

Copyright  
by  
Emily Ruth Emison  
2016

**The Report Committee for Emily Ruth Emison  
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**Learned by Heart:  
Pederastic Reading and Writing Practices in Plato's *Phaedrus***

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

---

Jeffrey Walker

---

Casey Boyle

**Learned by Heart:  
Pederastic Reading and Writing Practices in Plato's *Phaedrus***

**by  
Emily Ruth Emison, B.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin  
May 2016**

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to express deep gratitude to my readers, Dr. Jeffrey Walker and Dr. Casey Boyle. This project would not have been possible without their patient guidance and support, from early seminar discussions and papers to the various (and variously ghastly) reformulations of my report. Thank you.

I continue to be grateful to the faculty of Earlham College and the University of Minnesota, Duluth who contributed to my academic and professional development. For my first "Homeric Banquet" I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Heiny; my first *public Republic*, Dr. Amy Shuster; my first *oculus*, Dr. Jennifer Webb; my first ferry out of Piraeus, Dr. Ronald Marchese; and my first medieval manuscript, Dr. Krista Twu. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Michael Pfau for my first course on the art of rhetoric.

My greatest debts are owed to family—to my mother, Joyce, for her reading; to my father, Thomas, for his orating; to my brother, Malcolm, for his humoring; and to my aunt, Mary Ruth, for her caring. I also wish to thank Jenna Reasor and Maxwell Gantner for their savage love of mimetic art. Lastly, to the faculty and graduate students of the Department of English at the University of Texas at Austin goes my utmost esteem. *καὶ ἐμοὶ ταῦτα συννεύχον: κοινὰ γὰρ τὰ τῶν φίλων.*

## **Abstract**

### **Learned by Heart: Pederastic Reading and Writing Practices in Plato's *Phaedrus***

Emily Ruth Emison, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Jeffrey Walker

Rather than reiterating the ways in which *Phaedrus* may be seen as Plato's positive reformulation of rhetoric, this paper focuses on reading the pederastic dynamic between the dialogue's interlocutors (and, by extension, it argues, between Plato and his contemporary audience as well as the text and future readers). Viewed thus, *Phaedrus* may be less invested than is generally supposed in settling whether rhetoric belongs more properly to the realm of *doxa* versus *episteme* or whether there is a clear and steadfast division between a "philosophical method" and a "rhetorical method" of teaching. Closer attention to Plato's pederastic language not only reunites the *Phaedrus* with its originally stated subject (i.e., the prospective benefits and detriments of the lover versus the nonlover, of *mania* versus *sophrosune*), it also clarifies the ways in which Plato contributed to contemporary debates over the Athenian *paideia* and highlights the ideal relationship between author, written word, and reader that his dialogues sought to foster.

The paper begins with a brief description of pederastic practices and pederasty as an aristocratic phenomenon in 5th and 4th-century Athens, drawing on the constructionist approaches of Kenneth Dover and Michel Foucault. It then turns to the *Phaedrus* itself, reading the dialogue's dramatic setting, the intensifying erotic and poetic force of its three speeches, and its denouement with the so-called Myth of Theuth. The matter at hand is twofold: Why pederasty and how pederasty? Why does the dialogue include various references to rape, trickery, or force and how does Plato advocate particular reading and writing practices via the extended pederastic play of *Phaedrus*? These questions lead to an abbreviated survey of sophistic approaches to rhetorical education in 4<sup>th</sup>-century Athens, touching on the expanded sense of *paideia* and the rivalry between Plato and Isocrates. The paper's conclusion carries *Phaedrus* into the 21<sup>st</sup>-century classroom, ultimately proposing that learning Plato's dialogue, in more ways than one, may serve as a propaedeutic to rhetorical studies in the digital humanities and adjacent fields.

## Table of Contents

Proem.....	1
Introduction .....	3
Goals of This Paper .....	3
Partition .....	4
Loving <i>Phaedrus</i> .....	7
The Problem of Pederasty, Then and Now .....	7
Brief Review of Scholarship on Pederasty in Classical Athens .....	8
Teaching <i>Phaedrus</i> .....	14
The Dramatic Setting of Plato's <i>Phaedrus</i> .....	14
Rival Speeches: Lysias and Socrates on the Lover and Non-lover .....	17
The Myth of Theuth: Forgetting and the Technology of the Written Word .....	23
Learning <i>Phaedrus</i> .....	27
Analogous Anxieties: Pederasty, Pedagogy, and the Written Word .....	27
Plato's Invitation to Isocrates .....	30
Reading <i>Phaedrus</i> .....	33
With(in) Digital Humanities .....	33
Conclusion .....	37
Bibliography .....	39

## Proem

*Phaedrus: Not yet, Socrates, till the heat is past ... Let us stay and talk over what has been said, and then, when it is cooler, we will go away.<sup>1</sup>*

The Attic sun swelters over a fertile choric space. Two interlocutors lounge in the broad shade of a plane tree, far away from the bustle and din of Athens's agora. The older man is called Socrates, the younger, Phaedrus. Beyond city walls, the zenith of noontime is whiled away in discourse: speeches on love, rhetoric, and writing tumefy and subside; texts are analyzed and improved; seeds are planted; lessons are imparted. If some passerby had happened to glimpse this moment of shared intimacy, he would surely have reckoned that this duo was as in love with speech-making as with each other. Look how they blush and tease, offering acerbic wit and feigned threats. Look how voraciously they devour that text the youth kept secreted beneath his cloak. (What is its title? I can't quite make out...) Now the older man is practically flying into dithyrambics! Now nearly hexameters!

Jest aside, *somebody* did, of course, witness this love game—laid down in writing, Plato's authorial voice is the first voyeur to materialize in any reading of the *Phaedrus*. When we follow his words, readers are likewise invited to spend a few glad hours gazing on this tableau. But not looking, alone. For our entertainment and edification, Plato cast his dear Socrates as the lover (*erastes*) of this dialogue, no mere mouthpiece.<sup>2</sup> The love-

---

1. 242a

2. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates jests that Phaedrus has forced or compelled him to speak in the first place or to speak in a particular fashion. Such places complicate the power dynamic between the culturally proscribed passive *eromenos* and active *erastes*; they also hint at how Plato's dialogues model the



interest (beloved, *eromenos*) is the eponymous youth. Terribly beautiful but still a tenderfoot in the ways of rhetoric and philosophy, Phaedrus appears obsessed with the seductive forces of speech and the written word. His affections flit from one speech to the next, but his appetite remains insatiable. Talking is never enough, and yet it is everything. Over the course of their conversation, an ideal, Platonic pederasty is played out on three levels: between the dramatic interlocutors (Socrates and Phaedrus); between Plato and his contemporary audience (followers, teaching competitors, critics, etc.); and finally, between the written text and future readers. Bucolic and lyric and coy, the *Phaedrus* is far from low-maintenance. But it never fails to charm.

---

relation of author, text, and reader. Just as the exchange between Phaedrus and Socrates is deceptively reciprocal, the body of text (the written word) carries a certain hidden, bewitching force that the *Phaedrus* interrogates. When Plato's Socrates pokes fun at Phaedrus, as his beloved, for having forced him into some discursive position or another, the reader would be wise to remember that joke is also on him (in the most amiable of senses). E.g., 230d: "you seem to have found the charm to bring me out [σὺ μέντοι δοκεῖς μοι τῆς ἐμῆς ἐξόδου τὸ φάρμακον ἠὺρηκέναι]" 242d-e: "your speech which was spoken by you through my mouth that you bewitched [διὰ τοῦ ἐμοῦ στόματος καταφάρμακευθέντος]". Who is writing whom, then, in Plato's estimation? As we shall see, the roles of *erastes/eromenos* are reversed and revised a number of times during the dialogue; I therefore refrain from using reductive terms like "mouthpiece" in this paper, despite the fact that it represents only a preliminary step in a much longer project.

