

The Heroic Tale of Caenis/Caeneus, “...though he was born a woman”: Transphobic Centaurs, Potential Trans Allies and Ovid’s Apparent Obsession with Transmen in the *Metamorphoses* Book XII

By Kenneth R. Moore*

*This article examines the brief tale of Caenis (Caeneus), found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* XII.188-209, in which the character of Caenis, a woman, is raped by Neptune and then granted a wish; she wishes to never be subject to such an assault again and the god transforms her into a man—hence “Caeneus” thereafter. And he was not just any man, but one with heroic strength and resilience. Caeneus departs apparently pleased with his altered condition. This brief vignette perhaps lacks some of the emotional gravitas of the apposite tale of Iphis (IX.666-794), which in some ways prefaces it; however, it does suggest more than a passing interest in the theme of (ostensibly heterosexual) trans men being ‘liberated’ through a transformation by divine agency into biological men, a condition with which they are then much happier. Elsewhere, it has been argued that Ovid has accidentally discovered gender dysphoria. Was he sympathetic to actual individuals who may have suffered that condition? Or was he so immersed in his own state of what we might call ‘hetero-normative myopia’ that he was projecting his own thoughts and feelings, as a kind of thought experiment, onto characters who were biologically females but psychologically (heterosexual) males? Or did he find the whole notion of trans men to be erotically interesting for reasons of his own? This article will consider the tale of Caenis/Caeneus in light of that of Iphis, building upon the latter, in order to better understand Ovid’s apparent obsession with trans men. It delves into his historical context and background, along with any pertinent precursors or parallels in other sources as well as taking into account the cultural norms of Ovid’s time and place. It is the assertion of the author of this work that some gifted poets such as Ovid, for whatever reasons, have obtained keener insights into the human condition than have whole hosts of philosophers and psychologists. When one comes across such an insight, it bears greater consideration. Earlier scholarship, such as Seaman in the 1930s, thought that this must be an instance of hermaphroditism. More recent scholarship, such as that by C. Northrop, have interpreted the tale of Caenis/Caeneus as a “locus for reflection on the nature of heroism” while also presenting a “transmasculinity that is innovative” when compared to earlier examples. Northrop focuses more on the heroic nature of Caeneus as part of the War of the Lapiths and Centaurs. D. Freas, by contrast, argues that this tale demonstrates fundamental views about the power dynamics of sex and gender in the Augustan world, with women being considered the weaker and more subordinate sex and the male being the more desirable condition in which to be. Such trends as these in the scholarship, along with others, are taken into account; however, this subject is under-represented in the scholarship and is therefore open to newer interpretations that reflect the changed state of the modern world, and which does so on a topic of major interest.*

*Senior Lecturer, Teesside University, UK.

In an earlier work, this author had explored the case of Iphis at the end of Book IX of the *Metamorphoses*, in which it was argued that Ovid correctly, if inadvertently, managed to describe the symptoms of gender dysphoria as understood by modern medical science, albeit as a consequence of a unique set of circumstances and qualities specific to that author and his historical context.¹ It is the purpose of this work now to advance the interpretation that not only has Ovid 'discovered' gender dysphoria, but through his seeming obsession with what we would call transmen, he has also managed to accurately portray transphobia in terms that would likewise fit modern definitions, including the use of "dead-naming" and, seemingly as a bonus, the sort of prejudice typically associated now with toxic expressions of masculinity. Granted, the latter point can only amount to a kind of modern reception of Ovid, given Roman attitudes to gender, which will be presently considered in some detail. So too will be other scholarly interpretations and approaches to this topic, along with some informed speculation about Ovid's own views *vis-à-vis* transmen. The latter, in particular, considers the question of whether Caeneus should be considered heroic and how scholars have approached that subject, perhaps being influenced by transphobic tendencies, however unintentional.

This article, then, focuses specifically on the case of Caenis/Caeneus,² who was born a beautiful woman, raped by the sea god Neptune and then, at her request, turned into an extraordinarily heroic man, who could only be killed when he was suffocated by a mountain being effectively dropped on him during the war between the Lapiths and Centaurs. The episode comes in Book XII, as told by Nestor at a feast at Troy, as part of the wider, frame narrative. In that narrative, Achilles had just defeated Trojan Cygnus, who was the son of Neptune, and who was invulnerable against any weapon thanks to the gifts of his father (*Met.* XII.86-95). No weapon could break his skin; but Achilles managed to strangle him to death, with considerable difficulty, thus foreshadowing and paralleling Caeneus' own demise. The Achaeans then hold a feast in celebration and old Nestor, with his nearly three centuries (XII.188) of experience, recollects another figure who was similarly invulnerable, Perrhaëbian³ Caeneus, though more so remarkable, as Nestor expresses, since he also had the unusual fortune to have been born a woman.

In terms of the treatment of Caenis/Caeneus in the scholarship, his/her reception

1. K.R. Moore, "The Iphis Incident: Ovid's Accidental Discovery of Gender Dysphoria" in *Athens Journal of History* 7.2 (2021) 95-116. <https://www.athensjournals.gr/ajhis/v7i2> (last accessed 10 April 2025); see too *Ancient Adventures in Time and Gender* <https://adventurestimeandgender.org/wormholes/the-ancient-world/> (last accessed 8 May 2025) for a more popular culture approach to Iphis.

2. This article will refer to the character as Caenis, utilising relevant pronouns, typically when she was still female, and as Caeneus, also with appropriate pronouns, after the transformation. Sometimes both names will be used when referring to the character in the generic sense.

3. See Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 33, 32; 34; 42, 53; a people of Thessaly about Tempe and Mount Olympus, the Perrhaebians.

has typically reflected themes that were dominant at the time. Seaman's article from 1937, referenced below, takes a fairly clinical approach to enumerating examples, from Classical myth and literature, of people changing sex, along with some instances of hermaphroditism. And his approach certainly reflects themes that were part of his historical context, with the first recorded, medical sex change occurring in 1931 in Berlin, and great strides being made in surgical and gender-affirming treatments, especially in Germany and Austria, at least until the *Nationalsozialismus* thugs intervened.⁴ 1937 was also the year in which a 7th century BC bronze relief of Caeneus and the Centaurs was discovered at Olympia, which may have been another factor impacting Seaman's article.⁵ There is relatively little mention of Caenis/Caeneus to be found in Classical scholarship in the years between Seaman's article up to about 1967, when Anderson (also cited below) chose to discuss this subject alongside other similar transformations. In that work, he treats the rape of Caenis, along with Mnestræ and others, with seemingly little empathy for the women's suffering, focusing instead more on the male subject and using the language of love and romance as well as a tendency to regard such matters as transactional, as we shall presently see in other examples and also in relation to Caenis/Caeneus. Some scholars, such as Zumwalt in 1977, chose to focus almost exclusively on literary and Homeric features of the character of Caenis and her transformation (such as *fama*, see below), generally avoiding more controversial themes such as trans-issues.

Feminist scholars in the 1970s, like Curran (also below), were highly critical of such approaches, reacting specifically to the likes of Anderson and others who tended to downplay the significance of rape in the case of Caenis and other, comparable characters. Nagel's 1984 article focused both on the suffering of these individuals as well as the fact that many of those who are raped in the *Metamorphoses* could be classed as adolescents.⁶ More recent scholarship, such as that by Sharrock in 2005 and Freas in 2018, also focuses on themes of rape and gender. Freas interpreted Caenis' request to become a man "as her rejection of womanhood...tantamount to a refusal to be associated with the women of the

4. For an overview of the history of the medical development of this science, see K. Mumford, "Ethically Navigating the Evolution of Gender Affirmation Surgery" *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics* 25,6 (2023), 383-385; <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/ethically-navigating-evolution-gender-affirmation-surgery/2023-06> (last accessed 23 May 2025).

5. N. Shamugia, "A Bronze Relief of Caenius with Centaurs from Olympia" in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 109 (2017), 33 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44863952> (last accessed 23 May 2025).

