

possibility is maybe an important concept in a hermeneutic of the failure, this “something” created by the incapacity to fulfill the expectations. Possibilities of appearance, of gaze, of desire, of love, of acts, of departure, of journey home, of imagination, of understanding, of self-producing. Possibilities of interpretation as well (all the scholarly works as this paper act as a proof of it), of projection for the reader, of self-appropriation of Narcissus and Silence’s narratives in the personal history of the reader. A “grammar of possibilities”, to quote again Jack Halberstam, that reminds us that a narrative is not only made of what happens, but also of all these side roads glimpsed or hardly considered, these paths not followed but still present, as ghostly alternatives.⁶⁸

Rather than a conventional conclusion, I propose an epilogue to this inquiry, using another text, the famous *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris, from the thirteenth century. In this romance presented as the dream of the narrator/author, Guillaume, the fountain of Narcissus is present as previously mentioned. The tale shortly narrated by Guillaume is almost the same as in *Narcissus and Dané* except there is no mention of Narcissus seeing himself as a maiden, and this version is therefore more faithful to Ovid’s version.⁶⁹ What is interesting for us here are the verses following the tale, about the fountain itself:

“C’est li mireörs perilleus,
 Ou Narcisus li orguilleus
 Mira sa face ses yex vers,
 Dont il jut puis mors tous envers.
 Qui en cest mireör se mire
 Ne puet avoir garant ne mire
 Que tel chose a ses yex ne voie
 Qui d’amer l’a tost mis en voie.
 Maint vaillant home a mis a glaive
 Cis mirëors, car li plus saive,
 Li plus preu, li miex afetié
 I sont tost pris et aguetié”

“This is the perilous mirror
 Where Narcissus full of pride
 Looked at his face and his green eyes
 he enjoyed and died reversed.
 Who looks through this mirror
 Cannot be safe and looks at

⁶⁸ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

⁶⁹ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, 77-79.

Which thing his eyes don't see
puts him on the path of love.
Many glorious men fought against
This mirror, because the safest
The bravest, the most prepared
they are all caught and held captive.
(1571-1582).⁷⁰

We can note the insistence on the gaze and the reflection through the play with the verb “*mirer*”. Then a name is given for the fountain, “*Fontaine d’Amors*”, and the narrator, young and ignorant about love, looks inside and falls in love with a rosebud that he wants to gather, seen through the fountain, clarifying that the rosebud means a woman.⁷¹ The sexual meaning of the rosebud is quite clear and has often been noted by scholars. What interests me here is the symbolism of the mirror and the genealogical narrative established by the narrator, from Narcissus to him, with a succession of lovers between them. Narcissus, in his homoerotic self-love, appears as the symbolic “first lover” when Guillaume discovers the heterosexual desire through the same fountain-mirror where Narcissus loves himself. Does this mean that “love” now only concerns the knight and his lady, and that it has nothing to do anymore the Ancient homoerotic love as in Ovid’s stories, as a kind of genealogy from Antiquity to courtly love? Anyway, this fountain is in Guillaume’s dream (and thereby the story of Narcissus is part of his mind), in a kind of temporality outside of “real” time, and it is a shared place for homoerotic desire as well as for heterosexual desire. It is as though the fountain reflects the desire of each person looking through it, putting everyone in face of what s/he wants in his/her heart. Even if there is a play between homoeroticism as self-love and heterosexuality as attraction for alterity (the “opposite sex”), the fountain can be read as a queer place, offering the possibility of the queer look and of unconventional desire. I brought this text here in order to emphasize the presence of the homoerotic desire in the chivalric heterosexual world, also demonstrated by the ambiguity of the narrator of *Narcissus and Dané* in his portrait of Narcissus, and by the attraction of the imaginary French nobility for Silence as a young man.

⁷⁰ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, 80-81. (Personal translation)

⁷¹ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, 81.

All this economy of desire implies the distinction between the active lover and the passive loved one, while, in a naturalized patriarchy, the young man must prove that he deserves to be admitted into male adulthood. Silence and Narcissus are not able to do that, therefore Silence does not achieve his almost “perfect” chivalric masculinity, and Narcissus goes out of his childhood only to die in front of his impossible self-love: Silence-mirror broken by both the laughter of the wild man and the male gaze of the court; Narcissus broken by the mirror of his transgender beauty. The youth failing sexual initiation disrupts any discourse about chivalry as an acme of heterosexual manhood, and it acts as a reminder of the fragility of gender constructions, that can fall apart when the aspirations of the self are stronger than the social constraints.

Bibliography:

- Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature / De Plancta Naturae*, ed. and trans. James J. Sheridan. Toronto : Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980.
- André Le Chapelain. *Traité de l'amour courtois*, ed. and trans. Claude Buridant. Paris: Klincksieck, 1974.
- Barbezat, Michael B. "Bodies of Spirit and Bodies of Flesh: The Significance of the Sexual Practices Attributed to Heretics from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century" in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, No. 3 (September 2016)
- Burgwinkle, William. *Sodomy, Masculinity and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050-1230*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Bychowski, M.W. "The Mirror of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages," to be published in *The Medieval Feminist Forum* (2019)
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1949.
- Chen, Mel. Y. "Language and Mattering Humans," in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, ed. Mel. Y. Chen. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Cormier, Raymond. "Tisbé, Dané, and Procné: Three Old French/ Ovidian Heroines in Quest of Personal Freedom," in *Sexuality, the Female Gaze, and the Arts; Women, the Arts, and Society*, ed. Ronald Dotterer and Susan Bowers. London: Associated University Presses, 1992.
- Fletcher, Christopher. "« Être homme »: Manhood et histoire politique du Moyen Âge. Quelques réflexions sur le changement et la longue durée," in *Une histoire sans les hommes est-elle possible?*, ed. Anne-Marie Sohn. Lyon : ENS Editions, 2013).
- Fray, Sébastien. "A propos de l'esthétique des corps virils chez Bernard d'Angers: beauté clericale et beauté chevaleresque," in *Revue d'Auvergne* 610 (2014)
- Gilbert, Jane. "Boys Will Be ... What? Gender, Sexuality, and Childhood, in *Floire et Blancheflor* and *Floris et Lyriope*," *Exemplaria* 9, no. 1 (1997)
- Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Daniel Poirion. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971.
- Halberstam, Judith [Jack]. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press, 2005.
- Halberstam, Judith [Jack]. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Heldris de Cornouailles. *Silence : a Thirteenth-century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999.
- "Hermaphroditus," in *L'Ovide moralisé*, 4, ed. Cornelis de Boer. Amsterdam: Müller, 1915.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. "Knighthood, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and Sodomy," in *The Boswell Thesis*, ed. Mathew Kuefler. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Narcissus et Dané*, ed. and trans. Penny Ely. Liverpool Online Series: Critical Editions of French Texts, 2002. <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/modern-languages-and-cultures/french/liverpool-online-series/>

- Philipps Kim M., and Reay, Barrie, eds. *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History*. Cambridge, UK: Malden, 2011.
- Roche-Mahdi, Sarah. "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the *Roman de Silence*," *Arthuriana* 12, No. 1, (Spring 2002)
- Schneider, Thomas R. "The Chivalric Masculinity of Marie de France's Shape-Changers," *Arthuriana* 26, No. 3, (Fall 2016)
- Uebel, Michael. "On Becoming-Male," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.
- Villon, François. *Poésies complètes*, ed. Claude Thiry. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1991.