

Is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*' portrayal of women a projection of male fantasy?

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is occasionally viewed as simply a misogynistic, sadistic fantasy due to the exceptionally high volume of sexual abuse that pervades it, as Richlin points out, fifty rapes within fifteen books.¹ While a relevant argument, this essay shall explore the portrayal of women in the *Metamorphoses* in a broader sense, not as a 'catch-all' formula for *either* misogynistic rape or proto-feminism. Instead the deceptive nature of male fantasy and how it feeds the projection of women in the *Metamorphoses* and what motivates it will be scrutinised. I shall particularly focus on the fetishistic voyeurism of the Pygmalion episode in Book 10 and the fear of female *immascultation* that saturates the entire poem which motivates such objectification.

The fantastical fiction of Pygmalion's 'ideal' woman is suggested in numerous ways, the most palpable is the tale's juxtaposition with the extreme case of the first prostitutes in humanity, the "obscene" Propoetides (*Met.*10.238). Here one glimpses the view of autonomous female sexuality in classical antiquity. Those women who enjoyed or even moved during sex were viewed as *overly-erotic*, and respectable women were thought to only engage in sex with her husband for the sake of conception.² Thus Pygmalion brands all women as lascivious by observing the Propoetides in this manner, and rejects the entire gender by living a life of celibacy.³ Ovid punishes the Propoetides as the antithesis of the ideal woman in society by inverting Pygmalion's reward and turning living 'shameless'

¹ "more than 50 tales of rape in its 15 books" (Richlin, 1992: 158).

² "Nor is need the least for wives to use the motions of blandishment...courtesans are thuswise wont to move for their own ends, to keep from pregnancy and lying in, and all the while to render Venus more, a pleasure for the men- the which meseems, our wives have never need of." (*Luc.DRN.*4.1266-77) Compare Lucretius with Ovid himself "you'd surely suppose her alive and ready to move, if *modesty* didn't preclude it" (*Met.*10.250) [*all italicisation with primary sources during this essay is my own emphasis].

³ "These women's scandalous way of life was *observed* by a sculptor, Pygmalion. Sick of the vices with which the female sex has been so richly endowed" (*Met.*10.243-45), Pygmalion's voyeuristic nature is illustrated by the very *surveillance* of the Propoetides that prompts his celibacy, it is also interesting to note the use of the present tense ("has" not "had") by Orpheus in his intradiegetic narration which proleptically predicts Orpheus' own rejection of the Cicones.

Jessica Mackenzie

women into stone.⁴ The promiscuous reality that is first seen is rejected and replaced by its escapist counterpart when Pygmalion renders his own perfect woman in ivory. Elsner and Sharrock view this as more than merely an artistic interpretation of the character's ideal woman, but that the statue holds a strange irony as "an image of an image" where even the original female inspiration for the story was artificial.⁵ The description of Pygmalion's statue was often conjectured to be based on a copy of the Venus de' Medici which in turn was a copy of Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Cnidus.⁶

Potentially this could be Ovid harkening back to the original Pygmalion myth where Pygmalion was a king who fell in love with a statue of Aphrodite and tried to copulate with it. Therefore Pygmalion's perfect woman was based either another on a piece of art or a goddess. Pygmalion even treats his statue in this combination, bringing it offerings akin to a cult idol statue and gifts as a lover, simultaneously treating the statue as both a possession and a being of higher status than himself.⁷ Segal views this as Ovid parodying the lover in Roman elegy through Pygmalion's hyperbolic actions, while Sharrock views it as the apotheosis of his own art.⁸ In either instance, a template unattainable and several times removed from the regular mortal woman is presented. This interestingly illustrates a close analogy between the unrealistic standards of men in patriarchal antiquity with that of the 21st century's propagandic publications such as *FHM* magazine and 'Page 3' girls. An industry of illusion infiltrates

⁴ "it's said they were the first to offer their bodies and beauty for sale. Then after these harlots had lost all shame, and the blood no longer ran to their cheeks but congealed as hard as their natures, it didn't take much of a change to transform them to solid granite" (*Met.*10.240-43).

⁵ Barolsky "renders an image of an image" (Barolsky, 2007: 110) echoes Ovid himself "art was concealed by art to a rare degree" (*Met.*10.252).

