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**THE ADONIS COMPLEX:  
RESOLVING FRAZER AND SEGAL'S  
INTERPRETATIONS OF THE  
ADONIS MYTH**

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## The Adonis Complex: Resolving Frazer's and Segal's Interpretations of the Adonis Myth

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### Overview

In their analyses of the Adonis myth, Sir James George Frazer and Robert A. Segal cite numerous ancient variants of Adonis' myth and evidence of the *Adonia*, a ritual that commemorated Adonis' death, as evidence for their respective readings. Each emphasizes the evidence which best agrees with his own interpretive method; evidence which is itself informed by presuppositions about myth and ritual. Frazer assumes that myth should be rationalized and universalized, and believes the ritual dependent on it. He equates Adonis to Tammuz, Attis, and Osiris, other deities whose death and rebirth, he argues, represent the decay and renewal of vegetable life. Because of these presuppositions, Frazer downplays those variants of Adonis' myth in which the deity dies a "final" death and emphasizes ritual evidence, arguing that the *Adonia* reenacts Adonis' death annually.<sup>1</sup> Segal, by contrast, presupposes the relevance of myth to psychology and ritual's ability not to reenact, but to express those same ideas present in myth. He thus employs a Jungian interpretive method, believing Adonis a Greek manifestation of the *puer* archetype whose myth must end in "premature death" and whose negative exemplar "dramatizes the prerequisites for membership in the *polis*."<sup>2</sup> Segal's interpretive method requires that Adonis die a "final" death, and he prefers those variants of the myth which suppose Adonis' death and insists that the *Adonia*, rather than reenact myth, expresses its ideas of sterility and immaturity. Thus, Frazer and Segal analyze this myth with differing interpretive methods, informed by their presuppositions regarding the function of myth and ritual, and it is the abundance of this myth's variants and ritual evidence that allows each interpreter to analyze that evidence which best agrees with his own methods. First, I will outline Frazer and Segal's interpretive methods more fully, then discuss the versions of the Adonis myth and ritual evidence available to these interpreters. Next, I will explore first Frazer's and Segal's interpretations of the myth of Adonis' birth, then Frazer's analysis of Adonis' life and death followed by Segal's interpretation.

### Frazer and Segal's Variant Interpretive Methods

Both Frazer and Segal's presuppositions regarding the functions of and relationship between myth and ritual inform their respective interpretive methods. Frazer, on one hand, imagines that the meditations of many peoples on seasonal change led them to perform magical rituals that could hasten or delay that change, and then to believe in "some mightier power" who controlled seasonal shifts. These new believers, Frazer claims, then attempted to aid that deity "in his struggle with the opposing principle of death" through imitative ritual. According to Frazer, many of these struggling seasonal deities developed especially "in the lands which border the Eastern Mediterranean," and he claims that not only Adonis, but Tammuz, Attis, and Osiris "represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead."<sup>3</sup> Frazer presupposes that

Adonis' myth must be reenacted in ritual, the *Adonia*, annually, as, in the minds of Adonis' "primitive" worshippers, their ritual imitation of Adonis' death aided the deity and the vegetation which he symbolized to revive again. Frazer's discriminating selection of variants of the events of Adonis' birth, life, and death, and evidence of the *Adonia* allows him to best argue for his analysis of Adonis' myth and its ritual reenactment as symbolizing the death and revival of vegetation. Frazer strategically chooses those variants of Adonis' birth which allow rationalization, and those of his life and death which allow his universalization into a dying-and-reviving-type god who symbolizes vegetation and whose death is reenacted annually in ritual.

Segal's own presuppositions likewise inform his Jungian interpretative method and, in turn, his selection of variants and his treatment of ritual evidence. For Segal, Adonis is a specifically Greek manifestation of the universal *puer* archetype, allied with that of the Great Mother, "who initially is identical with the unconscious as a whole," and whom Aphrodite and Persephone represent.<sup>4</sup> According to Segal, to live as a *puer*, "the way Adonis does, is to live as a psychological infant and, ultimately, as a fetus. The life of a *puer* in myth invariably ends in premature death, which psychologically means the death of the ego and a return to the womblike unconscious," that is, to the Great Mother. Adonis never forms an independent ego, develops psychologically, or resists any smothering female; he never marries or works, and he dies young because of his attachment to the Great Mother.<sup>5</sup> Adonis, although imbued with a personality and agency, as a *puer* acts "out of blindness, not boldness" and "is oblivious to what being human"—developing psychologically and participating in *polis* life—means.<sup>6</sup> Segal aims to argue for Adonis' status as *puer*, and, because of this psychological immaturity, his "sterility": Adonis cannot function as an adult who can produce offspring or participate in *polis* life. Segal presupposes that ritual expresses those ideas present in myth, and so assumes that the *Adonia* likewise expresses political and psychological sterility. Segal's presupposition that myth explains psychological phenomena and that its related rituals express these same phenomena inform his chosen variants of the Adonis myth and ritual evidence.

