



1996

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Recommended Citation

Phillips '96, Betsy, "Descent into Chaos: Ways of Reading St. Thecla" (1996). *Honors Projects*. Paper 23.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/eng_honproj/23

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Descent into Chaos: Ways of Reading *St. Thecla*

By Betsy Phillips

I find reading a hypertext akin to finding shapes in a cloud. One minute, the cloud clearly looks like two people in a row boat, then the wind blows and the cloud becomes a dinosaur. In a hypertext, just when an incipient shape presents itself in the text, then one clicks the mouse, and that meaning can completely change. In fact, unlike a cloudy sky, in which the context of the clouds, the sky, remains the same, the whole context of the text can change. Trying to analyze a particular hypertext, then, could be likened to trying to convince a friend that the cloud I see really does look *just* like a dinosaur. Even if she does see the same cloud, which I can never be sure of, she might not see the dinosaur; she may see an Indy car, instead. With all the opportunity for confusion, I understand how a little guidance or insight might be helpful for a reader drifting around in my text, *St. Thecla: A Woman in Translations*.

The text is organized into four main sections. The first section is my retelling of the myth of St. Thecla and St. Paul. Although the plot follows the apocryphal version very closely, the motivations given to Thecla's actions are quite different. Where in the apocryphal version of Thecla's story she is motivated by her love of God, in my version, she is motivated by her love of Paul. In the apocryphal version, I saw a disparity between the words the writer attributed to Thecla and her actions. I retold the story in order to present a version where Thecla's words matched her deeds. The second section is a short collection of the stories of different women with variations of the name Thecla. They illustrate certain characteristics that all of the women in my text share. The third section contains the story of Tekla and David, two people who are continuously reincarnated until they can settle an old grievance between them. The fourth section is more autobiographical. It is

organized around a song my grandmother used to sing to me, and my ideas about what it means to have the name Teckla, and to be a part of a family structure are fleshed out here. However, the reader has the ability to switch between sections to the extent that he can no longer tell which section he is in. A reader can navigate the text in many ways. I have set up a main path that the reader can follow just by pressing the Enter key which will take him through three of the sections. However, when the reader holds down the option key and the apple key simultaneously, certain words on the screen may be outlined. These words are linked to boxes of text that are alternatives to the one accessed by pressing Enter. By clicking on the icon that looks like an open book, a reader may see and choose between all of the links leaving a box. By clicking on the arrow pointing left, the reader can turn around and follow his reading path back as far as he likes. Or, by clicking on the "H" icon, he can return back to the first screen. I strongly encourage any reader to experiment with the different ways of navigating my text.

Aside from giving this basic navigational advice, I would also like to recommend that a reader keep in mind the ways the fiction as hypertext both challenges and fulfills many expectations about how literature works. I consider two literary theories particularly useful to the study of hypertext fiction: post-structuralist theory, in general, and french feminist theory, in particular. In fact, the post-structuralist definition of language, that it "begins to look much more like a sprawling limitless web where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else," could double as a description of a text written in *Storyspace* (Eagleton 129). In *Storyspace*, because texts have no set beginnings or ends, the meaning of the text is constantly deferred and signification is a playground of possibilities. French feminist literary theory also speaks to this idea of deferral and possibility, but as a way of giving voice to a distinctly feminine type of writing. *Storyspace* has been posited as a possible space where "writing the body" may occur.

This ability to present many textual possibilities at once makes *Storyspace* as a form very appealing to both schools of thought.

Certainly *St. Thecla* is a 'writable' text, one with "no beginnings and no ends, no sequences which cannot be reversed, no hierarchy of textual 'levels' to tell you what is more or less significant" (Eagleton 138). The user interface on the Page Reader lets the reader follow his chosen reading sequence backwards as far as he likes. No *Teckla* is intentionally presented as more or less important than any other and since there are no markers (such as being able to see how far into the book one is) the reader can establish no ideas about the importance of a piece of text based on where it is in the work. Also, in the default version, I have purposely declined to end my text because I did not want to reward the passive acceptance of the unscrolling text. If the reader wants to get the full flavor of the text, she has to be willing to experiment. There are places in the text that could serve as "endings," but I have left traces in the text to suggest that the reader has not explored every possible textual option; hence, even though the reader has chosen to stop reading, the story does not end there and the reader must acknowledge this. Unlike a book, which end when there are no more pages, a hypertext has an infinite number of pages. It is true that when a reader finishes a book, he can always go back and start over and the reading technically does not have to end, but with my hypertext a reader never has to finish. Since one of my central themes is an escape from death, I wanted even the structure of my text to reflect this. Hypertext moves away from the idea of a primary, implicit textual (or lingual) meaning to a kaleidoscope of meanings that are constantly changing according to how the reader is organizing the text. However, these meanings are not completely left up to chance; instead, they are calculated, to the extent possible, by the underlying structure of the text.

