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# The Poems

*The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*

VOLUME 27

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON



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Cambridge New York Melbourne Madrid Cape Town Singapore São Paulo Delhi

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108005999](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108005999)

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2009

This edition first published 1966  
This digitally printed version 2009

ISBN 978-1-108-00599-9

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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Frontmatter  
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# THE POEMS



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by  
Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521094931](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521094931)

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First published 1966  
First paperback edition 1969  
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 65-14345*

ISBN 978-0-521-07551-0 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-09493-1 paperback

## CONTENTS

PREFATORY NOTE	PAGE vii
INTRODUCTION	ix
I. <i>Venus and Adonis</i>	x
II. <i>The Rape of Lucrece</i>	xx
III. <i>The Phoenix and the Turtle</i>	xxvi
IV. <i>A Lover's Complaint</i>	xxxiii
THE POEMS	
<i>VENUS AND ADONIS</i>	1
<i>THE RAPE OF LUCRECE</i>	45
<i>THE PASSIONATE PILGRIM</i>	109
<i>THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE</i>	127
<i>A LOVER'S COMPLAINT</i>	133
THE COPY FOR THE POEMS	146
NOTES	151
<i>Venus and Adonis</i>	156
<i>The Rape of Lucrece</i>	177
<i>The Passionate Pilgrim</i>	204
<i>The Phoenix and the Turtle</i>	220
<i>A Lover's Complaint</i>	223
GLOSSARY	232



## PREFATORY NOTE

In this admirable edition of Shakespeare's Poems, which seems likely to appear at much the same time as my own edition of the Sonnets, my friend Professor James Maxwell adds the last volume to the series of texts which he has been good enough to undertake during the past decade, and so enables me to reach the end of the long road entered upon in 1919. I am also heavily indebted to him for help, especially during my period of blindness, for corrections in earlier volumes as they came up for reprint; but my gratitude to him is boundless.

J.D.W.

*November 1965*

## INTRODUCTION

Both the narrative poems belong to the period when, with only brief intervals, the London theatres were closed because of plague—August 1592 to April 1594—and there is no reason to doubt that it was this emergency which led Shakespeare to turn to the composition of these poems: a more dignified and, he may well have hoped, a more remunerative form of writing. If we could accept the story told by Rowe on the alleged authority of Davenant that Southampton ‘at one time, gave him a thousand Pounds, to enable him to go through with a Purchase which he heard he had a mind to’,<sup>1</sup> his most sanguine hopes must have been more than realized, but the story has little claim to belief.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, the greater prestige of the non-dramatic poem is quite enough to explain the unnecessarily puzzled-over description of *Venus and Adonis* in the Dedication as ‘the first heir of my invention’. (It did, in fact, precede in publication the first plays to appear: *Titus Andronicus* and the Bad Quarto of *2 Henry VI* in 1594.)

After being extremely popular in their own day—by 1617 there had been ten (surviving) editions of *Venus and Adonis* and six of *The Rape of Lucrece*—these poems, though regularly reprinted in collected editions since 1778, sank into relative obscurity. With a very few exceptions, notably the brilliant comments by Coleridge in ch. xv of *Biographia Literaria*, all the substantial criticism of them belongs to the present century, so that the excellent sketch by J. W. Lever in

<sup>1</sup> E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare* (1930), II, 266–7.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dover Wilson, *The Essential Shakespeare* (1932), p. 66, treats it as possible, though with the sum probably exaggerated.

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William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

## THE POEMS

*Shakespeare Survey*, 15 (1962), of criticism since George Wyndham's edition of 1898 comes close to covering the whole field, and makes it unnecessary to attempt a new survey.<sup>1</sup> *The Phoenix and the Turtle* is also largely a twentieth-century discovery. *The Passionate Pilgrim* contains no certain example of Shakespeare's work not found elsewhere and calls for no comment.

## I. VENUS AND ADONIS

The main source is, of course, the version of the story in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, x. 510–62, 705–39. Other episodes in the *Metamorphoses* which contribute something are Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (iv. 285–388) and Narcissus and Echo (iii. 341–510).<sup>2</sup> Another mythological figure that has been regarded as of importance is that of Hippolytus.<sup>3</sup> As elsewhere, Shakespeare would seem to have used both the original (see notes on ll. 47, 1116) and Golding's translation. The reluctance of Adonis is probably drawn from the behaviour of Salmacis (and possibly Hippolytus)—Ovid's Adonis, though the passive partner, is wholly acquiescent.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is also much relevant material cited by H. E. Rollins in the New Variorum edition (1938).

<sup>2</sup> All three passages are reproduced in Golding's translation by G. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, I (1957).

<sup>3</sup> D. C. Allen, 'On *Venus and Adonis*', *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson* (1959), pp. 106–7.

