‘Sight Lines: The Mirror of the Mind in Medieval Poetics’

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> For herself, she lingered in the soundless saloon long after the fire had gone out. There was no danger of her feeling the cold; she was in a fever. She heard the small hours strike, and then the great ones, but her vigil took no heed of time. Her mind, assailed by visions, was in a state of extraordinary activity, and her visions might as well come to her there, where she sat up to meet them, as on her pillow, to make a mockery of rest […]. When the clock struck four she got up; she was going to bed at last, for the lamp had long since gone out and the candles burned down to their sockets. But even then she stopped again in the middle of the room and stood there gazing at a remembered vision — that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated.
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> [Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady*][1]

It may seem odd, in an essay on medieval poetry, to begin with a passage from the 1908 New York edition of Henry James’s novel. Yet the experience recounted in this prose passage highlights the intimate proximity of sight and knowledge, in which the sudden experience of recognition — of abruptly coming to understand what had previously been obscure — is expressed through the language of vision. To see is to know. Such alignment of sight and knowledge has a long history, some of which I have explored in an earlier book on optical theory and allegory in the Middle Ages.[2] In the medieval optical tradition, the sense of sight is thought to be a two-part relationship between seeing subject and the object seen, and is theorized in two fundamentally different ways. In extramission theories of optics, the visual ray is thought to emanate from the one who sees and then to encounter the thing that is seen, so that the power of vision can be said to be located in the seeing subject; conversely, in intromission theories of optics, the thing that is seen is thought to emit forms that can be apprehended by the one who sees, so that the power of vision — or, at least, the active component of the act — can be said to be located in the object itself.

In the present essay, I will turn to a different way in which medieval texts depict the relationship of seeing and knowing, where instead of the two-part visual exchange of seeing subject and object that is seen, we find a model of vision that articulates the nature of the subject through the very act of seeing, producing a moment in which the subject itself is constituted through the act of self-reflective vision. In some of these moments, as I will

[1] James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. by Bamberg, p. 364. On seeing and knowing in this scene, see Marshall, *The Turn of the Mind*, pp. 138–40; see also Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*.

[2] Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*.

demonstrate, the seeing subject is actually defined through the ability to see, rather than through the completed act of sight, with its concomitant linkage of seeing subject and object seen, even where that object is a reflection of the self. The examples I will focus on are drawn from two prolific writers, both working around the year 1400, one in French and one in English: in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la mutacion de Fortune*, the seeing subject finds herself in the mirror of history; while in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the seeing subject finds herself in the self-reflective gaze of inner vision. For both of these late medieval writers, the subject is constructed in terms of solitude rather than union, and it comes fully into being not through erotic intimacy but through a withdrawal or an abstraction from the earlier, apparently transcendent experience of the mutual gaze. After an introductory survey of reflective vision in medieval culture, including examples from other works by Chaucer and Christine de Pizan, I'll turn to a more detailed reading of the ways in which the seeing solitary subject is constituted in Christine's *Mutacion de Fortune* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Before turning to these works, however, it will be useful to lay out in some detail the ways in which medieval writers described how individual subjectivity might be constituted through the act of vision. In devotional and theological writing, in scientific and philosophical writing, in lyric and in epic, vision appears consistently as the fundamental analogical language through which the ability of the subject to know the world around him is articulated: to put it another way, to 'see' is to 'know'. At times the reliability and accuracy of vision is emphasized, along with its ability to mediate between subject and object; at other times, the deceptive, distorting nature of vision is at the fore. The ability of vision to mediate between subject and object has an especially profound force in devotional literature, in which the viewer's contemplative gaze is the means of achieving nearness to God. This contemplative gaze can have many different proximate objects — a physical statue or icon; a manuscript illumination; an image conjured up in the mind by a pious text that is read (or simply remembered).[3] The non-proximate, distant object of the devotional gaze, however, is always God who is (within the terms of Christian doctrine) the only proper object of desire. The devotional gaze is often highly mediated, as when the viewer imaginatively gazes upon the suffering Christ, achieving an affective link with the divine not through direct contemplation of the Passion, but through indirect contemplation of Mary's compassion with the suffering Christ. Here, vision acts as the medium binding the seeing subject to the object of his gaze, not directly but through a convoluted web of visual referents, including not only the statue or painted image and the image held in the mind, but also the mediating vision of Mary as primary witness of the Passion.[4] Paradoxically, it is the highly mediated act of vision that most closely approximates the unmediated, perfect experience of heaven, in which the subject finally comes to 'see face to face'.

There is a tendency to artificially separate such devotional and theological modes of vision from the scientific and philosophical writings that emphasize the precision and essential knowability of vision.[5] In medieval texts on optics, as in contemporary works of literature that rely on optical theory, vision — whether direct or distorted — is always represented as being quantifiable, geometric, and precise. The extent both of verity and of falsehood can be measured. The former, devotional mode of seeing is essentially affective; the latter, quantifiable mode of seeing is essentially intellectual. Now, the frailty and instability of this binary opposition will, I am sure, be immediately evident, and nowhere is this binary opposition so fragile as in literary descriptions of vision in the context of erotic love. As seen, for example, in the breathtaking moment of recognition that Narcissus experiences as he

[3] On visionary experience, see Newman, 'What Did It Mean to Say "I Saw?"', esp. pp. 10–14.

[4] On Mary as visual mediator, see Snow, '*Maria Mediatrix*'.

