



Queer and Trans Stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – Teachers' Guide

This document contains a series of sources which can be used to explore the myths in the chapter in more detail. Each source has some questions after it, which could help to prompt discussion. One idea is to run 'reading group' style sessions, giving students the sources to consider in advance. If time is limited, teachers can pick and choose which sources they would like to use. Please note, there are references within some of the sources to sexual assault. Teachers are advised to read the material before sharing with students.

1. The Legend of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus

Strabo *Geography* 14.2.16

Strabo (64 or 63 BCE – c. 24 CE) was a Greek geographer who lived in Asia Minor. Here, he describes the fountain called Salmacis (in modern day Bodrum, Turkey) which becomes important to the story of Hermaphroditus in Ovid.

Then to Halicarnassus, the royal residence of the dynasts of Caria, which was formerly called Zephyra. Here is the tomb of Mausolus, one of the Seven Wonders, a monument erected by Artemisia in honor of her husband; and here is the fountain called Salmacis, which has the slanderous repute, for what reason I do not know, of making effeminate all who drink from it. It seems that the effeminacy of man is laid to the charge of the air or of the water; yet it is not these, but rather riches and wanton living, that are the cause of effeminacy. Halicarnassus has an acropolis; and off the city lies Arconnesus. Its colonizers were, among others, Anthes and a number of Troezenians. Natives of Halicarnassus have been: Herodotus the historian, whom they later called a Thurian, because he took part in the colonization of Thuri; and Heracleitus the poet, the comrade of Callimachus; and, in my time, Dionysius the historian. [Source: [Perseus Digital Library](#)]

- What reputation does the fountain Salmacis have?
- What stereotypes about gender roles can you identify in this passage?

Vitruvius *de architectura* 2.8.11-2.8.12

Vitruvius (c.80-70 BCE to after c. 15 BCE) was a Roman architect and engineer. He also writes about the reputation of the spring of Salmacis.

At the extreme right of the summit is the **fane** of Venus and Mercury, close to the spring of Salmacis. There is a mistaken idea that this spring infects those who drink of it with an unnatural lewdness. It will not be out of place to explain how this idea came to spread throughout the world from a mistake in the telling of the tale. It cannot be that the water makes men effeminate and unchaste, as it is said to do; for the spring is of remarkable clearness and excellent in flavour. The fact is that when Melas and Arevanias came there from Argos and Troezen and founded a colony together, they drove out the Carians and Lelegans who were barbarians. These took refuge in the mountains, and, uniting there, used

to make raids, plundering the Greeks and laying their country waste in a cruel manner. Later, one of the colonists, to make money, set up a well-stocked shop, near the spring because the water was so good, and the way in which he carried it on attracted the barbarians. So they began to come down, one at a time, and to meet with society, and thus they were brought back of their own accord, giving up their rough and savage ways for the delights of Greek customs. Hence this water acquired its peculiar reputation, not because it really induced unchastity, but because those barbarians were softened by the charm of civilization. [Source: [Perseus Digital Library](#)]

- What is the reputation of the spring according to Vitruvius?
- What is his explanation for this reputation, and how does the idea of the “barbarian” come into this?

Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, IV.6.5

Diodorus Siculus was an ancient Greek historian writing in the first century BCE.

A birth like that of Priapus is ascribed by some writers of myths to Hermaphroditus, as he has been called, who was born of Hermes and Aphrodite and received a name which is a combination of those of both his parents. Some say that this Hermaphroditus is a god and appears at certain times among men, and that he is born with a physical body which is a combination of that of a man and that of a woman, in that he has a body which is beautiful and delicate like that of a woman, but has the masculine quality and vigour of a man. But there are some who declare that such creatures of two sexes are monstrosities, and coming rarely into the world as they do have the quality of presaging the future, sometimes for evil and sometimes for good. But let this be enough for us on such matters. [Source: [LacusCurtius](#)
• [Diodorus Siculus — Book IV Chapters 1-7 \(uchicago.edu\)](#)]

- According to this writer, what are the physical characteristics with which Hermaphroditus is born?
- What different responses to Hermaphroditus does the writer recount in this passage?

Ovid *Metamorphoses* Book IV.274-388

Ovid (43 BCE to 17/18 CE) explains how the spring came to have its reputation through his story of Salmacis (a naiad,  water nymph) and Hermaphroditus.

The sisters hush. Alcithoë begins.	295
She runs the shuttle through the warp threads, saying: “I will not tell the hackneyed loves of Daphnis, The shepherd boy of Ida, whom a nymph changed into stone in anger at a rival – such grief burns lovers. Nor will I recount	300
how gender-fluid Sithon, now a man and now a woman, made new laws of nature. I’m skipping you too, Celmis, (metal now	

but once most faithful to the baby Jove),
the rain-born Curetes, as well as Crocus, 305
transformed with Smilax into little flowers.
I'll tell you something new to charm your minds.

"Now learn why Salmacis is infamous
why it unmans and softens any limbs
its sapping streams have touched. The fountain's force 310
is most notorious, its cause obscure.

in Ida's caves, the naiads nursed a son
of Mercury and Venus in whose face
mother and father could be discerned.
He took his name from them as well. At age 315

fifteen, he left his native hills, departing
Ida, his nurse, to roam through unknown lands.
It brought him joy to look at unknown streams.
Eagerness made his labor light. He goes

To Lycia and to Caria, Lycia's neighbor, 320
and here he sees a pool of water, clear
down to the soil below. It had no reeds,
no sterile sedges, and no sharp-tipped rush.

Its water was transparent, yet its banks
were ringed by living turf and verdant grass. 325
A nymph lived there, but not one fit for hunting
or archery or racing. She alone

of naiads was unknown to swift Diana.
Often, the story goes, her sisters told her,
'Salmacis, lift a spear or painted quiver. 330
Balance your leisure with some rugged hunting.'

She does not lift a spear or painted quiver
or balance leisure with some rugged hunting,
but bathes her lovely limbs in her own waters
and smooths her tresses with a boxwood comb 335

while gazing at the streams to see what suits her.
She drapes her body in translucent robes
and lounges in soft leaves or on soft grass.
She often would pick flowers. She by chance

was picking flowers when she saw the boy, 340
and, seeing him, desired to possess him.
She longed to go to him, but did not go
till she composed herself. She checked her clothes

and face to make sure she looked beautiful,
then spoke: 'Boy worthiest to be thought a god – 345
or if you are a god, you could be Cupid –
but if you're mortal, blessed are your parents,

lucky your brother, fortunate your sister,
if you possess one, and the nurse who gave

her breasts to you. More blessed than all these 350
 is your fiancée, if you've found one worthy.
 If you're engaged, I can have secret pleasure.
 But if you're not, let me be your betrothed
 and we can climb into our marriage bed.'
 The nymph grew quiet after this. A blush 355
 marked the boy's face, for he was ignorant
 of love. Even this blush was most attractive,
 the hue of apples on a sun-drenched tree
 or painted ivory or the moon eclipsed
 and blushing underneath its gleam while cymbals 360
 ring out in vain to help. She begs and begs
 for kisses (just the kind he'd give a sister!)
 and lifts her hand up to his ivory neck.
 'Stop, or I'll flee,' he said, 'and leave this spot
 and you.' Salmacis grew afraid and told him, 365
 'I freely yield this place to you, my guest.'
 She turned around, pretending to depart.
 Yet even then she kept on looking back
 and hid by kneeling down behind some shrubs.
 The boy, as if unwatched, strolls here and there 370
 around the open grass. He dips his toes,
 then his whole foot, into the frisking stream.
 At once, drawn by the cool, enticing water,
 he takes the soft clothes off his youthful body.
 Then truly he was pleasing. Salmacis 375
 grows hot with longing for his naked beauty.
 The nymph's eyes glow, as when the sun's clear orb
 is shining very brightly and a mirror
 reflects its likeness. She can barely wait,
 barely postpone her joys. Out of her mind, 380
 she yearns to clasp him and cannot hold back.
 He strikes his chest with open palms, then quickly
 dives in the water. As he swims, he shines
 through the translucent stream as when clear glass
 encases ivory statues or white lilies. 385
 'I've won! Now he is mine!' the naiad shouts.
 Her clothing tossed aside, she hurls herself
 into the waves. She holds him as he struggles,
 steals kisses that resist. Her hands slide up
 to fondle his unwilling chest. She pours 390
 around him, now on one side, now the other.
 He fights her, trying to escape, but she
 enfolds him like a snake seized by an eagle
 (while hanging from the claws, it binds and squeezes
 the head and feet and wide wings with its tail), 395
 Or else like ivy woven round tall trunks,

or like an octopus beneath the sea
 that grabs and holds its foe with girding arms.
 The great-grandson of Atlas is persistent
 as he denies the nymph her hoped-for joys. 400
 She grips him, clinging as if her whole body
 were fused to his. 'Fight, wicked boy,' she said,
 'you won't escape! Decree, gods, that no day
 will let him part from me or me from him!'
 Her prayer found kindly gods, for their two bodies 405
 merge and combine. They wear a single face.
 As when somebody grafts boughs onto bark
 and sees them meld together as they grow,
 so when their limbs are joined in that unyielding
 embrace, they are no longer two. Their form 410
 is dual, and they can't be called a woman
 nor yet a boy. They look like both and neither.

"Seeing that those clear streams he'd entered male
 had made him half male and had softened all
 his limbs, Hermaphroditus stretches up 415
 his hands and speaks, his voice no longer virile:
 'Father and mother, grant your child a wish.
 He carries both your names. Whoever goes
 into these waters male, let him emerge
 as half a man, made soft by this stream's touch.' 420
 Both parents, moved, fulfilled their biform child's
 request and steeped the spring with tainting drugs."

[*Metamorphoses by Ovid*, Translated by Stephanie McCarter, pp.105-108, line numbers as
 per translation]

- In lines 321-325, how is the pool of water portrayed?
- How is Salmacis portrayed? (Lines 326-354). Consider both her actions and her words.
- How is Hermaphroditus portrayed when he first appears? (Lines 355-361). Pick out some images Ovid uses – how are they effective? What do they tell us about him?
- How does Ovid portray Salmacis' desire for Hermaphroditus? (Lines 375-404).
- Why do you think Ovid uses the tree imagery in line 407ff?
- What do you think about the ending of the story in lines 413 onwards?
- What is your response to this myth? For example, you find it engaging? Beautiful? Disturbing? Surprising?

The Sleeping Hermaphroditus

The sculpture below is an early Roman imperial copy of a Hellenistic bronze original. The mattress was a later addition, made by Bernini in 1620.



[Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)]



[Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)]

- How is Hermaphroditus portrayed in this sculpture?
- How do you think an ancient viewer might have interacted with it?
- Read the following interpretation of the sculpture: “The Roman statue the Sleeping Hermaphroditus, on display at the Louvre, plays a joke on the viewer. Viewed from behind, the statue looks like a woman, with female hips. Walk round to the front and you see Hermaphroditus’ genitals and the swell of their breasts. But what strikes me is the beauty of the sleeping figure: there is nothing monstrous about Hermaphroditus. Despite some disturbing elements in the myth (the sexual assault

and the effeminizing properties of the fountain), Hermaphroditus introduces a figure who breaks our sexual categories (boy or girl?) and – this part is crucial – who is exquisitely beautiful.” [Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths*, Ch 8 – Transmythology, p.137]. Do you agree?

Image from the Cult of Beauty exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, London

The image below is of a 19th century CE copy of the original Hermaphroditus sculpture.



[Photo taken by Sana Van Dal]

- Take a closer look: what has happened to this sculpture?
- Why do you think this is?

