

The *Menos* of the Poet

The figure of the metapoetic charioteer, the charioteer whose actions and skills are reflective of the process of creating poetry, is a relatively well documented figure in Greek poetry and in Indo-European poetry generally. It occurs in Pindar, Bacchylides, and Parmenides and is remarkably common in the earliest phases of Indo-Iranian poetry, being one of the more prominent poetic metaphors of the Sanskrit Vedas and the Avestan Gathas. Although it is tempting to assume that this shared phenomenon reflects a commonly inherited device, there is good reason to think that the origin of this device lies not in chariots or charioteers but in horses and the inherited ideology of the IE horse. I suggest that these cultures did not inherit a metapoetic charioteer so much as a metapoetic horse and that the charioteer figure is actually the result of independent parallel development.

There are multiple reasons to believe this to be true, but in this paper I focus only on one, the special relationship that horses and poets both share with *menos*. *Menos* is, of course, particularly associated with the Homeric heroes, but it is also regularly possessed by and placed in Homeric horses (*Il.* 17.456; 17.476; 23.399). This connection between horses and *menos* is not confined to Greek poetry but is clearly of rather deep Indo-European antiquity. The Sanskrit cognate *manas*, for example is in the Vedas the source from which the craftsmen gods formed the horse (1.120.2). *Menos* belongs to one of the more fleshed out of the IE etymological families. It is itself very simple, an e-grade s-stem noun derived from the verbal root $\sqrt{\text{men}}$. The root is usually defined as “to think,” but its derivatives have a surprisingly wide range of meanings. Across the daughter languages it yields words having to do with the exertion of physical strength, the production of poetry, and the pursuit of sex. I suggest, therefore, that this root should not be translated as “to think” but rather as “to direct one’s life force.” I argue that

the direction of this force could result in a sexual and reproductive act, a valorous act, or even an intellectual and poetic act and that the horse may have embodied the force expressed by this root, even in early IE times. If this is the case then metapoetic associations of the horse must be very ancient indeed and are likely to have formed part of a shared poetic inheritance that distinct IE cultures later developed into a metapoetics of charioteering.

I conclude by discussing the special value that exists in seeking the origins of this metaphor in horses rather than in charioteering, namely that there is considerable doubt about the date of the appearance of the chariot among the IE peoples. Despite the similarities in poetic treatment of chariots among the descendent IE languages many archaeologists doubt that these cultures inherited their chariot technology from a common parent, although they probably did inherit their horse-breeding and horse-riding culture from a common parent. If we can find in early equine poetics the germ of what could plausibly have developed later into multiple similar strains of charioteering poetics we can circumvent this otherwise challenging methodological problem.