

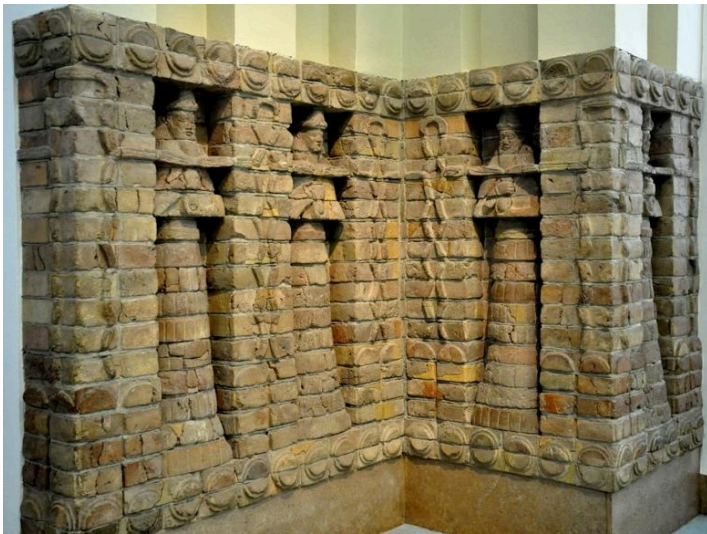
# PLURABELLE

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## Women and Men Switching Clothes and Places

### Sumerian Goddess, Inanna

Inanna is the ancient Sumerian goddess of love, sensuality, fertility, procreation, and war. In some poems she is the sister of the hero Gilgamesh. Inanna rose in prominence from a local vegetative deity of the Sumerian people to the Queen of Heaven and the most popular goddess in Mesopotamia. In the Sumerian / Babylonian poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2700 - 1400 BCE) Inanna appears as Ishtar and, in Phoenician mythology, as Astarte. In the Greek myth *The Judgment of Paris*, and in other tales of the ancient Greeks, the goddess Aphrodite is traditionally associated with Inanna through her great beauty and sensuality. Inanna is always depicted as a young woman, never as mother or faithful wife. She is fully aware of her feminine power and confronts life boldly, without fear of how she will be perceived by others, especially by men. As Ishtar, she is seen as promiscuous, jealous, and spiteful. When she tries to seduce Gilgamesh, he lists her many other lovers, who have all met with bad ends at her hands. She is often shown in the company of a lion, denoting courage, and sometimes even riding the lion as a sign of her supremacy. As goddess of war, Inanna is depicted in the armor of a male, in battle dress (statues frequently show her armed with a quiver and bow). Inanna does as she pleases, without regard for consequences, and either manipulates, threatens, or tries to seduce others to fix the difficulties her behaviour creates. Her temple at Uruk was her central cult center, but throughout Mesopotamia her temples and shrines were numerous, and sacred prostitutes



of both genders may have been employed to ensure the fertility of the earth and the continued prosperity of the communities. Her clergy were both male, female, and a third sex, which one would now define as “transgender.” Male transgenders, known as *kurgarra*, castrated themselves; females who identified as males were known as *galatur*; both were thought to have either been transformed by Inanna / Ishtar herself or created by the Father God Enki to rescue Inanna from the underworld. The *Descent of Inanna* notes that Enki made them “neither male nor female” and the clergy of Inanna’s temple honoured and embodied this tradition.

***Façade of Inanna’s Temple at Uruk***

### Iphis and Ianthe

Iphis is born a girl but raised as a boy. Dressed “as a boy—its face was such / that whether boy or girl, it was a beauty,” Iphis loves another girl, the “golden-haired” Ianthe. By a miracle of the goddess Isis, Iphis is transformed into a biological male in time for the appointed nuptials. “And you, who were so recently a girl / are now a boy! Bring gifts to the goddess! / Now boldly celebrate your faith in her! ... The next day’s sun revealed the great wide world / with Venus, Juno, and Hymen all together.” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IX, 960 – 1147

***Telethusa Praying to Change Iphis to a Man,  
Antonio Tempesta, 1606***





## Tiresias

In Greek mythology, Tiresias is a blind prophet of Apollo. He was transformed by Hera into a woman after striking a pair of snakes, and seven years later was transformed back into a man after encountering the snakes again. He mediates between humankind and the gods, male and female, blind and seeing, present and future, this world and the underworld. Zeus and Hera decide he is the perfect judge for their debate on sexual relations, having had experience in both bodies.

***Tiresias strikes two snakes with a stick, and is transformed into a woman by Hera, Johann Ulrich Kraus c. 1690***

## Transmutation of the Sexes

“A Morning Frolic, or the Transmutation of the Sexes” (c. 1780) depicts a man and a woman exchanging items of clothing, from the original picture by John Collet, an English satirical artist. On the pages of the book at the bottom left are the words: “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* done into English.”