<sup>4</sup> See Rollins, New Variorum edition (1938), pp. 392–3, for a disdainful Adonis in *Hero and Leander* (i. 11–14) and in Greene. F. T. Prince, Arden edition (1960), p. xxxii, n. 3, adds Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, III. i; but this is not quite correct. Venus there takes the initiative, but eventually 'So did she steale his heedelesse hart away' (37. 1).

## INTRODUCTION

xi

As far as derivation goes, then, this is a wholly Ovidian poem, and it is a poem for whose understanding the question of poetic kind is particularly important. The Ovidian mythological narrative is one of the most popular genres of the 1590's, and Shakespeare, though not its initiator, is among its first distinguished exponents. Except for actual translations, the narratives of the *Metamorphoses* had not been used as models for imitation until Lodge's *Scilla's Metamorphosis* (1589), whose influence on later examples of the genre is not easy to trace, though *Venus and Adonis* is in the same metre. It is in 1593 that it comes fully into its own with the only two poems of high distinction which it was to produce: *Hero and Leander*, Ovidian in spirit though not in source, and *Venus and Adonis*. It is, unfortunately, impossible to be sure of the chronological relationship between them. Shakespeare's poem was registered on 18 April. Marlowe is usually believed to have been occupied on *Hero and Leander* during the last months of his life, which ended on 30 May, and the poem was registered on 28 September, though it was not published, as far as we know, until 1598. It is clear, then, that if either poet knew the work of the other—as a few parallel phrases suggest—it must have been in manuscript. One would, of course, like to believe that the two poets showed each other their work in progress, and discussed it, but the only safe course is to treat the two as substantially independent and probably simultaneous compositions.

It is of the essence of an Ovidian narrative to be witty and pointed, but also to tell a story that has a bearing on the world as a whole. The two aspects must be held in focus. Indeed, much of the unbalanced criticism of *Venus and Adonis* has come from those who have held either that such a light and witty poem cannot have any serious meaning at all, or that a poem with the

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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

deeper implications that they rightly detect in it cannot really (or successfully) be light and witty at the same time. The word 'witty', rather than 'comic' or 'humorous', which have been popular in recent criticism, seems to be the one to keep hold of—it was the 'wittie soul of Ovid'<sup>1</sup> that Meres saw re-incarnated in Shakespeare—though the element of undisguised comedy is not to be underrated, either in Marlowe or in Shakespeare. We must certainly avoid the misreading of both poems of which C. S. Lewis is guilty. He rightly singles out the 'hardness'<sup>2</sup> of *Hero and Leander*, but wants us at the same time to banish 'our sense of humour',<sup>3</sup> and when he reaches *Venus and Adonis*, he finds its recurring words and images—'satiety', 'sweating', 'glutton', etc.—disgusting.<sup>4</sup> Such a response grossly exaggerates the prominence in the poem of the elements referred to, but I cite it here more especially for its rejection of even the possibility that Shakespeare was deliberately exploiting, among other things, the sheer comedy of sexuality. Whether wholly successfully or not is another matter, but surely it is a very stuffy reader who does not respond, say, to the erotic topography of ll. 229–40.<sup>5</sup>

Few descriptions of *Venus and Adonis* are as apt as what Hallett Smith writes of Ovid's own story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus: 'The tone of the narrative is, as always with Ovid, a mixture of sensuous delight, humor, preciousness, and airy sophistication.

<sup>1</sup> E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare* (1930), II, 194.

<sup>2</sup> *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), p. 487.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* (1951), p. 59, rightly talks of the 'joyful and mocking comedy'.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 498–9.

<sup>5</sup> For brief appreciative comments, see J. Middleton Murry, *Shakespeare* (1936), pp. 88–9.

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William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

xiii

The details and imagery are pictorial, not dramatic.... There is rhetorical heightening...but the rhetoric is controlled and kept in place by the speed and verve of the narrative.'<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Shakespeare is the most Ovidian of all the Ovidians.<sup>2</sup> But, notoriously, Ovid could be *moralisè*: how important is this for Shakespeare? *Venus and Adonis* is certainly not a moral story in any crude sense<sup>3</sup>—it is not a dissuasive from lust (or, for that matter, from chastity)—but it is not just an amusing narrative in which one of the principal figures happens to be a goddess. For this reason one must be disquieted, even apart from the question of how broadly comic Shakespeare's effects are, by such an account as that of Rufus Putney, who hails Venus as 'Shakespeare's first great comic character' and invokes such parallels as Falstaff and Juliet's nurse.<sup>4</sup> J. W. Lever's insistence is very much to the point, that 'the poem is, in fact, not a

<sup>1</sup> *Elizabethan Poetry* (1952), pp. 65–6. Smith's chapter on 'Ovidian Poetry' is the best treatment of the context both of *Venus and Adonis* and of *The Rape of Lucrece*.

