

THE *PHAEDRUS* AND THE LIFE OF PLOTINUS¹

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Abstract: A perusal of Plato's dialogue the *Phaedrus* sheds much light on Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*. The similarities between the two works are impressive, and it can be argued that Porphyry wrote his text with the dialogue in mind. These similarities include their use of medicine, their structural disunity, and their cast of characters, among which must be included the impalpable but pervasive entity the supernatural. Two of the key themes of the *Phaedrus*—communication and the godlikeness of the pre-fallen soul—also inform the present discussion of the *Vita*. Plotinus had difficulty with both spoken and written communication, but his godlikeness allowed him to triumph over them.

In the conclusion to Plotinus' *Enneads* as his disciple Porphyry has arranged them the philosopher writes, "This is the life of gods and godlike and blessed men."² This reminds one of such references to likeness to God as we encounter in the Platonic dialogues, especially in the *Phaedrus*. In its central section Plato writes, "This is the life of gods," and he goes on to speak of the souls that are most like them. A little later he refers to participation in God insofar as is possible.³ The notion of likeness to God is a major factor in Porphyry's hagiographical life of Plotinus, and I believe that he wrote it with much of the *Phaedrus* in the back of his mind.⁴ As a Platonist he would

¹ I would like to thank Mark Edwards, Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, and the anonymous reader for their help with this article.

² *Enn.* 6.9.11.

³ 248a, 253a. Cf. *Theaet.* 176a-b where the path to godlikeness is virtue, something Plotinus was not generally interested in; but see his early treatise *Enn.* 1.2.

⁴ This is also the view of Jeremy Schott in "Plotinus's Portrait and Pamphilus's Prison Notebook: Neoplatonic and Early Christian Textualities at the Turn of the Fourth Century CE," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 322-338.

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have been intimately familiar with this dialogue, all the more so since it was one of the five that most affected his master, together with the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Timaeus*, and Books Six and Seven of the *Republic*—all, except for the *Timaeus*, from Plato's middle period.⁵

Medicine and Disunity

There are many similarities between the two works which for reasons of space cannot all be inquired into. For instance Socrates calls his second speech on love a palinode, the very word Porphyry and Longinus use for a treatise the former wrote after Amelius convinced him that his objection to a point of Plotinus' metaphysics was mistaken.⁶ Porphyry also quotes Hesiod's question, "Why should I talk about oak and rock?" a question to which Socrates alludes when he tells Phaedrus that the people of the ancient world listened only to trees and rocks.⁷ More important are the roles medicine and disunity play in the dialogue and the life.⁸

At the extreme beginning of the dialogue two doctors—Acumenus and Herodicus—are cited on the health benefits of walking.⁹ Jacques Derrida has additionally drawn our attention to the pervasiveness of the word φάρμακον (remedy, poison, drug, philter) and its cognates in the *Phaedrus*.¹⁰ This is apparent first of all with the reminiscence of Oreithuia at play with Pharmaceia.¹¹ Socrates subsequently calls Lysias' speech, which Phaedrus has concealed in his cloak, a remedy for getting him out of town.¹² Later the bird god Thoth¹³ boasts to Thamus that his invention of writing is a remedy for memory, only to be put down.¹⁴ Before this Socrates compares an inferior rhetor to a self-proclaimed doctor who alleges that he knows how to induce warmth, coolness,

⁵ A. H. Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1967), 214; Allan Silverman, *The Dialectic of Essence: A Study of Plato's Metaphysics* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 12.

⁶ 243b; *Vit. Plot.* 18, 20.

⁷ 275b; *Vit. Plot.* 22. The source is Hesiod's *Theog.* 35.6-7, but Homer also uses it at *Il.* 22.166-167 and *Od.* 19.163 when Hector debates whether he should face Achilles and when Penelope addresses Odysseus whom she does not recognize. Cf. Plato, *Apol.* 34d.

⁸ Medicine plays an even greater role in the unorthodox physiology text the *Timaeus*.

⁹ 227a, d.

¹⁰ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 71, 129.

¹¹ 229c.

¹² 230d.

¹³ The Greeks called him Theuth. He was usually but not always depicted with a bird's head and was the Egyptian counterpart of Hermes. See Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 209-211; Thomas Taylor in Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras, Or Pythagoric Life* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1986), 26-27.

¹⁴ 274e-275b.

