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Anthony Mortimer*

SHAKESPEARE AND THE ITALIAN TRADITION OF VENUS AND ADONIS

I

The only significant source for Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, both in Latin and in the Arthur Golding translation (1565-67) which was to serve him so well throughout his career. The medieval tradition of *Ovide moralisé* would have been transmitted to him by Golding's own prefatory verse epistle and that of the Renaissance mythographers through such English adaptations as Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus* (1565) and Abraham Fraunce's *Third part of the Countesse of Pembrokes Yvychurch* (1592); but there is no evidence that he was acquainted with any Italian Adonis poem. As F. T. Prince has remarked, "the Elizabethans idolized their Ovid, and they did not need to know much Italian to absorb the intention and the methods of the numerous Italian poets who set out to expand and modernize the same type of material"[1]; by the time Shakespeare came to write *Venus and Adonis*, the absorption was already well advanced. To say that, however, need not mean that the Italian tradition is irrelevant to Shakespeare's poem. The aim of the present exercise is not to reveal some previously unsuspected source, but rather to look at the range of potentialities that Ovid's story offered to Renaissance poets and, by comparing the various choices made, to illuminate what is distinctive and purposeful in Shakespeare's version[2].

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* I am grateful to my colleague, Alessandro Martini, for his help in finding texts of the Italian Adonis poems.

[1] Introduction to *The Poems*, ed. F. T. Prince, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Methuen, 1960, p. xxx. Other important editions of Shakespeare's narrative poems are by J. C. Maxwell (The New Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1966), Maurice Evans (New Penguin Shakespeare, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989) and John Roe (New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992). Indispensable for all discussions of the poem up to 1938 is Hyder Edward Rollins, *The Poems*, New Variorum Edition, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1938).
For citations from *Venus and Adonis* I have used the 1593 Quarto, retaining original spelling and punctuation but making the usual purely typographical modifications.

The most immediately striking aspect of Ovid's tale, as compared with the Renaissance versions, is its brevity. If we exclude the long insert-story of Hippomenes and Atalanta which is introduced on the most fragile of pretexts (*Met.* X. 560-704), we are left with no more than 76 lines (X. 519-59, 705-39) for Venus and Adonis. Yet it may well have been precisely Ovid's brevity, his immensely suggestive condensation of situations, that proved such an irresistible temptation to the Renaissance taste for *copia*. It may be useful, therefore, to list these *nuclei* of the Ovidian narrative[3].

Venus, accidentally scratched by Cupid's arrow, falls in love with Adonis (X. 519-28).

Venus abandons her usual haunts (including Heaven) and, dressed like Diana but avoiding fierce animals, goes hunting with Adonis (X. 529-41).

Reclining with Adonis in an idyllic landscape, Venus warns him against the hunting of wild beasts (X. 542-59, 705-7).

Insert-story of Hippomenes and Atalanta (560-704).

Venus leaves for Paphos. Adonis ignores her warning, wounds the Boar and receives his own deathwound in the groin (X. 708-16).

Venus is recalled by the groans of Adonis; lamenting and reproaching the Fates, she establishes an annual ritual in his memory and transforms his blood into the anemone (X. 717-39).

What this summary omits is, of course, the particular context given to the Adonis myth in the *Metamorphoses*. Book X, as Jonathan Bate reminds us, presents an extraordinary range of transgressive or unconventional sexual situations[4]. Its narrator is Orpheus who, rejecting women, has taught the

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[2] A useful article covering some of the same material is Paolo Cherchi, "Molte Veneri e pochi Adoni – con un inedito attribuibile a G. B. Strozzi", *Esperienze letterarie*, XIII, 1988, pp. 15-38. Cherchi is mistaken in regarding Tarchagnota's poem as the first Italian version of the Adonis myth. His aim, in any case, is to provide a context for Strozzi's poem rather than to illuminate Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*.

[3] For the *Metamorphoses* I have used the Loeb edition (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard-Heinemann, 1971) with translation by Frank Justus Miller.

[4] Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1993, pp. 50-82.

Thracians the love of tender boys (X. 83-85). After announcing his topic as "boys beloved of gods and maidens inflamed by unnatural love and paying the penalty for their lust" (X. 152-54), he tells of Jove's passion for Ganymede, the love of Phoebus for Hyacinthus, the origin of prostitution with the Propoetides, the strange infatuation of Pygmalion with his statue and, in the longest episode of the book (X. 298-518), Myrrha's incestuous love for her father Cinyras which results in the birth of Adonis. We shall see that Renaissance poets varied in their reactions to a context that inevitably shed a disturbing and sinister light on a tale that they exploited primarily for its combination of eroticism and pathos.

The first Italian adaptation of the myth seems to be the *Stanze nella favola d'Adone* (1545), a poem of 83 stanzas by the prolific and versatile humanist, Lodovico Dolce (1508-68)[5]. The most original feature of this version is its transposition of Ovid's story into the mode of Renaissance pastoral. In Ovid the idyllic setting receives only a brief recognition from Venus herself:

> sed labor insolitus iam me lassavit, et, ecce,
> opportuna sua blanditur populus umbra,
> datque torum caespes: libet hac requiescere tecum[6].
> (X. 554-56)

Dolce expands this into a full-blown *locus amoenus*, a meadow ringed with myrtles, a perfect temperate climate, a clear fountain, abundant fruit and flowers, swallows and nightingales, nymphs and shepherds (sts 4-13). And yet the whole is veined with melancholy. Mysterious voices sing the predictable refrain of *carpe diem* and recall the sad fate of Narcissus and Echo; the flowers in the garden are all born of tragic metamorphosis:

> Era quel luogo al fine adorno e pieno
> Di quanti fior giamai creò Natura;
> Ch'in tal forma d'human corpo terreno
> Cangiati fur da strana empia ventura[7].
> (st. 11)

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[5] I have used the second edition, *Il Capitano, comedia di M. Lodovico Dolce, con la favola d'Adone*, Venice, G. Giolito, 1547.

[6] "But now I am aweary with my unaccustomed toil; and see, a poplar, happily at hand, invites us with its shade, and here is grassy turf for couch. I would fain rest here on the grass with you."

[7] "That place was filled and adorned with as many flowers as Nature had ever created; which, from a human earthly body, had been changed into that form by strange and evil chance."

Not only is the destiny of Adonis prefigured by the flowers, but his ambiguous sexual status is suggested both by comparison with Hyacinthus, Ganymede and the Alexis of Virgil's Eclogue II and by the fact that he looks like the twin brother of Cupid (sts 14-15). That the lover of Venus should be the double of her son and that his beauty should be so distinctly homoerotic is enough to remind us of the ill-fated incestuous and homosexual passions that play such a large part in the *Metamorphoses*. For all the pastoral paraphernalia, we are still in a very Ovidian world.

