

# *The Sculpted "Self" by the Other: Reinterpreting the Pygmalion Myth through Jacques Lacan's Theory of the Other*

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**Abstract:** Jacques Lacan's theory of the Other posits that the human subject is structured through the interpellation of the "I," emphasizing the Other's aggression toward the subject. Within the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a complex multi-layered interpellation by the Other exists among Pygmalion, the ivory woman, and the goddess of love (Aphrodite). Through carving and expectation, Pygmalion utilizes the "I"-image to facilitate the ivory figure's initial construction of a *pseudo-ego* within the Imaginary order. As Pygmalion's Other, the goddess interpellates his desire for love and beauty, which motivates his expectation for the ivory figure. The signifier within the Symbolic order is concretized through Pygmalion's prayer to the goddess. Both the ivory figure, now a living woman, and Pygmalion, desiring beauty, are sculpted into false selves by the Other, revealing the fundamental void of the ego's existence.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the Other both draws upon and transcends Hegel's dialectic of master and slave<sup>[1]</sup>. It contends that the subject establishes self-identification through the mirror stage, whereby the Other, via the subject's unconscious identification, ultimately substitutes itself for the subject, forming the *pseudo-ego* – the core logic of how the "ego" is sculpted by the Other.<sup>[2]</sup> The Pygmalion Effect, a classic concept in educational psychology, demonstrates how "expectation" exerts a powerful guiding and shaping force upon the subject. The Greek myth of Pygmalion, originating from Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, narrates how Pygmalion carved a beautiful woman from ivory, prayed to the goddess of love, who then brought the statue to life, enabling her marriage to Pygmalion. A complex and progressively hierarchical relationship of interpellation and being-interpellated exists among the ivory figure, Pygmalion, and the goddess. This myth vividly illustrates the schema of the Other's aggression towards the subject.

## **1. The Birth of the Ivory's *pseudo-ego*: Misrecognition of the Other's Gaze**

The ivory figure and Pygmalion constitute the first dyad of subject and Other within the Pygmalion myth. The designation of "Other" and "subject" between them stems primarily from their aggressive/aggressed relationship, where the ego is presented as utterly passive, exposing the "falsity" of existence. In Lacan's theory of the Other, the "I" possesses a spurious antecedence – a

violent preemption by a prior entity. Through this primordial aggression, the subject generates unconscious identification with the Other within the Imaginary. Within the Pygmalion myth, while Pygmalion, the ivory figure, and the goddess of love may appear as three subjects, Pygmalion, in fact, functions as a little other (a) in relation to the ivory figure. Before Pygmalion imposes his definition upon it, the ivory was merely ivory, and could not yet be called a "human" existence. Between the ivory figure and Pygmalion, a primary level of primordial aggression is established: Pygmalion, driven by his own aesthetic expectation, defines the ivory as "woman" and "wife," rendering it merely an object endowed with human form by another. A piece of ivory transitions from object to human due to Pygmalion's dream and expectation. Before truly becoming human, she existed in a non-human state. Her transformation into a human is precisely through the interpellation by a concrete Other, demonstrating how an other instigates an ego that the subject fundamentally lacks. Tracing the ivory woman's genesis, the ivory phase corresponds to the infantile period preceding mirror identification. Before the Other's intervention, the ivory can be seen as an unconscious subject. Once endowed with life and ego-consciousness by Pygmalion, she wholly accepts and internalizes the designations from the Other as the basis for her existence.

The ivory woman exists solely as an interpellated object, with the *little other* (a) focused entirely on Pygmalion. Firstly, Pygmalion bestows a face upon the ivory. This "image," entirely sculpted by another, is misrecognized by the ivory woman as her own visage. Pygmalion unequivocally assumes the role of the "I" within the Imaginary. While the face appears to belong to the ivory woman, it is, in fact, a face imagined and imposed by Pygmalion – a projection of his desire originating from the Other. He desires beautiful women; thus, the ivory possesses a beautiful face. At this stage, the ivory has already begun to forfeit its self. If Pygmalion's imaginary interpellation of the ivory figure constitutes a naming from the perspective of the little other (a), thereby endowing it with the transition from object to proto-human, then, viewed through the Symbolic order, Pygmalion simultaneously exercises the power of the Other (A) under the dominion of the goddess of love, defining the ivory woman. After the ivory is chiseled out into a human visage, Pygmalion further imposes social functions upon it through linguistic signifiers. The ivory itself is not human and cannot attain self-cognition. Definitions such as "wife" and "beauty" must be wholly subjected to Pygmalion's aggression, resulting in the gradual, passive conformation of its self to his imagined beautiful woman and wife within the interpellation of the Other. Although this woman in the myth is literally carved ivory, she manifests, in a form utterly stripped of subjective agency, the subject's passivity under the Other's coercive interpellation. Submitting to the aggression of the little other, she is bestowed with face, life, and emotion within the myth, culminating in the birth of a perfect *pseudo-ego*—a process echoing what Malabou theorizes as the 'sculptural plasticity' of subjectivity, wherein the self's form is violently molded by external forces that dictate its ontological contours.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. Desired Love and Beauty: Desiring the Desire of the Goddess

