RHETORIC AND PICTURE IN
VENUS AND ADONIS

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Like so many of his successful plays, Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis is dominated by a spellbinder. The eloquence of a gifted speaker, in this case Venus herself, accounts for much of our fascination for his art. Of this poem’s 199 stanzas, 89—almost half—are given to the oratory of the goddess. Consideration of this fact invites us to reckon with a problem: why does Venus’ rhetoric, for all its brilliance and charm, fail to seduce the handsome young hunter? If the art of persuasion recapitulates aesthetically a paradigm of seduction in its every act, then how is it that Venus’ orations, set pieces of Renaissance persuasion par excellence, can sound so alluring to us and yet leave Adonis so resistant to her voluptuous embraces? Consider these lines:

Sometime she shakes her head, and then his hand,
Now gazeth she on him, now on the ground;
Sometime her armes infold him like a band,
She would, he will not in her armes be bound:
And when from thence he struggles to be gone,
She locks her lillie fingers one in one.

Fondling, she saith, since I have hemd thee here
Within the circuit of this ivorie pale,
Ile be a parke, and thou shalt be my deare:
Feed where thou wilt, on mountaine, or in dale;
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be drie,
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

1 Just as seduction obtains a change of attitude, stance, or commitment between persons by employing the illusion of pleasure and moral deceit, so experiencing an art form obtains a similar change of attitude, stance, or commitment between the observer and the art form by employing the pleasure of illusion, aesthetic ‘deceit.’ Thus if the speaking or verbal persuasion is done by art, it is the eliciting of this pleasure which brings about the yielding of an habitual perception (the surrender of a customary attitude) and the winning of assent to a new one.
EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

Within this limit is reliefe inough,
Sweet bottome grasse, and high delightfull plaine,
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure, and rough,
To shelter thee from tempest, and from raine:
   Then be my deare, since I am such a parke,
   No dog shal rowze thee, though a thousand bark. (223-240)

We need no prompting from Freud to perceive beneath her topographic analogy the carnal pleasures Venus is offering. Yet Adonis smiles at her in disdain. Some subtle and elusive barrier persists throughout Venus' lengthy entreaties to love making; some psychic discord or disparity of phantasms prevents Adonis from being aroused. Repeated invitations to the touch and taste of her delicious body repel Adonis, while, with equal mystery, her attempts to dissuade him from hunting seem to excite him. The frightful images of the boar that she conjures to deter him are apparently what galvanize Adonis' resolve to challenge the beast:

   Thou hadst bin gone (quoth she) sweet boy ere this,
   But that thou toldst me, thou wouldst hunt the boare,
   Oh be advisd, thou know'st not what it is,
   With iavelings point a churlish swine to goare,
      Whose tushes never sheath'd, he whetteth still,
      Like to a mortall butcher bent to kill.

   On his bow-backe, he hath a battell set,
   Of brisly pikes that ever threat his foes,
   His eyes like glow-wormes shine when he doth fret
   His snout digs sepulchers where'ere he goes,
      Being mov'd he strikes, whate're is in his way,
      And whom he strikes, his crooked tushes slay. (613-624)

Something in this speech arouses Adonis, for though he courteously hears out the rest of Venus' tedious admonition (another 14 stanzas), at its conclusion he again struggles to escape, avowing his determination to rejoin his comrades of the chase. His fantasies may not be as lively as those of a Freudian

2 All quotations are taken from Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, a facsimile in photo-lithography of the first quarto, 1593 (London: W. Griggs, n.d.).