

**MARSTON'S *THE*
METAMORPHOSIS OF
PYGMALION'S IMAGE:
THE OVIDIAN MYTH
REVISITED**

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Renaissance rewritings of the Ovidian myths constitute quite an interesting subject for critical studies. Their particularities and deviations from the original versions tellingly speak about their authors' ideology concerning poetry and social organization. Marston's version of the story of Pygmalion's image transforms Ovid's romantic narration into a violently sexual satire against the Platonic conception of love. The female statue becomes a symbol of the conventional Petrarchan beloved and Pygmalion himself embodies the love poet. Hating women's imperfections and fearing love, he models an image of the ideal woman, adapted to his own needs and desires. She is also the Elizabethan prototype of a wife, who utters no words and whose existence is framed by men and according to men's needs. Her beauty's function is that of reasserting the worth of her creator's art.

Physically, her body obeys to the predicaments of Petrarchan blazons and the hardness of her ivory heart alludes to the Petrarchan mistresses' cruelty.

Marston's epyllion ironically deals with the Platonic idea that true love must be satisfied by the mere beholding of the beloved's image. He also directs his criticism towards the Petrarchan poets' admiring love for their own creations, which is a reflection of their Narcissist love. The sardonic description of Pygmalion's erotic attempts to sexually enjoy his sculpture endows the myth with a tinge of homoeroticism and self-love that symbolises Petrarchan poetic arrogance.

In the tenth book of the *Metamorphosis* Ovid introduces the myth of Pygmalion as one of the stories told by Orpheus after having lost his wife for a second time. The poet and musician, surrounded by a group of wild animals and by different kinds of fowls, pleads his Muse to inspire a song dedicated to those young men who were loved by the gods and young women who deserved the rage of their punishments for their lust. The story of Pygmalion, therefore, appears, together with that of Ganymede or Jacintus, as one of the examples of the gods' love to male mortals. With this myth, Ovid intends to instil the love and respect for their gods into the people. The transformation of the ivory

sculpture of a beautiful woman into a real human being is presented by the Latin poet as a reward for Pygmalion's confidence in Venus' might. After having participated in the celebrations of Venus' festivity, the most important event of the year in Cyprus, the sculptor prays before the goddess' altar that he can find an identical wife to the image he had created. Ovid wants to emphasise the youth's respect for Venus by presenting him cautious, not daring to require a miraculous transformation:

.... Vouchsafe,
 O Gods, if all things you can grant, my bride
 Shall be' —he dared not say my ivory girl—
 "The living likeness of my ivory girl."¹

Venus then carries out the metamorphosis as a display of sympathy for those who acknowledge her power.

The transformation narrated in this story, of a female stone image into a flesh and blood woman, contrasts with the tale Orpheus tells in the preceding lines. The Propoetides, "obscene" women, according to Ovid (10. 287), dared deny Venus' divinity and were punished with the opposite of the metamorphosis of Pygmalion's sculpture; they were turned from women into "stones of flint" (10. 292). Not only is the Latin poet concerned with religious teaching, but he also deals with the controversial commonplace of the worth of artistic creation. He censors the disappearance of the barriers between art and reality and mocks the sculptor for perceiving his work of art as a real being. The excessive cares Pygmalion offers the ivory woman are sometimes rendered ridiculous: "The firm new flesh beneath his fingers yields, / And fears the limbs may darken with a bruise" (311-312). In the whole passage that describes how he woos the senseless image, his love is treated as a kind of schizophrenia: "Kisses he gives and thinks they are returned" (309). Simultaneously, he praises the power of art and imagination to modify reality. Pygmalion himself experiences a transformation by art because he stops rejecting womankind when he succeeds in creating the ideal wife. Apart from meaning a criticism of the exaggerated emphasis on art and imagination over reality, this passage stands as a metaphor of dainty lovers who satisfy their anxieties by means of fantasy and turns out to be an ironic mock of the courting of arrogant women who deny sexual encounters. But Ovid is not just the pragmatist he shows to be in these lines for he also displays all the subtlety of his verse to delight the reader with the erotic description of the beloved's nakedness and of the first encounter between the two lovers once she has become human. In general, he conceived the myth from a sympathetic point of view. Although his text is the most

¹Translation by Geoffrey Miles (2000: 346-349).

ancient known source of the story, similar tales had also been written by the Christian Greeks Clement of Alexandria and Arnobius of Sicca; they employed them as negative examples with the intention of denouncing the harmful effects of art and of censoring pagan idolatry.

