

# The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

---

Volume 23 | Issue 1

Article 3


---

2021

## Peace, Love and War: Venus as a Pacifist, Warmonger, and Powerful Woman in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Faerie Queene*

Maia J. Janssen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Janssen, Maia J. (2021) "Peace, Love and War: Venus as a Pacifist, Warmonger, and Powerful Woman in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Faerie Queene*," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol23/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

---

Peace, Love and War: Venus as a Pacifist, Warmonger, and Powerful Woman in  
*Venus and Adonis* and *The Faerie Queene*

**Keywords**

Venus, pacifist, warmonger, war, Venus and Adonis, The Faerie Queene

Peace, Love and War: Venus as a Pacifist, Warmonger, and Powerful Woman in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Faerie Queene*

Maia J. Janssen

In Peter Paul Rubens's painting *Venus and Adonis* (1653), the love goddess Venus implores the young hunter Adonis to stay with her as he clutches his spear and tries to abandon her for the hunt. Rubens's painting serves as an ideal case study for the most basic and typical Renaissance beliefs about femininity, violence, and peace. Juxtaposing Venus and Adonis achieves two things. First, Venus's placement opposite Adonis aligns her with peace and distances her from violence. Venus begs Adonis to abandon the hunt and the violence it will bring, suggesting that she wants him to join her in embracing its opposite: pacifism. Secondly, by linking Venus and peace, the painting associates the concept of peace with femininity itself. With her fair hair, pale skin, and nude body, Venus conforms almost perfectly to Western beauty standards. Physically, therefore, she resembles an "ideal" woman. Her actions further this resemblance. She clings to Adonis with a vapid expression on her face, and her son Cupid helps by clinging to his leg (Rubens). The positioning of Venus's body portrays her as helplessly enamored with Adonis and wanting nothing more than for him to stay. This helplessness and paralyzing desire indicate a passive nature that only further associates her with typical Renaissance femininity—Renaissance women had no power in virtually every respect. Since she is meant to represent peace through her opposition to Adonis's violence,

and this woman is not just a woman but an ideal one because of her physical appearance and helpless, passive nature, a connection clearly exists in Rubens's painting between femininity and peace.

This connection is not unique to one painting. Femininity and peace are associated in many Renaissance works of art, as well as other areas of early modern life. Perhaps this was most obvious in the realm of politics. Complicating discussions of peace and femininity in the Renaissance era was Queen Elizabeth I, a female ruler who enjoyed a successful, powerful regime that was not always peaceful. Elizabeth I both asked and provided answers for the questions regarding what it meant to be a powerful female, the place of femininity in leadership, and the place of peace in Renaissance England.

Amidst these questions, arts and culture flourished in the Renaissance, setting the stage for exploration of the relationships between femininity, war, power, and peace through poetry. Two of the early modern period's most prolific poets—William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser—did just that. In *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Faerie Queene* (1590), respectively, Shakespeare and Spenser work out the question of how war and peace should fit into a powerful woman's actions and personality. They do this through the character of Venus, who in both texts is a powerful actor in the spheres of war and peace.

In doing so, both Shakespeare and Spenser break down the binary logic present in other Renaissance art, such as Rubens's painting. In their portrayals, Venus is not intrinsically linked with peace or femininity, and these concepts are not polar opposites of war, violence, or masculinity.

In *Venus and Adonis* and *The Faerie Queene*, Venus is a ruler who uses her power to act on her own desires. Sometimes she chooses to use her power for peacemaking, but just as often she decides to create war and violence. Venus's femininity is less important than her power and status as a god when it comes to her actions and decisions. Thus, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Faerie Queene* are two texts that ruminate on the fleeting whims of rulers and the self-serving nature of their power and desires.

### Gender, Power, War, and Peace in the Renaissance

Spenser and Shakespeare lived under one of the most powerful and influential rulers in England's history. Queen Elizabeth I also happened to be female; the presence of a powerful, successful female ruler in England prompted writings that explored the relationship between womanhood, femininity, and power.

