

PYGMALION

INTRODUCTION

From Ovid to Caxton

Pygmalion, according to Ovid (**P1**), was a sculptor of Cyprus who turned away in disgust from the local women because of their sexual immorality. Instead he fell in love with a statue of a beautiful woman that he had himself carved from ivory. He courted it as if it were a woman, dressing it in fine clothes, bringing it gifts, even placing it in his bed. Finally in despair he prayed to Venus, and Venus granted his prayer: as he embraced the statue, it softened from stone into flesh and turned into a living woman. Pygmalion married his statue-wife, and they founded a royal dynasty; their grandson was Cinyras, the unfortunate father/grandfather of Adonis. In passing it should be noted that in Ovid the statue is nameless; her now-traditional name ‘Galatea’ is an eighteenth-century invention (Reinhold 1971: 316–19).¹

Ovid is the inevitable starting-point for any discussion of Pygmalion. This is perhaps the main difference between this legend and those of Orpheus and Adonis, which have roots much older and deeper and darker than Ovid’s elegant retellings. For Pygmalion, Ovid’s is the oldest version we have, the only substantial ancient version, and the source of all subsequent versions. Indeed, the story as we have it may be essentially his invention – a literary creation rather than a genuine myth.

Two later writers give us an intriguing glimpse of what may be an earlier version of the story. The early Christian writers Clement of Alexandria (**P2**) and Arnobius of Sicca (**P3**) both refer to Pygmalion in the course of polemics against pagan idolatry, both citing as their source the third-century BC scholar Philostephanus. According to them, Pygmalion was not a sculptor, but a young Cypriot – king of Cyprus, according to Arnobius – who blasphemously fell in love with the sacred statue of Aphrodite in her temple, and tried to make love to it. Arnobius’s identification of Pygmalion as king suggests to modern scholars that this may be a distorted version of an ancient ritual, a sacred marriage or *hierogamy* between the island’s king and its patron goddess, represented by her

statue, to ensure the prosperity and fertility of the land. Cyprus was a famous centre of the worship of Aphrodite, or 'Cypris', who was said to have risen from the sea near its coast; the island held several of her temples and holy places. In its original form, then, the story of Pygmalion might have been similar to that of Adonis: a sacred union between the goddess and her mortal lover (Frazer 1922: 332). If so, it has left little or no trace in the literary tradition; it is Ovid who has shaped later conceptions of what the story of Pygmalion is about.

Ovid frames the story as one of the sons of the bereaved Orpheus. He omits all mention of Pygmalion's kingship; instead, by making the hero himself a sculptor, he focuses the story on the power of art. Pygmalion's 'marvellous triumphant artistry' counterfeits reality so well that it could be mistaken for it ('Such art his art concealed'), and in the end is transformed into reality; more successful than Orpheus, he is able to bring his love to life. At the same time, while dropping the idea of the sacred marriage, Ovid leaves Pygmalion's relationship with the gods as central. In Orpheus's sequence of songs of tragic and forbidden love, this one stands out as having a happy ending, and the suggestion is that this is because of the hero's piety: unlike other characters, including Orpheus himself, who came to grief through disobedience or ingratitude to the gods, Pygmalion humbly places his fate in Venus's hands, and she rewards his faith. This moral is emphasised by contrast with the immediately preceding stories, of Venus's punishment of the murderous Cerastae and of the Propoetides, the first prostitutes, who 'dared deny Venus' divinity', and whose transformation into stone mirrors the statue's transformation from stone to flesh.

Though Ovid sketches in these serious themes, the dominant tone of the story is humorous and erotic. Without labouring the point (as some later versions do) Ovid suggests the comedy of Pygmalion's sudden descent from high-minded celibacy to infatuation, and of his earnest courtship of his unresponsive stony lady. He also communicates very clearly the erotic charge of the story. The sensuous image of the stone softening like wax under Pygmalion's fingers, of (as Byron later put it), 'The mortal and the marble at a strife / And timidly awaking into life' – the whole concept of a perfectly beautiful woman designed to the lover's specifications and utterly devoted to her creator – this is, in many ways, one of the most potent of male fantasies.

Of course (as female readers may be about to protest) the story can, if viewed from a slightly different angle, become an unsettling or distasteful one. The two main areas of unease are Pygmalion's role as the artist-creator, and the sexual politics of the story. It is perhaps not too fanciful to focus these issues by looking at the slightly different objections of Clement and Arnobius to the story.

