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Corsini Gallery Assignment

Venus and Adonis at the Corsini

When thinking of classical paintings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the first paintings that come to mind are Titian's *Poesie* series from nearly 100 years prior. However, viewing Juspe de Ribera's *Venus and Adonis* in the Corsini Gallery seemed to be an emblematic Baroque work with much more drama.

Before diving into Ribera's interpretation, let's first address the myth of Venus and Adonis as described by Ovid. Venus, the goddess of love, falls in love with Adonis, the mortal son of Myrrha and Cinyras. Adonis, graced with beauty, prefers hunting in the woods to Venus's pursuits. Though she warned Adonis of the dangers of the forest, he was killed by a wild boar that attacked him during a hunt. Her tears mix with his blood and turn into anemone flowers.¹

Ribera's highly emotional work effectively shows this tragedy of lost love through both expression and gesture. In all aspects, this is an image of grief. Adonis's slumped body with his splayed crimson garment alludes to not only his spilled blood but also the flowers that will bloom from his body. His peaceful expression and parted lips add a sense of romance to the scene.

¹ Emeljanow, V. "Ovidian Mannerism: An Analysis of the Venus and Adonis Episode in Met. X 503-738." *Mnemosyne* 22, no. 1 (1969): 67-76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4429705>.

The most dramatic, however, is the grief of Venus. Upon viewing the work, the first thing I noticed was Venus's flushed cheeks and eyes. This effect makes it seem as if she has been crying or is just about to. Her jump from the heavens upon hearing of his death also mirrors Ovid's myth, though in *Metamorphoses* she arrived on a chariot drawn by swans.² However, I think that leaving out the chariot allows the viewer to focus more on her grief-stricken expression and her dynamic leap to her dead lover. Here, Venus's affetti is stronger than words. Her beauty and grieving body language allow the viewer to empathize with her loss. I do think that Venus's pose could employ more grief though. Instead of capturing her leap through the crowds, Ribera could have painted her crying over Adonis's body. However, her graceful bound from the heavens is fitting, as she is the goddess of love and beauty. Upon close inspection, I could not tell if tears were welling from her eyes or if the tiny white paint in her eyes is just a rendering of light hitting her pupils.

The most effective in depicting a scene of grief, though, is Ribera's use of tenebrism. Compared to the pastels of Titian which give his scenes a far more romantic tone, the muddled palette and intense shading by Ribera again emphasizes mourning.

According to the description of the painting by the Palazzo Barberini, this image deviates from Ovid's tale through its allusions to Christian canons. Adonis's injury appears to be stemming from his ribs, rather than his groin as Ovid states. Also, Venus's gesture with her raised hands resembles the posing typical of Mary Magdalene's in Renaissance and Baroque images.³ Ribera

² <https://www.barberiniconsiglieri.org/en/opera/venus-and-adonis/>

³ <https://www.barberiniconsiglieri.org/en/opera/venus-and-adonis/>

also deviates from Ovid as an original source with his neglect of the boar that delivered the fatal injury to Adonis. Ribera instead includes another creature, a hunting dog, placed alongside his dead master, which is an allusion to Venus's faithful loyalty to Adonis.⁴



(Me at the gallery)

⁴ Francis, Henry S. "Jusepe de Ribera: The Death of Adonis." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 53, no. 9 (1966): 339–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25152120>.