

VERBALIZING THE VISUAL IN SHAKESPEARE'S NARRATIVE POEM *VENUS AND ADONIS*

Verbalizando o visível no poema narrativo *Vênus e Adônis* de Shakespeare

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Abstract

The appropriation of motifs, codes and conventions from the visual arts for structural, thematic and aesthetic purposes in verbal discourses was paramount during the Renaissance and is a recurrent practice today. The present essay aims to examine Shakespeare's creative transposition of images from painting to poetry in his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593), and discuss his use of mythical themes and motifs to question gender and sexual roles current in his time. The intermedial dialogues between the visible and the legible will be addressed in the light of theoretical perspectives by Claus Clüver, Liliane Louvel, Erwin Panofsky, Farah-Karim Cooper and Laura Mulvey.

Keywords: Shakespeare. *Venus and Adonis*. Text. Image. Intermediality.

Resumo

A apropriação de motivos, códigos e convenções das artes visuais para fins estruturais, temáticos e estéticos em discursos verbais foi primordial durante o Renascimento e continua sendo uma prática recorrente na contemporaneidade. O presente ensaio tem como objetivo examinar a transposição criativa de imagens da pintura para a poesia no poema narrativo *Vênus e Adônis* (1593), de Shakespeare, e discutir o uso do poeta de temas e motivos míticos para questionar as relações de gênero e sexualidade vigentes em seu tempo. Os diálogos intermidiáticos entre o visível e o legível serão abordados à luz de perspectivas teóricas de Claus Clüver, Liliane Louvel, Erwin Panofsky, Farah-Karim Cooper e Laura Mulvey.

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare. *Vênus e Adônis*. Texto. Imagem. Intermidialidade.

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Introductory reflections

Poetry and painting, two autonomous arts displaying specific means of expression but sharing some constructive resources, intensified their relations during the Renaissance. Lyrical and dramatic poetry appropriated pictorial traits, and painting assumed narrative characteristics. In the Renaissance context, the affinity of the fine arts and literature had its roots in the common interest in the mythological narrative poetry of Ovid (43 a.C. – c.17 d.C.). In the *Metamorphoses* (c. 1 d.C.), the mythical accounts are described in vivid detail, so that the great Renaissance painters, at the height of their creative maturity, resumed Ovid's narrative poetry as a source of inspiration and model, using pictorial signs to interpret verbal signs. On the other hand, themes and pictorial motifs were employed by Renaissance poets and playwrights.

Shakespeare's visual imagination attests his familiarity with Renaissance art and his inclination to transmute images absorbed from painting into dramatic and narrative poetry. In the present essay, I discuss the hypothesis, forwarded by art historians, that Shakespeare introduces new insights into his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593), inspired by Titian's homonymous masterpiece (1553), a painting that deviates from the Venus and Adonis myth, as retold in Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2003). I shall also address Shakespeare's creative appropriation of mythical themes and motives to reflect on gender and sexual roles current during the early modern period. Like other writers of his time, he chose to focus on myth to express transgressive views on such issues, which were not allowed "to be represented in depth in non-classical frameworks", but attained validity and "propriety in representation through their classical exemplar" (CARTER, 2011, p. 162).

Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is divided into two main parts, namely the attempted seduction of Adonis by Venus in part one, and the death and metamorphosis of Adonis in part two. I intend to concentrate on ekphrastic forms and other modes of insertion of the pictorial in the first part (lines 1 to 814), which deals with Adonis' refusal to accept Venus' courtship and ends with his departure into the woods to pursue hunting. In this respect, I shall rely on reflections by Claus Clüver and Liliane Louvel,

since both theoreticians have sought to overthrow certain rigid classification impasses created by their structuralist and semioticist predecessors.

Theoretical perspectives on ekphrasis and other forms of pictoriality

Much critical discourse on the nature and categorization of ekphrasis has been developed in the 20th and 21st centuries, mainly proceeding from the assumption of the diverse ways in which verbal texts respond to visual works of art.

The restrictive definition of ekphrasis, born under the auspices of Horace's *Ut pictura poesis*, has undergone radical revisions in contemporary times. In an essay, entitled "Ekphrasis Reconsidered: On Verbal Representations of Non-Verbal Texts" (1997), Claus Clüver (1993) expands the concept of ekphrasis, including in its scope not only visual texts, but also non-visual texts such as dances and musical compositions. He takes as his starting point the definition of James Heffernan, who defined ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of a visual representation". While accepting the first part of Heffernan's definition, Clüver (1997, p. 26) proposes a radical change for the second premise, arriving at a more inclusive definition: "Ekphrasis is the verbal representation of a real or fictional text composed in a non-verbal sign system". In his expanded concept, he makes no distinction between existing or imaginary works of art, postulating that verbalizations of fictitious visual texts are as valid as those based on textualities of proven existence.

