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The In-Betweens: Marginal Status of Transgenders in Ancient Literatures-A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: The watertight demarcation of gender has always been a defining feature of human society from the inception of civilization. However, there had always been boundary breakers and trespassers who for most of the time are pinned at the margins but still find ways to raise a unique voice of their own. The present paper tries to take into account the chequered history of transgenders in ancient Greek and Roman literature that is consisted of myths, poems, epics and dramas. Their representation has been most of times stereotyped, written in the same ink whosoever held the pen. The paper will try to locate the historical perspective to the gender issues and how this particular stance affected the way the knowledge and artifacts of transgender category has been culturally disseminated through the medium of literature. The paper will attempt to decipher the role of those marginalised in relation to the 'classical ideal' – and how they were differently constructed in the ancient world.

Keywords: Gender, heteronormativity, masculinity, femininity, performativity, transgender, marginalization, stereotype, Greek aesthetics

It is popular misconception that traditionally and historically there have been only two genders and transgender, intersex, and other gender-nonconforming people only started existing in the modern times as a result of deviation from the heteronormativity. This could not possibly be further from the truth. It is true that the word "transgender" is rather a recent coinage, since it was first coined in 1965, but there have been people who can be classed as transgenders due to their aberrant ways.

The term androgynos, from a Greek point of view, referred to feminine men or male-to-female transgender women. The term is used in two ways: (1) to problematise 'feminine men' who were perceived as weak and lacking in courage, and (2) to describe intersex persons or male-to female

transgender persons. According to Judith Butler, 'it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.

Some of the earliest surviving records pertaining to people in the ancient world who might be considered transgender come from the ancient Near East. In the third millennium BCE, people in ancient Sumer worshipped the goddess Inanna. She was associated with a wide array of domains, including war, erotic attraction, beauty, sex, political power, and retribution, but perhaps her most interesting association was with gender nonconformity.

Gender diversity among the ancient Greeks of the Classical Period (490–323 bc) was understood to be about more than outward appearance. While clothing choice was one factor by which the Greeks measured gender queerness, and physiognomy another, classical-era Greek authors also factored an individual's intelligence and courageousness (or lack thereof) into their gender makeup. Any one of these characteristics, or some combination thereof, may have been used to denote gender diversity. Female masculinity in classical Athens was apparently measured by the presence of both courage and intelligence in women, because courage and intelligence were considered male qualities, that, when manifested in women, were often perceived as anomalies by male authors.

Nearly all the surviving ancient Greek and Roman literary sources were written by elite men, who generally held an extremely narrow view of gender. They believed that the only proper and complete kind of human being was an adult, gender-conforming man with fully intact male reproductive organs. They commonly perceived everyone who was not a masculine adult man with fully intact male reproductive organs (including women, children, intersex people, and adult men who had been castrated) as belonging to the same essential category. They generally regarded such people as inferior and incomplete, defined by their shared lack of masculinity.

Such ideas of gender disparity among the Greeks were linked to misogynist, normative definitions of gender, in which men were frequently assumed to be brave and intelligent while women were frequently not. Within such a paradigm, women who were courageous, intelligent

and also loyal could be called masculine, whereas men who lacked the characteristics of courage and strength, among other qualities, could be perceived as feminine.

Despite the misogyny and male chauvinism that were deeply embedded in Greek and Roman cultures, Greek and Roman mythologies include a number of figures who display various forms of sex and gender variance.

While Greek authors often describe the crossing of gender boundaries in a negative or pejorative fashion, occasionally we do find positive assessments, more so with respect to women who were perceived to be 'masculine' than with respect to men who were perceived to be 'feminine'. From Greek texts we also gain insight into the attitudes of others, such as the Scythians, who, although they did not record their own histories, refreshingly seem to have revered gender-diverse individuals as shaman-type religious figures.

In Greek mythology, Teiresias is said to have been the son of the mortal shepherd Eueres and the nymph Chariklo. Once when he came upon a pair of snakes mating. He struck the female snake on the head and was instantly transformed into a woman. Teiresias lived as a woman for seven years. Then, when she was walking along near Mount Kyllene again, she discovered the same pair of snakes mating again. This time, she struck the male snake on the head. As a result, she was transformed back into a man.

At some point, Zeus and Hera got into an argument over whether the man or the woman experiences greater pleasure during sex. Hera claimed that the man experiences more sexual pleasure, but Zeus claimed that the woman does. Teiresias was the only person they knew of who had had sex both as a man and as a woman, so they summoned him and asked him whether he had personally experienced greater pleasure during sex as a man or as a woman. Teiresias replied that, if you divide sexual pleasure into ten parts, the woman experiences nine of those parts, while the man only experiences one.

Hera was furious with Teiresias's answer, so she cursed him with blindness. Zeus, however, was greatly pleased, so he granted Teiresias the gift of prophecy and decreed that he would live seven times the lifetime of a normal person. Teiresias went on to become a renowned prophet and

advisor to the kings of Thebes. He is a fascinating and complicated figure, who embodies multiple paradoxes. He is both human and divine, both male and female, and both blind and seeing.

In Xenophon's Oeconomicus (7–10), a fourth-century b.c. Socratic dialogue on estate management, the Athenian aristocrat Ischomachus describes the ideal woman, his wife, in a discussion with Socrates. Xenophon does not see women as completely devoid of courage, however, as they must have some modicum of this trait to guard the valuables inside the house. In Xenophon's understanding, prescribed gender roles are ordained by the god Zeus, and thus considered natural.

