# Experiments in Gender-Swapping

At the college where I teach, I used to co-host "Gender Wednesday" discussions during which students and professors would read aloud a piece of literature—usually but not always a short story—and then consider its representation of gender. If conversation flagged, my go-to question was something like this: "What difference would it make if the genders of the characters were changed? If you think there would be a difference, then the text is—at least in some way—*about* gender." That prompt grew out of a more specific one that I used in courses on Classical reception. After reading ancient versions of the myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades along with post-antique retellings, I would ask the students to do some in-class, informal writing in response to the following: "Can you imagine a version of the myth in which some or all of the characters' genders are different? What modifications might you imagine making to the story if Demeter and/or Persephone were male or Hades female? What ideas would and wouldn't be explored if the characters' genders were changed?" I mention these moments to suggest how primed I was for *Gender Swapped Greek Myths* by Karrie Fransman and Jonathan Plackett (published in 2022).

I often skip reading introductory materials because I don't want someone to tell me what to think about a book before I have a chance to experience it myself. In the case of *Gender Swapped Greek Myths*, however, the authors' note is illuminating and crucial. Fransman and Plackett explain the project of the book and the process of making it. They took public domain retellings of mythological narratives for children and applied a computer algorithm developed by Plackett to identify and replace gender-specific words. For instance, *Theseus* becomes *Thesea*, and *maidens* becomes *lads*. Sometimes the switches require a judgment call or artistic license:

*nymphs* becomes *satyrs*, and *Minotaur* becomes *Minoheifer*. Fransman followed a somewhat analogous process in creating the images for the book. She surveyed depictions of the mythological characters with an eye to the ways they instantiate power relations, and those configurations serve as a springboard for her own illustrations. We see, for example, Andromachus—a nearly naked man—bound to a rock as an offering to the sea beast and Hadia forcibly carrying Persephonus away. Anticipating an objection that a binary approach is reductive, the authors assure readers that they recognize that there are more than two gender identities, but they have chosen to focus on the two that have been dominant historically. Fransman and Plackett also mention that the goal of the project isn't utopian or corrective. They are not presenting a woman-over-man hierarchy as better than a man-over-woman one, nor are they trying to settle a score. Instead, they hope that the gender-swapped stories become an occasion for us to reflect on our collective assumptions and individual expectations about gender. Depending on the reader, some moments may feel liberating, while others may be unsettling. Noticing our own reactions is part of—and maybe even most of—the point.

When I teach Classical mythology courses, I ask the students to think of mythological literature as a kind of mirror. Audiences may gain a new perspective on their reality—or ask new questions about it—after seeing its reflection in the alternate reality of myth. Ancient authors such as Euripides or Ovid may use the heightened world of myth to lay bare (for instance) gender dynamics or other social hierarchies, and each audience member has to decide what to do with what they see in the mythological mirror. Fransman and Plackett's anthology is its own kind of mirror, inviting us to look at our reactions to the modified stories and consider what they show us about our attitudes toward gender and the cultural parameters that have shaped them. In

this regard, Fransman and Plackett seem to me to be working very much in the spirit of ancient mythological literature.

Fransman and Plackett extend another invitation to their readers: to undertake some gender-swapping experiments of their own. Curious to experience the process from the inside, I gender-swapped "The Curse of Echo" from Elsie Finnimore Buckley's *Children of the Dawn* (published in 1908). The result is below, followed by some remarks. I've put all my alterations in ***bold italics***.

"The Curse of ***Echon***"

In the flowery groves of Helicon ***Echon*** was once a fair ***satyr*** who, hand in hand with ***his brothers***, sported along the green lawns and by the side of the mountain-streams. Among them all ***his*** feet were the lightest and ***his*** laugh the merriest, and in the telling of tales not one of them could touch ***him***. So if ever any among them were plotting mischief in their hearts, they would say to ***him***,

"***Echon***, thou weaver of words, go thou and sit beside ***Herus*** in ***his*** bower, and beguile ***him*** with a tale that ***he*** come not forth and find us. See thou make it a long one, ***Echon***, and we will give thee a garland to twine in thy hair."

