The Greeks and Romans often looked at life in terms of masculine and feminine. Simple things such as their language express this thought, but even humanity and the feelings humans have were assigned genders. Male emotions and actions were normally those which were domineering types, such as rage, chaos, and rape. Female assignments were normally predicated around the more diminutive and peaceful emotions and actions such as domesticity, shyness, and humility. Assigning these feelings and actions genders gave way to an idea expressed throughout Ovid’s Metamorphoses: the bisexuality of the mind. Throughout the epic, Ovid expresses this concept, however it is best captured in stories about the androgynous human, or “hermaphrodite”.

It is generally maintained and proven throughout *Metamorphoses* that the body is ancillary to its emotions. Actions reflect this within the myths and manifest themselves most often as rape in the stories. In book four there is a rare episode during which a nymph rapes a boy. The story of Salmacis begins with the description of a handsome fifteen year old boy (Hermaphroditus), who happens upon a pool that is immensely beautiful and captivating. The pool is often inhabited by one of Diana’s nymphs named Salmacis. The two meet, but Hermaphroditus declines all Salmacis’s advances, and shuns her. When he again thinks he is alone, he dives naked into the pool for a swim. Salmacis, unable to suppress her lust any longer, strips and dives in after him; starts to rape him, and at her request (to the gods) the two are joined into one effectively turning them into a hermaphrodite.

The story is not only unique in that there is a rare view of a woman raping a man, but in that it serves as an exemplar for the metaphor of bisexual minds. The description of Salmacis is one that serves as a starting point of the feminine mind:

But only kept on bathing in the water,
Or looking into the mirror of the water
To find what dress was most becoming to her,
Put on diaphanous garments, and recline
To rest on the soft greenery, or gather
Bright-colored flowers,

The obvious feminine mind characteristics being vanity and domesticity, through implication in the text this is the most proper and ideal female mind for a woman. She concerns herself more with being pretty than she does hunting (which causes some reproach from other maidens of Diana), and leads a very passive existence. However when she comes across Hermaphroditus, the mind instantly starts transitioning to the masculine, “she saw the youngster / And wanted what she saw” (91).

This turning point in the mind gives birth to the masculine actions and feelings that directly lead up to (and including) the rape. At first, her mind is not totally overtaken by the masculine. It is said she “Controlled her eagerness”, albeit not very well and only for enough time that she could look her very best. A full masculine mindset would not wait, but be taken over immediately by lust, as in the story of Pluto and Persephone. Upon repeat refusal by the object of her lust, Salmacis’s mind becomes more and more masculine. Desperation leads to
her pleading for affection from the boy, but spurned still, she retires to surrounding woodlands to watch Hermaphroditus. As the lust grows more intense without any contact, her mind continues it transition towards the masculine, peaking when the boy becomes naked. Unable to control herself now at the most intense spike of the masculine mind, she cries “I win, I have him,” and dives in after him and held him fast, resisting,

Sought his reluctant kisses, touched his body,
Stroked his unwilling breast, embraced and held him
Whatever way she could. He fought and struggled,

Here we see her absolute loss of capacity to control her body, becoming a slave to her masculine mind. As a final act to attain her ultimate satisfaction, she requests that “no day ever come to separate us!”, and in that moment the allegory of the masculine and feminine minds actually being one mind comes to fruition by way of the couple turning into a hermaphrodite.

While the story is primarily based around Salmacis, Hermaphroditus’s bisexual mind is also available for analysis. At the start of the story, his mind is portrayed as masculine:

Fifteen years old, he left his native mountains,
Left Ida for the new delights, to wander
In unknown lands, to look at unknown rivers,
His eagerness making it very little trouble,

The characteristics of the masculine mind here being his eagerness and adventuring attitude. These characteristics of the masculine mind are seen throughout epic literature including Beowulf. The word “wrecca” in Old English best expresses these same types of characteristics, and was most used to describe wandering soldiers, “Soldiers of Fortune”. Hermaphroditus’s yearning to explore is somewhat of a right of passage familiar to stories with boys his age, very typical to coming of age stories.

The change in his mindset comes when Salmacis first confronts him, “That was all she said, but the youngster started blushing, / Out of pure ignorance of love” (92). This is the initial realignment of his mind from masculine to feminine. The shyness displayed is a feminine characteristic, and when she keeps pressing him his mind displays more feminine characteristics as he states “‘Stop it!’ he cried, ‘Will you stop it? I am leaving / This place, and you’” (92). He becomes a bit fearful of her and states that he will flee, both of which being more characteristic of the feminine mind. Generally the Greeks and Romans would view fear as part of the feminine mind, as well as the willingness to run away.

The final and ultimate transition to the feminine mind is slightly tougher to prove. It can be assumed through action that this part of the transition comes about when Salmacis ambushes the boy in the pool. He “fought and struggled” and the general descriptions of him paint the picture that he was very unreceptive to this violation. There is no insight however into his mind through diction or narration. The fact that he cannot overpower his assaulter suggests weakness on his part, a feminine characteristic. His previous predilection towards the feminine mind earlier in the story sets a precedent to say that during the rape, the transition is
now strongly in the feminine mind, however it is not irrefutable and the reader can only make this assumption.

In Plato’s Symposium, there is a myth that humans were once all hermaphrodites, each with double sets of all appendages, each sexually both male and female. Zeus split them when they became too ambitious, and thus we ended up with male and female. This myth was more designed to answer why we search for that one person we fall utterly in love with (in the myth, each half searches for the other half to feel complete), but it also fits nicely for our purposes here. The explanation for the duality of the human mind in way of gender can be explained that they were once together. Ovid proves his thoughts on this throughout the course of Metamorphoses more aptly. Throughout the books, this point is subtly reinforced, and through metaphor the reader is given a perfect example in book four, Salmacis. Ovid’s point is most likely that humans are capable of anything, and any feeling despite the bifurcated mind.