be uncomfortable. For him, the notion of “perfect hermaphrodites” is only the result of the misreading of appearances by those who do not understand sexual difference.

What was in practice the role of personal observation and, in particular, of dissection in challenging systems of classification? Castro does not comment on this point but Bauhin pays attention to it in one chapter of his dissertation. The overall conclusion is that some of the reported cases problematize the designation of the sex of the hermaphrodite as male or female. Correspondingly, in the following chapter, the author approaches historical examples of the difficulty of determining sex<sup>19</sup>. In turn, Riolan mentions some cases of dissections of hermaphrodites by Bauhin and Realdus Columbus<sup>20</sup>. Although two of them are seen as hermaphrodites, two others are reinterpreted by the author as being just women. Thus, medical expertise did not necessarily lead to the same interpretation of sexual difference.

### **Hermaphrodites and the social order**

One of the issues that Rodrigo de Castro approaches briefly is the law of the hermaphrodite:

*For hermaphrodites who have both female and male traits that can be seen. [i. e. perfect hermaphrodites], the law allows them to choose the sex they would like to live by. However, they will be punished with the death penalty if it is found that, if they had departed once from the sex they chose, so that they will not abuse promiscuously of both sexes.*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 56-67.

<sup>19</sup> LONG (2006), 66.

<sup>20</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 21-28.

<sup>21</sup> CASTRO (1617) Parte 1, Liv. III, Cap. 12, 145: *Porro hermaphroditis, qui utraque genitalia notatu digna possident, leges sexus in quo manere ac uiuere uelint, optionem faciunt, poena tamen capitali imposita, si ab electo semel sexu discessisse comprehendantur, ne promiscue utroque abutantur.*

The existence of this law and its high penalty shows that “perfect hermaphrodites” raised considerable social concerns and moral anxieties. Their assumed ability to act sexually as both male and female related them to unstable gender roles and sexuality. This was socially disruptive since it called into question a clear distinction and hierarchical relation between male and female. It also fostered accusations of imposture and moral depravity. Hence, a legal restriction with heavy penalties on the potential alternation of the sex roles of “perfect hermaphrodite” was to be enforced. In turn, a sex for the hermaphrodite had to be established. But who was to decide this and based on what criteria?

In Castro’s presentation of the law, the power of decision is given to the hermaphrodite. This is also the case in previous literature such as Claude Tesserant’s *Histoires Prodigieuses* (1567). Tesserant remarks that hermaphrodites “can choose which sex they want to use, with prohibition upon pain of death of use of the other, because of the inconveniences that could result”<sup>22</sup>. In addition, he refers to St. Augustine who had already alerted readers to the moral debauchery involved in the interchange of sexual roles of the hermaphrodite.

By the end of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, there is a move towards a greater role for medical expertise in deciding the sex of the hermaphrodite. In *Des monstres et des prodiges* (1573), Ambroise Paré states that “Doctors and Surgeons who are expert and informed can recognize whether hermaphrodites are more apt to have and use one or the other sex, or both, or neither”<sup>23</sup>. Also, but in a more assertive way, Bauhin declares that the choice of the sex of the hermaphrodite should be made by medical and legal experts<sup>24</sup>. But it is Riolan who consecrates the supreme authority of medical expertise in identifying the sex of hermaphrodites by claiming that it is the physician who can determine their sex and judge which sex suits

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in LONG (2006) 40.

<sup>23</sup> PARE [1573] (1971) 25: Les Medicens et Chirurgiens bien experts et advisez peuvent cognoistre si les hermaphrodites sont plus aptes à tenir et user de l’un que de l’autre sexe, ou des deux, ou du tout rien.

<sup>24</sup> LONG (2006) 57.

them, without giving them the option to elect and choose the sex they would like<sup>25</sup>.

The attribution of a sex to hermaphrodites had crucial legal implications. Lawyers could tolerate no middle ground between male and female since sex was a legal "condition". It fitted or unfitted a person for marriage, inheriting property, bearing witness and so forth, and was thus an essential determinant of legal identity. Once classified as male or female, according to most legal opinion, hermaphrodites were entitled, with a few exceptions, to all the prerogatives of that sex. One of the novelties of the late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth century legal practice lay in its increasing reliance on outside testimony to determine the hermaphrodite's predominant sex. In this respect, medical observation and the use of systems of classification of hermaphrodites played an important role in the attribution of legal sex.

The use of medical expertise in assessing the sex of the hermaphrodite was also aimed at preventing immoral sexual practices such as sodomy and lesbianism with which they were often associated. In fact, Daston and Park have remarked that the problematic status of hermaphrodites in Renaissance France was linked to the condemnation of male and female homosexual behavior<sup>26</sup>. For Bauhin and Riolan it is the relation between hermaphrodites and lesbianism that is particularly significant<sup>27</sup>. If the first author associates a few cases of tribades with the issue of hermaphroditism, for the latter the subject is almost an obsession. It is in this context that Riolan mentions Rodrigo de Castro for a second time when he refers to the fact that he "saw women burnt in Lisbon for conducting lascivious relationships with other women"<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, for the French physician, many of the so-called female hermaphrodites were in fact just women with an elongated clitoris. Riolan considers this organ and, in particular, the extraordinary size that it can achieve in lustful women, as the evil source not only of false notions but also of women abusing it with each other: "The clitoris can grow like a finger in voluptuous and pas-

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<sup>25</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 130.

<sup>26</sup> DASTON e PARK (1995).

<sup>27</sup> PARK (1996).

