

3. NARCISUS

In the case of *Narcisus*,¹ as with *Piramus et Tisbé*, a useful starting-point is a comparison with the French author's source, the account of the story of Narcisus given by Ovid² in order to ascertain first what elements in the Latin do not figure in the French.

The mythological element has been cut down considerably. There is no mention of the nymph Liriope; Narcisus's mother is simply 'une dame de la cité' (47). The nymph Echo has become the princess Dané and in consequence there is no reference to Juno's depriving Echo of the power of voluntary speech. The goddess Nemesis is replaced by Venus, the reference to Bacchus and Apollo in line 421 of the Latin is absent from the French, and the French account ends with the death of Narcisus and Dané, thus omitting any mention of Narcisus's descent into the infernal abodes, his naiad sisters, or the funeral pyre. Nor, in the French, does Narcisus become the flower which bears his name. Besides the mythological aspect, the very slight homosexual element which appears in the Latin is very carefully treated in the French. There is nothing corresponding to the first part of line 353 in the Latin:

Multi illum iuvenes, multae cupiere puellae;

Similarly, whereas in the Latin it is a scorned youth who prays to Nemesis that vengeance might befall Narcisus, in the French this prayer is given to Dané (616-25). While in Ovid Narcisus realises that it is a boy he has fallen in love with, and addresses his reflection as 'puer unice' (454), this is left deliberately vague in the French; here Narcisus does not seem to realise that his reflection is male: he thinks at first that it is a goddess or fairy, he addresses it as *cose* in line 683, and as *douce riens* in line 779.

The social aspect of love relationships is more marked in this poem than in *Piramus et Tisbé*. The social position of both Dané and Narcisus is clearly defined. Dané is:

la fille au roi de la cité (127).

She is highly conscious of this, and 'fille a roi' rapidly becomes a *leitmotiv*. Quite obviously she is used to commanding and being obeyed, as in line 201:

Je ferai ces femmes lever.

She is conscious, too, of the conventions and obligations which this position imposes:

Ses tu que soies fille a roi? (385)

Here she is reminding herself that a certain standard of conduct is required of her; therefore to some extent she will keep up appearances and try to keep her infatuation secret. When she is planning to get up early and waylay Narcisus she says:

Bien m'en istrai; ja nel savront
Cil qui en la canbre gerront. (369-70)

Her parents have the authority and the obligation to provide her with a suitable husband:

Ja n'est-il pas raisons ne biens
Ne drois que je demant baron
Se par le conseil del roi non. (258-60)
Fille [e]s de roïne et de roi:
Segnor te donront endroit toi. (269-70)

but she would be prepared to rebel against this convention if necessary:

Et se il n'est a mon plesir? (272)

Her attitude towards Narcisus's social position is ambivalent: at first she is prepared to overlook the difference in rank:

Se nous ne sommes d'un parage,
Il est assés de haute gent (348-9)

but when he has spurned her, her pride cries out and she accentuates the difference by the use of the feudal *home*:

Donc ne sui jou file le roi
Et il [li] fuis a un suen home? (554-5)

Narcisus is the son of 'une dame de la cité' (47). He is not really concerned with what is expected of him socially, but is quick to remind Dané when she departs from convention:

Doit ensi aler fille a roi? (497)

Particularly fascinating are the different criteria adopted by Dané and Narcisus for the suitability of a relationship. When Narcisus is trying to persuade the reflection to leave the spring and join him, he puts his case in purely physical terms:

Ne sui gaires mains biaux de toi!
Maintes fois ai esté requis; (692-3)

Dané, however, in lines 341-50, gives a detailed description of what constitutes a sound basis for a relationship. The conditions include similarity of outlook:

assés somes d'une maniere (346),

equal attractiveness and age, similar social rank without the parties' being related. But before marriage can be concluded there should be love on both sides and there should be someone to act as mediator and make the arrangements: it is not *drois* that the girl should do this (345), and the consent of the parent should be obtained. If these conditions are fulfilled, then the relationship can lead to marriage:

Bien le porroie avoir par droit (344)

It seems, also, that if these conditions are complied with, then we have 'good' love; if not, then the lovers fall into *fole amor*. This latter concept is rather prominent in this poem. It is most striking that the poet uses this term in his prologue, line 18. The fact that he uses it here, before going on to illustrate it, implies that he was using *fole amor* as a fixed concept, an already defined idea, a term with which the listeners would be familiar, so that they would know what to expect from the subsequent illustration in the story.

