In all the controversy over Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, commentators agree on one issue: “Shakespeare's Adonis, contrary to the whole tradition, scorns love.”¹ This fundamental change in the myth

* An earlier shorter version of this essay was presented at a Brown University conference on Ovid and the Ovidian influence, March 1979. I wish to thank Charles Segal, William Carroll, and S. Clark Hulse for reading this paper and making many welcome suggestions and comments.


The one exception is A. Robin Bowers, “‘Hard Armours’ and ‘Delicate Amours’ in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 12 (1979), who argues Adonis does acquiesce by kissing Venus and is, therefore, destroyed by the boar, a symbol of lust. Bowers’ allegorical reading fails to explain why, if Venus herself represents lust, she so vehemently opposes Adonis’ hunting of the boar; he also ignores Venus’ jealousy and confessed frustration in lines 597-98; 607-10; J. D. Jahn presents a more convincing argument that Adonis, though reluctant, nevertheless tempts Venus in “The Lamb of Lust: The Role of Adonis in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 6 (1972).

The willing Adonis of earlier myth can be found in *Orphic Hymns*, No. 56; Theocritus, *Idylls*, 1, 3, 15; Bion, “Epitaphium Adonidis”; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 164, 271; and Fulgentius, *Mythologia*, III.

For a summary of earlier criticism and major issues raised by *Venus and Adonis*, particularly the debate as to its “seriousness,” see J. W. Lever, “The Poems,” *Shakespeare Survey* 16 (1962), pp. 19-22, and more recently, Keach, cited above.
has never been satisfactorily explained, for though Adonis complies with Venus' desires in the earliest versions, in the Ovidian account which is generally regarded as Shakespeare's primary source, we are told almost nothing of Adonis' response to her advances except that he does not reject them outright.²

Critics have advanced various biographical, historical and literary arguments to explain Shakespeare's unwilling Adonis. At the time Shakespeare wrote and published Venus and Adonis, the Earl of Southampton, to whom the poem was dedicated, was fighting an arranged marriage with Elizabeth Vere. Shakespeare must have known of the young earl's unwillingness to marry.³ Those interested in psycho-biographical causes explain Shakespeare's preoccupation with the motif of older women and young, inexperienced men by citing his own marriage at eighteen to Anne Hathaway who was eight years his senior.⁴

Panofsky proposes that Shakespeare's lover was influenced by the visual arts, specifically Titian's "Venus and Adonis" in which Adonis actively evades Venus' embrace. William Keach refutes his argument by pointing out first that Titian's virile young hunter is strikingly at odds with Shakespeare's effeminate Adonis, and then that "nothing in the painting proves that Titian thought of Adonis as having resisted Venus throughout the encounter."⁵ Adonis, after all, traditionally

² In Book X of the Metamorphoses, we learn only that Venus, grazed by an arrow of Cupid's, has fallen in love with Adonis and forgotten her usual haunts and occupations. Transformed by love, she goes about dressed like Diana and hunts animals, warning Adonis against the lion and wild boar. When he asks why, Venus stops to rest and tell him a story. Before beginning her warning tale of Atalanta, Venus places her head and neck in the lap of the reclining youth and interrupts her own words with a kiss ("inque sinu iuvenis posita cervice reclinis / sic ait ac medidis interserit oscula verbis" Metamorphoses X. 558-59). All quotations are cited from W. S. Anderson's Teubner edition, P. Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphoses (Leipzig 1977). In Renaissance pictorial representations Adonis is always depicted with his head in Venus' lap, a change from Ovid which reflects the aggressive Venus of earlier as well as later versions of the myth.


⁵ Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic (New York 1969); Panofsky notes that "the painting ordered by Philip II remained in England for several years and was widely accessible in sixteenth-century prints by Giulio Santo (dated 1559) and Martino Rota (died 1589) . . ." p. 155; Keach, p. 56; see also David Rosand, "Titian and the 'Bed of Polyclitus'," Burlington Magazine 117 (1975), pp. 242-45; and John Doebler's recent article in Shakespeare Quarterly 33 (1982), pp. 480-90, "The Reluctant Adonis: Titian and Shakespeare."
ignores Venus' warnings and evades her protectiveness. Neither biographical nor historical arguments provide a completely satisfactory explanation for Shakespeare's unwilling Adonis.

