

# BEHIND THE LOOKING GLASS

## Self-Reflection, Self-Expression and Identity in

### *Ovid's Metamorphoses*

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*This essay discusses how the mirror in Ovid's Metamorphoses navigates between the ancient theory of reflection and the Platonic conception of the soul, and how it illustrates Ovid's own, unique position on self-reflection and identity. Tales of transformation in the Metamorphoses constantly define and redefine the relationship between body and soul, and the mirror, as a vehicle for self-knowledge, becomes crucial in such definition. In accordance with the ancient theory of reflection, the physical appearance revealed by the Ovidian mirror is inseparable from one's inner self; at the same time, the Platonic dissonance between body and soul suggests that the self is distinct from what is visible. This tension manifests in the story of Actaeon, in which the character learns of his bodily changes and gains a sense of identity by looking at his mirror image, but still meets his tragic fate when that consciousness goes unrecognized. The Ovidian mirror, it follows, both affirms and challenges the significance of appearance in shaping the human identity. This essay concludes by exploring how the tragedy of Actaeon situates Ovid in a completely different position from his predecessors regarding the philosophy of self.*

I saw myself on the shore as of late  
when the sea stood unruffled by the  
winds  
Virgil, *Eclogae* 2.25–26

*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora.* ‘My spirit urges me to speak of forms changed into new bodies.’<sup>1</sup> So begins Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a song of changes, where tales of transformation are myth and history in equal measures. It is little wonder, then, that in a poem so concerned with physical alterations, the mirror should occupy a central role. From Book I where Io’s downcast gaze meets the clear water, to Book XV where Helen mourns her aged image, the mirror accompanies bodily changes to record the moments reality slips into magical realms.

For a motif so prevalent, it is surprising that the mirror has been rather understudied. Most existing scholarship comments on the fable of Narcissus, whose mirror and mirroring are admittedly paradigmatic. Yet the focus on a single myth limits the answers we can provide to questions about the nature of the Ovidian mirror, which is better treated as an independent poetic phenomenon rather than a device integral to only Narcissus. This paper aims to bring fresh insight by exploring the use of mirroring in the oft-overlooked story of Actaeon, with the hope that Actaeon’s

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A note on translation: Verse and prose passages that provide only contextual relevance will be cited in English, with the original Latin given in the footnotes. When the verse itself is the object of study, it will be cited in the original language accompanied by translation. All English translations are my own, as are all emphases (italicized). All citations to Ovid are taken from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. R. J. Tarrant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>1</sup> Ovid, 1.1–2.

reflection and bodily changes can reveal aspects of the human self that are not apparent under the gaze. I contend that the Ovidian identity is something both hidden and visible, and the mirror, paradoxically, exposes both the fickleness and the absolute necessity of self-expression in shaping the human self.

All concepts in question—the self, identity, self-expression, and reflection—need philosophical validation, and yet it is no easy feat trying to pinpoint the framework used by the elusive poet. In choosing two specific models, I have certainly left out other theories that could have made the discussion more nuanced. Still there are certain merits in making such choice. The ancient specular tradition provides enough of a contrast against the Platonic philosophy of the self, and they are both featured in the *Metamorphoses* more consistently than most other philosophical models. For that reason, this paper will first look at each of these two treatments of reflection, then focus on how Ovid responds to them, before turning to the story of Actaeon where that tension is made most apparent. Due to Plato’s influence on our discourse, concepts of ‘the soul’ and ‘the mind’ will also be used interchangeably to express the ‘inner self,’ with which this paper is primarily preoccupied.

## **The Mirror in Ancient Imagination**

Seneca writes about the mirror in the very first book of his *Quaestiones Naturales*. Its scientific significance aside, the treatise focuses much on the ethical role of the mirror whose essence is contained in one passage:

Mirrors were invented so that man could know himself, and from this many benefits will follow: first, knowledge of himself, then, in a certain way, wisdom. The beautiful uses it to avoid infamy; the

ugly to know that whatever he physically lacks must be remedied by virtues.<sup>2</sup>

