

# LESBIANTIQUITY

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**PHAEDRUS**

**PROMETHEUS'  
GENITAL MISTAKE**

LESBIANTIQUITY © Georgina Barker (Portknockie: Sapphizdat, 2024)

Phaedrus translation, introduction, and notes © Kristin Mann 2024

Latin text from: Ben Edwin Perry, ed., *Babrius and Phaedrus: Fables* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1965)

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## THE TRANSLATOR

### Dr Kristin Mann

I am the author of several articles about ancient Greco-Roman fables, and I have a particular interest in Phaedrus and his depiction of genders and sexualities in the *Fabulae*. I'm excited to be part of a project that is making ancient women-who-love-women more visible and accessible – I think it's important, both to give a fuller and more colorful picture of the ancient world and because, as a lesbian, I like to see glimpses of myself, however brief, in the past. Originally a native of California, I now live in the Midwest with my wife and two cats.



## GAIUS IULIUS PHAEDRUS

Very little is known about the first-century Latin fable-writer, Gaius Iulius Phaedrus. The title of Phaedrus' work identifies him as a freed slave who belonged to the emperor Augustus, but we have no way of knowing whether that is true. Phaedrus explores the nature of gender-nonconforming individuals in several of his fables (4.15, 4.16, 4.17, and *Appendix Perottina* 10).

This fable (4.16) concerns the creation of two types of gender-nonconforming individuals: the *tribad* and the *mollis* male. Neither word is easy to translate. The word *tribad* may refer to a woman who has sex with women (see Seneca *Controversiae* 1.2.23.2), or to a woman who *penetrates* (tops) women (like in Martial 7.67 and 7.70), or to a woman who wants or tries to be a man/male/masculine (as in Martial 7.67).<sup>1</sup> A man who is *mollis* is a man who is 'soft/effeminate', an adjective that usually has sexual implications – this is a man who is presumed to be 'feminine' in bed, aka a bottom, almost always with other men.

However, what Phaedrus emphasizes in this poem is not so much sexual activity (although the final line does seem to refer to sex), but rather the nature of their bodies. This poem features bodies that we today might consider intersex or trans: men with vaginas and women with penises, created when Prometheus 'mixes up' gendered bodies with gendered genitalia.

And although this is a poem that purports to 'explain' these individuals, not much is actually explained. Though the poem ends

<sup>1</sup> See LESBIANTIQUITY 13 & 17.

with vagina-having men and penis-having women, the poem never *labels* either of these groups. Are *tribads* men who have vaginas? Or are they women who have penises? Are *molles mares* women with penises? Or are they men with vaginas? The poem ends without clear answers, and modern scholars have argued both sides of the issue.

What the poem does seem to suggest is a relationship between multi-gendered bodies and non-normative sex: that women who have sex with women do so either because they are 'actually' men or because they have penises, and men who bottom with men do so either because they are 'actually' women or because they have vaginas.



## ROOT & BRANCH READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore  
a variety of options for the text:  
any variants in the original <Greek  
Latin> texts  
and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words  
of the original text, replicating when possible  
word order, root meanings of words, and  
grammatical gender  $\left( \begin{matrix} [n] \\ [f] \\ [m] \end{matrix} \right)$  of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

## FABLE 4.16

a second man asked: (masculine women  
tribads  
dykes) and (effeminate ~~men~~  
soft ~~males~~  
bottoms)

- what (motive  
procedure  
cause) had <(pro)created  
begot> them?, and the old man  
explained:

"that same Prometheus, <creator  
author> of the clay populace,

which, as soon as it (bumps into  
meets with  
runs aground on) fate, is broken,

5 when he had been fashioning separately for the whole day

nature's parts which (propriety  
modesty  
shame) hides beneath clothing,

so he could soon <fit  
apply> them to their own bodies,

was invited to dinner suddenly by <Liber  
Dionysus>;



rogavit alter tribadas et molles mares

quae ratio procreasset, exposuit senex:

'idem Prometheus, auctor vulgi fictilis

qui, simul offendit ad fortunam, frangitur,

5 naturae partes veste quas celat pudor

cum separatim toto finxisset die,

aptare mox ut posset corporibus suis,

ad cenam est invitatus subito a Libero;

## NOTES

1 *a second man*: this fable is a companion piece to Fable 4.15, in which someone asks Aesop to explain the origin of oral sex, and Aesop tells a story about how this practice was born from Prometheus' creation of woman's tongue. A different man then asks a second question, and Aesop once again blames everything on Prometheus.

1 *soft/effeminate males/men // bottoms*: men who are *molles* are usually assumed to enjoy being penetrated in sex with men. Generally speaking, there was no broad cultural disapprobation against men having sex with men or boys so long as they did the penetrating, but being penetrated carried cultural shame.

2 *the old man*: this is likely Aesop, the famed fabulist from ancient Greece.

7 *their own*: notice the marked use of *suis* here – although the genitalia have not yet been attached to the bodies, the bodies are still 'male' or 'female' in their own right, so that one set of genitalia (but not the other) can be said to be 'theirs'.

where he <irrigated his veins with much nectar>  
got very drunk

10 and returned home late with < tottering  
staggering X steps >.

then, with his ( judgment  
mind  
heart ) half-asleep and in a drunken error,

he <attached  
added > the virginal <thing  
part > to the masculine race,

and placed masculine parts onto women.

thus ( passion  
lust  
desire ) now enjoys ( an irregular  
a perverted  
a crooked ) X delight  
pleasure >."



ubi inrigatus multo venas nectare

10 sero domum est reversus titubanti pede.

tum semisomno corde et errore ebrio

adplicuit virginale generi masculo,

et masculina membra adposuit feminis.

ita nunc libido pravo fruitur gaudio.'

14 *perverted/irregular/crooked*: there does seem to be condemnation here of the type of sex enjoyed by *tribads* and effeminate men; it is not entirely clear whether it is the same-sex nature of the intercourse or the roles adopted (ie, women topping and men bottoming) or a combination of the two that is specifically condemned here.

It is often argued that the Romans had no issue with 'homosexual intercourse' per se but only with the roles taken during sex, but for more nuanced perspectives see: Richlin, Amy. 1993. 'Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law Against Love Between Men'. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 4: 523–73; and Boehringer, Sandra. 2021. *Female Homosexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome*.



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