CHAPTER 3

# *Authorship and acting: plotting* Venus and Adonis *along the Virgilian path*

> I did but act, he's author of thy slander.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 1006)

In the epigraph above, Venus complains to the dying Adonis that she is merely the "act[or]" of a fatal verse script about his calumny that the villain Death has tragically "author[ed]." The discourse and narration of authorship and acting here suggests that *Venus and Adonis* may be more than simply a retelling of the luscious and poignant Ovidian myth about "sexual violence or harassment" between unequal heterosexual partners (Crewe, ed., *Narrative Poems*, xxxiv). It may simultaneously be an Ovidian fiction about the relation between the twin arts forming the frame of Shakespeare's professional career.

Venus' term "act" is recognizable as a theatrical term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites *Hamlet*, 2. 2. 435 and *Cymbeline*, 3. 4. 26, but we could recall line 359 of *Venus* as well: "this dumb play had his acts."[1] Similarly, Venus' term "author" is recognizable as a term for the author of printed poetry, especially during the early 1590s, when Spenser had used it forcibly to present himself as England's New Poet in the 1579 *Shepheardes Calender* – "the Author" (*Dedicatory Epistle*) – and then followed with the 1590 installment of *The Faerie Queene*, to which is appended a famous "Letter of the Authors expounding his whole intention in the course of this worke" (*Letter to Ralegh*).[2] In this chapter, we might look into Shakespeare's curious 1593 jostling of these terms and the twin professional institutions surrounding

[1] See Righter, who quotes W. J. Lawrence: "'It is to be noted that Shakespeare . . . uses the word 'act' . . . rarely, if ever, without giving it some associated theatrical colouring'" (*Idea of the Play*, 90).

[2] On Spenser's invention of "a new Elizabethan author function," see Montrose, "Subject": Spenser's "'Laureate' authorial persona . . . not only professionalizes poetry, it authenticates through print the subjectivity of a writer whose class position might otherwise have rendered him merely the anonymous functionary of his patron. In claiming the originative status of an 'Author,' a writer claims the authority to direct and delimit the interpretive activity of that elite community of readers by whom he himself is authorized to write" (319). In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's Prince speaks of "the author" of the play on Aeneas and Dido (2. 2. 443).

them – a jostling that recurs in the poem as a whole. *Venus and Adonis* is valuable in part because it is Shakespeare's "first . . . invention" (*Dedicatory Epistle*) in print of a fiction directly about the cultural function and social interchange between poetic authorship and stage acting, at the very time when the art of theatre is competing with the art of printed poetry.[3] In 1602, the anonymous authors of *The Return from Parnassus* capture the peculiar Elizabethan competition between these forms, when Ingenioso relies on clothing imagery to tell Gull, "We shall have nothinge but pure Shakspeare and threds of poetry that he hath gathered at the theators!," only to have Gull quote stanza 2 of *Venus and Adonis* (*Shakspere Allusion-Book*, 1: 67).

## THE NARRATIVE OF POETRY AND THEATRE

The fiction in *Venus and Adonis* initially tells of the great goddess of love and beauty using the art of poetry to court the idyllic young hunter: "For to a pretty ear she tunes her tale" (74).[4] Indeed, Venus repeatedly tells her "story" (716) with its distinctively erotic "theme" (770). For instance, when Adonis escapes after accusing her of "Bewitching" him with a "tempting tune" sung "like the wanton mermaids' songs" (777–78), she "sings" in solitude "extemporally a woeful ditty" (836), a "heavy anthem" (839), however "tedious[ly]" she "outwore the night" (841). In fact, Venus sings this song in order to "mark" the "echoes" from "the neighbor caves," which "Make verbal repetition of her moans" (830–35). Such discourse identifies her specifically as an Orphic poet who wittily "redouble[s]" (832) the woods-resounding formula so central to the Renaissance Orpheus myth (Cain, "Orpheus," 28). Toward the end of *Venus and Adonis*, the goddess "stories" the "victories" of Death (1013–14), and "whispers" in the dying Adonis' ears "a heavy tale, / As if they heard the woeful words she told" (1125–26).

Yet Venus does not simply sing her songs of seduction to court Adonis "extemporally"; as this theatrical terms suggests, she performs them as an actor on the stage, drawing Adonis into her erotic theatre: "And all this dumb play had his acts made plain / With tears which chorus-like her eyes did rain" (359–60).[5] The theatrical metaphor measures the couple's failure

[3] Only Fienberg links *Venus and Adonis* with the theatre and the print shop ("Thematics of Value," 250). For the value and limitations of this essay, see below.

[4] Critics identify Venus as a "rhetor/orator" who deploys "talents/entrapments" (Kolin, ed., "*Venus and Adonis*," 34; see 34–35; Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 1–35). But some critics do identify Venus as a poet, usually a Petrarchan poet or sonneteer; see Baumlin, "Birth"; Kiernan "*Venus and Adonis*," 93.

[5] Roe discusses the theatrical significance here (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 98). For *extempore* as a theatrical term, see, e.g., *1 Henry IV*, 2. 4. 280: "a play extempore." On "Venus' skill as a role player," see Kolin, ed., "*Venus and Adonis*," 37. Hyland considers how Shakespeare's "theatrical experience might have a bearing on how he imagined Venus and Adonis" (*Introduction to Shakespeare's Poems*, 82). Hardie, *Poetics*, traces the theatrical Venus to Virgil's *Aeneid*, 4 (13).



to perform perceptual reciprocity and to enact companionate desire: they appear on stage together, but Adonis is the silent speaker of a dumb show and Venus the chorus commenting on his tragic action with tears. Thus, Venus can only imagine the "twain" of them participating in Love's "revels": "Be bold to play, our sport is not in sight" (123–24). Here the language of theatre and the language of sex are indistinguishable – and that is the point.[6]

At the end of the story, Venus' arts of poetry and theatre fail to perform their desired end. Adonis loses his life in the hunt for the boar and metamorphoses into a "purple flow'r . . . check'red with white" (1168).[7] Here the great goddess performs the poem's climactic act: she "crops the stalk" (1175) and cradles the flower to her "bosom" (1173). In the words of Jonathan Crewe, "The only 'progeny' resulting from the relationship is the flower Venus maternally cherishes in the end; since flowers traditionally stand for poetic creations, the poem becomes the sole 'offspring' of this ill-fated love" (Crewe, ed., *Narrative Poems*, xxxix). In this version of the poem's fiction, Venus is the figure of (female) agency who initially uses the (masculine) arts of poetry and theatre to render the comedic denouement of sexual fulfillment, but who finally consoles herself with a tragedic artifact that represents the very work we are reading.[8]

Yet Shakespeare complicates this Venerean fiction by presenting Adonis similarly as an artistic figure of agency associated with the art of poetry. While initially refusing to talk (427), Adonis eventually breaks into a "mermaid's voice" filled with "Melodious discord, heavenly tune harsh sounding" (429–31). The image of the mermaid here does not simply match the one associated with Venus (quoted above) but also functions as "the quintessential figure for poetry," from the *Odyssey* forward (de Vroom, 437).

[6] On theatre and sex in Shakespeare, see Parker, *Margins*, 253; on "show" and "tell" in terms of theatre, see 253–54, 271.

[7] As we shall see in chapter 5, the author of Poem 4 in *The Passionate Pilgrim* picked up on Shakespeare's use of poetry and theatre as Venus' two courting techniques: "She told him stories to delight his [ear]; / She show'd him favors to allure his eye" (5–6).

[8] On how *Venus* "registers the birth of the aesthetic from the sexual," see Halpern, "'Pining,'" 386. Cf. Schiffer, "Desire," 359–76, esp. 374; Dubrow, *Victors*, 40–43. Fienberg's "feminist argument" anticipates my own literary one: Venus' "bargains may . . . be analogous to the strategies Shakespeare, already a man of the theater, would employ as he both 'immures' that multiple, shifting, subversive theatrical talent between the fixed covers of a published poem, and risks exposing his poetry to the commodification of the court marketplace. Then Venus represents the politically, sexually, and epistemologically subversive realm of the theater invading the realm of published poetry" ("Thematics of Value," 257). We may extend this idea to Adonis, historicize it in terms of the intersystemic intertexutal rivalry with Ovid and the intrasystemic rivalry with other writers in the Elizabethan literary system, and finally see here more than simple analogy.

