Medieval Women and Their Objects
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In her letter of 1401, responding to Jean de Montreuil’s now-lost opus gallicum, which had defended the Roman de la Rose in virtually all respects, Christine de Pizan addresses the scandalous ending of Jean de Meun’s poem. She describes the Lover’s allegorical pilgrimage to sexual consummation as “la tres horrible et honteuse conclusion” (“this very horrible and shameful conclusion”).¹ Christine objects to Jean de Meun’s breach of literary decorum, his choice of genres, and his handling of allegory; she acknowledges the literary accomplishments of the Rose yet finds the poem all the more dangerous for its virtues.² Her most damning objection, however, is that Jean has said nothing new. Christine rejects any possible claim by defenders of the Rose that Jean speaks at the end of the poem “par maniere de jolie nouvelleté ne nous raconte!” (“I respond that he does not tell us anything extraordinary whatsoever!”). She repeats the point a few lines later: “mais nulle nouvelleté en ce ne nous anonce” (“but he does not tell us anything new in this”). Estrangeté means something strange, surprising, mysterious, or extraordinary. Nouvelleté is not just news but novelty, a new or extraordinary fact.³ The underlying problem that Christine identifies here lies not in the order of language (diction, discursive conventions, or figurative modes) but in the order of things themselves.⁴ Jean’s conclusion fails, she says, as a material account of objects and the sensuous experience of bodies in the world. Do we not know, Christine asks, how men usually and
naturally have sex with women (“Ne scet on comment les hommes habitent aux femmes naturellement”)?

Christine’s material critique of Jean’s allegory involves not just figuration but forms of knowledge. It asks specifically, what new knowledge can be derived from material things? In the ending to the Rose, this question moves from aesthetic to erotic to ethical concerns. It addresses not just what things are or what they represent but how we are to understand them. To track this movement, I want to look first at the narrative framing of Jean’s conclusion, then at Jean’s rewriting of the Pygmalion and Galatea episode, an embedded parallel to the consummation scene, and finally at the hermeneutic lens that this redacted Ovidian story offers for the Lover’s sexual possession of the rose. Jean’s conclusion, I shall propose, maps a shift from desire to appetite—that is, from an erotic demand constrained yet constituted by deferral and repetition to one that aims for terminal gratification. Jean’s conclusion is “horrible and shameful” because the Lover substitutes the reductive consumption of appetite for the moral complexities and knowledge of desire.

“UNE YMAGETE EN LEU DE CHASSE”

At the end of the Rose, Jean de Meun makes his most aggressive display of material objects in a poem that has largely used them as euphemisms for female bodies. As the barons mustered in service to Love prepare to renew their attack on the Castle of Jealousy, Venus draws her bow to fire a burning arrow through a narrow opening (“une petitete archiere,” 20792) located between two silver pillars that Nature has placed on the front of the castle. Her target is a small statue occupying the place of a reliquary or shrine in a sanctuary: “Une ymagete en leu de chasse” (20799). At this point, however, Jean halts the narrative action of the poem to introduce and embed the story of Pygmalion and Galatea. His stated purpose is to draw a comparison between the statue in the tower and the statue of Galatea created by Pygmalion. The Lover describes the likeness as that of a mouse to lion. When he resumes the narrative, Venus fires the arrow to induce panic in the castle’s defenders. She does so, Jean remarks, in a way too subtle (“si soutiment,” 21256) to be perceived, though the effect is to drive the defenders from the castle, free Fair Welcome, and set the Lover on his allegorical journey as a sexual pilgrim to penetrate the statue and take possession of the rose.

