

Mythological characters with transgender and detransition experiences in Ovid *Metamorphoses*. Detransition or Tiresias Process?



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Gender reassignment surgery has increased over the last few years and includes a series of technically complex surgical procedures. However, during ‘mythological times’, only a divine act would be enough to produce gender reassignment. The discovery of transexual characters in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*⁽¹⁾ caused me, as a surgeon, a huge and pleasurable surprise. Here I will talk about the three transgender mythological characters in Ovid’s work and propose, at the end of this article, renaming the gender detransition process as the Tiresias Process.

Roman poet Ovid Naso was born in Sulmona, around 140 kilometers away from Rome, on March 20th in the year 43 BC. In his pinnacle work, *Metamorphoses*, so-named because of the transformations or changes in appearance of the characters into different bodies or objects, he gathered Greek myths and adapted them to the Latin culture of his time. The book covers a period from the creation of the universe to Julius Caesar’s apotheosis. It is a 15-book hexameter epic poem, finished in the year 8 BC, with Caesar Augustus as the emperor of Rome at that time. It’s considered a masterpiece of classic Latin literature.

The three characters who experienced gender reassignment in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are Caeneus, Iphis and Tiresias. I will briefly summarize these myths.

Caeneus (Book XII)

Old Nestor tells Achilles the story of his fellow countryman Caeneus, the daughter of Atrax, born a woman named Caenis, the most beautiful young woman in Thessaly, who was pursued by many men. She did not agree to marry any of her suitors. One day, while she enjoyed the waters at a faraway beach, she was raped by Neptune, the god of the seas. Regretful of his attack, he promised Caenis to grant any wish she would have.

Caenis asked not to be a woman so she would never have to go through that. Her last words were uttered in a deepertone of voice, since she had already been transformed into a man. Neptune also granted him the faculty of not being able to be hurt, not even by iron: he had turned Caenis into a man as well as giving him the gift of immunity against weapons. To tell Caeneus’ deeds exceeds the purpose of this article, but it would be relevant to state that he was slain at the Battle of the centaurs and buried in a forest of trees. After his death, he was turned into a bird which flew through the logs that had fallen over him.

Iphis (Book IX)

Close to the time of his wife Telethusa’s childbirth, a tearful Ligdus told her about his wish to have a boy, and if the baby were to be born a girl, she had to be killed. Telethusa was unable to change her husband’s already set mind from his tragic decision. Goddess Isis appeared in Telethusa’s dreams, telling her to ignore her husband’s orders and encouraging her to raise whoever is born. A girl was born, and the mother ordered for her to be brought up pretending she was a boy. Only the wet nurse knew the truth of the situation. Ligdus named her after her grandfather, Iphis. By the time the girl turned 13, the deceit had remained unrevealed; her father engaged her to the blond Ianthe, daughter of Telestes, the most beautiful woman from the Phaestus (a Minoan Crete town) and also being thirteen years of age. They both fell in love, though Ianthe did not know that Iphis was indeed a woman. Iphis lives a tormented life, suffering both for her love for Ianthe and her closely kept secret. ‘I wish I were nobody’, she would repeat to herself. The wedding day comes close, after repeated postponements thanks to different excuses from her mother.

During the wait for the wedding, Telethusa goes to Isis' temple, where she pleads and asks the goddess for help. Upon leaving the temple, the altars shook and the doors trembled as an omen of the metamorphosis Iphis was to experience. As Telethusa, closely followed by her daughter, approached the venue for the wedding ceremony, Iphis' steps became longer, her skin tone became darker, her hair became shorter and her strength increased. Next morning, the marriage was consummated.

Tiresias (Book III)

I am leaving for the end the most endearing and surprising character, the most widely known of the three due to his sad and eventful life.

