

Renaissance Renderings: Classical and Christian Conflicts in Elizabethan Portrayals of Venus and Adonis

Modern study often characterizes the Renaissance as a period fostering a resurgence of interest in antiquity. Classical mythology, allusions and influences flourished anew in art, architecture, philosophy, and literature of the time. The motifs of ancient Rome and Greece have come to be seen as the dominant forces in shaping Renaissance art, following a period reputed for its focus on Christianity. Though some intellectuals of the Renaissance, such as the poet Samuel Daniel, believed English literature should develop on its own, creating an entirely new Christian style of poetry, Classical mythology became a very influential part of English letters.¹ Writers of the English Renaissance were faced with the challenge of understanding Classical mythology and texts in their contemporary Christian contexts. Indubitably, the world of Classical literature, with its pantheon of gods and many tales of licentiousness, conflicted greatly with the Christian world of the English Renaissance, and had to be reconciled. Many poets, such as Edmund Spenser, decided to incorporate Classical themes and characters into stories with Christian meanings and morals, whereas others, like William Shakespeare, strayed from the vigorous trend of Christian allegorization, and used Classical texts not only as a source of mythological plots, but also characters, meaning and rhetoric found in their poems.

Both William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser, as some of the most famous poets of the English Renaissance, demonstrate the tensions between these two ideologies in their interpretations of the Classical myth of Venus and Adonis. The two writers interact closely with both Classical and Christian ideologies – including Ovidian styles of story telling, Neoplatonism, eroticism, and moral allegory – producing poetry that allowed for an amalgamation of contemporary ideas with a long-standing artistic tradition that began long before. In his tract “The Art of Rhetoric”, Thomas Wilson proposed that Classical poets used fables to make statements regarding controversial topics. He saw poets like Ovid as political and moral philosophers.² Perspectives such as these allowed for the poetry of Classical authors to become more widely accepted among Christian readers. Spenser and Shakespeare each approach the tension between Christianity and Classical culture in different ways. Spenser adheres more closely to Christian thought than Shakespeare, who

¹ Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: Pageant Book Company 1957), 29.

² R. W. Maslen, “Myths Explored,” in *Shakespeare’s Ovid*, ed. A.B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200), 18.

incorporated more Classical ideas, although both writers maintain a unique combination of Classical and Christian motifs in their writing, which demonstrates the tension between the two streams of thought that dominated English Renaissance literature.

The upbringing and education of both poets provide context for the conflict between Classical and Christian ideas in their works. Spenser and Shakespeare were both raised in Protestant England, and wrote during the period in which Queen Elizabeth I was securing Protestant rule. Due to the emergence of Humanism and its focus on science rather than religion, education in England became modelled on learning Classical languages and texts, particularly Latin. English grammar school boys were expected to learn the art of rhetoric through Athonius' fables, found in the *Progymnasmata*; a series of Classical exercises in rhetoric that were translated from Greek to Latin, and made accessible to English students by Richard Rainolde.³ This is just one example of how English students encountered Greek texts through Latin translation; many Greek poets' and prose-writers' works were translated into Latin as well. Schoolmasters made their students memorize Latin fables then use them to compose their own 'themes', which demonstrated their knowledge of rhetoric, and gave them an opportunity to interpret Classical texts in new ways. Rainolde exemplified the Renaissance view of fables quite clearly when he defined one of these stories as "a forged tale, containing in it by the colour of a lie, a matter of truth".⁴

Renaissance fascination with antiquity included an interest in the compilations of myths and fables, as well as commentaries on the Greek and Latin poets. Many of their Renaissance counterparts, such as Shakespeare and Spenser, used these encyclopaedias and commentaries in addition to the original works to aid in their writing. Some poets, however, simply worked from the newer texts rather than from the Classical compositions themselves.⁵ These commentaries, such as the fourteenth century work *Ovide Moralisé* or Alexander Ross' *Mystagogus Poeticus*, presented Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a series of stories that could be read for their moral lessons.⁶ Though they were popular, and no doubt influential, not all commentaries were produced with Christian moralization in mind. A continental example includes Raphael Regius' translation of the *Metamorphoses*, published in Venice in 1493, which included commentary meant to explain aspects of the text not easily understood by readers, especially the obscure allusions to myths within Ovid's extensive cast of characters. These readings were neither antithetical to European Christian morality, nor did they directly draw connections between Christian virtue and

³ Maslen 17.

⁴ Ibid. 17.

⁵ Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry: A Student's Guide* (London: Routledge 1994), 23.

