ENGLAND’S PARNASSUS HAS LONG BEEN studied for what it includes. Published in 1600, the printed commonplace book culls together passages from Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and other lodestars of its fin de siècle moment. The inclusion of such vernacular authors sets England’s Parnassus apart from the commonplace books that came before it, which anthologized only writers of classical antiquity. It also aligns the volume with more recently printed commonplace books, like Francis Meres’s Palladis Tamia (1598) and John Bodenham’s Bel-vedere, or The Garden of the Muses (1600), which collectively ushered in what Zachary Lesser and Peter Stallybrass have called “a novel conception of commonplacing,” whereby “‘Moderne and extent Poets,’ who wrote in the culturally and geographically marginal vernacular of English, [are treated] as suitable authorities on which to base an entire commonplace book.” But England’s Parnassus is just as notable for what it leaves out. When the coy Adonis, in Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis, resists the advances of the goddess of love, he protests by urging her to “Call it not love, since love to heaven is fled, / Since sweating lust on earth usurped the name.” It is just one of the many aphorisms from the poem that Robert Allott, the book’s editor, excerpts. But that is not quite how the passage goes in England’s Parnassus. “—Love to heaven is fled,” it reads, “Since sweating lust on earth usurpt the name.” As a heavy dash effaces the metalanguage that begins Adonis’s pronouncement, England’s Parnassus offers an early modern example of the transcultural tendency, documented by Greg

ABSTRACT This essay draws upon the work of Erving Goffman and Michael Silverstein to read Shakespeare’s first poem as a guide to mastering the burgeoning early modern art of conversation. The epyllion follows the conversation manuals of its day in embracing the aphorism as a charismatic form of talk, but it departs from its precedents in attributing to the aphorism an overtly erotic force. By according to the aphorism the power to turn conversation into an erotic encounter, Venus and Adonis elaborates its period’s most seductive fantasy of talk. REPRESENTATIONS 148. Fall 2019 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1–29. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2019.148.1.1.
Urban, for transcriptions to delete the metalanguage that marks them as transcribable in the first place, “as if the metadiscursive portions of the discourse were invisible (or inaudible) and yet capable of exercising an effect.”

So far as Adonis’s aphorism is concerned, Urban’s parenthesis is crucial. An imperative to speak that is itself spoken, Adonis’s metadiscursive “call” is a particularly self-conscious reminder that the many aphorisms of *Venus and Adonis* are part of an extended conversational exchange. In fact, although it is rife with passages of lush and alluring description, the epyllion resembles nothing so much as a dialogue, since its primary narrative action comes from the heated discourse that unites its two protagonists. Shakespeare’s most outrageously successful poem, in other words, is also his chattiest, and the aphorism is its principle form of talk. By deleting Shakespeare’s metalanguage, however, *England’s Parnassus* deletes the words that give Shakespeare’s aphorisms their situated, conversational force. The excision would seem to have set a standard for the criticism that has flourished in its wake. While scholars have been rightly attentive to the place of *Venus and Adonis* in early modern sexualities, or in the formation of Shakespeare’s durable career, or even in the history of rhetoric, the poem’s remarkably dialogic texture would seem to have been taken for granted.

This essay reads with Allott’s commonplace book and also against it. It returns Shakespeare’s aphorisms to their most significant context, the amorous conversations of *Venus and Adonis*, in order to show how the form flourishes in that poem as a potent and seductive form of talk. In this respect, *Venus and Adonis* does not simply reflect early modern attitudes toward the aphorism; it actively shapes them. The poem’s outsized popularity—it was reprinted ten times during Shakespeare’s lifetime—came in no small part from the way readers reproduced its aphorisms in their own conversations, in just the way that its protagonists encouraged: that is, erotically. Like other works from the early modern period, *Venus and Adonis* celebrates the aphorism as a model of conversational competence, but it takes that celebration a step further by turning the budding early modern art of conversation into just the erotic practice that, as Jeffrey Masten has recently reminded us, its etymology implies.

This essay follows upon Masten’s investigation into the multiple early modern meanings of “conversation:” “interchange of thoughts and words,” “intimacy,” “sexual intercourse,” and “conversion.” But it departs from his avowedly philological approach in order to consider not iterations of the word “conversation” but one especially erotic (and especially popular) enactment of conversation. By drawing together talk and desire, using the former to illuminate the latter, I extend to early modern studies the methodologies and critical frameworks of a field that has come to be called “language-in-use.” Language-in-use treats as its foundation what Charles
Sanders Peirce called the indexical—or pragmatic—nature of language: the way words are saturated with meaning through the situated occasion of their use, as the empty pronoun “I” most readily demonstrates. Resisting literary analyses that, in the words of Michael Lucey and Thomas McEnaney, “seem to arise out of the encounter between a critic’s intellect and a text understood as a thing to be contemplated by that intellect,” language-in-use studies “how a work’s form, how the forming of a work, connects it (indexically) to the social world from which it emerges and also to the social worlds through which it circulates.” At the same time, the indexicality of language demands our consideration not only of how words absorb meanings from the contexts of their delivery, like a sponge in water, but also of how language meta-indexically—or metapragmatically—construes the very occasion of its unfolding.

The aphorism is at once indexical and constitutive of social relations. In Shakespeare’s moment as in ours, it is a form most readily associated with wisdom, learning, and erudition. We might think of these qualities as the aphorism’s pragmatic effect, the intersubjective meaning that the form communicates without making explicit in the moment of its utterance. Yet it is worth stressing from the outset that such meanings are in no way inherent or unvarying. As Asif Agha observes in an important treatment of language and social formations, “Cultural value is not a static property of things or people but a precipitate of sociohistorically locatable practices.” Any form is a relay of social relations, but if those relations ever seem essential or fixed—a property internal to the form—that is only because of how durably the form has been saturated with cultural value through reflexive and historically contingent occasions of use. In other words, the pragmatic effects of a form—didacticism, say, or wisdom—are metapragmatically achieved. *Venus and Adonis* is particularly illustrative of this achievement because it works to construe the social effects of the aphorism as erotic effects. Not only does the poem enlist the aphorism in seductive moments of talk, but it also metapragmatically accords the aphorism a metapragmatic effect of its own: in use, the aphorism frames the occasion of talk as just the erotic experience that Masten describes.

That sexual power comes from the aphorism’s two-pronged manipulation of conversation and contact. First, the aphorism indexes a speaker’s attention to—and respect for—talk as a collaborative undertaking. The form’s brevity projects a speaker who is not so caught up in his emotions, his anxieties, or his own words as to lose sight of the others to whom he speaks and from whom he solicits a reply. In this respect, the aphorism is a form of mastery. Its pith is the expression and the performative accomplishment of a presence of mind—call it composure—in the midst of the most demanding of social tasks. For Shakespeare’s Venus and the many

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Talk That Talk: Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and the Seductions of a Form
readers who quoted her, seduction is one particularly demanding such task; it rouses the nerves, excites the body, and risks a humiliating loss of face. The aphorism offers a counterbalance to such challenges. It projects a speaker whose bodily excitations are held in check, who is assured in speech, and who is, accordingly, entirely present.

That presence turns the speaker into an erotic object, a figure who is fully open to his addressee. Yet the eroticism of the aphorism is just as much an effect of its curious self-effacement. As a pointedly brief expression of universal truth, the form announces that “fresh talk has momentarily ceased,” as Erving Goffman puts it, and “an anonymous authority wider and different from ourselves is suddenly being invoked.”12 The aphorism thus makes its speaker both charismatically present and alluringly, even seductively, withholding. The effect of that opacity is to draw us in. In projecting a speaker who is as absent as he is present, who is as withholding as he is composed, the aphorism issues an unspoken invitation, soliciting further contact from the speakers to whom it is addressed. This silent invitation brims at the heart of even modern-day aphorisms—think of the way pithy, seemingly profound declarations create speakers we want to hear more from—but in Venus and Adonis, it is pointedly sexualized. The invitation to talk, in this poem, is also an invitation to sex.

