

Naturalized Desires and the Metamorphosis of Iphis

DEBORAH KAMEN

Introduction

The story of Iphis and Ianthe is the sole mythological account of female same-sex desire, not only in Ovid but in all of classical literature.¹ In the *Metamorphoses* (9.666–797), Ovid tells the tale of Iphis, a girl raised as a boy. At marriageable age, Iphis is betrothed to a girl, Ianthe, with whom she falls madly in love. All would be well, except that she realizes, with great sadness, that her desire is ‘unnatural’ and cannot be consummated. However, on the day before the wedding, the goddess Isis intervenes, transforms Iphis into a young man, and the marriage proceeds as planned. In this article, I integrate two of the main scholarly approaches to the Iphis story—namely, closely reading the myth itself, and exploring its relationship to its neighboring stories—in order to see what the surrounding narrative (*Met.* 9.450–10.739) reveals about Roman sexuality more broadly.²

Early scholarship on Iphis tried to deduce a pattern underlying the types of desire catalogued within this narrative set. The framing of this story is in fact significant, as I argue below. The Iphis myth (9.666–797) is preceded by a story in which a girl named Byblis tries, unsuccessfully, to seduce her brother (9.450–665), and is followed by the tale of Orpheus, who turns to a love of boys after losing his wife Eurydice (10.1–85). Next is the brief story of Cyparissus, a boy who accidentally kills his pet deer (10.86–147). Orpheus himself then tells a number of tales, including those of the Cerastae and Propoetides, women punished for their impiety (10.220–42); Pygmalion, who falls in love with an ivory statue (10.243–97); Ganymede and Hyacinthus, both beloved by gods (10.148–219); Myrrha, who knowingly sleeps with her own father (10.298–502); and Venus and her beloved Adonis (10.503–739). It has been variously suggested that Ovid assimilates Iphis to everyone but Byblis and Myrrha on the basis of a generalized unnatural desire (Otis 1970); that he assimilates Iphis to precisely these girls on the basis of their shared forbidden desire (Galinsky 1975); or that he assimilates Iphis to the boy-lovers on the basis of a shared homoerotic desire (Makowski 1996)³—though whether Ovid (or ‘Ovid’) disapproves of or is sympathetic toward female homoerotic desire has been a point of contention.⁴

In the past ten years, scholars have investigated primarily what the Iphis story itself can tell us about Ovidian/Roman concepts of gender and sexuality;⁵ these enquiries have yielded a number of different, but often complementary, interpretations. Thus, for example, Diane Pintabone (2002) has argued that Ovid simultaneously presents a positive and a negative portrait of “woman-for-woman passion,” thus appearing (at least temporarily) to question normative gender/sexuality but ultimately reinforcing it. Shilpa Raval (2002) contends that the Iphis story shows, on the one hand, that gender is performative and not necessarily tied to biological sex, and on the other, that social institutions (including heterosexual marriage) depend on and reinforce the notion of stable gender identity predicated on sexual difference.⁶ Jonathan Walker (2006) argues that the Iphis story both gives and revokes “lesbianism”: while the possibility of something like lesbianism is allowed to emerge in readers’ minds, Ovid never allows it to fully materialize. According to Kirk Ormand (2005), Ovid’s myth is ultimately not so much about female deviance or “lesbianism” as it is about the vexed relationship between masculine gender performance and a supposedly stable male sex.⁷ Finally, a few scholars have called attention to the impossible or incomprehensible nature of Iphis and Ianthe’s desire, whether because it is mutual and lacks hierarchy (Ormand 2005; Boehringer 2007, 257–8), because it lacks penetration (Walker 2006), or because it lacks a masculine element (Boehringer 2007, 257–8).

My argument focuses on what the Iphis story, read in context, can tell us about Roman conceptions of *sexual acts*. More specifically, I contend that alongside the well-known “penetration model” of Roman sexuality, in which sexual acts were defined by a differential between a (dominant and masculine) penetrator and a (subordinate and feminine) penetrated,⁸ there existed a *separate* scheme for categorizing sexual acts. In *Metamorphoses* books 9 and 10, Ovid plots out such a scheme, within which non-penetrative sex (or ‘sex’)⁹ is conceptualized as uniquely unnatural.¹⁰

Natural and Unconventional Acts

Brooks Otis (1970) was right to connect Byblis’s and Myrrha’s “guilty and incestuous love,” and to set it apart from the passions constituting the middle part of the narrative. Their kind of love is indeed “guilty,” in the sense that it is repeatedly referred to as illegal or unconventional. Thus, in both of these stories, we find the language of criminal activity used repeatedly to describe the girls’ passions. Incest is a crime (*scelus*, *crimen*, *facinus*, *nefas*, etc.)¹¹ and is forbidden (*inconcessus*, *vetitus*, *interdictus*).¹² Moreover, mention is sometimes

made explicitly of laws (*iura, leges*) and customs (*mores*) which incest violates;¹³ whether these are ‘real’ laws or not is irrelevant. Acts of incest, then, were deemed not only impious and shameful, but also criminal.¹⁴

Significantly, at least in Ovid, it is not *nature* that forbids the act of incest.¹⁵ Instead, it is explicitly *society’s* laws and conventions that do so. In fact, both girls cite examples of realms, outside their own, where incestuous relations are allowed. Byblis, for instance, first mentions the gods as precedents for incestuous love, saying (9.497–500):

‘ . . . di nempe suas habuere sorores.
sic Saturnus Opem iunctam sibi sanguine duxit,
Oceanus Tethyn, Iuonem rector Olympi.
sunt superis sua iura!’

