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## Sylvan Rhetoric in the Planes of Plato's *Phaedrus*

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# “Sylvan Rhetoric in the Planes of Plato’s *Phaedrus*”

Madison Jones

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## Abstract

Over the past few decades, Plato’s *Phaedrus* has become an important text for scholars interested in tracing new materialist approaches to the history of rhetoric and writing. Drawing on rhetoric and plant studies scholarship, this essay contributes to this conversation by arguing that trees disclose an important layer of irony in the dialogue, producing a deep, if not ambivalent, unity that brings together rhetoric, writing, and discourse. Through a study of trees in the dialogue, this essay demonstrates how the *Phaedrus* offers rich connections between spatial, nonhuman, and ecological dimensions of writing, rhetoric, and discourse.

**Keywords:** Plato; plants; sylvan rhetorics; environmental rhetorics; ancient Greek philosophy

Forgive me, my friend. I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees  
have nothing to teach me—only the people in the city can do that.

—Socrates (Plato, 230d).

## Introduction

For millennia, Plato’s *Phaedrus* has been a wellspring for scholarship on rhetoric and writing.<sup>1</sup> The dialogue presents a complex web of concepts that support countless readings and

interpretations and raising perennial concerns about writing and rhetoric as *pharmaka* (φάρμακον), a term describing something both remedy and poison. In recent decades, the *Phaedrus* has seen renewed attention from scholars interested in the environmental, nonhuman, and material elements of the dialogue, becoming a touchstone for spatial, digital, and ecological inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have also interpreted the dialogue's ambiguity as raising questions about writing, speech, and embodiment (Reames and Sloey, 2021), interpreted the symbolism of the scenery (Brown, 2023) and spatial dimensions of its myths through material-epistemic historiography (Pedersen, 2017). With such excellent company, it might seem safe to say that there is not much else that scholars might hope to gain from yet another study of the *Phaedrus*. However, among the many masterful rhetorical features and interwoven themes that unfurl throughout the dialogue, the use of trees and other plants stands out as a significant and underexamined facet. Despite what Socrates asserts in the epigraph, I argue that trees and plants have much to teach him, and us, about rhetoric and writing. As I will demonstrate, Plato uses plants in the *Phaedrus* to construct a profound irony that enriches the dialogue's depth and unity. For thousands of years, scholars have grappled with whether the *Phaedrus* is either a unified masterpiece or the fragmented composition of a greenhorn writer. By examining how Plato's plants function as a central rhetorical element, I demonstrate that irony not only unifies the *Phaedrus* but complicates Socrates' dismissal of sophistic rhetoric and writing as a *pharmaka*. In my analysis, I build on my previous study on "sylvan rhetorics," where I describe deeply-rooted connections between trees and rhetorical theory. In doing so, I hope to establish additional "uses, roots, and grafting points between trees and rhetoric" by showing how trees are an essential part of how Plato theorizes writing and rhetoric through the *pharmakon* concept (Jones 75).

At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates and Phaedrus wander outside the city to sit along the banks of the Ilissos—seeking refuge from the heat beneath a giant plane tree—so that they may discuss a speech authored by Lysias, a copy of which Phaedrus is hiding under his robe, written on a papyrus scroll. Socrates claims he is “charmed” by a “potion” (242e, 521) and refers to Lysias’ speech as a *pharmakon*, bait Phaedrus used to lure him into the countryside (230d). From here, Plato begins to graft connections between plants, writing, and the *pharmakon*. The plane tree, named for its broad leaves, shares etymological roots with Plato, whose nickname (according to Diogenes Laertius) was given to him by his wrestling coach either in reference to his broad shoulders or broad forehead (Laertius, 135). This nickname may also refer to the breadth of his eloquent style, which is on full display in the *Phaedrus* (Rowe). Michael Marder explains that, “[t]o the Hellenic readers of the text it will have been obvious that the plane tree, *platanos*, is a semantic play on the author’s proper name, with both words derived from the Greek *platys*, meaning ‘broad’” (4-5, emphasis original).

The plane tree is perhaps the most venerated tree in ancient Greek mythology. Its magnificent stature and dense foliage provide an ideal place to converse. Pliny the Elder explains that the plane tree was exported to places like Italy for its famous shade (104). As the day unfolds, Plato associates heat with the power of sophistic rhetoric and contrasts it with the cool shade of the tree. Importantly, Phaedrus’ name suggests *phaidros*, meaning “bright” or “radiant,” and the heat of his recitation of Lysias’ speech overwhelms and intoxicates Socrates in various parts of the dialogue. Like writing, an exotic import from Egypt and Phoenicia, plane trees were endemic to Crete and other southern islands but were transplanted until they became a ubiquitous icon of the Greek mainland where they flourished. By locating the Plato-as-plane-tree pun at the

center of the dialogue, Plato ironically alludes to his role as the author, highlighting how writing offers a place for discourse shaded from the heated passions of orality..