Clement is conducting an argument against idolatry: the worship of a statue, a thing made by human art out of wood or stone, as if it were divine. He frames his argument in terms of a distinction between art and nature: art is deceptive, an illusion pretending to be truth, and those who are deceived by it may be 'beguile[d] . . . to the pit of destruction'. Clement's argument leads directly to Renaissance condemnations of Pygmalion's sin of idolatry. Less directly, it

suggests problems with the figure of Pygmalion as the artist who desires to create life, transcending the limitations of human ability and perhaps transgressing on the prerogatives of God the creator. The Romantic period, which took most seriously the idea of Pygmalion as godlike artist-creator, also gave rise to the figure of Frankenstein; and these two mythic figures, suggesting respectively the benign and the horrific possibilities of creating life out of inanimate matter, have remained closely associated ever since.

Arnobius (a much less sophisticated thinker than Clement) is also arguing against idolatry, but he focuses in a rather tabloid-newspaper manner on the sexual perversity of Pygmalion's relations with the statue. It is true that, treated without Ovid's tact and humour, the story could appear nastily perverse. For a twentieth-century reader the story is more likely to seem objectionable in its portrayal of a woman as entirely passive, literally constructed by the artist's hands and gaze, and brought to life to be his submissive child-lover, without even the individuality of a name. This male-fantasy aspect of the story has been cheerfully exploited by some writers; others have questioned it, raising realistic doubts about the success of the marriage of Pygmalion and Galatea, or giving Galatea a voice to answer back or the power to walk out on, betray, or even (like Frankenstein's monster) kill her creator.

Pygmalion has only a flickering presence in the Middle Ages. From time to time he is cited as a famous artist, often paired with real Greek artists like Apelles and Zeuxis. So in Chaucer's 'Physician's Tale' Nature is made to boast of the beauty of the heroine Virginia, which neither Pygmalion nor Apelles nor Zanzis (Zeuxis) could ever 'countrefete', 'though he ay [forever] forge and bete, / Or grave, or peynte'; similarly in the Middle English poem 'Pearl' the beauty of the angelic Pearl surpasses anything Pygmalion could paint or Aristotle describe.

The two most interesting medieval treatments each inaugurate a metaphorical reading of the story. John Gower, in *Confessio Amantis* (P4), tells the story as a moral fable for lovers about the need for perseverance: Pygmalion continued to plead his love, even though it seemed hopeless, and in the end his wish was granted. By implication, obviously, the statue stands for a beloved who is as cold, hard, and unresponsive as stone, but can eventually be melted by a persistent suitor. This metaphorical reading has been very influential, and generations of love poets have alluded to Pygmalion and his statue in self-pity or self-encouragement. William Caxton, in a brief comment in his prose summary of the *Metamorphoses* (P5), has a less obvious allegory: the story symbolically relates how a rich lord took a beautiful but ignorant servant-girl and educated her to become a suitable wife for himself. This interpretation of the story as an allegory of class and education can be seen as the seed of Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

Dotage and idolatry: Pygmalion in the Renaissance

When we pass from Ovid and Gower to the Renaissance, there is a striking change of tone. On the whole, Renaissance writers take a harshly unsympathetic,

satirical view of Pygmalion; the recurring keywords are 'dotage' and 'idolatry'. Rather than allegorising, they take Pygmalion's courtship of the statue literally, and mock the absurdity of his behaviour. George Pettie (P6), for instance, derisively offers a series of mock explanations for Pygmalion falling in love with 'a senseless thing, a stone, an image': perhaps he was mad and thought he was made of stone himself, or perhaps he was motivated by ancestral loyalty, being descended from one of the stones thrown by Deucalion and Pyrrha . . . Pygmalion is presented as an extreme example of the folly of love, and especially of the kind of courtly and platonic love which places the beloved (literally) on a pedestal and worships her without a hope of sexual consummation. Richard Brathwait in his satire 'On Dotage' (P9) demands of Pygmalion, 'Why art thou so besotted still with wooing, / Since there's no comfort when it comes to doing [i.e. sex]?'; and John Marston (P7) compares him, 'So fond . . . and earnest in his suit / To his remorseless image', with the 'foolery / Of some sweet youths' who maintain that true love doesn't require sexual intercourse. A character in the university comedy *Lingua* complains of 'these puling lovers' and their extravagant praise of their beloveds: 'They make forsooth her hair of gold, her eyes of diamond, her cheeks of roses, her lips of rubies, her teeth of pearl, and her whole body of ivory, and when they have thus idolled her like Pygmalion, they fall down and worship her.'

