

“Venus and Adonis” by Ovid and Shakespeare

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1 Introduction

It was 18 April 1593 when an *epyllion* – a narrative poem – entitled *Venus and Adonis* was registered at the Stationers’ Hall. This was the first work Shakespeare had printed. In the poet’s lifetime alone, there were six editions, 16 before 1640, in other words, William Shakespeare’s debut was a great success (Hyland 2003, 64-65).

There is a clear time structure to the poem. It begins in the morning (v. 1/1). Venus, the goddess of Love, woos the mortal Adonis more and more insistently, begging for kisses and embraces. Adonis, however, is too young still and shows no erotic interest at all. After noon (v. 177/8), Adonis’ horse runs after a stray mare and he blames Venus. Adonis wants to leave in earnest in the evening (v. 529/30) and Venus learns of his plans to hunt the boar the next day (v. 587/88). In vain, she tries to talk him out of it. Left behind, Venus spends the night singing a “woeful ditty” (v. 836), til morning comes (v. 856). Hearing his hounds, Venus runs after them (v. 870). Worried, she chases the sound, her fear changing into hope and back again, until finally she finds Adonis killed by the boar (v. 1029/30). She mourns for him, making up her own version of what happened, and makes her prophecy, which sounds as if she was cursing love (v. 1135-64). Adonis’ body

vanishes and a flower springs from his blood (v. 1165-70). Venus resolves to now look after the flower as if it were Adonis and takes it with her.

Having read the poem, several questions came to my mind: Why did Shakespeare decide to publish something under his own name? And why a poem? After all, he was already a successful playwright at that time. And is it the same story that Ovid tells? If Shakespeare changed anything, why did he do so?

In order to find answers, I will go through the poem step by step. The Latin epilogue from Ovid represents the well-known sources he used, changed and turned into something of his own. To see how he could do that, I will outline Shakespeare's education and afterwards take a close look at classical sources and draw detailed comparisons. But Shakespeare did not only use the classical authors Virgil and Ovid as sources, but probably also a poem by Joachim Camerarius and a painting by Titian. When examining a painting as a source for a piece of literature, it is especially intriguing to see how the author transformed certain elements into another medium. In the description of Adonis' horse, Shakespeare came as close to painting as anybody could using words. Next in the line of reading is the dedication to the Lord of Southampton. Some information on his biography and Elizabethan society are indispensable for the interpretation and have led to interesting results. After that the poem proper begins. Here, it is necessary to consider the background of the genre, the *epyllion*. In the course of this I will also include Shakespeare's relation to the so-called "University Wits", especially Christopher Marlowe. These well educated men might have led the man from Stratford to prove his knowledge of classical mythology by including several myths in his *epyllion* – exactly how and to what purpose, I will show in the following part. Afterwards, I want to focus on the two main characters, Venus and Adonis, and show how they are presented by the narrator. Apart from the two main characters, the poem features a remarkable number of animals.¹ I want to focus on those which seem most important, namely birds, the hare, the boar that kills Adonis and the two horses, which may be seen as replacing the lions from the *Metamorphoses*.

By providing background information in the order of occurrence I want to achieve a deeper understanding of the poem. After all, it is by now well established that Shakespeare knew classical authors and drew on them in his writing,² and in this paper I try to explain the changes he made from his sources.

¹ For the animals, cf. especially Bates 2012, 336-39.

² Cf. e.g. Gillespie 2001.

2 May the Masses Admire the Ordinary

*Vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flavus Apollo
Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.*

May the masses admire ordinary things; may fair Apollo
offer me cups filled with Castalian water.³

These are the first words Shakespeare published, and they originally come from Ovid’s *Amores* 1.15.35-6. They certainly set the mood for what follows: This poem is not meant for the masses. Unlike his plays, it was written exclusively for an educated audience. William Keach calls the *Amores* “forbidden fruit”, it was not reconcilable with Elizabethan moral values (Keach 1977, 29). Yet, those who had read it regardless would have recognized and quite probably enjoyed the quote. Anybody accusing Shakespeare of reading the *Amores* would have been giving away they had done the same. Nevertheless, it is rather bold to use lines from a forbidden book for one’s entry into the literary world. By calling on the Muses for inspiration, the Elizabethan aligns himself with classical authors like Ovid. Moreover, after this epigram, it is not surprising to find Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to be one of the main sources.

While any of his educated contemporaries would have been amazed at the changed character of Adonis as it is, a verbal quote of Ovid and an acknowledgment of classical traditions would surely strengthen this effect. According to William Keach, “adaptive transformations and departures are themselves extensions of the Elizabethan poet’s exploration of his Ovidian subject” (Keach 1977, 5).

2.1 Education

Many scholars have concerned themselves with Shakespeare’s knowledge of Latin.⁴ There are numerous allusions to classical authors, mythological characters⁵ or allusions to myths in Shakespeare’s plays.⁶ The most diligent and complete approach to solving this problem has been made by Robert Kilburn Root (Root 1903). His work was the basis on which Thomas Whitfield Baldwin wrote his *William Shakspeare’s small Latine & lesse Greeke*, naming one reason for the uncertainty: “It was not Shakespeare’s habit to quote Ovid or any other poet, Latin or otherwise” (Baldwin 1944, 418). Direct quotations would help us to assess Shakespeare’s Latin skills. However, Baldwin is not entirely right: The epigram of *Venus and Adonis* is a direct quote (cf. p. 15). As Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R.

³ “Castalian water” means water from a fountain sacred to Apollo and the Muses and thus stands for inspiration (Duncan-Jones, Woudhuysen 2007, 127). All translations from Latin are my own unless stated otherwise.

⁴ For the school system, cf. Greenblatt 1997, 44-45.

⁵ E.g. Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

⁶ E.g. the myth of Pygmalion in *The Winter’s Tale*.

Woudhuysen note (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen, 2007) these lines would have been recognized “as supporting Ovid’s claim to poetic immortality” by anybody who knew the *Amores* (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 11). They go on to argue that with the plague in London, fear of death and the wish for immortality were ever-present (12/13). Still, Shakespeare could have read Marlowe’s translation:

Let base conceited wits admire vile things,
Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses’ springs
(Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen, 2007, 127)

Although rather liberally translated, the meaning remains the same: The poet is hoping to be inspired to write something extraordinary.⁷ This obviously is a fitting quote for Shakespeare trying to establish himself as more than an actor and playwright. In addition to that, it shows the intention to prove to critics, such as Greene, that he did know his Ovid. Indirect quotes included in the text show us Shakespeare knew at least the contents of Ovid’s work.

2.2 Sources

There are various sources that scholars have found influenced Shakespeare’s *epyllion*. Some are fairly obvious, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a well-known book containing classical myths. Others are more obscure or only alluded to. For an example of the latter, see William Weaver’s “Untutored Lines” (Weaver 2012, 70/1), where the author shows how Shakespeare points to a Greek version of the myth featuring Ares instead of the boar in the three very first lines of the poem. In a detailed analysis I will show where Shakespeare deviated from original texts and offer explanations. For this purpose I have chosen sources from different times and genres. I will start with Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which has been argued to have shaped the character of Shakespeare’s Venus, just like Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*. I will proceed with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as “The Elizabethan epyllion-writer will frequently elaborate a moment from an episode in the *Metamorphoses* in a way which reflects his familiarity with the witty informality of the *Amores* or the *Ars Amatoria*, or with the impassioned rhetoric of the *Heroides*” (Keach 1977, 5). Shakespeare is no exception to this rule by William Keach. Afterwards I want to include the translation of Arthur Golding, Shakespeare’s contemporary and also a very likely source. Then I will analyze a version of the myth by Joachim Camerarius, another contemporary. The last source will be Titian’s painting which has been taken to inspire a reluctant Adonis.

⁷ Besides, Shakespeare quoted Marlowe directly in other places (cf. chapter 4.1.1).

2.2.1 Virgil's *Aeneid*

João Froes finds Shakespeare's Venus to be consistent with Virgil's in the *Aeneid* (João 1997, 303). In twelve books, the epic tells the story of Aeneas, who saves his father, son and Penates⁸ from burning Troy. Aeneas and his fellow fugitives embark on their ships to find a new home. They face challenging adventures, finally founding the Roman Empire. Aeneas' fate is influenced by the gods, Juno's rage making her Aeneas' most influential enemy. Venus, Aeneas' mother, tries to ensure other gods' help for her son. However, the most important power is *fatum*, the fate, which even the gods cannot change. To compare Virgil's Venus to that of Shakespeare, I will analyze scenes from the *Aeneid*.

Venus first appears in Book I, verse 227. She addresses her father Jupiter, whom she talks to “*tristior et lacrimis oculos suffusa nitentis*” (I, v. 228), “very sad and her eyes wet with glittering tears”, obviously taking the matter very seriously. She reminds Jupiter of his promise that, with Troy destined to fall, the Trojans would eventually found the Roman Empire. But they continue to suffer and she fears that her father might not keep his promise (I, v. 229-253). Although she is the daughter here, she still seems like a worried, loving mother.

Disguised, she meets Aeneas in verse 325. The relationship between them is stressed: “*Sic Venus et Veneris contra sic filius orsus*”; “Thus spoke Venus and Venus' son began to answer”. She acts like a mother by trying to show her son the right way. He notes that she is not a mere human being and asks her where he is (I, v. 326-334). She answers, introduces the queen Dido and asks about him (I, v. 335-370). Aeneas disappoints the reader by only giving a summary of his story (I, v. 372-385).⁹ He acknowledges Venus' help with the words “*matre dea monstrante*” (I, v. 382), “with my divine mother showing [me the way]”. His mother tries to reassure him (I, v. 387-401). When she leaves, Aeneas recognizes her and chides her for deceiving him (I, v. 407-09). She hides the wanderers from the eyes of others (I, v. 411-14).

Invited into Dido's palace, Aeneas sends for his son Ascanius. As a precaution against Juno (I, v. 662), Venus asks her son Cupid to take over Ascanius' shape, go to Dido's palace and make the queen fall in love with Aeneas (I, v. 657-660). Again, she wants to shield him. Later the reader also sees the tragic side to her protection: When Aeneas sails away, Dido cannot deal with the loss and commits suicide. It is not explicitly stated whether Venus anticipated this, but she did know Aeneas would eventually continue his journey and that Dido would stay with her people. Venus used the queen in her scheming.

⁸ The Penates were figurines of ancestors that guarded a family as protective deities. Honoring them was important in Roman religion. The edition worked with and quoted from is Publius Virgilius Maro (1969). P. Virgili Maronis. *Recognovit Brevique Adnotatione Critica Instruxit* R. A. B. Mynors. ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors. Oxford.

⁹ He will tell Dido – and with her the readers – a more detailed version shortly.

After Dido has fallen in love, Juno takes action again (IV, v. 90-276). She approaches Venus and suggests to combine the two peoples, that of Aeneas and Dido's. Venus sees through her deceit and seemingly agrees. They arrange for Aeneas and Dido to consume a marriage Juno wants to establish. Afterwards, they do not try to conceal their affair anymore and found Carthage together. When Jupiter observes this, he sends Mercury to remind Aeneas of his task. In this passage Venus is rather self-confident. She sees how Juno wants to prevent the Roman Empire from being founded, but does not act. She goes along with it and relies on her father to solve the problem. In retro perspective, this was a mistake. Carthage will be a the future archenemy of Rome. Had Venus told Aeneas to leave Dido, that would have saved the Romans many wars. The reader gets the impression that Venus is not immune to mistakes. However, Virgil narrates this as etiology for the enmity between Carthage and Rom: It all goes back to a woman who did not want to let her lover go. This serves not only as an etiology, but also belittles the enemy. This instance might be neglected in a characterization, as it is necessary for reasons outside the text.

Venus appears once more as the caring mother, winning over both Neptune (V, v. 779-815) and her husband Vulcan (VIII, v. 370-404). The latter readily agrees to supply Aeneas with weapons. But he also says that he would have helped defend Troy (VIII, v. 396/97), but Venus apparently did not turn to him before. This is where the concept of the *fatum* is of crucial importance. Even Vulcan and Venus cannot change Troy's fate.

The beginning of Book VIII describes the terrible crimes of a king that the people can only fight under the leadership of a foreigner and they ask Aeneas to fight for them. While he is still pondering this, Venus sends the agreed-on sign (VIII, v. 523-529) to announce the imminent battle (VIII, v. 534-536). Already on his way, he receives Vulcan's weapons (VIII, v. 608-616). From a loving mother, one would expect to tell her son to be careful, but Venus encourages Aeneas to attack: "*ne mox aut Laurentis, nate, superbos aut acrem dubites in proelia poscere Turnum*" (v. 613/17); "do not hesitate soon, my son, to challenge either the proud Laurens or the fierce Turnus in battle". Again, Venus is very confident here, relying on *fatum* and her father's promise, on her husband's weapons and certainly also on her son's fighting skills and accepting her son's destiny.

In the beginning of Book X Jupiter calls for a council of the gods and requests peace between Italians and Trojans. The first to respond (X, v. 16-62) Venus recounts the Trojans' series of misfortunes and stresses their desperate situation, still fighting and homeless. Venus no longer reminds Jupiter of his promise to her, but seems to acknowledge her rival's victory: "*liceat dimittere ab armis incolumen Ascanium, liceat superesse nepotem. Aeneas sane ignotis iactetur in undis et quacumque viam dederit Fortuna sequatur*" (X, v. 46-49); "may it only be allowed to send Ascanius [i.e. Julius] away from the weapons unharmed, may it only be possible for my grandson to survive. For all I care, let Aeneas be tossed around in unknown waves and shall he follow whichever way Fortune has decided for him." This may well strike the

reader as betrayal. However, she does what Aeneas, always protective of his son, would want. Thus Venus is probably not as detached as one might think at first glance. It is more probable that, after considering the problem, she decides to opt for a compromise. She is rational, but nevertheless loving. In verses 330-32 the goddess once more proves her love for Aeneas by protecting him from any harm in battle: “*partim galea clipeoque resultant inrita, deflexit partim stringentia corpus alma Venus*”; “<the spears> partly bounce off <Aeneas’> helmet and shield unsuccessfully, partly gracious Venus deflects them after they have brushed his body.” Even if the armor that Venus gave to Aeneas cannot protect him from all the spears, she herself protects him from the remaining ones. Maybe this also explains why she could encourage him to seek a fight in Book VIII: She knew all along that she would be there to help.

