1. Recent articles by Catherine Belsey, Richard Halpern, and James Schiffer have shifted the critical focus of Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis from questions of what the poem means, to how it means, from its moral allegory to its erotic and literary effects. For Belsey, this transition arose from her sense that readers of Shakespeare's epyllon who seek a "moral center that would furnish the work with a final meaning, a conclusion, a definitive statement" (262) tend to be interpreted by the poem in the very effort made to interpret it. Venus and Adonis. Belsey contends, "prompts in the reader a desire for action it fails to gratify. Meanwhile, the critical tradition in its turn, tantalized by the poem's lack of closure, has sought to make something happen, at least at the thematic level" (262). Likewise, Halpern asserts that "Venus and Adonis is not only a poem about female sexual frustration; it is meant to produce such frustration. Just as Adonis' beauty arouses Venus but refuses to satisfy her, so Shakespeare's poem aims to arouse and frustrate the female reader" (381). Similarly, Schiffer argues that the poem dramatizes a Lacanian conception of desire to the extent that it reveals "desire can never be truly satisfied, because desire is always for absence, for lack, for what is not there" (369).

2. Although I agree that the poem aims to inspire a sense of frustration in its reader through its unrealized promise of satisfying closure, I do not think adequate attention has been paid to the rhetorical and intertextual elements that work to effect a reader's frustration. This paper aims, then, to demonstrate that the poem's frustrating effects are largely a product of its rhetorical design, the fact that a substantial portion of the narrative's comic-tragic trajectory is constructed through patterns of opposition, resolution, and subsequent disunion. Moreover, a closer rhetorical and intertextual analysis of Venus and Adonis reveals that the poem's "erotic ontology" (Halpern 383) does not, as Halpern suggests, restrict its frustrating effects to early modern female readers. Instead, the poem's reversal of gender norms enables a complex and unstable series of identifications that betray any straightforward assertion that a male reader is less likely to sympathize with Venus's cause than is a female reader; or, on the other hand, that a female reader is necessarily prone to identify with Venus over and against Adonis. Indeed, one of the primary effects of the poem's gender reversal is to complicate the process of identification so essential to literary response, making the identificatory process itself an issue for the reader, rather than something operating in terms of gender alone.

3. Part of the complexity involved in how a reader responds to the poem's use of reversals results from the way that Shakespeare organizes the symbolic oppositions through which the text is constructed. S. Clark Hulse understands the iconographic and imagistic oppositions in the poem less in terms of sustained narrative deferral, than as an expression of the poem's mythic and existentially mediating design:

Shakespeare's sophisticated reworking of a literary myth [in Venus and Adonis] comes surprisingly close to recovering the function that Levi-Strauss suggests for primary myth: 'to bridge the gap between conflicting values through a series of mediating devices, each of which generates the next one by a process of opposition and correlation.' (Hulse 172-3, Levi-Strauss 213-23)

For Hulse, "Shakespeare's manner of paradox making has the characteristics of a persistent personal syntax. Indeed, if we think of myth as a conceptual form rather than as a content, we might call it Shakespeare's personal myth, a way of perceiving and reconciling the paradoxes of experience" (173). Although the poem's imagistic and rhetorical design, its "mediating devices" as it were, clearly orbit the mythic concerns of existential and ideological antagonisms, Shakespeare's text makes no claim, as does primary myth, to "explanatory totality" (Levi-Strauss 213-23). Venus and Adonis, in other words, has no pretensions of reconciling "the paradoxes of experience"; it dramatizes such paradoxes and, as Belsey argues, it problematizes certain conflicting values -- but it offers no answers. To this extent, Shakespeare's poem makes explicit what Jacques Derrida sees as the latent unending deferral operating in all mythic structures of thought. For Derrida the themes [in myth] duplicate themselves to infinity. When we think we have disentangled them from each other and can hold them separate, it is only to realize that they are joining together again, in response to the attraction of unforeseen affinities. In consequence, the unity of myth is only tendential and projective; it never reflects a state or moment of the myth (526).