“The gods certainly have loved their sisters. Thus Saturn married Ops, joined to him by blood; Oceanus, Tethys; the ruler of Olympus, Juno. But the gods have their own laws!”¹⁶

She then acknowledges, with sadness, that *these* laws (*iura*), unlike her own society’s, allow for such behavior. Shortly thereafter, she mentions another potential model for brother-sister passion—the mythological Aeolidae, who practiced incest with their sisters (9.507)—but she dismisses this example as well, considering it too *recherché*.

Myrrha likewise cites precedents for incest, but unlike Byblis, she does not question the validity of her *exempla*. She refers first to the animal kingdom, where ‘incest’ is an acceptable practice (10.324–8):

‘ . . . coeuntque animalia nullo
cetera dilectu, nec habetur turpe iuvencae
ferre patrem tergo; fit equo sua filia coniunx,
quasque creavit, init pecudes caper, ipsaque, cuius
semine concepta est, ex illo concipit ales.’

“Other animals mate with no preference, nor is it thought dirty for a heifer to bear her father on her back; a horse’s daughter becomes his wife, and the goat enters the flocks he has created, and the very bird conceives from him by whose seed she was conceived.”

Turning next to other tribes of humans as a model, she declares, ‘*gentes . . . esse feruntur, / in quibus et nato genetrix et nata parenti / iungitur, et pietas*

geminato crescit amore (“There are said to be races among whom the mother is joined to the son, and daughter to father, and piety increases with the double love,” 10.331–3). In various Other realms—the divine, the mythological, the animal, the barbarian—incestuous relations are apparently unproblematic. The prohibition against incest, then, is seen as (merely) a matter of cultural convention.

Unnatural and Unconventional Acts

Strikingly different is Ovid’s characterization of Iphis’s love. The segue between the Byblis and Iphis stories is first worth looking at (9.666–8):

fama novi centum Creteas forsitan urbes
implesset monstri, si non miracula nuper
Iphide mutata Crete propria tulisset.

The report of a new monstrosity [i.e. Byblis] perhaps would have filled the hundred Cretan cities, if Crete had not recently had its own miracle in the metamorphosis of Iphis.

This transition is marked by both geographic and thematic proximity. The geographic connection—both stories take place on Crete—is surely less significant than the thematic one. That is, the subtext behind the association of Byblis and Iphis is that these are both stories about strange, monstrous, or miraculous love. But the character of this ‘strange love’ is not the same in both cases. To be sure, Iphis also feels a love she recognizes as unconventional, telling herself, *‘pete quod fas est, et ama, quod femina debes!’* (“Seek what is right, and love what you ought to as a woman!” 9.748).¹⁷ But Iphis’s desire, unlike Byblis’s, is also explicitly *unnatural*.¹⁸ This is implied when she says that if the gods had wanted to destroy her, *‘naturale malum saltem et de more dedissent’* (“They should at least have given me a natural wrong and one in accordance with convention,” 9.729–30)—but they did not, giving her instead an unnatural and unconventional one.

But in what way is Iphis’s love ‘unnatural’?¹⁹ According to Michel Foucault, the ancients considered sex between women ‘unnatural’ because (his argument runs) it involved a woman penetrating another woman through artificial means. As such, the act was necessarily performed “in defiance of what they both are and by resorting to subterfuge.”²⁰ Eva Cantarella (1992, 170) reads ‘unnatural’ similarly: “In the Roman imagination, female homosexuality could only mean an attempt by a woman to replace a man, and an attempt by another woman

to derive from homosexual intercourse, quite unnaturally, the pleasure which only men were able to confer.”²¹ By these interpretations, female same-sex love was thought ‘unnatural’ because it required one woman to deny her own ‘female nature’ to usurp the place of a man, and another woman to deny her partner’s essential ‘femaleness.’ The problem, then, was one of gender deviance.

Ovid, however, uses the word *natura* in a variety of ways in his poetry: sometimes it refers to the character or essence of something,²² at others to the nature of all things (as in *rerum natura*),²³ and finally at others to a primordial entity,²⁴ a force that creates, gives, and deprives²⁵ and possesses its own laws.²⁶ Any or all of these meanings are potentially at play when Ovid employs the language of *natura*.²⁷ Indeed, in some cases, Iphis seems to be speaking of *natura* primarily as an external force, as for example when she proclaims that ‘*non vult natura, potentior omnibus istis, / quae mihi sola nocet*’ (“Nature does not want it [i.e., my desire], [nature] stronger than all those things”—namely, the traditional impediments to a lover—“[nature] which alone is harmful to me,” 9.758–9).

