

“when he wished me to live”¹: Radical reinscription of the Posthuman Feminine in
narrativizations of the Galatea myth

The posthumanist turn of the era demands a reimagining of circumscribed modes of being set forth before such novel forms of life as this shift conceives. A radical departure from a discourse which pivots around the white European male— that is, humanism as an heirloom of the European Renaissance— the posthuman pervades the contemporary world through every life form existing beyond the circumscriptions of aforementioned discourse. Its lofty ideals of human dignity, knowledge and creativity, when situated within its temporal context, reveal the disparities and exclusions which have strived to hold together this monument to the supremacy of the White European Man. Whether one recalls the fictitious Judith Shakespeare (Woolf 37-39), or the starker realities of figures as Artemisia Gentileschi, Anne Clifford and Elizabeth Cary, Humanist genius has vehemently averted its face from the Feminine, right from its conception.

Feminine existence has long remained a pervasive mystery to those who have probed it, primarily men whose theorizations fell short of lived experiences by a wide margin. Any further attempts to mould it in accordance with the masculinist rubric which Humanism demarcated would be flawed and would also enact inconspicuous, yet immaculate, violence upon it. The discourse of Humanism, in its existent form, does not fittingly encompass feminine existence, failing to grapple with its myriad conflicts and nuances. To conceive an expansive and inclusive feminine existence, one is consequently driven to theorize along the ambit of a Posthuman Feminism. The invocation of Feminism, as an alternative to the exclusionary operations of Humanism, involves an orientation to the environment and to the planet that is “biophilic”—which implies reaching beyond humans to the nonhuman world (Hayles 28). Posited as a transversal exercise, Posthuman Feminism resorts to a relational mode of thinking, traversing categories and disciplines (Braidotti ln. 113). It supplants binary conceptions of what it means to be human, extending an awareness of continuum with the non-human, in its immersion in technological mediation and affinities with animal life, an assemblage termed ‘zoe/geo/technobodies’ (ln. 157). An extension of the conceptual frameworks outlined by Braidotti to depictions of the Posthuman Feminine in contemporary fictional narratives can be attempted, aiming to cultivate a knowledge of liberatory and

¹ Miller, Madeline. *Galatea*. HarperCollins, 2013, pp 10.

holistic modes of feminine existence. The eponymous protagonists in both the texts selected for analysis— *Galatea* (Miller) and “Miss Golden Dreams 1949” (Oates)— also make conspicuous the permeability of the categories ‘human’ and ‘posthuman’, demonstrating traits peculiar to both. Patriarchal attempts to imprison these dynamic lifeforms within familiar cages provide sharp commentary upon the humanist endeavour: both Galatea and Miss Golden Dreams start out as products of the Humanist’s creative assertions. However, it is their violent endeavours to evade the oppressive clutches of a life doled out by their patriarchal masters, that afford them an accommodative existential space. Through these visions of Posthuman liberation, the realization of a more holistic sphere for the existence of the Feminine can therefore come to fruition.

Tracing back to Classical Greece, the myth of Galatea serves as fecund imaginative ground for a posthumanist imaginary which has accelerated in growth in contemporaneity. Poetically treated first in *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 394-396), it raises pertinent concerns regarding the ethics of the creative endeavour. The Ovidian vision consists of a persistent and poetic Pygmalion, through his devotion to Aphrodite, willing the object of his passions to life— a statue carved by him, which remains unnervingly silent even after it comes to life; newer reimaginings go further in their attempts to gaze back at the subject through marble eyes turned flesh and blood. Yet, however devoted he be to his sculpture-turned-wife, traces of hatred towards womankind are revealed with a careless air about them, in the course of the narration. Pygmalion’s story starts out with this hatred noted diligently: the promiscuity of a particular lineage of women stretched out to envelope the entire sex in its vile embrace, one he himself shall extend to his sculpture in due course. The object of Pygmalion’s hatred, the Propoetides, are deemed by Ovid to be the first of humans “to offer their bodies and beauty for sale” (393); they are depicted as so hard-hearted as to justly warrant their transformation to granite, having incurred the wrath of Aphrodite. Preceding the tale of Pygmalion, the fate of the Propoetides forewarns of the treacherous path females tread in a patriarchal world unable to grapple with the various facets of their being. Pygmalion further edifies his hatred by carving his ideal woman out of marble, who shall stand against all that the Propoetides embodied. She is of smooth, white marble, thus named Galatea post-antiquity (Ovid’s tale does not even earn this miraculous lifeform a name), while her unfortunate rivals are petrified to brash, dark granite; she is virginal and subservient to the hands that have carved her, while the Propoetides earned their very transformation due to their sexual transgression and unconformity. Yet, the muse has uncanny ways of manifesting herself in the art: Pygmalion’s

