SHAKESPEARE'S DEPARTURE FROM THE OVIDIAN MYTH OF VENUS AND ADONIS

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Abstract

With his particular treatment of the Ovidian myth of Venus and Adonis Shakespeare departs from the Elizabethan tradition of the allegorical Ovid and from the commonplaces of Renaissance love poetry. If this myth could have any moralizing interpretations for the Elizabethan public, Shakespeare´s alterations of the *Metamorphoses* renders the reconciliation between the myth and the Christian conception of love more difficult.

This article analyses in what terms Shakespeare departs from the traditional Platonic discourse in *Venus and Adonis* by means of several deviations from the original account of the story.

Shakespeare's rewriting of the Ovidian myth of Venus and Adonis constitutes an example of how Renaissance authors managed to adapt classical stories of pagan gods to modern Christian literature. The survival of the gods as literary characters and of the poetic records of their corrupted passions during the period of Christian consolidation became possible due to a complex process of allegorization.

The medieval tendency to interpret the lives of the pagan divinities written by Virgil, Homer or Ovid as moral teaching had its origin in the Stoics' attempt to reconcile philosophy with popular religion; philosophers considered it necessary to preserve these poets' worthy verse despite the immorality of some of their stories about incest, fornication or fleshy love. Thus they endowed mythology with edifying meanings. But this conciliating resource faced the opposition of the

pioneers of Christianity, St. Agustine among them, who believed it would be a hindrance for the process of eradication of polytheist religions and denied the moralizing intention of the mythological stories. However, as they realized that they could neither reject the foundations of their own culture embodied in Greek and Roman literary records nor ignore that their own doctrines were being preached metaphorically by means of similar fables and parables based on daily life anecdotes, the allegorical interpretation was finally accepted as a universal vehicle for Christian teaching. In the Middle Ages pagan texts became even authorities in the process of Christianization; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, was exploited as powerful propaganda for Christian beliefs. There appeared numerous allegorical versions of his tales such as Petrus Berchorius's *Ovidius moralizatus*, or the *Ovide moralisé*, written by an anonymous author. The task the Stoics carried out at the end of the pagan era was retaken in the Renaissance by Neoplatonists, who found spiritual meanings everywhere. Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino proclaimed that mythology embodied sacred truth and succeeded in guiding Biblical and pagan texts along parallel ideological paths.

However, this conciliatory notion of pagan poetry was put in jeopardy by the shift of literary values that took place with the rise of Humanism. The allegorical method had deprived the classical texts of their aesthetic value; it had transformed the pagan gods into mere instruments for education and, therefore, it had annihilated their worth as individual characters. Literature was then judged according to its capacity for embodying a universal Christian truth and a text's originality depended on the doses of moral teaching it offered. The rise of individualism in the Renaissance provoked the modification of several aspects of the traditional conception of literature. On one hand, this utilitarian way of judging textual value had to be reconciled with the new tendency to consider texts as sources of aesthetic pleasure; on the other, meaning ceased to be the main focus of attention and began to share its relevance with form and style. In addition, Humanists proposed that the worth of literary works depended on subjective parameters of interpretation whereas the traditional Christian criteria for judging literary masterpieces had been based on the objectivity and universality of the truths they proclaimed. Writers began to consider their own individual creativity as the main source of originality, even when the overwhelming influence of their religious education prevented them from feeling totally free to neglect Christian decorum. Thus, Humanists found themselves entrapped between the must of following the established canon of doctrinal literature and the need of expressing individual anxieties. Erasmus reveals this conflict in *The Praise of Folly*. According to D. Quint's (1983: 8-21) interesting study, he presents an ambiguous version of Folly; on one hand, Folly believes in the relativity of textual interpretation, which is a product of man's capacity to create individual fictions and depends on the historical setting of his writings; but at the same time, he also allows Folly to preserve the idea that any sort of literature should proclaim a divi-

ne truth. These two views are hard to reconcile, even when Erasmus tries considering allegory as a consequence of the subjectivity of every human being's interpretation.

To achieve a balanced coexistence between the Humanist emphasis on the individual and aesthetic worth of pagan texts and the Christian requirement to ascribe doctrinal aims to them became specially difficult in Puritan England for Calvinist poets such as Sidney, Spenser or Milton. Being vocationally attached to literature as the expression of deep personal feelings and as an instrument for aesthetic delight, they faced the limitations of their Puritan education. A. Sinfield (1983: 21) has coined the term 'Puritan Humanism' referring to those English artists who simultaneously felt "the force of protestant doctrine as well as the imaginative excitement of literature".

