

What It Feels Like For a Boy: Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*

Richard Rambuss

Upon entering the Forest of Arden, Rosalind, the crossdressing heroine of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and the play's nexus of erotic desire, renames herself after a mythic boy beauty. "I'll have no worse a name than Jove's own page," she informs her companion in exile, Celia, "And therefore look you call me Ganymede" (1.3.118–19).¹ Intending to "suit me all points like a man," Rosalind dons "A gallant curtal-axe upon my thigh" and "A boar-spear in my hand" (110–12). In so doing, however, Rosalind may seem less to resemble Ganymede, who was simply a shepherd boy in the field before a smitten Jove ravished him away to heaven, than she does the other great male beauty of classical legend, Adonis, a huntsman who likewise armed himself with the boar-spear. Shakespeare retells this beautiful boy's own story – another narrative of male ravishment, but also death – in *Venus and Adonis*, an erotic mini-epic or epyllion, as the genre came to be known. He dedicated this by turns comic and tragic, earthy and elevate piece of Renaissance erotica to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, a rich, 19-year-old aristocrat, who was known for his own good looks, as well as his sophisticated literary tastes. Published in 1593, early in the period in which he was writing his comedies, *Venus and Adonis* was Shakespeare's debut in print. The poem, a showy display of rhetorical brilliance, was an immediate sensation, its popularity warranting numerous editions during Shakespeare's lifetime.

In *As You Like It* Rosalind, notwithstanding her "swashing and . . . martial outside" (1.3.114), hopes never to need to use the masculine props she brandishes. By contrast, Shakespeare's Adonis desires only to hunt and, apparently, to hunt only the boar at that. "I know not love, . . . nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it" (409–10), the boy hunter declares to Venus, who has in effect here been hunting him. Shakespeare culls the story of Venus and Adonis from Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a pervasive influence throughout Shakespeare's writings.² In Ovid, Adonis is inclined toward love as well as hunting. He even allows the goddess of love to join him on the chase. Together they stalk, Ovid specifies, timid creatures such as deer and rabbits. When Venus grows tired of this sport, she initiates another, direct-

ing her not unwilling paramour into a shady grove. There, making a pillow for him of her breast, she relates a cautionary tale, intermixed with kisses, meant to warn her beloved away from the more savage beasts of the forest, from hunting the wolf, the bear, the lion, and, of course, the wild boar. "Beauty and youth and love / Make no impression on bristling boars and lions, / On animal eyes and minds," Venus cautions (10.549–51). But Adonis recklessly disregards her warning, takes after the first wild boar he comes upon, and dies upon its tusk.

Shakespeare's Adonis not only scorns Venus's admonition; he scorns her. In Ovid's rendering, Adonis readily assumes a submissive role in relation to Venus' advances, which is to say that he does not reject them. Shakespeare retools the passivity of Ovid's Adonis into active resistance: "Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn," we learn as soon as the poem opens (4). Adonis' willful, resolute disdain for love – or, more precisely, for Venus – is Shakespeare's principal revision of the Ovidian original, a point registered in nearly every critical treatment of the poem. But Shakespeare wrought other, related alterations, which, though less remarked upon or even unnoticed, also prove significant. We have already seen how in Ovid Venus hunts both for and with Adonis. Not so in Shakespeare. There, from the very beginning of the poem, Venus' wooing interrupts Adonis' hunting. And instead of passively succumbing to her charms, Adonis spends most of the poem endeavoring to escape them in order to resume the hunt – though not with Venus, but rather, he says, with his friends (585–8). Even after the goddess of love has captured him in her arms and aggressively plied him with kisses, Adonis reiterates his eagerness to rejoin his male companions: "The night is spent," he declares, and "I am . . . expected of my friends" (717–18). The mention of these friends, these fellow huntsmen, is Shakespeare's innovation; they are not in Ovid. Their addition to the realm of the hunt, in tandem with Venus' exclusion from it, entails that the hunt, Adonis' singular desire in Shakespeare's poem, remains a distinctly male domain.

Whereas Shakespeare adds mention of Adonis' friends, he subtracts from the story the range of wild beasts that are named in Ovid. Shakespeare's Venus cautions Adonis against the wild boar alone, and it is the boar alone that Adonis remains intent upon pursuing, notwithstanding the goddess's dire oracle: "I prophesy thy death, my living sorrow, / If thou encounter with the boar tomorrow" (671–2). But why *just* the boar in *Venus and Adonis*, as though the forest afforded only one wild quarry worth the chase, only one way for a young man to earn his spurs? We will be returning to the boar's significance throughout this essay. Here, at its beginning, it seems important to remark the association in medieval and Renaissance mythography of the wild boar with jealousy, rivalry, lust, and male passion more generally. The boar, as one earlier critic succinctly put it, is an emblem of "overmastering virility" (Hatto 1946: 354). Like the addition of Adonis' companion huntsmen and his reiterated desire to rejoin the company of men, the narrowing down of the hunt to a single quarry – one whose mythographic resonance is markedly male – functions to hyper-masculinize the hunt. What is more, the poem charges the masculine world of the hunt with eroticism. The homoeroticism of this pursuit is apparent in the very terms of Adonis' rejection of

Venus for the wild boar, which at once oppose the hunt to love and eroticize it: "I know not love, quoth he, nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it." Here the wild boar serves both as a foil to Venus and her designs on the boy, and as an eroticized alternative to her for him. I foreground the masculine textures of Shakespeare's poem – its overtones of male friendship, male initiation or coming of age, male homoeroticism, and hyper-masculinity – in view of, to some extent even against, prevailing readings of the poem that principally turn on role reversal and gender inversion. Inversion, subversion, reversal, androgyny, effeminacy: these, I will suggest here, are not the only, or perhaps any longer even the most interesting, terms with which to treat *Venus and Adonis* as a piece of early modern erotica.³

To be sure, *Venus and Adonis* works a witty transposition of the Petrarchan conventions that inform so much of the period's love poetry, in which a painfully enamored man casts about to woo a reluctant, often unobtainable woman, who is all the more desirable as such, as unobtainable. Here, however, the pursued – an unwilling, high-minded, sullen, virginal Adonis – turns out to be male, and the pursuer – a sweating, lustful, incorrigible, sexually experienced Venus – female:

He burns with bashful shame; she with her tears
Doth quench the maiden burning of his cheeks.

