

7 Legitimizing Sex with Technology: Prisoners, Nazis, Misogynists, and the Origin Stories That Go Untold

Prison cells, Nazi war camps, the bedroom of a mythical sculptor. These are some of the sites of alternative origin stories—most just as imaginary as the story of the sailors’ dolls—for the birth of contemporary sexual technologies. In this final chapter, I transition from talking about the tale of the *dames de voyage* specifically to considering what other possible origin stories are not being told when authors tell sex tech’s history through the story of the sailors’ dolls. As I have mentioned, there are many ways to tell the history of sexual technologies and the sex doll. Some such narratives offer valuable opportunities for resurfacing the contributions of those who have largely been left out of dominant versions of history. The alternate origin stories I discuss here, by contrast, are not any more “true” than the tale of the *dames de voyage*. They too are the stuff of fantasy, contortions of fact, and problematic cultural logics. Nonetheless, they offer valuable lenses through which to consider how the history of sexual technologies is being told. In particular, they draw attention to what dominant historical narratives choose *not* to say, often precisely because doing so would reveal uncomfortable truths about sex tech in the present moment. By allowing authors to sidestep these alternate origin stories, the tale of the *dames de voyage* helps legitimize twenty-first-century sexual technologies like the sex robot, while keeping other possible interpretations of sex tech at bay.

In the sections that follow, I talk specifically about three alternate origin stories for the sex doll and for sexual technologies by extension. The first situates the birth of the sex doll not aboard seafaring ships but in prison. As I explain, prisoners have been gradually written out of the sex doll’s history as part of an ongoing effort to render sex dolls either more appealing or

less “deviant.” The second story is more disquieting, placing the birth of the sex doll in the hands of Nazi party leaders during World War II, who, so the myth goes, invented the blow-up doll for use by German troops. This story, I argue, has been set aside in favor of the tale of the dames de voyage because it risks bringing to the fore the underlying eugenicist and white supremacist overtones that characterize current conversations about “sexual robot futures.” Last, I look at the myth of Pygmalion, which is frequently told alongside the tale of the dames de voyage. The myth is commonly deployed to position sex tech within a venerable classical tradition. Instead, I perform a close reading of Ovid’s widely influential telling of the myth, demonstrating how Pygmalion’s story itself undermines the aura of gravitas that it is meant to impart to sexual technologies. I finish this chapter by reflecting on what these alternative origin stories—the case of the prisoners’ dolls, the Nazi doll, and the mythical “ivory girl” who comes to life—can reveal about sex tech cultures of the present moment and the people who participate in them.

When it comes to the sex doll, perceptions of legitimacy also go hand in hand with perceptions of the “natural.” In her writing on technofetishism, Allison de Fren argues that the members of the online alt.sex.fetish.robots community she studied (a kind of precursor to a now much wider and more visible cultural interest in sex with robots) were less invested in “technology in general, or the artificial woman in particular, than in a strategy of denaturalization.”¹ Through their attraction to robots, as well as mannequins, dolls, sculptures, and other “feminized objects,” de Fren explains that these technofetishists sought to hack or deprogram societal assumptions about “natural” sexuality, resisting the essentialist expectation that human beings are attracted to other human beings on an alienable level.² By contrast, I argue here that the origin stories typically foregrounded in dominant narratives about sex tech’s history are precisely those that serve to naturalize the concept of sex with technology. The tale of the dames de voyage reflects an approach to imagining that history that is concerned, first and foremost, with rendering the sexual devices of today, as well as the people who use them, “normal.” Holding this tale against other origin stories for the sex doll that have been pushed to the background allows us to question that bid for normalcy and to lay bare the real cultural problems within sex tech that it tries to hide.

Illegitimate Inventors: Creating Sex Dolls in Prison

One possible alternate origin story for the sex doll locates the act of their invention in prison. As possible backdrops for the imagined birth of sex tech, prisons and sailing ships would seem to have a lot in common. Although the realities of both settings are far more complicated—and while the racial politics of mass incarceration in the United States should never be far from our minds when discussing prisons, even as imagined spaces—prisons and sailing ships share a set of traits as they are depicted in media and popular culture.³ They are typically envisioned as all-male spaces (notwithstanding the recent interest in women's prisons sparked by the success of *Orange Is the New Black*), where burly men are forced to share tight quarters for long stretches of time. If, as the tale of the dames de voyage claims, sailors' frustrated desires in centuries past could inspire them to invent the very first sex doll, why could this same inspiration not be imagined to have struck prisoners rather than sailors?

