

Species Dysphoria in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In this paper, I argue that women experience species dysphoria differently from men in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Closely related to gender dysphoria and a type of Body Dysmorphic Disorder, species dysphoria occurs when you feel that your body belongs to the wrong species. Because women have inherently deceptive bodies in ancient literature, women experience this identity crisis more than men, and they feel it more acutely. Their transformation from human into animal displays—and perhaps even betrays—their internal nature to an external audience, and it creates deep-seated anxiety and emotional distress.

When women transform in the *Metamorphoses*, they discover an uneasy freedom and escape from the violent world of men and gods. I argue that among those who display this uneasiness in their metamorphosis, Io, Ocyrhoë, and Scylla are prime examples of species dysphoria, where the skin they now possess conflicts with the mind they think they have: Io spooks at the cow reflected back at her (1.640–41); Ocyrhoë wonders why she is turning into a horse when her father was a centaur (2.633–65); and Scylla tries to rip out the dogs who suddenly appear around her waist (14.62–63). Ingvild Gilhus has described these experiences as being stuck in a “foreign place,” and Chiara Thumiger suggests that metamorphic dysphoria is the character's anxiety at her change in destiny. For women particularly, I argue that dysphoria arises from an anxiety that they may have never been fully human in the first place. Because ancient gender stereotypes relied on the species instability of women, Ovid suggests that generally, women can experience more release from social pressure than men through metamorphosis. While some women, like Arachne, lose voice and agency in this change, others have the potential to embrace their new species and the freedom from violence it affords.