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vomiting, and evacuation in his patients but does not know which patients to apply these remedies to or when and for how long. He then compares rhetoric and medicine, both of which are concerned with determining the nature of something and with applying various phenomena—drugs or words—to achieve the intended results.¹⁵ Derrida does not mention these two passages which are presided over by the physicians Eryximachus, Acumenus, and Hippocrates.

Medicine, together with an interest in the discreditable entity that is the body, is conspicuous in the *Vita Plotini*.¹⁶ When Porphyry knew him Plotinus was troubled by an intestinal complaint. He declined the use of enemas and instead practiced vegetarianism and massage therapy. His final illness, which Porphyry called acute diphtheria, may have been leprosy, elephantiasis, or tuberculosis.¹⁷ The symptoms listed by Porphyry were hoarseness, dim eyesight, and ulcerous formations on the hands and feet. No less than the god of medicine himself was with Plotinus at his death.¹⁸ Of his six main disciples three were doctors: Paulinus, Eustochius, and the Arab Zethos.¹⁹ Another disciple, the senator Rogatianus, spurned politics and embraced asceticism which cured him of his gout to the extent that he could use his hands normally whereas previously he had been unable to stretch them out and had to be carried in a chair.²⁰ Even before his final illness Plotinus is said to have had poor eyesight.²¹ His enemy Olympius, essentially a *φαρμακεύς* or sorcerer, is described, at the moment of his operation against his former fellow student, as having convulsed limbs and a shriveling body.²² Finally Plotinus diagnoses and prescribes a remedy for Porphyry's depression.²³

In both the dialogue and the life *φαρμακεία* and medicine are brought up short. This is not surprising since medicine concerns the body, the soul's prison in Platonism as in Orphism.²⁴ The two remedies in the *Phaedrus*, those of Lysias and Thoth, are found

¹⁵ 268a-b, 270b-d.

¹⁶ See Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, "Medicine in the Life and Works of Plotinus," in *Papers of the Langford Latin Seminar*, vol. 14, ed. Francis Cairns and Miriam Griffin (Cambridge: Francis Cairns Publications, 2010), 93-117.

¹⁷ Dillon in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, abridged John Dillon (London: Penguin, 1991), ciii; Slaveva-Griffin, "Medicine in the Life and Works of Plotinus," 105.

¹⁸ *Vit. Plot.* 2.

¹⁹ Slaveva-Griffin, "Medicine in the Life and Works of Plotinus," 93. The *Vita* saves his best disciple, Porphyry, for last.

²⁰ *Vit. Plot.* 7.

²¹ *Vit. Plot.* 8.

²² *Vit. Plot.* 10.

²³ *Vit. Plot.* 11.

²⁴ *Phaed.* 67d, 114b; *Gorg.* 493a; *Enn.* 4.8.3; *Vit. Plot.* 22; Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 36. See Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 121. For the Hermetics likewise the soul was a prisoner in matter. See Mark Theodore Sabo, "The *Phaedrus* and the Life of Plotinus," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 8 (2014) 1-13; ISSN: 1754-517X. Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

wanting,²⁵ and the doctor who claims to be a doctor is in fact a quack.²⁶ In the life Plotinus is ultimately failed by medicine. He awaits Eustochius only so he can convey a message to him, not so he can be helped by him.²⁷

Another “structural” similarity between the two works is their disunity. In his criticism of the speech of Lysias, Socrates notes that it lacks unity. It is like the poem on Midas by Cleobulus of Lindus, each line of which can be moved without doing violence to the sense of the epitaph, so little does Lysias’ speech exhibit logical development.²⁸ It is like someone swimming on her back in reverse, ending at the beginning, whereas a true speech must be like a living creature, with head, body, and feet.²⁹ The lack of unity in Lysias’ speech is ironically echoed in both the dialogue itself and in the *Vita Plotini*. The *Phaedrus* can be divided into three sections: the first two speeches against love, the third speech in praise of love, and a discussion of rhetoric in which hardly any mention is made of love. This is certainly much like the work of a clumsy butcher, the same criticism Socrates levels against Lysias’ speech.³⁰

The *Vita Plotini* is even more disorganized than the *Phaedrus* and is really a series of vignettes which defy not only chronology but logical order.³¹ It begins with Plotinus refusing to tell his disciples his birthday, describes his death, gives a sketch of his life from the ages of eight to fifty, includes a list of the *Enneads*, touches on his male disciples, his writing habits, his female disciples, his supernatural prowess, his relationship with the emperor Gallienus,³² his speaking habits, his philosophical

Edwards, trans., *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), xiii.

