Ancient Greek and Roman mythology and poetry erased boundaries—physical, material, species, and gender—far more than we self-congratulatory moderns (despite our New Age muddiness and LGBT correctness). This ecstatic ode by the Roman poet Catullus (1C BCE) uses the prehistoric Anatolian story of Cybele and Attis to look at the boundary supposedly dividing female and male consciousness and emotional commitment to gender identity, then shatter it, and then ask us to think on the wreckage.

Taken in a swift bark, over deep waters,
Attis, when eagerly, with rapid foot,
He reached those Phrygian woods
And entered where the goddess was,
Shadowy, this: a forest—
It was there, impelled by madness, by rage,
His mind bewildered,
With sharp flint,
He made fall from him his weight of maleness.

Therefore, when she felt
That the structure of her body
Had manhood no longer—
Even while new blood wet the ground's surface—
With clear white hands
She seized the light timbrel,
The timbrel that is yours, Cybele,
Your mystery, as mother of things.
And making the empty oxhide tremble with her soft fingers,
She began to sing, afraid a little,
Thus to her companions:

"Ye Gallae, let us go, go to the mountain woods of Cybele together, together go,
As a wandering number of persons
Belonging to the Lady of Dindymus.
You wished to be exiles, wanted other houses soon.
You were ruled by me as I led, with you following.
You endured the swiftly flowing salt waters, the fierce seas,
And, through utter disgust with love, made yourselves something else than men—
Please now the heart of your goddess with your brisk moving about.
Dull slowness put out of your mind.
Go together, come to the house in Phrygia of Cybele;
To the forests in Phrygia of the goddess,
Where is heard the tumult of cymbals,
Where the sound of timbrels is followed by the sound of timbrels,
Where the flute-player, Phrygian, blows a deep instance of sound on his curved reed.
It is where the Maenads, ivy on their heads, toss these heads violently,
Where yelling shrilly, they toss their heads with energy;
Where that wandering number of persons belonging to the goddess like to go, now here, now there;
And to which it is right for us to hasten with lively dance motions.”

As soon as Attis,
Woman, yet not truly so,
Said this, in a chant, to her companions,
The lively crowd suddenly, with busy tongues, yell loud,
The light timbrel makes its ringing sound again,
The hollow cymbals clash again.
The rout, with hurrying foot, goes swiftly to green Ida.
Also, Attis, frenzied, breathing hard, unsure,
Their leader, accompanied by the timbrels, wanders
Through the dark forest—
Like a heifer, never tamed,
Running aside from the yoke meant to burden.

The Gallae rapidly follow their leader with his rapid feet,
Until they reach the house of Cybele,
Faint and weary,
After so much labor.
They rest, and they have had no bread.
Sleep, heavy, covers their eyes with weariness, drooping.
The delirious madness that was in their mind
Leaves, in the presence of soft slumber.
But when the sun
With the flashing eyes of his golden face,
Made the now clear heaven light,
The firm lands, too,
And the wild sea;
And drove away the shade night has,
With his renewed eager steeds, tramping,

It was then sleep left Attis, now wakened; sleep was gone.
It was the goddess Pasithea who received him into her tremulous bosom.
After soft slumber then, and the being freed from strong madness,
As soon as Attis himself in his heart looked at what he had done,
And saw with clear mind what he had lost,
And where he was,
With mind much in motion,
He ran back to the waves.
There, tears running down from his eyes,
She looked upon the empty seas,
And thus piteously spoke to her country,
In a voice having tears.

"O my country, that gave me life!
O my country that gave me birth—
Whom I leave, being a wretch,
As servants who run away leave their masters.
I have taken my foot to the forests of Ida,
There to live with snows and the frozen hiding places of beasts,
And to visit, in my frenzy, all their hidden living places.
Where then, in what part of the world, do I justly see you to be, O my own land?
These eyeballs of mine, unbidden, long to gaze at you, while, for a
    time, my mind is without uncontrol and wildness.
Shall I, taken from my own home, be carried far away into these forests?—shall I be away from
    my country, what I possess, my friends, parents?
Shall I be absent from the market, the place for wrestling, the racecourse, playground?
Heart, sad heart, again, again, you must tell your sadness.
For what way was there a human could be which I could not be?
For me now to be a woman—I who was a lad, then a youth, a boy, the flower of the playground!
I was once the glory of the palaestra;
I knew crowded doorways;
Thresholds were warm for me;
There were flowery garlands for me to adorn my house with when, at sunrise, I left my sleeping
    place.
What shall I now be called?
A maidservant of the gods,
An attendant of Cybele?
Is it for me to be a Maenad, part of myself, a man in barrenness?
I, shall I live in icy, snowy regions of verdant Ida,
Pass my life beneath Phrygian high peaks,
In the company of the hind whose home is the woods,
Along with the boar who goes up and down the forest?
Now, now what I did makes me sorrowful,
Now, now, I wish that it hadn't occurred."

As these words came from lips in rosy redness,
Saying something new to both ears of the gods,
Cybele, loosing the tight yoke of her lions,
And urging on that foe of a crowd of living beings, a foe eager to the left,
Spoke in this way:
"Come now," says she, "come, go fiercely, let madness hunt him from here, make him, by the
    coming upon him of madness, take himself to the forest again—he who would be too
    free and get away from my rule.
Come, lash in back with your tail, endure your whipping yourselves, let all about sound with
    your high, thick roar, shake your bright mane fiercely on your thick neck."
So speaks Cybele in anger, and, with her hand, makes the yoke easy.
The monster enlivens his courage,
Rouses himself to a fury in himself.
He speeds away, he roars.
With foot swiftly covering the ground, he breaks brushwood.
But when he came to where the water stretched from the shore gleaming in whiteness,
And saw gentle Attis by the flat spaces of the sea,
He rushed at him.
Attis runs with mad energy into the woods.
He was a handmaid in these woods all his life.

Goddess, Cybele, great goddess, lady of Dindymus, let all thy fury be far from where I am, O my queen.
Let it be others you drive into frenzy, others you drive into madness.

The Attis poem of Catullus is an important reflection on the warring forces within man, as well as saying something of the uses of poetry itself. Catullus, like some other Romans, could be delicate, tender, poignant in elegiacs; but there is a satirical directness in him, a personal way of attack, an unrestrained dismissal of the objectionable which have been associated with masculine restlessness and pugnacity. When he is felicitously Catullan, as largely in this poem, the might of Rome quivers as a dewy leaf in northern Italy on a brisk, early spring morning. Catullus is sturdy as he trembles with subtle knowledge. Gender identity begins in fine and ponderous existence, in delicate and weighty substance, in trembling object. Gender sensibilities are fluid. Greek and Roman mythology sees gender as instancing the reality of water, mountain, plain, cloud, wind, and light. The lyrics of Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, Horace, offer valuable meditations on shifting experiences of masculine and feminine, attempt to find the heart—throbbling, panicked, or delightful—within humanity’s inevitable polarities.