Despite Venus’ support, Aeneas is deeply wounded. Because no mortal can help him (XII, v. 400-04), Venus, “*indigno nati concussa dolore*” (XII, v. 411), “shattered by her son’s ignoble pain”, creates a potion and secretly pours it into a kettle of water (v. 411-19). When Aeneas’ wounds are washed with this water, he is instantly cured (v. 420-22). Again, Venus stays in the background and comes “*obscuro faciem circumdata nimbo*” (v. 416), “after she has wrapped her face into an obscuring cloud”. She does not seek admiration.

All in all, we see Venus as a loving mother, helping Aeneas in any way she can. We do not really see her as the goddess of love, but rather she transfers this aspect to her son Cupid who makes Dido fall in love with Aeneas.

2.2.2 Ovid

In his book *Untutored Lines*, William Weaver says about *Venus and Adonis*: “The poem is ostensibly Ovidian, but Shakespeare draws on a number of Ovids. He has wrested the basic outline and some of the words of his tale from two episodes in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, drawn an epigraph (printed on the title page of the first edition) from an elegy in Ovid’s *Amores*, and invested the story with the mock didactic tone of the *Ars Amatoria*” (Weaver 2012, 79). With the epigraph the topic of another chapter (cf. p. 15), I will now focus on relevant passages from the *Ars Amatoria*, a mock didactic poem on love affairs, and the *Metamorphoses*, a history of the world from the creation up to Ovid’s time told in etiological myths, that is explaining how the world became what it was, for example the origin of certain plants.

Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*

Michael L. Stapleton sees Shakespeare's Venus as reminiscent of Venus in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (Stapleton 1997, 309). It is promising to take a closer look at the *Ars Amatoria* in order to find out exactly how Venus is portrayed here.¹⁰

In Book I, verse 512 of the *Ars Amatoria*, Venus and Adonis appear for the first time: "*Cura deae silvis aptus Adonis erat*"; "Adonis from the woods was suitable for the goddess' [i.e. Venus'] love". The context is a guide for proper grooming. Adonis is depicted as living by himself in the wilderness. While Adonis' famous beauty is omitted, no reasons for Venus' love for him are named. The narrator tries to prove that grooming basically guarantees winning a girl's heart and thus presents Adonis as an example of a less desirable, yet clean hermit from the woods. His winning Venus' heart is supposed to reassure the reader. This is ironic to any reader who knows about Adonis' beauty from the *Metamorphoses*. The narrator's attempt to withhold this crucial aspect renders him foolish, an effect Ovid certainly desired. However, this is not the only omission. In the *Metamorphoses*, Venus falls in love with Adonis after Cupid had accidentally cut her with one of his arrows. The *Metamorphoses* present her more as a victim and emphasize the irony of the goddess of love suffering from love.

Venus and Adonis are mentioned again in Book III, dedicated to female readers, verses 85/86: "*Ut Veneri, quem luget adhuc, donetur Adonis: Unde habet Aeneam Harmoniamque suos?*" – "May Venus be granted Adonis, for whom she is still grieving: Where did she get her Aeneas and Harmonia from?" This passage encourages the female reader to embrace love while she is still young and attractive. Again, the narrator cites Venus and Adonis as mythological example. Although Venus is still grieving, she does not reject love as such. She gives birth to Aeneas and Harmonia, who play such an important role in mythology that Venus' affairs with the mortal Anchises and Mars seem forgivable.¹¹ According to mythology Venus was married to Vulcan whose outer appearance is described as less attractive. The beautiful goddess thus takes up an affair with Mars. Shakespeare mentions this affair in his myth (v. 97-114). Still, he does not relate how the two were caught and embarrassed. In this aspect, Shakespeare's Venus is quite similar to Ovid's narrator of the *Ars Amatoria*, as both only narrate what supports their intentions. Both authors employ this method in order to create an ironic effect. So while the narrator in the *Ars Amatoria* tries to encourage the female to embrace love affairs, the effect would have been the opposite.

¹⁰ All quotes are taken from Publius Ovidius Naso (2009). *Liebeskunst: Lateinisch-Deutsch*. ed. and transl. Niklas Holzberg. Berlin.

¹¹ Nevertheless, one might wonder why the narrator did not refer to Cupid here. He is also called "Venus' son" (e.g. v. 762: *Veneris puero*) and certainly of the utmost importance, especially to lovers, the claimed readership of this work.

There also are numerous mentionings of Venus alone throughout the three books of which only the more interesting ones can be included here. The first of these is to be found in Book I, verses 83-87:

*Illo saepe loco capitur consultus Amori,
 Quique aliis cavet, non cavet ipse sibi:
 Illo saepe loco desunt sua verba disertis,
 Resque novae veniunt, causaque agenda sua est.
 Hunc Venus e templis, quae sunt confinia, ridet.*

In that place [i.e. the Roman Forum] the lawyer is often captured by Cupid,
 He who supported others, he does not support himself:
 In that place the eloquent often lacks his words,
 A new situation occurs, and he has to carry on his own lawsuit.
 At him Venus laughs from her temples, which are adjacent.

This mentioning of Venus serves a double purpose. First, it gives the setting of the scene, which is the Roman Forum, right next to Venus’ temple. Any Roman reader could have pictured the place exactly. Second, it shows how cruel love can be. Without mercy, Venus watches what her son, Cupid, is doing to lawyers and finds it amusing.

We find another interesting reference to Venus when the narrator talks about judging girls’ beauty (I v. 247-250):

*Luce deas caeloque Paris spectavit aperto,
 Cum dixit Veneri “vincis utramque, Venus.
 Nocte latent mendae, vitioque ignoscitur omni,
 Horaque formosam quamlibet illa facit.*

In daylight and under the open sky had Paris looked at the goddesses,
 When he said to Venus: ‘You overcome both of them, Venus.’
 At night, flaws are hidden, any imperfection is forgiven,
 This hour makes every girl beautiful.

The double mentioning of Venus’ name in one line is striking, the reader would expect an epithet here. Hence, the author must have deliberately chosen to repeat the name for emphasis. Attention is drawn to Venus’ beauty: Even in broad daylight she surpasses her rivals. She is the standard every girl should be compared to – at least according to the narrator. A future lover should do what Paris did and judge the girls during daytime.

There is another less positive Venus (I, v. 361/2):

*Pectora dum gaudent nec sunt adstricta dolore,
Ipsa patent. blanda tum subit arte Venus.*

While the heart rejoices and is not constricted with grief,
it opens up. Then Venus enters with flattering skill.

Venus not only enjoys it when Cupid makes fools of men, she also plays her part. In the following two verses, the heart is compared to Troy: While it was sad, it defended itself. When it was happy, it took in the horse carrying its enemies. The reader gets the impression that Venus is rather deceitful. But she can also help, as in Book I, verse 608: “*audentem Forsque Venusque iuvat*” – “good luck and Venus help the bold one”.

With Book II, the narrator wants to teach his reader how to keep a girl. This requires skill, and also help from Venus, her son Cupid and Erato, the muse of love poetry, who are called upon (II, v. 15/16). But although lovers depend on Venus’ help, they also have to fear her revenge. The narrator advises the lovers to be careful about what they write because girls tend to interpret a lot (II, v. 397/8):

*Laesa Venus iusta arma movet telumque remittit
Et, modo quod quæsta est, ipse querere, facit.*

If Venus is hurt, she justly takes up arms and throws back the spear
And she causes him to lament, in the way she has lamented.

Although she can be his accomplice, a lover needs to treat Venus with respect.

On the other hand, Venus did hurt her husband with her affair with Mars. That is the topic of verses 561-592. Vulcan catches Venus and Mars in the act and traps them, so that all the gods can make fun of them. However, this does not have the desired effect: Now that their affair has become public knowledge, the couple does not even try to hide it anymore. To the narrator the whole story is evidence that one should never spy on one’s girl. Controlling her is a husband’s task, if he cares to undertake it (II, v. 595-598). The obvious moral at least from the first part of this myth would have been not to cheat on one’s husband. But the end, Venus and Mars loving each other openly, changes everything and makes it a fitting example for the *Ars Amatoria*. In the beginning Venus is depicted as shy and reluctant. In the end, she shamelessly loves her admirer openly. For this, the narrator blames Vulcan, her husband. The self-appointed teacher of love also advises to restrict intercourse to the bedroom. His argument for this is that Venus always covers herself when she is naked (II, v. 613/614: “*Ipsa Venus pubem, quotiens velamina ponit, Protegitur laeva semireducta manu*”; “Even Venus covers, whenever she takes off her clothes, halfway bending backwards, her private parts with her left hand”). Here, Venus functions as the typical girl. Her behavior is what is to be expected from any girl.

In the beginning of the third book, Venus is not only an exemplary girl, she is now the girls’ advocate (III, v. 45-52). The narrator claims that the goddess herself came to talk to him and requested that he should write this third book. He was content that the girls should not know about the art of love,¹² but Venus thought this was unfair, as the girls had to face the men “*inermē*” (III, 46), “unarmed”. She orders the narrator to make amends for this state by writing a third book just for his female readers. It is noticeable that the narrator seems to have written the first book on his own account. He does mention that he learned his lessons from Venus (I, v. 7), but he is inspired by his “*usus*” (I, v. 29), his experience. That he wants to share with the men of Rome. Necessity dictates that he should write the second book, as the lessons from the first are designed to make a girl fall in love, not to keep her. The narrator wrote those two books by his own choice. However, with the third book he betrays his readership and provides counsel for the “enemy”, which would be out of character. Thus Ovid needs to provide his narrator with a reason that cannot be challenged, such as the goddess of love herself ordering him to write this book.

As we have heard about Venus sitting in her temple and laughing at the lawyer in love, we now see that she is not at all partial to the women. When they have been betrayed by men and lament on the Roman Forum, she also watches them (III, v, 451/52). Although she does not laugh at them as she did with the men, she is still described as “*lenta*” (III, v. 562), as calm. She watches the scene without emotions. This seems like a contradiction with her speaking up for the girls in the beginning of the book. Had she been watching the betrayed girls before ordering the narrator to write another book, the contradiction would be dissolved.

There are numerous occasions on which Cupid is referred to as Venus’ son.¹³ Yet, this is not necessarily meant to allude to Venus’ role as a mother, but simply was a common way of bringing variation into a text. Together with epithets, references to parentage were often substituted for the name. Though Venus is spoken of as a mother here, there are no instances of her acting like a mother, it is not really part of her character.

The narrator, who up to now has spoken quite openly about love, now claims to be too modest to talk about intercourse in detail. That might have seemed improper. Again, Venus comes to his rescue and explicitly tells him to include this topic as well. After all, this is her foremost area of expertise.¹⁴ This is another example of Venus as a kind of alibi for writing about a topic the narrator should not write about.

In the very end of the third book Venus is honored as patron of the work. The words “*cygnus descendere tempus*” (III, v. 809), “it is time to descend from the swans”,

¹² Cf. III, v. 43: “*Nunc quoque nescirent!*” (“If only they still did not know <about the art of love>”).

¹³ E.g. III, v. 762: “*Veneris puero*”.

¹⁴ III, v. 760: “*Præcipue nostrum est, quod pudet*” inquit “*opus*.”; She said: “What embarrasses you especially is my work.”

refer to the goddess' carriage pulled by swans. Accordingly, she has been leading the narrator's way in her own chariot. Neither the narrator nor the author can be held responsible for the work's content. Still, this strategy did not work out. When Ovid was banned, the *Ars Amatoria* was named as one reason.

All in all, Venus is represented as in favor of love and of being in love. She therefore supports the narrator in writing the *Ars Amatoria*. She is extremely beautiful and can be an exemplary girl, covering herself when naked, and also speaks up for the girls when she sees that the men have gained an advantage, namely the first two books of the *Ars Amatoria*. Venus will help a bold lover. Still, she needs to be treated respectfully, otherwise she will take revenge. Should a lover fail or bring him- or herself into a funny situation, she will not be sympathetic, she might even laugh openly. Her being a mother is not a significant character trait.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid collected ancient myths on intricately interwoven narrative levels. William Keach states that "Ovid felt free to alter and elaborate the ancient myths as they came down to him, and even to invent new aspects of his mythological narrative, as long as the most important elements of the traditional version remained intact" (Keach 1977, 10). The meter of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a catalectic dactylic hexameter, catalectic meaning that the last hexameter is incomplete.¹⁵

The story of Venus and Adonis begins in Book X, verse 503 and ends in verse 739, the total being 236 verses. However, with Venus relating the myth of Atalante and Hippomenes to Adonis (v. 560-707), Ovid tells the myth of Venus and Adonis in 87 verses. As a story within a story, the narrator is the character Orpheus grieving over his loss of Eurydice. As an omniscient intradiegetic narrator, Orpheus not only includes direct speech, such as Venus' warning only to hunt harmless animals (v. 543-552), but also gives Adonis' words as indirect speech (v. 552). Although the setting is not specified, we know from the preceding tale of Myrrha that she fled to "*terra [...] Sabaea*" (v. 480) and asked to be transformed there. This is where Adonis is born and raised. Hunting with Venus, they wander through mountains and woods (v. 535). While Venus tells Adonis about Atalante and Hippomenes, they are lying in the grass underneath a poplar tree (v. 555/6). Adonis' hounds are chasing the boar, which is just about to leave the woods or the thicket (v. 711).

