Ovid, commonly known as Ovid, was a Roman poet and author who lived during the reign of Augustus Caesar. He is renowned as poet of great variety and skill, and no work so wonderfully displays his talent as his *Metamorphoses*, a massive volume of mythological stories of transformation. Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, art and nature serve as unifying themes and are present in some capacity in each myth Ovid recounts. In particular, art and nature are prevalent in the myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who falls in love with his ivory creation. An important contrast develops between art and nature in this story, and that contrast speaks to how the senses are woven into both.

Roman literature is fond of treating the subjects of art and nature, and their contrasting figures appear again and again in the best works of the Ancient World. These two didactic terms are often used in elegiac poetry as a means of deciphering the interwoven relationships among the poet, lover, and girl (*poeta, amator, and puella*).¹ The poet and the lover are one in the same, as the poet attempts to express the love and the experience of the beloved (i.e., the puella) to his reader. There is also, however, a sense of lament, as in all elegiac poetry, as the beloved has an unattainable quality that eventually leaves the poet/lover in despair. The girl, more specifically Pygmalion’s own beloved,² exemplifies the erotic nature displayed in Ovid’s version of elegiac poetry and the grappling of the role that the artist plays in shaping his own art.

Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* begins with the laments of Orpheus after losing his wife, Eurydice, to the underworld. Defeated and mourning his loss, Orpheus abstains from love and chooses to use his lyre and musical talents to sing of the various myths that follow similar lamentation. Ovid uses sorrowful Orpheus as an internal narrator to express the relationship between the poet and girl, as exemplified by lines 10.81-82: “Nevertheless, a
desire was holding the many women to join themselves to the poet, the many women pained at rejection” (Multas tamen arbor babebat / iungere se vati, multae doluere repulsae). The women were driven by a natural desire (ardor) to join themselves to the poet, illustrating to the idea of the poet/lover. Orpheus, however, rejected such “advances,” a common motif associated with the puella. One such myth of transformation written by Ovid is that of the Cyprian sculptor, Pygmalion, who falls in love with his own ivory statue, and desires that it be his wife. Through Pygmalion, retold in a different historical context. Ovid explains how the statue is simultaneously a symbol for art and nature. Joseph Solodow describes the relationship well when he writes: “this is the story about the relation between art, which is made by human skill, and nature, that which is born.” The reader sees how the artistic ability of Pygmalion and the “natural” qualities possessed by the statue create an air of immortality that resounds throughout the entirety of the poem. In making this observation, I seek to portray the importance of acknowledging both the power of art and nature in understanding how the elemental pair functions as a means to appeal to the senses of sight and especially touch.

Ovid uses a stone motif in order to juxtapose the converse roles of Venus in the preceding Propoetides myth and Pygmalion, while simultaneously conveying the eroto-artistic relationship associated with elegiac poetry. Women are perceived as “art objects” and are associated with the elegiac “girl” (puella) in both art and flesh. The Propoetides, daughters of the man Propoetus from the island of Cyprus, offend Venus because of their “whore-like” prowess and refusal to respect her divine power, an act that results in their transformation into stone as punishment. This offense can also be explained “as a half-way between death” because the stone renders the women lifeless, turning them from animate beings into inanimate ones. Their injustice is perpetually preserved in Ovid’s account of their metamorphosis, which immortalizes their crime and serves as a warning to outsiders not to defy the gods: “And what might that be if not the punishment of being transformed?” (Idque quid esse potest, nisi versae poena figurae?, 231).

By contrast, the Pygmalion myth begins with his lack of affinity towards women. Pygmalion rejects the idea of love due to the disdainful, shameful behavior of the Propoetides (Quas quia Pygmalion aevum per crimen agentis viderat, offensu vitis, 243-244). Ovid
uses the terms “crime” (crimen) and “faults” (vitiis) as idioms for infidelity in elegiac love poetry. By using this terminology, the poeta has rejected the concept of a puella as a lover because of the Propoetides’ prostitution, resulting in his lament (an act associated with elegiac poetry). Pygmalion, rather than disregarding the power of Venus, “timidly asks for her guidance and assistance in bringing his ivory statue to life” (timide, “si di, dare cuncta potestis, / sit coniunx, opto,” non ausus “eburnea virgo” / dicere Pygmalion “similis mea” dixit “eburnae,” 274-276).

