

Paula James

Ovid's Myth of Pygmalion on Screen

In Pursuit of the Perfect Woman

Continuum Studies in Classical Reception



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For my wonderful daughters, Tanith Tinuviel and Jessica Luthien

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Acknowledgements

I embarked upon a Latin degree at Southampton University in 1977. I was twenty-seven years old and had two young daughters. The experience transformed me, turning my life around personally, intellectually and professionally. I could never have contemplated going to college on credit – and if I had not been set on the path of lifelong learning, I would never have written this book! I would like to salute students of all ages (and their lecturers) struggling to stem the tide of reaction and to re-establish access to free higher education as a universal principle in the UK.

I would like to thank the Open University Arts Faculty (the research committee) for helping with the copyright costs so that the Burne-Jones paintings (and a website link where they appear in colour) could be included in the book. The committee also contributed funds towards a ten-day contract for Dr Amanda Wrigley. Amanda has advised on images and also commented very helpfully on drafts of my early chapters. Regarding the choice of illustrations, I was constrained by the complexity of the permissions' process and the price of reproduction. However, the mainstream and more recent films discussed are all commercially available.

Dr Stacey Abbott (Reader in Film and Television Studies at the University of Roehampton) gave generously of her time and cast a critical eye over the chapters on the Make-Over Movie (tragic and comic). This benefited me as my knowledge of film is as a movie goer of many years and as a widely read student of the discipline not as a formal practitioner. Similarly, my husband John James (Open University Associate Lecturer) read drafts of the book from the perspective of a sociologist and suggested improvements in the form and the content. I am also deeply indebted to family, friends, colleagues and students who have added to my ideas (and disagreed with them!) during the years I have been working and reflecting upon Ovid's Pygmalion on screen. Special thanks to my brother Steve (Stephen) Deahl who viewed some very strange (and some really bad) films with me at the National Film Theatre, which were not always as germane to my research as I had hoped!

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Paula James (2011)

Introduction

Pygmalion and His Ivory Statue: the Myth According to Ovid

In Book Ten of his epic poem *Metamorphoses* (written in the first century CE, Common Era) Ovid relates the story of Pygmalion of Cyprus. In Ovid's version Pygmalion condemns the loose morals of the local women and carves a beautiful statue out of ivory to be his female companion. The wondrous work of art is so lifelike that the sculptor himself is fooled into thinking she is real. He embarks upon a daily routine of wooing his ivory girl with gifts and imagines that she responds. Finally, Pygmalion approaches the shrine of Venus, goddess of love (the Greek Aphrodite), at the island's festival in her honour. He hesitantly asks for a wife who would be like his ivory girl. When he returns home the statue responds to his caresses, and looks up at him with a maidenly blush. Venus presides over their union and nine months later a daughter named Paphos is born.

It Makes a Good Story

My relationship with Ovid's ivory statue goes back a long way. Reading selections from the *Metamorphoses* (in the original Latin) as a mature student at Southampton University in the late 1970s I became in turns entranced and irritated by this wonderfully inventive poet, Publius Ovidius Naso. Ovid inhabited a complex cultural world, living and writing in Rome, the capital of an extensive empire. Ovid's epic work on transformation, *Metamorphoses*, is a poem which moves through mythical and historical time from the stabilizing of the primordial elements into the ordered universe of Ovid's day when Augustus was securely established as the first emperor. The term 'flawed masterpiece', which so amused director and actor Orson Welles when applied to the films he made after his acclaimed *Citizen Kane* (1941), can be used to describe Ovid's magnum opus.

I became interested in the afterlife of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through my friendship with Jane Miller (then Jane Keen) when we were students in the

University of Southampton Classics department. Jane was writing a doctoral dissertation on the legends of Perseus and Pygmalion in nineteenth-century art and literature. Ovid's influence was her starting point and she demonstrated that with Pygmalion Ovid had made a new myth out of a cultic practice, the ritual marriage between the king of Cyprus (Ovid cunningly suppresses Pygmalion's royal status during the narrative) and the statue of the goddess Aphrodite (Roman Venus). However, she discovered that many nineteenth-century texts (visual and written) reflected and refashioned Ovid's version of Pygmalion in a way that illuminated the ambiguous identity of the sculptor and his statue. Edward Coley Burne-Jones' series of paintings and George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*, were part of her study.¹

