

TO CLIP ELYSIUM

"TO CLIP ELYSIUM" :
DESIRE, STRUCTURE, AND THE MEANING OF MISPRISION
IN SHAKESPEARE'S
VENUS AND ADONIS

By

Gary Kuchar, B.A.

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in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*.

AUTHOR: Gary Kuchar, B.A. (University Of Winnipeg)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Mary Silcox

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins by examining the ways in which Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* anticipates its own criticism. For insofar as the critical history of *Venus and Adonis* attempts to enclose or explain "what" the poem means, rather than "how" the poem means, it tends to repeat the dramatic and lexical motions of the poem itself. By exploring the most pronounced discrepancies in the critical discussion around the poem, I show that interpretations of Shakespeare's epyllion which strive to locate a definitive center for the text -- be it allegorical, psychological, or historical -- tend to reveal the ways in which a reader's desire inhabits the text. Indeed, the poem's lack of a satisfying resolution has led a number of critics to ascribe a sense of closure for the poem's conclusion, just as its representation of ambiguous and aggressive female sexuality has led to a series of incomplete readings, which repeat the action of the poem. The second section of the thesis then attempts to explain "how" the poem's structure, imagery, and intertextuality evoke a sense of frustration in its readers. The poem's structure, I argue, is based on a series of repeated patterns that move from pursuit and opposition to ostensible but unrealized union. Although the poem's imagery and narrative structure appears to move towards a moment of synthesis in which Venus and Adonis unite, the poem never actually reaches such a point. The narrative and imagistic structure of Shakespeare's epyllion thus tantalizes the reader's hope for resolution, without ever fulfilling such a desire.

What?

Baloney

non sequitur

too big a topic

What?

appear

Too big a topic
too ambiguous

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INTRODUCTION

The art of (mis)reading early modern epyllions has a peculiar and particularly fertile history. The reception of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, in particular, forms an incongruent medley of unusually idiosyncratic readings, misapplied allegories, pronouncements of moral and aesthetic repugnance, as well as observations of lurking genius, sensuous brilliance, and rhetorical mastery. The dense and virtually immediate proliferation of interpretations of epyllions like Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* resulted, in part, from the highly unusual popularity of these poems. *Venus and Adonis* went through ten editions between 1593-1613 and sixteen editions by 1640, making it, along with Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, one of the most popular works of fiction of the period (Kolin 4). The early modern epyllion inspired a variety of interpretations and parodies throughout a range of early modern writings. Shakespeare himself, in *As You Like It*, depicts a resistant response to *Hero and Leander*, as Rosalind slights Marlowe's portrayal of excessively passionate love:

The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man who died in his own person, videlicet, in a love-cause. . . . Leander, he would have lived many a fair year though Hero had turn'd nun. . . . for, good youth he went to was him in the Hellespont, and being taken with the cramp was drown'd: and the foolish chroniclers of that age found it was 'Hero of Sestos'. But these are all lies: men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love. (IV. i. 86-99 Cited in Keach 123)

Some sixteenth-century readers of minor epic poetry, such as Gabriel Harvey ("the bookish, quirky friend of Edmund Spenser" (Kolin 10)) deprecated, if not dismissed, poems like Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* stating only "the younger sort takes much delight in" such texts. Without a doubt, however, William Reynolds presents the first, as well as the strangest recorded response we have to Shakespeare's

Venus and Adonis.¹ Katherine Duncan Jones summarizes Reynold's reading of the poem as "deeply idiosyncratic. For him, the narrative poem is a kind of stage-play dealing with his own life. The Queen 'represents' Venus- that is, she cunningly enacts the part of the Queen of love. Adonis, who loved hunting but scorned love, must therefore stand for Reynolds, professional soldier and Puritan" (489). Although idiosyncratic to the point of absurdity, Reynold's response to the poem reflects a critical phenomenon that continues throughout the history of the poem's reception. Reynold's interpretation, incomplete and naive as it is, illustrates one of the ways in which a reader's desire inhabits the text; he unwittingly shows, in other words, that literary response, particularly in the case of this poem, is not simply a matter of the reader interpreting the text, but of the text often comprehending its own readings.

Stanley Cavell suggests that this phenomena, this relationship between text and reader, can be conceptualized in terms of the psychoanalyst's relation to the analysand.

Stephen Mulhall summarizes Cavell's thesis, explaining that

[t]he reader does not interpret, but rather is interpreted by the text; exemplifying a mode of active passivity, the text invites transferences from its reader, projections of unconscious thoughts, fears and desires with the ultimate aim of responding to that onslaught in ways that disrupt its mechanical, fixated effects on the reader's interpretations of her own existence and world. This response will itself be shaped by counter- transference; the text will contain an image or fantasy of itself and its readers, one that guided its questioning and working through of the unacknowledged material elicited by the transference , and which ultimately aims at encouraging a process of mourning in its reader. . . a detachment from an outmoded pattern of desire in favour of new possibilities, the transformation of nostalgia into freedom. (Mulhall 18)

¹See Katherine Duncan-Jones "Much Ado With Red and White: The Earliest Readers of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593)" (1993).

The intense sexuality, provocative rhetoric, and comic-tragic trajectory of *Venus and Adonis* has inspired a wide variety of such resistances, transferences, and projections from its earliest readers up to those of the present. Even recent and sophisticated interpretations of Shakespeare's epyllion betray various forms of resistance to Shakespeare's text, particularly in relation to the poem's lack of a satisfying resolution and its representation of aggressive female sexuality. In order to account for such resistances we must focus on the poem's manipulation of the reader's desire. For as Richard Halpern and Catherine Belsey have recently noted (1997) *Venus and Adonis* is not only about sexual frustration, it is also designed to produce such frustration in its readers. Despite the poem having such designs on its readers, most interpretations of the text have focused on "what" it means, rather than "how" it means. In other words, the critical reception of *Venus and Adonis* has often attempted to fix the poem according to one central allegorical, historical, mythic, or psychological frame of reference. These types of "message-centered" interpretations are sometimes symptomatic of the poem's capacity to set a reader's desire in motion and to leave that desire suspended, rather than resolve it; and so long as our critical methodologies seek to locate the meaning(s) of *Venus and Adonis* within a specific allegorical or historic field we will remain blind to the poem's effects, how these effects are achieved, and even more problematically, how such effects determine a response to the text. By focusing their attention on the poem's "inherent meaning" rather than exploring the text as the site where a reader's desires are engaged, critics have often overlooked the poem's capacity to interpret its readers.

Shoshana Felman has developed two basic methodologies in order to account for the ways in which a text comprehends its own criticism. In her attempt to circumvent Freud's assertion that psychoanalysis is constitutionally incapable of

speaking to the specificity of the poetic, that it must, in other words, remain content to treat "poetry as a symptom of a particular poet", she proposes two alternative modes of reading (Felman *Reading Poetry* 119). The first mode calls for a Lacanian-inspired² analysis of the function and effects of how a poem "works through signifiers (to the extent that signifiers, as opposed to meanings, are always signifiers of the unconscious)" (146). Felman articulates a similar position in a discussion of Henry James' *The Turn of The Screw* when she argues for a methodology that emphasizes "how" a text means, rather than "what" it means. This approach, she emphasizes, is not intended "to *capture*" the meaning of a text, "but to follow rather, the significant path of its flight; not so much to solve or answer the enigmatic question of the text, but to investigate its structure; not so much to name and make explicit the text's ambiguity, but to understand the necessity and the rhetorical functioning of the textual ambiguity" (Felman *Literature* 119). Felman's methodology works from the assumption that language, particularly poetic or densely metaphoric language is not only a mode of communication as we generally understand it, but it is also the site of "miscommunication." Language, Freud taught, not only allows us to say what we mean, but it also permits us to say, in the very same gesture, what we do not (consciously) intend; and insofar as the unconscious speaks through a particular discourse, it plays a role in determining the structure of that speech-act.³ Felman's

²Despite the proliferation of "Lacanian" readings it still needs to be said that any application of Lacan's work within literary criticism requires one to move beyond him in a significant way. Lacan is only of value to literary critics insofar as his work offers insights into the complexities of the subject as a creature of language. There is nothing necessarily dogmatic about applying Lacanian ideas because he does not offer the literary critic any sort of system to begin with. Any "Lacanian" reading (whatever that means) is necessarily a re-creative one that demands a certain re-configuration of his thought rather than straight-forward application.

³See Freud *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Trans. Alan Tyson, ed. J. Strachey. London: Ernest Benn, 1966.

second mode of literary analysis also follows directly on this principle, as it is an attempt to understand how the critical history of a particular text might betray unconscious determinations which then inform the text's historical reception. Felman asks us to consider to what extent then "it's not so much the critic who comprehends the text, as the text which comprehends the critic" (*Turning* 115). Inspired by the work of Paul de Man, Felman suggests that a literary text is capable of "comprehending its criticism" for "the text, through its reading, orchestrates the critical disagreement as the performance and the speech act of its own disharmony" (*Turning* 115).

This second suggestion regarding the possibility of treating the historical reception of a text analytically will inform the first part of my analysis of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. In this section I will begin by reviewing a number of contemporary as well as some less recent readings of *Venus and Adonis* which explore the thematic, cultural, and structural significance of the poem's representation of desire. This review of contemporary approaches to the poem will provide a critical context against which I will analyze one particular strain of twentieth-century criticism of *Venus and Adonis* that might, for lack of a better term, be grouped as the "anti-ambivalent" school. By engaging three representative works of this strain, that of Beauregard, Doebler, and Bowers, as well as a more recent essay by Robert Merrix which attempts to avoid but nonetheless reproduces the allegorical tendency of much *Venus and Adonis* criticism, I will illustrate that the poem's ambiguity, its lack of satisfying closure, its rhetorical suggestiveness and its dramatization of a highly erotic narrative have led some commentators to disavow or explain away the poem's ambiguity in favor of a unifying theme believed to have eluded most twentieth-century scholars and readers. In doing so, however, these anti-ambivalent commentators have often unwittingly repeated the

text's dramatically ambivalent motions in their attempts to circumscribe the poem through allegory and/or early modern moral psychology. To the extent that these critics repeat the dramatic motions of the text itself, revealing a series of transferences, projections, and anxieties at work in their readings, they betray the poem's capacity to comprehend its own readings; they reveal, in other words, that the significance of a text is not reducible to the object as artifact, but that its meaning incorporates the possibilities of its own "misunderstandings." Our understanding of the meaning of *Venus and Adonis*, in other words, can and should include the ways in which it has legislated and inspired certain patterns of misprision.

My reading of the poem's critical reception, particularly the debates surrounding the issue of desire and ambivalence is informed by Peter Brooks's narratological application of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Brooks's model seeks to understand narrative in terms of how a reader's desire is engaged by meaningful patterns of repetition and expectation that inform the structure of a reader's experience, particularly as it relates to the function of beginnings and endings:

Desire is the wish for the end, for fulfillment, but fulfillment delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin, and to desire itself. . . [T]he tale as read is inhabited by the reader's desire, and . . . further analysis should be directed to that desire, not (in the manner of Norman Holland) his individual desire and its origins in his own personality, but his transindividual and intertextually determined desire as a reader. Because it concerns ends in relation to beginnings and the forces that animate the middle in between, Freud's model is suggestive of what a reader engages when he responds to plot. It images that engagement as essentially dynamic, an interaction with a system of energy which the reader activates. (299-300)

Following Brooks's and Felman's suggestion that the reader's desire inhabits the text, that the text, in other words, interprets and comprehends the reader, I will focus on the way the poem's critical reception betrays the text's capacity to evoke certain

desires and resistances from its readers. These resistances, like any symptomatic phenomenon, are readable through their repetition, a repetition that, in this case, takes place within the critical debate surrounding the poem. Certain strains within the critical history of *Venus and Adonis* manifest a number of such resistances. These resistances reveal the ways in which the poem's "meaning" does not simply reside in the text itself, but that much of its significance is a matter of the poetic effects which the text legislates through its various rhetorical and narrative motions. Commenting on the uncanny, if not pathological rhetoric of responses to Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* for instance, Felman notices that "what is perceived as the most scandalous thing about this scandalous story is that we *are forced to participate in the scandal*. . . [T]he reader's innocence cannot remain intact: In other words, the scandal is not simply in the text, it resides in *our relation to the text*, in the text's effect on us" (*Turning* 97).

The almost symptomatic hostility towards psychoanalysis that this "anti-ambivalent" camp of critics betrays in relation to readings of *Venus and Adonis* can be partly explained by their somewhat naive understanding of the relation between psychoanalytic discourse and historically removed texts like those of Shakespeare and Ovid. In order to clarify this relation it is my intention to put psychoanalysis in dialogue with *Venus and Adonis* as well as the mythographic history which informs it, rather than set up psychoanalysis as something which should be imputed onto the text. In other words, I am equally interested in the insights that Ovid and Shakespeare have for psychoanalysis as I am in the insights psychoanalysis might have for them.

The second section of my analysis is informed by Felman's emphasis on the rhetorical and structural trajectory of a text and the effects such a trajectory tends to evoke. Despite the proliferation of highly sophisticated readings of *Venus and Adonis*,

critics have not paid the sort of scrupulous attention to patterns of pursuit, opposition, and ostensible resolution which the poem demands. The poem's repetition of ostensible moments of resolution, moments when it looks as though Venus might finally consummate her desire for Adonis, have the potential to frustrate the reader as well as Venus; and it is such extended, Tantalean frustration that constitutes the poem's dramatic, imagistic, and structural motions, all of which have yet to be fully appreciated in their density, narrative complexity, and effect on the reader. A close analysis of the poem's tendency to tease a reader's desire for consummation through a narrative pattern constituted by a series of *interrupted* metonymic patterns might further explain some of the confusions, controversies, and (mis)readings the poem has evoked since its publication during the plague year of 1593.⁴

⁴ The Elizabethan theaters closed in 1592-3 due to the plague. This is likely the occasion that provided Shakespeare the opportunity to write, as he puts it in the dedicatory epistle to the Earl of Southampton, "the first heir of my invention" (Keach 52).

CHAPTER I

Reception and its Discontents: The Disavowal of Ambivalence

Recent articles by Catherine Belsey, Richard Halpern, and James Schiffer have shifted the critical focus of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* from questions of *what* the poem means, to *how* it means, from its moral allegory to its erotic and literary effects. For these contemporary readers of *Venus and Adonis* the issue of the poem's meaning must be informed by a radical interrogation of the reader's particular historical relation to poem as well as the psychoanalytic dynamics which characterize a reading experience of the text. As Catherine Belsey asserts, readers of *Venus and Adonis* have been interpreted by the poem just as thoroughly as they have interpreted it. In a 1997 essay that is both Lacanian and new historicist in approach, Belsey suggests that critics who attempt to resolve the poem's apparent confusions by "locating a moral centre that would furnish the work with a final meaning, a conclusion, a definitive statement" are *responding* to, rather than genuinely answering or explaining the poem's "Tantalizing" structure. The poem, Belsey notes, "prompts in the reader a desire for action it fails to gratify. Meanwhile, the critical tradition in its turn, tantalized by the poem's lack of closure, has sought to make something happen, at least at the thematic level" (262). Belsey argues that readings which emphasize Shakespeare's "moral message" fail to recognize how the poem's lack of finality "throws into relief the difference between its historical moment and our own" (263). This historical difference, according to Belsey, is most visible when Adonis distinguishes between love which "comforteth like sunshine after rain" and lust whose "winter comes ere summer half be

done" (799,802). This distinction has been heralded by a number of critics⁵, traditional and contemporary alike, as a definitive expression of the poem's moral center, a mark of clear "authoritative design" which reveals the central message of Shakespeare's epyllion. Yet such readings, as Belsey shows, overlook the distance between Adonis and the voice of the narrator, whose position in the poem does not validate Adonis's distinction. Moreover, Belsey justly argues that "love" and "lust" were not "consistently used as antitheses" in the early modern period: "on the contrary, both terms are synonyms for desire, each innocent or reprobate according to the context, and occurring interchangeably without apparent irony" (271). The poem thus articulates a "moment in the cultural history of desire" when the term "lust" was beginning to shed its relatively neutral connotations in favor of an explicitly moral meaning. Modern criticism of the poem, insofar as it has assumed cultural continuity between the significance of these terms, has unwittingly shown that such a distinction has been "formative for our own cultural norms and values" (271). Thus, rather than providing a definitive statement of the poem's moral context, Adonis's speech marks a culturally contingent viewpoint which the narration itself contests.

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According to Richard Halpern, criticism of *Venus and Adonis* has also failed to adequately recognize the poem's titillating structure, particularly in regards to its representation and manipulation of female desire. He ventures into the largely undiscovered country of female readership during the early modern period in order to argue that "*Venus and Adonis* is not only a poem about female sexual frustration; it is meant to produce such frustration. Just as Adonis' beauty arouses Venus but refuses to satisfy her, so Shakespeare's poem aims to arouse and frustrate the female reader"

⁵Belsey traces the association of Venus and lust from Coleridge, to Lu Emily Pearson down to Heather Dubrow (Belsey 269).

(381). To the extent that the poem is designed to produce frustration in its reader, it is, as Halpern suggests, better explicated in terms of its effects rather than its apparent "meanings." These effects, Halpern claims, tend to result from the poem's apparently misogynistic and male centered vision of Venus' sexuality. Moreover, Halpern legitimately challenges the assumption that Shakespeare's audience was predominantly male, citing evidence from the period that *Venus and Adonis* was often characterized as the reading material of "courtesans, lascivious nuns, adulterous housewives, or libidinous young girls" rather than the "sophisticated" readers alluded to in the Ovidian epigraph: "*Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Appollo/ Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.*" ("Let base things dazzle the crowd; may Apollo serve me cups filled with water from the Castalian spring") (377).

