

A Trans Philology of Bion's Lament for Adonis

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Abstract: This article explores the connections between trans theory and the ancient figure of Adonis in order to offer a definition of “trans philology”. The literary and historical ancestors for Bion’s *Lament for Adonis* are considered, offering important evidence that Adonis is already presented as a “gender outlaw” (Bornstein 2016) even in archaic and classical texts. The article then offers a close reading of Bion’s *Lament for Adonis*, resisting earlier editors’ attempts to erase Adonis’ ambiguous embodiment in this poem. The piece then closes by offering a wider context for the frequent connections in Greek literature between gender non-conformity and violent death, tracing an uncomfortable theme which makes it difficult to find in Adonis a wholly positive gender queer or trans ancestor.

Keywords: Adonis, Bion, gender, trans theory, philology.

Introduction¹

Adonis, from his earliest extant appearance in Greek literature, is something of a “gender outlaw”.² In applying Kate Bornstein’s term to the ancient mythical figure, this article argues that Adonis resists easy interpretation within the traditional gender binary of male/female. Adonis’ body, as the discussion below will show, displays markers of both masculinity and femininity from his earliest extant appearance in Greek literature. Adonis’ complex gender presentation is thus a (perhaps surprising) example of Jacob Hale’s concept of “rich and subtly nuanced embodiments of gender that resist and exceed any simple categorization”.³ Adonis and other characters from Greek myth disrupt the supposedly “objective” medical and psychological accounts of transgender pathology, and show that there is a long historical

¹ It is important to state that I am not trans, and that this paper is not intended to speak for or on behalf of family, friends, colleagues or students in the trans community. In working on issues of gender ambiguity and gender fluidity in classical texts I have found “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans ____” written by Jacob Hale (1997b) and shared open access online, helpful in framing my scholarship. For a recent and useful reflection on these rules see Zurn (2023).

Versions of this article were delivered as papers at the Oxford-Cambridge Classics Open Day in 2021, for the Lyne Society and FemSoc at St Edward’s School, Oxford in 2022 at the kind invitation of Mr Mark Taylor, at the WGSS & Trans Studies Seminar at the University of Kansas in September 2025 and at *Res Difficiles* 7 in March 2026. Thanks are owed to the audiences at all those talks for their engaged questions and challenges which have improved the piece considerably. I would also like to thank the editors of *Res Diff* and the anonymous reader, Abe Weil, Tom Sapsford and Erika Weiberg for their generous and helpful feedback. Of course, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the author alone.

² The term “gender outlaw” is explored at length by transgender scholar Kate Bornstein in *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (2016, first published 1994). The present article is concerned with portrayals of Adonis in Greek literature and culture—there is much fruitful work to be done on how Latin authors, particularly Ovid, receive and transform Adonis in their work, but that is outside the scope of this piece.

³ Hale (1997a): 273.

record of a wider, more inclusive understanding of gender and sex than the dominant and binary view of sex common in the USA and Europe today.

This article reinterprets Adonis through trans theory. Reading the ancient material through this modern theoretical lens allows us to look on the source materials with fresh eyes, to generate new interpretations, and (as *Postclassicisms* state in their essay on how the broader discipline of Classics might be transformed) “to interrupt the past understandings of the past in the name of an unpredictable future”.⁴ This approach allows a bidirectional rather than diachronic analysis of the texts: interpretation and understanding of Adonis’ ancient portrayal is enhanced by the perspectives of trans theory, and, simultaneously, these ancient Greek sources offer a challenge to certain understandings of the contemporary. While it is tempting to look for an affirming queer or trans ancestor in Adonis, the case in fact turns out to be uncomfortably complex. As with many contemporary gender outlaws, Adonis’ non-conformity ultimately causes him harm when he fails to perform in the traditionally masculine field of hunting, subsequently dying a painful death, gored in the groin by a wild boar.⁵ His violent, highly sexualized death is directly connected to his embodied gender expression: as we will see below, his body is read by other characters in those texts as rendering him incapable of functioning successfully within the bounds of Greek masculine society. His death therefore sits uncomfortably against the otherwise positive tone of his portrayal: while the texts uniformly celebrate the beauty and desirability of Adonis’ body, they also consistently present his non-conforming body as incompatible with life, or at least as incompatible with successfully living as a man. This tension complicates Adonis’ reception in modern queer culture and prevents a straightforwardly positive or affirming interpretation of his gendered embodiment.

I am not seeking to identify Adonis as transgender in the sense in which that term is understood in contemporary society, but rather to explore the Greek texts’ depictions of his embodied gender non-conformity and the implications of this for our understanding of ancient attitudes to gender difference(s).⁶ Two modern trans theories offer useful models for understanding the ways in which Adonis’ body is depicted in these texts, and for identifying the power structures which underpin his portrayal. The first is Susan Stryker’s broader concept of transgender phenomena which focuses on “anything that calls our attention to the contingency and unnaturalness of gender normativity” and bodies which “exceed or elude capture within the gender apparatus when they defy the logic of the biopolitical calculus”.⁷ The close readings which follow will argue that Adonis is positioned in the Greek texts as a “transgender phenomenon”, whose body “exceeds or eludes capture” within the gender apparatus of Greek culture. As an extension of this first theoretical model, my methodology in this article has also been shaped and inspired by the work of Cael Keegan who focusses on the theoretical implications of queer and transgender media representation, aesthetic figuration, and cultural production. “‘Bad’ objects,” in Keegan’s schema, are those “that refuse to fit neatly within the purportedly closed system of sexual difference, gesturing at the existence of possibilities beyond deterministic, binary categorizations”. Such “‘bad’ objects”, Keegan continues, “point to a broader vision for trans politics than the provisional

⁴ *Postclassicisms* (2020): 61.

⁵ On the violent punishments suffered by trans and gender non-conforming individuals in contemporary culture see Letcher (2018), DeJong et al. (2021), Brown (2022).

⁶ For a very useful discussion of the development of the term “transgender” see Williams (2014), Keegan (2020) and the guidelines prepared by the American Psychological Association (2024).