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He saith she is immodest, blames her miss;
What follows more she murders with a kiss. (49–50, 53–4)

In the typical Petrarchan scenario, the fervor of the lover's desire for the beloved is matched only by the icy disdain of her rebuff. Shakespeare, we see here, waggishly represents both wooer and her wooed as enflamed. Adonis' boyish bashfulness ignites the "maiden" or virginal (*OED* 2c) burning of his rosy cheeks. Yet his chiding, his blaming of her "miss" – her misbehavior, but also her mistake in believing that she could ever seduce him – serves only to heat the passion of his "bold-faced suitor" (6): "Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force" (29).

The poetic conventions traditionally associated with an eager, appetitive male lover and a reluctant, even adverse female beloved are not simply upended in *Venus and Adonis*: their reassignment is comically hyperbolized. Shakespeare's Venus appears to dwarf Adonis, whom she freely manhandles throughout the poem. "You hurt my hand with wringing," he exclaims at one point (421). The goddess is so much larger, so much stronger than the mortal target of her affections that she is able "to pluck him from his horse" (30) and handily tuck him under her arm: "Over one arm, the lusty courser's rein; / Under her other was the tender boy" (31–2). The goddess of love is so coercive in her pursuit of Adonis, the power differential between them so great, that Jonathan Crewe argues that we take this seriously as a case of classical sexual harassment.⁴ Here, too, we might make note of another of Shakespeare's rewritings of Ovid. In *Metamorphoses* Adonis is an exceedingly beautiful boy now become "a man, more handsome / Than he had ever been" (10.523–4). Shakespeare's Adonis, however,

is still very much a youth. "The tender spring upon thy tempting lip," Venus herself admits, "Shows thee unripe" (127-8). She also describes the young hunter as "Thrice fairer than myself" (7): a "Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man, / More white and red than doves or roses are" (9-10). Venus' blazon of her "sweet boy" (155) is echoed in *Twelfth Night*, when Orsino tells his page Cesario (the crossdressed Viola) that

... they shall yet belie thy happy years
That say thou are a man. Diana's lip
Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman's part. (1.4.29-33)

In *Twelfth Night* the "semblative" or seeming androgyny of Viola/Cesario, around whom cluster desires both heterosexual and homosexual, is a function of crossdressing. That is, Viola's assumed male attire and manner, renders her not exactly masculine, but rather effeminate. Since there is no crossdressing in *Venus and Adonis*, from what does Adonis' androgynous beauty derive? Venus finds him "more lovely than a man." What might this mean? What is lovelier than a man? An exceptionally beautiful boy? A maid? An androgyne? One like Ovid's Hermaphroditus, who was "half a man, / With limbs all softness" (4.381-2)? Or like Leander, the luscious male youth in Marlowe's epyllion, *Hero and Leander*, who seeks to put off an amorous Neptune by declaring, "I am no woman, I" (2.192)? Or might Venus be praising Adonis as a male mortal so lovely that he seems more like a god? The goddess's encomium is ambiguous in its hyperbole.⁵ Insofar as androgyny is an element of Adonis' allure in Shakespeare's poem, that quality may derive from the temporarily liminal gender status of the beardless boy in Elizabethan culture. As Stephen Orgel (1996) observes, attractive male youths "were praised in Renaissance England by saying that they looked like women - 'A women's face, by Nature's own hand painted / Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion'" (p. 51). "Eroticized boys," Orgel adds, "appear to be a middle term between men and women" (p. 63). Perhaps it is this very liminality that Adonis looks to throw off by way of his single-minded pursuit of the fearsome boar, making the hunt a kind of masculine rite of passage.⁶ In any event, the cross-genderings that we find in *Venus and Adonis* are not so straightforwardly crossed, not so neatly inverted as to substantiate, at least in any unproblematic way, what appears to be the prevailing consensus in every critical quarter, traditional to "queer." Namely that here Venus "plays the part of the male lover" (Evans 1989: 8) and Adonis, as if by default or even necessity (but necessity according to what view of eroticism?) that of the "passively 'feminine' boy" (DiGangi 1997: 136).

For, as we have already seen, the depiction of Adonis as a passively feminine boy would first need to be complicated by his ineradicable, almost mechanical drive toward the "hard hunt" of the wild boar, instead of the "soft hunt" of "timorous creatures" like the hare, fox, and roe advocated by Venus.⁷ Second, as William Keach usefully points out, most of what we know about Adonis we know from Venus (Keach

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1977: 67). Essentially all that we know about Adonis from Adonis himself is that he loves to hunt, that he wants to rejoin his friends, and that he knows, even though he won't or can't coherently articulate why, that he does not want Venus: "More I could tell," he tries to explain, "but more I dare not say" (805). We may then want to consider the extent to which the poem's renderings of Adonis as a pouty, delicate, fair – that is, effeminate – male beauty do not simply correspond to, but may in fact derive from Venus' own desire. A number of critics, Catherine Belsey (1995) most brilliantly among them, have read Shakespeare's poem – particularly Venus' position in it: "She's Love; she loves; and yet she is not loved" (610) – as a kind of poetic phenomenology of erotic desire. As such, as a lyric meditation on the subjective conditions of desire, might not *Venus and Adonis* be about, among other things, desire's propensity to fashion its love-object *as it would have it*, that is according to the desirer's own desire? Hence Venus is able to hear Adonis' increasingly testy refusals as what she calls "Thy mermaid's voice" (429), recasting his chaste refusal as a winsome siren song of seduction. Adonis corrects Venus on this account later in the poem – in a sense reinverting her gender inversion of him – by repudiating *her* amorous entreaties as "wanton mermaid's songs" (777). Such strains, he insists, have no effect upon him: "For know, my heart stands armèd in mine ear, / And will not let a false sound enter there" (779–80). Adonis answers Venus' enticement to erotic play with a martial figure; he regards himself as a soldier not a lover.