Marston's account of the myth preserves to a great extent both the Greek and Ovidian attitudes, though shaped according to Elizabethan parameters. He borrows the most critical elements from these two traditions and transforms them into a harsh satire against the poetic uses of his time or about several other subjects of controversy. This is in general the Renaissance tendency to apprehend the story; authors as John Pettie in his "Pygmalion's friend and his image" (1576) or Richard Brathwait in his satire "On Dotage" (1621) also take it as a vehicle to criticise human vice. Their versions have in common the sordid narration of Pygmalion's relationship with a senseless being; far from being referred to as a romantic episode, as Ovid's subtle verse succeeds in doing despite some ironic moments, his love for the statue appears as a kind of perversion in all of them.

Marston's erotic epyllion is certainly the most original one because of its ambiguity and powerful diction, in spite of the fact that it was considered pornographic by his contemporaries. He justifies the violence of the poem's eroticism arguing that he had intended to create a satirical parody of contemporary poetry, probably of the epyllion and Petrarchan sonnet sequences:

...deem'st that in sad seriousness I write
 Such nasty stuff as is Pygmalion,
 Such maggot-tainted lewd corruption?
 Hence, thou misjudging censor: know I wrote
 Those idle rhymes to note the odious spot
 And blemish that deforms the lineaments
 Of modern poesy's habiliments. (Satire 6)

However, the poem maintains a balance between seriousness and humour that questions Marston's real intention when writing such lascivious verse. The conflicts of representation of the female body by means of the rhetoric of desire that undermine Petrarchan poetry appear to be the main subject of reflection in the epyllion.

In the dedication "To his Mistress" the poet declares his intention to persuade her to grant sexual favours to him. He argues that his anxieties are literary, better than fleshy, because he does not want his verse to describe fanciful events in the manner of Petrarchism. His Muse inspires him lascivious lines because he does not have real experiences to be references for them. A parallelism is established between the expression of affected-invented love for ethereal women which come into being only in the poets' imaginations —for

which Pygmalion's passion stands as a metaphor— and Marston's compelled inclination to deal with love in hyperbolic terms. Marston, then, does not pray his beloved to satisfy his sexual desire, but to perform an active, not figurative—which is Laura's function in Petrarch's sonnets—, role in the inspiration of poetry. Of course, there is some irony in this argumentation because, after all, he demands sex. In the first line he complains of his "wanton Muse," making use of the two main meanings of the adjective, and accuses her not only of lewdness, but also of lack of poetic discipline in bringing forth feigned stories; the beloved's active participation is therefore required to convey reason to the composition:

My wanton Muse lasciviously doth sing
Of sportive love, of lovely dallying.
O beauteous angel, deign thou to infuse
A sprightly wit into my dulled Muse.
I invoke none other saint but thee
To grace the first blooms of my poesy.
Thy favours, like Promethean sacred fire,
In dead and dull conceit can life inspire,
Or, like that rare and rich elixir stone,
Can turn to gold my leaden invention. (1-10)

Though masked under the veil of poetic concern, the must to persuade the beloved to grant sexual favours becomes the main reason for this literary exercise. In line 8, the wish that "dead and dull conceit" could be inspired life by means of her favours mirrors the transformation of Pygmalion's inanimate work of art, carried out by Venus with the main intention to make them celebrate her might by means of performing "that action" she "seeks and ever doth require," as Marston states in line 195. In fact, sex is the first thing they do when they meet each other as two human beings. This narrative echo in line 8 conceals a desire to see his own art, his poetry, also transformed into reality. The beloved is endowed with Venus' power ("Be gracious then, and deign to show in me / The mighty power of thy deity," 11-12) not only to inspire art with life—his verse with lively conceits— but also to grant him the state of sexual satisfaction he needs to write about experienced events by contrast with Petrarchan idealisation of unfulfilled desires. That is why he pleads the lady not to force him to envy Pygmalion (14). And when he be given the material to write about, he will be able to conceive lively poetry: "Then when thy kindness grants me such sweet bliss, / I'll gladly write thy metamorphosis" (15-16).

