"A Story of Shifting Stone: Pygmalion in the Renaissance"

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The metaphor of living artwork is interestingly appropriate to the history of Ovid's Metamorphoses. The explosion of translation in the Renaissance turned the dusty tomes of Greece and Rome face up once more, but it is for very good reason that the movement is called a "rebirth" rather than a "rediscovery". Even a cursory comparison of early modern English texts and their classical shadows will show how often ancient works display distinctly Anglican features. This is especially visible in Arthur Golding's work with Ovid, where monotheistic piety juts out like an aquiline nose from the pagan pages. Golding provides his own apology for this in his opening epistle to the Earl of Leicester, in which he openly states that "in interpreting theis few I attribute/The things too one, which heathen men to many Gods impute" ("The Epistle", lines 306-307), with the ultimate goal of reinterpreting the Metamorphoses to align with and further the morals and teachings of "the whole true patterne", or Christian scripture (379). It is no surprise, then, that other Renaissance writers also "rebirthed" Pygmalion with a new interpretation for every cultural criticism and moralization. The close ties between the Renaissance disciplines of religion, philosophy, literature, and the sciences allow us to inspect the effects of Ovid's Pygmalion in a wide swath of English culture during the 16th and 17th centuries. By peering into the religious work of Thomas Adams, the scientific-philosophical work of Francis Bacon, and the poetic work of John Marston, we can gain a notion of the interpretations available to Shakespeare's own reincarnation of Pygmalion in The Winter's Tale. Bearing in mind that these works point not to a consistent societal understanding, but rather to a clash of understandings—a dynamic Shakespeare often plays upon, as we shall see with The Winter's Tale, to great dramatic effect—we may also gain an inkling of the Poet's own cultural meta-criticism.

Because it is didactic as well as academic, Renaissance religion provides a context of broad cultural interpretation. The clergy were disseminators as well as thinkers, and their ideas had a long reach. Take the sermons of Thomas Adams in the early 17th century, which demonstrate a series of convenient appropriations of the Pygmalion story rather than a steady perspective on it. Adams seems to use the popularity Pygmalion's tale as an endless parable, adding new (and often opposing) morals to each iteration. Contextually, Adams wrote in an increasingly iconoclastic culture, in which Protestants began to

extend the definition of idolatry until, as Margaret Aston observes, it "became a household word in the sixteenth century" (Lee 52). As the 16th century continued, the Anglican church, and thereby the English government, declaimed more and more fiercely the Catholic interpretations of the Eucharist as a vessel for the presence of Christ and holy statues as vessels for the presence of saints (51). In two of his sermons, Thomas Adams takes up myth of Pygmalion to cast down idolatry. "The Black Devil" reprimands the apostate for the way they "deck the world, as the Israelites did their calf; and then superstitiously dote upon it, as Pigmalion on his carved stone" (Adams 41). In "The White Devil", Adams directs this declamation of impious dotage against the hypocrite who "Pigmalion-like…dotes on his own carved and painted piece" (30). This latter passage criticizes the false "statue" of themselves that hypocrites create, much as we might criticize a deceptive "mask". In both cases, the interpretation of Pygmalion is explicit, demonstrating the direct influence of iconoclasm on the English understanding of ancient myth.

Religious interpretations of Pygmalion were not confined to the negative, however. In another pair of sermons, Adams uses the myth of Pygmalion to illustrate the natural love of Creator for creation rather than the impious dotage of idolaters. It is "natural" for man "to love the work of his own hands," just as Pygmalion does, for God Himself "loves us…because his own hands have fashioned us" (Adams 367). Pygmalion, then, represents both pride and proper love, the practice of idolatry and the paradigm of Creation— all from the mouth of a single clergyman. Interpretation, we see here, tends to flow according to the message rather than the myth, a quality not exclusive to Adams nor confined to the pulpit.

From the realm of philosophy, Sir Francis Bacon appropriates the myth of Pygmalion as well as the moralisation of the iconoclasts in his critique of philosophy and the sciences. For him, the true sin of idolatry is the love of a lifeless image, a soulless body; philosophers that love their own pure abstraction, their syllogism that lacks "the 'soul' of matter", are as guilty of sacrilege as the pagans and the idol worshipers (Tillman 71). Religion and philosophy are not as separate in Bacon's work as he sometimes professes, Tillman argues. Bacon easily extends the religious critique of false love into a scientific critique of false learning, which he represents through Pygmalion's false image. Bacon's contextualization of Pygmalion is

useful to us not because it accounts for the "idolatry" of philosophy, but because it gives a philosophical account of idolatry. Our goal is to understand the versions of Pygmalion available to Shakespeare, and while it seems unlikely that the playwright would steer his subtle commentary toward the champions of syllogism, Bacon grasps at the root of idolatry much like Shakespeare himself does.