## Introduction

### GOALS OF THIS PAPER

Plato's *Phaedrus* teems with contradictions: it is an idealization of pederastic exchange that trades on broader cultural anxieties over pederastic practices, a pedagogical illustration that addresses the perils of teaching methods, and a written work that speaks to the corrupting potential of the technology of the written word. Indeed, modern scholars and students might well find themselves carried away—not unlike Oreithyia was carried off by Boreas, very near where Socrates and Phaedrus sit and converse<sup>3</sup>—by its many difficulties and delights. Consequently, there is certainly no dearth of scholarship on the machinations of *Phaedrus*, nor any scarcity of college courses on the Platonic corpus, writ large (in which the erotic, pederastically concerned *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* figure as popular curricular choices). For readers specifically attuned to rhetoric, composition, and pedagogy, *Phaedrus* affords a wealth of material on how Plato may have conceived of the writing, delivery, and teaching of speeches during his late middle period.<sup>4</sup> In light of the ever-proliferating studies of this dialogue, my paper has only two slim ambitions: first, to read *Phaedrus* with care, to love well and eat well<sup>5</sup> off its pages; second, to offer an invitation to scholars and students in the digital humanities (DH) to turn back to the *Phaedrus* at this particular technologic moment, to take sincerely Socrates's sentiment that "we must return to our boy."<sup>6</sup>

---

3. 229b

4. Likely penned c. 370 BC.

5. After Derrida's "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject."

6. 238d

## PARTITION

Rather than reiterating the ways in which *Phaedrus* may be read as Plato's positive reformulation of rhetoric—viewed as a kind of supplement to the negative stance in his *Gorgias*—this paper focuses on reading the pederastic dynamic between the dialogue's interlocutors. By extension, I will claim, this dynamic is further extended between Plato and his contemporary audience as well as between the text and its future readers. Viewed through this lens, *Phaedrus* may be less invested in settling, once and for all, whether rhetoric and writing belong more properly to the realm of opinion (*doxa*) or true knowledge (*episteme*), or whether there is a clear and steadfast division between a "philosophical method" and a "rhetorical method" of teaching. Closer attention to Plato's pederastic language not only reunites the *Phaedrus* with its originally stated subject (i.e., the prospective benefits and detriments of the lover versus the non-lover, of *mania* versus *sophrosune*), it also clarifies the ways in which Plato contributed to contemporary debates over Athenian *paideia* and sophistic rhetoric, as well as the ideal relationship between author, written word, and reader that he sought to foster.

My paper will begin with a brief description of pederastic practices and pederasty as an aristocratic phenomenon in 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-century Athens, conceding that it is a sensitive topic for 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers, but noting that it was no more or less fraught during its own time (nor, indeed, during any intervening period). It is exactly this emotive dimension that makes it a powerful rhetorical tool within the *Phaedrus*. Here I will draw on the constructionist approaches of Kenneth Dover and, briefly, Michel Foucault, whose

elucidation of Greek pederasty's complex inter(cural)play of subordination and self-rule continues to draw scrutiny.<sup>7</sup>

Turning to the text itself, the second part of my paper will be concerned with reading three elements of the *Phaedrus* in turn: the dialogue's dramatic setting, the intensifying erotic and poetic force of its three speeches, and finally its denouement and the so-called Myth of Theuth. The matter at hand is basically twofold: Why pederasty and how pederasty? These questions share an interest in what kind of pederasty is actually advocated in *Phaedrus* (i.e., how "Platonic" is the relationship between Socrates and Phaedrus). Why does the dialogue include various references to rape, trickery, or force and how does Plato advocate particular reading and writing practices via the extended pederastic play of *Phaedrus*?

Following this close(ish) reading, the third part of my paper will dilate its perspective once again in order to survey how the individual thread of Plato's *Phaedrus* weaves into the broader fabric of Athenian cultural, political, and philosophical debates of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. To this end I will touch on Athenian *paideia* and the rivalry between Plato and Isocrates, relying on scholarship that has demonstrated how the speeches of *Phaedrus* may be read in response to Isocrates's *Against the Sophists*. I will maintain that a full consideration of the dialogue's pederastic language does not support the claim that

---

7. E.g., James Davidson's quarrel with Foucault's active-passive model in *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece*. Also illuminating is Andrew Lear's reading of Foucault, which, for the time being, will have to remain a footnote. NB: "problematized" carried a wider range of meanings in much of Foucault's work, but Lear contends that in the case of his examination of pederastic customs, Foucault narrows the term's application, naming solely a kind of anxious obsession. He therefore proposes that scholars employ two terms: "proto-problematization," referring to a more general cultural infatuation, and "hyper-problematization," referring to instances of explicit criticism and debate (115).

Plato's *Phaedrus* is either hotly invective or coolly condescending toward Isocrates (as James Coulter and Brad McAdon have both contended), but rather bolsters a reading of *Phaedrus* as a kind of invitation from Plato to his contemporaries—followers, teaching competitors, and harsh critics alike. If this suggestion is observed it begs the question: Does Plato's invitation still hold up today? Is it fundamentally still *good*?<sup>8</sup>

This paper's conclusion, then, carries the *Phaedrus* forward from 4<sup>th</sup>-century Athens to the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century classroom. Drawing on the work of Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy* (which has undergone further refinement by critics in and around DH, including Lev Manovich, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, and Richard Lanham), I will gesture to similarities between the technological revolution of 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-century Athens (oral transmission to written transmission) and our own revolutionary moment (print literacies to digital). Katherine Hayles's parsing of reading methods—close, hyper, and machine—is useful in imagining the promise that the *Phaedrus* might hold for today's readers. Ultimately this paper proposes that learning Plato's dialogue, in more ways than one, may serve as a propaedeutic to rhetorical studies in the digital humanities and adjacent fields.

---

8. Emphasized in order to call attention to the parallel question of whether, in its own time, pederasty was a benefit (good) or detriment (evil).

## Loving Phaedrus

*Socrates: Now there was once upon a time a boy, or rather a stripling, of great beauty: and he had many lovers.*<sup>9</sup>

### THE PROBLEM OF PEDERASTY, THEN AND NOW

Scholars, students, and teachers working with Plato's *Phaedrus* today might rightly wonder what difference exists between pederasty as an Athenian aristocratic practice and pedophilia, in the modern sense.<sup>10</sup> Equally valid, they might ask how necessary the extended pederastic metaphor is to understanding Plato's views on poetry, rhetoric, philosophy, or pedagogy: should we not bypass this inconvenient and potentially minor detail in favor of learning what is truly, philosophically at stake in the *Phaedrus*? Indeed, the coverage of pederastic practices often comes down to (i.e., devolves into) a question of ethics, rather than effects. And in classroom discussions its mention usually falls somewhere between irrelevant, distracting, and downright offensive. So then, why is this textual detail worth an onerous historiographical detour?

In the genealogy of Socrates→Plato→Aristotle (a rather prominent trio in the Western philosophical tradition), a few influences cannot be ignored. In the first place, surviving accounts of the life of Socrates portray him admitting, even lauding, attraction to student-youths (though he is always ostensibly able to restrain himself from such

---

9. 237b

10. The fact that variants of *paidophilia* were sometimes used by other classical writers to denote the love of an adult male for a youth—as is the case in the *Elegies* of Theognis—makes this general question all the more pressing for readers and students of ancient Greek, specifically. As Dover explains: "Homosexual poems, archaic and Hellenistic alike, profess love in abundance; since the noun *paiderastes* and the verb *paiderastein* will not fit into the elegiac metre which was almost invariably favoured for this genre of poetry, the poets replace it by *paidophiles* and *paidophilein* (e.g. Theognis 1345, 1357, Glaukos 1, Meleagros 80.2)" (50).

carnal appetites).<sup>11</sup> In the second place, unlike the grubby, distasteful Socrates, Plato hailed from an aristocratic family and would have been subject to contemporary social mores, potentially including pederastic inculcation. Finally, even the fastidious taxonomist Aristotle, in his *Politics*, approaches pederasty as a somewhat sticky wicket: “...for which purpose [the Cretan lawgiver] instituted association with the male sex, as to which there will be another occasion to consider whether it was a bad thing or a good one.”<sup>12</sup> Aristotle never returns to this discussion, leaving readers with only the effects of imported pederasty on the *polis* (i.e., its effectiveness as a method of population control). Whether his taciturnity was motivated by serious misgivings or mere disinterest is, of course, impossible to know. What is nevertheless clear is that Greek pederasty was a matter of special focus in art and literature from at least the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Furthermore, it represented difficulties for those thinking and writing about thinking and writing—Plato in particular. The thoughtful consideration of pederasty as it appears in the *Phaedrus* makes possible a deeper engagement with the whole of Plato's writings on rhetoric, composition, and pedagogy.

#### **BRIEF REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP ON PEDERASTY IN CLASSICAL ATHENS**

Those teaching the Platonic corpus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might be pardoned for wishing to delicately sidestep questions raised by references to pederasty in the *Phaedrus*, or, equally, the erotics inherent to Plato's *Laws*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*.

---

11. See Plato, *Charmides* 155d, *Protagoras* 309a-b; Xenophon, *Symposium* 4.27—28. On refusing sexual advances made by handsome youths see Plato, *Symposium* 219b-d and *Apology* 30a-b.

12. τὴν πρὸς τοὺς ἄρρενας ποιήσας ὁμιλίαν, περὶ ἧς εἰ φαύλως ἢ μὴ φαύλως ἕτερος ἔσται τοῦ διασκεψασθαι καιρός (Book 2, 1272a25). I owe a debt to Jeffrey Walker for his passing observation regarding Rackham's translation: *phaulos* as merely "bad" is perhaps overly mild, "foul" may come closer. The distinction, then, is whether pederasty is a foul or not-foul thing.