<sup>2</sup> Smith himself would not endorse the full laudatory implications of this: see his pp. 86–9, where he finds that Shakespeare 'betrays something of his own provincial background' (p. 86).

<sup>3</sup> That, for instance, of Golding's prefatory address: 'By Venus [are meant] such as of the fleshe to filthie lust are bent'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Venus Agonistes' in *University of Colorado Studies in Language and Literature*, IV (1953), 53, 50. His earlier essay, 'Venus and Adonis: Amour with Humor', *Philological Quarterly*, XX (1941), 533–48, gives a useful account of the genre as a whole. A recent essay in the same vein is Eugene B. Cantelupe's 'An Iconographical Interpretation of *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare's Ovidian Comedy', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XIV (1963), 141–51, which is not in fact very technically iconographical and which treats the poem as 'satiris[ing] Neoplatonic love' (p. 150).

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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

comedy or a tragedy. It is not a drama. It is occupied with narrating a myth, and characteristically the aim is to maintain a certain detachment or “distancing” of sympathetic response.<sup>1</sup> Venus is not just an amorous female of ripe years—she is Love; Adonis is not just a beautiful boy—he is Beauty;<sup>2</sup> the Boar is not just a Boar—he is, well, let us not be too precise, but he is something that can slay Beauty and frustrate Love. This is not a matter of ‘reading things into’ the poem. It is the paradox of Venus’s situation that

She’s Love, she loves, and yet she is not loved. (l. 610)

In so far as this is true, the death of Adonis is not hyperbolically but accurately summed up by her:

For he being dead, with him is Beauty slain,  
 And, Beauty dead, black Chaos comes again.  
 (ll. 1019–20)

It is not just a piece of embroidery but part of what makes this story what it is that the death of Adonis should explain why love is what it now is in this flawed world (ll. 1135–64). As Lever puts it, the figures of myth ‘interpret life through a fictional paradigm, telling how nature became as we know it, how death or winter came into the world, how paradise happened to be lost’.<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, part of the charm of Ovidian myth that we have a double vision: Venus is very much the frustrated lover *within* the myth which purports to explain how it first came about that love can be frustrated. And when we think of the controversy there has been in Milton criticism about how Adam and Eve

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare Survey*, 15 (1962), 81.

<sup>2</sup> This is a departure from tradition: see A. C. Hamilton quoted below, p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespeare Survey*, 15 (1962), 81.

## INTRODUCTION

xv

can fall without already seeming fallen beings, we may well find it a considerable advantage for a poet to be able to present such a myth in a setting basically comic rather than tragic (and avowedly fictitious rather than supposedly veridical). But does this save the coherence of *Venus and Adonis*? Is it not, at least in its climax, a tragedy, as some critics have claimed? When we are reminded at l. 1020, as we must be, of Othello's 'Chaos is come again', are we comparing the wholly incomparable? This is where the broadly comic interpretations, notably that of Rufus Putney, begin to break down. Granted that Venus indulges in gross hyperbole (e.g. ll. 1093–1104), which in one sense we cannot take 'seriously', does this make it burlesque or mock-heroic? Here we are driven back to the first really penetrating piece of criticism of this poem, ch. xv of *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>1</sup> Coleridge was more interested in 'the specific symptoms of poetic power' than in *Venus and Adonis* as a poem, but what he says is highly relevant to the poem as a mythical narrative. He writes of 'the alienation, and, if I may hazard the expression, the utter aloofness of the poet's own feelings, from those of which he is at once the painter and the analyst', and, though perhaps unduly concerned about the indelicacy of the subject, adds that 'Shakespeare has here represented the animal impulse itself, so as to preclude all sympathy with it, by dissipating the reader's notice among the thousand outward images, and now beautiful, now fanciful circumstances, which form its dresses and its scenery; or by diverting our attention from the main subject by those frequent witty or profound reflections, which the poet's ever active mind has deduced from, or connected with, the imagery and the

<sup>1</sup> See also other versions in T. M. Raysor's edition of Coleridge's *Shakespearian Criticism* (1930; Everyman edition 1960).



