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A Typology of the Pygmalion Paradigm

Abstract: The article addresses the universality of the Pygmalion myth by comparing two widely known Western texts from the heart of the Pygmalion paradigm – Ovid’s poem on Pygmalion from book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* and Hoffmann’s short story *The Sandman* – with an early medieval Silk Road tale, *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*. On the basis of this comparison, the article shifts discussion of the Pygmalion paradigm from the diachronic to the typological, setting aside the spatial and chronological origins of the text to focus on how the main motifs play out in the text itself. The new typology of the Pygmalion paradigm I develop offers a framework for understanding how texts from this paradigm have universally evolved their primary motifs from the desire to create and obsess over humanlike creatures. The Pygmalionesque type presents a creator/lover of the inanimate woman in a single character who is aware of the artificial woman’s non-human status; her eventual metamorphosis; and an overall successful human–nonhuman relationship. The agalmatophilic type presents a triangular scheme of characters – a creator, a lover, and an inanimate woman – in which the lover is deeply deluded and irrational, the humanlike creation lacks transformation, and the story concludes tragically.

Keywords: humanlike, Pygmalion myth, Pygmalion paradigm, typology

The motif of a man falling in love with a nonhuman woman has a long presence in literature, visual arts, and film. Mario Materassi’s and Michelle Bloom’s findings on the “Pygmalion paradigm” – a paradigm of texts with a Pygmalion-like main motif – reveal that the paradigm has changed significantly through time, most notably undergoing a “dissolution” in the nineteenth century (Bloom 2000, 291; Materassi 2000, 141). My research shifts the discussion of the Pygmalion paradigm from the diachronic to the typological, setting aside the spatial and chronological origins of the text to focus on how the main motifs play out in the text itself. The new typology of the Pygmalion paradigm I develop – a simple typology of two types of text – does not contradict Materassi’s and Bloom’s findings on the shift within the Pygmalion paradigm, but offers a framework for understanding how the primary motifs of texts from this paradigm, in all their many contexts, have universally evolved from the single, common conceit of human desire to create and obsess over humanlike creatures.

From the nineteenth century onwards, texts conforming to the Pygmalion paradigm are plentiful within the Western tradition; conversely, relatively few

textual examples of the motif persist from ancient or medieval times. I address the universality of the motif by comparing two widely known Western texts from the heart of the Pygmalion paradigm – Ovid’s (2008) poem on Pygmalion from book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* (AD 8) and E. T. A. Hoffmann’s (1844) short story *The Sandman* – with an early medieval tale, *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden*, which circulated on the Silk Road in the first millennium in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and Tocharian and is, to my knowledge, as yet unknown to literary scholarship. On the basis of this comparison of the paradigm’s main motifs in these three texts, I describe the two proposed typological types.

1 Outline of the Pygmalion paradigm

The Pygmalion paradigm is based on the core Pygmalion myth of falling in love with one’s own creation. A general definition of the Pygmalion paradigm has yet to be offered; its frame tends to be adjusted by each scholar to the scope of the literary texts examined in their particular study. In this article, I follow Materassi’s choice of classifying any story with Pygmalionesque motifs under the umbrella term of “the Pygmalion paradigm.” The term is more telling than general labels like “the Pygmalionesque” or “pygmalionism”; however, it has been used rather scarcely and only in recent decades. Scholars, including Materassi and Bloom, tend to use the latter two descriptive terms quite frequently, alongside ones like “the Pygmalion myth,” “the Pygmalion theme,” “the Pygmalion motif,” “the Pygmalionesque space,” “the Pygmalion complex,” and “the Pygmalion effect.”¹

Indeed, it is not only the definition of the paradigm but also a description of the Pygmalion myth itself that has thus far defied generalization. The three studies – Materassi’s, Bloom’s, and Gacoin-Marks’s – that I look into here never describe the Pygmalion myth; instead, they offer different parameters that help to frame it. A typical characterization of the Pygmalion myth is found in Florence Gacoin-Marks’s thematological study. She lists four different “elements” of the myth, which comprise “basic motifs” or “mythemes”: (1) “Pygmalion is in love with a female statue that he himself made,” (2) “the statue is animated,” (3) “animation is allowed by a unearthly entity (goddess),” and (4) “the creator and the creation get married” (2007, 137; all translations from this text are my own). In

