

# TRUE LOOKING-GLASSES: NARCISSISM AND MOTHERHOOD IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

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This paper studies mirror images and their relationship to the themes of replication and the perpetuation of physical beauty in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. The symbolic potential of mirrors and related images sustains contradictory meanings in the Renaissance lyric: as representations of an individual, these objects connote the reproductive impulse, the lover's desire that the beloved transmit his/her legacy to a next generation; however, as *re-presentations*, they are repetitions of the subject's sameness, of his desire to preserve his own beauty, and therefore, they address the many dangers of *philautia* or self-love: sterility, decay, ageing, and death. This paper traces the meanings of self-love in Shakespeare through the theoretical framework of post-Freudian readings of the Ovidian tale of Narcissus, and their construction of notions as narcissism and narcissistic aggression (Lacan, Kristeva). More specifically it focuses on narcissistic desire and its implications on the representations of the ageing lover (the literary commonplace of the *senex amans*), as well as their incidence on Shakespeare's anxieties about femininity and motherhood.

If it be true that in Narcissus' universe there is no other, one might nevertheless think of the *spring* as his partner.

## INTRODUCTION

When psychoanalysis approaches literature for theoretical, clinical, or critical purposes, it engages in forms of reading that might be termed *allegorical*. As in the title of Shoshana Felman's seminal collection, psychoanalysis poses "the question of reading: *otherwise*" (1982).<sup>1</sup> In Felman's intended quibble, psychoanalysis purports to read *alternatively*, but also intends, in Angus Fletcher's expression, to turn the text "into something other (*allos*) than what the open statement tells the reader" (1964: 2). This paper intends to interpret certain interrelated topics in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in the light of post-Freudian notions of *narcissism*. More specifically, I propose that the Young Man sonnets' preoccupation with ageing, reproduction, and the concern with time that derive from these are better understood if we accept the narcissistic structure of desire that shapes these love poems. At the outset I am

1. On Felman's title and its implications to post-Freudian psychoanalytic criticism, see her introduction, "To Open the Question" (1982: 5-10).

aware that Shakespearean imagery related to “self-love” in *The Sonnets* would not initially demand interpretation from the perspective of Freudian “narcissism”. Terms of current use in Renaissance literary codes as Latin *amor sui* or Greek *philantia* might have rendered this notion unnecessary.<sup>2</sup> However, I want to stress a problem in the sonnets whose implications psychoanalysis renders more clearly, namely, literary recognition as recognition of self. Recognition narratives taken from the classical tradition have helped psychoanalysis to formulate decisive theories on human subjectivity. And among these, the Oedipus and Narcissus story are paradigmatic. In bringing forth the Freudian and post-Freudian use of the latter, I want to subscribe the usefulness of psychoanalytic readings for unlocking problems of erotic subjectivity in the Renaissance lyric.

#### NARCISSUS: OVID IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

The opening epigraph in this paper is Julia Kristeva’s (1987: 113), and it suggests a key feature in the Narcissus story as we know it from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (III, 339-510): namely, the importance of the water-spring as the *vehicle* that links the *ego* to the *object* of desire. But this link is also a source of confusion to the ego. As a matter of fact, *vehicle* and *object*, water-spring and reflection, are merged into the same thing, since there are no tangible realities outside Narcissus but the reflecting waters. Ovid’s lines in the *Metamorphoses* emphasise this idea: “Inrita fallaci quotiens dedit oscula fonti, / in mediis quotiens visum captantia collum, / bracchia mersit aquis nec se deprendit in illis” (Miller ed. 1921: vol. 3, III, 427-29).<sup>3</sup> The object’s absence – its dissolution into a specular image of the fake spring (“fallaci fonti”) – is what Jacques Lacan has called the *object petit a* or the *other* (lowercase). In his Seminar 2, Lacan defines this object as “the other which isn’t the other at all, since it is essentially coupled with the ego, in a relationship which is reflexive, interchangeable” (1988: 321). Kristeva’s own paraphrase of Ovid points out this non-status of the other in relation to the *two acts of recognition* that sustain the story’s tragic substance. When the tears shed from Narcissus’ eyes splash on the surface and distort the image underwater, the youth realises first that what he has fallen in love with is his own reflection, and second that this reflection can – and in fact *will* – disappear, as soon as he turns back (Kristeva 1987: 104). The undulating waters signal the tragedy of Narcissus as a twofold problem of space and time. Of space, because the spring constitutes an impossible place for the subject’s union with the object of his desire. Of time, because Narcissus’ realisation of the image’s eventual disappearance signifies another impossibility: the object of desire is not eternal. But the impossibility of desire is the mark of its inevitability, and of the tragic fate of Ovid’s Narcissus: the object is *elusive* and *time-bound*, but its pursuit is at the same time *endless* and *inevitable*.

