

Concerning Zelia Gregoriou's "Reading *Phaedrus* Like a Girl"

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I am pleased and honored to respond to Zelia Gregoriou's "Reading *Phaedrus* Like a Girl," and to do so I shall read the early scenes of *Phaedrus* like a girl who is also a schizoanalyst, that is, from the perspective of a gender-neutral materialist psychiatry inspired by Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I hope some of my observations will be of help to Ms. Gregoriou, especially concerning the madness of Socrates, and the presence of some other machines in *Phaedrus* connected to Plato's writing machine, and *Phaedrus*' machine of shame: the despotic machine of Athens, the barbarian machine of the countryside, and the Bacchic machine of Orithyia.

Ms. Gregoriou successfully reads *Phaedrus* as a machine of writing and desire. She portrays the dialogue as "philosophy's closet drama, where actors perform on each other's speech" by focusing on the themes of production and deterritorialization of desire. Zelia Gregoriou reinterprets the relation between desire and philosophy as a "becoming," and does so in a way that revitalizes both.

Ms. Gregoriou teaches us to "read like a girl," a mode of responsiveness to texts that I found refreshing and awe-inspiring. She achieves a reading of the early scenes of *Phaedrus* that deterritorializes desire within the dialogue while degenitalizing the readership. Her girl-like irresponsibility toward the text allows us to raise questions and make conjectures otherwise forbidden. She makes the text porous, so that we may cross the barrier between author/character/reader, to experience and recreate the text of *Phaedrus*. Plato's text affects and indebts us in a new, living, interactive, personal way. We listen to the text like girls playing along the river, using an affectivity that remains, nonetheless, heterogeneous to the text. The dialogue itself tell us, "it's just the place for girls to be playing beside the stream."¹

Zelia convincingly shows us that "throughout the dialogue both the subject and object of desire lose their stability and identity as bodily desire and desire for discourse, erotic mania and philosophical inquiry continuously displace, anticipate, affect and multiply each other."

Zelia's technique of "reading like a girl" opens the view to a thousand small objects of the discourse. Reading *Phaedrus* like a girl myself, I noticed Orithyia. Orithyia and the Nereid nymphs are present throughout the geography of *Phaedrus*: perhaps she complements Pharmacia in the early stage of the dialogue. Orithyia was the daughter of Erechtheus, King of Athens. She is a water nymph, according to legend. One day, while playing with Pharmacia, she crossed the river Ilissus. Boreus, King of Thrace, abducted her: together they parented Cleopatra, among others. Her sister Nereid nymphs hide at the site of the *Phaedrus*, listening like girls. They lament Achelous at the tree, both phallus and axis mundi, centering the geography of *Phaedrus*, but they listen like girls to the male conversants.

Socrates fears these girls and their clutches in the early part of the dialogue. He pleads with Phaedrus at 241e: “Don’t you see that I shall clearly be possessed by those nymphs into whose clutches you deliberately threw me?” Their desiring machines have clutches: they threaten to enmesh Socrates on their gears; they threaten to make him a part of their machine, their appendage or cog; they threaten to strip his gears, to cause him to slip between ratio(cination)s. The Orithyian girls have their own desiring machine of countless *clutches*, and Socrates’ paranoia focuses, in part, on them.² They threaten to *clench* him, like so many Lilliputians.³ They threaten to turn Socrates into a paranoiac⁴ *coupling* to their own desiring machine.

Reading like a girl, Ms. Gregoriou argues, is not a misfire but a rhizomatic performance. The Bacchantic aspects of *Phaedrus* strike me as rhizomatic in this sense. Nereid nymphs lament for a hero unseen by Socrates and Phaedrus the mortals. Each of them has a rhizomatic performative act: Oriythia (from oros and quo) — mountain rusher, she who rages on the hillsides. She is a Bacchant like her aunts Procne and Philomela.⁵ She rushes around the mountain, she rages on the hillsides, like a storm, like a girl — this is her performance.

Zelia illustrates “reading like a girl” when considering Plato’s image of the pitcher. She persuasively argues that this is a degenitalized image and not feminine. Zelia Gregoriou’s style of “reading like a girl” deoedipalizes while it degenitalizes. I greatly appreciate this step beyond Freud in Zelia Gregoriou’s essay. Deleuze might say that Gregoriou transcends the anthropomorphic representation of sexuality: instead of two sexes, many sexes.⁶

Zelia’s choice of the term “girl” raises questions about essentializing gender: the irresponsibility that is integral to her idea of a “girl” raises questions about politics and humanism, of which she is clearly cognizant in her reading. Zelia Gregoriou rightfully questions “the totality and purity of the text as a signifying game by showing how reading and writing grow rhizomatically between different planes of meaning and desire, textual and extra-textual.” I would like to suggest that this strategy be broadened to include socio-political, extra-textual planes. We begin as Greeks but wind up as Germans; like Nietzsche remarks: How is this possible? The following remarks are meant as a friendly reading of the text in a more overtly political plane.

