

Transgendering Nietzsche: Male Mothers and Phallic Women in Derrida's *Spurs*

Willow Verkerk

As Derrida himself notes, Nietzsche is a thinker who seems at once misogynistic and sympathetic (Derrida 1979, 57). Pursuing the sympathetic reading further, we may ask whether there is also an emancipatory character to Nietzsche's writings on woman. This is a contentious question; however, it is one that Derrida entertains by his proposal that Nietzsche's feminisms and anti-feminisms are connected or have a larger "congruence" (Derrida 1979, 57). Nietzsche's attack on feminism is done in defence of what he and Derrida conceive to be feminine power. In *Spurs* this is reflected in two threads: one in which woman as a position is opened up to those who are not cisgender women; the other in which cisgender women are disciplined into femininity as their ideal location for power.

Derrida draws mostly on *The Gay Science* but he is also interested in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* where Nietzsche declares, "Supposing truth is a woman—what then?" Derrida turns to the Preface of *Beyond* in order to show that there is a close relationship between woman and truth and that Nietzsche is utilizing the concept of woman in itself (*Weib an sich*) in order to question the coherence of 'Truth' and the presumptions of the philosopher "who believes in the truth that is woman, who believes in truth just as he believes in woman" (Derrida 1979, 53). After reading transgender thinkers like Susan Stryker and Kate Bornstein, as well as the work of Judith Butler, we might re-write Derrida's statement and replace the word 'woman' with 'gender.' Then it would read like this: "the presumption of the philosopher who believes in the truth that is a gender, who believes in truth just as he believes in gender."

In *Spurs*, Derrida, through Nietzsche, is demonstrating that truth is multiple and varied just as woman is so. He is pointing out that we, like the philosopher who fetishizes 'Truth,'

fetishize 'woman.' Derrida's response, as is Nietzsche's, to the fetishization of woman is to both affirm it and undermine it. In other words, neither philosopher entirely escapes from their own fetishizations of woman, but they do proliferate these fetishizations and thus lay the groundwork for others to exceed them.

Nietzsche is a thinker open to diverse receptions because, as Derrida notices, Nietzsche's writings purposively yield multiple interpretations. Derrida thinks that Nietzsche's writing is a kind of pharmakon because it produces both heterogeneity and parody of the norm and in doing so allows for difference. In addition to Derrida's reading, the re-thinking of femininity through transgender theory attests to the relevance of opening up woman to multiple positions. Still, the political potential of Derrida's reading of Nietzsche's woman must be considered alongside earlier critique voiced soon after Derrida's *Spurs* was translated into English by a number of feminists who found Derrida's attempt to philosophize as a woman, while concurrently critiquing feminism, highly suspicious.

This essay will concentrate on three goals: first I will discuss Derrida's reading of Nietzsche as a performative thinker and examine three feminist readings of the Nietzschean woman; next, I will speak about Derrida's analysis of Nietzsche's notion of woman and her relationship with power and truth; last, I will pursue a brief transgendered reception of the Nietzschean and Derridean woman through drawing on some of the interpretive tools found in transgender studies.

Nietzsche as Stylist: Abducting Woman?

In *Spurs*, Derrida states that while reading Nietzsche on woman "we shall bear witness to her *abduction*" (Derrida 1979, 41). This may mean that Derrida himself is abducting Nietzsche's concept of woman through re-writing her, more simply that Nietzsche is abducting woman

through becoming feminine as a stylist and in doing so is re-writing woman. Then again, it may mean that we as readers are abducting woman, namely during the reading of *Spurs* we inscribe more layers of meaning onto woman's form- veils upon the veils of Derrida on top of Nietzsche. This is one reason why Nietzsche writes that "woman is so artistic" (Nietzsche 1974, 317). The position of woman is one that is performative so when she is taken up she recalls her previous articulations and failures and then enacts new ones. Nietzsche claims that we should allow ourselves to be hypnotized by women: they too are performing the position of woman or putting on a mask even when they appear to be revealing something about themselves (Nietzsche 1974, 317).

The woman that Nietzsche and Derrida write about and attempt to become through a masculine mimesis is one that Derrida explains acts to both open and close the notion that we have of woman as an intelligible figure (Derrida 1979, 41). But, must the figure of woman be abducted by male philosophers in order for her to gain greater polyvalence? Are Derrida and Nietzsche attempting to occupy the place of woman and, in doing so, taking woman away from women?