Like Venus, Adonis tells a "tale" (591), narrates a "story" (716), produces a "text" (806), and "recreate[s]" himself "when he hath song" (1095). Just as Venus redoubles Orpheus by echoing song through the neighbor caves, so Adonis' song here has the Orphic power to order nature harmoniously: "The tiger would be tame, and gently hear him . . . / When he was by, the birds such pleasure took, / That some would sing" (1096–1102; see Cain, "Orpheus," 25–28). For all their differences, these lovers share an Orphic vocation.

They do not, however, share a theatrical profession. In Shakespeare's lexicon, Adonis is never a theatrical agent. Instead, the youth becomes complicit in Venus' theatre *against his will*, both in Love's "revels" and in the "dumb play" that she has been scripting. Later, he finds himself haplessly performing a part in the "play" of Death, as Venus herself laments: "this foul . . . boar . . . / Ne'er saw the beauteous livery that he wore – / Witness the entertainment that he gave" (1105–08).[9] According to this second version of the fiction, Adonis himself is a figure of (male) agency who uses the (masculine) art of poetry to resist the allure of Venus' (feminine) arts of poetry and theatre, only to find himself an unwilling participant in a poem and its theater bent on turning him into a tragic artifact.

Perhaps the most concrete icon for Venus and Adonis as figures associated with poetry and theatre appears in lines 211–16, when Venus breaks into complaint at her unresponsive lover:

> Fie, liveless picture, cold and senseless stone,
> Well-painted idol, image dull and dead,
> Statue contenting but the eye alone.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 211–13)

Critics rightly observe that Venus here compares Adonis "in all but name to Pygmalion's statue" in Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – an especially appropriate allusion since "Adonis is, according to Ovid, the great-grandson of Pygmalion and the transformed statue."[10] As Richard Halpern suggests, "Shakespeare's innovation with respect to the Pygmalion myth – as in *Venus and Adonis* generally – is to explore the 'comic' possibilities of reversing this situation. Hence he places Venus in Pygmalion's place, lusting hopelessly after an unresponsive image" ("Pining," 380). As Halpern also notes, Shakespeare cross-dresses Venus as a male artist figure who fails to effect the metamorphosis that Venus in Ovid's story secures. The allusion

[9] On theatre and the "livery guilds," see Stallybrass, "Worn."

[10] Halpern, "Pining," 379–80. See also Roe, who adds that in Ovid's story "it was appropriately Venus who gave the statue life in response to Pygmalion's prayers" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 91).



to the Pygmalion myth compels us, then, to see Shakespeare's principals as more than figures of eros; they are also figures of art.[11] Most obviously, Venus presents herself as an artist figure and Adonis as her artifact; thus it is easiest to see Shakespeare here simply following Ovid in representing the poet and his poem. Yet, by taking Halpern's *dramatic* cues, we can discern that the imagery from the visual and plastic arts – "picture," "painted idol," "image" – brings us close to theatre, especially if we recall that Shakespeare's most famous use of the Pygmalion myth, the resurrection of the statue of Hermione closing *The Winter's Tale*, formally stages the Ovidian myth's original theatrical potential.[12] As we shall see, Shakespeare uses the Pygmalion myth to consolidate a complex Ovidian art that intertwines poetry and theatre in the agencies of both Venus and Adonis.[13]

## SONGS AND SHOWS

To understand more fully the story about "songs" and "shows" – and in particular about the interaction between the two within a poem conventionally understood to be about the death of desire – we may take Shakespeare's cue about Ovid's Pygmalion myth and recall the poem's most immediate historical context: the new, fundamentally sixteenth-century writing institution discussed in Part one, the emergence in England at this time of a writer who combines poems and plays as part of a single literary career, the author as poet-playwright. As we may recall, the new English poet-playwright is "Ovidian."

While it is well known that Francis Meres in his 1598 *Palladis Tamia* presents Shakespeare as England's Ovid, we might glance at another contemporary – one who more clearly understands Shakespeare's production of both poems and plays to be an Ovidian enterprise. Spenser's friend Gabriel Harvey wrote marginalia on a 1598 Speght edition of Chaucer (c.1600) that

[11] See, e.g., J. M. Miller, who notes that traditional interpretations see the Pygmalion myth either as "a metaphor for the creative process: the artist creates a perfect work of art which then comes to life," or as a metaphor for religious "piety" rewarded, although she herself emphasizes its "clear undercurrent of eroticism" ("Pygmalion," 206).

[12] Cf. J. M. Miller, "Pygmalion," 211–12. Hulse, *Verse* (141–94), discusses the idea that for the Renaissance "painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture" (143), and he goes on to link *Venus and Adonis* with comedy (173). In *Statue*, Gross describes Ovid's Pygmalion myth through a discourse of theatre (72–74); on the moving statue in *The Winter's Tale* as a parable of theatre, see 100–09. Hardie's chapter on Pygmalion in *Poetics* (173–226), which includes a section on *The Winter's Tale* (193–206), helps account for Shakespeare's transposition of Ovid's poetical Pygmalion to the stage: "The story of Pygmalion can be read as an *aition* of illusionist art" (190).

[13] Cf. Kolin's conclusion: "Poetic readings of *Venus* turn dramatic for many critics, while dramatic performances turn back to the work's poetic stubbornness" (Kolin, ed., "*Venus and Adonis*," 59).

bears importantly on *Venus and Adonis*, and here we may quote Harvey's commentary at greater length than we did in chapter 1:

> The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus, & Adonis: but his Lucrece, & his tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of denmarke, have it in them, to please the wiser sort. Or such Poets: or better: or none.
>
> Vilia miretur Vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo
> Pocula Castaliae plena ministret aquae: quoth
> Sir Edward Dier, betwene jest & earnest.
> (reprinted in *Riverside*, 1965)

Harvey finds Shakespeare's combination of two poems and a play here so natural that he emphasizes the dialectic of audience affect discussed previously. But Harvey then quotes Ovid, *Amores*, 1. 15. 35–36. Edward Dyer may have quoted these lines, but if so the quotation has not (to my knowledge) survived. Yet one quotation has survived: the epigraph to *Venus and Adonis*, which in Marlowe's translation reads: "Let base-conceited wits admire vile things, / Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses' springs" (*Ovid's Elegies*, 1. 15. 35–36). Although Harvey evidently uses the Ovidian quotation to distinguish between such "vile" works as *Venus and Adonis* and such Apollonian works as *Lucrece* and *Hamlet*, he includes both kinds of literary productions under an "Ovidian" rubric.

One way, then, to read Shakespeare's fiction in *Venus and Adonis* is as a self-conscious Ovidian narrative about the arts of poetry and theatre forming the Ovidian structure of his own career.[14] As in his other two experiments in narrative poetry – *The Rape of Lucrece* and *A Lover's Complaint* – Shakespeare makes his fiction about the separation of the sexes and the fatal nature of desire pertain to his professional career.[15] While both Harvey and Shakespeare quote the Latin from the *Amores*, most likely their contemporaries would have recognized a veiled intertextuality with the English author who had translated them in the first place, made them famous for English culture. For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Ovid's *Amores* were also Marlovian.[16]

By taking this cue, we can consolidate Shakespeare's literary historicism one step further, labeling his Ovidianism of poetry and theatre Marlovian.

[14] Cf. the principal studies of Ovid in *Venus and Adonis*: Keach, *Erotic Narratives*, 52–84; Hulse, *Verse*, 141–94, esp. 143–75; Dubrow, *Victors*, 21–79; Bate, *Ovid*, 48–67. See also Froes, "Shakespeare's Venus"; Stapleton, "*Praeceptor*"; Murphy, "Wriothesley's Resistance"; Kiernan, "*Venus and Adonis*."

[15] On eros independent of career, see Kahn, "Eros"; Belsey, "Trompe-L'oeil"; Merrix, "Hollow Cradle"; Schiffer, "Desire"; Halpern, "'Pining.'" For a "queer reading," see Stanivukovic, *Ovid* (quotation on 103).

[16] On Marlowe and the *Amores*, see Pearcy, *Mediated Muse*; Stapleton, *Harmful*.



