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Gender Amender: Sex-Changing and Transgender Identities in Ovid's Metamorphoses

The story of Iphis and Ianthe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* enjoys a reputation as one of the few transformations in that work with an unproblematic happy ending. In this story, the girl Iphis has spent her life disguised as a boy; when the time comes for her to marry, she finds herself in love with her fiancée, but is distressed, not knowing how to consummate the marriage. Happily, Isis steps in and transforms Iphis into a boy, and the marriage is able to proceed in the conventional way. Nevertheless, Iphis' transformation is not so innocuous. Based on Iphis' soliloquy before her sex change, the reader easily sees that Iphis is in love with Ianthe, but hears no indication that she wishes to change sex to solve the problem. In fact, her description corresponds much more closely to a homosexual female attraction with no transgender identity.

Transgender identities are visible but not prominent in ancient culture. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one finds several stories of sex changing: Tiresias, Caenis, and Salmacis/Hermaphroditus. All three of these sex changes occur in response to a prayer from the person transformed: the person expresses dissatisfaction with his/her native sex a desire to change sex. I argue that, even though Iphis' sex is changed to de-problematize the marriage, the reader must infer that Iphis is somehow transgender in order to find the ending happy, and that, since Iphis is not established as such in the text, the happy ending is entirely constructed by the reader. There are characters in the *Metamorphoses* who could be called transgender, but Iphis is not one of them, and to assign her a transgender identity simply because a sex change solves her problem is to ignore the realities of transgender identity and dismiss female homosexuality as practicable in the ancient world.