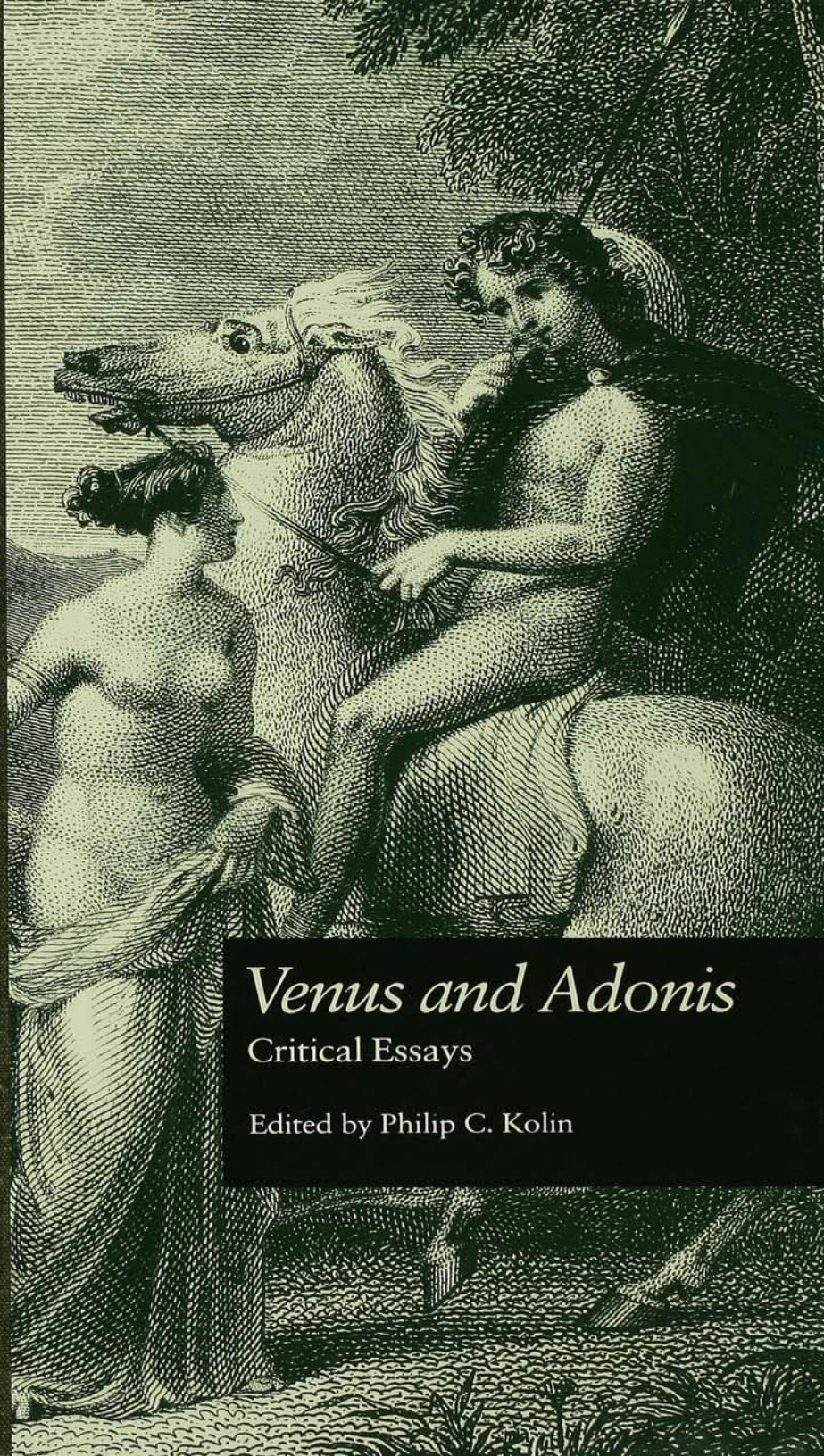

Venus and Adonis

Critical Essays

Edited by Philip C. Kolin

Venus and Adonis
Critical Essays

Edited by
Philip C. Kolin

Garland Publishing, Inc.
New York and London
1997

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Venus and Adonis: critical essays edited by Philip C. Kolin.
p. cm. — (Shakespeare criticism ; vol. 16.)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-8153-2149-X (alk. paper)
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. Venus and Adonis. 2. Mythology, Classical, in literature. 3. Adonis (Greek deity) in literature. 4. Venus (Roman deity) in literature. I. Kolin, Philip C. II. Series: Garland reference library of the humanities. Shakespeare criticism ; vol. 16.
PR2845.V46 1997
821'.3—dc21 96–37751
CIP

Cover illustration: Venus and Adonis (PR 2841 1830 copy 1 Sh. Col., plate facing title page). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Printed on acid-free, 250-year-life paper
Manufactured in the United States of America

To Sharron
and
To Mary

Contents

General Editor's Introduction

The continuing goal of the Garland Shakespeare Criticism series is to provide the most influential historical criticism, the most significant contemporary interpretations, and reviews of the most influential productions. Each volume in the series, devoted to a Shakespearean play or poem (e.g., the sonnets, *Venus and Adonis,* the *Rape of Lucrece*), includes the most essential criticism and reviews of Shakespeare's work from the seventeenth century to the present. The series thus provides, through individual volumes, a representative gathering of critical opinion of how a play or poem has been interpreted over the centuries.

A major feature of each volume in the series is the editor's introduction. Each volume editor provides a substantial essay identifying the main critical issues and problems the play (or poem) has raised, charting the critical trends in looking at the work over the centuries, and assessing the critical discourses that have linked the play or poem to various ideological concerns. In addition to examining the critical commentary in light of important historical and theatrical events, each introduction functions as a discursive bibliographic essay that cites and evaluates significant critical works—essays, journal articles, dissertations, books, theatre documents—and gives readers a guide to the research on a particular play or poem.

After the introduction, each volume is organized chronologically, by date of publication of selections, usually into two sections: critical essays and theatre reviews/documents. The first section includes previously published journal articles and book chapters as well as original essays written for the collection. In selecting essays, editors have chosen works that are representative of a given age and critical approach. Striving for accurate historical representation, editors include earlier as well as contemporary criticism. Their goal is to include the widest possible range of critical approaches to the play or poem, demonstrating the multiplicity and complexity of critical

response. In most instances, essays have been reprinted in their entirety, not butchered into snippets. The editors have also commissioned original essays (sometimes as many as five to ten) by leading Shakespearean scholars, thus offering the most contemporary, theoretically attentive analyses. Reflecting some recent critical approaches in Shakespearean studies, these new essays approach the play or poem from many perspectives, including feminist, Marxist, new historical, semiotic, mythic, performance/staging, cultural, and/or a combination of these and other methodologies. Some volumes in the series even include bibliographic analyses that have significant implications for criticism.

The second section of each volume in the series is devoted to the play in performance and, again, is organized chronologically, beginning with some of the earliest and most significant productions and proceeding to the most recent. This section, which ultimately provides a theatre history of the play, should not be regarded as different from or rigidly isolated from the critical essays in the first section. Shakespearean criticism has often been informed by or has significantly influenced productions. Shakespearean criticism over the last twenty years or so has usefully been labeled the "Age of Performance." Readers will find information in this section on major foreign productions of Shakespeare's plays as well as landmark productions in English. Consisting of more than reviews of specific productions, this section also contains a variety of theatre documents, including interpretations written for the particular volume by notable directors whose comments might be titled "The Director's Choice," histories of seminal productions (e.g., Peter Brook's *Titus Andronicus* in 1955), and even interviews with directors and/or actors. Editors have also included photographs from productions around the world to help readers see and further appreciate the way a Shakespearean play has taken shape in the theatre.

Each volume in the Garland Shakespeare Criticism series strives to give readers a balanced, representative collection of the best that has been thought and said about a Shakespearean text. In essence, each volume supplies a careful survey of essential materials in the history of criticism for a Shakespearean text. In offering readers complete, fulfilling, and in some instances very hard to locate materials, volume editors have made conveniently accessible the literary and theatrical criticism of Shakespeare's greatest legacy, his work.

Philip C. Kolin
University of Southern Mississippi

Acknowledgments

Editing a book like *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays* is not a solitary venture. Accordingly, I have happily acquired many debts, and I hasten to record what I owe and to whom. First of all, I am grateful to all the journals, presses, and newspapers that gave me permission to reprint reviews, articles, chapters, and sections of chapters. I also thank the various theatre companies for sending me material—programs, photographs, etc.—from their productions of *Venus and Adonis*. A special debt goes to those individuals who have written essays and comments expressly for my volume—João Froes, Richard Halpern, Robert P. Merrix, Patrick M. Murphy, James Schiffer, M.L. Stapleton, Benjamin Stewart, and Georgianna Ziegler.

Several librarians have helped me acquire *Venus and Adonis* criticism—among them are Georgianna Ziegler at the Folger Shakespeare Library and Lisa Brant at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival. I am also grateful to Patrick Murphy for his assistance in helping me gather *Venus and Adonis* materials.

I owe a special thank you to Professors Robert P. Merrix and Patrick M. Murphy for reading earlier drafts of my introduction and for saving me from egregious error. Professor Merrix also read an early draft of my bibliography on *Venus and Adonis,* as did Dr. Georgianna Ziegler. The mistakes that remain are to me as Caliban was to Prospero—a "thing of darkness / I acknowledge [as] mine."

At the University of Southern Mississippi, I have a shopping list of debts to publicize. Karolyn Thompson, the interlibrary loan librarian, and reference librarian Paul McCarver graciously and expeditiously assisted me yet more times. My department chair, Jeanette Harris, has consistently given me release time and encouragement for this project and countless others; Dean Glenn T. Harper established himself once more as my "Patron in the College of Liberal Arts." I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Dr. Karen

Yarbrough, Vice President for Research and Planning, who most generously assisted me through a research grant that allowed me to pay for permissions, keyboarding, and the sundry other expenses a collection such as *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays* demands. In fact, Dr. Yarbrough has generously and repeatedly supported my work as general editor of the Garland Shakespeare Criticism Series. Finally, I thank President Aubrey K. Lucas and Vice President for Academic Affairs G. David Huffman for their continuing encouragement and support.

Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays would have never seen the light of day were it not for the thorough and dedicated help of my research assistant Nancy Hill. I am also grateful to David Sedevie, Nancy's predecessor. To Jesse Stevens and Tippy Stevens I owe a giant debt for putting everything on disk and for making countless changes because of revisions and re-revisions. I am grateful to Beverly Ciko and Peggy Bowles for their help. I also express my gratitude to Kathleen Rossman-Pentecost and Marilyn Ford for their careful help in proofreading. To all of these good folks I say, "Thanks, and more thanks."

I am grateful to those souls in the St. Thomas Aquinas Prayer Group in Hattiesburg and to Sister Carmelita Stinn, SFCC, and to Marge and Al Parish, all of whom prayed for this volume and for my sanity as I edited it.

My love goes to my daughter Kristin and to my son Eric, who deserve much praise for patiently bearing with Dad all of the vicissitudes of my work. My love also goes to Theresa, John, and Robin. I also bless my spiritual director, Father G. Eddie Lundin, and Colby Kullman, who has been a faithful friend for thirty years.

Finally, I thank Sharron for her love, encouragement, and Cleopatrian wit and charm.

P.C.K.
1997

Venus (played by Katherine Owens and Sarah Rankin) kisses Adonis (Nathan Hinton) as Mars/Narrator (Bruce DuBose) looks on in the Undermain Theatre production of Venus and Adonis *directed by Ted Davey. Courtesy of the Undermain Theatre of Dallas.*

I

Venus and/or Adonis among the Critics

Venus and/or Adonis among the Critics

Philip C. Kolin

Venus and Adonis merits a special place in the canon as Shakespeare's first published work. Entered into the Stationers' Register on April 18, 1593, *Venus and Adonis* appeared in quarto predating the publication of the plays, though not their production, since *Henry VI, Parts 1, 2, 3, The Comedy of Errors,* and possibly *Titus Andronicus* were all performed before 1593. Happily, *Venus and Adonis* does not present the thorny textual problems of the plays; the poem was scrupulously printed from what must surely have been Shakespeare's own fair copy, or manuscript that the playwright-poet likely corrected and approved. In his 1992 Cambridge edition of the poems, John Roe relevantly asserted: "Because there are no grounds for believing that Shakespeare came back to either poem [*Venus* and *Rape of Lucrece*] with second thoughts . . . little of value can be gained by giving a full collation. There is even an argument for dispensing with collation altogether, apart from listing the substantive errors of Q1 (which number only two)" (75).

Shakespeare's authorship of *Venus and Adonis* has never been in question. His prefatory epistle dedicating the poem to Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton and Baron of Titchfield, acknowledges the fact. In the spirit and language of high patronage, Shakespeare deprecated his own work—referring to it as "My unpolished lines" and a "weak . . . burden"—yet he assuredly christened *Venus* the "first heir of my invention," dutifully announcing to the literary world his entrance as a poet. Although Ben Jonson caviled that Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek," Shakespeare's classical learning shone through *Venus and Adonis*. Through the poem's lush and arresting embellishment, Shakespeare attempted to "'out-Ovid' Ovid" (Baumlin 207), the most influential Latin poet in the Renaissance and the classical writer with whom Shakespeare was often admiringly compared. Significantly, too, Shakespeare chose to start his poetic career writing about

the vagaries of love as "Chaucer and Spenser before him did" (Hamilton, *"Venus and Adonis"* 13).

Venus and Adonis was the early flower of Shakespeare's reputation among a wide circle of Elizabethan readers, especially courtiers and students at the inns of court (Gent 722–23). Moreover, "the poem stimulated an extraordinarily rapid surge of excitement and emulation in all literary London" (Duncan-Jones, "Much Ado" 490). Demonstrating its immense popularity, *Venus* went through ten editions between 1593 and 1613 (six of them by 1599), and sixteen editions by 1640. Given the fact that the poem was reprinted so often, it is surprising so few copies survive. As S. Schoenbaum observes: "Multitudes bought *Venus and Adonis*. . . . No other work by Shakespeare achieved so many printings during this period. Readers thumbed it until it fell to pieces; so we may infer from the fact that for most editions only a single copy has survived" (*Compact Documentary Life* 176).

Although overshadowed by the plays, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece,* which followed it by one year, are significant scripts in Shakespeare's own creative development, a point fervently stressed by the critics who, starting with Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria,* saw the early signs of Shakespeare's genius in the poem. In 1898, George Wyndham assigned to *Venus* and *The Rape of Lucrece* pride of place in Elizabethan poetry: "They are the first examples of the highest qualities in Elizabethan lyrical verse" (lxxix). In the mid-1940s, Hereward T. Price emphasized that while Shakespeare surely "borrows" from the pastoral tradition, he is "at the same time daringly original. . . . There is probably no other poem in which direct first-hand observation of nature has been used with such brilliant effect to create form" ("Function of Imagery" 289). Continuing the panegyric, J. W. Lever in the 1960s asserted:

> These poems give a striking impression of the energy and range of the early Shakespeare; more so, indeed, than his first experiments on the stage. Written at a time when the theatres were closed on account of . . . plague in the capital, they belong to a phase of rapid maturing and awareness of latent powers. Into them was poured a ferment of intuitions, perceptions, speculations and fancies that had not yet found dramatic expression. ("Shakespeare's Narrative Poems" 116)

Similarly, Nancy Lindheim stressed the importance of *Venus and Adonis* in the creation of Shakespeare's art, particularly as "his earliest poetic or dramatic exploration of love." She argued that the poem is thus a "pivotal work in its author's technical as well as intellectual development" and "tonal com-

plexity"; *Venus and Adonis* "integrates comedy with tragedy, parody with straight representations" (191). Superlatives have flowed from many critics, though not all, over Shakespeare's descriptions of the power and pain of love. As one reviewer of an adaptation of *Venus* noted, "In *Venus and Adonis* Shakespeare combines erotica with brilliant symbolism and parallel evocations all couched in the most graceful, elegant imagery ever written" (Goodwin, "Irene Worth Brings a Love Poem to Life").

According to some famous readers, the poem also reflected a tremendous change in Shakespeare's personal development in love. In *The Portrait of Mr W.H.,* Oscar Wilde identified a specific Elizabethan cohort of Shakespeare's as the young Adonis and the object of the playwright's eye:

> Yes, the "rose-cheeked Adonis" of the Venus poem, the false shepherd of the "Lover's Complaint," the "tender churl," the "beauteous niggard" of the Sonnet was none other but a young actor; and as I read through the various descriptions given of him, I saw that the love that Shakespeare bore him was as the love of a musician for some delicate instrument on which he delights to play, as a sculptor's love for some rare and exquisite material that suggests a new form of plastic beauty, a new mode of plastic expression. (205–06)

Reflecting his own self-indulgence and *fin de siècle* emphasis on sexual pleasures, Wilde continued that "There was, however, more in [Shakespeare's] friendship than the mere delight of a dramatist in one who helps him to achieve his end. This was indeed a subtle element of pleasure, if not of passion, and a noble basis for an artistic comradeship" (207).

Looking closer to Shakespeare's family than Wilde did for a real-life person in *Venus and Adonis,* Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses* offers an even more ingenious explanation. Shakespeare, 28 when he wrote *Venus,* was a man who was commencing his eleventh year of matrimony. Eager to display his learning by puffing himself up in his readers' eyes, Dedalus speculates that Shakespeare was none too happy in that conjugal state: "If others have their will Ann hath a way. By cock, she was to blame. She put the comether on him, sweet and twentysix. The greyeyed goddess who bends over the boy Adonis, stooping to conquer, as prologue to the swelling act, is a boldfaced Stratford wench who tumbles in a cornfield a lover younger than herself" (*Ulysses* [Random House Edition] 191). No less a person than Ann Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, who was older than he by at least eight years, was the impetus and model for Venus, according to Dedalus' reasoning. However ingenious this approach may be, *Venus and Adonis* is much

more than Shakespeare's *bildungsroman.* The poem may not be the key that unlocks Shakespeare's heart.

Venus and Adonis and the Plays

Since *Venus and Adonis* itself is dramatic, the poem has been compared invariably to Shakespeare's plays, early and late, by critics who find parallels, analogues, and illustrations of intertextuality everywhere. Arguing that the "influence of [Marlowe's] *Hero and Leander* may go beyond the cult of the epyllion," Clifford Leech suggests that these narrative poems "may have constituted a mode of approach that could be, and was carried on in the dramatic form" ("Venus and Her Nun" 250). For Michael Goldman, "Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry [including *Venus*] reflects his dramatic bent as anything about his life might be expected to" (6). In *Venus,* as in *Lucrece* and the sonnets, Goldman discerns "certain situations and arrangements of material which draw attention to what Shakespeare calls the 'unsounded self,' a condition of being that can be fully explored only in the drama" (10). Accordingly, the first chapter of Goldman's *Shakespeare and the Energies of Drama* is occupied with the poems.