By framing the speaker as an erotic object, the aphorism simultaneously frames the conversation as itself an erotic encounter. This is the second, corollary effect of the aphorism, as indeed it is of any speech act meant to frame its speaker as a sexual object, since a definition of the self is always also a definition of the situation in which the self speaks. Yet what properly distinguishes the aphorisms of Venus and Adonis is the fantasy the poem generates about their use. As a poeticized conversation in which both parties trade aphorism for aphorism, Venus and Adonis unfolds as a script for how conversation might go, and, according to this script, the aphorism’s seductive power is to invite the addressee to respond with an aphorism of his or her own, as Adonis does when Venus courts him, so that the occasion of talk becomes a back-and-forth exchange in which each reply functions as part of a larger, unified whole. One word for such pointed exchange is stichomythia. Familiar to scholars of classical and Renaissance drama, stichomythia names idealistically formalized repartee in which alternate lines of a versified dialogue are delivered in rapid succession, drawing speakers into intimate and supercharged contact, sometimes even against their will. Such formalized repartee enjoys its fair share of treatment on the early modern stage. We might say that any instance of stichomythia produces a fantasy of how talk might go. I focus on Venus and Adonis, however, because it is the period’s most sustained attempt to embrace the eroticism that so often only simmers beneath the surface of aphoristic repartee. The aphorism is such an erotic
form of talk, the poem shows, because it invites another to join in the collaborative, pleasurable improvisation of form. Sex is one of those collaborative, improvised forms. Talk is another.

The best definition of the aphorism is to be found in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*: “see epigram.” Concise and composed, this imperative is a fitting register of the overlap between the aphorism and other equally pithy speech genres. Any treatment of the form must begin, therefore, by distinguishing it from those other compacted utterances into which it blurs—even as it acknowledges that any definition in this case can only ever be provisional. Rhetorical tools as much as statements of fact, aphorisms were highly prized in humanist training for their capacity to distill the grandest of truths into the briefest of words, and they may be defined by a concentration of four key linguistic features. First, the aphorism is brief. It rarely spans more than a sentence or a few lines of verse, and it is nearly always an independent clause. Second, the aphorism takes as its subject either a single abstraction—nature, time, love—or a plural class of nouns like “men,” “lovers,” or “days.” Third, the aphorism tends to adopt an authoritative, self-effacing, third-person point of view, accomplishing what Heather James describes as “the careful removal of the witnessing ‘I’ from the scene of truth-telling.” Even when an aphorism departs from its third-person perspective to make use of a singular “I,” it is invariably an empty “I,” an “I” stripped of any individuating detail and into which any voice, correspondingly, can be fit. Finally, the aphorism dwells in the gnomic tense, enlisting seemingly present-tense verbs—the “is,” for instance, of “Love is a spirit”—in order to describe not what is happening right now but the way things always are. The aphorism is thus the rare speech act that seems to strip itself clean of indexicality, and it is this (only) apparent absence of indexicality that imparts to the form its charismatic immunity to context as well as its remarkable portability.

In this, the aphorism is not far from other, equally compacted speech genres celebrated in early modern England: for instance, the proverb, the adage, the maxim, and the *sententia*. Like the aphorism, all of these forms are distinguished by a discursive portability that made them particularly amenable to a humanist culture of commonplacing. In fact, the conspicuous portability of all these forms renders the distinctions between them more fluid than we might wish to believe. Upon close inspection, for example, many aphorisms may start to look like proverbs and vice versa. We might distinguish the speech acts from one another in terms of circulation: proverbs are aphorisms that get circulated by a given speech community expressly because they have been circulated before, whereas aphorisms need not enjoy such circulation; they must only seem like they could. But a formal distinction is
just as salient. Like the adage or the proverb, the aphorism distills a universal truth or wisdom that has been handed down across generations. But in the midst of its truth claim, the aphorism brings disparate parts into a conspicuous whole. Consider the aphorisms of Hippocrates. Dating from the classical period and translated into English in 1610, Hippocrates’s collection represents the earliest effort to codify the aphorism as a distinct form of both knowledge—specifically medicinal knowledge—and language. The collection begins with a pronouncement that is also an exercise in rhetorical balance: “The Life of Man is short, the Arte of Physic long.” As “life of man” is set against “art of physic,” and “short” is against “long,” the aphorism emerges as a form of compacted rhetorical balance.

Equipoise is not a strict requirement of the aphorism, but in its absence, other figures fill the void: rhymes, antitheses, parallels, similes. For the purposes of the present analysis, then, let the aphorism stand apart from those other forms in this crucial respect: its rhetorical flair. It is such decorated pith that makes the aphorism an important forebear of what Geoffrey Hartman has called the “pointed style.” Emerging in the seventeenth century and persisting through the eighteenth, the “pointed style” is a sharply epigrammatic mode in which “everything... is sharp, nervy, à pic, and overtly so like a hedgehog.” As Hartman’s tally of spiny qualities suggests, the aphorism’s formal composition lends it a social force—the charisma of an elegant turn, a sudden snapping into place of unrelated ideas. Brief, eloquent, and self-contained, the aphorism is held up in this moment as the expression and the performative accomplishment of composure, that quality of self-possession that, for Goffman, projects a charismatic “presence of mind” in the midst of difficult tasks—not least of them talk itself.

At first blush, early modern England would seem to have little use for the aphorism’s charismatic social force. The form was put to a range of intellectual uses—medicinal, political, philosophical, protoscientific—and England’s grammar schools were particularly influential in treating the aphorism principally as an expression of moral insight, zeroing in on what Hartman calls its capacity to “impl[y] that there is a fixed locus of revelation or a reified idolatrous content.” Students were trained to extract “sound aphorisms” from classical texts like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—Shakespeare’s model for *Venus and Adonis*—so they could weave them into their own disputations, in the manner mocked by Faustus at the beginning of Marlowe’s tragedy. But when we leave the schoolroom to consider situated instances of the aphorism-in-use, it becomes clear that the form wielded social effects that supplemented, if not exceeded, any intellectual or moralistic content.

London’s Inns of Court provide an illustrative early example. “Finishing schools,” in Philip Finkelpearl’s words, that sought to prepare
London’s most affluent gentlemen for lives as lawyers or servants of the state, the Inns of Court supported networks of masculine comradery in which membership was signaled by the composition of poetry as much as the delivery of moots. Jessica Winston has recently considered some of that poetry as it was composed by residents of London’s Inns during the middle decades of the Tudor period, and what unites those poems, in her analysis, is a uniformly “impersonal tone and ponderous moralising, as well as an extensive development of aphorisms and didactic common-places, heavy meter, and an advisory tone.”21 In a printed collection of his works, for instance, Barnabe Googe reminds his friend Laurence Blundeston that “Some men be counted wise that well can talk, / And some because they can each man beguile.”22 Blundeston’s reply, also included in the collection, is no less aphoristic: “Affections seeks high honour’s frail estate, / Affections doth the golden mean reprove, / Affections turns the friendly heart to hate, / Affections breed without discretion love.”23 For Winston, the exchange of such aphoristic verse constituted an important “form of social converse” that confirmed the two writers’ “mutual esteem” and “comparable values” within the restricted and prestigious network of London’s Inns of Court.24 Those values have as much to do with the form of verse as its content. Bounded and balanced, the aphorism projects a speaker who is himself no less composed, announcing him to be a properly and fully formed subject because he can match virtue with virtue, wisdom with wisdom.