The metamorphosis of the ivory image, as these lines denote, has been interpreted by Marston as a metaphor of the conquest of the stony Petrarchan mistress. The idea that art and poetry become meaningful activities when they succeed in modifying reality, in "moving" the audience, appear to be the

message of this version of the classical fable. In his *Defense of Poesy*, Philip Sidney enhanced this function of the act of poetic creation: “for these indeed [*poets*] do meerely imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach, and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand” (Kimbrough 1983: 111).

Poetry should be a source of delight and, at the same time, move the passive audience to action. Similarly, Marston emphasises over the course of his poem art's effect as a catalyst of action; Lynn Enterline (2000: 125) calls the reader's attention over the frequent appearance of the Ovidian verb “to move” (*mouere*) to refer to Pygmalion's inability to awaken sympathy (“his dull Image, which no plaints could move,” 78); to define the aim of Pygmalion's prayer (“thus having said, he riseth from the floor...Hoping his prayer to pity moved some power,” 147); to describe the statue's awakening (“he found that warmth, and wished heate / Which might a saint and coldest spirit move,” 220); or to refer to the main aim of Petrarchan poetry (“Tut, women will relent / Whenas they find such moving blandishment,” 173-174).

Apart from being a satire of Petrarchan static love and affected poetic expression, the poem also deals with the Platonic opposition between Art and Nature, appearance versus substance. This view of the myth proceeds from Clement of Alexandria, who censures idolatry and the harmful power of art:

We must, then, approach the statues as closely as we possibly can in order to prove from their appearance that they are inseparably associated with error. For their forms are unmistakably stamped with the characteristic marks of the daemons... Such strength had art to beguile that it became for amorous men guide to the pit of destruction.² (*Exhortation to the Greeks*)

Marston's treatment of the Platonic opposition to art is conflictive. At the beginning of the story Pygmalion appears to deserve censorship because he loves the image, not the bodiless essence of women, as Petrarchan poets, unavoidably, do. Conscious of the many faults of womankind, he creates a representation of what he would like women to be. He makes up his own reality and loves it: “Yet Love at length forced him to know his fate, / And love the shade whose substance he did hate” (5-6). This is for Astrophil, the suffering lover in Sidney's sonnet sequence, the main mistake of worldly love: “what we call Cupid's dart, / An image is, which for our selves we carve” (5. 5-6). Pygmalion's attitude opposes Plato's interpretation of reality as the ethereal substance of which we can only see feigned images. And differs from Bembo's account of virtuous love, that is, love of the inner self instead of physical appearance (*The Book of Courtier* 4). The artist takes advantage of his ability to feign reality and shelters in a world of his own invention. However, despite the

²Translation by Geoffrey Miles (2000: 348-349).

fact that he admires women's image, not their soul, as it is supposed to be the case of Petrarchan poets, his love has parallelisms with theirs. Both adore the product of a subjective interpretation of reality. Though their feelings differ in their targets —the latter love the spirit and Pygmalion the body of women—, their love procedures coincide. The beloved is represented from the male point of view, and she is always an absent presence. Pygmalion's love for a sculpture is conceived as a metaphoric hyperbole of Petrarchan unfruitful passion.