[5] I myself have been guilty of this tendency: see Akbari, 'The Object of Devotion', esp. pp. 304–07.

gazes into the water and exclaims 'iste ego sum' ('It is I'; *Metamorphoses* III.463),[6] the moment of erotic desire is situated at the point of sudden convergence of two very different experiences of vision: the mutual gaze of the lover and beloved, as Narcissus gazes at the 'imaginis umbra' ('shadow', III.434; 'imago', III.463) that gazes back at him from the water, and the singular, self-reflective gaze that marks the shattering moment of anamnesis.

Much more could be said about the role of mythography in premodern constructions of the seeing subject;[7] here, however, I will merely point out the extent to which depictions of vision in love, both in late medieval and early modern examples, juxtapose (or, more precisely, place into a complex relation) the moment of the singular, self-reflective gaze and the shared mutual gaze. This juxtaposition of the dual and singular gaze lies at the heart of Sarah Kay's brilliant Lacanian reading of the *Roman de la Rose*, in which she argues that the fountain of Narcissus, as presented in Guillaume de Lorris's poem, reveals that 'love for another is the projection outwards of what starts as an investment of energy in the self […]. [L]ove […] invests desire in something patterned on the model of the self'.[8] In devotional literature, desire for the divine is based precisely on the vision of the self in the other, in recognizing the humanity of Christ, and, through that recognition, participating in the creation of an affective bridge that links God and man through contemplative experience. In non-devotional literature, whether the *Roman de la Rose* or the works of Chaucer, the expression of desire also begins with the vision of the self in the other; it differs, however, from devotional seeing in its embrace of idleness. Unlike devotional practice, which requires the exercise of disciplined visual contemplation, desire arises from vision in very undisciplined, lazy ways: it is no coincidence that the garden in which Guillaume de Lorris's narcissistic narrator falls in love has a gateway guarded by Oiseuse, the personification of Idleness.

A similar emphasis on lazy vision appears in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale'. The elderly January is determined to find a wife regardless of what his advisors counsel him to do; he wants a young one, not just because she will be of an age to give him heirs, but because (he thinks) a young wife is easier to control:

> Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse
> Fro day to day gan in the soule impresse
> Of Januarie aboute his mariage.
> Many fair shap and many a fair visage
> Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght,
> As whoso tooke a mirour, polisshed bryght,
> And sette it in a commune market-place,
> Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace
> By his mirour […].
> [W]han that he hymself concluded hadde,
> Hym thoughte ech oother mannes wit so badde
> That inpossible it were to repplye
> Agayn his choys; this was his fantasye.[9]

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[6] Quotations are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Miller, and are cited in the text by book and line number.

[7] On the role of Narcissus in medieval constructions of the subject, see Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric*; Poirion, 'Narcisse et Pygmalion dans le *Roman de la Rose*'; Hult, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecies*; Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*, chap. 3, pp. 45–77.

[8] Kay, 'The *Roman de la Rose* and the Inverted Bouquet', p. 308. On the relationship of vision, ethics, and desire in the Rose, see Rosenfeld, 'Narcissus after Aristotle', esp. pp. 10–14 and pp. 34–39.

[9] Chaucer, *Merchant's Tale*, ll. 1577–85, 1607–10. Quotations from Chaucer's works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson, and are cited by line number within the text.

In this passage, the imaginative faculty of the mind (the 'fantasye', or Latin 'phantasia') acts as a kind of 'brightly polished mirror' upon which the remembered images of local women can be reflected, made repeatedly available to be seen again.[10] Rather than a disciplined mode of thought, January's mode of thought here is casual, characterized as 'curious bisynesse'. The capriciousness of his imaginative mind is likened to the random quality of images that would appear in a mirror set up on the market place, catching glimpses of passersby. The same capriciousness affects his quality of judgement, so that his power of 'choys' is, precisely, 'his fantasye'.[11]

The idleness that motivates the subject — or, perhaps, the lack of motivation that itself constitutes idle thought — substantially affects what the subject sees within the mirror of his mind. Idleness colours not only the imagination but also the other mental faculties of judgement and will. But what about when the subject rises above idleness into a state of focused contemplation? The aim of raising the reader into such a state is central to Christine de Pizan's earliest allegory, the *Epistre Othea* or 'Letter of Othea to Hector', a mythographic mirror for princes. Here, the potential idleness of youth is redirected toward a more focused object: from the opening chapters, the youthful noble reader is urged to gaze upon Hercules, or gaze upon Perseus, in order to come to resemble them, just in the way that a devout reader might contemplate an image of a saint, or of the Passion, in order to reform the self. For example, Othea declares to the young Hector, 'Se tu de grant vertu fais force, | Vers Hercules te faut virer | Et ses vaillances remirer' ('If you set store by great virtue, you must turn towards Hercules and gaze upon his worthiness'; chap. 3, 160.4–6)).[12] Two chapters later, Othea urges Hector to turn his gaze upon another hero, Perseus: 'Apres te mire en Perseus' (chap. 5, 165.7). This phrase seemingly instructs Hector to gaze upon Perseus just the way he had gazed upon Hercules; but Othea tells Hector 'te mire' — that is, gaze upon yourself in Perseus. In other words, Perseus becomes a mirror in which the young Hector is able to see himself.