- For more information: “In our version of the sculpture, the penis has been damaged, probably deliberately. At about the same time as it was made, English antiquities collector, Henry Blundell, had his ancient Hermaphroditus chiselled into a sleeping Venus. The sculpture is weaker as a result of its surgery. Everything about it was originally designed for the ‘big reveal’, when what the viewer thought was an off-duty sex goddess or a vulnerable maiden is realised as Hermaphroditus, god of male and female sex. Already in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sculpture was thought beautiful (Lady Townsend called a bronze copy of it the only happy couple she ever saw!), but its beauty can be a source of fear as well as pleasure. Hermaphroditus challenges binary gender norms and the cultural expectations of active male, passive female that come with them.” [Extract from audio guide to exhibition featuring Professor Caroline Vout]

Barry X Ball

The images below feature contemporary sculptor Barry X Ball. The text is from an article in the New York Times (link below).



Bringing us back to the present is this contemporary version, completed in 2010 by the Brooklyn-based sculptor Barry X Ball. He made a detailed 3-D scan of the Borghese hermaphrodite in the Louvre; but the work isn't exactly a copy.

The scan was digitally edited to address some flaws, Mr. Ball said in an interview. And after it was carved by machine from a block of Belgian marble, he and a team of assistants spent thousands of hours refining it.

“I never want to say that the end result is better,” Mr. Ball said. Rather, he sees his work as a continuation of his artistic forebears’. “I was trying to make something that would be even more permanent.”



The broken-off hands were not replaced, but the finished work does resolve some aesthetic problems in the original that Mr. Ball identified, like the flow of the sheets and the connection to Bernini's mattress. The most noticeable change is that Mr. Ball's hermaphrodite has a larger penis.

More than two millennia after the original version, this remake was shown at the Louvre and in Venice during the 2011 Biennale; and it has found fans among some collectors. This work sold in the evening contemporary sale at Christie's last month for \$545,000 to an unidentified buyer. And Mr. Ball is working on another one, in white Iranian onyx, for a collector in Paris.

"Can you imagine, 2,000 years from now, what people are going to think about my thing?" he said.

[Source: *What the Sleeping Hermaphrodite Tells Us About Art, Sex and Good Taste*
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/27/arts/design/statue-hermaphrodite.html>]

- What do you think of this modern version of the sculpture?
- How does it build upon the original?

2. The Happily Ever After of Iphis and Ianthe

Ovid *Metamorphoses* Book IX.666-797

The original story of Iphis and Ianthe as told by the Roman poet Ovid in his work the *Metamorphoses*.

The rumor of this strange new wonder would 720
have filled Crete's hundred towns, but Crete had just
had its own miracle: the change of Iphis.

The land of Phaestum, near the realm of Cnossos,
once bore an undistinguished man named Ligdus,
a freeborn pleb. Though he was no more rich 725
than he was noble, he was true and blameless.

And when his wife was pregnant, nearly due,
he gave her this command: "I have two prayers—
that you give birth with little pain and bear a male.
The other sex is too expensive, 730

and fortune makes us poor. Heaven forbid,
but if by chance you give birth to a female
(I order this unwillingly—forgive
me, Duty!), she'll be put to death." He'd spoken.
Tears washed their faces, his who gave the order 735
and hers to whom the order had been given.

Yet Telethusa never stops entreating
her husband not to dash her hopes—in vain.
Ligdus' mind is firm. And when her womb
had grown so heavy with its full-term burden 740
that she could scarcely carry it, she dreamed
deep in the night that Isis stood or seemed
to stand before her bed in holy pomp.

Her brow wore lunar horns and golden grain
that shimmered and a regal diadem. 745
Barking Anubis joined her, as did sacred
Bubastis, dappled Apis, and that god
who holds his finger to his lips for silence.

And there were rattles and Osiris, who
was never fully found, and an Egyptian
serpent that swelled with soporific venom. 750
The goddess spoke to her as if she were
awake and seeing clearly: "Telethusa,
my devotee, dismiss your heavy cares

and foil your husband's orders. When Lucina 755
assists this birth, don't hesitate to raise
the child, whatever sex it is. I am
your patron goddess. Called, I help. You'll not

complain that you have worshipped an ungrateful
divinity." She gave her this command, 760
then left the room. In joy, the Cretan woman
rose from her bed and, as a suppliant,
raised pure hands to the stars, praying the dream
would come to pass.

When her pangs grew, she pushed
that burden to the air, bearing a female 765
without the father knowing. Then the mother,
pretending that it was a boy, instructed
that *he* be fed. This was believed, and only
the nurse was conscious of the fiction. Ligdus
fulfilled his vows and called the baby Iphis 770
after his father. This name pleased the mother
since it was unisex and not dishonest.
Through duteous guile, her lie went undisclosed.
The child dressed as a boy and had a face 775
that would look lovely on a boy or girl.
When thirteen years had passed, your father, Iphis,
betrothed you to the flaxen-haired Ianthe,
a virgin most renowned of Phaestum's women
for beauty's gift. She was of Telestes' daughter
and was your match in age as well as beauty. 780
They'd learned their early arts, the ABCs,
from the same teachers. Ever since, love touched
their youthful hearts, dealing them equal wounds.
And yet they have unequal hopes. Ianthe
looks forward to her wedding day, believing 785
the one that she presumes to be a man
will be *her* man. But Iphis is in love
with someone she despairs of ever having.
This feeds her flames, and virgin burns for virgin.
She speaks while barely blinking back her tears: 790
"What will become of me, gripped as I am
by this queer longing for a novel kind
of lovemaking that no one understands?
If the gods wished to pity me, they should have.
But if they wished to ruin me, they should 795
at least have given me a plight that fits
nature and custom. Cows don't burn with love
for cows, nor mares for mares. It is the ram
that burns for ewes, the doe that trails the stag.
Birds couple like this too. Among the beasts, 800

there is no female that desires females.
I wish I were no female! Yet Crete bears

wonders galore—the daughter of the Sun
 fancied a bull, but that was female/male.
 Love drives me even crazier, I confess! 805
 Yet she pursued her longing to make love.
 She used a ruse, a cow disguise, to get
 the bull to mount her. But at least she could
 make him become her lover through a trick.
 If all the cunning in the world converged here, 810
 if Daedalus himself flew back on wings
 of wax, what could he do? Could his shrewd arts
 transform me from a girl into a boy?
 Could he change you, lanthe? Iphis, why
 not steel your mind and pull yourself together? 815
 Why not shake off these senseless, foolish fires?
 You see how you were born—unless you trick
 yourself as well, So seek what is allowed
 and love what you, a female, ought to love.
 It's hope that kindles love and hope that feeds it, 820
 but facts strip you of hope! No guard is blocking
 you from her dear embrace, no overzealous
 husband or stringent father, nor does she
 refuse you when you ask. Yet you can't have her.
 No matter what, you can't be happy, even 825
 if gods and humans both work in your favor.
 Yes, even now no prayer has gone unanswered –
 the gods have gladly granted what they can.
 She and I want this, as do both our fathers.
 But nature, which has greater power, doesn't, 830
 and this alone impedes me. Look! The time
 we've wished for is at hand, our wedding day.
 lanthe will be mine, but I won't have her!
 Juno and Hymen, marriage gods, why witness
 nuptials that lack a groom but have two brides?" 835
 She hushed her voice. The other virgin burns
 no cooler, praying, Hymen, that you hurry.
 But what she yearns for, Telethusa fears.
 she now postpones the date, now stalls by feigning
 illness. She often cites bad dreams and omens. 840
 But soon she had used up all grounds for fiction
 and the long-hindered wedding was at hand.
 One day alone remained. Tearing the ribbons
 from her head and her child's, she clasped the altar
 and prayed, hair streaming: "Isis, you who dwell 845
 in Paraetonium and Egypt's fields,
 in Pharos and the seven-branching Nile,
 help us, I pray, and heal our fear. I saw

you, goddess, once, in all your panoply.
 I knew it all—the clatter of your rattles, 850
 your retinue, your torches. And I marked
 your orders in my heeding mind. That she
 looks on the light and that I've not been punished—
 this is your plan and gift. Pity us two
 and lend your aid." She capped her words with tears. 855
 The goddess seemed to shake her shrine—and did!
 The temple doors convulsed. Her moonlike horns
 began to glow. Her noisy rattle rang.
 Not yet assured, the mother still rejoiced
 in this good omen as she left the temple. 860
 And Iphis follows with a longer stride
 than usual, the bright complexion gone.
 Strength has increased. The face is more defined.
 The tousled hair is shorter, and there is
 more vigor than is normal for a female. 865
 You who were just a girl are now a boy!
 Bring offerings to temples and rejoice
 with dauntless faith! They bring the offerings
 and add a label holding this short poem:
 IPHIS, A BOY, VOWED THESE GIFTS AS A GIRL. 870
 When morning lights the world, Venus and Juno
 and Hymen come together for the wedding.
 And the boy Iphis now has his lanthe.

[*Metamorphoses by Ovid*, Translated by Stephanie McCarter, pp.272-276, line numbers as per translation]

- How is Ligdus portrayed?
- How is Telethusa portrayed?
- How does Ovid create pathos for Iphis?
- Why do you think Ovid has included Telethusa praying to Egyptian gods in this story?
- What do you think this myth tells us about Roman societal beliefs about women? (Both in terms of societal status and the relationships they could have).
- What effect do you think the ending of this story has on the story as a whole?

Girl Meets Boy, Ali Smith

Girl Meets Boy is a novel about two sisters, Midge/Imogen and Anthea. At the beginning of the novel, Imogen works in a corporate job for a company called Pure, which sells bottled water. She gets her sister Anthea a job there, but Anthea soon quits. One day during a company meeting, on the street below the office, somebody going by the pseudonym of Iphis writes some graffiti against the water company on the company sign. Anthea meets Iphis (real name Robin) and they fall in love. The pair later start writing provocative messages all over the city.

Extract 1 (pages 44-45): Anthea meets Iphis for the first time:

He shook the paintcan, listened to the rattle it made, thought about whether to keep it or to chuck it away, then tucked it into the pocket of his waistcoat. He took hold of the sides of the ladder, lifted his feet off the run in one move, put them on the outsides of the downstruts and slid himself neatly to the ground. He landed on his feet and he turned around.

My head, something happened to its insides. It was as if a storm at sea happened, but only for a moment, and only on the inside of my head. My ribcage, something definitely happened there. It was as if it unknotted itself from itself, like the hull of a ship hitting rock, giving way, and the ship that I was opened wide inside me and in came the ocean.

He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life.

But he looked really like a girl.

She was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life.

- What is the mood of this passage?

Extract 2 (pages 74-77): Imogen has found out that her sister Anthea is now with Robin / Iphis, and is coming to terms with it. She comes home one day to find Robin in her house. Robin quickly puts her in her place.

She is reading a book. I am too drunk and dizzy to make out the cover of the book she is reading. I stand in the doorway and hold on to the doorframe.

Hi, she says.

(Oh my God and also my sister is a)

What have you done with my sister? I say.

Your sister's in the bath, she says.

I sit down. I lean my head back. I feel sick.

(I am sitting in the same room as a)

Robin Goodman leaves the room. When she comes back, she puts something into my hand.

It's a glass. It's one of my glasses from the cupboard.

Drink that, she says, and I'll get you another one.

You haven't changed much, since school, I say. You look exactly the same.

So do you, she says, but some things have changed, thank God. We're not schoolgirls any more.

Apart from. Your hair. Got longer, I say.

Well, ten years, she says. Something's got to give.

