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## The Hermetic Enigma of a Protean Poet: Gnosis and the Puritanical Error in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis

Luke Jennings  
*The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor  
Dr. James Purkis  
*The University of Western Ontario*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a study of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (and by extension *Lucrece*) that builds on Ted Hughes's claim that they function as two halves of a binary whole.<sup>1</sup> Tracing a contrapuntal surface symmetry between the poems, Hughes argues that *Venus and Adonis* encodes the founding myth of Catholicism and *Lucrece* that of Puritanism; the poems together convey the great metaphysical war between these two oppositional forces that so haunted Elizabethan England.<sup>2</sup> Critics have dismissed Shakespeare's mythological references as mere "poet's argot," yet I shall build on Hughes's reading of this 'argot' as "a sacred symbolic language in itself" to show how *Venus and Adonis* embodies a coherent system of signification that encrypts the archetypal conflict, not ultimately between Protestantism and Catholicism, but rather between two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies: on the side of Venus, that of the broadly 'Gnostic' (the highly syncretic, ever-allegorizing, esoteric knowledge-seeking) tradition; and on the side of Adonis, that of the broadly 'Puritan' (the rigidly dogmatic, Protestant Biblical literalist) tradition.<sup>3</sup>

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Venus and Adonis, Gnosticism, Puritanism, Hermeticism, Occultism, Goddess, Allegory, Allegoresis, Ted Hughes

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (Faber, 1992), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, 57.

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## INTRODUCTION

First published in 1593, William Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is an early modern epyllion<sup>4</sup> based on the ancient fable enshrined in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>5</sup> In Ovid's version, which is far shorter than Shakespeare's, Venus, celestial goddess of love, woos Adonis, seasonal-vegetation god of ever-youthful beauty, who requites her love. Despite her protestations, he then goes off to hunt a boar who slays him. While the fable inspired many poets to render it in their own ways, Shakespeare's rendition is exceptional for the alteration he makes to it. Until Shakespeare set his pen to the mythic material, every version of the fable had Adonis reciprocate Venus's romantic solicitations. As S. Clark Hulse writes, "Shakespeare's fundamental alteration of the myth . . . was to make Venus and Adonis antagonists instead of lovers. Precisely what this does is to place them physically in a tableau of conflict and to transform this conflict of action into a conflict of ideas, enacted in a formal debate."<sup>6</sup>

By rendering the ever-youthful beauty that is Adonis a reticent interlocutor who rejects the very goddess of love, and by giving Venus the role of voluble rhetorician who solicits her repressor to no avail, Shakespeare forges a conflict between two irreconcilable tendencies which are, on the surface, most obviously understood in the crude terms of, in Adonis's case, chastity, and in Venus's case, lust. But building on Hulse's observation that Shakespeare transforms the original conflict of the Venus and Adonis fable "into a conflict of ideas, enacted in a formal debate," this thesis will read the poem's antithetical structure forged between Venus and Adonis allegorically in terms of a conflict between two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies.

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<sup>4</sup> A narrative poem stylistically resembling, but notably shorter than, an epic poem.

<sup>5</sup> See Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation of 1567* (Paul Dry Books, 2000), for the version (or one of the versions) which Shakespeare used as a source text.

<sup>6</sup> S. Clark Hulse, "Shakespeare's Myth of Venus and Adonis." *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 211.

I shall call the syncretic Venus tendency ‘Gnostic’ and the recalcitrant Adonis tendency ‘Puritanical’ for reasons explained below.

Fittingly, as might be expected by the poem’s antithetical structure, criticism on *Venus and Adonis* has tended to divide itself between: i) simplistic allegorical and/or moralistic readings (which sympathize with the chaste Adonis),<sup>7</sup> and ii) purely erotic, comic, and/or aesthetic readings (which abject allegorical/moralistic readings and celebrate Venus’s liberating eroticism).<sup>8</sup> Occupying the middle ground are iii) readings which see the poem as intentionally ambivalent (and which celebrate its valorization of irresolvable oppositions).<sup>9</sup> Lu Emily Pearson, herself in the first camp, writes that the “teaching of *Venus and Adonis* is as didactic a piece of work, perhaps, as Shakespeare ever wrote.”<sup>10</sup> She takes the figures at face-value almost to the same extent as the eroticists do: for her, Adonis embodies rational holy love and Venus predatory sensual love, so that “when Adonis is killed beauty is killed, and the world is left in black chaos.”<sup>11</sup> T. W. Baldwin, perhaps too intimately familiar with Neoplatonism, similarly claims that Adonis is simply “Love and Beauty,” and that “when he dies Chaos is come again.”<sup>12</sup> Robert P. Miller, who will read *Venus and Adonis* as a “Christian Mythological Narrative,”<sup>13</sup> takes Venus at face-value as an embodiment of lust when he writes,

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<sup>7</sup> Philip C. Kolin, ed., “Introduction.” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays* (Garland, 1997), 16-18.

<sup>8</sup> Kolin, 18-22.

<sup>9</sup> Kolin, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Lu Emily Pearson, “Shakespeare’s Philosophy of Love,” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 105.

<sup>11</sup> Pearson, 105.

<sup>12</sup> T. W. Baldwin, “The Literary Genetics of Venus and Adonis.” *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare’s Poems and Sonnets* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1950), 1-93.

<sup>13</sup> Robert P. Miller, “The Double Hunt of Love: A Study of Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis as a Christian Mythological Narrative.” *DAI* 14 (Princeton, 1954), 283.

According to Renaissance morality . . . love-making which stresses intercourse for the sake of pleasure only is artificial, a perversion of nature because a misuse of natural functions. This love falls into the old confusion of *utendum* and *fruendum*, use and abuse—a confusion that lies behind much of the persuasive philosophy of the goddess of love throughout *Venus and Adonis*.<sup>14</sup>

In similar fashion, W. R. Streitberger,<sup>15</sup> Franklin M. Dickey,<sup>16</sup> and Don Cameron Allen<sup>17</sup> take the poem at face-value, as it were, and inveigh against Venus but not the poet. Norman Rabkin distinguishes himself from these critics by reserving his indignation for the Venus we are introduced to at the beginning of the poem: the one she becomes is, for him, a moral improvement of the Neoplatonic variety.<sup>18</sup> The poem, said by Gabriel Harvey to please the “younger sort,”<sup>19</sup> is for these critics the one to make the younger sort moral. These critics perceive the poem’s allegorical dimension, but their interpretations, however steeped in Neoplatonic doctrine, fail to account for Venus’s ambivalent, shifting nature and the poem’s juxtaposition between i) the way she is ‘read’ by Adonis (the way she manifests in Adonis’s perceptual field) and ii) the way he is ‘read’ by her (the way he manifests in her perceptual field).

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<sup>14</sup> Robert P. Miller, “Venus, Adonis and the Horses.” *ELH: Journal of English Literary History* 19 (Dec. 1952), 262.

<sup>15</sup> W. R. Streitberger, “Ideal Conduct in Venus and Adonis.” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 171-180.

<sup>16</sup> Franklin M. Dickey, “*Not Wisely but Too Well*”: *Shakespeare’s Love Tragedies* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1957), 46-62.

<sup>17</sup> Don Cameron Allen, “On Venus and Adonis.” *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 100-11.

<sup>18</sup> Norman Rabkin, “Venus and Adonis and the Myth of Love.” *Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare*. Ed. Waldo F. McNeir and Thelma N. Greenfield (Eugene: U of Oregon P, 1966), 20-32; rpt. in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*. New York, Free Press, 1967. 150-64.

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare’s contemporary Gabriel Harvey. Quoted in Coppélia Kahn, “Self and Eros in Venus and Adonis.” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 181.

In the second camp, Rufus Putney would have us isolate the poem's comic dimension, to the extent of neglecting even its erotic one.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to the first camp, Putney perceives Adonis to be "distinctly secondary to Venus and only occasionally appealing."<sup>21</sup> For him, Adonis "is rendered comic by the obtuse view he takes of the passion he has inspired in the goddess, but even more by his petulance and self-pity."<sup>22</sup> Putney, to a limited extent, senses the poet's allegiance to Venus, and anatomizes the poem's comic dimension for us, but denies its erotic and mythic dimensions to the reader's detriment. Though ultimately occupying the middle ground, Kenneth Muir aligns himself with this second camp when he praises the poem's "daring sensuality"<sup>23</sup> and maintains that Shakespeare dramatizes Venus's seduction of Adonis as a means of countering "the effects of Renaissance painting, and of repudiating the denials of the flesh by puritan moralists and Neoplatonic theorists."<sup>24</sup> Tita French Baumlin, herself in the second camp, writes:

Certainly, in terms of the entire poem's erotic language, continually an aspect of the poet's art which readers have often appreciated, there appears an attempt to equal and even exceed Ovid's own mastery of lush, sensuous language. Flesh is a central concern in the poem, particularly its moistness, its texture.<sup>25</sup>

Such critics perceive the poet's allegiance with Venus as well as the poem's repudiation of "puritan moralists," but they overemphasize the poem's erotic surface to the neglect of its

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<sup>20</sup> Rufus Putney, "Venus Agonistes." *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 123-140.

<sup>21</sup> Putney, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Putney, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare the Professional* (Heinemann, 1973), 51.

<sup>24</sup> Muir, *Shakespeare the Professional*, 186.

<sup>25</sup> Tita French Baumlin, "The Birth of the Bard: *Venus and Adonis* and Poetic Apotheosis." *Papers on Language and Literature* 26 (Spring 1990), 199.

allegorical dimension.<sup>26</sup> The more balanced Edward Dowden praises with impassioned enthusiasm Shakespeare's ability to remain "unimpassioned" while coolly canvassing the physical in *Venus and Adonis*.<sup>27</sup> Somewhat in line with Dowden, Maurice Evans notes that the "revival of Platonism in particular had created a new pressure to idealize sexual love and to deplore its animal qualities or at least to make them respectable."<sup>28</sup> Less balanced, but also in line with the poem's repudiation of puritan moralists, Muriel Bradbrook praises the poem as a "justification of the natural and instinctive beauty of the animal world against sour moralists and scurrilous invective, a raising of the animal mask to sentient level, the emancipation of the flesh."<sup>29</sup> Even more heavy-handed, and perhaps even more consistent with the anti-puritanical structure I propose, is Bruce Smith's homoerotic reading. For him, the poem possesses "an erotic allure" for pubescent boys "far stronger than that of heroes or heroines whose gender is certain."<sup>30</sup> He fashions Adonis a Leander, a Hermaphroditus, who "inspire[s] in other men, especially older men, a desire to initiate the youths into maleness, to *incorporate* them, physically, into the male power structure."<sup>31</sup> Also in this camp, Gordon Williams focuses on the "sexual jealousy" of the "Vamp" that is Venus and the "sexual awakening" of Adonis.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Muir, *Shakespeare the Professional*, 186.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Dowden, *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London: Henry S. King, 1875), 51.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Evans, *English Poetry in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1967), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Muriel C. Bradbrook, "The Ovidian Romance." *Shakespeare and Renaissance Poetry: A Study of His Earlier Work in Relation to the Poetry of the Time* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), 70.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), 134.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, 134.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Williams, "The Coming of Age in Shakespeare's Adonis." *Modern Language Review* 78 (Oct. 1983), 775.



Jonathan Bate focuses on the poem's "Sexual Perversity."<sup>33</sup> Richard Halpern and Chantelle Thauvette will even read the poem as "a piece of softcore pornography."<sup>34</sup> None of these readings are invalid; they simply overemphasize one dimension of the poem (its most obvious one) to the neglect of others.

Occupying the 'intentional ambivalence' middle ground, Muir<sup>35</sup> and David Bevington,<sup>36</sup> though aligning themselves to varying degrees with one or the other camp, see straightforward attempts at providing closure unsatisfying. Rather than seeking to resolve its ambiguities, they praise the poem for its valorization of irresolvable oppositions. In "*Venus and Adonis: Comedy or Tragedy?*" Muir writes,

Although an interpretation that seeks to show that Shakespeare was writing a sermon against lust is clearly impossible, it is equally impossible to assume that the poem is a straightforward eulogy of sexual love. Almost everything in the poem appears to be ambivalent. The famous description of Adonis's stallion pursuing the mare can be taken either as an emblem of the naturalness of desire, as Venus herself points out, or as an emblem of uncontrolled desire, or lust, as it frequently was.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Bate, "Sexual Perversity in *Venus and Adonis*." *Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993), 80-92.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Halpern, "'Pining Their Maws': Female Readers and the Erotic Ontology of the Text in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*." *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 377-387; Chantelle Thauvette, "Defining Early Modern Pornography: The Case of *Venus and Adonis*." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 2012), 26-48.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Muir, "*Venus and Adonis: Comedy or Tragedy?*" *Shakespearean Essays. Tennessee Studies in Literature* 2. Eds. Alwin Thaler and Norman Sanders (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1964), 1-13.

<sup>36</sup> David Bevington, ed. *The Poems* (Toronto: Bantam, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Muir, "*Venus and Adonis: Comedy or Tragedy?*", 9.

While aligned with the ‘moralistic’ subset of the first camp, Streitberger’s reading reflects a sensitivity to the poem’s ostensibly disparate dimensions. He writes that while Shakespeare “manages to retain the erotic tone of the genre, he presents on another level an essentially moral struggle, one which his sophisticated readers were unlikely to miss.”<sup>38</sup> And yet his moralist reading takes Venus at face-value as a “moral threat to Adonis” who attempts to “persuade him from the noble to the easy hunt,” that she might “destroy his virtues and make him an unfit gentleman.”<sup>39</sup> While Streitberger’s reading acknowledges the poem’s myriad dimensions, so straightforward a conclusion, I will argue, fails to adequately take into account the competing perspectives (the competing reading methods) represented, respectively, by Venus and Adonis, and the way in which the diametrically opposed epistemologies associated with these two mutually exclusive hermeneutical tendencies clash throughout the poem. A. C. Hamilton comes still closer to capturing the poem’s ostensibly disparate dimensions when he writes that its “juxtaposition of flesh and spirit is too deliberate, too much part of the poem’s wit to be cancelled out by any reduction of Venus to a moral description as lust opposed to love,”<sup>40</sup> adding that the “union in Venus of the ‘marrow burning’ and the ‘spirit all compact of fire’ is essential to the poem’s argument.”<sup>41</sup> He comes close to perceiving the narrator’s allegiance to Venus but ultimately concludes that our response to her “must be ambivalent.”<sup>42</sup> In sum, Muir, Bevington, and Hamilton perceive the poem’s ambivalences and, though aligning themselves to varying degrees with one or the other camp, ultimately pose a devastating challenge to straightforward

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<sup>38</sup> Streitberger, 178.

<sup>39</sup> Streitberger, 177.

<sup>40</sup> A. C. Hamilton, “Venus and Adonis.” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 152.

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, 152.

<sup>42</sup> Hamilton, 154.

attempts i) on the part of the first camp to reduce the poem to a simplistic moralistic or Neoplatonic lesson, and ii) on the part of the second camp to reduce the poem to its comic or erotic dimension. But they satisfy themselves with an unsatisfying conclusion. They neglect to see the poem's consistently reinforced antithetical structure in terms of a conflict between two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies. As I will argue, Adonis consistently 'reads' Venus in a manner expressive of a hermeneutical tendency which is antithetical to the hermeneutical tendency expressed by Venus's manner of reading Adonis. I submit that this consistently reinforced antithetical structure between the way in which the two characters read one another (and the consistently reinforced clash of mutually exclusive epistemologies with which this radical distinction in hermeneutical tendency is inextricable) best explains the poem's ostensibly irresolvable ambivalences which manifest themselves so clearly in the poem's critical divide.

For critics who have contrasted Shakespeare with Spenser, the latter employs Neoplatonic allegory seriously, while the former only employs it to parody or subvert it. For example, opposing herself to Pearson, Ellen April Harwood perceives that while "[s]uch critics [as Pearson] treat Venus as a figure much like Acrasia and assume that Shakespeare views her as Spenser does the mistress of the Bower," the "narrator of Shakespeare's poem pities Venus's plight."<sup>43</sup> Not only this, but "his sympathy for her increases as the poem progresses."<sup>44</sup> Thus, while taking Venus's initial role as "impertinent aggressor" at face-value, rather than as a consequence of how Adonis 'reads' her (which is itself, I will argue, a more compelling reading), Harwood goes on to observe that, even if the narrator so "regards her at first," he "soon sees her

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<sup>43</sup> Ellen April Harwood, "Venus and Adonis: Shakespeare's Critique of Spenser." *The Journal of the University of Rutgers Libraries*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1977), 57.

<sup>44</sup> Harwood, 57.

as Adonis's victim."<sup>45</sup> However, Harwood writes that Shakespeare "adopts Neo-platonic philosophy, as Ovid would, in order to mock mystery."<sup>46</sup> She pithily captures how the poet has Adonis mistake "a traditional emblem of lust [the boar] for love," but concludes it is the poet himself who "shatters the Neo-platonic vision of the one."<sup>47</sup> Contrary to Harwood, I will argue that the goddess of love manifests as she does as a consequence of the way in which Adonis 'reads' her. His reading of her is a 'misreading' according to the opposing hermeneutical tendency, with which, I will argue, Venus and the poet are aligned. I will argue that it is not the poet himself (as Harwood would have it), but rather this 'misreading' of Adonis's that "shatters the Neo-platonic vision of the one"<sup>48</sup>—this 'misreading' of Adonis's that precludes the great consummation between Love and Beauty.

Consistent with my reading that the poem places the blame (for the unconsummated Neoplatonic union) on the repressive Adonis rather than on either an impertinent Venus or (self-reflexively) on a Neoplatonism-subverting narrator, Coppélia Kahn interprets Adonis's "narcissism" to be the problem, but she restricts her interpretation to its psychoanalytic application.<sup>49</sup> Even more to the point (of seeing the poem as holding Adonis, rather than Venus, culpable for the unconsummated Neoplatonic union), Nona Fienberg's feminist reading sees Venus as using "the very rhetorical tools of the patriarchy to subvert its fixed values."<sup>50</sup> According to my reading, it is Adonis's fixed patriarchal values that are the great obstacle to the Neoplatonic union, and it is Venus who is using the patriarchal system's very own language to

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<sup>45</sup> Harwood, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Harwood, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Harwood, 58.

<sup>48</sup> Harwood, 58.

<sup>49</sup> Kahn, 181-202.

<sup>50</sup> Nona Fienberg, "Thematics of Value in Venus and Adonis." *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 250.

subvert its fixed values. Fienberg will, for example, write of lines 547-558 that the “complex mixture of sexual and political language in these stanzas suggests [Venus’s] subversion of patriarchy through parody,”<sup>51</sup> but she restricts her reading to the poem’s political and socio-economic dimensions, to the neglect of its mythic layers.

More recently, Anne Lake Prescott has referred to “our time’s frequently expressed anti-allegorical bias.”<sup>52</sup> She cites Anthony Mortimer’s “distaste for the ‘solemnities of allegory,’” and observes he has “plenty of company.”<sup>53</sup> She defends allegory by noting that “in the right hands” it can “be witty as well as morally astute, just as can an anti-allegory that evokes its conventional other.”<sup>54</sup> She suggests that “[i]n readings of Renaissance texts . . . the equation of allegoresis with moralism or political acquiescence may be a modern prejudice.”<sup>55</sup> Of the original fable’s potentialities she writes the following:

in 1586, William Charke reported in an anti-papist tract that at one time in Orleans an image of Venus lamenting the death of Adonis was venerated by the superstitious in the belief that it showed the Virgin Mary with her dead son, and George Buchanan’s life of Mary Stuart recounts the death of Darnley but then scoffingly, if not altogether logically, calls Bothwell the murderous queen’s ‘faire Adonis.’ Shakespeare was not alone in seeing the story’s comic and ironic possibilities.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Fienberg, 253.

<sup>52</sup> Anne Lake Prescott, “The equinoctial boar: *Venus and Adonis* in Spenser’s garden, Shakespeare’s epyllion, and Richard III’s England.” *Shakespeare and Spenser: Attractive Opposites*. Ed. Julian Lethbridge (Manchester UP, 2008), 169.

<sup>53</sup> Prescott, 168.

<sup>54</sup> Prescott, 169.

<sup>55</sup> Prescott, 168.

<sup>56</sup> Prescott, 173.

Her defense of allegoresis in these ‘prejudicial times’ of ours helps correct the false impression which (according to her) “plenty” of critics have of its potential to yield fruitful readings. Moreover, this confirmation of the original fable’s “comic and ironic possibilities” helps clarify the mythic potentialities latent in the material to which Shakespeare set his pen. But Prescott restricts her allegorical reading to the poet’s exploitation of the original fable as a seasonal-vegetation myth as well as an “explicitly calendrical and astronomical or astrological” one.<sup>57</sup> Her exploration of these layers of the poem gives further confirmation for its concealment of a “meaning denied to the common reader,”<sup>58</sup> as Christopher Butler and Alastair Fowler put it, and her findings are consistent with the antithetical structure I propose: by unveiling, as it were, this sophisticated “astronomical or astrological” layer of the poem, Prescott (building on the work of Butler and Fowler) shows that the poem’s ostensible discrepancy between its purely naturalistic surface and its mythic sub-surface lends itself to the two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies which, according to my reading, are represented, respectively, by the poem’s two characters. However, while she does push her analysis into the metaphysical terrain of astrology, she still restricts her allegorical reading to the more ‘naturalistic’ layers of its mythic dimension (its seasonal-vegetative/astronomical layers). Moreover, without availing herself of the antithetical structure which I propose (one forged between two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies), she is ultimately unable to clarify how the poem’s ostensibly disparate dimensions might be profitably reconciled with one another.

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<sup>57</sup> Prescott, 173.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Butler and Alastair Fowler, “Time-Beguiling Sport: Number Symbolism in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*.” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 157.

As can be seen, the poem has given rise to a series of mutually exclusive readings (or a series of readings that would at least appear to be mutually exclusive). Among the allegorists, there is much talk of Neoplatonism, and among the eroticists, psychoanalysts, and feminists much talk about puritan moralists and subversion of the patriarchy, but little if any clarification of the poem's antithetical structure forged between two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies. In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Ted Hughes, writing in his capacity as a poet rather than as a scholar, perceives this 'thesis-antithesis' structure in *Venus and Adonis* and uses the word "Puritanical" (in highly ahistorical and anachronistic ways, as well as in a neglectfully unqualified manner) to refer to the poem's antithesis (what I am calling the hermeneutical tendency represented by Adonis). Hughes does not consistently apply a single word to the poem's thesis (what I am calling the hermeneutical tendency represented by Venus and the poet), but, for Hughes, this side of the antithetical structure is associated with what he calls "Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism," "Christian Cabalism," "Gnosticism," the "mystery schools," the "secret societies," and pre-Catholic pagan worship of the "perennial Goddess" (and, to a much lesser extent, Catholic preservation of the "perennial Goddess" in the severely stifled form that is the Catholic Mary).<sup>59</sup> Hughes does not frame the poem's antithetical structure in terms of tendencies. Rather, he simplistically refers to Venus's side as that of the "perennial Goddess" and to Adonis's side as that of the "Puritanical Goddess-repressing god."<sup>60</sup> For Hughes, the poem offers a broadly Esoteric (Hermetic, Neoplatonic, Christian Cabalistic, Gnostic, etc.) account of what he calls the Puritanical error. The Puritanical error is to be understood as the Puritan's erroneous anathematization of the invisible world of the unconscious

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<sup>59</sup> See Hughes, Introduction, particularly 33; 348-356.

<sup>60</sup> Hughes, 54-92.

(of which the libido is a crucial subset), and the Puritan's consequent eschewal of the esoteric wisdom that is to be acquired through engagement with it. For Hughes, the Goddess is properly understood as an embodiment of this invisible world and, by extension, the esoteric wisdom that is to be obtained through this broadly 'Gnostic' (esoteric knowledge-seeking) engagement with it. Adonis, who microcosmically embodies man (quite literally, male humanity),<sup>61</sup> is, for the opposing hermeneutical tendency, a potential god; his rejection of the Goddess is his rejection of the esoteric knowledge whereby he might realize his divinity in the here and now. By 'Puritanically' repressing the Goddess, and by anathematizing her into the infernal, animalistic boar (a form in which she may be hunted, rather than 'penetrated'), Adonis ends up being slain by its re-emergence into his consciousness in the infernal, animalistic form to which his 'Puritanical misperception' has reduced it.

Adonis's Phoenician name functions as a play on the Hebrew 'Adonai,' the Lord of the Bible. Adonis also inherits a mythic tradition which holds him to be a 'sun god,' a title which functions as a play on the Christian 'Son of God.' For Hughes, the poet exploits these puns and Adonis's man-god status,<sup>62</sup> as well as the mythographer's syncretic interpretation of i) Adonis as an early incarnation of Christ in the world's great cycle of myths and of ii) Venus (and Mary) as (respectively) one such incarnation among many earlier ones of the perennial Goddess (whose

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<sup>61</sup> I will often use the word *man* in what might be mistaken for neglect of one half of humanity. Not only is the word true to the limitations of the pertinent historical writers but it also pithily captures the fact that Adonis represents not only humanity but specifically male humanity in contradistinction to Venus who represents not only divinity but specifically female divinity. As Puritanism is patriarchal, the Puritan deifies Man but not Woman, and it is this patriarchal Man-deifying Puritan whom (on this reading) the female divinity Venus strives to illuminate through Gnosis.

<sup>62</sup> Hughes, 3-19.



most pertinent incarnation is the Gnostic Sophia)<sup>63</sup> to capture the debate between the broadly ‘Gnostic’ tradition and ‘Puritanism’ in the character’s very being. In Adonis’s own ‘Puritanical’ eyes, man is not a potential Christ; rather, Christ is God, whom he is to worship.<sup>64</sup> In the eyes of the Goddess, who embodies the broadly ‘Gnostic’ tradition, Christ is not the God who created man, but rather a God (a divine state of being) into whom (into which) man might transform himself (through cultivation of occult power via acquisition of esoteric knowledge).<sup>65</sup> For her, then, Adonis is a potential Christ, whose misconception of what he and Christ are precludes his access to the divinity it his birthright to realize.<sup>66</sup> In sum, on Hughes’s reading, the poem is to be understood as cryptically dramatizing—preserving through concealment the key that unlocks the secret to—the archetypal conflict between the i) perennial Goddess of the broadly ‘Gnostic’ tradition, whose most pertinent ‘incarnation’ is the Gnostic Sophia—and one of whose many ‘incarnations’ is the Mary of Catholicism (her most stifled, least ‘Gnostic’ one)<sup>67</sup>—and the ii) Puritanical Goddess-repressing god.<sup>68</sup>

While, on Hughes’s reading, the many different myths of the perennial Goddess are all pertinent, it is the Gnostic Sophia myth that cuts to the heart of the conflict between the i) wicked

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<sup>63</sup> Hughes, 3-19; 33; 348-356; Margaret Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination* (Oxford, 2011), 116.

<sup>64</sup> See *Isaiah 9:6 GNV; John 1:1 GNV; John 10:30 GNV; Colossians 1:9-20 GNV; Colossians 2:8-9 GNV; 1 Timothy 3:16 GNV; Hebrews 1:1-14 GNV; 1 John 5:7 GNV.*

<sup>65</sup> Healy, 25; A. D. Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 4-21. See especially Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Retrieved from eBooks@Adelaide, no pagination) for a Christianized celebration of Gnosis (self-immortalization in the here and now through cultivation of ‘white magic’ occult power and esoteric knowledge obtained by initiation into the [Gnostic] mysteries).

<sup>66</sup> Healy, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Hughes derives this idea of ‘incarnations’ from Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* (Octagon, 1972), whose argument is that there is not a plethora of different goddesses in world mythology, but rather one archetypal Goddess who wears many different masks.

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, 54-92.