Jane's thesis reinforced my belief that placing classical and post-classical texts side by side is not just about tracing the influence of the ancient world on later cultures. The modern manifestation of myth can become an interpretative tool for probing the complexity of the original narrative. During my academic career, and in between publishing on a range of Latin authors, I have been enticed back to Ovid and published a number of articles on figures and motifs in his epic poem. I have always kept Jane's approach to the reception of Ovid in mind when tracing the before and after of his myths in the *Metamorphoses*.²

Over the last two decades I have taught Ovid in schools and universities, not continuously, but with plenty of gaps for reflection in between. I have very much benefited from a steady synergy between research (engaging with an ever-growing body of sensitive and scholarly interpretations of the *Metamorphoses*) and conversations in the classroom, the lecture hall and at seminars, to say nothing of feedback after conference presentations.

Initially my focus on Pygmalion was prompted by a teaching need rather than a research one. In 1998 a new Open University Level One course was presented. *Introduction to the Humanities* (1998–2008) included Classical Studies as a subject in its own right. In the unit on 'Myths and Conventions,' Open University students read the Greek tragedy *Medea* in translation and studied George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. Cicely Palser Havely of the English Literature department wrote an excellent critique of Shaw, starting with a discussion of the myth and its function. Students were encouraged to explore the connections between the play and Ovid's narrative, so in my evening lecture at the residential school I suggested ways in which Shaw had reversed, refashioned and departed from the story of the statue.

To do this it was necessary to look at the before and after of the myth in Ovid's narrative sequence as these surrounding stories are intimately bound up with Pygmalion and the statue. I did a quick sketch of the women of Cyprus who were punished for impiety by the goddess Venus. She turned them into prostitutes and they seemed spontaneously to change into stone. The vices of these unfortunate creatures prompted Pygmalion to produce his own perfect woman. I also summarized the tragic fate of Myrrha (a descendant of Pygmalion and the statue), who fell passionately in love with her own father. Her story is told in the *Metamorphoses* immediately after that of the sculptor and his ivory creation.

I introduced students to the Burne-Jones' series of paintings depicting the myth of the sculptor and the creation of his perfect woman. I also distributed extracts from poems, plays and novels which had conjured with the Pygmalion theme before and after Shaw. Then there were the films, a modest and partly personal collection of screen texts that reworked the motif of the manufactured and the made-over woman with fascinating cultural and social implications. In those days visual aids consisted of the slide or overhead projector and the video machine. Technology in this kind of lecture has moved on, but sometimes the slick (PowerPoint) presentation allows no room for, or possibly inhibits, even a lively audience from intervening during the delivery. Of course, those who attended my Pygmalion 'performance' enthusiastically and imaginatively offered up other movies where the ivory maiden might have metamorphosed into a more modern but equally uncanny creature. The lectures invariably generated discussions about the unpalatable aspects of this tale, which on the surface celebrates the rewards of great artistry and piety.

Everyone Has a View on the Statue

The Pygmalion myth has proved to be all-pervasive. Whatever the place or time, starting a conversation about a myth that deals in the literal creation of a perfect partner or mate never fails to provoke a reaction. I was at the hairdressers in East Grinstead in August 2010 and mentioned I was writing a book about the pursuit of the perfect woman. Hair stylists know that good listening, diplomacy and acquiring some skills in therapy come with the territory. They frequently do far more than improve and 'make over' their clients' appearance. As it happens, hairdressers figure significantly in a number of re-workings of the Pygmalion story I discuss in this book.³ Emma, the graduate stylist, and the assistant who was shampooing me and

other clients listened with interest to my account of Ovid's myth. Emma is a twin and without prompting she raised the issue of Pygmalion's narcissism in carving something close to a second self and animating his own reflection. (She had produced a short film in college testing out viewer reactions to twins in profile closing in on a kiss.)

Other comments from her co-workers included the pornographic elements in controlling and forcing physical attentions on even an artificial body.⁴ The conversation turned to the ethics of men forming and re-forming women and to perceptions of patriarchy. Strong feelings were expressed about the power of the fashion industry and the media in determining ideals of femininity. This nails one of the central issues about the legacy of Pygmalion, the cultural constructedness of beauty and desire.