I went away to university, I say. Did you go?
 If you mean university, yes, I did, she says.
 And you came back, I say.
 Just like you, she says.
 Do you still play the clarinet? I say.
 No, she says.
 There's a silence. I look down. There's a glass in my hand.
 Drink it, she says.
 I drink it. It tastes beautiful, of clearness.
 That'll be better, she says.
 She takes the empty glass and leaves the room. I hear her in my kitchen. I look down at myself and am surprised to see I'm still wearing the tracksuit I put on after work. I'm not completely sure where I've just been. I begin to wonder if I made up the whole evening, if I invited the pub, the curryhouse, the whole thing.
 That's my kitchen you were just in, I say when she comes back through.
 I know, she says and sits down in my sitting room.
 This is my sitting room, I say.
 Yep, she says.
 (I am sitting in the same room as a)
 She is the kind of person who does not really care what she is wearing or what it looks like. At least she is wearing normal clothes. At least she is not wearing that embarrassing Scottish get-up.
 Not wearing your coat tonight? I say.
 Only for special occasions, she says.
 My company that I work for, you know, Pure Incorporated, is going to take you to court, I say.
 They'll drop the charges, she says.
 She doesn't even look up from her book. I have to look at my hand because it's covered in the water I've spilled on myself. I hold the glass up and look through it. I look at the room through the bit with water in it. Then I look at the same room through the bit with no water in it. Then I drink the water.
 Eau Caledonia, I say.
 Need another? she says.
 (I am sitting in the same room as a)
 A lass and a lack, I say.
 This pun makes me laugh. It is unlike me to be witty. It is my sister who is really the witty one. I'm the one who knows the correct words, the right words for things.
 I lean forward.
 Tell me what it is, I say.
 It's water, Robin Goodman says.
 No, I say. I mean, what's the correct word for it, I mean, for you? I need to know it. I need to know the proper word.
 She looks at me for a long time. I can feel her looking right through my drunkenness. Then, when she speaks, it is as if the whole look of her speaks.
 The proper word for me, Robin Goodman says, is me.

- How does this passage build on the themes of Ovid's original version of the myth?

Extract 3 (pages 88-101): Iphis / Robin tells Anthea the story of Iphis and Ianthe, which inspired her pseudonym:

Though actually, the telling of it went much more like this:

A long time ago, on the island of Crete, Robin said behind me, into my ear –

I've been there! We went there! I said. We had a holiday there when we were kids. We spent a lot of it at the hospital in Heraklion, actually, because our dad went to hire a motorbike to impress this woman in a motorbike hire shop, and before he'd hired one he rode it a few yards around the corner to get a feel for it, and fell off it and scraped the skin off half the side of his body.

A long time ago, Robin said, long before motorbike hire, long before motors, long before bikes, long before you, long before me, back before the great tsunami that flattened most of northern Crete and drowned most of the Minoan cities, which, by the way, was probably the incident responsible for the creation of the myth about the lost city of Atlantis – That's very interesting, I said.

It is, she said. There's pumice stone fifty feet up on dry land in parts of Crete, and cow-bones all mixed up with sea-creature remains, far too high for any other geological explanation –

No, I mean that thing about responsibility and creating a myth, I said.

Oh, she said. Well –

I mean, do myths spring fully formed from the imagination and the needs of society, I said, as if they emerged from society's subconscious? Or are myths conscious creations by the various money-making forces? For instance, is advertising a new kind of myth-making? Do companies sell their water etc by telling us the right kind of persuasive myth? Is that why people who really don't need to buy something that's practically free still go out and buy bottles of it? Will they soon be thinking up a myth to sell us air? And do people, for instance, want to be thin because of a prevailing myth that thinness is more beautiful?

Anth, Robin said. Do you want to hear this story about the boy-girl or don't you?

I do I said.

Right. Create. Way back then, she said. Ready?

Uh huh, I said.

Sure? she said.

Yep, I said.

So there was this woman who was pregnant, and her husband came to her –

Which one was Iphis? I said.

Neither, she said. And her husband said –

What were their names? I said.

I can't remember their names. Anyway, the husband came to the wife –

Who was pregnant, I said.

Uh huh, and he said, listen, I'm really praying for two things, and one of them is that this baby gives you no pain in the giving birth.

Hmm, right, his wife said. That's likely, isn't it?

Ha ha! I said.

No, well, no she didn't, Robin said. I'm imposing far too modern a reading on it. No, she acted correctly for her time, thanked him for even considering, so graciously, from his man's world where women didn't really count, that there'd be any pain at all involved for her. And what's the other thing you're praying for? she asked. When she said this, the man, who was

a good man, looked very sad. The woman was immediately suspicious. Her husband said, look, you know what I'm going to say. The thing is. When you give birth, if you have a boy, that'll be fine, we can keep it, of course, and that's what I'm praying for.

Uh huh? the woman said. And?

And if you have a girl, we can't, he said. We'll have to put it to death if it's a girl. A girl's a burden. You know it is. I can't afford a girl. You know I can't. A girl's no use to me. So that's that. I'm sorry to have to say this, I wish it wasn't so, and I don't want to do this, but it's the way of the world.

The way of the world, I said. Great. Thank God we're modern.

Still the way of the world in lots of places all over the world, Robin said, red ink for a girl, blue for a boy, on the bottom of doctors' certificates, letting parents know, in the places it's not legal to allow people just to abort girls, what to abort and what to keep. So. The woman went off to do some praying of her own. And as she knelt down in the temple, and prayed to the nothing that was there, the goddess Isis appeared right in front of her.

Like the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, I said.

Except much, much earlier, culturally and historically, than the Virgin Mary, Robin said, and also the woman wasn't sick, though certainly there was something pretty rotten in the state of Knossos, what with the whole kill-the-girl thing. And the goddess Isis had brought a lot of her god-friends and family with her, including that god whose head is like a jackal. What's his name? Damn. I really like - he's got, like, these jackal ears, and a long snout - a kind of dog-god - he guards the underworld -

I don't know. Is it a crucial part of the story? I said.

No. So Isis thanked the woman for the constant faith she had in things, and told her not to worry. Just give birth as per usual, and bring the child up, she said.

As per usual? I said. A goddess used the phrase *as per usual*?

The gods can be down-to-earth when they want, Robin said. And then she and all her god-friends disappeared, like they've never been there, like the woman had just made them up. But the woman was very happy. She went and stood under the night sky and held her arms out open to the stars. And then the time came for the baby to be born. And out it came.

You can't stay in the room all your life, I said.

And it was a girl, Robin said.

Of course, I said.

So the woman called her Iphis, which was the child's grandfather's name -

I like that, I said.

- and was also, by chance, a name used both for girls and boys, which the women thought was a good omen.

I like that too, I said.

And to keep her child safe she brought her up as a boy, Robin said. Lucky for Iphis, she looked rather good as a boy, though she'd also have looked very handsome as a girl. She was certainly every bit as handsome as her friend, lanthe, the beautiful fair-haired daughter of one of the finest families on the island.

Aha, I said. I think I see where this is going.

And Iphis and lanthe, since they were exactly the same age, went to school together, learned to read together, learned about the world together, grew up together, and as soon as they were both of marrying age their fathers did some bargaining, swapped some livestock, and the village got ready for the wedding. But not just that. The thing is, Iphis and lanthe had actually, for real, very really, fallen in love.

Did their hearts hurt? I said. Did they think they were underwater all the time? Did they feel scoured by light? Did they wander about not knowing what to do with themselves?

Yes, Robin said. All of that. And more.

There's more? I said. Man!

So to speak, Robin said. And the wedding day was set. And the whole village was coming. Not just the village, but all the fine families of the island were coming. And some people off faraway other islands. And off the mainland. Several gods had been invited and many had actually said they'd come. And Iphis was in quite a bad way, because she couldn't imagine. she couldn't imagine what? I said.

She couldn't imagine how she was going to do it, Robin said.

How do you mean? I said.

She stood in a field far enough away from the village so nobody would hear except maybe a few goats, a few cows, and she shouted at the sky, she shouted at nothing, at Isis, at all the gods. Why have you done this to me? You fuckers. You jokers. Look what's happened now. I mean, look at that cow there. What'd be the point in giving her a cow instead of a bull? I can't be a boy to my girl! I don't know how! I wish I'd never been born!

You've made me wrong! I wish I'd been killed at birth! Nothing can help me!

But maybe her girl, what's her name, lanthe, *wants* a girl, I said. Clearly Iphis is exactly the kind of boy-girl or girl-boy she loves.

Well, yes. I agree, Robin said. That's debatable. But it's not in the original story. In the original, Iphis stands there shouting at the gods. Even if Daedalus was here, Iphis shouted, and he's the greatest inventor in the world, who can fly across the sea like a bird though he's just a man! But even *he* wouldn't know what to invent to make this okay for lanthe and me. I mean you were kind, Isis, and you told my mother it'd be fine but now what? Now I've got to get married, and it's tomorrow, and I'll be the laughing stock of the whole village, because of you. And Juno and Hymen are coming. We'll be the laughing stock of the heavens too, And how can I get married to my girl in front of them, in front of my father, in front of everyone? And not just that. Not just that. I'm never, ever, ever going to be able to please my girl. And she'll be mine, but never really mine. It'll be like standing right in the middle of a stream, dying of thirst, with my hand full of water, but I won't be able to drink it! Why won't she be able to drink it? I said.

Robin shrugged.

It's just what she thinks at this point in the story, she said. She's young. She's scared. She doesn't know yet that it'll be okay. She's only about twelve. That was the marriageable age, then, twelve. I was terrified, too' when I was twelve and wanted to marry another girl.

(Who did you want to marry? I said. Janice McLean,

Robin said, who lived in Kinmylies. She was very glamorous. And she had a pony.) Twelve, or thirteen, terrified. It's easy to think it's a mistake, or you're a mistake. It's easy when everything and everyone you know tells you you're the wrong shape, to believe you're the wrong shape. And also, don't forget, the story of Iphis was being made up by a man. Well, I say man, but Ovid's very fluid, as writers go, much more than most. He knows, more than most, that the imagination doesn't have a gender. He is really good. He honours all sorts of love. He honours all sorts of story. But with this story, well, he can't help being the Roman he is, he can't help fixating on what it is that girls don't have under their togas, and it's him who can't imagine what girls could ever do without one.

I had a quick look under the duvet.

Doesn't feel or look like anything's missing to me, I said.

Ah, I love Iphis, Robin said. I love her. Look at her. Dressed as a boy to save her life. Standing in a field, shouting at the way things are. She'd do anything for love. She'd risk changing everything she is.

What's going to happen? I said.

What do you think? Robin said.

Well, she's going to need some help. The father's not going to be any good, he doesn't even know his boy's a girl. Not very observant. And Ianthe thinks that's what a boy is, what Iphis is. Ianthe's just happy to be getting married. But she won't want a humiliation either, and they'd be the joke of the village. She's only twelve, too. So Iphis can't go and ask her for help. So. It's either the mother or the goddess.

Well-spotted, Robin said. Off the mother went to have a word with the goddess in her own way.

That's one of the reasons Midge is so resentful, I said.

The what who's so what? Robin said.

Imogen. She had to do all that mother stuff when ours left, I said. Maybe it's why she's so thin. Have you noticed how thin she is?

Yep, Robin said.

I never had to do anything, I said. I'm lucky. I was born mythless. I grew up mythless.

No you didn't. Nobody grows up mythless, Robin said. It's what we do with the myths we grow up with that matters.