The life and rule of Elizabeth I is a study in contradictions between her identity as a woman and her status as a ruler. In a famous speech at the Battle of Tilbury, she declared that "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (Queen Elizabeth I). Elizabeth's separation of her female body and her royal status in this speech presents opportunities for interpreting her reign in the context of the Two Bodies Theory. This theory posits that a ruler has two bodies—their physical body and the body of people that they govern. Carole Levin emphasizes the particular importance of this theory for Elizabeth. Her individual, female body was subject to all the "pitfalls" of being a woman. Her body of subjects, however, would remain constant because of the trust

and faith already built between ruler and kingdom (122). The Two Bodies Theory, therefore, provides one way of reconciling womanhood with power—separating the two, even if they exist within one individual.

However, Elizabeth didn't always place her womanhood and her power in totally separate spheres. Sometimes, she embraced femininity, such as when she donned expensive jewels and furs in an attempt to present herself as the Virgin Mary. This encouraged loyalty to Elizabeth because it forced her subjects to associate defying the queen with defying a revered religious figure (Wagner-Wright). However, other times Elizabeth presented herself as more masculine. For example, she dressed just like her male soldiers in an armored breastplate when she appeared before them at the Battle of Tilbury. In doing so, Elizabeth made salient her strength and power, and any weakness associated with her sex became a non-issue (Wagner-Wright). Depending on what she sought to communicate to her subjects, Elizabeth portrayed herself in ways that, with respect to gender, were diametrically opposed. She sometimes harnessed femininity as a means of empowerment, and other times harnessed masculinity to minimize the liability that could come from being female. Regardless, Elizabeth was always conscious of her circumstances when choosing to present (or not present) as feminine.

Elizabeth's ambiguous gender presentation resembled her politics of warfare, as she demonstrated potential for both war and peace and gravitated towards whatever served her goals the best. She struck a balance between knowing that war was costly and thus avoiding it when necessary (Gittings 111), and unleashing violence and terror on some groups, such as English Catholics, whose beliefs clashed with her Protestant faith (Breight 2). As

with her femininity, Elizabeth chose war or peace depending on what was most advantageous for her.

Elizabeth's pragmatism differs considerably from the philosophy of Erasmus, who was perhaps the most well-known pacifist of the Renaissance. In his many writings on peace, one of the key ideas he emphasized was the idea of "positive peace," in which peace is not just the absence of war but a dynamic state in its own right and something that everyone must actively work towards. In "A Complaint of Peace" (1517), Erasmus declares that in order to have peace, "the very sources from which the evil springs and the base passions which give rise to your conflicts must be cleansed" (311). This is no small demand; cleansing society of all its strife requires serious time and energy.

In defining peace in this way, Erasmus insinuates that the maintenance of peace requires strength and assertiveness. His portrayal of peace as dynamic and requiring constant work suggests that individuals with the ability to problem solve, speak their minds, and take initiative will succeed at the "art of peace." Assertiveness, problem solving, and initiative are all characteristics associated with powerful people, because they are necessary for successful leadership. However, they are not usually associated with typical conceptions of femininity—Peter Paul Rubens's portrayal of a helpless, passive, and feminine Venus makes that clear. With these relationships (or lack thereof) between peace, power, and masculinity, a powerful Renaissance woman found herself in a delicate situation to navigate. Could one be feminine and a ruler in the early modern period? Must female rulers forgo their assigned gender scripts in order to fully engage in the warmongering

and peacemaking that leadership requires?

Because of the writings of Erasmus and the leadership of Queen Elizabeth, these types of questions were on the minds of writers trying to sort out the relationship between gender, power, war, and peace in the early modern period. Through their portrayals of the goddess Venus, William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser do just that.

*Venus and Adonis—Venus as a Peacemaker and Warmonger*

Initially, the source of Venus's power in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* seems obvious—her status as a lover and the love goddess. Early in the poem, Venus sees Adonis and her “desire [for him] doth lend her force/ courageously to pluck him from his horse” (l.29). Venus can overtake and capture Adonis because her desire for him lends her the strength necessary to do so. Later, Venus's “careless lust stirs up desperate courage” that helps her convince Adonis to pay attention to her another day and reconvene the next morning (l.556). Once more, Venus's desire helps her achieve her goals, suggesting that her desire gives her power. And, Renaissance culture's common association between Venus's desire and her femininity (such as in Rubens's painting) suggests that her femininity makes her powerful as well.

