

A LAW CASE IN VERSE: *VENUS AND ADONIS* AND THE AUTHORSHIP QUESTION

ROGER STRITMATTER*

This Article analyzes the history of scholarship on Venus and Adonis to highlight outstanding contradictions which cast doubt on orthodox premises of authorship. Although this Article suggests that orthodox literary critics have failed to contextualize the poem, in either a psychological or a cultural sense, the alternative theory that Edward de Vere was the poem's true author also raises significant interpretative questions. The Venus and Adonis dedicatory epistle conspicuously honors Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton, in a public communication subscribed "William Shakespeare." Why would the true author, if he were someone other than the apparent signatory to the epistle, have gone to such lengths to conceal himself? This Article answers this question by examining three types of literary evidence: the cultural and political context of the poem's composition and publication, the language and figures of the text itself, and finally, the many imitations and parodies which the poem inspired during several decades (1593-1649) following its initial publication. When read as an element in this larger cultural gestalt, the poem itself yields a provocative and convincing justification for the alleged concealment policy.

Superficially, *Venus and Adonis* provides compelling evidence for the orthodox view of Shakespearean authorship, which attributes the works to William Shakspere¹ of Stratford-upon-Avon. As shown in Figure One, the dedicatory epistle to Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton, is

* Roger Stritmatter holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts. He has published articles in a variety of academic and non-academic publications, including *Notes and Queries*, *Dialectical Anthropology*, *The Elizabethan Review*, and *The Oxfordian*.

1. The spelling denotes the name of the Stratford burgher to whom the works are conventionally attributed. The six surviving signatures on legal documents, which are the sole surviving witness of the alleged poet's hand, are all spelled without the terminal "e" in "shake." The distinction between "Shakspere"—the Stratford business man—and "Shakespeare"—the literary writer—is also employed to facilitate rational discussion which avoids presupposing the point at issue—whether one man can be equated with the other or whether the name "Shakespeare" was a cover for a third party such as Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, with "Shakspere" playing the role of an Elizabethan "Battillus." For the concept and Elizabethan currency of the term, see Diana Price, *Evidence for a Literary Biography*, 72 TENN. L. REV. 247, 249-50 (2004).

subscribed “Your Honors in all dutie, William Shakespeare.”² Why would the true author, if he were someone other than the apparent signatory to the epistle, go to such lengths to conceal himself? I propose to answer this question by examining three types of literary evidence: the context of the poem’s composition and publication; the language and figures of the text itself; and finally, the many imitations and parodies that the poem inspired during several decades, from 1593 to 1649, following its initial publication. When read as an element in this larger cultural gestalt, the poem itself yields a provocative and convincing justification for the alleged concealment policy.

I. ORTHODOX THEORIES OF MOTIVE

Despite the variety of interpretative approaches that *Venus and Adonis* has engendered since Coleridge published the first commentary on the poem in 1817,³ orthodox critics primarily endorse two main theories about when and why the poem was written. One theory, favored by Katherine Duncan-Jones and many others, associates the poem’s composition with a hiatus in the presumed author’s employment prospects in 1592: “[The plague] causing that prolonged closure of the theatres . . . is the immediate background to Shakespeare’s publication of *Venus and Adonis*.”⁴ This theory has been widely endorsed by Shakespearean critics, most recently and prominently by Colin Burrow in the 2002 Oxford University Press edition of the poems, for whom “[t]he most reasonable supposition is that Shakespeare composed both *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* during this extended period in which he could not be sure of any kind of financial return for a composition for the public theatres.”⁵

A second theory, proposed by Muriel C. Bradbrook in an influential 1962 article, proposes an epideictic motive.⁶ Jonathan Bate’s 1993 endorsement illustrates the elevation of this theory from hypothesis to established icon: “Muriel Bradbrook has convincingly argued that Shakespeare wrote *Venus and Adonis* partly in response to Greene’s ‘upstart crow’ quip—the Stratford

2. The epistle with “signature” attached constitutes a printed equivalent of a literary holograph—a body of text with authenticating signature attached. Obviously, much greater evidentiary value attaches to such a document than to the mere existence of a name on a title page.

3. SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA* (George Watson ed., new ed. 1956) (1817); see generally *VENUS AND ADONIS: CRITICAL ESSAYS* (Philip C. Kolin ed., 1997) [hereinafter *CRITICAL ESSAYS*] (providing a recent and useful survey).

4. Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Much Ado with Red and White: The Earliest Readers of Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis* (1593), 44 *REV. ENG. STUD.* 479, 482 (1993).

5. Colin Burrow, *Introduction to WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE COMPLETE SONNETS AND POEMS* 9 (Colin Burrow ed., 2002) (emphases added).

6. Muriel C. Bradbrook, *Beasts and Gods: Greene’s Groats-worth of Witte and the Social Purpose of Venus and Adonis*, in 15 *SHAKESPEARE SURV.* 62, 62-72 (Allardyce Nicoll ed., 1962).

lad decided to show that he could outdo the Oxbridge men in that most sophisticated of genres, the Ovidian erotic narrative.”⁷

Although convincing to Bate, Burrow, and other orthodox Shakespeareans, these theoretical models may appear inconclusive to independent readers. Indeed, Duncan-Jones offers an impressive example of a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy of the most elementary and misleading nature.⁸ Things may have happened as Duncan-Jones asserts they did, and for the reasons she asserts, but there is no way of knowing or of testing her theory. Instead, her account substitutes a theory of circumstance for one of motive, as if to argue that because a man had ink and pen and happened to be otherwise unemployed, he must be guilty of writing *Paradise Lost*. It fails to identify a coherent link between the alleged circumstance and the known result other than mere opportunity. Why did the author choose *this* theme and not another? Why did he shape his theme in *this particular figurative manner*? What contexts, immediate or extensive, informed his literary and rhetorical choices? Such questions are the *sine qua non* of literary interpretation and her theory offers no hint of an answer to them.

The Bradbrook-Bate theory comes one step closer to adequacy, linking an alleged motive, the competitive need to demonstrate literary prowess, with the poem’s literary genre, Ovidian erotic narrative.⁹ Such poems were indeed popular in the early 1590s, and it is possible to imagine a young and unschooled Will Shakspeare—especially, perhaps, one thrown adrift by the closure of the theatres—anxious to prove his mettle by outperforming the university wits in a popular and lucrative poetic genre. Unfortunately, however, even this second theory fails the critical standard of relevance. “A biographical critic,” write X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, “is not concerned with recreating the record of an author’s life. Biographical criticism focuses on explicating the literary work by using the insight provided by knowledge of the author’s life. . . . [B]iographical data should *amplify the meaning* of the text, not drown it out with irrelevant material.”¹⁰ Neither the Duncan-Jones nor the Bradbrook-Bate theories assist the explication of the literary work or “amplify the meaning” of the text in question. Their utility for literary historians is therefore null, despite their ability to supply the purely ideological function of providing an etiological fable to support the orthodox doctrine of Shakespearean authorship as it negotiates epistemically dangerous territory.

7. JONATHAN BATE, *SHAKESPEARE AND OVID* 102 (1993) (citing Bradbrook, *supra* note 6, at 62-72).

8. See Duncan-Jones, *supra* note 4.

9. See BATE, *supra* note 7, at 102; Bradbrook, *supra* note 6, at 62.

10. X.J. KENNEDY & DANA GIOIA, *LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION TO FICTION, POETRY, AND DRAMA* 1501 (9th ed. 2005) (emphasis added).

II. THE PROBLEM OF POLITICS

While embracing these two non-literary theories with surprising enthusiasm, orthodox scholars have largely ignored or misrepresented the case made by previous writers associating the poem with Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.¹¹ Phillip Kolin, in his introduction to a recent collection of critical essays on the poem, declares that “Shakespeare’s authorship of *Venus and Adonis* has never been in question.”¹² It is difficult to reconcile this proposition with the record of critical history. In the 1938 Variorum edition, Hyder E. Rollins reviewed an already extensive literature attributing the poem to either Oxford or Bacon.¹³ In fact, the case for Oxford’s authorship of the poem was presumed by J. Thomas Looney in 1920,¹⁴ reiterated in 1952 by Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn Sr.,¹⁵ and has never been doubted by the mainstream Oxfordians.¹⁶ By 1965 the case for Oxford’s authorship of the poem had gained such notoriety that Milward Martin, like Charlton Ogburn Sr., a lawyer, proposed a definitive critique: “The name [William Shakespeare] could not have been a *nom-de-plume*, for none of the pretenders had ever used a *nom-de-plume* and had no reason to use one on that non-political poem.”¹⁷ Martin’s critique reveals the brittleness of orthodox reasoning about the poem’s authorship and inadvertently suggests a reason why contemporary critics such as Kolin are so unwilling to acknowledge the existence of an authorship dispute with respect to *Venus and Adonis*.

11. For a general exposition of the case, see J. THOMAS LOONEY, “SHAKESPEARE” IDENTIFIED IN EDWARD DE VERE THE SEVENTEENTH EARL OF OXFORD (Duell, Sloan, & Pearce 1949) (1920); CHARLTON OGBURN, *THE MYSTERIOUS WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY* (1984); JOSEPH SOBRAN, *ALIAS SHAKESPEARE: SOLVING THE GREATEST LITERARY MYSTERY OF ALL TIME* (1997); RICHARD F. WHALEN, *SHAKESPEARE—WHO WAS HE? THE OXFORD CHALLENGE TO THE BARD OF AVON* (1994).

12. Philip C. Kolin, *Venus and/or Adonis Among the Critics*, in *CRITICAL ESSAYS*, *supra* note 3, at 3.

13. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *A NEW VARIORUM EDITION OF SHAKESPEARE: THE POEMS* (Hyder Edward Rollins ed., 1938) [hereinafter *NEW VARIORUM EDITION*]. For literature attributing the poem to Oxford, see PERCY ALLEN, *THE CASE FOR EDWARD DE VERE, THE 17TH EARL OF OXFORD, AS “SHAKESPEARE”* (1930) [hereinafter *ALLEN, CASE FOR EDWARD DE VERE*]; PERCY ALLEN, *THE OXFORD-SHAKESPEARE CASE CORROBORATED* (1931); GERALD H. RENDALL, *PERSONAL CLUES IN SHAKESPEARE POEMS & SONNETS* (1934). For literature attributing the poem to Bacon, see ARTHUR BRADFORD CORNWALL, *FRANCIS THE FIRST, UNACKNOWLEDGED KING OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND* (1936).

14. LOONEY, *supra* note 11.

15. CHARLTON OGBURN & DOROTHY OGBURN, *THIS STAR OF ENGLAND: “WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE” MAN OF THE RENAISSANCE 846-63* (1952).

16. The term “Oxfordian” is used to denote advocates of the case attributing the works to Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. For some representative works advocating this view, see *supra* note 11.

17. MILWARD W. MARTIN, *WAS SHAKESPEARE SHAKESPEARE? A LAWYER REVIEWS THE EVIDENCE* 136 (1965).

Although Martin does not defend the proposition that *Venus and Adonis* is a “non-political” poem, or even explain what he means by the term, his statement does identify the conditions that might justify the author’s concealment.¹⁸ Throughout the early modern period, a strong taboo discouraged aristocrats from damaging their reputations by association with published poetry or theater. “’Tis ridiculous for a lord to print verses,” wrote the Jacobean cultural historian and lawyer John Selden.¹⁹ “[T]is well enough to make ’em to please himself, but to make them public is foolish.”²⁰ But surely this “stigma of print,” to the extent that it had influence,²¹ is not a sufficient incentive to justify the degree of deception invoked by the Oxfordians when they propose that Oxford alienated not only his name but his identity²² in publishing *Venus and Adonis*. However, the hypothesis that *Venus and Adonis* was a “political” poem may provide a stronger rationale for the alleged concealment policy.

III. STRUCTURE AND CONTEXT

In a recent monograph, Justice Stevens stresses the importance of context as a principle for textual interpretation: “[T]he text [must] be read in its contemporary context.”²³ With this admonition in mind, we will explore the hypothesis of a “political” *Venus and Adonis* by examining three distinct modes of context: structural, intertextual, and cultural. A first, provocative level of context is given in the structure of the 1593 (Q1) and subsequent quartos of *Venus and Adonis*.²⁴ On the title page is the “purloined letter” of

18. *Id.*

19. THE TABLE TALK OF JOHN SELDEN 135 (Samuel Harvey Reynolds ed., London, Clarendon Press 1892).

20. *Id.* The sentiment was frequently expressed in the early modern period. Castiglione’s *Courtier*, one of the works most influential in shaping Shakespeare’s views on ethics and aesthetics, advises that the courtier must “take care to keep [his literary works] under cover . . . and let him show them only to a friend who can be trusted.” BALDESAR CASTIGLIONE, THE BOOK OF THE COURTIER 52 (Charles S. Singleton trans., Daniel Javitch ed., W.W. Norton 2002) (1561).

21. See Steven W. May, *Tudor Aristocrats and the Mythical “Stigma of Print,”* in RENAISSANCE PAPERS 11 (A. Leigh Deneef & M. Thomas Hester eds., 1980), available at <http://shakespeareauthorship.com/stigma.html> (arguing that the stigma of print did not exist). But see Diana Price, *The Mythical “Myth” of the Stigma of Print*, at <http://www.shakespeareauthorship.com/resources/stigma.asp> (Feb. 27, 2002) (disagreeing with May’s conclusions).

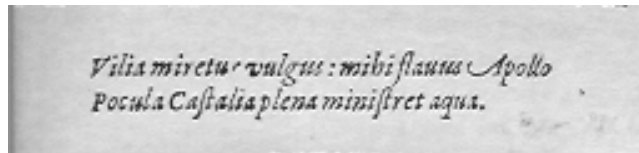
22. As Steven May, among others, has noted, Oxford himself violated the taboo with his 1573 poem prefixed to Thomas Bedingfield’s translation of Cardano’s *Comforte*. See May, *supra* note 21, at 16.

23. John Paul Stevens, *The Shakespeare Canon of Statutory Construction*, 140 U. PA. L. REV. 1373, 1379 (1992).

24. *Venus and Adonis* was the most popular Shakespearean text of the era. Lee’s census includes the following issues: 1593 (Q1), 1594 (Q2), 1596 (Q3), 1599 (Q4), 1600 (Q5), 1602

Shakespeare authorship studies: a two-line heroic couplet, excerpted from Ovid's *Elegy XV* and transformed into an epigram introducing Shakespeare's first venture into print. As shown in Figure One, the couplet reads: "Let the vulgar admire vulgar things (*vilia*); as for me, tawny-haired Apollo fills my cups from the Castalian springs on Mt. Parnassus."²⁵

Figure 1. Title-page epigram from *Venus and Adonis*



The reference to Mount Parnassus invokes a literary context that immediately suggests the scope and subtlety of the author's purposes and aesthetic design. Parnassus is a literary *topos* of impressive antiquity and suggestive associations. In the Greco-Latin tradition—to Pindar, Homer, Ovid, Catullus, or Persius Flaccus—it was home to the muses, the birthplace of Hermes, and the sacred source of all literary inspiration. According to the *Dictionnaire International des Termes Littéraires*, "[b]y synecdoche, Parnassus symbolizes poetry itself and represents the home of poets."²⁶ Moreover, from early times Parnassus was associated with a satirical genre of mock trials in which writers were prosecuted for their stylistic and social crimes.²⁷ At

(Q6), 1617 (Q7), 1620 (Q8), 1627 (Q9), 1630 (Q10), 1630 (Q11), 1636 (Q12), and 1675 (Q13). Sidney Lee, *Introduction to WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, SHAKESPEARES VENUS AND ADONIS: BEING A REPRODUCTION IN FACSIMILE OF THE FIRST EDITION* (Sidney Lee ed., Clarendon Press 1905) (1593).

25. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Dedication to VENUS AND ADONIS* [hereinafter *Dedication*]. Note that all quotations from *Venus and Adonis* in this Article are from WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE POEMS* (F.T. Prince ed., Arden ed. 1960) [hereinafter *THE POEMS*]. The epigram remained intact on all known reprints of the First Quarto (Q1). Lee reproduces title page collotypes of Q3 (1596), Q4 (1599), Q6 (1602), Q7 (1617), Q8 (1620), and Q9 (1627) which include the epigram. Lee, *supra* note 24, at 60-70. The importance which early publishers placed on exacting reproduction of the epigram is indicated by the fact that a minor error in the first issues of Q6, in which a comma replaced the epigram's colon (*vulgus: mihi*), was corrected in two of the three surviving copies. *Id.* at 65.

26. *DICTIONNAIRE INTERNATIONAL DES TERMES LITTÉRAIRES* (Robert Escarpit ed., 1979), available at <http://www.ditl.info/art/definition.php?term=478> (last visited Mar. 5, 2005).

27. A tradition associating the figure of Parnassus with the holding of mock trials against writers for their stylistic and social indiscretions goes back before Trajano Bocalini's *I Raggugli di Parnasso* (1612), the first well-known publication employing the theme. TRAJANO BOCALINI, *I RAGGUAGLI DI PARNASSO: OR, ADVERTISEMENTS FROM PARNASSUS: IN TWO CENTURIES* (Henry Earl of Monmouth trans., London, 2d ed. 1674), reproduced at Early English Books Online, at <http://eebo.chadwyck.com> (last visited Feb. 11, 2005). An anonymous 1645 tract attributed by editor Hugh McDonald to George Withers, *The Great*

Parnassus, conflicts between law and literature were resolved—but by other poets or their divine patrons, with Apollo himself, *not* lawyers or judges presiding. It is surprising to note that the implications of this ancient association of Parnassus with questions of a jurisprudential as well as aesthetic nature have been passed over in complete silence by orthodox Shakespeareans—despite an interpretative relevance which further consideration will render obvious.

Orthodox critics have articulated various theories about the epigram's meaning²⁸ but rarely see any decisive significance in it. However, Annabel Patterson, a Yale University literary historian who has studied the importance of introductory materials—of which title-page epigrams are one type—suggests an intriguing point of departure which has lacked prosecution until now. Patterson refers to such introductory materials as “entry code[s]” intended to “alert an educated audience to the possibility of hidden meaning.”²⁹ The Venus epigram is perfectly suited to such a purpose; it draws conspicuous attention to the most fundamental and enduring problem of interpretation known to literary historians: the distinction between topical (“vulgar”) and literary (“universal”) readings.³⁰ In fact, a modern, unlit

Assises Holden in Parnassus by Apollo and His Assessours continues the tradition in England, making Francis Bacon the “Lord Chancellor” of Parnassus and staging satiric trials in which various Elizabethan and Jacobean authors, including “Shakespeare,” are arraigned for literary crimes. THE GREAT ASSISES HOLDEN IN PARNASSUS BY APOLLO AND HIS ASSESSOURS (Hugh McDonald ed., Burt Franklin 1967) (1645). The theme appeared on the English stage as early as 1601, in Ben Jonson's *Poetaster*. BEN JONSON, POETASTER (Tom Cain ed., Manchester Univ. Press 1995) (1601).

28. See, e.g., Lee, *supra* note 24. To Lee, the epigram signals the author's “way of acknowledging a large indebtedness to Ovid.” *Id.* at 20. To Marchette Chute, it announces “the same contempt for the literary taste of the ‘penny knaves’ that was conventional with well-educated young gentlemen.” MARCHETTE CHUTE, SHAKESPEARE OF LONDON 110 (1949). Bradbrook infers that “he was dissociating himself from [moral] baseness” and that it should be read as “a literary equivalent of the application to Herald's College for a coat of arms.” Bradbrook, *supra* note 6, at 62. Similar disregard for the epigram's literary implications has characterized Oxfordian commentary on the poem. See RENDALL, *supra* note 13, at 51 (referring to the epigram as one of the bard's “trimmings” from Ovid). A few critics have adopted a more querying stance towards the epigram. See W.R. Streitberger, *Ideal Conduct in Venus and Adonis*, in CRITICAL ESSAYS, *supra* note 3, at 171, 173 (“[T]he prefatory couplet should suggest that we be careful in taking the poem too lightly . . .”). Butler and Fowler, in their impressive study of the poem's calendrical and numerical structure, note that although “the current conception of Shakespeare does not encourage us to look for esoteric structures in his poetry,” the use of “Ovidian epigraph hint[s] at the possibility of a meaning denied to the common reader.” Christopher Butler & Alastair Fowler, *Time-Beguiling Sport: Number Symbolism in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis*, in CRITICAL ESSAYS, *supra* note 3, at 157.

29. ANNABEL PATTERSON, CENSORSHIP AND INTERPRETATION: THE CONDITIONS OF WRITING AND READING IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND 56 (1990).

30. The problem of representation of living persons in artistic production, particularly satire, goes back at least to the ancient distinction between “old” and “new” comedy.

version of this same “entry code” appears on the copyright page of every modern novel: “This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.”

The epigram renders a moral judgment on the question of the preferred method of reading: the phrase “as for me” (*mihi*) employs an ethical dative construction to indicate that the speaker prefers the “universal” or literary mode of reading and rejects the topical one. According to Patterson, however, there may be more to this posture than meets the eye. Although the Elizabethan entry code, like its modern equivalent, may be intended to obviate legal reprisal by a disgruntled reader or protect a text from suppression by an insecure government by insuring “plausible deniability” against the accusation of topical intent, it also functioned as *an invitation* for readers to indulge in the same salacious, topical interpretation to which it ostensibly objected: “Disclaimers of topical intention are not to be trusted, and are more likely to be entry codes to precisely that kind of reading they protest against.”³¹ Does the epigram—paradoxically—authorize a topical, local reading, in which characters represent not only their mythic exemplars but real living persons known to the author? Without reading beyond the title page, the orthodox hypothesis of the poem’s “non-political” character already seems, at best, unstable.

A. *The Dedication*

The epigram is not the only structural element of Q1 that inflects our comprehension of the text’s nature and purpose. As noted, *Venus and Adonis* is conspicuously dedicated to the Elizabethan nobleman, Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton.³² In 1593, Wriothesley was approximately twenty years of age and was negotiating a complicated release from the Elizabethan wardship system and a proposed marriage between himself and the eldest daughter of the Earl of Oxford, Elizabeth Vere.³³ Whether one adopts the traditional view of Shakespearean authorship, or the “Oxfordian” alternative, Wriothesley’s importance cannot be overstated. Most scholars, both orthodox

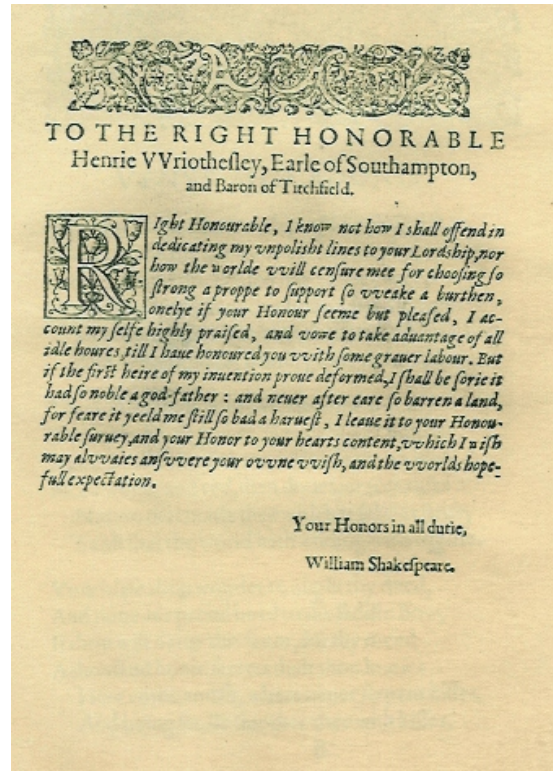
31. PATTERSON, *supra* note 29, at 65.

32. See *Dedication*, *supra* note 25; Figure 2.

33. Throughout the 1590s, Southampton was an extremely popular dedicatee of literary works. In addition to the two narrative poems by “Shakespeare,” several works were dedicated to Southampton. See JOHN CLAPHAM, *Dedication to NARCISSUS* (London, 1591), reproduced at Early English Books Online, at <http://eebo.chadwyck.com> (last visited Feb. 11, 2005); Ronald B. McKerrow, *Introduction to THE WORKS OF THOMAS NASHE* 141 (Ronald B. McKerrow ed., 1966) (1904); *Dedication to ACHILLES TATIUS, THE MOST DELECTABLE AND PLEASANT HISTORY OF CLITOPHON AND LEUCIPPE* (W.B. trans., London, 2d ed. 1597), reproduced at Early English Books Online, at <http://eebo.chadwyck.com> (last visited Feb. 11, 2005).

and Oxfordian, agree that he is the “fair youth” of Shakespeare’s Sonnets.³⁴ Significantly, he is also the only Elizabethan with whom a substantive documentary connection can be made to the literary name “Shakespeare.”

Figure 2. Dedicatory epistle to Quarto 1



There is no doubt that the association between Southampton and the author of the Shakespearean works was a profound and enduring one. Figure Three, painted in 1603, illustrates Southampton imprisoned in the

34. A number of authors have named Southampton as the “fair youth.” See, e.g., G.P.V. AKRIGG, *SHAKESPEARE AND THE EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON* (1968); NATHAN DRAKE, *SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIMES* (London, 1817); MARTIN GREEN, *WRIOTHESLEY’S ROSES IN SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS, POEMS AND PLAYS* (1993); SIDNEY LEE, *A LIFE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE* (new ed. Macmillan 1927) (1898); LOONEY, *supra* note 11; OGBURN, *supra* note 11; A.L. ROWSE, *SHAKESPEARE’S SOUTHAMPTON: PATRON OF VIRGINIA* (1965); S. SCHOENBAUM, *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: A DOCUMENTARY LIFE* (1975); ELISABETH SEARS, *SHAKESPEARE AND THE TUDOR ROSE* (1991); CHARLOTTE CARMICHAEL STOPES, *THE LIFE OF HENRY, THIRD EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON, SHAKESPEARE’S PATRON* (1922); R.J.C. WAIT, *THE BACKGROUND TO SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS* (1972). For a review of the alternative theories on the identity of the “fair youth,” see *NEW VARIORUM EDITION, supra* note 13, at 177-241.

Tower of London for his part in an abortive rebellion which erupted in the final years of the reign of Elizabeth I. This episode has become known to historians as the “Essex rebellion” because Southampton’s young friend and comrade Walter Devereux, the Earl of Essex, was executed for his part in leading the rebels.³⁵ Southampton was condemned to execution, but the sentence was commuted. In place of execution, he was held under arrest in the Tower of London for three years following the revolt until his eventual release by King James. The bond between Southampton and “Shakespeare” remained strong throughout this period. In the spring of 1603, about the time the Tower portrait was painted, the bard refers to him, in *Sonnet 107*, as “my true love . . . , / Suppos’d as forfeit to a confin’d doom.”³⁶

Figure 3. Southampton in the Tower



35. See generally *Arraignment, Tryal, and Condemnation of Robert Earl of Essex* (Margaret Pierce Secara ed.), at <http://renaissance.dm.net/trial/index.html> (last visited Feb. 10, 2005) (providing a reproduction of the 1679 trial of Robert Earl of Essex).

36. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnet 107* lines 3-4 (With the exception of *Venus and Adonis*, see *supra* note 25, all quotations from and references to the Shakespeare canon in this Article are from THE RIVERSIDE SHAKESPEARE (G. Blakemore Evans ed., 2d ed. 1997).); see also Hank Whittemore, *1601: “Authorize Thy Trespass with Compare. . .,”* SHAKESPEARE MATTERS (Shakespeare Fellowship, Marshfield Hills, Mass.), Summer 2004, at 1, 17 (providing a synopsis of the impressive scholarly testimony dating *Sonnet 107* to 1601 and identifying Wriothesley as the youth “supposed as forfeit to a confined doom”).

Orthodox scholars are fond of emphasizing Shakspeare's alleged association with Southampton. In fact, outside of the dedications to the two narrative poems and the literary evidence of the sonnets, there is no known association between the two men. Southampton's biographer, Charlotte Stopes,³⁷ devoted many years attempting to document such a link but produced no evidence in the end. Subsequent scholars—G.P.V. Akrigg, A.L. Rowse, and John Roe—followed in Stopes's footsteps with no more impressive consequences. Their findings are eloquently summarized by Philip Kolin: "[T]hese 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."³⁸ The argument that the Stratford Shakespeare was closely associated with Southampton is therefore a circular argument based solely on the self-validating evidence of the dedications to the two narrative poems and the Shakespearean sonnets.

Interestingly, the association between De Vere and Southampton is well documented. During the early 1590s, when the so-called "marriage sonnets" were being written,³⁹ Southampton was engaged to marry De Vere's daughter Elizabeth.⁴⁰ The marriage remained a living prospect until Southampton freed Elizabeth from any obligation by remitting a fine of £5000 to his guardian—and to the bride's grandfather, William Cecil, in November 1594.⁴¹ Two months later, Elizabeth married William Stanley, Sixth Earl of Derby, in a wedding ceremony which may have included a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁴²

37. See STOPES, *supra* note 34.

38. Kolin, *supra* note 12, at 26-27.

39. The first seventeen so called "marriage sonnets," which were written during the early 1590s, represent one of the few points of Sonnet scholarship on which something approaching a consensus exists. Therefore, if Southampton is the "fair youth," then the sonnets emphasize the youth's freedom of choice in the selection of a mate. "For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb / Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?" WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnet 3* lines 5-6.

40. Although Cecil's endorsement of the Vere-Southampton betrothal is well documented, and he profited handsomely by the groom's purchase of this freedom, no direct evidence survives to indicate Oxford's own view of the proposed marriage. Although it seems unlikely that the engagement would have lasted for five years with Queen Elizabeth's approval, it is unknown whether she endorsed or opposed the marriage. A letter dated September 8, 1597 from Oxford to Cecil endorsed a proposed marriage between Bridget, his youngest daughter, and William Herbert, the eldest of two sons of Mary Sidney. William was Lord Chamberlain of the Household under James I and one of the two "most noble brethern" who were dedicatees and probably patrons of the 1623 Shakespeare folio.

41. OGBURN, *supra* note 11, at 716.

42. DAVID WILES, *The Percy-Devereux and Stanley-Vere Weddings, in SHAKESPEARE'S ALMANAC* 137, 143-49 (1993) (providing a detailed and lucid exposition of the case before ultimately favoring the 1596 Carey-Berkeley wedding as the more likely date for the play's debut).