Unlike primary myth, which aims explicitly towards a complete mediation of existential and ideological oppositions, Venus and Adonis purposefully resists the state of closure, the point of full reconciliation of opposites. In this sense, Shakespeare's poem makes dramatically explicit what Derrida locates as an implicit feature of mythic thought in

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4. By choosing the sestina form of Thomas Lodge's epyllion *Scyllaes Metamorphosis* over the heroic couplets of Marlowe's minor epic *Hero and Leander*, [2] Shakespeare is able to create a sense of narrative deferral through the use of repetition offered by the smaller narrative units of the sestain pattern. Indeed, when we compare the opening stanza of *Venus and Adonis* with the opening of Marlowe's poem, for instance, we notice that Shakespeare emphasizes action and movement rather than description and imagistic detail. The sense of movement achieved in the opening of Shakespeare's poem occurs through a series of implied similes that are contiguously linked. Marlowe, on the other hand, begins by describing the Ovidian world of *Hero and Leander*. In particular he draws on the Ovidian ekphrastic tradition in his description of Hero's garments. Such extended detail so early in the poem focuses less on dramatic action than on the narrator's witty rhetorical displays and his capacity for evoking lush visual imagery:

At Sestos, Hero dwelt; Hero the faire . . .
The outside of her garments were of lawne
The lining, purple silke, with guilt starres drawne,
Her wide sleeves greene, and bordered with a grove
Where Venus in her naked glory strove. (7-11)

5. In Shakespeare's poem, however, we get neither extended physical description nor anything approaching narrative aside until the ekphrasis at line 259 when Adonis fails to mount his "trampling courser." Instead, we are immediately presented with Venus' wooing of Adonis through a series of contiguous images that creates tension and movement:

Even as the sun with purple-colored face
Had ta'en last leave of the weeping morn,
Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase;
Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn.
Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
And like a bold-faced suitor 'gins to woo him. (1-6)

These opening six lines present the reader with three movements of pursuit and one clear instance of abandonment. The larger narrative movement of pursuit and abandonment in the poem is thus encapsulated in this opening stanza as the first six lines initiate a movement towards resolution but conclude by simply emphasizing further pursuit. The proleptic image of the sun leaving the "weeping morn" frames both Adonis's and Venus' respective pursuits, establishing the poem's pattern of endless seeking, a pattern which fails to cease even at Adonis' death. In this case the pattern evolves through a series of continguously associated implied similes that develop from the sun and morn to Adonis and the chase, to Venus and her erotic hunt. Shakespeare spends little time describing the mythic world that his characters inhabit; instead, he employs the image of the sun to establish the theme of temporality and the cycle of loss and dissatisfaction to which Venus and Adonis are prisoners. The chiasmus in line four introduces a rhetorical reversal that mirrors the gender reversal of the sexual combatants; such reversals, and the oxymoronic rhetoric they are often figured through, are central to establishing the sense of opposition characteristic of the poem and the subsequent sense of postponement such opposition inspires.

6. From the very beginning of the poem the key axis upon which the narrative moves is not the totalizing motion of metaphor, but a series of delayed and incomplete contiguous or metonymic relationships. The beginning of *Venus and Adonis*, which already alludes to its own unsatisfying end, begins a pattern or cycle of unfulfillment that repeats throughout the text. This repetition of unfulfillment constitutes the narrative's postponement or detour which sustains the sense of tension that is usually accented by the "middle section" of the narrative and then resolved at the end. [3] In *Venus and Adonis*, however, the beginning, middle, and end all play a role in enhancing the sense of postponement and delay. By dividing the first 810 lines of the poem into four narrative movements each constituting (with the exception of the ekphrasis) a pattern of pursuit, ostensible resolution and subsequent opposition, it becomes clear that the poem is experienced as an over-determined series of unresolved patterns of sexual pursuit intertwined with moments of apparent, but finally unrealized union. Lines 1-258 constitute the first main narrative pattern which is followed by the "breeding jennet" episode (259-324). Subsequently, lines 325-545 renew Venus' momentum lost at the end of the first section. This third movement concludes with the kiss at 545, but rather than satiating Venus the kiss leads to yet another intensification of her desire: "Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey/ And glutton like she feeds, yet never filleth" (547-8). This intensification of desire and the unbearable sense of frustration it inspires reaches its climax at the poem's centre when it becomes apparent to the reader, if not to Venus, that "All is imaginary. . . / He will not manage her, although he mount her" (597-8). Venus follows this with an impassioned, if "over-handled," speech that Adonis be ruled by her rather than Cynthia [4] and Cynthia's subordinate, the boar. This takes us up to the tragic movement of the poem which furthers Venus' sense of loss and dissatisfaction through Adonis' death and the eventual "cropping" of the anemone. These larger narrative units within the first section of the poem contain a series of smaller narratives, as well as imagistic and metonymic patterns that develop the pattern of cyclic unfulfillment. Such sequences of images and the intertexts they evoke work in combination to develop the ceaseless detour and postponement of sexual and narrative resolution.