Recent literary studies of Venus and Adonis have more often explored the psychology of Shakespeare's reluctant lover than the sources for his reluctance. Wayne Rebhorn claims that Adonis is part of a long line of Renaissance epic heroes who fear being "reasorbed symbolically into the womb of this seemingly benevolent but really quite deadly mother." Adonis' rejection of Venus' advances, then, is positive and places him in the good, if surprising, company of Spenser's Guyon and Tasso's Rinaldo. For Coppélia Kahn, Shakespeare dramatizes the narcissism characteristic of adolescent boys who fear the devouring mother and project that fear outside themselves. She looks elsewhere in Ovid to explain Shakespeare's restive young man, to the myths of Hermaphroditus and Narcissus. T. W. Baldwin long ago pointed out that the common denominator of the Ovidian myths of Adonis, Hermaphroditus and Narcissus is "the irresistibly beautiful youth wooed by the over-ardent female." Though Ovid's presentation of these diffident young men certainly influenced Shakespeare's portrayal of his reluctant lover, we should not jettison too hastily Ovid's tale of Venus and Adonis. Preoccupation with Adonis' predicament obscures rather than clarifies the mystery of the unwilling Adonis, for as classicists have long recognized, the main psychological interest in all three Ovidian tales is the frustrated female lover.

The active reluctance of Shakespeare's Adonis can best be understood not by looking at other unwilling boys in Ovidian myth, but by looking at the structure of the Metamorphoses, at its later com-

8 Bullough notes the relationship between the Hermaphroditus and Narcissus myths and Shakespeare's portrayal of Adonis, I, pp. 162-63; see also Allen, "On Venus and Adonis," who suggests another possible source in the story of Hippolytus, the chaste hunter. He points out that "ancient poets and mythographers sometimes said that a jealous Mars or an avenger Apollo sent the boar that killed Adonis, but Passerat, a French contemporary of Shakespeare's, invented a new, and perhaps more congenial legend. Diana sent the boar to revenge the killing of Hippolytus. . . ." In addition, there is a supporting hint in the interpolated tale of Atalanta and Hippomenes found in Ovid's version of the myth. "Hippomenes (\(\pi\nu\omega\mu\nu\nu\nu\nu\) passion or strength of a horse) has a connection with Hippolytus and with Adonis's stallion that [a poet] with 'small Greek' would notice," p. 107; Donald G. Watson, "The Contrarieties of Venus and Adonis," Studies in Philology 75 (1978), pp. 32-63, explains Adonis' reluctance as a witty reversal of Petrarchan roles.
9 Baldwin, p. 84.
10 See, for example, Brooks Otis, Ovid as an Epic Poet (Cambridge 1970).
mentaries, and at Shakespeare's Venus from whose point of view, after all, most of the poem's action is recounted. This shift in perspective from Adonis' unwillingness to Venus' desire demands a re-evaluation of the poem in psychological as well as literary terms. What follows is first a reading of Ovid which suggests how Shakespeare's contemporaries understood the tale of Venus and Adonis; next I consider the implications of a Renaissance reading for Shakespeare's poem; and finally I re-evaluate traditional psychological interpretations of the myth in terms of a feminist analysis which offers a new perspective on Venus' central position in the poem.

I. The myth of Venus and Adonis ends Book X of the Metamorphoses, but the central story recounts the incestuous passion of Myrrha for her father, Cinyras. Adonis is the son of their unnatural union which Venus has caused by enflaming Myrrha with desire for her father. Implicit in Shakespeare's poem is the submerged irony that Venus' love for Adonis is incestuous, like Myrrha's for her father in Ovid. Myrrha's revenge on Venus for inspiring her unnatural passion is worked out through Adonis' rejection of the goddess of love.