However, Venus's desire also weakens her. Before she even interacts with Adonis, Venus sees him and “[trembles] in her passion” (Shakespeare l.27). The word “tremble” portrays Venus as not a powerful goddess, but a mere damsel struck weak by the sheer force of love at first sight. Later, while trying to convince Adonis not to reject her, “the love-sick queen [begins] to sweat” (l.175). Once again, Venus's desire for Adonis renders her a weak,



sweating mess. And, because of its established link with her desire, Venus's femininity also becomes a source of her weakness in these situations.

Sean Lawrence attributes Venus's simultaneous strength and weakness to Venus's inaccurate perception of Adonis as a mere object that can be controlled through force. As she pursues this version of Adonis, Venus is "simultaneously more aggressive and weak. Her weakness and aggression relate reciprocally: her failure leads her to greater aggression, and the failure of her aggression further illustrates her weakness" (190). Lawrence's explanation for Venus's simultaneous strength and weakness begin to reveal the masculine undertones of her seemingly hyper-feminine desire. Venus's objectification of Adonis, the violent nature of her attempts to control him, and her aggression that results from her failures all resemble typical masculine stereotypes of objectifying the object of one's desire, being aggressive in one's pursuits, and being unable to accept failure gracefully. The presence of these masculine-coded characteristics within Venus's seemingly hyper-feminine desire reveals contradictions that Venus presents with respect to the gender binary. The desire that characterizes her femininity gives her strength, but it also prompts a masculine-coded pursuit of Adonis that weakens her. While many facets of Renaissance culture, such as Peter Paul Rubens's painting, held up associations between femininity and weakness, and masculinity and strength, Shakespeare subverts them, instead portraying Venus as exhibiting all four characteristics simultaneously. In the love goddess' pursuit of Adonis, therefore, we begin to see a breakdown of the gendered binary logic of the Renaissance. In *Venus and Adonis*, peace and femininity are not intrinsically linked, and they are not the polar opposites

of masculinity and violence.

Similar instances of masculine-coded characteristics arising from Venus's feminine-coded desire further suggest that Venus's seemingly feminine desire may be more masculine than it appears. For example, Venus's "lust stirs up desperate courage" (Shakespeare l.556), and courage was a feature that early intellectuals associated with masculinity. One reason for this is that the ancient Greek word for "courage" is *andreia*, which translates to both "courage" and "manliness." This linguistic relationship led early thinkers to conflate courage and manliness and consider courage to be "a manly virtue that cannot refer to anyone else" (Reeser 153). The fact that a result of Venus's desire—courage—is masculine-coded suggests that her desire has a certain masculine quality as well.

Venus's desire also results in her demonstrating aggression. Masculinity and aggression were linked in the early modern period due to a "persistent valorization of masculine aggression that creates a seeming necessity for male violence" (Feather and Thomas 2). In other words, male aggression was applauded in the early modern period, which made aggression a necessary feature of "successful" masculinity. One situation that demonstrates Venus's aggression is the actions of the boar. It has been previously argued that Venus's sexuality—something closely linked to her desire and a pinnacle of her femininity and identity as the love goddess—physically manifests in the boar that kills Adonis. Murder has an inherently aggressive quality, and so the connection of the boar to Venus's sexuality not only marks her as demonstrating aggression, but consequently codes her sexuality and desire as opposite to femininity (Hansen).

However, while the boar demonstrates violence and aggression, it also presents further evidence for the idea that desire, peace, and violence exist on a spectrum rather than as binary opposites. While the boar that represents Venus's sexuality commits violence in a way that seems antithetical to Venus's desire and its connections to her femininity and peace (as in Rubens's painting), it simultaneously acts in a way characteristic of the love goddess. Shakespeare describes the boar's murder of Adonis as a loving act as well as a violent one. Upon seeing Adonis, the boar "by a kiss thought to persuade him there;/and nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine/sheathed, unaware, the tusk in his soft groin" (1.1.114). While the boar commits violence by killing Adonis, words such as "loving," "nuzzling," and "kiss" portrays this violent act as a more peaceful type of hunting that is gentle and amorous. The boar's murder of Adonis suggests violence, peace, and love are more closely related than they are opposed. Thus, the case of the boar provides further evidence for the idea that, in *Venus and Adonis*, the relationships between femininity and masculinity and violence and peace are a spectrum, not a binary.