Since scholarship and criticism have emphasized the presence of Marlowe in the discourse of *Venus and Adonis*, we need not argue this classification in any detail.[17] Rather, we may foreground a neglected idea: it is the poetry and theatre of Venus (in particular) that resembles the art of Christopher Marlowe. In fact, Venus' double-genre art of tragedic desire looks to be a rather precise photograph of Marlowe's aesthetics, especially as exhibited in *Hero and Leander*.[18]

Shakespeare could have taken Marlowe's own cue, for the Canterbury native dresses his heroine in "garments" (9) artistically depicting the Venus and Adonis myth: "Her wide sleeves greene, and bordered with a grove, / Where Venus in her naked glory strove / To please the careless and disdainful eies / Of proud Adonis that before her lies" (1. 11–14). Hero's complete attire – "myrtle wreath" (17) and "Buskins" (31) – reveals her to be a (feminine) figure for Marlowe's Ovidian art of elegy and tragedy; she is a figure for his own intertwining of poems and plays, an icon for the (feminine) role of the Ovidian poet-playwright (Cheney, *Profession* 243–45). Like Hero, Venus is not simply a titillating portrait of an erotically aroused female; paradoxically, she is also a figure for a masculine, Marlovian aesthetics that uses poetry and theatre to gain sexual gratification: "For men will kiss even by their own direction" (216).[19] While examining details of this historical portrait later, we may here observe that Shakespeare's well-known ambivalence towards Venus, together with her modulation from a comic to a tragic character, is deeply bound up with his equally well-known ambivalence toward his arch-Ovidian rival.

## THE VIRGILIAN PATH

Significantly, Shakespeare plots his Ovidian narrative about Marlovian poetry and theatre in a landscape that is decidedly Virgilian. As readers have long emphasized, Shakespeare sets his scene initially in a pastoral landscape: on the "primrose bank" (151) – a bank of flowers ("blue-veined violets" [125]), beside a river.[20] While neither Venus nor Adonis is a shepherd,

[17] On Marlowe and *Venus and Adonis*, see Leech, "Venus and her Nun"; Bradbrook, "Recollections"; Dubrow, *Victors*, 65–67. For my review on the Marlowe–Shakespeare connection between 1987 and 1998, see Cheney, "Recent Studies."

[18] What Berger says about Spenser's Venus obtains with Shakespeare (and Marlowe): "I think of Venus only as a symbol, a kind of intertextual allusion" ("Actaeon," 112). For support, see Hulse, *Verse*, 158; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 66.

[19] On Venus' gender reversal, see, e.g., Kolin, ed., "*Venus and Adonis*," 9, 12; Dubrow, *Victors*, 26, 34.

[20] Critics neglect Virgil but for isolated references, see Hulse, *Verse*, 175; D. C. Allen, "On *Venus and Adonis*," 101, 107n4; Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 154, 175, 166–67. On the pastoral setting, see Lee,

Shakespeare does insert a formal pastoral representation: "herdsmen and their lives" (Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 22). When Adonis opens his lips, they are "Like a red morn, that ever yet betoken'd . . . / Sorrow to shepherds, woe unto the birds, / Gusts and foul flaws to herdmen and to herds" (453–56). Moreover, hunting is a traditional activity in pastoral literature, as Spenser's Colin Clout reports in the *December* eclogue: "I . . . / . . . joyed oft to chace the trembling Pricket."[21] Equally to the point, the myth of Venus and Adonis has a long connection with pastoral; as Sir Sidney Lee observed in 1905, the origins of Ovid's version of the myth derive from his self-conscious emulation of "Theocritus and Bion, the pastoral poets of Greece."[22]

Just as Shakespeare's Ovidian combination of poetry and theatre has a deep connection with Marlowe, so his Virgilian dyad of pastoral and epic is connected with Spenser. Given Spenser's recurrent presence as an intertext both in modern editions of the poem and in recent criticism on it, this classification will also be easy to sustain.[23] Unanimously, critics have understood Shakespeare's homage to lie in his ideological response to Spenser's twofold representation of the myth of erotic desire in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*: the myth weaved into the tapestries of Malecasta's Castle Joyous in canto 1, and the appearance of Venus and Adonis in the Book's core canto, the famed philosophical Gardens of Adonis episode.[24] Yet A. C. Hamilton provides a clue that helps us to re-route the conversation from the characters' desire to the author's career: "It was inevitable that Shakespeare's first work, one in which he announced himself as a poet, should be dedicated to Venus. For the major poets in the English tradition, Spenser and Chaucer, were poets of love" ("*Venus and Adonis*," 13).

Shakespeare's inaugural self-presentation as a poet of Spenserian pastoral love is complicated by what we should expect: his inclusion of epic topoi.

"Introduction," 89–90; Bush, "*Venus and Adonis*," 91–92; D. C. Allen, "On *Venus and Adonis*," 101; Griffin, "Contraries," 46, 47, 52; Muir, "*Venus and Adonis*," 9–10; D. G. Watson, "Contraries," 58, 60; Yoch, "Eye of Venus," 61, 66; Dubrow, *Victors*, 52, 61–62; Kolin, ed., *Venus and Adonis*, 4; Merrix, "Hollow Cradle," 345, 348; Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 50–51. Kiernan sees the Venus–Adonis conflict as one between Virgilian and Ovidian art ("*Venus and Adonis*," 84–85).

[21] Spenser, *December*, 25–27. On the hunt, including links with pastoral and with the Venus and Adonis myth, see M. J. B. Allen, "The Chase"; E. Berry, *Hunt*.

[22] Lee, "*Venus and Adonis*," 90; see Bush, "*Venus and Adonis*," 94–95; H. T. Price, "Function of Imagery," 110–11.

[23] As with Ovid and Marlowe, most critics mention Spenser; see, e.g., A. C. Hamilton, "*Venus and Adonis*," 6, 8–9, 12–13, 15; Muir, "*Venus and Adonis*," 4; D. G. Watson, "Contraries," 34, 41, 59; Williams, "Coming of Age," 772–73; Greenfield, "Allegorical Impulses"; Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 56. Most would agree with Paglia that *Venus and Adonis* is a "homage . . . to Spenser" (194). Hyland recalls that Spenser had used the *Venus* sixain stanza in the opening and closing eclogues of the *Calender* (68).

[24] On Spenser, see Berger, "Actaeon"; on Spenser and Shakespeare here, see A. C. Hamilton, "*Venus and Adonis*," 7, 15; Greenfield, "Allegorical Impulses," 485–86.



For Spenser himself, pastoral is not an independent genre that the youthful poet pens simply in his idleness; it is the first phase of a laureate career leading to epic.[25] Accordingly, Shakespeare plots his Ovidian fiction of poetry and theatre along a Virgilian path, leading from the domain of pastoral to that of epic.[26]

When read in this literary context, Venus comes to represent, not simply the great goddess of beauty and desire from classical myth, but both Virgil's Venus from the *Aeneid*, the feminine fount appropriated for masculine empire, and her Spenserian guises in the Legend of Chastity. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare associates Adonis with the epic warrior. In lines 97–108, Venus appeals to Adonis' martial temperament when she cites the attraction to her felt by the "direful god of war, / Whose sinowy neck in battle ne'er did bow, / Who conquers where he comes in every jar, / Yet hath he been my captive, and my slave" (98–101). Her subsequent description of Mars reveals that she has seduced the great god into traveling down the Ovidian path, from epic achievement to elegiac dalliance:

> Over my altars hath he hung his lance,
> . . .
> And for my sake hath learn'd 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.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 103–08)

The references here to "dance" and especially to the "drum" sound a literary representation.[27] Moreover, Shakespeare shows Mars in terms strikingly similar to those with which Ovid had presented himself in the *Amores* (and Marlowe in his translation), especially 1. 1 and 2. 1, with line 106 constituting a formal listing of Ovid's (and Marlowe's) elegiac activity: *toy*, *wanton*, *dally*, *smile*, and *jest* (cf. Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 59). Venus recalls her union with Mars precisely to entice Adonis to walk down the Ovidian path himself: "'Thus he that overrul'd I overswayed, / Leading him

[25] On Spenser's "pastoral of progression," see Cheney, "Pastorals."

[26] Only Hulse places Shakespeare's "minor epic" along the "Virgilian path": "The minor epic was, in effect, the proving ground for lyric and epic . . . It was a genre for young poets ceasing to be young, a form somewhere above the pastoral or sonnet and below the epic, the transition between the two in the *gradus Vergilianus*" (*Verse*, 12; see 175). While Hulse plots *Venus and Adonis* on the Virgilian track, he supplies no detail.

[27] See Kiernan, "*Venus and Adonis*": "Epic poetry has been reduced to the level of a love elegy" (90; see 92–93). Other critics referring to epic include D. C. Allen, "On *Venus and Adonis*," 105; Griffin, "Contraries," 52; Doebler, "Many Faces," 39; Hulse, *Verse*, 166; Dubrow, *Victors*, 52, 61–62; Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 56. On the drum as a trope for counter-Virgilian epic, see Marlowe, *Lucan's First Book*, 6; Cheney, *Profession*, 29–32.

prisoner in a red rose chain'" (109–10). Venus of course fails to persuade Adonis to walk down the Ovidian path, for the hunter chooses to walk down the path of Virgil. But what is striking here is that Shakespeare would present their opposition as a dialogue between two established aesthetics and models for a literary career.

