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“I am no woman, I”: the Myth of Ganymede in Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis and Marlowe’s Hero and Leander

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Abstract:

Epyllion poems, or *little epics*, functioned in Renaissance society as provocative, comedic, and deeply intertextual explorations of Elizabethan sexuality and gender. *Venus and Adonis* (1593) by William Shakespeare and *Hero and Leander* (1598) by Christopher Marlowe are widely recognized as seminal poems of this erotic genre. Through their engagement and experimentation with the titular characters and narratives from Ovidian classical mythology, both poems seem to present subversive explorations of heterosexual love and desire in the Renaissance. In apparent transgressions and reversals of Petrarchan love conventions, Adonis, the beautiful male youth, is feminine and sexless, while Venus—the love goddess herself—is aggressive and virile; moreover, Marlowe’s Leander is both an object and an agent of the poem’s masculine gaze, and blazoned more extensively than his timid and reluctant lover, Hero.

However, in this paper, I argue that Shakespeare and Marlowe evoke a third myth through their alterations to character and story, and this myth serves to challenge and complicate the popular and preliminary analysis outlined above. In both poems, the encounters between Adonis, Leander, and the sexually aggressive, persistent deities that confront them, parallel the myth of Ganymede—the young Trojan prince abducted and subjugated by Jove. Through an analysis of the explicit and implicit ways that this myth manifests in these two poems, conducted in conjunction with a deep investigation into the social and historical context of the period, I demonstrate that rather than present subversive heterosexuality, Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* foreground male homoerotic desire—particularly between youths and older men—in a way that ultimately presents such relationships as acceptable, legitimate, and functional features of the Elizabethan sexual landscape.

Keywords: Early Modern Sexuality; Gender in Renaissance England; Constructions of Masculinity; Homoerotic Desire; Mythology in Renaissance Poetry

“I am no woman, I”: the Myth of Ganymede

in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*

William Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (1598) are seminal poems of the epyllion genre (Carter 136). According to Robert A. Logan, the epyllion—or *little epic* (Keach xvii)—“can be loosely defined as an Ovidian narrative poem about mythological and human figures in situations of frustrated love, usually unrequited or unfulfilled” (58). Though they were often perceived as “trite” and titillating entertainment, written “with undisguised artifice, prolixity, and ostentation” (58), the epyllia also “legitimated an erotic discourse by presenting erotic material in a framework of humanist education and literary skill” (Carter 136). Essentially, these poems functioned in Renaissance society as provocative, comedic, and deeply intertextual explorations of Elizabethan sexuality and gender. *Venus and Adonis* and *Hero and Leander* are both commonly analysed from the perspective of how Petrarchan love conventions are employed and destabilised within the poems to subvert the heterosexual relationships between the titular characters, and by extension, within Elizabethan society. However, as Sarah Carter explains, the notion of ‘sexuality’ as we understand and describe it today did not exist in the period, so the modern scholar must be careful about approaching such texts from a heteronormative paradigm that potentially “skews retrospective assessment” (5). In Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s time, “Individuals were defined primarily by gender and social position rather than sexual preference” (82), and “same sex sexual behaviour, as in the case of sexual behaviour or acts between members of different sexes, could be

considered *both* deviant and normative, depending on situation, circumstance, and nature of the participants” (5). Although *Venus and Adonis* and *Hero and Leander* are both based on Ovidian myths of heterosexual or ‘different-gender’ love, their poets’ alterations to character and story call attention to the presence of homosexual or ‘same-gender’ relationships (coined by Sinfield) between older men and adolescent boys in the period, specifically using the model of the Ganymede myth. Furthermore, rather than presenting such relationships as dissident, or with suspicion, both poems present them as a functional part of the sexual landscape of Elizabethan culture and society.