The significance of this transformation lies in the story that Christine does not tell explicitly in this chapter, but which was central to mythographic accounts of Perseus, such as that found in the *Ovide moralisé*: that is, Perseus's defeat of the Gorgon. Perseus avoids Medusa's petrifying effect by looking at her not directly but only as she is reflected in his shield. In the *Epistre Othea*, immediately after telling Hector to gaze at himself in Perseus, the goddess Othea then tells him to shift that gaze to the shield of Perseus: she says, 'Si te mires en son escu | Luisant, qui plusieurs a vaincu; | De son fauchon soyes armé, | Si seras fort et affermé' ('So look at yourself in his shining shield, which has vanquished many; be armed with his sword, and so you will be strong and steadfast'; chap. 5, 165.21–24). By looking at his shield, Hector avoids the harmful petrifaction caused by Medusa; instead, he experiences a desirable petrifaction, becoming 'affirmé', powerful, and overwhelmingly potent.

While several of the chapters in the *Epistre Othea* encourage the reader to gaze upon mythical figures, others warn against looking upon them. For example, Othea cautions Hector, 'Narcisus ne vueilles sembler' ('You do not want to resemble Narcissus'; chap. 16, 181.12), a warning that is reiterated in Christine's gloss on the passage: 'Pour ce deffent au bon chevalier que il ne se mire point en ses bienfais, par quoy il en soit oultre cuidez' ('For this reason, a good knight must beware that he never admire [*mirer*, gaze upon] himself in his

[10] On medieval theories of the imagination, see Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*.

[11] For a more detailed analysis of this scene in the context of Chaucer's allegory, see Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*, pp. 222–33.

[12] Quotations from Christine's *Epistre Othea* are from the edition by Halina Didycky Loukopoulos, 'Classical Mythology in the Works of Christine de Pisan', and are cited in the text first by chapter and then by page and line number; translations are my own. See also the edition of Gabriella Parussa, *Epistre Othea*.

good deeds, because that will make him overly proud'; chap. 16, 181.22–23). The narcissistic gaze, for Christine, is to be avoided; but gazing at the self is nonetheless repeatedly enjoined upon the reader, whether in seeing oneself in another (in Hercules, or in Perseus) or even more directly, as in Christine's return to the figure of Perseus later in the *Epistre Othea*. Christine alters her source in the *Ovide moralisé* by stating that Perseus protected himself from Medusa's petrifying effect not by looking at her reflected image in his shield but by looking at himself reflected in the shield. Christine's gloss interprets this act by saying that 'Perseus se mira en son escu, c'est a dire, en la force et chevalerie' ('Perseus gazed at himself in his shield, that is to say, in strength and chivalry'; chap. 55, 229.19–20). In the higher level of gloss, or, as she calls it, the 'allegorie', Christine adds that one should 'soy mirer en l'escu de l'estat de perfeccion' ('gaze at oneself in the shield of the state of perfection'; chap. 55, 230.6). This counsel seems to run counter to the earlier warning in the chapter on Narcissus, which states that a good knight 'ne se mire point en ses bienfais' ('does not admire {gaze upon} {Should be in square brackets rather than curly?} himself at all in his good deeds'). The chapter on Narcissus does not warn the knight to avoid contemplation of his good deeds, but to avoid seeing himself in them — that is, he must look beyond the surface of the mirror, avoiding the error of Narcissus. According to this reading, it would be possible for the second account of Perseus to be consistent in telling the noble reader to gaze at himself in the shield of Perseus, as long as what he sees in it is something more than the sterile insubstantial image. But what does he see, as he attempts to look below the surface? Or is it the act itself — the act of seeing, rather than the object seen — that Christine seeks to elevate?

This problem of how to express the coming into being of the subject through self-reflective vision, while still avoiding the narcissistic trap, persists beyond Christine's *Epistre Othea* into her hybrid combination of allegory and world history, the *Livre de la mutacion de Fortune*. This work has a peculiar place in the canon of Christine's works, because while many readers are familiar with its opening book — in which Christine recounts her allegorical transformation from a woman into a man — very few tend to read the later books, which contain a versified universal history adapted largely from the expansive *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, a universal history that grafts French national and imperial history onto the rootstock of Orosius's fifth-century *Seven Books of History against the Pagans (Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII)*. In general terms, the *Mutacion de Fortune* confronts the intersection of poetics and history by transposing a universal history mainly in prose into verse; in addition, it deals with the intersection of poetics and history in a highly focused and specific way, as the elaborate 'sale merveilleuse' (or 'marvelous great room') housed within the Castle of Fortune serves as the point of junction between the allegorical opening books of the *Mutacion de Fortune* and the universal history that dominates the latter books.[13]

In structural terms, the *Mutacion de Fortune* is a fusion of Orosian historiography with a Boethian view of the role of Fortune in the life of the individual, and of Providence in the unfolding of time itself. Historiographical and philosophical models of change are integrated throughout the work, expressed through the figures of Fortune and Providence who act as guiding principles within the effort to understand the nature of the changes that take place both on the level of the individual life and on the level of kingdoms and empires.[14] Book I is, as I mentioned, the allegorical autobiography, which integrates Ovidian and Boethian models

[13] On the highly visual presentation of history in the *Mutacion de Fortune*, placing it in the context of ancient and medieval scenes of ekphrasis including Virgil's *Aeneid*, the *Roman de la Rose*, the *Prose Lancelot*, and Dante's *Commedia*, see Brownlee, 'The Image of History in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*'.

