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**"SWEET BEGINNING BUT UNSAVOURY END": THE CHANGE IN POPULARITY OF
SHAKESPEARE'S POETRY**

By

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Unlike most 400-year-old texts, William Shakespeare's works are not just of interest to scholars, rather they are a central part of popular culture and are responsible for the formation of Shakespeare as a pop icon. Shakespeare's longevity, ubiquity and distinction are unparalleled by any other author and his image, name, and plays can be found scattered throughout the media. Fans of Shakespeare range in occupation, age, and nationality, from everyday people to scholars to schoolchildren. Having been translated into more than 100 different languages, his work has found a permanent place in cultures throughout the world (Estill and Johnson). He is considered to be the greatest and most influential author in modern time, not only among academics. Shakespeare's work influences our language, media, marketing, and education and permeates throughout nearly every facet of society.

Shakespeare's legacy is based specifically in the success of his plays and his brand revolves around his role as a dramatist and actor. Between 2011 and 2016, there were nearly 2,000 performances of Shakespearean plays by professional, notable theatre companies (Kopf).¹ Since 1960, *Hamlet* has been published and performed in more than 75 languages (Estill and Johnson). One of Shakespeare's most popular plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, was performed in 24 countries between 1995 and 2015 (Estill and Johnson). His plays have inspired films in Hollywood, Bollywood, and throughout the rest of the world. From Japan to Tibet to Argentina to Estonia there have been movies and television shows created based on Shakespeare's work (Estill and Johnson). Shakespeare is also a powerful advertising tool. His plays have been featured in commercials for Apple's iPhone, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appeared on ads for mustard, and *Romeo and Juliet* was used to market tobacco.

¹ This data is from journalist and Shakespeare obsessive, Eric Minton. Minton kept track of all upcoming Shakespeare productions in North America, England, Australia, and throughout the rest of the world between 2011 and 2016. His list of productions is the most comprehensive available. A graph of his findings can be found at Priceconomics.com.

Shakespeare's brand and popularity rests solely on the image of Shakespeare as a playwright and his plays as culturally significant and recognizable media.

Based on our understanding of Shakespeare today, it is easy to assume that his popularity as a playwright and a literary canon with his plays at the forefront has persisted over the past 400 years. Yet surprisingly, Shakespeare's first and by far most popular text was a narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*. The text that launched Shakespeare into popularity and gave rise to this cultural icon was a poem, rather than a play. But despite its initial success, *Venus and Adonis* is not a central feature of the modern literary canon and Shakespeare's original role as a poet has been overshadowed by his achievements in theatre. This paper sets out to explore what happened to Shakespeare's legacy in poetry. I will address how this dramatic literary canon was created and why it revolves around Shakespeare as solely a playwright.

Print and Popularity

In order to understand why interest in Shakespeare's poems has decreased and why some texts' reputations have waned, I will examine two of Shakespeare's poems: *Venus and Adonis* and Shakespeare's sonnets. Both texts have experienced drastic changes in popularity over time and for this reason I will be using them as a case study. The commercial history of these poems is important to understanding their popularity, however the market cannot explain everything. The economic and cultural status of texts is also bound up with their form, themes, and rhetoric. Therefore, I will analyze popularity through the markets in which these texts were printed and the reception of the aesthetic form of the texts.

Before I explore the poems, I want to define my measure of popularity and explain the scope of Shakespeare's popularity as a playwright. There are many different measures of

popularity and depending on which measure is used scholars have come to different conclusions about which texts were popular and which texts were not. For example, religious writings in early modern England might seem to be the most popular due to their large market share, however religious texts were not very profitable and have surprisingly low reprint rates. Hence, it is important to examine different facets of popularity and understand what the popularity implies about the text.

Using Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser's *The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited*, I measure popularity based on the total number of editions of a text printed, the market share of texts, the frequency of editions reprinted, and the profitability of texts (4). The total number of editions published per year indicates fluctuations within the market and suggests changes in the supply and demand for certain texts. Printing a first edition of a text cost a publisher around £9 for 800 copies, which had to be paid before the publisher could start to sell the edition (Erne 142). The total profit that a publisher could make from completely selling out this first edition was around £6 (Erne 143). Therefore, a publisher took a considerable risk with his money just to print a text. Publishers did not break even on most of the texts that they printed. In order to make a profit, the entire first edition had to sell out then the publisher spent another £7 on each subsequent reprinted edition (Erne 142). For a text to go through multiple editions, there must be a high level of popularity, otherwise a publisher would not waste his money. The market share is the proportion of playbooks among all other kinds of books that were printed. Similar to the total number of editions, the market share of texts indicates popularity because if publishers were printing many editions of a text then that denoted a high level of popularity and a subsequently high market share. The rate of reprinting is the measure of how often a new edition of a text was printed. This is a better

measure of consumer demand than the total number of editions printed because stationers often misread consumer demand and would reprint texts before they fully sold out. This measure assumes that the previous edition was completely sold before the new one was printed. The profitability of a text estimates how much printers made based off of each edition sold. There is not a lot of specific information on how much money each text brought in, however Erne estimates that the max amount that a publisher could make off of printing and reprinting a text was £18, while the regular wage for labor in this time period was around £12 (144). If a text made £18 then that indicates that many people bought several editions of the text. Therefore, when I use the term popularity throughout this paper, I am referring to a text that went through multiple editions, had a sizable market share, a high reprint rate, and made a decent profit (at least enough to breakeven).

There is a lot of debate among scholars about the popularity of playbooks in 1500 and 1600s London. Peter Blayney argues that playbooks were insignificant, only making up 2.77 percent of the total market for books between 1583 and 1642 (14). The market share of sermons was more than twice that of playbooks during their highest selling periods (Farmer and Lesser 21). The number of playbooks printed between 1583 and 1642 were outnumbered three to one by sermons and there was a five-year period when not a single playbook was printed at all (Blayney 11). Between 1500 and 1639, there were 1,607,000 poems, plays, and sonnets printed in England – compared to 7,538,000 major religious English works printed in the same time period (Konkola 24). More than five long treatises on religion were published for every single book of poems, plays, and sonnets published between 1610 and 1640 (Konkola 25). While there is clear evidence that the reading public were primarily interested in purchasing religious texts such as sermons and treatises, secular texts such as playbooks

had a significantly higher reprint rate. Farmer and Lesser argue that in terms of reprints, playbooks were highly popular and possibly even more profitable than religious works.

