

The Case Against Binaries: *Venus and Adonis* and the Impracticalities of False Dichotomies

The very title of William Shakespeare's narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* is charged with an idea of twoness: by having two character names as the title, a reader is reminded of *Romeo and Juliet*, perhaps, those star-crossed lovers from opposing families in fair Verona. And for those familiar with mythology, the title brings to mind a similarly opposing ideal: Venus is the goddess of love, feminine and sexual, while Adonis is a male name and, in this poem, an extremely handsome, masculine figure who is preoccupied with hunting. Before even reading a line of verse, readers expect a work featuring two opposing figures. And, on first read, the overwhelming presence of juxtapositions between warring ideals seems to solidify this work as a poem of tragic, fatal differences. Venus, in her divinity and femininity, could never share a mutual love with Adonis, in his fallibility and humanity. And yet, the text on closer examination actively works to blur boundaries and create ambiguities between seeming dichotomies. Adonis, in his humanity, adheres toward strict binaries as we readers might tend to as well. It is Venus who calls for a more nuanced look toward their relationship, one that is not beholden to the false belief that differences necessitate opposition.

In *Venus and Adonis*, the narrator's stance on dismantling binaries must first be understood by examining Adonis's cutting and articulate remark to Venus, regarding her tireless pursuit of him:

Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,
But Lust's effect is tempest after sun;
Love's gentle spring doth always fresh remain,
Lust's winter comes ere summer half be done;
Love surfeits not, Lust like a glutton dies;

Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies (Shakespeare, 799-804).

Adonis does not argue for the benefits and truth in ambiguity; quite the opposite, actually. His claim hinges on a hard and fast separation between bodily lust and a more tempered, emotional sense of love. When love is associated with fair weather and truth, it is good; this is especially true when contrasted with lust as bad, associated with storms and lies. All of Adonis's comparisons are reliant on mutual exclusivity. It can never be both fair and stormy weather; similarly, Venus, according to Adonis, cannot experience both love and lust at the same time. Since she is expressing lust toward him, he claims that she therefore does not love him. This perception is undercut by similar dichotomies throughout the work which conflate, collapse, or mix these seeming oppositions.

This is not to say that Adonis is completely wrong. This paper does not argue for the equivalence of love and lust, nor does it argue that binaries and distinctions should be destroyed entirely. There is simply more nuance than what Adonis claims. In this example, this means that love and lust are not equivalent, but they can coexist within the same person at the same time. And, true, Venus is pursuing him out of lust more than anything; she says as much herself: "Touch but my lips with those fair lips of thine" (Shakespeare, 115). Her goal is physical love, that is to say, lust. Adonis is, by and large, correct in his distinction, and such distinctions are important to make, but his failure lays in his refusal to accept any ambiguity. Just because Venus is pursuing him out of lust does not mean she is solely a lustful being. It does not mean that she cannot provide "comfort" or speak "all truth." His harsh dichotomies leave no room for coexistence between the opposing forces in the text.

It is not just the text, but the reigning historical thought of the time that works against Adonis's perception of lust and love as a strict binary. In the early modern period, the complete

separation between body and emotion was *not* a prevalent train of thought. This kind of separation is exactly what Adonis is claiming when he sets emotional love against bodily lust on two opposing, mutually exclusive ends of a spectrum. One's body and emotions were thought of as linked, one directly causing the other. Humoral theory was widely practiced during the time of this poem's publication. According to humoral theory, an imbalance of emotions would be reflected in an imbalance of biles in one's body. Humoral imbalance was caused by external factors, but was reflected as "a condition of what has become the body itself" (Selleck, 51). For example, an imbalance of the black bile was thought to cause depression and could be caused by heartbreak or distance from a beloved (Akhira, 167). So, it was a circular process; external conditions informed one's emotions, which in turn informed one's physical being and health. The ways ones experienced love could affect one's physical makeup. This is in stark contrast to Adonis's perspective. Adonis's claims that love (of the mind) and lust (of the body) are completely separate imply a complete separation of the body and mind, and it is not unreasonable to presume that many early modern readers of *Venus and Adonis* would have taken Adonis's spirited declaration with a grain of salt.

One of Shakespeare's contemporaries, John Donne, wrote compelling poetry which similarly called for ambiguity and interconnectedness; though the details differ, the heart of his poem "The Ecstasy" dovetails with the heart of *Venus and Adonis*. Donne is known and celebrated for the ways in which he conflates ideas that are seemingly contradictory and unrelated. In "The Ecstasy," Donne writes about a fusion of the body and soul. He describes a charged experience between two lovers, written in the first person, as a spiritually moving experience. Employing religious language in his discussion of a sexual experience, Donne's

reconciliation between sex and spirituality brings together these two generally separate spheres.

