

## Exploring FTM Mythology: Part 1

### RAISING CAENEUS

By

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"History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity."

--Cicero

"Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energy of the cosmos pour through into human cultural manifestation."

--Campbell: *The Masks of God - Primitive Mythology*

If we believe that transexuality is solely a medical phenomenon, then by that very belief we disavow our existence before the 20th Century. Needless to say, we did not suddenly spring into being during the mid-1900's. Lou Sullivan in *Information for the Female-to-Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual* (Seattle: Ingersoll Gender Center, 1990) has information peppered throughout his book about individuals, predominantly in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, who were assigned "female" at birth, but lived as men for some or most of their lives. True, there is some difficulty deciphering the lives of individuals before the advent of medical transition, the result being that both trans and lesbian communities stake a claim to a certain individual (e.g. Billy Tipton, Dr. Alan L. Hart, etc.). But, what is more important than the validity of some groups' claim, is that these histories provide a sense that regardless of what group we belong to we are not alone on this journey

Equally important is the realization that our story is not a new one, but one that has been captured in the tales and myths of peoples throughout the world. There are a variety of myths which contain the theme of changing sex, yet in very few does the individual begin life as female. [For theories as to why this may be, see *Traditions of Sexual Diversity and Sexualities: A Female-to-Male Transgendered Perspective* by Jason Cromwell in "Two-Spirit People" (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1997)] Myth in western eyes tends to be seen as fiction. By calling these tales myths, it is not my intent to diminish their importance or to suggest that they are or were untrue.

It is my hope to bring some of these "lost" myths into the light of day so that more scholarly types can do them justice and also to engender a sense of history that encompasses more than just a few hundred years. My hope is that this will be the first in a series of explorations of FTMs in mythology.

## Caeneus/Kaineus

I voraciously read Greek and Roman mythology during my childhood, and yet managed to completely overlook the myth of Caeneus. It first came to my attention when reading Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) which contains the following reference at page 56:

“[C]hanging attitudes toward trans people and the sharpening patriarchal class divisions are reflected by Greek legends, in the same way that the mythological defeat of goddesses by male gods mirrored the overthrow of matrilineal societies. For example, Kaineus (Caeneus), a female-to-male figure in mythology, is viewed as a scorner and rival of the gods. [P.M.C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1990) p. 161]. He is driven into the earth by Centaurs who consider Kaineus an outrage to their masculinity.”

What is written about Caeneus varies from writer to writer and even the spelling of the name changes between Caeneus and Kaineus depending on whether the underlying myth is Roman or Greek (respectively). There are, however, three distinct stories, some of which contain more detail than others: (1) the circumstances leading up to the transformation from female to male, (2) the flaunting of religious convention, and (3) the final battle/death/transformation. Although not specifically mentioned by name in the actual tales of the Argonauts, Caeneus' name appears as a member of its crew. [Apollodorus, *Epitome* 9.16; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 14]

There are, however, discrepancies in the telling such as whether Caenis (pronounced SEEN-us and constituting the female name) was raped or had consensual sex with Poseidon/Neptune<sup>1</sup>, whether the boon requested was merely to be transformed from female to male or sought invincibility as well, and whether Caeneus (the male name) reverted to female form following his death [according to Virgil] or whether he metamorphosed into a bird [according to Ovid].

### Transition from Female to Male

Edward Tripp in *Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology* (New York: Crowell, 1970) starts a little earlier in the tale than most common sources. He recounts that Caenis had refused to take a husband. While walking on the seashore one day, she was “violated” by Poseidon. “Afterward, when he offered to grant her whatever boon she might chose, she asked him to make her a man so that such an

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<sup>1</sup> For those of you unfamiliar with these myths, Poseidon was the Greek God of the seas while Neptune was the name ascribed to him by the Romans. The myths between these cultures have as many similarities as they do differences. They are not interchangeable.

indignity might never happen to her again. Poseidon not only kept his promise, but made Caenis -- now Caeneus-- invulnerable to weapons as well."