As in this example, dotage is very often associated with idolatry. For Renaissance Protestant writers Pygmalion's devotion to his statue irresistibly suggests pagan idolatry and the supposed Catholic worship of images of the Virgin and the saints. Brathwait talks of his 'fair saint', his 'image-gods', his 'idle idol'; Marston compares him to the 'peevish Papists' who 'crouch and kneel / To some dumb idol'; Pettie ironically justifies the credibility of the statue's coming to life by reference to Catholic frauds: 'The like miracles we have had many wrought within these few years, when images have been made to bow their heads, to hold out their hands, to weep, to speak, etc.' Going beyond such topical satire, the notion of idolatry is often linked to Clement's arguments about art versus nature, and to anxieties about appearance and reality (or, in Renaissance terms, 'shadow' and 'substance'): Pygmalion's sin is to fall in love with the outward appearance his art has created, and forget the reality that his image is a mere soulless lump of stone. So an epigram by Hugh Crompton labels him an 'ape' (imitator) who 'for the substance doth adore the shape'; another by Davies of Hereford condemns him as one who turns stones into men but 'Himself makes like a stone by senseless courses'. The philosopher-poet Fulke Greville makes the story a metaphor for our worship of intellectual idols: in our ignorant vanity 'we raise and mould tropheas' which we call arts and sciences, 'and fall in love with these, / As did Pygmalion with his carved tree.'

A particular and rather bizarre example of this appearance/reality theme is the recurring association of Pygmalion with women's make-up (or 'paint', as it was then called, making the link with art much more obvious). Renaissance moralists routinely condemned women's 'painting' as immoral. Brathwait aims his satire at 'you painted faces', and another satirist, Everard Guilpin, complains,

Then how is man turned all Pygmalion,
 That, knowing these pictures, yet we dote upon
 The painted statues, or what fools are we
 So grossly to commit idolatry?

Edmund Waller (**P10**), in a poem about the disillusionment of discovering that his beloved's beauty was only make-up, plays with the paradoxes of being in love with something that has no real existence: 'I dote on that which is nowhere; / The sign of beauty feeds my fire.' In a more extreme example, the satirist T.M. (Thomas Middleton?), after an embarrassing encounter with a beauty who turned out to be a male prostitute in drag, warns, 'Trust not a painted puppet as I have done, / Who far more doted than Pygmalion.' This almost obsessive theme points to a deep anxiety about the association of women's beauty with art (artificiality, artfulness, deceit) and its power to lead men into dotage and idolatry.

Not all Renaissance treatments of the story are so unsympathetic to Pygmalion. Some use the story, in Gower's manner, as a fable for lovers, as when Samuel Daniel laments that his mistress, unlike Pygmalion's, remains stony, or Abraham Cowley urges his to remember the legend ('The statue itself at last a woman grew, / And so at last, my dear, should you do too'), or William Fulwood, in a letter-writing manual, provides lovers with a model poem on the Pygmalion theme ('If thus Pygmalion pined away / For love of such a marble stone, / What marvel then though I decay / With piteous plaint and grievous groan'). Even for those who take the moral-satiric approach, the inherent narrative drive of the Ovidian story towards a happy ending creates problems: so Brathwait, having started out to preach a severe moral lesson against dotage, tails off anticlimactically with the sculptor and his statue living happily ever after. The two most substantial and interesting Renaissance versions – Pettie's and Marston's – both take a highly ambivalent attitude to Pygmalion. Pettie's novella relegates the statue story almost to an epilogue, focusing instead on the story of Pygmalion's previous lover, whose treachery contrasts with the devotion of that 'perfect proper maid', the statue; the narrator's tone is so saturated with tongue-in-cheek irony that it is hard to tell what his attitude is, or whether the antifeminist satire is neutralised or underlined by his ostentatious apologies to his female readers. As for Marston's poem, it swings disconcertingly between mockery of Pygmalion and a lascivious identification with him ('O that my mistress were an image too, / That I might blameless her perfections view!'), so that it was condemned by contemporary critics as pornographic and defended by Marston as a satiric parody of contemporary love poetry – prompting C. S. Lewis's barbed remark that 'Authors in Marston's position do not always realize that it is useless to say your work was a joke if your work is not, in fact, at all funny' (Lewis 1954: 473). I think Lewis underrates Marston's humour, but unquestionably the compound of satire and eroticism is a rather unstable one.