Yet Halpern's case regarding the poem's misogyny and its intention to frustrate the female reader is overstated to the extent that it underestimates the poem's capacity to titillate readers representing any number of gender and sexual differences, as is indicated by Titan's position in the poem:

By this the lovesick queen began to sweat
 For where they lay the shadow had forsook them
 And Titan, tired in the midday heat
 With burning eye did hotly overlook them
 Wishing Adonis had his team to guide
 So he were like him, and by Venus' side. (175-80)

Titan's evocation here accentuates the poem's lack of a satisfying male presence, and his wish parallels that of a male reader frustrated with Adonis's coyness. Titan manifests a heterosexual male reader's desire within the poem, marking out a definite textual site that invites a reader to play out his desire through identification with a powerful, yet finally absent, male presence in the narrative. Such passages reveal that Shakespeare's text does not discriminate in its capacity to titillate and amuse as well as

Sweat
 ↓

so what is
 the point
 ↓

frustrate its readers; if it did, its popularity in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries would be even more difficult to explain than is already the case.

James Schiffer puts an even greater emphasis than Halpern or Belsey on the poem's lack of a masculine figure capable of satisfying the desires of the Goddess of Love. Schiffer rightly cites this lack as the source of the poem's most interesting effects and meanings. For Schiffer the poem dramatizes a Lacanian conception of desire to the extent that it reveals "desire can never truly be satisfied, because desire is always for absence, for lack, for what is not there" (369). The genuine object of the subject's desire, Lacan argues, is that part of the other which exceeds signification, that *object-a* which is only representable, only thinkable, in terms of a gap or rupture initiated during the subject's emergence into language. Desire is necessarily a desire for something which is not present-as-such; it is a longing for *that Thing* which is less an object than a past that was never present, a phantasm. Moreover, the phallus, according to Lacan, "is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire" (*Ecrits* 287-8). In other words, because the "desire of the mother is the phallus, the child wishes to be the phallus in order to satisfy that desire (*Ecrits* 289, cited in Borch-Jacobson 212)." The phallus, we must keep in mind, is not an object as such, and even less the male object; it is the sign of a lack that initiates or inaugurates the child's move from biological need to symbolic desire.⁶ The phallus, Valerie Traub accurately summarizes, "is the signifier of the

⁶See Lacan "The Signification of The Phallus" (*Ecrits* 281). See also Borch-Jacobson for a further explanation of why Lacan uses the metaphor of the phallus as opposed to a gender neutral term. As Jacobson explains, "the father. . . is the father only to the extent that he himself has done his mourning for the phallus and thus desires it himself. . . [He] 'has' it only to the extent that he has given it up beforehand by incurring symbolic castration: the phallus is a title, which he has received so that he can bestow it in accord with symbolic pact and law" (213).

Misappropriated
Belsey

fiction of unmediated presence and integrated identity; as the metaphor for a fragmented and precarious subjectivity. . . it exposes even as it upholds the artificiality of the division upon which gender and sexual identity are based" (54). Traub continues by quoting Jane Gallop's insightful remarks, "The penis is what men have and women do not; the phallus is the attribute of power which neither men nor women have" (54). The question of desire for Lacan is thus "a question of the phallus, and that's why [the subject] will never be able to strike it [i.e., possess the phallus], until the moment when he has made the complete sacrifice- without wanting to, moreover- of all narcissistic attachments, i.e., when he is mortally wounded and knows it" (Lacan *Desire* 51 cited in Schiffer 369). This view of desire, according to Schiffer, helps explain the meaning of Adonis' death as well as Venus' incapacity to "strike at" the heart of desire. Working from this Lacanian conception of desire, Schiffer argues that as far as Adonis' desire is concerned his death at the hands of the boar fulfills, as it were, his unconscious and deeply narcissistic wish to escape from "his own body. . .in order to possess it" (188). Schiffer concludes that Adonis' death marks his escape into the only genuine retreat from the dialectic of desire because the subject can only "strike at" the heart of desire once it has fully abandoned all its objects. Because desire is never really aimed at an "object" as such, no one object can ever fulfill desire. Thus the subject is only capable of genuinely fulfilling itself once all narcissistic attachments are disavowed. From a Lacanian perspective, then, Adonis' death and the wounding which presumably led to it mark precisely this tragic abandonment of narcissistic attachments and the false sense of freedom it provides. For Venus, on the other hand, Adonis's death means continued frustration in a world forever marked by "dissension." The poem thus dramatizes Venus's deepening alienation from her own desire due to Adonis's lack of sexual interest; her desire becomes more and more a matter of signification, fantasy,

and lack, until finally it is revealed to be "All imaginary" (597). Although Schiffer's reading is insightful he does not fully exploit Lacan's view that the phallus only functions when veiled, that it, in other words, marks presence by its absence. From Venus's point of view Adonis possesses the phallus simply because he appears to be without desire. In the very absence of possessing the phallus Adonis unwittingly gives Venus the impression he is complete unto himself. This dynamic is not only essential to the thematic significance of Venus and Adonis's relationship, it also informs, as Richard Halpern explains to some extent, the issue of the reader's desire in relation to the text as an object which appears complete unto itself. Considering the importance of veiling and unveiling in Lacan's discussion of the phallus, and the role of the perceiver in relation to the sense of presence the phallus evokes, Schiffer's interpretation does not take the reader's desire in the poem as seriously as it could.

Despite certain key differences between Belsey's, Halpern's, and Schiffer's readings, each of them emphasizes the poem's structural and thematic complexity and the extraordinary capacity Shakespeare's representation of sexual desire has to evoke and comprehend different, even contradictory responses. These multiple responses are comprehended by the text insofar as they are contained within the dramatic movements of the poem itself. In other words, readings of the poem which are "message-centered" tend to re-enact or respond to the dramatic and narrative motions of the text itself. By focusing on the poem's rhetorical and narrative motions Belsey, Halpern, and Schiffer avoid the critical tendency to try to "answer" the poem's allegorical significance; allegorical readings, on the other hand, often reveal more about a critic's intention to resolve the poem's uncomfortable trajectory of unfulfilled desire than they reveal about the text's significance as an aesthetic and cultural document. However, much as these non-allegorical and non-message-centered

readings of the poem differ from previous responses to the text, they share the tendency of some relatively traditional readings to stress the poem's diverse representation of the passions; they de-emphasize the text's rigid moral or allegorical significance in favour of recognizing that like Ovid's, Shakespeare's conception of love is comic as well as tragic, a matter of delight and suffering, aggression as well as affection. These readings also tend to recognize that the poem's representation of multiple and discontinuous affections inspires equally ambivalent and equivocal responses from its readers; and that such responses form an integral part of the poem's significance.

In order to situate my critique of the "anti-ambivalent" camp within the body of *Venus and Adonis* criticism, it is useful to point out the main connections that exist between contemporary critics like Belsey and Halpern, which, for the most part, I align myself with, and the previous generation of critics (against which the "anti-ambivalent" camp are writing) that began seeing the poem as a diverse expression of the discontinuities of love and sexual desire. A partial genealogy of this non-allegorical strain of criticism might begin with A.C. Hamilton's unusually non-moral Neo-Platonic reading of the poem, which, despite its obviously allegorical leaning, remains highly sensitive to the poem's complexity and its equivocal portrayal of Venus' desire. Hamilton suggests that "the basis for Shakespeare's treatment of Venus' love for Adonis is the Platonic doctrine that love is the desire for beauty; yet that doctrine, Hamilton qualifies, "is treated with a sophisticated play of wit through her 'devises in love'" (149). According to Hamilton the poem's "juxtaposition of flesh and spirit is too deliberate, too much part of the poem's wit to be canceled out by any reduction of Venus to a moral description as lust opposed to love" (152). Norman Rabkin's reading complements Hamilton's to the extent that it focuses on the ways that

Shakespeare "reflects the hopelessly opposed elements of love as he found it in Renaissance neo-platonism" (32). Hamilton and Rabkin argue convincingly that the platonic elements of the poem do not "solve" or "answer" its moral or allegorical "message"; instead they provide part of the context Shakespeare drew on in order to dramatize a highly, or as William Keach notes, "disturbingly" ambiguous conception of desire and sexual passion (13).

For Keach such ambiguity is consistent with a definitively Ovidian combination of "violence and urbanity" present in Shakespeare's work as well as that of other epyllion writers such as Lodge, Edwards, and Beaumont (13). These authors, Keach observes, adopted Ovid's "unobtrusive use of symbolic description and imagery" and thus they preclude the possibility of interpreting the poems through a unifying moral or allegorical perspective (13). "Nothing could differ more from the rigid allegorical and moralizing impositions of so many of Ovid's medieval and Renaissance interpreters," Keach explains, "than the deftness and openness of his own handling of symbolic detail" (13). Working from iconographic representations of Venus and Adonis S. Clark Hulse supports Keach's position that Shakespeare's epyllion does not privilege any one moral center, observing that we have "not one but three Venuses, comic, sensual and violent, all embodying earthly love but differently depicted to reveal different aspects" (157). Hulse points out a number of illuminating similarities between the poem and the pictorial tradition which may have informed it, concluding, in the case of Venus' characterization, that "contradictory elements require contradictory figures" (158).⁷

⁷Other essays that might be said to stand within this "ambivalent" school of *Venus and Adonis* criticism are: W.B.C Watkins, "Shakespeare's Banquet of Sense"; Kenneth Muir, "*Venus and Adonis*: Comedy or Tragedy"; Jonathan Bate, "*Sexual Perversity in Venus and Adonis*"; Muriel C. Bradbrook, "Beasts and Gods: Greene's Groatsworth of Witte and the Social Purpose of *Venus and Adonis*"; Nancy Lindheim, "The Shakespearean Venus and Adonis"; Heather Dubrow, *Captive Victors*:

Hulse's conclusion that Venus consists of a number of competing or discontinuous characteristics is not only consistent with the mythic consciousness characteristic of Ovid and his Elizabethan emulators (see Hulse 158-163) it is also in line with Marion Trousdale's sophisticated analysis of Elizabethan views of language. Trousdale argues that Elizabethans tended to understand character according to the "intellectual categories by means of which. . . character can be described" (10). In other words the emphasis is not on verisimilitude as such but on the frames of reference through which character becomes accessible to the understanding. One example Trousdale gives of how these frames of reference illuminate, or more precisely construct a notion of character is in terms of the relationship between an individual and the place or places associated with her:

When Rainolde says of Helen of Troy that Greece was not lacking in a beautiful woman, he is drawing his argument from the genus of Helen, a question of substance, and the quality of Helen, an accident upon which the genus is not dependent. If we use such places to talk about character, as it seems to me the Elizabethans did, because places constituted for them the verbal means by which things are described, then our interest in Othello changes into an interest in those places by means of which his character can be verbally defined. We might, as Wilson suggests, when a man is commended or condemned for an action, consider whether the deed was honest, possible, easy or difficult to do. We might also inquire into his situation, his disposition, his studies, his exercises of mind and body. These are not aspects of his character, but intellectual categories by means of which his character can be described. If we use such places, Othello cannot be represented as having one single defining character. He has rather many different defining characteristics or aspects, and as verbal structures these characteristics are discontinuous. That is because they are general

Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets. Dubrow and Lindheim, in particular, provide illuminating analyses of the poem's stylistic shifts. Dubrow's analysis of the generic characteristics peculiar to epyllion poetry goes some distance in explaining the rhetorical and narrative complexities of Shakespeare's poem.

rather than particular and they are multiple. They are multiple because they are *forms of discourse*. They are not forms of things." (10)

This analysis of Elizabethan conceptions of verbal structures reveals that it was not only perfectly within the imaginative possibility of an Elizabethan author to construct a character with contradictory elements, but that such a conception is in line with a major if not dominant mode of understanding available to writers and rhetoricians of the period. To understand Venus, then, is to understand the conflicting categories through which we come to know her: passion, aggression, tenderness, maternity, love, jealousy, hate, etc. Venus is an intersection of various categories related to the experience of love, and thus cannot be understood as possessing or representing just one particular element, be it moral, allegorical, or otherwise.

In opposition to readings of the poem which accentuate Shakespeare's representation of discontinuous affections, his constantly shifting style, and the subsequent sense of ambiguity such radical shifts tend to produce, critics such as A. Robin Bowers, David Beauregard and John Doebler argue for a greater consistency of form and meaning. David Beauregard for instance, in "*Venus and Adonis: Shakespeare's Representation of the Passions*" (1975) marshals evidence ranging from Puttenham to St. Thomas in order to prove that "Shakespeare's intention would seem to be that of his contemporaries. He is, in fact, holding the mirror up to nature, 'to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image'" (87). Beauregard begins by quoting Puttenham's declaration, echoed by love poets and their readers throughout the period, that the "poetic form most appropriate to the "utterance of amorous affections"

requireth a forme of Poesie variable, inconstant, affected, curious and most witty of any others, whereof the ioyes were to be vttered in one sorte, the sorrowes in an other, and, by the many formes of Poesie, the many moodes and pangs of louers throughly to be discovered; the poore soules sometimes praying, beseeching, sometime honoring,

auancing, praising, an other while railing, reuiling, and cursing, then sorrowing, weeping, lamenting, in the ende laughing, reioysing, & solacing the beloued againe, with a thousand deuises, odes, songs, elegies, ballads, sonets, and other ditties, moouing one way and another to great compassion. (Puttenham cited in Beauregard 87)

Nevertheless, despite having quoted with approval Puttenham's emphasis on the constant shifts appropriate for amorous verse, Beauregard's next move is to de-limit the poem's meaning and structural motion between its comic and tragic sections. Beauregard attempts to explain the poem's structural shift in terms of an early modern distinction between the *concupiscible* and *irascible* powers of the soul. In the first and predominantly comic mode (ll.1-810), Beauregard suggests Venus and Adonis struggle with the *concupiscible* power of the soul whereas in the subsequent tragic mode the dramatic action is apparently explicable in terms of the soul's *irascible* power. Beauregard explains that because Venus is in pursuit of beauty and love she desires the good which is a feature of the concupiscible aspect of the soul; Adonis also "figures forth" this concupiscibility in the first section because he resists the "evil, voracious, and lustful, Venus" and thus also seeks the good (89). This pattern reverses in the second half of the poem, Beauregard argues, as the pursuit of the beautiful is replaced with the "hard and difficult" pursuit of the boar which results in suffering and despair, affections that apparently arise from the irascible nature of the self. Beauregard thus "engirts" the poem's structural motion within Thomistic psychology just as Venus strives to "engirt" "the poor fool Adonis" within the park of her body.

The inadequacy of Beauregard's bifurcated explanation of the poem's meaning and structure is most apparent in his conclusion, as he seems to try to exorcise the text, or more precisely, Shakespeare himself, from the "modern sense of being afflicted with emotional contradictions" (96):

The supposed 'ambivalence' discerned by modern commentators has. . . some basis in the shift of rhetorical intention between the two part [sic]

of the poem, but if Shakespeare is 'ambivalent' he is not so in the modern sense of being afflicted with emotional contradictions and divided against himself. Rather, through laughter and then pity, he intends to free us from the absurdities and evils attached to passionate love; like Coleridge and Lewis, we become detached spectators viewing the affections of love in two different situations. (96)

This passage calls for a number of analytic comments. First of all it is entirely unclear why Beauregard seems to metonymically transfer the poem's ambiguity onto the person of Shakespeare himself. It is as though Beauregard sees ambiguous readings of the poem as an attack on the person of Shakespeare himself, as indications that Shakespeare's text unintentionally mirrors his own self-difference and personal confusion. Beauregard fails to recognize that what is at issue for these critics is *the text's* representation of ambiguity, and not the supposed state of Shakespeare's mental instability. In fact, if the poem reflects the ambiguities of erotic experience it is only because Shakespeare is an astute enough poet to understand how to express such complexities; no one, as far as I understand, argues that the poem's ambiguity is an accident of Shakespeare's presumed identity crisis. Although W.B.C Watkins, Douglas Bush, and others suggest the poem has artistic flaws, none of the commentators cite Shakespeare's own psychology as somehow conditioning them.

Oddly enough A.Robin Bowers betrays precisely the same confusion evident in Beauregard's essay. After citing a passage from William Keach's reading of the poem which speaks to Shakespeare's *success* in handling the "dissonant elements" of erotic experience, Bowers makes one of the most erroneous, yet just for that reason, fascinating, comments on the poem's reception to date. He attempts to refute Keach's observation of these dissonant elements by asserting that "[t]o assume Shakespeare, almost thirty by the time he wrote his first narrative poem, is giving us a record of his own *identity crisis* in *Venus and Adonis* is hardly probable" (2-3 my emphasis). It is

precisely because Keach would undoubtedly agree with this statement that it stands out as being so apparently inexplicable.