⁷ Stryker (2014): 40.

inclusion into gender-normative worlds that ‘good’ media currently provide”.⁸ Adonis, I argue, is a perfect example of what Keegan calls a “‘bad’ object” in that his existence, identity and embodiment all call into question the male/female sex binary, offering a powerful challenge to the gendered power dynamics of not only the ancient, but also the modern worlds.⁹

The second element of trans theory relevant to this article relates to Stryker’s observation that bodies which manifest transgender phenomena “experience microaggressions that cumulatively erode the quality of psychical life, and they also encounter major forms of violence, including deliberate killing”.¹⁰ The ancient texts under examination in this article present Adonis’ body as narratively marked for death precisely because it does not fit neatly into the binary scheme of the Greek gender imaginary. Mark Padilla and Sheilla Rodríguez-Madera’s recent application of Achille Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics to trans studies has identified ways in which the embodied experiences of trans individuals are marked by structural violence and death, arguing that trans bodies are (within the current political and medical systems) “systematically excluded and designed to die”.¹¹ Padilla and Rodríguez-Madera identify “violence and aggression ...as forms of social control and gender regulation and as broader expressions of necropolitics, that is, the ways that transwomen are structurally ‘hastened toward death’”.¹² While the present article does not argue that trans people are *always* or necessarily transhistorically marked for death—which would ultimately affirm the discursive ideological structures which produce such death—it *does* argue that comparable mechanisms of power are operating in the mythical and literary representations of Adonis, who is structurally and discursively “hastened towards death” because of his embodiment. Although Adonis is temporally and culturally removed from the modern systems of power and profit described by Mbembe in his theory of necropolitics (such as colonialism, slavery and mechanized warfare), Mbembe’s exploration of how societies and states decide whose lives are protected, whose lives are exposed to violence, and whose deaths are rendered acceptable or invisible is relevant for exposing the ways in which Adonis’ embodiment is presented by the texts as creating the circumstances for his inevitable death.¹³

The final theoretical premise of this article aims to bridge the gap between modern trans theory and disciplinary discourses more traditional to and familiar within Classical Studies in exploring the idea of trans philology. The term trans philology is here coined in a similar spirit to Ella Haselswerdt’s “deep lez philology” or the “critical philology” discussed by Hannah Silverblank and Marchella Ward.¹⁴ These recent critiques are a call to recognize that the concept of a neutral, scientifically “objective” philology is a myth, and a dangerous myth at that.¹⁵ As Patrice Rankine puts it “the pretense of pure philology, set apart from its

⁸ Both quotations from Keegan (2022): 29.

⁹ Keegan, interviewed by Ward (2022): “These ‘bad’ objects ask us to consider whether a discrete male/female sex binary exists at all, undercutting the modes of power that produce cisness and transness as contrasting opposites”.

¹⁰ Stryker (2014): 40.

¹¹ Padilla & Rodríguez-Madera (2021): S26.

¹² Padilla & Rodríguez-Madera (2021): S26.

¹³ Mbembe (2019): 66-92.

¹⁴ Silverblank & Ward (2020): 507-514.

¹⁵ Recent helpful discussions of philology include Gurd (2010), Güthenke (2020), Hardwick (2021), Greenwood (2022), Rankine (2019).

legacies and associations is pernicious".¹⁶ It is pernicious partly because it leads to the importation of biases (whether misogynistic, racist, homophobic, ableist or otherwise) into the construction of editions of ancient texts, or into translation(s) from Greek and Latin into English and other languages.¹⁷ The discussion below highlights the ways in which some of the Greek texts featuring Adonis have been edited by modern scholars to render his gender non-conformity (which is clearly present in the manuscripts) invisible. Trans philology recognizes the practice not as an "objective empirical scientific method" but rather as a series of decisions which are inevitably political.¹⁸ It therefore aims to bring to textual criticism a sensitivity to the possibilities of existence that trans theory enshrines, as Keegan puts it: "transgender studies' attention to corporeality means that it often treats texts as if they were bodies—applying heuristic methods extracted from transgender phenomenology to textual objects themselves".¹⁹ Trans philology is thus an iteration of what Emily Greenwood has termed "philology, otherhow". For Greenwood, this involves "a practice of intramural counter-philology—of turning the tools of philological criticism onto the discipline to examine its sources of cultural knowledge, ways of knowing, and its lacunae".²⁰

The birth of Adonis

As mentioned above, Adonis is celebrated for his beauty and attractiveness in many surviving sources from the Greek world. However, we find a darker strand to his story in the details of his birth and death, which contain elements of marginalization and othering. Adonis' birth narrative, told as early as Panyassis in the early 5th century BCE, is best preserved in Apollodorus, and includes the taboo subject of father-daughter incest, initiated by the daughter, Smyrna, who tricks her father into having sex with her. Smyrna is eventually metamorphosed into a tree, thus providing an aetiology for the myrrh tree.²¹ The story is set in Assyria, likely in Smyrna (hence the name given to his mother), a city on the Aegean coast of Anatolia located at the site of contemporary Izmir.²² The connection in ancient Greek literature of "barbarian" nations (particularly those from territories east of Greece, including Asia Minor and Persia) with effeminacy and luxury is well documented: Adonis' origins thus prefigure and potentially even explain his effeminate gender non-

¹⁶ Rankine (2019): 349.

¹⁷ Particularly useful in regards to ableist and racist interpretations of ancient texts is the intervention of Silverblank (2023) which offers a lexicographical analysis of the reproduction of antiblack and ableist ideologies in translations and commentaries of texts featuring Hephaestus.

¹⁸ Conybeare & Goldhill (2021): 1-11 (quotation on p.6) discuss the tensions between ideas of philology as supposedly 'objective' discipline in relation to faith-based beliefs. My particular thanks to Hannah Čulík-Baird for her comments on this section of the article which were transformative.

¹⁹ Keegan (2020): 71.

²⁰ Greenwood (2022): 190.

²¹ Vernant (1988): 155 "the product of a union between a man and a woman who...should never have been united". Reed (1997): 329 "Furthermore, Panyassis' myth is constructed as an unsavory sexual daydream told from the male point of view: an older man has relations with his nubile adolescent daughter without the remotest risk of being blamed for the misdeed...notice especially...the excessive violence of his punitiveness, serving as an emphatic denial of guilt".

²² Apollodorus *Library* 3.14.3-4 (partly based on the earlier account of Panyassis) offers two alternative origins for Adonis as the son of Cinyras, the son of Syrian settlers in Cilicia who settled in Cyprus, and notes Hesiod's assertion that Adonis was the son of Phoenix and Alpheisiboea. By far the most attention is given to his Assyrian origins in the story from Panyassis. Hyginus (*Fab.* 58) also reports the Assyrian origin. See Frazer (1921) 87 n.1 for further discussion.

conformity.²³ The myrrh tree was also a symbol of exotic foreignness, since myrrh was not available in Greece and came as an import from Southern Arabia, Eritrea and Northern Abyssinia.²⁴ Adonis is carried to full term inside the tree, and is born from a slit in its trunk. As a baby, he is so beautiful that two goddesses fight over him: Persephone and Aphrodite, with the latter eventually become his lover. In many ways, Adonis is multiply “othered” in his birth narrative: the child of a taboo and abusive sexual relationship, a non-Greek who would be seen automatically by many Greeks as a barbarian; and born from a tree, so in some ways not even fully human. These elements of stigmatization subtly undermine an entirely affirming interpretation of Adonis, despite his almost supernatural beauty. Keegan identifies a tendency to present transgender phenomena “as *things*—indefinable and monstrous objects that threaten the taxonomies of the western scientific episteme” in literature and culture from the 19th century onwards, but we can see clear echoes of this more modern cultural trope in the Greek representations of Adonis.²⁵