Demiurge Jaldabaoth (with which the Gnostic identifies the God of the Hebrew Bible, whom the Puritanical Adonis worships and, in another sense, has become) and the ii) Goddess Sophia who has fallen from the center of the heavenly heights and accidentally given birth to the Demiurge in whose creation she has become imprisoned. In the Gnostic myth, Sophia (the Wisdom of God) seeks to know God objectively when he is in fact (paradoxically) purely subjective. Through this striving for objective knowledge, she gives birth to an illusory conception of God, which morphs into the quite real Jaldabaoth. This Jaldabaoth, an illusory conception of God, vainly pretends to be the one true God. Sophia (like Venus) is a representative of the esoteric wisdom which the Jaldabaoth Demiurge (the Puritanical Adonis) anathematizes. As in the Gnostic Sophia myth, the key to the fallen Goddess's salvation is the "Aeon Jesus" latent in Adonis, and so is the key to his own. This "Aeon Jesus" is the Goddess's Sacred Bridegroom, who was her other half in the very beginning of things. As in the Gnostic Sophia myth, this lesser, illusory deity Jaldabaoth (Jehovah, whom the Puritanical Adonis worships) obfuscates the Puritan's true origins to grant himself ultimate authority as the Almighty God. According to the Gnostic, Adonis has fallen prey to this Jehovan deception: he has been fooled into denying himself the real deity latent within him. It is with this deity (the "Aeon Jesus") which the fallen Goddess is to be reunited, so that the two may return, in matrimonial union, to their divine home. It is Adonis's Puritanical error (his rejection of the Goddess as a diabolical whore, into which Biblical literalism reduces her) that precludes this consummation.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout his introduction, Hughes (again, writing in his capacity as a poet rather than as a scholar) gives crude summaries of historical events. According to Hughes, this encryption method allows the poem to, on one level, function as a commendation of the Protestant Adonis

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<sup>69</sup> Hughes, 33; 348-356.

for rejecting the Great Whore of Babylon (which the Geneva Bible marginalia identifies as the Roman Catholic Church)<sup>70</sup> and on a deeper level function as a broadly ‘Gnostic’ (Esoteric wisdom tradition) account of Puritanism (roughly speaking, a more serious subset of Protestantism).<sup>71</sup> This would have allowed it to circumvent the morally severe Protestant censor John Whitgift and the anti-Catholic Protestant multitudes he would have represented.<sup>72</sup> As Hughes puts it in his crude, anachronistic way, the ‘Puritanical’ force of fundamentalist Christianity snuffed the Gnostic Sophia out in the early centuries A.D. and drove her underground where she has been forced to remain in the elusive form of mystery schools and secret societies up to this very day.<sup>73</sup> The Goddess (the invisible world of the unconscious, of which the libido is a crucial subset), who has been completely eradicated from the ‘Puritanical’ worldview, just barely survived Christianity in the severely stifled, paradoxically anti-‘Gnostic’ form of the Catholic Mary.<sup>74</sup> According to Hughes, the Goddess has three aspects: her heavenly virginal one, her earthly sacred bride one, and her infernal one. For him, the travesty that is Catholicism preserves alone the heavenly virginal aspect of the Goddess to the neglect of her other two. She is therefore a kind of sham Goddess (just as the Biblical Jesus is, for the Gnostic, a sham Christ).

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<sup>70</sup> *Revelation 17 GNV.*

<sup>71</sup> Hughes, 52-57.

<sup>72</sup> Hughes, 52-57. To understand the threat which Puritanism appeared to pose to the broadly ‘Gnostic’ tradition at the time, we need only consider what it must have meant for John Whitgift himself to abhor his more extremist Puritan counterparts. See *The Act Against Puritans* (1593), *35 Elizabeth, Cap. 1. Documents Illustrative of English Church History*. Eds. Henry Gee and William John Hardy (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 492-498; Patrick Collinson, *Richard Bancroft and Elizabethan Anti-Puritanism* (U of Cambridge P, 2013). See also Nuttall’s section “Calvinists and Hermetists,” of Chapter I, *The Alternative Trinity*, 22-41.

<sup>73</sup> Hughes, 3-19; 20-43, specifically 33; 348-356. Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 9-10.

<sup>74</sup> Hughes, 3-19.

Hughes infers Shakespeare to be Catholic, but ultimately argues that, in the poem, the Goddess's Catholic veil is simply another veil beneath her Venal one.<sup>75</sup> Here he equivocates between his own syncretic interpretation of myth and what he infers to be Shakespeare's Catholic beliefs. That is, on one hand he holds the Goddess instantiated in Mary to precede her Marian incarnation in the world's great cycle of myths, while on the other hand he holds Shakespeare to have been a crypto-Catholic. What he ends up doing is making Shakespeare view the Goddess as he (Hughes) views the Goddess while somehow retaining traditional Catholic doctrines such as a belief in eternal hellfire.<sup>76</sup> Hughes also writes a good deal about "Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism" in his introduction, but without sufficiently clarifying the precise extent to which it plays a role in the poem *Venus and Adonis*. He writes about the Gnostic myth of Sophia and relates it in some detail to such plays as *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale*,<sup>77</sup> and in great detail to *The Tempest*,<sup>78</sup> but in little detail to *Venus and Adonis*.<sup>79</sup> Focusing his attention on what he calls the poem's "fixed" allegorical dimension, he also neglects to do the close readings of what he calls the poem's "free" particulars (while acknowledging this neglect), where the "free" particulars are to be understood as the specific, naturalistic, embodied dramatizations, and, as it were, the gory, sweaty instantiations of the abstract universals of the poem's "fixed" allegorical dimension.<sup>80</sup> Notwithstanding these serious confusions and omissions, Hughes's central insight, when clarified, qualified, refined, and actually substantiated through the close readings he neglected to do, may offer a useful framework through which to think about the

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<sup>75</sup> Hughes, Introduction.

<sup>76</sup> Hughes, 64.

<sup>77</sup> Hughes, 344-375.

<sup>78</sup> Hughes, 379-499.

<sup>79</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>80</sup> Hughes, 36.

antithetical structure of the poem which has variously eluded, polarized, and bewildered critics since 1593.<sup>81</sup>

Building on Hughes's central insight, I will argue that the poem's antithetical structure is to be understood in the archetypal terms of two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies (which I shall call 'Gnostic' and 'Puritanical,' respectively), rather than as a conflict to be restricted to two clearly definable, historically contingent systems of thought. Nevertheless, late sixteenth-century England (while endlessly complicated in terms of doctrinal nuance between and amongst individual sects) may be understood, in very broad terms, to be characterized by these two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies. In *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake*, A. D. Nuttall writes of the "simultaneous rise" in the early modern period of

two contradictory pictures of human nature: from magicians, Platonists, and Hermetists came the idea that human potential was limitless: man could ascend into the firmament of knowledge and become divine; from Calvin and the Reformers came the contrary idea that human capacity was zero: man is totally depraved, naturally damned, deprived of all initiative, whether for moral or intellectual good. Each of these ideas is moving rapidly in the sixteenth century. Each is on a collision course with the other. What better place for their encounter than the stage of the Rose Theatre?<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> See Kolin, Introduction.

<sup>82</sup> Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 25.

And when the theatres close down due to a plague, as they did in January of 1593, what better place for this “encounter,” one might ask, than the leaves of *Venus and Adonis*? Nuttall goes on to write that

Calvin notoriously denied human free will through his doctrine of predestination. At the same time he retained the notion that man, for all that he could do nothing but sin, was nevertheless responsible for that sin and justly damnable. The Platonic-Hermetical party of the other hand ascribed to man not just free will but also a kind of super-freedom, a liberty to determine one’s own nature: a doctrine which curiously anticipates twentieth-century Existentialism.<sup>83</sup>

While I would not necessarily argue that Adonis’s viewpoint should be restricted to Calvinism, this formulation of Nuttall’s is helpful in clarifying the antithetical structure which is, in my reading, forged between *Venus and Adonis*. There is no single word which adequately captures either hermeneutical tendency, and there is no one historical movement or system of thought to which either tendency may be restricted. But broadly speaking, the one hermeneutical tendency, that of *Venus*, is the ever-malleable, ever-open, ever-allegorizing, ever-reconciliatory, non-doctrinal tendency exemplified, for instance, by the early modern syncretist who, inspired by the alchemical process of synthesizing ostensibly mutually exclusive antitheses, subscribed to a confluence of such systems of thought as Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Cabalism, and Christianity. Such syncretists who exemplify this tendency take elements of these many ostensibly disparate systems of thought and reject those less amenable to syncretization. Along the spectrum between the *Venus* tendency and the *Adonis* tendency, there will be many syncretists who disagree with one another on precisely what may be allegorized, and what may

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<sup>83</sup> Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 25.

be included in the ideal syncretic fusion. Some, like John Donne, for instance, might accept aspects of Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and Cabalism, but downplay (or outright reject) the overtly Old Testament Jehovah-reducing aspect of Gnosticism.<sup>84</sup> The point is simply that all such syncretists will approximate the Venus tendency more than the Adonis tendency. Moreover, as I will show, Venus will embody an ‘extremist’<sup>85</sup> strain of syncretism whose fusion does in fact involve this overtly Old Testament Jehovah-reducing aspect of Gnosticism. For this reason, I will use the word ‘Gnostic’ to describe her hermeneutical tendency.

Broadly speaking, the other hermeneutical tendency, that of Adonis, is the rigidly fixed, literalistic, dogmatic tendency exemplified, for instance, by a more ‘extremist,’ fundamentalist subset of Protestant Puritanism (or a fundamentalist strain of Calvinism, or a rigidly dogmatic strain of Roman Catholicism, etc.) The Adonis tendency is one that, in the case of the Protestant Puritan of 1593 (who would not have actually called him- or herself a ‘Puritan’), views the Geneva Bible as the one true revelation of the one true God, which is to be read as literally as possible from beginning to end. One is to avoid, wherever possible, imposing one’s personal interpretation onto the text, and one is to eschew any allegorical interpretation when a literalistic alternative is available.<sup>86</sup> One is to believe as many true doctrines and as few false ones as possible, lest one’s heresies betray a counterfeit conversion and land one in the lake of fire.<sup>87</sup> All other religions (including Catholicism and the lukewarm Christianity of the various Protestant sects) lead their believers into eternal torment. All other religious literature, and all extra-biblical fables, are Luciferian deceptions whose only purpose is to deceive would-be saints out of their

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<sup>84</sup> See “John Donne on the Gnostics: sermon preached on Easter Monday, 1622.” Quoted in Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, epigraph.

<sup>85</sup> I use the word ‘extremist’ in an objective sense, rather than a negative one.

<sup>86</sup> *Acts 24:14 GNV; 2 Peter 1:20 GNV.*

<sup>87</sup> *Galatians 5:19-21 GNV.*

heavenly reward through the allure of counterfeit wisdom.<sup>88</sup> The syncretism expressed by the ‘Gnostic’ Venus tendency is itself the great end times deception whereby Satan waters down the truth and overthrows the true and living God’s authority.<sup>89</sup> Individual Protestants (even individual Puritans or individual Calvinists) might disagree with each other on crucial issues, and may themselves be highly adept at allegoresis (may read much of the Bible in allegorical rather than purely literalistic terms). But the point is simply that Protestantism will approximate the Adonis tendency more than it will the Venus tendency, and more serious, ‘fundamentalist’ subsets of Protestantism will approximate the Adonis tendency even more so. I use the word ‘Puritanical’ because, while a given ‘Protestant’ may exemplify the Venus tendency more than the Adonis tendency, it is highly unlikely (if not outright impossible) to imagine a ‘Puritan’ (someone called ‘Puritanical’ by his or her opponents) exemplifying the Venus tendency more than the Adonis tendency.

Overall, while the terms ‘Puritanical’ and ‘Gnostic’ are problematic and rather ahistorical terms to apply to the poem *Venus and Adonis*, I will nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, use the first word, in a somewhat figurative way, to approximate the Adonis tendency (not in an effort to accurately represent it, but in an attempt to capture how the poem views it as being ‘read’ by the opposing tendency), and the second word, figuratively, to approximate the Venus tendency (again, not in an effort to accurately represent it, but in an attempt to capture how the poem views it as being ‘read’ by the opposing tendency). Throughout my reading, I will therefore call Adonis a ‘Puritan’ (and ‘Puritanical’) and Venus a ‘Gnostic’ and refer to these two antithetical forces in what will appear (for someone who has not read this introduction) to be a

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<sup>88</sup> *1 Timothy 1:4 GNV; 1 Timothy 4:7 GNV; 2 Timothy 4:4 GNV; Titus 1:14 GNV; 2 Peter 1:16 GNV.*

<sup>89</sup> *Matthew 24:24 GNV; Revelation GNV* (read as literally as possible).



simplistic manner. If, for example, Adonis happens to be a gross caricature of a ‘Puritanical’ person who would resent that label, this would not render the term ‘Puritan figure’ inapplicable to him (any more than Nathaniel Hawthorne’s gross caricature of ‘Puritans’ in *The Scarlet Letter* would render the term “Puritan figure” inapplicable to them).<sup>90</sup> I will further unpack the difficulties with these words (and make my reasons for using them more explicit) in my opening chapter.

While Katherine Eisaman Maus finds Hughes’s insights helpful in writing her preface for the Norton Shakespeare Anthology’s edition of the poem,<sup>91</sup> and while Philip C. Kolin includes Hughes’s insights in his critical history as a relevant point of contrast for the reader’s consideration,<sup>92</sup> Hughes’s reading of the poem has largely been overlooked.<sup>93</sup> While a surface reading—even a careful surface reading—of the poem might find Hughes’s reading “eccentric” and fruitless, as Anthony Mortimer does,<sup>94</sup> sufficient sympathy with its mythic dimension, supported by adequate background knowledge in the relevant (but now highly arcane) areas in Renaissance Esotericism, may validate its ‘Puritanical-Gnostic hermeneutical tendency’ extension as a fruitful reading model. In *Variable Passions*, Mortimer denigrates the “visionary solemnities” of the allegorists,<sup>95</sup> and provides a close sequential reading of the poem which is designed, in part, to repudiate the practice of allegoresis. But, as I will show, when Mortimer’s

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<sup>90</sup> See Leslie A. Fielder, “Puritanism: The Persistence of a Myth.” *Syracuse Scholar*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Art. 4, Spring, 1984, pp. 1-8; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Penguin, 2015).

<sup>91</sup> Katherine Eisaman Maus, “Venus and Adonis.” *The Norton Shakespeare: Volume I: Early Plays and Poems*. Gen. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. Eds. Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus (Norton, 2008), 629-634.

<sup>92</sup> Kolin, “Introduction,” 8, 40.

<sup>93</sup> Anthony Mortimer, *Variable Passions* (AMS, 2000), 5; Brian Cox, “Review: Shakespeare’s Myth.” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 46, no. 21 (1993), 390-394.

<sup>94</sup> Mortimer, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Mortimer, 57.

close sequential reading is viewed through the ‘Puritanical-Gnostic’ lens Hughes invites, and when this lens is itself bolstered by the illuminating historicist work Margaret Healy has done in *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, it may in fact reconcile the moralist-allegorist camp with the comic-erotic camp, resolve the ostensibly irresolvable oppositions which the ‘intentional ambivalence’ camp valorizes, and actually confute Mortimer’s attempted repudiation of allegoresis. Because this synergistic stone kills, as it were, so many birds at once, my thesis will rely heavily on Mortimer’s close sequential readings and Healy’s historicist work, to the extent that it will even develop a kind of meta-critical aspect, where my reading will, at times, be (for example) as much a reading of Mortimer as it will be of Shakespeare.

Muir thinks “we see everything through Venus’ eyes,”<sup>96</sup> and Hamilton agrees when he observes “Shakespeare’s temptress is the subject through whom we see all the action”<sup>97</sup>—an implausible construal that may explain much of the critical confusion the poem has engendered. Kolin writes that “[o]ne of the continuing problems in interpreting Adonis is identifying the exact epistemological space in which we as readers can know and respond to him,”<sup>98</sup> and the same may certainly be said of Venus. While Mortimer’s close sequential readings allow us to see how and when the poem’s perspectival shifts take place, the ‘Puritanical-Gnostic’ lens I offer via Hughes’s insight provides an epistemological framework through which we might profitably conceptualize *why* and *to what effect* the poem’s shifts take place. Through this synergistic approach, we might respond to the poem’s enigmatic characters in a cohesive manner and further reconcile its ostensibly disparate dimensions. It is with this conciliatory goal in mind that I shall proceed through the poem.

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<sup>96</sup> Muir, “Comedy of Tragedy,” 7.

<sup>97</sup> Hamilton, 148.

<sup>98</sup> Kolin, 38.

In Chapter One, I draw the crucial distinctions between the two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies which, for the sake of simplicity, I am calling ‘Gnostic’ and ‘Puritanical.’ I then unpack the poem’s epigraph as a signature of ‘theosophical elitism.’ Here I will consider evidence that shows contemporaries of Shakespeare engaged in an Esoteric reading method consistent with my allegorical reading of ‘veiled Gnostic wisdom’ in the poem (‘esoteric wisdom’ that was to be ‘veiled’ from ‘common’ eyes; hence the phrase ‘theosophical elitism’). I then provide a survey of evidence of Venus’s (and the poet’s) inversion of Biblical doctrines via their consistent employment of the ‘Gnostic’ law of reversal. In Chapter Two, I provide a close sequential reading of the poem’s first 204 lines via Mortimer’s *Variable Passions* to show how the ‘Puritanical-Gnostic’ structure I propose presents itself, unfolds itself, and reinforces itself sequentially throughout the poem. In my Conclusion, I analyze Adonis’s longest speech to show how the antithetical structure I reveal through my readings is clearly reinforced at the very surface level of the text through the sharp contrast in rhetorical style and linguistic content between the speech of Venus and that of Adonis.

## CHAPTER ONE: PURITANISM VS. GNOSTICISM

Chapter One is divided into three sections. In section one, I give an overview of the poem's antithetical structure. Here I will draw the crucial distinctions between the two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies presented in, and reinforced throughout, the poem. I am calling these two hermeneutical tendencies 'Puritanical' and 'Gnostic,' respectively. Here I will situate my use of these terms with respect to current scholarship on their usage, and further unpack what I mean by them. In section two, I analyze the poem's epigraph, take the hint which it seems to give of a "meaning denied to the common reader,"<sup>99</sup> and show how its suggestion of theosophical elitism gives a strong ground for reading the poem allegorically through the lens of Gnosticism. Here I will argue that the poem's theosophical elitism is consistent with the elitism of the Gnostics which Irenaeus condemns in *Against Heresies*,<sup>100</sup> as well as with the reading practices of such 'Gnostic' initiates as the Renaissance philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, and such contemporaries of Shakespeare as Sir Francis Bacon, Michael Maier, and Henry Reynolds (regarding poetry more broadly), and Abraham Fraunce, George Sandys, and the mythographer Natales Comes (regarding the Venus and Adonis fable in particular). I will also show that 'Gnostic' initiates (Rosicrucians) of the Romantic period read the fable in a manner consistent with my allegorical reading of Shakespeare's version. In section three, I present evidence of Venus's (and the poet's) employment of the Gnostic law of reversal throughout the poem. Here I will show that Venus (and the poet) consistently invert the Biblical literalist's doctrines by directly inverting Biblical doctrines, parables, and injunctions, as well as obliquely echoing Biblical phrases in subversive ways.

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<sup>99</sup> Butler and Fowler, 157.

<sup>100</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*. Ed. Alexander Roberts. Retrieved from [gnosis.org](http://gnosis.org).

*The Poem's Antithetical Structure*

My argument is that the poem's antithetical structure is forged between two mutually exclusive hermeneutical tendencies, rather than two clearly definable systems of thought restricted to a specific historical movement and geographical location. For the sake of simplicity, I have chosen to adopt the rather ahistorical and not entirely accurate labels 'Puritanical' and 'Gnostic' to describe these two hermeneutical tendencies, to capture how each hermeneutical tendency is 'read' by the other. In current scholarship, both terms are highly controversial. I will unpack each word individually before I relate them to each other. I will start with 'Puritanism.'

According to Glenn Miller, attempting to define the word 'Puritan' or 'Puritanism' is "one of the most frustrating tasks in all of scholarship."<sup>101</sup> Ian Hugh Clary observes that "like any other socio-historical phenomena," the terms are "notoriously difficult to define," and "[h]istorians of early modern Britain have long disagreed as to the nature and extent of English Puritanism."<sup>102</sup> John Coffey observes that "[h]istorians have agonized over [the word's] definition."<sup>103</sup> There appears to be no scholarly consensus as to i) how the term is to be properly defined, as to ii) what constitutes a Puritan, as to iii) when Puritanism began, as to iv) when the movement ended (if it ever ended), as to v) whether it is a movement restricted to early modern England or whether the 'Separatists' who fled to America may also be properly called Puritans, as to vi) whether it is to be restricted to a time period stretching (roughly speaking) from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid- or maybe late-seventeenth century, or whether the 'spirit' of

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<sup>101</sup> Glenn Miller, "Puritanism: A Survey," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 27, 3 (Spring, 1972), 170.

<sup>102</sup> Ian Hugh Clary, "Hot Protestants: A Taxonomy of English Puritanism." *PRJ* 2-1 (2010), 41.

<sup>103</sup> John Coffey, "Puritanism, evangelicalism and the evangelical protestant tradition," in Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2008), 255.

‘Puritanism’ may be said to long precede (and long exceed) the sixteenth century historical movement (and still be alive and well today). In “Toward a Definition of ‘Puritan’ and ‘Puritanism’: A Study in Puritan Historiography,” Brian H. Cosby provides a historically rooted definition with which many scholars would disagree, but one which, it seems to me, is (as far as restrictive definitions go) as good as any other:

A ‘Puritan’ was one who, politically, reacted against the *via media* of the Elizabethan Settlement in favour of a more thorough reformation in England; who, socially, promoted evangelism, catechism, and spiritual nourishment through the preaching and teaching of the Bible; who, theologically, held the views of Luther’s doctrine of faith (*sola fide*), Calvin’s doctrine of grace (*sola gratia*), and the Reformers’ doctrine of Scripture (*sola scriptura*); and who, devotionally, strove for personal holiness, a practical faith, communion with God, and the glory of God in all things.<sup>104</sup>

Clary agrees with the fundamentals of Cosby’s definition but disagrees with the particulars: for Clary, Puritans generally subscribed to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith rather than works, but not all Puritans would have simply subscribed to Luther’s doctrine of faith as formulated by Luther, or to Calvin’s doctrine of grace as formulated by Calvin, etc. Clary cautions that the “variegated nature of Puritanism tends to be downplayed as certain works are emphasized to the neglect of others” and that it is “requisite for historians to recognize such popular limitations and strive to move beyond them to seek a definition that accounts for the

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<sup>104</sup> Brian H. Cosby, “Toward a Definition of ‘Puritan’ and ‘Puritanism’: A Study in Puritan Historiography,” *Churchman* 122, 4 (2008), 307.

breadth and diversity of Puritan thought.”<sup>105</sup> Cosby is aware of these difficulties, for he himself cautions:

Mindful of the fact that the Puritans themselves were quite diverse, we would be wise to be more flexible when giving summary definitions, lists of qualifications, and time-frames. May we endeavour to understand these ‘intense Protestants’ for who they really were and not for what the modern world has often portrayed them to be—killjoys, radical oppressors, and sectarian hypocrites—for they were men and women who sought a life of holiness unto their God.<sup>106</sup>

While there seems to be little consensus among scholars of Puritanism about the fine details, there appears to be a consensus (or something like it) that Puritans neither called themselves nor thought of themselves as ‘Puritans.’ Moreover, there was no clearly definable group of people in the sixteenth century who could be said to fit the label. The word ‘Puritan’ was, rather, a slur used to label someone a “bigot, killjoy or extremist.”<sup>107</sup> J. I. Packer argues that the epithet ‘Puritan’ was applied to “five overlapping groups of people: clergy who chafed under the *Prayer Book*; advocates of Presbyterianism; those who practiced Calvinistic piety; doctrinal Calvinists; and gentry who showed public support for the things of God.”<sup>108</sup> Patrick Collinson puts it more straightforwardly: both Anglicans and Puritans are Protestants, but the latter is a “hotter sort of Protestant.”<sup>109</sup> The word ‘Puritan’ was, then, a slur applied to (broadly speaking) serious Protestant Biblical literalists who saw the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of

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<sup>105</sup> Clary, 42.

<sup>106</sup> Cosby, 310.

<sup>107</sup> Coffey, 255.

<sup>108</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990), 35; summarized in Clary, 55.

<sup>109</sup> Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 27.

England as heretical, and who simply sought the freedom to practice their serious form of Christian worship, which they viewed as being true to the (one true) Bible. Because the slur would have been applied to different kinds of believers who may have differed on several crucial questions of doctrine, no one set of beliefs can be ascribed to *every* Puritan. It must be kept in mind that Adonis is one character and not thousands of characters. But, if indeed he is one on whom the slur 'Puritan' or 'Puritanical' might be bestowed by his opponents, it should not be entirely outrageous if I use the Geneva Bible itself (on which the 'Puritan' based all his or her beliefs and practices) to approximate Adonis's hermeneutical tendency. As the 'Puritan' is a serious Protestant (a fundamentalist Biblical literalist, where 'fundamentalist' refers, in objective terms, to adherence to the fundamentals of the Bible, rather than, in negative terms, to a dangerous form of extremism, and where 'literalist' does not wholly exclude a grasp of metaphorical language and allegoresis), it is the Geneva Bible itself, read as literally as possible from beginning to end, which (in 1593) would have served as the closest approximation of what I am calling the 'Puritanical' Adonis tendency. The problems involved in doing so are obvious and I am well aware of them, but so long as it is understood that my citations of the Geneva Bible serve as a very rough approximation of a tendency antithetical to the 'Gnostic' Venus tendency, and that I am citing verses that the 'Puritan' would (or would be likely to) use to defend his or her position (rather than citing them to demonstrate how they must be read), the Geneva Bible itself should serve as a reliable frame of reference. Moreover, as I will show, it is the doctrines, parables, injunctions, and phrases of the Geneva Bible itself that Venus (and the poet) are constantly inverting and subversively echoing throughout the poem. As such, one cannot avoid using the Geneva Bible itself to approximate the perspective that is being challenged by Venus (and the poet).



As for Gnosticism, Steven Davies writes that

Today many people have left the comfort of the churches or synagogues they grew up in and have decided to understand religion for themselves, to be “spiritual” rather than to be part of any organized religion, perhaps to combine ideas from Buddhism and Judaism and Catholicism into a new synthesis that they create themselves. In ancient times, mainly in the first through the fourth centuries, religious thinkers of this sort were called “Gnostics.”<sup>110</sup>

He goes on to write that

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul (now Lyon, France) wrote a long savage attack against the Gnostics entitled “The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge (Gnosis) Falsely So Called,” in which he says angrily that “since their teachings and traditions are different, and the newer ones among them claim to be constantly finding something new, and working out what no one ever thought of before, it is hard to describe their views.” Irenaeus was certainly right about that.<sup>111</sup>

In *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Michael A. Williams argues that because the ancient Gnostic writers came up with so many different variations on their own thought, because they syncretized so many ostensibly disparate philosophical systems and synthesized so much ostensibly irreconcilable mythic material, and because the term has subsequently attracted so many diverse meanings and interpretations, the

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<sup>110</sup> Steven Davies, “Gnosticism.” *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, no pagination.

<sup>111</sup> Davies, no pagination.

word has ceased to be useful.<sup>112</sup> And yet it is precisely this ever-malleable, highly syncretic, and therefore ever-elusive aspect of Gnosticism that makes it the best word to describe the Venus tendency. Moreover, the chief characteristics common among all the ostensibly disparate systems developed by the Gnostics are, I will argue, shared by the tendency expressed by Venus. Regarding all these ostensibly disparate systems developed by the ‘Gnostics’ (not all of whom would have called themselves Gnostics, and many of whom would have resented the label as a slur), Robert Mc L. Wilson writes that

The chief characteristics common to all the developed systems are: (1) a radical cosmic dualism that rejects this world and all that belongs to it: the body is a prison from which the soul longs to escape; (2) a distinction between the unknown transcendent true God and the creator or Demiurge, commonly identified with the God of the Hebrew Bible; (3) the belief that the human race is essentially akin to the divine, being a spark of heavenly light imprisoned in a material body; (4) a myth, often narrating a premundane fall, to account for the present human predicament; and (5) the saving knowledge by which deliverance is effected and the gnostic awakened to recognition of his or her true nature and heavenly origin.<sup>113</sup>

A. D. Nuttall writes that the “idea that the power which made the world is wicked, not good, is the central proposition of Gnosticism.”<sup>114</sup> Needless to say, this view is diametrically opposed to the ‘Puritanical’ view that the power which made the world (the triune God of the Geneva Bible)

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<sup>112</sup> Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton UP, 1999).

