

‘With kissing him I should have killed him first’:

Death in Ovid and Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* both the refusal and acceptance of love result in death, in that both actions often result in the metamorphoses of individuals and the erasure of the human subject. Throughout the fifteen books of *Metamorphoses* characters are routinely transformed into animals, plants, and stone in order to provide an escape from rapacious pursuit (for example Daphne or Syrinx) or as punishment for fornicating under circumstances not approved of by the gods (for example, Atalanta, Hippomenes, Io, and Callisto), as well as for a host of alternative reasons. The story of Venus and Adonis, as recounted in Book 10, differs from the majority of these transformative ‘deaths’ in that Adonis is already dead when he is transformed into the anemone by his lover. Furthermore, the transformation is not a punishment for lust or release from pursuit, but Venus’ attempt to convey a form of immortality and commemoration, a ‘remembrance’ of her grief which also symbolically conveys the brevity of life, ‘For why the leaves do hang so looce through lightnesse in such sort, / As that the windes that all things perce, with every little blast / Doo shake them off and shed them so as that they cannot last’ (10. 861-63; Golding 272). Additionally, Adonis’ love for Venus is entirely separate from his accidental death. Though he goes hunting against her wishes, the two events, unlike so many others in *Metamorphoses*, are not linked causally. However, Shakespeare’s well-documented modifications in his version of Ovid’s tale extend to include the depiction of the relationship between love and death in the myth. Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593) constitutes an ironic exploration of accepted modes of expressing desire that ultimately punctures idealistic expectations through manipulation of myth, literary convention, and ideological anxieties. The chief deviation from the myth is of course Adonis’ unwillingness and resistance to Venus’ increasingly aggressive sexual overtures, which leads to a comical and paradoxical situation of

the goddess of sexual love being unable to seduce a notably young man. The poem is very much concerned with antithesis, for example: female and male; the divine and mortal; love and violence; hunter and hunted; and it seems initially that Love (or Venus herself) and Death may be similarly set up in opposition, but the juxtaposition of love and death in the poem is rather more complex. This essay will explore the tangled poetic functions of death, both figurative and actual, in Shakespeare's poem of unrequited love and negotiate the departures from the supporting mythology of Ovid's text and the mythology from which that text is derived. The poem's irony, use of antitheses, and utilisation of the received languages and tropes of love are established. I suggest that within these tropes and literary commonplaces, Shakespeare is also playing with and emphasising the potential irony in the language and meaning of death when used as part of the expression of love and desire.

To an extent, Venus' immortality means that her affairs with mortal men are always foreshadowed by death in that she will outlast their natural lives as well as their physical appeal. Her divine status is alluded to, by both herself and the narrator, throughout the text, 'were I not immortal' (197); and is contrasted with 'this mortal round' (368) of the earth. This effectively invites the comparison between Venus and Adonis' mortality. 'Mortal' is also used throughout the text in its secondary meaning of 'deadly' (the boar is described as having 'tushes, never sheathed, he whetteth still, / Like to a mortal butcher, bent to kill', 617-18). Such instances establish both the presence of death in the poem and the contrast between the protagonists' mortal and immortal states. Additionally, the intended contemporary reader was in all probability familiar with the Ovidian narrative and wider myth of Venus and Adonis and therefore suspect from the beginning that, despite Shakespeare's deviations, Adonis is in all likelihood marked for death. The fatal climax is intimated throughout Shakespeare's text by Venus' persuasive speeches which use metaphors of death and dying frequently. Venus'