Frustrated love motivates much of Ovid's narrative, and in Books IX and X, unnatural love, particularly that generated by the female libido, causes situations which can only be resolved through death and metamorphosis. As Brooks Otis points out in his study of Ovid as an Epic Poet, the series of tales beginning with the story of Byblis and climaxing in the story of Myrrha recounts the vagaries of perverse love and sexual desire. The story of Caunus and Byblis, which begins with a warning "that girls should never love what is forbidden" ("ut ament concessa puellae" Met. IX. 454), initiates the themes of incest and frustrated love which link the two books. Byblis loves her brother, but her love, as Ovid emphasizes throughout the tale, is unnatural, not fitting between brother and sister. Inspired by an erotic dream of sexual pleasure with her sibling, Byblis writes him confessing her love. Caunus rejects her proposal and flees. She is driven mad and eventually her tears of grief are metamorphosed into a fountain bearing her name. The Byblis story, in which unnatural love remains unconsummated, occupies the central position in Book IX; it is paralleled by the tale of Myrrha in Book X whose incestuous love is actually satisfied.

Book X begins with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but its avowed subject, as Orpheus tells us, is boys beloved of gods and girls frantic with forbidden fires so as to merit punishment ("dilectos

11 Ibid., pp. 225 ff.
superis, inconcessisque puellas / ignibus attonitas meruisse libidine poenam," *Met.* X. 154-55). The climactic episode and the center of the book is the story of Myrrha's unlawful passion to which Ovid devotes 222 out of 735 lines. After her father discovers he has been tricked into incest with his daughter, Myrrha flees to escape his wrath. Praying to an unnamed goddess, she is changed into the myrrh tree from which the incestuously conceived Adonis is born. The tale ends with a brief parody of the epic genealogy: Adonis is born from his sister and his grandfather: "ille sorore / natus avoque suo" (*Met.* X. 520-21).

Ovid's emphasis on the strange circumstances of Adonis' birth should also remind us that Myrrha's own father was the result of an unnatural union, for he is the grandson of Pygmalion and the statue which Venus had brought to life. Following the account of Adonis' birth, Ovid describes his unnatural beauty by comparing him to the Amores (*Met.* X. 516), Cupid-like cherubs who appear frequently in Roman art with wings and quivers.¹² The link between Adonis and Cupid is made explicit, however, in the medieval and Renaissance commentaries and translations: in the *Ovide moralisé*, for example, Adonis "le dieu d'amour ressemblant"; Golding translates Amores simply as "Cupids."¹³

Ovid begins Adonis' own tale with yet another description of his beauty which pleases Venus, but more significantly, avenges the desires of his mother ("matrisque ulciscitur ignes" *Met.* X. 524). Ovid says outright that Venus' love for Adonis avenges his mother's unnatural passion, a passion which most versions of the myth attribute to Venus' inspiration.¹⁴ The poet goes on in the next line to describe Venus as a mother herself: while giving his mother ("matri") a kiss, Cupid wounds her accidentally with one of his arrows; the result of this wound is her love for Adonis. In two lines, the word *mater* refers first to Myrrha, then to Venus, and thereby implicitly joins their guilty passions. For if we remember that Adonis has been explicitly identified with the Cupid-like Amores, and in the medieval and Renaissance traditions with Cupid himself, we can recognize the irony


implicit in Ovid: Venus’s love for Adonis, like Myrrha’s for her father, is incestuous.\textsuperscript{15} Though Shakespeare does not refer specifically to the Myrrha myth, Baldwin points out that “In Shakespeare’s day, that knowledge could be assumed.”\textsuperscript{16} Both the \textit{Ovide moralisé} and its humanist successor, the Regius commentary (1492), make Adonis’ origins explicit:

\textit{Venus, la mere au dieu d’amours,}
\textit{Le fil Mirre ama par amours.}
\textit{(3703-04)}

\textit{Venus, the mother of the god of love, was in love with Myrrha’s son.}

\textit{Adonis ex incesto patris ac filie coitu natus.}\textsuperscript{17}

Regius goes even further in his gloss at the beginning of the tale by setting up a careful equivalence between Venus and Myrrha: Venus delighted in Adonis no less than Myrrha in her father (“Adonem cognominatus quem non minus Venus dilexit quam illa patrem Cinyram dilexerat beneficio Cupidinis”).

