# Mythological Reference in Shelley's *Adonais*

*Adonais* is a pastoral elegy written by Percy Bysshe Shelley to commemorate the death of his poet-friend John Keats, who died at an early age of 26. Like Milton's *Lycidas*, *Adonais* is an English adaptation of the classical form of elegy. It was composed in 1821, when Shelley heard of Keats' death, and was widely regarded as one of Shelley's best and most well-known works. The poem consists of 495 lines in 55 Spenserian stanzas. In the preface of its first publication Shelley made the mistaken assertion that Keats had died from a rupture of the lung induced by rage at the unfairly harsh reviews of his verse in the *Quarterly Review* and other journals. Referring to Adonis, the handsome young man of Greek Mythology who was killed by a wild boar, Shelley assigns Keats the identity of Adonis.

The Greek legend of Adonis is a tale about a handsome youth who was equally admired by Aphrodite (Urania), Queen of Love, and by Persephone, Queen of Underworld. (However, Shelley makes Urania into Adonis' mother in this elegy.) Unable to agree on which Goddess shall have him, Zeus decided he would spend half the year on Earth with Aphrodite and half the year in the underworld with Persephone. During a summer hunt, Adonis pierced a boar with his spear, wounding but not killing the beast. In retaliation, the boar charged Adonis and stabbed him with his tusk, causing a lesion that would eventually kill the young and beautiful prince. When he died in the arms of lamenting Aphrodite, she poured nectar over his blood, and the flower anemone emerged. It was said that every year the Greek women would mourn for Adonis when he died, then rejoice when he was resurrected in the form of the windflower. Using this myth as the central theme in the elegy, Shelley is hoping, or suggesting, that Keats shall be as immortal as the young Adonis. Beyond the obvious parallel that both were taken at a young age, Shelley uses this poem to exhort readers to mourn him in his death, but hold onto him in memory and rejoice in his virtual resurrection by reading his words. Shelley also blames Keats' death on literary criticism that was recently published (lines 150-53) as he was probably unaware that Keats was suffering from tuberculosis. He urges that as Adonis was killed by the attack of the wild boar, Keats too had to lose his life due to the attack of those insensitive critics.

Shelley's poem begins with the announcement that *Adonais* has died. Here, *Adonais* is Shelley's own creation, not a historic or mythological figure, but it is evident that Shelley identifies Keats with Adonis to attain mythic proportions. The poet then calls on the mourners to lament *Adonais*' passing. Among the first to be called is Urania (stanza II onward), the Goddess of heavenly love and identified in the poem as *Adonais*' mother. The poet wonders why Adonis' mother was not able to do more to save her beloved son. The poet summons all spirits, living and dead, to join him in his mourning. Urania leads a procession of mourners to Adonias' graveside, where mythological and historical greats weep for him, from the illustrious poets, Thomas Moore and Lord Byron, to the very forces of nature itself: the Ocean, the Winds, the Morning Dew. As

these mourners cry for the lost *Adonais*, the poet condemns those he blames for the death, those who by force or by cunning cut down the hero. Those enemies, the poet suggests, will suffer most for their misdeeds, while *Adonais*' spirit lives on eternally.

As the poem closes, the poet calls for an end to mourning, recognizing that *Adonais* has achieved the happiest state of all: He has become one with nature, even as his name and spirit endure in the form of art, of poetry. This poetic spirit, immortal and unchanging, will be a source of beauty, inspiration, and light for all ages to come. Apart from drawing the myth of Adonis and the character of Adonis and Aphrodite Urania, Shelley also brings the reference of some other mythological figures such as Apollo (stanza XXX), Actaeon (stanza XXXI), Dionysus(Stanza XXXIII) etc in various contexts in his poem.

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