The shortcoming of post-structuralism I see when applying it to hypertext is post-structuralism's insistence on describing a text as non-linear, and the ensuing

confusion from the assumption that a reading of that text must then be non-linear as well. A text may be non-linear, but a reading is always linear. No reading of a text can then be said to be truly non-linear because people read in a linear order. First they read A, then B, then C. If C happened before A, then the correct term for the reading order A B C might be non-chronological. If it is impossible to tell when A, B, and C happened in relation to each other, which happens frequently in my text, the correct term might be non-sequential. A third useful term is multi-linear, when there are many strands of linearity that may be followed.

This concept of linearity is further made problematic because a hypertext, as opposed to a printed text, has a three-dimensional shape. The segments of text are set into boxes stacked inside each other or placed next to each other and connected (or not) by links. A reading, then, does not follow a line (there is nothing particularly straight about it) through the text, but a path through and around a three-dimensional object. St. Thecla is a textual mobile, where the fragments of text, when viewed alone, mean little or nothing, but when viewed with others, acquire multiple, layered, shifting meanings-the difference being that this mobile is set into motion by the reader and not by the breeze. In this case, even though reading is a linear (as qualified above) event, meaning is not acquired in a linear way. Rather, ideas and images are collected by the reader as he reads linearly, while the meanings of those images and ideas only become apparent in an imagistic fashion.

Thecla works by promoting a kind of intuition on the part of the reader, and in this way it may meet some goals of french feminism. French feminist theorists hope to write in a way that expresses the "female" experience, a way to represent the silences that woman must navigate, the holes in a patriarchal language that cannot accommodate them, the "*no man's land*, which constitutes precisely what men fail to understand of her and often attribute to stupidity because she cannot express its

substance in their inevitably alienated language" (Herrmann 169). To promote this "reader's intuition" is to create a way to fill the holes of patriarchal language and express the female experience. In hypertext, links made between text boxes can force a "cognitive jump" in the reader that may be the closest we come to reproducing these silences, full of unspeakable knowledge (Burnett 21). Silence "is the place where the repressed manage to survive": not only the repressed gender but the repressed ways of knowing (Cixous 337). For instance, the reader may "know" at the end of a reading of *Thecla* that Theoclia, Thecla's mother, is also the goddess who appears in Union Station. However, he may never be able to point to a particular piece of text that reveals this to him. Rather, the meanings he has accumulated through his readings have suggested this to him. He "knows" this even though he cannot verbalize how he has acquired this knowledge. The idea of the doubled Theoclia keeps "returning, arriving over and over again, because the unconscious is impregnable" (Cixous 336). The reader has engaged the text at a level he is not used to, I hope in a way that is particularly "feminine."

I think that post-structuralism and french feminism are helpful and appropriate starting points for hypertext discussion. However, trying to use any theory of literature postulated from print based texts to talk about a hypertext novel presents some problems. For example, *Thecla* has a non-traditional beginning and no designated ending. Also, there are countless choices a reader makes that influence the kind of text she is presented with, so there are countless possible readings. This can make any kind of theorizing about this particular text next to impossible. Say, for instance, that reader A wanted to talk to reader B about the french feminist implications of the gender switch at what reader A considers to be the end of the text. Reader B, unfortunately for reader A, never got to that part of the text and thought the story she read was about a woman coming to understand her place in her family. There is no way to really reconcile the two readings and

both are equally as valid as the other and all other possible readings. The conundrum these readers face illustrates the necessity of a new way of understanding how the text unfolds and of understanding the role of the reader.

A hypertext, it seems to me, operates according to principles of chaos theory. A simple explanation of this theory, as scientists know it, is that a chaotic system "is defined as one that shows 'sensitivity to initial conditions.' That is, any uncertainty in the initial state of the given system, no matter how small, will lead to rapidly growing errors in any effort to predict [its] future behavior" (Grolier). A hypertext could be called chaotic because it also shows "sensitivity to initial conditions." That is, the reader, in making an initial choice at the first screen, determines the way the text unfolds, which affects everything that will come after that, and, therefore, the meanings given to those pieces of text. This means, of course, that the possibilities for reading are almost endless and unpredictable.

