

The Ovidian Rhetoric in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*

川 浪 亜弥子
Ayako Kawanami

I

Together with *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Venus and Adonis* is an experimental poetic work which Shakespeare published in 1593 with a dedicated epistle to Henry Wriothesley, the young earl of Southampton, during the period of theatre closure from 1592 to 1594 due to the plague breakout. Since its first publication of 1593, the poetic work had undergone nine editions by 1619. It can be said from this fact that the poem *Venus and Adonis* had been a most popular and attractive one among the erotic poetic works, which are later to be called epyllia, under the movement of Ovidianism of the 1590s.¹

The very first stanza of *Venus and Adonis* succinctly sets its tone both thematically and rhetorically:

Even as the sun with purple-coloured face
Had tane 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. (ll. 1-6)²

Venus and Adonis is about the story of love between Venus and Adonis, and yet the love is one-sided rather than reciprocal with the young and lively Adonis solely engaged in hunting and the experienced and gloomy Venus carried away by her passions for him. Writing amid the literary vogue of Ovidian eroticism, Shakespeare may well have relied on the story of Venus and Adonis in the Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's Adonis is not necessarily cruel with regards to Venus's love for him, however. In Ovid's version of the story of Venus and Adonis, its main focus is on Venus's dire warning against the hunting of atrocious animals like bears, lions, wolves, and boars on the part of Adonis and the subsequent result of the dreaded death of Adonis killed by a boar. On the other hand, Shakespeare shifts his main focus to Venus's passionate pleading with the stubborn and indifferent Adonis for accepting and responding to her love while amplifying Ovid's 240 lines to 1194 lines.

As the first stanza which I just quoted above shows, *Venus and Adonis* is a rhetorically conscious poem full of rhetorical tropes and figures. Certainly, we can witness Shakespeare's

¹ The most thorough argument about the Ovidian epyllia in the 1590s remains William Keach, *Elizabethan Erotic Narratives: Irony and Pathos in the Ovidian Poetry of Shakespeare, Marlow, and Their Contemporaries* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1977).

² All the quotations from *Venus and Adonis* are from John Roe ed., *The Poems*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

rhetorical specimen in this one stanza only : antithesis in "Rose-cheeked Adonis" and "Sick-thoughted Venus," parallelism in "Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase" and "Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him," and chiasmus in "Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn." In respect of its structure, furthermore, the description of Adonis in lines 3-4 and that of Venus in lines 5-6 are on antithetical terms.³

In the Elizabethan period, it has been well known, Ovid's works, *The Metamorphoses* in particular, were introduced as collections of moral lessons and textbooks of rhetorical practice at the same time. Then, how did Shakespeare face the rhetoric of Ovid when he turned to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for composing his *Venus and Adonis*? It is the main concern of this small essay.

II

The readers of *Venus and Adonis* have been daunted by Venus's too much copious language at service for her voluminous sexuality for a long time. In his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Samuel Taylor Coleridge comments on *Venus and Adonis* as follows:

In the 'Venus and Adonis,' the first and most obvious excellence is the perfect sweetness of the versification; its adaptation to the subject; and the power displayed in varying the march of words without passing into a loftier and more majestic rhythm, than was demanded by the thoughts, or permitted by the propriety of preserving a sense of melody predominant. The delight in richness and sweetness of sound, even to a faulty excess, if it be evidently original, and not the result of an easily imitable mechanism, I regard as a highly favorable promise in the compositions of a young man.⁴

In fact, Coleridge has evaluated the excellent operation of verbal technique in *Venus and Adonis*. He sees beauty and richness in its words, and yet simultaneously he implies that its verbal deployment might be an indication of the recklessness of a young man, thereby incurring "a faulty excess." In one of the more modern criticisms of this poem, C.S. Lewis has described that "we become more and more doubtful how the work ought to be taken."⁵ As we read *Venus and Adonis* on, we are perplexed by Venus's copious language which is sometimes too erotic that we are inclined to turn away from the book pages and is sometimes too absurd that we feel sorry for the predicament of the goddess Venus.

From the beginning of the encounter between Venus and Adonis, Venus's words are redolent of rhetorical figures and tropes. To give only a few of plenty examples,

'Thrice fairer than myself,' thus she began,
'The field's chief flower, sweet above compare,

³ For the rhetoric-oriented criticism of *Venus and Adonis*, see, for example, Richard Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976); Heather Dubrow, *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); John Roe, 'Rhetoric, Style, and Poetic Form,' in Patrick Cheney ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 33-53; Clarke Hulse, *Metamorphic Verse: The Elizabethan Minor Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁴ Jonathan Bate ed., *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 147.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 61.

Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
More white and red than doves or roses are: (ll. 7-10)

This is the figure of hyperbole with the augmenting effects of comparison. And as she desperately tries one way or another of persuasion, repeatedly rejected by the indifferent Adonis, the use of various rhetorical figures is made to her advantage. In the following stanza, the repeated use of metaphor supports her “discourse” of love:

‘Bid me discourse, I will chant thine ear,
Or like a fairy trip upon the green,
Or like a nymph with long dishevelled hair
Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen. (ll. 145-148)

At one scene where she pretends to be dead in order to attract Adonis’s attention, she keeps silence as if she had been in a deep coma and restarts her talk thus:

‘O where am I?’ quoth she, ‘in earth or heaven?’
Or in the ocean drenched, or in the fire?
What hour is this? Or morn, or weary even?
Do I delight to die, or life desire?
But now I lived, and life was death’s annoy;
But now I died, and death was lively joy. (ll. 493-498)

The former quatrain consists of repeated questions, which the contemporary literary critic George Puttenham calls “eroteme or the questioner” in *The Art of English Poesie* (1588), his treatise on rhetoric. According to Puttenham’s explanation, eroteme is “a kinde of figurative speech when we aske many questions and looke for none answer, speaking indeed by interrogation, which we might as well say by affirmation.”⁶ In the latter couplet, the two lines are composed of parallelism; in addition, each line has the rhetorical figure of polyptoton; “polyptoton is the repetition of words derived from the same root, and as such is related to the logical argument from conjugates.”⁷ There is the use of polyptoton with “lived” and “life” in the first line of the couplet, and so is with “died” and “death” in its second line. The use of polyptoton, furthermore, is overlaid with another rhetorical trope of chiasmus with the crisscrossing of “life” and “death” and their derived words of “lived” and “lively” and “death” and “died.” These rhetorical figures are all to help to express Venus’s unsatisfied therefore amplifying passion.

In response to Venus’s words full of rhetorical figures, on the other hand, Adonis coldly casts doubt on their credibility. Adonis tells Venus to leave him and her flattering words again and again:

‘You hurt my hand with wringing, let us part,

⁶ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. by Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936; repri. 1970), p. 211.

⁷ Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare’s Use of the Arts of Language* (New York and London: Hafner Publishing Company, 1966), p. 83.

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;
Dismiss your vows, your fainèd tears, your flatt'ry,
For where a hart is hard they make no batt'ry.' (ll. 421-426)

'Nay then,' quoth Adon, 'you will fall again
Into *your idle over-handled theme*.
The kiss I gave you is bestowed in vain,
And all in vain you stain against the stream;
For by this black-faced night, desire's foul nurse,
Your treatise makes me like you worse and worse. (ll. 769-774; my emphases)

"Theme" is a closely related word to rhetoric. As Peter Mack puts it, "theme, a term found in sixteenth-century English and Latin, designated both the subject set and the composition itselfSixteenth-century writers might also call it a commonplace or an oration."⁸ With the contemporary significance of "theme" as an oration or a rhetorical composition in mind, we can perceive that Adonis's pleading with Venus for giving up meaningless talks ("bootless chat") is equivalent to for stopping her rhetoric. By the same association, Adonis's phrases "your treatise" could well indicate a rhetorical manual or a rhetorical treatise, in which many usages and many examples are introduced and explained, like Puttenham's rhetorical treatise *The Arte of English Poesie*. From the point of view of Adonis, Venus's rhetoric is far away effective; it is rather piling up words in vain.

In *Venus and Adonis*, the talks and gestures between Venus and Adonis are described by the narrator who from time to time intrudes to the scenes of those two characters. It is interesting that the narrator delivers their circumstances in a quite balanced way without being complicit in either side. Let us see the narrator's comment on the desperate Venus at the scene where Adonis tries to shake her off and leave off for hunting.

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

But all in vain, good queen; it will not be.
She hath assayed as much as may be proved;
Her pleading hath deserved a greater fee;
She's love, she loves, and yet she is not loved. (ll. 601-610)

⁸ Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 24.

As we have already witnessed in the first stanza of this poem, the narrator is an expert in rhetoric. Here is one good example of the effective use of metaphor. Venus's slight hope for Adonis immediately proves to be insubstantial and deceitful, just as birds are deceived by the insubstantial grapes painted by Zeuxis. The grapes on the canvas are metaphor for Venus's love for Adonis in imagination. There is another usage of rhetorical figure which is frequently pointed out by many critics as a typical example of polyptoton. In the line "She's love, she loves, and yet she is not loved," the word "love" shifts its form with its root maintained: "love," "loves," and "not loved." Whether with metaphor or with polyptoton, indeed, the narrator's rhetorical expression serves to describe Venus's more and more miserable predicament. Yet the narrator's mind is not the same as Venus's. The narrator never sympathizes Venus. Let us consider an occasion where we see pictures hung on the wall. When we see deceived birds pecking at painted grapes on a picture, we are to see them rather in an aloof manner. Through the introduction of the metaphor of painted grapes, therefore, the narrator sees Venus's situation objectively. Furthermore, the narrator's balanced attitude which can be discerned from the line "She hath assayed as much as may be proved" (the number of advancement and that of rejection are the same) and from the polyptoton "She's love, she loves, and yet she is not loved" (Venus is in love yet out of love) impresses his aloofness and objectivity.