As in Ovid (X. 532), Venus has abandoned Heaven to stay with her lover: *Et per giamai di lui non restar priva, / Cangeria mille cieli, e l'esser diva* (st. 16)[8]. For Ovid this means only that she has to accompany Adonis in his hunting; for Dolce, in keeping with his pastoral modification, it involves the transformation of a goddess into a shepherd's wife who sleeps on a hard and dusty bed, milks the goats and ewes with her celestial hands, shears the sheep and weaves wicker baskets to hold the cheese (sts 17-22). If Ovid gets a malicious pleasure from seeing Venus dressed as Diana (X. 536), Dolce obviously relishes giving her an even more incongruous role as patroness of cottage industry.

Dolce's pastoral interlude occupies the first 25 stanzas of his poem, after which he reverts to the Ovidian narrative with the warning against wild beasts and the insert-story of Hippomenes and Atalanta (sts 26-46). Dolce departs from Ovid in providing a cause for Adonis's death in Juno's moral outrage at his mother's incest; but this, in fact, results in an Ovidian paraphrase as Juno recapitulates the story of Myrrha (sts 52-63). In the final Lament (sts 75-82) there are some details (Venus deploring her own immortality and envying Persephone who will inherit Adonis in Hades) that have been taken from the Greek tradition as represented by Bion's "Lament for Adonis", but the metamorphosis is little more than a paraphrase of Ovid[9].

Apart from its pastoralism, Dolce's poem is still very much the story as Ovid tells it. Five years later came Giovanni Tarchagnota's *L'Adone* (1550), a poem of roughly the same length (74 stanzas of *ottava rima*) which makes more radical modifications and incorporates further elements from the Greek tradition[10]. Tarchagnota begins (sts 1-5) with Venus preparing to leave for Paphos and, haunted by a vague foreboding of disaster, warning Adonis against wild beasts. No sooner has the goddess departed than Adonis hears the noise of the approaching boar and takes arms against it. This occasions a first allusion to his origin with the suggestion that perhaps the boar has come to avenge the crime of Myrrha: *Che forse per punir Mirra, e 'l suo errore, / Venia verso il figliuol con tanto orrore* (st. 10)[11]. For Ovid it was not the boar who punished Myrrha by killing her son, but Adonis who took revenge on Venus for provoking his mother's passion (*iam placet et Veneri matrisque ulciscitur ignes*, X. 524)[12]. Here, as in Dolce's introduction of an offended Juno, there is an attempt to find some motive for the death of Adonis which in Ovid is essentially a hunting accident. Another cause for the catastrophe is given by the fact that Tarchagnota's Adonis wounds the boar with the same arrow of Cupid that had scratched Venus (sts 19-20). Thus the boar becomes enamoured of Adonis and, inflamed by the sight of his naked thigh, rushes to embrace him and accidentally gives him a mortal wound. Already we are beginning to see the multiplication of motives that will eventually blur the simple outlines of Ovid's story.

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[8] "And in order never to be without him, she would renounce a thousand heavens and her own divinity."

[9] For Bion and also for the pseudo-Theocritean idyll mentioned later, see A. S. F. Gow, *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1952.

Adonis laments his fate (sts 27-31), but proclaims that he will still possess infinite glory and consummate pleasure (*gloria infinita, sommo gioir*) if his death elicits from Venus a single tear or a sigh. Venus returns and, as in Ovid, tears her hair, beats her breast and reproaches Heaven. The captured boar obtains forgiveness by protesting that his sole desire was to kiss Adonis and by burning off his offending tusks. Venus decides to take her lover's body to Paphos where she will create the "Garden of Adonis" and establish an annual ritual in his memory. As she transforms his blood into a flower, her own hairs that she has torn from her head take root and grow into a plant that bears her name. The poem concludes with the wry observation that Venus is now so devoted to tending her garden that lovers in need of help rarely feel her presence: *Onde i devoti non troppo spesso / Sentir ne' lor bisogni nume presso* (st. 74)[13].

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[10] *L'Adone di M. Giovanni Tarchagnota*, Venice, 1550. Reprinted in Angelo Borzelli, *Il Cavalier Giambattista Marino*, Naples, G. M. Priore, 1898, pp. 307-24.

[11] "Perhaps to punish Myrrha and her crime, he came towards her son so horribly."

[12] "Now he excites even Venus' love, and avenges his mother's passion."

[13] "Hence not too often do her votaries feel the goddess near them in their need."

We still have the basic scheme of Ovid's story, but Tarchagnota's considerable debt to the Greek can be seen in the importance he attaches to the Lament of Venus. In Ovid there is no real lament; we are simply told that Venus reproaches the Fates before we pass directly to her creation of the ritual and to the metamorphosis. Bion's poem gives the actual Lament twenty lines (42-61) which Tarchagnota multiplies by four (sts 43-59). It is obviously to Bion rather than to Ovid that we owe the Renaissance tendency to develop the Lament of Venus, somewhat at the expense of the metamorphosis, into a kind of secular *pietà*, almost a subgenre which hardly needs the support of a narrative context. Minor details taken from Bion (the multitude of winged loves, the elaborate toilette bestowed on the corpse of Adonis) need not detain us here. Tarchagnota's most remarkable non-Ovidian move is his emphasis on the boar's love for Adonis which he develops from an anonymous late Greek poem that the Renaissance attributed to Theocritus as Idyll 30. The conceit was picked up by other Renaissance poets (Saint-Gelais, Shakespeare and a Latin epigram by Minturno), but only Tarchagnota makes it a crucial element in his narrative. As for the disturbing ancestry of Adonis, the idea that Venus and the boar are both wounded by Cupid's arrow allows the poet to evoke the Ovidian context of transgressive loves while deflecting excessive moral outrage. The arrow exemplifies that *potenza incredibile d'Amore* which links the love of gods for humans (Venus and Adonis) with the love of beasts for humans (the boar and Adonis) and the love of humans for beasts (Pasiphae and the bull). In that light, the incest of Myrrha, though one of those "strange ardours" that Nature condemns, hardly seems like an exception to the rule.

> Fu ben strano l'amor di lei, che in Creta
> Un bianco toro amando arse cotanto:
> Fu strano, che giacer potesse lieta
> Mirra madre d'Adon col padre a canto:
> Fur simili ardor strani, perchè il vieta
> Natura; e pentir sol ne segue, e pianto:
> Ma chi di ciò gran maraviglia prende,
> Poi che l'amante vi discorre, e intende?[14]
>
> (st. 17)

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[14] "Most strange was her love who in Crete burned for the love of a white bull; strange was it that Myrrha, mother of Adonis, could lie happily with her father: such ardours were strange because Nature forbids them; and from them follows only remorse and weeping: but who can be greatly surprised at that since it is the lover who speaks there and who understands?"