In the conjoined Rose, the Pygmalion episode serves a number of poetic
functions. It may have been originally written as a separate example of rhetorical *imitatio*, but it operates as a rhetorical digression that both retards and amplifies Jean’s narrative. The episode aligns the cultural prestige and authority of a classical source with vernacular romance and links myth with the allegorical narrative. Structurally and thematically, it balances the Narcissus episode in the first part of the *Rose*; by extension, it counters Guillaume de Lorris’s courtly erotics with the alternative of Jean’s materialism. The episode also elaborates Jean’s succession of Guillaume as the author of the *Rose*, for it gives Jean the final, emphatic position over Guillaume as an imitator and reviser of Ovid. Pygmalion makes the thematic contrast overt when he remarks that Narcissus futilely sought to embrace his own insubstantial reflection (“son ombre, 20879)—futile because it offered no sensory, tactile pleasure as a material object: “Onques ne s’enpot solacier” (20880). Often used in a figurative and courtly sense of consolation or pleasure, *solacier* carries a primary sense of “caress.” Though he registers the anxiety of his desire and resembles the foolish Lover of the *Rose* (“Se je vuel folement amer,” 20868), Pygmalion sees himself in the world of matter and touch as against Narcissus’s phantom realm, which is exemplified by Narcissus’s inability to possess what he sees in the fountain. Pygmalion lays claim to the material embodiment that eludes Narcissus: “la prens et acole et baise” (“I hold and embrace and kiss it,” 20885). For most readers of the *Rose*, these differences follow the lines that Daniel Poirion neatly outlines: Narcissus is the man of the look, and Pygmalion is the man of the hand.

Within the frame of Jean’s conclusion, the Pygmalion episode represents a decisive turn to the material. The comparison deals with the *zymagete* placed within the tower and the “zymage d’ivuire” (20826) carved by Pygmalion and likewise called “l’zymagete” (20825.01). Unlike Poirion’s thematic juxtaposition of courtly gaze and material hand, this comparison places material objects directly into relation with each other. It is the relation of objects in Jean’s poem that constitutes a form of knowledge. This is what Jean means in his famous authorial remarks about proceeding dialectically, “des contraires choses” (21573). Though the first-person voice in the *Rose* moves subtly between the poet-narrator and the Lover narrating his dream, here the voice is arguably that of the poet commenting on the structural disposition of his work. It thus establishes a point where the conceptual stakes of objects—the literalized images and figures of allegorical discourse—stand revealed in their power to sustain complex understanding.

Jean makes it clear that the comparison he sets out is an act of judg-
Fig 10.1. Pygmalion and Galatea. (By permission of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Philip S. Collins Collection, 1945-65-3, fol. 143v.)
ment guided by reason and the powers of understanding. After describing the *ymagete* in the tower, he offers an exposition that promotes a surprising application and *utilitas*:

> Et se nus, usans de raison,
> Voloit faire comparoison
> D’ymage a autre bien portrete,
> Autel la puelt fere des ceste
> A l’ymage Pymalion
> Comme de soris a lyon. (20811–16)

[If anyone, using reason, were to draw a comparison between this and any other image, he could say that this image was to Pygmalion’s as a mouse is to a lion.]

Jean’s comparison aims to make these two objects of women intelligible. They are comparable, he says, in being well executed and fully realized as objects of making (“bien portrete”). They are above all objects of manufacture and craft. The unanticipated discovery Jean offers—the *estrangeté* and *nouvelleté* that Christine broadly denies him—is the frame of comparison. Jean expresses the relation as a proportion: the *ymagete* is to Pygmalion’s statue of Galatea as a mouse is to a lion. Every expectation leads us to anticipate that the image in the tower (“cesté”), shaped as it is by Nature, will be the element in terms of which Pygmalion’s statue (“l’ymage Pygmalion”) will be seen as a subordinate or secondary version; the natural exemplar, incorporating the reason of providential creation, logically precedes the work of representation imitating Nature and executed by man. Indeed, editors and translators insist on this expected order, even against the literal sense of the passage. Ernest Langlois explains that, despite the precise grammatical construction, the mouse must refer to Pygmalion’s statue and the lion to the statue in the tower. Charles Dahlberg’s translation offers an accurate literal rendering, while his note on the passage argues that the simile shows the superiority of the Lover’s image to Pygmalion’s. Phillip McCaffrey finds the comparison ironic whether it is taken as exaggeration or a literal account. Discovering the comparison we should expect offers one kind of conventional understanding, but it ignores the literal meaning of the text and the explicit relation between two richly imagined objects whose value the poet signals by using the techniques of amplification and narrative dilation. In what way, we might plausibly ask, does it make sense to see the two objects in the relation that Jean actually formulates?
Jean's comparison of these objects turns on their shared quality of manufacture. The statue in the tower is a product of Nature acting in her role as artifex. She is first an architect in building the tower and then a shaper of figures in furnishing it. Venus aims her arrow at what Nature has placed through her craft ("par grant mestrise," 20795–96) between the two pillars. The ymage framed by the pillars is an artifact created according to principles of proportion:

