Historicizing Fat in Anglo-american Culture

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In 1960 the editor of the Arden edition of Shakespeare’s poems, F. T. Prince, announced with some confidence that “few English or American readers nowadays will respond to such happily wanton fancies as *Venus and Adonis*.” In this, he was giving voice to a critical tradition which taught the literate reader to read the poem in ways that precluded an erotic response. The use of “nowadays” suggests both the solution to this supposed problem and the reason why a solution was seen as necessary. Critics sought to develop increasingly more sophisticated ways to read the poem in order to counter what the literary record made obvious: namely, that in Shakespeare’s day, *Venus and Adonis* was appreciated for its “wanton pleasures.” Shakespeare’s contemporaries appreciated Shakespeare for his sweetness, lightness, and titillation. That *Venus and Adonis* was popular in his day is indicated by the sheer number of editions (seventeen before 1640) and by the frequency of allusions to it. Contemporary allusions confirm that *Venus and Adonis* was considered an “erotic sourcebook” or a piece of “soft porn.” The admiration for the park conceit, in which Venus asks Adonis to enjoy her expansive body as a deer enjoys a park, was not of a purely “literary” nature—that is, in terms of what the “literary” would come to be.

Early modern responses to *Venus and Adonis* usefully encourage us to scrutinize our own very different ascetic response to the poem and, indeed, to Shakespeare. These responses are especially important for those who are interested in promoting an anti-fatphobic agenda precisely because it chal-
lenges a pervasive asceticism that is often used to sustain fat prejudice. The critical tradition we inherit assumes that the literary is antithetical to the erotic, the former being a sophisticated response to the poem, the latter a primitive or naïve response. Such a tradition teaches us to read *Venus and Adonis* for a “larger purpose.” As Sasha Roberts explains, many critics urge us to read the poem allegorically, where an allegorical reading requires us to look beyond the salaciousness of the poem and its imagery. Whether it is the character of Venus or Adonis, we are not to take pleasure in their bodies; rather we are to understand that Shakespeare is using them to make a larger, moral point. One recent editor of *Venus and Adonis*, for example, even as he admitted its erotic dimension, recommends an allegorical reading of it because allegory “elevates [the poem’s] seriousness, adding poetic dignity to what might otherwise appear to be an unabashedly erotic poem.”

His remarks make it clear that to many it is not acceptable to see *Venus and Adonis* as a merely (so the thinking goes) erotic poem. Shakespeare must have had another, more important and serious reason to write it.

Our relationship to our object of investigation—whether it be Shakespeare, the poem, or the past—is often an implicitly ascetic one. Because we cultivate this ascetic relationship to the past, we pretend that the past does not affect the present. It cannot serve our own needs because such a view of the past as distant and detached from us serves to support a quietist status quo. Because we cultivate this ascetic relationship to the past, we ensure that the past cannot serve the needs of the present, erotic or otherwise. Our own pleasures must be placed as secondary to some larger purpose or greater end. Such an emphasis is deleterious to many, but especially the fat. We, after all, are the ones who are constantly targeted for placing our appetites and pleasures first. If we could only learn to assert superior willpower over our bodies, we could then achieve the elusive body of the “after.” As I have written elsewhere, such a logic depends on an implicit historiography. That is, it assumes a specific progressive historiography, in which the past, present, and future, as discrete entities, are related in a linear sequence. Because this temporal logic is used to pathologize the fat, critical fat studies must follow the lead of queer historiography and challenge the historiographical assumptions often implicit in much scholarship in the humanities. The assumption that the scholar must be detached from our subject requires an implicit asceticism, in which our needs are always placed as secondary to a greater end. In part, we subvert such a temporal logic if we simply refuse to put our own commitments and attachments, both political and erotic, secondary to an elusive end that never comes. Refusing a logic that would have us look for a “larger purpose,” we insist that our histories must serve our needs and desires.
Venus and Adonis provides us with the opportunity both to consider the effect of this implicit asceticism on the fat and to counter such an effect. A critical tradition developed from the Romantic period onward that taught the sophisticated reader to interpret the poem through a restrictive teleological logic. The danger of the poem was at first associated with the voluptuous imagery, which was, by synecdoche, gradually associated with what came to be the “fat” body of Venus. Given such intrinsic dangers, Venus and Adonis must properly be read with an eye toward reaching that larger moral point. Certainly, one should never linger over the sensuous details, nor should one enjoy either the represented bodies of the lean Adonis or the fat Venus. The scandal of the poem came with time to be equated with the scandal that is Venus’s body, initially seen as “voluptuous,” then as fat, and soon, no doubt, to be seen as “obese.” The contemporary critic, who inherits this tradition, could, of course, ignore Venus’s body altogether or seem to address it by saying that she is large but not fat, but the fatphobia, I would insist, demands to be more directly addressed and challenged. To challenge such fatphobia, we must do more than merely ignore fat; instead, we must alter our relationship to the fat Venus. In this, we respect our own needs and appetites in the here and now, even as we refuse to bow down to the elusive “after.” In celebrating Venus’s body as erotic, I place my own desire for fat Venus front and center, even as I insist that the fat body itself is often an object of pleasure.