Figure 4. The Earls of Southampton and Oxford, circa 1621



Despite the broken engagement, the two families remained close even after Oxford's death in 1604. Wriothesley and Oxford's son, Henry de Vere (born in March 1593, coincident with the registration of *Venus and Adonis*), were closely associated during the late Jacobean period as outspoken Protestant critics of crown policies which many feared were leading the country towards counter-reformation. A mid-seventeenth century engraving, shown in Figure Four, memorializes them as the "two most noble Henries."⁴³ Thus, although the dedication has the name "William Shakespeare" attached to it, the Earl of Southampton has no known connection to any person by this name but

43. See Peter W. Dickson, *Are British Scholars Erasing Two Heroic Earls from Jacobean History to Protect the Shakespeare Industry? A Case Study in How History Is Written*, SHAKESPEARE OXFORD NEWSL. (Shakespeare Oxford Soc'y, Malden, Mass.), Spring 1999, at 8, 9, 24, available at <http://www.everreader.com/twohenry.htm>. The phrasing seems to echo that of the first 1623 folio dedication to William and Phillip Herbert, the two brothers who were close allies of Southampton and Henry de Vere and patronized the folio, which refers to the Herberts as the "most noble and incomparable brethren." While serving the Protestant cause in Bergen op Zoom, Southampton and his son both died on November 10, 1624. The eighteenth earl of Oxford died in 1625. Peter Dickson's historiographical survey of the treatment of the two earls in the "post-Ogburn" era suggests a chilling conformism in leading historical scholars, who have apparently airbrushed both earls out of their accounts to obviate the destabilizing implications of acknowledging the pivotal importance of these two figures in Jacobean politics. See Dickson, *supra*.

has strong and enduring ties to the De Vere Earls of Oxford.⁴⁴

B. Intertextuality

The more closely we examine the cultural context of *Venus and Adonis*, the more puzzling and provocative the poem's introductory matter becomes. Renaissance reading and writing practices were more social, and more comparative, than modern ones. Young writers were instructed to develop their powers of invention by imitating classical models. This method constrained individual creativity within a framework of traditional meanings and an inherited stock of common texts and motifs, of which Ovid and the Bible were doubtless the two most important. Meaning was not contained within a text; it was established by ascertaining a relationship *between* texts. Consequently, the reader of a Renaissance text was always expected to simultaneously keep in mind at least two contexts of interpretation: an "original" or traditional version and the text the reader was actually reading at a given moment. The reader was conscientiously attuned to the modern critical principle that literary allusion always "brings with it another meaningful context."⁴⁵

Further study of the title-page epigram shown in Figure One reveals an impressive implication of this principle. Ovid's Amore I:XV is the source of the epigram:

Cedant carminibus reges regumque triumphi,
Cedat et auriferi ripa benigna Tagi!

44. See Charles Wisner Barrell, *Rarest Contemporary Descriptions of "Shakespeare" Proves Poet to Have Been a Nobleman*, SHAKESPEARE FELLOWSHIP Q. (Shakespeare Fellowship, New York, N.Y.), Spring 1948, at 1, available at <http://www.sourcetext.com/sourcebook/library/barrell/21-40/38edwards.htm> (last visited Feb. 10, 2005) [hereinafter Barrell, *Rarest Contemporary*]. Though space does not permit a detailed examination of the revealing rhetoric and imagery of the dedicatory epistle, it may be sufficient to note that the phrase "first heir of my invention" has provoked extensive commentary. *Dedication*, *supra* note 25. Typically, the phrase has been construed to refer to the poem itself. However, since 1937, in an opinion published shortly after Rollins had the Variorum edition to the press, Barrell noted that "it will be admitted that 'my invention' could just as well refer to the fabrication of the new pen-name, 'William Shakespeare.'" CHARLES WISNER BARRELL, ELIZABETHAN MYSTERY MAN: A DIGEST OF EVIDENCE CONNECTING EDWARD DE VERE, 17TH EARL OF OXFORD, WITH THE LITERARY ACTIVITIES OF "MR. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE" 23 (1940). On its surface, the dedication simulates a boilerplate, patronage-seeking request for the endorsement and patronage of Southampton. If the Oxfordians are correct, it also succeeded in fulfilling its necessary ideological function of masking the real author and concealing his relationship with Southampton while providing a plausible legal fiction to grease the poem's appearance in print.

45. J.C. Smith, *Destiny Reversed: A Study of Biblical and Classical Allusion Patterns in Shakespeare's Henry VI*, at 16 (1974) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Indiana) (on file with author).

Vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flavus Apollo
Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.⁴⁶

The two lines immediately preceding those excerpted for the Venus epigram invoke a striking and cognitively destabilizing “original context.” The poet, who would later spend his golden years in exile for offending Caesar Augustus in his poetry, boasts that the power of the state must bow to art: “Let monarchs and the triumphs of monarchs give way before the might of verses.”⁴⁷ “And the soft banks of the gold bearing Tagus”—that is, time itself—“yield to them as well.”⁴⁸ A prominent theme of Ovid’s elegy is that poetry is mightier than monarchs, the pen more powerful than the crown.⁴⁹ Is this a theme of Shakespeare’s own poem? The present Article will show that it is: As basic as sex, power, gender-code switching, mourning, maternity, metamorphosis, the rhetoric of courtship, or any of the poem’s myriad other ostensible themes, is the theme of the elemental conflict between the writer and the state. Can one imagine a more “political” theme for a literary work?

C. Allegory

According to John Keats, Shakespeare “lived a life of allegory.”⁵⁰ In fact, allegory was the idiom of Shakespeare’s age. It dominated both written and visual forms of artistic expression. *The Arte of English Poesie*,⁵¹ the leading work of Elizabethan literary criticism, articulates this preeminence by identifying allegory as “the chief ringleader and captaine of all other figures, either in the Poeticall or oratorie science.”⁵² Allegory works by establishing homologous relations between the content and figurative elements of a creative work—and those of the work’s social context—thereby blurring the boundaries between the text and the world and allowing the text to comment on its own context of production. As Rosemond Tuve asserts, Elizabethan

46. 1 OVID: AMORES, TEXT, PROLEGOMENA AND COMMENTARY 161-62 (J.C. McKeown ed., 1987).

47. 1 *Id.* (translation by author). Shakespeare parodies Ovid’s exile when Touchstone declares to Audrey, “I am here with thee and thy goats as the most capricious poet, honest Ovid, was among the Goths.” WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *AS YOU LIKE IT* act 3, sc. 3, lines 7-9.

48. 1 OVID, *supra* note 46, at 161-62 (translation by author).

49. In a more generic sense, as J.C. McKeown states in his authoritative edition, the poem is a plea for the significance and influence of the poet’s vocation. McKeown summarizes the poem’s argument: “I should not be criticized for preferring to write poetry rather than to follow a military or legal career, for only through poetry can I hope to achieve immortality (1-8). The works of the great poets survive them (9-10). All else is transitory (31-34), but I shall live on through my poetry (35-42).” 2 OVID, *supra* note 46, at 387.

50. 2 AMY LOWELL, JOHN KEATS 178 (Archon Books 1969) (1925).

51. GEORGE PUTTENHAM, *THE ARTE OF ENGLISH POESIE* (Gladys Doidge Willcock & Alice Walker eds., Cambridge Univ. Press 1936) (1589).

52. *Id.* at 197.

writers and readers were never interested in mythological fables for antiquarian purposes. Instead, allegorical mythology was a vehicle for addressing “certain living and troublesome ideas.”⁵³ Allegorical myth retained its artistic potency only because it continued to manifest a psychological presence for the living. At least since the fifteenth century, the Italian masters had painted living subjects into mythological or religious scenes. They did this to honor or, in some cases, to criticize or rebuke the living. Titian secured the patronage of Phillip II for his series of mythological paintings of scenes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* with a portrait, shown in Figure Five, of the Spanish monarch playing the organ for a reclining Venus: a meditation on power, art, and the erotic gaze.

Figure 5. Phillip II plays the organ for Venus in Titian’s 1548 commission.



In England, Elizabeth I, Phillip’s Protestant rival for political dominance in Europe, was a popular subject for mythological representation in painting. Figure Six illustrates her defeating Juno, Venus, and Pallas Athena in an Elizabethan re-enactment of the *Judgment of Paris*. In another portrait by an unknown artist from the 1570s, shown in Figure Seven, Elizabeth poses in her most common mythological guise, impersonating Cynthia-Diana, the virgin huntress and moon goddess of the Greco-roman tradition. The allegorizing of Elizabeth was a ubiquitous feature of Elizabethan political culture in all of the arts. She herself encouraged the allegorical zeitgeist as long as it flattered her: “As a Renaissance princess, she loved compliment dressed in ancient myth.”⁵⁴

Figure 6. Queen Elizabeth takes away the prize in an Elizabethan

53. ROSEMOND TUVE, *ELIZABETHAN AND METAPHYSICAL IMAGERY* 162 (1968).

54. ELKIN CALHOUN WILSON, *ENGLAND’S ELIZA* 284 (Octagon Books 1966) (1939).

re-enactment of the *Judgment of Paris*.



She was mythologized not only in portraiture but also on stage and in print. John Lyly's 1586 play, *Endymion, The Man in the Moon*, a typical specimen of the courtly drama of the 1580s, features Elizabeth as the moon goddess Cynthia-Diana, as does Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels*. Shakespeare depicts her as Titania,⁵⁵ Cleopatra,⁵⁶ and arguably as Portia.⁵⁷ In her famous outburst to William Lambarde, "I am Richard II. know ye not that?"⁵⁸ Elizabeth even confessed to the perceived allegorical parallel between herself and the deposed monarch of Shakespeare's play.⁵⁹ This allegorizing trend was so pervasive

55. See EVA LEE TURNER CLARK, *HIDDEN ALLUSIONS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS* 614 (Ruth Lloyd Miller ed., Kennikat Press 3d rev. ed. 1974) (1931); MARION A. TAYLOR, *BOTTOM, THOU ART TRANSLATED: POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM AND RELATED LITERATURE* 132 (1973); Edith Rickert, *Political Propaganda and Satire in A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 21 *MOD. PHILOLOGY* 53, 62-63 (1923). But see DAVID BEVINGTON, *TUDOR DRAMA AND POLITICS: A CRITICAL APPROACH TO TOPICAL MEANING* 16-17 (1968) (cautioning that "[t]o suppose a closer and more political involvement of Elizabeth [in Shakespeare's plays] is, however, extremely hazardous").

56. See Elizabeth A. Brown, "Companion Me with My Mistress:" *Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, and Their Waiting Women*, in *MAIDS AND MISTRESSES, COUSINS AND QUEENS* 131, 131-45 (Susan Frye & Karen Robertson eds., 1999); Helen Morris, *Queen Elizabeth I "Shadowed" in Cleopatra*, 32 *HUNTINGTON LIBR. Q.* 271, 271-78 (1968-1969); Keith Rinehart, *Shakespeare's Cleopatra and England's Elizabeth*, 23 *SHAKESPEARE Q.* 81, 81-86 (1972).

57. OGBURN & OGBURN, *supra* note 15, at 230-32.

58. Peter Ure, *Introduction to WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, KING RICHARD II*, at lix-lxii (Peter Ure ed., 5th ed. 1961).

59. *Id.* at lix-lxii. Critical dispute has centered on the question of whether the allegory was intended by the author. Yet regardless of whether the parallel was intended by the author, it was certainly intended by the Essex conspirators who bribed Lord Chamberlain's Men to

that when Elkin Calhoun Wilson wrote the definitive study of the iconography of Elizabeth in extant literature and the pictorial arts, the study required 479 pages to complete.⁶⁰ Do the characters of “Shakespeare’s” poem, in keeping with this allegorical spirit, intentionally represent living persons known to the author? The evidence reveals that this hypothesis is not only plausible but compelling.

D. *Venus*

The age and power difference between Venus and her lover is one of the most striking of Shakespeare’s innovations. In classical precedents,⁶¹ the two lovers are of a commensurate age, and their affection is mutual. Yale University Professor Don Cameron Allen reports that Shakespeare’s Venus becomes “a forty-year-old countess with a taste for Chapel Royal altos.”⁶² And Shakespeare’s Venus, unlike Ovid’s, “never succeeds in eliciting the desire of Adonis.”⁶³ Instead she is subject to parody as an Elizabethan Tantalus, a sexually frustrated goddess of love; scorned by the object of her desire, she is a lawgiver “in [her] own law forlorn.”⁶⁴

More specifically, as Heather Dubrow argues, Venus exhibits the characteristics of a queen and may have been intended as a parody of Elizabeth I: “[P]olitics in the narrower sense of the word lies behind the sexual politics of the poem: Venus’ assertions of power may well reflect resentment of Elizabeth herself. . . . [A]mbivalence about an unsuccessfully

revive the play on the eve of the rebellion. The episode consequently illustrates the profound sensitivity of the Elizabethan mind to allegorical parallels of this nature.

60. See *supra* note 54.

61. By the Renaissance, some potential sources were already tending in the direction exploited to such comic effect in Shakespeare’s poem. “S. Clark Hulse accounted for the difference between Shakespeare’s and Ovid’s Venus by offering Titian’s painting of Venus and Adonis, as well as Hero and Leander as the possible source for Shakespeare’s portrait of Venus as a ‘rapist.’” João Froes, *Shakespeare’s Venus and the Venus of Classical Mythology*, in *CRITICAL ESSAYS*, *supra* note 3, at 301, 301; see also John Doeblér, *The Reluctant Adonis: Titian and Shakespeare*, 33 *SHAKESPEARE Q.* 480, 480-90 (1982) (discussing Titian’s depictions of Venus and Adonis). Even with such Renaissance precedents, the question of authorial motive remains. As Laura Finarelli concludes, the transformation “is drastic and unexpected, leaving the reader questioning its inspiration”—and, one might add, purposes. Laura Finarelli, *Venus and Adonis in Elizabethan England: Ovid’s Metamorphoses Transformed*, at <http://english.la.psu.edu/deluge/spring03/finarelli.htm> (last visited Feb. 14, 2005).

62. Don Cameron Allen, *On Venus and Adonis*, in *ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN STUDIES* 100, 101 (Herbert Davis & Helen Gardner eds., 1959).

63. Catherine Belsey, *Love as Trompe-l’oeil: Taxonomies of Desire in Venus and Adonis*, in *CRITICAL ESSAYS*, *supra* note 3, at 261, 265.

64. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *VENUS AND ADONIS* line 251 [hereinafter *VENUS AND ADONIS*].

manipulative heroine encodes ambivalence about a brilliantly manipulative queen.”⁶⁵

Copious evidence, both internal and documentary, supports Dubrow’s proposition and reveals how purposeful the parody was.⁶⁶ Like Elizabeth, Venus is surrounded by flattering, emasculated minions who will do anything to curry her favor:

For who hath she to spend the night withal,
But idle sounds resembling parasites,
Like shrill-tongu’d tapsters answering every call,
Soothing the humor of fantastic wits?
She says, “’Tis so,” they answer all, “’Tis so,”
And would say after her, if she said “No.”⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, external documentary evidence proves that Elizabethan readers did in fact see Venus as a parody of Elizabeth, as this excerpt from a 1593 letter to William Cecil, by William Reynoldes, reveals:

[W]thin thees few dayes ther is a nother booke made of *Venus* and *Adonis* wherin a queene represents the person of *Venus*, w^{ch} queene is in great love (forsothe) wth *adonis*, and greatly desiars to kise him, and she woes him most intierly, telling him although she be oulde, yet she is lustie freshe & moyst, full of love & life (I beleve a goodell more then a busshell full) and she can trip it as lightly as a phery nimpfe vpon the sandes and her foote stepes not seene, and much ado wth red & whyte, But *adonis* regardid her not⁶⁸

Reynoldes was not the only Elizabethan reader to associate Shakespeare’s Venus with Elizabeth. George Chapman’s neo-platonic narrative poem, *Hymnus Ad Cynthiam*, apparently written as a sober rebuke to the comic eroticism of *Venus and Adonis* and published just one year later, is a prolonged paean to Elizabeth under her orthodox sobriquet as the virginal Cynthia. The poem’s introduction refers knowingly to the Venus epigram and announces a

65. Heather Dubrow, “*Upon Misprision Growing*”: Venus and Adonis, in CRITICAL ESSAYS, *supra* note 3, at 223, 231 (citations omitted).

66. Venus is referred to as a “Queen” five times in Shakespeare’s poem. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64 ((1) “By this the love-sick queen began to sweat,” (line 175); (2) “Poor queen of love, in thine own law forlorn,” (line 251); (3) “‘Fair queen,’ quoth he, ‘if any love you owe me, / Measure my strangeness with my unripe years,’” (lines 523-24); (4) “But all in vain; good queen, it will not be,” (line 607); (5) “[She] yokes her silver doves, . . . / Holding their course to Paphos, where their queen / Means to immure herself and not be seen.” (lines 1190, 1193-94)).

67. *Id.* at lines 847-52.