The most sympathetic Renaissance response to the Ovidian story is one which does not mention Pygmalion at all: the awakening of Hermione's statue in the

last scene of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* (P8). Shakespeare has explicitly raised the art versus nature question before, when in Act 4 the disguised king Polixenes and Perdita (a shepherdess who is really a princess) debated the ethics of artificial cross-breeding of plants: the king argues that 'This is an art / Which does mend nature . . . but / The art itself is nature'; but Perdita sturdily refuses to practise such arts, 'No more than, were I painted, I would wish / This youth should say 'twere well, and only therefore / Desire to breed by me' (4. 4. 95–7, 101–3). In the end, however, it is art which brings about the happy ending and the apparently miraculous resurrection of Perdita's mother Hermione. Shakespeare lays heavy stress on the artificiality of the statue, naming its creator (a real artist, Giulio Romano), praising his craftsmanship, even drawing attention to the 'oily painting' on its face; and behind this artificiality, of course, lies the art of Paulina, who has contrived the fake resurrection, and behind that the art of Shakespeare, who has contrived this extraordinarily improbable situation and even draws attention to its improbability (which 'should be hooted at / Like an old tale'). Yet these multiple layers of art are not wicked but benign, and their result is something entirely 'natural': the reunion of a family and the restoration of a wife to the husband who once lost her because of his unjust doubts of her virtue. It looks as though Shakespeare was creating a deliberate counter-version to the puritanical suspicion of art, love, and women which runs through most Renaissance versions of Pygmalion.

Eighteenth-century interlude

Annegret Dinter, in her historical survey of the Pygmalion story, describes the eighteenth century as the heyday ('*Blütezeit*') of the legend (Dinter 1979: ch. 5); significantly, however, all the versions she discusses are French, German, and Italian. In English, Restoration and Augustan versions of the story are surprisingly sparse. There are a number of translations and adaptations of Ovid, and one enterprising publisher reprinted Gower's version (slightly modernised) under the title *Chaucer's Ghost: A Piece of Antiquity*; but sustained original treatments are rare, and Pygmalion crops up mainly in casual allusions.

Some of these allusions are to Pygmalion as a great artist (Anna Seward, for instance, invoking 'Zeuxis' pencil, Orpheus' lyre, / Pygmalion's heaven-descended fire'). More often they are in an erotic context. Characters in Restoration comedy cite the legend to show that any woman can be won: a seducer in Dryden's *Secret Love* boasts that his victim 'warms faster than Pygmalion's statue', and a wooer in Flecknoe's *Demoiselles à la Mode* is encouraged with the thought that 'you love a woman, and she's a living one; Pygmalion only loved the dead statua of one, and yet you see he put life into it at last.' Others invoke Pygmalion's construction of the ideal woman: Soame Jenyns (P13) begins, 'Had I, Pygmalion-like, the power / To make the nymph I would adore. . . ' and goes on to describe his ideal mate; more raffishly, in his poem 'The Libertine', the Restoration poet Alexander Brome justifies promiscuity as an artistic search for

the ideal composite woman out of an experience of many imperfect ones ("Thus out of all, Pygmalion-like, / My fancy limns [paints] a woman. . .").² Others play with the image/reality motif: Aphra Behn writes of falling in love with her own imagined picture of the author of an anonymous love letter ('Pygmalion thus his image formed, / And for the charms he made, he sighed and burned'); Charles Cotton, asking a mistress for her picture, assures her that unlike Pygmalion he will not practise 'idolatry' before it; Thomas Tickell (**P12**) advises a young lover to 'clasp the seeming charms' of his unfaithful beloved's portrait, since – who knows? – it may come to life.

There are also, of course, humorous travesties of the story: Smollett's account (**P11**) of the metamorphosis of a beggar-girl into a fine lady (which I will discuss later), or Christopher Pitt's tale of the cat-fancier who successfully prayed to Venus to transform his favourite cat into a woman, and of his discomfiture on the wedding night when a mouse ran through the bedroom. One of the most interesting eighteenth-century versions is in Hannah Cowley's comedy *The Town Before You* (**P14**), which not only farcically parodies the statue scene from *The Winter's Tale* but also, unconventionally, presents us with a female sculptor-heroine and a female view of the relations between art and love.

On the whole, however, Restoration and Augustan allusions to Pygmalion are scattered and comparatively slight. The coming of the Romantic movement changes this, and the period from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century is the heyday of Pygmalion in English. Rather than follow a strictly chronological arrangement from here on, I shall divide the material into three thematic groups (which inevitably overlap to some extent): versions which focus on Pygmalion as the artist-creator; versions which focus on the sexual and marital relationship of Pygmalion and Galatea; and versions which, in the Caxton–Shaw tradition, treat the story as a fable of class and education.

The Romantic artist: Pygmalion/Frankenstein

The Romantics, with their lofty conception of the role of the artist, were inevitably attracted to the Pygmalion legend. Around the beginning of the nineteenth century there emerges a new, far more serious view of Pygmalion as the artist-creator, a solitary, often tormented, sometimes godlike genius, wrestling with the limitations of his material to create and bring to life a vision of ideal beauty. The idea of 'Pygmalion's heaven-descended fire' becomes more than a cliché, as his relationship with the divine once again comes to the foreground of the story. Does his artistic power come from God or the gods, or from external nature, or from within himself? In creating life, is he the tool of the gods, or their rival, or a blasphemous usurper of their power?