In his seminar on Poe’s “Purloined Letter,” J. Lacan demonstrates the importance of what is absent to psychoanalytic interpretation.\textsuperscript{18} Literary critics and theoreticians have transferred Lacan’s insights to literary analysis by showing how the not-said or silences of a text are analogous to the overdetermined details of dream or the analytic session. Such details make manifest what is absent or latent — a past trauma or event not overtly present in the patient’s discourse.\textsuperscript{19} Silences can signify, sometimes more eloquently than what is spoken aloud. In the case of Shakespeare’s \textit{Venus and Adonis}, what is absent shaped the Renaissance reader’s understanding of the poem in significant ways, for the poet undoubtedly recognized this submerged theme of incest and exploits its ironic potential.

When Venus presents her argument on behalf of procreation, her

\textsuperscript{15} Keach admits “there is a submerged suggestion of incest, a suggestion which glances at the story of Adonis’s mother Myrrha,” but he ignores the significance of his own glancing remark (p. 77); see also Rebhorn, who notes the incestuous implications of Venus’ role as mother (p. 3).

\textsuperscript{16} Baldwin, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{17} Raphael Regius, \textit{P. Ovidii Metamorphosis} (1526), sig. M6\textsuperscript{v}. Baldwin quotes a similar \textit{argumentum} derived from Regius’s commentary, p. 87.


\textsuperscript{19} See for example the work of Pierre Macherey, \textit{Pour une théorie de la production littéraire} (Paris 1978); Terry Eagleton, \textit{Criticism and Ideology} (Atlantic Highlands, N. J. 1976); and Shoshana Felman’s introduction to the volume of \textit{Yale French Studies} entitled \textit{Literature and Psychoanalysis} 55-56 (1977).
allusions to Adonis’ own begetting would inevitably have recalled to Shakespeare’s audience, so familiar with Ovid, the unnatural circumstances of Adonis’ conception and birth. “Sappy plants” she reminds him, are made “to bear” (165), certainly an odd end to the series which begins “Torches are made to light” (163), but a reminder to a knowing audience of Ovid’s etiological tale which explains Adonis’ birth in terms of the bole which exudes the myrrh tree’s sap. Venus ends the stanza with the exhortation “Thou wast begot; to get it is thy duty” (168). She also chides Adonis for his reluctance by reminding him of his own mother’s willingness, and obliquely links her frustration with Myrrha’s:

“Art thou a woman’s son, and canst not feel
What ’tis to love? how want of love tormenteth?
O, had thy mother borne so hard a mind,
She had not brought forth thee, but died unkind.”
(201-04)

Shakespeare also wittily recalls Adonis’ unnatural descent from Pygmalion and his statue when he has Venus characterize Adonis as

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)

Venus is not only an aggressive masculine wooer; she is also from the poem’s outset a loving mother. The notorious image of the goddess plucking Adonis from his horse and tucking him under her arm suggests not so much Venus as the “bold-faced suitor” of the first stanza, but Venus as a mother, lifting and carrying her small child. Shakespeare describes Adonis here as “the tender boy,” thereby establishing our sense of him as a child. Later he is “like the froward infant stilled with dangling” (562). Venus’ solicitous care for Adonis

20 Spenser’s portrayal of Venus’ relation to Adonis as maternal in Book III of the Faerie Queene (1590) must inevitably have influenced Shakespeare’s characterization of Venus and Adonis. In the Garden of Adonis Spenser describes the goddess as “great Mother Venus” who “takes her fill” of a “wanton boy,” an epithet which conflates Adonis and Cupid. For a discussion of Spenser and Shakespeare’s different uses of Ovid, see Ellen Aprill Harwood, “Venus and Adonis: Shakespeare’s Critique of Spenser,” Rutgers University Library Journal 39 (n.d.), pp. 44-60; Rebhorn assembles the evidence for Shakespeare’s maternal Venus, pp. 1-3; for an earlier classical account in which Venus’ relation to Adonis is portrayed as maternal, see Charles Segal, “Adonis and Aphrodite, Theocritus, Idyll III, 48,” L’Antiquité classique 38 (1969), pp. 82-88.
and her fear of his hunting wild animals, certainly inspired in part by Ovid's portrayal of Venus, suggest the motherly concern which critics often remark, but without noting its incestuous implications. Don Cameron Allen, for example, points out:

Adonis is a child with her. When she swoons, he fusses over her as a boy might over his mother. He will readily kiss her goodnight when it is time for bed. The goddess takes advantage of the filial-maternal relationship which is really all Adonis wants.\(^{21}\)

Venus, however, wants much more. Later in the poem she is described as a "milch doe" seeking to feed her fawn and, of course, a park which beckons Adonis to "Feed where thou wilt" (229-240). But the maternal-filial imagery is nowhere more obvious than in the poem's penultimate stanzas:

"Poor flow'r," quoth she, "This was thy father's guise —
Sweet issue of a more sweet-smelling sire —
For every little grief to wet his eyes;
To grow unto himself was his desire,
And so 'tis thine; but know, it is as good
To wither in my breast as in his blood.

"Here was thy father's bed, here in my breast;
Thou art the next of blood, and 'tis thy right.
Lo in this hollow cradle take thy rest;
My throbbing heart shall rock thee day and night:
There shall not be one minute in an hour
Wherein I will not kiss my sweet love's flow'r."

(1177-1188)

Venus crops the Adonis flower and her invocation of "thy father" reminds us of its direct, familial tie to Adonis. Having lost the father, she will have the son. Shakespeare alludes to Adonis' descent from Myrrha when he has Venus call Adonis "a more sweet-smelling sire." She places the flower in her breast which she calls "thy father's bed"; in "this hollow cradle" she will rock it "day and night."\(^{22}\)


\(^{22}\) Kahn (p. 357) claims that the comparison of the boy Adonis to a flower is unconventional and therefore emphasizes his youth and peculiar role with relation to Venus. On the contrary, the comparison of young men, particularly young men who die prematurely, to flowers dates from Homer and would have been well-known to Shakespeare from many sources including the story of Nisus and Euryalus in the *Aeneid*. 
We can now see the significance of this imagery and its relationship to Shakespeare’s Ovidian source: Adonis’ rejection of Venus’ advances is Shakespeare’s self-conscious elaboration of Myrrha’s revenge for her own disappointed love. He portrays Venus loving a mere boy in an incestuous relationship which wittily reverses the myth of Myrrha and Cinyras in which daughter loves father. For Shakespeare and the reader, mother Venus loves her unwilling “son” Adonis and his death is analogous to Myrrha’s loss of her beloved father. The audience for which Shakespeare wrote his poem, the Earl of Southampton and his sophisticated coterie of friends, were sure to be amused by the deliberate working out of Myrrha’s revenge which medieval and Renaissance glosses of Ovid make explicit:

Adonis a vengeance prise
De la grant honte et du mesfait
Que Venus à sa mere a fait
Quant el li fist amer son pere
Or revenche Adonis sa mere.

Adonis took vengeance for the great shame and wrong Venus did to his mother when she made Myrrha love her own father. Now Adonis avenges his mother.

William Barksted’s Mirrha (1607), a poem generally agreed to be prompted by Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis, provides further testimony of this revenge motif:

Wel, wel (quoth she) thou hast reveng’d the spight
Which from my accurst sons bow did fowly light
On thy faire Mother, O immortall boy
Though thou be faire, tis I that should be coy.\(^{23}\)

Ovid’s incestuous story of Myrrha informs the poem, acting as a witty and ironic subtext to the text itself.