In lines 259–324, Shakespeare inserts the episode of the steed and the jennet – the only image of sexual reciprocity in the poem: "He looks upon his love, and neighs unto her, / She answers him, as if she knew his mind" (307–08). As Hulse observes, "Adonis's horse is an epic steed, fit for the fields of praise, yet he is also a descendent of Plato's dark horse, the emblem of license" (*Verse*, 166). Dressed in "rich caparisons, or trappings gay" (286) and even sporting a "compass'd crest" (272), Adonis' horse mirrors the god of war himself in marching down the path from epic warfare to elegiac desire: "The iron bit he crusheth 'tween his teeth, / Controlling what he was controlled with" (269–70). As F. T. Prince indicates, the primary source of Shakespeare's description of the jennet in lines 295–98 is "Virgil's description of the well-bred horse in the *Georgics*, III. 75–94" (Prince, ed., *Poems*, 19). The contrast between the male horse and its master, signaled when the epic steed "Breaketh his rein" (264) and hies him from the primrose bank "unto the wood" (323), may also function as a generic indicator.

Finally, in lines 595–98 Shakespeare applies the union of jennet and steed to the goddess and her lover, when metaphorizing the embrace of Venus and Adonis as a chivalric tilting joust: "Now is she in the very lists of love" (595). As Hulse remarks, Adonis "has a chance to reenact his horse's epic deed," although the "moment of union slips away, love's freedom and bondage still at strife" (*Verse*, 167). Shakespeare inserts epic topoi into his pastoral landscape, but he follows Marlowe in Ovidianizing the Virgilian/Spenserian representation.

The structure of *Venus and Adonis* helps support this argument. Robert P. Merrix divides the poem into two parts ("Hollow Cradle," 345): in lines 1–810, Shakespeare lays his scene in the "pastoral setting" of the "primrose bank" (151) in order to narrate the action of Venus attempting to seduce Adonis unsuccessfully; then in lines 811–1194 the author moves his scene to "an alien environment" in order to narrate the action of the Boar killing Adonis, of Adonis transforming into a flower, and of Venus prophesying misery for all future lovers. While Merrix joins many critics in locating the scene of the first part in the domain of pastoral (see also 348), he never quite says that the second part moves into epic: "In leaving the static primrose bank, Adonis enters the deadly world of the hunt – the world of militant



chivalry" (350). He does follow Marcelle Thiébaux in identifying the boar with "dangerous militant activity as dangerous and exhilarating as warfare" (350), while Thiébaux himself notes the "epic magnitude in which boars loom . . . as adversaries . . . of heroes" ("Mouth of the Boar," 290; see Merrix, "Hollow Cradle," 351). For his part, Shakespeare structures *Venus and Adonis* via the twin domains of the Virgilian/Spenserian progression from pastoral to epic, but then he plots a Marlovian narrative in which Ovidian figures of poetry and theatre sing songs and perform dramatic roles along the Virgilian path.[28]

Hence, just as Shakespeare presents Venus' poetry and theatre as a form of Marlowe's Ovidian aesthetics, so he presents the Virgilian figure of pastoral and epic, Adonis, voicing an aesthetics that resembles Spenser's. Most obviously, Adonis is a figure of Spenserian chastity – what Venus scornfully terms "fruitless chastity" (751). Adonis prizes his virginity, like Spenser's Virgilian huntress Belphoebe, and refuses to participate in erotic play: "I know not love . . . nor will not know it" (409).[29] Specifically, Adonis imitates Spenser's chaste Neoplatonic aesthetics from Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene* (see Hulse, *Verse*, 165). Immediately after accusing Venus of voicing her "idle over-handled theme" in a "treatise" (770, 774), Adonis lapses into his own "text": "Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled, / Since sweating Lust on earth usurp'd his name" (793–94).

Adonis has not just been reading Plato and his Renaissance philosophical heirs, "invoking the Platonic distinction, newly set forth by Ficino and others, between Venus Urania (or heavenly, chaste Venus) and the earthier Venus Pandemons" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 119). He has also been reading an English poet like Spenser, who indicates that he himself has been reading Plato, Ficino, and others:

> Most sacred fire, that burnest mightily
> In living brests, ykindled first above,
> . . .
> Not that same, which doth base affections move
> In brutish minds, and filthy lust inflame.[30]
> (*Faerie Queene*, 3. 3. 1)

Like Spenser, Adonis distinguishes sharply between "love" and "lust," imagines love to be from "heaven," and chooses divine love over destructive "lust"

[28] According to Mortimer, "Shakespeare rewrites the relation between Venus and Adonis [from the Ovidian and Italian traditions] as a conflict" (*Variable Passions*, 195).

[29] Keach observes in passing that the epyllion poets of the 1590s "challenge Spenser's vision of the 'glorious fire' of love ideally realized in the creative chastity of marriage" (*Erotic Narratives*, 232).

[30] For support, see Hamilton, ed., *The Fairie Queene*, 326.

(see Belsey, "Trompe-L'oeil," 271). The "text" to which Adonis refers as "old" is almost certainly the "antique history" of *The Faerie Queene* (2. Proem 1). In short, while we can view the opposition between Venus and Adonis in sexual terms, we may also view it in terms of the 1590s clash between an Ovidian aesthetics of poetry and theatre, represented by Marlowe, and a Virgilian aesthetics of pastoral and epic, represented by Spenser.[31]

### THE OVIDIAN EPIGRAPH AND THE *DEDICATORY EPISTLE*

The two prefatory items to the 1594 quarto of *Venus and Adonis* create the lens through which we view the poem. Specifically, the epigraph constructs a lens for an Ovidian career:

*vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flauus Apollo*
*pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.* (Ovid, *Amores* 1. 15. 35–36)

Most often, critics read this epigraph as simple Ovidian eroticism – a philosophy of desire (see Hamilton, "*Venus and Adonis*," 7, 12). Ovid, however, distinguishes between his own elegiac verse and one that is "cheap" (Marlowe's translation, already quoted, and usually cited by editors). Thus the Roman poet foregrounds the difference in cultural value between his own higher form of poetry and a lower art practiced by others.

Yet long ago Muriel Bradbrook understood Shakespeare to be using the epigraph to "dissociat[e] . . . himself from [the] baseness . . . of popular playwrighting" and to turn to "courtly poetry," while recently a series of critics have followed suit.[32] We may add that Shakespeare's dialectic of poetry and playwriting originates in the *Amores* itself. In *Venus and Adonis*, the Ovidian epigraph functions as a career announcement for the famed man of the theatre's turn from stage to page.

If the epigraph constructs an Ovidian lens for viewing *Venus and Adonis*, the *Dedicatory Epistle* to Southampton introduces a corresponding Virgilian lens of lower and higher genres, pastoral/georgic to epic:

[31] Burrow sees *Venus and Adonis* "worrying about the risks of publishing and selling a poem" ("Life," 29; see 35). Dubrow, *Victors*, sees Venus as "the generic potentials of Ovidian mythological poetry," Adonis as "the pieties of *Ovide moralisé*," and their opposition as a "tension between two possible ways of imitating and adapting Ovid" (48). For an erotic understanding of the conflict, see Streitberger, "Ideal Conduct," 172; Kahn, "Eros," 182; Hulse, *Verse*, 165; Merrix "Hollow Cradle," 343. For the rhetorical opposition of selfhood, see Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 27–32.

[32] Bradbrook, "Beasts," 62–63. See Bate, *Genius*, 18; Halpern, "'Pining,'" 377; Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle*, 60; Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 1. These critics are not in dialogue with one another.



> I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your Lordship, nor how the world will censure me for choosing so strong a prop to support so weak a burden. Only if your Honour seem but pleased, I account myself highly praised, and vow to take advantage of all idle hours, till I have honoured you with some graver labour. But if the first heir of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather: and never after ear so barren a land, for fear it yield me still so bad a harvest. I leave it to your Honourable survey, and your Honour to your heart's content, which I wish may always answer your own wish, and the world's hopeful expectation. (*Riverside*, 1799)

Here Shakespeare relies on a broad European discourse originating in Virgil's *Eclogues*. In Eclogue 6, for instance, Tityrus reports that he "first" sported his Muse in the "strains" of the pastoral "woods," but that when he tried to "sing of kings and battles," Apollo warned him not to step beyond the bounds of the shepherd (1–10). Most critics believe that Virgil relies on the tradition of the *recusatio* to predict in a rather unspecified way the epic that turned out to be the *Aeneid* (Farrell, *"Georgics,"* 314; see 291–314). Ovid was among the first to imitate this discourse – and right where we might expect it, in *Amores*, 1. 15: "Tityrus and the harvest, and the arms of Aeneas, will be read as long as Rome shall be capital of the world she triumphs o'er" (25–26).