continual metaphors of mortality thereby anticipate the conclusion of the poem, and provide an ironic subtext to the language of persuasion and seduction throughout. Furthermore, Venus imagines, playfully, Adonis' death as early as lines 11-12 ('Nature that made thee with herself at strife / Saith that the world hath ending with thy life'), and helpfully foresees the climax of the poem, 'I prophesy thy death, my living sorrow, / If thou encounter with the boar tomorrow' (671-2) Katherine Duncan-Jones convincingly reads this prophecy as self-fulfilling, 'forgetting her own strength, Venus has used the word prophesy, and as a goddess, she has the power not merely to foresee future events but to shape them' (134). Adonis' death seems, therefore, in terms of intertextuality, mythology, and fate, inevitable. In the wider supporting mythology, however, Adonis is not simply a mortal man beloved and lost by the goddess. He brings with him an older tradition as a pagan deity associated with fertility, vegetation and seasonal cycles of death and rebirth, often through narratives of sacrifice and regeneration (Graves 69-70). Adonis' metamorphosis into a flower is possibly a remnant of this tradition as it recalls and functions within the older mythological understanding as a form of vegetative rebirth. As Leonard Barkan states, 'Here we can begin to see Adonis as personifying a principle by which human death can turn through metamorphosis into vegetable immortality' (80). This pre-classical tradition was evidently known by Shakespeare's contemporaries as Abraham Fraunce's mythography offers a 'philosophical explication' of the myth of Venus and Adonis:

Now, for *Venus* her loue to *Adonis*, and lamentation for his death: by *Adonis*, is meant the sunne, by *Venus*, the vpper hemisphere of the earth [...] by the boare, winter: by the death of *Adonis*, the absence of the sunne for the sixe wintrie moneths; all which time, the earth lamenteth: *Adonis* is wounded in those parts, which are the instruments of propagation: for, in winter the son seemeth impotent, and the earth barren: neither that being able to get, nor this to beare either fruite or flowres (Fraunce 46v).

Furthermore, Edmund Spenser's 'Garden of Adonis' in Book III of *The Faerie Queene* (1590) is the most thorough and imaginative response to this tradition in its representation of Adonis residing at the centre of the Garden, which functions as the generative origin of all living things in the world (Spenser III.vi.46-48). Adonis' link to vegetation, and more specifically, to flowers, is implied by Shakespeare as early as line 8 in Venus' playful terming of him as, 'The field's chief flower, sweet above compare'. Such instances in the text, like Venus' almost prophetic references to death, serve to anticipate Adonis' fate in establishing thematic coherence.

Metaphors of death and dying permeate *Venus and Adonis* as Venus 'erases distinctions [...] between love and death' (Barkan 271). These metaphors are, however, both unstable and contradictory: Venus states that Adonis' rejection is killing her but also that she wants to kill him with her love, and her kisses are described as doing just that; Venus claims that Adonis' lack of response to her wooing suggests he is already dead; she argues that Adonis' procreation will transcend his death, but also that he already transcends death with his inhuman beauty, he 'must not die / Till mutual overthrow of mortal kind!' (1017-18). Furthermore, Adonis' dimples are figured by the text's narrator as the self-made tomb of 'Love', where paradoxically Love 'could not die' (241-46). When Adonis does die Venus claims that so does beauty. Adonis, meanwhile, explains his resistance to love as it is a 'life in death' (413), though he later revises this claim by insisting it is 'sweating lust' (794) which 'like a glutton dies' (803), rather than love he avoids, clearly associating love / lust and death. Climactically, Venus refigures the fatal goring of Adonis by the boar as an act of love, and his dead body is described in the form and language of love poetry, in a parodic blazon. Therefore though both characters demonstrate something of a preoccupation with death and this is reiterated occasionally by the narrator, it is the immortal Venus who evidences the most thorough obsession.

Venus' wooing comprises a combination of articulations of her desire, reproachful warnings of the consequences of Adonis not reciprocating her love, and artful, conventional persuasions concerning why love is a positive experience. Interestingly, all of these elements revolve around death, often antithetically. She says she will 'smother [...] [Adonis] with kisses' (18), and when she actually gets to kiss him, she 'murders with a kiss' (54) and is described as an eagle consuming prey (55). All these instances imply that Venus' love will kill Adonis, as he fears, but her own reasoning claims the opposite. Venus' main argument in seducing Adonis is asserted as the need for humanity to love and procreate in their youthful prime, 'Thou was begot: to get it is thy duty' (168); 'Make use of time; let not advantage slip. / Beauty within itself should not be wasted' (129-30). This is a standard contemporary argument, as found in Shakespeare's earlier sonnets and early modern *carpe diem* poetry which also foreground mortality and procreation (or, at least in terms of the *carpe diem* poetry, mortality and sexual intercourse). Venus, whose immortality places her without such concerns, therefore asserts that love is synonymous with life itself. Accordingly she asks rhetorically, 'What is thy body but a swallowing grave, / Seeming to bury [...] posterity' (757-8), and states:

By law of nature thou art bound to breed,
That thine may live when thou thyself art dead;
And so in spite of death thou dost survive,
In that thy likeness still is left alive.
(171-74)

Adonis' lack of love or desire for Venus, and by extension, his lack of impulse to procreate and thereby transcend death, is conceived by her as being unnatural, though this emphasis seems rather cruel given her own self-acknowledged and emphasised immortality. Venus elaborates,

further linking Adonis to images of vegetation, 'Fair flowers that are not gathered in their prime / Rot, and consume themselves in little time' (131-2), linking the denial of prime breeding time to 'consuming' oneself and claiming that Adonis' refusal indicates his preoccupation with self-love, 'Things growing to themselves are growth's abuse' (166). This associates Adonis with another Ovidian tale, that of Narcissus, who 'so himself himself forsook, / And died to kiss his shadow in a brook' (161-62) and as guilty of the sin of pride, 'the world will hold thee in disdain, / Sith in thy pride so fair a hope is slain' (761-62). Adonis and Narcissus are usually only linked in early modern convention as examples of young male beauty. Here, Shakespeare demonstrates the potential of manipulation of Ovidian tradition, in pursuing this link of aesthetic appreciation to one of self-absorption, perhaps associating the two young men both in their beauty and in their transformation into flowers. Venus' argument suggests that death is the result of denying love to others, both in the immediate sense and in the wider sense that one's descendants convey a sort of afterlife. In addition, the imagery of vegetation again both suggests Adonis' ultimate metamorphosis and possibly links him to his precursory role as a fertility deity.

Reflexively, Venus applies her argument of procreation and living on in offspring through a retrospective illustration in considering Adonis' mother. She says, 'O, had thy mother borne so hard a mind, / She had not brought forth thee, but died unkind' (203-4). This is the only direct reference to Adonis' lineage in the text, and works within Venus' burgeoning argument that Adonis is somewhat unnatural. He does not respond like 'a woman's son' (201), and certainly not like his own mother Myrrha, whose propensity to desire could be considered excessive (Myrrha, in love with her own father, tricks him into having sexual intercourse with her and thereby conceives Adonis, as described in *Metamorphoses* 10). The use of Myrrha as an example of positive behaviour in her production of Adonis is thereby rather ironic, and culturally anomalous, especially as she is additionally an example of an individual

metamorphosed (effectively killed, as her humanity is erased) as a result of her submission to her desire. As Jonathan Bate writes, 'The Myrrha story [...] provides an ironic, darkening pre-text for the tale of Venus and Adonis, which points to the perverse origins of desire' (55).

Adonis' response to this argument is to plead his youth and attempt to invert Venus' argument. His lack of interest in love is clear, as he illustrates by stating his only passionate interest is in hunting, "I know not love," quoth he, "nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it' (409-10), but rather than this constituting a rejection of life as Venus claims, he argues that 'love' is akin to death. Premature use results in death or diminishment. He says, for example, 'Who plucks the bud before one leaf put forth? / [...] / They wither in their prime' (416-18), and he confidently states that love itself can be akin to death, 'I have heard it is a life in death, / That laughs and weeps, and all but with a breath' (413-14). Adonis later revises this opinion to specify that it is lust and seduction, not love, which he objects to: 'I hate not love but your device in love' (789); 'Love surfeits not; lust like a glutton dies. / Love is all truth, lust full of forgèd lies' (803-4). Thereby Adonis' arguments throughout the poem, like Venus', shift in their figuring and refiguring of love as death, then lust as death, but the link with death remains constant throughout.