²⁵ 264c-e, 274e-275b.

²⁶ 268a-b. Plato was suspicious of all forms of φαρμακεία. See *Prot.* 354a; *Phil.* 46a; *Tim.* 89a-d.

²⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 2.

²⁸ 264c-e.

²⁹ 264a-b.

³⁰ 265e-266a. Scholars have valiantly striven to find unity in the dialogue, but their very protests against the charge of disunity are self-defeating. See, e.g., Waterfield’s arguments in *Plato, Phaedrus* (Oxford University Press, 2002), xliii-xlix. G. R. F. Ferrari in fact examines the dialogue in reverse order in his *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s Phaedrus* (Cambridge University Press, 1987). At one time the *Phaedrus* was viewed as an early dialogue, written when Plato was “too young to do the thing right,” later as a product of his senile old age. So Jacques Derrida describes the views of Diogenes Laertius and Hans Raeder in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 66-67.

³¹ Dillon calls them cameos and observes that they are held together only by a loose association of ideas. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, lxxxvi; John Dillon, “Holy and Not So Holy: On the Interpretation of Late Antique Biography,” in *The Limits of Ancient Biography*, ed. Brian McGing and Judith Mossman (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 160.

³² Plotinus’ attempt to form a city of philosophers, initially endorsed by Gallienus, was reechoed in Augustine’s Neoplatonic and aborted Servants of God project and, more pedestrianly, in Berkeley’s failed Bermuda project, “its learned city so carefully mapped out, a steeple in the centre, a market in each corner.” Both Augustine and Berkeley were readers of Plotinus. See Philip F. Esler, ed., *The Early*

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influences, a *Symposium* seminar he attended or designed, his relationship with the Sethian Gnostics,³³ and the philosophical influence of Numenius. It concludes with five documents Porphyry has stapled together: two letters of Longinus, the oracle of Apollo on Plotinus, Porphyry's commentary on the oracle, and another list of the *Enneads*, this time in a different order. Most egregious of all are the reversal of Plotinus' birth and death and the distancing of four related pairs: the two lists of the *Enneads*,³⁴ the accounts of Plotinus' male and female disciples, his speaking and writing habits, and his general philosophical influences as over against the more specific influence of Numenius. Did Porphyry deliberately wrench the *Vita* out of unity in order to emulate the Lysias and Plato of the *Phaedrus*?³⁵ By contrast Marinus' account of his master is a straightforward biography, and Damascius' *Vita Isidori* is largely chronological albeit with lengthy digressions on the protagonist's friends and acquaintances, a fact which Damascius himself draws our attention to with some concern.³⁶

Dramatis Personae

Let us turn to the cast of characters. Three characters in the *Vita Plotini* have counterparts in the *Phaedrus*: Amelius, Longinus, and Plotinus. Like Phaedrus, Amelius is the excitable disciple of a famous master, though Amelius' master is a philosopher and not a rhetor.³⁷ Like Lysias, Longinus is a man of letters more than a philosopher,³⁸ and both were familiar with political violence in its most extreme form.

Christian World (London: Routledge, 2000), 2:1212; Thomas Whittaker, *The Neoplatonists: A Study in the History of Hellenism* (Cambridge University Press, 1901), 30; W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 399; Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 118.

³³ See Dillon in Plotinus, *Enneads*, cxiv; David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 50-51. Porphyry's statement that they deceived many including themselves seems to echo 2 Tim 3.13.

³⁴ Though this may have been done more for the sake of maintaining the reader's interest.

³⁵ The disunity of the *Vita* is to some extent mitigated by Porphyry's skillful transitions.

³⁶ E.g., *Vit. Isid.* 116a.

³⁷ For Amelius' excitability see especially his letter to Porphyry in *Vit. Plot.* 17. I feel, however, that Porphyry's possible attacks on him have been overemphasized by scholars. Edwards speaks of Amelius' attempt to have Plotinus' portrait drawn as an implied disparagement of him, but Porphyry actually seems quite pleased with the result and speaks of the talent (εὐφροία) of the painter Carterius in *Vit. Plot.* 1. See Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, xxxvii; cf. Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 108-109. There is even a certain amount of affection in the *Vita* towards Amelius who is said to have surpassed Plotinus' other students in diligence. See *Vit. Plot.* 3; cf. Dillon in Plotinus, *Enneads*, lxxxviii. And yet how often are people in the same profession not jealous of one another? As for Carterius' talent Edwards notes that for the Platonists philosophy required not only talent but discipleship. See *Neoplatonic Saints*, 2.