Pygmalion carves the ivory into a woman and, with the goddess's aid, creates the perfect woman conforming to his fantasy. While acting as the Other who sculpts and aggresses the ivory woman, he himself harbors unconscious identification with the goddess. Pygmalion and the goddess thus form the second dyad of subject and Other. Pygmalion, who bestows a face upon another, has his own consciousness constituted by the Other (the goddess), which is concretely manifested *through* the ivory woman. These three entities engage in graduated aggression yet resist simple hierarchical stratification. In the myth, Pygmalion, King of Cyprus, despises mortal women due to the punishment inflicted upon some who disrespected the goddess. Yet, he simultaneously longs for love, marriage, and beauty – indicative of the *objet petit a* a perpetually accompanying desire.

Pygmalion's aversion does not stem from inherent flaws in women; rather, their perceived offense lies in disrespecting and disbelieving the goddess, leading her to strip them of human status, reducing them to base prostitutes. The goddess, as the violent Other, persistently shapes Pygmalion's ego, constantly influencing and even determining the needs and desires of mortals like him. Consequently, Pygmalion's presumed autonomous wishes are not his own; his desire exists only insofar as it satisfies the goddess. Pygmalion believes himself to possess a unique pursuit of love and beauty, projecting this pursuit onto the subordinate ivory statue. He sculpts the ivory with love and beauty, expecting thereby to interpellate an ideal lover. However, while Pygmalion, who aggresses the ivory's cognition with his own values, appears to possess lucid self-cognition and can further interpellate the ivory in the form of an other, his cherished beliefs and personal pursuit of love and beauty are themselves generated under the interpellation of the higher-level goddess of love. When Pygmalion perpetually interpellates and aggresses the ivory through linguistic signifiers, violently usurping its self-cognition and compelling it to misrecognize the defined mirror-image as its true visage, he is, without doubt, simultaneously and imperceptibly accepting the Symbolic Other's (the goddess's) aggression upon him within the Symbolic order. How Pygmalion defines love and beauty—his cognition—is neither established nor sustained entirely by his self. Identical to the ivory's genesis, the cognition of love and beauty arises from the sustained interpellation by the goddess-faith as the Other (A). The women who disrespected the goddess, stripped of human status and exiled, already demonstrate the violent nature of goddess-faith. As the goddess, within her own domain, ceaselessly interpellates the visage of love and beauty in her capacity as the Other (A), Pygmalion's understanding of love and beauty has unwittingly accepted the sculpting of the goddess, internalizing it as his own identification.

Concepts like love, marriage, and beauty, born in Venus's homeland of Cyprus, cannot be fully represented by the *pseudo-ego* established through the Other's aggression, for desire resides solely in the lack within the signifier. When the goddess-faith, in its violent Otherness, injects notions like love and marriage into the subject's constituted *pseudo-ego*, they can only be satisfied through various concrete objects. Pygmalion's pursuit of love and beauty originates from the goddess-faith, yet their realization requires an anchor in reality; hence, ivory is carved into a beautiful woman (*i.e., desire is the desire of the Other*). The desire for beauty is embodied as a woman. However, once desire takes this feminine form, Pygmalion clearly develops a heightened desire for beauty, wishing the statue to become a real woman to fulfill his longing for marriage and love. In truth, due to the specific nature of desire generated by the *pseudo-ego*, the seemingly satisfied narcissistic desire perpetually remains unfulfilled.