68. LESLIE HOTSON, *Two Shakespearean ‘Firsts,’* in SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS DATED 141, 143 (1949).

moral intention to transcend the fleshly vulgarities of Shakespeare's poem through service to the virgin huntress: "Presume not then ye flesh confounded soules / That cannot beare *the full Castalian bowles*, / Which sever mounting spirits from the sences, / To looke in this deepe fount for thy pretenses."⁶⁹

Figure 7. Queen Elizabeth in her allegorization as Cynthia-Diana, the virgin huntress of the Greco-Latin tradition



In sum, the evidence suggests not only that Elizabethan readers could and did interpret the figure of Venus as a parody of the Queen but that no competent Elizabethan reader could have failed to make the association, which surely must have been intended by the writer and was certainly understood by readers as varied in temperament as William Reynoldes and George Chapman. This conclusion, however, invokes a startling corollary. Why has this theory not previously been proposed, except in a few marginalized sources such as Allen,⁷⁰ Ogburn and Ogburn,⁷¹ or, rather tentatively, by Heather Dubrow?⁷² Instead, orthodox critics such as Katherine Duncan-Jones have vehemently attacked Reynoldes's testimony, seeking to discredit the message by undermining the messenger,⁷³ while scrupulously negating the poem's larger

69. GEORGE CHAPMAN, *Hymnus in Cynthiam*, in *THE POEMS OF GEORGE CHAPMAN* 31, 34 (Phyllis Brooks Bartlett ed., 1941) (emphasis added).

70. See ALLEN, *CASE FOR EDWARD DE VERE*, *supra* note 13, at 73 (noting the comparison between Venus and Queen Elizabeth).

71. See OGBURN & OGBURN, *supra* note 15, at 846-63.

72. See Dubrow, *supra* note 65, at 231.

73. See Duncan-Jones, *supra* note 4, at 479-90. Reynoldes is typically regarded not merely as an eccentric, but also a mentally unstable purveyor of unsupportable ideas. Katherine Duncan-Jones, in particular, seems anxious to disqualify the potential significance of his

cultural context and avoiding any close reading of the poem itself. The answer is readily apparent: In a single stroke, the evidence of the parody transforms an innocuous, inconsequential, “universal” narrative poem into a salacious, scandalous, and possibly treasonous essay on political satire. To write or publish “seditious words and rumors . . . against the Queen’s most excellent Majesty” was a crime under Tudor Law.⁷⁴ Shakespeare’s Venus is portrayed as an aggressive, imperious, prolix, and “sick-thoughted” tyrant. She is sometimes a violent bird of prey who slashes and devours what she would possess and sometimes a queen of love comically “in [her] own law forlorn,”⁷⁵ an object of fear, pity, or mockery. Such a representation could not have

testimony and devotes eleven pages to discrediting him as a witness and undermining the significance of his identification of Venus with Queen Elizabeth. She categorizes Reynoldes as “crazy,” “a paranoid schizophrenic,” the “first misreader of *Venus and Adonis*,” and a victim of “paranoia” whose reading of the poem is “deeply idiosyncratic.” *Id.* at 480, 484-86, 489. Reviewing the evidence presented in her monograph, one cannot concur with these startling and prejudicial judgments. No doubt Reynoldes was a self-involved, pious Puritan, who imagined himself as more important and more powerful than he actually was—a sort of Falstaff figure, hanging about the court of Elizabeth I hoping for preferment and getting himself into all sorts of compromised circumstances. Clearly he was a thorn in the side of Elizabethan authorities. But nothing in the cited evidence justifies either the extent of Duncan-Jones’s evident hostility or her capriciously anachronistic diagnostic labels. Even Duncan-Jones admits that Reynoldes “may have acquired some slight status as an eye-witness reporter” of contemporary events and that “a definite literary perception is suggested in his impressionistic phrase ‘much ado *with redde & whyte*,’” which Duncan-Jones borrowed for the title of her essay. *Id.* at 486, 489. Anxious to depoliticize both poem and interpretation, she follows her statement praising Reynoldes’s “definite literary perception” with these comments about the colors red and white: “[T]hese colours, traditionally associated with love and desire, do indeed pervade the whole poem . . .” *Id.* at 489-90. But why should Reynoldes note that the poem makes “much ado” about the colors of “love and desire”? The phrase implies a political register of meaning, and a more plausible connotation of the colors, both in the poem and in Reynoldes’s gloss, is found in the following passage by Hereward T. Price:

“The war of red and white” is one of those figures that Elizabethan poets wore thin. Shakespeare makes fun of it in *The Taming of the Shrew* (IV.v.30), but in *3 Henry VI* (II.v.97-101) he uses it to symbolize the tragic mess of the Wars of the Roses. No doubt the bitter memory of these disastrous wars heightened any reference to the “war of red and white.” In the same way the union of the red and white was seen as a symbol of reconciliation such as was effected by the union of Lancaster and York in the house of Tudor.

Hereward T. Price, *Function of Imagery in Venus and Adonis*, in *CRITICAL ESSAYS*, *supra* note 3, at 107, 117.

74. Carole Levin, “*We Shall Never Have a Merry World While the Queene Lyveth*”: Gender, Monarchy, and the Power of Seditious Words, in *DISSING ELIZABETH: NEGATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF GLORIANA* 77, 88 (Julia M. Walker ed., 1998).

75. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at line 251.

pleased the royal ego and would certainly have tested Olivia's conviction that "[t]here is no slander in an allow'd fool."⁷⁶

Accordingly, Milward Martin,⁷⁷ and indeed all orthodox readers of *Venus and Adonis*, deny the poem any political implication. On the other hand, if the poem has a political dimension, and certainly if the politics are those suggested here, then the author had a manifest motive for concealing himself, and thereby his meaning, from all but the most discerning readers.

E. Adonis

Some Elizabethan readers employed the figure of Adonis as shorthand for the author. For example, the *L'envoy* to Thomas Edward's 1595 *Narcissus* concludes with an encomium to Elizabethan poets, in which they are identified with their best-known subjects.⁷⁸

Adon deafly masking thro,
Stately troupes rich conceited,
Shew'd he well deserved to,
Loves delight on him to gaze,
And had not love herself intreated
Other nymphs had sent him baies.⁷⁹

Who might this Adonis—"deafly masking thro[ugh]"—have represented?⁸⁰ The verb "masking," not to mention other elements of the poem, suggests a concealed, pseudonymous author,⁸¹ as well as one whom "love herself"—Elizabeth—entreated for a paramour.

Elizabeth's most conspicuous love interest, particularly during the first ten years of her reign, was the dashing Earl of Leicester. But Leicester, exactly the same age as the Queen, was the only one of her numerous suitors who possessed both the political status and the unprincipled machismo to hold her in awe. He does not match the profile of the coy, vulnerable Adonis found in the poem. Some critics, not implausibly, identify Adonis with the young Southampton.⁸² Observing that Southampton was negotiating releases from the Elizabethan wardship system in 1593 and from a betrothal between himself

76. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *TWELFTH NIGHT* act 1, sc. 5, line 94.

77. See MARTIN, *supra* note 17, at 136.

78. See Duncan-Jones, *supra* note 4, at 491-92.

79. THOMAS EDWARDS, *CEPHALUS AND PROCRIS. NARCISSUS* 62 (W.E. Buckley ed., London, Nichols & Sons 1882) (1595) (spelling regularized).

80. "Deafely" is defined as "[l]onely, solitary and silent." 4 *THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY* 307 (2d ed. 1989).

81. See Barrell, *Rarest Contemporary*, *supra* note 44, at 1.

82. See, e.g., Patrick M. Murphy, *Wriothesley's Resistance: Wardship Practices and Ovidian Narratives in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis*, in *CRITICAL ESSAYS*, *supra* note 3, at 323, 323-40 (noting the similarities between Adonis and the young Southampton).

and Elizabeth Vere made by her grandfather, William Cecil, Patrick Murphy proposes that *Venus and Adonis* may critique “the degenerative uses of wardship” by pointing to sexual politics in the families of Southampton, Oxford, and Cecil that mirrored those found in the tenth book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.⁸³ In 1594 Wriothesley paid Burghley £5,000 to free himself from the engagement to Elizabeth Vere. Murphy hypothesizes, plausibly, that the betrothed partners may have regarded the marriage as symbolic incest: “Raised in Cecil’s household, Wriothesley and Elizabeth Vere may have thought of each other as brother and sister.”⁸⁴ But Southampton, born when Queen Elizabeth was forty, was young enough to be her grandson and is not a likely analogue for the *original* Adonis.⁸⁵

A more plausible candidate is Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, who during the early 1570s engaged in an extensive romance with the forty-something-year-old Elizabeth I. After 1562 when his father John de Vere died, the young nobleman was a ward of Queen Elizabeth I.⁸⁶ In 1574 the Queen therefore stood in the contradictory dual relations of legal guardian or mother surrogate and lover to the young peer. Although omitted in accounts by Looney, Ward, and most recently Nelson, the affair was evidently one of the most conspicuous subjects of court gossip during the early 1570s.⁸⁷ “My Lord of Oxford is lately grown into great credit,” reported Gilbert Talbot to his father the Earl of Shrewsbury in 1573.⁸⁸ “[F]or the Queen’s Majesty delighteth more in his personage and his valiantness than any other. . . . If it were not for his fickle head, he would pass any of them shortly.”⁸⁹ Oxford’s father-in-law Lord Burghley was evidently caught between obligation to his daughter and deference to his Queen. “At all these love matters,” continued Talbot, “the Lord Treasurer winketh, and will not meddle any way.”⁹⁰ News of the affair eventually came even to the ears of Mary Queen of Scots, who in a communiqué to Elizabeth some years later recalled that “even the count of

83. *Id.* at 338.

84. *Id.*

85. I mean “original” in the historical, not the mythological, sense. To the extent that the poem recapitulates a myth of eternal recurrence, of course, there is no conflict in characterizing Adonis as both Oxford and Southampton, as both father and son, as both lover and child, of the goddess.

86. Although often regarded as Burghley’s ward, technically Oxford was a ward of the Queen, whose authority was delegated to Burghley as Master of the Court of the Wards.

87. See Josephine Waters Bennett, *Oxford and Endimion*, in 57 PUBL’NS MOD. LANGUAGE ASS’N AM. 354, 355 (Percy Waldron Long ed., 1942). Nelson, openly displaying his prejudices as usual, acknowledges that by 1574 “Oxford was now well established as courtier, *royal favourite*, poet, patron, egotist, and thug. His associates included the Queen” ALAN H. NELSON, MONSTROUS ADVERSARY: THE LIFE OF EDWARD DE VERE, 17TH EARL OF OXFORD 105 (2003) (emphasis added).

88. CONYERS READ, LORD BURGHLEY AND QUEEN ELIZABETH 130 (1960).

89. *Id.*

90. *Id.*

Oxford[d] dared not reconcile himself with his wife for fear of losing the favour which he hoped to receive by becoming your lover.”⁹¹ If, as Murphy has recently proposed, the poem critiques “degenerative uses of wardship,” then it is impossible to ignore the relevance of the Queen’s flamboyant 1574 affair with the young Earl who was still in the process of escaping the clutches of her wardship.⁹²

F. *Adonis and Endymion*

This line of reasoning would remain entirely speculative were it not for one intriguing fact: Impressive precedent exists for reading *Venus and Adonis* as an allegory of the love affair between Oxford and Elizabeth. As already noted, John Lyly’s 1586 play *Endymion*, is a prominent example of the allegorical mentality of the Elizabethan age. The play mythologizes Elizabeth as Cynthia, the lover of Lyly’s title character.⁹³ Moreover, according to Josephine Waters Bennett, the play’s title character and the lover of Cynthia should be identified with the Earl of Oxford.⁹⁴ Critical fashions come and go, but in his recent account, Richard Dutton summarizes a fifty-year tradition identifying Bennett’s article as “one of the most convincing of topical allegorical interpretations of an Elizabethan play.”⁹⁵

The situation of the play perfectly matches the circumstances of the court intrigue. Between 1573 and 1581 the details of the royal match are unknown, but in 1581, Oxford, still estranged from his wife and perhaps still hoping to secure the Queen’s affection, impregnated one of the Queen’s maids of honor, Anne Vavasour.⁹⁶ Elizabeth’s response was that of a jealous Venus—a rose with the sharpest of thorns⁹⁷—provoked by a younger rival. “On Tuesday at night Anne Vavysor was brought to bed of a son in the maidens’ chamber,” wrote Elizabeth’s spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham on March 23, 1581.⁹⁸ “The E. of Oxeford is avowed to be the father, who hath withdrawn himself with intent, it is thought, to pass the seas. The ports are laid for him, and therefore if he have any such determination it is not likely that he will escape.”⁹⁹ As Charlton Ogburn observes, aside from Walsingham’s letter there

91. FREDERICK CHAMBERLIN, *THE PRIVATE CHARACTER OF QUEEN ELIZABETH* 167 (1922).

92. Murphy, *supra* note 82, at 338.

93. See Bennett, *supra* note 87, at 360.

94. *Id.* at 359-61.

95. RICHARD DUTTON, *MASTERING THE REVELS* 56 (1991).

96. See Bennett, *supra* note 87, at 355.

97. One of Elizabeth’s mottos was “rosa sine spine,” a “rose without thorns.”

98. OGBURN, *supra* note 11, at 646.

99. *Id.* The Vavasour affair may well be referenced symbolically in *Venus and Adonis* through means of the poem’s most puzzling *ekphrasis*, see *VENUS AND ADONIS*, *supra* note 64, at lines 259-324, which develops in detail the “natural” love of Adonis’s stallion for the mare, in which the male pursues the female, as a contrast to the “unnatural,” smothering love of

is no extant evidence that Oxford intended to flee the country, and in any case he did not succeed in doing so.¹⁰⁰ Instead, he was jailed in the Tower of London, along with his lover, for some weeks following first notice of the affair.¹⁰¹ In *Endymion*, Vavasour inspired the character Tellus, who falls in love with her jailer, Corsites, just as in real life Anne Vavasour married her jailer, Sir Henry Lee.¹⁰² The incident precipitated a rift between Oxford and the Queen which lasted for more than five years and resulted in the deaths of feuding partisans loyal to Oxford and to Vavasour's jealously protective uncle, Thomas Knyvet, after Anne's pregnancy was discovered.¹⁰³ Oxford himself was apparently lanced in the duel.

Five years later on June 26, 1586, less than seven months before the Candlemas 1587 debut of Lyly's play, Elizabeth conferred an extraordinary gift on Oxford—the first evidence of her forgiveness. On that date, using a formula employed in secret service grants, she signed a privy seal warrant authorizing Oxford a thousand pound annuity for which no accounting was to be required.¹⁰⁴ The reasons for this annuity, which lasted for the next eighteen years until Oxford's death, are still a matter of dispute. In his 1992 *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* article, Justice John Paul Stevens endorses and amplifies the 1928 opinion of the annuity's discoverer, B.M. Ward:

This was an unusually large amount at the time The Queen, it appears, may have been a member of the imaginative ["Shakespeare"] conspiracy and for reasons of her own may have decided to patronize a gifted dramatist, who agreed to remain anonymous while he loyally rewrote much of the early history of Great Britain.¹⁰⁵

As Oxford's secretary, it is only natural that Lyly would employ his powers as a dramatist to effect and confirm a reconciliation between his noble

Venus for Adonis. *Id.* at lines 188-93.

100. See OGBURN, *supra* note 11, at 646.

101. *Id.*

102. See E.K. CHAMBERS, SIR HENRY LEE 106-07 (1936).

103. See Gwynneth Bowen, *Touching the Affray at the Blackfriars*, in SHAKESPEAREAN AUTHORSHIP REV., Autumn 1967, available at <http://www.sourcetext.com/sourcebook/library/bowen/19blackfriars.htm> (last visited Feb. 21, 2005); Gwynneth Bowen, *More Brabbles and Frays*, in SHAKESPEAREAN AUTHORSHIP REV., Autumn 1968, available at <http://www.sourcetext.com/sourcebook/library/bowen/20babbles.htm> (last visited Feb. 21, 2005); see also OGBURN, *supra* note 11, at 650-54 (summarizing the feud between Oxford and Knyvet).