For Googe and Blundeston, composure is meant to index an inner state, but here as elsewhere, this coveted effect is produced primarily through situated, social interaction. In early modern England, that interaction could be written, but it was just as often spoken. Take the example of Steffano Guazzo’s Civile Conversation. First translated into English in 1581 and re-issued several times thereafter, the Civile Conversation was one of the many books from the period that doubled as a courtesy guide and a conversation manual, that construed conversation, indeed, as itself a courteous form of behavior. Like its forebear, Baldassare Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, Guazzo’s tract unfolds as a conversation that has been merely preserved by the technology of print. This “extended, leisured conversation,” as Anna Bryson writes of the Courtier, “is no mere literary device; the balance of wit and earnestness, the discussion of general issues leavened with a gracious banter of personalities, was an ideal in itself.”25 As with its predecessor, The Civile Conversation models this ideal through dialogue that is protracted yet pointed, casual yet refined, and the facility with which the character Annibale quotes an aphorism to conclude his comments is a particularly eloquent demonstration of the aphorism’s utility as a form of talk:
And therefore hath it bene very profoundly said, that man is a god unto man, for that one receiveth so great pleasure & comfort of another. Which selfe thing is represented unto us by the picture of the blind man, carying upon his back the lame creple, who teacheth him the way: and thereupon, well saith, Almanni:

So of two halfes the whole is fitly made,
The one with eyes, the other with feete doth aide.26

The “Almanni” whom Annibale quotes is Luigi Almanni, the poet credited with importing the epigram into Italian, and the book’s orthography is a spur to readers to follow Annibale’s lead. With the aphoristic couplet on the two halves made whole, The Civile Conversation shifts from its standard blackletter font to a conspicuous Roman type. The effect of this shift is akin to what is achieved by the inverted commas that famously bracket passages in Hamlet: it announces that Almanni’s quotation is a form for readers to extract from Guazzo’s book and, like Annibale, weave into their own conversations.27

The Civile Conversation is littered with quotations of this sort, many of them introduced as proverbs or popular sayings, but it is significant that at this moment Annibale should draw upon a poet. The citation is a pithy demonstration of how genres we typically think of as “literary” were treated as forms of talk to be woven into regular conversations—and as demonstrations of how to do so. At a moment when, as András Kiséry has shown, readers could be found binding plays and courtesy guides together into the self-same Sammelbands, literary genres complemented—in the proper sense of completing—the many conversation manuals, dialogues, conduct guides, and rhetorical handbooks that were printed throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.28 Not just stipulating rules for fluent speech, they offered their readers imitable models of conversational competence, and in so doing they collectively codified the conversation as a novel social form, separate from the mere unstructured traffic of itinerant speech or the hyperstructured exchange of academic debate.

Of course, literary depictions of talk are only ever idealizations of it. They impart to talk a perfection of form that, under normal circumstances, it never quite manages to attain. In fact, if there is a form that captures the experience of ordinary talk, it is the “refuse heap” that, in Goffman’s words, hardly ever resembles the polished shape that literary representations give it.29 But even as our own experiences of talk might fall hopelessly short of the standards that books like The Courtier so majestically set, such works also provide a template—a kind of working script—of how conversation can go, of how one speech act can build upon another to give a legible form to the conversational heap. Literary works thus provide valuable instruments for accomplishing what Michael Silverstein calls “the entextualization” of talk. By this, Silverstein means more than the simple
commitment of dialogue to print. Rather, Silverstein proposes that talk is a process—“always being made,” “never finished,” and undertaken by all participants—of meta-indexically imparting coherence upon a form of interaction that is always, at heart, “a refuse heap.” It is this coherence that turns talk from a “structural midden” into a text: a genred and metricized coordination of roles and responses, of references and turn takings that collectively establish “an intersubjective interactional frame that interacting individuals come relationally to inhabit.” We might think of this frame as the division that makes text and context visible as such. It construes the interaction as an event distinct from what is happening beyond it, and it proves talk to be the never quite perfectly achieved transformation of the shapeless encounter into a poetic form whose “nonlinguistic context tends toward zero importance.” Talk, in other words, is ever oriented toward its own formalization.

Early modern literary works provide readers with a panoply of tools for undertaking this process—not, it should be said, in spite of their idealization and polish, but because of it. Those talky tools range from the simile to the jest, the epigram, and the languid dilations of Castiglione’s Courtier, but, among them, the aphorism enjoys pride of place. When we consider other uses of the form, however, the virtuous composure it projects for Googe and his associates acquires a decidedly more erotic charge in the final decade of the sixteenth century. There is perhaps no more infamous example of this than the Elizabethan sonnet. While Ilona Bell has scrupulously examined the ways sonnets were used as love letters, satires from the period additionally suggest that this most lachrymose of genres was just as commonly used for conversational purposes. John Marston, for instance, lampoons an “ailing” friend who “sighs some sonnet out / To his fair love,” and Joseph Hall reserves a special venom for “The love-sick poet” who “Hopeth to conquer his disdainful dame, / With publique plaints of his conceived flame” and “pours... forth in patched Sonnetings, / His love, his lust, and loathsome flatterings.” Central to the Elizabethan sonnet’s operation as talk is its concluding couplet, which provides the lovelorn speaker with the chance to show off his aphoristic wit, as when Thomas Lodge ends the tenth sonnet of Phillis—a sonnet collection published the same year as Venus and Adonis—with the pithy rumination that, “As love hath wreathes his pretty eyes to seel, / So lovers must keep secret what they feel.”

Like Googe, Lodge was a member of London’s Inns of Courts, and, like the forcefully end-stopped lines of Googe’s poetry, Lodge’s aphorism treats universal truths rather than time-bound particulars, avoiding the first person and keeping fast to a timeless and placeless present tense. But even as Lodge’s lines are recognizably aphoristic, they also turn the aphorism on its head. Rather than project a virtuous self-possession, the aphorism is enlisted...
instead to more erotic ends. That eroticism comes from the intersection of the sonnet’s amatory content with the composure that, as we have seen, the aphorism projects. This is how it works. With its fourteen-line rollout of anguished hyperboles and Petrarchan conceits, the sonnet stages the speaker’s radical dissolution at the hands of his beloved. But the aphorism is a counterbalance to such dolorous unraveling. Coming at the end of the poem, it offers the ballast and the certainty of a conclusion suddenly achieved—and with it, a completeness of form that makes the speaker, after all his longing, suddenly and fully present before his addressee. We might think of this dynamic as an illustration in miniature of the essentially retrospective nature of composure, which is ever “after the fact,” in Adam Phillips’s words, “a paradoxical form of self-cure for the experience of traumatic excitement; or rather, the seduction of one’s own excitement.” As Phillips’s attention to “seduction” and “excitement” suggests, composure is never far from scenes of sexual desire, with all their experiences of bodily stimulation, and so it is with the sonnet’s concluding aphorism. The “presence of mind” that Goffman accords composure achieves an erotically phatic function as the aphorism puts the speaker together, saying without saying, “I am here”—but also, because of the sonnet’s amorous content, “I am here for you.” Presence is a bid for copresence.

And yet it is significant that that presence is not an unmediated availability. Lodge is talking, after all, about secrets, and the implication of his aphorism is that he has many more secrets to share. In the very moment that the aphorism makes the speaker present, then, it also renders him inscrutable. In this respect, Lodge’s sonnet highlights the enigmatic laconicity that subtends every aphorism. The form’s distillation of the grandest of truths into the briefest of words turns the speaker into a kind of oracle, a figure whose pointed concision suggests an inaccessible profundity. The aphorism thus composes a speaker by making him both present and opaque, available and also distant. It is this contrapposto pose that makes the aphorism a particularly emblematic expression of what Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit call “erotic address.” More than mere presence, erotic address is “the soliciting move toward the viewer and the self-canceling move away from the viewer,” “an availability that is somewhat opaque.” Such opacity excites our desire precisely because it frustrates it.