II. By focussing on the incest theme and frustrated female desire, the Myrrha story, Ovid’s tale and its later commentaries serve, in addition to psycho-biographical and historical arguments, to explain Shakespeare’s reluctant Adonis. They also point to a central problem in the poem which has always disturbed commentators. The Shakespearean narrator’s distance from Venus’ desire, manifest in his often noted comic exaggeration of her size and ridicule of her overbearing lust, conflicts with a shift in our sympathies in the last section of the poem. After Adonis’ departure to hunt the boar, the narrator, and

consequently the reader, becomes increasingly sympathetic toward Venus' feelings. This shift makes the poem more emotionally powerful than is often admitted. Modern archetypal and psychological interpretations identify Venus and the boar with opposing aspects of the Great Mother and Adonis with the figure of her son-lover who in adolescence begins to differentiate himself from the unconscious and affirm his masculine otherness. As E. Neumann describes it in *The Origins and History of Consciousness*:

> he is her lover as well as her son. But he is not yet strong enough to cope with her, he succumbs to her in death and is devoured. The mother-beloved turns into the terrible Death Goddess. . . . The masculine principle is not yet a paternal tendency balancing the maternal-female principle; it is still youthful and vernal, the merest beginning of an independent movement away from the place of origin and the infantile relation.

The boar is a complicated symbol in myth, its phallic character, according to Neumann, a trace from that period when masculine and feminine are united in the uroborus or Great Mother. It is associated in Ovid with the wood and the cave, the womb-like realms of the *turrita Mater*, and by implication, with Venus who causes the lovers Atalanta and Hippomenes in their interpolated tale within Ovid's Venus and Adonis story to copulate in Cybele's cave. Such an interpretation of the myth certainly fits Ovid's larger narrative structure, for this tale, which ends Book X, is followed by the death of Orpheus at the hands of the Maenads, the maddened, destroying matrons of Thrace.

Traditional psychological interpretations such as Neumann's adopt a peculiarly masculine perspective toward Venus' desire; they project male fears of female sexuality onto Venus by attributing the boar and its destructiveness to her. An alternative and less limited view is to see the boar as a symbol of male virility, both in physical appearance and in myth. A. T. Hatto in fact argues that Venus is jealous of the boar with whom she competes for Adonis' affections. He documents


25 Ibid., p. 47; in his discussion of the Adonis myth, Atallah points out that Adonis' effeminacy and the phallic character of the boar probably date from the Alexandrian period, not from any so-called "primitive" past, pp. 48-49, 63-74.

26 Hunting the boar is traditionally associated with the hero's initiation. For a review of the medieval and Renaissance pedigree of the boar as a symbol of male virility, see A. T. Hatto, "Venus and Adonis — and the Boar," *Modern Language Notes* 41 (1946), pp. 353-61. Hatto also points to Shakespeare's own use of the boar as a sexual-phallic symbol in *Cymbeline* II, v.
the medieval and Renaissance identification of the boar with male sexuality and points out that in Shakespeare's poem mention of the boar inevitably leads Venus to discourse on jealousy.\(^{27}\) Her explicit sexual description of the slaying of Adonis supports his argument: the boar "thought to kiss him, and hath killed him so" (1110) and "by a kiss thought to persuade him there; / And nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine / Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin" (1114-16). Adonis, who seeks to avoid sexual love with Venus, encounters it with the boar. The late classical and continental sources of this conceit reinforce such a reading, for in pseudo-Theocritus and the Italian versions, the boar himself describes his act as a kiss and thereby makes the rivalry between Venus and the boar explicit.\(^{28}\)

If Venus is cast as mother in this poem, and Adonis as son, the boar suggests not so much the Great Mother, as conventional psychological interpretations claim, but her rival, a kind of sexual father whose violence reinstates the sexual difference which Adonis' beauty and Venus' incestuous love endanger. Venus can avenge her wrong only by prophesying an endless chain of reciprocal male violence in love which will punish men:

It shall be cause of war and dire events
And set dissension 'twixt the son and sire . . .

(1159-60)

Shakespeare's poem, Ovid's tale and indeed the myth itself re-enact that primitive act of violence which René Girard describes in his *Violence et le Sacré*, but with a difference.\(^{29}\) Girard liberates desire from its specifically Freudian familial model by arguing that all desire is mimetic. The Oedipal desire of son for mother is generated not from some inherent sexual urge toward a particular object at an early

\(^{27}\) Hatto notes the boar's role as a usurper both in *Venus and Adonis*, and *Richard III*, III, ii, and V, ii. With amusing understatement, he calls the Venus-Adonis-boar relation an "unusual triangular situation," p. 361.