The answer lies in the matter of legitimacy. Taken as contemporary cultural archetypes, sailors are perceived as “better” people than prisoners. Sailors, especially those from centuries past, are imagined as a rough-and-tumble sort who are nonetheless hearty, hardworking citizens. (We know from chapter 3 that this perception has itself shifted considerably over time, even just within the context of American popular culture.) Prisoners, on the other hand, are seen as dangerous and unfit to participate in society. They are also implicitly racialized, whereas sailors are envisioned as white by default. Cultural perceptions of historicity work against the prisoner as well. Whereas the sailor is viewed as a charming rogue from long ago, the prisoner is viewed as a menace of the present. The sexual conditions of sailing ships and prisons, as they appear in the cultural imaginary, themselves differ in important ways. Once they arrive in port, sailors are often associated with sex and queerness—yet this association often does not follow them onto their ships, as we saw in chapter 5. Prisons, on the other hand, are envisioned as more explicitly sexualized spaces, sites of sex and sexual assault between men. As John Mercer has explained, eroticized myths about prison have featured heavily in gay pornography, where they become sites for exploring non-normative sexual roles and identities.⁴ Yet whether viewed through the lens of gay panic or the lens of queer desire, visions

of sexuality in prison are bound up with ideas of deviance. Thus, to say that prisoners rather than sailors invented the sex doll would actively work against the (hegemonic, heterosexual, white) legitimacy that the tale of the dames de voyage attempts to establish. It would make sex dolls themselves seem deviant—or, rather, it would uncomfortably highlight the ways in which sex dolls are often already placed in this category.

In fact, the idea that prison might represent an alternate origin story for the sex doll is not a hypothetical one. If we look back at the actual history of sex dolls, as well as the lineage of texts that brings us the established version of that history in the present day, we find that prisoners have already played an important role in the development of sexual technologies, though their contributions have largely been left out of this history. The clearest illustration of this erasure of prisoners from sex tech's history lies in the supposed "photograph" of the dames de voyage that I discussed in chapter 1: the black-and-white image of what appears to be three sex dolls dressed in women's clothing (see figure 0.2). This image is commonly presented in twenty-first-century texts as visual evidence of the existence of the fabled sailors' dolls. Yet the image is not actually a photograph, nor does it depict sex dolls made by sailors. Instead, it is an artist's rendering of a sex doll (wearing three different outfits) fabricated by a prisoner, as we can tell from the earlier German-language captions that accompany the image. This distinction is itself important for uncovering the real history behind the dames de voyage, but far more telling for our purposes here is the process of how illustrations of a prisoner's sex doll from the start of the twentieth century came to be repeatedly misinterpreted as images of dolls made by sailors.

To illustrate, let me briefly recap how the image has moved through sources over the last two decades: Uses of the image today can largely be traced back to its appearance in David Levy's influential 2007 book *Love and Sex with Robots*, in which the placement of the image strongly suggested that it was a depiction of the sailors' sex dolls.⁵ Levy received the image from Cynde Moya, who included it in her own dissertation, "Artificial Vaginas and Sex Dolls," with a note that she thought perhaps it represented the dames de voyage, though she was not sure.⁶ Moya cited her source for the image as an illustrated volume that accompanied Leo Schidrowitz's 1927 German sexological text *Ergänzungswerk zur Sittengeschichte des Lasters* (Supplement to the moral history of vice).⁷ Digging up Schridowitz's text and looking

more closely at the image (which has since been replicated so many times in later printings that its details are hard to discern) clarified that the image includes two captions. The first, a more formal typeset caption beneath the image, translates to: "Coitus-substitute: undressable, primitive doll almost life-size, equipped with all female clothing." A second caption, this one handwritten on the image itself, translates to: "This doll was made by a prisoner in order to have coitus with her."⁸

There are a number of things we could note in this lineage—such as how "history" changes when materials are passed like whispers down the lane or how sexual history is remade through interpretation and imagination. However, the thing to notice for the moment is how the status of the doll specifically as a *prisoner's* doll was gradually erased over time. In the present day, we see authors of English- and French-language texts reprinting the supposed image of the dames de voyage while recodifying the assumption that the doll(s) represented can be attributed to sailors. Yet the work of separating the image of the doll(s) from its association with prisoners started much earlier. This is evidenced, for example, by the set of double captions in Schidrowitz's text. The caption that explains that the doll was created by a prisoner is handwritten and harder to read; it was perhaps written by an archivist at the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute of Sexology) in Berlin, to which Schidrowitz credits the image. Yet in his own, more formal caption, Schidrowitz has notably sidestepped any mention of a prisoner. Instead, he describes the doll only as a "coitus-substitute." Although the reason for this choice remains unclear, it seems driven by an erotic logic that is itself imbricated with a logic of legitimacy. In its own way, Schidrowitz's text is designed to be both scientific and titillating. Labeling the image as a *sex doll* rather than a *prisoner's sex doll* may have made it seem sexier.