⁶ Rivers 23

Ovid's poetry.⁷ Even though the influence of moral commentaries was strong and Classical myth was often read through a Christian lens, the education of an English student included separate exposure to the pure Classical texts and to the moral interpretations of these poems. By reading both the original poetry and their Humanist explanations, English Renaissance poets were able to distinguish between ideas found in the Classical and Christian traditions, and to understand the tensions between them.⁸

An examination of Shakespeare's and Spenser's interpretations of the story of Venus and Adonis gives excellent examples of how these two poets used allegory differently in their works. The use of allegory is much more prevalent in Spenser's poetry than it is in Shakespeare, and it is widely accepted that Spenser's epic, *The Faerie Queene*, can be read entirely as an allegory of Christian virtues. The first narrative of Venus and Adonis found in Spenser's work serves to support the continual allegory that is presented throughout the poem. The story is told as a description of a tapestry found in Malecasta's Castle, where Britomart, the warrior maiden whose journey teaches the virtue of Chastity, finds her virtue tested. The tapestry of Venus and Adonis cautions her against the disastrous possibilities of love, and serves as a warning to the maiden who is still quite naïve in her understanding of lust. Britomart mistakes Malecasta's affection for friendship, but soon learns of its deceptive and dangerous nature when Malecasta attempts to enter the knight's bed, compromising her chastity.

Though Spenser treats the story as an allegorical warning against the dangers of love within the larger framework of his epic, taken on its own, Spenser's narrative segment of Venus and Adonis' tale can be seen as demonstrating divine love rather than lust.⁹ The goddess often treats her love Adonis in a gentle and motherly fashion:

And whilst he slept, she over him would spread
Her mantle, coloured like the starry skyes,
And her soft arme lay underneath his hed,
And with Ambrosiall kisses bathe his eyes¹⁰

This depiction of the lovers contrasts with the lust portrayed in Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid places the story of Venus and Adonis immediately after the story of Adonis' mother, Myrrha. The sequence of narrative might be seen as simply following

⁷ Heather James, "Ovid in Renaissance Literature" in *A Companion to Ovid*, ed. Peter E Knox (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2009), 337.

⁸ Ibid. 423.

⁹ Syrithe Pugh, *Spenser and Ovid* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing 2005), 55.

¹⁰ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 3.1.36.316-19

generations of the same family, but elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid separates the stories of families creating a web of myths with seemingly little organization. The story of Myrrha details her disastrous lust for her father, from which Adonis is born. Ovid directly connects the stories of Venus & Adonis and Myrrha with the theme of destructive lust, writing:

Adonis has become a youth, a man;
His beauty now surpasses what he was,
Inflaming even Venus' love, and thus
Avenging that dread fire-incestuous-
Which Venus made his mother, Myrrha, suffer.
And this is how that vengeance came about.¹¹

Ovid depicts Venus' love as lusty and all consuming, suggesting that the goddess herself is the source of destructive love, and cites her as the cause of Myrrha's downfall. Spenser, on the other hand, does not mention Myrrha's tale, deviating from Ovid's association of the story with lustful love, and portraying Venus' as a gentler, divine love.

Ovid also excludes Venus' son Cupid from the narrative, whose arrow sparked his mother's love for Adonis in the first place. Ovid explains how strongly Adonis resembles Cupid:

Like the naked Cupid artists paint.
And to remove the only difference,
Just add a quiver to Adonis or
Remove the quiver from the Cupid's form.¹²

This similarity between Adonis and Cupid Ovid portrays Venus as the centre of scandalous and incestuous love, emphasizing the eroticism of the story. In contrast to this, Spenser does not include the likeness between Adonis and Cupid, avoiding implications of an incestuous relationship, and thus maintaining a purer love between the mortal and goddess; one that is more compatible with Christian morals. He portrays Venus much differently than the original Classical source from which the story is taken. Spenser's application of allegory to the story of Venus and Adonis paints it as a tale of divine love; a concept that has precedent in the moral commentaries of the Renaissance. These commentaries often went beyond extracting a valuable moral lesson from the poems, though, and instead saw

¹¹ Ov. *Met.* 10, 347. Trans. Mendalbaum; this edition does not include line numbers.