Translators and scholars themselves share a long history of censorship, writing instances of homoeroticism out of classical texts either due to vague academic apprehensions or more acute, culturally determined prejudices against homosexual practices. It was not until Dover's highly influential *Greek Homosexuality*, published in 1978, that the topic of pederasty began to be freed from scholarly moralizing and a certain carefully cultivated ignorance. Dover's book opens, in fact, opens with unconcealed exasperation: "I know of no topic in classical studies on which a scholar's normal ability to perceive differences and draw inferences is so easily impaired; and none on which a writer is so likely to be thought to have said what he has not said."<sup>13</sup>

Sparking interest in many areas of ancient sexuality and gender studies,<sup>14</sup> *Greek Homosexuality* demonstrated the artistic conventions and social mores of Greek pederasty, as well as the extent to which pederastic customs were criticized in their own era. Dover's work is primarily concerned with the subtle shades of difference between related terms, the evolution or confusion of usage over time, and the relationship between

---

13. vii. Scholarship on homosexuality and pederastic relations in classical literature has tended toward one of two positions: either homosexual acts and pederastic practices were utterly ubiquitous and hardly eyebrow-raising for contemporary Greeks (i.e., a roughly synchronic approach, centered on classical Athens to the exclusion of other times/places/attitudes); or, on the other hand, they were as multitudinous and anxiety-producing then as they are today (i.e., a roughly diachronic approach, interested in shifts over time). Certainly any study that focuses on a figure such as Plato or a time/place such as Athens, 370 B.C. (as in the case of this paper) is likelier to cleave to the former approach, and, regarding Dover's *Greek Homosexuality*, Lear notes how the earlier scholarly tendency toward a diachronic approach was rejected in favor of a synchronic snapshot of classical Athenian attitudes. The priority attached to Athenian pederasty is somewhat understandable, as Lear himself concedes, given the preponderance of literary and visual material from this one, short period. But a synchronic approach always, necessarily, extends the particularities of one time/place over those adjacent; thus we have conclusions about all of Greek pederasty being drawn from the comments of a few brilliant authors in one especially brilliant period. Further review in the space provided is hardly prudent. However, recent contributions include those by José González and Davidson.

14. Though its coverage of male sexual experience and male/male relations is notably weightier than of female sexual experience and female/female relations, for reasons which are likely obvious.



textual evidence and cultural practice. Concepts of Greek love never appear fully distinguishable from one another (e.g., *eros*, *philia*, *agape*, *anteros*, *paiderastes*, *philerastes*, *anterastheis*, etc.), but Dover points to Plato's *Phaedrus* and Xenophon's *Symposium* as prime examples of the classical Athenian ideal for the functioning of *eros* in pederastic relations.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most striking and significant similarity in both the cited passages is the asymmetrical experience of pleasure, as Dover notes: "In crude terms, what does the *eromenos* get out of submission to his *erastes*? The conventional Greek answer is, no bodily pleasure (cf. Pl. *Phdr.* 240d); should he do so, he incurs disapproval as a  *pornos* ... and as perverted."<sup>16</sup>

For Dover, the heart of the *erastes-eromenos* relationship was the power dynamic between active lover and passive beloved, and he reads the *Phaedrus* as conforming to the Athenian taste for docile *eromenoi* and well meaning, noble *erastai*. This dynamic was culturally accepted—indeed encouraged—when it involved a mature, married man inculcating a youth with civic consciousness and political savvy. Again, asymmetry was key. To be a grown man and act passively with another man would be to brand yourself a *malthakos*, one who is soft, feminine, and receptive (to any manner of persuasion).<sup>17</sup> Of course, the active-passive, dominant-submissive relationship between a mature man and a developing youth was the imagined ideal. As Dover's thoroughgoing survey attests, there is a great variety of classical sources alleging the transgressive experience of pleasure on the part of an *eromenos*, the sexual carrying-on between adult men, or the less-than-

---

15. *Phaedrus*, 255d; Xenophon, *Symposium*, 8.21 quot. in *Greek Homosexuality*, 52.

16. 52

17. Halperin, 22.

purely-educational motives of *erastai*. In other words, departure from normative ideals of sexual behavior was, then as now, far from uncommon.<sup>18</sup>

Nor was the practice ever uniformly accepted across Greece, as we see in sources that criticize or mock contemporary pederasts. In the comedies of Aristophanes, insults hurled at politicians such as Cleon and Hyperbolus (and even poets like Euripides) trade on the alleged homosexual promiscuity of politicians and the passive, penetrated roles they took, reflecting a broader cultural anxiety over relationships which fell outside the confines of the accepted *erastes-eromenos* model.<sup>19</sup> A number of scholars have argued that the frequent censure of sexual relationships between co-equal men indicates a classical Athenian obsession with the cultivation and maintenance of social hierarchy within a radical democracy. David Halperin, in particular, contends that the extreme polarization of sexual roles in classical Athens “merely reflects the marked division in the Athenian polity between this socially superordinate group, composed of citizens, and various subordinate groups.”<sup>20</sup> Artistic and literary expressions of difference, therefore, may be viewed not only as reflections of social division within the Athenian polity, but also as a kind of mechanical reinforcement of social distinctions between the ruling class and any of the lowly rabble. The *erastes-eromenos* relationship was the performance of

---

18. Dover, 204. See also Keuls 285-91, Percy, and Lear and Cantarella. Dover argues that by the time Plato wrote his *Laws*, “he is no longer in the mood for compromise or tolerance such as he shows for the pair who ‘lapse’ in *Phaedrus*” (165). The theme of homosexuality in *Laws*, he further notes, first appears in 636a-c, “where (in connection with temperance and restraint) the Athenian speaker declares that the pleasure of heterosexual intercourse is ‘granted in accordance with nature’, whereas homosexual pleasure is ‘contrary to nature’ and ‘a crime caused by failure to control the desire for pleasure’” (165).

19. See especially Aristophanes, *Knights*. Such insults went hand-in-hand with accusing one’s rivals of being foreign-born or embezzling city funds.

20. 31. The elite, ruling class of Athens was a small fraction of its total population, of course, consisting of only adult male citizens. Social subordinates fell into four main groups (not all of whom were equally subordinate or disdained)—women, foreigners, slaves, and children.

this hierarchy par excellence. And Plato wrestles with it head-on, using the weight of societal anxiety over pederasty (for sexual, social, and political reasons, some of which we have discussed above) against his opponent: sophistic rhetoric and all its rootless, roving rhetoric-teachers.

Building on the work of Dover, Foucault claimed that Greek pederasty was problematized as "the object of a special—and especially intense—moral preoccupation."<sup>21</sup> For Foucault, returning to classical pederasty must have seemed most attractive, replete with concepts of the construction sexuality, coercion, and self-fashioning. In the second volume of his unfinished *History of Sexuality*, an exploration pederasty is used to flesh out new modes of resistance against institutions (social, governmental, etc.), as well as an ethics, as Paul Allen Miller notes, "founded not on the juridical, authoritarian, or disciplinary structures of modernity, but on what [Foucault] refers to as an 'art' or 'stylization' of existence."<sup>22</sup> But Foucault's classical turn and its influence on subsequent studies of Greco-Roman sexuality continue to be controversial matters.

For the purposes of this paper, it is of primary importance to note how Foucault's work has been used to recuperate an idealized Greek conception of pederasty. Davidson's *The Greeks and Greek Love* pursues such an idealization, an enterprise Kirk Ormond dismisses:

It is Davidson, not Foucault, who wants to find a 'pure' version of 'homosexuality' in the ancient world, one in which lovers and beloveds really, truly cared about

---

21. *The Use of Pleasure*, 192.

22. 56

each other and in which reciprocity defined their tender, loving relationships—as if this alone would free the homoerotic sex from its ancient discursive bounds and its politics of gender, age, and social status.<sup>23</sup>

The conflict between these opposing views takes on even greater urgency and subtlety in the present study. To clarify, I do not mean to recover an ideal or pure version of homosexuality in Greek pederastic practice, but rather point out places where Plato can be seen doing so and offer a potential reading of his rhetorical moves. Ormond and those who would agree with his critique of Davidson might respond that these amount to the same thing, to which, at this juncture, I can only respond with further (future) investigations of the topic.