After challenging binary logics surrounding gender, peace, and violence, Shakespeare uses Venus and her actions to demonstrate that those in power can act within the violence and peace spectrum any way they choose. Venus uses her power to create both war and peace, depending on what would benefit her. One instance of Venus creating peace is her seduction and "taming" of the war god Mars. She achieves this feat by convincing Mars to accept peace and love as a suitable substitute for war. Everything that Mars loves about war, Venus helps him find in peace. She makes her

“arms his field, his tent [her] bed” (Shakespeare l.108). Venus’s power is so strong that it allows her to gain anything she desires—even if it requires a feat as large as pacifying the war god.

The story of Venus and Mars demonstrates Venus’s ability to create peace. However, powerful Venus is just as capable of creating war, as demonstrated by her curse on love at the end of the poem. When Venus finds Adonis dead, she is distraught, and in her distress she curses love to have the violent, destructive traits that characterize war:

It shall suspect where is no cause of fear;  
 It shall not fear where it should most mistrust;  
 It shall be merciful and too severe,  
 And most deceiving when it seems most just;  
 Perverse it shall be where it shows most toward,  
 Put fear to valour, courage to the coward.  
 It shall be cause of war and dire events,  
 And set dissension ’twixt the son and sire (Shakespeare  
 l.1153).

Here, Venus creates war out of love by declaring that love shall always be the cause of war and other “dire events.” And again, Venus does this for no other reason than her own desires. She sees her love Adonis is dead; she is upset. She takes out her emotions on what she has power over—love. Venus’s curse on love also reflects the nuances and contradictions of her own character. Just like Venus’s desire and goddess status makes her both powerful and weak, love itself is merciful and too severe, most deceiving and most just. Polar opposites exist side by side in both contexts. And so, while the curse at first seems to contradict what Venus stands for, it ends up being quite a natural declaration for her to make.

Shakespeare furthers his breakdown of such binary logic with the

character of Adonis, who displays elements of masculinity, violence, peace, and femininity. Like Venus, he demonstrates that these characteristics can exist side by side. The multifaceted nature of Adonis's character is alluded to when Venus finds Adonis dead. She weeps and tears blur her vision, causing her to see double. "Her sight dazzling makes [Adonis's] wound seem three" (Shakespeare l.1064), and Venus knows that this is merely an illusion, because "oft the eye mistakes, the brain being troubled" (l.1068). However, she still laments the fact that "two Adons" have died (l.1070). These two Adonises can be observed in the way that Adonis bridges the gap between masculinity and femininity and war and peace. Within the same character, there exists a masculine Adonis and a feminine Adonis, a violent Adonis and a peaceful Adonis.

Adonis's connection to violence and the hunt is obvious. He is love-averse, wanting only to hunt down the boar. We learn this very early when Shakespeare states that "hunting he loved, but love he laught to scorn" (l.4). Previous criticism has suggested that Adonis' rejection of love and desire represents a rejection of femininity. However, the only reason Adonis must reject love and desire in the first place is because he is put in the typically feminine position of the one who is seduced. As Hansen puts it, "desire—and thus the desiring subject—is feminine. Adonis's lack of desire can be read as a rejection of his femininity" (Hansen). So, Adonis presents a duality where he is captivated by violence and hunting, which is often masculine-coded, but he also occupies a position that is typically feminine-coded. Consequently, this puts Venus and her feminine-coded desire in the masculine-coded role of the seducer. Thus, *Venus and Adonis's* performances

of gender, love, war, and peace, and their subversion of binary logic surrounding these concepts, necessarily go hand in hand.

