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Venus and Adonis

In Book 4 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in a rather typical Ovidian scenario, Hermaphroditus is enjoying the feeling of the cool water from a spring on his feet when he decides to take a plunge: "[S]treight he stripped quight/His garments from his tender skin" (IV. 425–6). Seeing "His naked beauty" (IV. 426), the nymph Salmacis is overcome with lust, and even knowing that he has repulsed her on prior occasions, she strips off, jumps in after him, overpowers him, and arguably succeeds in compelling the unresponsive youth to copulate with her against his will:

> And therewithal in all post hast she having lightly throwne
> Her garments off, flew to the Poole and cast hir thereinto
> And caught him fast between her arms, for aught that he could doe:
> Yet maugre [in spite of] all his wrestling and his struggling to and fro
> She held him still, and kissed him and hundred times and mo[re].
>
> *Metamorphoses* (4. 441–5)

For many of Shakespeare's rigidly Protestant fellow countrymen, Ovid was salacious, immoral, and a byword for the dangers of poetry itself, and his unapologetically transgressive and erotic stories show why. Ovid was, however, Shakespeare's favorite poet, and the key ingredients of lines quoted above, namely beautiful naked bodies and sexual assault by a woman upon a man, were also major themes of Shakespeare's racy narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, which was first printed as a pamphlet in 1593. That poem concerns the unrequited love of Venus, goddess of love,

Reading Shakespeare's Poetry, First Edition. Dympna Callaghan.

for the mortal boy, Adonis, and her comically unsuccessful attempts to seduce him before his untimely death in a boar-hunting accident.

Some eight years before *Venus and Adonis* was published, an outraged Member of Parliament had roundly condemned Ovid's poetry, which was, he complained, "sold openly and read in the schools."[1] Ovid's Elizabethan successors too, the MP argued, had with their "idle pamphlets, lewd and wanton discourse of love," caused "the corruption of manners" not to mention "the expense of time" that would otherwise have been spent on reading the scripture and "other good treatise of morality."[2] Given the enormous success of Shakespeare's poem it seems clear that the speech did not have the desired effect. However, the oration remains symptomatic of a vehement hostility towards Ovid and to his Elizabethan imitators that persisted through the entire course of the sixteenth century. It is important to acknowledge this moral censure and the politicized opposition to Ovidian poetry because, especially prior to the sea change that was the advent of feminist and new historicist engagement with Shakespeare, earlier twentieth-century criticism tended to dismiss *Venus and Adonis* as a work of highly polished, but essentially thoughtless frivolity. For example, F.T. Prince, the Arden editor of *The Poems* (1960), opined that the poem was only valuable in so far as it might shed light on Shakespeare as a playwright: "Nothing else… is likely even now, to win an attentive reading of these poems…Few English or American readers will respond to such happily wanton fancies as *Venus and Adonis*."[3] Another then pervasive line of reasoning claimed that had it not been for the fact that theatres were closed on account of the outbreak of plague, Shakespeare would not have troubled himself to compose *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 or to seek patronage for it from Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. In fact, however, *Venus and Adonis* represents an eloquent and daring rebuttal to the strict Protestant sexual morality widely promulgated in Elizabethan England. Far from being the casual work of a playwright in the off-season, *Venus and Adonis* inaugurated a literary career throughout the entire course of which, as Patrick Cheney has definitively demonstrated, non-dramatic poetry remained a vital component.[4] Indeed, there is nothing accidental or tangential about Shakespeare's poems.[5] We noted in the Introduction that Francis Meres famously observed in *Palladis Tamia* (1598): "[T]he sweet and witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous & honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his *Venus and Adonis*…"[6] However, Shakespeare's readers not only heard a distinctly Ovidian sound in *Venus and Adonis*, they also witnessed a profoundly Ovidian – and therefore transgressive – poetics. Indeed, in its every line, *Venus and Adonis*

implicitly – and often explicitly – resisted the repressive forces, both social and legal, that sought to contain poetic expression.

*

Ovid

The trouble with Ovid had begun long before the Elizabethans. In his own lifetime, Ovid's poetry provoked imperial displeasure. He was exiled from Rome, on account of *carmen et error*, a poem and a mistake, and his banishment was probably an attempt on the part of the Emperor Augustus to quash political turbulence. Ovid had also parodied Augustus in the *Metamorphoses*, and no doubt that was a significant factor leading to his expulsion. However, the official story at the time was that Augustus sought to contain the poet's promotion of sexual indecency in another work, namely the *Ars Amatoria*, *The Art of Love*. Fearing that exile was but a prelude to assassination by Augustus's henchmen, in *Tristia 2* Ovid responded to the accusations made against him. In that poem, he claims, albeit via a very ingenious reading, that the imperial *Aeneid* of his lauded predecessor, Vergil, was essentially a poem about adulterous love.[7] Thus, Augustus's politically-motivated attempts to curb perceived immorality and to institute the ancestral "family values" of monogamy, chastity, and piety,[8] though they occurred centuries before the early modern debate about poetry in England, were nonetheless uncannily mirrored in the more repressive aspects of Elizabethan Protestantism, which were preoccupied with containing Ovidian lubricity.

Ovid's name, then, was almost synonymous with the poetry of sexual transgression, and Shakespeare's first major foray into non-dramatic verse makes his debt to Ovid quite explicit. Indeed, the very first words an Elizabethan reader would have encountered upon opening his 1593 pamphlet were not Shakespeare's own but those of his illustrious Roman predecessor, and what is more they are from Ovid's own poetic debut, the *Amores* (*Love Poems*):

> *Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo*
> *Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.*
>
> *Let the common herd be amazed by worthless things; but for me let golden Apollo provide cups full of the water of the Muses,*
> *Amores* (1.15.35–6)[9]

By means of this reference to Apollo, the Roman god of poetry and to the fountain on Mount Parnassus held sacred to Apollo and the Muses, Shakespeare inaugurated a new literary phase in his career. In doing so, he informed his patron, the Earl of Southampton, that *Venus and Adonis* was "the first heir [offspring] of my invention." The Ovidian epigraph, then, permits him to express rather more lofty aspirations as a writer than those of someone who was merely the "poet" (as playwrights were called) for a public playhouse. Thus, ventriloquizing his Roman forebear, Shakespeare asserts that he has imbibed divine inspiration from the purest and most exalted source. However, he may not be entirely solemn or pious in this declaration. More likely, Shakespeare's use of this epigraph is poised between sincere pronouncement and tongue-in-cheek boast. That tone of comic-seriousness accurately foreshadows the content of the poem itself, suspended as it is between humorous ebullience and somber gravity. Indeed, this is precisely the Ovidian tone – not always serious when solemn – and conversely, often profound when superficially comic and apparently trivial.[10]

The story the poem tells is a much-expanded version of the account of Venus and Adonis in Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which had been translated into English by Arthur Golding in 1567.[11] Importantly, while Shakespeare found his inspiration in Ovid, he made key alterations to the story. Shakespeare retains the central metamorphic aspect of his Ovidian source so that Adonis is killed in a boar hunt and transformed into a purple flower, the anemone. However, the focus in Ovid and in all earlier renditions of the story was on the tragic death of Adonis and Venus's consequent bereavement. Instead, Shakespeare devotes the majority of the poem to the courtship, or more accurately, to Venus's sexual harassment of Adonis, whose advances he continually repulses. This reframing of the story constitutes a sharp contrast with the myth as Shakespeare received it in the *Metamorphoses* where Venus and Adonis are lovers who share a mutual passion for one another and whose only tragedy is that the death of Adonis ends their love story. In the classical rendition of their relationship, its fundamental inequity was not, as it is in Shakespeare, Venus's unrequited love for Adonis, but that Venus was immortal, and Adonis was not. In these circumstances, the deity must, at some point, endure the irrevocable loss of the mortal beloved because he must die, and she cannot. Shakespeare appropriates and transforms this intrinsically and ultimately tragic disparity between Venus and Adonis,

so that in his poem an asymmetry of desire constitutes its quintessentially comic feature. That the goddess's one-sided love for young Adonis remains so, despite being expressed in speeches that unerringly follow the patterns laid out in Elizabethan handbooks on rhetoric, gives rise to much of the poem's humor. This gender-reversed disproportion is further intensified not only because Venus is bigger, stronger, as well as apparently considerably older, and certainly more sexually experienced, than Adonis, but also because he is not in the slightest bit interested in her. Venus's perfectly performed acts of language, her exemplary rhetoric, remain completely and comically ineffective when confronted by this circumstance, and Shakespeare uses it to perform the failures of language, its manifest inadequacies when confronted by a social reality that sits comically with the rather exalted sexual arrangements that are typically represented in poetry.

Venus's brazen sexual invitations further characterize her as the transgressive figure of the "woman on top," that is, the woman who usurps – or attempts to usurp – male sexual and social dominance. She occupies the masculine position of the "bold-faced suitor" (6) and her desire for the adolescent – or even perhaps, alarmingly, the child – Adonis ("the tender boy,/Who blushed and pouted" 32–3) creates disturbing intimations of abuse. Nor is Adonis presented as simply an asexual adolescent since he exhibits an unmistakable passion for the boar. Although at one level that he is in love with a ferocious wild pig is pure comedy, at another there is a sinister hint of bestiality: "I know not love…/Unless it be a boar" (409–10). Shakespeare parodies a Petrarchan dynamic here in which the lover pursues an unattainable beloved: Venus pursues Adonis, while Adonis chases the boar, just as Petrarch fruitlessly pursued Laura in the *Canzoniere*. However, this pattern of thwarted pursuit is also profoundly Ovidian. This is because while in thematic terms Shakespeare departs from the tale as he found it in Ovid, his comic twist to the story nonetheless still fully comports with the Ovidian dynamics of perverse desires and forbidden wishes that are the preoccupation of the *Metamorphoses*. For what Ovid recognized, long before Sigmund Freud and the advent of psychoanalysis, was that human beings are inherently perverse and almost invariably beset by inappropriate and unrequited desire. People have a marked tendency to love who – and even what – they should not love, and more often than not, fall in love with other (mainly) people who do not want them.[12]

Heresy, Sedition, and Unseemliness

Venus and Adonis, then, is erotic, titillating, transgressive, and funny. Precisely these qualities made the poem so popular. However, because Shakespeare's narrative poem was first published in the context of religious and social change ignited by the Reformation in the 1530s, not everyone in England of the 1590s (to put it mildly) was amused by it. The sources of disapproval and condemnation were both religious and moral and were excited not by Shakespeare's poem alone but by all manner of erotic and secular verse. As we noted at the opening of this chapter, there had been serious challenges to Ovid and Ovidianism through the course of the sixteenth century, particularly on the part of "hotter" or more radical proponents of the new Protestant religion who found such poetry irreligious and pornographic. An edict published early in Elizabeth's reign, for example, complained about the "great abuse in the printers of books, which for covetousness chiefly regard not what they print so they may have gain, whereby ariseth great disorder by publication of unfruitful, vain, and infamous books and papers."[13] The printer of *Venus and Adonis*, Richard Field, was, like Shakespeare, a Stratford native who had come to London to make his fortune. That ambition was greatly furthered by the profitable publication of Shakespeare's poem, which was printed no fewer than four times in the space of only three years. The flagrant eroticism that contributed to the immense popularity of *Venus and Adonis* among readers surely also violated, among other prohibitions, the proclamation issued in 1559 against the publication of all material that was "heretical, seditious, or unseemly…"[14]

The impetus of the 1559 regulation was threefold: it targeted religious dissent, treason, and obscene publications. The first of these concerns aimed to repress religious contention, or what was regarded as heresy, especially in the form of residual papistry. Roman Catholicism had been the official religion of England under Elizabeth's predecessor and half-sister, Mary Tudor, who reigned from the death of their Protestant half-brother, Edward VI in 1553 until 1558 when Elizabeth ascended the throne. The second aim of the proclamation, to eradicate treason or sedition, was intended to counter any challenge to the validity of Elizabeth's sovereignty. As the daughter of the divorced Henry VIII's second wife, Ann Boleyn, who had been beheaded for adultery, Elizabeth's claim to the throne was vulnerable to charges (often levelled by Catholics) that she was merely Henry's illegitimate

daughter and therefore had no rightful claim to the throne. The third target of the regulation, the "unseemly," was sexual indecency or what we would term pornography.

Set in the landscape of classical mythology, far from the social and religious proscriptions of post-Reformation England in which Shakespeare was writing, *Venus and Adonis* remained vulnerable to the kinds of objections to printed matter specified by this proclamation.[15] Even though Shakespeare's poem was most clearly in violation of the prohibition against "unseemly" matter, it is also true that, viewed from a certain angle, *Venus and Adonis* might be seen to violate all three of the prohibitions declared there. On cursory examination, the proclamation's foremost concern about heresy might seem not to apply at all to Shakespeare's poem because its unapologetic paganism eschews Christianity entirely. Certainly, a return to papistry was a much more immediate danger than of a revival of paganism. Nonetheless, literary paganism in 1590s in England constituted, somewhat perilously, "an extension of religion, a rival of religion, and an escape from religion."[16] For the Elizabethan pamphleteer, Philip Stubbes, for example, classical literature set what he regarded as the precedent for "Heathanical pamphlets of toys and babbleries" that were evidence of the need for "a reformation of manners and amendment of life."[17] Stephen Batman in *The Golden Booke of the Leaden Gods* (2nd edition, 1583) similarly argued that ancient Greek and Roman texts were a threat to Christian orthodoxy because their pagan, pre-Christian authors had never had their minds illuminated by "the clear light of the Gospel."[18] This was literally true in that Ovid had died in 18 CE, and thus before Jesus's public ministry. Ovid, therefore, had never been exposed to Christianity. The pre-Christian world of Greece and Rome, its religion, culture, and poetry, then, potentially also challenged the world view of Elizabethan England and offered what might be construed as dangerously radical alternatives to its fundamental theological principles. Further, there was a strong association between the Ancient Rome of Ovid and sixteenth-century Rome, the home of the papacy, often denigrated by Protestants as the home – or rather the den – of the Anti-Christ, the Whore of Babylon, as the papacy was often termed by its detractors. Rome, both ancient and modern, was thus often understood to be the evil antithesis of English Protestant rectitude.