Robert Graves in *The Greek Myths* (London: The Penguin Group, 1955,1960) downplays the sexual interaction stating:

"Poseidon once lay with the Nymph Caenis, daughter of Elatis the Magnesians or, some say of Cronus the Lapith, and asked her to name a love-gift. 'Transform me,' she said 'into an invulnerable fighter. I am weary of being a woman.' ¶Poseidon obligingly changed her sex and she became Caeneus, waging war with such success that the Lapiths soon elected her their king and she even begat a son, Coronus, whom Heracles killed many years later while fighting for Aegimius the Dorian."  
[at p.260]

Verlag Herder Freiburg in *The Chiron Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Chiron Publishing, 1993) tells a similar tale: that Caenis was abducted and then rewarded by Poseidon who granted her a wish to become male.

In the first rendition Caenis seeks manhood to escape sexual predation while in the next two it is simply what s/he desires. Pierre Grimal in *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Basil Blackwell Lt'd, 1990) is quite clear that the request arose after an act of violence, then leaves us to wonder whether it is something that Caenis wanted in the first instance:

"Caeneus (Kaineus) originally a girl named Caenis, the daughter of Elatis (2), who was raped by Poseidon. She asked the god to change her into a male; Poseidon granted this request and made Caeneus invulnerable."

Caenis' refusal to marry is not subject to clear interpretation. Caenis refusal to marry could mean that he was trans and heterosexual. However, if that is the case why do we not hear of the desire to be male until after the sexual assault? By the same token, this refusal could be construed as homosexuality. If that is the case, why do we not hear of Caenis' feelings for women? As he fathers a son, we can assume that there was at least one woman in his life, but nothing at all is said of the relationship or the identity of the mother of his child. Why is this?

Now that we know the modern interpretations what do the olden texts say? In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, book 12, Nestor tells the following tale. The text in poetic verse is depicted side by side with that set in modern English:

Then Nestor thus: what once this age has known,  
In fated Cygnus, and in him alone,  
These eyes have seen in Caeneus long before;  
Whose body not a thousand swords cou'd bore.  
Caeneus, in courage, and in strength, excell'd;  
And still his Othrys with his fame is fill'd:  
But what did most his martial deeds adorn  
(Though since he chang'd his sex) a woman born.  
A novelty so strange, and full of Fate,  
His list'ning audience ask'd him to relate.

Achilles thus commends their common sute:  
O father, first for prudence in repute,  
Tell, with that eloquence, so much thy own,  
What thou hast heard, or what of Caeneus known:  
What was he, whence his change of sex begun,  
What trophies, join'd in wars with thee, he won?  
Who conquer'd him, and in what fatal strife  
The youth, without a wound, cou'd lose his life?  
Neleides then: Though tardy age, and time,  
Have shrunk my sinews, and decay'd my prime;  
Though much I have forgotten of my store,  
Yet not exhausted, I remember more.  
Of all that arms atchiev'd, or peace design'd,  
That action still is fresher in my mind,  
Than ought beside. If reverend age can give  
To faith a sanction, in my third I live.

'Twas in my second cent'ry, I survey'd  
Young Caenis, then a fair Thessalian maid:  
Caenis the bright, was born to high command;  
A princess, and a native of thy land,  
Divine Achilles; every tongue proclaim'd  
Her beauty, and her eyes all hearts inflam'd.  
Peleus, thy sire, perhaps had sought her bed,  
Among the rest; but he had either led  
Thy mother then; or was by promise ty'd;  
But she to him, and all, alike her love deny'd.  
It was her fortune once to take her way  
Along the sandy margin of the sea:  
The Pow'r of ocean view'd her as she pass'd,  
And, lov'd as soon as seen, by force embrac'd.  
So Fame reports. Her virgin-treasure seiz'd,  
And his new joys, the ravisher so pleas'd,  
That thus, transported, to the nymph he cry'd;  
Ask what thou wilt, no pray'r shall be deny'd.  
This also Fame relates: the haughty fair,  
Who not the rape ev'n of a God cou'd bear,  
This answer, proud, return'd: To mighty wrongs  
A mighty recompence, of right, belongs.  
Give me no more to suffer such a shame;  
But change the woman, for a better name;