Qui n'ert trop haute ne trop basse,  
Trop grosse ou trop grele, non pas,  
Mes toute taillie a compas  
De bras, d'espaules et de mains,  
Il n'i falloit ne plus ne mains. (20800–4)

[Neither too tall nor too short, neither too fat nor too thin in any respect, but constructed, in measure, of arms, shoulders, and hands that erred in neither excess nor defect.]

The “grant mestrise” of Nature is visible and tangible in the rational order that informs the statue as an object of aesthetic unity, one executed with fitting and exact proportions ("a compas") among its different elements. John V. Fleming notes that the description of the statue closely follows the earlier description of Reason. Though overcharged with eroticism in the Lover’s sensual demands and Jean’s scandalous narrative, the ymage paradoxically follows an aesthetic of the mean ("ne plus ne mains").

The comparison with Pygmalion ostensibly aims to give the statue some defining nuance and context beyond the internal order it already manifests. Jean gives a formal account of the statue, stressing its order and properties. His subsequent description of the unnamed Galatea, “l’ymage Pymalion” (20815), incorporates a corresponding formal account: it is so well constructed and flawless ("bien compassee et . . . nete," 20826.02) that it duplicates the beauty of a natural creation. But Pygmalion’s “ymage d’ivuire” (20826) goes beyond the formal correspondences. It possesses a narrative that places the formal object within a myth extending over generations. The comparison thus marks a shift in understanding, from the isolated experience of the object in an act of perception to a network of human connections that entail contingencies and consequences.

The thematic trajectory that Jean sketches moves, therefore, from the aesthetic to the erotic and then to the ethical. Pygmalion is a sculptor (“en-
taillierres,” 20817) working across media—stone, metals, bone, and wax—that can be shaped by his intention and will. His initial motive is the desire to demonstrate his mastery: “Por son grant engin esprouver” (20822). The statue he creates is the means to this end, for its lifelike qualities rival those of the most beautiful creatures, surpassing Helen and Lavinia, the objects of conquest in classical heroic narrative and in the vernacular *matiere de Rome* joining Troy’s destruction to Rome’s ascendency. The aesthetic gives way to the erotic in a moment of surprise: “Touz s’esbahist a soi meïme / Pymalions, quant la regarde” (20838–39). Seeing what he has created, Pygmalion has the strange recognition of his own desire for the material object. The statue is unexampled by other images he has fashioned and absolutely unsought by him in this instance: “Dont me vient ceste pensee?” (20849). His recognition of desire leads in turn to a moral understanding of the unnatural quality of his love. The passage gives at least part of Christine’s language for disavowing the conclusion of the *Rose*: “Mes ceste amor est si orrible, / N’ele ne vient pas de Nature, / Trop mavesement m’i nature” (“But this love is so horrible that it doesn’t come from Nature. I am acting despicably in this case,” 20862–64). If the statue in the Castle of Jealousy incorporates the rational order of a divinely sanctioned Nature, the figure created by Pygmalion leads him beyond natural attachments. It is an erotic investment for which he claims authorship and ethical responsibility: “Si ne la doi je pas blamer, / Se je vuel folement amer; / Ne m’ien doi plaindre, s’a moi non” (“But I should not blame her because I love insanely, nor should I put the blame anywhere but on myself,” 29867–69). As Jean’s language indicates, Pygmalion acts as he wishes (“je vuel”) and the ethical center of action is his will (“a moi”), even if its operations surprise and astonish him with the emotions they reveal.

