

Ovid and Ignorance:  
Gender, Sexuality, and Alterity in *Metamorphoses* and  
*The Heroides*

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The tales in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *The Heroides* often rely on characters' ignorance to advance the plot. The story of Iphis and Ianthe in *Metamorphoses* is grounded on the ignorance shared by most of the characters regarding Iphis's female sex, and Matthew Leigh points out that in *The Heroides* "it is characteristic for each epistle implicitly to establish the dramatic time, context and motive ... to exploit the tension between the heroine's inevitably circumscribed awareness of her story and the superior information which can be deployed by the reader" (605). Ignorance, however, is not merely a simplistic narrative device. Ovid's use of ignorance as a thematic element in *Metamorphoses* and *The Heroides* opens up space for an excess of implicit narratives beyond the surface of the plot, narratives which work against the dominant norm by being sympathetic to characters and subjects that are typically forced into positions of alterity, and ultimately by exploring non-normative sexuality.

In book 9 of *Metamorphoses*, a girl child is born to parents Ligdus and Telethusa. The father, Ligdus, tells his wife that if the baby is a girl it will have to be killed to save on the dowry money they would be required to provide for a girl. This ultimatum is circumvented, however, when the goddess Io appears to Telethusa and tells her to deceive her husband as to the baby's gender, promising that she will have "no reason to complain" for complying with the goddess order for mercy (333). The child is named Iphis after her grandfather and raised as a boy until she is thirteen years old and her engagement to Ianthe, her childhood sweetheart, threatens to out her sexual identity. In the face of this imminent marriage, Iphis

and Telethusa go to the shrine of Isis and pray for a solution. As the mother and daughter leave the shrine, Iphis is transformed into a boy and the marriage that follows is, one can assume, wholly successful.

In his essay “Before the Name: Ovid’s Deformulated Lesbianism,” Jonathan Walker argues that Ovid’s story “formulates the thought of the possibility of lesbianism, a sort of shadow without an object to cast it,” inviting “the reader to see female homoerotic desire while simultaneously disavowing its existence” (206, 208). This simultaneous representation and disavowal is necessary, Walker argues, because Iphis lacks the semantic and conceptual vocabulary to describe her desire (208). Walker contrasts the modern terms “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” and “bisexual,” which he describes as relating only problematically to the conceptions of sexuality and sexual intercourse as understood in Augustan Rome, where homoerotic activity was organized along the gendered roles of the penetrator and the penetrated (208, 212). These roles are intelligible in male-male same-sex relationships because one partner can adopt the feminine role simply by refraining from penetrating the other; but Iphis’s female body restricts her to a non-penetrative role and, as a result, she feels that she will never be able to “own” Ianthe “in the sexual sense in which men physically take ownership of and stake their claims in women” (213). However, Iphis’s desire, because it is never directed anywhere but toward Ianthe, “determines the gendered [masculine] place from which she will do that desiring,” thereby preventing the reader from seeing Iphis and Ianthe’s relationship as a lesbian one (217). In Walker’s reading, this gendered conceptualization of desire reflects the conceptualization of desire as understood by society as a whole. This idea is based and relies on the success with which Iphis “has learned to inhabit her boyhood masculinity” as well as on Iphis’s supposed conception of intercourse as contingent on alterity and complementarily (208). Upon reflection, however, I believe

both of these descriptions of Iphis are problematic.

Walker argues for Iphis's masculine gender identity by referencing the fact that no one "questions Iphis's maleness or her masculinity" and by claiming that she "never entertains the thought of rubbing or of penetrating Ianthe with anything but a real penis" (213, 211). However, the fact that Iphis's masculine disguise is never questioned does little to substantiate what Walker calls a "genuine" masculinity (213). In fact, it becomes evident that there is little to connote Iphis's "masculine identity" except for the pronoun assigned by her mother.

Iphis's face is the androgynous kind that "whether boy or girl, [would be] a beauty" (*Metamorphoses* 333), and when Iphis is transformed into a boy at the conclusion of the story and the differences between her new body and the old one are explicated, it becomes apparent that as a girl she does not walk like a man, her skin is paler than a man's would ordinarily be, and she is more flamboyantly attired (337). It is, then, not only her stature and gait that transform when she becomes a boy, but also the traits which denote the manner in which she had performed or failed to perform her identity heretofore. The "darker complexion" (337) that appears on Iphis as a boy is an *ekphrastic* tactic, referencing the tradition in Aegean visual arts, especially pottery, of depicting women as light skinned and men as dark skinned in a form otherwise so stylized that it would be difficult to distinguish between the two genders (Rehak 192). But the visual tradition itself references a real-life difference, especially in Classical and Hellenistic Greece, between men, whose expected activities were more likely to draw them out of doors, and women, whose typical activities more or less confined them to the house (Powell 35). The culmination of Iphis's transformation with Ovid's description of her hair as "shorter than usual and unadorned" (337) further undermines any authentic masculinity by establish-