**DISCIPLINARY TELEOLOGICAL READINGS**

Much of the critical tradition plays the role of disciplining the reader so that he will either ignore the eroticism altogether, locate it in a quaint past, or regard it with contempt. Criticism often places the eroticism of the poem (or of Shakespeare) in a distant past, although different critics associate it with different time periods. Such a critical tradition is typified by the pedagogical remarks of Prince in his Arden edition of Shakespeare’s poems. Prince uses his introduction to initiate his British and American readers into a literary tradition, in which the poem must be read through a teleological framework that moves toward a greater end. Notably, he quotes heavily from the critic who can be said to have wrested the poem from the relative obscurity in which it was regarded in the eighteenth century—that is, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Prince accurately describes Coleridge as establishing a highly influential critical tradition. Coleridge designs his sophisticated reading method to protect the reader from the “danger” of the poem’s palpable eroticism. (Such a danger becomes associated in later forms of this critical tradition with the volup-
tuous, and later fat, body of Venus.) Significantly, Coleridge offered the first, and most influential, defense of the poem. Where previous editors had largely seen the poem as a literary curiosity that represented tastes that had long since disappeared, Coleridge argued that the poem, *if read correctly*, could be invaluable to the present-day critic. Coleridge admits that “the very subject cannot but detract from the pleasure of the delicate mind.”\(^{13}\) Exactly because the eroticism of *Venus and Adonis* was seen as a danger to the reader, if not appropriately armored with literary knowledge and sophistication, Coleridge offers strict (teleological) guidelines on how to read the poem. To discipline the reader so that he does not fall victim to the danger of the poem, Coleridge establishes a method of reading in which the poem is read through the prism of a rather strict teleological interpretative framework. If read rightly, *Venus and Adonis* must be seen as representing an early stage in the teleological development of poetic genius.

Coleridge, in fact, lays the foundation for a critical tradition which insists that the poem must be read for a “larger purpose” that is meant to preclude the reader from indulging his appetites in the supposedly transient corporeal images of the poem. Prince approvingly notes that “he [Coleridge] was wise to make his criticism serve the larger purpose of illuminating Shakespeare the dramatist.”\(^{14}\) Indeed, Coleridge does exactly this as he defends *Venus and Adonis* only insofar as it is taken to display Shakespeare’s “promise of genius.”\(^{15}\) In reading with an eye toward this end, genius, the reader is implicitly urged never to linger over any voluptuous passage, including those describing Venus’s abundant body. In essence, Coleridge is the first to insist that the poem should be read according to a modern temporal logic, in which the “end” is given the highest priority. In this, he feeds into a modern logic that is now pervasive, in which those who are wallowing in their own desires are seen as intensely dangerous and, in Coleridge’s case, wrong-headed, unsophisticated, and naïve. The critical tradition depends on just such a logic in which only the most primitive of readers would gratify their sense and feed their appetites in a way that suggests that they are stuck in the temporal state of a “before.”