Ovid does not clearly state how much time passes in his version of the myth. The narrator tells of Adonis' birth (v. 503-514), gives a summary of his childhood (v. 519-524) and a cutback to how Cupid accidentally hurt Venus with one of his arrows, causing her to fall in love with Adonis (v. 525-528). Through two lengthy lists, one of places Venus does not visit anymore, including the Olymp (v. 530-

¹⁵ The edition referred to is Ovid (2010). For the myth of Venus and Adonis, I referred to Ovid (2004).

532), and another of animals she is hunting (v. 537-539), the reader gets the impression that they have spent at least several days together. Nevertheless, she is not yet accustomed to the exercise of hunting all day (v. 554: “but the unfamiliar exercise has already tired me”), which she would be after a few weeks. The actual plot lasts one day.

After she has finished the story of Atalante and Hippomenes, Venus flies to Cyprus in her carriage (v. 708/9) and Adonis continues hunting. When the boar wounds him (v. 713-716), Venus has not reached her destination yet and turns around (v. 717/8). On her arrival she finds him already unconscious (v. 720/1). The metamorphosis lasts less than an hour (v. 731-735) and the episode ends with an etymology of the flower’s name (v. 737-739). Ovid clearly says that the flower grows out of the blood (v. 735: “when a flower of the same color grew from the blood”), so technically there is no real metamorphosis. Assuming that the actual body is not changed in any way, it is surprising that Venus does not bury her beloved Adonis but simply plucks the flower she caused to grow from his blood.

In Ovid’s version of the myth Adonis is already a grown man (v. 523). His feelings towards Venus are not clearly stated, but he does not reject her. He allows her to lean against and kiss him (v. 558/9).

2.2.3 *Golding*

In addition to the Latin text, I want to take a look at Arthur Golding’s English translation which scholars have proven Shakespeare referred to. Written “in fourteeners (seven accented syllables to the line), Golding rendered Ovid’s delicate detail in homey English idiom” (Kahn 2007, 76). If there are differences between Ovid and Golding, we can tell what Shakespeare found in which source and what stems from his own imagination. Should Shakespeare’s poem contain details from Ovid that Golding omitted, that would prove he read the Latin text. I only took into account the more significant differences, as some deviations are due to difficulties with expressing the Latin phrasing in English. In other places, Golding omitted words or made actual mistakes because he confused words. These are the most conclusive instances.

The first discrepancy in the myth of Venus and Adonis occurs in verse 583 in the description of the tree giving birth to Adonis. Here Golding has “and <the tree> shed forth teares as though shee there should drowne”. In contrast to this rather lively description of a flood of tears, Ovid states matter-of-factly “*arbor lacrimisque cadentibus umet*” (v. 509): “and the tree is wet from falling tears”. In verse 513 Ovid uses few words to describe Adonis’ reaction to coming into the world: “*vagitque puer*”, “and the boy cried”. Golding uses more words to describe the baby, “which cryde and wayld streyght way” (v. 588). Now that Myrrha’s is over Ovid’s narrator seems to be eager to tell the next myth. The only thing the reader needs to know is that Adonis is beautiful, and so his childhood seems to be depicted in fast motion. The translation slows down a little by adding more details in

several places, such as when talking about time that “mocks us to our face” (v. 596), where the Latin has only “*fallit*” (v. 519), “<time> deceives”. In Golding’s verses 598/99 we find a very significant deviation from the original: “that wretched imp whom wickedly his graundfather begate, and whom his cursed suster bare”. The words “wretched”, “wickedly” and “cursed” contain a judgment not found in the objective Latin text: “*ille sorore natus avoq̄ue suo*” (v. 520/21), “he, born from his sister and his grandfather”. Ovid merely states the facts, while Golding seems to feel the need to express that this is morally unacceptable. The original’s verse 523 contains a logical impossibility: “*iam se formosior ipso est*”, “now he is more beautiful than himself”. The manuscript tradition is consistent here, so that an error in the text is unlikely. Golding appears to correct this perceived error: “And every day more beawtiffull than other he becam” (v. 603).

In his verse 621 Golding adds detail once more when talking about the hunting Venus, who “cheerd the hounds with hallowing like a hunt”. Ovid says of his Venus “*hortaturque canes*” (v. 537), “and she incited the hounds”. However, Venus stays away from dangerous animals, such as boars, wolves, “*armatosque unguibus urso*” (v. 540), “and bears armed with claws”. The bears in the translation are not yet grown up, it seems, as Golding has “Bearwhelpes armd with ugly paws” (v. 624).

Next on the list of animals to be avoided while hunting are the lions, “*armenti saturatos caede leones*” (v. 541), “lions, satisfied by the slaughter of a cow”. Golding’s lions “delyght in blood” (v. 625). With “*bos*” being the more frequent word for “cow”, Golding might have mistaken “*armenti*” (“of a cow”) for a form of “*amare*” (“(to) love”), especially as in a manuscript “*rm*” is easily mistaken for “*m*”. That would explain both the “delyght” and the omission of the cow. Golding leaving out “*armenti*” on purpose seems unlikely keeping in mind that he tends to add to the original. When Venus warns Adonis that lions do not care for the things she loves about him, the classical poet has “*non movet aetas nec facies nec quae Venerem movere leones*” (v. 547/48), “your youth does not move the lions, nor your beauty, nor those things that have moved Venus”. His translator elaborates: “thy tender youth, thy beawty bryght, thy countnance fayre and brave although they had the force to win the hart of Venus, have no powre ageinst the Lyons” (v. 634-6). He probably split “*facies*” up into “beawty” and “countnance”, as the Latin word signifies both and otherwise cannot be adequately translated. On top of that, Golding added adjectives (“tender”, “bryght”, “fayre and brave”) and emphasizes that all this sufficed to make the goddess of Love herself fall in love with Adonis. The fact that the lions are in no way affected by all this stresses their savagery.

Boars are even more terrible: “*fulmen habent acres in aduncis dentibus apr̄i*” (v. 550), “the boars have lightning in their curved teeth”. Golding’s boars differ slightly, his “cruell Boares beare thunder in theyr hooked tushes” (v. 638). This might just be a simple mistake, as thunder and lightning often occur together and may thus easily be confused. With no obvious reason for the substitution, it is also just as difficult to imagine tusks containing thunder as lightning. On top of that, lightning was

usually attributed to Jove, the father of the gods. It would therefore be a good choice to emphasize the threat this animal poses. Also, “thunder” and “lightning” both have two syllables of which the first one is stressed, ruling out the meter as a reason. It is more probable that Golding made a mistake here.

Despite Venus’ warnings to stay away from dangerous prey, Adonis does not listen to her, “*sed stat monitis contraria virtus*” (v. 709), “but bravery stands opposed to warnings”. The Latin word “*virtus*” brings to mind “*vir*”, “man”. Golding translates this nicely as “but manhood by admonishment restryned could not bee” (v. 832). On closer examination, there is an important difference between the original and the translation. In Ovid’s version, the reader gets the impression that Adonis explicitly does the exact opposite of what Venus asked. This behavior is reminiscent of a small child, not of the man (“*vir*”) implied in “*virtus*”. Golding presents a brave, more mature Adonis who had always been planning on hunting boars and cannot be restrained by a woman’s warnings. When the boar sees Adonis, it attacks and mortally wounds him. Upon hearing his cries Venus returns and finds him unconscious. In her grief she displays the traditional gestures, which includes that “*indignis percussit pectora palmis*” (v. 723), “she beats her breast with her unworthy/ innocent palms”. A translation of “*indignis*” necessarily has to be restricted to one of two possible meanings: Venus’ hands can either be unworthy of holding Adonis’ any longer, or they, as a *pars pro toto* representing Venus, are innocent because they had warned Adonis. With his “and beate upon her stomach with her fist” (v. 846) Golding avoids this decision by omitting “*indignis*”. It is also worth noting that Venus beats herself with her fists upon her stomach. Although the act of beating might have led to the translation “fist”, in ancient times a grieving woman would beat her breast, not her stomach. The Latin word “*pectus*” is far too frequent for Golding to have mistaken it for stomach. Hitting one’s stomach with a fist sounds more brutal, so maybe Golding wanted to stress Venus’ violent grief. Another possibility is that was unfitting to speak of the goddess’ breast.

The mourning Venus goes on to complain to the Fates, the goddesses of destiny: “*at non tamen omnia vestri iuris erunt*” (v. 724/25), “but not everything will be in your realm”. Golding’s Venus does not talk to, but about the Fates: “Yit shall they not obtaine their will in all things” (v. 847/48). On closer examination, there are further, more crucial differences. For one thing, any Roman reader knew that the Fates, the one power above all gods, could not be denied their will. So the only thing Venus can do here is to withhold a tiny piece, her grief and the memory of the lost Adonis. Another difference is that the Latin version hints at the imminent metamorphosis, as “*non [...] omnia*”, “not everything” is going to the underworld, but the flower growing from Adonis’ blood will remain in the world of the living. The memory shall last “*semper*” (v. 726), “forever”. And yet again, Golding proves to be more dramatic with his “while the world doth last” (v. 849).

The metamorphosis, in a way catalyzed by the nectar which Venus sprinkled, takes places as soon as Adonis’ blood has been “*tactus ab illo*” (v. 732), “touched by it (i.e. the nectar)”. Golding ascribes power to the nectar itself when he writes

“through the power thereof” (v. 855/56), not “through Venus’ power”. The description in Ovid makes the reader expect anything but a beautiful flower to emerge, as the blood “*intumuit sic, ut fulvo perlucida caeno surgere bulla solet*” (v. 733/34), “rose, as when a clear water bubble usually rises in reddish brown mud”. The metamorphosis we find in the translation is more picturesque: “the blood [...] did swell like bubbles sheere that ryse in weather cleere on water” (v. 855-57). There is no more mud and dirty red color, instead one thinks of blue skies, sunshine and a nice lake. This seems to go well with Adonis’ beauty in life and that of the flower about to emerge. So why did Ovid include this unpleasant scene? The reason might be Adonis’ violent death. A reddish brown swamp might not be too far from the truth. But apart from being realistic, this description also adds another dimension to how death is seen in the story. After all, a main topic is transience. Adonis dies in the bloom of life, his beauty at its height. He needs to become ugly and disgusting, to wither, before he can bloom again – this time for real – as a flower.

This flower will only last for a short while, its very fragility is part of its name, “anemone”. Ovid derives this name from the Greek word for wind, *ανεμος*, and claims that it is too perishable and blown away by its namesakes (v. 737-39). So this short, repulsive scene is inevitable if Adonis, or rather the memory of him, is going to live on in a flower. Death is part of life, and death can be ugly. This now raises another question: Why did Golding choose to change it? It is not likely that it was a mere mistake on his side. Even if “*bullā*”, “water bubble”, is not a common word, “*fulvus*”, “reddish brown”, certainly is. One way to explain why Golding favored clear water is that his description seems more realistic. Most people would recall seeing bubbles rise in a lake. Fewer, if anybody, have witnessed water bubbles rise in a swamp. When the flower has grown from the blood, Ovid compares it to that of the pomegranate tree (“*punica*”, v. 737). Golding does not name the tree, he just says “that same tree” (v. 859) He omitted the exotic tree, probably because most of his readers did not know what it looked like and hence the comparison would have been of no use to his audience. This would be a typical characteristic of Golding’s way of translating. When he had the chance, he tried to give the stories an English setting.

2.2.4 *Camerarius*

After these examples of classical texts, I want to include a poem from a textbook by Swiss Joachim Camerarius, reprinted in William Weaver’s book *Untutores Lines*. Drawing from the *Metamorphoses* as a source as well, Camerarius introduces some of the changes scholars have found in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. In 1540, Camerarius included his version of the myth as “*Narratiuncula Exposita versibus elegiacis*” in his book “*Elementa Rhetoricae, sive Capita Exercitiorum Studii Puerilis et*

Stil? Although in his title¹⁶ he classifies his work as an elegy, Weaver finds parallels to Shakespeare’s *epyllion*:

Camerarius’ elegiac-didactic version of the Adonis myth supplied the plot and arguably modeled the rhetorical strategies for a much lengthier, English paraphrase: Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis. From Camerarius Shakespeare took the main outline of his *epyllion*, which focuses almost entirely on Venus’ copious arguments to a reluctant Adonis, and furthermore, crucially, remains with Venus after Adonis rejoins the hunt. Like Camerarius, Shakespeare does not narrate Adonis’ death but instead follows Venus in an ecstatic search for Adonis through a trackless wood. (Weaver 2012, 71)

Weaver identifies a verbal imitation in the concept of time. Camerarius has

*Cumque fuit medii iam pars transacta diei,
Phoebeoque ardens aestuat igne polus* (v. 31/2)
(And while the middle part of the day was already over,
and the burning sky sweats in Phoebos’ heat),

which Shakespeare renders as

And Titan, tired in the midday heat,
With burning eye did hotly overlook them (v. 177/8)

We find a god as the sun, the middle of the day and heat in both poems. Camerarius’ next two lines,

*Ilice sub nigra niveis complexa lacertis,
Detinet in gremio te Venus alma suo.* (v. 33/4)
(Underneath a black holly oak embraced in snowy arms,
nurturing Venus holds you in her lap.)

are, according to Weaver, reflected in Shakespeare’s

Full gently now she takes him by the hand,
A lily prisoned in a gaol of snow (v. 361/2)

The Latin word “*alma*” introduces an aspect Shakespeare will take up as well. It can signify “benign”, an appropriate attribute for a goddess, as well as “nurturing”.¹⁷ I will comment on Venus as a mother figure later (cf. p. 51).

Weaver stresses the importance of the context of Camerarius’ poem. His book, the *Elementa Rhetoricae, sive Capita Exercitiorum Studii Puerilis et Stili*, is a Latin textbook for boys. Weaver translates the title as “Elements of Rhetoric, subtitled The Chief Exercises of Boyhood Study and Style” (72). Apart from “the chief exercises”, “*capita exercitiorum*” can also mean “the beginning of exercises”. As Camerari-

¹⁶ “*versibus elegiacis*”, in elegiac verses.