But the material inclinations of his feelings do not constitute the most offensive feature of it. It is his ability to model an own world adapted to his needs what actually enters into conflict not only with the Petrarchan philosophy of love, but also with the Protestant idea of predestination. English Calvinism promulgated human inability to forge their destiny, to change God's plans concerning the Final Judgement of their sins. Men and women were not allowed to work in life for a better end and were doomed to accept a passive role in the trip towards salvation or condemnation. Pygmalion transgresses the role of God the creator. He dares modify reality according to his needs exerting the power to invent a new Nature that Aristotle and Horace ascribed to poets, in opposition to the Platonic theory of divine inspiration (*furor poeticus*). He fulfils Sidney's expectations in *Defense* about the poets' ability to create an original world, reflecting not what it really is but what it should be: "Only the poet, disdainful to be tied to any subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another Nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth" (Kimbrough 1983: 108).

Pygmalion identifies with this conception of the artists' might:

For having wrought in purest ivory
So fair an image of a woman's feature,
That never proudest mortality
Could show so rare and beauteous a creature

...

He was amazed at the wondrous rareness
Of his own workmanship's perfection.
He thought that Nature ne'er produced such fairness... (7-10, 13-15)

This conception of the poets' creative potential contrasts with the poetic humbleness of Petrarchan lovers who, influenced by the Neoplatonic trust in divine inspiration, appeal to their mistresses' motivation to produce verse. Though he conceives an anti-Petrarchan character in this respect, Marston himself appears as one of them in the dedication to his beloved.

Despite this Aristotelic aspect of his persona, Pygmalion embodies the Neoplatonic poetic style. Marston's *Metamorphosis* begins by developing a satiric parody of Petrarchan *clichés* by means of the hyperbole. The stoniness of

the mistress, a conventional motif of complaint referred to her heart's cruelty, is literally interpreted in the poem, and applied to her whole ivory body. The blazon becomes an instrument for criticism; it mocks, on one hand, the Petrarchan fanciful and affected descriptions of their ladies obeying the European canons of beauty and, on the other, their worn out tropes and images. It plays with the sculptor's inability to discern what is natural or artificial establishing parallelisms between the well-known features of Petrarchan mistresses and the outward properties of ivory:

Her breasts like polished ivory appear,
Whose modest mount do bless admiring eye,
And makes him wish for such a pillowbere. (43-45)

Does Marston forget that he is describing a carving of ivory and then turns to this simile driven by convention? He is likely to be mocking lovers' self-deception when they idealise their ladies' bodies in their blazons. Pygmalion's alienation from reality makes him desire such a stony breast for a place where to rest his head on. He also recognises in the brightness of polish the "beams / Which shoot from out the fairness of her eye" (29) and "her amber-coloured, her shining hair" (31). The whiteness of the material from which she was modelled gives her face the paleness of beauty: "Such red and so pure white / Did never bless the eye of mortal sight" (35-36). Redness could be one more element of his fantasy. And when Pygmalion's sight arrives to her pubes, to "Love's pavilion" (50) or Venus' "chiefest mansion" (50), the blazon turns into a parody of poets' ridiculous feigned decency when describing such an important element for love: "There he would wink, and winking look again; / Both eyes and thoughts would gladly there remain" (53-54). Marston compares their affectation to that of devout women who pretend not to look at what provokes sinful thoughts in them:

Whoever saw the subtle city dame
In sacred church, when her pure thoughts should pray,
Peer through her fingers, so to hide her shame,
When that her eye her mind would fain bewray.
So would he view, and wink, and view again. (55-59)

Marston censors the hypocrisy of the conventional resource to elude describing these parts but not without mentioning their existence. Instead of simply skipping them, poets usually call the readers' attention to the narrative ellipsis decorum obliges them to perform. In *The Countess' of Pembroke Arcadia* (2. 11), Sidney apologises for having to omit the best parts in his description of Philoclea's beauty: "Loth, I must leave his chief resort. / For such a use the world hath gotten, / The best things still must be forgotten." Similarly, Marston mocks the ladies' affected shame: "He wondered that she blushed not when his eye / Saluted those same parts of secrecy" (61-62); as it happens to be

the reaction of Sidney's muse when, after describing some of Stella's qualities, she is required to sing about her best attributes: "Yet ah, my maiden Muse doth blush to tell the best" (77. 14).

