

Swarthmore College

Works

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

1994

Nietzsche And Feminism: Transvaluing Woman In "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"

Tamsin E. Lorraine

Swarthmore College, tlorrai1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Tamsin E. Lorraine. (1994). "Nietzsche And Feminism: Transvaluing Woman In "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"". *International Studies In Philosophy*. Volume 26, Issue 3. 119-129. DOI: 10.5840/intstudphil19942633
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/91>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Nietzsche and Feminism: Transvaluing Women in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Tamsin Lorraine

We all know that Nietzsche is no feminist. Despite suggestions that have been made regarding Nietzsche's identification with the feminine, we know what he has to say about actual women, and we know the lengths to which Nietzsche goes to make sure that when he enacts the feminine, he does so in a manly manner.¹

So, what does Nietzsche have to do with feminism? Can a feminist go to Nietzsche's texts for nourishment and inspiration, or is she bound to be turned away by the passages that deliberately belittle and exclude her? Can and should she excise these passages as expendable in order to applaud Nietzsche's affirmations of the feminine, or does this present yet another appropriation of women, one that should be resisted?

In attempting to answer these questions, I hope not simply to affirm Nietzsche's relevance for feminism, but also to suggest a feminist style of listening and speaking, reading and writing, drawn from Nietzsche's texts. It is my belief that we should neither ignore Nietzsche's misogyny nor fixate on it. The spirit of Nietzsche's thought demands that we both confront the "truths" he throws our way and also go beyond them. In addition, it seems to me that the process of confrontation and overcoming that his texts evoke has implications for effective engagement in the hotly contested debates of our own cultural scene. Zarathustra says more than once that he loves "him who wants to create over and beyond himself and thus perishes."² If we take seriously the feminist ideal of a non-oppressive society, and if the creation of such a future involves the destruction of old' norms and patterns of being and relating, then we may still have something to learn from Zarathustra, who was also attempting to prepare the way for something better.

In what follows I will indicate four different positions in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with which a female reader might identify. I present these positions as options in subjectivity made available to the reader by the text. The first position is the one we might say most directly characterizes the female reader as woman-the woman Zarathustra speaks about to other men, the woman he says men want. The second position is the one that most directly characterizes the male reader- the brother or disciple whom Zarathustra exhorts to remain faithful to the earth and to whom Zarathustra devotes his gift-giving virtue. The third position provides an alternative conception of woman, perhaps more attractive to the female reader-woman as representative of life, the woman who fascinates, attracts, and ultimately eludes Zarathustra. Finally, there is the position occupied by Zarathustra himself as role-model and ideal.

Although, as I will argue, no one of these positions can be described as presenting a "feminist" option, the character of Zarathustra enacts a process that suggests how we might confront and overcome all the options presented in the text, even if Zarathustra himself does not do this. Thus, although it may be forever undecidable whether or not Nietzsche meant his texts for women's ears, we can learn from him how to read his texts against the grain of his own truths.

What does Zarathustra want from women? One response is that Zarathustra wants the same thing from a woman that he wants from a man - that is, that she should prepare the way for the overman, the future of humanity. In the section entitled "On the Friend," however, we get our first hint that woman's role is to be different from that of man. Woman, it turns out, is incapable of the kind of friendship Zarathustra advocates; she has too much of the slave and the tyrant concealed in her. She is only capable of love. It is perhaps because of her tendencies toward slavish servitude and tyrannical blindness against everything she doesn't love that Zarathustra

says in the section "On Little Old and Young Women" that happiness for men and women differs:

The happiness of man is: I will. The happiness of woman is: he wills. ... And woman must obey and find a depth of her surface. Surface is the disposition of woman. ... Man's disposition, however, is deep.³

Upon hearing these pronouncements, the little old woman who has invited Zarathustra to talk to her as he would to men about women asks him if he is right about women because nothing is impossible with woman. She then exclaims that if Zarathustra is going to women, he should not forget his whip.⁴ This coda to this section undercuts Zarathustra's pronouncements somewhat, suggesting that his discussion of women is for men in the sense of indicating what men want and need from women, rather than what women actually are. It is Zarathustra's hope, apparently, that woman remain faithful to man, not the earth. She is to attend to the nuances of her chosen man's body, not her own, in order to evoke the child and creative will within him.