I thought about our mother. I thought about what she'd said, that she had to be free of what people expected of her, otherwise she'd simply have died. I thought about our father, out in the garden in the first days after she went, hanging out the washing. I thought about Midge, seven years old, running downstairs to take over, to do it instead of him, because the neighbours were laughing to see a man at the washing line.

Good girl, our father had said.

Keep telling the story, I said. Go on.

So the mother, then, Robin said, went to the temple, and she said into the thin air: look, come on. You told me it'd be okay. And now we've got this huge wedding happening tomorrow, and it's all going to go wrong. So could you just sort it out for me? Please.

And as she left the empty temple, the temple started to shake, and the doors of the temple trembled.

And lo and behold, I said.

Yep. Jaw lengthens, stride lengthens, absolutely everything lengthens. By the time she'd got home, the girl Iphis had become exactly the boy that she and her girl needed her to be. And the boy their two families needed. And everyone in the village needed. And all the people coming from all over the place who were very anxious to have a really good party needed. And the visiting gods needed. And the particular historic era with its own views on what was excitingly perverse in a love story needed. And the writer of *Metamorphoses* needed, who really, really needed a happy love story at the end of Book 9 to carry him through the several much more scurrilous stories about people who fall, unhappily and with terrible consequences, in love with their fathers, their brothers, various unsuitable animals, and the dead ghosts of their lovers, Robin said. Voilà. Sorted. No problemo. *Metamorphoses* is full of the gods being mean to people, raping people then turning them into cows or streams so they won't tell, hunting them till they change into plants or rivers, punishing them for their pride or their arrogance or their skill by changing them into mountains or insects. Happy stories are rare in it. But the next day dawned, and the whole world opened its eyes, it was

the day of the wedding. Even Juno had come, and Hymen was there too, and all the families of Crete were gathered in their finery for the huge celebration all over the island, as the girl met her boy there at the altar.

Girl meets boy, I said. In so many more ways than one.

Old, old story, Robin said.

I'm glad it worked out, I said.

Good old story, Robin said.

Good old Ovid, giving it balls, I said.

Even though it didn't need them. Anubis! Robin said suddenly. The god with the jackal head. Anubis.

Anubis colony? I said.

Come on, Robin said. You and me. What do you say?

Bed, I said.

Off we went, back to bed.

- What are myths, according to this passage? (See pages 89 "I mean"-90 "more beautiful")
- What issues relating to gender does Robin raise on page 91 "Still the way" to 92 "to keep"?
- What is Robin's reading of Ovid's opinions about the relationship? (See page 97 "Ovid's very fluid...without one").
- What do you think Robin's interpretation of the ending of the story in Ovid is? (see pages 99-100 "Jaw lengthens...rare in it").

Extract 4 (pages 132-136): Paul, Imogen's love interest, breaks the news to her that Anthea is now in prison. He shows her why; Anthea and Iphis / Robin have been graffitiing signs in public places.

Paul is waiting for me at the station when the train pulls in.

Why aren't you at work? I say.

Because I'm here instead, he says.

He slings my bag into the boot of his car then locks the car with his key fob.

We'll walk, he says. You'll see it better that way. The first one is on the wall of the Eastgate Centre, I think because of the traffic coming into town, the people in cars get long enough to read it when they stop at the traffic lights. God knows how anybody got up that high and stayed up there without being disturbed long enough to do it.

He walks me past Marks and Spencers, about fifteen yards down the road. Sure enough, the people in the cars stopped at the traffic lights are peering at something above my head, even leaning out of their car windows to see it more clearly.

I turn round.

Behind me and above me on the wall the words are bright, red, huge. They're in the same writing as was on the Pure sign before they replaced it. They've been framed in a beautiful, baroque-looking, trompe l'oeil picture-frame in gold. They say: ACROSS THE WORLD, TWO MILLION GIRLS, KILLED BEFORE BIRTH OR AT BIRTH BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T BOYS. THAT'S ON RECORD. ADD TO THAT THE OFF-RECORD ESTIMATE OF FIFTY-EIGHT MILLION MORE GIRLS, KILLED BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T BOYS. THAT'S SIXTY MILLION GIRLS. Underneath this,

in a handwriting I recognise, even though it's a lot bigger than usual: THIS MUST CHANGE. Iphis and lanthe the message girls 2007.

Dear God, I say.

I know, Paul says.

So many girls, I say in case Paul isn't understanding me.

Yes, Paul says.

Sixty million. I say. How? How can that happen in this day and age? How do we not know about that?

We do now, he says. Pretty much the whole of Inverness knows about it now, if they want to. And more. Much more.

What else? I say.

He walks me back past the shops and up the pedestrian precinct into town, to the Town House. A small group of people is watching two men in overalls scouring the red off the front wall with a spray gun. IN NO COUNTRY IN THE WORLD RIGHT NOW ARE WOMEN'S WAGES EQUAL TO MEN'S WAGES. THIS MUST CHA

Half the frame and the bit with the names and the date have been sprayed nearly away but are still visible. It's all still legible.

That'll take some shifting, I say.

Paul leads me round the Town House, where a whole side wall is bright red words inside gold. ALL ACROSS THE WORLD, WHERE WOMEN ARE DOING EXACTLY THE SAME WORK AS MEN, THEY'RE BEING PAID BETWEEN THIRTY TO FORTY PERCENT LESS. THAT'S NOT FAIR. THIS MUST CHANGE. Iphis and lanthe the message boys 2007.

Probably Catholics, a woman says. It's disgusting.

Aye, it'll fair ruin the tourism, another says. Who'd be wanting to come and see the town if the town's covered in this kind of thing? Nobody.

And we can say goodbye to winning that Britain in Bloom this year now, her friend says.

And to Antiques Roadshow ever coming back to Inverness and all, another says.

It's a scandal! another is saying. Thirty to forty percent!

Aye well, a man next to her says. It's no fair, right enough, if that's true, what it says there.

Aye, but why would *boys* write *that* kind of thing on a building? a woman is saying. It's not natural.

Too right they should, the scandal-woman says.

And would you not have thought we were equal now, here, after all that stravaiging in the seventies and the eighties?

Aye, but we're equal here, in Inverness, the first woman says.

In your dreams we're equal, the scandal-woman says.

Nevertheless, equal or no, it's no reason to paint it all over the Town House, the woman's friend says.

The scandal-woman is arguing back as we walk up round the side of the Castle. In gilt-ed red on the front wall above the Castle door it says in a jolly arc, like the name of a house painted right above its threshold, that only one percent of the world's assets are held by women.

Iphis and lanthe the message girls 2007.

From here we can see right across the river that there are huge red words on the side of the cathedral too. I can't see what they say, but I can make out the red.

Two million girls annually forced into marriage worldwide, Paul says seeing me straining to make it out. And on Eden Court Theatre, on the glass doors, it says that sexual or domestic violence affects one out of every three women and girls worldwide and that this is the

world's leading cause of injury and death for women.
 I can make out the *this must change* from here, I say.
 We lean on the Castle railing and Paul lists the other places that have been written on, what the writing says, and about how the police phoned Pure for me.
 Your sister and her friend are both in custody up at Raigmore, he says.
 Robin's not her friend, I say. Robin's her other half.
 Right, Paul says. I'll run you up there now. You'll need to arrange bail. I did try. My bank wouldn't let me.
 Hang on, I say. I bet you anything -
 What? he says,
 I bet you their double bail there's a message somewhere on Flora too, I say,
 I can't afford it, he shouts behind me.
 I run down to the statue of Flora MacDonald shielding her eyes, watching for Bonnie Prince Charlie, still dressed in the girls' clothes she lent him for his escape from the English forces, to come sailing back to her all the way up the River Ness.
 I walk round the statue three times reading the words ringing the base of her. Tiny, clear, red, a couple of centimetres high: WOMEN OCCUPY TWO PERCENT OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT POSITIONS IN BUSINESS WORLDWIDE. THREE AND A HALF PERCENT OF THE WORLD'S TOTAL NUMBER OF CABINET MINISTERS ARE WOMEN. WOMEN HAVE NO MINISTERIAL POSITIONS IN NINETY-THREE COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD. THIS MUST CHANGE.
 Iphis and Ianthe the message boys 2007.
 Good old Flora. I pat her base.
 Paul catches me up.
 I'll nip down and get the car and pick you up here, he says, and we'll head up the hill -
 Take me home first, I say. I need a bath. I need some breakfast. Then maybe you and me can have a talk.
 Then I'll take us up to the police station on my Rebel.

- What is the theme of the messages that Iphis and Ianthe write?
- How does this relate to the original myth in Ovid?

Extract 5 (pages 149-161): The marriage of Anthea and Robin / Iphis

Reader, I married him/her.
 It's the happy ending. Lo and behold.
 I don't mean we had a civil ceremony. I don't mean a civil partnership. I mean we did what's still impossible after all these centuries. I mean we did the still-miraculous, in this day and age. I mean we got married. I mean we here came the bride. I mean we walked down the aisle. I mean we step we gailied, on we went, we Mendelsohned, we epithalamioned, we raised high the roofbeams, carpenters, for there was no other bride, o bridegroom, like her. We crowned each other with the garlands of flowers. We stamped on the wineglasses wrapped in the linen. We jumped the broomstick. We lit the candles. We crossed the sticks. We circled the table. We circled each other. We fed each other the honey and the walnuts from the silver spoons; we fed each other the tea and the sake and we sweetened the tea for each other; we fed each other the borhani beneath the pretty cloth; we fed each other a taste of lemon, vinegar, cayenne and honey, one for each of the four elements. We

handfasted, then we asked for the blessing of the air, the fire, the water and the earth; we tied the knot with grass, with ribbon, with silver rope, with a string of shells; we poured water on the ground in the four directions of the wind and we called on the presence of our ancestors as witnesses, so may it be! We gave each other the kola nuts to symbolise commitment, the eggs and the dates and the chestnuts to symbolise righteousness, plenty, fertility, the thirteen gold coins to symbolise constant unselfishness. With these rings we us wedded.

What I mean is. There, under the trees, on a fresh spring day by the banks of the River Ness, that fast black backbone of a Scottish northern town; there, flanked by presbyterian church after presbyterian church, we gave our hands in marriage under the blossom, gave each other and took each other for better, for worse, in sickness or health, to love, comfort, honour, cherish, protect, and to have and to hold each other from that day forward, for as long as we both should live till death us would part.

Ness I said Ness I will Ness.

Into thin air, to the nothing that was there, with the river our witness, we said yes. We said we did. We said we would.

We'd thought we were alone, Robin and I. We'd thought it was just us, under the trees outside the cathedral. But as soon as we'd made our vows there was a great whoop of joy behind us, and when we turned round we saw all the people, there must have been hundreds, they were clapping and cheering, they were throwing confetti, they waved and they roared celebration.

My sister was there at the front with her other half, Paul. She was happy. She smiled. Paul looked happy. He was growing his hair. My sister gestured to me like she couldn't believe it, at a couple standing not far from her – look! – was it them? – sure enough, it *was* them, our father and our mother, both, and they were standing together and they weren't arguing, they were talking to each other very civilly, they clinked their glasses as I watched.

They're discussing the unsuitability of the wedding, Midge said.

I nodded. First time they've agreed on anything in years, I said.

