

2022

## Metamorphosing Metamorphosis in the Metamorphoses

Zachary Tympanick

*College of the Holy Cross*, [zjtymp23@g.holycross.edu](mailto:zjtymp23@g.holycross.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j>



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Tympanick, Zachary (2022) "Metamorphosing Metamorphosis in the Metamorphoses," *Parnassus: Classical Journal*: Vol. 8, Article 13.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j/vol8/iss1/13>

This Essays is brought to you for free and open access by the Classics Department at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Parnassus: Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

## Metamorphosing Metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: a fifteen book long poem composed of mythical episodes involving transformations in one way or another, with notable episodes such as Daedalus and Icarus, Orpheus and Eurydice, and so many more! Although the previously mentioned stories involve some element of tragedy with a transformation, some of the lesser-known episodes discuss more serious matters such as rape and the abuse of women. Take, for example, the story of Io. After spotting Io's beauty, Jove rapes her under the cover of storm clouds, and then transforms Io into a white heifer to hide his crime from Juno. The act of transforming Io here hinders her ability to speak out about Jove's crime. Io shows up later again in the *Metamorphoses* as the goddess Isis, who helps to transform a female Iphis into a male, so she can marry her fiancée Ianthe. By linking the myths of Iphis and Io, Ovid illustrates the progress of transformation from damaging female bodies in Io's myth to empowering them in Iphis's myth.

Ovid establishes a link between Io and Isis in his Iphis narrative through the use of Io's patronymic. In this retelling of the myth attributed to Nicander, Ovid decides to swap out the goddess Leto for the Egyptian goddess Isis. Although both goddesses perform genderbending transformations in their respective myths, Isis has a linguistic connection to the character Io who was previously mentioned in the *Metamorphoses*. While the pregnant Telethusa was sleeping, "the goddess [Isis] stood...before [Telethusa's] troubled bed" and told Telethusa "to raise this child whatever it will be" (*Met.* 9.991-2, 1011, tr. Martin). In this encounter, Isis is referred to as *Inachis*, or "the daughter of Inachus," or Io (*Met.* 9.687). This patronymic appears earlier in the *Metamorphoses* to explicitly refer to Io as *Inachidos* (*Met.* 1.611). Although there are two instances of the substantive masculine form of *Inachides*, *Inachidae* that refer to "male

descendants of Inachus” like Phaethon (1.753) and Perseus (4.720), Io and Isis being the only female recipients of the term strengthens the connection between them. As a result, the importance of referring to Isis as Io is the way in which Ovid links the Iphis narrative to that of Io in Book 1.

Ovid then portrays Io as a helpless character in order to amplify her lack of agency in her own story. This daughter of Inachus endures torture and pain from the gods: Jove raped and “metamorphosed Io,” and “[Juno had] placed this heifer in the care / of Argus” as well as “set a horrifying Fury...[to] her Grecian rival” (*Met.* 1.847, 868-9, 1002, 1004). In neither of these instances is Io the subject of the clause, which denies her any sort of power in her own life at this moment. Although there are places where she is the subject of a clause, the verbs serve to flesh out the story rather than giving her any sort of power like running away from Jove or grazing the fields as a cow. The only action that grants her a voice in her cow form is when “she drew lines in the dust...[that] told the sad story of her transformation” to her father, which while it creates sympathy for her, does not help her current situation. Juno’s rage finally subdues, which allows for Jove to transform Io back to her original form: another transformation that Io is unable to control. However, it is at this point of the story where things start to look uphill for Io. She settles in Egypt and “she is cared for as a most celebrated goddess by the linen-wearing people” (*Nunc dea linigera colitur celeberrima turba*, *Met.* 1.747). At last, Io has now undergone one final transformation into a goddess worshipped by the Egyptians. In conjunction with the context of a shared patronymic between Io and Isis, this scene portrays Io metamorphosed into the goddess Isis, who is a being of immense power within the Egyptian pantheon of gods.