### **Variant Forms of the Adonis Myth and Evidence of the *Adonia***

Frazer and Segal each engage with those variants of Adonis' myth and ritual evidence which agree best with his own interpretive method. No single mythographer retells Adonis' myth in its entirety. Rather, the tellings of Panyasis, Ovid, Hyginus in his *Fabulae*, Fulgentius, the First and Second Vatican Mythographers, and Antonius Liberalis record the myth of Adonis' birth.<sup>7</sup> Apollodorus and Hesiod each supply alternate parentages for Adonis;<sup>8</sup> the variants of Apollodorus and Hyginus in his *De Astronomica* record Adonis' life;<sup>9</sup> and those of Panyasis, Apollodorus, Bion, and Ovid record Adonis' death.<sup>10</sup> Aristophanes, Plutarch, Lucian, and Theocritus supply evidence of the *Adonia*.<sup>11</sup> Although Panyasis' and Apollodorus' versions of Adonis' death imply that his goring is fatal,<sup>12</sup> the versions of Bion, Ovid, and Sappho mention the *Adonia*, allowing for some ambiguity between the myth proper and its related ritual.<sup>13</sup>

Each mythographer who discusses Adonis' birth affirms that Smyrna or Myrrha, Adonis' mother, first develops a passion for her own father. The cause of Myrrha's incestuous desire, however, varies between mythographers: in Panyasis' variant, Aphrodite curses Smyrna who had not properly honored the goddess, while in Ovid's, Fate curses Myrrha. Hyginus relates that Venus, angry at Smyrna's mother for bragging that Myrrha's beauty excelled Venus' own, curses Myrrha; and neither Antonius Liberalis, Fulgentius, nor the Vatican Mythographers

provide the cause of Myrrha's lust.<sup>14</sup> In each of these variants, Myrrha, with her identity concealed, then sleeps with her father. In the tellings of Panyasis, Antonius Liberalis, and Fulgentius, Myrrha's father, having discovered his daughter's incestuous pregnancy, attempts to kill her, but Myrrha transforms into a myrrh tree before he can. In these accounts, as well as in Ovid and Hyginus' *Fabulae*, Adonis is born from the tree, while in Antoninus Liberalis' variant, Myrrha gives birth to Adonis before her transformation. In two completely alternate versions, Apollodorus states that Cinyras marries Metharme, daughter of Pygmalion, and begets Adonis and his four siblings, while Hesiod relates that Phoinix and Alpheisiboea beget Adonis.<sup>15</sup>

Hyginus, in his *De Astronomica*, and Panyasis tell the story of Adonis' life.<sup>16</sup> In each account, both Aphrodite and Persephone desire to possess Adonis, but Panyasis alone provides the circumstances of their dispute. Panyasis says that, just after Adonis' birth, Aphrodite hides him in a chest and gives the chest to Persephone for safe-keeping. But when Persephone opens the chest and sees Adonis, she refuses to return it to Aphrodite. In both accounts, Zeus must mediate the situation. Hyginus records that Calliope mediates on Zeus' behalf, dividing the year into two parts and allowing each goddess to spend half with Adonis; in Panyasis' version, Zeus himself splits the year, allowing each goddess to spend one third of the year with Adonis, and Adonis chooses to spend the remaining third with Aphrodite. In Hyginus' variant, Aphrodite, angered by Calliope's decision, causes maenads to rip her son, Orpheus, to pieces.