6. B.R. Nagel, "'Amor, Ira', and Sexual Identity in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'" in *Classical Antiquity* 3.2 (Oct. 1984), 236-255 <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25010817> (last accessed 23 May 2025).

[Hesiodic] *Catalogue [of Women]*".⁷ In part Freas was responding to, and building on, Ziogas' *Ovid and Hesiod: The Metamorphosis of the Catalogue of Women*, also from 2018. Some of the most recent scholarship on Caenis/Caeneus now tends to focus more on trans- issues, with Caeneus' portrayal as a positive, trans-hero often emphasised, alongside the other relevant themes of gender and rape.⁸ The (modern) trans- approach to Caenis/Caeneus is relatively, and understandably, somewhat new and many of the articles available are on self-publishing sites such as WordPress and Medium; though, the range of scholarly research is growing, and will hopefully continue to grow as does our understanding of these complex matters that persist in being so important to humanity. For instance, Northrop's 2020 article in *Arethusa* has challenged many of the positions advanced by Zumwalt, as shall be considered later below.⁹ But we have returned, in more ways than are comfortable to the author of this article, full circle to the theme initially taken up by Seaman in the 1930s, and so too with some of the public and political attitudes around trans- issues. Is the burning of books on the science of sex-change and gender affirming treatments developed by the Institute of Sexology in Berlin in 1933,¹⁰ comparable to deleting digital texts of the same and/or similar type for ideological reasons, as has been done in the US in 2025?¹¹ In the midst of such upheavals, and much as with Seaman's research in the 1930s, this article is exploring a complex feature of human sexuality and gender with a rational and evidence-based methodology, aiming to be free, as much as humanly possible, from ideological bias. The aim is to examine Ovid's successful, if perhaps accidental, portrayal of transphobia, in effect as it would be defined in the current era, in the light of existing scholarship and relevant historical context.

And that poet did not draw his portrait of Caenis/Caeneus out of thin air. As observed in the earlier article on Iphis, there Ovid had many mythological and

7. D. Freas, "Da femina ne sim: Gender, Genre and Violence in Ovid's Caenis Episode" in *The Classical Journal* 114.1 (October-November 2018), 61 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5184/classicalj.114.1.0060> (last accessed 23 May 2025).

8. See e.g. N. Iakovidis, "Caeneus: the World's First Trans Hero" in *Exploring History*, Medium (2 September 2021), <https://medium.com/exploring-history/caeneus-257f0f1adf0c> (last accessed 23 May 2025).

9. See C. Northrop, "Caeneus and Heroic (Trans)Masculinity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" in *Arethusa* 53.1 (2020): 25-41. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/are.2020.0000> (last accessed 26th May 2025) for both a scholarly and positive approach to Caeneus' heroism, and below.

10. Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, '6 May 1933: Looting of the Institute of Sexology' <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/6-may-1933-looting-of-the-institute-of-sexology/> (last accessed 27 May 2025).

11. C.K. Johnson, "Health data, entire pages wiped from federal websites as Trump officials target 'gender ideology'", Associated Press, 1 February 2025 <https://apnews.com/article/trump-gender-ideology-sex-pronouns-order-transgender-2d7e54837f5d0651ed0cef a5ea0d6301> (last accessed 27 May 2025).

literary exemplars on which to draw, not the least being that of Teiresias.¹² The author of this article had argued that some of these, and in particular Ovid's more positive portrayals of trans-men, perhaps offered some hope to those experiencing gender dysphoria. However, Carlà-Uhink has posited that, while "gender reassignment" is portrayed as possible but only "carried out by divine figures", it reinforces the hard, physical barriers to actual change.; as he writes, "admitting the possibility of breaking a boundary only under specific, and superhuman, circumstances, reinforces the boundary itself and makes it more visible".¹³ While Carlà-Uhink notes that the fictitious airing of such notions opens them up to further discussion along with other gendered considerations, the author of this article takes exception to the rather rigid boundary imposed here. A modern, academic reader might think in precisely such terms; however, a number of ancient readers, as well as quite a few modern ones too, might be inclined more towards what we would term 'magical realism', considering at the very least the prospect of divine intervention being more real than imaginary. In than sense, as advanced in the Iphis article, such stories might indeed have been the source of some hope, even if it would have been ultimately forlorn. The tale of Caenis/Caeneus itself can be attested in Greek visual art at least from the Orientalising Period in the latter part of the 8th century BC onward, and is found in literary sources going back to Hesiod but also including the likes of Pindar and Plato.¹⁴ It was popular in both Greek and Roman sources.

Even so, as it happens, neither Ovid nor his audience were limited to only mythical exemplars of apparent sexual transformation. There were a number of reported (medical) cases of females having apparently changed to male, with which Ovid was likely conversant, and which almost certainly provided models for some, or maybe even all, of his sex-switching characters. Diodorus of Sicily (fl. 1st century BC) described an Epidaurian 'girl' who appears to have undergone something like a sex-change operation.¹⁵ Her name is Kallo (Καλλώ) and she was

12. See Moore, "The Iphis Incident" and see too Campanile, D., Carlà-Uhink, F. & Facella, M. *Transantiquity: Cross-dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World*. Routledge, London, New York: Routledge, 2017 for a thorough breakdown of such exemplars and particularly on Teiresias.

13. F. Carlà-Uhink, 'Between the human and the divine': Cross-dressing and transgender dynamics in the Graeco-Roman world", 19-20 in Campanile, D., Carlà-Uhink, F. & Facella, M. eds. *Transantiquity: Cross-dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World*. Routledge, London, New York: Routledge, 2017, 3-37.

14. Shamugia, "A Bronze Relief", 31. See too n. 1 on literary sources including, but not limited to: Hesiod fr. 87 Merkelbach- West; Acusilaus *FGrHist* 2 F 22 (POxy. Vol. 13, 1611, lines 38-97); Pindar, *Threnoi* fr. 57 Cannata Fera = fr. 167 Snell-Maehler; Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 1.57-64 and schol. to 57; Agatharcides of Cnidus, *de mari Erythraeo* 7.39-43; Plato, *Laws* XII.944d; schol. Homer *Iliad* 1.264; Apollodorus, *Epitome* 1.22; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.448-449 and the commentary by Servius.

15. Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of World History*, fragmentary book XXXII.11.1-4 and see too the 9th century the *Bibliotheca* of Photius, codex 244, which recounts the same tale.

born without obvious genitalia, only a small hole as her urethral outlet. She married a man and had only non-vaginal intercourse with him, lacking the requisite parts. Later, she developed a tumour on her crotch which an apothecary cut open to reveal a penis and testicles. The penis had no hole, however, and so a "silver catheter" was used to redirect the urinary tract, much as in modern sex-change operations, as Seaman also observed in his 1930s article, referring to this surgical account from Diodorus.¹⁶ Kallō's voice then deepened and he behaved in a more masculine manner, much as with Caeneus as we shall see, as well as with Ovid's other transman character of Iphis, and thereafter he was known by the masculine moniker of Kallon (Καλλών). This tale has medical as well as historical significance and is now considered an example of pseudo-hermaphroditism, which is a recognised intersexed condition, and with the surgery that Kallon underwent being the first example of its type, differing relatively little from its modern equivalent.¹⁷ Kallon was not the only such example¹⁸ and, interestingly, it seems that medical science up to at least the Renaissance, "accepted these transmutations at face value" because the likes of Galen (AD 129 – c. 216) had reported them.¹⁹ While Ovid could not have read Galen, he almost certainly had read Diodorus,²⁰ and the his *Metamorphoses* stands as another example of a 'universal history' encompassing all time, very much in the same tradition as the latter's *Library of World History*.²¹ It is interesting then, and perhaps not surprising, that Ovid may have been taking some inspiration from tales that were mostly about actual

16. W. M. Seaman, "Some Ancient Examples of Change of Sex" in *the Classical Journal*, 32.8 (May, 1937), 494-496, remarks on the similarity between this description observes that "It is interesting to note here that Diodorus tells of surgical operations that were performed similar to those employed today to aid the patient to be better adapted to his new sex, as related in the articles in *Time*", 496.