Both Adams and Bacon incorporate Pygmalion into their didactic. (It is hard to say they incorporate Ovid's Pygmalion, for ownership here seems either transient or non-existent.) But to see how the story of Pygmalion fares in the realm of literature, the womb in which Ovid originally conceived it, we turn to the satire of John Marston.

Marston is the first of our examined authors to emphasize a visceral, rather than a religious or intellectual, perversion in Pygmalion. What Ovid originally wrote in a largely romantic tone, Marston casts as sexual vice and perversion. This "maggot-tainted lewd corruption," as Marston calls it, is satire directed against the Petrarchan attitude of romance (Santano 261). The story of Pygmalion is used to amplify the criticism; the tale of a marble lady literalizes the Petrarchan ideal of a stony-hearted, indifferent mistress to be wooed and

won. The absurdity of the ideal when incarnate, complete with polished stone bosoms, lifts Marston's criticism into the realm of hyperbole. But though Marston's interpretation of Pygmalion is guided by his message—a satire on Petrarchan love and, more broadly, "the swaggering humour of these times" (Marston 211)—the poet exhibits a real loyalty to this interpretation. His poem demonstrates a consistency that Adams lacks and an interest in the myth's original context that Bacon overlooks. Whereas Adams wields the myth of Pygmalion as a convenient popular reference and Bacon extends it into a useful analogy, Marston holds it up as a mirror to Petrarchan love. His understanding of Petrarch and of Pygmalion are almost the same; the two are nearly interchangeable. Marston provides a serious criticism that ranks among the most significant Renaissance interpretations of Pygmalion.

Such a variety of interpretations float on the fringes of Shakespeare's stage, each of them echoed in many tiny pockets of early modern England. "Doting upon one's own work" became as commonplace a condemnation as the iconoclastic aversion to "idols". The depiction of physically perverted love resounds in Chapman's Monsieur d'Olive, where the "soulless image" is a corpse

rather than carved marble. But there is one conspicuously absent interpretation that we notice precisely because we invented it. Marston and Chapman satirically reprimand the perversion of Pygmalion's passion for something that is part stone, part himself. But his over-controlling character, which is one of our primary focuses today, is only shallowly criticized. To most Renaissance men, the issue with Pygmalion's desire was deviancy, not domination. Any trace of a feministic critique of Pygmalion is absent in Marston and opposed outright in Brathwaite, who discourages Pygmalion's vanity in young men only so that the lady that they choose "may be worthy of [their] embrace" (Brathwaite 262). It is little surprise that not much criticism of male dominance arose from a society still largely centred upon primogeniture. Shakespeare is one of the first to give any altitude to the feminist attitude, though we must take care to bring his Renaissance attitude forward rather than retroactively inserting the modern. He does this partly in The Winter's Tale through a version of the critique of the Petrarchan lover, which we are already familiar with through Marston. But Shakespeare proceeds to take a closer look at Pygmalion's overall evolution, playing with the problems of the iconoclasts and ideas of

idolatry, the rational uncertainties of which he ultimately turns into a poignant cultural analysis. Having tallied the total number of new appendages to the Pygmalion, he reimagines the myth by recasting the characters of Carver and Image.

The language of Marston's "The Metamorphosis of Pigmalions Image" viciously and directly satirizes the Petrarchan lover for his "feigned decency" as well as his idolatry, which parrots that of "the peevish Papists" (Marston 206). Marston's poem criticizes and in a sense punishes the Petrarchan lover. Shakespeare's play, on the other hand, simply shows the Petrarchan lover punished and criticized. The sense of judgement is more difficult to locate in The Winter's Tale than in Marston's poem because the part of the Petrarchan lover, or Pygmalion, is split throughout the play, as is the part of the statue. Until the fifth act, the play's connection to any iteration of the Pygmalion myth is tenuous. There are a couple of telling instances: before Time trots out on stage and dismisses sixteen years, Leontes' jealousy is certainly a dominating force, and the sudden shift where his suspicion is sparked reveals his preference for a cool and passive mistress instead of Hermione's active force. "Too hot, too hot!" (1.2.139) are the first lines of

burning jealousy from Leontes, who thereafter stops his ears when he cannot stop Hermione's mouth, turning his heart to stone to resist the reasoning of his queen of flesh and blood. For whereas Pygmalion's statue was stone-lipped and wordless, Hermione speaks volumes in her defence—only Leontes does not hear. When Hermione says, "My life stands in the level of your dreams," Leontes responds, "Your actions are my dreams" (3.2.86-88). This speaks not to Leontes' ability to create or shape Hermione—she is innocent quite independent of his dreams—but to his inability to reshape, or allow to be reshaped, his own bitter fantasies.

