Adaptations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Late Medieval France: Material and Moral Recontextualization in the Tapestry of *Narcissus at the Fountain*

by

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DEDICATION

To my grandparents, Bob and Jane Macey, my parents, Michael and Amber Grubb, and my husband, Joshua Whitehurst, for the continual support of my academic pursuits.

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ABSTRACT

As a result of Ovid's prominence in Northern Europe from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries, French adaptations of and commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* from the late medieval period abound. Here, I address the physical and moral transformation of the Narcissus myth in the tapestry of *Narcissus at the Fountain*. Specifically, I explore how the tapestry's presentation of the youth transforms Ovid's verse in a tantalizing yet moralizing image. To aid in this endeavour, I survey the intermediate sources which inspired said transformation. I argue the lavish clothing, lush garden, ornate fountain, and solemn reflection featured in the tapestry are both decorative and didactic. Whereas the material re-contextualization of the myth evokes empathy, the moral re-contextualization encourages prudence. Thus, the tapestry embodies a peculiar ambivalence: it displays the patron's status and engages the viewer's sensorium, while simultaneously alluding to the dangers of pride and sensation.

Introduction

As I thumbed through the exhibition catalogue *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*, I gravitated toward the sumptuous artefact depicting the youth whose pride facilitated his death and transformation. I was enamoured with the familiar subject and intrigued by its foreign presentation. Thus, I endeavoured to uncover how and why the tapestry of *Narcissus at the Fountain* [Fig. 1] departs from Ovid's account of the myth in his *Metamorphoses*.[1] Moreover, upon viewing the tapestry at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, I was struck by the disparity between the physical and historical context of the tapestry now and half a millennium ago. Thus, I endeavoured to uncover how the intended audience interacted with and interpreted the artefact. The premise that the tapestry's departure from the original is simply the result of an ignorance of or disregard for Ovid is oversimplified. To understand the complexity of the transformation which occurs, it is important to consider not only the form and function of the object but also the severity its subject.

Narcissus at the Fountain is simultaneously an intriguing and challenging artefact because of the mystery surrounding its conception and execution. Though the designer, weaving centre, and patron are unknown, the style and subject of the tapestry provide insight into its origins.[2] For example, art historians agree the tapestry was completed in Northern France around the turn of the sixteenth century based on its style and sophistication.[3] Furthermore, the tapestry may have been part of a mythological series, which includes scenes such as Heracles and the

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[1] *Narcissus at the Fountain*, early 16th c., wool warp and silk wefts, 282cm x 311cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
[2] Apart from a record which shows that Monsieur de Talgonet, of the Château de Rozay, possessed the tapestry in the late nineteenth century, the origin of the object is undetermined. For more on the provenance of *Narcissus at the Fountain*, see the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston digital catalogue entry and Martina Bagnoli (ed.), *A Feast for the Senses*, exh. cat., Walters Art Museum (Baltimore: 2016) 133.
[3] For more on the aesthetic of *Narcissus at the Fountain*, see Ella Siple, "French Gothic Tapestries of about 1500", in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 53, No. 306 (1928) 145-46; Genevieve Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century*. exh. cat. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York: 1974) 93; and Bagnoli, *A Feast for the Senses* 133.

Nemean Lion.[4] And yet, Narcissus is a strange character to display alongside the heroes of antiquity.[5] The unconventional subject hints that the tapestry was not ready-made but commissioned by an aristocrat to display his status and education. Consequently, I treat the tapestry as a decoration housed in a private estate, which was primarily observed by the patron and his guests. When visualizing the tapestry in such an environment, the intention behind its design is illuminated.

Here, I explore how *Narcissus at the Fountain's* presentation of the youth transforms Ovid's verse into a tantalizing yet moralizing image. To aid in this endeavour, I survey the intermediate sources which inspired said transformation.[6] Rather than identify any one image or text as the primary inspiration for the tapestry, I address the types of sources which the tapestry evokes through its unique presentation of the classical character. I argue the lavish clothing, lush garden, ornate fountain, and solemn reflection featured in the tapestry are both decorative and didactic. Whereas the material re-contextualization of the myth evokes empathy, the moral re-contextualization encourages prudence. Thus, the tapestry embodies a peculiar ambivalence: it displays the patron's status and engages the viewer's sensorium, while simultaneously alluding to the dangers of pride and sensation.

Part I: Material Transformation – A Decorative, Sensuous Object

The presentation of the youth in *Narcissus at the Fountain* as well as the transmutation of a classical text into a contemporary textile adds a unique dimension to the Ovidian narrative. The

[4] For an image of the Heracles tapestry, see Siple's "French Gothic Tapestries of about 1500".
[5] For more on characters and scenes often portrayed in French tapestries, see Marina Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2005) 89-133.
[6] Though the term intermediate sources technically encompasses art created between the death of Ovid and the inception of the tapestry, I focus primarily on art created in France during the twelfth through sixteenth centuries.

presentation of the figure and his setting enhance the allure of the scene. Furthermore, the tapestry's functionality, aesthetic, and style enhance the intimacy of the scene, while its sensuousness enhances its immediacy. As a result of Narcissus's physical transformation, viewing the tapestry evokes empathy in a way unlike reading the *Metamorphoses*. It tantalizes the viewer with a temporal, or profane, beauty similar to that which led the youth astray.