Jean adapts thematic features from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in constructing his narrative shifts. Ovid’s Pygmalion turns to carving his statue while he remains celibate (“caelebs”), an unmated creature removed from fecundity and reproduction. As Orpheus, a poet also removed from fecundity and reproduction, recounts in the Ovidian frame tale, Pygmalion is repulsed by the Propoetides, the Cyprian women turned into prostitutes by Venus and eventually transformed into lifeless stones. The petrification of the Propoetides carries over to Jean’s suggestion that Pygmalion’s statue is a simulacrum of the unresponsive beloved addressed in courtly discourse: “J’aime une ymage sorde et mue / Qui ne se crole ne se mue / Ne ja de moi merci n’avra” (“I love an image that is deaf and mute, that neither stirs nor moves nor will ever show me grace,” 20851–53). When he later remarks that he does not know whether the statue is dead or alive (20926), the comment ap-
plies equally to inert matter or a courtly beloved unmoved by persuasion and appeal. In addition, the attentions of Ovid’s Pygmalion to the statue recall the hopeless efforts of poet-lovers like Propertius, Tibullus, and Catullus to supplicate the disdainful mistress of Latin love elegy. When Jean’s Pygmalion complains of her coldness, he fears that he has offended her: “Trop ai follement parlé; / Merci, douce dame,” (20908–9). In effect, he transforms himself from an artificer imposing design on matter to an abject lover in the grip of shifting, violent emotions. The object intended to demonstrate Pygmalion’s artistry and craft (“son grant engin”) thus ironically compels his subjection. He becomes the affective creature that the carved image seemingly cannot be.

Jean’s shifts toward moral understanding follow the pattern of established rhetorical procedures for composition. Pygmalion’s invention and shaping of the statue leads to adornment, as he dresses the statue with a rotating wardrobe of fabrics, jewels, and accessories. The description is greatly amplified from Ovid. Jean recites an inventory of objects brought to vary and inflect Pygmalion’s experience of his creation. The sculptor’s obsessive attention to clothing the surface of the statue parallels the poet’s rhetorical copia in describing it and his overgoing Ovid in detail and conception. Dressing and reclothing Galatea is an occasion both for successive rewriting, as in the variations required on a set topic in rhetorical exercises, and for a renewal of desire as the statue changes appearance among styles—domestic and exotic, regional, Western, and suggestively (but not quite) Oriental. Dress provides an illusive and enticing barrier that serves by turns as an obstacle and lure for desire and potentially a lure because it is a barrier. The effect of dress as an aesthetic process and an erotic procedure is powerful enough to invert the relation of inside and outside things, kernel and covering integument. Jean remarks (21071–72), following Ovid (“nec nuda minus formosa videtur,” 10.266), that the statue is no less beautiful nude than clothed. Fabienne Pomel has suggested that Pygmalion’s dressing the statue is an allegory about allegory, in which the cold and naked statue corresponds to a dead letter or naked sense, while the clothing represents allegorical writing; undressing the statue would be a complementary figure for reading, for seeing through a figurative sense or integument to a literal meaning. Pygmalion’s dressing and undressing the statue, like his works across different artistic media, obsessively asserts his formal power of invention while disclosing the erotics within the fantasy of aesthetic mastery.
In both Ovid and Jean, Pygmalion's mastery over his materials is a figure for the creative power of art, hence the poet's artistry in crafting fictions, including those that reflexively describe themselves. Philip Hardie points out that for Ovid the erotics of verbal creation leads the poet to the same dilemma that he creates for his narrative characters: just as fashioning the artwork can never close the distance between aesthetic representation and real objects, so language fails an impossible demand to make fiction fully present in reality. The narrative device of animating the statue through Venus's intercession, which Ovid and Jean use, solves this dilemma within the fiction. But it leaves open a fundamental problem, which is to give some account of the relation of a desiring subject to the object he shapes from his own demands rather than one found in the world (even one as arbitrarily chosen as the rose that the Lover finds or the image Narcissus discovers in Guillaume's portion of the poem). As the two Pygmalion narratives unfold, their formulations of an ethics of desire give different weight to the play of sensation and affect in the material world.