Significantly, then, *Venus and Adonis* seems to have been a governing influence on the plays, thus adding to the poem's immense dramatic significance. *Venus and Adonis* has much in common, therefore, with Shakespeare's early plays, especially *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet,* and *Love's Labor's Lost,* all of which were written close to the time Shakespeare prepared *Venus* for the Earl of Southampton. Nancy Lindheim believes that *Venus* came in between these "apprentice comedies" (190–91). Lever usefully generalizes regarding *Venus*' relationship to the comedies:

> The follies of lovers, and the graver follies of those who refuse to love, make up the fabric of Shakespeare's comedies: Titania wasting her raptures upon a mortal; Lysander and Demetrius prating of reason. . . ; Silvius scorning Phebe; Bertram, another would-be hero, refusing Helena. In the comedies, tragic catastrophe is always potential, though happily averted. Tragedy is waiting for Adonis, too, in the inseparable Shakespearean antinomies of beauty and destruction, love and death, creation and chaos. ("Second Chance" 84)

Concentrating on one of the earlier comedies in particular, Price proclaimed that *"A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the most pagan poem in English literature, and in the same class we may put *Venus and Adonis"* ("Function of Imagery" 288).

According to James Schiffer, "Cousins to the aggressive Venus can be found in Nell the kitchen wench in pursuit of Dromio of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors,* Helena in pursuit of Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and that very different Helena who substitutes herself into Bertram's bed in *All's Well That Ends Well.*" In his *Shakespeare* (1970), Anthony Burgess links *Venus* with *The Comedy of Errors* in their interest in natural, even "coarse" love. Certainly, too, *Venus,* like *Dream* and many other early Shakespearean plays, is set in a pastoral world of enticements and entrapments, a place Jeanne Addison Roberts calls "The Shakespearean Wild":

> The Wild World in Shakespeare's early works is frequently a forest—mysterious, magical, and ambiguous. Elaborated or suggested forests occur in at least seven of Shakespeare's early works: *Venus and Adonis, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Titus Andronicus, Love's Labor's Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merry Wives of Windsor,* and *As You Like It.* (25)

Aptly enough, in all of these works the hazardous landscapes mirror the erotic dangers awaiting the lovers who venture into them.

Several readers have identified common elements between *Venus and Adonis* and *Romeo and Juliet,* four star-crossed lovers to be sure, and *Love's Labor's Lost.* The infamous description of Venus' "sweet bottom grass" (lines 229–40) is for Eugene Cantelupe "worthy of Mercutio" (144), and both Cantelupe and Peter Dow Webster (302) urge strong parallels between Venus and Juliet's bawdy Nurse. Linking *Venus* and *Love's Labor's Lost,* Heather Dubrow finds that "By dramatizing linguistic behavior . . . [Shakespeare] is highlighting the psychological traits that it reflects—an issue that he was, of course, exploring at roughly the same time in *Love's Labor's Lost* and in so many of his later works" (*Captive Victors* 45). And Wayne Rebhorn contends that *Venus,* like *Love's Labor's Lost,* seriously questions, and even mocks, the entire world of courtly love ("Mother Venus" 16–17).

Perhaps an even closer kinship exists between *Titus Andronicus* and *Venus and Adonis* than between the poem and *Love's Labor's Lost,* a connection that goes far beyond what Walter Raleigh observed at the turn of the twentieth century: "His early play of *Titus Andronicus,* which is like the poems, shows how strangely hard-hearted this love of beauty can be, and makes it easier to understand how he was fascinated and dominated, for a time, by Marlowe" (85). Yet the influence of Ovid is even stronger than that of Marlowe on *Titus* and *Venus.* Both *Titus* and *Venus,* Ovidian in origin, contain rape (or attempted rape), transformations, heavily embellished po-

etry to express the deepest physical and psychic wounds, the curse of doomed love, and the powerlessness of gods and goddesses to protect.

The one later Shakespearean play in which critics most often hear echoes of and/or parallels to *Venus and Adonis* is *Antony and Cleopatra.* The connections between the early poem and the late play are palpable. Cleopatra, the priestess of Isis, provocatively dresses as Venus. Both femmes fatales, Venus and Cleopatra are witty, aggressive, bestriding the world of love like a Colossus. The Queen of Love and the Queen of Egypt radiate immense desire, simultaneously ennobling and destroying. Paradoxically, each undermines her lover's manliness, and then apotheosizes him in a new heaven. Critics have compared the two couples, if only briefly—F.T. Prince (xxxiii); Heather Dubrow (25); and Hereward Price (281). Doebler wryly observes that "an even better parallel to Venus [than Falstaff] is Cleopatra, a glamorous tramp with a capacity for both Chaucerian bawdry and transcendent immortality of fame" ("Many Faces" 38). Schiffer is concerned with "the absence of the phallus" in both *Venus* and *Antony and Cleopatra.* Adrien Bonjour also traces numerous parallels between the couples.

Beyond doubt, though, the most impassioned discussion of the two Shakespearean scripts comes from Lever, whose thesis is that in "Shakespeare's maturity he won through to the concept of tragic drama as a paradoxical triumph. It was thus that the Venus and Adonis myth received its full explication in the late love-tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra.*" According to Lever, "Antony is Adonis allowed . . . to grow up [yet] . . . unlike the chaste, self-regarding boy, he willingly acts Mars to Cleopatra's Venus." And Cleopatra is Venus "In this lost paradise of her wooing of Antony [which] is comical and sensual, immoral and thoroughly reprehensible" ("Second Chance" 87). Ultimately, Lever argues, "Venus and Adonis, fallen and risen as Cleopatra and her Antony, live to triumph in the kingdom of the second chance" (88). The first chapter of Ted Hughes' *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* is also relevant to a discussion of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Venus.* Hughes "trace[s] connections between the Sonnets and *Venus and Adonis,* and between *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece,* suggesting how the group of works came to be the foundation of the mythic form of the Tragic Equation as it appears in [Shakespeare's] mature plays" (50).

Other Shakespearean plays also can legitimately claim affinities with *Venus and Adonis.* Streitberger, whose article is reprinted in this volume, examines *Venus and Adonis* in light of the courtesy book tradition informing *The Two Gentlemen of Verona.* Leonard Barkan's *The Gods Made Flesh* discusses *Venus and Adonis* in relation to *The Merchant of Venice* (270–74). William Keach and others have explored boars in *Richard III* (and even later

in *Cymbeline*) with reference to *Venus and Adonis* (78). Several critics have identified shared traits between Falstaff and Venus. While seen at first as an unlikely coupling, upon closer inspection the two larger-than-life figures revel in similarities. Dubrow, like many other critics, underscores their "earthiness" (25). Cantelupe puts the case rather well:

> Venus's never flagging efforts to fire the passive youth with either procreative arguments that comprise Shakespeare's first eighteen sonnets or with glowing descriptions of her physical beauty and sexual prowess not only reveal her self-confidence, insatiable appetite, and wit, but also beget sympathy through rollicking, robust humor. Adonis is the inverse of Romeo and Troilus, and Venus the obverse of Juliet's Nurse and Falstaff. (143)

Doebler also claims that "The largely comic Venus at the beginning of the poem is perceived by the distanced reader as appealing one moment and frightening the next, as Falstaff is both a fool and a threat to the state without ever losing our measured admiration and his ability to delight the audience" ("Many Faces" 38). Just as Venus tries to entertain and to persuade Adonis, so Falstaff does with Prince Hal.

Turning to *Measure for Measure,* Christy Desmet believes that "Venus's penchant for amplification and the rhetorical restraints imposed on her speech have parallels in the problem plays." Like Venus, Isabella and Helena from *All's Well* "are both accomplished orators. Both, however, have also been accused of dissimulation" (144). In chastising Adonis for denying "the animal appetites [that] move nature," William Sheidley similarly compares the youth to Angelo in *Measure for Measure* (13). Dubrow concludes that Venus, like Prospero, is an impresario (26).

The Reception and Reputation of *Venus and Adonis* up to the Twentieth Century

Writing in 1790, Edmond Malone, one of Shakespeare's most illustrious early editors, observed: "The poems of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece,* whatever opinion may now be entertained of them, were certainly much admired in Shakespeare's life time" (*Plays and Poems* 186). Tributes from Shakespeare's immediate contemporaries were drenched in admiration. John Weever lauded the "honey-tongued Shakespeare" of whose poems (or "issue") "I swore Apollo got them and none other" (75). The year 1598 saw three key references to *Venus and Adonis.* Frances Meres' *Palladis Tamia,* which helped to verify Shakespeare's authorship of several of the plays, con-

tinued Weever's panegyric strain: "As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras: so the sweet wittier soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous & honey-tongued Shakespeare; witness his *Venus and Adonis*." Richard Barnfield proclaimed that Shakespeare's name deserved to be recorded "in fame's immortal book" for his *Venus* (120). The repeated references to the "honey-tongued" Shakespeare cast him as the master Ovidian stylist, the inspired creator of one of love's most troubling epics.

Also in 1598 Gabriel Harvey, the bookish, quirky friend of Edmund Spenser, dichotomized *Venus* and *Lucrece,* insisting on a contrast that trivialized the former and enthroned the later: "The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* but his *Lucrece* & tragedy of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,* have it in them to please the wiser sort" (232). The sage though lugubrious Harvey introduced a way of looking at *Venus* as less worthy (in learning and morality) that would seep into critical discourse on the poem for centuries. Summarizing the reputation the poem had for many of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Katherine Duncan-Jones concludes: "For the Elizabethans . . . Shakespeare's poem was susceptible of numberless applications and adaptations, all associated with erotic play and enchantment" ("Much Ado" 498).

As the seventeenth century progressed, the eroticism increased as the enchantment waned. The reputation of *Venus and Adonis* changed, in general, from that of being an immortal love poem to that of a bawdy tale relished by wastrels and rebuked by moralists. The poem kept company with tapsters, courtesans, and roués. *Venus* became a poem that lived in naughtiness. *The Shakespeare Allusion-Book,* edited by John Munro, contains 61 references to *Venus* from the late 1590s through 1700. As the allusions below testify, *Venus* was widely known and read in Jacobean and Carolingian England. While some of these allusions are flattering, or at least neutral, many more are negative, charting the fall in esteem of Shakespeare's highly embellished poem. References to the poem's immorality in *The Shakespeare Allusion-Book* might be divided conveniently into two groups—those in moral tracts and those in the drama. The following references, all from *The Shakespeare-Allusion Book,* chronicle the fortunes of the poem.