Apollodorus, Panyasis, Ovid, and Bion relate the story of Adonis' death. Apollodorus relates that a boar, due to Artemis' wrath, kills Adonis in his boyhood.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Panyasis says that a boar gores Adonis.<sup>18</sup> Ovid, Bion, and Sappho each refer to the *Adonia* in their accounts of Adonis' death, and it is these accounts' slippage between Adonis' "final" death in myth and this deity's annual death in ritual that Frazer interprets as reenactment. Ovid gives the most detailed account of Adonis' death, recording that, after Eros' arrow accidentally cuts Venus, she falls in love with Adonis and warns him against hunting.<sup>19</sup> Adonis ignores Venus' advice, and is gored by a boar. Venus laments, promising that every year the *Adonia* will commemorate his death and her own grief. In this account, Ovid refers to the ritual: "Memorials of my sorrow, / Adonis," Venus laments, "shall endure; each passing year / Your death repeated in the hearts of men / Shall re-enact my grief and my lament." Here, Ovid explicitly states that Venus intends the *Adonia* to "re-enact" her own sorrow at Adonis' passing yearly. For Adonis' worshippers, then, the god dies each year in ritual. Bion, in his "Lament for Adonis," and Sappho also imply a relationship between Adonis' death in myth and the *Adonia*.<sup>20</sup> Bion, in his ritual lament, "transfer[s] the lament from female worshipers at a ceremony to the goddess herself at the moment of Adonis' death [...]"<sup>21</sup> In Bion's variant, after a boar's tusk stabs Adonis' thigh and he dies, Aphrodite/mourners lament.<sup>22</sup> Adonis descends to the underworld, and the "Moirai summon Adonis back from the dead, 'Adonis!' / and sing spells over him, but he does not obey them."<sup>23</sup> But, says Bion, "[y]ou must weep again, again shed tears in another year." Here, as in Ovid, Adonis, for his worshippers, dies annually, lamented by Aphrodite/mourners.<sup>24</sup> Sappho too transfers the mourning of female worshippers onto Aphrodite, a mythical personage who partakes in a ritual event: the female worshippers' mourning of Adonis' death.<sup>25</sup> Sappho implies again that, for Adonis' worshippers, Adonis dies annually in ritual. Because Ovid, Bion, and Sappho blur Adonis' "final" death in myth with his ritual death, perceived by his worshippers as annual, this deity's death is not unambiguously "final." Thus, the event can be interpreted two ways: either as an unambiguous "final" death, as in the versions of Panyasis and Apollodorus,

who do not mention Adonis' annual death during the *Adonia*, or as ambiguous, as in the variants of Ovid, Bion, and Sappho, who note that, for Adonis' worshippers, the god dies each year.<sup>26</sup>

Aristophanes, Plutarch, Lucian, and Theocritus relate evidence of the *Adonia*.<sup>27</sup> In his *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes depicts the *Adonia* as drunken and loud with dancing, and comprising of "luxurious rites" during which Adonis is "wept to death on the terraces [...]" In his *Alcibiades*, Plutarch relates that during the ritual, women carried "images like dead folk" to burial, and then "mimicked burial rites, beat their breasts, and sang dirges." Plutarch describes a similar scene in his *Nikias*, saying that "in many places throughout the city little images of the god were laid out for burial, and funeral rites were held about them, with wailing cries of women [...]" At Byblos, Lucian says in *De Dea Syria* 6, "[t]hey assert that the legend about Adonis and the wild boar is true, and that the facts occurred in their country, and in memory of this calamity they beat their breasts and wail every year, and perform their secret ritual amid signs of mourning through the whole countryside." Lucian reaffirms the Byblians' mourning for Adonis' yearly demise in *De Dea Syria* 8, but does not explicitly state, as in *De Dea Syria* 6, Adonis' subsequent resurrection. He relates that the yearly reddening of a river named 'Adonis' "announces their time of mourning to the Byblians," whose "story is that during these days Adonis is wounded, and that the river's nature is changed by the blood which flows into its waters; and that it takes its name [Adonis] from this blood." Theocritus' depiction of the *Adonia* in *Idyll XV* communicates that the *Adonia* begins in celebration of Adonis' annual return to Aphrodite, but ends when the women bear Adonis to the shore and mourn his death. The *Adonia*, then, memorializes the death of Adonis, a mythical event which, when blurred with its own commemoration, as in the variants of Ovid, Bion, and Sappho, recurs yearly.

### **Rationalizing and Psychoanalyzing Adonis' Birth**

Frazer and Segal each interpret Adonis' birth, but their selected variants differ according to their respective interpretive methods. Frazer, presupposing that "primitive" rationale underlies myth, aims to rationalize Adonis' birth. He chooses those variants which best lend themselves to rationalization. Segal, meanwhile, presupposing that psychology underlies myth, aims to prove that the circumstances of Adonis' birth explain Adonis' *puer* status, and so he selects those variants in which Adonis is smothered by an overbearing mother figure. For instance, Frazer explains that Adonis' birth from a tree connects him to plant life and that "[a] faint rationalistic colour was given to the legend by saying that his mother was a woman named Myrrh, who had been turned into a myrrh-tree soon after she had conceived the child."<sup>28</sup> As sources for Adonis' birth from a myrrh tree, Frazer cites the versions of Panyasis, the scholiast on Theocritus, Antoninus Liberalis, Ovid, Hyginus in *Fabulae* 58 and 164, Servius on the *Aeneid* and *Eclogues*, and Fulgentius. Frazer mentions no other detail of Adonis' birth until later in his analysis, when he interprets Ovid's version,<sup>29</sup> in which Cinyras "is said to have begotten his son Adonis in incestuous intercourse with his daughter Myrrha at a festival of the corn-goddess [...]" with whom Frazer identifies Demeter.<sup>30</sup> This variant allows Frazer to link Cinyras to the tradition of matriarchal succession on Paphos, which dictated that if a king's wife died, he could retain power only by marrying his own daughter.<sup>31</sup> Apollodorus' variant, in which Cinyras and Metharme beget Adonis, also supports Frazer's claim that Cinyras depended upon female hereditary lines for his power.<sup>32</sup> By locating Cinyras' incest within his imagined historical progression from matriarchy to patriarchy, Frazer rationalizes this aspect of Adonis' birth:

Cinyras must commit incest in order to retain his kingship. Frazer, then, relates those variants of Adonis' birth which best allow him to employ his rationalizing interpretive method.

Segal, by contrast, emphasizes the unusual circumstances of Adonis' birth, as this event explains Adonis' *puer* status, a key point for this interpreter's psychoanalytic analysis. Although he does not cite them by name, Segal relates the variants of Fulgentius, Ovid, Hyginus, and Panyasis: their collective assertion that Myrrha transforms into a myrrh tree before giving birth to Adonis reflects Myrrha's reluctance, as a smothering female, to allow Adonis independence. Segal argues that Myrrha's behavior informs Adonis' later actions, and so Segal cites the variants of the First and Second Vatican mythographers, Fulgentius, Ovid, Panyasis, Antonius Liberalis, and Hyginus in *Fabulae* 58, who each confirm Myrrha's incestuous conception of Adonis, which itself occurs because of Myrrha's own *puella*-like desire for absorption into the father archetype, a desire which prefigures Adonis' own desire for absorption into the Great Mother archetype, represented by Aphrodite and Persephone later in the narrative.<sup>33</sup> Segal interprets Myrrha's incest as prefiguring Adonis' desire for absorption and her transformation as disallowing Adonis' separation from his mother, behaviors that confirm Adonis' status as *puer*. Because Segal's psycho-political interpretive method requires that Adonis manifest the *puer* archetype, he deliberately relates only those variants of Adonis' myth in which Myrrha commits incest and those in which she transforms into a tree before Adonis' birth. In interpreting the events of Adonis' life, both Frazer and Segal select those variants which lend themselves best to their respective interpretive methods, which are themselves informed by each interpreter's presuppositions regarding myth.

### **Universalizing and Reenacting Adonis' Life and Death**

In analyzing Adonis' life, Frazer aims to universalize it, equating this deity to Tammuz, Attis, and Osiris, other dying and reviving gods who represent vegetation and whose rituals, Frazer believes, reenact their myths. By universalizing Adonis' life events, equating this deity to other dying and reviving gods, Frazer garners support for his interpretation of Adonis' death as annual, reenacted by ritual. Frazer's presupposition that myth is universal and that ritual reenacts myth informs his selection of variants of Adonis' life and death and his prioritization of ritual evidence. Thus, Frazer relates that Aphrodite hides Adonis in a chest and gives it to Persephone for safe-keeping. Persephone, however, refuses to give the chest back even "though the goddess of love went down herself to hell to ransom her dear one from the power of the grave." Zeus then mediates, allowing each goddess one part of the year with Adonis.<sup>34</sup> This retelling emphasizes Adonis' annual exchange between the goddesses, as this annual cycle of descent and ascent supports Frazer's hypothesis that Adonis symbolizes vegetation and its yearly cycle of death and renewal.<sup>35</sup> Frazer cites Bion, Panyasis, and Ovid as sources for his retelling, although none of these versions mention Aphrodite's descent to Hades. In the myth of Tammuz, however, Ishtar and Eriškigal dispute over that deity—much as Aphrodite and Persephone dispute over Adonis—and Ishtar descends to hell to ransom Tammuz.<sup>36</sup> In his retelling, Frazer splices these two myths to blur the distinction between them and further his own claim that Adonis is equivalent to Tammuz, a dying and reviving god who represents vegetation. In relating the events of Adonis' life, Frazer exercises his universalizing interpretive method to further his claim that Adonis symbolizes vegetation, like other dying and reviving gods, whose myths he relates because they accord with his universalizing presupposition.