The second object of concern in the proclamation was sedition, and in relation to *Venus and Adonis*, the sexualized figure of "the woman

on top," certainly might be deemed to flirt with potentially treasonous agitation against the constituted authority of the Elizabethan state. Indeed, the representation of any powerful woman during Elizabeth's reign, invariably either critiqued or corroborated (and Shakespeare's genius is that by the end of *Venus and Adonis* he may have succeeded in doing both) the cultural assumption that femininity and power were mutually exclusive. Female sovereignty itself was often understood, as John Knox had argued, an aberration or monstrosity in nature, which he termed "the monstrous regiment [rule] of women."[19] Just as Ovid had courted political danger by satirizing Augustus Caesar towards the end of the *Metamorphoses*, *Venus and Adonis* parodied ineffective female supremacy because despite being a goddess, Venus still cannot get what she wants (Adonis): "But all in vain; good queen, it will not be" (607). Indeed, the word "queen" occurs no fewer than six times in the poem – while the word "goddess" occurs only once. "Queen" or "quean" was also a slang for "prostitute." "Good queen" comes perilously close to a reference to Elizabeth herself. Indeed, one of Shakespeare's early readers, William Reynolds, forcefully insisted on the connection between Venus and Elizabeth:

> Also within these few days there is another book made of *Venus and Adonis* wherein the Queen represents the person of Venus, which queen is in great love (forsooth) with Adonis, and greatly desires to kiss him, and she woos him most entirely, telling him although she be old, yet she is lusty and fresh and moist, full of love and life…. But Adonis regarded her not, wherefore she condemns him for unkindness, those books are mingled with other stuff to dazzle the matter.[20]

For Reynolds, a former soldier who suffered from mental illness, and who, on account of it, was eventually banned from coming into proximity of the court, the poem contains an unalloyed reference to Elizabeth, and its only meaning is allegorical. While his interpretation of the poem is in every sense unbalanced, Reynolds nonetheless aptly points out the ways in which Shakespeare lampoons female power. Venus is the actor in this poem; she is all verbs and possesses apparently brute strength, which is sufficient to abduct and restrain Adonis: "she *seizeth* on his sweating palm" (25; my emphasis); "she *murders* with a kiss" (54; my emphasis); "backward she *pushed* him" (41; my emphasis). Perhaps most impressively, she snatches him from

his horse and tucks him under her arm (30–2) in what is hardly a flattering image of female vigor and indeed which parodies the very idea of women's power:

> Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force
> Courageously to *pluck* him from his horse.
>
> Over one arm the lusty courser's rein,
> Under her other was the tender boy,
> Who blushed and pouted in a dull disdain,
> *Venus and Adonis* (29–33; my emphasis)

"Pluck" is a verb which suggests a sudden and forceful grasping action normally applied to an insensate object. Venus herself castigates Death for plucking (killing) Adonis when he could have chosen to wreak destruction on some worthless entity:

> The Destinies will curse thee for this stroke;
> They bid thee crop a weed, thou pluck'st a flower.
> (945–6)

At the end of the poem too, Venus literally plucks the metamorphosed Adonis as a flower ("She crops the stalk" 1175) and presses him into her bosom. Plucking Adonis, both literally and metaphorically, is a sexually charged act that entails aggression and even outright violence. It is also an action that suggests a violation of personhood, which arguably extends to the potentially tyrannical imposition of the power and will of the sovereign over her subjects. Yet, even physical superiority cannot grant the immortal Venus the love of Adonis against his will, and in this, the poem renders female power inherently, and paradoxically, impotent. In a society where a Queen was the absolute authority in the state, such representation, while it was certainly not the straightforwardly allegorical ridicule argued for by the unstable Reynolds, nonetheless invariably bore some reflection upon the nature of Elizabeth's power and glanced satirically at her sovereignty.

So how did such a poem that flirted so dangerously with the law achieve publication? Perhaps surprisingly, given its condemnation of heresy, sedition, and unseemliness, the proclamation of 1559 in fact also offered some

protection for classical literature in a let-out clause that is symptomatic of the era's culturally conflicted relationship to the ancients, and especially to Ovid.[21] This was the provision that explicitly excluded pre-Christian, that is, pagan "profane," Greek and Latin authors whose works were already well-established components of the curricula in the grammar schools and the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Shakespeare's poem, of course, was not written in Latin by an ancient author. Nonetheless, the proclamation's loophole, though it would not have specifically exempted *Venus and Adonis*, bears powerfully upon how it came to be published because in the political climate of the 1590s, Ovidian myth provided something of a haven, where Shakespeare could, as Heather James points out, skirt the boundary between the permissible and the licentious.[22] However, the view that such protection should be afforded even to the classical poets was far from unanimous. Symptomatic of the cultural contradiction that Ovidian poetry presented was that on 21 April 1582, the Privy Council itself had urged the substitution of a book of Latin verse written by the contemporary author, Christopher Ockland, instead of the "heathen" and "lascivious poets" currently being taught, among whom Ovid is singled out.[23] This objection seems to have had little or no effect, but for all that, such protestations demonstrate the fact that the pressure was being kept up in the face of what were regarded as the moral dangers of pre-Christian poetry.[24] Stephen Gosson in *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579) specifically singled out for condemnation Shakespeare's source for *Venus and Adonis*, namely Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, and especially took issue with the aesthetic argument that bawdy could be excused on grounds of eloquence:

> Many good sentences are spoken … and written by Poets, as ornaments to beautify their works, and set their trumpery [rubbish] to sale without suspect [suspicion].
>
> Gosson *The Schoole of Abuse* (2–3; 5)

Gosson here countered one of the chief defenses of classical poets and their sixteenth-century imitators, namely the aesthetic argument, that eloquence and technical facility with language could be appreciated, even if the subject matter merited condemnation. This is precisely the aesthetic argument that was made by Francis Meres:

> As in the portraiture of murder or incest we praise the Art of him that drew it, but we detest the thing itself: so in lascivious Poets let us imitate their elocution but execrate their wantoness. *idem*. Some things that are not

> excellent of themselves are good for some, because they are meet for them: so some things are commended in Poets which are fit and correspondent for the persons they speak of, although in themselves they bee filthy and not to be spoken".[25]

Yet, this was an inadequate defense for many of poetry's opponents. While the humanists defended the linguistic command of the ancients, their opponents condemned such writing as merely "harmful eloquence."[26] Nor were poetry's detractors entirely without justification. For example, Shakespeare's contemporary, Thomas Nashe, relished writing about exactly the kind of filthy things about which anti-Ovidian Protestants endlessly complained. Nashe's narrative poem, "*A Choice of Valentines*," (also known as "*Nashe's Dildo*") was probably written about the same time as *Venus and Adonis* and claimed to take Ovid as the inspiration for his "wanton [obscene] elegy." Nashe argued that his poem should not be blamed for "loose unchastity" since "all men act what I in speech declare." Nashe also claims in his dedicatory address to Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, that "in these latter times," no poet since Ovid has written about love's pleasures. There is, indeed, nothing subtle about Nashe's account of the prostitute Frances's determination that a dildo is a more reliable instrument of sexual satisfaction than her lover/client Thomasin's penis, and the unmitigated obscenity of *A Choice of Valentines* is no doubt why it remained in manuscript form and saw publication only late in the nineteenth century.[27] For all that *Venus and Adonis* is much more subtle than Nashe's poem, Shakespeare nonetheless includes a graphic description of female sexual frustration, a key theme shared by both poems.

Such "scurrilitie" was also a matter about which condemnation issued forth from both sides of the Reformation schism in Christianity. In June 1592, when *Venus and Adonis* was probably circulating in manuscript form, the Catholic poet and soon-to-be martyr, Robert Southwell, wrote *Saint Peter's Complaint*, a poem which begins with a stanza lamenting the fact that poets were writing on pagan erotic themes rather than about Christian subjects. *Saint Peter's Complaint* does not mention Shakespeare, but as Richard Wilson points out, since its six-line stanza structure is identical to that of *Venus and Adonis*, there is good reason to believe that Shakespeare's poem was the object of Southwell's disapproval:

> This makes my mourning Muse resolve in tears
> This themes my heavy pen to plain [complain] in prose:
> Christ's thorn is sharp, no head his garland wears,

> Still finest wits are 'stilling [distilling] Venus' rose,
> In paynim [pagan] toys the sweetest veins are spent,
> To Christian works few have their talents lent.[28]

Christ painfully wears a crown of thorns not the garland of laurels with which poets were traditionally represented. According to Southwell, instead of meditating on the sorrows of the crucifixion and writing on Christian themes, poets waste their talents on pagan trifles, "paynim toys." It is, however, far from clear that readers who had been deprived of Ovidian poetry would invariably have turned their attention either to the scriptures or to treatises on morality. This view was mercilessly satirized in Thomas Middleton's play, *A Mad World My Masters* (1608), where a violently jealous husband, appropriately named Harebrain, orders the confiscation of his wife's "wanton pamphlets," namely the two great Elizabethan narrative poems, Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*:

> I have conveyed away all her wanton pamphlets, as *Hero and Leander*, *Venus and Adonis*; oh, two luscious mary-bone [Marylebone] pies for a young married wife.[29]
>
> (1.2.44–6)

In place of these toothsome literary delicacies, Harebrain proposes reading about the terrors of hell: "Terrify her, terrify her; go, read to her the horrible punishments for itching wantoness" (1.2.44–52). Secular erotic poetry is feared by Harebrain as an incitement to infidelity, and indeed, Southwell's main objection to contemporary Elizabethan poetry was its pagan eroticism. He no doubt wished Shakespeare had bent his talents towards specifically religious poetry. In fact, however, the transgressive nature of Ovidian poetry notwithstanding, Shakespeare probably took the safer route than Southwell himself who was a Jesuit priest and for that was executed at Tyburn in 1595. It is important to keep in mind then, that despite the barrage of Elizabethan anti-Ovidianism, fears about a resurgence of Catholicism made religious dissidence a much more serious form of transgression than erotic poetry.

Complaints against Ovidianism in the period far exceeded actual and enforced prohibitions against poetry, which were applied only intermittently and unevenly. Despite being a decidedly transgressive and explicitly Ovidian poem, indeed, *Venus and Adonis* succeeded in evading much

scrutiny, probably because the authorities were more focused on stalling the publication of religious tracts that posed an explicit threat to the newly established Protestant church than in censuring lascivious verse. So it was that *Venus and Adonis* was entered into the Stationers' Register on 18 April 1593 with notices that it had been authorized by none other than John Whitgift, the Archbishop of Canterbury himself.[30]

About a Boy

The poem's carefully wrought rhetorical artifice is directly connected to the curriculum of the Elizabethan grammar school and to the pedagogical challenge of directing intractable boys along the path to manhood. Renaissance pedagogy was essentially training in rhetoric, which was believed to be a transformative force, capable of molding the base, animalistic aspects of human nature into the socially useful virtues of civility. The product of this system was *homo rhetoricus*, the man trained in the arts of rhetoric who could be useful to the Elizabethan state. This was metamorphosis wrought by rhetorical means, and as Peter Platt has argued, was often "violent, artificial, and potentially distorting."[31] The rite of passage from childhood to puberty and adolescence occurred in the schoolroom for the minority of Elizabethan boys who were fortunate enough to have access to education. School was the scene of what the Dutch Renaissance humanist, Erasmus, pondering the childhood and adolescence of Christ termed "the mystery of boyhood."[32] The theological doctrine of the incarnation whereby God became human in the person of Christ was indeed a mystery, but a certain inscrutability also attended more mundane and secular transitions from malleable youth to manhood. William Weaver has argued that in Adonis's unawakened sexuality or, indeed, asexuality, Shakespeare explores the process of masculine maturation.[33] Training in rhetoric was a key part of that process and was a fundamental aspect of grammar school education. Boys were required to memorize the names and figures of rhetoric, only a handful of which, such as antithesis and repetition, remain very familiar today. Rhetorical tropes, figures of speech, such as metaphor, simile, or allegory, were also important tools because they altered meaning by means of comparison, transposition, or substitution. These techniques of language were often derided in the period as stilted and artificial, suitable only for a "schoolboy's tongue" (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.339), disparagingly dubbed "Taffeta phrases,"

"Three-piled hyperboles," and "Figures pedantical," by Shakespeare's Biron in *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2.442–444). For all that, the deliberate, often intricately wrought, patterns of language that comprised rhetoric were indispensable elements of early modern expression and not just as a way of speaking but also a way of thinking. As Scott Newstok puts it:

> [Shakespeare's] mind was shaped by rhetoric, a term that you probably associate with empty promises—things politicians say but don't really mean. But in the Renaissance, rhetoric was nothing less than the fabric of thought itself. Because thinking and speaking well form the basis of existence in a community, rhetoric prepares you for every occasion that requires words. That's why Tudor students devoted countless hours to examining vivid models, figuring out ways to turn a phrase, exercising elaborate verbal patterning.[34]

Rhetorical eloquence is almost always associated with the purely aesthetic dimensions of language – with elegance, proportion, compact expression, rich ornamentation, and elaborate compositional techniques. While these were indeed vital components of Renaissance rhetoric, the principal characteristic of eloquence was its persuasive power.[35]

Importantly, *Venus and Adonis* is not just characterized by rhetorical sophistication. It is, in fact, a poem *about* rhetoric; about the construction of the self as a rhetorical identity and the stylistic tactics attendant on that process.[36] As Anthony Mortimer, puts it "Venus and Adonis exist in and not behind their rhetoric."[37] *Homo rhetoricus* had no female counterpart, and so rhetorical identity was overwhelmingly masculine, and, perforce, it remains so even when Shakespeare ventriloquizes the goddess, who is, so to speak, linguistically transvestised. Gender role reversal was also part of the grammar school training in rhetorical eloquence, and boys impersonated women's roles in Latin drama and in written exercises. In a comic reversal of gender roles, it is not the schoolboy-aged Adonis who is the master of rhetoric in this poem, but Venus, and with it she hopes to compel Adonis to make love to her. In *Venus and Adonis* this gender inversion permits Venus as the persuader, or *suasoria*, to speak at length in an endeavor not only to make Adonis make love to her but also to caution him to beware the boar. She fails miserably on both counts: "Your treatise makes me like you worse and worse" (774). When her rhetorically-perfect overtures to Adonis nonetheless fail to seduce him, "impatience chokes her pleading tongue" (217). Notably "pleading"

implies not only supplication but also the legal and specifically rhetorical sense of making a plea for something in a courtroom, an idea which is further developed three lines later: "Being judge in love, she cannot right her cause" (220). In other words, as the Queen of Love, she cannot be the arbiter of her own court case. This judicial aspect of rhetoric is particularly significant since, in contrast to our own modern justice systems, which depend heavily on witness testimony and physical evidence to ascertain guilt or innocence, the Roman legal system had relied heavily on the power of persuasion (the most fundamental goal of rhetoric) to gain advantage over an opponent in court.[38] Tudor schools derived their system of rhetorical schemes and tropes from precisely that Roman system. Venus chokes on her words, and yet her proficient yet ineffective eloquence is also tantamount to verbosity.

Despite Venus's failures of rhetoric, hers remains the voice that dominates this poem. Through her, Shakespeare represents the coercive element in both sexual seduction and rhetorical persuasion (the "pleading tongue" of line 217), and crucially, the potential violence of erotic language – and even of poetry – because words are always embedded in power relations. Thomas Wilson's *The Art of Rhetoric* (1553) had claimed that "such force hath the tongue, and such is the power of eloquence and reason that most men are forced even to yield in that, which most stunted against their will." Such powers, Wilson claimed, made those who possessed them semi-deities, "half a God."[39] While words could be vacuous, "words, words, words" (*Hamlet* 2.2.210) as Hamlet calls empty rhetoric, when deployed with intellectual rigor, with the arsenal of rhetorical techniques available to early moderns, they were also understood to be immensely – even dangerously – powerful. In *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577; 1594), Henry Peacham noted that an orator trained in rhetoric "may lead his hearers which [whichever] way he list [wants], and draw them to what affection he will."[40] That is, rhetorical training allows anyone who deploys it to manipulate and control the emotions of others with words. Yet of course, the joke of the poem is that Venus is a goddess, and yet she still cannot make Adonis act against his will – and goddesses are not accustomed to fail.

Everyone who had attended grammar school was attuned to rhetorical figures and devices and probably enjoyed recognizing them. As Simon Palfrey points out: "Many in Shakespeare's audiences were thus trained to relish effects that we often view suspiciously, or as some sort of artificial excrescence upon straight talking and real meaning."[41] Thus, Venus's

failure to seduce Adonis is fundamentally a failure not of her sexual magnetism but instead a failure of what is, paradoxically, brilliantly executed rhetoric. This is part of the wit of the poem, namely that perfection, whether of beauty or of rhetoric is not invariably a recipe for success. This is because human desire does not proceed along the steady channels of logic and reason but is rather characterized by deviation from such courses – in fact, by varying degrees of deviance, perversity, and transgression. There is, after all, no straightforward logic in love.

In an important sense, however, because of its emphasis on pleasure, the sheer delight in language for its own sake, Renaissance rhetorical theory allowed for the conjunction of the logical reasoning required to persuade and the instinctive aberrations of human desire and did so far in excess of the practical necessity of making a legal argument or any other instrumental or purposeful objective. This brings us back to the transgressive nature of *Venus and Adonis* because, as George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) points out, all rhetorical figures constitute some form of transgression:

> As figures be the instruments of ornament in every language, so be they also in a sort abuses or rather trespassers in speech because they pass the ordinary limits of common utterance and be occupied of purpose to deceive the ear and also the mind, drawing it from plainness and simplicity to a certain doubleness…[42]

Plain truth, Puttenham explains, requires plain language, while, for all his sympathies with it, fanciful language is an unnatural deviation from ordinary speech; it is doubletalk and is, fundamentally, a form of deception. Puttenham here exemplifies an important point, namely that rhetoric requires defense precisely because it is *unnatural*.[43] From the point of view of Renaissance humanism, left in a state of nature, human beings would remain brutish and uncivilized, so in order to become humane and civil, they must, paradoxically, become denatured. However, since the second objective of the ritualized, stylized language of rhetoric is pleasure, all attempts to persuade must also entice the listener with delight. As Richard Lanham has pointed out: "Purposeful striving is invigorated by frequent dips back into the pleasurable resources of pure play. Rhetoric is always ritualizing, stylizing purpose in order to enjoy it more."[44] That is, figures of speech deviate from the direct path of plain meaning in order to revel in the play of words. In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare plays upon this

deviance so that rhetoric acquires sexual, and sexually perverse, connotations so as to demonstrate that rhetorical eloquence is something of a double-edged sword.

Chiasmus

Venus and Adonis is of course replete with the highly ornamented, artificial language that became suspect precisely because it was unnatural, that is to say, deliberately set very far off from everyday discourse, and a marked deviation from plain speech and thus plain truth. Such deviancy is apparent from the opening stanza in the chiasmus of line 4, "Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn." This figure prepares the way for a story in which the conventional hierarchy of relationships will be turned inside out and upside down. *Chiasmus* is the rhetorical figure for reversal through repetition. The term comes from the Greek word for "crossing" and means literally to place crosswise, like an X, or what Richard Lanham calls an *abba* pattern of mirror inversion. This figure, he argues, sets up an "internal dynamic that draws the parts closer together, as if the second element wanted to flip over and back over the first, condensing the assertion back towards the compression … and seems to exhaust the possibilities of argument."[45] More than that, however, the reader is readied for a poem that exhibits sheer relish in the scintillating surface of words as objects and sounds.[46] Adonis's hubris conveyed in the chiasmus "Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn" creates the proverbial expectation that "pride comes before a fall." While sadness and grief are ultimately the outcome of Venus's pursuit of Adonis, such a reversal of the actual social relationship between gender and power (most men had it and most women did not), was also grist for the mill of the comedy of the world-turned-upside-down or the topsy-turvy world in which social hierarchies of gender and class were reversed for temporary periods of carnival celebration. This is an idea Shakespeare famously exploits in a dramatic context in his festive comedies, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*,which entail actual transvestism as a means of role reversal within the fiction of the plot. Indeed, theatrical cross-dressing might be said to be the performative equivalent of the rhetorical figure of chiasmus.

Time and again in the poem, the reversal of expectations creates comedy: Venus, of course, wants to make Adonis love her – but despite

the inventiveness of her rhetoric, this she cannot do, and indeed her attempts at persuasion have entirely the opposite effect:

> What have you urged that I cannot reprove?
> The path is smooth that leadeth on to danger.
> I hate not love, but your device in love,
> That lends embracements unto every stranger
> You do it for increase: O strange excuse,
> When reason is the bawd to lust's abuse!
> (787–92)

Adonis deploys the proverbial wisdom of the idea that a smooth and easy road leads only to destruction, which derived from the following scriptural direction:

> Enter in at the strait gate: for it is the wide gate, and broad way that leadeth to destruction: and many there be which go in thereat.
>
> Because the gate is strait, and the way narrow that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.
>
> Geneva Bible (Matthew 7: 13–14)

The "strait gait" is a constricted entrance that leads to the narrow road because, unlike sin, which is easy, virtue is taxing and arduous. Adonis, confident in his rebuke of Venus, marshals his arguments as if in a formal rhetorical contest. Shakespeare's readers would have known that Adonis was in fact the product of his mother's incestuous sexual relationship with her father. Thus, she spurned "strangers" by committing what early moderns termed "the abominable sin" of incest. Unaware of the irony of his argument, Adonis expresses disgust at what he regards as Venus's promiscuity, her history of allegedly indiscriminate couplings that he aligns with prostitution. He condemns the goddess's reasoning about how sex is the necessary prelude to reproduction as the deceptive sales pitch of a brothel keeper, a "bawd." That Adonis has specifically *moral* objections to Venus's overtures makes him not only impervious to seduction in a way that mocks ideas of rhetorical prowess in general, but also inescapably constitutes his discourse as a parody of those who disapproved of what they regarded as Ovidian obscenity.

Epyllion

In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare comically foregrounds not the success of rhetoric in turning boys into men but rather the unfinished or violently truncated masculinity consequent upon its perhaps inevitable failure. This sense of diminution and abbreviation as opposed to the maturation promised by a rhetorical education is also reflected in and structured by the form of the poem itself. As a long, narrative poem that is nonetheless much shorter than an epic, *Venus and Adonis* belongs to the genre of the epyllion. This is a designation which, although that was used neither in the ancient world nor in the early modern one, has been deployed since the late eighteenth century to describe a specific category of writing defined by its brevity relative to the epic. In this, Shakespeare followed Ovidian precedent since the *Metamorphoses* is made up of a series of epyllia derived from ancient myths about the nature of change and transformation. The *Metamorphoses* was composed in Latin dactylic hexameters just like its older and more imposing sibling, the classical epic, and Shakespeare emulates the effect of this meter in English by adopting instead the very tightly organized verse framework of a sixain in iambic pentameter, which is to say, six lines rhyming *ababcc*: thus, a heroic quatrain (four lines of alternately rhymed iambic pentameter) and a rhymed couplet, which has the function of providing definitive closure in the stanza.

The epyllion is a diminutive, miniature, or even "minor" form of the epic, but it is also fundamentally a subversive genre not only because it indulges in erotic and transgressive themes, but even more importantly because it cuts epic situations and aspirations down to size. Set in the legendary past, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Illiad* in Greek, and Vergil's *Aeneid* in Latin featured the great battles of the Trojan war and the founding of the Roman Empire. They told the valorous and momentous deeds of larger-than-life warrior heroes, Odysseus and Aeneas. In contrast to such epic grandeur, the *epyllion* comes from the Greek, meaning "little epic" or "scrap of poetry," and it is indeed a "scrappy" genre, because, despite its size, the diminutive epic spiritedly takes on the high pretentions, the huge themes, and the out-size proportions of epic, and in the case of *Venus and Adonis*, questions and counters them with humor and verve. In this, the epyllion is not just a short epic, it is also a critique of the epic, a form of anti-epic in which heroic masculinity, men and arms, do not invariably take center stage.

As we have noted, Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* provided the source for Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, which is not a story of battle, empire,

and dominion, but of love and transformation. Clearly, being penetrated by a pig and then turning into a flower would not fit the aspirational career path of an epic hero. In the *Metamorphoses*, Adonis begins life in a tree and ends up transformed into a flower, appropriately since change is the very signature of the *Metamorphoses*. This is characteristic of the trajectory of Ovid's characters where human beings become less, not more, and where there is a focus on their frailty and vulnerability rather than on their power and strength. Crucially in Ovid, the transformation nearly always involves not the epic aggrandizement of a hero into a superhuman, legendary status, but rather the attrition, attenuation – and even the complete loss – of human identity.

Following Ovid, Shakespeare's poem also parodies the features of epic poetry because instead of being about great men and war, it is about erotic conflict, and far from being an epic hero, Shakespeare's Adonis is a virgin boy whose diminished masculinity leads him to refuse the sexual overtures of the goddess of love herself. In relation to the form and substance of *Venus and Adonis*, Ovid's lyric poems, the *Amores* (love poems), which had been translated by Shakespeare's great contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, were clearly a significant influence. It was, as we have noted above, from the *Amores* that Shakespeare took his epigraph for *Venus and Adonis* and not from the *Metamorphoses* from which he derives the story. Ovid's *Amores* deliberately undermined epic pretentions, beginning with a reference to Vergil's magisterial Roman epic, the *Aeneid*, the first words of which are: "*Arma virumque cano*" "Arms and the man I sing."[47]

The *Aeneid* was composed in epic meter, that is in dactylic hexameters. (A dactyl has three metrical feet, only the first of which is accented; hexameters are lines of six stresses.) Ovid begins the *Amores* by telling his readers that he fully intended to write a martial epic, but that he fell in love and that Cupid assaulted his metrical feet, so that his meter was no longer that of epic poetry but that of love elegy. In doing so, in his very first lines, Ovid simultaneously summarizes and undercuts the principal themes of the epic, namely arms, "arma," the violence of warfare, "*violentaque bella*," and the meter suited to its themes:

> "*Arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabams*
> *Edere, materia conveniente modis*
>
> Arms, warfare, violence—I was winding up to produce a
> Regular epic, with verse form to match—

Hexameters, naturally. But Cupid (they say) with a snicker
    Lopped off one foot from each alternate line…
I'd got off to a flying start, clean paper, one magnificent
    Opening line. Number two bought me down
With a bump. I haven't a theme to suit your frivolous meter:
When I'd got so far, presto, he opened his quiver, selected
    An arrow to lay me low,
Then bent the springy bow in a crescent against his knee, and
His shafts–worse luck for me—never miss their target:
    I'm on fire now, Love owns the freehold of my heart.
So, let my verse rise with six stresses, drop to five on the downbeat
Goodbye to martial epic, and epic meter too!