³⁸ *Vit. Plot.* 14.

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Lysias' brother Polemarchus was executed by the Thirty Tyrants and Longinus was himself executed by the emperor Aurelian after he had advised, and been disowned by, Queen Zenobia of Palmyra.³⁹

Like Socrates, Plotinus is the great listener of speeches, at philosophers' feast days and at two sessions on the *Symposium*, and each of them is disgusted with one of these performances, the creations of rhetors rather than philosophers.⁴⁰ In the *Vita* Porphyry notes that Socrates and Plotinus were each praised by Apollo.⁴¹ Both men were godlike. Porphyry says as much about Plotinus and quotes Apollo on Socrates being the wisest of men⁴² which should be compared to Socrates' statement in the *Phaedrus* that only a god is wise.⁴³ Plotinus and Plato's character were Platonists, and this gave them an equally low view of the body. Socrates calls the body a prison in which the soul is bound like an oyster in its shell.⁴⁴ In objecting to having his portrait drawn Plotinus refers to his body as an image in which nature has enclosed him, and the future portrait as an image of an image (ειδώλου εἶδωλον).⁴⁵ He was so ashamed of having been "in the body" that he refused to celebrate or reveal his birthday, though he revealed the year he was born to his physician Eustochius, possibly only at the last moment.⁴⁶ Was a like shame of being in the body a partial reason for Socrates' veiling his face before his first speech?⁴⁷

Socrates is certainly much warmer, sillier, and more overbearing than Plotinus. Jowett finds his derivation of μαντική, οἰωνιστική, and ἕμερος to be characteristic of

³⁹ Paul Harvey, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 245; N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 631; Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors: A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome* (New Jersey: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 186.

⁴⁰ E.g., 234e-235a; *Vit. Plot.* 15.

⁴¹ *Vit. Plot.* 22.

⁴² *Vit. Plot.* 23, 22.

⁴³ 278d; cf. Alcibiades' statement about Socrates in *Symp.* 219c.

⁴⁴ 250c; cf. *Rep.* 611d; Marinus, *Vit. Proc.* 3. For Plotinus, in *Enn.* 1.1.10, the body was itself the beast.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Rep.* 597d-e. On Plotinus' use of εἶδωλον see *Enn.* 2.9.1, 10; 3.9.3; 6.3.15; 6.4.10. Note the apostle John's reaction to having his portrait painted in the apocryphal *Acts of John* 26-29.

⁴⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 1-2. His caution may have stemmed in part from his having previously given this information to the sorcerer Olympius who needed it in order to harm him through star spells. See *Vit. Plot.* 10; Mark Edwards, *Christians, Gnostics, and Philosophers in Late Antiquity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), xvii:55.

⁴⁷ 237a. Related to this was his fear of an unworthy performance. The main reason for his covering his head was of course the speech's blasphemous attitude toward Eros. See R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus: Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge University Press, 1952), 35. It is also hard to resist the contrary suggestion that Socrates was veiling his godlikeness during the pedestrian offering. Cf. Moses' veil in Exod 34.33-35. Masks and veils were often used in the ancient world to set the wearer apart from the people and to accentuate his authority. See Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 754.

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his tendency to mix sense and nonsense.⁴⁸ That Plotinus has no trace of his frequent fatuousness is due in part to the fact that he goes back to an older and nobler tradition than that of Plato's master, the tradition of Pythagoras.⁴⁹ Plotinus comes across as emotional on only one occasion in the *Vita Plotini*, when he repeatedly says during Porphyry's refutation of a scandalous commentary on the *Symposium*, "Strike thus so that you may be a light to men." He had, to be sure, only recently waged a successful battle against his own indignation at the first offering of the *Symposium* seminar, getting up several times to leave the room.⁵⁰ I believe Porphyry has caught something of Plotinus' persona in his biography, the studious practice of a Stoic-like dispassion,⁵¹ a restriction of the emotional life due to his shame of being in the body.⁵² It was with much justification that Dean Inge wrote, "There is not the slightest trace of hysterical emotion in Plotinus."⁵³

The Socrates of Plato's dialogues is analytical. He seeks to get to the bottom of things even if this means seriously grappling with views he is in no danger of holding. If anything Plotinus is even more analytical.⁵⁴ When Phaedrus says that he has only a few unimportant points to bring up regarding rhetoric Socrates summarily dismisses them,⁵⁵ an approach that would not have been expected of Plotinus who spent three days contending with objections Porphyry raised on the soul's relationship with the body, to the impatience of a certain Thaumasius.⁵⁶ Plotinus' habit of encouraging his students to put questions to him led, according to Amelius, to much wasted time.⁵⁷

Plotinus has another Phaedran counterpart in Isocrates, the only contemporary rhetor whom Socrates praises, just as Longinus, in the letter to Marcellus which Porphyry has

⁴⁸ 244c-d, 251c; *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Charles Scribner, 1871), 1:528.

