

The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea

from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*:

Pygmalion had seen them, spending their lives in wickedness, and, offended by the failings that nature gave the female heart, he lived as a bachelor, without a wife or partner for his bed. But, with wonderful skill, he carved a figure, brilliantly, out of snow-white ivory, no mortal woman, and fell in love with his own creation. He marvels: and passion, for this bodily image, consumes his heart. Often, he runs his hands over the work, tempted as to whether it is flesh or ivory, not admitting it to be ivory. he kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned; and speaks to it; and holds it, and imagines that his fingers press into the limbs, and is afraid lest bruises appear from the pressure.

The day of Venus's festival came...when Pygmalion, having made his offering, stood by the altar, and said, shyly: "If you can grant all things, you gods, I wish as a bride to have..." and not daring to say "the girl of ivory" he said "one like my ivory girl." Golden Venus, for she herself was present at the festival, knew what the prayer meant, and as a sign of the gods' fondness for him, the flame flared three times, and shook its crown in the air. When he returned, he sought out the image of his girl, and leaning over the couch, kissed her. She felt warm: he pressed his lips to her again, and also touched her breast with his hand. The ivory yielded to his touch, and lost its hardness, altering under his fingers....The lover is stupefied, and joyful, but uncertain, and afraid he is wrong, reaffirms the fulfillment of his wishes, with his hand, again, and again.

Thomas Bulfinch. "Pygmalion." *Age of Fable*. Vols. I & II: Stories of Gods and Heroes. 1913.

PYGMALION saw so much to blame in women that he came at last to abhor the sex, and resolved to live unmarried. He was a sculptor, and had made with wonderful skill a statue of ivory, so beautiful that no living woman came anywhere near it. It was indeed the perfect semblance of a maiden that seemed to be alive, and only prevented from moving by modesty. His art was so perfect that it concealed itself and its product looked like the workmanship of nature. Pygmalion admired his own work, and at last fell in love with the counterfeit creation. Oftentimes he laid his hand upon it as if to assure himself whether it were living or not, and could not even then believe that it was only ivory. He caressed it, and gave it presents such as young girls love,—bright shells and polished stones, little birds and flowers of various hues, beads and amber. He put raiment on its limbs, and jewels on its fingers, and a necklace about its neck. To the ears he hung earrings, and strings of pearls upon the breast. Her dress became her, and she looked not less charming than when unattired. He laid her on a couch spread with cloths of Tyrian dye, and called her his wife, and put her head upon a pillow of the softest feathers, as if she could enjoy their softness.

The festival of Venus was at hand—a festival celebrated with great pomp at Cyprus. Victims were offered, the altars smoked, and odor of incense filled the air. When Pygmalion had performed his part in the solemnities, he stood before the altar and timidly said, "Ye gods, who can do all things, give me, I pray you, for my wife"—he dared not say "my ivory virgin," but said instead—"one like my ivory virgin." Venus, who was present at the festival, heard him and knew the thought he would have uttered; and as an omen of her favor, caused the flame on the altar to shoot up thrice in a fiery point into the air. When he returned home, he went to see his statue, and leaning over the couch, gave a kiss to the mouth. It seemed to be warm. He pressed its lips again, he laid his hand upon the limbs; the ivory felt soft to his touch and yielded to his fingers like the wax of Hymettus. While he stands astonished and glad, though doubting, and fears he may be mistaken, again and again with a lover's ardor he touches the object of his hopes. It was indeed alive! The veins when pressed yielded to the finger and again resumed their roundness. Then at last the votary of Venus found words to thank the goddess, and pressed his lips upon lips as real as his own. The virgin felt the kisses and blushed, and opening her timid eyes to the light, fixed them at the same moment on her lover. Venus blessed the nuptials she had formed, and from this union Paphos was born, from whom the city, sacred to Venus, received its name.

Pygmalion

Albert G. Miller (1945)

Pygmalion thought that women were a great abomination.
What little charm they had, he thought, was always on vacation.
He swore he'd never say "I do" before the bridal altar
And said he'd rather hammer stones than wear a husband's halter.

He took a block of ivory and many months he sculpted,
And what he had when he got done impressed him so he gulped.
For Pyg had carved a woman, an extremely lovely creature,
And doggone realistic, every hillock, curve, and feature.

The figure was his masterpiece. He kissed it and caressed it
And gave it pearls and emeralds, but first of course, he dressed it.
He spoke of her as "Mrs." and he played the good provider.
He tucked her into bed at night and hopped right in beside her.

The folks at Venus' Festival heard young Pygmalion urgin'
The Goddess to create a woman like his ivory virgin.
He rated high with Venus, so she simply up and took
Her wand and mumbled something, and said, "Go right home and look.

But why go any further? I would be undignified,
For Venus blessed the nuptials, and the family multiplied.
Now this is pretty fiction, but don't let your Mrs. catch you
In the parlor after midnight making sheep's-eyes at a statue.

from "The New Pygmalion or the Statue's Choice"

Andrew Lang (1911)

O maiden, in mine image made!
O grace that shouldst endure!
While temples fall, and empires fade,
Immaculately pure:
Exchange this endless life of art
For beauty that must die,
And blossom with a beating heart
Into mortality!
Change, golden tresses of her hair,
To gold that turns to gray;
Change, silent lips, forever fair,
To lips that have their day!
Oh, perfect arms, grow soft with life,
Wax warm, ere cold ye wane;
Wake, woman's heart, from peace to strife,
To love, to joy, to pain!

Pygmalion

William Bell Scott (1923)

"MISTRESS of gods and men! I have been thine
From boy to man, and many a myrtle rod
Have I made grow upon thy sacred sod,
Nor ever have I pass'd thy white shafts nine
Without some votive offering for the shrine,
Carv'd beryl or chas'd bloodstone;—aid me now,
And I will live to fashion for thy brow
Heart-breaking priceless things: oh, make her mine."

Venus inclin'd her ear, and through the Stone
Forthwith slid warmth like spring through sapling-
stems,
And lo, the eyelid stirr'd, beneath had grown
The tremulous light of life, and all the hems
Of her zon'd peplos shook. Upon his breast
She sank, by two dread gifts at once oppress'd.

Galatea Again

Genevieve Taggard (1929)

Let me be marble, marble once again:
Go from me slowly, like an ebbing pain,
Great mortal feuds of moving flesh and blood:
This mouth so bruised, serene again,—and set
In its old passive changelessness, the rude
Wild crying face, the frantic eyes—forget
The little human shuddering interlude.

And if you follow and confront me there,
O Sons of Men, though you cry out and groan
And plead with me to take you for my own
And clutch my dress as a child, I shall not care,

But only turn on you a marble stare
And stun you with the quiet gaze of stone.

Galatea Before the Mirror

Claribel Alegria (1993)

my perfection isn't mine
you invented it

I am only the mirror
in which you preen yourself
and for that very reason
I despise you.