These acts of misprision become more understandable when we recognize the structures of identification, resistance and desire informing them. Beauregard's confusion over the ambiguity of the poem, for instance, is compounded and subsequently made explicable by his citation of C.S Lewis' reaction to *Venus and Adonis*. Beauregard's appropriation of Lewis' reading and the conclusions he draws from it reveal an identificatory structure of desire running through his, as well as Lewis' reading of the poem. Toward the end of his essay Beauregard argues that Shakespeare "intends to *free us* from the absurdities and evils attached to passionate love. Like Coleridge and Lewis, we become detached spectators viewing the affections of love" (96 my emphasis). The strangest, or perhaps most symptomatic thing about Beauregard's argument at this point is his citation of Lewis as an example of *detachment* from the poem. Lewis's brief comments on the text betray an indisputable *resistance* (in the psychoanalytic sense) to *Venus and Adonis*, a resistance that is wholly distinguishable from Coleridge's sense of aesthetic detachment.⁸ Lewis's disgust for Shakespeare's epyllion, needless to say, is expressed in emphatic and unequivocal terms. I quote it at length to illustrate his resistance to the poem's representation of female desire and the female body, and the disjunction this resistance creates between his apparent "detachment" on the one hand and his own self-confessed

⁸Coleridge suggests "it is, . . . from the perpetual activity of attention required on the part of the reader; from the rapid flow, the quick change, and the playful nature of the thoughts and images; and above all from the alienation, and . . . the utter aloofness of the poet's own feelings, from those of which he is at once the painter and the analyst; that though the very subject cannot but detract from the pleasure of a delicate mind, yet never was poem less dangerous on a moral account. (Cited in Beauregard 95)" Clearly, Coleridge downplays the poem's "immorality" whereas Lewis dwells upon it with the fascination of one thoroughly offended.

sense of being overwhelmed by its insistent representation of aggressive female sexuality on the other:

Venus is a very ill-conceived temptress. She is made so much larger than her victim that she can throw his horse's reins over one arm and tuck him under the other, and knows her own art so badly that she threatens, almost in her first words, to 'smother' him with kisses. Certain horrible interviews with voluminous female relatives in one's early childhood inevitably recur to mind. If . . . on the other hand, the poem is meant to be anything other than a 'cooling card', it fails egregiously. Words and images which, for any other purpose, ought to have been avoided keep on coming in and almost determine the dominant mood of the reader-'satiety'. 'sweating', 'leaden appetite', 'gorge' 'stuff'd', 'glutton' 'gluttonlike.' Venus' 'face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil, and the wretched 'boy' (that word too was dangerous) only gets away 'hot, faint and weary with her hard embracing.' And this flushed, panting, perspiring, suffocating loquacious creature is supposed to be the goddess of love herself, the golden Aphrodite. It will not do. If the poem is not meant to arouse disgust it was very foolishly written. (Lewis 499)

By citing Lewis as an example of critical detachment from the poem, as proof that the text is not an expression of emotional ambivalence, Beauregard unintentionally recalls us to precisely the sort of emotional tension readings of the poem tend to inspire. Aside from Lewis' deeply subjective and highly invested diatribe against Venus' "leaden appetite" he comments that the poem's "words and images almost determine the dominant mood of the reader" (499). What dominant mood is Lewis alluding to here without specifying? Is there, as Derrida might say, any significance to this comment under erasure? Presumably Lewis is referring to his own sense of disgust. But why indicate that these terms "almost" determine the reader's dominant mood when he is categorical in his own sense of repugnance to the text? Might one not suggest that this inconsistency reveals a gap in Lewis' affective response to the poem; that it betrays the possibility that Lewis feels something more complex than simply moral disgust, be it fear, titillation, shame, or otherwise? In any case, Lewis'

comments reveal an un-critical and not in the least detached identification with Adonis. "I cannot forgive Shakespeare for telling us how Venus perspired," Lewis tells us, "how soft and plump she was, how moist her hand, I cannot conceive why he made her not only so emphatically older but even so much larger than the unfortunate young man" (Lewis cited in Beauregard 94). Lewis' diatribe against Venus and the intensely affected rhetoric that shapes his reaction shows Lewis repeating Adonis' function in the poem. Instead of taking up the male gaze of Titan, (that I refer to on p.10-11), replacing that of Adonis, Lewis responds to Venus by sympathizing and identifying with Adonis; like the "unfortunate young man" of the text, Lewis moralizes and resists Venus's overwhelming presence. More than once he places himself in Adonis's position, first through a personal anecdote regarding the poem's effect on him, and second by expressing feelings of dissatisfaction and resistance in a highly charged rhetoric that betrays a profound sense of emotional investment in the poem. Such emotional investment and the defensive resistance it evokes not only preclude the sort of critical detachment that Beauregard seeks to find in the text but even more radically undermine it. Lewis's response stands perfectly within the affective field the poem sets up, and by doing so it illustrates Felman's thesis that "it's not so much the critic who comprehends the text, as the text which comprehends the critic" (Felman *Turning* 115).

Beauregard explains that the "source of Lewis' confusion and puzzlement is his assumption that Shakespeare means to portray Venus in flattering terms" (94). Yet, despite this apparent error in judgment, intriguing in its own right, and despite Lewis' fearful, if understated, sense of the poem's potential homo-erotic powers (indicated by his observation that the representation of the young boy "was dangerous") Beauregard still cites Lewis as an example of the sort of critical detachment the poem invites. By

Beauregard's own admission, Lewis' reading differs from Coleridge's because Lewis finds the poem morally and aesthetically reprehensible whereas Coleridge emphasizes its "perpetual activity" and the sense of diversion from the "animal impulse" such activity evoked for him (Coleridge cited in Beauregard 95). Rather than expressing any sort of genuine distance, Lewis reminds us that Shakespeare's text allows for, and often provokes, any number of identifications, transferences, and fears that determine the shape of one's response to the text. In Wolfgang Iser's terms the poem's *esthetic* component, that element which consists of the reader's realization of the text, can unfold in a variety of ways that the text legislates through its thematic, rhetorical, and narrative motions. Beauregard's re-deployment of Lewis' comments on the poem reveal that his own apparently detached critical commentary is also determined by the poem's unresolved and unsatisfying representation of desire. Beauregard's desire to remove himself from the poem's insistent representation of lack and longing expresses itself in the essay's denouement when he states that "[Shakespeare] intends to free us from the absurdities and evils attached to passionate love" (96). Beauregard not only seeks the very resolution that eludes Venus, but he hopes to become "free" of *the very need* for such resolution. In other words Beauregard wants the poem to function in terms of what Claude Levi-Strauss defines as primary myth. Primary myth, Strauss explains, resolves existential and ideological contradictions; it bridges the gap between conflicting values (206-41). Yet, it would seem that this is precisely what Shakespeare's displaced⁹ version of the already highly displaced Ovidian myth does

⁹Primary, as opposed to displaced myth, according to N. Frye, "is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire. The gods enjoy beautiful women, fight one another with prodigious strength, comfort and assist man, or else watch his miseries from the height of their immortal freedom (*Anatomy* 136)." Displaced myth on the other hand tends towards greater verisimilitude in its representation of human desire.

not do; it dramatizes sexual desire without ever seeking to resolve it; it engages the reader's desire through constantly shifting action that moves our focus and our sympathies from one character and one emotion to another throughout the various sections of the poem. This constant motion, this back and forth movement between Venus and Adonis remains largely unaccounted for in Beauregard's circumscription of the ideal reader's response to the poem as consisting of two movements, the first laughter, the second pity. In fact, Beauregard's citation of Lewis inadvertently reminds us of the poem's capacity to interpret its reader, rather than confirming his thesis that it invites critical and moral distance from the "animal impulses" it dramatizes.

The inadequacy of Beauregard's explanation results, in part, from his disavowal of what he calls modern notions of "ambivalence." According to Beauregard it is critically irresponsible to apply contemporary, and thus "anachronistic" notions concerning the complexity and tensions of the self to texts written before such theories were available. This implies that "emotional ambivalence" is an entirely and peculiarly twentieth-century phenomena. To argue this one must overlook the fact that psychoanalysis bodied forth a new vocabulary for a condition as old as neurosis itself; for as William Keach notes, such self-difference and internal complexity is given one of its clearest and most profound expressions in Ovid:

ambivalent and ambivalence are terms 'invented by psychoanalysts in the 20th century to mean the coexistence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes towards the same object' the 'words are new, but not the condition they describe.' [As Ovid writes in his] presentation of Medea 'I see the better and approve it, but follow the worse' (VII 20-1) to support his guarded approbation. (Keach xvii)

Although there are countless other examples of such discontinuity of self in Ovid, one unmistakable moment occurs in book X of the *Metamorphoses* when Myrrha, Adonis' mother/sister, greets her father and lover-to-be in disguise: "The ill

starred girl/ felt no whole-hearted joy. Forebodings filled/ Her soul with sadness; even so joy too/ Was there- her warring thoughts were so confused" (343-47). Shakespeare clearly adopts and adapts this form of psychological representation in his characterization of Venus. "Variable passions throng her constant woe,/ As striving who should best become her grief/ All entertained, each passion labors so/. . . But none is best; then join they all together/ Like many clouds consulting for foul weather" (967-73). The literary representation of this very common motif of "warring thoughts", evident in virtually all major Elizabethan literature, particularly courtly poetry¹⁰, problematizes early modern formal psychology, especially the argument John Doebler cites, which emphasizes the coming and going of a single passion into the mind (37). In these literary instances, Ovid's representation of the complexities of self clearly exceeds Elizabethan psychology, not to mention our own. Because I will pursue this theme in greater detail in a later chapter suffice it to say now that such discontinuity is not only integral to Ovid in general, but it is an essential element of the mythographic history of Venus and Adonis that Shakespeare inherited from Ovid.

Just as Beauregard unintentionally recalls us to the poem's capacity to evoke ambivalence, rather than detachment, in its readers, John Doebler explicitly disavows readings that explain the poem via "Freudian ambivalence" while at the same time he suggests the poem evokes "tensions" in the mind of its readers. At one point in his essay Doebler, like Beauregard, draws on Coleridge in order to argue in favor of the poem's tendency to invite detachment rather than "feeling participation" in "the possibilities available to the flesh" that are illustrated by the poem's "thousand shifts in

¹⁰See Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* for one popular and "well wrought" example of this discontinuous representation of self. See in particular sonnets 71-2 for an example of the self at war with its desires. As far as drama is concerned it is needless to say that Shakespeare's Hamlet is the most complex representation of the ambivalent mind.

imagery and tone" (36). According to Doebler "if Coleridge is fundamentally correct, it is no wonder that very different conclusions have been reached by those who would pin the poem down to a consistent point of view, including not only those favorable to Renaissance didacticism and allegory but also those who discover modern sexual playfulness or Freudian ambivalence" (36). Despite this disavowal of the poem's representation of "ambivalence" and its capacity to evoke discontinuous responses, Doebler makes a rather psychoanalytic observation further on during a discussion aimed at discrediting Hulse's ambivalent reading of *Venus*. "Shakespeare is not jumbling diverse meanings in *Venus and Adonis*. . . Rather, he is creating a rich drama in which character evokes tension in the mind of the reader" (38). Although Doebler tries to explain this shifting tension in terms of early modern psychology which claims that "one passion drives out another as one nail drives out another" actual responses to the poem, such as Lewis's, indicate a co-habitation of various "passions" consistent with, as Doebler himself admits, the "tendency of mythographers" (37-8). No longer, it seems, are we in the safe and distant world of ideal Coleridgean detachment; instead, Doebler reminds us of the poem's capacity to evoke "tension", which is to say "ambivalence", in its readers. While Doebler's reading of the poem attempts to explain its significance and its effects in terms that avoid notions of self-difference he betrays, nonetheless, an uncanny repetition of the dramatic motions of the text itself. Both Beauregard and Doebler seek detachment from the poem's cycle of unfulfillment, yet they tend to unwittingly draw attention to its power of evoking a sense of readerly unease and dissatisfaction. They tend to illustrate that the poem's significance "is not simply in the text, it resides in our *relation to the text*" (Felman 97); and our relation to *Venus and Adonis*, as these readings reveal, is often too *complex* to allow for the kind of moral and psychological detachment Beauregard and Doebler seek.

Of all the readings of *Venus and Adonis* to date, A. Robin Bowers presents the most virulent and extended attack on "ambivalent" interpretations of the poem. For Bowers, ambivalent readings of the text consistently overlook the ways in which Renaissance minds represented their world. Although on the face of things this might appear to be an entirely reasonable critical attitude, Bowers patently misrepresents current "fashionable" readings of the poem which emphasize its psychological complexity and the variegated effects such complexity produces:

One must assume. . . that Shakespeare was quite capable of avoiding the confused aims, the poised ambivalence, which so many modern critics of a fashionably pluralistic bent have concluded he had. Instead it is more logically and historically reasonable to conclude that Shakespeare wrote his poem with definite aims in mind- aims more likely to involve moral rather than psychological persuasion. (3)

Just as Beauregard confuses claims made about Shakespeare's text with Shakespeare himself, Bowers also seems to elide readings, like that of Keach, which emphasize Shakespeare's complex representation of the passions, with critics who argue that the poem is an artistic failure.

Despite the fact that Bowers shares the same critical disposition regarding the poem and the various hermeneutic issues involved as Beauregard, he is led to a very different explanation of the poem's "meaning as a whole" (3). For Beauregard the moral psychology at work in the poem is explicable in terms of a distinction between concupiscible and irascible powers of the soul, but Bowers seeks to explain the poem's meaning according to Shakespeare's representation of the hunt and more specifically Adonis' moral failure to resist Venus. Bowers' interpretation thus rests on the tenuous claim that "the failure of Adonis to survive the boar hunt at the end of the poem is seen by Shakespeare to be the proper result of his failure to resist the temptations of Venus in the course of the poem" (9). As readers of *Venus and Adonis* might imagine, it takes

an extended and imaginative effort to prove that Adonis's failure consists of his lack of resistance. Bowers's argument regarding Adonis's moral failure is dependent on the supposition that the sexual kiss (ll. 549-64) represents intercourse. Yet, as Robert Merrix has pointed out, this overlooks lines 595-600 "which specifically state that though Venus is 'in the very lists of love/ Her Champion mounted for the hot encounter. . . He will not manage her, although he mount her'" (Merrix 342). Jonathon Bate agrees that coitus never takes place in the poem, except in the "form of parodic variations, as Adonis is nuzzled by the boar and Venus cradles the flower- because the partners are not equals" (64). Bate convincingly argues that "Shakespeare has some fun inverting the traditional power structure- . . . - but in the end the poem shows that a sexual relationship based on coercion is doomed" (64).

Bowers' attempt to unify the poem through a highly erudite and historically dense, if textually incomplete reading, arises from his assumption that the dilemma of modern interpreters "results, first, from our inability to discover any logical thematic development in the poem" and, secondly, from "our modern emotional reaction that neither Venus nor Adonis really gets what she or he deserves"- - a reaction which leaves contemporary readers feeling dissatisfied (3). Such dissatisfaction is only a problem, though, if one presumes that the poem's meaning is structured according to a single and pre-established moral architecture that is locatable in some specific discursive site, such as the "Augustinian concept of man's progression into sin and death" (15). But as Catherine Belsey has shown, the poem dramatizes, and puts into conflict, a number of competing moral claims; and by doing so the poem is not reducible to any one allegorical or moral meaning.

Although Bowers's insistence on interpreting the poem in moral terms is doubtless a reflection of critical assumptions regarding Elizabethan poetry that are

often entirely justified, the specific way in which Bowers, C.S. Lewis, and other (mostly male) critics characterize Venus's role in the poem betrays a certain anxiety regarding female sexuality that the text dramatizes and thus tends to evoke. This anxiety towards aggressive female sexuality, which led Lewis to identify with Adonis and to disavow Venus's characterization altogether, seems to lead Bowers to over-emphasize her lustful dimensions and to efface the clearly positive and healthy component normally associated with the Goddess of Love as *Venus Genetrix*. Rufus Putney, on the other hand, provides a more balanced account of Venus's characterization, an account which seems to reproduce the poem's paradoxical portrayal of Venus. For he notes that "although the violence of Venus' passion makes her ludicrous, she is beautiful and attractive rather than grotesque or sinister" (130). Like Putney, Klause suggests that "to mock Venus. . . is in some sense to mock ourselves;" he concludes by emphasizing Venus's capacity to generate a reader's sympathy: "the denigration of a goddess leads to her identification with a flawed humanity" (Klause cited in Kolin 32). Nona Fienberg offers an even more sympathetic reading of Venus, as she suggests that "instead of responding with alarm to Venus' range of self-representation, to her power and dynamism, we are enabled to identify her mutability, her risk-taking and her appropriation of a system of rhetorical display with the changing cultural conditions of the early 1590's in England" (248). Yet, the most convincing evidence that readings which chastise Venus are overstating their case comes from Elizabethan responses to the poem. In the most extended exploration of Elizabethan readings of the poem, Katherine Duncan-Jones concludes that,

[f]or the Elizabethans. . . *Venus and Adonis* was above all a poem which exemplified the rhetoric of courtship. It was entrancing, sexually exciting and open to numberless fresh applications. The fact that Venus' advances to Adonis are unsuccessful seems to have been scarcely heeded. Many early readers, like William Reynolds, responded most

warmly to Venus's wooing speeches, often making a powerfully personal identification with her. For instance a Cambridge man called Henry Colling seems to have memorized lines 229-34 beginning 'Fondling, she saith, since I have hemd thee here' which he transcribed into a commonplace book some time before December 1596. Richard Barnfield an early and assiduous admirer of Shakespeare's, applied erotic images from *Venus and Adonis* to the wooing of Cassandra by Phoebus. (497)

This is not to suggest that Elizabethan responses to the poem are the most accurate, or that they necessarily reflect the text's genuine significance; it is simply to point out that if Venus' role in the poem is to illustrate the evils of lust, the poem was as extraordinary a failure then, as it would have to be now.

