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978-0-521-85551-8 - The Poems: Venus and Adonis, the Rape of Lucrece, the Phoenix and the Turtle, the Passionate Pilgrim, a Lover's Complaint: Updated Edition

Edited by John Roe

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

This edition contains the following works of poetry: *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, and *A Lover's Complaint*.

In the early 1590s Shakespeare may have felt that he was destined for a career as a poet rather than in the theatre. His two big narrative poems, written within a year of one another in 1593 and 1594, both carry fulsome dedications to the Earl of Southampton. These are the only two works Shakespeare is known to have dedicated to anyone. Securing the patronage of a rich and influential nobleman would have seemed the obvious and most direct way to preferment, and the evidence suggests that this is what he was bent on doing. Yet in the middle of the decade, following the reopening of the theatres after their closure because of the plague, his stage-writing gathered fresh impetus, and he never again wrote narrative poems of the length or ambition of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

At the same time as he was writing *Venus and Adonis* he began his sonnet sequence, which was not, however, published until 1609. (The scope and ramifications of the *Sonnets* warrant a separate editorial volume.) Eagerness on the part of contemporary readers to encounter them (we know from Francis Meres's 1598 remark about the 'sugred Sonnets' that they were circulating in manuscript) may well have occasioned the publication of an odd collection calling itself *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599, reprinted with additions in 1612. Although it was published under Shakespeare's name, it appeared almost certainly without his authority. This miscellany of twenty sonnets and lyrics contains only five poems which are positively by Shakespeare. Some of the other pieces have been ascribed either with certainty or conjecturally to other authors, and the rest, about half the volume, are by persons unknown. The number of sonnets in the collection on the theme of Venus and Adonis testifies to the enormous popularity of that poem while hinting that the love of Venus for Adonis may have been thought to be the principal subject of the sonnet sequence. Of particular interest is that the two opening sonnets of *The Passionate Pilgrim* are indeed Shakespeare's, since they constitute close enough versions of Sonnets 138 and 144. What gives the collection its continuing value, despite much pseudo-quality, is that it should have included these two examples ten years before any of the other sonnets saw print.

1601 witnessed the appearance of yet another curious collection. This was Robert Chester's *Loves Martyr*, dedicated to Sir John Salusbury and put together by various hands, the most strenuous contributor being Chester himself. The volume contains poems by Ben Jonson, George Chapman, John Marston, and Shakespeare, who contributed *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. It is a further mystery how Shakespeare came to be involved in this poetic symposium, and even harder to decide what his intentions were in the poem itself (see the arguments below, pp. 41–50). It is unique in the

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Shakespearean canon and appeared nowhere else in his lifetime (apart from the second printing of Chester's book in 1611); but few have ever doubted his authorship.

Although Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were among the first of his poetic compositions, they were the last of his non-dramatic works to be published, and there is evidence that he continued writing them into the 1600s. When they did finally appear in 1609 they were followed in the same volume by a narrative poem entitled *A Lover's Complaint*, which the publisher also attributed to Shakespeare. For a long time its authenticity was strongly contested. But recent scholarship has made emphatic advances in favour of its being by Shakespeare, and the poem is now confidently regarded as his. Its date of composition is still under dispute, estimates ranging from the mid-1590s to as late as the year of publication, though a majority prefers the beginning of the 1600s. Arguments have recently been put forward favouring a return to the formula of its first publication, i.e. placing it once again with the *Sonnets* (see below, p. 61). However, one of the principles of the present edition is to observe the generic links and similarities between the poems; from this perspective, bearing as it does the dual influence of the Ovidian and complaint traditions, *A Lover's Complaint* stands interestingly between *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

The poem of ninety-five lines that begins 'Shall I die?', and that had hitherto existed in manuscript only, has been included by Wells–Taylor in the new Oxford *Complete Works* and in their *Original-Spelling Edition* as an authentic Shakespearean piece. Following the poem in the same scribal (Secretary) hand appears the signature 'William Shakespeare'. The early seventeenth-century manuscript collection which contains it is Rawlinson Poetical MS 160 in the Bodleian Library.

The confident endorsement of the poem's attribution by Taylor (*TLS* 20 December 1985) gave rise to a keen scholarly exchange. For the debate see *TLS* 20 December 1985–31 January 1986, in particular R. H. Robbins's reply of 20 December 1985. Wells–Taylor marshal the arguments in favour of the poem's authenticity in their *Textual Companion* (pp. 450–4). For opposing arguments see Donald W. Foster, "'Shall I die?'" Post mortem: defining *Shakespeare*' (*SQ* 38 (1987), 58–77), and Thomas A. Pendleton, 'The non-Shakespearean language of "'Shall I die?'" (*RES* New Series, 15 no. 159 (1989), 323–51).

