

*Roger Anne Rogem? Ovid's Narcissus in a Pederastic Context*

Ovid's Narcissus is a young man on the verge: sixteen years old, and at an ambiguous stage of life in which he is able to seem both boy and youth (*puer iuvenisque videri; Met. 3.351-52*). As a well-born Greek male, desired as a *puer* by somewhat older *iuvenes*, he is implicitly embedded in a pederastic context; in this paper I will suggest that Ovid uses this pederastic context to explore the contradictions of this institution that always remained, in the Roman imagination, peculiarly Greek (Williams 1999, 62-72).

The standard pederastic model of active, desiring *erastēs* and passive, desired *erōmenos* was, like any model, an ideological simplification of a complex lived reality. Perhaps the most glaring contradiction within that model was what Michel Foucault called "the antinomy of the boy," (Foucault 1985, 221) in which a young man of citizen status transitions from being "the object of pleasure for another" to become a fully autonomous desiring subject, capable of the self-mastery that allows him to be a fully responsible member of society, and to exert power over others. The transition is problematic, however, since there is no generally agreed-upon procedure for turning from *erōmenos* to *erastēs* (and indeed the instances of ambiguous status--most famously Alcibiades and Agathon--were a source of cultural anxiety in Athens).

Ovid's presentation of Narcissus may fruitfully be read as an exploration of this problem. Narcissus as *puer* is shown as both desirable and aloof: *multi illum iuvenes, multae cupiere puellae / sed fuit in tenera tam dura superbia forma / nulli illum iuvenes, nullae tetigere puellae* (3.353-55). Yet Ovid, via an extensive and obvious Catullan borrowing, invites readers to consider the intertext with Catullus 62.39-47 and with Roman wedding ritual. In the latter text a chorus of girls praises virginity as necessary for preserving beauty and desirability, only to ultimately lose their argument to a chorus of boys who praise marital sex. As Gildenhard and Zissos

point out (139-40), it is the *superbia* of Narcissus that denies him the successful resolution of the wedding hymn (and that ultimately dooms him to floral, rather than sexual, reproduction; Loewenstein 1984, 34). The marital context of the Catullan intertext is particularly significant: in stark contrast to heterosexual marriage, the transition from *erastēs* to *erōmenos* has no officially recognized rite of passage to mark the participant's changed status, or to sanctify the sex which will follow his transition. Ovid's allusion highlights this gap, and in effect sets up Narcissus' self-discovery as a miserably failed rite of passage: one that involves separation (via his taking refuge in the sort of deadly *locus amoenus* Ovid was so fond of), but no successful transition (let alone reintegration).

It is, of course, Narcissus' combination of beauty and aloofness that lead to his downfall: in recompense for his disappointment of both men and nymphs, he is cursed to feel the sort of unfulfilled desire he has inflicted on others (3.402-5). Tellingly, he is described as a *puer* when he goes to drink from the pool, and he is seen (by both himself and the reader) to possess the gender presentation of a sexually desirable youth (including hairless cheeks and rosy-white coloration; 3.419-24). On a pederastic model Narcissus must be one or the other, desired or desiring; yet here he is both, and Ovid's wordplay (*qui probat, ipse probatur, dumque petit, petitur, pariterque accendit et ardet*; 3.425-26) highlights not only Narcissus' individual predicament, but the model's inherent contradictions. Nor does Narcissus' self-recognition take away his uncertainty. When he realizes that he burns with desire for himself he still wonders what role he can play: *quid faciam? roger anne rogem?* (3.465) In a society with strictly polarized gender roles, someone has to take the lead, to do the asking; indeed, the question of what he might ask for (*quid deinde rogabo?*) is actually secondary to this more basic question. It is not only the

impossibility of possessing himself physically that dooms Narcissus, but his inability to fulfill simultaneously the two dichotomous gender roles he is caught between.

### Bibliography

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