Adult Adonis: a body in flux

The earliest reference to adult (or adolescent, at least) Adonis is in Sappho (630-570 BCE), who mentions him several times in the extant fragments.²⁶ Sappho, a lyric poet from the Greek island of Lesbos, famous in modernity for her love poetry focused on same-sex desire, was equally renowned in antiquity for the excellence of her verse. Relevant to this discussion is fr.140a, a short snippet of call and response between a group of girls (who are directly addressed in the preserved lines) and the speaker, otherwise unidentified. The fragment may allude to women-only cults in honor of Adonis but sadly lacks the necessary context for any certainty:²⁷

καθνάσκει, Κυθήρη', ἄβρος Ἄδωνις· τί κε θεῖμεν;
κατύπτεσθε, κόραι, καὶ κατερείκεσθε κίθωνας.²⁸

“Delicate Adonis is dying, Lady Aphrodite. What should we do?”
“Beat your breasts, girls, and tear your dresses.”

(Sappho fr. 140a)

The adjective ἄβρος (“delicate”, “dainty”) used to describe Adonis here is a signal that he is gender non-conforming.²⁹ This descriptor (elsewhere, and in all of the examples below, usually spelled with a rough breathing) is coded as feminine wherever it appears in Greek

²³ On the concept of the “effeminate” barbarian see especially Kurke (1992), Hall (1989): 56-101, 209-210; Harrison (2020), Castriota (2021). On the persistence of this phenomenon into Roman culture see Strassfeld (2023): 35-36.

²⁴ On myrrh in Greco-Roman culture and literature, see Frazer (1921): 87 n.2, Hünemörder (2006). For myrrh in the Adonis myth specifically, see the extensive discussion of Detienne (1994): 5-36.

²⁵ Keegan (2020): 72, emphasis his.

²⁶ Fr. 168 consists only of the phrase “alas for Adonis”, which may connect to the Adonia festival, while the uncertainly attested fr. 17b (=Sappho/Alcaeus fr. 24) consists of the phrase “Oh for the Adonian”.

²⁷ Stehle (1996): 194-195 discusses the fragment and its potential cultic significance; see also Neri (2021): 817-818. On Sappho’s poems for girls, see Ferrari (2021): 107-108.

²⁸ The Greek text of Sappho is that of Campbell (1982). The English translation is my own.

²⁹ See Kurke (1992) for an analysis of the changing cultural value of this word and its cognates, tracing an increase in negativity towards the word after the Persian war and due to the development of *isonomia* as a key civic value in Athens, alongside the earlier survey of Lombardo (1983): 1077-1103.

literature, as a short survey shows: it is used of tragic heroines such as Hecuba, former queen of Troy: "Guide me, who before trod so daintily the streets of Troy..." and Antigone "I do not veil my delicate cheek shaded with curls"³⁰. Of adult men, it indicates both foreign luxury and effeminacy, as we see in Pentheus' threats to the gender non-conforming stranger in *Bacchae* that he will cut his "delicate hair".³¹ Antiphanes, a now-fragmentary comic playwright uses it to describe "a delicate, luxury-loving host of foppish Ionians".³² Its use in reference to Adonis shows that, as early as Sappho, his character already pushes the boundaries of manhood. The examples discussed here also show the intersectionality of gender non-conformity and racial identity in the Greek imaginary.³³

Along with Sappho, the Hellenistic poet Theocritus is a direct literary influence on Bion's Adonis. Although our evidence for his life is scant, it is likely that Theocritus was originally from Syracuse and that he later spent time in Alexandria and on Kos. Internal evidence allows us to date some of his extant poems to the 270s BCE, including *Idyll* 15 (dated to c. 275 BCE) in which Adonis has a starring role. This poem is focalized through two ordinary middle-class women, Gorgo and Praxinoa. The action takes place firstly at Praxinoa's home, subsequently following their walk through the streets of Alexandria and their experience attending a festival of Aphrodite and Adonis at the royal palace. The women are married and have children, and before they attend queen Arsinoe's lavish display, they complain about their husbands who are grumpy, stupid and boring.³⁴ This creates a strong contrast to the images of Aphrodite and Adonis that are described as part of the festival, where the couple are depicted as the paradigm of passion and romance.³⁵

³⁰ Hecuba at Eur. *Trojan Women* 506, Antigone at Eur. *Phoenician Women* 1486; further similar usages occur at Eur. *Medea* 1164 (of Creusa's "dainty" movement), Eur. *Helen* 1528 (of Helen's "dainty" movement), Eur. *Iph. Aul.* 614 (Clytemnestra instructing Iphigenia to move "daintily"). Plato *Symp.* 204c5 uses it to refer to pederastic eros. Bacchylides fr. 15.4 applies the adjective to "a delicate song".

³¹ Kurke (1992): 109 notes that the term connotes "hedonistic luxury" in most lyric poetry apart from Pindar where it retains a more positive tone. Outside tragedy it is used to praise "the delicate Graces" (Sappho fr. 60), to evoke the vulnerability of a new-born baby: "his tender body washed in the golden and purple light of violets" (Pindar *Ol.* 6.55). In some cases ἄβρος is used to connote foreignness in the context of the alleged effeminacy or luxury associated with non-Greeks.

³² Antiphanes fr. 91 K-A (91K).

³³ Olson (2023): 344 notes that the adjective is "used occasionally in the classical period in praise of girls and women (A. fr. 313.1) but not of men, for whom such "delicacy" is unmanly (e. g. E. *Ba.* 968–9, where the maddened Pentheus imagines the ἄβροτης and τρυφή that will in fact be his destruction)".

³⁴ Hunter (1996): 117 "a contrast which runs parallel to that between the sensuality of the Adonis cult and the "lovelessness" of the marriages in which the women find themselves"; Hopkinson (2015): 206 "the two women's husbands are no Adonises".

³⁵ The Greek text of Theocritus is that of Hopkinson (2015).

ΓΟΡΓΩ

Πραξινοά, πόταγ' ὦδε. τὰ ποικίλα πρᾶτον ἄθρησον,
λεπτὰ καὶ ὡς χαρίεντα· θεῶν περονάματα φασεῖς.

...

ΠΡΑΞΙΝΟΑ

αὐτὸς δ' ὡς θαητὸς ἐπ' ἀργυρέας κατάκειται
κλισμῷ, πρᾶτον ἵουλον ἀπὸ κροτάφων καταβάλλων,
ὁ τριφίλητος Ἄδωνις, ὁ κὴν Ἀχέροντι φιληθείς.

GORGO

"Praxinoa, come over here! First look at these tapestries, how detailed and charming they are—you'd say they were the clothes of the gods!"

...

PRAXINOA

[describing Adonis' image on the tapestry] "And he himself—how wonderful he is, lying on the silver couch, with the first beard hair spreading down from his temples, thrice-beloved Adonis, who is desirable even in death."