Shakespeare also takes several opportunities to draw parallels between Adonis and the goddess of love herself, and by consequence places Adonis towards the middle of the gender spectrum rather than fully at the masculine end. Venus and Adonis are described in equal, but opposite ways. For example, they are both described as “red,” but Venus is red like “coals of glowing fire” (Shakespeare 1.35), while Adonis is “red for shame” (1.36). Venus also observes the similarities between herself and Adonis, and even perceives him as exhibiting love’s characteristics better than she herself does. Upon seeing him for the first time, she immediately declares Adonis to be “thrice-fairer than myself” (1.7). At one point, Venus, the goddess of love, refers to Adonis as “Love’s master” (1.585). Clearly, Venus sees herself in this love-repulsed hunter. Thus, while Adonis is certainly meant to be a character who loves violence and detests love, he also serves as evidence that violence, peace and love are more connected than they are opposed through his similarities to Venus, who herself demonstrates violence, peace, and love all at once. Consequently, he provides evidence against the fact that femininity and peace are intrinsically linked, since he, like Venus, exhibits masculinity and violence alongside femininity and peace.

All in all, Shakespeare subverts the binary logics of violence and peace, masculinity and femininity by means of Venus’s own characterization and actions as well as those of Adonis. And, in Venus’s taming of Mars and the cursing of love, he suggests that Venus’s power is unrelated to her being the love goddess and that she is just another leader acting on her own

desires.

*The Faerie Queen—Distancing Femininity and Pacifism*

Like *Venus and Adonis*, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* challenges associations between Venus and pacifism by associating her with war and violence, and in the process demonstrates that Venus is just another ruler using her power how she desires. However, while Shakespeare demonstrates that femininity and peace can exist simultaneously, but do not always, Spenser drives a larger wedge between femininity and pacifism through the character of Amoret, who suggests that it is very difficult for these two concepts to coexist.

*The Faerie Queene* separates Venus from peace through multiple direct associations between Venus and violence that happen in the tenth canto of the fourth book of the epic poem. In this section, Scudamore journeys to the temple of Venus to win back his love, Amoret. Venus and her temple present several challenges to Venus's link to pacifism (such as the one established in Rubens's painting). First, before Scudamore even meets Venus, he has to fight off the monsters guarding her temple—Doubt, Delay, and Danger. Particularly the latter is quite an aggressive monster to have guarding the temple of the goddess of love. Thus, a dichotomy already starts to form between what we expect of the goddess of love and what actually manifests in her territory. These monsters are also reminiscent of Venus's curse on love in *Venus and Adonis*. Doubt "[suspects] where there is no cause of fear" (Shakespeare l.1153). Delay "the strongest body [makes] most weak" (l.1145). And Danger is "too full of riot...raging-mad" (l.1147).

Spenser's Venus thus comes off as a logical successor to Shakespeare's Venus; this intertextuality facilitates Spenser's further portrayal of a vengeful, violent Venus.

Next, Scudamore meets Hate and Love, who are "begotten by two fathers of one mother" (Spenser 4.10.32). This common mother is Venus, for earlier in the canto she is said to be "of love the mother" (4.10.34). Thus, while Venus clearly can produce the love we all know her to represent, she can also produce hate—something often associated with violence and war. Not only did Venus mother Hate, but she bore him first. Although love is now the more powerful of the two brothers (4.10.32), there was a time where Venus's most powerful creation was something diametrically opposed to what she is known to represent.

This canto also presents a very obvious separation of Venus and peace through the figure of Concord. Before meeting Venus, Scudamore meets Concord, who is the "mother of blessed Peace" (Spenser 4.10.34). Spenser's version of Venus is not the primary creator of peace, despite the early modern period's frequent associations between Venus and peace. On the contrary, Venus and Peace appear on two separate family trees. Furthermore, while Concord is female, Peace's gender is not specified. Beyond anything related to Venus, this ambiguity makes it difficult to conflate peace and femininity in *The Faerie Queene*. If femininity and peace were meant to be associated, then surely the character of Peace would be a woman.

The situation of Concord also suggests Spenser's support for Erasmus's concept of positive peace. "Concord" translates to "agreement" (OED), providing a clue to where Spenser believes peace begins—har-



mony between people. However, Concord and Peace are not the same; rather, Peace is Concord's child. Their familial relation indicates a connection between the two virtues, but the generational gap suggests that Peace is meant to be more than Concord and exists to continue what Concord starts—as children often do for their parents. The notion that Peace is meant to do more than facilitate interpersonal harmony calls forth Erasmus's conception of positive peace. While Concord merely creates agreement between individuals, her child Peace goes further, doing the active work Erasmus believes is necessary to truly be at peace.