Shakespeare, as Coleridge imagines him, offers the reader a model of a disciplined reader. Shakespeare’s “promise of genius” is fulfilled in the mature tragedies; thus, *Venus and Adonis* is to be read and evaluated according to this tragic aesthetic. In this, Coleridge creates a teleological method of reading that ensures that the poem is not taken as a reflection of the youthful pleasures of the poet himself. That is, Shakespeare could not have had an erotic or aesthetic interest in bodies, whether these be those of beautiful, slim boys or pushy fat gals. According to Coleridge, the poetic genius, universally under-
stood, writes for more lofty purposes that necessarily preclude just such “private interests.” In disciplining the reader in this way, Coleridge seems aware that the poem had and continues to have an erotic appeal, but that does not mean that such eroticism reflects the tastes, erotic or otherwise, of the poet himself. Coleridge assures us of the principle that “A second promise of genius is the choice of subjects very remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer himself.” Coleridge will expand upon this principle in what follows; thus, he writes of the “alienation” of the poet of which he is at once the painter and the analyst. As a poetic genius, Shakespeare must be an ascetic, who cultivates a sophisticated detachment from the subjects of his poem. Just as Shakespeare is assumed to have taken no pleasures in the bodies he so lovingly depicts, and just as the poem is assumed to have nothing to do with Shakespeare’s lived eroticism, so too the reader is encouraged to cultivate the same sophisticated detachment for the poem and its bodies.

The method of reading that Coleridge promotes becomes hardened into a subsequent tradition. If anything, the learned reader becomes even more anxious to follow such an ascetic relationship to the literature he reads. In his 1898 *Poems of William Shakespeare*, an edition designed for the learned middle-class reader, George Wyndham announces that there is an “asceticism of artistic creation.” All artistic creation emerges out of a labor of ascetic self-mastery; as such, the poem can never be read as suggesting the kind of erotic or voluptuous tastes of the artist himself. Just as the author is supposed to create through such asceticism, so too is the reader supposed to read with the same asceticism. A literary sensibility required a detached appreciation of poetry, and most especially a detached appreciation of all poetry with a scandalously erotic component.

Other critics read *Venus and Adonis* through a teleological framework in which they consider it as part of an early stage of literary development. The “coarseness of manners” reflected in the poem must be relegated to some time neatly past and thus irrelevant to the present. The “voluptuous” dimensions of the poem are explained away as a relic, in which coarser readers would read poetry primarily for erotic pleasure. Ironically, such theologically informed criticism calls attention to the very presence of the erotic precisely because it expends so much energy trying to confine the erotic to a distant, more primitive past. Indeed, critics worry that an unsophisticated reader will read the poem in a more frankly erotic manner. In the Victorian literary magazine *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, an influential magazine among literary sophisticates, Y.J., a pseudonym for the sub-editor, Cyrus Redding, warns his readers that “It is not a proper book to be in all hands, and of late years has not been much read; nor can it be so in future, because it
is out of keeping with our times, and is on a subject which the most pure pen could scarcely be expected to delineate and escape the censure of conveying indelicate impressions. It is to be pursued by the discriminating and curious in literature, rather than by those who seek amusement only.” Redding follows in the steps of Coleridge by reading the poem according to a modern teleological framework, only now applied to the literary tradition rather than to the genius Shakespeare. The poem, then, reflects the cruder tastes of a time past that is “out of keeping with the times.” Redding’s careful attempts to foreclose an erotic reading of the poem underscore the extent to which the poem is, indeed, erotic in nature. Implicitly acknowledging this dimension of the poem, Redding even warns that the unsophisticated contemporary reader may well respond to the poem with “indelicate impressions.”