<sup>113</sup> Robert Mc L. Wilson, “Gnosticism.” *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, no pagination.

<sup>114</sup> Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 7.

alone is good.<sup>115</sup> For the ‘Puritan,’ Jesus Christ is the God of the Hebrew Bible made flesh, for he is the Word of God (who was God in the very beginning), through whom everything was created;<sup>116</sup> for the ‘Gnostic,’ as Wilson’s definition shows, the God of the Hebrew Bible is a lesser deity, a wicked Demiurge who has trapped us in matter. A popular misunderstanding is that orthodox Christianity sees Jesus Christ and the Jehovah of the Hebrew Old Testament as vastly different Gods. This is actually a classic Gnostic formulation of the trinity. Nuttall writes that in “orthodox Christianity the Trinity is a happy family; the Father and the Son get on well, see things from the same ethical point of view. For the Ophites the Trinity is a dysfunctional family; the Son is the antagonist of the Father.”<sup>117</sup> Nuttall writes that the word ‘Gnosticism’ is “derived from the Greek *gnosis*, which means ‘knowledge.’”<sup>118</sup> The broadly ‘Gnostic’ tradition views salvation as being contingent upon acquisition of esoteric knowledge that is to be obtained through engagement with the invisible world. Conversely, the ‘Puritan’ tradition anathematizes both the invisible world and *gnosis* (‘science falsely so called’) and subscribes to a doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. Specific subsets of Gnosticism, such as the Ophites, even saw the serpent in the Garden of Eden as humanity’s saviour. The eighteenth century German Lutheran Church historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim writes that the Ophites believed “the *serpent* by which our first parents were deceived, was either CHRIST himself or *sophia* [wisdom], concealed under the form of that animal.”<sup>119</sup> As Nuttall summarizes the view, “The serpent leads

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<sup>115</sup> *Matthew 19:17 GNV; Mark 10:18 GNV; Luke 18:19 GNV.*

<sup>116</sup> *Isaiah 9:6 GNV; John 1:1 GNV; John 8:24 GNV; John 8:28 GNV John 9:9 GNV; John 13:19 GNV; John 18:5-8 GNV; Romans 1:20 GNV; Colossians 2:9 GNV; 1 John 5:7 GNV.*

<sup>117</sup> Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (Yale UP, 2008), 264.

<sup>118</sup> Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 7.

<sup>119</sup> Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History Antient and Modern from the Birth of Christ to the Beginning of the Present Century*, trans. Archibald Maclaine, 5 vols. (London: printed for A. Millar, 1758-68), vol. 1, 190.

us to *gnosis* and is therefore good.”<sup>120</sup> Needless to say, this Gnostic view is diametrically opposed to the ‘Puritanical’ view that the serpent is to be identified with Satan, man’s perennial adversary.<sup>121</sup>

I am not entirely alone in arguing for Gnosticism in Shakespeare. In *The Alternative Trinity*, Nuttall argues that Gnosticism is to be found in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and William Blake’s poetry, and in *Shakespeare the Thinker*, Nuttall argues that the “preliminary structure” of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* is “Ophite Gnostic in its readiness to merge the Devil with Christ.”<sup>122</sup> He argues that there “is no great problem . . . in supposing that [Shakespeare] could have known something of the Gnostics.”<sup>123</sup> He observes that, for example, Marlowe “knew the (pseudo-)Clementine *Recognitions*, which contains some vertiginous Gnostic material.”<sup>124</sup> Harold Bloom, who has referred to himself as a Gnostic,<sup>125</sup> sees Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as being “set in a Gnostic cosmos,” but he qualifies this claim by adding that “Shakespeare’s own vision is,” however, “by no means Gnostic in spirit.”<sup>126</sup> Perhaps equally surprising, in *The Gnostic Paradigm: Forms of Knowing in English Literature of the Middle Ages*, Natanela Elias argues that the *Pearl* poet, William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, while ostensibly orthodox, all contain unorthodox elements of Gnosticism beneath the surface.<sup>127</sup> A vast number of Shakespeare’s contemporaries have been

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<sup>120</sup> Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 11.

<sup>121</sup> *Revelation 12:9 GNV; Revelation 20:2 GNV.*

<sup>122</sup> Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, 274.

<sup>123</sup> Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, 274.

<sup>124</sup> Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, 274.

<sup>125</sup> David Mikics, “Harold Bloom is God.” *The Tablet Mag.* January 2, 2013.

<sup>126</sup> Harold Bloom, “Harold Bloom on Macbeth’s Gnosticism.” *Shakespeare’s Tragedies*. Ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, 2000), 89.

<sup>127</sup> Natanela Elias, *The Gnostic Paradigm: Forms of Knowing in English Literature of the Middle Ages*. 1st Ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

identified with the more broadly ‘Gnostic’ (esoteric knowledge-seeking) tradition, and some with the explicitly Old Testament Jehovah-reducing, man-deifying aspect of Gnosticism. For example, in *Gnostic Apocalypse: Jacob Boehme’s Haunted Narrative*, Cyril O’Regan argues that the visionary discourse of Shakespeare’s contemporary Jacob Boehme, though outwardly Lutheran, ultimately represented a return to Gnosticism.<sup>128</sup> Shakespeare’s contemporary Cornelius Agrippa wrote of transforming himself, through occult power that was itself to be cultivated through acquisition of esoteric knowledge, “into that image which is God.”<sup>129</sup> Nuttall writes of Agrippa’s “linking of the notions of humanity and divine sonship, not according to the orthodox theology of incarnation but in the oblique, disturbing manner of the Gnostics.”<sup>130</sup> Nuttall adds, “[y]et all these Renaissance figures thought of themselves as Christians.”<sup>131</sup> None of these scholars is unaware of the fact that such applications of the term ‘Gnostic’ are anachronistic and deeply surprising; they all sympathize with their readers who find their suggestions radical. But the claim is simply that, just as there was a return to Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and Cabalism in the early modern period, so too was there such a return to Gnosticism (as there was in the Medieval and Romantic periods).

The term ‘Gnosticism’ straightforwardly captures Venus’s Sophianic status (her status as the Gnostic Sophia), as well as the broader hermeneutical ‘Venus’ tendency exemplified by those early modern syncretists who subscribed to a confluence of Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Cabalism, and Christianity which, as Hughes discusses and as Margaret Healy so

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<sup>128</sup> Cyril O’Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse: Jacob Boehme’s Haunted Narrative* (State U of New York P, 2002).

<sup>129</sup> Cornelius Agrippa, *Opera*, facsimile reprint of 1600 edn., ed. R. H. Popkin, 2 cols., (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1970), vol. 1, 321 and 408.

<sup>130</sup> Nuttall, 28.

<sup>131</sup> Nuttall, 28.

thoroughly illuminates in her pioneering study, exerted an inestimable (albeit elusive) influence upon the early modern period as a whole, and on early modern poetry in particular. As I will argue, Venus is a Hermeticist in that she, like the spiritual alchemist inspired by the Hermetic Corpus, is intent on synthesizing all ostensibly mutually exclusive antitheses (including humanity with divinity, masculinity with femininity, Protestantism with Catholicism, ‘Biblical’ Christianity with Neoplatonism, Cabalism, Gnosticism, etc.)<sup>132</sup> She is a Neoplatonist in that she, in her capacity as the Neoplatonic Form of Love, seeks to acquire Divine Truth through the Neoplatonic Form of Beauty that is Adonis.<sup>133</sup> She is a Cabalist in that she, like the early modern Christian cabalists, allegorizes—rather than literalizes—the surface text of the Bible, as is evidenced by the way she inverts the Biblical literalist’s doctrines.<sup>134</sup> She is the Goddess Sophia in that, just as in the Gnostic Sophia myth, she has fallen, through a mysterious intellectual error of her own, from heaven (in the Gnostic myth, from the Pleromatic center of the heavenly heights)<sup>135</sup> to give birth (and in a sense become) the reality in which we dwell.<sup>136</sup> In the process she gives birth to her son Jaldabaoth (the demiurge whom the Puritanical Adonis worships and with whom he is in another sense identical) by whom she is rejected and in whose false reality

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<sup>132</sup> Healy, 51; see also 13, 18, 26, 33, 37, 126, 148, 155, 169, 196, 201-202.

<sup>133</sup> Healy, 5, 8, 10-11, 25, 26, 28, 125, 126, 154, 171, 198.

<sup>134</sup> Healy, 19-20, 26, 33, 202.

<sup>135</sup> In “Gnosticism,” Davies describes the Pleroma as “conceptual and therefore below the level of the indescribable God.” Sophia’s error is that she (the Wisdom of God) “seeks to know God objectively,” when “God is purely subjective. God’s Wisdom imagines God and, although an imaginary God is unreal, it yet takes on a kind of inferior illusory being of its own outside of God’s realm. This lower god has the name Yaldabaoth [or Ialdabaoth or Jaldabaoth] and is to be identified with Yahweh [or Jehovah] of the Hebrew Bible.” This wicked demiurge who traps the divine spark of humanity in gross matter “makes the human being ignorant of its origins. But the divine mind sends down a messenger (Jesus, in the Christian version of the tale) to give human beings true “gnosis” by which they can go back to the perfect divine realm.”

<sup>136</sup> Hughes, 348-356; Irenaeus, Ch. III.i., no pagination.

she becomes ‘imprisoned’ and reduced to a love-sick mortal.<sup>137</sup> As in the Gnostic Sophia myth, Venus must be reunited with the “Aeon Jesus” (the divine revealer and consummator of Gnosis) that is her Sacred Bridegroom (that was her other half in the very beginning of things).<sup>138</sup> He is to emerge out of the false reality to which she has given birth and rescue her from it.<sup>139</sup> This “Aeon Jesus” is latent in Adonis and is the key to her rescue, but because he has devolved through Puritanism into the Jaldabaoth demiurge, he misperceives her, rejects her, and reduces the Goddess that she is into a diabolical whore as Biblical literalism has done.<sup>140</sup>

Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*, a text which would have been available to Shakespeare, thoroughly reveals to us a Church Father’s view of Gnosticism. It provides a detailed account of the Gnostic Sophia myth (as viewed through Irenaeus’s ‘Puritanical’ perception). The Puritanical Adonis, in line with Irenaeus, perceives this Gnostic myth to be a Luciferian lie. For him, Sophia is really Lucifer who fell from heaven.<sup>141</sup> She is not the mother of a wicked demiurge. Rather, she is a creation of the true and living God, who cast her out of heaven for rebelling against him. She deceives her followers into turning the world upside down so that she may be viewed as the mother of—and therefore as higher than—the most High God. The Puritan’s perception of Sophia’s offer of Gnosis (ascension into divinity through esoteric knowledge in the here and now) is captured in the poem by the “curious mixture” of “forbidden knowledge” (“A thousand

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<sup>137</sup> Hughes, 348-356; Davies, “Gnosticism”; Irenaeus.

<sup>138</sup> Hughes, 348-356; Davies, “Gnosticism”; Irenaeus. *Aeon* is a word Gnostics use to refer to deities such as Sophia. Hughes calls this “Aeon Jesus” (which he writes as “Aion Jesus”) the “antithesis of Jaldabaoth”—a “spiritual angelic brother of the material titanic daemon” who “rescues her, lifts her out of her debasement among the demons [of the world of suffering into which she has fallen (and accidentally created)] and becomes her ‘Sacred Bridegroom,’ both together marrying into a reunion with the Divine Fullness of Heaven,” 352.

<sup>139</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>140</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>141</sup> *Isaiah 12:12-14 GNV*.

honey secrets shalt thou know,” 16) and “prelapsarian innocence” (“Here come and sit where never serpent hisses,” 17),<sup>142</sup> which Venus promises Adonis—that same “curious mixture” which, according to the Puritanical Adonis, was offered by the serpent to Eve in the Garden of Eden.<sup>143</sup> Crucial to this distinction between Puritanism and Gnosticism is the fact that, on Puritanism, Man alone is deified, while on Gnosticism, the Goddess Sophia is superior to the Goddess-eschewing, Man-deifying Demiurge of the Hebrew Bible.

With these antithetical distinctions in mind, let us now turn to the poem’s epigraph.

*The Epigraph as a Signature of Theosophical Elitism*

The poem’s epigraph corroborates Healy’s perception of “theosophical elitism” in the Shakespearean corpus,<sup>144</sup> and offers a strong ground for reading *Venus and Adonis* allegorically through the lens of Gnosticism: it quotes, in the original Latin, 1.15.35-36 of Ovid’s *Amores*, the first clause of which reads something like, “Let the vulgar throng admire vile things.” In “Time Beguiling Sport: Number Symbolism in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*,” Christopher Butler and Alastair Fowler write that

Numerological patterns are not perhaps so contrary to expectation in the works of a Benlowes, a Spenser, or even a Milton; but the current conception of Shakespeare does not encourage us to look for esoteric structures in his poetry. And yet, doesn’t his Ovidian epigraph hint at the possibility of a meaning denied to the common reader?<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Mortimer, 45.

<sup>143</sup> *Genesis 3:5 GNV*.

<sup>144</sup> Healy 9, 54.

<sup>145</sup> Butler and Fowler, 157.



Hamilton observes that in the *Countess of Pembroke's Iuychurch* (1592), Shakespeare's contemporary Abraham Fraunce "translates certain Ovidian myths and adds philosophical explications, for he believed, in common with his age, that poetry is radically allegorical."<sup>146</sup> In his discussion of poetry, Fraunce classifies readers into three groups. He distinguishes those who are i) "but of a meane conceit," whose "rurall humor" may be fed by "a pleasant and plausible narration . . . set forth in most sweete and delightsome verse," from ii) those "whose capacitie is such" that "they can reach somewhat further then the external discourse and history" to "finde a morall sence included therein."<sup>147</sup> He further distinguishes these two groups from the iii) "rest, that are better borne and of a more noble spirit," who "shall meete with hidden mysteries of naturall, astrological, or diuine and metaphysicall philosophie, to entertaine their heauenly speculation."<sup>148</sup> While Healy's pioneering study is supported by the work of such intellectual historians as Paolo Rossi, Charles Webster, and Allen G. Debus,<sup>149</sup> and such early modern literature scholars as Alastair Fowler, Lyndy Abraham, Charles Nicholl, Stanton J. Linden, and John S. Melbane,<sup>150</sup> and has been rather favorably reviewed by such scholars as Catherine

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<sup>146</sup> Hamilton, 145.

<sup>147</sup> Hamilton, 146.

<sup>148</sup> Hamilton, 146. Quoting Abraham Fraunce, *Countess of Pembroke's Iuychurch* (1592).

<sup>149</sup> See Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1620-1660* (London: Duckworth, 1975) and Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge UP, 1982); Paolo Rossi, 'Hermeticism, Rationality and the Scientific Revolution,' in M. L. Bonelli and William R. Shea (eds.), *Reason, Experiment and Mysticism in the Scientific Revolution* (Macmillan, 1975), pp. 247-275 and Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (Routledge, 1968); Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe* (Folger Library and Associated UPs, 1998) and Allen G. Debus and Michael T. Walton, *Reading the Book of Nature: The Other Side of the Scientific Revolution* (Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1998).

<sup>150</sup> See Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge UP, 2010); Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge UP, 1998); Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990); Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Stanton J. Linden, *Darke*

Gimelli Martin and John Slater,<sup>151</sup> such lines of inquiry as her work represents have been largely overlooked by academic Shakespeareans. In her review of Healy's pioneering study, Katherine Duncan-Jones identifies shortcomings in Healy's work at the level of fine detail, but betrays her own short-sightedness when she writes that it is "hard to see why a writer always admired for his naturalism as a playwright should decide to attempt such learned, dark and complex allegorical modes as are proposed here."<sup>152</sup> Maurice Evans notes that the "Elizabethans were more flexible readers than we are, able to accept simultaneously, and yet enjoy separately, the levels of allegorical myth and naturalistic narrative."<sup>153</sup> Healy is well aware of the naturalistic dimension of Shakespeare's work and concurs with Evans when she writes that, "where we . . . find troubling divisions and incompatible binaries, Shakespeare's 'private friends' . . . undoubtedly encountered productive fusion."<sup>154</sup> It is only fitting, then, that in the *Countess*, Fraunce "translates Ovid's story of Venus and Adonis in highly erotic terms, and appends, without any sense of incongruity, a highly philosophical explication."<sup>155</sup> Fraunce writes:

By *Adonis*, is meant the sunne, by *Venus*, the vpper hemisphere of the earth (as by

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*Hieroglyphicks* (Kentucky: The UP of Kentucky, 1996); Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader*; Linden, ed., *Mystical Metal of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture* (New York: AMS Press, 2007); John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1989).

<sup>151</sup> Catherine Gimelli Martin, "Review of *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and A Lovers Complaint – By Margaret Healy*," *Isis*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (Sept 2012), 577; John Slater, "Review of *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and A Lovers Complaint – By Margaret Healy*," *Ambix*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (July, 2012), 175-176.

<sup>152</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Review of *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and A Lovers Complaint – By Margaret Healy*," *Renaissance Studies*. Vol. 26, Iss. 5 (Nov 2012), 771.

<sup>153</sup> Maurice Evans, "Introduction: Venus and Adonis." *William Shakespeare: The Narrative Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 5-6.

<sup>154</sup> Healy, 9.

<sup>155</sup> Hamilton, 145.

*Proserpina* the lower); by the boare, winter: by the death of *Adonis*, the absence of the sunne for the sixe wintrie moneths; all which time, the earth lamenteth: *Adonis* is wounded in those parts, which are the instruments of propagation: for, in winter the son seemeth impotent, and the earth barren: neither that being able to get, nor this to beare either fruite or flowres: and therefore *Venus* sits, lamentably hanging downe her head, leaning on her left hand, her garments all ouer her face.<sup>156</sup>

As Hamilton notes, the “potentialities of the Venus-Adonis myth, as Shakespeare inherited it, were enormous: possibly, a naive literalism; perhaps, but not likely with this myth, a moral significance; and most likely, what Fraunce calls the ‘hidden mysteries of naturall . . . philosophie.’”<sup>157</sup> Hamilton concludes: “That Shakespeare shared Fraunce’s belief that poetry treats the ‘hidden mysteries of naturall . . . philosophie’ is suggested by his choice of the Venus-Adonis myth, and also by the Ovidian motto so daringly placed on the title-page of his poem.”<sup>158</sup>

George Sandys, another contemporary of Shakespeare’s, provides a comparable commentary on the tenth book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which Butler and Fowler call a “popular statement” on the matter,<sup>159</sup> which further gives support for the early modern period’s predilection for ‘radical’ allegoresis in general and its allegorical treatment of the fable in particular.<sup>160</sup> Muriel Bradbrook further reveals that a year before Shakespeare would dedicate *Venus and Adonis* to Henry Wriothesley, John Clapham would dedicate to the same patron an allegorical poem entitled *Narcissus*, written in Latin, upon which Shakespeare’s *Venus and*

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<sup>156</sup> Hamilton, 146. Quoting Abraham Fraunce, *Countess of Pembroke’s Iuychurch* (1592).

<sup>157</sup> Hamilton, 146.

<sup>158</sup> Hamilton, 147.

<sup>159</sup> Butler and Fowler, 158.

<sup>160</sup> George Sandys, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Englished Mythologiz’d and Represented in Figures* by G. S. (Oxford, 1632), pp. 366-67.

*Adonis* is modelled, a poem which, it might be observed, reads like the inverted allegorical sketch for Shakespeare's version, in which all the same central elements are to be found, but where Adonis (called Narcissus) ends up being pitched into a pool called Self-Love, and where the horse is even called Lust.<sup>161</sup> Moreover, Harwood cites Natales Comes<sup>162</sup> as Spenser's "favourite mythographer" (from whose *Faerie Queene*, in turn, she argues Shakespeare drew inspiration for his *Venus and Adonis*).<sup>163</sup> Comes's influence touched not only poets but also such philosophers as Sir Francis Bacon, as is evidenced in Bacon's much overlooked *De Sapientia Veterum* ("Of the Wisdom of the Ancients").<sup>164</sup> In its preface Bacon states that "beneath no small number of the fables of the ancient poets there lay from the very beginning a mystery and an allegory," and in the book he allegorizes myths pertinent to Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, such as the Narcissus fable.<sup>165</sup> As Hulse relates, while ruminating over a passage in Euripides, Comes discovers Harmony to be "the offspring of the elements of all things; and that force which is born from the motion of celestial bodies, whether we call it divine or natural, acting so that the elements themselves are led into this mixture, or rather leading them, that force is called Venus."<sup>166</sup> Consistent with Comes's view is Hulse's observation that "Shakespeare's Venus strives to harmonize the elements, as they appear in various guises: in climatic terms, they are wind, sun, earth, and rain; in emotional terms, sighs, desires, disdain, and tears."<sup>167</sup> According to

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<sup>161</sup> Muriel Bradbrook, *Shakespeare: The Poet in His World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978); Hughes, 52.

<sup>162</sup> See Natales Comes, *Mythologiae*. Trans. John Mulryan and Steven Brown (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006).

<sup>163</sup> Harwood, 47-48.

<sup>164</sup> Sir Francis Bacon, *De Sapientia Veterum* ("On the Wisdom of the Ancients"). Retrieved from Bartleby.

<sup>165</sup> Bacon, *De Sapientia Veterum*, preface, middle of second paragraph (no pagination); Chapter IV.

<sup>166</sup> Hulse, 215.

<sup>167</sup> Hulse, 215.

my reading, Venus, as the Gnostic Sophia, strives to harmonize all ostensibly mutually exclusive antitheses through a kind of Hermetic alchemy and it is the recalcitrant Puritanism of Adonis against which her syncretic project strives. Given that *Against Heresies* is a classic enunciation of the ‘Puritanical’ view of Gnosticism (of which Shakespeare was likely aware), the overemphasis which Shakespeare’s narrator places on the Goddess’s sweat and tears may be explained by a synthesis of Comes’s ‘discovery’ and a passage in *Against Heresies*, where Irenaeus ridicules the Gnostic myth’s etiological account of the earth’s waters. Irenaeus relates that, according to the Gnostic myth, the earth’s waters are composed wholly of Sophia’s tears. Taking the myth literally, Irenaeus sees a difficulty with this explanation and quips that, if her tears explain the earth’s salt water, what but her sweat could explain the earth’s fresh water?<sup>168</sup>

That Shakespeare’s poem may be read as allegory is clearly confirmed by the readings of Baldwin, Pearson, Price, Hamilton, Hulse, Butler, Fowler, and Prescott, but what we want to know is whether it is beyond the pale to conceive of Shakespeare as having concealed the mysteries of his Gnostic doctrine in what has appeared to most readers a tale of mere trifles.<sup>169</sup> Hughes argues Shakespeare lifted the myth out of its leafy Ovidian recess and re-theologized it.<sup>170</sup> I have clarified and extended Hughes’s argument to suggest we read the poem’s antithetical structure as a specifically ‘Puritanical-Gnostic’ one forged between two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies. That it may be so read can only be demonstrated through the kind of close sequential reading I will provide it. Nevertheless, it might serve my reading well to consider the precise extent to which Renaissance initiates of the ‘Gnostic’ mysteries read allegories into the classical poetry upon which were modelled the poems they themselves wrote.

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<sup>168</sup> See Irenaeus, Ch. IV.iii.

<sup>169</sup> A wholly comic one, for Putney.

<sup>170</sup> Hughes, 55-56.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ranks Marsilio Ficino as the “best known philosopher of the Renaissance.”<sup>171</sup> Healy writes that, in Marsilio Ficino’s scheme, “non-egotistical religious love” (as embodied by Venus) “was more important than doctrinal religion” (as embodied by Adonis) and “Orphic Hymns, Greek myths and Platonic dialogues were envisaged as allegorically encoding the wisdom of the ancient sage of Egypt,” the thrice-great Hermes Trismegistus (where we understand Hermeticism to be a central element in the confluence I am calling Gnosticism).<sup>172</sup> John S. Mebane even refers to the *Hermetic Corpus* straightforwardly as a corpus of explicitly “Gnostic texts,”<sup>173</sup> and to “Florentine Neoplatonism” as a “complex interaction among humanism, scholasticism, and the Neoplatonic and Gnostic philosophies which had influenced the radical sects,”<sup>174</sup> the “resulting compound” of which was, according to Mebane, the “intellectual foundation of the occult tradition which spread throughout Europe and to which Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare responded.”<sup>175</sup> This Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism,<sup>176</sup> championed by such other philosophical dignitaries as Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno, and adopted by such literary luminaries as Sir Philip Sidney and John

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<sup>171</sup> Brian Copenhaver, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Last revised Wed, Aug 3, 2017.

<sup>172</sup> In the early centuries A.D., Alexandrian Gnosticism became such a confluence of Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Cabalism, and Christianity, as in the teachings of Valentinus. It appears it may have even originated as one such confluence. See Irenaeus, Ch. I on Valentinus. Irenaeus relates in detail the syncretic practice of the Gnostics whereby myths and fables from disparate traditions are synthesized and Biblical passages appropriated haphazardly to support extra-canonical doctrines which otherwise conflict with a literalistic interpretation of the Bible. See Irenaeus, VIII.i. and *Isaiah 28:13 GNV* for what the Biblical literalist understands to be a condemnation of this practice.

<sup>173</sup> John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (U of Nebraska P, 1989), 16-17.

<sup>174</sup> Mebane, 16-17.

<sup>175</sup> Mebane, 16-17.

<sup>176</sup> What Hughes and Healy call it.

Donne<sup>177</sup> lent itself to Renaissance Alchemy as a ‘spiritual technology’ whereby all diametrically opposed mythologies might be synthesized through Cabalistic Love. Through this ideal synthesis it was thought that humanity might recover the ‘true religion’ of which every mythological system (including that of the Bible) was but a pale shadow. Through this syncretic fusion man might transcend the fetters of dogma, put aside superficial differences between himself and his neighbour, recover that knowledge that has always been his to possess, and finally realize the godhood latent within him (and, to boot, purge humanity of the ‘Puritanical’ sexism latent within this sentence’s pronoun usage). Healy writes that in Bruno’s scheme,

paradoxes and contradictions are fusions of two extremes into a harmonic one and the driving force for this conjunction is love/desire (this is, of course, the philosophy of late sixteenth-century Hermetic alchemy with its symbolic ‘copulations,’ ‘chemical weddings’ and ‘marriages’). In line with this, Bruno promulgated the belief that the revival of Egyptian religion, as expounded in the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, especially the *Asclepius*, offered a way of reuniting Catholic and Protestant Christendom and returning religion to its pristine state; a focus on universal love was key to this regenerative spiritual alchemy.<sup>178</sup>

This passage almost serves as a summary of Hughes’s reading of *Venus and Adonis*. Here we have Catholic Christendom (as embodied, at the level of the first veil, in Venus), Protestant Christendom (as embodied in Adonis), and the alchemist-poet trying—through Venus as Goddess of Love—to ‘reunite’ the two through ‘copulation’ in order to return religion to its

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<sup>177</sup> Donne’s and Sidney’s personal systems are, strictly speaking, less overtly ‘Gnostic’ in the Jehovah-reducing sense than the confluence I would ascribe to Venus and the poem’s narrator, but nevertheless highly Esoteric and importantly antithetical to the ‘Puritanical’ Adonis tendency.

<sup>178</sup> Healy, 51.

“pristine state”—the undogmatic, lived, experiential state of spirituality to which the syncretic Gnostic aspires. The antithetical model I propose is consistent with the syncretic project described in this passage, for according to my reading, it is this i) great alchemical marriage between all ostensibly mutually exclusive antitheses which Venus strives to achieve, and the i) recalcitrant Puritanism of Adonis that precludes its consummation.