For Renaissance writers, the Virgilian discourse is characterized by the self-presentation of a youthful writer who admits the lowness of his present publication yet paradoxically predicts his ability to write a work of greater merit and higher literary form.[33] Here is Marlowe addressing Mary Sidney on behalf of his recently deceased friend, Thomas Watson, in the 1592 *Amintae gaudia*:

> you who imbue my yet unripe quill with the spirit of a lofty rage; by whose aid, wretch as I am, I believe that I can achieve more than my unripe natural talents are accustomed to bring forth . . . So shall I, whose scanty riches are but the shore-myrtle of Venus and the evergreen tresses of the Penean nymph [Daphne], call you to my aid on the first page of every poem. (Marlowe, *Dedicatory Epistle* to *Amintae Gaudia*, reprinted in Pendry and Maxwell, eds. *Christopher Marlowe*, 397)

Marlowe relies on the terms of the Virgilian progression, telling the Countess he will turn from works produced by his "yet unripe quill" to those penned in "the spirit of a lofty rage," but then he superbly Ovidianizes

[33] See Sannazaro, *Arcadia*: "he by nature having a genius disposed to higher things, and not contenting himself with so humble a strain, took in exchange that reed that now you see there, larger and newer than the others, to be the better able to sing of greater things" (ch. 10: 104–05; see ch. 7: 74–75).

(and Petrarchizes) the discourse, acknowledging that currently his "scanty riches" foreground Venus and Daphne but then promises to invoke the Countess' high standing "on the first page of every [future] poem."[34]

A year later, Shakespeare imitates such a Virgilian discourse in his poem on "the shore-myrtle of Venus." Thus, he addresses Southampton in the terms of husbandry ("prop," "burden," "labour," "ear," "barren a land," "yield," "harvest," "survey") in order to introduce *Venus and Adonis* as a lower verse form ("unpolished lines . . . weak . . . first heir . . . deformed"). But then he promises Southampton "some graver labour" – a higher verse form with greater "yield" in the "harvest."[35] While traditionally readers have found Shakespeare's "countryside" metaphors simply evoking his rural Warwickshire (here and in the poem itself), we need to recall that such rhetorical language was also part of the discourse of a young poet presenting himself as a Virgilian author of pastoral, including in competition with England's Virgil in the progression to "some graver labour." Thus, Shakespeare's rural metaphors underscore the author's need for maturation and his promise of it; they also signal his transference of this developmental model to the career of his patron, as the concluding (double) resonance of "hopeful expectation" entreats.

Together, the epigraph from Ovid's *Amores* and the *Dedicatory Epistle* to Southampton create the double lens through which to view the poem; that lens is not strictly erotic but literary. The two prefatory items present "William Shakespeare" as an "author" with a generically based literary career, in competition with other authors with literary careers. Specifically, the Ovidian and Virgilian career models in the epigraph and the dedication do not allude simply to the careers of the two great classical authors. In this Shakespearean typology of intertextuality, they allude to Elizabethan England's successors to each of them, especially the two most famous practitioners during the early 1590s: the Ovidian Marlowe and the Virgilian Spenser.

## THE OVIDIAN INTERTEXT

The Ovidian and Virgilian career models from the prefatory material shed fresh light on the primary intertext of *Venus and Adonis*: Ovid's telling of the myth in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*. Critics have seemingly exhausted

[34] For details, see Cheney, *Profession*, 223–26.

[35] Roe notes "metaphors of human and natural growth" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 78), while Lee notices "impressions of the country-side" ("*Venus and Adonis*," 89). The Renaissance does not always oust georgic from the Virgilian progression (Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 240); at times, it enfolds georgic into both pastoral and epic (Tylus, "Spenser").



this topic, but they tend to confine themselves to Shakespeare's reworking of Ovidian sexuality. Some recall the complex placement of the myth in Ovid's poem – as one of the songs of Orpheus. But we can add two features of Ovid's Orphic representation that are crucial to a fuller understanding of Shakespeare's Ovidian intertextuality.

The first is that Ovid presents Orpheus not simply as a poet who has lost his wife, but more precisely as an author with a literary career, enacting a progression of literary forms:

> . . . he raised his voice in this song: "From Jove, O Muse, my mother – for all things yield to the sway of Jove – inspire my song! Oft have I sung the power of Jove before; I have sung the giants in a heavier strain. . . . But now I need the gentler touch, for I would sing of boys, beloved by gods, and maidens inflamed by unnatural love." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10. 148–53)

Orpheus tells how his loss of Eurydice leads him to turn from songs about Jove and his battle with the Giants to songs about amorous desire addressed to young men and young women. From the outset, Ovid's story of Orpheus posits an intimate link between sexual desire and literary production. Eurydice's death leads Orpheus to make a career change: from singing a higher form of song to singing a lower one – from epic to elegy.[36]

Orpheus' turn from Virgilian epic Gigantomachy to erotic elegy reverses – and probably evokes – Ovid's own career turn opening the *Metamorphoses* itself: "My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms. Ye gods . . . bring down my song in unbroken strains from the world's very beginning even unto the present time" (1. 1–4). In this opening, writes E. J. Kenney, "Ovid has been metamorphosed from elegist into epicist" ("Ovid" 137) – a metamorphosis confirmed later in Book 1 when Ovid narrates the Gigantomachy (151–60). Yet Ovid also reverses the career predicament he suffered back in the *Amores*, where he tried to write Gigantomachy but turned instead to elegy; in Marlowe's translation,

> I durst the great celestial battle tell,
> . . .
> Jove and Jove's thunderbolts I had in hand,
> . . .
> My wench her dore shut, Joves affairs I left,
> . . .
> Toys, and light Elegies my darts I took.
> (Marlowe, *Ovid's Elegies*, 2. 1. 11–21)

[36] See Sharrock: the Gigantomachy is "the theme which above all others epitomizes martial epic, which the most daring of literary exploits and exactly that attempted by Virgil" (*Seduction*, 115).

In Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, then, Ovid presents Orpheus as he had presented himself in the *Amores*: as a poet who turns from epic to elegy. This network of authorial representations suggests a new context for viewing Shakespeare's appropriation of the Venus and Adonis myth.

The second feature useful to recall is that Ovid presents Orpheus moving from epic to elegy by unwittingly participating in the genre of tragedy, as the theatre simile introducing the death of Orpheus in Book 11 makes clear:

> Then these [the Maenads] turned bloody hands against Orpheus . . . and as when in the amphitheatre in the early morning of the spectacle the doomed stag in the arena is the prey of dogs. They rushed upon the bard and hurled at him their wands wreathed with green vines. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11. 23–28)

According to Stephen Hinds, the Ovidian *locus amoenus* here has "built-in associations . . . with performance" (*Metamorphosis*, 35). As the indirect representation of the Actaeon myth indicates, the performance is in the ampitheater of tragedy, as Orpheus undergoes a grim death enacting the biography of Ovid, who used the Actaeon myth to represent his predicament in the Augustan state – both before and after his exile.[37] Ovid's use of the topoi of tragedy reinforces his reference to the genre of tragedy: the Maenads are the priestesses of Bacchus, god of tragedy (17), and they kill Orpheus with the implement held by Dame Tragedy in *Amores*, 3. 1: the thyrsos. Structurally, the tragic death of Orpheus marks the end of the second part of the *Metamorphoses*, which Ovid divides into three parts – "thrice five rolls about changing forms" (*Tristia*, 1. 1. 117–18): Books 1–5 represent love elegy; Books 6–10, tragedy; and Books 11–15, epic.[38] Just as Orpheus' singing of both epic and elegy mirrors Ovid's self-presentation in the *Amores*, so does Orpheus' link with tragedy, since (as we have seen) the penultimate poem of Book 2 ends precisely with Ovid's self-presentation as a tragedian.[39]

The context of the Ovidian story is a complex one, as the reader literally experiences a series of poems within poems: Ovid tells the story of Orpheus proper (1–155), which then divides into five parts: Orpheus' marriage with Eurydice; the death of this beloved wife and his descent to the underworld to use his art to win her a second life; the failure of this artistic endeavor

[37] See Cheney, *Profession*, 164–65, 311nn17–20. For Actaeon in the simile, see N. J. Vickers, "Diana," 99–100; Enterline, "Embodied Voices," 127–28.