This conflict constitutes the primary focus of our study. It analyses the strategies Shakespeare used to adapt classical mythology to Renaissance poetic expression and to cope with the ideological clashes of his time. Forced by the succeeding allegorical tradition that had been definitely recovered by Neoplatonists, many Renaissance poets were compelled to create ambiguous texts that oscillated between Christian literary pragmatism and secular aestheticism. This is, for instance, the case of Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*; this love story is grounded on textual tensions between Neoplatonic spiritual and Ovidian sexual discourses, thus offering many possible interpretations.

In his study of the influence of classical literature on the Renaissance texts, David Quint (1983) asserts that the French Humanist François Rabelais best represented these writers' attempts to achieve a harmonious coexistence between the allegorical method and the purely aesthetic conception of mythology; however, in the prologue of *Gargantua*, a skeptic Rabelais sarcastically denies the moralizing intention of the classical authors:

> Do you honestly believe that Homer, when he wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* had in mind the allegories which have been foisted off on him by Plutarch, Heraclides, Ponticus, Eustathius, and Phornutus, and which Politian has purloined from them? If thou do believe this, you are far indeed from my opinion, which is that Homer could no more have dreamed of anything of the sort than Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* could have been thinking of the Gospel Sacraments [(1)].

Unlike Rabelais, many sixteenth century poets tended to adapt the extravagant stories of the pagan gods to the Christian system of pious truths following the medieval tradition of the moralized Ovid. In England, Arthur Golding's

(1) Translation by Jean Seznec in *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, p. 95.

translation of the *Metamorphoses* contributed to a great extent to make British poets consider classical mythology an appropriate vehicle to teach. However, only those contents that could be useful for doctrinal aims were thought worth to imitate; this, of course, meant a complete disregard of stylistic features. The poetic recreation of Ovid's stories did not imply the reproduction of his witty narrative or subtle verse. Nevertheless, there were Renaissance authors who dared deny their characters the allegorical meaning required by the Christian cultural spheres and who struggled to create individualized fictions. In a study by Daniel Javitch (1995) on the development of the myth of Perseus and Andromeda in Ariosto's *Orlado furioso*, the critic shows how the author deprives Ruggiero's and Angelica's personas of the moralizing intention by endowing them with an inconsistent ambiguity that enhances their human worth and makes it impossible for the reader to identify any of them with the allegory of a particular Christian value. And Ariosto achieves this effect by imitating Ovid's playful narrative, which consists in "emphasizing the normal, banal, and often erotic impulses of characters engaged in solemn and larger-than-life exploits" (Javitch, 1995: 175). Javitch considers Ariosto's work a successful attempt to restore Ovid's witty verse.

Shakespeare's dealing with the Ovidian myth of Venus and Adonis is also built upon ambiguous foundations. The frequent shifts in the narrative tone he uses to define both characters prevent us from considering them emblematic figures. Their function in the poem depends on the reader's subjective interpretation because the poet, imitating Ovid's witty verse, endows them with complex personalities whose real nature becomes difficult to apprehend. If one of the Latin poet's literary concerns was that of conferring human identity on gods in order to shorten the distance between heaven and earth, Shakespeare insists in creating characters with ambiguous personalities that defy the conventional allegorical system. On one hand, they seem to represent the Neoplatonic debate between chaste and lustful love (*charitas versus cupiditas*) -Venus embodying beastly sexual desire and Adonis the spiritual Petrarchan eroticism. In lines 793-804 Adonis bases his rational defense of the Platonic conception of love versus the tyranny of lust on Castiglione's (*The Courtier*, 4. 52) idea that sensual love never finds satisfaction whereas spiritual affection can be a permanent source of pleasure: 'Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,/But Lust's effect is tempest after sun' (799-800). The poet reminds the reader of this correspondence between lust and unsatisfaction when he describes the moment in which Venus avidly takes Adonis's promised kiss before his departure: 'And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth' (548). This conception could be taken as the moral teaching of the whole poem; Venus's inability to quench her desire and the swain's obstinate rejection of her embraces punish the goddess's fleshly passion. However, this point of view is not constant in the narration; the definitions of 'vice' and 'virtue' are continuously fluctuating. As Venus's lust is made manifest by means of

grotesque images that enhance Adonis's chastity, the latter's behavior is also conceived as a consequence of his arrogance and it sometimes constitutes a source of mockery.