We are now in a better position to see how Shakespeare's chief reworking of the story – he makes Adonis say no – actually cuts in the other direction from the transgender interpretations that predominate in the criticism, even as the poem's revision of Ovid works its witty play with Renaissance Petrarchanism. Indeed, it could be said that Ovid's is really the more effeminate Adonis. For whereas Shakespeare's Adonis remains "unapt to toy" (34), actively seeking to escape Venus, Ovid's Adonis dallies with her, languorously submitting to her advances and readily abandoning the hunt for a time. Of course, "active" and "passive" are not so univocally gendered, either in Shakespeare's poem or according to the Petrarchan love tradition that it parodies, where even as the male lover actively pursues his female beloved, he bitterly complains of his hapless passivity in view of her power to reject him, of his tender mistress's hard heart. Similarly in Shakespeare's poem, Venus entitles Adonis "love's master" (585), notwithstanding the domineering role she takes in the courtship of a beloved who is named both the "tender boy" (32) and the "flint-hearted boy" (95). If active and passive, hard and soft are not so uniformly gendered as amorous attributes here or elsewhere, why should the narrative feature of Venus wooing Adonis redound to his effeminacy? Similarly, why should Adonis' erotic apathy for the very goddess of love herself come (as so many critics have cast it) at the cost of his masculinity? It clearly need not, at least to those who can conceive of masculinity and male sexuality apart from heterosexuality, that is, apart from Venus: to those, in other words, who can grasp that a boy *as a boy* might desire something else.

Nor am I any more convinced that Shakespeare's poem renders a transsexual Venus, who, as though this were a necessary corollary to a passively feminine Adonis, can

simply be said, as Evans puts it, to play "the part of the male lover." Just as the notion of Adonis' youthful effeminacy is complicated by his staunch devotion to the hyper-masculine boar hunt, so too is the belief that Venus is effectively regendered in her aggressive pursuit of him at odds with the poem's representation of her as the instantiation, if not hyperbolization, of the desirable female figure. Or at least that is how the goddess of love, understandably enough, regards herself: "Thou canst not see one wrinkle in my brow," she challenges Adonis (139). What follows is a blazon of female beauty that is conventional in every respect – except, of course, that it issues from its subject's own mouth: "Mine eyes are grey, and bright, and quick in turning. / My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow. / My flesh is soft and plump, my marrow burning" (140–2). Venus further amplifies her own desirability in a second self-blazon, which pornographically surveys the terrain of her outsized female form, metaphorizing it as a delightful, if inescapable, pastoral playpen for the boy hunter:

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

Within this limit is relief enough,
 Sweet bottom-grass, and high delightful plain,
 Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain.
 Then be my deer, since I am such a park;
 No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark. (229–40)

Once again, the poem sets the call of the hunt ("No dog shall rouse thee") in opposition to a distinctly female domain of amorous pleasure: Venus' own female body. The metaphorical park to which Venus would confine Adonis evokes the pastoral delicacies of the woodlands to which Titania, queen of the fairies, imprisons Bottom, her own mortal paramour, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "Out of this wood, do not desire to go," she enjoins him; "Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no" (3.1.134–5).

Even the poem's renderings of Venus' desire at its most voracious remain markedly female in their gendering. Here is, for instance, how the poem describes her as she is about to kiss Adonis, having strong-armed him off his horse and onto his back:

Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,
 Tires with *her* beak on feathers, flesh, and bone,
 Shaking *her* wings, devouring all in haste
 Till either gorge be stuffed or prey be gone,
 Even so *she* kissed his brow, his cheek, his chin,
 And where *she* ends *she* doth anew begin. (55–60; my emphasis)

No conceits of inverted, doubled, or blurred gender here. The image of a lustful Venus as a starved female eagle ripping into her prey – of Venus as raw animal appetite – is remarkable for its sheer intensity, for the “downright violence” of female desire as Shakespeare here renders it. No less interesting is how this representation of the goddess of love alludes to and recasts that other Ovidian narrative of male ravishment: Jove’s abduction of Ganymede, for which to accomplish the king of the gods assumed the form of a giant eagle, “the only bird / Able to bear his thunderbolts” (10.158–9). Here, then, is indeed an instance of sexual inversion in *Venus and Adonis*, but it has little to do, I would argue, with any notion of gender indeterminacy. Rather, the poem’s figurative metamorphosis of Venus into a female eagle, able to pluck Adonis from the hunt as easily as Jove snatched Ganymede from his flock, inverts a classical emblem of male homoerotic desire into a drama of (failed) heterosexual seduction. It should be evident by now that I have been regarding Shakespeare’s Venus – who attempts to bolster her suit with procreative arguments (“Thou was begot; to get it is thy duty”: 168), in tandem with an indictment of Adonis’ male narcissism (“Is thine own heart to thine own face affected?”: 157) – not simply as the goddess of love, but as the font and the fulfillment of a certain kind of love, of *heterosexual* love.⁸ For even in this sixteenth-century text – written centuries before the great Victorian divide posited by Foucault of sexuality into heterosexuality and homosexuality – sexuality and heterosexuality, sexuality and Venus, are not construed to be fully coextensive: “I know not love, quoth he, nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it.”

Later in the poem, after the sunset, Adonis offers Venus a goodnight kiss as a “fee” (538) for his release:

He with her plenty pressed, she faint with dearth,
Their lips together glued, fall to the earth.

Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey,
And glutton-like *she* feeds, yet never filleth.
Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,
Paying what ransom the insulter willeth,
Whose vulture thought doth pitch the price so high
That *she* will draw his lips’ rich treasure dry. (545–52; my emphasis)

The detail of this kissing couple falling backwards to the earth bespeaks another repointing of the Ganymede myth, a myth that was imbued in the Renaissance with a spiritual, as well as a homoerotic, significance as an emblem of the transumption of the devout soul from earth to heaven.⁹ Here that trajectory is dramatically reversed downward, as the poem further accentuates the carnal, indeed bestial aspects of sexual desire, even when it emanates from a divinity. In doing so, Shakespeare coarsens the image of Venus as a bird of prey, figuratively metamorphosing her yet again, this time turning her in the throes of her passion from a Jove-like eagle into a ravenous vulture and vampire. Notably, the figuration remains distinctly female. Maurice Evans