The above passage reflects the heritage of a long specular tradition in antiquity, a tradition in which self-knowledge, the gaze, and the mirror share a deep connection. Moritz H. W. Schuller discusses how integral the physical gaze is to the instructive capacity of the mirror in key classical texts. The ancient mirror, while not nearly as efficient as the modern, illumined looking glass, and in many cases dented to various degrees, is regarded a faithful instrument that would return the exact reflection of one's appearance. In so doing, it provides a perspective otherwise unavailable and allows the person to 'know' himself in the same manner that he would be apprehended in the public sphere. The self-knowledge gained from the reciprocal gaze with the mirror is of a social kind and requires no introspective insight, and whose visual merits are connected to how mirror image is often seen as a distinct, physical object.<sup>3</sup> Shadi Bartsch likewise comments on how the idea of an inner self, one separate from appearance, is largely absent from ancient thinking. The eventual instructive value of reflection is neither to suggest that appearance is negligible, nor to inspire subjective, "self-generated

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<sup>2</sup> Seneca, *Natural Questions: Books 1–3*, trans. Thomas H. Corcoran (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1, 17.4. Original Latin: inuenta sunt specula ut homo ipse se nosset, multa ex hoc consecuturus, primum sui notitiam, deinde ad quaedam consilium: formosus, ut uitaret infamiam; deformis, ut sciret redimendum esse uirtutibus quicquid corpori deesset.

<sup>3</sup> Schuller, Moritz H. W., "Watching the Self: The Mirror of Self-Knowledge in Ancient Literature" (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1998), 4–15.

insight";<sup>4</sup> instead, the ethically implicated appearance is used as the measure for virtues. Cued by his own reflection, the individual is motivated to shape his behaviors to either uphold or mitigate the social expectations attached to his image. The ancient mirror thus functions mainly as a device to moral ends: by showing the person how others would see him, it inspires ethical cultivation to maintain, or improve, his image in the eyes of his peers.

This emphasis on the appearance is rooted in the face-to-face cultures in both Ancient Greece and Rome, where personal looks are believed to be reflective of the mind. (This is partly the reason the ethical mirror never appears in the *Metamorphoses*, which, as we shall see, concerns itself precisely with the dissonance between appearance and essence.) For example, no Greek equivalent exists for expressions such as 'under the mask,' 'behind the mask,' or anything that suggests mismatched inner and public identities.<sup>5</sup> Similarly on the importance of countenance, Cicero remarks, "imago animi uultus, indices oculi" ('the face is the image of the soul, and you express with the eyes').<sup>6</sup> The ancient

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<sup>4</sup> Bartsch, Shadi, "The Mirror of Philosophy," in *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>5</sup> Frontisi-Ducroux, Françoise, *Du Masque au Visage. Aspects de l'identité en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), quoted in Simon Goldhill, "ΠΡΟΣΩΠΙΟΝ," Review of *Du Masque au Visage. Aspects de l'identité en Grèce ancienne*, *The Classical Review* 46, no. 1 (1996): 112.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero, "On the Orator: Book 3," in *On the Orator: Book 3. On Fate. Stoic Paradoxes. Divisions of Oratory*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 3.221.

self becomes synonymous with visible expression. Most classical texts follow this tradition, and the mirror, even in the writings of Seneca, still retains its deeply social, performative function. While the Ovidian mirror does partake in this legacy, it nevertheless is much more cynical about the integrity of mirror image. The fickleness of appearance stands as the tenor of Ovid's grandest song, and violent changes to the body can cast doubt over any easy definition of the self. The subtle tone of distrust toward appearance echoes that of Ovid's poetic predecessor, Lucretius, whose writing has a Platonic pedigree, which in turn lends Book XV of the *Metamorphoses* philosophical substance.<sup>7</sup>

Lucretius, in Book IV of his *De Rerum Natura*, presents a sustained analysis on the illusory nature of reflections and images. Bearing an Epicurean imprint, Lucretius' images (*simulacra*) are films of atoms streaming from the surface of physical bodies, which, while having no substance, easily create illusions of the actual objects.<sup>8</sup> Mirrors that return these films unchanged add little essence to the already empty semblances.<sup>9</sup> Drawing the distinction between water and its likeness, the poet scoffs at the unreality of appearance toward the end of the treatise:

Like a thirsting man in a dream seeks  
something to drink,  
and is given no liquid which could  
quench the flame in his limbs,

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<sup>7</sup> Hardie, Philip, Introduction, in *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, rev. Martin F. Smith, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.26–44. See also Hardie, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.59–120.

