

From Daphne to Tiresias: Trans Representation & Misrepresentation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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## CONFLICTS IN IDENTIFYING AS TRANSMASCULINE

I have always been obsessed with masculinity. My mom used to tell me that when I was a child I would stare at older boys whenever we were out in public. She thought this meant I was straight; so did I for the longest time. I finally came to realize that most crushes I had were also me experiencing gender envy. I have always loved men but never as a woman. In high school I became attached to foreign films about queer teenage boys. I connected to them in a way I had never connected to any other art form. These films opened me up to the possibility that I could exist as someone outside of what society had told me I was. Art and storytelling have always helped me to understand myself more deeply. Before I could label myself as trans, I had to ask myself a lot of questions about what taking on this identity would mean, specifically with regards to my relation to society. I have always known who I am. But I have been slow to categorize myself—for many reasons but especially because of a fear of becoming something that I am not due to the limitations of society. I did not want to become society's version of a man.

There is no way to live as a woman in this world and not objectify yourself from time to time. It is inevitable that you will feel the need to base your appearance off of the perceived ideas of how others will react. As John Berger puts it, “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger 45, 47). I fluctuate between wanting and not wanting to be perceived. This is only natural. What is also natural but more difficult to come to terms with is distinguishing between when I dress a certain way in order to be perceived by myself or to be perceived by other people. I want to see myself in my most ideal form, and I have come to realize that that is not “feminine.” But does embracing masculinity mean that I am forsaking femininity altogether?

How do I reconcile the masculine parts of myself that I wish to embrace with the feminine parts that I do not want to leave behind? Some of my worst fears when it comes to understanding what it means to be genderfluid in this world are realized in Greek mythology. I was already familiar with the myth of Daphne and Apollo before I started to consider how it related to my own experience with transness. In one of the original tellings of the myth, Apollo mocks Eros for his use of the bow and arrow, enraging him so much that he decides to seek revenge upon the god of archery. Eros strikes Apollo with one of his bows to make him fall in love with the nymph Daphne, a sworn virgin. Daphne is hit with an arrow to make her even more averse to Apollo's love. He chases her and she flees, eventually calling on her father, a river god, to free her from the god's pursuit. To save her, he transforms Daphne into a laurel tree. This does not stop Apollo from using her as his symbol and taking branches from her. This story deals with issues of autonomy and consent: "As a tree, leafy and earth-bound, Daphne's loss of self is both physical and psychological. No longer human, she loses the ability to express herself through her facial features, and the power of speech. Like so many women in the myths of transformation, Daphne is perpetually silenced. She can only 'speak' through the rustling of leaves" (Johnson, "Rethinking the Myth"). This story and its depiction throughout art history disturbed me. How could something so despicable be rendered with such glorious delicacy by Bernini as well as by countless other artists? I knew I had to explore this more deeply.

I have always shared a special relationship with trees, but as I began to understand the fluidity of my gender, I started to see Daphne's story in a whole new light. Her transition represented a lot of the fears I had about my own identity and what form it might take. I discovered that there are many stories in Ancient Greek mythology featuring transgender characters. In the following reflection, I consider how Greek myths play with and reimagine

gender within a heteronormative society. Instances of good trans representation in the media are very few and far between. It makes sense therefore to wallow in self-hatred when most depictions of people like you are negative. Recently I have been on a quest for early/historic trans representation, whether it be in real life, literature, or art. The myths that I have found serve as inspiration for my own work as an artist. As Cy Twombly put it, “For myself the past is the source (for all art is vitally contemporary)” (Hirsch, 43).

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is an epic Latin poem that focuses on the theme of transformation. Beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the death of Julius Caesar, Ovid reconstructs old tales and generates new ones. Many of the stories within his fifteen books derive from Ancient Greek mythology, including the myths that I will discuss in this essay. In these myths, transness is often introduced as a means of escaping some danger or, in some cases, conforming to heteronormative romantic/marriage expectations. Ovid explores gender identity and transformation, revealing the heteronormative, binary gender roles of his time—constraining roles that still linger today. Questions and meditations on my own gender identity will arise through the discussion of the myths of Caeneus, Leucippus, Iphis, Tiresias, and Hermaphroditus and Salmacis. What silver linings can we gather from reinterpretation of these texts? Before examining these stories in some detail, it will be helpful to briefly summarize a few of them so that we can see how fluid gender and transformation play out within them.