(Theocritus *Idyll* 15.78-79, 84-86)

In this exchange, we are told what it is about Adonis that the women find so attractive (in contrast to their husbands for whom they have only criticism): he is very young, with the first facial hair only just spreading on his face. As Joan Burton notes, it is precisely Adonis' gender non-conformity to which the women are responding so enthusiastically: "Theocritus's Praxinoa also finds this stage of gender doubt erotic, and her description of Adonis makes evident the eroticism of her gaze".³⁶ This suggests that Adonis is here aligned with the age of pederastic attraction: perhaps Theocritus, in attempting to subjectivize female sexual desire, has superimposed onto them a male-focalized pederastic gaze?³⁷ The reference to Adonis' continued attractiveness after death has double valence, referring to the myths of his sojourn in the underworld and rebirth, but also anticipating the later poetic accounts of his body's literal beauty in death. The women's admiration of Adonis' boyish beauty is echoed in the hymn of the un-named female singer at the festival:

ὦ ἔβενος, ὦ χρυσός, ὦ ἐκ λευκῷ ἐλέφαντος
αἰετοὶ οἰνοχόον Κρονίδα Διὶ παῖδα φέροντες,
πορφύρεοι δὲ τάπητες ἄνω μαλακώτεροι ὕπνω·
ἅ Μίλατος ἐρεῖ χῶ τὰν Σαμίαν καταβόσκων,
"ἔστρωται κλῖνα τῷδ' ὠνιδι τῷ καλῷ ἄμμιν."
τὸν μὲν Κύπρις ἔχει, τὰν δ' ὁ ῥοδόπαχυς Ἄδωνις.
ὀκτωκαιδεκετὴς ἢ ἐννεακαίδεχ' ὁ γαμβρός·
οὐ κεντεῖ τὸ φίλημ'· ἔτι οἱ περὶ χεῖλεα πυρρά.
νῦν μὲν Κύπρις ἔχοισα τὸν αὐτὰς χαιρέτω ἄνδρα·

³⁶ Burton (1995): 58.

³⁷ Burton (1995): 57 and 85-86 notes the pederastic overtones in this passage.

“O ebony, O gold, O eagles of white ivory carrying a boy as wine-server to Zeus son of Cronus, and purple coverings above, softer than sleep! Miletus and the shepherd who pastures the land of Samos will say, ‘The bed for beautiful Adonis has been spread (with blankets) by us!’ Kypris is holding him, and Adonis holds her in his rosy arms. The bridegroom is eighteen or nineteen years old, and his kiss does not scratch; reddish down is still around his lips. Farewell now to Kypris as she holds her man.”

(Theocritus *Idyll* 15.123-131)

The reference to Ganymede as an ornament on the couch links Adonis again to pederasty, indicating immature manhood and mirroring the power imbalance between Aphrodite and her young lover. The Greek term for Adonis’ “rosy arms” (ροδόπαχυς) is strongly female-coded, as noted by Gow in his commentary on Theocritus: “the adjective is not used elsewhere of a male person”.³⁸ Once more, we are told that Adonis does not have rough facial hair, only “down” on his lip and a soft face which “does not scratch” his lover. Of course, this signals immature masculinity, but combined with the rosy arms, and the gender-reversed relationship in which the female partner dominates, it is also a signal of gender non-conformity.³⁹ Hunter notes this non-conformity: “Adonis ‘the beautiful’, who is always both bridegroom and lost lover, is not a martial hero, indeed in some ways is the very antithesis of such a hero, for whom hunting and warfare are two sides of the same coin”, connecting Adonis’ non-traditional masculinity directly with his beauty and his inability to perform in the masculine pursuits of battle and the hunt.⁴⁰

The festival song-performance closes with a list of heroes to whom Adonis is claimed to be superior: the line-up includes Agamemnon, Ajax, Patroclus and Neoptolemus. Adonis’ superiority rests, for this singer, on the fact that he is “the one and only hero, so they say, that visits both the underworld and the world here above”.⁴¹ His ability to traverse between worlds was granted to him because of his extreme beauty and the rivalry between Aphrodite and Persephone, who both wanted to possess him.⁴² Thus, it is his sexual attractiveness, explicitly expressed through embodied gender non-conformity, which has rendered Adonis superior to the rollcall of Greek epic heroes. Although Adonis is manifestly not an example of Greek heroic manhood or hegemonic masculinity, he is nonetheless beloved and admired, by Aphrodite, by Persephone, by Queen Arsinoe who chooses to honor him with this lavish festival, and by the two ordinary women who narrate this poem. There is not scope here to go into a detailed textual comparison, but Adonis’ particular brand of effeminized, boyish masculinity is seen elsewhere in Greek literature: we might think of Paris in the *Iliad*, or Dionysus/the Stranger in Euripides’ *Bacchae*.⁴³ All of these characters exhibit a powerful sex appeal, and this raises the question: why did the Greeks turn, again and again, to exploring

³⁸ Gow (1950): 310 n.128. Hunter (1996): 130 “the epithet ‘rosy-armed’ (v. 128) is normally applied to women and so both points this [gender] reversal”.

³⁹ Hunter (1996): 130 “the sex rôles are reversed... the tableau representing them suggests both illicit lovemaking (‘incest’) and the grandiose style of Ptolemaic funerals”.

⁴⁰ Hunter (1996): 134, see also Lambert (2001): 95-96 “the singer...feminizes the young lover at the hymn’s most erotic moment”. Burton (1995): 57 describes Adonis as “sexually ambiguous”; Griffiths (1981): 119 as “the sweet and passive Adonis”.

⁴¹ Theocritus *Idyll* 15.136-137.

⁴² Vernant (1988): 155 “inspiring an equally passionate love for him in both Persephone of the Underworld and the heavenly Aphrodite”.

⁴³ These figures, and Adonis, are part of a larger study under preparation by this author on gender outlaws in Greek literature.

the idea that gender outlaws (i.e. figures who do not fit into a socially authorized gender binary) are more attractive than those who *do* conform to those societal constructs?

Towards a trans philology of Bion's *Lament for Adonis*

The non-conformity of Adonis' embodied gender expression is intensified in Bion's *Lament for Adonis*. Almost nothing is known of Bion's life or the dates he was active, although a date in the late 2nd century or early 1st century BCE is thought to be most likely.⁴⁴ The Suda θ 166 reports he was born in Phlossa, a town near Smyrna, which is significant given the origins of the Adonis myth. His work shows the influences of both Moschus and Theocritus.⁴⁵ The *Lament for Adonis* focuses on the death of Adonis and Aphrodite's grief for him. Here too, the descriptions of Adonis emphasize his beauty using language more usually used of women, and here, too, there is a language of infantilization reflective of the references to Ganymede (and pederastic love) which we saw in Theocritus *Idyll* 15.