but, laboring in vain, he then seeks the  
image of the springs  
and thirsts even as he drinks from the  
middle of a rushing river . . .  
(4.1097–1100)<sup>10</sup>

The analogy recalls Socrates' treatment of the mirror in *Republic* X which Melchior-Bonnet suggests begins the tradition of meditation on mirror image.<sup>11</sup> The Platonic mirror could limn the heavens and earth, but is incapable of creating things as they are<sup>12</sup>—an argument that draws from Plato's continued belief in the existence of an inner soul distinct from the body. Even though it may not yield direct insight of such a soul, nor lend itself to spiritual revelation,<sup>13</sup> the mirror nevertheless is still a trusted device that brings forth the tension between appearance and essence in many Socratic dialogues. For example, the *Alcibiades* sees Socrates suggest that humans gain knowledge of their soul only by looking into a mirror (130e–133a);<sup>14</sup> the *Sophist*, on the other hand, mocks the sophistic

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Original Latin:

ut bibere in somnis sitiens quom quaerit, et umor  
non datur, ardorem qui membris stinguere possit,  
sed laticum simulacra petit frustraue laborat  
in medioque sitit torrenti flumine potans

<sup>11</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine, "In the Semblance of God," in *The Mirror: A History*, trans. Katharine H. Jewett (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 102.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1968), 596d.

<sup>13</sup> Schuller contests Melchior-Bonnet's claim that the mirror could reveal things other than physical appearance. For extended discussion, see Schuller, 1–7.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, "Alcibiades," trans. D. S. Hutchinson, in *The Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

orators who take the world in the mirror to be true (240a).<sup>15</sup> Other dialogues which more broadly discuss the Platonic conception of appearance also display affinities with the framework that Ovid will eventually adopt for his poem. Much of *Phaedo* is dedicated to address the dissonance between body and soul, in which the soul is uniform, divine, and deathless, as opposed to the body which remains inconsistent, mortal, and frail (80a–c).<sup>16</sup> The *Republic* sees a similar discourse at the end of Book X, when immortal souls choose the earthly forms for their next incarnation (617d–621b).<sup>17</sup> *Charmides* raises a question over the trustworthiness of appearance, when upon the arrival of the titular character, the greatest beauty of Athens, Socrates is skeptical if his mind is “of good grain” (154d).<sup>18</sup> *Gorgias* tells a fantastic tale where judges of the underworld are fooled by the looks of men before they die (523d–524a).<sup>19</sup> The list goes on. Even though they are by no means the sole influence on the poet, these dialogues still remain part of the philosophical currents from which Ovid could draw inspiration.

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, “Sophist,” trans. Nicholas P. White, in *The Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Plato, “Phaedo,” in *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. John M. Cooper, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, “Charmides,” in *Charmides. Alcibiades I & II. Hipparchus. The Lovers. Theages. Minos. Epinomis*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> Plato, “Gorgias,” in *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

The framework that Ovid seemingly employs for his poem is nestled within his longest monologue. In Book XV, Pythagoras delivers a speech that many have taken to be an account on the nature of corporeal bodies, and by extension, of all changes:

Everything changes; nothing dies. The soul moves back and forth, now here, now there, and occupies whatever frame it likes, passing from beasts to humans, from our own forms to beasts, and not ever dies.

Like soft wax imprinted with new shapes, neither staying as it was nor maintaining old designs, yet still being itself, just like that, hear me, the soul is forever the same, even though its shape varies. (15.165–172)<sup>20</sup>

Bearing more than passing resemblances to Plato, Pythagoras’ speech may be read as a poetic rendition of both the *Phaedo* and Book X of the *Republic*. As he echoes the philosopher who questions the integrity of the form, Ovid also expresses his own distrust of appearance in his grand epic. Transformations become the means to reveal the changeable shape, and hence, its

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<sup>20</sup> Original Latin:

omnia mutantur, nihil interit. errat et illinc huc uenit, hinc illuc et quoslibet occupat artus spiritus eque feris humana in corpora transit inque feras noster, nec tempore deperit ullo. utque nouis facilis signatur cera figuris, nec manet ut fuerat nec formas seruat eadem, sed tamen ipsa eadem est, animam sic temper eandem esse sed in uarias doceo migrare figuras.