Adonis' rejection of Venus allows her rhetoric to move onto conventional associations of the pain of unrequited love being akin to death: 'like the deadly bullet of a gun, / His meaning struck her ere his words begun' (461-62). Such convention is intimated in Adonis' previous, more complex statement about love being a 'life in death'. Venus plays at making her metaphors of Adonis killing her literal ('For looks kill love', 464), as she falls down and pretends to be dead: 'on the grass she lies as she were slain' (473). Adonis' refusals which lead to her pretended faint 'kill' Venus, in a conventional metaphor of unrequited love, 'like the deadly bullet of a gun', as his eyes 'have murdered this poor heart of mine' (504). When he

attempts to revive her with a kiss, after the lack of success with less romantic tactics, she feigns rapture in rhetoric:

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.
O thou didst kill me; kill me once again!
(493-99)

Here, Venus gives Adonis' kisses the ability to transcend life and death, his breath to 'breatheth life in her again' (474). However, this is demonstrably pretence and play; Venus cannot die any more than Adonis' kisses can instil or remove life, or indeed, banish the plague as she claims, 'the star-gazers, having writ on death / May say the plague is banished by thy breath!' (509-10). Venus' language is knowingly metaphorical, and it is this which is tested and exposed when Venus has to articulate her reaction to Adonis' death, as explored below.

Venus also inverts her pretended 'death' in her burgeoning argument to imply that Adonis' unnatural resistance must mean that it is *he* who is dead: 'Fie, lifeless picture, cold and senseless stone, / Well painted idol, image dull and dead' (211-12). Adonis' beauty is essential to this accusation of inhumanity and senseless perfection, and the concept is subtly reiterated in terms of the beauty of Adonis' horse:

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

Here, the artist's perfect rendition, as an image, a non-sentient model, is described as 'dead'. The juxtaposition of Adonis' resemblance to a statue, 'senseless stone', a work of art, and the previous mention of Adonis' mother also introduces a reminder of his more distant lineage. Adonis' Petrarchan 'stoniness' recalls his father's grandmother, the statue of Pygmalion and the embodiment of unresponsive beauty (*Metamorphoses* 10). This is implicitly reiterated at the end of the text where Venus flies away to Paphos (Cyprus). In Ovid, the child of Pygmalion and his statue / wife, the father of Cinyras, is named Paphos, 'Of whom the Iland takes that name' (10. 324) (Golding 258). These intertextual, mythological reminders of Adonis' eventful family history serve to both support Venus' representation of love as opposing death (Myrrha's love produced life, in that it produced Adonis; Pygmalion's statue is given life because of his love, through his prayers to Venus) but also to highlight the irony of these examples. Myrrha's love leads to a violation of familial and social boundaries, her exile, and transformation into a tree (taken in this reading as akin to death), and Adonis is, unlike the statue of his great-grandmother, unmoved from his 'dead' state to the 'life' Venus aligns with love.

Venus' clearest feelings towards death are articulated when she is forced to consider it as a reality as opposed to using the metaphorical concepts of death, with the potential for attendant puns on 'dying' (orgasm), in her game of persuasion and seduction. Initially, Venus unleashes an invective against Death when she thinks Adonis has been killed (which she does not know for certain) and then recants. She calls Death 'Hateful divorce of love' (931), clearly placing death as opposing or negating love. Venus' following image of Death as a grim archer in imitation of Cupid with arrows of ebony seems to continue this opposition, 'Love's golden arrow at him should have fled, / And not death's ebon dart to strike him dead' (947-8). However, this striking pairing of the bringers of love and death instead further serves to

compound the link between the two forces as stressed throughout the text. Venus also returns to her previous theme of Adonis' extraordinary beauty giving him elevated status, as she claims that had Death seen Adonis, he would not have targeted him: 'it cannot be, / Seeing his beauty, thou shouldst strike at it' (937-38). Venus explains this seeming error to herself with the knowledge that Death cannot see because the personification of such as a skeleton has no eyeballs ('thou hast no eyes to see', 939), and therefore the targets of Death's arrows are purely a matter of chance. This goes some way to providing whimsical reasoning behind unnatural deaths, 'Thy mark is feeble age; but thy false dart / Mistakes that aim, and cleaves an infant's heart' (941-42), but what is also established is that Venus' celebration and exultation of Adonis is the empty rhetoric of seduction and desire.