Ovid foregrounds sensation by his repetition of the verb *temptare*, “to handle, touch, feel,” with the transferred meaning “to test and try out” and even “to agitate and excite.” After creating the statue, Pygmalion tries to determine by touch whether its matter is ivory or flesh: “Saepe manus operi temptantes admovet, an sit / corpus, an illud ebur, nec adhuc ebur esse fatetur” (“he often moves his hands feeling the work to test whether it was flesh or ivory, nor from that could it be said that it was ivory,” 10.254–55). He repeats the test after Venus signals that his petition has been granted, and he returns to the statue, lying upon the image and kissing it, as it seems to grow warm: “admovet os iterum, manibus quoque pectora temptat” (“he moves his mouth toward her again, he feels her breast,” 10.282). The ivory probed in this mix of inquiry and pleasure (*temptatum ebur*) submits by growing soft (“mollescit”) and yielding literally and metaphorically to the fingers on its surface: “subsidit digitis ceditque” (10.283). As commentators frequently note, the pressure of Pygmalion’s touch in his urgency to know and experience Galatea’s transformation tropes his earlier fear, as his fingers seem to sink into the body (“credit tactis digitos insidere membris,” 10.257), that his probing might leave a bruise: “et metuit, pressos veniat ne livor in artus” (10.258). Here, as Ovid’s simile makes obvious, the physical surface gives way
to a fantasy of submission and shaping to both the will and insistent pressure: “ut Hymettia sole / cera remollescit tractataque pollice multas / flec-
tit in facies ipsoque fit utilis usi” (“as the wax of Hymettus softens in the
sun and worked by the thumb is bent into many shapes and becomes useful
and fitting with use itself,” 10.284–86). Pygmalion knows that Galatea has
a living body (“corpus erat!,” 10.289) only when he has the tactile evidence
of her pulse registered against the pressure of his hand: “saliunt temptatae
pollice venae” (“the veins tested by the thumb beat,” 10.289).

Jean carefully reformulates Ovid’s use of touch as a mechanism of
knowledge and desire. The statue is rigid and transfers its cold when he
kisses it so that Pygmalion’s mouth is chilled (20903–6). Ovid’s Pygmalion
imagines that the statue returns his kisses (“Oscura dat, reddique putat,”
10.256) or senses his care in arranging her on pillows (“tamquam sensura,”
10.269), but Jean demonstrates the impossibility of his fantasy. The statue
remains inert to his courtly supplication and service. Jean resituates Ovid’s
simile of shaping wax from the scene of Galatea’s animation to earlier in the
narrative sequence, where the artist courts his creation. His point in doing
so is to show that the lover-artist is constrained by his craft and desire. The
flesh that Pygmalion thinks gives way like wax reveals only the pressure of
his hand on matter: “Et croit, aussi cum se fust paste, / Que ce soit sa char
qui li fuie, / Mes c’est sa main qu’il y apuie” (“he thought that she was like
putty, that the flesh gave way under his touch, but it was only his hand which
pressed her,” 20928–30). Even after the extensive descriptions of Pygma-
lion’s dressing the statue and offering it musical performances in a mock
liturgy, Jean returns to the futile love-making of a man led on and excited
(èsmouveir) by his own projections onto his unresponding creation: “Por sa
sorde ymage èsmewe” (21068).