Similar issues concerning concepts of perfection and the rights of manufactured beings came to the fore when my PhD student Amanda Potter set up a focus group of viewers who gave their reactions to an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in which a perfect robot girlfriend named April is made and then discarded by her creator/manufacturer, Warren. The writer of the relevant episodes, Jane Espenson, was not consciously drawing upon or referencing Ovid's myth but our selected viewers pointed out parallels with films about ideal woman and the make-over movie in particular. We asked the group to read Ovid's Pygmalion myth and re-evaluate the *Buffy* episode.

The results were enlightening and I shall go over them in more detail in Chapter 6. Needless to say, the viewers of *Buffy* had some very definite ideas about the relationship between the screen robot April and Pygmalion's ivory girl, and I have incorporated a number of their responses into my interpretation. There was a consensus that robots and vivified statues have human rights and that Pygmalion's manipulation of his ivory girl and Warren's treatment of his technological triumph (April) had distinct similarities.

The *Buffy* case study was incorporated into the Open University Honours Level course *Myth and the Greek and Roman Worlds* to broaden out the discussion on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its modern reception. I am beholden to the Open University Arts faculty for allowing me to incorporate results from this case study into my book and for permitting me to reproduce, in this volume, aspects of my Ovid chapter written for that module. I am also grateful to the Open University for making me over into a creature of interdisciplinarity. As a lecturer in Classical Studies department since 1993, I have had the opportunity to work with Arts Faculty colleagues (English Literature, Art History, Religious Studies, History, Philosophy and Music)

on courses that create subtle dialogues between disciplines, their content and methodologies, without in any way losing or silencing the voice of each subject.

So, my work on Pygmalion and his statue has developed out of all kinds of intellectual encounters and academic endeavours, as well as the occasional idiosyncratic, spontaneous and highly illuminating thoughts from ‘innocent bystanders’. The beauty of this myth as metamorphosed by the mind of Ovid is its endless capacity for reinvention. A story simply (apparently) and briefly told by Orpheus, singer of songs, who takes the narrative reins from Ovid in Book Ten of the poem has become a slippery signifier for critical interpreters across the disciplines of arts, humanities, social sciences, and science and technology. It has reached out to novelists, dramatists, poets, painters and movie makers. The perfect woman of my title has become a trope or template for desiring the illusory ideal and the paradoxical disappointment of getting what you want.

The Singer and the Song

Although Ovid is the creator of the Pygmalion story in this (relatively) familiar form the internal narrator is the legendary Thracian bard, Orpheus. It is one of several stories sung by the singer to an entranced audience of wild beasts, birds and trees. It is appropriate that the bard who can move stones with his magical musicianship celebrates a divinely inspired sculptor whose ivory statue becomes a real girl. Possessing one’s heart’s desire has an added poignancy for the singer as Orpheus was bereft of his beloved. In the *Metamorphoses* at the beginning of Book Ten, Ovid introduces Orpheus as the tragic figure who has loved and lost, reprising the story told in the fourth book of Virgil’s *Georgics*.

Virgil gives a moving account of the bard’s journey to the realms of the dead to retrieve his wife Eurydice who had been killed by a snake bite. Orpheus charmed the king and queen of Hades (the Underworld) with his tuneful lament and they agreed to release Eurydice and let her accompany Orpheus up to the surface of the earth. However, in the final stage of the perilous journey, Orpheus broke the taboo the king of the dead had imposed not to look back at Eurydice. She vanished from view, reverting to a *simulacrum* (ghost) of no substance. The ruler of the Underworld proved pitiless in the face of Orpheus’ pleas for a second chance. Ovid’s decision to tell Orpheus’ story and then make him the narrator of the Pygmalion myth is a deliberate one, as it seems as if the sculptor has succeeded where

the singer failed. Pygmalion has in a sense brought a dead thing to life. Ovid may also be referencing the fifth-century play, *Alcestis* by Euripides. The king Admetus plans to have a statue fashioned as a substitute for his wife who willingly took his place in the underworld. The ghost of Eurydice and the story of *Alcestis* tend to lurk behind the cold inert statue in subsequent versions of the Pygmalion myth where the likeness of a dead woman is recreated by a bereaved lover or husband.

