

“When now her [Telethusa’s] pains increased and the birth was accomplished, and the child proved to be a girl (though without the father’s knowledge), the mother, with intent to deceive, bade them feed the boy. Circumstances favoured her deceit, for the nurse was the only one who knew of the trick. The father paid his vows and named the child after its grandfather: the grandfather had been Iphis. The mother rejoiced in the name; for it was of common gender and she could use it without deceit. And so the trick, begun with pious fraud, remained undetected. The child was dressed like a boy, and its face would have been counted lovely whether you assigned it to a girl or boy.

Meanwhile thirteen years passed by; and then your father found you a bride, O Iphis, in goldenhaired Ianthe, a girl the most praised among the Phaestian women for the rich dower of her beauty, the daughter of Cretan Telestes. The two were of equal age and equal loveliness, and from the same teachers had they received their first instruction in childish rudiments. Hence love came to both their hearts all unsuspected and filled them both with equal longing. But they did not both love with equal hope: Ianthe looked forward confidently to marriage and the fulfilment of her troth, and believed that she whom she thought to be a man would some day be her husband. Whereas Iphis loved without hope of her love’s fulfilment, and for this very reason loved all the more—a girl madly in love with another girl. Scarcely holding back her tears, “Oh, what will be the end of me,” she said, “whom a love possesses that no one ever heard of, a strange and monstrous love? If the gods wished to save me they should have saved me; if not, and they wished to ruin me, they should at least have given me some natural woe, within the bounds of experience. Cows do not love cows, nor mares, mares; but the ram desires the sheep, and his own doe follows the stag. So also birds mate, and in the whole animal world there is no female smitten with love for female. I would I were no female! Nevertheless, that Crete might produce all monstrous things, the daughter¹ of the Sun loved a bull—a female to be sure, and male; my passion is more mad than that, if the truth be told. Yet she had some hope of her love’s fulfilment; yet she enjoyed her bull by a trick and the disguise of the heifer, and it was the lover who was deceived. Though all the ingenuity in the world should be collected here, though Daedalus himself should fly back on waxen wings, what could he do? With all his learned arts could he make me into a boy from a girl? or could he change you, Ianthe?

“Nay, then, be strong of soul, take courage, Iphis, and banish from your heart this hopeless, foolish love. See what you were born, unless you actually deceive yourself as well as others; seek what is lawful, and love as a woman ought to love! It is hope of fulfilment that begets love, and hope that keeps it alive. And of this hope the nature of things deprives you. No guardian keeps you from her dear embrace, no watchfulness of a jealous husband, no cruel father; nor does she herself deny your suit. And yet you cannot have her, nor can you be happy, though all things should favour you, though gods and men should work for you. And even now none of my prayers have been denied; the gods, compliant, have given me whatever was theirs to give; and what I wish my father wishes, she herself and her father all desire. But nature will not have it so, nature, more mighty than they all, who alone is working my distress. And lo, the longed-for time is come, my wedding-day is at hand, and soon Ianthe will be mine—and yet not mine. In the midst of water I shall thirst. Why do you come, Juno, goddess of brides, and Hymen, to these wedding rites, where no man takes the woman for his bride, but where both are brides?” She broke off speech with these words. The other maiden burned with equal love, and prayed, Hymen, that you would make haste to come. And Telethusa, fearing what Ianthe sought, put off the time, now causing delay because of a pretended sickness, often giving for reason some ill-omened vision she had seen. But now she had exhausted every possible excuse, and the postponed wedding-day was close at hand, and but one more day remained. Then the mother took the encircling fillets from her own and her daughter’s heads, and with flowing locks she prayed, clinging to the altar: “O Isis, who

dwellest in Paraetonium and the Mareotic fields and Pharos and the sevenfold waters of the Nile, help us, I pray, and heal our sore distress. Thee, goddess, thee and these thy symbols once I saw and recognized them all as I hearkened to the brass-sounding clashes of the accompanying sistra, and with retentive mind I noted thy commands. That this, my daughter still looks on the light, that I have not been punished, behold, is all of thy counsel and thy gift. Pity us two, and help us with thy aid!" Tears followed on her words. The goddess seemed to move, nay, moved her altar, the doors of the temple shook, her moon-shaped horns shot forth gleams of light and the sistrum rattled noisily. Not yet quite free from care and yet rejoicing in the good omen, the mother left the temple; and Iphis walked beside her as she went, but with a longer stride than was her wont. Her face seemed of a darker hue, her strength seemed greater, her very features sharper, and her locks, all unadorned, were shorter than before. She seemed more vigorous than was her girlish wont. In fact, you who but lately were a girl are now a boy! Go, make your offerings at the shrines; rejoice with gladness unafraid! They make their offerings at the shrines and add a votive tablet; the tablet had this inscription: These gifts as man did Iphis pay which once as maid he vowed. The morrow's sun had revealed the broad world with its rays, when Venus, Juno, and Hymen met at the marriage fires, and the boy Iphis gained his Ianthe." (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.704-797, C1st BCE)