Secular texts experienced a significant growth rate in the early modern period, indicating an increase in leisure reading of non-religious works (Erne 20). Making up only 13 percent of all publications before 1560, by the end of the century, literature increased to around 25 percent (Erne 20). Much of this growth was in the market for playbooks. Sermons did not have high reprint rates and playbooks were more likely to reach a third edition than a sermon was to reach a second (Farmer and Lesser 22). Plays were also more likely to be reprinted within a 5-year window, indicating a high level of popularity in a short period of time (Farmer and Lesser 22). Plays gained a reputation for being “middle-cost, middle-profit, low risk” investments (Farmer and Lesser 25). Publishers knew that if they printed a play, they could at least break-even and oftentimes reprint multiple editions at a lower cost, increasing their chances of making a profit. The success of the playbook market was directly related to the success of Shakespeare in print.

Shakespeare was an incredibly successful and popular author in print, by far surpassing his competitors and helping to establish the market for playbooks in this time period. While 30 percent of the market for books in London was made up of “literature,”² five percent of that was Shakespeare’s works (Erne 28-29). Shakespeare’s 29 titles went through 105 editions (Erne 34). According to Lukas Erne, “Shakespeare was the most published playwright during his career, no two playwrights together saw as many editions of their plays reach print as Shakespeare did alone” (42). By 1660, Shakespeare had 76 editions

² Literature refers to secular texts such as poems, sonnets, and plays. Other major texts in this time period are sermons, religious treatises, and religious ballads. Additionally, a large part of the market consists of royal treatises.

of playbooks printed, the most of any other author (Erne 38). The second closest author in number of editions printed was Thomas Heywood, who had 25 fewer editions than Shakespeare (Erne 38). Almost 60 percent of Shakespeare's quartos and octavos received a second edition within nine years compared to 20 percent for all other professional plays — meaning there were three times as many editions of Shakespeare printed compared to other playwrights (Erne 47). In a time period where putting the name of an author on a title page was not the norm, Shakespeare had 28 mentions of his name on title pages while his competitors had 12 (Erne 45). Shakespeare's name quickly became a marketing device with publishers frequently misattributing texts to Shakespeare in order to sell more copies. He was the only author to have works misattributed to him in this time period and between 1595 and 1622 he had ten title pages misattributions (Erne 56). Shakespeare's popularity in print continued long after his death because his works were considered to be sound investments and publishers continued to profit from printing and reprinting his plays. Based on the popularity measurements laid out by Farmer and Lesser, Shakespeare was the most popular author in print in this time period and his plays reached high levels of success.

However, the incredible success of his plays was insubstantial compared to the popularity of his most popular text: *Venus and Adonis*. Shakespeare's narrative poem outsold his most popular play by four editions and paved the way for Shakespeare as a successful author (Blayney 388). Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* was published in 1593 and was an immediate hit. Within a decade, it went through six editions, and in the following 20 years it was printed nine more times (Hooks 57). Between 1593 and 1641, *Venus and Adonis* went through 17 quarto editions (Yearling 54). According to Adam Hooks, *Venus and Adonis* was the "best-selling book of vernacular poetry in the entire period," outselling both poems and

plays (61). Erne claims that there were only two other literary titles in English published in this time period that went through more editions than *Venus and Adonis* (30). Shakespeare made most of his money from the high sales of *Venus and Adonis* and his other successful poem, *The Rape of Lucrece* (Bland 462). *Venus and Adonis* was so popular that it created and sustained a vogue for Ovidian poetry even among a highly religious audience (Hooks 57). Like the misattributed plays, one publisher even pirated *Venus and Adonis* and issued a falsely imprinted version of the text in order to gain a profit (Hooks 111). The poem was so popular that this publisher was willing to risk his career and good standing with the Stationers' Company in order to make some money on its success. The narrative poem was also used as a marketing tool on other title pages such as *The Passionate Pilgrim*, advertising "Certaine Amorous Sonnets, between Venus and Adonis, newly corrected and augmented" in the 1612 reprint (Hooks 111). Shakespeare's first and most successful text, *Venus and Adonis*, is arguably the reason for the prominence of Shakespeare today.

Yet, as the century progressed, the poem was all but forgotten. *Venus and Adonis* was not even included in the 1623 First Folio. While today we might assume that this was because *Venus and Adonis* was not popular enough, it is actually because it was too popular. The compilers of the folio did not want to pay for the rights to own *Venus and Adonis* and the owner of those rights did not want to sell because he was still profiting off of it. The First Folio then rose to prominence without the narrative poem and became the text most associated with Shakespeare. Shortly after this in 1641, *Venus and Adonis* stopped being printed and only circulated on the second-hand market. Ironically, "the books that had first guaranteed Shakespeare's commercial success, and had demonstrated the viability of the Folio project, would eventually become subordinated or obscured by it" (Hooks 135). Today,

Venus and Adonis is an afterthought to the plays. The poem is seen as a useful tool that can “illuminate the appeal of those plays” (Hooks 173). What was once so popular among the general public, is today only read by “literary persons” in order to learn more about the plays that dominate the canon (Duncan-Jones 501).

Shakespeare’s sonnets were also not included in the First Folio; however, unlike *Venus and Adonis*, it was because they were very unpopular and poorly received. When they were first printed in 1609, they were met with “no notable success” (Yearling 54). The sonnets were not reprinted again until 1640 and even then the publisher was able to get away with suggesting that they had never been printed before (Yearling 54). This is particularly telling due to the success and profitability of Shakespeare’s name. In a time when texts were frequently misattributed to Shakespeare, the sonnets which were actually written by him, were able to go untouched and unnoticed by both publishers and readers for over 30 years. One would think that a text that was so unpopular that it did not make it into the First Folio would have no chance of resurfacing 400 years later, yet the sonnets have climbed in popularity and earned a spot in the present-day literary canon. Today, the sonnets are read alongside Shakespeare’s plays in classrooms and are often quoted in popular literature. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” from sonnet 18 is as recognizable as “To be or not to be?” from *Hamlet*. As culture has raised Shakespeare to the level of an almost divine figure, the sonnets have been used as a means of understanding more about him as a person and the life that he lived. The sonnets are often read biographically to make inferences about Shakespeare’s family, love life, and sexuality. They are both a highly praised piece of literature and a never-ending source of theories and gossip about the author. While the

sonnets barely made it to two editions in the early modern period, today they are a widely read Shakespearean text.