But, long ago, I myself saw one Caeneus of  
Thessaly, who could take a thousand strokes  
with unwounded body: Thessalian Caeneus, I  
say, who, famous for his exploits, lived on  
Mount Othrys, and what made it more  
remarkable in him, he had been born a  
woman.' All who there were interested by this  
strange wonder, and asked him to tell the  
story.

Achilles, among the rest, said: 'Say on, old one!  
O ancient eloquence, wisdom of our age, all of us  
equally desire to hear, who Caeneus was, why he  
was changed to his opposite, what campaign you  
met him in, fighting against whom, by whom he  
was overcome, if anyone overcame him.' Then the  
old warrior said: 'Though the slowness of age  
hampers me, and many things I once saw have  
slipped from me, I can still remember many.  
Nothing sticks more firmly in my mind than this,  
amongst all those acts, in battle and at home, and  
if length of years alone enabled a man to report  
many deeds, I have lived two hundred years: now  
I live in my third century.

Elatus's daughter, Caenis, loveliest of the  
virgins of Thessaly, was famous for her beauty,  
a girl longed for in vain, the object of many  
suitors throughout the neighbouring cities and  
your own (since she was one of your people,  
Achilles).  
Perhaps Peleus also would have tried to wed  
her, but he had already taken your mother in  
marriage, or she was promised to your father.  
Caenis would not agree to any marriage, but (so  
rumour has it) she was walking along a lonely  
beach, and the god took her by force. When  
Neptune had enjoyed his new love he said:  
'Make your wish, without fear of refusal. Ask  
for what you most want!' (The same rumour  
mentioned this.)

'This injury evokes the great desire never to be  
able to suffer any such again. Grant I might not  
be a woman: you will have given me  
everything,' Caenis said. She spoke the last  
words in a deeper tone, that might have been

<p>One gift for all: she said; and while she spoke, A stern, majestick, manly tone she took. A man she was: and as the Godhead swore, To Caeneus turn'd, who Caenis was before. To this the lover adds, without request, No force of steel shou'd violate his breast. Glad of the gift, the new-made warrior goes; And arms among the Greeks, and longs for equal foes.</p>	<p>the sound of a man's voice. So it was: the god of the deep ocean had already accepted her wish, and had granted, over and above it, that as a man Caeneus would be protected from all wounds, and never fall to the sword. Caeneus, the Atracides, left, happy with his gifts, and spent his time in manly pastimes, roaming the Thessalian fields."</p>
<p><a href="http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ovid/meta/meta11.htm">http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ovid/meta/meta11.htm</a></p>	<p><a href="http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph12.htm#Bktwelve146">http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph12.htm#Bktwelve146</a></p>

## Impiety or Pride

Not much is told about the life of Caeneus' except that events leading to transition from female to male, that he fathered a son, Coronus, that he participated in the Calydonian bore hunt and was a member of the Argonauts, and of his downfall after angering Zeus.

Freiburg in *The Chiron Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology* mentions the spear, but there are no specifics provided other than the assertion that Caeneus is impious because he worships nothing but his own spear.

Grimal in *The Concise Dictionary of Classical* relates that "A different tradition tells that after he had become a man, Caeneus grew extremely proud and he set his spear up in the marketplace and ordered the populace to worship it. To punish him Zeus roused the Centaurs against him and finally killed him." [p. 80].

So why was Zeus so angry? The answer may lie in Grave's commentary. In *The Greek Myths* he notes:

"Exalted by his new condition, Caeneus, set up a spear in the middle of the market place, where people congregated, and made then sacrifice to it as if to a god, and honour no other deity whatsoever.