The Poet and His World

Publius Ovidius Naso (Roman citizens had three names) was born in Sulmo (Sulmona), Italy in 43 BCE. (Before Common Era). He was a prolific poet and we are lucky that most of his work has survived (with the exception of a tragic play, *Medea*, which, ironically, Ovid and ancient critics thought was the high point of his literary career). He was a wonderful wordsmith and enlivened every genre he turned his hand to. He started his first love poem in the collection called the *Amores* with an image of the love god Cupid propelling him away from serious epic tomes towards light-hearted 'songs for swinging lovers'. The *Amores* in which Ovid introduces Corinna (a pseudonym for his mistress but she could be as fictional as one of the many mythical figures he introduces into his poetic corpus) take the reader through the make-ups and break-ups of a furtive romance. Ovid just about exhausted the love elegy genre with his convoluted dramatic scenarios and his poetic gamesmanship. He worked to death the metaphor of the lover as a soldier undergoing all kinds of hardships and manoeuvres in the pursuit of sexual satisfaction.

However, he did eventually embark upon poems on the grand scale. His unfinished *Fasti* on the gods, cults and rituals associated with the Roman calendar is full of fascinating insights into ancient beliefs and practices with constant reference to the myths that are woven into the very fabric of the days dedicated to religious celebrations. In many ways, Ovid can be heralded as the supreme myth maker. He found a place for the matter of myth in all his works either in the form of sly allusions for the knowing reader or as an apparent diversion in the text, frequently introduced by a quirky bit of lateral thinking.

Ovid was popular and famous in Rome and beyond. Even if his sophisticated and self-conscious poetry targeted as its audience the educated and comfortably off, his literary works would have trickled down through the echelons of society and been recited relatively widely. He could be regarded

as the poet laureate of his time. He seemed a natural heir to the poets of the late Republic (a period of great political turmoil and destructive civil strife) who survived into the reign of Augustus. Ovid's predecessors had been actively encouraged by this first emperor to put a positive spin on the new age of peace and prosperity he was promising the people of Rome and its empire. Ovid followed in the footsteps of Virgil and Horace in this respect, but he was a post-war baby and that made him a little more cavalier and relaxed in his style and in the subject matter he chose for his poetry.

It was around the time of composing the *Fasti* and putting finishing touches to the *Metamorphoses* that Ovid fell from grace, rather like a tragic hero. Up to this point, his decision to be a full time poet and to stay away from a career in public office had been vindicated. However, the approval of the emperor and of those through whom he exercised his power was easily lost. When Ovid was around fifty years old, he suffered banishment for an unrecorded crime (he may have witnessed or been implicated in a politically embarrassing incident involving the emperor's family). Ovid's considerable corpus of epistolary poems from Tomis (modern Constanza, Romania), a bleak outpost of the Empire and a cultural backwater, is a painful study in the psychology of an urbane and sophisticated middle-aged man who was destined to die far from home in spite of his constant pleas for a pardon. In his verse letters (*Tristia*, *Epistulae ex Ponto*) Ovid writes of a poem (*Ars Amatoria*, *Art of Love*) and a mistake that caused his downfall. At one point he hints at seeing something compromising and compares his unintentional error to the Actaeon myth, which he tells in *Metamorphoses* Book Three. Actaeon was a young Theban prince who accidentally stumbled upon the virgin goddess Diana while she was bathing with her nymphs. She turned him into a stag and his own dogs tore him apart.

Ovid's offending work, *The Art of Love* (*Ars Amatoria*), had been in circulation for ten years before Ovid suffered his unhappy fate. Ovid's pastiche on the didactic genre in which the conduct of love affairs is taken as an appropriate topic for teaching and learning may have rankled with the emperor Augustus over the preceding decade. This manual of seduction was not exactly in tune with the imperial legislation designed by Augustus to promote family and family values, to encourage the continuation of the wealthier stratum and restore some dignity and status to the upper classes of Roman society. My thumbnail sketch of the emperor's motivation for a moral armament programme does not do justice to its economic and social ramifications. Ancient politics was as rife with contradictions, corruptions and dissembling as it is today, but obviously Ovid was out of tune with

the ideological strategies of the regime. Ovid's elusive (for us) indiscretion may have brought the witty but unwise poem to the fore once again.