Despite the attractive and liberating elements of Venus' rhetorical overtures, and the rich paradoxical sense of characterization they produce, not to mention the complexity of shifting cultural conditions in which the poem was authored, Bowers insists on explaining the poem by drawing a definite "causal connection between lust and death." Bowers goes further still, suggesting that

Those like Shakespeare who were brought up in the Church of England would have been familiar with the many biblical stories. . . and pagan examples of the punishment of whoredom by death. The standard *Book of Homilies*, read in Elizabethan churches, includes a 'Sermon against Whoredom and Uncleaness' which develops from the observation on contemporary society that this 'vice is grown unto such an height, that in a manner among many it is counted no sin at all, but rather a pastime, a dalliance, and but a touch of youth: not rebuked, but winked at; not punished, but laughed at.' (15)

This emphasis on Venus as whore and Adonis as morally responsible victim originates in what Nona Fienberg defines as the poem's "perennially relevant" representation of "powerful women in the particular moment of danger, flux, and change" who pose an emasculating "threat to male potency" (249). By dramatizing Venus as a sexually aggressive woman, with - - as D.C. Allen puts it - - "a taste for Royal Chapel altos" (Allen 101), the poem enacts and thus may potentially provoke emasculatory anxieties

in its reader. Such anxiety is not only essential to the poem, but as Valerie Traub observes, it is a constitutive element of male subjectivity. For "insofar as women act as mirrors for the development of male subjectivity, female erotic mobility threatens the process by which male subjectivity is secured. For men to achieve the fantasy of full subjectivity, women must remain still" (27). Although Traub's commentary on the psycho-dynamic process of the silencing of women is appropriate to elements in Shakespearean drama it must be reversed in order to account for Bowers's, and Lewis's responses to *Venus and Adonis*. For the absence of a powerful male presence in the poem, as Schiffer notes, is "similar, yet opposite to the marginalization, absence, disappearance, or destruction of the feminine in several Shakespearean history plays and tragedies" (364). This absence of the phallus and the overwhelming presence of female sexuality in the poem strikes a number of twentieth-century male critics as requiring justification. Venus's representation seems to create a palpable sense of unease in critics like Lewis and Bowers. Duncan-Jones for instance, notices such unease in a commentary by Roston published as recently as 1982:

The picture of a mature female pursuing a tender young boy, and even at one point absurdly tucking him under her arm, is so lacking in amorous interest that a topical allegory is suggested. . . As the goddess embraces the boy against his will, the description scarcely encourages sympathetic identification. (Roston cited in Duncan-Jones 500)

Here again, a male critic disavows the representation of Venus and subsequently sympathizes with the 'unfortunate boy' suffering at the hands of the much larger, much more threatening female. This disavowal, like Bowers', results in an allegorical interpretation of the poem intended to explain away Venus' paradoxical representation and the sense of uneasiness she evokes. Such responses to the poem illustrate Cavell's

and Brook's claims that a reader's desire inhabits the realization of a text and as such it informs the direction of a critic's response to it.¹¹

One very recent reading of Venus that de-emphasizes her aggressive sexuality in favour of her domestic and procreative significance, but which results in an unsatisfying interpretation of the poem's conclusion nonetheless, is Robert Merrix's "Lo, In This Hollow Cradle Take Thy Rest" (1997). Although Merrix convincingly argues that the poem is not wholly explicable in allegorical terms, he misreads Adonis's transformation into an anemone, imputing an allegorical sense of resolution and synthesis onto a passage that is better explained in terms of absence and continued dissension. Such a reading again seems to indicate the critical tendency to "make something happen" produced by the poem's lack of sexual and readerly gratification:

Whatever respite comes must certainly involve the metamorphosis of Adonis which occurs immediately after Venus' prophecy. It is here that we must include an allegorical dimension in the poem. This metamorphosis of Adonis reflects other Ovidian transformations of those who similarly rejected sexual overtures: Daphne into a tree, Picus into a bird, and Narcissus into a flower. But the transformation of Adonis into the anemone- emblematic both of fragile early love and resurrection- operates more positively. (352)

Merrix's attempt to illustrate the poem's final stanzas in terms of symbolic synthesis goes against both the steady and unresolved tide of images indicating dissension

¹¹ Such responses also verify Belsey's thesis regarding the historical distance between the poem and modern readers. For as Duncan-Jones has illustrated, there is solid historical evidence to suggest that "the partly comic, partly tragic piquancy of love between a mature woman and an immature boy was not always viewed as a remote or necessarily, a repulsive theme. The popular ballad 'The trees they do grow high' is a tender account of the marriage of a young woman to a pretty but sickly boy. . . This must once have been a motif deeply embedded in European culture. In societies in which arranged marriages took little account of compatibility in age an awareness of the emotional resonances of such disparate unions must naturally have developed" (501).

between Venus and Adonis, and Shakespeare's variation of Ovid's text. Beginning with the Ovidian intertext, we notice that

Shakespeare, even more than Ovid, makes it clear that Adonis is not reincarnated in the flower, although the flower resembles him (1169-70). And Venus herself realizes this- she initially allows the flower a separate, fully natural existence. She begins by bending down to smell the flower and by 'Comparing' (l. 1172) its odor to the breath. She then "crops the stalk" and 'compares' (the word is repeated for emphasis) the drops of sap to the tears which came to Adonis' eyes with 'every little grief' (ll. 1175-1176). . . Venus's realization that the flower is not Adonis contributes to the pathos of her comparisons and, in a sense, mitigates the shock of her 'cropping' the flower. . . Shakespeare significantly transforms the idea expressed in the final lines of Book X of the *metamorphoses*: whereas Orpheus laments the inevitable natural withering of the short-lived anemone, Venus is unwilling to allow the flower to grow and wither naturally. (Keach 82-3)

Keach might also have noted the profound difference between the flower's origins in Ovid's and Shakespeare's text. In Book X of the *Metamorphoses* Venus reproaches the fates and then immediately transforms Adonis's body into an anemone:

She rent her garments. . .
 . . . and springing down
 Reproached the fates: "Even so, not everything
 Shall own your sway. Memorials of my sorrow
 Adonis, shall endure; each passing year
 Your death repeated in the hearts of men
 Shall re-enact my grief and my lament. . .
 And with these words she sprinkled nectar
 Sweet scented, on his blood, which at the touch
 Swelled up, as on a pond when showers fall. (724-37)¹²

¹²Golding's translation follows Ovid in making Venus explicitly responsible for the metamorphosis of Adonis into a flower:

Of my greefe remembrance shall remayne
 Whyle the world doth last. From yeere to yeere shall growe
 A thing that of my heavynesse and of thy death shall showe
 The lively likenesse. In a flowre thy blood I will bestowe.
 Hadst thou the powre *Persephonee* rank sented Mints too make

In Shakespeare's poem however, Adonis' body does not undergo this active and ritualistic metamorphosis into an enduring reminder; instead, it is transformed by a power that remains unspecified and it is then quickly "cropped" by Venus in another aggressive act that perpetuates rather than resolves her desire. Many critics, Merrix among them, have ignored or overlooked the term "crops", which clearly implies a sense of being "cut short." By overlooking this integral word it becomes easier to interpret the ending as a moment of union, rather than seeing it as a perpetuation of Venus' desire:

By this the boy that by her side lay killed
 Was melted like a vapor from her sight
 And in his blood, that on the ground lay spilled,
 A purple flower sprung up, check'ed with white,
 Resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood
 Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood.
 Comparing it to her Adonis' breath,
 And says within her bosom it shall dwell, . . . /
 She crops the stalk, and in that breach appears
 Green-dropping sap which she compares to tears. (1165-76)

Notice that the only line indicating close proximity between the ill fated two is spoken indirectly by Venus herself, creating a gap between the actual event as it is narrated and her own interpretation of it: "Comparing it to her Adonis' breath, *and says* within her bosom it shall dwell" (1172). As Keach implies in the previously quoted passage, the emphasis on the word "comparing" accentuates the flower's prosopopeiac function; this sense of absence generates a greater pathos in Venus' following line because her desire to keep the flower within her bosom stands against our sense that death has set the ultimate rift between them. It is precisely this gap between narrator and Venus, so

Of womens limbes? and may not I lyke powre upon mee take
 Without disdeine and spyght, too turne *Adonis* too a flowre? (848-54)

essential to the poem, that Merrix overlooks in order to impute a sense of resolution onto the text. Merrix cites lines 1183-5, "Here was thy father's bed, here in my breast;/ Thou art next of blood, and 'tis thy right. Lo in this hollow cradle take thy rest;" in order to show that "[w]ith the transformation of Adonis into the anemone. . . the two composites are united, forming a sexual resolution, a synthesis in which the major attributes of each are embodied in the other" (345). Yet, even here we are invited to read against Venus' choice of images at the same time we are encouraged to sympathize with her. First of all, the image of the hollow cradle recalls us to her intense and insatiable desire that propels the poem's narrative motions; it indicates a sense of emptiness that has not yet been filled; and secondly by drawing attention to her throbbing heart we do not get a sense that she feels any release or resolution; but rather we sense a feeling of deepening sadness. We might also recall that at line 945 Venus accuses death of the very thing she is later guilty of, introducing an unintentional and unfortunate proleptic warning of the eternal dissension set between her and Adonis: "The Destinies will curse thee for this stroke/ They bid thee crop a weed; thou pluck'st a flower" (945-6). Venus becomes the procurer of her own worst fears.

Most importantly, however, by drawing attention to Adonis' father Venus immediately reminds those familiar with Ovid that Adonis' birth was the result of an incestuous relationship between his mother/sister Myrrha and his father Cinryas. By evoking Adonis' lineage Venus draws an implicit parallel between Adonis' transformation into a flower, and Myrrha's metamorphosis into a tree which was punishment for her incestuous love. Jonathon Bate notices this parallel in the imagery of sap falling from the anemone which "reintroduces Myrrha, whose guilt and sorrow are symbolized by the gum that drops from the Arabian tree into which she is

metamorphosed. . . It is an adroit variation: where Ovid begins his tale with Adonis as a son issuing from a tree, Shakespeare ends his with a flower issuing from Adonis" (58-9). The parallel between Adonis and Myrrha deepens the theme of impossible passion and the eternal anguish associated with it.¹³ Venus' lack of self-awareness at this point, indicated by her inappropriate choice of imagery, as well as her refusal to abandon her desire for Adonis, does not "free us" from the paradoxes of desire, but rather it intensifies our consciousness of them; it is precisely because we are *aware* Venus loves not rightly, but too well that we are left with an ambiguous and tragic sense of the antinomies of sexual passion.

The image that Merrix cites as an example of synthesis ("Lo in this hollow cradle take thy rest"), is connected to the long series of images indicating Venus' insatiable desire. This sequence of images, which signifies the lack of reciprocity Venus and Merrix so desperately seek to find, begins at line 18 when abundance and fulfillment are paradoxically troped as absence: "And yet not cloy thy lips with loathed satiety/, But rather famish them amid their plenty." In an attempt to achieve sexual fulfillment Venus ironically expresses the paradoxes central to desire itself. When desire is fulfilled, Venus implies, there still remains an element of dissatisfaction; we wish to experience pleasure again once we have achieved "loathed satiety." Venus here evokes the first Tantallean image of the poem, an image which is central to the paradoxes of desire as the poem articulates them. This image has a number of cognates working through the narrative; it is present in the ravaging bird of prey motif, the flood and water imagery, the play on consummation-consumption, and lastly it appears in the final and predatory gesture of Venus' "cropping" of the anemone.

¹³Readers might also remember from Book X of the *Metamorphoses* that Cinyras is the grandson of Pygmalion who is an archetypal example of impossible passion.

Merrix's attempt at unifying *Venus and Adonis* through this apparent moment of synthesis marks a perfect example of Peter Brooks' thesis that the reader's transindividual unconscious (his intertextual presuppositions, which are formed by the logic of narrative and its capacity to evoke a reader's desire) affects the way texts are (mis)read. Merrix, working with a well developed sense of the structure of myth and narrative, assumes a moment of synthesis that will resolve the text's overwhelming insistence on thematic and sexual dissension. Yet, the lack of such a resolution is exactly what the poem dramatizes. Merrix's rhetoric is even characterized by an emphatic and imperative tone that seems determined to find a sense of unity for the poem even when such unity is not apparent: "Whatever respite comes *must certainly* involve the metamorphosis of Adonis" (352 my emphasis). Going against his previous claim that the poem is not functioning as allegory Merrix follows this by suggesting, "[i]t is here that *we must* include an allegorical dimension in the poem." Then, following a list of Ovidian metamorphoses that all express, as he admits, a tragic lack of sexual reciprocity, Merrix cites Shakespeare's Adonis as a rare example of a positive transformation. Such a misreading reveals the often overlooked role of desire in the dynamics of literary response. As with Bowers, Lewis and Beauregard, Merrix unwittingly reveals the poem's capacity to comprehend its own readings. He imputes resolution onto the poem's denouement rather than acknowledging its lack of sexual synthesis. Such readings reveal the various and complex ways in which literary "meaning" is a matter of the text's capacity to evoke transferences and resistances from a reader. This dimension of fiction, this ability to arouse a reader's pleasures, fears and unconscious resistances, is itself resistant to the sorts of objectivity and distance many critics presume is a necessary component of literary interpretation.

CHAPTER II

"All is Imaginary": The Form, Content, and Rehearsal of Desire

Desire can only be taken literally, since it is the nets of the letter that determine, overdetermine its place as a bird of paradise. (Lacan)

The ego. . . is frustration in its essence. Not frustration of a desire of the subject, but frustration by an object in which his desire is alienated and which the more it is elaborated, the more profound the alienation from his jouissance becomes for the subject. (Lacan)

To argue that Venus and Adonis unite at the poem's end, that they achieve a state of union and resolution, however unfortunate, is to overlook how Shakespeare's poem presents a clear example of what Peter Brooks calls the "improper ending." I quote Brooks at length in order to illustrate the proximity between Shakespeare's poem and Brooks' psychoanalytic theorization of the "improper" (this is a descriptive not evaluative term) end that narrative holds out as a kind of threat to the reader. The erotic and sexual underpinnings of Brooks' insights regarding the structure of narrative in general are not latent but manifest in *Venus and Adonis*, and thus his analysis of the "proper" plot as movement from tension and irritation to a state of quiescence or "proper death" is particularly illuminating for Shakespeare's epyllion. For Shakespeare's poem does not end in a fully realized union that resolves Venus' state of erotic irritation; it ends, as Brooks might say, "improperly"; it fails to move the narrative from stimulation to quiescence, from irritation to stillness. Plot begins, Brooks observes,

from that moment at which story, or "life", is stimulated from quiescence into a state of narratability, into a tension, a kind of irritation, which demands narration. Any reflection on. . . beginnings shows the beginning as an awakening, an arousal, the birth of an

appetency, ambition, desire or intention. . . (The specifically erotic nature of the tension of writing and its rehearsal in reading could be demonstrated through a number of exemplary texts, notably Rousseau's account in *The Confessions* of how his novel *La Nouvelle Heloise* was born of a masturbatory reverie and its necessary fictions). . . The ensuing narrative- the Aristotelian 'middle'- is maintained in a state of tension, as a prolonged deviance from the quiescence of the 'normal'- which is to say, the unnarratable- until it reaches the terminal quiescence of the end. The development of a narrative shows that the tension is maintained as an ever more complicated postponement or *detour* leading back to the goal of quiescence. As Sartre and Benjamin compellingly argued, the narrative must tend towards its end, seek illumination in its own death. Yet this must be the right death, the correct end. The complication of the detour is related to the danger of short-circuit: the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving the im-proper death. The improper end indeed lurks throughout narrative, frequently as the wrong choice: choice of the wrong casket, misapprehension of the magical agent, false erotic object-choice. (291-2)

Such improper endings go against the grain of our most basic desires and assumptions regarding aesthetic experience. As Barbara Smith puts it, "the sources of our gratification in closure probably lie in the most fundamental aspects of our psychological and physiological organization, and [our] most gratifying [experiences] are those in which tensions are created and released (Smith 2-3). In Shakespeare such improper endings generally appear in the form of a sub-plot as Brook's allusion to the *Merchant of Venice* indicates; but in *Venus and Adonis* the main narrative remains unresolved whereas the aside, or ekphrasis, dramatizes desire fulfilled through the figure of the "breeding jennet." The poem's lack of sexual and readerly fulfillment is best imaged through the figure of Tantalus who appears in the dead center of the poem (ll. 599). This allusion, which succinctly expresses Venus' sense of frustration, informs the text's thematic focus as well as its structural motions. Thus, to appreciate the poem's imagistic and structural complexity, its "improper" narrative form as well as its

capacity to sustain tension, is to recognize how the narrative manipulates, through repetition and variation, our desire and our expectation of resolution.

Despite Tantalus' thematic importance to the poem virtually no critic has extensively commented on the less obvious significances he has in relation to Shakespeare's representation of Venus and the poem as a whole. Although Bowers remarks that "this allusion should not be passed over lightly" (12) he offers a very brief and for the most part footnoted explanation of its role in the poem. He reads the emblematic significance of the image in strictly moral terms arguing that it is a stark visual representation of the unsatisfying nature of merely sexual love. He also notes, somewhat cryptically in the footnote, that "[t]he significance of Tantalus is aptly and conventionally expressed in the poem" (22). Aside from this unqualified observation he lists a number of critics (Alastair Fowler, George Turberville, and Christopher Butler) who also comment on the allusion's importance without providing any further discussion. Most notable of these is Butler and Fowler's "Time Beguiling Sport: Number Symbolism in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*." In this analysis of the poem's possible number symbolism, Butler and Fowler briefly comment on the centrality of the Tantalus allusion without drawing any distinct implications from it aside from "numerological and seasonally cyclical" (Bowers 22).

Despite this gap in the poem's criticism understanding the thematic and structural significance of the allusion to Tantalus is critical to recognizing the poem's form as well as its representation of desire. Tantalus presents, for instance, one of the few myths in which the Gods are duped into an act as depraved and humiliating as cannibalism ¹⁴(Edith Hamilton 239, Grimal 414). Here we are not only recalled in a

¹⁴Tantalus' punishment in the underworld is generally attributed to the fact that he sacrificed his son and served him to the unwitting Gods out of excessive pride (Grimal 414). See *Metamorphoses* Book I 163-252 for the story of Lycaon who also

Garbage
lead in too
lengthy H notes
42

general sense to the virtually *low mimetic*¹⁵ characterization of Venus, but more specifically to the series of cannibal images throughout the poem that express the

served human flesh to the Gods.