The moralists (and their allies, the satirists) had a field day with *Venus.* A few examples illustrate how pernicious some critics regarded the poem to be. John Davies of Hereford labeled *Venus* "shameless stuff" in his *Scourge of Folly* (1611) and described the plot as "lewd Venus, with eternal lines / To tie Adonis to her love's design." Apostrophizing Shakespeare, Thomas Freeman unhappily noted in a 1614 poem that "Virtues or vice the same to thee all one is." Endorsing Gabriel Harvey's preference, Freeman

judged *Lucrece* fit "for a teacher" but he "who list read lust there's *Venus and Adonis,* / True model of a most lascivious lecher" *(Rune, and a Great Cast. The Second Boke).* In 1623, Thomas Robinson had written that *Venus* was a "scurrilous book" read by wags after being enchanted by "bawdy songs" from tarts.

Many warnings about *Venus* were directed to female readers; Richard Halpern's essay, written expressly for this collection, explores the Lacanian dimensions of this audience's reflection in/on the poem. Admonishing the female reader, Richard Brathwait in 1631, for example, denounced *Venus* as unsuitable for young women: "Books treating light subjects, are nurseries of wantonness; they instruct the loose reader to become naught; whereas before, touching naughtiness, he knew naught . . . *Venus and Adonis* are unfitting comforts for a lady's bosom. Remove them timely from you, if they ever had entertainment by you, lest like the snake in the fable, they annoy you." Although R. Henderson attacked "carnal men," he castigated "English and Romish Jezebels and Italian Courtesans" (a litany of familiar seventeenth-century satiric subjects) who "will be frying, boiling, and broiling in their luxurious desires" like that "wanton Venus." More mildly, Thomas Crumble feared in 1635 that the ladies of the day read "amorous pamphlets that best like their eyes" such as *Venus* instead of "prayers of grievous order."

References to *Venus and Adonis* in the drama of the time corroborate the sordid reputation the poem had for moralists. As popular entertainment, theatre clearly mirrored the anxieties of society. In the theatre, *Venus* was almost always associated with debauchery and seduction. In a play written by Cambridge University students in 1599–1602, *The First and Second Part of Parnassus,* allusions to *Venus* characterize it as frivolous, while in the mode of Gabriel Harvey these student-produced dramas honor *Lucrece* as noble. The student Judicio self-assuredly pronounces that Shakespeare's authorship of *Venus* was disappointing: "Could but a graver subject him content, / Without love's foolish lazy languishment." While Meres, Weever, and Barnfield memorialized *Venus* as a poem worthy of the gods, the Cambridge students emphasized its lassitude. Despite his objection, no doubt Judicio and other students savored *Venus* as highly entertaining. In fact, one of the earliest references to Shakespeare in the New World can be found in a commonplace book belonging to Harvard student Elnathan Chauncy, who copied lines from *Venus* (Marder 2, 8). Chauncy's counterparts in England were doubtless no less enthusiastic in their admiration (perhaps clandestine) for *Venus.*

Many other allusions to *Venus* in seventeenth-century drama paint

it as taboo. Thomas Heywood's *Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1607) characterizes the poem as a seduction manual. Bowdler, a foolish lothario, swears to his friend: "I'll never read anything but *Venus and Adonis*." Answering him, Cripple admits: "Why that's the very quintessence of love, / If you remember but a version or two / I'll pawn my goods, lands and all 'twill do." *Venus* had become mandatory reading for lustful men trying to conquer a young, vulnerable woman. Jarvis Markham and Lewis Machin in *The Dumb Knight* (1608) observed that the poem was "A book that never an orator's clark in the kingdom but is beholden unto: it is called the maid's philosophy, or *Venus and Adonis*." The same year, in Thomas Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters,* a jealous husband, Harebrain, righteously prevents his wife from making him a cuckold by censuring her reading materials: "I have conveyed away all her wanton pamphlets, as *Hero and Leander, Venus & Adonis;* O, two luscious marrow-bone pies for a young married wife." *Venus and Adonis* had sordidly descended into being an aphrodisiac, or "marrow-bone," to worry a jealous husband.

Significant for the history of *Venus* criticism, the text had been metamorphosized into a plant or flower—like the anemone into which Adonis was transformed—capable of promoting love. In 1609, *Venus* is mentioned together with some plays for its "salt of wit" in the address prefixed to *Troilus and Cressida,* another appropriately sexual reference, given the fact that *Troilus* (like *Venus*) is one of Shakespeare's greatest exposés of seduction. *Venus*' reputation as a seduction manual continued into the middle of the seventeenth century. In Lewis Sharp's 1640 drama *The Noble Stranger,* Pupillus, another lust-hounded student, and doubtless one of the "younger sort" that Harvey mentions, exclaims: "Oh for the book of *Venus and Adonis,* to court my mistress by; I could die, I could die in the elysium of her arms: no sweets to those of love." Considering the sexual meaning that *die* had in the seventeenth century (to reach a climax), *Venus* was indeed a survival manual, a handy aphrodisiac, for a prowling lad like Pupillus.

Perhaps no part of *Venus and Adonis* better contributed to its reputation to incite lechery than the goddess' description of herself in the toponymic (geographic) terms in lines 229–40. These lines were satirically incorporated into a ballad "The New Married Couple" from the *Roxburgh Ballads* (1675) in which a bawdy wife speaks them to her new husband, Ned. The stanzas were also included in Thomas Durfey's play *The Virtuous Wife, or Good Luck at Last* (1680) in which a lustful squire Sir Lubb and his Boy speak of sexual conquests—in a highly mocking vein.

The reception of *Venus and Adonis* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not nearly as celebratory as it had been in Shakespeare's life-

time. Most influential eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare dropped *Venus and Adonis,* displaying that century's lack of attention to the poem and/or its nugatory opinion of it. Katherine Duncan-Jones succinctly summarizes the poem's reputation during the years 1700–1900:

> Somehow or other, as is so often the way with every popular work, during the succeeding centuries interest in the poem collapsed. Its omission from all the great eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare until Malone's in 1780 contributed to its disappearance from readers' view. Though the Romantics to some extent rediscovered it, the then firmly established notion of Shakespeare as above all a dramatist led to its being seen as a slightly embarrassing cul-de-sac in his *oeuvre.* Coleridge's account in *Biographia Literaria* encouraged readers to see it as essentially preliminary to the plays, and to contemplate it in a distanced and prudish manner. ("Much Ado" 499)

Edmond Malone's response to *Venus* in 1780 may have been typical of many eighteenth-century readers. While Malone readily acknowledged that Shakespeare was following Elizabethan conventions, he still maintained that *Venus* and *Lucrece* offered "wearisome circumlocution" (quoted in *Variorum* 462). No unqualified praise came from this editor as had been forthcoming from Shakespeare's contemporaries.

Focusing on the nineteenth-century response to *Venus and Adonis,* J.W. Lever identified still further reasons for the poem's lack of enthusiastic favor among that century's critics:

> Fair attention had been given to *Venus and Adonis* by nineteenth-century writers, but mainly either as a by-product of dramatic genius or as a quasi-biographical document. Rather vague resemblances had been seen to the works of Titian and Rubens. On moral grounds it was deemed too sensual, yet artistically it was considered too cold. ("The Poems" 19)

We might qualify Lever's assertion by noting, as Roe does, that "Later Romantics such as Keats and Coleridge gave special praise to *Venus and Adonis* for its quickness of wit, imaginative bravura, and liveliness of detail" (3). Unquestionably, Coleridge's comments on *Venus and Adonis,* included in this volume, constitute landmark criticism. According to Rabkin, Coleridge's remarks were among the most significant ever written ("*Venus and Adonis*: Myth"). Coleridge played a valiant part in rebutting charges of immorality

leveled against Venus by upholding the essential integrity of the poem. Keats' respect for *Venus* is reflected in his echoing the poem in "Isabella" (Boyar) and *The Fall of Hyperion* (Spiegelman). In a letter to Reynolds, Keats also praised lines 1033–4 in which Venus is compared to a snail (Roe 3). Yet near the time Coleridge and Keats honored *Venus and Adonis,* Ezekiel Sanford, in 1819, spoke, I fear, for the majority of nineteenth-century readers in observing that "So long as we are concerned for the interests of morality, we cannot wish that it may again become popular" (quoted in *Variorum* 467).

Several distinguished writers from the nineteenth century attacked Shakespeare's poem, his skill, and his intent. While Coleridge praised the blending of passion and intellect in *Venus,* William Hazlitt in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817) denounced *Venus* and its companion poem *The Rape of Lucrece* for being unengaging, distant, stiff: "It has been the fashion of late to cry up on our author's poems, as equal to his plays: this is the desperate cant of modern criticism. . . . The two poems of *Venus and Adonis* and of Tarquin and Lucrece appear to us like a couple of ice-houses. They are about as hard, as glittering, and as cold." In *Shakespeare* (published in 1909 but written earlier), C.A. Swinburne admired some things about the two poems but concluded that they were unworthy of Shakespeare, whose reputation as a playwright remained unequaled:

> There are touches of inspiration and streaks of beauty in *"Venus and Adonis":* there are fits of power and freaks of poetry in the *"Rape of Lucrece":* but good poems they are not: indeed they are hardly above the level of the imitations which followed the fashion set by them, from the emulous hands of such minor though genuine poets as Lodge and Barksted. (7)

In his *Note-Books* (written around the turn of the century), novelist Samuel Butler also eagerly dismissed *Venus* as unworthy of Shakespeare:

> I have been trying to read *Venus and Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece* but cannot get on with them. They teem with fine things, but they are got-up fine things. I do not know whether this is quite what I mean but, come what may, I find the poems bore me. Were I a schoolmaster I should think I was through in three sittings. If, then, the magic of Shakespeare's name, let alone the great beauty of occasional passages, cannot reconcile us (for I find most people of the same mind) to verse, and especially rhymed verse as a medium of sustained expression, what chance has any one else? ("Enfant Terrible" 192)

Perhaps no assessment of *Venus* could be more despondent than Butler's. There is little hope for poetry if Shakespeare himself could fail.