In placing Socrates beneath the shade of the plane tree, Plato encourages us to distinguish between the overtly negative views of sophistic rhetoric and writing that Socrates espouses and the ambiguous message(s) of the dialogue. When they arrive at the tree, Socrates remarks that “[t]he plane tree is tall and very broad; the chaste-tree, high as it is, is wonderfully shady, and since it is in full bloom, the whole place is filled with its fragrance” (230b, 510). Here, Socrates refers to the *Vitex agnus-castus*, known as the chaste tree, a small flowering tree native to the Mediterranean that was believed to decrease sexual desire or promote sexual dysfunction (which is the meaning of “agnus” in Greek and “castus” in Latin). Importantly, Derrida notes that *pharmakon* also refers to perfume (142), and Socrates will later refer to “the son of Pythocles, of the deme Myrrhinous,” and who is ironically also named Phaedrus (243e). Michael Rinella (2007) explains that myrrh was often added to wine, sometimes producing a toxic effect that Plato describes in the *Laws* (773d). Renella (2010) explains that myrrh was “among the many substances the ancient Greeks added to their wine during the mixing ceremony which accompanied the *symposion*, reputedly with their own intoxicating effects” (130). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates references inebriation as part of his rejection of the lover (240e), and Phaedrus contrasts drinking parties with writing as a pastime (276d). In connecting these inebriating effects of plants, Plato establishes the perfume of plants as *pharmaka*, capable of both decreasing and increasing *Eros* and mania. Their intoxicating scent contributes to the growing irony between Plato, plants, and writing as a *pharmakon*.

Throughout the dialogue, Plato refers to the plane tree, and other plants, to make subtle, rhetorical gestures alluding to himself as the author of the text and to writing itself, playfully

exposing the constructed nature of the written text and calling attention to the relationship between writing and speech. Plato's metonymic use of plants in the *Phaedrus* sheds light on the dialogue's discussions of writing and rhetoric as *pharmaka*, disclosing an instructive unity between writing, rhetoric, and discourse. Through irony and metonymy, Plato uses plants and other rhetorical environmental elements to develop a complex web of connections spanning the entire dialogue (Ferrari). Through rhetorical techniques, Plato advances a holistic view that brings together a vast and overwhelming, number of dichotomies present in the dialogue. To be clear, this article does not seek to resolve the many well-noted riddles of the dialogue, but rather to show how trees might shed new light on these mysteries, and perhaps, cast others into shade. In what follows, I build from critical plant studies to discuss how the *pharmakon* is rooted in plant-based rhetorics, examine how plants speak to longstanding debates on unity and disunity, and unpack how Plato's plants can help us understand his critiques of heliotropism and his incongruous portrayals of rhetoric and writing.

### **Sylvan Rhetorics**

Although plants in Plato's *Phaedrus* offer key anchor points for interpreting the dialogue, scholars have focused more on other environmental and spatial elements. By homing in on the rhetorical role of plants in the *Phaedrus*, I hope to graft scholarship on ancient Greek botany (Forster, 1936; 1942), spatial rhetoric (Ferrari), and critical plant studies (Laist, 2013; Marder 2013; Marder 2023). In recent years, a budding interest in plants has begun to blossom in rhetoric and writing studies. For decades, scholars have examined how trees serve as icons for public memorialization (Black, 2019), environmental advocacy (Rice, 2012) anti-advocacy (Jones, 2020), environmental justice and peacebuilding (Chirindo, 2016), tree planting in the

Anthropocene (Clary-Lemon, 2019), science communication (Miller and Hartzog, 2020) and its affective dimensions (Barnett, 2021), and as part of more-than-human relations (Pflugfelder and Kelly 2022). Given its significance to both ancient and contemporary rhetoric and writing theories, the *Phaedrus* serves as a rootstock for connections between plants, writing, and rhetoric.

This essay builds on my previous study, “Sylvan Rhetorics,” where I argue “that trees have long been participants in rhetoric” (2019, 63). Trees offer a way to understand rhetoric as “rooted between nature and culture,” challenging distinctions between humans and nonhumans. While plants hold longstanding connections to rhetoric, they haven’t received their “day in the sun” according to John Muckelbauer (2016) partly because “there is nothing whatsoever human about a plant turning toward the sun” (39). While plants make for strange rhetorical companions, it is in their differences that we may find salves for human-centered rhetorical theory (Jones 2019, 67). This study builds from my initial examination of sylvan rhetorics in ancient theories (such as Aristotelian concepts like *hyle* and *telos*) to argue that “[r]hetoric has always been arboreal” (65). Likewise, Michael Marder’s *The Philosopher’s Plant* unearths the ways that the vegetal has, for centuries, played a central role in the development and growth of Western philosophy while often being relegated to secret potions, lush but marginal backgrounds, and roots entangled below dark surfaces. Marder’s brilliant work illuminates the capacious role plants play in Plato’s thought more generally and in the *Phaedrus* specifically. His analysis reveals how Plato’s cunning metaphor produces ironic relations between author and written environment. However, he stops short of connecting that central irony to the ways that the *Phaedrus* presents “a dialogue overtly hostile to *ars rhetorica* and even more so to writing” (4). While Marder concludes that Plato affirms philosophy over rhetoric and speech over writing, I



argue that plants in the *Phaedrus* suggest a more complex perspective of rhetoric and writing. Plato's use of arboromorphism reveals important layers to the dialogue's discussion of writing and rhetoric as *pharmaka*.<sup>3</sup> For example, Marder identifies the ways that heat indexes other "overtones of sexual seductiveness that permeate this strange love triangle of Phaedrus-Socrates-Plato" (5). Yet the presence of the chaste tree offers a contradictory salve, a *pharmakon*, between the heat of the day and the cool shade of the plane tree.

