

Passing Queerness in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there are four stories of characters who experience supernatural transformation from one gender to another: Tiresias (*Met.* 3.316-338), Hermaphroditus (*Met.* 4.271-388), Iphis (*Met.* 9.666-9.797), and Caeneus (*Met.* 12.189-209 and 12.459-12.535). Given the increased interest of queer-theoretical readings of Classical texts in the past few years (e.g., Waston 2021, O'Hearn 2021, Levin-Richardson 2020, and Kamen 2012), it may be tempting to read these stories as a queering of Roman gender norms. Watson, for example, posits a reading of Iphis and Caeneus as transgender men, which downplays the impossibility of their existence prior to divine intervention. Complicating this, I will argue that while Ovid depicts characters who seem to have queer experiences of gender, only those characters who are wholly men or wholly women are happy; anything else is a failure.

There are two outcomes from these changes, both of which are rooted in the idea of a strict and natural gender binary. When Ovid's characters receive a happy ending, they are denied any possibility of queerness—after their metamorphoses, their physical characteristics, sexual relationships, and role in society all fit within the gender boundaries of Roman society. Conversely, androgyny in any form is portrayed as tragic and unnatural. Only pitiable characters persist in a state of gender-queerness; the rest leave it behind for a typically-gendered life.

Works Cited

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