

Gender Transformation and Ontology in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Episodes of gender transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* primarily reflect and reinforce traditional Roman binary gender roles, misogyny, and normative sexuality. These hegemonic ideologies are visible in the motivations for each metamorphosis, wherein masculinization is framed as a miracle performed on a willing subject and feminization as a horrific and unnatural curse born from the perverted desires of an assailant. Yet a close analysis of these narratives reveals a crucial point of difference between Ovid's assumptions about gender and that of most modern Westerners: for Ovid, gender is at least hypothetically mutable. It is generally synonymous with sex (although even this is complicated in the story of Iphis), but once a person's sex has been physically changed, they can and should take up their new social role and be accepted as a member of their new gender. In this essay, I will examine three cases of gender transformation from the *Metamorphoses* – the stories of Caeneus, Iphis, and Hermaphroditus and Salmacis – from a queer and specifically transgender perspective which seeks to reveal the underlying ontology of Ovid's conception of gender. I argue that although these stories reflect the hegemonic gender ideologies of the period, they still illustrate conceptions of gender that differ radically from the biologically determinist and immutable one that is hegemonic in modern Western culture, making the *Metamorphoses* a highly significant text for queer scholarship.

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The story of Caeneus (*Met.* 12.146-535)¹ defines vulnerability to sexual violence as a fundamental characteristic of womanhood. Raped by Neptune and granted a wish in return, Caenis asks her assailant for one thing: "This injury evokes the greatest desire never to be able to suffer any such again. Grant I might not be a woman: you will have given me everything."² Neptune not only transforms Caenis from a woman into a man, whose name becomes Caeneus, but also makes him invulnerable to all wounds. Neptune's choice to make Caenis a man "in a poem where humans are transformed into a variety of flora and fauna" is an unusual one given the formulation of her request, which stipulated only that she not be a woman with the implication that she not be a target of further sexual violence.³ In asking only that she "not be a woman," Caenis' phrasing draws a direct equivalence between being a woman and being a target of sexual violence. Neptune could have made her a stone or a tree and thus fulfilled both the letter and the spirit of her request.

As a matter of fact, in order to make Caenis a man who could not be subject to sexual violence, the addition of miraculous invulnerability was necessary. According to the 2nd century CE historian Phlegon of Tralles, the Caenis/Caeneus story appeared in a now-lost section of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, wherein Caenis explicitly requests that she become a man (and that this man be invulnerable) but does not give a

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Anthony S. Kline, The Ovid Collection, University of Virginia Library, 2000, <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm>. Kline's translation has been used throughout this essay.

² Ovid, *Met.* 12.201-3: "Magnum ... facit haec iniuria votum; tale pati iam posse nihil; da, femina ne sim: omnia praestiteris."

³ Debra Freas, "Da Femina Ne Sim: Gender, Genre and Violence in Ovid's Caenis Episode." *Classical Journal* 114, no. 1 (2018): 65.

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reason, at least not one that Phlegon preserves.⁴ In the *Metamorphoses*, then, Ovid does not present an original story, but rather he “offers an interpretation for what motivates Caenis’ wish in the *Catalogue*.”⁵ Debra Freas argues that Neptune’s addition of invulnerability suggests that being a man is not, in itself, enough to avoid becoming a victim of rape, and this is a salient point; the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis also demonstrates that Ovid can imagine men as victims of rape. The logic behind Ovid’s interpretation of Caenis’ wish is not that only women can be raped, but that women are more vulnerable than men – and indeed, considering the context of the poem, plants and animals. Caenis wishes to be anything other than a woman because women are uniquely vulnerable and likely to be targeted as victims of sexual violence.

Once transformed, Caeneus becomes a hypermasculine and heroic warrior. In the battle between the Lapiths and the centaurs, Caeneus has already killed five centaurs when he is challenged and taunted by Latreus, who appeals to his past life and particularly to his rape.