And ***Echon*** would laugh a gay laugh, which rang through the grove.

"What will you do when ***he*** tires of my tales?" ***he*** asked.

"When that time comes we shall see," said they.

So with another laugh ***he*** would trip away and cast ***himself*** on the grass at ***Herus'*** feet. When ***Herus*** looked upon ***Echon his*** stern brow would relax, and ***he*** would smile upon ***him*** and stroke ***his*** hair.

"What hast thou come for now, thou sprite"? ***he*** would ask.

"I had a great longing to talk with thee, great ***Herus***," ***he*** would answer, "and I have a tale—a wondrous new tale—to tell thee."

"Thy tales are as many as the risings of the sun, ***Echon***, and each one of them as long as an ***old woman's braid***."

"The day is yet young, ***father***," ***he*** would say, "and the tales I have told thee before are as mud which is trampled underfoot by the side of the one I shall tell thee now."

"Go to, then," said ***Herus***, "and if it pleases me I will listen to the end."

So ***Echon*** would sit upon the grass at ***Herus'*** feet, and with ***his*** eyes fixed upon ***his*** face ***he*** would tell ***his*** tale. ***He*** had the gift of words, and, moreover, ***he*** had seen and heard many strange things which ***he*** alone could tell of. These ***he*** would weave into romances, adding to them as best pleased ***him***, or taking from them at will; for the best of tale-tellers are those who can lie, but who mingle in with their lies some grains of truth which they have picked from their own experience. And ***Herus*** would forget ***his*** watchfulness and ***his*** jealousies, and listen entranced, while the magic of ***Echon's*** words made each scene live before ***his*** eyes. Meanwhile the ***satyrs*** would sport to their hearts' content and never fear ***his*** anger.

But at last came the black day of reckoning when ***Herus*** found out the prank which ***Echon*** had played upon ***him*** so long, and the fire of ***his*** wrath flashed forth like lightning.

"The gift whereby thou hast deceived me shall be thine no more," ***he*** cried. "Henceforward thou shalt be dumb till someone else has spoken, and then, even if thou wilt, thou shalt not hold thy tongue, but must needs repeat once more the last words that have been spoken."

"Alas! alas!" cried the ***satyrs*** in chorus.

"Alas! alas!" cried ***Echon*** after them, and could say no more, though ***he*** longed to speak and beg ***Herus*** to forgive ***him***. So did it come to pass that ***he*** lost ***his*** voice, and could only say that which others put in ***his*** mouth, whether ***he*** wished it or no.

Now, it chanced one day that the young ***Narcissa*** strayed away from ***her*** companions in the hunt, and when ***she*** tried to find them ***she*** only wandered further, and lost ***her*** way upon the lonely heights of Helicon. ***She*** was now in the bloom of ***her*** youth, nearing ***womanhood***, and fair as a flower in spring, and all who saw ***her*** straightway loved ***her*** and longed for ***her***. But, though ***her*** face was smooth and soft as a ***lad's***, ***her*** heart was hard as steel; and while many loved ***her*** and sighed for ***her***, they could kindle no answering flame in ***her*** breast, but ***she*** would spurn them, and treat them with scorn, and go on ***her*** way, nothing caring. When ***she*** was born, the blind ***sibyl Teiresia*** had prophesied concerning ***her***,

"So long as ***she*** sees not ***herself she*** shall live and be happy."

And ***her*** words came true, for ***Narcissa*** cared for neither ***woman*** nor ***man***, but only for ***her*** own pleasure; and because ***she*** was so fair that all who saw ***her*** loved ***her*** for ***her*** beauty, ***she*** found it easy to get from them what ***she*** would. But ***she herself*** knew nought of love, and therefore but little of grief; for love at the best brings joy and sorrow hand in hand, and if unreturned, it brings nought but pain.

Now, when the ***satyrs*** saw ***Narcissa*** wandering alone through the woods, they, too, loved ***her*** for ***her*** beauty, and they followed ***her*** wherever ***she*** went. But because ***she*** was a mortal they were shy of ***her***, and would not show themselves, but hid behind the trees and rocks so that ***she*** should not see them; and amongst the others ***Echon*** followed ***her***, too. At last, when ***she*** found ***she*** had really wandered astray, ***she*** began to shout for one of ***her*** companions.

