

**GUEST
EDITORIAL**

Societal Déjà Vu: Gender Bender Shapeshifting as a Cultural Mirror



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Apart from the media frenzies around real-life ghost stories during the Halloween season (Houran et al., 2020) or the announcements of Nobel prizes for the latest scientific advancements (Piccone & Behrman, 2022), topics pertinent to frontier science seldom make the headlines or touch people's daily lives. Shapeshifting is one such topic. Embodying the larger concept of transformation, shapeshifting exists on a continuum from classic or archetypal representations in folklore and mythology to metaphorical representations within a range of other shapeshifting manifestations. In this liminal space, we may find shape-shifting ghosts from Asian folklore (Foster & Kijin, 2015); shapeshifters in films and literature; masks, cosplay, and Halloween costumes as a form of shapeshifting and people of color 'shapeshifting' to navigate through the dominant culture (Cox, 2015). There is also the parapsychology of shapeshifting shamans (Vilenskaya, 1996), as well as consumer products, especially food and alcohol, including bear shapeshifter names and logos (Kachuba, 2019). Of course, this editorial cannot possibly address all the various ways in which shapeshifting affects Western societies, so we will focus on one metaphorical manifestation that is passionately playing out across mainstream culture and the sociopolitical landscape — the phenomenon of 'fluidity' in gender identity (Lindqvist et al., 2021; Monroe, 2019).

As seen in anthropological studies of the mythology, religion, and folklore of cultures worldwide, a shapeshifter is someone capable of physically changing into an animal, another person, or even an inanimate object. These characters are as ancient as time itself; the famous cave painting at Trois Freres, France, said to depict a shapeshifting shaman transforming into a deer. Entitled "The Sorcerer" by anthropologists, this cave painting dates from the Paleolithic era. By its very nature, the shapeshifter has come to symbolize the deconstruction of binaries. Instead, it occupies a transient, liminal space that defies specific categorization. Social scientific treatises have metaphorically related the concept of shapeshifting to contemporary issues and controversies, especially regarding gender identity (Kent, 2019). Classical mythology and folktales from around the world are likewise rife with stories of shapeshifters whose transformations often involve gender (Ready, 2021; Jameson, 1951). The gender-bending ability of shapeshifters resonates with our modern society, where gender identification issues have become paramount and sometimes contentious. Gender shifting brings into focus the question of what constitutes a person's identity. Does our outward appearance determine our gender, or is it something innate in our consciousness that informs us of our gender?

John Locke's (1689) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* examines ways to define and understand human thought and consciousness. Locke argued that personal identity is not decided upon a physical basis but rather upon the unique arrangement of each person's atoms; Locke referred to that arrangement as 'soul,' although it often



is interpreted as 'consciousness.' If we agree that one's identity will always encompass gender, then Locke's argument may be used to support the idea that society's judgment on how one looks or represents oneself does not determine a person's gender identity. Individuals' consciousness and how they think of themselves determine their gender identity. This conclusion would seem logical and rational, but it does not allow for irrational ideas of self-identity as in cases of lycanthropy, where the sufferer believes they are a wolf and acts accordingly (Guessoum et al., 2021; Nasirian et al., 2009). Wolf-men aside, in contemporary society, those who identify in any way other than 'cisgender' (i.e., a person whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth) may find their gender identity challenged as unnatural and perhaps even immoral (Lombardi et al., 2008); Gordon & Meyer, 2008; Campbell et al., 2019).

It is interesting to speculate on the relationship between shapeshifters and the understanding of gender within the culture in which they appear. It is not unusual to find gender-bending shapeshifters mirroring the realities of gender identity in the society that had created them. Gender-bending shapeshifters were known to the ancient Greeks. The blind seer, Tiresias, transformed twice in his life, first from man to woman, then seven years later, from female back to male. Although his shapeshifting resulted from a curse by Hera and not of his own volition, he made the best of the situation each time. As a woman, Tiresias married, had children, and became a priestess and a successful businesswoman. Transformed again as a male, he became a famed seer, prophet, and king's confidant. Because of Tiresias's dual nature, he occupies a liminal space in Greek mythology, mediating between humans and the gods, man and woman, the mortal world and the underworld, and the present and future. This complexity comes from the knowledge gained through his gender transformation, the 'mating' of male knowledge with female knowledge. It reflects the values of Greek society with its well-defined male and female roles. Rather than an abnormal figure to be scorned or shunned, the Greeks held Tiresias in high regard for his/her complementary nature.

Norse mythology also demonstrates the notion of gaining knowledge or power through gender transformation, especially in the shapeshifting abilities of Odin, the most powerful male god, and the trickster, Loki. Norse culture adhered to rigid male/female roles, and a man who exhibited any feminine tendencies, either in actions or appearance, could be accused of *ergi*, or unmanliness, the worst kind of insult. Transsexualism or queerness was despised, and there were strict legal sanctions against such gender behavior. Yet Odin sought out and obtained *seid*, shamanic magic, from Freya and other sorceresses,