The material transformation of the myth is multifaceted, involving both visual and physical departures from the *Metamorphoses*. Firstly, *Narcissus at the Fountain* transforms the distraught youth in Roman fashion into a serene youth in French fashion. Ovid emphasizes Narcissus's emotional turmoil and physical suffering.[7] He devotes less than twenty-five lines to the initial falling in love yet more than sixty-five lines to the subsequent torment Narcissus endures. Even so, the tapestry depicts the moment when Narcissus first discovers his own reflection. The youth's supple body, relaxed posture, and pleasant expression contrast sharply with the wailing, withered youth Ovid describes. Though the tapestry contains symbols of the youth's fate, the image on its surface is tranquil and romantic. Ovid describes Narcissus's beauty at length; however, about the youth's clothing he says only that he was hunting and wearing a tunic.[8] Thus, based on Ovid's description, modern readers presumably envision a young man in a thigh-length tunic wearing sandals and a quiver. And yet, the tapestry portrays Narcissus in the lavish clothing of a French courtier. Though the presentation of classical figures in contemporary dress was commonplace in Northern Europe during the fifteenth century, the opulence of Narcissus's dress is distinctive.[9] The youth's head is adorned with an elegant feathered band. His

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[7] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 157: Upon recognizing his reflection, Narcissus laments, 'Oh, that I might be parted from my own body! And, a strange prayer for a lover, I would that what I love were absent from me! And now grief is sapping my strength; but a brief space of life remains to me and I am cut off in my life's prime. Death is nothing to me, for in death I shall leave my troubles…'

[8] Ibid 159: Narcissus 'plucks away his tunic at its upper fold and beats his bare breast with pallid hands.'

[9] For more on the presentation of classical figures in late medieval France, see Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1960), 42-114.

doublet is intricately patterned and studded with pearls. His regal cape is bordered with gold. His shoes and stockings are embellished with precious stones. And the hilt of his sword, an impractical weapon for hunting, is handsomely decorated. Though the lavish clothing may appear incongruous to modern viewers, it would have been familiar to and endearing for the intended audience. Furthermore, a faithful portrayal of Narcissus as described by Ovid would not have had the same appeal to the French nobility as the relaxed and fashionable youth. The curation of, and alterations to, the Narcissus's appearance enhance the allure of the tapestry.

Secondly, the tapestry transforms a secluded setting with a static spring into a bustling garden with a flowing fountain. Ovid describes a shaded glade with a smooth pool undisturbed by men and animals.[10] He evokes and subverts the *locus amoenus* of antiquity – an idyllic landscape which symbolized safety and comfort. The tapestry, however, evokes the medieval pleasure garden – a tantalizing landscape which symbolized love and desire. The Garden of Love included 'a combination of standard motifs associated with love: a flowering garden, a marble fountain, and a series of courtly figures often dancing or playing music.'[11] As seen in the tapestry, blooms sprinkle the resplendent backdrop; birds and other woodland creatures gambol among the plants; the ornate fountain spills crystal water into the basin below. Though such motifs are somewhat obscure to modern viewers, the intended audience would have recognized them with ease. Narcissus's inability to draw himself from the fountain is comprehensible when

[10] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 153: 'There was a clear pool with silvery bright water, to which no shepherds ever came… 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.'

[11] Patricia Zalamea, "At the Ovidian Pool: Christine de Pizan's Fountain of Wisdom as a Locus for Vision", in Alison Keith & Stephen Rupp (eds.) *Metamorphosis: The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Toronto: Center for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2007) 92. For more on Garden of Love iconography, see also Johanna Bauman, "Verbal Representations", in Michael Leslie (ed.) *The Medieval Age*, vol. 2 of *A Cultural History of Gardens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 126, 134.

one considers the vitality and opulence of the setting. As such, the alterations to Narcissus's environment further enhance the allure of the tapestry.

In addition to the visual departure of *Narcissus at the Fountain* from the *Metamorphoses*, it is important to also consider its physical departure. The verses of the classical poet are transmuted into an ornamental, practical, and social object. Tapestries were first and foremost decorative; they beautified and enlivened both private and public spaces. Consequently, a tapestry's visual appeal was paramount. Tapestries were also practical; they insulated drafty rooms and were transported with relative ease. A tapestry could be moved between rooms and estates, placed in storage and displayed for celebrations, or even carried on journeys and military campaigns.[12] Lastly, tapestries were status symbols. As a result of 'the vast quantities of expensive materials and their labour-intensive manufacture,' tapestries functioned as 'eloquent expressions of their owner's ambitions and accomplishments, policies and threats, faith and taste.'[13] Tapestries had widespread appeal because of their practicality and complex functionality. The learned few who had direct access to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would have approached the poem as an exemplar of classical grammar and aetiology. Meanwhile, the many who had access to woven adaptations of classical myths primarily viewed them as exemplars of beauty and affluence. Tapestries which depict scenes from antiquity gave new life to the verses of dead poets. The proximity of the viewer, to the classical characters portrayed, lessened the aesthetic distance between them. The transmutation of the Ovidian myth into a contemporary tapestry lends an intimacy to the scene characteristic of the medium.