With Spenser's support of positive peace in mind, it becomes even more obvious that he means to distance Venus from peace. The text does give Venus some credit as a pacifying force, but not enough for her to be considered a great agent of peace. One soul in the temple gives a speech praising Venus for her role as a pacifist, but it describes Venus as engaging in a type of peacemaking that is quite passive. She is only praised for her ability to bring peace to the natural world—the seas, the clouds, the winds (Spenser 4.10.44). Nowhere in the speech does the speaker give Venus any credit for reconciling warring countries or feuding individuals, which is perhaps the true mark of a powerful pacifist. Additionally, the reason Venus can pacify nature is her “smiling looke” (4.10.44). This gives Venus a passive role in peacemaking because of the implication that any other beautiful person could achieve what she does. In no way is Venus meant to exemplify pacifism if the only power she has to create it is her appearance and she cannot bring peace to the most violent of situations. In short, her passive pacifism does not facilitate positive peace.

After separating Venus from peace in a similar way to Shakespeare, Spenser utilizes the character of Amoret to distance femininity from peace, as well as to demonstrate the fleeting desires of Venus and all others who have power. Amoret's relationship with Venus demonstrates Spenser's intent to separate the goddess from typical Renaissance ideas of femininity. While other works like Rubens's painting portrayed Venus as the "ideal woman," *The Faerie Queene* places Amoret in this role instead. Scudamore comes across Amoret sitting in a circle of virtues—womanhood, shamefastness, cheerfulness, modesty, courtesy, obedience, and silence (Spenser 4.10.49). Amoret's position in the center implies that she embodies all of these virtues, which were all associated with femininity in the Renaissance. Amoret also wears a "lily white veil" (4.10.52), which further emphasizes her purity. The same cannot be said for Venus—she also wears a veil, but one that depicts male and female genitalia (4.10.41), something that is in no way chaste. The depiction of Venus and Amoret portrays them as opposites of one another, with the latter being the "ideal woman" because of her association with traits valued in Renaissance women.

The circumstances of Amoret's birth and Venus's raising of her further the perception of Amoret as an ideal woman. Amoret was born alone in a forest to a chaste mother. Her conception story resembles the birth of Jesus—Chrysogonee was impregnated by a sunbeam from the heavens and then gave birth in her sleep. Kyndra Spaulding argues that this chaste, otherworldly birth means Amoret was born devoid of original sin. In this way, she can be read as a "Second Eve," who embodies the quintessential chaste, Christian woman of the sixteenth century (7). Eve, being the first woman

in the Christian tradition, sets forth the standards for what a woman should be. If Amoret is “Second Eve,” then she must adhere to these standards, making her an “ideal woman” as well.

However, while Amoret is born an “ideal woman” in some respects, her birth also leaves plenty still to be determined. Chrysogonee “bore without pain that she conceived without pleasure” (Spenser 3.6.27). Childbirth is a painful, bloody, and almost violent act, while conception is a pleasurable and amorous one. But Amoret’s birth was neither of those things. This absence suggests that we can interpret Amoret as being born predisposed to neither love nor violence, as someone to mold as one pleases. Venus does just this, adopting Amoret “to be upbrought in goodly womanhed” (3.6.28) and “trained up in trew femininitee” (3.6.51). With this rationale, Venus makes clear that she hopes to raise Amoret to be an “ideal woman.” However, what exactly it means to be an “ideal woman” is ambiguous. In reading the text through a Christian lens like Spaulding does, Amoret is an ideal woman because she resembles the first woman—Eve. Erin Goss, however, reads Amoret’s role as the ideal woman as coming from the goddess Psyche, whom Venus employs to train Amoret. Psyche, Goss argues, trains Amoret to be a different type of ideal woman. She teaches her to be chaste, and she also trains her to be passive, having “properly directed amorous energy that defers to the masculine for its status” (262).