## CAENEUS

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the woman Caenis is transformed into a powerful man by Poseidon. The tale goes that Poseidon desired Caenis and proceeded to rape her: "The Pow'r of ocean view'd her as she pass'd, / And, lov'd as soon as seen, by force embrac'd" (Dryden, Book Twelve). Afterwards Poseidon offered to grant Caenis any wish that she had. Traumatized by what had been done to her, she asked to be transformed into a man so that no more harm would come to her:

So Fame reports. Her virgin-treasure seiz'd,  
 And his new joys, the ravisher so pleas'd,  
 That thus, transported, to the nymph he cry'd;  
 Ask what thou wilt, no pray'r shall be deny'd.  
 This also Fame relates: the haughty fair,  
 Who not the rape ev'n of a God cou'd bear,  
 This answer, proud, return'd: To mighty wrongs  
 A mighty recompence, of right, belongs.  
 Give me no more to suffer such a shame;  
 But change the woman, for a better name;  
 One gift for all: she said; and while she spoke,  
 A stern, majestick, manly tone she took.  
 A man she was: and as the Godhead swore,  
 To Caeneus turn'd, who Caenis was before.  
 (Dryden, Book Twelve)

There are many things of note in this passage. First, we might observe the use of words such as “shame,” “haughty,” and “virgin-treasure,” all of which betray the sexism of the time and are essential to understanding ancient Greek society and current “Western” views on gender. Second, we should consider the repeated theme of characters transitioning in order to avoid sexual violence.

Caenis is deeply ashamed of the violence Poseidon has committed against her: “Give me no more to suffer such a shame.” We have a history as humans of displacing shame and guilt onto the victim, especially when she is a woman. This story is no different from many that have already been, and will be, told. Poseidon does not repent; he merely offers Caenis payment for something that, we can infer from the text, he believes to have been rightfully taken. The language used to describe this rape is romanticized: “Her virgin-treasure seiz’d, / And his new joys, the ravisher so pleas’d.” This brings to mind certain familiar talk of men’s “conquests” and their bragging of overpowering women. Although the word “rape” is directly stated in the text, how much sympathy does the narrator really offer Caenis? Sexual violence against women has been depicted all throughout the history of “Western” art. It is worth noting that most of this explicit and gratuitous work was created by men (see the rape of Europa, the rape of the Sabine women, and many other similar stories). What does creating a beautiful work of art about such a hideous subject say about the artist and the world they live in? Perhaps more importantly, how does it affect society’s view of violence? How has romanticizing such stories worked against feminism and other civil rights issues?

Like Daphne, Caenis/Caeneus uses transformation as a method of escape from rape or the trauma of rape. Is escaping womanhood altogether truly the answer to avoiding sexual violence? Clearly not, since women are not the only victims of sexual assault. It is also not enough for

Poseiden to transform Caenis into a man; he must also make him impenetrable. And yet there is still some uncertainty. The word shame is associated with womanhood in the lines, “Give me no more to suffer such a shame; / But change the woman, for a better name.” It is also implied in this myth and others that it is the woman’s fault for tempting the man and “looking so desirous.” How can transitions, particularly transmasculine transitions, be celebrated while addressing the issue of escaping misogyny? In other words what sort of steps can trans men take, especially cis passing trans men, to challenge the patriarchy? I seek to explore these issues in my own artistic practice, which I will discuss later.

This still could have been a somewhat empowering ending for Caeneus had it not been for the vile beginnings— and the fact that this is not the end of his story. After Caeneus transitions, he becomes one of the mighty argonauts, going on to fight the centaurs in battle. He is nearly invincible—all of the centaurs’ weapons bounce off of him—but his enemies conceive of a way to dispose of Caeneus. They uproot trees and throw them at Caeneus, burying him. Here is where the myth can go one of two directions: it is said that he was either thrust down to Tartarus or that he transformed once more, this time into a bird. Either way Caeneus has lost all or almost all of his autonomy, first as a woman and then as a man.