¹² *Ibid.*

them as stories of Christ.¹³

To defend the value of Classical texts, some held the view that Classical writers based their works off of Christian ones. The Elizabethan poet Sir Walter Raleigh wrote that ancient poets “did greatly enrich their inventions, by venting stolen treasures of divine letters, altered by profane additions, and disguised by poetical conversions, as if they had been conceived out of their own speculations and contemplations”.¹⁴ The book of allegorical commentary, *Ovide Moralisé*, mirrors the birth of Adonis with the birth of Christ, depicting the lustful Myrrha being forgiven her past sins by the limitless divine love of God.¹⁵ Spenser incorporates this idea of God’s divine love into the narrative of the tapestry depicting Venus and Adonis, strengthening the parallel with the Madonna and Child. Spenser describes Venus’ lamentation over the dying Adonis and his metamorphoses:

And by his side the Goddess grovelling
 Makes for him endlesse mone, and evermore
 With her soft garment wipes away the gore
 Which stains his snowy skin with hatefull hew:
 But when she saw no helpe might him restore,
 Him to a daintie flowre she did transmew,
 Which in that cloth was wrought, as if it lively grew.¹⁶

In this passage, Spenser conjures an image similar to that of the Madonna holding the crucified Christ in her arms, a very popular image in Christian Renaissance art. Continental painters reinforced this connection between the figures of Adonis and Christ when they used the form of Titian’s Adonis (*Venus and Adonis*, 1553) to model their own representations of the dead Christ.¹⁷ Other intellectuals of the Renaissance such as the French Humanist, Francois Rabelais, outright denied the moral lessons some saw in Classical texts, writing:

Do you honestly believe that Homer, when he wrote the
Iliad and the *Odyssey*, had in mind the allegories which
 have been foisted off on him by Plutarch, Heraclides,
 Ponticus, Eustathius, and Phornutus, and which Politian
 has purloined from them? If thou do believe this, you are

¹³ Rivers 24.

¹⁴ Ibid. 11.

¹⁵ Pugh 56.

¹⁶ Spenser 3.1.38.336-42

¹⁷ Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 216.

far indeed from my opinion, which is that Homer could no more have dreamed of anything of the sort than Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* could have been thinking of the Gospel Sacraments.¹⁸

Poets such as Rabelais would not approve of allegory being used as a means of reading Classical texts, nor would he accept it in the Renaissance renderings of Classical myths.

Though the mutilated body of Adonis featured in Shakespeare's narrative may be read as the crucified body of Christ by some Christians, in contrast to Spenser it is far from a Christian allegory, following the interpretation proposed by Rabelais. Instead, Shakespeare's characters are firmly rooted in figures from the *Metamorphoses*. Like Ovid's portrayal of Venus, the goddess in Shakespeare's poem is initially seen as an embodiment of lustful love. Arthur Golding, the Elizabethan translator of Ovid, whose work Shakespeare is known to have been familiar with, tried to isolate one moral from Ovid's story: "to reprove prodigious lusts".¹⁹ Shakespeare begins the poem with this theme of lust, depicting the goddess as licentious, seemingly contrasted by the cold refusal of Adonis. Though the rejection and disastrous end of Adonis might seem like a warning against the Christian sin of lust, Shakespeare's change in tone throughout the narrative makes it impossible to maintain a single allegorical perspective on the nature of Venus' love for Adonis. The reader oscillates between feeling grotesque repulsion for Venus' relentless and excessive pursuit of Adonis, and contempt for the boy's cold and arrogant refusal. He allows sympathy for Venus' lust without obviously condoning such behaviour.²⁰ By continuously changing the tone of the poem in this way, Shakespeare is able to create a highly erotic narrative that pushes the boundaries of what was acceptable in Elizabethan literature.

By removing his work from Christian allegory, Shakespeare remains closely inspired by characters and ideas portrayed in Ovid, even though he seems to have deviated from the Latin author at times. One of the most noticeable deviations in Shakespeare's story is Adonis' disdain for Venus. The poet makes this change in order to navigate the poem away from being a warning of unchecked lust, distancing his story from Spenser's allegory. He points to arrogance as the cause for Adonis' refusal, making this the cause of the young boy's downfall rather than lust. Shakespeare's Adonis rejects Venus:

'Fair queen,' quoth he, 'if any love you owe me,

¹⁸ Sonia Hernandez Santano, "Shakespeare's Departure from the Ovidian Myth" in *Spanish Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, ed. Jose Manuel Gonzalez (Newark: University of Delaware Press 2006), 76.

¹⁹ Katherine Eisaman Maus, "An Introduction to 'Venus and Adonis'" in *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 602.

