Old Myths through New Eyes:

A Feminist Re-Appropriation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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Abstract

Even though the common reader may not be familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* over centuries of circulation, this epic poem has woven itself into the very fabric of our present-day culture. In my thesis, I will analyze three of its most popular myths, searching for new feminist meanings in these ancient, male-dominated texts. In my introduction, "The Metamorphosis of the *Metamorphoses*: A Brief History," I examine the epic's history of translation and explore the ethos of retelling and reinterpreting stories about rape and female subordination. In my first chapter, "From Beheld to Beheaded: Medusa and the Male Gaze," I show how Medusa's gaze symbolizes the belief that to truly see and appreciate the woman would result in a man's loss of identity. In Chapter II, "Modern Arachne and Ancient Webs of Female Misogyny," I explain how Arachne's myth exposes the patriarchy's reliance on rivalry between women to maintain male dominance. Lastly, in "Pygmalion's Womb Envy: The Male Suppression and Appropriation of the Female Procreative Life Force," I prove that Pygmalion sculpts his perfect woman not only to use her as an object of sexual gratification but also as one of reproduction. Drawing inspiration from feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Bordo, and Karen Horney—and depending exclusively on Stephanie McCarter's translations—I analyze how the patriarchy uses stories to inculcate and perpetuate its ideology.

The Metamorphosis of the *Metamorphoses*:

A Brief History of Ovidian Translation and Interpretation

To change the normative gaze—the standard way we look at the world and thus act upon it—we must change the way we see; conversely, in order to change the way we tell Ovid's myths, we must change the way we read them. In *Arguments with Silence,* Amy Richlin argues that most feminist critics choose one of three paths when approaching male-centric texts: "throw them out, take them apart, [or] find female-based ones instead." She poses another option: she suggests we re-appropriate them by "taking myths and looking at them in a different way" (137). Elissa Marder also evaluates the ways a feminist might interact with Ovid's texts, arguing that a progressive analysis "must go beyond reading for the plot of male oppression and female victimization." Rather than dictating "specific political action," she claims, a feminist reading should "[open] up the fabric of a literary text" to "examine the discursive structure of patriarchy" and "formulate an effective language of response" (156). To tell these stories newly, in a way that reflects our own era's readership, we must *revise* them, or, rather, see them through new eyes. The word "revise" literally means to see (*vis*) again (*re*); only through this *re-vision* can we begin to develop an "effective language of response."

In 11,995 lines and fifteen books, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* recounts a history of humanity from the dawn of time to the death of Julius Caesar (only one year before Ovid's birth) through a catalog of myths and transformations. These stories are translations of popular myths of his time, with inspiration drawn heavily from Homer and Hesiod. While Ovid wrote the poem in 8 A.D, no original manuscript of the epic survived antiquity. Several fragments appeared in the ninth and tenth centuries, with the first full transcripts hailing from the eleventh century (Anderson

31-32). The oldest fragments are of French origin; "from France the text went to Germany, and ultimately to Italy" (Bruère 100-1). The abundance of translations accessible to us now hail from seventeenth-century scholar Nicolaus Heinsius: "In the course of diplomatic missions in various parts of Europe during the years 1640-52, [he] collated more than a hundred manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses*" (Tarrant 343). Translation is no easy feat, especially that of a so-called "dead language." The tremendous difficulty of the task requires a multitude of varied perspectives and oppositional dialogues. But for the past several hundreds of years, translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have suffered from the narrow converse among men alone. First, William Caxton translated the poem into English (1483), followed by Arthur Golding (1565) and George Sandys (1626). The next most influential version appeared in 1717 from collaborators Samuel Garth, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and several others (Lyne 249-263). And from the twentieth century on, the following translations emerged: A.E Watts (1954), Horace Gregory (1958), A. D. Melville (1987), Charles Boer (1989), Allen Mandelbaum (1993), David Slavitt (1994), Charles Martin (2005), Stanley Lombardo (2010), and Rolfe Humphries (2018). Stephanie McCarter's 2022 translation, which I will use through the entirety of my thesis, is the first version in over sixty years to be translated into English by a woman.

While the *Metamorphoses* remains one of the most relevant works of classical literature in our day—influencing the older works of Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and Dante, to the modern works of Rick Riordan, Madeline Miller, and Laurie Halse Anderson—our current understanding of the text is filtered almost exclusively through the male lens. While most translations have been completed by men, academic scholarship on Ovid has been undertaken by multitudes of diverse perspectives. Even these selections, though, are rarely public facing, and are tremendously difficult to find and obtain access to. Liz Oakley-Brown claims, "Critical

discussion of the relationship between women and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* at this time is a neglected area" and that "as the titles of many of the current publications suggest, men have predominantly produced and controlled the dissemination of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in English" (2). *The Metamorphoses* was used to teach boys the basic rules of Latin, while girls (if given the opportunity to learn at all) were taught from religious texts. Unless women knew Latin and had access to the text, they could not engage in translative conversation with Ovid's works, and the effects of this exclusion are still felt today. In "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*," Leo Corran admonishes commentators writing on this work:

> Although there are fifty or so occurrences of forcible rape, attempted rape, or sexual extortion hardly distinguishable from rape, one would scarcely guess the fact from reading most of the commentaries on the *Metamorphoses*, Ovidian scholarship in general, or the retellings of Ovid's stories in the mythological handbooks. Traditional scholarship, systematically ignoring this fact and refusing to take rape seriously, glosses over unpleasant reality and prefers euphemisms to the word rape.
>
> Rape is the dirty little secret of Ovidian scholarship. (214)

A.D Melville, in contrast, glides over the presence of rape in *The Metamorphoses*, arguing in the preface to his translation that "it is time to enjoy once more the tales of the *Metamorphoses,* not only for the famous stories that they tell, but for the grace and fluency of Ovid's style, the wit, the humour, pathos, mischief, and majesty that make this one of the most enjoyable poems ever written" (xxxvii). By only emphasizing Ovid's humor and wit, he fails to examine the role sexual assault takes throughout his myths. In "How (Not) To Translate the Female Body," McCarter writes: "A challenge translators face, or ought to face, is how to avoid imposing their own

culture's construction of gender and the gendered body onto the work they are translating … Yet this is not often done. [The] translation almost inescapably reflects its own place and time" (582). That McCarter understands these biases and works to overcome them is one of the primary reasons I use her translation. Further, I also strive in my analyses to expose those ideologies which have been ignored.

By briefly examining translations of Medusa's rape, we can see how Melville and Mandelbaum, for example, each render Ovid's myths with their own cultural assumptions marking the pages. Melville's translation buries the blame for the crime at the end of the sentence, rendering Medusa both physically and grammatically passive: "She, it's said, / Was violated in Minerva's shrine / By Ocean's lord" (4.796-7). By separating the agent (Neptune, the rapist) and the subject (Medusa, the victim), instead of translating Neptune as both subject *and* agent, (as in "Neptune raped Medusa" versus "Medusa was violated by Neptune"), Melville places focus on the wounded only to guide the reader's attention away from the abuser, which further renders Medusa passive and makes both the reader and translator complicit in Neptune's rape. Mandelbaum's translation takes Melville's transgression a step further—instead of blaming Neptune in the passive tense or at the end of the sentence, he faults Medusa's appearance: "Her beauty led the Ruler of the Sea / to rape her in Minerva's sanctuary" (4.798-9). This syntax adopts another common heteronormative male ideology: that a woman can protect herself from sexual violence by changing the way she looks or appealing less to a man's senses. Mandelbaum also replaces Neptune's name with a valorizing epithet, "Ruler of the Sea," thereby not only condemning the victim, but also acquitting the rapist through the omission of his name and glorification of his title, in a fashion commonly practiced today. By syntactically and grammatically guiding the reader's attention away from the abuser (such as by replacing the

rapist's name with valorizing titles and selectively using passive voice) the male translator perpetuates the same systems of injustice the story itself portrays, violating the victim twofold.