¹⁵ "Low Mimetic: A mode of literature in which the characters exhibit a power of action which is roughly on our own level, as in most comedy and realistic fiction" (*Frye Anatomy* 366). Part of the complexity of Shakespeare's Venus consists in the combination of apparently conflicting mythic and cultural elements in the representation of her "personality." At certain moments in the poem she appears in the traditional Classical mode of *Venus Genetrix* (ll. 875) whereas at other moments Venus stands at the opposite pole of the mythic spectrum, appearing as a harlot figure in the style of Shakespeare's Cleopatra (ll. 55). The flexibility of her character suggests that the poem is functioning in a highly displaced mode even for epyllions of the Elizabethan period. Perhaps part of the complexity of the representation of Venus can be accounted for through the fluidity of early modern conceptions, (or more precisely non-conceptions) of sexuality. As Valerie Traub has cogently argued, "[r]ather than inhering in the psyche of characters, sexuality in Shakespearean drama anonymously traverses the text. Characters in these plays do not so much possess sexuality as inhabit it; eroticism is an aperture, a permeable space of exchange, a position from which negotiations for pleasure take place. And. . . certain characters inhabit more than one erotic mode" (16). Traub's comments seem particularly relevant to Venus, whose presence in the poem shifts from one pole of cultural fantasy and anxiety (*Venus Genetrix*) to another (whore), problematizing, reproducing, and undoing these extremes as she moves throughout the text. The difficulty of comprehending Venus within any one interpretive mode, be it cultural, archetypal, psychoanalytic or otherwise speaks to the enabling contradictions that constitute the cultural situation from which she arose. One of the major cultural anxieties circulating through the poem, moreover, is the discrepancy between a woman's subordinate social position and the potential of her possessing immense erotic power. Traub is again helpful here as she observes that it is clear "the early modern intersection of gender and sexuality posed dramatic problems based, at least in part, in the contradiction between women's inferior social status and inordinate (fantasized) erotic power" (20). Taking this comment into consideration it is not difficult to imagine a feminist reading of the poem which postulates that by reversing this cultural contradiction (where Venus has social authority but no discernible erotic power), the text dissipates intense male anxieties regarding the residual power women potentially possess in early modern culture. The poem, viewed in this way, might be said to perform a kind of cultural exorcism of male anxieties; thus the real death which the poem dramatizes, the argument might go, is not Adonis' biological death but the symbolic death of Venus' erotic power. For insofar as Venus is the Goddess of love she stands as a synecdochic representation of woman's erotic power in general; thus the dramatization of her erotic failure actually

intensity and violence of her passion: "Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast/ Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh, and bone. . ./ Even so she kissed his brow, his cheek, his chin" (55-59). Elsewhere, Venus employs this common metonymic elision from consumption to consummation, effecting an erotic and yet a potentially repulsed response from Adonis as well as the reader: "The tender spring upon thy tempting lip/ Shows thee unripe; yet mayst thou well be tasted" (127-8). At a number of other points in the poem, Venus, like the unwitting Gods about to eat human flesh at Tantalus' table, is represented as all too human in her incapacity to exceed her own laws: "Being judge in love, she cannot right her cause./ And now she weeps, and now she fain would speak. . ./ Poor queen of love, in thine own law forlorn," (220,221,252). Perhaps the most integral thematic similarity lies in the fact that Venus' and Tantalus' suffering extends to subsequent generations. Tantalus' descendants, Niobe, Atreus, and Thyestes¹⁶ are doomed to misfortune and suffering, just as Venus prophesies that "sorrow on love hereafter shall attend/ It shall be waited on with jealousy/Find sweet beginning but unsavory end" (1136-39). Leonard Barkan rightly suggests that Venus' angry and prophetic response to Adonis' death is a *homage* to Ovid. "The history of origins" Shakespeare's poem presents, Barkan argues, "happens to be that of Ovid's own world of passionate and excessive love" (271). To the extent,

fulfills or plays into male fears regarding women's authority in the sexual and erotic spheres. There is little doubt that this reversal of sexual and social authority is integral to the poem's representation of female sexuality and the, sometimes misogynist, humour derived from it; but at the same time however, the poem dramatizes the weakness, frailty and susceptibility of Adonis. Thus, although the poem represents the failure of woman's potential erotic power it gives equal opportunity to the dramatization of immature and fallible male behavior. Furthermore, although the poem certainly dramatizes a number of male anxieties regarding female sexuality it would be an oversimplification to suggest that these anxieties are imaginatively dissipated through the text or that they determine the text in any decidedly misogynist way.

¹⁶See Edith Hamilton 237-9, and Pierre Grimal 294, 414.

then, that Venus' and Tantalus' suffering is passed on to future generations, their stories stand as originary explanations for a type of irresolvable and tragic suffering that, within the context of the poem, (not to mention future Shakespearean plays) will henceforth be a constitutive feature of human experience.

The relationship between the image of Tantalus and the poem is as much a matter of form as it is of theme. For the structure of the poem consists of repeated patterns of pursuit, ostensible and/or imaginary but ultimately unachieved resolution, and subsequent opposition. When choosing to write an English epyllion with such a Tantallean structure Shakespeare had two precedent stanzic forms to decide between each of which carries its own structural tendencies: the heroic couplets of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*¹⁷ and the sixain form of Thomas Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphosis*. The sixain form provides greater possibilities, as Shakespeare's poem illustrates, for repetition and the building of tension through the smaller units of the single stanza than the continuous stichic patterning of heroic couplets. When we compare the opening stanza of *Venus and Adonis* with the opening of Marlowe's poem for instance, we notice that Shakespeare emphasizes action over description, and metonymy over metaphor. This emphasis on action achieved through an associative or contiguous patterning of images creates a sense of propulsion and movement that is absent from Marlowe's opening. *Venus and Adonis* begins *in medias res*, creating a sense of tension rather than providing the sort of narrative background that opens *Hero and*

¹⁷It is generally understood that Shakespeare and Marlowe wrote their epyllions around the same time; and as certain similarities in the texts reveal, they seem to have been aware of one another's poem. William Keach notes that "although Marlowe's epyllion was not entered in the Stationer's Register until 28 September 1593, almost five and a half months after Shakespeare's (18 April), and of course not published until 1598, it must have been written by the spring of 1593, since Marlowe was killed at Deptford on 30 May of that year" (Keach 85).

meaning what?
logical
historical

Leander, or, for that matter, the framing device that begins Lodge's poem.¹⁸ Marlowe's opening provides a detailed physical portrait of Hero while illuminating her significance as a "Venus Nun" within the Ovidian context of the poem. The sensuous and unusually long description of Hero's garments borrows from the Ovidian ekphrastic tradition as it establishes Hero as a worshiper of the Goddess of love. Such extended detail so early in the poem focuses less on dramatic action than on the narrator's witty rhetorical displays and his capacity for lush description:

On Hellespont guiltie of True-loves blood,
 In View and opposit two citties stood,
 Seaborderers, disjoin'd by Neptunes might:
 The one Abydos, the other Sestos hight
 At Sestos, Hero dwelt; Hero the faire . . .
 The outside of her garments were of lawne
 The lining, purple silke, with guilt starres drawne,
 Her wide sleeves greene, and bordered with a grove
 Where Venus in her naked glory strove. (1-11)

Again so
 what

In Shakespeare's poem we get neither extended physical description nor anything approaching narrative aside until line 259 when Adonis fails to mount his "trampling courser" which rushes towards the lusty "breeding jennet" during the ekphrasis; instead we are immediately presented with Venus' wooing of Adonis as the poem establishes its metonymically driven narrative:

Even as the sun with purple-colored face
 Had ta'en last leave of the weeping morn,
 Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase;

¹⁸Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphosis* begins with the narrator who happens upon the sea God Glaucus: "Walking alone (all onely full of grieffe)/ Within a thicket nere to Isis floud/ Weeping my wants, and wailing scant relief/ Wringing mine armes (as one with sorrow wood)/. . . From forth the channel, with a sorrowing crie/ The Sea-God Glaucus (with his hallowed heares/ Wet in the tears of his sad mothers dye). . . appears" (1-10). Like Marlowe, Lodge delays immediate action by framing his narrative within a mythological context. He begins by situating the poem in a mythic England, mixing the familiar and the foreign, the common and the Ovidian.

Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn.
 Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
 And like a bold-faced suitor 'gins to woo him.

(1-6)

These opening six lines present the reader with two movements of pursuit and one of abandonment. As far as the main narrative movement of pursuit and abandonment is concerned, it exists in its entirety in this microcosmic unit. We are presented with the beginning of a pattern of interrupted metonymy, as the narrative appears to move towards some form of resolution but is turned back upon itself in a cyclic and frustrating motion. The proleptic image of the sun leaving the "weeping morn", for instance, establishes the poem's cyclic pattern which fails to cease even at Adonis' death. Shakespeare spends little time describing the mythic world that his characters inhabit; instead, he employs the image of the sun to establish the theme of temporality and the cycle of loss and dissatisfaction to which Venus and Adonis are prisoners. The chiasmus in line 4 introduces a rhetorical reversal that mirrors the gender reversal of the sexual combatants; such reversals, and the oxymoronic rhetoric they are often figured through are integral to the poem's rhetorical complexity. Moreover, although we are already bombarded with the *action* of sexual combat, the narrative portends humor, pathos and frustration rather than development of plot. Because Shakespeare's readers know, more or less, how the poem will end, action tends to be in the service of erotic titillation and the postponement of resolution, rather than narrative suspense as such.

The key axis upon which the narrative moves is not the totalizing motion of metaphor, but a series of delayed and incomplete contiguous or metonymic relationships. Metonymy, in this sense, as Peter Brooks argues, is the dynamic principle of all narrative:

The plotting of meaning cannot do without metaphor, for meaning in plot is the structure of action in closed and legible wholes. Metaphor is in this sense totalizing. Yet it is equally apparent that the key figure of narrative must in some sense be not metaphor but metonymy: the figure of contiguity and combination, the figure of syntagmatic relations. The description of narrative needs metonymy as the figure of movement, of linkage in the signifying chain of the slippage of the signified under the signifier. That Jacques Lacan has equated metonymy and desire is of the utmost pertinence, since desire must be considered the very motor of narrative, its dynamic principle. (Brooks 281)

The proleptic and metonymically driven opening to *Venus and Adonis*, with its emphasis on frustration and pursuit, is clearly reminiscent of the first stanza of *The Rape of Lucrece*. A comparison of these two openings will further illuminate the importance of metonymy in the representation of a character's desire as well as its role in creating a sense of tension in the reader. For *Lucrece*, like *Venus and Adonis*, begins *in medias res* as "Lust-breathed Tarquin,

From the besieged Ardea all in post
Borne by the trustless wings of false desire. . .
leaves the Roman host
And to Collatium bears the lightless fire
Which, in pale embers hid, lurks to aspire
And girdle with embracing flames the waist
Of Collatine's fair love, Lucrece the chaste. (1-7)

Although there is greater emphasis on Tarquin's moral turpitude than is the case with *Venus*, the dramatic structure is the same: we are presented with the intense desire of the hunter and the disinterest of the hunted. We are also witness to a poetic logic that functions according to a principle of contiguity, a principle that Lacan suggests is constitutive of our experience of desire.¹⁹ Just as the image of the sun leaving the

¹⁹ For Lacan desire can never be fully satisfied so long as our relation to the other, in whose being our desire is alienated from us, is constituted by language. When Lacan suggests that "desire is a metonymy" he is pointing to the fact that we strive, through language, towards the lost object, the primal Thing, from which we have been torn in the movement from need to lack. The paradox here, illustrated by Tarquin's

Again, so what.
Argument goes nowhere
or proves nothing

"morn" foreshadows Adonis' tragic end, the images of Tarquin's "trustless wings", "lightless fire" and the insinuation of "ardor" in the name "Ardea" develop a sense of tension and frustration while indicating a tragedy to come. Moreover, Tarquin's desire is not inspired through a vision of Lucrece, but through a *description* of her; he finds himself caught in the throes of the signifier "chaste". "Haply that name of 'chaste' unhap'ly set/ This bateless edge on his keen appetite" (ll. 8-9). Desire is loosed from the nets of the signifier; it is shown to be a matter of symbolic and metonymic power; for Tarquin is driven by the symbolic power of the signifier "chastity" and the metonymic associations inspired by it. The opening to *Lucrece* thus presents us with a classic Lacanian situation in which a subject's desire is metonymically activated. As we move through the poem though, we begin to realize the extent to which Tarquin fails to satisfy this desire. The metonymic pathways of Tarquin's desire appear to provide him with the possibility of satisfaction, they appear to lead him to a desired moment of consummation, but in the end they are shown to be limitless and deceiving. The poem, as well as Tarquin, is metonymically propelled, moving rapidly by a law of association as it builds through a series of contiguous images indicating increasing desire:

fascination with the signifier "chaste", is that the further one moves along a particular metonymic sequence, (the greater, moreover, one is alienated from the locus of the metonymic chain) the greater one's desire becomes. Anika Lemaire comments on this aspect of Lacan's thinking, noting, "the Lacanian expression 'desire is a metonymy' simply justifies the alienation of desire in a signifier which is removed from the original signifier by a series of associative connections" (197). Desire, in other words, is never really desire for the thing as such, but it is mediated, experienced, and alienated in language; and the structure of metonymy is such that it permits infinite variations on the 'original' signifier, which is of course a name or replacement as much as any other signifier. So for instance, although "Lucrece" might stand as the original signifier in a metonymic chain, it is not primal in the sense of marking a presence of the thing itself. (See Lacan "Agency of the letter in the unconscious" *Ecrits* 159-71). To this extent desire is always, in Jacobson's phrase, "caught by its tail;" or as Nietzsche puts it, "Ultimately one loves one's desires and not that which is desired" (106).

"lightless-fire", "pale-embers" "embracing-flames". Along with these images of flame, fire and lust an analogous series of images explicitly indicates a sense of movement and motion which insinuates that Tarquin's desire is somehow beyond his control, that he is prisoner, as Žižek might put it, to his own symptoms: "besieged, "borne" "leaves", "bears" "lurks". These two sets of contiguous images sustain an implicit analogy between the movement of an army and Tarquin's threatening and desirous movement towards Lucrece. Such contiguity characterizes both *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* as they begin by engaging the reader's desire through this propulsion of metonymy. The metonymically driven beginnings to these epyllions establish the frame through which Shakespeare will explore *the theme* of unexpressed desire and the tragic circumstances it often leads to. Shakespeare repeatedly returns throughout the sonnets and the epyllions to this Ovidian concern over unexpressed desire, summarized in *Pyramus and Thisbe* when the narrator observes that, "Their fire the more concealed, fiercer raged" (Ovid 65).

The beginning of *Venus and Adonis*, which already alludes to its own unsatisfying end, begins a pattern or cycle of unfulfillment that repeats throughout the text. In Brooks' terms this repetition of unfulfillment constitutes the narrative's postponement or detour that sustains the sense of tension is usually accented by the "middle section" of the narrative and then resolved at the end. In *Venus and Adonis* however, the beginning, middle, and end all play a role in enhancing the sense of postponement and delay. By dividing the first 810 lines of the poem into four narrative movements each constituting (with the exception of the ekphrasis) a pattern of pursuit, ostensible resolution and subsequent opposition, it becomes clear that the poem is *experienced* as an over-determined series of unresolved patterns of sexual pursuit intertwined with moments of apparent, but finally unrealized union. Lines 1-258 constitute the first

significance of this?

main narrative pattern which is followed by the "breeding jennet" episode (259-324). Subsequently, lines 325-545 re-ignite Venus' momentum lost at the end of the first section. This third movement concludes with the kiss at 545, but rather than satiating Venus the kiss leads to yet another intensification of her desire: "Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey/ And glutton like she feeds, yet never filleth" (547-8). This intensification of desire and the unbearable sense of frustration it inspires reaches its climax at the poem's center when it becomes apparent to the reader, if not to Venus, that "All is imaginary. . . / He will not manage her, although he mount her" (597-8). Venus follows this with an impassioned, if "over-handled," speech that Adonis be ruled by her rather than Cynthia²⁰ and Cynthia's subordinate, the boar. This takes us up to the tragic movement of the poem which furthers Venus' sense of loss and dissatisfaction through Adonis' death and the eventual "cropping" of the anemone. These larger narrative units within the first section of the poem contain a series of smaller narratives, as well as imagistic and metonymic patterns that develop the pattern of cyclic unfulfillment. Such sequences of images and the intertexts they evoke work in combination to develop the ceaseless detour and postponement of sexual and narrative resolution.

Lines 1-254 constitute the first extended narrative pattern of pursuit, imaginary resolution, and subsequent opposition. This narrative segment begins with the opening stanza that initiates Venus' hunt of Adonis and it moves towards the imaginary resolution of her attempt to "hemm [Adonis] here/ Within the circuit of this ivory pale" (228-9). Venus' desire to imaginatively alter Adonis' perception of the world in her favor is then foiled when the narrator intervenes: "her words are done, her woes the more increasing/ The time is spent, her object will away/ And from her twining arms

²⁰Goddess of the moon, the hunt, and chastity.

doth urge releasing" (254-6). Adonis then breaks from her arms and chases after his "trampling courser," allowing the major narrative cycle to repeat while the sub-plot of the horses portrays the quenching of previously thwarted desire. The primary sequence of pursuit and failure is over-determined within this first narrative unit through a series of imagistic and intertextual patterns that repeat the narrative cycle of unfulfillment. Between lines 55-90, for instance, the narration moves from the predatory eagle imagery of stanza 10 to Adonis' coy escape when "her lips were ready for his pay/ He winks, and turns his lips another way" (89-90). This movement away from Venus breaks the ostensible union established through the imaginary "truce" where "one sweet kiss shall pay this comptless debt" (84). This early and failed attempt at seduction initiates a common rhetorical play on paradoxical images that insinuate incommensurability while ostensibly expressing a sense of sensual reciprocity. Although the narrator indicates the possibility of union through the anxiously awaited kiss, his use of market language reveals that such desire is "comptless," hence unpayable. Such a rhetoric of monetary exchange accentuates the ontological incommensurability between a Goddess and a human; its irony and humor arise from the stark reversal of troping Adonis as infinitely wealthy and Venus as an impoverished investor in the market of love. Furthermore, although the narration seems to sympathize with Venus to the extent that "she cannot choose but love" while Adonis remains disinterested, the patterning of imagery consistently implies a constitutional sense of dissension set between them. Line 81, for instance, introduces another proleptic image that looks forward to Venus' lament for Adonis when he is prosopopeiacally figured by the anemone: "And by her fair immortal hand she swears/ From his soft bosom never to remove" (81-2). This image is reversed at the poem's tragic end when she holds the flower in the "hollow cradle" of her breast. Venus' desire

Asshole
extraordinary!
Like Kuchin!

never to be removed from Adonis' breast, and the previous image of Adonis "fastened" in her net, evoke the false, or in Northrop Frye's terms, *demonic* union of Ovid's "Salmacis and Hermaphrodite." "The demonic erotic relation", according to Frye,

becomes a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty or frustrates the one who possesses it. It is generally symbolized by a harlot, witch, siren, or other tantalizing female, a physical object of desire which is sought as a possession and therefore can never be possessed. The demonic parody of marriage, or the union of two souls in one flesh, may take the form of hermaphroditism. . . (149)

Salmacis like Venus, grapples her lover/foe as she,

[catches] him fast betweene hir armes for ought that he could do
Yea maugre all his wrestling and his struggling to and fro
She held him still, and kissed him a hundred times and mo
And wilde he nilde he with hir handes she toucht his naked breast
And now on this side now on that (for all he did resist
And strive to wrest him from hir gripes) she clung unto him fast
And wound about him like a Snake, which snatched up in hast
And being by the Prince of Birdes borne lightly up aloft
Doth writhe hir selfe about his necke and griping talants oft,
And cast hir taile about his wings displayed in the winde.
(Golding trans. 442-52)

The dramatization of this violent union leads up to the poem's tragic finale in which "Salmacis and Hermaphrodite" merge "in one form and face"²¹ thus

²¹Francis Beaumont completely refigures the status of Hermaphrodite's androgyny in his re-writing of Ovid's text. For Beaumont, Hermaphrodite's androgyny marks a redemptive return to a state of virginity; it expresses an ideal state of inclusive fullness, a balance between the masculine and feminine parts of the self. As Jonathon Bate observes, "in the address which prefaces the poem, Beaumont expresses the hope that it will enable the male reader to dissolve his sexual identity and himself 'turne halfe-mayde'" (64-5). This state of unity is achieved at the end of the poem when "in one body they began to grow/ She felt his youthfull bloud in every vain;/ And he felt hers warme his cold breast againe/ And ever since was womens love so blest,/. . . May nevermore a manly shape retaine/ But halfe a virgin may return againe" (Beaumont ed. Donno 900-19). Although Bate emphasizes the similarity between these two poems, particularly their highly erotic rhetoric, it is clear that Beaumont and Shakespeare have two very different goals in mind. Shakespeare, like Ovid in "Salmacis and

completing her castration of his masculine identity. The intertextual relationship between Salamacis and Venus is ambiguous at this point because on the one hand Venus is the Goddess of love and thus she offers Adonis the possibility of manhood rather than posing any threat to his masculinity, yet on the other a clear parallel is drawn between her and Salamacis through the similarity of their predatory images. What is unambiguous about the Ovidian intertext at this point is that it signifies a sense of unresolved or at least unsatisfying union. Moreover, this Ovidian narrative is juxtaposed in the *Metamorphoses* against "Pyramus and Thisbe" which dramatizes full reciprocity rather than emasculation.²² Thus, the drama of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is aligned very early on with the negative Ovidian transformations of dissension and false union rather than narratives which dramatize full reciprocity.