From the Victorian standpoint, something was “not quite normal” about the poem; indeed, it was quite simply a “perversion in nature.” Such a perversion is commonly explained, in part, by associating it with a pagan past. Venus and Adonis is associated with this spirit of the past, whether that be the “erotic and elegiac poets of classic times, and especially Roman literature” (1880), “the spirit of the classics” (1894), or the “pagan spirit” (1879). As Venus and Adonis is located in the past, it is also seen as something that expresses a quaint or archaic taste that is, the critics hope devoutly, has been superseded by a more solid, Christian present. As Redding writes in 1823, “This composition is agreeable to the coarseness of manners in the time of Elizabeth, being deficient in that delicacy which has happily been introduced by modern refinement.” Barrett Wendell insists similarly that, as a “spirit of the classics,” it is superseded by the more moral contemporary Victorian culture. Wendell, therefore, describes the poem as follows: “What these poems of Shakspere, and the others of their kind, first evince, then, is a state of culture alive to the delights of past civilization, but too young to be soundly critical.” As this passage indicates, Wendell associates the poem with a primitive culture, equated with unchecked appetites; his own Victorian culture is associated with the modern. The primitive past is equated with the unchecked appetites, whereas the modern era is characterized by a critical restraint. Venus and Adonis is often also associated with a “past decadence” that only confirms the superiority of the more critical and rational present.

**FATPHOBIA IN THE CRITICAL TRADITION**

In the twentieth century, as J. W. Lever and Katherine Duncan-Jones observe, Shakespeare criticism has been consistently scandalized by Venus’s body.
Since the mid-twentieth century much of that scandal is attached to what is presumed to be a fat, middle-aged body. Influential twentieth-century critics C. S. Lewis and Don Cameron Allen gave voice to what many probably knew by then: Venus was a ridiculous object of (heterosexual male) desire because she was middle-aged and fat. Because such fatphobic—and ageist—comments remain uncriticized, their assumptions remain alive and well, if implicit, in contemporary criticism. We may be far “too polite” to mention the problem, but we allude to it, nonetheless, often in tongue-in-cheek parentheticals. Thus, in recent years, a critic refers to the “(literally and metaphorically) large problem” of the poem even as another, while making a show of her own propriety, remarks that Venus’s rhetorical “content exceeds the form (perhaps an unfortunate, though apt, phrase when Venus gives the impression much of the time of being too large).”

Relatedly, C. S. Lewis’s lines, quoted at length below, remain the most quoted lines from *Venus and Adonis* criticism; they are, furthermore, often quoted with little or no comment in a way that gives them cultural heft. The discussion here is meant to encourage more forthright discussion of our fatphobic assumptions in the hopes that subsequent critics will also be more critical about what they say.

Lewis and Allen merely gave voice to assumptions that had become culturally obvious years before. A number of factors converged that made it likely that the poem could be explained, and the reader’s response could be controlled, if Venus were simply taken to be a fat woman of forty. For one, the teleological framework described above was just as frequently used to understand the condition of the fat body. The fat body comes to be seen as the anomalous, naturally located in the bygone past, and therefore disruptive when it makes itself felt in the present. The fat body comes to represent an obstruction, where its immense appetite is seen as representing a danger to present-day society at large. Notice that the same teleological framework used to contain and control the salaciousness of the poem is used to contain and control the unruly appetites and flesh of the fat body. As such, it simply makes sense to associate the scandal that is Venus’s (fat) body with the scandal of the poem.

This is precisely what the critical tradition demonstrates. By the twentieth century, critics were conditioned to see Venus as the problem and to look to her body for signs of it. Such an assumption seems merely commonsense because they were used to a critical tradition which did make the scandal that is Venus’s body emblematic of the scandal that is the poem. Criticism commonly equates the poem with a painting of a nude, usually a Titian Venus. This strain of criticism began to equate the voluptuousness of the poem with the voluptuousness of Venus’s body. Although voluptuousness lacked con-
temporary associations, it nonetheless shows the degree to which the critic used aspects of her body to explain the scandal of the poem. Critics continually asked the question, “What was ‘not quite normal’ about Venus?”

