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HYPATIA'S GAZE

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Ther comes a time in everyones lief whan 'tis gode
think on ones condition & look ahead by looking in.
[.] A time to speech ma minding 'n let some wisdam
yrise. Call on a friendly assembly for fair share &
witnessing, and there let ones hair down!

– Caroline Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*

Hi y'all, my meme is Hypatia (FYI: just so you know, I'm channelling my friend Caroline who begins her recent book, *Alisoun Sings*, with "Hi you all, I am Alisoun," so simple, so cool, so go open the book, but not now). You might know mee as a buddy of Sophia's, the one from/in/of philoSOPHIA (WISDOM), who is probably better known and nowadays, I see, she is more artificially present. The same difference? She, highly patient too, is the one with the Botox smile.

Just googled my, I mean, meme-self, just curious yes. The first entry by or as we say "hit" from *ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA*, penned by Michael Deakin, says this about my double me: Hypatia, (born c. 355 CE—died March 415, Alexandria), mathematician, astronomer and philosopher who lived in a very turbulent era in Alexandria's history. She is the earliest female mathematician of whose life and work reasonably detailed knowledge exists.

You could go read there a reasonably detailed summary of the reasonably detailed knowledge about this other one whose "philosophy also led her to embrace the life of dedicated virginity." A nun too? Who knew? When? Two Hypatias? Maybe even three?

As for dress I take all ma Qs from Getalife, will get
back to what.

– Caroline Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*

In any case, like my big sis Simone (de Beauvoir, 1908–1986), yeah, who wrote *The Second Sex* (1949), another life-long embracer of dedicated philosophising, who was also known for her unavoidable beauty, not unlike her I have been rather “hesitating” to write this out, “for a long time,” yes, this very note on philosophy, as our Elly knows all too well, but then when I heard the other day my girlcrush Alisoun singing out loud in *Alisoun Sings* (2019), ALL LISTEN ALISOUN SINGING!—yeah that voluble beauty from *The Canterbury’s Tales*, Al we call her, who just got revived so awesomely resonatingly by Caroline Bergvall, as I think I mentioned earlier—I got so aMUSEd, aroused, psyched and all that, thinking well yeah why not, ’tis about time, #philosophERS too. “Sbeen a long timem,” as dear Al says, indeed, patient, high again.

Dunno Alisoun? Fine, no fame, no shame.

No shame either in not knowing. It is nice to know that everyone is ignorant of at least one thing, something. It is not nice to know that many, far too many, ignore *that*, ignoring the obvious that should be acknowledged as such, at least minimally, that is. How so everyday *and* so esoteric ...

Remember just that, **Point #1**. The first and one last thing this lady philosopher, mee, whosbeen teaching philosophy 101 for over two decades, transcontinentally too, in Europe, in Asia, in North America, would ask you from the start even if you’re an indoctrinated professional type or especially *if* you are, is to remember, **re-member the obvious, something so obvious as to be obliterated in front of our eyes**, “hidden in plain sight.” How does that happen? Almost always.

Almost always, the mind connected to the body and vice versa, call it a mindbody, is where such a vibrantly membraned perspicuity—foresights and insights—of perception gets stored, sharpened, cultivated, amplified, and shared. Consider it, all *sides*, like lovers’ words, like liars covers, first and last and in between. When we hear the legendary Socrates saying “know yourself” or him on about some stunningly beautiful soul in an unremarkably ordinary body that often gets overlooked in *this* world, we hear a troubled, and desiring, mind nursing its own unknowing or semi-knowing through a body that senses its mortal defects and wishes.

Philosophers whose main business is to think ... thinks things *through*. It inhabits that love of or passion for X, or more like friendship (*philos*) with it, like some oddly gluey arrow that would pass through and connect all sorts of bodies that think while being thought at least in thought. As René Descartes (1596–1650) saw it, who could *not but* think, one simply thinks, no matter what. In other words, I think, or more precisely, I *am* thinking, no matter who, or what, or where I am.

If, however, the Cartesian tendency of a modernised consciousness to escape to an island of iThink seems rather limiting, if you reckon its tendency towards narcissistically truncated self-regard psychopathologically excessive, potentially or actually—although I must also point out, as I did in *Reading Descartes*

Otherwise (2013), that this man of ambitious reason did try to include all broadly conscious activities in his conception of *cogitare* (to think) and so what we might need to do is not to reject him and his philosophical legacy altogether, which is neither possible nor desirable, too late, history's part of us, but rather to *rethink* all such by *re-reading* them—we can also, quickly here, turn to another sense of philosophy from the East Asian Sinographic sphere, for instance. “Philosophy 哲學,” retroactively reconstructed like so in a kind of modern epochal response to the “Western” philosophy is, to think of it literally through its etymological signal, a kind of thorough(ly analytic *and* synthetic) discourse, verbal networks 口 (a mouth, an entrance) that would skilfully ax 斤 the object at hand 扌, sort of cracking it, its code, in which what is stressed is this simple, powerful point that philosophy is also a practice through and through, not just a series of sayings. In sum, philosophers are those who, while thinking thoroughly, do philosophy, and female philosophers are those who do that while female.

