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Narcissus in Queer Time

Queer temporality, particularly in relation to the Middle Ages, has often been interested in questioning the prevailing historiography, suggesting affective or embodied connections to the past as alternative modes of engaging with history.¹ At the same time, other branches of queer temporality, focused on queer lives lived now, have been a crucial means of describing how queer lifestyles disrupt the reproduction-based structure of mainstream, heteronormative society.² Uniting both of these threads of discussion, I argue that John Gower's retelling of the Narcissus myth in the *Confessio Amantis* imagines Narcissus as a queer protagonist, living out of sync with the (hetero)norms of medieval society in ways that are recognizable in queer theory today. I read Gower's Narcissus as a transgender narrative of self-recognition and identity that ultimately cannot be sustained in his hostile social environment.

Before entering into Narcissus's queer temporality, we must consider the context in which this tale is told. As part of Book I, focused on the sin of Pride, Genius tells Narcissus's tale as an example of the subset of Pride called "surquiderie."³ Defined by the *Middle English*

¹ See, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), esp. chapter 3, "Time Binds: or, Erotohistoriography."

² Some of the most familiar and noteworthy examples include Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

³ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, Middle English Texts Series, ed. Russell A. Peck, Latin trans. Andrew Galloway, 2nd edition (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006). <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1> Subsequent quotations are taken from vol. 1 of this edition.

Dictionary as “presumption, arrogance, [and] self-importance,”⁴ Genius’s subsequent description highlights the delusional aspects suggested by its modern English denotation of “presumption.” Those who presume believe confidently in things that are not true, believing themselves to be not only more intelligent, more beautiful than their peers, and generally better, but attaining a level of self-absorption that finally renders them unable to worship God:

And thus he wolde bere a pris
 Above alle othre, and noght forthi
 He seith noght ones ‘grant mercy’
 To Godd, which alle grace sendeth,
 So that his wittes he despendeth
 Upon himself, as thogh ther were
 No godd which myhte availe there.
 Bot al upon his oghne witt
 He stant, till he falle in the pitt
 So ferr that he mai noght arise. (I. 1900-1909)

In effect, those guilty of *surquiderie* exist in a kind of self-contained alternate reality subsumed within the usual temporal space, in which lies are transformed into veracity for them, and they therefore transgress the social hierarchy that defines the norms of “truth.” Therefore, *surquiderie* itself denotes a kind of queer temporality, in which presumption marks a rejection of societal norms in favor of personal truths. Whether or not the vice here is “correct” is less of a concern for me than the reaction it engenders. Genius continually returns to the metaphor of falling to

⁴ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “Surquidrī(e),” accessed July 17, 2019, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/>.

refer to the rewards of *surquiderie*: “Bot al upon his oghne witt / He stant, til he falle in the pitt / So ferr that he mai nocht arise” and the connotation of rigid punishment is clearly presaged, even before we begin Narcissus’s tale (I. 1907-1909). Presumption, and its attendant cognitive dissonance between what is construed as false and true, the space between the public and the personal, lies at the heart of Narcissus’s tale, as we will see.

Indeed, we are acquainted with Narcissus’s delusion early on. Genius comments with evident disdain that Narcissus had acquired a “nyce wone” (I. 2276) or foolish habit, of believing that there were no women worthy of him. The Latin marginalia informs us that Narcissus’s tale in particular is meant to warn lovers: “contra illos, qui de propria formositate presumentes amorem mulieris dedignantur” (“against [being] those who, presuming on their own beauty, disdain the love of a woman”),⁵ which is Narcissus’s primary fault in Genius’s reading. Genius continues to say, “So hihe he sette himselve above / Of stature and of beauté bothe, / That him thoghte alle wommen lothe: / So was ther no comparisoun / As toward his condicioun” (I.2280-2284). Here, Genius’s tale presents a departure from Ovid’s version, in which Narcissus is characterized by his vanity, demonstrated by his lack of empathy for his lovers, rather than a simple dislike of all women. While Gower’s Narcissus does indeed disdain women for their appearance, his disinterest is also located in their not being of his “condicioun,” which is glossed as “moral disposition”⁶; indicating a dissatisfaction not just with the beauty, but also with the internal, moral qualities of women.

⁵ The English translation of the Latin is Andrew Galloway’s. See page 270-1 of the TEAMS Middle English Texts Series edition, 2nd ed, the note to line 2279.

⁶ This reading is supported by the *MED*. See *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “Condicioun,” accessed July 17, 2019, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/>.