¹⁷ Cf. *alma mater*.

us' aim is to teach boys the basics of rhetoric, this is a reasonable translation as well. Being at the end of the grammar book, the poem is meant for boys who are about to move on and Weaver considers the topic, "Adonis' frustrated transition to manhood" (Weaver 2012, 72), fit for this purpose. Also fitting the context, Weaver sees Venus as a teacher figure "holding back the unready boy in the grove of boyhood study" (72), while Shakespeare's Venus first urges Adonis on and tries to make him a man, but later holds him back.

No matter how much Weaver stresses Camerarius' influence on Shakespeare, he still sees that of Ovid, namely of the *Metamorphoses*, *Ars Amatoria* and the *Amores*. These among others Weaver sees as evidence of the eclectic quality of Shakespeare's poem, thus fulfilling the first of three criteria of the boyhood style, the two remaining being the episodic and the ethical quality (Weaver 2012, 76-78).

Weaver quotes a passage from Camerarius arguing that boys should be encouraged to write long pieces rather than short ones, for later on it would be easy to shorten a too long text. It seems like Shakespeare acted accordingly when he turned Ovid's short sequence into an *epyllion* of 1,194 lines.

2.2.5 Titian: *The Art of Painting*

The last, rather uncommon source, is a painting from the Italian Titian.¹⁸ It depicts a scene from the Ovidian myth and was produced for Philipp II., King of Spain (Schlink 2008, 86-90). William Keach has no doubts Shakespeare had seen at least a replica of the painting (Keach 1977, 55).

As Wilhelm Schlink points out, Titian chose an unusual, albeit crucial scene: In the painting, Venus is trying to hold Adonis back. Equipped for the hunt, he has his hounds with him and Schlink identifies his weapon as a boar spear. To an expert hunter, such as a sixteenth century king, it was a distinctive spear clearly hinting at the boar about to kill the young man. We also find Titan, the sleeping Cupid and his bow and the arrows that had caused Venus to fall in love in the picture. S. Clark Hulse calls to mind Ovid's verses likening Adonis to Cupid,¹⁹ and remarks that "this figure [i.e. the one I identified as Cupid], equipped with both wings and quiver, lies in the same position as the dying Adonis in illustrated Ovids of the Renaissance, so the dead shepherd may here be fused with the sleeping boy, reminding us of the conclusion of the tale" (Hulse 1978, 99). This is a by far more direct reminder of Adonis' imminent death than the boar spear he is carrying. It also stresses Venus' helplessness: With her back to the viewer, we cannot read her face while body language implies she is straining to hold Adonis back. The depiction of what could be the dead Adonis, however, renders her efforts pointless.

¹⁸ The painting is currently on display at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. See the museum's online gallery at <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/venus-and-adonis-1/> (date of access 21 Nov 2014).

¹⁹ Cf. *Met.* X.515-18.

Looking only at the painting and its title and not taking into account what we know from Ovid, we see a naked Venus holding on to Adonis trying to leave her. Even if we know she fears for his life, the picture also allows for desire as a reason for her holding him back. Although Adonis’ face is turned towards the goddess, his body is trying to get away from her. Still, youth as reason for the reluctance hardly comes from this source, as the Adonis in the picture appears to be old enough to fall in love.

However, we find painting not only as a source, but also represented in the poem itself. In their introduction to their edition of Shakespeare’s poems (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 31-56), Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen point out that Sidney had already written about Venus and “also associated [her] with the visual arts” (40). Furthermore, in his “vividly pictorial description of Adonis’ runaway horse, expressing the unbridled male sexuality in which his young master is pitifully deficient” (47), the poet features as painter. He even seems to be describing the work of one in verse 289: “Look when a painter would surpass the life”. It is noteworthy that in his description of the horse Shakespeare fulfills many of Isidore’s criteria for an ideal horse (cf. Clark 2006, 158). Isidore wants a “small, firm head” and Shakespeare gives his horse a “small head” (v. 296). While Isidore believes a horse’s emotion are shown in its ears, which therefore should be “short and expressive”, Adonis’ horse is described as having “short ears” (v. 297). Instead of Isidore’s “thick mane and tail” we only find “thin mane, thick tail” (v. 298) in Shakespeare, the thin mane possibly made up for by a “high crest” (v. 297). Shakespeare describes the “firm roundness of the solid part of the hooves”, which Isidore wants, simply as “round-hoofed” (v. 295). Shakespeare says of the horse that

Sometime he scuds far off and there he stares;
Anon he starts at stirring of a feather. (v. 301-2),

meaning “that it is easily aroused from absolute quiet”, as Isidore says it should. W. R. Streitberger identifies Plato as an inspiration for Adonis’ horse, with Thomas Elyot as a likely source for the knowledge on Plato (Streitberger 1975, 289).

The detailed description of the horse with every part of its body as well as its movements and habits being laid out for the reader, inspires a much more vivid picture in the reader’s mind than any painter possibly could have produced.

3 The Dedication

Right after the epilogue, we find a dedication “To the Right Honourable Henry Wriothlesley, Earl of Southampton and Baron of Titchfield” (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 128). Ingeborg Boltz remarks that Shakespeare employs several *topoi* expressing modesty, as was customary in a dedicatory letter (Boltz 2009, 146/7). Although the expression “unpolished lines” might be accounted for by

these *topoi*, that would be the exact opposite of the elaborate *epyllion*. By including the word “unpolished”, Shakespeare plays with his readers’ expectations. They would certainly have heard about Shakespeare’s *epyllion*. By claiming not to have met the standards, he only proves he knows the rules of the genre.²⁰ Shakespeare goes on to refer to *Venus and Adonis* as “the first heir of my invention”. Peter Hyland thinks that “Shakespeare may have been erasing all the plays he had already written in order to intensify the sense of the poem’s significance. This does not mean that he really regarded it more highly than his plays, but he was clearly aware of the demands of his intended readership” (Hyland 2003, 66). Thus with his dedication to one man, Shakespeare was really consciously addressing the whole of his possible readership. If we want to take it a step further, we could see the word “heir” as introducing the topic of legacy. If *Venus and Adonis* is the first “heir”, that makes Shakespeare’s plays illegitimate “children”. The publication would equal Shakespeare’s will, and because he did not arrange for his plays to be published,²¹ they are not legitimate heirs.

Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen identify two fields of metaphors, one employing words associated with pregnancy, giving birth and family in general. The other one belongs to the country and, as they argue, already provides the setting for the poem (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 129). It might also have been a reference to Shakespeare’s hometown. After all, some Londoners might have looked down at him for not being from a big city, and he might have chosen to bring up this topic before anybody else had a chance to do so. As for comparing the poem to a baby, there probably is more to it. As we will see later (cf. p. 33), the Lord of Southampton’s father had died early on. As a ward, the young man had to wait until he came of age before he could claim his father’s heritage. Thus, the word “heir” would have a special meaning for him at that time. Furthermore, Southampton’s ward had proposed a marriage for him. With this in mind, the words “I leave [...] your honour to your heart’s content; which I wish may always answer your own wish and the world’s hopeful expectation” (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 128) appear to be more than just a polite commonplace. What his heart on the one side, and his ward on the other side wished for were not the same thing. On the other hand, “the world” could also have been people supporting the lord. If that was true, the expressed wish would have been for Southampton to fall in love with his bride-to-be. Shakespeare might have gotten himself in a difficult position had he openly told his patron to do what his heart told him (especially since after the publication virtually everybody could read the dedication). Thus he might have chosen to qualify his statement.

²⁰ For the genre of the *epyllion*, cf. p. 37.

²¹ Cf. Hyland saying “there is no evidence that he had any involvement in the publication of any of his plays” (Hyland 2003, 66).

3.1 Patronage

Now that we know what Shakespeare wrote in his dedication to the Lord of Southampton, we need to consider his reasons. A common approach is to assume financial problems: With London’s theaters closed from September 1592 til June 1594, opened only two months in between, due to an outbreak of the plague, Shakespeare could not earn money with his plays the way he used to unless he left London and performed somewhere else (Boltz 2009a). Apart from being a possible reason for the composition of *Venus and Adonis*, we find the plague inspired allusions to death bells and death as such in the text (cf. Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 69/70). Shakespeare could hope for money for dedicating his poem to a patron. Still, Ingeborg Boltz doubts that that would have been a large sum, because the Lord of Southampton himself was having financial difficulties at that time (Boltz 2009a, 147). Peter Hyland, on the other side, calls the young aristocrat “a generous benefactor to writers and scholars” in 1953 (Hyland 2003, 32). Even if Shakespeare did not receive a fortune from his patron, it certainly was enough to make him dedicate his second narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, to the same man. Others argue that already in 1596 Shakespeare “purchased both a grant of arms, [...] and a substantial mansion, New Place, in his native Stratford-upon-Avon” (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 14). It is unlikely that just three years earlier, his financial situation would have been devastating.

Another explanation for turning to a patron would be what we today would call a marketing strategy: The Lord of Southampton was a fashionable man, and Shakespeare could count on many people to try to emulate him (Hyland 2003, 32). Thus, as soon as his poem had a connection to the Lord, it would also gain more readers.

3.2 Southampton

There are different interpretations finding a more or less hidden meaning in the text. The first, from a letter by William Renoldes, rather a conspiracy theory, is quoted by Leslie Hotson:

yet [...] if they colde once move me by ther printed bookes to com to the queene [...] they suppoes it would be there best sporte, for they would then beleve that by ther bookes I conseavid a secret hope of some great love in the queene towards me (Hotson 1950, 141-7)

“They” means the Privy Council who Renolds believes to have published certain books, such as *Venus and Adonis*, only in order to make him believe the Queen loved him so that he would make a fool of himself.

Apart from such admittedly not quite sane explanations of Shakespeare’s works, scholars have come up with other solutions. In his essay “Wriothesley’s Resistance” Patrick M. Murphy talks about alternative interpretations of *Venus and*

Adonis (Murphy 1997, 323-340). He sees the poem as an analogy of the Earl of Southampton's life. The key to this approach is the Elizabethan wardship practice.

Henry Wriothesley's (the later Earl of Southampton) father had died, so he eventually became the ward of Burghley (at least as far as his personal affairs were concerned). Burghley was also the warden of his granddaughter, Elizabeth Vere, who he chose as a bride for Southampton. Her father, Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, is the man that some people believe actually wrote the plays commonly ascribed to William Shakespeare. That would have some interesting consequences for the interpretation of the dedication to the Lord of Southampton.²² However, the desired groom did not agree with the marriage and succeeded in postponing the wedding until he came of age. He then had two options. The first one would have been to refuse to marry on grounds of "disparagement",

including: first, defects of the mind, involving a lunatic or an idiot; second, defects of the blood, involving persons of lower social station, aliens, or bastards; and third, defects of the body, including missing limbs or other deformities. (Murphy 1997, 325)

To Southampton, the second aspect would have been the most interesting one: After Elizabeth Vere's mother had given birth to her, her husband left her because he had serious doubts about the paternity (334-335). If she really was an illegitimate child, Southampton would have had the right to refuse the marriage. Murphy also detects possible hints at an incestuous affair between Anne and William Cecil, Elizabeth's mother and grandfather. We also find the topic of incest in Ovid, while Shakespeare seems to avoid it in *Venus and Adonis*.

The second option for a former ward to escape a proposed marriage was paying a fine, which Southampton did in the end. The statute of Merton offered this way out, stating that no one could be forced to marry, "but when he cometh to full age he shall give to his lord, and pay him as much as any would have given him for the marriage" (325). In this case, the amount was £5,000. But why did the former ward pay at all, when he had a perfectly legal alternative? Apart from claims of disparagement being relatively rare, Murphy sees another reason:

This (self-) destructive strategy, however, would be an affront to Burghley, beyond proof and acceptable persuasion, and politically very dangerous, as well as personally offensive to feelings of mutual concern likely shared between the ward, his guardian, and perhaps Elizabeth herself. (1997, 336)

Thus Murphy thinks Southampton preferred to pay the customary fine out of respect for his former guardian.

So how does this connect to Shakespeare's poem? The first and maybe the only direct hint is the dedication to the Earl of Southampton. We find another allu-

²² For the Earl of Oxford as the actual author, see Boltz 2009b, 188-189.

sion to the process of inheritance and thus of the issues Southampton was facing at that time when in the end of the poem Venus addresses the flower:

Here was thy father’s bed, here in my breast;
Thou art his next of blood, and ‘tis thy right. (v. 1183/4)

Venus considers the question of legacy immediately after Adonis’ death and then, at least physically, moves on in her chariot. When reading these lines Southampton probably identified with the flower easily: After his father’s death, he was taken away to live with his guardian. At first glance, the flower in the poem has a clear advantage over Southampton, as it is granted its rights on the spot, while he had to wait until he came of age and even then pay a large amount of money. Yet, the flower was cropped by Venus and thus will die shortly. This could be seen as an ironic word of comfort to a possibly impatient heir: It is true that he has had to wait for a long time and will have to pay a considerable sum, but at least he does not have to pay with his life for what is his.

4 The Poem

Today, we chiefly associate Shakespeare with his plays. This we probably share with Londoners in 1593. Shakespeare had at that time already written several plays (Kahn 2007, 72-7). So why did he now turn to poetry, and why did he publish *Venus and Adonis* under his own name?

Kahn mentions one practical reason for the young author to turn his back on the stage: Due to an outburst of the plague “London theaters were closed from June 1592 until June 1594 [...], with only two brief periods of playing in the winters of 1593 and 1594” (72). Unable to earn money with his plays, Shakespeare turned to poetry as a way to pay his bills. The topic of *Venus and Adonis* was not unheard of among Elizabethans.²³ Some scholars are of the opinion that Shakespeare had been working on the poem for some time, others that he had a draft already and just revised it for publication. Kahn also talks about another explanation scholars have found, namely Shakespeare wanting “his career to follow the pattern of classical poets such as Virgil and Ovid, beginning with pastoral lyrics that often focused on the vicissitudes of love, and then moving into a loftier epic style” (72). The setting of *Venus and Adonis* is pastoral, and Venus aptly embodies the “vicissitudes of love”.