17. G. Markantes; Deligeoroglou, E.; Armeni, A.; Vasileiou, V.; Damoulari, C.; Mandrapilia, A.; Kosmopoulou, F.; Keramisanou, V.; Georgakopoulou, D.; Creatsas, G.; Georgopoulos, N., "[Callo: The first known case of ambiguous genitalia to be surgically repaired in the history of Medicine, described by Diodorus Siculus](#)" in *Hormones* 14.3 (2015-07-10), 459-461, doi:10.14310/horm.2002.1608 (last accessed 8 May 2025) and see too R. Langlands, "[Can You Tell What it is Yet? Descriptions of Sex Change in Ancient Literature](#)" in *Ramus* 31.1-2 (2002), 91-110, doi:10.1017/S0048671X00001387 (last accessed 8 May 2025).

18. See P. Kelly "Intersex and Intertext: Ovid's Hermaphroditus and the Early Universe" in A. Surtees & Dyer, J. eds. *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2020, 95-105.

19. D. Beecher, "Concerning Sex Changes: The Cultural Significance of a Renaissance Medical Polemic" in *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 36.4 (Winter, 2005), 997.

20. A number of astronomical observations from Diodorus turn up in Ovid, e.g. "Ariadne's Crown" from book VI.4 also found in *Fasti*, III.459-561 and *Met.* VIII.176.

21. See S. M. Wheeler, "Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Universal History" in *Clio and the Poets: Augustan Poetry and the Traditions of Ancient Historiography*, *Mnemosyne, Supplements*, London & New York: Brill, 2017, 163-189, 224. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400493_010 (last accessed 8 May 2025).

instances of hermaphroditism and intersexed individuals in real life, as recounted by the likes of Diodorus and others.

Since the theme of this article is one of the earliest instances of transphobia, then before we continue further into this analysis of Ovid's story of Caenis/ Caeneus, let us first consider a modern definition of transphobia which will inform our reading. There are, of course, many and varied ways to define transphobia. Like other types of discrimination, it can likewise manifest in myriad forms. However, as the author of this article has previously used the United Kingdom's National Health Service for defining gender dysphoria, the same source seems likewise appropriate in this context, in order to give us a working definition of transphobia. Here it is:

Discrimination against and/or fear or dislike of people whose gender identity does not align with their sex and gender role assigned at birth, or whose gender identity or expression doesn't appear to align. This also includes the perpetuation of negative myths and stereotypes through jokes and/or through personal negative thoughts about trans people.²²

Let us bear this in mind as we proceed since a central position of this article is that Ovid has managed to somehow articulate a clear illustration of transphobia, albeit in a unique way, through his characters, and particularly the wild centaurs, possibly for the first time in history. His articulation fits exceedingly well with modern definitions, as we shall see, as does his portrayal of gender dysphoria in Book IX, as this author has previously argued. And, as we shall likewise consider, Ovid appears to have also portrayed instances of what we would call trans-allies who act to counter the transphobes' negativity. This comes in the form of Nestor himself and his positive portrayal of Caeneus as well as his audience who likewise seem much more positive about this divinely metamorphosed transman.

The company of feasting Greek heroes in Ovid's narrative are portrayed as being very eager to learn more about this Caeneus fellow. They especially want to know "why was his sex changed"?²³ This is a minor point, perhaps, but it is revealing that this group of hyper-masculine warriors, the quintessence of *andreia* (manliness, courageousness) in the Greek sense, should be so fascinated, for all intents and purposes, by the genitalia of a trans-man, by the transformation itself and all that it entails. It seems reasonable to assert that they, and likely Ovid too, were at least as interested in his sexual transition as they would have been in the preternaturally enhanced martial prowess of Caeneus. And Nestor does not disappoint. He first gives Caenis/Caeneus' 'pedigree', much as with a Homeric hero, which is the story of her rape and transformation and then, adding to the parallelism, he recounts the feast of Lapiths and Centaurs, which he had personally attended, and which resulted

22. NHS Hampshire Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service <https://hampshirecamhs.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Glossary-of-LGBT-Terminology.pdf> (last accessed 11 April 2025)

23. Ovid, *Met.* XII.179, *cur in contraria versus*.

in Caeneus' eventual downfall and final transformation.

Nestor tells the company that Caenis (the feminine form of the name) was born in Thessaly, Achilles' homeland, that her father was named Elatus and that she was "the most beautiful maiden of the Thessalians" (*Thessalidum virgo pulcherrima*), who was courted, in vain as it happens, by many suitors.²⁴ She was so popular, asserts Nestor, that even Achilles' father Peleus might have courted her had he not already been betrothed to the goddess Thetis. Had he done so, he would presumably not have succeeded as we are told that "Caenis would never demean herself with marriage" (*nec Caenis in ullos denupsit thalamos*).²⁵ And Ovid has chosen the verb *denubo* here which can mean "to marry beneath one's rank".²⁶ However, the implication, and most translators seem to agree, is that marriage to any man is itself beneath her, that is to say that she appears to disdain the whole prospect of at least a mixed-sex, nuptial union. It might imply a range of possible sexualities for Caenis, at least spanning the spectrum from asexuality to lesbianism to gender dysphoria, as we would interpret them in the modern era. As Freas has observed, Caenis does seem to be rejecting her female-ness, firstly by refusing to marry and then by asking Neptune to make her cease to be a woman.²⁷

Ovid has Nestor describe Caenis' reluctance to marry in the same breath as her rape by Neptune. We are told that, as she walked along a quiet shoreline one day, "the god of the sea forcefully ravished her".²⁸ The Latin is somewhat obtuse here, but it is apparent what has happened. And Neptune is so "enraptured by the joy of his new sexual exploit" that he tells her to ask of him whatever she wishes and it will be granted.²⁹ We shall return to her response in a moment. However it is worth noting now that, while Latin is denser than English, being able to express more in fewer words, the passages which describe the rape scene appear to be passed over in a rather hurried manner. Whether this indicates distaste for such unpleasantness or possibly a discounting of such activity in a kind of implicit value judgment is difficult to say, though the author of this article suggests the former rather than the latter, giving the poet some credit here. But we should also consider Ovid's, and other, relevant views on rape as we have them. And another apposite example is present in book VIII where the character of Mnestræ is also sexually assaulted (as we would see it) by Neptune. Her rapacious father sells her into

24. Ovid, *Met.* XII.189-192, Clara decore fuit proles Elateia Caenis, Thessalidum virgo pulcherrima, perque propinquas perque tuas urbes (tibi enim popularis, Achille), multorum frustra votis optata procorum.

25. Ovid, *Met.* XII, 196.

26. As in Tacitus, *Annales* VI.27, Julia denupsit in domum Rubellii Blandi; it could also refer to a "mock" marriage, or one that was considered illegitimate or obscene such as with Nero and Sporus, see Tac. A. XV.37; Suet. *Ner.* 29.

27. Freas, "*Da famina ne sim*", 61

28. Ovid, *Met.* XII.197, aequorei vim passa dei est (ita fama ferebat)

29. Ovid, *Met.* XII.198-200. utque novae Veneris Neptunus gaudia cepit, "sint tua vota licet" dixit "secura repulsae: elige, quid voveas!"

slavery during a famine and, while attempting to escape, she approaches the sea and begs the god for help, saying “Oh, you who have deprived me of virginity, deliver me from such a master’s power!”.³⁰ She wants to avoid being raped by her male owner, which would be considered his right and due. And Neptune answers her prayer by giving her the ability to change her appearance, and presumably her form itself, temporarily into that of a man and, as it happens, other creatures as well, in order to deceive her master and any other pursuers thereafter. Indeed, her greedy father repeatedly sells her into slavery and she repeatedly uses the trick to escape.

