

‘Still finest wits are stilling *Venus Rose*’: Robert Southwell’s ‘Optima Deo’, *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso’s *canto della rosa*.

Jason Lawrence

This essay will examine ‘Optima Deo’, the manuscript translation into English of Tasso’s *canto della rosa* attributed to Robert Southwell, arguing that it needs to be considered specifically in relation to other English versions of the celebrated Italian stanzas produced in the 1590s. It takes the Jesuit martyr’s sacred translation and his dedicatory poem to *Saint Peters Complaynt* as the starting points for a fresh consideration of the antagonistic relationship between love poetry (‘*Venus Rose*’) and religious poetry (‘*Christs Thorne*’) that Southwell outlines and seeks to transform in English verse of the late 1580s and early 1590s. Unlike much recent critical analysis, the essay will not posit a direct relationship between Southwell’s work and Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*,¹ focusing instead on the mediating influence on contemporary English writers, including Southwell and Shakespeare, of one of the most significant recent examples of *both* religious and amorous verse in Italian poetry,

¹ The connections between Southwell and Shakespeare have been explored in Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare* (London: BBC Books, 2003), 151-4 and 162-4; Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 126-43; Matthew Baynham, “‘Twice done and then done double’”: Equivocation and the Catholic Recusant Hostess in *Macbeth*’ in G. Burgess, R. Wymer, and J. Lawrence (eds.), *The Accession of James I: Historical and Cultural Consequences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 101-12; John Klause, *Shakespeare, the Earl, and the Jesuit* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2008); Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London: A & C Black, 2010).

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), ‘Still finest wits are stilling *Venus Rose*’: Robert Southwell’s ‘Optima Deo’, *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso’s *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), with particular reference to the controversial erotic episode of Armida and Rinaldo in cantos XV and XVI.²

It is important to cite in full the third stanza from Southwell's poem 'The Author to the Reader' to demonstrate initially that it implies a wider frame of reference than simply Shakespeare, but also to suggest ultimately that there may be a particular contemporary allusion in the image of 'Venus Rose', which has been consistently overlooked in the attempts to find a direct analogue in *Venus and Adonis*:

This makes my mourning Muse resolve in teares,
 This theames my heavy penne to plaine in prose,
Christs Thorne is sharp, no head his Garland weares:
 Still finest wits are stilling *Venus* Rose.
 In paynim toyes the sweetest vaines are spent:
 To Christian workes, few have their talents lent. [13-18]³

In the prose epistle 'The Author to his loving Cosen', which directly precedes the two dedicatory poems in the earliest editions of *Saint Peters Complaynt* printed in 1595, Southwell similarly laments those poets who have discredited the divine art of poetry by 'abusing their talent, and making the follies and feyninges of love the customary subject of

² For an account of the early English reception of Tasso's eagerly anticipated poem see Jason Lawrence, 'Samuel Daniel's *The Complaint of Rosamond* and the arrival of Tasso's Armida in England', *Renaissance Studies*, 25 (2011), 648-65: 648-51.

³ Peter Davidson and Anne R. Sweeney (eds.), *St. Robert Southwell: Collected Poems* (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 2007), 63.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

theire base endeavors'.⁴ John Klause suggests that 'Southwell's censure applies not to an individual but to all of the "wits" who have been forever ... drawing puerile inspiration from the goddess', speculating that the specific poets whom the Jesuit might have had in mind for 'abusing their talent' in writing exclusively about love were Petrarch, George Gascoigne, and Thomas Watson.⁵ I would add two names from a later generation of English poets to this list: Edmund Spenser and Samuel Daniel.

In *Secret Shakespeare*, however, Richard Wilson has recently argued that Southwell was responding directly, and highly critically, to Shakespeare's earliest printed poem in the dedicatory verses that he composed for his most significant religious work, printed for the first time shortly after the Jesuit's execution in February 1595, but written before his arrest and detention almost three years earlier:

For in the days before his arrest in June 1592, the Jesuit poet Robert Southwell responded to one of the manuscripts of *Venus and Adonis* which circulated, we know, in recusant households, with a poem of his own in identical stanzas, entitled *Saint Peter's Complaint*, which he prefaced with a dedication rejecting Shakespeare's

⁴ The Jesuit edition of Southwell's works printed at St. Omer in 1616 adds the name 'Maister W. S.' to the prose dedication 'to his loving Cosen': for the suggestion that these initials refer to Shakespeare, see Christopher Devlin, *The Life of Robert Southwell: Poet and Martyr* (London: Longmans, 1956), 260-273; Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, 152-4; Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare*, 127. For a dissenting opinion, see Klause, *Shakespeare, the Earl*, 37-8.

⁵ Klause, *Shakespeare, the Earl*, 46-7.

image of poetry as a passive distillation of experience and deploring the waste of his artistic gifts.⁶

Despite Wilson's certainty relating to both the specificity of the allusion and the manuscript circulation of Shakespeare's poem a year or more before it appeared in print in the summer of 1593, there is no evidence to suggest that the poem had even been composed as early as June 1592.⁷ Klause offers a measured rebuttal of some of Wilson's more 'adventurous and often extravagant conjectures', arguing both that 'Southwell's disparaging mention of Venus is no evidence that he knew Shakespeare's narrative of her misfortunes', and also that there is 'no sound reason' to assume that the poem circulated in manuscript prior to the date of Southwell's arrest, thus making it virtually impossible for the Jesuit to have read *Venus and Adonis* before the apparent reference to it in the dedicatory poem to *Saint Peters Complaynt*.⁸

⁶ Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare*, 127.