²⁰ Hernandez Santano 77

Measure my strangeness with my unripe years:
Before I know myself, seek not to know me²¹

Instead of modelling his male protagonist after Ovid's Adonis, Shakespeare borrows traits from the Ovidian character Narcissus.²² Adonis' refusal bears a strong similarity to Narcissus when the sage Tiresias predicts the cause of his destruction, saying that the boy would live to see old age "if he never knows himself".²³ Though this comparison might have been read as allegory by many of his Christian contemporaries, Shakespeare distances from this possibility by focusing it on the character of Venus, and her love and distress, rather than on Adonis.

The form and language of Shakespeare's poem also have deep roots in Ovidian styles of poetry. Compared to Spenser's epic style of poetry, (a form that fit in more easily with Christian values) Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* follows the model of Ovid's amatory poems, creating what became known in the Renaissance as an *epillion* or "little epic."²⁴ Literary Critic William H. Race identifies a rather formulaic narrative sequence, which he terms "the lament," that is used in Book II of Ovid's *Amores*, where the poet laments the death of his lover's pet bird. Shakespeare makes use of the various stages of lament in his own narrative after Venus discovers Adonis' dead body.²⁵ Shakespeare draws not only upon Ovid's narrative structures, but upon his style of language as well. This is no great surprise, as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was incorporated heavily into lessons of rhetoric for English Grammar School boys, meaning that his witticisms would have been taught as ornamental language to Elizabethan poets like Shakespeare. Shakespeare uses similar language to Ovid regarding the pursuit of a disinterested love, and parallels can be seen between Ovid's story of Polyphemus' love for the beautiful nymph Galatea, and Shakespeare's portrayal of Venus' courtship of Adonis. Both authors make use of a literary technique called the *blazon*, in which a lover describes the beauty of their beloved. Polyphemus and Venus, because their love goes unreturned, are forced to provide blazons for themselves in attempt to win over the object of their desires.²⁶ Ovid uses this opportunity

²¹ William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, ll. 523-5.

²² Hernandez Santano 79.

²³ *Ov. Met.* 3.93

²⁴ Hernandez Santano 73.

²⁵ William H. Race, "The Rhetoric of Lament and Consolation" in *Classical Genres and English Poetry* (New York: Croom Helm Ltd 1988), 92. These stages, as identified in both Ovid's *Amores* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, include 1) a list of mourners 2) disfigurement of the mourners or corpse 3) praise of the deceased 4) a contrast of past and present 5) a description of the last day 6) remarks on the finality of death 7) complaints.

²⁶ Eisaman Maus 603.

to mock Polyphemus, creating a tone of levity in his work, whereas Venus' blazon evokes the reader's sympathy for her unrequited love. His narrative identifies more with Ovid's praise of human lust and love than with the Christianized divine love and disapproval of sexual attraction, which is what Spenser focused his narrative around.

One of the most obvious reasons for the moralization of Ovid's myths during the Renaissance is the highly erotic nature of his writings. In providing an ekphrasis (a detailed description of a work of art) of the tapestry, Spenser avoids eroticism by making the love between Venus and Adonis divine love. Even in his next representation of the couple, in "The Garden of Adonis" (Book II of *The Faerie Queene*), Spenser turns what might be read as erotic into a Christian virtue. He portrays the perpetual lovemaking of Venus and Adonis as an act sanctioned by the command of God. Adonis and Venus enjoy what Spenser presents as 'Chaste' love. This definition of chastity does not necessarily imply celibacy, but rather a loyal and married love that allows for the creation of children, who will grow up to be chaste and honourable themselves. This vision of Chastity encourages Spenser's reader to uphold their Biblical duty to perpetuate the human race through a monogamous love between two people. He fits Venus and Adonis into this mould by pairing their union with Venus' adoption of Amoretta, who is raised in the Garden of Adonis. Amoretta grows up to be the paragon of chaste love,²⁷ and an exemplary standard of Christian morality.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, maintains the eroticism of Ovid, even in his Christian context. Remarkably, with its risqué content, five editions of the poem were printed before 1600 without any censorship.²⁸ Perhaps Elizabethans did not see Classical eroticism as scandalously as one might expect. Though the Christian public might not have rejected *Venus and Adonis*, it is still far from meeting the standards of Protestant virtues. Shakespearian scholar Katherine Eisaman Maus argues that by setting the poem clearly in the Classical world, Shakespeare is able distance his characters from the boundaries of contemporary Christian morality.²⁹ Spenser, because his depictions of Venus and Adonis are found within a story set in Arthurian England, is not able to achieve this separation. Eisaman Maus also proposes that though the setting and characters may be Classical, many elements of the story come from the Renaissance tradition.