reactionary creation nods to her granite inspirations in *Galatea* (Miller), where the loving object of the sculptor's virile, violent love turns her all-embracing arms upon her creator.

Miller's first, blatant subversion is to give this sculpture a name, a name that binds her narrative and echoes throughout it. The male desire for female purity is labelled and probed for what it is: male fantasy. The contradictory nature of Pygmalion's hatred for women and his desire for their bodies is also highlighted (Anthony), which is what drives his prayers to bestow human life upon his creation, in order that she may be bound by his shackles of patriarchal possession and propriety. He is her birthgiver, which fosters his entitlement to her body. The myth is undergirded by processes rife with objectification and anxiety indicative of the creator-lover's aim to obtain and subsequently contain this ideal woman (O'Sullivan 133-134), who stands as an absolute contrast to the entirety of womankind, yet must be absorbed within it so as to legitimize Pygmalion's patriarchal authority. Galatea's act of reclaiming her body comes in the form of a deathly embrace, binding both their bodies under her control. Galatea's moment of deliverance takes the form of a final riddance from human flesh— her husband's, which she offers up to death, and hers, which she disavows as she sinks into the ocean. A purported death, yet Miller's choice of words in describing the scene might hint at a reversion to marble, or an existence beyond death, given that Galatea is not natural life but divine will. Strongly evidenced in both scenarios is that she shirks off all human entrapments so as to wade completely into her feminine existence; her fatal plunge with Pygmalion into the depths of the ocean calls the reader to witness a veritable Posthuman Renaissance.

Rebirth carries liberatory connotations of ultimate significance in the (after)lives of the Posthuman Feminine. Galatea's leap away from the cruel imposition of her humanity ushers forth a novel conviction that life as humans claim to know it just might be the tip of the iceberg, the surface of the ocean; death isn't final but defies the human urgency for closure, a legacy of the same Humanism which premises itself upon the infallible logic and rationality of Man. It is through death and rebirth that the Posthuman Feminine liberates itself beyond the narrow cognitive walls of such discourse. As with Galatea, so with Norma Jeane Baker reborn as the "PlastiPlutoniumLuxe Miss Golden Dreams 1949" (Oates 75): dying implies a departure from the realm of the human. Existence, prolonging itself even after death, thus posits itself as Posthuman, exceeding that which is humanely possible. Oates makes accessible to the reader the interior monologue of this eerie doll, which asserts itself as life, as

feminine life, but never human. To be a woman, in Oates' narrative world, implies a spectrum of debasements and defilements, which run dialectically opposite to the assertion of human dignity upon which Humanism is premised. The author provides an ironic catalogue of these, artistically crafted to shock:

‘...I will lie at your feet. I will prostrate myself before you. I will be your beautiful bride. I will not—ever—murmur a word of sarcasm. I will not be impatient with you, though you are a foolish, doddering old man; I will be respectful of you, I will fawn over you as only a “fawn” can fawn...’ (85)