⁴⁹ John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 383; cf. John Dillon and Lloyd P. Gerson, *Neoplatonic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), xvi-xvii.

⁵⁰ *Vit. Plot.* 15. Plotinus was quoting from *Il.* 8.282.

⁵¹ Despite his criticism of the psychology behind the Stoic concept at *Enn.* 1.4.13.

⁵² *Vit. Plot.* 1. At *Enn.* 1.4.8; 1.9.1 he objects to suicide in part because of the passion attendant upon it, but note his own impassioned outburst at 1.4.7. The complete restriction of a person's emotional life is obviously impossible.

⁵³ William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917-1918* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1929), 1:121.

⁵⁴ See Dillon in Plotinus, *Enneads*, lxxxix, xcix, 468; Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus*, 101. Plotinus' habit of "teasing out the intricacies of a question" has led one scholar to use the *Enneads* as a key for explaining the somewhat ambiguous concept of a Buddha field. See W. Randolph Kloetzli, "Nous and Nirvāṇa: Conversations with Plotinus, An Essay in Buddhist Cosmology," *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 2 (April 2007): 140-177.

⁵⁵ 268a.

⁵⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 13.

⁵⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 3.

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included in the *Vita*, singles out Plotinus as one of only two contemporary philosophers worthy of study.⁵⁸ We know that both men were shy. Isocrates was so lacking in confidence he did not deliver public addresses.⁵⁹ Porphyry tells us that sweat gathered on Plotinus' forehead while he lectured which has been thought to indicate shyness.⁶⁰ Certainly his bringing to a peremptory end a lecture into which his former fellow student Origen had stumbled betrays shyness,⁶¹ as does much of the aloofness that is so apparent in the *Vita*.⁶²

A fourth, albeit amorphous character in common to both works is the supernatural. As would be expected from a Platonic milieu both documents are open-minded about the phenomenon. Plotinus and Porphyry are even more explicitly so than Plato. Recent commentators⁶³ have identified Plato's Demiurge, Young Gods, and World Soul as characters in an intentionally fictitious story that arose from a desire to dissect the universe, and it is possible that Plato was one of those few men whose true opinions we will never know.⁶⁴ Against this is Socrates' judgment on the abduction of Oreithuia in the *Phaedrus*: "The common opinion is enough for me,"⁶⁵ and his view that the future judgment of the dead was unable to be disproven by the three wisest Greeks of his day.⁶⁶

Gods and the supernatural are conspicuous in both the dialogue and the life. In the dialogue they are often grouped around the number four, the Pythagorean number for justice.⁶⁷ The nymphs who inhabit the stream by the plane tree inspire Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*, a speech which is paradoxically blasphemous to Eros, and Socrates' divine sign duly urges him to make atonement for it.⁶⁸ The four divine entities of Zeus, the gods, the daemons, and Hestia are central figures in his second speech, and there Zeus, Hera, and Apollo influence the lover's conception of whom his beloved must emulate.⁶⁹ Four of the Muses brighten the myth of the cicadas which

⁵⁸ 279a; *Vit. Plot.* 20. The other philosopher was Amelius.

⁵⁹ Harvey, *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 224; Hammond and Scullard, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 554.

⁶⁰ *Vit. Plot.* 13; Inge, *Philosophy of Plotinus*, 1:120.

⁶¹ *Vit. Plot.* 14. Origen appears so much warmer than Plotinus in this encounter.

⁶² Though some of this aloofness was due to what Patricia Cox calls his "interior inclination" in *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 115.

⁶³ E.g., Silverman, *Dialectic of Essence*, 256-257.

⁶⁴ The author of the *Second Platonic Letter* makes Plato say at 314c that there will be no written work of his own and that his Socrates is only a Socrates embellished and modernized. Cf. *Ep.* 7.341c.

⁶⁵ 230a.