Tarchagnota clearly works to make the myth more self-contained than it is in either Ovid or Dolce. The antecedent Myrrha story receives only passing reference and is irrelevant to the outcome, while the insert-story of Hippomenes and Atalanta is omitted entirely. At the same time the internal coherence of the poem is reinforced by symmetrical patterning: Adonis has his own lament to balance that of Venus, there is a double metamorphosis (the blood of Adonis and the hair of Venus), and the arrow that sets the love-story in motion also brings it to an end. This may be Ovidian poetry, but it is no longer Ovidian paraphrase.

In his 54-stanza *Favola d'Adone* (1553) Girolamo Parabosco (c. 1524-57) reduces the action to a strict minimum[15]. From the balcony of Heaven Venus sees the sleeping Adonis and, wounded by Cupid's arrow, descends to earth and becomes his lover. Obliged to pay a flying visit to Paphos to receive the homage of her devotees (*divinité oblige*), she utters her expected warning (sts. 33-35) the inefficacy of which is underlined by the fact that her catalogue of dangerous animals includes the tiger, the bear, the wolf and the lion, but omits the boar. There follows, as always, the death of Adonis, the Lament and the metamorphosis – this last liquidated in a single stanza. The story is almost completely severed from the antecedents provided in the *Metamorphoses*: there is no reference to Myrrha and only a fleeting allusion to the Hippomenes-Atalanta tale when Venus cryptically reminds Adonis that the lion is her old enemy. Parabosco, in fact, evacuates as many narrative elements as he can and hurries over those that remain to leave us with a structure where the intervention of the boar splits the poem into two almost autonomous sections – the first an erotic idyll (the lovemaking of Venus and Adonis) and the second a female complaint (the Lament of Venus). This structure, with its corresponding double vision of Venus as seductress and *mater dolorosa*, prefigures Shakespeare's version, though Parabosco lacks Shakespeare's skill in combining contrast with continuity. The first section recalls Dolce's pastoral in some of its details, but the emphasis is significantly different. Where Dolce stresses the humble domestic happiness of the lovers, Parabosco is resolutely erotic and again he prefigures Shakespeare in the sexually aggressive rôle he gives to Venus. It is, of course, implicit in the original myth that Venus takes the initiative since it is she, not Adonis, who is wounded by Cupid's arrow. But where the tradition takes the response of Adonis for granted, Parabosco's

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[15] For Parabosco's poem I have used *Quattro libri delle lettere amorose di M. Girolamo Parabosco*, Venice, Andrea Baba, 1561.

Venus has to work hard for her satisfaction (sts. 9-17). She finds Adonis sleeping and her flattering address fails to wake him. When, at last, he is aroused by her kissing and shaking, his first impulse is to flee, (*si desta / Timido in vista; e di fuggir procaccia*)[16]. Even her reassurance that she does not bite is not enough to overcome the timidity of this virginal youth. Though inexperienced in the ways of love (*quantunque male usato /Fosse a i dolci d'Amore atti lascivi*)[17], he is not insensitive to the beauty of Venus; his reaction, however, is to fall at her feet in adoration. Her end is obtained only when she takes him in her arms and, quite literally, opens the way to intercourse (*Dandogli a quel bel loco adito e via / Ch'ogni caldo amator brama e desia*)[18]. There is nothing in Ovid, Dolce or Tarchagnota that comes so close to Shakespeare's earthy goddess who will adopt the same tactics without the same success. It is, of course, only initially that Parabosco's Adonis seems to share the "leaden appetite" of his English counterpart. He turns out to be a gifted pupil and the poem does not spare titillating indications (*iterato più volte il dolce gioco*)[19] that he possesses the virile stamina to satisfy a goddess for whom once is decidedly not enough.

The Lament is more conventional and adds little to Bion, Dolce and Tarchagnota – except perhaps, for a minor eruption of the Petrarchan wordplay that Shakespeare also will lend to Venus:

> Deh perchè 'l ciel tutto a miei danni volta
> Dispose, e 'l fato ch'immortal foss'io?
> Se mille volte ohime sol di martire,
> Questa immortalità mi fa morire[20].
>
> (st. 41)

The growing evacuation of narrative incident is no less evident in the *Favola di Venere e Adone*, a 40-stanza poem of uncertain date attributed to Giovan Battista Strozzi the Younger (1551-1634) and recently published by Paolo Cherchi[21]. Strozzi begins with a brief *praeteritio* which makes his exclusions explicit:

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[16] "He awakes with a look of fear, and seeks to flee."

[17] "Although he was little used to the sweet lascivious acts of love."

[18] "Giving him the way and the entrance to the fair place that every ardent lover craves and desires."

[19] "Having repeated the sweet game many times."

[20] "Ah, why did Heaven ordain that all should turn to my harm and Fate that I should be immortal; if, with its torments, this immortality kills me a thousand times?"

[21] The text is given by Cherchi in the article already cited.

Non voglio or questionar se per vendetta
La madre Citerea Cupido offese
Perché Mirra a giacer col padre astretta
Dal venereo furor infame il rese;
O se della faretra la saetta
Avanzar fuor il ferro non comprese,
Onde le punse non volendo il petto
Mentr'ei l'abbraccia, ell'a sé 'l tien stretto.[22]
(st. 3)

By stanza 5 we have already arrived at the warning which extends through to stanza 27. The death of Adonis occupies only two stanzas and the remainder of the poem comprises the Lament and the metamorphosis. On the surface it would seem as if we have the same two-part structure as in Parabosco; but there is, in fact, no sense of a contrast or of a break between the two parts. Venus, in her warning, already foresees and bewails the death of Adonis so that, as Cherchi points out, the whole poem appears as one long lament[23]. Even the Ovidian episode of Venus as huntress is incorporated into a female complaint as the goddess protests ("My feet are killing me!") that she is not really cut out for this kind of activity:

Ma come queste delicate piante
De' miei candidi piè ponno soffrire
Tra sassi e spini (ohimè) fatiche tante.
[...]
Offendo i delicati omeri miei
Portando tue nodose e gravi reti[24].
(sts. 15, 17)

This querulous tone of "Look what I do for you" distinguishes Strozzi's Venus from her predecessors and undermines the traditional idyllic relationship between the lovers. Though Adonis does not, as in Shakespeare, refuse her advances, Venus is forced to recognize that he prefers the *aspre fatiche* of hunting to the *giocondissimi diletti* that she offers. As the goddess pleads that she is arguing in his interest rather than her own, we hear all the accents of a lovers' quarrel:

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[22] "I shall not here consider whether Cupid harmed his mother Cytherea out of vengeance because Myrrha, compelled by lustful madness to lie with her father, had rendered him infamous; or whether he did not know that from the quiver there pointed the arrowhead with which unawares he wounded her breast while he embraced her and she held him close."