Twentieth-Century Critical Approaches to *Venus and Adonis*

The neglect or, worse yet, the misunderstanding of *Venus and Adonis* continued into the twentieth century. William Keach understates the vexatious nature of *Venus and Adonis* criticism in this century: "The poem . . . has proved especially troubling to modern readers and critics" (52). Such discomfort has extended over 400 years. C.S. Lewis went even farther than Samuel Butler in deploring *Venus and Adonis,* denying the poem any function except to display "disgust":

> Certain horrible interviews with voluminous female relatives in one's early childhood inevitably recur to mind . . . this flushed, panting, perspiring, suffocating, loquacious creature is supposed to be the goddess of love herself, the golden Aphrodite. It will not do. If the poem is not meant to arouse disgust it was very foolishly written. (*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* 498)

Lewis' observations represent one of the most disappointing responses to *Venus*. Perhaps equally distressing is F.T. Prince's condescending observation that "few English or American readers nowadays will respond to such happily wanton fancies as *Venus and Adonis*" ("Introduction" xxv).

Price identified the long-standing critical habit of not valorizing the poem that extends back to Harvey. "A tendency to deprecate Shakespeare's choice of subject has persisted down to the present day. For shame's sake I shall refrain from giving names or references" (286). Huntington Brown similarly complained: "For one may doubt that any other masterpiece of English poetry has been treated by so many scholars—many of them men of reputation—with the ineptitude and smug condescension that have run like a disease through the critical literature from Edmond Malone's remarks in his edition of 1780 to the present day" (73). As Hyder Rollins, the editor of the magisterial *Variorum Edition,* lamented in 1938: "Scholars and critics seldom mention *Venus* . . . without apologies expressed or implied" (474). An example is W.B.C. Watkins, who asserted in 1950: "All his life Shakespeare indulged in rhetoric from time to time, either for its own sake or to indicate a certain quality of emotion; but the rhetoric in *Venus and Adonis* is disconcerting because it does not seem to be always intentional or under full control. Much of the poem fails where *Hero and Leander* succeeds . . ." (*Shakespeare and Spenser* 6). As the following survey of interpretations of

Venus shows, too many twentieth-century readers have sided with Watkins in labeling the poem a failure.

While *Venus and Adonis* has unquestionably suffered from critical prejudice and myopia, the poem nonetheless has launched a constellation of multivalent readings, some contributing to "mad mischances and much misery" (*Venus,* line 738). William Sheidley commented that "the themes of frustration and incompleteness . . . dominate the poem" (9). The same feelings uneasily accompany twentieth-century readers on their way through the labyrinth of critical pronouncements on what the poem does and does not signify. Many readers agree with Kenneth Muir that "We are driven to conclude that the poem cannot easily be categorized" ("Comedy or Tragedy" 13). Hardly inspiring a reader's confidence, either, Lucy Gent more forbodingly claimed that "The number of published interpretations bears witness to the variety of possible answers [to the poem]; but no one interpretation works for more than one aspect of the poem" (721). Given Gent's admonition, few readers might ever ratify John Klause's benevolent opinion that "*Venus and Adonis* helps to establish the paradox that criticism may sanction charity" ("Can We Forgive Them" 369). The chronological bibliography of *Venus* scholarship and commentary at the end of this volume, pages 407–29, records the intense range of studies on the poem.

Schiffer understandably recognizes that readers have desired "the 'phallocentric' *right* reading" of the poem, but judging from the contrariness of twentieth-century critical views, this desire will never be fulfilled. Any Shakespearean text *a priori* invites faith in and/or the folly of a shifting critical ontological space, and the tectonics of *Venus and Adonis* are no exception. Underneath the multiplicity of interpretations—one is tempted to say penetrations when speaking of *Venus and Adonis*—lie an even more entrenched encampment of confluent contradictions.

Identifying one significant school of critical opinion, John Doebler properly calculated: "The largest single body of opinion on the poem in this century has found Neoplatonism of one sort or another within it." ("Many Faces" 34). Other labels for this critical inquiry include the *moral,* the *allegorical,* and the *thematic.* Readers tutored in this school valorize the poem as a philosophical/theological statement and regard their criticism as unpacking the wisdom the poem offers. One of the most apostolic views of *Venus and Adonis* as a moral document was expressed in E.W. Sievers' *William Shakespeare* (1866): "*Venus and Adonis* . . . is really the foundation of the entire structure of Shakespeare's philosophy of life" (166). According to Lu Emily Pearson, a critic from the 1930s, "the teaching of *Venus and Adonis* is as didactic a piece of work, perhaps, as Shakespeare ever wrote" (285).

For Pearson, Adonis is the embodiment of rational (holy) love and Venus of predatory sensual love, so that "when Adonis is killed beauty is killed, and the world is left in black chaos." T.W. Baldwin also preached that "Adonis is Love and Beauty, and when he dies Chaos is come again." Robert P. Miller takes the high ground, too, when he similarly inveighs against the lust embodied in Venus: "According to Renaissance morality . . . love-making which stresses intercourse for the sake of pleasure only is artificial, a perversion of nature because a misuse of natural functions. This love falls into the old confusion of *utendum* and *fruendum,* use and abuse—a confusion that lies behind much of the persuasive philosophy of the goddess of love throughout *Venus and Adonis*" ("Venus, Adonis, and the Horses" 262). Reversing Harvey's assessment, these critics elevated *Venus* to a sacrosanct text.

Firmly in the camp of the moralists, too, W.R. Streitberger argued that the poem educates a young man in morals and nobility: "Venus presents a moral threat to Adonis despite the fact that he is too young for love" and that her "seduction attempt is potentially destructive" ("Ideal Conduct" 291). In *Not Wisely but Too Well: Shakespeare's Love Tragedies,* Franklin Dickey allegorized the poem for instinctually moral reasons: "As *Aphrodite Pandemos,* she [Venus] is the powerful goddess whose charms continually lure men and animals to reproduce themselves and perpetuate life on earth. For the aspect, she is fair. However, this Venus, this earthly love, despite her proper function, is a violent passion which disturbs men's lives. In keeping with the allegory, lust or desire must be powerful and fair, for lust is enticing" (52).

Plato has been invited into the poem by critics privileging ethical imperatives. Concerned with "moral meaning" in *Venus and Adonis,* Don Cameron Allen sought to distance Shakespeare from Ovid—"Shakespeare's intent and plan is as different from that of Ovid as his Venus"—in order to question the sinful liabilities of Venus and her advocacy of the "love-hunt" ("On *Venus*" 100). Armed with ideas from Plato, medieval poems, and weighty treatises, Allen concluded that "the love-hunt, dangerous and valiant as it may be, does not on the lower venerian level ennoble the soul; hence the classical pedagogues did not recommend it to young men for whom life had a grander course" (105). Of course, Allen wanted readers to believe Adonis should adopt such a higher course. Reading *Venus and Adonis* in light of "the Platonic doctrine that Love is the desire for beauty," Hamilton argued that the "poem treats the mystery of creation and the fall" (*"Venus and Adonis"* 7–8). Even though Hamilton claimed that the poem's message "cannot be simply moral," he analyzed *Venus and Adonis* in moralistic

terms. "Traditionally Venus appears in a moral world where her evil temptations must be resisted in order that many may achieve the perfected virtuous life. Shakespeare translates the action of his poem into the prelapsarian state" (14) where Adonis as "unfallen nature" succumbs to Venus' "temptations," and his own unheedful conduct.

Relying on the wisdom of Neoplatonic dichotomies, Rabkin saw in *Venus and Adonis* sensual love opposing a higher spiritual love (*Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* 161). In a very influential article, Heather Asals, too, read the poem "in terms of the Neoplatonic hierarchy of the senses . . . [as] Venus progresses from the lowest desire to touch an ennobled appreciation of what she sees . . . what she begins as lust . . . is fulfilled in love" ("*Venus* . . . Education of a Goddess" 31).

Though these moral/allegorical readings are solidly grounded in historical/philosophical evidence, they have been challenged frequently. Dogmatic (or propositional) readings seem destined to fail in explaining *Venus and Adonis*. Cantelupe rebutted these moralistic readings precisely because they were based on such widespread historical evidence: "Thus the rhetorical burlesque and the comic characters of the legendary lovers travesty Neoplatonic notions of love, which were as current and popular then as Freudian concepts are now" (148). Doebler faulted the fated pair on still other grounds: "The clear limitation of too philosophical an approach is the tendency toward consistent allegory in a poem which resists any one pattern of symbolism. . . . 'Platonic' analyses of literature are often inclined to gather all particulars into transcendent ideals which end up questionable even as philosophy." Venus is both lust and love; Adonis is Love "who loves no one but possibly himself" ("Many Faces" 34). Roe similarly argued that:

> Poetry such as that of *Venus and Adonis* keeps uppermost in mind the relationship between the word and the world. The differences separating Venus and Adonis, differences of temperament, inclination, and disposition, differences in ethical outlook (including each's own internal contradictions), cannot be resolved by the debating parties within the poem nor in the judgment of its readers. Attempting to take a consistent ethical reading of, for example, Venus's sensuality is bound to fail. The play of language in the poem sees to that. (Introduction 5)

Roe is right. The overall effects of the poem supersede any moral categories into which critics try to place *Venus*. More bluntly put, Bullough announced that *Venus* "was anything but a Platonic piece," and Muir even more

acrimoniously asserted that since "Shakespeare's plays are singularly free from such Neoplatonic nonsense, why should we superimpose it on *Venus and Adonis*" ("Comedy or Tragedy" 4).