¹ “The Pygmalion effect” became a psychological term for a phenomenon based on renditions of the Pygmalion myth, also known as the Rosenthal effect. “Pygmalionism” became a subterm for a medical diagnosis of agalmatophilia.

her overview of the texts, Gacoin-Marks looks at works that contain at least two of these elements. She adds that, regardless of how many elements are present in a specific work, every work can be radically transformed from Ovid's "original" Pygmalion poem. In her view, the Pygmalion myth is "an unusual love story with a happy ending" and "a story about faith" which was granted by a deity (Gacoin-Marks 2007, 137). This only shows how different scholars' takes on the myth are: these two aspects of the story emphasized by Gacoin-Marks are peripheral to the elements of the Pygmalion paradigm as examined in Materassi, Bloom, and also this particular discussion.

Bloom's, Materassi's and Gacoin-Marks's parameters for the Pygmalion myth do not fully overlap, and I will analyse them below. Aside from this divergence, the canon of the Pygmalion-paradigm texts is quite stable in all three authors, starting with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (AD 8) and including Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1762), Hoffmann's *Sandman* (1816), Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece* (1831), Poe's *Oval Portrait* (1942), Isle-Adam's *Future Eve* (1886), Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913). Additional works that are dealt with come largely from the same national traditions as the texts above.

My motivation in contrasting Gacoin-Marks's paper with those by Bloom and Materassi is the unique approach to the Pygmalion myth taken by the latter two scholars, which is paradigmatic and chronological at the same time. The paradigmatic view is broader than the thematic view since, among other things, it includes non-literary works of art, such as the visual arts. According to Bloom's and Materassi's studies, the Pygmalion paradigm is a set of literary and visual works that thematize the Pygmalion myth. In addition to this broader understanding of the paradigm, the criteria with which they identify the Pygmalion myth are also more general than those of Gacoin-Marks. For example, Gacoin-Marks's first "basic motif" of the myth – "Pygmalion is in love with a female statue that he himself made" (2007, 137) – is already quite narrow, implying that the Pygmalion myth can only deal with sculptors, artists, and the like. The paradigm, though, is wider than the myth; for example, it includes various forms of inanimate women (puppets, wax figures, marionettes, mechanical dolls, automata, robots, androids, cyborgs and other hybrids, holograms, and artificial intelligence systems), and is always open to new kinds of entities. Granted, these creational variants result in significantly different artificial women: a statue cannot move, whereas an automaton, by definition, can; a womanlike artificial intelligence system is often bodiless, thus losing the most important attribute of older human imitations in the form of statues and paintings. These creations tend to represent an ideal of purified femininity, and are contrasted as superior to imperfect human women despite being modelled after them. The main and first criterion I propose here encompasses all these types: a Pygmalion-para-

digm text deals with a man-made, humanlike, and most often gynomorphic creation.

If the wording of Gacoin-Marks's first "basic motif" is recast in paradigmatic terms, using the broader labels from her fourth criterion ("the creator" instead of "Pygmalion," and "the creation" instead of "a statue"), it could be broadened to "a creator falls in love with their own creation." This phrasing allows for a much wider definition and array of pertinent texts, one that is significantly more common in scholarship than the sculptor–statue model. Bloom and Materassi, however, are even broader. Neither requires the paternal relationship; in their descriptions, the Pygmalion character ("the creator" or "the artist") need not be the actual creator of the inanimate woman. Bloom does not even require a romantic relationship between the two. Bloom lists three "elements in Ovid's narrative particularly relevant to [her] study: 1) the male artist (subject, creator) and the female work of art (object, creation); 2) the work of art's representation or simulation of human form; and 3) the happy ending" (2000, 293). Materassi also lists three elements, which are as a whole more precise than Bloom's as they include the romantic relationship and metamorphosis: "A typological investigation of the changes to the Pygmalion paradigm through the centuries evinces that with some notable exceptions, until the 1700s included, the 'plot' tended to maintain the three fundamental elements of Ovid's model: the artist, the artificial woman who is the object of his passion, and the metamorphosis" (Materassi 2009, 141). Gacoin-Marks's second (animation) and fourth (marriage) elements are thus also taken into consideration in Bloom and Materassi.

