

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the gender and sex themes insinuated in the story of Iphis

Ovid was a poet from 1st Century BCE Rome, and created a collection of poems titled '*Metamorphoses*'. These contained legendary stories with Hellenistic mythology, keeping within the theme of change, with the zoology translation of 'metamorphoses' meaning a biological and physical transformative process between a young form into an adult form.

*Metamorphoses* 9.704-797 tells us the story of Iphis, born a girl but raised as a boy by her mother to save the child from the fate of exposure by the father. Iphis, being perceived by everyone else as a boy, is now grown and arranged to marry Ianthe. Iphis is then conflicted, with the desire to marry Ianthe however is aware that her same-sex desires are 'unnatural' and that on her wedding night she will be discovered. The wedding is postponed by both Iphis and her mother Telethusa while they pray for a solution. With prayers heard from both Ianthe who desires the marriage to Iphis, and Iphis and Telethusa to be changed from a girl into a boy so the marriage can take place, the Goddess Isis was moved and grants Iphis's wish, transforming her into a boy, so he can marry his wife Ianthe.

Ovid and his creative choice in names, explains and preempts the audience to the direction of the story. The use of the name Iphis can be associated with the Latin '*vires*' which can be interpreted as 'sexual potency' which Iphis obviously lacks in order to consummate the marriage, but gains after his transformation and marriage.<sup>1</sup> Calling the character a gender neutral name also illustrates the character's sexual ambiguity, and that the character 'passed' as a man, so well that she gained the betrothal of Ianthe's hand. Ovid explains the mother's joy when Iphis's was named by her husband after his own father as '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...' <sup>2</sup>

Iphis being female and having same-sex lesbian desires is portrayed to be in anguish due to not being able to act on their desires, as an attempt to consummate the marriage will lead to discovery. Iphis proclaims her intense love she feels for Ianthe to the Gods, which feels unnatural as she compares it to the animal kingdom where no such thing is present "whom a love possesses that no one ever heard of, a strange and monstrous love?... Cows do not love cows, no mares, mares..."<sup>3</sup> We know now that same-sex sexual behaviour has been observed within the animal kingdom by the scientific community in over 1,500 species<sup>4</sup> and in our twenty-first century society increased awareness and acceptance of such relationships would make this conundrum almost non-existence. However, in the ancient world this was not apparent or accepted, and to be different would be seen as unnatural and marriage impossible.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Wheeler, *Changing Names: The Miracle of Iphis in Ovid's "Metamorphoses" 9*, Classical Association of Canada, Phoenix, Summer, 1997, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer 1997), Page 195.

<sup>2</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.704-797 (1st BCE)

<sup>3</sup> IBID

<sup>4</sup><https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/why-is-same-sex-sexual-behavior-so-common-in-animals/> <Accessed on 24/4/2023>

Biological essentialism also puts into debate whenever Iphis had lesbian desires, as she was presenting and living as a man, with J. L. Watson argued 'Iphis cannot distinguish between his desire for Ianthe and his body'<sup>5</sup> as she would have had the same desires as most men, and would wish to act upon these but lacks the autonomy. However, in order for a same-sex relationship to be socially and morally acceptable, Ovid had to engineer the divine intervention of Iphis transforming into a man by a Goddess, so there was no longer a conundrum to be had.

Transgenderism as defined and exposed to now are not similar to that of the ancient world. However that does not mean that its existence was not present, just perceived and 'practised' differently. Some can argue that Ovid (whether he was aware or not) created Iphis as a transgender character, a *transman*, and that her dysphoria is expressed through her prayers of "...there is no female smitten with love for female. I would were no female!"<sup>6</sup> and got 'cured' by divine intervention. Watson argues for the transgender narrative with 'This sort of self-hatred and obsession with the mismatch between how everyone perceives Iphis (as a boy) and how his autonomy is (inept for penetrative sex) characteristic of the modern medical diagnostic tools used to identify gender dysphoria in trans people.'<sup>7</sup> However, the line of "could he make me into a boy from a girl? Or could he change you, Ianthe?"<sup>8</sup> disapproves of the trans narrative; as it seems that Iphis's true wish is to be with Ianthe, no matter the cost. Iphis's plea clearly states she wants a reprieve for her homosexual thoughts and the subsequent sexual constructivism she is trapped in as cross dressing as a man.

Iphis's sexual transformation is not described in terms of anatomy, but with 'Her face seemed of a darker hue, her strength seemed greater, her very features sharper... She seemed more vigorous than was her girlish wont.'<sup>9</sup> Ovid uses this subtle language, instead of directly insinuating Iphis's genital change to keep within the tastes of the poems genre of *Metamorphoses*. However, this also gives us an insight into Ovid and ancient Rome's patriarchal attitudes of masculinity and gender expectations and what was valued to be a man. Moore summarises in his paper '*The Iphis Incident: Ovid's Accidental Discovery of Gender Dysphoria*' Ovid's choice of narrative and language as 'he has certainly embedded his culture's sense of negativity toward female same-sex relations, alongside a heteronormative, masculine ideal, within his narrative.'<sup>10</sup>

Iphis pronouns also change after his transformation from she/her to he/him, "These gifts as man did Iphis pay which once as maid he vowed.... And the boy Iphis gained his Ianthe."<sup>11</sup> solidifying his biological transformation with the audience by coercing them to address him with

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<sup>5</sup> J. L. Watson, *Reframing Iphis and Caeneus: Trans Narratives and Socio-Linguistic Gendering in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Texas Tech University Press, Helios, Volume 48, Number 2, Fall 2021, Page 155

<sup>6</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.704-797 (C1st BCE)

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Watson, *Reframing Iphis and Caeneus: Trans Narratives and Socio-Linguistic Gendering in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Page 156

<sup>8</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.704-797 (C1st BCE)

<sup>9</sup> IBID

<sup>10</sup> Ken Moore, *The Iphis Incident: Ovid's Accidental Discovery of Gender Dysphoria*, Athens Journal of History- Volume 7, Issue 2, April 2021, Page 111-112.

<sup>11</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.704-797 (C1st BCE)

his now correct pronouns. This can also be seen as dismissing the trans narrative due to mis-gendering Iphis's pronouns at the beginning despite Iphis's presenting and being perceived as male throughout the story and becoming biologically male at the end of the story.

In conclusion, there is no concise answer to Iphis sexual or gender identity before his transformation and is still up to discussion today, whenever she was a lesbian and the only way their desires and the relationship could be acceptable was to become a man, or that Iphis was suffering with gender dysphoria and was 'cured' and becomes the biological man he believed himself to be. Either way he finishes as a heterosexual male, and "rejoice with gladness unafraid! ...and the boy Iphis gained his Ianthe".<sup>12</sup>

### Bibliography

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<sup>12</sup> Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.704-797 (C1st BCE)