

“mirror, n.”: I. A model or example.¹

Some might find it surprising that this first definition of mirror (*n.I*) in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reflects what a mirror *reproduces*, and arguably, not what a mirror actually *is* (*n.II*). Derived from Latin, *mirare*, it is curious that the paternal word of this English noun is a Latin verb meaning “to look at.” Therefore, its classical roots define an action, rather than, as in the English example above, the consequence of what is duplicated. From these Romanish (*n.B.2.a*) roots of conquest,² the word can be traced into the English language across the Channel via Anglo-Norman and Old French, *mireor*, et al, referring simply to a reflective surface.³ From there may also be seen the French word *miroir*, meaning model or ideal type, returning to the primary definition in the *OED* context.⁴ The ambiguity between the object that is a mirror, and the subject in the mirror, is thus tracked from the earliest spores of western European language.⁵ What is revealed through this unstable relationship and unexpected principal definition is a complex interplay between the technology of the object and the reflected representational image encased in the shiny surface. Furthermore, as a reflection of internal elusiveness, this keyword demonstrates the language’s helplessness in fully revealing mirror’s intangible nature: the

¹ “mirror, *n.I*”. *OED Online*. October 2022. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/119110> (accessed October 14, 2022). As part of this definitional essay here, I will also explore “mirror, *n.II.4a*”. Additionally, “mirror, *v*”. *OED Online*.

² “Romanish, *n*”. *OED Online*. I only include this definition because it is a new term for me and I didn’t want to keep repeating “Latin.” Plus, as seen in the *OED*, it is now considered obsolete.

³ See “mirror, *n*. ‘Etymology’”. *OED Online*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ See also *mirar* (Spanish), defined as “to look at,” and *mirar* (Portuguese), defined as “to aim.”

nebulous conceptual twins of identity and self-perception embodied within. Thus, the question: Other than one's reflection, what else does a mirror reveal?

The first reflecting devices were polished stone or obsidian, and from there they innovated to a lighter metal, perhaps bronze, silver, or some other precious amalgam.⁶ Later, as an object in a frame, whether mounted or handheld, a mirror might comprise of a glass coating atop a metallic surface.⁷ Therefore, well into the Renaissance, *glass* doubled as a term for mirror, and in my analysis I will need to incorporate definitional aspects of “glass” into scrutiny.⁸ Generally, mirrors leading into the early modern era were very small, revealing one's image only in part or miniature.⁹ Yet water has also mirrored (v.2.a.) our reflections back to us since time immemorial, suggesting the anxiety between self-love and self-perception a condition of humanity.¹⁰ To complicate this etymology further, the technological aspects of the early modern device of a mirror as it evolved—convex, perhaps watery, nebulous, and at times opaque, are replicated in the *eye* (n.5.b., n.P4.b.).¹¹ As a convex, watery surface, when in close enough proximity, the eyes of others (or of lovers) might reflect one's image as clearly as a water glass, polished stone, glass-coated metal, or even early modern mirror.¹² In every instance the likeness may be subject to distortion or misinterpretation, and therefore a proliferating ambiguity repeats itself, much like the image upon image of how a mirror propagates its own reflection *ad*

⁶ Laura Gowing. *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 5. Also, Philippa Kelly. “Surpassing Glass: Shakespeare's Mirrors.” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 8.1 (May, 2002): 2.1-32.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ “glass, n.1”. *OED Online*. October 2022. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/78752> (accessed October 14, 2022). See especially, (n.8.a.).

⁹ Miranda Anderson. *The Book of the Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Collection Exploring the Cultural History of the Mirror*. Cambridge: Scholars Press, 2007, 110-11.

¹⁰ See e.g. “Narcissus” in Jenny March, and Neil Barrett. “N.” In *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxbow Books, 2014), 325. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1djpk.17>.

¹¹ “eye, n.1”. *OED Online*. October 2022. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/67296> (accessed October 14, 2022). See especially, (n.5.b., n.P4.b.).

¹² Eugen Weber. “Heart of Glass.” *New Republic* 224, no. 7 (2001): 41-42.

infinitum. What is mirrored in this ouroboros is the instability of how we understand what a mirror *is*, what it *does*, and the perception of what it is seen to *reflect*. This haziness of comprehension and relationship between object and subject is reproduced within many examples of early modern verse.

In Shakespeare's "Sonnet 3," the bard calls for the "Fair Youth" to gaze into his glass.¹³ In this proffered reflection, the young man might not only appreciate his current youth and beauty, but also deem this first blush an appropriate time to procreate.¹⁴ Shakespeare states, "Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee / Calls back the lovely April of her prime" (9-10). Thus, the notional mirror went beyond the object, the glass, the water, or the eye, and could possibly be actualized when inherited by the next generation. Through procreation, one's mirror might then be their child's face – the better to crystallize one's own youth through offspring. Here, Shakespeare demonstrates the mutability and potentiality of what a mirror can be; it can serve as an object as the youth gazes into the glass, or a metaphor for the reflection of oneself in the hereditary likeness of another. However, this sonnet also reveals a further fluidity of the mirror: "So thou through windows of thine age shall see / Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time" (11-12). Shakespeare demonstrates the changeableness of the glass for the eye in "windows of thine age" (11). Windows, made of glass and also known as lights ("light, *n.*" I.1.d. and especially 9.a.), provide an aperture with which to view the outside world and, like eyes, are capable of showing and monitoring change over time.¹⁵ They also may, especially during hours

¹³ William Shakespeare and Colin Burrow. *Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2002), 386-87. In "Sonnet 3", "Look to thy glass and tell the face thou viewest / Now is the time that face should form another" (1-2).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*. In this sonnet glass/time is paired with agricultural/Nature/pastoral motifs, perhaps echoing anxieties about timely reproduction.

