queering greco-roman mythology

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the stories of greek and roman mythology utilize themes of transformation, assimilation, metamorphosis, transition, and, more. these themes allow for appropriation and utilization of narratives for the creation of queer art. the works in here show greek and roman art under a modern lens of queerness. along with the help of joel peter
Witkin’s work, that references classical myth, this zine aims to show the existence of queer themes within Greco-Roman art and myth, and also how these ideas manifest and can be brought into the contemporary!
hermaphroditus:

hermaphroditus’s story varies. one rendition is told in ovid’s metamorphoses: salamacis, the naiad, sees hermaphroditus bathing in the springs, having inherited both his parents beauty, many wanted him, incluing salamacis. when she sees him she grabs him, holding him tightly. as she hold him, she begs for the gods that they will never seperate, when they grant her wish, the two are combined, birthing the androgynous body of hermaphroditus. other stories say that he was born androgy nous, with this he was given a name that represents his femininity and masculinity, a combination of his parents, aphrodite and hermes. another story says he was born male, but raised by the feminine naids

the union of the gendered tradtions of art is seen in lorenzo bernini’s sleeping hermaphroditus -->
no matter which story of Hermaphroditus is told, a few aspects should be emphasized:

- the gender union shown by this myth reveals a divine nature to the androgyny

- his story can be seen as a representation of an intersex individuals, and a divine quality is attributed to them

- this story reveals the aspects of gender transformation and gender non-conformity, without punishment
another story of transformation is the story of daphne. ovid’s metamorphoses tells a tale where apollo is shot with an gold-tipped arrow by cupid and begins to pursue daphne, who shot by a lead-tipped arrow from cupid and begins to flee. for help, she calls to her father, peneus the river god, who transforms her into a laurel tree.
the story of daphne is one of the many that recalls a situation in which transformation happens for safety or resolve. while the story of arachne tells the story of transformation as punishment or as a legend. both establishes the normality of transformation in itself.

metamorphoses also recalls the story of arachne. she was once an incredibly gifted weaver, so much so that she said she had never been taught by minerva and challenged her. when they competed, arachne’s “web” was impeccable, although she won, minerva become so frustrated that she hit the girl till she begun to hang herself. out of pity she tranforms the girl into a spider, now she can weave and hang forever.
aphrodite/venus:

the greeks refer to her as aphrodite, the romans refer to her as venus. she is the goddess of sexuality, of erotic longing, and of sexual love. most myths of her reveal that she was born of out sea foam, from the severed genitals of ouranos (roman god of the sky) that fell into the sea. she rules sexuality in how she can plant longing and desire, as well as the opposite into individuals. the ideal and themes of venus are used by many.
Saturnalia tells of Aphrodite being worshipped instead as “Aphroditos,” in Cypus. This version of the goddess had her feminine figure and male genitals. This reveals the gender mutability of the gods, and how the way their gender is expressed can exist outside of the gender binary.

Her iconography is utilized and her name is evoked by many. Sappho states: “Sweet mother, I cannot weave – slender Aphrodite has overcome me with longing for a girl.” Her myth runs through different media and inspires many artists, one of those being Joel Peter Witkin.
Joel Peter Witkin uses the macabre to create images that deal with themes of mortality, transformation, and non-conformity. In many ways, his work mirrors Greco-Roman myth. His photos often reference or recall classical art, they also often challenge it.
Witkin’s Venus is named after the work it recreates, which is Antonio Canova’s “Pauline Bonaparte, as Venus Victrix.” The goddess’ often nude and sensual mode is utilized by both artists to create a compelling work that plays into the myth and iconography that surround her. But Witkin divests in his usage of a male model. Witkin utilizes the feminine traits that have been engrained in the Greco-Roman traditions of art. His Venus lays on a soft pillowy surface. Venus has curves that parallel the bed. He softly holds the prize for the judgment of Paris upon his hip. He gazes away from the camera and wears her jewelry. Witkins creates an intricate depiction of a Venus that recalls the sleeping Hermaphroditos and queers the typical Venus.
witkin does this again with his work “the graces, los angeles.” both works stem from a much larger collection of his that all recall greek and roman myth, all using models that differ from the reference material. in this case, he focuses on the story of the three graces, three sisters, attendents of aphrodite.

the three graces by antonio canova
the story of the three graces is one that is closely tied to feminine myth and creation, including the creation of the first women, pandora. witkin uses trans-women and intersex models to queer the myth of the three graces and he uses the iconography to make this myth visible, just as the original does.
the gender mutability of the gods is seen in many ways, for one, apollo and artemis are twins of the opposite gender. often in myth and depiction the two are displayed with opposite gender features, with apollo being more effeminate and artemis being more masculine.

in the orphic hymns, some gods are referred to as male and female; this happens with dionysus/mise, selene, athena and adonis. often the gods change gender when it suit the situation

another well known example of this is dionysus, or the romans calls him, bacchus. the god ruled over many things, but especially wine and ecstasy. he was often referred to as effeminate, and was depicted as such (see right). in his younger depictions, the god was shown wearing girls clothing
as models, the gods show what is possible in the realm of gender mutability and transformation!

a stature of dionysus, sharing feature of witkin’s venus and sleeping hermaphroditos
in the symposium, platos speaks of three genders: male, female, and the androgyne. this third gender relates to the original state of humans, creatures with four arms and legs, and both sex organs. they are split because of their power. this tells a compelling story regarding androgynous or trans individuals.

these philosophers reflect a less black and white way of thinking, even if they are not progressive for time, it is not as binary as some might think...
aristotle’s views on gender are unconventional as well. he proposes an idea of eunuchs as their own gender

“Women do not go bald because their nature is like that of children, both alike being incapable of producing seminal secretion. Eunuchs do not become bald, because they change into the female condition. And as to the hair that comes later in life, eunuchs either do not grow it at all, or lose it if they happen to have it, with the exception of the pubic hair: for women also grow that though they have not the other, and this mutilation is a change from the male to the female condition”
in many stories, gender transformation sits at the center

the story of caenis in metamorphoses recalls how she was a maiden who turned down many. when she was alone by the sea, she was assaulted by neptune, he gave her one wish. her one wish was to become a man, he granted her this wish, and she transformed into caeneus. with this, neptune also made him invulnerable.

another story is the one of mestra. ovid tells that mestra was lover of poseidon, who granted her the ability to shape shift. she would change from man to women to animal, to be sold by her father again and again just to return home as herself.
Iphísi was the child of Telethusa and Ligdus in Crete, while born female, Iphísi was raised male. But when she fell for Iánthe, she could not marry her as a woman, so she prayed at the altar of Isis. Isis transformed her into a man.

This story is not unique, different legends echo the same tale. A girl was raised as a boy and as she grew and wished to wed, divine intervention transformed him. Rarely does the story cover the transition from male to female, which is where subjects like Hermaphroditos become important.
transformation, in many ways, but specifically in gender was incredi-
bally common within myth. gods would change to get what they want and
they would change mortals so they could become happy or reach a per-
fected union. in the contemporary with a queer lens, it is easy to see not
much needs to be done to queer greco-greco-roman myth. but contemporary
artists like joel peter witkin, can do so easily, with this source mate-
rial.

i learned this stuff from;
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- macrobe, and robert andrew kaster. saturnalia. harvard university press,
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