The link between love and death is most clearly illustrated in Venus' reaction to Adonis' dead body. Ironically recalling the previous metaphors of Adonis killing her with his looks, Shakespeare describes Venus' eyes as 'murdered with the view' (1031) of dead Adonis. The same language is used in both situations, the first time comically, romantically, this time tragically. The overlap here conveys the distance between metaphorical and actual, as the frivolous figurative language which previously imagined the death of both protagonists, as well as the commonplace pun on orgasm as 'dying', is replaced with a corpse. Adonis' 'unnatural' resistance to Venus arguably leads to his death as he states he will choose the boar over love. Thereby Venus' prophecies, as mentioned above, are fulfilled, although her romantic exaggeration is shown to fall short. The world does not end when Adonis dies, and this is perhaps emblematic of the weakness of Venus' hyperbole in the face of Adonis' death. For example, 'For he being dead, with him is beauty slain, / And beauty dead, black chaos comes again' (1019-20); 'true sweet beauty lived and died with him' (1080). These statements, while conveying the strength of Venus' desire or love, are evidently untrue as chaos does not arrive

on cue when Adonis dies, leaving Venus to mark Adonis' pointless death herself, as discussed below.

Most famously, Venus refigures the boar's goring of Adonis as an act of love, reflexively reworking her previous verbal manoeuvres that describe both her love and the lack of love, as death. She says the boar, 'thought to kiss him, and hath killed him so' (1110); 'nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine / Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin' (1115-6). Here, 'Shakespeare's lines function as a grotesque parallel to all the previous occasions when Venus's embraces were described as the attack of a wild beast. Instead of an amorous embrace depicted as a savage attack, we have just the reverse' (Keach 80). The phallic penetration of Adonis has been well remarked upon, and his blood-letting (his exsanguination is described at length) can be read as a grotesque exaggeration of a feminised loss of virginity. This also refers back textually to Venus' inability to rape Adonis, unlike so many male Ovidian immortals that rape the mortals they desire. As she wistfully says, 'Had I been toothed like him, I must confess / With kissing him I should have killed him first' (1117-8).

It has been critically suggested that the boar is a projection of Adonis' fear of Venus, thus his resistance to love is directly linked to his antagonistic stance toward the boar (Kahn 38). Less explored is the implication of reading this event in the light of alternative versions of the story of Venus / Aphrodite and Adonis, which sees Adonis being fought over and ultimately shared throughout the year by Persephone and Venus / Aphrodite. In some related versions of this narrative (which is also linked to the fertility tradition in Adonis' seasonal presence and absence on earth), Adonis is vengefully killed by Persephone in the guise of a boar when the Venus / Aphrodite figure does not keep to the bargain one year and retains Adonis for too long. For example, Robert Graves records this tradition as applying to Tammuz, the Syrian version of Adonis, and as part of the life cycle of the Adonis/Tammuz-figure as a fertility god (72-3), and Fraunce's previously quoted contemporary allegorical reading of Venus and Adonis

includes a parenthetical mention of Proserpina as indicating the lower hemisphere of the earth (Fraunce 46v). In addition, Judith Dundas points out that the contemporary early modern construct as ‘Death as a lover [...] mirrors or in some sense reflects the myth of Proserpina, carried away by Pluto to the underworld to be his wife’ (39). Proserpina or Persephone’s return here as queen of the dead for *her* lover to take to the underworld posits Persephone as death in relation to Adonis, and Adonis firmly in the female position as being taken as Death’s lover; the Shakespearean role reversal in life as a pursued Petrarchan beloved continuing in death. The female goddess in this form can ‘rape’, penetrate, possess, and kill the mortal male lover.