This is a concern that Kelly Oliver voices when she claims that the consequence of Nietzsche and Derrida, "dressing up like woman" in order to write as her is that "philosophy has no need for women. Feminist philosophy, then, also becomes the domain of men" (Oliver 1988, 25). Oliver claims that Nietzsche does not only want to become woman, he wants to possess her (Oliver 1988, 25). There is evidence for this reading in Nietzsche's writing: not only does he think men want to possess and control woman and women, he considers it human nature to want to shape and transform objects of knowledge to one's advantage (Nietzsche 1974, 88-89, 318-320). Whereas the 'truth' of 'woman' is repetitively denied by both Derrida and Nietzsche,

feminine behaviour is celebrated and even coveted by them. The consequence of this is that woman as a performative category is re-fetishized yet in a domain that is no longer exclusive to ciswomen. Do Nietzsche and Derrida think they know woman better than women do? There seems to be evidence for this in both Derrida's and Nietzsche's texts.

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes, "Do I dare to suggest that I *know* women [*Weiblein*]? This is part of my Dionysian dowry. Who knows? Perhaps I am the first psychologist of the eternal-feminine [*Ewig-Weiblichen*]" (Nietzsche 2005(1), 105). In addition, Nietzsche makes a diagnostic claim about the way in which female identity is formed. In *The Gay Science* (68) Nietzsche writes, "it is man who creates for himself the image of woman (*Weibes*), and woman (*Weib*) forms herself according to this image" (Nietzsche 1974, 126). Are Nietzsche and Derrida then doing, as Oliver charges and Nietzsche admits, creating images of woman through their articulations of her? Are they men manipulating the image of woman for their own benefits rather than affirming or facilitating the performative representations of woman by women which would be the role of a friend or an ally? The proposal that woman gains polyvalence through Nietzsche and Derrida can also be disputed by their comments about feminism. Both thinkers critique the feminist movements of their times with the charge that feminists want to be too much like men (Nietzsche 1989, 163-164; Derrida 1979, 65).

The urge to be like men, to make claims about science and objectivity, is said to be a break from the artistry and power that women have as great actors, it is conceived as a loss to their feminine styles (Derrida 1979, 65). Derrida attempts to defend Nietzsche from this move by claiming that the feminists who Nietzsche attacks are also men because they believe in the 'truth' of 'woman'. In other words, if they were 'real' women they would understand the untruth of woman.

The irony that one cannot help but point to here is that while women are critiqued for wanting to be like men by Derrida and Nietzsche, both of these male philosophers attempt to become feminine or like woman themselves. We find ourselves returning to Oliver's concern that there is no place for women in philosophy, but not only because men are writing about and embodying her through styles and feminine discourse. The primary issue today when reading Derrida and Nietzsche on woman is not that male philosophers want to write as woman and thus occupy both masculine and feminine positions. The more concerning issue at stake is that when women 'want to be like men' and speak about science and objectivity, or 'the Truth,' the consequence is that they that are said to lose their feminine styles (Derrida 1979, 65).

In Nietzsche (and Derrida) a double gendered position is open to men but not to women. If 'woman' really does become more malleable through Derrida's reading of Nietzsche why is it that she also becomes less accessible to women who take on masculine qualities? How is it that masculine women are barred from woman yet men who wear feminine masks have access to her? This demonstrates a perhaps unexpected consequence that Oliver's reading implicitly suggests: the polyvalence brought to woman by Derrida's reading of Nietzsche makes her more accessible to male philosophers, but less available to women, and particularly those who would compete with the abilities of the male philosophers.

It is also worth considering if Derrida's treatment of woman, as well as Nietzsche's, are time dependent and, as such, may not have the same level of philosophical reflections to offer us today on the meaning of woman. Jane Gallop makes this argument about Derrida when she states that *Spurs* was an attempt to critique seventies feminism, namely the tendency of it to essentialize woman as a broad category for mobilization. Although Gallop concedes that Derrida is able to demonstrate that Nietzsche's woman must not be read as singular (Gallop 1995, 127),

she states that Derrida fails to consider Nietzsche's use of the terms *Frau*, *Weib*, *Frauenzimmer*, and *Weiblein* (Gallop 1995, 130, 133) and their class associations. Gallop's charge is that Derrida in reading Nietzsche's woman overlooks, as did seventies feminism more generally, issues of class, age, and race which are necessary for both understanding Nietzsche's terminology as well as the process of fetishization. Gallop's conclusion is that *Spurs* is a text for the seventies, a mark of that era, not one which continues to offer us timeless philosophical reflection (Gallop 1995, 134).