For now then, going back to Alisoun, whom we must also re-member: just con-sider this about her, the following, two together as in, say, two of a kind. First, our Alisoun is an intriguingly juicy and juicily controversial “Dame,” as Caroline stresses right from the start of her *Alisoun Sings*, the title of the first chapter. She, (springing from) the Wife of Bath, a strong, sassy, mature woman, is the singular female “soveraynetee” among a nun and the Prioress in that aforementioned unfinished poetic masterpiece by Geoffrey Chaucer, “the Founder of the English language,” “the Father of English literature,” etc., I mean, EnglySHE. Now then, also note that there is another Alisoun in Chaucer's tales, from the Miller's Tale, much younger, an intriguingly juicy and juicily controversial local beauty, also noted for the strength of her character. What I want to do here and with you all, is to bring them together, mingling the Alisounian senses and references. What I want us to enter together is a kind of Alisoun in wonderland sonically gathered here, a world of transgenerational alternativity. Consider both and many sides of HER at once, the manifold character(s) overlapping in one and the same name.

For instance, one of (younger) Alisoun's meme-worthy moments is when she stuck her “naked ers” (arse, which does now sound like ears too) out the window in place of her mouth so wanted by many opposite mouths of the opposite sex, when Absolon, an unwanted suitor, eagerly offered a wet lingering nightly kiss. Now, as if that were not hot(ly sore) enough, her lover of the night, dashing Nicholas, after co-giggling wildly and solo-farting pointedly on her behalf, when Absolon returns with a hot iron poker and a 2nd offer of his moist lips, gets his buttocks branded.

So what? What has this bit of class ob-scenity got to do with philosophy? Look, read it again:

First, one, including you, could see this case of displaced orality or replaced anality, perhaps equally banal and equally cerebral, as 2 men fighting over 1 woman who, then, outlives the battle. Also for the record, **Point #2:** note

foshur that **she**, “**the 2nd sex**,” **did it 1st**, the ers-sticking, she did done it already, which makes him a 2nd fiddle. It was also HER, another Al-Listener all the way back, Eve, who got curious, first, **who wants to know that thing unlike her boo**. Who, practically, started the tree of knowledge? Who first ate that apple and took a s***?

Likewise, though it might be a stretch to call Alisoun a feminist performance artist or thinker in action, this hyper-hetero-sexualised Wife of Both, her moral (NB: mOral) sexual activism, her counter-active dual lipkinkiness, remains amply instructive. Her oranal bi-portal fluidity is ...

Btw nat worry should ma language feeling it weirdo,
rude & cueryous at first. Rough as a cats lick or like a
dress whats travagant [...] as though am speechin
many languages at once. Whats forshur! And many
stories too! In many gay appare! [...] the northern sea
rushing between my herculean legs splashes against the
mixed wools of my quim.

– Caroline Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*

yes, cueryously or qriously, which way you put it, “as agile ... as a french kiss or a sailing cog in the storm,” as the smoothly “frenchy” lower-case alisoun puts it. Hélène Cixous, the avant-garde thinker-scholar-writer, a poet, a critic, a professor, also a playwright who plays right all around, another feministar, “Jewish-Algerian-French,” the Jewish Women’s Archive.org says, dubbed this move that counters the phallic language-centred norms in intellection, “*l’écriture féminine*” (womanly writing); if interested, go read, not now though, her braingasmic 1975 essay “*Le Rire de la Méduse*” (The Laugh of the Medusa). Poignant hilarity continues, the echo of. The title almost says it all, if you care to hear it—yes, *through* that castrated, viral head of hers that just can’t stop reproducing her-othered-weathered-selves, viscerally menstrually questioning, threatening, that is, the monosyllabic monolithic monolingual monologic monadic monotonous monosexualised and monopolised one-ness of phallic proselytising. Her problem? Too many fizzy phalluses? But just because her hairs are fab doesn’t mean you’d have a bad hair day, right?

Say-so maselfs been good, spite a beating, or two.