To look at the use of the term in the story itself, in the case of Dané *fole* is used from the point where she decides to take the matter into her own hands and do something she knows she should not do. It is at this point, too, that her perspective begins to be distorted, so that her *folie* is indeed a kind of deviation or madness. When she says:

Ja, certes, se je sens avoie,
Le sien conseil nen atendroie. (263-4)

she is completely twisting the meaning of *sens*. On the contrary, in accordance with *sens* and *mesure* she should approach her father about Narcisus and not take the initiative herself. From this point on the term *fole* is used consistently to describe her: *fole* (266) *fole*, *dervee* (383), *esgaree* (384), 'tout ai perdu le sens' (389), *fole* (391), *fol corage* (422), *fol plait* (424), and Narcisus calls her *fole* (489) and regards her action as *folie* (496).

The poet uses the term about Narcisus in line 804:

Ne sa folie n'aperçut

evidently with the meaning that his love was misplaced in being directed to himself. Here again, it is significant that Narcisus first uses *fol* to describe himself when he realises that he himself is the object of his love (838); before that he knew that he was in love but he was unaware that it was the wrong kind of love. From this point onwards the term is used successively in lines 851: 'en fol liu ai mis m'entente', 871, *folie*, 907, *folie*, and 906 *dervés*. Thus from this poem it does become more obvious that one is dealing with a particular concept and not just with an adjective used haphazardly.

In the delineation of the characters the French author has made far-reaching changes to his source. Ovid's Echo is little more than a symbol of unrequited love; all we are told about the way her mind works is contained in lines 494-5, when she finds Narcisus dying:

Quae tamen ut vidit quamvis irata memorque
Indoluit,

Dané is a far more complex character. From the first time she glimpses Narcisus from her commanding position in her tower we are conscious of her imperiousness, whims, and way of behaving like a spoilt child. Although characterisation does not come within the terms of reference of this subject, it is necessary to point out that love, as seen in the *romans d'Antiquité*, is a matter of individuals as well as of types, for the authors go to some lengths to show the interaction of character upon character. In so far as the love interest develops in Dané, this is shown partly by reference to literary convention: her wounding by love's arrow, the way in which she expresses the effects of love upon her, and her lament for Narcisus. However the development is not always very skilfully directed: from line 155 onwards Dané realises very well that it is Love who has struck her, yet subsequently she cannot understand why she is unable to sleep and why her thoughts keep returning to Narcisus. In spite of this *non sequitur* it is interesting to see how she gradually realises that she does love Narcisus. In her monologue beginning in line 225 she still does not know why this *vassal* seems so important to her. She knows that she is attracted by his beauty, and by trying to picture to herself his character, which is perhaps thoroughly bad, she is putting into practice one of the dictums of the *Remedia amoris*: (299-326)³

Il est, espoir, fel u vilains
U enueius, u d'ire plains (243-4)

At this stage her reasoning is still perfectly sound, but already in line 263, as has been noted, her sense of perspective is distorted, and all her arguments from this point stem from a false premise. However, she still has not used the word 'love': in lines 275 and 282 she uses *plaire*. She feels irresistibly drawn to watch Narcisus pass under her window again, and this time the effects of seeing him are even stronger. Suddenly she knows that she is in love, for at the start of the second monologue, from line 333, she says:

Ainc mais ne seu je nient d'amer
Et or me fait color muer (335-6)

and refers to Narcisus as: 'cil que je tant ain' (341). She then decides to take action. She does not approach her father, probably because she realizes that he would not approve of the difference in class:

Se nous ne sonmes d'un parage,
Il est assés de haute gent, (348-9)

Throughout, Dané is perfectly aware of what she is doing, as she makes a detailed plan of campaign, and even takes into account the possibility of Narcisus's refusing her.

No time is lost in putting her plan into action, and there is a parallel with *Piramus et Tisbé* in the way she steals out of the house and sits down waiting for

Narcissus and thinking what to say to him (425-37). When she sees Narcissus she has no inhibitions about going straight up to him and embracing him, and begging for mercy, thus adopting the man's role (456-8, 468-9). When he refuses her she again transgresses against convention by throwing aside all modesty and appealing to his sensuality (511-14). Dané's monologue beginning in line 541 completes the sketch of her character. The emphasis is not on her love for Narcissus, but rather on the fact that she, Dané, has been refused, in spite of her birth, her beauty, and the suffering she has undergone for Narcissus's sake: another instance of Dané's *desmesure*, as it was not the woman's place to take the initiative.

