

RED AND WHITE AND THE WARS OF THE ROSES:
SHAKESPEARE'S *VENUS AND ADONIS* AND THE *RAPE OF LUCRECE*

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The Wars of the Roses haunted Shakespeare's imaginative vision of medieval history. Compared with most of his work, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* have received minimal critical attention, yet they complement the dramatic canon better than we may at first suspect: the long poems exhibit in their color symbolism and theme the same illuminating connections to the Wars of the Roses as do his history plays, and they show Shakespeare's use of "medievalism" to comment on politics more generally.

Historian Alison Weir observes that most of the population of Renaissance England "did not regard the Wars of the Roses as a civil war as such, but as a dispute between noble factions" (417); however, "Tudor historians were fond of reminding their readers of the horrors of the Wars of the Roses," and they "spared no efforts to portray . . . a grim period of violence, political anarchy, and social decay" (415-16). Weir argues that the literature of the time does not "reflect a preoccupation with the evils of civil war" (417); I would like to suggest, however, that exactly such a concern motivated Shakespeare's composition of his two long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.

Tudor-age chroniclers, as Francis Fergusson notes, "saw in the success of the Tudors, which finally ended the destructive Wars of the Roses, the predestined happy ending of England's time of troubles"; similarly, Samuel Daniel's epic *The Civil Wars* (the first installment of which appeared in 1595) suggests that the subject of the Wars represented a consistent artistic/patriotic concern for other poets as well, so we should not feel surprised to find Shakespeare a persistent participant in the dialogue (23).¹ Shakespeare composed, as Weir notes (416), a whole cycle of plays on the subject of the War of the Roses, beginning with *1 Henry VI* around 1591 and concluding with *Henry V* as "vindicator of the house of Lancaster" (Weir 58) before the end of 1599. With occasional interruptions he spent a decade in dramatic exploration of this extended play for power, "primarily wars between the great magnates," wars fought among "men who owned most of the landed wealth of the kingdom and who exercised the greatest influence in their own territories, where they were respected and often feared" (7-8).

Shakespeare completed *Venus*, identified by Hallett Smith as, of all Shakespeare's works, "the most popular during his lifetime" (1704), toward the end of 1592 and *Lucrece*, apparently the supposed "graver labor" promised to the Earl of Southampton, before mid-1594. Writing during his "idle hours," as he says in the dedication to *Venus*, probably for the most part while the theaters were closed as a result of plague, Shakespeare took up, I would like to suggest, symbols and themes ready at hand, the very stuff of his concurrent dramatic obsessions, those wars fought among families respected and often feared. Particularly, the juxtaposition of red and white color symbolism with violence, horror, and internal struggle from the outset of both *Venus* and *Lucrece* embodies not mere play with the conventions of "adult" passions confronting "youthful" purity, but continued and continuing concern with the particularly ironic and destructive nature of civil war. Passages in both poems strongly suggest that the "opposing" colors lead to deadly pursuit and attempts at subjugation and vengeance, problems that historians of Shakespeare's time to some degree saw as eminent, though put to rest by the Tudor dynasty.

The history plays set our stage for consideration of the narrative poems. Modern researchers such as Marchette Chute have long thought the early history plays essentially "unplayable today." But "Shakespeare's first English history plays," as S. Schoenbaum has pointed out, "have since triumphantly returned to the stage in Stratford, as *The Wars of the Roses* (heavily adapted, to be sure), and elsewhere" (161). Considering the likely magnitude of their impact on Elizabethan audiences, Schoenbaum adds that "[o]nly the Mystery plays of the cathedral towns, which he had perhaps himself witnessed as a boy in Coventry, afforded a precedent for drama on the Shakespearian scale" (161)—only by reference to Shakespeare's standards might we call the Wars of the Roses plays less than accomplished, though we can hardly fail to see them as chauvinistic. Clearly, by the comments of his early contemporaries Nashe and Green, we can attest to the influence and popularity even of *1 Henry VI*. Given those early successes, along with that of *Richard III* (written probably circa 1592-93—perhaps after *King John*—followed most directly by *The Comedy of Errors*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*, none of which may have been played before 1594-95), we may reasonably suppose that the concerns of his dramatic compositions would spill over into those poems for private reading, namely the long poems with their dramatic narrative elements (unlike the more lyrically individual and only dubiously autobiographical sonnets, written probably between the middle and end of the 1590s).