"Ho, there! where art thou?" ***she*** cried.

"Where art thou?" answered ***Echon***.

When ***she*** heard the voice, ***she*** stopped and listened, but ***she*** could hear nothing more. Then ***she*** called again.

"I am here in the wood—***Narcissa***."

"In the wood—***Narcissa***," said ***he***.

"Come hither," ***she*** cried.

"Come hither," ***he*** answered.

Wondering at the strange voice which answered ***her***, ***she*** looked all about, but could see no one.

"Art thou close at hand?" ***she*** asked.

"Close at hand," answered ***Echon***.

Wondering the more at seeing no one, ***she*** went forward in the direction of the voice. ***Echon***, when ***he*** found ***she*** was coming towards ***him***, fled further, so that when next ***she*** called, ***his*** voice sounded far away. But wherever ***he*** was, ***she*** still followed after ***him***, and ***he*** saw that ***she*** would not let ***him*** escape; for wherever ***he*** hid, if ***she*** called, ***he*** had to answer, and so show ***her his*** hiding-place. By now they had come to an open space in the trees, where the green lawn sloped down to a clear pool in the hollow. Here by the margin of the water ***he*** stood, with ***his*** back to the tall, nodding bulrushes, and as ***Narcissa*** came out from the trees ***he*** wrung ***his*** hands, and the salt tears dropped from ***his*** eyes; for ***he*** loved ***her***, and longed to speak to ***her***, and yet ***he*** could not say a word. When ***she*** saw ***him she*** stopped.

"Art thou ***he*** who calls me?" ***she*** asked.

"Who calls me?" ***he*** answered.

"I have told thee, ***Narcissa***," ***she*** said.

"***Narcissa***," ***he*** cried, and held out ***his*** arms to ***her***.

"Who art thou?" ***she*** asked.

"Who art thou?" said ***he***.

"Have I not told thee," ***she*** said impatiently, "***Narcissa***?"

"***Narcissa***," ***he*** said again, and still held out ***his*** hands beseechingly.

"Tell me," ***she*** cried, "who art thou and why dost thou call me?"

"Why dost thou call me?" said ***he***.

At this ***she*** grew angry.

"***Lad***, whoever thou art, thou hast led me a pretty dance through the woods, and now thou dost nought but mock me."

"Thou dost nought but mock me," said ***he***.

At this ***she*** grew yet more angry, and began to abuse ***him***, but every word of abuse that ***she*** spoke ***he*** hurled back at ***her*** again. At last, tired out with his wanderings and with anger, ***she*** threw ***herself*** on the grass by the pool, and would not look at ***him*** nor speak to ***him*** again. For a time ***he*** stood beside ***her*** weeping, and longing to speak to ***her*** and explain, but never a word could ***he*** utter. So at last in ***his*** misery ***he*** left ***her***, and went and hid ***himself*** behind a rock close by. After a while, when ***her*** anger had cooled down somewhat, ***Narcissa*** remembered ***she*** was very thirsty, and noticing for the first time the clear pool beside ***her***, ***she*** bent over the edge of the bank to drink. As ***she*** held out ***her*** hand to take the water, ***she*** saw looking up towards ***her*** a face which was the fairest face ***she*** had ever looked on, and ***her*** heart, which never yet had known what love was, at last was set on fire by the face in the pool. With a sigh ***she*** held out both ***her*** arms towards it, and the figure also held out two arms to ***her***, and ***Echon*** from the rock answered back ***her*** sigh. When ***she*** saw the figure stretching out towards ***her*** and heard the sigh, ***she***

thought that ***her*** love was returned, and ***she*** bent down closer to the water and whispered, “I love thee.”

“I love thee,” answered ***Echon*** from the rock.

