

Apostolos L. Pierris

Myth and Reality of female to male sexual transformation in Classical Antiquity

Plinius (Historia Naturalis, VII §34) reports four cases in proof of his contention that female-to-male transformation is a reality and no imaginary tale (“ex feminis mutari in maris non est fabulosum”). This is his argument:

“Ex feminis mutari in mares non est fabulosum. invenimus in annalibus P. Licinio Crasso C. Cassio Longino cos. Casini puerum factum ex virgine sub parentibus lussuque haruspicum deportatum in insulam desertam. Licinius Mucianus prodidit visum a se Argis Arescontem, cui nomen Arescusae fuisse, nupsisse eliam, mox barbam et virilitatem provenisse uxoremque duxisse; eiusdem sortis et Zmyrnae puerum a se visum. Ipse in Africa vidi mutatum in marem nuptiarum die L. Consitium civem Thysdritanum, <vivevatque cum proderem haec>”.

There is a lacuna in the manuscript tradition after “civem Thysdritanum”. Mayhoff (the Teubner editor) correctly supplies the last clause to complete the sentence from Aulus Gellius, who quotes verbatim Plinius’ passage as we shall see.

[Change from women to men is no fabulous tale. We find in the Annals under the consulship of

P. Licinius Crassus and C. Cassius Longinus that a virgin in Casinum, still under the tutelage of her parents, became a boy, who on the command of the soothsayers was deported to a desert island. Licinius Mucianus recorded that he saw in Argos Arescon, whose name previously was Arescousa, she having even been married, then soon thereupon beard and virility had arisen, and he took a wife. Of the same lot was a boy seen by him in Smyrna. Myself I saw in Africa L. Consilium, citizen of Thysdra, who was changed into a man the day of his marriage, and he was alive when I was writing this account].

The first case (in Rome) of a female transformed into male Pliny takes from the Annals ("Annales"). Since there is no specific authorship mentioned, perhaps the very "Annales Maximi" are meant, the Tables of memorable events arranged in consular years and recorded by the Pontifex Maximus (the most prestigious religious authority in Rome) from the commencement of the state to the time of the Pontifex Maximus P. Mucius Scaevola, B.C. 133. Even if this is not what we should deduce from Pliny's formulation, the indefiniteness of the reference shows that the story was a report well attested in various Annalists. The event is anyway dated; the consulship of P. Licinius Crassus and C. Cassius Longinus fell in 171 B.C.

The two following cases (in Argos, Peloponnesos and Smyrna, Asia Minor respectively) are reported on the personal testimony of Licinius Mucianus (Fr. 2 Brunn.). He was three times consul (52, 70 and 75 A.D.) and legatus to the Roman Province of Lycia. A formidable orator, politician and general, an accomplished and perspicacious author, a forceful, idiosyncratic personality distinguished alike for energetic work and luxurious indulgence, for affability and haughtiness, for public service and private extremes (Cf. Tacitus, *Historiae*, i, 10). In short, a reliable source.

Finally, the fourth case (in Thysdrus, North Africa) of sexual transformation is reported on Pliny's own evidence. As he explains, the subject was still living when Pliny was writing the account.

All four cases consist in transformations from female to male sex. And they are all cases of such transformation in or around puberty. In the first case, a virgin girl (still under her parents) became a boy ("puerum factum ex virgine sub parentibus"). The Argive girl Arescousa (Ἀρέσκουσα = the well-liked One) of the second case was married but soon developed male attributes and sex, changed his name to the equivalent Arescon (Ἀρέσκων), and was married now to a woman. As girls were normally married upon very early puberty, we may infer again her age from this circumstance.

Similarly, for the third case: Mucianus saw a boy ("puerum a se visum") that had suffered the sexual transformation.

In the last case, testified by Pliny himself, it is again a question of a female changing into male the very day of her marriage, hence on, or shortly after, puberty.