[38] Professor Joseph Farrell suggested this idea to me, and noted that the pattern has never been examined (personal communication, June 1998).

[39] On Orpheus and tragedy, see DeNeef, "Poetics of Orpheus," 22, 35; on Ovid's Orpheus and tragedy, see Segal, *Orpheus*, 55–56.



and his subsequent shunning of "love of womankind" in favor of the love of boys (79–80); his corresponding turn from epic to elegy, the gods to youths and maidens; and the series of five tales that he actually sings (143–739), the last of which is the story of Venus and Adonis (503–59, 708–39). Altogether, Ovid's Orphic story narrates the tragedy of desire – in large part, of marital desire: "Marriage . . . is a fatal thing" (621).

What the *Metamorphoses* shares with the *Amores* is a keystone of Ovidian aesthetics – the one that is more foundational than wit, eroticism, style, and subversion:[40] what we have called Ovid's elegiac attenuation of Virgilian epic. This principle forms the inaugural base of Ovid's career, since the very opening of the *Amores* responds to the opening of the *Aeneid* through attenuation. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid attenuates Virgil on a more global scale than he does in the opening to the *Amores* by condensing the narrative of the twelve-book *Aeneid* into a few scattered lines in Books 13–15. Within the fiction, Orpheus most fully represents the Ovidian poet par excellence, and his turn from epic to elegy narrativizes the principle of Virgilian attenuation, which the Orphic poet-figure Venus herself extends.[41] Thus, Ovid's self-reflexivity about his art and career creates an intriguing equation: between Ovid, Orpheus, and Venus as types of artist (male mortal, bisexual mortal immortalized, immortal female). Specifically, Ovid's attenuating Orphic *cursus* of failed epic, elegy, and final tragedy, scripted to oppose imperial nationalism – a replay of the very *cursus* from the *Amores* – counters the imperial Virgilian *cursus* of pastoral leading to georgic and epic.

Ovid's presentation of Venus as a cross-dressed Orphic-Ovidian author of poetry and theatre is deeply pertinent to Shakespeare's representation of the goddess in his amorous minor epic. Elizabethan authors, from Gascoigne and Spenser to Daniel and Shakespeare himself, use the genre of the female complaint to "cross-dress" their authorial voices, literally "taking on the voice of a fallen woman" (Wall, *Imprint*, 260).[42] As we shall see, by rewriting Ovid's elegiac myth of counter-Virgilian epic, Shakespeare only appears to follow Marlowe in scripting the Ovidian principle for the purpose of attenuating the imperial Virgilian project of Spenser.

[40] On these four traits as the cornerstones of Ovid, see Keach, *Erotic Narratives*, 29.

[41] On Orpheus as the arch-Ovidian poet, see Segal, *Orpheus*, 54–72, 81–94: "Ovid's Orpheus verges close to becoming a persona for Ovidian aesthetics, particularly for an aesthetics deeply conscious of the distance between the narrative of the *Metamorphoses* and [Virgil's *Aeneid*]" (93).

[42] Wall, *Imprint*, briefly discusses both the Sonnets (195–98) and *Lucrece* (214–20, 272–73), but not *Venus*.

### SHAKESPEAREAN ATTENUATION

What more specifically is the attenuating fiction that Shakespeare tells in *Venus and Adonis* about the two rival Elizabethan aesthetics? Initially, it is the tragic story about their fatal separation; but finally it is the poignantly comedic story about their intimate Shakespearean interlock. A clue to this reading lies in the structurally mirroring representations of an arch-artistic symbol in both the opening and the closing stanzas: the chariot. For Renaissance readers, the *locus classicus* of Shakespeare's imagery is Virgil's self-presentation in Book 3 of the *Georgics*, where the poet imagines himself driving "a hundred four-horse chariots beside the stream" (18), during his triumphal entrance into Rome in the presence of Augustus Caesar (1–39). As we have seen, critics locate the Virgilian horse in Shakespeare's steed and jennet episode. For Virgil himself, the chariot is thus an icon of his poetic art's immortal power, the reward of fame for his georgic labor.[43] As we might expect, Virgil's rival successor appropriates the symbolic Virgilian chariot in order to conclude the *Amores*, which in Marlowe's translation reads:

> Tender Love's mother, a new poet get;
> This last end [*meta*: chariot racing post] to my elegies is set,
> . . .
> Horned Bacchus greater fury doth distil,
> A greater ground [*area maior*: race-track] with great horse is to till.
> Weak elegies, delightful Muse, farewell. (*Ovid's Elegies*, 3. 14. 1–19)

With this projected "meta" or chariot turn on the literary race-track from lower to higher genres, elegy to tragedy, the poet concludes his elegiac collection.[44]

In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare's opening stanza introduces a superb two-line miniature of the sun and the morn in order to establish a temporal setting, with a core idea of erotic and artistic separation. Yet we peer at this miniature through the lens of the Ovidian epigraph, which features Apollo, god of the sun and god of poetry:

> Even as the sun with purple-color'd face
> Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 1–2)

[43] See also *Georgics*, 2. 541–42; Hardie, *Epic Successors*, 100–01.

[44] On Ovid's chariot as a symbol of his poetry, see Kenney, "Poeta," 206; for details applicable to the Ovidian Marlowe in rivalry with the Virgilian Spenser, see Cheney, *Profession*, 50–51, 283n5.



Shakespeare's little narrative inscribes the dynamic the poem will enlarge: the sexes are intrinsically separate, because the male departs from the domestic space of the female to perform his daily work (see Roe, ed., *Poems*, 79). As Prince notes, the identification of the sun as the lover of the morn rewrites the myth of the aged Tithonus as the lover of the Dawn (Prince ed., *Poems*, 3). One justification for Shakespeare's revision may be the link between the Ovidian erotic action of the poem and the Ovidian career model featured in the epigraph.

The remaining lines of the opening stanza help us to measure the import of this link:

> Rose-cheek'd Adonis hied him to the chase;
> Hunting he lov'd, but love he laugh'd to scorn.
> Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
> And like a bold-fac'd suitor gins to woo him.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 3–6)

Since the opening phrase of the poem, "Even as," can also mean "just like," we may discern a simile that likens Adonis' hying him to the hunt to the sun's taking his leave of the morn (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 79). Moreover, the phrase suggests that Adonis follows the sun in his daily course. In both cases, a male abandons a female: the sun, the morn; Adonis, Venus. Evidently, Shakespeare identifies both a cultural problem and its cause: men and women remain separate because men "take . . . and leave," as the country maid laments in *A Lover's Complaint* (305).

Prince glosses "purple-colour'd" with *The Faerie Queene*, 1. 2. 7, which reads:

> Now when the rosy fingred Morning faire,
> Weary of aged Tithones saffron bed,
> Had spred her purple robe through deawy aire,
> And the high hils Titan discovered,
> The royall virgin [Una] shooke off drowsy-hed.
> (*The Faerie Queene*, 1. 2. 7)

Spenser's myth for the time of day is the opposite of Shakespeare's: for Spenser, the female morning is the aggressive figure of separation, actively spreading her robe because she is "weary" of her elderly mortal husband. As Hamilton observes, "the mortal Tithonus . . . was granted immortality but not eternal youth" (Hamilton, ed., *Fairie Queene*, 45). Morning has made a mistake, and here she pays the price through her impatience. As Hamilton also observes, "To connect the virgin Aurora and Una, the classical and Christian day-stars, S. provides a pastiche of classical sources: **rosy-fingred**

is the stock Homeric epithet, **saffron bed** is Virgil's *croceum cubile* (*Aen.* iv 585), **purple robe** is Ovid's *purpureae Aurorae* (*Met.* iii 184)" (Hamilton, ed., *Fairie Queene*, 45). In other words, Spenser's passage derives from the epic tradition. We can add that Shakespeare's meteorological report opposes Spenser's, wherein the Redcrosse Knight, under the spell of the evil magician Archimago, has fled from Una (1. 2. 6), who arises in the morning to seek him out. On the one hand, Spenser simply versifies the coming of day, but on the other he invests the weather with philosophy. Anticipating Shakespeare, he links the morning miniature with the action of his poem; unlike Shakespeare, Spenser does so through a principle of opposition: whereas Aurora is weary of Tithonus and leaves his bed, Una is faithful to her lover, who has abandoned her. At stake for Spenser is the importance of faith, both erotic and religious, but also the romantic matrix of his epic action celebrating "mery England" (1. 10. 61).