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[12] For more on the complex functionality of tapestries, see Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* 89-133; Paul Elek, French Tapestry, ed. Andre Lejard (London: Paul Elek Publishers, 1946) 21-24; and R. A. Weigert, *French Tapestry*, trans. Donald and Monique King (Glasgow: Robert MacLehose & Co., 1962) 23-25.
[13] Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* 95, 99. For more on the role of tapestry in local economies, see Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century* 17-18.

Furthermore, *Narcissus at the Fountain* appealed to the intended audience because of its conservative aesthetic and regional style. The tapestry updates and localizes the myth by employing a visual language characteristic of the time and place in which it was woven. Though the tapestry was completed at the outset of the sixteenth century, 'it should not be supposed that from the year 1501 the far-reaching traditions of the Middle Ages were suddenly abandoned. [French] craftsmen did not cast aside a past whence they had drawn so much rich inspiration.'[14] Afterall, the oldest surviving tapestry from France dates to the fourteenth century, during the height of the Gothic period. Though some art historians argue 'the Renaissance betrayed, or even killed, the aesthetic peculiar to tapestry, reducing the art to merely woven painting,' others argue that tapestry 'remained essentially faithful to customary methods of composition and spatial organization.'[15] Apart from the foreshortened fountain and its dimensional embellishments, *Narcissus at the Fountain* is reminiscent of its Gothic predecessors. The imposing figure and fountain dominate the foreground; the decorative blossoms and wildlife crowd the background. The spatial relationships between forms make them appear as though they are superimposed on the picture plane. The visual conservatism of the tapestry is particularly evident when compared to later tapestries such as *Narcissus and Echo* (c. 1715) [Fig. 2].[16] For example, the composition and naturalism of the eighteenth-century tapestry are more painterly than that of the earlier tapestry. The conservative aesthetic of *Narcissus at the Fountain* enhances the intimacy of the scene by positioning the myth within the framework of a rich decorative tradition in France.

Through contemporary stylistic flourishes, the tapestry foregrounds the tantalizing elements of the Ovidian narrative. French tapestries depicting classical figures and historical

[14] Elek, *French Tapestry* 39.
[15] Henri Zerner, *Renaissance Art in France: The Invention of Classicism*, trans. Deke Dusinberre, Scott Wilson, and Rachel Zerner (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 2003) 274-75.
[16] Antione Dieu, *Narcissus and Echo*, early 18th c., Nazmiyal Collection, New York.

events were common during the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries.[17] Also popular were tapestries depicting courtly life, leisure, and love.[18] *Narcissus at the Fountain* is both; it is simultaneously a testament to the patron's education and taste. Narcissus is not a moral exemplar like Aeneas or Heracles; consequently, it stands to reason that the myth was primarily chosen for its romantic appeal. Afterall, the myth features a handsome, high-born youth, pursued by many suitors, who laments his inability to satisfy his desires. Whereas the origin of the myth lends a sobriety to the scene suitable for a noble patron, the presentation of the myth lends a gaiety to the scene suitable for a decorative tapestry.

The similarities between *Narcissus at the Fountain* and other tapestries from the region illustrate that the designer was inspired at least in part by intermediate visual sources depicting courtly subjects. For example, *The Unicorn is Found*, from *The Hunt of the Unicorn* series, presents a group of men who have tracked the animal to a fountain in the middle of a forest [Fig. 3].[19] The background is crowded with foliage and wildlife, including partridges, pheasants, and rabbits. The handsome rooster drinking from the basin of the fountain is a particularly pronounced parallel between the two tapestries. The hunter, in the upper righthand of the tapestry, wearing a feathered cap, velvet cape, and textured doublet, illustrates the modernity of Narcissus's dress. Also, the unicorn drinks from an ornate, marble fountain decorated with golden lion's heads. The stylistic similarities between the two tapestries suggest that the designers were inspired by similar visual sources, sources crafted to cater to French aristocrats.

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[17] For examples of historical tapestries, see Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* 89-133.
[18] For examples of courtly tapestries, see Elek, *French Tapestry* 29-48; Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century* 93-106; and Weigert, *French Tapestry* images XXV – XXIV.
[19] *The Unicorn is Found*, early 16th c., wool warp with silk, silver, and gilt wefts, 368cm x 378cm, The Cloisters, New York.

Narcissus at the Fountain's highly stylized background further enhances its appeal. The tapestry belongs to a sub-genre known as *millefleurs*; these tapestries, unique to Southern France, are characterized by solid red or blue backgrounds covered with plants and flowers.[20] The *Lady with the Unicorn* series, which many art historians present as an exemplar of the genre, is intriguing both because of its visual and allegorical elements.[21] The most relevant tapestry from the series for this study is *Sight* [Fig. 4].[22] The tapestry depicts a courtly lady flanked by a lion and unicorn; she and the mirror she holds serve as the tapestry's focal point. The grassy patch beneath these central characters hovers like a saucer in the foreground. Numerous varietals of plants and small animals populate the background. The stylistic similarities between *Sight* and *Narcissus at the Fountain* further illustrate the flourishes characteristic of early sixteenth-century tapestries in Northern France. The regional aesthetic imbues the antique narrative with a sense of familiarity and intimacy.