7. Lines 1-254 constitute the first extended narrative pattern of pursuit, imaginary resolution, and subsequent opposition. This narrative segment begins with the opening stanza that initiates Venus' hunt of Adonis and it moves towards the
imaginary resolution of her attempt to "hemm [Adonis] here/ Within the circuit of this ivory pale" (228-9). Venus' desire to imaginatively alter Adonis' perception of the world in her favour is then foiled when the narrator intervenes: "her words are done, her woes the more increasing/ The time is spent, her object will away/ And from her twining arms doth urge releasing" (254-6). Adonis then breaks from her arms and chases after his "trampling courser," allowing the major narrative cycle to repeat while the sub-plot of the horses portrays the quenching of previously thwarted desire. The primary sequence of pursuit and failure is over-determined within this first narrative unit through a series of imagistic and intertextual patterns that repeat the narrative cycle of unfulfillment. Between lines 55-90, for instance, the narration moves from the predatory eagle imagery of stanza 10 to Adonis' coy escape when "her lips were ready for his pay/ He winks, and turns his lips another way" (89-90). This movement away from Venus breaks the ostensible union established through the imaginary "truce" where "one sweet kiss shall pay this comptless debt" (84). This early and failed attempt at seduction initiates a common rhetorical play on paradoxical images that insinuate incommensurability while ostensibly expressing a sense ofensual reciprocity.

8. Although the narrator indicates the possibility of union through the anxiously awaited kiss, his use of market language reveals that such desire is "comptless," hence unpayable. This rhetoric of monetary exchange accentuates the incommensurability between a Goddess and a human; its irony and humour arise through an unlikely figure in which Adonis is presented as infinitely wealthy and Venus as an impoverished investor in the market of love. Although the narration seems to sympathize with Venus to the extent that "she cannot choose but love" while Adonis remains uninterested, the patterning of imagery consistently implies a constitutional sense of dissonance set between them. Line 81, for instance, introduces another proleptic image that looks forward to Venus' lament for Adonis when he is prosopopeically figured by the anemone: "And by her fair immortal hand she swears/ From his soft bosom never to remove" (81-2). This image is reversed at the poem's tragic end when she holds the flower in the "hollow cradle" of her breast. Venus' desire never to be removed from Adonis' breast, and the previous image of Adonis "fastened" in her net, evoke the false, or in Northrop Frye's terms, demonic union [5] of Ovid's "Salamacis and Hermaphrodite." Salamacis, like Venus, grapples her lover/foe as she

[catches] him fast betweene hir armes for ought that he could do
Yea maugre all his wrestling and his struggling to and fro
She held him still, and kissed him a hundred times and mo
And wilde he nilde he with hir handes she toucht his naked breast
And now on this side now on that (for all he did resist
And strive to wrest him from hir gripes) she clung unto him fast
And wound about him like a Snake, which snatched up in hast
And being by the Prince of Birdes borne lightly up aloft
Doth writhe hir selfe about his necke and griping talants off,
And cast hir talie about his wings displayed in the winde.
(Golding trans. 442-52)