I have not included the poem in this edition because I am not persuaded it is Shakespeare's.¹

The danger of including works of dubious attribution is that habit builds on habit. The inclusion of the 'Shall I die?' verses by Oxford has in turn made way for the adoption as canonical of various slight funerary verses popularly, but with no great plausibility, ascribed to Shakespeare from the early seventeenth century. One of these, the epitaph on Elias James, is also found in the Bodleian manuscript, from which Malone printed it for its curiosity value in his *Prolegomena* to the 1790 *Plays and Poems*. It is

¹ When this edition first appeared the only other editor to have had time to respond to Wells–Taylor's proposals was the Penguin editor, Maurice Evans, who printed the verses, though evidently with some reluctance. See *William Shakespeare: The Narrative Poems* (1989), pp. 62–6. Since then other editions have appeared, all of which, with one exception, have opted for various reasons to print them, either centrally or in an appendix. See below, pp. 79–80.

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therefore all the more interesting that he should have ignored the manuscript's other attribution. As for this and other epitaphs and the like verses (see also below, p. 46), it still seems sensible to share Chambers's caution (I, 550–5); accordingly they have not been reproduced here.

The themes treated by the two long narrative poems exercised an extraordinary power over the Renaissance artistic imagination. The illustrations included in this edition serve as iconographic comments on certain of the significant and dramatic moments in the poems.

Venus and Adonis

THE POEM

By virtue of its exuberant stylistic confidence, *Venus and Adonis* has always been recognised as a leading example of the erotic narrative tradition. It shares with Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, with which it is often compared, a brilliance and accomplishment which other poems in the genre imitate but do not match. With these two effortlessly fluent masterpieces English poetic *sprezzatura* comes of age. Discerning compatriots would have leafed through their pages with feelings of incredulous admiration and pride. Later, Romantic poets such as Keats and Coleridge gave special praise to *Venus and Adonis* for its quickness of wit, imaginative bravura, and liveliness of detail.

Sidney's belief in the power of art over nature, a dominant credo of the period, finds itself repeatedly vindicated.¹ Take for example the famous stanza describing Adonis's horse:

Look when a painter would surpass the life
 In limning out a well-proportioned steed,
 His art with nature's workmanship at strife,
As if the dead the living should exceed—
 So did this horse excel a common one,
 In shape, in courage, colour, pace, and bone,

(289–94; my italics)

The purpose of such descriptions is to bring out the life of things in such a way as to exceed even the power of life itself. Keats writes to his friend Reynolds on the celebrated snail image (1033–4) that Shakespeare 'has left nothing to say about nothing or anything' (see commentary). Coleridge puts a similar point differently when he commends Shakespeare's subtlety in rendering vivid detail: 'You seem to be told nothing, but to see and hear everything.'² Such observations suggest that not a little of the poem's appeal lies in its convincing evocation of a living moment. Yet the argument that life as portrayed in poetry excels natural life brings us back to the poem's art. Much of its power derives from its verbal dexterity, not just in hitting off successful details such as

¹ See *Apology*, p. 100. Sidney develops Horace (*Art of Poetry*, lines 408–15) who sees the two as necessary to each other.

² Coleridge, II, p. 15.

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the evocation of the horse (259–300), or the snail simile (1033–34), but in the way in which words play on each other.