Lastly, the immediacy of *Narcissus at the Fountain* results from its sensuousness. Though the precise origins of the tapestry are unknown, its physical context would have resembled that of other tapestries from the period. Whereas contemporary viewers primarily encounter woven artefacts in museums – spaces intentionally void of sensory stimuli outside of the artworks themselves – sixteenth century viewers encountered tapestries in sensory rich environments such as luxurious estates and churches.[23] Marina Belozerkaya paints a vivid picture of the context within which contemporaries viewed such woven artefacts: 'Activated by air currents, tapestries came to life in busy rooms, and their life-sized figures appeared to move

[20] For an explanation and examples of the *millefleur* genre, see Weigert, *French Tapestry* 76-81.
[21] For a brief explanation of the allegorical significance of the *Lady with the Unicorn* series, see Souchal *Masterpieces of Tapestry* 100-106.
[22] *Sight*, late 15th c., 310cm x 330cm, Musèe de national du Moyen Âge, Paris.
[23] For more on the sensory dimension of medieval objects, see Martina Bagnoli (ed.), "Sensual Awakenings", in *A Feast for the Senses*, exh. cat., Walters Art Museum (Baltimore: 2016) 13-15.

and mingle with the similarly dressed inhabitants. The particular stories depicted in the weavings – readily understood by and relevant to their contemporaries as they are not to us – turned them into interactive tableaux, rather than passive artifacts.'[24] The immediacy of *Narcissus at the Fountain* is the result of not only the subject's familiarity but also the object's materiality. The contemporaries of such classical tapestries could walk among and touch the magnificent works which depicted familiar stories and activities. The rich sensory environments of tapestries animated the figures portrayed, thus immersing the viewers in the mise-en-scène of historical and mythological narratives.

Though some of the tapestry's dimension is lost to the ages, its sensuousness has largely been preserved. *Narcissus at the Fountain* directly engages the senses and promotes the imagined engagement of the senses.[25] The tapestry's scale and subject attract the viewer's gaze. The lavish clothing and delicate beauty of Narcissus as well as the orientation and opulence of the fountain direct the gaze to the tapestry's focal point – the fateful image beneath the water's surface. The tapestry's substance and intricacy invite the viewer's touch. The silky, vibrant threads peppered with a profusion of plants creates a texture which is obscured in photographs of the artefact. The viewer imagines the feeling of the warm breeze, cool water, smooth stone, sharp steel, waxy leaves, slick feathers, and downy fur. The viewer imagines the smell of bluebells, carnations, columbines, cowslips, daisies, forget me nots, hyacinths, strawberries, and violets. The viewer imagines the sounds of the flowing fountain, cooing quails, and rustling rabbits. The tapestry tantalizes the viewer with sights, sensations, smells, and sounds both corporeal and imagined, thus immersing them in the indulgent landscape of the classical figure.

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[24] Belozerskaya, *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* 95.

[25] For more on the direct and imagined engagement of the senses, see Martina Bagnoli (ed.), "Making Sense", in *A Feast for the Senses*, exh. cat., Walters Art Museum (Baltimore: 2016) 16-30.

In summation, the materiality, contemporaneity, and sensuality of *Narcissus at the Fountain* lessens the aesthetic distance between the intended viewer and the subject. The material recontextualization of the Ovidian myth displays the status of its patron and tantalizes the audience with its opulent youth and dynamic backdrop. As Narcissus was drawn to the fateful pool and treacherous image, so the viewer is drawn to the temporal beauty of the scene.

Part II: Moral Transformation – An Instructional, Moralizing Object

As a result of the physical transformation which occurs in *Narcissus at the Fountain*, the classical character is recontextualized within the moral framework of sixteenth century France. The rise of Christianity, during the medieval period, as well as the development of vernacular literature in France alters the severity and implications of the Ovidian myth. Because of contemporary attitudes toward pride, the senses, and love, the tapestry encourages prudence in a way unlike the *Metamorphoses*. The tapestry alludes to the dangers of excessive love of self and love of the ephemeral.

Though interpretations of Narcissus were remarkably diverse, pride and perception remained integral to adaptations of and commentaries on the myth. As a result of the rise and spread of Christianity, European attitudes toward pride and perception evolved. Pride came to be viewed as the root of all sin – a voluntary withdrawal from society, a turning away from the will of God. The gravity of pride is illuminated by the teachings of early Church Fathers such as Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Gregory the Great (540-604). Augustine argued that pride preceded original sin; after all, Adam and Eve disobeyed God because they desired to be like Him.[26] Thus, he defined pride as a rebellion of the will of man against the will of God. Gregory

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[26] Stanford Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil*, ed. Larry T. Reynolds (New York: General Hall, Inc., 1989) 163.