All the people from the rest of the tale were there too; Becky from Reception; the two work experience girls, Chantelle and her friend Lorraine; Brian, who was going out with Chantelle; and Chantelle's mum, who wasn't in the story as such but who'd clearly also taken a shine to Brian; a whole gaggle of Pure people, including the security men who first arrested Robin; they waved and smiled. Not Norman or Dominic, were those their names? they'd been promoted to Base Camp, so they weren't there, at least not that I saw, and not the boss of bosses, Keith, I don't remember seeing him either. But the whole of the Provost's office came, and some officials from other places we'd written on; the theatre, the shopping mall, the Castle. A male-voice choir from the Inverness Police Force attended, they sang a beautiful arrangement of songs from Gilbert and Sullivan. Then the Inverness Constabulary female-voice choir sang an equally beautiful choral arrangement of Don't Cha (Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me). Then the Provost made an eloquent speech. Inverness, she said, once famed for its faith in unexpected ancient creatures of the deep, had now become famous for something new: for fairness, for art, and for the art of fairness. Inverness, now world-renowned for its humane and galvanising public works of art, had quadrupled its tourist intake. Thousands more people were coming especially to view the public exhibits. And not just Antiques Roadshow, but Songs of Praise, Question Time, Newsnight Review and several other tv programmes had *all* petitioned the council, keen to record themselves in

front of the famous sloganned walls. The Inverness art may have spawned copycat art in other cities and towns, she said, but none so good as in the city whose new defining motto, inscribed on all the signposts at all the entrypoints to the city, would be from this day forth *A Hundred Thousand Welcomes And When You See A Wrong, Write It! Ceud Mile Failte! Còir! Sgriobb!*

Really terrible slogan, I said privately to Robin.

Your sister thought it up, Robin said. Definitely in line for a job as Council Creative.

Which is your family? I asked Robin. she pointed them out. They were by the drinks table with Venus, Artemis and Dionysos; her father and mother were cuddling the baby Cupid, which was problematic because of the arrows (in fact there was a bit of a fuss later when Lorraine cut her finger open on an arrow-tip, and even more problems when Artemis and Chantelle were found down the riverbank in the dusk light firing arrows at the rabbits on the grass at the side of the Castle and, Chantelle being very short-sighted, the damage to four passing cars had to be paid for, and Brian had to be comforted after Chantelle swore eternal celibacy, so it was lucky that Chantelle's mum had come with her after all).

Then we had the speeches, and Midge read out the apologies, including one from the Loch Ness Monster, who'd sent us an old rusty underwater radar scanner, some signed photos of herself and a lovely set of silver fishknives, and there was a half gold-edged, half black-edged telegram-poem from John Knox, sorry he couldn't make it to be there with us even in spirit:

*Here's tae ye,
Wha's like ye?
Far too many
And y're all damnt to Hell.
But whit can I say,
It's a weddin day,
So come on, raise your glasses now,
And wish the damnt pair weel!*

We had the blessings then, and the toasts. Honour, riches, marriage-blessing, Love, continuance, and increasing, Hourly joys be still upon us, Juno sing her blessings on us, till all the seas gang dry, my dear, and the rocks melt wi' the sun. May our eternal summer never fade. May the road rise up to meet us, and may God always hold us in the palm of His hand. A dog on two legs was drinking too much whisky. A goddess so regal she must have been Isis spent the whole reception making fine new guests out of clay. A beautiful Greek couple came graciously up and shook our hands; they were newlyweds themselves, they said, and how had the run-up to the wedding been? was it as nervewracking as it'd been for them? They'd never thought they'd make it. But they had, they were happy, and they wished us all happiness. They told us to honeymoon in Crete, where their families would make us welcome, and that's exactly what we did, Robin and I, when the wedding was over, we hotfooted it to the hot island, its surfaces layered with wild flowers, marjoram, sage and thyme, its rocks split by the force of tiny white and pink and yellow flowers and everywhere the scent of herbs and salt and sea. We stood where the Iphis story had originated, we stood between red-painted pillars in the reconstructed palace, we went to the museum to see the ancient, pieced-together, re-imagined painting of the athlete, the acrobat, boy or

girl or both, who was agile enough to somersault right over the top of the back of the charging bull. We stood where the civilised, rich, cultured, Minoan cannibals had lived before nature had simply flooded them into oblivion, and we thought about the story that arose from their rituals, the story of the annual sacrifice of the seven boys and seven girls to the bull-headed beast, and the clever artist, the man who invented human wings, who devised the girls and the boys a safe way out of the bloody maze.

But back at the wedding the band had struck up now, a noise, for the legendary red-faced fiddler who played at all the best weddings had come, and had had a drink, and had got out his fiddle, he was the man to turn curved wood and horsehair, cat-gut and resin into a single blackbird then into a flight of blackbirds singing all the evenings at once, then into a spawn of happy salmon, into the return of the longed-for boat to a port, into the longing that waits in a lucky place for two people who don't yet know each other to meet exactly there, where the stones grass over, the borders cross themselves. It was the song of the flow of things, the song of the undammed river, and there with the fiddler was his sidekick, who doubled the tune and who, when he played alongside his partner, found in everything he laid hands on (whistle, squeezebox, harp, guitar, old empty oilcan and a stick or stone to bang it with) the kind of music that not only made the bushes and the trees pull themselves out of the ground and move where they could hear better, but made them throw their leaves and twigs up in the air, made all the seagulls clap their wings, made all the dogs of the Highlands bark with joy, made all the roofs dance on the houses, made every paving stone of the whole town tear itself up, stand itself on its pointed corner and do a happy pirouette, even made the old cathedral itself on its fixed foundations leap and caper.

Up the river it came, then, the astonishing little boat, up the river that no boats ever came up, with its two great fibreglass juts like the horns of a goat or a cow or a goddess held ahead of it, and its sail full and white against the trees and the sky. How it got from the loch through the Islands, how it did the impossible, got under the Infirmary Bridge with that full huge sail up we'll never know, but it did, it sailed the stretch of Ness Bank and it docked right below us, and there at the wheel was our grandmother, and throwing the rope to be caught was our grandfather. Robert and Helen Gunn, they were back from the sea, in time for the party.

We felt in our water that something was happening! Our grandmother called up to us as she put her foot on dry land. We wouldn't miss this, no, not for the world!

Well, girls, and have you been good, and has the world been good to you? and how was your catch? Have you landed fine fish? that was our grandfather, his old round us, him ruffling our hair.

They younger than the day they left. They were brown and robust, their faces and hands were lined like the trunks of trees. They met Robin. They met Paul. They flung their arms round them like family.

Our grandmother danced the Canadian Barn Dance with Paul.

Our grandfather danced the Gay Gordons with Robin.

The music and the dancing went on late into the night. In fact, there was still dancing going on when the night was over, the light coming back and the new day dawning.

Uh-huh. Okay. I know.

In my dreams.

What I mean is, we stood on the bank of the river under the trees, the pair of us, and we

promised the nothing that was there, the nothing that made us, the nothing that was listening, that we truly desired to go beyond our selves.

And that's the message. That's it. That's all.

Rings that widen on the surface of a loch above a thrown-in stone. A drink of water offered to a thirsty traveller on the road. Nothing more than what happens when things come together, when hydrogen, say, meets oxygen, or a story from then meets a story from now, or stone meets water meets girl meets boy meets bird meets hand meets wing meets bone meets light meets dark meets eye meets word meets world meets grain of sand meets thirst meets hunger meets need meets dream meets real meets same meets different meets death meets life meets end meets beginning all over again, the story of nature itself, ever-inventive, making one thing out of another, and one thing into another, and nothing lasts, and nothing's lost, and nothing ever perishes, and things can always change, because things will always change, and things will always be different, because things can always be different.

And it was always the stories that needed the telling that gave us the rope we could cross any river with. They balanced us high above any crevasse. They made us be natural acrobats. They made us be brave. They met us well. They changed us. It was in their nature to.

And there's always a whole other kittle of fish, our grandfather said in my ear as he reached down and tucked the warm stone into my hand, there it was, ready for me to throw.

Right, Anthea?

Right, Grandad, I said.

- What is your interpretation of the wedding passage?
- Reading this final extract from the book, what do you feel is the message of the story?

The Mechanisms – Iphis (2013)

Song Lyrics

[Click here to hear the song: Iphis - song and lyrics by The Mechanisms | Spotify](#)

Iphis was strong as any boy you would meet
Though she'd been born in female form
In the city this was fine, 'til at last, one day
Deep in love she did fall

Iphis loved lanthe and was loved in return
Iphis turned away, forlorn
"Oh, I cannot marry you, a girl as I am -
I cannot marry you in this form"

But she had no money, she had not the gold
To buy the body she desired
So, in despair, she went to Isis' throne
And begged for all she required

And Isis said, "I'm moved by your tale of doomed romance
I know how that feels
I'll do what you ask - my people will find you a suitable body
And you'll find the money for the cerebral transfer is already in your account
But, my dear Iphis, you must remember - all things come at a price
One day, I will call on you
Don't let me down"

At once she agreed with the harsh demands
At once he was reborn
They were married the self-same day
The next by Isis' summons they were torn

Iphis and Ianthe, together at last (Together)
But torn apart straight away (Torn apart)
"I am with you now, a boy as I am (With you)
But when will I see you again?" (See you again)

- What changes does this song make to the myth as told by Ovid, and what effect do you think these have?
- Describe what sort of atmosphere you feel this song creates. How do you think it does this?
- Do you think the song is sympathetic to Iphis?

3. The Strange Case of Tiresias

Homer's *Odyssey*, Book XI.84-154

Background to passage: the main character of the *Odyssey*, the Greek hero Odysseus, is on his way back home to the Island of Ithaca after the Greeks have won the Trojan War. In this passage, he goes down into the Underworld to consult the prophet Tiresias about the future. While he is there, he catches sight of his dead mother, Anticleia.

Then came the spirit of my own dead mother,
Autolycus' daughter Anticleia,
whom I had left alive when I went off
to holy Troy. On seeing her, I wept
in pity. But despite my bitter grief,
I would not let her near the blood till I
talked to Tiresias. The prophet came
holding a golden scepter, and he knew me,
and said,
'King under Zeus, Odysseus,
adept survivor, why did you abandon
the sun, poor man, to see the dead, and this
place without joy? Step back now from the pit,

90

hold up your sharp swords so that I may drink
 the blood and speak to you.’
 At that, I sheathed
 my silver-studded sword. When he had drunk
 the murky blood, the famous prophet spoke.

‘Odysseus, you think of going home 100
 as honey-sweet, but gods will make it bitter.
 I think Poseidon will not cease to feel
 incensed because you blinded his dear son.
 You have to suffer, but you can get home,
 if you control your urges and your men.
 Turn from the purple depths and sail your ship
 towards the island of Thrinakia; there
 you will find grazing cows and fine fat sheep,
 belonging to the god who sees and hears

all things – the Sun God. If you leave them be, 110
 keeping your mind fixed on your journey home,
 You may still get to Ithaca, despite
 Great losses. But if you hurt those cows, I see
 disaster for your ship and for your men.
 If you yourself escape, you will come home
 late and exhausted, in a stranger's boat,
 having destroyed your men. And you will find
 invaders eating your supplies at home,
 Courting your wife with gifts. Then you will match

the suitors’ violence and kill them all, 120
 inside your halls, through tricks or in the open,
 with sharp bronze weapons. When those men are dead,
 you have to go away and take an oar
 to people with no knowledge of the sea,
 who do not salt their food. They never saw
 A ship’s red prow, nor oars, the wings are boats.
 I prophesy the signs of things to come.
 When you meet somebody, a traveler,
 who calls the thing you carry on your back

a winnowing fan, then fix that oar in earth 130
 and make fine sacrifices to Poseidon –
 A bull and stud-boar. Then you will go home
 And offer holy hecatombs to all
 the deathless gods who live in heaven, each
 in order. Gentle death will come to you,
 far from the sea, of comfortable old age,
 your people flourishing. So it will be.’
 I said, ‘Tiresias, I hope the gods
 spin out this fate for me. But tell me this,
 and tell the truth. I saw my mother's spirit,

sitting in silence near the blood, refusing 140

even to talk to me, or meet my eyes!
My lord, how can I make her recognize
that it is me?’

