

**'Reader, I married him/ her': Ali Smith, Ovid, and queer translation**

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3 'Reader, I married him/ her': Ali Smith, Ovid, and queer translation  
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7 Abstract  
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12 This essay discusses Ali Smith's novel *Girl meets boy* (2007) and its 'queer translation' of  
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14 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.666-797. I argue that Smith's presentation of a contemporary  
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16 genderqueer Iphis and Ianthe not only fictionalizes the critical argument proposed by Judith  
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18 Butler's *Gender Trouble*, but uses *Gender Trouble* as a queer translation manifesto. Reading  
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20 *Girl meets boy* through this Butlerian lens, which foregrounds multiplicity and insists upon  
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22 the politically subversive potential of repetition, I show how Smith translates, re-translates,  
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24 and re-writes Ovid's text, to make queer identities that are made to disappear in the Latin  
25  
26 'loosed' in translation. I also propose a new reading of the conclusion of Ovid's episode  
27  
28 informed by Smith's queer translation. I discuss Smith's politicized use of repetition  
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30 throughout the novel to produce queer translations which disrupt the surface homophobic  
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32 discourse of the original text; and I discuss the particular political context of the novel's  
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34 publication before the legalization of same-sex marriage in England, Wales, and Scotland. In  
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36 conclusion, I argue that a queer translation practice, as evidenced by Smith's novel, is an  
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38 activist project which combats homophobic discourse (ancient and modern) and allows  
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40 ancient queer bodies and identities to retain their multiplicity in translation.  
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3 ‘Reader, I married him/ her’: Ali Smith, Ovid, and queer translation  
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8 Article  
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12 In her 2011 Sebald Lecture for the British Centre of Literary Translation, Ali Smith  
13 suggested that translation should be considered not solely in terms of what gets lost, but also  
14 by what gets found and what gets ‘loosed’.<sup>1</sup> This wordplay on the aphorism ‘lost in  
15 translation’—attributed to Robert Frost by Louis Untermeyer in 1964—is a typically  
16 Smithian game.<sup>2</sup> Described by critic James Woods as ‘surely the most pun-besotted of  
17 contemporary novelists’, Smith’s clear delight in the multiplicity and metamorphic potential  
18 of language is a quality she shares with the Roman poet Ovid (interviewed on BBC Radio 4’s  
19 *Desert Island Discs*, Smith selected Mary Innes’ translation of *Metamorphoses* as the book  
20 she would wish to be stranded with as a castaway).<sup>3</sup> Smith’s novel *Girl meets boy*, which re-  
21 tells the myth of Iphis, the girl transformed into a boy from book 9 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,  
22 foregrounds an equal concern with the multiplicity and metamorphic potential of gender and  
23 sexuality.<sup>4</sup> An epigraph to the novel quotes Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*: ‘Gender ought  
24 not to be construed as a stable identity... rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in  
25 time’.<sup>5</sup> This excerpt explicitly signals Smith’s fictionalization of Butler’s critical queer theory  
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48 <sup>1</sup> *Sebald Lecture 2011 – Ali Smith*, online audio recording, SoundCloud, 17 May 2013  
49 <https://soundcloud.com/bclt/sebald-lecture-2011> [accessed 7 May 2018]. This article began life in 2010 as an  
50 MPhil dissertation on Smith’s queer politicization of Ovid; an early version of this paper was presented at the  
51 conference ‘The History of Sexuality and Translation of the Classics’ (University of Durham, 2014). Sincere  
52 thanks are due to the conference participants and the anonymous reviewers at *CRJ* for their comments and  
53 challenges.

54 <sup>2</sup> <http://www.oxfordreference.com/abstract/10.1093/acref/9780199237173.001.0001/q-author-00001-00001297>  
55 [accessed 22 December 2018].

56 <sup>3</sup> Woods (2018); 11 November 2016 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081tflr> [accessed 13 February 2017].  
57 Smith quotes Innes’ translation again in her novel *Autumn* (2016: 112, 171), but uses Ted Hughes’ versions of  
58 *Metamorphoses, Tales from Ovid*, in *Artful* (2012: 65). On Smith’s career-ranging Ovidianism, see Ranger  
59 (2019).

60 <sup>4</sup> Smith (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Butler (1999: 191).

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3 within the pages of her novel. I argue here that it also signals Smith's queer approach to  
4 'translating' Ovid's text. Although Butler does not consider the act of translation in *Gender*  
5 *Trouble*, her focus on the discursive construction of gender—and her conception of gender  
6 performance as a queer copy, later qualified as '*a kind of imitation for which there is no*  
7 *original*'—suggests itself as a queer translation manifesto, inviting the queer translator 'to  
8 open up the field of possibility' for language as well as gender, to 'trouble' the language that  
9 maintains binary categories of gender as well as troubling those gender categories  
10 themselves.<sup>6</sup> In this essay, I use this Butlerian lens to discuss *Girl meets boy* and to show how  
11 Smith translates, re-translates, and re-writes Ovid's text, making queer identities that are  
12 apparently made to disappear in the Latin visible, or, 'loosed' in translation.<sup>7</sup>

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26 The first section of the essay situates 'queer translation' as an extension of feminist  
27 translation techniques developed in the 1980s. After noting that existing literature on queer  
28 translation predominantly focuses on the translation of modern source texts in which queer  
29 identities are explicitly visible, I propose that critical queer theory suggests itself as a  
30 methodology for the translation of 'troublesome' subjects in ancient texts—that is, those who  
31 resists binary categories of gender or sexuality.<sup>8</sup> I discuss the problem of the lack of  
32 equivalence between ancient and modern identities and sexualities, and the utility of an  
33 experimental queer translation practice that maintains and foregrounds multiplicity in the  
34 target text. After reviewing the critical reception of Ovid's tale of Iphis, I propose a new  
35 reading of the conclusion of the episode informed by Smith's queer text. I use Smith's  
36 multiple translations of the final line of Ovid's Latin as a focused example to show how the  
37 novel expands the limits of and possibilities for translation as well as gender. The main body  
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56 <sup>6</sup> Butler (2003: 378); emphasis in original; Butler (1999: viii).

57 <sup>7</sup> Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appears in *Gender Trouble* in Butler's discussion of Foucault's editing of the diaries of  
58 Herculine Barbin, an intersex wo/man whose (ultimately, legally-enforced) 'gender category proves less fluid  
59 than h/er own references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* suggest' (1999: 143).

60 <sup>8</sup> Doan and Waters (2000: 20).

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3 of the essay considers the novel more broadly. I analyse three significant alterations that  
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5 Smith makes to Ovid's version, and examine the ways in which Smith edits and rearranges  
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7 lines from the Latin in her text to deconstruct the surface homophobic discourse of  
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9 monstrosity and impossibility in Iphis' soliloquy in *Metamorphoses*. I use the repeated scenes  
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11 of translation embedded within the novel and enacted on the narrative level as demonstrative  
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13 of Smith's queer approach to rewriting Ovid's text, as she tests out translation as paraphrase,  
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15 dialogue, and finally, as creative transformation. I argue that Smith's novel insists upon the  
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17 politically subversive potential of repetition, that is, translation as the production of queer  
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19 copies that disrupt the original. I also consider the particular political implications of the  
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21 iterated wedding sequence in the context of the novel's publication before the legalization of  
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23 same-sex marriage in England, Wales, and Scotland. In conclusion, I argue that a queer  
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25 translation practice, as evidence by Smith's novel, is an activist project which combats  
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27 homophobic discourse (ancient and modern) and enables ancient queer bodies and identities  
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29 to retain their multiplicities in translation.  
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### 38 Feminist translation, queer translation

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42 In the last thirty years, the cultural and feminist turns of Translation Studies have  
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44 reconceptualized the possibilities of translation, expanding its generic and strategic boundaries,  
45  
46 and redefining its processes, artefacts, and gendered metaphors.<sup>9</sup> While the impact of feminist  
47  
48 theory and queer theory on scholars' readings of ancient texts has been substantial, the  
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50 discipline has been largely resistant to innovative translation work.<sup>10</sup> As the critical reception  
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52 of Emily Wilson's *The Odyssey* has recently demonstrated, even the boundaries of 'literary'  
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59 <sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Bassnett (2014).

60 <sup>10</sup> See, e.g., the opposing positions taken by essays in Lianeri and Zajko (2008).