However, that is not to say that the reader is left to muddle about in a text without form or structure. The author has given the text a form and structure and the reader gives shape to her individual reading by the choices she makes when interacting with the author's form. We might not be able to predict the choices a reader will make, but when she looks back over where she has been, she will see a discernible pattern in addition to a plot, some other connection of meaning. To understand how a pattern may be unpredictable, yet discernible, I think it helps to consider lightning, which shows chaotic characteristics. If we could slow lightning down enough to watch it as it makes its way through the sky, we could recognize at each instant that it was lightning, but we would have no way of predicting with certainty where it would strike until it did. The reading patterns take on these attributes of a chaotic system.

The patterns I have structured into my text are types of fractals, geometrical shapes that exhibit self-similarity; in other words, patterns that resemble themselves

at any scale. Trees exhibit fractal geometry in that a stick looks like a little tree, although not necessarily an exact replica of the tree it came from. In my hypertext, I have set up a complicated relationship between all of the women in my text partially based on my understanding of the fractal nature of hypertext patterns, a relationship that mirrors the way a reader creates a meaning in relation to a text. I was recreating the character of St. Thecla at the same time that I was creating a version of myself in relationship to this ever-becoming Thecla. When the immediate circumstances of the plot would not let that particular woman be what I needed, because I could call on the unique structure of hypertext, I was either able to create another set of circumstances or another woman to be what I needed at that moment. I was creating a textual self in relationship to my family and circumstances in my own life. The post-structuralist might theorize that I had set up a complicated group of characters who are who they are only by their relationship to the other characters whose meanings they encompass and defer simultaneously. The french feminist might say that a singular textual voice or narrator is a phallogocentric phenomena and that the multiplicity of voices and the rejection of standard barriers of space, time and physicality represents a more feminine way of writing.

But these women are not simply a multiplicity. The fractal nature of hypertext structure allows the reader to read these women as the same "Thecla." They are all individual parts of an over-all pattern. They should all seem similar to each other in some ways, and it is in this resemblance that a meaning can be found. This over-arching idea of *Thecla* resembles a fractal in repeating all of Thecla's parts to suggest self-similarity. This idea of fractals can serve to unify all the Theclas into a whole, but also can suggest the form that the whole takes without necessarily validating or depending on some "unitary" whole for their meaning.

In hypertext, the reader must also take on a different theoretical "shape."

Faced with a print-based text, the reader has a less active role in the creative evolution of a text than she does when she engages in a reading of hypertext. In other words, each reader might find her own meaning in the text, but the shape of the text had already been set in stone-or paper, in this case. In hypertext, the reader becomes an active participant in the creative process. She still reads the text, but the decisions she makes directly affect the text she reads. She is creating-"writing"-the text she then reads when she decides whether to hit "enter" or click on an icon or on a particular word. At the same time, she also becomes the only site for that particular reading of the text. Only she will ever read that particular version of the text. A hypertext reader is reader and creator simultaneously.

The types of reading paths chosen by the reader, therefore, take on a form of their own. In order to fully appreciate my (or perhaps any) hypertext, one has to appreciate not only the stories, but the shape the story takes, the different shapes the stories take every reading. When I set up *Thecla*, I organized the text into loops. I made a main loop, accessible merely by pressing Enter. Off this main loop are other loops that take the reader to other parts of the text that contain either similar words or ideas to ones in that particular piece of text. There are even smaller loops, ones that either serve to illustrate certain more oblique connections, such as that Thecla's Thamyris is also Tekla's Ris, or to allow for authorial intrusions. However, when one reader was telling me about mapping her experience of reading, I began to realize that she had only a vague sense of the patterns I had intended in the text. Her diagram of her reading experience also had a pattern, but not one I had specifically written into the text. My structure was useful and necessary for organizing the text, but is not the only one the text can support.

I hope that few, if any, readers will spend much time trying to figure out what text "really" fits where. Instead, trust your "reader's intuition." If things fit (or do not fit) together in your reading, your experience as reader is just as valid as my

intention as writer. Whether I intended the box called FairyTales to go in the autobiographical section or in the collection of Theclas is of no importance. The meaning you find in the text where you find it is.

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