unreliability as a measure of the self. Accordingly, the mirror that follows these transformations takes on a new layer of meaning. It is true that the mirror in the *Metamorphoses*, like many other mirrors in antiquity, still focuses heavily on the actual, physical gaze. Its primary function, still, is to let the person see what he is otherwise unable to see. The most powerful thing about the Ovidian mirror, however, is its capacity to render the self-aware subject, who by looking at his reflection is conscious of how he is different from his mind.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the failure of recognition, which so often leads Ovid's characters to their tragic fate, reminds us of the pivotal role appearance plays in shaping the human identity. Ultimately appearance is all we have to communicate ourselves, and—as the story of Actaeon will show—the hard-earned human consciousness is simply futile when it goes unexpressed. The paradox of Ovid's mirror is that it both questions and affirms the significance of appearance, and the philosophical dispute surrounding ancient reflection only adds to the palette from which Ovid paints his universe.

### Actaeon's Mirror and the Fractured Self

The Ovidian mirror takes many forms. In Book I, the transformation of Io and her subsequent discovery of her morphed appearance introduces the mirror to the poem. Book III picks up where Book I leaves off, with Actaeon, Tiresias, and Narcissus forming a cluster of narratives on vision and mirroring. The story of Hermaphroditus explores

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<sup>21</sup> Anna Mudde raises a similar point on the mirror—though not on Ovid's mirror—and its alienating effect. For more on the mirror and self-reflection in general, see Mudde, Anna, "Self-Images and 'Perspicuous Representation': Reflection, Philosophy, and the Glass Mirror," *Metaphilosophy* 46, nos. 4–5 (2015): 539–554.

the complexities of gender through the ruffled surface of water, before leading up to perhaps the most well-known myth of reflection, Perseus and Medusa. Among these, the mirror of Actaeon is one of the earliest, and also one that most skillfully articulates the crisis of a soul residing in foreign flesh. Often overshadowed by the story of Narcissus, it nonetheless proves an equally compelling treatment of reflection that accompanies bodily changes. Actaeon's story is atypical because it does not stop at the point of metamorphosis, as do most other tales, but instead lasts well until after his death. In fact, the bulk of the story happens *after* the transformation. The mirror that appears at the mid-point of the story offers us a chance to watch the story unfold from within—a window into the human consciousness of Actaeon which endures despite his now animal form. Its presence draws us into one of the few moments in the poem when the subject is aware of the divide between his mind and his looks, and to Actaeon, when he experiences both the knowledge and the tragedy arising from that chasm.

The story begins with the hunter Actaeon, by sheer accident,<sup>22</sup> stumbling upon the goddess Diana while she is bathing.<sup>23</sup> Enraged, she transforms him into a stag, and Actaeon, in his flight, sees his altered appearance when looking into the water:

dat sparso capiti uiuacis cornua cerui,

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<sup>22</sup> Ovid stresses Actaeon's innocence in 3.175–176: "Through unknown clearings of the forest, [Actaeon] found the sacred grove—so the Fates guided him."

<sup>23</sup> For more on the relationship between Diana and Actaeon, and a different account on Actaeon's mirror image, see Barkan, Leonard, "Ovid and Metamorphosis," in *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 44–46.

dat spatium collo summasque cacuminat  
 aures,  
 cum pedibusque manus, cum longis  
 bracchia mutat  
 cruribus et uelat maculoso uellere corpus;  
 . . .  
 ut uero uultus et cornua *uidit* in unda . . .  
 (3.194–200)  
 (She gave his sprinkled head the antlers  
 of a living stag,  
 gave his neck length, and made the tips  
 of his ears pointed,  
 changed his hands into feet and arms  
 into long legs  
 and covered his body with a dappled pelt;  
 . . .  
 When he saw, indeed, his face and  
 antlers in the water)

A typical ancient mirror, the shimmering forest stream renders a strikingly truthful reflection of his animal appearance. Ovid assures us of the clarity of the image by taking great care describing Actaeon before the eventual *uidit*, ‘seeing,’ which marks the moment the image is revealed to the seeing subject. In fact, the delayed *uidit* means that the hunter is the last to realize his altered form. In that sense, Ovid’s mirror goes beyond its dictated role in antiquity: more than a mere reflecting medium that faithfully returns Actaeon’s appearance, it becomes a device that enables changes in his psyche once confronted with a reality he does not expect. While Actaeon is not the only metamorphosed victim to learn of his own transformation—Ulysses’ comrades, for example, can give their gruesome recollection as ample proof—he is one of the select few who, through vision, could see themselves in the same way they are gazed at by others. The emphasis on ‘seeing’ is significant, as Ovid will proceed to tell the rest of the story from Actaeon’s inner feelings and

thoughts. This mirrored gaze, though momentary, allows him to see what otherwise would be hidden from himself, while exposing the rupture between the bestial guise and the human mind to which only he has access.