Another possible reason, Kahn continues, is rivalry between poets. John Clapham dedicated his poem *Narvissus* to Southampton as well. The topic is the same, but it was written in Latin. In the *Shakespeare-Handbuch* (Boltz 2009a, 146) we find Greene’s attack on Shakespeare as a likely motivation for him to prove himself.

²³ For works of Greene Shakespeare may have been inspired by, see Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 18.

Assuming Shakespeare wanted to work with the myth of Venus and Adonis, with only three characters, it would not have provided enough roles. In addition to that, both Venus and Adonis would probably have been played by boys – Venus, because only men were allowed to act on stage and Adonis, because the character is not a grown man yet. This would render the whole play ironic. The myth could have served as a subplot in another play, like Tyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In that case, however, he could hardly have developed the psychological depth of the characters the way he did (Dubrow 1987, 77).

Unlike Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, Shakespeare writes in iambic pentameters (Ovid had used catalectic dactylic hexameter, cf. p. 24). Each stanza consists of six lines, which gives us 199 stanzas. The rhyme scheme is ababcc. While Ovid's relating of the myth at least partly had an etiological background, that is it explains the origin of a flower and why love sometimes appears to be cursed, we do not find any evidence for this in Shakespeare.

One of the most obvious differences is the length. Of Ovid's 87 verses, Shakespeare makes 1,194. With just one more stanza, he would have achieved the even number of 200 stanzas. The number of verses (1,200) would have been reminiscent of the number twelve, which Christian tradition names as the perfect number.²⁴ Twelve is the number of months in a year as well as hours both in a day and a night. It also is the number of the apostles. Thus, by adding only one more stanza, the poem would have been perfected in Christian terms. However, that would not do justice to the content: It is a recurrent theme throughout the work that Adonis is still quite young.²⁵ So just like Adonis' life, the poem seems to end prematurely. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether readers would have counted the lines and discovered this as well as whether Shakespeare did this on purpose.

Heather Dubrow finds another reason for this premature and therefore incomplete ending in Venus' "volatile character" (Dubrow 1987, 42). She points out that in both Ovid's original and Golding's translation Venus actively ends the story by transforming the dead Adonis into a flower. Shakespeare's Venus simply witnesses this transformation.

Another alteration which Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 57) point out is the omission of Cupid. He takes no active part in the story and is only mentioned once. This we also find in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. The "even more remarkable" (57) alteration is Adonis: Venus' lover, that he was in Ovid, suddenly appears as "resolutely unresponsive to Venus' wooing" (57). Shakespeare's contemporary "readers, well versed in the *Metamorphoses*, must have read on and on, increasingly puzzled by the failure

²⁴ This would be even more striking not read as "one thousand two hundred", but as "twelve hundred".

²⁵ Cf. v. 127: "The tender spring upon thy tempting lip shows thee unripe; yet mayst thou well be tasted."; v. 187: "young and so unkind?"; Adonis himself stresses this in v. 416: "Who plucks the bud before one leaf put forth?"; later he is spoken of as "the boy that by her side lay killed" (v. 1165).

either of Venus’ brilliant rhetoric or of her physical approaches to stimulate any erotic response in him” (57). Apart from making an impression on his readers, this also was a welcome opportunity for Shakespeare to show his own ability: While his readers wondered why any man would not be seduced by Venus’ words, at the same time they would have been impressed by the poet’s skill. This is exactly what Shakespeare would have been aiming for in his first publication, to prove he was an outstanding rhetorician. This discipline was valued very highly and important especially for somebody who had not attended university. Those of the Elizabethan authors who had are referred to as “University Wits”. There was an interesting relationship between them and Shakespeare.

4.1 The Genre: Village vs. Cambridge

Without a doubt, *Venus and Adonis* is poetry – but a further definition of this and similar poems is difficult. William Keach argues that for the sake of simplicity and because “these Elizabethan poems are sufficiently like one another and sufficiently indebted to one another to be grouped under a single name, and they are closer related to late classical *epyllia* than to any other kind of poem” (Keach 1977, xvi/xvii) *Venus and Adonis* may be called an *epyllion* (information from Anz 2007, 54-56). The word *epyllion* is Greek and denotes a small epos. The genre was established by Kallimachos, a Hellenistic poet and patron of the arts in the third century before Christ. He thought of the epos as too long and outdated. An *epyllion* typically consisted of 100-800 verses, written in either hexameter or, less often, distichon. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is counted among the classical *epyllia*. A poet established himself as a *poetus doctus*, educated poet writing for an educated audience in a polished and elaborate style (von Wilpert 1969, 228). Weaver (Weaver 2012, 7) differentiates between two kinds of content of the English *epyllion*, mythological or historical. Thus *Venus and Adonis* is a mythological *epyllion*.

As we have seen before, Shakespeare received a rather basic education and did not go to university.²⁶ This is an important distinction from other writers from his time, the so-called “University Wits”. Robert Fricke (Fricke 1975, 80-83) talks about a trilogy of plays written by authors who certainly received a university education between 1598/99 and 1601/02, a few years after *Venus and Adonis* was published. Fricke finds a direct mentioning of Shakespeare and mocking of his *epyllion*. This can be taken as a revenge for the provocation that Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* surely was. In choosing the *Metamorphoses* as a source and making a Latin quotation of Ovid his epigram, Shakespeare entered the “University Wits” domain. If we add Camerarius’ grammar book as a source, Shakespeare even seems to have proven that a school book was all he needed to write a very successful poem. He did not need to go to Cambridge. According to Fricke, the play also

²⁶ In the dedication of *The Rape of Lucrece*, he talks about his “untutored lines”, possibly stressing that he needed no university for his work.

tells Shakespeare to turn from narrative poems to more serious topics. Ironically, Shakespeare seems to follow the classical tradition. As we have seen above, Ovid had written love poetry before the *Metamorphoses*. It was the first topic an aspiring poet turned to. Encouraging Shakespeare to turn to something as serious as an epic now actually is acknowledging that he has mastered this first step.

Furthermore, Fricke stresses that Shakespeare's plays are not mentioned in the academic play. He should have liked that, as he deliberately published this first narrative poem under his name as the starting point of his career as an author. It might also show us that authorship of plays might not have been deemed too important. Yet, the plays are another important distinction to set Shakespeare apart from the "University Wits", as he took an active part in the theaters, both on stage and as a shareholder. Fricke suggests the university educated writers envied the players their success, feeling that they merely repeated another's words and received all the admiration for that. Shakespeare's acting could come in here as another reason for the "University Wits" dislike for him.

4.1.1 Shakespeare and Marlowe

One other Elizabethan author often connected with Shakespeare is Christopher Marlowe. Both writers were working on Ovidian poetry at roughly the same time. A possible explanation, even a reason for both of them to start writing at the same time, is a letter offending playwrights. It could have encouraged both men to "show the reading public what great things they could achieve that had nothing to do with 'play-making'" (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 21). While Fricke does not name him among the "University Wits" proper, Peter Hyland nevertheless calls Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* more sophisticated than Shakespeare's two *epyllia* (Hyland 2003, 56). He shows how Shakespeare introduces his "Rose-cheeked Adonis" (v. 3) with a quote from Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*.²⁷ Although the publication of *Hero and Leander* cannot be dated with certainty, "Shakespeare, at any rate, was familiar with it" (Hyland 2003, 56). Hyland stresses that by the time Shakespeare turned to writing poetry, Marlowe was already well established (57) and thus "To outdo Marlowe at his own Ovidian game would have been a notable feat" (57) for Shakespeare. The poem resulting from this "Ovidian game" Hyland describes as "deeply transgressive; Marlowe seems to have intended to make it as outrageous as possible, stimulating both heterosexual and homosexual erotic interest" (57). Considering the source for *Venus and Adonis*, namely the tenth book of the *Metamorphoses*, it is an obvious choice for Shakespeare if he wants to draw connections to this aspect of *Hero and Leander*. Book X is told by Orpheus who has just lost his love Eurydice and decides never to love a woman again. Instead, he will turn to loving boys. The topics of the stories told here are

²⁷ "For his sake whom their goddess held so dear, /Rose-cheeked Adonis", v. 92-3, quoted from Hyland 2003, 57.

all connected with lovers meeting some kind of difficulty or prohibition. Adonis, after all, was conceived by Myrrha from her own father.²⁸

So if Marlowe had already written about homosexuality, in order to outdo him here, Shakespeare chose incest as a topic. With this topic he was ahead of his time: “The authors of Elizabethan *epyllia* show no particular interest in Ovid’s tales of incest, although the Jacobean, not surprisingly, do” (Keach 1977, 18). Still, he never names Myrrha or retells her story. Yet, the following stanza is quite explicit:

Art thou obdurate, flinty, hard as steel?
Nay, more than flint, for stone at rain relenteth.
Art thou a woman’s son, and canst not feel
What ‘tis to love, how want of love tormenteth?
O, had thy mother borne so hard a mind,
She had not brought forth thee, but died unkind! (v. 199-204)

Being pregnant from her own father, Myrrha left her family. She did not want to live, but neither to die, afraid of meeting dead family members. At the time of Adonis’ birth, Myrrha was a tree, the only way out of her misery. So no, he was not “brought forth” by her, and, strictly speaking, he was not “a woman’s son”. Following Ovid, he even was a statue’s descendant: The sculpturer Pygmalion had fallen in love with his own work, which Venus made come to life.²⁹

Fie, lifeless picture, cold and senseless stone,
Well-painted idol, image dull and dead,
Statue contenting but the eye alone,
Thing like a man, but of no woman bred! (v. 211-14)

Shakespeare includes incest in yet another way: Although Venus treats Adonis like a mother, she also desires him for her lover (cf. p. 51).

Apart from that, Shakespeare’s poem is “more English”: Although Marlowe also wrote in English instead of Latin, his setting is more foreign than that of Shakespeare (Kahn 2007, 75). The latter’s staying true to the English language and country in a way sets him apart from the “University Wits”. He seems to be making a point of the fact that he does not need foreign languages or settings for his work – among his sources, however, are still classical Latin ones. In conclusion, Shakespeare made his entry into the literary world by challenging one of its leaders. He showed that he could produce Ovidian poetry himself, and he was even more daring than Marlowe. Not having studied at a university, he may have wanted to make a point of showing off his knowledge of the *Metamorphoses* by including several myths, mostly just hinting at them.

²⁸ For a more detailed look at the myth of Myrrha and its significance for the poem, see p. 41.

²⁹ Cf. p. 43 and Met. X, v. 243-97.

4.1.2 Myths

Given their popularity and the education a considerable part of the readership had, a contemporary reader very likely detected the hints at mythological characters. Each of the myths was purposefully included in *Venus and Adonis* to contribute to the poem.

Tantalus

While Venus is begging Adonis for a kiss, we find the following lines:

Never did passenger in summer's heat
More thirst for drink than she for this good turn.
Her help she sees, but help she cannot get;
She bathes in water, yet her fire must burn. (v. 91-94)

This is reminiscent of Tantalus, who is standing in water that recedes whenever he tries to drink. In addition to being thirsty in all eternity, he is also hungry (Fink 1993, 289/90). Ovid makes Jupiter Tantalus' father.³⁰ This would make Venus his half-sister. By likening her suffering to that of Tantalus, Shakespeare renders all additional description of her pain superfluous.

When Adonis has revealed his plan of hunting the boar (v. 587/8), we see Venus once more in distress: "That worse than Tantalos' is her annoy" (v. 599). Her situation now is even worse than in verses 91-94: Before, what she desired was right in front of her, but she could not have it. Now, she fears that Adonis will be taken away from her altogether. Traditionally, the torments of Tantalus are the worst imaginable. Even the thought of Adonis dying makes Venus suffer even more, so that the reader can only guess how she feels when Adonis actually dies.

Narcissus and Echo

Because Narcissus (*Metamorphoses* III, 339-519) rejects Echo, the nymph's body withers away, and only her voice is left. Narcissus, however, walks on to find a spring. When he kneels down to drink, he sees his reflection in the water and immediately falls in love with himself. He cannot bring himself to part with his reflection and in the end slowly fades away and dies. His dead body turns into a flower, the narcissus, while the mourning Echo is left behind.

There are some obvious similarities between the Ovidian and the Shakespearean youth: Both are beautiful, die young and are turned into flowers. Both like to hunt³¹ and their beauty is oftentimes described using the colors red and white (cf. *Met.* III, v. 422/3). Also, both are said to have a "hairless face" (v. 487 and *Met.* III

³⁰ In the *Metamorphoses* Niobe, Tantalos' daughter says: "*Iuppiter alter avus*"; "my other grandfather is Jupiter" (*Met.* VI, v. 176).

³¹ *Met.* III v. 413: "*studio venandi*"; "the fervor of hunting" is what brought Narcissus to the spring.

v. 422), stressing their youth. Still, while Narcissus’ youth functions more as part of his beauty, Adonis’ youth is the reason he rejects Venus.

Being rejected, Venus tries to persuade Adonis of her beauty and, when that is not successful, finally bursts out:

Is thine own heart to thine own face affected?
 Can thy right hand seize love upon thy left?
 Then woo thyself, be of thyself rejected,
 Steal thine own freedom, and complain on theft.
 Narcissus so himself himself forsook,
 And died to kiss his shadow in the brook. (v. 157-62)

She uses Narcissus’ fate as a warning to Adonis.

During her lamentation over Adonis’ death, Venus says: “When he beheld his shadow on the brook” (v. 1099). “His shadow in the brook” is a verbal repetition of verse 162. This is an elegant way of reminding the reader that Venus had been afraid this might happen all along, without her actually saying so.