The Amores (I.1–28)[48]

Ovid jokingly claims to have switched suddenly from hexameters, epic meter, to the elegiac meter of Latin love poetry, to what Peter Green wonderfully translates as the "six-five groove" (I.30), in which every second line has five stresses.[49] The "Nasty young brat" (I.4), Cupid, has wounded him, and elegiacs are the poetic consequence of that injury because now every other line is one foot short of epic hexameters. In other words, Ovid's celebrated elegies are all about truncated and impaired masculinity rather than triumphant bellicosity because to enter the realm of love is to enter the terrain of a woman because it is presided over by the goddess of love herself.

Crucially, the minor epic is not only diminutive and curtailed in relation to epic grandeur and length, it is also a feminized form which, from the Alexandrian and Roman periods foregrounded female characters.[50] The genre was also characterized by vivid and detailed descriptions of natural beauty. Shakespeare opens the poem with exactly such a description, one that possesses not only what Peter Hyland has called "epic sonorousness"[51] but also one of the key colors of the Greek epic – "purple" (*porphyr*eos):

Even as the sun with purple-colored face
Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn.
(1–2)

This metaphorical vignette of lovers' parting and of the woman's grief also mirrors the themes of epic poetry in which men leave mournful women to go off and do manly things such as when in Vergil, Aeneas

abandons Dido in Carthage in order to sail away and found Rome. In Shakespeare, this idea is humorously ironic because *Venus and Adonis* treats Adonis's comic struggle to escape the amorous clutches of Venus.

Another important convention of the epyllion is digression. In the midst of the lush, sensual world of *Venus and Adonis*, the digression comprises the only view of undiminished masculinity in the whole poem, and this does not even take human form but is rather a depiction of Adonis's horse breaking his tethers in sexual pursuit of a nearby female, a jennet:

> And now his woven girths he breaks asunder.
> The bearing Earth with his hard hoof he wounds,
> Whose hollow womb resounds like heaven's thunder.
> The iron bit he crusheth 'tween his teeth,
> Controlling what he was controllèd with.
>
> (266–70)

In sharp contrast to his master, who will later describe himself as a "colt" (419) as we will discuss below, the horse is the embodiment of spirited, libidinal male energy: "he leaps, he neighs, he bounds," (265). This imagery intimates vigorous coitus, and the palfrey pounds and "wounds" the "womb" of the feminized earth in an act of self-emancipation. Further, this wounding anticipates the boar's sexual ferocity and the quasi-vaginal death wound that it will inflict to end Adonis's life: "the wide wound that the boar had trenched/In his soft flank" (1052–3). Thus, Adonis's death sees him feminized, and symbolically and even literally castrated by the boar who "Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin" (111–6).[52] Adonis is repeatedly described as physically – though not emotionally – "soft." He is described as having a "soft bosom" (81) and "soft hands" (632). However, that "soft groin" in the description of his death along with his "soft flank," in line 1053 offers a telling description of Adonis's specifically genital vulnerability:

> … Thus was Adonis slain:
> He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
> Who did not whet his teeth at him again,
> But by a kiss thought to persuade him there,
> And nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine
> Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin.
>
> (1111–16)

Death by "nuzzling" is hardly heroic. It is also, quite literally not a masculine ending, since "swine" and "groin" create a feminine rhyme. Here the "kiss," the "nuzzling," and the penetration of the "soft groin" serve not only to eroticize Adonis's death, but, crucially, work to feminize and even invaginate him. "Nuzzling" is a particularly telling word, which prior to this period meant burrowing like an animal but was beginning to be used also in the sense of affectionate snuggling. "Nuzzling" is, therefore, as Colin Burrow points out, "just on the cusp between boarish aggression and loving warmth."[53]

Shakespeare, however, does not simply undermine the principles of the epic in *Venus and Adonis* by taking love rather than war as his subject matter. Instead, he foregrounds deficient, under-developed, and ultimately castrated masculinity as one of his central themes. Epic masculinity is diminished and parodied in the abbreviated manhood of the petulant Adonis. Although he is referred to nine times as a "boy," the poem does not specify exactly how old Adonis is; he might be anything from pre-pubescent to early adulthood. He is old enough to hunt, but he is immature, and his masculinity is incomplete at least according to his own self-description as "green" (805), "unfinished" (415), and like a bud in springtime (416–7), or a young colt (418). While "colt" signals youthful masculinity and burgeoning powers – in contrast to a foal who would still be with his dam – the voice of the narrator in the poem describes him in a series of similes as a bird-like creature that is small enough to hold in the hand, an exhausted deer (and thus not a hunter but an object of prey) – and, most tellingly, as a baby:

> Hot, faint, and weary with her [Venus's] hard embracing,
> Like a wild bird being tamed with too much handling,
> Or as the fleet-foot roe that's tired with chasing,
> Or like the froward infant stilled with dandling,
> He now obeys and now no more resisteth.
>
> (559–63)

Here, an infantile Adonis becomes the fussy or "froward" baby, fretful, and petulant but soothed to stillness by being rocked on the lap of an adult. This is in marked contrast to Ovid's text:

> That son of his sister and his grandfather, who was but lately concealed within his parent tree, but lately born, then a most lovely baby-boy, is now a youth; now man, now more beautiful than his former self".
>
> *Metamorphoses* (10: 520–3)

This compressed three-line biography of Adonis in the *Metamorphoses* describes Adonis as young, "*juvenis*" (545), and as the young grandson of Cinyras (712). The words "*iam juvenis, iam vir*" (10.523) – which literally translates as "already a youth, already a man" – suggest progression from adolescence to youthful manhood. Ovid is not telling us here that Adonis is a minor – someone's grandchild; rather, he is reminding his readers that Adonis is the product of a disturbingly transgressive relationship – an incestuous one, in fact, between Myrrha, Adonis's mother-sister and her own father, Cinyras, who is both Adonis's father *and* grandfather. Ovid focuses on Adonis's aberrant parentage, which is made even more anomalous by the fact that Myrrha was transformed into a myrrh tree and that her "misbegotten" ("*male conceptus*" 10. 503) son, Adonis, was birthed from its bark. Thus, Ovid's emphasis is on the perversion and deviance of Adonis's parents rather than on either his own perversity or on his youth. Similarly, while in Arthur Golding's 1567 translation Venus uses the endearment "tender youth" (Golding X, 630), he does not, as Shakespeare does, impugn Adonis's masculinity. Thus, when Adonis breaks away from the erotic entanglement with Venus to go hunting despite her concerns for his safety, the episode is described in Golding, unproblematically, as an assertion of his masculinity:

> But manhood by admonishment restrained could not be.
> By chance his hounds in following of the track, a boar did see.
> Golding, *Metamorphoses* (X:831–2)

In Golding, that he can no longer be delayed from the hunt by dallying with Venus or attending to her warnings about its perils is a sign of Adonis's puissance. Similarly, Ovid's Latin is explicit that Adonis's manhood or manliness, *virtus*, is the source of danger for *both* the lovers. Venus admonishes: "*virtus tua sit damnosa duobus*" (10: 707); "Your manhood would damage us both."[54] Shakespeare presents the reader with the complete antithesis of Adonis's Ovidian heteroerotic masculinity, and Venus is, unsurprisingly completely bewildered by it:

> 'Who sees his truelove in her naked bed,
> Teaching the sheets a whiter hue than white,
> But when his glutton eye so full hath fed,
> His other agents aim at like delight?

> Who is so faint that dares not be so bold
> To touch the fire, the weather being cold?
> (397–402)

The goddess invokes one of the standard chromatic hyperboles of Petrarchan verse, namely the ultra-white beauty of the female love object, an image Shakespeare uses in *Lucrece* with serious intent rather than with the aim of comic exaggeration produced here. "Naked bed" is a transferred epithet since it is the woman who is naked, not the bed, and the sight, at least in Venus's imagined scenario, of conventional heterosexual relations, leads to the lover's arousal. The "other agents" which seek sexual satisfaction is an innuendo suggesting the man's erection. To add to the wit of this episode, Venus phrases her response to Adonis's indifference, which is clearly unique in her experience, as a pair of questions, beginning "Who?" The answer is blindingly obvious to the reader – it is Adonis – but not to the goddess.

In contrast, then, to the normative masculinity detailed by Venus in the stanza above, the comic irony of Shakespeare's depiction of Adonis is that he, who is the product of one of the most famous incestuous unions in all mythology, becomes the mouthpiece for arguments about sexual continence. Adonis's declaration against human sexuality occurs first in a monosyllabic line that suggests simple, youthful naivete and is emphatically punctuated by three negatives (not, nor, not) in order to convey his obdurate determination:

> "I know not love," quoth he, "nor will not know it,
> Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it.
> (409–10)

Further, again indicating paradox and perversity, the feminine rhymes here (in which the second of two syllables is unstressed: "know it," "chase it") indicate that Adonis guards and cherishes his virginity in a fashion that is, in the early modern context, both feminine and puritan. Yet this disposition is the consequence of an obsessive interest in the decidedly masculine sport hunting, which was in this era supreme among recreational sports and served in art as a cultural metaphor for a series of power relations, fundamentally the dominion of human beings ("man") over nature, but especially also, of men over women.

After being compelled to attend to Venus's lengthy disquisition on the dangers of boar hunting, Adonis must also escape from the physical constraints she has placed upon him:

> With this he breaketh from the sweet embrace
> Of those fair arms which bound him to her breast.
> (811–12)

Notably, Venus's embrace is only ironically described by the narrator as "sweet" because Venus is the epitome of erotic beauty and not because Adonis takes any pleasure in constriction. Like a nursing infant, Adonis is "bound" to the goddess's breast. Thus, the Ovidian erotic liberties allowed by the poem serve only to entrap Venus in a cycle of unfulfilled longing and to ensnare Adonis in her unwanted embrace:

> "Fie, fie," he says, "you crush me. Let me go.
> You have no reason to withhold me so".
> (611–12)

In one of his futile attempts to flee entrapment by the goddess, Adonis bargains with his captor that if she would but say goodnight, and so end their interview, she can have a kiss.

> "Now let me say goodnight, and so say you.
> If you will say so, you shall have a kiss."
> "Good night," quoth she, and ere he says "Adieu,"
> The honey fee of parting tendered is.
> Her arms do lend his neck a sweet embrace;
> Incorporate then they seem; face grows to face,
>
> Till, breathless, he disjoined and backward drew.
> (535–41)

The peril that Adonis shrinks from here is that of being absorbed into the feminine via sexual conjunction.[55] In this passage, the two become one flesh, "incorporate" (540) – but not in the biblical sense of conjugal union. Instead, they are joined via a grotesque image of their faces melting into one another. This is arguably more terrifying than the loss of autonomy more

commonly feared by human beings in relation to sexual and genital intimacy. The imagery of unnatural incorporation is indebted to Ovid's story with which this chapter began, namely that of Salmacis, who forces herself on the unwilling son of Mercury, Hermaphroditus, to the point that the two merge into one: "They were not any lenger [longer] two: but as it were a toy [curiosity] of double shape" (*Metamorphoses* IV. 468–9). Crucially, because Adonis has been described throughout as already less than whole, less (smaller) than Venus, and less (younger) than a man, the image is not one merely of *indistinction* but of *extinction*. Notably also, there is a stanza division at the point that Adonis finally succeeds in escaping Venus's grasp. That break represents the pair's separation. However, unlike his powerful horse[56] who "Breaketh his rein" (264) and "breaks asunder" (266), Adonis does not break free, but instead endures a laborious process of disjunction: "he disjoined." That the word "joined" is embedded in "disjoined," suggests a residual adhesiveness rather more than a clean break.

Shakespeare seems to have taken his hint here from both Ovid and Golding. Ovid describes Venus as being "taken with," Adonis. Ovid's Latin word "*capta*" is, of course, etymologically related to the English "captured" and "captivated," while Golding says that Venus "clinged" (clung) to Adonis, arguably more in the sense of amorous proximity than in the sense of actually being what we would call clingy:

> She loved Adonis more
> Than heaven. To him she clinged, ay, and bare him company.
> Golding (10: 251–2)

Further, Golding and Ovid also convey, as Shakespeare so significantly does not, the shared experience of the lovers: she goes hunting with him for small game, and they rest together on a couch of grassy turf:

> [S]he reclined upon the ground and on him… pillowing her head against his breast and mingling kisses with her words. [Ovid 10. 103 Loeb].