In fact, one can say that Actaeon is only, and painfully, aware of himself because of his altered appearance. Leonard Barkan offers an excellent commentary on the same note: “what Actaeon sees in the mirror after his transformation is for the first time a sense of his own identity.”<sup>24</sup> For Actaeon, what comes after ‘seeing’ is a desire to define himself as something other than his looks:

. . . lacrimaque per ora  
*non sua* fluxerunt; mens tantum pristina  
 mansit. (3.202–203)  
 (. . . And tears were flowing  
 On the cheeks that were *not his own*;  
 only his mind remained untouched.)

The sense of self that slowly takes shape within Actaeon comes from the negation of what is visible. His inner self, he identifies, is precisely the thing missing from the surface. Ovid is careful to contrast the reflexive possessive *non sua* with Actaeon’s preserved human consciousness (and we might as well supply *sua* for *mens* had the meter allowed), a contrast which draws out “the dissolution of selfhood” as Philip Hardie terms it.<sup>25</sup> In trying to rationalize the change while he straddles the divide between being human and being animal, his blooming consciousness, new as it is, learns to separate its own existence from his physical form. Over the episode this consciousness remains, and is strengthened. It urges him to turn to the other medium of expression, voice, as his appearance no

<sup>24</sup> Barkan, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Hardie, 9.

longer corresponds to what he considers appropriately his:

. . . clamare libebat  
'Actaeon ego sum, dominum cognoscite  
uestrum!' (3.229–230)  
(. . . He wanted to yell  
'I am Actaeon, recognize your master!')

"Actaeon ego sum" is registered on the same key as the later Cartesian "cogito ergo sum," albeit less detached, less cerebral—more desperate and instinctive. It is a clear and unequivocal statement of the human essence, a sentiment that Ovid also seems to agree with. *Dominum* appears first from Actaeon's perspective, but gets repeated twice in the narrator's comments where it assumes a more impersonal, and hence more authorial, tone:

. . . dominum retinentibus illis  
cetera turba coit confertque in corpore  
dentes.  
...  
dilacerant *falsi* dominum sub imagine  
cerui (3.235–250)

(. . . while they held down their master  
the rest of the pack gathered and sank  
their teeth into his flesh.

...  
They tore apart their master under the  
*false* guise of a deer)

The insistent repetition confirms the truth in Actaeon's silent words. Appearance is proven merely skin-deep, and the false guise (*falsi imagine cerui*) is implicitly contrasted with what lies hidden. The hunter's identity is fractured through the mirror—*dominum* to himself, *cerui* to his hounds—but Ovid, if only so briefly, gives us a glimpse of what is true. Perhaps even more

importantly, the vision of that truth is impossible to experience without knowledge of the physical form. That inner self, buried beneath the guise of appearance, can only be apprehended after the individual confronts his own mirror image.

With this discovery, it is compelling to think that the Ovidian mirror can now accommodate the introspective gaze, like the intensely meditative mirror of the biblical Rachel, or the spiritually endowed looking glass in the Middle Ages. But the mirror-puzzle of the *Metamorphoses* is not as easily resolved, and in any case, it is Ovid who eventually reminds us that his mirror still keeps in line with the ancient specular tradition. In other words, a paradox: the instrument that unveils to Actaeon his human consciousness, in reality, reflects nothing but his physical looks. The mirror could 'show' us the identity of the hunter only because it grants us access to his shifting psyche. A conundrum of a tragic kind follows—the inner self that Actaeon discovers can never be truly divorced from his appearance. Like Narcissus, he gains the vision at the cost of his life, and one might wonder if Tiresias' prophecy can be retroactively invoked: He may live, "if he does not know himself" (3.348: *si se non nouerit*). As Gian Biagio Conte keenly remarks, Ovid does not always remain faithful to the philosophical framework that he himself lays out.<sup>26</sup> The Platonic exhortation "everything changes; nothing dies" (15.165: *omnia mutantur, nihil interit*) strikes a deeply ironic note when we remember that Actaeon's life indeed has ended:

nec nisi *finita* per plurima uulnera *uita*

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<sup>26</sup> Conte, Gian Biagio, "Ovid," in *Latin Literature: A History*, trans. Joseph B. Solodow, rev. Don Fowler and Glenn W. Most (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 353.