This juxtaposition exemplifies Pygmalion’s reversal of flesh as not only an external physical quality, but also an erotic quality. The Propoetides use their fleshy bodies as a means of disgrace towards the women of society, and especially as an insult to Venus. Pygmalion’s “girl” (puella), however, is at first made of ivory, lifeless and immobile. Through sensation, perception, and gratitude towards the power of the gods, his prayers are answered as his own girl is transformed into the corporal form that he so desperately desires. Ovid uses such diction as “tries” (temptat, 282) to describe Pygmalion’s act of touch. The sculptor already believes his ivory girl is real and prays for one similar to it, thus highlighting the contrast between art and nature. In using this stone motif, Ovid captures the immortality of art and nature in describing the juxtaposition associated with the opposing concepts, giving and taking life.

The ivory medium used by Pygmalion to sculpt such a breathtaking image of a woman breathes life into how the senses of sight and touch correlate with art and nature. Ivory is the most difficult medium to sculpt, and his use of it not only demonstrates the excellence of Pygmalion’s craftsmanship but also exemplifies the true form revealed by the statue. “Pygmalion marvels [at her] and draws up fires deep within his chest for that feigned body. Often he moves his hands trying the work, but whether it is a body or ivory, he does not acknowledge the statue to be of ivory” (Miratur et haurit / Pectore Pygmalion simulati corporis ignes / Saepe manus opera temptantes admovet, an sit / corpus, an illud ebur, nec adhuc ebur esse fatetur, 252-255). Pygmalion marvels at his statue from afar, using his eyes (and ultimately his imagination) to fabricate what he believes the figure of the perfect girl is. As a result, there is an inanimate quality to his ivory girl. He does not experience the full breadth of his creation in terms of natural life. Nevertheless, as
Ovid shifts the reader's focus to a sense of touch through verbs related to touching, he also shifts Pygmalion's perception of the statue. As Pygmalion is “trying the work,” he experiences how his art is a representation of the natural female body, the embodied soul. While using his hands to caress her like a lover, he removes the shroud of doubt associated with two-dimensional art and replaces it with the “tangible truth” imposed by the independent existence of the statue. The art itself deceives the artist. Essentially, the statue, as a figure, has the capacity to stand alone because Pygmalion’s touch has breathed life into his art, even before Venus has animated her through divine intervention. Furthermore, Ovid demonstrates this theory of immortality through touch by using present tense verbs, like “he moves” (admovet, 254). He also uses an indirect statement (esse fatetur, 10.253-255) to acknowledge the thin boundary that exists between art and nature as Pygmalion attempts to decipher the difference between imagination and reality. Thus, Ovid is indulging the reader in the erotic nature of the poetry by using the antithetical sensations of sight and touch.

Ovid carefully chooses a simile in relation to Hymettian wax as another source and example of “trying.” The wax’s pliability and durability relates to the theme of immortality in that it demonstrates a manipulation of the art medium. Just as Pygmalion manipulated the ivory into the form of a woman, the wax is softened (mollescit, 283) under the contact of the thumb (pollice, 285). The formability and origin of the wax is also reminiscent of the immortality theme as honey, in antiquity, was associated with immortality. The hardening of the honey into wax closely resembles the process of sculpting as the ivory is molded and manipulated to suit the needs and desires of the artist. The artist, Pygmalion, molds an imitation of the form of the natural woman through his art, and ultimately as a companion. This “companionship” is conceived through the semblance art has with nature. The textual evidence indicates that “trying” has a close association with manipulation and immortality in relation to the process of creating a sculpture of such beauty.

George Hersey’s literature on enamoration with statues describes this appeal to the senses as a form of tactile beauty. Tactile beauty is the personal, physiological responses that Pygmalion experiences from “trying” his work. This realm of
beautification links art and nature as it describes the actual transformation of stone to flesh in terms of splendor and in natural, lifelike contexts. While Pygmalion wills his statue to life, he is physically affectionate with his puella. For example, “he believes his fingers sit on her touched arms and fears lest a bruise appear on her pressed limbs” (et credit tactis digitos insidere membris et metuit, pressos veniat ne livor in artus, 256-258), signifying his desire for the statue to become a true woman. The sculptor’s ideal of beauty is influenced by his experience with women. His eyes have seen the disgrace of the Propertides, and as a result, he wishes to mold a woman that does not embody such characteristics. When the statue is roused, there is a softness and moldable quality present that did not exist in the immobile statue. “She appears to be warm; he moves his mouth to her mouth again, and also touches her chest with his hands, and the ivory softens having been touched…” (Visa tepere est; /admovet os iterum, manibus quoque pectora temptat:’ temptatum mollescit ebur…., 10.281-283). The visceral and palpable reaction undergone by Pygmalion in response to his ivory girl’s transformation suggests that Ovid believes this change to be a representation of the art in a natural context. Ovid could have suggested Pygmalion’s response to this transformation as one of speaking, moving, or weeping; however, he critically chooses to express such a transformation through sensation because it accurately represents the statue as a substitute for a true body. Her form is a representation of a body and must be felt in order to prove conception.

