

Ovid and Mel Gibson: Power, Vulnerability, and What Women Want

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Abstract

Knowledge of Ovid is invaluable for analyzing Nancy Meyers' film *What Women Want* (2000). Advertising executive Nick Marshall (Mel Gibson) is a sexist, chauvinistic ladies' man who wants the ability to hear what women are thinking. He is in effect a second Tiresias, and this article examines him in light of the gender-bending queer from the *Metamorphoses*. Meyers links Nick's miraculous transformation to his attempt to listen to women while on the three "B's": "buts," "bodies," and "beer."¹ The story begins when he is passed over for promotion to the position of Creative Director at work; his boss is attempting to bolster the firm's sagging fortunes by hiring a woman instead. Darcy McGuire, played by Helen Hunt, seeks to relieve the firm's worries an ostensibly neglected market segment: women. From the get-go, Nick and his colleagues set a very practical task: discovering what female consumers want and selling it to them.

What Women Want should, however, not be mistaken for a feminist film. For one thing, it does not situate male and female desire with respect to broader issues of power. In *Metamorphoses*, the figures of Semele and Caenis offer powerful testimony to the susceptibility of women to violence. Ovid emphasizes this in a way that Meyers does not, depicting lustful gods and men with a spy; subversive irony that pops up time and again in his otherwise stately heinawriters. And as someone exiled from Rome to a remote town on the Black Sea, he understood better than most what it meant to be exposed and vulnerable to powerful authority. And so, Meyers' film offers little in the way of genuine gender analysis; her forte seems to be decking out essentialized gender stereotypes with consumerist fluff. If we truly wish to determine *What Women Want*, Ovid's critique of Tiresias proves a sure guide than Meyers' embrace of Nick Marshall.

At first glance, my title likely seems far-fetched, what possible connection could there be between the august seer, known to us from ancient Greece and Rome, a Hollywood lead boy, and an unremarkable romantic comedy that routinely airs late at night on PBS? Yet Nancy Meyers' film (2000) is evidence of the lasting impact of our cultural predecessors: we are so profoundly steeped in their legacy that we often fail to notice its distinctive flavor. Nowhere is this truer than in the intellectual realm. When we seek to make sense of the world around us, we cannot but do so with the former, categories, and concepts bequeathed to us by the literature and mythology of yore.

The serious study of antiquity is distinct from antiquarianism. Put differently, it offers more than a scorecard for identifying, for example, continuities in plots, characters, and motifs in modern film. Rather, concern with the past allows us to ask deeper and abiding questions that do not admit of easy answers. In the current instance, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* helps us to identify the character played by male lead Mel Gibson as a gender-bending Tiresias figure, and this analysis, in turn, leads us to reconsider roughly/knotty issues of gender and difference that persist to the present day.

Publius Ovidius Naso completed his epic masterpiece a life over two thousand years ago. As its name implies, *Metamorphoses* is a poem about changes of every conceivable sort. In its lines, gods become humans and beasts; people become trees, flowers, and animals; and the dead Julius Caesar becomes a goat. One of the poem's best-known changes is that which befalls Tiresias, a Greek man from the town of Thebes. Ovid describes his transformation thus:

They say that Jove, by chance, relaxed with nectar,
Had set aside his heavy cares and stirred up old jokes
"With this wife" Juno, who had time to spare, and said
"Your woman's pleasure is greater than what we
Glymp'g got!" She decided it, and so they decided to ask
Learned Tiresias what he thought; he had played for both teams.
After he had smacked with his staff the bodies
Of two great snakes mating in the green forest.
Something amazing happened: he became a woman
And spent several fawns' lives. In his eighth year,
He again saw the same snakes, and said
"If striking you is so powerful
That it switches things around,
Let's try it again." He did, and straightaway
His prior shape and original gender came back.
When asked to settle the divine dispute,
He agreed with Jove, Saturn's daughter Juno,
Said to be pissed off, took it all too seriously,
And turned the judge's eyes with eternal night.
But Pater Noster (since no one god
Can undo the deeds of another) gave him a consolation prize.
To know the future, and lightened his punishment with honor!¹ (3.118-338)

This tale about Tiresias provides a valuable template for assessing Meyers' main character, advertising executive Nick Marshall. Nick, played by Mel Gibson, is an unrepentantly sexist, chauvinistic, ladies' man, whose ad campaigns focus relentlessly on the three B's: "buts," "bodies," and "beer."² The story begins when he is passed over for promotion to the position of Creative Director at work; his boss is attempting to bolster the firm's sagging fortunes by hiring a woman instead. Darcy McGuire, played by Helen Hunt, seeks to relieve the firm's worries an ostensibly neglected market segment: women. From the get-go, Nick and his colleagues set a very practical task: discovering what female consumers want and selling it to them.