Reading *Phaedrus* like a girl, I was struck by the image of Socrates as part of a despotic machine. The despot is what Deleuze calls “the full body of the earth.” His despotic machine produces manic-depression and paranoia, just as the capitalist desiring machine would later produce fascism and schizophrenia. His machine is the despotic state, the Urstaat. In the *Phaedrus* it is the city-state of Athens. The savage territory which Phaedrus leads Socrates into is the barbaric state now controlled by the despotic machine. The area is rural, a place of mythos not logos. The Greek despotic machine is the child of the Egyptian machine; it is an imitation of Urstaat.⁷ The despot replaces inscription with the despotic signifier.⁸ Despots overcode, repress desire; they see barbarian incest as shameful. The despot internalizes shame and incest, creating Oedipus. Oedipus is a despot and vice-versa.⁹

As the political context to *Phaedrus*, Athens is already well into decline; she can no longer repress desire in the countryside of the barbarians. Deterritorialization of desire comes out of despotic triumph over colonies and the savage machine of bargaining-inscription. Thus, *Phaedrus* and Socrates experience a freeing effect on their sexuality. Homosexual *bargaining* in barbarian territories is no longer repressed by the *exchange*-oriented polis.¹⁰ We might read, with Deleuze, homosexuality to be a relation of theft or gift — not exchange — in pre-market libidinal economies.¹¹

The early scenes of *Phaedrus* overflow with homoerotic imagery: twisting and wrestling, master-slave, penetration-surrender. *Phaedrus*' machine of shame — the scroll bearing Lysias' speech and all things (dys)functionally attached to it — seeks to suppress the primitive territorial setting based on alliance and filiation by shaming erotic love. Socrates' logos-machine completes the job by a rendition of Stesichorus. Desire is repressed, the Forms re-introduced. His dialectical machine restores the despotic signifier, imposing order on the barbarian territory.¹² But in doing so, Socrates undergoes a pendulous motion from mania to paranoia. I would suggest that Socrates and *Phaedrus* are bodies without organs in pendulous movement from mania to paranoia.¹³ Socrates' mania is welcomed: "in reality, the greatest blessings come by the way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent."¹⁴ His swings into paranoia would prove to be otherwise, however.

Zelia Gregoriou's reading of *Phaedrus* as a girl meets an important challenge in the homosexual atmosphere of the dialogue, seeming to exclude girls. When I went back to this dialogue and read it like a girl myself, I noticed the following schizoanalytic points:

Phaedrus tells Socrates that a handsome young boy was tempted by a nonlover, according to the speech by Lysias. Delighted, Socrates comments, "Splendid! I wish he would add that it should be to a poor man rather than a rich one, an elderly man rather than a young one, and, in general, to ordinary folk like myself."¹⁵ Socrates possesses the despot's will to make all others mere appendages of himself. Deleuze finds this omnilechery among the traits of the despot.

For what is at stake in the overcoding effected by incest is the following: that all organs of all the subjects, all the eyes, all the mouths, all the penises, all the vaginas, all the ears, and all the anuses become attached to the full body of the despot...Royal incest is inseparable from the intense multiplication of organs and their inscription on the new full body.¹⁶

This should not be overlooked when reading *Phaedrus* like a girl schizoanalyst, that Socrates' madness in the early scenes presupposes a socio-political context of Athenian despotism and the royal incest which is its libidinal investment; royal incest is the common coin of Socrates' libidinal economy. Socrates' idea of democracy is obscured by his despotic will to omnilechery. When he considers a world in which all handsome young men would seek him alone out, he says, "What an attractive democratic theory that would be!"¹⁷

Ignoring the question of adult seduction, projecting incestuous desire into the child: Freud's fallacy, Socrates' dialectical tissue in the *Phaedrus*. Deleuze insists, as a basic tenet of his anti-oedipal revolt, that adult paranoiacs Oedipalize neurotic

children.¹⁸ In the early scenes of *Phaedrus* this tenet realizes itself: Socrates, the paranoiac adult, Oedipalizes the child Phaedrus. He ignores the theme of seduction and treats incestuous desire as originating in the child. Socrates instructs Phaedrus in the connection between madness and incest:

And in the second place, when grievous maladies and afflictions have beset certain families by reason of some ancient sin, madness has appeared among them, and breaking out into prophecy has secured relief by finding the means thereto, namely, by recourse to prayer and worship.¹⁹

But there is no need for real argument, because Phaedrus is already Oedipalized.

To conclude, Zelia's reading of Socrates' palinode, shame-nudity, and catharsis-cavity, and her many other themes, certainly deserves more attention than this space allows. I hope to read more of Zelia's work in the future.

1. Plato *Phaedrus* 229b.

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans., Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 283; cf. 26.

3. *Ibid.*, 281. Girls are molar aggregates on the full body of the earth, in the idiom of Deleuze and Guattari.

4. *Ibid.*, 277.

5. Adrian Room, *Room's Classical Dictionary* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 224.

6. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 296.

7. *Ibid.*, 218.

8. *Ibid.*, 206.

9. *Ibid.*, 215.

10. *Ibid.*, 186.

11. *Ibid.*, 185-86. Notice that Orithyia is stolen by Boreus, according to mythos.

12. *Ibid.*, 194.

13. *Ibid.*, 281.

14. Plato *Phaedrus* 244a.

15. Plato *Phaedrus* 227c-d.

16. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 210.

17. Plato *Phaedrus* 227d.

18. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 274.

19. Plato *Phaedrus* 244d-e.