Tiresias found two big snakes mating in a forest. He hit them with his cane and was turned into a woman. He spent seven years like that, and after that time he found the same snakes again, in the middle of their mating process. He hit them again, while calling upon the snakes' power to turn him back into a man. One night in which Jupiter had surrendered to the pleasures of his son Bacchus (the god of wine), he was joking with his wife Juno, to whom he said 'without a doubt, women's sexual pleasure is greater than ours'. Juno showed her disagreement with such a statement. In order to clarify things about their funny marital dispute, they decided to ask Tiresias, who had experienced both pleasures. He confirmed Jupiter's suspicions, saying that female pleasure was greater. Juno, in irritation, punished Tiresias, taking his sight forever (there are different versions regarding what happened to the snakes and how Tiresias lost his sense of sight; other sources argue that his answer was 'out of ten parts of pleasure, the woman takes nine...'. I am sticking to Ovid's version). Given the fact that no god can invalidate another god's actions, Jupiter compensated for Tiresias' blindness by giving him the gift of seeing the future, somewhat making up for his wife and sister's punishment, turning Tiresias into one of mythology's best fortunetellers.

Here is where the stories about the three transgender characters from Ovid's work ends.

A transgender (or trans) person is defined as the person whose identity or gender expression differs from cultural expectations regarding assigned sex after being born. Currently, people have the given right to define their own gender identity and to express it according to their needs, regardless of whether they have modified their bodies or not. During the last few years, there have been advances in the depathologization of trans people, referred to according to the DSM-5 version as 'gender identity dysphoria', and to 'gender incongruence' according to CIE-11. The trans person who requests gender reassignment

surgery will undergo surgery after a full medical surgical assessment, carried out by a multidisciplinary team, where the plastic surgeon will play a fundamental role.

It is estimated that 0,6% of US population identifies as transgender. The first documented gender reassignment surgery (vaginoplasty) was carried out at Hirshfeld Institute for Sexual Sciences in Berlin in 1931, on the patient Dorchen Richter, under the supervision of Dr. Hirshfeld himself.⁽²⁾

The term transsexualism was coined in 1953 by Harry Benjamin, a German born American endocrinologist, a standard bearer for transgender people, to refer to the discrepancy or incongruence between assigned gender at birth and gender identity.

It is surprising to learn that the concept already existed at least in ancient Greece, where the jump from 'mythos' to 'logos' took place. However, from a linguistic point of view the term was not coined until 25 centuries later. I say 'at least', as there are vague references to transgender people in other ancient civilizations, even during the Paleolithic. The reality of transsexuality, as happens with most concepts, was preexistent to its denomination.

In 1979, the World's Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) is constituted, replacing the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. WPATH has recently published the 7th edition of their 'Standards of Care'.

It has been reported that 1% of the patients who have undergone surgical procedures such as gender reassignment surgery have experienced feelings of regret, and of these, a small number choose to undergo detransition surgeries.⁽³⁾ Detransition is the term used to refer to the act of interrupting or turning back gender transition. Tiresias represents a case of gender detransition, possibly the first in 'history'.

Therefore, I take the occasion to propose calling the gender detransition process the 'Tiresias' process or phenomenon'.

Throughout the History of art, music, literature, etc., we find an infinite number of universal works which are based on mythological characters. Equally, medicine has turned to mythology to name medical conditions or anatomical structures such as Atlas, mons pubis, or Achilles tendon, to cite a few examples.

Just as psychiatry chose the figure of Oedipus, the parricide from the Greek tragedy, to refer to feelings or psychological drives of confrontation, rivalry and/or rebellion against the father figure, Plastic Surgery, along with the rest of disciplines involved in the treatment of these patients, could be inspired by Greek mythology to name Tiresias process or phenomenon the detransition process from a gender reassignment procedure.

Bibliografía

As a final anecdote, I would like to mention that I do not casually reference Oedipus, since both he and Tiresias are characters from Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus the King. It is he who requests the fortune tellers' services to find out about his father's assassination. It is Tiresias himself who, after failing in his attempt to try to persuade Oedipus to stop trying to find the murderer, has the complicated task of informing Oedipus that the unwitting perpetrator of the horrendous crime is none other than Oedipus himself.

I hope these brief mythological literary reviews relating to transsexuality are to the liking of the readers. The classic world prevails in current times, as Ovid sensed in the epilogue of his work: '... and through the centuries... I shall live on!'

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