This idea of nature as not only internal but also external is bolstered by Jack Winkler’s explanation of the Greek phrase *para phusin* (contrary to nature), which, like Foucault, he bases on a reading of Artemidorus’s second-century C.E. handbook of dream interpretation, the *Oneirocritica*.²⁸ In this work, Artemidorus distinguishes three (sometimes overlapping) categories of sexual acts: some acts are “natural and conventional,” including penetration of social inferiors, penetration by other men, and masturbation; others are “unconventional,” including incest and oral-genital contact; and still others are “unnatural,” including sex between women.²⁹ In Winkler’s view, “natural and conventional” refers to acts in which sexual roles mirror social relations of domination and submission; the second category, “unconventional,” includes acts which, like those in the first category, articulate an asymmetrical power relation, but which nonetheless violate law or custom (*nomos*); and finally, the acts constituting the third category, “unnatural,” do not, in Winkler’s words, “involve any representation of human social hierarchy.” This is because

sexual relations can only be articulated in the significant terms of the system: namely (i) men, (ii) penises that penetrate, and (iii) the articulation thereby of relative statuses through relations of dominance. These three protocols determine the field of significance. Woman-woman intercourse is “unnatural” only and exactly insofar as it lies outside that determinate field of meaning. (1990, 38–9)

That is to say, “unnatural” acts are those in which no relations of dominance are

articulated, no human is exerting power over another, and as such these acts cannot be understood—or rather, they cannot be understood by the culture *as sex*.³⁰

But it was not the case that the ancients were unable to conceptualize *any* sexual relations between women.³¹ It was simply that their conception was a very particular one: it entailed tribadism,³² literally ‘rubbing,’ but referring most often to penetration, whether by a dildo or an extra-large clitoris.³³ Sex between women—in the form of tribadism—therefore *was* intelligible to the ancients, if deemed monstrous.³⁴ What was inconceivable, then, was sex *without penetration*. This is an important distinction, and one that is easy to overlook.³⁵ I disagree, then, with Winkler when he states that “a woman penetrating a woman” was one of the acts constituting Artemidorus’s category of unnatural acts.³⁶ In discussing woman-woman sex, Artemidorus uses *περσύνω*, a verb related to the noun *πέρας* (end). The verb does not refer to a specific sexual act, but must instead mean something like ‘bring to fulfillment’ (i.e., bring to orgasm).³⁷ That is to say, it is not, at least according to Artemidorus, specifically “a woman penetrating a woman” that is unnatural or impossible, but a woman bringing another woman to orgasm without penetration.

Artemidorus’s categories, of course, cannot be applied wholesale to Ovid—among other difficulties, the *Oneirocritica* is a late Greek source³⁸—but I would like to suggest that the notion of ‘unnatural = culturally unintelligible (or impossible)’ also lurks behind the *Metamorphoses*.³⁹ In fact, this conception seems to explain some of the particular ways in which Iphis characterizes her ‘unnatural’ passion.⁴⁰ In one instance, Iphis, barely holding back tears, cries: *‘quis me manet exitus . . . / cognita quam nulli, quam prodigiosa novaeque / cura tenet Veneris?’* (“What end remains for me, whom a strange care holds, a care known to no one, and of a new Venus?” 9.726–8). Iphis, like all of us a product of culture,⁴¹ considers her breed of love “new” and “known to no one.”⁴² Whether this love is in fact a novelty is irrelevant;⁴³ the point here is that it was not comprehensible and thus, in a certain sense, did not exist. This unintelligibility apparently extended to passion between non-human females as well. Like Myrrha, Iphis too cites comparanda from the animal kingdom (9.731–4):

‘nec vaccam vaccae, nec equas amor urit equarum;
urit oves aries, sequitur sua femina cervum;
sic et aves coeunt, interque animalia cuncta
femina femineo correpta cupidine nulla est.’

“Love does not burn a cow for a cow, nor a mare for a mare; the ram burns for the sheep, his doe follows the stag. Birds also mate thus, and among all the animals no female is seized with desire for a female.”

Unlike Myrrha, however, Iphis uses these examples to show that her love is universally *unnatural* and *non-existent*.

What makes Iphis’s love unnatural—in the sense of ‘against an external nature’—is the fact that consummation without penetration is inconceivable.⁴⁴ Although anatomy is underplayed in Ovid’s telling of the myth, the problem of two vaginas (and no penis) is likely hinted at when Ovid says that Iphis and Ianthe had an *aequum / vulnus* (720–1)—a phrase primarily referring to their equal wounds of love, but also to their matching genitalia.⁴⁵ As such, Iphis repeatedly laments the fact she has no hope (*spes*) of fulfilling her desires. Unlike Pasiphaë, who at least had a hope of realizing her love (*spem Veneris*, 9.739), Iphis considers her own desires unattainable. For this reason, she tries to extinguish her passion, chastising herself thus: ‘*quin animum firmas teque ipsa reconligis, Iphi, / consiliique inopes et stultos excutis ignes?*’ (“Why don’t you strengthen your heart and pull yourself together, Iphis girl, and drive out the fires, foolish and devoid of resolution!” 9.745–6). These lines contain obvious echoes of Catullus, who says, in his attempts to shake off his love for Lesbia, ‘*quin tu animo offirmas atque istinc teque reducis*’ (“Why don’t you strengthen your heart and lead yourself out of this?” 76.11). Ironically, although Iphis speaks here like a man (namely, Catullus)⁴⁶—that is, with a voice that is gendered male—her love is hopeless precisely because she is *not* a biological male. If she were, she would have the proper equipment with which to penetrate Ianthe. As it is, her biological sex is revealed by the proximity of her self (*te*) to the feminine pronoun *ipsa*, a fact she herself acknowledges (hence my over-translation of *ipsa* as girl).