One of the most powerful explanations for the prevalence of moral readings in *Venus and Adonis* comes from Catherine Belsey in a 1995 article, reprinted in this volume. The basis for such a "critical tradition," according to Belsey, lies in promoting the opposition Adonis introduces (lines 799–804) between love and lust, a contradiction not established before in Elizabethan culture. Twentieth-century moral readings have readily valorized love over lust in part because they were "tantalized by the poem's lack of closure" (Belsey 258) and in part because they wanted to "relegate the wayward textuality of the poem" (264). Belsey persuasively identifies the adverse implication of a moral view of *Venus and Adonis*. Agreeing with Roe and Muir, Belsey discovers that a moral approach to the poem "betrays . . . both the complexity of cultural history and the polyphony of Shakespeare's text" (275).

At the other extreme from allegorical/moral interpreters of *Venus and Adonis* are those who support its "daring sensuality" (Muir *Shakespeare,* 51). These readers interrogate and destabilize objections voiced earlier by seventeenth-century moralists, nineteenth-century puritan readers like Ezekiel Sanford, and critics like Pearson and Miller. They go far beyond Coleridge's defense of the poem against moral objection to embrace a lively celebration of sexuality. For Robert Burton, who undoubtedly knew Shakespeare's poem, the very word *Venus* was a term for sexual intercourse in *The Anatomy of Melancholy.* As Muir maintained, Shakespeare wrote about Venus' seduction of Adonis as a way of countering "the effects of Renaissance painting, and of repudiating the denials of the flesh by puritan moralists and Neoplatonic theorists" (*Shakespeare the Professional* 186). In language and tone that Muir would condone, Tita French Baumlin underscores the power of the flesh in the poem:

> Certainly, in terms of the entire poem's erotic language, continually an aspect of the poet's art which readers have often appreciated, there appears an attempt to equal and even exceed Ovid's own mastery of lush, sensuous language. Flesh is a central concern in the poem, particularly its moistness, its texture. . . . ("Birth of the Bard" 199)

Nor do critics in this camp of the flesh try to have it both ways as some nineteenth-century readers did. For example, toward the fin de siècle, when fleshly pleasures were celebrated in poetry and art, Edward Dowden wrote passionately about the physical in *Venus and Adonis* in his *Critical*

Study (1875), but unlike some twentieth-century critics he felt obligated to absolve Shakespeare of lustful intent.

> For a young writer of the Renascence, the subject of Shakespeare's earliest poem was a splendid one,—as voluptuous and unspiritual as that of a classical picture by Titian. It included two figures containing inexhaustible pasture for the fleshly eye, and delicacies and dainties for the sensuous imagination of the Renascence,—Beauty, Lust, and death. In holding the subject before his imagination Shakespeare is perfectly cool and collected. He has made choice of the subject, and he is interested in doing his duty by it in the most thorough way a young poet can, but he remains unimpassioned,—intent wholly upon getting down the right colours and lines upon his canvas. (51)

In his introduction to the narrative poems, Maurice Evans supplies an alternative reason why Shakespeare's age may have had more difficulty with sexuality in *Venus* than Dowden was able to admit.

> The debate about the nature of love and Shakespeare's concern with sexual matters in the poem is typical of the period, which had become less confident about its sexual certainties and very prone to theorize about them. Sex had presented no especial problem to Chaucer, for whom the animal, the human and the spiritual still had their accepted places and roles in a great and all-embracing hierarchy. Much of this had been lost by the end of the sixteenth century, however, and the revival of Platonism in particular had created a new pressure to idealize sexual love and to deplore its animal qualities or at least to make them respectable. (15)

Evans unintentionally explains why the physical and animal can be celebrated by contemporary readers of *Venus and Adonis*. While our society, like Shakespeare's, is prone to theorize about sex, many have shed worry about such things as "sexual certainties" and "idealize[d] sexual love." The sexual revolution of the Flower Children, the long-ranging effects of the *Kinsey Report,* the freedom with which sexual differences are publicized and promoted in the 1980s and 1990s—these lifestyles empower interpretations that do not censure but condone sexuality in the poem. Many readers of *Venus* are a long way from the sentiment expressed in Lever's "sexuality does not pay" ("Second Chance" 81).

One of the most liberating responses to sensual love in *Venus and*

Adonis comes from Muriel Bradbrook: "*Venus and Adonis* is a justification of the natural and instinctive beauty of the animal world against sour moralists and scurrilous invective, a raising of the animal mask to sentient level, the emancipation of the flesh" (70). Some readers might rebuke Bradbrook as a too-jolly pagan, but her response was moderate compared to views of the 1990s.

Greatly expanding Evans' interpretation of how the Renaissance responded to "sexual certainties," Bruce Smith in 1991 advanced a far more radical reading than Bradbrook's. Keeping in the spirit of gender studies of the 1980s and 1990s, Smith argues that "an erotic allure" in the poem (as in other epyllia) for young, innocent boys was "far stronger than that of heroes or heroines whose gender is certain." Consequently, Adonis, like Leander or Hermaphroditus, "inspire[s] in other men, especially older men, a desire to initiate the youths into maleness, to *incorporate* them, physically, into the male power structure" (134), yet how such a homoerotic reading applies to Southampton is not on Smith's agenda. More fully expressed, Smith's views are these:

> In their androgyny, figures like Leander, Adonis, and Hermaphroditus embody, quite literally, the ambiguities of sexual desire in English Renaissance culture and the ambivalences of homosexual desire in particular. They represent not an exclusive sexual taste, but an *inclusive* one. To use the categories of our own day, these poems are bisexual fantasies. The temporary freedom they grant to sexual desire allows it to flow out in all directions, towards all the sexual objects that beckon in the romantic landscape. (136)

No doubt for Smith the time is ripe for a reading of *Venus and Adonis* in light of queer theory. Joseph Pequigney's *Such Is My Love,* which reads the sonnets in this light, makes only occasional and very brief references to *Venus.*

Also re-collecting the sexual fantasies in the poem, though not from the standpoint of homoerotic love, Gordon Williams emphasizes Venus' (the "Vamp") sexual jealousy and Adonis' "sexual awakening" as well as the young hunter's "emotional development associated with the disturbances of puberty" (775).

In his essay written for this collection, Richard Halpern, as we saw, confronts sexuality in *Venus* by studying its impact on Elizabethan female readers, concluding that the poem was "designed to frustrate female desire" and in doing so it is best seen as "a piece of soft core pornography."

Mapping the "erotic ontology of the text," Halpern comes full circle from earlier moralists who castigated erotic displays in the poem. For Halpern these are the sites for an intensive study of the relationship of the erotic and the aesthetic. While interrogating different audiences for the poem, Smith and Halpern offer provocative readings based upon historical evidence that earlier critics viewed myopically or ignored in light of cultural/sexual tensions.

Jonathan Bate's 1993 article "Sexual Perversity in *Venus and Adonis*" also belongs, in a curious way, in the flesh camp of critics. Bate is chiefly concerned with the sexual script in *Venus,* relating it to larger issues while admitting that its "perversity" thwarts fulfillment. Searching for reasons among classical texts about why "coitus is not achieved" in *Venus,* Bate claims that Adonis is not qualified to "participate in an ideal Salmacian/Hermaphroditic Union" (91). And so "*Venus and Adonis* is a disturbing poem in that perversity takes the place of the unfulfilled Salmacian/Hermaphroditic potential." Here is Bate's reasoning:

> Coitus only occurs in the form of perverted, parodic variations, as Adonis is nuzzled by the boar and Venus cradles the flower—because the partners are not equals. An oppressive power-relation has to exist: after all, this is a goddess dealing with a mortal. Shakespeare has some fun inverting the traditional power structure—Venus's problem is that she can't actually rape Adonis, as Jove rapes Danaë, Neptune Theophane, and Apollo Isse—but in the end the poem shows that a sexual relationship based on coercion is doomed. The inequality is highlighted by the difference in age of the two characters; one function of the allusions to Adonis's mother is to suggest that the sexual dealings of partners of greatly unequal age are bound at some level to replicate the archetypal relationship based on an unequal power-structure, incest between a parent and a child. ("Sexual Perversity" 92)

Besides valorizing *Venus* from either a moral or a sexual perspective, critics have celebrated Shakespeare's poem for its intentional ambivalence. These readers refuse to take sides with Venus or Adonis, preferring instead to de-categorize or defuse the poem as an organic, consistent text. Rebhorn briefly surveys the tenets of this group of critics. Among the ambivalence school Kenneth Muir stands out as chief critic. His opinion of Shakespeare's intentional ambiguity is best expressed in the following comments from his 1964 article "*Venus and Adonis:* Comedy or Tragedy?"

> Although an interpretation that seeks to show that Shakespeare was writing a sermon against lust is clearly impossible, it is equally impossible to assume that the poem is a straightforward eulogy of sexual love. Almost everything in the poem appears to be ambivalent. The famous description of Adonis's stallion pursuing the mare can be taken either as an emblem of the naturalness of desire, as Venus herself points out, or as an emblem of uncontrolled desire, or lust, as it frequently was. (9)

Muir argues that such an approach is consistent with Renaissance painting and, on an even deeper level, notes that "The ambivalence of the poem is caused by the poet's own acceptance of the conflicting feelings about love, and partly by the essentially dramatic nature of his imagination" (12). Muir valorizes oppositions to explain the script of *Venus and Adonis*.

David Bevington concurs with Muir's overall assessment, observing that "We must not expect psychological insight or meaningful self-discovery. The conventions of amatory verse do not encourage a serious interest in character. Venus and Adonis are mouthpieces for contrasting attitudes toward love" ("Introduction" 13). Rejecting any "allegory" as a true meaning of the poem, Bevington further claims that its seriousness is as much a part of the poem as the "sexual teasing" and "our own erotic pleasure" (14). The debate between Venus and Adonis, according to the ambivalence school, will never be resolved, nor should it.