[23] *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

[24] "But how can the delicate soles of my white feet suffer such toils (alas!) among stones and thorns [...] I hurt my delicate shoulders carrying your knotty and heavy nets."

> Quent'ella più 'l distoglie, ei più s'incuora
> A seguir l'ostinato suo pensiero.
> Ei timida la chiama; ella s'accora
> E 'l dispregiante accusa animo fiero[25].
> (st. 27)

One may note in passing that this Venus again displays considerable linguistic ingenuity, playing on the miraculous circumstances of Adonis's birth from a tree and on the name of his mother (*O non pur nato in selva, ma di selva; / Di Mirra no, ma di ria pianta dura*)[26] or, as she reproaches the Fates, exploiting the *antanaclasis* of *tronco* as "truncated" and "tree-trunk":

> Perché non puoi tagliar col ferro adunco
> Invidia Parca 'l fil della mia vita,
> Poiché si vago e nobil germe hai tronco
> Nell'età sua più bella e fiorita?
> Un odorato, lacrimante tronco
> (Oh! meraviglia non mai prima udita)
> Ti diede al mondo[27].
> (st. 33)

Strozzi's goddess is not, however, self-conscious in her rhetorical virtuosity, and Adonis is given no direct speech. We are still far from Shakespeare's animated debate where rhetoric itself is called into question. But there is at least the sense that Adonis has a mind of his own and that, perhaps, the void left by the evacuation of narrative incident can be filled by argument as well as by lyrical expansion.

What seems to be a turning-point in the Italian development of the Adonis myth comes with the *Metamorfosi d'Ovidio* (1561) of Giovanni

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[25] "The more she dissuades him, the more he resolves to follow his obstinate intention. He calls her cowardly; she is distressed and blames his proud scornful spirit."

[26] "Not born in a wood, but of wood; not of Myrrha, but of a hard evil plant."

[27] "Why, envious Fate, can you not sever with your curved knife the thread of my life, since you have truncated such a fair and noble seed in his fairest and most flowering age? An odorous weeping trunk (a marvel never known) gave you, Adonis, to the world."

Andrea dell'Anguillara (1517-72)[28]. Unlike the Golding version that Shakespeare used, this is not so much a translation as an extended *ottava rima* paraphrase. Thus the 442 lines that Ovid devotes to the Cinyras-Myrrha and Venus-Adonis tales become 1440 (X. sts. 131-311) in Anguillara. The expansion, however, retains something close to the Ovidian distribution: where Ovid has 221 lines for Cinyras-Myrrha and exactly the same number for Venus-Adonis (if we include the insert-story of Hippomenes and Atalanta), Anguillara gives 84 stanzas to the former episode and 96 to the latter. It is in the second section that we find a significant modification. Whereas in Ovid the insert-story is almost twice as long as its frame, Anguillara gives Venus and Adonis slightly more space than Hippomenes and Atalanta. This more equitable balance is achieved by introducing a number of non-Ovidian elements.

The first of these is not, as we might by now expect, the Lament which Anguillara, following Ovid's example, merely reports in a few lines. It is rather Venus's long wooing speech (X. sts 224-36) which, unlike the wooing in Parabosco, is less an erotic invitation than a justification of love as the mysterious unity of two in one, the fusion of soul and body and the source of all creation:

> D'ogni cosa creata Amore è padre.
> Or, se, mentre ad amare Amore esorta,
> Fa nascer tante cose alme e leggiadre;
> Ogn'un, ch'al voto suo non è secondo,
> In quel, ch'a lui s'avien, distrugge il mondo[29].
> (X. st. 224)

This cosmic view of love is, perhaps, the nearest that any of the Italian versions get to Spenser's "Garden of Adonis" where Adonis, as the lover of Venus, becomes "the Father of all forms" (*Faerie Queene*, III. vi. sts 30-50). It also anticipates the arguments of Shakespeare's Venus that the refusal of love is a form of suicide ("So in thy selfe, thy selfe art made away", 763) and a crime against the order of Nature ("By law of nature thou art bound to breed", 171). To Parabosco's double Venus (seductress and *mater dolorosa*) Anguillara has added another dimension – that of the philosophical Venus who will also find her way into Shakespeare's poem.

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[28] I have used *Le Metamofosi d'Ovidio ridotte da Gio Andrea dell'Anguillara in ottava rima*, Venice, B. Giunti, 1585.

[29] "Love is the father of all created things. When Love exhorts to love and brings to birth so many fair and lovely things, any man who refuses to follow his lead destroys the world in himself."

Anguillara's major non-Ovidian elements, however, involve the addition of narrative incident. Adonis, having reached manhood, returns to his father's kingdom (now Cyprus, not Ovid's Panchaia) and becomes king in his turn. Since the island is sacred to Venus, this provides the occasion for his meeting with the goddess. When Venus leaves it is not to attend her own festival in Paphos, but for Heaven where the gods are to hold a family reunion in honour of Jove. After her departure, Adonis decides to revisit his birthplace (Sabaea) and, passing through Lebanon, is invited by the king to join a hunting-party. He is then killed by the boar who is an incarnation of the jealous Mars, the rejected lover of Venus. Anguillara devotes relatively little space to these non-Ovidian features, but their presence in his version does suggest a shift in direction. Whereas Dolce and Parabosco had reduced the action to a minimum and Tarchagnota had made it more self-contained, Anguillara initiates a contrary movement where the story undergoes an expansion that is both spatial (the journeys of Adonis) and temporal (the antecedents that explain his death). That later poets were uncomfortable with Ovid's elementary plot is suggested by Marcello Macedonio (c. 1575-1620) when he remarks that his own pastoral *Adone* (1614) *per esser affatto priva di favola, non s'arroge il titolo di tragedia, ma solamente di poema drammatico o rappresentativo*[30].