Upon taking charge at the office, Darcy sets a more collaborative tone. As she meets with her subordinates around the office, she urges them to think creatively, noting that when Sears revamped its advertising to target women, its revenues soared. Nick and a male colleague greet this invitation to "come see the softer side" with barely concealed derision, openly deriding gossamer Darcy. They then hands out boxes filled with women's lingerie, cosmetics, and consumer goods, and sets a follow-up meeting. Each employee is to return the next day with a novel pitch for at least one of the products.

Nick is disgusted. At home that evening, he fortifies his masculinity by smoking, drinking, watching basketball on TV, and dancing with a cotnam. At last, he resigns himself to a try by trying to get into women's bathrooms rather than theirs. In an effort at role-playing, he applies nail polish, styling gel, and mascara; he engages in a "hair-raising" attempt at depilation; he dons control-top panty hose; and he even fidgets with a wonder Bra. Partway through the process, though, he slips on both beads he has spilled, falls into a bathtub full of water, and has a plugged-in hair dryer in his hand. Miraculously, Nick is not electrocuted, though when he comes to the next day, he finds he has acquired the ability to hear what women are thinking.

Several aspects of Nick's transformation deserve comment. First of all, his change is linked, both temporally and causally, to an attempt to listen to women. Just prior to the accident, he had been trying to imagine himself as a woman and asking himself, "What do women want?" Moreover, he has recently been forced to care temporarily for his estranged teenage daughter, Alex, slung by Alex's criticism that he never listens to what she says. Nick had been trying to remember her boyfriend's name. And it is his subsequent epiphany ("Camaron") that leads directly to his absent-mindedness, the spilled bath beads, the effeminate skater's waltz, and the electrifying moment of change.

The fact that cross-dressing precedes Nick's transformation is noteworthy. In addition to being amusing, it is a clear sign of his trying on another's identity, and it is a potentially perilous game.³ At one level this is obvious from his (intertextual) assertion that "90% of all household accidents occur in the bathroom," and from the fact that he is electrocuted while on the three B's: "buts," "bodies," and "beer."⁴ The story begins when he is passed over with a broader nexus of Theban myths, one of whose main characters, the prince Pentheus, is similar to Nick in his simultaneous antipathy and attraction to women. In the fullest surviving version of the Pentheus story, Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae*, the prince conducts an entirely similar toilette, eschewing his armor to primp and preen in women's clothes (lines 810-846) before he is disemboweled by his female relatives.

Meyers highlights the significance of Nick's change in other ways. One of these is the music playing in the background. At the start of the evening, Nick danced to the strains of Sinatra, the ultimate man's man. But to explore his feminine side, he replaces Ol' Blue Eyes with a CD riffed from his daughter's backpack, cranking up a more "feminine" playlist. And his singing along with the lyrics, due to the fact that he has a little bit of everything all rolled into one, "I'm a chick, I'm a chick, I'm a chick, I'm a chick!" I'm a chick!" Nick's assumption of this variegated female identity is marked by appropriate elements of ritual: immersion, symbolic death, and his former gender.

Both Tiresias and Nick respond to their change with impassiveness; each longs to revert to the former life. After seven long years the Theban has a smothery serpentine encounter and decides to give a whack. In the film, Nick cannot wait anywhere near that long; he is so distraught that he attempts to reverse the process in the very next evening. He repeats the fateful toilette, dons his lingerie anew, grabs his hair dryer, and stands out in his balcony in the middle of a thunderstorm, praying that lightning will strike twice. And so it does – but to no avail. When Nick comes to the next morning, he can still hear what women are thinking.