Frazer, in relating Adonis' life events, also chooses variants on which he can employ his myth-ritualist interpretive method. He explains in terms of ritual both Probus' version, in which Adonis reigns as king on Cyprus,<sup>37</sup> and Apollodorus' claim that Pygmalion's daughter Metharme with Cinyras begat Adonis and that Adonis' three sisters, by Aphrodite's wrath, "cohabited with foreigners."<sup>38</sup> Frazer argues that the Phoenician kings of Cyprus took 'Adonis' as a title and that, as suggested by Cinyras' connection with Pygmalion, observed a "ceremony of sacred marriage in which the king wedded the image of Aphrodite, or rather Astarte." Further, since King Cinyras founded religious prostitution on Paphos and his daughters observed it, Frazer says "that at certain festivals each of [the kings of Paphos] had to mate with one or more of the sacred harlots of the temple, who played Astarte to his Adonis."<sup>39</sup> These two interpretations stress that ritual reenacts myth: if the kings of Paphos—each called Adonis—in ritual mated with sacred prostitutes—each representing Astarte/Aphrodite—then they do so to reenact Pygmalion's marriage to an "image of Aphrodite" and Adonis' union with the goddess of love. Frazer here chooses to explicate the variants of Probus and Apollodorus because they can be explained in terms of ritual, a reading which supplies evidence that myths of Adonis and Aphrodite were reenacted in ritual. His myth-ritualist interpretation of Adonis' life—as well as Frazer's choice of variants and emphasis on ritual evidence—will serve to bolster Frazer's hypothesis that the *Adonia* reenacts the final portion of the Adonis myth—his death, since Adonis never suffers a "final" death, but, for his worshippers, dies annually—as a symbol of vegetative life, as a dying and reviving god—even after his going.

In his discussion of Adonis' death, Frazer, presupposing that ritual reenacts myth and that Adonis is equivalent to other dying and reviving gods, engages at more length with ritual evidence than with his selected variants of Adonis' myth and accepts Bion and Ovid's implication that, for the *Adonia*'s participants, Adonis dies annually. Frazer, in his main retelling of the myth, says that a boar, or Ares in disguise, kills Adonis and Aphrodite laments her lover's death.<sup>40</sup> Although Frazer mentions plainly Adonis' "final" death as an aspect of the myth, the performance of Adonis' death in ritual—as implied by the versions of Bion and Ovid, to which Frazer refers—for Frazer, "overwrites" Adonis' going: Frazer presupposes that the *Adonia*'s annual reenactment indicates that, in the minds of his worshippers, Adonis dies and revives eternally. Aside from the variants of Panyasis, Ovid, and Bion, Frazer cites the ritual evidence supplied by Plutarch in his *Alcibiades* and *Nikias*, Zenobius, Theocritus' *Idyll XV*, and Eustathius on the *Odyssey*, who say that "[a]t the festivals of Adonis, which were held in Western Asia and in Greek lands, the death of the god was annually mourned, with bitter wailing, chiefly by women; images of him, dressed to resemble corpses, were carried out as to burial and then thrown into the sea or into springs; and in some places," says Frazer, citing Lucian's *De Dea Syria* 8, Origen's *Selecta in Ezechielem*, and Jerome's commentary on *Ezekiel*, "his revival was celebrated on the following day." Similarly, the worshippers of Adonis in Byblus, according to Lucian's *De Dea Syria* 6, mourned Adonis one day, but on the next witnessed his rise to heaven. The female worshippers would then shave their heads or else "had to give themselves up to strangers on a certain day of the festival, and to dedicate to Astarte the wages of their shame." At Alexandria, however, "[t]he marriage of the lovers [Aphrodite and Adonis] was celebrated one day, and on the morrow women attired as mourners, with streaming hair and bared breasts, bore the image of the dead Adonis to the sea-shore and committed it to the waves. Yet," Frazer significantly points out, "they sorrowed not without hope, for they sang that the lost one would come back again." Frazer emphasizes those rituals during which

worshippers followed their mourning for Adonis with either a celebration of—or hope for—his revival, yet also accepts those sources which record only that Adonis’ worshippers annually mourned his death: although during these festivals worshippers do not explicitly celebrate Adonis’ revival, their annual occurrence implies, for Frazer, that Adonis must rise yearly, even if only in order to die again. Frazer, employing his myth-ritualist interpretive method, informed by his belief that ritual reenacts myth, prioritizes ritual evidence, his discrimination allowed by the Adonis myth’s abundance of variants.