In the wake of Anguillara, therefore, the Adonis myth loses the relatively clear outlines imposed by the old blend of Ovid and Bion. The trend may be exemplified by Ettore Martinengo's 1174-line *L'Adone, idillio* (1614) in which Ovid's tale becomes diluted rather than enriched by an unhappy combination of static *tableaux* and extraneous episodes[31]. An inkling of what awaits us is given by the opening description of spring. The conventional *chronographia*, which his predecessors (and Shakespeare) cover in a couple of lines or stanzas, is here extended over one bloated sentence (1-47) where a fourfold *allhor che* introduces an extraordinary series of subordinate clauses before we reach the subject

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[30] "Because it is completely without plot, it does not claim the title of tragedy, but only that of dramatic or representative poem." Cited from *Le nove Muse* (Naples, G. Ruardo, 1614) by Giovanni Pozzi in "Metamorfosi di Adone", *Strumenti critici*, 16, October 1971, p. 352.

[31] *L'Adone, idillio di Ettore Martinengo*, Venice, 1614. The book seems extremely rare and the imprint is missing from the title-page of the Yale copy.

(Venus) in line 41. Martinengo then launches into the story of Cinyras and Myrrha (48-200), following Ovid fairly closely but not failing to add the occasional detail of his own, as when Cinyras, seeking to comfort his melancholy daughter, inadvertently caresses her breast (119-22). Martinengo, however, tends to avoid the direct speech that Ovid exploits to such dramatic effect. Thus Myrrha's appeal to Nature against the laws of man (*Met.* X. 329-31) becomes, with an unmistakeable echo of Tasso's *Aminta* (669-74), the narrator's own comment:

> O troppo, dura legge
> Non già legge d'Amor, d'Amor nel regno,
> Non legge di Natura,
> Che la Natura offende;
> Ma legge sol di quel Tiranno onore
> Di natura, e d'Amore[32].
>
> (142-47)

Given the narrator's earlier horror at the betrayal of religion and decency (68), this could be justified only as an example of free indirect speech or as subtle characterization of the narrator by the poet himself. But one hesitates to credit Martinengo with such sophistication. The avoidance of direct speech is, in fact, only one aspect of his consistently non-dramatic approach to the myth. Characterization and narrative rhythm are submerged by passages of descriptive expansion whose primary purpose seems to be that of allowing Martinengo to display his classical erudition. The sixteen lines with which Ovid describes the miraculous birth of Adonis and his resemblance to Cupid (*Met.* X. 503-18) are developed into a vast *tableau* (201-381) where the hierarchy, geography and botany of the ancient world are ransacked for illustration. The lovemaking of Venus and Adonis is presented with lively military metaphor (*Qui si corre all'assalto, e qui si crolla / Con Ariete gentil porta amorosa*, 569-70)[33], but this is only a passing burst of vigour and Martinengo again prefers to concentrate on a *tableau*, the long procession that Nature brings to contemplate the sleeping lovers (597-723) while a parrot rehearses Catullus and Tasso on the theme of *carpe diem*. Though the poem returns to Ovid for Venus as a huntress and for her warning (735-839), the transition to the catastrophe is delayed by an expanded version of the incidents introduced by Anguillara (Adonis as king in Cyprus, his journey to his birthplace). As if the narrator had suddenly remembered something essential, we are told of the jealousy of Mars (1031-57), but this comes too late to function as a real factor in the plot. The death of Adonis provokes yet another *tableau* – this time of Nature's universal mourning. Finally there is the Lament – not from Venus but from the narrator himself who defeats any expectations we may still have by concluding that he cannot describe the feelings of the goddess or the metamorphosis since he is himself overcome with grief:

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[32] "O too hard law – not the law of love in the kingdom of love, not the law of nature for it offends nature; but the law only of honour, that tyrant over nature and love."

[33] "Here there is rushing to the assault, and here the gate of love is broken through by the sweet battering-ram."

> Dillo tu Dea d'Amore
> E 'l chiuso duol ti disacerba alquanto
> Se però il dir dolente
> Pur come a me, non interrompe il pianto[34].
> (1163-66)

The disarming modesty of this gesture is hardly enough to overcome our impression of a narrative so diluted by *tableaux*, so sporadic in its progression, so pulled out of shape, that by this time neither the reader nor the poet himself cares greatly how it comes to an end.

The final dissolution of the Adonis myth is accomplished by the longest poem in Italian literature, the vast *Adone* (1623) of Giambattista Marino (1569-25). There would be no point here in attempting to describe the extraordinary proliferation of episodes that Marino grafts onto the Ovidian story. One might say that Marino, rather than choosing between different versions of the myth, manages to include them all while elaborating further variants of his own. Thus Cupid, Apollo, Vulcan, Mars and Diana are all, to some extent, made responsible for the death of Adonis[35]. As an example of what happens to the narrative structure, Giovanni Pozzi cites the episode where Venus falls in love with the sleeping Adonis. Marino gives us three consecutive accounts (III, sts. 16, 17-55, 56-116): the second repeats the first with only a slight variation, while the third is radically inconsistent with the first two. What is true of one episode is true of the poem as a whole which abounds in subtle revisitings and in potentially infinite variations on analogous situations. Pozzi argues convincingly that what has often been seen as a mass of brilliant and disorganized digressions is, in fact, the result of a consciously anti-epic design, a structure in which, as in a starry sky, all the units illuminate each other without being related to a single discernible centre[36]. It is in this plural and decentred regard, with its consequent rejection of conventional narrative logic, that the Adonis myth at last evaporates. It is not, perhaps, a strange destiny for a myth that the Renaissance inherited from the *Metamorphoses* where the sequence of episodes is less important than the analogies between them and which is also, in its way, an anti-epic.

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[34] "Say it yourself, Goddess of Love, and may it ease your pent-up sorrow, unless, as in my case, weeping should interrupt the grieving speech."

[35] There is no consensus about which of the gods or goddesses is responsible for the death of Adonis. For Nonnos (*Dionysiaca*, 41. 204-11) it is Mars; for Apollodorus (*The Library*, III. xiv. 4) it is Diana, though there is also a hint that Persephone may be involved since she is the rival of Venus for possession of Adonis. I have been unable to trace where Dolce found the idea that it was Juno. What all these versions have in common is that the death of Adonis is the result of the celestial jealousies aroused by Venus in divinities of both sexes.

II

We have seen, in the national literature that exploited it most fully, the evolution of the Adonis poem from an initial stage of restriction and self-containment to its final expansion and dissolution. Seen in relation to that evolution, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* obviously belongs to the initial stage. Eliminating all antecedents, the poem begins *in medias res* and never looks back. A single stanza is enough to establish all we need to know about the opening situation:

> Even as the sunne with purple-colourd face
> Had tane his last leave of the weeping morne,
> Rose-cheekt Adonis hied him to the chace,
> Hunting he lov'd, but love he laught to scorne:
> Sick-thoughted Venus makes amaine unto him,
> And like a bold fac'd suter ginnes to woo him.
> (1-6)

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[36] Pozzi, *op. cit.*, 348-49, 355-56. The starry sky as a metaphor for the structure of Marino's *Adone* is cited by Pozzi from Francesco Busenello (1598-1659), an ardent defender of the poem against the attacks of Stigliani. For a detailed discussion of the poem's organization see Giovanni Pozzi's monumental two-volume edition of the *Adone* (Milan, Mondadori, 1976).