Although the following chapter deals with a myth in his weighty epic poem that Ovid may have completed in exile, his other literary ventures do have a bearing upon the *Metamorphoses* in general and Pygmalion in particular. Ovid was a man of many poetic parts and his exceptional artistry is very much tied up with the times he lived in. It is hard to say whether Ovid was simply a wild card or a conscious critic in the new era of Augustan *auctoritas*. The Latin word suggests authority legitimized by precedent and sanctioned by the gods. Of course, such authority was sustained by Augustus' control of the Roman legions and his ownership of the Imperial revenues. Ovid was writing under an autocratic regime and his treatment of the myths does seem to possess a subtext about the use and abuse of superior power by gods and mortals.⁵ He also offers up for exploration complexities and intellectual conundrums that make his mythical narratives readily transferable to times and places far from the cultural world he himself inhabited and was to lose so tragically in the year 8 CE.

The Lasting Legacy of Ovid

In his lengthy (fifteen books' worth) epic, *Metamorphoses*, Ovid displayed his knowledge of myth in all its glory. His many stories of transformations still bear the hallmark of his distinctive approach to narratives that had already proved capable of moving audiences out of their comfort zone. The tragedians at Athens writing in the fifth century BCE had found myths and legends good to think about. Regarding themselves as teachers as well as creative writers competing for prizes, they recognized that the dramatic festivals celebrating the god Dionysus were a relatively safe space in which to explore the mortal condition and fearful 'what if' scenarios of social upheaval. They introduced contemporary resonances into legendary and traumatic tales of heroic suffering and the fragmentation of dynastic families, demonstrating the power of the gods and the precarious nature of human happiness.

So Ovid was by no means the first ancient poet to make myths multi-functional on an aesthetic and an ethical and ideological plane. However, Ovid has an almost modern approach to his mythic material in the way he synthesizes, theorizes and psychologizes his subject matter. He also has a keen sense of the dramatic nature of the myths and how these might be conveyed in a poetic narrative. The *Metamorphoses* conveys colour, tone and

moving image so vividly in the re-enactment of mythical stories and the portrayal of heroic and divine figures that it has in turn inspired artists, authors and dramatists through the centuries to visualize, theorize and extemporize around Ovidian narratives. Picturing Ovid's mythical characters has helped me to expand my interpretations of his text in general and the myth of Pygmalion in particular.

Chapter 1

Ovid's Rich Text: Layers of Identity in the Pygmalion Myth

Pygmalion: the Full Story?

But the foul Propoetides¹ dared to deny that Venus was a goddess and they experienced the wrath and retaliation of the offended deity; for the consequence was (it is said) that they made their bodies and their reputations common property. As their sense of shame withdrew and the blood ceased to flow in their faces, it was but a small step for them to turn into unyielding granite. Because Pygmalion had witnessed these women leading reproachful lives and repulsed by the defects nature had bestowed in such abundance upon the female character, he took to living as a single man without a wife. For a long time he was deprived of a companion for his bedchamber. During this time he carved snow white ivory with propitiously wondrous artistry, giving it shape, a beauty with which no woman can be born. He conceived a love for his own work. Her appearance is that of a genuine girl, one you would believe to be alive and, if deference did not stand in the way, you would believe she was willing to make a movement. To such an extent, artifice takes cover under its art of artifice.

Pygmalion is in awe and stokes the fires of passion in his breast for the simulated body. Often he moves his hands over his work, testing whether it is flesh or ivory as before and he does not admit it to be ivory still. He plants kisses and thinks they are reciprocated. He speaks to the statue and holds it and believes that his fingers are sinking into the limbs he is touching. He even frets that bruising may appear where he has put pressure. One moment he employs flattery and the next he brings it gifts appreciated by girls; seashells, polished stones, little birds, flowers of myriad colours, lilies and painted balls and amber, the tears of the Heliades fallen from the trees. He adorns the limbs with clothes as well, puts jewels on the fingers, strings of necklaces around the throat, hangs delicate pearls from the ears

and loops chaplets around the statue's bosom. All this becomes her and yet naked she seems no less beautiful. He lays her on coverlets dyed with Tyrian purple and addresses her as the partner of his couch and rests her neck on downy pillows as if she could feel them.