ing her sartorial choices while disguised as a boy as choices that typically connote femininity. If Iphis's disguise included long hair and ornaments, as it appears to have done, she would have made a noticeably flamboyant boy, regardless of whether her family or her lover questioned the authenticity of her masculine performance. There is a suggestion, then, that Iphis has not been participating in enough masculine behaviours for those activities to be reflected in her skin or in her dress, and that the education that she and Ianthe have shared has not been an overtly masculine one, as Walker suggests (218), but rather mostly feminine.

Walker blames Iphis's ignorance of the semantic and conceptual vocabulary she needs in order to adequately describe her desire on the active ignorance of society at large, suggesting that society carefully maintains an ignorance of female-female homosexual desire and by doing so prevents it from being a "culturally intelligible phenomenon" (207). This ignorance, he argues, prevents Iphis from relating to her desire for Ianthe in non-penetrative terms. Parts of Walker's argument are convincing here. Iphis complains vehemently that her desire for Ianthe is not a culturally intelligible phenomenon; as far as she is concerned no one, be they human, cow, horse, sheep, deer, or bird, has felt female-female desire before (334). It is not clear, however, that Iphis's trouble conceptualizing her desire stems from a conception of all sex as consisting of a penetrator and a penetrated, as Walker claims. In fact, Iphis remains an example to herself of someone who can conceive of non-penetrative sex and allows female-female homoerotic activity much more valence within Ovid's poem than is suggested by Walker.

Iphis does not worry about sexual inadequacy but about the imminent revelation of her feminine body. She is fearful for two reasons: the ignorance of her lover and friends regarding her gender, of which she is aware, and her own ignorance, not of the semantics of

her desire, but of its frequency and therefore the chance that Ianthe will reciprocate. Iphis does not complain that she will not enjoy sex with Ianthe because of failing to penetrate, she complains that she will be unable to deceive Ianthe as to her real gender when it comes down to it. Iphis relates this to Queen Pasiphae, wife of King Minos of Crete, whose passion for the bull of Poseidon begot the minotaur, by saying

at least she had the hope  
of satisfaction, taking in the bull  
through guile, and in the image of a cow  
thereby deceiving the adulterer! (335)

The emphasis here is on Iphis's ability to deceive. The trick is to take the lover in, which has so far been successful but is unlikely to remain so after her wedding. It is true that Iphis regrets the fact that not even Daedalus could "transform [her] from a girl into a boy" (335), which might give Walker's penetrator/penetrated binary some traction. But it must be remembered that Daedalus is an artificer. The heifer costume that he made for Queen Pasiphae, the labyrinth, and the wings that he made for himself and his son Icarus to escape are all elaborate deceptions. They enable sex, entrapment, and flight, but are not enduring. In this sense, Daedalus's work can be described as a series of inauthentic, illusory solutions that allow his clients to do the work of the moment. Pasiphae, tucked inside a heifer statue, would have had incredible difficulty feeding herself and escaping predators if she were to live the authentic life of a cow, the labyrinth entraps people precisely by presenting inauthentic paths as authentic ones, and the wax wings melt when used for the full range of motion possible with real wings (Powell 424, 432). Even if Daedalus could manufacture Iphis's transformation, it would likely only go as far as to get Iphis in and out of bed with Ianthe without the femininity of her body being detected.

Throughout much of the story, Telethusa's worry for her daughter is constructed as a fear for Iphis's safety, with the threat of her daughter's death and the implicit repercussions of the deception as extremely good motivations. However, toward the end of the story, Telethusa's straightforward fear is complicated by the narrator: "Fearing what you sought, / Telethusa postponed the wedding day" (336). The "you" is most likely directed toward Hymen, the Roman god of marriage, as the line before also directly addresses him, and, considering Hymen's occupation and the subject matter of the story, it stands to reason that Hymen may have a stake in Iphis and Ianthe's wedding. But the direct address of Iphis herself two stanzas later complicates this conclusion somewhat. There are only three instances of direct address in the story, and there is nothing explicitly connecting the "you" at 336 to either Hymen or Iphis. Therefore, the "you" can be read as belonging to either of them. If "Fearing what you sought" belongs to Iphis, then Telethusa's fear implies that Iphis does, in fact, conceive of non-penetrative female-female sex. It makes no sense that Iphis would seek rejection, which is all she can expect from the circumstances without entertaining the possibility of non-penetrative sex. One could of course argue that Iphis seeks both Ianthe *and* the body that would make the authentic possession of Ianthe possible, but Telethusa's fear would then be nonsensical. There would be no reason for Telethusa to fear what Iphis seeks if what she seeks is qualified by her also seeking an appropriately complimentary body.