A particularly notable visual aspect of both poems, the extensive use of red and white color imagery, reflects the symbols of the warring

families, the red rose of Lancaster and the white of York. More typically considered by scholars as exemplifying the bloom of passion upon the purity of youth, the “familiar Petrarchan trope for the complexion of the beloved” (Uhlmann 15), the color scheme proves, as Dale Uhlmann has observed of *Venus and Adonis*, “highly significant in terms of the tension in the poem” (15); in both poems Shakespeare casts the red and white amidst battle imagery, and he shows how the war between the factions they represent creates violence ultimately self-destructive, even deadly to both lover and beloved. The mutuality of red and white suggests—as the colors do in youthful love or embarrassment—an external symbol of internal conflict, or, as one might term it by viewing through an allegorical lens, *civil war* perhaps even more powerfully than the “conflict between love and romanticism” (19). Such civil incivility drives the plot of many of Shakespeare’s tragedies as well as his histories: *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, for instance. Scholars have seen *The Rape of Lucrece* as exemplifying mutability or tragic disorder (Sylvester), a common theme appearing often in Spenser, or as a verbalization/visualization of internal conflict (Wadley). The powerful confrontation and sway of colors support not only those notions of symbolic conflict, but also the likelihood of specific historical reference.

Shakespeare’s recasting of the Wars of the Roses as a combination of internal struggle, deadly hunt/pursuit, and lovers’ conflict does not require any great stretch of the critical imagination. Both “Roses”—or Houses—Lancaster and York, descended from King Edward III and his queen, Philippa. The wars began with the deposition in 1399 of Richard II, son of Edward III’s eldest son Edward the “Black Prince,” by Henry Bolingbroke (to become Henry IV), son of John of Gaunt, Edward III’s third son, establishing the House of Lancaster; they ended with the defeat of Richard III (of York, descended from Edmund of Langley, Duke of York, Edward III’s fourth son) at Bosworth Field in 1485 by Henry Tudor (to become Henry VII), descended from the Beauforts, who also descend from John of Gaunt. Clearly the whole thing was a family matter—though, as George Becker points out, “no less bitter and brutal on that account” (85), and no less destructive to the interests of England as a whole country. Fully a mixture of hate and love, the Wars comprise a familial scramble to take control, to determine who had the right and the will to rule. That rule—and the identification of pursuer and pursued—wavered between Red and White, just as do the colors on the faces of Adonis and Lucrece in Shakespeare’s poems. Since the attention to color applies most powerfully in *Venus and Adonis*, I’ll begin my analysis of the poems there.

The very first two stanzas of *Venus and Adonis* create that tension intensified by color symbolism:

Even as the sun with purple-color'd face
Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,
Rose-cheek'd Adonis hied him to the chase;
Hunting he lov'd, but love he laugh'd to scorn.
Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
And like a bold-fac'd suitor gins to woo him.

"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.

Did we not already know the story, the purpled sun of line one tips us that the hunter Adonis, hunted in turn by Venus, will meet a violent end doing what he loves best despite the warnings of his lover; the conjunction of "white and red" and "roses" in line ten provides not the least notable clue to the poet's historical referent. Together these stanzas show the dangers that can arise from loving relationships; though the relationship here is romantic rather than familial, the goddess might have sought to protect the boy in a parental fashion rather than pursue him in an erotic one, and the boy should not have "laughed to scorn" his superior. The political parallel suggests that a powerful or ruling House might have an obligation to support rather than pursue and subjugate others.

Subsequent passages reinforce, even deepen the symbolic implications of color, implying both their mutuality and the danger they provoke. For example,

She red and hot as coals of glowing fire,
He red for shame, but frosty in desire . . . (ll. 35-36)

and

Still is he sullen, still he low'rs and frets,
'Twi'xt crimson shame and anger ashy-pale.
Being red, she loves him best, and being white,
Her best is better'd with a more delight . . . (ll. 75-78)

both suggest that Venus' hot red love turns Adonis frosty white. Venus and Adonis both exhibit red *and* white, showing that an element or aspect

of each inhabits the other, and both colors show in either face: the combatants in the Wars of the Roses share a heritage, blood, and the supposed purity of noble birth—and we may wonder about either House's commitment to England rather than to its own advancement. Venus in expressing her suit argues the futility of resistance; "I have been wooed, as I entreat thee now, / Even by the stern and direful god of war," she says, and for her Mars has hung up his lance and shield, "Scorning his churlish drum, and ensign red, / Making my arms his field, his tent my bed" (ll. 97-98 and 107-8). She hastily adds, "Thus he that overrul'd I overswayed, / Leading him prisoner in a red rose chain" (ll. 109-10). Adonis resists, but Venus does not give up; as the poet notes, "what a sight" it was