---

23. 65

## Teaching *Phaedrus*

*Phaedrus: It is clear that you will not let me go  
until I speak somehow or other.*

*Socrates: You have a very correct idea about me.*<sup>24</sup>

### THE DRAMATIC SETTING OF PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS*

When *Phaedrus* and Socrates initially meet, it is importantly outside city walls, in the Attic *chora*—the countryside, a vacant or partially filled space (as distinguished from *kenon* and *topos*), a landscape of possibility, or an unsettled province.<sup>25</sup> In ancient use, including that of Lycurgus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, *chora* denoted the country as opposed to the city.<sup>26</sup> It was a place of potentiality, fertility, and feminine connotations (in the sense of vacancy, space to be filled, matrix/womb). In his *Timaeus*, Plato employed the concept as a receptacle in reimagining (starting again) the design of the universe.<sup>27</sup> In this rustic setting, *Phaedrus* suggests he and Socrates go find shade beneath the ample branches of the tallest tree nearby—a plane tree—in order to read Lysias's speech and converse in cool repose.<sup>28</sup> The symbolism of the plane tree would have been familiar to any Athenian and should not be lost on modern readers: it was under just such a tree that Zeus, in the form of a bull, raped Europa. Oblique as it may be, the allusion

---

24. 228c-d

25. *Liddell and Scott* s.v. “χώρα.”

26. From *Perseus Digital Library*: “ἡ πόλις καὶ ἡ χ.” in Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 1.1; “τὰ ἐκ τῆς χώρας” in Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 2.5 and Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.6.11.

27. 48e4. On *chora* in *Timaeus* specifically see Derrida; El-Bizri; and Sallis. Moving beyond Greek definitions of *chora*, modern uses of the term include Julia Kristeva's description of the first stage of psychosexual development (working toward a less phallogocentric psychoanalytic theory than that of Jacques Lacan). Martin Heidegger conceived of it as a “clearing” in which being takes place, a clearing of happening (El-Bizri). Jacques Derrida, in a short work titled *Khôra* as well as his book on the Parc de La Villette project in Paris, talks about *chora* in relation to trace, play, the mobile and transmutable, and the aesthetics of space more broadly (Derrida, 1993; Derrida et al., 1997).

28. 229a

raises the threat of what happens when words (i.e., seduction, persuasion) fail.

Continuing in this vein, Phaedrus queries: “Tell me, Socrates, is it not from some place along here by the Ilissus that Boreas is said to have carried off Oreithyia?”<sup>29</sup> In a setting with such brutish associations, Plato juxtaposes Socrates’s exchange with Phaedrus (and, thereby, his own models of reading, writing, and teaching) with the approach of sophists like Gorgias.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than be a mighty and cruel master, the old philosopher wishes to engage in generous and mutually generative discourse with his student. Young Phaedrus, the reader learns, is returning from a visit with Lysias, a prominent orator from whom he cribbed a speech arguing that it is better for a beloved to grant favor(s) to the non-lover than the lover. Lysias was the son of Cephalus and the brother of Polemarchus (both of whom feature as Platonic interlocutors elsewhere). Plato depicts Cephalus as a wealthy merchant interested in sophistic erudition; subsequent generations, as attested by Diodorus Siculus, remembered him as “a man distinguished for education and intelligence.”<sup>31</sup> Both Lysias and Polemarchus, then, were taught the art of speaking well by teachers Plato regularly censures, like Gorgias, Protagoras, and Isocrates.<sup>32</sup> Plato thus

---

29. Socrates affirms it is indeed the place, 229b.

30. Movingly retold in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “the god [Boreas] long kept from his beloved Oreithyia, while he would and preferred to use prayers instead of force. But when he could accomplish nothing by soothing words, rough with anger, which was the north-wind’s usual and more natural mood, he said: ‘I have deserved it! For why have I given up my own weapons, fierceness and force, rage and threatening moods, and had recourse to prayers, which do not at all become me? Force is my fit instrument’” (VI, 683-90). The tale is, at its core, about failing to persuade with rhetoric and reverting to violence.

31. *Library* 16.82.7

32. Among the rich offerings on sophistic rhetoric in recent decades, especially useful for this project were Nehamas on Plato’s delineation of sophistry and philosophy, Timmerman on Isocratean philosophy, and Coulter on the praise of Isocrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

introduces Phaedrus to the reader as a youth emerging from a sophistic enclave, erroneously captivated by superficial rhetorical skill—and this is only fitting, as it is a naïve, indoctrinated state the reader himself may occupy at the opening of the dialogue. Phaedrus has been won over by a non-lover, by unloving speech (i.e., speech that pays mere lip service to the beautification of the student's soul and claims it can develop a *dynamis* for effective speaking in any boy whose family can pay for the program of rhetorical gymnastics).<sup>33</sup>

The above emphasis above on "real-life" figures in classical Athens raises one final contextual concern: with *Phaedrus* (or, indeed, any of his dialogues) is Plato writing with more historical precision or poetic license? This is not a new question. Conjecture over the accuracy of characters, settings, and sayings portrayed in Plato's dialogues has been around for as long as the works themselves. McAdon points, for example, to Athenaeus's contention in *The Deipnosophists* that Socrates and Phaedrus could not *really* have been lovers, nor even associates.<sup>34</sup> And no mean amount of ink has been spilled on the trio of Socratic characterization inherited from Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes. While I by no means seek to ratify Plato's characters or arguments, one by one, via reference to historical details, obviously my paper is invested in the interplay between the very real phenomenon of aristocratic pederasty and the composition and interpretation of the *Phaedrus* (by the equally real Plato, his contemporaries, and

---

33. This paper's conception of such exercises is informed primarily by John Poulakos on sophistic practice in Greece, Takis Poulakos on Isocrates's particular defense of the training he offered, Hawhee on the rigorous physical aspects of rhetorical education, and Walker on the performance and development of classical rhetoric and poetics.

34. 505f cited in McAdon, 38.

generations of readers). I find myself, therefore, in a tight spot familiar to many scholars. Suffice it to say that in this paper I only hope to provide a taste of the complex cultural, political, and philosophical milieu in which *Phaedrus* stewed—a fuller hashing out of methodology must, as with so many other discussions, be saved for another day.

### **RIVAL SPEECHES: LYSIAS AND SOCRATES ON THE LOVER AND NON-LOVER**

Running into Socrates on the road, Phaedrus is pleased when the philosopher expresses an interest in discussing the speech Phaedrus has just received from Lysias—here is an opportunity for him to practice his rhetorical prowess! Too quickly, however, Socrates intuits the youth's desire:

I know very well that when listening to Lysias, he did not hear once only, but often urged him to repeat; and he gladly obeyed. Yet even that was not enough for Phaedrus, but at last he borrowed the book and read what he especially wished, and doing this he sat from early morning. Then, when he grew tired, he went for a walk, with the speech, as I believe ... he was going outside the wall to practice it. And meeting the man who is sick with the love of discourse [νοσοῦντι περὶ λόγων], he was glad when he saw him, because he would have someone to share his revel, and told him to lead on. But when the lover of discourse asked him to speak, he feigned coyness.<sup>35</sup>

Embarrassed but undeterred, Phaedrus submits, and the interlocutors begin a recitation and analysis of Lysias's speech. Claiming he is not obsessively in love with the beautiful boy, though many others are, Lysias argues that the *eromenos* ought to grant his favor to a moderate, self-restrained non-lover:

I claim that I ought not to be refused what I ask because I am not your lover. For lovers repent of the kindnesses they have done when their passion ceases; but there is no time when non-lovers naturally repent. For they do kindnesses to the

---

35. 228b-c



best of their ability, not under compulsion, but of their free will, according to their view of their own best interest.<sup>36</sup>

A man who is in love suffers from a sickness, a madness that makes him behave in shameful, deceitful, and jealous ways, while one who is not in the clutches of passion will see to the best interests of the *eromenos* (making the right introductions in society, etc.), not guard him jealously or become irrational and enraged, and build a firm foundation for a long and stable friendship, even after the sexual relationship has ended.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Lysias's speech pays quite a bit of attention to soothing anticipated fears on the part of his hearer. He imagines that "you are frightened by the thought that it is hard for friendship to last, and that under other circumstances any quarrel would be an equal misfortune to both, but that when you have surrendered what you prize most highly you would be the chief sufferer."<sup>38</sup> Acquiescing to the non-lover is just more sensible—cooler, in every way. It is the best way to maintain healthy boundaries and protect one's heart, as an *eromenos*.

