

The Reception of Plato's *Phaedrus* from Antiquity to the Renaissance

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The Reception of Plato's *Phaedrus* from Antiquity to the Renaissance

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Introduction

Plato's *Phaedrus* is an extremely rich dialogue. It covers themes as diverse as the value of myth and allegory, religion and theology, love and beauty, the essence and condition of the soul, teaching and learning, metaphysics and epistemology, rhetoric and dialectic, as well as the role and the limits of writing. It is also a literary masterpiece, and although up to now commentators still debate about the unifying theme of the dialogue, it is hardly doubted that it at least aims to live up to the famous canon it itself introduces for any valuable discourse, namely to display organic unity (*Phaedrus* 264b–c).

It thus comes as no surprise that this dialogue has had a tremendous influence on Western culture since Antiquity. Especially its famous myth of the charioteer and its account of love have had an extraordinary afterlife in the West; yet the dialogue's views on the nature of the soul, on beauty, on rhetoric and on writing have also provoked numerous reactions and reflections. The commentary on the *Phaedrus* attributed to the fifth-century Platonist Hermias of Alexandria, the only extant commentary from Antiquity,¹ bears the traces of a long exegetical tradition, which began with the Middle Platonist Atticus (2nd century CE), if not earlier.² Before Atticus, Philo of Alexandria (1st century BCE–1st century CE) treated the *Phaedrus* as one of the keys to understanding Plato's philosophy.³ The *Phaedrus*' influence, however, was hardly limited to those whom we would now call Platonists. The dialogue's ambition to lay the foundations for a philosophical rhetoric was further developed by Aristotle and later picked up by a number of Latin authors. Literary writers alluded to the *Phaedrus*' dramatic setting and treated it as a model for the *locus amoenus*. The psychological ideas of the dialogue were known and discussed not only among Platonists, but also by the Church Fathers and by physicians like Galen, who even drew inspiration from Socrates' teachings on the arts in general, and on medicine in particular. Its views on beauty were elaborated by Plotinus and had a profound impact on Renaissance artists and art theorists. Its religious content was reanimated and adapted in the Renaissance, a time when the criticism of writing developed in the dialogue also met with renewed interest thanks to the emergence of mechanical printing.

The influence of the *Phaedrus* from Antiquity to the Renaissance thus offers an excellent perspective from which one can assess the diverse and profound influence of Plato on the history of ideas. Until now, however, no attempt has

¹ See the new critical edition by Lucarini & Moreschini 2012.

² See Proclus, *In Timaeum* III 247.12–15 Diehl = Atticus fr. 14 des Places.

³ See Runia 1986, 374.

been made to study the tradition of the *Phaedrus* from Antiquity up to the Early Modern period in a comprehensive way. Studies on this subject are usually limited to specific authors or texts that have played a prominent role in this story (such as Plotinus, Hermias, or Ficino), to particular areas of study (i.e. the histories of philosophy, literature, religious studies or medicine), or to a specific period (i.e. classical Antiquity, late Antiquity, the Byzantine period, or Early Modern times).⁴ As a follow-up to a previous conference on the reception of Plato's *Phaedo*,⁵ we therefore decided to explore the rich and multifarious reception of the *Phaedrus* from Antiquity to the Renaissance at a conference organized jointly by KU Leuven, the Université de Liège (ULiège) and the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) at the Royal Academy of Belgium.⁶ The present volume gathers most of the contributions presented at this occasion, often substantially revised.⁷ We do not claim that it exhausts the history of the reception this major text, but we do hope that it will place it in a broader perspective than is usually done.

Our volume opens with the *Phaedrus*' first known reader and critic, Aristotle. It is mainly in the field of rhetoric that the *Phaedrus* left its mark on Aristotle's work. Nicolas Zaks shows that, contrary to a widely held view, Aristotle's reception of the dialogue is far from being merely critical, as is apparent in all three books of the *Rhetoric*. In *Rhetoric* III, Aristotle not only explicitly refers to the *Phaedrus*, but also draws on key points of Plato's dialogue, such as the comparison between a speech and a living being and the criticism of divisions of speech made in the rhetorical tradition. As a matter of fact, the very existence of *Rhetoric* III seems to be justified in terms of Socrates' distinction between invention and arrangement at *Phaedrus* 235e–236a. As for Book II, Nicolas Zaks argues, controversially, that the study of passions and characters in chapters 2 to 17 accomplishes

⁴ It was only after completing our manuscript that the volume *Studies in Hermias' Commentary on Plato's Phaedrus*, ed. by J.F. Finamore, C.-P. Maneola and S. Klitenic Wear, Leiden: Brill, 2019, was published. This volume testifies to the renewed interest in Hermias' commentary, but could unfortunately not be taken into account in the present publication.