Another subject of criticism in the epyllion is Petrarchan poets' Narcissist love for the written images they themselves create; marked by the outward expression of heterosexual love, their passionate verse has the only purpose of claiming for the recognition of artistic worth. Mistresses' representations do not embody real ladies, but the result of the artists' creative efforts to stand out for their genius. Marston places continuous emphasis on Pygmalion's authorship and repeats comments such as: "And thus, enamoured, dotes on his own art" (71) or "he finds how he is graced / By his own work" (172-173). The perfect correspondence between the two bodies, when Pygmalion amorously embraces the ivory sculpture, alludes to the unilateral character of their relationship. Her members are continuations of his because he has created them:

His eyes her eyes kindly encountered,
His breast her breast oft joined close unto,
His arms' embracements oft she suffered-
Hands, arms, eyes, tongue, lips, and all parts did woo.
His thigh with hers, his knee played with her knee.
A happy comfort when all parts agree. (97-102)

It is evident that all parts agree because all of them are coordinated by the same person. And when he goes to bed with the senseless woman, her passivity is taken for granted as the meaningful silence of the Petrarchan mistress — whose existence, not active presence— is all the poet requires to carry out the representation of his poetic abilities. Marston ironically uses the plural pronoun to denounce the unbalanced relationship: "Now they dally, kiss, embrace together" (161). It is not them, but he, who perform all these amorous actions.

The complexity of this version of the Ovidian myth of Pygmalion lays on the ambiguity of the satire. Because, on one hand, Marston intends to distance himself from Petrarchan poetic conventions by means of a parodying description of the youth's pathological love, but on the other, he insists on identifying himself with this discourse. He envies Pygmalion's freedom to enjoy his lady's beauties: "O that my mistress were an image too, / That I might blameless her perfections view!" (65-66). He acknowledges the advantages of the Petrarchan free manipulation of the lady's body. However, he explicitly laughs at those lovers who assume the Platonic conception of love, that is, love without sex:

I oft have smiled to see the foolery
Of some sweet youths, who seriously protest

That love respects not actual luxury,
But only joys to dally, sport and jest. (109-112)

Because he knows that "Love's eyes in viewing never have their fill" (42).

Apart from these changes in the point of view of the narrator that make the reader doubt whether he mocks Petrarchists or he is one of them, the most troublesome passage in the poem is the narration of the metamorphosis of the image into a real woman and of the two lovers' encounter. If Marston wrote an almost pornographic portrait of the sculpture's nakedness and Pygmalion's sexual abuses, once he is dealing with the body of a real woman, his poetry requires the limitations of decorum: "Peace, idle poesy, / Be not obscene, though wanton in thy rhymes." (225-226). Although a sexual intercourse takes place in the course of the poem, the author denies giving a detailed report of what "is not fit reporting" (210). This sudden show of decency makes Lynn Enterline (2000: 138) identify Pygmalion with Marston because, if the former "loathes female substance", the latter "is equally averse to having any truck with it." From the moment she becomes an actual woman, the development of actions in the poem is quickened; the narrator draws the curtain of censorship to avoid having to mention certain facts, and appeals to the readers' imagination to portrait what happened between the lovers:

Let him conceit but what himself would do
When that he had obtained such favour
Of her to whom his thoughts were bound unto,
...
Could he abstain midst such a wanton sporting
From doing that which is not fit reporting?
...
What he would do, the selfsame action
Was not neglected by Pygmalion. (199-201, 209-210, 215-216)

Marston, therefore, unveils at the end of the poem a Petrarchan conception of poetic creation, which has been continuously struggling to dominate the narrative process. Whether he intended to parody the commonplaces of Renaissance poetry or not, he now appears to accept Elizabethan social and stylistic precepts. He finally becomes identifiable with the Petrarchan inability to represent the female body —which is, according to Enterline (2000: 139) "the poem's closing idea."

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