Indeed, shortly thereafter, Iphis says, ‘*spes est, quae capiat, spes est, quae pascit amorem; / hanc tibi res adimit*’ (“It is hope that captures love, it is hope that nourishes love; [but] the facts take this [hope] from you,” 9.749–50). She then explains that the “facts” in her case do not consist of a beloved girl’s guardian, nor a jealous husband, nor a cruel father, nor the girl herself—that is, none of the normal impediments of elegy. As in her ‘*quin . . .*’ self-reproach a few lines earlier, she is comparing herself (implicitly) to a male-gendered elegiac lover. Once again, however, it is precisely the fact that male sex does not underlie her male gender performance that poses the problem.⁴⁷ As such, despite the lack of traditional impediments, Ianthe ‘*nec tamen est potianda tibi*’ (“is nevertheless not to be ‘obtained’ by you,” 9.753). But it is not just that Iphis cannot ‘get’ the girl. The verb *potior*—like *fruar*, which Iphis used a bit earlier (*amat, quia posse*

frui desperat’ [“She loved her whom she had no hope of being able to ‘enjoy,’” 9.724])—has specific sexual overtones. Indeed, *potior* can refer euphemistically to the moment of male orgasm, while *fruor* is often used “for the man ‘taking’ pleasure.”⁴⁸ What Iphis is lamenting, therefore, is that without the possibility of penetration she is unable to satisfy her sexual urges, not to mention her partner’s.

We see, then, how very different the ‘strangeness’ of Byblis’s and Myrrha’s passion is from that of Iphis’s: Byblis and Myrrha possess an *unconventional* love, whereas Iphis possesses, in addition, an *unnatural*—that is to say, incomprehensible and impossible—love.

Natural and Conventional Acts

Iphis’s love, therefore, is not assimilated to incest, nor is it equated to the other passions in this narrative set. The Iphis story is connected to the next tale by the transferred presence of the marriage god Hymen, who first presides over the newly male Iphis’s wedding and then is summoned by Orpheus for his marriage to Eurydice. Soon after Orpheus and Eurydice marry, however, Eurydice dies, and Orpheus responds by turning away from all women (10.79–85):

omnemque refugerat Orpheus
femineam Venerem, seu quod male cesserat illi,
sive fidem dederat . . .
.....
ille etiam Thracum populis fuit auctor amorem
in teneros transferre mares citraque iuventam
aetatis breve ver et primos carpere flores.

Orpheus avoided all love of women, whether because [love for women] had done him ill, or because he had given his loyalty [once and for all to Eurydice]. . . . He was the author for the people of Thrace of directing one’s love to tender males on the side of youth, and seizing the brief springtime and first flowers of their age.

Ovid then tells the story of Cyparissus, a boy beloved by Apollo (*deo dilectus ab illo*, 107). This story sets the scene for Orpheus’s lengthy song, which begins with the programmatic statement: *puerosque canamus / dilectos superis, inconcessisque puellas / ignibus attonitas meruisse libidine poenam*’ (“Let’s sing of boys beloved by gods, and girls struck by forbidden flames who deserved the penalty for their lust,” 10.152–4).

Whether Ovid (or ‘Ovid’) is critical of pederasty (in this case, the gods’ boy-love) was once an issue of contention, dependent on the reading of a few key phrases in Ovid’s works. One such phrase is found in the *Ars amatoria*, in which Ovid explains that in order to attract a woman, a man should be neatly groomed but not a dandy. He then says, disparagingly, that wanton girls and ‘*siquis male vir quaerit habere virum*’ may do otherwise (*Ars am.* 1.523–4). It is not entirely clear how to take this latter phrase: Is it “any man who seeks to have a man in a bad way (*male . . . habere*),” that is, deceitfully?⁴⁹ Or is it “any poor excuse for a man (*male vir*) who seeks to have a man”?⁵⁰ In either case, Ovid seems to be referring to something different than pederasty, since he specifically uses the term *vir* for both parties, rather than *vir* and *puer*. As such, however we interpret these lines—that is, whether Ovid disapproves of all men who have sex with men, or only those who do it under false pretenses—they are not necessarily relevant to Ovid’s treatment of pederasty.

Other passages, however, do shed more light on this question, including ‘*odi concubitus qui non utrumque resolvunt; / hoc est cur pueri tangar amore minus*’ (“I hate sexual encounters that don’t satisfy both parties. This is why I am less touched [*tangar*] by boy-love,” *Ars am.* 2.683–4). I doubt that anyone would argue these days that Ovid *objects* to the love of boys; a more sensible reading is that Ovid (or ‘Ovid’) personally likes sex with boys *less* (*minus*) than he does sex with women.⁵¹ In fact, Tom Habinek (1997) has argued that Ovid invented the category of “heterosexual male,” carving out a unique identity for men whose primary erotic attraction is to women. This interpretation is perhaps bolstered by Ovid’s statement in *Amores* 1.20 that *aut puer aut puella* (either boy or girl) is an equally suitable theme for love poetry, although he himself prefers *puellae*.