reminds us that the Ovidian tradition, in contrast to the Petrarchan, produces a number of impassioned, aggressive women who undertake all the wooing: Echo with Narcissus, Salmacis with Hermaphroditus, and Myrrha (Adonis' own mother) with Cinyras.¹⁰ Nor are such powerful female aggressors unknown in Shakespeare, as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* illustrates. Like *Venus and Adonis*, that play stages an anxiety about – or maybe an interest in – female erotic domination: "Tie up my love's tongue; bring him silently," Titania instructs her fairy minions as they carry off Bottom to her bower (3.1.182). Indeed, the queen of the fairies and the goddess of love seem, in Shakespeare's conception of them, to share a taste for men and boys in bondage, restraint being a principal component of their amorous repertoires. Thus at the beginning of the poem, Venus having already tethered Adonis' male charger to "a ragged bough," looks next "To tie the rider" (37, 40). She also boasts to him of having led Mars, "the stern and direful god of war, / Whose sinewy neck in battle ne'er did bow," as (in one of the poem's most famous lines) her "prisoner in a red-rose chain" (98–9, 110). "Lie quietly, and hear a little more," Venus tells the squirming boy as he tries to break away; "Nay, do not struggle, for thou shalt not rise" (709–10). He doesn't.

My point is that the panting, sweating, rapacious Venus of *Venus and Adonis*, for all the poem's erotic plethora, is more a representation of aggressive female sexuality – or, really, aggressive heterosexuality – than she is a figure of gender inversion or indeterminacy. Rather than simply "reversing female and male roles," as Philip Kolin (1997: 31) and so many other critics have framed it, the poem, it may be more accurate to say, instead shows Venus taking on both roles herself: "Backward she pushed him, as she would be thrust, / And governed him in strength, though not in lust" (41–2). Venus, that is, does to Adonis what she wants done to herself. That she is constrained to enact all the amorous roles within the poem's at once exaggerated and parodically dysfunctional Petrarchanism – to be both lover and would-be beloved, both blazoner and blazoned beauty – moreover seems to me to have less to do with the kind of theatrical destabilization of gender wrought in Shakespeare's crossdressing comedies than it does with the simple fact of Adonis' unresponsiveness to her charms – that, and his contrasting obsession with the boar.

When Adonis tells her he still intends to seek the boar the next day, Venus says that she is jealous (649, 657). She then endeavors to dissuade him from the hunt by insisting that his singular beauty will be unappreciated by the "churlish swine" (616), who, the goddess informs him by means of yet another blazon, could never love him as she does (631–6). Venus makes her case from flat on her back, having excitedly pulled Adonis down on top of her at his mention of the boar. And in her jealousy and her alarm, she prophetically envisions a supine Adonis, wounded and bleeding, in the very same, hence erotic, position underneath her masculine rival:

And, more than so, presenteth to mine eye
The picture of an angry chafing boar,
Under whose sharp fangs on his back doth lie
An image like thyself, all stained with gore. (661–4)

For just as the poem has been consistent in specifying that Venus remains in female form throughout each of her figurative animal metamorphoses, so too is Shakespeare's boar, in keeping with literary tradition, a male boar. Given that bestiality and buggery were so closely associated in English Renaissance erotic discourse (sodomy might name either species of sexual crime), it is striking that Venus conceives the threat that the boar poses to Adonis in terms of penetration, and this multiply so, seemingly from every point of the beast's body. His tusks, she thus warns, "never sheathed, he whet-teth still" (617). "On his bow-back he hath a battle set," she continues, "Of bristly pikes that ever threat his foes," while "His snout digs sepulchres where'er he goes" (619–20, 622). "[H]aving thee at vantage," Venus concludes, he "Would root [your] beauties as he roots the mead" (635–6). Of course the boy hunter wields his own "pike," the boar-spear, but his weapon, he is plainly told, is no match for the boar, whose "brawny sides with hairy bristles armed / Are better proof than thy spear's point can enter" (625–6). Venus' figuration of the wild boar as *penetration* can be linked up with a blazon of Adonis earlier in the poem, in which the poet renders the boy's beauty in curiously official terms. There his "pretty dimple[s]" are cast as "These lovely caves, these round enchanting pits, / Open[ing] their mouths to swallow Venus' liking" (242, 247–8). Love (Cupid), we are told, "made those hollows," not so much to capture Venus' fancy but to suit his own, so that if he

. . . himself were slain,
He might be buried in a tomb so simple,
Foreknowing well, if there he came to lie,
Why, there love lived, and there he could not die. (243–6)

This passage signals, well before the appearance of the "rooting" boar, that Adonis' beautiful, penetrable boy's body, with its amorously alluring hollows and openings, is a site of homoerotic interest as well. Which is also to say that the poem reminds us here, if only obliquely, that there is another god of love – a male one – who seems in fact to enjoy more intimate access to Adonis' body than his mother Venus ever gains.

Like the male god of love, "the hunted boar" (900) is himself little more than a trace presence in *Venus and Adonis*, appearing in *propria persona* only momentarily, for three lines near the poem's end. The boar crosses Venus' path on her way the next morning to her discovery of Adonis' body, and she notes with horror that the beast's "frothy mouth" is "bepainted all with red, / Like milk and blood being mingled both together" (901–2). Then she comes upon Adonis. Here white and red – the color scheme of the blazon – again mingle, this time around the "wide wound" the boar has just "trenched" into Adonis' "soft," "lily-white" flank, a wound that Venus finds still to be weeping bloody "tears" (1051–6). The trauma of this sight redoubles itself – literally so, Venus seeing two corpses ("behold two Adons dead!": 1070), both multiply penetrated: "Upon his hurt she looks so steadfastly / That her sight, daz-zling, makes the wound seem three" (1063–4). The reduplicating violence of the traumatic gaze – of "her mangling eye, / That makes more gashes where no breach should be" (1065–6) – prepares the way for the stunning self-identification of Venus (whose

desire the poem repeatedly figures, we have seen, in animal terms) with her erotic rival several stanzas later: "Had I been toothed like him, I must confess / With kissing him I should have killed him first" (1117–18). As Venus comes to embrace the boar's violence as a reflection of her own desire for the boy, she reciprocally recasts that violence as a form of sexual climax: "He thought to kiss him, and hath killed him so" (1110). Suddenly unsaying all that she had said before about the boar as a blind, furious enemy of beauty, Venus renames him "the loving swine":

'Tis true, 'tis true; thus was Adonis slain;
 He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
 Who did not whet his teeth at him again,
 But by a kiss thought to persuade him there,
 And, nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine
 Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin. (1111–16)

As rendered by Venus with such palpable, voluptuous detail, the coupling of the boar and the boy stands as one of the most graphically sexual figurations in Renaissance poetry of male/male penetration, of tusk in groin, of male body "rooting" male body.