At once he made his answer.
‘That is an easy matter to explain.
Whenever you allow one of these spirits
to come here near the blood, it will be able
to speak the truth to you. As soon as you
push them away, they have to leave again.’

With that, Tiresias, the prophet spirit, 150
was finished; He departed to the house
of Hades. I stayed rooted there in place
until my mother came and drank the blood.
She knew me then and spoke in tones of grief.

[*The Odyssey by Homer*, Translated by Emily Wilson, pp.282-284, line numbers as per translation]

Discussion questions:

- What is the mood of this passage?
- What do you think Odysseus thinks of Tiresias?
- What impression of Tiresias do you get from this passage?

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 297-462

Background to passage: the city of Thebes, where Oedipus is king, has been hit by a plague, and the people of Thebes do not know why this plague is occurring. Creon, the brother of Queen Jocasta, to whom Oedipus is married, returns from a visit to the oracle. He reports that Apollo has made it known that the plague will be lifted once the person who murdered King Laius (Queen Jocasta’s ex-husband) is punished. Oedipus promises to do this. In this passage, he talks to Tiresias, who tries to tell Oedipus that Oedipus himself is the culprit.

Leader: Here is the one who will convict him, look,
they bring him on at last, the seer, the man of god.
The truth lives inside him, him alone.

Oedipus: O Tiresias, 340
master of all the mysteries of our life,
all you teach and all you dare not tell,
signs in the heavens, signs that walk the earth!
Blind as you are, you can feel all the more
what sickness haunts our city. You, my lord,
are the one shield, the one savior we can find. 345

We asked Apollo – perhaps the messengers

haven't told you – he sent his answer back:
 "Relief from the plague can only come one way.
 Uncover the murderers of Laius,
 put them to death or drive them into exile." 350
 So I beg you, grudge us nothing now, no voice,
 no message plucked from the birds, the embers
 or the other mantic ways within your grasp.
 Rescue yourself, your city, rescue me – 355
 rescue everything infected by the dead.
 We are in your hands. For a man to help others
 with all his gifts and native strength:
 that is the noblest work.

Tiresias: How terrible—to see the truth
 when the truth is only pain to him who sees! 360
 I knew it well, but I put it from my mind,
 else I never would have come.

Oedipus: What's this? Why so grim, so dire?
 Tiresias: Just send me home. You bear your burdens,
 I'll bear mine. It's better that way, 365
 please believe me.

Oedipus: Strange response . . . unlawful,
 unfriendly too to the state that bred and reared you—
 you withhold the word of god.

Tiresias: I fail to see
 that your own words are so well-timed.
 I'd rather not have the same thing said of me . . . 370

Oedipus: For the love of god, don't turn away,
 not if you know something. We beg you,
 all of us on our knees.

Tiresias: None of you knows—
 and I will never reveal my dreadful secrets,
 not to say your own. 375

Oedipus: What? You know and you won't tell?
 You're bent on betraying us, destroying Thebes?

Tiresias: I'd rather not cause pain for you or me.
 So why this . . . useless interrogation?
 You'll get nothing from me.

Oedipus: Nothing! You, 380
 you scum of the earth, you'd enrage a heart of stone!
 You won't talk? Nothing moves you?
 Out with it, once and for all!

Tiresias: You criticize my temper . . . unaware
 of the one *you* live with, you revile me. 385

Oedipus: Who could restrain his anger hearing you?
 What outrage—you spurn the city!

Tiresias: What will come will come.
 Even if I shroud it all in silence.

Oedipus: What will come? You're bound to *tell* me that. 390

Tiresias: I will say no more. Do as you like, build your anger
to whatever pitch you please, rage your worst—

Oedipus: Oh I'll let loose, I have such fury in me —
now I see it all. You helped hatch the plot,
you did the work, yes, short of killing him 395
with your own hands—and given eyes I'd say
you did the killing single-handed!

Tiresias: Is that so!
I charge you, then, submit to that decree
you just laid down: from this day onward
speak to no one, not these citizens, not myself. 400
You are the curse, the corruption of the land!

Oedipus: You, shameless—
aren't you appalled to start up such a story?
You think you can get away with this?

Tiresias: I have already.
The truth with all its power lives inside me. 405

Oedipus: Who primed you for this? Not your prophet's trade.

Tiresias: You did, you forced me, twisted it out of me.

Oedipus: What? Say it again—I'll understand it better.

Tiresias: Didn't you understand, just now?
Or are you tempting me to talk? 410

Oedipus: No, I can't say I grasped your meaning.
Out with it, again!

Tiresias: I say you are the murderer you hunt.

Oedipus: That obscenity, twice—by god, you'll pay.

Tiresias: Shall I say more, so you can really rage? 415

Oedipus: Much as you want. Your words are nothing—
futile.

Tiresias: You cannot imagine . . . I tell you,
you and your loved ones live together in infamy,
you cannot see how far you've gone in guilt.

Oedipus: You think you can keep this up and never suffer? 420

Tiresias: Indeed, if the truth has any power.

Oedipus: It does
but not for you, old man. You've lost your power,
stone-blind, stone-deaf—senses, eyes blind as stone!

Tiresias: I pity you, flinging at me the very insults
each man here will fling at you so soon.

Oedipus: Blind, 425
lost in the night, endless night that nursed you!
You can't hurt me or anyone else who sees the light—
you can never touch me.

Tiresias: True, it is not your fate
to fall at my hands. Apollo is quite enough,
and he will take some pains to work this out. 430

Oedipus: Creon! Is this conspiracy his or yours?

Tiresias: Creon is not your downfall, no, you are your own.

Oedipus: O power—
wealth and empire, skill outstripping skill
in the heady rivalries of life,
what envy lurks inside you! Just for this, 435
the crown the city gave me—I never sought it,
they laid it in my hands—for this alone, Creon,
the soul of trust, my loyal friend from the start
steals against me . . . so hungry to overthrow me
he sets this wizard on me, this scheming quack, 440
this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled
for his own profit—seer blind in his craft!

Come here, you pious fraud. Tell me,
when did you ever prove yourself a prophet?
When the Sphinx, that chanting Fury kept her deathwatch here,
why silent then, not a word to set our people free?
There was a riddle, not for some passer-by to solve—
it cried out for a prophet. Where were you?
Did you rise to the crisis? Not a word,
you and your birds, your gods—nothing. 450
No, but I came by, Oedipus the ignorant,
I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.

And this is the man you'd try to overthrow?
You think you'll stand by Creon when he's king? 455
You and the great mastermind—
you'll pay in tears, I promise you, for this,
this witch-hunt. If you didn't look so senile
the lash would teach you what your scheming means!

Leader: I would suggest his words were spoken in anger, 460
Oedipus...yours too, and it isn't what we need.
The best solution yours to the oracle, the riddle
posed by god—we should look for that.

Tiresias: You are the king no doubt, but in one respect,
at least, I am your equal: the right to reply. 465
I claim that privilege too.
I am not your slave. I serve Apollo.
I don't need Creon to speak for me in public.
So,
You mock my blindness? Let me tell you this.
You with your precious eyes, 470
you're blind to the corruption of your life,
to the house you live in, those you live with—

who are your parents? Do you know? All unknowing
 you are the scourge of your own flesh and blood,
 the dead below the earth and the living here above, 475
 and the double lash of your mother and your father's curse
 will whip you from this land one day, their footfall
 treading you down in terror, darkness shrouding
 your eyes that now can see the light!
 Soon, soon
 you'll scream aloud – what haven won't reverberate? 480
 What rock of Cithaeron won't scream back in echo?
 That day you learn the truth about your marriage,
 the wedding-march that sang you into your halls,
 the lusty voyage home to the fatal harbor!
 And a crowd of other horrors you'd never dream 485
 Will level you with yourself and all your children.
 There. Now smear us with insults—Creon, myself
 and every word I've said. No man will ever
 be rooted from the earth as brutally as you.
 Oedipus: Enough! Such filth from him? Insufferable— 490
 what, still alive? Get out—
 faster, back where you came from—vanish!
 Tiresias: I would never have come if you hadn't called me here.
 Oedipus: If I thought you would blurt out such absurdities,
 You'd have died waiting before I'd had you summoned. 495
 Tiresias Absurd, am I! To you, not to your parents:
 the ones who bore you found me sane enough.
 Oedipus: Parents—who? Wait... who is my father?
 Tiresias This day will bring your birth and your destruction.
 Oedipus: Riddles—all you can say are riddles, murk and darkness. 500
 Tiresias: Ah, but aren't you the best man alive at solving riddles?
 Oedipus: Mock me for that, go on, and you'll reveal my greatness.
 Tiresias: Your great good fortune, true, it was your ruin.
 Oedipus: Not if I saved the city—what do I care?
 Tiresias: well then, I'll be going.
To his attendant. Take me home, boy. 505
 Oedipus: Yes, take him away. You're a nuisance here.
 Out of the way, the irritation's gone.

Turning his back on Tiresias, moving toward the palace.

 Tiresias: I will go,
 once I have said what I came here to say.
 I will never shrink from the anger in your eyes—
 you can't destroy me. Listen to me closely: 510
 the man you've sought so long, proclaiming,
 cursing up and down, the murderer of Laius—
 he is here. A stranger,

you may think, who lives among you,
 he soon will be revealed a native Theban 515
 but he will take no joy in the revelation.
 Blind who now has eyes, beggar who now is rich,
 he will grope his way toward a foreign soil,
 a stick tapping before him step by step.
 Oedipus enters the palace.
 Revealed at last, brother and father both 520
 to the children he embraces, to his mother
 son and husband both—he sowed the loins
 his father sowed, he spilled his father's blood!

Go in and reflect on that, solve that.
 And if you find I've lied 525
 from this day onward call the prophet blind.

[*Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, Translated by Robert Fagles, pp.175-185, line numbers as per translation]

Discussion questions:

- What do you think is Oedipus' opinion of Tiresias before this exchange, and how does this change?
- How is Tiresias portrayed?
- What role do you think the motif of blindness plays in this passage?
- Pick out some language you find particularly effective. Why do you think this?

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book III.316-338

Background to passage: this is a very short excerpt from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a poem which features lots of well-known myths, all of which involve a change of some sort. The passage features the myth of Tiresias being changed from a man into a woman and an argument between Jupiter/Jove and Juno (to give them their Roman names) otherwise known as Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology.

While this took place on earth through fate's decrees
 twice-born Bacchus safely passed his childhood,
 they tell how one day Jove, when flushed with nectar,
 dismissed his weighty cares and idly joked 340
 with Juno as they lazed. "No doubt you women,"
 he said, "get more delight from sex than men."
 But she refutes this. They decide to seek
 judgment of the wise Tiresias,
 since he had known both types of lovemaking. 345
 For in the verdant woods he once had struck
 two giant mating serpents with his staff
 and was transformed (amazing!) from a male
 into a female. Seven autumns passed,

and in the eighth he saw the same two snakes 350
again and said, "If hitting you can change
a person's sex, I'll bash you now once more."
And when he struck the snakes, his prior form—
the likeness he'd been born with—reappeared.

When chosen as the playful quarrel's judge, 355
he favored Jove. It's said that Juno grieved
excessively—more than the matter called for—
and damned the judge's eyes to endless night.

But the almighty father (since no god
can void another's deeds) made him a prophet 360
to soothe the pain of his lost sight with honor.