By the turn of the twentieth century, the analogy between the poem and a nude had been so entwined that it was no longer considered whether the poem was, in fact, a nude for the viewer to “see,” but, rather, what kind of nude it was. In making this point, the temporal logic we considered above was applied to the poem. What was the painting’s style and, relatedly, proper artistic period? Was it a painting that reflected a style long past, and thus an archaic relic of bygone tastes, or was it an emphatically modern painting? Wendell sums up this tradition when he writes, “Beyond doubt it is a nudity; but it is among the few nudities in English Literature which one groups instinctively with the grand, unconscious nudities of painting or sculpture.”

If one groups it “instinctively” with such nudities, one also, presumably, “instinctively” knew that the body of Venus represented a danger or scandal to the contemporary reader/viewer. As Wendell concludes, the poem was not really a Titian at all, but “a nudity as suggests rather the painting of modern Paris than that of Titian’s Venice. It is not conscienceless, not swiftly impulsive, not quite pagan,—above all, not quite normal.”

The problem of the poem here is applied to the representation of Venus’s body. If the poem were a Titian nude, the contemporary could appreciate it as a primitive style, more characteristic of Renaissance Italy or of the pagan past than of the more moral Victorian present-day. If, however, *Venus and Adonis* was seen as a “painting of modern Paris,” the painting becomes more threatening. Like the fat body of the past appearing in the present-day, the poem becomes disruptive, especially insofar as it insists on the pressing needs of its appetites. Its voluptuousness is directed at us, even from the somewhat distant geographical point of the cosmopolitan Paris. For our purposes, we should remember that the scandal of the poem is equated with the scandal of Venus’s body. Something about the body, we might assume, bears the marks of being “not quite normal.”

What about Venus’s body was “not quite normal?,” critics began to ask. Although some considered her body to be not quite normal in her muscular bigness, others equated her lack of normality with her fat body. Shakespeare could not have expected the reader to find this middle-aged fat Venus attractive, a number of twentieth-century critics insist. Critics like Lewis and Allen use their vivid descriptions of Venus in order to make the reader understand quite viscerally that she was fat. In so doing, they were simultaneously insist that the poem “failed” because the object of its sexual attention was a fat, middle-aged woman. As such, they bring us as modern readers into the
circle of people who all share this open secret that the queen is, indeed, “a thoroughly absurd, a fat white woman, whom nobody loved.” Gordon Williams calls her simply “too grotesque.” Don Cameron Allen calls Venus, a “forty-year-old countess with a love for Chapel Royal altos.” All of these critics simply crystallize the image of Venus that C. S. Lewis had given us in his popular and influential 1954 *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. With vivid details, Lewis urges us to read the poem as unsuccessful because its central character is a buxom, pushy, and finally fat middle-aged woman.

What Lewis does is to place this fat female body in the recent past so that the reader can impose his own views on the bulging figure of the poem. The poem’s problem, Lewis insists, issues from the object of our desire—the goddess herself—whom Lewis characterizes as innately unlovely. I do not so much object to his conclusion as I object to the way he universalizes his desires. Because he found the fat bodies of his own aunts threatening and ugly and because Venus’s body reminds him of their bodies, he reasons that all readers necessarily feel the same. Venus’s body, more specifically her fatness, is the problem. Contemporary critics often quote the following, sometimes disapprovingly, but never in order to analyze Lewis’s assumptions and desires. It represents a culmination in a literary tradition, which has seen Venus’s body as embodying the scandal of the poem. Lewis simply takes the next step by equating the scandal of her body with her fatness, which by the mid-fifties in the West had become a grotesque emblem. Beginning with the assumption that Shakespeare must have been writing a story to make a “moral point,” Lewis explains that

