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# The Never-ending Chase: Unrequited Love in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *The Merchant of Venice*

William Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *The Merchant of Venice* exemplify the use of the Petrarchan characteristic of unrequited love. Both works present a conflict between the object of affection and the love—with the latter left feeling unsatisfied. While the poem *Venus and Adonis* deals with romantic love, the play *The Merchant of Venice* highlights the possibility that unrequited love can exist in friendship as well. Throughout both works, Shakespeare supplies clues for the reader to support this theme. Shakespeare's use of the Petrarchan theme of unrequited love resonates as the dominating theme in both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Merchant of Venice.*

The Petrarchan characteristic of unrequited love presents the consequences of love not reciprocated. Maus writes, "Thus *Venus and Adonis* reproduces a dynamic that Petrarch and his followers made familiar by the late sixteenth century, in which a yearning lover pleads endlessly with a chilly love object" (660). Here, a clear parallel between Shakespeare and Petrarch is drawn. Shakespeare's use of Petrarchism sets the tone for both the poem and the play. Edwards lends to this, stating, "Francesco Petrarch wrote narratives of selfhood across the genres and other discursive forms that compromise his vast body of work" (1). Edwards provides Petrarchan context that is useful when examining Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare employs Petrarchism consciously throughout his literary works.

Shakespeare's use of unrequited love manifests most discernibly in *Venus and Adonis.* Venus's feelings for Adonis are apparent from the beginning, as Shakespeare writes:

And at his look she flatly falleth down,

For looks kill love, and love by looks reviveth.

A smile recures the wounding of a frown,

But blessed bankrupt that by loss so thriveth.

That silly boy, believing she is dead,

Claps her pale cheek, till clapping makes it red. (463-468)

This quote provides a basis for the theme of unrequited love throughout the work. The concept that Venus can die at Adonis's glance and then be revived by him heightens her feelings for him, making these intentions clear to the reader in an urgent sense. Venus's adoration and Adonis's subsequent disinterest epitomize Shakespeare's use of this Petrarchan theme. Venus's attempts prove futile until she is forced to fake her death for Adonis to notice her. Her sheer affection for Adonis is present when Shakespeare writes:

And, trembling in her passion, calls in balm,

Earth's sovereign salved to do a goddess good.

Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force

Courageously to pluck him from his horse. (27-30)

Here, the intensity of Venus's devotion to Adonis drives her actions. His rejection only fuels her passion more. Maus writes, "In Petrarchan poetry, little of consequence seems to happen, but the apparent lack of momentum is actually a prime stimulus to creativity. Frustration hones techniques or erotic persuasion, it energizes lament and interestingly complicates the poet-lover's state of mind" (660). In Adonis's rejecting Venus, she is not deterred but instead makes more headstrong advances. This frustration gives ammunition for her pursuit of him. The reader gains insight into Adonis's feelings for Venus when Shakespeare writes:

Over one arm the lusty courser's rein,

Under her other was the tender boy,

Who blushed and pouted in a dull disdain,

With leaden appetite, unapt to toy—

She red and hot as coals of glowing fire,

He red for shame but frost in desire. (31-35)

In these lines, Adonis's intentions with Venus are made clear: he could not care less about her or her feelings toward him. Her appearance is described as hot, while his demeanor is icy cold. The two descriptions could not be more polarly oppositive, underlining the unrequited love that exists between them. Lindheim writes, "It is possible for Adonis to feel that the boar and Venus are equally his enemies, and it is possible for Venus to see in the boar's nuzzling of Adonis with his tusk an analogue to her own sexual desires" (197). Venus's pining for Adonis matters not to him because his aim is only to hunt. Adonis's love for the hunt equals Venus's love for him—both characters are chasing after an objective that they are not sure they will obtain. This drives Venus to chase him harder and causes Adonis to run faster from her. Like Adonis's desire to capture the boar is being magnified by Venus's interferences, Venus's yearning for Adonis's love is highlighted by his rebuttals. Adonis is Venus's boar.