⁵ Published as Delcomminette, d'Hoine & Gavray 2015.

⁶ The conference received funding from the Belgian Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS), the Institute of Philosophy at KU Leuven, the Faculté de Philosophie et sciences sociales of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), and the Faculté de Philosophie et lettres of the Université de Liège (ULiège). The conference also received financial and logistic support from the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium (KVAB), and was organised as a 'Contact forum' of the Academy.

⁷ Two other papers were delivered at the conference: "Plato's *Phaedrus* and the Idea of Literary Scholarship", by Richard Hunter (University of Cambridge), and "The *Phaedrus* in Philostratus and the Second Sophistic", by Danny Praet (Universiteit Gent).

Socrates' program for a scientific rhetoric exposed at *Phaedrus* 271a–b. Finally, Book I notably studies the relationships between dialectic and rhetoric in a way that might be less critical than is usually thought, since, in the end, Aristotle endorses rather than criticises Plato's view according to which being a competent dialectician entails being a competent rhetorician.

There are clues that the *Phaedrus* was read by the Hellenistic philosophers, but they are scarce and rather marginal.⁸ Matters change from the 2nd century ACE onwards, when the *Phaedrus* became a widely cited work even outside institutionalized Platonism, as Teun Tieleman shows with Galen of Pergamum. Galen's project consisted in the foundation of a medical philosophy and his admiration for Plato is well-known. Against this backdrop, it should come as no surprise that the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato lays an explicit claim on Hippocrates (270c–d), became a central text for Galen's self-understanding as both a physician and a philosopher. This is illustrated by Teun Tieleman with reference to passages in various Galenic treatises. In the ninth book of his *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*, Galen draws extensively on *Phaedrus* 261a–274b, which he takes to be dealing not only with rhetoric but with the correct method of any art. In addition, Galen considers this section particularly relevant from an epistemological point of view, because of the attention Plato pays here to such key-concepts as truth and verisimilitude, unclarity and disagreement. The moral and religious dimension of the art of medicine emerges from a passage in Book III of Galen's *Exhortation to Medicine*, which, as Teun Tieleman argues, alludes to the *Phaedrus* myth, i.e. the procession of the gods and human souls (247d–248a). It thus seems that Galen's self-understanding as a philosophically educated medical scientist and practitioner was in many ways informed by his engagement with the *Phaedrus*.

Turning to the tradition of Platonism in a more narrow sense, Alexandra Michalewski analyses some key aspects in the debates between Platonists and Aristotelians of the imperial era. The focus of her paper, in which Atticus and Plotinus are the main protagonists, concerns the reception of the definition of the self-moving soul, presented at the beginning of the palinode of the *Phaedrus* (243e–257b). In the long fragment 7 (des Places) preserved by Eusebius, Atticus systematically uses the *Phaedrus* definition of the self-moving soul in a polemical way to highlight the consequences of the Peripatetic doctrine of the soul. Plotinus, who is equally critical for the conception of the soul as an entelechy, does not limit himself to a simple opposition of Plato to Aristotle: he also shows how the soul, being an impassible substance, is at the same time a self-moving principle, a source of the bodily motions.

⁸ See however the interesting study of Brouwer 2008.

Suzanne Stern-Gillet tackles Plotinus' reception of the *Phaedrus* from an entirely different angle. She argues that, contrary to a widespread claim in the scholarly literature, Plotinus does not depart from Plato in (mostly) dispensing with the concept of ἀνάμνησις (recollection). After a brief outline of the role that recollection plays in the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue to which Plotinus returns time and again, she offers a critical reading of the most salient passages in the *Enneads* where Plotinus makes use of the notion. She then shows that the function of ἀνάμνησις, in Plotinus' understanding of the term, enables the embodied human soul to become aware of the presence in itself of riches she had previously been unaware of possessing, namely *logoi* of a reality higher than itself. In building a normative element into the concept of ἀνάμνησις, Plotinus made it a key factor in the inward process through which human souls can reverse the self-forgetfulness that had led them to become alienated from their ontological source in Intellect. In the end, despite having profoundly modified Plato's concept of ἀνάμνησις, Plotinus remained at one with him in presenting the apprehension of beauty as the stimulus most likely to lead the human soul back to her true self in Intellect.