One example (among innumerable others) of a reading practice consistent with the model I propose is to be found in Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ranks Mirandola as being, after Ficino, “the best known philosopher of the Renaissance,” and declares “his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*” to be “better known than any other philosophical text of the fifteenth century.”<sup>179</sup> Mirandola famously composed 900 theses attempting to syncretize all theological and philosophical systems, a work which was, not surprisingly, the first to be universally banned by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>180</sup> In this case, though Mirandola and the Church are, strictly speaking, both Catholic, Mirandola is approximating the ‘Gnostic’ Venus tendency through his ‘extremist’ syncretic project, whereas the Roman Catholic Church itself is, at least insofar as it is banning Mirandola’s syncretic project, approximating the ‘Puritanical’ Adonis tendency. In *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Mirandola defends the ‘Gnostic’ doctrine (while careful to avoid the word “Gnostic”) that one is to immortalize oneself in the here and now through cultivation of occult ‘white magic’ power, which is to be distinguished from its ‘black magic’ counterpart. This power is to be developed through acquisition of esoteric knowledge, which is itself to be obtained via initiation into the (Gnostic) mysteries. He then writes that Homer “concealed this doctrine”—a quite clearly

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<sup>179</sup> Brian Copenhaver, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Last revised Wed, Aug 3, 2017.

<sup>180</sup> S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses* (ACMRS, 1998), 16.



‘Gnostic’ doctrine—“symbolically, in the wanderings of his Ulysses, just as he did all other learned doctrines.”<sup>181</sup> Mirandola defends a Cabalistic—and therefore broadly ‘Gnostic’—account of the Bible (again, being careful all the while to avoid the word “Gnostic”) when he writes that the true God conceals his meaning from the vulgar masses, reserving it as he does for an elite few:

Openly to reveal to the people the hidden mysteries and secret intentions of the highest divinity, which lay concealed under the hard shell of the law and the rough vesture of language, what else could this be but to throw holy things to dogs and strew gems among swine?<sup>182</sup>

In this same work, Mirandola writes,

Orpheus . . . (and this was the case with all the ancient theologians) so wove the mysteries of his doctrine into the fabric of myths and so wrapped them about in veils of poetry, that one reading his hymns might well believe that there was nothing in them but fables and the veriest commonplaces. I have said this so that it might be known what labor was mine, what difficulty was involved, in drawing out the secret meanings of the occult philosophy from the deliberate tangles of riddles and the recesses of fable in which they were hidden; difficulty made all the greater by the fact that in a matter so weighty, abstruse and unexplored, I could count on no help from the work and efforts of other interpreters.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, middle of fifth last paragraph (no pagination).

<sup>182</sup> Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, middle of fourth last paragraph (no pagination).

<sup>183</sup> Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, middle of second last paragraph (no pagination).

Mirandola was widely read and heavily plagiarized throughout the Renaissance, as S. A. Farmer shows in *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses*.<sup>184</sup> This exact quote is plagiarized virtually verbatim by Henry Reynolds in his 1632 *Mythomystes*,<sup>185</sup> who, as Healy tells us, “reads the Greek myths in the manner of Maier”—the prominent alchemist Michael Maier—“as allegories and riddles of abstruse Hermetical-chemical knowledge.”<sup>186</sup> This Esoteric reading practice, popularized by such philosophical dignitaries as Mirandola, seems to go beyond even ‘radical’ allegoresis: it understands poets to dissemble the “mysteries” of their “doctrine” in “veils of poetry” to deceive the many into believing there is “nothing in them but fables and the veriest commonplaces.” As I show in the third section of this chapter, and as I will further demonstrate through my close sequential reading, Venus (and the poet) may be read as employing the Gnostic law of reversal to cryptically invert the teachings of the sham Christ of the Bible. Venus (and the poet) constantly subvert Biblical doctrines with such precision that the employment of this law of reversal would be difficult to regard as purely coincidental with the poem’s consistently reinforced Puritanical-Gnostic structure. To use Mirandola’s language, the mysterious “doctrine” dissembled under the “veils of poetry” (under what Reynolds would call the “poeticke maske”)<sup>187</sup> of *Venus and Adonis* may be read as a Gnostic one: a Gnostic account of what Hughes calls the Puritanical error. On this view, the poem explains, via Gnostic epistemology, why Puritanism renders the Goddess (and the Gnostic wisdom she embodies) as it does, and further serves as a warning for those who would reject her (who would, by extension, anathematize the invisible world of the unconscious, upon engagement with which is contingent

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<sup>184</sup> See, for example, S. A. Farmer, note 70 on page 122.

<sup>185</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Mythomystes*, in J. E. Spingarn, ed., *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1957), 170-171.

<sup>186</sup> Healy, 54. Referring to Henry Reynolds, *Mythomystes*, 170-171.

<sup>187</sup> Reynolds, 156-157.

the art of Gnostic illumination). The poem (as these Renaissance reading practices corroborate) is to be understood as conveying one thing to what the Gnostic initiates, at the time, called the “vulgar” throng<sup>188</sup> (a mere tale of erotic trifles) and something entirely different to what they called the “worthy initiated”<sup>189</sup> (a Gnostic account of the Puritanical error); that is, one thing to Fraunce’s first group, and something entirely different to the third group with whom he himself identifies (and perhaps something still different to a fourth group of which he is himself unaware). It is worth noting here that Irenaeus, in his condemnation of Gnosticism, attributes to the Gnostic this strain of elitism whereby humanity is categorized into three groups: “animal men” and “material men” (others) and those who are “spiritual by nature” (themselves).<sup>190</sup> Perhaps even more to the point, Irenaeus writes that the Gnostics “tell us”—just as Mirandola tells us—“that this knowledge has not been openly divulged, because all are not capable of receiving it, but has been mystically revealed by the Saviour through means of parables to those qualified for understanding it.”<sup>191</sup> This Gnostic elitism is echoed by Reynolds who, again using similar language to Mirandola, maintains the necessity that these “high and Mysticall matters should by riddles and enigmatical knots be kept inviolate from the prophane Multitude.”<sup>192</sup>

On this reading, it is the “Hermetic” technique of what Healy calls “veiling truths from common eyes”<sup>193</sup> (in which “Philosophers never express the true significance of their thought in the vulgar tongue,” and in which the Hermetic master’s words “must not be interpreted according to the literal sense of the expression,” for the “sense which is presented on the surface

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<sup>188</sup> Healy, 68. See Shakespeare’s Ovidian epigraph.

<sup>189</sup> Healy, 135.

<sup>190</sup> The animal-spiritual distinction is in Irenaeus, Ch. VI; for the three group distinction, see Ch. VII.v.

<sup>191</sup> Irenaeus, Ch. III.i.

<sup>192</sup> Reynolds, 156.

<sup>193</sup> Healy, 37.

is not the true sense”<sup>194</sup> that is being employed throughout *Venus and Adonis* to subvert Puritanical doctrine via Gnostic epistemology. While even among early moderns, this reading practice of what we might call the *ultra-radical allegorical* variety might have been the exception, among Renaissance initiates of the ‘Gnostic’ mysteries it was not. Such lucid expositions of deliberate obscuration are legion: “In such a poem” as we might say *Venus and Adonis* is, “the literal meaning of the plot is not the important one but intended only to lead gullible fools astray and, to adopt Maier’s phrasing, the poet has succeeded in using a ‘veil of colours’ and enigmas to obscure its spiritual allegory from all but the worthy initiated.”<sup>195</sup>

An apt analogue is to be found in Romantic poets such as Keats, who peered back through the “veil” of fables of which Bacon speaks,<sup>196</sup> and upon the Venus and Adonis story in particular as my reading of the poem’s antithetical structure would suggest Shakespeare may have done. The following quote from Jennifer N. Wunder’s *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* is as specific a passage as one could be expected to find regarding the way in which mystery school Gnostics (here Rosicrucians) read the fable in the Romantic period:

In hermetic terms, sexual consummation was viewed as symbolic of both the ‘essence’ and the means by which man must reach that essence through the realities of life. Virtually every alchemical text Keats might have encountered contained descriptions of sexualized unions, often described as marriages, sometimes between a king and queen, other times between a goddess such as Venus and her paramour Adonis, and some texts such as the *Chymical Wedding* made use of aspects of both. Sexual love served as the exoteric metaphor and led

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<sup>194</sup> Martin Rulandas, *A Lexicon of Alchemy* (1612), trans. A. E. Waite (London, 1892), 381.

<sup>195</sup> Healy, 135.

<sup>196</sup> See Bacon, preface, first paragraph (no pagination).

quite naturally in these allegories to the more generalized and esoteric assertions that it was through the power of love that a commingling of contraries took place and a transmutation was achieved. The mystical union between man and woman, the human and the divine, and the desirer and desired was understood as symbolic of love as ‘all strength and power,’ the ‘Divine Nature’ and ‘Divine Elixir,’ and that which ‘dissolves and changes [all] to itself . . . a transmuting and transforming nature’ that ‘restores that which is fallen and degenerated to its primary beauty, excellence and perfection.’<sup>197</sup>

Thus, in “hermetic terms,” “sexual consummation” is i) a mythic symbol for the elusive spiritual “essence” to which the neophyte is to aspire, at the same time as it is the ii) “means by which man must reach that essence” through the mundane “realities of life.” Here erotic love serves as the “exoteric metaphor” for the alchemical mystery whereby a “commingling of contraries” takes place and a “transmutation” is “achieved.” In Shakespeare’s version (on the reading we are considering), the Puritanical Adonis awaits the rapture to be physically transmuted; the Gnostic Venus seeks spiritual transmutation in the here and now. The poet-chemist tries to create a “mystical union between man and woman, the human and the divine, and the desirer and desired” to restore “that which is fallen” (Adonis has fallen from his ‘sun god’ status through Puritanism, and Venus has fallen from the celestial Neoplatonic form of Love which she instantiates on earth to try to save him through Gnosis) to its “primary beauty, excellence and perfection” (hence the Gnostic Venus calling attention to the “beauty, excellence and perfection” latent in Adonis at the poem’s very inception, 7-12).

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<sup>197</sup> Jennifer N. Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* (Routledge, 2008), 125. Quotes taken from Rosicrucian Society member and contemporary of Keats Ethan Allen Hitchcock’s “Remarks Upon Alchemy and the Alchemists.”

To be sure, I am not using these evidences (of which there are myriads more) to prove my reading. Rather, I will use my close sequential reading of the poem to show that Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* may be profitably read as one such 'Gnostic' 'veil of colors.'

*The Gnostic Law of Reversal*

Because Hughes neglects to do the close readings required to substantiate his position, I have therefore had to discover the following patterns in the poem myself. Crucially, the Biblical literalist claims the "god of this world"<sup>198</sup> employs the satanic law of reversal to flip the truth upside-down,<sup>199</sup> getting Gnostics to "speak evil of good, and good of evil," "put darkness for light, and light for darkness," "bitter for sweet, and sweet for sour," to make them "wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight," and "justify the wicked for a reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him."<sup>200</sup> Venus may be read as employing this Gnostic law of reversal to speak evil of Adonis's goodness throughout the poem (to take away his righteousness from him), as when she renders his abstinence an endless litany of Biblical sins.

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<sup>198</sup> 2 *Corinthians* 4:4 GNV. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*.

<sup>199</sup> *Isaiah* 29:16 KJV. The Jesus of the broadly 'Gnostic' *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* enunciates the law of reversal at line 22: "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom." The Jesus of the Bible is a sham Christ for the Gnostic; this Gnostic Jesus is a Luciferian deception for the Puritan. In *The Gospel of Thomas: Annotated & Explained* (Skylight Illuminations, 2002), Stevan Davies argues that this apocryphal Gospel is, strictly speaking, not Gnostic in the narrowest sense. It is, however, representative of the mystical, secret teachings which the broadly 'Gnostic' (esoteric knowledge-seeking) syncretist would incorporate into his or her synthesis and a text which the 'Puritan' would reject as an extracanonical Luciferian deception.

<sup>200</sup> *Isaiah* 5:20-24 GNV.

The poet may also be read as employing this Gnostic law of reversal himself when he subverts Biblical parables, injunctions, and doctrines (not always through Venus's lips).

From the perspective of each hermeneutical tendency, the other one flips the truth upside-down. As Hulse observes, the answer Venus gives to the question 'Why does beauty wither?' (to which Adonis would give the answer, 'Because of sin') is that "Diana, goddess of chastity and narcissism, is to blame and love is the force that preserves"<sup>201</sup> (where Diana is a mirror for Adonis, 733-38). From the Puritan's perspective, Adonis's perseverance in chastity may be understood as righteous rejection of Gnostic illumination through carnal knowledge. From the Gnostic perspective, Adonis misperceives esoteric wisdom as carnal knowledge and Gnostic illumination as devil possession (his narcissistic chastity, not sin, is to blame for beauty's transience). Thus for the Puritan, given that abstinence is virtuous in the Bible,<sup>202</sup> Venus is speaking "evil" of Adonis's goodness (see the above paragraph),<sup>203</sup> when she renders his abstinence a sin tantamount to: i) narcissistic pride (157-162, 761-762),<sup>204</sup> ii) refusal to acknowledge and adhere to one's nature as it was created by God (163-168, 385-386),<sup>205</sup> iii) selfish neglect of the Biblical principle of reciprocity (167-168, 169-174, 203-204, 369-372),<sup>206</sup> iv) destructive repression of natural impulse ("Affection is a coal that must be cooled,/Else, suffered, it will set the heart on fire," 387-388), v) self-enslavement (by implication, 391-392),

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<sup>201</sup> Hulse, 211-212.

<sup>202</sup> *1 Corinthians 6:18 GNV; 1 Thessalonians 4:3 GNV; 2 Timothy 2:22 GNV; 1 Peter 2:11 GNV.*

<sup>203</sup> *Isaiah 5:20 GNV.*

<sup>204</sup> *Proverbs 16:18 GNV.*

<sup>205</sup> *1 Corinthians 11:14 GNV; Romans 1:26 GNV.*

<sup>206</sup> *Matthew 7:12 GNV; Luke 6:31 GNV.*

vi) suicide (127-132, 763, 765),<sup>207</sup> vii) robbery (where “steel” is a pun for “steal,” 375),<sup>208</sup> and even viii) murder (playfully, 499-503; seriously, 757-762; specifically, infanticide, 766).<sup>209</sup>

That is, through the Gnostic (satanic) law of reversal, Venus renders Adonis’s Biblically virtuous abstinence the Biblical sin of narcissistic pride<sup>210</sup> (which leads to the Biblical sin of suicide;<sup>211</sup> that is, the sin of slaying the very image of God),<sup>212</sup> with the dual implication that his chastity is a cover for the Biblical sin of masturbation,<sup>213</sup> at 157-162:

‘Is thine own heart to thine own face affected?  
Can thy right hand seize love upon thy left?  
Then woo thyself, be of thyself rejected;  
Steal thine own freedom, and complain on theft.  
  
Narcissus so himself himself forsook,  
  
And died to kiss his shadow in the brook.’ (157-162)

Moreover, Venus has just promised her burden to be light as Christ claims his to be (155-156),<sup>214</sup> and here she subversively evokes Christ’s command to the alms-giver not to let his “left hand know” what his “right hand doeth” (“Can thy right hand seize love upon thy left?” 158).<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Only wicked men, apart from Saul’s armor-bearer (about whose character we are told nothing, *1 Samuel 34:1-6 GNV*) are depicted committing suicide: Abimelech (*Judges 9:54 GNV*); Saul (*1 Samuel 31:4 GNV*); Ahithophel (*2 Samuel 17:23 GNV*); Zimri (*1 Kings 16:18 GNV*); Judas (*Matthew 27:5 GNV*). Samson’s intent was not merely to commit suicide (*Judges 16:26-31 GNV*).

<sup>208</sup> *Exodus 20:15 GNV; Matthew 19:18 GNV; Romans 13:9 GNV.*

<sup>209</sup> *Exodus 20:13 GNV; Matthew 19:18 GNV; Romans 13:9 GNV.*

<sup>210</sup> *Job 41:34 GNV; Proverbs 8:13 GNV; Proverbs 16:18 GNV; Mark 7:22 GNV; 1 Timothy 3:6 GNV; 1 John 2:16 GNV.*

<sup>211</sup> See note 155.

<sup>212</sup> *Genesis 1:26-27 GNV; Genesis 9:6 GNV.*

<sup>213</sup> *1 Corinthians 6:9-10 GNV; Galatians 5:19-21 GNV.*

<sup>214</sup> *Matthew 11:30 GNV.*

<sup>215</sup> *Matthew 6:3 GNV.*



Seizing connotes theft, and theft is the inverse of alms-giving. This sets up her accusation that Adonis's narcissistic pride (the supposed symptom and cause of his Puritanism) is the thief who robs his own freedom, which theft she mockingly instructs him to "complain on" (160).

By being chaste (which St. Paul recommends as a holier option than marriage),<sup>216</sup> Adonis is, according to the Gnostic Venus, 'burying' his "posterity" (758) in the "swallowing grave" that is his "body" (757); he is 'destroying' his would-be progeny in "dark obscurity" (760), the consequence of which being that the "world will hold" him in "disdain/Sith in [his] *pride* so fair a hope is slain" (my emphasis, 761-762).

Through the Gnostic (satanic) law of reversal, Venus renders Adonis's Biblically virtuous abstinence the Biblical sin of refusing to adhere to his nature as it was created by God,<sup>217</sup> when she sermonizes on the purpose of things and the neglect of those purposes ("Torches are made to light, jewels to wear,/Dainties to taste, fresh beauty for the use,/Herbs for their smell, and sappy plants to bear./Things growing to themselves are growth's abuse," 163-166). She does the same when she compares him to his "palfrey," who, "as he should" (and as Adonis should) "Welcomes" (as Adonis does not) "the warm approach of sweet desire" (385-386). Through this same Gnostic law of reversal, Venus renders Adonis's Biblically virtuous abstinence the Biblical sin of selfishly neglecting the Golden Rule (*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*)<sup>218</sup> when she argues, "Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breedeth beauty:/Thou wast begot; to get it is thy duty" (167-168). She does the same when she rhetorically asks, "Upon the earth's increase why shouldst thou feed/Unless the earth with thy increase be fed?" (169-170).

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<sup>216</sup> See *1 Corinthians 7 GNV*.

<sup>217</sup> *1 Corinthians 11:14 GNV; Romans 1:26 GNV*.

<sup>218</sup> *Matthew 7:12 GNV*.

According to Venus, it is the Gnostic (her) and not the Puritan (Adonis) who is really abiding by the Golden Rule. She makes this clear when she claims,

‘Would thou wert as I am, and I a man,  
My heart all whole as thine, thy heart my wound;  
For one sweet look thy help I would assure thee,  
Though nothing but my body’s bane would cure thee.’ (369-372)

According to Venus, by abstaining from sexual intercourse with her (by rejecting Gnostic illumination through esoteric knowledge), Adonis is, just as his horse was before it emancipated itself through love, “Servilely mastered with a leathern rein” (392), rather than ‘free from sin,’ as the ‘Puritanical’ God of the Bible would have it.<sup>219</sup> Through the Gnostic law of reversal, she renders his Biblically virtuous chastity the Biblical sin of suicide when she argues, “Beauty within itself should not be wasted./Fair flowers that are not gathered in their prime/Rot, and consume themselves in little time,” 130-132). She does the same when she concludes that through his perseverance in chastity he ‘himself’ is ‘in himself’ “made away” (763), and that his “mischief” is “worse than . . . theirs whose desperate hands themselves do slay” (764-765). At 375, Venus accuses the Biblically virtuous Adonis of ‘steeling’ (hardening) his as well as her heart, where “steel” may be read as a pun for “steal,” thereby rendering his abstinence the Biblical sin of robbery.<sup>220</sup> Venus will even go so far as to render Adonis’s chastity the Biblical sin of murder,<sup>221</sup> first playfully (“O, thou didst kill me; kill me once again!” 499), then seriously (“Sith in thy pride so fair a hope is *slain*,” my emphasis, 762), before specifically rendering it

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<sup>219</sup> *John 8:32 GNV; John 8:36 GNV; Romans 6:18 GNV.*

<sup>220</sup> *Exodus 20:15 GNV; Matthew 19:18 GNV; Romans 13:9 GNV.*

<sup>221</sup> *Exodus 20:13 GNV; Matthew 19:18 GNV; Romans 13:9 GNV.*

infanticide when she calls it a “mischief worse than” that of a “butcher sire that reaves his son of life” (763-765).

Venus also renders Adonis’s abstinence sinful via this Gnostic law of reversal when she ix) paronomastically emasculates him as inhumane (“Thing like a man, but of no woman bred,” 214), which she does while x) flipping the Protestant Adonis’s accusations of Catholic idolatry on him to render the chaste Adonis a self-revering idol (211-216).<sup>222</sup> That is, she exploits the dual meaning of the phrase “like a man” (like a real manly man/like a human being with a heart) to render Adonis’s Biblically virtuous chastity simultaneously self-emasculating and inhumane, both of which are, for the Biblical literalist, sins: for the Puritan, men are to be men, not women;<sup>223</sup> and human beings are to be human beings with hearts, not soulless monsters.<sup>224</sup> She also renders his abstinence a sin via this method when she xi) ascribes to him the hard-heartedness of the unredeemed (“O, give it me, lest thy hard heart do steel it,” 375).<sup>225</sup> Here she even evokes Adonai’s controversial hardening of Pharaoh’s heart when she absurdly imagines Adonis’s continued chastity as causing Love’s goddess to lose regard for love’s groans,<sup>226</sup> in the devastating couplet “Then love’s deep groans I never shall regard,/Because Adonis’ heart hath made mine hard” (377-378). That is, the Biblical God is said to have hardened Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus 9:12, which implies, for those unsympathetic to the Biblical God (such as the Gnostics), an infringement on human freedom. To harden one’s heart to God is to damn oneself to eternal torment.<sup>227</sup> So the argument goes, while it makes sense that one who hardens one’s heart to God

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<sup>222</sup> *Exodus 20:3-6 GNV; 1 Corinthians 10:14 GNV; Galatians 5:19-21 GNV.*

<sup>223</sup> *Deuteronomy 22:5 GNV; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 GNV; 2 Timothy 2:12 GNV.*

<sup>224</sup> *Galatians 5:19-21 GNV.*

<sup>225</sup> *See Proverbs 28:14 GNV; Mark 8:17 GNV; Ephesians 4:18 GNV; Hebrews 3:8 GNV.*

<sup>226</sup> *Exodus 9:12 GNV.*

<sup>227</sup> *Mark 16:14 GNV; Romans 2:5 GNV; Hebrews 3:13-15 GNV; Hebrews 4:7 GNV; See also John 12:40 GNV.*

might be denied salvation, it seems problematic that God should harden people's hearts to him to render them irredeemable while they are still living. With dual irony, Venus evokes this hardening of Pharaoh's heart by attributing a comparable act to Adonis, where it is his hard heart that hardens hers. In the same way that Adonis will, in some lines, be Neoplatonic Beauty itself, here Adonis in some sense *is* the 'Puritanical' Goddess-repressing God of the Bible Himself: so long as he heeds the Biblical call to chastity, he is His very heart-hardening manifestation on earth.

Venus often inverts Biblical injunctions, parables, and doctrines to render the Puritanical Adonis a hypocrite. For example, she renders him the idle servant who accuses his master (who represents God) of usury in the Parable of the Talents ("Foul cank'ring rust the hidden treasure frets,/But gold that's put to use more gold begets," 767-768).<sup>228</sup> In the Parable, the idle servant is given one talent (here a gold coin) and instructed to put it to good use. Being the idler he is, he buries it. The master's other servants, all of whom were given more than him at the outset, double the money they were given. The idler alone returns with no gains. He 'explains' himself via accusing his master of usury. The implication is that God gives each of us certain "talents" (which serves as a metaphor as well as a pun for gifts), and though he gives some people more than others, we are all to put them to good use. Here Adonis is the one who refuses to, as it were, "put to use" the "gold" God gave him in order to beget more. Chastity is a virtue in the Bible but Venus here employs the Gnostic (satanic) law of reversal to render it idleness (the Biblical sin of slothfulness).<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> *Matthew 25:14-30 GNV; Luke 19:12-28 GNV.*

<sup>229</sup> *Mathew 25:26 GNV; Romans 12:11 GNV; Hebrews 6:12 GNV.*

By employing the Gnostic law of reversal, Venus will even invert Christ in her own person, when she says, “Love keeps his revels where there are but twain” (123)—a subversive echo of Christ’s claim to be wherever two or three are gathered in his name.<sup>230</sup> She will even invert Christ’s teaching on the rapture via the Gnostic law of reversal when she flips the Parable of the Ten Virgins to render the wise ones foolish and the foolish ones wise:<sup>231</sup>

‘Therefore, despite of fruitless chastity,  
 Love-lacking vestals and self-loving nuns,  
 That on the earth would breed a scarcity  
 And barren dearth of daughters and of sons,  
 Be prodigal. The lamp that burns by night  
 Dries up his oil to lend the world his light. (751-756)

In the original Parable, it is the five Virgins who are actually virgins (those who have purged themselves of worldliness and are prepared for the return of their master Christ) who are rewarded with salvation for having “oil” in their “lamps” at his coming (presumably the Holy Spirit in their hearts). It is the five Virgins who are not actually virgins (those who are worldly and not prepared for the return of their master) who are condemned for lacking “oil” in their “lamps” (lacking the Holy Spirit in their hearts). By a startling inversion, here it is ‘prodigality’ that is praised (755). Here it is noble to burn one’s lamp by night (in romance), to dry up one’s “oil” (expend one’s spirit in what is for Venus not a waste of shame), and “lend the world” the “light” of one’s progeny (756).

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<sup>230</sup> *Matthew 18:20 GNV.*

<sup>231</sup> *Matthew 25:1-13 GNV.*

The poet has his fair share in this Gnostic subversion. For example, he daringly evokes the Golden Rule with bawdy irony in the line “Backward she pushed him, as she would be thrust” (41), wherein Venus does unto Adonis as she would have him do unto her.<sup>232</sup> And he evokes the woeful cry of Jesus on the cross, who is said to be God manifest in the flesh,<sup>233</sup> “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”<sup>234</sup> in the line “She’s Love; she loves; and yet she is not loved” (610), wherein Venus, Love manifest in the flesh, has been forsaken by Love. Here, as throughout the poem, the poet exploits Venus’s status as Love manifest in the flesh to subversively examine the Biblical literalist’s doctrine that Jesus Christ was himself God manifest in the flesh.<sup>235</sup>

The Gnostic views Puritanism’s anathematization of the invisible world (its suppression of the unconscious, of which the libido is a crucial subset) as profane. The Gnostic therefore views Puritanism’s repression of sexuality as unnatural and wicked. Thus, the most obvious level on which this Gnostic subversion functions (the erotic level) is consistent with what I might call the poem’s most crucial layer (its deeper, purely theosophical level). The erotic level may even be said to supervene upon this purely theosophical level. But given that Venus’s romantic solicitations function (on this deeper level) as a sales-pitch for Gnosis, Venus is ultimately rendering Adonis’s Biblically righteous rejection of self-deification through esoteric knowledge an atrocity synonymous with this endless litany of Biblical sins.

Keeping the poem’s pervasive employment of the Gnostic of law of reversal in mind, let us now turn to my close sequential reading of the poem’s first 204 lines.

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<sup>232</sup> *Matthew 7:12 GNV; Luke 6:13 GNV.*

<sup>233</sup> *1 Timothy 3:16 GNV.*

<sup>234</sup> *Matthew 27:46 GNV.*

<sup>235</sup> *John 1:1 GNV; 1 Timothy 3:16 GNV.*

## CHAPTER TWO: SALESWOMAN OF GNOSIS

This chapter is composed of four sections. I have broken up the poem's first 204 lines into its key episodes to make my close sequential reading of the poem via Mortimer's *Variable Passions* as clear as possible. Because Hughes's reading is anything but close and anything but sequential, to offer anything but a close sequential reading of the poem to validate its 'Puritanical-Gnostic hermeneutical tendency' extension as a fruitful model would be to cause more confusion than Hughes's book (and the poem itself) has already engendered. As we have seen, critics who, in proper scholarly fashion, have amassed evidence from throughout the poem to prove a certain point have not adequately taken into consideration which perspective each line in the poem is representing. It is by attending to the poem's perspectival shifts in sequential fashion—by allowing the poem to present its ambivalences to us as they sequentially unfold themselves—that my proposal may be, first and foremost, clearly understood, and secondly, validated as a profitable reading model. I will start with Venus's approach, which is the Gnostic Sophia's approach to the Puritan (1-24). Here especially the poem's appropriation of Hermeticism is made evident. I will then look at Venus's physical aggression in detail, which signifies the way the Gnostic Goddess manifests for the Puritan who rejects her (25-90). I will then proceed to the Mars episode which reveals, through Venus's expurgated version of her affair with the war god, her recognition that her beloved is a Puritan (91-114). The episode further captures the distinction between i) Venus's Gnostic project of synthesizing the masculine with the feminine and the ii) Puritanical Adonis's perception of her syncretic project as an emasculating threat. I will then look at Venus's Horatian argument in detail which forges a distinction between the i) Gnostic Venus's desire for immediate spiritual transformation through esoteric knowledge in the here and now, and the ii) Puritanical Adonis's desire for physical

metamorphosis at the resurrection which is to be attained through patient perseverance in chastity (115-174). Here also I will look at Adonis insofar as he is the potential sun god, the potential Christ, the potential “Aeon Jesus” who holds the key to Sophia’s (and his own) salvation. Through the realization of the “Aeon Jesus” latent within Adonis, the Sophianic Venus may be saved from the world whose author and prisoner she has unintentionally become (175-204). Here especially the poem’s syncretic appropriation of Neoplatonism is clarified. This Chapter is called “Saleswoman of Gnosis” because it reads the first 204 lines of the poem primarily as the Gnostic Sophia’s sales-pitch to the Puritan who rejects her.