In another essay, written in 1999, entitled "The *Musikgedicht*. Notes on an Ekphrastic Genre", Clüver further extends the concept of ekphrasis when he writes:

[...] the verbalization need not be a 'literary' text, nor does it have to render a 'non-verbal' work of art, although in an interarts context the latter will be the norm (always depending on whatever concept of 'art' may be available and valued in that context). Instances of *ekphrasis* include certain types of reviews, passages in textbooks, descriptions in auction catalogues or on CD covers, and renditions in narratives, plays, and poems. (CLÜVER, 1999, p. 189)

In the sense imparted by the quotation above, I shall treat some descriptive-narrative passages permeating the first part of Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis*, as forms of ekphrasis, since they verbalize, in the form of visual poetry, a motif borrowed from the Venetian painter Titian. Furthermore, these passages display the quality of *energeia* or *Anschaulichkeit* (visual energy), a trait that Clüver (1999) considers essential in verbal representations of works composed in non-verbal sign systems.

In her theoretical studies on the relations of text and image, Liliane Louvel (2006), quoting Viola Winner, explains that the borrowing of motifs, codes and conventions from the visual arts for structural, thematic and aesthetic purposes in literary texts was paramount during the Renaissance and is a recurrent practice today, constituting an important generating impulse for the development of ideas, themes, motifs, characterization, description of setting, configuration of the narrative, among others. She further adds that, in the process of mediation from one medium to another, heterogeneity is inevitable, because in the displacement of a narrative substratum, the relationship of identity is impossible, not only due to the fact that each medium is governed by different codes and conventions, but also because in such practices all kinds of manipulation are allowed:

A description will be called 'pictorial' when the predominance of painterly 'markers', namely those which confer artistry to the image, turning it into an artifact, are irrefutable, casting into background didactic intentions, references to mathematical and mimetic knowledge, etc. At least, we will have an emulsion, never a total fusion, namely an iconotext. There will always be a trace, a vestige of one in another. [...] We shall denominate this process 'translation' or, rather, 'revolution', i.e., the action of passing from one place to another, from one language to another, from one semiological code to another. It will be a process of observing the modes of operation of this 'revolution', of recovering traces of heterogeneity caused by the presence of the source medium in the target medium, owing to textual markers. (LOUVEL, 2006, p. 95)

In her book, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, Louvel (2011, p. 89) discusses a series of pictorial strategies of textual composition, establishing "a graduated typological scale according to a higher or lesser degree of pictorial saturation of the text". Among

the several categories described, she mentions hypotyposis, a rhetorical trope which “paints things so vividly and so energetically that it puts them under one’s eyes, as it were, and turns a narrative or a description into an image, a painting, or even a living scene” (LOUVEL, 2011, p. 94).

Hypotyposis narrativizes “the somewhat diluted pictorial reference” (LOUVEL, 2011, p. 99), constituting an expedient of descriptive narration, however “the pictorial effect depends on the point of view of the reader, who may or may not make the connection” (LOUVEL, 2011, p. 94), because no direct reference to a specific painting can be found in the text.

In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare tends to rely not only on ekphrastic modes of composition, but also in other rhetorical figures such as hypotyposis. He introduces a narrator into his poem, whose voice alternates with the voices of Venus and Adonis, who repeatedly enunciates words, such as “Look” or “Lo”, inviting the readers to visualize the narrative segments of the poetic universe.

Shakespeare and Titian: intermedial dialogues

The six canvases based on mythological themes², painted by Titian (c. 1488-1576) for Prince Philip (1527-1598), the future Philip II of Spain, between 1553 and 1562, were called *poesie* (visual poetry), since they developed out of the Venetian artist’s reconceptualization of literary sources. It is known that the second painting of the collection, entitled *Venus and Adonis* (1553), was shipped to England in 1554, for the occasion of the marriage of the Spanish Prince to Queen Mary Tudor (1516-1558).

Another known fact is that Philip left England in 1555 to assume the command of his army against the French in Flanders. Some critics report that he took the painting with him, while others claim that it remained in England many years after his return to Spain (DOEBLER, 1982).

² *Danaë* (London, The Wellington Collection, Apsley House), *Venus and Adonis* (Madrid, Museo del Prado), *Perseus and Andromeda* (London, The Wallace Collection), *Diana and Actaeon* (Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland), *Diana and Callisto* (London, National Gallery) and *The Rape of Europa* (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum).



Fig. 1 – Titian. *Venus and Adonis* (1553). Oil on canvas. 186 cm x 207 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado.
Source: <<https://library.bc.edu/venetianart/exhibits/show/l--titian-and-contemporaries/item/1804>>

The question whether Shakespeare had seen or not seen Titian's oil painting is matter of controversy among Shakespearean and art critics. However, considering that there were many reproductions and etchings of this famous painting in Renaissance England, the art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) points to it as one of Shakespeare's likely pictorial sources of inspiration for writing *Venus and Adonis*.