The story of this image takes yet another twist if we trace it back to an earlier source. Seven years before the image of the prisoner's doll appeared in Schidrowitz's text, a version was published by the imminent sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld himself in a 1920 volume of his book *Sexualpathologie* (figure 7.1).⁹ Situated within a discussion about people who are sexually attracted to visual representations and replicas of the body, Hirschfeld brings up the Greco-Roman myth of the sculptor Pygmalion, adding, "Primitive men and peoples themselves make much more primitive replicas than the artistic and skillful Helens. As an example, I offer pictures of a doll that a prisoner made as a substitute for a woman."¹⁰ Here Hirschfeld prints

Hypererotismus.

Tafel III.



Lebensgroße Puppe, die sich ein Gefangener als Weibersatz anfertigte (siehe S. 129).

Figure 7.1

Three renderings of a life-sized sex doll made by a prisoner. This image (undated) appears in volume three of Magnus Hirschfeld's *Sexualpathologie*, published in 1920.

his own copy (seemingly more complete and closer to the original artwork) of what we now know to be the image of the prisoner's doll.

For the first time, in Hirschfeld's text, we can see the image clearly. It is certainly not a photograph; the strokes and shading of what was likely an ink, watercolor, and/or gouache artist's rendering are very visible. Also visible is the intricacy of the doll. Her face looks carefully constructed and her body is more or less realistically proportioned, though she is conspicuously missing hands. Her wardrobe is impressive; it seems to include a dress, a skirt, socks, shoes, even a dainty scarf to tie around her neck. Even more informative, from the perspective of sex toy history, we can see that she has been equipped with a specific set of apparatuses for sexual penetration. To engage in sex with her, it seems, a person inserts their genitals into a tube with a soft, pseudovaginal opening, much like a modern-day Fleshlight. The tube is then inserted into an opening in the doll's pubic area. This opening itself appears to consist of a hole cut into the doll's undergarments, which has then been fitted with an inflatable rubber *ventre de femme* like those discussed in chapter 4. Thus, though this is not an image of a dame de voyage as it is imagined in the present day (as a sex doll made by sailors), it

is in fact an image of a sex doll wearing an artificial vagina of the sort that was sometimes referred to, in the original historical context, as a *dame de voyage*. Things have come full circle.

Unlike authors after him, Hirschfeld is not shy about attributing the creation of this sex doll to a prisoner. In addition to the description he provides in the body of his text, he also captions the image: "Life-size doll made by a prisoner as a substitute for a woman."¹¹ This does not mean, however, that his recognition of the prisoner's creation is complimentary. He uses this image to illustrate that "primitive" people like prisoners (the word *primitive* bringing with it both racial and colonial overtones) make sex dolls that are supposedly less artful than those made by the "Helens"—that is, figures from Greek and Roman antiquity. Interestingly, in this juxtaposition, prisoners are not presented as illegitimate because of their association with social deviance. Instead, what makes prisoners illegitimate in Hirschfeld's description is their purported lack of artistic skill. This is an odd choice, given that the doll in question seems to be quite artfully made. It also contrasts sharply with the contemporary tale of the *dames de voyage*, which celebrates sailors as ingenious inventors precisely for fashioning dolls that are often described as rudimentary. In this sense, the case of the prisoner's doll illustrates how legitimacy and innovation, as they have been posited across various histories of sexual technologies, are tied more to who does the inventing than to the quality of what is invented.

Despite prisoners' erasure from sex tech history, it is actually in the inventions of prisoners that we find real makeshift sex dolls that most closely resemble the imagined sailors' dolls. Some of these dolls do not date from times long past but from the twenty-first century. Written by author Angelo, the 2003 book *Prisoners' Inventions* catalogs an array of clever contraband devices that Angelo and his fellow prisoners have made while incarcerated.¹² A number of the devices that Angelo describes are related to sex, such as a "covered wagon" (a blanket fort designed to give privacy for sex and masturbation) and a variety of prophylactics, including a condom made out of sandwich wrap and a rubber band that Angelo playfully refers to as a "French tickler."¹³

Of particular note is an entry in *Prisoners' Inventions* labeled "muff bag." The muff bag replicates a pair of buttocks with a torso and legs that can be penetrated for simulated sex. Angelo explains how the item is constructed from water-filled trash bags and a set of blankets: "The device is made using

two 24-inch square thin plastic wastebasket liners (a double-bag system is recommended due to the tendency of the bags to puncture in moments of passion). The corners of the bags are pulled in and tied together inside the bag so that the whole thing resembles Speedo shorts without the leg holes, after which the bag is filled with hot water, tied off, and positioned properly on the bunk. . . . Add rolled-up blankets to simulate the torso and legs and supply support and you're ready to slip it to her."¹⁴ This description, along with Angelo's accompanying illustration, paints a picture of a fornicatory doll much like the envisioned *dames de voyage*, made in a human form out of materials ready to hand. Yet the muff bag also productively complicates the vision of the sailors' dolls by inhabiting an ambivalent space between variously gendered bodies. The item is referred to with the slang term *muff* but Angelo says that the bag, once tied up, looks like men's Speedo shorts. Angelo's illustration resembles the torso and legs of a cisgender man, yet his description of the item concludes, "You're ready to slip it to her." Ultimately, it remains unclear whether the muff bag is supposed to replicate an ass or a vagina, or whether perhaps the item itself blurs the division between the two.