Based off of the sonnets' current popularity, it is easy to assume that they would have been included in the First Folio, the pivotal text that defines Shakespeare. We would also assume that *Venus and Adonis* was not included in the folio because it is not popular or widely read today. If the sonnets were included in the First Folio while *Venus and Adonis* was not, then this would easily explain their change in popularity. But this is not the case. Neither *Venus and Adonis* nor the sonnets made it into the folio. Therefore, there must be another explanation for this drastic change in popularity. Examining the poems together, they have many similarities: both poems were not included in the folio; both texts were written by Shakespeare, who was very popular in this time period; both are poems despite Shakespeare mainly being known as a playwright; and both deal with themes of erotic love, changing gender representations, androgyny, and homosexual connotations. The most significant difference in these texts is their form; *Venus and Adonis* is a narrative poem, while the sonnets are lyric verse. The use of lyric verse allows the sonnets to be read as coterie texts, poems that would circulate among an elite group of people in manuscript. This fosters a sense of intimacy with the reader and makes them feel as if they are gaining access into a socially restricted group. The intimate portrayals of love in the sonnets permit the reader to gain pleasure and excitement from learning about the personal details of the author's life. However, when the sonnets are read alongside the narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, the genuine portrayal of love turns sour — at best the reader becomes a voyeur gazing into an uncomfortable sexual situation, at worst the unwanted advances of the poems are directed at the reader. The form of narrative poetry lets readers experiment with eroticism at a safe

distance, while lyric verse engages the reader too intimately and blurs the line between fact and fiction, words on a page and reality.

***Venus and Adonis* & Shakespeare's Sonnets**

Venus and Adonis follows the goddess of love, Venus, as she pursues a young beautiful human named Adonis. Trapping him in the pastoral setting of the forest, Venus attempts to seduce Adonis while he strains to leave to go hunting with his friends. Despite constant rejection from the young man, Venus continues to prey on and assault Adonis until his untimely death at the end of the poem. The portrayal of Venus's fruitless love pursuit is light-hearted and comedic; however, the ending is tragic and heart wrenching at points. Shakespeare wrote this text when the theaters in London were closed due to the bubonic plague and it was printed in the boom after the theaters reopened in 1593. It is an Ovidian poem based on a story found in *Metamorphoses*. However, in Shakespeare's version of the story, Venus's love is unrequited and the poem is more comedic than tragic.

Unrequited love is also the theme of Shakespeare's sonnets. Written later in his career, the 154 poems were published as a quarto in 1609. The sonnets are considered today to be divided into two parts; one part dedicated to a young man and the other part to a Dark Lady. Within these subsets there are also the procreation sonnets and the rival poet sonnets. The sonnets grapple with erotic love, jealousy, longing, and homosexuality. Rather than following a narrative story like *Venus and Adonis*, the sonnets are snippets of time and emotions that tempt the reader to organize them as a series of events. As Colin Burrow suggests, "a story converges from the lyrics, and then it vanishes...the sequence calls for a form of disappointed wonder, as readers make and remake different methods of unifying the sequence" (110).

Moreover, the reader is attempting to unify a storyline with Shakespeare as its speaker. The sonnets are often read biographically; the reader assuming that Shakespeare himself is the authorial “I” figure. The desire to interpret the “I” in poems as the author themselves is an issue that readers are often faced with, especially with lyric verse. The dedicatory material of the sonnets, the tradition of the sonnet form, and the intimacy of the themes and rhetoric promote this biographical reading. However, I will refer to the speaker of the poems as ‘the speaker’ rather than Shakespeare. Poems are inherently separate from their authors and works of fiction, so I leave the role of the speaker up for interpretation. Still, the suggestions of biography allow the reader to feel as if they are gaining access into something deeply personal and even elite. This access is made more intriguing and even titillating because it is an intimate portrayal of unrequited love. Reading biographically allows the reader to imagine themselves as part of a coterie that gained access to these poems through manuscript circulation.

It was not unusual in this time period for poets to circulate their work in manuscript among their close family, friends, and academic community. This manuscript circulation was akin to publishing and allowed the work to spread by word of mouth among an elite group of poets and academics. Coterie poetry was not for the public and was not a formal method of publishing, therefore the content of the poems could be more personal and intimate, rather than commercial. Arthur Marotti argues in *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* that previous to the printing of *Astrophil and Stella* in 1591, the religious public was prejudiced against amorous verse and it was even embarrassing for an author to make their intimate writing public (229). Reading coterie poetry almost feels like an invasion of the author’s privacy and a glance into their most personal thoughts and desires. The poetry is so

intimate at times that it often borders on erotic. While this further perpetuates the feeling of being part of a small and elite group that has access into the author's life, it also promotes intrigue and enjoyment from reading these sexual exploits. The poetry titillates the reader and the possible biographic nature of these erotic episodes makes the sense of enjoyment even more intense. It is no wonder that gentlemen and gentlewomen of higher social classes would purchase poetry collections of individual poets just to "gain access to such socially restricted literary communications" (Marotti 214). When lower class people were able to access and read these personal works, they felt as if they were a part of the intellectual elite (Marotti 34). After *Astrophil and Stella* legitimized and normalized coterie works and love lyric, many other sonnet collections such as Shakespeare's were published (Marotti 229). Despite being published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe, Shakespeare's sonnets still read as coterie works. While some critics argue that Shakespeare may not have approved the publication of the sonnets and may not have written them for a public audience, the intent of publication is not the question that I am interested in (Burrow 98). Whether the sonnets were meant to be commercial or coterie, the poems still feel incredibly intimate and intrigue the audience. The nature of lyric verse is that it shares enough information about these personal relationships to spark excitement, while still making it feel as if there is a secret that only people in the coterie have the information to understand. The general public is then forced to read for hints and clues that might give them further access into this elite and educated social circle. Shakespeare's use of the sonnet form allows the reader to feel as if they are personally connected to Shakespeare and this elite clique.

The sonnet form that Shakespeare employs in his coterie poetry establishes intimacy with his readers and titillates them through personal expressions of amorous love in the Fair

Youth sonnets. The traditional theme of the sonnet form is love, and oftentimes, erotic love. Petrarch, whom the Petrarchan sonnet is named for, addressed his beloved, Laura, in his sonnets. Thomas Wyatt, the father of the English sonnet, followed Petrarch's tradition and used the sonnet form for amorous expression. Philip Sidney later wrote *Astrophil and Stella* as a series of poems about star-crossed lovers, likely to his former love Penelope Devereux. The audience reads Shakespeare's sonnets in conversation with these great lyric poets who also use sonnets to express issues of love, intimacy, and sexual pleasure. This tradition emphasizes the sexually intimate aspects of the text. Additionally, the tradition of manuscript circulation allows the reader to believe that the poems are biographical and an honest glance into the personal life of the author. Therefore, the "I" in the sonnets is perceived to be Shakespeare's authorial "I." This further perpetuates the reader's excitement in gaining insight into something that is based in reality. The sonnet form carries the tradition and themes of all the previous sonnet authors, allowing the reader to further connect to both Shakespeare and the elite group in which these poems usually circulated.