## **LEUCIPPUS**

Leucippus is considered to be the first of many characters who undergoes a transition in Ancient Greek/Roman mythology. Born to Galatea and Lamprus, Leucippus was determined female at birth but assigned male by their mother Galatea in order to save their life. It became difficult to conceal this fact from Lamprus, so Galatea prayed to Leto, who transformed Leucippus so that he would be accepted in society as a man. To celebrate this transition, the

people of Phaestus surnamed Leto Phytia (from the Greek φύω, meaning “to grow”), because she let Leucippus grow a penis, and then held a feast, called *Ecdysia* (from Greek ἐκδύω “to undress”), because Leucippus got rid of his “feminine” garments. It became a custom for women to lay next to a statue of Leucippus before their wedding day. This myth begins by imagining gender as something that needs to be concealed. It concludes by suggesting that a person’s gender can only be accepted once a physical transformation has occurred.

## **IPHIS**

The myth of Iphis is another iteration of this story, found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Their parents could not afford to pay the dowry for a daughter, so Iphis’ mother, Telethusa, conceals the gender they were assigned at birth from their father at the persuasion of the goddess Isis. (It is worth drawing attention to the fact that when Isis visits Telethusa, she is accompanied by Harpocrates, the god of silence. A few centuries later the name Silence will be used in another retelling of this story, *Le Roman de Silence* [early 13th century]). For the purpose of clarity I will refer to characters by the pronouns they choose to use in the end. Although Lygdus does not know his child’s “true” gender identity, he still gives them a gender-neutral name:

Th’ indulgent mother did her care employ,  
 And past it on her husband for a boy.  
 The nurse was conscious of the fact alone;  
 The father paid his vows as for a son;  
 And call’d him Iphis, by a common name,  
 Which either sex with equal right may claim.  
 Iphis his grandsire was; the wife was pleas’d,



Of half the fraud by Fortune's favour eas'd:  
 The doubtful name was us'd without deceit,  
 And truth was cover'd with a pious cheat.  
 The habit show'd a boy, the beauteous face  
 With manly fierceness mingled female grace.  
 (Dryden, Book Nine)

Both parents are at ease until Iphis' father decides to marry him off to the beautiful daughter of Telestes, Ianthe. Iphis and Ianthe had been educated together and fell in love with each other. Ianthe is unaware of the controversy their marriage poses. Meanwhile, Iphis laments the impossibility of their love existing within a heteronormative culture:

Could I the care of Providence deserve,  
 Heav'n must destroy me, if it would preserve.  
 And that's my fate, or sure it would have sent  
 Some usual evil for my punishment:  
 Not this unkindly curse; to rage, and burn,  
 Where Nature shews no prospect of return.  
 Nor cows for cows consume with fruitless fire;  
 Nor mares, when hot, their fellow-mares desire:  
 The father of the fold supplies his ewes;  
 The stag through secret woods his hind pursues;  
 And birds for mates the males of their own species chuse.  
 Her females Nature guards from female flame,  
 And joins two sexes to preserve the game:

Wou'd I were nothing, or not what I am!

(Dryden, Book Nine)

It is evident from this passage that a woman loving another woman was not socially acceptable in Greece or Rome at the time. Reproduction is viewed as the ultimate reason for marrying. Rather than confront these norms, Iphis is desperate for a way out of the situation. Before the wedding, Telethusa prays to Isis to help her child. The goddess answers this plea and transitions Iphis into a man, and the two live happily ever after.

Although there is no doubt that Iphis is a trans character, his story seems more concerned with conformity to heterosexuality than expressions of gender euphoria. This is a recurring theme throughout the *Metamorphoses*. As Sasha Barish writes in his essay “Iphis’ Hair, Io’s Reflection, and the Gender Dysphoria of the *Metamorphoses*,” “In a way, [trans characters are] proof that my people were so silent that we were confined to fantasy stories, existing only to symbolize the epitome of impossibility” (Barish para. 8). Iphis is a cisgendered person’s representation of transness. He goes on to say, “Caenis and Iphis certainly do care about changing sexes, but not for reasons of psychological comfort; gender transformation is the means to an end for them, a way of avoiding a problem (rape and lesbianism, respectively) that derives from their being female” (Barish para. 8). This is the case for most of the myths Ovid writes about: in the world(s) of the *Metamorphoses*, it is a curse to be a woman and a blessing to be transformed into a man.