Frazer's presuppositions that ritual reenacts myth and that myth is universal support each other circularly: he argues that Adonis’ status as a dying and reviving god and symbol of vegetation itself supports his myth-ritualist interpretation. These circular presuppositions inform Frazer's decision to emphasize the variants of Bion and Ovid, which mention the annual *Adonia*, and to relate certain versions of the related myths and rituals of other dying and reviving gods. The summertime date of Adonis’ festivals proves that “the ceremony of the death and resurrection of Adonis must also have been a dramatic representation of the decay and revival of plant life.”<sup>41</sup> Further, Frazer equates Adonis’ rites to those of Tammuz, Attis, and Osiris, since Adonis’ equivalency both to vegetation and to these other dying and reviving gods supports his myth-ritualist view that Adonis’ festivals reenact his myth. He cites *Ezekiel* 8.14, in which Ezekiel “saw the women of Jerusalem weeping for Tammuz at the north gate of the temple,” providing evidence for Adonis’ similarity to Tammuz through the women’s “melancholy rites.”<sup>42</sup> Further, Frazer cites an account “given by an Arabic writer of the tenth century” that characterizes “Tammuz or Adonis”—here, Frazer directly equates the figures—as a corn-spirit whose annual death comes at the hands of harvesting men: in mid-July, during the festival of el-Bûgs , women mourn for Tammuz, “because his lord slew him so cruelly, ground his bones in a mill, and then scattered them to the wind.”<sup>43</sup> Frazer connects this festival to the gardens of Adonis, baskets in which women, “chiefly or exclusively,” planted vegetables which grew rapidly, but without roots, quickly withered, “and at the end of eight days were carried out with images of the dead Adonis, and flung with them into the sea or into springs.”<sup>44</sup> For Frazer, this ritual recalls laments for Tammuz “which liken him to plants that quickly fade.”<sup>45</sup> That the rites of Adonis and those of Tammuz both symbolize the decay and revival of vegetation renders their rites—and these deities’ symbolism—substantially equivalent. Likewise, Attis “was to Phrygia what Adonis was to Syria. Like Adonis, he appears to have been a god of vegetation, and his death and resurrection were annually mourned and rejoiced over at a festival in spring.”<sup>46</sup> Again, although Adonis’ myth and ritual bear little resemblance to those of Attis, because both describe the death and revival of vegetation, Frazer equates these figures’ symbolism. Similarly, Frazer proves the equivalence of Osiris to Adonis through the rites of Egyptian farmers, who mourned at midsummer when the harvest had passed and then again in November during sowing.<sup>47</sup> “Yet,” writes Frazer, “they sorrowed not without hope, perhaps a sure and certain hope, that the seed which they thus committed with sighs and tears to the ground would yet rise from the dust and yield fruit a hundredfold to the reaper,” in March, April, or May; but, as the reapers necessarily destroyed the corn-god in order to reap him, their joy remained secret.<sup>48</sup> The equation of Tammuz, Attis, and Osiris with Adonis supports Frazer’s interpretation of Adonis as a symbol of vegetation who never experiences a “final” death: rather, each year, Adonis dies and revives, this portion of his myth reenacted in ritual. Frazer's assumptions—that ritual reenacts myth, which can be universalized and rationalized—inform his selection of the variants of Adonis’ life and death. He downplays those variants of Adonis’ myth which imply Adonis’



“final” death, like those of Apollodorus and Panyasis, instead emphasizing the versions of Bion and Ovid, which suggest that Adonis, for his worshippers, dies annually, like the vegetation to which Frazer desires to liken Adonis. Frazer's presupposition that myth is universal likewise informs his decision to relate the myths and rituals of those dying and reviving deities to which Frazer aims to equate Adonis. These presuppositions bolster each other, and inform Frazer's selection of evidence.

