

Awakening Galatea

Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Book X [Excerpt]

*'Quas quia Pygmalion aevum per crimen agentis
viderat, offensus vitiiis, quae plurima menti
femineae natura dedit, sine coniuge caelebs
vivebat thalamicque diu consorte carebat.*

*interea niveum mira feliciter arte
sculpsit ebur formanque dedit, qua femina nasci
nulla potest, operisque sui concepit amorem.*

*virginis est verae facies,
ars adeo latet arte sua. miratur et haurit
pectore Pygmalion corporis ignes.
oscula dat reddique putat loquiturque tenetque
et grata puellis
munera fert illi conchas teretesque lapillos
et flores mille colorum
et ab arbore lapsas Heliadum lacrimas;
Cuncta decent; nec nuda minus formosa videtur.*

*'Festa dies Veneris tota celeberrima Cypro
venerat, cum munere functus ad aras
constitit et timide "si, di, dare cuncta potestis,
sit coniunx, opto," [non ausus "eburnea
virgo" dicere], Pygmalion "similis mea" dixit "eburnae."*

*sensit, ut ipsa suis aderat Venus aurea festis,
vota quid illa velint,
ut rediit, simulacra suae petit ille puellae
incumbensque toro dedit oscula: visa tepere est;
temptatum mollescit ebur positoque rigore
subsidit digitis ceditque:
corpus erat!*

*tum vero Paphius plenissima concipit heros
verba, quibus Veneri grates agit, oraque tandem
ore suo non falsa premit, dataque oscula virgo
sensit et erubuit timidumque ad lumina lumen
attollens pariter cum caelo vidit amantem.*

*coniugio, quod fecit, adest dea, iamque coactis
cornibus in plenum noviens lunaribus orbem
illa Paphon genuit, de qua tenet insula nomen.*

Pygmalion had watched women spending their lives in shame, and,
disgusted with the faults that, in such full measure, nature had given the female mind,
he lived unmarried, and long was without a partner of his couch.

Meanwhile, with wondrous art he successfully carved a figure out of snowy ivory, giving it a
beauty more perfect than that of any woman ever born.
And with his own work he fell in love.

The face is that of a real maiden,
So well is his art concealed within his art;
Pygmalion looks on in admiration, and his heart is inflamed with love for this semblance of a
form.
He kisses her, thinking that his kisses are returned;
He speaks to her tenderly,
Now he even brings her gifts pleasing to girls:
Shells and smooth stones,
Flowers of a million hues,
And tears of the Heliades that drop down from the trees¹;
All of these things suit her; but she's no less gorgeous unadorned.

And now the festal day of Venus had come, which all of Cyprus thronged to celebrate;
Pygmalion, having brought his gift to the altar, stood and falteringly prayed: 'If ye, O gods,
can give all things, I pray to have as my wife' - - [he did not dare add 'my ivory maid'] - -but
asked the gods instead to grant him someone just like her.

But golden Venus (for she herself was present at her own feast) knew just what that prayer
meant,
And when he returned, he sought the image of his maid and, lying on the couch, he kissed
her.
The ivory grew soft to his touch and, its hardness vanishing, yielded beneath his fingers:
It was real flesh!

Then did our Paphian hero pour out copious thanks to Venus, and again pressed with his
lips real girl -lips at last.
The maiden felt the kisses and blushed, and, lifting her timid eyes up to the light, she saw the
sky and her lover at the same time.

The goddess graced with her presence the marriage she had made; and ere the ninth moon
had brought her crescent to the full, a daughter was born to them, Paphos, from whom the
island takes its name.

Translation: Kati Agócs

¹ amber

Awakening Galatea, composed for the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival (where I was a composer in residence) in 2009, is a setting of Ovid's poem from *Metamorphoses* on the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. This myth, in which an artist falls in love with his own creation, has fascinated dramatists through the ages. More recent versions include George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* and the musical *My Fair Lady*. Ovid's poem, the oldest version, tells how the artist Pygmalion vows to shun the company of women because he finds too many faults in them. Yet he uses his miraculous skill to carve an ivory statue of a woman that is more beautiful than any living woman could possibly be and, awestruck, he falls in love with it. He caresses it, showers it with attention, brings it gifts - - yet no adornment makes it any more beautiful than the original statue. Finally, the goddess of love, Venus - - who up until that point had thought that she had seen it all - - takes pity upon him. Pygmalion is praying to find a woman just like his statue, because he does not dare ask for the actual statue. But Venus knows what he really wants, and she answers his prayer by making the statue come alive. The statue, Galatea, awakens to see Pygmalion with her very first glance. She is brought to life by the strength of his love (and the gracious intervention of Venus).

There were stories in Greek times of people falling in love with statues, but it was most probably Ovid who made this archetypical tale into an allegory for artistic creation. At the same time, the basis of the story that Ovid inherited from bronze-age myth is also a somewhat circuitous explanation of how the Greek sanctuary site of Paphos got its name. I have set the poem in the original Latin, cutting it extensively to serve my musical purposes - -- although the opening and ending stanzas maintain the phrase structure of the original verse. Thanks are due to my older brother Peter Agócs, a fellow in Classics at Christ's College in Cambridge, for his assistance with the translation, and for helping me to perceive and appreciate the nuances of the great fun that Ovid had with the story.

- Kati Agócs