

Elizabeth BELFIORE
Satyric Imagery in Plato's Phaedrus

In his second speech in the Phaedrus, Socrates compares the soul to a charioteer driving two horses, one good and one bad. Although this myth has been much discussed, one aspect of it has not been noticed by scholars: the bad horse resembles a satyr. Moreover, satyric imagery in this passage is not mere poetic ornamentation, but provides important clues to the religious and psychological views expressed in the myth.

That the bad horse has many of the physical characteristics of a satyr is apparent from Socrates' description: "The other [horse] is crooked, big, with limbs put together at random, strong-necked, short-necked, snub-nosed, black, with gray and bloodshot eyes, companion of hybris and boastfulness, shaggy around the ears" (253e1-5). Satyrs are typically represented in vase-paintings as big, misshapen creatures, with snub noses, high foreheads, shaggy hair, thick, short necks, large eyes, and large, erect phalluses. The bad horse not only looks, but acts like a satyr, being characterized by hybris and lack of sexual restraint.

Satyrs, however, are not merely comic hybrids of human and animal, they also have a status intermediate between mortals and gods. They have more than human wisdom, like the satyr captured by Midas, but are subordinates rather than equals of Dionysus, from whom they are frequently separated. Moreover, satyrs mediate between humans and gods through their role in initiation. The fact that the satyr is associated with initiation rites makes the image of the satyr-like bad horse especially appropriate to the myth of the Phaedrus. This passage, in which the soul-chariots of mortals attempt to return to the choruses of the gods in which they danced as initiates before falling to earth, recounts a story similar to the motif in satyr plays of separation from Dionysus followed by reunion. Moreover, the chariot myth makes extensive use of mystery terminology. The combination of mystery and satyric imagery in this passage suggests that the bad horse has positive as well as negative qualities, calling into question the view held by many scholars that it represents an intractable evil in the soul, causing the original fall to earth, and impeding progress as the soul attempts to return to the gods. The fact that the bad horse resembles the satyr-like Socrates also suggests that its ugly exterior conceals hidden virtues that can be harnessed for good purposes.

The complex ambiguity of the satyr, a creature that shares in bestiality, humanity, and divinity, makes it an appropriate image of one part of the soul. Socrates' myth suggests that the satyr-like aspects of the human soul can drag us down to bestiality, wrecking the chariot of the soul. With proper guidance, however, these same elements in the soul can also help to raise us above the merely human sophrosyne of the good horse, thus allowing us to rejoin the chorus of the gods.