There is no dispute that Gallop is correct in that we require other categories in addition to sex/gender in order understand fetishization. She is also correct that Nietzsche's choice of words for woman and women affect his critical commentary which sometimes involves a statement about class. However, what Gallop characterizes as outdated, namely the mobilization of women as a group, seems still to be important even if these groups are more specialized with their specific interests. The world continues to be overwhelmingly delimited by two genders with those who are or who want to become women experiencing a higher degree of violence. 'Woman' requires more openings, further simulations. The concept of woman must be allowed to remain performative yet it is also important that woman be distanced from the misogynies of cismen, male philosophers, and their heteronormative assumptions. If Nietzsche's statement in *The Gay Science* (68) that man forms the image of woman and woman forms herself according to this image is still relevant then performatives of woman by cisgender male philosophers are suspicious. In the language of Kate Bornstein, Nietzsche and Derrida are "gender defenders": they do "defend the status quo of the existing gender system" (Bornstein 2006, 237) because they suggest that women should find their location and power within the feminine gender.

The third reception of the Nietzschean woman is one that is much more positive. Frances Nesbitt Opper, claims that “In the case of ‘woman,’ we don’t need to ask whether Nietzsche is erecting an ideal or knocking one down: woman is taking the knocks, and being carted off the dump with other old and now worthless ideals” (Opper 2005, 15). Opper thinks that Nietzsche is undermining ‘woman’ and ‘man’ just as he is questioning through his genealogy ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Reading Derrida’s notion of abduction through Opper, we may propose that Nietzsche is abducting woman in order to destroy her, he is attempting to undermine our passionate attachments to ‘woman’ through showing how she is much more bound up in the concept of ‘man’ than any of us would like to admit. This is very much in line with the aims that Nietzsche articulates for himself in *Beyond* (2) to investigate the metaphysical faith in opposite values through demonstrating how they are “insidiously related” (Nietzsche 1989, 10). Nietzsche’s writings on woman in *Beyond* do much to dispute Opper, yet her reading is not without some evidence, especially if we read *Beyond* as a work that confronts sex and gender prejudices in order to promote overcoming.

Phallogocentric Truth: Reading the Nietzschean Woman with Derrida

Perhaps in defence of what is considered to be Nietzsche’s misogyny, Derrida states that when Nietzsche speaks of the relationship between men and women it is in reference to an “already formalized law” (Derrida 1979, 109), what we may call today the heterosexual hegemony. A charitable reading of Nietzsche would be that he is diagnosing the heterosexual relation and the limited positions that women have to occupy within it as embodiments of ‘woman.’ Woman is not free enough to be capable of friendship, Nietzsche states in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and this predicament is founded upon the miserliness of men (Nietzsche 2005(2), 50).

In *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida addresses this issue more directly when he states that there is political merit to Zarathustra's statement that men are not generous enough when it comes to women. Derrida writes that for Zarathustra woman is the "outlaw of humanity" (Derrida 2005, 283). In *Spurs*, published more than 15 years earlier, Derrida articulates the Nietzschean woman through three positions that reflect Zarathustra's sentiment.

The first position of woman that Derrida sees in Nietzsche's text is her representation as a figure of falsehood. This woman is a subjugated woman that Derrida states is condemned and told that she does not represent the truth. The man "offers truth and his phallus as his own proper credentials" (Derrida 1979, 97). This figure of woman is most present in *Beyond* where Nietzsche writes severe and provocative reflections on the woman who fails: not only does she fail at being woman, she is incapable of offering any knowledge about what being a woman entails. This is the woman that Nietzsche writes "compromises herself" when she attempt to seek enlightenment (Nietzsche 1989, 164).

The second position of woman that Derrida reads in Nietzsche is as a figure of truth. Derrida states that woman is again condemned, but she has two reactive options. In the first reaction, woman identifies with her representation of truth which is a Christian-Platonic one and attempts to become it. This is a slavish position for Nietzsche in which woman gives herself as a truth that man has defined and man takes and possesses her.