104. B.M. WARD, THE SEVENTEENTH EARL OF OXFORD 1550-1604, at 257 (1928). As Ward was the first to notice, Oxford's annuity was signed into law only three days after the most far-reaching legal reforms governing printing and censorship during Elizabeth's entire reign: the June 23, 1586 Star Chamber decree on printing. *Id.* The timing seems unlikely to have been a coincidence.

105. Stevens, *supra* note 23, at 1384.

patron and the Queen.¹⁰⁶ Bennett suggests, moreover, that Lyly's play traverses the entire arc of the period 1581-1586, drawing within its allegorical orbit both the estrangement and reconciliation of the title lovers:

If the myth was selected as the vehicle for a plea for Oxford, then both the sleep and the kiss [of Endymion] must be symbolic of Oxford's situation

The sleep can be interpreted as a symbol of royal displeasure The kiss, as a unique display of Cynthia's favor, is a very appropriate poetic symbol for the unusually large pension which the Queen granted Oxford in June, 1586.¹⁰⁷

To conclude, Adonis would be understood by Elizabethan readers to represent a young courtier caught up in the love intrigues of Elizabeth's court, and Oxford was, or had been, such a courtier. Moreover, his affair with Elizabeth had already been the subject of a leading allegorical play written by his secretary, John Lyly, featuring a title character modeled on his experience. The comparison should not lose sight of the profound difference between the two texts. While Lyly is slavishly orthodox in his depiction of the Queen as a chaste and benevolent Cynthia, whose most sexual act is to awaken her ideal lover with a condescending kiss, "Shakespeare" adopts an aggressive, satirical, moralistic stance towards the goddess of love. Obviously, for Oxford to place his name on the poem or publicly disclose an association with the text would have constituted social and political suicide and would plausibly have jeopardized the security of the Elizabethan state.

G. *The Boar*

Although the boar's role is limited to relatively few lines¹⁰⁸ and he is the only character who does not speak, he is a major figure—both as a character and a symbol—in *Venus and Adonis*.¹⁰⁹ As Merrix notes, "[t]he boar . . . has long been a *bête noire* for critics, both the most puzzling object in the poem

106. See JOHN DOVER WILSON, *JOHN LYLY* 7 (Haskell House Publishers Ltd. 1970) (1905); see also 1 JOHN LYLY, *THE COMPLETE WORKS OF JOHN LYLY* (R. Warwick Bond ed., 1902). Oxford's association with Lyly, the most successful and talented English playwright of the early 1580s and a "source" of inspiration of profound importance to Shakespeare, supplies an impressive witness to his commitment to the English theatre.

107. See Bennett, *supra* note 87, at 363. But see David Bevington, *Introduction* to JOHN LYLY, *ENDYMION* 1, 9 (David Bevington ed., 1996) (providing a wholly unconvincing critique of Bennett and attempting to disassociate the play from Oxford). Only by conveniently ignoring the June 1586 grant, a critical element of Bennett's case, can Bevington sustain the orthodox fiction that Bennett's "hypothesis suffers the chronological disadvantage that the affair was long since over and done with by 1588." *Id.* at 9.

108. *VENUS AND ADONIS*, *supra* note 64, at lines 614-42, 900-03, 1105-16.

109. See *id.* at lines 208-09, 222, 232.

and the most controversial.”¹¹⁰ The distinguished medievalist A.T. Hatto devoted an entire monograph to the boar’s symbolism.¹¹¹ To a non-Stratfordian, the language of Hatto’s monograph is provocative. Hatto argues, first, that Shakespeare’s boar is a heraldic device—that is, a literary symbol which designates a distinctive individual.¹¹² Heraldic devices are legal symbols associated with specific persons or familial descent groups. Second, he unambiguously equates the boar with *the author* of the poem: “[T]he boar is sole and ultimate author of his [own] symbol, however it may be with others, like the Unicorn.”¹¹³

In a more recent commentary, Ted Hughes points out that the boar cannot be confined to a single Shakespearean text copying a putative source, but assumes an emblematic significance within Shakespeare’s own subjective mythology,¹¹⁴ appearing in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cymbeline*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Richard III*.¹¹⁵ “In *As You Like It*,” as Kolin notes, “the young

110. Robert P. Merrix, *The “Beste Noir”: The Medieval Role of the Boar in Venus and Adonis*, 11 UPSTART CROW 117, 117 (1991).

111. A.T. Hatto, *Venus and Adonis—and the Boar*, in 41 MOD. LANGUAGE REV. 353 (Charles J. Sisson et al. eds., 1946).

112. *Id.* at 355-57. As a medieval literary symbol, the boar has “unmistakable and long-standing associations of nobility.” *Id.* at 355. With respect to Gottfried, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, Hatto explains, “[the] clue given by the three poets is heraldic.” *Id.* at 357.

113. *Id.* at 358. Hatto’s essay raises many intriguing questions of interpretation and authorial intention. The ironic note of the phrase “however it may be with others, like the Unicorn,” is sustained throughout the essay, suggesting that Hatto entertains ideas regarding the boar symbolism which he prefers to express only in literary form. Why does the boar excite Venus’s jealousy, wonders Hatto. “I believe there is an answer to this question, a simple literary answer which can stand symbolically for other more specific answers bolder men might wish to give.” *Id.* at 353. Hatto hints at the “specific answers bolder men might wish to give” later in his essay when he notes that

[t]he wild boar ceased to be hunted in England round about the middle of the seventeenth century. No doubt the slump in wild bacon was hastened by the improvement of domestic breeds, but of greater immediate importance for our theme will have been *the decline in the fortunes of wild men which attended the consolidation of the Tudor regime. Neither boar-hunting feudal knights nor their literature were of the sort to make much headway at Court now.*

Id. at 360 (emphasis added). Needless to say, Edward de Vere was a prominent exemplar of the “wild men” whose decline “attended the consolidation of the Tudor regime”—and it seems unlikely that a scholar as thorough and influential as Professor Hatto ignored the fact that his heraldic device was the boar. If so, Hatto fully recognized the professional danger of articulating this knowledge in 1946.

114. See TED HUGHES, *SHAKESPEARE AND THE GODDESS OF COMPLETE BEING* 88, 161-62, 171-72, 501-04 (1992).

115. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE TRAGEDY OF ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA* act 4, sc. 13, lines 1-3 (“O, he’s more mad / Than Telamon for his shield; the boar of Thessaly / Was never so emboss’d.”); WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *CYMBELINE* act 2, sc. 5, lines 16-17 (“Like a full-acorn’d boar, a German one, / Cried ‘O!’ and mounted . . .”); WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE*

Ganymede/Rosalind is forced to carry a ‘boar-spear’ (1.3.17) for protection against the sexually aggressive beast.”¹¹⁶ To Hughes, the boar is Shakespeare’s “shamanic animal,”¹¹⁷ the secret spring to the author’s mythopoesis and his psychology; “[the] lineage of the Boar,” moreover, “is the key to Shakespeare’s ethical system”;¹¹⁸ and “he is the power unit and vital protagonist of Shakespeare’s entire dramatic, tragic, transcendental, poetic creation.”¹¹⁹

Figure 8. De Vere coat of arms showing heraldic boar on crest as supporter



Figure Eight reproduces Edward de Vere’s coat of arms to illustrate a striking fact which has heretofore apparently escaped the notice of orthodox Shakespearean critics and has not been sufficiently emphasized by students of the Oxford theory: His heraldic symbol was the boar. One etymology of the name Vere, in fact, derived it from the middle French *Verres*, Boar, and De Vere was known around the court under the heraldic nickname “the boar.” By

LIFE OF TIMON OF ATHENS act v, sc. 1, lines 164-66 (“Of Alcibiades th’ approaches wild, / Who like a boar too savage doth root up / His country’s peace.”); WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE TRAGEDY OF RICHARD THE THIRD act 3, sc. 2, lines 11, 28-29 (“He dreamt the boar had razed off his helm. . . . To fly the boar before the boar pursues / Were to incense the boar to follow us . . .”). Shakespeare’s usage in *Richard III* is especially apropos in the present discussion. In the play the conspirators employ the symbol of the boar, Richard III’s heraldic device, as a coded synecdoche for Richard himself. This is precisely the usage of the figure, I argue here, in *Venus and Adonis*; only the referent is the poem’s author, not a character created by him.

116. Kolin, *supra* note 12, at 47.

117. HUGHES, *supra* note 114, at 88.

118. *Id.* at 501.

119. *Id.* at 504; see also OGBURN & OGBURN, *supra* note 15 (explaining the psychological significance of the boar as an emblem of Oxford’s identity in the poem). “Oxford does not spare himself, but shows the dark side of his nature—the libertine given to lust, the melancholy boar, [w]hose downward eye still looketh for a grave.” *Id.* at 847 (quoting *VENUS AND ADONIS*, *supra* note 64, at line 185). “[T]he boar, that bloody beast, / Which knows no pity, but is still severe.” *VENUS AND ADONIS*, *supra* note 64, at lines 999-1000.

way of caveat, the boar was also associated in heraldry with several other Elizabethan persons, including Francis Bacon.¹²⁰ However, the strength of the association between the boar and De Vere is without rival; only De Vere possessed an ancestral heraldic association with the beast stretching back into the Middle Ages,¹²¹ and only he went by the nickname “the boar” in the Elizabethan court.¹²² The following contemporary iambic hexameters celebrating De Vere’s role in the victory over the Spanish Armada supply ample witness to the ubiquity of the association:

De Vere, whose fame and loyalty hath pierced
The Tuscan clime, and through the Belgike lands
By wingèd Fame for valour is rehearsed,
Like warlike Mars upon the hatches stands.
His tuskèd boar ’gan foam for inward ire,
While Pallas filled his breast with warlike fire.¹²³

From heraldry to Elizabethan lyric, De Vere’s association with the figure of the boar was without precedent or rivalry.

To conclude this review of the contextual evidence, consider the following:

1. The wording of the title-page epigram supplies an “entry code” to the poem, authorizes the topical reading we have conducted, and posits the theme of the conflict between the artist and the state.
2. The Earl of Oxford had close relations with the poem’s dedicatee, the Third Earl of Southampton—who was engaged at the time of the poem’s publication to Oxford’s daughter Elizabeth Vere, and afterwards was a close friend and ally of the family.
3. A convincing juxtaposition of internal and external evidence suggests that the three primary characters of Shakespeare’s poem can be identified,

120. See W. LANSDOWN GOLDSWORTHY, *SHAKE-SPEARE’S HERALDIC EMBLEMS; THEIR ORIGIN & MEANING* 17 (1928).

121. See WILLIAM CAMDEN, *BRITANNIA* (London, 1586), reproduced at Early English Books Online, at <http://eebo.chadwyck.com> (last visited Mar. 29, 2005). Camden’s choreographical poem recalls Robert de Vere, the favorite of Richard II, as one “notissimus apro”—“well known for his [heraldic] boar.” *Id.* (translation by author). According to a tradition recorded by Holinshed, Robert de Vere was killed by a boar in Brabant after fleeing England after his defeat at Radcot bridge.

122. See OGBURN, *supra* note 11, at 504. In a 1573 love letter to the Queen, Lord Chancellor Christopher Hatton—then Oxford’s bitter rival for the Queen’s affection—refers to his rival by this nickname and urges his mistress to reserve her love “to the Sheep”—that is, himself—“who hath no tooth to bite, where the Boar’s tusk may both raze and tear.” *Id.*

123. *Id.* at 705 (emphasis added). Ogburn attributes the poem to John Lyly. *Id.* at 706. Nelson identifies the author as James Lee and claims that the description is “entirely conventional.” NELSON, *supra* note 87, at 314.

respectively, with Queen Elizabeth I and the Earl of Oxford. On this reading, Oxford is split into the two masculine archetypes of the androgynous youthful Adonis and hypersexual libidinous boar.¹²⁴

4. These circumstances alone would have justified the author's alleged need to conceal his identity by publishing his work under the name of another man.

IV. READING VENUS AND ADONIS

These propositions can serve to explicate the literary texture of *Venus and Adonis*. The following eight cognate motifs further the discussion: broken language, secrets, kisses, painting, the virgin birth, the doppelgänger, "slips," and irony.

A. Broken Language

As previously noted, Venus dominates the poem through both her actions and more significantly, her speech. Of the 1,194 lines of Shakespeare's poem, 537 lines, almost half, are the reported speech of Venus. It is noteworthy that this verbal dominion does not result from Adonis's reluctance to speak his mind. Rather, whenever he tries to speak, Venus silences Adonis with kisses: "He . . . 'gins to chide, . . . she stops his lips, / And kissing speaks, with lustful language broken, / 'If thou wilt chide, thy lips shall never open.'" ¹²⁵ Venus speaks a lustful "language broken" which inhibits and controls her paramour. Soon Adonis resumes his chiding, and the results are even more dramatic: "He saith she is immodest, blames her miss; / What follows more, *she murders* with a kiss."¹²⁶

It is striking how critics have rarely commented on this bizarre motif. Surely the idea that Venus "murders" Adonis's criticisms with a kiss is among the most striking figurative expressions in a poem known for its "conceited" rhetoric. Apparently, however, the violence is reciprocal. Later, Adonis again opens his mouth to speak:

Once more the ruby-colour'd portal open'd,
Which to his speech did honey passage yield,
Like a red morn that ever yet betoken'd

124. Hughes sees the duality in terms of a mythic split in the psyche of the mother goddess, but otherwise his reading of the complementarity of the two figures is equivalent to my own object relations analysis of them as expressions of the author's ambivalence towards his own divided nature: "In the right side [of the goddess] is the uncontrollable, primeval Boar, image of the sexual body itself, while the male figure in the left side is the moralized, idealized, intellectualized, Puritan Adonis." HUGHES, *supra* note 114, at 161.

125. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 45-48.

126. *Id.* at lines 53-54 (emphasis added).

Wrack to the seaman, tempest to the field,

 This *ill presage* advisedly she marketh:
 Even as the wind is hush'd before it raineth,
 Or as the wolf doth grin before he barketh,
 Or as the berry breaks before it staineth,
 Or like the deadly bullet of a gun,
 His meaning struck her ere his words begun.¹²⁷

The omens of danger come fast and thick, concluding with the hyperbolic comparison of Adonis's speech to "the deadly bullet of a gun" which strikes Venus with its "meaning . . . ere his words begun." These passages constitute prima facie evidence supporting a "political" reading of the poem, for they reveal the author's distinctive awareness of the political problem of speech and the tendency of suppressed speech to assume a threatening posture vis-à-vis censoring authorities.

B. Secrecy

A related, but no less provocative, theme is secrecy. In the opening stanzas of the poem Venus promises to initiate Adonis into her erotic mysteries: "A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know."¹²⁸ However, it soon becomes apparent that, like a Queen guarded only by the motto of the garter (*honi soit y mal pense*),¹²⁹ Venus fears that her amours may be overheard by prying ears and reported by lascivious tongues. She reassures Adonis that "These blue-vein'd violets wheron we lean / Never can *blab*, nor *know not what we mean*."¹³⁰ The personification of "blabbing" violets seems to indicate a pathological paranoia on the part of Venus.¹³¹ But perhaps it is a paranoia suitable to the Tudor temperament of a Queen whose father divorced and put to death six of his own wives and accused her mother of incest with her own brother.

C. Kisses

Venus has reason to be paranoid about "meaning." One of the figurative peculiarities of Shakespeare's poem is the frequent identification of kisses with money and courtship with a business proposition. Over the course of the first fifteen stanzas, Venus succeeds in planting five kisses on her unwilling prey. The narrator then proposes that "one sweet kiss" from the still-reluctant

127. *Id.* at lines 451-54, 457-62 (emphasis added).

128. *Id.* at line 16.

129. "Shame to him who thinks ill of me." (translation by author).

130. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 125-26.