*You will always be a woman, Caenis, to me.
Does your natal origin not remind you; does not
the act you were rewarded for come to mind, at
what cost you gained this false aspect of a man?
Consider what you were born as, or what you
experienced, go, pick up your distaff and basket
of wool and twist the spun thread with your
thumb: leave war to men.*⁶

⁴ Phlegon, *Mirabilia* 5.74: “ταύτη δὲ Ποσειδῶνα μίγνεντα ἐπαγγεῖλασθαι ποιήσιν αὐτῆι ὃ ἂν ἐθέλη, τὴν δὲ ἀξιῶσαι μεταλλάξαι αὐτὴν εἰς ἄνδρα ποιῆσαι τε ἄτρωτον.”

⁵ Freas, “Gender, Genre, and Violence,” 65.

⁶ Ovid, *Met.* 12.470-6: “Nam tu mihi femina semper, tu mihi Caenis eris. Nec te natalis origo commonuit, mentemque subit, quo praemia facto quaque viri falsam speciem mercede parasti? Quid sis nata, vide, vel quid sis passa, columque, i, cape cum calathis et stamina pollice torque: bella relinque viris.”

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Here Caeneus' identity is directly challenged and the question of whether someone who was once a woman can ever truly be a man is raised. Ovid's answer to the question is an emphatic yes: Latreus' weapons fail to penetrate Caeneus' flesh. The blow aimed at his loins "resounded, as if it struck a body of marble, and the weapon fractured in pieces as it hit the firm flesh" (*Met.* 12.487-8). Caeneus kills Latreus with his sword in "an act of exaggerated penetration," and the rest of the centaurs attack him with their spears to no avail: "A people defeated by one who is scarcely a man: yet he is the man, and we, with our half-hearted attempts, are what he once was."⁷ Caeneus is finally defeated when the centaurs hurl all the trees on the mountainside at him, asphyxiating him under the pile. Some of the Lapiths say that he was driven down to Tartarus under its weight, but others believe he was transformed into a bird which they saw flying away from the mass of trees.

Some scholars draw significance from the manner of Caeneus' death, although their conclusions differ. For Freas, the trees are phallic symbols and the scene is a metaphor for rape, and the feminine grammatical gender of the bird casts ambiguity on the final determination of Caeneus' gender.⁸ This ambiguity is reflected in Vergil's *Aeneid*, where Caeneus' shade has the form of a woman while retaining his masculine name.⁹ But within the *Metamorphoses* itself, the other Lapiths remember him as a man, calling him by his male name Caeneus and addressing him as *maxime vir*; moreover, his death by

⁷ Freas, "Gender, Genre, and Violence," 73.

Ovid, *Met.* 12.499-501: "populus superamur ab uno vixque viro; quamquam ille vir est, nos segnibus actis quod fuit ille, sumus!"

⁸ Freas, "Gender, Genre, and Violence," 77.

⁹ Ibid., 79. Vergil, *Aeneid*, 6.448-9: "et iuvenus quondam, nunc femina, Caeneus, rursus et in veterem fato revoluta figuram."

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suffocation and transformation into a bird directly parallels that of another invulnerable man, Cygnus, earlier in the same book of the *Metamorphoses*.¹⁰ Given that Nestor tells the story of Caeneus in response to hearing about Cygnus, it seems much more natural to link these two stories than to link Caeneus with Cornix, a woman transformed into a bird to escape sexual violence, as Freas does.¹¹ For Charles Segal, the outcome of the story is confirmation that Caeneus is a man, whereas for Freas it positions him as a dual-gendered individual. In either case Caeneus is not “half a man,” as the centaur Monychus calls him, but fully male, though there is an open possibility that he possesses a feminine aspect in addition to the manhood which is firmly legitimized by the narrative.

The story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis (*Met.* 4.285-415) contrasts with that of Caeneus because the focus is on an act of feminization rather than masculinization. Both metamorphoses occur during an act of sexual violence, but Caeneus’ transformation is a blessing to him and a marvel to other humans, while Hermaphroditus’ is a curse and a horror. The already androgynous youth Hermaphroditus, son of the two gods whose names he bears, chances upon a spring occupied by the nymph Salmacis, who falls madly in lust with him and rapes him after he rejects her proposition. She prays to the gods “that no day comes to part me from him, or him from me,” and “the entwined bodies of the two were joined together, and one form covered both ... they were not two, but a two-fold form, so that they could not be called male or female, and seemed

¹⁰ Charles Segal, “Ovid’s Metamorphic Bodies: Art, Gender, and Violence in the ‘Metamorphoses.’” *A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 5, no. 3 (1998): 24.