⁶⁶ *Gorg.* 527a-b.

⁶⁷ Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 467.

⁶⁸ 241e, 242c-e. On the divine sign see *Apol.* 31c-d, 40a-b, 41d; *Euthy.* 272e; *Rep.* 496c; *Theaet.* 151a.

⁶⁹ 246e-247a; 252c-253c.

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forms a transition to Socrates' discussion of rhetoric.⁷⁰ Later four types of madness are attributed to four groups of divinities: Apollo, Dionysus, the Muses, and Aphrodite.⁷¹ In Socrates' second myth the bird god Thoth introduces writing to mankind, to the objections of the chief god Thamus.⁷² And the dialogue closes with Socrates' prayer to Pan.⁷³

The *Vita Plotini*, as would be natural for a document emerging from late antiquity, is replete with the supernatural. Magical incidents dog Plotinus throughout his life: he resists the attempt of his former friend Olympius to destroy him by star spells (ἀστροβολῆσαι), an Egyptian priest declares his guardian spirit to be a god, the priest's attendant becomes overwhelmed with terror and strangles the talismanic birds.⁷⁴ Plotinus identifies thieves merely by looking at them, correctly prophesies what will happen to the children whose guardian he is, and divines Porphyry's intention to end his own life.⁷⁵ A snake, an emblem of Asclepius, is said to slip away from the philosopher's bed as he dies.⁷⁶ Finally his disciple Amelius learns from the oracle of Apollo that he has safely arrived "where lovely breezes blow [and] where there is affection and yearning to delight the eyes, full of pure joy."⁷⁷

Plotinus: Communicator and God-Man

Communication, whether spoken or written, is a key theme in the *Phaedrus*. There Socrates favors speech over writing, holding that speech more fully intimates reality than anything else except thought because speaker and hearer are present spatially and temporally whereas the relationship between writer and reader, separated in time as well as place, is threatened by the possibility of a diversity of interpretations.⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida famously labeled this view phonocentrism and attacked it,⁷⁹ for all the wrong

⁷⁰ 259c-d.

⁷¹ 265b; cf. 244b-d.

⁷² 274c-275b.

⁷³ 279b-c.

⁷⁴ *Vit. Plot.* 10.

⁷⁵ *Vit. Plot.* 11.

⁷⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 2.

⁷⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 22.

⁷⁸ 275d-f. Plato is even more radical in *Polit.* 294a-c where the will of the king is preferable to the written law, but this is hinted at in *Phaedr.* 276a where written speech is described as an image (εἰδωλον) of mental speech. There is thus a downward progression in Plato from mind to speech to writing. It is interesting that this is somewhat the opposite of Hinduism in which the *smṛti* literature (that which is remembered) is inferior to the *śruti* literature (that which is heard). See A. H. Armstrong and R. Ravindra, "The Dimensions of the Self: *Buddhi* in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and *Psychē* in Plotinus," *Religious Studies* 15, no. 3 (September 1979): 327.

⁷⁹ See Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 63-171.

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reasons I feel.⁸⁰ Because of the centrality of the idea of communication in the *Phaedrus*, and in line with the thesis of the present paper to establish connections between it and the *Vita Plotini*, it would be instructive to inquire into Plotinus' speaking and writing habits.

We would expect Plotinus, as a follower of Plato, to have a better attitude toward speech than writing.⁸¹ This is in fact true, but in practice he did not excel at either. His one concern, as Porphyry tells us, was for the idea (νοῦς).⁸² He insisted on greeting his friends by word of mouth rather than by letter,⁸³ expected them to give addresses at the birthdays of Plato and Socrates,⁸⁴ and spent at least one summer doing nothing but talking to them, the conversation being doubtless of the highest intellectual caliber.⁸⁵ His formal lectures left something to be desired. Early on in his career he would open up his classroom to the most time-consuming questions.⁸⁶ He made verbal mistakes, for instance saying ἀναμνημίσκεται instead of ἀναμμνήσκεται, although to an English speaker this does not sound greatly different. Sweat gathered on his forehead, either out of shyness or nervousness, and if an unexpected visitor turned up, his pupils could expect the class to be abruptly cut short. However this is only half the picture. Whenever Plotinus lectured his νοῦς illuminated his face; he became engaging and radiated benignity.⁸⁷ He would begin his lectures with readings from the Middle Platonists and Aristotelians and, instead of following them blindly, would use them as a springboard for his own discussions, taking an original view of their contents and following the method (νοῦς) of his charismatic teacher Ammonius.⁸⁸

His attitude toward writing was much different. The "Pythagorean pact"⁸⁹ he made with his fellow students involved a nondisclosure of Ammonius' doctrines which extended to the written word. When Erennius and Origen broke this pact it was significantly through writing. Plotinus lectured in Rome for ten years without writing

⁸⁰ Cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 116-117; Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 4:92. It should be observed that Jones Irwin does not regard Derrida as an unqualified critic of phonocentrism. See his *Derrida and the Writing of the Body* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 51.