The first Romantic treatment along these lines is a foreign one: Rousseau's dramatic monologue with music, first staged in France in 1770, and later adapted into English verse by William Mason (**P15**) – a piece that was enormously popular throughout Europe, and established 'Galatea' as the name of the statue-bride.

Rousseau's Pygmalion is a genius in despair over the apparent decay of his creative inspiration: 'Where, Pygmalion, / Where is thy power which once could rival Jove's, / Creating gods?' Gradually he realises that his passion and imaginative warmth have not died but been diverted into love for the statue, and that this love is not to be despised as dotage or idolatry, since it springs from the same qualities of soul that make him a great artist: 'My crime (if I indeed am culpable) proceeds / From too much sensibility of soul.' Instead he prays to Venus – not Venus the love goddess, but Venus Urania, 'Parent of Worlds! Soul of the Universe!', the lofty patroness of universal life and fertility – to bestow life on his creation. Venus does so, and the playlet ends with Pygmalion ecstatically united with Galatea – who, in greeting Pygmalion as 'myself', reveals herself as an integral part of the great artist's own soul.

The first and perhaps most memorable English version of the theme is that of Beddoes (**P17**). This powerful though overwrought poem presents a world which itself seems to pulse and seethe with creative energy. Pygmalion, a solitary genius regarded with wondering awe by his fellow citizens, is the vehicle of this creative force, a 'Dealer of immortality, / Greater than Jove himself, yet tormented by his inability to confer life on his creation. His passion is not simply love for the statue, but a violent rebellion of the life-force against the inevitability of death – and, in the poem's apocalyptic conclusion, it is not altogether clear which has triumphed.

Through the later nineteenth century a number of lesser poets took up this Romantic vision of Pygmalion the artist, treating it often at great length, with earnestness and reverence and (frankly) some tedium. They foreground the spiritual rather than the sensual side of the story; Pygmalion's love, far from idolatry, is in itself a kind of spiritual quest for the ideal and the divine. In William Cox Bennett's feverish dramatic monologue the statue emanates a 'mystic spirit' and 'utterance divine' that arouses hopeless yearning in the sculptor, who appeals, 'Have mercy, Gods! . . . This hunger of the soul ye gave to me, / Unasking.' William Morris's romance (**P21**) foregrounds the power of Venus, as Pygmalion returns home from the 'awful mysteries' of her temple to find the statue alive and wrapped in the golden gown that formerly decked the goddess's own image; Morris almost evokes the idea of Pygmalion's sacred marriage to the goddess, as if Galatea is standing in for her. The most loftily idealistic version is the 696-line poem by Frederick Tennyson (Alfred's brother). Tennyson's Pygmalion, who has 'throned / The beautiful within [his] heart of hearts' until 'the Ideal grew / More real than all things outward', gives his love to the statue's ideal beauty rather than any living woman, and at last his purity of heart is rewarded. In the central section of the poem he is treated to a dream-vision of godlike figures discoursing upon the immortality of the soul and the superiority of soul to body – a conventional moral, but for Tennyson, unlike earlier Christianisers of the legend, Pygmalion's love of the statue reveals not his dotage upon material appearances but his insight into a deeper spiritual world. The longest and oddest of these Victorian poems is the twelve-book epic *Pygmalion* by the Pre-Raphaelite sculptor and poet Thomas Woolner. Woolner presents Pygmalion as 'ardent-eyed, of

eager speech / Which even closest friends misunderstood' (Woolner was notoriously sharp-tongued) and driven by 'a passionate hope / To bring the Gods' own language, sculpture, down / For mortal exaltation'. When he falls in love with and marries his servant-model (Woolner's rationalisation of the Ovidian story) he is subjected to 'foul calumny' and 'poisonous lies' by malicious rivals, but he proves his heroic worth in leading an army against the invading Egyptians, and is finally chosen king of Cyprus. Myth as wish-fulfilment could hardly go further.

More interesting, perhaps, are those writers who use the Pygmalion story as an image of the limits of unaided human art. So Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (P19), dissatisfied with her own poetry, wonders if Pygmalion too was frustrated by 'the toil / Of stretching past the known and seen, to reach / The archetypal Beauty out of sight.' In Hawthorne's 'Drowne's Wooden Image' (P18) the transformation of the hack woodcarver into a true artist is marked not only by his new-found skill but also by his new, wretched sense of the limitations of that skill. (Hawthorne's story, of course, also teases the reader with the question of whether or not an actual miracle takes place; the ending seems to provide a purely rational explanation, but one niggling detail remains unexplained.) Rousseau and Beddoes show the frustration of the genius who can create physical perfection but not bestow life, and even in Gilbert's comedy (P22) Pygmalion bitterly reflects that 'The gods make life, I can make only death!' In the early twentieth century H.D.'s Pygmalion (P25), who boasted that 'I made the gods less than men, / for I was a man and they my work', is tormented by doubts about whether he is the master or the tool of the creative power he wields. Only the American nun Mary Nagle revises the story's ending to leave the statue still 'a monument / Of dead perfection', underlining the moral that 'No human ardour kindles stone to life . . . Man fashions stone, but God bestows the soul.'