Adonis' violent death occurs due to his failure to kill a wild boar in the hunt, a traditionally masculine pursuit:⁴⁶

κεῖται καλὸς Ἄδωνις ἐν ὄρεσι μὴρὸν ὀδόντι,
λευκῷ λευκὸν ὀδόντι τυπεῖς, καὶ Κύπριν ἀνιῇ
λεπτὸν ἀποψύχων· τὸ δέ οἱ μέλαν εἵβεται αἶμα
χιονέας κατὰ σαρκός, ὑπ' ὀφρύσι δ' ὄμματα ναρκῇ,
καὶ τὸ ρόδον φεύγει τῷ χεῖλεος ἄμφι δὲ τήνῳ
θνάσκει καὶ τὸ φίλημα, τὸ μήποτε Κύπρις ἀποίσει.

Beautiful Adonis lies in the mountains; wounded in the thigh with a tusk, wounded in his white thigh with a white tusk, and he longs for Kypris as he breathes his last faint breath. Dark blood trickles over his snow-white flesh, and under his brows his eyes grow dim; the rose flees from his lips, and around it dies the kiss, too, which Kypris will never carry off again.

(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 7-12)

Bion, like Theocritus, describes Adonis in terms which do not conform to the usual embodied gender expression of masculine heroes: his thigh is “white” (λευκός) and his flesh is described as “snow-white” (χιονέας). Whiteness in Greek literature is a marker of attractive femininity.⁴⁷ The location of his wound and the ecphrastic emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of his body in death sexualizes the attack of the boar. Adonis is penetrated by his tusk and wounded in the thigh even as he is emasculated through his failure in hunting.⁴⁸ Adonis' continued sexual attractiveness in death, hinted at by Praxinoa in Theocritus, is again a feature in Bion's poem: “even when he is no longer living his kiss pleases Kypris, but Adonis does not know that she kissed him after he died” (13-14). The sexual interaction after Adonis' death intensifies the poem's portrayal of Aphrodite as the

⁴⁴ For Bion's date see Hopkinson (2015): x-xi; Reed (1997): 3 prefers a date earlier in this range.

⁴⁵ See Reed (1997): 2-4 for discussion of what is known of Bion's life.

⁴⁶ The Greek text of Bion is that of Hopkinson (2015), with any changes noted in the discussion.

⁴⁷ On cultural ideals of paleness as a female beauty standard in the ancient world, see Davies & Llewellyn-Jones (2017), Eaverly (2013): 83-122.

⁴⁸ Fowler (1987) identified an association between wounded heroes on the battlefield and sexual penetration or defloration in Vergil, tracing this motif back to the *Iliad* (as I discuss further below).

dominant partner in the relationship, further effeminizing Adonis. We will return to the theme of Adonis' sexualization in death below, after a discussion of two passages of the *Lament for Adonis* which have been edited by modern scholars to remove gender ambiguity from the descriptions of Adonis, and/or due to discomfort with the age-gap relationship between the adult Aphrodite and the younger, effeminized Adonis.

Bion's *Lament for Adonis* is preserved in two principal manuscripts (V and R), both dated to the early 14th century, which are generally agreed to derive from a common ancestor (Φ).⁴⁹ We do not have any papyrus evidence for Bion, and his works otherwise survive as fragments deriving mostly from the quotations of 5th century CE anthologist Stobaeus. While acknowledging this relatively precarious textual transmission, this article aims to consider the text as we have it in the extant manuscripts and to evaluate the rationale for making changes to the transmitted text, particularly in cases where the manuscripts show no variance and/or there are no obvious metrical, lexical or grammatical errors to be remedied.

The first case to be considered is the poem's description of Aphrodite searching and calling out for Adonis:

ὄξ' ὃ δὲ κωκύοισα δι' ἄγκεα μακρὰ φορεῖται
Ἀσσύριον βοόωσα πόσιν καὶ παῖδα καλεῦσα.⁵⁰

Lamenting shrilly, she wandered the long, winding ways
screaming and calling for her Assyrian husband, her boy.

(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 23-24)

The first item which has caused problems is the reference in line 24 to Adonis as both πόσιν καὶ παῖδα. Scholars have struggled with this in the context of Aphrodite's sexual relationship with Adonis, and Neil Hopkinson's Loeb edition (after Gallivotti, Fantuzzi and Hermann) prints an emendation to this line as follows: Ἀσσύριον βοόωσα πόσιν, καὶ πολλὰ καλεῦσα, "crying out for her Assyrian husband and calling many times". Hopkinson's note on the line identifies the reason for the textual emendation: "in this context 'boy' seems odd".⁵¹ The "context" meant here is the sexual nature of Adonis' relationship with Aphrodite. The word πολλά does not appear in the manuscript tradition, and there is no reason to change the Greek text here for reasons of metre or grammar. The motivation to change the text here is therefore not a technical problem with the Greek, or a preference for a variant attested MS reading, but rather a discomfort with the content of the text itself. Such a practice, of changing an ancient text based on value judgement (or anachronistic moral grounds) alone, calls into question the supposed objectivity of philology and textual criticism as commonly understood, or rather as commonly assumed, in the discipline of Classical Studies.

In fact, Bion refers to Adonis as a παῖς ("boy") only a few lines before this (line 18: "Around that boy his own dear dogs howl") and it is not at all out of place that he should use

⁴⁹ For a detailed discussion of the textual transmission of Bion's *Lament for Adonis*, see Reed (1997): 64-86. Fantuzzi (2017): 169-171 offers a very useful and accessible overview.

⁵⁰ The Greek text is that of Reed, here following the MS R, and noting the variant reading reported in MS V as an error based on a misreading of παῖδα. For a detailed account of the vexed history of these lines, see Reed (1992): 538-543 and Reed (1997): 209-210.

⁵¹ Hopkinson (2015): 509 n.6. Hopkinson's 2015 edition follows the MS for these lines, but expresses serious misgivings in the footnote to the passage.

this term again here. Rather than changing the Greek text to fit with (negative, or at least wary) modern attitudes to such an age-gap relationship, it is more profitable to raise the question: *why* does Bion use the word “boy” to describe Adonis here? As we have seen from the Sapphic and Theocritean depictions of Adonis, he is frequently depicted as a very young man or older boy on the cusp of manhood, even in the context (as in *Idyll* 15) of a sexual union with Aphrodite. As in Theocritus, Bion’s emphasis on Adonis’ youth suggests that the age-gap relationship between Aphrodite and Adonis is being depicted as quasi-incestuous and that Aphrodite is coded here as a mother figure as well as a lover. This transgressive aspect of their relationship is noted in Hunter’s analysis of Theocritus and furthermore reflects the power imbalance and incest which resulted in Adonis’ own birth.⁵² Another connection with Theocritus (where we saw the desire of the married women for Adonis described in terms reminiscent of pederastic relationships) is that the repeated use of *παῖς* suggests that Aphrodite’s desire for a younger man, and a mortal, is coded as pederastic.