*The Gnostic Sophia’s Approach to the Puritan*

The first stanza presents, in Coleridge’s words, the “whole argument of the poem,”<sup>236</sup> and thus it may be said to present the antithetical structure between Puritanism and Gnosticism which it will consistently reinforce:

Even as the sun with purple-coloured face,  
 Had ta’en his 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)

The Hermetic quality of the world we are invited to enter, the astrological correspondence between the heavens above and the things of this earth, the divinity latent within Adonis, the hypocrisy in his Puritanical—and therefore paradoxically impassioned—rejection of the

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<sup>236</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 1 (Dent, 1960), 192-193.



alchemist-poet's Neoplatonic Love, the subjection of the Love Goddess's ontology to the whims of his Puritanical 'misperception,' and the irony of her being the representative of the Neoplatonic form of Love at the same time as she is its love-sick instantiation, are all visibly brought to the fore at the poem's very inception.

The poet immediately identifies Adonis with the sun in three ways: i) his rosy cheeks are comparable to, albeit contrasted with, the sun's "purple-coloured face" (1, 3); ii) his hurrying "to the chase" is suggested as being temporally and therefore supernaturally linked with the sun's taking "his last leave of the weeping morn" (2); and iii) the sun is subtly introduced as that higher, divine aspect of the terrestrial Adonis who, though himself a god, has here been brought down to earth and clothed in quite human flesh, as if he were a demi-god caught between heaven and earth. The "weeping morn" is Aurora (2), "goddess of the dawn," who "weeps tears of dew when forsaken each morning by her lover, the sun,"<sup>237</sup> with whom Venus is to be identified. Both Venus and Adonis hurry themselves "to the chase" (3), only they hunt after different things: Adonis hunts after the boar, Venus after Adonis.

That "Even as" is at once a temporal comparison—"[while] the sun with purple-coloured face/Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,/Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase" (1-3)—and a non-temporal comparison—"[in the same way that] the sun with purple-coloured face/Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,/Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase" (1-3). Thus we have the Hermetic motto "as above, so below" depicted right from the start:<sup>238</sup> in the world of *Venus and Adonis*, events on earth are mirrored in heaven; they even occur at the same time. Mortimer observes:

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<sup>237</sup> Norton, 635.

<sup>238</sup> Healy, 16.

The implied comparison between Adonis and the sun (which Venus will render explicit, 197-98, 863-64) involves a subtle blend of similarity and difference: purple and rose, though close in the spectrum, are opposed in their respective connotations of inflamed passion and blushing innocence; the sun's leavetaking of the "weeping morn" at daybreak anticipates Adonis' departure from the weeping Venus at nightfall, but the sun will return and Adonis will not.<sup>239</sup>

A binary red-white colour scheme pervades the poem,<sup>240</sup> and yet there are a few notable exceptions to the otherwise unbreakable law which dictates everything must needs be red or white: the sun begins as "purple" (1), the mute flowers "whereon" they "lean" are "violets" (125-126), the "painted grapes" of Zeuxis are presumably purple (601-604), and Adonis will notably be transformed upon his death into a "purple flower . . . chequered with white" (1118). The purple may therefore be understood as signifying that which is above them (the sun), below them (the violets), and beyond them (the purple flower that lies beyond the grave), and therefore generally what is beyond reach (the purple grapes of Zeuxis). Given purple may signify majesty (and by extension divinity), divinity may be understood as something, at least at present, beyond Adonis's reach—what is for him divinity's counterfeit, which though above him (like the sun), he sees as beneath him (like the violets, into whose resemblance he is nevertheless fated to metamorphose).

The key line of this stanza is "Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn" (4).

Mortimer notes that the "rhetorical neatness" of the line, "with its polyptoton"—the repetition of

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<sup>239</sup> Mortimer, 38.

<sup>240</sup> See lines 1-3; 10; 21; 35-36; 49-50; 75-78; 115-116; 185-186; 275; 337-338; 343-348; 361-366; 387-388; 397-402; 451-456; 459, 460, 461; 467, 468; 516; 542; 574; 589-591; 643; 661-666; 728, 732; 739, 742; 750; 775-786, 793-798; 809-810; 891-892; 901-906; 933; 935-936; 955-966; 979-984; 1051-1056; 1073; 1081-1086; 1103; 1122; 1123; 1165-1170; 1190.

*love* in “loved” and “love”—“and paronomasia”—homophonic play on “loved” and “laughed”—“prepares us for the clipped, self-sufficient and categorical quality that will be typical of Adonis when he speaks for himself, but it also initiates the poem’s complex play of antithesis and analogy between hunting and love, and hints at the reversal by which the youth who loves to hunt will be hunted by love.”<sup>241</sup> But the line may be understood as doing much more than this. The poet, as spiritual alchemist, may be understood as exposing the Puritanical Adonis’s hypocrisy here: the second “love” of the line, which Adonis laughs to scorn, may be understood as Neoplatonic Love, the very Form of Love, and the first “loved” his instantiation of it—his instantiation of the very thing he is mockingly rejecting. So sayeth the Neoplatonist, ‘one cannot hate love and love hunting.’ This argument sounds sophistical—it sounds like the poet is playfully adopting the role of sophist, and the comical thrust of the poem would suggest there is something to be said for this reading<sup>242</sup>—but notwithstanding the equivocation on the word “love,” from the Neoplatonic perspective it is actually sound. With dual irony, the phrase “laughed to scorn” further reinforces the hypocrisy: “laughed” sounds like “loved” at the same time as it carries with it a Biblical echo of that scornful Pharisaical laughter to which Christ himself was subjected (“And they laughed him to scorn”).<sup>243</sup> That is, the homophonic play on “laughed” allows for the alternative reading, ‘Hunting he loved, but love he *loved* to scorn’ (4). With this addition, Adonis is to be understood as one who not only i) instantiates the Neoplatonic form of Love in the same sentence in which he rejects it, but one who further ii) instantiates it in the very act of scorning it. The Puritanical Adonis is hereby rendered a Pharisee for rejecting

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<sup>241</sup> Mortimer, 38.

<sup>242</sup> See Putney.

<sup>243</sup> *Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:40; Luke 8:53 GNV.*

Love, which the Bible says God is.<sup>244</sup> As the Biblical Christ was subjected to scornful Pharisaical laughter, so here the Gnostic's syncretic "Love-Christ" is subjected to scornful Puritanical laughter.<sup>245</sup> The poet hereby employs the Gnostic (satanic) law of reversal to invert the Biblical Christ of the Puritan into the syncretic "Love-Christ" of the Gnostic,<sup>246</sup> whereby those who worship the first and reject the second are rendered philosophically incoherent.

Mortimer then writes that "as we move from the face of the sun and the cheeks of Adonis to the countenance of the goddess, an antithetical pair of compound adjectives, 'sick-thoughted' and 'bold-faced,' warns us that the rhetoric of Venus, however superficially exuberant, will be generated more by anxiety than self-confidence."<sup>247</sup> That epithet "Sick-thoughted" is surely meant to suggest love-sickness, an ironic epithet for the Goddess of Love. But it may also suggest the Puritanical Adonis's paranoid 'misperception' of the thoughts within Venus's skull. As Catherine Belsey writes,

In Shakespeare's narrative poem the goddess of love, traditional object of all men's admiration, unexpectedly appears as a desiring subject, herself at the mercy of an intractable passion. Led by experience to expect the devotion of others and accustomed to master, imprison, and enslave her lovers (ll. 101-12), Venus is here reduced to the role of suitor (l. 6) overpowered by another's beauty and subject in her turn to indifference and disdain.<sup>248</sup>

At the mythic level, Venus, in her capacity as the Gnostic Sophia, has ended up imprisoned in a

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<sup>244</sup> *1 John 4:7-8 GNV.*

<sup>245</sup> Healy, 25.

<sup>246</sup> Healy, 25.

<sup>247</sup> Mortimer, 38.

<sup>248</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Love as Trompe-l'oeil: Taxonomies of Desire in *Venus and Adonis*." *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 263.

world she has accidentally created. She seeks her salvation in the Sacred Bridegroom that is the “Aeon Jesus” latent within Adonis.<sup>249</sup> In the very beginning of things, he was her other half, her divine consort, but he is here reduced through Puritanism to the Jaldabaoth who can only misperceive her.<sup>250</sup> In her capacity as the Love Goddess, she is a heavenly deity to be adored by earthly beings, but she is here reduced to a love-sick whore who deifies a man. To avail ourselves of Mortimer’s insight, but to draw a connection between this “antithetical pair of compound adjectives” in another way,<sup>251</sup> we might say it alerts us to the fact that Adonis sees a bold face and behind that bold face the sick and twisted thoughts of a devil. The suggestion may be that, if one sees the very Goddess of Love as “sick-thoughted,” there is something wrong, not with her, but with her percipient; the argument being that Puritanism corrupts Love to the extent of rendering love-sick the earthly manifestation of its very celestial form. On this reading, we are to understand the Puritanical Adonis’s boar-hunt as a witch-hunt: he has turned Neoplatonic Love (something heavenly) into a boar (something animalistic and infernal) in order to hunt it, as the Biblical literalist renders the Goddess a devil to be extirpated and the Gnostic adept a witch to be burned.

The second stanza of *Venus and Adonis* captures the ‘alchemical’ thrust of the poem:

‘Thrice fairer than myself,’ thus she began,  
 ‘The fields’ chief flower, sweet above compare,  
 Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,  
 More white and red than doves or roses are—  
 Nature that made thee with herself at strife

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<sup>249</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>250</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>251</sup> Mortimer, 38.

Saith that the world hath ending with thy life. (7-12)

While Mortimer will write of Venus, “Variable passions throug her constant woe” (967) to describe the “combination of fear, despair, revolt and incredulity with which she reacts to the first (inconclusive) evidence that Adonis has been killed,”<sup>252</sup> he sees the phrase “Variable passions” as an “apt way to describe not only the grief of Venus, but her situation from the very beginning of the poem where her first address to Adonis suggests the plurality of desires that she can bring to bear on a single object.”<sup>253</sup> Mortimer fittingly sees the crucial phrase “More lovely than a man” as readable on three levels: “i) more lovely than a mortal, ii) more lovely than an adult male; (iii) more lovely than the male sex.”<sup>254</sup> He sees Venus’s love as “triply transgressive: transgressive of the cosmic hierarchy by overstepping the bounds between human and divine; transgressive of the generational order because it is the sexual desire of an adult for a child; transgressive of established gender roles because it involves female desire for an essentially feminine beauty.”<sup>255</sup> In a word, her desire is transgressive of the Puritanical order. As Fienberg’s feminist reading would have it, Venus “suggests a liberating reevaluation of the patriarchal world she both plays in and subverts, as she demonstrates the usefulness of the thematics of value to expose the limitations of absolutist perspectives.”<sup>256</sup> Venus comes on the scene disrupting three different binaries at once, presenting herself to Adonis as the Hermetic Corpus, the Gnostic apocrypha, and early modern alchemical texts present themselves to the Puritan. That her desire should be “triply” transgressive is all too apt as, on this reading, the phrase “Thrice fairer than myself” (7) may be read, on one level, as suggesting Adonis has the Goddess’s feminine beauty

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<sup>252</sup> Mortimer, 40.

<sup>253</sup> Mortimer, 41.

<sup>254</sup> Mortimer, 41.

<sup>255</sup> Mortimer, 41.

<sup>256</sup> Fienberg, 257.

as well as the masculine (and child-like) beauty she lacks. On another level, it calls attention to the threefold nature of man (that he is body, soul, and spirit; a potential beast and a potential angel, but presently a man) with the suggestion that, if he, a man, is thrice as great as a divine being in at least one way, he may be (or become) greater than her in other ways. On yet another level, the Sophianic level, it calls attention to the fact that Adonis is female to the extent that he is the same person as Venus. He was her other half in the very beginning of things.<sup>257</sup> Moreover, for the Gnostic, he is the child of Venus in the same sense in which the demiurge Jaldabaoth is the child of Sophia.<sup>258</sup> The phrase additionally evokes, for the astute reader, the divine Hermes Trismegistus, who is said to be “thrice-great”—a reincarnation of whom Adonis is destined to become, but whose esoteric truths he is fated to eschew:<sup>259</sup> he is to trade in his Puritanical boar-spear for a Hermetic caduceus, but, rejecting the latter, he will fatally cling to the former.

Heather Dubrow would have us see Venus’s behaviour in lines 7-19 as “self-centered and self-serving.”<sup>260</sup> For Dubrow, when Venus uses the phrase “Thrice fairer than myself” (7), “she is really lauding her own beauty even while seemingly concentrating on his, presenting herself as the measure of all loveliness.”<sup>261</sup> But if we understand Venus to be manifesting as she does in consequence of the way in which the Puritanical Adonis ‘misperceives’ her (as Hughes would have it), an additional layer of the poem is opened up to us and its apparent ambivalences accounted for. It is consistent with Hughes’s reading that Venus’s promises and demands should persistently manifest themselves throughout the poem as incoherent and self-defeating. Venus is constantly wanting it both ways, which captures at once the i) spiritual alchemist’s desire to

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<sup>257</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>258</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>259</sup> Wunder, 83.

<sup>260</sup> Dubrow, 229.

<sup>261</sup> Dubrow, 229.

synthesize all ostensibly mutually exclusive antitheses,<sup>262</sup> and the ii) Puritan's refusal to see "productive fusion" in her "troubling divisions and incompatible binaries," as Healy claims we moderns, "peering" into Shakespeare's more enigmatic lines "through our post-Cartesian lenses," are unable to do.<sup>263</sup> In short, Venus's arguments appear to Adonis as the Hermetic Corpus, the Gnostic apocrypha, and the early modern alchemical texts read to the Puritan—as the offer of Gnosis appears to the Biblical literalist.

Consistent with my Puritanical-Gnostic model is Mortimer's observation that Adonis sees a "threat posed by the sheer profusion and incoherence of [Venus's] persuasions"<sup>264</sup>—the "love proposed by Venus appears so protean and so unstable, so much all and therefore nothing, that it can only threaten to dissolve rather than define the fragile identity of a youth who pleads 'Before I know myself seek not to know me' (525)."<sup>265</sup> Equally apropos is his observation that

It is the complexities of Venus' own desire, her "variable passions" (967), that most radically undermine her plea for natural simplicity. If nature dictates mutual attraction between the sexes, what are we to make of the fact that Venus is attracted to Adonis by his feminine qualities ("Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man," 9)? If sexual intercourse is, as she argues, the fruit of maturity, how do we take her own admission that she wishes to taste Adonis while he is still "unripe" (127-128)? And, if it is an initiation into manhood, how does this fit with her repeated attempts to reduce him to the level of a child to be tempted with

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<sup>262</sup> Healy, 51.

<sup>263</sup> Healy, 9.

<sup>264</sup> Mortimer, 29.

<sup>265</sup> Mortimer, 29.



“honey secrets” and protected from the dangerous world by the playpen of a maternal body?<sup>266</sup>

We have already seen how the “sheer profusion and incoherence” of Venus’s protean “persuasions” may be understood at the Sophianic level.<sup>267</sup> She is seeking the Sacred Bridegroom who is to rescue her from a world whose author and prisoner she has accidentally become. She is seeking him in Adonis who is, at the same time, her son Jaldabaoth, for Adonis has become the Puritanical demiurge he worships—the false God of the Biblical literalist who has taken over her creation, imprisoned her within it, and anathematized her as a diabolical whore.<sup>268</sup> On the Hermetic level (recall that Hermeticism is a crucial aspect of the confluence I am calling Gnosticism), her approach to Adonis is Hermes Trismegistus’s sales-pitch to the Puritan. The reason it does not work on him is he views her syntheses as incoherent and her idealism as vain flattery. She functions as an embodiment of these Hermetic alchemical texts that encourage man to see himself, as he presently is, as “the field’s chief flower, sweet above compare” (8), rather than as an irredeemably evil worm in need of a permanent makeover, as the Puritanical God would have it. These texts, in sharp contrast to Biblical literalism, promise divinity to man in the here and now, encourage an outlook of freedom without restriction, and embolden its reader to become all he may imagine himself to be. This, for the Puritanical Adonis, is Luciferian pride. She is selling the philosopher’s stone to Adonis; she is promising him the elixir of life; she is calling upon the muses to grant her the eloquence to express to Adonis his divine potential; she is trying to get him to revoke Puritanism and join her secret society dedicated to the realization of his own inner deity, none of which interests him. Her

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<sup>266</sup> Mortimer, 27.

<sup>267</sup> Mortimer, 29.

<sup>268</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

urgency is best explained on the Sophianic level: to save herself, the Goddess must save Adonis from the Jaldabaoth he has already become; and to save himself he must save the Goddess, for on the mythic plane they are one and the same.

Moreover, the Petrarchan phrase, “More white and red than doves or roses are” (10), as well as praising man’s beauty—and by implication, his supremacy over all things—is an example of alchemical conjunction, which fittingly evokes, through its alchemically labile construction, the “Red Man and his White Wife” whom the alchemist’s *magnum opus* is dedicated to marrying.<sup>269</sup> The alchemically labile sentence serves as a contraction of two clauses—‘More white than doves are *and* more red than roses are,’ but where the comparison of the “and” with the “or” results in what is productive alchemical fusion to the syncretic Gnostic but vain confusion to the Puritanical Adonis. This alchemical conjunction fittingly follows the attempted synthesis of Adonis’s male and female attributes, evoking the “hermaphrodite” which the alchemist’s *magnum opus* is designed to produce,<sup>270</sup> and which Adonis’s Puritanism will keep him from becoming. Harwood confirms the “hermaphrodite” to be a “favourite Neoplatonic image” and argues the ostensibly-but-not-quite-consummated hermaphrodite in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* III.xii.46 inspired Shakespeare’s near-incorporation of Venus and Adonis into one.<sup>271</sup> Loraine Fletcher writes that “[a]n environmentalist reading might suggest that if we ignore our kinship with the animals as Adonis does, if we see them as merely food, the food will strike back.”<sup>272</sup> On my theosophical reading, we might say that, for refusing to become the spiritual

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<sup>269</sup> Healy, 21.

<sup>270</sup> Healy, 145.

<sup>271</sup> Harwood, 52.

<sup>272</sup> Loraine Fletcher, “Animal Rites: A Reading of *Venus and Adonis*.” *Critical Survey*. Vol. 17, No. 3 (2005), 12.

Hermaphrodite of the syncretic Gnostic, Adonis is, with ‘savage irony’ (as Price would put it),<sup>273</sup> fatally castrated by one. By a mortal wound to the groin, he is slain by the boar, whose “peculiarly hermaphroditic nature” is “almost universally recognized in mythology”<sup>274</sup>—a hermaphrodite comprising what Hughes calls the rival brother (Mars, 97-114) and the infernal aspect of Venus.<sup>275</sup> As Mortimer observes,

The hermaphrodite figure is particularly relevant to *Venus and Adonis* because we already think of both protagonists in bisexual terms—Adonis as a hunter, proud of his male autonomy and yet feminine in his beauty and virginally fearful of sexual invasion; Venus as a woman inviting penetration, yet attracted by a beauty that, with its enticing hollows, casts her in the male role. What could be more fitting than that one doubly sexual identity should replace two split sexual identities and that sexual fusion should be the answer to sexual confusion.<sup>276</sup>

Peter Dow Webster, emphasizing the boar’s distinctively masculine traits, even sees the creature as the castrating “archetypal primal father,”<sup>277</sup> as figured, we might add, by a poet inclined to the ‘Gnostic’ tendency. James Schiffer’s Lacanian reading even understands the boar as the “Name-of-the-Father, representative of the symbolic order, the Other (as locus of signification), the Law.”<sup>278</sup> William E. Sheidley also corroborates this reading when he contends the boar to be “the locus of [Adonis’] missing phallic impulse,”<sup>279</sup> the “return,” as Schiffer puts

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<sup>273</sup> Price, 119.

<sup>274</sup> See Hughes’s lengthy footnote, 11-12.

<sup>275</sup> Hughes, 11-12.

<sup>276</sup> Mortimer, 101.

<sup>277</sup> Peter Dow Webster, “A Critical Fantasy or Fugue.” *American Imago* 6 (1949), 300.

<sup>278</sup> James Schiffer, “Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis: A Lacanian Tragicomedy of Desire.” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 371.

<sup>279</sup> William E. Sheidley, “‘Unless It Be a Boar’: Love and Wisdom in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*.” *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974), 3-15.

it, “in objective form of what Adonis has repressed.”<sup>280</sup> For the Gnostic, Adonis’s Puritanical anathematization of the invisible world (his repression of the unconscious, of which the libido is a crucial subset) inevitably manifests as one’s own murderer. That is, on the deepest level, Adonis’s Puritanical repression of sexuality symbolizes more broadly Puritanism’s anathematization of the hidden world which Gnosticism is committed to exploring—the hidden world of the unconscious, the dream-world that is the visual imagination, the invisible world of abstract principles which undergirds all of visible nature. The poem suggests that to anathematize one’s own unconscious, to repress one’s visual imagination, to render nature deaf and mute is to slay one’s very own soul.

Not only this, but line 10 simultaneously evokes the commandment of the Biblical Christ (what is, for the Gnostic, the sham Christ): “be ye therefore wise as serpents, and innocent as doves.”<sup>281</sup> The Biblical Christ commands Christians to be wise as something that is evil, yet innocent as something that is harmless (one is to be knowledgeable of the devices of the devil so as not to be corrupted by them; one is to know how they are employed but avoid employing them oneself). Venus praises man (Adonis) for what he already is: simultaneously more white than the whitest thing there is (doves) and more red than the reddest thing there is (roses). Her claim (like Christ’s commandment) is presented in the form of a paradox: how can one be wise as a serpent *and* innocent as a dove? (Surely if one lacks the slyness of the serpent, one cannot be as wise as one); and how can one be more white than doves are *and* more red than roses are? (Surely if one is both, one is neither.) For Venus, Adonis does not need to be told, ‘Be innocent as doves’; he is already whiter than them. He simply needs to realize the fact. That is, for the Gnostic, man

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<sup>280</sup> Schiffer, 371.

<sup>281</sup> *Matthew 10:16 GNV*.

(Adonis) does not need to be told what to do (by the Puritanical God); rather, he needs to realize the supreme beauty (divinity) already latent within him. Furthermore, the phrase ‘more white than doves are,’ echoing as it does Mathew 10:16, may suggest that Adonis is more innocent than even doves are (rather than inherently irredeemable, as the Puritanical God would have it). In this case, the word “red” in the phrase ‘more red than roses are,’ would align itself with the word “wise” in Matthew 10:16, and the word “roses” with Matthew 10:16’s “serpents.” Thus the “red,” associated as it is with carnal passion, and aligning itself as it does with the wisdom of serpents in Matthew 10:16, may therefore suggest the ‘serpentine wisdom’ of the Gnostic which is viewed by the Puritan as carnal knowledge. For Adonis, the serpentine wisdom of the Gnostic is antithetical to the white dove-like innocence of Puritanism, but for Venus (the Gnostic Sophia), they are not diametrically opposed. On his view, he is to be wise to her devilish devices, that he may remain unblemished by them. For her, he may illuminate himself through Gnosis and remain innocent in the process.<sup>282</sup>

Venus’s anti-Puritanical ennoblement of humanity is evocative of the ‘damnably heretical’ Emerald Tablet whose “first precept states, ‘That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.’”<sup>283</sup> The poem precisely enacts this above-below correspondence (1-3) and suggests it via the heavenly Venus’s likeness with the earthly Adonis. She, a celestial Goddess (the heavenly Neoplatonic form of Love) is, if anything, more ‘anthropomorphic’ (more human in her emotional expression) than the earthly Adonis. The elusive “miracles of one thing” to be accomplished are the miracles of the alchemical mystery whereby Venus (and the vast system of

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<sup>282</sup> See Irenaeus, Ch. VI for a Church Father’s perception of this Gnostic view. According to him, Gnostics viewed themselves as immune from the Biblical God’s judgment.

<sup>283</sup> Healy, 16. This is also stated in the broadly ‘Gnostic’ *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, line 22.

correspondences she embodies—Neoplatonic Love, Roman Catholicism, paganism, femininity, Sophianic Gnosis) is to be married with Adonis (Neoplatonic Beauty, Protestantism, Biblical literalism, masculinity, the Puritanical Goddess-repressing God) to produce the alchemical “hermaphrodite” of oneness,<sup>284</sup> whereby Sophia and the “Aeon Jesus” may return to their original matrimonial state. The Emerald Tablet’s second precept “talks of ‘the contemplation of one’” (that is, Venus’s transgression of binaries to render such oppositions as male and female, divinity and humanity, and red and white ‘one thing’).<sup>285</sup> Another of its precepts “promises, ‘Thus thou wilt possess the glory of the brightness of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly far from thee.’”<sup>286</sup> This grandiloquence is mirrored in Venus’s assessment that Adonis’s beauty is thrice that of the very Goddess of Love (7) and stains that of all women (divine ones included) by comparison (9). He is more lovely than humankind as conventionally conceived by the Puritan (9). He is “sweet above compare” with anything in the universe (8). He is more “white” than “doves,” more “red” than “roses” (10)—in a word, superior to all the things of this world.<sup>287</sup>

Venus’s approach to Adonis aligns itself with Sir Francis Bacon’s “audacious belief” that natural magic allowed the scientist to encourage nature to “yield her secrets, which gave him enhanced ‘powers’ that could be deployed . . . to ‘the effecting of all things possible.’”<sup>288</sup> Venus promises Adonis a “thousand honey secrets” (17), and suggests, by the magniloquent epithets she bestows upon him, that there are no limitations for Adonis. He might, as we shall see, even become the sun god he once was. This “audacious belief” of Bacon’s was “underpinned by a heightened confidence in human potential that was also supplied in swathes by the

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<sup>284</sup> Healy, 145.

<sup>285</sup> Healy, 16.

<sup>286</sup> Healy, 16.

<sup>287</sup> Healy, 16.

<sup>288</sup> Healy, 30.

*Hermetica*.<sup>289</sup>

A human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god . . . He cultivates the earth; he swiftly mixes into the elements; he plumbs the depths of the sea in the keenness of his mind. Everything is permitted him.<sup>290</sup>

In *Venus and Adonis* it is a Goddess worshipping man, not man worshipping God. She is the one honouring him. She emboldens him to change “his nature into a god's, as if he were a god” (the sun god). In Venus's eyes, the only thing between man (Adonis) and the stars is himself. In Adonis's Puritanical eyes, however, this is all clearly heretical: man is not “a living thing to be worshipped,” and he does not of his own doing change “his nature into a god's.” It is also not at all true that “everything is permitted him.” He is to patiently wait for God to transform him into a ‘son of God’ at the resurrection,<sup>291</sup> and there are few things God *does* permit him to do.<sup>292</sup>

The grandiose promises of Venus may also be comparable with those of the Hermeticist as they are put in Christian—but not Puritanical—terms in the following passage:

Let him [man] revere himself as an image of the divine God. Let him hope to ascend again to God, as soon as the Divine Majesty deigns in some way to descend to him. Let him love God with all his heart, so to transform himself into Him, who through singular love wonderfully transformed Himself into Man.<sup>293</sup>

In *Venus and Adonis*, the Divine Majesty (in the form of Venus) has deigned “in some way to

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<sup>289</sup> Healy, 30.