These two elements, animation and marriage, are also adopted as the second and fourth criteria in my typology: (2) absence vs presence of metamorphosis of the inanimate creation, and (4) successful human–nonhuman relationship vs tragic denouement of the story. The third criterion focuses on (3) the irrationality vs rationality of the suitor, as revealed in the suitor's awareness of the artificial woman's nonhuman status as well as in the eccentricity of his behaviour in regards to social expectations. In the typological view of the Pygmalion paradigm that I suggest, the first criterion is the most significant for placing a text in the Pygmalion paradigm: (1) a Pygmalion-paradigm text deals with a man-made, humanlike, and most often gynomorphic creation. I thus separate the first criterion into two parts: the paternal relationship (creating an artificial humanlike entity) and the romantic relationship (falling in love with an artificial humanlike entity). These two notions can be separated or conglomerated in paradigmatic texts: both relations may be exhibited in one and the same person (the suitor and the creator in one character, as in the case of Pygmalion himself), or each relationship may be manifested in a separate character (the suitor and the creator as two separate characters; examples of this variant are *The Sandman* and the Silk Road

tale).² In the following discussion, this two-part criterion will be crucial for defining the Pygmalion myth and paradigm, especially in the context of the typology.

2 The three exemplary texts

The Pygmalion paradigm is widely considered to be a product of the Western literary tradition. The standard lists of works identified in the Pygmalion paradigm consist largely of reinterpretations of Ovid's Pygmalion poem, and possibly of Jean de Meun's later, medieval portion of *The Romance of the Rose*, which was illuminated with the first visual depictions of the myth. Although Ovid wrote the Pygmalion myth down relatively late – the *Metamorphoses* date to AD 8 – his depiction of this motif is not a completely isolated case in Greek antiquity or elsewhere (see D'Huy [2012] for examples of a Pygmalion motif among the Kabyle people of northern Africa; and the Native American Nuxalk, Tlingit, and Tsimshian peoples). Nevertheless, it is Ovid's particular version of the story that is considered the basic model for paradigmatic Western texts, and rightly so. As a result, I will use Ovid's Pygmalion poem as a main point of reference in my study of resonances between an early medieval Eastern text, *The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden* (or the "Silk Road tale" for short), and a nineteenth-century Western text, Hoffmann's *Sandman*.

I argue that the Pygmalion motif is universal since it is present in many ancient cultures that had no contact with each other. The Silk Road established contact among Eurasian peoples; however, there are also examples of Native American Pygmalion-like tales that could not have been influenced by faraway cultures of the Old World. As I have shown in a philological study of the Silk Road tale, the Silk Road tale was very likely part of an oral, folkloristic tradition before it was sacralized for the purposes of Buddhist proselytization (Beguš 2020, 4). It appears that the tale circulated in India well before the fifth century AD, when it is attested in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and Tocharian Buddhist sources. Thus, we can point to an interest in creating and animating humanlike entities that evoked erotic passion in Western as well as Eastern cultures.

² Materassi observes this – what he considers – change: "On both sides of the Atlantic, the place of the artist may be taken by a different character: a lover (as in 'The Assignment'), a hysterical young man (in Oscar Wilde's 'Charmides,' 1881), a scholar (in Wilhelm Jensen's 'Gradiva,' 1903), an artist manqué (in Gautier's 'Le Roi Candaule,' 1844) or a madman (in Norman Douglas's *Nerinda*, 1901)" (2009, 141–142). All these roles, in my view, fall under those of a lover and of a creator, and are as such reflective of the two types.