Narcissus is therefore a failed lover from the outset. His disinterest in women presents a major obstacle in the romance tradition, one that must be rectified by the conclusion of the tale. The trope of the failed lover is not uncommon in medieval romance—memorable examples include the “Tale of Rosiphelee” in Book IV of the *Confessio*, as well as Marie de France’s *Guigemar*.⁷ Like Narcissus, both protagonists are aristocrats disinterested in romance, yet both Guigemar and Rosiphelee are offered the chance to be rehabilitated back into their society—indeed, their earlier mistakes merely serve as the impetus for their stories. However, for Narcissus, his disinterest becomes the “pitt” mentioned above, out of which “he mai nocht arise” (I. 1909).

The irreversible nature of Narcissus’s rejection of societal norms indicates that his situation is more complex than those of his counterparts mentioned above. In *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Judith Halberstam offers a working definition of queer temporality as “develop[ing], at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction,”⁸ and as “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.”⁹ Narcissus’s rejection of the marriage economy embodies the queer temporality Halberstam describes. The fact that the text does not allow the young lord to be rehabilitated indicates precisely how vital his romantic interests are to heteronormative, socioeconomic stability. As a “lordes sone,” Narcissus must marry and reproduce in order to safeguard his family’s interests, which he refuses to do. His rejection of the

⁷ See Marie de France, “Guigemar,” in *The Lais of Marie de France*, ed. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁸ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

marriage economy is absolute, and such a rejection is indicative of a kind of selfishness, or Pride, which the text finds inexcusable, no matter what grounds his decision is based on. The “pitt” of delusion to which Narcissus succumbs—the delusion being that he is allowed a choice about his marital status—not only presents problems for the continuation of his aristocratic family, but could contribute to future social unrest and upheaval. As far as his society was concerned, of course, aristocratic marriage was not about choice, but socioeconomic alliance and continuity.

This social impetus is present in the tale as the “goddes pourveance,” (l. 2289) a hegemonic force that promises to “beguile” and therefore punish Narcissus’s failure to accede to straight culture’s dictates. Though only briefly mentioned, the line indicates that the tale which follows is one engineered by the gods for their purposes. In Ovid’s version, this incursion from the gods makes somewhat more sense: Ovid goes to great lengths to ensure, through sympathetic descriptions of Echo and the other distraught lovers prior to the reflection scene, that his audience comes to see Narcissus as receiving his just desserts.¹⁰ By removing these demonstrations of Narcissus’s cruelty, Gower enables a more sympathetic reaction to the young lord’s situation. And what’s more, the gods’ punishment also seems far less justifiable as a result, therefore also laying the blame for Narcissus’s suicide at the feet of the gods.

Narcissus’s apathy toward women could also be attributed to an extended adolescence: in Ovid’s version, we are told that “namque ter ad quinos unum Cephisius annum/ addiderat poteratque puer iuvenisque videri” (“Narcissus had reached his sixteenth year and might seem

¹⁰ Gower picks up the Narcissus story essentially at the well itself—all prior matters included by Ovid are not mentioned, though Echo’s story is told in a later book. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller. 3rd ed. Vol. 1, Book III, lines 340-407. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977; repr. 1984), 340-407. Subsequent English translations of Ovid are Miller’s, and all Ovidian citations are from this edition.

either boy or man”).¹¹ Halberstam indicates that queer temporality can also be manifested as a “disrupt[ion] [of] conventional accounts of youth culture, adulthood, and maturity.”¹² For Halberstam, extended adolescence in the queer community today is an opportunity for prolonged participation in, and therefore a strengthening of, queer subcultures. Narcissus, however, has no recourse to such a community, and seems instead to isolate himself from others, excluding his cool response toward women. In the hunt, for example, Narcissus separates himself from the group early, riding out after the hart with such speed that he leaves his companions behind (I. 2303). His bid for isolation is especially notable if we consider him in terms of other adolescents like Chaucer’s romantic young Squire, of similar age, who defines himself by his service to his lady,¹³ and Nicholas and Alisoun of “The Miller’s Tale,” all three of whom display plenty of interest in love/sex, all of which being consistent with medieval authorities’ expectations for the age group.¹⁴ It’s tempting to read Narcissus’s isolation as a symptom of his Pride, as Genius does, but it seems to me to speak to a sense of lack in the youth’s life: he appears to be quite capable of articulating what he does or does not want, like an adult, but isn’t sure yet what it is that he’s missing, something we tend to associate with adolescence. The hunt for the hart (and its

¹¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, lines 351-2.

¹² Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 2.

