The Metamorphoses

by Ovid

Book 10, Fable VII
PYGMALION, shocked by the dissolute lives of the Propœtides, throws off all fondness for the female sex, and resolves on leading a life of perpetual celibacy. Falling in love with a statue which he has made, Venus animates it; on which he marries this new object of his affections, and has a son by her, who gives his name to the island.

“When Pygmalion saw these women spending their lives in criminal pursuits, shocked at the vices which Nature had so plentifully imparted to the female disposition, he lived a single life without a wife, and for a long time was without a partner of his bed. In the meantime, he ingeniously carved a statue of snow-white ivory with wondrous skill; and gave it a beauty with which no woman can be born; and then conceived a passion for his own workmanship. The appearance was that of a real virgin, whom you might suppose to be alive, and if modesty did not hinder her, to be desirous to move; so much did art lie concealed under his skill. Pygmalion admires it; and entertains, within his breast, a flame for this fictitious body.

“Often does he apply his hands to the work, to try whether it is a human body, or whether it is ivory; and yet he does not own it to be ivory. He gives it kisses, and fancies that they are returned, and speaks to it, and takes hold of it, and thinks that his fingers make an impression on the limbs which they touch, and is fearful lest a livid mark should come on her limbs when pressed. And one while he employs soft expressions, at another time he brings her presents that are agreeable to maidens, such as shells, and smooth pebbles, and little birds, and flowers of a thousand tints, and lilies, and painted balls, and tears of the Heliades, that have fallen from the trees. He decks her limbs, too, with clothing, and puts jewels on her fingers; he puts, too, a long necklace on her neck. Smooth pendants hang from her ears, and bows from her breast. All things are becoming to her; and she does not seem less beautiful than when naked. He places her on coverings dyed with the Sidonian shell, and calls her the companion of his bed, and lays down her reclining neck upon soft feathers, as though it were sensible.

“A festival of Venus, much celebrated throughout all Cyprus, had now come; and heifers, with snow-white necks, having their spreading horns tipped with gold, fell, struck by the axe. Frankincense, too, was smoking, when, having made his offering, Pygmalion stood before the altar, and timorously said, ‘If ye Gods can grant all things, let my wife be, I pray,’ and he did not dare to say ‘this ivory maid,’ but ‘like to this statue of ivory.’ The golden Venus, as she herself was present at her own festival, understood what that prayer meant; and as an omen of the
Divinity being favourable, thrice was the flame kindled up, and it sent up a tapering flame into the air. Soon as he returned, he repaired to the image of his maiden, and, lying along the couch, he gave her kisses. She seems to grow warm. Again he applies his mouth; 359x. 282-299. with his hands, too, he feels her breast. The pressed ivory becomes soft, and losing its hardness, yields to the fingers, and gives way, just as Hymettian wax grows soft in the sun, and being worked with the fingers is turned into many shapes, and becomes pliable by the very handling. While he is amazed, and is rejoicing, though with apprehension, and is fearing that he is deceived; the lover again and again touches the object of his desires with his hand. It is a real body; the veins throb, when touched with the thumb.

“Then, indeed, the Paphian hero conceives in his mind the most lavish expressions, with which to give thanks to Venus, and at length presses lips, no longer fictitious, with his own lips. The maiden, too, feels the kisses given her, and blushes; and raising her timorous eyes towards the light of day, she sees at once her lover and the heavens. The Goddess was present at the marriage which she thus effected. And now, the horns of the moon having been nine times gathered into a full orb, she brought forth Paphos; from whom the island derived its name.”

EXPLANATION.

The Pygmalion here mentioned must not be mistaken for the person of the same name, who was the brother of Dido, and king of Tyre. The story is most probably an allegory, which was based on the fact that Pygmalion being a man of virtuous principles, and disgusted with the vicious conduct of the women of Cyprus, took a great deal of care in training the mind and conduct of a young female, whom he kept at a distance from the contact of the prevailing vices; and whom, after having recovered her from the obdurate and rocky state to which the other females were reduced, he made his wife, and had a son by her named Paphos; who was said to have been the founder of the city of Cyprus, known by his name.