The depictions of the prisoners' sex dolls that we see in Angelo's texts differ in critical ways from Hirschfeld's. Angelo himself explicitly situates the creation of prisoners' inventions within traditions of technological innovation. For example, he describes one particularly inventive cellmate as "possessing the spirit of Thomas Edison," calling him a veritable "Leonardo da Vinci of his age."¹⁵ Angelo is also careful to explain that this "technology" of the prisoners' inventions, as he refers to it, is all the more impressive given severely limited access to materials and oppressive regulations in prison. "The prison environment is designed and administered for the purpose of suppressing such inventiveness," he writes. "Officially, the devices described here are considered contraband, subject to confiscation in routine cell searches. But inmates are resilient if nothing else—what's taken today will be remade tomorrow."¹⁶ In these ways, the image of the prisoners' doll (as an actual present-day technology) destabilizes the image of the sailors' doll (as an imagined historical technology). It places sexual inventiveness in the hands of people whom mainstream society sees as deviant. At the same time, it flips the script on that notion of deviance, recasting prisoners like those whose inventions Angelo documents as bold inventors, ones who refuse to allow the oppressive regimes of prison to prevent them from

engaging in sexual expression. Therefore, as an alternative point of origin for contemporary sex tech, the prisoner's sex doll sheds light on dominant, hierarchical notions about who gets to be an inventor and who, to call back to Hirschfeld's language, is deemed an "unartful primitive."

Nazi Blow-up Dolls: An Urban Legend

While some alternate origin stories for sex dolls risk being seen as delegitimizing, others are outright damning. One such story is the tale of how sex dolls—and blow-up dolls in particular—were supposedly invented by Nazis for use by German soldiers during World War II. Like so many stories about the origins of sexual technologies, the specifics of this myth, as it appears in contemporary writing, vary from source to source. A few of these sources are among those discussed elsewhere in this book. For example, Rebecca Clark writes, "A popular urban legend holds that during WWII Nazi Germany engineered the first modern sex dolls—perfect Aryan specimens . . . in order to both train and contain the sexual appetites of its invading armies."¹⁷ Clark points to Anthony Ferguson's *The Sex Doll* as her source for this anecdote.¹⁸ In a chapter subsection titled "The Borghild Project," Ferguson gives an expanded version of the story, explaining that the Germans "supposedly created a special task force" to address the problem of soldiers' sexual frustration while away from home:

[They] called it the "Model Borghild" project. Legend has it that the Nazis under Heinrich Himmler started the project in the early years of the war to combat the sexual excesses of the conquering German armies. Himmler was allegedly concerned about the debilitating effect of sexually transmitted disease picked up by his troops from foreign prostitutes of inferior races. His solution was to commission a select team of experts to create a traveling army of gynoids to follow the conquering Wehrmacht across the battlefields of Europe. The dolls were to be housed inside a series of "disinfections-chambers."¹⁹

Accounts from additional sources contrast with Ferguson's, claiming that it was not Heinrich Himmler, a Nazi party leader often described as "the architect of the Holocaust," but Adolf Hitler himself who provided the impetus that kicked off the Borghild Project.²⁰ Some accounts also elaborate on the specific concerns of Nazi leadership that lead to the creation of the dolls—for example, that German soldiers would contract syphilis from Parisian sex workers.²¹ Clark describes the dolls as "perfect Aryan specimens,"

but the story as it appears across a broader network of sources is more complicated. Many authors imply that the prototypical doll in the Borghild Project was indeed white, blue-eyed, and blond, but clarify that she was actually intentionally designed *not* to look like a “good” German wife. Instead, reportedly, she was given a “coquettish” face so that she would have the air of a sex worker.²² This reminds us, yet again, of the complicated yet notable role that sex workers have played in the history of sexual technologies, whether as creators and users of such technologies or as figures of fantasy that have driven sexual imaginaries.