> "They sate [sat] them down anon.
> And lying upward with her head upon his lap along,
> She thus began, and in her tale she bussed [kissed] him among [while telling it]."
> Golding (10: 82–4)

Shakespeare's poem belies the heterosexual coupling and mutuality implied by these episodes both in Ovid's original and in Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*. Furthermore, Shakespeare's poem offers a sharp contrast with the other great epyllion of the era, Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, which was written about the same time and contains explicitly heterosexual consummation. Both poems, however, demonstrate their debts to pagan poetry in that in neither work does marriage figure at all even though it was the foundation and cornerstone of early modern English Protestant society. These epyllia also reveal sex as something which human beings, and even the gods, have in common with animals. This commonality therefore jeopardizes the pecking order of the species and blurs the hierarchical distinctions between the divine, the human, and the natural. Further, in both poems, models of sexual engagement emerge that are violently at odds with Christian ideals of conjugality, namely, the boar's penetration of Adonis, and the predatory sea-god Neptune's attempted rape of Leander.

The biggest difference between Marlowe's poem and Shakespeare's is that Hero and Leander are in love with one another and have sex, even though this only occurs after Leander, who is devoid of both sexual experience and knowledge, fathoms the basic mechanics of coitus. His natural instinct is slow to kick in, but eventually it does so:

> Albeit Leander rude [inexperienced] in love and raw,
> Long dallying with Hero nothing saw
> That might delight him more, yet he suspected
> Some amorous rites of other were neglected.
> Therefore unto his body hers he **clung**.
> She, fearing on the rushes to be flung,
> Strived with redouble strength; the more she strived
> The more a gentle pleasing heat revived,
> Which taught him all that elder lovers know.
> (61–69; my emphasis)[57]

Marlowe, like Shakespeare, shows how human sexuality is a "natural" facet of our being, which aligns us with animals, but both poets also demonstrate that human sexuality has been diverted – in fact perverted – from its natural course in myriad ways. In this, sexuality parallels the deviation of "natural" language, plain speech, into the unnatural artifice of rhetoric. Unlike Adonis, Leander is not opposed to sex, he is simply naïve and

devoid of sexual knowledge so that the "clinging" in the above passage is of a specifically genital variety as it is not in Shakespeare, where Adonis, when he is bound to the goddess's bosom, resembles a child. However, as in *Venus and Adonis*, although Hero is a virgin rather than an aggressive suitor like the sexually-experienced Venus, the dynamic of Marlowe's poem is still one in which the woman is "on top" since she has greater knowledge of sex (enough to fear sexual violence: "on the rushes to be flung") than the ill-equipped young Leander who, though eager for sexual encounter as Adonis is not, is nonetheless like him in being young and unready to accomplish it.

The Woman on Top

In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare explores Adonis's unfinished or diminished masculinity in conjunction with gender role reversal. The latter has several precedents in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* including Echo, Oenone, Scilla, and Phoebe. The nymph, Salmacis, mentioned above, was hopelessly in love with that other peevish boy, Hermaphroditus, and in Francis Beaumont's rendition of Ovid's story, she laments the fact that these are bad times when men are not man enough to do the wooing:

> Ages are bad when men become so slow
> That poor unskillful maids are forced to woo.[58]

Salmacis thus claims that women only reluctantly assume the position of "the woman on top" when men are demonstrably incapable of taking the lead. In this understanding, from the point of view of Ovid's female character, the problem is not power-hungry women but weak men. Thus, female sovereignty, in this scenario, whether in the sphere of intimacy or in relation to the state, might be read as the sign and symptom of a more general societal degeneration characteristic of an Iron Age rather than a golden one. Mythologically, the Golden Age was understood to be a time when the goddess Astrea returned to Earth, and in the official ideology of Elizabethan England, Elizabeth was figured as Astrea and her reign as a new Golden Age.

In *Venus and Adonis*, as we have already noted, Shakespeare also inverts the structure of the relationship explored in Francesco Petrarch's sonnet sequence, the *Canzoniere*, which became paradigmatic in erotic

poetry in early modern Europe and where the man woos an unattainable woman he puts on a pedestal. However, Shakespeare adds a gender-bending twist to the Petrarchan paradigm lending a satirical edge to the erotic dynamics of his poem. For although both the *Canzoniere* and *Venus and Adonis* are structured by the asymmetry of unrequited love, in Shakespeare's poem it is Venus who takes up the masculine roles of wooer and melancholic or grieving lover. While Petrarch's sonnet sequence occurs within the context of late medieval Christianity so that, for example, Petrarch first encounters Laura on a Good Friday (the day that commemorates Christ's crucifixion), marriage is no more on the horizon of possibility for the Petrarchan lover than it is for Venus and Adonis. This is because Petrarch as the poet-lover pursues an unresponsive and indifferent love object, his cold and unyielding *inamorata*, Laura. Shakespeare's Venus is just as unsuccessful despite occupying the pagan landscape of untrammeled sexual license where the frank expression of desire evades Christian stricture and is unbound by its mores.

Venus's language in courting Adonis rehearses Petrarchan commonplaces:

> "Thrice fairer than myself,' thus she began,
> "The field's chief flower, sweet above compare,
> Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
> More white and red than doves or roses are,
> Nature that made thee, with herself at strife,
> Saith that the world hath ending with thy life.
> (7–12)

Prominent here is the Petrarchan trope of red and white as the color-scheme of ideal beauty. Here, the unmanly Adonis is described not as less than a man but as more than one. However, as we shall see, this amounts to the same thing because excess of beauty – "more lovely," "more white," extends the proper boundaries of the masculine, beyond which there is only one place to go – the feminine. Referring to the use of "Venus" in the period not just as a proper name but also as a condition of sexual excitement, Mario DiGangi has observed, *Venus and Adonis* is "a highly queer" poem because "the source of [the poem's] confusion resides in 'Venus,' the disorderly passion that afflicts unruly women and womanish men."[59] In describing the perfection of a young male addressee, Shakespeare's own Sonnet 20, a poem we will examine

in greater detail in Chapter 4, similarly resorts to the rhetoric of lyrical hyperbole to the point where the youth's beauty renders his masculinity ambivalent. He can only be described adequately in terms of female beauty, and thus, as a woman (or as someone who looks just like a woman), but one who nonetheless is equipped with male genitalia. This sonnet also contains the female figure, Nature, as the creator of this perfect masculine form, which in its perfection, exceeds the parameters of male gender identity and becomes feminine just in the same way that in the epyllion Nature has made Adonis "more lovely than a man" (9). The problem with this excess of beauty, "more lovely," is that it detracts from Adonis's masculinity. In Sonnet 20, Nature intended to produce a female form when she created the beautiful youth, but she then tried to gild the lily and fatefully tinkered with her creation to add just one more thing, namely the definitive masculine characteristic, "one thing" (20.12); "thing" being the colloquial term for a penis.

In Sonnet 20, Nature's addition lends the poem a light-hearted humor in the portrait of the artist who cannot leave her work well enough alone. In *Venus and Adonis*, in contrast, Nature's manufacture produces a much more somber tone because she has created something of such extraordinary beauty that when Adonis's life ends, the world will be over too: "Nature that made thee, with herself at strife,/Saith that the world hath ending with thy life" (11–12). She is therefore self-conflicted ("at strife" 11) because in her act of making the most beautiful of mortal creatures, she has seeded the world's destruction. In this, Shakespeare picks up on the tenor of Petrarchan lyricism, which is overwhelmingly melancholic. Like Laura, Adonis is "frosty in desire" (33), but whereas Laura's icy chastity is deemed culturally appropriate, his *sang froid*, especially when contrasted with normative masculinity, is comic and perverse. For example, an ostensibly "real man" (by which I mean a man about whom there is no query as to his gender or his sexual identity), Marlowe's Faustus, sells his soul to have, among other things, sex with Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman who ever lived. In *Venus and Adonis*, Mars, the god of war, constitutes the gold standard of heroic masculinity and yet allows himself to be enfeebled and feminized by Venus. This is because to be sexually spent is (temporarily) to lose potency and is a physiological requirement of consummation, albeit one that is often understood as a form of emasculation. Venus's boasts that she "foiled" Mars, a term that derives from wrestling and thus suggests both that she physically overcame and sexually enervated him:

> "I have been wooed, as I entreat thee now,
> Even by the stern and direful god of war,
> Whose sinewy neck in battle ne'er did bow,
> Who conquers where he comes in every jar,
> Yet hath he been my captive and my slave
> And begged for that which thou unasked shalt have.
>
> "Over my altars hath he hung his lance,
> His battered shield, his uncontrollèd crest,
> And for my sake hath learned to sport and dance,
> To toy, to wanton, dally, smile, and jest,
> Scorning his churlish drum and ensign red,
> Making my arms his field, his tent my bed.
>
> "Thus he that overruled I overswayed,
> Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain;
> Strong-tempered steel his stronger strength obeyed,
> Yet was he servile to my coy disdain.
> O, be not proud, nor brag not of thy might
> For mastering her that foiled the god of fight!
>
> (97–114)

The above practices of love – the sporting, dancing, toying, dallying, and jesting – are not only diametrically opposed to the rites of war, but they also require surrender, here expressed in its most extreme form as the antithesis of martial conquest, namely enslavement: "Yet hath he been my captive and my slave" (101). Yet, this condition arises because in early modern culture the association with women is understood to undermine virility rather than to establish or enhance it.

Richard III's description of the post-war pleasures that turn soldiers into lovers similarly deploys a series of oppositions between love and war:

> Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,
> Our bruisèd arms [damaged weapons] hung up for monuments,
> Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
> Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
> Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front;
> And now, instead of mounting barbèd steeds
> To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
> He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
> To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
>
> *Richard III* (1.1–13)

Richard's malevolent disdain for his fellow-creatures permits him to characterize as ridiculous the metamorphosis of ferocious masculinity from war machine into a dancing, capering lover. In contrast, although Venus does not intend a satirical portrait of Mars turned lover, the poet-narrator does, and the effect for the reader of brawny, thick-necked Mars cavorting and being led in "a red-rose chain" is comic nonetheless. In the struggle to make love not war, signaled by the words "overruled" and "overswayed" (109), Venus was the decisive victor. However, there is a paradox here because in love, to surrender is to win. Alas, Venus's logic is entirely unconvincing to obdurate young Adonis.

The Pursuit of Love

Venus and Adonis also utilizes the Petrarchan theme of erotic captivity whereby the unresponsive beloved becomes responsible for the wretchedness of the lover, and thus, symbolically, becomes his adversary. Immobilized by Venus's strong grip, "Rose-cheeked Adonis" (3) is depicted as a captured enemy combatant:

> A lily prisoned in a goal of snow
> Or ivory in an alabaster band
> So white a friend engirts so white a foe.
> (362–4)

The emphasis on constriction suggests both confinement ("prisoned") and surrounded ("engirts"). The narrator here also manipulates the Petrarchan dynamic and color scheme so that both lover and beloved are white in the image of a lily imprisoned by snow.[60] Adonis acquires all the aesthetic qualities of the cold, fickle, female Petrarchan love object, while Venus, though she pursues him and is enthralled by him just like the male Petrarchan lover, nonetheless retains the features of ideal female beauty.

More importantly, these lines further reflect the power relations whereby the beloved alabaster Petrarchan lady who refuses the poet-lover becomes his "foe." In the *Canzoniere*, Laura is figured as a wild creature, a white doe who eludes the poet who is endlessly unsuccessful in his exhausting pursuit of her. In this scenario, it is the hunter who is captivated by the game, and his quarry who has all the power. In contrast, it is Adonis, who is, as we

have already noted, also described as a deer, a "roe that's tired with chasing" (561), who is wearied by the chase, and not, as in Petrarch, his pursuer. In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare thus drew on the well-established tradition whereby love and hunting are metaphorically connected. When Venus suggests to Adonis "I'll be a park, and though shalt be my deer" (231), she proposes an arrangement in which he will be, quite literally, a "kept" man in a fashion that emulates a well-known Petrarchan reference to game enclosures. Parks, as these game reserves were known, were the predominant locations for hunting: "The number of parks throughout England testifies to the paramount status of deer hunting throughout the period."[61] However, in Thomas Wyatt's translation of Petrarch's *Canzone* 190,"Whoso List to Hunt," which was written and circulated in manuscript form during the reign of Henry VIII, the poet's mistress is the "hind" who is kept in captivity like the deer reserved by the Roman Emperor in his hunting grounds. These animals were essentially sitting ducks for the imperial huntsmen:

> Whoso list [Whoever wishes] to hunt: I know where is an hind [a doe].
> But as for me, alas I may no more:
> The vain travail [futile labor] hath wearied me so sore,
> I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
> Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
> Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
> Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
> Sithens [Since] in a net I seek to hold the wind.
> Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
> As well as I may spend his time in vain.
> And graven with diamonds in letters plain
> There is written, her fair neck round about:
> '*Noli me tangere* [Touch me not], for Caesar's I am,
> And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.'[62]

By juxtaposing Wyatt's famous deer hunting poem with Shakespeare's boar hunting one, the degree to which *Venus and Adonis* simultaneously depends upon and upends conventional Petrarchan images and patterns becomes vividly evident. The idea of the beloved as prey, for example, is a prominent Petrarchan trope. For Wyatt, the poet-lover-hunter's pursuit is futile and leads not to capture and conquest but only to further dejection and melancholy. The hunter can never be victorious in the Petrarchan scenario because, emotionally at least, the hunter is captured and tormented

by his quarry who is already the property of the emperor and thus inaccessible to him. As a bitter and disillusioned lover, the obsessive chase of the deer causes him to realize the futility of his enterprise – it's like trying to capture the wind in a net: "in a net I seek to hold the wind." The compulsion to the chase even though he is at the back of the pack, figures the psychological condition of an obsessive, erotic attachment to an unattainable love object, which is also one of the ways in which Ovid influenced Petrarch: "Yet may I by no means my wearied mind/Draw from the deer." The sense here is that while he has physically withdrawn from the chase, his compulsive psychological attachment to it is undiminished.