Much of this has to do with the role played by rhetoric in shaping the poetic character of *Venus and Adonis*. For the Elizabethans rhetoric constituted one of the great discoveries of antiquity. Perhaps ‘the application of rhetoric’ is a better way of putting the matter, since the precepts of classical orators such as Quintilian and Cicero had been available throughout the Middle Ages. What is curious about the application of rhetorical principle in Elizabethan poetry is that it differs in manner even from the ancients whose principles it revives. Latin poets such as Virgil, Ovid, and Horace indisputably observe the relations of words to each other and produce effects comparable to those described and recommended in theories of oratory. Yet the Elizabethans’ self-conscious display of wit in creating verbal effects exceeds anything in classical literature and is probably greater than in contemporary Europe. Petrarch certainly knew how to pun, as his wordplay on the name Laura makes clear, but Elizabethan poetic punning seems to be of unprecedented intensity. Not only the pun but the stylish use of a wide range of rhetorical tropes characterises the poetry of the 1590s. Even Wyatt, who puns frequently, does not display anything like the variety of figures of speech which occur in the opening sonnets of *Astrophil and Stella*. And of course this dexterity is not confined to the genre of poetry: verbal virtuosity is the distinguishing mark of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (written probably between 1593 and 1595). Neither ancient comedy nor the comedy of another contemporary European literature demonstrates wordplay on so sophisticated a scale. The fact that linguistic principles in Spain, Italy, or France were at the time comparatively more settled may account to some degree for the uniqueness of the English position. As studies of Shakespeare’s vocabulary have shown (see below with respect to *A Lover’s Complaint*), the English language was expanding at a considerable rate and its grammatical and syntactical character undergoing fundamental modification.¹ Culturally England had absorbed the impact of the Reformation and was a strong independent Protestant country within a geographical alignment of states dominated by Catholicism. In such circumstances it is not surprising that the trope of oxymoron, or antithesis, inherited from Petrarchan poetry, should register changes in how it was used and a marked increase in frequency. Punning similarly indicates division or unsettled meaning. When Venus pleads for a kiss from Adonis she puns on the different senses of the word ‘seal’:

Pure lips, sweet seals in my soft lips imprinted,
What bargains may I make still to be sealing? (511–12)

The word means variously the sign of authority which certifies a document and the conclusion of a bargain. Hinted at is the idea of things being sealed in silence, or made impermeable. Such punning works antithetically in that it enables a range of meanings to be comprehended at once (which no other deployment of language can do), while

¹ The claim being made here is not that English possessed greater resourcefulness than other contemporary literary languages (the writings of Rabelais would sufficiently rebut that), but rather that certain tropes, and above all the habit of punning, occur in English at a special rate and in an accentuated manner.

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reminding us pointedly that meanings contradict and conflict with each other. Sealing a bargain denotes an agreement between equals, whereas the privileging seal of a king denotes inequality; the official pomp and display of a documentary seal differs from the furtive sealing of lips to keep a secret. The pun accordingly signals the ideal capacity of language to bring different and discordant meanings together while yet underlining the divisions that exist in reality. Poetry such as that of *Venus and Adonis* keeps uppermost in mind the relationship between the word and the world. The differences separating Venus and Adonis, differences of temperament, inclination, and disposition, differences in ethical outlook (including each's own internal contradictions), cannot be resolved by the debating parties within the poem nor in the judgement of its readers. Attempting to take a consistent ethical reading of, for example, Venus's sensuality is bound to fail. The play of language in the poem sees to that. The subversions of wordplay are no trite affair, nor are they mere surface merriment. For wordplay is not, as we have just seen, only divisive (though current fashions in linguistic theory concerning instability would insist that it was). It provides the only solution there is – an aesthetic one, which is beyond the scope of continuous, unfinished, formless action. The language of the poem encapsulates human reality, fragmented, inconclusive, and frustrating, and submits it to the order of art. If we are to see an ideal principle in the poem it is this: not an approved human choice as represented by one of the protagonists more than the other, for the poem does not ultimately evaluate such things, but a balanced contemplation of feelings, motives, and actions from contrasting or opposing angles.

Venus and Adonis is both a tragic and a comic poem. Because people are affected differently by it, and differently at different times, responses vary; we have already noted some of them. Like all poems which seem in any way to advocate sexual licence, its sensuality is held against it. Venus has powerful detractors, such as C. S. Lewis and Don Cameron Allen,¹ who argue that Shakespeare expects us to disapprove of her. We cannot do that any more than we can disapprove of Adonis. If we were to reverse allegiances, for instance, and say that Venus expressed the poem's essential spirit of exuberance, then we would be forced to include Adonis's courser along with her, the logic of this being, to adapt Sidney, 'to wish ourselves a horse' (*Apology*, p. 95). It is important, therefore, to distinguish between the overall character of the poem and locally occurring statements or appeals.

But how does the poem affect us by and large? It works by contraries, celebrating the principle of erotic pleasure embodied in Venus while countering this with that refinement of spirit expressed in Adonis. Between the two polarities degrees of approximation can be observed. Adonis's integrity is tempered by his childish petulance over the loss of his horse (325–6); but such chafing and lowering of brows is none the less attractive, as Venus finds. Venus's voluptuous appeal is qualified by her disingenuousness; yet that aspect of her too finds an answering chord in the reader who is no longer sexually innocent. The erotic principle, embodied in Venus, is never confused with mere lasciviousness, as it is in Marston's more voyeuristic poem, *The Metamorphosis*

¹ See Lewis, *English Literature*, pp. 498–9; and Allen, 'On *Venus and Adonis*' in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies*, pp. 100–11.