It may be the case then, as Anderson has put it, that whether “reward or punishment, Ovid uses his folk-motif skilfully to emphasize the fact that the gods’ amoral violence to human beings transforms them physically and psychologically”.³¹ In this vignette too there is clearly a transactional nature to the sexual encounter. Neptune has raped her, which Mnestra clearly did not desire; but she plays on his apparent expectations *vis-à-vis* compensation and so receives her reward, which she uses both to avoid rape and to take advantage of gullible men. She has changed psychologically as well as physically and, as a former student once pointed out to the author of this article, and in keeping with Anderson above, a psychological change always seems to accompany—and usually precedes—the material transformations in the *Metamorphoses*. But altered Mnestra was not asking for remuneration, whatever Neptune may have thought in this instance nor likewise with Caenis. Compensation for violence committed is not the same thing as payment for goods or, in this case, services rendered. The latter implies some freedom of choice and willingness on the part of both subject and object, which is not so in either of these cases. This is a distinction that Caenis likewise draws (below) but which some male characters (e.g. Neptune and the centaur Látreus) seemingly interpret rather more as *quid pro quo*.

There are at least fifty instances of forcible rape, “or sexual extortion hardly distinguishable from rape”, as Curran writes, in the *Metamorphoses*.³² This has received more attention in the current age than previously where the tendency of translators had often been either to resort to euphemisms or joking expressions, or the language of romance, or otherwise in like manner tended to underplay the *gravitas* of the act.³³ One should also consider Ovid’s sometimes (apparently) playful attitude to rape in his seminal works such as the *Amores*, in which he

30. Ovid, *Met.* VIII, 854-855, “eripe me domino; qui raptae praemia nobis virginitatis habes” ait.

31. W.S. Anderson, “Multiple Change in the *Metamorphoses*” in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Johns Hopkins University Press 94 (1963), 9.

32. L.S. Curran, “Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*” in *Arethusa* 11.1/2 (Spring and Fall 1978) Women in the Ancient World, 214.

33. *Ibid.*, esp. n 7; See *Classical News and Views* 21 (1977) 63, with a translation that treats rape jokingly in “elegant Latin verse”.

preferred to draw particularly martial comparisons,³⁴ and specifically in the *Ars Amatoria* where "no" is sometimes seen to mean "yes" (I.480-485). In the latter work, we can also observe light being made of "project rape", in relation to Ovid's retelling of the story of the Sabine women from Roman mytho-history (I.124ff.),³⁵ along with other passages that imply that women might somehow enjoy the prospect of men forcing their affections upon them (I.675 and 700). Critics have noted that the character of Corinna in the *Amores* likewise reveals signs of psychological trauma associated with sexual violence, after experiencing her lover's aggressive approaches.³⁶ In the poet's defence, we may note that those were works of his youth and that his attitude does indeed appear to have undergone something of a transformation of its own, and especially after the trauma of his exile, in the years leading up to the completion of the *Metamorphoses*. None of the rape victims in that work are willing participants, as was often implied or directly indicated to be the case in both the *Amores* and *Ars*; and Ovid has made that fact explicit.

There is still perhaps a double-standard. We might recall Daphne in book I who asked her father, the river god Peneus, to permit her to remain a virgin forever (485ff.); but, we are told, "though her father promised to fulfil her desire, her loveliness prevailed against both of their wills".³⁷ It is implicitly understood that lusty males, such as Apollo, would not be able to resist pursuing her—and by extension other women—on account of her physical beauty. And this, as we know today, is the standard formula of a rapist blaming the victim. It also upholds a range of presumptions about agency and responsibility for one's actions that has been used to exonerate many a rapist throughout the ages. When we add to this the fact that most of the females raped in the *Metamorphoses* are almost certainly adolescents, the terror that they would understandably experience becomes starkly apparent.³⁸ The observable change in Ovid, however, is a keener awareness of the "victim's unwillingness and terror", which displays remarkable empathy on his part for women and their wishes, and which lends credibility to the notion that he likely edited and revised the *Metamorphoses* while in exile at Tomis, where his sudden and unaccustomed status as victim, in some ways psychologically comparable with rape, clearly had an impact.³⁹ Suffice it to say that Ovid's views

34. See L. Rutter, "Ovid's Military Metaphor and Gender Transgression in *Amores*" in *Comparative Humanities Review* 2.6 (Summer 2008), 46-50, <http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr/vol2/iss1/6> (last accessed 25 April 2025).

35. *Haec queritur, stupet haec; haec manet, illa fugit; Ducuntur raptae, genialis praeda, puellae*

36. J. Wise, "Subaltern women, sexual violence, and trauma in Ovid's *Amores*" in A. Karanika and V. Panoussi eds., *Emotional Trauma in Greece and Rome: Representations and Reactions*. New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2019, 71-92.

37. Ovid, *Met.* I.489-90, *ille quidem obsequitur, sed te decor iste quod optas esse vetat. Votoque tuo tua forma repugnat:*

38. Nagel, "'Amor, Ira'", 237.

39. Curran, "Rape", 230. Curran notes that Ovid has resisted the temptation to exploit Tiresias' notorious appraisal of the pleasure women derive from sex (III.316ff.). As noted

on sexual aggression had changed over time and with experience; though they remain firmly rooted in his cultural context. And we should also be keenly aware that much of his audience, on the whole, may not have been so enlightened.

Caenis is unequivocal in her attitude to her own rape. Whatever her psychological state before, presumably having been content with her virginity, she appears to think differently about sex and its relationship with her identity. She is very clear about what she wants in recompense for her forced loss of maidenhood and we should note well that it is not payment which she is demanding for services rendered, but restitution for damages done:

“These injuries demand significant compensation”, said Caenis, “let me never again suffer such things; grant that I should no longer be a woman: you shall have then accomplished all that I desire.”

“Magnum” Caenis ait “facit haec iniuria votum; tale pati iam posse nihil; da, femina ne sim: omnia praestiteris.” (201-203)⁴⁰

As she spoke these “strange words in prayer”, her voice deepened like that of a man and, indeed, it would turn out not merely to be likeness but had “become fact” (*sicut erat*). The god not only answered her prayer with alacrity but also gave *Caeneus*, as he would now be called, a body extraordinarily strong and proof against all weapons, presumably because men can also be raped but, with these enhanced abilities, such a prospect would become considerably less likely.⁴¹ Evidently Neptune was very pleased with the ‘exchange’, as he clearly regards it, having answered the prayer both in terms of the letter and the spirit of it. *Caeneus* was certainly pleased with the result, if not the ‘cost’ thereof. And the rape of *Caenis*, along with her desire to avoid such denigration in the future as *Caeneus*, a man, aptly illustrates conventional manifestations of Roman masculinity. The latter, as

elsewhere (see Moore, “Iphis”, n. 18), there is a possibility that Ovid revised some of the *Metamorphoses* while in exile. We know that he brought some of his books with him to Tomis. While he claims to have burned one manuscript of the *Metamorphoses* when he found out about his punishment (*Tristia* I.7.19-24), he observed that several copies had survived. And one has to wonder whether the final transformation in book XV, that of Julius Caesar into a god and on the destiny of Augustus (alluded to at *Tristia* II.1.61-5) might not have been added later in hopes of getting his exile rescinded by way of flattery. He mentions the fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses*, “lately saved from my exequies” (*Tristia* I.1.117-18) and mourns his own recent and unpleasant ‘transformation’. He repeats this again at *Tristia* III.14, also indicating that the *Metamorphoses* had had gone out to the public “uncorrected” (19-24). If he did correct that manuscript in exile, then it is a tantalising prospect that could have impacted on his attitude to women and increased empathy for them in light of his own trauma.

40. The phrase *tale pati iam posse nihil* recollects the phrase often used to describe a ‘passive’ homosexual: *pati muliebria* (womanish suffering); see Curran, “Rape”, 228. And see Freas, “*Da femina ne sim*”, 61 ff. on *Caenis*’ apparent rejection of femininity.