The festival day of Venus had arrived, most renowned in all Cyprus and heifers, their curved horns clothed in gold, had fallen under the blow to their snowy white necks. The altars were smoking with incense when Pygmalion performed his office (made a sacrifice) at the shrine, stood and falteringly prayed: 'If O Gods you can grant all things, I long for my wife to be (he did not dare to say "the ivory maiden") like the ivory one.' Golden Venus was present at her own festival and realized the import of his prayer. And as a sacred sign of the favouring deity three times, the altar flame blazed up and propelled its point through the air. When he returns, he makes for the image of his mistress and lying upon the couch, he kissed her. She seemed to grow warm. He closes upon her mouth again and with his hands he touches her breast. The ivory softens under his touch and with hardness set aside and letting his fingers sink in, it yields as Hymettian beeswax re-melts and made pliable by the thumb, it is moulded into many shapes, becoming usable by being used.

While he is in a state of awe and hesitantly rejoices and fears he is deluded, the lover persistently tests out his heart's desire. She was flesh: the veins throbbed under the pressure of his thumb. Then indeed does the Paphian hero produce fulsome words with which to thank Venus and at long last he presses with his own mouth a mouth that is not manufactured. The girl feels the kisses he proffers and blushes and lifts her hesitant gaze to the light. She sets her eyes upon her love and the sky simultaneously. The goddess is present at the union she has engineered and when the horns of the moon had nine times been curved into a full crescent the girl gave birth to Paphos from whom the island takes its name.²

Metamorphoses 10: 238–297

(translated by Paula James)

The Before and After of Pygmalion

The Pygmalion narrative has distinct echoes of other metamorphic moments in the poem, particularly the transformation of stone into flesh and the reverse process. The hero of Cyprus is himself a composite of characters who are less lucky in love and in artistic endeavours than himself, from Narcissus (in Book Three) who is fooled by his own likeness and falls

hopelessly in love with his beautiful reflection in the pool to skilled craftsmen and women whose works are destroyed by envious gods (Arachne in Book Six for instance). Ovid's text is a landscape of intersecting myths and motifs, a literary canvas of metamorphic stories. The first ten books deal in narratives that might be happening simultaneously rather than sequentially and the poet appears quite consciously to allow his chronology to crumble at times. However, commentators have noted that the Orpheus stories mark a structural shift in the poem from a fluid mythological patterning to a focus on human history.³ Pygmalion seems to sit at a crossroads in terms of Ovid's poetic structure, which gives this story of art and love particular significance. As Pygmalion and the statue have been remoulded over the centuries they have become ever more complex as signs and signifiers.

According to the narrator, Orpheus, before turning her attention to the Propoetides (usually translated as the women of Cyprus) Venus has already perpetrated a physical transformation on another family group in the Amathus region, the Cerastae, or horned ones. The Cerastae, a male household (Anderson, 1972, pp. 493–494), have indulged in human sacrifice at the very altar of Hospitality, so their crime is against Jupiter as protector of guests and a guarantor of the good treatment of strangers. The Cerastae's impiety, taking place on her own island, is an embarrassment to Venus; so much so the goddess considers leaving her shrines and the beautiful cities and meadows of Cyprus. Instead she devises an appropriate penalty for the Cerastae, turning them into fierce bullocks so interior savagery is now in tune with their external appearance. Venus is in vengeance mode but the Propoetides do not take heed of the warning implicit in the fate of the Cerastae.

We really are not sure who these women are nor their provenance other than they inhabit the Amathus region of Cyprus. The mythological plot thickens with the characterization of these women as *obscenae*, variously translated as foul, lewd and 'obscene' even before they are forced into prostitution when the adjective would be more appropriate. The derogatory description seems to prejudge the Propoetides and prefigure the punishment meted out by Venus in return for their denial of her. A challenge to the identity of a god is liable to result in a corresponding loss of identity for the mortal offender or offenders. Another way of translating *obscenae* is 'irredeemable', which would then refer to their impiety. Venus herself was associated with *obscenitas* (obscenity) by an early Roman playwright and poet, Ennius. Commenting on the subject of temple prostitution in Cyprus he asks: 'Why should I speak of the lewdness of Venus prostituted to the lusts of all?'⁴ Miller (1988, 205) briefly mentions the theory that the

Propoetides had pocketed the profits from their sacred trade instead of filling the coffers of the goddess. This would be a theft from and an insult to Venus but does not quite constitute a denial of her divinity.