categorized pride (*superbia*) as the progenitor of all sins, placing vanity (*vana gloria*) at the top of his hierarchy of deadly sins.[27] He asserted that the proud man 'wrongs God, himself, and society by his haughty withdrawal and voluntary removal from the blessings of God and the vigilance of the world.'[28] The teachings of these early Church Fathers are echoed in the writings of later theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and Alain de Lille (1128-1220). Anselm suggests that pride facilitates idolatry because the evil, or autonomous, will (*voluntas propria*) 'renounce[s] divine will, placing itself above it.'[29] Moreover, he states that self-aggrandizement precedes sins such as vainglory, envy, sadness, anger, and greed.[30] Alain taught that pride is a spiritual malady which manifests in physical ways. He asserted that 'pride and its concomitant, disdain for the world, are indicated in modes of speech and mannerisms of silence and also in the vanity expressed in fashionable dress and cosmetic beautification.'[31] The presentation of the handsome, isolated youth in *Narcissus at the Fountain* is not only aesthetically pleasing but also intellectually stimulating. The lavish clothing lends to the tapestry's luxuriousness while alluding to the dangers of indulging in such luxuries. The tapestry serves as a sort of mirror which draws attention to the narcissism inherent in expensive decorations. The relaxed youth serves as a warning rather than an inspiration; he symbolizes the proud, who damn themselves by indulging base desires. The gravity of the scene stems, in part, from doctrine regarding pride, original sin, and free will.

Furthermore, the senses were viewed as facilitators of spiritual enlightenment and self-reflection as well as sinful desire and self-destructive behaviour. Medieval conceptions of the

[27] Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1952) 72.
[28] Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins* 136.
[29] Carla Casagrande, with the assistance of Martina Bagnoli (ed.), "From Vigilance to Temperance: The Senses, the Passions, and Sin," in *A Feast for the Senses*, exh. cat., Walters Art Museum (Baltimore: 2016) 88.
[30] Ibid 89.
[31] Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins* 141.

senses were characterized by an ambivalence rooted in the stimulation of the mind and body. On the one hand, the senses were 'instruments of faith as well as perception: they provided the raw material from which the intellect could move to higher truths.'[32] On the other hand, ecclesiasts, such as the ascetic monk Jerome (c. 347-420), taught the senses were 'vehicles of dangerous and sinful passions that ravage the soul.'[33] Augustine conceded that the senses were hazardous because they encouraged individuals to turn 'toward worldly things, loved and sought after in and of themselves, and not in function of God.'[34] And yet, he recognized the role that the senses play in cognition. He argued the senses, when governed by reason, were able to 'move beyond carnal desire and aspire to higher knowledge.'[35] Therefore, Augustine concluded that discipline, rather than self-denial, was the best solution to the problem of the senses. The prominence of Augustine's teachings during the late Middle Ages is evident in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas postulated, 'when reason agrees with sensation in identifying the good, then sensible pleasure becomes intellectual pleasure, as well; conversely, when a pleasure of the intellectual appetite is particularly intense, it can overflow into the lower faculty and activate sensible pleasure.'[36] In short, the senses were dangerous because they could lead to sin yet advantageous because they could lead to spiritual enlightenment.

The paradox is particularly evident upon examining attitudes toward sight. Sight was beneficial in that it enabled the observation of both man, who was created in God's image, and nature, which was a testament to the power and imagination of God. And yet, as Neoplatonic

[32] Bagnoli, "Making Sense" 17.
[33] Casagrande, "From Vigilance to Temperance" 86.
[34] Ibid 87.
[35] Bagnoli, "Making Sense" 18.
[36] Casagrande, "From Vigilance to Temperance" 90.

scholars noted, man and nature are but imperfect reflections of divine forms.[37] Vision had a sort of double nature: it was 'both the truest and falsest of the senses: it ha[d] the greatest capacity to reveal truth, and the greatest capacity to deceive.'[38] As a result of doctrine regarding spiritual truth and earthly desire, the senses were viewed as tools of both redemption and condemnation. Sight plays a crucial role in the myth of Narcissus; after all, the deception of the youth is the catalyst for his transformation. The solemn reflection feature in *Narcissus at the Fountain* signifies deception and alludes to the fate of the figure. As the viewer contemplates the image, they are faced with the perils of earthly beauty.

The moral gravity of the tapestry is further illuminated by the role of Narcissus in the courtly romance tradition. To understand how the myth is reimagined in France, it is important to first address garden and mirror iconography. The medieval pleasure garden was a popular setting for both secular and sacred art because of its sensuousness and multivalence. Firstly, gardens symbolized relaxation and comfort. The *locus amoenus*, as popularized by Homer and Vergil, gave rise to 'the medieval notion of the earthly paradise of natural beauty and eternally vernal climate,' which allowed individuals 'to linger within a lovely, soothing place that exists for its own sake'.[39] Secondly, gardens symbolized purity and chastity. As pagan imagery was absorbed into Christian iconography, the gardens of antiquity were conflated with the gardens of the Bible.[40] Thus, gardens were ascribed sacred significance; for example, 'white roses became

[37] For more on Neoplatonic conceptions of mirrors, see Jeanne Nightingale, "From Mirror to Metamorphosis: Echoes of Ovid's Narcissus in Chretien's *Erec et Enide*", in *The Mythographic Art: Classical Fable and the Rise of the Vernacular in Early France and England* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 1990) 57.
[38] Suzanne Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 7.
[39] Bauman, "Verbal Representations" 118, 120.
[40] For more on gardens in sacred texts and visual art, see Virginia Brilliant with the assistance of Martina Bagnoli (ed.), "The Virgin in the Rose Garden", in *A Feast for the Senses*, exh. cat., Walters Art Museum (Baltimore: 2016) 47-54 and Elizabeth Augspach, "Meaning", in Michael Leslie (ed.) *The Medieval Age*, vol. 2 of *A Cultural History of Gardens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 101-115.

