

‘Venus and Adonis’ reworked: transformations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in William Shakespeare’s ‘Venus and Adonis’ and J. M. W. Turner’s ‘Adonis Departing for the Chase’.

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Abstract: Transformation in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is paradoxical, a process of change that fixes in time a specific narrative moment. This work considers two works which adapt Ovid’s tale of Venus and Adonis. When revisioned by Shakespeare and Turner, Venus and Adonis, just as in Ovid’s myth, become fixed in time, though in the different forms of word and image. This paper will posit that these two artefacts, in reimagining the story of Venus and Adonis, both reject Ovid’s notion of transformation as an ‘enduring memorial’ to a love torn apart by death and instead fix narrative attention on moments of apparent movement, which forever commemorate the carnal sexuality of the pairing.

Transformation in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is paradoxical, a process of change that fixes in time a specific narrative moment: the fleeing Daphne is metamorphosed into a tree, the praying Niobe to stone. With the fluidity of transformation comes a permanence, a stasis, that adopts a thematic resonance, which is developed through future revisionings of the myth. The short-lived anemone, into which Ovid’s Adonis is transformed by Venus, ‘easily shaken and blown away by the winds’, becomes nevertheless ‘an enduring memorial’.¹ Ovid’s ‘Venus and Adonis’, is emblematic of a parting, a valediction, which fixes attention on a flimsy but everlasting monument to love. When revisioned by Shakespeare – for much of his narrative poem, ‘Venus and Adonis’ (1593) – and Turner, in his painting, ‘Adonis Departing for the Chase’ (1803-4), Venus and Adonis, just as in Ovid’s myth, become fixed in time, though in the different forms of word and image. Both writer and artist focus not on the moment of transformation leading to permanence in the myth, however, but on moments of apparent movement. This paper will posit that these two artefacts, in reimagining the story of Venus and Adonis, both reject Ovid’s notion of transformation as an ‘enduring memorial’ to a love torn apart by death and instead fix narrative attention on moments of apparent movement, which forever commemorate the carnal sexuality of the pairing.

Shakespeare’s development of the sixty-seven lines of Ovid’s verse, which form the ‘Venus and Adonis’ story, into an almost twelve-hundred-line poem clearly stretches the narrative, but Shakespeare does not extend the story in an even manner. Where Ovid spends an approximately equal number of lines on the love between Venus and Adonis and his death and transformation, Shakespeare dwells on the corporeality of their love at the expense both of introductory material and the fate of Adonis. By the end of the first stanza Shakespeare positions Venus as ‘a bold-fac’d suitor who “gins to woo” and by the end of the fifth she has ‘pluck[ed] him from his horse’.²

From their first touch – ‘she seizeth on his sweating palm’ (l. 25) – Adonis apparently wishes to depart; however, it takes him a full eight hundred lines to do so. His ‘sweating palm’ – a physical sign of a sensuous disposition³ – suggests his ‘frosty desire’ (l. 36) is perhaps mere modesty or sexual immaturity. Although critics such as Katharine Eisaman

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (Penguin: London, 2004), Book 10, ll. 737, 725, pp. 418-9. All subsequent references are to this edition incorporated in the text.

² William Shakespeare, ‘Venus and Adonis’ in *The Poems*, ed. F. T. Prince (Methuen & Co.: London, 1969), ll. 6, 30. All subsequent references are to this edition incorporated in the text.

³ see Othello 3.4.36-9, cited by Edmond Malone, *Supplement to the Edition of Shakespeare’s Plays Published in 1778*.

Maus⁴ favour an unconsummated love between Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, I propose that the erotic language of the poem suggests otherwise, indicating a uniting of lovers in carnal sexuality, rather than the separation which is emphasised in Ovid:

Forc'd to content, but never to obey,
Panting he lies and breatheth in her face.
She feedeth on the steam as on a prey,
And calls it heavenly moisture, air of grace,
Wishing her cheeks were gardens full of flowers,
So they were dew'd with such distilling showers. (ll. 61-6)

Critical opinion regarding the meaning of 'content' here is divided: whether it is a substantive meaning 'acquiescence' or a verb, and if so whether active (to content Venus, or that she has to settle for what she gets), or passive (to content himself).⁵ I suggest that the clear sexuality of the lexis in the stanza – 'panting', 'steam', 'heavenly moisture' and 'dew'd' – indicates that Shakespeare intended 'content' to be read as a 'forc'd' sexual consummation, a rape. This would account for Adonis' 'pure shame' (l. 69) and 'angry eyes' (l. 70) of the next stanza and her 'pretty entreat[ies]' (l. 73) which seek to annul his distaste for what has just happened.