Aulus Gellius ("Noctes Atticae", IX, 4) argues that incredible stories, miraculous events and wonderful tales expressed in myths or reported by authors that had an eye for such curiosities and whose mind was caught by abnormalities that vary the normal course of events in the natural order of the world as we apprehend it – that such "mirabilia", such wonders and "miracles" often possess important truth in themselves and a kernel of significant reality extending much beyond the symbolic meaning they exhibit as creations of the individual or collective imagination of man's soul. In Pliny's relation of the reality of female-to-male transformation Gellius finds in particular proof of what is glorified in the myth of Caenis and Caeneus. He had fallen upon in the harbor, and bought, a collection of old books devoted to this subject of "mirabilia", θαυμαστά, things wonderful (and hardly credible). He narrates selectively

their content, and in this context comments on the Caeneus myth in connection with Pliny's reports of sexual transformation.

"Libitum tamen est in loco hoc miraculorum notare id etiam, quod Plinius Secundus, vir in temporibus aetatis suae ingenii dignitatisque gratia auctoritate magna praeditus, non audisse neque legisse, sed scire sese atque vidisse in libro naturalis historiae septimo scripsit. Verba igitur haec, quae infra posui, ipsius sunt ex eo libro sumpta, quae profecto faciunt, ut neque respuenda neque ridenda sit notissima illa veterum poetarum de Caenide et Caeneo cantilena. Ex feminis inquit mutari in mares non esse fabulosum." And there follows the quotation verbatim from Pliny.

[I'd like to notice, in this context of miraculous events, also that which Plinius Secundus (a man adorned in the times of his age with great authority on account of his genius and merits) writes in the seventh book of *Naturalis historia* as not merely heard or read by him, but as something known to himself and seen by him. These his words then, which I adduce below, are his own taken from that book, and they settle it, that the very well-known lays of the ancient poets about Caenis and Caeneus are neither to be rejected nor to be ridiculed].

It is noteworthy that his quotation of Pliny contains, as I noticed above, the last clause that is missing from all Plinian manuscripts "vivebatque, cum proderem haec". And hence we are able to restore it to its proper position in Pliny's text and complete the last sentence of the passage with a most important piece of information, namely that the man of the case study was living when Pliny was reporting on his case.

Now the myth of the female-to-male transformation is this. King Elatus of Lapithae in Thessaly had a daughter called Caenis of resplendent beauty. Poseidon, the god of sea and principle of salt-waters enveloping and embracing Earth (whose earthquakes are caused by his striking her with his trident, thus striking being a symbol of his penetrating her in copulation), was inflamed with love for the beautiful girl. (Probably her name comes from *καίνυμαι* = surpass, excel; cf. Hesiod, Fr. 96.2 Merkelbach-West: *ἔιδει ἐ]καίνυτο φ[ῦλα γυναικῶν*, she surpassed in beauty of form all women. This fragment belongs to the papyrus P. Oxy. 2495, whose text related in all probability the story of Caeneus, v. Fr. 88.4-5). She gave herself up to him on condition that he will make her a man and indeed invulnerable. The God consented, had her for his pleasure and transformed her sex (Phlegon, *Mirabilia*, V, p. 74 Keller = FGrH 257 F36; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, Epitoma, 1, (V), §22; Antoninus Liberalis, *Μεταμορφώσεων Συναγωγή*, XVII, §4 (Caenis is daughter of Atrax in this source); Heracleitus, *de incredibiliis*, III). According to Phlegon, who reported, as we shall see, with relative completeness on a number of such sex-transformations and on case of hermaphroditism, the story of Caeneus had an illustrious pedigree of testimonies starting with Hesiod (Fr. 87 Merkelbach-West; cf. Fr. 88, vv. 4-5 probably referring to Caeneus' end), and continuing with Dicaearchus the Peripatetic (Fr. 38 Wehrli), Clearchus, the other Aristotelian pupil (not in Wehrli) and Callimachus, the Alexandrine eminent poet and scholar (Fr. 577 Pfeiffer). We know independently that Pindar also, in his *Threnoi* (*Θρήνοι*, Lamentations), sung the tale of Caeneus, but the papyrus fragment is too curtailed to supply any informative detail about the version of the myth employed by Pindar (Fr. VI; cf. Plutarch, *Stoicos absurdiora poetis dicere*, 1, 1057D). Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, A 59 – 64, narrates Caeneus' singular death but not his transformation. And similarly in the Orphic *Argonautica*, 170 - 4.