The title of George Gascoigne's *The Noble Art of Venery or Hunting* (1575), a book which includes an engraving of Elizabeth I at a hunt assembly, conveniently draws attention to the fact that the now obscure word "venery" is a synonym for "hunting."[63] "Venery," however, also refers to the pursuit of or engagement in sexual activity. Hunting, like courtship, was highly ritualized, and in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare refers to both as forms of "solemn hunting" (2.1.12). The hunt is "solemn," because it is a cultural rite that inflicts death while the predations of the villains of the play will be solemn on account of their dark and murderous determination to engage in a revenge rape. The villains track their victim, Lavinia, and although they do not kill her, they cut off her arms and cut out her tongue, a dismemberment that gorily imitates how hunters butcher their kill. While the others hunt animals, the villains of *Titus Andronicus* will hunt for their rape victim, a "dainty doe" (2.1.118):

> A speedier course [than] ling'ring languishment
> Must we pursue, and I have found the path.
> My lords, a solemn hunting is in hand;
> There will the lovely Roman ladies troop.
> The forest walks are wide and spacious,
> And many unfrequented plots there are,
> Fitted by kind for rape and villainy.
> Single you thither then this dainty doe,
> And strike her home by force, if not by words.
> (2.1.117–25)

Instead of languishing like the rejected Petrarchan lover, the evil sons of Tamora, Chiron and Demetrius, take matters into their own hands.

In Elizabethan and Jacobean England, hunting was also "solemn" in an additional sense in that it was "one of the most significant royal activities and manifestations of royal power."[64] This was not just because both Elizabeth I and James I, as well as Prince Henry (James's heir until his untimely death) enjoyed the chase, as paintings and engravings from the period amply demonstrate, but because the hunt was as Edward Berry points out, "deeply intertwined in conceptions of the royal prerogative itself." The monarch had sole authority over all English forests and the sole right to all the wildlife who inhabited them. Thus, it was a woman, Elizabeth I, who held absolute authority over forests and game, and the entitlement to hunt could be conferred only by her, and only upon those who owned land valued at a minimum of forty shillings a year.[65] Everything else by anyone else, constituted poaching, which was a crime. In *Of the Vanitie and Uncertainte of Artes and Sciences* (1530) Henry Cornelius Agrippa objects to hunting in part because of the immense social disruption caused by game reserves. Agrippa writes:

> And they, which [who] ought to be the examples of patience, do seek daily, to have some things to conquer and hunt. And such beasts as are free by nature, according to the law be theirs which [who] take them, the tyrannies of the Nobles have usurped them with dreadful menacings; the husbandmen are driven from their farms; the countrymen are put out of their tenaments; the herdmen are shut out of the woods, and meadows, and the pastures may be stored with venison, to feed and delight noblemen, who are allowed to eat it. Whereof, if any countryman or husbandman doth taste, he is accused of treason against the King, and is made a prey to the hunter together with the beasts.[66]

Game preserves offer a vivid instance of actively enforced social injustice. Importantly, Agrippa situates the origins of hunting and its attendant horrors in the transgressions of Eden:

> …God's judgement for a punishment of unjust rebellion of the first parents… I will set hatred between thee and the woman and between thy seed and her seed, of this sentence the battle of hunting took his beginning, to wit, of men with other living creatures.[67]

In other words, hunting is the natural extension of the primordial enmity between the sexes instigated by Adam and Eve's transgression.

Agrippa also found the sport reprehensible because, by inuring them to cruelty, hunting turned human beings into beasts:

> [Hunters] setting all humanity apart become savage beasts, and through the monstrous naughtiness of nature… are changed like Acteon into the nature of beasts.

Agrippa thus cites Ovid's story of Acteon who was torn apart by his own hounds after the enraged goddess of chastity and of the hunt, Diana, transformed him into a stag because he had seen her naked:

> [T]he wild beast, running before the greedy hounds with spilt blood and mangled flesh doth delight the followers of the chase, and with great pleasure doth behold a most bitter death, as it were a pastime: and in the mean season [meanwhile], the cruel hunter laugheth and accompanied with a great rout, as it were one that triumphed, bringeth home the unhappy prey.[68]

This indifference, according to Agrippa, itself reverses the human/animal hierarchy. Agrippa's is an historical instance of the complexities of psychological metamorphosis that Shakespeare's Ovidian representation explores in relation to both forms of venery – sexual pursuit and hunting. Venus, whose role as celestial goddess or *Venus Coelestis* is deferred until she returns to Paphos at the end of the poem, is transformed by her lust into the rapacious *Venus Vulgaris* (the sex goddess). In a sense too, in her sexual voracity, she becomes the boar, the "loving swine" (1115):

> 'Had I been toothed like him, I must confess,
> With kissing him I should have killed him first'.
> (1118–19)

On the other hand, Venus's earlier description of hare coursing rehearses some of the period's ethical concerns about the cruelty of hunting:

> By this, poor Wat, far off upon a hill,
> Stands on his hinder legs with list'ning ear
> To hearken if his foes pursue him still.
> Anon their loud alarums he doth hear,
> And now his grief may be comparèd well
> To one sore sick that hears the passing bell.

> Then shalt thou see the dew-bedabbled wretch
> Turn and return, indenting with the way.
> Each envious brier his weary legs do scratch;
> Each shadow makes him stop, each murmur stay,
> For misery is trodden on by many
> And, being low, never relieved by any.
> (697–708)

"Wat" was a familiar name for the terrorized hare, who flees his pursuers, zig-zagging his painful way through the briar. Shakespeare's analogy for the creature's trepidation is with terminally ill people who hear the church bell toll for the dead, a vivid reminder of their own imminent demise.

Like Agrippa, the French philosopher and essayist, Michel de Montaigne in "*Of Cruelty*," abhorred hunting. Though the English translation by the Italian émigré, John Florio, who was tutor to Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, was not published until 1603, Montaigne's *Essais* were published in French in 1580–88, and it is quite likely that Shakespeare had read them by the time he wrote *Venus and Adonis*:

> As for me, I could never so much as endure, without remorse and grief, to see a poor, silly, and innocent beast pursued and killed, which is harmless and void of defense, and of whom we receive no offense at all.[69]

"Silly" means defenseless and without guile in early modern English, and Shakespeare uses it four times in the *Venus and Adonis*. Venus's fantasy-cum-memory of the power of Adonis's beauty, of his physique and his voice, claims that natural predation would be suspended upon sight of him:

> "To see his face the lion walked along
> Behind some hedge because he would not fear him.
> To recreate himself when he hath song,
> The tiger would be tame and gently hear him.
> If he had spoke, the wolf would leave his prey
> And never fright the silly lamb that day.
> (1093–8)

Here, Adonis acquires some of the characteristics of the mythic Orpheus, the ur-poet, whose song tamed wild animals, while in the New Testament,

Jesus is described by John the Baptist as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The poem also echoes the biblical image of universal peace where "a little child" leads both of the ferocious predators, the lion and the wolf, who now dwell peaceably with the lamb (Isaiah 11.6).

Despite the regal exception of Elizabeth I, who hunted and was frequently figured as the virgin huntress-goddess Diana, "venery," as hunting was known, is historically an intensively masculine venture understood as the ritual rehearsal of warfare.[70] Hunting was also a definitively aristocratic recreation, as we have noted, because forests belonged to the Crown and game enclosures assured a kill. There are echoes of this social arrangement in Shakespeare's poem when the goddess offers to be the enclosure for Adonis: "I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer" (231). In the ultimate reversal of proper hierarchy by the end of the poem, Adonis, the hunter, will have been slaughtered, and indeed castrated, by the game he sought to vanquish. Meanwhile, however, Venus views *him* as game. In sharp contrast to the aggressively masculine figure of the boar, she positions Adonis, whom she addresses as "Fondling" (229), as a tame creature, who dwells in an aristocrat's game enclosure: "I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer" (231). In an invitation that is at once risible, erotic, and scandalous, she urges Adonis to "graze" upon her body – and to perform cunnilingus:

> Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
> Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
> Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.
> (232–4)

The anatomical landscape of her body depends upon inescapably bawdy wordplay, which continues into the next stanza:

> "Within this limit is relief enough,
> Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,
> Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
> To shelter thee from tempest and from rain.
> (235–8)

"Relief" was a hunting term used for the food sought by the prey, while "bottom-grass" referred to the succulent pasture to be found in a valley.

Venus's geography lesson then extends to the *mons veneris*, the mound of Venus, the projection of the pubic bone: "round rising hillocks." Venus also imagines shielding her beloved from both inclement weather and the violence of the hunt: "No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark" (240), intimating the maternal aspects of the blindly procreative *Venus genitrix* (the mother goddess). Astonishingly, in the most sexually explicit and transgressive moment in the poem, safety is located as the "brakes obscure and rough," which refer to Venus's pubic hair.

Of course, no argument will entice Adonis to succumb to Venus, who is compelled to resort at times to physical coercion. Readers today may have serious qualms about the idea that sexual violence can ever be funny. However, that Adonis is "Forced to content, but never to obey" (61) describes his imposed acquiescence, but also suggests that he is able to preserve his autonomy as well as the integrity of his body and his masculine identity, which is not true of his Ovidian counterpart, Hyacinthus, who though he does not want – as Golding so quaintly puts it, "willde he nillde" (IV. 446) – sex with Salmacis, nonetheless has her thrust upon him. In the case of Adonis, in contrast, notwithstanding Venus's molestations, *he* has succeeded in "mastering *her*" (114; my emphasis). There is a sense in which, even while Adonis is on the bottom of the binaries divine/human, strong/weak, adult/child, his trump card is that he maintains his position in the gender hierarchy: male/female. Thus, despite rhetorical and physical coercion, his will is never broken, and thus he is never emasculated by Venus – though he *is* literally emasculated by the boar's "tusk in his soft groin" (1114–15). The difference between being penetrated by the boar and Venus's attempts at sexual assault is that Adonis gave his consent in the former instance and withheld it in the latter. We may hear his voice much less frequently than that of Venus in this poem, but when Adonis does speak, he is decidedly emphatic. For example, to return to his categorical double negative in that key line: "I know not love. . . nor will not know it" (409). "Nor" and "not" encase his "will," his unshakably autonomous volition.

The final aspect of the hunt in the poem is Venus's admonition about the "brawny" boar:

> His brawny sides, with hairy bristles armed,
> Are better proof than thy spear's point can enter.
> His short thick neck cannot be easily harmed.
> (625–7)

This creature is a killing machine – "Like to a mortal butcher bent to kill" (618) – and he bears more than a passing resemblance to Venus's former lover, the similarly thick-necked Mars:

> Whose sinewy neck in battle ne'er did bow,
> Who conquers where he comes in every jar.
> (99–100)

The parallel between Mars and the boar is significant because the latter, as the poet Ted Hughes has pointed out, "always has the double role of being both the Goddess, infernalized and enraged, and her infernal consort (Mars in boar form)."[71] Indeed, "Don't mess with the goddess" might be the motto of Ovidian mythology, and this sense that there is a retributive motive for Adonis's death becomes explicit when Venus admits her affinity to the boar: she is, she tells us, just "like him" (1117). Though of course in the poem, Venus never actually threatens Adonis, at the symbolic level of myth, rejection of the goddess can only bring about the direst of consequences:

> "Thou hadst been gone," quoth she, "sweet boy, ere this,
> But that thou toldst me thou wouldst hunt the boar.
> O, be advised! Thou know'st not what it is
> With javelin's point a churlish swine to gore,
> Whose tushes, never sheathed, he whetteth still
> .
> "On his bow-back he hath a battle set
> Of bristly pikes that ever threat his foes.
> His eyes like glowworms shine when he doth fret.
> His snout digs sepulchers where'er he goes.
> Being moved, he strikes whate'er is in his way,
> And whom he strikes his crookèd tushes slay.
> (613–24)

The brambles and bushes that scratched the timid hare prove no obstacle to the boar. In the confrontation between jejune Adonis and the beast, the boar will be the victor. Venus offers a warning rather than a threat about the boar who will indeed make a bloody "sepulcher" (622) of Adonis's body.