Pygmalion is motivated to make himself a life partner because of his revulsion to real women with their innate vices. This is what we are told by the narrator, Orpheus, and yet the explanation does not quite gel with the punishment of those women who had denied that Venus was a goddess. The Propoetides⁵ were forced by divine intervention to acquire those very vices Pygmalion abhorred. At least one scholar (Liveley, 1999, p. 202) has suggested that these women of Cyprus or Amathus may have chosen a life of celibacy and this is what Ovid means by their denying Venus. It is not altogether certain whether the Propoetides have questioned the existence of the goddess herself or are refusing to recognize her divine power in matters of passion, sex and procreation.

Whatever they have done, these women, the Propoetides, seem to teeter and then make the transition between pure and impure, celibate and meretricious. The verb *vulgo* indicating that they allowed their bodies and their reputations (their good name?) to be prostituted or made common property makes a pertinent contrast with the private nature of Pygmalion's passion and the secret and secluded existence he is to lead with his 'lover.' At first reading the Propoetides are negative role models for both sculptor and statue. Their metamorphosis into stone seems to be a natural not a supernatural corollary of their shamelessness; they can no longer blush once modesty has fled from their bodies. Pygmalion shuns these shameful women and the fate of the local girls motivates him to carve a creature with no earthly blemishes. We cannot know whether, before Venus' spiteful revenge, the Propoetides would have been potential partners for this young man looking for a pure and untouched wife.

Putting moral considerations aside, it is worth remembering that ossified creatures are hardly accessible ones, so Pygmalion has no marriageable material in his vicinity.⁶ Otherwise it would be tempting to accuse Pygmalion of being like other haughty young men present in earlier books of the *Metamorphoses* who reject available partners. It is ironic that Pygmalion then makes a model which should be as impervious to feeling and as physically frustrating a bedfellow as those he has rejected.

The Propoetides certainly influence the production and the character of the ivory maiden in subsequent reincarnations. Painters, playwrights and film makers bring the ossified prostitutes to life, giving them a significant part to play in their narrative pictures and in unfolding dramas about the manufacture of an ideal. I plan to place the marginalized and

immobilized beings much more centre stage in Ovid's version of the myth, for, with hindsight, they never really disappear from the story's frame.⁷ For this reason I have gone into detail about the preamble to Pygmalion's story in Ovid, as it is important to my argument that from the outset they are seen as complementary and reflective of the statue rather than oppositional.

Commentators are quick to comment on the reverse process that occurs in Ovid's version of the myth with ivory or solid material becoming flesh and blood after living, breathing women have been turned into stone. I firmly believe that Ovid is not so much counter posing the Propoetides to the statue as suggesting they might be a mirror image (albeit distorted) of the initially inert carving. This point has been touched upon before but previous interpretations, even those of the art historians, do not focus upon the way the statue's tarnished 'sisters' tend to lurk in the background of the myth in visual as well as literary representations. Detecting a woman of Cyprus beneath the virginal statue's exterior will be a feature throughout my discussion of the screen texts.

The Ambiguous Identities of the Sculptor and the Statue

Given all these ambiguities about the stone prostitutes and the liminal ivory statue, it is clear to me that Ovid intended the Propoetides to be imagined as a sculptural group. Pygmalion is presumably aware of the ossified women and in the paintings of Burne-Jones they seem to be present in the artist's studio. In both series, marble statues stand in the background of the first painting in the series. In the earlier Sutton quartet of pictures they stare balefully out at the viewer, doubling for discarded attempts at carving perfection and for the women of Cyprus frozen in the pose adopted by the living girls on the left of the frame. Could these fallen women of Amathus serve as precursors of the pure and virginal future wife of the king? If they are part of Pygmalion's modelling process, then the ambiguity of the statue seems to reflect the problem of the Propoetides' provenance.

[excursus: Keen (1983, pp. 130–145) gives a detailed comparative analysis of these Burne-Jones quartets. She notes that both sets of paintings reflect the artist's longing for an elusive higher state. For Wildman (1995, p. 301) the series 'can be interpreted as a failure of the cerebral concept of beauty when faced with a physical reality which is impossible to resist.' Burne-Jones' model for the statue was his mistress, Maria Zambaco. Keen