This “palpability of living” further showcases the power of the artist and his art as Pygmalion is moved by not only the physical beauty of his work but also the grace in which she gradually transforms. This build-up allows the reader to sense the power of the beauty in the transformation that Pygmalion is experiencing firsthand through sensation and perception. “These physical sensations fill the work of art itself, and its creator and its observer.” There is a certain level of artistic immortality present as the living version of Pygmalion’s statue retains the features that surpass the natural woman; his puella is perpetually his own love and creation.

The purpose of art is to surpass the model nature has created in order to realize an ideal beauty that can only exist in an artistic form, as expressed by Anne Sharrock. As a result, art is a flawless concept and one that strives for a perfection that cannot be sullied
because of the artist’s idealism and immortality associated with such an element. Such an ideal beauty should surpass reality as Pygmalion attempts to manufacture the “ideal woman.” As a creator of art, he is simultaneously a creator of beauty. “He sculpted and gave her beauty, with which no other woman is able to be born, and he took in the love of his own work.” (Sculpsit ebur formamque dedit, qua femina nasci/ nulla potest, operisque sui concepit amorem, 248-249). The verb concipio often means “to take in;” however, it can also mean “to produce/form” and “to understand.” Taken in this context, Pygmalion “understands” the love of his own work, indicating that he is consciously aware of the beauty he has sculpted by his own hand.

Art, however, is still a representation of nature. Through the use of the feminine noun imago, defined by the Oxford Latin Dictionary in some instances as “appearance,” Ovid understands art’s deceptive appearance as a representation of nature. Art is not equivalent to nature in that nature has a sense of liminality that cannot be altered. Art, however, has the power to take a variety of appearances to suit the needs of the artist. It can be molded and manipulated to fit a certain ideal that nature does not have the ability to do. Art can be defined as an abstract personification, while Pygmalion is rendered the spectator and creator of the art object. Furthermore, Pygmalion has constructed a degree of immortality in his statue. There is no natural-born woman that can surpass the beauty he has chiseled. He marvels at his creation and drinks in his burning passion for her. He does not reject this version of the puella because his conception of art and beauty has surpassed the ideals of nature; the ivory statue is more beautiful than any natural woman.

Critics of Ovid’s rendition of Pygmalion associate the dominance of nature with an imitation of art. “Art is simply an imitation of nature and is a secondary order of reality, ever striving to match nature but unable to completely do so.” Solodow indicates that nature is true beauty, echoing how Propertius views natural beauty as the principle beauty. “He gives kisses to be returned and he thinks, he speaks, he holds (it) and he believes his fingers sit on her touched arms and fears lest a bruise appear on her pressed limbs” (Oscula dat reddique putat loquiturque tenetque/ et credit tactis digitos insidere membris/ Et metuit, pressos veniat ne livor in artus, 256-258). Pygmalion is treating his puella as if she is already
animated and lifelike. This “fear of bruising” is related to bare skin eroticism, 30 much in the same that the simile of Hymettian wax relates to the medium’s moldable quality. Pygmalion fears that he will cause harm to his beloved, but this episode is also indicative of the manipulation that created the beautiful statue in that it demonstrates how the body itself is a realm of flexibility and change, the antithesis of a statue’s supposed rigidity. Pygmalion is treating his ivory statue how he would treat a natural woman; however, his statue has exceeded his expectations.

There is also a realistic aspect to the statue: “the form of the virgin is true, you might almost believe to have lived, and if not held back in reverence, she would have wished to be moved” (virginis est verae facies, quam vivere credas, et, si non obstet reverentia, velle moveri, 250-251). The use of the subjunctive denotes that to Pygmalion the ivory statue already seems alive and through such uncertainty, as suggested by the tense and mood of credo, that the ebur is so realistic that the reader might even believe her to be real. Furthermore, by using the second person singular, Ovid intends to bring his reader into the dynamic of his myth. As the author, he wants his listeners to become critical thinkers and to investigate what they, themselves would do if in the same situation as Pygmalion.

Ovid continues to emphasize the natural quality of the ivory as he mentions the terms for ivory (ebur and eburnea) in various lines throughout the Pygmalion myth, emphasizing the importance of the medium used to sculpt the perfect woman. 31 The ivory often describes a certain part of the body, as displayed in other myths in Book 10, including the back and shoulders of Atalanta, all sensual parts of human anatomy that often coincide with the notions of “trying” (temptantes). 32 As a result, Pygmalion’s ideal woman carved in the most difficult medium to sculpt indicates the “immortality of the artist.” 33 The ivory is a segue into a godly interpretation of Pygmalion; he is creating natural life with his hands and a chisel, something only a god/goddess has the power to command.