### **Platonic Irony and the Plane Tree**

While it is well beyond the scope of this essay to fully address the capacious role that irony and satire plays in Plato's writings, it is important to briefly discuss these concepts before turning to the role of plants in establishing writing and rhetoric as *pharmaka*. Many scholars have discussed the central role of irony in Plato's dialogues (Swearingen, 1991). In interpreting Plato's plane tree metonym, we encounter what Charles Griswold calls "the problem of interpretation" (84), an ambiguity hinging on Plato both as author and as a character conspicuously absent from most dialogues.<sup>4</sup> Though the dialogue genre that Plato writes in seems to reproduce qualities of conversational speech, the "dialogues are clearly fictional in character" (85). Given this, we must not mistake Plato's Socrates for the historical figure or as representing Plato's own views. While Griswold affirms that "there is no internal representation of the authorial Plato," the references to Plato-as-plane-tree in the *Phaedrus* playfully contradict the characterization of the author as "*deus absconditus*" (88). Against this larger Platonic irony, Griswold also describes a *Socratic* irony which occurs within the fictional plane of the dialogue and is "oral rather than written" (88). He explains that in the dialogues, "irony is as much a way of revealing as it is of concealing, a way of teaching and motivating the reader/auditor to look further" and that "irony

does not necessarily come to meaning the opposite of what one is saying” (88). This irony is of central importance to understanding the relationship between the plane tree and Socrates’ characterization of writing as a *pharmakon*, which we will return to in the next section.

While Marder admits that as an “obsessive writer [...] Plato could not bring himself to forgo intricate rhetorical devices, metaphors, subtle similitudes, and clever allegories,” or his “mythic storytelling,” he ultimately interprets these devices as supporting Socrates’ love of philosophy and denouncement of writing and rhetoric. Here, it is important to return to the idea that the name “Plato” may refer to his physical features (broad shoulders or forehead), his training as a wrestler, his broad style, or some combination of all three. This connects to Phaedrus’ mentions of wrestling holds (236c), Socrates’ discussion of a wrestler in the Olympic Games (256b), and his mockery of Lysias’ speech for being too broad (235a). To Marder, the shade of the plane tree becomes a “thin veneer that hides the towering presence of the student over the Socratic legacy” (4). Marder’s reading participates in debates about whether the dialogue denounces rhetoric (McAdon, 2004 and Neel, 1988) or positively advances a philosophical or dialectical rhetoric (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990). I argue that Plato’s self-allusion contradicts Socrates’ dismissal of writing and rhetoric, showing these tools as valuable for self-examination and pedagogy (100). The Plato/plane pun opens a space for readers to “wrestle” with the *agon* that the text dramatizes (Hawhee 36) as well as to understand how the text connects mind, body, and environment, through what Kevin Musgrave refers to a “dialogic rupture” that performs “an ethical stance toward alterity that forgoes the possibility of violence and respects plurality” (293). Irony and ambiguity promote a plurality between writing, rhetoric, and discourse, and in this place where material and ethereal planes enfold, Plato reproduces Socratic dialectic through writing.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to commonplace perspectives on the dialogue as

disunified, I read the irony that pervades the dialogue as part of what Robin Reames and Courtney Sloey (building from Derrida) refer to as “the subtle, hidden unity of the *Phaedrus*” (2021, 3). That is, tensions between the sophistic poetics of writing and the philosophical speeches are written into the irony and the plane tree and the dialogue itself.

### **Plants and the Pharmakon**

While Socrates dismisses trees and the countryside, I argue that Plato foregrounds plants to demonstrate how rhetoric and writing can produce the dialectic that Socrates reserves for speech. Trees help establish an irony between Plato and Socrates, dramatized through the plane tree.<sup>6</sup> This irony is a central element of Derrida’s famous criticism of writing as a *pharmakon*: “at once good and bad” (115). Derrida interprets Plato’s views on writing as a powerful drug, one that promises to augment memory but that also destroys living memory. In defining Plato’s view of writing as a type of drug, Derrida picks up on the many comparisons between plants, medicine, and writing in the dialogue. For instance, Socrates makes a withering comparison between writing and planting seeds in gardens of Adonis (267b), a tradition celebrating the vegetation god, where plants were sprouted quickly to display for the festival but would soon die.<sup>7</sup> In *Euthydemus*, Socrates directly discusses hellebore, often used to treat mental health disorders, as a remedy and a poison (299b). Likewise, in the *Phaedo*, Plato uses *pharmakon* to describe the cup of poison hemlock used to execute Socrates (117a).