[14] On the personification of Fortune in the *Mutacion de Fortune*, see Attwood, *Fortune la contrefaite*.

of change;[15] Books II and III are ekphrastic accounts of the Castle of Fortune, its walls, gates, and pathways, and the inhabitants located in and around the castle. Book IV is a transitional book, containing an elaborate, ekphrastic account of the 'sale merveilleuse' or marvelous great room whose walls are richly decorated with images of the entire sequence of world history. Books V, VI, and VII are a sustained exposition of universal history, elaborating in words the images depicted on the walls of the 'sale merveilleuse', moving from the empires of Assyria and Babylon to conclude with imperial Rome and rulers of European nations in Christine's own day.[16]

The autobiographical allegory of Book I enacts the process of self-examination from the perspective of the narrator, positioning her as an authoritative figure whose own 'mutacion' enables her to recount the 'grandes mutacions' (l. 1460) of history.[17] The counterpart of this authorial self-examination appears in the seventh, final book of the *Mutacion de Fortune*, which disrupts the conventional order of imperial succession by moving the story of Alexander the Great's world conquest from its usual place, in Orosian chronicles, just after the rule of Babylon, and then using the figure of Alexander as a model for rule — both the rule of others, and the proper rule of one's own self. The reader is encouraged to see the figure of Alexander — and, by extension, all history — as a mirror reflecting the self, balancing the autobiographical account of the first book with the exemplary biography in the last book. As Christine puts it in the closing passages of her Alexander narrative, 'Mire toy, mire en ceste istoire' ('Look at yourself, look within this history', l. 23274). Here we find the same kind of reflective vision that the goddess Othea urged on Hector — and which the narrator of the *Epistre Othea* urges on her noble young reader — where the youth was urged to 'te mire[r]' (look at yourself) in the image of heroes such as Hercules and Perseus. Here, however, not just the individual exemplary figure of the hero but the entire span of history itself is the mirror into which the subject is urged to gaze, as Alexander appears as the culmination of the sequence of exemplary histories. The reader is thus urged to find himself not only in the historical mirror that reflects Alexander but in the mirror of history itself.

The *Mutacion de Fortune* has a symmetrical structure, with an opening focus (in Book I) on the narrator's self-examination counterbalanced by a closing focus (in Book VII) on the reader's self-examination, and the generally allegorical framework of the opening three books balanced by the generally historiographical framework of the closing three books. The junction or hinge that links the two halves of this symmetrical structure lies in Book IV of the *Mutacion*. While we can refer to the work as being divided into 'two halves', since this bipartite division accurately represents the number of books devoted to allegory and history-writing, this division does not accurately represent the overall balance of the work: of its approximately 24,000 lines, more than two-thirds of the work is comprised of the historical chronicle. Allegory serves, therefore, as the preliminary stage or foundation for the exposition of history, with ekphrasis acting as the mediating principle that enables the movement between these two modes. We see this process unfold in Book IV of the *Mutacion*, as the ekphrasis of the 'sale merveilleuse' located within the Castle of Fortune moves the reader from the external perspective of the architectural allegory to the intimate, internal perspective of the reader of narrative ekphrasis. This narrative ekphrasis begins with the Boethian ladder of Philosophy, ranging from theoretical to practical knowledge, through an engagement with

[15] On the integration of Boethian and Ovidian metamorphosis in book one of the *Mutacion de Fortune*, see Akbari, 'Metaphor and Metamorphosis in the *Ovide moralisé* and Christine de Pizan's *Mutacion de Fortune*'.

[16] For a detailed account of the historical ekphrases of the *Mutacion de Fortune*, see Akbari, 'Ekphrasis and Stasis in the Allegories of Christine de Pizan'.

[17] Quotations are from *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*, ed. by Suzanne Solente, and are cited in the text by line number; translations are my own.

all the various branches of knowledge including the Seven Liberal Arts, to an exposition of world history from creation through the first age of mankind.

Christine's opening description of the 'sale merveilleuse' emphasizes its enormous scale and its geometrical form: it is 'reonde' (or 'round', l. 7090), its perfect circularity emphasizing its essentially microcosmic nature. It is 'belle, clere, grande et haulte' (l. 7094), a 'strong piece of work' ('fort ouvrage', l. 7095) in spite of the fact that it, like the whole of the Castle of Fortune, is constantly in motion ('toudis tremble', l. 7095). The great chamber is 'painte moult richement | D'or et d'azur' ('painted richly with gold and azure', ll. 7104–05), and illustrated with pictorial narratives of the history of the world: 'Si sont escriptes les gestes | Des grans princes et les conquests | De tous les regnes, qu'ilz acquistrent' ('And the "gestes" are also written there, | Of the great princes and of the conquests | Of all the kingdoms that they acquired', ll. 7107–09). Here, the pictorial quality of the images that are said to be 'painted' (l. 7104; cf. 'pourtraict', l. 7117) is intertwined with the narrative quality of the 'gestes' that are said to be 'written' or 'escriptes' upon the walls: in other words, text and image are mutually constitutive, united in the ekphrastic writing.