With two lines for *chronographia*, two for Adonis and two for Venus, Shakespeare sets up the basic polarities of his text – meeting and leave-taking, laughter and weeping, hunting and love, the scornful self-sufficiency of Adonis and the frustrated longing of Venus who is both "sick-thoughted" and "bold fac'd". It is worth noting that what could have been presented as a sequence (the rising sun wakes Adonis to the hunt and there he is seen by Venus who falls in love with him) is transformed by the first words, "even as" into three simultaneous converging actions, reinforcing the sense of a situation that is simply given and requires no explanation in terms of narrative logic. In this context, we shall not be surprised that the poem contains no insert-story of Hippomenes and Atalanta, no explicit allusion to Myrrha, no account of how Venus came to fall in love with Adonis and no jealous Mars to explain his death. The events of the poem can be reduced to the following simple scheme:

I Venus with Adonis (1-810)

IA The wooing (1-588)
IB The warning (589-810)

II Venus Alone (811-1194)
IIA The solitary night, the morning hunt (811-1030)
IIB Discovery of Adonis's corpse, lament and metamorphosis (1031-1194)

At first sight, this resembles Parabosco's structure of two parts, the first erotic and the second pathetic, with the double image of Venus as seductress and *mater dolorosa*. Shakespeare, however, is by no means so schematic. While the Venus of IA urges Adonis to take a masculine initiative, she also abounds in images that infantilize him so that the maternal goddess of IIA and IIB does not appear inconsistent. Pathos begins to dominate with the warning of IB and reaches a first climax with Venus's *ecphrasis* of the hunted hare (673-708), but the warning also continues the wooing of IA since Venus uses the threat of the boar as an argument for immediate lovemaking. Thus Shakespeare, unlike Parabosco, establishes a continuity between the erotic and the pathetic by making the warning serve as a bridge between the two. It follows that we get a more complex Venus who does not play first one rôle and then the other, but who is throughout both threatening and protective, sexually aggressive and maternal. And this in turn creates a highly ambiguous sexual situation where it is not clear whether Adonis's surrender to Venus would be an initiation into manhood or a regression to infancy.

But in Shakespeare Adonis does not surrender, and it is a conflict not an amorous idyll that is brought to an end by his death. There has been much speculation about where Shakespeare might have found a source for his uncooperative Adonis. Hints of a disdainful Adonis have been found in a number of Shakespeare's contemporaries (Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, I. 12-14; Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, III. i. sts 34-38; Greene, *Never Too Late*). Parabosco's youth was initially unreceptive and there is the controversial case raised by Panofsky of the Prado Titian which shows Venus clinging to a burly Adonis who is about to leave her for the hunt[37]. But none of this amounts to much beyond the established tradition that it is Venus who takes the initiative and that she fails to cure Adonis's passion for hunting. Modern editors of *Venus and Adonis* are agreed that, if we must find a source for the Adonis who refuses love, we should look back to the *Metamorphoses* – not to the Adonis episode, but to the stories of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (IV, 285-388) and, to a lesser extent, Narcissus and Echo (III, 344-510), both of which concern beautiful youths who refuse the advances of inflamed nymphs. Both stories help Shakespeare to flesh out the rather empty figure of Adonis as he appears in Ovid and in the Italian versions. Hermaphroditus contributes to the disturbingly androgynous quality of his beauty ("Staine to all Nimphs, more lovely than a man", 9) and Narcissus to his obsession with autonomy and self-knowledge ("Before I know my selfe, seeke not to know me", 525). Shakespeare's decision to make Adonis resist Venus is, at the same time, unprecedented and very Ovidian.

The major result of this bold decision is that it redeems Adonis from passivity and gives him a voice of his own. In Dolce, Parabosco, Strozzi, Anguillara and Martinengo (Tarchagnota is the exception), Adonis is not given direct speech. In Shakespeare he is given 89 lines and, though this may seem little compared to the 384 allotted to Venus in the debate (IA and IB), it is enough to make him a real antagonist.

From what has been said so far it should be clear that in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* it is the cut and thrust of debate that compensates for the lack of action. What allows the debate to continue over eight hundred lines is the fact that both protagonists keep shifting ground, becoming progressively more inconsistent in the arguments they advance. Thus Venus will, in the same stanza (127-32) claim that Adonis, though still unripe, may yet be tasted and then conclude that fair flowers should be "gathred in their prime"; Adonis himself will first utter a downright rejection of love ("My love to love, is love, but to disgrace it", 412), then immediately plead that he needs more time to arrive at his maturity (415-20) and finally argue that what he rejects is not love but lust (708-804). Even the narrator is infected by the inconsistency of the characters he observes, at one moment expressing sympathy for Venus ("Poore Queene of love, in thine own law forlorne", 251), at another reproaching her for "carelesse lust" that forgets "shames pure blush, and honors wrack" (556-58), and then promptly lauding her persistence (565-70). We suggested earlier that Italian poets may have been attracted by Ovid's story precisely because its brevity offered so many opportunities for rhetorical expansion. This is equally true for Shakespeare, but the difference lies in the way the rhetoric itself is called into question. Both protagonists are aware that the situation betrays them into a language that is not their own. Venus remarks "Unlike my selfe thou hear'st me moralize" (712) and Adonis concludes his sermon on the difference between love and lust with the admission that "The text is old, the Orator too greene" (806). As for the efficacy of rhetoric as a means of persuasion, we are constantly reminded that Adonis is detained not by the eloquence of Venus but by her physical strength. At the same time, her seductive speeches, exciting herself more than Adonis, repeatedly end with attempts at an impossible rape. The comedy derives not merely from the demonstration that rhetoric convinces no-one but its user, but also from the incongruity between love's elegance in its verbal representation and its crudity in physical manifestation. The point, however, is not a simple debunking of amorous rhetoric as a cover for brute physical appetite. Body-language is no more reliable than verbal language, and it is only in the combination of sweaty wrestling with virtuoso Petrarchan conceits that we shall get some measure of the complex sentiment that animates the goddess. Moreover, since the tradition does not prepare the reader for the successful resistance of Adonis, the rhetoric involves an element of suspense that is lacking in the Italian versions: we wait to discover whether it will work. Shakespeare is, therefore, in one sense true to the Italian tradition which exploits the story as a pretext for rhetorical rather than narrative invention, but he also overcomes the distinction by making rhetoric an issue in his plot.