The reading of the first Platonist interpreters had a huge impact on the appropriation of the *Phaedrus* by contemporary Christian thinkers, which is the focus of the next three papers. Claudio Moreschini provides a survey of the reception of various aspects of the dialogue in the School of Alexandria, whose main representatives were Clement and Origen and which was contemporaneous with some of the so-called Middle-Platonists. In this context, the *Phaedrus* was studied, above all, for certain doctrines that appeared important to both the Middle-Platonists and the Christians: the immortality of the soul and its fall to earth after its creation by God; the nature of God Himself; His transcendence and His existence in the world beyond the heavens. The same problems were also of interest to Methodius of Olympus and Eusebius of Caesarea, who followed Origen in this respect.

George Karamanolis pursues the investigation on Clement and Origen and extends it to Gregory of Nyssa. The evidence regarding the reception of Plato's *Phaedrus* by these early Christians shows that the dialogue greatly influenced both the language and the thought of these thinkers, especially the Socratic critique of writing and the psychology suggested by the myth of the charioteer. A typology of the reception of the *Phaedrus* by early Christians includes not only the integration of citations, images, and doctrines, but also a dialectical engagement with several aspects of the dialogue and their Christian appropriation, as is the case with Clement's reaction to Socrates' critique of writing in the beginning of his *Stromateis* and Gregory's assessment of the psychology of the partite soul in his *De anima et resurrectione*.

Among the Latin Church Fathers, Augustine did not know the *Phaedrus* directly, except for the proof of the immortality of the soul (245c–246a) which he read in Cicero’s translation. Augustine disagrees with the proof, probably because he took its emphasis on the self-moving nature of the soul as contradicting the immutability of the soul which is so important to him, as Gerd Van Riel suggests. However, when one digs deeper into Augustine’s continuous discussion with the Platonists, one recognizes the *Phaedrus* in a number of quotes, which reveal that the dialogue did have a very distinct place in Augustine’s thought, even though the author himself must have been unaware of the fact that he was referring to the *Phaedrus*. In particular, the *Phaedrus* myth seems to have played a fundamental role in Augustine’s discussion of Porphyry’s *De regressu animae*. In the course of this text, Augustine develops his own specifically Christian view on eschatology and on the resurrection of the body. It thus appears that Augustine gained some important insights, although unwittingly, from the *Phaedrus*, which were made part of his own version of Christian Platonism.

Turning to the commentary tradition on Plato from late Antiquity, Pieter d’Hoine shows that the *Phaedrus* played a vital role in the development of the later Neoplatonists’ hermeneutics of Plato’s dialogues, by focusing primarily on the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Plato’s Philosophy*, which he supplements with information drawn from Hermias’ *Commentary on the Phaedrus* and from the methodological introductions to the extant commentaries on Plato from the fifth and sixth centuries. As it turns out, the later Neoplatonic commentators on Plato scrutinized the *Phaedrus* in an attempt to find Plato’s own reading instructions for the dialogues, and many of their hermeneutical strategies can be traced back to the *Phaedrus*. This holds true not only for the Neoplatonic theory of *skopos*, which drew its inspiration from Plato’s comparison of speech with a living being, but also for the Neoplatonic views on the division of Plato’s dialogues, for Plato’s choice for the dialogue form, for the dialogues’ components, and finally for Plato’s very choice to commit his thought to writing.

Marc-Antoine Gavray continues this study of Neoplatonic hermeneutics. He shows that the *Phaedrus* taught the Neoplatonists not only how to read a Platonic dialogue, but also how to read myths and inspired poetry, so as to reconcile Plato with the poets, in spite of Plato’s criticism of Homer in the *Republic*. From Plato’s analysis of inspired poetry (245a), Proclus draws four general principles: 1) inspired poetry is directly related to the gods (the Muses), 2) the soul of the poet no longer belongs to itself but to them, 3) it has undergone an awakening that elevates it beyond the level of human reasoning, and 4) it has assimilated its light to another light that transcends it. Using these rules of thumb for reading poetry allows one to get rid of the apparent contradictions. Furthermore,

in Socrates' criticism of the allegorical interpretation of the story of Boreas and Oreithyia (229c–230a), Proclus finds justification to interpret (inspired) myths in a strictly theological manner, and to reject physicalist and 'likely' readings. Thus Plato's *Phaedrus* is not only a key to the Neoplatonist's hermeneutics of Plato's own dialogues, but also to their understanding of poetry.