the story does not point the moral at all well, and Shakespeare’s Venus is a very ill-conceived temptress. She is made so much larger than her victim that she can throw his horse’s reins over one arm and tuck him under the other, and knows her own arts so badly that she threatens, almost in her first words, to “smother” him with kisses. Certain horrible interviews with voluminous female relatives in one’s early childhood inevitably recur to the mind. If, on the other hand, the poem is meant to be anything other than a “cooling card,” it fails egregiously. Words and images which, for any other purpose, ought to have been avoided keep on coming in and almost determine the dominant mood of the reader—“satiety,” “sweating,” “leaden doth reak and smoke, her blood doth boil,” and the wretched “boy” (that word too was dangerous) only gets away “hot, faint and weary with her hard embracing.” And this flushed, panting, perspiring, suffocating, loquacious creature is supposed to be the goddess of love herself, the golden Aphrodite. It will not do.
Just as previous critics assumed the poem to be unsuccessful because the body of Venus was too voluptuous, so too Lewis assumes that the poem is unsuccessful because Venus is fat. Because Venus should evoke some sort of erotic response in the reader, Lewis assumes, she fails because her body in its presumed grotesque fatness is intrinsically ugly and undesirable. The “temptress” must be young, thin, and passive to the older and more active heterosexual male seducer. Lewis merely gives voice to what many still assume: Venus is fat and, in her fatness, undesirable.

C. S. Lewis and other professional critics of the mid-twentieth century established a precedent by which Venus became presumptively fat. Venus was the typical fat woman of the day—overweight and overindulgent. That the grotesque language of the poem also made her abundant, oozing, and fleshly only made it more likely that we all knew that she was fat. After all, that which was “not quite normal” about her was undoubtedly registered on her body itself. While critics can counter these unspoken associations by calling attention to the fatphobia of the critical tradition around Venus and Adonis, as I have done here, critics also need to offer alternative readings of the poem.

**Desiring Fat Venus**

Such a critical tradition demands to be answered. We cannot simply remain silent or argue that Venus is not, and never was, fat. The polite or objective critic today might prefer such an approach. Fat, after all, is an unpleasant reality, they might reason, and thus they will do the fat a favor by not mentioning the subject. As we have seen, this ineffective strategy invites those who are less than polite to reserve the right to allude to such facts in order to bolster their own arguments. If we do not respond to this fatphobic critical tradition, the judgments of C. S. Lewis, Don Cameron Allen, and others prevail. Fortunately, we powerfully answer the critical tradition, because it has the biases described above, when we express our desire for a fat Venus. In doing so, we resist the critical tradition of detached objectivity, even as we resist those who, like Lewis, insist that Venus is necessarily undesirable in her fatness. An expression of desire for a fat Venus can go further, however, in resisting both the asceticism implicit in much of the criticism and in intervening in a history which values the controlled, contained bodily aesthetic. Her grotesque body, characterized by its oozing and melting nature that defies clear-cut bodily boundaries and violates would-be bodily autonomy, reminds us of the interconnectivity of bodies.

What does it mean to desire Venus’s fat body? To desire her fat body is to
align ourselves with a very different aesthetic that we might call the grotesque aesthetic, to use the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin. To desire Venus is to align ourselves with such a grotesque aesthetic against what derives from a puritan bodily aesthetic, as I have described elsewhere. Shakespeare writes at a historical juncture before a puritan bodily aesthetic completely dominated, and the character of Venus embodies a very different grotesque aesthetic. In expressing our desire for her expansive and expanding body, we resist the puritanical tendency to value the contained and controlled body, which comes to be associated with the thin body. As I have argued in *The Culture of Obesity*, the 1590s saw the beginnings of a puritan bodily aesthetic that would flower in the first decades of the seventeenth century. By drawing on the Ovidian example evident in the epyllion form he uses, Shakespeare evokes a very different aesthetic, one in which the human body transforms itself easily from human to plant. Such an aesthetic opposes the puritan one, in which the body asserts its autonomy and bodily self-control. From the perspective of the lean, disciplined puritan body, the fat body of Venus is a distinct threat.