Thus, despite some scholars’ claims (Otis 1970 and Makowski 1996), pederasty is never characterized in the *Metamorphoses*, or elsewhere, as either unnatural or unconventional.⁵² Indeed, positive representations of pederasty crop up again and again in the *Metamorphoses*, especially in the set of tales under consideration here. We hear first of Ganymede, Zeus’s beloved, and then of Hyacinthus, the beloved of Apollo, who was accidentally killed by the god, just as the deer was by Cyparissus. In both of these stories, there is no talk of *natura* violated, no talk of *crimina*, to describe the two gods’ love for boys. Rather, it is completely unproblematic—in fact, completely unmarked—that Zeus burned with love (*amore arsit*, 10.155–6) for Ganymede, that he loved the boy above all others (*ante omnes . . . dilexit*, 10.167). Likewise, when Apollo accidentally kills Hyacinthus, he says (10.197–201):

‘videoque tuum, mea crimine, vulnus.
tu dolor es facinusque meum: mea dextera leto

inscribenda tuo est! ego sum tibi funeris auctor
 quae mea culpa tamen? nisi si luisse vocari
 culpa potest, nisi culpa potest et amasse vocari?’

“I see your wound, my crimes. You are the cause of my grief and my crime: my hand must be branded by your destruction! I am the author of your death. But what is my fault, unless having played [with you] is a fault, unless my having loved [you] can be called a fault?”

This is in fact a rhetorical question: neither his playing nor his love is a crime; his only crime is accidentally killing his beloved. The pervasive language of criminality here thus serves in part to contrast Apollo’s *non-criminal* love of boys with Byblis’s (and later Myrrha’s) criminal love for a family member. We thus see that boy-love, just like Orpheus’s love for Eurydice, is considered both natural and conventional.

After these pederastic tales, Orpheus next tells two brief stories: the first is about the Cerastae, whom Venus turns into bulls as punishment for polluting a temple of Jupiter Hospes; and the second is about the Propoetides, whom Venus turns first into prostitutes, and then into stones, for the sin of denying her divinity. The Propoetides—whether or not they represent the “girls struck by forbidden flames” of Orpheus’s programmatic statement—are at any rate considered in the next vignette sexual ‘criminals’ by Pygmalion, who says that they act *per crimen* (10.243). Their ‘unconventional’ acts are meant to represent a contrast to the preceding (and following) tales of ‘conventional’ love. Pygmalion’s story follows next, and while it does not fit neatly with Orpheus’s stated themes, he himself doubles Orpheus, explicitly shunning all women. However, rather than turning to boys as Orpheus did, Pygmalion falls in love with an ivory statue, which Venus transforms into a real woman. Peculiar as it might seem to us, Pygmalion’s love for the ivory *puella* is never deemed ‘unnatural’ or ‘unconventional’ by either Orpheus or Ovid.

The theme of gods who love boys resumes, in slightly altered form, in the final sequence of Orpheus’s narrative, in which Venus is cast as a pederast of sorts.⁵³ Moreover, the language used to describe Venus’s passion for the boy Adonis is very similar to that used of Zeus for Ganymede. So, for example, Adonis pleases her (*placet et Veneri*, 10.524) and he is preferred to heaven (*caelo praefertur Adonis*, 10.532). Embedded in the Venus/Adonis tale is the story of Atalanta, who, like Orpheus and Pygmalion, keeps her distance from potential spouses, and who is in a sense a pederast herself. When she sees Hippomenes, she says, *‘nec forma tangor, (poteram tamen hac quoque tangi), / sed quod adhuc puer est: non me movet ipse, sed aetas’* (“I am not touched by his beauty—though I could

be touched by this as well—but because he’s still a boy; he himself doesn’t move me, but his age does,” 10.614–5). Unlike Ovid (*Ars am.* 2.683–4), then, Atalanta is touched (*tangor*) by the love of boys. In none of these tales, however, is the love of “tender males” criticized: it is completely conventional and natural.

Conclusions

I have argued that Ovid structures the narrative set of *Met.* 9.450–10.739 around three conceptual categories of sexual acts: ‘natural and conventional,’ ‘natural and unconventional,’ and ‘unnatural and unconventional.’ Sex between an older (generally male) lover and a younger beloved was considered conventional, natural, and unproblematic. Incest, whether between parent and child or brother and sister, was thought natural, in that it articulated recognizable power relations, and yet at the same time it was unconventional, violating, as it did, social customs and practices. Non-penetrative ‘sex,’ by contrast, to the extent that it was thought about at all, was conceptualized as both unconventional and unnatural. The model Ovid employs here is best represented through a grid:⁵⁴

	Natural	Unnatural
Conventional	Pederasty (et alia ⁵)	n/a
Unconventional	Incest	Non-penetrative ‘sex’

This scheme, unlike the penetration model, allows for the *concept* of non-penetrative ‘sex,’ even if the *practice* of this type of sex remains inconceivable. Thus, for sex (rather than ‘sex’) between Iphis and Ianthe to be rendered comprehensible, Iphis’s desires must be naturalized⁵⁶ and she herself must undergo a compulsory metamorphosis from female to male.⁵⁷

My analysis has demonstrated that the Iphis story is not only about the relationship between gender, sex, and sexuality (though it is about those things as well), but also about the uniquely unnatural concept of non-penetrative ‘sex.’ Moreover, Ovid’s framing of the larger narrative set of which Iphis is a part—itsself representing a conceptual scheme of sexuality coexistent with the penetration model—reveals in turn that Augustan-era Romans held in their minds multiple models for classifying sexual acts.⁵⁸

Works Cited

- Adams, J. N. 1982. *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*. Baltimore.
 Anderson, W. S. 1972. *Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Books 6–10*. Norman.