The dramatization of this violent union leads up to the poem's tragic finale in which "Salamacis and Hermaphrodite" merge "in one form and face," completing Hermaphrodite's emasculation. The intertextual relationship between Salamacis and Venus is ambiguous at this point because on the one hand Venus is the Goddess of love and thus she offers Adonis the possibility of manhood rather than posing any threat to his masculinity, yet on the other a clear parallel is drawn between her and Salamacis through the similarity of their predatory images. What is unambiguous about the Ovidian intertext at this point is that it indicates a sense of unresolved or at least unsatisfying union. Indeed, Venus and Adonis' relationship is aligned very early on with the negative Ovidian transformations of dissonence and false union rather than narratives which dramatize full reciprocity.

9. If we trace the imagistic patterning of lines 55-90 we notice that they follow our sequence of opposition, imaginary union, and subsequent conflict. In stanza 10 Venus is figured as an "empty eagle" gluttonously feeding on her prey. The final couplet of the stanza plays on the Sisyphian or Tantalean nature of her desire: "Even so she kissed his brow, his cheek, his chin/ And where she ends she doth anew begin" (60). The end couplet of the next stanza momentarily resolves this oppositional image of predatory feeding by representing Venus' imaginary and hypothetical hope for satisfaction. Just as Venus will ostensibly resolve this first major narrative pattern through images of potential reciprocity in which she imagines her body as a park that contains Adonis who is transformed into a deer, she resolves this minor sequence by "Wishing her cheeks were gardens full of flowers/ So they were dewed with [his breath's] distilling showers" (65-6). Here again the imaginary and hypothetical nature of Venus' imagery of reciprocation masks the predatory action which the narration had just presented. In the following stanza the narrator reverses Venus' wish full-filling flower and rain imagery into its dialectical opposite, turning the garden full of flowers into a "river that is rank/ Perforce will force it overflow the bank" (72-3). Thus we move from an image of opposition that the narrator presents in stanza 10, to an image of reciprocation that comes from Venus in the following stanza, back to an image of opposition that reverses Venus' hope for union. The same pattern then repeats over the next two stanzas as lines 73-8 introduce the oppositional colour motif of red and white which is momentarily resolved in the couplet of the following stanza where "one sweet kiss shall pay this comptless debt" (84). The sense of sexual combat and the tension which provokes it is bodied forth through the narrator's heavy use of medial caesura and the repetition of terms such as "still" and "entreats" which overtly express a sense of frustration:
The colour imagery which expresses Adonis' combination of fear and anger recalls us again to a similar passage in Golding's translation of "Salamacis and Hermaphroditus":

This sed, the Nymph did hold hir peace, and therewithall the boy
Waxt red : he wist not what love was : and sure it was a joy
For in his face the color fresh appeared like the same
That is in Apples which doe hang upon the Sunnie side :
Or Ivorie shadowed with a red : or such as is espide
Of white and scarlet colours mixt appearing in the Moone.

(Loim. 400-6)

10. One of the most distinguishing features of Shakespeare's variation on this Ovidian passage results from the metrical patterning of the sixain stanza which naturally lends itself to a closing couplet that develops or reverses the sense of the previous lines. The closing couplet of stanza 13, for instance, plays on the sense of desire's incapacity for fulfillment that closed out the previous stanza with the river imagery. This sense of Venus' instability is then repeated in the following stanza through the trope of the comptless debt. Such imagistic patterning and rhetorical reversals, which are usually accomplished in the final couplet of the sixain, are more fully exploited in Shakespeare than in Ovid. Moreover, within this minor narrative and imagistic unit of lines 55-90 we see that the closing couplets of stanzas 10, 12, 13, and 15 express the constitutional impossibility of Venus satisfying her desire for Adonis, while stanzas 11 and 14 present an imaginary sexual resolution. Shakespeare thus adopts much of Ovid's imagery in order to dramatize the sexual combat between Venus and Adonis at the same time as he exploits a series of rhetorical reversals in order to create the sense of an irreconcilable gap between the characters' perception of one another.

