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**The Skin Ego and Body Boundaries: A Psychoanalysis of the Skin in Helen Mort's *The Illustrated Woman***

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**Abstract**

This research examines the psychological landscape of Helen Mort's 2022 poetry collection *The Illustrated Woman* through the unique lens of Applied Psychoanalysis. Centred on Didier Anzieu's "The Skin Ego," this research explores how the skin (as opposed to merely a biological barrier) serves as an important site for ego development and protection. Through repeated references to tattooing, scarring, and inscriptions of the body, this research posits that Mort's lyrical speakers use their skin as a "Psychic Shield" to protect their fragmented internal selves from disintegration by external forces. The research focuses on how deliberate, physical pain and permanent ink allow for a working-through process of intergenerational trauma as well as a psychic weaning from the maternal body. Overall, this research demonstrates that in Mort's poetry, the illustrated body is in fact the very fabric of the ego itself—a resilient, living script that has been carefully constructed with the intention of maintaining psychological wholeness

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, Skin Ego, Helen Mort, The Gaze, Body Boundaries, Didier Anzieu, Tattooing, Ego Defense, Contemporary Poetry, Somatic Subjectivity.

**Introduction**

A major theme of Mort's 2022 poem, "The Illustrated Woman," is the human body's susceptibility to the outside world. While many have praised her book for its feminist approach to reclaiming the female body and for her artistic depiction of tattoos, another element lies beneath the surface: the role of the skin in forming the ego. Using Psychoanalysis, one may look at the 'Illustrated' skin as a 'Skin Ego', which was created by Psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, who used the term to illustrate the skin's use as a container for both our physical and mental psyche. My research will explore the intersection of Post-Freudian clinical studies of the mind and Mort's lyrical depictions of bodily control. Mort does not depict the skin as a boundary to be crossed; rather, she portrays the skin as an area where boundaries are made, broken, and remade. I plan to examine how Mort depicts tattooing, scarring, and writing on the body, and how these depictions reflect the struggle to create a stable sense of self in an ever-intrusive society.

This study relies heavily on Didier Anzieu's 1985 treatise, *The Skin-Ego*, which changed how researchers understood the connection between a person's biological body and their psychological self. Anzieu stated that the ego is not simply an idea; instead, it is rooted in a person's experiences with their skin. According to Anzieu, the Skin-Ego provides three important services: it contains what goes on inside us; it protects us from what happens outside us; and it serves as a medium for communication between people. When the

Skin-Ego is damaged- whether due to some type of traumatic event, social/physical abuse/neglect, etc. -the individual may feel like their internal self is leaking out into the world or vice versa. In *The Illustrated Woman*, Mort's characters often seem concerned about leaving marks on their skin. From a psychoanatomical perspective, making marks on the skin could help thicken the dermal barrier. As Mort describes in *Tattoo*, a person uses tattoo needles to inscribe onto their skin - essentially adding layers to their skin - creating a visual/tactile divide between their inner self and outer world.

Historically, psychoanalysis has viewed the body as nothing more than a symptom. For example, Freud saw the "hysterical" body as an outward expression of ideas or feelings suppressed in a person's mind. However, in today's poetry, the body has become a site of active creation. Mort's work is at the height of this transformation. Rather than simply describing bodies, Mort's poems describe bodies that are being intentionally modified. Therefore, my study needs to take into consideration the transformation from a Lacanian Symbolic Order - where identity comes from language - to a more tactile/visual Real Identity formed through touch/flesh. In many of Mort's poems, including "The Illustrated Woman" and "Tattoo," Mort creates the illusion that language is inadequate to help her subjects process trauma or find a sense of self. If someone cannot express trauma through words, then they rely on their skin to tell them a story. This study will focus on the psychology of the tattoo: how a tattoo needle can become a tool for the unconscious to tell its own story, while avoiding censorship by the conscious mind and telling a story that is felt as well as seen.

