

Pygmalion of the Printed Page: “Ruby Sparks”

The 2012 summer movie “Ruby Sparks” is instantly recognizable as a modern adaptation of the story of Pygmalion and his statue. In this incarnation, Pygmalion is the young novelist Calvin and the statue (or Galatea) is his literary creation Ruby Sparks.

Like Pygmalion, Calvin is driven to create his ideal woman out of disillusion with real women. Ironically, in view of what happens in the movie, he complains that the female “groupies” he meets are in love with an idea of him and are not interested in him as a person. He is unable to create until he “sees” Ruby in a dream, at which point he starts writing frantically. He falls in love with his own creation, just as Ovid’s sculptor did. When she suddenly comes to life (a miracle the movie does not try to explain), one of her first utterances is “Kiss me, stupid”—just as Pygmalion’s statue’s first act as a human being was to gaze adoringly at her creator.

At this point Ovid’s story ends (apart from a brief mention of the happy couple’s marriage and subsequent children), but the movie goes on to explore the full implications of this myth. The “ideal” woman that Calvin has created is a distinctly modern creation: the “manic pixie dream girl,” a chipper, quirky young woman who “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures...Audiences either want to marry her instantly (despite The Manic Pixie Dream Girl being, you know, a fictional character) or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against them and their immediate family.” In other words, even in the flesh, Ruby is not real; the implausibility of her is brought out repeatedly. As Calvin’s cynical brother Harry comments, “Quirky messy women whose problems only make them endearing are not real.” The film shows how destructive the fantasy of her is to both men and women. When Ruby wants to

lead her own life, Calvin continues to manipulate her to make her fully compliant again, but his tinkering has disastrous results. Only after Ruby disappears and then (not quite convincingly) reappears independently of Calvin's typewriter can Ruby and Calvin have a real relationship.

Simulacra and the people who love them are not new creations. They have been studied extensively, most notably in 2011 by Paula James and in a chapter on "Cinematic Mythmaking". Often the Pygmalion theme manifests itself in a makeover, a trope so common it received its own book. It is rarer to see what happens when a man creates a woman *ex nihilo*, and rarer still when a woman writes the story. (The star of *Ruby Sparks*, Zoe Kazan, also wrote the film.) The film is of interest to all scholars of this enduring myth.

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