According to John Roe, Shakespeare's phrase "purple-color'd" means "red, blushing," and has "classical origins": "It also occurs in the classical derived genres: in tragedy or epic poetry, it describes the colour of blood (invariably shed in a noble action), whereas in lyric or erotic poems it may denote passion or even voluptuousness. Here it may carry several shades of meaning from regality down to embarrassment, especially through associations of debauch, purple being the colour of the grape which signifies the god of excess, Bacchus" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 79). Thus the purple-colored face of the sun god constitutes a site for both generic and philosophical anxiety; it is a locus of conflict between the high genres of tragedy or epic and the low genres of lyric or erotic elegy, as well as that between the heroic action of regal duty and the shameful action of sexual indulgence.

Both Roe, *Poems*, 79 and Prince, *Poems*, 3, gloss the related phrase in the opening stanza, "Rose-cheek'd Adonis," with the identical phrase in *Hero and Leander*, where Marlowe describes the occasion for the poem's initial action: "The men of wealthy Sestos, every year, / For his sake whom their goddess held so dear, / Rose-cheeked Adonis, kept a solemn feast" (1.91–93). This occasion helps explain the dress Hero wears, which is embroidered with the Venus and Adonis myth. Hero is a priestess of Venus, and her love for Leander enacts the Goddess' love for Adonis. The rose-colored cheek of Adonis may echo the Elizabethan pronunciation of Wriothesley, Rosely or Risely, but it also links Adonis with the sun god, imprinting his face with both the sexual and generic stamp we have identified. Like Marlowe, Shakespeare writes an Ovidian epyllion, and like him he uses the genre to represent the inherent separation of the sexes. The matching imitations of Spenser and Marlowe in the opening stanza



announce Shakespeare's rivalry with these two titans of the literary scene during the early 1590s.[45]

If the opening stanza implies an image of the authorial chariot moving along its path, the concluding stanza makes the image explicit:

> Thus weary of the world, away she hies,
> And yokes her silver doves, by whose swift aid
> Their mistress mounted through the empty skies,
> In her light chariot, quickly is convey'd,
> Holding their course to Paphos, where their queen
> Means to immure herself, and not be seen.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 1189–94)

This final image mirrors the opening one by representing a pattern of separation between the sexes; in both cases, the female is alone within her own domestic space, in a state of grief over the loss of her male lover. The primary difference is that at the end the female is the agent of her own immuring (cf. Hamilton, "*Venus and Adonis*," 15).

The concluding chariot image also evokes an author's literary career (cf. Doebler, "Many Faces," 42; Baumlin, "Birth," 204–05), presenting not an Apollonian *cursus* but a Venerean one, as the goddess uses her chariot to fly from "the world" to "Paphos." Venus' turn from earth to heaven suggests a turn from a lower to a higher form, mirroring the conclusion to Ovid's *Amores* and Marlowe's translation, in which the Ovidian poet tells Venus that she needs to "get" a "new poet" because he is turning from elegy to tragedy.[46]

Shakespeare's detailed narrative of Venus' courting of Adonis represents the precise contents of their opposing aesthetics. In the most famous part of the "tale" that Venus "tunes" to the "pretty ear" of Adonis, she relies on a richly embroidered language of sexual metaphor:

> "Fondling," she saith, "since I have hemm'd thee here
> Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
> I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer:
> 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.

[45] In his edition, Burrow briefly discusses Shakespeare's rivalry with both Marlowe and Spenser here, including the principle that authors of epyllion "loved to miniaturize the poems they were imitating" (*Sonnets and Poems*, 17).

[46] Macfie ("Ovid's Poetry") suggests that the chariot image closing Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* deploys the conventional image concluding classical tragedy, and we may re-route the idea to the closing of Shakespeare's *Venus*.

> "Within this limit is relief enough,
> Sweet bottom grass and high delightful plain,
> Round rising hillocks, breaks obscure and rough,
> To shelter thee from tempest and from rain;
> Then be my deer, since I am such a park,
> No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark."
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 229–40)

The great goddess uses the deer park metaphor to versify a Venerean aesthetics of desire, an eroticized poesis. Presenting herself as a figure for sexual love, she equates her body with the land in order to voice a piercing philosophy of desire.

Although this passage is famous for its titillating power to arouse erotic desire (see S. Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems*, 73), it manages to voice a philosophy of eros tracing to Plato's *Symposium*. Certainly, Shakespeare pens a masculine fantasy in which the goddess of love and beauty – Plato's Venus Pandemos rather than Venus Urania – invites a young man to come live with her and be her love – a fantasy that would appeal to Shakespeare's youthful patron and friends. Yet Venus' use of poetic metaphor suggests that she is not simply opening her body to pleasing recreation; she is making an argument. The image of the lone deer feeding where it wills, "on mountain, or in dale," appeals to the appetite, even as it offers the freedom of native nourishment. The deer's freedom within the "ivory pale" further promises security and protection – of a maternal nature. Specifically, Venus claims that she can open her body as a park to "shelter" Adonis from life's vicissitudes, "from tempest and from rain." Her physiological park will allow her dear to mature freely, pleasurably fenced off from the masculine warfare of the hunt: "No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark." In short, Venus versifies the deer park to compel Adonis into believing that her female body – with all its nutritive pleasures – can protect him from time and death: love can fence off suffering and tragedy in a recreative park of eternal youth. Unlike Plato's Venus Pandemos in the *Symposium*, this Venus Pandemos philosophizes desire as a principle and force of immortality (see Cheney, "Alcestis"). Significantly, Venus' philosophy is that of Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd" – with its discourse of "boy eternal," a phrase used by Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale* (1. 2. 65; see Cheney, *Profession*, 82–85).

Since Venus is voicing her philosophy of boy eternal as part of the song she sings rhetorically to Adonis, her *locus amoenus* functions as a *locus poeticus*.[47] Generic indicators may lie in the *high/low* imagery of "mountain" and

[47] See Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 26: "The scene is a playwright's reading of a playwright's poem."



"dale," familiar as a central trope of pastoral/epic from Spenser's *Calender*, as this from Hobbinol in some professional advice to Colin Clout in the *June* eclogue: "Leave me those hilles . . . / And to the dales resort" (19–21). Moreover, the "pleasant fountain" is not merely the female womb but also the Ovidian *fons sacer*, the site of Ovid's professional confrontation with Dame Elegy and Dame Tragedy in *Amores*, 3. 1. 3, as well as the "Muses' well" introduced in the Ovidian epigraph to Shakespeare's poem. Venus becomes Shakespeare's arch-representation of Marlowe's Ovidian aesthetics of invitational desire.[48]

In a subsequent passage, Shakespeare stages the tragedic reality of Venus' aesthetics, when he returns to the foraging metaphor after Venus and Adonis "fall to the earth" (546):

> Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey
> . . .
> Whose vultur thought doth pitch the price so high
> That she will draw his lips' rich treasure dry
> . . .
> With blindfold fury she begins to forage;
> Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil
> . . .
> Planting oblivion, beating reason back,
> Forgetting shame's pure blush and honor's wrack.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 547–58)

No sooner does Venus fulfill her wish to hem her dear within the circuit of her ivory park than the goddess undergoes an Ovidian metamorphoses into a bird of prey, a "vultur" filled with the "thought" of "blindfold fury." Venus begins to "forage," even as her landscape erupts like a volcano, smoking and reeking, depleting the fountain on Adonis' lips. In this astonishing photograph of the female in the throes of desire, Shakespeare emphasizes the subjective and moral consequences. Rather than nurturing immortality, she "plants oblivion," the arch-fear of Western (masculine) "thought," a dark condition of forgetfulness and of being forgotten, the total erasure of identity and achievement, the loss of consciousness – a kind of psychic and reputational blackout.[49] In the process, Venus' oblivious fury beats

[48] Dubrow begins *Victors* with the deer park passage (21–24), but even though she sees Venus "twisting Petrarchism," she calls the passage "a charming rendition of the playful sexual fantasies in which lover's indulge" (22–23). We might see in Venus, however, a localized version of the "Tudor aesthetics" emphasized by Hulse in his essay by this title: "the debate about the nature of imitation is itself represented by Tudor writers through metaphors of the human body, so that Tudor aesthetics can with justice be called an aesthetics of the body" (30).