<sup>290</sup> *Asclepius, Hermetica*, Trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge UP, 1995), 69.

<sup>291</sup> *Romans 8:19 GNV*.

<sup>292</sup> *I Corinthians 6:9 GNV; Galatians 5:19-21 GNV*.

<sup>293</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *The Christian Religion, Opera Omnia* (Basle, 1561; reprinted Turn: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1959); ‘Introduction,’ *Letters*, vol. 1, 22-23.

descend” to man (in the form of Adonis), and it is as if Venus expects that, “as soon as” she does so, Adonis shall “ascend again to God” (to his sun god status) through consummating the matrimonial mystery with her.<sup>294</sup> Again, this Christianized brand of Hermeticism, Christianized though it be, is heretical to the Puritan. For him, it is vain to “revere” oneself, and to “transform” oneself “into Him.”<sup>295</sup> In response to this statement of Ficino’s, the Puritanical Adonis might say, ‘Yes, “through singular love,” God “wonderfully transformed Himself into Man,” but it is God who will transform us into the sons of God, not the other way around.’<sup>296</sup>

As for the stanza’s final couplet (“Nature that made thee with herself at strife/Saith that the world hath ending with thy life,” 11-12), Mortimer notes that, for the modern reader, it “inevitably invites comparison with Shakespeare’s own Sonnet 20 on the ‘Master-Mistress,’”<sup>297</sup> the last six lines of which merit especial attention:

And for a woman wert thou first created,  
 Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,  
 And by addition me of thee defeated  
 By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.  
 But since she pricked thee out for women’s pleasure,  
 Mine be thy love and thy love’s use their treasure. (9-14)

As Mortimer notes, in this context, the couplet of lines 11-12 of *Venus and Adonis* becomes richly ironic:

In the sonnet an apparently transgressive situation, the desire of male for male, is

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<sup>294</sup> Ficino, 22-23.

<sup>295</sup> Ficino, 22-23.

<sup>296</sup> Ficino, 22-23.

<sup>297</sup> Mortimer, 42.



restored to conformity with the natural order by the lover's renunciation of sexual satisfaction. In the narrative poem an apparently natural situation, the desire of female for male, is shown as inwardly transgressive and the lover insists on physical satisfaction. The "one thing" that defeats the speaker of the *Sonnets* would be very much to the purpose of Venus and it turns out to be the one thing she cannot control.<sup>298</sup>

Here it is the Puritanical Adonis who renounces Love's satisfaction. It is difficult for him to reconcile the argument that "nature is a straightforward procreative machine" with a nature that evidently "uses effeminate beauty to excite female desire."<sup>299</sup> As Mortimer writes, "Venus may not be fully aware of her own complex and contradictory urges, but what she will discover in her descent to human love is truly a nature 'with herself at strife,' too complex, too incoherent and too contradictory to offer any kind of norm."<sup>300</sup> Her desire (which is the spiritual alchemist's desire) for ideal syntheses between ostensibly mutually exclusive antitheses is precluded by the Puritanical perception of Adonis who fails to see productive fusion therein. Venus is compelled as a result to "change manner and argument without warning,"<sup>301</sup> as if constantly gauging Adonis's responsiveness (or lack thereof) and adjusting her argument in accordance with his silent rejections. Consistent with my extension of Hughes's insight, Mortimer observes that Venus's "inexhaustible profusion" and the "inventivity of her rhetoric" emerges "in the long run" as the "desperate adaptability of someone whose initial certainties have been undermined and who is reduced to clutching at straws."<sup>302</sup> Her initial certainty was that "man" (Adonis) shall

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<sup>298</sup> Mortimer, 42.

<sup>299</sup> Mortimer, 43.

<sup>300</sup> Mortimer, 43.

<sup>301</sup> Mortimer, 43.

<sup>302</sup> Mortimer, 43.

“ascend again to God” (to ‘sun god’ status) “as soon as the Divine Majesty” (Venus) “deigns in some way to descend to him.”<sup>303</sup> Adonis’s Puritanical rejection of Gnosis undermines her “initial certainties” and she is thereby “reduced” to the tragicomic role of desperate adaptability incarnate.<sup>304</sup>

Moreover, the couplet “Nature that made thee with herself at strife/Saith that the world hath ending with thy life” (11-12), beyond its purely Neoplatonic application, may capture yet another Puritanical-Gnostic distinction. For the Puritan, the spiritual “life” of Adonis,<sup>305</sup> in his capacity as the Biblical Christ, renders the world dead. That is, from the Puritanical perspective, the life that is in Christ conquers and destroys the world that could not destroy him.<sup>306</sup> The true Christian is to be at enmity with the world.<sup>307</sup> But from the Gnostic perspective, nature produced Puritanism which has anathematized her into an evil void, thereby rendering dead the mother that gave it life. Venus, in her capacity as the Gnostic Sophia, is the one who, through her fall from heaven, became nature, and Jaldabaoth is the son of hers who through his Puritanical misperception reduces, imprisons, and spiritually slays her.<sup>308</sup>

The next stanza is most revealing of Venus’s allegiance to Gnosticism:

‘Vouchsafe, thou wonder, to alight thy steed  
 And rein his proud head to the saddle-bow;  
 If thou wilt deign this favour, for thy meed  
 A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know.

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<sup>303</sup> Ficino, 22-23.

<sup>304</sup> Mortimer, 43.

<sup>305</sup> *John 3:16 GNV.*

<sup>306</sup> *John 16:33 GNV.*

<sup>307</sup> *John 15:19 GNV; James 4:4 GNV.*

<sup>308</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

Here come and sit where never serpent hisses;

And, being sat, I'll smother thee with kisses. (13-18)

J.W. Lever, who sees Venus as the Puritanical Adonis does, calls her “the personification of lust that sullies all it touches; mistress of the dark horse from Plato’s *Phaedrus*; a figure of evil eminence comparable with Milton’s Satan.”<sup>309</sup> Franklin M. Dickey concurs.<sup>310</sup> Don Cameron Allen, who had drawn the Platonic parallel before Lever, concludes less viscerally that Venus’s lesson, which she will draw at 259-408, is marred by Shakespeare’s phrase “breeding jennet” (260).<sup>311</sup> Streitberger, also siding with Adonis, argues that the “description of the horse in Plato . . . is part of his description of the soul, composed of the passionate and docile horses and the charioteer. Shakespeare’s sophisticated readers could hardly have missed seeing the reverse of Venus’ allegory—the bit and rider as morality and reason abandoned for passion.”<sup>312</sup> While such critics as Miller also read the horse as representative of the lower passion governed by reason,<sup>313</sup> the horse symbol, as Muir observes,<sup>314</sup> may also be seen as inherently ambivalent, used as it is in *Antony and Cleopatra* to celebrate erotic love (“O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!”)<sup>315</sup> Rather than simply siding with Adonis as these critics do, we might see the poet as exploiting the symbol’s inherent ambivalence to reinforce the poem’s Puritanical-Gnostic structure.

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<sup>309</sup> J. W. Lever, “Venus and the Second Chance.” *Shakespeare Survey* 15 (Cambridge UP, 1962), 81.

<sup>310</sup> Dickey, 53.

<sup>311</sup> Allen, 100-111.

<sup>312</sup> Streitberger, 175.

<sup>313</sup> Miller, 249-264.

<sup>314</sup> Muir, 9.

<sup>315</sup> William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*. *The Norton Shakespeare: Volume II: Later Plays*. Gen. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. Eds. Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus. 2nd ed. (Norton, 2008), 1.5.9-22.

By having Venus ask Adonis to “alight” his “steed/And rein his proud head to the saddle-bow” (13-14)—and by having her promise that, if he should do so, he shall be rewarded with a “thousand honey secrets” (17)—the poet captures at once, in a single image, how Gnosis is viewed from the Gnostic perspective and the Puritanical perspective. From the Gnostic perspective, Gnosis (cultivation of occult power through esoteric knowledge) emancipates man from his bestial nature and elevates him into divinity.<sup>316</sup> On this view, Adonis’s horse represents his bestial fetters (so long as he is on his horse, he is tied to his animal nature). From the Puritanical perspective, however, Adonis on his horse represents the rational ego’s executive control over his animal instincts, and more generally man’s dominion over the animal kingdom.<sup>317</sup> Venus asks Adonis to alight his steed, not so that he can walk freely on his own, but so that she can take its place. By replacing the horse, she may be understood, from the Puritanical perspective, as inserting her demoniacal self into his subconscious (which was previously occupied by his bestial instincts as symbolized by his horse, but where she will now be the one in control). By contrast, the Gnostic views the substitution of a Goddess—divinity—for a horse—animality—as an improvement. Fittingly, the Puritan views the Gnostic’s self-deification as proud ambition,<sup>318</sup> and yet here Venus refers to the horse’s head as the “proud” one (14).

Should Adonis “deign this favour,” for his “meed” (15)—his reward, though Mortimer reads a pun for “mead,” suggestive of the “honey-pot” between Venus’s legs<sup>319</sup>—he is promised “a thousand honey secrets” (16), which is, for the Puritan, the forbidden knowledge the infernal

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<sup>316</sup> See Irenaeus on the Gnostic distinction between “animal men” and those of a “spiritual nature,” Ch. VI.

<sup>317</sup> *Genesis 1:26 GNV; Genesis 1:28 GNV.*

<sup>318</sup> *Genesis 3:4-5 GNV.*

<sup>319</sup> Mortimer, 45.

serpent promised Eve.<sup>320</sup> Yet this time, the exchange of forbidden knowledge for one's 'horse' (what is the rational ego's executive control over one's animal instincts for the Puritan,<sup>321</sup> but base animality for the Gnostic,<sup>322</sup> and what fittingly was dominion over the animal kingdom for Adam and Eve)<sup>323</sup> is promised to take place "where never serpent hisses" (17)—a phrase all too reminiscent of the infernal serpent's promise that Eve shall not die.<sup>324</sup> Whereas the serpent falsely promised immunity from death, here Venus promises an absence of serpents who make false promises. Hamilton notes that, in the very act of promising a prelapsarian state purged of the infernal serpent's susurrations, she is "hissing herself like a serpent" at him.<sup>325</sup> Once Adonis has been "sat" (18)—which Mortimer reads as an event that is to take place on Venus's lap,<sup>326</sup> in which case the "serpent" (17), typical of Venus's gender inversions, may, in her capacity as a male devil garbed as a goddess,<sup>327</sup> have an ironic phallic connotation—Venus promises to "smother" him with kisses (18).

Mortimer adds that the "honey is, however, not merely erotic; it also suggests the maternal tempting of a child with sweetmeats, and Shakespeare may intend us to hear the mother-rhyme in 'I'll smother thee with kisses' (18)."<sup>328</sup> Mortimer's reading here, apparently unbeknownst to him, is utterly consistent with Hughes. The word "(s)mother" encapsulates Venus's heavenly maternal aspect and her earthly bridal aspect at once—she wishes to both

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<sup>320</sup> *Genesis 3:4-5 GNV.*

<sup>321</sup> *1 Thessalonians 4:3 GNV; Galatians 5:22-24 GNV; 1 Peter 2:11 GNV.*

<sup>322</sup> See Irenaeus, Ch. VI.

<sup>323</sup> *Genesis 1:26 GNV; Genesis 1:28 GNV.*

<sup>324</sup> *Genesis 3:4 GNV.*

<sup>325</sup> Hamilton, 150.

<sup>326</sup> Mortimer, 45.

<sup>327</sup> *1 Corinthians 10:20 GNV.* See also John Milton, *Paradise Lost*. Ed. John Leonard (Penguin, 1998), I.423-424: "Spirits when they please/Can either sex assume, or both."

<sup>328</sup> Mortimer, 45.

*smother* him as a lover and *mother* him. Also apparently unbeknownst to Mortimer, his general claim that there is no consistent Neoplatonic ascent in *Venus and Adonis* is not inconsistent with Hughes's reading. Kolin writes that "[g]enerally speaking . . . critics who explore Venus' role as mother have emphasized either the milch doe or vulture side of her nature."<sup>329</sup> In doing so, they have neglected to account for the interrelation between her disparate natures. Hughes's insight allows us to see Venus as the heavenly "milch doe" Mother Goddess who is intent on being Adonis's earthly Sacred Bride but who ends up being collapsed by Adonis's Puritanical misperception into her infernal aspect and thus condemned to live out the "vulture side of her nature." Mortimer observes here, as Hughes does, that Venus's "desire for Adonis has, from the start, co-existed with maternal protective elements and her transformation into a *mater dolorosa* remains erotic."<sup>330</sup> Of the word "smother," he goes on to write that the "verb, with its blend of physical aggression and over-protectiveness, is typical of Venus and should lead one to appreciate why Adonis later argues (523-28) that intercourse with her would be a threat to his development rather than a step towards manhood,"<sup>331</sup> where "step towards manhood" may be understood as symbolic of the step towards godhood the Gnostic Sophia promises the Puritan, and where "threat to his development" may be understood as the way in which the Puritan views Sophia's Gnosis as ultimately inhibitive to one's spiritual development by offering a counterfeit divinity that leads to devil possession and ultimately eternal torment.<sup>332</sup>

Venus, as if aware she has given away too much—as if aware of how the Puritanical Adonis is taking what she has just offered—shifts to what turns out to be a vain attempt to

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<sup>329</sup> Kolin, 36.

<sup>330</sup> Mortimer, 12.

<sup>331</sup> Mortimer, 45.

<sup>332</sup> *2 Corinthians 11:14-15 GNV.*

mitigate the damage:

‘And yet not cloy thy lips with loathed satiety,

But rather famish them amid their plenty,

Making them red, and pale, with fresh variety;

Ten kisses short as one, one long as twenty.

A summer’s day will seem an hour but short,

Being wasted in such time-beguiling sport.’ (19-24)

As Mortimer observes, Venus “seems to recognize the negative implications of her own imagery and seeks to correct them. Just as earlier she had promised secret knowledge without loss of innocence, so now she promises satisfaction without loss of desire.”<sup>333</sup> All she ends up doing is confirming the Puritan’s suspicions by offering the same incoherent, too-good-to-be-true Gnostic formula with different variables plugged into it. Perhaps Adonis’s less-than-enthusiastic reaction compels her to promise the paradox that is moderation-in-overindulgence, when she tries to reassure him with an addendum (“And yet not cloy thy lips with loathed satiety,/But rather famish them amid their plenty,” 19-20). The Puritan’s gripe with the things of this world is that they do not satisfy: with pleasure comes sin, and with sin, death.<sup>334</sup> She therefore promises him not only “fresh variety” through malnourishment amid excess (21), but she even ‘shows’ him how this can be when she promises “Ten kisses short as one, one long as twenty” (22). As Mortimer observes, this inducement, “like so many of Venus’ inducements, cuts both ways at once, for she cannot promise endless pleasure without simultaneously presenting the sexual appetite as one that cannot be assuaged.”<sup>335</sup> Mortimer writes of line 22 that

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<sup>333</sup> Mortimer, 45.

<sup>334</sup> *Romans 5:12 GNV; James 1:15 GNV.*

<sup>335</sup> Mortimer, 46.

Instead of the predictable antimetabole ABBA which might suggest a vicious circle, we are given ABBA+, conveying the sense of an upward spiral which, rather than returning to the starting-point, rises to an ever-higher intensity where the confusion of time (what's long? what's short?) eliminates the problem of alternating states. But time, after all, will not be beguiled and the poem will continue to remind us of its passing (177-80, 529-34, 727-32, 853-58).<sup>336</sup>

That is, rather than the predictable, 'Ten kisses short as one, one long as ten,' ten is transformed into twenty, thus offering a glimpse into the occult means whereby she might provide the extraordinary—and therefore suspect—"fresh variety" she has promised (21). But the word "wasted" (24)—evoking as it does, for the modern reader, Sonnet 129's "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame"<sup>337</sup>—will not work so well on the ear of Adonis, nor will the phrase "time-beguiling sport" (24), reminding him as it will of the beguilement of Eve.<sup>338</sup>

*The Gnostic Sophia's Extreme Passion*

S. Clark Hulse reads the poem as conveying "three Venuses—comic, sensual, and violent—all embodying earthly love but differently depicted to reveal different aspects."<sup>339</sup> John Doebler also perceives the ever-shifting nature of Venus when he claims the "largely comic Venus at the beginning of the poem is perceived by the distanced reader as appealing one

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<sup>336</sup> Mortimer, 46.

<sup>337</sup> William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 129." *The Norton Shakespeare: Volume I: Early Plays and Poems*. Gen. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. Eds. Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus (Norton, 2008), 1798.

<sup>338</sup> *Genesis 3:13 GNV*.

<sup>339</sup> Hulse, 209.



moment and frightening the next.”<sup>340</sup> Like Doebler, Hughes perceives Venus’s ever-shifting nature, and like Hulse, he reads Venus as having three aspects, only he categorizes them as follows: the Divine Mother (her heavenly aspect), the Sacred Bride (her earthly aspect), and the Queen of Hell (her infernal aspect, to which Adonis’s Puritanical misperception collapses her).<sup>341</sup> Ellen April Harwood corroborates Hughes’s triune Venus when she writes that “Neo-platonists” (one of the things the syncretic Gnostics of the early modern period were) “distinguished Venus Urania, who symbolized the beauty of the divine mind, from Venus Pandemos, beauty realized in the sublunary world,” and adds that Spenser’s Garden of Adonis, which she views as a prominent source for Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*,<sup>342</sup> specifically “excludes the third Venus of the Neo-platonists, the bestial Venus identified with lust.”<sup>343</sup> João Froes further confirms Hughes’s view to be consistent with the ancient tradition of a Venus possessing these disparate aspects.<sup>344</sup> In line with the view that Shakespeare’s Venus is a syncretic fusion of Venus and Sophia (among many other things), Irenaeus also describes Sophia as having this ever-shifting nature when he writes of the Gnostics:

For at one time, as they affirm, she would weep and lament on account of being left alone in the midst of darkness and vacuity; while, at another time, reflecting on the light which had forsaken her, she would be filled with joy, and laugh; then,

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<sup>340</sup> John Doebler, “The Many Faces of Love: Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*.” *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983), 38.

<sup>341</sup> Hughes, 11-12.

<sup>342</sup> Harwood, 48.

<sup>343</sup> Harwood, 48.

<sup>344</sup> João Froes, “Shakespeare’s Venus and the Venus of Classical Mythology.” *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin (Garland, 1997), 301-307.

again, she would be struck with terror; or, at other times, would sink into consternation and bewilderment.<sup>345</sup>

While Hughes is less clear about Adonis, he may also be read as having three aspects: the Sun God (his heavenly aspect), the Sacred Bridegroom (his earthly aspect), and the Puritanical Goddess-repressor who is reincarnated as the Goddess-raping Tarquin in *Lucrece* (his infernal aspect).<sup>346</sup> According to the Gnostic, for whom reality is mental rather than physical (and hence for whom perception dictates reality),<sup>347</sup> Adonis's Puritanical presuppositions cause him to 'misperceive' the Goddess who is inherently a potentiality rather than a fully-formed actuality.<sup>348</sup> He is only able to see her infernal aspect,<sup>349</sup> which is why her heavenly and earthly aspects are never able to come into complete focus in the poem and are ever inextricable from each other as well as from the infernal one by which they are condemned to be ever sullied.<sup>350</sup> Initiation into her mystery is unpredictable: as the neophyte sees her, so will the Goddess manifest.<sup>351</sup> This Gnostic doctrine might be summarized thus: *The world in the soul makes the world the soul is in.*

Healy corroborates Hughes's understanding of the Gnostic Goddess in her study of Renaissance spiritual alchemy. For the early modern Alchemist who encounters the Goddess, she is a potentiality whose ontology is beholden to the whims of her percipient:

Always dark and female, she is both the 'power of desire and longing in man' and a potent force that 'develops all the capacities hidden in the soul, against or in keeping with the desires of the ego, depending on whether the latter assimilates

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<sup>345</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Ch. IV.ii.

<sup>346</sup> Hughes, 78-84.

<sup>347</sup> Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 27.

<sup>348</sup> Healy, 116.

<sup>349</sup> Hughes, 11-12; 54-57; 78-84.

<sup>350</sup> Hughes, 11-12; 54-57; 78-84.

<sup>351</sup> Healy, 116.

the power of nature, or becomes its victim.’ As Sophia or ‘wisdom’ she is a positive, nurturing power but as extreme passion she binds the soul and blocks spiritual progression.<sup>352</sup>

The Goddess’s “ambivalent, shifting nature – actually a reflection of her lover’s conflicting desires – and her spiritually improving potential help us to understand” not only the “seemingly ironic Shakespearean lines” that are Healy’s concern, but the Venus of the poem that is ours.<sup>353</sup> This description of the Gnostic Goddess is precisely the sort of description one would expect on the antithetical framework Hughes’s insight invites. If Venus functions, at the allegorical level, as the Gnostic Sophia, the poet should represent her as having this “ambivalent, shifting nature” to serve as a reflection of Adonis’s shifting desire (or as a desperate response to his persistent lack thereof). Moreover, her “spiritually improving potential” is latent in the poem’s structure. The combination of Adonis’s i) mythological heritage, the ii) pun which his name affords, and his iii) relation to Titan render him a potential sun god (175-198). Venus as Sophia promises esoteric knowledge (“A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know,” 16) whereby Adonis might realize his divine potential. She might develop “all the capacities hidden in the soul,” only, in Adonis’s case, this development is “against” rather than “in keeping with” the “desires” of his “ego.” Adonis, the rational Puritanical ego, does not assimilate the “power of nature” but rather “becomes its victim.” From the Gnostic perspective, she is the Goddess Sophia and therefore the bearer of esoteric wisdom: she is a “positive, nurturing power.” But for the Puritanical Adonis, she manifests as an overwhelmingly “extreme passion.” She “binds” his “soul” and “blocks spiritual progression,” as signified by her suffocating physical aggression.

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<sup>352</sup> Healy, 116. Quotes from Burkhardt, *Alchemy*, 123, 118.

<sup>353</sup> Healy, 116.

Mortimer writes that through her “profuse and ingenious rhetoric” Venus “excites herself more than she excites Adonis and the result is a potentially endless rhythm of frustration where eloquence repeatedly topples over into physical aggression and where the defeat of that aggression provokes a new bout of eloquence.”<sup>354</sup> The reader is introduced to Venus’s physical aggression in the very next stanza:

With this, she seizeth on his sweating palm,  
 The precedent of pith and livelihood,  
 And, trembling in her passion, calls it balm—  
 Earth’s sovereign salve to do a goddess good.  
 Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force  
 Courageously to pluck him from his horse. (25-30)

Mortimer’s reading of lines 25-28 is particularly pertinent:

Gypsies try to read palms in a sense favorable to their clients: since Venus here is both gypsy and client, she has no difficulty in making the hand provide the answer she wants. Her misreading predictably leads to more hyperbole which culminates in more physical action. As if ashamed of her own earthiness, she renames the sweat with imagery that combines the politico-religious (the anointing of a monarch) with the medical. By a startling inversion of the cosmic hierarchy it is the earthly subject who produces a salve to heal the queen and goddess.<sup>355</sup>

This “startling inversion” is a prime example of the Gnostic’s “turning of things upside down.”<sup>356</sup> Rather than the Puritan’s sweat being what, for him, it is (sweat in need of relief from

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<sup>354</sup> Mortimer, 27.

<sup>355</sup> Mortimer, 47.

<sup>356</sup> *Isaiah 29:16 KJV*.

the divine), she metamorphoses it into something capable of—even necessary for—healing divinities. She inverts the cosmic hierarchy so that it is Puritanism that has rendered the gods ill, rather than sin that has rendered man ill and in need of divine redemption.<sup>357</sup>

The key factor in this stanza is rage. The *rage* of line 29's "enraged" is echoed in the *rage* of line 30's "Courageously," upon which the stress also fittingly falls ("Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force/Courageously to pluck him from his horse"). Rufus Putney, who wants to reduce the poem to its comic dimension, summarizes his view when he writes that "Shakespeare's jocose tone fumigates the eroticism and belies the critical conviction that he had any serious intention beyond writing a delightful poem."<sup>358</sup> Putney sees lines 29 and 30 simply as a set-up for the "absurd picture that follows of Venus with the flushed, indignant Adonis tucked under one arm, his horse's reins over the other, hastening to the bank that is their destined battleground."<sup>359</sup> The comic dimension is surely there; however, if we avail ourselves of Hughes's insight and allow ourselves to see the poem in terms of a specifically Puritanical-Gnostic conflict, an additional layer of the poem is opened up to us. Here the Goddess of Love is somehow aided by Desire (29), where the one god is imagined as being in need of divine help from the other, and where it is Love's rage that seems to summon just the divinity she needs for the occasion (29-30). It is as if Adonis's Puritanical perception has caused the Goddess of Love to split into three separate manifestations, rendering her a triune goddess of Lust comprising three parts (Love, Rage, and Desire), wherein Desire is perhaps the Mother, Rage the 'Unholy Spirit,' and she (the image of invisible Lust)<sup>360</sup> the daughter. The phrase "pluck him from his

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<sup>357</sup> *Romans 3:21-26 GNV.*

<sup>358</sup> Putney, 128.

<sup>359</sup> Putney, 126.

<sup>360</sup> See *Colossians 1:15 GNV.*

horse” also anticipates the flower-plucking imagery of lines 127-132, evoking Venus’s desire to pluck the flower of Adonis’s virginity at the same time as it foreshadows Venus’s plucking of the flower into which Adonis will be metamorphosed at death (1175).

Consistent with my thesis is Mortimer’s observation that the “dilemma of Venus who cannot resist using on Adonis the strength that she wishes he would use on her is neatly embodied” in the “hilarious cartoon-like vignette” which lines 31 and 32 comprise (“Over one arm, the lusty courser’s rein;/Under her other was the tender boy”).<sup>361</sup> Mortimer writes that with “one arm she holds the lustiness of the horse and with the other the tenderness of Adonis. What Venus wants but cannot have is the lustiness and the tenderness united in the same object. She appears momentarily as a gigantic walking antithesis.”<sup>362</sup> Putney views lines 31 and 32 as doing nothing more than acquainting the reader “with Shakespeare’s mirth,”<sup>363</sup> but an additional layer of the poem is opened up to us if we read this “hilarious cartoon-like vignette” as the embodiment of the spiritual alchemist’s desire to synthesize all ostensibly mutually exclusive antitheses (and how this syncretic project appears to the Puritan). Just as Venus promised an ideal combination of forbidden knowledge and prelapsarian innocence (recall how I unpacked the line “More white and red than doves or roses are,” 10), then promised satisfaction without loss of desire, and just as she “cannot argue that Adonis should take the male initiative without effectively appropriating the male role for herself,” and just as her “advocacy of procreation (in keeping with her mythical status as Venus Genitrix) fails to mask the underlying truth that one aspect of her passion is not to have a child by Adonis but to have Adonis as her child,”<sup>364</sup> so now

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<sup>361</sup> Mortimer, 48.

<sup>362</sup> Mortimer, 48.

<sup>363</sup> Putney, 126.

<sup>364</sup> Mortimer, 16.

she wants the “lustiness” of the horse united with the “tenderness” of Adonis and the best she can do is hold both simultaneously.

That immediately after Venus ties Adonis’s horse she assays to tie the “rider” (40) is confirmation for the Puritan that the evil one behind Gnosticism does not have man’s best interests in mind (or else this behavior of hers is explained by the Puritanical perception that compels it to so manifest). At stanza 9, the poet appears to adopt Venus’s perspective in inverting Adonis’s gender by applying the phrase “maiden burning” to his red cheeks (50). But it is the shift between stanzas 10 and 11 that most aptly captures Hughes’s grasp of the changing perspectives which Mortimer also perceives. We first read:

Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,  
Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh, and bone,  
Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste  
Till either gorge be stuffed or prey be gone,  
Even so she kissed his brow, his cheek, his chin,  
And where she ends she doth anew begin. (55-60)

On Hughes’s reading, this is the Great Whore of Babylon that is the Roman Catholic Church as viewed from the Protestant censor Whitgift’s perspective,<sup>365</sup> and the perennial Goddess as reduced to her infernal aspect via Adonis’s Puritanical ‘misperception.’ As Mortimer notes, this “undeniably unpleasant” imagery “recalls Ovid’s Olympian rapists in their most bestial forms,” but the simile “tells us not so much what the desire of Venus is really like as what it looks like to the observer and, no doubt, feels like to Adonis.”<sup>366</sup> For immediately, in the next stanza, we read

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<sup>365</sup> Hughes, 52-57.