¹¹ Freas, “Gender, Genre, and Violence,” 76.

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neither or either."¹² So transformed, Hermaphroditus (and it is he and not Salmacis who seems to dominate their shared form) prays to his parents that "whoever comes to these fountains as a man, let him leave them half a man, and weaken suddenly at the touch of these waters."¹³ This story seeks to provide an etiology for the emasculating powers the spring was already rumored to have, and differs markedly from earlier versions of the tale in which Hermaphroditus is intersex since birth and/or Salmacis does not rape him but rather raises him as a mother figure.¹⁴ In Ovid's version of the story, being overpowered sexually by a woman emasculates a man, resulting in his transformation into an androgynous being who is not fully male or female. There is a suggestion here of gender as an expression of power, defined by one's relationship to others and echoed by the centaurs' concern that Caeneus has made them "what he once was."

Ovid's account of Hermaphroditus' transformation is anomalous not because it describes a man as a victim of rape – young men and boys especially were seen as targets for sexual desire and therefore as vulnerable to rape – but because it portrays a woman as a rapist.¹⁵ Female desire and aggression are the driving monstrosities in this story, which "reinstates

¹² Ovid, *Met.* 4.371-9: "et istum nulla dies a me nec me diducat ab isto" and "nam mixta duorum corpora iunguntur, faciesque indicitur illis una ... nec duo sunt et forma duplex, nec femina dici nec puer ut possit: neutrumque et utrumque videntur."

¹³ Ovid, *Met.* 4.385-6: "quisquis in hos fontes vir venerit, exeat inde semivir et tactis subito mollescat in undis."

¹⁴ M. Robinson, "Salmacis and Hermaphroditus: When Two Become One (Ovid, *Met.* 4.285-388)." *Classical Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1999): 215. See also, Allen J. Romano, "The Invention of Marriage: Hermaphroditus and Salmacis at Halicarnassus and in Ovid." *Classical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2009): 543-4.

¹⁵ Freas, "Gender, Genre, and Violence," 76.

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sexual difference by a nightmarish enactment of what happens when the familiar gender roles are reversed.”¹⁶ Ovid uses the expectations set by the poem thus far to misdirect the reader. Salmacis is a nymph, like many others in the *Metamorphoses* who are all subjected to attempted sexual violence by various gods. Hermaphroditus is commonly read by other characters as a woman in other stories, usually to humorous effect, and indeed “his features were such that, in them, both mother and father could be seen”; so the reader might expect that “perhaps [Salmacis] will mistake Hermaphroditus for a woman, and be lulled into a false sense of security.”¹⁷ But Salmacis is unlike all of the other nymphs in the *Metamorphoses*: “she is not skilled for the chase, or used to flexing the bow, or the effort of running, the only Naiad not known by swift-footed Diana ... She only bathes her shapely limbs in the pool [and] combs out her hair.”¹⁸ She concerns herself primarily with her appearance and seems to have as little regard for the virginity prized by her fellow nymphs as she does for hunting.¹⁹ It is Hermaphroditus who plays the part of the chaste victim here and Salmacis the predatory divinity whose eyes “[blaze] with passion, as when Phoebus’ likeness is reflected from a mirror.”²⁰

After the gods grant Salmacis' wish, the narration seems to leave her aside and focus only on Hermaphroditus' thoughts

¹⁶ Segal, “Ovid’s Metamorphic Bodies,” 22.

¹⁷ Ovid, *Met.* 4.290-1: “cuius erat facies, in qua materque paterque cognosci possent.” Robinson, “Salmacis and Hermaphroditus,” 217.

¹⁸ Ovid, *Met.* 4.302-12: “Nympha colit, sed nec venatibus apta, nec arcus flectere quae soleat nec quae contendere cursu, solaque naiadum celeri non nota Dianae ... sed modo fonte suo formosos perluit artus, saepe Cytoriaco deducit pectine crines.”

¹⁹ Robinson, “Salmacis and Hermaphroditus,” 218.

²⁰ Ovid, *Met.* 4.346-9: “Salmacis exarsit: flagrant quoque lumina nymphae, non aliter quam cum puro nitidissimus orbe opposita speculi referitur imagine Phoebus.”