<sup>28</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 82: "Rodericus à Castro dit avoir vu bruler quelque femmes publiquement à Lisbonne pour umpudicité". See CASTRO (1617) Parte I, Liv. 1, cap. 3, 10.



sionate women and they can abuse it to give them pleasure when they live with each other"<sup>29</sup>. Indeed, the author provides a significant number of cases of false hermaphrodites associated with tribades. Moreover, he even asserts that it is in the clitoris that the "hermaphroditic nature of women" resides<sup>30</sup>.

Riolan's radical solution to the problem of deception of clitorises with a monstrous size and the perpetuation of immoral sexual practices between women lies in its excision. The performance of this operation had been mentioned occasionally by medical authors such as Ambroise Paré<sup>31</sup>. Bauhin refers to it as well but says that it is potentially lethal<sup>32</sup>. Instead, Riolan devotes a significant number of pages to the issue, mentioning other authors who agree with it, successful cases and how the excision should be carried out<sup>33</sup>. The amount of attention dedicated to the topic suggests that it was not just the clarification of the understanding of hermaphrodites and the disempowerment of female sexuality that was at stake but also his negative views on women in general. Indeed, shortly after he asserts that women are closer to monsters and invokes Aristotle by saying that they are merely imperfect or defective men<sup>34</sup>.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to compare Castro's presentation on human hermaphrodites with that of Bauhin and Riolan since it is much shorter and offered in a different context. In any case, it seems to correspond to what the physicians and scholars of his intended audience would expect from a general introduction to the topic. It is Bauhin who presents the most learned and com-

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<sup>29</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 79: [le clitoris] peut croître et grossir comme le doigt aux femmes voluptueuses et amoureuses, et en peuvent abuser pour se donner plaisir, en habitant les unes avec les autres.

<sup>30</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 84: Il se faut se arrêter au clitoris pour ce qui est de l' hermaphrodie des femmes.

<sup>31</sup> PARÉ, Ambroise [1573] (1971) 27. On the excision of the clitoris as a supposed 'corrective surgery', see LAQUEUR (1990) e PARK (1996) 183-184.

<sup>32</sup> LONG (2006) 69.

<sup>33</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 54, 77-80.

<sup>34</sup> RIOLAN (1614) 72: "la femme, selon l'opinion d'Aristote, est un masle imparfait, un erreur de nature desirant faire un masle".

prehensive view of hermaphrodites in the period by focusing on their place in history, medicine and culture. He also shows some acceptance towards them. His work was successful since it was already enjoying a second edition in 1614. Of the three authors, Riolan is certainly the most controversial, especially in his denying of “perfect hermaphrodites’. He is also the most vociferous in his treatment of the subject and in his generally negative portrayal of women.

This paper has pointed out that in the period a variety of causes were used to explain the generation of hermaphrodites and that they included Hippocratic interpretations but these differed in some respects from each other. In addition, in at least one case, a syncretic combination of Hippocratic and Aristotelian interpretations was used by Riolan. Following other studies, this paper has also shown the increasing importance of the medical profession in the establishment of the predominant sex of the hermaphrodite and their legal identity in society. However, medical attempts to clarify the nature of hermaphrodites and to diminish their challenges to the order of society were only partially successful. Not only were there disagreements between physicians in the categorization and identification of hermaphrodites but also some cases and observations after dissection testified to the extreme sexual ambiguity of the hermaphroditic body.

Finally, this paper illustrated the importance of the medical view that certain of the so-called hermaphrodites were in fact women with deformed genitals. This interpretation is presented as an attempt to denounce false hermaphrodites and to remove vulgar misconceptions. However, it is also related to anxieties about non-procreative and lustful sexuality between women. Moreover, it is linked to male concerns with female pretensions to masculine roles, status and prerogatives. In this, as well as in other issues, early seventeenth-century medical discourses on hermaphrodites were inextricably linked to social and cultural views of the period.

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**Resumo:** Este artigo compara a visão de três médicos seiscentistas, Rodrigo de Castro, Caspar Bauhin e Jean Riolan, sobre os problemas anatómicos e sociais suscitados pelo corpo hermafrodita. Da análise apresentada, conclui-se que os discursos médicos sobre hermafroditas dos primórdios do século XVII são de natureza sincrética e influenciados por receios relacionados com o poder disruptivo da ambigüidade sexual na sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** hermafroditas; história da medicina; Rodrigo de Castro; Caspar Bauhin; Jean Riolan.

**Resumen:** Este artículo compara la visión de tres médicos del seiscientos, Rodrigo de Castro, Caspar Bauhin y Jean Riolan, sobre los problemas anatómicos y sociales que suscita el cuerpo hermafrodita. A partir del análisis realizado se llega a la conclusión de que los discursos médicos sobre hermafroditas de inicios del s. XVII muestran una naturaleza sincrética y están influidos por miedos relacionados con el poder disruptivo de la ambigüedad sexual en la sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** hermafroditas; historia de la medicina; Rodrigo de Castro; Caspar Bauhin; Jean Riolan.

**Résumé :** Cet article compare la vision de trois médecins du XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, Rodrigo de Castro, Caspar Bauhin et Jean Riolan, au sujet des problèmes anatomiques et sociaux posés par le corps hermaphrodite. L'analyse réalisée permet de soutenir que les discours médicaux sur les hermaphrodites du début du XVII<sup>ème</sup> sont de nature syncrétique et sont influencés par des peurs liées au pouvoir disruptif de l'ambigüité sexuelle existant dans la société.

**Mots-clés :** hermaphrodites ; histoire de la médecine ; Rodrigo de Castro ; Caspar Bauhin ; Jean Riolan.