131. Later Venus personifies jealousy as a "sour informer" and "bate-breeding spy." *Id.* at line 655.

boy will cancel Adonis's "comptless debt" to the goddess.¹³² Adonis, however, only teases the lovelorn goddess: "But when her lips were ready for his pay, / He winks, and turns his lips another way."¹³³ This coy response provokes a lengthy diatribe from Venus—twenty stanzas appealing to him to become her lover—which concludes on the same financial note: "Give me one kiss, I'll give it thee again, / And one for int'rest, if thou wilt have twain."¹³⁴ Ultimately, Venus's entreaties fall on deaf ears. She conquers through force, exacting an erotic ransom from her unwilling subject, just as a monarch might exact a ransom from an unwilling tributary: "Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey, / Paying what ransom the insulter willeth."¹³⁵

As we have seen, John Lyly's play *Endymion* supplied precedent for the idea of symbolizing Oxford's thousand-pound annuity as a kiss conferred by a grateful monarch on a loyal subject. In this passage, that theme is given a sardonic twist. Venus tells Adonis that a thousand kisses—precisely the amount of the De Vere annuity¹³⁶—will purchase her heart.¹³⁷

132. *Id.* at line 84.

133. *Id.* at lines 89-90.

134. *Id.* at lines 209-10.

135. *Id.* at lines 549-50.

136. *See supra* text accompanying note 104. Further references to the De Vere annuity can be identified for the plays and Sonnets. *See* WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS* act 4, sc. 1, line 21 ("I buy a thousand pound a year! I buy a rope!"); WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE SECOND PART OF HENRY THE FOURTH* act 1, sc. 2, lines 223-24 [hereinafter *HENRY THE FOURTH*] ("Will your lordship lend me a thousand pound to furnish me forth?"); WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnet 111* ("public means, which public manners breeds"); WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK* act 3, sc. 2, lines 286-87 ("I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound."). Indeed, "the figure of one thousand pounds . . . recurs again and again in the Prince Hal-Falstaff relationship" in both parts of *Henry IV*. ROBERT GIROUX, *THE BOOK KNOWN AS Q: A CONSIDERATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS* 82 (1982). Giroux connects this theme in the *Henry IV* plays with the tradition, which Nicholas Rowe recorded. *See id.* at 81-83. Reverend Dr. John Ward, who became vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon noted that Shakespeare "had an allowance so large that he spent at the rate of £1000 a year." OGBURN, *supra* note 11, at 19. Rowe preserves mention of the one thousand pounds but does not describe it as an *annual* amount. *See* GIROUX, *supra*, at 81-82 ("[M]y Lord Southampton at one time, gave [Shakespeare] a thousand pounds to go through with a purchase which he heard he had a mind to."); *see generally* Hank Whittemore, *1586: 'By a Thousand Pound, Buy a Rope,' SHAKESPEARE MATTERS* (Shakespeare Fellowship, Marshfield Hills, Mass.), Summer 2003, at 27-33 (discussing briefly the theme of one thousand); Roger A. Stritmatter, *The Marginalia of Edward de Vere's Geneva Bible: Providential Discovery, Literary Reasoning, and Historical Consequence* (2001) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts), available at <http://shakespearefellowship.org/virtualclassroom/bibledissabsetc.htm>.

137. The critical reader may have noticed that the poem reverses the direction of this financial transaction: It was Elizabeth who paid De Vere the thousand pound annuity, but in the poem Venus begs Adonis for the thousand kisses. But kisses, of course, by their very nature, tend towards reciprocity, or rather, reflexivity, as Venus understands: "Touch but my

Venus continues:

A thousand kisses *buys* my heart from me,
 And *pay them at thy leisure*, one by one,
 What is ten hundred touches unto thee?
 Are they not quickly told and quickly gone?
 Say for *non-payment* that *the debt* should double,
 Is twenty hundred kisses such a trouble?¹³⁸

Edmund Malone supplies a revealing gloss to the concluding couplet: the idea of doubling the debt for non-payment is a technical reference to “a conditional bond’s becoming forfeited for non-payment; in which case, the entire penalty (usually the double of the principal sum lent by the obligee) was formerly recoverable at law.”¹³⁹ The Earl of Oxford entered into such a conditional bond with Queen Elizabeth not long before his love affair with her; this is first noted in contemporary documents. In 1571 Oxford “sued for his livery”—the formal recognition of his achievement of the age of majority and his right to assume all the ancestral prerogatives of his noble house, including to blazon his heraldic emblem of the boar on the insignia of his dependents.¹⁴⁰ Queen Elizabeth demanded three thousand pounds for his release from wardship and four thousand pounds for his livery. “Lacking ready cash, Oxford signed an obligation to pay double—£14,000—if he should fail to pay the £7000 by some specified date.”¹⁴¹

lips with those fair lips of thine The *kiss shall be thine own as well as mine.*” VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 115-17. Apparently, the passage fuses two dimensions of the Oxford-Elizabeth relationship, combining memory of Oxford’s indebtedness as the Queen’s ward during the 1570s—when he bestowed “kisses” on the Queen to buy his wardship—with the later experience of the Queen’s benevolence as the payee of the 1586-1604 annuity. It would be a mistake to lay undue exclusive emphasis on the numerical coincidence. The number one thousand occurs repeatedly in the poem. *See* Butler & Fowler, *supra* note 28, at 166-67 (noting the instances in which the number one thousand occurs in the poem). What matters is that the thousand kisses are monetary symbols exchanged as part of a contract of secrecy. One obvious “inkhorn” source of the thousand kisses motif, perhaps neglected by orthodox Shakespeareans because it was not translated into English until 1593, is Catullus’s *Carmen V*:

Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
 Then another thousand, then a second hundred,
 Then still another thousand, then a hundred;
 Then, when we’ve made many thousands,
 We’ll muddle them so as not to know,
 Or lest some villain overlook us
 Knowing the total of our kisses.

GAIUS VALERIUS CATULLUS, THE POEMS OF CATULLUS 7 (Guy Lee ed., 1990) (n.d.).

138. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 517-22 (emphasis added).

139. NEW VARIORUM EDITION, *supra* note 13, at 56 n.521.

140. NELSON, *supra* note 87, at 71.

141. *Id.*

Perhaps it is only a coincidence that the young Earl entered into a financial bond with Queen Elizabeth of the particular type described in the poem. Doubtless such bonds were a common feature of the economic life of the era; many in and around the court must have adopted similar measures to stave off financial disaster in this age of the “crisis of the aristocracy.” But when we review the entire network of circumstances—Oxford’s close family association with the poem’s dedicatee, his love affair with the Queen, his double identity as the boar and Adonis, and the Queen’s personification as Venus—our confidence in the exculpatory power of “coincidence” may begin to wane. From the orthodox perspective, the financial metaphors of *Venus and Adonis* are barbaric intrusions that contribute nothing to the poem’s entire significance. Hence, the subject is scrupulously avoided in the secondary literature of *Venus and Adonis*. However, the connections to Oxford—from the wardship negotiations to the thousand pound annuity—are both tangible and consequential for our understanding of the poem. As J. Thomas Looney noted, in first identifying Oxford as “Shakespeare”: “The predominating element in what we call circumstantial evidence is that of coincidences. A few coincidences we may treat as simply interesting; a number of coincidences we regard as remarkable; a vast accumulation of extraordinary coincidences we accept as conclusive proof.”¹⁴² What further “coincidences” does the poem, considered in the light of Oxford’s proposed authorship, reveal?

D. *Doppelgänger*

Some scholars argue that the boar and Adonis represent complementary aspects of the male personality in general and more specifically of the poem’s alleged author, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. Close reading of the imagery and symbolism of the poem supports these two inferences. Venus describes the final encounter between the boar and Adonis in these reflexive terms:

’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
 Sheath’d unaware the tusk in his soft groin.¹⁴³

The imagery of mutual penetration is not merely homoerotic; it also depicts each being as the mirror image of the other, identifying the hunter with the hunted and implying that Adonis and the boar are mutually constituted and constituting beings, extrinsic opposites but internally reciprocal in their

142. LOONEY, *supra* note 11, at 80.

143. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 1111-16.

natures.¹⁴⁴ This identity is underscored in the immediately preceding stanza, in a moment of Sophoclean irony when Venus attributes the tragic destruction of Adonis to the boar's *misrecognition* of Adonis, "[T]his foul, grim, and urchin-snouted boar, / Whose downward eye still looketh for a grave, / *Ne'er saw the beauteous livery* that he wore."¹⁴⁵

One may be tempted to pass over this passage with hardly a second glance, construing the word "livery" only in a metaphoric sense. In the context of the dense heraldic symbolism¹⁴⁶ of the poem, however, a more pictorial reading inevitably intrudes: "a suit of clothes, formerly sometimes a badge or cognizance . . . bestowed by a person upon his retainers or servants and serving as a token by which they may be recognized."¹⁴⁷ Falstaff uses the word in this sense to Shallow in *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*: "[I]f I had had time to have made new liveries, I would have bestow'd the thousand pound I borrow'd of you."¹⁴⁸ Readers who prefer to exercise powers of perception more refined than those of the boar himself may be forgiven for wondering what "token of recognition" the boar overlooked before killing Adonis. If Adonis, on some level, represents the Earl of Oxford, then the answer resounds with tragicomic irony: the "beauteous livery" which the boar overlooked was the heraldic badge of . . . the boar.

E. Painting

One of the peculiar dimensions of *Venus and Adonis* is the poet's frequent recourse to the language of the visual arts and incidents from the history of painting—in particular the *trompe l'oeil*, that "fools the eye" by tricking the observer into perceiving an artificial object as a real one.¹⁴⁹ Pliny preserves the *locus classicus* of the Greek painter Zeuxis, whose painting of grapes

144. See Dympna Callaghan, *(Un)natural Loving: Swine, Pets, and Flowers in Venus and Adonis*, 3 EARLY MOD. CULTURE 2, ¶ 6 (2003), at <http://eserver.org/emc/1-3/callaghan.html> (last visited Feb. 19, 2005) (noting that the passage functions as "a grotesque parody of the legal definition of bestiality, 'carnal knowledge' of a brute," in Elizabethan legal doctrine). Callaghan's analysis demonstrates yet another scandalous "post-Stratfordian" dimension to the poem which is quite inconsistent with orthodox beliefs about authorship. Callaghan persuasively argues that "the poem's comic imputations about bestiality had serious ramifications in a culture where, as Keith Thomas points out: 'The frequency with which bestiality was denounced by contemporary moralists suggests that the temptation could be a real one.'" *Id.* at 3, ¶ 7 (quoting KEITH THOMAS, *MAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD: A HISTORY OF THE MODERN SENSIBILITY* 118-19 (1983)).

145. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 1105-07 (emphasis added).

146. See, e.g., *id.* at lines 103-08 ("His batter'd shield, his uncontrolled crest . . .").

147. 8 THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, *supra* note 80, at 1055 (emphasis added).

148. HENRY THE FOURTH, *supra* note 136, act 5, sc. 5, line 11.

149. See generally Belsey, *supra* note 63 (discussing the *trompe-l'oeil* as a theme in the poem).

possessed such versimilitude that hungry birds gathered around to feed on it.¹⁵⁰ Stanza 101 illustrates the frustration of Venus, who was ready to consummate her love to Adonis in the previous stanza, with a simile based on Pliny's anecdote: "Even so poor birds, deceiv'd with painted grapes / Do surfeit by the eye and pine the maw: / Even so she languisheth in her mishaps, / As those poor birds that helpless berries saw."¹⁵¹ Already Venus, invoking the Pygmalion theme, had compared the reluctant Adonis to a "lifeless picture," a "[w]ell-painted idol," and a "[s]tatue contenting but the eye alone."¹⁵² At the poem's midpoint, she is still likened to a hungry bird trying to feed on a painting "contenting but the eye alone."

The critics' responses to this theme are divided. Some, like Hazlitt, have felt disoriented and disturbed by it.¹⁵³ But, as Clark Hulse has indicated, the visual imagery plays a critical aesthetic role in Shakespeare's narrative technique: In the poem, "visual images hold together the machinery of an incomplete argumentative sequence."¹⁵⁴ Whenever action is impossible, the narrator, or Venus herself, slips into the language of painting. This has the rhetorical effect of emphasizing both the artificiality and stasis of the described object and, somehow, of completing an otherwise incomplete argumentative sequence, as if art supplies what nature lacks.

Adonis is not the only character whom Venus perceives as a character in a painting. As soon as Adonis "name[s] the boar,"¹⁵⁵ jealousy, the "sour informer," and "bate-breeding spy,"¹⁵⁶ whispers in Venus's ear presentiments of Adonis's death and then, like an Elizabethan usher holding up a portrait miniature for his mistress's inspection, "[p]resenteth to [her] eye / The picture of an angry chafing boar, / Under whose sharp fangs on his back doth lie / An image like [his own], all stain'd with gore."¹⁵⁷ Clearly the boar, or the hunting of it, represents for Venus an aspect of Adonis's personality which her erotic enchantments can neither regulate nor tame. However, a glance at the relevant portraiture may be enough to convince us that Shakespeare—whomever he was—may also have had personal reasons for associating the figure of the boar with painting. Figure Nine, a portrait of the Earl of Oxford by Marcus Gheeraedts dated circa 1586, illustrates the popular Renaissance concept of

150. See THE POEMS, *supra* note 25, at 34 nn.601-02. In Pliny's account, Zeusix is defeated by his rival Parhassius when he attempts to draw back the curtain on Parhassius's work only to discover that the curtain is part of the painting.

151. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 601-04.

152. *Id.* at lines 211-13.

153. See JOHN BUXTON, ELIZABETHAN TASTE 299 (1963).

154. S. Clark Hulse, *Shakespeare's Myth of Venus and Adonis*, in CRITICAL ESSAYS, *supra* note 3, at 203, 211.

155. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at line 641.

156. *Id.* at line 655.

157. *Id.* at lines 661-64.

articulate painting.¹⁵⁸ The sitter, named after the boar, here identifies himself through silent gesture with his heraldic alter ego.

Figure 9. Portrait of the Earl of Oxford by Marcus Gheeraedts, courtesy of Ruth Loyd Miller



A cunning reciprocity links this portrait with our poem, almost as if the two creations are part of a common design: Just as the portrait identifies the sitter with his heraldic boar, Venus, in Shakespeare's poem, identifies the boar as an author. A.T. Hatto paraphrases Venus's remark about the boar when he writes that "the Boar is sole and ultimate author of his symbol."¹⁵⁹ Indeed, one is tempted to wonder, juxtaposing poem and portrait, whether the portrait was intended as a gift honoring Queen Elizabeth's 1586 annuity to the sitter. Certainly one is reminded of the original Greek definition of the *symbolum*, from which the English word "symbol" is derived: "originally [it] meant the corresponding part of a tally, ticket, or coin cut in twain. The person who

158. That poetry is a "speaking picture" and painting "silent poetry" was a Renaissance cliché. In the paragon between the arts, supreme mastery consisted of imitating the excellence of the contending art, to produce poetry which evoked visual response, and painting which "spoke." Painting, wrote Ben Jonson, "is it selfe a silent worke . . . yet it doth so enter, and penetrate the inmost affection . . . as sometimes it orecomes the power of speech, and oratory." BEN JONSON, *Timber: Or Discoveries*, in 8 BEN JONSON 610 (C.H. Herford & Evelyn Simpson eds., Oxford Clarendon Press 1947) (1641); see generally JOHN DOEBLER, *SHAKESPEARE'S SPEAKING PICTURES: STUDIES IN ICONIC IMAGERY* (1974) (discussing Shakespeare's use of icons).