⁷ Burrow suggests that '*Venus and Adonis* was probably composed in the months immediately before its publication': Colin Burrow (ed.), *William Shakespeare: Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8. The recent Arden edition of the poem concurs, suggesting that it was composed between February and April or May 1593: Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen (eds.), *Shakespeare's Poems* (London: Thomson Learning, 2007), 15.

⁸ Klause, *Shakespeare, the Earl*, 18 and 45-6. This recent critical disagreement replays another from almost a century earlier, where Praz had rejected, on the same grounds, H. H. Child's claims, made in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1909):

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

It is noteworthy also that Klause does not restrict the frame of reference for Southwell's criticisms exclusively to contemporary English poetry, suggesting instead the consideration of a broader European context for the poetry that the Jesuit undertook as a key part of his mission in England from 1586 until his arrest in 1592:

He felt it part of his vocation to write poetry, more than seventy pieces of which survive: a few in Latin, most in English, several of them translations or

There can be no doubt that Southwell had read Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* which was published in 1593. He seems indeed to have regarded it as the capital instance of the poetry he wished to supplant. *St Peter's Complaint* is written in the metre of Shakespeare's poem, and the preliminary address from the author to the reader contains a line ('Still finest wits are 'stilling Venus' rose'), which may be a direct reference to it.

Quoted in Mario Praz, 'Robert Southwell's "Saint Peter's Complaint" and its Italian Source', *MLR*, 19 (1924), 273-90: 288. The suspicion that this particular line might refer directly to Shakespeare predates even this exchange, however, going back to Grosart's edition of Southwell's work, before recurring at regular intervals throughout the twentieth century: A. B. Grosart (ed.), *Robert Southwell: The Complete Poems* (London, 1872), lxxxix-xci, and see also Devlin, *Life of Southwell*, 262-3, and Peter Milward, *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 55-6. The only dissenting voice was Janelle, who rejected the plausibility of any direct association with Shakespeare's poem: Pierre Janelle, *Robert Southwell, the Writer* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 160.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

transformations of works by the Italians Petrarch, Tasso, and Tansillo, and by the English men Edward Dyer and Thomas Watson.⁹

One specific aspect of this religious vocation was to provide an alternative poetic model and direction for those contemporary writers who Southwell felt had been previously led astray, as detailed in his prose epistle: ‘the best course to lett them see the error of their works is to weave a newe Webb in their owne loome; I have heere laied a few course thridds together to invite some skillfuller Wittes to goe forward in the same or to beginne some fyner peece wherein it maye be seene, how well Verse and Vertue suite together’.¹⁰ This poetic practice of weaving ‘a newe Webb in their owne loome’ is best exemplified in the early manuscript collections of the Jesuit’s verse, all of which are prefaced by this prose dedication, by his sacred transformations of secular love poetry. Louis Martz was the first to describe this ‘campaign to convert the poetry of profane love into the poetry of divine love’ as the ‘art of sacred parody’,¹¹ a technique summarized recently in Alison Shell’s important re-appraisal of Southwell’s impact on contemporary and seventeenth-century English poetry:

⁹ Klause, *Shakespeare, the Earl*, 41-2.

¹⁰ Davidson, *Collected Poems*, 1.

¹¹ Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 184.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), ‘Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose’: Robert Southwell’s ‘Optima Deo’, *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso’s *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

Even while recognising the sensuous appeal of earthly beauty, sacred parody sets out to transmute base material, and ultimately to invalidate its original by comparison to the beauties of the Divine.¹²

Thus, for example, Southwell's lyric 'What joy to live' begins with a close translation of the opening quatrain of one of the best-known of all Petrarch's sonnets describing the oxymoronic experience of romantic love, 'Pace non trovo' [134], before progressing, from the fifth line onwards, to an elaboration of the spiritual perils associated with worshipping such secular love and beauty. Southwell's rendering of Petrarch's quatrain demonstrates his awareness of both the Italian original and a recent transformation of the poem into English by Thomas Watson in his *Hekatompathia, or the Passionate Centurie of Loue* (1582), where the poet acknowledges that his version 'is almost word for word taken out of *Petrarch*':

I wage no warr yet peace I none enjoye
 I hope I feare I frye in freesing colde
 I mount in mirth still prostrate in annoye
 I all the worlde embrace yet nothing holde.
 All welth is want where chefest wishes fayle
 Yea life is loath'd where love may not prevayle. ['What joy to live', 1-6]

Pace non trovo, e non ò da far guerra,

¹² Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 75.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

e temo et spero, et ardo et son un ghiaccio,
 et volo sopra 'l cielo et giaccio in terra,
 et nulla stringo et tutto 'l mondo abbraccio. [*Canzoniere*, 134, 1-4]

(Peace I do not find, and I have no wish to make war; and I fear and hope, and burn
 and am of ice; and I fly above the heavens and lie on the ground; and I grasp nothing
 and embrace all the world.)

I joy not peace, where yet no warre is found;
 I feare, and hope; I burne, yet freeze withal;
 I mount to heau'n, yet lie but on the ground;
 I compasse nought, and yet I compasse all;
 I liue her bond, which neither is my foe,

Nor frend; nore holdes me fast, nor lets me goe: [*Hekatompathia*, 40, 1-6]¹³

Southwell echoes the six-line stanza that Watson employs in his expansion of Petrarch's sonnet form, and the recurrence of the non-Petrarchan 'joy' and 'enjoye' in the opening line of the two English renditions, which enables Southwell to exploit a familiar English sonnet oxymoron in the rhyme with 'annoye',¹⁴ confirms the later poet's knowledge of the earlier English translation. Southwell's fourth line, however, is certainly closer to Petrarch's Italian

¹³ Davidson, *Collected Poems*, 46; R. M. Durling (ed. and tr.), *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 272-3.