This is not to deny Nancy Vickers’s resonant formulation that the sonneteer silences his beloved through his voluble languishing—that “his speech,” as Vickers puts it, “requires her silence.” In fact, the aphoristic couplet plays an instrumental part in silencing the sonneteer’s addressee, since its projection of enigmatic presence and solicitation of erotic contact are meant to take the place of any actual conversation. But when we turn
our attention to other genres from the period, we see how potently the aphorism can function as a tool for actual, dialogic exchange—and it is all the more erotic for it. Shakespeare’s *Richard III* offers a case in point. There, Shakespeare’s master Machiavel courts Lady Anne in the midst of her mourning; she is attending the funeral for her late husband, murdered by Richard, who promptly arrives on the scene. Anne is repulsed to begin with, but their conversation quickly achieves a recognizable form:

**Richard:** Lady, you know no rules of charity,  
*Which renders good for bad, blessings for curses.*

**Anne:** Villain, thou know’st nor law of God or man.  
*No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.*

**Richard:** But I know none, and therefore am no beast.  
**Anne:** *O wonderful, when devils tell the truth!* . . .

**Richard:** *It is a quarrel most unnatural*  
*To be revenged on him that loveth you.*

As a series of à pic replies that in turn demand à pic replies of their own because of how quickly they are delivered, this dialogue bears a deep Senecan stamp. Like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Seneca’s tragedies were also studied in England’s schoolrooms, and they are littered with stichomythic volleys of aphorisms and counteraphorisms. But “this keen encounter” of “wits” (1.2.115) also stands apart from its Senecan precedents in its none too apparent eroticism. Once again, that eroticism hinges on the aphorism’s inviting combination of presence and opacity. Coming after a twenty-line diatribe in which Anne calls him “a lump of foul deformity,” Richard’s opening gambit is twofold in its perlocutionary effects: on the one hand, its pith and poetic flair announce that he is unruffled by her attack and is instead entirely present before her, as composed as ever. On the other hand, the aphorism’s gnomic truth content turns Richard into an enigmatic font of wisdom, a figure of inscrutable profundity whose depths remain unplumbed because his language is so brief. Through the aphorism, Richard has made himself uniquely available to Anne, but, in the contrapposto that is the secret logic of composure, he has also withheld himself from her.

Anne’s own aphoristic response is of a higher order. She uses it to compose herself against Richard’s unsettling composure, to communicate that she is unruffled by his verbal sallies, just as in Richard’s ensuing, aphoristic reply he means to compose himself against Anne’s. But it is also a response to the very invitation that, I have been arguing, the aphorism elicits—and it elicits its own invitation in kind. Richard responds accordingly, with a subsequent aphorism of his own. A palpable friction ensues;
composure produces presence, and presence invites contact, and contact provokes composure once more. The aphorism thus produces relations of a distinctly intimate kind, as Shakespeare’s characters discover themselves suddenly and fully enmeshed with one another, in a way that few other social encounters enable. In this scenario, the aphorism is not the symptom of desire, but its engine.

*Richard III* thus gives voice to its moment’s potent fantasy of talk within the period. As a speech act, the aphorism is imagined to compose the subject in such a way as to produce, in the manner of a charm, a response whose reciprocation of form can only be construed as a reciprocation of desire. As the character of Shakespeare’s mustache-twirling villain suggests, that fantasy is forcefully, insistently male—borne aloft by humanism’s investment in masculine acts of persuasion. It is a fantasy that only flashes across Shakespeare’s tragedy, meeting its undoing in Anne’s ghostly curses scenes later. But in *Venus and Adonis*, it is given its most seductive expression.

*Venus and Adonis* stands at the forefront of a fashion for epyllia that gripped the English reading public of the 1590s. Brief, minor epics written in an erotic key, epyllia owed a deep debt to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for they tended to spin stories of love and transformation in verse that was by turns vivid, eloquent, and witty. They also offered their readers aphorisms in abundance, in another extension of Ovid’s poetic project. As I noted in passing earlier, the *Metamorphoses* was treated as a storehouse of eloquence, its episodes mined for their many memorable aphorisms, such as the one that begins Ovid’s tale of Venus and Adonis: “Nihil estannisvelocius” (“Nothing is swifter than the years”). The practice would seem to have carried over into early modern iterations of the genre. In the middle of *As You Like It*, the lovesick Phebe is found remarking to herself, “Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might, ‘Whoever loved, but loved not at first sight?’” (3.5.86–87). The “saw” in question comes from *Hero and Leander*, Christopher Marlowe’s posthumously published epyllion, and Phebe’s ready quotation of it makes dramatic fare out of the tendency to treat early modern epyllia as models for conversational competence.

Shakespeare’s epyllion is remarkable in this regard because of how actively it invites such citation. As early as the first stanza, Venus has spied Adonis from afar, approached him, and, “like a bold-faced suitor, ’gins to woo him” (5–6). Linked to the metalanguage of wooing, this simile reverses the gendered positions of seducer and seduced. It frames Venus’s language as the exemplary language of courtship, specifically of masculine courtship, and, in providing such an aspirational model of “suiting,” it interpolates Shakespeare’s reader as implicitly male:
“Thrice fairer than myself,” thus she began,
“The field’s chief flower, sweet above compare,
Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
More white and red than doves or roses are,
Nature that made thee, with herself at strife,
Saith that the world hath ending with thy life.

(7–12)

We might follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in treating such crisscrossed circuits of gender, identification, and desire as the result of a homosocial impulse to “consolidate partnership with males in and through the bodies of females”—an impulse that leads straight to a “confusion of identities with the woman”—so long as we recognize that it is the woman’s voice as much as her body, in this chatty poem, that concretizes relations among men.43 To this end, Lynn Enterline has persuasively argued that that hermaphroditic voice is the direct product of a humanist pedagogy that “fractured the unity of the masculine identities it was explicitly designed to produce,” teaching boys to be men by imitating classical literature’s most eloquent women.44

Yet the humanist schoolroom was not the only site of “fractured masculinity” that influenced the early modern epyllion. From John Marston’s Metamorphosis of Pygmalion’s Image (1598) to Francis Beaumont’s Salamacis and Hermaphroditus (1602), early modern epyllia tended to be written by men who were associated with the Inns of Court in the final years of the sixteenth century and the first years of the seventeenth. This period saw a shift in the social makeup of the Inns; matters of moral rectitude were replaced by “bonds of education and intellect” as the community’s principal foundation.45 For Michelle O’Callaghan, masked reveling was one of the primary means whereby Inns of Court gentlemen “publicly display[ed] collective academic capital and ma[de] claims to a cultural hegemony.”46 But epyllia were another. Georgia Brown has gone so far, in fact, as to describe the epyllion as a genre “born in and for the Inns of Court.”47 Their pointedly aphoristic lines, sensuous and erudite at once, offered readers potent tools for demonstrating their learning, conversational competence, and uncompromised comfort in talking about matters of sex—in making sex, indeed, a subject of learned conversation. To be sure, epyllia could be and were read by women, but the genre’s close connections with the Inns of Court meant that the sexual and discursive competences that it elaborated were implicitly male.

Shakespeare himself was no resident of the Inns of Court. But in both genre and material presentation, his poem recalls Scillaes Metamorphosis (1588), which was the most recent epyllion to appear in print before Venus and Adonis.48 Like Phillis, Scillaes Metamorphosis was written by Thomas Lodge, and its first pages announce the author’s associations with the Inns
of Court—Lodge is, according to its title page, a “Gentleman” “of Lincolnes Inne”—before the poem addresses itself, in the ensuing epistle, to “the Gentlemen of the Innes of Court and Chauncerie.” The epyllion bills itself as the artifact of a fully enclosed textual network, a poem by the Inns of Court and for the Inns of Court. To purchase this poem, to read it, even to recite it, was to participate in this network—even if only imaginatively—through a kind of social textuality.