Comparing Ovid's Venus to Shakespeare's Venus, Maus writes, "Shakespeare's Venus declares herself in a much more forthright fashion, but his Adonis, unlike Ovid's, remains unresponsive to her charms" (660). Shakespeare's Adonis verbally refuses Venus outright. Venus's feelings for Adonis overshadow his rejection because her judgment is clouded by love. Shohet writes, "I propose that we might fruitfully read Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* as addressing just these questions: as considering multiple and competing discourses of desire, and

exploring how different poetic and erotic modes might inflect one another" (86). Venus's hunt for Adonis mirrors his hunt: they are both passionately seeking out prey. Adonis regards her interrupting his hunt as Venus would hypothetically regard an obstacle in her way of pursuing him. These unrequited feelings further cement Shakespeare's employment of the theme throughout this poem.

*The Merchant of Venice* provides a similar conflict. Though sometimes subtle, the unrequited love that Antonio feels for Bassanio prevails. The reader must critically evaluate Antonio's actions and Bassanio's reception of the actions to discern the unreciprocated feelings. Shakespeare does not make the nature of these feelings known, leaving it up to the reader to determine whether the love exists as extreme dedication or romantic affection. Antonio's character is purposefully confusing throughout the play, as Lewis writes, "This discouragement against judgment is desirable dramatically not only because the play presents a tension between judgment and love—or law and mercy—but because, more radically, the play concerns the very difficulty of human judgment" (27). Antonio's clouded judgment when choosing to trust Bassanio and continually lend him money contributes to his feelings for Bassanio. Whichever the reader chooses, it is clear that Bassanio does not repay those feelings for Antonio. It is, however, unnecessary to decide if these feelings are romantic or rooted in friendship, as Hyman writes, "Some readers might insist that Antonio has some unconscious sexual feelings for Bassanio that he would never reveal even to himself. But such an assumption is neither necessary nor relevant to our understanding of his actions" (110). Hyman goes on to add, "All that we need to assume is that Antonio knows he should be happy in his friend's normal attempt to find a wife and is nevertheless unhappy at losing him" (110). Considering this, the research provides an understanding of Bassanio's abuse of Antonio's willingness to help his friend. This Petrarchan

tradition presents itself in the form of unrequited love in *The Merchant of Venice.* Antonio wants to rejoice for Bassanio but cannot seem to bring himself to face that happiness.

This paradox prompts his statement in the first lines of the play, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (1.1.1). The group to whom he is speaking tries to figure out what he is upset about. Eventually, Solanio concludes, "Well, then, you are in love" (1.1.46). This suggestion sparks the idea of unrequited love between Antonio and another. Antonio rejects this notion, too, exclaiming, "Fie, fie!" (1.1.47). Such an outburst of response presents grounds to examine his behavior throughout the play. Lewis expands on this, "Nowhere in Act I—or, for that matter, the rest of the play—does Antonio come to terms with his 'sadness'; nowhere does he admit a plausible cause for the vague, inscrutable feeling he initially describes as preventing him from knowing himself" (21). This considered, Antonio's lack of resolution in the play directly relates to Bassanio's failure to requite. Throughout the course of the plot, Antonio gives Bassanio money and even almost his own life, and yet his feelings are unmatched. Nonetheless, Antonio makes evident his feelings for Bassanio from the beginning of the play. Antonio confesses to Bassanio, as Shakespeare writes:

> I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it;
> And if it stand, as you yourself still do,
> Within the eye of honor, be assured,
> My purse, my person, my extremest means
> Lie all unlocked to your occasions. (1.1.142-146)

In these lines, Antonio pours out his heart to Bassanio, assuring him of his willingness to do anything for his friend. Later in the play, he does goes to his extremest means by almost giving his life for his friend—and does so not only willingly but enthusiastically.