Christian Ears

Crucially, even those epyllia of the ancient world composed by Theocritus, Calimachus, and Apollonius were not written with public enunciation in mind but with a view to private reading. Poets composed epyllia rather than epics because as M. Marjorie Crump points out, they "were now writing for readers and not for listeners."[72] However, as an inheritance from the oral tradition, hearing rather than sight was understood to be the primary avenue of cognition, and as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the Elizabethan state was concerned not so much about what might offend sight as what was "unseemly for Christian ears," and about what they might *hear* in "any manner of book or paper."[73] Ovid's honeyed sounds were, as we have seen, considered to be especially dangerous.[74]

This is significant because late sixteenth-century England is a period Ian Frederick Moulton has claimed is a time "before pornography" since, as the etymology of the word suggests – *porno* meaning prostitute and *graphoi* meaning painter – "pornography" describes overwhelmingly visual rather than textual artifacts.[75] Further, the emphasis on the dangers of hearing is something of a contrast to Petrarch where the lover's primary vulnerability is to be found in the eyes. In the *Canzoniere*, love at first sight is the instigation of the poet's tragedy:

> Love found me all disarmed and saw the way
> was clear to reach my heart down through the eyes,
> which have become the halls and doors of tears.
>
> Petrarch, *Canzone* (3)[76]

Eyes remain important in poetry throughout the early modern period, but ears acquire a new significance attendant upon the period's religious turbulence. Wes Folkerth has pointed out: "The most salient discourse on hearing and the role of sound in early modern English culture was conducted in the religious sphere and concerned the proper use of the Christian ears."[77] This was especially important given the new Protestant emphasis on the Word of God that we noted in the previous chapter. However, the concern with those Christian ears was also particularly aimed to increase the attentiveness of the congregation (whose church attendance was legally compelled) while the homily was being read. Much of the imagery in *Venus and Adonis* affirms an idea repeatedly promulgated in religious discourse, namely that the ear leads directly to the heart,

which is both the seat of emotion and cognition. While the tongue was understood to be the source of much transgression in Christian scripture, the ear was also culpable, longing for novel and quasi-sexual stimulation of the "itching wantonness" that, as we saw above, Middleton parodied in *A Mad World My Masters*:

> For the time will come when they will not suffer wholesome doctrine: but having their *ears itching*, shall after their own lusts get them an heap of teachers.
>
> (2 Timothy 4:3; my emphasis)

What we might call the problem of the ear, whether tickled, itching, or abused, is frequently recapitulated in the poem itself:

> Still she entreats, and prettily entreats,
> For to a pretty ear she tunes her tale.
> Still is he sullen, still he lours and frets.
> (72–4)

We are reminded of the beauty of every aspect of Adonis's body – even his pretty ears. At this point in the poem, Venus changes tactics, for now abandoning sexual aggression to adopt a pretty-please approach, but all to no avail. She urges him to "Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear" (145), but since Adonis will not comply, she resorts to command and constraint: "Lie quietly, and hear a little more" (709). In contrast, Venus is moved by Adonis's voice which she describes as "Ears' deep sweet music, and heart's deep sore wounding" (432), an image which again evokes the ears as the avenue to the heart.

The early modern ear was understood to be a very vulnerable organ not because of the volume of sound that it might be subjected to but because of the potentially corrupting information that might make its way into the minds of listeners. Actors were known to have the capacity to "cleave the general ear with horrid speech" (*Hamlet* 2.2.90),[78] as Hamlet puts it in his advice to the Players. This implies an amplified, ear-splitting volume, but there is also a sense that the horrors contained in the speech are more disquieting and that the "horrid" substance is what pumps up the volume.[79] In fact, all kinds of sound from bellowing to whispering had the power to corrupt. Thus, on 1 April 1627, John Donne delivered a sermon on the text "Take heed what ye hear" from St. Mark's Gospel (4.24), "The whisperer wounds thee, and with a stilleto of gold. . ." For

Donne, even whispers could inflict a mortal blow, as indeed Venus recognizes, although not because she fears that her soul is imperiled, but rather because she fears Adonis's mortality:

> "This sour informer, this bate-breeding spy,
> This canker that eats up Love's tender spring,
> This carry-tale, dissentious Jealousy,
> That sometimes true news, sometimes false doth bring,
> Knocks at my heart and **whispers in mine ear**
> That if I love thee, I thy death should fear.
> (655–60; my emphasis)

Early modern culture was certainly one of "fake news" that persisted despite increased efforts to disseminate information – especially new laws and government policy – much more effectively. Hence Venus's reference to spies and informers, and to gossip. Her apprehension of Adonis's inevitable mortality is the whisper of fear, and we see yet again, the ear and the heart working in concert.

Shakespeare's readers were (and are) necessarily what R.S. White calls "creative listeners." Poetic imagery and metaphor work to ignite the visual imagination, but the words, whether read privately or aloud, necessarily precede the image. White asks: "What do we 'see' in our 'mind's eye' when we only 'hear' words and sound effects?"[80] The Elizabethans feared that what might be seen there was something quite pornographic. The poet, Lady Anne Southwell, who was related by marriage to the Jesuit martyr, Robert Southwell, whose disapproval of pagan poetry we noted above, wrote in 1626 that her "chaste ears" had been abused by "some wanton Venus or Adonis."[81] Shakespeare's representation of the ear as a defenseless orifice also occurs in *Hamlet* where the Old King is murdered by having poison poured "in the porches of my ears" (1.5.62–3):

> So the whole ear of Denmark
> Is by a forgèd process of my death
> Rankly abused.
> (1.5.43–5)

In *Hamlet*, the abused ear here belongs to the body politic itself, and it is connected retroactively with sexual abuse or transgression when Hamlet

describes with vividly, almost pornographic detail the "rank" or foul bed his mother shares with Claudius (*Hamlet* 3.4.90).

Adonis himself is rather a parody of those who want to protect themselves from lascivious language:

> If love have lent you twenty thousand tongues,
> And every tongue more moving than your own,
> Bewitching like the wanton mermaids' songs,
> Yet from mine ear the tempting tune is blown;
> For know my heart stands armèd in mine ear
> And will not let a false sound enter there,
>
> "Lest the deceiving harmony should run
> Into the quiet closure of my breast,
> And then my little heart were quite undone,
> In his bed-chamber to be barred of rest.
> No, lady, no, my heart longs not to groan
> But soundly sleeps while now it sleeps alone.
> (775–86)

Appropriately, there is in Adonis's diatribe a biblical allusion to the evils of the tongue: "And the tongue is fire, yea, a world of wickedness: so is the tongue set among our members" (James 3: 6). In this biblical context the sense is that speech may be a uniquely human gift but that it is also the source of uniquely human depravity. The multiplicity of tongues in the poem – all of them are organs of deception – suggests an image of anatomical monstrosity. However, this image also indicates that despite himself, Adonis has been listening very carefully to Venus since his "twenty thousand" tongues is a hyperbolic advance on Venus's earlier entreaty for "twenty hundred kisses" (522). The "wanton mermaids" are the Sirens of classical mythology whose enchanting music lures sailors to their deaths, but while their song irresistibly draws those who attend to it to their doom, Adonis maintains that wind deflects the corrupting influence of Venus's importuning: "the tempting tune is blown." "Tempting" is an interesting word here because it echoes the Puritan discourse of the period by aligning Venus with the temptations of the devil. Oscar Wilde is claimed to have said that the only way to get rid of temptation is to give in to it, but the humor and irony here is that Adonis is not even remotely tempted. Indeed, the image that follows suggests that he is inured to temptation not merely by environmental conditions, like the wind blowing in a direction

that carries the sound of Venus's voice away with it, but also, as he claims very self-righteously, that his own will power, his vigilant heart, makes him invulnerable to sin: "my heart stands armèd in mine ear" (779).

Animals in the poem are also attuned to sound, and indeed the hare, savagely pursued by the hunt, is just as self-protective as Adonis but with even more reason:

> By this, poor Wat, far off upon a hill,
> Stands on his hinder legs with list'ning ear
> To hearken if his foes pursue him still.
> (697–99)

The "list'ning ear" here is a carefully honed form of attention whose aim is survival. Adonis's horse is also depicted as a listening creature, and his attention is geared towards reproduction, the natural, instinctive drive towards the survival of the species:

> His ears up-pricked, his braided hanging mane
> Upon his compassed crest now stand on end.
> (271–2)

These animals strain to hear whereas Adonis exemplifies human perversity because despite being fully equipped with the requisite sensory capacity, he strains *not* to hear, *not* to attend. This will prove his undoing when he fails to pay heed to Venus's warnings about the boar.

Despite Adonis's arguments, the problem with the ear is that physiologically it is the most open of anatomical orifices:

> Mine ears, that to your wanton talk attended
> Do burn themselves for having so offended.
> (809–10)

With the freakish exception of a very few people who can waggle their ears, humans possess no capacity to exert muscle contraction on this unguarded orifice. Whereas we can easily shut our eyes, it is physiologically impossible to close the ears without manual assistance. "Best you stop your ears" (4.3.81) Kate advises Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, but this would only constitute an effective remedy against the

incursions of sound if the ears were plugged with the fingers or other objects. This is what makes the ears so vulnerable, an idea that persists in modern philosophy, as in Stanley Cavell's argument for the cognitive primacy of hearing: "In saying that the home of belief lies in my relation to others, to what they tell me, to what I hear (or remember as having heard; perhaps I read it), I am proposing that our access to belief is fundamentally through the ear, not the eye."[82] Because an act of will does not apply in relation to the ears, so Adonis's image of his heart standing sentry there is a fanciful one: "my heart stands armèd in mine ear" (779). Although Adonis is clearly meant to be unaware of the origins of this image, it is in fact borrowed from love poetry. Like Venus's description of her seduction of Mars (103–14), military imagery in poetry is used to suggest not just that love and war are antithetical but also that, as modes of human interaction and engagement, they are also analogous. The first stanza above ends with the heroic image of Adonis's soldier-heart standing guard in his ear only to shift once more to the image of the diminished Adonis with his "little heart" – clearly a very compact space – and to the contracted space of his bedroom: "my little heart were quite undone/In his bed-chamber" (783–4). This is indeed the kind of sterile, monastic environment that Venus has railed against only a few lines earlier:

> 'Therefore, despite of fruitless chastity,
> Love-lacking vestals and self-loving nuns,
> That on earth would breed a scarcity
> And barren dearth of daughters and of sons,
> Be prodigal: the lamp that burns by night
> Dries up his oil to lend the world his light.
> (751–56)

Chastity is fruitless in that it cannot procreate, but there are further bawdy implications here about other non-reproductive sexual practices of the narcissistic or perhaps onanistic lesbian nuns: they love themselves – thus, they are potentially, selfish, masturbating, or making love to one another, or all of the above. In contrast, breeding, reproduction is the goal of Venus *genetrix*, while generating scarcity, fruitlessness (literally, without fruit, without a harvest) is a recipe for dearth, which is the tragic antithesis of life-affirming fruition because survival requires sufficient abundance to secure the continuity of the species. In the goddess's reference to the four consecrated virgins who guarded the fire at the Temple of Vesta, the

goddess of the hearth: "Love-lacking vestals" (752), Venus intimates the religious violence both in Ancient Rome and Elizabethan England that was implicit in rigid ideas about sexual conduct. This is because any vestal found to have violated her vow of chastity was buried alive. Similarly, the reference to those "self-loving nuns" invokes one of the standard accusations made against Catholic convents, namely that, since they had no other sexual outlet, nuns were compulsively engaged in what was then regarded as deviant sexual activity. The final couplet here argues against parsimony and miserliness, as, indeed, the poet argues in Sonnet 1 where he charges that by saving himself for himself, the young man is just being a glutton:

> Pity the world, or else this glutton be—
> To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.
> (Sonnet 1.13–14)

The sense that sexual continence is sterile is also specifically relevant to poetry and rhetorical ornament. Poetic language, especially that of the epyllion, is lush, lavish, inventive, generative of images and ideas, and animates and enhances what it depicts. There is no parsimony in Ovidian poetics. Like the narcissistic self-containment of the fair youth in the *Sonnets*, when Adonis recoils from the biological imperative to reproduce, he therefore invariably also resists the artistic (re)-production of beauty and thus is opposed to poetic energy itself. Adonis is saving himself – or from Venus's point of view, hoarding himself – in the belief that he can avoid the erotic torment associated with the notoriously groaning, sighing Petrarchan lover: "No, lady, no, my heart longs not to groan" (785). Shakespeare parodies this clichéd Petrarchan sigh in *Romeo and Juliet* where Mercutio jokes that the love sick Romeo has lost his "roe," or semen (2.4.34), which is also a pun on the first part of his name, and thus is left only with the "meo" or "Me oh!" Perhaps the most famous sexual usage of the word "groan" is Hamlet's bitter retort to Ophelia's concern for him: "It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge" (3.2.237). The groan in Adonis's "[M]y heart longs not to groan" also connotes orgasm so that even in telling Venus how he disdains desire, part of the comedy of the poem is that he unwittingly conjures up a rather vivid picture of precisely what he wishes to abjure.

Adonis's disquisition on celibacy is an energetic riposte to Venus's pro-sex argument, and it is worth quoting again:

> For know my heart stands armèd in mine ear,
> And will not let a false sound enter there,
>
> Lest the deceiving harmony should run
> Into the quiet closure of my breast,
> And then my little heart were quite undone,
> In his bed-chamber to be barred of rest.
> No, lady, no, my heart longs not to groan
> But soundly sleeps while now it sleeps alone.
> (779–86)

Adonis, interestingly, presents himself in the diminutive: "my *little* heart" (783; my emphasis). In these lines, it is almost as if we are entering an infant boy's nursery, or at least a bedroom from the time of life prior to the advent of Eros; or a chamber reminiscent of a monk's cell into which Adonis has barricaded himself. While on the one hand, Adonis's sexual continence and moralizing discourse align him with Protestant ethics, his celibacy points towards Catholicism. The consecrated sexual abstinence required by pre-Reformation monasticism was claimed by Protestant reformers to pervert natural libidinal energies from their ostensibly proper course in marriage towards a range of sexual abuses. These included the hypocrisy of claiming to be celibate while being all the while rampantly incontinent and, especially, engaging in the practice of sodomy, a behavior figuratively represented in this poem when the boar gores Adonis.