Their changes let the two men serve as intermediaries in words split sharply along gender lines. As we have seen, Ovid enlists Tiresias as referee to settle a dispute between god and goddess, while in the film, Nick opens as a go-to-guys converser to men and women on many levels. Long and dived, he is forced to care for Alex while she makes her way through her own problems. And when it comes to his father, but he is her surrogate mother as well, he abandons his earlier aloofness. He takes her dress-shopping for the prom, dispensing unwanted advice about boys with just one thing on their minds: (Nakedness to say, his insights here derive from hands-on experience.) At the office, Nick likewise straddles the gender gap. One scene shows him explaining to a male colleague that women do not suffer from penis envy; in another, he is Ann Landers offering relationship advice to his female employees. And he is a man who has his own boss, Darcy, who grows closer to him in ways both professional and also personal. Nick's status as a male-female go-between reaches its apex when the company executives Nick to pitch a new advertising campaign to Nike. The target audience is women around the country; the executives him to convince are all women; and the campaign seeks to appeal to women's innermost desires.⁵ Relying on a combination of ideas he has telepathically purloined from Darcy and on his own intuitions, gender-bending Nick does Nike ad that fits the account.

Among the fault-lines Tiresias and Nick traverse, the most hazardous involve sex, and the two figures are alike in their versatile opacity of this treacherous terrain. In Ovid's epic, Tiresias has spent years as a woman and is therefore able to explain to his mortal colleagues who enjoys sex more. Jupiter's initial assertion ("You woman's pleasure is greater than what we Glymp'g get") is a model of double-edged setting the tone for the entire episode. His specific language here is worth quoting in Latin: "maior vestra prole potest quam, quae coniugat maris, . . . voluptas." The words "maior," meaning greater or bigger, and "voluptas," meaning pleasure or desire, are widely separated by the relative clause beginning with "quae." To my ear this is a characteristically Ovidian bit of humor. Jupiter's remark seems headed towards some sort of crude joke about size ("You woman's is bigger"), until the punchie verb *potest* as an adverbial phrase: "maior vestra prole potest quam" now reads "bigger, and we remember Tiresias' partisan response.

For its part, the film contains a scene apparently upholding the Theban's verdict. Following his transformation, Tiresias, played by Mel Gibson, is a barista from the local coffee shop, who he has to take care of. His ability to hear his thoughts through the proceedings gives him firsthand knowledge of how a woman experiences sex. As Iota puts it at one point, "you were more inside me than anybody. . . . No, I mean like you were inside my head. You know exactly what I like and how I like it." Nick's intimacy with women gives Iota wild, leading her to exclaim silently, "Ladies and gentlemen, Nick Marshall is a sex god!" It was not quite as good as Nick's however. Attended by performance anxiety and temporary impotence, in the aftermath, he is less ecstatic than relieved.

At this point, we must consider an apparent difference between Tiresias and Nick. The former's change into a woman is effected from "the action of the gods and knoes"; he saw two snakes entwined on a forest path and struck them apart. Nick's change, on the other hand, could be said to result from faulty wiring: if only his bathroom had had a GFI, a ground-fault interrupter. Yet this surface discrepancy conceals a more fundamental similarity, namely the two men's excessive self-love. The wanderer Cadmus arrives at the spot foretold by the god Apollo and kills the huge serpent inhabiting the well. Then he sows the serpent's teeth in the field to produce the first generation of Theban warriors. And he is the one who sets up the serpent Cadmus' initial insult to his wife. It is the fact that they are mating ("Coenonia . . . corpora," lines 3324-5) suggests an attack on sexual reproduction as well. Thebes and its citizens are inclined to autochthony and endogamy,⁶ not exogamy. Put differently, they look inward rather than outward and are prone to a solipsism that stifles appropriate relations with Others.

Tiresias' transformation must also be considered in light of the other stories surrounding it in Book 3. Just prior to his change, we read the tale of Actaeon, a grandson of Cadmus who is dog of hunting with his dogs in the mountains. One day Actaeon ventures into a secluded glen and comes upon the goddess Diana and her attendants bathing in a pool.

He entered the caverns dripping with nectar,
And the nymphs, just as they were naked, struck their breasts
When they saw him, and filled the entire grove
With their sudden shrieks, and poured around
[Their mistress] Diana, sought to shield her
With their own bodies; nevertheless the goddess
Was head and shoulders taller than they.
Like the color of clouds struck by the purple dawn,
Of the setting sun, or like the color of rayed Dawn,
Diana blushed, seen without her clothing.
Although hemmed in by the throng of her companions,
She nevertheless turned to the side, and bent
Her face back, and as if trying to seize the arrows
Which she ordinarily had ready, she grabbed some water
And drenched Actaeon's face, sprinkling his hair with a venereal spray.
And she added these words pronouncing death to come:
"Now you can say that you have seen me with my shirt off:
Go ahead, if you are able to speak. (3.177-193)

On death Actaeon's outing becomes a stag party, and his life goes to the dogs. While his friends tear him limb from limb, he vainly tries to speak their names. For their part, his friends struggle that he is missing all the fun. As Ovid wryly notes, "He would have liked to miss it, but he was so lost present. And he would have preferred! To see the fierce work of his hounds, not feel it!" (3.247-8).