Robin Reames and Courtney Sloey argue that Derrida’s “analysis of Plato’s *pharmakon* does not yield a truly ‘ambiguous’ understanding of writing” but one “that only seems good but in reality is bad” (12). As Derrida puts it, “[w]hat is magisterial about the demonstration affirms itself and effaces itself at once” (68). Socrates dismisses writing as incapable of producing

dialectic, comparing it to painting (275d-e, 552).<sup>8</sup> In my understanding of *pharmakon*, I work along the lines of Reames and Sloey, who follow “Derrida’s basic impulse to define writing as neither purely poisonous nor exclusively curative but both at once.” By focusing the central irony of the dialogue on trees, Plato brings attention both to the medium of writing (papyri, made of plant pulp) and to his rhetorical role as author of the dialogue. This irony fosters connections between the various dichotomies of the dialogue, demonstrating a subtle unity within Plato’s views on rhetoric, writing, and discourse. In *Bibliophobia*, Brian Cummings discusses how this irony speaks directly to the ambivalence that Plato directs toward writing and “the old world of face-to-face teaching” (166). He discusses how Derrida’s ‘Envois’ in *La carte postale* takes up the ironic reversals between Socrates and Plato as speaker and writer, “scribe or prophet” (166). Cummings directly connects this irony with the tensions of writing as an emerging technology in Greek culture. As Socrates and Phaedrus loiter in the cool shade of the plane tree, we are invited to wrestle with the difficult problems that writing and rhetoric, *as pharmaka*, present to self-examination and pedagogy.

### **Unity and Disunity**

A sylvan perspective on the *Phaedrus* brings its masterful, holistic unity into view. Since antiquity, debates abound over the dialogue’s unity or disunity. Since Olympiodorus, Neoplatonists frequently interpreted the supposed disunity as a flaw, leading to the 19th-century characterization of the *Phaedrus* as an early Platonic work by a greenhorn writer (De Vries, 8).<sup>9</sup> While such characterizations have been shown to be quite dubious, this tradition contributed to a longstanding interpretation of the dialogue which views the different sections, topics, and elements as stylistically incommensurable.<sup>10</sup> George Kennedy (1994) suggests the dialogue is

“divided into two parts” (39). As Jessica Moss puts it, the dialogue “famously seems to be a misshapen jumble” (1). Against these interpretations, Derrida (1981) claims that “the *Phaedrus* [...] was obliged to wait almost twenty-five centuries before anyone gave up the idea that it was a badly composed dialogue” (66). Such negative portrayals hinge on understanding the unity of supposedly disparate elements that unfold across the dialogue.

The numerous, complex connections Plato establishes between topics—mania/*Eros*/countryside/Dionysus, *logos*/chastenedness/*polis*/Apollo, love/inspiration/Muses—and the tensions between others, such as love/*Eros*, orality/literacy, writing/speech, rhetoric/philosophy, countryside/*polis*, and mania/*logos*—can make the dialogue seem chaotic and disorderly. For example, while the chaste tree clearly points to the embodied experiences of the characters in the dialogue, who are surrounded by its fragrance and subdued by its effects, it also hints at the topic of Lysias’ written speech, Phaedrus’ impassioned reading, and Socrates’ spoken responses, as well as to the constructed nature of the dialogue genre itself, to writing. Lysias’ speech also evokes questions of authority, as it does not closely resemble any of his known works (De Vries 12-13). The claims of authenticity cannot be taken seriously, as they play into Plato’s exaggerations of Lysias’ style, pointing to the tension between writing and memory. In the speech, Lysias argues that it is better to choose a partner who is not in love with you, as *Eros* acts like a sickness which impairs *sophrosyne*, meaning “sound mind” or “sound thinking” (231d). Like the chaste tree, cicadas, and myth, *Eros* has the power to impair and confuse. After Phaedrus finishes reading, he asks Socrates if the speech was well put. Importantly, he uses the word *hyperphuos*, with *phu* meaning “grow,” “germinate,” or “nature,” which could translate to “preternatural.” Again, Plato uses synecdoche to index Lysias’ written speech, the natural world, and refer to the Plato/plane pun. Socrates finds the speech “out of this

world” and feels intoxicated. He then specifies it was not the writing that enflamed his passions but rather Phaedrus’ reading, making him “radiant with delight,” recalling how his name refers to light (234d). This sets up an important play that will come full circle later in the dialogue, when Socrates compares writing to painting, dismissing both as unable to respond to inquiry or say anything new (275d-e). The irony here is that Phaedrus and Socrates are discussing the speech together, and Socrates blames his failed speech on being bewitched by both Lysias’ writing and Phaedrus’ recitation (242d-e). Likewise, Lysias has used his rhetorical capabilities to charm his readers, which directly contradicts the argument in the speech. The growing passion and mania Socrates experiences points again to the connections between the environment, the mythical, and embodied experiences of the *dramatis personae* (234d).