¹³ By which I mean that all of the Squire’s actions are calculated to win him favor with his lady—whether chivalric deeds or his appearance. In further contrast to Narcissus, note that he is called “curteis...lowely, and servysable” while the less straight-seeming Narcissus is always described by denoting how “hihe” he sees himself. See “General Prologue” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁴ Eve Salisbury, *Chaucer and the Child* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 152.

homonym, heart) symbolizes, as it so often does in romance, the simultaneous search for love and meaning in one's life, both of which are transformed into identity for Narcissus.

In addition, Narcissus's isolation becomes the means by which he enters the liminal space comprised of the "lusty welle" in the forest (I. 2306). Though Gower does not include a description of the well, or describe it as enchanted or magical, its close narrative proximity to the hunt for the heart and the attendant thirst that assails him indicates its special nature. Though Gower does not include this passage in his retelling, the magical qualities Ovid describes remain present in his text:

a clear pool with silvery bright water, to which no shepherds ever came, or she-goats feeding on the mountainside, or any other cattle; whose smooth surface neither bird nor beast nor falling bough ever ruffled. Grass grew all around its edge, fed by the water near, and a coppice that would never suffer the sun to warm the spot.¹⁵

A preternaturally perfect spot, one that humans and animals instinctually avoid, we may conclude that the water is clearly enchanted. Its undisturbed surface also adds to a sense of stillness and calm which will make the pool all the more effective as a mirror. Such qualities indicate that this is not a simple well of water, but instead a liminal space where the invisible becomes visible, and where the hidden is revealed. The fact that Narcissus will later identify his female reflection as being a "nimphe as tho was faie" (I.2317-18) suggests that he also recognizes the magic potential of the space, if only subconsciously.

¹⁵ fons erat inlimis, nitidis argenteus undis,/ quem neque pastores neque pastae monte capellae / contigerant aliudve pecus, quem nulla volucris / nec fera turbarat nec lapsus ab arbore ramus;/ gramen erat circa, quod proximus umor alebat, / silvaque sole locum passura tepescere nullo. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, lines 407-412.)

Just as the hunt is more than a hunt, the thirst that causes him to pause also symbolizes more than fatigue. Gower tells us that “such a thirst was on him falle,/ that he moste owther deie or drinke” (I. 2308-2309) emphasizing a sense of need that does appear as strongly in the *Metamorphoses*. This thirst functions as a type of urgent longing, resembling lovesickness, even before Narcissus approaches the water. There’s no mistake, particularly for Genius, that the proud Narcissus, who dislikes women, is compelled to “le[y] himself lowe” on the ground, literally and figuratively, in order to quench his needy thirst and experience a moment of realization.

In Ovid’s version, Narcissus’s view of himself is characterized by physical desire, culminating in a catalogue of his beauty catering to the gaze of the audience. Although appearance plays a role, it becomes such a moot point in this narrative that Gower does not include a description of Narcissus, nor is it ever even noted whether or not he is attractive. The central focus is much more on narrating the internal processes that Narcissus is experiencing through a kind of psychological, stream-of-consciousness perspective. In gazing into the well, Narcissus sees “the like of his visage” (I. 2315), not the copy, necessarily, but one similar to his—indicating that he recognizes both himself and a crucial difference: that of gender. Moreover, unlike his experiences with the women he has rejected, he instinctually feels a kind of equality, or kinship, that opens his heart to the female reflection in a way he was unable to respond. Genius explains the process by which Narcissus understands the image as female as a course of slow realization:

He sih the like of his visage,
 And wende ther were an ymage
 Of such a nimphe as tho was faie,

Whereof that love his herte assaie
 Began, as it was after sene,
 Of his sotie, and made him wene
 It were a womman that he syh. (I. 2315-2321)

In Genius's view, the beauty of the reflection, described as the "nimphe," is imagined to make Narcissus think that it has magical properties, that somehow transforms in his besotted mind into that of a woman. The Latin marginalia attached to this tale wants to explain the female apparition as being that of Echo, whom he had previously rejected,¹⁶ but close readers might note that Genius is not so specific, and such a conclusion seems more likely to be an attempt by the note-writer to erase any trace of homosexuality.¹⁷ However, the fact that the image arises as a reflection in the water must remind us that this is instead a reflection of self.

In her article on mirrors and mirroring in the *Confessio Amantis*, Andrea Schutz posits that "in classical sources, the mirror tends to reflect the truth of the matter" or a realization of "self-knowledge or self-awareness," particularly in Narcissus's tale.¹⁸ In her reading, Schutz argues that part of Gower's move in making Narcissus believe his reflection is female is an

¹⁶ See footnote to line 2279, p. 270-1 "vbi ipse faciem suam pulcherrimam in aqua percipiens, putabat se per hoc illam Nympham, quam Poete Ekko vocant, in flumine coram suis oculis pocius conspexisse" ("There, perceiving in the water his own most beautiful face, he thought instead that he was regarding that nymph whom poets call Echo, in the river before his eyes.") Andrew Galloway's translation.