By recalling Lodge’s earlier epyllion, Venus and Adonis might be read as advertising itself as another way for readers to symbolize their membership in London’s Inns of Court—or at least to associate themselves with its educated residents. But the culture of humanist masculinity that the poem addresses was merely concentrated in the Inns, not limited to them. The figure for that culture is the goddess who is likened to a man because she promises to teach the reader how to woo any woman. The poem makes good on this promise as early as its first several stanzas. As it blooms into hyperbolic descriptors like “thrice fairer,” “sweet above compare,” and “more lovely than a man,” Venus’s language turns the poem into a masterful demonstration of epideixis, the practice of extravagant praise that was the cornerstone of early modern rhetorical instruction. For Enterline, such aphoristic epideixis makes Venus a praeceptor amoris, a teacher of love in the Ovidian tradition. But even as the goddess “styles herself a teacher who can dispense a lesson in ‘love,’” it is perhaps more accurate to say she is a teacher who can dispense a lesson in talking love—which also means, as the poem’s opening suggests, talking aphorisms.49

The quotation marks that bracket the passage quoted earlier quietly emphasize this, but they are a modern editorial imposition.50 No sixteenth- or seventeenth-century edition of Venus and Adonis features such punctuation, which was only just beginning to be used to signal reported speech—a historical condition that lends all the more weight to metalinguistic verbs like the “began” and “saith” that frame the stanza. In the absence of quotation marks, that is, talk must be signaled linguistically rather than paratextually, through words rather than marks, making the metalanguage woven throughout the poem all the more striking. Through words like “voice,” “say,” “speak,” “woo,” and “words,” and through language about language, Shakespeare’s poem highlights the moments of “wanton talk,” in Adonis’s words, that the Petrarchan tradition so infamously conceals.

In this respect, Venus and Adonis is as close to the Ovid of the Ars Amatoria as it is to the Ovid of the Metamorphoses. The Ars Amatoria was Ovid’s comic but by no means unstimulating guide to talking love and, as Jonathan Bate wryly puts it, “arguing [one’s] way into bed.”51 The central comedy of Ars comes from the praeceptor’s ignorance in the very matters of love that he professes to know. A similar comedy may be found in Venus and Adonis, but it
is given a distinctly corporeal, not to say slapstick, cast. The goddess’s all too bodily body is a constant source of laughter. Not only is she impossibly huge—plucking Adonis from off his horse and tucking him under her arm—but she is also sweaty (175), she is thirsty, her breath is hot, and she falls down to the ground when Adonis looks at her. As Shakespeare’s narrator puts it, “Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil, / And careless lust stirs up her desperate courage” (555–56). The very thought of Adonis gets her so worked up that she begins to tremble. A parody of the Elizabethan sonneteer’s lovelorn unraveling, such uncontrollable excitation would seem to cut against the poem’s invitation for its (implicitly male) readers to treat Venus as a model of courtship. Yet the comedy of the stimulated body is an essential part of Shakespeare’s distinctly early modern concern with composure, which the goddess of his poem manages to achieve and to lose again and again.

For Venus, as for so many of her sixteenth-century contemporaries, the aphorism is the key to securing composure. Venus desires Adonis; desire leaves her in shambles; and the aphorism puts her back together. After Venus falls down, for instance, she promptly faints, desire so overwhelming her body that she has lost all control over it. Upon her revival, she summons scattered questions—“where am I?” “What hour is this?” (493–95)—before a two-part aphorism returns her to herself: “But now I lived, and life was death’s annoy; / But now I died, and death was lively joy” (497–98). With this, Venus is back to her prolix seductions, and, as they unfold, the narrator’s descriptions of her body tellingly fall away. The aphorism keeps the excitations of the body in check.

The lopsided relation between Shakespeare’s lovers only underscores the aphorism’s power to compose the speaker in the midst of talk. Adonis is steadfast in refusing Venus’s advances, and his refusals are the other great threat to Venus’s composure. They force Venus to summon one new rhetorical strategy after another in her efforts to persuade him. Valerie Traub notes as much when she writes that the poem’s center of gravity is “less the youth’s ignorance [in matters of love] than the possibilities it provides for rhetorical innovation.” Venus’s innovation becomes readily apparent as she moves from one frustrated argument to another. She reminds Adonis that she has seduced Mars (“he that overruled I overswayed,” she brags, “leading him prisoner … in a red-rose chain”; 109–10). She promises secrecy (“These blue-vein’d violets whereon we lean / Never can blab, nor know not what we mean”; 125–26). She even delivers her own version of the carpe diem imperative, the early modern classroom’s most studied theme (“make use of time,” she urges, since “Beauty within itself should not be wasted: / Fair flowers that are not gather’d in their prime / Rot and consume themselves in little time”; 129–32). Her wooing subsequently reaches a stirring, erotic
climax when she tells Adonis that “Within the circuit of this ivory pale, / I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer. . . . Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry, / Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie” (230–34).53 But for all this rhetorical variety, Venus revealingly holds fast to her amorously decorated aphorisms. Indeed, the poem’s six-line stanzas, each ending in a couplet, encode a nearly obsessive return to the form, which in Shakespeare’s hands, almost always takes the shape of two rhymed lines—lines that, in the earliest editions of the poem, are typographically set off by indentations from the rest of the stanza, like self-enclosed stanzas unto themselves.54

Venus’s endless recourse to the aphorism is a kind of grasping after form: an attempt to compose herself against the loss of face that comes with Adonis’s many rejections. In a manner not unlike what we have seen in Richard III and the Elizabethan sonnet, Venus imputes a simmering eroticism to this composure. The aphorism makes her fully present before Adonis in a way that enables contact, opening the subject to the expression and reception of desire. At the same time, the aphorism’s compact, gnomic content has the familiar effect of effacing Venus; the form replaces her own voice with that of a timeless authority, which makes her an erotically enigmatic figure, a speaker who invites attention precisely because she resists it. Of course, Adonis refuses such solicitations, but this only means that Venus compensates for his silence by laying aphorism on top of aphorism, in an attempt to mime for Adonis the very response she is inviting him to make. Not only does she want Adonis to respond with aphorisms of his own, like Richard’s Lady Anne, but she also wants to engage in just the kind of conversational dance that Richard and Anne partake of—a dance in which each speaker’s projection of presence is also an invitation for the other to make the same sort of invitation.

Venus’s extended pleas are a comic substitute for such repartee, but in their bounded, self-contained quality, they reveal something important about other, more properly conversational dances, which is that the exchange of one aphorism for another immerses speakers in a form of another kind: the form of the conversation. Spoken once, the aphorism flashes across a conversation as a brief moment of composure, of presence that solicits contact. But repeated, the aphorism construes an earlier aphorism as its central, animating context. The meaning provided by that context is not so much semantic as it is formal. As each iteration of the aphorism becomes an echo of the one that came before it—reproducing its meter, its rhyme scheme, its gnomic present, its pith—the conversation itself becomes a rhythmically and poetically regimented form akin to Roman Jakobson’s poetic function. For Jakobson, the poetic function involves “a set of indexical relationships of utterance-segment to utterance-segment”—rhyme words, for instance, or metrical feet—getting so densely overlaid onto one another that “every unit is locatable with respect to every other,” and
“nonlinguistic context tends toward zero importance.” In the stichomythic exchange of aphorisms, however, it is the conversation itself, rather than a single utterance, that achieves the quality of a poem. As “nonlinguistic context tends towards zero importance,” the aphoristically regimented conversation cordons speakers off from the rest of the world, seductively insulating them in a world of their own. The self-containment of the aphorism thus extends to the entirety of the conversation, and talk becomes a balletic interaction sealing off its participants from any context. Then again, “participants” is perhaps the wrong word here, since it is only Venus who talks. For all the self-reflexivity of her interwoven aphorisms, Shakespeare’s goddess of love is still not so far from the mopingly monologic sonneteers of her moment. It is to Adonis’s own aphorisms, which elaborate a countercurrent of desire, that the rest of this essay turns.

Like every good Petrarchan suitor, Venus is shocked to discover that the object of her affections has a voice: “‘What, canst thou talk,’ quoth she. ‘Hast thou a tongue?’” (427). Part of the reason Venus is so flummoxed is that Adonis’s preceding speech is delivered in exactly the aphoristic style as hers, and for this reason I quote it in full:

“I know not love,” quoth he, “nor will not know it, Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it. ’Tis much to borrow, and I will not owe it. My love to love is love but to disgrace it, For I have heard it is a life in death That laughs and weeps, and all but with a breath.

“Who wears a garment shapeless and unfinished? Who plucks the bud before one leaf put forth? If springing things be any jot diminished, They wither in their prime, prove nothing worth. The colt that’s backed and burdened being young Loseth his pride and never waxeth strong.