The 'sale merveilleuse' anchors the universal history that follows, as the narration of the sequence of great empires flows out of the intense ekphrastic imagery that adorns the inner walls of Fortune's castle. The account of universal history continues through Books V, VI, and VII, almost until the end of the entire work; it is halted only in the final book, when an abrupt return to the ekphrastic framework punctuates the annals of world history, reminding us of its original visual context in the 'sale merveilleuse', and introduces a concluding section on Alexander the Great. This turn to Alexander is at once historiographical and prescriptive, a mirror for princes that seeks to provide guidance to the reader, whatever rank of society he (or she) comes from. In this story of Alexander, as in all narratives recounted in the *Mutacion de Fortune*, the reader can see himself in the mirror of history.[18] Like everyone living in the sublunary realm, Alexander lives at the whim of Fortune, who is sometimes his beloved 'amie', sometimes his hateful 'ennemye'. It is this very mutability that makes Alexander an appropriate focus for the reader, a point made explicitly in the lines that conclude the Alexander narrative of the *Mutacion de Fortune*:

> O tout homme, ou maint vaine gloire,
> Mire toy, mire en ceste istoire,
> Vois se Fortune la perverse,
> En peu d'eure, de moult hault verse!
>
> (Oh, every man, in whom there is so much vainglory,
> Look at yourself, look within this history [or story],
> See how Fortune, the perverse one,
> In short time, from high above, throws down!) (ll. 23273–76)

These lines evoke two crucial moments in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*: the narrator's identification of the fountain of Narcissus, and his lament concerning Fortune. In the first of these two moments in Guillaume's *Rose*, the narrator recognizes the dangerous nature of the mirroring fountain in the garden: 'C'est li miroërs perilleus | ou Narcisus, li orgueilleus, | mira sa face et ses ieuz vers, | dont il jut puis morz toz envers' ('It is the perilous mirror where Narcissus, the proud one, looked at his face and his gray eyes, for which reason he then fell down dead', ll. 1569–72).[19] Don't gaze at the fountain of Narcissus, Christine warns; instead, 'Mire toy, mire en ceste istoire'. Look at this, she says, and see yourself as

[18] On other exemplary heroic narratives in the *Mutacion de Fortune*, see Dulac, 'Le chevalier Hercule de l'*Ovide moralisé*'.

[19] Quotations from *Le Roman de la Rose* are from the edition of Félix Lecoy, and are cited in the text by line number; translations are my own.

you might become. The Narcissus passage has its counterpart, in Guillaume's *Rose*, in the narrator's closing lament regarding Fortune:

> Ele a une roe qui torne
> et, quant ele veut, ele met
> le plus bas amont ou somet,
> et celui qui est sor la roe
> reverse a un tor en la boue.
> Et je sui cil qui est versez!
>
> (She has a wheel that turns
> and, when she wishes, she places
> the one who is the lowest high up at the top,
> and the one who is on top of the wheel
> she throws in one turn into the mud.
> And I am he who is turned!) (*Roman de la Rose*, ll. 3960–65)

In this passage, as David Hult has persuasively argued, 'versez' means both to be turned on the wheel of Fortune and to be immured within poetic verse, to become exemplary for those who will come afterward. A similar pun appears in the earlier passage from the *Rose*, where Narcissus is said to fall down dead ('envers') or, alternatively, 'in verse' ('en vers').[20] In the *Mutacion de Fortune*, Fortune similarly 'de moult hault verse', throws people down from on high. They fall; but they too become immured in verse, transformed into examples for the one who can learn from them. The historical mirror of the *Mutacion de Fortune* is, we might say, the good mirror of Narcissus: by gazing at the 'vrayes histoires' recounted in Christine's verse, it is possible for the reader to make out how he might similarly be tossed on the tides of change.

The concluding turn to Alexander, as a mirror for the reader, is introduced by a return to the stunningly visual ekphrastic mode, with another description of the images depicted on the walls of the 'sale merveilleuse', in a final return to the general form of history just as it was presented in the opening historiographical passages of Book VI. In the earlier book, the ages of mankind served as a kind of epitome or temporal overview of the shape of time; in this final book of the *Mutacion de Fortune*, the concluding ekphrastic description of the parts of the world serves a similar ordering purpose, here providing a geographical overview that corresponds to the temporal overview that opened the initial move into the historiographical mode in Book IV. The moments of ekphrastic intensity, in Christine's universal history, suspend the forward movement of the exposition in temporary stasis. In Book IV, at the opening of her ekphrastic description of Philosophy and the various branches of knowledge that flow from her, Christine describes this state of being in terms of 'abstraction':

> Par les escriptures, qu'y vy,
> Mon esperit y fu ravy
> Et astract, si que supposay
> D'elle, ainsi qu'icy le posay.
> Si vous en diray mon rapport,
> Ainsi qu'ay de l'escript recort.
>
> (By the engravings that I saw there
> My spirit was ravished from that place
> And abstracted, so that I imagined these things concerning
> Her, just as I present them here.
> So I will tell you my report
> Just as I recorded it from the engravings.) (ll. 7203–08)

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[20] Hult, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecies*, p. 297.

This state of being lifted outward from the present moment, in a movement of abstraction (the narrator's spirit is 'astract') that marks a temporal pause, where the narrator is lifted out of her body — the same body whose physical transformation from male to female was recounted in Book I — and then returned to continue the sequence of ekphrastic exposition. This return is marked by the direct address to the reader in which Christine renews her commitment to recount her experiences accurately, 'just as I recorded it' from the images on the wall.

