False Forms and Wicked Women: Apuleius' Isis Book and Ovid's Iphis Story

This paper explores an understudied intertextual link between Lucius in Book 9 of Apuleius' *Golden Ass* and Iphis in Book 9 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Both Lucius and Iphis experience conflict between their physical forms and self-identifications, and with the help of Isis their transformations ultimately lead to the conclusion of their narratives. Apuleius builds his Isis upon Ovid's earlier version, and each version of the goddess provides her worshiper with an "appropriate" role in society. In transforming Iphis and Lucius, Isis strengthens the community at large by reinforcing social norms of marriage, gender, and morality.

Krabbe (1989), Finkelpearl (1998), and Harrison (2012) have provided substantial evidence for a close relationship between Ovid and Apuleius, and more specifically between the two *Metamorphoses*. Iphis' character arc mirrors that of the Lucius in critical ways: Lucius is a man in the body of an ass, while Iphis is a boy in the body of a girl. Both exist in a state of duality, in which their natures directly oppose their physical attributes. Although Lucius undergoes two changes and Iphis only one, each of their final transformations is preceded by a degree of internal change, reflected in an act of prayer to Isis (DeFilippo 1990; Drews 2012). Both attribute their misfortunes to a preternatural and unstoppable force—Nature in Iphis' case, Fortuna in Lucius'—but after they pray for deliverance, their physical forms change to reflect their internal identities.

In addition, each account of transformation is placed within a series of stories about "inappropriate" love or sexual deviance. As Anderson notes (1972), Ovid's Iphis story is directly preceded by the story of Byblis, who falls in love with her brother (*Met.* 9.454-665); soon after comes the story of Myrrha, who falls in love with her father (*Met.* 10.298-502). Likewise,

Apuleius' *Golden Ass* contains numerous accounts of adultery, murder, and women who engage in illicit romance, but after Lucius returns to his human form, these tales of debauchery vanish. The arrival of Isis in these narratives resolves any problems of internal identity and unchastity, and removes the pervasive sexual immorality of both Ovid's poem and Apuleius' novel.

This interpretation corresponds to Alvar's assessment (2008) of Isiac ethics, which include a devotion to chastity, whether in the short or long term. Total abstinence from sex was one acceptable way of achieving chastity, but there was a spectrum of chaste conduct for both initiates and those who worshiped the goddess more casually. The Isis aretalogies from Memphis emphasize especially Isis' establishment of marriage and the relationship between men and women; Isiac cult accepted sex as a means of preserving organic family life, but extramarital sex was condemned as destructive. The regulation of sexual desires was a way of preserving the roles of men and women in marriage and the wellbeing of the community at large.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Isis exercises this role by fitting Iphis into a traditional marriage with her newly male body. Iphis is now able to adhere to an appropriate social role—that of a heterosexual husband. Similarly, in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Isis represents the acceptance of social order and moral responsibility. Although Lucius does not enter into a traditional marriage, he becomes the "goddess' consort" (Alvar 2008), and by practicing ritual abstinence accepts a socially acceptable identity. The function of Isis in both works is to give the protagonist an acceptable role in her community, defined by controlled sexual conduct and moral responsibility.

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