Jacques Lacan argues that human desire is constituted through mediation, illustrating how the Other uses its own desire to mediate the subject, thereby generating unconscious identification within the *pseudo-ego*. The desire originating from the goddess, once internalized by Pygmalion, is further imposed upon the ivory woman through his disciplining and aggressive desire. The ivory, becoming woman, embodies traits sanctioned by the goddess: unlike the shameless punished women, she is full of modesty, "her face blushing".<sup>[4]</sup> Pygmalion provides the form; the goddess provides the erotic capacity (Eros). Only such a perfect woman merits the goddess's blessing. Surveying the process by which the ivory transitions from object to a genuine human, it, in fact, traverses an entire chain of interpellation extending from the goddess of love through Pygmalion and ultimately to the ivory itself. Yet, this interpellation does not operate in a strictly hierarchical manner within the formation of the *pseudo-ego*. At the myth's conclusion, the goddess responds to Pygmalion's plea, endowing the ivory with authentic life. At this pivotal moment, the goddess—the Other (A) presiding over the ideals of love and beauty for Pygmalion and indeed all individuals—directly defines the ivory. This act further reveals the void within Pygmalion's *pseudo-ego*: what he perceives as his own definitions of love and beauty are merely a linguistic

signifier looming over all individuals. Under the interpellation of the Other (A), individuals cannot attain a true self; they can only possess a *pseudo-ego*. When Pygmalion and the ivory woman establish their *pseudo-egos* under the interpellation of the goddess of love as the Other (A), their cognition of love and beauty is inevitably void and empty. The marital ideal and the role of "wife" that Pygmalion envisions were conferred by the goddess long before he concretized the image. What he believes is necessarily what the goddess has already interpellated. Thus, it is not that the goddess as the Other (A) fulfills Pygmalion's wishes; rather, she first implants the definitions of love and beauty that she intends Pygmalion to adopt, then materializes the ivory image—which Pygmalion has internalized as his subjective cognition—into reality. Pygmalion and the ivory, both subjected to aggression within the Symbolic order of the Other (A), are successively endowed with *pseudo-egos*. Consequently, their desires cannot originate from an authentic self; they can only be interpellated by the goddess within the mirror of the *pseudo-ego*. Under the dominion of the Other (A), the desires of both are solely conferred by the goddess. Even the self is incapable of independently constructing cognition of love and beauty apart from the goddess; it can only exist contingent upon her. Both Pygmalion's and the ivory woman's desires originate from the Symbolic Other of goddess-faith. Desiring the desire of the Other ultimately leads only to nothingness.

### 3. The Linguistic Murder of Thing and Human: The Pseudo-Subject under the Goddess's Dominion

Jacques Lacan asserts that "language is the murder of the thing".<sup>[5]</sup> Linguistic signs function as symbolic relations; the abstraction of reality into concepts is itself a murder of being. As Adam named the animals, the moment a living creature is described by the linguistic concept "X animal" it is alienated into the corpse of existence. Within the Pygmalion myth, the Symbolic Other, manifest as the goddess, enacts violent aggression upon the subject, murdering thing and human through symbolic language. Consider the juxtaposition of the punished women and the ivory. Certain Cypriot women denied Venus's existence, rejecting the goddess-faith and challenging its axiomatic status, ultimately suffering punitive discipline from the goddess. The Propoetides were designated by the goddess as "the first to prostitute their bodies" and "hardened stones",<sup>[4]</sup> losing their existence *as human*, alienated into non-human entities by linguistic symbols. Their authentic meaning and being were supplanted by symbolic signifiers.

Conversely, the ivory statue's transformation appears miraculous. Pygmalion, enamored with his statue, prays devoutly at the goddess's altar, wishing for a bride like his ivory maiden. Miraculously, the statue becomes a living woman. The crux of this miracle lies in the fact that the beautiful face existed within Pygmalion's desire before the ivory statue materialized. The aggression of the Symbolic Other is actualized through Pygmalion via the linguistic signifier. Pygmalion's prayer articulates: "If you gods can give all things, grant me a wife... one like the ivory maid".<sup>[4]</sup> Within the Pygmalion narrative, the Other (A) exists in the form of a deity, enacting aggression upon humans through linguistic signifiers in the Symbolic order. This manifests in two distinct facets: first, the human women who rejected the goddess-faith were stripped of their normative human existence and exiled; conversely, the originally non-human ivory statue, through Pygmalion's devout prayer, received the Other's grace and was transformed into a genuine woman. The goddess of love, as the Other (A), possesses both the power to transmute object into human and the capacity to deprive women who resist the Other's aggression of their human status. The divergent human experiences revolving around goddess-faith ultimately further expose the violent nature of the Other's aggression upon the subject: it is inevitable and inescapable. Within the interpellation of the Other (A), there exists no individual who remains untouched by this interpellation and can exist independently outside it. If the aggression of the Other is accepted, even an object can be endowed