In all these versions, Pygmalion's own genius can only go so far; an external, divine force is needed to transform the statue into life. Remove that divine element from the story and you have the other great nineteenth-century myth about the creation of life: *Frankenstein*. In Mary Shelley's novel (P16), Victor Frankenstein, by an unexplained but clearly scientific process, infuses life into a creature assembled from dead body-parts; he is then so appalled at the creature's ugliness that he abandons it, and is consequently persecuted and killed by his own abused and resentful creation. The novel's most obvious theme is scientific irresponsibility, but many critics (and filmmakers) have read into it a more religious moral: Frankenstein blasphemously usurps God's prerogative of creating life, and his soulless creation is inevitably evil and destructive.

Frankenstein has become a kind of dark shadow of Pygmalion, a myth embodying the horror rather than the joy of lifeless matter becoming alive. Robert Buchanan (P20) reworks the Pygmalion story in the light of Shelley and her religious critics. His Pygmalion has lost his bride, Psyche ('Soul'), on their wedding morning, and her spirit commands him to make a statue of her to assuage his grief; but when it is finished, his 'holy dream [is] melted' into physical desire, and he involuntarily prays for it to come to life. The result is a beautiful

but soulless creature ('Her eyes were vacant of a seeing soul'), purely animal and sensual in her instincts – her first move is to sun herself like a cat in the sunlight at the window. Pygmalion cajoles her to join him in a riot of feasting (food and drink presumably standing in for other sensual pleasures which Buchanan couldn't explicitly describe), but the orgy ends in horror: plague strikes the city, he sees the marks of death on his partner and flees, to roam the world like the Ancient Mariner as an awful warning to others of the peril of meddling with nature. Buchanan's poem is melodramatic and at times hysterical, but he shows that the Pygmalion story can be made to carry a genuine frisson of horror.

The shadow of Frankenstein hangs over later twentieth-century versions, like those of Graves (**P26b**), Hope, and Sisson, in which Pygmalion bitterly regrets creating the statue-wife who has become a millstone around his neck. It is most obvious in Angela Carter's fantasy (**P28**), which combines Pygmalion, Frankenstein, and Dracula in its story of a puppetmaster whose beloved puppet comes to life and vampirically murders him. There are traces of the Frankenstein pattern, too, in Shaw's play (**P24**), in which Eliza angrily rebels against the man of science who has irresponsibly created her and then lost interest. In such versions, however, questions about the relations and responsibilities between creator and creation are read in terms of gender and class, and so find their place in our next two sections.

Loving a statue: the sexual fable

While some nineteenth-century writers soared into the loftily ideal in their treatment of Pygmalion the artist, others focused in a more realistic, sometimes humorous, often disillusioned spirit on the human side of the story. How would love and marriage between an artist and an ex-statue actually work out? How might the ex-statue herself feel about the situation? And what does the story imply about actual or possible relationships between men and women?

Perhaps the first such 'realist' version is W. S. Gilbert's comedy (**P22**). Gilbert makes one crucial change in the story: Pygmalion is already married. Hence the sudden arrival of the beautiful Galatea, adoringly declaring 'That I am thine – that thou and I are one!', is not a happy ending but the start of a tangle of confusions that starts as farce and ends as rather sour tragicomedy. Galatea is perfectly, comically, good and innocent, with no understanding of civilised institutions like marriage, jealousy, war, hunting, money, class, or lying. Her impact on Pygmalion's respectable bourgeois society is catastrophic, and in the end, to restore order, she must return to being a statue, bitterly declaring, 'I am not fit / To live upon this world – this worthy world.' By implication, it is our world which is not good enough for Galatea.³

Other writers, male and female, try to imagine Galatea's feelings on coming to life, and suggest that these may not be of unalloyed joy. After all, the statue, in becoming alive, is also becoming mortal (as Pygmalion abruptly realises in poems by James Rhoades and Benjamin Low). William Bell Scott's Galatea, coming to

life, sinks upon Pygmalion's breast 'by two dread gifts at once oppressed' – presumably, life and love. Emily Hickey's Galatea regrets the loss of the other gift she could have given Pygmalion, 'Art's life of splendid immortality'. In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's dramatic monologue (**P23**) Galatea hesitates, contemplating the inevitable suffering and misery that marriage to Pygmalion will involve, before nobly deciding to make the 'sacrifice supreme' for love. The poem's attitude may strike modern readers as masochistic, but it is a striking, proto-feminist critique of the traditional assumption that marriage is a happy ending.