The Burdens and Mystery of Readership

Venus and Adonis explores the obligations and power, burdens, and mystery of readership. An indissolvable fascination exists between criticism of *Venus and Adonis* and the idea of readership or, better put, strategies of readership. A theme running through *Venus and Adonis* criticism is what readership entails. Certainly readership is an investment in the text as a fluid economy, and critics have tried to negotiate within that forum. A major article on "the open responsiveness of the earliest readers of *Venus and Adonis*" is Katherine Duncan-Jones' "Much Ado with Red and White." Nona Fienberg also insightfully discusses *Venus*' impact on Elizabethan readers (and contemporary ones as well): "Venus' power extends beyond Adonis to readers of the poem who are challenged to reevaluate a fixed and stable set of standards against her dynamic and shifting self-evaluation" ("Thematics of Value" 21). Fienberg's article is reprinted in this collection.

Antecedent to, yet imbedded in, the idea of readership in *Venus and Adonis* is Shakespeare's act of (re)reading Ovid and Arthur Golding, one of

the most frequently consulted Elizabethan translators. This performance is challenging and potentially subversive for many contemporary critics, though it was far less problematical for earlier ones. Editors of *Venus and Adonis* since Malone—including Hyder Rollins, J.C. Maxwell, F.T. Prince, and John Roe—document echoes, catalogue parallels, and chart influences. Rollins and Bullough include Ovidian source material. Just as there is a debate (unrehabilitated for some readers) between Venus and Adonis, for many readers a struggle rages between Ovid and his Renaissance interlocutor Shakespeare. Opinions vary on exactly what Shakespeare saw in and took away or left intact from Ovid. Baldwin conjectured that Shakespeare relied most heavily on Ovid while Muir finds that the poem's overall effect of "mingling . . . wit and seriousness" is unmistakably Ovidian. Dubrow and Keach, however, base their readings on the ways Shakespeare transformed Ovid. Bate as well sees more differences than point-for-point source hunting might unearth. Warning that Ovid "tells the story of *Venus and Adonis* in less than a hundred lines, Shakespeare in more than a thousand," Bate contends that:

> Within Shakespeare's poem there are signals that we must consider the Ovidian source-text to be much broader than the seventy or so lines of direct material. Golding's outward/inward distinction works differently in Shakespeare's reading of Ovid: whilst the moral translator claimed to find meaning "inwardlye" but in fact imposed it from outside the text, the creative imitator interprets his source narrative partly by means of other narratives that lie both outside and inside, around and within, it. Surrounding the text is a distinctly unwholesome context. (*Shakespeare and Ovid* 50)

Bate concludes that Shakespeare's "version [of the story] is very much his own, as Ovid's is his, in that the *Metamorphoses* do not lean particularly on the older versions of Venus and Adonis story . . ." (57). In this respect Bate echoes George Wyndham's observation at the end of the nineteenth century: "Shakespeare's poem is not a classic myth" ("Introduction" lxxxiv). Poet Richard Wilbur similarly stresses that *Venus and Adonis* "differs from Ovidian poetry generally in containing a very high proportion of dialogue . . ."("The Narrative Poems" 1402). Tita French Baumlin further identifies a key difference between Shakespeare's and Ovid's texts in terms of the emerging poet-playwright's development:

> Unlike her Ovidian ancestor, Shakespeare's Venus must learn how to use the language of divine seduction, how to be the goddess she is

> reputed to be; this process of apotheosis, of learning and growing into the full-fledged Goddess of Love, mirrors a similar struggle in the inventive process of the new poet. Like Venus, who utilizes and must ultimately reject each of her models' persuasive rhetorics, so must the poet ultimately reject his source materials if he is to fashion his own voice and authority. ("Birth of the Bard" 192)

Like Baumlin, Catherine Belsey separates Shakespeare's Venus from Ovid's: "Shakespeare's Venus . . . unlike Ovid's . . . never succeeds in eliciting the desire of Adonis" (261). Admitting that Shakespeare, like other Renaissance poets, adopted from Ovid "above all the notion of erotic metamorphosis itself," Shakespeare considerably expanded the frame of reference in which love/desire could be represented. "But if Ovid's tale of Venus and Adonis offers absence as the recurring figure of desire, Shakespeare's poem surpasses its sources in audacity as well as length, by setting out to explain the origin of desire in its entirety" (261).

In an essay commissioned for this volume, M.L. Stapleton characterizes Shakespeare as an even more aggressive, less reverent reader of Ovid: "Whether in Latin or in the English translations that were published with great frequency throughout the Renaissance, Shakespeare had access to most of the Ovidian corpus, a poetical body that he cannibalized, reconstituted, and transfused into his own words." As a reader himself, then, Shakespeare was keenly aware of the problems and possibilities of readership as well as the incumbent dangers of an easy *detente.* Once a burgeoning writer is loosed inside a famous author's text, especially such a hallowed script as Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* alterations multiply. No servile redactor was Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was thus caught in a field of anxieties existing between reader and writer in *Venus and Adonis.* In fact, the poem begins with the ontological perplexities of this relationship. As Anthony Burgess put it in his fictionalized life of Shakespeare, *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love-life* (1964), "Here was WS [William Shakespeare] in naked confrontation with the reader, with, above all, one particular reader" (99). Starting immediately with the prefatory dedication to Southampton, Shakespeare apologetically, yet sophisticatedly, acknowledges the empowerment of readership. Deprecating the "unpolished lines" of the "first heir of my invention," Shakespeare commends *Venus and Adonis* to Southampton's "honorable survey," or reading, and wishes for the earl's "hopeful expectation." Shakespeare chooses the language of patronage cautiously, investing in the act of reading a venerable economy of fame and power. His poem is an "heir," a claimant in a contest for the conveyance of

power and property; and in deferentially appealing for Southampton's support, Shakespeare makes the young nobleman's reading a juridical decision in the acknowledgement and transference of power (or, in this case, influence). Southampton's "survey" of the poem is like the earl's appraisal of his baronial estates and rights. Shakespeare thus metaphorizes the act of reading as if it were an economic privilege emanating from the influential nobleman to his subservient though talented admirer/poet/heir. Given that Southampton allowed his name to be used in the dedication, Shakespeare clearly succeeded in his plea for an influential place in the earl's reading.

In *Nothing Like the Sun,* novelist Burgess records conversations between Elizabethan secretary and translator John Florio (who dedicated his own *Worlde of Wardes* to Southampton) and Shakespeare about Southampton's precise "surveying" of *Venus and Adonis.* Florio pointed out to Shakespeare: "I remember your verses about the horse. You will then know my figure and my meaning. If you understand a horse you will understand what I am saying about my lord. He is all fire and air and water. He can hurt and he can be hurt" (101). Continuing, Florio cautioned WS that Southampton was urged to marry by Lord Burghley, his guardian, and that Southampton read/saw himself and his predicament in the poem: "'Oh, already he talks of himself as Adonis. Poets have more power than they think. I think,' said Florio slowly, 'that he ought to marry. Not only for the sake of the house, but for his own sake. There are corruptive forces at court, there are not hands eager to lay themselves on his beauty. I think you, more than any man, might persuade him to think of marriage'" (102–103). Benjamin Stewart, who has performed a one-person *Venus and Adonis* throughout the 1980s and 1990s, interpreted Shakespeare's message to the young earl in unmistakably twentieth-century terms:

> The plague had closed the theaters in London, so he [Shakespeare] was out in the country weathering the storm. And he had a patron, Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, to whom the poem was dedicated. It was an artistic way of telling his patron, who was a beautiful young aristocrat, "Please have a child before it's too late. You're getting involved in all these court intrigues, and people get their heads cut off that way. We don't have sperm banks yet." (quoted in Herman, "People Need to Hear a Poem Being Quoted" F1)

The historical connections between Shakespeare and his chief reader, Southampton, have also been explored by G.P.V. Akrigg, A.L. Rowse, and John Roe—though these studies have not progressed much beyond the idea

that Shakespeare was a loyal poet soliciting the benevolence of the young earl to prosper in the Elizabethan twin spheres of letters/politics.

In his essay for this volume, Patrick Murphy extends our knowledge of the Southampton–Shakespeare nexus by examining *Venus and Adonis* in the light of cultural materialism as a social practice that comments on Southampton's status as Burghley's ward and his resistance to marry Burghley's granddaughter, Elizabeth Vere. Retrieving social and legal practices surrounding wardship, Murphy believes that *Venus and Adonis* functions as a form of advice literature, counseling Southampton about cultural, personal, and economic prescriptions and prohibitions. Edward de Vere participated in (and apparently believed) rumors that Elizabeth Vere was not his daughter. Foregrounding the details surrounding these rumors and the extant legal options, Murphy outlines Southampton's choices between different orders of prescription and prohibition. Through this "first heir" of his invention, then, Shakespeare provided Southampton with a disguised critique of social pressures and economic practices enabling the earl to avoid complicity with intolerable prescriptions, on one hand, and a destructive revenge against the loss of human distinctions, on the other.

Venus and Adonis has prompted several studies of Renaissance readers besides Shakespeare's primary audience, Southampton. Key questions confronting critics are these: Who precisely was Shakespeare's reading public? What were its attitudes toward the classical myths about the doomed couple of Venus and Adonis? What prejudices and/or tolerances did a Renaissance audience have that contemporary readers may lack? Were Renaissance readers involved (more or less?) in the characters' plight? Did earlier readers feel less anxious because they saw the poem more symbolically/politically than we do? Readers have raised these and other issues with varying degrees of sophistication and success. As we saw from *The Shakespeare Allusion-Book,* late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century readers were simultaneously enthusiastic about and disrupted by *Venus;* they condemned the poem as dangerous erotica or praised Shakespeare's honey-tongued language.