Derrida states that the positions of woman as falsehood or truth are within a phallogocentric economy. However, in the second reaction to woman as truth, which is considered more liberating for both Derrida and Nietzsche, woman performs the truths of 'woman,' manipulating them for her own advantage (Derrida 1979, 97). This is the woman who passes as an ideal figure of woman with her femininity, she is the great actor that Nietzsche

celebrates and can be read as a phallic woman because she plays the phallogocentric economy as a means to gain power (Derrida 1979, 67).

What is indicative for the second position of woman as truth is that she does not believe in the truth of 'woman' as such, but she understands that enacting the feminine seductive power is in her interest (Derrida 1979, 67). Nietzsche considers the position of the actor to be one that is most gratifying for women. He explains the characteristics of the actor as "falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one's so-called 'character,' flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for appearance; an excess of the capacity for all kinds of adaptation" (Nietzsche 1974, 316-317). Derrida's agreement with Nietzsche is evidenced when he writes that woman in 'giving' is simulating herself and in doing so assures herself of a kind of self-mastery. As she performs her characteristics of the feminine as a "seductive power," Derrida states that she "rules over dogmatism, and disorients and routs those credulous men, the philosophers" (Derrida 1979, 67). As an appropriator, Derrida thinks that woman upsets the distinctions between giver/taker, possessed/possessor, master/slave. The suggestion made by Derrida is that the taking up of the position of woman as mask involves a doing rather than a being which upsets the regime of sexual difference.

The third position of woman that Derrida articulates is woman as an affirmative power. He explains her as creative, "recognized and affirmed as an affirmative power, a dissimulatress, an artist, a dionysiac" (Derrida 1979, 97). This affirmation is not done by man but by herself, Derrida claims. He distinguishes this from the previous two reactive positions as an active position. Derrida refers to *The Gay Science* (361) as evidence for this reading of Nietzsche. However, this section is the same one that reveals woman's position as actor, as one that is

reactionary as a mode of survival. As such, it is debatable whether this section can show the position of woman as affirmative to the extent that Derrida supposes. In *The Gay Science* (361) Nietzsche writes that women *have to be* actresses and this suggest a reactive rather than an active position.¹

One must look elsewhere to Nietzsche's writings on pregnancy and motherhood for an active account of the feminine. Woman's creativity rests in the power to birth children for Nietzsche. Specifically, he thinks that giving birth to the *Übermensch* is the most important role of woman and this is where she can find her highest affirmation (Nietzsche 2005(2), 57-58). Nietzsche uses the notion of pregnancy to explain creativity in general but makes spiritual pregnancy exclusive to men (Nietzsche 1974, 128-129).

Derrida's reading is much kinder than what Nietzsche himself writes when it comes to the affirmative power of woman. Derrida states that Nietzsche is "a thinker of pregnancy which, for him, is no less praiseworthy in a man than it is in a woman" (Derrida 1979, 65). Although this statement appears as salutary, it actually has the effect of once again, bringing a feminine characteristic over to the male gender and praising it, but without making a reciprocal move for women.

In *Beyond*, Nietzsche writes that if a woman chooses another life pursuit instead of motherhood, it is likely due to some deficiency (Nietzsche 1989, 169, 89). He thinks women are abandoning their most important and natural roles in order to attempt to be like men. Nietzsche implies that there is a serious consequence to this. Nietzsche proclaims: "What? And this should be the end? And the breaking of woman's magic spell [*Entzauberung des Weibes*] is at work?" (Nietzsche 1989, 170).

Conclusion: The Nietzschean Woman and Transgender Theory

There is evidence in both Nietzsche and Derrida that they want to do precisely what Nietzsche cautions about, namely attempt to break the spell of woman through becoming feminine themselves, as well as undermining the truth of woman. At the same time, however, they reify the feminine as style and in doing so tinge it with exoticism, claiming it to be the most desirable mode of enactment for women. We have already seen some of the problems with this; in conclusion I will explore what might be considered an emancipatory reading of the Nietzschean woman through transgender theory.

In *The Gay Science* (69) Nietzsche writes, “Would a woman [*Weibe*] be able to hold us (or, as they say, ‘enthral’ us) if we did not consider it quite possible that under certain circumstances she could wield a dagger (any kind of dagger) against us? Or against herself—which in certain cases would be crueller revenge” (Nietzsche 1974, 126). In reference to this quote Derrida writes, “The exchange of stylistic blows or the thrust of a dagger confuses sexual identity” (Derrida 1979, 53).