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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

incidents'.<sup>1</sup> And elsewhere, restricting himself less to the specific question of 'the animal impulse': 'he works exactly as if of another planet, as describing the movements of two butterflies'.<sup>2</sup> This is Lever's 'distancing'. We do not take the characters 'seriously', in the sense in which dramatic characters can be taken seriously, but the alternative is not to take them comically: seeing them as mythical beings is something generically different from either. Thus in the *Hippolytus* we do not regard Aphrodite as a character on the same level as Hippolytus and Phaedra; but this does not make her a mere abstraction or piece of supernatural machinery: she is 'not a member of the Pantheon of whom Euripides disapproves, but a potentially disastrous element in our nature'.<sup>3</sup> So in *Venus and Adonis*, not to take Venus 'seriously' in one sense—to treat the story as mere comic fable—would be to turn one's back on a whole dimension of human experience which the poem is about. There is a 'Shakespeare the Irrationalist' in the sense in which E. R. Dodds wrote of 'Euripides the Irrationalist',<sup>4</sup> who 'explored those dark tracts of the spirit that lie outside the narrow illuminated field of rational thought'.

Having said so much, I must stop short of some of the interpretations heavily fraught with cosmic significance that recent critics have offered. Ovid, no doubt, was a 'philosopher' in his way, and the Pythagoreanism of the final book of the *Metamorphoses* is not mere eyewash.

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (1907), II, 15–16.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, Everyman edition (1960), I, 193. H. N. Coleridge gave a padded-out version of this in *Literary Remains* (1836): see *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other Dramatists* (World's Classics edition, 1931), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (1939), p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> *Classical Review*, XLIII (1929), 97–104; p. 100 quoted.

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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

xvii

Still, Ovid was not Euripides; neither was the Shakespeare of this poem the 'sage and serious Spenser' of the Mutability Cantos. Of the most stimulating of the 'deeper' interpretations of the poem, that by H. T. Price,<sup>1</sup> Lever reasonably raises the question 'whether these depths might be compatible with its surface brilliance'.<sup>2</sup> But there is one recent discussion of the poem which does justice to the mythical element while judiciously avoiding over-reading. This is A. C. Hamilton's 'Venus and Adonis' in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 1 (1961). Hamilton rejects the view that the poem was 'written against lust': if it was, then 'all [Shakespeare's] contemporaries were deceived'. Departing from the traditional identification of Venus with Beauty, and equating Venus with Love and Adonis with Beauty, Shakespeare makes use of 'the Platonic doctrine that love is the desire for beauty' (p. 9). 'Adonis sees Venus as lust....But Shakespeare does not, and neither may readers of the poem' (p. 10). 'The Boar expresses all these forces which seek to pluck the flower of Beauty. Accordingly, it functions as a poetic symbol through which Shakespeare explores the mystery of evil' (p. 13).

This still leaves indeterminate exactly what

<sup>1</sup> 'The Function of Imagery in *Venus and Adonis*', *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, xxxi (1945), 275-97.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare Survey*, 15 (1962), 21. This is the place to mention, but not discuss, the ingenious account of the numerology of the poem by Christopher Butler and Alastair Fowler, 'Time-Beguiling Sport: Number Symbolism in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*', *Shakespeare 1564-1964: A Collection of Modern Essays by Various Hands*, ed. E. A. Bloom (1964), pp. 124-33. On the seasonal significance of the myth, this usefully quotes Sandys's commentary on *Metamorphoses*, x (p. 125).

Cambridge University Press  
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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

xviii

## THE POEMS

Shakespeare has to *say* about the 'mystery of evil' through this symbol. It is at this point that one must ask how the slaying of Adonis is related to his rejection of Venus. Perhaps this should not be pressed—after all, this is how Adonis was traditionally slain—still, the opposition of love and hunting has been put in the forefront from line 4:

Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn.

And it is because of his rejection of Venus that Adonis perishes. It is here that it would be specially helpful to decide whether, as D. C. Allen thinks,<sup>1</sup> the Hippolytus story has made an important contribution to the story as Shakespeare sees it, for there the fate of Hippolytus is a punishment (not a just one but a divinely inflicted one) for his rejection of love. Certainly the one myth cannot be simply applied to the other—Venus is far removed from a vindictive Aphrodite, and the symbolic reading of H. T. Price must be firmly rejected: that Venus as 'the irrepressible desire to possess and to destroy is represented in three figures; she is the eagle (ll. 55–60), the horse (ll. 259–318), the boar (ll. 614–42, 1105–18)', and the boar becomes in Racinian vein 'Venus in her most horrible symbol'.<sup>2</sup> We cannot possibly depart from the surface meaning of the story in such a way as to make Venus and the boar anything but enemies; and if Venus toys with the conceit of the boar as lover (ll. 1109–20), this can be paralleled by 'Death the bridegroom' in *Romeo and Juliet*—Death is none the less Death. I suspect that the traditional story is treated as sufficient to make us accept the vulnerability of

<sup>1</sup> *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson* (1959), pp. 106–7.

<sup>2</sup> *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, xxxi (1945), 292.