There are a number of similarities between the story of the sailors’ sex dolls and the myth of the Nazi blow-up dolls. For instance, both origin stories are, in reality, not actual, factual histories but instead comparatively recent constructions. As we know from chapter 4, blow-up dolls (initially made of inflatable vulcanized rubber) may have been manufactured in Europe or America as early as the 1850s, with commercial versions of such dolls on the market by the 1880s or 1890s. Just as sailors did not invent and popularize the sex doll, as the tale of the *dames de voyage* would have us believe, Nazis did not invent the blow-up doll. The two stories also come into being in similar ways. Although my investigation of the citational history behind the evolution of the *dames de voyage* has been far more extensive than my work on the story of the Nazi blow-up doll, initial research suggests that the two stories coevolved through related processes of hearsay and fantasy, with historical sources of information about the Borghild Project, like those of the tale of the *dames de voyage*, revealing themselves under scrutiny to be questionable at best.²³

Yet there are also revealing differences between the two stories, both in their contents and in the ways that they are told. The myth that Nazis invented the blow-up doll positions sex dolls as military technologies—as opposed to technologies of pleasure or even technologies of colonialism, as we see in the tale of the *dames de voyage*. This is in keeping with the actual fact that many domains of technological development, as numerous scholars have noted, have emerged in conjunction with wartime efforts and military funding.²⁴ Even though it is false, the myth of the Nazi blow-up doll helpfully reminds us that the connection between technology and war extends to sexual technologies. Yet interestingly, the myth that Nazis invented the sex doll is comparatively infrequently told in the context of sexual histories that foreground technology, with some exceptions. Instead,

it more commonly appears in histories that are intended to be quirkier or more comedic in nature, presenting sex dolls as curiosities with an even more curious history. (Personally, as a Jewish American scholar, I cannot say that I find the notion that “the architect of the Holocaust” invented sex dolls to be very funny, even if Nazis themselves are meant to be the butt of the joke.)

Another key difference lies in how the two stories are represented as fact versus fiction. Whereas the tale of the *dames de voyage* is repeated time and time again as being simply true, the myth of the Nazi blow-up dolls is typically discussed as an “urban legend” or an “unsubstantiated theory.”²⁵ For every article or blog post that claims that the Nazis did indeed invent the sex doll, there is another that explicitly questions that claim. Consider this string of nearly identical headlines: “Did Hitler Invent the Inflatable Sex Doll?” “Did Adolf Hitler Really Invent the Sex Doll?” “Fact or Fiction? Hitler Invented the Inflatable Sex Doll . . . Allegedly!”²⁶ The difference in how the story of the sailors’ dolls and the story of the Nazis’ dolls is presented raises a question: Why is one origin story for the sex doll accepted as fact while another is presumed to be fiction? Perhaps the idea that Nazis invented the sex doll seems so outlandish that it inherently raises skepticism, whereas the idea that sailors did so seems more plausible, just unassuming enough to be “real.” Ironically, there is a very real connection between Nazis and the history of sex dolls. As I mentioned in chapter 2, Nazi forces destroyed the Institute of Sexology in 1933, including archives that may have contained vital documentation regarding the sex doll’s earlier history.

Of course, the most striking (and upsetting) feature of the myth of the Nazi blow-up doll is its basic premise. The proposition that the origins of the sex doll might lie in a “traveling army of gynoids” created to bolster the efforts of the Germany army casts this history in a far more sinister light.²⁷ Ferguson writes that the dolls were supposedly designed to be housed in a “series of disinfection-chambers,” a notion that hauntingly recalls the use of gas chambers. Authors who tell this story often explicitly link the creation of the blow-up doll to ideologies of white supremacy. The Nazi dolls, we read, were expressly created to keep German soldiers from engaging in sex with “foreign prostitutes of inferior races.”²⁸ As imagined, then, the dolls’ role was to uphold a white sexual purity within a racist, xenophobic hierarchical system that positions sex with dolls as preferable to sex with nonwhite partners.

Why does the story of the Nazi blow-up doll not get told in the same contexts and with the same frequency as the tale of the dames de voyage? It's perhaps unsurprising that a story linking sex dolls to the Nazi party would be less popular among those who are themselves invested in presenting sexual technologies in a positive light. Yet at issue here is not just avoiding an origin story that would make sex tech look bad. The trouble with the story of the Nazi blow-up doll is that it draws too much attention to things that are already true about the dominant rhetorics surrounding sex tech today, especially when it comes to sex robots. As I explained in the introduction, the current buzz about sex robots is often animated by a set of romanticized, technoutopian visions of how such robots (almost always designed to resemble white or Asian women) will usher in a brave new future of mind-blowing sex.²⁹ Despite the intentions of any individual roboticist or proponent of robot sex, the very notion of building an ideal sexual partner cannot be separated from the logics of eugenics. The drive to create perfect people, whether as citizens or as sexual partners, is bound up with historical acts of violence precisely like those in Nazi Germany. Sex robots imply a hierarchy of racial and ethnic purity all their own, while allowing their creators to supposedly sidestep issues of race and ethnicity by moving beyond the human. This is the uncomfortable truth that the story of the Nazi blow-up doll, though it is itself a false history, makes all too apparent.