symbols of purity, red roses of redeeming blood, and both colours, together with the green of their leaves, also represented the three cardinal virtues faith, hope, and love'.[41] Lastly, gardens symbolized romance and desire. They were popular retreats for those who desired intimacy, both spiritual and physical. The Garden of Love was an ideal setting for romances because within them 'the ideas and vocabulary of love, sacred and secular, spiritual and bodily, terrestrial and celestial intermingled.'[42] Though the lush garden primarily enhances the tapestry's visual appeal, it also alludes to physical desire and forbidden love. The transformation of the *locus amoenus* into a medieval pleasure garden evokes romantic adaptations of the Narcissus myth.

The influence of intermediate literary sources upon *Narcissus at the Fountain* is further solidified by the ornate fountain which functions as a mirror. On the one hand, mirrors facilitated contemplation of and reflection upon the self and the spiritual; on the other hand, mirrors facilitated vanity and deception. Mirrors provided 'access to other realms – earthly, imaginary, and divine;' consequently, they were considered 'guarantors of clarity, divine truth, or mimetic accuracy.'[43] And yet, mirrors were often 'opaque and distorting creating false, shadowy, or deformed images of earthly reality,' which signified the 'limitations of human perception, knowledge, and wisdom.'[44] The dual nature of mirrors is central to the Narcissus myth in that the reflective surface enables the youth to gain knowledge of himself, a knowledge which precipitates the destruction of self.[45] In the courtly romance tradition, mirrors were associated

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[41] Celia Fisher, "Flowers and Plants, the Living Iconography", in Colum Hourihane (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 459.
[42] Brilliant, "The Virgin in the Rose Garden" 47.
[43] Nancy Frelick, "Introduction", in *The Mirror in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: Specular Reflections* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016) 1.
[44] Ibid 2-3. For in-depth analyses of the dual nature of mirrors in courtly romances, see Peter Allen, *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the Romance of the Rose* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) 80-110 and Nightingale, "From Mirror to Metamorphosis" 49-72.
[45] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 157: 'Oh, I am he! I have felt it, I know my own image. I burn with love of my own self; I both kindle the flames and suffer them… What I desire I have; the very abundance of my riches beggars me.'

with the 'dream vision, both of them signifying the distorted perception characteristic of revelatory allegory.'[46] Although fountains were a common feature of medieval pleasure gardens, the signification of the fountain of Narcissus was distinctive. Thus, the focal point of the tapestry imbues it with a sense of wonder and vigilance, characteristic of allegory. The tapestry's presentation of the myth illustrates the role of the courtly romance tradition in its conception.

Narcissus is re-contextualized within the cultural framework of feudalism through allusions to and adaptations of the myth in the late Middle Ages.[47] The youth becomes a symbol of not only pride but also unrequited, or misplaced, love. For example, Chrétien de Troyes *Erec et Enide* (c. 1170) features a knight whose extraordinary beauty is rivalled only by his feminine facsimile. Enide both inspires Erec to improve himself and distracts him from his chivalric duties. Enide becomes 'a fatal seductive mirror, the instrument of Erec's symbolic death in courtly society.'[48] And yet, it is important to note that Erec does not suffer the same fate as Narcissus. The knight's outwardly directed love of the lady is rewarded with the eventual restoration of his social status. Though it is evident that the author recast the Narcissus myth in a feudal context, it is ambiguous how he intends the reader to interpret the protagonist and his lover. Conversely, Alexandre de Paris in his *Roman d'Alexandre* (c. 1180) clearly portrays his lovers as negative examples. The princess Dané, a courtly surrogate for Echo, humiliates herself by propositioning the unreceptive knave Narcissus. The princess prays to Venus to curse the knave, who in turn becomes infatuated with his own reflection. Narcissus reveals his physical and emotional suffering to Dané, and she wishes death upon herself. Alexandre de Paris'

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[46] Akbari, "Seeing Through the Veil" 49. For more on the role of mirrors in medieval allegory, see also Zalamea, "At the Ovidian Pool" 92.
[47] For more on the reimagination of Ovidian myths in courtly romances, see Miranda Griffin, *Transforming Tales: Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 1-23.
[48] Nightingale, "From Mirror to Metamorphosis" 65.

adaptation is in many ways faithful to the original; and yet, he implies the princess was punished because she loved someone beneath herself and the knave was punished because he loved something unattainable.[49] Here, the author imposes contemporary class structure upon the classical myth. Though these twelfth century romances are fascinating examples of the intermediate texts which added layers of meaning to Narcissus, they do not moralize the characters to the same extent as later adaptations.

Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* (c 1230 – 1275) is noteworthy not only because of its widespread popularity and influence but also because of its use of Narcissus as part of its allegorical framework. The *Rose* recounts the myth at length and features the fountain of Narcissus as the catalyst for the protagonist's journey in search of the Rose. In the first chapter, the protagonist is ushered into the Garden of Pleasure by Idleness, a young woman wearing exquisite clothing and carrying a mirror. The beauty of the verdant setting and its jocund occupants are described at length. Later, Idleness introduces the protagonist to the God of Love who possesses ten arrows: five which are fair and five 'whose points and shafts were blacker than demons from hell' – the first of which is named Pride.[50] In the second chapter, the protagonist discovers the Spring of Narcissus. The myth is retold, with special emphasis placed on retribution for those who, like Narcissus, 'basely refused loyal lovers.'[51] The spring itself is characterized as a perilous mirror where 'violent feelings spring up,' where 'sense and moderation are no use.'[52] In part two of the *Rose*, the Garden of Pleasure is contrasted with the Park of the Shepherd. As Genius characterizes the two settings, he

[49] Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme in Western European Literature Up to the Early 19th Century*, trans. Robert Dewsnap (Lund: Skanska Centraltryckeriet, 1967) 58-66.
[50] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 16.
[51] Ibid 23-24.
[52] Ibid 25.

intimates that 'the Garden of Delight is a garden of vanity, deception, and earthly love, while the Park of the Shepherd is a garden of purity related to a more elevated spiritual love.'[53] Moreover, in part two, Jean de Meun compares Narcissus to Pygmalion; he emphasizes 'the fruitfulness of Pygmalion's fertile, outwardly directed love, in contrast with the sterile, self-directed love of Narcissus.'[54] Though the themes of pride and perception are preserved in the *Rose*, Narcissus serves primarily as a symbol of unrequited, misplaced, or futile love. Whether the parallels were intentional or no, the similarities between the text and the tapestry were undoubtedly more pronounced to the intended audience than its modern audience. As a result of vernacular adaptations of the *Metamorphoses*, layers of meaning were added to classical myths. Through romances such as *Erec et Enide*, the *Roman d'Alexandre*, and the *Roman de la Rose*, Narcissus became a symbol of not only pride and perception but also earthly love.

Translations of and commentaries on Ovid further illuminate the moral gravity of *Narcissus at the Fountain*. Whereas some scholars took a philological, grammatical, or rhetorical approach to the classical poet, others took a philosophical, ethical, or allegorical approach.[55] The *Metamorphoses* was popular during the Middle Ages despite its licentiousness because it was 'capable of bearing a sustained moral exegesis.'[56] Myths were viewed as vessels for truth, an

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[53] Bauman, "Verbal Representations" 130. For more on the gardens in parts one and two of the *Roman de la Rose*, see also Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth: Classical Mythology and Its Interpretations in Medieval French Literature* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997) 83-87.
[54] Akbari, "Seeing Through the Veil" 83. For more on the contrast between Narcissus and Pygmalion, see Stephen Bann, *The True Vine: On Visual Representation and the Western Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 115.
[55] For more on scholarly approaches to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Frank Coulson, "Ovid's Metamorphoses in the School Tradition of France, 1180-1400," in Frank Coulson, James Clark, & Kathryn McKinley (eds.) *Ovid in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 48-82 and Kenneth Knoespel, *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985) 24-58.
[56] Nigel Llewellyn, "Illustrating Ovid," in Charles Martindale (ed.) *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the 20th Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 155. For more on the exegesis of the *Metamorphoses*, see also Jane Chance (ed.), "The Medieval 'Apology for Poetry': Fabulous Narrative and Stories of the Gods," in *The Mythographic Art: Classical Fable and the Rise of the Vernacular in Early France and England* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 1990) 5-8 and Marilynn Desmond, "The Goddess Diana and the Ethics of Reading in the *Ovide moralise*," in Alison Keith & Stephen Rupp (eds.) *Metamorphosis:*

idea which dates back to fifth century Rome. Macrobius, whose commentary on Aristotle's *Dream of Scipio* was often cited by medieval authors, theorized that dreams and myths have a twofold nature: *fabula* and *veritas*.[57] Medieval scholars endeavoured to explicate the truths concealed within myths; consequently, Christian values were often imposed upon the works of pre-Christian authors.[58] The moralizing commentaries on Ovid present 'classical fable as veiled truth, necessarily open to interpretation of different levels;' they encourage readers to 'keep simultaneously in one's head several equally valid but self-contradictory 'meanings' for a single text and make equations between them.'[59] Rather than discard or rewrite Ovidian narratives, medieval commentators added layers of signification through summation, annotation, and intertextual citation.

The myth of Narcissus became an example of futile, terrestrial pursuits as a result of the explication of the *Metamorphoses*. Here, I address a few of the many commentaries which demonstrate the variety of ways scholars interpreted and presented the myth of Narcissus. John of Salisbury, in his *Policraticus* (c. 1159), foregrounds the classical distinction between appearance and reality. He chastises those who strive for power, glory, and praise and asserts that they 'despise others in comparison to themselves and seek to attain the impossible, rejoicing in advance at the deceptive image of things.' Moreover, he notes that they are like Narcissus who was 'transformed into a flower as he [was] captivated by his empty reflection, and perish[ed] in his youth like a flower without fruit while he, ignorantly, look[ed] at himself.'[60] John of

The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (Toronto: Center for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2007), 63-64.