11. Because Venus' sensuality is highly verbal as well as deeply physical, she has far greater success achieving a union of words than of bodies. Her failure to entice Adonis reaches a brief and comic climax in lines 85-9 which completes this minor narrative pattern while developing the water and flood imagery that re-appears when Adonis sets off to meet the boar mid-way through the poem. Line 86 embellishes the flood imagery introduced in the couplet of stanza 11 as Adonis "like a divedapper peering through a wave... ducks as quickly in:/ So offers he to give what she did crave, But when her lips were ready for his pay/ He winks, and turns his lips another way" (86-9). This comic disappearing act is tragically replayed at line 819 as Adonis vanishes in the waves of a "merciless and pitchy night." The flood imagery takes on more profoundly tragic dimensions as the shift in tone from the comic to the mournful is initiated with the image of Adonis being swallowed into the darkness of approaching death:

... after him she darts, as one on shore
Gazing upon a late-embarked friend
Till the wild waves will have him seen no more
Whose ridges with the meeting clouds contend.
So did the merciless and pitchy night
Fold in the object that did feed her sight.
Whereat amazed, as one that unaware
Hath dropped a precious jewel in the flood... (816-34)

The imagery of the rising and devouring waves contending with the limits of sky expresses a sense of tragic foreboding that extends beyond Adonis' particularity. This sense of the world becoming increasingly tragic in tone is realized more fully when Venus bewails the loss of true beauty that dies with Adonis. "Alas, poor world, what treasure hast thou lost/ What face remains alive that's worth the viewing?... The flowers are sweet, their colors fresh and trim./ But true sweet beauty lived and died with him" (1075-80). The patterning of flood imagery embellishes and repeats the cycle of loss and unfulfillment throughout the smaller narrative sequences as well as the larger shift from the comic to the tragic. This pattern overdetermines the profound sense of frustration that Venus eloquently, if unsuccessfully, strives to resolve.

12. The erotic rhetoric intensifies towards the end of the first major narrative pattern (lines 1-258) as Adonis arouses greater and greater frustration in his pursuer. The carnal and even violent crescendo of the narrative at this point is marked by a cyclic movement of metonymic images which propels the sense of narrative and sexual postponement. The sequence of images from lines 240-53 moves through a metonymic logic that concludes as it began, taking us through an imagistic variation of the cyclic pattern of incommensurability, union, and subsequent opposition. These lines immediately follow Venus' wish-fulfilling and imaginary transformation into a park; they begin by reversing the sense of union proposed by the park imagery and then re-introduce it, only to undo it yet again:

At this Adonis smiles as in disdain
For position in the poem:

poem's capacity to titillate readers

misogyny and

rather than the "sophisticated" readers alluded to in the

categorized as the reading

predominantly male, Halpern cites a variety of sources from the period

and male centered vision of Venus'

accounts for

It is the insistent absence of a satisfying male presence in Venus and Adonis, according to Halpern and Schiffer, which accounts for much of the poem's frustrating effect. Halpern reads this absence in the context of the poem's misogynistic and male centered vision of Venus' sexuality. Challenging the assumption that Shakespeare's audience was predominantly male, Halpern cites a variety of sources from the period to show that Venus and Adonis was often characterized as the reading material of "courtiers, lascivious nuns, adulterous housewives, or libidinous young girls" rather than the "sophisticated" readers alluded to in the Ovidian epigraph (377). Halpern's case regarding the poem's misogyny and its intention to frustrate primarily female readers is overstated to the extent that it underestimates the poem's capacity to titillate readers representing any number of gender and sexual differences, as is indicated by Titan's position in the poem:

By this the lovesick queen began to sweat

For where they lay the shadow had forsook them
Shakespeare ends the third sequence (325-545) with a unique and highly ironic variation on Adonis' death, which in
19. The proximity the two achieve in the end of the third section is dramatically undone in the first three stanzas (547-564) of the fourth sequence. In the first of these stanzas the narration repeats three of the main rhetorical images of incommissurability we saw developed in the first sequence between lines 55-90. The first two lines of the stanza return us to the bird of prey motif indicating the unequal and predatory nature of the sexual rapport: “Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey/ And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth” (547-8). The third line repeats the military or combative image of master and slave implicit throughout much of the poem: “Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,” (549). And the fourth line returns us to the rhetoric of monetary exchange: “Paying what ransom / of the fourth sequence. In Book X of Ovid’s Metamorphoses Venus reproaches the fates and then immediately transforms Adonis’ body into an anemone:

She rent her garments. . .  
. . . and springing down  
Reproached the fates: “Even so, not everything  
Shall own your sway. Memorials of my sorrow  
Adonis, shall endure; each passing year  
Your death repeated in the hearts of men  
Shall re-enact my grief and my lament. . . .  
And with these words she sprinkled nectar  
Sweet scented, on his blood, which at the touch  
Swelled up, as on a pond when showers fall. (Melville trans. 724-37) [71]

Shakespeare’s ending is decidedly lacking the theme of resurrection and characteristics that characterizes Ovid’s version, placing in its stead, a continued sense of dissonance:

By this the boy that by her side lay killed  
Was melted like a vapor from her sight  
And in his blood, that on the ground lay spilled,  
A purple flower sprung up, check’red with white,  
Resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood  
Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood.  
Comparing it to her Adonis’ breath,  
And says within her bosom it shall dwell, . . . /  
She crops the stalk, and the breach appears  
Green-dropping sap which she compares to tears. (1165-76)

Some critics, most notably Robert Merrix, have ignored or overlooked the term “crops”, which clearly implies a sense of being “cut short”, in order to read the ending in more Ovidian terms of union and resurrection. Merrix cites lines 1183-5, “Here was thy father’s bed, here in my breast; Thou art next of blood, and ‘tis thy right. Lo in this hollow cradle take thy rest;” in order to show that “[w]ith the transformation of Adonis into the anemone. . . the two composites are united.
21. It is also important to notice that the only line indicating close proximity between the ill-fated two is spoken indirectly by Venus herself, creating a gap between the actual event as it is narrated and her own interpretation of it: "Comparing it to her Adonis' breath, and says within her bosom it shall dwell" (1172). William Keach has noted that the repetition of the word "compares" and the shock of the word "crops" in this final sequence makes it clear that the flower functions prosopopeiatically, rather than indicating the promise of return. Venus, Keach notes, realizes that "Adonis is not reincarnated in the flower. . . . She. . . . 'crops' the stalk and 'compares' . . . the drops of sap to the tears which came to Adonis' eyes (ll. 1175-1176). Venus' realization that the flower is not Adonis contributes to the pathos of her comparisons and, in a sense, mitigates the shock of her 'cropping the flower' (82-83).

22. Part of the narrative dynamic of frustration being played out in this fourth narrative sequence, as well as the poem as a whole, consists of what Catherine Belsey, following Lacan, terms the trompe l'oeil motif. Because the poem constructs what Belsey refers to as a "promise of . . . presence it fails to deliver" (261), it is structurally analogous to the scopic or visual effect known as trompe l'oeil. Just as a visual representation might appear to be the thing-as-such, Shakespeare's poem represents an apparent but finally unrealized union. This withholding of aesthetic fulfillment suggests that the poem is based on an "erotic rather than philosophic ontology" (Halpern 383). Both Halpern and Belsey point to the poem's allusion to Pliny's story of artistic competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, based as it is on the principle of the trompe l'oeil (ll. 601-6), as a lucid example of this erotically charged aesthetic:

Even so poor birds, deceived with painted grapes
Do surfeit by the eye and pine the maw;
Even so she languished in her mishaps
As those poor birds that helpless berries saw.
The warm effects which she in him finds missing
She seeks to kindle with continual kissing. (601-6)

This passage, which occurs directly after the allusion to Tantalus, offers a pictorial analogy for the dynamic of frustrated desire the poem dramatizes. This "pictorial" analogy not only offers a meta-commentary on Venus' unrealized desire, it also reflects the aesthetic ontology with which the reader is engaged. For the reader, like Venus, is tantalized by a promise of narrative and sexual fulfillment that remains unfulfilled. Catherine Belsey summarizes Lacan's insights into the deceitful pleasures this trompe l'oeil dynamic offers a reader or viewer:

In order to enjoy the trompe l'oeil we have to be convinced by it in the first instance and then to shift our gaze so that, seeing the object resolve itself into lines on a canvas, we are no longer convinced; we have to be deceived and then to acknowledge our own deception. (262)

For Lacan, the essence of tragic anagnorisis is the recognition of one's lack-of-being (manque-a-etre). [8] Venus is driven to such a recognition through her failed attempts to have Adonis return her desire. She expresses this negative recognition with a combination of humor and pathos, tragedy and melodrama we have come to expect from Shakespeare's Queen of love. "O, where am I? . . . in earth or heaven/ Or in the ocean drenched, or in the fire?/ What hour is this? or mom or weary even?/ Do I delight to die, or life desire?/ . . ./ O, thou didst kill me, kill me once again!" (492-499). The pun on sexual satisfaction, mixed as it is with cosmological references, expresses a sense of total absence, loss, and lack. Venus' agonized recognition of her emptiness is appropriately expressed as a question, indicating the deep uncertainty she feels as a result of Adonis' refusals. This passage sets up the even more dramatic moment when she falls to the ground with Adonis on top of her only to realize "he will not manage her, although he mount her" (597).

23. Venus' recognition of her lack stems from her perception of Adonis as being full and complete unto himself. This same structural relation exists between the reader of the poem and the text; for just as Venus feels herself absent before a self-sufficient Adonis, the reader experiences a sense of lack in relation to a text that appears complete. Richard Halpern articulates the paradoxical nature of the poem's desire-based ontology by recognizing that

...to reveal [an] image's emptiness is precisely to confirm its power. . . . Indeed, a kind of metamorphic inversion occurs between viewer and object, for the unsatisfied hunger of the birds indicates their own emptiness in relation to the image, which is complete. (383)

This "metamorphic inversion," in which the viewer feels empty in the presence of an object that appears full and self-sufficient, occurs throughout the poem in a number of varying forms. The first instance of this occurs at lines 211-16 when Venus alludes to Pygmalion as she bewails Adonis: "Fie, lifeless picture, cold and senseless stone/ Well-painted namn himself/ When Venus found him..."
idol, image dull and dead./ Statue contenting but the eye alone,/ Thing like a man, but of no woman bred!" (211-14). Here, as in the Pliny allusion, Venus' psychosexual struggle is expressed through an aesthetic analogy in which the object viewed inspires a heightened sense of lack in the viewer. Her object contains "but the eye alone", evoking rather than fulfilling desire. Where the reader is confronted with the fact that "the signifier precisely defers, supplants, relegates the imagined presence it sets out to name" (Belsey Desire 64), Venus is confronted with the fact that her object is unattainable and unrealizable. Venus' growing frustration over this intolerable situation expresses itself through her aggressive and cruel allusion to Adonis' unnatural origins. "Thing like a man, but of no woman bred!" (214). This erotic/aesthetic ontology in which Adonis is full and self-sufficient while Venus languishes in her lack is reversed in lines 235-40 when Venus imagines herself as a park upon which Adonis feeds himself. The fulfillment that Venus seeks thus demands a reversal of the unreciprocal mode of perceiving presented in lines 211-16: in order to achieve a sense of momentary fulfillment she imagines being self-sufficient, full, and generative. The same dynamic occurs even more explicitly at line 370, "Would thou wert as I am, and I a man! My heart all whole as thine, thy heart my wound!" Venus' only power against Adonis' refusals lies in such rhetorical gestures; for as Richard Halpern observes, Venus "must content herself with 'venerian speculation'" (Halpern 380). Halpern, moreover, sees an analogy between Venus' plight and the reader's relation to the text insofar as "[t]he theological gap that separates Venus from the merely mortal Adonis stands in for the ontological gap between the... reader and the empty imaginations generated by the poem" (380). Thus part of the process of reading the poem consists of imaginatively re-enacting or reproducing its dramatization of unfulfilled desire.