To note the fighting conflict of her hue,
How white and red each other did destroy!
But now her cheek was pale, and by and by
It flash'd forth fire, as lightning from the sky. (ll. 345-48)

and again

. . . she takes him by the hand,
A lily prison'd in a jail of snow,
Or ivory in an alabaster band,
So white a friend engirts so white a foe. (ll. 361-64)

Of course, we know the upshot of this amorous war: Adonis, still driven by desire to hunt rather than to indulge in amorous play, resolves to follow the boar, an ancient symbol of courage, battle, and accomplishment, and Venus "sudden pale," but "blushing rose," cannot dissuade him. Finding that her exhortations to peace and quiet have failed, "She sinketh down, still hanging by his neck, / He on her belly falls, she on her back" (ll. 589-94). Adonis' death blurs Venus' vision: "behold two Adons dead!" (l. 1070), for "this foul, grim, and urchin-snouted bore . . . nousling in his flank, the loving swine / Sheath'd unaware the tusk in his soft groin" (ll. 1105 and 1115-16.). Venus then prophesies "sorrow on love" (l. 1136), for in the future love—like war— shall "Pluck down the rich, enrich the poor with treasures, / It shall be raging mad, and silly mild" (ll. 1150-51), and finally

It shall be cause of war and dire events,
And set dissension 'twixt the son and sire,
Subject and servile to all discontents,
As dry combustious matter is to fire.

Sith in his prime, Death doth my love destroy,
They that love best, their loves shall not enjoy.
(1159-64)

Where love should/might reign, it will instead set families at odds, upset the scale of being, and bring about general destruction: a pretty good description of what the Wars of the Roses wrought, replacing ordered, familial love with battle, chaos, and continuing dynastic conflict.

The poem concludes with Venus' disappearance from the world: with the loss of the beloved, Love flees. Symbolically, when the human embodiment of red and white dies, the source of conflict disappears; allegorically, the civil war ends when the last of the combating members (namely Richard III) of the two houses perishes and a new family (the Tudors) assumes the throne, restoring peace and at least brief agreement upon civil authority.

The *Rape of Lucrece* uses the color symbolism (in similar stanzaic pattern, augmented by an additional line) identically, but with even more stress upon the violence those colors inspire. Having identified in the first stanza the "chaste Lucrece" and "lust-breathed Tarquin" as the subjects of the poem, Shakespeare turns in the second stanza to Lucrece's husband's imprudent praise and the inciting effects of the colors:

Happ'ly that name of "chaste" unhapp'ly set
This bateless edge on his keen appetite;
When Collatine unwisely did not let
To praise the clear unmatched red and white
Which triumph'd in that sky of his delight;
Where mortal stars as bright as heaven's beauties,
With pure aspects did him peculiar duties.

(II. 8-14)

Together the colors triumph, but they require the protection of justly agreed upon government: Tarquin's father has seized the throne by murder, and a king's son should contribute to the protection of good subjects rather than to their undoing. The unprotected subject of Tarquin's lust becomes easy prey—regardless of his social duty—in some sense as Henry IV deposed Richard II to begin the Wars of the Roses, but more importantly as each House sought its own ends at the expense of the other, rather than the good of others or the state.

One may say that Lucrece represents the combination of white and red, both purity and beauty, which her "governors" should protect. By despoiling her "white," they shed her "red," though the wound be self-

inflicted, and she dies. Lucrece serves as the metaphorical ground upon which the factions fight their battles of power and self-indulgence. Losing her because of “civil” strife, between those desiring rule and those wishing themselves well ruled, the country loses its best symbol of beauty and life.

In stanzas eight through ten Shakespeare recapitulates and clarifies that point:

When beauty boasted blushes, in despite
Virtue would stain that o'er with silver white.

But beauty, in that white entitled
From Venus' doves, doth challenge that fair field;
Then virtue claims from beauty beauty's red,
Which virtue gave the golden age to gild
Their silver cheeks, and call'd it then their shield,
Teaching them thus to use it in the fight,
When shame assail'd, the red should fence the white.

This heraldry in Lucrece' face was seen,
Argued by beauty's red and virtue's white;
Of either color was the other queen,
Proving from world's minority their right;
Yet their ambition makes them still to fight,
The sovereignty of either being so great
That oft they interchange each other's seat.

The field seems “fair,” and is fair, until it becomes a field of battle, at which point virtue fails and a nation finds itself divided generation by generation, as one House and then the other ascends the throne—in a case where both colors derive from the same source, Lucrece's natural beauty or the descendants of Edward III.