⁸¹ Svetla Slaveva-Griffin reminds me that speech was the center of the philosophical enterprise in ancient Greece in general. See also John Dillon, "Orality in the Later Platonist Tradition" (paper presented at the Prometheus Trust Conference, Wiltshire, July 2011).

⁸² *Vit. Plot.* 8.

⁸³ *Vit. Plot.* 1. Edwards translates this "with a kiss" in *Neoplatonic Saints*, 3.

⁸⁴ *Vit. Plot.* 2.

⁸⁵ *Vit. Plot.* 5.

⁸⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 3.

⁸⁷ Cf. Marinus, *Vit. Proc.* 3.

⁸⁸ *Vit. Plot.* 13-14.

⁸⁹ Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 7.

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anything, possibly not even notes.⁹⁰ In this he was emulated by Amelius who wrote only notebooks. When he did begin to write treatises he gave them out begrudgingly and refused to title them, and at one point Amelius and Porphyry had to urge him to pen two treatises.⁹¹ Plotinus chose Porphyry to revise his writings because he never reread his work, in part because of his bad eyesight. His handwriting was sloppy, and he misjoined and misspelled words; to his pupils' astonishment he never changed these habits. And yet his dislike of writing was overridden by his godlikeness. He had thought out his treatises before they were written down and wrote them out in one jet, and if he was interrupted he did not have to jog his memory by rereading what he had written before.⁹²

This brings us to our last point of comparison between the *Phaedrus* and the *Vita*. In the central section of the dialogue Socrates likens the soul to a winged charioteer driving a pair of winged horses, one good and one evil; the good one, we later learn, is white with black eyes and the evil one black with gray eyes.⁹³ Before they are born human souls, along with the gods who are arrayed in twelve companies and who possess only good horses, live in the lower heaven and aspire to the ὑπερουράνιος τόπος, the supercelestial place, the colorless, shapeless, and intangible world of the Forms. The souls who are the most godlike are able to gaze on this upper world and are thereby kept safe from sorrow, but if they fall into forgetfulness they lose their wings and are incarnated in one of a number of different personages, the most privileged of which is the philosopher.⁹⁴

It goes without saying that Plotinus was one of these godlike souls, and Porphyry, who explicitly avers that Plotinus was godlike,⁹⁵ takes great pains to illustrate this fact. As far as he is concerned Plotinus has no ancestry, parentage, or birthplace.⁹⁶ He writes without having to reread what he has written before, so continually present is he in the Nous.⁹⁷ Even without having any previous knowledge of it he is able to resist the attempt of Olympius to destroy him by star spells. An awed Egyptian priest tells him that his guardian spirit is not a daemon but a god, and he himself tells his disciples

⁹⁰ *Vit. Plot.* 3.

⁹¹ *Vit. Plot.* 5; cf. 18. The treatises are *Enn.* 6.4-5.

⁹² *Vit. Plot.* 7-8. In addition the *Enneads* frequently rise to flights of poetic rapture and are never dull as, for instance, Proclus' writings are. In conveying this facet of Plotinus, MacKenna is a surer guide than Armstrong.

⁹³ 246a-b, 253d-e.

⁹⁴ 246a-248d. Damascius refers to this passage in *Vit. Isid.* 34d.

⁹⁵ *Vit. Plot.* 23.

⁹⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 1.

⁹⁷ *Vit. Plot.* 8. See Andrew Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 26-27.

