

Critical theory has helped draw attention to all the narratives and voices, and therefore unrepresented and unvoiced truths, which may have become marginalised through this hegemonic process. It helps to explain, in the first instance, why the experience of Narcissus may not only have been regarded as more *important* than that of Echo, but that those charged with the task of writing about the myth may well have identified more with the character of Narcissus, as it resonates much more strongly with their own identity and experiences. Interesting questions arise, therefore, regarding the degree to which the marginalisation of Echo's importance is culturally determined. For our purpose, I propose to offer an alternative close reading of the myth, which prioritises the experience of Echo over that of Narcissus and, in so doing, challenges many assumptions formerly made, and unquestioned. This goes some way to understanding why Echo herself may have become marginalised not just in analyses of the myth but in the psychoanalytic thinking that has prevailed.

Close reading of Ovid's version of the myth

The first description given of Echo is that she is manipulative and talkative. In Ovid's account she uses speech to hide truth, and prioritises the male god's hedonistic and self-serving behaviour over his wife's feelings:

The goddess [Hera] would be all ready
to catch her husband Zeus making love to some nymph, when crafty Echo
would keep her engaged in a long conversation, until the nymph could scurry
to safety.

The use of the words *scurry* and *safety* draws attention to a frailty in Echo that is present from the start, and belies ideas of her as confident and crafty. I suggest that where words and actions appear contradictory, there is a need for probing and exploration in order to understand exactly whose words are being spoken, and why there is an experience of incongruity for the witness to the phenomenon. I will discuss in detail in Chapter Five the corresponding experience for the therapist as it is encountered in the clinical situation. It is important, however, to draw attention to its occurrence here in the myth, because the incongruence has largely been ignored, and is crucial to my understanding of echoism.

When Saturn's daughter perceived what Echo was doing, she said to her,
"I've been cheated enough by your prattling tongue.
From now on your words will be short and sweet!". Her curse took effect at
once.
Echo could only repeat the words she heard at the end of a sentence and never
reply for herself.
(ibid, Book 3, p. 361-369)

While this shows Echo's ability to dissemble, it is easy to see how Hera is locating her angry feelings towards her husband in Echo, whom she has some power to punish and damage. While Hera's punishment is perhaps a fitting one – the ability to speak her own truth is withheld from Echo – it seems unnecessarily harsh to curse her for protecting the most powerful god in existence. It demonstrates Echo's dilemma, and perhaps goes some way in justifying her choice to offend instead the god with the lesser power. The curse has the effect of rendering Echo to a mere fragment of her former self, and Ovid likens her to a parrot, one who mimics and imitates but has nothing original to contribute.

Echo...could only...parrot the last few words of the many spoken by others.
(Book 3, p. 359-360).

We might see this as the de-humanising effect of her punishment, leaving her with an inability to relate to another person as a human being in her own right. Whilst an objection may be raised on the basis that Echo is indeed a nymph, and not a human woman, I would argue she certainly fulfils the function of a woman in the myth, and has recognisably human emotions and feelings, and for our purposes we can therefore treat her as human. It is interesting to speculate that she has already been somehow 'transformed' before we meet her in the myth, but I leave this path of enquiry for further consideration elsewhere.

When Echo finally encounters the youth Narcissus, Ovid draws attention both to her lack of a voice and to her absence of *Being*:

her nature imposed a block and would not allow her to make a start. She was
merely permitted
and ready to wait for the sounds which her voice could return to the speaker.

(ibid, p. 376-378)

We can see in this extract how she requires the other in order not just to be able to speak, but to *be*. This is fundamentally important as it points to the requirement of, and the dependence upon, another human being for Echo even to exist in a human form. It also leads us to some understanding of her active need to take in the other's words, and their Being, in order to experience a human life force running through her.

In the following passage, the poet describes Narcissus' reaction, which has poetic resonance with the actions of Zeus who, in enjoying the bodies of the nymphs, neglects any feelings for a woman scorned and rejected by him.

[Narcissus] yelled, "Hands off! May I die before
You enjoy my body". [Echo's] only reply was "...enjoy my body."

I suggest that the idea of Echo enjoying Narcissus' body reinforces what he perceives to be a dependence on him not just as a source of words, but of Being. It also leads the reader to understand the Echo character as consuming of Narcissus in some way.

Scorned and rejected, with burning cheeks she fled to the forest
To hide her shame and live thenceforward in lonely caves.

The shame felt by Echo in the myth is strongly represented in the powerful image of the burning cheeks. In my experience of clinical work, it is feelings of shame that often provide the catalyst that brings the echoist into therapy in the first place. Alongside her own rejection there is shame at being party to, and unable to separate from, her partner's unacceptable behaviour. In the next line we see a masochistic response to Narcissus' treatment of Echo, where the more he hurts her the more her love grows:

But her love persisted and steadily grew with the pain of rejection.