\(^{28}\) It has long been remarked that the sexual roles of Venus and Adonis are reversed to enable Shakespeare to describe a homosexual rather than heterosexual relation — obliquely enough, however, for the poem to have won the approval of the Archbishop of Canterbury who licensed it in 1593. For late classical and Italian examples of the boar justifying his "kiss," see Hatto, and Hulse, p. 104, who cites the pseudo-Theocritean "Death of Adonis," accepted as Theocritus, No. 30, in the Renaissance. Hulse notes that the poem was translated anonymously into English as *Sixe Idillia* (1588; repr. London 1922); cited by Gregorio Giraldi, *De Deis Gentium*, and imitated by Ronsard and Minturno, "De Adoni ab Apro Interempto," in *Epigrammata et Elegia*, pp. 7a-8b, bound with *Poemata* (Venice 1564).

stage of development, but simply by the desire to imitate those with power. Men contend for a sexual object, or indeed any object, in endlessly reciprocal “mimetic desire” which leads to what Girard terms a crisis of difference. By desiring the same object, father and son lose their individual identities and become doubles whose rivalry leads to reciprocal violence. Girard contends that such violence can only be arrested by collective aggression against a surrogate victim, an outsider, whether slave, child, foreigner, or pharmakos, whose death restores difference and, therefore, order. The implied threat of incest in Venus’ love for Adonis, present for author and audience, is deflected through his death and metamorphosis, thereby maintaining the incest taboo with its widely recognized, almost universal civilizing function.

But neither Ovid’s tale nor Shakespeare’s poem wholly conforms to Girard’s model, for the conventional syntax of the Oedipal complex is inverted: mother, not father, is desiring subject, and Adonis, that epicene representative of sexual desire itself, the object of her desire. For Venus, the boar represents the father and phallic power which destroys her love object; by doing so he re-establishes the familial bonds upon which patriarchal culture depends. Both the boar and the narrator of the poem, like Orpheus in Metamorphoses X, are the bearers of patriarchal order.

By ending Book X not only with the death of Adonis, who rejects women, but also with the death of Orpheus at women’s hands, Ovid subverts that patriarchal order. At the end of Book IX, we find the tale of Iphis and Ianthe in which both women are desiring subjects whose desire works within and across gender lines. In that tale, Iphis’ mother, ordered to expose her female child, violates patriarchal command and instead obeys the Great Mother’s behest to raise Iphis as a boy. She is eventually transformed into a man and thereby enabled to marry Ianthe. Throughout Books IX and X, Ovid counterpoints the overvaluation of love that crosses gender lines in the incest tales with the tales of Pygmalion and Orpheus who undervalue love by refusing women or loving boys; the tale of Iphis and Ianthe is subversive because it upholds and obliterates sexual difference.

Shakespeare’s poem, unlike the Metamorphoses, contains and controls these subversive suggestions, for in Venus and Adonis, Venus is left with only the delicate purple flower which was Adonis, a flower which Shakespeare reminds us will “wither,” a mere ornament instead of the flesh and blood object of her unnatural desire. In Venus and Adonis the witty conceit of Myrrha’s revenge focusses our attention on Venus’ frustrated love, a focus in keeping with Shakespeare’s Ovidian source. This shift in perspective generates for the reader a
re-interpretation of the myth itself to represent woman as desiring subject in a changed position in conventionally represented sexual and familial configurations, but that changed position is finally undermined by the Shakespearean narrator's distance from, even punishment of, Venus' desire.