ira pharetratae fertur satiata Dianae.  
(3.251–252)

(If his *life* had not been *finished* through  
many wounds  
The wrath of quivered Diana would not  
have been satiated.)

To the world he was living in, Actaeon is no more. *Finita uita* marks the end of his physical life and also of his social existence, announced by none other than his rejected appearance (*per plurima uulnera*, through many wounds). Similarly, as much as the mirror reveals to Actaeon the self-invisible to the naked eye, it also affirms that to any other person, his appearance is all there is.<sup>27</sup> On the surface of the mirror dwells the dual existence of human and animal, hunter and prey, being and non-being. The doubling mirror thus gives every moment of revelation a counterpart, manifest in every thwarted attempt to bring that revelation to the surface. The instant Actaeon gains the vision of himself, for example, is marred by the failure to communicate it:

ut uero uultus et cornua uidit in unda  
'me miserum!' dicturus erat; *uox* nulla  
secuta est  
ingemuit; *uox* illa fuit . . . (3.200-202)  
(When he saw, indeed, his face and  
antlers in the water  
'Miserable me!' he was about to say; but  
no *voice* followed  
Instead he growled; that was now his  
*voice* . . .)

The distressed cry 'me miserum' is heavy with the weight of recognition. Actaeon's identity is splintered: on the one hand, the thinking, feeling human, on the other hand, the animal guise. But the

words for that recognition are lost. The question of the hunter's nature returns as Ovid draws our gaze to another mirroring pair, *uox-ingemuit-uox*. One is the human voice that is no longer real (*nulla*), the other the sound of animal, materialized through the dividing growl. If the visual mirror shows Actaeon his inhuman form, the vocal mirror reflects his now inhuman utterance reinforced by *ingemuit*. The dual *uox* later on finds another parallel: "Labros et Argiodus et *acutae uocis* Hylactor" (3.224: 'Labros and Argiodus and Hylactor with the *sharp voice*'). Robbed of his speech, Actaeon is faced with an eerie echo of both his human and bestial *uox*, which resounds in the voice of his hound. The former is a reflection of opposites, the latter a mirroring of resemblances. Here we reach a dismal conclusion: the transformed man, in the end, is only little more than an animal. As the hollow of his silent 'me miserum' fills with foreign growling, his mirror image turns a stranger to himself.

The lack of human voice, the inability to speak,<sup>28</sup> reminds us that the tragedy of Actaeon is essentially the failure of self-expression. Io, who suffers a nearly identical fate as Actaeon, could eventually pronounce her existence by scraping letters on the ground. The young man, however, has no such luxury. The divide in his case is clear: what he knows is completely unknown to others. Here the paradox of Ovid's mirror emerges. One look at the mirror allows Actaeon to define his inner self by rejecting his appearance. Another look, from the other side, denies its existence once the individual fails to bring that self to the surface.

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<sup>28</sup> For an extended discussion on Actaeon's inability to speak, see Murray, Penelope, "Bodies in Flux: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," in *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings*, ed. Dominic Monserrat (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 92.

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<sup>27</sup> See Mudde, 546–547.

The further we advance in the story, the sharper this contrast becomes, the tragedy hedging closer. Actaeon is aware, and he tries to escape its finality—every passing line sees another attempt to make himself heard. The *dicturus erat* ('he was about to say') eventually matures into an insistent *clamare libebat*:

. . . clamare libebat  
 'Actaeon ego sum, dominum cognoscite  
 uestrum!  
 uerba animo desunt; resonat latratibus  
 aether. (3.229–231)  
 (. . . He wanted to yell  
 'I am Actaeon, recognize your master!  
 But words deserted his spirit; the air  
 resonated with barking.)