While Shakespeare establishes this connection between Adonis and Narcissus, he does the same with Venus and Echo. In verses 147/8 Venus says she could dance like the nymph Echo was. Both women are rejected, left behind, and later find their beloveds’ corpses. When Venus tries to persuade Adonis to hunt a less dangerous animal than the boar, she mentions Echo (v. 695/6), who doubles the hounds’ barking. In verses 829-52 Echo even joins Venus in her lamenting and repeats her sighs. After Narcissus’ death, Echo did not have the chance to express her grief, as she could only repeat another’s utterances. She can now mourn by echoing Venus.

Myrrha

Myrrha is Adonis’ mother. She falls in love with her own father and is so ashamed she tries to kill herself, but her nurse intervenes. Together, the two women take the opportunity of Myrrha’s mother’s absence and trick her father into sleeping with his own daughter. Upon finding out what they have done, he bans his daughter, by then pregnant with his child. Myrrha keeps wandering around, until she finally cannot stand the shame anymore and asks the gods to take her away both from the world of the living and of the dead. She is granted her wish and changed into a tree (*Met.* X, 298-502). With the help of the goddess Lucina, Adonis is delivered from this tree (*Met.* X, 503-513). One important detail is that Myrrha’s love was inspired neither by Venus nor by Cupid, but by one of the Furies (*Met.* X, v. 311-14) and consequently the incest is not associated with Venus and her son.

Myrrha’s story explains several lines in the poem. In every one of them, Venus seems to be unaware of Adonis’ history, such as when she calls him “Thing like a man, but of no woman bred!” (v. 214) or when she describes his beauty to Titan:

There lives a son that sucked an earthly mother
 May lend thee light, as thou dost lend to other. (v. 863/4)

Though Adonis had “an earthly mother”, she was a tree at the time he was born and could not nurse him. Again, Venus’ ignorance creates irony:

Art thou obdurate, flinty, hard as steel?
 Nay, more than flint, for stone at rain relenteth.
 Art thou a woman’s son, and canst not feel
 What ‘tis to love, how want of love tormenteth?
 O, had thy mother borne so hard a mind,
 She had not brought forth thee, but died unkind! (v. 199-204)

Strictly speaking, he is not a “woman’s son”, but a tree’s. Also, Myrrha herself knew exactly “how want of love tormenteth”, it even made her try to commit suicide. Throughout the poem, we find various incidents where Adonis’ heart is said to be hard and is compared to stone. The first of these is “flint-hearted boy!” (v. 95), which first introduces the comparison to flint. But why flint, and not for example marble? Maybe this is because flint can be used to light a fire. Just as the flint stone produces sparks that eventually turn into flames, Adonis inspires love (often likened to fire) in Venus. The “rain” probably refers to Venus’ tears that cannot move Adonis. Venus again talks of Adonis’ “hard heart”:

O, give it [i.e. my heart] me, lest thy hard heart do steel it,
 And beeing steeled, soft sighs can never grave it;
 Then love’s deep groans I never shall regard,
 Because Adonis’ heart hath made mine hard. (v. 375-78)

This threat of an unsympathetic love may scare the reader, but is of no effect to the unexperienced Adonis. Still, this is a first indication that Venus’ unhappy love might have consequences for all lovers. Near the end of the poem, Venus finally does curse love (v. 1135 ff.). In verses 425/6, Adonis actually takes up the motif of his hard heart:

Dismiss your vows, your feigned tears, your flatt’ry,
 For where a heart is hard they make no batt’ry.

The first of these two verses contains an anticlimactic tricolon, with flattery being the beginning of wooing and vows its most serious part. This reversed order might represent Venus choosing the wrong approach as well.

In verses 500-03 we once more find Venus accusing Adonis:

Thy eyes’ shrewd tutor, that hard heart of thine,
 Hath taught them scornful tricks, and such disdain
 That they have murdered this poor heart of mine.

Here we once more find the thought of Adonis’ heart being “contagious”. In verses 375/6, Venus uttered her fear it might infect her own heart, and now it influenced his eyes. Adonis’ heart controls his ears as well:

For know, my heart stands armed in mine ear,
And will not let a false sound enter there (v. 779/80)

All this makes the reader feel like Adonis is perfectly able to take care of himself. However, we also find the perfect opposite of this “tough”, malevolent heart right in the next couple of lines:

Lest the deceiving harmony should run
Into the quiet closure of my breast;
And then my little heart were quite undone,
In his bedchamber to be barred of rest.
No, lady, no; my heart longs not to groan,
But soundly sleeps, while now it sleeps alone. (v. 781-86)

Adonis obviously knows the risks of love and decides to avoid it altogether. He thus avoids the fate of the mother he never met. Deeply in love with her own father, Myrrha could find no rest: At midnight, when everybody else was asleep, only she was wide awake (*Met.* X, v. 36872).

Her own love drove Myrrha into suicide, where she failed, and finally into something even worse than death: She is separated from all human beings, alive and dead, and can never be reconciled with her family (which might be a comforting thought for her, since she cheated on her mother with her father). So what about Adonis? He is introduced with the following words: “Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn” (v. 4). Later, he says:

“I know not love”, quoth he, “nor will not know it,
Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it.” (v. 409/10)

So instead of loving one of his parents, Adonis loves hunting. This love is what kills him, and from his blood grows a plant, likening him to his mother.

There is a certain irony in Adonis’ behavior: He is aware of the dangers of love and tries to guard himself against these. But he only thinks about Venus’ love and does not see the real threat: His love for hunting. If he had indulged in Venus’ love, he would not have encountered the boar the next day.

Pygmalion

With Pygmalion, we encounter another ancestor of Adonis. A very gifted sculpturer appalled by women, he builds a most beautiful statue from ivory. It is so perfect it can be mistaken for a real woman, and Pygmalion treated it like one. When he asks Venus to make his wife like her, she knows he really wants the statue as his wife, and makes her come alive. The daughter of Pygmalion and his statue is Paphos, the mother of Cinyras, Myrrha’s father (*Met.* X, v. 243-97 and Dun-

can-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 151-152 n. v. 211-16). The statue as Adonis' ancestor is recognizable in the Venus' lines:

Fie, lifeless picture, cold and senseless stone,
Well-painted idol, image dull and dead,
Statue contenting but the eye alone,
Thing like a man, but of no woman bred! (v. 211-14)

However, if this is the statue's heritage showing in Adonis, Venus has only herself to blame. After all, she was the one who granted Pygmalion's wish and watched over the marriage:

*Coniugo, quod fecit, adest dea, iamque coactis
cornibus in plenum noviens lunaribus orbem
illa Paphon genuit, de qua tenet insula nomen.* (Met. X, v. 295-97)

The goddess watched over the marriage she had brought about, and already when the crescent of the moon had completed the disk nine times (i.e. after nine months), did she give birth to Paphos, from whom the island has its name.

So, if it had not been for Venus, Adonis would never have been born.

If we think back on Adonis' "hard heart", we find an explanation in his statue-great-great-grandmother. Although she was technically made of ivory, not of stone, her being a statue brings stone to mind nevertheless. Just as she used to be of ivory through and through, Adonis' heart appears to be made of stone.

Atalante and Hippomenes

The beautiful Atalante was warned by an oracle not to marry. As she is a very fast runner, she decides that whoever beats her in a race would become her husband. If she wins, however, her opponent has to die. Many men enter the race and loose. Hippomenes asks for Venus' help, who in turn gives him three golden apples. Whenever Atalante overtakes him, he throws one of the apples to distract her. She cannot resist and stops to pick up each one. Also, she feels drawn to her opponent, without realizing she is in love. Hippomenes wins the race with Venus' help and marries Atalante. However, Hippomenes forgets to thank Venus. Enraged, Venus brings lust onto him, so that the two violate an old sanctuary of Athena in the woods. Athena punishes the couple by turning them into lions. Venus tells Adonis this story to warn him of the dangers of hunting, as he might encounter wild animals such as lions (*Met. X, v. 560-707*).³²

We find the lions from the original in Shakespeare's poem in three different places:

³² Thus with 147 lines this myth is longer than that of Venus and Adonis framing it, which is told in 87 lines.

Being ireful, on the lion he [i.e. the boar] will venture. (v. 628)

Here, the lion serves as an example of a highly dangerous animal and makes the boar appear even more dangerous.

For now she knows it is no gentle chase,
But the blunt boar, rough bear or lion proud (v. 883/4)

It is interesting to see that while both the boar’s and the bear’s attributes stress their fierceness, the lion is called “proud”. This could be a reference to Hippomenes, who Venus thought was too proud to thank her. But pride is an attribute commonly ascribed to the lion.

To see his [i.e. Adonis’] face the lion walked along
Behind some hedge, because he would not fear him (v. 1093/4)

As the footnotes suggest, “fear” in this case means “frighten, scare” (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 221). Adonis is likened to the proverbial lamb that the lion will not attack. This creates a rather paradisaical atmosphere, while at the same time pointing at Adonis’ innocence.

Salmacis and Hermaphroditus

The mythological boy Hermaphroditus, son of Venus and Mercury, is the origin of the word “hermaphrodite”. Ovid (*Met.* IV, 284-388) claims that he looked both like his mother and his father³³ and thus was named after both of them.³⁴ At the age of fifteen Hermaphroditus leaves home. While he is traveling, the nymph Salmacis, who is as beautiful as she is vain, falls for him. She approaches him and straightforwardly offers herself either as a secret affair or a bride, should he not already have one. However, Hermaphroditus is still a “*puer*” (v. 329), a boy, meaning he cannot fend for himself yet (Menge 2007, 165). He blushes at her words, “*nescit enim, quid amor*” (v. 330) – “because he does not know what love is.” When the nymph gets even closer to him, the boy sends her away and she agrees to leave. Young and naive Hermaphroditus does not notice she is secretly watching him and takes off his clothes to take a bath. At this sight, Salmacis cannot hold back any longer and follows him. But try as she might, Hermaphroditus does not give in, and the desperate nymph calls on the gods for help, asking that the two of them be joined together inseparably, which the gods grant her – the first hermaphrodite is created. Hermaphroditus in turn asks his parents for every man entering that spring to be weakened and to leave it as half a man. His wish is

³³ “*cuius erat facies, in qua materque paterque cognosci possent*” (*Met.* IV, 290/1); “he had a face in which you could recognize both his mother and his father”.

³⁴ “*nomen quoque traxit ab illis*” (*Met.* IV, 291); “he also derived his name from them”. What Ovid does not explicitly mention is that while he as a Latin author uses the names *Mercurius* and *Cytherea* (v. 288), the latter being a common name for Venus, Hermaphroditus’ name is derived from the Greek names of the gods, *Hermes* and *Aphrodite*.

granted as well. Its explaining a natural phenomenon makes this myth another etiological one.

Heather Dubrow points out that Shakespeare takes an image from either Ovid's original or Golding's translation of the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, changes it, and then includes it into his poem (Dubrow 1987, 46/7). Both Adonis and Hermaphroditus are still very young (cf. p. 51) and therefore not yet interested in love. Both are desired by very persistent, beautiful suitors. We even find Salmacis likened to a "*regia [...] ales*" (v. 362), a "royal bird", i.e. an eagle, while Venus' behavior is likened to that of an "empty eagle" (v. 55). Both boys are described as extremely beautiful with the colors red and white. Although Hermaphrodite's fate was dreadful to any reader, Adonis' turns out to be even worse.

4.2 Characterizations of Venus and Adonis

Keach sees the poem as characterized by opposition and inversion. Obviously, one of the protagonists is male and mortal, the other female and immortal. Their roles, however, are inverted, the female wooing the male, the immortal begging and depending on the mortal. He proposes that Shakespeare wanted to show how the wooer is actually depending on the one wooed, in whose power it is to reject (Keach 1977, 59).

In the characterization of either of the two characters, tears play an important role. When the narrator describes the "tears which chorus-like her eyes did rain" (v. 360), or when Venus is weeping for Adonis and we read

O, how her eyes and tears did lend and borrow!
 Her eye seen in the tears, tears in her eye:
 Both crystals, where they viewed each other's sorrow,
 Sorrow that friendly sighs sought still to dry;
 But like a stormy day, now wind, now rain,
 Sighs fry her cheeks, tears make them wet again. (v. 961-66),

we are bound to feel sorry for her. Following Gary L. Ebersole, tears held a special place in the Renaissance, as they "cross the bodily boundary of interior/exterior and visible/invisible" and so "offer a glimmer of hope that another person's true feelings could be known unambiguously" (Ebersole 2000, 229). When the sun burns Adonis' face, Venus offers:

I'll make a shadow for thee of my hairs;
 If they burn too, I'll quench them with my tears. (v. 191/92)

Crying by command refutes an indication of true feelings. In Adonis' outright accusation of producing "feigned tears" (v. 425), Shakespeare expresses his belief that "women learn to shed tears at will" (Ebersole 2000, 230). So what are we to think about Venus' emotion? In the *Metamorphoses* Venus' feelings are caused by one of Cupid's arrows and she undoubtedly feels drawn to Adonis. Why is Shake-

spare’s Venus in love? He introduces her as “sick-thoughted Venus” (v. 5), and Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen explain the attribute “sick-thoughted” as “sick from her thoughts, in particular from her longing and love for Adonis” (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 132n5). Venus herself certainly feels love, no matter what the source of it. After all, she cries and mourns for Adonis when she finds him dead. Without any witnesses, there is no use in putting on an act. She is grieving and even takes care of the flower she perceives to be Adonis’ son.