Echo seems somehow to feed upon the pain, and Ovid understands this as love. If this is the case then it is a love which knows no bounds in terms of its destructiveness. Indeed, he goes on to say of its effects on Echo:

Wretched and sleepless with anguish she started to waste away.
Her skin grew dry and shrivelled, the lovely bloom of her flesh
Lost all its moisture.

The myth seems to suggest that the relationship persists even after they have parted. It is as if Echo has taken in a version of Narcissus which lives on inside her, and with whom she continues to have a relationship in spite of the external physical object of her love having disappeared. The effect of such an internal relationship upon Echo is to eat away at her from the inside, and the voice of Narcissus not only fills the empty and unbearable void inside Echo, but actively depletes her, generating a loss of self that is made manifest not just psychically but in the most visceral sense, as described by Ovid below:

... nothing remained but voice and bones;
Then only voice, for her bones (so they say) were transformed to stone.
Buried away in the forest, seen no more on the mountains,
Heard all over the world she survives in the sound of the Echo.
(ibid, p. 389-401).

In the final part of the myth, where Echo experiences Narcissus' destruction and eventual death as if living it herself, we learn how she resonates with his pitiful sighs:

Echo had watched his decline, still filled with angry resentment
But moved to pity. Whenever the poor unhappy youth
uttered a pitiful sigh, her own voice uttered a pitiful
sigh in return. When he beat with his hands on his shoulders, she also
mimicked the sound of the blows.
(ibid, p. 494-498).

It is interesting here to note that all the feelings expressed by Echo are those of Narcissus, with the exception of angry resentment. This is important as it explains why Echo may find it difficult to take responsibility for her own words and actions, and why in therapy the echoistic patient may spend much of the time blaming the narcissist for all aspects of the relationship having reached such a destructive state, while being unable to take any responsibility for her role in it. Indeed, the therapist too may experience angry resentment as one of the only genuine emotions felt to be coming from the echoist – resentment that the therapist cannot give her enough to sustain her – as well as shame at her dependency upon the narcissist, both areas on which I expand fully in Chapters Three and Five.

Analysis

If we consider the myth from the perspective of Hera, the punishment of Echo is poetically fitting. As well as the resounding echo of her words serving as a reminder to mortals of the power of the gods, and the nemesis that will ensue should an individual dare to believe that they can outwit them in their games, there is another more interesting interpretation for our purpose. Hera is the partner of a god who is omnipotent, vengeful, vain and murderous. At the moment she encounters Echo, her husband is using his power as entitlement, seducing young females, leaving Hera bereft and full of resentment. In this moment he might be considered the archetypal model for the narcissist, indeed so much so that the actual character Narcissus, whom Echo later encounters, is perhaps just a mortal version, who without the actual power assumed by the immortal god, is subjected to a painful and tragic existence and death. Meanwhile Hera's curse places Echo in her own position, as if to say "Now you will know how it feels being me, having no power, no voice, and being in a relationship with an entitled narcissist". If we take this one step further it could be argued that Echo, in betraying a fellow woman by deceiving her, has somehow been taken over or colonised by Zeus – uttering *his* words and thoughts, and avoiding or being unable to speak her own truth. This leads to interesting theorising regarding the role of projective identification in narcissistic relating (a concept which I define in Chapter Two, and to which I return in detail in Chapters Five and Six). However, for our purposes now it might be worth interpreting the feelings experienced by Zeus and Hera in their turbulent relationship as having been projected into two cursed

mortals, to play out to its gritty conclusion, from a position of some distance and observation by the gods.

This of course deviates radically from dominant readings of the text and there are many considerations to be investigated as to why those interpretations have become so central and pervasive. Feminist critical theories are helpful in understanding why, to some degree, the character of Echo has become marginalised and silenced in the literatures. They reveal how processes, often unconscious, lead authors to express ideas which serve to reinforce patriarchal dominance. Feminist and post-feminist analyses of the writings demonstrate the ways in which the literatures conform to a linearity in thinking and a grammatical structure which is inherently masculine in its form. This has a hegemonic effect which dictates the need to respond through a repositioning of feminine narratives within the literary canon. While this may be considered to refer to writings relating to Narcissus in more contemporary literature, it seems unsatisfactory to me to classify the Ovid text amongst such writings. The poetic and eclectic nature of the myths in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* pay due attention to the matriarchal voice, and conform more to the oral tradition than dominant, and more patriarchal, styles of writing. It seems likely, therefore, that it is not simply this version of the myth itself which has caused such dominance, but something innate in the human psyche that seems to resist the character of Echo's very existence.

In attempting to understand what might be being resisted and why, it is useful to consider the functions of myth. In classical myth the plight of the mortal, subjected to the whims of the omnipotent gods, mirrors that of the infant to its parents. As Ferry (2014, p. 20) states:

For the gods, time does not count... and this allows them both to endure and witness human passions with a superiority and from a vantage to which human mortals cannot aspire. In their sphere, everything is sorted out and settles sooner or later... Our principal characteristic as mere mortals is quite the reverse. Contrary to the gods and the beasts, we are the only sentient beings in this world to have full consciousness of what is irreversible: the fact that we are going to die.