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[More information](#)1 Titian's *Venus and Adonis*

of *Pigmalion's Image*. Nor, despite attempts to link the poem with Nashe's salacious *Choise of Valentines* (see below, p. 12), is there much to satisfy pornographic inclination. The closest the poem comes to this is the moment when Venus sketches for Adonis a picture of sensual possibilities:

‘Fondling’, she saith, ‘since I have hemmed thee here
 Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
 I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer:
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
 Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
 Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.’

(229–34)

Even as she holds out the prospect of her body as a place in which to graze she turns the grazer from an eager scavenger into a timid animal finding refuge from ‘tempest and from rain’. The duality of such imagery keeps a constant balance between the twin appeal of erotic enjoyment and tender restraint, the poem shifting back and forth easily between the two. Its success depends on neither principle’s becoming dominant.

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But there is a moment when the balance may seem to be upset and the ethical question matter more. This comes when Venus manages to prolong her kissing of Adonis, enacting for herself something of the enjoyment she promises him in the stanza quoted above:

Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey,
 And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth;
 Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,
 Paying what ransom the insulter willeth,
 Whose vulture thought doth pitch the price so high
 That she will draw his lips' rich treasure dry.

And having felt the sweetness of the spoil,
 With blindfold fury she begins to forage;
 Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil,
 And careless lust stirs up a desperate courage,
 Planting oblivion, beating reason back,
 Forgetting shame's pure blush and honour's wrack.

(547–58)

These stanzas touch on the more troubling side of sexuality, namely the process whereby possession leads to loss, or, in this precise instance, how the grip of desire removes rational control, which constitutes human dignity. The description matters less as an account of Venus's attempt to ravish Adonis, and more as an indication of how the self is lost as brute instinct gains ground – 'reason', 'shame', and 'honour', all signs of self-consciousness, being temporarily obliterated. Such moments derive their inspiration in part from the *Metamorphoses*, which repeatedly shows characters undergoing transformation as a result of a sexual encounter, most famously in the pursuit of Daphne by Apollo in Book I. This frightened virgin escapes her fate at the god's hands by being changed into a tree; the subsequent flowering symbolises the irresistible force of sex, which, though denied its immediate object, does involve an enforced change in her condition: Daphne gives up her maidenly freedom to come and go as she pleases, and takes root. Without going so far as to enforce a physical change in his protagonists as they experience passion (Adonis only flowers in death), Shakespeare none the less portrays the powerful psychological transformation which a person temporarily undergoes in the grip of sexual longing. The same argument is applied more despairingly in *The Rape of Lucrece* and in *Sonnet 129*:

Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
 Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
 Past reason hated,

and further,

Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,
 Had, having, and in quest to have extreme,
 A bliss in proof, and prov'd, a very woe,
 Before, a joy propos'd, behind, a dream.

(Sonnet 129. 4–7, 9–12)

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The difference between these observations and those of the passage quoted from *Venus and Adonis* is that Venus never experiences the 'having'. She is on the point of but never possesses 'bliss'. However furiously her face may reek, such 'desperate courage' never fully confronts conscience, for the sexual act remains unconsummated, 'unhad'. Within a couple of stanzas of her leaving off kissing him Adonis tells Venus that tomorrow he means to hunt the boar:

whereat a sudden pale,
Like lawn being spread upon the blushing rose,
Usurps her cheek; she trembles at his tale,
And on his neck her yoking arms she throws.
She sinketh down, still hanging by his neck;
He on her belly falls, she on her back.

(589–94)

At this point the poem fully recovers its tone of tender comedy and pathos, and the recovery is made possible by the fact that desire remains unglutted. The voracious Venus of only a moment before adopts a more passive posture. Even as she 'devours' Adonis the narrative varies the significance of her action and its effect upon him by introducing images which would be unthinkable in a sonnet such as 129 and inappropriate to *The Rape of Lucrece*:

Hot, faint, and weary with her hard embracing,
Like a wild bird being tamed with too much handling,
Or as the fleet-foot roe that's tired with chasing,
Or like the froward infant stilled with dandling,
He now obeys.

(559–63)

Taming is injurious to a wild bird, though it is kind to calm a tetchy child; a deer at the beginning of a chase is eagerly hunted, but when seen at the end, exhausted, it arouses pity. This process of revising analogies places a check on those images which maintain an idea of the brutality of appetite, so that not only do they modify the impression of a threatened Adonis conjured earlier, but at least one of them even justifies Venus's attentions.