After Phaedrus delivers Lysias's speech, he turns to Socrates and asks "tell me truly, do you think any other of the Greeks could speak better or more copiously than this on the same subject?"<sup>39</sup> Excellence and copiousness are roughly equivalent to Phaedrus, who doesn't believe one can have too much of a good thing (provided that thing is discourse). Socrates responds with characteristic irony, but hints that Lysias's speech is perhaps not quite the masterpiece Phaedrus had initially felt it to be. The younger

---

36. 231a

37. 231a-234b

38. 232b-c

39. 234e

interlocutor quickly asks Socrates to compose a superior example, though at first the old philosopher plays rather hard-to-get: “have you taken my jest in earnest, Phaedrus, because, to tease you, I laid hands on your beloved, do you really suppose I am going to try to surpass the rhetoric of Lysias and make a speech more ingenious than his?”<sup>40</sup> Plato depicts the *erastes-eromenos* relationship and the composition and performance of speeches, importantly here as a lark, as play. Plato’s insistence on rhetoric as experiment, exercise, or game will return in the “Myth of Theuth” near the dialogue’s close, and has significant implications for Plato’s conception of what language—especially the written word—really means and does.<sup>41</sup>

Preparing for his own speech, Socrates contends that Lysias’s was a jumble of repetitions without elegant arrangement<sup>42</sup> (this is especially deplorable since its medium of transmission is the written word). In the second speech of the *Phaedrus*,<sup>43</sup> Socrates lifts his thesis from the pages of Lysias: it is better for a beloved to yield to the non-lover than the lover. For this view is not entirely without merit, he surmises, asking, “who do you suppose, in arguing that the non-lover ought to be more favored than the lover, could omit praise of the non-lover’s calm sense and blame of the lover’s unreason, which are inevitable arguments...?”<sup>44</sup> Socrates is careful to note that, in terms of these “inevitable

---

40. 236b

41. Cf. the erotic verses in Theognis’s *Theognidea* (“Boy, sit with me, and do not be persuaded by other men”) and Maximus of Tyre’s description of Socrates’s and Sappho’s *technē erotikē* (Oration 18.9). See Walker on Theognis, Alcaeus and Sappho in *Rhetoric & Poetics in Antiquity* for more on the game of erotic alignments as a politics.

42. 234e-235a

43. In the splitting inherent to Platonic dialogues, it is the first speech of Socrates’s “own” devising and the second of Plato’s devising, if we assume that Lysias’s speech was not actually copied word-for-word into the *Phaedrus* (again, the question of accuracy rears its glorious head).

44. 235e-236a

arguments," it is merely arrangement that the rhetor might perfect and win praise for. Lysias's thesis, though Socrates deigns to take it up in his first speech, is in no way novel. A truly original argument, in both arrangement and invention, cannot be born of gymnastics or finely ornamented prose, alone. Its *choric*, *kairotic*, *daimonic* happening is yet to come. When Socrates balks, Phaedrus levels a threat: "we are not going away from here until you speak out what you said you had in your breast. We are alone in a solitary spot, and I am stronger and younger than you; so, under these circumstances, take my meaning, and speak voluntarily, rather than under compulsion."<sup>45</sup> A shrinking beloved he is not.

Socrates makes claims in his first speech which are not entirely unlike Lysias's, including that the lover will seek out his intellectual and moral inferior in order to have full control over the youth. Moreover, he will wish to keep his beloved isolated and without a home for as long as possible so he might enjoy the sexual relationship unfettered. With this speech, Socrates suggests the necessarily misleading effect(s) of relying on the lessons (written or otherwise) of rhetoric-teachers who only *seem* to have true knowledge on that which they expound, who only *seem* to have the best interests of their students in mind. In other words, he contends that sophists are guilty of seeking intellectually and morally inferior pupils and of isolating their readers/reciters/students in order to prolong the empty (if profitable) relationship. Just as Socrates finishes, however, he is visited by his *daimon*.<sup>46</sup> Ashamed, he exclaims that the two preceding speeches

---

45. 236c-d

46. NB: Phaedrus is insatiable and does not accept Socrates's conclusion, whining, "but I thought you were in the middle of it, and would say as much about the non-lover as you have said about the lover,

were terribly impious as they disgraced divine Eros.<sup>47</sup> With this turn, Plato opens his hero up to a possibility greater than merely beating Lysias through arrangement and adornment—the interlocutors' goal on this lazy afternoon becomes beating Lysias (and all such sophists) through the invention of divinely inspired arguments via a reciprocal erotic exchange. For Plato, then, ideal reading/writing practice appears as (pro)creation via “a generous love”<sup>48</sup>—giving birth to the beautiful in the presence of the beautiful.

In his final speech, Socrates forwards a third possibility between lover and non-lover. Namely, man need not be either slave to his animal lust or utterly dispassionate, rather, he might approach *erastes-eromenos* relations with a pure, ennobling love that benefits both parties and elevates both souls heavenward. His speech casts *eros* in metaphysical terms: love between two souls is a refining, purifying, perfecting, and co-constitutive activity that contributes to the philosophical life. In fact, as Dover notes, “the only type of soul which is said to 'return whence it came' in less than ten thousand years is that of 'him who has philosophised or has been a *paiderastes* with (= in conjunction with) philosophy' ... the eschatological status of philosophical *paiderastia* is still remarkable.”<sup>49</sup>

It is here that Plato offers the famed metaphor of a charioteer and his team of horses. While the gods drive their chariots in perfection, with absolute control over their absolutely obedient horses, Socrates relates, there is some variation in immortal human

---

to set forth all his good points and show that he ought to be favored. So now, Socrates, why do you stop?" (241d)

47. 242b-243a

48. 243c

49. 165

souls. Some are able to better control their team of horses, some less, and some hardly at all. The good news is that even when these immortal souls fail in their celestial jaunt, lose their wings, and fall to the earth, they get another chance. The kind of love Socrates advocates between lover and beloved—a generous, generative love—is apparently the only opportunity mortal souls have to progress. The soul is able to seize this opportunity when it recognizes beauty in the face and body of the beloved, recalls true beauty, and begins to sprout its wings anew:

Then when it gazes upon the beauty of the boy and receives the particles which flow thence to it ... it is moistened and warmed, ceases from its pain and is filled with joy; but when it is alone and grows dry, the mouths of the passages in which the feathers begin to grow become dry and close up, shutting in the sprouting feathers, and the sprouts within, shut in with the yearning, throb like pulsing arteries, and each sprout pricks the passage in which it is, so that the whole soul, stung in every part, rages with pain; and then again, remembering the beautiful one, it rejoices. So, because of these two mingled sensations, it is greatly troubled by its strange condition.<sup>50</sup>

Here, as in his *Symposium*, Plato advocates a progression from loving the particular beauty of a youth to loving the beautiful itself. The ideal pederastic coupling of *erastes* and *eromenos* is not consumed solely with base, corporeal sexual acts—though both lover and beloved feel a sensual ache and may begin their discourse with touching and kissing.<sup>51</sup> Rather, their energies are caught up in dialectic, which reanimates both partners and nourishes their souls.

It is important to note here that the depiction of the *erastes-eromenos* dynamic in the *Phaedrus* does not adhere in any facile way to prevailing cultural mores. Plato's ideal pederasty involves both parties giving and receiving of love and wisdom, playing

---

50. 251c-251e

51. 255c

dominant and submissive roles in various registers. Equally important is the fact that “Platonic love” is not really platonic at all—it is not assumed to be sexless (as the term denotes today), at least not at first. The reason Plato offers for limiting physical activity between the lover and beloved is to avoid exhausting the tension between them.<sup>52</sup> Such a paradoxically balanced, asymmetrical union will lead the respective partners to a life of happiness and harmony on earth, “self-controlled and orderly, holding in subjection that which causes evil in the soul and giving freedom to that which makes for virtue; and when this life is ended they are light and winged, for they have conquered in one of the three truly Olympic contests.”<sup>53</sup> Ideal Platonic pederasty, then, is both a preliminary exercise in reading/writing practices as well as a metaphor for the rhetoric’s greater purpose. It is the highest, most productive form of play.

#### **THE MYTH OF THEUTH: FORGETTING AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF THE WRITTEN WORD**

Following on the heels of the riotous lyricality of the third speech, the so-called Myth of Theuth might feel like something of an epilogue. Indeed, it is most frequently read as an explicit warning against an overreliance on writing, a kind of terminal punctuation on the preceding recapitulation of Socrates's points. The story begins that there was once an ingenious god at Naucratis named Theuth who invented a great many

---

52. See especially 256b-d. Note Vernon Provencal’s contention that “Plato’s abstraction of the pedagogical aspect of pederastic influence on the myth [of Ganymede, as told in *Phaedrus*] from its sexual aspect does not actually contradict the earlier history of pederastic influence, nor the Greek institution of pederasty as a pedagogical institution. It does, however, tend toward the sublimation of the sexual in the spiritual in a way that is especially characteristic of the Platonic philosophy of the sensible realm as an image of the intelligible” (97).