Ovid's sympathy for the unknown and, by extension, the non-normative extends beyond *Metamorphoses*. The dramatic irony in *The Heroides*, which Matthew Leigh points out, creates excess

stories within familiar ones. Leigh argues that Ovid is able to exploit the tension between the heroine's inevitably circumscribed awareness of the development of her story and the superior information which can be deployed by a reader acquainted with the mythical tradition or master-text which dictates what is actually going to follow. (605)

However, the heroine's blatant lack of awareness does more than simply capitalize on the tension between this lack of awareness and the mythic tradition, and *The Heroides* does not simply serve as one instalment of a continuous collaborative story of which the established tradition is a part. By emphasizing the heroine's lack of awareness, Ovid reinforces the authority of the mythic tradition while establishing that his stories, in that they convey information that the tradition does not, reveal something insufficient about the information the tradition provides. Excess stories are therefore introduced. Ovid cannot, and does not try, to fix the now obvious insufficiency with his rather short additions to the master text; rather, he opens up space for those other stories to take root.

Because these stories are necessarily composed of what does not appear in the tradition, there is frequently a counter-cultural thrust to them. Penelope has room to voice her impatience and mistrust of Ulysses, suspecting him of "being captive now to a foreign love" and of telling his new lover that his "wife's an innocent / considered to be almost like raw wool" (*Heroides* 1). Here, Penelope's famous patience is not the meek, virtuous sort lauded by writers after Ovid, for it is hard won, cultivated patience that does not shirk from condemning Ulysses for being "shamefully absent" (*Heroides* 1). There is a suggestion that the *Odyssey* is not the heroic tale that it seems, but a long procrastination on the part of Ulysses. Sappho, though pining for a man, also constructs her "infamous" relation-

ships with the women of Lesbos in terms of an entire community: “Lesbian women, beloved women, who made me infamous, / Cease to come, in a crowd, to the melodies of my lyre! / Phaeon has stolen what pleased you so before” (*Heroides* 15). This focus on Sappho’s unusual obsession with a man does not delegitimize her earlier lovers, as Elizabeth D. Harvey suggests in her essay “Ventriloquizing Sappho, Ovid, Donne, and the Erotics of the Feminine Voice,” but rather subtly naturalizes the community of women that Sappho has, at least temporarily, abandoned.

Harvey claims that Ovid’s “[conversion] of the object[s] of Sappho’s passion from the girls she addresses in her own songs ... to a man who scorns her suggests a subjugation that is at once sexual ... and poetic” (120). This subjugation is also revealed in the elegiac style that Ovid employs throughout *The Heroides*, which “violates” Sappho’s lyric style (121). While Harvey’s argument is compelling, it does not account for the fact that Sappho may well have had male lovers along with female ones. Indeed, fragment 75 reads, “But if thou lovest us, choose another and a younger bed / fellow; for I will not brook to live with thee, old woman with young man” (Sappho). Nor does Harvey address the manner in which Ovid’s transplantation of Sappho’s voice from lyric to elegiac preserves the authority of Sappho’s own work and protects her poems from Ovid’s arguably more awkward additions to the master text. Indeed, Sappho expresses worry that Phaon will not recognize the style or quality of her of writing when the letter is delivered to him (*Heroides* 15). Sappho’s hesitation in adopting Ovid’s elegiac style, when read in conjunction with her lamenting the loss of her “powers of song” (*Heroides* 15), and the obvious admiration Ovid has for Sappho in his *Tristia* and *Remedia Amoris* as evidenced by lines such as “only the woman bard of Lesbos will surpass your work” (qtd. in Hallett) and “Certainly Sappho made me a better lover to my mistress” (qtd.

in Hallett), suggests that Ovid's approach to Sappho is nothing if not deferential.

Ovid's deferential, even reverent attitude toward Sappho does not directly challenge the cultural norm which considered non-penetrative sexual relationships as but poor imitations of penetrative ones. Rather, his works open up a space for these stories to percolate. More than Ovid's personal politics, his sympathetic attitude toward metamorphoses and his respect for people and situations oppressed by active ignorance allows his work to transcend the ages. Ovid does not necessarily anticipate modern ethics; rather, his works challenge the reader to embrace change and the unknown, encouragement that we are arguably in just as much need of now as we have ever been.

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