159. Hatto, *supra* note 111, at 358.

presented the piece which fitted showed a 'symbol' of his right to what he claimed."¹⁶⁰

F. Virgin Birth

Enough has been said, one hopes, to convince even the skeptical reader schooled in orthodox belief that an "Oxfordian" analysis of *Venus and Adonis* can exploit the resources of biographical and historical context to produce a reading rich in ironic undertones. But a truly literary reading of the poem must take us into more dangerous waters. Kay Stanton, in an unpublished monograph, identifies the central epistemic paradox of *Venus and Adonis*: "[w]ithin the action of the poem, [Venus] does not have sex, yet becomes a mother."¹⁶¹ Sexual union should occur at the exact midpoint of the poem, stanza 100,¹⁶² but instead, the poem parodies the popular orthodox idiom of Elizabeth as the "Virgin Queen":

Now is she in the very lists of love,
Her champion mounted for the hot encounter;
All is imaginary she doth prove,
He will not manage her, although he mount her,
That worse than Tantalus' is her annoy,
To clip Elysium and to lack her joy.¹⁶³

A "Queene in love," Venus is in her "own law forlorn,"¹⁶⁴ a "judge in love" who "cannot right her cause."¹⁶⁵ Her hopeful expectation "proved . . . imaginary"; she is like Tantalus, tantalized by the object of her desire but unable to "get it."¹⁶⁶

As Stanton observes, however, Venus does, paradoxically, give birth to the Adonis flower in the concluding stanzas of the poem. Moreover, Venus is also insistently associated with images of pregnancy which are in no way derived from Shakespeare's precedent sources. For example, stanza 146 concludes by envisioning her as a nursing doe with a concealed fawn:

And as she runs, the bushes in the way,

160. Webster's Online Dictionary, The Rosetta Edition, at <http://www.websters-dictionary-online.org/definition/english/sy/symbol.html> (last visited Mar. 7, 2005).

161. Kay Stanton, Gender and the Problems of *Venus and Adonis* 2 (n.d.) (unpublished manuscript, on file with the Department of English and Comparative English, California State University).

162. See Butler & Fowler, *supra* note 28, at 162.

163. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 595-600.

164. *Id.* at line 251.

165. *Id.* at line 220.

166. *Id.* at line 168.

Some catch her by the neck, some kiss her face,
 Some twin'd about her thigh to make her stay;
 She wildly breaketh from their strict embrace,
Like a milch doe, whose swelling dugs do ache,
*Hasting to feed her fawn, hid in some brake.*¹⁶⁷

Indeed, Venus seems to have babies on her mind. From the poem's opening line—"even as the sun with purple-color'd face"—solar imagery has been a dominant motif. On a generic level, such imagery is suggested by the mythological tradition associating Adonis with the sun, but this tradition does not dictate the author's specific emphasis on the theme of pregnancy. When, for example, Venus greets the sun on the second day of the poem's action, she associates it by homophony with human pregnancy and, once again, lactation:

Venus salutes him with this fair good-morrow,
 "O thou clear god, and patron of all light,
 From whom each lamp and shining star doth borrow
 The beauteous influence that makes him bright:
 There lives *a son that suck'd an earthly mother,*
 May lend thee light, as thou does lend to other."¹⁶⁸

Such references call attention to themselves by their overt but arbitrary character. A second, even more destabilizing form of reference to pregnancy is innuendo. Orthodox critics rarely discuss the poem's concluding stanza (Figure Ten), in which Venus yokes her doves to the island of Paphos, "where their queen, / Meanes to immure herselfe, and not be seen." Comparison with book X of the *Metamorphoses* reveals Shakespeare's startling divergence from his source text:¹⁶⁹ Ovid's Venus starts to Paphos but then turns her chariot back to the site of Adonis's death.¹⁷⁰ In Ovid, the scene ends with Venus

167. *Id.* at lines 871-76 (emphasis added).

168. *Id.* at lines 859-64 (emphasis added).

169. Anthony Mortimer describes the poem's conclusion as a "direct confrontation" between Shakespeare and his sources. Anthony Mortimer, *The Ending of Venus and Adonis*, 78 ENG. STUD. 334, 334 (1997).

170. Arthur Golding translates the two relevant passages:

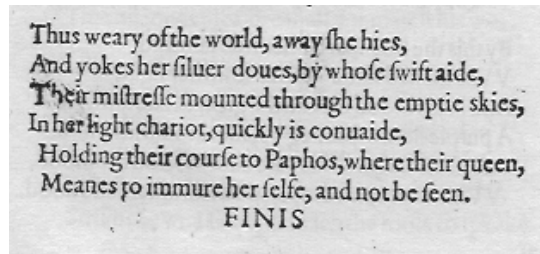
Too *Cythera* Ile no mynd at all shee had,
 Nor untoo *Paphos* where the sea beats round about the shore . . .
 She lovd *Adonis* more

Than heaven. To him shee clinged ay, and bare him companye.
 OVID, SHAKESPEARE'S OVID 213 (Arthur Golding trans., W.H.D. Rouse ed., S. Ill. Univ. Press 1961) (1567).

Dame *Venus* in her chariot drawn with swannes was scarce arrived
 At *Cyprus*, when shee knew a farre the sygh of him de pryved
 Of lyfe. Shee turnd her *Cygnets* backe, and when shee from the sky
 Beehilld him dead, and in his blood beweltred for to lye,
 Shee leaped downe, and tare at once hir garments from her brist . . .

rending her clothes in mourning by Adonis's side. But the author of *Venus and Adonis* rewrites the scene so that Venus retires in secrecy to the Island of Paphos, "where she means to *immure* herself"—literally, to wall herself in, like a nun in a convent—and the emphatically conclusive words of the poem state her manifest intention to "not be seen."¹⁷¹

Figure 10. Stanza 199 from Quarto 10



The concluding words emphasize that the reader does not, indeed *cannot*, see what will happen at Paphos. The contrast with the poem's opening stanza—also cosmographical but elaborately *visual* in nature (the "purple-color'd face" of the mid-morn sun)—could not be contrived with greater artifice or conscious intent. Moreover, the divergence from Ovid appears to be purposeful and, if so, profoundly subversive. Paphos features prominently in the fable of Pygmalion earlier in *Metamorphosis X*. Pygmalion fell in love with his own carved statue of a nude woman and thereby became the prototype of the erotic artist seduced by his own artistry. His lover, having been transformed into a live woman through the force of Pygmalion's desire, gives birth on the island of Paphos and by metonymy names it: "This Ladye was delivered of a Sun that *Paphus* hyght [was called], / Of whom the Iland takes that name."¹⁷² Nimble readers might understand that Paphos was, in origin and in name, a place at which the lovers of artists gave birth to their offspring.

G. Slips

As noted, the idiom of finance is often used to describe the love relations between Venus and Adonis, and the motif of pregnancy is an arbitrarily prominent design element in the poem. These two themes—pregnancy and finance—are brought together in one of the poem's most unusual and striking idioms. Once again, Venus is the speaker of these un-Ovidian lines:

Id. at 217.

171. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at line 1194.

172. OVID, *supra* note 170, at 207.

Pure lips, sweet seals in my soft lips imprinted,
 What bargains may I make, still to be sealing?
 To sell myself I can be well contented,
 So thou wilt buy, and pay, and use good dealing:
 Which purchase if thou make, *for fear of slips*,
 Set thy seal manual on my wax-red lips.¹⁷³

Several editors offer a gloss for the surprising word, “slips.”¹⁷⁴ It can refer to a piece of counterfeit money, a reading which is certainly supported by the word’s rich numismatic context.¹⁷⁵ However, this polysemantically perverse word is dense with further applicable significance. A second meaning has earned the approval of the poem’s more cautious editors: “Slips” can refer to a mistake or error, as in “a mistake or fault, esp. one of a slight or trivial character, inadvertently made in writing, speaking, etc.; an unintentional error or blunder.”¹⁷⁶ A third meaning, although attested in Shakespeare and consistent with the poem’s theme of pregnancy, has gone unmentioned: “[a] scion or descendent.”¹⁷⁷

As previously noted, in the opening stanzas of the poem, Venus employs kissing as an instrument of coercion to silence Adonis from speaking out against her tyrannical governance. In this passage we see that a kiss can also be used to witness and seal an agreement. Venus exhorts a kiss which will insure secrecy and guarantee against “slips”—mistakes of pen or tongue that might inadvertently reveal the intimate secrets of Elizabethan governance. Elizabeth Waters Bennett saw in the kiss between Cynthia and Endymion a sign of royal favor; this kiss in *Venus and Adonis* would seem to symbolize a formal contract, equivalent to a secret betrothal designed in part to legitimize “bastard slips.” Interestingly, Elizabeth Sears has argued, without making any use of the present evidence, that such a betrothal between Elizabeth I and Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford in fact took place sometime in 1574.¹⁷⁸

H. Double Tongued Irony

Venus and Adonis begins with an excerpt from a poem that boasts that

173. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 511-16 (emphasis added).

174. *E.g.*, NEW VARIORUM EDITION, *supra* note 13, at 55 n.515; THE POEMS, *supra* note 25, at 30 n.515.

175. See 15 THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, *supra* note 80, at 714 (“A counterfeit coin’ He went and got him a certaine slips, which are counterfeyt peeces of mony”).

176. 15 *Id.* at 713.

177. 15 *Id.* at 711. The OED supplies two witnesses: “bastarde slippes shal never take depe roots,” from Thomas More’s *The History of Richard the Third*, and “[b]rave slip, sprung from the Great Andronicus,” from Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. 15 *Id.* (typography regularized). The idiom was not obscure. The quotation from Thomas More’s work quotes the Douay-Rheims Bible (*Wisdom* 5:3).

178. SEARS, *supra* note 34.

poetry will prevail over the power of the state. Ultimately, this is the message—ironically delivered—of Shakespeare’s own poem. Although Venus spares no effort to stifle Adonis’s speech with her Queenly kisses, and then prevails on Adonis to seal a compact not to divulge any potentially embarrassing “slips,” she proceeds to display an astounding lack of discretion in her own prolific speech. “Grief hath two tongues,” she declares, “and never woman yet / Could rule them both, without ten women’s wit.”¹⁷⁹ This dimension of the poem is of course not only consistent with the theory developed in this Article, but it is its final, literary proof. What greater poetic triumph can we imagine than a poet who is able to place in the mouth of a character representing the forces of censorship, to which he has himself been subjected, the very things which she has enjoined him from saying *in propria persona*?

It is Venus, it has been shown, who identifies the boar as “the author” of death’s slander while exculpating herself as a mere “actor” in the boar’s dramatic poem. It is Venus, it has been shown, who proposes, and thereby reveals, the *quid pro quo* confirmed by the “seal manual” kiss which will guarantee against slips. Finally, it is Venus who utters the poem’s superlative indiscretion to her floral offspring as she compares him in the final stanzas to his deceased father. She is a rather different Venus here than the violent conqueror of the poem’s opening stanzas. Parody has been transfigured into lament, summer’s lust exchanged for winter’s regret. With her beloved Adonis slain by the boar, all that remains to comfort her is the “sweet issue” of her paramour, the “harvest” of her unconsummated love. She concludes with a kind of lullaby, as she cradles the Adonis flower in her breast: “Here was thy father’s bed, here in my breast; / Thou art the next of blood, and ’tis thy right.”¹⁸⁰

The phrase, “next of blood,” has no precedent in Ovid¹⁸¹ or, so far as can be determined, in any of Shakespeare’s other possible sources. Instead it has been interpolated—invented—by the poem’s author. The significance of the phrase quickly becomes evident when we turn to a Shakespeare concordance. It appears only four times in Shakespeare. Three times—twice in *The Second Part of Henry VI* and once in *The First Part of Henry IV*—it refers unmistakably to the person who stands next in line to inherit the crown: “[C]onsider, lords, he is the next of blood, / And heir-apparent to the English crown.”¹⁸²

179. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at lines 1007-08.

180. *Id.* at lines 1183-84.

181. A similar phrase does occur earlier in Book X when Hippomenes boasts to the virginal Atalanta, in an attempt to secure her love, that “am I great graundchylde by degree / In right descent, of him that rules the waters.” OVID, *supra* note 170, at 214.

182. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *THE SECOND PART OF HENRY THE SIXTH* act 1, sc.1, lines 151-52 (emphasis added). According to the 1571 statute on treason:

whosoever shall hereafter during the life of our said Sovereign Lady, by any book or work

The author's practice, throughout the poem, of inserting deliberate anachronisms which place his idiomatic intentions and meaning in the foreground of the careful reader's consciousness appears here with the full force of a literary *trompe l'oeil*, tricking the reader to "see" against his will. Ovid boasted that "even monarchs and the triumphs of monarchs [should] give way before the might of verses." In *Venus and Adonis*, wielding the fine scalpel of the ironic wit one expects from a literary genius, Shakespeare delivers a *tour de force* demonstration of Ovid's principle. Elizabeth's poet, invested in a fool's motley, delivers up the message his monarch refused to heed.

V. CONCLUSION

My title is drawn from a line in Ben Jonson's *Poetaster*, a play that parodies *Venus and Adonis*. In the play, Jonson's Ovid, like the Ovid of his sources, rebels against his father, who planned for him a secure career as a lawyer. Instead, Jonson's Ovid writes verses—or, rather, "law cases in verse."¹⁸³ Jonson's play is one of many literary texts in which, over the sixty years after *Venus and Adonis* was first published, the poem was imitated or parodied in ways which confirm that at least a few privileged early readers were cognizant of the poem's political and legal implications.¹⁸⁴ Perhaps the most obvious and certainly the most comical of these travesties was a series of anonymous plays, *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus* and *The Returne from Parnassus I & II*, written for performance at St. John's College, Cambridge. Strangely, orthodox Shakespeareans have failed to recognize that the entire concept of the St. John's *Parnassus* trilogy¹⁸⁵—of scholars making a

printed or written . . . affirm at any time before the same be by Act of Parliament of this realm established, . . . that any person is or ought to be the right heir and successor to the Queen's Majesty . . . except the same be the natural issue of her Majesty's body . . . shall for the first offense suffer imprisonment of one whole year and forfeit half his goods, whereof the one moiety to the Queen's Majesty, the other moiety to him or them that will sue for the same.

SELECT STATUTES AND OTHER CONSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENTS ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE REIGNS OF ELIZABETH AND JAMES I, at 59-60 (G.W. Prothero ed., 4th ed. 1913).

183. JONSON, *supra* note 27, at 98.

184. The vogue for satirizing *Venus and Adonis* continued at least up until 1650, when Robert Baron published a book which is, in many regards, the most interesting item in the entire tradition. Baron's *Pocula Castalia*, a narrative poem in the style of *Venus and Adonis*, adopts motifs from several Shakespearean plays, including both *Hamlet* and *A Winter's Tale*. The "Vilia miretur" epigram from Ovid's *Elegy XV* appears prominently on the title page of the publication. ROBERT BARON, *POCULA CASTALIA* (London, 1650), reproduced at Early English Books Online, at <http://eebo.chadwyck.com> (last visited Feb. 21, 2005).

185. The *Parnassus* plays are often supposed to constitute evidence for the ubiquity of public knowledge regarding William Shakespeare of Stratford and the general consent of his authorship of the works. Actually, they support the contrary view that many Elizabethan writers

pilgrimage to Parnassus—parodies the Ovidian epigram from the title page of *Venus and Adonis*. The intent to parody is signaled in the opening prologue of *The Pilgrimage*, in which the speaker travesties the *Venus* dedication:

If youle take three daies study in good cheare,
Our muse is blest that ever shee cam here.
If not, wele care noe more the barren sande,
But let our pen seeke a more fertile lande.¹⁸⁶

The passage mimics—and parodies—the controversial line from the *Venus and Adonis* dedication: “[I]f the first heir of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather: and never after ear so barren a land, for fear it yield me still so bad a harvest.”¹⁸⁷ The play concludes with the two pilgrims, Philomusus and Studiosus, having successfully traversed the fearful lands of Logic and Rhetoric, encamped before the summit of Parnassus and preparing for the final ascent. Philomusus then repeats the title-page epigram from *Venus and Adonis*: “Let vulgar witts admire the common songes, / I’le

understood the name “Shakespeare” to be a literary joke. Shakespeare is mentioned by name nine times in the *Parnassus* texts. PARNASSUS: THREE ELIZABETHAN COMEDIES (W.D. Macray ed., Oxford, Clarendon Press 1886) (circa 1601) [hereinafter PARNASSUS]. One passage often cited from *Returne from Parnassus II* allegedly demonstrates the high regard of and transparency of the name:

Kemp. Few of the university [men] pen plaies well, they smell too much of that writer *Ovid*, and that writer *Metamorphosis*, and talke too much of Proserpina and Juppiter. Why heres our fellow *Shakespeare* puts them all downe, I and *Ben Jonson* too. O that *Ben Jonson* is a pestilent fellow, he brought up *Horace* giving the Poets a pill, but our fellow *Shakespeare* hath given him a purge that made him beray his credit. *Id.* at 138 (typography regularized). Close reading undermines any conviction in the usefulness of these references as evidence supporting the orthodox view of authorship. As F.S. Boas in *The Cambridge History of English Literature* describes the circumstance,

The whole purport of this well known passage is misunderstood unless it be recognised that it is written in a vein of the bitterest irony. The gownsman is holding up to scorn before an academic audience the judgment of illiterate boors who think that *Metamorphosis* is a writer, and that their fellow Shakespeare puts to shame the university playwrights

F.S. Boas, *University Plays*, in 6 THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE 330, 352-53 (A.W. Ward & A.R. Waller eds., 1933). The Cambridge writer is too kind to orthodox pretensions. Actually, the passage supports the view that “Shakespeare” was a literary joke. At the very least, Kemp’s reference to “that writer *Metamorphosis*” suggests that *Returne from Parnassus* represents Kemp as an untrustworthy witness who knows nothing at all about literature, because he does not even understand that *Metamorphoses* is a book by Ovid, and not another author.