The Myth of Pygmalion: Making Masculinity Legitimate, Making Masculinity Absurd

Both prison cells and Nazi war camps may be unmentionable sites for the possible origins of today's sexual technologies, but there is one origin story that no one seems to hesitate to tell: the myth of Pygmalion. There are many versions of the myth of Pygmalion, which has been told and retold in numerous forms. Broadly speaking, as it's described in texts related to the history of sex tech, the myth is about a talented sculptor who creates a statue of a woman so beautiful he falls in love with it. His creation is then brought to life, and he marries her. Referring to Pygmalion, David Levy writes in *Love and Sex with Robots*, "Sex with humanlike artifacts is by no means a twenty-first-century concept—in fact, its foundations lie in the myths of ancient Greece."³⁰ Presented in this way, the myth of Pygmalion

ties the sexual technologies of today to a time so long ago that it makes sex tech seem timeless. It is easy to see why the myth of Pygmalion serves as an appealing parable for the contemporary creation and use of sex dolls, at least on its surface. Pygmalion is an artisan, a man in touch with the gods, a symbol of antiquity that brings along with it all the cultural capital of Western classicism. Across these texts, Pygmalion comes to stand in for the figure of the (male) inventor who, through his vision and prowess, creates new works of technology so bewitching that even he cannot help but desire to possess them. He is seen as both legitimate and legitimizing: a legendary innovator whom every robotics engineer working on the newest sex doll AI could fancy themselves to be.

And, indeed, Pygmalion is everywhere. In the network of contemporary texts described in this book, references to Pygmalion proliferate. It's very common to see authors who recite the tale of the *dames de voyage* preface it by recounting the myth of Pygmalion, implying that while sex tech has a "real" historical origin story (the tale of the *dames de voyage*), it also has an origin so ancient that it goes beyond history (as modeled through the myth of Pygmalion). This is true in both twenty-first-century works and ones from earlier, back across the twentieth century and into the later decades of the nineteenth. Pygmalion gets a reference in Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1886 *L'Ève future*, Madame B.'s 1899 *La Femme endormie*, and René Schwaebler's 1904 *Les Détraquées de Paris*.³¹ A discussion of Pygmalion prefaces an explanation of the *dames de voyage* in Iwan Bloch's much-quoted 1907 *The Sexual Life of Our Time*.³² Admittedly, rather than Pygmalion himself, Bloch is more interested in the fetish he refers to as *pygmalionism*, which he says entails enjoining a woman to take off her clothes, stand on a pedestal like a statue, and "gradually come to life"—a practice that Bloch compares to necrophilia and which, he says in the most unflattering terms, largely appeals to "old, outworn debauchees."³³ Recent accounts in this lineage offer a far more romanticized portrait of Pygmalion. In *The Sex Doll: A History*, Anthony Ferguson writes that "the origins of man's desire for the perfect love object date back to the ancient world," as evidenced by Pygmalion, who was "able to consummate his love for this perfect object of desire made flesh."³⁴

If we look at the actual myth of Pygmalion itself, however, we find a story that does not match up with this idealized vision of perfect love objects or the venerable history of men's desires. Consider the version of

the Pygmalion myth that appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: arguably the most widely influential version of the tale.³⁵ In Ovid's "The Story of Pygmalion," Pygmalion is not so much a brilliant sculptor—the protofigure for the contemporary sex tech genius—as he is a timid, self-involved, misogynistic loner. At the story's start, Ovid writes that Pygmalion has sworn off women because he finds their behavior shameful. "Shocked at the vices nature had given the female disposition," Pygmalion chooses "to have no woman in his bed."³⁶ Instead, he makes for himself "with marvelous art, an ivory statue, as white as snow, and [gives] it greater beauty than any girl could have," at which point he promptly falls in love not with the statue itself but with his own "workmanship" (*operis* in Latin, arguably closer to "work" or "creation").³⁷ He touches and kisses the statue, then compliments her, and then starts bringing her an array of "presents such as girls love": trinkets ranging from flowers and jewelry to dresses and even "little pet birds," all of which he drapes across her ivory body in an act of what might best be described as girlfriend dress-up.³⁸ Eventually, though, he decides she looks better naked, removes the items, lays her down on a blanket, and "takes her to bed"—the same bed where he chose not to take real women because their morals were so shameful, whereas his naked ivory statue somehow maintains the air of a snow-white "virgin."³⁹

