

The Poet and the Charioteer

The metaphorical treatment of poets as charioteers is a relatively well documented phenomenon in Indo-European poetry, most notably Old Avestan poetry in which the poet routinely imagines his hymn as a team of horses competing in a race and his skill as performer is likened to that of the charioteer who must steer his team in the proper direction. Similar comparisons are also observable in several hymns of the *Rigveda* and may also underlie numerous depictions of Greek chariot racing, such as those seen in Homer and Pindar.

In this paper I compare the Greek treatment of the poet/charioteer relationship to that seen in the Sanskrit *Rigveda* and the Old Avestan *Gathas*, so as to consider three points. Firstly, I provide a sketch of the nature of these comparisons in order to evaluate the possibility of a genetic relationship among these geographically distant poetic tropes. This discussion draws attention to such difficulties as the differing generic distribution of the comparison, i.e. its ritualistic versus its non-ritualistic deployment. Secondly, in order to find the logic in this comparison, I draw on Plato's *Ion* to discuss the Greek concept of poetic inspiration and to illustrate the similarity of the control required of a poet, especially the oral poet, and that of a charioteer. Finally I contextualize this discussion within the economic realities of poetic performance by considering the literary evidence for the use of horses as payment for poetic services. Much of this evidence comes from the appearance of horses in the Vedic *danastuti*, the praise of the payment received by poets from patrons which often ends Vedic hymns. This is compared to the anxiety concerning lack of payment for poetic performance in the *Gathas*, in which horses also feature.

Ultimately, I present the argument that Greek, Rigvedic and Old Avestan poetry document an Indo-European equine poetics shaped not only by similar views of poetic inspiration, but also by an economic relationship between poets and horses which may underlie its origin.