The use of 'still' in the same stanza, echoes the 'distilling' of the line quoted above. Here it occurs three times, twice at the beginning of the lines and on each occasion emphatically after a caesura;

Still she entreats, and prettily entreats,
For to a pretty ear she tunes her tale.
Still is he sullen, **still** he lours and frets,
'Twixt crimson shame and anger ashy pale. (ll. 73-6)

The ambiguity of 'still' – as indicating the continuance of a previous action or condition; or as stationary, unmoving, which carries a greater resonance here – shows Adonis as the antithesis to that which is favoured by critics and ties in more with the iconographical tradition of Adonis, from Ovid, as the willing lover of Venus. Further evidence of this willingness comes in a later stanza:

Till breathless he disjoin'd, and backward drew
The heavenly moisture, that sweet coral mouth,
Whose precious taste her thirsty lips well knew,
Whereon they surfeit, yet complain on drouth.
He with her plenty press'd, she faint with dearth,
Their lips together glued, fall to the earth. (ll. 541-546)

The indulgent sexuality of the language can be read with Adonis as willing or unwilling lover. 'They' may refer to Venus and Adonis, or her lips; both are feasible readings, though the former is supported by the continued use of the plural pronoun, 'their', in the final line. 'He with her plenty press'd' may refer to her ample body pressed close against him, or to his having experienced more than enough of her lips.

That there is a sexual consummation between the lovers is hinted at repeatedly throughout the poem, not just embedded in language such as the above. In the central section

⁴ Katharine Eisaman Maus, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: New York, 2008), p. 630.

⁵ F. T. Prince (1969), p. 6 (n).

of the poem Adonis is ‘hot, faint and weary with her hard embracing,/ Like a wild bird being tam’d with too much handling’ (ll. 559-60) and thus ‘he now obeys, and now no more resisteth,/ While she takes all she can’ (ll. 563-4). This follows references which take their meaning from the Elizabethan pun which links death with orgasm;⁶ ‘Struck dead before, what needs a second striking?’ (l. 250) and ‘O thou didst kill me, kill me once again!’ (l. 499).

The above analysis demonstrates how a poem which is essentially about a parting of lovers is, for the main, concerned with a non-parting, and perhaps with a conjoining. Although the poem contains many images of movement, few of these come from Adonis and even fewer concern movement away from Venus. Adonis attempts to leave Venus twice. The first, ‘Away he springs, and hasteth to his horse’ (ll. 255-8) and the second ‘With this he breaketh from the sweet embrace/ Of those fair arms which bound him to her breast,/ And homeward through the dark laund runs apace’ (ll. 811-13). On both occasions the lexis is one of sudden urgency. The final parting itself, coming eight hundred lines into the poem, is over within the above-quoted three lines. Lauren Shohet appears to agree that:

the poem’s so-called “action”—Adonis’s sporadic bursts of motion away from Venus and toward the hunt—moves briskly forward precisely whenever Venus stops talking. Even Adonis’s most extended speech, the seven stanzas that culminate in his narratively decisive departure...seems terse and active in comparison to the preceding twenty-five stanzas of Venus’s attempts to dissuade him.⁷

Rather than ‘terse and active’, Adonis’ swift departure is the decisive and quick-willed action of one who has been persuaded before and that once the impetus has developed must move quickly in order to avoid the recurrent effects of those same persuasive techniques. While Venus talks and soothes, Adonis appears happy to stay ‘still’, it is when he finds the will to interrupt that he also finds the will to move and thus must act abruptly, ‘break[ing]’ the narrative, and the embrace, of Venus and departing quickly before she has the chance to change his mind again.