The dedication of Shakespeare's sonnets further promotes a biographical reading of the text. The reader interprets the dedication as Shakespeare himself addressing the poems to a man. This turns the intimate portrayal of erotic love into one of homoerotic love. The sonnets are precluded with a Roman-style dedication that reads:

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.
THESE.INSUING.SONNETS.
Mr.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE.
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.
PROMISED.
BY.
OUR.EVER-LIVING.POET.
WISHETH.
THE.WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTURER.IN.

SETTING.
 FORTH.
 T.T. (Burrow 99)

Aside from containing the signature of the publisher rather than the author, the most confusing and curious aspect of this dedication is to whom it is addressed: Mr. W.H. The identity of Mr. W.H. has fascinated both early modern- and present-day readers alike.³ Many readers have assumed that the ensuing love poems are about the relationship between Shakespeare and this Mr. W.H. Though, other readers have dismissed the dedication entirely because Thomas Thorpe signed it rather than William Shakespeare, an indicator that Shakespeare was not in London when this was printed (Burrow 99). While it may very well be that Shakespeare himself did not even write this dedication and has no connection to a Mr. W.H., it is still a crucial part of the text because it influences how readers interpret the ensuing sonnets. The use of ambiguous initials creates a secret code to an inner circle that the reader desperately tries to access by deciphering. If the reader can figure out whom Shakespeare is addressing in both the dedication and the rest of the sonnets, then the reader can feel as if they are part of this coterie and the ensuing relationship. And even if they cannot, they may feel that there is a secret on which they are illicitly – and thus excitingly – intruding. The use of “W.H.” intrigues the audience and gives them a taste into the intimate nature of the works: “Initials create an atmosphere of furtive but deniable biographical allusion, and readers from the 1580s onwards were well used to the uncertain pleasures to which these tricks could give rise” (Burrow 102). Readers enjoyed the mystery of the initials and hypothesizing about Shakespeare’s erotic relationships; it was a means in which to intrigue different members of society and allow them to feel as if they are witnessing a secret

³ Readers’ theories name everyone from Henry Wriothesley to William Herbert to Shakespeare himself (why Shakespeare would dedicate the sonnets to himself and get his own initials wrong is a mystery to me).

romantic relationship. If Thomas Thorpe was responsible for writing this dedication, then he was cleverly capitalizing on the homosexual language and coterie nature of the poems. As Burrow succinctly states in his introduction to the sonnets, “W.H. may be someone; but he may be part of an invitation to readers of a printed edition of what is presented as a coterie work to believe themselves on the outer fringes of a hidden inner circle of drama” (103). The use of the mysterious dedication could be a clever marketing tool that plays into people’s natural curiosity. Regardless, it excites and pleases the audience to feel as if they are watching an intimate, homoerotic relationship between Shakespeare himself and this mysterious younger man.

Aside from the dedicatory material, the sonnets also set up a relationship between the speaker and the Fair Youth (Mr. W.H.?) that can be read as homoerotic at times. It is unclear throughout the Fair Youth sonnets exactly what the relationship between the two men entails. There are suggestions that the speaker is nothing more than an admirer of the Fair Youth, there are passages that imply that the two men are actually quite close and intimate but in a more paternal way, and there are sonnets that insinuate that the two men are in a homoerotic relationship. Throughout the Fair Youth sonnets, the nature of the relationship shifts and changes, however, the speaker’s genuine love and compassion for the Fair Youth seems to be constant. The procreation sonnets in particular are difficult to discern because they could be an expression of unrequited love from the speaker or they could be a fatherly figure giving advice to a younger man. In sonnet 2, the speaker is trying to convince the Fair Youth to have children. He does this by praising the young man’s beauty. The speaker uses the term “beauty’s field” to evoke pastoral images of rolling fields, new growth, and fertility (2). Throughout the sonnet, he mentions the Fair Youth’s “beauty” three separate times. The Fair

Youth is so attractive in the present that the potential loss of that beauty becomes terrifying, and the speaker mourns the loss with time saying, “When forty winters shall besiege thy brow, / And dig deep trenches in thy beauty’s field” (1-2). He uses the violent and warlike imagery of time “besiege[ing]” the Fair Youth’s beauty to show how dire and tragic the situation will become. Therefore, the Fair Youth must take action in order to save his beauty – that action being procreation. Procreation allows the Fair Youth to pass down his beauty: “Proving his beauty by succession thine” (12). The speaker’s infatuation with the Fair Youth’s looks and preoccupation with his “lusty days” suggests that this poem is more than just an offering of advice from an older man to a younger one (6). The love and concern expressed for the Fair Youth’s physical appearance and sex life feels more intimate than paternal. This sonnet could easily be interpreted as an older man lusting after a beautiful young man. Even though he is not encouraging the Fair Youth to procreate with him, the speaker’s interest in the young man could be seen as one of secret admiration or unrequited love.

Yet, by encouraging the Fair Youth to have sex with a woman in order to procreate, the speaker could also just be taking on the role of an older paternal figure. The sonnet also expresses the importance of procreation in allowing the Fair Youth to pass on his name: “Thy youth’s proud livery so gazed on now / Will be a tattered weed of small worth held” (3-4). In order to continue the Fair Youth’s name and lineage, he must marry and procreate. In this time period, it was believed that the blood of a son was the same as that of his father, therefore the last couplet makes the important biological argument for the Fair Youth to have children: “This were to be new made when thou are old, / And see thy blood warm when thou feel’st it cold” (13-14). Procreation is the literal passing down of blood, which would

allow the Fair Youth to live eternally through his lineage of sons. Rather than desiring the Fair Youth and thinking about his “lusty days,” the speaker could be offering advice and guidance to the youthful man.

