

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Themes in Shakespeare

DESIRE

LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST, VENUS AND ADONIS; RAPE OF LUCRECE

Desire serves as background music in many of Shakespeare's plays—say *Romeo and Juliet*, *As you Like It*, or *Troilus and Cressida*—for Shakespeare's mirror of life is faithful to the prominent role sexuality and desire both play in human nature. One might say that Shakespeare's sonnets are a brilliant verbal panorama of desire, fear, and addiction to human beauty. A few of Shakespeare's pieces, the narrative poems 'Venus and Adonis,' and 'The Rape of Lucrece,' and such a play as 'Love's Labor's Lost,' spotlight issues like blunt physical desire or the comprehensive tension between the sexes, James Thurber's 'war between the sexes.' Female sexuality could hardly be more poundingly intense than that of Venus, or male lubriciousness more oily than Tarquin's, while male desire, and fear of female sexualities dominate the anxieties of the French court in *Love's Labor's Lost*, a paean to the power of the female sexuality.

LOVE'S LABOR LOST From the outset of their encampment, the men more or less besiege the ladies, attacking them with wit, masquerades, and (to us, even in our enlightened moment) startlingly explicit talk about male sexual desire and (for example) ways in which it can promote women's sexual pleasure. The reader will want to approach this entire theme from an understanding of the burgeoning new role of female sexuality in the societies of the Renaissance, a period during which, for example, male sexuality felt itself besieged by that thread of cuckoldry, which for Shakespeare's male characters is a constant threat.

VENUS AND ADONIS Venus—in the long early narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*-- is unabashedly lustful. From the first view of Adonis she is recklessly in love with him, and does everything she can, right down to tackling and nearly raping him. (His frozen responses, yes, take on a slight taint of comedy here, and the poet reserves a fund of irony, throughout the poem, for the sex role reversals that generate the whole poem.)

RAPE OF LUCRECE When Collatine speaks to Tarquin at the beginning of the poem, about his wife's beauty and chastity, he awakens desire in his interlocutor. This desire is still a latent interest, but it grows, and by the time Tarquin has made a return visit to the house of Collatine, his desire has grown stronger. Lust is the outcome of desire, in Tarquin's mind. We must suppose that he has been reflecting, for some time, on the described virtue and beauty of Lucrece. (We have no reason to think Tarquin has met the lady prior to the fatal night of the rape.) Lust is harder to silence than desire. Tarquin cannot silence it.