## **HERMAPHRODITUS & SALMACIS**

The myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis deals with issues of consent akin to the struggles characters like Daphne and Caeneus face. This time, however, it is the woman who is

the perpetrator. Salmacis is a Naiad of Artemis's tribe who has chosen to reject hunting in favor of leisure and vanity. One day she spies Hermaphroditus near the pool she usually spends long hours bathing in. She becomes instantly attracted to the fair youth and approaches him.

Salmacis's affections are not returned and she is told by Hermaphroditus to leave him alone. She withdraws behind a tree hiding until he enters the water, then she makes her move. Salmacis forces herself on Hermaphroditus and the two struggle:

So pray'd the nymph, nor did she pray in vain:

For now she finds him, as his limbs she prest,

Grow nearer still, and nearer to her breast;

'Till, piercing each the other's flesh, they run

Together, and incorporate in one:

Last in one face are both their faces join'd,

As when the stock and grafted twig combin'd

Shoot up the same, and wear a common rind:

Both bodies in a single body mix,

A single body with a double sex.

(Dryden, Book Four)

At the end of the story Hermaphroditus, now referred to as Hermaphrodite, begs the gods to turn anyone who enters the water into what we would now call intersex. Although this transformation suggests that a woman raping a man "permanently feminizes him," it is ultimately Hermaphroditus' spirit that survives (Stickley 65).

## **TIRESIAS**

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Tiresias is called in to settle a bet between Hera and Zeus over which gender enjoys sex the most. Zeus begins the argument:

'In troth,' says he, and as he spoke he laugh'd,  
 'The sense of pleasure in the male is far  
 More dull and dead, than what you females share.'  
 Juno the truth of what was said deny'd;  
 Tiresias therefore must the cause decide,  
 For he the pleasure of each sex had try'd.

(Dryden, Book Three)

Tiresias was transformed into a woman by Hera as punishment for attacking two mating snakes:

"It happen'd once, within a shady wood, / Two twisted snakes he in conjunction view'd, / When  
 with his staff their slimy folds he broke, / And lost his manhood at the fatal stroke" (Dryden,  
 Book Three). Tiresias becomes a priestess, gets married and bears children, but after seven years  
 he reencounters the snakes and strikes them again:

But, after seven revolving years, he view'd  
 The self-same serpents in the self-same wood:  
 'And if,' says he, 'such virtue in you lye,  
 That he who dares your slimy folds untie  
 Must change his kind, a second stroke I'll try.'  
 Again he struck the snakes, and stood again  
 New-sex'd, and strait recover'd into man.

(Dryden, Book Three)

Tiresias declares to Hera and Zeus that women enjoy greater pleasure from sex. This enrages Hera and she blinds him. Feeling sorry for Tiresias, Zeus bestows him with the gift of prophecy, a second sight.

This version of Tiresias the Prophet appears in the third part of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* titled "The Fire Sermon." In this section of the poem, Tiresias is the onlooker of a sexual encounter between a typist and a man she reluctantly agrees to fuck. Eliot inhabits the character of Tiresias, addressing the reader through him:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
 The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.

(Eliot, *The Waste Land*)

The line "Old man with wrinkled breasts" confronts you immediately with a visceral image. One's reaction to that image will differ depending on the person. For me it represents the future I like to imagine for myself. Eliot's Tiresias is far more relatable to me than any of Ovid's trans characters.

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back  
 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting,  
 I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
Out of the window perilously spread  
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,  
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.  
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—  
I too awaited the expected guest.  
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.  
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)  
Bestows one final patronising kiss,  
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .  
(Eliot, *The Waste Land*)

Eliot interprets the figure of Tiresias as an embodiment of trans experience as a source of knowledge. He/she/they possess a second sight. This is a step forward towards more positive representation for trans characters. Transness is no longer something to be lamented or used solely as a method for escaping violence. In Eliot's poem, it becomes a source of wisdom to be celebrated. Trans people do have a perceptive way of seeing the world that looks beyond binaries and

## REREADING & REDEFINING MY TRANSMASCULINITY

All of these stories of transition depict masculinity as triumphant at the end of the day. As Quentin A. Stickley argues:

Despite the pervasive misogyny of the *Metamorphoses*, the poem seems to lack the understanding of gender as an immutable fact set at birth which we might expect to see based on our understanding of modern gender politics. For Ovid, once someone's body has been transformed, they are for all intents and purposes a member of that sex and should be accepted as such. (Stickley 65)

This should not be the only level of acceptance trans people are ever allowed to receive; we deserve far more.