¹⁴ See, for example, the final couplets of sonnets 44 and 108 in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, printed for the first time in the surreptitious Newman edition in late 1591.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

than to Watson's English, retaining the idea of trying in vain to embrace the world from the original that is lost in Watson's verbal repetition. This demonstrable use of the two versions as initial sources for this 'sacred parody' suggests significantly that the traditions of secular love poetry in *both* languages are targeted in the Jesuit's prefatory criticisms and desire for poetic reform.

Southwell's engagement with Italian poetry, alongside contemporary English verse, is not surprising in light of the eight years he spent in Rome before returning to England in 1586. Indeed, it seems likely that Southwell was more fluent in Italian than English in the early 1580s, and Klause argues that most of his English poetry dates from his time on the mission, composed 'when he had recovered facility in his native language'.¹⁵ Possibly his earliest surviving English verse, the autograph draft of *[The] Peeter Playnt* in the Stonyhurst manuscript, may even have been undertaken as part of this attempt to reacquaint himself with his mother tongue.¹⁶ As Mario Praz demonstrated, this work in progress is a direct if sometimes clumsy translation from an early printed fragment of Luigi Tansillo's *Le Lagrime di San Pietro* (1585); this use of verse translation as a means of improving linguistic facility conforms with the model explored in a recent study of late sixteenth-century modern

¹⁵ Klause, *Shakespeare, the Earl*, 42.

¹⁶ Nancy Pollard Brown argues that Southwell's 'reading of Italian verse and prose had greater influence upon his literary taste than his explorations in any other vernacular; through translation of Italian texts into English he strove to regain fluency in his native tongue': J. H. McDonald and N. P. Brown (eds.), *The Poems of Robert Southwell, S. J.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), xx.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

language-learning habits, with the notable difference that Southwell is here translating into rather than from the target language, albeit one that he is seeking to recover rather than learn from scratch.¹⁷ Tansillo's religious narrative poem, however, clearly offered Southwell much more than the opportunity for an early translation exercise, providing also a model, and sometimes direct source, for his longest original poem, *Saint Peters Complaynt*, which survives in manuscript in various stages of composition before the completed version was printed soon after the poet's execution in February 1595. An equivalent process of close translation as a starting point for a subsequent act of freer poetic imitation is another contemporary language-learning phenomenon, and it may also be an instructive one in relation to Southwell's lyric practice in the creation of what he terms 'spirituall Sonnetts'.¹⁸ The previously cited opening stanza of 'What joy to live' clearly acknowledges its origins in Petrarch's oxymoronic sonnet (and Watson's later expansion), before moving for the remainder of the lyric to an original warning against the dangers of being in thrall to secular love. Perhaps less overt are the initial echoes of another equally celebrated Italian poem in 'The prodigall chylds soule wracke', where both the central image of Southwell's lyric, of the poet as a ship lost at sea in a storm, unable to reach the haven of port, and many specific

¹⁷ Praz, 'Southwell's "Saint Peter's Complaint"', 274-9; see Jason Lawrence, *Who the Devil taught thee so much Italian?': Italian Language Learning and Literary Imitation in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 29-46.

¹⁸ Janelle traces a similar pattern of successively freer manuscript translations from Italian prose sources for Southwell's English prose work *Mary Magdalens Funerall Teares*, printed in 1591: Janelle, *Robert Southwell*, 184-93.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389-406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

details in the opening four stanzas, such as the untimely disappearance of the navigational stars, derive ultimately from Petrarch's despairing sonnet 'Passa la nave mia colmo d'oblio' [189], already familiar to English readers from Wyatt's translation, 'My galley charged with forgetfulness', printed in Tottell's popular *Songes and Sonettes* (1557):¹⁹

I founde my selfe on every side
 Enwrapped in the waves of woe
 And tossed with a toylsome tide
 Could to no port for refuge goe

The wrestling wyndes with raging blasts
 Still holde me in a crewell chase
 They broke my Ankers sayles and mastes
 Permitting no reposing place.

The boystrous seas with swelling fludds
 On every syde did worke their spyte
 Heaven overcast with stormie cloudes
 Deny'd the planets guyding lyght. [5-16]²⁰

¹⁹ Tottell's collection went through nine editions in thirty years, the final one appearing in 1587, shortly after Southwell's return to England.

²⁰ Davidson, *Collected Poems*, 38.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

This lyric is assigned to the early part of his poetic career by Nancy Pollard Brown, one of the principal twentieth-century editors of Southwell's verse, on the grounds that 'such poems may be literary exercises to regain facility in writing English; it is to be expected that his first attempts at writing verse on his return to England would be mainly derivative, traditional in metrical forms, perhaps somewhat archaic in language'.²¹ The indebtedness to the Petrarchan model, although not extending to direct translation in this instance, may be another indication of the poem's origins in his early linguistic exercises. It is necessary to emphasize this speculative relationship between early writing and a certain poetic clumsiness as a means of attribution of particular poems to Southwell's authorship, as editors are confronted with a similar problem with regard to twelve poems that are found exclusively in a seventeenth-century manuscript collection of the Jesuit's verse, bound with Wolfe's first edition of *Saint Peters Complaynt*, identified at the Folger Library at the start of the twentieth century. These poems, which include 'Optima Deo' and an apparently intermediate draft of 'S. Peters complaint' in four-line stanzas, were accepted as authentic by James McDonald, and published as such in his *Poems and Prose Writings of Robert Southwell, S. J.: A Bibliographical Study* in 1937. However, they have *all* been omitted by Peter Davidson in the most recent edition of Southwell's poetry, with the brief explanation that 'to [his] eye they are considerably later reworkings of material possibly Southwellian in origin', having already been placed in an appendix as 'Poems in *F* of Doubtful Authorship' by Brown in her continuation and completion of McDonald's work for their Oxford edition of *The Poems of*

²¹ McDonald, *Poems of Southwell*, lxxix.