¹⁷ Diane Watt has noted the silence surrounding the topic of homosexuality, within this tale and others. See Diane Watt, "Transgressive Genders and Subversive Sexualities," in *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 63-81. Section within chapter, entitled "The Lack of Sodomy" (76-81) deals specifically with this issue.

¹⁸ Andrea Schutz, "Absent and Present Images: Mirrors and Mirroring in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *The Chaucer Review* 34, no. 1 (1999): 107-124.

attempt to interrogate the validity of the “self-knowledge” available in mirrors (or mirroring devices), and that his mistake better serves to illustrate Narcissus’s vanity in ways that Ovid’s cannot.¹⁹ However, what substantiates a reading of dysphoria rather than delusion is the emotional power that Gower places into his minutely detailed narration of the interactions between Narcissus and his reflection. If Narcissus has seemed at all problematic in the beginning of the tale, the image of his lovelorn struggle with his reflection softens our view of him. The interaction between them begins like this:

The more he cam the welle nyh,
 The nerr cam sche to him agein;
 So wiste he nevere what to sein;
 For whanne he wepte, he sih hire wepe,
 And whanne he cride, he tok good kepe,
 The same word sche cride also. (I.2322-2327)

In these lines, Narcissus is transformed into the most sensitive of lovers, attuned to each movement, look, and gesture in the woman reflected back to him. The mirroring reflected in the verse creates the sense that these attempts at communication are suspended in time, unmoored from the usual pattern and rhythms of needs that constitute human life, and locked into an eternal, instinctual desire to communicate. As M.W. Bychowski describes it, this is Narcissus’s

¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

“speaking-together” with himself,²⁰ and I would add that it constitutes a crucial example of queer temporality within the narrative.

These lines, which describe the visual and emotional struggle of Narcissus with his reflection, build a sense of the image as another person, complete with its own responsive actions and gestures, which mirror his. The fact that this image is reflected in a mirror adds to a reading of it as an identity buried within himself. The “image,” as I’ve called it, is also not merely an image, but could be construed as a kind of nearly-separate being, as the diction of the verse implies an ability to respond physically and verbally. Narcissus’s frustration grows as he attempts to communicate with the woman he sees, but they utter the same words at the same time; he tries to make contact by attempting to approach her but cannot reach her; he finds both dismay and sympathy in observing her weep at the same time he does. He finally lies down by the river, begging her to come out, but “evert he fond hire in o place” (I.2337).

If Narcissus is viewing an inner female identity, then the embodiment of the image in the water means that two temporal realities are existing at once: Narcissus’s physical body representing his identity in the conventional, heteronormative world; with the female reflection inhabiting a temporal and physical reality external to his, but also as present and real as his. The reflection represents the imaginative world of a desire to become, the ethereal future that Narcissus cannot reach. Therefore, the space between the physical Narcissus and his image in the pool acts as a symbolic, yet permeable, membrane between these two temporal and ideological realities. Becoming is a process, as E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen assert, which is intimately connected to temporality, as it typically brings to mind a process of forward

²⁰ M.W. Bychowski, “Transgender Suicide as Corporate Sin,” *Transliteration: Things Transform*, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.thingstransform.com/2015/03/mad-for-narcissus-transgender-suicide.html>

progression in time.²¹ In their introduction, in which they unpack the history and future of critical notions of becoming, they turn to Nietzsche in his *Untimely Meditations* to consider the relationship between youth and queer becoming.²² In the second essay of the collection, Nietzsche considers the types and uses of history, and comes to the conclusion that all three can be both beneficial and harmful: in particular, toward the end of his essay, he asserts that too much historical thinking, with its familiar, easy pathways carved into the framework of society, discourages free-thinking. This restriction on creativity affects the youth the most, he argues, as they have yet to be fully assimilated into normative society, and carry the most potential for creating change in systems that they are still able to recognize as flawed.²³ As McCallum and Tukhanen indicate, Nietzsche celebrates young people who do not rush into what we would call heteronormativity; by not marrying, reproducing, and having gainful, profitable employment, these individuals' "slower" development allows them time to live life on their own terms and employ agency in deciding their own future. In terms of progression, "[t]his momentum is *evolutionary* rather than developmental—the cultivation of a sensibility that becomes more adept with practice, but not necessarily progressively more moral or more productive or more quantifiable."²⁴ By his refusal to assent to the familial and societal norms of his time, Gower's Narcissus is a medieval example of self-cultivation, of an "evolutionary, rather than

²¹ E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tukhanen, eds. *Queer Times, Queer Beginnings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York at Albany Press, 2011), 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 3-7.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. David Brezeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 120-21. See also McCallum and Tukhanen, *Queer Times*, 7.