A fundamental aspect of the context of Mort's poetry is that skin has traditionally been viewed as social property. The social 'gaze' judges, touches, and regulates women's skin. As such, psychoanalytic theory (Lacan and, later, feminist analyses by Mulvey) suggests that being constantly under the influence of a 'gaze' leads to a split in one's ego. In so doing, the individual sees themselves through another person's lens and thus loses their sense of autonomy and personal space. Mort's book responds to this disconnection with "rebranding" of the self. This paper examines the contradictory nature of tattoos, which are symbols on the surface that draw the gaze, but are also symbols created by individual choice.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does tattooing function as a psychic shield to protect the ego in Mort's poetry?
2. In what ways does marking the skin help the speaker reclaim agency from the gaze?

### **Literature Review**

Didier Anzieu, a psychotherapist who worked closely with dermatological patients and using projective methods in his research, initially proposed skin-ego (*moi-peau*) in 1974. He was greatly encouraged to broaden his research and provide a clearer definition of this new term throughout the period he spent closely examining dermatological patients. The significance of skin and its functions must first be thoroughly examined in order to comprehend this concept. Anzieu claims that skin is crucial to development for three reasons. To begin with, the skin is the sole organ that covers the entire body. It successfully shields the body from external hazards and risks by separating the inside from the outside. Second, it is the host that takes in sensory data from its environment. Third, it has a dual bilateral role; from early infancy, a kid feels both touching and being touched due to the skin. Touching has a significant impact on the mother-child bond and is necessary for children's proper psychological development. According to psychoanalysts, a lack of touching results in a variety of skin illnesses, which are a defensive mechanism for both the body and the ego. According to Szwec, patients' skin deformities are a direct representation of their skin disputes. Skin is a region of the body that naturally permits narcissistic investment since it is the first visible feature of humans and plays a significant role in emotional, visual, and sensory communication. By presenting data from research on the psychological health of patients with skin conditions and disorders, dermatologists highlight the role of the skin in psychological development.

According to Anzieu, the severity of a person's psychological issues is highly correlated with the magnitude of skin deformities. In order to more thoroughly assess the psychological well-being of 73 patients with psoriasis, lichen simplex chronicus, and alopecia universalis, Tunaboğlu İkiş, İşımen, Pirim, Yavuz, and Atak did significant research. The results showed that the patient group had a rather constrained dream world, and their symbolic thinking—described by Pierre Marty—dominated the analysis. Additionally, this study indicated that individuals with psoriasis may not have early object relations skills or may have severe issues with them. They may therefore require more assistance, protection, and holding than other members of society. According to Anzieu, the Skin-Ego is "a mental image of which the child's ego uses during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an ego containing psychical contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body." According to his idea, skin-ego is a psychological envelope that primarily serves ego. Eight distinct roles of the skin-ego were identified by Anzieu, including maintenance, confinement, protection, individuation, intersensoriality, sexualization, recharging, and inscription within the psyche. While defining these roles, Anzieu highlighted the theoretical parallels between the skin's bodily activities and the skin ego's psychological functions. He claimed that if these processes fail, the psychological equipment may eventually deteriorate pretty severely.

The skin-ego is generally considered a metaphor created mainly in by the French psychoanalyst widely respected Didier Anzieu to describe in detail the process by which over time the infant's emerging ego develops quite gradually a container for psychic contents and achieves with stability a secure feeling of well-being. The ego encloses very closely the psychic apparatus as quite similarly the skin encloses the body from birth. The ego becomes able over development to fix barriers protecting quite strongly the internal world and more carefully to screen exchanges with the id, the superego, and the outside world in reality. The skin-ego is commonly viewed an envelope that contains many complex thoughts and gives quite effectively to thinking activity some limits, continuity, and a protection against the instincts under pressure. The functions of the skin-ego are mainly understood to maintain thoughts, to contain ideas and affects, to provide a stable protective shield, to register traces from early of primary communication with the outside world, to manage quite efficiently inter-sensorial correspondences, to individuate, to support sexual excitation, and to recharge the libido through experience. The skin-ego is widely accepted the foundation of the container-contained relationship in psychoanalysis. An important part in therapy of psychoanalytic work with borderline patients is the reconstruction from infancy of the earliest phases of the skin-ego and their consequences for mental organization and stability.