53. 256b

things ("numbers and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy, also draughts and dice"<sup>54</sup>), among these was the technology of the written word. One day he brought his inventions to King Thamus of Thebes so that they might be judged and distributed among all Egyptians. Thamus regarded them each in turn and when it came to letters, Theuth explained:

"This invention, O king ... will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered." But Thamus replied, "Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them."<sup>55</sup>

For centuries, scholars, teachers, and students have struggled to reconcile Plato's apparent dismissal of the written word here and in his "Seventh Letter" with the most obvious characteristic of his corpus: it is most certainly written. Interpretations of the *Phaedrus* as a delineation of Plato's true rhetoric cannot do much to assimilate the mythological blip represented by this episode, however.<sup>56</sup> As with the apparently contradictory moment in his "Seventh Letter," the Myth of Theuth is too easily met with a quizzical shrug: Plato railed against writing in his writings, so what's a reader to do? One possible remedy for this ambivalence lies in the first pronouncement made by

---

54. 274d

55. 274e-275a

56. Broadly, this view advocates a philosophical or dialectical rhetoric emerging from *Phaedrus*. See Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's formulation of Plato's "true rhetoric" (56), C. Jan Swearingen on Plato's "philosophical and ethical rhetoric that is dialogical and dialectical" (526), and Kathleen Welch's "dialogical rhetorical practice" of Plato (527).

Thamus—a man (or god, apparently) may beget new technologies, but lacks the ability to judge their usefulness or harmfulness to future generations, that reckoning comes down to users' own interpretations.

Lysias's speech, with which Phaedrus was so enamored at the beginning of the dialogue, led both Socrates and his comely student down the path of incorrect, even impious, reasoning and speaking. But as we shall see in the section dealing with Plato's address to Isocrates, he does not lay the blame at the feet of the reader/student/user. Nor is it, as is often supposed, the inherent fault of the written word. The blame properly belongs to the author of the text. Writing is nefarious and fraudulent only to the extent that it is practiced as a closed, simple transmission of the author's thoughts, feelings, and/or arguments. This, according to Plato, is not only impossible with regards to the written word, it is actually profane. The connections drawn between erotic reciprocity and the analysis and composition of speeches in the *Phaedrus* demonstrate that, for Plato, viewing the written word as a means-to-an-end or a stable treatise is as wrong-headed as approaching a pederastic relationship in either of the ways delineated in the dialogue's first two speeches.

For better or worse, the question of Plato's rhetorical theory is still very much an open one, and is inextricably linked to this question of the written word. If, for example, writing were less permanent and transmittable, modern scholars, teachers, and students of Plato may be less aware of seeming contradictions or omissions in his corpus—this very anxiety is made plain in both *Phaedrus* and the "Seventh Letter." In negotiating this *aporia*, some scholars have read Plato as redefining rhetoric and speech-writing in the



mold of “discourse that is more analytic, objective, and dialectical,”<sup>57</sup> claiming, as I have mentioned above, that Plato forwards a positive view of rhetoric in his *Phaedrus* to complement the resolutely negative coverage in *Gorgias*. Others argue that attempting to fold Plato's rhetoric and dialectic in on one another is an oversimplification. McAdon notes that, “by equating Plato's dialectic with his *true conception of rhetoric*, advocates of the view that attribute to Plato a positive, dialectical, or philosophic view of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, conflate Plato's conception of what a philosopher is and does with what the rhetor is and does.”<sup>58</sup> Such appraisals result in the reading of *Phaedrus* as a continuation of Plato's denunciation of rhetoric and speech-writing.

Clearly it is not the case that Plato wishes to simply equate dialectic with rhetoric and wash his hands of the whole matter, as his discussion of the processes of division and bringing together specifically states that dialectic is but an “aid to speech and thought.”<sup>59</sup> So then, is dialectic a remedy for memory-shrinking writing, as presented in the Myth of Theuth? This too appears to be less than straightforward, for the process of dividing and combining enables the properly educated rhetor<sup>60</sup> to invent arguments and, presumably, write some of those arguments down in the form of dialogues or epistles (say, for

---

57. Bizzell and Herzberg, 81.

58. 22, emphasis original.

59. 266b

60. 266c, on proper education and dialectic: “whether the name I give to those who can do this [dialectic] is right or wrong, God knows, but I have called them hitherto dialecticians. But tell me now what name to give to those who are taught by you and Lysias, or it this that art of speech by means of which Thrasymachus and the rest have become able speakers themselves, and make others so, if they are willing to pay them royal tribute?”

example, the text you are just now reading).<sup>61</sup> Here I wish to use this passage as just that, speculating that the Myth is not a moment of closure (punctual, neat), but another aperture or dilation. For our purposes, it opens here onto a broader discussion of how the anxieties over pederastic practices, Athenian *paideia*, and the technology of the written word function in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

---

61. The fact that Plato's works can be divided into dialogues and epistles further suggests that his pedagogy was deeply invested in intimate, eternally unfolding relations between writer and reader, instructor and instructed.

## Learning *Phaedrus*

*Socrates: I advise Lysias also to write as soon as he can, that other things being equal, the lover should be favored rather than the non-lover.*

*Phaedrus: Lysias must of course be compelled by me to write another discourse on the same subject.*<sup>62</sup>

### ANALOGOUS ANXIETIES: PEDERASTY, PEDAGOGY, AND THE WRITTEN WORD

The *erastes-eromenos* relation in Plato's *Phaedrus* entwines three contemporary cultural anxieties: first, the shifting social mores and political trends of contemporary Athens; second, the increased menace of rhetorical training lacking true pedagogical (pro)creation; and third, the promulgation of the written word, especially in the fussy speeches of sophists who drafted and published their compositions.<sup>63</sup> As the reader progresses through each of the *Phaedrus*'s three speeches (Lysias's written argument in favor of the non-lover, Socrates's spontaneously composed argument in favor of the non-lover, and finally his *daimon*-inspired reversal and argument in favor of the lover), as well as the Myth of Theuth, he is forced to apprehend and wrestle with each of these anxieties.

This reading of Plato takes sincerely his bold declaration in the "Seventh Letter": "There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise [*suggramma*<sup>64</sup>] of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but,

---

62. 243d-e

63. Drafted in solitude as well as in classroom and workshop-type environments, anywhere intimate or with restricted access (as opposed to public judicial, legislative, and commercial spaces). Plato appears to direct this last charge most pointedly at Isocrates, even while he potentially praises the sophist at the end of *Phaedrus*. Compare the workshopping activity Isocrates describes in *Panathenaicus* or the contention of Alcidamas in "Against the Sophists, Or On those Who Write Written Speeches: "those who devote their lives to writing are woefully deficient in rhetoric and philosophy."

64. Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *σύγγραμμα*: "writing," "written paper" of course, but also, more to the point, "a systematic work" (esp. prose work, in opp. ποιήματα).

as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion."<sup>65</sup> Responding in the prickly tone of an open letter, Plato does not assert that he has never written any arguments or theories, rather he says that a systematic text (of his own fabricating) does not and will never exist. His statement does not disclose that the reading, interpreting, and teaching his work is and always will be sheer folly, but rather that reading and writing—especially works about reading and writing—cannot ever be viewed as stable or finite or separable practices. Any author who believes such claptrap is not only fooling himself but also doing violence to the ideas he wishes to express and to the souls of his future readers.

The ideal reader, therefore, must move beyond viewing the (Platonic) text as a treatise, as epistemologically static and perfectly rational; beyond the impulse to dominate and diminish the text, reducing it methodically to an object, as a jealous lover might. They must instead strive toward a kind of divine *mania*, through which wisdom, proper self-control, and self-possession (*sophrosune*) will ultimately be gained. In other words, they must learn to experience the text as an ideal lover (*erastes*) experiences his beloved (*eromenos*). And vice versa. Plato's *Phaedrus* both describes and performs this reading/writing practice.<sup>66</sup> It is modeled most immediately—or perhaps, to further confuse matters, most mediately—in the rapt attention the interlocutors pay one another and the practice of close reading, textual analysis, and loving composition depicted

---

65. 341b-d

66. NB: I use the virgule in "reading/writing" throughout this paper in what I hope is a fashion consistent with Plato's pederastic ethic. Reading and writing are seen to be inextricable practices in the *Phaedrus*—intertwined, mutually constitutive, and double-edged. Reading and writing cut both ways in Plato's teaching.

within the dramatic narrative.<sup>67</sup> Further, Plato's ideal reading/writing practice is suggested by the style and arrangement of the dialogue's speeches, in which Plato may be seen responding to contemporary sophistic practices (especially his rival Isocrates's philosophy, as adduced in *Against the Sophists*). The speeches of blame or praise to the *erastes* in the *Phaedrus* represent not only the Platonic revision of Athenian pederasty in terms of reciprocity, self-knowledge, and true love, but also the Platonic intervention on sophistic reading, writing, and teaching methods (which, in his view, lacked the very supplements he added to pederastic relations). Finally, most mediately—or, again, perhaps immediately—the relation developed between the reader and *Phaedrus* performs the ideal Platonic relationship between author, written word, and reader. In *Phaedrus*, reading/writing is never simply *down to* the author but rather *up to* (all of) us.

