

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Venus and Adonis 1593

Shakespeare

Overview.

The narration. *Venus and Adonis*, a long narrative poem of 199 stanzas, was Shakespeare's first published work., and one of his few pieces of extended poetry. (Some of his earliest dramatic work was performed prior to 1593, but not published before that date.) The present work is composed of stanzas comprising six lines of iambic pentameter each—from the outset the reader is drawn to the mastery of the form—and to the power of the poetic imagination which, though on a seemingly uninvolved theme, continually brings forth concepts and perspectives which make us think. The ABABCC metrical scheme, well used before Shakespeare, in his century, maintains the narrative, even simply the talkative flow of the tale, but never gets boring, keeps the energy of the *mot juste* without being precious.

The sources. Right from the beginning of his artistic career, Shakespeare knows what kind of raw material to use and how to use it. In the present instance he turns to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a particularly available and popular text among Renaissance poets—a text usually narrative, light in color and tone, euphonious, and easily enough readable (even in Latin) among the educated elite—a growing segment of the more prosperous classes. But Shakespeare has made the material thoroughly his own, both with the brilliant flow of his lyric narrative power, the flow which will infuse many of his greatest plays, and by his deepening of the Ovidian tale, which in Ovid is confined to a pretty slick picture of metamorphosis, god into man, man into god.

Characters

Venus (Greek Aphrodite) is the Greco-Roman goddess of love and beauty. (She is gorgeously represented for us by Botticelli's *Venus Rising out of the Sea*). Wherever she appears she brings graceful sexuality at its finest, sometimes lust, and the power to enchant. She is omnipresent in Homer's *Iliad*, and in Hesiod's *Theogony* she is the offspring—from the ocean foam around the island of Paphos—of the genitals of the god Ouranos, a representative of the deepest level of archaic Hellenic myth. Shakespeare tweaks her character, as only he could, by making her deeply destined to loss, wounded by rejection, and unsure of her powers.

Adonis has an equally profound rooting in Greek mythic experience, his spiritual birthplace rooted in the ancient Mesopotamian world, and his wonderful physical beauty assured him a position of honor among ancient Greek women, who—to speak of a typical ritual—celebrated his meteoric beauty and scenic death by planting 'gardens of Adonis' on their rooftops, and, as the fast growing plants withered, giving way to group extravagances of breast-beating and social keening.

Story

The voice of Athena, final lines:

*'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.'
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.*

Tragedy. Above, a taste of the Shakespearean poetic narration in which we first hear the tone of this still young just published writer, age twenty nine. We are quite comfortably lodged in the same iambic pentameter which will be the lifeblood of his lifetime writing career; thirty-seven actual dramas, from this most confidently masterful of writers in English. In the lines before us—packaged as they are, adroitly, in the casing of three rhymed couplets, which bear promise of opening forth into blank verse, then sharply reign themselves in—Venus has found the boar-gored corpse of her beloved Adonis, and is woefully absorbing the truth of her loss. We are at the end of a tragic but artistic panorama, in which the discovery that even the gods lose big time has hit home, and sent Venus packing to her home island, Paphos. It will have been noted, by the careful that the language conveying this tragic ending is energetic, graceful, and immune to the cliché fractures that would strain the typical classical-myth rendering of Shakespeare's time. In the hands of a master, small Latin and less Greek can do it, to give archaisms new birth.

Tenor. Above we overhear the tragic tenor of the conclusion of the present poem. It is not really tragic, is it? Shakespeare will in due time teach us what tragic means. The author distances himself from the language in which he recounts the (already artificial) mood of the finale of the poem. The same veneer of authorial distance, artistic sheen, pity and comedy interwoven characterizes the entire poem, the prominent prosodic shaping of which keeps us under constant reminder that poetry alone drives this work.

The development. From the outset, the poet is craftily distant from the figures he marshals, and is able to generate a sense of conflict, pain, and passion without himself being caught up in those emotions. It goes this simply, on the surface: Venus spots an incredibly handsome young lad heading out for the hunt, and immediately chases after him. (We are both inside these characters, and outside them looking in at them virtually, as though they were comic book characters.) The narrative dimension is blunt, and from Venus' standpoint it's as *get your man* as Sadie Hawkins day, or as in the *Thesmophoriazousae* of Aristophanes, where any guy is fair hunting for the hags in the upper stories. Not only is Venus all over Adonis, but she is pleading and perorating as she chases. As for Adonis, he has no sexual interest in this preoccupied playmate.

Action. At just the point needed, to generate some action, Adonis' hunting steed, who has been awaiting nearby, gets an itch to run after a charming jennet standing in the nearby pasture. The chase takes place, and Shakespeare is, as often, at his most empathetic in describing the emotions and behaviors of animals. (We will see a repetition, of this animal sensitivity, a little later, as Shakespeare, deepening our sense of the plight of Adonis, compares his attempt to flee to those of a hare fleeing the hunt, turning and twisting this way and that.)