Both Venus and the narrator are, as it were, technicians in rhetoric. Venus exerts her rhetorical skill for exploring subjective feelings, while the narrator does for exploring objectivity. Venus's rhetoric encounters the narrator's rhetoric in the manner of creating the rhetorical spirit of antithesis, and moreover, chiasmus. As in many cases of rhetorical expressions in *Venus and Adonis*, however, discursive speeches deepen confusion without giving no solution.

Now let us turn to the rhetoric of Ovid's Venus in the Book X of *Metamorphoses*. Once in love with Adonis, Ovid's Venus is herself engaged in hunting in the earthly woods, leaving away from her accustomed residence in heaven. She chases such safe and gentle beasts as hares, stags, and does in the manner of Diana. Fearing the wild beasts like boars, wolves, bears, and lions, however, she warningly persuades Adonis to shun those wild beasts. Ovid's Venus is also skillful in rhetoric, as can be seen in her using a rhetorical trope of polyptoton: '*in audaces non est audacia tuta*'—the female noun "*audacia*" is shifted to the adjective "*audax*" ("*audaces*").⁹ She thoroughly knows the timorousness of boars because a boar is the transformed figure of Hippomenes, the son of Megareus of Onchestus and the grandson of Neptune; he has been transformed into a beast because he has neglected the thanksgiving for Venus despite of her help for achieving his love for Atalanta. Between her persuasions against hunting wild beasts, thus, Venus inserts the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes.

Atalanta is an attractive woman with unprecedented beauty and unmatched foot speed. She has been approached by many suitors, but she has rejected them with harsh words; she has been told by the oracle of the god to shun the intercourse of husband. She has even claimed that a winner in a running contest can have her as his wife, yet a loser is to die. As a result, many suitors lose their life. Although at first despising those suitors who have tried in vain, Hippomenes, struck by Atalanta's surpassing beauty, has become an attractive applicant in the running contest. In

⁹ For the quotations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Volume II, ed. by Frank Justus Miller (London: William Heinemann, 1916). This sentence is translated as "against bold creatures boldness is not safe." pp. 102-103.

attending the contest, Hippomenes appeals to Venus for assisting him in winning Atalanta in the race and gaining her love; Venus has been moved by him. Venus has helped him by giving three golden apples which he has tossed at critical moments during the running contest, thereby making Atalanta delayed. In this way, Venus has been on Hippomenes's side, but once achieving his love, he has forgotten his thanks for Venus, the goddess of love.

In the Book X of *Metamorphoses*, this story of Atalanta and Hippomenes is told by Venus herself for persuading Adonis to avoid wild beasts in hunting. She begins her story with such words as '*non fabula rumor ille fuit; superabat enim.*' ("And that was no idle tale, for she did surpass them.")¹⁰ Considering the fact that Venus was herself involved in their love story, we will probably expect from this opening phrase Venus's opinions based on her experience with this event.

In the course of her story, however, her manner of talking is quite balanced and objective. At one moment, she describes Hippomenes's impression about Atalanta thus: '*quae quamquam Scythica non setius ire segitta Aonio visa est iuveni, tamen ille deccorem miratur magis: et cursus facit ille decorum.*' ("Though she seemed to the Aonian youth to go not less swiftly than a Scythian arrow, yet he admired her beauty still more. And the running gave a beauty of its own.")¹¹ The rhetoric in using the phrase "*ille decorum*" repetitiously serves for the rich description of Atalanta, but it also helps to maintain Venus's balanced position in her narration.

The following is another example which shows Venus's balanced attitude towards this story. When Hippomenes nominates himself as a true competitor in the running contest, Venus describes Atalanta's feelings thus: '*taliam dicentem molli Schoeneia vultu aspicit et dubitat, superari an vincere malit.*' ("As he said his, the daughter of Schoeneus gazed on him with softening eyes, being in a strait betwixt her desire to conquer and to be conquered.")¹² The antitheses between "*aspicit*" and "*dubitat*," and "*superari*" and "*malit*" are the right choice of rhetorical trope for expressing Atalanta's split mind, yet they are helpful in conveying Venus's objective position.

In both *Venus and Adonis* and *Metamorphoses*, as we have seen so far, the rhetoric of characters in love and the rhetoric of narrators are balanced in an antithetical way. In its structure, interestingly, the phenomenon of the deliberate use of rhetorical tropes is drowned out by itself. What is required after all is the readers' interpretation and judgement. Ovid asks us to do so, and so does Shakespeare.

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 104-105.

¹¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 106-107.

¹² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 106-107.