### **Psycho-politicizing Adonis' Life and Death**

Segal, because of his different presuppositions, chooses the variant of the myth of Adonis' life which best supports his own psychological and, later, political analysis of the myth. Unlike Frazer, Segal cites only Panyasis' version because in this version, Aphrodite hides Adonis in a chest, demonstrating her desire as a smothering Great Mother to restrict Adonis' independence: re-enclosing Adonis, according to Segal, effectively undoes his birth. This maternal reading of Aphrodite's reaction to Adonis' birth allows Segal to downplay any sexual aspects of the relationship between Aphrodite and Adonis, as Segal argues that Adonis' relationship to the goddesses is filial. Segal again accepts only Panyasis' version of Zeus' mediation, as in Panyasis' variant alone Zeus allows Adonis to choose how he will spend the final third of each year.<sup>49</sup> Because Segal insists that myth must impart a lesson to its readers, he presupposes that mythical figures maintain agency, as without agency, one acts mechanically.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, that Adonis chooses to accord Aphrodite the final third of his year in this version demonstrates Adonis' inability to exist without the goddesses, and this choice thus furthers Segal's argument that Adonis, as a *puer*, desires absorption into the Great Mother archetype rather than differentiation from her. That Adonis desires this absorption shows Adonis' “psychological retardation,” which “entails political retardation: to fail to become an adult”—that is, to become separate from the Great Mother—“is to fail to become a citizen” and to live in “political infancy: tyranny.” Thus, Panyasis' version permits Segal, presupposing the psychological significance of myth, to analyze this myth psychologically, which, in turn, allows him to insist on the political relevance of Adonis' myth by establishing this figure as a specifically Greek version of an archetype. Further, Segal notes, Adonis fails both to marry and to reproduce; and, says Segal, one must first establish a “settled family life” before achieving citizenship.<sup>51</sup> For Segal, the events which do not occur in Adonis' myth are as important as those that do: Adonis' lack of adult action, in addition to his abundance of childlike action, disqualify him from *polis* citizenship. Thus, Adonis evinces through his negative example the requirements for the attainment of citizenship.<sup>52</sup> Segal, then, selects Panyasis' version of the myth of Adonis' life because its plot proves Adonis' subjugation to the Great Mother. This subjugation proves Adonis a *puer*, which in turn proves that Adonis' myth teaches, through his negative example, the requirements for *polis* citizenship. Segal selects Panyasis' variant, which lends itself to a Jungian analysis, because of his presupposition that myth is best interpreted psychologically and then located within a culture's specific political landscape.

Segal's presupposition that psychology and political agenda underlies myth continues to inform his interpretive method and selection of evidence in his analysis of Adonis' death. Because Segal assumes that Adonis embodies the *puer* archetype, Adonis must endure a “final” death, not reenacted annually in ritual. He, unlike Frazer, thus rejects Bion, Ovid, and Sappho's implication that Adonis himself, for his worshippers, dies annually. Instead, Segal presupposes

that ritual expresses those ideas expressed in their related myths. In ritual context, Segal believes Adonis' gardens to merely symbolize Adonis, and that this botanical symbolism supplies a metaphor "for the tie between humans and politics," as "[f]or Hesiod, Theognis, and others, loyalty to the *polis* yields political fruit and disloyalty political barrenness."<sup>53</sup> The *Adonia* expresses Adonis' fruitlessness, his political sterility and lack of citizenship; it does not reenact myth, as Frazer presupposes, but expresses its ideas, as Segal assumes. Segal's presupposition that myth is psychological and political leads him to privilege those unambiguous variants of Adonis' death, as, for this interpreter, that Adonis dies specifically because of his failure to hunt demonstrates his lack of adult masculinity and sterile *puer* status. Adonis, in dying a very "final" death, not even reenacted in ritual, demonstrates that Adonis "dies not because he is a poor hunter but because he is none at all [...] So enveloped is he in the Great Mother that he actually wants to be killed in order to return wholly to her," and he "unconsciously" courts the danger of the hunt.<sup>54</sup> Segal here privileges Ovid's telling of Adonis' death, as in this version alone Aphrodite warns Adonis not to hunt; Adonis' disregard for her warning signals his "blindness" to—or even his courtship of—danger, and thus his *puer* status. That Segal assumes that psychological, political meaning underlies myth informs his selection of variants of the Adonis myth and his treatment of its related ritual evidence.

## Conclusions

Each interpreter's presuppositions regarding the function of myth and its relationship to ritual informs Segal and Frazer's selection of the Adonis myth's variants and treatment of ritual evidence. While Frazer believes ritual a reenactment of myth, itself a narrative of "primitive" peoples able to be rationalized and universalized, Segal believes that ritual and related myths express the same ideas, which are psychological and, ultimately, political, in nature. These different presuppositions require each interpreter to engage different interpretative methods—Frazer employing rationalization, universalization, and myth-ritualist methods, Segal using psychoanalysis located in a specifically ancient Greek socio-political context. These differing interpretative methods, informed by their equally different presuppositions regarding myth and ritual, likewise inform which variants of Adonis' myth and evidence of the *Adonia* each scholar chooses to analyze. Thus, Frazer's presuppositions and interpretive methods, employed on his preferred evidence, result in his assertion that Adonis, equivalent to other dying and reviving gods, represents vegetation, and that the *Adonia* annually reenacts this deity's death, and that "primitive" peoples believed this ritual to aid the growth and decay of this god and the plant life that he symbolized. Meanwhile, Segal's very different presuppositions and methods, employed on his own preferred evidence, yield a psycho-political analysis, in which Adonis embodies the *puer* archetype and dies sterile, unable to participate in *polis* life as an adult, his ritual expressing these same ideas. These interpreters' variant presuppositions, allowing their two totally variant analyses to coexist.