Furthermore, Hermione's lines throughout the first three acts reveal far too self-aware a statue. When speaking to Leontes before his fit of envy, she paints her passive role in very acute language:

I prithee tell me. Cram 's with praise, and make 's

As fat as tame things. One good deed dying tongueless

Slaughters a thousand waiting upon that.

Our praises are our wages. You may ride 's

With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs... (1.2.18-21)

Her verbiage suggests comparison with slavish livestock, but the speech itself reveals her insight into her position as his queen. She plays the game of clueless-ness well enough to show her cleverness. Again, when she stands on trial before Leontes, she expresses the power he holds over her, calling Leontes' favour "the crown and comfort of my life" (3.2.101). Quite paradoxically, Hermione states her helplessness so lucidly that we are assured of her awareness. Her character avoids the classical role of Pygmalion's statue just as Leontes' does the role of Pygmalion. Leontes finds in his wife not the malleable marble figure of his desires, but a recalcitrant character that does not, in fact, alter to fit his unhappy dreams.

The first three acts in The Winter's Tale construct the characters of Leontes and Hermione with some small resemblances to Pygmalion and his carving. Marston's criticism of the worshipful lover with his idealistic construct is somewhat worked into Leontes, though it is tweaked by madness—for though the king ostensibly desires Hermione to

fit his definition of a perfect, faithful wife, his determination to condemn her suggests that he more truly desires her to fit his suspicions. And yet what sort of Carver is Leontes, who cannot change his wife, nor even his own mind? And what sort of Statue is Hermione, who is so resistant to the chisel of her husband's accusations, and so aware of her own shape and character? The complexity of these two characters and their incongruity with the Ovidian myth, or even Marston's reimagining of it, prevent predictability as well as certainty. As Act V builds toward the reanimation of the Statue, the connections between Shakespeare's characters and their classical counterparts become even more obscured. The playwright, it seems, refuses give his audience the sense of direct judgement that Marston provides or the didactic that Adams demonstrates. Instead, he uses the uncertainty of the fifth act as a means of exploring the clash of ideals and understandings in the 16th century, addressing most especially the issue of idolatry and iconoclasm through the vehicle of his reimagined Pygmalion narrative.

When at last, after the speedy passage of sixteen years, we are presented with Hermione's statue on stage, we are caught by a handful of realizations and doubts. First we see accented, by the statue's steady posture, the supreme patience that Hermione demonstrated with her poignant analysis of her position in Act I and with her attitude of acceptance and even "pity" (3.2.131) when she stood at the very doorway of a death sentence in Act III. Then we are seized by uncertainty as to whether we truly behold a living Hermione or a statue. As Mueller says, "The audience is expected to be…naïve about the resurrection of Hermione," which comes as a sort of "rude awakening" (229). He argues that the signs that Hermione still lives are "necessarily lost on a naïve spectator," one who has not read the play at least several times, which we can presume to encompass nearly all of Shakespeare's original audience (227). This edge of uncertainty provides for more than just dramatic bombast, however. We lack the crucial knowledge of whether or not the statue has a soul—whether Leontes and Perdita stand in awe of Hermione's presence or merely of her absence.

The question of presence is critical to the 16th century cultural critiques that appropriate Pygmalion. By suspending the certainty of Hermione's presence, Shakespeare is able to suspend the audience's judgements on the subjects of idolatry and morbidity of love. Jongsook Lee observes in an essay on

presence, Pygmalion, and iconoclasm in Shakespeare:

Whether images were numinous or dead, whether pictures and statues of the saints and the Virgin were vivacious or inert…whether the real presence of Christ was in the bread and wine of the Eucharist—all come down to that initial question about how to imagine the dialectic between immanence and transcendence. (51)

Marston's criticism of the Petrarchan lover also rests upon the question of presence. To Marston, Pygmalion's suit to "his remorsles image, dum and mute" (Marston 206) is a foolish result of loving a construct—an image that is separate from any real substance, following the Petrarchan habit of abstracting a woman. The artistic representation of a woman, Marston concludes, is not a woman at all, and therefore to worship the representation is tantamount to idolatry. Adam's idea of idolatry is, quite simply, the worship of lifeless matter. Shakespeare, however, pauses upon this point in the final scene of the play.

Julio Romano, whose skill, like Pygmalion's, allows him to "beguile Nature of her custom" (5.2.105-106), creates a statue so perfect that it stirs Leontes with love and Perdita with worship.