⁶ "in 'reality' there is no real girl, for Pygmalion has rejected all real women and is creating an image of his own imagination" (Sharrock, 1991: 175).

⁷ "He'd whisper sweet nothings or bring his idol the gifts that which give pleasure to girls" (*Met.*10.259), "He even dressed it in clothes, put rings on the fingers and necklaces round the throat, hung jewels from the ears and girdled the breasts with elegant bands" (*Met.*10.262-65), "called it his darling mistress" (*Met.*10.278).

⁸ "In a parody of the lover in Roman elegy, Pygmalion adorns it with precious jewels and places it on a feathered couch. Ovid clearly marks these gestures as silly, and in another mood they could be signs of incipient madness" (Segal, 1998: 18); "the way in which Pygmalion cares for the statue, dresses it in fine clothes and jewellery and brings it presents is typical of the treatment of cult statues and must have religious overtones" (Sharrock, 1991: 171).

Jessica Mackenzie

society and promotes a dogma of cosmetic surgery to women while creating unrealistic standards (like Pygmalion's) among modern men. Pygmalion views the statue as alien to *actual* womankind *because* of its loveliness.⁹ Even in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Pandora as the first woman is described as only the "likeness" of a modest maiden. The *ekphrasis* of Pandora's diadem, like Pygmalion's statue, issues dual layer of artificiality. Hesiod explicitly notes that the beings depicted on it as only *like* the living – like Pandora herself, these images are too perfect to be true in their flawlessness.¹⁰ Pygmalion does not want a genuine woman. In a ridiculous inversion he prays to Venus for a woman *like* his statue and not the reverse.¹¹ The fantastical nature of Pygmalion's 'ideal' woman is underlined throughout the episode through Ovid's choice of ivory as the material for the perfect woman to be carved in, a material notorious since the Homeric era for its deceptive associations.¹² In Pindar's *Olympian I* the motif of artificiality is highlighted most explicitly when he debunks the original Pelops myth as false paradoxically after describing Pelops' acceptance of an ivory shoulder himself.¹³ Like Pindar's Pelops emerging from Klotho's cauldron revived with a fragment of false anatomy, so Pygmalion's statue becomes animated

⁹ Ovid explicitly states no woman on Earth can compete: "This *heavenly* woman" (*Met.*10.248).

¹⁰ Hesiod's description of the first woman "he made an affliction for mankind...The renowned Ambidexter moulded from earth the *likeness* of a *modest* maiden" (*Hes.Theog.*567-70) and the *ekphrasis* of Hephaestus/ Ambidexter's diadem connotes falsity like Pygmalion's work, but in that such flawlessness cannot be maintained, the perfect Pandora is not static like the images on her diadem, she *will* fall from her pedestal, "a wonder to *behold*...On it...all the *formidable* creatures...charm breathing over them all...*like* living creatures with a voice of their own" (*Hes.Theog.*581-84); compare this with Ovid's description: "an *image* of perfect feminine beauty" (*Met.*10.248), "*appeared* to be real" (*Met.*10.250), "desire for *semblance* of body" (*Met.*10.253).

¹¹ "Pygmalion...nervously asked...[for] 'a woman resembling my ivory maiden'" (*Met.*10.273-75).

¹² "in Greek and Roman literary tradition, ivory had strong associations with deception"(Elsner, 1991: 162), Elsner goes on to highlight Homer's famous pun in *Odyssey* between 'ivory' (*elephas*) and 'to deceive' (*elephairomai*) (*Od.*19.562-65), Penelope's description of the dream gates made of ivory and the producer of false dreams (*Od.*19.562-67), later appropriated by Virgil in his *Aeneid* (*Aen.*7.893-98).

¹³ "Lydian Pelops...Klotho lifted him out of the cleansing cauldron, with his shoulder of ivory, white and fine" (*Pind. Ol.*1.24-26), "I shall counter the poets before me" (*Pind.Ol.*1.36).