The same assumption is questioned, from the other side, by male poets who suggest that Pygmalion's infatuation with Galatea may not last once she dwindles from an unattainable ideal into a wife. W. H. Mallock's *Pygmalion*, informing Galatea that he has fallen out of love with her, advises her that she should be grateful for the consolation of still loving him, whereas he should be pitied for his inability to remain satisfied with a consummated love:

Can you ever know how sorrowful men's loves are?
 How we can only hear love's voice from far –
 Only despaired-of eyes be dear to us –
 Mute ivory, that can never be amorous –
 Far fair gold stigma of some loneliest star!

(In fairness to this insufferable piece of male chauvinism, it should be added that Mallock was only twenty when he wrote it.) F. L. Lucas hints at a bitterer relationship of betrayal and mutual hatred, as *Pygmalion*, contemplating his sleeping wife, wishes he could undo his own 'wild wish' and return her to stone 'yet unpoisoned with a mind'. The same wish is shared by C. Day Lewis' lover in 'The Perverse' (**P27**), who can only love a woman who is an unattainable ideal, and once she is won 'would have changed her body into stone', and by C. H. Sisson's *Pygmalion*, in the most brutally reductive version of the legend, who 'often wished [Galatea] back / In silent marble, good and cold' – but 'The bitch retained her human heat.' A. D. Hope's 'Pygmalion' traces a relationship from its first ecstasy and agony through its decay into routine and boredom, and a final realisation of 'the horror of Love, the sprouting cannibal plant / That it becomes . . .'

Of course, some of the cynicism and misogyny of these versions is ironically placed. Nevertheless, on the whole, twentieth-century writers have taken a bleak view of the *Pygmalion*/*Galatea* love story, finding it hard to see any possibilities of happiness in such an unequal and artificial relationship. Some versions explicitly criticise the legend. Michael Longley's 'Ivory and Water' (**P29**) gently (and literally) deconstructs the male dream-fantasy that it embodies. Angela Carter's cruelly witty short story (**P28**) goes further in its critique of the whole process of male fantasising about women. Her *Pygmalion* figure, the aged Professor, is personally harmless and even endearing, but the fantasy he spins around his beloved puppet Lady Purple – that of 'the shameless Oriental Venus', the

irresistibly beautiful, utterly evil vamp/dominatrix – is destructive. It destroys not only the Professor, when Lady Purple comes to life by literally sucking the life out of him, but also Lady Purple herself, who, at the moment of her apparent liberation, is merely beginning to act out the self-destructive fantasy he has programmed into her.

Perhaps the twentieth-century writer who best captures the ambiguities of the Pygmalion story is Robert Graves, in a mirrored pair of poems. ‘Galatea and Pygmalion’ (P26b) seems at first glance to embody the misogynistic view of the story, painting Galatea as a sexually demonic ‘woman monster’ who betrays her creator by fornication with others. A closer reading suggests an ironic sympathy for Galatea’s rebellion against her ‘greedy’ and ‘lubricious’ creator, and a hint that the poem is not so much about sex as about art: the way the successful work of art inevitably escapes the control of the ‘jealous artist’ who tries to control and limit its meanings. ‘Pygmalion to Galatea’ (P26a), by contrast, is clearly a poem of successful love. Graves takes the traditional motif of Pygmalion listing the qualities of his ideal woman, but restores the balance of power by making Pygmalion’s list a series of requests, to which Galatea graciously consents, sealing the bargain with ‘an equal kiss’. In its implication that Pygmalion and Galatea can have a free and equal loving relationship, this is perhaps the one unequivocally positive modern version of the love story.

Pygmalion the educator: the Shavian tradition

While some writers have read the creator/creation relationship of Pygmalion and Galatea as an archetype of male/female relationships, others have read it as a metaphor for class differences and education. This reading goes back to Caxton (P5), who saw the Ovidian story as a metaphor for a lower-class woman transformed by an upper-class educator into a lady and a potential wife. William Hazlitt may have had the Caxton reading in mind when he gave the ironic title *Liber Amoris; or, The New Pygmalion* to an account of his tragicomic infatuation with his landlady’s daughter, who notably failed to be transformed. On a more intellectual level, eighteenth-century philosophers and scientists (as Carr 1960 explains) were fascinated by the idea of the ‘animated statue’ as a thought-experiment in human perception and learning: if a marble statue could be brought to life with a fully developed but entirely blank mind, how would it see the world and how would it develop?