At these words ***she*** bent down further, and tried to clasp the figure in ***her*** arms, but as ***she*** did so, it vanished away. The surface of the pool was covered with ripples, and ***she*** found ***she*** was clasping empty water to ***her*** breast. So ***she*** drew back and waited awhile, thinking ***she*** had been overhasty. In time, the ripples died away and the face appeared again as clear as before, looking up at ***her*** longingly from the water. Once again ***she*** bent towards it, and tried to clasp it, and once again it fled from ***her*** embrace. Time after time ***she*** tried, and always the same thing happened, and at last ***she*** gave up in despair, and sat looking down into the water, with the teardrops falling from ***her*** eyes; and the figure in the pool wept, too, and looked up at ***her*** with a look of longing and despair. The longer ***she*** looked, the more fiercely did the flame of love burn in ***her*** breast, till at length ***she*** could bear it no more, but determined to reach the desire of ***her*** heart or die. So for the last time ***she*** leaned forward, and when ***she*** found that once again ***she*** was clasping the empty water, ***she*** threw ***herself*** from the bank into the pool, thinking that in the depths, at any rate, ***she*** would find ***her*** love. But ***she*** found naught but death among the weeds and stones of the pool, and knew not that it was ***her*** own face ***she*** loved reflected in the water below ***her***. Thus were the words of the prophet fulfilled, “So long as ***she*** sees not ***herself she*** shall live and be happy.”

***Echon***, peeping out from the rock, saw all that had happened, and when ***Narcissa*** cast ***herself*** into the pool, ***he*** rushed forward, all too late, to stop ***her***. When ***he*** found ***he*** could not save ***her***, ***he*** cast ***himself*** on the grass by the pool and wept and wept, till ***his*** flesh and ***his*** bones wasted away with weeping, and naught but ***his*** voice remained and the curse that was on ***him***.

So to this day ***he*** lives, a formless voice haunting rocks and caves and vaulted halls. ***Himself*** no ***woman*** has seen since the day ***Narcissa*** saw ***him*** wringing ***his*** hands for love of ***her*** beside the nodding bulrushes, and no ***woman*** ever shall see again. But ***his*** voice we all have heard repeating our words when we thought that no one was by; and though now ***he*** will say whatever we bid ***him***, if once the curse were removed, the cry of ***his*** soul would be,

"***Narcissa***, ***Narcissa***, my love, come back—come back to me!"

By the side of the clear brown pool, on the grass that ***Echon*** had watered with ***his*** tears, there sprang up a sweet-scented flower, with a pure white face and a crown of gold. And to this day in many a land ***women*** call that flower "***Narcissa***," after the ***girl*** who, for love of ***her*** own fair face, was drowned in the waters of Helicon.

Some remarks

Most of the gender-swapping changes were straightforward to make. Pronouns accounted for the vast majority of them, followed by proper nouns. Having to go through and switch all the gendered third-person singular pronouns underscored how much gender-signaling happens through these little words. It's one of the reasons why I decided to flag my changes in the story. I wanted people to be able to see at a glance how much gender articulation we may take for granted—so much that I'm tempted to use a less descriptive phrase than *gender articulation*. *Gender reinforcement*, *enforcement*, or even *policing* perhaps? Names also participate in gender buttressing, since names based in Latin and Greek indicate gender. I adopted Fransman and Plackett's practice of altering the end of names to reflect gender along Latin and Greek patterns: *Echo* to *Echon*, *Narcissus* to *Narcissa*, *Hera* to *Herus*, and *Teiresias* to *Teiresia*. I count only five sentences in the story which don't convey gender through pronouns or names!

Of those five sentences, two use other words that make gender apparent. When Herus curses Echon, we are told: "'Alas! alas!' cried the satyrs in chorus." And later Narcissa says to Echon: "Lad, whoever thou art, thou has led me a pretty dance through the woods, and now thou dost nought but mock me." In these cases I followed Fransman and Plackett's modifications, substituting *satyrs* for *nymphs* and *lad* for *maiden*. This means that in the entire story there are only three sentences in which gender isn't explicitly conveyed. One of those sentences is in second person singular (when Herus curses Echon), and the other two are in the third person plural (referring to the satyrs and to Narcissa and Echon as "they")—all instances in which English doesn't use gender-specific pronouns. Gender inflections in surrounding sentences, however, ensure that a reader is in no doubt of the genders of "you" or "they."