Hermaphrodite," dramatizes the dissension between the sexes as he gives expression to the antinomies which often inhere in passionate love; Beaumont on the other hand explicitly states his hope to resolve the dissension between the sexes, as well as those within the self. It is interesting to note in this context that Shakespeare set dissension between two characters normally represented as fully reciprocal lovers whereas Beaumont introduces reciprocity in an unrequited and tragic affair.

²²See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book iv 55-169 (Melville trans.) Unlike Venus who retreats to Paphos following Adonis' death, Thisbe prays to the Gods to be reunited with Pyramus in death:

'Death now shall have no power to part us ever.
 And yet, dear sorrowing parents, mine and his,
 Grant us, we both implore, this last request,
 That we whom love and life's last hour have joined
 Be not denied to share the selfsame tomb.
 And you, strange tree, whose boughs one body shade
 And soon shall shade another, keep for aye
 The marks of death, your fruit funereal,
 Most fit for grief, the pledge of our twin blood'.
 She fixed the sword's sharp point below her breast. . .
 The parents and the gods received her prayer:
 The mulberry retains its purple hue;
 One urn the ashes holds of lovers true. (129-69)

If we trace the imagistic patterning of lines 55-90 we notice that they follow our sequence of opposition, imaginary union, and subsequent conflict. In stanza 10 Venus is troped as an "empty eagle" gluttonously feeding on her prey. The final couplet of the stanza plays on the Sisyphean or Tantalean nature of her desire: "Even so she kissed his brow, his cheek, his chin/ And where she ends she doth anew begin" (60). The end couplet of the next stanza momentarily resolves this oppositional image of predatory feeding by representing Venus' imaginary and hypothetical hope for satisfaction. Just as Venus will ostensibly resolve this first major narrative pattern with the imaginary transformation of her body into a park and Adonis into a deer, she resolves this minor sequence by "Wishing her cheeks were gardens full of flowers/ So they were dewed with [his breath's] distilling showers" (65-6). Here again the imaginary and hypothetical nature of Venus' imagery of reciprocation masks the predatory action which the narration had just presented. In the following stanza the narrator reverses Venus' wish full-filling flower and rain imagery into its dialectical opposite, turning the garden full of flowers into a "river that is rank/ Perforce will force it overflow the bank" (72-3). Thus we move from an image of opposition that the narrator presents in stanza 10, to an image of reciprocation that comes out of Venus' consciousness in the following stanza, back to an image of opposition that reverses Venus' hope for union. The same pattern then repeats over the next two stanzas as lines 73-8 introduce the oppositional colour motif of red and white which is momentarily resolved in the couplet of the following stanza where "one sweet kiss shall pay this comptless debt" (84). The sense of sexual combat and the tension which provokes it is bodied forth through the narrator's heavy use of medial caesura and the repetition of terms such as "still" and "entreats" which overtly express a sense of frustration:

Still she entreats, and prettily entreats
For to a pretty ear she tunes her tale

Still is he sullen, still he low'rs and frets
 'Twixt crimson shame and anger ashy-pale.
 Being red, she loves him best; and being white
 Her best is bettered with a more delight. (73-8)

The color imagery which expresses Adonis' combination of fear and anger recalls us again to a similar passage in Golding's translation of "Salamacis and Hermaphroditus":

This sed, the Nymph did hold hir peace, and therewithall the
 boy Waxt red : he wist not what love was : and sure it was a joy
 For in his face the color fresh appeared like the same
 That is in Apples which doe hang upon the Sunnie side :
 Or Ivorie shadowed with a red : or such as is espide
 Of white and scarlet colours mixt appearing in the Moone.
 (Golding 400-6)

One of the most distinguishing features of Shakespeare's variation on this Ovidian passage results from the metrical patterning of the sixain stanza which naturally lends itself to a closing couplet that develops or reverses the sense of the previous lines. The closing couplet of stanza 13, for instance, plays on the sense of desire's incapacity for fulfillment that closed out the previous stanza with the river imagery. This sense of Venus' insatiability is then repeated in the following stanza through the trope of the comptless debt. Such imagistic patterning and rhetorical reversals, which are usually accomplished in the final couplet of the sixain, are more fully exploited in Shakespeare than in Ovid. Moreover, within this minor narrative and imagistic unit of lines 55-90 we see that the closing couplets of stanzas 10, 12, 13, and 15 express the constitutional impossibility of Venus satisfying her desire for Adonis, while stanzas 11 and 14 present an imaginary sexual resolution. Shakespeare thus adopts much of Ovid's imagery in order to dramatize the sexual combat between Venus and Adonis, at the same time that he exploits a series of rhetorical reversals in order to create the sense of an epistemological gap between the characters' perception of one another.

Because Venus' sensuality is highly verbal as well as deeply physical, she has far greater success achieving a union of words than of bodies. Her failure to entice Adonis reaches a brief and comic climax in lines 85-9 which completes this minor narrative pattern while developing the water and flood imagery that re-appears when Adonis sets off to meet the boar mid-way through the poem.²³ Line 86 embellishes the flood imagery introduced in the couplet of stanza 11 as Adonis "like a divedapper peering through a wave/. . . ducks as quickly in:/ So offers he to give what she did crave, But when her lips were ready for his pay/ He winks, and turns his lips another way" (86-9). This comic disappearing act is tragically replayed at line 819 as Adonis vanishes in the waves of a "merciless and pitchy night." The flood imagery takes on its most profoundly tragic resonances as the shift in tone from the comic to the mournful is initiated with the image of Adonis being swallowed into the darkness of approaching death:

. . . after him she darts, as one on shore
 Gazing upon a late-embarked friend
 Till the wild waves will have him seen no more
 Whose ridges with the meeting clouds contend.
 So did the merciless and pitchy night
 Fold in the object that did feed her sight.

Whereat amazed, as one that unaware
 Hath dropped a precious jewel in the flood. . .
 (816-34)

²³ A. Fraunce comments on the relationship between Venus and the poem's sea imagery in *The Third Part of the Countesse of Pembrokes Yvychurch* noting that "Venus is borne of the sea, lovers are inconstant, like the troubled waves of the sea: Hereof was she also called *Aphrodite*, of the froath of the sea, being like to *Sperma*." (45a Cited in Hulse "Shakespeare's Myth of Venus and Adonis" 207). Hulse further notes that the etymology of Venus and the sea derives from Hesiod, *Theogony*, ll. 188-204. (Hulse 221).

The imagery of the rising and devouring waves contending with the limits of sky expresses a sense of tragic foreboding that extends far beyond Adonis' particularity. This sense of a *world* darkened by absence is given full expression when Venus bewails the loss of true beauty that dies with Adonis. "Alas, poor world, what treasure hast thou lost/ What face remains alive that's worth the viewing?/. . . The flowers are sweet, their colors fresh and trim,/ But true sweet beauty lived and died with him" (1075-80). The patterning of flood imagery embellishes and repeats the cycle of loss and unfulfillment throughout the smaller narrative sequences as well as the larger shift from the comic to the tragic. This pattern overdetermines the profound sense of frustration that Venus eloquently, if unsuccessfully, strives to resolve.

The erotic rhetoric intensifies towards the end of the first major narrative pattern (lines 1-258) as Adonis arouses greater and greater frustration in his pursuer. The carnal and even violent crescendo of the narrative at this point is marked by a cyclic movement of metonymic images which propels the sense of narrative and sexual postponement. The sequence of images from lines 240-53 moves through a metonymic logic that concludes as it began, taking us through an imagistic variation of the cyclic pattern of incommensurability, union, and subsequent opposition. These lines immediately follow Venus' wish-fulfilling and imaginary transformation into a park; they begin by reversing the sense of union proposed by the park imagery and then re-introduce it, only to undo it yet again:

At this Adonis smiles as in disdain
 That in each cheek appears a pretty dimple;
 Love made those hollows, if himself were slain
 He might be buried in a tomb so simple
 Foreknowing well, if there he came to lie
 Why, there love lived, and there he could not die.

These lovely caves, these round enchanting pits,
 Opened their mouths to swallow Venus' liking

get to the point, blowing air

Being mad before, how doth she now for wits?
 Struck dead at first, what needs a second striking?
 Poor queen of love, in thine own law forlorn,
 To love a cheek that smiles at thee in scorn! (241-53)

The patterning of images in these two stanzas illustrates the sort of narrative negotiation between Venus' desire and the reality principle of Adonis' refutations that constitutes much of the poem's structural motion. The metonymic sequence begins with Adonis' dimple metamorphosing into a "tomb so simple" where Cupid may lie "if himself were slain." Here again, the poem's paradoxical rhetoric balances a latent sense of impending tragedy while manifestly expressing the young boy's remarkable beauty. As the narrative focus shifts from Cupid to Venus, Adonis' tomb-like dimples transform again into "lovely caves. . . round enchanting pits. . . [which] opened their mouths to swallow Venus' liking" (247-8). This transformation introduces one of the most explicit and sensual images of Venus' masculine position in the poem. The highly charged euphemism of Venus penetrating Adonis' "dimple" gives way as the narrative shifts from Venus' perception of the situation to the actual distance placed between her and Adonis: "Poor queen of love, in thine own law forlorn/ To love a cheek that smiles at thee in scorn." Here the narrative moves away from Venus' perception of Adonis' dimple as a sexualized and penetrable object to a more sober and less erotic view of the situation. Thus the patterning of imagery is cyclic in motion, moving from dimple to tomb, to cave, to pit, to mouth, to cheek again. Such patterning creates a sense of movement towards quiescence while continually frustrating its realization. Moreover, Venus' imaginary and metaphoric transformations are continually undermined by the narration's re-deployment of her own rhetoric, revealing, as it were, that there is not "relief enough" within her limits.

The reversal of gender roles in *Venus and Adonis*, as in Ovid's "Salamacis and Hermaphrodite", plays an integral role in the necessarily frustrating conclusion the

relation is driven towards. Venus' masculine role bodied forth in lines 55-90 is complemented in the third narrative section (lines 325-545) as Adonis unwittingly tropes himself in effeminate and emasculating terms. In an attempt to counter Venus' *carpe diem* argument, Adonis displays wisdom beyond his years, at the same time as he expresses an unwitting effeminacy that undermines his argument by making him appear ridiculous and coldly narcissistic:

'Who wears a garment shapeless and unfinished
 Who plucks the bud before one leaf put forth?
 If springing things be any jot diminished
 They wither in their prime, prove nothing worth.
 The colt that's backed and burdened being young
 Loseth his pride, and never waxeth strong.

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 ope the gate.
 Dismiss your vows, your feigned tears, your flatt'ry;
 For where a heart is hard they make no batt'ry.'
 (415- 26)

In line 417 Adonis implicitly reintroduces the absent and/or flaccid phallus theme with unintentionally humorous results. Then in line 423, through another unfortunate choice of images, he portrays himself as the assailed virgin striving to keep the female phallus from his unyielding gate. Finally he adds insult to his own injury when he reveals that the only "hard" thing about him is his unbattered heart. Adonis' self-emasculating choice of images weakens his position in the poem, indicating an unnatural fear of intimacy that leads some readers to sympathize with Venus' reproach of the coy and unyielding boy.

From a Lacanian perspective it is clear that Adonis presents the kind of pathological and ultimately self-destructive behavior of one who has not yet made the transition from *need* (in a biological sense) to *desire* (as it circulates in the

Symbolic).²⁴ Such individuals remain resistant to the "symbolic castration" necessary for the development of the ego engendered through the *Spaltung* or division within the self that permits one to signify oneself for others. This division within the self, which constitutes the possibility of signification, is also the condition of possibility for love. For Lacan, the possibility of desiring an other's desire lies in one's ability to perceive the other as something more than an object, to see them (in the Heideggerean sense) as a Thing, as something *irreducible*. Slavov Zizek lucidly articulates this mode of perceiving an other as something more-than-an-object in terms of a distinction between *ontical* and *auratic* objects. To experience the sublimity of love, Zizek explains, is to perceive beyond the other's positive ontical properties; it is to experience an other as an auratic object rather than an ontical one. For an "auratic" object, has something in it "more than itself (for this reason, man is a thing *par excellence*). This something more, this sublime indefinable X which cannot be located in any of the positive features of the object, yet the presence of which makes a Thing out of the object, is engendered by the word which names the object" (170). It is thus language itself, the argument goes, that opens up a gap or "placeholder for the (lacking) representation that permits one to make a Thing out of an other" (170). The Word is thus an enabling function, a process that permits one to move beyond the designation of positive properties and to allow one to "encircle the elusive *je ne sais quoi* beyond positive properties" (Zizek 170). From this perspective, Zizek observes, "Where the word breaks up no thing can be" (170). Thus individuals incapable of love are unable to elevate an other to the dignity of an auratic object. For to elevate an other to this point of sublimity is to admit, within a Lacanian paradigm, one's own

²⁴See Coppelia Kahn "Self and Eros in *Venus and Adonis*" for a reading that analyzes the narcissistic dimensions of Adonis.

lack. (If one did not suffer lack there would simply be no need to seek the desire of an other.) To seek the other's desire, which for Lacan is the very essence of love, is to recall oneself to the fact that one has been torn from the original primacy of the pre-symbolic. Such is the state, moreover, of the ego's precarious "autonomy" and the possibilities of love it offers. Shakespeare's Adonis, and his Ovidian counterparts, Narcissus and Hermaphroditus, avoid intimacy and love in a manner that suggests they are defending against the trauma constitutive of a definitive break from the primitive, pre-autonomous state prior to ascension to the symbolic.²⁵ Adonis is thus unable to

²⁵Adonis' fear of castration, his pathological tendency to avoid exposure to Venus' sexuality is dramatically expressed in sonnet IX of the *Passionate Pilgrim*, often attributed to Shakespeare:

Fair was the morn when the fair queen of love,

Paler for sorrow than her milk-white dove,
For Adon's sake, a youngster proud and wild,
Her stand she takes upon a steep-up hill.
Anon Adonis comes with horn and hounds.
She, silly queen, with more than love's good will,
Forbade the boy he should not pass those grounds.
"Once," quoth she, "did I see a fair sweet youth
Here in these brakes deep-wounded with a boar,
Deep in the thigh, a spectacle of ruth!
See, in my thigh," quoth she, "here was the sore."
She showed hers; he saw more wounds than one,
And blushing fled and left her all alone.

Here, as in the epyllion, Venus prophesies Adonis' death; only now the sexual overtones of Adonis' violent demise are made explicit. His vision of female "absence" precedes his own analogous castration at the hands of the boar. The sonnet, like the epyllion, implicitly dramatizes Adonis' castration anxieties. In the epyllion it is Venus who reminds us of the sexual overtones of Adonis' death (1117-19), whereas in the sonnet it is through the dramatic recognition of Venus' "castration" that the text signifies Adonis' unconscious conflicts. Thomas Lacquer, in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, argues that castrative anxieties in early modern culture could be rationalized according to Galenic theories of the origination of sex. As Valerie Traub summarizes, "the contemporary medical literature conceived of males and females as structurally inverted: both genders originate as female, with the

"elevate" Venus to the status of an auratic object in the manner of one who resists the enabling, if self-alienating, power of the signifier; he sees her only as a(n) (ontical) threat, rather than as the means by which he might attain manhood and the sublimity of its passions, which, being the Goddess of love, she clearly offers. Adonis is unable to love, as it were, because he has yet to become a fully developed and autonomous self:

'I know not love' quoth he 'nor will not know it,
 Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it
 'Tis much to borrow, and I will not owe it²⁶
 My love to love is love but to disgrace it. (409-14)

As Ted Hughes, Robert Merrix, D.C. Allen, and others, have argued in various ways, Adonis turns away from the soft pleasures of Venus for the hard hunt of the boar which represents the secular male world of action, quest, and eventually death. Adonis' experience in the poem "is a mythic image of the Elizabethan dilemma, as

greater presence of 'heat' in the male forcing outward that which lies hidden in the interior folds of the female" (153). This theory inspired male fantasies and anxieties of "reversion" back to a female state. From a psychoanalytic point of view this medical theory enhances, at the same time it might rationalize, an anxiety that is already constitutive of male subjectivity within a patriarchal symbolic order.