As for the transformation of Pygmalion's statue into a flesh-and-blood woman, Ovid does not actually credit it to the sculptor's exceptional artistry, but rather to an act of a goddess who takes pity on his romantic plight. Ovid's telling has Pygmalion attend a festival for Venus, whom he sheepishly asks for a wife just like his "ivory girl."⁴⁰ Pygmalion does not really want a wife, Ovid explains; he is just too embarrassed to admit that what he would actually like is to marry the statue he's already been sleeping with. Venus gets the point anyway (she "[understands] the prayer's intention"), and when Pygmalion goes home and starts kissing and stroking his statue, the statue seems to come to life—or, at least, it starts to seem vaguely alive.⁴¹ We read how, beneath Pygmalion's fingers, the ivory of the statue softened like warm wax "made pliable by handling."⁴² Pygmalion then has sex repeatedly with his "pliable" but still apparently silent partner. In the heat of his passion, he takes a moment to observe that the statue beside him has become a body ("*Corpus erat!*" writes Ovid [It is a body!]), with blood pulsing in its veins, blushing cheeks, and eyelids that open.⁴³ However, even now that she is living, the statue-turned-woman seems little

more than a doll. She does not seem to speak or move her body of her own accord. With her wax-like skin, which Pygmalion touches “over and over,” she is still basically an object. The one thing she can do, however, is get pregnant. Writes Ovid, “The crescent moon fills to full orb, nine times, and wanes again, and then a daughter is born, a girl named Paphos, from whom the island [on which the story takes place] later takes its name.”⁴⁴ From here we hear no more of the ivory girl or her life as the “wife” of Pygmalion. For all the fuss around Pygmalion’s statue coming to life, neither Pygmalion nor Ovid seem particularly interested in the life she leads.

This fact is not lost on Ovid, and indeed his rendition of the story of Pygmalion is itself highly critical of the sculptor. In Ovid’s telling, Pygmalion is a comedic character: immature, misguided, and foolishly idealistic. Ovid’s long description of Pygmalion’s courtship of his statue is clearly meant to be funny. The absurdity of their romance is driven home in one particularly parodical scene in which Pygmalion lays the nude statue on a “crimson coverlet” with a “soft pillow under head, as if she felt it,” and calls out to her with all campy sincerity, “Darling, my darling love!”⁴⁵ The arrival of Pygmalion’s daughter, Paphos, at the end of the story also casts the tale in a more ambiguous light. On the one hand, this ending invokes cycles of abuse; one fears what might happen to a girl in the home of a father who hates women and so married his sex doll. On the other hand, there is potential for a kind of retribution in this ending. The man who found women despicable ultimately has his own story hijacked, in its final moments, by his daughter. She will go on to become the namesake of an island. Meanwhile, Pygmalion’s name will become, among other things, a term for obscure sexual proclivities that German sexologists will later attribute to “old, outworn debauchees.”⁴⁶ Thus, we find that even as the myth of Pygmalion is used to legitimize the practice of men making—and loving and sleeping with—dolls, Pygmalion’s story itself makes the origins of sex tech seem far from legitimate.

Precisely because it fails to fit the legitimizing narrative that it is meant to serve, the Pygmalion myth helpfully draws out certain questionable elements of the imaginaries that surround contemporary sexual technologies. As an imagined origin (literally the stuff of myth), the story of Pygmalion suggests that what has sparked the invention of the sex doll and other such devices is not male ingenuity or male artisanship but rather a fragile, bitter masculinity. In Ovid’s particular vision of Pygmalion, we see how

a paradoxical, incel-like disdain fuels the creation of the sculptor's "ivory girl." Pygmalion reviles women because he thinks they are promiscuous and therefore sculpts himself a woman who is somehow both virginal and available for his sexual use at all times. He loves the statue, in large part, because it makes him feel powerful and talented; she puts up no resistance and reminds her creator-turned-husband, every time he looks at her, of his own exceptional cleverness. Like a misguided robotics engineer transported back to the time of gods and togas, he seems fascinated by the idea of transforming his statue into a real girl. Yet at the end of the day, the thing that really arouses him is how his creation teeters on the edge between real and unreal, human and nonhuman. She was so beautiful, Ovid writes, that she seemed "truly almost living" and yet her beauty was "greater . . . than any girl could have."⁴⁷

What we find in the story of Pygmalion, then, rather than a legitimization or illegitimization of today's sexual technologies, is a reminder of what is really at stake in the telling of tales about the origins of sex dolls. References to the myth of Pygmalion attempt, and ultimately fail, to legitimize not sex dolls or sex robots themselves, but rather the people who make and use them. Such references reflect an effort to portray the particular brand of straight male desire that longs for sex with machines as a legitimate one. Whether we are talking about the myth of Pygmalion or the tale of the *dames de voyage*, both stories that are ostensibly about the creation of objects in the shape of women, what we are really talking about is men and how they want to be imagined. Here, we would do well to pause briefly and reflect on how Pygmalion's story contrasts with the story of Pinocchio, another work of fanciful fiction about a doll that comes to life, but one that has remained strikingly absent from cultural histories of sex dolls, automata, and other replica humans. Pinocchio's character originated in an 1883 Italian children's novel, but he is best known to contemporary audiences through Disney's *Pinocchio* film from 1940.⁴⁸ In this iconic representation, Pinocchio is a doll (well, a puppet) who longs to become a "real" boy. By contrast, in Pygmalion's story, the gender dynamics go the other way: Pygmalion is a man who longs to make a woman "real."