The sense of disunity is exacerbated by translation and loss of the etymological roots of Plato’s wordplay. Yet, this displacement is also a characteristic of the dialogue itself. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates greets Phaedrus by asking him where he has been and where he is going, suggesting the meandering trails of thought that the pair will soon traverse together, and immediately the spatial and environmental elements of the dialogue abound. The English word for “place” shares roots with Plato (“broad”), seen in “Broadway” and these etymologies are further tangled in the plane tree with “plant,” meaning “to spread” or broaden. At the same time, the dialogue also evokes a disjointed sense of time and place, or *atopia*, meaning “without a place” or “out of place” (Kennerly 2021, 71). Rather than “taking a stance” (*topos*) on the dichotomies discussed in the dialogue, Plato sets the stage for a dynamic unity, portraying writing, rhetoric, and discourse as richly interwoven. Phaedrus tells Socrates that he has just left a conversation with Lysias, though this immediately renders the dialogue anachronistic (*atopos*), as it is unlikely that the timelines of the historical figures in the text could align in this way.

The strange temporal displacement of the dialogue contributed to the characterization of the *Phaedrus* as an early Platonic dialogue by scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (De Vries, 8), a belief which was later heavily critiqued as the dialogue became viewed as a “stylistic *tour de force*” (10). Likewise, the pair decide to leave the city walls, which is unusual for the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues. As Michele Kennerly discusses in “Socrates *Ex Situ*,” both Socrates the character and historical figure were “out of place,” as “contemporaries called him *atopos*” (2017, 196)—partly in reference to the *Phaedrus* (229c6). This is especially important because, as Kennerly puts it, “Socrates is *reception all the way down*” (198), and by extension, so is the rhetorical environment that Plato writes into being, including the trees and other nonhuman characters (Ferrari). The central irony of the plane tree bares some of those connections and fosters unity throughout the dialogue. Rather than treating these concepts as separate, the dialogue dramatizes them through irony and metonymy. As Socrates claims towards the end of the dialogue, “every speech should be put together like a living creature, with its own proper body [...] with all the parts written so that they fit in with one another and with the whole” (264c). In the *Phaedrus*, trees and other plants offer a way to challenge presumptions about the dialogue’s insights and to enrich our understanding of Plato’s portrayal of rhetoric and writing as *pharmaka* that are intimately bound to place and the material environment.

### **Critique of Heliotropism**

As the pair wait out the heat of the day, the shade offers a place for Plato to voice opposition to the type of rhetoric that Muckelbauer (2016) refers to as “heliotropism” or “the movement of plants toward the sun” (41). Phaedrus reads aloud from Lysias’ speech, which discusses the role of *Eros* in love. He persuades Socrates to voice a response to the writing. Socrates begrudgingly

obliges, first in an impotent rebuttal, and finally in a flowering speech, referred to as the palinode. The dialogue dramatizes the erotic power of rhetoric (McCoy; Yunis) and demonstrates how dialectic can correct what Socrates sees as the heliotropism of sophistic rhetoric and writing (see Kastley). As they take shelter beneath the shade of the plane and chaste trees, calefaction and shade become playful metaphors for the ways writing and dialogue mediate and influence passions, as well as imitation (*mimesis*).<sup>11</sup> Socrates, overwhelmed by Eros during Phaedrus' recitation, cools down as reason prevails. Socrates describes a lover "not trained in full sunlight but in dappled shade" (239c, 518). As he describes the fragrance of the chaste tree, Socrates contrasts it with "the stream flowing under the plane tree [which] is particularly charming, and its water is very cold" (230b) along with the "chorus of the cicadas" and the soft grass that sits on a "gentle slope which is perfect for resting one's head on when lying down" (230c). The place's charm threatens to overwhelm the pair, luring them to sleep. The environment both reflects and exacerbates Socrates' soporific response as he lies down in the grass to passively listen to Phaedrus read. Again, the dialogue points to Phaedrus' radiance, a heliotropic force that renders Socrates passive. Plato points to the dialogue as a written speech and places readers in a similar position as Socrates "dozing in the shade." Though Socrates refers to writing as mute phenomena (275d), his speech represented in dialogue is deeply ironic. At the same time, the plane tree's cool shade and chaste tree's scent act as remedies for heat-induced mania. This pleasure-seeking heat is also associated with rhetoric in Socrates' critique in the *Gorgias* (Plato, "Gorgias" 465c5–8, 810). Through reflection and discourse, Socrates shields Phaedrus from the heat of sophism, which he sees as built on an Athenian infrastructure of colonialism, enslavement, extraction, and agriculture. Read this way, the shade provides space for Socrates' chastened response to the *Eros* of sophistic writing.