As many scholars have pointed out, Shakespeare’s most significant adjustment to Ovid’s myth of Venus and Adonis, recounted in Book X of the *Metamorphoses*, was to make Venus sexually aggressive, and the beautiful Adonis steadfastly resistant to her seduction (Carter 12, 153; Hulse 99; Keach 53). Immediately, Shakespeare characterises the goddess as “Sick-thoughted” (5) and “like a bold-faced suitor” (6). She is “Courageous[.]” (30) and full of “force” (29) in comparison to Adonis who is “Rose-cheeked” (3) and hyperbolically “fairer than [Venus]” (7). In this way, the poem seems to dramatize a gender reversal of Petrarchan conventions (Carter 153) with Venus figured as the masculine ‘pursuer’, and Adonis as the feminine ‘pursued’. However, Shakespeare’s other major alteration to Ovid’s myth was to make Adonis very young (Logan 64), and the effects of this decision on the power dynamic between the two characters within the narrative is just as noteworthy and interesting as the gender dynamic alone. As Adonis himself states, it is principally the matter of his youth that renders him unwilling and perhaps even incapable of yielding to Venus’s advances:

“Fair queen,” quoth he, “if any love you owe me,
Measure my strangeness with my unripe years.

Before I know myself, seek not to know me.

No fisher but the ungrown fry forbears.

The mellow plum doth fall; the green sticks fast

Or, being early plucked, is sour to taste. (523-528)

Through repeated emphasis, Adonis's status as a "tender" (32), "sweet" (155, 583, 613), "gentle" (403), and "silly" (467) boy comes to define his character more than his female-like beauty. His young age also offers a practical explanation for his effeminacy: "puberty has yet to take up residence" (Logan 64). Venus describes Adonis as "more lovely than a man" (9), but that does not mean that he is like a woman. As Alan Sinfield points out in *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism*, "For the adult male, the female is not the only defining other: also there is *the boy*" (103). The relationship between the sexually aggressive, masculine, and ancient (despite her emphasis on her own youthful appearance (139-144)) divinity of Venus, and Adonis's weaker or effeminate masculinity as a youth, is what produces the poem's association with the myth of Ganymede. In Ovid's version of the myth, "Jupiter becomes an eagle because he desires Ganymede sexually" (Carter 92), and he carries the Trojan prince away to Olympus to serve as his cupbearer, among other things. This scenario is paralleled in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, as Venus, after physically removing Adonis from his horse and carrying him away (29-36), kisses him and becomes an eagle, "Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste / Till either gorge be stuffed or prey be gone" (57-8). As many critics have argued, this imagery of predator and prey invokes the Ovidian theme of the "sexualized hunt, with the wicked reversals of the hunter and the hunted" (Starks-Estes 13), but one should not overlook that the specific use of the eagle also evokes the Ganymede myth. Overall, by resisting Venus and insisting that he is too young for sexual activity, Adonis simultaneously identifies

himself as, and actively resists his status as, a Ganymede figure.

In *Sexuality and Citizenship: Metamorphosis in Elizabethan Erotic Verse*, Jim Ellis argues that near the end of Shakespeare's poem when Adonis leaves to pursue the wild boar instead of Venus—completely rejecting and essentially abandoning his role as an adolescent lover or Ganymede figure—“Adonis seems to be embracing vigorous, masculine activity over Venus's effeminizing charms” (91). According to Sinfield, “In early-modern England, manliness generally meant hanging out with other males and fighting [while] [e]ffeminacy mostly meant being emotional, spending too much time in the domestic space, and being excessively devoted to women” (88). These statements seem to suggest that although Adonis refuses the role ascribed to him as a beautiful youth, he is still operating within Elizabethan sex and gender norms by pursuing masculinity and seeking to strip himself of his effeminacy. However, Sinfield goes on to explain that masculinity in the period did not exist as an abstract ideal “to which the individual may aspire” (86). Rather, it was about obtaining power in its various political and social forms, and in the period, the domains of sex and society were inextricably linked: “[S]ex was something a man did with his inferiors” (94). By choosing the literal hunt of the boar over Venus, Adonis attempts to divorce masculinity from sexual power and dominance. As a result, the boar, typically associated with Mars as “a symbol of ‘overbearing masculinity in love and war’” (Carter 159), penetrates and kills him at the end of the poem in another echo of the Ganymede myth in which the youth is raped by Jove. After Adonis's death, his body “melt[s] like vapor from [Venus's] sight, / And in his blood that on the ground lay spilled / A purple flower sprung up, checkered with white, / Resembling well his pale cheeks” (1166-1169). Therefore, in the eyes of Love, Adonis will forever be associated with a passive, beautiful object. As punishment for his sexless and therefore subversive relationship to society, he is forced by the boar to assume