4.2.1 *Venus*

Venus’ most prominent feature is her wooing Adonis. According to William Keach, this is not atypical, “the aggressive female wooer is often treated comically and even satirically, and this has to do [...] with her function as an anti-type of the chaste, idealized, cruelly reluctant mistress so prominent in Renaissance lyric and pastoral poetry” (Keach 1977, 20). The words “chaste, idealized, cruelly reluctant” aptly describe Adonis. Venus does not act as a mortal woman, but not as a true goddess either. Keach describes her as “human enough to make use of conventional poetic hyperbole and superhuman enough to tuck a young man under her arm” (60). Clark Hulse poses the following questions: “If one grants that Venus is earthly love, what is the attitude toward earthly love? Is it loathsome, foul lust? Delightful sense? A near-sacred force of natural propagation?” (Hulse 1978, 97). She is all of that to the different characters in the poem: The way she sees herself certainly is different from the way Adonis sees her, and the narrator has a third opinion. Clark Hulse comes to a similar conclusion and talks about “not one, but three Venuses – comic, sensual, and violent – all embodying earthly love but differently depicted to reveal different aspects” (98). I would rather call the different “Venuses” different views on Venus. The comic one would be that of the narrator. He (assuming it is a male narrator) expresses his view very early on, for example with these lines:

Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force,
Courageously to pluck him from his horse. (v. 29/30)

We do not get the picture of a graceful, charming goddess, but rather of a comic figure. The sensual Venus is what she herself has in mind. She sees herself as desirable – consistent with the common image of the Goddess of Love. Wooing Adonis, she says:

Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,
 Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green,
 Or, like a nymph, with long dishevelled hair,
 Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen. (v. 145-48)

It seems like she cannot quite make up her mind which ideal beauty to compare herself to. This would leave the impression of a violent Venus to Adonis. Keeping in mind the way she plucked him from his horse, his opinion of her seems reasonable even before he utters it:

You hurt my hand with wringing; let us part,
 And leave this idle theme, this bootless chat.
 Remove your siege from my unyielding heart;
 To love's alarms it will not open the gate.
 Dismiss your vows, your feigned tears, your flatt'ry,
 For where a heart is hard they make no batt'ry. (v. 421-26)

The perceived violence is clear in Adonis' choice of words (cf. "you hurt") and especially in the military imagery: "siege", "alarms", "open the gate" and "batt'ry". Even the words "unyielding" and "vows" go well with the military, and "bootless" calls to mind the boots a soldier might wear. However, the division is not all that clear. After all, the narrator is the one employing similes like this to describe the way Venus kisses Adonis:

Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,
 Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh and bone,
 Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,
 Till either gorge be stuffed or prey be gone (v. 55-59)

Then again, maybe Adonis' view needs this support from the narrator, as the boy talks very little.

We find that the *Ars Amatoria* was a model for Shakespeare not only in the characterization of Venus, but also of love itself. When Adonis is gone at night, Venus is longing for him

And sings extemporally a woeful ditty,
 How love makes young men thrall, and old men dote;
 How love is wise in folly, foolish witty. (v. 836-8)

We have already seen what love is capable of in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (Book I, v. 83-87):

*Illo saepe loco capitur consultus Amori,
 Quique aliis cavit, non cavet ipse sibi:
 Illo saepe loco desunt sua verba deserto,
 Resque novae veniunt, causaque agenda sua est.
 Hunc Venus e templis, quae sunt confinia, ridet.*

In that place (i.e. the Roman Forum) the lawyer is often captured by Cupid,
 He who supported others, he does not support himself:
 In that place the eloquent often lacks his words,
 A new situation occurs, and he has to carry on his own lawsuit.
 At him Venus laughs from her temples, which are adjacent.

We find the notion that love can turn things around in both poems. In Shakespeare, it is paired with the irony that what Venus, as love impersonated, usually does to others, now happens to herself. She herself recalls Ovid.

But there are other models for Venus. Gordon Williams sees in her the Wife of Bath and a sign of feminism (Williams 1983, 770). Peter Hyland sees Shakespeare’s work for the theaters as explanation why Venus might be such an unexpected female character: “All his female characters were written with the knowledge that they would be played by boys, and the writer’s consciousness that the staged ‘woman’s part’ had an unavoidable masculine core is apparent in many of the roles that he wrote early in his career” (Hyland 2003, 82). Imagining Venus as a male actor accounts for her plucking Adonis from his horse (v. 30). While the narrator does not openly call Venus male, he still characterizes females as different from her when he describes the behavior of the mare:

Being proud, as females are, to see him woo her,
 She puts on outward strangeness, seems unkind,
 Spurns at his love and scorns the heat he feels,
 Beating his kind embracements with her heels. (v. 309-12)

If we exchanged the personal pronouns here, we would have a summary of how Venus and Adonis act with Venus as the male suitor. She is experienced in love, after all she has a son, Cupid,³⁵ and tells Adonis about her affair with Mars (v. 97-114). It is worth noting that here Venus says she has been “wooed” (v. 97), she did have the traditionally female part in this affair. Robert P. Miller points out the following: “The dramatic virtue in permitting Venus to recount the tale herself has been ignored by critics of Venus and Adonis.” After all, Venus chooses to omit the fact that the affair ended with the two getting caught by Vulcan, her husband, and the other gods in a net (Miller 1959, 477). In the end, “the classical version is completely altered by Venus’ failure to mention Vulcan and his net” (Keach 1977, 62). Venus being the suitor makes Adonis the reluctant virgin.

Maybe it is important to look at who says what in the poem. Until now I talked about a male narrator for the sake of simplicity. There is nothing that would clearly identify the narrator’s gender. However, with such a sexually provocative poem I assumed it was aimed at a male audience and consequently told by a male narrator. But a female narrator would allow for a whole new range of interpretations. If we imagine a woman telling the story, she might even be jealous of Venus, who

³⁵ Although she has more children, he is the only one mentioned and the only one to have played an active part, at least in the *Metamorphoses*.

has the chance to approach Adonis. That would explain the rather negative description of her throughout the poem, such as the comparisons to birds of prey. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have a very intricate structure of narrative levels and stories within a story.³⁶

This emphasis on the hierarchy of narrators might have led to Shakespeare giving his narrator some thought. John Klause shows how the narrator is “not an indifferent spectator” (Klause 1988, 365). If Shakespeare wanted to make his narrator a third character, Ovid could have provided him with Athena. In the *Metamorphoses*, Venus tells Adonis the story of Atalante and Hippomenes (cf. p. 44). Angry with Hippomenes, Venus made them violate Athena's sanctuary. Athena punished the humans, but not Venus. If Athena was the narrator in *Venus and Adonis*, her negative characterization of Venus might stem from her anger. Although there is no hint at Athena being the narrator, it is interesting to think about the consequences if she was.

Many scholars have found the figure of Adonis to be an important change Shakespeare made to Ovid's story (cf. e.g. Kahn 2007, 77) but what if we see Venus as unsuccessful? If one wanted to defame Venus, there could hardly be a better way than to show how she failed in her own area of expertise, and the *Metamorphoses*, at least in this place, suggest Athena as a possible slanderer. Still, the gods from classical mythology were constantly fighting and scheming among themselves, so the narrator does not necessarily have to be Athena. Anybody disappointed with love could hold a grudge against Venus. All in all, I think it is worthwhile to think about the narrator of *Venus and Adonis* and to consider the possibility that it was not necessarily Adonis who is changed, but maybe Venus. On top of that, it would be even more outrageous for a female narrator to talk about sex in the way the narrator does.

Venus represents a woman having and at the same time craving power. Heather Dubrow observes that Venus renames things: “To name something is to assert one's power over it [...]. Another function of Venus' naming, however, is to attempt to change the nature of [in this example] sweat and breath” (Dubrow 1987, 28). With Queen Elizabeth I. ruling, it is hard not to draw parallels here. Hyland says about Venus that “she is freed from the social and moral constraints that were imposed upon Elizabethan women and thus enabled to behave like a man. In this she clearly reflects the position of Queen Elizabeth herself, and it would have been impossible for a contemporary reader to avoid the allusion” (Hyland 2003, 90). Although this powerful woman is unhappy in the end, the character of Venus apparently was not taken as critique of the Queen, otherwise it would never have been published. Still, Heather Dubrow identifies “ambivalence about a brilliantly manipulative queen” (Dubrow 1987, 34).

³⁶ Jonathan Bate sees this as the origin of a contradiction. Venus encourages love while Orpheus wants to refrain from it (cf. Bate 1993, 86).

One topic of the poem is incest. This comes quite naturally, considering that Adonis was conceived in an incestuous affair between Myrrha and her own father. Now William Keach sees this motif continued in “the idea of a maternal-filial relationship between Venus and Adonis” (Keach 1977, 75). Considering Adonis’ youth, maternal feelings seem only logical. And Keach thinks that Shakespeare did not include this aspect of Venus’ relation to Adonis simply to shock his readership, he sees it as “a connection between the erotic and the maternal aspects of the feminine psyche. Venus lusts after Adonis, but she is also maternally protective of him, especially in the second part of the poem” (77). If one wants to accept such a quality of the female psyche, there finally would be an aspect where Venus acts the woman/ goddess she is. Jonathan Bate focuses on Adonis in this relationship: “Such juxtapositions of sexuality and parenting suggest that Adonis is forced to re-enact, with gender and generational roles reversed, his mother’s incestuous affair” (Bate 1993, 84). Venus’ role as a mother is prominent in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (cf. p. 17) where she looks out for the protagonist, her son Aeneas. Yet, while Virgil’s Venus stays calm and rational at all times,³⁷ “Variable passions” (v. 967) govern Shakespeare’s Venus. She insults Death (v. 931-54), only to apologize the next instant (v. 997-1014).

4.2.2 *Adonis*

Shakespeare’s Adonis was unlike anything known at the time (cf. Keach 1977, 54). One of his most prominent features is his youth. This is a deviation from Ovid’s Adonis, who only behaved childish, and even more from Golding’s mature Adonis (cf. p. 27). In verse 95 Venus calls him a “flint-hearted boy” and verse 467 shows him as easily deceived “silly boy”. He himself refers to his “unripe years” (v. 524) to escape Venus’ love, and takes this topic up again in verse 783 (“my little heart”) and verse 806 (“The text is old, the orator too green.”). After Adonis’ death, Venus ponders on how the sun and wind would act “in pity of his tender years” (v. 1091). Adonis is young, but, as Hyland states, he “is seeking an adult identity: he wants to be a man, and his desire for the boar is a desire for manhood” (Hyland 2003, 89). He eventually goes hunting, but still misses out on adulthood and finds only death.

In addition to being young, Adonis is feminized. In verses 49/50 we find

He burns with bashful shame: she with her tears
Doth quench the maiden burning of his cheeks

Apart from shame usually being associated with women rather than men (especially when it comes to love), the “maiden burning of his cheeks” shows the reader that Adonis behaves more like a girl than a man. Venus does the same:

³⁷ João Froes claims that Virgil’s Venus is an “impulsive person who violently pursues her objectives” as well as Shakespeare’s Venus (cf. Froes 1997, 303.)

Thy mermaid's voice hath done me double wrong;
 I had my load before, now pressed with bearing:
 Melodious discord, heavenly tune harsh sounding,
 Ears' deep sweet music, and heart's deep sore wounding. (v. 429-32)

Likening his voice to that of a mermaid is an interesting choice. Mermaids were said to use their voices to ruin sailors (cf. Duncan-Jones, Woudhuysen 2007, 170 n. v. 429). Although strictly Venus was not a sailor, she did have a connection with the sea. Trying to find an etymological meaning of the Greek goddess' name Aphrodite, the ancient Greek came up with the story of her being born from foam in the sea (Fink 1993, 48). If this is enough to connect Venus to the sea, it is only logical for her to compare Adonis to another being living in the sea, namely the mermaid. It is ironic that in the end, Venus lives and Adonis dies.

Still, there is a contrast in "thy mermaid's voice", as Adonis is, after all, a young man. This contrast is expressed in the two oxymora in verse 431, namely "melodious discord" and "heavenly tune harsh sounding". Other than male gods and heroes, Venus is not usually associated with homosexual affairs.

Yet more significant than these single incidents is the distribution of (gender) roles. Traditionally, we find a man wooing – or even pursuing – a reluctant woman (cf. e.g. Mars and Daphne; *Met.* I, v. 452-67). So just by being the one who is being courted and holding back Adonis takes over the traditional role of the woman. At the same time, Venus, the most beautiful of the goddesses (according to Paris' judgment), takes over the man's part, begging for a kiss (e.g. v. 115: "Touch but my lips with those fair lips of thine"). After he has kissed her (v. 479), she demands more:

A thousand kisses buys my heart from me;
 And pay them at thy leisure, one by one.
 What is ten hundred touches unto thee?
 Are they not quickly told and quickly gone?
 Say for non-payment that the debt should double,
 Is twenty hundred kisses such a trouble? (v. 517-22)

In verse 517 we also see Venus' self-confidence: Adonis does not want to buy her heart from her. Still, she offers it to him and names a price, and already in the next line does she give the terms of payment. For her, the deal is settled.

4.3 Animals

Catherine Bates takes a uniquely simple approach to explaining all the different animals we encounter in Venus and Adonis. She sees the boar, the horses, the hare, the "snail, falcon, eagle, vulture, dabchick, deer, doe, fawn, and so on" (Bates 2012, 339) primarily as counterparts to the human (and divine, respectively) characters in the *epyllion*. She calls them "stable behavioural archetypes" (339), one

knows what behavior to expect from any of them, such as the hare running away when hunted.

Unlike their animal counterparts, however, human beings are born into language and, for better or worse, their subjectivity and desire are irremediably structured by it. With the actions of the human characters (and for the sake of the argument I am including Venus here), language inevitably intervenes. Language comes first: it is what makes the concept of ‘action’ possible at all, and what – as several celebrated protagonists would soon articulate in a number of Shakespeare’s plays – often stands in the way of an action actually being performed. Venus and Adonis makes great play of this, presenting us – in its huge wall of words that gets in the way as much as it impresses or delights – with a sense that, if we can be masters of language (as the aureate poet was undoubtedly trying to be), we can also be its subjects, and that the resulting condition can be turned as much to negative as to positive effect. (Bates 2012, 339)

Before traveling allowed people to see wild animals from far away countries for themselves, they had to rely on drawings and descriptions in bestiaries. I am quoting here from Willene B. Clark’s *A Medieval Book of Beasts*. The bestiaries developed from the Early Christian *Physiologus*, the oldest manuscript being from the tenth century (Clark 2006, 8). Although this was well before Shakespeare’s time, Clark mentions Sir Robert Cotton collecting and distributing manuscripts in the seventeenth century (Clark 2006, 31n 72) so that we may assume that the contents of bestiaries were still known at the end of the sixteenth century.