41. Ovid, *Met.* XII.203-207.

Sharrock has noted, is "predicated not only on sexual performance", as may be noted in Ovid's other female-to-male transformation of Iphis,⁴² "but also on autarky, control of the self both internal (in the emotions) and external (in political liberty)".⁴³ Again, we get relatively little about Caenis/Caeneus internal, emotional world except that, as a woman, she deeply resented being raped and, as a man, we shall see below that he greatly enjoys his new condition; but it is clear that, having changed sex, his external "liberty" is now on a much firmer footing, *gratis* his new masculinity.

We do not know how Caenis (in female form) had felt about her original sex, except that she adamantly chose not to marry. But we are specifically told that *he* "rejoiced" in *his* new state, travelling around Thessaly for a span of time, engaging in "manly pursuits".⁴⁴ And this inclines the author of this article somewhat toward favouring an interpretation of something like 'latent gender dysphoria', perhaps not as advanced as in the case of Iphis, but like Iphis inasmuch as it has been remedied through another act of divinity. The result, as Ovid has written it, appears to be a gender-affirming 'treatment' with which Caeneus is genuinely happy, possibly for the first time in his life. However, this is but one such interpretation and others should be considered. A strong case can be made for asexuality, as noted above. It is also unclear what precisely Caeneus post-transformational "manly pursuits" (*studiisque virilibus*) entailed, and Ovid has not specified except to say that he engaged in them "joyously" (*laetus*). Nestor's narrative ranges next to the Wedding of the Lapiths and Centaurs, at which Caeneus will later face his doom, which we shall shortly consider. While "manly pursuits" would appear to constitute acts of athletic and martial prowess, of course, they could also include sexual exploits with women and others. This would seem implicit, given Roman (and especially the poet's own) attitudes to the actualising of masculinity. But Ovid has not said and has thus left it to the reader's imagination.

It is likewise worth considering the historical context somewhat further here. There are numerous (negative) examples of Homeric male attitudes to women in the *Iliad* of Homer. These are presumably more so features of that poet's 8th century *milieu* than perhaps that of Bronze Age Greece. The author of this article is aware too that there has been some recent revision of views on sexism in Homer more broadly, and that some of what has been considered negative is in fact the product of (often unselfconsciously) sexist translators.⁴⁵ And there are many positive

42. See Moore, "The Iphis Incident", *passim*.

43. A. Sharrock, "Gender and Sexuality" in P. Hardie ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 2005, 96 and esp. n. 5.

44. Ovid. Met. XII.208-209, *Munere laetus abit studiisque virilibus aevum exigit Atracides Peneiaque arva pererrat*.

45. E. Wilson, trans. *The Iliad: Homer*. Norton: 2023. And see too E. Wilson, "Exit Hector, Again and Again: How Different Translators Reveal the 'Iliad' Anew" in *The New York Times* (2 July 2023), 27 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/books/review/iliad-translations.html> (last accessed 23 April 2025). See too Monsacré (below) for additional Homeric positivity about women.

associations with women in the *Iliad*, frequently concerning maternal matters, with even male heroes such as Achilles and Patrokles being favourably compared with them in a maternal capacity.⁴⁶ But this article is more concerned with those exemplars which would be considered today as sexist or misogynistic, indicating an implicit weighting of value in regard to women and men. Indeed, such examples are too numerous to even begin to address all of them outside of something the size of a monograph specifically on that theme. Though, we can consider some prominent cases. A major one is that of Briseis and Chryseis, taken as spoils of war and fought over by the protagonists Agamemnon and Achilles, effectively defining the plot of the narrative. And there are many instances of women captured in just such a way, with Cassandra being a particularly poignant example, as to become sex slaves to their victorious male masters.⁴⁷ Even outwith the context of women as chattel, the famous lines spoken by Hektor to Andromache that starkly defined gendered roles amongst the elites, along with society more broadly, will be discussed below.

Apropos to the case of Caeneus and the Centaurs in Ovid, the most common type gendered insult in the Homeric context is that of baiting which is aimed at casting shame or doubt on a given object's masculinity, usually either to enrage them or to spur them on to some action, through what we might term pejorative 'gender inversion'. Paris is thus ridiculed by Hektor for his 'womanish' good looks and excessive fondness for pleasures, at which he is informed the Achaeans laugh (III.39-55). His own lover, Helen, berates him similarly in book VI, saying "Would that I were the wife of a better man, one who knew righteous anger (νέμεσιν) and the many reproaches of men (αἴσχεα)".⁴⁸ Similarly, Thersites and Menelaus, respectively, both resort to this type of approach in order to rouse the Greeks' courage through shame, calling them "weakling cowards, 'Achaean women' rather than Achaeans" (ὦ πέπονες κάκ' ἐλέγχε' Ἀχαιῖδες οὐκέτ' Ἀχαιοί, II.235) and, somewhat formulaically, "vain braggarts, Achaean women, not Achaean men" (ὦ μοι ἀπελητήρες Ἀχαιῖδες οὐκέτ' Ἀχαιοί, VII.96). In book XXIII, during the 'friendly' race that is part of the funeral games for Patrokles, at which the first prize was a woman and a tripod, female horses are even deployed rhetorically in order

46. Achilles compares his protection of the Achaean army to a mother bird bringing food for her chicks (IX.323-27); see E. M. Warwick, *For Those Yet to Come: Gender and Kleos in the Iliad*. A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Classics, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018, 142 ff. https://escholarship.org/content/qt5d3140fs/qt5d3140fs_noSplash_15afa1d2c0eefc8c0aeefc55b634706e.pdf?t=p96h6g (last accessed 23 April 2025)

47. E.g. see IX.154-168, where women are bartered as property and XIII.417-419 where they are gifts for victors.

48. Homer, *Iliad* VI.350-51 ἀνδρὸς ἔπειτ' ὥφελον ἀμείνωνος εἶναι ἄκοιτις, ὃς ἤδη νέμεσιν τε καὶ αἴσχεα πόλλ' ἀνθρώπῳ, see G.S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary: Volume II: Books 5-8*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1990, 202; and see B. Graziosi and J. Haubold, eds. *Homer. Iliad, Book VI*. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010, 168-69

to shame the steeds into action. The hero Antilochus urges his father's horses to victory against those of Menelaus, declaring that they must "hasten to overtake the horses of the son of Atreus, and be not outstripped by them, lest Aethe inflict shame upon you, she that is *but a mare*".⁴⁹ And there are many more individual examples of the same type which others have kindly enumerated.⁵⁰ Misogynistic baiting is a common feature particularly of male combat in the *Iliad*; though, in the case of Caeneus, it takes on an added dimension, as we shall see.

While Ovid is in some sense recreating the atmosphere of the Homeric world through his account of Caeneus, it seems clear that his own cultural and historical context must likewise be considered as more influential. In particular, Ovid himself would have been painfully aware of the then contemporary attitudes to women and sex, in the official sense, crystallised so sharply in the Augustan Marriage laws of his day—arguably laws of which Caenis (when female) would be considered in breach by refusing to marry. The *Leges Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BC) and *Papia Poppaea* (AD 9) of Augustus Caesar both established laws pertaining to the licit marriage and procreation of Roman citizens, heavily regulating women's sexuality in particular.⁵¹ These determined who could marry whom, encouraged legal marriages through economic and social incentives and/or penalties, and especially encouraged the bearing of legitimate offspring, with women who bore the proper number being free from *tutela*—the normally mandatory condition of having a male guardian, assuming of course that they survived the ordeal.⁵² Respectable Roman women were expected to marry and produce legitimate offspring. And even while doing so might win some degree of autonomy for a woman, if birthing three or more children did not kill her, these laws nevertheless made it much easier to equate unattached women with prostitutes, conflating the concept of prostitute/

49. Emphasis mine. Homer, *Iliad* XXIII.410 ἵππους δ' Ἀτρεΐδαο κιχάνετε, μὴ δὲ λίπησθον, καρπαλίμως, μὴ σφῶϊν ἐλεγχείην καταχεύῃ Αἴθῃ θῆλυς ἐοῦσα:

50. H. Monsacré, trans. by N. J. Snead, with an Introduction by R. P. Martin *The Tears of Achilles*. Hellenic Studies Series 75. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2018; http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_MonsacreH.The_Tears_of_Achilles.2018 (last accessed 25 April 2025), writes 'Wanting to return home to moan like children and widows (*Iliad* 2.289–290); treating one's enemy like a woman ignorant of war (7.235–236); [12] being transformed into a woman; being no longer anything but a cowardly young girl (8.162–163); [13] scratching an opponent with one's arrows, as a simple woman would (11.389); [14] being like a "little girl that comes running to her mother, and begs to be taken up and carried" (16.7–8); [15] shouting insults at an enemy like an enraged woman instead of fighting with bronze (20.252–254); [16] being "as though I were a woman, when I had off my armor in battle," that is, without armor, shield, helmet, or spear (22.124–125) [17] —all are considered forms of weakness that classify the warrior among the feminine and the cowardly.'