That Shakespeare chooses to dwell on the togetherness and sensuality of Venus and Adonis may reflect contemporary fashions in poetry: the poem was extremely popular in Shakespeare’s time, with nine editions being printed.⁸ Either Shakespeare was simply tapping in to the popularity of the *Metamorphoses* in the Elizabethan period, with Arthur Golding’s translation reprinted six times within Shakespeare’s lifetime⁹, or perhaps it was the sensual content of the *Metamorphoses* which rendered it so well liked at this time. Shakespeare, by adapting the narrative to focus on the sexual dynamic of the pair was providing his audience with just what they desired, similar perhaps to Christopher Marlowe, with his erotic epyllion, ‘Hero and Leander’. Shakespeare produces a revision of the myth that accords with a more Petrarchan lover, a familiar tradition by the late sixteenth century, with poets such as Thomas Wyatt, Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser producing sonnets where a desperate lover petitions a ‘frosty’ beloved. While the sequence of beseeching sonnets played on the absence of sexual gratification between mortals, ‘Venus and Adonis’ seeks engagement with this dynamic through Adonis’ inability ever to quench the desires of the goddess of love, ‘Whereon they surfeit, yet complain on drouth’, ‘A thousand kisses buys my heart from me...Is twenty hundred kisses such a trouble’ (ll. 517, 522). Adonis may have quenched her once but it is continuous love she desires, and that which he cannot give her, “I know not

⁶ Definition 7d, *OED* online, accessed 12th January 2013.

⁷ Lauren Shohet, ‘Shakespeare’s Eager Adonis’ in *Studies in English Literature 1500 - 1900*, Volume 42, Number 1, Winter 2002, pp. 85 - 102 (91).

⁸ Katharine Eisaman Maus (2008), p. 629.

⁹ Laurence Lerner, ‘Ovid and the Elizabethans’ in *Ovid Renewed*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988), p. 121.

love,” quoth he, “nor will not know it” (l. 409). Shakespeare’s reversal of the sexual dynamic of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence plays with expectations, freshly titillating an audience already familiar with the usual narrative. Extension of the sexual, rather than love, narrative of the myth, as Adonis yields and recoils while Venus pleads for more, allows Shakespeare to focus on the sensuousness of the myth, forming a narrative that was of enduring fascination with Elizabethan readers.

Writers and artists have often, used Ovid’s work as inspiration for their own work of art: it has provided ‘by far the most significant repository of subjects for artistic representation of any text in the Western tradition other than the Bible’.¹⁰ In *Tristia*, Ovid’s first book of



Figure 1: ‘Adonis Departing for the Chase’, J.M.W. Turner (1803-4), ©Tate. London 2012.

poems after his exile to Tomis by Augustus, Ovid compares the *Metamorphoses* to a visual representation, claiming that it provides a ‘greater’ image of the poet than any sculptural depiction, *carmina maior imago* (Tr. 1.7.11).¹¹ By reinterpreting his work as visual art, Turner takes Ovid’s statement literally. A review of a Royal Academy showing of the painting in ‘The Athenaeum’ reflects the interplay between visual and textual ‘art’; ‘having

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Andrew Feldherr, *Playing Gods. Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Politics of Fiction* (Princeton University Press: Princeton & Oxford, 2010), p. 243.

been painted by Titian and sung by Shakespeare, [the myth] has lost none of its beauty on Mr. Turner's canvas... The little cupids (sic) loosening the sandal of Adonis is a suggestion as significant as pages of words could express'.¹²

The origins of Turner's painting can perhaps be traced back to Turner's visit to the continent in the summer of 1802.¹³ Yet, Turner does not simply recreate either Titian's work or Ovid's myth. Turner reinterprets the visual presence of Venus and Adonis to reflect the paradox present in Shakespeare's line, 'Whereon they surfeit, yet complain on drouth'. Unfortunately it is not known if Turner read Shakespeare's poem but what is known is that a period of separation between the plays and the poems, which were not included in the first folio, had come to an end by the end of the eighteenth century, and that the poems were at that time being assimilated back in to Shakespeare's canon.¹⁴ In 1780 a supplement was published by Edmond Malone which 'subjoined' the poems to the plays.¹⁵ Turner does indeed express interest in poetry: throughout his career he painted representations of the works of Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell.¹⁶ It is, therefore, likely, that Turner will at least have been aware of Shakespeare's poem, if not before, then perhaps after, this important publication.