The ethical center of the Pygmalion story in Ovid and Jean lies in the re-
lations that each poet imagines for the lover and the statue. These relations
shift as the narratives unfold. Ovid describes Pygmalion using the vocabu-
lary of love elegy. As a figure of the ambivalent poetic mistress (puella), the
statue receives the gifts and attention recommended to prospective lovers by
Ovid in his Ars Amatoria. After dressing the statue, Pygmalion optimisti-
cally calls it his bedmate (tori socia, 10.268). Praying to Venus, however, he
seeks a wife or possibly a consort (“coniunx,” 10.275). In a revealing act of
self-censorship as well as semantic slippage, he dares not ask directly for
the ivory statue but requests instead something like it, a simulacrum of an
image: “Si, di, dare cuncta potestis, / sit coniunx, opto,’ non ausus,’èbur-
nea virgo' / dicere Pygmalion 'similis mea' dixit 'eburnae'” (“If, gods, it is true that you can give everything, I would like to have as my wife”—Pygmalion did not dare to say 'my ivory girl'—but said, 'someone similar to the ivory image,” 10.274–76). As he puts desire into language and states his demand (“opto”), Pygmalion moves briskly through a sequence of objects in a chain of substitution: women, who have been rendered inaccessible to him because of the Propoetides, are replaced by the statue of Galatea, which is displaced in turn by a request for a wife resembling the statue. Venus immediately understands the complex layering within Pygmalion’s prayer. The “vota” (10.278) she accepts from him have at least two senses—the votum is a prayer and a marriage vow. When he returns home, Pygmalion seeks the object that contains all his desires and self-imposed evasions; it is a “simulacra suae . . . puellae” (10.280), the statue of a girl that he has made and a representation of the erotic partner he cannot possess.

Jean’s equivalent to the puella of Latin elegy, as we have seen, is the distant courtly amie suggested by Pygmalion’s initial address to the statue as its tormented suitor. After his elaborate draping and adornment of the statue, he addresses her as a wife, summoning Hymen and Juno to witness the wedding he imagines: “De cest anel je vous espous, / Et deviens vostres, et vous moïe” (21014–15). At the festival, he asks Venus that the statue become “ma loial amie” and that he possess her “cors, ame et vie” (21099–100). Unlike Ovid’s Pygmalion, who cannot speak what he desires, Jean’s character is explicit in his willingness to trade chastity for the stabilized eroticism of marriage. His chastity, in these terms, is more than the denial or lack that structures Ovid’s Pygmalion; it is the marker of eroticism redirected to marriage and its network of affective relations sustained by access to bodies. Moreover, Venus does not simply animate the statue, as in Ovid, but sends it a soul that makes it a natural and social creature: “A l’ymage envoia lors ame, / Si devint si tres bele dame” (21117–18). Pygmalion’s return to find the statue alive and embodied (“vive et charnue,” 21133) amplifies Ovid’s mention of the pulsing veins of the animated statue: “Et sent les os et sent les venes, / Qui de sanc erent toutes plenes, / Et le pouz et batre et movoir” (“he felt the bones and the veins all filled with blood, and he felt the pulse move and beat,” 21137–39). The difference that Jean claims from Ovid’s scene is between shaped matter transformed to a sentient creature and matter made incarnate by divine intervention and transformed to a separate creature. Pygmalion may offer marriage to the statue before Hymen and Juno, but what he finds on his return from Venus’s festival is a human and social being.
In both narratives, Galatea emerges directly from Pygmalion’s uncertainty about what she really is and what he can believe her to be. In Ovid, she becomes a living creature and known as such when she both feels and responds with an instinctive blush to Pygmalion’s kisses: “dataque oscula virgo / sensit, et erubuit” (10.292–93). Brooke Holmes argues, “the metamorphosis is realized only at the moment it is not the corpus, the ‘body,’ but the girl herself who senses and responds to Pygmalion’s ardor with a blush” that recalls the ambivalent bruise and sweeps Galatea up in the dynamics of Pygmalion’s desire. When she cautiously raises her eyes, Galatea sees both the sky and her lover: “timidumque ad lumina lumen / attollens, pariter cum caelo vidit amantem” (10.293–94). The “lumina” she sees with her own eyes (“lumen attollens”) are twofold and exist in the same moment (“pariter . . . vidit”), for the world of nature (caelum) and the sight of Pygmalion as lover hovering over her are simultaneously before her. The created world and the artist-creator occupy the same plane of vision.

It is only after the statue has transformed and responded with her blush that Venus solemnizes the marriage that she has made possible: “Coniugio, quod fecit, adest dea” (10.295). At one level, Venus’s agency has succeeded Pygmalion’s to correct his original abandonment of eros and to restore what had been lost through her transformation of the Propoetides into bloodless women, incapable of blushes, and finally changed into stone. Catherine Bruno suggests that a second difference informs the passage as well. For Bruno, it is Pygmalion’s love-making that transforms Galatea into a woman, while Venus’s intervention only animates her. The trajectory that Ovid’s Galatea follows is from the uncanny to the familiar, to a fecund domestic life that begins a genealogy.