[49] On memory and forgetting in Shakespeare, see Sullivan, "Forgetting."

reason back, holding at bay the mind's martial might to order recalcitrant desire temperately. Venus' intemperance has immediate social and moral consequences: the fury of sexual desire obliviates "shame's pure blush and honor's wrack," causing Venus to lose her female modesty, maternal instinct, and feminine identity. Her loss is dangerous – physiologically, subjectively, and morally – because it erases the sanctity of identity, smothering the intellectual faculties and their ethical character – what the maid in *A Lover's Complaint* calls "sober guards and civil fears" (298). Shakespeare dramatizes the full effect of Marlowe's Ovidian aesthetics.

The contents of Adonis' "text" turn out to have a similar doubleness of representation – at once idealized and criticized:

> Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled,
> Since sweating Lust on earth usurp'd his name.
> . . .
> Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,
> But Lust's effect is tempest after sun.
> Love's gentle spring doth always fresh remain,
> Lust's winter comes ere summer half be done;
> Love surfeits not, Lust like a glutton dies;
> Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies.
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 793–804)

Adonis' text is certainly Neoplatonic, but of a Spenserian printing. Adonis uses his text to critique that of Venus, identifying her desire not as she idealized it in the deer park passage but as we realize it in the "vultur thought" passage: "'You do it for increase: O strange excuse! / When reason is the bawd to lust's abuse'" (791–92).

In the first stanza above, Adonis counters Venus by arguing that Lust is a tyrannical, "sweating" usurper to the kingdom of Love, who has been forced to seek asylum in heaven. If Love had not fled, he would have been devoured by a parasitical Lust, who is like the caterpillar that blots, stains, and bereaves the (rose's) "tender leaves." Yet the terms of Shakespeare's career are intimated through imagery of the "flowers of poetry" from "Apollo's garden."[50] Shakespeare's word *blotting* is usually glossed as a moral term ("making it shameful" [Roe, ed., *Poems*, 119]); but Colin Burrow has shown how Shakespeare worries over print publication in the poem, which Burrow terms "a study in the materialities of work and print."[51] The discourse from the print shop merges with a theatrical representation in the image of Lust

[50] Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (G. G. Smith, ed., *Essays*, 1: 105).
[51] Burrow, "Life," 35; on "blotting," see Valbuena, "Reproduction."



disguised "Under . . . simple semblance" – wearing the garb of an actor who impersonates Love in order to "usurp" Love's "name."

In the second stanza above, Adonis relies on the seasonal and meteorological imagery familiar from Spenserian pastoral to reveal Lust for the imposter he is. Love, Adonis insists, brings comfort, renews the body and spirit, never satiates himself, and commits himself to "truth." By contrast, Lust storms the body and spirit, brings coldness prematurely, feeds gluttonously, and commits himself to falsehood.

Even though this is "the most serious passage in the poem" (Putney, "Venus *Agonistes*," 137), Shakespeare clearly critiques Adonis' aesthetics of desire, not simply through Adonis' comical admission of its oldness and of his own (pastoral) greenness (806), but also through the poem's fatal conclusion: Adonis' philosophy fails to protect him as haplessly as does the philosophy of Venus. Shakespeare pinpoints the idealistic shortcomings of Spenser's Virgilian aesthetics in opposition to the Ovidian aesthetics of Marlowe.

## "SHE CROPS THE STALK": BEYOND OPPOSITION

What are we to make, then, of Shakespeare's retelling of the story of Venus and Adonis along the lines we have examined? First, he appears to be using the Ovidian myth to bring into print a literary history of his own professional environment during the early 1590s. *Venus and Adonis* registers the decisive point of entry of Marlowe's Ovidian aesthetics of poetry and theatre into a literary scene dominated by Spenser's Virgilian aesthetics of pastoral and epic. Although certainly not an allegory of this literary rivalry, *Venus and Adonis* does appear to process the rivals' authorial projects. Second, Shakespeare could simultaneously be representing the effect of this rivalry on his culture – on those who have read Marlowe and Spenser. According to this second possibility, *Venus and Adonis* would explore not simply "the obligations and power, burdens, and mystery of readership" (Kolin, ed., "*Venus and Adonis*," 23; see 23–30) but a very particular historical form of readership. And if so, Shakespeare would be processing the literary consequences of his two competing colleagues' work.[52]

A final possibility exists, for the climactic act of the poem also suggests a personalized version of this literary history of reading and writing:

[52] On readers of *Venus*, including contemporary dramatic fictions of characters reading the poem, see Prince, ed., *Poems*, 16; S. Roberts, "*Reading Shakespeare's Poems*," 20–101. For contemporary reaction to the poem generally, see Duncan-Jones, "Much Ado."

> She bows her head, the new-sprung flow'r to smell,
> Comparing it to her Adonis' breath,
> And says within her bosom it shall dwell,
> Since he himself is reft from her by death.
> She crops the stalk, and in the breach appears
> Green-dropping sap, which she compares to tears.
>
> "Poor flow'r," quoth she, "this was thy father's guise."
> (*Venus and Adonis*, 1171–77)

In a way that no longer should surprise us, Venus' repetition of the words "Comparing" and "compares" shows her performing the poetic process of similitude, as when Will in Sonnet 18 famously writes of the young man, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" (1).

For her part, Venus bows her head to smell the flower, pausing to compare it to the breath of her deceased lover, and speaking, evidently to herself quietly so that the text does not record her words, what is surely one of the most stunning representations of the immortality of subjectivity in the canon: "And says within her bosom it shall dwell," since Adonis has been "reft from her by death." As the goddess voices the transposition of death into physiological immortality, she enacts the transposition decisively, cropping the stalk in preparation for her departure to Paphos. But in the process Shakespeare opens his text to something like the origin of literary production itself, the exquisite "breach" showing the "Green-dropping sap," which Venus compares to tears – Adonis' certainly, and her own, but also perhaps the green of pastoral liquid from the Ovidian *fons sacer*. When Venus does speak so that we can hear her, she introduces a remarkable temporalization of Ovidian poetry and theatre: "Poor flow'r . . . this was thy father's guise." Quite literally, the text grafts the cropped poetical flower to the costumed "guise" of theatre, rehearsing a process that looks like the author's own "move from stage to page" (Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 1): Adonis may have once "act[ed]" in the "dumb play" of Venus' "chorus-like" tears, but now he becomes the poor flower within the goddess' eternal bosom.

Taking the cue of Crewe and others, we can say that when Venus crops the flower, Shakespeare grafts the stalks of his two rivals' careers. Whereas previously Venus and Adonis clashed and were separated, now they act out a process not of unity but of succession, as Venus bears away the metamorphosed Adonis in her chariot. The moment of grafting that produces the artifact of the poem models more than the rivalry between Marlowe and Spenser, Ovid and Virgil, or even their Elizabethan readers; it models one particular reader who happens to be an author. In *Venus and Adonis*,



Shakespeare can be seen to represent his own entry into the authorial list: he grafts the two aesthetics – "mighty opposites, poised in antagonism" (Greenblatt, *Fashioning*, 222) – into a single yet hybrid art of dramatic poetry. When Coleridge observed that "'Venus and Adonis' seem at once the characters themselves, and the whole representation of those characters by the most consummate actors" (reprinted in Kolin, ed., "*Venus and Adonis*," 70), he appears to intuit the fusion of poetry and theatre that here we witness iconographically.

If the boar who kills Adonis represents "nature's arbitrary violence," as Anthony Mortimer argues, so that "the death of Adonis remains an accident" (33), Shakespeare shows how two very different principles of immortality, Spenser's "eterne in mutabilitie" (*Fairie Queene*, 3. 6. 47) and Marlowe's boy eternal, become subjected to a higher power in the new print of their rival: the tragic randomness of time and "mad mischances" (738) "cross the curious workmanship" not simply of "nature" (734) but of art.

Venus' "prophe[c]y" that "Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend" (1136) does seem to identify *Venus and Adonis* as "an etiological poem," which is often understood to be about "how the tribulations of mortal lovers originated" (Crewe, ed., *Narrative Poems*, xxxiv). Yet Venus' bearing of the flower of Adonis to her royal palace also constitutes a new Elizabethan icon, a figure for a hybrid literary career and its driving aesthetics: Shakespeare imprints an etiological poem about the origins of *Venus and Adonis* itself. Specifically, Shakespeare's inaugural narrative poem is born out of his perception of a fatal clash being waged at this time between the twin arts of England's two great contemporary authors. In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare manages to record his own literary genealogy as the youthfully competing heir of two interlocked, violently opposed literary aesthetics, both forcefully transacted through the cultural opposition between the twin media of poetry and theatre. Presenting himself in print for the first time, Shakespeare uses the amorous minor epic to sing extemporally about the birth of the new Ovidian poet-playwright within his own historical moment.

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