

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS WORLD

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Venus and Adonis

So Shakespeare's school friend, Richard Field, publishes his 'Venus and Adonis' and it's a huge success. We can, indeed, say it was the most popular poem of the Elizabethan age. Everybody read it. Everybody started quoting it. We find it quoted from in other poems. There are references to it in prose works. There are even moments in plays where characters talk about reading 'Venus and Adonis', having a copy of it under their pillow as giving them some useful words for the seduction of young women.

It was printed again and again and one of the reasons we know it's so popular is that it was obviously read, more or less, into disintegration. Field would have printed about 1,000 copies of that first edition. Only one copy survives. The other thing that does survive is the occasional loose leaf of a copy that has obviously been read so much that it's literally fallen to pieces.

One of the most precious possessions here in the library at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is exactly that – a single loose leaf from an early edition, possibly the first edition, of 'Venus and Adonis' and you can get a sense from it of the wonderful poetry of Shakespeare – the young Shakespeare showing off his art. The page that survives comes from towards the end of the poem where the boar has gone on its rampage. And it's not only Adonis who has felt the boar's tusk, it's also his dogs. Venus has gone in pursuit to try to find out what's happened to Adonis and she finds the dogs in a brake, a woodland thicket.

'Here kennel'd in a brake, she finds a hound, And asks the wearie caitiffe for his maister, And there another licking of his wound, Gainst venom sores, the onely soveraigne plaster, And here she meets another, sadly skowling, To whom she speaks, he replies with howling'. It's a very funny sequence. She's asking the questions of the dogs, but all they can do is howl in reply because they are so wounded themselves. It was a poem that was at once a showcase for Shakespeare's art, something that gave readers a sense of how to use language beautifully and at the same time, an exploration of the nature of erotic love and a very, very funny piece of writing. It really did put Shakespeare on the map.

In 1594, the plague abated and the theatres reopened. By this time, Shakespeare – following on from the success of 'Venus and Adonis' – had written a second poem called 'The Rape of Lucrese', but now he was ready to go back to his friends, with Burbage, the other actors and they formed a new theatre company. It was a joint stock company. That's to say, they were all shareholders taking a share of the box office profits.

From that point on, Shakespeare always wrote for his own acting company. He wrote for the same group of actors. He knew that he was creating parts like Romeo and Hamlet and King Lear for Burbage.

They got the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain – the officer in charge of court entertainment. So from 1594 to 1603, they were the 'Lord Chamberlain's Men' and from 1603 onwards, they had the title of the 'King's Men'.

When he returned to the theatre, Shakespeare made use of those arts of poetic inventiveness that he had developed in 'Venus and Adonis'. Within a year or two, he was writing 'Romeo and Juliet' and the romantic language of that play – the most famous love play in history – is, at many points, very close to that of 'Venus and Adonis'. So it was by no means wasted time during that period of plague closure.