Notably, it is difficult to define Venus precisely. Certainly, her body seems to resist all solidity, evident in the way she applies very different natural tropes to herself and in the way that she is defined by a melting, oozing, almost primal presence. Within the poem, her expanding presence opposes the leaner aesthetic embodied by Adonis and, to a greater extent, the character of Death. That she gives voice to an aesthetic, which is antithetical to the puritan bodily one, surfaces in the judgment she passes on the “lean” body. The lean body is the ugly one, Venus insists, precisely because it seeks to divorce itself from everything around it. Venus makes her aesthetic preferences obvious when she voices her frustration at Adonis’s refusal to copulate with her. She would understand his reluctance, Venus insists, if she were “Thick-sighted, barren, lean, and lacking juice.” Her description does not so much insist she is beautiful because she has any distinct physical form; instead, she is beautiful because she is fecund and plump. Similarly, she reprimands Death, who has taken her would-be lover from her, by calling him “Hard-favoured tyrant, ugly, meagre, lean, / Hateful divorce of love.” Whereas Venus herself represents the desire for bodies to merge with bodies, Death represents the divorce of such bodies from each other. Here, being “thin” and “meager” represent this meanness.

If contemporary puritans recognized the poem as “scurrilous,” as it was deemed by the 1622 anti-Catholic pamphlet, *The Anatomie of the English Nunnery at Lisbon*, they did so because they recognized the dangers of the pagan pan-eroticism embodied by Venus’s expansive and expanding body.
Katherine Duncan-Jones reminds us that the poem focuses on the “overwhelming physicality of Shakespeare’s Venus—her fleshy strength, her hot breath, her ardor, and her verbal brilliance.” Unlike contemporary tracts that encouraged the puritan to discipline his body so that it could be a bulwark of the early modern English state, *Venus and Adonis* encourages the reader to indulge his senses. Its world teems with desire from human, animal, and plant alike, and no figure has more desire coursing through her body than the Goddess of Love herself, Venus. Throughout the poem, Shakespeare characterizes Venus by her abundant desire and appetite, which in its immensity threatens to engulf the bodies around her. Similes indicate that her desire is a natural one, as when it is likened to animal appetites: “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.” Such vivid imagery associates Venus with her appetites, even as it suggests a grotesque aesthetic in which body unites with body as she seeks to consume Adonis.

Rhetorically, Venus tends to display herself in forms that enlarge her body so that she merges with the surrounding nature itself. In some ways, it is exceptionally strange that criticism would see her as a fat woman, simply because she tends to be described in ways that resist any clear definition. She is defined as a predator, a garden, or a park. Her coupling with Adonis seems to be associated as much with a vegetative growth in which one organism merges with another. Imagery suggests that she mingles with him in the here and now, as when she is fertilized with his breath: “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.” Elsewhere, she asks him to feed from her body in the famous conceit of her body imagined as an expansive pasture of delights: “I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer: / Feed where thou wilt.” Such an aesthetic sees Venus as beautiful exactly because she’s larger than life, not quite as cultivated and contained as a garden, although not quite as expansive as an entirely uncultivated field or forest. The emphasis throughout on her sweating, juicy, fleshy self serves to connect her with the impulse toward growth in nature. When she offers a panegyric to her beauty, she focuses exactly on this life force that acts within her. Notably, she refuses a Petrarchan blazon that would require a detailed anatomization of her body and its charms; instead, Venus describes herself in expansive terms that refuse any efforts to contain her. As she tells Adonis,
“Were I hard-favour’d, foul, or wrinkled old,  
Ill-nurtur’d, crooked, churlish, harsh in voice,  
O’erworn, despised, rheumatic and cold,  
Thick-sighted, barren, lean, and lacking juice,  
Then might’st thou pause, for then I were not for thee;  
But having no defects, why dost abhor me?

 Thou canst not see one wrinkle in my brow,  
Mine eyes are grey and bright and quick in turning.  
My beauty as the spring doth 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.”

