

A Love Under the Gaze

Paula Pires

When Elizabeth Taylor, the famous Hollywood actress, met Richard Burton, famed Shakespearean actor, both were already married. As Elizabeth was bringing Cleopatra to life on the silver screen, Richard so happened to be performing as her love interest Mark Antony. The epic coupling that inspired the Shakespearean tragedy seemingly upended Taylor and Burton's life equally, reflecting an encounter with elements of some love stories: a fanciful object of desire, a sense of completeness which Lacan mentioned in relation to Aristophanes' myth of love, and the rupturing forces of the impossibility of such a sense of completion.

Taylor and Burton's marriage was surrounded by lust, over-publicity, hatred, pity, extravagance, and scandals - a mix of factors one would predict for a quick and short relationship, whilst in fact it lasted more than 10 years, and possibly did not end after their (two) divorces. Commenting upon a fallout, Burton said: "Elizabeth is like a spoilt child. She enjoys undermining me. One gets tired of it."¹ On announcing their first divorce Taylor declared: "With deep regret the reconciliation had failed, and the marriage had died of irreconcilable differences". Some minutes after Taylor telephoned Burton to ask: "do you think we did the right thing?"² The divorce was followed by public appearances of both in romantic encounters and affairs with others which were extensively covered by the media, but less than two months later their remarriage was announced.

The voyeuristic/exhibitionist aspect of Taylor and Burton's relationship was not a surprise. Their love passed through a scopic drive described by Lacan as essential for the formulation of the object of desire in the field of the Other. In this sense, the subject who "was previously nothing [...] solidifies into a signifier."³ The desire embedded in such a drive implies in its essence the classic Freudian narcissistic sphere of love that demands being loved. On being seen one projects onto oneself the idealised image referred by one's ego ideal or "loving oneself through the other."⁴

¹ Lewis, R. *Erotic vagrancy: Everything about Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor*, 2019, p. 515.

² Lewis, R. *Op. cit.*, p. 518.

³ Lacan, J. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: Routledge 2018, p. 199.

⁴ Lacan, J., *Op. cit.*, p. 195.

Despite their “irreconcilable differences”, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton were very similar, compounding a tragicomic dyad which emphasises the narcissistic trait of love present at the core of their encounter, which is related to the field of *Lust*: where the narcissistic object-subject identification results in the regression of love on the levelling out of *Lust* and *Lust-Ich*. “What one cannot keep outside, one always keeps an image of inside. Identification with the object of love is as silly as that.”⁵

⁵ Lacan, J., *Op. cit*, p. 243.