In Zarathustra's ranking of rule and obedience, it would seem that women, simply by virtue of being women, are fit only for obeying. One could dismiss this aspect of Zarathustra's teaching as a cultural by-product; surely if Nietzsche had been writing now, Zarathustra would have taught something different. Surely Zarathustra would not have made a gender distinction between those who could and should attempt his path and those who shouldn't. Instead, men and women would sort themselves out through their own actions. Some would rise to become higher human beings, precursors of the overperson; some would serve the worthier leaders strong enough to command; others would sink back into the rabble unable to distinguish themselves.

On this reading, it may be discouraging that Zarathustra has so little to say directly to women; but women are used to finding their way into texts that would exclude them. Even if

Zarathustra continually calls out, "O, my brothers!" many female readers have refused to put the book down as unsuitable for their sex. They have also refused to read the book as if they were eaves-dropping on a conversation between men. Instead, they have attempted to read as active recipients of Zarathustra's words-participants in a dialogue from which they too might have something to learn. They have thus refused Zarathustra's exhortation to be educated for the recreation of the warrior and have instead identified with the warriors themselves.

In simply dismissing the option in subjectivity Zarathustra extends to women, however, we close off alternative possibilities that could be generated. In one sense, the role that Zarathustra would have woman play is analogous to that of Zarathustra, who also sees his brothers as his children, and hopes to evoke from them the birth of the overman. Zarathustra, too, is a dangerous plaything for man, looking for the child within him, waking up destructive as well as constructive instincts in hopes of something better. When Zarathustra says, "let woman be a plaything, pure and fine, like a gem, irradiated by the virtues of a world that has not yet arrived,"⁵ we can recognize that waking others' hopes to an image of a future yet to come is in itself a creative act of will.

This analogy is sharply demarcated, however, at the point of substituting another's will for one's own. It is only by developing the capacity and strength to listen to one's own body that one can hope to get closer to the overperson. And it is to men, Zarathustra's brothers and potential warriors, that Zarathustra addresses his teachings on how to attain this development. What, then, might we learn by taking up the position of these warrior brothers?

Zarathustra calls out to those who can hear him for companions that will "write new values on new tablets."⁶ Those who write new values are not those who merely react against the old values. They are highly disciplined warriors who have managed to create a law to which they

subject themselves. The disciple is to listen with a delicate ear and find words and honors for the body and earth.⁷ Zarathustra suggests that speaking or writing the body brings new virtues to light. The origin of one's virtue is to be found in those moments when the body is elevated and resurrected through speaking in parables.⁸ It is in such moments that the origin of one's virtue is to be found.

We see this attitude enacted in Zarathustra. Nietzsche's aphoristic style, the loose narrative, the inconsistencies in Zarathustra's character, the contradictions in style and content, all point to various strategies enacted to create the language that will speak of the body.⁹ Several times Zarathustra is overcome with despondency at becoming imprisoned in tombs, only to break through the prison-tombs of old words and ways of being with a life-affirming resolve of will, which provides impetus for further self-overcoming.¹⁰ To remain faithful to the earth, one needs to continually remake oneself and one's speech. The old truths, the old values are never enough. New evaluations speak to one in strange and unfamiliar sounds, music of the soul that is heterogeneous to language. These moments require the attention a mother gives her child. It is thus that they can be nurtured into virtues. Without any thought of reward or revenge, the disciple is to love his virtues and allow them to grow.¹¹

This feminine moment of receptiveness to the strange, the unfamiliar, the music beyond language, the body, is to be followed by a more masculine moment, necessary for guarding against nihilistic anarchy. In attending to what is heterogeneous to language, one runs the danger of running amok:

You are not yet free, you still *search* for freedom. You are worn from your search and overawake. You aspire to the free heights, your soul thirsts for the stars. But your wicked

instincts, too, thirst for freedom. Your wild dogs want freedom; they bark with joy in their cellar when your spirit plans to open all prisons.¹²

Thus, a battle among virtues is necessary. Each virtue will battle for the full strength of spirit to back it. In this battle, it is best if one or very few virtues come to the fore so that the individual can put as much force as possible behind the virtue(s) elevated into one's tablet of good.¹³ This takes attentiveness, creative inventiveness in articulation, and rigorous discipline in execution. Thus, one's virtues are organized and written up in a new law or tablet of good, which channels one's will and guides one's actions.