The classic treatment of the story as a fable of education and class is Bernard Shaw’s comedy *Pygmalion* (P24), but Shaw may have been influenced by an earlier comic version in Tobias Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle* (P11). He joked that ‘Smollett had got hold of my plot’, but admitted that the story might have unconsciously stuck in his mind from reading it as a boy (Holroyd 1989: 334–5).

In Smollett’s version, Peregrine Pickle picks up a beggar-girl on the road and, with some new clothes and a hasty education in polite manners and conversation, passes her off as a lady. The episode is a joke and a piece of practical social

criticism, the rebellious and misogynistic Peregrine demonstrating how very shallow are the external accomplishments which separate a fine lady from a beggar. Eventually the (nameless) pupil exposes herself by her 'inveterate habit of swearing', and Peregrine, now bored with the joke, is happy to marry her off to his valet.

In Shaw's version, the phonetician Henry Higgins, to win a bet, passes off the Cockney flower-girl Eliza Doolittle as a princess merely by teaching her how to speak with an upper-class accent. Shaw, like Smollett, uses the story partly to satirise the English class system and its obsession with proper speech. But, more seriously than Smollett, he also faces the morality of the Pygmalion/Galatea relationship. Higgins has his own kind of idealism: 'you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul.' But in his enthusiasm for the experiment – as his mother and housekeeper point out – he has given no thought to Eliza as a person, or what will happen to her when the experiment is over and she is stranded in a class limbo, with an upper-class accent and tastes but no income or marketable skills. Eliza/Galatea's transformation to full humanity is not complete until she rebels against the patronising Higgins and walks out to lead her own independent life. In his epilogue Shaw explains why Eliza finally marries the amiably dim Freddy rather than Higgins: 'Galatea never does quite like Pygmalion: his relation to her is too godlike to be altogether agreeable.'

Shaw's determinedly anti-romantic conclusion, however, goes against comic convention and the dynamics of the Ovidian story. Even in the original 1912 London production Shaw was infuriated when the actors played the last scene to suggest that Higgins was in love with Eliza; the 1938 film hinted at a final romantic union of the hero and heroine, and the 1958 musical adaptation *My Fair Lady* made it explicit. The same 'happy ending' was imposed on a more recent film version of the story, *Pretty Woman* (1990), in which Pygmalion is a wealthy businessman and Galatea a prostitute; here, however, the real metamorphosis is not the heroine's social rise but the softening into humanity of the stony-hearted tycoon. Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* (1980), about the mutual transformation of a burnt-out English tutor and a working-class pupil, has a more open ending, leaving a question mark not only over the characters' future but also over whether Rita's education is entirely positive – the tutor, in a moment of dismay at what he has done, recalls 'a little Gothic number called *Frankenstein*'.

As a result of Shaw's play Pygmalion has become a common image in the study of education and psychology (a classic educational study, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, is based on the Shavian idea that pupils' achievements depend on teachers' expectations), as well as in computing and cybernetics (a recent pamphlet inquires 'Internet: Which Future for Organised Knowledge, Frankenstein or Pygmalion?'). In Richard Powers's 1995 novel *Galatea 2.2* a computer scientist and a novelist, for a bet, try to educate a computer program (codenamed 'Helen') to pass an exam in English literature. In the end Helen, having become

sufficiently human to be aware of her own limitations, shuts herself down, like Gilbert's Galatea returning to her pedestal. The science-fictional and real-life possibilities of the relationship between human beings and mechanical intelligence suggest that the Pygmalion legend will continue to develop over the next century.

Notes

- 1 Reinhold notes that an alternative eighteenth-century name for the statue was Elissa or Elise, which possibly inspired Shaw's Eliza Doolittle. The name Galatea was borrowed from another Ovidian character, the sea-nymph unwillingly courted by the Cyclops Polyphemus in *Met.*, 13; the two characters are occasionally confused, just as Pygmalion is sometimes confused with his namesake, the tyrannical king of Tyre in Virgil's *Aeneid* (Rousseau, for instance, locates his Pygmalion in Tyre rather than Cyprus).
- 2 Brome is alluding to a story usually told of the painter Zeuxis, that, commissioned to paint Helen of Troy, he put together a composite portrait with the eyes of one model, the forehead of another, and so on.
- 3 Gilbert's version was in turn parodied in the 1884 musical comedy *Adonis* (which despite its title is primarily a version of Pygmalion). Here the sexes are reversed, as a female sculptor creates and brings to life a handsome young man; pursued by the sculptor, her patron, and other lovelorn women, the harried Adonis finally opts to return to marble and hang a 'Hands Off' notice round his neck.