“You hurt my hand with wringing. Let us part, And leave this idle theme, this bootless chat. Remove your siege from my unyielding heart; To love’s alarms it will not ope the gate. Dismiss your vows, your feigned tears, your flatt’ry. For where a heart is hard, they make no batt’ry.”

(409–26)

Bate points out that Adonis’s active rejection of love is among Shakespeare’s most significant alterations of Ovid. In that version of the story, Adonis gets slaughtered by the boar only after he indulges Venus’s advances.
In Shakespeare’s version, Adonis rejects love outright. So committed is Adonis in his refusal, in fact, that refusal would seem to be his most characteristic posture. The hunter’s many negative constructions are indeed difficult to overlook: “know not,” “will not owe,” “but to disgrace it,” “prove nothing,” “losteth,” “unyielding,” “not ope,” “no batt’ry.” Richard Rambuss correspondingly reads such language as a “curt, contemptuous dismissal of Venus’ attempts to win him.” But Heather Dubrow detects in such lines a somewhat softer touch, a “coy” if “petulant tone,” which “leads us to distrust his moral stance.” Her observation is borne out by the expansion of Adonis’s response from one stanza to two, and again from two to three. This expansive language does more than flatly refuse Venus’s advances; it rises to the extravagant rhetorical standard that she sets. Not only does Adonis match rhyme for rhyme; he matches aphorism for aphorism, even mirroring the many metalinguistic verbs that Venus strings throughout her own aphorisms: “For I have heard,” he counters, “it is a life in death.” Just as we saw Venus quote Nature, so does Adonis cite the speech of an implicit and unspecified “they,” whose authority is all the greater for its vagueness; the more people who have repeated this saying, the more legible it is as a piece of ratified wisdom. Shakespeare’s untutored “student” of love thus proves himself an apt learner indeed.

This mastery awkwardly complicates any reading of Adonis as simply refusing Venus’s advances. Not only, as I have been arguing, does the aphorism have an enigmatically inviting effect, construing Adonis as an erotic object because he is so present and absent at once. But even as he tells the goddess that his “heart is hard,” that aphoristic reply also “carves out” a very particular sort of “reference” for his speech, to quote Goffman once more. By matching Venus’s rhymed aphorisms with rhymed aphorisms of his own, Adonis communicates that he has not merely heard the goddess’s many requests; like Lady Anne in Richard III, he has noted the form in which she has made them, and he has chosen to honor that form by fitting his own language into it. The effect of this emulation is to take one step further Venus’s endless repetitions of the aphorism. Where her repetitions of this form, as we have seen, were self-reflexively decontextualizing—such that each aphorism construed the one before as its principle context and source of meaning—Adonis’s aphorisms likewise hail Venus’s as the primary context for his own.

They thus extend to Adonis’s own talk the chain of aphorisms we first saw Venus put together; they link his language to hers, and her to himself in a single, cooperative process of form making. As the world beyond their conversation recedes to “zero significance,” Shakespeare’s characters achieve what we might think of as talk’s operative will to form. Their densely patterned conversation, collaboratively produced, attains what Silverstein
calls “balletic fluency” that “builds consistently . . . to a structurally perfect execution of [a] genred social-actional event” in which all that matters is the present moment as their talk constructs it.60 Through the back and forth exchange of aphorisms, conversation in Venus and Adonis acquires the idealized, stichomythic structure of ping-pong—of rhythmic and cohesive repartee—that talk so often lacks. Sparks fly less because of what is said than how it is spoken, and through them Venus and Adonis demonstrates that ambiguity is constitutive of what Traub calls “sex talk” because the erotic is itself an effect less of any single word than of the relation of one utterance to another in their cumulative, collaborative construction of the meaning of their own delivery.61

How is one to read Adonis’s participation in this repartee? Consent is a special problem for this poem, as it is for the Ovidian tradition that produces it.62 Shakespeare’s epyllion does not so much resolve that problem as compound it. For while the acquiescence of Ovid’s Adonis becomes the character’s refusal in Shakespeare’s hands, it also primes readers to look out for signs of his acceptance and, with it, any ensuing scenes of sexual consummation. Ultimately, Venus and Adonis only tempts readers with sex, but in its place it gives them talk, a substitution that might be read as Shakespeare’s coy deflation of readerly expectations, except that in this poem, verbal concourse is just as erotic as the real thing.63 Not only does the replacement of sex with talk invite readers to approach Venus and Adonis’s conversation with an erotic eye, but the epyllion also satisfies this inclination by scripting Adonis to match each of Venus’s aphorisms with one of his own, in an altogether more flirtatious conversation than critics have tended to allow. The sensuous charge to this conversation is shown to come from the characters’ cumulative overlay of form onto form, in a collaborative improvisation of form that anticipates the duets of Romeo and Juliet, Benedick and Beatrice, and Richard III and Lady Anne—even as Adonis and Venus remain at odds in their desires.

Or perhaps because they remain at odds. Although Adonis remains steadfast in his commitment to hunting the boar, whose tusk will eventually penetrate him in no uncertain sexual terms, his language invites readers, with Venus, to think otherwise. His many aphorisms are enlisted to communicate rejection in terms the goddess will recognize, but by forming a stichomythic conversation, they suggest his recognition of “conversation” is just the erotic game that Venus wants it to be and his momentary desire to play along with it—either to satisfy Venus with its erotic electricity or to experience it for himself. My point is not that Adonis secretly wants Venus, but that Shakespeare’s poem eroticizes his refusal, inviting readers to construe denial as flirtation because of the matching of one aphorism for another. As Dubrow has argued, there is an “intimate link” between Venus
and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece. Both poems share the unnerving tendency “to conjoin and confound the sexual and the aggressive.” Indeed, for all the ways Venus and Adonis upends Petrarchan convention, the poem is never so Petrarchan as in its eroticization of Adonis’s refusal. (It is not going too far, in fact, to propose that in Richard III the eroticization of refusal is not so much replaced as refined in accordance with a humanist fantasy of talk: the fantasy, namely, that the right words can turn any rejection into acceptance.)

It is surely for this reason—and not just its aphorisms—that Venus and Adonis enjoyed such popularity with the men whom Gabriel Harvey called “the younger sort.” Harvey’s disapproval is echoed by the fictional Hic Mulier, of the protofeminist pamphlet Haec-Vir, who laments the frequency with which one hears “a Man court[ing] his Mistress with the same words that Venus did Adonis, or as neere as the Booke could instruct him.” As Sasha Roberts has demonstrated in exhaustive detail, a host of plays from the period feature foppish gallants courting women through Venus’s lines. In the two-part Return from Parnassus plays, for instance, the aptly named Gullio, a daft Cambridge student, brags of having seduced his mistress by quoting passages from Shakespeare’s poem—“Pardon fair lady,” he claims to have told her, “thoughe sick-thoughted Gullio mak[e]s amaine unto thee, and like a bould-faced sutore ‘gins to woo thee.” Gervase Markham’s The Dumbe Knight, performed around 1608, likewise features a law clerk named President, who is discovered suggestively reading the poem aloud to himself in a bedchamber. And Lewis Sharpe’s comedy The Noble Stranger stages the “foolish gentleman” Pupillus, who cries out “for the book of Venus and Adonis, to court my mistress by.”