However, we can only criticize the male translator so much for his perpetuation of pernicious cultural positions. No matter how mindfully one translates his diction and syntax, Ovid himself told these myths through the lens of the normative man for the enjoyment and consideration *of* the normative man. McCarter changes Melville's passive verse to the active voice and rejects Mandelbaum's victim-blaming by rightfully denunciating Neptune: "They say the sea-god raped her in Minerva's / temple"—But even these alterations translate a story where Medusa is raped and then punished for *being* raped (4.861). Furthermore, McCarter cannot enhance Medusa's perspective or narrative prominence without betraying her own duty as translator.

In such circumstances, we must wonder at our own intentions in translating and interpreting these texts: What do we stand to gain from telling and retelling these stories? How can we responsibly read, write, and communicate about the *Metamorphoses*—especially in regard to the particularly sensitive material it contains? How does our way of telling and reviewing stories transform the stories themselves? In the great game of Ovidian telephone, what is the best—most honest, most ethical, most elucidating—way to tell and retell this poem, ever-conscious of the individual, subjective stain one invariably leaves by acting as its representative?

In her own evaluation of how we should continue to tell Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, McCarter states that the epic is a "product of a patriarchal culture whose sexual politics we would do well not to emulate," and that if we "do not rethink these texts through the lens of the present, they will cease to have any meaning for the present." Furthermore, she argues that

Ovid's emphasis on rape suggests that he felt "such violence was worthy of critical interrogation." She, too, agrees with Corran that, "not to focus our reading on the theme of sexual violence, or to quickly explain it away," misses the point, as well as "the opportunity to trace the legacies of such abusive power in our own world so as to understand and combat them" (McCarter xxix). One of my central goals in writing this thesis is, in fact, to take "the opportunity" to identify and protest "legacies of abusive power." I agree with McCarter that the *Metamorphoses* are a product of a patriarchal culture and that we must confront and engage with the sexual violence within its verses; I agree even more strongly that these stories will quickly lose meaning in modernity if not reappropriated through a feminist lens.

Therefore, in this thesis, I will examine three of Ovid's most ubiquitous tales to determine their modern relevance and how one can preserve their value while actively opposing the destructive hegemony from which they originate. My first chapter, "Beheld to Beheaded: Medusa and the Male Gaze," argues that Medusa's gaze symbolizes the male belief that to truly see and appreciate a woman would result in his loss of identity. In Chapter II, "Modern Arachne and Ancient Webs of Female Misogyny," I will show how Arachne's myth exposes the patriarchy's reliance on female rivalry to maintain the social order. Lastly, in "Pygmalion's Womb Envy: The Male Suppression and Appropriation of the Female Procreative Life Force," I will prove that Pygmalion sculpts his perfect woman not only to use her as an object of sexual gratification but also as one of reproduction. Drawing inspiration from feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Bordo, and Karen Horney—and depending exclusively on McCarter's translations—I will analyze how the patriarchy tells stories to perpetuate and inculcate its ideology.

Chapter I

From Beheld to Beheaded: Medusa and the Male Gaze

Perseus' story speaks to the inherent threat the female gaze poses to the patriarchal order; to truly *see* the woman (Medusa) is to kill the man (her observer)—that is, fully understanding appreciating women and the female perspective would dismantle the social imperative, where a man's agency and value comes from a woman's lack thereof. By depicting the powerful woman as a monster, a society ensures that these genders will never see eye-to-eye. As I explained in my introduction, *The Metamorphoses* has until very recently been seen and read only through the male perspective. As Susan Bowers claims, "The antidote to the male gaze, and one avenue to women reclaiming their own sexuality, is the female gaze: learning to see clearly for themselves, thus reconstructing traditional male images of women" (218). I choose to begin my thesis with the Perseus' myth because it immediately brings into question the consequences of looking and perceiving. His tale unfolds in five parts: First, he defeats Atlas by petrifying him ("Perseus and Atlas") and then saves the beautiful virgin Andromeda from a monster, but only under the condition that she will marry him ("Perseus and Andromeda"). Violence infuses their wedding: Andromeda's fiancé, Phineus, interrupts the festivities and begins a war to win her back; Perseus vanquishes him (and all two hundred of his men) by thrusting out Medusa's severed head and shining her gaze onto them—"Battle for Andromeda". Finally, he deposes king Proetus and claims his throne, and when King Polydectes does not believe his tale, he proves it true by turning "the king's face into bloodless stone" (5.264). In this chapter, I will define the male gaze; explore Medusa's reversal of his gaze, explaining how hers reflects and diverges from that of a man's; trace the breadcrumbs of divine femininity trailing from Perseus' footsteps to unveil

Medusa as a creative—rather than destructive—force; and, finally, expose why men continue to decapitate and villainize Medusa (and Medusa figures).

Ovid draws on the male gaze throughout nearly all his myths, but by relying on it when he focuses on Medusa's body, he directs particular attention to its process and ramifications. Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey initially coined "the male gaze" to describe how film-makers utilize the typical heterosexual male perspective to magnify male pleasure. In Art, Film, and other media, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "gaze" by "how an author chooses (consciously or not) to direct his or her (and hence the audience's) attention" ("Gaze, *n.*"). It is not just men who adopt this point of view and women who adopt their own, since women often adopt the normative male perspective, and men, too, can convey a uniquely feminine perspective; thus, gendered gazes do not always correlate with the observer's biological sex. I must also note that in Classical times, the division between *man* and *woman* was far less stark than the division between the *active* and *passive*. As Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner explain in *Roman Sexualities,* "The Romans divided sexual categories for people and acts on the axis of 'active' and 'passive'" (48). The "active" sense is first and foremost associated with phallic penetration; "what is active is deemed superior (male)" and "what is passive is deemed inferior (female)." A woman taking an active standpoint could be relegated to a masculine status (like the goddess Venus), just as a man taking a passive position could be delegated to a feminine one (like Adonis). Thus, the hierarchy of these attitudes speaks less to a schism between man and woman than it does to positions of power.

In the *Metamorphoses,* these power gradations provide a constant source of tension as characters exchange expressions of masculinity and femininity in their attempts to attain or maintain control. The gaze is only one manifestation of this active/passive interplay, as the

observer embraces a dynamic way of looking and desiring, while the observed assumes a submissive role as an object of visual consumption. Understanding the gendered gaze will prove imperative in analyzing any story from the *Metamorphoses*, but especially so in Perseus's because his focuses so explicitly on the power dynamic between the observer and the observed. The male gaze always begins with an active possession of the woman's body: man first sees; then he seizes. This occurs almost constantly throughout the epic—Jove "had seen [Io]" then "raped her;" or the Sun "sees / Leucothoe" and "delay[s] no more;" or Dis "sees [Proserpina], wants her, [and] steals her" (McCarter 1.633-47, 4.233-45, 5.422)—and Perseus' story is no exception.