In a series of lectures, subsequently published in his book *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographical* (1969), Panofsky argued he was convinced that Shakespeare departure from Ovid was inspired by Titian, who had reinvented the Ovidian myth in his canvas *Venus and Adonis* (1553), by showing a "reluctant Adonis" (DOEBLER, 1982), eager to escape from Venus' sexual assaults to go hunting. This motif deviates from Ovid who did not describe the last parting of the pair, and whose Adonis lovingly embraces the goddess.

Additionally, considering that Titian painted the female figure in the nude, seen from the back, an insight he derived from a classical sculpture denominated *Bed of Polyclitus*, Panofsky (1969) further ventured to propose that

Titian – just as he was to inspire Keats with his ‘swift bound of Bacchus’ – inspired Shakespeare with a new version of the Venus and Adonis story, a version well motivated on artistic grounds (i. e. by the painter’s intention to present the principal figure from the back) but not anticipated, it would seem, in any literary source. (PANOFSKY, 1969, p. 163)

To validate his hypothesis, Panofsky refers to an ekphrastic passage in Shakespeare’s narrative poem which, in his view, displays a series of explicit pictorial markers of Adonis’ flight away from Venus, a motif that permeates Shakespeare’s poetic narrative up to the moment when Adonis succeeds in breaking away from her:

*With this he breaketh from the sweet embrace
Of those fair arms which bound him to her breast,
And homeward to the dark laund runs apace,
Leaves love upon her back, deeply distressed.
Look how a bright star shooteth from the sky;
So glides he in the night from Venus’ eye. (811-816, my emphasis)*

The option by Titian of painting the female figure from the back was considered lascivious by Renaissance art critics, bearing in mind that the canvas showed the buttocks of Venus, a part of the female anatomy that most excited the imagination of contemporary males. By the same token, Venus’ desperate effort to restrain her lover from departing with a seductive embrace was considered transgressive and indecorous, violating accepted standards of male seduction.

The motif of the reluctant Adonis, who disdains and repels the caresses of Venus, is foregrounded in ekphrastic configurations since the very beginning in Shakespeare’s text:

*Over one arm the lusty courser’s reign,
Over her other was the tender boy,
Who blushed and pouted in a dull disdain,
With leaden appetite, unapt to toy:
She red, and hot, as coals of glowing fire,
He red for shame, but frosty in desire. (31-36, my emphasis)*

Throughout the poem, Venus uses the traditional rhetoric of male seduction, while Adonis repeatedly entreats her to let him go:

'You hurt my hand with wringing. *Let us part.*
And leave this idle theme, this bootless chat.
Remove your siege from my unyielding heart:
To love's alarms it will not ope the gate'. (421-424)
[...]
'Fie, fie', he says, 'you crush me. *Let me go:*
You have no reason to withhold me so. (611-612, my emphasis)

Besides inserting the motif of the reticent Adonis right from the beginning of his highly erotic narrative poem, and differently from Ovid whose Venus displays a restrained sexuality, Shakespeare creates a rapacious and sexually aggressive Venus, characterized by masculine attributes: she plays an active role, while Adonis is described as the sexual object of the goddess. Even the physical representation of Adonis is accomplished by means of feminine attributes, and there prevails the objectification of the masculine body through female gaze.

Almost all these motifs developed by Shakespeare in *Venus and Adonis* constitute reversals of stereotypical gender roles. Adonis, in his position of love object, is cast into the conventional passive feminine role of Petrarchan love poetry. He is described by Venus as an effeminate youth, "rose-cheeked" (1), with blushing white skin "More white or red than doves or roses are" (10). He also has conventional red lips and his blushing stands for his "chaste maiden coyness" (33). He is portrayed like the blazoned female object of desire, however, as he does not respond to Venus' sexual innuendos, she accuses him of being a statue, choosing epithets that refer to the visual arts:

Fie, lifeless picture, cold, and senseless stone.
Well-painted idol, image dull and dead.
Statue contenting but the eye alone.
Thing like a man, but of no woman bred:
Thou art no man, though of a man's complexion,
For men will kiss even by their own direction. (211-213, my emphasis)

This passage shows that Shakespeare was aware of the *paragone* – the comparison between painting and sculpture made famous by Leonardo da Vinci – since he makes use of the language of art to convey Adonis' lack of interest in the goddess. There are many visual configurations which do not refer to specific paintings, but the visual energy emanating from the words suggests painterly motifs and themes, activating the shift between textuality and pictoriality, such as the passage in which Venus is prodigal in praising her own attributes to attract Adonis' gaze:

Thou canst nor see a wrinkle in my brow,
My eyes are grey, and bright, and quick in turning.
My beauty as the spring does yearly grow,
My flesh is soft, and plump, my marrow burning.
My smooth moist hand, were it with thy hand felt,
Would in thy palm dissolve, or seem to melt. (139-144)

The reference to the palm of her “smooth moist hand”, which she yearns to offer to Adonis so that it might dissolve in his hand relates not only to Renaissance paintings in which hands are highlighted, but also to Elizabethan stage conventions. According to Farah Karim-Cooper (2016), Elizabethan dramaturgy, by relying predominantly on the sense of hearing to provide emotions related to other senses, such as vision, taste, smell and touch, included numerous references to hands, because they are organs providing expressive communication and passion, mainly through touch. The woman's hand was seen as an object of desire and erotic fantasies, especially with regard to the palm, reputed as one of the most intimate parts of womanhood, a powerful sexual symbol capable of arousing overwhelming passions and the desire for carnal union (KARIM-COOPER, 2016). Thus, it is possible to infer, according to the prevailing view of the early modern period, that when Venus offers Adonis the palm of her “smooth moist hand”, encouraging him to touch it, this gesture implies her desire for sexual intimacy.

Adonis' stubborn unwillingness and resistance to Venus' increasingly aggressive sexual harassments casts the goddess into a male role. She encourages him to explore the topography of her body in a narrative description which reminds us of pictorial representations of female nudes with overtly sexual overtones:

I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie,
Within this limit is relief enough,
Sweet bottom grass, and high delightful plain.
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
To shelter thee from tempest and from rain. (231-238)

In the Elizabethan context, these words of the female speaker were extremely audacious, not only because they alluded quite explicitly to sexual eroticism, but also because the expression of sexuality was a male prerogative. In this way, Shakespeare questions and subverts traditional views on gender identity and exposes male anxieties over female sexuality. Instead of a male suitor, here we have a female speaker who intends to exert complete control over the sexual situation, since she strives to take the lead in courtship to possess the male, as the pun indicates: he is her deer/dear.

Sarah Carter (2011, p. 157) argues that this daring speech by the goddess constitutes “an erotic description of the female body with explicit reference to the genitals for (male) readers to appreciate and are essentially a male fantasy of sexual license”. She adds that Venus’ self-blazon also carries homoerotic overtones, since “it can be argued that Adonis objectification through Venus’ ‘masculine’ gaze makes him too a subject of the male gaze of the reader [...]” (CARTER, 2011, p. 157).

In this sense, Shakespeare anticipates contemporary reflections on the theme of scopophilia in his narrative poem. Of Greek origin, scopophilia is a Freudian term, related to Jacques Lacan’s notion of the gaze, issues that have been discussed by Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, first published in 1975 in *Screen*. In her provocative essay, she argues that in classical Hollywood cinema, women are represented mainly in terms of sexuality, as objects of desire for the male gaze: “The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (MULVEY, 1999, p. 825).

In Shakespeare's reconceptualization of his visual sources of composition, he cunningly draws attention to both aspects of sexual eroticism: the pleasure of looking and being looked at. Venus, by calling attention to her own availability as an object of visual pleasure, casts herself into the posture of sex object as well. Hence, the position of sexual dominance becomes dubious, evidencing that sex roles are easily reversed.

Final remarks

The visual poetry of Italian Renaissance painters and Shakespeare's verbalization of pictorial themes and motifs in *Venus and Adonis* prove the fertility of interdiscursivity between word and image. As has been argued in the essay, Shakespeare's interest in the relationship between visual and verbal modes of representation and his borrowing of themes and motifs from the visual arts takes on structural and thematic functions in his *oeuvre*, becoming the driving force for his complex intermedial constructions.

The hypothesis whether Shakespeare's departure from Ovid was inspired by Titian's painting is controversial. However, the coincidence that both Titian and Shakespeare deviate from Ovid's narrative events by concentrating on the moment before Adonis' departure for hunting is significant and thought-provoking. Titian's powerful image of Venus, struggling to prevent Adonis from leaving her, is reconfigured by Shakespeare in lengthy ekphrastic passages in which she insists to restrain him from pursuing his objective.

Shakespeare's appropriation of Titian's reconceptualization of the Venus and Adonis myth expresses the poet's insight on male anxieties over excessive female sexuality, probably aiming at subverting and discrediting early modern politics of gender and sexuality. Although Titian's painting is not directly referred to in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, the thematic variation of the motif of the reluctant Adonis is expanded *ad infinitum* into different narrative strands, constituting the *Leitmotif* of the first part of the poem. Both texts, the literary and the pictorial, invert the innumerable myths that narrate the seduction or rape of mortal women by the gods.

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