Zeus, hearing of Caeneus' presumption, instigated the Centaurs to an act of murder."

Was it pride or was it disdain for the gods stemming from the rape by Poseidon/Neptune that caused this incident at the marketplace? Angering the head of the Greek Pantheon by worshipping and demanding that the crowds worship his spear to the exclusion of all others, Caeneus seals his own fate.

## Battle to the Death

Graves tells that “During the wedding of Peirithous (the Centaurs) made a sudden attack on her (Caeneus), but she had no difficulty killing 5 or 6 of them without incurring the slightest wound, because their weapons rebounded harmlessly from her charmed skin. However, the remaining Centaurs beat her on the head with fir logs, until, they had driven her under the earth, and then piled a mound of logs above. So Caeneus smothered and died.”

Grimal reports that “Caeneus took part in the struggle against the Centaurs, but when they could not kill him, they beat him with trunks of fir trees and finally buried him alive. It is said that following his death Caeneus became a woman again, or according to Ovid, a bird.

Ovid’s tale of the battle is again told through Nestor in the 12<sup>th</sup> Book of *Metamorphosis*. The following uses the same format as above:<sup>2</sup>:

<p>“Caeneus, with his conquering hand, Had slaughter'd five the boldest of their band. Pyrachmus, Helymus, Antimachus, Bromus the brave, and stronger Stiphelus, Their names I number'd, and remember well, No trace remaining, by what wounds they fell.</p> <p>Laitreus, the bulki'st of the double race, Whom the spoil'd arms of slain Halesus grace, In years retaining still his youthful might, Though his black hairs were interspers'd with white,</p> <p>Betwixt th' imbattled ranks began to prance, Proud of his helm, and Macedonian lance; And rode the ring around; that either hoast Might hear him, while he made this empty boast:</p> <p>And from a strumpet shall we suffer shame? For Caenis still, not Caeneus, is thy name: And still the native softness of thy kind Prevails; and leaves the woman in thy mind; Remember what thou wert; what price was paid To change thy sex; to make thee not a maid: And but a man in shew; go, card and spin; And leave the business of the war to men.</p>	<p>Caeneus had killed five: Styphelos, Bromus, Antimachus, Elymus; and Pyracmos, who was armed with a battle-axe. I do not recall their wounds, but I noted their number, and their names.</p> <p>Then Latreus rushed forward, massive in body and limbs, armed with the spoils of Emathian Halesus whom he had killed. He was between youth and age, but had the strength of youth, his hair greying on his temples.</p> <p>Prancing in a circle, turning to face each of the battle-lines in turn, and conspicuous for his Macedonian lance, helmet and shield, he clashed his weapons, pouring out many proud words, into the empty air.</p> <p>“Do I have to put up with you, Caenis? For you will always be a woman, Caenis, to me. Does your natal origin not remind you; does not the act you were rewarded for come to mind, at what cost you gained this false aspect of a man? Consider what you were born as, or what you experienced, go, pick up your distaff and basket of wool and twist the spun thread with your thumb: leave war to men.”</p>
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<sup>2</sup> To allow poem and modern text to be viewed side by side, hard returns have been inserted where they do not appear in the actual text.

While thus the boaster exercis'd his pride,  
 The fatal spear of Caeneus reach'd his side:  
 Just in the mixture of the kinds it ran;  
 Betwixt the neather beast, and upper man:  
 The monster mad with rage, and stung with smart,  
 His lance directed at the hero's heart:  
 It struck; but bounded from his harden'd breast,  
 Like hail from tiles, which the safe house invest.  
 Nor seem'd the stroke with more effect to come,  
 Than a small pebble falling on a drum.  
 He next his fauchion try'd, in closer fight;  
 But the keen fauchion had no pow'r to bite.  
 He thrust; the blunted point return'd again:  
 Since downright blows, he cry'd, and thrusts are vain,  
 I'll prove his side; in strong embraces held  
 He prov'd his side; his side the sword repell'd:  
 His hollow belly eccho'd to the stroke,  
 Untouch'd his body, as a solid rock;  
 Aim'd at his neck at last, the blade in shivers  
 broke.