Miss Golden Dreams 1949 can arguably claim distant ancestry to Galatea: a technobody (Braidotti ln. 157) assembled so as to gratify masculine demands upon the female body; she transgresses in her dissociative yet absolute identification with the visceral, the bodily, the anatomical. Reducing herself to a body before a man can do it first, she goes on to claim his body as well through the active exercise of violence. “Daddy”—the unnamed man to whom Miss Golden Dreams addresses herself— is obliterated in death, unlike Norma Jeane, for whom death appears as a brief interruption before she is pushed to continue with the business of her body, which is both commodity and currency. However, the body of Miss Golden Dreams 1949 has been dehumanized: frozen in time, never ageing, and boasting oddities as blood more efficient in oxygenation, while doubling as an aphrodisiac (Oates 76). This is a body which is barely human and blatantly feminized, a body which knows its greater-than-human traits, and is thus agentic. Posthuman embodiment has offered it a life far larger than a human existence could, substantiating the argument that the arena of the Posthuman serves as a suitable sphere for a liberated Feminine existence. Birth and death serve as vital metamorphic frontiers for both protagonists, while rebirth signals a transcendence full and freeing. Both females are artificially born of the Humanist—the Man, practising his creative craft unbound and unabashed—to whom their infancy is infinitely precious in its docility, purity and helplessness. Death extracts them from such oppressive life, which is made into an everlasting series of births, the Man enamoured by this Frankensteinian ambition, this sublation of the physiological prerogative of the female as birthgiver. The icon of the sublimated womb in man is surely his productive brain, the box in the skull (Spivak 255) parallel to Athena being born out of Zeus' head, the only glorious weapon permitted in the arsenal of the rationalizing Man, the Humanist. Aiming to break free of the suffocating implications of a human-in-the-loop circuitry, Miss Golden Dreams upsets

the reign of logic and reason with recourse to violence. Startling in its physicality, it strikes back at the years of representational and symbolic violence which had suffocated the life out of Norma Jeane, through the discursive constructions that dehumanized and objectified her (Lokaneeta 1010). It is comfort in the corporeal, exhibited once the transcension to the Posthuman has been fulfilled, which exceeds and baffles the existent order of Humanism, still redundantly reliant on demoting the bodily to the realm of the bestial.

The order of the corporeal thus asserts itself through Posthuman embodiment, as observed in the above reinscriptions of the Galatea myth. Developing on the claim that one is not born a woman but becomes one (Beauvoir 273), it is through escaping such oppressive socialization as a human order entails, that the Feminine is able to chalk out an existence on their own terms. Both *Galatea* and “Miss Golden Dreams 1949” depict protagonists who defy assimilation into a social order designed to confine them in its margins, and keep them there. The texts retrace the footsteps of an infamous creator’s ambivalent ethical engagements with his creation, propelling one upon an analysis of the discursive frameworks which have fostered both Pygmalions and Galateas, in apposition. Encountering these alternate narrativizations focalizing a distinctly female voice, the contemporary imaginary resultantly envisions the fashioning of a feminine self which is distinctly posthumanist, in its deviations from the restrictive patriarchal existence delineated for it. The twin promises of inclusivity and dynamism for a posthuman womanhood, formerly inhibited by humanist frameworks laying their siege upon it, flow through these literary representations, articulating Posthuman Renaissances.

Works cited:

- Anthony, Ella A. “‘Galatea’ Review: Female Pain, Male Pleasure.” *Arts | The Harvard Crimson*, 18 Oct. 2022,
www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/10/18/galatea-madeline-miller-review-2022/. Accessed 6 Jan. 2026.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Translated by H.M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, 1956.
- Braidotti, Rosi. “Introduction: Feminism by Any Other Name.” *Posthuman Feminism*. Polity Press, 2022.
- Hayles, N. K. “Good Technology Is Biophilic.” *The Good Robot: Why Technology Needs Feminism*, edited by Eleanor Drage and Kerry McInerney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, pp. 28.
- Lokaneeta, Jinee. “Violence.” *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1010.
- Miller, Madeline. *Galatea*. HarperCollins, 2013.
- O’Sullivan, Jane. “Virtual Metamorphoses: Cosmetic and Cybernetic Revisions of Pygmalion’s ‘Living Doll.’” *Arethusa*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2008, pp. 133–56. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44578499>. Accessed 6 Jan. 2026.
- Oates, Joyce C. “Miss Golden Dreams 1949.” *Night, Neon and Other Stories of Suspense*. 2021. Head of Zeus Ltd., 2023.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*. Translated by D. A. Raeburn, Penguin, 2004.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 243–61. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343469>. Accessed 6 Jan. 2026.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. 1929. Penguin Classics, 2020.