Certainly, Zarathustra cares about his disciples, but although he calls them friends and brothers, they are continually in danger of sinking to the level of the rabble in his estimation. In the course of Zarathustra, Zarathustra often professes his ambivalence about spending time with other human beings. His first companions are jesters and corpses. When he decides to avoid the market place and the rabble and speak only to those who have ears to hear his teachings things get a little better; but it is only in solitude that he can find true spiritual sustenance. It is in solitude that his wild wisdom becomes pregnant.¹⁴ He then goes to his companions to relieve himself of the riches of his soul. It is his virtue to want to give to humanity its future - the overman.¹⁵ It is his burden that the light he brings to humanity comes from within:

But I live in my own light; I drink back into myself the flames that break out of me. I do not know the happiness of those who receive; and I have often dreamed that even stealing must be more blessed than receiving. This is my poverty, that my hand never rests from giving; this is my envy, that I see waiting eyes and the lit-up nights of longing.¹⁶

It is because Zarathustra loves humanity, because he perceives a future for humanity, that he perfects himself in order to return to his children and raise them to his heights,¹⁷ by putting

them to the test and evoking the creator within them.¹⁸ But this is often a lonely task for Zarathustra; his children never seem to reach his level, and they are prone to distorting his teachings into hurdy-gurdy songs. Indeed, Zarathustra recognizes this latter danger in himself as well. It is not to his children, however, that he turns for fresh insight, but to life itself who, it just so happens, Zarathustra represents as a woman.

Thus, a third position we might try is that of the powerful woman that seems to fascinate Zarathustra so:

Into your eyes I looked recently, O life! And into the unfathomable I then seemed to be sinking. But you pulled me out with a golden fishing rod, and you laughed mockingly when I called you unfathomable.¹⁹

Woman as life is "changeable and wild and a woman in every way, and not virtuous."²⁰ Out of all the characters in the book, Zarathustra seems to take Life and his Wild Wisdom (also characterized as a woman) most seriously. It is with Life that Zarathustra seems to be most anxious to have a relationship.

If Zarathustra despairs at various points that his children will ever love him well enough to become true companions with wills of their own, he also despairs of his own ability to keep up with Life:

And now you are fleeing from me again, you sweet wildcat and ingrate! I dance after you, I follow wherever your traces linger. Where are you? Give me your hand! Or only one finger!²¹

And it is for the eternal recurrence of Life that Zarathustra forsakes all human women:

Never yet have I found the woman from whom I wanted children, unless it be this woman whom I love: for I love you, O eternity.²²

Life has no stake in virtues, values, or words. She mocks all of Zarathustra's truths - she is always somewhere else, somewhere beyond. She does not care for Zarathustra's discipline nor his command nor his rankings. Yet it is Life that Zarathustra would please, it is Life's love that he wants. Far from finding her honor in love for another, however, Life is unpredictable and shifty, impatient and elusive.

Precisely because she is so changeable, Life exerts a powerful effect on Zarathustra. She it is who cannot be pinned down, who always requires new words, new songs, new ways of being. To win her, one must always be trying something unprecedented, and letting the old perish in the attempt. She taunts and teases Zarathustra, never losing her appeal. She requires a dancer with his ear in his toes.²³ If Zarathustra does come into relationship with her from time to time, it is not because he is her ultimate satisfaction, but only because for a brief moment he has managed to keep up with her.

Here we can see the analogy between the human woman Zarathustra wants and Life as woman. Zarathustra wants both women to love him, and for this love to lead to the perfection of his own creative will. If he chooses to love Life rather than a woman, it is because Life is the most dangerous plaything of all and requires more of him than any human woman ever could.

We have already seen the cul-de-sac that the position of woman presents. The position of Life as woman presents a cul-de-sac as well. For even if Life is willful and scarcely faithful to man, she is still depicted here in relationship to him. What if Life is bored with all the attempt to win her favor and would much rather have a conversation? What if Life has other projects of her own, which have nothing to do with Zarathustra's perfection and which she'd like to share with him? What if Life involves, not merely dancing with one other, but dancing with a multitude of others to a complicated symphony of often dissonant notes?