Elusiveness constitutes an essential motif in Ovid’s narrative: the half line

2. On these concepts, see the discussion below.

3. “How often did he offer vain kisses on the elusive pool? How often did he plunge his arms into the water seeking to clasp the neck he sees there, but did not clasp himself in them!” (trans. F. J. Miller).

“quod amas, avertere, perdes” (“what you love, if you turn back, you lose” [Miller ed. 1921: vol. 3, III, 433]) embodies an aspect of narcissistic desire which was captured in the Renaissance emblematic tradition. Otto Vaenius’ *Amorum Emblemata* (1608) provides the instance here (Figure 1). One of its emblems displays a winged Cupid contemplating his image in the mirror, while the English motto and epigram remind, in terms similar to those in Ovid, that love will disappear as soon as the lover’s gaze is withdrawn from the reflecting object – in this case, a looking-glass.<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, Narcissus’ endless pursuit of his impossible object is made clear in Ovid’s account of the youth being bound to beholding his own image even after death: “tum quoque se, postquam est inferna sede receptus, / in Stygia spectabat aqua” (Miller ed. 1921: vol. 3, III, 504-5).<sup>5</sup> The duplication of the water-spring into the deadly Stygian pool reproduces the endless duplication of Narcissus’ image every time the undulating waters that make the reflection disappear resume their calmness (Miller ed. 1921: vol. 3, III, 485). Narcissus’ tragedy consists in the iteration of reflecting vehicle and reflected image *in* and *beyond* the bounds of life. And in this sense, to psychoanalysis it is not particularly relevant that the youth’s body turns into a beautiful flower.

Ovid’s tale of tragic *Liebestod* becomes in psychoanalysis an allegory of recognition. In Jacques Lacan’s view, the myth of Narcissus embodies the aggressive character of human eroticism, since its narrative plays out the unbalance between the wholeness of the specular image and the uncoordinated incompleteness of the ego’s real body.<sup>6</sup> Kristeva’s own reading stresses incompleteness in its subjective, spatial, and temporal dimensions. It is my main contention here that the old-aged man that takes up the poetic voice in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* becomes a site for rehearsing different ways for venting, sublimating, or taming this aggressive side of the narcissistic drive.<sup>7</sup>

#### SHAKESPEARE’S NARCISSISTIC “SENEX”

A first scenario leads us to sonnet 22:

My glass shall not persuade me I am old  
 So long as youth and thou are of one date,  
 But when in thee time’s furrows I behold,  
 Then look I death my days should expiate.  
 For all that beauty that doth cover thee

4. The English version of the motto and epigram in the 1608 multilingual edition reads as follows: “Out of sight out of mind: / The glasse doth shew the face whyle thereon on doth look, / But gon, it doth another in lyke manner shew, / Once being turn’d away forgotten is the view, / So absence hath bin cause the lover love forlook” (Vaenius 1996: 126).

5. “And even when he had been received into the infernal abodes, he kept on gazing on his image in the Stygian pool” (trans. F. J. Miller).

6. On aggressivity, and the relations between the specular image and *amour-propre*, see Lacan 1979: 16-29, 137-39. See also Evans 1996: 119-20.

7. Quotations from the sonnets are from Booth ed. 1979, and will be subsequently given parenthetically by number in the original 1609 edition and line(s).

Is but the seemly raiment of my heart,  
 Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me.  
 How can I then be elder than thou art?  
 Therefore love, be of thyself so wary  
 As I not for myself, but for thee will,  
 Bearing thy heart, which I will keep so chary  
 As tender nurse her babe from faring ill.  
 Presume not on thy heart when mine is slain,  
 Thou gav'st me thine not to give back again.