Whether or not this potential mythical intertextuality is taken into account, the boar, as the instrument of Adonis’ death, is figured as death by Venus both in her attempt to dissuade Adonis from the hunt and after he is dead. The boar, says Venus, is armoured:

Like to a mortal butcher, bent to kill.
On his bow-back he hath a battle set
Of bristly pikes that ever threat his foes.
(618-20)

After the discovery of Adonis’ corpse, Venus describes the boar as ‘this foul, grim, and urchin-snouted boar, / Whose downward eye still looketh for a grave’ (1105-6). The figuring of the boar as a bringer of, or indeed as, death is not particularly remarkable in its literal nature, but it is from this position that Venus then goes on to figure the goring of Adonis as an act of love, it ‘thought to kiss him, and hath killed him so’, evidently making the link between love, sex, and death, and which leads on to consideration of ancient mythic embodiments of this connection described previously. The mortality of Adonis stressed throughout the text in comparison to Venus’ divinity is the crux of this link between sex, love, and death, itself central

to philosophical and theological systems concerning the mortality of humanity. What Shakespeare constructs in *Venus and Adonis* is a condensed, exaggerated illustration of this association and the compression of issues of procreation, birth, love, sex and death into one interaction between the protagonists.

The combination of matters of love and death continues as Shakespeare's narrator offers a parodic blazon of Adonis' corpse, the 'tragic spectacle of the raped emblem of chastity' (Bate 65-66):

She looks upon his lips, and they are pale.
She takes him by the hand, and that is cold.
She whispers in his ears a heavy tale,
As if they hear the woeful words she told.
She lifts the coffer-lids that close his eyes,
Where lo, two lamps burnt out in darkness lies;
(1123-1128)

All the aspects of the chaste beloved, as described in countless Petrarchan sonnets, and as previously itemised in conventional, feminised descriptions of Adonis, are re-itemised in death in these lines as the form and language of a poetic style usually solely focused on a living object of desire is appropriated to describe the dead lover. The lips, hands, and eyes are all parts of the body where Petrarchan description is concentrated, and Shakespeare uses similar language to the conventional praise of these parts when living. Paleness, coldness, and eyes like lamps are all conventional content of Petrarchan sonnets, but in this case the pale coldness is that of a dead body and the metaphor of lamps for eyes serves only in order to negate the image in death; the lamps are 'burnt out'. The redness which usually accompanies and contrasts a lover's

whiteness is absent and unrecorded, yet is implicit from the previous lines in the description of Adonis' blood which surrounds his fallen body:

[...] his soft flank, whose wonted lily-white
With purple tears that his wound wept was drenched.
No flower was nigh, no grass, herb, leaf, or weed,
But stole his blood, and seemed with him to bleed.
(1053-56)

Indeed, the final line of the stanza previous to the blazon informs the reader that Venus 'stains her face with his congealèd blood' (1122). This tragic image grotesquely refigures the glorious red and white combination of the desirable complexion (as well as the heightened colour of the aroused lover) and serves as a contrast to the description of Adonis' exsanguinated, pale corpse. This scene is also anticipated earlier in the text as when Venus encounters the boar, 'Whose frothy mouth, bepainted all with red, / Like milk and blood being mingled both together' (901-2), the blood and saliva smeared snout repeats and subverts the Petrarchan emphasis on Adonis' red and white beauty as previously established in the text (for example, 'Rose cheeked Adonis'; 'More white and red than doves or roses are', 3, 10). Shakespeare's subversion of Petrarchanism throughout the text, then, in the comical inversion of reluctant and seductive gender roles and gendered description, is continued in the application of deliberately 'inappropriate' language to scenes of death and lamentation. The continuity of imagery and description serves to dislocate and confuse the narrative through the language which conveys it, which both mocks and echoes Venus' previous games that represent her desire and the consequences of denying her as matters of life and death.