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[37] Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*, New York, New York University Press, 1969, pp. 149-54.

We have already traced the variety of solutions that Italian poets provide to the problem of antecedents and insert-stories in the *idillio*. Dolce recounts both Cinyras-Myrrha and Hippomenes-Atalanta as insert-stories; Tarchagnota, Parabosco and Strozzi give them only passing reference; Anguillara restores them to their Ovidian status; Martinengo begins with Cinyras-Myrrha, but has only a one-line allusion to Hippomenes-Atalanta. Shakespeare adopts the most rigorous policy of exclusion and yet, because monotony obviously does threaten a narrative so poor in events (*affatto priva di favola*), he provides a structural equivalent to insert-stories with three passages that are not so much episodes as *ecphrases*. These are Venus's recall of her affair with Mars (97-114), the interlude of the horses (259-34) and Venus's description of the hunted hare (679-708). The first of these suggests that lovemaking with Venus would be less a conquest for Adonis than a threat to his virility; the second casts a sceptical light on the conventional theme of lovemaking as a "natural" activity; the third, while following Ovid in proposing the hare as a more suitable prey than the boar, seems to undo its purpose by exciting sympathy for the animal who is implicitly being offered in place of Adonis as a sacrificial victim to the arbitrary violence of the world. Shakespeare, therefore, is sensitive to the structural problems of the *idillio* and recognizes that *copia* alone is not enough to maintain interest in a basically static situation. His *ecphrases*, however, unlike insert-stories, do not require the pretext of narrative explanation. Their function is not to answer questions (How does Venus fall in love with Adonis? Why does she hate wild beasts? Who is responsible for the death of Adonis?), but to create a mature, witty and ironic vision of the issues and arguments that divide the protagonists.

The *locus amoenus* features, to a greater or lesser extent, in almost all the Italian Adonis poems. Dolce and Martinengo offer the most elaborate setpieces on the backdrop of lush grass, perfumed flowers, melodious birds, shady trees, clear fountains and fluttering Cupids; but Tarchagnota, Parabosco and Macedonio are not without their *alati Amori*, *fiorite valli*, *piagge amene* and other standard features of *l'adorno Giardin d'Amor*. Shakespeare avoids anything like a formal *topographia* and yet the setting permeates the whole poem. Ever since Coleridge and Keats, readers have been impressed by the freshness and accuracy of the poem's natural imagery which conveys the sense of a landscape that has been rendered deliberately unmythological not only by becoming so recognizably English, but also by being peopled with such small and humble creatures as the divedapper, the caterpillar and the snail. Despite invigorating moments like the stallion's exultant freedom, the song of the lark or the golden glory of the second sunrise, this is no *locus amoenus*. We are constantly made aware of its darker side – the sensitive snail withdrawing its tender horns in pain, the bird captured in the net, the eagle rending its prey, the hare's pathetic strategies to escape the dogs. The Italian poets offer a privileged site of libidinal freedom where a fruitful and harmonious nature encourages the satisfaction of sexual desire. Shakespeare's setting is much closer to that of the *Metamorphoses* which, as Charles Segal remarks, symbolizes "not only an inner world of free desires, but also a mysterious outer world where men meet an unexpected and unwelcome fate". In this "world bare of protection and open at any moment to sudden arbitrary attack" the violence of the boar needs no explanation in terms of a special supernatural conspiracy[38].

The one *topographia* that *Venus and Adonis* does offer is Venus's presentation of her own body as a prelapsarian Eden "where never serpent hisses" (17) and where Adonis is promised all the benefits of the *locus amoenus* – shade, shelter, mountain, valley, grassland, water. On the one hand Venus is eager to make her own female body a territory less threatening than Adonis probably assumes it to be; on the other hand she is offering that body as a substitute for the real and perilous landscape where Adonis hunts. Since both the real body and the real landscape are dangerous, only the metaphorically landscaped body can be safe. The only *locus amoenus* we are allowed to envisage is conjured up by the defiant rhetorical skill of a goddess who will learn all too well what to expect from Nature.

Shakespeare's version of the Venus and Adonis myth is, above all, the story of a goddess who learns what human love is like and does not like what she learns. The exquisite torture of a goddess who is disappointed by the very passion over which she presides is exploited by the narrator in aphoristic formulae: "Being Judge in love, she cannot right her cause" (220), "Poore Queene of love, in thine own law forlorne" (251), "She's love; she loves, and yet she is not lov'd" (610). Venus's assumption that Nature provides a simple law of love is as naive as Adonis's distinction between love and lust and is belied by her own experience. What, after all, is Nature doing when it makes a woman

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[38] Charles Paul Segal, "Landscape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*", *Hermes: Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie*, 23, 1969, 15, pp. 74.

(herself) desire a man because of his feminine beauty or when it gives a man (Adonis) the instrument of procreation without the will to use it? The Nature to which Venus appeals ("By law of nature thou art bound to breed", 171) is revealed as confused in its intentions and arbitrary in its conclusions.

The one major non-Ovidian feature that Shakespeare takes from the Greek tradition and that he shares with almost all the Italian versions is, of course, the extended Lament of Venus. Shakespeare seems to make this more difficult for himself by initially parodying the convention he will then exploit. We are told that Venus, after being abandoned by Adonis, spends the night uttering a self-indulgent female complaint (829-52)[39]. The complaint of the abandoned woman, as established by Ovid in the *Heroides*, had already become a standard Renaissance genre and the narrator suggests that by now it is too monotonous and predictable to merit direct speech:

> Her song was tedious, and out-wore the night,
> For lovers houres are long, though seeming short,
> If pleased themselves, others they thinke delight,
> In such like circumstance, with such like sport:
> Their copious stories oftentimes begunne,
> End without audience, and are never donne.
>
> (841-6)

This would lead any educated Renaissance reader to wonder how the poet will handle the final Lament. Shakespeare rises to the challenge that he has himself created. His Lament of Venus (1069-1120, 1133-64) is a complex dramatic monologue which exemplifies all the goddess's inner contradictions and self-deceptions. She rewrites the story of Adonis in a way that flatters her own incurable vanity by avoiding all allusion to his determined resistance and implicitly inviting us to believe that an idyllic courtship was only denied consummation by the inopportune arrival of the boar. Where the Venus of Bion (51-53) and of the Italian tradition regrets the immortality that has prevented her from following Adonis into death, Shakespeare's Venus vents her spleen upon the human world that has failed to meet her expectations. Attempting to construe the story as an etiological myth, she prophesies that, because Adonis is dead, love will henceforth be a source of discord and distress (1135-64), but we know that this is only the irrational vindictiveness that decrees that love must be for others what it already has been for her. As with most etiologies, what purports to be an account of the cause turns out to be a description of the effect.