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3 translation remain heavily policed.<sup>11</sup> Experimental translators including Anne Carson and  
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5 Josephine Balmer have worked to expose the various cultural and ideological discourse at play  
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7 in the transmission and translation of ancient literature, and both foreground subjectivity and  
8  
9 issues of gender and sexuality in their translation practices and texts. In her book, *Piecing*  
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11 *Together the Fragments*, Balmer references the pivotal influence on her work of the  
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13 ‘subversive’ translation practice of Suzanne Jill Levine and the French-Canadian school of  
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15 feminist translators.<sup>12</sup> In the late 1970s, Québécoise writers Louky Bersianik, France Theoret,  
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17 and Nicole Brossard were experimenting with a new literary style Brossard termed ‘fiction-  
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19 theory’, blending fiction and feminist theory to craft critical-creative texts that disrupted  
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21 gendered patriarchal language at the levels of narrative, grammar, and vocabulary.<sup>13</sup> Brossard’s  
22  
23 *Amantes* (1980), for example, uses feminized spelling ‘errors’ such as the titular *amantes* to  
24  
25 emphasize the female subjectivity and homoeroticism occluded by the masculine plural *les*  
26  
27 *amants*. Conversely, the anarchic use of gendered grammar in Bersianik’s *L’Eugélonne*  
28  
29 (1976) suggests that linguistic ambiguity provides a method for resisting patriarchal binaries.<sup>14</sup>  
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31 As grammatical gender inflections can be visibly disrupted, these Francophone texts easily  
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33 exposed the linguistic mechanisms of patriarchy and heteronormativity; the development of  
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35 feminist translation strategies arose directly from the need to convey these grammatically-  
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37 experimental texts in English in a visually-striking and similarly politicized and interventionist  
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39 manner (Barbara Godard translates Brossard’s *Lovers* as *Lovhers*, for example).<sup>15</sup>  
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52 <sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Burrow (2018).

53 <sup>12</sup> Balmer (2013: 5, 139, 203); Levine (1991). Early ‘gender inclusive’ translation was pioneered in the late  
54 1970s in ‘restated’ New Testament translations, e.g., Haugerud (1977).

55 <sup>13</sup> Godard, Marlatt, Mezei and Scott (1994).

56 <sup>14</sup> Bersianik (1996).

57 <sup>15</sup> While Bersianik and Brossard began their writing projects with the intention of inscribing *female* subjectivity  
58 in language, feminist translation is a political epistemological mode rather than an essentialist mode tied to  
59 biological sex. For example, Bersianik’s work was translated into English by feminist translator Howard Scott,  
60 whose style is marked by its political interventions in language rather than a *feminine* mode of writing. Feminist  
translation strategies are also applied to non-feminist texts.

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3 The signal feature of a feminist translation is the visibility of the woman ‘translator/  
4 rewriter’, who signals her presence alongside the author of the source text in a self-reflexive  
5 polyphonic target text that ‘flaunts... its work, its textuality’.<sup>16</sup> The reader is made aware of  
6 the feminist translator’s presence and her efforts to work transparently and to foreground the  
7 inherently subjective nature of a process that conventionally purports to be objective. Luise  
8 Von Flotow and Sherry Simon proposed three strategies by which the feminist translator can  
9 flaunt her presence: supplementing the target text (that is, ‘over-translating’, by providing  
10 multiple translations for one word to avoid the closure of meaning); heavy use of  
11 autobiographical commentary and paratextual materials such as prefaces and footnotes (to  
12 contextualize both the process and product of translation); and ‘hijacking’ the text (that is, the  
13 active intervention of the feminist translator to make woman visible in language and to  
14 directly combat, problematize, or erase sexist, homophobic, and racist discourse).<sup>17</sup> Simply  
15 expressed, ‘translators can draw attention to gender and to related issues, such as the  
16 treatment of female characters, by choosing to highlight, to add in, to alter, or to remove  
17 particular aspects of a text’.<sup>18</sup> The finished artefacts of feminist translation can vary widely in  
18 their combination of these translation strategies, but they are united by their foregrounding of  
19 methodology. By ‘womanhandling’ a text in such a way, the feminist translator combines a  
20 literary project with an activist one.<sup>19</sup>

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William Burton and B.J. Epstein have both repurposed these strategies to  
conceptualize a queer translation practice as one which draws attention to the treatment of  
queer characters in a source text, or ‘hijacks’ a text to foreground issues of gender and

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<sup>16</sup> Godard (1990: 92).

<sup>17</sup> von Flotow (1991); Simon (1996).

<sup>18</sup> Epstein (2017: 121).

<sup>19</sup> Godard (1990: 93).

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3 sexuality.<sup>20</sup> Epstein proposes that ‘acqueering’ a text would ‘emphasize or even increase  
4 queerness’:  
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7 For example, a translator can add in queer sexualities, sexual practices or  
8 gender identities or change straight/cis identities or situations to queer ones;  
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10 remove homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic language or situations, or  
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12 highlight it in order to force a reader to question it; change spellings or  
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14 grammar or word choices to bring attention to queerness, or add in footnotes,  
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16 endnotes, a translator’s preface, or other paratextual material to discuss  
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18 queerness and/or translatorial choices.<sup>21</sup>  
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23 Existing literature on ‘queer translation’ predominantly focuses on modern source texts in  
24 which queer identities are explicitly visible, and/or target texts whose binary gendered or  
25 heteronormative language has erased queer identities.<sup>22</sup> Yet critical queer theory itself  
26 suggests a translation methodology. Building on the work of post-structuralist discourse  
27 theory, Butler argued that gender is not only socially constructed in discourse, but is  
28 constructed as performances. In the preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler  
29 clarified the intention behind her claim that gender is performative: ‘that what we take to be  
30 an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through  
31 the gendered stylization of the body’.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, ‘performativity is not a singular act, but a  
32 repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a  
33 body’.<sup>24</sup> If the performativity of gender achieves its effects through repetition in the body, it  
34 may be said that a queer translation achieves its effects in its (queer) repetition of language in  
35 the body of a target text. The repetitions of gender and translation, which produce imitations  
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57 <sup>20</sup> Spurlin (2010); Epstein (2017); also von Flotow (2012).

58 <sup>21</sup> Epstein (2017: 121).

59 <sup>22</sup> Epstein and Gillett (2017); Baer and Kaindl (2018).

60 <sup>23</sup> Butler (1999: xv).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.



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3 or queer copies that disrupt and even belie the notion of an ‘originary’ gender or text,  
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5 implicitly reveal the contingency of gender and language, and the contingency of the  
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7 discourse employed to construct and regulate categories of gender and sexuality.<sup>25</sup> Although  
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9 Butler does not consider the act of translation in *Gender Trouble*, her book serves as a queer  
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11 translation manifesto. Her focus on the repetitive and discursive construction of gender  
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13 invites the queer translator ‘to open up the field of possibility’ for language as well as gender,  
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15 to ‘trouble’ the language that maintains binary categories of gender and heteronormativity,  
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17 and to trouble those categories themselves.<sup>26</sup> I turn now to consider the utility of such a queer  
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19 translation practice in the context of ‘troublesome’ subjects in ancient texts.<sup>27</sup>  
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24 As Hubbard reminds us, ‘the whole question of modern categories [of sexualities] and  
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26 their relevance to the ancient world is... deeply fraught and contentious’.<sup>28</sup> Discussing Greco-  
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28 Roman representations of female homoeroticism, Boehringer similarly notes that ‘insofar as  
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30 we know that the heuristic categories with which we approach the ancient world are destined  
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32 to dissolve as the ancient categories appear, we must expect to arrive in regions where we did  
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34 not expect to go’.<sup>29</sup> My reading of Ovid’s Iphis through Smith in this essay follows scholars  
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36 from Halperin and Winkler who argue that ancient and modern categories of gendered and  
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38 sexual identities cannot be assumed to be identical, nor named as equivalents—a problem that  
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40 surfaces in the act of translation.<sup>30</sup> As Lewis has shown in her discussion of translating the  
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42 gender(s) of Attis in Catullus 63, not only do scholars’ gender ideologies shape their textual,  
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44 editorial, and translation choices, but the ambivalence and subversive multiplicity contained  
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46 within ancient representations of gender and sexuality can exceed both dictionary definitions  
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56 <sup>25</sup> Butler (2003: 378).

57 <sup>26</sup> Butler (1999: viii).

58 <sup>27</sup> Doan and Waters (2000: 20).

59 <sup>28</sup> Hubbard (2014: ix).

60 <sup>29</sup> Boehringer (2014: 164).

<sup>30</sup> Halperin (1990); Winkler (1990).