Just as Shakespeare symbolised the natural and unrestrained desire of his Venus with that of Adonis' horse, so too does Turner reflect the emotional status of his pairing with Adonis' dogs. While two of the dogs seem eager to depart – straining at their leashes while Adonis holds them back – the other two are content to sit or lie as they wait for their master finally to leave. The parting is thus presented as irresolute, a sense which is reflected in Adonis' upright posture, unlike Titian's painting, or Shakespeare's poem where, when Adonis decides to leave, there is significant forward momentum.¹⁷ Turner's choice of the subject of Venus and Adonis is both an homage to Titian's painting and a departure from his interpretation. While Titian cleaves more closely to the original text, showing Venus physically restraining Adonis as he leaves for the hunt, Turner's pair are far more relaxed. Venus' visible right eye appears to suggest a smile on her face: she reclines, making no perceptible effort to prevent Adonis' departure, elegantly draping her hands on his arms, rather than physically restraining him. Only one of the putti appears to attempt to rein Adonis in, loosening the sandal of his right foot. There is none of the urgency here which is present in Titian's painting, or of the departing movement of Adonis in Shakespeare's poem. Turner's painting possesses none of the sense of the hunter hunted which is to come, or even the sexual chase which has occurred. The figures here seem to reflect a stasis that is casual and relaxed, despite the apparent storminess of the background.

Both writer and artist capture the tempestuousness of their narratives through their own form. In the poem, the quatrain moves the narrative briefly forward, only to be held back

¹² Royal academy (1849), *The Athenaeum*, (1124), 494-496 (495), retrieved from

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/9006232?accountid=13042>, accessed 15th January 2013.

¹³ Turner made several sketches on the subject of Venus and Adonis in his 'Calais Pier' sketchbook, and though there has been some disagreement about the date of this painting, Butlin & Joll are most convinced by a suggestion that Turner was influenced in his subject choice by a Titian acquired by William Angerstein in 1801 and thus date the picture to 1803-5. Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll, *The Paintings of J. M. W. Turner, Revised Edition*, The Tate Gallery and Yale University (1984 [1977]), p. 114-5.

¹⁴ Ian Warrell states that 'the most notable omission' from Turner's personal library was a copy of the Shakespeare's complete works, and that 'he would have been largely dependent on his recollections of an evening at the theatre for the basic information about any incident he chose to depict'. *Turner and Venice* (Tate Publishing, 2003), p. 69.

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, ed. Edmond Malone, *Supplement to the edition of Shakspeare's plays published in 1778 by Samuel Johnson and George Stevens. : In two volumes. Containing additional observations by several of the former commentators: to which are subjoined the genuine poems of the same author, and seven plays that have been ascribed to him; with notes by the editor and others.* (1780).

¹⁶ National Gallery of Scotland, *Turner's illustrations for the poetical works of Thomas Campbell*, (Edinburgh, 1978); J. M. W. Turner, *A series of twenty-four engravings illustrating the poetical works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart. from designs by J.M.W. Turner, R.A.* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1852).

¹⁷ Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=1030>, accessed January 15th 2013.

by a summarising or reflective couplet, a turbulence that echoes the stop-start motion of Adonis. A similar turmoil is captured in Turner's painting, which, in hand made oils, swirls around a central focal point. Venus forms the lowest part of the curve that is completed by the billowing clouds and pale-skinned putti. The momentum is circular rather than progressive, with Adonis and his dogs contributing to the visual motion of the work. Despite the movement suggested by its title, this painting deliberately demonstrates the stasis of Adonis' position: he wants to depart but is also persuaded, by the sensuousness of the scene, to remain.

Turner's painting focuses on the sensuousness of the bower. The forest is lush, the trees heavy with verdure, flowers are prevalent and are strewn down towards the luxurious cloths on which Venus lies. The painting embodies a sense of plenty, which is further enhanced by the presence of so many putti; the trees are laden with these playful figures. Symbolically, they represent sexuality. They are there to help Cupid facilitate the onset of profane love,¹⁸ and their profusion in the painting is emblematic of Venus and Adonis' 'thirst' for each other.

The positioning of both the poem and the painting in a forest reflects the theme of *Book Ten* of Ovid's poem, in which the story of Venus and Adonis appears. The book begins and ends in gardens or nature and there is a noticeable involvement of movement. At the beginning Hymen 'flew from Crete through the measureless sky' (10. 2) to join the nuptials of Orpheus and Eurydice. The garden here represents danger and the marriage is over before any consummation can take place. The transformation of Adonis ends the book, with the flimsy transience of Adonis as an anemone. *Book Ten* also contains the story of Pygmalion, in which a piece of art, a sculpture, is brought to life by the intervention of the gods, thus prioritising movement and narrative motion over stasis, as well as the story of Atalanta, in which suitors must compete against the heroine in a running race in order to win her hand in marriage. The framing and content of the book, thus, highlights the vigour of the book's emphasis on motion and the resulting tension between this and the inaction of the revisionings of narrative movement.

