

The story of Iphis and Ianthe is the sole mythological account of female same-sex love in Classical literature. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells the tale of Iphis (9.666-797), 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 love is “unnatural” (*non vult natura*, 758) 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.

Our interpretation of this “queer” myth—particularly of what it tells us about Roman notions of sexuality—is shaped very much by Ovid’s framing of the tale. Therefore I begin by contextualizing the Iphis story within the *Metamorphoses*: It is immediately preceded by a story in which a girl named Byblis unsuccessfully tries to seduce her brother (9.450-665), and followed by the tale of Orpheus, who turns to a love of boys after losing his wife Eurydice (10.1-85). Orpheus himself then tells a number of tales, including those of the Cerastae and Propoetides (10.220-42); Pygmalion (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 Adonis (10.503-739).

Scholars have categorized the relationships between the stories of *Met.* 9.450-10.739 in diverse ways, assimilating Iphis either to everyone but Byblis and Myrrha on the basis of some generalized “unnatural love,” or to precisely these girls on the basis of their shared “forbidden love,” or to the lovers of boys on the basis of a common “homosexuality.” I argue that Iphis’ love is in fact marked as *different* from that found in the other tales. A study of the language Ovid uses to describe the various passions demonstrates that erotic love between women, to the extent that it was thought about at all, was considered unnatural and conceptually impossible, whereas sex between men—or at any rate, sex between an older lover and younger beloved—was deemed conventional and unproblematic. Incestuous love, on the other hand, whether between parent and child or brother and sister, was considered “natural,” in that it articulated comprehensible power relations; and yet at the same time it was “unconventional,” violating, as it did, social customs and practices (see further Winkler 1990). It should not go unnoticed that Iphis’ desire for another girl is the only type of love within this sequence of tales that must be “naturalized” in order to be rendered comprehensible. As such, Iphis’ metamorphosis sheds further light on the Roman taxonomy of sexuality, illuminating in particular the unique, and indeed marginal, position of female same-sex love.