Robert Southwell, S. J., printed in 1967.²² Despite her anxieties about attributing all of the poems found exclusively in the Farnsworth manuscript (*F*) to Southwell, Brown suggests that ‘none can summarily be dismissed’ from the canon, and it is clear that she believes, like McDonald, that at least some of the twelve can be attributed with confidence to the Jesuit poet, particularly those poems which ‘may be early drafts or examples of works later discarded’:

There are some grounds for believing that the compiler had access to another manuscript, or perhaps a collection of single poems from which he copied. He may even have been fortunate enough to have come across drafts of some of Southwell’s earliest English lyrics, later set aside as he progressed in literary skills. Although some of the poems suggest Southwell’s hand very strongly, in view of the extremes of trust and mistrust aroused in an examination of the poems as a group they have been relegated to an appendix of poems of doubtful authorship in this edition.²³

It is striking that Davidson’s grounds for the summary dismissal of all of these poems from the canon are the polar opposite of Brown’s strongest explanation for their possible inclusion: where she suggests that they are early drafts and disregarded fragments, he views them as much later re-workings by someone other than Southwell.

It is important to outline the recent editorial uncertainty surrounding the authorship of these poems found uniquely in the Farnsworth manuscript, as two of them are further examples of ‘sacred parody’ with origins in Italian love poetry. For Brown, both constitute

²² Davidson, *Collected Poems*, 150.

²³ McDonald, *Poems of Southwell*, lxxxiii and lxxxvi.

part of a group of ‘five brief lyrics, in a variety of verse forms, [that] are translations or adaptations of scriptural themes’, again suggesting ‘the possibility that some early work may have survived’.²⁴ The ‘awkward hexameter couplets’ of ‘Unworthy receaving’ are linked by the editor with later Southwell lyrics on the holy sacraments; she does not mention, however, that the first half of the poem, on the dangers of taking communion in a state of sin, is built, like ‘What joy to live’, on a series of familiar Petrarchan oxymora, where the poet’s seeming despair, conveyed entirely in the language of secular love poetry, can only be remedied, at the *volta* in the poem, with the promise of the transubstantiation of Christ’s body in the act of receiving communion (‘Christ shrined hath him self within my mortal chest, / And shoured his vermilion blood within my mortal brest’ [9-10]):

I freeze in fire, I thirst amiddest the crytal streames;

I live in darke environed with glistering beames;

In mirth I moane, in joy it self I pine away,

I raunge and roave, and with a guide I goe astray; [‘Unworthy receaving’, 1-4]²⁵

The other lyric in the Farnsworth manuscript with an even more conspicuous origin in Italian poetry is ‘Optima Deo’, the sacred translation of Tasso’s celebrated *canto della rosa* from canto XVI (stanzas 14 and 15) of *Gerusalemme liberata*, first printed in its entirety in 1581. It is this poem that allows the intriguing possibility that there might be a specific allusion intended in the image of ‘Venus Rose’ in the dedicatory poem to *Saint Peters Complaynt*. Where the lyric has been accepted as Southwell’s, it has characteristically been

²⁴ *Ibid.*, lxxxv.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

assigned to the earliest period of his poetic career. Christopher Devlin, for example, in his biography of the Jesuit poet suggests that it ‘can be dated most probably between 1581 and 1585’, pointing out that ‘the first fourteen lines are a translation of the song in Armida’s pleasure-garden ..., which Southwell evidently read at Rome’.²⁶ Devlin argues for a date of composition prior to Southwell’s return to England, but noticeably not in order to account for any perceived shortcomings in this early translation, even in relation to a more widely-known later English imitation:

Another version of it is Edmund Spenser’s ‘lovely lay’ which was sung as a lascivious invitation to the Bower of Bliss. Robert’s youthful effort is ‘drab’ no doubt (to use Professor C. S. Lewis’s term) by comparison with Spenser’s. But what is interesting is the tranquil ease with which the younger writer turns a temptation to vice into an incitement to virtue.²⁷

It is the two final, original lines of Southwell’s ‘youthful’ lyric, replacing the *carpe diem* conclusion to the second stanza of Tasso’s song, that enable this movement from vice towards virtue, a transformation already familiar from other apparently later examples of ‘sacred parody’:

Cogliam la rosa in su ’l mattino adorno
di questo dí, che tosto il seren perde;
cogliam d’amor la rosa; amiamo or quando
esser si puote riamato amando. [XVI, 15, 5-8]

²⁶ Devlin, *Life of Southwell*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), ‘Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose’: Robert Southwell’s ‘Optima Deo’, *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso’s *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

(Gather the rose in the beautiful morning of this day, which will soon lose its serenity;
gather the rose of love: let us love now, when we can still be loved in return whilst
loving.)