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3 and contemporary epicene pronouns.<sup>31</sup> A conventional translation practice within dominant  
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5 binary linguistic and cultural structures dictates that one word—or, one of two genders—  
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7 must be chosen over another. A queer translation practice is mindful of what an appeal to  
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9 equivalence or ‘transparency’ may obscure, that is, how a particular choice of vocabulary  
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11 may restrict the visibility of ancient queer identities.<sup>32</sup> Retaining ambiguity and multiplicity  
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13 in translation suggests one solution to the problem of naming ancient queer identities. While  
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15 it may be argued that Latin and Greek, as grammatically gendered languages, leave no room  
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17 for ambiguity, ancient texts written predominantly by elite males describing non-normative  
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19 gendered or sexed bodies and sexualities are already engaged in acts of cis-washing and  
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21 straight-washing, forcing unruly bodies and desires into binary moulds.<sup>33</sup> A queer translation  
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23 of an ancient text is a recuperative act, leaving meaning open, and using repetition to provide  
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25 multiple translations on the page and make visible in translation the multiple possibilities of  
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27 queer identities.  
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33 The translation of binary gendered terms in ancient texts is further complicated by  
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35 ancient constructions of sexuality. In *Metamorphoses*, Iphis is born a girl but disguised and  
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37 raised as a boy to save her from death. With her unisex name and androgynous appearance,  
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39 Iphis passes as a boy. She falls in love with Ianthe, who, while equally smitten, believes Iphis  
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41 is a boy (*quamque uirum putat esse, uirum fore credit Ianthe, Met. 9.723*); they are engaged  
42  
43 to be married.<sup>34</sup> On the eve of her wedding, Iphis curses her love for another girl and laments  
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45 that she will never be able to enjoy Ianthe as she wishes. Her mother prays to the goddess Isis  
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47 for help; Iphis is transformed into a *puer* and marries Ianthe. Despite Iphis’ successful  
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49 performance of masculinity (to her father, to Ianthe), Ovid emphasizes throughout the  
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57 <sup>31</sup> Lewis (2014).

58 <sup>32</sup> Butler (1999: xx).

59 <sup>33</sup> Tweet, @CherylMorgan, 11 February 2019. Thank you to everyone who participated in the Twitter discussion  
60 on ancient queer folk lost in translation: Tweet, @themaavedesert, 11 February 2019.

<sup>34</sup> All Latin quotations are from Tarrant (2004); unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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3 episode ‘how much Iphis resembles a girl in spite of the circumstances and in spite of her  
4 own rearing’.<sup>35</sup> He uses female nouns and pronouns to refer to Iphis, as Iphis also uses  
5 feminine forms self-reflexively and when speaking of her desire for another woman.<sup>36</sup> After  
6 the final appearance of Isis at the episode’s denouement, Ovid refers to Iphis three times in  
7 six lines as *puer*.<sup>37</sup> This has historically been read as signalling Iphis’ physical transformation  
8 from girl to boy, but I wish to suggest that Iphis’ transformation is only grammatical.  
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11 The key to this reading is twofold: the presence of the goddess Isis; and the  
12 grammatical representation of Roman constructions of gender and sexuality. Ovid’s source  
13 for Iphis is Nicander’s tale of Leucippus.<sup>38</sup> In Nicander, the goddess Leto provides Leucippus  
14 with a penis, in accordance with her cultic role as one who makes male genitals grow. In  
15 *Metamorphoses*, Ovid replaces Leto with Isis. In the myth of Isis and Osiris, Osiris is  
16 murdered and dismembered by Typhon, who has Osiris’ body parts scattered across the world  
17 and his penis thrown into the River Nile. In her search for his body parts, Isis retrieves all of  
18 the pieces of her husband except for his penis, which has been eaten by fish. Isis fashions a  
19 replica phallus, and places it in a temple to be worshipped.<sup>39</sup> If the domain of Leto is the  
20 penis, the domain of Isis is the dildo. Various arguments have been proposed to explain  
21 Ovid’s alteration to Nicander’s version. Graf suggests that Ovid replaces Leto because of her  
22 irrelevance to a contemporary Roman audience and uses Isis as the new protector of women  
23 in the Roman pantheon.<sup>40</sup> Anderson explains away the replacement as due to a Roman  
24 squeamishness regarding the violent initiation ritual of Leto’s cult; and Walker suggests that  
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52 <sup>35</sup> Boehringer (2014: 159).

53 <sup>36</sup> *nata, femina* (*Met.* 9.705), *uirgo* (725), *femina* (734), *me puerum de uirgine* (743), *teque ipsa... Iphi* (745),  
54 *nata, te... ipsam* (747), *femina* (748), *mea* (760), *nubimus ambae* (763), *natae* (771), *haec* (779), *solita est* (787),  
55 *femina, quae* (790), *femina* (791), *quae femina* (794).

56 <sup>37</sup> *Met.* 9.791, 794, 797.

57 <sup>38</sup> Epitomized at Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses*, 17.1-4.

58 <sup>39</sup> Diodorus Siculus, I.22.6; that this tale was known in Ovid’s Rome is suggested by its later appearance in  
59 Plutarch’s *Moralia: de Iside et Osiride*, 358B.

60 <sup>40</sup> Graf (1988: 60-1); Boehringer (2007: 241) follows Graf; similarly, Wheeler reads the change as allowing  
Ovid to bring the cult of Isis ‘into play’ (1997: 191).

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3 ‘Isis’s motivation in endowing Iphis with a penis recalls and even supplements her inability  
4 to restore Osiris’s, for which she can only create a phallic replica or effigy’.<sup>41</sup> On the  
5  
6 contrary, to my mind, Ovid’s invocation of Isis is a joke that plays on the knowledge that Isis  
7  
8 has previous form in manufacturing replica phalli. Keeping this niche artistic skill of Isis in  
9  
10 mind, we can also re-read Iphis’ appeal to Daedalus on the eve of her wedding. The Latin  
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12 lines emphasize Iphis’ appeal to the skill and craft of Daedalus (*sollertia, doctis artibus*, 741,  
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14 743-4); and she does not ask for physical transformation (as Daphne does, *mutando*, 1.545),  
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16 but seems instead to be seeking a manufactured solution (*quid faciet... efficient*, 743-4; we  
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18 recall that Daedalus did not physically transform Pasiphae into a cow but constructed a cow-  
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20 suit in which she could appear as a cow).<sup>42</sup> Iphis concludes that Daedalus is no use; but Ovid  
21  
22 knows that Isis holds the necessary experience.<sup>43</sup>

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24  
25  
26  
27  
28 Most recent scholarly writing on the tale of Iphis concentrates on what the episode  
29  
30 reveals about Roman conceptions of gender and sexuality. Scholars who observe the fleeting  
31  
32 presence of ancient female homoeroticism (Pintabone, Boehringer, Kamen), or who explore  
33  
34 the performativity of gender (Raval) all accept the physical metamorphosis of Iphis at  
35  
36 episode’s conclusion.<sup>44</sup> In the Roman model of sexuality, however, in which the active  
37  
38 penetrator is gendered masculine, and the passive penetrated is gendered feminine (following  
39  
40 Walker, drawing on the models of Halperin and Parker):

41  
42 [i]f lesbian desire finds visibility and intelligibility only in terms of gender  
43  
44 roles, then at least one of them must imitate either a male bodily form or a  
45  
46 masculine erotic activity... the practical question of who penetrates whom—or  
47  
48  
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56  
57 <sup>41</sup> Anderson (1972: 465); Walker (2006: 219 n. 19).

58 <sup>42</sup> Although Iphis does wonder whether Daedalus can change Ianthe, *num te mutabit, Ianthe?*, *Met.* 9.744.

59 <sup>43</sup> As Anderson (1972: 470) notes on *Met.* 9.731, an urbane Roman audience would have been amused by Iphis’  
60 ‘pseudo-problem’.

<sup>44</sup> Pintabone (2002); Boehringer (2007: 232-60); Kamen (2012); Raval (2002).

1  
2  
3 who can penetrate whom—organizes and tends to organicize gender as well as  
4  
5 the erotic roles performed.<sup>45</sup>  
6  
7

8 In the final line of Ovid's tale, *potiturque sua puer Iphis Ianthe* ('the boy Iphis gained his  
9 Ianthe here', 797, tr. Innes), Iphis is the active, penetrative *puer* in the grammar of Roman  
10 sex and is gendered masculine—but she may not necessarily have a penis. For at the moment  
11 of the apparent physical metamorphosis from girl to boy, 'Ovid delicately slides over the  
12 chief change by which Iphis becomes a man ready for marriage. Nicander was only interested  
13 in the miraculous new genitals'.<sup>46</sup> Ovid provides little specific information about the physical  
14 change or the secondary sexual characteristics we might expect, excepting the predominantly  
15 socially-constructed rather than biological markers of Roman gender: a longer stride, darker  
16 complexion and sharper features, and shorter hair (*maiore gradu; nec candor in ore |*  
17 *premanet et uires augentur et acrior ipse est | uultus et incomptis breuior mensura capillis, |*  
18 *plusque uigoris*, 787-9).<sup>47</sup> Accepting the proposition that Isis has provided a replica phallus,  
19 and that Iphis is now in possession of the *uis* that has previously been lacking but is not  
20 physically male, may explain why the extended narrative of metamorphosis anticipated by  
21 the reader of *Metamorphoses* is comically brief and vague.<sup>48</sup> Ovid appears to playing here  
22 with both grammatical and social gender, bodily sex, sexual practices, and playing with how  
23 'who can penetrate whom—organizes and tends to *organicize* gender' [my emphasis].  
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45 That Ali Smith may also have read Isis' gift to Iphis as a model phallus is suggested  
46 by allusive details in *Girl meets boy*. One character's witty summation of Ovid's episode as  
47 'a fishy tale' alludes to the fate of Osiris' penis; Isis herself attends the fantasy wedding of  
48 Robin (Iphis) and Anthea (Ianthe) at the conclusion of the novel and is seen 'making fine new  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53

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55  
56 <sup>45</sup> Walker (2006: 212); Halperin (1996); Parker (1997).