If nothing is impossible for woman, what then, should the female reader do with the text of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? Should she listen to Zarathustra's statements about woman's happiness? But this would be to run away from the truths of her own body. Should she attempt to become one of his disciples, loving Zarathustra, serving him by letting him command? But this would be to ignore his injunctions to aid him in nurturing the overman in others. Should she attempt to gain his favor by playing Life as the *femme fatale*, thus evoking others to be forever revising their articulations of virtue? But this would be to abandon her own hope for humanity, the image that she sees in the stone.

Perhaps the best answer comes from Zarathustra himself. To redeem the past through the present in light of the future, one can neither deny that past, put something else in its place, nor let it determine one. Instead one can redeem it by affirming it in light of one's own vision for the future:

I taught them all *my* creating and striving, to create and carry together into One what in man is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident: as creator, guesser of riddles, and redeemer of accidents, I taught them to work on the future and to redeem with their creation all *that has been*. To redeem what is past in man and to recreate all "it was" until the will says, "Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it" - this I called redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption.²⁴

If I can read Nietzsche as a feminist and still feel affirmed, this is not because I can ignore the way in which Nietzsche's texts exclude or belittle women. Representing and valorizing life as the feminine undecidable, that which forever eludes us and incites us to creative self-overcoming, does nothing for women in their struggle for recognition and respect. If I can read Nietzsche as a feminist, it is because Nietzsche himself gives me some suggestions as to

how to transform the often ugly and nauseating "truths" that are my cultural resource into something I can affirm in the present.

Zarathustra presents us some of his truths. These truths have implications for my future as a woman and as a human being. What I do with these truths, how I arrange or rearrange them, is up to me. Zarathustra suggests that when I break the old tablet of values, I should create a new one that speaks more honestly of the body. This suggests a listening and reading strategy that attends to nuances of feeling that are not immediately articulate. It suggests a patient and receptive waiting in the stillest hour for the perhaps unprecedented meaning that emerges. It suggests a resourceful flexibility in further developing that meaning, by giving it free play in a variety of forms and styles, letting various possibilities reverberate and following those possibilities where there is life and a quickening of feeling.

This attention to nuance also suggests the kind of destruction found in a process of digestion. Food is not useful to my body until I sort through it, reject what disgusts me, chew up the rest, break it down, assimilate it, expel the waste. What is true for you may not be to my taste, or I may assimilate it differently. I can't tell until I put it into my pot and cook it through.²⁵

Going through the positions offered me in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I don't have to reject any of them out of hand. Instead, I can affirm them all as providing material for my own future, material that I sort through, taking the flavors and aromas I need to conjure up the image dearest to me. I sniff out various aspects of each, distinguish different flavors, mix them up, using bits of one to spice up another. Thus, out of the dreadful fragments and accidents of this text I create a strong image of woman in keeping with my own taste for the future.

My Zarathustra would be an artist as well. She would dance with and after life, but she would also fall apart in order to dance with multiple partners. My Zarathustra would be a cook

who flings the most nauseating as well as the more savory aspects of her culture into her pot to cook them through in keeping with her own tastes, but she would also let herself be dissolved and transformed in the pots of other cooks. Zarathustra as a woman would engage in the Dionysian process of creation, but she would also acknowledge herself as material formed through a process in which there is no longer any distinction to be made between creator and created. Such a woman would have the discriminating hardness to say no and the strength to break down old truths, but she would also have the receptive strength to disperse herself among others only to reemerge transfigured within her community of artists. To create such a position from this text - an image of whole woman that moves me, that represents my will to power - requires careful reading and a discriminating taste that is both destructive and disrespectful of old boundaries, and yet respectful to nuance and in hopeful flight after a living truth.

Perhaps Zarathustra is right to emphasize the image of the future one envisions in the shadow of the stone. I have been discouraged of late with the policing of borders practiced by feminists and anti-feminists alike. At times it seems to me that we have become more immersed in barricading and assaulting various already-laid-out positions than in ignoring old boundaries, in order to utilize creatively the full range of material available to us. If the feminist virtue is the hope for a non-oppressive society, then boundaries and categories, truths and goals, can and must be continually created and destroyed, only to be recreated again, in our attempts to keep step with the living truths that honor this hope.