[*Metamorphoses by Ovid*, Translated by Stephanie McCarter, p79, line numbers as per translation]

Discussion questions:

- What do you think is the tone of this passage?
- How does it entertain us?
- What do we learn about the relationship between gods and humans in this passage?

Mrs Tiresias, From *The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy

All I know is this:
he went out for his walk a man
and came home female.

Out the back gate with his stick,
the dog;
wearing his gardening kecks,
an open-necked shirt,
and a jacket in Harris tweed I'd patched at the elbows myself.

Whistling.

He liked to hear
the first cuckoo of spring
then write to *The Times*.
I'd usually heard it
days before him
but I never let on.

I'd heard one that morning
while he was asleep;
just as I heard,
at about 6 p.m.,

a faint sneer of thunder up in the woods
and felt
a sudden heat
at the back of my knees.

He was late getting back.

I was brushing my hair at the mirror
and running a bath
when a face
swam into view
next to my own.

The eyes were the same.
But in the shocking V of the shirt were breasts.
When he uttered my name in his woman's voice I passed out

*

Life has to go on.

I put it about that he was a twin
and this was his sister
come down to live
while he himself
was working abroad.

And at first I tried to be kind;
blow-drying his hair till he learnt to do it himself,
lending him clothes till he started to shop for his own,
sisterly, holding his soft new shape in my arms all night.

Then he started his period.

One week in bed.
Two doctors in.
Three painkillers four times a day.

And later
a letter
to the powers that be
demanding full-paid menstrual leave twelve weeks per year.
I see him still,
his selfish pale face peering at the moon
through the bathroom window.
The curse, he said, the curse.

Don't kiss me in public,
he snapped the next day,
I don't want folk getting the wrong idea.

It got worse.

After the split I would glimpse him
out and about,
entering glitzy restaurants
on the arms of powerful men -
though I knew for sure
there'd be nothing of *that*
going on
if he had his way -
or on TV
telling the women out there
how, as a woman himself,
he knew how we felt.

His flirt's smile.

The one thing he never got right
was the voice.
A cling peach slithering out from its tin.

I gritted my teeth.

And this is my lover, I said,
the one time we met
at a glittering ball
under the lights,
among tinkling glass,
and watched the way he stared
at her violet eyes,
at the blaze of her skin,
at the slow caress of her hand on the back of my neck;
and saw him picture
her bite,
her bite at the fruit of my lips,
and hear
my red wet cry in the night
as she shook his hand
saying *How do you do;*
and I noticed then his hands, her hands,
the clash of their sparkling rings and their painted nails.

Discussion questions:

- How does this poem make you feel?
- What does the perspective of 'Mrs Tiresias' bring to the story?
- How is pathos evoked, and who is this pathos for?

Tiresias, from *Hold Your Own*, by Kae Tempest

Kae Tempest is a spoken word artist. If you would like to see them reciting this poem, you can watch this link: [KAE TEMPEST - POETRY PERFORMANCE AT THE ROYAL COURT - YouTube](#) (watch from 3m11 onwards)

Picture the scene:

A boy of fifteen.

With the usual dreams

And the usual routine.

Heading to school with a dullness inside
Borne of desires left unsatisfied.

Is he stifled or is he just
Learning the ways of his times?
Give him limbs that are awkward
But know how to climb.

Give him a gait that you know.
Give him hopes.
His days are so painfully slow,
But he copes.

This morning
He wakes to the same old alarm.
Slumps in the shower
Like a frog in the rain.
Winks at the mirror – does cool, does charm.
Shaves soft skin.
Nods at the pain.
No hair yet. Soon though.

Headphones on.
Last half of last night's joint in his lips.
Bass so loud it feels like a movie.
Scuffing his trainers.
Swinging his hips.

They're always laughing,
The kids at the bus stop.

He tries to ignore them,
But it doesn't help.

Hood up, he walks past them.
Blowing out smoke rings.
Singing out Wu-Tang.
Hating himself.

Into the woods, he takes the old path.

There is the rope swing,
There is the bath lying broken.
There is his name in the bark.
There are the trees,
So slim and so stark
In the thin little woodland.
Hardly a forest,
The last of the green washed clean by the grey.
There is the bike chain that nobody wanted,
There is a child's shoe
– hope they're ok.

Out of the damp leaves and mulch in the pathway
His eye is caught by a glittering flash.
A dark moving something,
A mess of bright muscle.
Ore in a forge,
A deep, billowing gash.

Snakes. Two snakes!
Coiling, uncoiling
Boiling and cooling
Oil in a cauldron
Foil in a river
Soil on a mood ring.

He stares:
They spoil each other.
They do things
He has only dreamt of doing.

His blood's alive inside him, fizzing.
He shuts his eyes and watches blotches
Underneath his lids for minutes.
But peeks before he knows he's peeking.

Clutching his knees, he squats on his haunches

Watching the scales as they bounce and contort
And before he has thought he has reached out a fist
And picked up a short stick that lies near a ditch.

He swings from above
And breaks open the fortress.
The snakes, now apart,
Seem smaller, more awkward.
They flee for their love.
The boy, swaying and nauseous
Falls to the floor
More raw than before,
More tortured.

He feels himself shiver, contorting.
A current is coursing within him,
Shorting his circuits.
He curses,
His curses are perfect
The trees bow their branches in worship.

His body's responding to something beyond him.
Swells where before there were dips.
A crunching of muscle, the hips
Opening up, bones roaring,
Beneath them, boyhood shrinking, falling inwards.
Thinking nothing.
Feeling new blood rushing.

Scuffing ankles on the forest floor
As his shape moves
His body pours itself to puddles.
He fits and starts.
He will be more than the sum of his parts.
He shakes and shouts, a screwed-up mouth.
A pain that only women know
Grabs him in the guts.
He slows to gently stuttered breaths

He stops.
He feels.
He's still.
He rests.

And slowly, with caution
She climbs to her feet.
Wipes tears from her cheeks with her sleeve.

Frowns at the trees.
How could you stay so calm?
Places a nervous palm
Against her new face, her new chest,
The new flesh of her arm.

She approaches the school gates,
She can't face her class.
She can't go home, not now.

She is glass
Amongst sand.

She turns and retreats.
Finds herself deep
In the smog and the heat,
The fog and the meat
Of the bodies that beat out their lives
In the throb of the street.
She learns to be small and discreet.
She learns to be thankful for all that she eats.
She learns how to smile
Without meaning an inch of it.
She learns how to swim in the stink
And not sink in it.
It's as if this is all she has known.

Give her a face that is kind, that belongs
To a woman you know
Who is strong
And believes in the rightness of doing things wrong.

Give her a body that breathes deep at night
That is warm and unending; as total as light.
Let her live.

Brighter every day
That she was not so young and desperate.
Bigger every minute
That she settled all the restless
Urges in her chest
And when she woke from nightmares, breathless,
She would piece herself together
Like some relic found in ash and clay,
A precious, ancient necklace.

When she was complete again,

She'd wolfwalk into town.
And drink down every wave that came
To break her spirits down.
She was wild and wonderful.
A star throughout the district.
A red light dreadnought.
Queen among misfits.

And yes, sometimes they sneered
When they glimpsed her in the gutter.
It made her crack her knuckles,
Shake her head and start to mutter
To herself under her breath
You posh pricks don't know fucking shit.
And they would look away
And light their cigarettes and spit.

She liked to giggle with the pretty boys and kiss the lonely addicts
And weave exquisite curtains for the dismal little attics
Where they lay their heads at night,
Out of beads and string and plastic.
Each corner she inhabited made warmer by her magic.

She grew expert in the field
Of love
She learned to see and feel
The deepest secrets lurking in
The hearts of those who came to swim
In her dark waters.
She knew things.
She knew Kings
And she bore daughters.
She knew love, she made her fortune.
Till she met her match.
Exhaustion.

He was an older man,
A man who liked to hold her hand
A man who made her feel like she was rolling round on golden sand.

A man as soft as any girl
A man as hard as any luck.
She understood what life was for
Each time they bucked and came unstuck.
True love takes its toll
On souls
Who are not used to feeling whole.

They tangle limbs and feel the shudders,
All the world is nothing.

Lovers:

Promising each other not to take the vital parts,
While even as they mutter it, they're giving up their hearts.

It is a new moon
In late May
She gives way
To his weight
They are laid out flat by a lake.

She can feel
His blood in her veins.
He can feel
Her pulse in his wrists.
And they kiss.
And the moon hangs open and orange
Like a wound in the mist.

He asks her to marry him.
Have him forever and never be lonely but only together.
She thinks that he's taking the piss.
Throws him a scowl so sharp his darkest parts are shafted, blasted,
ripped in half,
She starts to laugh, she hits her palms
Against the grass. He lifts his arms, *I mean it*
Shining cheeks, his garments creased,
Naked skin on cold damp heath. *I mean it.*
Silence. Let it land.
She cannot breathe or stand.
She crawls towards him, smiling.
Takes his hand.
Of course.
They kiss and both expand.
She decides she must go back,
Seek out a past.
A mother, a father,
Whatever she has.
A blessing or something,
Maybe an answer.

She packs some things and leaves at dawn, alone.
And heads out North. For home.

By dusk she's walking the woods of her youth,

Smelling the air.
Is this where I'm from?

Who was I when I was here last?
If this isn't home
Then where has home gone?

She sees a small clearing between the trees.
She's rocks in a river.
She's leaves in a breeze.

There is a shopping trolley
There are some keys
There is a hawthorn
There's a horse chestnut
There's a used condom
There's an old desk lamp
There's a nice conker . . .
Is that blood or ketchup?
Birds in the branches
Light in the darkness
Like sand in the toes of the bushes.

There!

Right there.

There in the path. In the leaves and the bracken
Two black backs untangle, dragons.
Coupling, shuffling, grappling.
She is staggering.
Can't stop looking. Strange unravelling.
Something from before, something forgotten.
Someone she used to be.
Some rotten something in her darkest somewhere,
Scale and danger.
Nature, sun glare.
Faint, she takes a branch and holds it
Steadies herself. Stills her shoulders.
Snakes and sex and innocence
And nothing really makes much sense.

Who was I then?
She watches awed.
And grips the branch like it's a sword.

Believing.

Believing.

I should be leaving.

She breaks the branch with sudden force.
She swings the branch, and knows its course:
The snakes, no chance, are soon divorced.

A sudden dark and squelching tension.
She panics, sweats, can't breathe. Head pounds.
Her body writhes and juts.
No sounds.

The image of her lover's face
Begins to shake and wilt and fade,
She loses him, there, in the shade.

It hurts. She's felt this once before.
She knows this pain, this change, this awe.

She feels herself retract and harden.
Feels her bones enlarging,
Moving, arching.
Something charging,
She's old milk bursting from its carton.

Shaken, floored, a body heaving
Writhing, smiling, something's pleasing,
Finding her throat open, screaming,
Hoarse and full of light
Her body stops. She feels his might.
His veins thicken in intense delight.

A man again.
He stands, confused.
And walks away.
Too much to lose.

This poor once-boy, sudden-woman,
Who'd lived so long and done so well
And kept so much so deeply hidden,
Now found himself before the bell
Of some new door in some new town.
The pain of new beginnings.
Everything that went before
Gushed in him.
Water overflowing.

Smash the cup and let it happen.

Tiresias.

A full grown human.

Moves on from what he cannot fathom.

He swears his past will not consume him.

And so the man with many pasts

Matures into his present,

But he feels his waters move

In the last arc of the crescent,

And as the moon expands to full

He feels his blood respond,

But as all humans know to do,

He holds it in

And soldiers on.