The first quatrain brings forth several acts of the gaze: on the first line, the lover perceives a deceitfully young image of himself as a product of a previous look at the youthful beauty described in the second line; conversely, the fourth line describes the subject's perception of himself as an old man, which is indeed the consequence of a hypothetical perception of the beloved's ageing complexion on line three. The lover's "glass" is to no purpose here, since the lover's actual glass (like Narcissus' "water-spring") is identified as the beloved. The stanza progresses from self-deception to self-recognition in ways that remind us of the two dimensions of Ovid's Narcissus addressed above. Subjective space and time concur in the process. First, the spatial dimension is made manifest as the vehicle of the reflection (the young beloved) prevents the subject (the old lover) from perceiving the truth of his own reflected image (his ageing complexion). Second, the lover's realisation of his former self-deceit is triggered off by his recognition of the workings of time: his acceptance that the object of desire is also, like himself, an ageing individual conveys the apparent defeat of the old man in love. The rest of the sonnet tries to efface the anxiety generated by this defeat: keeping the beloved's heart becomes not so much an act of self-giving, but an attempt to possess his beauty and youth ("How can I then be elder than thou art?"), which is materialised in the warning, even threatening conclusion: "Thou gav'st me thine [heart] not to be back again."

Sonnet 62 represents a new version of the dynamics of self-deception and self-recognition opened in the first quatrain of 22:

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,  
 And all my soul, and all my every part;  
 And for this sin there is no remedy,  
 It is so grounded inward in my heart.  
 Methinks no face so gracious is as mine,  
 No shape so true, no truth of such account,  
 And for myself mine own worth do define,  
 As I all others in all worths surmount.  
 But when my glass shows me myself indeed  
 Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,  
 Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;  
 Self so self-loving were iniquity.  
     'Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise,  
     Painting my age with beauty of thy days.

The first two quatrains depict a well-known literary commonplace, namely the

ridiculous carriage of the *senex amans* – the “old man in love” of classical comedy. Love rejuvenates the old man, but only to his own private eyes. The looking-glass of the third quatrain replaces his self-deceit with a kind of moralistic awareness that is indeed suggested from the first word of the sonnet – “sin” – to the last in the third quatrain – “iniquity”. The sinful character of “self-love” is the subject of moralistic warning in emblematic representations. Geoffrey Whitney’s “*Amor sui*” shows Narcissus on the spring’s side, and also describes “self-love” as a the incapacity for self-recognition, a “blindnesse most extreme”. In Whitney’s account, in the tradition of moralising Ovid’s tales, death comes mechanically as punishment after sin, thus becoming the logical moral outcome of egotism (Figure 2).

However, the moralistic simplicity of this emblem freezes the dynamics of desire (deceit *vs.* recognition) explained above. In spite of the thematic coincidences between the emblem and the poem, one wonders whether this third quatrain should be read as a recognition of sin, or rather as exculpation on the part of the narcissistic lover. “Quite contrary,” that is, on the other side of the mirror, the lover reads self-love “quite contrary,” that is, differently from what he has read in the previous two stanzas:<sup>8</sup> “self-love” is no longer the sin of a self-loving self, as the subjunctive “were” suggests, but the consequence of what the final couplet explains: “Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise, / Painting my age with beauty of thy days.” As “thee” becomes “myself”, the reader understands that the deceit of self-love has been undone only apparently, since it is reproduced into another narcissistic trick: the identification of first with second person as effected by the mirror and the “painting” of the very last line. What sonnets 22 and 62 propound is a definition of love as the assimilation of the other into the self’s mirror-image, and therefore, a conception of desire as inevitably bound to a narcissistic strategy of self-deceit, a way of making up for the impossibility of idealised desire. Differences between them are a matter of mood: whereas in 22 the overall effect relies on the lover’s warning, 62 uses self-persuasion as the vehicle to self-deceit. Aggressivity in the former sonnet is replaced with the latter’s exercise of sublimation.

In any case, the narcissistic self is not a casual theme in the *Sonnets*. The self-loving *senex* is probably one of Shakespeare’s major poetic achievements. In this sense, I would like to sketch a reading of the first seventeen sonnets – that is, the group of poems within the sequence in which the lover urges the beloved to beget children while he is young – as an effect of the lover’s narcissistic drive. Even though in his already classic study Joel Fineman (1988) has read the whole sequence in the light of epideictic rhetoric as poems of praise, I think that this initial group allows a more consistent interpretation in terms of their indebtedness

8. Stephen Booth has first suggested this reading, and hints at its relation with a possible dynamics of deceit and recognition in the sonnet’s structure: “The line cannot be precisely glossed. The roundabout phrasing may have been dictated by Shakespeare’s desire to play on the fact that a mirror image is reversed, *contrary*. The phrase *contrary I read* may also have been appealed to him because it embodies the reader’s and speaker’s sense that the speaker’s self-image has been exactly contrary to the physical facts of his experience, and because it embodies a capsule description of the poem’s process and the reader’s experience of it – repeatedly shifting from one kind of truth to another and from another basis of perceiving the speaker’s position as contrary to truth” (Booth 1979: 243).