One of the poem's most discerning and judicious critics, Hallett Smith, finds that the provincialism of such images makes it the inferior of *Hero and Leander* for sophistication:

There is nothing like the variety of color, of surface finish, that Marlowe's poem exhibits. And curiously, Shakespeare's queen of love herself seems considerably less divine than the semi-human figures of Hero and Leander.

(*Elizabethan Poetry*, p. 86)

The maternal Venus observed above supports Smith's impression, as does the occasional gawkiness of Adonis. Yet while Shakespeare's poem may defer to Marlowe's on the point of surface accomplishment (Hero's costume and Leander's anatomy are both richly evoked in comparison with the largely undescribed persons of Venus and Adonis), as a poem of atmosphere and mood rather than of expressive detail it shows a capacity for introspection lacking in the earlier work. This has again to do with Coleridge's instructive observation (quoted above), 'You seem to be told nothing, but

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to see and hear everything', but also with Shakespeare's more sympathetic narrative stance, which shares the hopes and frustrations of Venus equally with the youthful, naive idealism of Adonis. By contrast, Marlowe's amused and caustic commentator keeps a knowing distance from both his protagonists, whom he regards as equally untutored. His point of view (to invoke a Jamesian term) is provided by the mature, homosexual Neptune, whose desire for Leander is more self-confident than desperate. Marlowe gives the impression of knowing all the answers, whereas Shakespeare's narrator shows slightly more concern to explore the questions. Shakespeare, who allows freer play to instinct, filtering his theme less than Marlowe through the lens of scepticism, creates a dimension of pathos as the action moves from the common Marlovian ground of inadvertent slapstick to that of the brutality of chance and accident at the moment in which the boar catches Adonis unawares. In their different and opposing ways both Venus and Adonis exercise the freedom nature offers to take one's pleasure according to one's inclination. But what she senses, and what he is still too young to have learnt, is equally true: nature's freedom recognises no distinction of value or intention; violent accidents or impulses also share it. The world that acknowledges the force of Venus's sexual appeal is the same one that includes the boar's mindless savagery. This is not to say, as is often claimed, that the two are identifiable, or that the boar stands as an allegory for an essential destructiveness in Venus's passion; but they are in some respects coextensive: what nature permits the one she must allow to the other.

The effect of pathos is realised variously in the depiction of the two principals, partly in the not-altogether callow innocence of the youth (see for example Adonis's condemnation of lust in lines 793–810), but also in Venus herself, who renounces her procreative advocacy following the death of the boy, prophesying instead that love will henceforth act cruelly and arbitrarily. To some degree Shakespeare follows the practice of classical authors in observing this contradictory behaviour of a deity: a goddess being still a woman and therefore subject to whim might turn petulant when crossed, acting out of character and even contrary to her own interests. But that does not sufficiently explain the force of Venus's dire prediction, which issues in a spirit of lament as much as threat, as if she is discovering that things have changed beyond her control. It is not Adonis now but fate that has crossed her, and, understanding this, she declares her new-found opposition to love as much in terms of a submission to destiny as an edict of her own rule:

Since thou art dead, lo, here I prophesy,
Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend;
It shall be waited on with jealousy,
Find sweet beginning, but unsavoury end;
Ne'er settled equally, but high or low,
That all love's pleasure shall not match his woe. (1135–40)

In the attempted 'rape' scene, as the prospect of raging sexuality gradually fades, it is followed by a series of statements which appear to vindicate Venus in terms of *carpe florem*:

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2 Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*. 'For on the grass she lies as she were slain' (*Ven.* 473)

What wax so frozen but dissolves with temp'ring,
 And yields at last to every light impression?
 Things out of hope are compassed oft with vent'ring,
 Chiefly in love, whose lease exceeds commission:
 Affection faints not like a pale-faced coward,
 But then woos best when most his choice is froward.

When he did frown, O had she then gave over,
 Such nectar from his lips she had not sucked.
 Foul words and frowns must not repel a lover:
 What though the rose have prickles, yet 'tis plucked.
 Were beauty under twenty locks kept fast,
 Yet love breaks through, and picks them all at last. (565–76)

As she sinks fainting at the news of what he intends the next day, she finds herself at last lying beneath him; this is enough to revive her, but to no avail:

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:
 That worse than Tantalus' is her annoy,
 To clip Elizium and to lack her joy. (595–600)

The broad comedy secures the complete release of the poem from the darker effects that temporarily cloud it. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, as we shall see, such disturbances are