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and feelings, even though they are now one being. His personality is the one that persists, and he is able to voice his umbrage in the form of his prayer to his parents. The transformation is described in the sense of weakening or diluting rather than gaining something: Hermaphroditus' "limbs had been softened there," leaving him "half a man."²¹ While we might argue that by this logic, Salmacis has also been strengthened. But, Ovid spares no mention of her, focusing entirely on the injury done to Hermaphroditus. In addition to reifying the Roman belief that men should be sexually aggressive and that women should be passive by mythologizing the shift in gender identity that occurs when a man is sexually overpowered, the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus reflects ideas of male superiority, and it is this misogyny which accounts for the drastic difference in tone between this episode and the others examined here.²²

Although it lacks the theme of sexual violence shared by the other two stories, the transformation of Iphis (*Met.* 9.666-797) offers perhaps the most jarring example of gender bias to modern sensibilities. While pregnant with Iphis, her mother Telethusa is told by her husband that if the child is female, it will be exposed because he cannot afford to pay a dowry, but a vision from the goddess Isis inspires Telethusa to hide Iphis' sex and raise her as a boy. All goes as planned until thirteen-year-old Iphis is betrothed to a girl, Ianthe, whom she knows she

²¹ Ovid, *Met.* 4.380-2: "Ergo ubi se liquidas, quo vir descenderat, undas semimarem fecisse videt, mollitaque in illis membra"

²² Modern transgender activists and scholars have argued that a similar disdain for femininity underlies the differences in social reception of transgender women and transgender men. See Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007).

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cannot marry: "Love had touched both their innocent hearts, and wounded them equally ... Iphis loved one whom she despaired of being able to have, and this itself increased her passion, a girl on fire for a girl."²³ The problem is not that Iphis fears that her sex will be revealed; her ensuing crisis of identity stems from her perception that her desire is unnatural and impossible to fulfill, a "strange and monstrous love that no one ever knew before."²⁴ It is specifically the sexual aspect of the union which is impossible in Iphis' mind: "See, the longed-for time has come, the wedding torch is at hand, and Ianthe will become mine – yet not be had by me. I will thirst in the middle of the waters."²⁵ (*Met.* 9.759-61). In comparing her situation to that of her fellow Cretan, Pasiphaë, Iphis even supposes that "my love, truth be told, is more extreme than that. She at least chased after the hope of fulfillment," since the target of Pasiphaë's desire, despite being an animal, was male.²⁶ But even among animals, according to Iphis, sex between two females is an impossibility. And indeed the issue is one of impossibility, not of immorality. The marriage is sanctioned by Iphis' father and Ianthe's and welcomed by Ianthe herself, and Iphis' male social role is the divine will of Isis: "The gods have readily given whatever they were able, and my father, her father, and she herself, want what I want to happen. But Nature

²³ Ovid, *Met.* 4.720-5: "Hinc amor ambarum rude pectus et aequum vulnus utrique dedit ... Iphis amat, qua posse fruit desperat, et auget hoc ipsum flammam, ardetque in virgine virgo."

²⁴ Ovid, *Met.* 4.727-8: "cognita quam nulli, quam prodigiosa novaque cura tenet Veneris?"

²⁵ Ovid, *Met.* 4.759-61: "Venit ecce optabile tempus, luxque iugalis adest, et iam mea fiet Ianthe – nec mihi continget: mediis sitiemus in undis."

²⁶ Ovid, *Met.* 9.737-9: "meus est furiosior illo, si verum profiteamur, amor! Tamen illa secuta est spem Veneris"

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does not want it, the only one who harms me, more powerful than them all."²⁷

Iphis' belief that she will not be able to have sex with Ianthe is consistent with the "phallogentric and penetrative model of erotic activity, that is to say, *the* model of erotic activity" expressed in classical texts. As Jonathan Walker puts it, "she speaks of the intensity of her desire for the girl Ianthe, but she can only understand that desire in terms of a heteronormative logic of physical complementarity."²⁸ In other words, Iphis, or perhaps more accurately Ovid, cannot imagine how two people can have sex if neither of them has a penis (whether this is a manifestation of Iphis' youth and innocence or an artifact of Ovid's own limited range of experience is irrelevant to this discussion). The positive and miraculous nature of the transformation derives from the fact that it is a correction of Iphis' "unnatural" lesbian sexual desire. In this respect, the narrative relies upon and reinforces the hegemonic Roman understanding of sexual activity, which erases the possibility of sex between women.