## INTRODUCTION

xix

beauty without linking it too closely with Shakespeare's (primarily comic) innovation of the unconquerable coldness of Adonis. In fact they fit in quite well with each other; even if we are not to think of Adonis's death as in any way a retribution, it certainly drives home the need for Beauty to propagate itself, which has bulked large in Venus's urgings; to this extent the customary linking of the poem with Sonnets 1-17 is fair enough.

I have stressed the role of the central myth in the poem because it is by keeping hold of this that it is easiest to avoid one-sided interpretations of various sorts. But such an account is of course far from exhausting the richness of the poem. The vividly realized rural setting, which led some earlier critics to imagine Shakespeare writing the poem in the Stratford of his early years, is essential to the effect, and the episode of the horse shows the dramatist's sense of the telling power of concrete *exemplum*.<sup>1</sup> It is these local felicities that have seemed to many critics to bulk too large in the poem, and to distract attention from its main narrative line. I do not myself feel that this happens, but clearly Shakespeare has gone at least as far as he safely can in naturalizing Ovid in an English setting. Even the sceptical critic must surely admit that any incongruity between the worlds of comedy and of myth is in some degree mitigated by such things as the easy, lightly touched unsentimental pathos—for which perhaps Burns affords the only parallel—of the description of the hare, and the unforced naturalism of the stallion and the mare. And if the final lament over the death of Adonis is in danger of striking the unattuned reader as over-strained and operatic, it can still be seen as falling

<sup>1</sup> Not only the dramatist's, of course: it is what Sidney in the *Apology* praises as the special virtue of the poet as such.

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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

xx

## THE POEMS

within the boundaries of Shakespeare's conception of comedy—a conception that, perhaps about the same time, was exemplified in the shadow that falls across the riotous farce of the Show of the Nine Worthies in *Love's Labour's Lost* with the news of the King's death. Such a comparison must not be allowed to blur the distinction between myth and comic drama—yet in Shakespeare's treatment of both there is the same generalizing power. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, just because the King is not even a character in the play, his death is all the more apt to stand for Death as such, and its impact on the business of everyday life. So, in *Venus and Adonis*, the distance from reality intrinsic to the mythological figures enables us to contemplate the vulnerability of Beauty without having to think away the comic reality presented by the whole structure of the poem.

## II. THE RAPE OF LUCRECE

The question of sources is a little more difficult for *The Rape of Lucrece* than for *Venus and Adonis*, because here we have a single story told by two Latin authors, Ovid (*Fasti*, II. 721–852) and Livy (I. 57–60), as well as by several writers in English.<sup>1</sup> There can be no doubt that Shakespeare read Ovid, and that he also had access to certain material available in Livy but not in Ovid. Whether his knowledge of Livy was first-hand is harder to prove. As has been shown by T. W. Baldwin in particular, the relevant passages in Livy were freely quoted by Renaissance commentators on Ovid, and there are other derivatives (see note on ll. 1850–1). Of

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, I (1957), prints Ovid, in the original and in a translation of 1640, Chaucer, and Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (fairly closely translating Livy).

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William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

xxi

the two Middle English versions, Shakespeare had pretty certainly read Chaucer's (see notes on ll. 197–210, 365, 515, 596–630), and quite possibly Gower's (see notes on ll. 106–13, 170).

But what is most important about Shakespeare's re-handling of the story is not his use of earlier versions in detail, but the radically different impression that his poem as a whole makes. Not only is it greatly expanded, but it displays a type of interest in the figure of Tarquin that is quite new.<sup>1</sup> It is here, rather than in the story of Lucrece, that the poem points significantly forward to later Shakespearian tragedy. But before considering this aspect of it, we must look at it in the context of the 1590's.

The question of genre arises with *Lucrece* as with *Venus and Adonis*, but with differences that can be linked with the lesser degree of success of the later poem. *Lucrece* can be placed in the tradition of the complaint poem, which had leapt into prominence with Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* (1592). This was certainly known to Shakespeare, and Daniel in his turn seems to have drawn on *Lucrece* in revising and expanding his poem in 1594.<sup>2</sup>

The complaint poem, like the mythological-erotic poem, can be broadly classified as Ovidian, as it is by Hallett Smith in the title of ch. 11 of his *Elizabethan*

<sup>1</sup> The Argument, among its other divergences from the poem, completely lacks any such interest. For its sources, and for the view that it is not by Shakespeare, see J. M. Tolbert, *Studies in English* [University of Texas], xxviii (1950), 77–90. For the view that it 'may transmit an early outline for the narrative superseded in some details by the actual poem', see E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text* (1965), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (1932), p. 152, n. 31.