1. For examples of feminist critiques of Nietzsche's masculinist bias see Jean Graybeal, *Language and "the Feminine" in Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Luce Irigaray, *Amante Marine: de Friedrich Nietzsche* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1980); N. S. Love, *Marx, Nietzsche, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Tamsin Lorraine, *Gender, Identity, and the Production of Meaning* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990); Kelly Oliver, "Woman as Truth in Nietzsche's Writing," *Social Theory and Practice* 10 (Summer 1984): 185-199; and Kelly Oliver, "Nietzsche's Woman: The Post-structuralist Attempt to Do Away with Women," *Radical Philosophy* 48 (Spring 1988): 25-29.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1966), hereafter indicated as "TSZ," p. 65.
3. TSZ, p. 67.
4. A member of the audience at which this paper was initially read commenced chat in the infamous photograph of Nietzsche and a whip, the whip is in the hands of Lou Salome, thus pointing out that this passage could be read ambiguously-perhaps the whip is meant to be used by woman and not man! This is an interesting suggestion, and I think indicates some of the tension in Nietzsche's characterization of women. Although Zarathustra is depicted as an artist who creates in keeping with his own will, the process of creation involves the strength to self-dissolve in responsiveness to others as well as the will to create. The question Nietzsche is never able to adequately answer is, how can one do this and still be "a warrior"?
5. TSZ, p. 66.
6. TSZ, p. 24.

7. "Indeed, this ego and the ego's contradiction and confusion still speak most honestly of its being-this creating, willing, valuing ego, which is the measure and value of things. And this most honest being, the ego, speaks of the body and still wants the body, even when it poetizes and raves and flutters with broken wings. It learns to speak ever more honestly, this ego: and the more it learns, the more words and honors it finds for body and earth" (TSZ, p. 32).

8. TSZ, p. 75.

9. Eric Blondel suggests that Nietzsche creates a fairly systematic set of metaphors that evoke the body in order to point us toward something beyond the text, something heterogeneous to language in general as well as to any words with which we might speak of the body itself. See Eric Blondel, *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture; Philosophy as a Philological Genealogy*, trans. Sean Hand (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 28-31. I have considered this suggestion, in the reading I give here, in light of Kristeva's theory of the body, especially as it emerges in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); and Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche in *Amante Marine*.

10. TSZ, p. 112.

11. "You are too pure for the filth of the words: revenge, punishment, reward, retribution. You love your virtue as a mother her child; but when has a mother ever wished to be paid for her love? Your virtue is what is dearest to you. The thirst of the ring lives in you: every ring strives and turns to reach itself again" (p. 94).

12. TSZ, p. 43.

13. "My brother, are war and battle evil? But this evil is necessary; necessary are the envy and mistrust and calumny among your virtues. Behold how each of your virtues covets what is highest: each wanes your whole spirit that it might become *her* herald; each wanes your whole strength in wrath, hatred, and love" (TSZ, p. 37).

14. TSZ, p. 85.

15. "But my fervent will to create impels me ever again toward man; thus is the hammer impelled toward the stone. O men, in the stone there sleeps an image, the image of my images" (TSZ, p. 87).

16. TSZ, p. 106.

17. TSZ, p. 124.

18. TSZ, p. 161.

19. TSZ, p. 108.

20. TSZ, p. 108.

21. TSZ, p. 225.

22. TSZ, p. 231.

23. TSZ, p. 224.

24. TSZ, p. 198.

25. "I am Zarathustra the godless: I still cook every chance in my pot. And only when it has been cooked through there do I welcome it as my food" (TSZ, p. 171). Also see Lisa Heldke's article "Recipes for Theory Making" (*Hypatia* 3/2 (Summer 1988):15-29) for a helpful analogy between cooking and theory. Although Heldke cites Dewey rather than Nietzsche in developing this analogy, she also mentions attending to the nuance of flavor and aroma and the perhaps unprecedented varying of a given recipe in actual preparation. Zarathustra, however, would

encourage more "disrespectful" tampering with recipes (indeed, a wholesale cacophony of experimentation and exploration) than Heldke would seem to suggest.