Trans men are not men because they are trying to escape femininity. Trans women are not cursed into becoming women. These transphobic notions of gender keep us from receiving the adequate care, resources, and security we need. It is already scary to realize that you exist in a way that goes against everything you have been taught about binaries. I wonder if I ever felt like a "self" before now. Everyone probably questions this now and again in different ways. Exploring existential questions through my gender identity has had a profound effect on how I see myself moving forward. It is affecting the art I make, the way I perform for society, and constantly changing the way my brain deals with inhabiting a body. Contextualizing these myths within the makeup of my own life and what it means to be trans today has helped me to understand myself on a deeper level. Albert Camus has written that: "Myths have no life of their own. They wait for us to give them body" (Hirsch 1). This may be true, but they have also given me an understanding of my own trans body.



I do not have to conform to being cis passing in order to be accepted as trans. That in of itself seems like an oxymoron, the antithesis to what being trans represents. In her semi-autobiographical contemplation on theory and gender and relationships *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson discusses her partner Harry Dodge's film *By Hook or By Crook*. In it the characters refer to each other with he/him pronouns, but out in the world they are labeled as she/her. Nelson writes, "The point wasn't that if the outer world were schooled appropriately re: the characters' preferred pronouns, everything would be right as rain. Because if the outsiders called the characters 'he,' it would be a different kind of he. Words change depending on who speaks them" (Nelson 8). Nelson is talking about the limiting nature of language without the proper context. I understand what she is talking about when I think about the many different nicknames I have been awarded. "Maggot" is a term of endearment from many—it is a common trend among gender fluid people to gift themselves with bug names—and so the name has kind of stuck. "Magnolia" is the name given to me by my parents. It would have been Max if I had been born with different genitalia. I often wonder what would have happened if this had been the case, or if I had been born intersex: how would I have been raised then? Would I have still transitioned and embraced a more gender fluid identity? I often think that, if I were to give myself a new name, I would call myself Max: I too am a wild thing that refuses to go to bed. I still love the name Magnolia, though, and I never really saw my name as being gendered.

For a while I had the phrase, "I can't wait to be real" stuck in my head, as if I were Pinocchio (who by the way is definitely trans). I felt I had to be in accordance with a certain kind of transness. If I was really transmasculine then that must mean I have gender dysphoria and should be desperate to be put on testosterone and receive top surgery. This may be the case in the future but I am not rushing into anything. I observe and think deeply about everything before I

make any sort of action; sometimes it takes me a while to understand what I truly want and that is okay.

The trans characters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* also don't experience dysphoria, at least not in the way we think of it today. But they don't experience self-revelation or gender euphoria, either. Their transitions act merely as a means of escaping harm or avoiding societal constraints. All of their demons exist outside of them, whereas for real trans people the major struggle to understand one's gender is psychological. It is overcoming everything that you have been taught since you were born. It is unlearning and relearning what truth is. Coming out as trans is much like experiencing the five stages of grief, running on a continuous loop and sometimes not in the original progression. There are times where I fall backwards in my transness: not by reverting back to womanhood, but by believing embracing femininity is an issue; by forcing myself to be one thing when I know this to be impossible. Men can and do have tits, and this is just a fact. Men can and do give birth. I can give birth and still know that this does not make me a woman. I am a man but I am also not a man. Context and the way in which language is used is everything, just as Maggie Nelson says; finding new words aids us but it will never fully satisfy all the running contradictions within us. I have denied myself my true feelings so many times for fear of not being able to properly fit into the box that I know everyone will perceive me in. Reading about early representations of transness that feel like me but also don't feel like me helps in navigating that curious word "identity" a little more thoughtfully.

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