The situation of Amoret changes the information necessary to answer the question of whether peace and femininity are linked. Amoret’s status as the ideal woman who presents the idea version of femininity means that the answer lies in her, not Venus. And, Amoret’s character suggests that

peace and womanhood do *not* inherently go hand in hand. Amoret does not possess the conflict-resolution skills necessary for a peacemaker doing active work to create peace. Peace requires assertion. It requires the ability to communicate and negotiate. In contrast, Amoret, being found by Scudamore in a circle of virtues that include silence and obedience, possesses characteristics that make her a passive figure (as Goss argues) who exists to serve the whims of others. She is not a self-sufficient, assertive person capable of doing the active work that peace requires.

Spenser's distancing of Venus from peace and peace from femininity suggests that his Venus, like Shakespeare's, is capable of producing peace and war, depending on what serves her goals the best. However, Venus's way of doing this differs in the two texts. While in *Venus and Adonis* Venus demonstrates her power and her individualistic reasons for using it through her seduction of Mars and her curse on love, in *The Faerie Queene* Venus demonstrates her power through delegation. Shakespeare's Venus does the work of creating war and peace on her own, but Spenser's Venus delegates these tasks to others—warmongering goes to Cupid, while peacemaking (or, more accurately, the illusion of peacemaking) goes to Amoret. Spenser's version of the powerful Venus means that she can not only afford to act totally according to her own desires, but she has enough power to force others to fulfill these desires for her.

In the case of Cupid, we see more links between *Venus and Adonis* and *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser's Venus employs Cupid to carry out actions that closely resemble the curse she puts forth at the end of Shakespeare's poem, and when Venus loses Cupid in Canto six of Book three, she first

seeks him out in court, where she finds many people who bear the “fowle infamous blot/his cruell deeds and wicked wyles did spot” (Spenser 3.6.13). Here lies evidence of violence put forth by Cupid—the “infamous blot” implies bloodshed at his hands. Next, Venus looks for Cupid in the city, where she hears testimonies of his being “the disturber of all civill life/the enemy of peace, and the author of all strife” (3.6.14). Finally, she searches in the country, where she hears accounts from country-dwellers of “how he their heedlesse harts with love had fyred/and his false venim through their veins inspyred” (3.6.15). Together, these three instances demonstrate the violence Cupid incites through his powers of love. He is creating bloodshed through his arrows of love, disturbing civil life, and making an enemy of peace. He is creating war through love, which is quite similar to what Venus declared will happen at the end of *Venus and Adonis*—that love “shall be the cause of war and dire events” (Shakespeare l.1159).

Cupid’s power is an extension of Venus’s for three reasons. First, Venus is Cupid’s mother. So, his power comes from her in a biological sense. Secondly, the resemblance between Cupid’s actions and Venus’s curse on love from *Venus and Adonis* is striking, and while this was perhaps not Spenser’s intent, Venus’s employing Cupid to bring this curse to life is a very logical conclusion to draw. And, finally, Venus is the goddess of love, so it is reasonable to assume that she is responsible for the actions of Cupid, another authority in the area of romance.

In many ways, Amoret is the “other side” of Cupid—upon losing Cupid and not being able to find him, Venus adopts Amoret to raise like she raised Cupid. Amoret is, of course, raised to be a passive figure who serves

the whims of others. Since Venus is Amoret's caretaker, Amoret at least in part serves to fulfill the whims and desires of Venus. And while Amoret is a passive figure who does not possess the assertiveness necessary for creating peace, she does serve to maintain the image of pacifism that most Renaissance readers would associate with Venus. In other words, Amoret does not serve as a pacifying figure herself, but she does serve to maintain Venus's reputation as one.

Amoret, as previously established, occupies the role of the "ideal woman"—traits that most would initially assume to be held by Venus. While Venus pursues her own desires such as cursing love or taming the god of war, Amoret serves as the idol representing common perceptions of Venus such as that in Rubens's painting—servile to her own feelings and embodying submissive, passive womanhood. Of course, this is not actually what Venus represents. She employs someone else to maintain her own reputation, and then she does whatever she pleases—often in the process subverting the image she means to present to the world.