Then croppe the morening Rose, while it is faire;

Our day is short, the evening makes it die;

Yeld God the prime of youth, eare it empaire;

Lest he the dregges of crooked age denie. [‘Optima Deo’, 13-16]²⁸

If Southwell translated the song in Rome before his return to England in 1586 then it suggests that, even at that nascent stage of his poetic career, he was beginning to develop the practice of transmuting contemporary secular love poetry towards the ‘beauties of the Divine’. The immediate reception in early 1580s Italy of Tasso’s long-awaited poem would have provided an important context for the poet’s musings on the conflicting attractions and demands of amorous and religious verse; *Gerusalemme liberata* is ostensibly a religious epic, celebrating the recapture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders, led by Godfrey of Boulogne, in 1099, but it was already starting to attract critical scrutiny, not least from its troubled and imprisoned author, for its frequent romantic episodes. The most erotically charged of these recounts the pagan conjuror Armida’s kidnapping of the Christian hero Rinaldo, with whom she has unexpectedly fallen in love, and their subsequent amorous interlude in her enchanted garden.

²⁸ Lanfranco Caretti (ed.), *Torquato Tasso: Gerusalemme liberata* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), 478 (all translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise stated). McDonald, *Poems of Southwell*, 110.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), ‘Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose’: Robert Southwell’s ‘Optima Deo’, *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso’s *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

It is in the sensuous description of this *locus amoenus* in canto XVI that readers, along with the Christian soldiers Carlo and Ubaldo, overhear the invocation to (sexual) love in the *canto della rosa*, where it is voiced by a female parrot. Southwell's sacred re-working of the song, from an episode in which a Christian knight is temporarily distracted from his divine duty by the erotic charms of a pagan enchantress, suggests that *this* might be the most appropriate poetic analogue if there is a specific allusion intended in the later warning to those 'finest wits', who in 'stilling *Venus* Rose' and spending their 'sweetest vaines' 'In paynim toyes', are neglecting 'Christian workes': Tasso himself, in repeatedly submitting the poem to the scrutiny of the Inquisition in the late 1570s, clearly shared similar anxieties about the potential moral and poetic distractions of such amorous verse.

Devlin's insistence that Southwell's version dates from his time in Rome would rule out any chance that it might have been directly indebted to Spenser's rendering of the same song in the final canto of Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, first printed in 1590; he does, however, liken it stylistically to another later English translation, which was itself, as Selene Scarsi has recently demonstrated, influenced by Spenser: 'its graceful economy compares favourably with Edward Fairfax's translation in *Godfrey of Bulloigne* (1600). It should be added that Robert's version is quite clearly taken direct from Tasso..., not from *The Faerie Queene*'.²⁹ As an extension of this implicit desire to compare Southwell's adaptation with other more or less contemporaneous English versions, I want to posit a much later date of

²⁹ Devlin, *Life of Southwell*, 17. See Selene Scarsi, *Translating Women in Early Modern England: Gender in the Elizabethan Versions of Boiardo, Ariosto and Tasso* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 114-16.

composition for the poem in England, which would allow the possibility that Southwell *was* also acquainted with Spenser's poem. If, as Wilson argues, the dedicatory poem to *Saint Peters Complaynt* was composed shortly before Southwell's arrest in June 1592 then the implied reference to Tasso's song in the image of 'Venus Rose' could also be extended to include two recent English renderings of it, in Spenser's *Bower of Bliss*, and in Samuel Daniel's sequence of love sonnets *Delia*, which was first printed in a volume with *The Complaint of Rosamond*, and entered on the Stationers' Register in February 1592. The specificity of the allusion would thus be broadened to encompass the 'finest wits' of *both* recent Italian and contemporary English poetry within its frame of reference, as Klause suggested in making the case against *Venus and Adonis* as its exclusive target. If Southwell's sacred transformation of a famous Italian song promoting the need to surrender immediately to the joys of 'Venus Rose' was also written at around the same time as the dedicatory poem, then it would be constructive to consider this lyric as an analogous reproach not only to the author of the original but also to those English poets who had already been enticed by its illusory charms.

The general fidelity to Tasso's Italian in the first fourteen lines of Southwell's translation confirms that the original was his principal source, but this does not, of course, necessarily rule out his knowledge and use of the other English versions, as Devlin seems to imply. Before the radical alterations to the final couplet, Southwell only departs from the Italian on a couple of occasions: for example, in the second quatrain he ignores entirely the erotic associations of the rose as an emblem of transient female beauty, which are retained in Spenser's invocation to love before it is too late:

Ecco poi nudo il sen già baldanzosa / dispiega. [XVI, 14, 5-6]

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

(Behold how later, already self-confident, she displays her naked bosom.)

But in her pride her leaves she doth display. [‘Optima Deo’, 5]

Lo see soone after, how more bold and free

Her bared bosome she doth broad display. [II, xii, 74, 7-8]³⁰

It is understandable that Southwell, in contrast to Spenser, chooses to eliminate the eroticism of the original in his transformation of Tasso’s song, and yet, perhaps surprisingly given the very different tones and conclusions of the respective English versions, it is in the re-worked endings that there is the strongest indication of a direct connection between the two. The stern warning in Southwell’s version that God might deny ‘the dregges of crooked age’ by plucking the rose, which here becomes a general image of human life rather than of female sexuality specifically, in its ‘prime of youth’, before it has the opportunity to decay naturally, seems to be a response to the intensification of the threat of time at the end of Spenser’s song:

Gather therefore the Rose, whilest yet is prime,

For soone comes age, that will her pride deflowre:

Gather the Rose of loue, whilest yet is time,

Whilest louing thou mayst loued be with equall crime. [II, xii, 75, 6-9]³¹

³⁰ Caretti, *Gerusalemme*, 478; McDonald, *Poems of Southwell*, 110; A. C. Hamilton (ed.)

