

## The Influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* upon Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*

Most literary critics and historians of English Renaissance literature agree that the basic story of Shakespeare's epic poem *Venus and Adonis* is drawn from Book Ten of Ovid's first-century Latin narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, namely Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of the text (a book which Shakespeare probably first read as a child). Ovid's version of the legend of Venus and Adonis tells the story of Venus taking Adonis on as her first human lover. The two become romantic companions and hunting partners. The mortal Adonis wishes to hunt dangerous beasts, hence Venus attempts to dissuade him but Adonis ignores Venus and is killed by a bore he is hunting. Shakespeare reworks Ovid's basic story into a poem that is nearly 2,000 lines in length. Shakespeare, however, does not merely adapt Ovid's poem, but instead reworks Ovid's basic story of Venus and Adonis into a far more complicated poem that explores the nature of love and sexual desire from a variety of different perspectives. Shakespeare, interestingly, repositions Venus as the pursuer of Adonis, who is far more interested in hunting than romantic relations. While the poem represents a radical thematic break from Ovid's original poem, Shakespeare nevertheless adheres quite closely to Ovid's own poetic style throughout the poem, as well as Ovid's particular use of setting and general story-structuring. Some critics have argued that Shakespeare's version of *Venus and Adonis* is meant to mock the role of Venus in classical mythology, while others argue that Shakespeare presents Venus and Adonis as being more akin to mother and son than lovers, and that Venus functions as something of a sexually empowered subverter of standard Elizabethan gender and romantic relations.

Christopher Marlowe's poem *Hero and Leander*—which Marlowe developed from Ovid's own version of the legend of Hero and Leander presented in his *Heroides*—is considered by many critics to have been an influence on Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, hence the primary reason the two poems are often studied alongside each other. While Marlowe's poem was published five years after Shakespeare's, it seems quite likely that Shakespeare read an unpublished version of it before writing *Venus and Adonis*. Marlowe's poem presents, like Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, a poetic exploration of love and desire, and it also features a somewhat reluctant male figure and empowered and decidedly sexualized female figure. Some critics and literary historians have speculated that Shakespeare was perhaps engaging in something of a friendly poetic competition with his friend Marlowe and was issuing a response through *Venus and Adonis* to the themes presented in Marlowe's poem by offering a more psychologically complex and overtly sexual exploration of the nature of romantic love and desire. While Marlowe's poem is certainly poetically rich, Shakespeare's poem offers a far more complex and subtle exploration of the nature of love and sexual desire. However, some critics and literary historians argue that Marlowe's poem was written in response to Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and serves to present a purer and more emotional and passionate depiction of youthful love and desire than Shakespeare's poem does.