Studies of Renaissance readers of *Venus* have unearthed a variety of conflicts. Maintaining that "Venus's temptation is not directed against Adonis . . . but against the reader," Hamilton confidently found that "For Shakespeare's first readers the context of the poem would include the spiritual pilgrimage where the pilgrim meets Venus; but of course, she is condemned by the form itself" ("*Venus and Adonis*" 14). Williams describes the meaning Venus had for "the attentive Elizabethan reader" in overtly political terms. Seeing Venus' "outrageous behavior . . . as a reaction against

sociosexual tyrannies, contemporaries would have recognized Venus as embodying this new feminism, and qualified their attitudes accordingly" (701). Studying the "nature of romantic love and its analogue of courtly service," Dubrow perceptively suggests a further political link between Venus' flattery of Adonis and Shakespeare's encomium to Southampton. Dubrow concludes that "politics in the narrower sense of the word lies behind the sexual politics of the poem: Venus' assertion of power may well reflect resentment of Elizabeth herself," a view elaborated in Louis Montrose's influential article on Elizabethan mythologies. Peter Erickson also interrogates *Venus* to find "refracted images of Queen Elizabeth": "In *Venus and Adonis* Venus' domination evokes Elizabeth's control, and this undercurrent helps to account for the poem's unstable tonal mixture of defensive jocularity and general alarm" (*Rewriting Shakespeare* 41). Exploring the poem in terms of the politics of class/power, Kenneth Burke earlier wrote: "Venus would stand for the upper class, Adonis the middle class, the boar for the lower classes" (216).

Commenting on still other Elizabethan readers, Maurice Evans paints a different picture of them as sophisticated aesthetes. "The Elizabethans were more flexible readers than we are, able to accept simultaneously, and yet enjoy separately, the levels of allegorical myth and naturalistic narrative" (5–6). Moreover, Evans contends, "A poetry reader of the 1590's would have been quick to recognize the inversion and have found Venus witty and provocative because of it. In contrast to the Petrarchan tradition, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is full of aggressively passionate women who, like Shakespeare's Venus, do all the wooing" (9). Evans' views are typical of the received opinion about Shakespeare's first readers—they could be more generous than we and applauded eager displays of feminine wit that later generations found suspect or labored, depending on their moral/aesthetic views.

Yet Evans does not sufficiently explain just where and how *Venus* is "provocative." Duncan-Jones' article on Elizabethan reactions ("Much Ado") again is relevant on this point. Halpern's essay, found in this volume, concentrates profitably on the cultural anxieties—the heart of what in society can be most provocative—of Shakespeare's female readers. Forcing contemporary readers to admit that Shakespeare's first audience was not predominately male, Halpern allegorizes Elizabethan female readers to locate their sexual frustrations/anxieties inside the text.

In his introduction to the Cambridge edition, Roe implicates contemporary readers, as Halpern does Renaissance ones, who are surprised at seeing themselves reflected in *Venus*. "Venus's voluptuous appeal is qualified by her disingenuousness; yet that aspect of her too finds an answering chord

in the reader who is no longer sexually innocent" (6), which, I daresay, includes most readers in the late twentieth century. Doebler, however, believes that there is a "sudden diverting and distancing of the reader" through Venus' arguments ("Many Faces" 41).

According to Sheidley, Adonis offends male readers because, unlike "the properly ordered male," he does not "accept and realize his phallic potential." As Sheidley emphasizes, "what happens to Adonis is the inevitable result of his *unkindness,* that is, the unnatural role in which he casts himself. It stands in place of the consummation the poem always points toward and causes its readers to desire" ("'Unless It Be a Boar'" 13). Who are these readers? For Sheidley, "The logic of the tragic plot depends upon such great improbability that the disaster which overtakes the boy and the goddess promises quite the opposite for more ordinary men and women like the readers of the poem" (13). So where Halpern identifies frustrated Renaissance female readers in the text, Sheidley locates in *Venus and Adonis* the unfulfilled hopes of all readers rooting for the couple's consummation. Sheidley posits a most perceptive reader (himself!):

> Adonis' last words make up his rigid and single-minded oration against lust. To the reader upon whom the double perspective from which he views the action has enforced ironic detachment, wise empathy, and a compassionate awareness of multiple ramifications and possibilities, such simplicity cannot fail to appear inadequate. Benedick rises to his ultimate happy sanity by climbing a ladder of ironic awareness perceiving first Claudio's folly and finally his own. In *Venus and Adonis* Shakespeare distills a similarly sane and joyful spirit by raising his reader to a viewpoint from which love is revealed not to present (as it seems to Adonis) a dreary choice between lust and chastity but to offer a welcome alternative in the "warme effects" of charity to self-defeating paralysis of pride. (15)

Expressing a contrary view, Bevington wants us to confront "our own erotic pleasures" in *Venus and Adonis* by admitting that "Venus' repeated encounters with Adonis take the form of ingeniously varied positions, ending in coital embrace although without consummation. Adonis' passive role invites the male reader to fantasize himself in Adonis' place, being seduced by the goddess of beauty" ("Introduction" 14–15). Where Halpern sees the female Elizabethan reader frustrated in and by the poem, Bevington finds it more probable that the contemporary male would enjoy being in Adonis' predicament, though, in all likelihood, that *Playboy*-browsing reader would

take a different path. Critics like Bevington would have readers be like Puck, "an auditor, an actor, too," in *Venus and Adonis*.

Then there are those commentators like poet-critic Richard Wilbur, who fault Shakespeare for being inconsistent with any reader, abrogating his obligation by employing contradictory imagery for *Venus* and for blending comedy with tragedy:

> Shakespeare's poem breaks its own contract with the reader. By line 551 Venus' eagle has become a vulture, her face "doth reek and smoke," and her "lust" is being denounced by the poet for its shamelessness and its subversion of reason. This passage endorses in advance Adonis' tirade (769 ff.) against "sweating Lust," in which that sweat which first seemed earthily matter-of-fact (25) and later erotically attractive (143–44) becomes wholly distasteful. Is the reader expected, at this point, to make such judgments retroactive, and to see the first part of the poem in a radically altered light? If so, it is too much to ask. One could no more do it than one could reconceive *Macbeth* as comedy. (1402)

As Wilbur's mistrust attests, the relationship between *Venus* and readers of the poem has not always been fulfilling. If the history of criticism on the poem proves anything, it is that the burdens *Venus* places on readers are often reciprocated by the anxieties readers themselves incorporate into the script.

Venus and Her Infinite Variety

Like her votary Cleopatra, Venus envelops readers in her infinite variety. In 1953, Rufus Putney comfortably reassured readers that: "The supreme achievement of the poem resides in the characterization of Venus but Shakespeare's success in creating her implies also deft handling of Adonis' role and skillful organization of the narrator" ("Venus *Agonistes*" 58), as if consistency graced the entire poem and every character as well. About twenty years later, S. Clark Hulse, much less confidently, reflected on the centuries-old uneasiness about the goddess: Her presence "is the core of the poem's problem. If one grants that Venus is earthly love, what is the attitude toward earthly love? Is it loathsome, foul lust? Delightful sense? A near-sacred force of natural propagation?" ("Shakespeare's Myth" 97). Venus is both achievement and problem. The combination of these two traits leads to paradox: "She cannot choose but love" yet she is "doomed to the most flagrant incompatibility" (Klause 373).

Since the sixteenth century, Shakespeare's Venus has provoked con-

troversy; she has been remorsefully at strife with herself and with her critics. Among the recurring questions raised about her are: Who is she? What is the precise nature of her love for Adonis? Is her notion of love honorably Platonic or luxuriously sensual, or both? Is she the guiding force of procreation or the dupe of her own unflattering, etiolated attempts at union? What world(s) does she dominate? Does she merit the reader's sympathy or deserve the reader's scorn? The answers to, or attempts to answer, these questions have furrowed critical discourse with vehement contradictions. Venus has been represented as the sublime goddess of love, a denizen of an erotic epyllion, the victim of unmerited hostility, an over-the-hill bully-bawd or, for some, all of the aforementioned. Readers have celebrated her, denounced her, or pitied and excoriated her simultaneously. For James Lake and Kenneth Muir, Venus is a tragic heroine; yet for Robert Miller and David Beauregard, she catapults others into tragedy. For Beauregard, Venus' "desire for the young Adonis can only be taken as unnatural and disorderly" (94). Klause observes that "The indignities that Venus suffers are many and severe" (370). Much of Venus' post–1593 disquietude can be attributed to critical wrangling.

From the start of her Shakespearean existence, Venus has thwarted unequivocal response. By reversing female and male roles, thus transforming Venus from pursued lady into the forceful wooer, Shakespeare destabilized Petrarchan boundaries that embowered Elizabethan lovers. The result has led to a debate about Shakespeare's view of his own creation. According to Cantelupe, the poet is engaged in "parodying not only the myth [of Venus] but also its traditional presentation, literary and pictorial" (148). Yet, contrarily, Sheidley believes that Shakespeare "intends, at least to some extent, to endorse Venus' arguments (but not, of course, her farcical manners). Surely Shakespeare gives her more than adequate space to state her position, as the conclusion of the poem bears her out" (7). Here, then, are two sides of Venus' complex nature.

Venus' credentials as "Goddess of Love" have received scrupulous attention. In an essay prepared for this collection, João Froes explores the many myths out of which Shakespeare's Venus emerged to argue for a classically correct (the critical equivalent of "politically correct"?) goddess. Regarding an Ovidian Venus, Gordon Williams, however, cautions, "Shakespeare is not interested in [an] Ovidian explanation for the tempestuous passion aroused in Venus. Mythic explanations like the mythic powers normally enjoyed by Venus, here yield to a human predicament" ("Coming of Age" 774). As the traditional personification of Love, Venus confidently recounts her victory over Mars, whom she enshackled in a rose chain, to proffer unearthly de-