Of course, Greek conceptions of gender did not necessarily match up to the reality portrayed in Greek historical accounts or even myth, where women do show intelligence. In the Odyssey, for example, Homer does portray Penelope as clever, and hence the gendering of intelligence as a male trait is not universal among Greek authors. In extant classical Athenian literature, however, there is a tendency to view intelligent women as masculine.

The Athenian playwright Aeschylus presents the character of Clytemnestra as a masculine woman due to both her intelligence and her boldness in his tragic trilogy the Oresteia. The three plays of the Oresteia centre around the murder of the Greek hero Agamemnon by his wife, Clytemnestra, upon his return from the Trojan War. At the beginning of the first play, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra is called androboulos 'manly-minded' because she is capably ruling Argos in her husband's stead. She eventually she kills her husband in revenge for his murder of their daughter, Iphigenia. As revenge was considered to be the domain of men in ancient Greece, Clytemnestra's actions are ascribed to tolma, or audacity that is improper for a woman.

Aeschylus' portrait of Clytemnestra negatively inscribes classical-era Athenian gender norms: Clytemnestra usurps power reserved for men, and she pays the ultimate price for doing so: death. The same may be said for Sophocles' Antigone, in the tragedy of the same name. Unlike Clytemnestra, however, Antigone is a parthenos (a virgin or unmarried girl). The unmarried woman was considered to be adamatos, or 'untamed', and the only way that she could be tamed

was via marriage. Sophocles' Antigone, betrothed but yet unwed, disrupts the social and political order by disobeying the orders of her uncle Creon, who represents patriarchal authority in the play Antigone. Hence she is called a man by Creon. Yet she is also called a man by her father, Oedipus, for her loyalty to him in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus. In both plays, we sympathise with Antigone, and thus Antigone's masculinity is held in a positive light.

In Aeschylus' Oresteia, Clytemnestra's partner in crime, Aegisthus, is called a 'woman' (gynē) and accused of 'having a cowardly soul' by the chorus because he did not serve in the Greek army that attacked Troy, and, furthermore, because he allowed Clytemnestra to kill Agamemnon rather than do the deed himself.

Aristophanes' comedy Clouds has a character, Cleōnymus who is called a 'shield-thrower' (rhipsaspis). Throwing away one's shield amounted to deserting the ranks of the phalanx and retreating, and was seen by the Greeks as a true act of cowardice. Cleōnymus becomes the butt of a joke when the character Socrates instructs his pupil Strepsiades to write Cleōnymus' name with a feminine ending, thus changing it to Cleōnymē. Plato equates the man who lacked courage, and thus failed to live up to the ancient Greek ideals of manhood, with a woman when he asserts that the cowardly man who lives a bad life will be reincarnated in the second generation as a woman.

Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, was usually considered female, but, in the city of Amathos on the island of Kypros, she was worshipped in a male form under the masculine name Aphroditos. In Greek art, Aphroditos is typically portrayed as an androgynous figure; he wears a kind of dress that the Greeks traditionally regarded as feminine, but yet he is lifting up the dress to show everyone his erect penis. In some depictions, he is also shown with a beard to further emphasize his male aspect.

The Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BCE – c. 17 CE) wrote his long narrative poem Metamorphoses in Latin sometime around the year 8 CE. Near the end of Book Nine of the poem, he tells the story of Ligdus and his wife Telethusa. They were very poor and they knew that if they had a daughter, they would not be able to pay a dowry for her. When Telethusa

became pregnant, Ligdus told her that, if she gave birth to a son, they would raise him, but, if she gave birth to a daughter, they would abandon her to die in the wilderness. Telethusa had a dream in which the Egyptian goddess Isis instructed her that she should raise her child—regardless of whether it was a boy or a girl—and promised to assist her in the future.

In time, Telethusa gave birth to a girl, but she concealed the child's sex from her husband telling him that the child was a boy. Ligdus named the child Iphis after his own father and the couple raised Iphis as a boy. When Iphis reached maturity, Ligdus, still believing that she was a boy, arranged for her to marry a beautiful young woman named Ianthe. Iphis and Ianthe fell deeply in love with each other. Iphis wanted to marry Ianthe, but she knew this would be impossible, since she was not really a man, so she prayed to the goddess Iuno to make her a man.

Telethusa took Iphis to the temple of Isis and, in that moment, Iphis was miraculously physically transformed into a man. As a result of the miracle wrought by Isis, Iphis was able to marry Ianthe, the love of his life.

As early as the fifth century to the ninth century, there has been a record of a series of the lives of individuals who were female at birth but for a variety of reasons who chose to live most their lives as monks, usually passing as eunuchs within male monastic communities. Throughout the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, these stories gained in popularity as evidenced by their increased presence in the manuscript tradition. There's no doubt that the order included people who had been assigned male at birth who adopted traditionally feminine gender attributes. It's not clear, though, whether these people identified as men, women, or some other gender.

After all, the existence of intersex individuals is much more common than Western society would have us believe, and often is not tied to genitalia at all. The Greek tradition as we have it does not allow for many variants from their binary paradigm; thus, we benefit from considering other ancient paradigms that can offer a more nuanced view of reality that is unable to be expressed in Greek literature.

These recalibrations in our perspectives of what transgender means in the ancient literature reveal a range of sites in which premodern non-cis-gender persons could find potent sites for

self-identification: not as queer, abject, and aberrant social figures, but often within the central vision of a work.

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