Diana's deadly anger comes from being on the receiving end of what feminist scholars call "the gaze." This phenomenon is generally defined as a male subject and the looked at as a female object.⁷ What is interesting for our purposes is the way "the gaze" figures in another, earlier version of the Tiresias myth. According to the third century BCE Aelianian poem *Metamorphoses*, the Theban was blinded not for falling sides in a domestic dispute but for looking at a different goddess than his wife. As he tells us in the text, "I give the thematic importance of gazing and visual imagery to the *Metamorphoses* as a whole⁸ and the fact that Ovid tends to conflate differing variants of ancient myths, Leonard Barkan rightly concludes that Tiresias was punished not just for striking the snakes but for seeing them in the first place. According to him, "the serpents were not only sacred but also sexual; and [his] punishment for witnessing their act [of coitus] and violating their sanctified space takes both sexual and sacred form."⁹ It is for this reason that Tiresias is punished with his original gender and also his eyes: the intrusive male gazer has become a female spectacle for others.¹⁰

But Tiresias' loss brings him a knowledge denied most mortals and enables him to set up shop as a prophet. According to Ovid, one of the first customers is a Nasid concerned with the fate of her young son. Like all parents, she wants to know if the will live to a happy old age. The seer answers cryptically, "Yes, if he never knows himself" (3.348). But alas, the handsome youth is pursued by a loveless nymph, and, stumbling upon yet another pool in yet another sylvan setting:

While he tries to slake his thirst, another third grows within him,
And while he drinks, caught by the image of the shape he sees,
He loves an incorporeal hope, and thinks the water is a body.
Motionless, he gazes at himself and clings to his own face
Like a form hewn from Parian marble. . . .
Witless, he desires himself; the admirer is himself admired,
The seeker is sought, and the fire of passion burns both ways. (3.415-419, 425-6)

The boy yearns to embrace himself, and in his yearning melts away, leaving naught but a lovely yellow-and-white flower, the narcissus. Once again, the act of gazing is central to Ovid's story of change. This time, however, the narcissus is not a different goddess than his wife. As he tells us in the text, "I give the thematic importance of gazing and visual imagery to the *Metamorphoses* as a whole⁸ and the fact that Ovid tends to conflate differing variants of ancient myths, Leonard Barkan rightly concludes that Tiresias was punished not just for striking the snakes but for seeing them in the first place. According to him, "the serpents were not only sacred but also sexual; and [his] punishment for witnessing their act [of coitus] and violating their sanctified space takes both sexual and sacred form."⁹ It is for this reason that Tiresias is punished with his original gender and also his eyes: the intrusive male gazer has become a female spectacle for others.¹⁰

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The boy yearns to embrace himself, and in his yearning melts away, leaving naught but a lovely yellow-and-white flower, the narcissus. Once again, the act of gazing is central to Ovid's story of change. This time, however, the narcissus is not a different goddess than his wife. As he tells us in the text, "I give the thematic importance of gazing and visual imagery to the *Metamorphoses* as a whole⁸ and the fact that Ovid tends to conflate differing variants of ancient myths, Leonard Barkan rightly concludes that Tiresias was punished not just for striking the snakes but for seeing them in the first place. According to him, "the serpents were not only sacred but also sexual; and [his] punishment for witnessing their act [of coitus] and violating their sanctified space takes both sexual and sacred form."⁹ It is for this reason that Tiresias is punished with his original gender and also his eyes: the intrusive male gazer has become a female spectacle for others.¹⁰

But Tiresias' loss brings him a knowledge denied most mortals and enables him to set up shop as a prophet. According to Ovid, one of the first customers is a Nasid concerned with the fate of her young son. Like all parents, she wants to know if the will live to a happy old age. The seer answers cryptically, "Yes, if he never knows himself" (3.348). But alas, the handsome youth is pursued by a loveless nymph, and, stumbling upon yet another pool in yet another sylvan setting:

While he tries to slake his thirst, another third grows within him,
And while he drinks, caught by the image of the shape he sees,
He loves an incorporeal hope, and thinks the water is a body.
Motionless, he gazes at himself and clings to his own face
Like a form hewn from Parian marble. . . .
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