At first she is still hopeful that he may come back to her, and thinks of trying again, but then, in anger, she calls down a curse upon him. In the last part of the monologue the previous distortion of perspective develops into the complete disintegration of her personality: she is no longer conscious of her identity or behaviour, a state brought on probably by the realisation that the combined assets of her personality and attractiveness, of which she has a high opinion, have accomplished precisely nothing. Then Dané returns to her room until, at the end of the poem, she is again discovered running about the woods in search of Narcissus (972-6). This does not seem at first sight to be sufficiently motivated: it would seem that she repented of her violent curse and became concerned for Narcissus's welfare. Such an explanation is indeed the only justification for Dané's death for love of Narcissus: although initially her feelings were more akin to an obsession than to love, she seems to realise, too late, that she acted wrongly, and it is only when she is able to forgive Narcissus for slighting her that she can consider him as her *ami* (991).

The character of Narcissus is depicted with sympathy on the part of the poet. We are told that Narcissus:

D'amer n'a soing ne rien n'en set,
Dames en canbres fuit et het. (119-20)

and indeed he is extremely puzzled at first by the sensations aroused in him by the sight of his reflection. However he is far from insensible; at first sight he thought Dané beautiful (452), and given the right stimulus, he is quite ready to respond. It appears from the poem that he is not to be blamed for not loving Dané; when he met her he was still quite unaware of love. As he himself knows later, when his love is aroused, if a suitable object for his love were at hand, he would not be in the unfortunate situation of loving himself (959-62). It is a tragedy of timing. Yet Narcissus is to blame for two reasons.

First, he has an inexplicable prejudice against love, and when he meets Dané he tells her that he does not wish to have anything to do with it, alleging the poor excuse that he is still a child (498-500). Denial of such a fundamental part of his nature would therefore be likely to lead to tragedy. Secondly, granted that he need not be expected to love the 'first-comer', in this case Dané, this does not excuse his gallant treatment of her, and the poet significantly does not blame his lack

of love, but his lack of pity (529-34). Narcissus does, however, progress. He realises that he has behaved badly towards Dané, and repents.

As in the case of *Piramus et Tisbé*, the forms of address used by Dané and Narcissus are referred to in the glossary, section thirteen. It is worth while pointing to the isolated use of *dous amis* in line 991. Dané does not call Narcissus *ami* until she realises that he is prepared to be involved with her, and she is now ready to adopt a more flexible, less selfish attitude.⁴ Without drawing conclusions at this stage, it would seem that *amis* or *amie* is used as a form of address when a certain informal contract has been entered into, implying that mutual love exists between the two parties and that a greater freedom of expression exists for that reason, as it did between Pyramus and Thisbe.

As far as the religious element goes, there are again certain similarities to *Piramus et Tisbé*. God is called upon in exclamations (282, 333, 375, 424, 489, 506, 529, 550, 556, 559, 577, 605, 704, 876), and for specific favours by both Dané (289-90, 438-40) and Narcissus (951), and he is automatically presumed to be on the side of the lovers. There is a reference to 'the gods' in lines 616-21 and lines 893-902. In this second passage Narcissus suffers a momentary loss of faith when he accuses the gods of being deaf and unable to help him. Mrs Laurie gives an interpretation in terms of religion: 'By realisation of his state Narcissus is brought to see himself alienated from God'.⁵ Lines 889-92 are somewhat ambiguous in that Narcissus may be addressing either God or the gods, but lines 893-902 show clearly that he is thinking of the gods in general. Moreover when he dies at peace this is not, perhaps, because he is at peace in the religious sense, but because he is at peace in the realisation that Dané loves him and that he could love her, given the opportunity. This poet is not at all preoccupied with religion or indeed with moral conduct: the problems which arise, although they may have moral overtones, such as Narcissus's selfishness, are seen in the context of the social situation. Religion is present in the background and is taken for granted, but it does not intrude.

More pronounced than in *Piramus et Tisbé* is the erotic element. Here too this is shown mainly with reference to the girl. Narcissus at the start of the poem appears to deny sensuality, and remains unmoved by Dané's beauty. However, as has been noted, he says that he found Dané attractive. The latter part of the poem, where he falls in love with his own reflection, shows him to be far from insensible, but here, because of medieval distaste for homosexuality and a probable desire not to shock, sex is played down. Narcissus says he is in love, but the nature of this love is left vaguely defined.