Finally, there are many poems that encourage the reader to see the two men in an intimate, homosexual relationship. In sonnet 18, the speaker asks the Fair Youth, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” (1). Just within the first line of the poem, the speaker sets up a close connection between himself and the Fair Youth, strategically situating “I” and “thee” close together. The pronoun “thee” that the speaker uses to refer to the Fair Youth was considered a less formal and more personal way of addressing someone than “you.” This suggests a level of intimacy with the two men. Between “I” and “thee” is the word “compare” (1). The meter stresses the second half of the word “-pare,” which establishes the speaker and the Fair Youth as a “pair” when the poem is spoken aloud. This could be read as an expression of reality – that the two men are actually in a relationship – or it could be the speaker longing for a relationship. In sonnet 22, this potential relationship is referred to again when the men give each other their hearts. The poem insinuates more than one-sided longing: “For all that beauty that doth cover thee / Is but the seemly raiment of my heart, / Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me” (5-7). The line “which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me” resembles a Petrarchan theme in which lovers exchange hearts to show their connection and love for one another (Burrow 424). The poem explicitly states that the Fair Youth gave his heart to the speaker. This indicates more than unrequited love, secret admiration, or a paternal relationship. Rather, the exchange of hearts implies a romantic, mutual homosexual relationship between the two men. The reader can even see this relationship come to a close in sonnet 126: “O thou my lovely boy, who in thy power / Dost hold Time’s fickle glass, his

sickle hour;” (1-2). The phrase “lovely boy” has heavy homoerotic connotations, signifying the sexual nature of their connection. The poem mourns the ending of their love with the image of an hourglass counting down and waiting for death’s hour. Yet, there is no way to confirm the terms of their relationship. The speaker could be recounting the end of a mutual love or he could just be moving on from his delusional hope that they will be together. Regardless of the nature of their love and whether or not the Fair Youth feels the same way about the speaker, the sonnets depict a genuine love and affection for the young man. From the speaker’s concern about getting married and having children to lovingly comparing him to a summer’s day to giving the Fair Youth his heart, the speaker’s love for the Fair Youth is eternal and unconditional. Even in his parting sonnet 126, the speaker is still trying to give advice and guidance to the Fair Youth on how to live fully and avoid death. Throughout the sonnets, the speaker’s admiration of the Fair Youth feels sincere, which amplifies the interest that the reader has in the sonnets. If the affection is mutual and the men are in a homoerotic relationship, then the reader gets pleasure from gaining insight into something so deeply personal. If the relationship is not mutual then the reader gains pleasure from learning about the speaker’s feelings and unrequited love. And finally, even if the relationship is more platonic or even fatherly, the reader is still excited to gain access into another social circle and the intimate details of a stranger’s life.

Due to the nature of the sonnet form, the audience does not get to witness what the Fair Youth is actually thinking or saying in these supposed situations. The sonnet form only allows the speaker to express his emotions, without providing a means for the Fair Youth to respond. The thrill of reading the sonnets is constantly evolving for the reader. At times the reader gets to feel like they are a part of an erotic relationship, other times the reader gets to

enjoy feeling privy to the pangs of a desperate and delusional individual who fantasizes about a mutual affection. Regardless, the excitement of witnessing intimacy at such a close proximity allows the reader to forget about the Fair Youth's response. But, when the audience recognizes similar rhetoric of love in the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* and they observe how Adonis responds, the excitement and titillation from being a part of this relationship turns voyeuristic and sinister, and the audience starts to feel complicit in something less wholesome.

The rhetoric that Venus uses to try to seduce Adonis anticipates the rhetoric that Shakespeare uses in the Fair Youth sonnets. Due to Venus's role as a sexual predator and Adonis's explicit reluctance, this parallel characterization of Venus and the speaker of the sonnets undermines the loving relationship that is set up in the sonnets. Because *Venus and Adonis* and the sonnets are very different forms of poetry that were written at distinct points in time, the comparison may not be obvious, but the striking similarities in their rhetoric begs them to be put into conversation with one another. Venus resorts to long, drawn out manipulative speeches that attempt to convince Adonis to sleep with her. Venus strives to make Adonis feel guilty for not sleeping with her by convincing him that he is obligated to pass along his beauty:

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;
Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breadth beauty:
Thou wast begot: to get it is thy duty (163-168)

Venus sets up sex as a means of procreation that is both inevitable by nature and the "duty" of a human in order to continue the human race. Using words like "fresh," "herbs," "plants," "growing," "seeds," and "spring" Venus reminds Adonis of the naturalness of procreation

and pretends that it is not about what she wants, but what nature demands of men. Adonis is no longer just turning down Venus, but rather he is refusing Mother Nature herself. Not only is Adonis rejecting the wishes of Mother Nature, but he is also letting down the entire human race by not passing down his beauty. Venus claims that just as a “torch” should be used to help illuminate its surroundings and beautiful “jewels” should be worn so that people can enjoy them; a man should have to procreate to carry on the human race. The torch and jewel comparisons are important because of the ways in which they work towards a greater good. The torch spreads light for many people to benefit from and the jewels are not only for the person wearing them, but also for everyone that receives pleasure by gazing upon their beauty. Venus condemns Adonis for being selfish for not doing something that would help many people besides just him. Venus believes that he has an even greater obligation to humanity to procreate because he was given beauty and “beauty breadth beauty” (167). Denying other humans of his beauty by refusing to pass it down is morally wrong. When she says, “things growing to themselves are growth’s abuse,” Venus is calling out Adonis for being selfish for not having sex and procreating (166). Since in this time period sexual intercourse for men was thought to shorten their lifespan, Venus’s accusation is that Adonis values his own longevity over the longevity of humanity.

The arguments that Venus employs in this passage are very similar to the arguments of the first seventeen sonnets, the procreation sonnets. Where before the procreation sonnets may have been an older man giving life advice, or even an older man lovingly admiring the Fair Youth, when read alongside *Venus and Adonis*, the relationship between the men can begin to feel uncomfortable. The speaker argues that it is the Fair Youth’s obligation to get

married and have children in order to pass down his genes. The rhetoric of sonnet 11 most resembles Venus's rhetoric:

As fast as thou shalt wane, so fast thou grow'st
 In one of thine, from that which thou departest;
 And that fresh blood which youngly thou bestow'st,
 Thou mayst call thine when thou from youth convertest.
 Herein lives wisdom, beauty, and increase;
 Without this folly, age, and cold decay:
 If all were minded so, the times should cease
 And threescore year would make the world away.
 Let those whom nature hath not made for store,
 Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish:
 Look whom she best endowed, she gave the more;
 Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish:
 She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby,
 Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die. (1-14)