- Auanger, L. 2002. "Glimpses through a Window: An Approach to Roman Female Homoeroticism through Art Historical and Literary Evidence." In Rabinowitz and Auanger 2002, 211–55.
- Boehringer, S. 2007. *L'homosexualité féminine dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine*. Paris.
- Boswell, J. 1980. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Chicago.
- Brooten, B. J. 1996. *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago.
- Butler, J. 1999. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York.
- Cantarella, E. 1992. *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*. Translated by C. Ó Cuilleain. New Haven. (Originally published as *Secondo natura: la bisessualità nel mondo antica* [Rome, 1983])
- Castelli, E. et al. 1998. "Lesbian Historiography before the Name?" *GLQ* 4: 557–630.
- Delcourt, M. 1958. *Hermaphrodite: Mythes et rites de la bisexualité dans l'Antiquité classique*. Paris.
- Foucault, M. 1988. *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*. Translated by R. Hurley. New York. (Originally published as *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3 [Paris, 1984])
- Galinsky, C. K. 1975. *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects*. Bristol.
- Gordon, P. 1997. "The Lover's Voice in *Heroides* 15: Or, Why Is Sappho a Man?" In Hallett and Skinner 1997, 274–91.
- Habinek, T. 1997. "The Invention of Sexuality in the World-City of Rome." In T. Habinek and A. Schiesaro, eds., *The Roman Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge. 23–43.
- Hallett, J. P. 1997. "Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature." In Hallett and Skinner 1997, 255–73.
- , and M. B. Skinner, eds. 1997. *Roman Sexualities*. Princeton.
- Halperin, D. M. 1990. "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality." In D. M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*. New York. 15–40.
- , J. J. Winkler, and F. I. Zeitlin, eds. 1991. *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*. Princeton.
- Henderson, J. 1991. *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. Second edition. New Haven.
- Kamen, D., and S. Levin-Richardson. Forthcoming. "Lusty Ladies in the Roman Imaginary." In R. Blondell and K. Ormand, eds., *New Essays in Ancient Sexuality*. Columbus.
- Lateiner, D. 2009. "Transsexuals and Transvestites in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." In T. Fögen and M. M. Lee, eds., *Bodies and Boundaries in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. Berlin. 125–54.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1969. *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Translated by J. H. Bell, J. R. von Sturmer, and R. Needham. Boston. (Originally published as *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* [Paris, 1949])
- Lively, G. 2003. "Tiresias/Teresa: A Man-Made-Woman in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 3.318–38." *Helios* 30: 147–62.
- . 2005. *Ovid: Love Songs*. London.
- Makowski, J. F. 1996. "Bisexual Orpheus: Pederasty and Parody in Ovid." *CJ* 92: 25–38.
- Ormand, K. 2005. "Impossible Lesbians in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." In R. Ancona and E. Greene, eds., *Gendered Dynamics in Latin Love Poetry*. Baltimore. 79–110.
- . 2008. *Controlling Desires: Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Westport, CT.
- Otis, B. 1970. *Ovid as an Epic Poet*. Cambridge.
- Parker, H. P. 1997. "The Teratogenic Grid." In Hallett and Skinner 1997, 47–65.
- Pintabone, D. 2002. "Ovid's Iphis and Ianthé: When Girls Won't Be Girls." In Rabinowitz and Auanger 2002, 256–85.
- Rabinowitz, N. S., and L. Auanger, eds. 2002. *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World*. Austin.

- Raval, S. 2002. "Cross-Dressing and 'Gender Trouble' in the Ovidian Corpus." *Helios* 29: 149–72.
- Rich, A. 1986. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." In A. Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985*. New York. 23–75.
- Richlin, A. 1993. "Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law against Love Between Men." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3: 523–73.
- Robinson, D. M. 2006. *Closeted Writing and Lesbian and Gay Literature: Classical, Early Modern, Eighteenth-Century*. Aldershot.
- Sharrock, A. 2002. "Gender and Sexuality." In P. Hardie, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Cambridge. 95–107.
- Walker, J. 2006. "Before the Name: Ovid's Deformulated Lesbianism," *Comparative Literature* 58: 205–22.
- Wheeler, S. M. 1997. "Changing Names: The Miracle in Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9." *Phoenix* 51: 190–202.
- Williams, C. A. 2010. *Roman Homosexuality*. Second edition. New York.
- Winkler, J. J. 1990. *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*. New York.
- Zajko, V. 2009. "'Listening With' Ovid: Intersexuality, Queer Theory, and the Myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis." *Helios* 36: 175–202.

Notes

1. Ovid bases this story on Nicander's account of Leucippus, a summary of which is found in Antoninus Liberalis (17), although he changes it in significant ways. On the relationship between the two stories, see Delcourt 1958, 52–3 and Boehringer 2007, 232–55; on the significant name changes in Ovid's version, Wheeler 1997.

2. In this article, I use the term 'sexuality' to refer to the realm of the erotic, without implying any equivalence with our modern concept of (homo-, hetero-, bi-) sexuality. For the ancient world as a time "before sexuality," see, e.g., Halperin-Winkler-Zeitlin 1991.