²⁷ Ovid, *Met.* 9.756-9: "dique mihi faciles, quidquid valere, dederunt; quodque ego, vult genitor, vult ipsa socerque futurus. At non vult natura, potentior omnibus istis, quae mihi sola nocet."

²⁸ Jonathan Walker, "Ovid's Deformulated Lesbianism," *Comparative Literature* 58, no. 3 (2006): 205, 209. It is not entirely accurate to call this model heteronormative, at least not in the modern sense, because it certainly incorporated sexual relationships between men.

Nevertheless, it was a hegemonic model that structured the way the authors of Greek and Latin classical texts thought about sexuality, and it played a broadly parallel role to that of heteronormativity in modern Western culture. For further discussion of Roman paradigms of sexual activity, see Deborah Kamen and Sarah Levin-Richardson, "Revisiting Roman Sexuality: Agency and the Conceptualization of Penetrated Males," in *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, ed. M. Masterson, N. Rabinowitz, and J. Robson (Routledge, 2015), 449-60.

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Yet the story of Iphis remains significant from a queer perspective because of its acknowledgment of the possibility of discrepancy between a person's social role or gendered behavior and their physical body. Ovid creates a nature/culture binary in the story of Iphis in an attempt to negotiate this contradiction, and though he seems to struggle with the concept, what he comes up with begins to evoke the modern scholarly usage of the term "gender" in reference to social role and personal identity and "sex" in reference to biological characteristics. This tension is resolved through divine intervention, and Iphis gets a happy ending with Ianthe when Isis transforms his body to match his social role. It turns out that Nature is not more powerful than the gods after all. Of course, such matters do not resolve themselves so neatly outside of stories and poems, but the lack of moral condemnation for Iphis' assumption of a male gender role throughout the story is striking, as is the narration's unquestioning acceptance and celebration of his manhood once he has been transformed.

All three of these stories reflect hegemonic Roman ideals about gender roles, including a deep misogyny. It is notable that both instances of masculinization are framed as positive and miraculous events, while the one tale of feminization has a considerably darker tone. Iphis' transformation into a man is valued positively because it is seen as correcting an already unnatural condition (that of lesbian desire) and it is justified by his divinely sanctioned male social role. Caeneus' is also framed as a boon because it is done to prevent future instances of sexual victimization (although this is complicated by the addition of invulnerability to penetration, which is likely an acknowledgment of male vulnerability to rape in the absence of the ability to defend oneself). Hermaphroditus'

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transformation is framed as horrific if somewhat farcical, representing a reversal of the perceived natural order wherein a sexually aggressive woman rapes a man and, in doing so, permanently feminizes him; yet despite this role reversal, the masculine half is still ultimately dominant in a dual-sexed body, as it is the persona of Hermaphroditus and not of Salmacis that seems to survive the encounter.

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. Modern Western transphobia does not accept transgender people as their gender, even if they medically transition to the point that they would be visually indistinguishable from a cisgender person of the same gender, because of a belief in the primacy of the "original" gender assigned at birth, which Ovid does not appear to share. In fact, when Caeneus' identity is challenged in much the same terms by Latreus – "you will always be a woman to me" – he answers Latreus' taunt with a display of hypermasculinity which awes and terrifies the other centaurs, and the narrative considers Iphis fit to take the role of a married man as soon as he is properly equipped. And while Ovid does seem to believe that gender is defined by one's body and especially genitals, there are times when he seems to explore the concept of gender as a social identity which may not match biological sex, as in the story of Iphis, or as a relationship to power wherein men can be made less manly by the actions of a sexually or martially dominant individual. The *Metamorphoses*, then, has an underlying ontology of gender

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which differs markedly from the hegemonic modern Western one in its belief that gender is ultimately mutable, and may even represent some rudimentary questioning of the Roman belief that gender is defined by sex.

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