But why does Shakespeare's Adonis die? Or, "since all Adonises must die," as Don Cameron Allen (1959: 111) reminds us, what does his death here mean? Surely there is more to his death on the point of the boar's tusk than simply a scoring of the familiar Renaissance pun on dying as climax, as orgasm. Indeed, the meaning of Adonis' death has puzzled many of *Venus and Adonis's* readers, especially the poem's most moralizing allegorists. We expect Adonis to die in Ovid (so the moralist accounts go) because there we find that beauty has succumbed to lust. There, Adonis' death is a form of punishment for the youth and the goddess both. But here, in Shakespeare's poem, Adonis does no more than sample Venus' lips, that kiss ultimately serving only to confirm his decided indifference. So why should Shakespeare's Adonis, who ultimately spurns Venus, and with her what he censures as "sweating lust" (794), have to die?

According to Coppélia Kahn, this is precisely the reason that Adonis dies, and apparently deservedly so. In an enduringly influential essay, she argues that Adonis meets his death precisely because he refuses Venus' love, because he "scornfully rejects the easier, more overtly pleasurable and normal course for the fatal one" (Kahn 1981: 44). Kahn sees Adonis as caught between the poles of adulthood and youth, between "intimacy with Venus, which constitutes entry into manhood, and the emotional isolation of narcissism, which constitutes a denial of growth" (p. 21). Asserting that "for a man sexual love of woman is vital to masculinity" (p. 42), Kahn's reading collapses sexuality – more precisely, sexual object choice – into gender identity:

The boyish Adonis, whom Venus, the very incarnation of desirable femininity, presents with an enviable chance to prove his manhood, sternly rejects that opportunity, meets death in the boar hunt, and metamorphosed into a flower, ends up as a child again, sheltered in Venus's bosom. (p. 22)

What Kahn here terms "mature sexuality" (p. 22) is simply and only heterosexuality. Although she is unapt to treat what the boar represents in the poem's allegory as a homoerotic or even a homosocial alternative to Venus, Kahn's explanation of why Adonis rebuffs "the very incarnation of desirable femininity" nonetheless turns out the usual suspects thought to be responsible for male homosexuality in psychoanalytic accounts that look to render it a form of deviancy. Hence Kahn predicates of Adonis male narcissism, effeminacy, infantilism, castration anxiety, and what she simply terms "the fear of woman" (p. 23).¹¹

What Kahn does say of the wild boar is that he "embodies all that is inimical to life, beauty, and love" (p. 44). The goddess of love, we found, thought so too, but then she changed her mind. Why can't the critic? As we have seen, Kahn's orthodox psychoanalytic feminism, with its developmental model of maturation into heterosexuality, simply will not allow for "life, beauty, and love" deriving from any other kind of desire. "Venus," Kahn flatly declares, "is the queen of love, the supreme object of desire for any man, whose manliness is defined by his desire for a woman" (p. 34). Not only is this a reductive view of desire that ignores desire's incorrigible waywardness in Shakespeare (not to say Ovid), but Kahn's definition of masculinity is also strikingly unhistorical. Virility may be demonstrated a number of ways in Renaissance culture – prowess in the hunt or on the battlefield among them, but acceding to the amorous advances of an aggressively desirous woman would hardly rank very high among them. On the contrary, unbridled passion for women was widely seen to have an effeminizing effect upon a man. *Romeo and Juliet*, written just a few years after *Venus and Adonis*, provides the most pointed registration of this anxiety in Shakespeare. After his part in the botched street fight that leaves his friend Mercutio mortally wounded, Romeo exclaims "O sweet Juliet, / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate / And in my temper softened valour's steel" (3.1.108–10).

Kahn may be the most influential, but she is by no means the only critic to cast Adonis' lack of interest in Venus as more or less aberrant. For every critic like Allen, who lampoons Venus as "a forty-year-old countess with a taste for Chapel Royal altos" (Allen 1959: 101) (and thereby justifies Adonis' disdain for her), there is another like Evans who takes Shakespeare's huntsman to task for choosing "the sterile chase of the boar in preference to the kiss of Venus" (Evans 1989: 14). "Adonis," Evans finds, "is drawn as callow, petulant, curiously literal and unpoetic: above all, narcissistic," and his motives in rejecting Venus "have nothing to do with the idealism about love of which he is made the mouthpiece, and in all respects he falls short of the Platonic conception of beauty" (p. 13). William Keach (1977), who astutely recognizes that Shakespeare's handling of the myth is too ambivalent to yield "a conventionally moral interpretation" (pp. 52–3), nonetheless determines that "there is something mean and perverse in Adonis's aversion to love as such" (p. 70). Heather Dubrow (1997), while wholly disapproving of Venus' "tendency to see love not as 'mutual render' (Sonnet 125.12) but rather as an aggressive struggle for domination" (p. 225), is hardly less suspicious of Adonis' resistance to her. "Recognizing that Adonis does not fully understand his own behavior," she writes, "we begin to suspect subterranean motives

that he cannot or will not face, such as the narcissism of which Venus accuses him" (p. 240). Even Richard Halpern (1997) has recently suggested in his gynocentric reading of the poem that Adonis' indifference to Venus signals sexual deficiency. Halpern repeatedly refers to "the strategic absence of Adonis' erection," although, in an interpretive twist, he reads this phallic lack as a "viciously misogynist" joke staged more at Venus' expense than the boy's (pp. 382, 378).