The primary theoretical basis of this research is Didier Anzieu's groundbreaking book, *The Skin-Ego* (Anzieu, 1989). Anzieu challenged traditional Freudian psychology and developed a new perspective that views the ego as being deeply rooted in one's biology—specifically, the skin. According to Anzieu, the skin-ego acts as a "mental wrapper" providing the subject with a sense of enclosure and protection. Many studies cite Anzieu's eight functions of the skin-ego, especially the "function of maintenance" (keeping the mind intact) and the "function of protection" (a barrier to protect the ego from outside stimuli). For example, Lafrance (2009) built upon Anzieu's theories and hypothesized that when the body is "tattooed" or physically altered through other means, it symbolizes an emotional/psychological effort to fix a "leaking" or fractured ego. Poetry today represents a paradigmatic shift in the representation of the body—from being a static object to becoming an inscribed subject. Scholarship on contemporary poets, including Helen Mort and Eavan Boland, has demonstrated that many poets now write about their "lyric I" in relation to the "Skin Ego."

Furthermore, critics have observed that, particularly for female writers, the skin is often a place of both psychological and social struggle. Grosz (1994), a feminist psychoanalyst, argues that the body is a "porous surface" at which internal and external realities collide. In her most recent collection of poems, *The Illustrated Woman* (2022), Mort uses the tattoo as an exemplar of this porous nature. These inscriptions are not simply aesthetic devices; they represent forms of "psychographics" that circumvent the limits of

linguistic expression to access "the real," i.e., the Lacanian experience of reality that lies beyond the symbolic order. In addition to addressing how these tattoos represent psychographic expressions, much of the literature also examines the relationship between the skin-ego and the "Gaze."

Historically, feminist literary theory has grappled with how women poets reclaim agency from voyeurism. More recently, there has been an analysis of body-centred poetry arguing that "marking" the skin is an act of regaining agency. When a poet chooses to "illustrate" their body through tattoos or other markings, they transform their skin from a translucent window into an opaque fortress. Once transformed into a fortress, the poet gains dermal agency and can regulate who perceives them. Through this transformation of the skin into a protective shield, the poet is able to filter out the Other's invasive "gaze". Finally, much of the literature addresses the concept of an "intergenerational dermis", or how one's skin carries traumatic experiences passed down from ancestors. Psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok (1994) originally coined terms related to "crypt" and "phantom", concepts that describe how parental trauma becomes buried inside children. Poets often express this intergenerational dermis using imagery representing "inheritance" of bodily marks. Ultimately, researchers conclude that by overlaying these inherited marks with new tattoos or symbolism, poets accomplish a "psychic weaning" enabling the ego to create its boundaries independent from those established by mothers or ancestors.

### **Methodology**

Didier Anzieu's notion of the skin-ego builds mainly upon a long psychoanalytic tradition that began many years with Freud's idea that the ego is first and foremost a body ego, a projection deep within in the psyche of the surface of the body, or, in other words, the idea that psychic phenomena are always embodied in experience. An interface, a container quite firmly for the ego, but also its origin: thus did Anzieu conceptualize very clearly the skin's psychic function through theory. The baby's fantasy, quite naturally, of having a common skin with the mother, is the concrete starting point from infancy for a development that, through the prohibition on touching, leads to the experience over time of being a separate and individual person in society. Psychoanalytic work with severe mental disorders makes it necessary in practice to investigate deficiencies in the skin-ego's containing function before the patient's psychic contents can be explored more deeply. In the psychoanalytic situation, the analyst's words replace tactile contact and thereby contribute quite directly to healing injuries to the skin-ego through communication. The clinical implications quite broadly of Anzieu's theoretical model are illustrated very effectively by examples from psychoanalyses of children and adults in treatment. The close connection quite clearly between touch, psychic envelopes, and thinking opens a wider perspective for understanding on the necessity of setting limits to violence, against both nature and human beings in reality.