Though Jean moves in and out of the Lover’s voice at the end of the Rose, he acts as the improbable poet of domesticity in rewriting the Pygmalion story. Pygmalion responds to his sensory experience of testing the statue in a much-elaborated passage that registers the effects of the uncanny. He does not know if what he sees is false or true (“mençongne ou voir,” 21140), and so he freezes, fearing enchantment and temptation from an object and power he cannot name. Suspended between waking and dreaming, he tries to define his experience of the transformed statue within a literary-cognitive taxonomy: is it “songe,” “apert songe” (“likelife dream”), “merveille,” “phantom, ou anemis” (21145–49)? As the last few items suggest, knowing is closely linked with affect. And it is against this fraught narrative background that Galatea speaks as “la pucele” (21151). Giving her voice, Jean takes the figure
significantly beyond Ovid’s portrayal, in which her reactions and experience are described for her. Jean’s Galatea gives assurance that she is neither a phantom nor an enemy but “vostre amie / Preste de vostre compaignie / Recevoir, et m’amor vous offer / S’il vous plest recevoir tel offer” (“your sweetheart, ready to receive your companionship and to offer you my love if it please you to receive such an offer,” 21155–58).

As these terms indicate, Galatea is the courtly woman (“m’amie,” 20903) whom Pygmalion initially seeks in creating the statue and then asks Venus to produce for him (“ma loial amie,” 21099). What changes from these earlier demands is the stress on erotic reciprocity, which Jean conveys by repeating the prefix _entre_ in the verbs that describe the bond of affect between Pygmalion and Galatea: “s’entrefient” (21165), “s’entrefacent” (21167), “s’entrebracent” (21168), “s’entrebaisent” (21169), and “s’entr’aient” (21170). The full realization of desire coincides not with the possession of body, soul, and life, as Pygmalion asks Venus, but with a concord of wills negotiated and continually affirmed by lovers within marriage. Douglas Kelly argues that the love displayed in the story is the only example that follows the principles set out by Reason and the only positive mythological example in the poem. Kevin Brownlee emphasizes “the reciprocity of agency” in which Pygmalion and Galatea “occupy simultaneously the positions of desiring subject and of object of desire.” The mutual embraces they share as a couple, says Brownlee, at last fulfill the erotic demands that have been deferred throughout the poem.

LOST OBJECTS

Ovid and Jean complicate this resolution, of course, by citing the narratives that the Pygmalion episode subsequently generates. Ovid makes the turn from resolution to sequel when he says that Cinyras, the grandson of Pygmalion and Galatea, would have been numbered among the happy if he had remained childless (“si sine prole fuisset,” 10.298)—in effect, if he had suffered the barrenness that afflicted the Propoetides and the celibate and frustrated Pygmalion. As Susan Stakel observes, Myrrha’s incestuous relationship with her father subsequently replays Pygmalion’s relation with the statue he creates and desires, while Myrrha’s final form as a tree rooted in place resembles the statue at the beginning of her lineage. For Ovid, Myrrha’s actions are an impiety contrary to divine law (_nefas_) and a crime
For Jean, they are a bizarre trick (“trop estrange semille,” 21199), a diversion from his poetic “matiere” (21211) whose meaning is deferred until the end of his work: “Bien orrois que ce segnefie / Ains que ceste ovre soit fenie” (21213–14). The overt explanation that Jean mentions here does not, in fact, occur later in the poem but has to be inferred from the conclusion.