24. A further example of the trompe l'oeil dynamic occurs during the ekphrasis, when Adonis' horse is described in complete detail, playing on this ontological relationship between viewer and object:

Look when a painter would surpass the life
In limning out a well proportioned steed
His art with nature's workmanship at strife
As if the dead the living should exceed
So did this horse excel a common one
In shape, in courage, color, pace and bone...
Look what a horse should have he did not lack
Save a proud rider on so proud a back.
(my emphasis 290-300)

The density of this passage lies in its long, careful description of the horse which functions like the close and mimetically accurate brush-strokes of a Renaissance painter filling in every conceivable detail in order to convey a sense of totality and completeness within the image:

Round-hoofed, short-jointed, fetlocks shag and long,
Broad breast, full eye, small head and nostril wide
High crest, short ears, straight legs and passing strong,
Thin mane, thick tail, broad buttock, tender hide. (295-300)

Although some readers may find this passage somewhat tedious, its unusually dense and exaggerated description paradoxically reminds us as viewers that it is description and not real. Shakespeare's description presents a kind of wholeness while at the same time making it clear to a reader that the fullness is an effect and not the thing itself. Passages such as this offer a complex and subtle meta-commentary on the relationship between the reader and the text; for just as the description of the horse is a "full-representation" and not the thing itself, the text is an "unresponsive artwork" intended to "generate some kind of sexual thrill or tension" without being able to actually fulfill the desire it is capable of evoking (Halpern 380). Thus Shakespeare's poem presents an unusual self-awareness of the relationship between the text and the reader, revealing the ways in which the text is the site upon which the reader's own desires are manipulated, frustrated, and enjoyed. As much of the critical history of the poem reveals, it is extraordinarily difficult, perhaps even impossible, to interpret the poem without repeating some of the dramatic motions it represents. [9] To see the text as an allegory against lust is to repeat Adonis' position in the poem; to unabashedly enjoy its erotic and verbal play is to align oneself with Venus; to become frustrated with Adonis' refusals is to take up Titan's place in the poem. Thus the structure of the poem -- with its repetition of ostensible moments of resolution, enticing and humorous rhetorical displays and its highly erotic aesthetic ontology -- opens up an interpretive space that allows a reader to identify his or her own desires within its frame.

Notes

I would like to express my gratitude to Mary Silcox for her insightful comments on various versions of this paper.

2. It is generally understood that Marlowe's poem was written before Shakespeare's and that Shakespeare had some knowledge of it before publication. William Keach notes that "although Marlowe's epyllon was not entered in the Stationers' Register until 28 September 1593, almost five and a half months after Shakespeare's (18 April), and of course not published until 1598, it must have been written by the spring of 1593, since Marlowe was killed at Deptford on 30 May of that year" (85).


4. Goddess of the moon, the hunt, and chastity.

5. The demonic erotic relation, according to Frye, "becomes a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty or frustrates the one who possesses it" (Anatomy 149).


7. Golding's translation follows Ovid in making Venus explicitly responsible for the metamorphosis of Adonis into a flower (848-54).


**Works Cited**

Recent articles by Catherine Belsey, Richard Halpern, and James Schiffer have shifted the critical focus of Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis from questions of what the poem means, to how it means, from its moral allegory to its erotic and literary effects. Although these recent readings have deepened our understanding of how the poem prompts in the reader a desire for action it fails to gratify (Belsey), I do not think adequate attention has been paid to the rhetorical and intertextual elements that give rise to the reader’s experience of frustration. Venus and Adonis, the earliest written of the two (or three) narrative poems of Shakespeare, takes its plot from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, a book which, if not his favorite, certainly held a special place in the young poet’s heart. The story recounts the unrequited love of Venus for Adonis, wherein Venus, not being able to prevent Adonis from going on a hunt, soon hears of him being mortally wounded by a boar. For when Adonis, being pulled away from Venus by the vision of the hunt, says to her: “The sun doth burn my face; I must remove,” we first gain insight to the underlying theme of the poem, t