

Reconsidering Pygmalion
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After Orpheus returns the underworld, he sings a song “about boys loved by the gods and girls punished for unnatural lust” (Ovid *Met.* 10.152-4), including the story of the promiscuous Propoetides who became rocks, Pygmalion the sculptor, his great-granddaughter Myrrha and her lust for her father Cynras, and a series of stories about gods in love with mortal boys. The traditional interpretation of Ovid's story of Pygmalion as an endearing tale of true love leaves many unanswered questions. The reader is left to question what place Pygmalion has in a song about lust-crazed girls and the gods' beloved boys and what provocation caused the Furies to force his great-granddaughter Myrrha to lust after her father (10.311-13). The fact that *agalmatophilia* (love of a statue) is not a virtue in any other instance is also a difficulty. Recent scholars have noted unpleasant features of the tale, such as the statue's namelessness and silence, but it remains unclear whether Ovid and his audience would also have found these distasteful. I will argue that Pygmalion's story is presented as one of impiety and perversion, and not one of reverent love.

Ovid's frequent allusion to Euripides' *Hippolytus* is key to solving this story's problems. As many scholars have noted, Myrrha is a Phaedra character. A second look at Pygmalion reveals that he shares unusual characteristics with Hippolytus: both are celibate misogynists, apparently the only two in ancient literature, and both conceive of a woman as an ἀγάλαμα (*Hipp.* 631). There are other reasons to believe that Pygmalion's actions, like those of Hippolytus, are sacrilegious despite their superficial appearance of piety. There are 12 other ancient examples of *agalmatophilia*, all of which are instances of desecration and pollution. The traditional version of Pygmalion's story is one of these (Apollod. 3.14.2). Ovid emphasizes Pygmalion's celibacy and *agalmatophilia*, and both of these would have seemed impious and perverted to the ancient reader. Venus' “gift” of allowing Pygmalion to marry his statue is a curse in disguise. It sets off the disastrous chain of events that serves as punishment for his lifelong refusal to acknowledge the goddess' power.

Pygmalion's impiety consists not simply of celibacy as was the case for Hippolytus, but celibacy followed by marriage to his statue. Through this alteration Ovid explores the relationship between artist and art. Marriage between artist and art intuitively suggests incest and arrogance; the creator is like a parent to the creation, which is an expression of his own mind. The Furies punish Pygmalion's family by forcing Myrrha to reenact this crime in more familiar terms. Incest with a father appears very rarely in ancient literature, and its use is significant here. Like her great-grandmother, Myrrha cannot distinguish between creator/father and lover. Verbal echoes reinforce the connections between the stories: Pygmalion requests a wife *similis eburnae* (10.276) and Myrrha begs for a husband *similem tibi* (10.364), and they both *vota retractat* (10.370 and 10.288) just before they achieve their desires. Myrrha is like her great-grandmother the statue as well, and becomes more so the closer she comes to achieving her desire, for example *muta silet virgo terramque immota tuetur* (10.389), and *et color et sanguis animumque relingit euntem* (10.459).

Pygmalion is thus not a unique example of benign *agalmatophilia*, Orpheus does not digress from his stated topic, and the Furies do not attack Myrrha without reason. Ovid includes Pygmalion's story in his song because Myrrha's would be incomprehensible without it, just as Phaedra's story would be if the audience didn't know that Hippolytus had offended Aphrodite. With this interpretation Orpheus' song has increased relevance to his life, functioning as a sort of *priamel* exploring the three paths his life could take after his failure to rescue Eurydice: love of women, exclusive devotion to art, or love of boys. Love of women is exemplified by the distasteful Propoetides and immediately dismissed. Exclusive and celibate devotion to art is explored through Pygmalion's story. The unhealthiness of this choice is demonstrated by its effects on Pygmalion's family. Although the temporary nature of love with boys is represented by the early deaths of the boys in Orpheus' poem, this is the best option left to the poet and it is this path he chooses to follow.