57 <sup>46</sup> Anderson (1972: 483).

58 <sup>47</sup> Boehringer (2014: 159).

59 <sup>48</sup> That Iphis' phallus is a manufactured one may be supported by Martial's borrowing of Ovid's coinage  
60 *prodigiosa* to describe Bassa (1.90.7-8), who penetrates both men and women (although Martial makes no explicit mention of a dildo); on *prodigiosa* see Hallett (1997: 263).

1  
2  
3 guests out of clay' (alongside Daedalus 'the clever artist'); and when Robin tells Anthea the  
4  
5 story of Iphis, Smith shifts the focus of Mary Innes' translation from an assumption that  
6  
7 Daedalus will '*change me*' to emphasize the craft of the request: 'even *he* wouldn't know  
8  
9 what to *invent* to make this okay for Ianthe and me' [second emphasis mine].<sup>49</sup>

10  
11  
12 In Smith's version of the tale, Iphis is the androgynously named Robin (*nomine...*  
13  
14 *commune foret*, 'a name common [to girl or boy]', 709-10), a young genderqueer person of  
15  
16 colour. Smith removes the physical metamorphosis, and it is Anthea's sister Imogen, who  
17  
18 expresses uncertainty about Robin and Anthea's relationship, who undergoes a  
19  
20 metamorphosis of understanding—a 'celestial exchange'.<sup>50</sup> Ovid's final line—and the need to  
21  
22 resolve its *puer* in light of the decision to remove the physical metamorphosis from *Girl*  
23  
24 *meets boy*—may have been a particular preoccupation of Smith's when she began her project  
25  
26 to rewrite his text. This is suggested by Smith's inclusion of three different translations of  
27  
28 line 797 at three separate points in the novel, each a queered repetition of the last:  
29  
30  
31

32  
33 and the boy Iphis gained his own Ianthe

34  
35 as the girl met her boy at the altar

36  
37 Reader, I married him/ her<sup>51</sup>

38  
39  
40 The first version repeats Innes's translation. The second iteration plays with ambiguity in its  
41  
42 refusal to name who is the 'girl' and who the 'boy', while the word 'met' suggests the  
43  
44 equality of their partnership, rendering girl and boy as both active or both passive.<sup>52</sup> In the  
45  
46 third iteration, Smith explicitly signals her reading of the grammatical gendering of Ovid's  
47  
48 *puer* and her refusal in translation to select one word or gender over another. This refusal to  
49  
50 include the physical transformation of Iphis from girl to boy in her final creative translation  
51  
52 suggests an awareness on Smith's part that an argument for the 'correct' translation of Ovid's  
53  
54

55  
56  
57 \_\_\_\_\_  
58 <sup>49</sup> 'could all his magic arts change me from boy to girl?', Innes (1955: 233); Smith (2007: 156, 155; 96).

59 <sup>50</sup> Smith (2007: 144).

60 <sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 88, 100, 149.

<sup>52</sup> Innes (1955: 224).

1  
2  
3 *puer* as the English ‘boy’ may be a ‘regulatory fiction’.<sup>53</sup> A tradition of scholarship has read  
4  
5 Iphis as either girl or boy, lesbian, or trans man; but as Diane Pintabone reminds us, Iphis  
6  
7 expresses no preference to be girl or boy: *num te mutabit, Ianthe?* (‘Perhaps the gods will  
8  
9 change you, Ianthe?’ , 744).<sup>54</sup> With her genderqueer lovers, Smith refuses to foreclose the  
10  
11 possibilities of identity and desire for Iphis—and Ianthe, because Ianthe does not simply love  
12  
13 a boy, ‘Ianthe thinks that’s what a boy is, what Iphis is’.<sup>55</sup> By foregrounding the ambivalence  
14  
15 and potential multiplicity that she reads in Ovid’s text, and releasing the latent complexity of  
16  
17 bodies and desire, Smith resists a history of translation and commentary that has restricted  
18  
19 Iphis’ identity to a single category. Smith’s creative expansion challenges both the limits of  
20  
21 gender and ‘translation’.

#### 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 Boy-girl meets girl-boy

29  
30  
31  
32  
33 In form and material, Smith’s novel is indebted to the lesbian experimental literary tradition  
34  
35 of writers including Renée Vivien and Monique Wittig who have used creative translations of  
36  
37 ancient texts to voice female homoerotic desire. Many lesbian writers have looked to Sappho  
38  
39 as a mother/ lover, and these creative responses to Sappho’s poetry, ‘at once scholarly and  
40  
41 imaginative’, have been instrumental in recovering female homoeroticism obscured by  
42  
43 generations of scholars and translators.<sup>56</sup> Sappho certainly shadows Smith’s work; an  
44  
45 untranslated quotation of Sappho fr. 160 provides a dedication to *Girl meets boy* (*Táδε νῶν*  
46  
47 *ἐταίραισ | ταῖσ ἔμαισι τέρπνα κάλωσ ἀείσω*, ‘I shall now sing these songs beautifully to please  
48  
49 my friends’), and the wedding sequence that closes the novel contains allusions to fr. 47 and  
50  
51 91: ‘we epithalamioned, we raised high the roofbeams, carpenters, for there was no bride, o  
52  
53  
54  
55

56  
57  
58 <sup>53</sup> Butler (1999: 192).

59 <sup>54</sup> Robinson (2006: 165) provides a useful survey; Pintabone (2002: 275).

60 <sup>55</sup> Smith (2007: 98).

<sup>56</sup> Doan and Waters (2000: 15).

1  
2  
3 bridegroom, like her. We crowned each other with the garlands of flowers'.<sup>57</sup> Smith's  
4  
5 selection of Ovid over Sappho breaks with this tradition, but she may have found what she  
6  
7 reads as the ultimate ambivalence of Iphis' identity more useful for the representation of a  
8  
9 broader queer spectrum of identity and sexuality than is gnominically represented by Sappho.<sup>58</sup>  
10  
11 In Smith's reading, Ovid's Iphis is a 'troublesome' subject: one who resists binary categories  
12  
13 of gender or sexuality, is 'not quite gay' but nevertheless offers a critique of compulsory  
14  
15 heterosexuality (Adrienne Rich's term for the social and cultural forces that compel women  
16  
17 to live heterosexual lives), and one of those whose place on the 'queer family tree ought to be  
18  
19 equally prominent alongside [John Addington] Symonds, Oscar Wilde and Sappho, but  
20  
21 whose narratives the lesbian and gay past has so far signally failed to accommodate'.<sup>59</sup> Smith  
22  
23 employs the multivalence of queer not only as a translation strategy, but as a political strategy  
24  
25 to democratize the queer family tree. The novel actively resists and disrupts binary and  
26  
27 monolithic conceptions of identity and sexuality. The four chapter titles are non-gender-  
28  
29 specific pronouns ('I', 'you', 'us, and 'them'), and the two protagonists shift and exchange  
30  
31 genders and desiring subject positions as Ovidian metamorphosis is employed as a metaphor  
32  
33 for the queer destabilizing of fixed categories of gender and sexuality (Robin/Iphis comments  
34  
35 that Ovid is 'very fluid... he honours all sorts of love, he honours all sorts of story').<sup>60</sup> Smith  
36  
37 plays with indeterminately gendered pronouns throughout the novel—catching the  
38  
39 polyvalence of the third person singular verb endings in Latin—and subverts the dominant  
40  
41 cultural and metaphorical genders of English verbs and adjectives in an accumulation of  
42  
43 incongruous descriptions: 'She had the swagger of a girl'; 'She was as... rough as a boy';  
44  
45 'She was as pretty and delicate and dainty as a boy'; 'She was so boyish it was girlish, so  
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56 <sup>57</sup> Smith (2007: n.p.; 149).

57 <sup>58</sup> Hallett (1996) surveys the history of reading Sappho's sexualit-y/ies.

58 <sup>59</sup> Rich (1986); Doan and Waters (2000: 20). Boehringer may have Rich's formulation in mind when she argues that the foremost metamorphosis in Iphis' tale is not the sex change from female to male, but the change from homoerotic to heteroerotic love (2007: 255).

59 <sup>60</sup> Smith (2007: 97).