The story was also told by Acusilaus, the early Argive logographer (end of 6th century B.C.), but in an extremely significant variant form in what concerns the reason for the transformation. The girl is again daughter of royal Elatus. Poseidon copulates with her. But it was not sacred, not

sanctified and fated, for her to bear children either from the god or from anybody else: οὐ γὰρ ἦν αὐτῇ ἱερὸν παῖδας τεκεῖν οὐτ' ἐξ' ἐκείνου οὐτ' ἐξ' ἄλλου οὐδενός. This incapacitation suggests some malformation or abnormality in her genitalia. So she could not carry children. And therefore Poseidon made her an invulnerable man, after the coition. Caeneus became an eminently strong warrior and a mighty king, whose fall was consequent upon his arrogance and insolence even vis-à-vis the gods (Acusilaus, FrGrH, 2F22).

A contamination of the Phlegonian (and ultimately Hesiodic in all probability) account as to the reason of the transformation with Caneus' haughty character, overweening attitude and hubristic behavior as man that we find in Acusilaus, is reported in Scholia A to Homer, *Iliad*, A 264 (in the *Iliadic* verse itself only the name of the hero is mentioned) and in the Scholia to Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, I 57. In the former passage we have an explicit mention of the youth and beauty of Caenis (ἦν παρθένος εὐειδής).

An unlikely variant of the affair is adopted by the Scholia to Lucian, p. 92.11-15 Rabe. Caenis makes Poseidon swear that before he copulates with her, he will do whatever she asks of him. He consents and she demands that she is made a man. Bound by his own oath Poseidon transforms her into Caeneus and so cannot copulate with her as a woman (οἷ δὲ διὰ τὸν ὄρκον ποιήσας οὐκ ἠδυνήθη συγγενέσθαι).

On the opposite extreme in Ovid's poetic narrative first Poseidon takes his pleasure with beautiful Caenis by the sea and then, in gratification, permits her to ask for any favor from him, granting her wish immediately upon its very utterance (*Metamorphoseon*, XII, 189-209).

Myth, fable and actual reality are again complicated in Ausonius' epigram on sexual transformation (LXXVI Peiper). He is the late (4th century A.D.) eminent classicizing poet, statesman (imperial minister – comes and quaestor sacri palatii under Valentinian I; consul in 379 A.D.) and teacher (Paulinus the famous Bishop of Nola was a pupil of his). In the epigram he joins among other cases, Ovid's account of Caeneus and Pliny's personal testimony of sexual mutation (vv. 6 – 12).

The point urged by Aulus Gellius, that mythological paradoxical symbolisms do have a real foundation, is implied also by Phlegon. [He was a freedman of Emperor Hadrian, a universal mind, and an antiquarian, very erudite and methodical; his opus magnum was a chronographical summa in 16 books arranging historical events according to the Olympiads.] His account of the Caenis-Caeneus sexual female-to-male transformation (*Mirabilia*, V) is followed by a series of documented actual such cases of transformation. In fact, one of them seems to accurately reproduce a medical report. Since this one adds significant details as to the circumstances and the manner of the transformation, it will be treated in a following paper of ours. In still another and concluding paper we will investigate two similar cases, reported in detail by Diodorus, which involve surgical information and operations. Finally, in a separate paper we shall treat about reported cases of reverse (male-to-female) sexual mutation.

Besides the one richly documented case, Phlegon reports three more, attested in a way similar to the Plinian ones, and actually constituting a chronological sequel to them. They are as follows:

VII. Εγένετο καὶ ἐν Μηρου<a>νίᾳ, πόλει τῆς Ἰταλίας, ἐν' Ἀγριππίνης τῆς Σεβαστῆς ἐπαύλει ἀνδρόγυνος, ἀρχόντος Ἀθήνησιν Διονυσιοδώρου, ὑπατευόντων ἐν Ρώμῃ Δέκμου Ιουίου Σιλανοῦ Τορκουάτου καὶ Κοῖντου Ἀτρείου Ἀντωνίνου. Φιλωτὶς γὰρ τις ὀνόματι παρθένος, Σμυρναία τὸ γένος, ὥραία πρὸς γάμον ὑπὸ τῶν γονέων κατεγγυημένη ἀνδρὶ, μορίων αὐτῇ προφανέντων ἀρρενικῶν ἀνὴρ ἐγένετο.