Social sentiment was increasingly inclined to condemn both of these in its war on icons. However, if we recall Bacon's identification of idolatry and false love as that which fixates upon an image "without the 'soul' of matter", we see that Shakespeare has left out the most important bit of information from the accusers' case. When Perdita first bows and implores a blessing, does she do so at the foot of a statue or of her mother? And when Leontes attempts to kiss the ruddy lips, does he lean toward his wife or merely her likeness? Much like the audience, the two find themselves unable to believe that they behold a mere statue—for "What fine chisel/Could ever yet cut breath?" (5.3.97-98)—and yet unable to reconcile the alternative they faintly perceive. "Let no man mock me," says Leontes (5.3.98); "do not say 'tis superstition," insists Perdita (5.3.50). For as long as the audience is forced to suspend judgement on the statue and Hermione's presence, it must also suspend judgment on Perdita and Leontes, the idolater and the Petrarchan lover.

Some will think that this moment of suspended judgement requires an over-dumb audience, and that it is quite obvious early on that Hermione never actually died. If this is the case, then Shakespeare's message to us becomes a

little clearer: what looks to be a statue truly is a woman, filled with soul rather than stone. Marston, Adams, the iconoclastic Englishman: all are mistaken. But Shakespeare is not in the habit of giving plain messages, and a good production ought to hold the non-dogmatic intellect in at least partial suspension. That uncertainty serves as a catalyst for the reconciliation of England's ideological culture war, but it is only accomplished through the rife uncertainty of characters. If we look back upon our earlier conundrum of who is what in this appropriation of Pygmalion, we find ourselves even further from an answer than before.

Leontes, who began to look a bit like our Pygmalion when he held Hermione helpless at her trial, now seems far too clueless to be the Carver. He is surprised by the wrinkles beneath her eyes and taken aback by her beauty. He exclaims, "Does not the stone rebuke me/For being more stone than it?" (5.3.43-44). Though he plays the role of old bachelor like Pygmalion does, he shows himself to be something far distant. It is clear that Leontes did not shape the statue to fulfil his desire; rather, his desire has been shaped to fit the statue.

Paulina, not Leontes, demonstrates the power to shape the other characters after the sixteen year intermission. It is she who echoes Ovid's Pygmalion when she speaks of Hermione's perfection as "unparalleled" by anything the world could contrive (5.1.16-18) and insists, "There is none worthy,/Respecting her that's gone," (5.1.42-43). She holds Leontes to a vow of bachelorship and reminds him regularly of Hermione's virtues, preparing and shaping his love so that she can bring Hermione back to him. Before performing her ritual of reanimation, she admits to the enthralled Leontes, "The stone is mine" (5.3.70).

But Paulina does not only play the part of the now many-faced Carver. In the reanimation scene, Paulina adopts a Venus-like role, both in the power she demonstrates and in the match she makes. It is she who binds Leontes to Hermione again in love, with something between a blessing and a warning: "Do not shun her/Until you see her die again," (5.3.131-132). Moreover, it is she who (like Venus in Ovid's myth) bids Hermione, "Be stone no more," (5.3.125). Whether we are meant to believe, for a moment, that Hermione was really resurrected from stone matters little; a very real change comes to Hermione. The power of action, which she had been stripped of in her trial before

Leontes, is restored her. No longer does her husband wield the only potent voice and complete control. The next command that Hermione is given by Paulina is "Approach" (5.3.125). And, quite unlike Marston's statue that "suffered" the embrace of her suitor's arms (Marston 206), Hermione extends her arms first. "When she was young, you wooed her; now in age/Is she become the suitor?" says Paulina to Leontes (5.3.134-135). Hermione, who is "stone no more", exhibits her own agency. She acts for herself and thus creates herself. The queen, like Paulina and Leontes, plays a bit of Pygmalion's part.

Shakespeare seems to carefully avoid direct character parallels between The Winter's Tale and any of the available interpretations of Pygmalion. Leontes is too clueless a carver, Hermione too aware and active a statue, Paulina too manipulative to avoid Pygmalion and too powerful but removed (recall her desire to go off alone and "Lament 'til I am lost" [5.3.169]) to dodge the part of goddess. Through the mystic sense of uncertainty surrounding the final scene, Shakespeare prompts a closer look at some of the big cultural and artistic views of the day. It is possible that the iconoclasts are misguided in their conception of idolatry, just as it is possible that Petrarch's critics are misguided in their idea of artistic creation. The question it comes down to—the question that tends to be assumed rather than analysed—is simple: can creation have soul? Though the culture wars have subsided, that question is more confused than ever. Should we ever stumble across its answer, we would find a much fuller understanding of what it is to be human, what it means to create, and what sort of thing art really is. Quite possibly, though, that is more than can be answered. At least, without depriving us of our favourite points to quibble over.

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