The heat of Phaedrus' recitation of Lysias' speech overwhelms and intoxicates Socrates in parts of the dialogue. This is the model of rhetoric that the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedrus* opposes: the sophist speaking persuasively in the agora as a passive audience turns their heads like sunflowers shifting towards the light. In this model, there is no critical thinking, engagement, or participation—only the sender's eloquence and the receiver's attunement to stimuli. At the same time, Socrates' opposition to heliotropic rhetoric, and writing as a medium, are couched within the irony of him being a character in a written text. Throughout the dialogue, Plato dramatizes heliotropism through plants and other environmental elements. Socrates makes constant references to walking and conversation (227d). Importantly, this movement foreshadows the conflict between philosophy and sophistry as embodied in the character of Socrates and the disembodied writings of Lysias, as sophists travel to earn their living while philosophers seek to restore their own *polis*. Bess Myers explores the connections between wandering and dichotomies of sophistry/philosophy, which creates problems for democracy when hubristic “wandering consequently destabilizes the state because so many of those already in power are primarily focused on maintaining and expanding that power, rather than caring for the state and its people” (Myers 265). While she focuses her analysis on the *Sophist* and *Timaeus*, she argues that “these dichotomies should map onto other Platonic dialogues—including, significantly, his rhetorical dialogues (265). As Socrates leaves the city, he enters the countryside, connecting Dionysian mania to sophistic rhetoric. Through synecdoche and irony, the *Phaedrus* operates on an ambiguity that allows readers to participate in the performance of a dialectic that lends itself to more subtle views on rhetoric and writing than those espoused by Socrates.

At the same time, the heat of the day is also connected to a “passion for hearing speeches,” which compels Phaedrus to wander outside the city seeking Socrates at daybreak (228b, 508). Here, he refers to passion as both a “sickness” and a “frenzy,” which begins to establish the connections between the heat of the day, *Eros*, rhetoric, speech, and writing (as a *pharmakon*) that will continue to build throughout the rest of the dialogue in what Robin Reames and Courtney Sloey refer to as a conflict between “the controlled mastery of the knowing subject and the unbridled forces of the passive, manic subject” (2021, 18). They show that Plato uses “writing to construct two contrary models of knowledge and subjectivity—the critical, scientific subjectivity of the literate subject and the manic passivity of the possessed speaker that could be explained only by divine power” (2022, 3). Their analysis aptly reveals the contrast between “the verdant, lush setting in which the interlocutors are immersed” and “the text Phaedrus reads [that] serves as a model for the critical distance that writing provides” (6). However, as Reames (2018) points out elsewhere, the dialogue constantly gestures to the text as written material, which produces a rich irony that both delineates and undercuts its distinctions. As such, there are clear connections between the environment, the discussions of love and *Eros*, the embodied experiences of mania, and writing and speech. This ambiguity creates a dynamic experience that emphasizes the value of each of the different conflicting topics and elements through a harmonious text that resonates with complex ambiguity.

Socrates declares that “landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me—only the people in the city can do that” (230d, 510), revealing a preference for the Apollonian city where he practices philosophy in other dialogues over the sophistry of the Dionysian countryside. When Socrates refuses to respond, Phaedrus exclaims,

I swear to you—by which god, I wonder? How about this very plane tree?—I swear in all truth that, if you don't make your speech right next to this tree here, I shall never, never again recite another speech for you—I shall never utter another word about speeches to you! (236e).

This irony emphasizes the role of trees as a key to understanding the harmony of the *Phaedrus*.<sup>12</sup> While Socrates denounces writing and rhetoric, Plato gestures to writing and rhetoric through the plane tree. Socrates' statement sets the stage for the mania he experiences when he leaves the city walls and listens to Phaedrus' passionate recitation of Lysias' speech. This contrast between the Apollonian and Dionysian connects the discussion of *Eros* to mania and gestures to the Plato/plane pun, suggesting that trees do, in fact, have much to teach Socrates. As the pair engage in a peripatetic discourse, Socrates leads them from the roadside to the banks of the Ilissus, where they walk towards the plane tree. As they approach the tree, Socrates begins to describe the different nonhuman characters that make up the scene, such as the cicadas, which seem to harmonize their sounds with the breeze.<sup>13</sup> He refers to the stream as "charming" (230b) and interprets the statues and votives to mean the place is sacred to Achelous and some of the Nymphs. Following this, Socrates refers to Lysias's speech as "bait" or a "potion" or "charm" (230d-e, 510) and says that Phaedrus has used the writing to lure him wherever he wanted, when in fact it was Socrates that led them to this place. He notes that it would not be "out of place" for him to question the history of the spot and offers a flippant counter-mythology of the place (229c).<sup>14</sup> This establishes the synecdochical irony between the plane tree, which refers to Plato as author, and the notion of writing and storytelling as capable of being at once a remedy for memory and a tool to mislead.

One example of Plato's use of punning and irony to offer similar critiques can be found elsewhere, in the *Critias-Timaeus* dialogues, where Socrates voices opposition to the extractive practices that fuel Athenian imperialism through the allegory of Atlantis (Backhaus 7). In these dialogues, Plato offers a regionalist critique of Athenian excess fueled by imperialist practices (Jones, 2016). In the *Critias*, the descriptions of precious metals refer to the mining and refining of silver, which took place just south of Athens at the Larium mines, one of the largest veins of silver ever discovered (Jones, 2016). While natural resources were considered state property (Hughes 118), mining operations at Larium also made a handful of individual Athenians wealthy (Healy 132), and Plato was critical of the conflicts this posed for the relationship between public and private interests (Taylor 227). In these dialogues, the degradation of the environment reflects political decay, connecting *polis* and *psyche*, or "city and soul" (Lane, 2012). In the *Cratylus* dialogue, Plato deploys name associations to refer critically to Hipponicus, known as the "richest man in Greece," who profited immensely from the Larium mines and whose wealth funded numerous sophists (Bartlett 160). In these critiques, Plato uses wordplay to connect the extractive processes of mining and refining silver to the Athenian navy that the silver funded, and then to the imperial practices that allowed Athens to fill the mines with enslaved workers. This example demonstrates how Plato frequently uses wordplay in the dialogues to create richly layered and subtle arguments.