The next two papers study the way the late Neoplatonists apply these hermeneutical tools to the *Phaedrus* itself. From Antiquity onwards, readers have been struck by the contrast between the claim made in the dialogue that every text should hang together in a meaningful unity like a living being and the apparent lack of unity of the *Phaedrus* itself. The dialogue is obviously about love, and about rhetoric, but what unifies these themes and the many other themes discussed is far from obvious. The Neoplatonists address this question of unity when looking for the dialogue's *skopos*, its main theme or purpose. Saskia Aerts provides an original interpretation of Hermias of Alexandria's answer to the question of the *skopos* of the *Phaedrus* by focussing on the notion of 'soul-leading'. Hermias indeed interprets the themes of love and rhetoric as *leading the souls* to different manifestations of beauty, while taking these manifestations of beauty as the dialogue's *skopos*. This paper thus sheds light on the Neoplatonic reception of the *Phaedrus* with an emphasis on the crucial role that the dialogue plays in the ascent of the soul.

Simon Fortier takes a different approach by focussing on Proclus' exegesis of a very short piece of text. The passage in question, *Phaedrus* 247c6–d1, is just one sentence. *Prima facie*, with these lines Plato may have meant nothing more than that the immaterial Forms are contemplated by the soul's mind or intellect and that it is from them that we derive true knowledge. However, Proclus finds here a great deal more. According to him, the phrase not only reveals the *Phaedrus*' most profound theological teachings, but also offers a description of the nature of contemplation. He therefore takes it to be the very climax of the dialogue. The reconstruction of Proclus' interpretation of these lines, in the absence of his lost commentary on the *Phaedrus*, is therefore of crucial importance, and gives a good illustration of how the late Neoplatonists deployed their hermeneutical tools in specific cases.

The last two texts of our volume turn to the reception of the dialogue beyond Antiquity. Pantelis Golitsis explores the comments that the eleventh-century Byzantine scholar Michael Psellos offered on the images of the expedition of gods (*Phdr.* 246e4–247a2) and of the chariot flight of the soul (*Phdr.* 246a3–246b7), which Socrates included in his palinode, in relation to *erōs* as a madness (μᾶνιᾱ) that comes to the human soul from the gods. The choice to concentrate on these two isolated passages from the *Phaedrus* might appear puzzling, but is in keeping with Psellos' selective exegetical activity. Pantelis Golitsis shows that although

Psellos' comments are heavily (but tacitly) dependent on Hermias' commentary on the *Phaedrus*, they are interesting in that they illustrate Psellos' general approach to Hellenic philosophy.

Finally, Guy Claessens examines the reception of Plato's criticism of writing by Renaissance readers and assesses the extent to which the focus on Plato's so-called condemnation of writing is a modern invention originating in Jacques Derrida's seminal study. The Renaissance reception of the *Phaedrus* is traced through various interconnected discursive formations, ranging from rhetoric and the art of memory to philosophy. Guy Claessens shows that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the *Phaedrus* primarily served as a starting point for the investigation of the relationship between memory and writing, and that Renaissance thinkers such as Petrus Ramus and Giordano Bruno tried to blur the sharp distinction drawn by Plato between memory and reminding in order to save a particular kind of writing. It is certainly no coincidence that such an interest in Plato's comments on writing arises in the context of the invention and immense success of the printing press, which might be deemed as a crucial victory of writing over speech.

We hope that this brief survey, to which the papers that follow will add much more substance, gives a glimpse of the richness and the variety of the impact the *Phaedrus* has had on Western thought, from Antiquity to the Renaissance. Many other aspects are still to explore; we would be pleased if the present volume should prompt other researchers to pursue this project.⁹

⁹ We would like to thank Simon Fortier for his revision of this introduction, as well as Thanos Kiosoglou for preparing the index locorum.