When Venus returns looking for the dead Adonis, she finds his dogs “howling” (v. 918) and mourning (v. 920) for their dead master. This is a character trait we find in B-Isodore, who says that dogs “happily run with the master in the hunt; they even guard their master’s dead body and do not leave it” (quoted from Clark 2006, 145). Shakespeare’s dogs seem to be shaken by what happened, although it is not quite clear whether their fear is caused by Adonis’ death or the boar. Still, the dogs stay close by instead of running as far away as they can.

4.3.1 Birds

Birds are an important theme throughout Venus and Adonis. Both characters are repeatedly likened to different species and thereby characterized. Venus has a flying chariot. In the *Metamorphoses*, it is drawn by swans (*Met.* X.718). Shakespeare substitutes them for “silver doves” (v. 1190). One possible reason would be to once more stress how light Venus is. Before, she had been the one to point this out:

Witness the primrose bank whereon I lie:
These forceless flowers like sturdy trees support me (v. 151/52)

Now, at the end of the poem, the narrator seems to agree with her. Still, it is obvious that magic has to be involved in the chariot. This restores Venus as a goddess after she, the goddess of love, had fallen in love and been absolutely powerless. When we turn to the bestiaries once more, we find that the only important information on swans seems to be that they are white (Solinus, *Collectanea* 40:25, 171) and their beautiful singing stems from their long necks (B-Isidore/CCC 22, f. 168, 179). Doves, however, are traditionally associated with love and therefore a more adequate choice.

4.3.2 *The Hare*

The hare is the prey Venus suggests Adonis should hunt instead of the dangerous boar. She gives a detailed, empathetic description of the chased animal's behavior (v. 637-708). The goddess reminds of a worried mother. According to her, the hare is very fast and constantly changes directions when running:

The many musits through which he goes
Are like a labyrinth to amaze his foes. (v. 683/4)

With “a-maze”, Shakespeare includes a synonym for “labyrinth”, thus doubling the complexity and presenting the hare as difficult prey. To make Adonis want to hunt the hare rather than the prestigious boar, Venus needs to make him feel a dead hare would be just as big a triumph. Running fast and zigzagging likely is not enough, so she presents the hare as cunning, hiding its smell among sheep to make it impossible for the hounds to track it down (v. 685/6), after all, “wit waits on fear” (v. 690). By introducing wit as a topic, Venus proves she does not understand Adonis. Hyland sees the wish for hunting the boar as the wish for becoming a man (Hyland 2003, 89; cf. also p. 51). Adonis would thus probably think it necessary to prove his courage, not his wit.

While the first four stanzas let the hunt appear almost heroic, with the last two Venus seems to lose focus and inspires pity for the animal. After doing everything in his power in order to save himself, the “poor Wat” can only wait and see whether he was successful. Shakespeare describes the exact pose of a carefully listening rabbit. This makes the situation more vivid so the reader empathizes with the animal. Despite its efforts, it is still being chased:

And now his grief may be compared well
To one sore sick that hears the passing-bell. (v. 701/2)

The sound of the “passing-bell”, in the hare's case the dogs' barking in the distance, would be both well-known and dreaded by contemporary Londoners as announcing another victim of the plague. With the barking likened to the passing-bell, the hare is personified, and readers might mix fear for their own life into the apprehension felt for the hare's fate – which, according to Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen is prefiguring Venus' desperate search for Adonis

(Duncan-Jones, Woudhuysen 2007, 64). They also point out that the hare was “traditionally associated with lust” (64). According to Adonis, this links it even stronger to Shakespeare’s Venus:

Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled
 Since sweating Lust on earth usurped his name (v. 793/4)

Venus cannot be “Love”, because she is still on earth and “Love” is male here (cf. “his name”), probably referring to Eros. If we take this as resentment at the male love’s absence, it might be a hint at homosexuality and thus at Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*.

Identifying “Love” as Eros leaves “sweating Lust” to denote Venus, who indeed perspires: “By this the love-sick queen began to sweat” (v. 175). However, so does Adonis. The narrator calls Venus “love-sick Love” (v. 328), and not Lust, albeit maybe to emphasize the irony of her situation. Still, the way Venus acts throughout the poem calls for an identification as Lust rather than Love.

4.3.3 *The Boar*

Just like the hare, the boar never actually makes an appearance in the poem, but it plays a crucial role by killing Adonis. His future victim is the first to mention him, telling Venus that

tomorrow he intends
 To hunt the boar with certain of his friends. (v. 587/8)

After fainting at the mentioning of the animal, Venus gives a detailed description (v. 615-30) presenting the boar as a monster, a “mortal butcher” (v. 618), as good as invincible:

His brawny sides, with hairy bristles armed,
 Are better proof than thy spear’s point can enter.
 His short neck cannot be easily harmed (v. 625-27)

all in order to discourage Adonis from hunting the boar. Venus focuses only on her beloved Adonis and completely neglects his friends who will go with him (v. 588). She talks about “thine spear’s point” (v. 626), “that face of thine” (v. 631), “thy soft hand, sweet lips and crystal eyne” (v. 633) and “having thee at vantage” (v. 635). Again, she shows she cannot empathize with him: If he wants to prove himself, he will hardly walk up to his friends and tell them he thinks the boar is too dangerous.

Venus already pictures the scene of the attack quite accurately, including [Adonis’] blood upon the fresh flowers being shed
 Doth make them droop with grief and hang the head. (v. 665/6)

These lines foreshadow the description of the actual scene:

No flower was nigh, no grass, herb, leaf or weed
 But stole his blood and steemed with him to bleed.
 This solemn sympathy poor Venus noteth;
 Over one shoulder doth she hang her head. (v. 1055-58)

Again, there is blood on grieving flowers, although in the actual scene it covers not only flowers, but various plants. The “fresh flowers” from the middle of the poem prefigure the metamorphosis from the end:

And in his blood that on the ground lay spilled
 A purple flower sprung up, chequered with white (v. 1167/8)

This is not the first boar in a work by Shakespeare (cf. Keach 1977, 78). Here, Keach sees Venus’ “obsession” with the boar as crucial (77). With the boar’s “symbolically sexual energies”, its attack on Adonis is sexualized (Duncan-Jones, Woudhuysen 2007, 25) at least by Venus. Keach proves Venus’ connection to the animal by showing how her kissing Adonis “prophesies the boar’s kiss which kills Adonis” (Keach, 1977, 79/80). It is important to keep in mind that it is Venus who interprets the killing as an attempted kiss (v. 1110/11). She likens her own behavior to that of the boar:

Had I been toothed like him, I must confess,
 With kissing him I should have killed him first. (v. 1117/18)

She does not claim Adonis’ death was an accident, but she does not assume guilt either. Although she obviously does not have any tusks with which to hurt Adonis, both acted against his will.

4.3.4 *Horses for Lions*

Ovid’s *Atalante and Hippomenes*³⁸ told by Venus, is almost twice as long as his *Venus and Adonis*. Venus uses the myth to discourage Adonis from hunting the boar. Knowing Ovid’s myth, readers would have had lions in the back of their minds. We actually do find lions mentioned in Shakespeare’s poem in three different places:

Being ireful, on the lion he [i.e. the boar] will venture. (v. 628)

Here, the lion serves as an example of a highly dangerous animal and makes the boar appear even more dangerous.

For now she knows it is no gentle chase,
 But the blunt boar, rough bear or lion proud (v. 883/4)

³⁸ For the myth, see p. 44.

It is interesting to see here that while the boar and bear are described with an attribute that stresses their fierceness, the lion is called “proud” – which is what Venus accused Hippomenes of being. Still, pride is an attribute commonly ascribed to the lion.

To see his [i.e. Adonis'] face the lion walked along
 Behind some hedge, because he would not fear him (v. 1093/4)

As the footnotes suggest, “fear” in this case means “frighten, scare” (Duncan-Jones, Woudhuysen 2007, 221). The innocent Adonis is likened to the proverbial lamb that the lion will not attack, which creates a rather paradisaical atmosphere. In the *Metamorphoses*, lions are described as cruel, not showing any sympathy for Adonis’ beauty (cf. 26). Shakespeare focuses on presenting the boar as most dangerous animal of all.

So why did Shakespeare leave it up to his readers to remember Atalante and Hippomenes? For one thing, retelling the story would have destroyed the unity of place and time in the poem. William Keach points out that Ovid’s work was a “*carmen perpetuum*”, a “continuous narrative” where each episode was connected to others, while the aim of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was “to treat their mythological narratives [...] in such a way as to establish a convincing narrative and poetic self-sufficiency” (Keach 1977, 26). In addition to that, lions did not go well with the pastoral setting which might, for all we know, have been an English one. Lions would alienate the reader. The myth inserted by Ovid also introduces a whole range of new topics: the foolishness of young men risking their lives for a beautiful girl, proper conduct when asking favors from gods as well as vengeful and scheming females. All these aspects would have distracted the readers’ attention.

Another reason might be found in the animals themselves. In a bestiary compiled by Leonardo da Vinci, the passage on lions is titled “Courage”: “The lion is never afraid, but with strong spirit puts up a fierce fight against his hunters, always seeking to vent his rage upon the one who first molested him” (Evans 1952, 394).

Isidore is even more specific, he writes that “the nature of lions is such that they cannot become angry toward men, unless <the lions> are hurt” (Clark 2006, 120). Thus a lion would not be a danger to Adonis, unless he attacked the animal. A peaceful lion might be why it did not serve to warn of the dangers of hunting anymore.

Omitting the lions, Shakespeare introduces horses (v. 258-324). For one thing, horses were a common sight to an Elizabethan. Besides, Adonis’ horse easily fits into the narration. After all, the setting is in the countryside. Venus, we learn, traveled there in her flying chariot, and it is only logical for Adonis to have some means of transport himself. It is only natural, then, that Adonis should become “sworn with chafing” (v. 325) when he loses his horse. T. W. Baldwin explains Adonis’ horse as requirement for Venus’ “afternoon lecture” (Baldwin 1950, 26), but any other animal would have served the same purpose. As mentioned earlier

(cf. p. 31), the description of the horse also allows for a display of Shakespeare's skill. Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen point to Plato and say that "a rider's control over his horse has been traditionally viewed as symbolizing the mastery of animal passion by reason" (Duncan-Jones, Woudhuysen 2007, 58). Here, however, they explain Adonis' lack of mastery with his youth.

Coming back to Catherine Bates' interpretation of the animals as the humans' (including Venus) counterparts (Bates, 2012), the horses can be taken to represent love as it should be – according to an Elizabethan. As soon as the male sees the female, Adonis' horse begins to woo the mare, who plays her part in being wooed. There are no words needed, words being Venus' choice of a way to win over Adonis. "Nature", that being the way an Elizabethan might perceive it, is simple enough to do without words, as long as each horse plays by the rules. Right in the beginning, however, we see that Venus does not stick to the rules:

Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
And like a bold-faced suitor 'gins to woo him. (v. 5-6)

In the very introduction of Venus, her mistake is already presented: She behaves like a "bold-faced suitor", not as a "bold-faced suitor", indicating it is not her place to act this way. Both lines ending in "him" gives the impression that something is not quite the way it should be – certainly Shakespeare gave a lot of thought to this very first stanza, and the repetition would not simply be for lack of a rhyme. So, if we know from the beginning that the way Venus is going about it is wrong, the episode with the horses shows us how it should have been: Venus should have just come into Adonis' sight and waited for him to act – which he would not have done, because, as it is, he is yet too young to be interested in love at all.

5 Conclusion

We have seen that for his *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare did not simply tell his own version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* because the theaters were closed and he needed money. Although that is part of it, the *epyllion* is carefully composed to impress the readers and marks a turning point in Shakespeare's career.

In this it has been shown that Shakespeare drew on various sources. The example of Venus' character serves to show how he took aspects from both Virgil and different works of Ovid as well as Camerarius and possibly Titian and combined them to build something of his own: Shakespeare's Venus acts both like a mother and a lover to Adonis, while also showing attributes of Love personified. While working on a characterization of Venus, I noticed the importance of the narrator, which surely requires more research, as most essays tend to focus on Venus and Adonis. Apart from the complex characters in themselves, there are

more hints at a classical education. One of them is the daring epigram taken from the forbidden *Amores*, another are the myths included in the poem. Those myths are not told in their entirety, but rather casually alluded to, a bit like dropping names at a party. The intended reader only needed a short hint, for instance to Pygmalion to remember that Adonis had something of a heart of stone, to see the irony Shakespeare intended. The playwright thus proved his education to Elizabethan readers, especially the “University Wits” who had little regard for anybody connected to the theaters.

Within the poem we find several fields of metaphors that are worth focusing on. I elaborated on animals, although this topic still deserves more attention. There are others that I did not have a chance to work on. I shortly mentioned military metaphors, although it would be interesting to dwell on their implications. There are repeated references to the colors red and white throughout the poem, which would quite probably be another rewarding topic, just like references to tears and eyes. I included Titan as the sun only as far as he marks the time structure of the poem, but the roles of the sun and the moon in *Venus and Adonis* might be a promising topic for research.

All in all, *Venus and Adonis* is proof that William Shakespeare did not deserve his contemporaries looking down on him. Even today there is no reason to exclusively focus on the plays. Writing a poem, intended to be read and not performed and viewed like a play, he could use more subtle hints and intricate structures than would have been suitable for the stage. With *Venus and Adonis*, William Shakespeare established his knowledge on the genre of the *epyllion* and thereby himself as a respected author.

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