*Poetry*.<sup>1</sup> But it is a much more mixed genre. The subject-matter of its first exemplar, Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond*, admits Ovidian influence. In Hallett Smith's words: 'Because of the special nature of the new complaint poems, their concern with love and chastity, the Ovidian tradition had an opportunity to influence and color the complaint' (p. 103). But, though Shakespeare's contribution to it has a specific Ovidian source, the tone of the genre remains remote from Ovid. The grim shadow of the *Mirror for Magistrates* tradition hangs over it, and in its short career—the last example Hallett Smith discusses is Middleton's juvenile *The Ghost of Lucrece* (1600)—it produces no such assured masterpiece as *Hero and Leander* or *Venus and Adonis*. It is significant that the most accomplished poems that can be linked with it are Drayton's 'Heroical Epistles', in which complaint material is held within a firm framework supplied by Ovid—the *Heroides* instead of the *Metamorphoses*—so that the result is markedly superior to Drayton's earlier and much more diffuse *Piers Gaveston* (1594), which is strongly under the influence of Daniel and Shakespeare.

It would have been surprising, then, if Shakespeare had managed to achieve the same degree of unity and coherence as he has in *Venus and Adonis*, and he certainly did not.<sup>2</sup> But if *The Rape of Lucrece* is a less satisfactory poem, it is more interestingly related to Shakespeare's dramatic work. Its intrinsic qualities and defects are admirably assessed in F. T. Prince's *Arden*

<sup>1</sup> But he sometimes, as on p. 104, contrasts the 'Ovidian poem' with the complaint.

<sup>2</sup> The interesting essay by Horst Oppel, 'Das Bild der brennenden Troja in Shakespeares *Rape of Lucrece*', *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, LXXVII–VIII (1951–2), revised in *Shakespeare, Studien zum Werk und zur Welt des Dichters* (1963), seems to me to make excessive claims for the poem.

## INTRODUCTION

xxiii

Introduction (pp. xxxiii–viii): ‘while the digressions in *Venus and Adonis* strengthen the whole, those in *Lucrece* consistently weaken it’; ‘the greatest weakness in Shakespeare’s *Lucrece* is . . . her remorseless eloquence’; and, most important of all, ‘the poem offers, in turn, two centres of interest’: Tarquin and *Lucrece*. It is, in fact, the tragic potentialities of Tarquin’s role that make the second, and longer, half of the poem so unsatisfying. As Fr. Christopher Devlin puts it, Shakespeare ‘is more concerned with Tarquin’s soul than *Lucrece*’s body’,<sup>1</sup> and indeed the probing concern with Tarquin’s soul brings out more clearly than would otherwise have been necessary the degree to which *Lucrece* is simply *Lucrece*’s body, or, at best, the guardian of a valuable physical possession,<sup>2</sup> regarded in something like the fashion Coleridge credited to Beaumont and Fletcher, who ‘always write as if virtue or goodness were a sort of talisman or strange something that might be lost without the least fault on the part of the owner. In short their chaste ladies value their chastity as a material thing, not as an act or state of being.’<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, of course, is not satisfied to make *Lucrece*’s chastity just a possession for her, and the better passages of this second half of the poem effectively convey her sense of intrinsic pollution. But the effect is blurred. It is possible to tell the story, as do Ovid and Chaucer, without raising any embarrassing questions; and of course the combination of subjective innocence and objective pollution can be the stuff of great tragedy, as in the story of Oedipus. But Shakespeare, by treating the situation of Tarquin in such an Augustinian fashion,

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Robert Southwell* (1956), p. 272.

<sup>2</sup> See especially the presentation of the body-soul relation in ll. 1163–76.

<sup>3</sup> *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (1936), p. 81.



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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

xxiv

## THE POEMS

has made inescapable the Augustinian question about Lucrece: 'si adulterata, cur laudata? si pudica, cur occisa?' (see note on ll. 1723-4). The inconsistency reveals itself in the stanza in which Shakespeare makes the transition from Tarquin to Lucrece:

He thence departs a heavy convertite;  
 She there remains a hopeless castaway;  
 He in his speed looks for the morning light;  
 She prays she never may behold the day.  
(ll. 743-6)

The term 'castaway', with its strong theological connotations, is quite inappropriate to this tale of pagan honour, which can only be acceptable if its basic assumptions go unchallenged. It might still have been possible to present Lucrece's suicide as not, indeed, exemplary, but still as the only choice left open to her,<sup>2</sup> and there are passages in which the pathos of her predicament does emerge. As F. T. Prince says (*Arden* Introduction, p. xxxvi), 'the most moving passages are those in which she is silent, or nearly so: the interviews with the maid and with the groom. Here we are shown her grief momentarily from without, or indirectly, checked by social circumstance.' But the force of these passages is destroyed by the 'remorseless eloquence' elsewhere. The highly wrought set pieces, on Opportunity and Time, and on the Fall of Troy, have their own impressiveness, and it is easy to see how Shakespeare came to feel that they represented the only way the subject could be treated, but they emphasize rather than mitigate the failure of the poem as a whole.