#### PLATO'S INVITATION TO ISOCRATES

Closer attention to Plato's pederastic language not only bolsters the arguments of those who read *Phaedrus* as a response to Isocrates's *Against the Sophists*, it further clarifies the key differences Plato asserted between his teaching and that of his rivals. After all, in terms of the ethical cultivation of their pupils (by which, of course, I also mean to include their readership), Plato and Isocrates, in particular, appear to have much

---

67. Including, interestingly, an instance of etymological play with the term *mania* itself: "And it is worth while to adduce also the fact that those men of old who invented names thought that madness was neither shameful nor disgraceful; otherwise they would not have connected the very word mania with the noblest of arts, that which foretells the future, by calling it the manic art. No, they gave this name thinking that mania, when it comes by gift of the gods, is a noble thing, but nowadays people call prophecy the mantic art, tastelessly inserting a T in the word. So also, when they gave a name to the investigation of the future which rational persons conduct through observation of birds and by other signs, since they furnish mind (*nous*) and information (*historia*) to human thought (*oïesis*) from the intellect (*dianoia*) they called it the oionistic (*oionoistike*) art, which modern folk now call oionistic making it more high-sounding by introducing the long O." (244b-d)

in common. Both ascribed to a similar pedagogical triad of observing a student's inborn nature, coupling that talent with guided practice, and relying on an instructor who possessed true knowledge of the art.<sup>68</sup> But Plato's teaching and writing practices departed from Isocrates's in important ways—ways made more evident when one attends to the pederastic dynamic modeled between Socrates and Phaedrus.

One might take Phaedrus's text-loving nature as the sole driving force behind his impulse to copy, carry away, and practice Lysias's speech, for when Socrates first comes upon him, Phaedrus is involved in exactly the activity of "admiring and emulating" that Isocrates imagines his ideal student to perform.<sup>69</sup> This would lay the blame for false, superficial rhetorical practice and the misapprehension of lessons mostly at the feet of the impressionable young student, be he good or bad. But this is not a cut-and-dried matter. In depicting Phaedrus, Plato demonstrates what, for him, is a key failing of contemporary rhetorical training (*epimeleias*): an emphasis on *mimesis* and its oversimplified understanding of the parallels between bodily emulation and the beautification of the soul. Plato portrays the sophistic obsession with social relations/alliances and *mimesis* and places the blame back at the feet of instructors, including rhetorical treatises masquerading as such.

Discussing this aspect of ancient education, Debra Hawhee cites Democritus's famous quip that "one must either be good or imitate a good man."<sup>70</sup> This was the

---

68. Cf. *Against the Sophists* 14-15 and *Phaedrus* 269c-e.

69. *Aeropagiticus*, 48, quot. and trans. by Hawhee, 153.

70. Frag. quot. in Hawhee, 152. That Plato had infamous animus for the philosophy of Democritus is no accident. It's said that he wished all the works by Democritus might be burned, but thought it futile since they were already in such wide circulation; the virality of the written word foiled Plato's fantasy.

fundamental supposition behind Athenian pederastic inculcation. Hawhee's unpacking of the concept of association (*suniein*, *sunousia*) is useful: "literally 'being together,' 'habitual or constant association,' even 'sexual intercourse' (Liddell and Scott 1723). *Sunousia* produces relations, alliances, which in turn occasion *mimesis*."<sup>71</sup> Isocrates was interested in the ethical promulgation of such associations. On this much he and Plato appear to have agreed. The athletic repetition of Isocrates's rhetorical training as laid out in *Antidosis*, his discussion of how a teacher should offer his own practice as a model for students in *Against the Sophists*, and the kind of workshop activity he describes in *Panathenaicus* all demonstrate an investment in persuading his contemporaries (including potential students) that his teachings went beyond the merely mimetic or mechanical. Plato's *Phaedrus* goes one step further—ethical rhetorical education is only achieved through erotic reciprocity (i.e., "generous love"<sup>72</sup>). By renewing attention to the work's extended pederastic metaphor, the pedagogical care at the center of the *Phaedrus* emerges more clearly, and Plato and Isocrates may be properly viewed once more as rivals for student bodies both ancient and modern.

---

71. 153. It is, of course, this latter reading as "sexual intercourse" that I wish to extend in my paper, building on the athletic bodies of Hawhee.

72. 243c

## Reading *Phaedrus*

*Socrates: Where is the youth to whom I was speaking? He must hear this also, lest if he do not hear it, he accept a non-lover before we can stop him.*  
*Phaedrus: Here he is, always close at hand whenever you want him.*<sup>73</sup>

### WITH(IN) DIGITAL HUMANITIES

My paper has sought to trace the pederastic relationship developed between the interlocutors of Plato's *Phaedrus*, positing that Plato's discussion of reading and the technology of the written word is couched in a text on the virtues and vices of pederastic relations because contemporary debates over these seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena were marked by similar social anxieties and rhetorical appeals. In foregrounding the discussion of Athenian pederasty, Plato was able to reimagine and reinvigorate contemporary debates, ultimately suggesting that the revisions he made to relations between *erastes* and *eromenos* in the *Phaedrus* might be extended over sophistic teaching and writing practices in 4<sup>th</sup>-century Athens. Those practices (even of Isocrates, the most promising of Plato's philosophical-rhetoric rivals<sup>74</sup>) were hounded by analogous anxieties. Moreover, in Plato's view, they simultaneously overestimated their pedagogical abilities while underestimating their long-term effects on students.

---

73. 243e

74. See, of course, the famous reference from 278e- 279b: "Isocrates is young yet, Phaedrus; however, I am willing to say what I prophesy for him ... I think he has a nature above the speeches of Lysias and possesses a nobler character; so that I should not be surprised if, as he grows older, he should so excel in his present studies that all who have ever treated of rhetoric shall seem less than children; and I suspect that these studies will not satisfy him, but a more divine impulse will lead him to greater things; for my friend, something of philosophy is inborn in his mind. This is the message that I carry from these deities to my favorite Isocrates, and do you carry the other to Lysias, your favorite."



My sole aim up to this point has been an attending—a consideration of pederastic practice as revised by Plato, an overview of what (we) readers might make of pederasty in the *Phaedrus*. I pivot now to the *Phaedrus*'s continued promise for rhetoric and composition studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to what Plato's pederastic *Phaedrus* makes of us (readers). What light might the dialogue shed on modern debates within areas of rhetoric, communication, composition, and pedagogy? How does it speak to our own technological moment (one in which both teachers and students often feel torn between approaches gleaned from centuries of "old media" and nascent methods of reading, writing, and teaching that are only just emerging from the mercurial realm of "new media")? How can it contribute to the disciplining—as of an unruly horse—of the rapidly growing field nebulously termed "digital humanities"?

Debates over the purported defilement of careful reading and writing practices, understood as "traditional" close or slow reading and writing, at the capricious hands of digital methods echo the debates over pederastic practices, rhetorical education, and the technology of the written word addressed in the *Phaedrus*. This affinity was divined by Ong in his influential *Orality and Literacy*, originally published in 1982. Writing specifically of Plato's critique of the written word, Ong argues that one weakness in Plato's ostensible position was that, in order to make his criticism effective, he had necessarily to put it into writing.<sup>75</sup> The same weakness crops up in every media revolution, Ong continues, from the printed word to the computer: "Writing and print and the computer are all ways of technologizing the word. Once the word is technologized,

---

75. 79

there is no effective way to criticize what technology has done with it without the aid of the highest technology available."<sup>76</sup>

This is precisely why "criticism" and "critique" may not be the best terms to use when discussing Plato's *Phaedrus*, "Seventh Letter," or other writings (specifically *writings*). As Ong himself claimed, "the new technology is not merely used to convey the critique: in fact, it brought the critique into existence. Plato's philosophically analytic thought, as has been seen (Havelock 1963), including his critique of writing, was possible only because of the effects that writing was beginning to have on mental processes."<sup>77</sup> As Casey Boyle has noted, Lanham further refined Ong's position: "rhetoric as we know it was born in the midst of a radical change in technology—the invention of writing."<sup>78</sup> I would follow Boyle in saying that it is perhaps a misnomer on Lanham's part "to consider writing as having been invented just once because it still continues to be invented. Rhetoric too."<sup>79</sup> Clearly greater attention to how we teach and practice reading skills—contrasting pre-digital with post-digital-era methods, or looking at how close(d) reading stacks up against hyper reading—is essential to any conversation about what DH is, how it is maturing, and who (or what) is authorized to practice it.

In the past decade, there has been a steady push in academe to define, widen, narrow, or slam shut the bounds of DH. In his *Understanding Digital Humanities*, David M. Berry emphasizes the need for greater study of computational methods and ways of

---

76. 79

77. 79

78. 84-5, quot. in Boyle, 22.