1  
2  
3 girlish it was boyish'.<sup>61</sup> In a knowing echo of Butler, Smith illustrates how tenuous the binary  
4  
5 gender categories that maintain compulsory heterosexuality are if they can be so easily  
6  
7 disrupted in language.  
8  
9

10 Smith makes three significant alterations of characterization, narration, and plot  
11  
12 resolution to Ovid's tale. First, Smith combats the masculinizing, Hellenizing, anachronizing,  
13  
14 and melancholic presentation of female homoeroticism that many scholars have detected in  
15  
16 Ovid's episode, by characterizing her Iphis and Ianthe as fluid in their expressions of gender  
17  
18 and sexuality, Scottish, contemporary, and happy.<sup>62</sup> This shift in characterization is  
19  
20 epitomized by her transformation of a metaphor central to Iphis' soliloquy in the Latin, a cry  
21  
22 to the gods expressing sexual frustration: *mediis sitiemus in undis* ('in the midst of waves I  
23  
24 shall thirst', 761). Smith remains in the same element, but reverses the premise of Ovid's  
25  
26 metaphor to cast a simile which creates an image of sexual awakening as an abundance of  
27  
28 water. On seeing Robin for the first time, Anthea is overwhelmed by a deluge: 'It was as if a  
29  
30 storm at sea happened... like the hull of a ship hitting rock, giving way, and the ship that I  
31  
32 was opened wide inside me and in came the ocean'.<sup>63</sup> Smith's technique disarms Iphis' lonely  
33  
34 complaint; and this reclaimed metaphor is multiplied and queered throughout the pages of the  
35  
36 novel, suffusing the narrative with watery imagery of sexual liberation that dissolve the  
37  
38 boundaries between lovers and genders.  
39  
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44 Second, Smith refocalizes the narration of the episodes through Ianthe, transferring  
45  
46 Ovid's male authorial gaze to the desiring female gaze of Anthea who watches Robin/Iphis.  
47  
48 In the Latin text, Ianthe is silent; and although Ovid notes twice that she eagerly anticipated  
49  
50 the day of the wedding, he also notes that she believes Iphis is a boy.<sup>64</sup> In Smith's reading,  
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53

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56 <sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 84; 'dominant cultural and metaphorical genders' as exemplified by the definitions and sample usages  
57 provided s.v. 'swagger', 'rough', 'pretty', 'delicate', and 'dainty' in the *Third Edition of the Oxford English*  
58 *Dictionary*, available at [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) [accessed 28 December 2018].

59 <sup>62</sup> Kamen (2012) provides a useful survey.

60 <sup>63</sup> Smith (2007: 44).

<sup>64</sup> *Met.* 9.722-3, 764-5.

1  
2  
3 spoken by Anthea: '[m]aybe... Ianthe *wants* a girl... Clearly Iphis is exactly the kind of boy-  
4 girl or girl-boy she loves'.<sup>65</sup> By radically inverting the perspective through which her readers  
5 engage with Iphis' story, from omniscient narrator to silent Ianthe, Smith restores Ianthe's  
6 narrative agency and enables a female homoerotic subjectivity absent from the texts of  
7 antiquity to emerge: the woman who desires the masculinized, active *tribas*.<sup>66</sup> Yet this desire  
8 is not definitively categorized and Smith refuses to restrict hermeneutic possibilities ('boy-  
9 girl or girl-boy'). This moment in the novel metatextually dramatizes the resisting reading  
10 practice that Smith is engaged in, and evidences her textual efforts to ensure that the ancient  
11 identities she translates remain open and queerly multivalent. This 'boy-girl or girl-boy' may  
12 seem an egregious misquotation, but Smith is always explicit about 'changing the words to  
13 things', metatextually foregrounding her presence in the text. In response to Anthea's reading  
14 of Ianthe, above, Robin replies, 'Well, yes. I agree... That's debatable. But it's not in the  
15 original story'.<sup>67</sup>

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33 Third, Smith omits from her denouement the physical metamorphosis of Iphis that  
34 concludes Ovid's tale. In *Metamorphoses*, the sexual transformation and wedding resolve the  
35 'problem' that Iphis-as-girl will never be able to penetrate her bride (and so fulfil her duty as  
36 an Augustan husband and produce the next generation of Roman citizens: while Iphis's story  
37 is ostensibly set in Crete, I follow the majority of scholars who read the tale of Iphis as a  
38 'Roman creation' and a story about Roman gender and sexuality).<sup>68</sup> Smith resolves the  
39 impasse by arguing not for 'reproductive futurism', but for a culturally productive futurism.<sup>69</sup>  
40 Her Iphis and Ianthe are artists, queer feminist activists who tag themselves 'the message  
41 girls' and 'the message boys' beneath graffitied slogans that highlight global sex- and gender-  
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57 <sup>65</sup> Smith (2007: 95).

58 <sup>66</sup> On *tribades*, see Boehringer (2014).

59 <sup>67</sup> Smith (2007: 19, 95).

60 <sup>68</sup> Kamen (2012: 26 n. 41).

<sup>69</sup> Edelman (2004).

1  
2  
3 based inequalities and reference their Ovidian analogues. In the Latin tale, for example, Iphis'  
4 father Lygdamus is a poor man whose plan to kill a female child (*necetur*, 679) is motivated by  
5 economic factors and structural sexism. Iphis is spared death because of her mother's deceit,  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10 but the first piece of graffiti encountered in *Girl meets boy* references the girls who do not  
11  
12  
13 escape this fate:

14  
15 ACROSS THE WORLD, TWO MILLION GIRLS, KILLED BEFORE  
16  
17 BIRTH OR AT BIRTH BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T BOYS. THAT'S ON  
18  
19 RECORD. ADD TO THAT THE OFF-RECORD ESTIMATE OF FIFTY-  
20  
21 EIGHT MILLION MORE GIRLS, KILLED BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T  
22  
23 BOYS. THAT'S SIXTY MILLION GIRLS.  
24  
25 THIS MUST CHANGE.<sup>70</sup>

26  
27  
28 Smith overtly politicizes Ovidian metamorphosis ('THIS MUST CHANGE'), transforming it  
29  
30 in her novel from a passive process into an active possession of political agency. That this is a  
31  
32 particularly queer political agency is evidenced in Smith's replacement of Iphis' physical  
33  
34 transformation with a metamorphic love-making scene.  
35  
36

37  
38 In Ovid, the transformation from girl to boy is swift and comprises five lines. Retold  
39  
40 in *Girl meets boy*, Robin describes Iphis's physical metamorphosis as a historical necessity:

41  
42 By the time [Iphis ha]d got home, [she] had become exactly the boy that she  
43  
44 and her girl needed her to be... And [the boy that] the particular historic era  
45  
46 with its own views on what was excitingly perverse in a love story needed.  
47  
48 And [the boy who] the writer of the *Metamorphoses* [*sic*] needed, who really,  
49  
50 really needed a happy love story at the end of Book 9 to carry him through the  
51  
52 several much more scurrilous stories about people who fall, unhappily and with  
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<sup>70</sup> Smith (2007: 133).

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3 terrible consequences, in love with their fathers, their brothers, various  
4  
5 unsuitable animals, and the dead ghosts of their lovers ...<sup>71</sup>  
6  
7

8 Smith suggests that only literary conventions and Roman *mores* forced the poet's hand to  
9  
10 transform Iphis from girl to boy.<sup>72</sup> In her novel, Smith renders the (Roman, penetrative)  
11  
12 metamorphosis unnecessary by figuring Robin and Anthea's love-making outside the  
13  
14 'reproductive matrix' and beyond heterosexual language: 'Doesn't feel or look like  
15  
16 anything's missing to me'.<sup>73</sup> Smith rejects the homophobic demand for 'proof' and sidesteps  
17  
18 the trope of 'impossibility' in the Roman original, as the transformation of the two lovers is  
19  
20 an extended and celebratory transcendence of gender, sexuality, and even species through  
21  
22 physical love. At the same time as she discards Iphis' metamorphosis, she creates a distinctly  
23  
24 'Ovidian' scene as her shapeshifting lovers cycle through the tales of Midas, Thetis,  
25  
26 Arethusa, Actaeon, and Icarus:  
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30  
31 'Was I gold? ... Was I briny, were my whole insides a piece of sea, was I  
32  
33 nothing but salty water with a mind of its own, was I some kind of fountain,  
34  
35 was I the force of water through stone?... I was a tree whose branches were all  
36  
37 budded knots, and what were those felty buds, were they — antlers? ... [We]  
38  
39 were the feather that mastered gravity were high above every landscape then  
40  
41 down deep...I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and  
42  
43 a boy, we were blades, were a knife that could cut through myth, were two  
44  
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50  
51 <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

52 <sup>72</sup> It is not only in the lovemaking scene that other characters from *Metamorphoses* appear. In addition to the  
53 plot summary of *Metamorphoses* 9 and 10, the reader catches glimpses of Narcissus ('I saw myself in a mirror,  
54 except it wasn't a mirror, and it wasn't me', *ibid.*, p. 14), Salmacis and Hermaphroditus or Pyramus and Thisbe  
55 ('I stared at my grandparents in their photo, with their arms around each other and their heads together, and I  
56 wished that my own bones were unbound, I wished they were mingling... with the bones of another body, p.  
57 24), Clytie (Imogen is starving herself to death, while Anthea is the flower with her face turned towards the sun,  
58 p. 81), Io, Arethusa, Daphne, Niobe, and Arachne ('*Metamorphoses [sic]* is full of the gods being mean to  
59 people, raping people then turning them into cows or streams so they won't tell, hunting them till they change  
60 into plants or rivers, punishing them for their pride or their arrogance or their skill by changing them into  
mountains or insects', p. 100).