Moments of stasis do occur in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with the literary trope of ecphrasis and Philip Hardie highlights the exploitation by the visual arts of this technique.¹⁹ Interestingly, however, while Ovid continually makes demands on the reader to stop and visualise the events of other stories within the *Metamorphoses*, he does not demand that the reader 'see' any part of his narration of the Venus and Adonis myth. This underlines the importance for Ovid of movement and transformation within this story, rather than for any moment of narrative pause, which an ecphrasis naturally embodies. Like Shakespeare, however, or even perhaps, as a result of Shakespeare, Turner's painting ostensibly represents a moment of stasis, with Adonis neither staying nor departing.

Turner's languid presentation focuses attention on the sexuality of the pair. This along with the lack of faces on the protagonists is in direct opposition to Titian's work, but serves here to highlight the sensuous corporeality of the figures. At 59" x 47", Adonis' muscular back and shoulders are large, and at the forefront of the work, however, it is the naked torso of Venus which confronts the viewer most vividly. She is reclined with her left breast visible and her legs coquettishly entwined, making no attempt to cover her modesty, despite the supposed imminent departure of Adonis.

¹⁸ Juan Carlos Martinez, "What's with the Cherubs?", *ARChives - Essays and Information on Art by Today's Experts and Professionals*, Art Renewal Center, 2004, <http://www.artrenewal.com/pages/archives.php?articleid=1435>, accessed 12th January 2013.

¹⁹ Philip Hardie, *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002), p. 173.

The middle to end of the eighteenth century saw an increased interest in sexual gratification as part of a healthy disposition²⁰ and perhaps what we can see here is Turner's representation of the salubrious nature of sexual love. James Graham, an eighteenth-century quack, lectured to fashionable crowds about the invigorating properties of happy sexuality, and gave instructions as to how it could be made more successful and enjoyable. He advocated the use of pornography, saying people should have 'their passions aroused and excited, by the sight of rich warm or what are called lascivious prints, statues and paintings'.²¹ Turner's departure from his 'present style' in this painting, in a genre with which he was neither familiar nor adept, suggests a desire to engage with a dialogue of which he was not a part.²² The sensuousness of the setting, the presence of the putti, the naked facelessness of the figures are all suggestive of a highly sexualised scene that could be interpreted as a 'lascivious' painting, such as those advocated by Graham. An earlier, perhaps preparatory, sketch for the work, entitled the 'Parting of Venus and Adonis', shows Venus sitting upright, not reclining in a bower, and is based directly on Titian's *Death of St Peter Martyr*, which Turner saw and admired in The Louvre in 1802.²³ This move away from the apparent religiosity of the earlier sketch seems to suggest a deliberate decision to sexualise the painting of the departure of Adonis with its more sensuous setting and postures.

With a public who were more willing to engage in open appreciation of sexual images, perhaps Turner was responding to those who admired his landscapes but also enjoyed a rather more titillating experience. Pornographic journals began appearing from the 1770s, starting with 'The Covent Garden Magazine or Amorous Repository', which contained sexy stories and advertisements for prostitutes and brothels. Sexuality was very much more open than in the subsequent Victorian period, with the Georgian public not requiring sexual exuberance to be punished either in life or in art.²⁴ Like Shakespeare's poem, it seems Turner's interpretation of the myth is also a reflection of the times in which he lived.

Both Shakespeare's and Turner's revisions of the Venus and Adonis myth make it relevant to their own time and space. The first line of Ovid's poem says how 'new forms' and 'changes of shape' are what impels him to write (1). Arthur Golding's translation has 'of shapes transformed to bodies strange'.²⁵ Shakespeare and Turner adapt Ovid's 'new form' into their own 'bodies strange', and by doing so they make their own transformations. While both adopt the underlying narrative of Ovid's story, they also fix their own *maior imago* of the poem, removing the sense of fluency of motion that accompanies Ovid's tale and rendering their image of movement as fixed in time by their own new narrative. Thus endures the paradox of transformation as a new kind of permanence, creating a new form of 'enduring memorial' to the original work.

²⁰ Paul-Gabriel Boucé, ed., *Sexuality in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Manchester University Press: Totowa, New Jersey, 1982), p. 7.

²¹ I am indebted for this paragraph to Boucé (1982), p. 7.

²² *The Times*, 5th May 1849, quoted in Butlin & Joll (1984), p. 114.

²³ Butlin & Joll (1984), p. 114.

²⁴ Boucé (1982), p. 7.

²⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding (Penguin: London, 2002), l. 1, p. 31.

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