Ted Hughes argues that the Puritan fear of women's sexuality is an informing principle of Shakespeare's work. This fear, Hughes contends, is manifested through Shakespeare's lifetime negotiation with the two sides of the Goddess of Love myth as it works its way through his canon beginning with *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* all the way up to *The Tempest*. In so far as *Venus and Adonis* is concerned, Hughes unconvincingly suggests, the boar signifies Venus' dark, violent side. If this is the case however, one is left asking why she manifests this side of her personality consistently throughout the poem: if the boar is a symbolic manifestation of her darker elements it would seem more appropriate to have made the distinction between her generational and her destructive aspects clear rather than so unevenly blurring the two (See Hughes 1-86).

²⁶Here again Adonis borrows market language in order to express the incommensurability between himself and Venus. In this case however, his rhetoric becomes too strong, and too harsh to be read sympathetically; he speaks with the defensive arrogance of someone whose self-obsession conceals a greater sense of personal anxiety.

typified in several famous lives of the time, such as Raleigh's, or even that of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton.²⁷ The natural, 'chosen' spiritual hero exerts all his free energies to become a hero of the secular, materialist, rational adventure" (Hughes 41). Although Hughes overemphasizes the mythic subtext of the poem, particularly Adonis' heroic capacity, he is right in suggesting that Adonis turns away from the procreative world Venus represents in favour of a male world that leads to early death. In Lacanian terms we might say that Adonis turns to the Other for fulfillment, to the Name-of-the-Father, rather than striking a balance between the social pressures of the male world and the soft pleasures of love and sensuality.

Our reading of Adonis as being unable to bear witness to the ineffable qualities of the Goddess of love, to, as one might put it in Lacanese, experience the *object-a*, the unrepresentable part of the other, is verified by Venus' response to him following his disavowal of romantic love. The Goddess responds to Adonis' defensive and fearful accusations in a manner that speaks directly to Lacan's characterization of human desire as desire for something absent and ultimately unrepresentable. She moves through each sense explaining that any *one of them* would be adequate to send her into throes of love for him. The logic of her theme is that she sees in Adonis something more than her physical senses perceive: "Had I no eyes but ears, my ears would love/ That inward

²⁷See Patrick Murphy, "Wriothesley's Resistance: Wardship Practices, and Ovidian Narratives in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*" for an exploration of the possible links between the Earl of Southampton and Adonis. There are intriguing parallels between the two, particularly in relation to the fact that the Earl of Southampton was being pressured to marry Elizabeth Vere in order to secure his inheritance. Southampton delayed the marriage until he reached maturity, offering instead to pay a fine of 5000 pounds (323-4). Prior to the publication of *Venus and Adonis* John Clapham wrote a clearly allegorical poem dedicated to Southampton titled *Narcissus* which undoubtedly speaks to Southampton's situation and his refusal to marry. There is also little doubt that Shakespeare's procreative sonnets were written to Southampton.

beauty and invisible;/ Or were I deaf, thy outward parts would move/ Each part in me that were but sensible" (433-6). The significance of such erotically charged argument is not simply a matter of sexual persuasion, for it is in such acts of persuasion that Venus, as well as readers sympathetic to her cause, indulge in a kind of *jouissance*, or excess pleasure. Clearly, the bliss achieved in such moments of sexualized rhetoric has little to do with its realization; its *meaning* is not a matter of metonymic reference but rather its power lies in the throes of the signifier not the signified: "all is imaginary." During moments of imaginary sexual union, of ecstatic verbal bliss, Venus indulges in a symbolic and momentary expression of fullness that titillates the reader's desire at the same time it frustrates his or her hope for narrative resolution. For here again the intense semiotic and imaginary pleasure Venus offers us is undermined or at least threatened by Adonis' impatient coyness:

Once more the ruby-colored portal opened,
Which to his speech did honey passage yield,
Like a red morn that ever yet betokened
Wrack to the seaman, tempest to the field,
Sorrow to sheperds, woe unto the birds,
Gusts and foul flaws to herdmen and to herds. (451-6)

In the world of sexual combat every gesture is a sign portending greater meaning, and because Venus is the Goddess of love she is only too aware that Adonis' ruby portal will express rejection and further frustration. The Ovidian-like list of stock images ("Wracked seaman", "Sorrowing sheperd", "red morn") expresses a sense of impending doom at the same time it places Venus' frustration within a familiar poetic context that expresses the extent to which she shares our own flawed humanity.

Despite the undeniable debt to Ovid in Venus' characterization, however, Shakespeare's Venus is strikingly different from her Ovidian counterpart(s).²⁸

²⁸Jonathon Bate draws on Thomas M. Greene's work, *The Light in Troy*, in

Shakespeare's use of Ovidian allusions is particularly important in terms of Venus' role as frustrated lover, especially in regards to the oppositional elements that Shakespeare brings together in Venus. Just as the precise significance between Salamacis and Venus is somewhat unclear, Venus' role as an Echo figure in her relation with the narcissistic Adonis varies in ways that illuminate the extent to which Shakespeare's poem is aimed at representing and inspiring a greater sense of erotic frustration than earlier versions of the story. As the poem shifts from a dominantly comic mood to a tragic one Venus' suffering is compared with Echo's; at the same time an important contrast is drawn between the two:

And now [Venus] beats her heart, whereat it groans
That all the neighbor caves, as seeming troubled,
Make verbal repetition of her moans.
Passion on passion deeply is redoubled;
"Ay me!" she cries, and twenty times, "Woe Woe!"
And twenty echoes twenty times cry so. (829-34)

Although the allusion to Echo is clear, the emphasis in this passage is on Venus' activity rather than the passivity more commonly associated with Echo. In Golding's translation Echo is punished by Juno for keeping the Goddess occupied while Jove seduced others (III 455). Juno strikes out at her saying "for of thy speech but simple use hereafter shalt thou have/ The deede it selfe did straight confirme the threatnings that she gave" (458-9). Echo is thus rendered entirely passive, capable only of

order to distinguish three types of "Renaissance imitation." The first and most "rudimentary is 'reproductive' or 'sacramental' imitation, in which a classical original is followed with religious fidelity" (Bate 42). Secondly there is the more sophisticated "eclectic" or "exploitative" imitation, "in which heterogeneous allusions are mingled. Most sophisticated is "dialectical imitation, in which the later text actively conflicts with and dissociates itself from its classical pre-text." Shakespeare's allusion to Echo in *Venus and Adonis* is an example of dialectical imitation because the allusion is employed in order to distinguish Venus from Echo at the same time it draws an analogy between them.

repeating the words of others. Venus' suffering, on the other hand, initiates a sympathetic response from the natural world around her, as the "neighbor caves. . . Make verbal repetition of her moans" (830). To the extent, then, that Echo loses her power of persuasion she is an effective metaphor for Venus as an unsuccessful courter. Yet, Shakespeare's narrator is careful to emphasize Venus' creative and active power and her anguish appears even greater than Echo's because she is more fully present to the reader; she becomes more rather than less real due to the fact that she speaks while nature responds. The allusion does not simply align Venus with Echo; it deepens our sense of Venus' loss while emphasizing the extraordinary active sexuality that she displays. The world around her appears as her shadow, rather than she being a shadow of it:

She, marking [the echoes] begins a wailing note
 And sings extemporally a woeful ditty:
 How love makes young men thrall, and old men dote;
 How love is wise in folly, foolish-witty.
 Her heavy anthem still concludes in woe,
 And still the choir of echoes answer so. (835-40)

It is precisely the extemporal nature of Venus' "woeful ditty" that distinguishes her from Echo who "harkens for some sounde,/ Whereto she might replie hir wordes, from which she is not bounde" (III. 469-70 Golding). This subtle shift in emphasis between Echo's verbal imprisonment and Venus' creative if tortured consciousness is not only enormously important for any reading of Venus as a character, it is also integral to the reader's response towards her frustration. Venus' presence in the poem, unlike Echo's, is intensely physical as well as verbal and thus she tends to demand more of a reader's attention, sympathy and desire than Echo. Venus' physicality, particularly the maternal eroticism expressed in the doe image (871-6) invites potentially positive and negative transferences from a reader. The description also indicates an unacknowledged sympathy on the part of the narrator which counteracts the more distant and less

enthralled verse of lines 840-5 in which " Her song was tedious and outwore the night,/ For lovers' hours are long, though seeming short./ . . . Their copious stories, oftentimes begun,/ End without audience, and are never done." At line 871 Venus' intense physicality and her insatiable desire come to the fore as the narrator seems to lose himself in the deeply erotic image of her seeking the young hunter:

And as she runs, the bushes in the way
Some catch her by the neck, some kiss her face,
Some twine about her thigh to make her stay.
She wildly breaketh from their strict embrace,
Like a milch doe, whose swelling dugs do ache,
Hasting to feed her fawn, hid in some brake. (871-76)

Here again the natural world is deeply sympathetic to Venus as it caresses her, holds her, and longs to possess her as she desires to possess Adonis. Notice also that this passage presents another possible union, between nature and Venus (who appears here in her more traditional *Venus Genetrix* mode), while undermining it by expressing Venus' growing sense of frustration through the image of her "swelling dugs." Just as Adonis' "ruby-portal" forecasts an ominous future for Venus, Adonis' barking hounds (877) sound another warning that interrupts the ostensible union between Venus and the natural world around her.

As we saw in the poem's first narrative sequence (1-259), the poem's Tantallean structure moves through a series of images that express an apparent but unrealized union. This initial sequence establishes the imagistic and structural basis upon which the rest of the poem is then based. Within the larger narrative patterns of the poem there are smaller imagistic sequences, intertextual elements, and rhetorical forms that develop the dissension between Venus and Adonis while manipulating the reader's desire for a resolution to this dissension. These patterns also constitute the structural form of the third narrative pattern (lines 325-545) which begins by making explicit the Ovidian theme that unexpressed desire leads to dire consequences. Developing on the

river and flood imagery introduced in lines 70-90, (see p. 49-52) the narration moves from the horse episode (259-324) which expresses the fulfillment of desire to the mounting tension of Venus' lust and Adonis' growing impatience:

An oven that is stopped, or river stayed,
 Burneth more hotly, swelleth with more rage;
 So of concealed sorrow may be said
 Free vent of words love's fire doth assuage;
 But when the heart's attorney once is mute
 The client breaks, as desperate in his suit. (331-6)

The narrator establishes the ensuing debate (lines 368-450) between Venus and Adonis through a complementary set of images that ostensibly compare the two while further distancing them. Lines 331-6 imply that Venus *burns* to express her desire for Adonis, while in line 338 Adonis is troped as a *burning* coal whose anger revives with her return. "He sees her coming and begins to glow/ Even as a dying coal revives with wind" (338-9). This imagistic chiasmus concludes with another illusory union between Venus and Adonis as "Taking no notice that she is so nigh/ For all askance he holds her in his eye" (339-40).

The erotic distance between the two becomes even more palpable in this momentary unification in which Adonis "holds her in his eye" while he tries to hide from her in a solipsistic gesture of concealment. The gaze according to Renaissance theories based in Plato's *Phaedrus* saw staring as the beginning of intimacy; in this case it signifies a reluctant beginning that moves nowhere. This indication of a potential sexual union without its realization complements the patterning of imagery surrounding it which also evokes the sense of sexual union while suspending its actualization. Thus, action and image, plot and rhetoric, form and content move in analogous patterns of untotalizability, teasing but never fulfilling the text's and our desire for closure and completion.

The combative color imagery is further developed in the following stanzas as the narrator moves from comparing and contrasting Venus and Adonis with images of red and its associations of lust, heat and burning, to white and its associations of innocence and inexperience. The first image of white appears in order to express Adonis' boyish virginity, "His tend'rer cheek receives her soft hand's print, / As apt as new fallen snow takes any dint" (353-4); the second further develops the sense of his purity while indicating an element of potentially destructive isolation, "Full gently now she takes him by the hand,/ A lily prisoned in a jail of snow" (361). This second use of the snow image reverses the earlier sense of commensurability, indicated by Venus' print on Adonis' cheek, to disharmony bodied forth through the prison image. Subsequently, the third use of the color white returns to the combative nature of the color imagery, "So white a friend engirts so white a foe" (364). The unresolved dialectic movement of color and snow imagery functions in the same way as the river and flood imagery of the first section, moving between complementarity and subsequent distance. This movement in the pattern of color imagery between parallel and opposition, between comparison and complementarity, mirrors the larger narrative motion between incommensurability and desired union.

The imagistic chiasmuses accomplished through the dialectic play of color imagery shift into a series of rhetorical and conversational reversals that begin the intense verbal combat of lines 368-450. The rhetorical chiasmuses which begin this sequence give the debate a dynamic, dramatic quality that retains a clear sense of playfulness at the same time the chiasmuses sustain the developing sense of Venus' growing frustration:

Would thou wert as I am, and I a man,
My heart all whole as thine, thy heart my wound!
...
'Give me my hand' saith he. 'Why dost thou feel it?'

'Give me my heart,' saith she, 'and thou shalt have it.
 O, give it me lest thy hard heart do steel it,
 And being steeled, soft sighs can never grave it.
 Then love's deep groans I never shall regard
 Because Adonis' heart hath made mine hard.'" (369-78)

Venus develops the earlier image of Adonis' imprinted cheek. This motif of "engravement" proleptically plays on Adonis' death in which the boar's tusk will "trench" (1052) itself in his thigh; when Venus laments that she will not witness "love's deep groans" she unwittingly parallels the "groans" of love with the "groans" of pain during Adonis' agonized and violent demise. For further on at line 950 when Venus chides death she ironically, and tragically asks, "What may a heavy groan advantage thee?," thus returning our focus to the absent and long awaited coitus scene passed over in favour of the "hard hunt."

Two stanzas later (385) Venus begins her interpretation of the ekphrasis episode intended to seduce Adonis. Although Venus' exegesis is clearly motivated by her sexual appetite it still accords, as William Keach argues, with the narrator's earlier characterization of the palfrey episode:

It has been argued that the episode reflects Venus's and not the poem's ideal of healthy sexual energy, but this view overlooks the fact that the sequence is related by the narrator, not by Venus. The episode is placed so as to bring about a welcome release from the tension built up over the first 250 lines of confrontation and impasse, and this release of tension draws the reader sympathetically into what has justly been called an 'anti-type' to the main action. . . The behavior of the horses is presented as admirable and natural, and in this sense it does support Venus' earlier argument that 'By law of nature thou are bound to breed.'
 (171) (64)

Keach continues, observing that Venus' defence of the palfrey's behavior betrays some of the inadequacies which consist in aligning human and animal behavior (65). Despite the inconsistency of such an analogy, however, her argument is not undermined by the lurking presence of a Platonic allegory of the soul which states that

the irrational faculties must be reined in by the rational (as D.C. Allen argues); instead, Keach convincingly notes that the weakness of Venus' argument is that "her conclusions are partly undermined by her own failure to act with the natural beauty, dignity, and freedom of the animals she praises" (65). Perhaps the most central component of Venus' argument in regards to the form of her desire occurs in the closing couplet when she juxtaposes the conceivable limits of the sea with the limitlessness of desire. "The sea hath bounds, but deep desire hath none;/ Therefore no marvel though thy horse be gone" (389-90). Here again, even within a passage that displays rhetorical flair for comic and seductive purposes a latent proleptic and tragic undertone remains discernible. Desire, Venus admits with the assuredness of a Lacanian, hath no bounds.

Shakespeare ends the third sequence (325-545) with a unique and highly ironic variation on Adonis' death, which in traditional mythic readings tends to signify the "dead time of the year, whether winter or the late summer drought" (Frye *Code* 69).²⁹ Shakespeare sets up a comic play on the mythic death and rebirth element underlying

²⁹C. Hulse notes that "Historically, the myth recalls ancient religious festivals in Assyria. Physically interpreted, Adonis represents the crops of the earth, as Micyllus learned from scholia in Theocritus. . . Or, in Boccacio's version, Adonis is the sun and Venus the earth; their love brings forth lush flowers, leaves, and ripe fruit. But winter is like the boar that slays the beautiful Adonis, for then the sun seems banished from our world, Venus mourns, the earth lies barren" (205). Abraham Fraunce interpreted Shakespeare's poem along such purely mythic lines: "By Adonis is meant the sun, by Venus, the upper hemisphere of the earth, by the boar, winter: by the death of Adonis, the absence of the sun for the six wintrie months, all which time, the earth lamenteth. Adonis is wounded in those parts which are the instruments of propagation: for, in winter the sun seemeth impotent and the earth barren" (45). Once we recognize the allegorical and mythic precedents of Shakespeare's poem it becomes clear that they are primarily useful in terms of how Shakespeare turns on them for ironic purposes; in and of themselves they say little about Shakespeare's poem. For Shakespeare's epyllion seems as far from such allegorical patterns as one might imagine possible, considering the heavy mythic residue underlying the genre's literary precedents.

the narrative by having Venus faint (464) and then quickly revive with expectations for sexual gratification (482). This variation further develops the ontological and erotic distance between the two as we see Adonis comically kissing and poking Venus in an attempt to arouse her from her feigned sleep. "He bends her fingers, holds her pulses hard/ He chafes her lips; a thousand ways he seeks/ To mend the hurt that his unkindness marred./ He kisses her; and she, by her good will,/ Will never rise, so he will kiss her still" (476-80). These unsatisfying kisses finally lead to the very thing Venus has been waiting for: "Her arms do lend his neck a sweet embrace; Incorporate then they seem; face grows to face; . . . / Till breathless he disjoined, and backward drew/. . . He with her plenty pressed, she faint with dearth,/ Their lips together glued, fall to the earth" (540-5). These lines offer the clearest example of the poem's capacity to tease a reader with a sense of fulfillment while sustaining a dramatic sense of incompleteness. The heavily weighted, and clearly Ovidian term "Incorporate", with all its senses of full physical union, is qualified and thus undone by the epistemologically weighted term "seem." Following this explicitly Ovidian term Shakespeare makes a daring allusion to Corinthians I 13:12 in order to manifestly express a sense of reciprocity which is latently but consistently undermined: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but *then face to face*: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known". This passage expresses precisely the sense of intimacy and knowledge of the other the poem seems to move towards without ever achieving. Finally, after drawing on two of the most powerful moments of reciprocity the Classical and Christian traditions offer him, the narrator gives an account of how, "Their lips together glued." Even this moment of apparent union is permeated with comic and ironic overtones as the word "glued" indicates the struggle Venus had to undergo and which she must sustain in order to even kiss the elusive boy-hunter. The

text again presents the reader with powerful, if comic indications that the two shall "incorporate," while sustaining an impossible distance between them.