Th' impassive knight stood idle, to deride  
 His rage, and offer'd off his naked side;  
 At length, Now monster, in thy turn, he cry'd,  
 Try thou the strength of Caeneus: at the word  
 He thrust; and in his shoulder plung'd the sword.  
 Then writh'd his hand; and as he drove it down,  
 Deep in his breast, made many wounds in one.  
 The centaurs saw, inrag'd, th' unhop'd success;  
 And rushing on in crowds, together press;  
 At him, and him alone, their darts they threw:  
 Repuls'd they from his fated body flew.  
 Amaz'd they stood; 'till Monichus began,

O shame, a nation conquer'd by a man!  
 A woman-man! yet more a man is he,  
 Than all our race; and what he was, are we.  
 Now, what avail our nerves? th' united force,  
 Of two the strongest creatures, man and horse;  
 Nor Goddess-born; nor of Ixion's seed  
 We seem (a lover built for Juno's bed);  
 Master'd by this half man.  
 Whole mountains throw  
 With woods at once, and  
 bury him below.  
 This only way remains.  
 Nor need we doubt  
 To choak the soul within; though not to force it

At this Caeneus threw his spear, ploughing a furrow in the centaur's side, where man and horse joined, as he was stretched out in the act of galloping. Maddened with pain, Latreus struck the Phylleian youth in his unprotected face, with the lance: but it bounced off like a hailstone from a rooftop, or a small pebble from a hollow drum. Then he closed up on him, and tried to thrust his sword into his impenetrable side: the sword found no way in. The centaur shouted: "You will still not escape! I will kill you with the sword's edge if the point is blunt." Turning his blade sideways he reached out for his enemy's loins with his long right arm. The blow resounded, as if it struck a body of marble, and the weapon fractured in pieces as it hit the firm flesh.

When he had exposed his unwounded limbs for long enough to his wondering enemy, Caeneus said: "Now let me try your body with my blade!" and he drove his fatal weapon into the other's side, turning and twisting his hand, buried in the guts, causing wound on wound. See, the centaurs maddened, rushed on him with a great shout, and all aimed and threw their spears at the one man. The spears fell, blunted: and Caeneus, son of Elatus, remained unpierced and unbloodied by all their efforts. This marvel astonished them.

"Oh, what overwhelming shame!" Monychus exclaimed. "A people defeated by one who is scarcely a man: yet he is the man, and we, with our half-hearted attempts are what he once was. What use are our huge limbs? What use our twin powers, and that double nature uniting the strongest living things in us? We are not sons of a divine mother: nor of Ixion who was such as aspired to captivate great Juno: we are overcome by an enemy, who is half a man! Roll down rocks and tree trunks on him, and whole mountainsides, and crush that stubborn spirit with the forests we hurl! Let their mass constrict his throat, and let weight work instead of wounds."