Shakespeare's free adaptation of Ovid's myth develops into this particular conception of the two characters. The narrative procedures he uses here differ to a great extent from those of the original story. Analyzing the poet's departures from Ovid's version, this paper attempts to understand the ideological guiding lines of the poem, which do not always flow along the path of moral didacticism. One of the most determining of Shakespeare's innovations is Adonis's arrogance and immaturity; he appears as an egocentric youth who insists on avoiding Venus's company. In the *Metamorphoses*, he is conceived as a beautiful man, his teens already passed ('ya es un niño bellísimo, ya un joven, ya un hombre', 10. 523); meanwhile Shakespeare insists on his extraordinary youth calling him 'boy' (95), or frequently alluding to his 'unripe years' (524). Furthermore, the Ovidian Adonis receives quite willingly the goddess's expressions of love; he allows her to accompany him in his hunting, he takes her head on his lap and listens to the tale she tells in order to prevent him from chasing wild animals; but the English Adonis is determined to preserve his chastity and, therefore, he scornfully dismisses her. There are no known records of this version of the myth. Critics have usually turned to Titian's painting to find the origin of Shakespeare's new version. The Italian painter depicts Venus desperately trying to grasp Adonis from her strange sitting position, with her back to the audience; the man is painted looking at her with disdain and briskly departing to his hunting. William Keach (1977: 55) found a parallelism between this scene and Shakespeare's description of the same moment in lines 811-814:

> 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;
> Leaves Love upon her back, deeply distressed.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to ascertain that there is a direct influence of the painting on Shakespeare's version of Adonis. However, it is doubtless that he borrowed some of the new features from other Ovidian myths. The story resembles in several details the tale of Echo and Narcissus told in the *Metamorphoses* (3. 339-510). First, his Adonis, like Narcissus, is in love with himself and shows proud disdain for his female suitor. Venus herself highlights their similarity when she reproaches the youth for self-loving: 'Narcissus so himself himself forsook,/And died to kiss his shadow on the brook' (161-162). Both are also quite young; Narcissus is only fifteen when he encounters the nymph. In addition, not only does the poet identify both characters, but he also insists on reproducing some details of the tale of the egocentric Narcissus. For instance, Venus's despe-

rate wandering through the forest after having been abandoned by her beloved (829-852) is reminiscent of Echo's punishment. As Echo was condemned to pronounce only the last words of her speeches, the goddess's punishment consists in listening to the repetition of her own moans: 'Ay me', she cries, and twenty times, 'Woe, woe',/And twenty echoes twenty times cry so' (833-834). Her desolation equals that of the forest nymph after having been rejected by her arrogant beloved. In this scene, Venus assumes the role of victim of an immature boy's wantonness. It contributes to the benevolent representation of the goddess —in opposition to the images of beastly lust that repeatedly define her— that Shakespeare develops in order to provide the reader with an alternative reading to the moralizing one.

Another feature that both the Ovidian Narcissus and Shakespeare's Adonis have in common is the nature of their metamorphoses; Shakespeare departs from the Ovidian version of Adonis making the flower spring up from the disappeared body (1165-1168) instead of from his blood, as it happens in the Roman poet's version (10. 728). Narcissus's body does also disappear and, in its place the flower that takes his name sprouts (3. 509-510).

Shakespeare's insistence on the convergence of both stories must have been due to the aim of adapting Adonis to the portrait of a real person he probably had in mind when he wrote this poem. The features he modified supply some clues for deducing who this person was. He probably was quite young and had probably had something to do with a rejected love affair. Whoever he were, likely he was the same person who inspired the sonnets in which the poet tries to convince someone about the advantages of making good use of sexual reproduction. In fact, sonnets 1 to 17 contain obvious parallelisms with the message in lines 751-768 of *Venus and Adonis*. In these lines, Venus invites his beloved to be generous and to make use of his capacity to reproduce, disregarding the strict impositions of 'fruitless chastity' (751). The uselessness of chastity is a commonplace in Shakespearean poetry as he regarded descendants as the only weapon for human beings to fight against the passage of time and against death. The image of the barren land also appears in sonnet 3: 'For where is she so fair whose uneared womb/Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?' (5-6). Venus also refers to the convenience of making a profitable use of our body in terms that recall St. Matthews' parable of the talents: 'But gold that's put to use more gold begets' (768). In sonnet 4, the poet also uses monetary language to persuade his addressee to take advantage of the grants nature has loaned him:

> For having traffic with thyself alone,
> Thou of thyself thy sweet self doest deceive.
> Then how when nature calls thee to be gone,
> What acceptable audit canst thou leave?' (9-12).