79. 22

reading and writing in the digital age—what he calls “iteracy.”<sup>80</sup> Berry’s research often revolves around computation aesthetics and design, an area which Anne Burdick et al. likewise highlight in *Digital\_Humanities*, heralding the new possibilities afforded by digital technologies in the creation and (re)presentation of knowledge.<sup>81</sup> They coin the term “generative humanities” to capture the notion that 21<sup>st</sup>-century students will need to be able to craft “synthetic responses, rich with meaning and purpose, and capable of communicating in a range of appropriate media, including but not limited to print.”<sup>82</sup> For her part, postmodern literary critic and science and technology theorist N. Katherine Hayles envisions a discipline entitled “Comparative Media Studies”—within a “Post-English Department”—tasked with studying the interrelationship between visual, print, and digital media. This was a project of great import to Plato; his critiques of mimetic art and rhetoric are complex and frequently appear contradictory. Whatever their internal ambiguities, however, these views are laid bare nowhere more so than in *Phaedrus*, where the discussion of poetry and rhetoric (indeed, the performance of stunning poetry and rhetoric) is tied to reading and writing practices. Most crucially, all of these issues are brought under one heading in Plato's dialogue: the benefits of a true love between *erastes* and *eromenos*.

---

80. NB: “Computation” and “computational studies” (including “classics computation”) were earlier terms for fields using digital methods to collect and analyze vast archives and databanks.

81. 10

82. Ibid., 25

## Conclusion

Plato's opinion on the paintings of Zeuxis or the poetry of Homer (perhaps most famously evinced in *The Republic*, but equally at play in *Phaedrus*) is by no means a dead issue. The journalist Nicolas Carr, for example, cites Plato's critique of poetry in his recent book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. In arguing that the ubiquitous use of computers and mobile phones is fundamentally changing the way our brains process information, Carr proposes a reading of Plato that largely adheres to the work of Havelock and Ong. "Unlike the orator Socrates, Plato was a writer," he claims, "and while we can assume that he shared Socrates' worry that reading might substitute for remembering ... it's also clear that he recognized the advantages that the written word had over the spoken one."<sup>83</sup> The question of the Socratic mouthpiece, as referenced in my introduction, is apparently intimately caught up in this argument—but why? Is this a simple matter of ethos, of tracing the philosophical lineage of one's argument back to the root of Socrates's very tongue? Put another way, why are we still trying to score (points) with Plato?

Plato, Carr, and Hayles share a common interest in reading/writing practices and their effects on our ability to digest and retain knowledge, though Hayles appears somewhat more hopeful (or perhaps just somewhat less damning): "although Carr's book is replete with many different kinds of studies, we should be cautious about taking his conclusion at face value."<sup>84</sup> I would follow both Carr and Hayles in their tethering of

---

83. 55

84. 67

brain function and memory to modes of reading, but find Hayles's discussion of potential reading and compositional practices (including close reading, distant reading, machine reading, hyper reading, and rapid shuttling), new pedagogical protocols, and the interactions between narrative and database in contemporary print and electronic novels (i.e. "born-digital") to be more productive.<sup>85</sup> And this is precisely what is at stake in the *Phaedrus*: productive, or, more specifically, *reproductive* reading, writing, and teaching practices.

When Hayles outlines key tensions in the obstreperous field of DH in the opening chapters of *How We Think*, she raises the concept of a fertile mediation between traditional print-based humanities and digital humanities that is entirely in line with the idealized view of pederasty in Plato.<sup>86</sup> We are (again, still, already) living in a stripling age. Those reading and writing in DH might wisely ask *Phaedrus* to speak again,<sup>87</sup> viewing the dialogue as an interlocutor in the continued discourse on oral, print, and digital media. In all its pederastic melliflence, Plato's *Phaedrus* is no static treatise, but a propaedeutic text; no mean censure, but an invitation to reciprocal care and self-knowledge left "for others who follow the same path," all in good fun.<sup>88</sup>

---

85. In charting a middle ground, Hayles is particularly responding to Lev Manovich, who figures narrative and database as natural enemies (228).

86. This kind of work is sorely needed, as there generally seem to be three scholarly reactions to the rise of digital methods: naive abeyance, violent offense, or feigned engagement (where scholars from disparate fields continue talking past one another, erroneously supposing real dialogue is occurring). Successful collaboration and communication has been the exception, not the rule, however this circumstance is improving.

87. λέγοις ἄν (227c).

88. 276d

## Bibliography

- Alcidamas. *Alcidamas: The Works and Fragments*. Translated by J. V. Muir. London: Bristol Classical, 2001.
- Aristophanes. *Knights*. Translated by Jeffrey Henderson. Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by H. Rackham. Harvard University Press, 1932.
- Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.
- Boyle, Casey. "The Rhetorical Question Concerning Glitch." *Computers and Composition* 35 (March 2015): 12–29.
- Cantarella, Eva and Andrew Lear. *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods*. Routledge, 2008.
- Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.
- Chroust, Anton-Herman. "Plato's Detractors in Antiquity." *The Review of Metaphysics* 16, no. 1 (1962): 98–118.
- Coulter, James A. "Phaedrus 219A: The Praise of Isocrates." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 8 (1967): 225-36.
- Davidson, James. *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007
- Derrida, Jacques. "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject." *Points....: Interviews*,

- 1974-1994. Stanford University Press, 1995.
- . *Khôra*. Paris: Galilée, 1993.
- Derrida, Jacques, Peter Eisenman, Jeffrey Kipnis, and Thomas Leiser. *Chora L Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*. Monacelli Press, 1997.
- Diodorus Siculus. *The Library of History*. Translated by C. H. Oldfather. Harvard University Press, 1933.
- Dover, Kenneth J. *Greek Homosexuality*. Harvard University Press, 1989.
- El-Bizri, Nader. "ON KAI KHORA: Situating Heidegger between the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus*." *Studia Phaenomenologica*, Vol. IV, Issue 1-2 (2004): 73–98.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*. Vintage Books, 1990.
- González, José M. *Diachrony: Diachronic Studies of Ancient Greek Literature and Culture*. De Gruyter, 2015.
- Halperin, David. *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Hawhee, Debra. *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Hubbard, Thomas K., ed. *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*. 1st edition. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- Isocrates. *Aeropagiticus. Isocrates* Vol. 2. Translated by George Norlin. Harvard University Press, 1991. 100-59.

- , "Against the Sophists." *Isocrates I*. Translated by David C. Mirhady and Yun Lee Too. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000. 201-64.
- , *Antidosis. Isocrates Vol. 2*. Translated by George Norlin. Harvard University Press, 1991. 181-367.
- Keuls, Eva. *The Reign of the Phallos: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
- Lanham, Richard. *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Lear, Andrew. "Was pederasty problematized? A diachronic view." *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*. Edited by Mark Masterson, Nancy Rabinowitz, and James Robson. Routledge, 2014.
- Liddell, H. G., and R. Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
- Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001.
- McAdon, Brad. "Plato's Denunciation of Rhetoric in the 'Phaedrus.'" *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2004): 21-39.
- Nehamas, Alexander. "Eristic, Analogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato's Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7.1 (Jan. 1990): 3-16.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London; New York: Routledge, 2002.



- Ormond, Kirk. "Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and the Discipline of Classics" in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*. Edited by Thomas K. Hubbard. 1st edition. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Translated by Frank Justus Miller. Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Percy, William Armstrong III. *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
- Perseus Digital Library*. Edited by Gregory R. Crane. Tufts University.  
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>
- Plato. *Charmides*. Translated by W. R. M. Lamb. Harvard University Press, 1927.
- *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, and Phaedrus*. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Harvard University Press, 1990.
- *Laches, Protagoras, Meno, and Euthydemus*. Translated by W. R. M. Lamb. Harvard University Press, 1990.
- *Lysis, Symposium, and Gorgias*. Translated by W. R. M. Lamb. Harvard University Press, 1991.
- "Seventh Letter." *Epistles*. Translated by R. G. Bury. Harvard University Press, 1929.
- Poulakos, John. *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece*. University of South Carolina Press, 1995.
- Poulakos, Takis. *Speaking for the Polis: Isocrates's Rhetorical Education*. University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

- Provencal, Vernon. *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Sallis, John. *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Swearingen, C. Jan. "Plato." *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*. Edited by Theresa Enos. New York: Garland, 1996. 523-28.
- Timmerman, David M. "Isocrates's Competing Conceptualization of Philosophy." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 31.2 (1998): 145-59.
- Walker, Jeffery. *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Welch, Kathleen. *The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric: Appropriations of Ancient Discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1990.
- Xenophon. *Memorabilia, Oeconomicus, Symposium, Apologia*. Translated by E.C. Marchant and O.J. Todd. Harvard University Press, 1923.