Shakespeare terms the play of color in Lucrece's face “This silent war of lilies and of roses” (l. 71), which “his [Tarquin's] traitor eye encloses” (l. 73); the resulting attack becomes poetically a war of cosmological proportions:

This earthly saint, adored by this devil,
Little suspecteth the false worshipper:
For unstain'd thoughts do seldom dream on evil.
(ll. 85-87)

But the evil occurs nonetheless, and as Tarquin attacks her, fear routs red from the white field of Lucrece's face:

O how her fear did make her color rise!
First red as roses that on lawn we lay,
Then white as lawn, the roses took away. (ll. 257-59)

That passage presages death as well as—at least in the sense of her sexual fidelity—Lucrece's symbolic “deflowering,” but Shakespeare has already made plain his theme:

The aim of all is but to nurse the life
With honor, wealth, and ease, in waning age;
And in this aim there is such thwarting strife
That one for all, all for one, we gage:
As life for honor in fell battle's rage,
Honor for wealth, and oft that wealth dost cost
The death of all, and all together lost. (ll. 141-47)

Proper rule seeks to nurture honor and virtue, as in what would later become the Musketeerian phrase, but where the individual's lust for control prevails, the whole nation, “all together,” loses in the long run.

The Rape of Lucrece envisions red and white more as opposites (though Uhlmann notes the pattern of opposition in *Venus* as well [19]) than as aspects of the same whole, and Tarquin's willful use of darkness obscures them both as representatives of, at least, living alternatives, as “for his prey to pray he doth begin, / As if the heavens should countenance his sin” (ll. 342-43):

. . . “I must deflow'r;
The powers to whom I pray abhor this fact,
How can they then assist me in the act?

“Then Love and Fortune be my gods, my guide!
My will is back'd with resolution.
Thoughts are but dreams till their effects be tried,
The blackest sin is clear'd with absolution;
Against love's fire fear's frost hath dissolution.
The eye of heaven is out, and misty night
Covers the shame that follows sweet delight.
(ll. 348-57)

Tarquin predictably blames Lucrece for the rape, and Lucrece, fixed on Collatine's honor, resolves on suicide: "For in my death I murder shameful scorn: / My shame so dead, mine honor is new born" (1189-90), and "My blood shall wash the slander of mine ill" (l. 1207). Full of self-loathing, Lucrece calls to mind an elaborate painting of Troy that decorates her home; standing before it, observing its scenes of strife internal as well as external, she asks, "Why should the private pleasure of some one / Become the public plague of many moe?" (1478-79). In her final acts she begs her husband's vengeance upon her attacker and destroys herself: she "sheathed in her harmless breast / A harmful knife" (ll. 1723-24); the red blood congeals black around the wound. Lucrece's husband and father then fight over the body (suggesting the pointless quarreling even within Houses), until Brutus intervenes to encourage the vengeance Lucrece had requested; they bear the bleeding body through Rome "to publish Tarquin's foul offense," and speedily "The Romans plausibly did give consent / To Tarquin's everlasting banishment" (ll. 1852-55): civil war ends with the replacement of both Houses.

The martial and heraldic diction and phrasing—"field," "shield," "assail'd," "red should fence the white," "heraldry," "queen," "sovereignty," "oft they interchange the other's seat"—clearly suggest not merely Shakespeare's skill in following a metaphysical conceit, but also a context in which to read the poem as a whole, one of medieval political and military conflict between "red and white." They also imply no particular victor and no particular "right side"—whatever Shakespeare may have thought of Richard III—but rather the destruction of the innocent as a result of unnecessary, though to some degree natural, conflict. Even after the ascent of the Tudors, Shakespeare may have felt expressing a preference for one "rose" over another impolitic. In any case, his continuing to explore that imagistic and thematic concern should not surprise us, as it merely expresses in a different field of vision the same poetic obligation Shakespeare must have felt to support the social stability he saw in the reign of Elizabeth and perhaps to warn against what he feared in the conflict between Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots (executed 1587). Ever expressing the dangers of social schism, Shakespeare also taught wariness of lust (*Romeo and Juliet*) and our need for vigilant prudence (*Measure for Measure*). In reading Shakespeare, the poet of human individuality, we must not miss the equally persistent poet of moral and historical responsibility.

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Notes

¹ Not Shakespeare alone, but Spenser also took up the subject in the same metaphorical way, as Brooks-Davies notes in the introduction to his selection of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*:

In the April eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender*, Elisa's cheeks are described as mingling the red rose with the white. E.K., in his comment on this line, writes: "By the mingling of the red rose and the white is meant the uniting of the two principal houses of Lancaster and York: by whose long discord and deadly debate this realm many years was sore travailed, and almost clean decayed." This union is now summed up in Elizabeth. (ix)

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