51. See especially T.A.J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality and the Law in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press., 1998.

52. S. L. Budin, "A Revisited Interpretation of the Ancient Greek *Hetaira*", in K.R. Moore, *The Routledge Companion to the Reception of Ancient Greek and Roman Gender and Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023, 264.

whore, who takes money for sex, with a women who is 'free' with her sex in much the same way that men tended to be, but who does not take money for it. We still have this hypocritical double-standard today in no small part thanks to these Roman laws. The issue, as Buden has noted, was one of sexual "accessibility and promiscuity".⁵³ Proper Roman wives were characterised by neither and, as McGinn has observed, respectable Roman women were expected to be unapproachable in the public sphere.⁵⁴ Adulteresses and prostitutes, by contrast, were often delineated by both of those qualities, that is promiscuity and public approachability. Is rape then some kind of implicit penalty that Caenis faces for refusing marriage, and perhaps for being 'accessible' and 'approachable' by not having a male guardian or protector as she walked along the shore? Would Neptune's actions be somehow acceptable within the Roman context? And was being made male some kind of an acquittal or upgrade for Caeneus? The latter point must surely be answered in the affirmative, from Ovid's perspective at least, and likewise in the context of Roman attitudes and legality. And that context does seem to infuse this narrative, as we shall see below when the centaur Látreus clearly regards Caenis' rape by Neptune, and subsequent transformation, as an instance of payment for sexual favours—transactional, as with a prostitute, which he makes quite explicit.

To resume Ovid's tale of Caeneus, Nestor's narrative being delivered to the company of Achaeans shifts to the story of the the wedding feast of Pirithoüs, the son of the problematic king Ixion, and Hippodamia, to which the the "heaven-born" centaurs were also unfortunately invited, being also fathered by Ixion and therefore family (210-211). The story is well-known: everyone drinks too much, the centaurs' 'animal' nature takes over, and Eürytus, "wildest of the wild centaurs" (*saevorum saevissime Centaurorum*, 220) lusts after the bride, demanding to have her for his pleasure, which results in the ensuing conflict. This violent, and highly detailed, vignette stands in contrast to the more civilised feast at Troy, at which Nestor is narrating. But it does perhaps not too obliquely allude to Achilles and Agamemnon's conflict over Chryseis, the captured daughter of Apollo's priest, which underpins much of the *Iliad*, as already noted. The battle is described in the sort of epic detail that would appeal to manly (*andreios*) Greek warriors; as noted above, Nestor himself was present at the feast/battle, and so was an eye-witness. Heroic figures such as Theseus and Peleus were involved and Ovid's recourse to graphic details, accuracy of wounds and epically *apropos* emotive responses are all worthy of the famous Boeotian bard himself.

Caeneus was also present at the feast. He reappears at line 459 where Nestor describes him as manfully slaying multiple centaurs. It turns out, though, that the centaurs know something of his origins and use that intelligence to taunt him. And their insults are worth considering as potentially the first recorded instance of what

53. *Ibid.*, 265.

54. McGinn, *Prostitution*, 334.

we would call transphobia today. Let us consider the examples that Ovid has provided through his characters. In the course of Caeneus' heroic fighting, the centaur Látreus, who had recently slain a Macedonian and is described as prancing around in the exotic armour that he has stripped from him (466-469), "shouts insults into the empty air" (*verbaque tot fudit vacuas animosus in auras*), saying:

And shall I tolerate one such as you, oh Caeneus? For you will always be a woman to me, and you will always be 'Caenis'. Does not the origin of your birth remember you? And has the very act slipped your mind by which you provided favours in exchange for that false form of a man? Consider what you were born as well as that to which you have submitted. Then go and pick up the weaving basket and wind the strands of wool with your thumb: leave warfare to men.

Et te, Caeni, feram? 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 (470-476).⁵⁵

Látreus is rather fixated on the fact that, as per the NHS definition above, Caeneus' gender identity does not align with his "sex and gender role assigned at birth", and the centaur resorts to stereotype-enforcing ridicule. In this tirade we can also observe the common transphobic tactic of 'dead-naming' as it is called in the modern era, effectively denying the validity of the transformation by insisting on the original label, as well as hearkening to a sexually essentialist view based on a rather facile understanding of natal biology. Note too that he repeatedly refers to Caenis' sexual relations with Neptune, when still female, as some kind of an exchange, as one might associate with a prostitute. This surely reflects the Augustan Marriage laws, discussed above, under which it became easier to identify women without guardians as prostitutes. While 'slut-shaming' is a common tactic when particularly misogynistic men verbally assault women, it seems likely that Ovid was recollecting those Roman laws of his era here—laws against which he, of course, likewise ran afoul with his notorious *carmen et error*. The passage here also recalls the famous scene in Book VI of the *Iliad*, in which Andromache hazards to give (sound) martial advice to Hector, who responds in a remarkably similar way to Látreus, saying "Go into the house and see to your tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid your handmaidens go about their work. War will concern men, all those

55. I have rendered *fero* (to bear) as in "to tolerate", which is acceptable and appropriate definition here as it is clear that Látreus is talking about "bearing", in the sense of "tolerating", the prospect of a woman becoming a man. The word "tolerate" in English likewise contains a root that derives from the Latin verb *tolero*, which can mean "to tolerate" as well as "to bear" in much the same sense as *fero*.

born at Troy and me especially".⁵⁶ Certainly this was a deliberate choice by Ovid, knowing his audience would likely make the connection with Homer and probably with Aristophanes' comedic countering of this position with his irrepressible character of Lysistrata as well.⁵⁷

And war is most certainly Caeneus' bailiwick as his invulnerable flesh turns back every sword stroke or weapon's blow. He easily defeats the centaur Látreus, taunting him with the epic quip "Come now! Let us test how well your body *tolerates* my steel!"⁵⁸ After he is slain, the other centaurs rally, expressing some awe at Caeneus and also chastising themselves for behaving "as women", to be so easily defeated by one who, as far as they are concerned, is not even a real man. As with Látreus, they engage in some more transphobic insults, considering it shameful that "our whole tribe has been worsted by one man, and hardly a man at that! No, he is the man and we are behaving as feeble women".⁵⁹ The centaurs question their own divine descent via the act of *xenia* against Jupiter by Ixion, "a mortal with pride enough to aspire to sleep with lofty Juno, when we are being defeated by an enemy who is only half a man!"⁶⁰ Ovid is clearly playing on that initial crime by Ixion (as have other poets) as being parallel to the Centaurs' breach of *xenia* at the wedding feast. But we can observe how they cannot even praise Caeneus without including transphobic insults. The word rendered above as "half a man" is *semimas* (–*maris*), which can also mean "hermaphrodite" or "one who has been castrated". It seems likely that the fictional characters of the centaurs here do not in actuality think that Caeneus is either a hermaphrodite or a eunuch; but, they are perhaps at a loss for vocabulary to describe this unusual condition and have seized upon terms that both denote sexual ambiguity and function aptly as a means of belittling their target's masculinity—again, exactly as the NHS definition above indicates, along with broader definitions, by the "perpetuation of negative myths and stereotypes through jokes".