Withdrawal. At one point Venus throws herself on top of her own prey, then pulls him over onto her, and, at her moment of greatest success elicits a frozen and prolonged kiss from him. But then Adonis, far more interested in the hunt than in Venus' outpouring of kisses, does all he can to get away from her, although she makes her desire as potent as he makes his reluctance. Venus herself pours kisses on Adonis, traversing as much as she can of his uncooperative body, while inviting him to explore all the hidden resources of her own meadow. In her ultimate exasperation she faints, appears to be expiring, then gradually wakes, to hear the sounds of the hunt in the distance. Ultimately defeated, as she discovers the death of her beloved, she returns to Paphos.

Ritual. One wonders, in the end, how Shakespeare the twenty nine year old pulls off the charm, even power, of this *coup d'écriture*, which could so easily have turned out slickly Ovidian, simply a pastiche of wit and turns of phrase. The answer is twofold. Shakespeare taps into that implication, always near in a revived ancient tale, that it overlies a deeper and more archaic stratum of meanings, in this case the Mesopotamian hearings of Tammuz, Innana, and the culture world where gender roots deeply in the meaning of the cosmos—birth and death, renewal, sacrifice—and the fructuation of the goddess is part of a life sustaining ritual. (The male's failures can be seen either as comic book snafoos, or as the failures of the seasons to turn fruitfully on their axes.)

Prosody. The other skill Shakespeare makes irresistibly attractive in this long poem is prosodic flexibility. Many of us have been brought up on the naturalness of Shakespeare's address to us. He is as playwright in charge of our oral attention, from the get go. We may curse at the archaic in his language, but even through the archaisms we penetrate to the mastery of living sound. The 'rhyme scheme' of Venus and Adonis perfectly fits the thought-ear's desire for narrative flow across borders of prosodic completion; we savor the tension of completed sense unit—all one hundred ninety nine of these sestets—with narrative continuity.

Themes

Lust. Venus 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.)

Withdrawal. Adonis is turned off by the aggressiveness of Venus, who is passionately in his face. For the ancient reader, I would speculate—as in the note on ritual above—this turning away, by the male, touches the ever potential threat of nature's withdrawal of itself. (Have we global mortals, gripped as I write by a hungry virus, inadvertently rediscovered that archaic sensibility?)

Nature. Venus represents nature in full abundance, as unquestioning as the crops, the spawning of salmon, or the coming of the rainy season. She sees Adonis and finds him irresistible, and cannot stop pursuing him until his rejection of her has become total. Like nature, she begins anew even as she is rejected, for *natura non facit saltum, nature does not tolerate a discontinuous leap.*

Irony. The culture from which Shakespeare creates the present poem is already more than early modern; it is scientifically fertile, socially and politically forward looking, and—as we see well in Shakespeare's contemporary Montaigne—it is skeptical, in many ways secular, and increasingly educated. Shakespeare is ironizing, as he pulls this ancient mythological poem into his lens, and goes both seriously and ironically into the tensions of the work.

Main Character. The main character is Venus, who is all about sexual pursuit and control, until she has to recognize that she has been totally defeated. The more pressure she applies to Adonis, the more desperately he flees her. The extent of her carnal longing is clear and it takes a fainting fit and the death of her lover to send her back to Paphos, to review her godly life.

Parallels. Hippolytus, in Euripides' play of the same name, and Hippolyte, the same male character in Racine's *Phedre*, both bear some meaningful resemblances to and differences from Shakespeare's Adonis. All three figures would rather hunt than make love, in fact prefer the society of youngish men, their age mates, to that of women. The downfall for Shakespeare's Adonis is a boar's tusks, a metaphor we might say for male penetration. The downfall for Hippolytus, in both Euripides' and Racine's plays, is the fury of Theseus, the young man's father, but in Euripides it is the rage of a father toward a seemingly audacious son, while in Racine it is the jealous vengeance of a stepmother who has been spurned by her stepson.

Illustrative moments

Accosting 'Thrice fairer than myself...' are the words with which Venus directly approaches Adonis, as he is getting ready for the hunt, with his buddies.

Luring 'Here, come and sit, where never serpent hisses...'. Venus assures the wary Adonis of the security of their location. She wants him to sit close to her.

Seductive 'Tis but a kiss, I beg; why art thou coy...?' Before long, having straddled Adonis, she posts a major kiss on his lips. He accepts, and they hold...and then that's it.

Nature

'Thy palfrey, as he should,
Welcomes the warm approach of sweet desire...'

Venus takes any opportunity to remind Adonis of the natural rhythm of the world around them.

Wretched 'Sweet boy,' she says, 'this night I'll waste in sorrow.' Toward the end of the poem, Venus begins to realize that her case is hopeless. The goring of Adonis' thigh is the last straw, and breaks her spirit.

Discussion questions

Shakespeare had already presented several plays on the stage, at the time he published the present book of poems. Do you feel he is either a natural poet, or a natural playwright, in these early pieces? Are there obvious traits of the dramatic imagination, in *Venus and Adonis*?

What is Shakespeare's attitude toward nature, and its power, in the present poem? Is he a lover of nature, or does he seem to think the human can rise above his natural origins? What does Shakespeare feel about the feelings of the horse or hare?

Has Shakespeare sympathy for Adonis, or does he consider him a foolish prig? What would Shakespeare have thought about the *désabusé* views of later psychoanalytical critics, who took it for granted that Adonis was gay.