his Ganymede status, and is then metaphorically immortalized in the role.

A.D. Cousins argues that Venus's constant attempts to draw Adonis's attention to aspects of her own physical beauty is her way of trying to make him "make himself approximate the male figure of sexual desire and power" (198). It therefore seems fair to attribute the poem's heterosexual coding of the Ganymede myth to the fact that Venus occupies a dual role: she is the masculine figure who assigns Adonis his Ganymede status, and the female figure that presents him with an opportunity to mature and move out of his subordinate position. However, evidence from the poem suggests that even if Adonis were to stay and satisfy Venus's desires, he would still be in a position of inferiority in comparison to her aggressive masculinity. By employing a lexical field related to eyes and looking, Shakespeare unequivocally establishes Adonis as Venus's inferior. Most descriptions of the boy's beauty come from Venus, and he is repeatedly described as avoiding or shying away from her gaze. Venus implores him, "Look in mine eyeballs; there thy beauty lies" (119). Frustrated by his lack of warmth towards her, she describes him as a "Well-painted idol, image dull and dead, / Statue contenting but the eye alone" (212-13), which essentially establishes him as an "object of the male gaze" (Cousins 195). Furthermore, Venus tells Adonis that she made Mars, the god of war, her "captive and [her] slave" (101), "servile to [her] coy disdain" (112). It is illogical to presume that Adonis, a pubescent male, would be able to dominate Venus in the way that she wants to be dominated if she clearly delights in "control[ling]...powerful masculine sexuality" (Keach 65). In conclusion, Adonis's fate, which binds him to the image of a flower—a beautiful organism without the capacity to gaze, that exists only to be gazed at—is not simply punishment for the fact that he rejects his submissive male identity: he is additionally unwilling or unable to assume or exercise a dominant masculine identity, and this double disavowal places him not in opposition to, but

completely outside of, the sex and gender norms of the Elizabethan world.

In composing *Hero and Leander*, Marlowe primarily used Musaeus Grammaticus's version of the myth, as well as "epistles XVIII and XIX of [Ovid's] *Heroides*" as his source material (Keach 86). Like Shakespeare, Marlowe reimagines this classical narrative about love and desire by infusing it with more aggression and sexual conflict. However, the most notable difference is that Marlowe's poem does not end with the death or "blood" of the titular lovers foreshadowed in the opening (I. 1), as Marlowe himself was killed before the poem's completion. Nevertheless, it is possible to treat the poem as a completed work because though Marlowe "narrates only a "fragment"...of the entire story...he treats this "fragment" with a remarkable unity of conception and execution" (Keach 115). Although the poem's ending stands in stark contrast to the violent, tragic ending of *Venus and Adonis*, overall, both poems explore the same themes and arrive at the same conclusion about what was constituted as acceptable behaviour within the sex, gender, and power structures of early-modern England. Like Adonis, Leander is a beautiful young man figured in the poem as an object of desire (Cousins 200): "Some swore he was a maid in man's attire, / For in his looks were all that men desire" (I. 83-84). As in the case of Adonis, this description seems to transgress Petrarchan conventions. However, it does not lead to a direct inversion of gender in the poem because unlike Venus, Leander's love interest Hero is not masculinised. In fact, she is also identified as a figure "for men to gaze upon" (I. 8; 17-18), and both characters are extensively blazoned in the poem's First Sestiad (I. 5-90). That said, Hero's body is obscured by her heavily ornamented clothing which serves to distract the male eye, forcing it to wander, while the narrator describes Leander's physical characteristics explicitly and erotically. As Cousins argues, this amounts to a "homoerotic celebration and display of the male protagonist for the male gaze" (Cousins 201).