These satirical depictions suggest how eagerly London’s gallants embraced Venus and Adonis as just the conversation manual it presented itself to be. More, they suggest how eagerly erotic talk was conceived as the most formalized possible exchange of aphorisms. That The Academy of Complements, a conversation manual and conduct guide from 1640, excerpts two aphorisms from the poem for readers to repeat to their mistresses suggests the close connection that endured in the seventeenth century between Venus and Adonis and conversational competence. But the comedies I have cited also expose Shakespeare’s poem to be, like any conversation manual, merely a fantasy of how talk might go. Thomas Heywood’s Fair Maid of the Exchange enlists the epyllion to just such an effect. Published in 1607, the comedy stages the attempts of the young gentleman Bowdler—listed among the dramatis personae as a “humorous gallant”—to court a woman named Mall Berry. Though he confesses he is “not furnish’t of a courting phrase,” he admits that Venus and Adonis is the one book he has read, and he proceeds to quote the poem directly to Mall:
BOW: Fondling I say, since I have hemmed thee here,
Within the circle of this ivory pale,
I’ll be a park.
MAL: Hands off fond sir.
BOW: And thou shalt be my deer;
Feed thou on me, and I will feed on thee,
And Love shall feed us both.\(^72\)

As Bowdler wraps his arm around the unwilling Mall, Heywood vividly dramatizes the fantasy of talk that *Venus and Adonis* offered its readers: the fantasy that merely repeating the poem’s lines will turn interlocutors into lovers, and Mall’s refusal is merely part of the script.

But if *Venus and Adonis* is grossly imbricated within the Petrarchan tradition, the poem also elaborates in Adonis an alternative model of sexual sociability, which becomes apparent when we look past its blatant eroticization of refusal. We might think of this sexual sociability as the inverse of humanist self-fashioning, the unspoken wish that humanism produces in its subjects, which I conclude by locating in Adonis’s aphoristic talk. As I noted earlier, that talk is conspicuous in its refusals, and critics have responded to those refusals by reading them in positive terms and thereby imputing to Adonis the interiority that he seems to lack. Adonis says no, that is, because he wants—and is—something else. Adonis is rejecting lust because he wants virtue; he is rejecting love because he wants sex; he is rejecting effeminacy because he wants masculinity; he is rejecting homosexual desire; he is rejecting heterosexual desire; he is rejecting human desire. For all their variety, these claims have been united in their commitment to reading Adonis’s refusal as evidence of something else, since his negation of Venus would seem to point the way toward some positive preference either metaphorized or literalized by the fatal boar.\(^73\) The question of Adonis’s rejection—how to read it, what motivates it—is in this respect tantamount to the question of the poem itself, where the meaning of everything seems to hinge on the meaning of the desires it depicts.

Yet Adonis’s many denials are never just about rejecting Venus. Through the aphorism, Adonis negates himself in the very moments that he denies Venus’s advances. “If springing things be of any jot diminished,” Adonis remarks at one point, “They wither in their prime, prove nothing worth.” It is a characteristic utterance for this rather characterless character, for it scrupulously excises all particularizing details of his person; the metaphor of the “springing things,” for instance, takes the place of any “I” or “me,” while the gnomic tense of “they wither” extricates Adonis from his situated present, along with the self that is enmeshed within it. *England’s Parnassus* is characteristically quick to capture this impersonal feature of Adonis’s

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Talk That Talk: Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and the Seductions of a Form 21
language, citing several of the aphorisms that he enlists to counter Venus’s
own: “For where Love doth reign, disturbing jealousy, / Doth call himself
affection’s sentinel” (649–50); “Love surfeits not, but like a glutton dies, / Love is all truth, lust full of forced lies” (803–4); and “Love to heaven is fled, / Since sweating lust on earth usurped the name” (793–94), the altered
quotation with which this essay began. Adonis’s evasion of the first person
exceeds that of his besotted counterpart by far, and it demonstrates the
particular appeal that the form holds for him. The aphorism’s careful sup-
pression of selfhood provides this anticharacter with a means of escaping
selfhood rather than expressing it. If “all we know about Adonis from Ado-
nis himself is that he loves to hunt, that he wants to rejoin his friends, and
that . . . he does not want Venus,” it is in no small part because this insistently
passive character fits himself so compulsively into the form that Venus mod-
els for him.74

For Adonis, then, the aphorism is akin to refusal; it is a form that cancels
the self. In its place, the form elaborates a disposition in which interiority,
depth, and subjectivity are merely secondary. Scholars of Shakespeare’s
poem have sought to understand this disposition by projecting onto it the
depth of various queer sexualities, but the project of queerness, as Lauren
Berlant has argued, need not always “start ‘inside’ the subject and spread
out from there.”75 Looking past the poem’s eroticization of Adonis’s
denial—as if he secretly wants Venus—also means looking past the inward-
ness that such eroticization indirectly imputes. Adonis is so impenetrable
because bracketing the self is a pleasure that sex and sociality afford. It is for
this reason that Adonis embraces composure even more completely than
Venus does. As I have been arguing, composure is a way to make yourself
present, collected, open for contact. But there is also a flip side to this
dynamic. Even as composure makes the self present, it also holds part of
the self at bay. Phillips notes as much when he writes that composure can
“creat[e] a distance . . . from the affective core of the self.”76 Shakespeare’s
practically characterless object of desire embraces the self-cancellations of
composure in the extreme, and those self-negations are given a conspicu-
ously erotic cast when he is killed by the penetrative tusks of the boar:
“nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine / Sheathed unaware the tusk in his
soft groin” (1115–16). As “one of the most graphically sexual figurations in
Renaissance poetry . . . of male body ‘rooting’ male body,” these lines cast an
illuminating retrospective light on Adonis’s earlier conversation with
Venus.77 For in turning Adonis from a spear-wielding hunter into a boy who
is “lovingly” pierced himself, Shakespeare’s unnervingly flat protagonist is
revealed to be a figure who seeks out others (human or not) in order to be
shaped—and replaced—by them. For this “flint-hearted boy,” negation is
not simply a denial of something unpleasant; it is itself a source of pleasure.
The boar offers such pleasure in fatal excess. Indeed, Adonis’s death is nothing if not an emblem of the subject’s negation, as the hunter with the rock-hard heart dissolves into the “grass, herb, leaf, or weed, / Which but stole his blood, and seemed with him to bleed” (1055–56). Painful and pleasurable at once, the image invites us to read Shakespeare’s epyllion as an emblem of the sadomasochistic “self shattering” that, for Bersani, is the special pleasure of sex and that, for Cynthia Marshall, early modern subjects ardently sought out in the literature of their moment. It is such a notion of the subject’s rapturous deformation that motivates Bruce Smith to read the poem in terms of “ambient swoon.” Drawing upon Timothy Morton’s ecological conception of ambient poetics, Smith defines “ambient swoon” as the pleasurable dissolution into “not just one’s sexual partner but in an ambient surround of gods, mortals, plants, animals, and things in between.” But in Shakespeare’s unmistakably Ovidian project, liquefaction is only half the story; no sooner has Adonis “melt[ed] like a vapor” than he has metamorphosed into a “new-sprung” flower, “resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood / Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood” (1169–71). For Venus, the flower is a symbol for love’s cruel frustrations, but coming after Adonis’s compulsive self-negations, it is also the poem’s unlikely icon of sex, which is not an experience that shatters the self, but a form that replaces it.

Nor is sex the only self-replacing form in Shakespeare’s epyllion. The poem’s animating insight is that talk, like sex, can pleasurably cancel the self because it is a process of establishing forms that can take its place. Adonis’s enigmatically flirtatious responses to Venus are perhaps the epyllion’s most resonant demonstration of this. Adonis may deny the goddess’s advances, but that does not mean that he does not also accept Venus’s invitation to match all the rhythms and forms of her talk. He is not simply participating in the dance of turning talk into form—enjoying, like Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing, the friction that comes from resisting a suitor while mastering his forms—he is also participating in this dance for the pleasure of getting both negated by it and formed by it himself.

Shakespeare even gives this passive relation a comic cast when Adonis, having grown tired of the game, tries to cut things off with Venus once and for all. “Your treatise makes me like you worse and worse,” he protests, but the line conveys more than distaste; it also suggests that Adonis experiences “an undesirable affinity,” a transformation into the person he has been talking to. The moment gives comic resonance to Masten’s observation that “conversation,” in early modernity, was never far from “conversion,” in the sense of transformation into—and through—the person with whom one converses. That conversion reaches its comic climax when Adonis protests,
In this heated moment, the word “device” explains it all. Used in the now archaic sense of “the manner in which a thing is devised or framed,” it sets in motion the poem’s secret comedy of form: the speaker who claims to hate Venus’s “device” is using that “device” to express his hate. Opening himself up to the ambient swoon of verbal repartee, Adonis discovers to his horror that the voice he rejects is also his own.