¹⁵ "light, *n.1*". *OED Online*. October 2022. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/108172> (accessed October 14, 2022). See especially, (*n.I.1.d.* and especially *n.9.a.*).

of night, reflect as well as any mirror, rendering an image of oneself in darkened, though sharp relief. In “Sonnet 3,” the glass encapsulates not only the static idea of the window, but also the possibility of what can serve as a mirror, up to and including the duplication of oneself in procreation.

Thus, the mirror is a useful tool with which to measure one’s own time and degeneration with age in addition to the metaphorical embodiment of regeneration through reproduction. Heather Dubrow points to an equally generative and morbid fascination with fear of time and its relationship to death as intrinsically woven into early modern lyric forms.¹⁶ Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 126” also demonstrates this preoccupation with “Time’s fickle glass” (2).¹⁷ As Reyna Kalas articulates, this poem exhibits as much in its silences as it does through its verse.¹⁸ Comprised of twelve lines of rhyming couplets ending with two lines of bracketed muteness, it is written outside of Shakespeare’s normal formulaic scheme.¹⁹ The lunulae furthers its singular oddity; like in a reflection, the two unwritten lines are the moments of silence caught in a framed mirror. These empty parentheses may invite the reader to pen their own reflection, or else ponder on the “quietus” of death (12). The “fickle glass” (2) held by Time is impotent against “Nature” (5), and in a departure from the concept of mirroring an image it is the glass instead, as an hourglass, that measures time through diminishing grains: “Who hast by waning grown, and therein show’st / Thy lovers withering as thy sweet self grow’st—” (3-4). The mirror and glass can both be seen to measure time and possibility, or the reductions thereof as youth fades. Even

¹⁶ Heather Dubrow, “Lyric Forms” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1500-1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge UP, 1999), 179, 195.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare and Colin Burrow. *Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2002), 632-33.

¹⁸ Reyna Kalas, “Fickle Glass” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 262-63.

¹⁹ Generally, Shakespeare’s sonnets follow a 14-line iambic pentameter with rhyme scheme ABAB / CDCD / EFEF / GG. However, “Sonnet 126” has 12 lines of rhyming couplets, and 2 empty, bracketed lines.

more melancholic, this sonnet can be seen to bare deep anxieties around time and its effects, since this glass measures Time's "sickle hour;" and, as revealed through the personification of time in classical literature, the Old Man / Saturn that is Time is an impotent being, castrated by his own son. Saturn / Time as god of agriculture also carries a sickle (2).²⁰ Time is thus gelded by his progeny, just as time emasculates; a mirror, or glass, measures this process.

Miranda Anderson signals the complexity of dissecting one's representational mirror image when she states, "the mirror is a cognitive artefact that demonstrates the unstable boundaries between the inner and outer realms of the subject."²¹ However, that cognitive artifact is equally physical in its object form. An excellent example of this contrablazoning is extant in Spenser's *Amoretti*, "Sonnet IX," wherein the links between [his love's] "powerfull eies, which lighte my dark spright," (2) are enlisted in comparative anaphora with a host of celestial and earthly objects culminating with the "glasse:" (12).²² However, with this glass, "such basenesse mought offend her" (12) as her eyes "to the Maker selfe they likest be" (13). Spenser's love's eyes then are elevated to a deified state, their light illuminating all else in splendor.²³ As mimicked in the first definition is Spenser's exemplar: as the object of his love she is elevated and set as model – the object by which all other precious materials may be compared and found wanting.

The keyword *mirror* is particularly significant to the study of gender and sexuality in early modern poetry, especially through assistance in construction of self-identity. Whether that identity is defined though a glass or mirror's measurement of time and its effects, the fashioning

²⁰ See "Saturn" in Jenny March, and Neil Barrett. "S." In *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 435. Oxbow Books, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1djpk.21>. For "Cronus," see esp. *ibid.*, 139-40.

²¹ Anderson. *The Book of the Mirror*, 109.

²² Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti* "Sonnet IX" in Marie H. Loughlin, Patricia Brace and Sandra Bell. *The Broadview Anthology of Sixteenth-Century Poetry and Prose*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2012, 804.

²³ *Ibidem*, "Whose light doth lighten all that here we see" (14).

of oneself it reveals, how it provides relative comparison, or even the reflection in another's eye, early modern poetry utilizes these fluid modalities of the conceptual framework that a mirror offers to great extent. Etymologically, the roots of mirror are actually rhizomatic, the undergrowth spanning a continent over millennia, generating possibilities of conception as the amorphousness of its meaning spreads. The mirror, or glass is unique: as an object its shining surface proposes more than a reflection of one's exterior state. The mirror's capacity to provide a context through which to measure oneself also allows for reflection on one's own interiority as well. The *mirror* is indeed magical, like a mycelium it weaves tangible and intangible perceptions of humanity as it evolves, adapts, lies fallow, and returns stronger with complex iterations, up to and allowing for speculation into the unknown.²⁴

²⁴ For "magic mirror," see "mirror, *n.*" (II.5.a.). *OED Online*, and *idem.*, "glass, *n.*II.8.e." Both allow to *speculate*, a term I ran across in researching this essay, but sadly a fuller analysis incorporating these aspects of what mirror/glass offers lies outside the parameters of this assignment.

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