Unlike in analyses of *Venus and Adonis*, discussions of the Ganymede myth are common in scholarship pertaining to *Hero and Leander* because in the poem, Marlowe alludes to the myth directly. Almost immediately, he establishes a parallel between the youths by writing that Leander was so beautiful, “Jove might have sipt out nectar from his hand” (I. 62). Later, on his way to Hero’s tower, Leander’s swim across the Hellespont is interrupted by the “lusty god” Neptune (II. 167) who, “Imagining that Ganymede, displeas'd, / Had left the heavens” (II. 57-8), pulls him under the water. Neptune, as water personified, begins to embrace Leander in ways that recall Venus’s one-sided caressing of Adonis (II. 181-191), and Leander similarly refuses to return the god’s affections. Ultimately, similar to Adonis’ being pierced by the boar’s phallic tusk, Leander is wounded by Neptune’s “triple mace” (II. 172) for refusing to be the subordinate party in a same-gender relationship with an older lover (II. 207-213). However, the fact that he is merely wounded may be construed as the result of the way in which he, in contrast to Adonis, does not renounce sexual behaviour outright. Imploring Neptune to release him, he exclaims, “You are deceiv'd; I am no woman, I” (II. 192). This phrase signifies that Leander refuses to be subjugated by the male god because—since having his gaze awakened by Hero (I. 161-166)—he identifies women as the appropriate objects of masculine desire. By the end of the poem, he has fully positioned himself in relation to this desire as the subject rather than the object of the gaze: “In his rejection of Neptune, his apparently violent seduction of Hero, and his scopophilic pleasure in the naked Hero...he is obviously a man, a desiring subject” (Ellis 105). Overall, *Hero and Leander*, like *Venus and Adonis*, is a poem about a Ganymede figure who resists his classification as such, but neither text condemns nor denounces the role as something perverse or subversive.

Although the myth of Ganymede is foregrounded in Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* as an

important intertext that complicates the reader's understanding of the poem, it has an equally important subtextual function in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. In discussing the significance of the myth in larger Elizabethan culture, Sinfield explains that "Ganymede translates, approximately, into the early-modern page boy" (113), whose role was often that of the catamite. Sinfield emphasizes that such relationships had "quite a prominent social function" (115), and on the whole, "same-gender liaisons were relatively unimportant in the sex/gender system of early-modern England." In fact, texts and records from the period that do address this facet of male-male desire—whether directly or passingly—largely contain "signs of humour, disapproval and envy" (117) rather than disgust, upset, or condemnation. In general, "[m]ale bonding... was invaluable still in early-modern England, as part of the glue for the networks of alliance, kinship and patronage through which business was conducted" (Sinfield 92), and it would not have been unconventional or uncommon for any of these hierarchical relationships—including that between the artist and the patron, or Shakespeare and Henry Wriothesley to whom he dedicated *Venus and Adonis*—to have a sexual component. Overall, the above analysis seems to suggest that the kind of pederastic relationships hinted at in *Venus and Adonis* and *Hero and Leander* did not merely serve as trivial or scandalous material for epyllia. In the urgent and violent way Adonis is forced to assume his Ganymede role at the end of Shakespeare's poem, and the ferocity with which Leander divorces himself from his by ravishing Hero following his encounter with Neptune—exemplifying the minion who "takes his master as a role model" of masculinity (Sinfield 123)—both poems seem to advance the notion that in addition to being legitimate forms of male desire in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, relations between adolescent males and grown men played a fundamental and necessary role in constructing and maintaining stability in Elizabethan conceptions of sex, power, and masculinity.

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