Jessica Mackenzie

through, as Elsner posits, a material that is liminal, that is celebrated as a matter that crosses the boundaries between reality and fabrication.¹⁴

Ovid's use of a liminal material to permit a wish-fulfilment miracle underlines the fantasy element of the woman created. This miraculous event *metamorphoses* the reader themselves – from complicit participant in the fantasy to an external voyeur when the audience can no longer suspend their disbelief at the vivification of art. Pygmalion's voyeur status evolves from gaze to act within two lines, violating the sculpture with first his eyes and then his body.¹⁵ This imitates the voyeuristic fetishist instinct radiating from male figures in antiquity that was first illustrated by Hesiod when the gods were confronted with the very first human woman, Pandora; another female figure created through male [Hephaestus'] artistry and subject to aesthetic objectification.¹⁶ When Pygmalion's *mimesis* moves into reality the reader becomes overtly conscious of Pygmalion's fetishist *agalmatophilia*;¹⁷ the statue's real status as a private sex-object becomes apparent to Ovid's audience when Pygmalion has sex with the paradox of a grown woman who is also a new-born.¹⁸

Film critic Laura Mulvey discusses the nature of the male gaze, which I believe particularly appropriate by virtue of Pygmalion's art moving from stasis to animation, the closest example of pseudo-cinematic art in antiquity beyond the theatrical stage. Mulvey posits that *scopophilia* transforms the subject into a satisfying object, the voyeurism congruent with a sadistic guilt that actually heightens

¹⁴ "In this Homeric Virgilian tradition, ivory is liminal – the material for a gate between worlds" (Elsner, 1991: 163).

¹⁵ "Pygmalion's marvelling soul was inflamed with desire [passive]...Again and again his hands moved over his work [active]" (*Met.*10.252-54), "He kissed it...He talked to it, held it, imagined his fingers sinking into the limbs he was touching...he gripped them tight" (*Met.*10.256-58), "He laid this [statue] down on a couch...and called it his darling mistress" (*Met.*10.267-68).

¹⁶ "he led her out where the other gods and men were...Both immortal gods and mortal men were seized with wonder when they saw that precipitous trap" (*Hes.Theog.*586-90).

¹⁷ *Agalmatophilia*: the sexual attraction to a mannequin, doll or statue.

¹⁸ "Pygmalion's statue is created for (very) private consumption; there is no audience or patron (apart from the readers of the *Metamorphoses*) to shape his 'womanufacture'" (Johnson, 2008: 152).

Jessica Mackenzie

the observer's pleasure.¹⁹ This is evident in the Pygmalion character's combination of fear of harming the statue and guilt in voicing his true desire for it.²⁰ The episode proves close to a quasi-pornographic novelette. Ovid engages in only two lines of the statue's actual creation and approximately fifty lines of its surveillance and fondling. This perhaps highlights the Roman public's taste for fantasy, and how it balanced carefully on a knife's edge that was the boundary of ambiguous transgression with full-scale taboo. The myth only ends happily because of Venus' unlikely charity in permitting the statue life, a rare example among the predominantly tragic cases in the *Metamorphoses*.²¹ Modern readers may wonder whether this is not a marker of Pygmalion as a successful artist, but instead a failed human being, one whose delusion has not only excluded him from half the world's population in womankind, but also escalated to the point that he cannot distinguish between his own fantasy and reality.²²

The story of Pygmalion illustrates the ancient (yet perhaps contemporary) male ideology of a passive mate; he does not require a voice or identity but only a small signifier of her life and virginity. Pygmalion's love for his perfect wife borders on necrophilia, the woman not much more than a living corpse, a zombified blank doll that acquiesces to his sexual fantasies.²³ This is highlighted with Ovid's simile that likens Pygmalion's woman to the malleability of wax, moulded by foreign hands it gains value

¹⁹ "fetishistic *scopophilia* builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself...voyeurism, on the contrary, has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt" (Mulvey, 2005: 65).

²⁰ Pygmalion voices delusional fear in harming the statue *whilst* he engages sexually with it, a hint of sadism emerging as he locks onto the body as if afraid it might flee "Flesh or ivory? No, it couldn't be ivory now! He kissed it and thought it was kissing him too...*frightened* of bruising those pure white arms as he *gripped* them tight" (*Met.*10.255-58); as well as this Pygmalion displays guilt of this very impulse during his prayer to Venus "Pygmalion stood by the altar and *nervously* asked...not *daring* to say" (*Met.*10.273-75).