Spenser: The Faerie Queene (Harlow: Longmans, 2001), 283.

³¹ Hamilton, *Faerie Queene*, 283.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), ‘Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose’: Robert Southwell’s ‘Optima Deo’, *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso’s *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

The *carpe diem* motif at the end of the *canto della rosa* is given still greater urgency in Daniel's condensed adaptation of it into sonnet form in his *Delia* sequence, where it forms part of a brief *corona* of sonnets emphasising to Delia the ravaging effects of 'tyrant Times desire' [XXX, 8] on female beauty:

No Aprill can reuiue thy withred flowers,
 Whose blooming grace adornes thy glorie now:
 Swift speedy Time, feathred with flying howers,
 Dissolves the beautie of the fairest brow.
 O let not then such riches waste in vaine;

But loue whilst that thou maist be lou'd againe. [*Delia* (1592), XXXI, 9-14]³²

The ninth line of Daniel's sonnet on 'the halfe-blowne Rose, / The image of thy blush and Summers honor' [XXXI, 1-2] offers the most accurate English rendering of two lines from the second stanza of Tasso's song ('né perché faccia indietro april ritorno, / si rinfiora ella mai, né si rinverde' [XVI, 15, 3-4]), and it is also characteristic of the prominence given to the swift advance of the months and seasons throughout the poems in the *corona*: the following sonnet again urges Delia to love 'Now whilst thy May hath fill'd thy lappe with flowers' and to 'use [her] Summer smiles ere winter lowres' [XXXII, 2 and 4]. This re-enforced emphasis on the fleeting seasons in Daniel's *carpe diem* sequence is replicated in Southwell's version of the song of 'the modest Rose' in her 'somers coate in virgins hew' [1-2]:

³² A. C. Sprague (ed.), *Samuel Daniel: Poems and a Defence of Ryme* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 26.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

So with the passing of a sliding day
 Of mortal life the floure and leafe doth passe;
 Ne with the new returne of flouring May
 Doth it renew the bounteous wonted glasse. [‘Optima Deo’, 5-8]³³

A direct knowledge of Daniel’s use of Tasso’s song in this part of his sequence might also help to account for Southwell’s only other significant departure from the Italian in the opening fourteen lines of the poem: the slightly obscure image of the rose’s ‘bounteous wonted glasse’, which can never be renewed (‘né si rinverde’), has no precedent in Tasso. This might, if arguing for an early date of composition, be interpreted as the only occasion in the translation where Southwell’s search for a suitable rhyme in English prompts him to take liberties with the Italian original; however, the same rhyme is used by Daniel in the sestet of the preceding sonnet, which introduces his *corona* sequence, where the beloved’s mirror, often regarded in the sonnet tradition as a direct rival to the poet-lover,³⁴ reveals to her the irreversible effects of time (‘Then fade those flowres which deckt her pride so long’ [XXX, 8]), only to be offered the consolation of the lasting image of her beauty miraculously preserved in verse:

When if she grieue to gaze her in her glas,
 Which then presents her winter-withered hew;
 Goe you my verse, goe tell her what she was;
 For what she was she best shall finde in you.

³³ McDonald, *Poems of Southwell*, 109-10.

³⁴ See, for example, sonnets 45 and 46 of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*.

Your firie heate lets not her glorie passe,

But Phenix-like shall make her liue anew. [*Delia*, XXX, 9-14]³⁵

The evidence for Southwell's knowledge of Daniel's version of the *canto della rosa* suggests that it extends beyond this sonnet alone to the other *carpe diem* poems surrounding it in the *Delia* sequence. This is significant, because Daniel's sonnet sequence, and indeed the entire volume of which *Delia* forms part, displays the English poet's sustained indebtedness to contemporary Italian love poetry, and particularly to the works of Tasso. Most of the poems in his *corona* sequence derive demonstrably from Tasso's own love sonnets, and Daniel's conception of Rosamond in *The Complaint of Rosamond* is influenced by and repeatedly indebted to the Armida episodes in cantos IV and XVI of *Gerusalemme liberata*.³⁶ If Southwell did become familiar with Daniel's debut volume of poetry before his apprehension in June 1592, then it would have been regarded as a prime example of exactly the kind of work that he was soon to lament in the dedicatory verses to his own *Complaynt* poem on a sacred theme: by neglecting the overtly religious elements of Tasso's 'Christian workes' and incorporating instead the pagan toys of the Armida episodes into both his love sonnets and *The Complaint of Rosamond*, Daniel, like Spenser before him, had shown himself to be one of the contemporary Italianate wits in England whose verse was still very much in thrall to 'Venus Rose'.³⁷

³⁵ Sprague, *Samuel Daniel: Poems*, 25.

³⁶ See Lawrence, 'Samuel Daniel's *The Complaint of Rosamond*'.