The "dappled shade" of the written dialogue creates an ambiguity that can bring about the sort of dialectic dramatized in the dialogue. As the pair finish praying together, the heat of the day softens, and Socrates asks that their inner selves be made harmonious with the external world (279b). Attention to the subtle unity of the dialogue reveals how Plato portrays rhetoric and writing as a *pharmakon*. The dialogue's use of arboromorphism supports dialectical views of

rhetoric, writing, and discourse as that speak directly to the discussions of love (Weaver, 1996) and the private/political dimensions of conversation (Kastley, 2018). The trees of the *Phaedrus* serve as images, characters, and metaphors that illustrate and complicate the ways that writing, rhetoric, and discourse can both mediate and arouse passion. In the shade of these trees, Plato cultivates a space for cool reflection and dialectic that reveals our entanglements with, and obligations to, the environment. Through playful ambiguity, Plato establishes a harmony that both delineates and undermines distinctions between the wide array of interconnected topoi.

## **Conclusion**

By examining plants in the *Phaedrus*, I discuss how the text espouses a profound ambiguity that both delineates and undermines the dichotomies it wrestles with, performing a dialectic that invites readers to participate. This analysis shows how Socrates and the other characters are instructive, rather than direct representations of Plato's view on rhetoric and writing. To ignore the irony and unity of the *Phaedrus* traps us in the very heliotropic perspective that the dialogue resists. Though Socrates dismisses writing as a tool of rhetoric in its basest forms, Plato's plane tree reveals them to be true *pharmaka*, at once a remedy and a poison. This reading reveals how the *Phaedrus* and other dialogues are touchstones for new materialist and environmental rhetorics. In her analysis of the *Sophist* and *Timaeus* dialogues, Myers explains how Plato contrasts circular, mental motion—which he associated with philosophy—against the wanderings of sophistry (253). The *Phaedrus* dramatizes these movements as the characters wander until they find shade in writing to contemplate the dialogue's animating dichotomies. Through rhetorical devices like synecdoche and irony, Plato also invites us to consider how the mythical and material planes remind us of our responsibilities to our place in the world. Plato's

plane tree semantics toy with dichotomies like story/history, material/ethereal, poison/remedy, memory/forgetting, actual/virtual, spoken/written, revealing rootstock that we might graft to scions of spatial, ecological, digital, cultural, and historical perspectives of rhetoric and writing. These connections open exciting new avenues of scholarship tracing the material and vegetal roots of rhetorical theory.

The value of the *Phaedrus* lies in how it draws on the environment to produce its generative irony, crossing the vegetal and the rhetorical to offer a compelling figure through which to grow our understanding of rhetoric and writing. The plane tree suggests a broader view of rhetoric and writing and demonstrates that landscapes and trees do have much to teach us about our rhetorical entanglements with, and ethical obligations to, the environment. Attention to plants broadens our understanding of the rhetorical entanglements between humans, nonhumans, and places. This reading demonstrates that much remains to be learned about Plato by focusing future studies on the role of plants in other dialogues—such as Socrates’ comparison in *Euthyphro* between tending “young plants” and corrupting the youth (2d), in the discussion of seasonal time (*hōrai*) and plants in *Cratylus*, or the comparison of the speechwriter and the greedy farmer in the *Hipparchus* (225b)—and show not only how Plato uses plants as rhetorical devices but also how plants have long informed his understanding of rhetoric. These connections between plants and rhetoric suggest many areas of inquiry for future studies, both in unearthing roots in rhetorical history and discovering future grafting points. For instance, George Kennedy’s (1992) “Hoot in the Dark” suggested that rhetoric should be characterized as energy moving through both plant and animal life. This idea proved years ahead of its time and, as Diane Davis puts it, “[t]he field’s immediate reaction [...] was basically to wonder what Kennedy had been smoking” (276). Davis reads this reaction as evidence Kennedy crossed a line scholars had

drawn around rhetoric. This study suggests that the connections between plants and rhetoric are much older than Kennedy (who as a decorated Plato scholar was certainly aware of this fact).

While Plato's rhetorical environments are intractably part of the human world, they also unearth just how deeply rooted humans are to, and dependent upon, the environments they inhabit. At the end of the dialogue, the pair pray together as the heat softens, and Socrates asks that their inner selves be made harmonious with the external world (279b). Just as Socrates and Phaedrus find a harmonious place in the chaste tree's perfume and the plane tree's shade, so might we come to better understand our obligations to, and place within, the environments we rhetorically inhabit by reading the *Phaedrus* in the shade of a tree on a hot summer's day.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Steve Forrester, gifted philosopher, teacher, and poet, who first inspired my love of Plato's dialogues. I am deeply grateful to *RR* reviewers John Belk and Chris Mays for bringing out the best in this essay, as well as the generous support of the editor, Elise Verzosa Hurley and Assistant Editor Addison Lamb. I would also like to thank Sidney I. Dobrin for suggesting I undertake this study and Lee Rozelle, Kimberly Wright, Adam Roberts, Leah Heilig, Jeremiah Dyehouse, and Raúl Sánchez for their feedback.