The critics I have been citing represent widely divergent interpretive methods, and the readings they forge of Shakespeare's poem are ultimately quite different. Yet their estimations of Adonis (to the extent that they are concerned with him) all seem to me to be predicated upon the view, as Kahn (1981) puts it, that "in repudiating [Venus] he repudiates love itself" (p. 29). In contrast, the impetus of my reading is to consider how Adonis' intractable disregard for Venus begins to point in the direction of another kind of love. Whereas Kahn posits that "hunting serves Adonis's deepest unconscious need, which is to keep eros out of his life" (p. 39), I see the hyper-masculine world of the boar hunt as being shot through with eros, an eros that is at once different from and like what Venus proffers. To summarize what I have been arguing thus far, then, I regard Shakespeare's poem as less monolithically heterosexual in its conception of love than the criticism concerned with the poem has tended to be. Second, the expression of homoerotic desire here is not exclusively, or even primarily, beholden to tropes of gender inversion or reversal, tropes that tend to reinscribe homoerotic desire onto a heterosexual template (Adonis in the feminine or androgynous role and Venus in the masculine). And third, I find that Adonis can refuse Venus – just as a man may refuse, may turn away from the love of women – and that refusal be neither deviant nor necessarily tantamount to an expression of misogyny.

So what do we say about a beautiful male youth whose passion cannot be roused by "the very incarnation of desirable femininity" herself? I have been arguing that Adonis' eschewal of Venus – the pivotal feature of Shakespeare's rendering of the story – points in the direction of another kind of love. Moreover, I would say that it does so in a way that makes *Venus and Adonis* something other than simply one more illustration of the fluidity of desire (now much discussed in the criticism) so prevalent in Renaissance literature, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Shakespeare's own writings. There we find that erotic desire tends to be a highly mobile affective impetus: cross-sex, same-sex, and not infrequently both at once, Shakespeare's comedies, in particular, stage sustained explorations of what Valerie Traub (1992) nicely terms "the flexibility of erotic attraction" (p. 128). In *As You Like It* we saw that when Rosalind crossdresses as a young man, she takes the homoerotically charged name of Ganymede as her alias in exile. Thus disguised, she meets Orlando in the forest and offers to impersonate his beloved (who happens to be Rosalind herself), while schooling him in courtship. Orlando quickly falls in love with Ganymede-cum-Rosalind, even as Rosalind-cum-Ganymede also becomes the beloved of another woman, the shepherdess Phoebe. The fact that Rosalind, a girl who plays a boy playing a girl, is herself of course played by a boy actor in drag (a convention of the English Renaissance stage

the play's Epilogue highlights) further complicates this comedy's multiply crossed and recrossed vectors of desire. As Traub (1992) describes it, "distinctions between homoerotic and heterosexual collapse" (p. 127). Erotic attraction may be even more transitive in *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare's last comedy, which produces interchangeable male/female twins, Viola and Sebastian, as its doubly sexed, hetero-/homoerotic universal object of desire.

In contrast, Adonis' desire – to the extent that it finds expression in the poem (a matter to which I will shortly return) – flows in only one direction: toward the boar. Adonis wants to rejoin his friends so that he can resume the hunt. In this respect, the characters from the comedies that he ultimately most resembles are not Rosalind, Orlando, Viola, Sebastian, and the like: characters crisscrossed by hetero- and homoerotic desires before, and in some cases even as, they are eventually paired off in marriage. Rather, Adonis seems to me more to resemble two figures from the comedies who are not folded into the heterosexual closure toward which romantic comedy as a genre seems inexorably to be pointed, however ambivalently in many of Shakespeare's own comedies. The two figures I have in mind curiously share the same name: Antonio. They appear in plays – *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* – that abound in crossdressing and crossed desires, but there seems to be nothing pluralistic about their own erotic longings. They both love other men. Passionately.¹² As Stephen Orgel (1996) observes of the latter play: "What the presence of Antonio and Sebastian acknowledges, in a play that has at its center a man wooing a man, is that men *do* fall in love with other men" (p. 51). To this I would only add that – even as early on as on the early modern stage – some men who fall in love with other men do not *also* fall in love with women at the same time, or even eventually thereafter. This is what makes the Antonios different from Shakespeare's other lovers, including the Antonios' own male beloveds, Bassanio and Sebastian, respectively. At the conclusion of both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, an Antonio notably remains outside the conventional comedic closure wrought by marriage. But apart as what? Not as a homosexual *per se*, surely, inasmuch as early modern same-sex desire has yet to coalesce into the distinctive subjectivity connoted by that term.¹³ Yet the monovalently homoerotic love voiced by the Antonios – who together represent perhaps more a "desire position" than a characterology – signify, if only nascently, something different from the erotically transversal sexual desire of the other characters around them, characters who nonetheless all choose or are made to marry.

Shakespeare's Antonios thus seem to me to be figurations of a proto-gay male desire, just as *Venus and Adonis* can be read, at least *vis-à-vis* Adonis and the boar, as a proto-gay text. Jonathan Goldberg's *Sodometries* (1992), still the most sophisticated discussion of the vagaries of early modern homoeroticism, brilliantly explicates "how relations between men (or between women or between men and women) in the period provide the sites upon which later sexual orders and later sexual identities could batten" (p. 22). I hope that I have at least shown that Shakespeare's epyllion should be seen as one such site. But might the poem's place as a small, but not insignificant part of the still to be fully unfolded "history of sexuality" be something still more?

Here let us turn to the jumble of reasons that Adonis himself provides as to why he wants nothing to do with Venus. As I remarked earlier, those reasons are not fully coherent. Adonis first declares his hostility to love as he understands it – that is, as Venus – in a chiasmus that paradoxically renders his repudiation of love in amorous terms: “My love to love is love but to disgrace it” (412). Adonis later gainsays his own claim when he informs his pursuer that “I hate not love, but your device in love” (789). He then contrasts lust and love, maintaining that the latter “to heaven is fled” (793–804). The youth’s indignant Platonism quickly founders, however, upon his own lack of experience. “The text is old, the orator too green,” he admits (806). Yet even when Adonis seems implicitly to concede the possibility that his relation to eros may change as he grows older, the poem offers no indication that it will ever come to embrace Venus, “Fair queen” (523) though she may be.

