

Analysis of Moacyr Scliar's *The Centaur in the Garden*. Translated by Margaret A. Neves, University of Wisconsin Press (2003). Originally published as *O centauro no jardim* by Editora Nova Fronteira S.A. (1980).

“Mythological Delirium”: *The Centaur in the Garden* as a Story for Transsexuals
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A centaur, with great effort, becomes a man; later, he goes through a crisis and decides to become a centaur again; then he doesn't really know if he wants to be a centaur again or not; meanwhile, he meets a crazy sphinx who wants to transform him into a lion man! Ridiculous. Mythological delirium. (p. 175)

Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar wrote a fascinating novel in 1980 that happens to be a curiously illuminating fable for transsexual experience. The story opens with a Jewish family in rural Brazil that sees the arrival of a deformed son. The doctor's notes read:

As far down as the umbilical scar, a normal, well-built child. Below this point, the body is mulelike. ...haunches, shanks, pasterns, hooves, tail, everything resembling a horse. Penis particularly notable, being monstrously large for a newborn baby. A complex case. Radical surgery? Impossible. (p. 17)

The doctor tells the centaur's father that being a centaur is neither a sickness nor a disease, but that there is no possible treatment.

From the very beginning, the centaur, called Guedali, is perceived as an intensely sexual being. Even the man who comes to circumcise the infant centaur is impressed. The centaur's father imagines his son will never masturbate because he will refuse to touch his own horse penis. He assumes his son will desire women, not horses, and that, unfortunately, no woman will ever desire him in return.

Guedali's parents cannot allow him to gallop around the countryside—the neighboring farmers will not understand, and they will surely make target practice of him. They keep him in hiding, and Guedali grows up acutely aware of his monstrosity. He reacts strongly to hearing about other people who have almost been put in his situation:

They [Nazi doctors] amputated arms and legs. They made strange transplants, uniting the upper half of a man with the lower half of a woman, or the hindquarters of a goat. Fortunately these atrocious operations caused the death of the patients, who expired as human beings and were not obliged to live as monsters. (By this point my eyes would be brimming over with tears; my father thought I was moved by the description of the Nazi horrors.) (p. 45)

As Guedali grows to full horse-size, he crouches in a dark storeroom and becomes bookish. His early curiosity about sex—including an allusion to what may be homoerotic or inter-species desire—mirrors the confusion of many transsexuals who struggle to understand what to do with their atypical minds and bodies.

For years I had forced myself not to think about sex. I felt desire, of course, but following the advice of certain books, I tried to sublimate it. Before going to bed at night I would do dozens of exercises for the waist, legs, and arms. I would lift enormous weights, flagellate my body with wet towels. I would lie down exhausted, but even so I didn't manage to get to sleep; I seemed to hear sighs of pleasure, debauched laughter. I asked my father to buy me some sleeping pills at the drugstore. With five of them, I would manage to drop off, but then my dreams would torment me, dreams populated by women or mares, and in them I was now a normal man, now a complete horse, and to top it all off, it wasn't always a man going to bed with a woman, nor a stallion breeding a mare. I would wake up exhausted. Disgusted, but relieved, I would verify that I had ejaculated. Nature had done what it had to, and I was resigned. (p. 50)

Guedali's sexual confusion prompts him to examine his identity. Knowing nothing about what it means to be a centaur, other than living in a storeroom, he struggles to put himself in some sort of context and to learn more about his condition.

When, by chance, he runs into a female centaur, Tita, they fall in love at first sight, and return to the farm where Tita was raised. Tita comes up with the idea of asking a sex-reassignment surgeon if he would be able to transform a centaur into a human. The only surgeon they have heard of is in Morocco, so the centaurs leave Brazil and hide in the cargo hold of a ship to reach him. Later, the doctor reflects that he never would "have guessed that I would end up operating on mythological beings." (p. 163)

Guedali is apprehensive before his surgery. He thinks:

The operation would be a success, the doctor would remove those growths—tails, hooves—as if they were warts, gigantic warts but none the less removable.

And then I experienced a curious feeling: a tender melancholy, a sort of advance nostalgia. No, those weren't warts we had on our bodies. They were extensions of our being; we are centaurs on the inside, too, I thought... (p. 86)

Nevertheless, both Guedali and Tita undergo surgery, which leaves them human except for their hooves and the horsehide on their legs. Guedali finally feels able to bring Tita to meet his mother. He explains how they met each other as centaurs and together underwent the difficult transformation. Guedali's mother tolerates his live-in girlfriend, but she eventually admits her dismay that Tita is not Jewish.

But I have hooves, Mama! I would yell, losing my temper, what could be odder than a man with horses' hooves? And men with wooden legs, she would retort, aren't they people too? Don't give me any excuses, Guedali. You could have found yourself a nice Jewish girl. Hooves or no hooves, you could have found one. (p. 97)

Now that the surgery has enabled him to stop hiding in barns, fearing for his life, and to join human society, Guedali feels almost as if he is starting his life over. "I needed to make up for lost time--time on a little farm in Quatro Irmaos, in a circus, on a ranch near the southern border, in a Moroccan clinic; all useful experiences in their own right, but not directly connected with what I was now proposing to do." (p. 103)

As many transsexuals do, the ex-centaurs avoid the beach so no one glimpses the unusual parts of their bodies. They do not tell anyone about their past. They bear and raise two normal human children (twins, in a mythological allusion to the double-self).

But, years later, after a stressful domestic incident, Guedali undergoes an existential

crisis, briefly thinks he might prefer to be transformed back into a centaur again, and even travels to see the Moroccan surgeon again. He decides not to return home to his wife and young sons "without first finding out who I was: a crippled centaur, deprived of its equine body? A human being trying to liberate himself from his fantasies?" (p. 188) Circumstances partly outside of his control prevent the surgical reversal, and he returns home, still human. Guedali and Tita begin to naturally shed their hooves, revealing human feet, which completes their transformation into humans (and contradicts Guedali's earlier musing that "we are centaurs on the inside, too").

Tita becomes bold enough to tell their human friends their life stories as centaurs, but only as a kind of joke, fictionalizing crucial details. Guedali understands why she does this: "The story is as ingeniously woven as a soap opera. With one single objective: to convince me that I never was a centaur." (p. 214) The author, Moacyr Scliar, probably did not intend a single, straightforward moral to this fable. But the examination of deviant sexuality as a thing of arresting beauty and the affirmation of life before and after reconstructive surgery nevertheless make this a relevant novel for transsexuals.