Nearly every male figure in these verses, including Perseus, renders women passive with his gaze. For example, he "sees [Andromeda's] arms tied to hard rock," and, "seized by the image of her visual beauty," he nearly "forgets to beat his airborne wings" (4.726, 4.732-3). Perseus negates the girl's humanity, recognizing her only as an "image" of her "visual beauty"—if "gentle winds weren't blowing her hair," or "her eyes weren't wet with tears," he would have believed "she was a marble statue" (4.727-9). He cognitively dehumanizes her by comparing her to stone; only in seeing external forces acting upon her body (wind blowing her hair) and her signs of vulnerability (tears wetting her eyes) does he allow her to be a living person. The word "seized" emphasizes his desire to take her and his determination to make his desire her fault: he argues that *she* has "seized" *him* with her appearance, rather than acknowledging that he desires to seize *her* because of her beauty. He tells the tethered virgin, "'You don't deserve *these* chains, but those that join together eager lovers" (4.733-4). Of course, he thereby implies that she *does* deserve chains, but that he'd prefer her shackled to him than to a tree. He then uses her desperation as a chain of his own making: "'If my manly valor / can save

her,'" he says, "'She will be mine'" (4.761-2). The ultimatum delivered, he slays the monster threatening her life, and "The virgin [...] comes forth, his labor's prize and cause" (4.799-800). By referring to her as a "prize," he evacuates her individuality, recognizing her only as his reward for his hard "labor." When Phineus arrives to fight for her hand, Andromeda's father objectifies her the same way, claiming, "'You're pained that someone freed her, so you'll steal his prize? If you thought it so grand, you should have won it from those cliffs where it was chained'" (5.24-6). Her father's language reflects his—and the typical male—perspective, as he considers his daughter a "prize" that can be rightfully "won" or wrongfully "stolen." Furthermore, he turns her into a mere *thing* by substituting the pronouns "she" and "her" with "it."

Similarly, Perseus refutes Medusa's humanity by "snatch[ing] her head clean off" and using her gaze to overcome his rivals and nourish his pride (4.847-8). He narrates Medusa's tragic story to his wedding party (though only anecdotally and for their entertainment). One rapt listener praises him: "what manly valor and skill it took to steal that snake-haired head" (4.834-5). Here, Ovid exemplifies how the normative male audience reveres men who "subdue" powerful women. Another nobleman asks why only Medusa has snake-hair, and Perseus imparts:

> Since you seek things worth the telling,
> here is the reason: Once acclaimed for beauty, s
> he was the fervent hope of many suitors.
> And her most striking feature was her hair.
> I found a young man who alleged he'd seen it.
> They say the sea-god raped her in Minerva's temple. Jove's daughter turned away, chaste eyes veiled by her aegis. This was not unpunished.
> She changed the Gorgon's hair into foul serpents.

> And even now, to stun her foes with fright, she wears upon her chest those snakes she made. (McCarter 4.856-866)

Just as Perseus had looked upon Andromeda and sacrificed her humanity because he wanted to possess her and her beauty, "the sea-god" saw Medusa, objectified her for her "striking" features, and raped her. Significantly, while the god gazes on his victim, the goddess Minerva looks "away," her own gaze passive and permissive. Even when "Jove's daughter" finally takes action, she perpetuates the active harm of the male gaze, punishing Medusa for having been raped in her place of worship. The male gaze continues as Perseus' relays the tale, as he only mentions the Gorgon's assault to explain one of her physical attributes to his curious boys' club. He continues exploiting her, "rais[ing] the Gorgon's face" (5.190) and "mov[ing] Medusa round" (5.243) to defeat Phineus and his men, Proetus, and Poydectes. Perseus and his male counterparts objectify and dehumanize both Andromeda *and* Medusa: both are prizes to be won and commodities to be traded—but Medusa's freedom and power make her a monster, while Andromeda's captivity and subservience make her the ideal bride. By establishing the male gaze so clearly in its process (man sees, then seizes) and its ramifications (the woman becomes an object, prized when she is powerless and despised when she is not), Ovid exposes the monstrous acts the male gaze portends. E. Ann Kaplan argues in *Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* that "Men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return the gaze but cannot act on it" (311). A woman does not only dread being looked at; she dreads that a man will look at her and take away some part of her, that his gaze will forever change the way she sees the world and her place in it. A woman fears that a man will glimpse her, steal her sovereignty, and petrify her being.

Despite playing an essential role in Perseus' journey, Medusa rarely comes into focus; instead, she haunts his tale with her silent and deadly gaze, her presence always felt but rarely acknowledged. Her gaze moors Perseus' story; her power allows his domination. Medusa's curse—to turn to stone all who meet her eyes—allows her to render men passive through her gaze. In this way, she reverses the established male-female power dynamic since it is now *her* gaze which renders the *man* immobile, literally petrifying him. For the same act which gives male figures like Apollo and Jove titles of King and God, Medusa instead earns the title of the Gorgon (from Greek *gorgos* meaning *terrible*).

Perseus's exploitation of Medusa's gaze shows how he—and correlatively other men—admire a woman's strength only when he can harness it for himself. When Atlas refuses to host Perseus, he uses her gaze to transform the titan into a mountain; his "beard and hair" become "woods," his "hands and shoulders, ridges," his "head becomes the peak," and "his bones" change to "rock" (4.712-4). The next time Perseus displays her gaze, he "lays Medusa facedown" on a "pillow" of "soft leaves and seaweed" so as not to harm the "snaky head" (4.802-4). Ironically, he shelters her head despite having chopped it from her body; he only protects her now that she proves serviceable to him. Beneath Medusa's head, "the living seaweed's spongy pith absorb[s] the monster's force and harden[s] at her touch," and "its stems and leaves … feel a strange new stiffness" (4.805-7). This example differs from the others because Perseus does not intentionally use her gaze to end life. Instead, Ovid associates Medusa's power with Andromeda's "rescue," as Perseus lays Medusa on the seaweed immediately after "the virgin comes forth," "his labor's prize and cause." Through this juxtaposition, one can read Medusa's gaze as a symbol of Andromeda's emotional dissociation from trauma: *Andromeda* "absorbs" *Perseus'* "force" and "hardens" at *his* "touch," feeling a

"strange new stiffness" when he "snatches [her] up at once" (4.819). In Perseus' next exhibition of Medusa's gaze, "two hundred [soldiers] glanced at the Gorgon and were turned to stone." Phineus' "fearful gaze" met hers:

> . . . his neck stiffened;
> his tears became hard stone. Inside the marble,
> he still looked timid with a suppliant
> expression, passive hands, and abject face. (5.245-8)

Phineus, eyeing Medusa, adopts traits typically associated with female submission: timidity, a "suppliant expression," "passive hands," and an "abject" face. This again shows a reversal of gender roles, the woman forcing a male into compliance. Even weaponry and a "stolen throne" cannot "defeat that snaky monster's glaring eyes" as Perseus claims one kingdom after another (15.254-5). Clearly, Medusa's gaze holds unfathomable power, but under his possession, she holds none of it for herself. She rarely *acts*; she is acted upon, then vilified for the violence she endures and the use man makes of her—a male god rapes her, a misogynistic goddess curses her for having *been* raped, and Perseus "snatches her head clean off," only then to exercise her curse to murder his own challengers. All the while, she takes the blame; Medusa becomes the "monster," Perseus the "hero," and Minerva the venerated goddess. Thus, Ovid shows how men abuse a woman's power to sow discord and death, only then to fault her for the pain and chaos he himself espouses. In "Medusa and the Female Gaze," Bowers states: "The great irony of Medusa is that she has become a classic example of the female object, though the great emphasis in the Medusa myth is the terrifying power of her own gaze" (219). A figure of contrast and contradiction—victim and a monster, beautiful and ugly, object and objectifier—she encapsulates both versions of women Ovid commonly portrays: the exploited woman (like Andromeda and

