

The two versions of Blow's *Venus and Adonis*

The principal structural difference between the two is that the revised version is more compact than the original. This results, however, not from some general tightening but merely from the cutting of three substantial dance numbers which stand outside the dramatic framework. The earlier version of the work, composed as a formal entertainment for King Charles II, contains a sequence of courtly dances, placed at the end of the second act, which probably constitute the last vestige of the Revels (social dances, in which the court audience joined, at the end of the stage action in Jacobean and Caroline masques). The revised version of *Venus and Adonis*, with this sequence removed, may therefore have been prepared for performance outside the court – perhaps on the public stage, though no record of such a production has survived. Other structural changes are comparatively minor (one short link between movements inserted and a slightly longer one cut, one phrase extended a little and another compressed slightly), but they suggest, again, that a change of venue had resulted in different production requirements.

One small solo part included in Version 1, the 2nd Shepherd in the Prologue, is removed altogether in Version 2 – its music, a brief dialogue and duet with the Shepherdess, being taken over by the latter. In Version 1 an obligato recorder part twines sensuously around Venus's vocal lines, but none is provided for any other character. That feature of the scoring was probably intended as a private joke for the court audience – the principal recorder player in the royal band happened to be sexually involved with the singer taking the part of Venus – but hearers outside the court circle would have missed the point. In Version 2 this focus is less clear: at one point a newly added recorder part accompanies the Shepherdess, and at another a phrase originally sung by Venus, with obligato accompaniment, is instead played by two recorders. Another change is even more subtle: the vocal lines in a short duet for Cupid and Venus are interchanged in Version 2. The upper part was originally given to Cupid, sung at the first performance by a child of eleven or twelve who no doubt had a smaller voice than the adult (actually her own mother!) who sang Venus – but in a performance outside the court this constraint may not have applied, and indeed the opposite one may have resulted from some vagary of casting.

Several orchestral passages in Version 2 are extensively recast, and many smaller details of melodic line, harmony, and part-writing are also modified. The reworking has one amusing aspect. It begins ambitiously – in the Overture, the slow outer strains are systematically overhauled, the inner parts being largely new – but both its extent and its thoroughness gradually tail off: there are far fewer changes in Act II than in the Prologue and Act I, while Act III is almost unaltered save for a single small cut. One suspects that the task of revision, whatever had occasioned it, was carried out against a looming deadline!

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