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that it is the daemons' business to go to him and not for him to go to them.⁹⁸ He identifies thieves by looking at them, is prophetic, clairvoyant,⁹⁹ and supremely gifted, thoroughly conversant with Stoicism, Aristotelianism, geometry, arithmetic, mechanics, optics, and music.¹⁰⁰ On his deathbed, accompanied by the god Asclepius, he expressly speaks of the divine in himself, and afterwards Apollo, questioned by Amelius, calls him his friend.¹⁰¹

Mark Edwards argues that Porphyry, who was extremely antagonistic towards Christianity¹⁰² and may have been one of the two philosophers who trampled on the religion during Galerius' persecution,¹⁰³ to some extent modeled the *Vita* after the Gospel of John's depiction of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁴ Jesus is the God-man par excellence, and Plotinus, as we have seen, is one of the godlike among men. Edwards notes especially the location of the truth in Plotinus and Jesus, not in the temple of Isis or the Temple in Jerusalem; the inscrutability of the oracle of Apollo and the fourth Gospel as a whole; and the voluntary character of the two masters' deaths. One does not need to stop at the Gospel of John, however, to discover parallels between them. This includes their willingness to accept female disciples¹⁰⁵ as well as their noble aloofness and concomitant lack of humor; but the most striking parallel of all is when, after Plotinus alleges that it was for the daemons to come to him, Porphyry writes, "We did not understand what he meant by this exalted saying and we dared not ask him."¹⁰⁶ This is strongly reminiscent of an episode in Luke's Gospel. After the Sadducees pose a question to Jesus and He successfully answers them the evangelist remarks, "And no one dared to ask him another question."¹⁰⁷

⁹⁸ *Vit. Plot.* 10.

⁹⁹ *Vit. Plot.* 11.

¹⁰⁰ *Vit. Plot.* 14.

¹⁰¹ *Vit. Plot.* 2, 22.

¹⁰² According to Socrates of Constantinople he forsook the religion after a youthful beating at the hands of his coreligionists in Caesarea. See *Hist. Eccl.* 3.23.

¹⁰³ Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 5.2.

¹⁰⁴ Edwards, *Christians, Gnostics, and Philosophers in Late Antiquity*, xvii:66-69. The same may be true of Iamblichus' life of Pythagoras. See Gillian Clark, "Philosophic Lives and the Philosophic Life: Porphyry and Iamblichus," in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 44.

¹⁰⁵ Plato accepted only two female disciples, and one of these, Axiothea, was allowed to feel so ill at ease that she wore men's clothes. See Diogenes Laertius, *Vit. Phil.* 3.46; cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.19.

¹⁰⁶ *Vit. Plot.* 10.

¹⁰⁷ Luke 20.40; cf. Matt 22.46; Mark 12.34; John 21.12. Plotinus' end, forsaken by everybody but one person, recalls Paul more than Jesus. Cf. *Vit. Plot.* 2; 2 Tim 4.9-13. It is illuminating that, even though he had been the guardian of many children, none of them appeared at his deathbed.

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Conclusion

In this paper the impact of Plato's dialogue the *Phaedrus* on Porphyry's hagiographical biography of his master was detected partly through their use of medicine and their structural disunity. In both works medicine, which concerns the sublunary entity the body, was shown to be wanting. Their disunity may reflect the Platonic privileging of philosophy over art despite Plato's one-time advice to Xenocrates to sacrifice to the Muses.¹⁰⁸ Further similarities were discovered in the cast of characters. Amelius, Longinus, and Plotinus were each found to have a counterpart in Plato's dialogue, and in the case of Plotinus two counterparts were divined: Socrates and Isocrates. The supernatural was taken to be a fourth character and was shown to suffuse both works, especially perhaps the life, though the gods are in abundant evidence in the dialogue.

Two of the themes of the *Phaedrus*—communication and the godlikeness of the philosopher's soul—were also inquired into. Plotinus was seen to be a dutiful follower of the Platonic bias, criticized by Derrida, which favored speech over writing. In point of fact he struggled throughout his life with both forms of communication, though his divinity was powerful enough to shine through them. The article tends to support the theory that Porphyry, who was antagonistic to Christianity and saw Neoplatonism as a religious alternative to his former faith, deliberately modeled the life of his master after the Gospel of John's portrayal of Jesus Christ. Porphyry's honesty has usually been taken at face value,¹⁰⁹ and we must assume that his modeling involved little or no distortion of the truth.

¹⁰⁸ Diogenes, *Vit. Phil.* 4.6.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Armstrong and Ravindra, "Dimensions of the Self," 337; Dillon, "Holy and Not So Holy," 158; but see Edwards, *Christians, Gnostics, and Philosophers in Late Antiquity*, xvii:55; "Scenes from the Later Wanderings of Odysseus," *The Classical Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1988): 516-517; Stephen R. L. Clark, "Plotinus: Body and Soul," in Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 288.

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