III. In closing we should consider the nature of myth itself and what differentiates it from other narratives. Myth, unlike other stories, seeks to contain or overcome oppositions and improbabilities. A general theory of myth is perhaps as hard to formulate as a definitive reading of Venus and Adonis, but S. Clark Hulse makes a useful suggestion in his essay on Shakespeare's poem and the mythographic tradition. Despite their differences, he remarks, all the various theories of myth are preoccupied with mediation. For Frazer and the ritualists, myth mediates between the sacred and profane; for Freud and Jung, between the unconscious and the conscious, the collective and the individual; for Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists, between the opposing terms and contradictions of a given social system. In classical versions of the ancient tale as well as in Shakespeare's poem, Adonis mediates between opposites. In his fascinating book on the system of dietary, vegetable and astronomical codes attached to the ritual of the Adonia in ancient Greece, Marcel Detienne recognizes in Adonis erotic powers of attraction capable of bringing together opposing terms. As a mortal who attracts the goddess of love, he brings together heaven and earth; as the progeny of the union of Myrrha and Cinyras, he links those who should be poles apart, daughter and father. Adonis is not a husband, nor even a man, but a lover whose effeminacy, his mediating status between masculine and feminine, is always emphasized by the Greeks' description of his appearance and his association with the perfume myrrh. In its ambivalence, in its multiple contrarieties and in Adonis' role as mediator, Shakespeare's

50 Lévi-Strauss argues that the function of primary myth is 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 mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science. . . . [T]he difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied" Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke G. Schoepf (New York 1963), pp. 226, 230.


52 Detienne argues that the legend is not a fertility myth at all, but a myth about seduction: "The two episodes (Myrrha and Adonis) involve a double seduction, that of the mother as well as that of the son. . . . As in the story of Myrrha, seduction makes it possible to bring together two terms that are usually held apart," p. 64.
Venus and Adonis resembles these earlier versions, for Shakespeare’s transformation of Adonis into unwilling lover, Venus into loving mother and boar into jealous father, rings another change on the mediated oppositions characteristic of myth.

Shakespeare’s use of antithesis in this poem has been often remarked: red and white is united in Adonis’ complexion and in the purple (purpureus, red, dark, violet) and white flower which is Adonis metamorphosed. Venus manifests the same antithesis because of the conflicting feelings of fear and desire he generates in her. Adonis’ beauty is androgynous: he is “rose cheeked,” “the field’s chief flower;” “more lovely than a man,” with a “maiden burning in his cheeks.” This sexual ambiguity is suggested even in the Ovidian tale, for in the story of Atalanta Venus emphasizes the young runner’s beauty by saying she was as beautiful as Venus herself, or Adonis “if he were a woman.” Adonis also plays a mediating role in joining the two hunts of the poem, for he is first the quarry of Venus’ sexual chase which begins the narrative; then a hunter in the literal hunt; and in a final reversal of roles, the victim of the boar. Adonis also mediates between the sun and moon, for his beauty shames “the sun by day and her [Cynthia] by night.” The sun, as classicists have pointed out, frequently suggests danger and destruction in the Metamorphoses. It is a masculine symbol of sexual power and energy “frequently represented as the unwelcome obtruder shunned by hunters and virgins.” And Adonis’ own words link Venus with the sun:

Fie, no more of love!
The sun doth burn my face — I must remove.
(185-86)

Both animals and gods act contrary to their natures because of Adonis: wild beasts are tamed by seeing his beauty and Venus is transformed from an ardentely sought object of love to an aggressor who “like a bold faced suitor ‘gins to woo him.” But she is more frequently described not as a mortal, but as a beast of prey — a parodic elaboration of Ovid’s description of Venus as huntress. The effect of Adonis’ beauty, which from the first is described as unnatural, upsets the cosmological order; he threatens that order by endangering or abolishing the sexual, natural, familial and cultural distinctions upon which peace, order and fertility depend.


34 Both Detienne and Parry (p. 277) point out the powerful and dangerous qualities of the sun and its associations with sexuality.
The riddle of Shakespeare's reluctant Adonis can be solved not through the discovery of some new source, but by a more careful attention to the larger narrative structure of Books IX and X of the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid provides not only a source for the plot of this poem and its psychological configurations, but also a beginning for its most frequently cited stylistic feature, antithesis. And Shakespeare's use of antithesis and paradox in his portrayal of Adonis, though characteristic of the intellectual and rhetorical climate of his age, can also be better understood by considering the nature of myth itself which seeks to represent in language the multiple contrarieties and oppositions of human desire.

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