Imagine how it feels

To walk so far away from life and love,

To know that all you've known

Is now

No longer enough.

All the blood they'd bled,

All the children they had borne,

All the mouths their mouths had met,

Behind them now.

Forlorn,

He staggers knee-deep through his pity

Sadness grabs his shins.

A stranger in a strangers' city,

Where new strangeness begins.

In distant god terrain,

Mount Olympus, pink and milky,

Zeus and Hera fight again,

Raw and honest, foul and filthy,

Hera with her eyes screwed up

I swear you're out to kill me.

She weeps and screams and he enjoys

The feeling of his power.

He froths and paces, thunders, pleads;

Tempers frayed, their bodies need

A break from fighting –

But none comes.

Not after this – another tongue
Roasted in his total blaze.
Surprise surprise, old Zeus has strayed.

The fighting carries on for days.
Down on Earth the weather's mental.
Hurricanes and ancient heat.
Sudden freezes ice the deserts.
Rain leaves craters in concrete.
Hera's ripping up her dresses.
– *Am I not enough for you?*

Zeus is melted, stares intently
– *Sister, you are all I love.*
– *Then why?*
– *Because these others tempt me.*
And unlike you, I lack the guts
To turn away and know my path.

Hera swigs straight from the cask,
The nectar's strong and soothes her heart.
She sighs in disbelief, *don't start.*

Zeus, bored of being wrong and sorry,
Puffs his chest up, shows his might.
Hera knows his godly body
Well enough to not take fright.

I don't know what the fuss is for
Zeus begins, playing wounded.
Women like it more than Men.
I don't even want to do it.
What you get from me is more
Than what I get from you.

Red rag to a Minotaur.

What? says Zeus. *It's true.*

They row like it's a holy war,
The Earth suffers their anger.
Finally, when neither has
The strength to raise the anchor
And the ship of their relations
Is broken-keeled and sinking,
And they're fighting over what the other
Might have just been thinking,

They stop for ragged breaths.
The sky is bruised and black.
Hera won't be pacified
Until he takes it back.

Tiresias, at peace at last,
Is older now than ever,
He's found a lovely partner
And they've made a life together.
He won't walk the woods alone;
He'll only walk the heath.
He blanks out all the lives he's known,
But they survive beneath.

He's started doing pottery.
He's joined the local choir.
If he thinks about his history
His heart is set on fire.

There's no way back,
There is no track
That leads to his past lives.
He sets himself on forwards.
And he loves.
And he survives.

His lover is a gentle man,
Together they are free.
They enjoy each other
I love him. And he loves me.

But on dark days he likes to walk
Beside the heartsick sea.
And as the waves begin to howl
He drops down to his knees,
And cries for all he's lost
And for all he used to be.

Zeus – in final stage of fury –
Beats his massive fists
Against the stormy clouds
And says – *there's only one who can fix this.*

Tiresias is home alone,
His partner's out all day;
He teaches in the local school

Good students but shit pay.

The weather's turning nasty
The house rattles and moans.
The door's ripped from its hinges
And Tiresias is thrown.

The house is filled with stormclouds
Rain smashes at his cheeks
He is too shocked to recognise
That this is how god speaks.

Suddenly the storm abates
The house is filled with sun
Zeus, in his human form,
Sticks up a golden thumb,
Hey.

Tiresias is terrified.
He can barely speak.
Zeus nods in recognition.
Swans in, takes a seat.

*Look, me and Hera
Are having this domestic,
Pathetic – I know.
But that's what's to be expected
From an eternity of marriage.
Anyway
You're my only hope.*

And Zeus takes him by the hand
– might as well have been the throat –
And ascends the mount Olympus
And dumps him before the queen.

*Here's the guy to settle it.
Tiresias has been
Man and woman both.*

*So ask him – who enjoys it more?
A woman or a man?*

Tiresias is stunned
But wants to help them if he can.

His mind begins to shudder,

Every kiss comes back to bite him.
His body buckles under
The old echoes of excitement.

He sees every time his open mouth has yelled,
All tongue and teeth,
He sees the necks and backs and legs,
His rising chest, his blushing cheeks.
He remembers after sex,
The woman he once was,
Lying in her happiness
Like nothing had been lost.

He thinks of how he finds it now,
Spent and drained and breathing deep.
The agony that follows.
The desperate need for sleep.

He feels it moving like a hand
Across his shaking thighs.
He takes his time and works it out,
And slowly he describes:

*If you could split sexual
Pleasure into tenths,
Women would get nine.
That leaves just one
For men.*

Zeus grins,
Smug,
In that way he does.
And Hera feels the boiling of her blood.

She, in rage and consternation,
Screams towards Tiresias
Takes the eyes out from his head
And leaves him blind and sore and red.
And gore is pouring forth before them all.
His arms are spread.
He wishes with his broken heart
He could be someone else instead.

Zeus is shocked, appalled, impressed.
Mate he says *Ah mate*.

Tiresias knows better

Than to howl and remonstrate
But his swollen eyeballs roll in grief;
His face is aged with pain.
Zeus, still reeling from his victory,
Accepts it is a shame.

*What one god has done,
No other god can undo.
I can't give you back your eyes
But I can give you something new.*

Zeus lays a mighty palm
Against the bloody sockets
And floods the body's blindness
With the inner sight of prophets.

Tiresias was melted,
But inside the vision grew.
A weakness in his legs,
A sobbing emptiness, shot through
With some new tenderness,
Some blue
And calm uncurling in his guts.

He staggered like a child pretending blindness,
Hands out in the dark.
But couldn't close his eyes to what exploded in his heart.
He could see the truth of things
He couldn't look away.
Nothing left but to accept,
He had been born to live this day.

And so, with face streaked warpaint red,
And every sense burnt white with pain,
He was given seven lifetimes
And dropped back down to Earth again.

A whole life lived
At the mercy of the fates.
Here he comes again,
The old seer with the shakes.
Wheeled on to mutter prophecy,
Chased off by angry kings.

Tiresias, you lived for more
Than what the legend sings.

Tiresias – you’ve lost
Everyone you ever loved.
But you stand beneath
The cruelty of the sun that burns above
And you offer only toothless grins
For all that you have seen.

Tiresias, you hold your own.
Each you that you have been.

You walk among us, slow,
A ragged crow,
With breath to blow,
In which we’ll see a truth
That we’ll wish we didn’t know.

You’re the crazy on the corner
Old, and smelling weird
Queuing for electric
With birdbones in your beard.

You stagger on regardless,
Swaying in the street
Summoning an oracle
That can’t be arsed to meet.

While we assemble selves online
And stare into our phones,
You are bright and terrifying,
Breath and flesh and bone.
Tiresias – you teach us
What it means: to hold your own.

Discussion questions:

- How are Tiresias, Zeus and Hera portrayed?
- Tempest uses language which we might think is anachronistic when discussing a Greek myth. What do you think of this? Do you find it effective?
- How does this poem make us empathise with Tiresias?
- How does Tempest make this 2000+ year old myth relevant for a modern audience?
- (If you listened to Tempest perform the poem): what does the spoken element add to the story?

4. The Wish of Caeneus

Ovid *Metamorphoses* Book XII.459-535

This extract is a scene from the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs, in which Laetreus and other Centaurs contend with Caeneus.

"Caeneus had killed five centaurs: Styphelus,
Bromus, Antimachus, ax-armed Pyracmon, 500
and Elymus. I don't recall their wounds—
I marked the count and names. Laetreus flies up,
his limbs and body massive. He wears armor
stripped from Emathian Halaesus, whom
he'd slain. His age was neither young nor old— 505
his force was youthful but his temples gray.
He looked impressive with his shield and sword
and Macedonian lance. Facing both armies,
he flashed his weapons, trotting in a circle,
then poured these boastful words into the air: 510
'Caenis! Must I put up with you? To me,
you always will be female—always Caenis!
Don't you recall how you were born? Does it
not haunt you how you got this prize, the price
you paid to have a man's false form? Remember 515
that you were born a girl, that you were raped!
Go get a distaff and some wool—spin thread!
Leave war to men!' As he was taunting, Caeneus
let fly a shaft that reamed his flexing side
where man and horse combine. Enraged by pain, 520
Laetreus tries to pierce the youth's bare face.
His spear rebounds, like hail off of a rooftop
Or a pebble flung against a hollow drum.
Then he moves in and tries to run his sword
through that hard flank. The sword can't penetrate! 525
'You won't escape!' he yelled. 'I'll use the edge
to slash you since the point is blunt!' He slants
the sword, then with his outstretched hand he targets
the young man's groin. The blow resounds as though
his flesh were marble, and his rock-hard skin 530
shatters the steel. The centaur is astonished.
Caeneus shows off his unscathed limbs and says,
'Now let me try your body with my blade.'
He thrust his deadly sword into that flank
hilt deep. And wildly swiveling his hand 535
into that wound, he deals him wound on wound.

"Look! Centaurs charge with booming shouts, all casting

their spears at this one man. Their spears fall, blunt.
 Caeneus, the son of Elatus, remains
 unpunctured and unbloodied by each blow. 540
 This strange thing left them shocked. 'What a disgrace!'
 shouts Monychus. 'One man defeats our tribe!
 Hardly a man! And yet he *is* the man—
 our impotence makes us what he once was.
 What good are giant limbs and superstrength, 545
 that nature joined in us the two most valiant
 creatures? I don't believe our mother was
 a goddess, nor our father Ixion,
 so great that he aspired to lofty Juno!
 We're vanquished by a foe who's half a man! 550
 Bury him under rocks and trunks—whole mountains!
 Hurl forests! Wring the breath of life from him!
 Choke him with trees—let weight stand in for wounds!'
 He spoke, then chanced upon a trunk knocked down
 by raging gusts of wind. Leading the way, 555
 he hurled it at his rugged enemy.
 In moments Othrys had been stripped of trees
 and Pelion lost its shade. The huge mass covered
 Caeneus, who fumed beneath the weight of trees
 while bearing piles of oak on his firm shoulders. 560
 But once the heap grew taller than his mouth
 and head, he could no longer draw his breath.
 At times he falls unconscious, and at times
 he tries in vain to clamber to the air
 and roll away the trees. At times he writhes, 565
 as lofty Ida (look—we see it there)
 shakes in an earthquake. It's not certain that
 he died. Some said the tree-pile plunged his body
 to gaping Tartarus. Mopsus denied this.
 He saw a gold-winged bird fly from the pile 570
 up to the crystal air. I saw it too—
 that was the first and last time ever. Mopsus
 watched as it gently hovered round the camp,
 its screeches loud. His eyes and mind both trailed it.
 'Hail Caeneus!' he said. 'Glory of the Lapiths! 575
 The greatest man once—now a matchless bird!'
 This story was believed due to its source.
 Grief fueled our rage, and we could scarcely bear
 that one man had been crushed by countless foes.
 We exercised our rage with steel, not stopping 580
 till half were dead and half fled in the night."

[*Metamorphoses by Ovid*, Translated by Stephanie McCarter, pp.359-361, line numbers as per translation]

Discussion questions:

- How is Caeneus portrayed?
- How is Laetresus portrayed?
- What stereotypes about gender can you spot in this passage?
- How does Ovid evoke pathos for Caeneus?

Bronze relief



Bronze relief from Olympia depicting two Centaurs fighting with Caeneus (mid to late 7th Century BCE) (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Discussion questions:

- Which elements of the story as represented in Ovid can you see in this relief?
- How is Caeneus portrayed?
- How are the Centaurs portrayed?
- Who do you think is winning at this point in the fight, and why?