In terms of methodology, this study utilizes an applied, qualitative, hermeneutic paradigm that has been influenced by psychoanalytic principles. The theoretical framework used to interpret the study was primarily psychoanalytic. Specifically, the focus of the study will be to analyze the psychological function of the skin in Helen Mort's illustrated poem, *The Illustrated Woman* (2022). Additionally, the research will examine the relationship between bodily boundary and ego-defence. Using a multiple-layered approach to analyse the poetic text, it can be demonstrated how the text acts as a source of manifestation of the subconscious. This method bridges the divide between current clinical psychoanalytic theory and modern-day lyrical poetry. The research is based upon post-Freudian ego psychology and focuses on Anzieu's theory of the skin-ego (Anzieu, 1989). The rationale for selecting Anzieu's theory as the foundation for this research is due to its application in providing criteria for analysis. In particular, Anzieu's definition of the skin acting as both a "container" and a "protective shield". With respect to the research question on agency and the "gaze", the study will incorporate Lacanian psychoanalysis and explore the concepts of the "symbolic order" and "object petit a" in this context.

## Analysis

Through the lens of the "Skin Ego," as developed by Anzieu (1989), this collection can be analyzed by considering the ego as a representation of a person's surface area, including their skin, and thus the physical skin as the outer layer of the mind. The "illustrations" within Mort's work represent the psychic thickening of this surface. Mort's work illustrates how the skin serves as a container for the self and a barrier against invasion by the external environment. It also demonstrates how the fragmented nature of the psyche is mended and brought back together through the action of inserting a needle into the skin to create marks such as tattoos.

The basic theory behind the Skin Ego is that our skin constitutes the major portion of our psyche. Therefore, if an individual perceives their skin as weak or permeable, they will perceive their ego as equally vulnerable. Mort begins her title poem with a speaker who relates every mark on her body to the places she has been. She describes her body as a map of all the locations she has traveled. From a psychoanalyst's viewpoint, individuals develop tattoos when they have experienced an invasion of their ego. Tattoos are used to establish a second layer of skin, stronger and more defined than the original. This supports Anzieu's belief that the skin-ego creates a sac or container that helps to keep our inner world intact. Mort also believes that her own skin is a "boundary made of ink and blood" (p. 14), implying that the actual pain caused by receiving a tattoo was worth suffering to maintain psychological wholeness.

A central component of analyzing this collection of poetry is understanding that the Skin-Ego works as an exterior boundary. Anzieu stated that another role of the skin is Para-excitation or screening out unwanted stimuli from our surroundings. Women, in particular, live in a world that constantly scrutinizes their bodies. Mort's speakers use tattoos to limit these intrusions. For example, in Mort's poem "Tattoo," the speaker says, "I am making myself from the outside in" (p. 5); this statement clearly represents how people form their sense of self through their body. Rather than having identity flow outward from the soul, Mort's speakers use their exterior surface to build their interior sense of self. The "bite of the needle" serves as a sharp reminder of "where I end and the world ends" (p. 6).

The relationship between the Skin Ego and the "Maternal" is repeated throughout the poems. In psychoanalysis, the skin is seen as the initial physical contact between mother and child. Mort, in "Inheritance", discusses how her skin holds the "ghosts of other women" (Mort, 2022, p. 31). She describes her skin as a "hand-me-down" (Mort, 2022, p. 32), thus indicating that her physical boundaries are not solely hers. Using Object Relations as a lens, this suggests the daughter's ego has been integrated into the mother's. Thus, by inscribing her own skin with new stories and becoming tattooed, she is declaring that her skin - and subsequently her ego - is no longer a replica or copy of the maternal body but rather a uniquely "inscribed" space.