³⁷ Shell seems to concur with the idea that Spenser was one of the intended targets of the Jesuit's prose epistle and dedicatory poem when she suggests that 'Southwell's verse elicited

Although both Spenser and Daniel are more plausible chronological targets for Southwell's mournful poetic reproach, this essay will now consider Wilson's favoured candidate, in order to suggest that his first narrative poem also constitutes part of the English poetic response in the early 1590s to Tasso's *canto della rosa*, and indeed the increasingly popular erotic episode from which it derives. If Shakespeare were familiar with Tasso's epic poem before the publication of *Venus and Adonis* in the summer of 1593 then he can only have had access to it in Italian, as there were no translations into either English or French

an agonistic reaction from Spenser', specifically his neo-Platonic response in the *Four Hymnes*, printed in 1596, where the two latter hymns (on heavenly love and heavenly beauty) are apparently intended as a retraction of the two earlier hymns in praise of earthly love and beauty, as Spenser explains in the dedicatory epistle to the Countesses of Cumberland and Warwick: Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy*, 72. Daniel might also have had access to Southwell's observations on the state of English poetry even before they were printed shortly after his death: in 1595 he dedicates the first four books of his epic poem *The Civil Wars* to his new patron Charles Blount, who was certainly present at Southwell's execution in February 1595, and who is also the most likely candidate as the nobleman who visited the Jesuit in prison the night before, where he seems to have been given 'a book designed to teach Poets how to safeguard their talent and employ it as befitted', which he later showed to the Queen when giving an account of the execution: see Devlin, *Life of Southwell*, 317-18.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389-406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

available until the middle of the decade.³⁸ It has recently been argued that Shakespeare does not seem to have acquired a competent reading knowledge in Italian (with the aid of John Florio's language-learning manuals) until the latter half of the 1590s, but the evidence for his engagement with Italian romantic epic poetry in the original language in *Venus and Adonis* suggests the need to revise this assertion.³⁹ Scarsi has demonstrated that one of the most popular passages in Shakespeare's earliest printed work, the erotically charged stanzas in which Venus figures herself as a park and Adonis as a deer who is encouraged to feed wherever he pleases [229-240], borrows directly from a similarly suggestive description of Olimpia in canto XI of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1532), a stanza whose eroticism is, significantly, minimized in Harington's English translation, printed by Richard Field in 1591.⁴⁰ Shakespeare's apparent knowledge of Ariosto's poem in the original language by the time he came to compose *Venus and Adonis* suggests that he would have been equally capable of reading Tasso's epic in Italian.

Shakespeare's engagement with Italian romantic epic in his erotic narrative poem might therefore open up a previously neglected sphere of influence for its composition and

³⁸ Richard Carew's bi-lingual parallel text translation of the first five cantos of the poem, *Godfrey of Bulloigne*, was printed in 1594. The earliest French translation, Jean du Vignau's *La Déliverance de Hierusalem*, was printed in 1595.

³⁹ Lawrence, 'Who the Devil', 121-6.

⁴⁰ Scarsi, *Translating Women*, 47-8. On the popularity of these stanzas in the seventeenth century, see Sasha Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 73-91.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389-406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

initial reception. The most radical alteration of his Ovidian source, the decision to make Venus' love for Adonis unrequited, allows Shakespeare to depict the central relationship in the poem in terms of the Petrarchan model for love poetry, so prominent in English verse of the early 1590s, albeit with a significant reversal of the customary gender roles. The allusions to Tasso's poem in *Venus and Adonis* work similarly, by drawing the earliest readers' attention to another example of Italian love poetry, which was becoming increasingly popular with contemporary English poets, such as Spenser and Daniel. The appropriateness of the dedication in 1593 of an Ovidian erotic poem to Henry Wriothesley has often been stressed, usually in relation to John Clapham's earlier Latin poem *Narcissus* (1591),⁴¹ but the Earl of Southampton would have been equally responsive to the Italianate elements of Shakespeare's work: he was later commended for his Italian studies as one of the co-dedictees of Florio's first Italian dictionary, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598), and Frances Yates has demonstrated that the most prominent teacher of Italian in Elizabethan England was a member of Wriothesley's household in 1594, the year in which Shakespeare dedicated his second Ovidian poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, to him.⁴²

This idea that Ovidian elements of Shakespeare's poem are deliberately overlaid with allusions to more contemporary Italian forms of amorous verse leads specifically to Venus' use of the *carpe florem* argument as part of her sustained attempt to persuade Adonis to consent to her seduction:

⁴¹ See, for example, Burrow, *Complete Sonnets*, 10-12.

⁴² Frances Yates, *John Florio: the Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 124-5.

The tender spring upon thy tempting lip
 Shows thee unripe; yet mayst thou well be tasted.
 Make use of time, let not advantage slip:
 Beauty within itself should not be wasted,
 Fair flowers that are not gathered in their prime
 Rot, and consume themselves in little time. [127-132]

Burrow traces the motif back to Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*,⁴³ but it is, of course, also exactly the argument of Tasso's *canto della rosa*, replicated recently in both Spenser's Bower of Bliss and Daniel's sonnet sequence. Although the flowers are not explicitly roses in this version, other details in Venus' speech of persuasion suggest that Shakespeare *did* have the specific setting of the rose song in Armida's garden in mind: two stanzas earlier an increasingly desperate Venus urges Adonis to see his own beauty reflected in her eyes ('Hold up thy head, / Look in mine eye-balls, there thy beauty lies: / Then why not lips on lips, since eyes in eyes?' [118-120]), another traditional conceit of love poetry certainly, but strikingly one which also follows on closely from the *canto della rosa* in Tasso's poem, where a similarly erotically frustrated Rinaldo ('i famelici sguardi avidamente / in lei pascendo si consuma e strugge', 'with his hungry glances avidly devouring her, he was consumed and pined away' [XVI, 19, 1-2]) implores Armida to regard him rather than her mirror:

Deh! poi che sdegni me, com'egli è vago
 mirar tu almen potessi il proprio volto;
 ché il guardo tuo, ch' altrove non è pago,

⁴³ Burrow, *Complete Sonnets*, 182.