<sup>73</sup> Butler (1999: 171-72); Smith (2007: 97).

knives thrown by a magician, were arrows fired by a god, we hit heart, we hit  
 home, we were the tail of a fish were the reek of a cat were the beak of a bird  
 were the feather that mastered gravity<sup>74</sup>

Smith's lovers are subject or object, boy or girl, Ovidian gods and animals, and exceed even a contemporary definition of sexual identity as affirmed by sexual object choice. This twenty-first-century Iphis and Ianthe circumvent categorization and make visible in language the mobility of identity and sexual desire. Smith reuses and reshapes these untold Ovidian metamorphoses to represent queer identities and sexualities, intertwining sex and language to the point at which the line between sexual and textual practice blurs.

#### Scenes of translation

*Girl meets boy* translates, re-translates, and re-writes Ovid's text in a series of queer repetitions. The tale of Iphis informs the narrative structure of the novel, is re-told multiple times within the narrative itself, and appears explicitly as two consecutive, alternative translations embedded within the narrative. The first is a paraphrased translation of *Met.* 9.669-797; the second translation comprises a dialogue over fourteen pages between the two contemporary lovers.<sup>75</sup> Robin and Anthea's polyphonic translation deconstructs discourses of gender and translation by interrupting the act of translation with challenges and questions of interpretation ('She couldn't imagine how she was going to do it... || How do you mean?'; 'Why won't she be able to drink it?'), and dramatizing within the narrative a fictionalized repetition of the translation performed by Smith and enacted at the level of the book.<sup>76</sup> In addition to literalizing the metamorphic iterations of queer repetitions, these repeated essays

<sup>74</sup> Smith (2007: 102-3).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-8; 88-101.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-6.

1  
2  
3 at translation may also nod to Dryden's tripartite theory of translation, set out in the preface  
4 to his edited collection, *Ovid's Epistles* (1680). Dryden suggested that while the method of  
5 'metaphrase' ('word by word') sacrificed the fluidity of the original text, 'imitation' took  
6 such 'liberty' that both 'words and sense' were 'forsake[n]'. The method of 'paraphrase'  
7 ('Translation with Latitude, where the Authour is kept in view by the Translator, so as never  
8 to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense, and that too is admitted to be  
9 amplified but not alter'd') is proposed as the ideal method between two extremes. Smith's  
10 telling and re-telling of the tale of Iphis may be read as a playful experiment in Drydenian  
11 'paraphrase', before abandoning this mode for a defiantly queered 'imitation'. From Dryden  
12 to Smith, Ovid's multivalent poetry is a site to test new modes of translation.

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26 The initial paraphrased translation is Smith's own, excepting two lines which closely  
27 follow or repeat Mary Innes' translation: 'Love touched their innocent hearts simultaneously  
28 and wounded them both' (cf. Innes, 'love had touched their innocent hearts, and wounded  
29 both alike', *hinc amor ambarum tetegit rude pectus et aequum | uulnus utrique dedit*, 720-1),  
30 and 'the boy Iphis gained his own Ianthe' (in an epilogue to the novel Smith quotes Innes'  
31 translation again, uncited: 'Carry your gifts to the temples, happy pair, and rejoice, confident  
32 and unafraid!').<sup>77</sup> Smith's paraphrase can momentarily touch the Latin vocabulary (as in her  
33 description of the 'trembling' temple doors, *tremuere*, 783), but she mostly modernizes or  
34 compresses Ovid's circumlocutions. Isis' words to Telethusa, for example, are rendered as  
35 'You've been true to me so I'll be true to you... Bring the child up regardless of what it is  
36 and I promise you everything will be fine', summarizing *pars o Telethusa mearum... | nec  
37 dubita, cum te partu Lucina leuarit, | tollere quidquid erit. dea sum auxiliaris opemque |  
38 exorata fero, nec te coluisse quereris | ingratum numen*, 'O Telethusa, one of my own, have  
39 no fear—after Lucina has eased the birth, raise the child whatever it turns out to be. I am the

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 88, 163, cf. Innes (1955: 222, 224).

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2  
3 goddess who brings help when asked, and you will never complain that the goddess you  
4 worshipped is an ungrateful deity', 696-701). Although Smith compresses the tale in this first  
5 paraphrased translation, the reader finds the missing lines and details embedded in images  
6 throughout the novel. The temple dedication that closes the Latin episode (*dona puer soluit*  
7 *quae femina uouerat iphis*, 794), is echoed in the recurring ekphrastic descriptions of graffiti  
8 slogans, war memorials, and epitaphs throughout the novel ('ROBERT AND HELEN GUNN  
9 BELOVED PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS LOST AT SEA 2003'); the reader meets  
10 another bride dressed as a groom in Anthea's first description of Robin, in which she  
11 mistakes her for 'a lad, dressed for a wedding'; Iphis' lament, *uellem nulla forem* ('would  
12 that I had never been born', 735), reappears as Anthea's disillusioned 'I was tired of having  
13 to be anything at all'; and Iphis' comparison of her love to Pasiphae ('at least it was a male  
14 she loved') reappears in the homophobic Dominic's comparison of lesbians to gay men ('at  
15 least it's real sex they have, eh?').<sup>78</sup>

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There is one minor error in the first paraphrase—the pregnant Telethusa visits the temple of Isis, rather than having a vision of Io/ Isis in her home—but there is one striking elision. After relating Iphis' concern that she will 'never really enjoy her bride the way she longed to' (*Iphis amat, qua posse frui desperat*, 724), Smith compresses Iphis' thirty-eight-line soliloquy on the eve of her wedding (726-63)—notable within *Metamorphoses* not only as one of the longest passages of direct speech, but also for its delivery by a woman—to a single sentence of indirect speech: 'She complained bitterly to the gods and goddesses about it'.<sup>79</sup> Smith stages an active intervention to remove from her translation an unproblematized presentation of the Latin's surface homophobic discourse and its tropes of monstrosity and impossibility. Instead of repeating the soliloquy verbatim, using the same cut and paste

<sup>78</sup> Smith (2007: 114-15, 22; 42; 23; 70).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-8.

1  
2  
3 technique which re-used the lines omitted from the compressed paraphrase for moments  
4  
5 elsewhere in the text, Smith borrows tropes from the speech and transforms them into the  
6  
7 novel's thematic concerns. Iphis' self-perception of monstrosity (*prodigiosa*), for example, is  
8  
9 transformed into a recurring joke about the local Loch Ness Monster (like Crete, Inverness is  
10  
11 famous for its monsters) and the anti-feminist rhetoric of Scottish Reformer John Knox's  
12  
13 'monstrous regiment of women'; and her perception of her love for another woman as  
14  
15 'unnatural' is rendered moot by the global capitalist corporation Pure, who seek to  
16  
17 commoditize the Highlands' natural resources for unethical profit. Smith's creative rewriting  
18  
19 allows her to recontextualize the speech and problematize its representation of female  
20  
21 homoeroticism as unnatural, 'impossible', and melancholic.<sup>80</sup>

22  
23  
24  
25  
26 Immediately following the two-page-length paraphrase, the second 'translation'  
27  
28 stretches over fourteen pages. While Robin's words colloquially 'translate' the Latin almost  
29  
30 line-for-line in the second iteration ('So there was this woman who was pregnant, and her  
31  
32 husband came to her'), Ovid's direct narrative is transformed into a dialogue, and translation  
33  
34 blurs with autobiography as the tale prompts Robin and Anthea to swap stories of childhood  
35  
36 holidays on Crete and first loves.<sup>81</sup> In this iteration, Iphis' soliloquy occurs over three pages  
37  
38 in this dialogic form, enabling the surface homophobic discourse of the Latin to be  
39  
40 contextualized and contested.<sup>82</sup> Robin's 'translation' of Iphis' soliloquy is interrupted,  
41  
42 repeated, and delayed by questions and critical analysis of the story:

43  
44  
45  
46  
47 Robin shrugged.

48  
49 It's just what she thinks at this point in the story, she said. She's young. She's  
50  
51 scared. She doesn't know yet it'll be okay. She was only about twelve. That was  
52  
53 the marriageable age then, twelve. I was terrified, too, when I was twelve and  
54  
55  
56  
57

58  
59 <sup>80</sup> On the trope of impossibility, see Ormand (2005).