The next problem with this passage is the reference to Adonis’ chest and the blood on his body in lines 25-27. Before looking at the changes made to these lines of the poem by textual critics, let us consider the relevant lines of the poem with the “problematic words” in bold. These words are reported by all the extant manuscripts, and do not cause metrical or grammatical problems. Once more, as we shall see below, the reasons for changing the text are ideological and/or moral.

The text with bold words as reported in the extant manuscripts:

ἀμφὶ δέ νιν μέλαν **αἷμα** παρ’ ὀμφαλὸν ἄωρεῖτο,
στήθεα δ’ ἐκ **μηρῶν** φοινίσσετο, τοῖ δ’ ὑπὸ μαζοῖ
χιόνεοι τὸ πάροιθεν Ἀδώνιδι πορφύροντο.

Around him the black **blood** gathered above his navel,
his chest was bloody from his **thighs**, and Adonis’ breasts which
before were snowy-white grew crimson (with blood).

The text as emended by Reed (1997), followed by Hopkinson (2020):⁵³

ἀμφὶ δέ νιν μέλαν **εἶμα** παρ’ ὀμφαλὸν ἄωρεῖτο,
στήθεα δ’ ἐκ **χειρῶν** φοινίσσετο, τοῖ δ’ ὑπὸ μαζοῖ
χιόνεοι τὸ πάροιθεν Ἀδώνιδι πορφύροντο.

Around her the dark **cloak** floated at her navel,
her chest was bloodied by her **hands**, and her breasts
snow-white before, grew crimson for Adonis

The substance of the changes is that *αἷμα* (“blood”) becomes *εἶμα* (“cloak”) and *μηρῶν* (Adonis’) “thighs” becomes *χειρῶν* (Aphrodite’s) “hands”. The image over all is changed to refer to Aphrodite rather than Adonis. Reed offers justification for this on the grounds that the verb used of the blood pooling around Adonis’ navel in line 25 (“floated”, *ἄωρεῖτο*) is inappropriate of liquid: “Blood cannot do this”.⁵⁴ However, the imagery of blood floating on Adonis’ navel is not out of keeping with Bion’s creative use of language elsewhere

⁵² Hunter (1996): 130. See also Lambert (2001): 98-99 “The discreet flash of incest may glimmer momentarily; certainly the myth of Adonis is fashioned by it”.

⁵³ Reed is ultimately here following the emendations of Ahrens (1854).

⁵⁴ Reed (1997): 209, followed by Hopkinson (2015): 509 n.7 “floating blood is a very strange expression”.

in this poem. Idiosyncratic language usage, when describing Adonis' embodied suffering, occurs throughout the descriptions of the death scene. We might take as an example the phrase ὑπ' ὀφρύσι δ' ὄμματα νάρκη (lit. "under his eyebrows his eyes grew numb", line 10). One might similarly argue that "eyes cannot do that", but editors have not sought in this instance to change the Greek to something more literal.

Another reason for the change from Adonis to Aphrodite is the position of Adonis' body as implied by the description in the MSS of his chest growing bloody from his thighs (i.e. we should picture him lying on his back, with his thighs resting on his prone chest and covering them in blood). This description has been termed "improbable"⁵⁵, "awkward"⁵⁶ and "a perversely sexual image".⁵⁷ The image, I would argue, is probably sexual: Adonis, a beautiful young man, lies naked, wounded in his thigh in a symbolic penetration, his body arranged in a posture which recalls his sexually passive characterization. The sexualization of warriors wounded in battle is a theme already in the *Iliad* (as I discuss below). Here, Bion intensifies the sense that the painful, yet ecphrastic image is meant to be read erotically by the poem's audience. Like Aphrodite, we are meant to take pleasure in Adonis' body after his death. The fetal position also resonates with the previous imagery of Adonis as a child, indicating his vulnerability in death and emphasizing his passivity.

The Greek manuscripts as transmitted use the term μαστοί ("breasts") of Adonis' body, which has also caused consternation. Reed comments on the "strangeness of the MS reading", arguing that this word if used of a man, must mean "nipple", and therefore that the adjective applied to Adonis' chest (χιόνεοι, "snow-white") is incongruous in this context. He finds "internal and external indications that the lines originally described Aphrodite". However, the external indications are to literary depictions of female lament in Adonian and non-Adonian ritual contexts, none of which offers strong justification for emending the lines, while the internal indication is simply a claim that the reference to Aphrodite's ruined beauty at lines 29-31 "is better accounted for" if these changes are accepted.⁵⁸ Ultimately, Reed finds that "Bion did not intend what the MSS report".⁵⁹ This claim to understand the ancient poet's authorial intention is based on very little evidence other than discomfort with the description as it stands in the transmitted text(s). Rather than emending the ancient Greek text to reflect particular 20th century sexual norms and desires I suggest that we consider the text as transmitted and ask what the implications are for the poem and its meaning. While the term μαστοί is most commonly used of female bodies, there is a strong indication through intratextuality that it is Adonis' body which is described here: the adjective "snow-white" (χιόνεοι, which was used already of his skin at line 10 of the poem) is used here of his chest. Here, as there, the whiteness indicates femininity, as does the deliberate use of an anatomical term more usually used of women to describe his body. The language of this description encourages a reading of Adonis as a "transgender phenomenon" or "bad object" whose body confounds and undermines what Keegan terms the "purportedly closed system of sexual difference".⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Hopkinson (2015): 509 n.7.

⁵⁶ Reed (1997): 209

⁵⁷ Reed (2006): 52.

⁵⁸ Reed (1997): 210.

⁵⁹ Reed (1997): 210.

⁶⁰ Keegan (2022): 29.

Deliberate use of language to subvert gender norms continues in Bion's description of the supernatural metamorphosis of Adonis' blood.

δάκρυον ἅ Παφία τόσσον χέει ὅσσον Ἄδωνις
αἶμα χέει, τὰ δὲ πάντα ποτὶ χθονὶ γίνεται ἄνθη·
αἶμα ῥόδον τίκτει, τὰ δὲ δάκρυα τὰν ἀνεμώναν.

The Paphian pours out as many tears as Adonis
pours out blood, and it all turns to flowers on the earth:
the blood gives birth to roses, the tears to the anemone.

(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 64-66)

The choice of the verb τίκτω ("to give birth") to describe the spontaneous growth of roses from the earth where Adonis' blood falls further blurs Adonis' gender presentation within the poem. His non-human birth from the tree trunk of his metamorphosed mother comes full circle as his blood generates botanical life, blurring the boundaries not only of gender but of human and non-human lifeforms. The ῥόδον ("rose") that is born from his blood was previously used in the poem metaphorically of the color loss in his lips as he dies: καὶ τὸ ῥόδον φεύγει τῷ χεῖλεος, "and the rose flees his lip" (line 11). One of the most admired and distinctive features of his beauty in life is transferred through this metamorphosis to perennial existence in the natural world, recurring yearly in the due season and mirroring his own eventual bilocation between the upper and underworlds.