Daphne) and the villainous one (like Circe and Medea). Her gaze holds the same force of every male voyeur, though she renders the observer passive without the active attempt at possession or penetration. A woman averts a man's gaze because of what violence he might inflict; a man averts *her* gaze because connecting with her might change the way he views himself and the world. By programming men to fear powerful women, a male-dominated society maintains the former's privilege to be his whole, complex self while the latter lives in abstracted fragments, as an archetype of one label or another. Medusa's gaze affords her no personal advantages or agency, but as a symbol she holds prominent feminist implications. By creating such high stakes—death by glance—Ovid shows how men tremble at the thought of seeing, appreciating, and connecting meaningfully with women. A man needs hands or a penis to diminish a woman; to diminish *him*, Medusa needs only her eyes. As Ovid so clearly demonstrates, a man accustomed to privilege and dominance will consider gender equality a deprivation of his own power and selfhood. The kind of individual who considers a woman's agency to be his rightful property will believe that any amount of sovereignty she gains is potency he loses—represented by his transformation into stone. Moreover, Perseus warns his companions: "Friends, look away!" (5.190) and "Friends, guard your eyes" (5.363). By preventing his allies from looking at Medusa, he ensures that they will not "lose" any authority—of their own or the patriarchy's—by relinquishing it to a woman. Ovid therefore shows how man uses woman's power to manage the social order: defeating his adversaries, dethroning kings, securing passive wives, and reserving self-determination for the male realm.

However, Ovid's myth still harbors ancient hints of the divine feminine, commemorating Medusa as a figure of fertility as well as fatality. When Perseus "hover[s] over Libya's sand," "drops of blood" fall from "the Gorgon's head to earth," which then take life as "varied

serpents”—this explains “why that land is snake-infested” (4.666-71). With just a few drops of blood, Medusa populates an entire country with snakes, emphasizing her ample procreative potential. Furthermore, after Perseus beheads her, “swift-flying Pegasus sprang, with his brother, from their mother's blood” (4.848-9). As Minerva sprang fully formed from Jove’s head, so too did Pegasus and his brother from Medusa’s. Pegasus, with the force of his birth, “broke open” a “new spring” of “holy water” with his “hoof-strike,” a “marvel” even Minerva felt compelled to observe (5.272-6). Her fertile blood thus posits her as a creative force rather than a destructive one. As Bowers clarifies, “Medusa was a powerful goddess at a time when female authority was dominant and the power to be feared was feminine” (220). She enumerates the Gorgon’s presence in different cultures: “as the serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons … Medusa represented women's wisdom,” and “as Neith of Egypt and Athene in North Africa, [she] represented the Destroyer component of the Triple Goddess” (220). In "Medusa, Apollo, and the Great Mother," A.L Frothingham maintains that “Medusa was not an evil demon or bogey, but primarily a nature goddess and earth-spirit of prehistoric times identical with or cognate to the Great Mother, to Rhea, Cybele, Demeter, and the ‘Mother’ Artemis” (349). His archeological findings revealed Medusa to be “a procreative and fertilizing energy,” an embodiment of both “productive and destructive forces” (349). Even though Perseus and Neptune objectify and subjugate Medusa, her blood preserves her ancient divinity. "The particular problem faced by Zeus in that period,” Joseph Campbell explicates, “was simply that wherever the Greeks came, in every valley, every isle, and every cove, there was a local manifestation of the goddess-mother of the world whom he, as the great god of the patriarchal order, had to master in a patriarchal way” (149). Annis Pratt carries Campbell’s argument a step further, succinctly expressing Medusa’s metamorphosis from Goddess to Gorgon: “Myths in which heroes conquer dragons and gorgons

and snakes and other monstrous figures are essentially stories of 'riddance' in which the beautiful and powerful women of the pre-Hellenic religions are made to seem horrific and then raped, decapitated, or destroyed" (168). Perseus' story attempts to drain Medusa's power by using it to perpetuate the male-domineered social structure, but her divinity persists through her blood's bountiful procreative abilities.

Ovid's myth of Perseus shows, then, how the patriarchy constructs ideologies which villainize powerful women and convince men that his identity relies on his dominance over others. Propagating this fallacy guarantees that men and women will never find common ground or embrace a mutual appreciation. Therefore, Medusa's gaze shows how the male gaze infiltrates and rules the conquered female body, and, further, how it symbolizes a man's fear that by seeing and valuing women, he will lose his identity. However, the story's retention of Medusa's progeny—Pegasus and Libya's many snakes—proves the patriarchy will never fully unstitch the sacred feminine from its fabric.

Chapter II:

Modern Arachne and Ancient Webs of Female Misogyny

The story of Arachne and Medusa exposes a phenomenon as old as the patriarchy itself: the necessity for women to oppose and antagonize each other in order to maintain systems of male superiority. A feminist reappropriation of this myth reveals that, beneath a thick layer of sexism and prejudice, one can find a biting commentary on how internalized misogyny prevents women from holding men accountable for their actions. As the story goes, Arachne, one of the finest weavers in the land despite her low status and lack of riches, challenges the goddess Minerva to a weaving contest. Minerva weaves a portrait exalting the gods and herself among them. Arachne counter-weaves a portrait narrating the gods' crimes: Jove, as an eagle, bull, swan, satyr, husband, golden rain, shepherd, and serpent, rapes Europe, Leda, Antiope, Alcema, Danae, Mnesomyne, and Proserpine; Neptune, as a bull, ram, horse, bird, and dolphin, rapes Canace, Theophane, Ceres, Medusa, and Melantho. Other gods mimic this deceitful debauchery: Phoebus, as a shepherd, seduces Isse; Bacchus tricks Erigone with grapes; and Saturn, as a horse, impregnates the nymph Philyra, creating the first centaur. Minerva gazes at these weavings and fury overcomes her; she shreds Arachne's flawless indictment of the gods and attacks the artist herself. Unable to endure the pain any longer, the spinster hangs herself, and Minerva turns her into an immortal, forever-weaving spider. Arachne wins the contest but loses her humanity; she suffers at the hands of a woman for attesting to the pain women endure at the hands of immortal men. Like the Aunts in *A Handmaid's Tale*, Minerva deftly eliminates Arachne and her attempt to speak out against injustice, setting a harrowing example for all women who might dare challenge the gods (and the patriarchal order).

There are two key elements at force within this story: weaving as a potent means of connection between women, and female misogyny as an equally formidable means of *disconnection*. For the purpose of this thesis, I define *female misogyny* as women opposing and antagonizing other women in order to assume a dominant, male-assimilated position of authority. *The Oxford Handbook of Gender in Organizations* more explicitly defines *female misogyny* as "the social processes, behaviours, and activities women engage in, consciously or unconsciously, when they subjugate, undermine, exclude, and stigmatize other women" (240). Simply put, the phrase describes women's "violence" towards other women. Any society founded on beliefs of male superiority and female inferiority requires misogyny to perpetuate itself. As Anthonia Yakabu explains in "Rewriting the Women Enmity Lore: New Voices in Autobiographical Narratives," the patriarchy conditions women "not to trust themselves, to believe the worst of the other, and to always see the other woman as a 'competitor'" (223). This distrust—of themselves and each other—then results in "acts of violence intended to subdue the other woman into silence." She continues, "Women take on the position of the man in these instances and perpetuate the same violence they suffer from the hands of men, onto fellow women." Minerva appropriates active masculinity to elevate herself to a position of assimilated dominance and reflect male brutality back onto other women. Yakuba insists that "the meting out of violence on women by women [...] challenges simplistic analyses about 'male violence' and raises important questions about the nature of patriarchy, and women's active participation in it" (223). Ovid's story of Arachne and Minerva does just this: it exemplifies the practice of female misogyny, challenging simplistic notions of male hostility and investigating the role women play in scaffolding their own oppression.