The proximity the two achieve in the end of the third section is dramatically undone in the first three stanzas (547-564) of the fourth sequence. In the first of these stanzas the narration repeats three of the main rhetorical images of incommensurability we saw developed in the first sequence between lines 55-90. The first two lines of the stanza return us to the bird of prey motif indicating the unequal and predatory nature of the sexual rapport: "Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey/ And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth" (547-8). The third line repeats the military or combative image of master and slave implicit throughout much of the poem: "Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey" (549). And the fourth line returns us to the rhetorics of monetary exchange: "Paying what ransom the insultor willeth" (550). The repetition of such images indicates that Venus and Adonis have returned to their original state of disunion.

Part of the narrative dynamic of frustration being played out in this fourth narrative sequence, as well as the poem as a whole, consists of what Catherine Belsey, following Lacan, terms the *trompe l'oeil* motif. Because the poem constructs what Belsey refers to as a "promise of . . . presence it fails to deliver" (261), it is structurally analogous to the scopic or visual effect known as *trompe l'oeil*. For just as a visual representation might appear to be the thing-as- such, Shakespeare's poem represents an apparent but finally unrealized union. This withholding of aesthetic fulfillment suggests that the poem is based on an "erotic rather than philosophic ontology" (Halpern 383). Both Halpern and Belsey point to the poem's allusion to Pliny's story of artistic competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, based as it is on the principle of the *trompe l'oeil* (ll. 601-6), as a lucid example of this erotically charged aesthetic:

Even so poor birds, deceived with painted grapes
 Do surfeit by the eye and pine the maw;
 Even so she languisheth in her mishaps
 As those poor birds that helpless berries saw.
 The warm effects which she in him finds missing
 She seeks to kindle with continual kissing. (601-6)

This passage, which occurs directly after the allusion to Tantalus, offers a pictorial analogy for the dynamic of frustrated desire the poem dramatizes. This "pictorial" analogy not only offers a meta-commentary on Venus' unrealized desire, it also reflects the aesthetic ontology with which the reader is engaged. For the reader, like Venus, is tantalized by a promise of narrative and sexual fulfillment that remains unfulfilled. Catherine Belsey summarizes Lacan's insights into the deceitful pleasures this *trompe-l'oeil* dynamic offers a reader or viewer:

In order to enjoy the *trompe-l'oeil* we have to be convinced by it in the first instance and then to shift our gaze so that, seeing the object resolve itself into lines on a canvas, we are no longer convinced; we have to be deceived and then to acknowledge our own deception. The gap between these two moments is the place, Lacan affirms, of the *object a*, the lost object in the inextricable real, the cause of desire. That which delights in art- the civilizing, sublimated product of the drive- is experienced in psychosexual life as a lack, the minus phi, a source of indestructible longing. (262)³⁰

³⁰The passage in Lacan which Belsey summarizes is in section 2 of "What is a Picture" from *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: "What is it that attracts and satisfies un trompe-l'oeil? . . . At the moment when, by a mere shift of our gaze, we are able to realize that the representation does not move with the gaze and that it is merely a trompe l'oeil. For it appears at that moment as something other than it seemed, or rather it now seems to be that something else. The picture does not compete with appearance, it compete with what Plato designates for us beyond appearance as being the Idea. It is because the picture is the appearance that says it is that which gives the appearance that Plato attacks painting, as if it were an activity competing with his own. This other thing is the petit a, around which there resolves a combat of which trompe-l'oeil is the soul" (112).

It is precisely this ontological lack presented by the poem that critics such as Merrix try to reinstate through the theme of reciprocation, and which Beauregard longs to avoid through the mediating power of narrative. Yet the poem explicitly shows that "All is imaginary." Desire is not fulfilled through Shakespeare's narrative; it is suspended without resolution. This "unfulfilling" narrative pattern paradoxically presents the reader with a sense of fullness, which, in turn, evokes the reader's lack. For Lacan, the essence of tragic anagnorisis is the recognition of one's lack-of -being (*manque-d'etre*).³¹ Venus is driven to such a recognition through her failed attempts to have Adonis return her desire. She expresses this negative recognition with a combination of humour and pathos, tragedy and melodrama we have come to expect from Shakespeare's Queen of love. "O, where am I? . . . in earth or heaven/ Or in the ocean drenched, or in the fire?/ What hour is this? or morn or weary even?/ Do I delight to die, or life desire?/ . . . / O, thou didst kill me, kill me once again!" (492-499). The pun on sexual satisfaction, mixed as it is with cosmological references, expresses a sense of total absence, loss, and lack. Venus' agonized recognition of her emptiness is appropriately expressed as a question, indicating the deep uncertainty she feels as a result of Adonis' refusals. This passage sets up the even more dramatic moment when she falls to the ground with Adonis on top of her only to realize "he will not manage her, although he mount her" (597). If we were to phrase this passage in Lacanese we might suggest that for Venus the absent phallus signs both what *she does not have*, and *what she is not*.

Venus' recognition of her lack stems from her perception of Adonis as being full and complete unto himself. This same structural relation exists between the reader of

³¹For a discussion of Lacan's views on tragedy, particularly in relation to Hegel's reading of Antigone and Freud's views on catharsis see *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Seminar VII* (243-311).

the poem and the text; for just as Venus feels herself absent before a self-sufficient Adonis, the reader experiences a sense of lack in relation to a text that appears complete. Richard Halpern articulates the paradoxical nature of the poem's desire-based ontology by recognizing that to

reveal [an] images' emptiness is precisely to confirm its power. Zeuxis' temporary victory occurs when his grapes prove unable to feed the birds; and Parrhasios' ultimate victory comes when he subjects Zeuxis in his turn to the emptiness of the image. Indeed, a kind of metamorphic inversion occurs between viewer and object, for the unsatisfied hunger of the birds indicates their own emptiness in relation to the image, which is complete unto itself. In the paradoxical ontology of the artwork, it is the real birds who are hollow and the painted grapes that are full. (383)

This "metamorphic inversion," in which the viewer feels herself empty in the presence of an object that appears full and self-sufficient, occurs throughout the poem in a number of varying forms. The first instance of this occurs at lines 211-16 when Venus alludes to Pygmalion as she bewails Adonis: "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!" (211-14). Here, as in the Pliny allusion, Venus' psychosexual struggle is expressed through an aesthetic analogy in which the object viewed inspires a heightened sense of lack in the viewer. Her object contents "but the eye alone", evoking rather than fulfilling desire. Where the reader is confronted with the fact that "the signifier precisely defers, supplants, relegates the imagined presence it sets out to name" (Belsey *Desire* 64), Venus is confronted with the fact that her object is unattainable and unrealizable. Venus' growing frustration over this intolerable situation expresses itself through her aggressive and cruel allusion to Adonis' unnatural origins. "Thing like a man, but of no woman bred!" (214). ³²

³²As I discussed in the previous chapter, Venus re-evokes Adonis' "unnatural"

This erotic/aesthetic ontology in which Adonis is full and self-sufficient while Venus languishes in her lack is reversed in lines 235-40 when Venus imagines herself as a park upon which Adonis feeds himself. The fulfillment that Venus seeks thus demands a reversal of the unreciprocal mode of perceiving presented in lines 211-16: in order to achieve a sense of momentary fulfillment she imagines being self-sufficient, full, and generative. The same dynamic occurs even more explicitly at line 370, "Would thou wert as I am, and I a man/ My heart all whole as thine, thy heart my wound!" Venus' only power against Adonis' refusals lies in such rhetorical gestures; for as Richard Halpern observes, Venus "must content herself with 'venerian speculation'" (Halpern 380). Halpern, moreover, sees an analogy between Venus' plight and the reader's relation to the text insofar as "[t]he theological gap that separates Venus from the merely mortal Adonis stands in for the ontological gap between the . . . reader and the empty imaginations generated by the poem" (380).³³ Thus part of the process of reading the poem consists of imaginatively re-enacting or reproducing its dramatization of unfulfilled desire.

A further example of the *trompe l'oeil* dynamic which neither Belsey nor Halpern discusses occurs during the ekphrasis, when Adonis' horse is described in complete detail, playing on this ontological relationship between viewer and object:

Look when a painter would surpass the life
 In limning out a well proportioned steed,
 His art with nature's workmanship at strife,
As if the dead the living should exceed.

origins at the end of the poem (1183).

³³For Halpern this phenomenon is restricted to female readers, but as I asserted in the first chapter, I tend to de-emphasize the gender distinction Halpern argues for in his essay. This having been said, I think Halpern's remark is an entirely accurate one, but it speaks to a wider audience than he acknowledges.

So did this horse excel a common one,
In shape, in courage, color, pace and bone

. . . Look what a horse should have he did not lack,
Save a proud rider on so proud a back.
(my emphasis 290-300)

The density of this passage lies in its long, careful description of the horse which functions like the close and mimetically accurate brush-strokes of Renaissance painters such as Titian who fill in every conceivable detail in order to convey a sense of totality and completeness within the image:

Round-hoofed, short-jointed, fetlocks shag and long,
Broad breast, full eye, small head and nostril-wide
High crest, short ears, straight legs and passing strong,
Thin mane, thick tail, broad buttock, tender hide." (295- 300)

Although some readers find this passage somewhat tedious, its unusually dense and exaggerated description paradoxically reminds us as viewers that it is description and not real. The description functions in the same way as Rene Magritte's painting of a pipe which includes the words "this is not a pipe" within its frame; despite the image's likeness to the thing itself, its signifying or representational components are made explicit (See Belsey *Desire* 42-71). In this same way Shakespeare's description presents a kind of wholeness while at the same time making it clear to a reader that the fullness is an effect and not the thing itself. Passages such as this offer a complex and subtle meta-commentary on the relationship between the reader and the text; for just as the description of the horse is a "full-representation" and not the thing itself, the text is an "unresponsive artwork" intended to "generate some kind of sexual thrill or tension" without being able to actually fulfill the desire it is capable of evoking (Halpern 380). Thus Shakespeare's poem presents an unusual self-awareness of the relationship between the text and the reader, revealing the ways in which the text is the site upon which the reader's own desires are manipulated, frustrated, and enjoyed. As

the critical history of the poem reveals, it is extraordinarily difficult, perhaps even impossible, to interpret the poem without repeating some of the dramatic patterns it represents. To see the text as an allegory against lust is to repeat Adonis' position in the poem; to enjoy its erotic and verbal play is to align oneself with Venus; to become frustrated with Adonis' refusals is to take up Titan's place in the poem. Thus the structure of the poem- with its repetition of ostensible moments of resolution, enticing and humorous rhetorical displays and its highly erotic aesthetic ontology- opens up an interpretive space that allows a reader to identify his or her own desires within its frame. This interpretive, or as D.W. Winnicott would have it, "potential space," is constituted by the dynamics of a reader's negotiation between her "mirror reflections" and that which is alien to her experience (Bouson 24-9). The critical methodology I have tried to articulate in this chapter has been an attempt to describe *how* this interpretive space is constructed, how the poem's narrative, rhetorical, and imagistic patterns - how its characterization, description, and intertextual play- manipulate the reader's desire for thematic and structural closure, a desire that, as we have seen, remains unrealized.

CONCLUSION

The Illusions of Shakespeare's Anti-Myth

Harmony is the offspring of the elements of all things; and that force which is born from the motion of celestial bodies, whether we call it divine or natural, acting so that the elements themselves are led into this mixture, or rather leading them, that force is called Venus.

Natali Conti, *Mythologia*

In his seminal essay, "The Structural Study of Myth", Claude Levi-Strauss argues that myth is a kind of speech, a particular system of signification whose meaning "is not defined by the object of its message but by the way in which it utters this message" (Barthes 109). The form or system of speech known as *myth*, as Strauss and Roland Barthes have shown, tends to reconcile existential and ideological contradictions. Indeed, particular myths often concern themselves with resolving existential oppositions between life and death, beauty and decay, fecundity and sterility, as well as more explicitly ideological and historically contingent oppositions such as lust and love. In other words, myth has its own precise logic for giving what Strauss refers to as "the illusion of explanatory totality" (Strauss 208-9). Clark Hulse, as far as I know, is the first critic to argue that,

Shakespeare's sophisticated reworking of a literary myth [in Venus and Adonis] comes surprisingly close to recovering the function that Levi-Strauss suggests for primary myth: 'to bridge the gap between conflicting values through a series of mediating devices, each of which generates the next one by a process of opposition and correlation'. . . The kind of logic in mythic thought is as rigorous as that of modern science. . . the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied. (Hulse 172-3, Strauss 213-23)

Arrogant
interjection

For Hulse, "Shakespeare's manner of paradox making has the characteristics of a persistent personal syntax. Indeed, if we think of myth as a conceptual form rather than as a content, we might call it Shakespeare's personal myth, a way of perceiving and reconciling the paradoxes of experience" (173). This passage more than any other in the entire body of *Venus and Adonis* criticism has informed my reading of the poem. Hulse's observation led me to distinguish the four narrative sections analyzed in Chapter Two, as well as the numerous patterns within each. And it strikes me even now as probably the most important observation made about Shakespeare's epyllion; and yet, there is a very important distinction between Hulse's characterization of Shakespeare's poem and my own. For it is clear to me that Shakespeare's poem makes explicit the fact that its "explanatory totality" is an illusion. Shakespeare's poem, in other words, is radically different in form from primary myth because it holds no pretensions of reconciling "the paradoxes" of experience; it dramatizes such paradoxes and, as Belsey has argued, it problematizes certain conflicting values- - but it offers no answers. Thus, as much as I dislike misuses of the term, Shakespeare's poem *deconstructs* its own claims to narrative finality and resolution as they appear in primal myth and other forms of fiction such as allegory. There is no doubt that the text functions through a process of opposition and correlation of its constituent parts, as the erotic distance between Venus and Adonis is signed through a series of images and rhetorical devices only to be momentarily and ostensibly united; but, as I believe I have shown, the patterning of images and the general poetic form of the text never realizes the totality it seeks; it is constantly undone, deferred, and unrealized. And it is precisely this structural lack, in combination with the erotic content of the poem, that effectively evokes, manipulates, and sustains a reader's desire throughout the text.

es, so
what?
knows
you be!

Shakespeare's re-working of the Venus and Adonis myth, with its incomplete or "improper" form, makes explicit the unending or untotalizable element that is latent within all myth. As Jacques Derrida writes in his essay on the uses of structure in the social sciences, particularly in the work of Levi-Strauss:

There exists no veritable end or term to mythical analysis, no secret unity which could be grasped at the end of the work decomposition. The themes duplicate themselves to infinity. When we think we have disentangled them from each other and can hold them separate, it is only to realize that they are joining together again, in response to the attraction of unforeseen affinities. In consequence, the unity of the myth is only tendential and projective; it never reflects a state or a moment of the myth. An imaginary phenomenon implied by the endeavor to interpret, its role is to give a synthetic form to the myth and to impede its dissolution into the confusion of contraries. (526)

As the history of *Venus and Adonis* reception reveals, much criticism has attempted to impute or provide such a synthetic unity to a text whose own narrative, imagistic, and rhetorical motions impede such acts of interpretive totalization. The poem's pattern of contraries, antinomies, and oppositions constantly re-assert themselves throughout the poem and as Derrida suggests, the end to such confusion is always projective, wishful, and a matter of desire.

Clearly, critics are right to bring out the mythic undertones of the text, its oppositions between life and death, chaos and order, and decay and fecundity, just as critics are right to explore the ways in which culturally contingent distinctions such as lust and love inform the poem. Moreover, Clark Hulse is accurate in suggesting that primary even to these mythic concerns is the perennial Heideggerian problem that is neither "seeming or seeing but being itself." Perhaps the central question which the text poses might be translated: "What are the possibilities of happiness for a being whose desire is necessarily insatiable." Venus even seems to pose something analogous to this when she cries out "O, where am I . . . in earth or heaven/ Or in the ocean

Meaning
of what
is meant

fiction is a
lie so
how do
you do
get
Hulse

drenched, or in the fire/. . . Do I delight to die, or life desire? But now I lived and life was death's annoy/ but now I died, and death was lively joy" (496-8). Undoubtedly, Venus is in the throes of an existential as well as an erotic crisis; and one need not be a post-structuralist, but simply a good close reader, to recognize that by reversing the elements of the various oppositions she is confronted with, Venus is forced to recognize the fact that the elements of the oppositions simply re-assert themselves through their difference. Venus' declamation speaks not only to the narrative pattern of opposition and resolution which consistently repeats through the poem, but it also speaks to the formal elements of the text as the images and rhetorical patterns re-assert their incommensurability and unresolved dialectic patterns. Shakespeare's poem exposes the working of its mediating devices, circumventing readings that seek narrative totality. The poem is less a "personal answer" to the paradoxes of experience, than a site which invites us to engage the infinite complexity of our own desires, fears, and joys. It is precisely in the impossibility of totalizing the poem that we engage in the continued crisis of our own subjectivity. To read *Venus and Adonis* well is to participate in the powerful transferences it offers, and to recognize them as such. A good reading does not arrive at the truth of the poem, but rather it arrives at something altogether more real: a re-birth of the reader herself. It is through an understanding of how this re-birth takes place that criticism might begin to see its relationship to psychoanalysis more clearly. As Julia Kristeva has shown, "Freud, the post-Romanticist, was the first to turn love into a cure; he did this, not to allow one to grasp a truth, but to provoke a rebirth- like an amorous relationship that makes us new, temporarily and eternally. For transference, like love, is a true process of self-organization" (381). It is here, at the imaginary and precarious intersection of the

Buloney

Amichat

reader's confrontation with her own subjectivity that literary criticism might begin to recognize poetry as a process in which the reader re-orient its desires.

total baloney.
 The "truth" you claim is
 never found; hence,
 you never find "truth"
 in an ever-changing reader

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