Since the Silk Road tale is not well known to Western literary scholarship, let me briefly present it here. The tale is found in six versions and four languages: two Sanskrit versions,³ a Tibetan version,⁴ two Chinese versions,⁵ and a Tocharian version.⁶ The Chinese and Tocharian versions are not straight translations of the original Sanskrit tale but rather adaptations; the Tocharian version, in particular, enhances the original story with versified segments and many details added to the original plot.

Although the outline of the tale is typically Buddhist – a contest between two artisans – there are not many other Buddhist elements: some versions have a Buddhist moral at the end and some name the artisans after two of Buddha's disciples. The story goes as follows: a travelling painter is hosted by a mechanic who makes a wooden mechanical doll and puts it on his guest's bed. Although she does not communicate much, the painter falls madly in love with her. He knows he should not touch her because she belongs to his host, and as soon as he reaches at her, she falls to pieces. The painter is ashamed when he realizes he was tricked by the mechanic, and decides to trick him in turn. He paints himself on the wall as if having been hanged, and hides. When the mechanic sees that his guest has killed himself, he starts crying. The royal servants are called to confirm the suicide and are also unable to tell that the hanged body is not of flesh and blood. Just as they go to cut the (painted) rope with an axe, the painter reappears and victoriously explains his prank.

This tale therefore includes the main motif of the Pygmalion myth: a human man falling in love with an artificial woman. Besides this main motif, there are also other motifs that match ones from the Pygmalion paradigm, including the mechanical maiden's extraordinary beauty and the notion that she belongs to the mechanic, her creator and thus her father. Additional motifs of losing one's mind due to erotic passion and apparent suicide cause a sense of despair to pervade the story, echoing motifs that abound in Pygmalion-paradigm stories of the nineteenth century in the West.

This cluster of motifs strongly resonates with those found in Hoffmann's novella *The Sandman*, as originally noted by the Tocharian philologist Jean-Georges Pinault (2008, 251). *The Sandman* has yielded new interpretations of the Pygmalion theme in opera (*The Tales of Hoffmann*) and ballet (*Coppélia*), and serves as an exemplary text of the Pygmalion paradigm in many studies. Curi-

3 Hofinger (1982, 185–187), after Dutt (1939, 3: 166–168); also in Pinault (2008, 253) and Degener (1990, 47–48).

4 Schiefner (2007, 17–18), also in Davids, von Scheifner, and Ralston (2003, 361–362).

5 Chavannes (1911, 2: 12–13); Dschi (1943, 323–324).

6 Sieg (1952, 8–13); Lane (1947, 33–53); Malzahn (2011, A5–A9); Pinault (2008, 254–267).

ously, the resonance of the Silk Road tale with *The Sandman* is stronger than it is with Ovid's Pygmalion poem. My new typology offers a way to read texts of this kind by explaining their resonant clusters of motifs in terms of two prevalent types.

3 The new typology

According to Bloom, a "dissolution" or "failure of the Pygmalion paradigm" (2000, 291, 294) took place in the nineteenth century, after which the usual happily-ever-after formula, as found in Ovid, did not flourish any more. Indeed, quite the opposite: this is when the paradigm makes a turn towards stories of broken hearts and broken bodies. The Silk Road tale from early medieval times is, however, closer to Hoffmann's *The Sandman* rather than ancient and medieval examples of the Pygmalion myth.

Although the Silk Road tale could simply be the exception that proves the rule in the case of the Pygmalion myth, examining it in the light of canonical stories of the Western Pygmalion myth reveals new perspectives on the paradigm. In contrast to Materassi's and Bloom's views on the paradigm, the new typology I propose is not temporally determined and therefore does not exclude the Silk Road tale or *The Sandman* based on the time of their origin. Moreover, as a universal typology, it does not discriminate on the basis of place of origin either. Excluding such culture-specific qualities, two lines of development of the Pygmalion myth can be traced: one line of this typology follows the basic scheme of Ovid's Pygmalion poem, while the other follows the scheme of *The Sandman* and the Silk Road tale.