VIII. Καὶ ἄλλος δὲ τις ἀνδρόγυνος κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους ἐγένετο ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ, γονέων

ἄπόρων παῖς, ὃς ἑκαλεῖτο πρότερον Συμφέρουσα, ἄνῃρ δὲ γενόμενος ὠνομάζετο Συμφέρων, κηπουρῶν δὲ τὸν βίον διῆγεν.

IX. Καὶ ἐς Λαοδίκειαν δὲ τῆς Συρίας γυνή, ὀνόματι Αἰτητή, συνοικοῦσα τῷ ἄνδρὶ ἔτι μετέβαλε τὴν μορφήν καὶ μετωνομάσθη Αἰτητὸς ἄνῃρ γενόμενος, ἄρχοντας Ἀθήνησιν Μακρίνου, ὑπατευόντων ἐν Ῥώμῃ Λουκίου Αἰμυλίου Αἰλιανοῦ καὶ <...> Οὐέτερος. τοῦτον καὶ αὐτὸς ἐθεσάμην.

[Αἰμυλίου Αἰλιανοῦ is Meursiu's correction from the manuscript faulty reading +λαμία αἰλιανοῦ, on the evidence of information contained in the lists of Roman consuls; v. infra. Οὐέτερος is the Greek rendering of the genitive of Latin "Veter"].

[VII. Also in Mevania, a city in Italy, at a villa of Empress Agrippina, there appeared a hermaphrodite in the archonship of Dionysodorus in Athens and the consulship in Rome of Decimus Iunius Silanus Torquatus and Cointus Aterius Antoninus. A virgin by the name of Philotis, of Smyrnaean descent, in the proper age for marriage and betrothed to a man by her parents, became a man, male pudenda having been shown forth.

VIII. And another such hermaphrodite appeared in Epidaurus during that time, a child of poor parents, who was called Symferousa before, and when she became a man he was called Symferon, and lived as a gardener.

IX. And also in Laodicea of Syria a woman, by the name of Aetete, still in wedlock with a man, changed the (sexual) form and was renamed Aetetos becoming a man, in the archonship in Athens of Macrinus, and the consulship in Rome of Lucius Aemilius Ailianus and <...> Veter. This one I myself have inspected].

The first event happened according to the Consular Tables in 53 A.D. The place was no lower establishment than a villa of Empress Agrippina, wife of Claudius (49 A.D.), Augusta (50 A.D.), mother of Nero from her first marriage with Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus. The villa was located in Mevania, a considerable city of Umbria, on the great Flaminian way. The subject was Philotis, a virgin from Smyrna, ready to marry the man to whom she was betrothed by her parents, when male genitalia appeared and she became a man. Her age, we deduce, was on puberty.

Similarly with the second case, we are informed about the same time, a girl (παῖς) in Epidaurus under the name of Symferousa (= the Beneficial One), who suffered the same transformation, becoming a man, Symferon, a gardener in the sequel by occupation.

Finally, the third case is adduced on the personal testimony of Phlegon. (Thus, his reporting as a whole mirrors the formal pattern of Pliny's account). The event happened in Laodiceia of Syria, and the name of the man was Aitetos (Αἰτητὸς), the Wanted One. The time fell on the consulship of Aelius [or Aelianus (Chronicon Paschale) or Aemilius (Cassiodorus)] and Vetus [or Veter (Chronicon Paschale)], 116 A.D., during Phlego's lifetime. Since we are told that the transformation took place while the woman lived in wedlock with a man, the change must have occurred shortly after her marriage. In this respect, the case is similar to the second Plinian one and to the mythological archetype. One may draw the implication that, in these cases, the subject, as a female, was capable of vaginal coition with a man. Although care should be exercised in what we may safely infer, since there is the possibility of anal intercourse, as with the Spartan virgins.