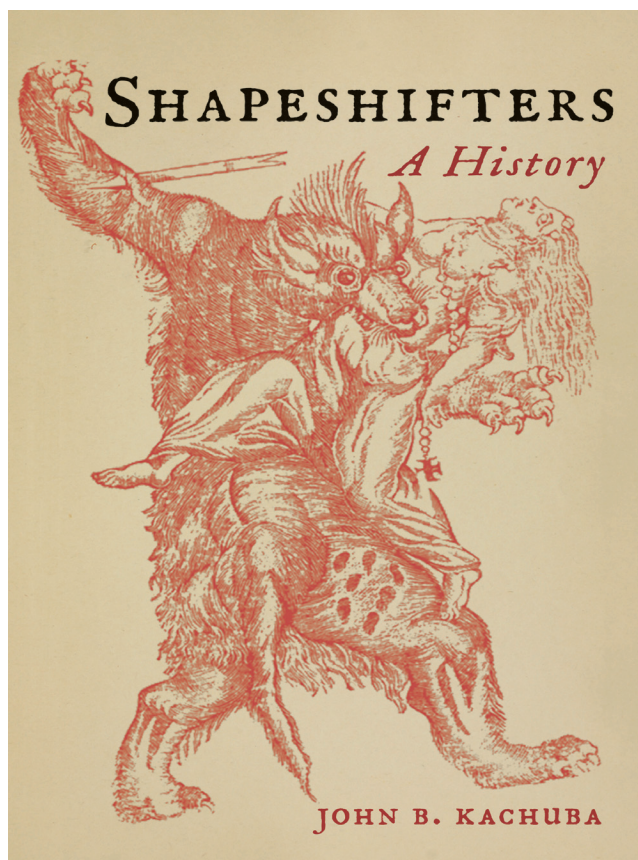


Figure 1. Shapeshifters: A History. (Reaktion Books, 2019).

acting unmanly since the Vikings recognized women as the holders of *seid* and rituals. Odin became a master of *seid* and used that power in ways that crossed gender boundaries. Disguised as a woman, he could beget a child to avenge Baldur, but his magic also allowed him to cross the border between the land of the living and the land of the dead, where he found knowledge in the runes. Like Tiresias, Odin becomes the embodiment of both the melding of male and female characters and a transgressor of gender boundaries.

Loki called out Odin as unmanly because of his affinity for the feminine or, to be more precise, his affinity for knowledge and power embodied in the feminine. Yet, the Norse myths relate how often Loki himself shapeshifted into the form of a woman, enjoying and making use of the female body, even to the point of bearing children. For that, he earns the derision of the gods. In one tale, Odin mocks Loki, calling him a 'milkmaid' after Loki spends eight winters living underground as a woman. Perhaps the most infamous tale of Loki's gender-bending shapeshifting relates to how he transformed himself into a mare, then mated with a stallion, giving birth to Sleipnir, the magical horse (Kent, 2019). Loki's gender-transforming shapeshifting is born of the same motivations as that of Odin, i.e., to fuse male and female attributes into one being. As a woman, Loki

could avoid the physical altercations common among the gods and gain access to the magical feminine knowledge contained in seid. While the myths refer to Loki with masculine pronouns, it might be more accurate to refer to him as non-binary or gender-fluid.

Many cultures have other examples of gender-shifting entities. Almost universally, Native American tribes believed coyotes and wolves to be shapeshifters. Some tribes also hold that 'skinwalkers' and 'wendigos' are shapeshifters. While contemporary films and movies seem to dwell on the evil nature of these mythological characters (Dillinger, 2015; McMahan-Coleman & Weaver, 2015), they ignore their positive aspects, especially the benefits of health, protection, and prosperity that these creatures may bring to the people. Among the Diné (Navajo), there is a strong belief in skinwalkers, or yenaldlooshi, evil shapeshifting shamans. As the skinwalker transforms its gender, it takes on the function and behavior of that gender. Once transformed, the shapeshifter's character is stereotypical, which is what one would expect from a member of that gender. However, the skinwalker is a confusing figure since its ability to shift between genders renders it, at heart, androgynous and undefinable. The societies of some Native American peoples mirror this androgynous nature.

Native American cultures have long familiarity with the berdache tradition in which a cisgender male adopts the role of a woman, wearing female clothing, doing women's chores, and sometimes marrying a man. It is important to note that while a berdache assumed a gender role different from his cisgender, it did not necessarily change his sexual identity. He may have still identified as heterosexual or adhered to a different sexual orientation. About 150 Native American nations had a berdache tradition, with about thirty of them having women who took on the roles of men. Members of the berdache community valued and respected them. The community regarded them as 'two spirits' people, a term revived among contemporary Native Americans to honor people of gender-fluid identity. While such gender shifters are not magically transforming themselves in the traditional way we think of shapeshifters, they do represent an innate desire to take on a new gender – a new shape, but one of their choosing.

In cultures holding rigid codes of gender identity and behavior, such as the Norse, people who are sure their birth gender does not truly represent who they are may find navigating their place in society challenging. As a result, they may suffer from anxiety, frustration, depression, and even suicide. Worse, their society may punish them for what it believes is a transgression against nature. In a tale of shapeshifting as punishment for transgressing traditional gender roles, the Aborigines of Australia tell of a tribe of women (jandu) who lived away from other conventional

tribes and performed the roles of men. The jandu women carried men's weapons – spears, spear-throwers, and knives – and hunted kangaroos and emus, just like the men, rather than gather fruits and vegetables, as expected of them. Tchooroo, the Great Snake, who was responsible for upholding the laws of the tribes, chastised the women and ordered them to stop hunting since they were violating the law by taking on the role of men by doing men's work. The women defied him and continued hunting for meat, so Tchooroo transformed them into giant termite nests.

The shapeshifter character in such rigid cultures does serve to reinforce society's gender and sexual norms. Still, simultaneously it may recognize and honor the power and knowledge of the 'Other', the crosser of boundaries. Cultures with a more tolerant attitude toward gender and sexuality demonstrate a benign, if not favorable, attitude toward their shapeshifter characters. Like traditional Native Americans, these cultures may offer a model for creating harmonious societies for all, including gender-fluid people, our modern-day shapeshifters.

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