The notion that woman as actor has the ability to destroy herself and in doing so challenge the coherence of woman is a power that both Derrida and Nietzsche find admirable. Today, those who are most actively involved in the project of re-forming the figure of woman are transgender thinkers and activists who dispute as Susan Stryker puts it, “the stability of the material referent ‘sex’ and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and psychic categories of ‘gender’” (Stryker 2006(1), 9). Following what Derrida and Nietzsche write about the actor who simulates the truth of woman, one might claim that the transgender woman is a new enactment of the phallic woman who, as appropriator, re-defines the embodiment of ‘woman’ and multiplies its truths. Potentially, the transgender woman goes further than the ciswomen of Nietzsche’s philosophy because she must, in order to survive, move

from the position of a reactive figure of truth who enacts what Nietzsche calls “falseness with a good conscience” (Nietzsche 1974, 316) to an affirmative position of power in which being woman is a doing that she creates. Since her location as woman defies the metaphysics of heterosexuality, her very being, which is a doing and a becoming, can be seen to actively disrupt and transform the category of woman.

It is important to recognize that transgender people are up against great resistance as evidenced by the disproportionately high level of violence they experience. This violence is perpetuated by the “naturalized heterosexual order” (Stryker 2006(2), 248) and its “gender defenders” (Bornstein 2006, 237) who condemn transgender people as, in Derrida’s language, figures of falsehood (Derrida 1979, 97). Stryker explains, “Transgender people who problematize the assumed correlation of a particular biological sex with a particular social gender are often considered to make false representations of an underlying material truth, through the wilful distortion of surface appearance. Their gender presentation is seen as a lie rather than as an expression of a deep, essential truth” (Stryker 2006(1), 9). Transgender identities are considered a threat to the heterosexual hegemony because their very presence divulges the cultural imperialism of gender, its flaws, and the fact that gender is unfinished.

Politically speaking, the point is not to reject woman entirely. Instead, we must allow for ciswomen to occupy more positions within and outside of ‘woman.’ Woman must be abducted by multiple bodies so that her presence no longer exerts the heteronormative violence of a phallogocentric economy. As Derrida writes, when it comes to woman, “One can no longer seek her[...] And she is certainly not to be found in any of the familiar modes of concept or knowledge. Yet it is impossible to resist looking at her” (Derrida 1979, 71).

As a writer, Nietzsche is made into both a male mother and a phallic woman by Derrida and also by himself. Nietzsche praises both male mothers as creative types and phallic women, namely women who master the masters, women who are great actors, and women who take as they give, and Derrida recognizes this. In addition to these movements acting to de-stabilize woman and with it gender as a metaphysical category, Nietzsche is attempting to become woman in so far as she is the one who challenges the coherence of truth. This becoming feminine as a writer defies the notion that there is one correct way of reading a text. Potentially, it also challenges the notion that the category of woman is one that is exclusive to those designated as female at birth. While this enactment of the feminine through Derrida's reading of Nietzsche remains problematic because of its misogyny, today it may offer us new productions that align themselves symbiotically with those transgender thinkers and activists who want to disrupt and expand the category of 'woman.'

1. Such an instinct will have developed most easily in families of the lower classes who had to survive under changing pressures and coercions, in deep dependency, who had to cut their coat according to the cloth, always adapting themselves again to new circumstances, who always had to change their mien and posture, until they learned gradually to turn their coat with every wind and thus virtually to become a coat—and masters of the incorporated and inveterate art of

eternally playing hide-and-seek, which in the case of animals is called mimicry (Nietzsche 1974, 316).

Works Cited

- Bornstein, Kate. 2006. "Gender Terror, Gender Rage." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. Edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 236-243. London: Routledge.
- Gallop, Jane. 1995. "'Women' in *Spurs* and Nineties Feminism." *Diacritics* 25.2: 125-134.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1997. *The Politics of Friendship*. Translated by George Collins. London: Verso.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1979. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Translated by Barbara Harlow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2005(1). *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche. 2005(2). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Graham Parkes. Oxford: Oxford University Press,
- Nietzsche. 1989. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- Nietzsche. 1974. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- Oliver, Kelly. 1988. "Nietzsche's Woman: The Poststructuralist Attempt To Do Away with Women." *Radical Philosophy* 48: 25-29.
- Oppel, Frances Nesbitt. 2005. *Nietzsche On Gender*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press.

Stryker, Susan. 2006(1). "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. Edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1-18. London: Routledge.

Stryker, Susan. 2006(2). "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. Edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 244-256. London: Routledge.