He writes,

As our blood labours to beget

Spirits, as like soules as it can,

Because such fingers need to knit

That subtle knot, which makes us man (Donne, 61-64)

The very physical components of life, such as blood, are likened and connected to the lovers' spirits and souls. The oppositions the narrator writes about differ from the ones Adonis presents in *Venus and Adonis*. In "The Ecstasy," body and spirit, while different, are not separate from one another. They fuse together; the lovers' bodily desires and spiritual desires become one. The narrator of Donne's poem finds commonality within seemingly opposing ideas. For Adonis, on the other hand, body and spirit must be separated and conceived of as fundamentally different. And even if bodily lust and spiritual love shared any common ground, the idea of their shared existence within one person (Venus) is clearly a foreign to Adonis in a way it would not have been for many early modern readers.

Adonis's separation of love and lust is certainly a compelling place to begin a discussion on binaries from the poem, but the text itself is rife with dichotomies. When strict dichotomies are presented they are often subversive, advocating for a more flexible interpretation rather than one rooted in mutual exclusivity. One can see this in *Venus and Adonis*'s use of colors, which create a rich interplay between ideas and physical descriptions that speaks against strict binaries. The poem constantly uses red and white in its descriptions, particularly when describing the two main characters. The narrator uses these colors to contrast Adonis and Venus in the following passage:

Still is he sullen, still he lours and frets,
 'Twixt crimson shame and anger ashy-pale:
 Being red, she loves him best; and being white,
 Her best is better'd with a more delight (Shakespeare, 75-78).

For Adonis, the text places him straddling between the two. He is “twixt” the two colors, which reflects his tendency toward an either/or mentality. He operates under mutual exclusivity, and if he is not either of the colors, he certainly cannot be both. Thus, he is between. This contrasts Venus, who is both red and white: the text says, “Being red, she loves him best; and being white...”. She *is* both of these colors at once. The separation exists, but it does not call for binary interpretation. In fact, it calls for exactly the opposite: a way to interpret colors and “opposites” with the possibility of coexistence.

Conceptually, Adonis’s and Venus’s different ideas regarding the opposition between life and death is just as, if not more, compelling than Adonis’s impassioned love versus lust speech. Death and life are *necessarily* opposites and mutually exclusive; one cannot be both dead and alive. At least, this is how Adonis perceives it. At the point in the poem when Adonis wants to go hunting, he tries to convince Venus to release him from her pursuit. He says, “For I have heard [love] is a life in death / That laughs and weeps, and all but with a breath.” (Shakespeare, 413). Adonis understands that life and death are separate. He does not wish to experience death in life and conflate the two, which he believes will happen if he and Venus were to fall in love with one another. This is further proven when one considers that at the time, the word “weep” was often used in a metaphorical sense to describe one’s heart weeping blood, due to emotional distress (OED, 7b). This description of a physical reaction as a response to emotional duress is

exactly the mingling between separate spheres that Adonis wants to avoid. In this instance with Venus, he looks to avoid this mingling altogether by avoiding love entirely.

Venus's response to Adonis's plea is just as telling; Venus herself is the cause of so much of the mingling that Adonis dislikes. Upon his death, it is safe to assume that Adonis would want to be completely, definitely dead. He clearly is someone who does not want ambiguity in his life, so his death would likewise be ideally unambiguous. And yet, Venus does not even allow him a final separation from the living world. As a flower emerges from his remains,

She bows her head, the new-sprung flower to smell,

Comparing it to her Adonis' breath,

And says, within her bosom it shall dwell,

Since he himself is reft from her by death:

She crops the stalk, and in the breach appears

Green dropping sap, which she compares to tears. (Shakespeare, 1171-1176)

Adonis dies, yet his life remains somewhere in the flower. Then, Venus plucks it, killing whatever piece of him was in the flower once again. “[I]t is Venus who has turned Adonis' flesh and blood into a cold and senseless statue, she who has turned life into art” (Kiernan). However, her action of keeping it close to her reflects her valuation of the flower as some kind of living reminder of Adonis. Adonis tried to create neat separations, as humans are wont to do. It takes the goddess Venus to turn these separations upside down and erase them or flip them at her will. Adonis does not want death to interfere with life, but Venus has a different idea. This representation of life and death is remarkably similar to that of love and lust. In both cases, Adonis creates a neat dichotomy. In both cases, Venus forces him and the readers to rethink their valuation of the dichotomy and to understand how two opposing ideals may be able to coexist.

Adonis's life is symbolized and memorialized in that flower. A memorial is meant to surpass death's reach and keep a memory alive indefinitely. Venus both kills and memorializes Adonis and his representation in the flower; she actively undoes all the binaries Adonis so desperately desires.

On a more micro level, the narrator employs oxymorons to create the same effect that the mingling of red and white, as well as love and death, does, but with more subtlety. By writing with these sly, commonly used rhetorical devices, the narrator creates an undercurrent of blurred lines and contradictions; this means the narrator and the text itself is working against Adonis's claims for completely and definitively separate spheres. Describing how she would convince Adonis of her love, Venus says she would sing, "[m]elodious discord, heavenly tune harsh sounding, / Ear's deep-sweet music, and heart's deep-sore wounding" (Shakespeare, 431-432). Describing the same song as simultaneously "melodious" and "harsh sounding" places opposing ideas to coexist not only within the same song, but the same sentence as well. Her two adjectives of choice are indeed opposites. They do not fuse together, a la Donne's conception of physicality and spirituality. However, they both exist at the same time; they are not mutually exclusive. Melodiousness and discord coexist within the same song; love and lust, within Venus; life and death, within Adonis's final moments. Venus embodies and sets into motion these opposing ideals in a way Adonis could never even grasp, which is why she is often the one employing these oxymorons. She herself embodies an oxymoron, muddling contradictions and blurring lines.