3. Cf. Williams 2010, 8–9 who argues that "the Latin textual tradition does not suggest a cultural environment in which the set *homosexuality* consisted of two subsets *male* and *female*" (original emphasis).

4. Disapproves of: Lilja 1983, 80; sympathetic toward: Hallett 1997, 263.

5. This is part of a larger trend of reading the *Metamorphoses* through the lens of gender and queer theory: see, e.g., Sharrock 2002, Liveley 2003, Lateiner 2009, Zajko 2009.

6. An important contrast between these two articles is that whereas Pintabone 2002 argues that Iphis is rewarded for acting like a gender-normative girl, Raval 2002 contends that the metamorphosis occurs precisely because Iphis succeeds in her performance as a boy.

7. See also Ormand 2008, 209–19 on the Iphis story. See further Sharrock 2002, who asserts that the Iphis story "shows the anxieties surrounding the acquisition of gendered identity, and especially male gender" (96).

8. For the 'penetration model' of Roman sexuality, see Parker 1997 and Williams 2010; on the Greek side, see, e.g., Halperin 1990 and Winkler 1990. For a critique of this model in the context of a discussion of Iphis, see Robinson 2006, 163–97.

9. I put 'sex' in scare quotes to indicate an erotic activity that the Romans did not necessarily think of as *sex*.

10. For the uniqueness of Iphis and Ianthe's love within this set of stories, see also Boehringer 2007, 258–60.

11. Incest is a crime: *peccare* (9.458); *scelus/sceleratus* (9.506, 9.577, 10.315, 10.322, 10.323, 10.342, 10.352, 10.367, 10.413, 10.460, 10.468, 10.474); *nefas* (9.551, 9.633, 10.307, 10.322, 10.404); *furtum* (9.558); *crimen* (9.566, 9.629, 10.312, 10.470); *admissum* (9.304); *facinus* (10.448, 10.471).

12. Incest is forbidden: *inconcessus* (9.454, 9.638); *vetitus/veto* (9.577, 10.353, 10.354); *interdictus* (10.336). See also Ovid, *Ars am.* 1.283 on Byblis's love (*vetito*).

13. Laws/customs about incest: *ius* (9.500, 9.551, 10.331, 10.346); *lex* (9.552); *licet* (10.329); *mos* (10.355).

14. Incest is impious: (*in*)*pius* (10.345, 10.354, 10.469). Incest is shameful: *pudor/pudet* (9.515, 9.531 bis, 9.578, 10.421). Incest warrants punishment: (*in*)*noxius* (9.628, 10.351); *poena* (10.302). Other negative attributes of incest: *obscenus* (9.468); *monstrum* (9.667); *foedus* (10.319); *dirus* (10.426).

15. Cf. Lévi-Strauss 1969, who argues that the prohibition against incest not only is both a natural and a cultural phenomenon, but also represents the fundamental link between nature and culture.

16. Translations are my own; the text of *Metamorphoses* is drawn from Anderson 1972.

17. Cf. Byblis, who loved Caunus *non soror ut fratrem, nec qua debebat* (not as a brother, nor in the way a sister should, *Met.* 9.456); and Myrrha, who *patrem, sed non qua filia debet, amavit* (loved her father, but not as a daughter should, *Ars am.* 1.285).

18. Pintabone (2002, 268) also notes this turn from the “rules established by civilized human society” to the realm of nature, but does not develop the contrast between the two realms.

19. On the various meanings of ‘nature’ in ancient texts, see Boswell 1980, 11–15 and Williams 2010, 269–77.

20. Foucault 1988, 23–5; quotation from p. 25.

21. Cf. Brooten 1996, according to whom the Romans believed that “women who had sexual relations with other women are going beyond the passive, subordinate role accorded to them by nature, and they often described them as taking on an active role, thereby becoming like men” (265).

22. *Natura* as character or essence of something: *Am.* 3.8.45; *Her.* 14.55, 20.25; *Ars am.* 2.42; *Met.* 1.403, 3.376, 4.750, 5.205, 10.67, 10.117, 12.394, 12.503, 13.946, 14.684, 15.194; *Pont.* 3.2.53.

23. *Natura* as nature of all things: *Met.* 8.189, 15.6, 15.68; *Tr.* 5.10.9.

24. *Natura* as primordial entity: *Met.* 1.6; *Pont.* 4.8.57.

25. *Natura* creates, gives, deprives: *Her.* 15.31; *Ars am.* 2.503, 2.493, 3.159, 3.381, 3.797; *Met.* 1.21, 3.159, 4.589, 6.350, 10.245, 10.546, 11.235, 15.63, 15.218, 15.253, 15.270, 15.354; *Fast.* 4.429; *Tr.* 2.1.531, 3.7.13; *Pont.* 4.6.27; *Hal.* 52, 92.

26. *Natura* possesses its own laws: *Met.* 4.279, 10.304, 10.330, 10.353; *Tr.* 1.8.5.

27. See Liveley 2005, 9 who makes a similar point about Ovid's use of the word *amor*.

28. For a further interpretation of Artemidorus's category “contrary to nature,” see Brooten 1996, 184–6.

29. Winkler 1990, 36–8. The other ‘unnatural’ acts include necrophilia, sex with a god, sex with an animal, self-penetration, and self-fellation.