And transphobia can and does manifest in more subtle ways too. In her 1977 article, Zumwalt had observed how Caeneus' unique situation afforded such comparably unique insults, but she failed to elaborate further on that point while

56. Homer, *Iliad* VI.490-493. ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε ἰστόν τ' ἡλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι: πόλεμος δ' ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ' ἐμοί, τοῖ Ἰλίῳ ἐγγεγάασιν.

57. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 536-8, for the counterpoint "Then card wool and work it delicately whilst munching beans: war will be women's business" (κατὰ ξαίνειν ξυζωσάμενος κύαμους τρώγων: πόλεμος δὲ γυναιξὶ μελήσει).

58. Emphasis mine. Ovid, *Met.* XII.490-491, "nunc age," ait Caeneus, "nostro tua corpora ferro temptemus!" Granted, mine is a somewhat liberal translation for dramatic and thematic effect; but it is no less accurate and correct within the limits of the language. It picks up on the affinity between the earlier "feram" (Shall I tolerate/bear..., in line 470 above) and "ferro" (steel) as well as the implications of the subjunctive "tempto /temptemus".

59. Ovid, *Met.* XII.499-500, "populus superamur ab uno vixque viro: quamquam ille vir est, nos segnibus actis quod fuit ille, sumus!"

60. Ovid, *Met.* XII.506-7, "Nec nos matre dea, nec nos Ixione natos esse reor, qui tantus erat, Iunonis ut altae spem caperet: nos semimari superamur ab hoste!"

inexplicably declaring that, since he was ultimately defeated by the centaurs "though called *Lapithae gloria gentis* (530), Caeneus has failed to show remarkable prowess in fighting".⁶¹ This is in support of that scholar's position that the tale here is designed to subvert the Homeric narrative. Yet it seems clear that Ovid's Caeneus did show very remarkable "prowess" in fighting and it appears that Nestor and the company of Achaeans would agree with that position more so than Zumwalt's. They are not the only ancient voices praising Caeneus' manliness. It is perhaps worth noting that in Homer's *Iliad* (I.259-265), the character of Nestor there describes Caeneus as being one of "such warriors that I have never since seen, nor shall I see again", that were the "mightiest of men reared upon the earth" (οὐ γάρ πω τοίους ἶδον ἀνέρας οὐδὲ ἰδωμαι...κάριστοι δὴ κείνοι ἐπιχθονίων τράφεν ἀνδρῶν:). In the *Laws* of Plato (XII.944dff.), the Athenian Stranger mentions the transformation of Caeneus, using that as a segue-way to suggest that warriors who shamefully discard their weapons and flee battle ought to be turned into women as a penalty (he admits that this would be impossible and settles on a barring them from soldiering instead). This entails some implicit praise for Caeneus' courage on Plato's narrator's part, given that treatise's attitude toward manliness (*andreia*).⁶² Is Zumwalt's downplaying of Caeneus' heroism a consequence of "fear or dislike" of transmen, as per the definition cited above? We shall shortly return to this point.

Of course, we do not know if the centaurs were necessarily disdainful of Caeneus' changed sex before he started slaughtering them by the score. Ovid has not said whether they, for example, looked askance at him as they dined, presumably having learned of his past at that time or prior. It would have added another dimension to this discussion had he done so; but he did not. And it is not unusual for men who are engaged in either mortal or even friendly combat, especially within the Homeric context, to insult each other's masculinity. The whole of *Iliad* book XXIII has many such examples along side those instances noted above. But with Caeneus it seems more pointedly specific, emphasising the particularly transphobic themes already noted. His altered status does necessarily admit the possibility of a different type of insult against him, which the centaurs take up with a zeal that implies something more than the usual routine of masculinity-baiting that we commonly find among cis-men in epic combat. That they round on Caeneus as they do, dishing out their transphobic insults in spades, suggests to the author of this article not a small *quantum* of fear on their part, and not without cause, as we have seen. It is interesting to observe the ideational 'channel', so to speak, through which such fear readily flows into transphobic invective.

Unable to defeat this remarkable hero in standard combat, the centaurs rally

61. N. Zumwalt, "'Fama Subversa': Theme and Structure in Ovid 'Metamorphoses' 12" in *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 10 (1977), 216 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25010720> (last accessed 23 May 2025). She claims that the tale of Caenis/Caeneus undermines and subverts the Homeric narrative.

62. K.R. Moore, *Sex and the Second-Best City: Sex and Society in the Laws of Plato*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, 85 ff.

and decide to heap trees and earth upon Caeneus to suffocate him, paralleling in an exaggerated way the manner in which Achilles slew Cygnus, by choking him to death. Caeneus puts up an impressive resistance, passing out, waking again and twice nearly sloughing off the growing mountain atop him; but, he eventually loses consciousness for lack of air, against which Neptune had not made him proof (507-523). Nestor then reports two versions of his fate thereafter. In one, "some said that he was thrust right down into Tartarus by the mass of trees" (524). The alternative, however, is the one that Nestor explicitly prefers and is the more interesting of the two. We are told that Mopsus the seer had noticed an unusual "bird with shimmering feathers"⁶³ emerging out of the pile and soaring into the air. This too parallel's the metamorphosis of Cygnus, whom Neptune ultimately saved from Achilles by turning him into a swan.⁶⁴ Possibly we are to assume that the god felt guilty about Caeneus' demise.⁶⁵ And the avian transformation is certainly in keeping with Ovid, as shall be presently considered. As noted, Nestor favours this version too, claiming to have sighted the marvel on that day, for the first and only time. He reports that it gently circled the camp, loudly clapping its wings together. As he observed it, the seer Mopsus declared:

"Farewell!" he said "Oh Caeneus, glory of the Lapith race, once their greatest hero, but now a unique bird of your own kind!" That authority's interpretation was believed.

"o salve" dixit, "Lapithaeae gloria gentis, maxime vir quondam, sed nunc avis unica, Caeneu!" Credita res auctore suo est (530-531).⁶⁶

63. Ovid, *Met.* XII.525, vidit avem pennis liquidas exire sub auras; the author of this article has rendered "liquidus" here as "shimmering", although it could also mean "clear", "liquid" or "bright", but in the sense of shimmering like water. As the note in Raeburn's translation also suggests, this quality would seem to further emphasise the uniqueness of Caeneus as a "unique bird". See D. Raeburn (trans.) *Metamorphoses: Ovid. A New Verse Translation*. New York: Penguin 2004, n. on XII.525. One is almost tempted to imagine Ovid here playing on the word "penis" with "pennis"—except that "penis" (tail) does not appear to have been used to refer to a male's "privy member" until about the 17th century AD, in England. Ovid would have known "mentula" and other forms, but would surely not have used "penis", which is unfortunate but still may be received as oddly apt by the current era.

64. "The god of the sea changed his body into a white bird, whose name he used to have" ... corpus deus aequoris albam contulit in volucrem, cuius modo nomen habebat (*Met.* XII.144-5).

65. See Freas, "*Da famina ne sim*", 76-77.

66. It would seem impossible to mention a seer in the context of sex transformation in Ovid without recollecting the judgement of Tiresias in *Met.* III.316-338. This may have been intentional or accidental on Ovid's part; but it is certainly understandable. And that tale deserves its own treatment outwith this article—except to note that Tiresias is another sex-changing character treated in a positive light.