While Adonis is impervious to beauty and rhetoric, Venus cuts a much more sympathetic figure when she explains the deficiency of all the senses in relation to her ardor for him:

> "Had I no eyes but ears, my ears would love
> That inward beauty and invisible.
> Or were I deaf, thy outward parts would move
> Each part in me that were but sensible.
> (435–38).

The above lines are part of a wonderfully sophisticated rhetorical exercise on the banquet of the senses that extends in the poem to the length of

three stanzas. However, these lines in particular suggest not how the world can be consumed by the senses, but rather suggest, much more sympathetically, love beyond sexual attraction and even corporeality itself. Rejection makes Venus almost human: "She's Love, she loves, and yet she is not loved" (610). This is the Venus we will see again at the close of the poem: the goddess capable of profound grief. Indeed, the mock-heroic account of the death of Adonis is Shakespeare's unique contribution to the Ovidian genre, namely "a sensuous poem treating in mock-heroic terms a deeply felt tragic conclusion."[83]

The goddess of love is transformed by Shakespeare from an ethereal being into a figure with recognizably human emotions. Particularly moving is Venus's stunned disbelief at Adonis's death as she looks upon his violated corpse:

> She looks upon his lips, and they are pale.
> She takes him by the hand, and that is cold.
> She whispers in his ears a heavy tale
> As if they heard the woeful words she told.
> She lifts the coffer-lids that close his eyes,
> Where, lo, two lamps, burnt out, in darkness lies.
> (1123–28)

Venus still holds out hope that Adonis may at last hear her. Paradoxically, while her grief is all too human, at this moment Venus also manifests her association with the divine mother of Christianity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who as the sorrowing mother, the *mater dolorosa* cradles Christ's dead body when it is taken down from the cross, and whose veneration was widespread in English medieval Catholicism. Thus, *Venus and Adonis*, while using Ovidian precedent as a license to escape Christian ideas about sexuality and gender relations, is also inevitably shaped by them.

Venus's final rhetorical act emanates from her profound sense of loss and her rage against Adonis's death. She makes a retributive prophesy:

> Since thou art dead, lo, here I prophesy
> Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend;
> It shall be waited on with jealousy,
> Find sweet beginning but unsavory end,
> Ne'er settled equally, but high or low,
> That all love's pleasure shall not match his woe.
> (1135–40)

Venus here stresses the fundamental asymmetries of desire, that are never "settled equally" (1139) in the sense of the difference in status between the lovers or because love is unrequited. This key lopsidedness here, however, is that love's woe exceeds its pleasures. All forms of disproportion, of course, have plagued Venus's relationship with Adonis, not only the key fact that Venus's attraction was matched only with Adonis's indifference. Age and size have also created a sense of embodied, physical imbalance. Indeed, the goddess's expansive, park-like dimensions may even suggest, as Valerie Billings has argued, the queer erotic potential of an adipose Venus.[84] That unsavoriness follows love's "sweet beginning" also mirrors the structure of the poem itself, which begins in comedy and ends in tragedy.

*

That Shakespeare adopts Ovid's tone and modulations of voice and deploys the bounce and brio of Ovidian language allows him to make the mythic love affair of Venus and Adonis into a tragicomedy of frustrated desire. However, it is Adonis's transformation into what is traditionally believed to be a "wind flower," an anemone, "A purple flower sprung up checkered with white" (1168) that seals the poem's status as a story of metamorphosis synonymous with Ovid:

> "Poor flower," quoth she, "this was thy father's guise—
> Sweet issue of a more sweet-smelling sire—
> For every little grief to wet his eyes;
> To grow unto himself was his desire,
> And so 'tis thine, but know it is as good
> To wither in my breast as in his blood.
>
> "Here was thy father's bed, here in my breast;
> Thou art the next of blood, and 'tis thy right.
> Lo, in this hollow cradle take thy rest;
> My throbbing heart shall rock thee day and night.
> There shall not be one minute in an hour
> Wherein I will not kiss my sweet love's flower".
>
> (1177–88)

As a "wayward boy" (344), Adonis's aberrant desire "to grow unto himself" (1180) suggests the unnatural inwardness of something unhealthily ingrown – like a toenail – a contraction at a time of life when there should

be expansion. In this sense, as Venus avers, he does indeed get his wish, reversing the natural progression of growth to maturity, in a regression to the "hollow cradle" (1185) between Venus's maternal breasts. Thus, any intimation in the image of the wind flower that Adonis has at last evaded the predatory grasp of Venus is short-lived as she presses the blossom to her bosom as a final, memorial act. Indeed, metamorphosis, the only form of escape, if it can be called that, is a change of state, a transmutation into an identity and a condition that is beyond speech, beyond hearing, and indeed, beyond language itself.

Notes

1 Hartley, T.E. (ed.) (1995). *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I 1584–1589*. Leicester: Leicester University Press. II. p. 40.
2 Ibid.
3 Prince. F.T. (ed.) (1960; rpr. 1985) *The Arden Shakespeare: The Poems*. London: Routledge. p. xxv.
4 Cheyney, Patrick. (2008). *Shakespeare's Literary Authorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. xii and Cheyney, Patrick. (2004). *Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 63.
5 "*Venus and Adonis* is not only set up as the opening gesture in a new career, and a new departure for the dramatist, but it also embodies the raw materials from which the poet is fashioned into social and literary respectability". Brown, Georgia. (2004). *Redefining Elizabethan Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 115.
6 Quoted in Duncan-Jones, Katherine and Woudhuysen, H.R. (eds.) (2007). *Shakespeare's Poems*. London: Bloomsbury. p. 83.
7 Williams, Gareth. (2002). Ovid's exile poetry: *Tristia, Epistulae ex Ponto* and *Ibis*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid* (ed. Philip Hardie), 241. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8 Green, Peter. (2004). *Ovid's Erotic Poems*. London: Penguin. p. 71.
9 My translation. Ovid. (1977). *Heroides. Amores*. (trans. Grant Showerman). Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press. p. 378. See also Christopher Marlowe's translation: "Let base-conceited wits admire vile things,/Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses's springs," *All Ovid's Elegies: 3. Books, by C.M Epigrams by J.D*. At Middleborough: n.p., n.d. p. 15.
10 See Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen. p. 127. When Gabriel Harvey copied these lines into an edition of Chaucer, he added the phrase "between jest and earnest." Similarly, Thomas Nashe's satire, *Lenten Stuff* (1598), makes fun of this Ovidian quotation, declaring that the praise of the (salty) red herring "were a work that would drink dry fourscore and eighteen Castalian

fountains of eloquence." Steane, J.B. (ed.) (1985). *Thomas Nashe: The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works*. London: Penguin. p. 457.

11 Nims, John Frederick. (ed.) (1965) *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation 1567*. New York: Macmillan. Shakespeare's is a much-expanded version of Ovid's account. See Bate, Jonathan. (1993). *Shakespeare and Ovid*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 50–66.

12 Callaghan, Dympna. (1994) (Un)natural loving: Swine, pets, and flowers in Venus and Adonis. In: *Textures of Renaissance Knowledge* (ed. Philippa Berry and Margaret Clayton Tudeau), 58–78. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. (1994). Bestial buggery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In: *The Production of English Renaissance Culture* (eds. David Lee Miller, Sharon O'Dair, and Harold Weber), 123–150 at 150. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

13 Hughes, Paul L. and Larkin, James F. (eds.) (1969). *Tudor Royal Proclamations: 1553–1587*. II. New Haven: Yale University Press. p. 128.

14 Ibid. pp. 128–129. "The Queen's majesty straightly chargeth and commandeth that no manner of person shall print any manner of book or paper of what sort, nature, or in what language soever it be, except the same be first licensed by her majesty by express words in writing, or by six of her Privy Council, or be perused and licensed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Bishop of London, the chancellors of both universities. . . And because many pamphlets, plays, and ballads be oftentimes printed wherein regard would be had: her majesty likewise commandeth that no manner of person shall enterprise to print any such except the same be licensed by such her majesty's commissioners…".

15 See Callaghan, Dympna. (2003). The book of changes in a time of change: Ovid's Metamorphoses in post-Reformation England and Venus and Adonis. In: *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works* (eds. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard), IV, 27–45. Oxford: Blackwell.

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18 Batman, Stephen. (1583). *The Golden Booke of the Leaden Gods*. 2nd edn. unpag.

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20 Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen. pp. 70–71; Brown, p. 131; Duncan-Jones, Katherine. (1993). Much Ado with Red and White: The Earliest Readers of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593). *The Review of English Studies* 44 (176): 479–501 at 488.

21 Callaghan, Dympna. (2003). Comedy and Epyllion in Post-Reformation England. *Shakespeare Survey: Shakespeare and Comedy* 56: 30.

22 Heather James argues that 'The *Amores* and the *Metamorphoses* … share an artistic vision when it comes to the question of subordinating one's ingenuity and expressive liberty to the decrees of the state': James, Heather. (2006). The Poet's Toys: Christopher Marlowe and the Liberties of Erotic Elegy. *Modern Language Quarterly* 67: 108. On the political dimension of Ovidianism, see James, Heather. (2003). Ovid and the Question of Politics in Early Modern England. *ELH* 70: 343–73, and on the moral dilemma Ovid posed for his early modern admirers, see James, Heather. (2008). Ovid in English Renaissance literature. In: *A Companion to Ovid* (ed. Peter E. Knox), 423. Oxford: Blackwell.

23 Callaghan. Comedy and Epyllion in Post-Reformation England. 33.

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29 Taylor, Michael. (ed.) (1995). *Thomas Middleton: A Mad World, My Masters and Other Plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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49 Ibid. p. 87.
50 Crump, M. Marjorie. (1931 and 1997). *The Epyllion From Theocritus to Ovid*. London: Bristol Classical Press. p. 22.
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52 On softening as an Ovidian idea, see Mann, Jenny. (2021). *The Trials of Orpheus: Poetry, Science, and the Early Modern Sublime*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp. 128–156.
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55 Kahn, Coppélia. (1981). *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 153 on the need for men to be definitively separate from a significant other.
56 On the connection between Adonis's "courser" and the Mediterranean horse trade, see Jacobson, Miriam. (2019). *Barbarous Antiquity: Reorienting the Past in the Poetry of Classical Antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 120–126.
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59 DiGangi, Mario. (1997). *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 136–137.

60 The emphasis here is not on opposition but on sameness or conjunction. See Harris, Jonathan Gil. (2011). Four Exoskeletons and No Funeral. *New Literary History* 2 (4): 615–639.

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63 Berry. *Shakespeare and the Hunt*. pp. 7–8.

64 Ibid. p. 3.

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67 Ibid. p. 263.

68 Ibid. p. 260; Quoted Berry. *Shakespeare and the Hunt*. p. 25.

69 Quoted Ibid. p. 27.

70 Bates, Catherine. (2013). *Masculinity and the Hunt: Wyatt to Spenser*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 16, 61.

71 Hughes, Ted. (1992 and 2009). *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. New York: Barnes and Noble. p. 82.

72 Crump. p. 11.

73 On the eye and ear as antithetical modalities of understanding subjectivity in the early modern period see Woodbridge, Linda. (1994). *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. pp. 215–227.

74 "Item, because there is a: the Queen's majesty straightly chargeth and commandeth that no manner of person shall print any manner of book or paper of what sort, nature, or in what language soever it be, except the same be first licensed by her majesty by express words in writing, or by six of her Privy Council, or be perused and licensed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Bishop of London, the chancellors of both universities. . . And because many pamphlets, plays, and ballads be oftentimes printed wherein regard would be had: her majesty likewise commandeth that no manner of person shall enterprise to print any such except the same be licensed by such her majesty's commissioners…" Hughes and Larkin. pp. 128–129.

75 Moulton, Ian Frederick. (2000). *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 5.

76 Petrarch. (1996). *Petrarch: Canzoniere*. (trans. Mark Musa). Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. 5.

77 Folkerth, Wes. (2002). *The Sound of Shakespeare*. London: Routledge. pp. 44–45.

78 Berry, Philippa. (1999). *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies*. London: Routledge. pp. 59, 60.

79 On early modern understandings of the physiological vulnerability of the ear, see Folkerth, pp. 62–67.

80 White, R.S. (ed.) (2021). *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Language and Writing*. The Arden Shakespeare, London: Bloomsbury. p. 84.

81 Quoted Moulton, p. 57.

82 Cavell, Stanley. (1979). *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. p. 391. See also Fineman, Joel. (1991). Shakespeare's ear. In: *The Subjectivity Effect in the Western Literary Tradition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 222–231.

83 Alexander, Nigel. (1968). *Elizabethan Narrative Verse*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p. 14. On attempts to restrict Ovidian poetry, see Callaghan, Dympna. (2003). The Book of Changes, and Callaghan. Comedy and Epyllion.Loraine Fletcher claims that the equine species in the poem succeeds in communicating despite the absence of human language, whereas Venus and Adonis talk a lot without communicating: Fletcher, Loraine. (2005). Animal Rites: A Reading of "Venus and Adonis". *Critical Survey* 17: 1–14. As Coppélia Kahn remarks "The playful suggestion that … that he would rather 'know' or love the boar seems a kind of risqué joke at first, a glance at sodomy. But it carries the serious undertone that he is deeply alienated from his own kind determined not to love even at the expense of being perverse" Kahn, Coppélia. (1981). *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 40. C. L. Barber has argued that the boar is a figure of "homosexual rape." Barber, C.L. and Wheeler, Richard. (1986). *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 147.

84 Billing, Valerie. (2017). The Queer Erotics of Size in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis. *Shakespeare Studies* 45: 131–136, 139.