In a thoughtful survey of ekphrasis from antiquity to the present, Valentine Cunningham describes ekphrases as 'pausings for thought', in which 'the linear flow of narrative slows or even stops'.[21] Such pauses appear repeatedly in the *Mutacion de Fortune*, initially in the form of a sequence of repeated pauses for ekphrastic description and then movements of return to historical chronology, found throughout Books II and III and much of Book IV. But once the move to historiography takes place in the latter parts of Book IV and the ekphrastic image retreats into the background, the movement of abstraction is transposed from the state of ecstatic wonder induced by ekphrasis into synoptic moments that summarize, with brevity and intensity, the sequence of imperial succession. In these synoptic moments, great patterns of history are made visible as if they were contained within a single glimpse. These include the synoptic view of the ages of mankind, in a temporal moment of stasis, and the synoptic view of the empires of the world, in a geographical moment of stasis. These highly concentrated moments make linear time visible in a single glance, making the river of history into a gleaming mirror.

As a counterpart to the moments of visual, reflective encounter we have examined in the poetry of Christine de Pizan, I will turn to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. In this long narrative poem, we find a comparably detailed engagement with how vision mediates knowledge, and how the subject is constituted not through the erotic mutual gaze but by the aftermath of that experience. The depiction of visual experience in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* has been a kind of magnet for readings based in psychoanalytic theory and film theory, as well as in medieval optics.[22] Here, however, I will focus particularly on the process through which vision mediates knowledge, and on the interrelation of intellect, affect, and desire. I use the word 'process' deliberately, for vision in the experience of love, as described in *Troilus*, has a double nature: it is sudden, happening all at once in a single moment of rupture; and it is gradual, unfolding over time. We can see this double nature in Chaucer's account of Troilus's initial look at his soon-to-be-beloved Criseyde:

> Withinne the temple he wente hym forth pleyinge,
> This Troilus, of every wight aboute, [person]
> On this lady, and now on that, lokynge,
> Wher so she were of town or of withoute; [whether]
> And upon cas bifel that thorugh a route [by chance it happened] [crowd]
> His eye percede, and so depe it wente,
> Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente. [struck] [stuck]
>
> And sodeynly he wax therwith astoned, [astonished]
> And gan hir bet biholde in thrifty wise. [began] [better] [careful way]
> […]
> And of hire look in him ther gan to quyken [began to stir]
> So gret desir and such affeccioun,

[21] Cunningham, 'Why Ekphrasis?', p. 61.

[22] Stanbury, 'The Lover's Gaze in *Troilus and Criseyde*'; Stanbury, 'The Voyeur and the Private Life in *Troilus and Criseyde*'; Stanbury, 'Women's Letters and Private Space in Chaucer'. See also Holley, 'Medieval Optics and the Framed Narrative in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*'; Hill, *'She, this in blak'*.

> That in his herte botme gan to stiken [bottom of his heart] [began]
> Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.267–75, 295–98)

Here, the sudden temporal rupture is plainly visible as Troilus's gaze strikes and rests upon Criseyde, in a moment of abrupt termination of the visual beam. For the one who sees, this metamorphic moment is not only a reenactment of the experience of Narcissus, but also of the victims of Medusa: Troilus is 'sodeynly […] astoned', both astonished and, in a Middle English pun, turned to stone, transfixed by this transformative object of the gaze.

Yet this singular moment soon proves to be more liminal than climactic: it is the entryway into a process of seeing that does not reach its final termination until the poem's closing stanzas at the end of Book V. Troilus begins to 'behold her more closely', looking at her 'in thrifty wise'. This phrase, difficult to translate, is echoed later on in Book II when the manipulative Pandarus calculates how best to phrase his appeal to Criseyde while looking at her in a 'bysi wyse' (II.274). It suggests an intensity of gaze, an attempt to see further, looking beyond the visible surface of things. This 'thrifty' gaze elicits a returning gaze from the eyes of Criseyde, precipitating the narcissistic gaze of love, in which desire is born. Criseyde's 'look' causes the 'quickening' — literally, the coming to life, the conception — of desire.

Yet the look of love is still not complete; when Troilus withdraws to his private room, the process of looking continues:

> And whan that he in chambre was allone,
> He doun upon his beddes feet hym sette,
> And first he gan to sike, and eft to grone, [sigh]
> And thought ay on hire so, withouten lette, [ever] [pause]
> That, as he sat and wook, his spirit mette [stayed awake] [dreamed]
> That he hire saugh a-temple, and al the wise
> Right of hire look, and gan it newe avise. [examine]
>
> Thus gan he make a mirour of his mynde [began]
> In which he saugh al holly hire figure, [wholly]
> And that he wel koude in his herte fynde. (*Troilus and Criseyde*, I.358–67)

Note how closely the wording of this passage parallels the phrasing we saw in the first passage, taken from the parodic and darkly ironic *Merchant's Tale*. In both cases, the subject makes a 'mirror of his mind', reviewing the images of the waking day in the quiet night-time solitude of his private chamber. This image of Criseyde, like the women's images reviewed by January, seems to be the product of idleness: Troilus experiences a waking dream (he 'mette') in which he 'newly regards' the 'look' of Criseyde. Earlier, we contrasted the focused vision of devotional practice, in which the subject regards the divine object of desire through mediating forms, with the idle vision of January; but can we simply identify Troilus's vision as belonging to the latter category of idle vision? Although the daydream setting suggests idleness, other aspects of this scene align it with the devotional language of visual contemplation: for example, it is surely significant that this reflective, after-the-fact vision causes Troilus to see Criseyde 'all wholly', in an entirely full image of the beloved object of desire, in contrast to the fragmented, random images of women that fill January's idle thoughts.