Io, with the authority of Isis, transforms Iphis in order to empower the recipient of the transformation rather than hinder. Now, with Io as Isis, a rape survivor has attained an authority

on par with the deities who abused her. However, instead of continuing this cycle of violence, the goddess decides to perform a transformation for Iphis when the latter needs it. Right before the wedding day, Telethusa takes Iphis to the temple of Isis where Telethusa asks “O holy Isis... spare [them] both and offer your aid” (9.1112, 1124). Rather than deciding to transform Iphis whenever the goddess finds it convenient for herself, as Jove does for himself, Isis grants the transformation because the recipient, Iphis, desires it. By subverting the use of metamorphosis to hinder and oppress as seen in the story of Io, Isis empowers Iphis to pursue a relationship with Ianthe within her own society.

In addition to her lack of agency, Io undergoes different stressors in her altered form in order to illustrate the negative impacts that forced transformation has on an individual. As previously mentioned, Jove was the one who transformed Io to hide his crime of rape. However, while Io was a cow, she experienced different stressors in her new form: “When she tried to utter a complaint / she only mooed—a sound which terrified her,” and “when she beheld her own slack jaws and newly sprouted horns / in the clear water, she fled, terrified” (1.8883-4, 888-9). As a result of her forced transformation, Io undergoes a disconnect between her psychological and bodily states, which Sasha Barish broadly describes as an experience similar to “gender dysphoria” for transgender people (Barish, 2018). Although I do not personally identify as transgender, Barish elaborates on his experience as being very negative where he would “want to scream at the sight of [his] reflection in a mirror” or how “nobody saw that [he] was obviously out of place in the girls’ locker room!” (Barish, 2018).

Iphis too experiences distress in her own form since she loves her bride-to-be Ianthe, but cannot marry her in her own society. Generally within Greco-Roman societies, there would be an age gap between the bride and the groom where the male would be significantly older than the

female. When the narrator describes Iphis and Ianthe together, “the two were similar in age and in looks,” and they are at the age of being able to be married off, or the onset of secondary sex characteristics for the both of them (9. 1036). Not only is the idea of two girls in this society getting married unnatural, but the lack of an age gap is also abnormal for the situation. It is through this lack of age gap that Isis’ intentions of delaying the transformation become clear. If Isis had transformed Iphis when she was a baby, Iphis the boy would have to wait even longer before being of wedding age. However, by waiting until Iphis is both about to be married and developing secondary sex traits, the transformation removes the issue of the age gap and gender by having Iphis gain more masculine features like “longer strides, / [a] darker complexion... and with more vigor than a woman has” (9.1132-3, 1136). Instead of replicating the pain Io experienced in her altered form, Io as Isis not only removes the stressors on Iphis to pursue a happy marriage with Ianthe, but also grants agency to another female body where she did not have that luxury.

When I first learned the story of Iphis, the professor asked if this episode was a proto-trans or a proto-lesbian narrative. Although there are aspects of the story that can equate to these perspectives, I do not believe that we can say the story is either or. Since the notions of transgender and lesbian are modern concepts, it would not be productive to try and understand a past culture with modern ideas. Such actions will only reveal more about our own culture and how we try to understand others rather than taking the story within the context of its culture. Thus, when looking at the myths of Io and Iphis as one cohesive narrative from the time of Ovid, it tells the story of a woman whose rape and abuse by the hands of higher authorities fuels her to be the change that she wants to see in the world (and she succeeds, too)! By also connecting these two myths together, it paints a liberatory narrative that shows recovery and healing from

gendered violence. By removing the attribution of modern concepts to ancient stories, we can better understand the motivations and purposes behind certain stories. Rather than looking at Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as one giant collection of rapes and atrocities, we as the collective readership should continue to examine this work from an open perspective to liberate our negative perceptions and uncover hidden ideas unseen in translation.

## Works Cited

Barish, Sasha. "Iphis' Hair, Io's Reflection, and the Gender Dysphoria of the Metamorphoses." *Medium*, EIDOLON, 16 July 2018, [eidolon.pub/iphis-hair-io-s-reflection-and-the-gender-dysphoria-of-the-metamorphoses-4b75c1ba38d7](https://eidolon.pub/iphis-hair-io-s-reflection-and-the-gender-dysphoria-of-the-metamorphoses-4b75c1ba38d7).

Martin, Charles, translator. "Book I." *Ovid Metamorphoses*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004, pp. 38–47.

Martin, Charles, translator. "Book IX." *Ovid Metamorphoses*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004, pp. 331–337.