Throughout the 16th century, the motif of the 'pining lover' grew in popularity, particularly influenced by the poetry of Petrarch, whose writing set the standard for love poetry. He included in his works such techniques as the 'blazon', but is known most famously for his trope of the unrequited lover, whose desire only grows as his lady

²⁷ Spenser, 3.1.23-24.

²⁸ Maslen 31.

²⁹ Eisaman Maus 604.

continually refuses to reciprocate his affection.³⁰ This device is not strictly unique to the Renaissance, however; Ovid himself notes the effect that separation has on desire. In Book II of the *Amores*, Ovid's lover figure addresses the guardian of his beloved:

You may not feel any need (and the more fool you) to guard that
 Girl of yours-but it sharpens my desire...
 Let me have the girl
 And there's an end to my passion³¹

Though Shakespeare's motif of unrequited love is a quite radical break from the Venus and Adonis stories told in Spenser and Ovid, this Petrarchan understanding of desire is still deeply rooted in Ovidian poetics itself.

Shakespeare takes this trope of erotic poetry one step further as he reverses the gender roles within the couple, depicting Venus as playing the role of male pursuer, and Adonis of the beloved lady.³² This serves to create a comedic effect where both figures clumsily trying to play roles they do not understand in a relationship that cannot be consummated, but the situation also evokes pity for the characters in their confusion. Still, Shakespeare makes light of eroticism and invokes a feeling of mystery and intrigue surrounding it. This is far from a moralized Christian telling of a fable, and falls in much more closely with the attitude of Ovid. Even though Spenser's scene of "The Garden of Adonis" allows for the consummation of Venus and Adonis' affection, he treats love in a more serious manner than Shakespeare, who plays with the conventions of courtship throughout the narrative of his poem.

If Shakespeare's Classical setting helps him to distance his poetry from Christian thinking, Spenser's does the opposite. "The Garden of Adonis" bears many influences from Platonic philosophy, and Spenser adopts the points of Platonism and Neoplatonism not only through his depiction of a divine world that sustains life, but with the love of Venus and Adonis. The Garden is a place of rebirth for souls, a story sourced from *The Republic* in which Socrates describes the creation of new life and transition of souls from another world to the human one. The Garden of Adonis is fashioned to be a world separate from the one of human beings; a paradise. Though many aspects of Platonic philosophy conflicted with Christian belief, the idea of two worlds, one human, the other divine, appealed to Christians. Peter Burke describes how the "idea of the Idea" played a significant role in Renaissance thought. He explains that this created a vision of art and a form of the Idea

³⁰ Eisaman Maus 601.

³¹ *Ov. Am.* 2.19. Trans. Peter Green.

³² Eisaman Maus 602.

found in a divine world.³³ Platonism suggests that the love of an individual's beauty could lead to the love of general beauty, which in turn would eventually lead to one's love of moral beauty and gradually to an understanding of the ideal form of beauty. This idea is quite compatible with Christian morality, and endorses the role of art and beauty in the search for virtue, which Renaissance artists could appreciate.³⁴ Though Shakespeare was influenced by Renaissance art and the popular trope of the blazon, these Platonic ideas, fairly compatible with Christianity, are not found in his narrative poem.

William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser's different interpretations of the myth of Venus and Adonis show the different renderings of Classical influence in the Renaissance. While Spenser imbued his work with Christian morality, Shakespeare tended to stay true to the Classical origins. Both poets drew on a variety of sources of Classical and Christian thinking in penning their works, and used them to varying extents. Spenser's representations maintain aspects of Christian allegory and morals as well as depictions of divine love, rather than the lustful attitudes of Ovid's myth. He incorporates elements of Classical philosophy, but only to the point at which it was reconcilable with Christian virtue. In contrast, Shakespeare draws heavily on Ovid, not just for his plot outline and a few mythological references, but also for ideas of characters, rhetoric, eroticism, and love. Though his work is not outright antithetical to Christian morality, it should not be read as an allegory and represents a very different understanding of appropriation of Classical texts in the Renaissance than Spenser. The two poets, both living and writing in a time of strong Protestant Christian power in England, exemplify two different solutions to the challenge of reconciling the ideas of Classical literature and mythology.

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³³ Peter Burke, "The Renaissance" in *Perceptions of the Ancient Greeks*, ed. K.J. Dover (Oxford: Blackwell 1992), 135.

³⁴ Rivers 33.

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