The extended period of seeing the object of desire continues through the subsequent books of *Troilus and Criseyde*. In this excerpt from Book III, which appears just after the lovers have parted after spending their first night together, not just the visual but all the sensory experiences of the beloved are rehearsed, repeated, and re-experienced in the solitude of the private room:

> He softe into his bed gan for to slynke, [began to creep]
> To slepe longe, as he was wont to doone. [in the habit of doing]

But al for nought, he may wel ligge and wynke, [lie awake]
But slep ne may ther in his herte synke,
Thynkyng how she for whom desir hym brende [burned]
A thousand fold was worth more than he wende. [believed]

And in his thought gan up and down to wynde [began]
Hire wordes alle, and every countenaunce,
And fermely impressen in his mynde
The leeste point that to him was plesaunce; [pleasing]
And verraylich of thilke remembraunce [verily, truly] [that memory]
Desir al newe hym brende, and lust to brede [burned]
Gan more than erst, and yet took he non hede. [began] [at first]
(*Troilus and Criseyde*, III.1535–47)

This passage repeats some of the visual terminology that we have already seen, in which the impact of the object of vision is described as an 'impression' upon the seeing subject. Here, the receptive soul is figured as a kind of wax that takes on the form of the impressing object. More specifically, however, this passage recalls the lines examined above, in which Troilus's first glance at Criseyde resulted in the conception of desire (I.267–75, 295–98). In that passage, Criseyde's look back at Troilus was fertile, 'quickening' his own impulse to love; in this passage, the 'remembrance' of her words and her 'countenance' causes him to 'burn' with desire, and causes 'lust to breed'. In some ways, as we have seen, the mutual gaze of Troilus and Criseyde is a narcissistic moment, in which the passionate engagement of the seeing subject is engendered by the returning look: to put it another way, the arrows of Love that wound Troilus proceed not from their apparent, proximate source — the eyes of Criseyde — but from a more distant source, that is, the dynamic eye-beams of the seeing subject himself. To put it another way, the eyes of the beloved function as mirrors that reflect the narcissistic image of the lover back to him. Yet, paradoxically, the narcissistic origin of desire is characterized not in terms of sterility, as is the norm in medieval literary tradition, but in terms of its opposite: exuberant fertility. From Alain de Lille's *De planctu Naturae* to the *Roman de la Rose*, and throughout the tradition of Ovidian commentary, the sterile love of Narcissus is repeatedly opposed to models of fertile love, particularly as expressed in the counterexample of Pygmalion. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, however, narcissistic love has its own generative fecundity.

Thus far, we have focused on the visual experience of Troilus in the construction of the subject in Chaucer's poem; the visual experience of Criseyde, however, is at least as complex as Troilus's, although it proceeds along rather different lines. Like Troilus, Criseyde withdraws into the private space of her 'chamber' in order to review earlier events; unlike Troilus, however, who gazes back upon the image that has been deeply impressed upon his soul, Criseyde engages in rational thought, even logical argumentation:

[S]he gan in hire thought argue [began]
In this matere of which I have yow told,
And what to doone best were, and what eschue, [eschew, avoid]
That plited she ful ofte in many fold. [pleated]
Now was hire herte warm, now was it cold.
[…]
But right as when the sonne shyneth brighte
In March, that chaungeth ofte tyme his face,
And that a cloude is put with wynd to flighte,
Which oversprat the sonne as for a space, [spreads over]
A cloudy thought gan thorugh hire soule pace, [began]
That overspradde hire brighte thoughtes alle,
So that for feere almost she gan to falle. [began]

[…]
And after that, hire thought gan for to clere, [began]
And seide, 'He which that nothing undertaketh,
Nothyng n'acheveth, be hym looth or deere'. [reluctant or eager]
And with an other thought hire herte quaketh;
Than slepeth hope, and after drede awaketh; [fear]
Now hoot, now cold; but thus, bitwixen tweye, [between the two]
She rist hire up, and wente hire for to pleye. [rose]
(*Troilus and Criseyde*, {Book number?} 694–98, 764–70, 806–12)

We might be tempted to express the difference between the interiority of Troilus and that of Criseyde by means of the binary opposition of affective and intellectual modes of seeing, the former based in devotional literature and theology, the latter based in scientific and philosophical discourse. To do so, however, would elide the profoundly affective nature of Criseyde's experience.

While she begins by offering herself arguments and counter-arguments, she ends by 'quaking' with 'dread' or fear. Clearly, Criseyde's intellectual engagement does not preserve her from emotional lability; moreover, the very language used to describe her rational processes — itself drawn from contemporary scientific theories of motion along latitudes — is also used to describe her emotional turmoil. On the intellectual scale, Criseyde moves between degrees of doubt and certainty just as temperature moves between the extremes of hot and cold; but she also moves along the affective scale, torn between hope and dread, ultimately caught 'bitwixen tweye' (between two). Finally, we should note one striking aspect of the visual language in this passage: instead of positing any one single specific object of vision, Criseyde's very process of thinking is itself obscured as a 'cloudy thought' enters her mind. This cloudy thought might be understood in terms of the passions of the body, in which the affective states of fear and hope rise up to impair the processes of the mind. Unlike Troilus's contemplative vision of the form of Criseyde impressed upon his soul, Criseyde's inner vision is self-reflective and intellectual, yet remains vulnerable to the affective states of the body. We might call this a solipsistic form of interiority, entirely self-contained yet never completely satisfied in itself.