In Ovid's narrative, Venus' continuing love is to be expressed in annual, ritual re-enactment of Adonis' death: 'Of my greefe remembrance shall remayne / (Adonis) whyle the world doth last. From yeere to yeere shall growe / A thing that of my heavinesse and of thy death shall showe / The lively likenesse' (10. 848-51; Golding 271-2), which is translated more clearly in a more recent edition: 'Every year, the scene of your death will be staged anew, and lamented with wailing cries, in imitation of those cries of mine' (10.725-7) (Innes 244). This annual ritual (as well as the transformation into a short-lived flower), recalls Adonis' role in fertility rites, which were annual, seasonal, and cyclical, but this is not a role Shakespeare encourages the reader to associate with his early modern Adonis. As Anthony Mortimer suggests, the metamorphosis is deprived of its 'consolatory function' (337) in Venus' picking of the flower. The climax of Shakespeare's poem is plainly aetiological, as Venus prophecies the future tribulations and torment attendant on love (1135-1164). In Shakespeare's version Venus's words over the metamorphosis of Adonis are vengeful, 'Sith in his prime death doth my love destroy, / They that love best their loves shall not enjoy' (1163-64). She prophesies that from this time romantic relationships will be afflicted with sadness ('Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend', 1136), that jealousy will ruin relationships ('It shall be waited on with jealousy', 1137), and that love may 'Find sweet beginning but unsavoury end' (1138). Love will be 'fickle, false, and full of fraud' (1141), cause extremes of emotion ('Ne'er settled equally, but high or low', 1139), humiliate its victims ('The strongest body shall it make most weak, / Strike the wise dumb'; 'Teaching decrepit age to tread the measures', 1145-46; 1148), and be plagued with paranoia ('It shall suspect where is no cause of fear', 1153). Ultimately, it will 'be cause of war and dire events' (1159). Whilst this dire prophesy works extra-textually and aetiological to explain the pain that love causes, and perhaps provides some comfort for the figure of the Petrarchan poet never far from the surface of the text, as those who 'love best' are certain not to 'enjoy' their lovers, within the text it is the frustrated reaction of a goddess whose hyperbolic

rhetoric has failed to assist her in obtaining her desire or articulating the gravity of her love. As discussed previously, her romantic assertions over the worldly importance of Adonis have fallen flat in terms of his death causing the fall of beauty or the destructive entry of ‘black chaos’. As the goddess of love, what Venus does have the power to do is instigate this curse. However, even this assertion of divine power is open to question. Throughout *Metamorphoses* Ovid repeatedly depicts the pain and tragedy potentially caused by love, and Shakespeare’s Adonis, in his explanation of his avoidance of love, clearly states that he is aware of what problems and misery it can cause; ‘throughout the poem love has been what Venus prophesies it will be in the future’ (Keach 81). The irony of Venus’ curse is that that it illustrates the redundancy of her power and influence; a redundancy arguably demonstrated throughout the poem as a whole.

In conclusion, Shakespeare’s departures from Ovid’s narrative which negate the love between the protagonists and the annual ritual commemoration of such extend to present *Venus and Adonis* as a text that ultimately foregrounds mortality, not love, as its theme. As such, it posits stock rhetorical arguments in favour of, if not loving, then procreating, together with a standard theological focus on mortality and the ideological causal links between procreation and death. Shakespeare indirectly relates Adonis’ refusal to love and procreate to both his death and his inescapable mythic lineage, thereby selectively employing Ovidian material. The text also cruelly exposes the irony in the metaphors of death as part of Venus’ game and language of love, and demonstrates how the poetic language of seduction and sexual desire is mirrored horrifically in the face of death. Venus attempts to present death and love as opposing forces, but throughout the text they are demonstrably linked through the very nature of what it means to be alive. Ultimately, Adonis’ death allows Venus to possess him through the metamorphosis, ‘There shall not be one minute in an hour / Wherein I will not kiss my sweet love’s flower’ (1187-88), as she cannot do so through her language of love.

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