[57] Nightingale, "From Mirror to Metamorphosis" 49. For more on extracting truth from myth, see also Kosinski, "Reading Myth" 99 and Knoespel, *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* 26-35.

[58] For more on the imposition of Christian values upon pagan myths, see Griffin, *Transforming Tales* 31-66.

[59] Ann Moss, *Ovid in Renaissance France: A Survey of the Latin Editions of Ovid and Commentaries Printed in France before 1600* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1982) 26.

[60] For additional information on vanitas symbolism in Scripture, see Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme* 72.

Salisbury highlights the ignorance of Narcissus, who was destroyed by his preoccupation with the unsubstantial. John of Garland, in his *Integumenta Ovidii* (c. 1234), foregrounds the distinction between the ephemeral and the eternal. He interprets the shadow of Narcissus and the flower into which he transforms as 'emblems of the emptiness and transience of life and the evanescence of earthly beauty;' consequently, he suggests that Narcissus exemplifies 'souls who seek vain and fluctuating glory only to lose true lasting joy.'[61] The author highlights the vanity of Narcissus, who was destroyed by his preoccupation with transitory beauty. *L'Ovide Moralisé* (c. 1317 – 1328), whose author is unknown, foregrounds the distinction between the terrestrial and the celestial. Narcissus symbolizes the fools who 'look at themselves and amuse themselves in the false mirrors of this world.'[62] As demonstrated in these commentaries, the themes of pride and perception are preserved and elaborated upon. The Christian preoccupation with distinguishing between, yet reconciling, the earthly and heavenly realms is thereby evident in theses medieval interpretations of Narcissus. Through intermediate literary sources, both romantic and academic, the youth portrayed in the tapestry was transformed into a symbol of profane and ephemeral love.

In summation, the rise of Christianity and the development of vernacular literature, in France, increases the severity and implications of the Narcissus myth. The moral recontextualization of the youth encourages prudence through allusions to the dangers of pride, false perception, and the pursuit of temporal pleasure. As Narcissus suffered for his attraction to his own image, so the viewer may suffer for their attraction to such alluring images.

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[61] Nightingale, "From Mirror to Metamorphosis" 51.

[62] Griffin, *Transforming Tales* 79. For more on the approach to Ovid in *L'Ovide Moralisé*, see also Knoespel, *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* 46-52 and Ana Pairet, "Recasting the Metamorphoses in fourteenth-century France", in Frank Coulson, James Clark, & Kathryn McKinley (eds.) *Ovid in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 83-107.

Conclusion

Narcissus at the Fountain is a decorative, sensuous tapestry and moralizing, instructional object. The material recontextualization of Narcissus updates and localizes the classical myth. The presentation of the youth, the transmutation of the poem, as well as the direct and indirect engagement of the senses impact the ways in which the intended audience interacted with Ovid. The tapestry's allure, intimacy, and immediacy evoke empathy for the handsome youth. Moreover, the moral recontextualization of Narcissus increases the severity of and adds layers of signification to the character. The evolution of attitudes toward pride and the senses, the adaptation of the Narcissus myth in courtly romances, and the explication of the myth in commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* impacted the way the intended audience interpreted the classical character. The tapestry encourages prudence via the symbolism of the lavish clothing, lush garden, ornate fountain, and solemn reflection.

The formal and cultural analysis of *Narcissus at the Fountain* is valuable because it illuminates the dimension of French tapestry, with its unique function and aesthetic. Moreover, the tapestry illustrates that visual artists and patrons were not simply ignorant or dismissive of Ovid, rather they drew inspiration from a variety of sources – classical and contemporary, foreign and regional. Rather than discard the *Metamorphoses*, artists expounded upon a foundation laid by Ovid.

Since the research presented here raised more questions than I was able to address, I conclude by posing several questions worthy of consideration in future. What was the impact of illuminations from manuscripts such as the *Roman de la Rose* and the *L'Ovide Moralisé* upon portrayals of the Narcissus myth? How does the tapestry's portrayal of Narcissus compare to the portrayals of later French painters such as Nicolas Poussin, René-Antoine Houasse, François

Lemoyne, and Nicolas-Bernard Lépicié?[63] How does the visualization of Narcissus compare to the visualization of other prideful characters from the *Metamorphoses*, including Arachne, Niobe, Pentheus, and Phaethon? To answer these and other related questions is to gain a better understanding of the reimagination and recontextualization of Ovid in France during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

[63] Echo and Narcissus (1630), Narcissus (1688), Narcissus (1728), and Narcissus Changed into a Flower (1771)

Figure 1. Narcissus at the Fountain

Early 16th c., wool warp and silk wefts, 282cm x 311cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Accessed October 19, 2019, https://collections.mfa.org/objects/37423

Figure 2. The Unicorn is Found

Early 16th c., wool warp with silk, silver, and gilt wefts, 368cm x 378cm, The Cloisters, New York. Public Domain. Accessed October 12, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/en/art/collection/search/467638

Figure 3. Sight

Late 15th c., 310cm x 330cm, Musèe de national du Moyen Âge, Paris. Public Domain. Accessed October 19, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lady_and_the_Unicorn#/media/File:The_Lady_and_the_unicorn_Sight.jpg

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