30. See further Winkler 1990, 43 who says that by ‘unnatural,’ Artemidorus “simply means that certain acts are either impossible or irrelevant, that is, they are insignificant within the terms of the social meaning of sex.”

31. For example, Auanger (2002) argues that two distinct forms of female homoeroticism are represented in Roman sources: a negative stereotype (tribadism) and a positive version (in the form

of “touching, gazing, appreciating beauty”). The latter form, I would argue, is more homosocial than homoerotic.

32. On tribadism generally, see Brooten 1996 (with Castelli 1998); Hallett 1997; and Boehringer 2007, s.v. “tribade.”

33. See, e.g., Winkler 1990, 40 and Brooten 1996, 6; cf. Hallett 1997, who argues that this conception is “a denial of biological reality and social reality” (268).

34. See Parker 1997 on the monstrosity of the “active female” (including the tribad).

35. It has, however, been noted by Ormand 2005 and especially by Walker 2006 in the context of Iphis.

36. Winkler 1990, 38–9; also Brooten 1996, 179, 182–3.

37. See LSJ, s.v. *περφαίνω*, II, which glosses the Artemidorean passage in question with “sens. obsc.” According to Henderson 1975, the verb *περφαίνεσθαι* “to bring something to a conclusion, is very common in Greek for sexual congress” (158). He translates it as “finish off,” and says that it is a euphemism pointing “more directly to orgasm than obscenities” (50 note 23).

38. Another difficulty is that while sex with animals is ‘unnatural’ in Artemidorus’s categorization, it is only ‘unconventional’ in the *Metamorphoses*; so, for example, we find ‘criminal’ language used in the story of Pasiphaë and the bull.

39. For a similar equation in this context, see also Ormand 2005 and Walker 2006. Ormand also mentions Artemidorus, but only briefly and in a footnote (108 note 77).

40. Drawing on Winkler 1990, Raval (2002) argues that Iphis’s words reveal that ‘nature’ is actually a cultural construct. I agree with this, but not entirely with her statement that “what is natural is explicitly defined as that which is culturally sanctioned” (162); I would argue instead that what is natural is instead what is culturally *intelligible*.

41. Iphis, of course, is technically from Crete, but the character is a Roman creation.

42. So new, in fact, that it warrants a new adjective (*prodigiosus*) to describe it, one picked up later by Martial to describe a tribad. He says about a certain Bassa, alleged penetrator of both males and females, that her “strange (*prodigiosa*) Venus imitates a man” (1.90.7–8). Hallett (1997, 263) argues that Martial is drawing explicitly on Ovid here.

43. Cf. W. S. Anderson, who comments that “Iphis here reflects her own innocence, not the truth” (1972, 494).

44. See also Walker 2006, 209: “Because it cannot be consummated in a penetrative fashion, Iphis’ desire confounds both cultural and natural intelligibility.”

45. See Adams 1982, 152 (*vulnus*).

46. A point also made by Ormand 2005, 96.

47. As Lateiner (2009, 151) concisely puts it, “For her, *res* (biological reality) cancels all *spes* (hope of fulfilment).”

48. Adams 1982, 188 (*potior*) and 197 (*fruor*).

49. See, e.g., Howell 1980, 83 note 106.

50. See, e.g., Habinek 1997, 31 who translates *male vir* as “hardly a man.”

51. See Lilja 1983, 79 who points out that the (then) conventional wisdom was that this passage “indicate[d] Ovid’s *disgust* of homosexuality” (original emphasis).

52. See also Ormand 2005, 90 and Williams 2010, 8. See further Boswell 1980, who points out that Ovid has Iphis “expatiate on the extreme oddness of lesbian passions, whereas he appears to regard homosexual love between males as perfectly normal” (83; see also 237 note 10).

53. It is striking that Venus (and, in the next story, Atalanta) can be assimilated to the pederastic model despite being female, but it is not unprecedented in Ovid; see, e.g., Ovid’s portrayal of Sappho as an *erastês* of Phaon (on which see Gordon 1997, who points especially to *Heroides* 15.85–6,

93–6). This seems to represent further confirmation of the conventional scholarly wisdom that sexuality in Rome was categorized more by relations of dominance than by the sex of each partner. This is not to say, however, that the sex of the partners is irrelevant, just that it is not a structuring category (cf. Richlin 1993).

54. I borrow the idea of a grid of Roman sexuality from Parker 1997. For a critique of Parker's teratogenic grid, see Kamen and Levin-Richardson, forthcoming.

55. Normative heteroerotic acts would of course also fall in this category.

56. Cf. Judith Butler's notion of the heterosexual matrix, "that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (1999, 194 note 6).

57. I use the term 'compulsory' as a gesture toward Adrienne Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality," the various and complicated forces compelling women to live heterosexual lives (see Rich 1986, 23–75). Indeed, Boehringer (2007, 255) argues that the important metamorphosis here is not so much the change from female to male as that from homoerotic to heteroerotic love.

58. I thank Sarah Levin-Richardson, Nelly Oliensis, Kirk Ormand, Cashman Kerr Prince, and *Helios's* two anonymous referees for their helpful comments at various stages of this project. All errors are of course my own.