## Notes

1. In the accounts of Bion (Bion, “Lament for Adonis”) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 10.716–39), the authors equate Aphrodite’s role in the myth of Adonis’ death with that of the mourning worshippers observing the *Adonia*. These authors blur the distinction between myth and ritual, implying that Adonis dies and revives annually in an eternal cycle. Apollodorus, however, does not imply Adonis’ resurrection (*Bibliothèque* 3.14.3–3.14.4). Frazer focuses on the former sources while Segal prefers the latter.
2. Robert A. Segal, “Adonis: A Greek Eternal Child,” in *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 110, 106, 99.
3. Sir James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough: A New Abridgment of the Classic Work*, ed. Dr. Theodor H. Gaster (New York: Criterion Books, 1959), 283–85.
4. Segal, “Adonis,” 110.
5. *Ibid.*, 106-107.
6. *Ibid.*, 105.
7. Panyasis in Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.4; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.284–529; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 58; Fulgentius, *Mythologiae* 3.8; The First Vatican mythographer, 2.197; the Second Vatican mythographer, 45; Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoseon Synagoge* 34.
8. Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.3; Hes fr 139 MW.
9. Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.4; Hyginus, *De Astronomica* 2.7.3.
10. Panyasis in Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.4; Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.3–3.14.4; Bion, “Lament for Adonis”; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.684–739.
11. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 436; Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 18.3; Plutarch, *Nikias* 13.7; Lucian, *De Dea Syria* 6, 8; Theocritus, *Idyll* XV.
12. Panyasis in Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.4; Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.3–3.14.4.
13. Bion, “Lament for Adonis”; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.684–739.
14. Servius, in his commentary on Vergil’s *Eclogues*, mentions that Helios causes Myrrha’s lust, but he gives no reason for Helios’ wrath (Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 730).

15. Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.3; Hes fr 139 MW.
16. Hyginus, *De Astronomica* 2.7.3; Panyasis in Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.4.
17. Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.3.
18. Panyasis in Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.4.
19. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.284–529.
20. Bion, “Lament for Adonis.”
21. Stephen Trzaskoma, R. Scott Smith, and Stephen Brunet, eds., trans. *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 73.
22. Bion, “Lament for Adonis” 7–12, 19–27, 45–50.
23. Ibid., “Lament for Adonis” 94–6.
24. Ibid., “Lament for Adonis” 98.
25. Sappho *LP* 140.
26. This ambiguity will allow Frazer, presupposing that ritual reenacts myth, to interpret Adonis' death as annual and cyclical.
27. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 436; Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 18.3; Plutarch, *Nikias* 13.7; Lucian, *De Dea Syria* 6, 8; Theocritus, *Idyll* XV.
28. Frazer, 290–91.
29. Ibid., also cites the versions of Hyginus in *Fabulae* 58 and 64, Fulgentius, Lactantius Placidius, Servius on the *Aeneid* and *Eclogues*, Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives*, and the scholiast on Theocritus. Hyginus and Fulgentius do not include this detail in their retellings.
30. Ibid., 300. In Ovid’s version, Myrrha sleeps with her father while her mother celebrates the Thesmophoria, a festival of Demeter (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.408–67).
31. Ibid., 300–1.
32. Ibid., 301.
33. Segal, 110, 109.

34. Later in his analysis, Frazer cites Hyginus' version as well, in which Adonis spends two-thirds of the year with Aphrodite and one-third with Persephone (Frazer, 291).
35. Ibid., 291.
36. Stephanie Dalley, ed., trans. *Myths of Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 155–61.
37. Probus' version appears in his scholia to Vergil's *Eclogues*, as cited by Frazer, 302.
38. Apollodorus, *Bibliothèque* 3.14.3.
39. Frazer, 302.
40. Ibid., 286. Frazer cites the versions of Panyasis, Ovid, and Bion, none of whom mention Ares' culpability.
41. Ibid., 290. Frazer also cites certain versions of the Adonis myth in which anemones spring from his blood, as well as variants in which Aphrodite's blood dyes white roses red, both of which suggest a summertime date.
42. Ibid., 286.
43. Ibid., 292.
44. Ibid., 293.
45. Ibid., 285.
46. Ibid., 309.
47. Ibid., 329.
48. Ibid., 331–32.
49. Segal, 110.
50. Ibid., 105.
51. The circumstances of Adonis' birth too bar Adonis' from citizenship, as "he is the child of incest, not marriage, and his father tries to kill his mother" (Segal, 112).
52. Segal, 112–113.
53. Ibid., 112.

54. Ibid., 112–113.

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