This intersection of gender and "realness" helps explain why it is Pygmalion and not Pinocchio we hear about when read about sex tech's origins. To suggest that men themselves might be dolls, and moreover to suggest that their status as "real" men might be in question, would come

uncomfortably close to revealing the anxieties about masculine realness that already underlie attempts to legitimize sex dolls and sex tech more broadly. Real men make women; they are not made. Origin stories like the myth of Pygmalion and the tale of the *dames de voyage* also function to lend sex tech a sense of historical realness. Whether or not these stories are themselves “realistic,” they cast an aura of authenticity around twenty-first-century sexual technologies and make them seem more “real” by giving them a past. Yet ironically, what we find in Ovid’s story of Pygmalion is a mockery of the very idea of realness. Pygmalion is a lust-driven fool who either does not know or does not care what it would actually mean for a statue-turned-woman to seem real. Venus grants Pygmalion’s unspoken wish and brings his beloved ivory girl to life in the way that one indulges the whims of a child who is playing make-believe. Yet Pygmalion is not a child; he is a man-child, and the more “real” his creation becomes, the more he seems disconnected from reality.

Alternative Origin Stories, Uncomfortable Truths

Attending to these alternative origin stories allows us to see what particular narratives the tale of the *dames de voyage* is deployed to promote—and also what uncomfortable truths about present-day cultures of sex tech it is meant to help sidestep. I have talked in previous chapters about how the story of the sailors’ dolls works to make the history of sexual technologies masculine, straight, white, and Western. Yet even before all of those things, arguably the most immediate goal of the tale of the *dames de voyage* when it is deployed as an origin story is to make contemporary sex tech and the people who use it seem normal. Those people (most typically though not exclusively men) who celebrate the supposedly inevitable arrival of high-tech sex robots made to look like human women have a vested interest in dispelling the cultural stigmas that surround love and sex with machines: stigmas that they commonly blame for any critiques of questionable ethics. In the face of claims that erotic interactions with machines are “unnatural,” the tale of the *dames de voyage* renders the invention of such machines preeminently natural, placing the early construction of makeshift sex dolls into the hands of normatively masculine and conveniently historically vague subjects. Certain accounts take this fantasy of the natural further, emphasizing the naturalness of the materials out of which the sailors’ dolls

were purportedly made: cloth, leather, straw. This brings a soft, human quality to the impression of sexual technologies as the stuff of cold, unnatural materials like metal and even computational code, justifying the high-tech by insisting on its roots in the low-tech.

By now, as we near this book's final pages, we know the truth about the *dames de voyage*. Far from representing a real set of historical practices, the tale of the *dames de voyage* reflects and embodies a series of efforts as well as a series of affects: evidence of intermingled desires and anxieties. We can understand the *dames de voyage* as one particularly telling example of how fantasy becomes fact and how the histories of both sexuality and technology take shape through selective forms of imagining and reimagining. Yet as much as the tale of the *dames de voyage* tells us about what visions of history are deemed desirable, it also tells us about what visions of history are not. In this sense, the story of the sailors' dolls operates in a defensive mode. The masculinity reflected in the tale of the *dames de voyage* is an anxious masculinity. In a cultural context in which sex dolls still often appear in mainstream media as the stuff of humor and men who have sex with them are seen as jokes, the tale is one among many tactics for insisting that sexual technologies and the people who use them are credible. Through the tale of the *dames de voyage*, the twenty-first-century tech enthusiast pining for a sex robot is transformed, in the cultural imaginary, from the stereotype of an emotionally stunted loner to the latest in a long lineage of strong, adventurous men exploring new sexual horizons, whether on the high seas or in their bedrooms.

What makes the particular alternate origin stories discussed in this chapter important to address is not some imperative to shift the imagined origins of sex tech from one tall tale to another. Rather, confronting the contrasts between which histories sex tech does and does not lay claim to reveals the constructedness of sex tech's history itself. These juxtapositions show us what the tale of the *dames de voyage* would not like us to see. They show us that making sex tech's history requires ignoring the contributions of those who are seen as "deviant," like prisoners, because sex tech itself teeters just on the brink of being deemed similarly deviant. They show us that the clear resonances between eugenicist thinking and the longing to build the "ideal" robotic sex partner hit a little too close to home for those invested in sex tech. And they show us that even when dominant narratives try to make sex tech's history seem so boldly masculine that it

is mythical, the reality is that indulgent visions of dolls brought to life are often driven by toxic masculinity. Such masculinity may have a predecessor in the figure of Pygmalion, but it is very much a thing of the present. Without our intervention—and a push toward more liberatory forms of sexual technologies that break from these ways of thinking—it will continue to set the terms for the sex tech of the future.