Some other phrasing changes were required: *sisters* to *brothers*, *old man's beard* to *old woman's braid*, *mother* to *father*, *manhood* to *womanhood*, *man* to *woman* and vice versa, and *seer* to *sibyl*. The switch of *seer* to *sibyl* might not have been strictly necessary, but I think *seer* has a masculine connotation, especially in a Classical context. The words of Buckley's story announce gender at nearly every turn. It's as if reminding or reassuring the reader about gender is an integral part of grounding the narrative. Making and marking the substitutions brought this to the forefront of my notice.

I understand why Fransman and Plackett switch *nymph(s)* to *satyr(s)*. These beings seem to have similar places in the ontology of the mythical cosmos, and they are often presented in groups rather than as individuals, but they differ by gender, so we could think of the change as analogous to that of *sister(s)* to *brother(s)*. Nevertheless, I found the swap more consequential than that. Satyrs bring with them a legacy of sexual appetite and potential menace that nymphs don't. As a result, when the satyrs hide behind trees to watch Narcissa, their distancing feels

more voyeuristic than when Buckley's nymphs duck out of sight due to bashfulness. And when Echon follows Narcissa into the woods, his tracking seems more threatening because he's a satyr, as if he's a predator by sex and species, and Narcissa is his prey. This particular modification in the gender-swapping experiment is a reminder that words may bring with them a cloud of gender-relevant connotations and associations that make a neutral substitution impossible.

The story of Echo and Narcissus might have been an odd one to choose for gender-swapping. My decision to work with it was motivated by a few factors. I teach the Ovidian story every year, so I know its moves well, and I admire the strategic echoing of Ovid's Echo, how she chooses which words to repeat so that she can make meaning within the constraint of her curse. The tale was included in Buckley's *Children of the Dawn*, which I was reading because a student of mine was working on a research project involving a different story in the anthology, so it was a public domain version that was close at hand and that I was already thinking about. Within Buckley's collection "The Curse of Echo" is one of the shorter stories, which made the swapping process very manageable. All of these reasons are sound. And yet, the ancient story—as we have it from Ovid—is one that deals with gender-swapping in its own sort of way: Ovid's Echo takes on the role of a lover, usually given to a male, who pursues a beloved, usually designated female. Thus my gender-swapping partly made the story conform to more usual gender expectations. The "lover" role is accorded to the male, and the female Narcissa slides easily into a stereotype.

Using an adaptation of Ovid's story introduced further complications, since Buckley alters her Ovidian source material. Her Narcissus never realizes that he has fallen in love with his reflection and instead boldly dives to his death while trying to reach his beloved. I view this as Buckley's attempt to give Narcissus some masculine initiative, but when Narcissus becomes

Narcissa, her drowning takes on overtones of Ophelia, more desperate than daring. After the death of Buckley's Narcissus, the tears of her Echo provide nourishment for the narcissus flower. Echo thereby becomes a virtual mother, her grief giving botanical birth. My gender-swapped version gives originary power to the male Echon, and I am ambivalent about the result. On one hand, it avoids the sentimentality and/or valorization of female sadness. On the other hand, it transfers to the male a creative power that Buckley grants her female character after other outlets—speech and love—have been curtailed, and I'm sorry to lose that nod to female capability. The wrinkles and roundabouts occasioned by working with a public domain adaptation emphasize for me the layers of reception through which we engage Classical antiquity: the centuries of difference, the other participants who have influenced the conversation along the way, our own knowledge of and relationship with ancient material that we bring to any encounter.

I consider mythological literature a discourse that experiments with ideas and encourages each member of its audience to experiment themselves. This aspect of mythical narratives can be difficult to communicate to people who first (and primarily) encounter myth as something definitive, set down in anthologies that iron out wrinkles and uncomfortabilities and provide didactic take-aways. Though *Gender Swapped Greek Myths* uses the familiar format of a mythological anthology, its effect is otherwise: it uses the ancient stories—doubly refracted through adaptation and gender-swapping—as opportunities for reflection, questioning, and open-ended exploration.

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