Yet this failure sharpens our attention to those elements in the poem which seem to belong to the nature

<sup>2</sup> As good a case as can be made out for a reading of this sort is presented by Harold R. Walley, *PMLA* LXXVI (1961), 486-7.

## INTRODUCTION

xxv

of Shakespearian tragedy as it is later to develop, more markedly than anything in *Titus Andronicus* or even in *Romeo and Juliet*. It may be broadly true that 'if *Lucrece* is a tragedy, it is of course a tragedy by the author of *Titus Andronicus*, and not by the author of *Lear* or *Othello*',<sup>1</sup> but it is still what casts our minds forward to more mature Shakespeare that is of the greatest interest. The subject has recently been discussed by Harold R. Walley,<sup>2</sup> who traces Shakespeare's account of 'precisely what is involved in the commission of an act like that of Tarquin', and 'how it comes about that such an act is ever committed'.<sup>3</sup> Walley also deals with the later part of the poem, which concentrates on 'the central interest of tragedy, the plight of the victim',<sup>4</sup> but he is not notably more successful than other critics in showing that this *is* the 'central interest' of this particular poem. Indeed, taking 'victim' in its natural sense, this would seem to be something that distinguishes the poem from later tragedy, rather than something that links them. Where, in Shakespearian tragedy, does the central interest lie in the fate of a victim who is other than the principal agent? But if we are prepared to be satisfied with the more limited local successes of the first part, there is much to reward us. The epic plunge *in medias res*, in the opening stanza, is extremely effective, with its immediate introduction of the image of 'lightless fire' (l. 4), to be taken up later in symbolic incidents (with no parallel in Ovid or Livy) at ll. 309 ff., where

The wind wars with his torch to make him stay,  
 And blows the smoke of it into his face,  
 Extinguishing his conduct in this case;

<sup>1</sup> *Arden* Introduction, pp. xxiv-v.

<sup>2</sup> *PMLA* LXXVI (1961), 480-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 482.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 484.

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 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

xxvi

## THE POEMS

and ll. 673-4:

This said, he sets his foot upon the light,  
 For light and lust are deadly enemies.

Even more interesting is the emphasis on the compulsive and irrational nature of the crime, which all critics have linked with *Macbeth* (especially the soliloquy of Act 1, scene 7): the two stanzas, ll. 225-38, culminating in:

But as he is my kinsman, my dear friend,  
 The shame and fault finds no excuse nor end.

Even here the unevenness of the poem is manifest, since these fine stanzas are immediately followed by the *Spanish Tragedy* formulae:

Shameful it is—ay, if the fact be known;  
 Hateful it is—there is no hate in loving;...

Apart from the parallels that force themselves on the reader's notice, there is some warrant for thinking of *Lucrece* in terms of later Shakespearian tragedy in the fact that Shakespeare himself recalls both the story and his own handling of it up to the end of his career. *Macbeth* speaks of 'Tarquin's ravishing strides' (2. 1. 55), and Jachimo of 'our Tarquin' (*Cymbeline*, 2. 2. 12). It is, perhaps, not really surprising that, of the two early poems, it should have been the unsatisfactory, uneven and inchoate work that continued to solicit its creator's attention, whereas he could move forward leaving *Venus and Adonis* behind him as a limited, mannered but self-sufficient artistic achievement.

## III. THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE

We shall probably never know why Shakespeare contributed to the 'Poeticall Essaies' appended to Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr* (1601). Unlike his fellow-

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 978-1-108-00599-9 - The Poems, Volume 27  
 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

xxvii

contributors Jonson and Marston, he does not appear to have had any personal knowledge of Sir John Salusbury, Chester's patron, and his poem contradicts the personal allegory of Chester's poem. This deplorable and obscure piece of verse has a generally 'Platonic' flavour, but it is pretty clear that, as Carleton Brown demonstrated,<sup>1</sup> there is also a reference to the marriage of Sir John Salusbury and Ursula Stanley in December 1586, and the birth of their daughter Jane in October 1587. In so far as the poem uses the Phoenix myth, a final act of immolation is required, and Chester's inept attempt to superimpose upon this the mystical union of a (male) Turtle with a (female) Phoenix inevitably gives rise to obscurity as to whether the lovers did or did not perish (whatever that might symbolically stand for) in the process of creating a new Phoenix. Those who knew the actual facts (like Marston, who refers to the new Phoenix as 'now...growne vnto maturitie'<sup>2</sup> by 1601) could cope with the situation. Shakespeare would seem to have contented himself with a glance at the subtitle, 'Allegorically shadowing the truth of Loue, in the constant Fate of the Phoenix and Turtle', and

