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A Vase-Painting of a Comic Parody of the Amymone Myth?

A vase-painting from the collection of Sir William Hamilton, engraved by Wilhelm Tischbein before its loss in the wreck of the H.M.S. Colossus in 1798 (Volume I, no. 35), depicts two figures in what appears to be an episode from the Amymone myth. The female figure is likely to be Amymone; the male seems to be a bizarre satyr wearing wings and what may be a feathered body-suit.

The date of the original painting is difficult to determine because it only survives in an engraving, but some features, such as the musculature of the winged figure, the restraint of the standing female figure, and the fall of her drapery, point to the third quarter of the fifth century.

Amymone appears in some sixty-five fifth- and fourth-century vase-paintings. We generally see her carrying a hydria; she is shown either being assaulted by satyrs, pursued by Poseidon, or in amicable company with Poseidon. The myth was the subject of a satyr-play by Aeschylus, but nothing indicates that there was a winged satyr in it. If anything, this image reflects a *parody* of the myth, and we should consider the possibility that it illustrates or indirectly reflects a scene from comedy. Satyrs are known to have appeared in comedy. One candidate would be the Amymone or Pelops by the comic poet Nicochares, a contemporary of Aristophanes (PCG VII.40-41). At least we know that the myth was part of the repertory of mythological burlesque in comedy.

The central problem posed by this vase-painting is the winged satyr. I suggest that he had dressed up to play the part of Eros. A winged Eros is present on twenty of the sixty-five vase-paintings of Amymone; I can find no parallel for a satyr disguised as Eros, but it is what a comic poet might do in a burlesque.

Let me acknowledge that we cannot completely rule out possible alternative identifications. For example, Electra is shown on some vase-paintings shrouded in a mantle, holding a hydria, and in the company of a winged Fury. Perhaps the winged satyr is meant to be a comic Fury, but we would expect the scene to be set at the tomb of Agamemnon.

In any event, it is not unprecedented for a satyr to take on bird characteristics (or for a bird to have satyr characteristics). On an oinochoe in London (BM 509) we find bird dancers with faces that are rather satyr-like and, although it is barely detectable, the dancer on the left may be ithyphallic. The birds on the Getty vase are remarkable for the fact that they are wearing the tights of satyrs. On a vase in Berlin members of a bird chorus have faces with notably snub, satyr-like noses. In other words, the line between animal costume and satyr costume may never have been a rigid one. The hybrid nature of creatures on the comic stage was widespread.