This appears to be genuine praise, even if there are some over-blown, comedic elements to the tale. However, Zumwalt had emphasised the uncertainty over Caeneus' final transformation, considering the whole narrative to be subverting of Homeric *virtus* through satire.⁶⁷ Indeed, arguably, the heroic quality of Caeneus, as attested in the narrative, may be somewhat occluded by the nature of his defeat. It was Neptune's rape that prompted Caenis' initial metamorphosis and the "phallic violence" (with trees) by male centaurs can be read, then, as being some kind of symbolic rape that thereby initiated Caeneus' final, avian metamorphosis.⁶⁸ Though Caeneus is, as Freas states, a "demonstrated impenetrable penetrator", which should make him an ideal *vir* and thus impervious to phallic violence in both public and private; yet he is nonetheless the victim of a metaphorically phallic, sexual assault.⁶⁹ Even so Nestor seems unequivocal in his positive regard. There is no transphobia here, no demeaning language or belittling of his deeds—quite the contrary for this "greatest hero" and "glory" of the Lapith race. The company of Lapiths themselves, and their allies, appear to likewise evince a positive attitude toward Caeneus in the tale, as do the Achaeans listening to it in Ovid's narrative. Nestor concludes the story, saying that the grief which they felt for Caeneus, whom they clearly respect for his masculine prowess, made the warriors' anger bitter at the fact that "one man's life should be crushed by so many enemies!"⁷⁰ He narrates that the Lapiths and their allies then set about slaying half of the remaining centaurs while the rest escaped under cover of darkness. Such a positive and supportive attitude toward Caeneus could be regarded as being in keeping with the sentiments of what we would today call trans- allies.

In contrast, the case can be made that critics who are downplaying Caeneus' role as hero are themselves being transphobic, if perhaps unconsciously so. Was Seaman being transphobic, then, when he discussed Caeneus in juxtaposition to Kallo, who was an apparent case of pseudo-hermaphroditism, along with the established medical procedure to correct that condition? It is possible that there was an unconscious bias present; but Seaman would likely have been considered quite "woke", in today's terms, just for discussing such a thing within an academic context in the 1930s, though demonstrably topical at the time, with what appears to be a genuine attempt at relative, scholarly neutrality. And raising awareness of trans- issues, in just such a way, may also be considered a form of ally-ship. Zumwalt in contrast focused a great deal on Caeneus' defeat and judged him to be less than heroic, emphasising comedic elements, whether real or exaggerated. That reading may more strictly follow literary conventions on Homeric values and

67. Zumwalt, "Fama Subversa", 214.

68. I. Ziogas, *Ovid and Hesiod: The Metamorphosis of the Catalogue of Women*. Cambridge UP, 2018, 201, offers a descriptive statement that alludes to a suggestive correspondence: "Caeneus' death, just like his rape, is followed by a metamorphosis..."

69. Freas, "Da *famina ne sim*", 76.

70. Ovid, *Met.* XII.532-533, *dolor addidit iram, oppressumque aegre tulimus tot ab hostibus unum!* Emphasis mine.

Ovid's subversion thereof; but it seems implicitly demeaning to Caeneus when the text itself does not seem to call for such a negative inflection. It may therefore be transphobic in the sense of "perpetuation of negative myths and stereotypes", according to our NHS definition, but likely without conscious or malicious intent. And we find plenty of challenges to Zumwalt's position not only amongst the self-published, pro-Caeneus literature but also in contemporary, mainstream scholarship. Northrop has argued that Ovid's depiction of Caeneus, is a positive one in terms of both his heroic identity and his gender identity, writing "that Ovid's Caeneus attains the highest levels of heroic achievement not despite of but because of his transmasculinity".⁷¹ Again, the Achaean audience and Nestor (and probably also Ovid himself) seem to be in agreement with that position.

Nevertheless let us turn that around, for the sake of playing Devil's advocate. Contrary to Zumwalt's position, the author of this article has assumed *a priori* that Caeneus was being portrayed in highly heroic fashion, more or less in keeping with Northrop's position, albeit along with those of many of the less scholarly, self-published works on this subject. But what if that is also an unconscious bias? Caeneus was ultimately defeated, and in a manner that suggests something akin to phallic rape, as noted by Freas and Ziogas above. And Freas had also noted that Caeneus final transformation into a bird was fairly typical of Ovid's subjects, writing that "his body is ultimately like the bodies of many female rape victims in the *Metamorphoses*".⁷² So, a case could be made that Caeneus is less heroic than, say, someone like Achilles or Diomedes, possibly even that he is being portrayed in something like a mock-heroic manner, if one is inclined to interpret his representation in just such a way. Yet the unquestionable super-powers of Caeneus, his slaughter of numerous Centaurs who are themselves preternaturally strong, the clear admiration on the part of (Ovid's rendition of) Nestor and on that of the Achaean company, their outrage at the Centaur's bad form in ganging up on Caeneus in order to defeat him, the seer's pronouncement about his transformation into a "unique bird" along with Nestor's reaction to it, all to this author rather suggest qualities of the heroic more so than the mock. Is Ovid subverting Homer in some way? Probably. But that does not necessarily mean that Caeneus is not still a hero and worthy of admiration. Although it is certainly plausible to interpret this vignette as wholly satirical, with comedic elements, even that does not deny the prospect that it might also have an 'edge' to it. As satire shines light upon the gap between the ideal and the real, and like Nestor, the *Lapithae* and the Achaeans in Ovid's narrative, we too can feel admiration and compassion for heroic Caeneus and his fate, while also laughing at some of the comedic elements of the tale. But it matters as to whether we stage the scene, in our imagining of it, as a dark comedy or a farce. And that inflection is likely to match up with transphobic elements, whether conscious or otherwise, or their absence in the subject who is observing.

71. Northrop, "Caeneus and Heroic (Trans)Masculinity", 25-41.

72. Freas, "*Da famina ne sim*", 76.

The author of this article suggests that Ovid can be *both* poking fun at Homer *and* presenting Caeneus as a hero to be taken seriously. But readers will likely interpret Caeneus as heroic or otherwise in keeping with their own pre-disposition toward transmen.

The centaurs are clearly transphobic, whether in accord with the NHS definition cited at the beginning of this article or with others that might be adduced. Certain modern critics too, as considered above, may fall into this category, whether with conscious intent or otherwise. By contrast, all of the other characters in the tale—Nestor, the company of Lapiths, the Achaeans, Mopsus the seer, even arguably Neptune—do not evince transphobia in any identifiable manner. And those who do engage in transphobic invective are clearly identified as enemies and sent packing. This strongly suggests, given his interest in other such trans- characters, that Ovid too was not transphobic, at least as regards transmen. And this begs a question that was initially going to define this article but has since taken a backseat: was Ovid obsessed with transmen? It would seem that he had more than a passing interest. The author of this article suggests that, as with his development of greater compassion for women as he matured, that poet was able to feel considerable empathy for the likes of Iphis and Caenis who, though born women, became men, and relished in that condition, much as Ovid himself might relish in his own actualisation of masculinity. His empathy for them, as with his apparent growth of empathy for rape victims, may stem in no small part from his personal experiences and in particular his exile. Almost certainly a great deal of his sympathy for women who wanted to be men (as with Iphis) derived out of his understanding of penetrative masculinity as a positive condition. So it was perhaps Ovid's genuine delight in, even at times his obsession with, what we would today call heterosexual romance that has permitted him such unique insights into the trials and tribulations of transmen. That is, he could imagine and viscerally understand what it might feel like to be denied, and mercilessly ridiculed for, that which was such an essential part of one's self. Ovid is in no small part responsible for much of humanity, in this or any subsequent era, being in possession of the wondrous idea that it is possible in fact to change, to transform, to metamorphose into something other than that to which we were born, and sometimes even for the better. And he bore witness to the injustice that can force one to deny one's true self, and the cruelty which may be inflicted specifically on trans-people by those who fear and despise them for seemingly no other reason than their disruption of a particular sexual *status quo*, albeit an essential one to many. He did so, perhaps unwittingly, by raising awareness down through the intervening ages, offering a remedy and therefore some hope as well, however rooted in myth, through his arguably positive rendition of Caeneus, a transman who was the "glory of the Lapith race, once their greatest hero".

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