The typology I present is a simple schematic distribution of the Pygmalion paradigm across two types, which I call the Pygmalionesque type (PY type) and the agalmatophilic type (AG type). The Pygmalionesque type receives its name from the scheme of Ovid's Pygmalion poem: in this variant, the suitor adores what he himself has created. The term "Pygmalionesque" is used by Bloom and other, mostly French, scholars for texts with any kind of connection with the Pygmalion myth. I use it more narrowly, designating only the stories that strictly follow the scheme of the creator/lover as one character. The agalmatophilic type covers a suitor's erotic attraction to nonhuman objects, and thus stands as a hypernym to the Pygmalion theme. The term "agalmatophilic" is a form of para- and objectophilia, used generally for an "erotic attraction for a statue" (Materassi 2009, 137) and other man-made humanlike forms. I use the term to designate an erotic attraction to humanlike entities that are not of one's own making.

My four criteria for the Pygmalion paradigm are applied to the two types to derive salient typological divisions. The main types differ first and foremost with respect to the distribution of the main characters: the human–nonhuman couple only (i. e. the artificial woman and the creator/lover in one person; PY type), or a triangle of main figures (i. e. the artificial woman, the creator, and the lover; AG type). The second distinction is metamorphosis, which may be present (PY type) or absent (AG type). The third distinction concerns the rationality (PY type) and irrationality (AG type) of the suitor; this involves his knowledge of the artificial woman’s inanimate status and the eccentricity of his behaviour. The fourth and last distinction reflects the denouement of events, which can take either the promising (PY type) or tragic (AG type) route for the human–nonhuman couple.

The contrast between the two plot types manifests itself most clearly in the lover’s desire for metamorphosis. On the one hand, as both creator and lover, Ovid’s Pygmalion is aware that the metamorphosis of his beloved is beyond the scope of his artistic ability and therefore prays to Venus to grant him her transformation. On the other hand, Nathanael and the painter do not even perceive the need for metamorphosis, since their respective women are already alive in their eyes, animated by their passionate gazes. Pygmalion thus retains knowledge of reality, which is lost by the other two suitors: Pygmalion is an audacious dreamer, whereas the other two lovers are tricked and deluded.

Just like irrational lovers, eccentric creators of artificial women are considered to be at the edge of sanity. Both the creators and the lovers help to create an artificial woman’s identity by animating her. It is no wonder that the creators and the lovers have so much in common: they used to act in a single character such as Ovid’s Pygmalion.

The criterion of metamorphosis is the most complex, however, as it essentially tries to distinguish between human and humanlike – the basis for the Pygmalion myth itself. In Bloom’s opinion, metamorphosis is gone once there is no divine, supernatural instance to animate the lifeless matter (2000, 296). However, Bloom also claims that, after the nineteenth-century failure of the Pygmalion paradigm, metamorphosis moves to a different level: to film, where “the very medium embodies the longstanding human desire for the animation of the inanimate” (2000, 292). In cinema, metamorphosis is not perceived but imagined by the spectator (Bloom 2000, 304). Materassi traces metamorphosis through the centuries and notes that, after the 1800s, “the metamorphosis begins to be either eliminated or limited to the artist’s wishful thinking” (2009, 141). Like Bloom, Materassi does not think that metamorphosis is completely gone after the nineteenth century; unlike Bloom, he argues that it can still function beyond this time: “Whereas in the nineteenth century the occasional metamorphosis tended to be presented in a negative light [...], in the twentieth century it was usually stripped

of moral connotations. At times, the metamorphosis is treated ironically” (2009, 142). Overall, Materassi concludes that, by the twentieth century, only the agalmatophilic syndrome has survived – that is, the syndrome of an “artist developing a passion for his creation” (2009, 141).

Unfortunately, studies of the Pygmalion myth often stop at the first half of the twentieth century. One great change in more recent Western texts is that the agalmatophilic syndrome became stronger in (no less passionate) science and technology than in art. Besides literature, it would be necessary to study the Pygmalion myth in the theatre and visual arts of the twentieth century to the present day.