With Dané, the attraction she feels is purely physical in the first place: she keeps referring to Narcissus's beauty (132, 280-8, 320, 562). She has to remind herself forcibly that *bonté* is important too (242), and rather naively assumes that someone so beautiful must have a beautiful character (250-5), but it later becomes clear that his physical attractiveness is more important to her than anything else:

Car sa biatés, qui me rapele
 Quant m'en voeil partir, me ratrait.
 Ne me caut de quanque il a fait! (580-2)

The vocabulary she uses when referring to this love seems at first sight ambiguous:

Je te desir sor tote rien (466)
 Mout nous poons bien entr'amer.
 Biaus sire, otroie'l moi, t'amor! (482-3)

It need not necessarily refer to sex, but in the light of her actions and the way she offers herself to Narcisus, she is obviously speaking of physical love.

Does Dané see this love as leading to marriage, or as quite apart from it? At first it seems that marriage is her objective, from the following passages:

. . . Sera il tiens?
 Ja n'est il pas raisons ne biens
 Ne drois que je demant baron
 Se par le conseil del roi non. (257-60)
 Segnor te donront endroit toi.
 Auques t'estuet por çou souffrir.
 Et se il n'est a mon plesir? (270-2)
 Bien le porroie avoir par droit (344)

It would be difficult to imagine her father sanctioning an extra-marital relationship. Then, however, Dané's attitude seems to change. She does not plan to say anything about marriage to Narcisus, but simply to tell him that she loves him. Yet at the end of the poem, in spite of nothing specific being said, it appears that both Dané and Narcisus, though too late, accept a relationship which has its own conventions and which would perhaps in time have led to marriage.

Finally, there remains the question of the attitude adopted by the poet. This is contained mainly in the prologue to the poem, lines 1-40, but there is also the poet's exclamation (529-34) about Narcisus's pitiless attitude to Dané, and the last two lines of the poem, which contain a warning to the listener or reader not to fall into the same situation as the characters. In the prologue there is an exaltation of natural, mutual love, which the poet describes as 'bien biaus a maintenir' (28). He warns the reader not to underestimate the power of love, in the way that Narcisus did (35-8) and advises caution (5-15) and adherence to 'sens et mesure' (3-4). Yet there is a definite condemnation of *fole amor* (18) which is by implication opposed to the kind of love which keeps to *sens* and *mesure*, and *fole amor* can only bring suffering (19).

There is a further element in the prologue which is not so clear. If someone is in the grip of *fole amor*, then:

En est il bien raisons et drois
 Que cele en oie sa proiere
 Ne ne soit pas vers li trop fiere,
 Ke tost en poeut avoir damage
 Par son orgeul, par son outraige. (20-4)

The most obvious interpretation of this would be that one should not act as Narcissus did: that even if one is unable to return love, one should at least be courteous in return. This would seem to fit in with the way the poet continues:

Et s'il avient que femme prit,
 Qui que il soit qui l'escondit,
 Je voel et di sans entreprendre
 Que on le doit ardoir u pendre. (29-32)

Yet it is strange that although his poem tells the story of the suffering caused to Dané by Narcissus's cruelty and rebuff, the poet should say:

Que *cele* en oie sa proiere
 Ne ne soit pas vers li trop *fiere*

Might this perhaps be an indirect condemnation of courtly love? This would fit in with the poet's praise for love which is natural and mutual. However, if this is a reference to courtly love, or to a misconception of courtly love, then it is the only reference to it in the poem, and Hilka, speaking of: 'die Ausgestaltung der Redeszenen und des verfeinerten Minnebegriffs'⁶ must surely have been thinking of courtliness rather than of courtly love.

NOTES

- ¹ *Narcissus*, edited by M. M. Pellan and N. C. W. Spence, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg, Fascicule 147 (Paris, 1964).
- ² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by F. J. Miller, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (London, 1916), III, 339-510.
- ³ Ovid, *The art of love*, translated by J. H. Mozeley, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1929).
- ⁴ Above, p. 15.
- ⁵ H. C. R. Laurie, 'Narcissus', *Medium Aevum*, 35, no. 2 (1966), 111-16 (p. 114).
- ⁶ A. Hilka, 'Der altfranzösische Narcissuslai, eine antikisierende Dichtung des 12. Jahrhunderts', *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*, 49 (1929), 633-75 (p. 675).