<p>out: Heap weights, instead of wounds.</p> <p>He chanc'd to see Where southern storms had rooted up a tree; This, rais'd from Earth, against the foe he threw; Th' example shewn, his fellow-brutes pursue. With forest-loads the warrior they invade; Othrys, and Pelion soon were void of shade; And spreading groves were naked mountains made. Press'd with the burden, Caeneus pants for breath; And on his shoulders bears the wooden death. To heave th' intolerable weight he tries; At length it rose above his mouth and eyes: Yet still he heaves; and, struggling with despair, Shakes all aside, and gains a gulp of air: A short relief, which but prolongs his pain; He faints by fits; and then respire again: At last, the burden only nods above, As when an earthquake stirs th' Idaean grove.</p> <p>Doubtful his death: he suffocated seem'd, To most; but otherwise our Mopsus deem'd, Who said he saw a yellow bird arise From out the piles, and cleave the liquid skies: I saw it too, with golden feathers bright; Nor e'er before beheld so strange a sight. Whom Mopsus viewing, as it soar'd around Our troop, and heard the pinions' rattling sound, All hail, he cry'd, thy country's grace and love! Once first of men below, now first of birds above. Its author to the story gave belief: For us, our courage was increas'd by grief: Asham'd to see a single man, pursu'd With odds, to sink beneath a multitude, We push'd the foe: and forc'd to shameful flight, Part fell, and part escap'd by favour of the night."</p>	<p>He spoke, and finding a chance tree-trunk toppled by a furious southerly wind, he threw it at his powerful enemy. He served as the example, and in a little while Mount Othrys was bare of trees, and Pelion had lost its shade. Buried under the huge pile, Caeneus strained against the weight of trees, and propped up the mass of oak on his strong shoulders, but as it mounted above his mouth and face, he had no breath of the air that he breathed, and lacking it, often, he tried in vain to raise himself into the air, and throw off the forest piled on him, and often heaved, as if steep Mount Ida, that we see there, look, was shaken by an earthquake.</p> <p>His fate is doubtful: some said his body was thrust down to empty Tartarus, by the mass of forest: but Mopsus, the son of Ampycus denied this. He saw a bird with tawny wings fly into the clear air from the midst of the pile, which I saw also, then, for the first and last time ever. As Mopsus watched him smoothly circling his camp in flight, making a great noise, he pursued him with mind and vision, saying "Hail to you, Caeneus, glory of the race of Lapiths, once a great hero, but now a bird alone!" The thing was believed because of its author: grief was added to anger, and we could barely accept one man being conquered by so many enemies. Nor did we cease to work off our pain with the sword until half were dead, and half, fleeing, were swallowed by the night.'</p>
<p><a href="http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ovid/meta/meta11.htm">http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ovid/meta/meta11.htm</a></p>	<p><a href="http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph12.htm#Bktwelve146">http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph12.htm#Bktwelve146</a></p>

## Conclusion

What is the relevance of this myth? Well, to some degree not much has changed about how we are treated by society. What struck me the strongest was Graves' utilization of female pronouns throughout his telling of the tale, not unlike the Centaur Latreus' taunt that Caeneus is not a "real" man. Some of the other authors at least utilized female pronouns prior to the gender transformation and male pronouns thereafter. The refusal to acknowledge our current identities is something that seems to have transcended the ages. Also, Latreus referred to

Caeneus by his former name, also something experienced by many of us at one time or another.

One parable that was immediately noticeable was that of “pride goeth before a fall”. Here, Caeneus’s pride takes the form of a demand that his spear be worshipped. In doing so, he reveals a sense of self-absorption which is not uncommon to those beginning transition. While I’ve yet to hear of the transman who has gone so far as demanding to be worshiped as a deity, the tendency to become engrossed in the process to the exclusion of all else is not uncommon. Also, there is the tendency to become increasingly focused on those things that represent our maleness or our “spears” as the tale tells.

Finally, death as the disavowal of our lives as men resounded strongly. There have been a number of instances in which individuals assigned female at birth who lived, breathed, and acted as men during their lives without the use of medical technology have been “discovered” at their deaths and referred to as women. [See Billy Tipton, Jack B. Garland, etc.]. For many, who have not had lower surgery, regardless of the reason, this is an unfortunate reality.

What else did you see in the tale?

*For Further Reference See:*

Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphosis* 17  
Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 1.57-64  
Apollodorus, *Epitome* 1.22  
Homer, *Iliad* 1, 262  
Hyginus, *Fabulae* 6  
Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 12.189-209 and 12.459-531  
Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 13, 1611, 38  
Palaeph. *Incredibilia*. In *N. Festa* 11  
Virgil, *Aeneid* Book 6

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