²⁴ McCallum and Tukhanen, *Queer Times*, 5, their emphasis.

developmental” practice of becoming in life. His dysphoric experience of self, and its expression in his reflection, likewise marks the embodiment of Narcissus’s becoming, unstructured by the social mores of his society.

Narcissus can find no viable solution to his newly discovered dysphoria. Ovid locates the metamorphosis in the young lord’s posthumous transformation, but here we see him reaching out for a transformation that cannot be: expression as a transgender woman is impossible in his world. This internal struggle made manifest is what results in the violent death rather than the slow decay imagined by Ovid. In a final act of desperation, Narcissus “agein a roche of ston, / As he that knew non other red, / He smot himself til he was ded” (I. 2340-2342). Halberstam writes that heteronormative modes of life “applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances) and pathologize [those] that show little or no concern for longevity.”²⁵ Narcissus’s suicide is a statement of agency, and a choice of quality over quantity of life—something unavailable in Ovid’s version of a slow, involuntary transformation.

After being interred by the nymphs of the grove, Narcissus continues on as a symbol of queer temporality. Genius tells us that the flowers that grew on his grave bloomed in the least fruitful time of the year: “For in the winter freysshe and faire / The floures ben, which is contraire / To kynde” (I. 2355-2358). In keeping with Narcissus’s refusal of matrimony and compulsory reproduction, the flowers likewise appear in a time of conventional barrenness. Yet for all the implications of sterility, the flower nonetheless persists and, indeed, thrives in its environment, even when all others lie dead or dormant. Genius continues: “and so was the folie / Which fell of his Surquiderie” therefore reminding us of how “unkynde” Narcissus was, and continues to be (I. 2358-2359). The beauty and freshness of the flower thriving in its own unkind

²⁵ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 4.

situations brings to mind Nietzsche's description of the free-thinking youths who are able to think past the constraints of their environment in order to create a unique, if unconventional, existence of their own choosing. Although Gower couldn't predict Nietzsche, nor, to my knowledge, did Nietzsche read Gower, the philosophy and the tale align in their recognition that those who defy norms and attempt to forge their own paths will encounter challenge and hostility, and yet will still persist, even if their stories are only remembered in those like Gower's revision.

As in many places in the *Confessio*, Genius's reading of the tale is often faulty; or, as I might put it, runs counter to the underlying tone of the text. While Genius reads Narcissus as a prime example of presumption, the text works counter to this view, transforming Narcissus from Ovid's cruel, vain lover²⁶ to a developing adolescent who is dealing with an overwhelming pressure to conform, even as he comes to realize that such a life would not reflect his most authentic understanding of himself. Throughout, Gower's version of the tale asks careful readers to recognize the truth of the subtext for, in effect, as Diane Watt has posited, "the tensions, contradictions, and silences in Gower's text expose the limits of the ethical structures available to him and open up his text to multiple interpretations."²⁷ Genius does not seem to be always aware of the interrogation of the limits of morality, but even he describes Narcissus's relationship with the female form with sympathy.

And let's not forget that Gower has performed his own bit of queer temporality in the tale. In encountering Ovid's classical version of the myth, Gower doesn't simply rewrite it into the fourteenth century, but adapts it to make it reflect new concerns and interests. As a result, the

²⁶ In which such an accusation would be more accurately supported, as I have suggested above.

²⁷ Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 12.

dysphoric Narcissus not only explores questions of gender, but does so with one foot in the classical past and the other in the medieval present. In doing so, Narcissus reminds us how a medieval character might represent queer temporality in the Middle Ages, as well as in dialogue with another time.

Medieval texts like the *Confessio Amantis* offer us an opportunity to imagine temporal possibilities outside of the heteronormative ideal, which has become so embedded in our culture that we often overlook its presence. Existing in a time before the linearity of time was as entrenched as it is now, medieval narratives make use of fantastical/surreal elements which open the door to other worlds and temporal dimensions, indicating the extent to which those other, queer possibilities are available at all times if we only choose to see them. The ability to look beyond realism, beyond the seen, to other connected pasts which are somehow queerly present, can help reshape our ideas of how time and temporality can function.

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