<sup>81</sup> Smith (2001: 90).

<sup>82</sup> On Smith's use of dialogue in her novels as a democratizing narrative strategy, see E. Smith (2010).



1  
2  
3 wanted to marry another girl... It's easy to think it's a mistake, or you're a  
4  
5 mistake. It's easy, when everything and everyone you know tells you you're the  
6  
7 wrong shape, to believe you're the wrong shape.<sup>83</sup>  
8  
9

10 By removing the self-hating speech of Iphis from her first translation, and recontextualizing  
11  
12 the speech in her second translation, Smith circumvents a literal translation that would  
13  
14 provide only the surface discourse of sexuality presented in Iphis' soliloquy—that female  
15  
16 homoeroticism is miserable, masculine, unnatural, and, without a penis, surely impossible—  
17  
18 and so prevents' Iphis' speech from being read literally by a contemporary audience.<sup>84</sup>  
19  
20  
21 Smith's radical queer rewriting of the soliloquy allows her to present simultaneously  
22  
23 translation and commentary, embedding within the dialogue a gesture towards the context of  
24  
25 Ovid's witty play with the politics of sexuality and gender, and drawing out an immanent  
26  
27 political resistance in the Latin text.<sup>85</sup>  
28  
29

30  
31 Smith plays with the trope of translation throughout the novel, and the central dialogic  
32  
33 'translation sequence' becomes a self-reflexive metatextual moment as the reader glimpses  
34  
35 Smith the translator at work. When Robin translates Isis' message to the pregnant Telethusa  
36  
37 as 'give birth as per usual, and bring the child up', Anthea repeats incredulously, 'As per  
38  
39 usual?... A goddess used the phrase *as per usual*?' (to which Robin replies: 'The gods can be  
40  
41 down-to-earth when they want').<sup>86</sup> In the first paraphrase, Smith translated lines 698-699  
42  
43 (*cum te partu Lucina leuarit, | tollere quidquid erit*) as 'Bring the child up regardless of what  
44  
45 it is...', providing a sense of only the second half of the sentence; in the second dialogic  
46  
47 translation, Smith includes both halves, but extends the colloquial, unspecific nature of the  
48  
49 pronoun *quisquis* to rescue the term as representative of the positive indefinability of queer  
50  
51 identity. Smith's play with translation here as literal, literary, or colloquial, and her  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56

57  
58 <sup>83</sup> Smith (2007: 96-7); cf. *et iam mea fiet Ianthe— | nec mihi continget; mediis sitiemus in undis, Met. 9.760-1.*

59 <sup>84</sup> Indeed, Lilja (1983: 79-81) and Makowski (1996) read the episode as a condemnation of homosexuality.

60 <sup>85</sup> Hallett (1973).

<sup>86</sup> Smith (2007: 92-3).

1  
2  
3 experimentation with word-choice and attendant justifications illustrates the translator's  
4  
5 process; but it also illustrates the multiplicity of a queer translation, in which multiple  
6  
7 translations are provided and none are posited as definitive. Smith actively resists the notion  
8  
9 that any of her versions are a final version, and she invites her reader to question her  
10  
11 translation alongside Anthea.  
12  
13

14  
15 In addition to the double repetition of Iphis' soliloquy in chapter three (compressed  
16  
17 paraphrase, dialogue), details from the Latin speech appear in two further altered forms in  
18  
19 chapter two: as the internal monologue of Ianthe's sister Imogen, comprising fourteen pages  
20  
21 of a fragmented stream of consciousness; and as a homophobic commentary on Anthea and  
22  
23 Robin's imagined sexual relationship between two of Imogen's oafish male colleagues  
24  
25 ('there's no way they could do it, I mean, without one. So it's like, pointless').<sup>87</sup> As Imogen  
26  
27 struggles to reconcile her sister's new relationship with a genderqueer 'boy-girl or girl-boy'  
28  
29 with Anthea's past relationships with men, her repeated attempts to place her sister into a  
30  
31 definitive category and 'explain' her sexuality ('is that the right way to say it, a gay? Is there  
32  
33 a correct word for it?') play with Ovid's trope of novelty and unnameability (*prodigiosa*,  
34  
35 727). Imogen's belief that 'Gay people are always dying all the time' references Iphis'  
36  
37 statement that she would rather be struck by a *naturale malum* (730), here, cancer, and her  
38  
39 wish that she had never been born, *uellem nulla forem* (735):<sup>88</sup>  
40  
41  
42  
43

44 (... [Robin] had a boy's name instead of a girl's name...)

45 (Dear God. It is worse than the word cancer.)

46 (My little sister is going to have a terrible sad life.)

47 (Gay people are always dying all the time.)  
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59 <sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

60 <sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

(It said in the paper this morning that teenagers who are it are six times more likely to commit suicide than teenagers who aren't it.)<sup>89</sup>

In a complementary move to that enacted by the recontextualized dialogue in the central translation scene, Smith re-uses elements of the soliloquy to rewrite contemporary myths about homosexuality and queer identities, foregrounding legal and medical issues that have been faced by queer communities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Imogen's monologue comments explicitly, for example, on Section 28, the UK law effective until repealed in 2003 that outlawed the 'promotion' of homosexuality:

(My sister is now one of the reasons the man who owns Stagecoach buses had that million-pound poster campaign all over Scotland where they had pictures of people saying things like 'I'm not a bigot but I don't want my children taught to be gay at school', that sort of thing.)

[...]

(My sister would be banned in schools if she was a book.)

(No, because the parliament lifted that legislation, didn't it?)

(Did it?)

(I can't remember... I didn't ever think that particular law was anything I'd ever have to remember, or consider.)

(Have I ever noticed or considered anything about it? Should I have?)<sup>90</sup>

In her four-part repetition and variation of Iphis' soliloquy, Smith challenges and dismantles the homophobic discourse embedded within it (the homophobic 'jokes' of Imogen's colleagues are mediated through Imogen's reactions, 'My whole body goes cold', and by her attempts to interrupt the conversation). Chapter two's versions explicitly politicize Ovid,

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-62.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-1. Implemented in UK law in 1988, Section 28 was repealed in Scotland in 2000, and in England and Wales in 2003.

1  
2  
3 harnessing his text to pose politically pertinent questions about embedded complacency in  
4 contemporary UK society.  
5  
6

7  
8 Imogen's uncertainty about naming 'it' is revisited when she arrives home to find Robin  
9 reading a book in her living room. Although Imogen is too drunk to decipher the cover, in a  
10 nod to Shakespeare's Imogen, who reads Ovid before bed, the reader suspects it is  
11  
12  
13

14  
15 *Metamorphoses*:

16  
17 A lass and a lack, I say.

18  
19 [...]

20  
21 Tell me what it is, I say. ... I mean, what's the correct word for it, I mean, for you? I  
22 need to know it, I need to know the proper word.  
23  
24

25  
26 [...]

27  
28 The proper word for me, Robin Goodman says, is me.<sup>91</sup>  
29

30  
31 Robin resolves Imogen's dilemma about naming in a simple refusal of categories. Imogen's  
32 Smithian pun, which summarizes the Ovidian Iphis' romantic dilemma ('a lass and a lack'),  
33 nods to the trope of impossibility that permeates Ovid's text and to the euphemistic wordplay  
34 of the Latin, which infers that Iphis' main concern is that she has the wrong genitals (*uires*,  
35 677; *uulnus*, 721). Robin comments on this moment that Ovid 'can't help being the Roman  
36 he is, he can't help fixating on what it is that girls don't have under their togas, and it's him  
37 who can't imagine what girls would ever do without one'.<sup>92</sup> Smith's pun is an Ovidian  
38 evasion that plays on the avoidance of naming the phallus in the Ovidian original itself, using  
39 humour to dismantle the violence of the surface Roman discourse and to stage or, perhaps,  
40 fill in the lack in the Latin original. In these scenes of translation, Smith fragments and re-  
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60 <sup>91</sup> *Cymbeline*, II, ii; Smith (2007: 76-7); Ovid is not named until p. 97.

<sup>92</sup> Smith (2007: 97).