### Conclusion

In the worlds of Shakespeare and Spenser, powerful women are more complex, less feminine, and more self-serving than meets the eye. But why, then, does Venus always come off as a "typical" Renaissance woman, rendered helpless by her love and exuding sex appeal?

Throughout all of history, including the Renaissance but leading up to today, powerful women have had to maintain a carefully crafted image in order to appear legitimate. Despite the fact that Venus's image hardly

captures the nuances of her persona, this image is vital for her success as a leader. Venus's maintenance of a feminine image resembles the situation of Elizabeth I when she presented herself in the image of the Virgin Mary to maintain a respectable reputation (Wagner-Wright). While Elizabeth sometimes had the opportunity to present herself as more masculine, such as at Tilbury, Venus does not have this same luxury—she is too closely associated with femininity due to countless cultural artifacts such as Rubens's painting. In short, the love goddess' femininity (or, at the very least the illusion of her femininity) provides her with the reputation she needs to be taken seriously, because a feminine Venus is all most people know. So, this is why Venus uses her femininity as a facade, behind which she operates as any other powerful ruler, serving their own desires whenever they come about. Images matter—but they never capture the full picture.

## Works Cited

- Bright, Curtis C. *Surveillance, Militarism and Drama in the Elizabethan Era*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1996.
- "Concord, N.1." *OED Online*, Oxford UP, Mar. 2021, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/38345](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/38345). Accessed 29 May 2021.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. "A Complaint of Peace." *DOBD Literary and Educational Writings, 5 and 6*. Translated by Betty Radice, U of Toronto P, 2016, pp. 289-322.
- Feather, Jennifer and Catherine E. Thomas. "Introduction: Reclaiming Violent Masculinities." *Violent Masculinities: Male Aggression in Early Modern Texts and Culture*, edited by Feather and Thomas, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 1-20.
- Gittings, John. *The Glorious Art of Peace*. Oxford UP, 2012.
- Goss, Erin M. "A Training in 'Feminitee': Edmund Spenser, Mary Tighe, and Reading as a Lover." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2014, pp. 259-291. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/43280225](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43280225). Accessed 15 Aug. 2020.
- Hansen, Signe. "Shakespeare's un(w)holy trinitities: female identity in Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece." *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, vol. 13, 2001, p. 65+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A94126714/AONE?u=grinnellc&sid=AONE&xid=6f919702](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A94126714/AONE?u=grinnellc&sid=AONE&xid=6f919702). Accessed 30 June 2020.
- Lawrence, Sean. "The Frustration of Power and the Weakness of Desire in Venus and Adonis." *Of Levinas and Shakespeare: "To See Another Thus"*, edited by Moshe Gold, Sandor Goodhart, and Kent Russell Lehnhof, Purdue UP, 2018, pp. 185-202.



- Levin, Carole. *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*. 2nd ed., U of Pennsylvania P, 2014, doi:10.9783/9780812207729.
- Queen Elizabeth I. "Tilbury Speech." 1588. *Learning Timelines: Sources from History, The British Library*, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html>.
- Reeser, Todd W. *Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture*. U of North Carolina P, 2018.
- Rubens, Peter Paul. *Venus and Adonis*. 1630. *The Met Fifth Avenue*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437535>.
- Shakespeare, William. *Venus and Adonis* [1593]. The Shakespeare Head Press, 1905.
- Spaulding, Kyndra. "Th'ensample of True Loue Alone": Spenser's Amoret as Second Eve." M.A. Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 2011. <https://hdl.handle.net/11244/45208>. Accessed 30 July 2020.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene, Book III* [1590]. Edited by Kate M. Warren, Archibald Constable & Co, 1908.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene, Book IV* [1596]. Edited by Kate M. Warren, Archibald Constable & Co, 1908.
- Wagner-Wright, Sandra. "Common denominators in successful female statecraft: the political legacies of Queen Elizabeth I, Indira Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher." *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table*, 2012. *Gale Academic OneFile*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A317588347/AONE?u=grinnellc&sid=AONE&xid=b90bba22](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A317588347/AONE?u=grinnellc&sid=AONE&xid=b90bba22). Accessed 15 July 2020.