Such descriptions require that we imagine Venus in terms that are antithetical to either the Petrarchan blazon or the classical (or neoclassical) nude. When Venus comes to describing her body, she does so in a manner that resists all solidity. She embodies the principle of dilation, by which she is continually bodied forth in different images, usually vegetative in form. In fact, even when Venus describes herself as having the conventionally beautiful gray eyes, she focuses on the way that they are “quick in turning.” That is, she focuses on their action, their effect, rather than on their static and closed form. Throughout, she focuses, instead, on the way in which she typifies an impulse toward growth at the heart of nature. Such a description focuses on an endless growth: “My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow,” which, as the final image suggests, resists all efforts to contain it.

Reading such passages, we can understand why Venus would offend the puritan writers of her day, as well as the professional, male critics of the twentieth century. She, after all, gives free reign to her appetites in a way that will be perceived as dangerous to those who value a companionate marriage that requires that the appetites be moderated and contained within an increasingly more affectively and erotically demanding bond between husband and wife. In a similar way, Venus refuses to moderate or contain her body, but, instead, celebrates the principle of growth at its very core. In this opposition, Venus also offers a useful counterpoint to our own puritan aesthetic, maintained now by a bio-medical disciplinary regime. Exactly because Venus gives so much offense, we can use her to challenge the assumption that all bodies need to be intensely regulated under the supervision or “assistance” of medical practitioners. Health in our narrow-minded, reductive sense is the last thing on Venus’s mind. To see Venus as offering a fattening aesthetic
is to allow her elusive and large physical presence in the poem to challenge our own seemingly dominant aesthetic. Insofar as her bodily form challenges our own belief that thinner is better and insofar as her eroticism is cultivated without regard to the heterosexual nuclear family (indeed, she is at least as much herbo-erotic as she is hetero-erotic), she offers a potential for a queer aesthetic. Of course, whether she will offer such a queer and fattening aesthetic depends in large part on whether we work on developing new types of pleasures, including new types of pleasures open to our engagement with Venus’s expansive body.

NOTES

5. Prince, Introduction, xxv.
10. The use of the masculine pronoun is purposeful because as this critical tradition develops, it assumes a masculine reader and increasingly a “heterosexual” and fatphobic one.

There is a significant body of queer- and gay-inflected reading. For those that address the issue of teleology for how it secures the heterosexual norm, see Menon, “Spurning Teleology”; Richard Rambuss, “What It Feels Like for a Boy: Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis,” in The Poems, Problem Comedies, Late Plays, 240–58.

For a reading that places it in a historical context in order to interrogate our own tendency to impose on the poem modern categories especially of sex and “family values,” see the important article: Catherine Belsey, “Love as Trompe l’oeil: Taxonomies of Desire in Venus and Adonis,” Shakespeare Quarterly 46.3 (Autumn 1995), 257–76.

12. Prince, Poems, xxv.
14. Prince, Poems, xxv.
15. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, 2: 20. See also Y.J. [Cyrus Redding], “Shakespeare’s Poems,” New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal 7 (May 1823), 470-1: “It is rather for the purpose of directing attention to the links which connect incipient genius with maturity—the character of primitive attempts with more finished excellencies—to shew how the poet’s genius may be traced from its juvenility to manhood, and to display, besides his surprising knowledge of our common nature, the great power of description of the author in his first productions, that I would draw the attention of the reader to this poem.”
17. Ibid., 2: 22.
18. George Wyndham, Introduction, in Poems of William Shakespeare (London:
8: Resisting Fatphobia

Methuen, 1898), xxx.


24. Ibid.


30. Ibid.


37. Ibid., 116–33.
39. Ibid., 931–32.
41. The paganism of the poem has been recognized for many years, but see Dympna Callaghan, “Change,” for a discussion of how this Ovidian paganism is used by Shakespeare to oppose the puritans of his day. The pan-eroticism of the poem, especially, which refuses to be contained to the boundaries of an individualized body, is a threat to the puritan bodily aesthetic.
44. Ibid., 61–66.
45. Ibid., 231–32a.
46. Ibid., 133–44.