In this sonnet, the speaker argues that the Fair Youth should shorten his life, playing on both the notion of shortening life through sexual climax and on the inevitable human "waning" towards death. Using the same natural imagery as Venus, such as "grow'st," Shakespeare reminds the Fair Youth that it is the natural duty of men to procreate. Shakespeare further argues the importance of procreating not only to the Fair Youth's bloodline and legacy, but also to society itself. Saying that his child would bring "wisdom" and "beauty" to the world and without this the world would be filled with "folly, age, and cold decay," Shakespeare follows Venus's line of thinking and puts the fate of society in the Fair Youth's hands. Shakespeare even goes so far as to predict the end of the world in "threescore year" if the Fair Youth doesn't pass down his genes; this dramatization is clearly incorporated into the sonnet in the hope of guiltting the Fair Youth into having sex. The poem advocates that the Fair Youth should procreate with someone other than the speaker, but it implies that speaker is still interested in a sexual relationship with the Fair Youth. Again, following Venus's rhetoric, Shakespeare invokes Mother Nature using "she" pronouns and arguing that by not

passing down his genes he is insulting and wasting the “bounteous gifts” that Mother Nature bestowed onto him (12). Shakespeare tells the Fair Youth, “which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish,” implying that the only way to show his thanks is to pass down his gifts through sex (12). This rhetoric mirrors Venus’s in *Venus and Adonis* by using the same natural imagery, turning procreation into a duty, and invoking Mother Nature. Reading the sonnets alone, this rhetoric could be benign, however alongside *Venus and Adonis*, these sonnets take on a predatory taint.

Even the words of praise that the speaker uses to exalt the Fair Youth in a very sincere way become tainted when Venus uses the same rhetoric to prey on the reluctant Adonis. Venus tells Adonis that he is “the field’s chief flower,” “sweet about compare,” “more lovely than a man,” and “more white and red than doves or roses are” (8-10). This praise echoes the language in sonnet 18 in which the speaker draws a comparison between the Fair Youth and a perfect summer’s day calling him “more lovely and more temperate” (2). Both Venus and the speaker are comparing the young men to the perfection of nature and claiming that their loves are even more perfect than something already idyllic. Both poems use, quite literally, flowery and over the top language to praise the beauty and temperament of their lovers. The words “fair,” “sweet,” and “lovely” appear again and again in both poems. Previous to reading *Venus and Adonis* the reader interpreted this language in the sonnets as that of a genuine affection, however it takes on a different reading due to the role of Venus as a sexual predator. By using the same rhetoric, the two poems parallel the characters of Venus and the speaker and complicate the nature of the relationship in the sonnets.

While Venus and the speaker are united in their rhetoric and argumentation, the Fair Youth and Adonis are paralleled by their lack of rhetoric. Adonis has only 80 lines in the entire poem, almost all of which are refusals of Venus's advances, and the sonnet form does not provide any means for the Fair Youth to respond to the speaker of the sonnets. However, despite not being able to compare their spoken responses, the reader can compare the ways in which the two men are physically described. This uncanny resemblance allows the reader to interpret Adonis's responses as those of the Fair Youth in the sonnets. The physical descriptions of Adonis and the Fair Youth closely resemble each other; mirroring their characters and making the reader rethink the genuine relationship in the sonnets based off of the predatory relationship between Venus and Adonis. Both Adonis and the Fair Youth are portrayed as feminine, youthful, virginal, beautiful, and innocent. The most prominent feature of Adonis is his red and white face, which was a distinctly feminine attribute in this time period (Burrow 179). Just within the first ten lines of the poem, Adonis's pink cheeks are referred to twice. The first time that Adonis is introduced in the story he is described as "rose-cheeked" (3). In some of her first words to Adonis, Venus tells him that he is "more white and red than doves or roses are" (10). The poem is constantly mentioning Adonis's red cheeks in lines such as "he red for shame" and "being red she loves him best" (36,77). The onslaught of this imagery overwhelms the reader and incessantly reminds the audience of Adonis's femininity. The imagery of his burning red cheeks and pale white face also brings to light the issue of his innocence and virginity. While the red cheeks represent femininity, the white face signifies purity. When Venus pins him down and tries to kiss him "he burns with bashful shame" and his face is described as "maiden burning," meaning it has a virginal glow (49-50). Adonis's femininity is closely linked with the female notion of being pure,

innocent, and virginal. Every time Venus initiates physical contact, Adonis's cheeks burn in shame to indicate his level of discomfort with his sexuality. His innocence and virginity also ties into his age. Adonis is significantly younger than Venus and his youthful beauty along with his sexual innocence makes him easy prey. Finally, and most obviously, Adonis is incredibly beautiful and handsome. Just the idea that a goddess, especially the goddess of love, is pursuing him implies his almost god-like attractiveness. After Adonis is killed by the boar, Venus eulogizes his beauty saying, "The flowers are sweet, their colours fresh and trim, / But true sweet beauty loved and died with him" (1079-1080). Adonis is described as more beautiful than nature itself and his death brings the death of all beauty in the world. After his death, Adonis's blood turns into a purple flower "chequered with white, resembling his pale cheeks," allowing Adonis's memory and beauty to live on eternally (1168-1169). This is similar to the ways in which the procreation sonnets claim that having a child will allow the Fair Youth to also live on as a posthumous replica.

The only person that seems to compare physically to Adonis is the Fair Youth. The portrayal of the Fair Youth in sonnet 20 most closely resembles Adonis. This sonnet sets up the Fair Youth as an incredibly beautiful 'womanly man' that is the "master mistress of my passion" (2). The speaker describes the Fair Youth as having a "woman's face" and uses only feminine rhyme in this poem (1). The feminine imagery in this poem is almost as prevalent as the use of red and white imagery in *Venus and Adonis*. The Fair Youth has a "woman's gentle heart" and is a "man in hue, all hues in his controlling" (3, 7). This suggests that the Fair Youth has the temperament of a woman and the potential to adopt the complexion of a woman (Burrow 420). The Fair Youth's face can become womanly just as Adonis's face can when he turns red and white. The speaker's explanation for the Fair Youth's femininity is

that “for a woman wert thou first created” (9). More than just possessing possibly feminine features, the speaker labels the Fair Youth as having been born female. The speaker describes the young man as even more of a woman than his mistress, the Dark Lady. In sonnet 130 the Dark Lady is described as the exact opposite of the Fair Youth:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks (1-6)

The Fair Youth has cheeks that are redder, skin that is whiter, and golden hair as opposed “black wires” for hair. It is almost as if the Fair Youth is being held up as the standard of female beauty, and even some women cannot achieve this standard. For this reason, the Fair Youth's beauty is universally appealing to both men and men: “which steals men's eye and women's souls amazeth” (sonnet 20, 8). The Fair Youth is so attractive and feminine that his beauty even captivates men, presumably heterosexual men. The Fair Youth and Adonis's femininity, beauty, youth, and lack of dialogue make them compellingly similar characters. Just as the audience draws parallels between Venus and the speaker, the Fair Youth and Adonis can also be read as mirrored characterizations. This allows the reader to directly compare the relationship between Venus and Adonis and the speaker and the Fair Youth.