Adonis’s “conversion” by means of Venus’s “device” is the comic iteration of the boar’s more tragic “nuzzling.” In both cases, the poem’s object of erotic fixation opens himself up to a sexual form—talk, tusk—and in both cases, he is the one formed indelibly by it. For Berlant, such a passive relation to form is constitutive of sexual pleasure, which does not so much express personality as bracket it: “a reiteration that makes a form, not necessarily something that feels good,” pleasure “captures a way of being a something unbound to an identity that circulates or can be tracked to personality.” We may read Adonis as an early modern version of this phenomenon. His personality is negated because the aphorisms he reiterates, like the boar he pursues, take the place of a self. It is this negation and replacement of the self through form that makes Adonis a figure for humanism’s unspoken wish. The familiar dream of humanist self-fashioning produces, like a shadow, a dream of radical passivity, wherein the self is not so much dissolved as it is contained by a form that precedes it. Small wonder that this “ungrown fry” is so insistently feminized, femininity being equated, in so much early modern thinking, with passivity. Adonis is a “stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,” not simply because he is an object of desire, but because he is what the humanist reader secretly wishes to be. Adonis’s self-negations thus turn Shakespeare’s most popular poem into an unlikely parable of sex, which we might experience as a rapturous loss of self, but which gets played out as the self’s immersion in the form that it fashions with another.

The same may be said of talk. When Goffman writes that talk is an “arrangement by which individuals come together” and get “lodge[d] . . . in some sort of intersubjective, mental world,” he is articulating a distinctly early modern insight, which is that talk provides a form in place of the self—an aphorism, a conversation, a poem—even as that form may be construed as an emanation of the self. As utterances that have been uttered before, the aphorisms of Venus and Adonis are a pithy reminder that our forms of talk are
only rarely our own; they are lifted from elsewhere, from conversations that may be fictive as easily as real, and embedded in new social encounters. Words like “citation” and “quotation” begin to capture this dynamic, but only partly. Better to speak of embedding, since by imitating Venus’s aphorisms, Shakespeare’s readers sought to transpose onto the occasion of talk the very eroticism that his poem gives to the form. Turning the epyllion’s aphorisms into talk, in other words, is a way to turn one’s talk into another version of the epyllion. The interplay between the reception and the narrative content of Venus and Adonis makes it an object lesson in talk, which is a process of imputing cultural values to forms, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a process of embedding within a given interaction the cultural values that have been imputed to a form. Eroticism is one of those values, but others are not far to seek. If it seems odd to seek them in literature, where ordinary interactions are so fantastically idealized, Shakespeare’s epyllion is a reminder that the peculiar power of such idealizations is to give us scripts for imagining how ordinary interactions might go—for imagining the form talk will take, which is also the form that will take our self’s place. So far as social life is concerned, what we imagine might happen is just as meaningful as what does, and Venus and Adonis is nothing if not the story of how a fantasy of talk becomes, for better or for worse, the real thing.

Notes

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8. Ibid., 86.
15. Though less commonly, the gnomic tense can also be communicated by past-or future-tense constructions.
16. *The whole aphorismes of great Hippocrates, prince of physicians: Faithfully translated into English for the benefit of such as are ignorant of the Greek & Latine Tongs* (London, 1610), sig. B1v.
17. It is admittedly perverse to define one genre in terms of another. But in the case of aphorisms and epigrams, it is only partly so, since the speech genre of the aphorism provides the essential core for the poetic genre of the epigram, which comes into its own in the early modern period. Certain differences abide; epigrams are less wedded to the gnomic tense, for instance. Eventually, the epigram would assimilate the aphorism so completely into itself that the two become nearly indistinguishable from each other, “epigrammatic” becoming another word for the pointed quality that I am tracing in the aphorism. Geoffrey Hartman, “Beyond Formalism,” *Modern Language Notes* 81 (1966): 545. On the sexual charge that electrifies even the most seemingly combative and “masculine” of such rejoinders, see Len Gutkin, “The Dandified Dick: Hardboiled Noir and the Wildean Epigram,” *ELH* 81 (2014): 1299–1326.
25. Ibid.
27. On the commonplace markers in various editions of *Hamlet*, see Lesser and Stallybrass, “The First Literary Hamlet.”
32. Silverstein, “Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function,” 50–51. I use the word “poetic” here in a deliberate evocation of Roman Jakobson’s “poetic function” of language, which for Silverstein is one especially significant iteration of “co-textuality,” whose great power is to establish such indexical and meta-indexical relations among co-occurring units as to make their relation to their “context” seem utterly irrelevant.
39. William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.2.68–135; italics mine. All citations from Shakespeare’s plays are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., unless otherwise noted.
40. I am grateful to the readers at *Representations* for drawing my attention to Shakespeare’s Senecan upbringing.
41. I am indebted to the readers at *Representations* for this insight, as well.
46. Ibid.
47. Georgia Brown, *Redefining Elizabethan Literature* (Cambridge, 2004), 103. Brown’s comments are echoed by James Richard Ellis, in *Sexuality and Citizenship: Metamorphosis in Elizabethan Erotic Verse* (Toronto, 2003), 18, who proposes that the most celebrated examples of the genre—*Venus and Adonis* and *Hero and Leander*—stand outside the norm in not being written by men directly associated with the Inns of Court.
48. Lodge’s poem is typically recognized as the first epyllion to appear in print, though Matthew Grove’s *Pelops and Hippodamia*, published in 1587, provides a loose generic precedent. Both are anticipated by Thomas Peend’s *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salamcis* (1565). Like Lodge’s poem, Peend’s, too, is dedicated to the gentlemen of the Inns of Court.


54. The Elizabethan sonnet likewise ends in a couplet, often a couplet with an aphoristic edge, but the multiplication of this form across *Venus and Adonis*, I am arguing, lends it a special force. On the commonplacing and circulation of couplets and their relation to the sonnet, see Jessica Rosenberg, “The Point of the Couplet: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Tusser’s *A Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie,*” *ELH* 83 (2016): 1–41.


56. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 57.


61. Traub, *Thinking Sex*, 173–76. In her exhaustive focus on individual words and phrases, Traub necessarily brackets the “sexual meanings [that] develop and accumulate … through processes of linguistic exchange.” This analysis is meant to fill that gap by arguing for conversation as a primary way that “sex talk”—as a collaborative, self-reflexive accomplishment—“denotes itself.”

63. For a fuller consideration of the tension between sex and its substitutes in the poem—which becomes a tension between the erotic and the aesthetic—see Richard Halpern, “Pining Their Maws': Female Readers and the Erotic Ontology of the Text in Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis,” in Kolin, Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays, 377–88.

64. Dubrow, “Upon Misprision,” 225.

65. Harvey’s note is to be found in his annotated copy of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, edited by Thomas Speght. The book is housed in the British Library, Add. MS 42518, sig. 3z6v.

66. Haec Vir, or, the Womanish Man (London, 1620), sig. Cv.


68. The First Part of the Return from Parnassus, as cited in The Pilgrimage to Parnassus, with the Two Parts of The Return from Parnassus, ed. W. D. Macray (Oxford, 1886), lines 981–85.

69. Gervase Markham, The Durne Knight (London, 1608), sig. F1r.


71. Philosomus, The Academy of Complements (London, 1640), 141. The two passages excerpted in The Academy are “Once learne to love, the lesson is but plaine, / And being learnt is never lost again,” listed under the header “The Constancy of Lovers”; and “Were beauty under twenty lockes kept fast, / Yet love breakes through, and picks them all at last,” listed under “The Force of Love.”


75. Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism (Durham, 2011), 125.


77. Rambuss, “What It Feels Like,” 249.


82. OED Online, s.v., “device,” def. 1.b.