However, the Skin Ego in Mort's poetry is not merely protective; it is also ecstatic in its ability to be a "border". Within the poem "Needle", the experience of being tattooed is described as a "holy friction" (Mort, 2022, p. 40). This experience can be categorized under pleasure-pain - akin to the Death drive (Freud, 1920/1961). Mort explains the sensation as "where the world enters me" (Mort, 2022, p. 41), illustrating that her border is not simply a wall, but a gate. Therefore, she experiences a duality of desire: a need for connection to the external world and a need for isolation or protection. The ink acts as an intermediary, allowing her to negotiate contact with the world while maintaining her sense of wholeness as a porous shield.

Ultimately, this psychoanalysis of the "Skin Ego" in Helen Mort's *The Illustrated Woman* demonstrates a strong desire for autonomy. The skin is a battleground where the poet seeks to establish her right to define who she is. Through the use of what I refer to as "the language of the needle", Mort creates a body boundary that will protect her from unwanted attention and simultaneously function as a conduit to connect with her subconscious. Ultimately, Mort's poetry illustrates that the ego is not located within some interiorized aspect of the psyche but rather is an exteriorized entity visible upon the surface - a tapestry of scars and ink (Mort,

2022, p. 55) that safeguards the individual from the disintegration of their self.

The skin is transformed from an entirely physical shell to a highly developed psychological barrier. The collection must be analyzed as a form of the "Skin Ego" based on the ideas of Didier Anzieu (1989), who described the ego as a representation of a person's physical outer layer and indicated that the physical skin acts as a mental container. As Mort describes, the "illustrations" are a mental thickening of this outer layer. The skin acts as both a vessel for the self, a barricade against invasion from the outside and the site where the fragmented psyche is sewn back together via the symbolic act of placing a needle into the skin.

In reference to the fundamental theory of the Skin Ego, it can be stated that the skin is considered to be the first organ of the mind. Therefore, if the individual perceives their skin as fragile or porous, they will perceive their ego as fragile or porous. In the title poem, Mort establishes an initial relationship to her speaker in which the speaker describes her body as a "map of all places I have been" (Mort, 2022, p. 12) relating her body to the markings that she chose to put on herself. Based on psychoanalytic thought, when an individual creates tattoos on themselves, they are responding to a condition known as a "leaking" ego. With each new tattoo application, Mort illustrates how she is creating a "second skin," one that is harder and less ambiguous than her natural skin. Anzieu also suggests that the skin/ego serves as a "sac," or a container for the internal world. Mort states that the skin is a "border made of blood and ink" (Mort, 2022, p. 14), illustrating that the physical pain involved with getting a tattoo is required for the psychological process of containment. The ink utilized in tattoos acts as a sealer to keep the internal "liquid" of oneself from leaking out into its surrounding environment.

A central aspect of this analysis is the function of the Skin/Ego as a protective shield. Anzieu explained that one of the functions of the skin is Para-excitation, or filtering of incoming information. Given the constant visual attention that females receive regarding their bodies, Mort's speakers utilize tattoos as a way to regulate this attention. In the poem "Tattoo", Mort states that "I'm making myself from outside-inwards" (Mort, 2022, p. 5), illustrating perfectly how the ego develops through bodily experience. Unlike traditional development models in which identity flows from an interior soul outward, Mort's speakers create their internal self through the utilization of their exterior surface. The "bite" of the needle is a sharp indicator of where Mort begins and where the rest of the world ends (Mort, 2022, p. 6). Creating boundaries is a defensive mechanism; by converting the skin into an "illustrated" wall, Mort's speaker assures that when external gazes hit her created surface, they are receiving something created by her, not an unadorned, naked ego.