Adonis' gender non-conformity is central to this poem's portrayal of his identity, and a vital component of his extreme beauty and sexual appeal for Aphrodite, thus "gesturing at the existence of possibilities beyond deterministic, binary categorizations".⁶¹ Previous scholarship on Adonis has sought to minimize or even deny his gender non-conformity precisely *because* scholars cannot accept that a gender non-conforming figure could have been positively viewed by the ancient Greeks. On this reading, exemplified in the following quotation from Reed, Adonis' popularity, sexual attractiveness and beauty negates the possibility of his being gender queer:

"it is a commonplace in scholarship on Adonis to regard him as a figurative antithesis of what a Greek man should be: his death by the boar epitomizes failed hunting, his position as the kept boy of Aphrodite deprives him of traditional male virtues...to this theory let it be objected immediately that no extant version of the myth clearly suggests treatment of Adonis as contemptible..."

(Reed 1997: 25)

This article seeks to turn this statement on its head. The praise for Adonis' transgressive gender presentation in these texts suggests that ancient attitudes to gender were more flexible in some ways than contemporary binary ideologies of gender. The beautiful, complicated Adonis could thus be added to a growing cohort of examples, many from non-Western cultures, of more complex and diverse cultural understandings of gender and sexuality than the two-sex binary we are all familiar with.⁶² It is important to consider

⁶¹ Keegan (2022): 29.

⁶² Keegan (2022): 28 "From the 17th through the 19th century, what had been a range of available social and legal roles for trans and intersex people was slowly restricted until there were only two sexed categories: 'male' and 'female'". See also Fausto-Sterling (2000): 30-44.

however, the extent to which Adonis' non-normative body is fetishized by the Greek texts in ways familiar from modern cultural treatments of trans bodies. Recent scholarship has exposed the many ways in which gender non-conforming people "face multifaceted fetishization" both in online spaces and in daily life, while there is a long-standing and well documented trope in film and media of "fetishizing trans bodies and stereotyping trans stories". Adonis' hyper-sexualized representation throughout the examples discussed above has echoes of such objectification and fetishization.⁶³

The death of Adonis

Turning to the end of Adonis' story and his death, we should remember at this point the circumstances of his birth. Conceived through incestuous intercourse and born from a tree, his taboo origins imply that Adonis non-conforming gender, his existence as a trans phenomenon, is somehow an embodiment of that sexual transgression. This unease surrounding Adonis culminates in the texts' implication, at his death, that he was somehow "designed for death" because his body does not meet the societally sanctioned standards of traditional, hegemonic masculinity.⁶⁴ So, Aphrodite, distraught, laments over his wounded corpse:

τί γάρ, τολμηρέ, κυνάγεις;
καλὸς ἐὼν τί τοσοῦτον ἐμήναο θηρὶ παλαίειν;
"Why indeed, rash one, are you hunting?
Since you are beautiful, why were you so mad as to fight with a beast?"
(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 60-61)

In Aphrodite's view, Adonis' beauty logically and naturally excludes him from the masculine pursuit of hunting. The choice of verb in line 61 παλαίειν (lit. "to wrestle") cleverly suggests that Adonis is also excluded from that other most masculine of pursuits: athletics. Aphrodite's assertion that Adonis' body both guaranteed his failure in the masculine activities of hunting and athletics and assured his death is, as I stated in the introduction above, resonant with the conclusions of modern trans necropolitical analysis which notes the ways in which trans bodies are structurally failed by systems in such a way that they "must die". It is also not an isolated example: there is not scope in this piece to offer a full series of parallels, but it is the case throughout Greek literature that gender non-conformity is depicted as alluring, thrilling and seductive, but as having disastrous consequences for the non-conforming individual and/or their community. One example will have to suffice here: a moment in Homer's *Iliad* where Hector upbraids Paris for his cowardly exit from the failed duel with Menelaus:

τὸν δ' Ἑκτωρ νείκεσεν ἰδὼν αἰσχροῖς ἐπέεσσιν·
"Δύσπαρι, εἶδος ἄριστε, γυναιμανές, ἡπεροπευτά,
αἶθ' ὄφελες ἄγονός τ' ἔμμεναι ἄγαμός τ' ἀπολέσθαι.
καί κε τὸ βουλοίμην, καί κεν πολὺ κέρδιον ἦεν
ἢ οὕτω λῶβην τ' ἔμμεναι καὶ ὑπόψιον ἄλλων.

⁶³ Kidd et al. (2026): 5, Samer (2021): 538. For a wide-ranging discussion of this phenomenon see also Anzani et al. (2021).

⁶⁴ Padilla & Rodríguez-Madera (2021): S26, S36, building on the framework of Mbembe (2019): 66-92. Vernant (1988): 156 "He fails the test which normally gives a boy access to full manhood".

ἧ που καγχαλόωσι κάρη κομόωντες Ἀχαιοὶ,
φάντες ἀριστῆα πρόμον ἔμμεναι, οὔνεκα καλὸν
εἶδος ἔπ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔστι βίη φρεσὶν οὐδέ τις ἀλκή.”⁶⁵

There Hector saw him and reproached him with shame-arousing words: “Wicked Paris, excellent in looks, woman-mad, deceiver! I wish you had never been born, or had died before you married. I really do wish that, and this would have been far better than your being an outrage, an object of other men’s contempt. The long-haired Greeks must be laughing out loud, saying that this leader was chosen as champion only for beauty, devoid of strength and courage in his heart.”

(Homer *Iliad* 3.38-45)

Hector’s terms of abuse for his brother here show that Paris, like Adonis, is a “gender outlaw”: the phrase εἶδος ἄριστε (“excellent in looks”) is usually only applied to women, and when it is used of men it marks a failure to perform successful masculinity.⁶⁶ Paris’ capacity for deception (ἡπεροπευτά, “deceiver”) and his excessive sexuality (γυναιμανές, “woman-mad”) also render him effeminate. His beauty exists in a correlate inverse to his lack of strength and courage. A few lines later, Hector more directly associates Paris’ beauty (here coded as feminine by association with Aphrodite) with his lack of martial prowess:

οὐκ ἄν τοι χραίσμη κίθαρις τά τε δῶρ' Ἀφροδίτης
ἦ τε κόμη τό τε εἶδος ὅτ' ἐν κονίῃσι μιγείης.

Your lyre will not help you, nor will those gifts of Aphrodite,
your looks and your locks, when he lays you in the dust.