²¹ "great numbers of people attended theatrical shows and wild beast 'games' that exhibit some of the same traits as Ovid's writing: portrayal of sexual scenes from Greek myth, especially in the polymorphous theatre of pantomime; savage and gruesome deaths" (Richlin, 1992: 161)

²² Ovid conspicuously comments on the possibility that the following scenes are only fancy: "Astonished, in doubtful joy, afraid that he might be deluded" (*Met.*10.288) extremely similar to a comment by Virgil's deluded witch in his *Eighth Eclogue* on the power of love as an illusionary device: "May we believe it, or are lovers still by their own fancies fooled?" (*Virg.Ecl.*8.107).

²³ "her blushes are part of her attraction, symbolising as they do utter virginity" (Sharrock, 1991: 175), "She felt his kisses, and blushed; then timidly raised her eyes" (*Met.*10.293-94).

Jessica Mackenzie

by being *used*, the simile itself echoing the need of a horse to be broken.²⁴ Pygmalion experiences the ultimate male fantasy when the Madonna-Whore dichotomy is simultaneously fulfilled by his creation. The statue is both the passive, virginal Madonna who provides Pygmalion with an heir (which in turn reinforces his masculinity) while also being his submissive sexual plaything.²⁵

The male fantasy of the spiritually static but physically pliable is echoed throughout *Metamorphoses*. When Perseus comes across Andromeda he initially takes her to be a statue and instantly falls in love with her, Andromeda then feeds this fantasy by primarily refusing to speak.²⁶ Segal points out that as soon as Andromeda's statuesque body has attracted Perseus and she is saved, she is omitted from the rest of the tale, one never glimpses whether the partnership is successful outside the *fabula* as presumably Andromeda's personality would have to be exhibited.²⁷ Ovid echoes this fantasy of passivity when he refers to Orpheus' theatre of static and silent rocks and trees which were once women but now cannot voice any critique of his art.²⁸

²⁴ "The ivory...*yielding* beneath his sensitive fingers. Imagine beeswax from Mount Hyméttus, softening under the rays of the sun; imagine it moulded by human thumbs...each touch contributing *value*" (*Met.*10.283-87): the simile likening Pygmalion to the sun itself illustrates his hierarchical self-delusion at this stage as his status as *lover* of the statue changes to *loved*, he becomes *her* world as she was once his, *her* idol, but also her parent as she appears to filially 'imprint' on him like a baby bird "She...timidly raised her eyes to the light and saw her lover against the sky" (*Met.*10.293-95); this inversion of the previous attraction hierarchy is illustrated immediately by the need of the ivory to 'yield' into submission.

²⁵ "She sees the heavens and the lover at the same moment...Her sole future role, as far as the narrative is concerned, is to bear Pygmalion a child" (Segal, 1991: 18).

²⁶ Andromeda appears to resemble the very rock she is tied to, simply in an attractive womanly form like Pygmalion's statue "Perseus noticed the maiden tied by the arms to a jagged rock-face...(he would have supposed she was merely a marble statue), unconscious desire was kindled within him. Dumbly amazed and entranced by the beautiful vision" (*Met.*4.673-76). Andromeda appears the perfect lady "At first she was silent, constrained by *maidenly* shyness in front of a man" (*Met.*4.681-82) *because* she acts as a blank canvas to project his fantasies onto.

²⁷ "As in the case of Pygmalion's beloved, this statuesque role is Andromeda's only function in the episode. Once her naked body has attracted Perseus, the action shifts to the male contestants for her hand, and she is not mentioned again except at the wedding" (Segal, 1998: 20).

²⁸ "Orpheus' leafy *theatrum*...is the perfect audience: silent and appreciative" (Johnson, 2008: 112), "the sorrowing birds...the stubborn rocks and trees which so often had followed his singing" (*Met.*11.44-46), the likes of Daphne, Myrrha and, ironically, the very Thracian women who dismembered him mutate into trees that were his audience "Bacchus...would not allow the crime of his [Orpheus'] murder to go unpunished. There in the forest were all the Thracian women who'd taken part in the outrage. At once he tied them in twisted tree-roots...forced the extremities down into solid earth...bark was creeping over her slender calves" (*Met.*11.67-80).