<sup>366</sup> Mortimer, 52.

what this same event feels like from Venus's perspective:

Forced to content, but never to obey,  
 Panting he lies and breatheth in her face.  
 She feedeth on the steam as on a prey  
 And calls it heavenly moisture, air of grace,  
 Wishing her cheeks were gardens full of flowers,  
 So they were dewed with such distilling showers. (61-66)

As Mortimer notes, the “contrast with the previous stanza could hardly be greater and yet we recognize that we are being offered different perspectives on the same reality.”<sup>367</sup>

Heather Dubrow observes here that Venus, in her capacity as “postlapsarian Eve,” assumes “Adam’s function” when she “names—or, more to the point, renames—the objects around her.”<sup>368</sup> Dubrow goes on to write that “Adonis too is very concerned with naming and misnaming,”<sup>369</sup> citing as evidence the lines “Call it not love, for love to heaven is fled,/Since sweating lust on earth usurped his name” (793-794). In Venus’s case, this subversive ‘renaming’ of things “typically assumes one form in particular: she tries to transform the material into the spiritual,”<sup>370</sup> precisely what the Gnostic does from the Puritanical perspective. That is, she renders spiritual the vain things of this world, magically reconstituting them by renaming them against (rather than in keeping with) the way in which the Puritanical God originally ‘named’ them. Here the Gnostic law of reversal is employed as follows. She (a celestial divinity) renders herself earthly (“gardens full of flowers,” 65) and the earthly Adonis’s breath heavenly (by

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<sup>367</sup> Mortimer, 52.

<sup>368</sup> Dubrow, 225.

<sup>369</sup> Dubrow, 241.

<sup>370</sup> Dubrow, 226.



renaming it “heavenly moisture,” 64). For the Puritan, it is God alone who bestows upon humanity the grace it so desperately needs.<sup>371</sup> Here, the divine Venus renames the earthly Adonis’s breath “air of grace” (64), thus granting him the power to bestow his grace upon her. In sum, she inverts the cosmic hierarchy by rendering herself the earthly “gardens full of flowers” (a self-transformation which recalls the Gnostic Sophia’s metamorphosis from the Pleromatic light of the heavenly heights into the earth for our sake),<sup>372</sup> and by rendering the earthly Adonis the heavens above which are to rain “distilling showers” upon her (65-66), in which case it will be the earthly mortal sustaining the celestial divinity.

This inversion is accomplished through the power of alchemical imagination, but where it is, paradoxically, the imaginary result that is most alchemical: she, a celestial Goddess, shall be “dewed” with the “distilling showers” of a mere mortal. ‘Distillation’ (alongside “dissolving, “cleansing,” and “smelting”) is one of the key processes of Renaissance alchemy which leads ultimately to the sort of “transmutation” which Venus here imagines, whereby heaven and earth switch places and are reunited through cosmic inversion.<sup>373</sup> Fittingly, as Healy notes, these processes which could be “observed taking place in the refining apparatuses of chemistry could be projected on to mental processes and vice versa.”<sup>374</sup> It is only fitting, then, that such laboratorial processes as cleansing and dissolving (cleansing Adonis’s earthly breath by dissolving it into “heavenly moisture,” and then purifying it into “air of grace,” 64) should involve the projection of laboratorial processes onto Venus’s divine imagination and lead back into the laboratorial result of her being “dewed” with “distilling showers” (66).

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<sup>371</sup> *Romans 3:21-26 GNV.*

<sup>372</sup> Hughes, 33; 349-353.

<sup>373</sup> Healy, 161.

<sup>374</sup> Healy, 161.

The lines “Look how a bird lies tangled in a net,/So fastened in her arms Adonis lies” (67-68) brings the question of liberty and autonomy to the fore (‘Which system,’ we are led to ask, ‘is more freeing, Puritanism or Gnosticism?’). Here Mortimer cautions:

The real issue is not that Venus threatens to destroy Adonis, but that she tries to deprive him of his freedom. And lest anyone should argue that this amounts to the same thing, it should be remembered that it is Adonis’ regained liberty rather than his temporary captivity that brings about his death.<sup>375</sup>

This may be read as yet another Gnostic inversion of Biblical doctrine. Just as Jehovah’s restriction of knowledge in the Garden of Eden is viewed by the Gnostic as wicked (at the same time as it was Eve’s supposed self-enfranchisement from Jehovah’s fetters that brought about her death, which in her case was spiritual rather than physical),<sup>376</sup> here Venus’s restrictiveness is rendered apparently wicked but is in reality what supposedly keeps Adonis out of harm’s way.

Mortimer reads lines 67 and 68 as the author’s invitation of a “more balanced view” after “juxtaposing the event as it appears and the event as it is subjectively reconstructed.”<sup>377</sup>

According to Mortimer, here “Adonis is still a prey of sorts, but the birdcatching simile would suggest that he is in more danger of being tamed and kept for amusement than of being eaten alive (anticipating ‘Like a wild bird being tamed with too much handling,’ 560).”<sup>378</sup> The image nicely embodies the Puritanical-Gnostic debate, as the “bird” (man insofar as he is a spirit) is here “tangled in a net” (a bad thing from the Puritanical perspective),<sup>379</sup> and yet he is perhaps entangled only so that he may be tamed (by the wisdom of the Goddess) and taught (through

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<sup>375</sup> Mortimer, 53.

<sup>376</sup> *Genesis 3 GNV*.

<sup>377</sup> Mortimer, 53.

<sup>378</sup> Mortimer, 53.

<sup>379</sup> *1 Timothy 3:7 GNV; 1 Timothy 6:9 GNV; 2 Timothy 2:26 GNV*.

Gnosis) how to fly better. It is all too fitting that Venus should be the bird in the previous image, and that Adonis should be the bird in this one: this pattern notifies the astute reader that a shift in perspective (and an attempt to reconcile the shift) has taken place. The former shows the reader in what sense Adonis sees Venus as a bird, the latter in what sense Venus (and the poet through her eyes) sees Adonis as one.

The poet then renders Venus a demoniacal rapist who derives sadistic pleasure from Adonis's "Pure shame and awed resistance" (69) to capture how the Goddess of Gnosis is viewed through Puritanical eyes. It is specifically his "resistance" which is said to have "bred more beauty in his angry eyes" (69-70), where it is, not Venus and Adonis themselves, but the sadism of Venus and the resistance of Adonis doing the breeding.<sup>380</sup> Mortimer observes that the couplet of lines 71-72 can be seen, not only in the "immediate context," in which it "points to Venus (the 'rank' current of her lust)," but also as a "generalization that is relevant to both protagonists" ("Rain added to a river that is rank/Perforce will force it overflow the bank," 71-72).<sup>381</sup> The couplet not only captures the "first of Venus' many orgasms"<sup>382</sup>—and therefore the Gnostic's wicked carnality from the Puritanical perspective<sup>383</sup>—but also the unhealthy repression of desire which the Gnostic views as the Puritan's illness.<sup>384</sup> The *r* of "Rain" literally seems to be "added" to the *r* of the "river that is rank." The consonance of the *f* sound, coupled with the assonance of the *o* sound, then captures how the rain "Perforce will force it overflow the bank," otherwise emphasized as "Perforce will force it overflow the bank." At the couplet's culmination, the lack of the *f* consonance and *o* assonance in the "bank" signifies the abrupt,

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<sup>380</sup> Hughes, 52-57.

<sup>381</sup> Mortimer, 53.

<sup>382</sup> Mortimer, 54.

<sup>383</sup> See Irenaeus, Ch. V.iii.

<sup>384</sup> *1 Corinthians 6:9-10 GNV; Galatians 5:19-21 GNV.*

unexpected change of the consummated overflow.

In the stanza that follows, Venus's "energy is momentarily exhausted and she returns to verbal persuasion."<sup>385</sup> Mortimer observes that the narrator's rhetoric, "with its anaphora, epistrophe, polyptoton and, of course its red-white antithesis, enacts the prettiness of which it speaks":<sup>386</sup>

*Still* she ENTREATS and **prettily** ENTREATS,

For to a **pretty** ear she tunes her tale.

*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 *BETTERED* with a more delight. (My emphases, 73-78)

Here the poet is showing off his rhythm, his Pythagorean music—his power to enact whatever he speaks of. What Mortimer goes on to observe is surprisingly consistent with Hughes's reading of the Goddess's three aspects:

In a poem that revels in the observation of small things (the caterpillar, the divedapper, the snail), the "pretty ear" of Adonis need not be taken as a straightforward synecdoche. The detail suggests the delicate, finely-chiseled beauty of Adonis, and Venus' admiration for her beloved's ear—not normally an object of intense erotic attraction—has a tender, intimate quality like maternal absorption in the anatomical minutiae of a newborn son.<sup>387</sup>

Even here, in what might appear to be a purely aesthetic stanza, Venus's maternal and bridal

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<sup>385</sup> Mortimer, 54.

<sup>386</sup> Mortimer, 54.

<sup>387</sup> Mortimer, 54.

aspects are inextricable from one another. Even here, Adonis, in his capacity as the “Aeon Jesus” who has devolved into the Biblical literalist’s Jehovah, is at once the Sacred Bridegroom of Sophia and her narcissistic child Jaldabaoth.

As for the stanza’s red-white antithesis, Hereward T. Price writes that throughout the poem the “two colors are not only at war with one another; each is at war with itself.”<sup>388</sup> This ‘warring with itself’ serves to enact the alchemical process, whereby things must become their opposites in order that they may be reconciled with that to which, prior to becoming their opposites, they were opposed; the Self must become the Other, and therefore its opposite, before it can see itself as it truly is—identical with all things.<sup>389</sup> Moreover, the red-white antithesis of this stanza further reinforces the poem’s Gnostic-Puritanical structure. For the Gnostic Venus, white and red are not inevitably at odds. For her, that a thing is “best” does not mean it cannot be “bettered” (78). It is through Venus’s (rather than Adonis’s) perspective that we see: “Being red she loves him best, and being white,/Her best is bettered with a more delight” (77-78). For Venus, even in a war in which one colour must defeat the other, neither ends up on top: the two are mysteriously reconciled in that the one being bettered remains “best” (78). Conversely, through Adonis’s perspective, we see that red and white can be reconciled only in death:

O what a sight it was wistly to view,  
 How she came stealing to the wayward boy,  
 To note the fighting conflict of her hue,  
 How white and red each other did destroy:  
 But now her cheek was pale, and by and by

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<sup>388</sup> Price, 118.

<sup>389</sup> Healy, 12.

It flashed forth fire, as lightning from the sky. (343-348)

Here, the “fighting conflict of her hue” (345) does not lead to the quasi-reconciliation of one being “best” and the other bettering it (78). Here white and red simply “destroy” each other (346). The Gnostic Venus is ever intent on reconciliation through transgressive syntheses; the Puritanical Adonis’s vision is restricted to antithetical distinctions. With ‘savage irony,’<sup>390</sup> white and red will finally be mingled together in the mouth of the boar, wherein Adonis’s whiteness and redness shall “Like milk and blood” be “mingled both together” (902). Here the *m* of *mouth* and the *b* sound of *bepainted* are even linguistically “mingled both together” in the lines “Whose frothy *mouth bepainted* all with red/Like *milk and blood being mingled both together*” (my emphases, 901-902). For failing to see how red and white (serpentine wisdom and dove-like innocence) reconcile themselves through the Gnostic’s syncretic project, the Puritanical Adonis ends up having his white milk and his red blood “mingled both together” in the mouth of the boar to which his Puritanical misperception reduces the Goddess of Gnosis. To add to Price’s memorable words (“Then the boar . . . Venus in her most horrible symbol”),<sup>391</sup> we might say the boar is Venus and Adonis collapsed into their most horrible union.<sup>392</sup>

Regarding poetic enactment, even more impressive will be lines 427-432, where Venus responds with incredulity at the discovery that Adonis possesses the power of speech:

‘What, canst thou talk?’ quoth she. ‘Hast thou a tongue?’

O, would thou hadst not, or I had no hearing.

Thy mermaid’s voice hath done me double wrong.

I had my load before, now pressed with bearing:

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<sup>390</sup> See Price, 116.

<sup>391</sup> Price, 116.

<sup>392</sup> Price, 116.

Melodious discord, heavenly tune harsh-sounding,

Ears' deep sweet music, and heart's deep-sore wounding.' (427-432)

First, she will complain, "Thy mermaid's voice hath *done* me *double* wrong" (my emphases, 429), enacting not only the twofold wrong his verbal rejection has done her, but also the duplicity involved in his pretense at speechlessness, as well as the reverberating effect of this newfound echo (her shock that the poem in which she finds herself should turn out to have two speakers). Next, she describes Adonis's voice thus: "Melodious discord, heavenly tune harsh sounding,/Ears' deep-sweet music, and heart's deep-sore wounding" (431-432). Here the assonance of the hard *o* sound in "Melodious discord" falls on the stress in the case of the first word but not in the case of the second (431), and likewise with the *h* consonance of "heavenly tune harsh sounding" (431). Here we find i) "[m]elodious" attention being paid to word choice at the level of literary minutiae and a simultaneous ii) "discord" between the stresses on which the carefully selected letters fall (my emphases). The following line ("Ears' deep-sweet music, and heart's deep-sore wounding," 432) will only reinforce the effect by enacting the no-longer-merely-double but now doubly-thrice-deep wound Adonis's voice inflicts upon Venus's heart through the repetition of three hard consecutive stresses: "Ears' *deep-sweet music*, and heart's *deep-sore wounding*" (my emphases, 432).

Venus, insofar as she is the planet named after her, is the Pythagorean musical sphere whose harmony none but the illumined may hear.<sup>393</sup> She is trying to get Adonis to hear her heavenly harmony, that she may harmonize the not-so-heavenly discord within him. For among Neo-Pythagoreans (what the early modern syncretic Gnostics *also* were) it was believed that the right kind of music could cure illness, which was itself caused by disharmony between the

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<sup>393</sup> Healy, 77-97.

‘strings’ of the musical instrument that is the body.<sup>394</sup> It only makes sense, then, that Venus, in her capacity as a planet, should be as attentive to sound as she proves to be throughout the poem, and that here (at 431-432) she should recognize the potential for sweet harmony within Adonis but at the same time gawk at the horrendous spiritual discord of the Puritanical state he is in.

*The Gnostic’s Masculine-Feminine Synthesis Viewed as an Emasculating Threat*

Venus’s expurgated retelling of her liaison with Mars serves as evidence for the Gnostic Venus’s recognition of Puritanism in her beloved. The episode also serves to forge a distinction between the way in which the Gnostic Goddess shapes events to produce particular effects in her reticent interlocutor and the way in which the Puritanical Adonis perceives her devices. The episode particularly serves to capture the distinction between i) Venus’s Gnostic project of synthesizing the masculine with the feminine and ii) Adonis’s perception of this project as a diabolically emasculating one.

As it merits especial attention, it is worth laying out the Mars episode in full. Venus recounts:

‘I have been wooed as I entreat thee now  
 Even by the stern and direful god of war,  
 Whose sinewy neck in battle ne’er did bow,  
 Who conquers where he comes in every jar.  
 Yet hath he been my captive and my slave,  
 And begged for that which thou unasked shalt have.

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<sup>394</sup> Healy, 77-97.



‘Over my altars hath he hung his lance,  
 His battered shield, his uncontrolle’d crest,  
 And for my sake hath learned to sport and dance,  
 To toy, to wanton, dally, smile, and jest,  
     Scorning his churlish drum and ensign red,  
     Making my arms his field, his tent my bed.

‘Thus he that over-ruled I overswayed,  
 Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain.  
 Strong-tempered steel his stronger strength obeyed,  
 Yet was he servile to my coy disdain.

O, be not proud, nor brag not of thy might,  
 For mast’ring her that foiled the god of fight. (97-114)

As Mortimer notes, when Venus “seeks to enhance her own attractions by giving a wisely expurgated version of the Homeric tale of her affair with Mars (97-114),” she notably omits the “net which the jealous Vulcan throws over the lovers and their embarrassing exposure to the voyeuristic gaze of the assembled gods.”<sup>395</sup> Heather Dubrow describes Venus’s “omission of the humiliating conclusion of her liaison with Mars” as an event in which “they were both mastered, both caught in a net.”<sup>396</sup> Hulse writes that if “Mars here is robbed of heroism, one may recall that to the Neoplatonists the love of Mars and Venus was an allegory of a transcendent concordance of Virtue and Pleasure.”<sup>397</sup> Mortimer, as if in response to Hulse, claims that “neither the homilies

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<sup>395</sup> Mortimer, 56.

<sup>396</sup> Dubrow, 228.

<sup>397</sup> Hulse, 213.

of *Ovide moralisé* nor the visionary solemnities of the Neoplatonists will provide a convincing explanation of how this episode works in *Venus and Adonis*,<sup>398</sup> to which it may be replied that the Gnostic Venus is here clearly expurgating the part of the story that captures the consequence of transgressive love affairs—precisely what is on the Puritanical Adonis’s mind. She promises forbidden knowledge without loss of innocence, satisfaction without loss of desire, and transgressive love affairs that are never discovered and for which there are no consequences (at least this is how Gnosticism, though it may claim itself to be rigorously ascetic in purifying itself for contact with the divine, appears to the Puritan).<sup>399</sup>

Mortimer then notes that a “potential lover is rarely encouraged by praise of his predecessor and if Mars embodies the kind of virility needed to satisfy Venus, then Adonis might well shrink from the task.”<sup>400</sup> He goes on to say more than he realizes when he writes that “Venus is catholic in her tastes and she may, after all, be making a useful psychological move.”<sup>401</sup> The catholicity (universality) in her tastes is the metaphor for the spiritual catholicity that aligns her more with the Catholic church than with Protestantism, and even more so with the syncretic universalism of the Gnostic for which her Roman Catholicity is itself a veil behind her Venal one. She converted the hypermasculine Mars and now wishes to convert the effeminate Adonis; yet it is not so obvious just how much of Adonis’s effeminacy is latent within him and how much of it is the projection (or even imagination) of Venus and the poet. In both cases she appears to emasculate men associated with traditionally masculine pursuits (war and hunting), and her boast to having emasculated Mars will not go over well with Adonis. The Gnostic views

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<sup>398</sup> Mortimer, 57.

<sup>399</sup> See Irenaeus, Ch. V.iii.

<sup>400</sup> Mortimer, 58.

<sup>401</sup> Mortimer, 58.

masculinity and femininity as latent within all persons, and he who ascends to Gnostic Nobility as one who has synthesized his masculine with his feminine aspects.<sup>402</sup> Venus's attempt to reconcile the masculine with the feminine manifests itself in the Puritan's eyes as the emasculation of the masculine by the hypermasculinized feminine.

Notably, the couplet which concludes the Mars-Venus episode ("O, be not proud, nor brag not of thy might,/For mast'ring her that foiled the god of fight," 113-14) presents this "superficially sound" argument: "if I have conquered Mars and you conquer me, then you must be a greater conqueror than Mars."<sup>403</sup> Though Mortimer claims the issue with this argument is that its "emphasis falls on the emasculating power of female sexuality and is likely to serve Adonis more as a warning than as an inducement,"<sup>404</sup> surely its biggest problem is that it reinforces rather than undermines Adonis's Puritanical view. The Puritanical Adonis prides himself on his ability to withstand temptation. Mars's inability to withstand Venus's temptation only renders Adonis's ability to do so a nobler feat than it had already seemed to be. Perhaps Putney says more than he realizes when he writes, "Adonis' disinterest inspires the recital of her conquest of Mars, but her narration of that triumph brings fears lest Adonis pride himself on excelling the god and consequently scorn her."<sup>405</sup> As if to anticipate this shortcoming in her argument, Venus ensures that, should Adonis so misunderstand it, he will still end up rendering himself "proud" for being able to withstand her whom the "god of fight" could not (where being proud is the Puritan's worst nightmare). The Puritan wants to be proud of himself in one sense—proud of his steadfastness in obeying his master Christ, which includes steadfastness in

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<sup>402</sup> Healy, 68-72.

<sup>403</sup> Mortimer, 59.

<sup>404</sup> Mortimer, 59.

<sup>405</sup> Putney, 132.

humility<sup>406</sup>—but not “proud” in the Luciferian sense;<sup>407</sup> he wants to make Christ proud of him but not take any of the credit for it. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit alone that his good works are performed.<sup>408</sup> But even being proud of himself in this worse sense is probably a better deal than ending up as Mars has ended up: Venus “had done well to avoid any reference to Vulcan’s net, but her own ‘red-rose chain’ might seem to Adonis only a prettified version of a hardly less disgraceful humiliation.”<sup>409</sup> In the male war god’s battle with female Love, it is clearly the “woman who emerges as the victor” and the military dignitary who is “reduced” to the “Malvolio role of fatuous lover” after an “extraordinary list of synonyms (sport, toy, wanton, dally, jest).”<sup>410</sup> Mortimer observes that “the ‘lance’ and ‘uncontrolled crest’ lose their phallic power by being, as it were, detached from their owner and displayed as trophies on the altar of Venus,”<sup>411</sup> where the “lance” of Mars is a mirror for the “spear” of Adonis, which he would like to hold onto and use, not in romantic pursuits, but to hunt the infernal aspect (what is for him the true identity) of the one who desires to separate him from it and keep it on display as evidence of her mastery over him.

#### *Gnosticism’s Horatian Argument*

Adonis’s complaint that Venus’s inducements to love are premature may be understood as embodying the Puritan’s “fervent desire” for the ‘rapture’—the “manifestation of the sons of

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<sup>406</sup> *James 4:6 GNV; James 4:10 GNV; 1 Peter 5:5-6 GNV.*

<sup>407</sup> *Isaiah 14:12-15 GNV.*

<sup>408</sup> *Ephesians 2:8-10 GNV.*

<sup>409</sup> Mortimer, 59.

<sup>410</sup> Mortimer, 59.

<sup>411</sup> Mortimer, 59.

God”<sup>412</sup>—for which he patiently waits.<sup>413</sup> Whereas for Venus, *spiritual* metamorphosis is to be had through *immediate carnal knowledge* (or immediate knowledge that manifests, in Adonis’s Puritanical perception, as carnal),<sup>414</sup> for Adonis, *physical* metamorphosis into a celestial body is to be had through *perseverance in chastity*.<sup>415</sup> On this reading, Venus’s Horatian inducements to “Make use of time; let not advantage slip” (129) are to be understood as the Gnostic’s refusal to await the wisdom which the Puritan’s God promises to bestow upon man at the resurrection.<sup>416</sup> That is, Venus insists that Adonis pursue illumination in the here and now, to resurrect himself into the sun god while it is still within his power to be the master of his own fate. Adonis’s fear of the sun god (his higher celestial self, who wishes to switch places with him, 175-198) causes Venus to pretend the sun god (into which she wishes him to metamorphose himself in the here and now) is harmless as compared with the devastating effect which the “earthly sun” that is Adonis has upon her (193-198), in what appears to be mere hyperbolic praise of his beauty. Adonis, who is, according to the Gnostic, presently held captive by the Jehovan demiurge in the realm of shadows, and who is fearful of the sun—what is for the Neoplatonist the Form of forms<sup>417</sup>—must be conciliated with shadows, precisely what Venus employs in her attempt to soothe him (191).

Immediately after the Mars episode, we notice a drastic shift in Venus’s rhetoric:

‘Touch but my lips with those fair lips of thine—  
 Though mine be not so fair, yet are they red—

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<sup>412</sup> *Romans 8:19 KJV.*

<sup>413</sup> *Romans 8:19 GNV.*

<sup>414</sup> Irenaeus, Ch. V.

<sup>415</sup> *Romans 8:19 GNV; 1 John 3:2 GNV.*

<sup>416</sup> *1 John 3:2 GNV; 1 Corinthians 13:12 GNV.*

<sup>417</sup> Plato, *Republic*. *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper (Hackett, 1997), 514a-517a.

The kiss shall be thine own as well as mine.

What seest thou in the ground? Hold up thy head.

Look in mine eyeballs: there thy beauty lies.

Then why not lips on lips, since eyes in eyes?' (115-120)

Mortimer observes that here, "as if some second sense made her aware of Adonis' unspoken objections to her rhetoric of conquest ('over-ruled,' 'overswayed,' 'mast'ring,' 'servile,' 'prisoner,' 109-114), she rapidly changes direction and insists on love as mutual exchange between equal partners" (115-120).<sup>418</sup> Her usual rhetoric of competition and domination, anatomized for us by Dubrow,<sup>419</sup> is suddenly replaced by the give-and-take rhetoric of common property. She suspects Adonis's narcissism to be her obstacle, as is made even more explicit in the following stanzas.<sup>420</sup> Her appeal is now supposedly increased by the fact that his beauty is reflected in her eyes. Her argument is that, if his beautiful eyes are in her eyes, his lips might as well be on her lips ("Look in mine eyeballs: there thy beauty lies./Then why not lips on lips, since eyes in eyes?" 119-120). This may serve as a play on the concept that 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' On one hand, Adonis apparently proves the maxim true by eschewing the very Goddess of Love. On the other hand, being as he is Beauty himself, he is quite literally in the eye of Beauty's beholder. It therefore follows, by a certain sort of logic, that he cannot help but find his beholder beautiful. Evidently, however, the logic does not hold in his case, for it turns out he can.

Venus's central argument, as conveyed in lines 127-132, is the Horatian *carpe diem*:

'The tender spring upon thy tempting lip

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<sup>418</sup> Mortimer, 60.

<sup>419</sup> Dubrow, 223-246.

<sup>420</sup> See Kahn for a detailed psychoanalytic account of Adonis's narcissism.

Shows thee unripe; yet mayst thou well be tasted.

Make use of time; let not advantage slip.

Beauty within itself should not be wasted.

Fair flowers that are not gathered in their prime

Rot, and consume themselves in little time. (127-132)

As Mortimer observes, “even here Venus fails to reassure”: the “taste metaphor occurs before we have forgotten the devouring fury of Venus as ‘the empty eagle’ (55-60)”—to the extent that the word “tempting” might even recall the word “empty”—and the “association of temptation and fruit has an inappropriate biblical resonance” (“The tender spring upon thy tempting lip/Shows thee unripe; yet mayst thou well be tasted,” 127-128), evoking as it does the “tempting” forbidden fruit in an “argument that consumption preserves beauty from corruption.”<sup>421</sup> Gnostics infamously praise the serpent for granting Adam and Eve the forbidden knowledge which the wicked Jehovan demiurge denied them.<sup>422</sup> It is therefore fitting that she should evoke the same argument here, and all too fitting that she should structure her conceit so that Adonis is the fruit which is being forbidden, where he himself—the Gnostic inversion of the Puritanical god-man (the Biblical literalist’s Adonai manifest in the flesh)—is the one doing the forbidding.

Venus’s assurance that “Love is a spirit all compact of fire,/Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire” (149-150) is evocative of Hermetic science, sounding as it does particularly alchemical (laboratorial, even). Putney reads this, as he reads the entire poem, purely as a joke, without telling us how the joke works.<sup>423</sup> Presumably the joke is something like this: Love does not go flaccid as in the love-eschewing Adonis’s case but rather erectly aspires. Putney quips that

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<sup>421</sup> Mortimer, 61.

<sup>422</sup> Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity*, 9-10.