<sup>2</sup> See E.V. Walter's *Placeway*, G. R. F. Ferrari's *Listening to the Cicadas*, Nedra Reynolds' *Geographies of Writing* and Lisa Swanstrom's *Animal, Vegetable, Digital*. As Ferrari puts it, "what is particularly striking about this dialogue is that the background will not stay where it belongs. It becomes a prominent topic of discussion and a direct cause of the conversational action" (3-4).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Cooper-Smithson coined *arboromorphism* to refer to "the literal, literary, or psychological process of becoming a tree" (223). She defines it as "both an ethics and a poetics, a way of thinking and writing connectively, collectively, in a kin-making, assembling, or branching kind of way, that looks beyond the scope and scale of human lives and bodies" (234).

<sup>4</sup> Griswold notes that he is only directly mentioned "twice in the entire corpus, once as being absent (Pho. 59b10), and once as being present (Apol. 38b6)" (84).

<sup>5</sup> While it is well beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the connections between *atopia* in the *Phaedrus* and the influential spatial concept of *chora* (Ulmer, 1994), Thomas Rickert turns to

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Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Gregory Ulmer to argue that “*chōra* transforms our senses of beginning, creation, and invention by placing them concretely within material environments, informational spaces, and affective (or bodily) registers, and in the case of Derrida, also by displacing them” (252). When they leave the city walls, they encounter a choric space, because “used in the context of *polis*, [*chōra*] more properly means the surrounding territory; a *polis* consists of a town (*asty*) and territory (*chōra*). Most importantly, *chōra* directly confronts questions of “how we give life to and make a place for (static) ideas” (257).

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Rosen offers a careful analysis of the problem of authorial intent in Plato’s *Republic*, demonstrating that we cannot “automatically identify Plato’s views with those expressed by Socrates” (2). Importantly for the *Phaedrus*, Socrates uses rhetorical techniques to convince Phaedrus, alluding to rhetoric and writing as *pharmaka*, while mirroring the argument in the *Republic* that if “philosopher-kings are authorized to tell medicinal lies for the good of the city, why should the teacher of philosopher-kings not permit himself such medicine for the good of his pupils?” (2).

<sup>7</sup> In *The Gardens of Adonis*, Marcel Detienne reconsiders how the ephemeral gardens that Athenian women planted were a form of mockery of Adonis. He considers the function of such vegetal matter as spices, myrrh, and other plants in religious practice and in a wide selection of myths in connection with the history of sexuality and gender.

<sup>8</sup> Jasper Neel builds from Derrida to argue that Plato uses a “brilliant rhetorical ploy,” where he uses “a medium against itself so as to debase it and impede its use by all followers” (28). Neel underscores the irony, that Socrates “could stand under the plane tree beside the Ilissus and shout as loudly as he liked; the only way we ‘hear’ him today is in writing” (3).

<sup>9</sup> Importantly, scholars do not have any definitive consensus on the ordering of Plato’s dialogues, though there are established groupings based on characters, themes, content and style. T.H. Irwin explains that historical dates and events “are mostly useless for fixing the dates of composition, since most of them are much earlier than any date at which Plato could conceivably have written the dialogues” (71). The order of the dialogues become especially important because scholars “suggest that Plato began by agreeing with Socrates, but developed his distinctive, and in some respects non-Socratic, philosophical outlook” (73). Irwin suggests that *Phaedrus* probably appears somewhere in the middle of the chronology, supporting a reading of Plato’s ambivalent characterizations of Socrates.

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Moss revisits unity in the *Phaedrus* and offers numerous sources which include “unity” and “Phaedrus” in the title of the essay (see Heath, Rowe 1989, Muller, Plass, Winnington-Ingram, Ferrari 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Ekaterina Haskins argues that, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato turns Socrates “into a mime, making him speak in voices other than his own” (35). Such portrayals demonstrate the ways that Plato uses rhetorical devices such as foils to achieve philosophical ends.



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<sup>12</sup> Because Phaedrus has invoked the plane tree, when Socrates calls to the Muses, he reinforces the mythical/material dynamic that will come to fruition in his final speech, when he recognizes the cicadas that dwell on the tree as spies for the gods.

<sup>13</sup> Here, Socrates commits an offense against the gods which is witnessed by the cicadas. Muckelbauer claims, “[e]ver since the cicadas offered a sonic canvas on which Phaedrus and Socrates articulated their fetish for logos, rhetoric has made its way on the backs of animality” (2011, 98). It is important to note that their dialogue is also witnessed by the plane tree, and therefore by Plato as writer.

<sup>14</sup> Pedersen demonstrates that in this scene “Plato is calling into question the division between belief (*nomos*) and reality (*physis*), between his philosophy espoused through Socrates, and those of his contemporaries, invoked in the coy words of Phaedrus” (9).

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