<sup>1</sup> *Poems by Sir John Salusbury and Robert Chester*, Early English Text Society, E.S. CXIII (1914 for 1913). For the gist of Brown's argument see H. E. Rollins's New Variorum edition of the *Poems* (1938), pp. 575-7. Less plausible is the view of T. P. Harrison, *Studies in English* [University of Texas], xxx (1951), 82, that 'the new Phoenix is a symbol of reconciliation between the Queen and Salisbury [Salusbury]'. The old view (that of Grosart) that the Phoenix is Elizabeth is accepted, but not argued, on p. 124 of Elizabeth Watson's 'Natural History in *Love's Martyr*' (*Renaissance and Modern Studies*, VIII, Nottingham, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. A. Davenport (1961), p. 179. Carleton Brown, *op. cit.* pp. lxxi-ii, noted the importance of this reference.

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 978-1-108-00599-9 - The Poems, Volume 27  
 William Shakespeare  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

possibly at the stanzas which, on a casual reading, would suggest that both birds perish in the flame. (I argue below that Shakespeare makes something wholly new of this.) At any rate, it is futile to look for personal allusions in Shakespeare's poem, which must be interpreted from within itself, with such help as can be gained from literary or philosophical tradition.

Literary sources are hard to find. In what remains one of the most useful discussions, A. H. R. Fairchild<sup>1</sup> claimed as the clue to the poem the tradition of the Court of Love, and Chaucer in *The Parlement of Foules* in particular, on the one hand, and the emblematic tradition on the other. There is enough to suggest—in conjunction with evidence from other works that he knew the poem<sup>2</sup>—that Shakespeare took a few hints from *The Parlement of Foules*, but there is nothing in Chaucer that really throws much light on what is distinctive in *The Phoenix and the Turtle*; and while emblematic equivalences are certainly used, they are of a familiar kind. Perhaps a more promising specific source is the collection *The Phoenix Nest* (1593),<sup>3</sup> which contains an elegy on Sidney by M. Roydon, introducing the Phoenix, the Eagle, the Turtle and the Swan as mourners, and also a 'Dialogue between Constancie and Inconstancie', but the resemblances are not very striking. The whole phoenix tradition has been examined by various scholars, notably T. W. Baldwin, who also claims a special

<sup>1</sup> *Englische Studien*, xxxiii (1904).

<sup>2</sup> Nevill Coghill in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson* (1959), pp. 86–99; also *Notes and Queries*, ccv (1960), 16, 17–18.

<sup>3</sup> Noted in passing by Sidney Lee, *Life of Shakespeare* (1898), p. 184; elaborated by K. Muir and S. O'Loughlin, *The Voyage to Illyria* (1937), pp. 130–1, and R. Ellrodt, *Shakespeare Survey*, 15 (1962), 100–1.

## INTRODUCTION

xxix

connexion with Ovid, *Amores*, II. 6 (on the death of the parrot),<sup>1</sup> and Robert Ellrodt.<sup>2</sup>

Basically, our interpretation must be from within the poem itself. It did not greatly impress most critics until relatively recent times, and it is significant that it should have grown in repute with the growth of interest in 'metaphysical poetry' on the one hand and 'pure poetry' on the other. These two affinities suggest rather different, though not necessarily incompatible, ways of looking at the poem. Helen Gardner, though she includes it in *The Metaphysical Poets* (1957), places it among 'poems which in some ways anticipate the metaphysical manner', along with poems by Raleigh, Fulke Greville and Southwell, and writes that, compared with Donne, Shakespeare is 'too remote, and too symbolic, creating a static world where Love and Constancy are deified' (p. 23). Certainly *The Phoenix and the Turtle* is not characterized by 'the dialectical expression of personal drama', to borrow a phrase which J. B. Leishman regards as more aptly descriptive of Donne than 'metaphysical'.<sup>3</sup> Yet Miss Gardner has also written that it is 'the most "strong-lined" of all poems, if "strong lines" are riddles' and the central paradox of 'two and one' is eminently reminiscent of Donne.<sup>4</sup> What Shakespeare gives us is, in some measure, scholastic terminology,<sup>5</sup> but without the scholastic

<sup>1</sup> *Literary Genetics of Shakspeare's Poems and Sonnets* (Urbana, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare Survey*, 15 (1962), 99-110.

<sup>3</sup> *The Monarch of Wit* (1951), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> For the importance of Shakespeare's substitution of 'neither two nor one' for the Neoplatonic 'two and one', see Ellrodt, *op. cit.* p. 109, n. 28.

<sup>5</sup> See J. V. Cunningham, *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History*, XIX (1952), 265-76; reprinted in *Tradition and Poetic Structure* (Denver, 1960).