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[39] See John Kerrigan (ed), *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint': A Critical Anthology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991.

The Lament shares with Tarchagnota's poem the idea of the boar's love for Adonis which Shakespeare probably derived from E. D.'s translation of the pseudo-Theocritean text in *Sixe idillia* (1588). In the Greek poem and in Tarchagnota the boar pleads love for Adonis in his own defence; in Shakespeare there are no talking animals to provide explanations and the conceit is given a wholly different function by being placed in the mouth of Venus herself:

> Tis true, tis true, thus was Adonis slaine,
> He ran upon the Boare with his sharpe speare,
> Who did not whet his teeth at him againe,
> But by a kisse thought to persuade him there.
>   And nousling in his flanke the loving swine,
>   Sheath'd unaware the tuske in his soft groine.
>
> Had I bin tooth'd like him I must confesse,
> With kissing him I should have kild him first.
> (1111-18)

Some readers have been tempted to see here a suggestion that the love of Venus was potentially destructive, but in context it does not appear that the goddess is being made guilty by association with the boar. The point is rather that she is attempting to make the boar innocent by association with herself. Venus has, indeed, just told us (1081-1104) that the whole of Nature was in love with Adonis – including, with typical inconsistency, the wild beasts against whom she had warned him. The conceit is her last desperate attempt to believe in the innocence of a Nature that has betrayed her.

The metamorphosis poses something of a problem to the Italian poets. What in Ovid is a moment of extreme pathos tends to fall flat in the Italian versions because so much emotion has already been invested in the non-Ovidian Lament. Shakespeare overcomes the difficulty by radically changing the significance of the metamorphosis. In Ovid and in all the Italian versions it is Venus who performs the metamorphosis in order to perpetuate the memory of Adonis; in Shakespeare the metamorphosis simply happens without any intervention on the part of Venus, and her reaction is not to let the flower grow as a lasting monument (*Met.* X.725-27), but to crop it:

To grow unto himselfe was his desire;
    And so tis thine, but know it is as good,
    To wither in my brest, as in his blood.
(1180-82)

The metamorphosis, therefore, is no consolation. To offer the flower as a substitute for Adonis is the last cruel joke of Nature. Venus responds by making sure that, like Adonis, the flower will die without posterity. For a moment only she indulges in the fancy that the flower is the child of her lover:

Here was thy fathers bed, here in my brest,
Thou art the next of blood, and tis thy right.
Lo in this hollow cradle take thy rest.
(1183-85)

As Jonathan Bate suggests, this is an adroit variation on the Cinyras-Myrrha incest story[40]. The son takes the father's place in his mother's bed, and only such an incestuous image could convey the simultaneously erotic and maternal passion of Venus, her desire to possess Adonis as both lover and child. The illusion, however, is short-lived, and Venus, "weary of the world" (1189), flies away to Paphos where (with an echo of Tarchagnota's ending) she "Meanes to immure her selfe, and not be seen" (1194). The goddess of love, frustrated in her own desires and unable to protect Adonis from the violence of the world, takes revenge by depriving lovers of her patronage.

Looking back over *Venus and Adonis*, it is clear that Shakespeare's poem belongs to the genre of the Ovidian *idillio* as practised by the Italians, exploiting the same blend of eroticism and pathos. Even the comic aspect of Shakespeare's poem can be seen to have Italian precedents if one thinks of Dolce's Venus as housewife or of the seduction scene in Parabosco. At a formal level also Shakespeare conforms to the dominant Italian pattern with a basic two-part structure, *ecphrases* that correspond to the Italian insert-stories, set speeches that provide occasion for rhetorical virtuosity and a final extended Lament. But, at the level of plot, Shakespeare rewrites the relation between Venus and Adonis as a conflict (of the Italians only Strozzi takes a timid step in this direction), and that fundamental modification provides his version with an unprecedented density and unity since all the traditional elements of the *idillio* are harnessed to a new function as psychological indicators. The metamorphosis becomes significant not as a promise of rebirth or renewal but for the complex reaction it provokes in Venus; Venus's affair with Mars and the boar's infatuation with Adonis are presented not as explanations for the catastrophe, but as the self-advertising and self-consoling excursions of the goddess herself; it is Venus again who appropriates the *locus amoenus* as a metaphor for her own body. Finally, though Shakespeare exploits the rhetorical *copia* that is characteristic of the genre, the effect is rarely one of gratuitous ornamentation. This is partly because the context of conflict and debate has restored rhetoric to its primary function as persuasion and partly because the whole poem demonstrates an ironic consciousness that rhetorical strategies can be simultaneously impressive and unconvincing, inevitable and misguided, misleading and self-revealing. A reading of *Venus and Adonis* in the light of the Italian tradition confirms that Shakespeare is less interested in formal innovation than in the way received forms can be made hospitable to new content. It is, after all, the kind of talent he claims for himself in Sonnet 76: to "keep invention in a noted weed" while devoting his best efforts to "dressing old words new".

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[40] Bate, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

Riassunto

Le versioni italiane della storia di Venere e Adone illustrano le opzioni che il mito offriva ai poeti del Rinascimento e così ci aiutano a definire le scelte determinanti del testo shakespeariano. Dolce, Tarchagnota, Parabosco e Strozzi riducono al minimo l'azione del racconto ovidiano, privilegiando invece aspetti descrittivi – pastorali per Dolce (1545) e erotici per Parabosco (1553). Il lamento di Venere, quasi inesistente in Ovidio, assume un'importanza crescente che dà luogo ad una struttura bipartita (amore fra i due protagonisti – lamento). Le parafrasi ovidiane dell'Anguillara (1561) mostrano un'inversione di tendenza con l'introduzione di episodi che conferiscono alla storia un'espansione temporale e spaziale. Ne segue una dissoluzione del racconto ovidiano che, dopo la versione prolissa di Martinengo (1614), culmina nella vasta macchina narrativa di Marino (1623). Shakespeare segue la tendenza iniziale, riducendo l'azione al minimo e adottando una struttura chiaramente bipartita. Ma la sua decisione di creare un Adone che resiste alle seduzioni di Venere gli permette di evitare le lunghezze descrittive degli italiani e di offrire invece un dibattito acceso dove la natura stessa della retorica amorosa viene chiamata in questione. In questo contesto, tutti gli elementi essenziali dell'idillio italiano (il paesaggio, il corteggiamento, l'avversione di Venere per la caccia, il lamento, la metamorfosi) si trovano riveduti e rinvigoriti.