The unavoidable passage of time, looming death, human beings' debt to nature, and the importance of leaving footprints for posterity are some of the main concerns of the sonnets, also embodied by Shakespeare's Narcissist Adonis.

Probably, the Earl of Southampton was who inspired these lines. In fact, he appeared as the dedicatee of the poem and he was also the recipient of *The Rape of Lucrece*. We do not exactly know what type of relationship he maintained with the poet; he may have just exerted a mere patronage. But, what we do know for sure is that he was a young man, quite handsome -as the Hilliard portrait evidences, whose reluctance to marry Lord Burghley's granddaughter in the years in which this poem was written (the early 1590s) may have proved a disappointment to his contemporaries, as John Roe (1992: 14) speculates. He could therefore be identified with this new version of Adonis for he was likely one of the poet's reasons for borrowing certain features from the myth of Narcissus. His concern about the harmful consequences of chastity and his intention to celebrate the pagan meanings of Venus could have been the other ones.

But this is not Shakespeare's only departure from the Ovidian myth in the poem. In fact, the original story seems to be just a thematic axis around which he develops the expression of his particular concerns. The divergences concerning the first part of the poem, before Adonis's exit from the narrative scenery, are mainly aimed at characterizing Venus as a lustful lover.

First, the poet omits any explanation of how she fell in love with the boy. In the *Metamorphoses* her love is attributed to a fortuitous cause; when Cupid kissed her mother, one of his arrows grazed her breast opening a deep wound on it (10. 525-528). But in her first appearance in the poem, Shakespeare describes Venus as already in love, avoiding detailed situational preliminaries: 'Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,/And like a bold-faced suitor gins to woo him' (5-6). This abrupt presentation aims at emphasizing the irrational nature of her passion; the poet does not supply the reader with any logical motifs for it. To have explained any would have meant to justify her anxiety, to lighten the load of her animal-like desire. And nothing is farther from the main intention of the first lines of the poem, where Shakespeare makes us foresee that this is going to be the story of an uncontrollable passion. The description of the sun's face as 'purple-coloured' (1) leads us to identify it with Cupid, as 'purpureal' is a frequent epithet for the child in Ovidian poetry; and in the Renaissance it acquired the connotation of voluptuousness (Roe, 1992: 79). In *Amores* (2. 1. 41) the Latin poet refers to Venus's son as 'purpureus Amor'.

The incestuous conception of Adonis, born from his mother's relationship with her own father (*Metamorphoses* 10. 298-502), constitutes another omission in the poem; Shakespeare's intention seems to be to mark clear boundaries between the lascivious Venus and the pure Adonis. On several occasions, Venus mentions

his human birth: 'Art thou a woman's son, and canst not feel?' (201). Amazingly, his human nature is the source of a divine beauty comparable to the sun´s light: 'There lives a son that sucked an earthly mother/May lend thee light, as thou dost lend to other' (863-864). But his shameful origin would not have fitted in with the role of chaste youth assigned to him in the first part of the narration.

The development of actions in Shakespeare's poem diverges to a great extent from the original story. In the Ovidian tale, Adonis welcomes Venus's company; she helps him with the hunting, setting the dogs on the preys and chasing tame animals; but she avoids the boar. On the contrary, the English Venus is rejected; she also takes up hunting, although not as an entertaining activity, but as part of a desperate instinct for survival. The poem develops the classical motif of love as hunting, with the hyperbolic connotation of uncontrolled desire; Venus is frequently referred to as a wild animal in search of food. Her avid kisses are compared to the eagle's cruel attack:

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

The image of the vulture-like goddess appears several times and becomes a commonplace in the poem. Epithets and verbs usually enhance her bestiality; she has 'fiery eyes' (219), she 'feedeth on the steam' of his breath 'as on a prey' (63) or 'murders with a kiss' (53). She embodies all those wild animals she wants to prevent Adonis from hunting; even her violent kisses parallel the final killing kiss of the boar, for whom she seems to feel empathy: 'He thought to kiss him and hath killed him so/ … Had I been toothed like him, I must confess,/With kissing him I should have killed him first ' (1110, 1117-1118). By contrast, the Ovidian Venus is delicate; she folds up her dress in order to run over hills and bushy crags and gracefully grasps him (10. 534-536). Ovid's subtle allusion to her grabbing the young man ('hunc tenet') develops in Shakespeare's poem into a series of grotesque embracings: 'Over one arm the lusty courser's rein,/Under her other was the tender boy' (31-32) or 'She sinketh down, still hanging by his neck' (593). When in the Latin tale both lovers lay down on the ground over a bed of grass and flowers, their position is amorous and calm; her head on his lap, she starts telling him Atalanta's story, alternating kisses with words (10. 557-559). Ovid creates a quite bucolic setting dominated by serenity and by an aesthetic harmony between both bodies. However, Shakespeare's is rather the opposite. Their embracings are always one-sided, it is Venus who forces them, and acquire a kind of absurd and

cold eroticism: 'Each leaning on their elbows and their hips' (44); 'He on her belly falls, she on her back' (594). And she does not subtly combine kisses with words but 'kissing speaks, with lustful language broken' (47).

The aggressive linguistics and imagery that surround Venus's characterization in Shakespeare's poem is therefore his own creation; it constitutes a significant deviation from the original tale and offers just a single explanation. It seems to obey the Platonic tradition of censoring lustful love. Was it then the poet's intention to follow the Christian requirement of endowing literature with edifying meanings? Of course, this interpretation is not totally mistaken because the whole poem echoes the parable of Adan and Eve, Venus representing female temptation. When at the starting point she urges Adonis to descend from his horse, she offers to grant him knowledge, as the apple in the Genesis was supposed to do, and mentions the serpent, a Christian symbol for temptation: 'If thou wilt deign this favour, for thy meed/A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know./Here come and sit, where never serpent hisses' (15-17). Though she tries to calm him down telling him there is no serpent, who else is more animal-like than her, who is identified with the eagle (54) or even the boar (1117-1118) and whose alliterative words reproduce the snake's sibilant voice?

This aspect of Venus's characterization seems to fit in the Christian tradition of literary didacticism; however, the nature of the digression introduced by Shakespeare's own voice, not by Venus, as is the case of Ovid's tale, makes this hypothesis uncertain. The Ovidian Venus tells the story of Atalanta and Hipomenes with the intention of preventing Adonis from hunting wild animals. Shakespeare's digression, however, aims at mocking his lack of masculinity and at reproaching him for neglecting the payment of his biological debt to nature. The irrational obedience to instincts, harshly condemned by means of the representation of a grotesque Venus, is now projected from an approving viewpoint. The narrator makes the couple witness Adonis's horse mating with a mare that casually passes by. The animal, which had remained quietly tied to a tree while his master dealt with Venus, gathers force enough to break its bit and runs to fulfil nature's laws: 'The iron bit he crusheth 'tween his teeth,/Controlling what he was controlled with' (269-270). Its action parallels that of Venus pulling Adonis down from his horse: 'Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force/Corageously to pluck him from his horse' (29-30). It is significant that Shakespeare himself narrates the digression. If it were part of Venus's speech it would run the risk of being interpreted just as one of her desperate arguments to achieve her purposes. However, the poet's active presence reinforces the teaching of the tale; in the horses' episode he himself takes the control of the game of persuasion and expresses his well-known obsession with the human need to reproduce, thus supporting Venus's position. His lesson addresses those that, like Adonis, reject making use of their capacity to conceive. Although the horse was a Neoplatonic symbol of

passion, considered 'amore bestiale' by Pico de la Mirandolla, here it appears as an example of natural behavior. In fact, the narrator highlights the similarities between the animals' strategies of conquest and human courting habits: 'Being proud, as females are, to see him woo her,/She puts on outward strangeness, seems unkind' (309-310). In the description of the horses' mating, the poet echoes the didactic and enticing tone of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* reproducing the kind of courting strategies the Latin poet suggests in this treaty.

