

**Phyllis B. KATZ**  
**Ovid's Tiresias Transformed**

Although there are many variations of the myth of Tiresias (Brisson, 1975), perhaps the most influential telling of his story is that of Ovid. Tiresias' sexual transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are described in a short and humorous passage (*Met.* 3.316-338), one that has played a significant role in the Nachleben of Ovid's poem. Within Ovid's poem the prophet's "intrusions on the mystery of sex" are depicted ironically as both the source of his prophetic power and the cause of his blindness (Anderson, 1997, 368). This paper examines two notable examples of the influence of the influence of Ovid's Tiresias. Christine de Pisan, 14th century poet/historian employs Ovid's transformation of Tiresias as a metaphor for her own empowerment as a writer; she envisions herself physically transformed into a male so as to write in a traditionally male genre, and she views this "transformation" as a necessary and permanent change (*Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*, I.1056-1093; 1159-1407). In T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, however, written immediately after World War I, Ovid's Tiresias has no such positive connotation; he is a jaded, disillusioned hermaphrodite, one who has done and "seen it all." Eliot describes Tiresias as one who encompasses all the men and all the women in *The Waste Land* and claims that what Tiresias sees is "the substance of the poem" (Eliot, note 218); here, the seer's vision and experience signify a degree of hopelessness and defeat that can only be faintly counterbalanced by the hint of promise in the voice of the thunder at the end of the poem.

Ovid's Tiresias is an expert in the sexual experiences of males and females; yet the wisdom he has gained from his transformations does not enable him to truly see or understand the feminine; his vision is limited by his original masculine identity (Loroux, 1995). Ovid's Tiresias assumes his most positive identity in the poetry of Christine de Pisan. Tiresias' sexual transformations provide a model by which a female poet can create a male voice for herself, and hence be successful in a male dominated literary world. Yet Christine's perspective is uniquely female as well; her voice is androgynous. Eliot places Ovid's Tiresias in a world where, in the aftermath of a horrific war, Eliot depicts the emptiness of sexual experience for both male and female.