Ovid contrasts the dissension female misogyny espouses with a symbol of female unification and solidarity: tapestry weaving. In his verses, he pays close attention to the skill and artform of weaving. Before divulging the contents of their respective tapestries, he first establishes the physicality and finesse the art requires. He writes, Arachne

wound the rough
wool into spheres, or worked it with her fingers
until it softened like a cloud, or turned
the rounded spindle with her agile thumb,
or painted with her spool. (McCarter 6.20-4)

By associating Arachne with active verbs—"wound," "worked," and "painted"—he gives power to her artistry (and to the artform itself). The dynamism he gives to Arachne counteracts the assumption that tapestry weaving, because of its association with women, is a passive act. He then describes Arachne and Minerva in unison as the competition begins:

With their sharp shuttles
they weave the weft thread in and out, then pull it
tight with their fingers. When it's winded through,
they tap it with a notch-toothed comb to pack it.
Their tunics belted to their chests, they move
their skilled arms quickly back and forth, their toil
forgotten in the thrill. They weave in purple
dyed in a Tyrian vat and subtle shades
in slightly graded hues, just like a rainbow
when drizzle strikes the sunlight and its arc

stains the wide sky—a thousand colors shine
in it, but their transitions fool the eye,
looking the same where touching, but with edges
in different colors. They add stiff gold thread
and weave into the fabric ancient tales.
(6.61-75)

By describing Arachne's and Minerva's actions together—"they weave," "they tap," "they move," "They add"—the two seem almost to work as one. This emphasizes the opportunity weaving presents for female connection and solidarity, for women to unite and move together. In describing their tunics "bolted to their chests," Ovid further amplifies the femininity of weaving, showing the fabric physically attached to their breasts. He compares the magnificence of the weaving to a rainbow whose beauty arises from the interaction of two opposing forces: "drizzle" and "sunlight." He juxtaposes the potential for connection with the forthcoming disconnection: despite acting almost as mirrors to one another, "looking the same where touching," they use "different colors" to tell opposite messages; Minerva's tapestry glorifies the patriarchal order, while Arachne's rages against it.

Ovid focuses on weaving for two narratological purposes: as a representative of female communication and connection, and as a method to tell stories, write history, and perpetuate cultural ideologies. Kathryn Kruger explains that "traditionally, the history of weaving is a history of women's work," and "anthropological research has concluded that invariably women produced most of the textiles in the ancient world" (23). Not only did women dominate the ancient textile industry, but as Marie-Louise Nosch elaborates in "Voicing the Loom: Women, Weaving, and Plotting," textiles have been "a specific means of female communication, invisible

to and inaudible to men" (96). Ovid's story of Philomela exemplifies this, as she weaves her assault and mutilation onto a tapestry for her sister as a form of communication "only [a woman] could assess and understand." In *The Metamorphoses*, weaving thus represents a "means for women to acquire a voice and express their stories and realities in opposition to the words of the men." Nosch continues, "figurative weaving became women's only way to express their version of the truth," as it was "the only available means of expression to them." She concludes that "from the voice of the oppressed gender, tapestry and weaving therefore became the female tool or even weapon in the struggle for truth, in writing history and passing on messages" (96). In understanding the role of weaving in ancient Roman society, we can read Arachne and Minerva as a story of two women using the only tool of expression available to them in a battle for each to immortalize her own version of the truth.

This brings us to the second role weaving plays in this myth—that is, as a method of writing history and propagating political doctrines. Kruger writes that "weaving and cloth were not incidental to culture but were vital forces in establishing, homogenizing, and perpetuating many societies." She explains that by dominating the textile industry and participating in the textile-making community, "women took part in the first textual practices, recording their society's stories, myths, and sacred beliefs in symbols woven or embroidered on their textiles." In this way, women were active participants in the perpetuation of a culture's myths, legends, and ideologies; "Weaving becomes, in the hands of women, a tool for signifying, and their textiles represent a text inscribed with a personal and/or political message." For Minerva and Arachne, weaving becomes a device to signify and spread her own political beliefs. Kruger adds, "If the weaver is in league with the dominant patriarchal society, this text will reproduce its signs of prerogative, but if she is not a confederate of the dominant culture her textile will unmask these

signs and represent them as marks of tyranny" (23). Minerva, as a "confederate" of the dominant culture, perpetuates the status quo through her tapestry, while Arachne, an active dissenter of the overriding society, defies the status quo through hers.

Minerva, using tapestry weaving to assume masculine power and perpetuate patriarchal dogmas, portrays herself among "twelve gods" who "sit high on thrones in august grandeur." She depicts Jove looking "like a king," Neptune "stand[ing] and strike[ing] his trident," and herself with "a shield and a sharp-tipped spear / and helmet" (6.78-85). By associating her might with the most powerful gods, she attempts to elevate herself to their same level of authority. She then shows how "the earth, struck by her spear" gives life to the first olive tree. Notably, Minerva weaves her "peaceful olive" tree last, as her emblem as a "peace-maker." However, her acts of violence against women (beating Arachne and turning her into a spider, or punishing Medusa for her own rape and making her turn all onlookers to stone) negate her "peacekeeper" reputation.

In determining to purportedly "keep the peace," Minerva, in fact, resolves to maintain the patriarchal order. Before the competition begins, she tries to intimidate Arachne into admitting she is the better weaver: "Reckless girl, yield to the goddess. / Ask her in supplicating tones to pardon / your words" (6.35-7). If Minerva only offers mercy when her victim capitulates, this cannot be interpreted as an attempt to maintain peace, but as a threat of future violence. Minerva continues warning her through her tapestry, as she weaves four instances of mortals competing with gods and losing: "Thracians Rhodope / and Haemus" likened themselves to Jove and Juno, but are "now cold peaks;" the Pygmy queen and Antigone both compared their beauty to Juno's, and, for this, were transformed into "a crane that wars against its people" and a "stork," "white with feathers." And finally, she depicts how the "now childless" Cinyras "seems to weep" after his daughter tricked and bedded him, for which the gods changed her into a tree. Throughout her

tapestry, Minerva focuses solely on gods "winning" by forcing mortals to submit. Her every depiction shows them losing to gods and holding intact the hierarchy of the powerful and powerless. By upholding this order, Minerva can clutch the relative authority her association with masculine dominance grants her. Finishing her tapestry, "she adds one final detail: [a] peaceful olive / around the hem." By dictating that Minerva end her artwork this way, Ovid shows that each instance of a mortal losing to a god leads to the continued growth of Minerva's tree, which supposedly symbolizes peace, but actually symbolizes systemic submission and silencing.

It is important to note, too, that several of the myths Minerva alludes to here are ones with the theme of "beauty competitions" between women. Anne Campbell relates that "Attractiveness appears to be the currency of female competition even when no mention is made of what the competition is about" (19). Leora Tanenbaum similarly argues that "many women compete over things they think men value," such as appearance and desirability, with the "most dangerous outcome" of this manifesting as "girls and women [disparaging] themselves and [dissociating] from other females" (47). Likewise, Lyn Mikel Brown says that girls "[ventriloquize] patriarchal male attitudes about appropriate female appearance and behavior," ultimately dividing them from themselves and securing their "subordinate status within the prevailing social order" (117). By retelling myths in which women (like Juno, Haemus, and Antigone) rival one another over their respective allure to males, Ovid emphasizes how, when women focus their energy on securing male attention, they sow discord in their own relationships.