to deliberative rhetoric, especially if we accept Katharine Wilson's suggestion that a source for these poems might be found in Thomas Wilson's translation of Erasmus of Rotterdam's "Epistle to Persuade a Young Man to Marriage", as it appeared in his *Art of Rhetoric* in 1560 (Wilson 1974: 146-67).<sup>9</sup> Thomas Wilson includes Erasmus's letter as paradigmatic of a deliberative speech, that is, the rhetorical mode of persuasion. And for those reasons, the Epistle becomes a defence of the socialising, educative aspects of married life, whose virtues and usefulness the Young Man in question must be persuaded by. Most of the reasons adduced throughout these sonnets are found in Wilson's translation of Erasmus, as well as major images. Thus, Erasmus counsels the Young man to marry, among other reasons, and I quote Wilson's translation, "because that they, like unprofitable persons, and living only to themselves, did not increase the world with issue" (Medine ed. 1994: 83). The language of "profit" and "increase", as opposed to the notion of reflexive love, is the same as in Shakespeare's sonnets. Images of the fertility of the land like "tillage" versus "barrenness" are also shared by both texts. But, in spite of lexical and thematic indebtedness, Shakespeare's interests are quite far from the kind of pragmatic issues that Erasmus' letter propounds. And ultimately none of Erasmus' / Wilson's reasons for reproduction are as powerful as the poet's own in sonnet 10: "Make thee another self *for love of me*" (10.11; emphasis added). And this makes it quite clear that, whatever purpose the poems have, these are oriented to the subject's own profit rather than the beloved (as should be the case were they poems of praise in the epideictic guise). But, as usually in Shakespeare, the meaning of this line is far from transparent: the causal or final senses of the preposition "for" open up a wide range of semantic possibilities, as well as the subjective or objective senses of the genitive construction "love of me", with its possible subjects or objects ("thou" or "another self"). I want to suggest one which is perhaps among the oddest: *make a replica of yourself so that I can continue to love you/him*; or, *make a replica of yourself so that I continue to love myself (in you/him)*.<sup>10</sup> The line creates a structure of desire which includes a third term with a function similar to the mirror-image in the sonnets analysed above: the lover asks the beloved to provide a copy ("another self") which is not only the beloved's, but also the lover's own narcissistic object.

Understanding reproduction as the making of exact replicas of one parent explains these poems' insistence on certain words. In sonnet 11, for instance, we read a description of the young man as a repository of "beauty, wisdom, and *increase*" (11.5; emphasis added), the last being a reminder of the reproductive power of nature as it is idealistically rendered in the very first line of the sequence

9. My remark on Fineman does not attempt to invalidate his main theses, which I subscribe in this essay. I regard my contribution as an extension to Fineman's main contention that "Shakespeare's sonnets inaugurate and give a name to the modernist literary self, thereby specifying for the future what will be the poetic psychology of the subject of representation" (1988: 29).

10. Stephen Booth (1979: 149) detects in this line the first moment of close personal friendship between addresser and addressee in the 1609 arrangement of the poems, but does not interpret "love of me" as a possible intimation of "self-love", a topic that recurs throughout the sequence.

–“From fairest creatures we desire increase” (1.1). *Increase* is indeed the ideal of reproductive desire in the conclusion of sonnet 11: “She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby / Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die” (11.13-14). The sense of reproductive abundance in terms like “increase” and “copy” (Lat. *copiā*) is clear as the lover asked the beloved to print “more” – the lover’s request that the beloved have a son multiplies to ten in sonnet 6: “Ten times thyself were happier than thou art, / If ten of thine ten times refigured thee” (6.9-10). This multiple *refiguring* is only desirable as long as it is reproduction of sameness: terms like “seal,” “print,” and “copy” in sonnet 6, as well as the motherly “glass” of sonnet 3 testify to it:

Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest,  
 Now is the time that face should form another,  
 Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,  
 Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.  
 For where is she so fair whose unneared womb  
 Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?  
 Or who is he so fond will be the tomb  
 Of his self-love to stop posterity?  
 Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee  
 Calls back the lovely April of her prime;  
 So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,  
 Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.  
 But if thou live rememb’red not to be  
 Die single and thine image dies with thee.