The parallel characterization of Adonis and the Fair Youth allows the reader to substitute in Adonis's response to Venus as the Fair Youth's response to the speaker. It allows the reader to read intentional silence into the silences between and around the sonnets, as well as perhaps more outspoken responses. In doing so, the mutual loving relationship that the speaker paints in the sonnets becomes a one-sided predatory obsession in which the speaker preys upon the Fair Youth and the Fair Youth is resistant. Adonis is adamant about

his disinterest in Venus, expressing his objections both verbally and physically. Yet, Venus ignores his protests and obvious discomfort. In their first meeting, Venus “plucks” Adonis from his horse and pushes him to the ground (30). The use of the word “plucks” implies her intentions of a “premature reaping” of Adonis or taking his virginity (Burrow 177). She forcefully dominates Adonis and the text explicitly states that she “governed him in strength,” setting him up as the helpless victim of her lust (42). The ensuing passages describe her assault on Adonis in animalistic predator terms:

Even as an empty eagle sharp by fast
Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh, and bone,
Shaking her wings, devouring in haste,
Till either gorge be stuffed, or prey be gone (55-58)

Venus is an eagle hunting and Adonis is her prey. Her planting of forceful kisses onto Adonis reflects the image of an eagle tearing apart its prey with its beak. Like the fasting eagle, she will not be satisfied until Adonis is hers. Her prey, Adonis, is vulnerable to her onslaught. When she grabs him from his horse, he can only blush and pout in “full disdain” (33). When she pins him to the ground and kisses his face, he is “forced to content, but never to obey” (61). When he is wrapped in her arms and unable to move, he lies there with “pure shame and awed resistance” in his “angry eyes” (69-70). Finally, able to speak after Venus’s incredibly long and manipulative speech, Adonis cries, “Fie, no more of love: / The sun doth burn my face, I must remove” (185-186). He desperately tries to leave and get out of the forest, but Venus traps him. The entire time he can only blush and turn his face away from her hungry lips. As she eventually releases him from her arms, he immediately races to his horse to get away. Adonis suffers from the predatory nature of Venus’s sexuality. The narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* allows the reader to observe both sides of the relationship and see and hear Adonis’s responses. The narrative poem provides insight into the Fair

Youth's perspective in a way that the sonnet form cannot. While the speaker expresses feeling neglected by the Fair Youth in several sonnets⁴ and there are indications of the Fair Youth being unfaithful, the Fair Youth is not able to give his interpretation of the events. Adonis gives his voice to the Fair Youth and it is not the voice of consent or love. *Venus and Adonis* forces the reader to reexamine the relationship in the sonnets and their position as a third party intimately watching this relationship play out on the page before them.

More than just a voyeur complicit in a predatory relationship, the reader also feels as if the speaker's sexual advances are directed at them. The poem's use of ambiguous pronouns such as "you," "thou," and "thee" acts to encourage the reader to take on the role of the Fair Youth. By not always addressing the Fair Youth directly, the speaker aims his advances and praise outwards towards the reader. Normally in lyric verse this works to break the fourth wall and engage the reader more intimately, heightening the sense of titillation. But the sonnets predatory rhetoric and unrequited love, work to make this engagement uncomfortable and unwanted. The reader takes the place of the Fair Youth and suddenly this closeness to the text is overwhelming. When reading the sonnets, the reader is either a voyeur, a reluctant observer, or even worse, the victim of a sexual predator.

While the intimacy of the lyric verse engages the reader to feel like a third-party observer or even the one being preyed upon, the narrative form of *Venus and Adonis* detaches the reader and allows them to experiment with the themes of the poem at a safe distance. Both *Venus and Adonis* and Shakespeare's sonnets portray erotic love and posit similar relationships between older, more mature sexual predators and innocent young men that fall prey to their affections. The main difference seems to be the form in which Shakespeare

⁴ See sonnets 35-36, 40-42, 92-96, and 120-126.

chooses to express this relationship: lyric verse versus narrative or dramatic verse. Rebecca Yearling argues the importance of the differences in the forms and a possible explanation as to why one may be more disturbing and upsetting than the other:

Lyric is an unruly literary mode, which works to blur or break down the boundaries between author and text, reader and subject. It is a suggestive and ambiguous form of writing, which aims to draw the reader into a fictional world to a greater degree than other forms do. As a result, it may well have been perceived as more disturbing than other literary modes when it was used to explore controversial sexual sentiments (55).

Shakespeare's sonnets use the dedicatory material, tradition of the sonnet form, and biographical suggestions to engage the reader and make them feel like a part of a coterie; however, the sexual sentiment of the text has the potential to make this engagement highly uncomfortable.

On the other hand, *Venus and Adonis* deals with the same erotic sexuality yet, "the narrative form acts as a way of keeping the sexual ambiguity in check. The reader is allowed to play with homoerotic emotions and enjoy them because they never become too real or immediate" (Yearling 64). There are no suggestions in *Venus and Adonis* of reality or biography, unlike the sonnets. Rather than using generic pronouns such as "you," "thee," and "I" that might be mistaken for real people, the narrative poem explicitly names its characters to avoid that confusion. Furthermore, the characters are derived from mythology, emphasizing the fictionality of the poem. It is much harder for the reader to mistake Venus for Shakespeare when they already know Venus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and a plethora of other Greek myths.⁵ The narrative poem does just as the title suggests — it creates a narrative with a specific setting, characters, and dialogue. Now when the characters are dealing with explicit sexual situations or uncomfortable nonconsensual relationships, the

⁵ Not to mention Shakespeare and Venus are different genders and it is difficult to imagine the beautiful goddess of love as an aging male English poet.

reader does not have to feel like a voyeur or a part of the story; rather, they can just be detached spectator. *Venus and Adonis* “creates a world that is separate, for the most part, from that of the reader or spectator” and that has “little real overlap between fictional world and real world” (Yearling 65). This allows the reader to experiment with eroticism without having to actually engage in it.