While Minerva's tapestry focuses on the gods' superiority and patriarchal ascendancy, Arachne's serves as a scathing accusation of the immortal. She depicts the various disguises male

gods take to trick and rape women: Jove pretends to be an eagle, bull, swan, satyr, husband, shepherd, and serpent; Neptune takes the form of a bull, ram, horse, bird, and dolphin; and Saturn assumes the appearance of a horse. In all these portrayals, Arachne gives the gods "their true looks," thus criticizing the anonymity and impunity their masquerades provide. In juxtaposition to Minerva's hem, with its alleged message of peace, Arachne lines hers with "flowers intertwined with tendrils" of ivy—which often symbolizes devastation, as it covers dilapidating and decaying structures. However, it also replicates Arachne's attempt to cover the *social* structure with her own demands for justice, an ultimately rejuvenating cause. Just as Minerva's olive tree symbolizes aggression more than peace, Arachne's ivy symbolizes healing more than it does destruction; the healthy redesign of the social order could only serve to mend women and their relationships. We can see, then, that it is actually Arachne's ivy that represents peace, and Minerva's olive that represents destruction. Both Minerva and Arachne use their weaving to reveal scenes in which gods and immortals "win," but only the latter reveals the cruel methodology behind patriarchal victory.

Ovid then depicts Minerva destroying Arachne's tapestry and literally dehumanizing her to provide a vivid, visceral example of how women silence other women to maintain the system of power: "Pallas [Minerva] can't criticize Arachne's work," and yet is so "pained by her success" that she "shreds the tapestry that shows gods' crimes" (6.138-41). By revealing Minerva's fury with Arachne rather than with the men who committed such crimes, Ovid emphasizes the goddesses' inability to differentiate between the reporter of the problem and the problem itself. Minerva exemplifies a finding in one of Sharon Thompson's case studies, which proved that girls frequently displaced their anger, "hating girls, instead of boys or men, for

injuries inflicted by boys or men" (245). She aims her animosity at women—Arachne and the victims she represents—instead of at men, for injuries inflicted *by* men.

Minerva, the supposed embodiment of the "peace" her olive tree signifies, "three, then four times strikes Arachne" with the "boxwood shuttle in her hand" (6.142-3). Ironically, the "boxwood shuttle," otherwise a tool of feminine connection and solidarity, becomes, in the goddesses' hands, a weapon to perpetuate systemic silencing of female voices. Finally, to punish Arachne for recognizing and voicing the crimes of men and gods, she turns her (and her "whole line") into spiders, forever shooting out thread "to work [their] ancient webs" (6.149-55). Minerva, in her desire to resemble the powerful men surrounding her, appropriates their masculine cruelty (and their methodologies of deceit such as approaching mortals in disguise, as she, herself, initially approaches Arachne as an old beggar woman) to suppress other women's voices. By dividing herself from other women and acting as a surrogate male abuser, she upholds the social order and nourishes her own sliver of power in a male-dominated world. Yakabu argues that female antagonism and misogyny—women distrusting and viewing each other as "competitors"— spreads a belief "that women cannot find a common ground to harness their potentials and work together for their good and the good of all" (223). This results in women, like Minerva, then "[transferring] and [devoting] their strengths and capabilities to the men." Because of Minerva's belief in her own assimilated masculinity and in other women's inferiority—especially a mortal's—she refuses to listen to Arachne's words, or to see the pain they express as her own, and, as such, she devotes her strengths and capabilities to the male gods around her. For as long as there are women—or goddesses—like Minerva, protectorates of their own oppression, the patriarchy will continue to thrive.

By using weaving as a symbol of feminine solidarity and cultural and ideological preservation, Ovid's competition symbolizes the futility and violence that emerges when two representatives of an oppressed group—one who advocates for their group's oppression and one who actively fights against it—engage in "battle." (I must note, too, that while Minerva's immortality affords her far more power than mortal women, she herself still suffers from the expectations and stigmas spread by men; even as a goddess, her potency pales in comparison to that of the gods'.) Though the story ends with the tyrant's victory, we can carry the torch of Arachne's cause by recognizing female rivalry both as Ovid exemplifies it and as it appears in reality. Thus, a feminist reading of this text understands the patriarchy's reliance on misogyny and recognizes the necessity for women to connect, unite, and move as one—unafraid of themselves or of each other—to attain freedom and genuine peace.

Chapter III

Pygmalion's Womb Envy:

The Male Suppression and Appropriation of the Feminine Procreative Life Force

The myth of Pygmalion is purportedly simple: having watched the "lusty daughters of Propoetus" (10.258) "pass their lives in crime" (10.623) he decides to make his own perfect woman out of stone. He falls in love with his creation and asks the goddess Venus to give it life; nine months later his ivory wife gives him a child. Pygmalion objectifies a woman (literally making her an object), just like a male-dominated culture molds women to meet its standards. However, while most analyses recognize that he uses his statue as an object of sexual desire, few (if any) explore how he uses it as an object of sexual reproduction. While Pygmalion can sculpt it, he cannot give it life; thus, I will argue that it is Pygmalion's envy of a woman's creative and reproductive abilities that propels him to sculpt his utopian woman, not only as an object of sexual desire but also, and most importantly, of sexual reproduction. He forms his sculpture and imagines that by creating art, he also creates life. But when his fantasy fails him, he must attain Venus's assistance to incarnate his statue so that he, in turn, can reproduce through the ivory body he created. By fabricating his own woman, eliminating her independence, and appropriating her progenitive potential, he overcomes his envy and establishes himself as the primary mover in creating and sustaining his progeny.

Ovid begins his poem by establishing Pygmalion's obsession with creativity. The first line drives the reader's attention to female sexuality by introducing what the sculptor pays attention to: "[he] watched them [the first prostitutes] pass their lives in crime." Even though he frowns upon the prostitutes, believing they live sinfully, he nonetheless gazes on them as they do

so. By writing that Pygmalion had “long lived on his own" because he was “outraged by the myriad faults that nature / gave women’s minds” (10.264-5), Ovid immediately exposes this story’s protagonist as a misogynist who would rather live alone than subject himself to a woman’s allegedly faulty mind. In response to his loneliness and disgust with women, he sculpts, “with his astounding art,” “a statue from white ivory and g[ives] it / beauty with which no woman can be born” (10.267-9). His talent exceeds nature, his ivory birth’s beauty surpassing that of any natural creation. By making his statue more exquisite than any other, Pygmalion prioritizes a woman’s physical appearance over her mind, and for this falls “in love with his own masterpiece” (10.270). Ovid writes that, made with such artistry, his sculpture “looks like a real virgin—alive / and wishing to be roused” (10.271-2). Unsurprisingly, Pygmalion bestows upon his statue *virginity* as the second most important trait. He then describes her as human rather than stone, with “flesh” he worries he’ll “bruise.” By imagining that his statue lives, I argue, he flatters himself as life-giving and conflates *creativity* with *procreativity.*

Pygmalion shows a male reversal of natural reproduction: the man forms the woman through artistic processes, rather than the woman forming man through biological ones. He feels desire “for man-made flesh,” (10.274) rather than for that which is woman-made. By believing the statue’s surface to be composed of “flesh” instead of stone and refusing to “admit she is still ivory,” (10.277) he feeds his self-deception—he renders her as living, but he has not given life. Ovid’s language mimics Pygmalion’s illusions, referring to the statue with the pronouns “her” and “she” instead of “it”: “He kisses her and thinks she kisses back. / He speaks to her and holds her” (10.278-9). Even his fear of bruising the “arms he’s touched” (10.280) emphasizes his fantasy that he has not created a *statue* of his ideal (that is, mindless) woman, but that he has created his archetypal woman, in the flesh. No one can ignore that Pygmalion objectifies woman,

though I argue that he uses her not only for sexual gratification but also for *reproduction*, that is, as a way to control a woman's (pro)creative abilities. Once a man renders a woman entirely passive and subservient, he can overtake and appropriate her procreative life-force; he can use her body to pass on his own DNA, values, and culture without her interference.