Sonnet 3 is outstanding within the first group, and also within the sequence, for several reasons. First of all, because the two uses of the “glass” image: in the first line, the injunction that the beloved see his own image in the mirror invites an act of self-recognition as the cause of reproduction, and therefore, constructs begetting as parthenogenesis: the mirror urges the beloved’s desire to form another, and the same, face. The “mother” of line 4 observes the conception of the female as the vessel which contains the matter which is informed (recall the “form” of line 2) by the male seed. Line 9, however, states the beloved’s maternal inheritance: “thy mother’s glass” disrupts the masculine rhetoric of inheritance which presides this and the rest of this group of seventeen sonnets, as epitomised in the concluding line of sonnet 14: “You had a father, let your son say so” (14.14). In a different order of things, the text also engages in a paradoxical rhetoric of self-love: although self-love becomes the origin of reproduction when on line one the mirror reflection persuades of the necessity of love-making, some lines after it is explicitly invoked as synonymous with barrenness, old age, and death, an instance of the egotistic, self-destructive narcissism of Whitney’s moral emblem (Figure 2): “Or who is he so fond will be the tomb / Of his self-love to stop posterity?”. Fatherly *vs.* motherly inheritance, reproductive *vs.* sterile self-love, make this a quite exceptional sonnet in the sequence. On the first dichotomy, Booth has suggested that it might relate to the Fair Lord’s womanly physique as portrayed in Sonnet 20: “A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted”. On

the second, one must recall that the kind of self-love invoked in this sonnet puts the old man's reproductive longings (the theme of sonnets 22 and 62, and also the first group in the sequence) against the young man's self-assured, egotistic indifference towards reproduction. In this sense, mirrors in the sonnets create replicas of the self which embody the paradox of sameness: doubling a subject is at the same time an act of perpetuation and a denial of the replica's difference. It is my contention that the gender and reproduction paradoxes in these sonnets are explained by the lover's narcissistic drive. Behind the constant injunction that the beloved fathers a child, there lies the lover's desire that the beloved be his mother's glass, and become therefore a mother himself, thus replicating not his own image, but a narcissistic copy of the lover, that is, the ideal image of sameness that the lover constructs and introjects throughout the sequence. The post-Freudian conception of love as a narcissistic drive whereby the individual assimilates pleasant sexual objects as parts of his own self is relevant to understand amorous subjectivity in the *Sonnets*, as well as the lover's description of the beloved as "thy mother's glass". By making the beloved a mother, the lover decides to father the replicated image, thus preventing the begetting of an image different from the one he has fallen in love with: by shunning maternal difference, the lover sustains the narcissistic fantasy that the mirror-image of his desire be eternal and the same.

The ageing, homoerotic, and narcissistic male of the *Sonnets* constructs an ideal object of desire who assimilates the traditional notion of motherhood as feminine matter without form, a reproductive force which leaves no imprint on her offspring. And for that reason, the maternal legacy of the young man consists in his ability to father a son made to the old lover's selfsame image and likeness. By being a glass, the beloved is the vehicle to reproduction; by being a mother-like male, the replica of himself that he will beget shuns the risks of difference, and therefore, becomes the narcissistic ideal of eternal sameness. In this sense, Shakespeare's lyrical discourse of motherhood in the Young Man poems is by no means different from what feminist and psychoanalytic criticism has concluded on the dramatic works. As critics like Mary Beth Rose (1991), or Janet Adelman (1992) have suggested, Shakespearean mothers never achieve a full representation as subjects, and their functions are frequently surrogated, displaced, or erased. They may be simply dead (like in *King Lear* or *The Tempest*), and their absence recalled at certain key moments in the plays; sometimes, like in the history plays, their crucial role in legitimising inheritance is distorted or occluded (*King John*, or *Henry V*); and other times, their presence constitutes a problem for the male hero's masculine aspirations of independence and dominance (like in *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus* or *All's Well that Ends Well*). Even though little has been said on maternal origins in the *Sonnets*, I think that the few references to mothers in the sequence should help understand that Shakespeare rehearsed in these *Sonnets* an almost total suffocation of the threat of motherhood which he could not achieve in the plays. By inventing a beloved who is his "mother's glass", Shakespeare's *senex* fantasises the possibility of fathering (narcissistically) the object of his desire (as well as its possible replicas). And thereby he recalls

Kristeva's Narcissus: *if it be true that in the universe of the senex there is no other, one might think nevertheless of the Young Man as his mirror.*

APPENDIX: ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: *Out of sight out of minde.* Otto Vaenius, *Amorum Emblemata* (1608)

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Figure 2: *Amor sui.* Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems* (1586)

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