The private space of Criseyde's mind, on one hand, is filled with possible alternatives, potential movements in one direction or another; the private space of Troilus's mind, on the other hand, which is experienced most fully in the private space of Troilus's room, is filled with the image of Criseyde, repeatedly reviewed over the time following his initial sight of her. Interestingly, although we are told that Troilus sees her 'figure' in his mind, that figure is not literally described in the text until near the end of the fifth, final book of the poem, in a sequence of three portraits describing the three members of the love triangle poised about Criseyde: herself, Troilus, and his Greek successor, Diomede. The portraits are sometimes described as ekphrastic, not because they are actual descriptions of works of art, but because the elaborate visuality of the language aligns them with the ekphrastic tradition. We can see the portrait of Criseyde, which appears between the portraits of the other two:

Criseyde mene was of hire stature; [mean, middling]
Therto of shap, of face, and ek of cheere, [the same] [also] [countenance]
Ther myghte ben no fairer creature.
And ofte tymes this was hire manere:
To gon ytressed with hire heres clere [to go with her bright hair dressed]
Doun by hire coler at hire bak byhynde, [collar]
Which with a thred of gold she wolde bynde.

And save hire browes joyneden yfeere, [except]
Ther nas no lak, in aught I kan espien. [was no lack] [anything I can see]

But for to speken of hire eyen cleere,
Lo, trewely, they writen that hire syen [they that saw her wrote]
That Paradis stood formed in hire yën. [eyes]
And with hire riche beaute evere more
Strof love in hire ay, which of hem was more. [strove] [also] [them]
(*Troilus and Criseyde* V.806–19)

The peculiar position of these portraits, situated at the end of the work rather than (as would be usual) at the outset, is striking: it positions, first, the narrator and, second, the reader in the position of seeing Criseyde in something like the way that Troilus sees her — more precisely, the ways in which he repeatedly sees her within the mirror of his mind, as we saw earlier. In this portrait passage, we learn how Criseyde looked: not simply how she looked at one particular moment in time, but how she looked 'often times' — that is, how she usually looked, how she was seen over time by those who knew her. These lucky few saw not only her outer features but also looked more deeply — perhaps even, like Troilus, looking at her in 'thrifty ways' — to see that 'paradise stood formed in her eyes'. The position of the narrator is peculiar here, because while he does not associate himself with those who 'hire syen' (who saw her), he does imply visual knowledge of her in saying that she lacked nothing 'in aught I kan espien' (as far as I can see).

In the narrator's mediated visual knowledge of Criseyde, focused through the mediating gaze of Troilus, we might perhaps see an analogue to the role of Mary in the visual contemplation of the Passion in devotional texts and imagery of the period. The comparison to the devotional context is useful precisely because it illuminates the position of the viewer who is not privy to the originary moment of desire. The narrator's vision of Criseyde is not so much like Troilus's initial view of Criseyde at the temple as like his later, retrospective, interior views of her within his mind. Like Troilus, the narrator views Criseyde as her image appears in its habitual form, as she usually looked, flashed up on the mirror of his mind. Unlike Troilus, however, the narrator's desire for Criseyde is grafted upon the stock of Troilus's love; it is secondary, mediated through Troilus's desire in something like the way the devotional reader's desire for Christ is mediated through the desire of Mary.

In the end, the common ground that links Christine de Pizan's *Mutacion de Fortune* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is not simply their common focus on the ability of vision to mediate knowledge, and their repeated recourse to specular reflection in describing how the subject comes into being. They also share a common ground in investigating the temporality of the visual act: that is, the way in which the act of seeing unfolds in linear time, yet also provides a means of knowing that is synoptic, that takes place all at once in a singular moment of vision. In Christine's *Mutacion de Fortune*, the ekphrastic imagery of the painted walls of the 'sale merveilleuse', like the ekphrastic portraits of Chaucer's *Troilus*, provide moments of suspension where the reader is compelled to pause to experience the contemplative sense of wonder engendered by ekphrasis. Through the medium of the ekphrastic pause, the reader shares in the narrator's remembered moment of temporal stasis, the period during which she is (in Christine's words) 'abstracted' from the body. In other words, the moment of temporal stasis experienced by the reader is itself a reflection of the moment of interiority experienced by the seeing subject within the text.

In Chaucer's *Troilus*, the reader is invited into the interior space of Criseyde's mind, to witness her own act of self-reflective contemplation that takes place within her chamber — an interior space that is literally her private room but which also consists of the figurative chamber of her mind. This passage expresses Criseyde's experience of interior vision as she turns over the images she has seen and processes them intellectively; in turn, the reader witnesses the sight of the thinking self. In some ways, this interior vision — experienced by Criseyde, and witnessed by the reader — is comparable to the introspective moments of

vision that we saw in Christine de Pizan's *Epistre Othea* and, especially, in the *Mutacion de Fortune*. There, the reader was repeatedly urged to 'soi mirer', to gaze upon oneself, in the mirror of another. In the *Epistre Othea*, the exemplary figures of Hercules and Perseus serve as mirrors; through gazing into these mirrors, the subject can, so to speak, find himself as he is reformed to correspond to the model of what is visible in the mirror. Even more richly in the *Mutacion the Fortune*, the reader's visual experience is focused upon the introspective gaze into the mirror of history. No longer limited to individual heroic exemplars, as in the *Epistre Othea*, the reader now gazes into the mirror of history, finding in that sight not simply a sequence of historical facts, but something far more profound: here, the reader is able to gaze upon the phenomenon of 'mutacion', of change itself.

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