Adonis’ explanations of why he cannot return Venus’ love may be incoherent. There may even be a vector of misogyny that crosses through some of his expressions of scorn for her, though, unlike Halpern, I do not find male contempt for woman to be the poem’s predominant charge. Yet however muddled, Adonis’ anti-venerian discourse remains stubbornly anti-heterosexual. This aversion is pointedly registered in his curt, contemptuous dismissal of Venus’ attempts to win him with arguments (recurrent in the period’s love poetry) about beauty being sterile and wasteful until it is deployed in the service of reproduction. “You do it for increase – O strange excuse,” Adonis retorts distastefully (791). Even more remarkable is Adonis’ hostile indifference to what is presented to him as a natural emblem of the naturalness of heterosexual desire, of the animal attraction that every male is supposed to feel for the female. Spying “A breeding jennet, lusty, young, and proud,” Adonis’ instantly aroused charger “Breaketh his rein, and to her straight goes he” (259–64). The poem devotes fifteen stanzas, yet more virtuosic blazons, and some of its most exuberant poetry to this didactic erotic set piece. “Thy palfrey, as he should, / Welcomes the warm approach of sweet desire” (385–6), Venus endeavors to instruct “the wayward boy” (344) of whom she has laid hold. Pedagogy then becomes pornography: “Who sees his true-love in her naked bed, / Teaching the sheets a whiter hue than white, / But when his glutton eye so full hath fed / His other agents aim at like delight?” (397–400). “O, learn to love!” Venus continues; “The lesson is but plain. / And, once made perfect, never lost again” (407–8). This sexy exemplum of how the sexes are meant to respond to each other – no doubt one of the bits responsible for *Venus and Adonis*’ contemporary reputation as a lover’s Bible and a literary aphrodisiac (Kolin 1997: 12) is, however, wholly lost on Adonis himself. His only thought “Is how to get my palfrey from the mare” (384).

Renaissance homoeroticism, as groundbreaking work by Goldberg (1992), Orgel (1996), and Eve Sedgwick (1985) has demonstrated, seldom poses as a distinct opposite to heterosexual forms of desire or as adversarial to marriage. In *The Merchant of Venice* Antonio materially enables Bassanio’s marriage by funding, at great personal cost, his beloved’s trip to Belmont, where Bassanio wins Portia’s hand. (Antonio’s reward for this service comes not only in the form of his deliverance from his bond

to Shylock by Portia, but also as an invitation from her to live with the newlyweds back in Belmont.) It is a different matter in *Venus and Adonis*, however; there Adonis' repudiation of Venus and his corresponding eroticized devotion to the hunt *is* effectively anti-heterosexual. Here, too, we should consider Shakespeare's final revision of Ovid. In Shakespeare's poem, Venus never gets Adonis, not even in the end, not even after death, the way that she does in *Metamorphoses*: that is, her beloved and loving Adonis transformed into a flower. In Ovid, Venus sprinkles "sweet-smelling nectar" over his spilt blood and an anemone springs forth, a flower as frail as Adonis' life was brief (10.731–9). In Shakespeare, however, Adonis' corpse melts into the air like a vapor, and the purple flower that sprouts from his blood, seemingly of its own accord (here Venus plays no role in the transformation), is identified not as Adonis metamorphosed, but as his offspring. "Poor flower," Venus laments, "this was thy father's guise – / Sweet issue of a more sweet-smelling sire –" (1177–8). She then plucks the bloom (yet another change from Ovid) and plants it in her bosom, there to wither: "Here was thy father's bed, here in my breast. / Thou art the next of blood, and 'tis thy right. / Lo, in this hollow cradle take thy rest" (1183–5). These alterations are subtle, but telling. In *Venus and Adonis* the goddess never gets her boy, but rather gets *his* boy. Any form of heterosexual congress or closure is here replaced by the odd couple of a compensatory erotic maternalism and male parthenogenesis.¹⁴

Joel Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye* (1986), his commanding reading of Shakespeare's sonnets, essentially credits the sequence, published a decade-and-a-half after *Venus and Adonis*, with the invention of heterosexual literary subjectivity. This claim's obverse – namely that in *Venus and Adonis* Shakespeare "invents" homosexual poetic subjectivity – is not exactly what I am looking to set forth here. Adonis does not seem fully to understand what his relationship to love should or will be. He may not, as Dubrow (1997) wonders, even know exactly what he wants or what it means. Indeed, I would further argue that Adonis' desire – what it feels like for a boy – is, in fact, just what the poem does not deliver. W. B. C. Watkins voices a complaint prevalent in the criticism when he dubs Adonis "an incomplete sketch of what might, in a less confusing poem, have been a characterization" (cited in Keach 1977: 68). The sense that Shakespeare's Adonis remains unrealized, especially in comparison to the poem's rendering of its other titular character, derives, I think; from more than the relatively few lines (only eighty-eight) that he speaks. Even Venus finds him as a "Well painted idol, image dull and dead," a "Thing like a man, but of no woman bred" (212–14). Adonis seems a cipher to Venus, a "Thing like a man" but no man, because he remains so perversely impervious to what every man, even a young one, is supposed to respond to. "What are you then?" the goddess seems to be asking here. Shakespeare's poem looks ahead to, anticipates, but does not distinctly realize what a boy like Adonis – a boy who feels that whatever he wants or will want, it will not be Venus, will not be a female lover, even if she is the goddess of love herself – what a boy like this might want *instead*. Hence Adonis' desire can only be rendered here in negative terms: "I know not love, quoth he, nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it."

This recognition may open another vantage onto the meaning of Adonis' death in Shakespeare's poem. Perhaps the question of why Adonis dies here should be recast along the lines of: What else do we envision the story doing with him? In this respect, *Venus and Adonis* evokes another of those "beautiful male young men who die (and are transfigured)" narratives. There are, of course, the stories of Narcissus, Hyacinthus, and Apollo's male beloved Cyparissus (who himself fell in love with a great stag), all in *Metamorphoses*. There is also Marlowe's Leander. We might even think here of Christ. But the particular story I have in mind is Melville's *Billy Budd*, another, though much later, piece of proto-gay literature. As soon as Billy, who is simply called "Beauty" throughout the novella – "the flower of his flock" (1357) – is taken aboard the *Bellipotent*, he becomes the ship's cynosure of erotic desire.¹⁵ From that point on, we sense that Melville's "childman" (1393), however much an innocent, is not long for this world. Whereas in his death Shakespeare's Adonis generates a flower, Melville's beautiful male youth – an Adonis rearticulated into an all-male setting – is already a flower, a "bud," a "buddy," a friend, who becomes a Christ-like figure after his execution. And that, of course, is one of the ways Renaissance moralizers of Ovid liked typologically to view the mutilated Adonis: as a pagan prefiguration of the slain and resurrected Christ.