– Caroline Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*

Re-cognising in 2020 the polyphallic mobilisation and postmodern retreatment of the Medusa’s hair inseparable from her head and then her face and her gaze and her mouth and her voice and so on that overlaps with many others’ to be *allisouned* to, I cannot but entertain this notion again, “*l’écriture féminine philosophique*” “if I may just add the word “philosophical” freely incorrectly subterraneanly unfrenchy to the concept,” as I was also making this point

in a recent (2017) article on “Second Languageing *The Second Sex*, Its Conceptual Genius.” Well, here, having come this far, I might as well go further to say, *l'écriture féminine philosophysique*. What glues the Medusa's oracerebral fecundity and Alisoun's oranal fluidity, what runs through them supplely ever after is their contemporarised pre-posterity, their profoundly embodied, philosophical vibrancy that challenges the tyranny of over-professionalised philosophy, which, I, Prof. Dr. Lee, one professing the love of wisdom to a P.H. degree, feel compelled to amplify.

Nowadays in the age of #MeToo movements, when old new stories about the boundary-violating sexual behaviours of some mature folks, mostly men, of tenured reason begin to surface as newspaper headlines, as if in part to fill the void in the increasingly philosophy-free world often found in the world of institutional(ly empowered and impoverished) philosophy, what we are witnessing through the eyes of Sophia, the object of philosophic love, is a mundane, and at times alarmingly academic, allegory of philosophy. Just imagine a kind of high-functioning artificial intelligence phenomenally naturalised, theoretically sexualised. Warmly welcome those “real dolls” tagged with their own school email addresses too, the impossibly lovely lips and buttocks and holy holes of youthful, often female, graduate student assistants or fresh admirers *in the eyes of* those often in a position to be able to call themselves distinguished philosophers. Consider how they, some real lovers of Sophia in their own salaried mind of purity, could therefore abuse and exploit such eroticised objects *in the name of* philosophy, the shared love of intellection.

Quite simply, what would Sophia look like, this metonymic object? With “long hairs, short ideas,” as Michèle Le Dœuff quips, one of the most spirited philosophers today (who by the way happens to be usually very sexily short-haired, although the length of her hair is essentially her own business of course, which also would have no correlation to the philosophic power of her head *per se*), the stereotypical image of Sophia as an object of (modern) philosophical contemplation, namely, as nature itself or herself (*la nature*), still appears to be almost, mysteriously, just given. While really hoping that I myself might be really just anachronistic about this in this day and age, I note that this sort of cognitive shortcut many thinking folks have still internalised and even buy into, “a long-haired woman = a bimbo,” this sort of rudimentarily sexist code of generic (un)attractiveness socially *naturalised* as such (for one does not instantly undervalue the *intelligence* of long-haired dudes) needs to be cracked, especially philosophically.

Still unclear? Not quite convinced? Try this too then, quickly.

Google “Sophia” and you will mostly see the contemporary AI version, with almost no hair, for presumably the thinking machines would need to be ventilated in order to operate well and her gender code is often in the digitally modified red lips or else in her slightly twitchy lips or just the name, of course. Another thing about the Sophic face that may not have escaped your attention

is her racialised code, of course. Why (not)? We might also want to ask why some noticed that and, perhaps more importantly, some didn't. What is the colour, and cost, of that techno-abstraction? Again, do not ignore the obvious that remains obscure. Re-register the fact.

Google, this time, "Sophia the goddess of wisdom" and you will get a variety of long-haired versions, the classical conundrum I am alluding to, the issue being that Sophia has either a (very, and often supposedly lovely) long hair or else a (very, and often reactionarily or defensively politicised) short hair, but hardly a neutral hair style of her own (choosing), except when, perhaps, she gets to be lucky enough to become part of a community that can afford to forget about all this hairy headache at least for a while. The long mythological resonance about wisely long-haired Sophia notwithstanding (the long-bearded, differently gendered, while related, is a topic for a whole new paper), a modern and still often academically secondarised Sophia still seems to have little room to grow in further unless she flips her beautiful long hairs so cuttingly, so wildly, so radically so long, to become a really long-haired ghost that can even neither publish nor perish. Can Sophia think? Does Sophia have a mind, a language, a world, of her own?

That is: if this kind of often lopsided—unrequited, in a feminised language—and misguided, almost instantly fetishised, institutionally twisted *philia* for SO-PHIAs is or has become part of the normalised, normativised, ob-scenity of philosophic thinking, how should philosophers love?

Note forshur that my point is not to moralise or police the freedom of loving, of living lovingly. Also, note foshur that not all philosophers are actually *doing* philosophy, many just studying it. On the contrary, what I am suggesting is that philosophy will become most beautifully powerful when it remains self-critical while creatively attuned to its own blindness. In that spirit, let me put my **Point #3** in the form of a question: **could Sophia become a subject?** (subject *and* object)

Here comes Hypatia again, who would love Sophia and think as Sophia. And where is she now?