186. *Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, in PARNASSUS, *supra* note 185, at 1.

187. *Dedication*, *supra* note 25 (spelling regularized); *see also* NEW VARIORUM EDITION, *supra* note 13, at 6-7 (explaining the controversial nature and various interpretations of the line).

lie with Phoebus by the Muses' springs"¹⁸⁸ From first to last, the primary target of the parody is *Venus and Adonis* and the politics surrounding the poem. As long ago as 1895, Sarrazin noted that the character Gullio, a foppish and vain aristocrat who gushes his enthusiasm for "Shakespeare," is a caricature of the Earl of Southampton.¹⁸⁹ Orthodox scholars have been slow to acknowledge the comic implications of this identification,¹⁹⁰ but the internal evidence of the plays suggests that the anonymous author was well versed in the contemporary political situation.¹⁹¹

One telling scene from *Returne I* reveals Ingenioso—a caricature of Thomas Nashe¹⁹²—quoting *Venus and Adonis* to Gullio. "Noe more," breaks in Gullio:

I am one that can judge accordinge to the proverbe, *bovem ex unguibus*. Ey marry, Sir, these have some life in them! Let this duncified worlde esteeme of Spencer and Chaucer, I'le worshipp sweet Mr. Shakspeare, and to honoure him will lay his Venus and Adonis under my pillowe, as wee reade of one (I do not well remember his name, but I am sure he was a kinge) slept with Homer under his bed's heade.¹⁹³

The comic point is that Southampton, although claiming in the Latin proverb to know an ox by its hoof, has been fooled by the name on the title page of *Venus and Adonis*. He cannot remember the name of Alexander the Great, but is sure he "was a kinge." Apparently from royal pretensions of his own—so the play would seem to imply—Gullio plans to sleep with *Venus and Adonis* under his pillow. It is not an auspicious moment for Shakespearean orthodoxy.

In a more sober vein, George Chapman's *Hymnus Ad Cynthiam*, as previously discussed,¹⁹⁴ is a pointed neo-Platonic answer to *Venus and Adonis*.

188. *Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, *supra* note 186, at 24.

189. G. Sarrazin, *Die Entstehung von Shakespeares "Verlorener Liebesmühe," in JAHRBUCH DER DEUTSCHEN SHAKESPEARE-GESELLSCHAFT 200, 216-17 (1895)* (translation by author).

190. See J.B. Leishman, *Introduction to THE THREE PARNASSUS PLAYS (1598-1601)* 81-83 (J.B. Leishman ed., 1949) (rejecting the identification). His reasoning seems entirely unpersuasive.

191. For instance, the contretemps over the Vere-Wriothsesley wedding is satirized in Gullio's statement to Ingenioso that

[t]he Countess and my lorde entertayned mee verie honorablely. Indeede they used my advise in some state matters, and I perceyved the Earle woulde faine have thruste one of his daughters upon mee; but I will have noe knave priste to medle with my ringe. I bestowed 20 angells upon the officers of the house att my departure, kist the Countess, tooke my leave of my lorde, and came awaye.

Returne I, in *PARNASSUS*, *supra* note 185, at 60.

192. Leishman, *supra* note 190, at 71-79.

193. *Returne I*, *supra* note 191, at 63.

194. See *supra* note 69 and accompanying text.

In place of Shakespeare's sweaty, sexually frustrated Venus, Chapman gives us the orthodox image of the chaste, stoically dignified sovereign, Cynthia, goddess of both moon and hunt. Interestingly, Chapman's poem also contains a direct rebuke to the author of *Venus and Adonis*, under the sobriquet "Alpheus." In Shakespeare's poem, Venus silences Adonis by kissing him. Chapman is a trifle less nuanced. His poem urges Cynthia and her "nymphs"—a transparent reference to the Queen's maids of honor and the Vavasour affair—to "stop his mouth with mire."¹⁹⁵ Chapman struggles to vigorously contradict the poetic tradition that Cynthia bore children by her lover Endymion: "Therefore those Poetes did most highly fault, / That fainde thee fiftie children by Endimion, / And they that write thou hadst but three alone, / Thou never any hadst, but didst affect, / Endimion for his studious intellect."¹⁹⁶ The purpose of this mythographic debate seems obscure unless Chapman is, under the guise of a purely academic treatise, contradicting the literary rumor of Elizabeth's pregnancy which forms such a powerful subtext in *Venus and Adonis*.

To summarize, *Venus and Adonis* may be read as a law case in verse, a poetic manifesto which invokes the most politically charged question of London in the 1590s: the succession of the Tudor throne. According to this reading, the poem mythologizes a titanic subterranean struggle in the Elizabethan body politic, a conflict of cross-purposes which, eight years later, broke into open civil strife on the streets of London when the Earl of Southampton and his followers took up arms to settle the succession question.¹⁹⁷ Southampton risked decapitation for aggressively asserting his "right" to a private conference with an aging monarch who notoriously refused to name an heir to the throne. The "civil home-bred strife" that the author of *Venus and Adonis* evidently feared had become a reality.¹⁹⁸ As we have seen, texts such as the *Parnassus Plays* and Chapman's *Hymnus Ad Cynthiam* actively answer to this reading.

In concluding, it may be useful to place this undoubtedly controversial interpretation in the proper comparative light. Modern English speakers have inherited two great historical myths from our Elizabethan ancestors: (1) the myth of the apolitical, conformist Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon, whose plays and poems, as Charlton Ogburn says, appeared, "bang!, overnight, in his head"¹⁹⁹ without precedent, forethought, or motive and (2) the myth of the Virgin Queen. Surprisingly, Elizabethans themselves were not

195. The entire passage deserves to be quoted: "If proude Alpheus offer force againe, / Because he could not once thy love obtaine, / Thou and thy Nimphs shall stop his mouth with mire, / And mocke the fondling, for his mad aspire." CHAPMAN, *supra* note 69, at 40.

196. *Id.* at 41 (footnote omitted).

197. For a useful introduction to the Essex rebellion, see AKRIGG, *supra* note 34. For an "Oxfordian" analysis of the rebellion, see SEARS, *supra* note 34.

198. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at line 764.

199. *The Shakespeare Mystery* (PBS television broadcast, Apr. 18, 1987).

willing dupes of the Virgin Queen myth. Throughout her reign, rumors abounded that Elizabeth I, although officially designated the Virgin Queen, iconographically depicted as the Virginal Diana, and psychologically serving as the Protestant substitute for the Virgin Mary, was in fact a true daughter of the lusty Henry VIII. According to Puritan gossip, whenever Elizabeth went on summer progress, away from the court and out of the public eye, it was, like Venus in the concluding stanzas of our poem, to find a safe haven in which to be delivered of a child without fear of public scandal.²⁰⁰ As Daniel Wright has emphasized in one recent discussion of the subject, the common currency of these rumors suggests that “opponents of the Queen (herself a bastard—at least according to Catholic reckoning) clearly thought such reports might be regarded as plausible.”²⁰¹ The rumors have proven to be enduring and troublesome. In 1922 Frederick Chamberlin published an entire book, *The Private Character of Queen Elizabeth*,²⁰² devoted with touching Victorian thoroughness to defending Elizabeth’s honor against continued rumors of her “immorality.”

In at least one case, the evidence for such a scenario went well beyond rumor and broke into the full glare of historical scrutiny. In 1587 Arthur Dudley, a young man of about twenty-six years, announced to the English ambassador in Spain, Sir Francis Englefield, that he was the heir to the Tudor throne, being the biological son of Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley.²⁰³ After his brief entrée onto the stage of history in 1587, Dudley swiftly and silently disappeared. His fate, like the truth of his claim to be a “child of state” and Tudor heir, is unknown. Most historians reject—somewhat prematurely it seems—the possibility that Dudley may have been exactly who he said he was. But whether he was is not the issue. Instead, the currency of such stories does permit an intriguing question: Is it possible that the Earl of Southampton was another such putative heir to the Tudor throne, a “little purple flower”²⁰⁴ who had sprung up in the fertile soil of the Tudor dynasty but had been concealed from public recognition for two decades when “Shakespeare” saluted him in verse? Southampton, it will be recalled, is both the dedicatee of the narrative poems and the “fair youth” and “sovereign flower” of the Shakespearean sonnets. Arrested for his part in the Essex rebellion, James I commuted Southampton’s death sentence, for

200. Levin, *supra* note 74, at 88.

201. Daniel L. Wright, *Good Night, Sweet Prince*, SHAKESPEARE MATTERS (Shakespeare Fellowship, Marshfield Hills, Mass.), Summer 2004, at 32. As Wright goes on to comment, royal bastards are a recurrent theme in English dynastic politics: They were “highly regarded, respected, honored and feared; controversy over them shaped the history of the nation.” *Id.*

202. CHAMBERLIN, *supra* note 91.

203. *Id.* at 169-70.

204. Cf. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM* act 2, sc. 1, lines 165-69 (“little western flower”).

unknown reasons, on April 5, 1603. He survived to become a leading parliamentarian under the Jacobean crown.

In closing, it is worth emphasizing that the theory proposed here, while unprecedented in its historical implications, is entirely consistent with the current trends of Renaissance literary criticism. Contrary to popular modern perception, England in the 1590s was an anxious society, at war with the imposing military power Spain and divided against itself over both religion and the unresolved matter of the Tudor succession. The 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada must have seemed, to an Elizabethan society steeped in Calvinist doctrine, a miraculous dispensation and a sign of divine providence. But the longer the Queen refused to name a successor and the more her decaying body came to symbolize the frailty of the body politic, the deeper social anxiety became. Recent scholarship stresses how popular literary genres responded to and reflected this growing angst: “[D]uring the 1590s a current of sexual imagery emerged within English poetry that reflected a hostile perception of Elizabethan government.”²⁰⁵ This imagery included “references to Elizabeth *in sexually compromising contexts*.”²⁰⁶ The relevance of this description to stanza 100 of *Venus and Adonis*, with its comical portrayal of the “Queen of love,” unable to seduce the object of her desire and reduced to a parody of the official doctrine of Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen, scarcely requires emphasis.

Literary historians are also aware, although it may be an understatement to suggest that they have pursued the implications, that the Renaissance tradition of Ovid moralized was one of allegorical secrets. The very “barbarisms” which have so often offended or bewildered orthodox critics of *Venus and Adonis* were regarded, under prevailing renaissance theory, as the appropriate stimulus to deeper appreciation of form and purpose of the type pursued to its logical conclusion in the present Article. Leonard Barkan summarizes the view which Shakespeare’s literate contemporaries would have taken for granted:

[P]oets do not create myths simply for ornament . . . or just to hide the truth for the fun of it; rather they invent fanciful episodes because the deepest truths must remain hidden from those unworthy to perceive them. This idea—which flowers less in the Middle Ages than in the Renaissance—introduces a whole upside-down element in the reception and recuperation of paganism. That is, the more bizarre or repellent or “poetical” the mythic covering, the deeper truth it hides.²⁰⁷

205. Hannah Betts, “The Image of this Queene so Quaynte”: *The Pornographic Blazon 1588-1603*, in DISSING ELIZABETH, *supra* note 74, at 153, 155.

206. *Id.* at 156 (emphasis added).

207. LEONARD BARKAN, THE GODS MADE FLESH: METAMORPHOSIS AND THE PURSUIT OF PAGANISM 112 (1986).

In such a zeitgeist, as John Doeblen says, “[t]he Neoplatonic ideal was for the soul to supply intuitively the connectives linking juxtaposed (but seemingly unrelated) events, images, and concepts.”²⁰⁸

Of course, one can press the case too strongly. Law and poetry are, in fundamental respects, different spheres of human experience. To insist on a narrowly legalistic understanding of *Venus and Adonis* would violate the normative principles of poetry set forth by Ovid in the epigram cited on the title page of our poem. From a legal perspective, the text is defensible *only because* it can be construed in all kinds of creative ways *other than* the interpretation offered here. Poets themselves must take refuge from censorious authorities in such creative misconstruction. Charged with defending the author from prosecution for treason and saving the honor of the virgin Tudor, any competent lawyer could distract readers with the innocuous and inconclusive interpretations that orthodox scholars have, over the years, proffered to explain this curious and enigmatic creation and “first heir” of Shakespeare’s pen. The first weapon in his arsenal would be the name “William Shakespeare” attached to the poem’s dedicatory epistle.

However compelling a political reading of *Venus and Adonis* can be, it is also important to avoid the repressive reduction of the poem to unidimensional satire. *Venus and Adonis* is not merely a poem that asserts a legal claim—“[t]hou art the next of blood, and ’tis thy right”—in mythic clothing.²⁰⁹ It is also a poem about power, lust, ambition, mourning, irony, and art. As Richard Ohmann reminds us—and the author of *Venus and Adonis*, citing Ovid as his authority, would likely agree—“the function of the poem is precisely to block any overbearing impulse to action, by bringing the ‘appetencies’ into balance. Eliot would put it otherwise, but he and all the rest would agree that the sphere of a poem’s operation is the sensibility, not the will.”²¹⁰

A quotation from one of Edward de Vere’s extant letters, first transcribed by William Plumer Fowler in his magisterial 1986 book, *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford’s Letters*,²¹¹ will bring this investigation to a close: “I hope truth is subject to no prescription, for truth is truth though never so old, and time cannot make that false which once was true”²¹² Lawyers are familiar with a technical meaning of the word “prescription”—as it refers to the legal principle more commonly known as the statute of limitations. Despite the philosophical claim, I would argue that the statute of limitations has run out on the legal function of *Venus and Adonis*. Whatever the author

208. DOEBLER, *supra* note 158, at xiii.

209. VENUS AND ADONIS, *supra* note 64, at line 1184.

210. RICHARD OHMANN, ENGLISH IN AMERICA: A RADICAL VIEW OF THE PROFESSION 72 (1976).

211. WILLIAM PLUMER FOWLER, SHAKESPEARE REVEALED IN OXFORD’S LETTERS (1986).

212. *Id.* at 771.

may have hoped in 1593 for Southampton's future,²¹³ all happy outcomes were terminated when the youth joined the group who took up arms on the streets of London in February 1601 to force their way into the court. Paradoxically, I trust that we may now appreciate the poem's effect on our own sensibilities, enjoy its sly humor, and learn from its wisdom, without fear of being labeled traitors to the Tudor state.

213. The dedication of *Venus and Adonis* refers to Southampton's promise in terms of "the world's hopeful expectation," words echoed in *Sonnet 1*, in which the fair youth is "now the world's fresh ornament / And only herald to the gaudy spring." WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Sonnet 1*.