What a boy like Adonis wants remains gestural, allegorical in Shakespeare's poem. Adonis never articulates a view of love that is a coherent alternative to Venus. Nor do we ever find him happily back in the company of the friends whose mention Shakespeare adds to the story. Nor do we ever actually see Adonis coming together with the wild boar. Rather, the poem elides a direct representation of that encounter, instead mediating it through the divinely visionary powers of Venus. Even Venus' own desires, then, cannot be entirely circumscribed within the normative heterosexuality that she is principally made (no doubt reductively at times) to represent in this argument. For, we may ask, what kind of erotic desire is *female* desire for a soft, effeminate boy – if that is indeed what Adonis is here, or even simply what Venus wants him to be? But that is another story. Yet even in this story, one about Adonis and male homoeroticism, the poem's most explicitly sexual expression of male homoerotic desire – the boar attempting to kiss Adonis as he sheaths his tusk in the youth's soft *groin* – is planted by Shakespeare in Venus' imagination and cast, "cross-voice" by the male poet, in her words.¹⁶ In so doing, however, Shakespeare enhances the erotic force of the encounter. For what transpires between "the loving swine" and his Adonis is something that someone no less than the goddess of love herself can recognize and ordain as erotic love.

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NOTES

- 1 All references to Shakespeare's works are according to the *Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997).
- 2 Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of the *Metamorphoses* made Ovid's work available in an English verse edition.
- 3 The homoeroticism that I am arguing is amplified in Shakespeare's rendering is by no means absent in the Ovidian original. The context there too is homoerotic. As Bate (1993) reminds us, Ovid's story of Venus and Adonis is narrated by Orpheus – "the patron saint of homosexuality, or, more precisely, of pederasty" – in his extended lament to the trees and the wild beasts after his loss of Eurydice (pp. 82–3). Afterwards, Ovid tells us, Orpheus' love "was given / To young boys only" (X.82–3).
- 4 Crewe (1999: xxxv and xl–xli) argues, "To imagine that a powerful older woman's persistent, coercive advances cannot count as damaging in Shakespeare's judgment (or be taken seriously even now as a form of sexual violence) is again to refuse a consideration of what the poem is about. Refusing to take *Venus and Adonis* seriously may also entail the sexist assumption that while coercive or threatening advances by a man are serious, such advances by a woman, especially an older one, cannot be taken seriously, women being by definition powerless, so to speak, and their desires merely embarrassing" (p. xxxvii).
- 5 Keach (1977) also remarks the ambiguity of "more lovely than a man," but he does not conceive of its meaning apart from androgyny: "This ambiguity is richly expressive of the way in which the soft, effeminate male became for the Renaissance an ideal type of human beauty" (p. 67).
- 6 Cf. Berry (2001): "Adonis's quest to 'know' himself through the boar hunt is thus an initiatory quest. The boy becomes a man in the conquest of death, taking on the warrior-status of the ferocious beast he kills" (p. 47). Berry's book provides a valuable cultural history of the hunt in early modern England and Shakespeare's writings more specifically.
- 7 I derive the terms "soft hunt" and "hard hunt" from Allen (1959).
- 8 Maus (1997) makes a similar point: "Venus, the goddess of love, is supposed to be the apex of heterosexual desirability, both source and goal of every man's desire" (p. 605).
- 9 On Ganymede's spiritual significance, see Saslow (1986). While he considers both the erotic and the religious significance of Ganymede, Saslow scrupulously keeps these categories of meaning separate. See also Bush (1963: 168–9). For an account that treats the religious and the homoerotic meanings of Ganymede in relation to each other, see Rambuss (1998).
- 10 Evans (1989: 9). As many critics have noticed, Shakespeare absorbed elements of the story of Narcissus and Echo and the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus into his rendering of the Venus and Adonis story. See Bush (1963: 138–9); Kahn (1981: 26–7); Keach (1977: 56); and Bate (1993: 89–92).
- 11 Feminist theory, psychoanalytic literary criticism, and Shakespeare studies have all certainly come a long way in the decades since Kahn's essay first appeared, especially in their ability to address sexuality, and homosexuality in particular. Yet Kahn's essay, which continues to be widely cited and reprinted in critical anthologies, has eluded sustained critique. It recently appears, for instance, as one of the five recommended critical texts on *Venus and Adonis* in the *Norton Shakespeare*. Even so, Kahn's insistent pathologization of any desire that parts company with heterosexuality would, one hopes, now have little critical currency. That said, the essay's ascription to Adonis of a perverse, even lethal inclination to foreswear "the easier, more overtly pleasurable and normal course" of desire "for the fatal one" still rankles. Indeed, the notion that non-heterosexual male desire is essentially suicidal in nature has acquired an especially pernicious resonance in our own time, in the midst of the ongoing AIDS epidemic.
- 12 Antonio, facing his imminent execution in *The Merchant of Venice*, enjoins Bassanio: "Commend me to your honourable wife. / Tell her the process of Antonio's end. / Say how I loved you. Speak me

fair in death, / And when the tale is told, bid her be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love" (4.1.268-72). The Antonio of *Twelfth Night* speaks no less passionately of his love and desire for Sebastian. See, for instance, 3.3.1-13.

- 13 In a much-cited summary passage, Foucault (1990) writes: "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him . . . It was cosubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature" (p. 43).
- 14 The poem's Dedication offers another scene of male/male procreation. There Shakespeare offers *Venus and Adonis*, "the first heir of my invention," to his patron the Earl of Southampton, who is named "so noble a godfather" to the male poet's offspring.
- 15 As with Shakespeare's Adonis, Billy Budd's beauty is described in ambiguously gendered terms:

He was young; and despite his all but fully developed frame, in every aspect looked even younger than he really was, owing to a lingering adolescent expression in the as yet smooth face all but feminine in purity of natural complexion but where, thanks to his seagoing, the lily was quite suppressed and the rose had some ado visibly to flush through the tan. (1359-60)

Is Billy's "all but feminine" beauty so lovely that it is nearly feminine in quality? Or are his masculine, seafaring good looks anything but feminine? Interestingly, Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd*, the canon's only all-male opera, casts Billy as a baritone, not a tenor.

- 16 I take the term from Enterline (2000). See also Harvey (1992).

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