Additionally, the potential sexual aggression in *Venus and Adonis* is mitigated by the fact that the aggressor is a woman. Even though Venus and the speaker are using the same rhetorical devices and likely have the same end goal, the power dynamic is very different. Venus’ aggression is undermined by stereotypical misconceptions of women being weak and submissive. Also, her prey is a feminine male. The unusual change in gender roles provides comedic relief to a situation that could have been uncomfortable. This dynamic, though unconventional, is still portraying a heterosexual relationship. The relationship between a man and a woman in *Venus and Adonis* is likely more agreeable to the reader than the homoerotic relationship implied in the sonnets. Still, the level of intimacy at which this homoerotic relationship is portrayed in the sonnets is more jarring than the relationship itself.

The intimacy at which the lyric verse deals with love and eroticism may have turned off early modern readers to the sonnets, while the narrative verse allowed readers to experiment with these same themes safely distanced by the pages of a book. In the present day, scholars and fans are less interested in reading themselves into Shakespeare’s texts. It does not matter as much whether or not the text draws them in in a comfortable way. Rather, present-day readers are more interested in biography than they are with establishing a fictional barrier between themselves and the story. The lyric verse offers a biographical reading and fulfills the longing for insights into Shakespeare’s thoughts and desires.

Performance on the Page

While, Shakespeare's sonnets excite and engage the modern-day reader more so than *Venus and Adonis*, the reception of Shakespeare's poems is still lacking. The sonnets have increased in popularity over time, but Shakespeare's poetry is still overshadowed by his plays. Neither *Venus and Adonis* nor the sonnets can compete with the popularity of Shakespeare's drama. The most performed Shakespearean play between 2011 and 2016 was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, making up eight percent of Shakespeare's total performances or approximately 160 performances (Kopf). Interestingly enough, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deals with erotic love and relationships, similar to his poems. The second most performed play is *Romeo and Juliet*, a story of young star-crossed lovers riddled with sexual puns. And the third most performed play is *Twelfth Night*, a story that most famously deals with changing gender roles and homoerotic desire. The three most popularly performed plays share the same themes as *Venus and Adonis* and the sonnets. Therefore, there is not a lack of interest in engaging in erotic love, even between two men or youths or gender ambiguous people, rather it is an issue of form and what the dramatic form offers the audience.

Just as *Venus and Adonis* allowed early modern readers to experiment with uncomfortable topics while maintaining a safe distance, Shakespeare's plays offer the same respite to the modern-day audience. Shakespeare's plays allow people to engage with difficult, painful, and sometimes awkward situations with the distance of fictionality and the physical distance of the stage and time. Even more so than a narrative poem, the fictionality of plays is made incredibly blatant. The characters are not only explicitly named and engaged in dialogue, but also the characters are acted out on the stage. It is difficult to mistakenly identify a character as oneself or Shakespeare when there is a flesh and blood human

enacting the role. The audience is physically separated from the characters and events of the story. They are watching something elevated on a stage before them and they can actually witness the characters addressing each other, making it impossible to think that they might be addressing them as an audience member. While plays do often engage the audience by breaking the fourth wall in soliloquys, snide jokes, or physically walking through the audience, for the most part, the world of the play is kept separate from the real world. There is also a historical difference in performance that creates distance between the audience and the play. From its rehearsed Old English lines to the imperfect set design to the Elizabethan costumes that the actors sometimes wear, a modern-day audience is constantly made aware of the historical differences in performance practice. Especially in a time when television and movies can create effects that feel very real, drama is still limited to what can feasibly be performed in a small space over a short time span. To a modern audience this can feel even less like reality. The audience is physically and mentally at a distance when watching the play, allowing them to engage in the subject matter without engaging intimately with the characters. The prominence of Shakespeare's drama today seems to support this claim. *Venus and Adonis* provided some level of distancing, but not enough to remain popular. Watching plays such as *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, and *Romeo and Juliet* allows the audience to play with difficult and sometimes uncomfortable topics such as homoerotic desires, unrequited love, androgyny, changing gender roles, and sexuality comfortably from their seats in the crowd. Plays can help explain the relative popularity of poems, however, the change in popularity can only be explained by print circumstances.

There is a desire among scholars and fans of Shakespeare to attribute the popularity of his texts to something inherently unique and superior about his writing as compared to

other authors. Even this paper goes to great lengths to explain changing popularity based on the form, themes, and rhetoric of the texts. While I cannot dismiss the literary merit of Shakespeare's texts and the importance of these textual characteristics, I believe that the role of printers and publishers in the early modern period greatly contributed to the creation and maintenance of Shakespeare as a literary and cultural icon. The change in popularity of *Venus and Adonis* and Shakespeare's sonnets as well as the creation of a literary canon that does not even include these texts is attributed to the decisions of printers and publishers in the early modern book trade. Shakespeare's "aesthetic value" was not solely responsible for his rise to fame, "rather, his status as an author was tied to and resulted from the book trade's complex valuation of printed drama" (Hooks 139). Texts were printed if publishers believed that they could make a profit and they stopped being printed when they were no longer profitable. Printers did not necessarily care about the quality of Shakespeare's writing and they did not even care about commemorating Shakespeare (Hooks 126). The printing of Shakespeare was purely a "matter of commerce" (Hooks 126). Shakespeare's texts had a higher chance of returning a profit than other comparable texts and printers made the best decisions with the information and resources that they had. Even the First Folio was not a personal project for the printer and not including Shakespeare's poems was a strategic business decision. The First Folio was then elevated to a level of prestige and prominence without the poems. The plays that made it into the Folio, arbitrarily, persisted in popularity over time, while the ones that were not included fell into obscurity. Shakespeare's *Pericles* exemplifies this point. *Pericles* was the most popular one of Shakespeare's plays that was left out of the Folio (likely for same reasons that *Venus and Adonis* was left out) and today we rarely read or perform *Pericles*. The economic reasons for not including the poems are

greater than any aesthetic quality about the texts. And the rise of the First Folio in popularity and prestige says more about the power of advertising and publisher's desire to minimize financial risk by printing a popular genre in a collection than it does about the quality of the texts themselves. Our obsession with Shakespeare's plays could have less to do with their content or aesthetic value and more to do with the printing decisions of publishers: "our cultural and disciplinary investments in Shakespeare, and in the stories we tell about him, ultimately depend on, and in crucial ways have been determined by, the investments first made in him by the early modern book trade" (Hooks 177). Shakespeare persists in popularity today because he appeals to everyday people. He was not a scholar or part of the socially elite, and his writing was not aimed at an educated crowd. Therefore, it makes sense that the people who elevated him to commercial and literary success were also common people. It was not the acclaim of the academy or the literary aesthetics of his work, it was the routine business decisions of producers to print and consumer to purchase Shakespeare's texts that resulted in a literary canon that persists in popularity and acclaim to this day.

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