

Narcissus, the Beam, and lung cancer

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ABSTRACT

In the management of lung cancer, the rules of engagement of SABR are not clearly defined. The potential for stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR) to affect to an unprecedented level current protocols and in all disease stages emerges vehemently from the literature. However, in a time when the role of surgery is being reassessed, surgeons need to take a closer look at the evidence for the use of SABR in lung cancer patients and clearly define their indisputable role within the context of multidisciplinary teams. The myth of Narcissus exemplified in the absolute masterpiece by Caravaggio seems to represent an ideal metaphor to explain the ever-evolving interaction between surgery and SABR in lung cancer management. (J Thorac Cardiovasc Surg 2016; ■:1-6)



Narcissus by Michelangelo “Caravaggio” Merisi (1571-1610).

Central Message

Whereas SABR is a powerful treatment modality in lung cancer management, its full potential is unclear and must be further investigated.

Perspective

Despite a lack of substantial evidence to justify clinical equipoise, SABR has become an increasingly attractive alternative to surgery for early-stage lung cancer patients. An analysis of *Narcissus* by Caravaggio reveals parallels between the painting’s theme and the current situation in lung cancer management when evidence is often replaced by subjective interpretations of reality.

Among the masterpieces created by the famous Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi (1571-1610), better known as Caravaggio, one of the most renowned is *Narcissus* (Figure 1), which is an oil painting on canvas housed at the Palazzo Barberini, a site of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica in Rome. Caravaggio painted *Narcissus* between 1597 and 1599, and he drew inspiration from the myth of Narcissus from *Metamorphoses*, a poem by the Roman poet Ovid. Narcissus is loved by the god Apollo for his astonishing physical appearance, which in turn makes him vain and egocentric. Echo, a beautiful nymph, falls for

Narcissus but is painfully rejected by him. This leads to the goddess Nemesis becoming angry with Narcissus. Nemesis then constructs a mystification of reality to punish Narcissus for being an unreachable love. One day, the young and very attractive Narcissus sees his own reflection in a pool and falls in love with it, completely losing perception of the world around him. Stunned by the beauty of his reflection and fearful of it disappearing, Narcissus is immobilized and eventually dies of thirst and starvation.

The painting shows a young adult, who is stupefied and unaware of his surrounding environment, immersed in a penetrating and foreboding darkness (Figure 1). Caravaggio is the master of the chiaroscuro technique, which plays with the contrast of shadows and light to confer tridimensional realism to characters and situations. The same chiaroscuro dominates current lung cancer management policies, in a time when stereotactic radiotherapy is increasingly considered as a viable alternative to surgery.

Indeed, the rules of engagement for stereotactic radiotherapy have rapidly evolved over the past few years.^{1,2} Whether or not the chamber of resonance provided by the

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0022-5223/\$36.00

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jtcvs.2016.04.072>

Abbreviations and Acronyms

CT	= computed tomography
NSCLC	= non-small cell lung cancer
SABR	= stereotactic ablative radiotherapy
VATS	= video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery

ever-growing number of publications corresponds to hard undisputable evidence is still being debated.³ The story of stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR) and early-stage lung cancer parallels the legend of Narcissus, as immortalized in Caravaggio's masterpiece. This amazing painting is about misguided self-perception, darkness and light, chiaroscuro, and the realism that is brought to life divinely with each individual paintbrush stroke.

NARCISSUS

It is obvious that Narcissus was a Surgeon. Surgery was traditionally considered the “gold standard” in management protocols for early-stage disease despite some evidence to the contrary.^{1,2} Over time, unchallenged surgeons become egocentric and they look with disdain at alternative therapeutic options. Surgery became an even more attractive option when the principles of minimal invasiveness started to become applied widely to reduce surgical mortality and morbidity.³ Skeptics have questioned the true oncologic value of video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS), specifically with regard to incomplete mediastinal lymphadenectomies.⁴ Because of this hubris, Narcissus rarely attended multidisciplinary team meetings and, when he actually attended, he always believed that he was wasting time.⁵

ECHO

Echo was a patient who was diagnosed recently with a disease that required—according to Narcissus—surgical intervention. To avoid a large painful incision, she wanted to opt for minimally invasive surgery.⁶ More specifically, Echo wanted a keyhole operation, which she anticipated would cure the disease and allow for a quick return to her normal life with the other Nymphs.⁷ However, after reviewing her computed tomography (CT) scan, Narcissus believed that she may require a more invasive procedure; the possibility of experiencing post-thoracotomy pain terrified her. Determined to find an alternative to surgery, Echo researched and came across SABR (ie, the Beam), which is painless and leaves no scars.⁸

THE GODDESS NEMESIS

Nemesis was the goddess of fortune and retribution. The story of Echo destined to suffer perennial pain drew Nemesis' attention and attracted her sense of justice. The retribution was SABR. With SABR at her disposal, Nemesis felt omnipotent and believed that she had a very attractive treatment option for



FIGURE 1. *Narcissus* by Michelangelo “Caravaggio” Merisi (1571-1610).

Echo's disease.⁹ Traveling from Mount Olympus to the northern lands of Europe, Nemesis gained her first proselytes (Beamers) who, like forgers, helped her to improve the usage of SABR.¹⁰ Typical of the early days of surgery, news of this wondrous treatment spread quickly. Soon, the Beamers who, convinced by the promising initial results and determined like the characters of the *Fourth Estate* by Pellizza da Volpedo (Figure 2), began advocating clinical equipoise even without much evidence in support of SABR.¹¹ The Surgeons were stunned and incredulous. They were incapable of responding to the Beamers who were using the same arguments they once used in support of traditional surgical interventions—local control, short-term survival, and improved quality of life.^{12,13} The Surgeons were akin to battered boxers hanging fiercely to the ropes and struggling to find balance. At that moment, the Beamers seemed to be winning the fight yet were still, somehow, unable to land that knockout blow.

MYSTIFIED PERCEPTION OF REALITY: THE MYTH OF CLINICAL EQUIPOISE

For years, Narcissus and the other Surgeons had indulged and were almost narcotized by the mastery and magic of VATS and robotics.⁷ Just as Narcissus' heart blends in and almost disappears into the surrounding darkness in Caravaggio's painting, the hearts of the Surgeons were also darkened and misplaced.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Nemesis and the Beamers had constructed a very compelling theoretical structure and body of evidence—including a large

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