Perhaps, the greatest psychological triumph within this collection relates to reclaiming control over external gazes. For Mort, female bodies often become sites of unwanted observation. Through utilizing tattoos on her skin, Mort complicates how others view her. Furthermore, Mort's work illustrates the "communicative" role of the Skin Ego. Psychoanalytically, the skin serves as the interface between one and the "other," without the use of words. Mort's poems frequently depict bodies speaking in symbols. Tattoos are portrayed in the collection as "the only language that doesn't lie" (Mort, 2022, p. 18). This implies a conflict where the symbolic order of spoken word is found wanting. The speaker's psyche has suffered damage at the hands of experiences that cannot be captured by spoken words. Therefore, the ego turns to "dermal writing." When Mort writes that the tattoos are "written into the flesh" (Mort, 2022, p. 22), she is illustrating the movement from a psychic wound to a physical indicator. Freud (1923/1961) was famous for stating that "the ego is above all else a bodily ego," and Mort's images illustrate that many of the deepest truths of oneself are written directly upon the flesh.

However, while the Skin Ego in Mort's poetry does offer a form of protection; it offers much more than this — it offers an "Ecstasy of the Border." In the poem "Needle," Mort describes the experience of receiving a tattoo as "a holy friction" (Mort, 2022, p. 40). There is a sense of "pleasure-pain" associated with this concept that corresponds with Freud's (1920/1961) Death Drive. According to Mort, "this is where I feel the world enter me" (Mort, 2022, p. 41); thus indicating that there is more to this border than mere walls; this

border exists as gates. This indicates a complex psychological condition whereby the individual desires both containment and contact. The ink functions as the medium through which she negotiates this interaction; serving as a porous shield allowing her to engage with the world outside herself without sacrificing her integrity. The agency lies in her consent to pain; choosing the needle transforms a potentially traumatic event into a planned, therapeutic ritual.

Lastly, the collection demonstrates the "fragility of the ego" through imagery related to aging and change. Just as the skin may stretch or scar; the Skin Ego must adjust accordingly. Mort writes about "old ink fading" (Mort, 2022, p. 50) and "the silver tracks of birth" (Mort, 2022, p. 51) recognizing that "the body's map is always changing." Psychoanalytically speaking, this indicates mutability of the self. The ego is not some unchanging monument; it is living — it is a "script in motion." Rather than breaking when its borders shift — Mort's speakers show an adaptable ego; incorporating these changes into their illustration.

Thus, Mort's illustrated woman presents a psychoanalysis of the "Skin Ego," revealing a significant struggle for independence. The skin represents the battlefield on which the speaker seeks to assert control over her ability to define herself. Using the "language of the needle," the speaker creates a protective barrier between herself and others that simultaneously provides access to her subconscious. Ultimately, Mort's poetry demonstrates that an individual's ego is not located deep inside their mind; rather it resides upon the surface — it is a tapestry made up of scars and ink (Mort, 2022, p. 55) providing insulation from the disintegration of one's self. By converting her skin into a shield, Mort's speaker guarantees that her identity will remain hers alone; forever inscribed and forever protected.

## Conclusion

Psychoanalytic exploration of the "Skin Ego" in Helen Mort's *The Illustrated Woman*, published in 2022, demonstrates that the skin is a major battlefield for psychological autonomy. Through the application of both Didier Anzieu and Jacques Lacan's theories, this research demonstrates that the process of tattooing is much greater than just an aesthetic choice; It is an important defensive measure to strengthen a weakened psychic boundary. In addition, the "illustrations" that are described throughout this collection serve as a "second skin" or protective envelope to house the subject's internal world while protecting them from the intrusion of the outside world. Moreover, the results of this research reveal that dermal inscription enables the author to regain control over the "Gaze". The transformation of the physical body into an authored text enables the subject to move from being a passive object of observation to an active participant in their own visual representation. The ritual of the needle provides a structured space for the working through of traumatic events, thereby enabling the integration of fractured memory into a singular narrative of the self. Ultimately, Mort's poetry illustrate that the ego is fundamentally rooted in the body. To be "illustrated" is to be psychically fortified — transforming the skin into a strong barrier that protects the individual from disintegration due to loss of identity.

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