Orpheus' mode of death illustrates the male castration anxiety by female *immasculation* which in turn nourishes the submissive fantasy evident in the Pygmalion episode by his rejection of the sexually autonomous women in the Propoetides.²⁹ Orpheus' supernatural power to move stones with his voice is drowned out by the power of the Ciconian women's voices. One doesn't have to look very hard to see the subtext: when women gain their *own* voice it proves fatal. Orpheus' 'Akoustik-kinetic' power is literally disarmed by the female voice and he meets his destruction with the rise of feminine power.³⁰ The voyeurism that was employed with Pygmalion's statue is inverted as the embedded narrator of the tale becomes the *subject* in a cruel theatre of his own. The audience's admiration turns to pity as Orpheus' safe *locus amoenus* setting becomes a gladiatorial arena where Orpheus is victimised and likened to a stag.³¹ The association of promiscuous women with predatory dogs suggests not only the dehumanisation of the female by their animalistic brutality of Orpheus, but also the association of the female voice and lasciviousness. Both Homer and Semonides likened promiscuous women to dogs in their poetry.³² Semonides' *Fragment 7* actually exhibits an attempt to stop the yelping curiosity of the 'bitch' woman through smashing her teeth in; this attempt to anatomically remove the female voice is paralleled in Ovid's tale of Tereus and Philomela. Philomela's agency of speech, her tongue, that would act as her means to punish Tereus for her rape is torn out.³³ The male anxiety of the female voice as something that enables the reappropriation of male power by the female is demonstrated through the

²⁹ In a society where efforts were made to hinder growing female autonomy since the attempt shown in 215 BC by the *Lex Oppia* and later *Lex Iulia de Adulteriis Coercendis* in 17 BC as well as notoriously sexual female villainess figures such as Clodia Metelli.

³⁰ Male castration anxiety is here symbolised by the voice: "Orpheus' singing could well have weakened their shots, but cacophony won...the clapping hands and the bacchanals' shrieking drowned the sound of the lyre, and the voice of the bard could no longer be heard" (*Met.*11.15-19). Orpheus' voice becomes incomprehensible "his lyre and his head were thrown in the river Hebrus...the instrument uttered a plaintive moan, the lifeless tongue emitted a feeble dirge" (*Met.*11.50-53).

³¹ "they turned on Orpheus...like...dogs at the morning fight in the amphitheatre who prey on mortally wounded stag" (*Met.*11.23-26).

³² "when for the sake of bitch-faced me the Achaeans came to Troy" (*Od.*4.145-46); "One from a bitch: a slut, that by herself gets pregnant...and prowls and yelps...The men can't make her stop...nor if he knocks her teeth out with a stone" (*Sem.*fr.7).

³³ "I'll tell the world of your crime myself...I'll cry it aloud...my words will ring through the trees...the sky will listen and so will the gods" (*Met.*6.544-49).

Jessica Mackenzie

mirroring of a phallic simile *on* to Philomela's tongue as a snake.³⁴ Based on Mulvey's view of the male castration anxiety one can recognise the reaction to this anxiety is to either punish the woman or fetishise her, one can see both in Ovid through the tales of Tereus and Pygmalion.³⁵

Though Ovid's depiction of women in the *Metamorphoses* demonstrates a polyphony of voices, his dual portrayal of male fantasy and the anxiety that informs it proves most enlightening. A modern audience can identify trends that are ageless and familiar. The relevance of modern cinematic feminist theories on ancient poetry proves strangely apt particularly when one parallels Pygmalion's statue with modern sexual surrogates such as the Japanese silicone 'Dutch Wives'. Here one recognises the enduring human propensity for *mimesis* with self-deceit. The attempt to legitimise 'perverse' sexual fantasy is treated in different ways; in antiquity mythology enabled Ovid to turn a bizarre infatuation into a pious marriage, while contemporary society achieves the same end through mere ubiquity of the sex-trade in various forms. Ovid compliments fantasy with anxiety and achieves a more balanced version of the world than either misogynists or feminists could deem their own and succeeds in emphasising a persistence of specific psychological tendencies in mankind that has lasted two thousand years.

³⁴ "As its root in the throat gave a flicker, the rest of it muttered and twitched...like the quivering tail of an adder that's chopped in half" (*Met.*6.557-59).

³⁵ "The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma...by devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object...or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (Mulvey, 2005: 65).

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