Shakespeare's position becomes then evident in Adonis's childish reaction to his horse's escapade. He seems to be censoring the young man for his neglect of love, describing him as selfish, superficial and arrogant:

> 'For shame', he cries, 'let go and let me go;
> My day's delight is past, my horse is gone,
> And 'tis your fault I am bereft him so.
> I pray you hence, and leave me here alone,
> For all my mind, my thought, my busy care,
> Is how to get my palfrey from the mare.' (379-384)

This is a well defined aspect in the youth's characterization and Shakespeare often censors it. He calls him 'silly boy' (467) or 'poor fool' (578) for having been unable to appreciate the goddess' irresistible sensuality, which had even tamed the very god of war (97-114), for its true value. In the passage where he describes Venus's race towards the forest where Adonis is supposed to be hunting, natural elements render his lack of manliness ridiculous showing that they really recognize the eroticism of her body**:**

> And as she runs, the bushes in the way,
> Some catch her by the neck, some kiss her face,
> Some twine about her thigh to make her stay;
> She wildly breaketh from their strict embrace … (871-874)

This scene indirectly puts the blame on Adonis for rejecting a body that is objectively enticing. In fact, some of Shakespeare's narrative devices are aimed at censoring Adonis's excessive temperance. Venus criticizes his coldness by references to the myth of Pigmalion, comparing him to an impassible marble statue:

> Fie, liveless picture, cold and senseless stone,
> Well-painted idol, image dull and dead,
> Statue contenting but the eye alone,
> Thing like a man, but of no woman bred. (210-214)

Erasmus considered the myth of Pigmalion as a metaphor for the excessive use of reason and the rejection of human passions; in *The Praise of Folly* he compared the passionless wise man the Stoics proclaimed as a model of virtue to 'una figura humana de mármol, inmóvil y totalmente ajena a cualquier sentimiento humano', and he shows his contempt for that sort of man: '¿Quién no huiría horrorizado de un hombre así, como de algo monstruoso y espectral? Sería un hombre sordo de todo sentimiento de la naturaleza, a quien ningún afecto, amor o misericordia, le causaría mayor impresión *que si fuera un enhiesto y duro pedernal, o una marmórea roca de Paros* (2)' (30).

Adonis's neglect of his duties concerning love is mocked in the poem by means of sharp reproaches or by the description of grotesque situations. As he does not fulfil conventional expectations about the male role in sexual affairs, Venus occasionally reminds him how he should behave: 'Thou art no man, though of a man's complexion,/For men will kiss even by their own direction' (215-216). Even when their position invites to sexual intercourse —their bodies lying on the grass, his over hers, face to face— he is unable to fulfil conventional expectations. His impotence is mocked by the use of the verb 'to mount' (596), which echoes the previous scene of the horses and denounces Adonis's inability to follow the animals' previous example:

> Now is she in the very lists of love,
> Her champion mounted for the hot encounter.
> All is imaginary she doth prove;
> He will not manage her, although he mount her. (595-598)

Whereas Adonis is blamed for neglecting his natural duties, Venus is allowed to recover her human feelings. Her moans, when she thinks her beloved is dead, acquire a deep pathos that makes the reader feel sympathy for her. Even the nature of her love seems to be transformed at the end of the poem. J. Roe (1992: 21) finds that she finally is enabled to love Adonis according to the Neoplatonic parameters. She acknowledges that Adonis's reluctance was due to his obedience to a 'principle of self-realisation', in Roe's words, and not to his marked Narcissism: 'To grow unto himself was his desire' (1180). Her love is no longer located in her senses, but in her spirit. Thence, her resolution to keep the flower forever near her heart as a symbol of her recently adopted contemplative love. As Roe states, Adonis ceases to be an object of desire and becomes a motif for true love only when he is dead. He therefore redeems her of her sinful feelings just as Christ did with the whole of humankind. In fact, their deaths have the disappea-

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(2) Erasmus quotes Virgil's *Eneida*, 1, 471.

rance of their bodies in common. The fact that Adonis's body melts is a departure from the Ovidian tale; Ovid makes the flower spring from his blood, just as Venus desired. This Christian reminiscence, however, does not modify the conclusion drawn by a general analysis of the ambiguities of the poem.

Despite its Neoplatonic end, the narration's inconsistent presentation of the characters and its continuous movement forward and backward towards the articulation of a defense of spiritual love, hinders any attempt to consider it an allegory in the terms of the Christian literary tradition. Roe points out that the end of the poem does not aim at recovering a Neoplatonic teaching: 'The Neoplatonic vision, which is glimpsed sporadically and, in the main, comically earlier in the poem, functions seriously at the close not as its own triumphant principle but as an enhancement of tragic pathos'.

Whether this ambiguous treatment of the classical myth of Venus and Adonis was Shakespeare's intention or it was the unconscious product of his attempt to maintain a balance between religious demands and Humanist impulses we will never know.

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