

# Ovid and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*: A Study of sexual-role reversal

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The use of mythology was widespread among writers in the Elizabethan period, and Ovid's presence in Renaissance literary texts seemed to be essential as it constituted the most important classical source for the literary tradition at that time. We should mention a single book, *The Metamorphoses*, of which many writers were aware, as it played a very important role in the transmission of a mythological world, often becoming the most suitable frame for poetry.

Elizabethans were fascinated by stories about gods who loved, but could not pursue the loveliest object of their desire, without experiencing terrible transformations in doing so. These stories represented the natural way of expressing the processes of human feelings, especially the anguish of love. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* suggests that change is one of the primary realities of our experience; our lives, our society, the rules and powers which govern us, our feelings all being subjected to different changes somehow. We are used to this sense of mutability in the same way Elizabethans were. In this sense Ovid's writing provides the idea of a changing reality and claims that poetry should find the mechanisms to express it.

Ovid's influence in the sixteenth century was easily perceived after Cardinal Wolsey's decision to introduce the *Metamorphoses* into the curriculum of English grammar-schools. Soon the poem gained popularity among schoolboys who learnt it to adapt and imitate Latin verse. In this way Shakespeare became familiar with the poem. Shakespeare knew the Latin version, but preferred the most famous translation ever written in Renaissance England, Arthur Golding's *Metamorphoses*, which was published in 1567. Golding was a moralist, and his interpretation of Ovid's poem assumed that "metamorphosis was a punishment for sexual unnaturalness". (qtd. in Bate, 1994: 53) However, poets like Shakespeare and Marlowe were more interested in the causes of love than in moralizing it. Mythology was good material for poetry, and it constituted the natural background for the erotic-love narrative poems which flourished at the end of the sixteenth century. Shakespeare was aware of the great excitement these narrative poems stirred at the turn of the century: That may have been the reason why he decided to make his own contribution to this subject, writing the epyllion *Venus and Adonis*- perhaps in a theatrical off-season-, which was entered in April 1593 and published a few years later. The aim of this paper is to explore the use of mythological material and illustrate how it works in the poem in order to show a reversal of the feminine and masculine roles, as traditionally illustrated in love poetry.

The story of Venus and Adonis appears in Book Ten of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Orpheus tells us the story when he laments to the trees and wild animals after the loss of Euridyce. Venus is desperately attracted to the young Adonis, who, being more interested in the art of hunting, does not show any form of affection. She tries in vain to persuade Adonis to love her. However, Adonis prefers to go hunting, and he dies after being badly injured by a boar. But Venus does not resign herself to the loss of her beloved and decides to metamorphose him into a beautiful flower growing from his blood, and which still remains a symbol of her frustrated love.

Shakespeare does not follow Ovid's version of Venus and Adonis, as it is told in Book Ten from the *Metamorphoses*. However, he shapes his poem out of diverse mythological references. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* filters into the poem in many different ways, and this constitutes the main

alteration to the original source. Shakespeare takes the central figures and the general background from Book Ten, but his characters are taken from Salmacis and Hermaphroditus' tale, as it appears in Book Four. Ovid tells us the story of Salmacis who falls in love with the beautiful Hermaphroditus while the latter is bathing in a river nearby. Salmacis is so impressed by his beauty that she feels a terrible desire to embrace his body and in doing so they turn into a single person. Shakespeare's Venus owes much of this terrible passion to Salmacis, as described in Book Four, and this constitutes the prime issue of our discussion.

On the contrary, Adonis is a keen hunter, reluctant to show any expression of love, who has close affinities to another mythological figure: Narcissus. The expression of desire which cannot be fulfilled turns out to be a commonplace in the different mythological allusions Shakespeare uses in the composition of his poem. The poem is Ovidian in technique as we appreciate in the use of antithesis, the echo device, the parallelism of some linguistic structures of many passages from the poem and all the embedded tales that give shape to the poem. Shakespeare's originality lies in the way he retells the story and alters the main source, mainly because he seems to be more interested in exploring the lover's mental state under the stress of emotion and desire.