Pygmalion's attempt to cement femininity in stone shows the patriarchy's attempt to simplify woman by classifying her with absolute labels. Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* argues that "In concrete reality, women manifest themselves in many different ways but each of the myths built around woman tries to summarize her as a whole" (1214). Pygmalion, as an artist, does just this: rather than accept woman as complex and complicated, he simplifies her with clay: a beautiful, mindless shape to dress and hold and lie with. Beauvoir identifies one of the most insidious myths "anchored in masculine hearts" as the "feminine 'mystery.'" Like Pygmalion, a patriarchal society defines "the second sex" in the most basic terms by dividing her into categories: virgin or whore, beautiful or ugly, young or old, etc. Then, when a man cannot comprehend this strange being—because she is *not* simple and *cannot* divide herself neatly along a binary—he classifies her as a "mystery," effectively expelling the need or desire to understand her in any meaningful capacity. Beauvoir rightly asserts that "this subjective game" of rendering woman in whatever terms conveniently suit him "is for many a more attractive experience than an authentic relation with a human being" (1216). By crafting a being from stone, Pygmalion shows how the masculine attempt to mold a woman to his own desires projects the male self onto the female body, thus identifying her as excusably impenetrable—his projection onto her allows him to physically penetrate her while simultaneously seeing her as emotionally impenetrable. He cannot understand the internal life of a woman made of stone, and yet it is his own choice to render her *through* stone (or through unyielding, absolute terms) which makes her impossible to

understand. Once a man expels the woman's interiority, and configures her as an eternal enigma, he can further justify objectifying, manipulating, and appropriating her body.

Pygmalion uses a specific *material* to form his woman—hard, inflexible ivory—which symbolizes male culture's cognitive rigidity. This, in turn, deems her "mysterious" and excuses his disavowal of her humanity; the actual *act* of sculpting and shaping his ideal woman, though, displays *how* a patriarchy configures woman to meet its standards: Pygmalion manifests his woman and uses her like a doll, showing how a male-dominated society uses female bodies to perpetuate its customs and ideologies. He "kisses her," "speaks to her," "holds her," "brings her gifts," "decks her limbs in clothes," "puts jewels on her fingers" and "pendants around her neck," "lays her down," and "calls her his bedmate" (10.278-92). Ovid elucidates with exacting accuracy that a man expects a woman to be a beautiful virgin who passively receives his kisses, words, gifts, clothes, jewelry, and sexual penetration. As Susan Bordo writes, "The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture" (2096). Pygmalion's ivory woman, too, is a "medium of culture," as he creates her to encapsulate all that he (and a male-monopolized society) would wish her to be. Bordo endorses anthropologist Mary Douglas' perception that the body is "a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced," but also draws on Bourdieu and Foucault's theories of the body as a "practical, direct locus of social control" (2096). The body reflects the culture's values and expectations, ensuring the continuation of social morés themselves. While every*body* in a society is subject to the implementation and continuation of its values, the repercussions for female bodies are especially dire: Bordo writes that

> Through the pursuit of an ever changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, [and] 'improvement.'" (2097)

By hanging "small beads […] from [the statue's] ears" (10.287) and "drap[ing] her chest" with "ribbons" (10.288) or enjoying her nakedness because "nude she's no less beautiful to look at" (10.289), Pygmalion ensures that his statue mirrors his own "whimsical changes in fashion," as well as his society's preoccupation with beauty and docility. His sculpture's corpus becomes the direct locus of his command, since he makes her passive to his "external regulation" and "improvement." More than any woman, the ivory "skin" resembles Pygmalion, reflecting his own imagination, culture, and ideals. As Beauvoir puts it, asserting his beliefs onto the female body leaves a man with a sad reflection of himself, "alone with his dreams, hopes, fears, love, [and] vanity" (1216).

Furthermore, Pygmalion repeatedly acts *upon* the sculpture's body, and she readily receives his actions—never responding with her own—which shows how even male dominance at its best (when he acts under the guise of love), drains a woman of her agency. Beauvoir states that, "As man holds a privileged place in this world, he is the one who is able actively to display his love; very often he keeps the woman, or at least he helps her out; in marrying her, he gives her social status; he gives her gifts; his economic and social independence permits his endeavors and innovations" (1218). As we see in the poem, even when a man treats a woman as if he "loves" her, "sweet-talking" her and "bring[ing] her gifts" (10.282), he extinguishes her independence when he expects her to be a silent, grateful receptacle for his displays of affection.

Beauvoir, too, emphasizes the precariousness of a man's favor: “While normally woman finds numerous advantages in commerce with man, commerce with woman is profitable to man only inasmuch as he loves her” (1218). The myriad privileges this social order affords man ensures that a woman will almost always have more to gain from a man’s favor than he stands to gain from hers. By shaping his perfect female, Pygmalion therefore reflects on how the patriarchy uses myths and lived ideology to model the women under its control. “Through myths,” Beauvoir claims, “society impose[s] its laws and customs on individuals in an imagistic and sensible way” (1219). “The myth of the woman”—as a mystery, as a one-dimensional character resting decidedly on a binary, and as a passive receiver of male action and agency—becomes indoctrinated into her body every which way a man molds her, through “religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, and film” as well as man-made “laws and customs” (1219). Like Pygmalion’s statue, she “grows more usable with use,” softening “like wax,” which “a thumb can bend and mold [...] into many shapes” (10.309-14).

Though Ovid emphasizes the exclusively female power of conception—through Pygmalion’s reliance on Venus to animate his model—he also retracts from it, as ultimately he (rather than the statue herself) pleads with the deity, and he alone benefits from doing so. By indulging the artist, the goddess also represents the role women play in their continued oppression. As a goddess of fertility, Venus possesses more power than either Pygmalion or his statue, yet she chooses to support the male artist, forcing his creation into a lifetime of sentient servitude to her maker. Ovid hereby shows how internalized misogyny (as Venus prioritizes Pygmalion and the male gender over herself and her own) helps a man appropriate female sexuality. Finally, Pygmalion’s sculpture fully satisfies him when “the moon's horns waxed to full nine times” and she gives him a child named Paphos (10.323-4). Notably, only Pygmalion

and his progeny have names; his statue remains nameless. (Though modernly referred to as Galatea, the name's connection with the artist originated from a post-classical writer, likely Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The *Metamorphoses* includes a myth about a sea-nymph named Galatea, but her story never intersects with Pygmalion's.)