with human existence. Herein lies a glimpse of the very condition for being human: it is not that the subject is born as a subject; rather, humans merely submit in ignorance to the pseudo-subject established by the Other. The essential being of the human is nothing but a void. Post-mirror stage, the ivory, endowed with a face by the Other, remains merely a statue. Only *after* the prayer does this quasi-human object become fully alive. The signifiers "wife" and "grant" interpellate the ivory woman's social function. Before the ivory statue becomes a real woman, the signifier "wife like the ivory maiden" is already uttered. It is not the ivory that defines the self; rather, the signifying symbols of language define the ivory.

Consequently, upon becoming human, the ivory woman "naturally" loves Pygmalion. This aligns perfectly with Lacan's analysis: the subject believes it makes free choices, but this apparent freedom is merely the Symbolic Other's suspension of the real world. Symbolic concepts reconstruct and substitute for concrete reality. The void of this murder lies in the fact that the ivory woman herself does not know what a woman "like herself" truly is. When concept becomes essence, all dissolves into emptiness.

Lacan defines subjectivity as "a syntax that makes the signifying mark into a sign of its own gap".<sup>[6]</sup> When the subject is voided of its own being, it can only inhabit the signifier to establish reference to a supposed real subject – *i.e.*, social existence is realized solely through the signifying chain. Within the Pygmalion myth, the aggression of the goddess of love as the Other (A) upon humans is omnipresent. When Pygmalion, driven by the demands of his goddess-constructed pseudo-subject, implores the goddess to grant him a wife who conforms to her definitions of love and beauty, he becomes the linguistic signifier-spokesperson forged by the Other's aggression. Having grown in the goddess's homeland and been ceaselessly interpellated by her with these definitions of love and beauty, Pygmalion develops a *pseudo-ego* that is misrecognized as his authentic self. With this *pseudo-ego*, he then violently defines the ivory woman through signifiers, thereby interpellating the ivory—an object extrinsic to reality and devoid of intrinsic subjectivity—into existence according to the visage conferred by the Other (A). The transmutation of identities between ivory and woman further exposes how goddess-faith as the Other (A) enacts aggression and interpellation upon the pseudo-subject. Real women who deny the goddess's existence are stripped of human status and exiled, deemed abject beings, whereas Pygmalion—through devout supplication—enables the ivory to attain life, becoming a "genuine" woman. Here, a dialectical inversion between human and non-human occurs: the omnipotent Other (A) can violently define human subjectivity and even subvert authentic existence. Yet within this myth, the human/non-human transgression extends further. When Pygmalion takes the ivory woman—sculpted by his hand according to the conferred ideals of love and beauty—as the archetype, beseeching the goddess for a real wife "like the ivory maiden," the ivory—originally a mere derivative of real women—paradoxically becomes the standard against which real women are measured. Human and non-human once more reverse their ontological hierarchy under the Other's aggression. Through this interpellation, the ivory woman is endowed with symbolic significance and assimilated into the signifying chain as a referable being. Attributes like "beauty," "modesty," and "Pygmalion's wife" define the ivory woman. Stripped of these symbolic concepts, she reverts to an inhuman statue. Intersubjective interaction is possible only through the subject's fundamental lack (*manque-à-être*). Like the portrait in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—which bears the traces of time and spiritual burdens in place of Dorian Gray—it is defined by Dorian Gray and accepts all imprints that should have marked the subject.<sup>[7]</sup> The truth of being does not truly exist. Things and humans murdered by language can only exist as the Pseudo-Subject, subjected to the aggression of the capitalized Other (A).

## 4. Conclusion

Jacques Lacan's theory of the Other profoundly reveals, from a philosophical perspective, the cruel essence of human existence: from birth, the subject is pre-defined by the Other. While the theory primarily studies humans, applying it to the Pygmalion myth, particularly the ivory figure, might seem initially incongruous. However, the ivory's material existence – aggressed by the little other and integrated into the intersubjective social realm as an empty shell of signifiers – directly points to the non-existent truth of the self. Interpreting this millennial myth through Lacan's provocative theory of the Just as Bernard Shaw did with his re-creation of the ancient Greek Pygmalion myth (which is known as the play *Pygmalion* or *My Fair Lady*), other opens vast philosophical research horizons beyond the confines of the Pygmalion Effect.<sup>[8]</sup>

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