You might have seen my meme and some of her buddies in your PHI 101 class or the cover of the syllabus if your college professor chose to use some visual shortcut, "The School of Athens" (1509–1511) by Raphael. It's everywhere, again google it, if you don't know what I'm on about (Figure 8.1).

If you cannot find our #philosophHER, perhaps this caption from the Vatican might help?

The most famous philosophers of ancient times move within an imposing Renaissance architecture which is inspired by Bramante's project for the renewal of the early Christian basilica of St Peter. Some of these are easily recognizable. In the centre Plato points upwards with a finger and holds his book *Timeus* in his hand, flanked by Aristotle with *Ethics*; Pythagoras is shown in the foreground intent on explaining the diatesseron.



FIGURE 8.1 Raphael: The School of Athens (1509–1510) Vatican Palace, Stanza della Segnatura. <http://www.eurocare.it/Caption/tabid/70/Default.aspx>

Diogenes is lying on the stairs with a dish, while the pessimist philosopher, Heracleitus, a portrait of Michelangelo, is leaning against a block of marble, writing on a sheet of paper. Michelangelo was in those years executing the paintings in the nearby Sistine Chapel.

[...] according to crockery hierarchies, keep this one in this one out for freshness, usefulness, dominant criteria, & makes a master meal for a High Table none of us binvited to!

– Caroline Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*

If you still cannot spot her, it really is not your fault, there are just so many there, and also given what is usually said about the picture as above, as if there were ultimately just two guys arguing about some world up there (Plato) or down here (Aristotle), and the rest is just extra, “footnotes” to masters. But well, yes, hello, she is still standing there, quite tall, quite queenly, centre-left between Pythagoras and Parmenides (neither of whom were listed above) ... OK, we might need to revert to the original title of the painting, “*Causarum Cognitio*” (Seek to know the causes).

Why is she typically, almost totally, absent present? What (non-)sense could we make of it?

If you could see her only now, that distinguishable figure, why is Hypatia there and not there?

Is she less than obvious? Is she not there more than obviously? Has she not been there all along?

Re-member this cueriously translocalised transhistoric summit of philosophers from the Greco-Egyptian antiquities (often cropped as “Greek antiquities,” it must be also pointed out even in passing, for we say that as if, for instance, Alexandria were also *in* Athens). As the story goes, Raphael had to end up constructing something of an old boys’ club under a theocratical pressure from the Bishop who had commissioned the artist to decorate the rooms of the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican. Now, re-con-sider that one lady philosopher, Hypatia, whose name does rhyme with Sophia (also Diotima, albeit more distantly). Allegedly, Raphael, who much appreciated her philosophic genius and legacy had intended to place her in the centre on the marble steps right beneath and between Plato and Aristotle, and yet when his sketch was rejected by the Bishop who demanded that *that woman*—whom the clergy had no knowledge of—be removed, he had to do something about that, and his solution was to codify her presence, to hide her in plain sight.

[...] that’s my whole megafony!

– Caroline Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*

The fact that Hypatia is the only woman in this classical, almost dead-metaphorised, gallery of Sophia-loving all “Greek” fraternity is obvious enough, although, as I also have been trying to keep reminding my-our-selves, there are countless subtexts and uncontested axioms built into the kaleidoscopic and cartographic obscurities of the obvious itself, of what is often unquestioningly taken to be part and parcel of the unquestionable norms, which is again often *just* the naturalised cognitive limits of the privileged who, almost structurally, cannot see, hear, sense stuff otherwise and yet feel and can in fact be practically *justified* in holding onto their baseless base. All such lessons count, or if not, must, and that is one way philosophy remains *contemporarily* relevant.

The fact that I, a woman philosopher “of colo(u)r,” find Hypatia & Associates so colourfully relatable and mobilisable this allegorical way, is not irrelevant to the fact that philoSOPHY in its trans-radical contemporaneity, is such a conceptual storehouse for all who can think and think none the less. The fact that Hypatia was flayed alive by a mob of religiously misogynistic (anti-Neo-Platonist) fanatics is not irrelevant, either. The fact that even *She* is, however, still un-seen in the scene of “mainstream” academic philosophising is a philosophical problem *par excellence*.

Look again, does she come alive—to you? You see? Which part of her? And which she in you?

I am not trying to be bossy. I am just pointing to the grass that is green or perhaps now greener, if you did or do hear me saying it *is* green. Look at the one looking at you as if right through you, the only one looking *out* as if she had to throw *out* her menstrual towel again and again at those catcallers in a critical defiling of the philoSOAPurity of groupie philosophy boys—except that, here, she is also being kind of ignored even by a few seemingly eager mansplainers, since all the other members of the school are famously busy, buried in themselves, pontificating, meditating, debating with their opponents ... but with Raphael, some of us are gazing back at her, now.