Bassanio knows how Antonio cares for him, and this knowledge drives Bassanio to take advantage of his friend throughout the play. Bassanio's ambitions are brought to light when Shakespeare describes:

> But my chief care
> Is to come fairly off from the great debts
> Wherein my time, something too prodigal,
> Hath left me gaged. To you, Antonio,
> I owe the most in money and in love,
> And from your love I have a warranty
> To unburden all my plots and purposes
> How to get clear of all the debts I owe. (1.1.134-141)

The interest rests in the fact that, when Bassanio addresses Antonio, he mentions money first and love second. Here, Bassanio's intentions are affirmed: he is using Antonio for monetary gain. He owes Antonio the most in money, and though he acknowledges that he is indebted to him in love, his actions throughout the rest of the play prove he does not intend to repay this debt. The only wrong he appears to desire to right is his monetary debt to Antonio. Amy Greenstadt comments on this, writing, "Antonio's regular habit of lending money to Bassanio at no interest reflects his desire to regard their friendship in these idealized terms, where the very words 'lend or give' can have no meaning because, as two souls have joined in one body, in giving to the other each friend donates himself" (950). The giving of himself to Bassanio remains, in Antonio's mind, no question because he feels obliged to help his friend in whatever way he can be of use. Bassanio, in turn, knows that Antonio will lend to him as long as he is able, both because he knows how deep Antonio's feelings for him are, and because Antonio has said he will go to extreme lengths

to support his friend several times throughout the play. If Antonio is willing to do anything for his friend, but Bassanio does not reciprocate this willingness, then the conflict between the two men defines itself as that of unrequited love.

The same between these two characters in friendship can be said about a passionate lover pursuing a disinterested object, as in *Venus and Adonis.* Bassanio only gives Antonio attention because of Antonio's readiness to provide him with financial relief. Antonio's passionate feelings for Bassanio remain prevalent throughout the play, as even near his death, Antonio prays for Bassanio to witness his sacrifice. Antonio cries out for Bassanio, as Shakespeare writes:

> Therefore go.
>
> These griefs and losses have so bated me
>
> That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh
>
> Tomorrow to my bloody creditor.
>
> Well, jailer, on! Pray God Bassanio come
>
> To see my pay his debt, and then I care not. (3.3.31-36)

Antonio's affection for and loyalty to Bassanio supersede his wish for living. Here, a faithful friend is described as willing to die to prove his love, exemplifying the Petrarchan characteristic of unrequited love.

Antonio's adoration is very much unrequited, as it is, in fact, Portia who saves his pound of flesh. Shakespeare writes,

> Tarry a little. There is something else:
>
> This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.
>
> The words expressly are 'A pound of flesh.'
>
> Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh;

> But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
> One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and good
> Are by the laws of Venice confiscate
> Unto the state of Venice. (4.1.303-309)

Portia, not Bassanio, saves Antonio from his fatal payment. Here, Bassanio's claims of repaying the loan three (or even ten) times over fall flat, because without Portia, Antonio would now be dead. This conclusion would cause most friends to reevaluate their priorities and relationship—but not Antonio. Bassanio's words mean little to the reader when Antonio's actions for his friend are so great. Still, Antonio's love for his friend trumps all reason, as he does not see Bassanio's failure to be the one to save him as unwilling or careless. Antonio reunites with Bassanio, declaring he will now "stand indebted over and above/ In love and service to you evermore" (4.1.411-412). Antonio's feelings for Bassanio remain unfaltering, demonstrating his unconditional love for his friend. This very sentiment is the precedent for the Petrarchan theme of unrequited love. Antonio's love for Bassanio proves to be unconditional, deterred not by Bassanio's failure to contribute to the friendship in as meaningful a way as Antonio does. In a sense, this action heightens Antonio's feelings for Bassanio—maybe because he believes that this dramatic display of public adoration will cause Bassanio to reciprocate his feelings.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's employment of the Petrarchan characteristic of unrequited love presents itself as a reigning theme throughout both the poem *Venus and Adonis* and the play *The Merchant of Venice.* In *Venus and Adonis,* the theme of unrequited love implores the reader to discern friendly fondness from amorous devotion. Venus and Antonio are not deterred by their love object's reluctance. In Venus's case, this causes her to pursue Adonis more feverishly. For Antonio, his loyalty to his friend blinds him throughout the trial and his almost death. Venus is

more than willing to feign death to gain Adonis's attention, and Antonio is acceptant of laying down his life for Bassanio. Though Venus longs for Adonis's admiration, Antonio seems content with what he has now. In an urgent sense of the Petrarchan theme, Shakespeare utilizes unrequited love as a driving force to propel the contents of the plot in both literary works.

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