Venus is the embodiment of these coexisting opposites, which creates interesting power dynamics. She is both a woman (generally inferior to men) and a goddess (inherently superior to mortals). Adonis, as a mortal man, maintains an interesting relationship with her because of this.

He rejects her advances and spurns her, yet one would think that she maintains an element of power over him as an immortal. However, even this power as a goddess is contested. Eugene Cantelupe argues, “there is very little divinity and even less of mythology about Venus” (Asals, 31). In her dogged pursuit of a young mortal, Venus is seen as an embodiment of lust and not much else. She is reduced to her earthly desires by many readers, despite her immortality. How can Venus be both an embodiment of pure earthly desire as well as maintain her divine nature? The conflation between Venus as a lustful woman and Venus as the goddess of love creates an idea of Venus as an all-encompassing woman; a woman who is many things at once, some of them contradicting. Most compellingly, Venus is described as follows: “She’s Love, she loves, and yet she is not lov’d” (Shakespeare, 610). This convoluted and confusing claim is rich with meaning about Venus and the nature of Love, but this essay is far too short to consider all of these. By being Love, loving, and not being loved, Venus embodies love in different forms, while also simultaneously representing the opposite of love – that is, not being loved. She is the very representation of the coexisting contradictions that Adonis so opposes.

The interpretation of Venus as a dynamic embodiment of coexisting opposites is not ubiquitously accepted among readers and academics. Heather Asals claims that Venus is indeed a woman of many tempers, moving across lines of comedy and tragedy, and she acknowledges the naysayers:

For years critics have been aesthetically troubled by the peculiar combination of comedy and tragedy [in *Venus and Adonis*] ... Venus, by moving from comic to tragic dimensions, gains and grows in stature by the end of the poem, but most readers deny her that stature. Most commentators approach Venus as a static character (Asals, 32).

The argument hinges on Venus being so lustful and sexually aggressive that her aggressions are sometimes relegated to a comedic arena, and many commentators will stop their interpretations there. This essay, as well as Asals's, claims that Venus is far more than just a sexual being. Venus can and does express care for Adonis and grief at his death. Upon his death, Venus begins her mournful monologue saying, "My tongue cannot express my grief for one, / And yet... behold two Adons dead!" (Shakespeare, 1069-1070). She is grief-stricken. Dramatic, yes, but comedic? Not at all. Venus traverses the planes of laughably aggressive lustfulness as well as broken-hearted grief. When she is treated as one-dimensional and static, as Adonis wishes her to be, it strips her of her vitality and being. She is, by her very nature, multi-dimensional and expansive.

Adonis's refusal to accept the togetherness of different, contradicting ideas places him directly at odds with Venus. This creates another layer of contradictions. The immortal woman, Venus, embodies exactly that which the mortal man cannot understand. This is, in and of itself, a dichotomy; Venus and Adonis themselves find themselves as different as Love and Lust. This creates a tragically self-fulfilling prophecy. For Venus, these differences mean little, hence her dogged pursuit of Adonis. But for Adonis, the very reason he is so different from his pursuer is the very reason why any relationship between the two of them would never succeed and why he will never entertain the idea. He stands against mingling opposites, regardless of what Venus says and the poem itself does, and therefore sees no future in which himself and Venus can ever happily coexist. She has no reason not to pursue him; he has every reason to resist. It is their opposing viewpoints on binaries that condemns this love story into a tragedy.

And so, Venus and Adonis will never be together as Venus so wished. Adonis represents humans' tendency toward strict binaries, while Venus and the text itself argue for a richer, more

ambiguous take. Had this method of viewing the world through binaries not been instilled in me as a child, I have a feeling I would have had a much easier time viewing myself as someone who did not adhere to either/ors: just because I was smart did not mean I could not be athletic, just because I was a girl did not mean I had to marry a boy. These structures shaped my childhood and adulthood in ways that held me back. And I do not claim that my personal anecdotes are by any means the best representations of this. Children who do not fit within the gender binary are far more vulnerable to bullying, self-harm, and suicide than children who can find themselves at one pole or the other (Transgender Children). While a comfortable and human tendency, constructing false, harsh binaries creates real difficulties for real people. If people were a little more like Venus, all-encompassing beings who understood themselves and others as many things as once, prejudice might be a little less deep-seated and self-doubt a little less ubiquitous. Binaries and dichotomies are useful in creating a simple understanding of the world, but this understanding is inherently flawed. I would rather raise and teach children to understand the world's complications, although that process may pose its difficulties, than have children believe they are living in a simplified and flawed version of the world which can create such dangerous discomfort and prejudice for those who do not fit into its neat dichotomies.

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