To say only that Pygmalion objectifies woman fails to examine the deeper roots of his artistic and progenitive ambitions. That he degrades and exploits his statue garners obvious attention, but merely focusing on how he uses woman to exhaust his lust does not account for his obsession with procreativity—woman as an object of sexual reproduction. It is not enough to render her an object for his sexual gratification, he must also take a woman's greatest and most unique form of power and use it for himself. Ovid's emphasis on Pygmalion's "astounding art" as well as his frenzied delusion of having given his statue life (calling her stone "flesh," and fearing he will "bruise" her arms) both show how he prides himself on his ability to create art so lifelike that it appears lively. I suggest that by describing his art with female pronouns and living characteristics, he conflates artistic creativity with biological *pro*creativity. To actually create life, however, he must depend on the goddess' procreative abilities. Realizing his statue's animation, "the Paphian hero / conceives abundant words of thanks to Venus" (10.317-8). Ovid's enjambement emphasizes the word "conceives." By giving the "paphian hero" this verb—which refers to sexual reproduction—Ovid (like Venus to the statue) allows the artist to conceive, or rather, to give life (290). The story ends, too, with fecundity in the spotlight: the ivory woman births Paphos. Pygmalion finally asserts himself as a creative force beyond the powers artistry offers him—in having sex with his now-living, man-made bride, he can use her and her reproductive abilities for his own ends.

Pygmalion's preoccupation with fertility—the resemblance of life, the reciprocation of life (as he thinks the statue "kisses back"), and the creation of life—can be better understood through an analysis of male womb envy. German psychoanalyst Karen Horney responded to Freud's concept of "penis envy" with her own theory: the subconscious male envy of a woman's reproductive organs and her role in creating and preserving life. As Cheryl L. Eschbach writes, "The womb is the primary target of envy because it is the childbearing capacity of woman that both differentiates her biologically from man and is central to her sexuality" (54). Felix Boehm adds that "it excites our envy when others have something *more* than we have ourselves. We may say, further, that when they have something *different*, something which we can never have, we experience a sense of inferiority" (457). Female sexuality aggravates Pygmalion into creating his own woman; his "outrage" at watching the promiscuity of Propoetus' "lusty daughters" compels him to rectify the "myriad faults that nature gave women's minds" (10.264-5). By making a ravishing, inanimate "virgin," he takes away the woman's procreative power—what she has that he does not. He fancies himself a life-giver—confusing creation with procreation—by attributing living qualities to his statue, describing it with feminine pronouns, and mistaking its stone surface for flesh. Harriet E. Lerner claims that "Devaluation of an envied object is a typical defensive manoeuvre, for as long as an object is devalued it does not need to be envied" (542). Making the woman's body a mere object helps alleviate a man's jealousy. Peter Shabad states that "It is not a simple task for men to face the fact that in the most elemental, procreative sense, as sons, they are mere creatures who are indebted for their emergent life to their mothers, woman the creator." He allows that men, of course, "contribute to the procreative process," but insists, "most immediately, most viscerally, and most visibly for all eyes to see, the miracle of creation has its source in woman." In his artistic endeavors as well as sexual, Pygmalion can give a

physical form and shape, but without a woman, he cannot actually reproduce. Shabad continues, "men must struggle restlessly in their search for creative meaning." Through asserting his creativity in the public sphere, "far away from the rival creative influences of motherhood," a man attempts "to compensate for his biological lack and create an enduring monument of creative significance in his own right" (77). By elevating himself to a woman-like position by creating his statue, and by disparaging women for their sexual difference (shaming the prostitutes' sexuality), I argue that Pygmalion compensates for his inability to reproduce by contributing an "enduring monument of creative significance." Exercising his inanimate art as an object of sexual pleasure only goes so far, however: he has dressed and undressed her, sweet-talked her and "called her his bedmate," and yet he still prays to Venus: "If […] you can grant all things, / let my wife be […] *like* my ivory virgin" (10.300-1). By pleading for a wife "like" his statue, Pygmalion both idolizes his art and emphasizes its lack: he wants a wife with all of his statue's attributes, and yet his sculpture itself cannot fill this role because it lacks life.

I argue, then, that he wishes for his statue's animation not to increase his sexual enjoyment—as it already satisfies his lust before it comes to life—but rather to harness a woman's procreative potential. Both before and after his model's animation, Pygmalion has sex with it, "call[ing] [it] his bedmate." He continues to use the statue as an object of erotic fulfillment, but now he can use her for reproduction as well. Ovid's language shows how his sexual relationship with his art does not change due to its animation: Before, he "often strokes" his masterpiece, "kisses her," "holds her," "sinks" his fingers into "her arms," and drapes "her chest" with ribbons; after her animation, he "kisses her again" (10.307) "feels her chest" (10.308), and the ivory "sinks beneath his fingers' touch" (10.310). By using the same language before and after Venus incarnates the sculpture, Ovid shows that his art's animation makes little

difference in his sexual attraction, as it serves his lust equally—whether or not it lives. As I argue, what matters to Pygmalion is the ability life gives his model to *reproduce* life, a fact which highlights the primary biological difference between the sexes: Only now that she lives and breathes can she bear fruit; only now can he exploit her to sustain his own lifeblood.

My analysis thus examines the overlooked reason Pygmalion sculpts: envying woman's reproductive abilities, he creates a statue first to imagine himself as a life-giver, and lastly (after petitioning for her animation) so he can *become* a life-giver. His occupation as an artist exposes his fixation on creativity; his treatment of his statue reveals his desire to independently reproduce; supplicating to Venus, he recognizes (and fears) his impotence without woman; and lastly, by impregnating his statue, he can both reproduce and believe he has done so himself, having molded his reproductive machine with his own hands and animating her with his prayers. Thus, Pygmalion demonstrates how a man's treatment of the female body manifests his womb envy: by defining her with simplistic, black-and-white terms and using her as a passive receptacle for his agency, he can ultimately claim her reproductive abilities for himself to perpetuate his values and his likeness through her body, absent of her influence.

A New Language of Response

Through a feminist analysis of these myths, one can understand how the male gaze, female misogyny, and womb envy operate in a patriarchal society. By establishing frameworks that drain a woman's divinity and villainize her power, stories like Perseus's show how men who let their authority over women define them will believe that honoring a woman's equality will result in a loss of self. The dissemination of myths like these prevent all people from valuing one another and forming meaningful connections. Additionally, stories like Arachne's expose the patriarchy's reliance on female antagonism and reveal female solidarity as an antidote. As Audre Lorde posits, women "have been taught either to ignore [their] differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change" (2). By sowing discord in female relationships, a male-dominated culture ensures that women perceive their differences as reasons to compete with and mistrust each other, rather than as necessary tools for social revolution. Finally, stories like Pygmalion's—in which men simplify and objectify women and use their sexuality for his own gratification and reproduction—reveal the compulsion to appropriate the female procreative power to perpetuate his own lifeblood and ideals. By reading these stories and realizing the dangerous ideologies they cultivate, we can start to recognize similar myths we encounter in our daily lives, ones which tell us a man and woman cannot see eye-to-eye without one or the other losing their humanity, or teach us that every woman is another's adversary, or tempt us to bifurcate ourselves along a binary. We must familiarize ourselves with these fables—not only with their contents but also the falsehoods they represent—in order to remember and recover our connection to ourselves and each other. In apprehending the perfidies the dominant culture would have us accept as natural fact, we shed

old, noxious myths like itchy wool sweaters and wrap kinder convictions around our shivering shoulders. Like Arachne, we work “the rough / wool … until it soften[s] like a cloud,” unraveling the dogmatic blinds shrouding our eyes, the imperious wires cording our wrists. Finally, we meet the others’ gaze; finally, we hold the others’ hand. This is the true meaning of re-vision—this our new language of response.

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