1  
2  
3 uses Iphis' self-hating soliloquy in the Latin to ensure that its latent homophobic tropes are  
4  
5 never presented unproblematicized, but are diffused and de-fused.  
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8  
9

10 The wedding sequence(s)  
11  
12  
13

14 The novel's final acts of queer repetition re-stage the wedding which concludes  
15  
16 *Metamorphoses* 9. The first iteration is an imagined future wedding between the  
17  
18 contemporary Iphis and Ianthe and is placed immediately before the first paraphrase of  
19  
20 Ovid's tale. This anticipated wedding is dismissed by Robin/Iphis as 'impossible, both in  
21  
22 story and in life', perhaps a nod to Iphis' own resigned *hanc tibi res adimit... nec tamen est*  
23  
24 *potienda tibi, nec, ut omnia fiant | esse potes felix* ('the situation itself deprives you of  
25  
26 her...you will never have her nor be happy, even if everything comes to pass', 750-3).<sup>93</sup> In  
27  
28 addition to the second and third versions of the wedding in the paraphrased and dialogic  
29  
30 translations, the wedding is repeated twice more in the final chapter. The first instance  
31  
32 appears to be a celebration, as Robin and Anthea wed in a fantastical setting attended by  
33  
34 Greco-Roman and Egyptian gods and goddesses:  
35  
36  
37  
38

39 Reader, I married him/ her.  
40

41 It's the happy ending. Lo and behold.  
42  
43

44 I don't mean we had a civil ceremony. I don't mean we had a civil  
45  
46 partnership. I mean we did what's still impossible after all these centuries. I  
47  
48 mean we did the still-miraculous, in this day and age. I mean we got married.<sup>94</sup>  
49  
50

51 In these few lines, both Latin original and English tale appear in miniature. The close  
52  
53 sequential positioning of 'impossible' and 'miraculous' offers a two-word précis of Iphis'  
54  
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56  
57  
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59 <sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

60 <sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

1  
2  
3 story in Ovid, while Smith's queer translation practice is epitomized by her rendering of  
4  
5 Ovid's final line ('him/ her'), a line that encompasses a riff on the epilogue of *Jane Eyre* at  
6  
7 the same as enacting a final refusal to foreclose the possibilities of language or gender.  
8  
9

10 Lightly foreshadowed by the formulaic and artificial phrase, 'lo and behold', the  
11  
12 fantasy dissolves with the knowingly bathetic: 'Uh-huh. Okay, I know. | In my dreams'.<sup>95</sup> In  
13  
14 Ovid, the 'impossibility' is explicitly sexual; in *Girl meets boy*, published in the UK in 2007,  
15  
16 it is the wedding itself that is legally impossible (as of March 2019, marriage for same-sex  
17  
18 partners is still not legal in Northern Ireland).<sup>96</sup> While Smith points out the irony of the  
19  
20 'impossibility' of the contemporary Iphis' story, her narrator suggests that the wedding  
21  
22 ceremony is not as important as the promise Robin and Anthea affirm in a non-officiated  
23  
24 moment of partnership, a promise 'to go beyond our selves. | And that's the message. That's  
25  
26 it. That's all'.<sup>97</sup> This final repetition of the wedding followed by a denial is ambivalent. At the  
27  
28 same time as Smith highlights the injustice that women partners in England, Wales, and  
29  
30 Scotland could not legally marry, she also exposes the wedding ceremony as a sham,  
31  
32 highlighting its unnecessary place in her own novel, contemporary society, and in the Latin  
33  
34 original. Smith's negotiation of the contemporary debate regarding the political efficacy of  
35  
36 same-sex marriage—for women, particularly, who must consider whether this queer copy is  
37  
38 an inherently politically subversive act, or a commodification of lesbian love by the  
39  
40 heteropatriarchy—also negotiates the surface and subversive readings of Ovid's text,  
41  
42 recognizing that the wedding of the ancient text was simply what 'the particular historic era...  
43  
44 [and] the writer of the *Metamorphoses* [*sic*] needed'.<sup>98</sup> Like the knowingly ambiguous 'him/  
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54  
55 <sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

56 <sup>96</sup> Marriage equality for same-sex partners was not enacted in UK law until 13 March 2014 in England and  
57  
58 Wales, and 16 December 2014 in Scotland. Smith's fantasy wedding sequence also makes reference other  
59 'impossible' weddings, including the tradition of 'jumping the broomstick', a wedding ceremony practiced by  
60 enslaved African-Americans (2007: 149).

<sup>97</sup> Smith (2007: 159).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

1  
2  
3 her', Smith refuses to provide a definitive solution to this contemporary debate. Her wedding  
4  
5 scene is concerned with the right to be socially recognized as a pair, regardless of legal  
6  
7 recognition, and to make queer eroticism visible in the ancient world and modern Britain.  
8  
9  
10 Smith's ambivalent ending(s) and her narrator's admission that the final pages have been a  
11  
12 fantasy leaves the conclusion of the novel open for the reader to construct their own  
13  
14 interpretation of Iphis' story.  
15  
16  
17  
18

### 19 Conclusion

20  
21  
22  
23  
24 Late in the second chapter of *Girl meets boy*, readers learn that Robin once engaged in an act  
25  
26 of translation that mirrors Smith's own transformation of Iphis' thirst to a watery abundance.  
27  
28 In a flashback scene, Imogen defaces Robin's school workbook ('Denise and I write the  
29  
30 letters L, E and Z... [and an] arrow pointing at them'), and watches 'to see Robin Goodman's  
31  
32 response... I see her shoulders tense, then droop':  
33

34  
35       When I go past her at the end of the period and glance down at the book on her  
36  
37 desk I can see that she's made Denise's arrow into the trunk of a tree and she's  
38  
39 drawn hundreds of little flowerheads, all around the letters L, E and Z, like the  
40  
41 letter are the branches of the tree and they've all just come into bloom.<sup>99</sup>  
42  
43

44  
45 As Arachne's tapestry functions as a *mise en abyme* for Ovid's epic poem, Robin's notebook  
46  
47 similarly distils Smith's ethical act of queer translation performed at the macro level of the  
48  
49 novel, which has transformed Iphis' wretched cry into a 'joyful celebration of life in all its  
50  
51 strange shapes'.<sup>100</sup> Translation is necessarily a mediatory act between two texts and two  
52  
53 cultures, and I am convinced by scholars and practitioners who argue that translators are  
54  
55  
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57  
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59 <sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-3.

60 <sup>100</sup> Jeanette Winterson, quotation on back cover of Smith (2007).

1  
2  
3 obliged to mediate texts ethically. New methods and genres of translation dissolve the  
4  
5 hierarchies between source and target text, between original and translation, and refuse to  
6  
7 maintain oppressive cultural values embedded within—or in the surface discourse of—those  
8  
9 texts (misogyny, homophobia, racism, or classism). Queer theory’s troubling of the  
10  
11 categories of identity liberates new possibilities for bodies, genders, and sexualities; Smith’s  
12  
13 troubling of the boundaries of textual bodies and translation liberates new possibilities for the  
14  
15 representation of ancient genders and sexualities. Using queer theory as a translation  
16  
17 methodology is a useful tool to avoid the anachronistic categorization of ancient sexualities  
18  
19 and the linguistic suppression of queer identities that may get lost in translation. Smith’s  
20  
21 ambiguities tease out how Iphis resists any definitive categories of gender or sexuality in the  
22  
23 Ovidian original, and a queer translation/rewriting practice frees her from clearly-defined  
24  
25 modern ontological or epistemological categories. Ovid’s own opinion on Iphis and female  
26  
27 homoeroticism is impossible to discern; but while scholars take care not to read Ovid on the  
28  
29 surface only, new hybrid texts that combine translations and critical commentary are  
30  
31 necessary to convey this complexity to a non-specialist reader. Smith’s queer repetitions of  
32  
33 Ovid’s text work to disrupt the surface tropes of queer melancholia in the Latin original, and  
34  
35 it is finally the ‘discontinuity’ of myth—a refusal to present the metamorphosis—that  
36  
37 troubles a history of translations of Ovid and makes ancient queer identities ‘loosed’ in  
38  
39 translation.<sup>101</sup> Smith’s sophisticated blend of translation, fiction, and critical theory offers the  
40  
41 reader a fictionalized account of *Gender Trouble* at the same time as providing a critical  
42  
43 interpretation of the myth of Iphis. The multiple retellings, rewinds, and replays throughout  
44  
45 the novel create a translation that is an essay disguised as a work of fiction, and foregrounds  
46  
47 the process and artefacts of translation as a queer activist project.<sup>102</sup>

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59 <sup>101</sup> Butler (1999: 192). A second epigraph to the novel cites Kathy Acker on the imperative ‘to misquote’, ‘to  
escape the prison-house of the story’ (Smith 2007: n.p.).

60 <sup>102</sup> Godard (1990: 93); on scholarship as an activist project, see Richlin (1993).



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*Metamorphoses* continues to present rich source material for foundational myths of queer identities.<sup>103</sup> Smith's ambiguities leave Iphis open to multiple queer genealogies by recognizing plurality and allowing for the mobility of desire and identity. Iphis is any and all of the various readings (girl or boy, trans man or lesbian), and Smith does not select one identity to the exclusion of others. She foregrounds the translator-rewriter's choices at the same time as she signals alternative possibilities to her reader. In this way, Smith presents an Iphis who holds multiple possibilities of subjectivities, bodies, genders, and sexualities, and builds a text which anticipates a queer reading subject.

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<sup>103</sup> Zajko (2009).

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