*Cognoscite* is the imperative of a self-aware soul: from *con-* ('with') and *-gnoscite* ('know'), Actaeon demands that the hounds know him the same way that he knows himself. Never vocalized, however, that demand is echoed back at him and his isolated inner world. With the muted speech "Actaeon ego sum," Ovid summons up the hunter's self-consciousness only to cast it in the animal lexicon where words are nonexistent (*uerba desunt*). Line 231 sees a transformation of the mirroring *uox-uox*, this time with a clearer contrast: words against barking, silence against discord. After the initial struggle, the voice and the barking become one. Actaeon, his human words missing, is overwhelmed by the beastly presence in both himself and the real animals.

The climax of the tale comes, as Barkan notes, when Actaeon's consciousness has been completely divorced from his form.<sup>29</sup> Incidentally this is also the moment his human companions appear in the

story. At this point Actaeon not only is most conscious of himself, but also learns the painful necessity of appearance when his companions arrive and seal his fate, unaware of what has happened:

at comites rapidum solitis hortatibus  
 agmen  
 ignari instigant *oculisque* Actaeona  
 quaerunt  
 et velut absentem certatim Actaeona  
*clamant*  
 (ad nomen caput ille refert) . . .  
 (3.242–245; emphasis mine)  
 (But his comrades, ignorant, urged on  
 the rapid pack  
 With their usual cheers, and looked for  
 Actaeon with their *eyes*  
 And, as though he was absent, *called* for  
 Actaeon earnestly  
 [He turned his head at the name] . . .)

The story comes full circle: it starts with Actaeon seeing himself in the mirror and ends with him meeting the gaze of others. The self reflected in the mirror and its physicality, which he denies, become the only means for others to measure his identity. Metamorphosis creates tension between the flesh and mind, but we would be hard-pressed to find the same celebration of the human essence otherwise present in Platonic thoughts. If the story of Actaeon is any indication, it is the true 'self' that would eventually, and tragically, yield to the false guise. After everything we have learned about the deceptive appearance, Ovid closes the curtains with cruel irony when Actaeon's companions first look for him with their eyes. There is simply no better way to reinforce the importance of appearance, which is fatal in every sense of the word.

The fact that the story focuses so heavily on expression reveals the intimate link between

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<sup>29</sup> Barkan, 46.

consciousness, self-expression, and reflection. The two words *Actaeona clamant*, line 244, are that link made manifest. They resound the earlier, unexpressed *clamore libebat*, and above all, are the inner wish of Actaeon materialized. But those words come only from his companions, the external world, while he who is most aware of his own identity cannot make a sound. Actaeon's death affirms that self-expression is inherently imperfect, and the tragedy situates Ovid's mirror in a completely different position from the ancient specular tradition. The mirror of Actaeon no longer appeals to ethical ends—there is nothing he could do, no moral he could cultivate, that could let him 'overcome' the judgement based on his looks (nor, as Ovid stresses Actaeon's innocence, is he supposed to). Ovid's mirror, instead, is a central figure that negotiates the relationship between self-expression and self-consciousness. The subject only acquires a sense of identity when he sees the asymmetry between the two, and from whence grasps a vision of the self unbound by the corporeal. At the same time, to live in a world of others is to construct an identity that can be seen and, eventually, understood. The goal is to bring that discovered self to the surface, even if that quest is by nature futile, and even if, along the way, something might be lost in translation.

Ultimately that quest of self-expression lies at the heart of metamorphosis—the struggle to find one's self amidst the fickleness of all changes, the impermanence of a world made flesh. Some, like Lycaon, after the transformation are united with their hidden essence, while others, like Actaeon, mourn the loss that comes with such vision. Let us conclude with the lines that best capture Actaeon's nature, when the failure of expression renders him something neither beast nor human:

... gemit ille sonumque

etsi non hominis, quem non tamen edere  
possit  
ceruus . . . (3.237–239)  
(. . . He gave a scream,  
Which, though none of human, no stag  
was able to give.)

This is the precis of the story, when the essence of the transformed subject is at its most ambiguous. Things from both sides of the mirror are to be questioned, but then again, no other object is more appropriate for the job. To reveal the multiform nature of things: that, in the end, is the *telos* of metamorphosis.

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