gioirebbe felice in sé rivolto. [XVI, 22, 1-4]

(Ah, rather than scorn me, since it is so beautiful, you could at least look at your own face; for your glance, content with nothing else, would delight to see itself reflected.)⁴⁴

This image is not reproduced by Spenser in his re-imagining of Armida's garden as Acrasia's Bower, suggesting that Shakespeare was familiar with Tasso's original, probably in addition to Spenser's recent English version. His conception of the Ovidian Venus as an unrequited Petrarchan lover is thus granted another dimension through her poetic association with Tasso's Armida and the more sinister Acrasia, who specifically entraps and seduces the unripe young boy Verdant in Spenser's poem, although it is important to stress the added element of erotic frustration afflicting Shakespeare's Goddess in relation to these epic models. If Venus is figured by Shakespeare as a kind of thwarted Armida then his Adonis should also correspond to Tasso's Christian warrior Rinaldo (with hints of Spenser's Verdant), albeit as a male character restrained in an equivalent *locus amoenus* expressly against his will: Venus' account to him of her erotic subjugation of Mars, who is confined specifically in a chain of roses, calls to mind both the ekphrastic representation of the effeminized Hercules on the gates to Armida's garden [XVI, 3], and Tasso's later description of the romantically enslaved Rinaldo:

Over my altars hath he hung his lance,
His battered shield, his uncontrolèd crest,
And for my sake hath he learned to sport, and dance,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 181; Caretti, *Gerusalemme*, 479-80.

To toy, to wanton, dally, smile, and jest,
 Scorning his churlish drum and ensign red,
 Making my arms his field, my tent his bed.

Thus he that over-ruled, I over-swayed,
 Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain.
 Strong-tempered steel his stronger strength obeyed;
 Yet was he servile to my coy disdain. [103-112]

Egli al lucido scudo il guardo gira,
 onde si specchia in lui qual siasi e quanto
 con delicato culto adorno; spira
 tutto odori e lascivie il crine e 'l manto,
 e 'l ferro, il ferro aver, non ch'altro, mira
 dal troppo lusso effeminato a canto:
 guernito è sí ch'inutile ornamento
 sembra, non militar fero instrumento. [XVI, 30, 1-8]

(He on the bright escutcheon turns his gaze, / that shows what kind of man he has
 become / and how finely decked out. Sweet perfume plays / the wanton in his hair and
 cloak. Struck dumb, / he sees his sword, his very sword, ablaze / with womanish

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

gauds, to luxury succumb. / Adornment makes it seem a useless toy, not the fierce tool a soldier might employ.)⁴⁵

Uniquely, however, Shakespeare's Adonis is granted the power to refuse the amorous advances of the domineering female figure, and it is striking that on two separate occasions he turns Venus' invocation of the *carpe florem* argument against her, by stressing both the dangers and the offence to nature of picking a flower, or harvesting fruit, before it is ready:

Who plucks a bud before one leaf put forth?

If springing things be any jot diminished

They wither in their prime, prove nothing worth. [416-418]

'Fair Queen,' quoth he, 'If any love you owe me,

Measure my strangeness with my unripe years.

Before I know myself seek not to know me. [...]

No mellow plum doth fall, the green sticks fast,

Or being early plucked is sour to taste. [523-528]⁴⁶

The fundamental argument of the *canto della rosa*, that, metaphorically, humans should surrender to their natural instincts before it is too late, is here reversed to stress the inappropriateness of insisting on any kind of sexual relationship before physical maturity has been reached. Despite the apparent rationality of Adonis' repeated rejections of Venus'

⁴⁵ Burrow, *Complete Sonnets*, 181-2; Caretti, *Gerusalemme*, 483; translation by Max Wickert, *Torquato Tasso: The Liberation of Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 292.

⁴⁶ Burrow, *Complete Sonnets*, 198 and 203.

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', *Venus and Adonis*, and Tasso's *canto della rosa*. *Renaissance Studies*, 27: 389–406, ***which has been published in final form at*** doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x ***This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.***

familiar poetic argument, however, his are not the final words on the subject in the poem. After the boy's death at the hands of the boar, when Venus discovers Adonis' maimed body, Shakespeare uses the floral metamorphosis at the end of his Ovidian source to offer in his poem a bold enactment of the central metaphor from Tasso's song:

And in his blood that on the ground lay spilled
 A purple flower sprung up, chequered with white,
 Resembling well his pale cheeks, and the blood
 Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood.

She bows her head the new-sprung flower to smell,
 Comparing it to her Adonis' breath,
 And says within her bosom it shall dwell,
 Since he himself is reft from her by death.
 She crops the stalk, and in the breach appears
 Green-dropping sap, which she compares to tears. [1167-1176]⁴⁷

If it is not quite certain at the end of the poem whether Venus' untimely plucking of the flower constitutes an act of love or an act of desecration, it should now, I hope, be sufficiently clear that in *Venus and Adonis* Shakespeare was engaging, like Spenser, Daniel, and Southwell immediately before him, with Tasso's celebrated song of 'Venus Rose' and its surrounding episode, and that the conception of his Goddess of Love, who, like Armida,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

finally flees in a chariot from the scene of her romantic tragedy, might be enriched by this association with a previously unacknowledged Italian poetic model.

[7,725 words, including footnotes.]

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: LAWRENCE, J. (2013), 'Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose': Robert Southwell's 'Optima Deo', Venus and Adonis, and Tasso's canto della rosa. Renaissance Studies, 27: 389–406, which has been published in final form at doi:10.1111/j.1477-4658.2012.00816.x This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance With Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.