3.1 Examples

Examples of the Pygmalionesque type tend to be early works such as Rousseau’s *Pygmalion, scène lyrique* (1762) and Champfleury’s *The Man with the Wax Figures* (1849), and recent works such as Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1982, based on Dick’s 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) and Jonze’s film *Her* (2013). Shaw’s famous *Pygmalion* (1912) is also of this type and follows the tradition of the PY-type texts in which a young woman is educated by her paternal mentoring figure, starting with Bretonne’s *Le Nouveau Pygmalion* (1870), Gilbert’s *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1871), and James’s *Watch and Ward* (1871). This tradition is still prominent today in Tanizaki’s *Naomi* (1947), Powers’s *Galatea 2.2* (1995), and Kore-eda’s *Air Doll* (2009, based on Gōda’s manga series with the same title), to name just a few examples. The rising popularity of this type suggests a rekindled interest in human relationships with humanlike entities in recent decades, largely due to the science fiction genre. One minor development has taken place in this type: ever since humanoids became scientific designs,⁷ there tends to be more than one creator, like in *The Sandman*.

The agalmatophilic type, despite its diversity of interpretations, strictly follows the four criteria and far outnumbers the Pygmalionesque type. Besides the Silk Road tale and *The Sandman*, examples of the AG type are Mérimée’s *La Vénus d’Ille* (1937), Hawthorne’s *Rappaccini’s Daughter* (1844) and *Birthmark* (1845), Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris, or The New Pygmalion* (1894), Poe’s *The Oval Portrait* (1942), Isle-Adam’s *Future Eve* (1886), Moore’s *No Woman Born*, Tiptree’s *The*

⁷ Daedalus’ or Hephaestus’ inventions from Greek mythology, for example, are generally not considered scientific. The earliest – and extremely influential – scientific humanoid is Frankenstein’s creature from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818).

Girl Who Was Plugged In (1974), Bodroza's film *Ederlezi Rising* (2018, based on Neškovič's 1988 short story *Predveče se nikako ne može*), Makavejev's film *Anthony's Broken Mirror* (1947), and Gardland's film *Ex Machina* (2015). The AG type was most popular in continental Europe, especially in France, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while coeval US texts instead "stressed family or social values" and "legitimize[d] the unnatural passion in the almost imperative conclusion [of] a happy ending" (Materassi 2009, 140), and were therefore inclined towards the PY type.

3.2 Implications of the typology

The benefits of dividing the Pygmalion paradigm according to a binary typology are many. The primary benefit is a better understanding of the paradigm and the myth, especially when it comes to the main motif's duality of humanlike creation *and* the attraction of humans to the humanlike, which is well reflected in the binary typology of the paradigm. It is telling that the two types are still distinguishable today, as indicated by the examples of two recent Hollywood movies, *Her* and *Ex Machina*, each of which corresponds to one of the types.

The identification of two types could potentially point to significant changes in the paradigm. The two types could also be applied to non-gynomorphic Pygmalion-like texts. One prominent example of such a text is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818), which had – both independently and as a result of the rising industrial and scientific revolutions – a significant impact on the Pygmalion paradigm. The ancient Greek myths of Prometheus, Narcissus, and Talos; the Jewish figure of golem; and so forth are marked in the typological view by similar clusters of motifs, which could contribute to further discussion on the (still very current) issues they raise.

The typology could be further used to study cultural implications. Although the Pygmalion myth is, as I argue, universal, it is normally studied only from a Western perspective, as the mere name of the myth tells us. The myth certainly flourished in the West from the eighteenth century on. It would be valuable to study the typology in non-Western texts as well, such as Native American mythological stories or modern Japanese literature. Moreover, examining the role of mythology, folklore, and religion in this paradigm could prove fruitful for their respective fields of study.

Pygmalion-myth stories address archetypal human desires for companionship, our quest to create and destroy, and our encounters with new forms of the humanlike. These themes have always been a part of human thought and are all the more current in the posthuman era, which was brought on with the rise of

technologies such as artificial intelligence and bioengineering. Studying the Pygmalion myth from a typological perspective could further contribute to the fields of women's and gender studies, film, bioethics, disability studies, the history of science, artificial intelligence, animal studies, and others.

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