“The maid held a bow in her left hand, / and from her shoulder swung an ivory / quiver, whose arrows clattered as she walked. / So much for her attire: as for looks, it wouldn’t be inaccurate to say / that she was somewhat girlish for a boy / and really rather boyish for a girl.” Ovid, Book VIII, 453 – 59, describing Atalanta.

“But Thebes has been captured by a sissyboy, / untutored in the arts of war, unaided / by spears or cavalry: the city taken / by slicked and scented hair, by tender garlands, / by robes embroidered with rich gold and purple.” Ovid, Book III, 714 – 18, on Bacchus.



## Male Performers Putting on Female Costumes

Two male actors putting on female costumes prior to a theatre performance. Masks are worn and a mask lies on the ground between the two figures. The masks represent female characters, with kerchiefs around the hair. The costumes also include female clothing: high boots and a chiton, or long woolen tunic. This two-handed pelike was manufactured in Athens between 440 and 430 BCE.

## Shakespeare

In early modern London, on Shakespeare’s stage and other commercial stages devoted to plays and drama, all the female roles were played by boys or men, although recent research shows that women danced and sang in pageants and on civic, court, and festival stages. An excerpt of Portia’s speech, as the lawyer Balthazar, in *The Merchant of Venice*: “The quality of mercy is not strained. / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. ... we do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy.”



***Alexandra Carlisle as Portia (1908), disguised as the male lawyer Balthazar***

## **Opera has always been replete with cross-dressing, women singing as men, men singing as women, and various other permutations and metamorphoses.**

“Overall, the ‘typecasting’ of the sexes was rare: Cavalli’s *Eliogabalo* had three male soprano roles and one woman’s role in the tenor range, Vinci’s *Catone in Utica* (1732) cast soprano Lucia Faccinelli as Julius Caesar, Gluck’s *Le nozze d’Ercole e d’Ebe* used a woman singer in the part of Hercules, and the San Carlo opera was opened in 1737 with a famous women contralto, Vittoria Tesi-Tramontini, singing the role of Achilles ... operatic characters were not invariably of the same sex as those who sang the roles, and the sexual identity of a character within an opera was frequently hidden for plot purposes.” – Matthew J. C. Hodgart and Ruth Bauerle, *Joyce’s Grand Operoat: Opera in Finnegans Wake*

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In Lully’s *Armide* (1686) the malevolent spirit *La Haine* (Hatred) is sung by a man. *Armide*, the hero, is sung by a woman (originally, a high French male tenor, an “haute-contre”). In this opera, the three Fates are traditionally sung by men. The subject for the opera was chosen for Lully by King Louis XIV of France.

In Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) Cherubino, an adolescent boy and the Count’s page, is written for female mezzo-soprano. In Act Two, Cherubino disguises himself as a girl. The actor playing Cherubino is therefore a female playing a male disguised as a female.

In Beethoven’s *Fidelio* (1805) Marzelline, daughter of the jailer, has fallen in love with Leonore, not suspecting that she has disguised herself as the errand boy, Fidelio, as part of a plan to rescue her husband, Florestan, from prison. Initially Florestan does not recognize his wife, but at the end, Fidelio / Leonore removes Florestan’s chains.

In Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) the 17-year-old Count Octavian Rofrano, is played by a female mezzo-soprano. As the curtain rises, Octavian has just completed a night of lovemaking with the 32-year-old Princess Marie Thérèse von Werdenberg, whose husband is away hunting.

In Philip Glass’s *Akhnaton* (1984), the titular role is sung by a countertenor. “It’s an incredibly big role ... It’s almost like my version of Wagner ... You always feel this reaction [from the audience]: ‘What is going on? Why is that guy singing like a girl?’ ... That creates ... this otherworldliness which I feel is really appropriate for who Akhnaten was.” – Anthony Roth Costanzo

### **Notable countertenor roles:**

Mazzocchi’s *La catena d’Adone* (1626) – Adone

Charpentier’s *Médée* (1693) – Jason

Handel’s *Giustino* (1737) – La Fortuna

Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774) – Achille

Méhul’s *Joseph* (1807) – Joseph

Britten’s *Death in Venice* (1973) – Voice of Apollo

Birtwistle’s *The Second Mrs Kong* (1994) – Orpheus

Dove’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (2007) – Fox/Coachman

Nico Muhly’s *Marnie* (2017) – Terry

### **Notable breeches roles:**

Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) – Orfeo

Haydn’s *La canterina* (1766) – Don Ettore and Apollonia

Rossini’s *William Tell* (1829) – Jemmy

Bellini’s *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830) – Romeo

Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* (1845) – The Young Shepherd

Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera* (1859) – Oscar

Janáček’s *From the House of the Dead* (1930) – Aljeja

Kaija Saariaho’s *L’Amour de loin* (2000) – The Pilgrim

Thomas Adès’s *The Tempest* (2004) – Ariel



**Anthony Roth Costanzo as Akhnaten, The Met, 2019**