<sup>423</sup> Putney, 128.

it could never “have been easy to write or read solemnly a poem in which falling is so common an activity.”<sup>424</sup> To this it may be replied that the poem’s antithetical structure, when conceived in Puritanical-Gnostic terms, may allow the reader to see “falling” as having a profound theological significance. Here Venus may be read as attempting to assuage Adonis’s fears that lust-disguised-as-love causes a fall (something she needs to do given that she, Love, appears to have fallen from heaven; just as Lucifer himself is said to have done;<sup>425</sup> and just as the Gnostic Sophia is said to have fallen from the Pleromatic center of the heavenly heights to become the earth for our sake).<sup>426</sup> Hulse observes that

Shakespeare’s description of [Venus] is a metaphoric catalog of the characteristics of physical love. When he wishes to show that love is light, that is, merry and delightful, he says that Venus does not weigh much . . . We are used to the physical being the literal, but literally Venus is delightful, and so she is figured as if she were light in weight.<sup>427</sup>

Here Hulse captures an aesthetic layer of the poem to which the poet is constantly drawing the astute reader’s attention. It is not that Venus is the Neoplatonist’s abstract form of Love and the Neoplatonist’s abstract form of Love alone. Rather, it is that she is in some sense supposed to be. The poet is exploiting the discrepancy between i) her anthropomorphic manifestation and ii) that which she is supposedly an anthropomorphic manifestation of for the virtuosities of paradox and paronomasia to which their interplay gives rise. Hulse, like Mortimer, perceives the incoherence between Venus’s physical manifestation and the way she figures herself through rhetoric:

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<sup>424</sup> Putney, 126.

<sup>425</sup> *Isaiah 14:12 GNV; Luke 10:18 GNV.*

<sup>426</sup> Hughes, 33; 348-356; Irenaeus.

<sup>427</sup> Hulse, 207.



“curiously, this reversal changes the impact of the image; instead of seeing a sylph supported on flowers, we see tree trunks, holding aloft an awesome bulk.”<sup>428</sup> Hulse concludes on a more or less aesthetic note that Shakespeare is simply portraying love in the complex manner in which it really manifests itself in the lives of humans: at once as “loathsome, foul lust,” “delightful sense,” and a “near-sacred force of natural propagation.”<sup>429</sup> That is, we are not to answer the question of what the poem’s “attitude” to “earthy love” is.<sup>430</sup> It is all three: the poet enjoys playing with its inherent ambiguities, and we are to enjoy their interplay.

However, an additional layer of the poem is opened up to us, and love’s ambiguities elegantly accounted for, if we understand the Gnostic Venus to be subverting Puritanical doctrine: in her capacity as the Gnostic’s syncretic “Love-Christ,”<sup>431</sup> she is promising to be light as the Biblical Christ claims his burden to be light.<sup>432</sup> When she asks, “Is love so light, sweet boy, and it may it be/That thou should think it heavy unto thee?” (155-156), she is calling attention to the fact that she, the Neoplatonic Love of the syncretic Gnostic, is light (aspires to the heavenly) at the same time as she is viewed as heavy (“gross,” 150, and sinking down into hell) by the Puritan—an inversion of the fact that the Biblical Christ claims his burden to be light at the same time as it is viewed as heavy by the Gnostic. In keeping with the fact that the Gnostic’s syncretic system is viewed as incoherent to the Puritan—as well as with Hughes’s reading to the effect that Venus is meant to function on one level (that of the first veil) as the Catholic Whore of Babylon, and on another level (that of the veil-beneath-the-veil) as the perennial Goddess to whose infernal manifestation she is reduced by Adonis’s Puritanical

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<sup>428</sup> Hulse, 207.

<sup>429</sup> Hulse, 207.

<sup>430</sup> Hulse, 207.

<sup>431</sup> Healy, 25.

<sup>432</sup> *Matthew 11:30 GNV.*

misperception—Mortimer observes that as Adonis “hears Venus speak of her own and love’s lightness, he is actually being pinned to the ground: the goddess is impressive in more ways than one.”<sup>433</sup>

Just as at 133-138, Venus expressed incredulity at Adonis’s rejection of the very Goddess of Love (the Puritan’s rejection of Sophia’s Gnosis), wondering what could possibly be wrong with her appearance (who wouldn’t want to sleep with the Love Goddess a.k.a. be illumined into a deity?), so now at 157-162, she assumes the “only beauty which could prevent Adonis from admiring her must be his own.”<sup>434</sup> Puritanism is perhaps bewildering to the outsider (who would want to be a Puritan?). The point is not that there is anything wrong with her appearance, but that there is something wrong with that for which her appearance is a facade. She may not *appear* “hard-favoured, foul, or wrinkled-old,/Ill-nurtured, crooked, churlish, harsh in voice,/O’er-worn, despisèd, rheumatic, and cold,/Thick-sighted, barren, lean, and lacking juice” (133-136), but the consequences of loving her will be ugly. She might not appear like that now, but that is her true appearance beneath the veil, and that is (if we imagine her to be a real female for a second) what her—and his—new body will look like when cast into the lake of fire for engaging in their transgressive love affair. Venus can only imagine that his own superior beauty is his reason for rejecting her: to reject Love, Beauty must be in love with himself. For the Goddess of Love, asexuality, or wilful abstinence, is not a concept (nor, for the Gnostic, is willingness to wait for the world to come).

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<sup>433</sup> Mortimer, 63.

<sup>434</sup> Mortimer, 63.

As the Gnostic sees the Puritan as imprisoned by the Jehovan demiurge in the realm of shadows, she fittingly accuses him, as it were, of narcissistically kissing his own “shadow,” which anticipates the Titan incident (175-198):

‘Is thine own heart to thine own face affected?  
 Can thy right hand seize love upon thy left?  
 Then woo thyself, be of thyself rejected;  
 Steal thine own freedom, and complain on theft.  
 Narcissus so himself himself forsook,  
 And died to kiss his shadow in the brook. (157-162)

For the Neoplatonist, man is but a shadow of his Ideal self—the Form of Man—and so to be in love with oneself (as one presently is) is to be in love with a shadow.<sup>435</sup> For the Gnostic, the Puritan is therefore Narcissistic, in that he is in love with the shadow of a shadow, and by loving his shadow-self he forsakes his true (ideal) self. For Adonis, this accusation of narcissism comes across as hypocritical (he, a Puritan, is being accused of hypocrisy by a Gnostic, who vainly ascends to godhood in the here and now without the true and living God’s permission). As Mortimer points out, one might think her accusation of narcissism is “a bit rich coming from a woman who has spent the last three stanzas cataloguing her own attractions—especially when the poem offers no evidence that Adonis is even conscious of his own beauty.”<sup>436</sup> Putney observes that in “keeping the lush inventory of the lady’s charms, Shakespeare made it part of his comic characterization of Venus by transferring the description from the poet or the lover to the goddess herself.”<sup>437</sup> But beyond its purely comic dimension, we might do well to see

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<sup>435</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 514a-517a.

<sup>436</sup> Mortimer, 63.

<sup>437</sup> Putney, 133.

Shakespeare's characterization as consistent with the view that Venus is in some sense *supposed* to be the great perennial Goddess but has been reduced by Adonis's Puritanical misperception to the role of one *trying* to be the Goddess she truly is. As Tita French Baumlin writes,

Unlike her Ovidian ancestor, Shakespeare's Venus must learn how to use the language of divine seduction, how to be the goddess she is reputed to be; this process of apotheosis, of learning and growing into the full-fledged Goddess of Love, mirrors a similar struggle in the inventive process of the new poet.<sup>438</sup>

Venus will then abruptly shift to moralizing, the reason for which eludes Mortimer.<sup>439</sup> The shift is best explained by the fact that she perceives Adonis's moralism as her true obstacle, and may suspect that by shifting to a "graver register" and presenting the "issue in essentially moral terms" she might correct his perception of her as essentially amoral. Her accusation of narcissism served as a set-up for this shift to moralizing, as it had allowed her to assume the moral high-ground from which to accuse him of sinful pride (what is for the Puritan the Gnostic's turning of things upside down).<sup>440</sup> Now she speaks of moral harm ("Things growing to themselves are growth's abuse," 166) and moral obligation ("Thou wast begot; to get it is thy duty, 168), to conclude her sermon of sorts which expounds on the purpose of things and the neglect of those purposes ("Torches are made to light, jewels to wear,/Dainties to taste, fresh beauty for the use,/Herbs for their smell, and sappy plants to bear," 163-164). Venus's difficulty is that the "fertility of 'sappy plants' cannot quite correct the impression that Adonis is simply being constituted as one more object of conspicuous consumption."<sup>441</sup> Mortimer also observes

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<sup>438</sup> Baumlin, 192.

<sup>439</sup> Mortimer, 64.

<sup>440</sup> *Isaiah 29:16 KJV*.

<sup>441</sup> Mortimer, 65.

that the phrase “By law of nature thou art bound to breed” (171) “hovers rather cynically between enjoining procreation as a duty and presenting it as a biological impulse that leaves him with no choice.”<sup>442</sup> Gnostic libertinism-disguised-as-liberty-and-moral-duty is for the Puritan enslavement to sin; St. Paul even spoke of sin as having its own law.<sup>443</sup>

After arguing that Adonis is made for love as “torches are made to light, jewels to wear” (163), she begins to use quite Biblical language.<sup>444</sup> First, she invokes Genesis with the phrase, “seeds spring from seeds” (167). Then, as John Roe notes, Venus’s rhetorical question, ‘Upon the earth’s increase why shouldst thou feed,/Unless the earth with thy increase be fed?’ (169-170) “invokes the command of the Hebrew God with its insistence on duty: ‘Bring forth the fruite, and multiplie, and replenish the earth’ (Gen. 9.1).”<sup>445</sup> But he unfortunately concludes, rather perfunctorily, “The effect of this is to keep serious ideas in view despite the prevailing use of comedy.”<sup>446</sup> We are better rewarded if we see Venus as using quasi-biblical arguments to impress her Puritan beloved when she is really twisting scripture to replace the Christian doctrine of immortality with a pagan doctrine of reincarnation (one to which the syncretic Gnostic subscribes), where Adonis’s only hope at surviving death is through his progeny. It is “by law of nature” rather than by the divine law of God that Adonis is “bound to breed” (171). If Adonis’s children should live when he himself is dead, then, according to Venus’s doctrine, “in spite of death,” he shall “survive” (173)—not in the sense that Christ conquered death so that he might do the same—but rather, “[i]n that” his “likeness still is left alive” (174).

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<sup>442</sup> Mortimer, 65.

<sup>443</sup> *Romans* 8:2 GNV.

<sup>444</sup> As is noted by John Roe, ed., *The Poems. The New Cambridge Shakespeare* (Cambridge UP, 1992), 88.

<sup>445</sup> Roe, 88.

<sup>446</sup> Roe, 88.

This argument actually turns out to be potentially anti-Platonic. That is, it begins as Neoplatonic but would seem to catch itself in its own trap: Narcissus, vainly mistaking himself for the ideal form of Man, kisses not just a shadow in the brook but, according to Plato, a shadow of a shadow, for he is, as are we all, but a shadow of the ideal form of Man. This is all well and good. But then Venus tells Adonis that he can transcend death in that his “likeness” may still be “left alive” (174). His “likeness” is not the thing itself, but a mere shadow of the original (an even further removal from his ideal form). Perhaps the idea (consistent with Gnosticism) is that the Puritan is narcissistic in that he deifies Man, but not Woman,<sup>447</sup> and this neglect of the divine feminine precludes (by the force of the poet’s metaphorical logic) the only real form of immortality that is available to him.

Aligning himself with the eroticists, Mortimer reads the Titan episode as little more than an extension of the reader’s voyeuristic pleasure:

Titan, as voyeur, recalls the eyewitness situation of the narrator and also evokes the reaction that Shakespeare could have expected from his male readers—especially ‘the younger sort’ who might envy Adonis the opportunity of being initiated into the mysteries of sex by an experienced older woman. Such readers, already made spectators of an erotic performance, are now offered the added refinement of watching someone watching.<sup>448</sup>

On one level, the poem certainly functions like this. One could perhaps argue that Shakespeare renders Venus an older woman specifically to incite this sort of reaction. However, an additional

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<sup>447</sup> Hughes, Introduction; 33; 348-356. See Chapter, “God the Father/God the Mother” of Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage, 1989), 48-69.

<sup>448</sup> Mortimer, 65-66.

layer of the poem is opened up if we consider the full range of opportunities which this unprecedented change affords the poet. As Dubrow notes,

Emphasized by Shakespeare's repeated references to him [Adonis] as a boy (for example, ll. 32, 95, 344), his immaturity represents a striking deviation from the sources. Though Golding once calls his Adonis a "tender youth" (l. 634), elsewhere he indicates that he has reached manhood, and Ovid explicitly states that he was "iam iuvenis, iam vir" ("now a youth, now man," *Metamorphoses* X.523).<sup>449</sup>

By rendering Adonis more youthful and Venus far older than the sources would have them, the poet avails himself of a series of metaphors in the service of the poem's Puritanical-Gnostic structure. The Puritanical Adonis is young (innocent, to the Puritan) whereas Venus is old (no longer innocent). The Puritanical Adonis, preoccupied by a fear of transience, already sees the result of Gnosis: he already sees the consequence of lust, the agedness of Venus. Moreover, for the Gnostic, Venus precedes Adonis in that she, in her capacity as the Gnostic Sophia, is aligned with the true God from which she has descended to earth. Adonis, in his capacity as the Puritanical Goddess-repressing god, is her son Jaldabaoth—a younger, more recent, corrupted manifestation of the Ultimate.<sup>450</sup> The Puritanical God claims to be the beginning and the ending, the first and the last.<sup>451</sup> By a startling inversion, here it is the Goddess who is the more ancient of the two. Furthermore, as Mortimer observes, Shakespeare

established a continuity between the erotic and the pathetic by making the warning serve as a bridge between the two . . . [Venus] does not play first one role

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<sup>449</sup> Dubrow, 239.

<sup>450</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>451</sup> *Revelation 22:13 GNV*.

and then the other, [but rather is] throughout both threatening and protective, sexually aggressive and maternal . . . [This] creates a basic ambivalence about Adonis' response since we are not sure whether surrender to Venus would be an initiation to manhood or a regression to infancy.<sup>452</sup>

This signifies the fact that it is unclear whether surrender to the Gnostic Sophia is a means of progression toward illumination or regression into diabolical obscurity. It also plays on the idea of the alleged requirement of being born again in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven.<sup>453</sup> For the Puritan, one must become dead to the world in order to be born again.<sup>454</sup> For the Gnostic, one must slay one's ego in order to be regenerated: one must descend into the primordial depths of infancy before ascending into the lofty heights of godhood.<sup>455</sup> The age distinction between the two interlocutors lends itself all too well to these doctrinal differences.

This additional layer of the poem is further opened up if we recall that, in the poem's first stanza, Adonis is an earthly man whose celestial aspect (whose higher self) is the sun, here called Titan. This sun, the Form of forms for Plato, is Adonis's higher illuminated self (what is for the Gnostic the potential Christ within him), which, contrary to the earthly Adonis (the Puritanical one), seeks the celestial illumination of the Goddess, as in lines 175-180:

By this, the love-sick queen began to sweat,  
 For where they lay the shadow had forsook them,  
 And Titan, tired in the midday heat,  
 With burning eye did hotly overlook them.

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<sup>452</sup> Mortimer, 190.

<sup>453</sup> *John 3:3 GNV.*

<sup>454</sup> *Colossians 3:3 GNV.*

<sup>455</sup> Healy, 22.



Wishing Adonis had his team to guide,  
 So he were like him, and by Venus' side.

Here Adonis's higher celestial self wishes to receive the illumination of the Goddess, but Adonis's terrestrial self refuses to allow the exchange to occur. Here the absurdity of the Puritan's rejection of the Goddess is captured with elegant comedy: the Form of Love has descended from heaven to earth, and the very Form of forms is willing to leave heaven to join her; the Puritan, for whom the Form of Love descends all the way from heaven to earth in order to instantiate herself in his very presence, rejects her. Notably, the "shadow," as anticipated by Venus's Narcissus conceit, has a profound Neoplatonic resonance to it, in its sharp contrast with Adonis (the earthly sun) and Titan (the heavenly sun). This is perhaps emphasized even more in the following stanza:

'Ay me,' quoth Venus, 'young, and so unkind?  
 What bare excuses mak'st thou to be gone?  
 I'll sigh celestial breath, whose gentle wind  
 Shall cool the heat of this descending sun.  
 I'll make a shadow for thee of my hairs;  
 If they burn too, I'll quench them with my tears.' (187-192)

Here Venus is imagined as protecting Adonis from his higher celestial self, whom Venus claims to have little effect upon her, when it would seem what Venus is *actually* doing is trying to get Adonis to connect with his higher self. She can tell the earthly Puritanical Adonis is overwhelmed by the Gnostic illumination of his higher self, and so she pretends to protect him with shadows (for it is, according to the Gnostic, the realm of shadows in which the Jehovan demiurge has imprisoned him). Venus is the Neoplatonic form of Love, intent on instantiating

herself in the realm of particulars, an immortal Goddess intent on entering the realm of mortality (the Gnostic Sophia descending from the Pleromatic center of the heavenly heights to become the earth for our sake)<sup>456</sup> in order to raise the Puritanical Adonis (through Gnosis) into his higher celestial self, but she is here forced to pretend she is protecting Adonis from the Sun (the overwhelming Form of forms) with shadows, the particular instantiations of forms, for what is (from the Gnostic perspective) his own good.<sup>457</sup>

Venus's language in the next stanza is most readily understood as mere hyperbole:

‘The sun that shines from heaven shines but warm,  
And lo, I lie between that sun and thee.  
The heat I have from thence doth little harm;  
Thine eye darts forth the fire that burneth me,  
And were I not immortal, life were done  
Between this heavenly and earthly sun. (193-198)

It might appear all Venus is doing is capturing just how beautiful Adonis is. The sun himself has little effect upon her; it is *his* “eye” that “darts forth the fire that burneth” her (196). But are we to simply take her word for it that the sun has little effect upon her? Is she engaging in mere flattery, or is she, as the Puritan would put it, a devil that savours (or understands) “not the things that are of God, but the things that are of men”?<sup>458</sup> The word “lie,” evocative of Plato’s ‘Noble Lie,’<sup>459</sup> here suggests a subtle admission of duplicity. If the heavenly sun has little effect upon Venus it is perhaps because the poem imagines her as being singularly moved by the earthly

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<sup>456</sup> Hughes, 348-356.

<sup>457</sup> This is reminiscent of Plato’s “Noble Lie.” See Plato, *Republic*, 414b-415d.

<sup>458</sup> *Mark 8:33 GNV*; Compare *Mark 8:33 KJV*.

<sup>459</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 414b-415d.

Adonis as one would expect earthly men would be by a celestial Goddess. The poet achieves a profound paradox here: the immortal sun has little effect upon the immortal Venus, whereas the mortal Adonis has an effect upon her that would be fatal were she not immortal. But from the Puritanical perspective she is simply invoking the law of reversal to pretend the Gnostic illumination of Adonis's higher self is harmless—going so far as to claim his celestial self is far less dangerous to him than his earthly one is to her—when devil possession (what it really is) is anything but benign.

## CONCLUSION: THE CLOSING SPEECH

The radical distinction between the rhetorical style of Venus and that of Adonis, as well as the content of their speech, presents evidence at the very surface level of the text that further reinforces the view that Venus embodies the non-doctrinal spirituality of the Gnostic and Adonis the rigid dogmatism of the Puritanical Biblical literalist. Streitberger writes that

Throughout the debate Adonis acts as an ideal Renaissance schoolboy who has learned his lesson well. Indeed, he is in the second of the seven ages of man, noted by Jacques in *As You Like It* (II.vii.143-66). He rejects Venus' procreation argument in terms reminiscent of the grammar school debate.<sup>460</sup>

T. W. Baldwin confirms this view by noting Erasmus's recommendation of the subject for the practice of rhetoric, and by documenting how common it was for schoolboys to debate the question of procreation via marriage through the rhetorical practice of weighing its pros and cons.<sup>461</sup> Mortimer also notes this striking difference in rhetorical style. He writes that the "rhetoric of Venus is opportunistic and infinitely flexible, short on logic but strong on invention, expansive, all-embracing, taking whatever offers as grist to her mill."<sup>462</sup> Adonis's rhetorical style, by contrast, is "relatively even in tone, tightly organized, antithetical and aphoristic—the opposite of expansive, concerned with making rather than blurring distinctions," as in 799-804, where Adonis repeatedly reinforces the distinctions between lust and love which Venus will only blur throughout the poem.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Streitberger, 176.

<sup>461</sup> T. W. Baldwin, *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1950), 183-186; and *Small Latin and Less Greek* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1944), II, 339-40.

<sup>462</sup> Mortimer, 29-30.

<sup>463</sup> Mortimer, 30.

But Mortimer perceives more in Adonis's rhetorical style than the mere embodiment of a "diligent and priggish schoolboy reciting a well-learned lesson."<sup>464</sup> The "clipped and rigorous symmetries of the syntax and the predictability of the antitheses convey Adonis' need to find security in a scheme of moral certainties, rigid boundaries and mutually absolute exclusions."<sup>465</sup> This is the Puritan to a tee. Whereas a "rhetorical education" more generally "might encourage a relativist outlook that would place any orthodoxy at risk,"<sup>466</sup> Puritanism keeps its rhetoric binary to preserve its orthodoxy from the relativist outlook which the unrestrained practice of rhetoric might facilitate. In line with this, Dubrow writes that as we read the words "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" (799-802), "we sense a tension between their neatness, the sense of intellectual and poetic stasis that they convey, and the rapidly moving, unpredictable world we encounter elsewhere in the poem."<sup>467</sup> Catherine Belsey even confirms the view that the poet's sympathies lie with the Goddess and not the Puritan when she observes that the narrator's synonymous use of "love" and "lust" to capture Venus's passion reflects pre-Protestant attitudes, whereas Adonis's rigid restrictions at 793-804 reflect those made by Protestantism through its revaluation of marriage.<sup>468</sup>

Adonis's most lengthy speech (769-810) even prompts Hamilton to quip that "Adonis is more rigorous than the compromising Church Fathers."<sup>469</sup> Here the Puritanical Adonis acknowledges the Gnostic Venus as a temptation, but he is suspicious of her as he would say Eve

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<sup>464</sup> Mortimer, 31.

<sup>465</sup> Mortimer, 31.

<sup>466</sup> Mortimer, 18.

<sup>467</sup> Dubrow, 240-241.

<sup>468</sup> Belsey, 261-285.

<sup>469</sup> Hamilton, 145.

should have been of the honey-tongued serpent.<sup>470</sup> He compares her to the “wanton mermaid” when he accuses her of like bewitchment (777). He acknowledges the fact that her “tune” is a “tempting” one but he says it is fated to be ever “blown” from his “ear” (778), for his “heart stands armed in [his] ear,/And will not let a false sound enter there” (779-780). He is well aware the “path is smooth that leadeth on to danger” (788), for he has read the words, “wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.”<sup>471</sup> He implicitly distinguishes Venus from that which she is supposedly a Goddess of, that of which she is supposedly an embodiment, in the hypothetical line, “If love have lent you twenty thousand tongues” (775), as if to distinguish her from what she (on his view) pretends to be. He labels her “harmony” as “deceiving” (781), and appears to be aware of what will happen if it “should run/Into the quiet closure of [his] breast” (781-782)—for “then” his “little heart were quite undone,/In his bedchamber to be barred of rest” (783-784). How he knows this is not made explicit, for he admits to having had no experience of love (409-414). He ‘knows not love,’ but he has “heard” some nasty things about it (414). Given that, for him, love is lust’s disguise, the place he must have heard about it is the Bible. Moreover, that he loves to disgrace love echoes the fact that he loves to hunt love (4), and captures the Puritan’s predilection for exposing darkness and reprovng evil (“What have you urged that I cannot reprove?” 787).<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> *Genesis 3:4-5 GNV.*

<sup>471</sup> *Mark 7:13 KJV.*

<sup>472</sup> *Ephesians 5:11 GNV; KJV.*

Many critics have commented on the lack of sophistication in Adonis's speech,<sup>473</sup> but Mortimer acknowledges the rhetorical potency and elegant pithiness in his aphoristic delivery,<sup>474</sup> and Dubrow compares it rather favorably to the "couplets in Shakespeare's sonnets."<sup>475</sup> Dubrow observes that of the poem's 1,194 lines, "537 are spoken by the goddess of love."<sup>476</sup> Whereas Venus is voluble and expansive, Adonis, as Coppélia Kahn notes, "speaks only eighty-eight lines,"<sup>477</sup> which is perhaps significant given Jesus's name is 888 in Greek Isopsephy (a cryptic confirmation for Hughes's reading of Adonis as a 'Gnostic' inversion of the Puritanical god-man). Whereas Venus's speech is complex and rife with ambiguity, Adonis's speech is simple, straightforward, and binary, but no less rhetorically impressive: his speech represents that of the Bible (characterized as it is by such binaries as light versus darkness, good versus evil, God versus the devil)—a library of books whose writers (it must be admitted by the objective critic) are masters of rhetoric. But while Adonis is rhetorically impressive in his own way, Lucy Gent's qualification must be heeded: "[e]uphuistic elements of Adonis's style are out of date for the 1590's."<sup>478</sup> The poet may thus be understood as traiking the Puritanical Adonis as one unlikeable as well as old-fashioned. He is simultaneously young (to represent his Puritanical 'innocence,' his status as one who has not yet been initiated into Gnosis) and 'old' (to represent his Biblical conservatism): for he himself is "green" though his text be "old." This speech of Adonis's at 769-810, which reinforces all too clearly the antithetical structure I have proposed, recalls the

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<sup>473</sup> For example, Christy Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992), 141; Lucy Gent, *Picture and Poetry, 1560-1620. Relations between Literature and the Visual Arts in the English Renaissance* (Lemington Spa, Warwickshire: Hall, 1981), 726.

<sup>474</sup> Mortimer, 124-129.

<sup>475</sup> Dubrow, 241.

<sup>476</sup> Dubrow, 225.

<sup>477</sup> Kahn, 193.

<sup>478</sup> Gent, 726.

following scripture, which may serve to summarize it (as well as the whole poem from the Puritan's perspective): "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the *simplicity* that is in Christ" (my emphasis).<sup>479</sup>

In sum, I have shown that the poem's antithetical structure actually lends itself to two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies which, fittingly, manifests itself (to a striking degree) in the poem's critical divide. I have shown that simplistic allegorical and moralistic readings which sympathize with the chaste Adonis and inveigh against Venus fail to take into consideration the eroticists' recognition of i) the poem's celebration of eros, and ii) the many strong indications that the poet's sympathies ultimately lie with Venus, as well as the iii) myriad ambivalences which the readers occupying the middle ground apprehend. I have further uncovered much of the poem's allegorical dimension, whose existence the eroticists and the humorists deny to the reader's detriment. I have also shown that the 'intentional ambivalence' camp, while perceptive enough to see the poem as anything but simple, ultimately satisfies itself with an unsatisfying conclusion. The epistemological framework I have offered allows the reader to see the poem's ambivalences as manifestations of the clash between the hermeneutical tendency expressed by Venus and that expressed by Adonis. Each hermeneutical tendency 'reads' the opposing hermeneutical tendency in a specific manner, and it is this clash that may best explain the poem's ostensibly irresolvable oppositions. I have even shown how the one hermeneutical tendency (the Venus tendency) expressed in Hughes's radically allegorical reading may be synergized with the opposing hermeneutical tendency (the Adonis tendency) expressed in Mortimer's allegoresis-abjecting literalistic reading, in order to not only yield

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<sup>479</sup> 2 *Corinthians* 11:3 KJV.



fruitful insights into the poem but, moreover, actually confute Mortimer's attempted repudiation of allegoresis.

While I think I have validated my proposed reading method at the level of "free" particulars via my close sequential reading of the poem's first 204 lines, I have not had the space to demonstrate how the entire poem might be read through the antithetical 'Puritanical-Gnostic' lens I have offered. Moreover, I have not had the space to tease out as many doctrinal nuances from the endlessly complicated webs of 'Puritanism' and 'Gnosticism' as I would have liked to. Also, with more space, I could have built a stronger historicist case for my reading method. But overall, while one could perhaps disagree with my choice of terms, and differ with me on matters of fine detail, I think I have succeeded in uncovering a clear antithetical structure forged between two diametrically opposed hermeneutical tendencies, which not only offers fruitful insights into the poem, but which may further illuminate and even ameliorate, if not completely resolve, the poem's hitherto irreconcilable critical divide.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

**N**AME: Luke Jennings

### **P**OST-SECONDARY **E**DUICATION:

Western University, London, Ontario, B.A., English Literature and Philosophy, graduated 2015

Western University, London, Ontario, M.A., English Literature, 2016-2017

### **R**ELATED **W**ORK **E**XPERIENCE:

Teaching Assistant, Western University, London, Ontario, 2016-2017