(Homer *Iliad* 3.54-55)

Achilles (whose embodiment in the *Iliad* is generally characterized as gender conforming, and who is obviously highly successful on the battlefield) is depicted as playing the lyre at *Il.* 9.186-9; hegemonically masculine heroes can also have long hair (as noted by Hector’s own reference to the “long-haired” Achaeans just a few lines above) and be beautiful (so Achilles at *Il.* 2.673-4).⁶⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear from Hector’s critical tone, and the connection to Aphrodite, the female goddess of sex and beauty, that Paris’ particular brand of embodied gender expression does not fit societal norms and that Hector considers it to be incompatible with success on the battlefield. Paris’ gender expression, like that of Adonis, is feminine-coded and yet brings with it considerable sex appeal (he is, after all, married to the most beautiful woman in the world). However, Paris also brings destruction on himself and his whole community as a direct result of his relationship with Helen. As with Adonis, the consequences of an individual’s refusal or inability to meet the gendered expectations of their society are portrayed in literature as dire, although Adonis’ failure to conform rebounds only on himself and arguably Aphrodite, while Paris’ has much wider reach.

Adonis’ sexualized death also has epic roots in the trope of the beautiful corpse in battle, and particularly the erotic connection between battlefield wounds and

⁶⁵ The Greek text of the *Iliad* is that of Bowie (2019). The translation is my own.

⁶⁶ Bowie (2019): 101 n.39 “more usually applied to women; when it is used of men...there is always an implication that their valour does not match their looks”.

⁶⁷ Of course, there are many fruitful queer readings of Achilles’ sexuality, including Mueller (2023): 29-41 on the boundary-defying “wildness” of Achilles’ passion for Patroclus and Warwick (2019): 115-139 on conjugal imagery in the Achilles-Patroclus relationship. There is no evidence in the *Iliad* to indicate that Achilles is depicted as expressing a gender non-conforming embodiment.

penetration/defloration which was identified by Don Fowler in a landmark article "Vergil on Killing Virgins".⁶⁸ Fowler traces this tendency back to the *Iliad*, noting examples such as that of Euphorbus in *Il.* 17.50-60 whose hair is compared to the Graces as he is wounded and dies, which "makes Euphorbus like a girl".⁶⁹ Fowler argues that in the case of these characters (including Euryalus, Pallas, and Camilla) the sexualization of their death invokes pathos for both their wasted beauty and the untimeliness of their death, which has shut off the full development of their sexualities. He notes the gender non-conformity of the masculinized Camilla and ponders a morally negative interpretation of her death:

"In the case of Camilla, it could be said that the perversity of her becoming a wife (defloration) and a mother (suckling) only at the moment of her death constitutes a reproach to her way of life. She should have stayed at home to become a wife and mother in the normal way: her death shows the abnormality of her life."

(Fowler 1987: 196)

There is, however, an important difference between the pathos evoked by the death of a young warrior (who might well have survived if he had been luckier) in these texts and the death of a character who dies because of their physicality, i.e. their embodied gender expression renders them incapable of succeeding. The heroes who are injured or who die on the battlefield in Homer may be emasculated and effeminized in the moment of injury or death, and this may inspire pathos in the audience, but they are not incapable of success in war because of their bodies. An example of the latter is Menelaus at *Il.* 4.141-7, where his wound is sexualized both by its location on his inner thigh and through a simile comparing the blood on his skin to purple dye on a fine ivory artwork.⁷⁰

In the case of Adonis, his beauty marks him, in Aphrodite's view, as designed to fail in the hunt. To take Fowler's example of Camilla, who is also gender non-conforming, I suggest that both his suggested interpretations co-exist: the poem generates pathos at the moment of her death but also implies that her non-conforming gender identity led to her death.⁷¹ The Greek (and Roman) texts therefore reveal underlying anxieties about individuals who do not or cannot conform to the binary gender expectations and roles imposed on them by society.

Conclusion

The ancient depictions of Adonis, then, this paper contends, offer a strong challenge to current binary ideations of sex and gender. Adonis' portrayal in the Greek texts offers evidence of the existence of gender non-conforming people in antiquity, an important

⁶⁸ Fowler (1987): 185-198.

⁶⁹ Fowler (1987): 187.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, commentators prefer to term the wounding as "aesthetic" rather than sexual: so Kirk (1985): 345-6 n.141-7 and Coray, Krieter-Spiro & Visser (2020): 72 n.140-147 "By highlighting Menelaos' beauty, and by conjuring up the image of a little 'treasure' (*ágalma*) made by a woman (141-142n.), his stylized brush with death is lent a strongly aestheticized component". Fowler (1987): 190 notes the sexual tone and the (awkward) acknowledgement of it as early as bT scholia on *Il.* 4.141.

⁷¹ Caravaca-Morera & Padilha (2018): discuss a similar mechanism in modern culture concluding that 'there are significant similarities between the life histories and daily coexistence with stigma, structural violence and trans necropolitical practices'.

counter to claims that transgender identities are a modern leftist phenomenon, a fad or a phase.⁷² Adonis' existence as a person with a complex gender expression is therefore (albeit in a problematic and limited sense) an example which could be added to the work of scholars across disciplines aiming to focus attention on the often-ignored presence of trans identities in many historical world cultures.⁷³ However, reading Adonis' violent death through trans theory, particularly noting the fact that his taboo birth and violent death are directly connected to his embodied gender expression, also allows us to see the long history of "the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood".⁷⁴ The fetishization of his beauty before death leaves an impression of an objectified and dehumanized rather than a non-stigmatizing, subjective transgender representation. Adonis' painful death in the hunt thus mirrors and long pre-figures the theme identified in post-19th century literature and culture by Keegan whereby "transgender phenomena have generally been represented as things-indefinable and monstrous objects that threaten the taxonomies of the western scientific episteme".⁷⁵ It is important, although also difficult and painful, to recognize that, despite positive portrayals in some aspects, individuals with complex gender expression such as Adonis or Paris do not generally fare well in ancient myth. This tendency of the myths to "punish" gender non-conformity, or to present such individuals as outside society and incapable of participating in the rituals and activities prescribed for their perceived gender group, prevents an easy, joyful connection between modern trans identities and these ancient mythical characters. We also noted how societal assumptions about gender have informed the philologists constructing ancient texts, leading to alterations to the Greek transmitted in the manuscripts which are driven by modern *mores* of sexuality and/or gender rather than problems with the text's metrical, lexical or grammatical stability. Bion's *Lament for Adonis* stands as a miniature test case for the ways in which a 'trans philology' can open up new interpretations of ancient texts and expose the ways in which textual criticism has both been influenced by normative sex and gender systems and played a part in their enforcement and construction.

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⁷² On the history of anti-trans and queer ideologies see, among many, Butler (2024), Gill-Peterson (2024), Wuest (2026).

⁷³ Sienna & Plaskow (2019), Giardina (2025), Edwards et al. (2026).

⁷⁴ Stryker (2006): 9.

⁷⁵ Keegan (2020): 72.

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