Shakespeare's Venus cannot be regarded as the ideal woman according to the Renaissance canon of beauty, deeply affected by Petrarch's poetry. On the one hand, although Petrarchism provided Renaissance poetry with some basic assumptions about how desire operates within and between lovers, Shakespeare does not follow Petrarch in his female characterization and moves away from him. Venus' beauty is described with great sensuality and Shakespeare does not pay much attention to the traditional commonplaces of hair, teeth, lips and face to describe his Venus. Instead, he prefers to talk about her in different terms, and she appears, for instance, as a woman with "soft flesh" and a "smooth moist hand". On the other hand, Shakespeare completes Venus' characterization by providing her with unusual qualities for a young lady in love, as it is the active role in the game of love, usually given to men. It is the female character who persuades Adonis and desperately tries to obtain his natural response to love, becoming trapped in her own desire and love sentiments.

However, Shakespeare approaches Adonis in a very different way. Shakespeare's poem opens with Adonis' physical description, which is a praise of his splendid beauty, but the reader of the poem is disturbed by the way Adonis is presented. We do not find a conventional description of a young man, strong and aggressive in love, but a sweet and delicate lover, and it constitutes the characteristics more of a woman suffering from love than those of a man. Adonis' shyness had already been prefigured in Spenser, although it is Shakespeare who provides him with this unexpected effeminacy. Adonis' beauty reaches perfection and goes beyond the natural barriers of gender. Venus says that he is "more lovely than a man / more white and red than doves or roses are" (vv. 9-10). The symbolism of the colours red and white, applied to Adonis in the poem, had traditionally been used in relation always to the female, as in the poetry of Petrarch or Sidney.

There is, consequently, a deliberate intention to stress a sexual ambiguity in the roles that Venus and Adonis take in the game of love. Their personalities, as traditionally conceived, are reversed and the conventional barriers of gender dissolved. We should not forget that the Venus and Adonis story must be seen in the broader context of the Orphic series of narratives concerning destructive passion and female desire, as originally transmitted by Ovid. (Bate: 1994) Book Ten is terribly ambiguous in its content, and the tales that appear claim a homoerotic desire which becomes licensed under the cover of mythology, although this attitude contrasts with social reality since homosexual behaviour was condemned and punished in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare was fascinated by the extreme expression of desire in the story of Orpheus and he took the ambiguity of the general background of Book Ten in the *Metamorphoses* to stress the ideological implications of natural desire. In traditional love poetry it is the woman who is seduced and shows her rejection to physical love, whereas man takes the active role of the young lover who persuades his beloved by means of linguistic arts. In the art of persuasion conventional and linguistic arguments are very important in the quest for love and, following the conventions that govern love poetry, we observe how the discourse of love is mainly masculine. However, Shakespeare complicates Ovid on this matter and incorporates a new reading of the poem, as we observe in this deliberate reversal of roles, although this unusual perspective is not free from ironic connotations.

It is Adonis who blushes when he hears about love, who looks sexually desirable and whose perfect body resembles a work of art.

It is interesting to point out that Shakespeare devotes most of his attention to the arguments characters use to persuade themselves rather than to the story itself. Venus' attempt to seduce Adonis becomes, then, the prime issue dealt with in the poem. Seduction for her is a very difficult task, and in this sense we should draw our attention to the role hunting plays in the structure of the poem. The expression of human desire and love sentiments is deliberately perverse, and the figurative use of hunting in the poem serves this purpose. There are, consequently, many external references to the hunting theme in the poem, especially in the love-making scene, where lexical terms such as 'vulture', 'wild bird' or 'falcon' always tend to occur in relation to Venus. Then, Adonis necessarily becomes the hunted, giving, therefore, direct interpretation to the allusion of the Acteon myth. Diana, the huntress becomes the hunted when Acteon hides behind a bush and secretly gazes at her while she is bathing. In the tradition of love poetry all furtive and lustful gazes always rest on the female. However, Shakespeare seems to be much more interested in playing with such conventionality. He makes Adonis the object of desire and it is Venus who hides and gazes at his splendid beauty. The author seems to give us always a wrong impression of what we think we perceive as readers. Adonis is forced to look like a girl, whereas Venus' aggressiveness in love is described in a grotesque way as we deduce from the stanza concerning her kisses:

Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,  
Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh and bone,  
Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,  
Till either gorge be stuff'd or prey be gone:  
Even so she kiss'd his brow, his cheek, his chin,  
And where she ends she doeth anew begin. (vv. 55-60)

Ambiguity becomes one of many strategies Shakespeare uses to discover the inability to express desire with conventional language, and the language of desire, therefore, needs to be "multifaceted" (Dollimore, 1994: 133). Desire grows up in Venus and reaches such a dimension that provokes a distortion in the perception of reality, which ceases to be itself when it enters the complex world of emotions. We are forced to move to a world of appearances and visions, becoming trapped in an ambiguous atmosphere of unreality and uncertainty. Shakespeare is interested in exploring Venus' state of mind at this stage of the poem and shows how everything that surrounds Venus is not real. The experience of desire can be terrible and Venus' appreciation of reality becomes a reflection of her tortured mind. All this implies a sense of destruction and violation of the natural norms, returning us to the idea that female desire may be destructive.

There are some episodes in the poem that stress this sense of distorted reality, as we can appreciate in the encounter between Venus and Adonis' horse. The erotic implications suggested by the symbolism of the horse cannot pass unnoticed by us, as they did not by Venus. She becomes fascinated by the vision of this horse, she feels such a passion that can only be compared to her extreme attraction for Adonis. We have the impression that the horse is something more than just a simple horse, as can be deduced from the following lines:

His nostrils drink the air, and forth again,  
As from a furnace, vapours doth he send,  
His eye, which scornfully glisters like fire,  
Shows his hot courage and his high desire (vv. 273-276)

This unnatural vision of the horse could only find its origin in the lover's stressed mind, as a result of the materialization of desire. There is a marked ambiguity that emphasizes the contrast between the extreme sensuality entailed by the vision of the horse and Adonis' rejection of love. The experience of desire, therefore, generates moments of madness and irrational excitement, spoiling the perception of reality and becoming, then, wild and violent. It seems possible to say that Shakespeare, following Ovid, prefers to focus on the kind of representation of the lover's tortured mind, which constitutes the main contribution to the Elizabethan narrative poetry.

However, this loss of reality isolates Venus, who is trapped by her desire and by the distorted image which have their origin in her stressed mind, and produce terrible effects on her. This situation awakens instinctive behaviour, almost wild, in Venus when she sees how Adonis' life is menaced by the boar. The episode of the boar-hunting occurs as in a dream, as a terrible vision about what is to come. Venus experiences how all her senses stop, all except for her hearing. She cannot see, she can only hear the boar and the hounds barking, feeling terrible anguish when she knows that she is going to lose her beloved. Although the goddess of love can use all her power and metamorphose herself into the boar in the manner of Jupiter becoming an animal to rape a young woman, she behaves like a mortal. Her humanity confirms the idea that "the story is about frustration rather than violation, because a woman cannot rape a man". (qtd in Bate, 1994: 65). The expression of desire appears at this stage with extreme violence as is suggested by the image of Venus surrounded by hideous small animals, which becomes a reflection of the destructiveness released by strong emotions. The power of silence, her terrible isolation, the stress upon the heart impeding utterance, and the final look at the body of Adonis dead are all elements used throughout the poem with the sole purpose of expressing the multiple aspects of desire. But all this violence generated by intense emotion ceases at the moment Adonis is metamorphosed. Although the story of Venus is tragic, we cannot consider the poem a tragedy of love. That is partly because Shakespeare mocks at the story he is telling by means of all the comic devices he uses throughout the poem; although it is Adonis' final metamorphosis which stops this tragic sense.

The *Metamorphosis* is a book which implicitly seems to raise questions about the nature of love, and Ovid's mythology apparently licenses unnatural manifestations of love, which could only be celebrated in the visual arts and in literature. Ovid had been moralized since Medieval Times, but Shakespeare prefers to explore the origin of amorous feelings and the experience of love rather than condemn it. The sexual role-reversal, as it appears in the poem, entails a new perception of the conventional norms that govern love poetry and its conceptualization in the Renaissance tradition, and, moreover, the nature of female desire.

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