The significance that Jean promises to reveal directly evokes the comparison that begins the poem’s conclusion. Jean reiterates the distinction contained in the “similitude” (21221) of the two images, the difference in scale and value. This is the hermeneutic method folded into the poem’s narrative structure and made explicit when the narrator-poet describes the procedures that render things intelligible in the poem: “Aussi va des contraires choses, / Les unes sont des autres gloses” (“Thus things go by contraries; one is the gloss of the other,” 21273–74). Comparison, he explains, marks difference, and difference permits definition:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Car qui des deus n’a connoissance} \\
\text{Ja n’i metera difference,} \\
\text{Sanz quoi ne puelt venir in place} \\
\text{Diffinicion que l’en face. } (21579–82)
\end{align*}
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[For he who has no understanding of the two will never understand the difference between them, and without this difference no definition that one may make can come to anything.]

Narratives seen in relation to each other rather than direct, expository commentary provide the gloss. Thus, as the Lover finally advances to the *ymagete*, he repeats Pygmalion’s initial devotion to his statue and fulfills his erotic demands without recognizing the difference. The mutual desire that emerges with Pygmalion and Galatea gives way to what Brownlee rightly describes as “the union of two sets of detached, depersonalized genitalia, figured metaphorically.”

The appetite glossed and defined through these contraries supports Christine’s objection that Jean’s conclusion tells us nothing new. Its mechanized eros is as unremarkable as the ordinary sexuality that she says in her letter would be better expressed through a beast fable (“matiere de rire pour la fable”). Modern readers have interpreted the poem’s final display of appetite as idolatry, as in Fleming’s application of medieval allegory and iconography, or as the irony that Marc Pelen detects in Ovid’s tone and Venus’s
inability to protect her followers from catastrophe. Equally important is the sense of loss that informs the ending. While the Lover advances to possess the statue and collect the rose, the narrator who recounts this triumph knows that it is already over. He describes it from retrospect, from waking consciousness looking back on a dream concluded. (The dream itself is a Macrobean insomnium, one devoid of meaning.) From this position, the objects of appetite remain as unrecoverable for the narrator as they were transitory for the Lover in his quest. This perspective, in which narrative closure can only be loss, also invites us to reflect on the conceptual differences set out in Jean’s conclusion. If horrible events—what Ovid calls “Dira” (Metamorphoses 10.300)—follow the Pygmalion story, the animated statue nonetheless has offspring and a history. The Lover, though he inseminates the rose, leaves by his act nothing but the testimony of his own appetite. In Jean’s poem, the tragic aftermath of Pygmalion and Galatea requires an understanding that the Lover never attains. As desire narrows to appetite and appetite aims to gratify itself, he misses the larger lesson that the meaning of objects resides not in things themselves but in the relations they generate and signify.

Notes


2. Christine returns to the ending of the Rose in her letter to Pierre Col of October 2, 1402. Jean Gerson addresses the passage in his sermon sequence Poenitemini and his treatise against the Rose.


4. The contrast is with the debate between Reason and the Lover over naming “coilles” (6927–7228).


7. Though the Pygmalion episode is clearly part of the overarching design of the poem, it is sometimes omitted in remaniements and other reworkings of the Rose; see Sylvia Huot, "Authors, Scribes, Remanieurs: A Note on the Textual History of the Romance of the Rose," in Rethinking the Romance of the Rose: Text, Image. Reception, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Sylvia Huot (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 203–33. The episode is also omitted in medieval translations such as the Fiore ascribed to Dante and a Middle Dutch adaptation; for the latter, see Dieuwke van der Poel, "A Romance of a Rose and Florentine: The Flemish Adaptation of the Romance of the Rose," in Rethinking the Romance of the Rose, 305.


19. I am grateful to Jenny Adams for her helpful suggestions in thinking about the uncertain barrier that dress provides. Perhaps the most developed example of dress as a barrier and source of enticement is the vision of Beatrice held in Love’s hand and covered only by a thin veil in chapter 3 of Dante’s Vita Nuova.


22. Colin Burrow, “Reembodying Ovid: Renaissance Afterlives,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 310, observes Ovid’s grammatical subtlety in the phrase “tamquam sensura,” which can be rendered as both “as if she could feel them” and “as if she will feel them.”


26. Langlois, *Roman de la Rose*, 5:112, glosses “apert songe” as a dream in which things are coherent and comport with reality.


30. Brownlee, 207.


Works Cited