Pygmalion looks to divine intervention as means to animate his ivory statue. Naturally, in antiquity, Venus is associated with not only love but childbirth. As a creational matriarchal figure in the mythological world, it can be inferred that Pygmalion is hoping his soon-to-be fleshy bride will mirror the characteristics of the divine Venus. As Pygmalion shyly (timide) asks Venus to hear and act on
his prayers, she responds with “a favorable omen” (*amici numinis omen*, 278). Venus’s favor toward him highlights his humility. Pygmalion does not want to dishonor Venus, a direct contrast to the Propertides’ disrespect of Venus’s will (*numen*) earlier in Book 10. He cannot be the direct creator of life because he does not hold the rightful power to do so; only gods have the power to create and destroy life, metaphorically symbolized through Ovid’s description of the transformation that occurs in the ivory statue.

Pygmalion even treats his ivory statue as a fleshy being by bedecking her with ornate gifts, a common motif in elegiac love poetry, as the lover presents these gifts to his beloved as a symbol of the elegiac roles of the poor poet and rich lover. “Recently, he brings her beloved presents: smooth conch shells and pebbles and small birds and a thousand colors of flowers and lilies…also he adorns her limbs with clothing” (*modo grata puellis munera fert illi conchas terestisque lapillos/ et parvas vulcres et flores mille colorum/ liliaque…ornat quoque vestibus artus*, 259-263). Ovid expresses and foreshadows the transformation and climax of the story by having Pygmalion “adorn” (*ornat*) his love with natural world items, such as clothing. The giving of clothes concretely denotes the idea of eventual animation because often sculptors would leave their art nude as a way for “nothing to be left to the imagination.” The natural quality of the statue expressed the embodied shape of beauty that art seeks to portray and represent. Thus, a natural woman would need clothes as a sign of modesty. Eventually “he calls it a marriage bed and rests her neck on the soft feathers as if she could feel it” (*Appellatque tori sociam adclinatque colla/ mollibus in plumis tamquam sensura reponit*, 268-269). The use of the future participle foreshadows that eventually the ivory will feel such soft feathers around her head and neck region as a “natural” lover would be able to experience.

I have argued the validity in suspecting that art or nature holds superiority in various textual instances within the Pygmalion myth. The interwoven relationship between the two elements that are presented in the work are most accurately described by: “Art conceals itself by its own art” (*Ars adeo latet arte sua*, 252) Pygmalion’s “ivory woman” is so lifelike that the reader would think it to be real as Pygmalion continues to caress and fondle his love. The beauty of his *puella* prompts him to seek the help of Venus in order to make his dream a reality. His *puella* also allows
Pygmalion to absolve the metaphorical sins of the Propertides as he has found a woman whom he wished to share in the marriage bed, and he is further rewarded for his humility. Just as “adorns” (*ornat*) signifies a decorated, theatrical element, *hubris* is indicative of excessive pride that lends itself to the juxtaposition of modesty and chastity seen in the former half of the myth. The idea of creation is also prominent here as Ovid attempts to differentiate between what is made by hand and what is by procreation. The language used in the reflexive quality of “-self” (*suo*) indicates the beauty that the statue itself is exuding which could be mistaken for a natural woman.

The dynamic pairing of art and nature in the Pygmalion myth demonstrate the struggle between which element is superior. I have argued that both elements are necessary if one is to analyze the full breadth and accomplishments of Ovid’s rendition of Pygmalion as told in the *Metamorphoses*. The philological importance of *ars* and *natura* is most accurately depicted through Pygmalion as the theme of immortality, as seen through the senses, preserves the idea that art struggles as a representation of nature. The notion of * tempta* links the interface of art and nature, as the concept strives to solidify where the line of imagination ends and truth begins. Through touch, Pygmalion is able to bridge the gap between the beauty associated with art and nature. The level of organicism expressed by Ovid through Pygmalion further demonstrates how the two elements function as a pair in describing the organic quality of nature with the manufactured quality of art. In essence, Ovid evokes the senses of Pygmalion and the reader in understanding how the sense of touch manifests in describing art as a representation of nature.
Bibliography


Notes

3 Bauer (1962) 1.
5 Bauer (1962) 2.
8 Sharrock (1991) 38.
14 Alison (2014) 127.
16 Hersey (2009) 95.
17 Hersey (2009) 96.
18 Hersey (2009) 96.
20 Alison (2014) 96.
22 Bauer (1962) 8.
23 OLD s.v. “concipio” 1; 4; 6.
24 OLD s.v. “imago” 12.
30 Sharrock (1991) 43.
31 Bauer (1962) 16.
33 Bauer (1962) 18.
34 Sharrock (1991) 43.
35 Herder (2002) 47.