

Whatta Man: Ovid's Caenis/Caeneus

While most rape victims in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tend to be punished, Caenis, after her rape by Neptune, receives a type of reward – the god offers to grant any prayer she might make. Thereafter, her prayer is granted by her transformation into an impenetrable man. The apparent lack of punishment, as well as the lack of emphasis on the act of the rape itself, seems to have contributed to the lack of close analysis of this tale in terms of rape – rather, it is often grouped with tales of androgyny or sex changes (e.g., in Keith 2000, Brisson 2002, and Fratantuono 2011). I investigate the story of Caenis/Caeneus through the lens of other rapes in Ovid. Through a close analysis of the Latin and the use of previous analyses of this and similar tales, I find that Caenis is indeed punished for her rape, and its effects do not cease at her transformation of sex.

I begin by establishing the framework of a “typical” Ovidian rape narrative (Curran 1978, Richlin 1992). One notable aspect of the rapes that occur in Ovid's works (whether attempted or successful) is that the author tends to describe the fear and flight of the victims. The emphasis tends to be overtly on the violence, potential or achieved, within the narrative of the attack, rather than the eroticism of it. The threat of penetration is generally followed by a punishment of the victim. In the case of Ovid's Caenis, however, the story of the encounter with Neptune is tellingly lacking in this displaced violence and punished victim, so it is often brushed aside in favor of the gender deviancy of its subject.

An examination of shifts of grammatical gender and gender-related words within the passages relevant to the Caenis episode (12.171-209, 459-535), supplemented by commentary and previous analyses, help to clarify the emphasis on the sexual fluctuation of Caenis. The Latin of the passages follows clearly defined patterns. For example, as a female, Caenis is

sexually subjected to the god – she is the passive recipient of his sexual violence. As a man, he is an active and successful participant in battle, and so much so that the Centaur Latreus harangues him for his female past. The centaur begins by calling him Caenis (the original, feminine form of his name) and goes on to remind him of the way in which he procured the “false appearance of a man” (12.473). Further, Caeneus is told to take up the female task of weaving and to leave war to the men. Provoked by this, he wounds the centaur. Latreus’ subsequent stab at Caeneus rebounds off his (now impenetrable) groin. Caeneus then stabs the centaur violently enough to create a “wound within a wound,” which kills him (12.493). Following this display of power, however, the other centaurs band together to kill Caeneus in a barbaric – and ultimately anti-masculine – way. The battle scene emphasizes Caeneus’ perceived fluctuation between male and female, and highlights the distinctions between the sexes, but simultaneously associates violence and sexuality.

The metamorphosis of Caenis/Caeneus appears to transgress the typical framework of Ovidian rapes. Caenis is not punished for her rape, as occurs in other Ovidian tales – in fact, she is rewarded for it. Though raped, she maintains the powers of speech and choice. Unlike most divine/human rapes, Caenis is neither impregnated nor destroyed due to the interaction. He becomes more honored as a male, though as a woman she would likely have been deprived of all honor (and her life) due to the rape. She becomes such a paradigm of masculinity that he is respected by all his allies, but rejected by the half-man half-beast centaurs. The description of the rape itself is lacking in overt violence. Yet the final battle and transformation of Caeneus appears to replace that violence, and to subject Caeneus to another kind of rape. Caeneus’ final human act is a forcible penetration (into the earth). At the instigation of the initial encounter

with Neptune, he ends his life destroyed by his own victimhood, and presumably as an illustration of the resonance of sexual violence rather than as an exemplum of sexual alteration.

Works Cited

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