A Thesean Socrates: Plato’s Suggestive Allusion

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*-Pl. Phaedo, 58b1*

So speaks Phaedo within the first twenty-five lines of Plato’s dialogue of that name. The subject is Theseus, who both saved the Athenian youths and was himself saved in the famous tale of the Cretan Minotaur. A deliberate connection between Theseus and Socrates can be seen from the outset of the *Phaedo*—a connection that not only frames Plato’s presentation of Socrates, but colors the meaning of the dialogue as a whole. Possible reasons for an allusion to Theseus are many. Scholars of Attic vase painting have frequently noted the sudden increase in Thesean imagery in 5th century B.C. Athens. This trend lasted well into the time of Plato, and likely reflects an appropriation of Theseus as a true Attic hero, and even savior. Although prominently placed to set the stage for the dialogue to follow, Plato’s Thesean reference has consistently been overlooked in scholarly literature (Calame 1996, Colaiaco 2001, Neils 1987, Rowe 1993, among others). This paper will offer a political and philosophical interpretation of Plato’s elaborate parallel between Theseus and Socrates, and examine Plato’s use of contemporary cultural trends to portray Socrates as a philosophical hero willing to be sacrificed for the greater good of the city.

We are told at the opening of the dialogue that Socrates’ death was delayed until the return of the sacred ship from Delos. This custom honors Theseus’ voyage to Crete and triumph over the Minotaur, and by law, no one can be put to death in Athens until the ship has completed its pilgrimage. Socrates’ death, then, is inextricably linked to the voyage of Theseus’ ship. In this context, Theseus’ ship can be seen as a loaded symbol, carrying Socrates metaphorically into the elevated status of Athenian hero, as it did Theseus in his most famous test of valor. Both are willing victims for sacrifice, offering to risk their own lives for the well-being of Athens. The two are further joined through their founding of political structures (one philosophical, the other pragmatic), their roles as cultural icons, and their philosophies of virtuous leadership.

More absorbing are the philosophical implications of this parallel. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates expounds on his beliefs regarding the soul and the body. He explains that man’s corporeal elements pollute the good parts of the soul, if the soul allows itself to be too closely associated with the body. Nothing embodies the corporeal more than the Minotaur, the monstrous issue of Pasiphae’s lust for a bull, which was consummated through adultery and trickery. Only in the realm of myth are such grotesque results of wrong-doing made tangible. Through the *Phaedo’s* opening passage, Plato refers indirectly to this piece of Athenian mythic history, perhaps to draw an implicit connection between it and the philosophical teachings of Socrates. With the head of a bull and the body of a human, the Minotaur personifies the very corporeal element that Socrates rails against, without the human mind that can philosophize and, in so doing, save it from its baser self. Indeed, the Minotaur is unequivocally a composite being—a physical manifestation of Socrates’ definition of the body as πολυειδής, compared with the μονοειδής quality of the soul (*Phaedo* 78d, 80b, 83e). By means of philosophy, Socrates’ soul can save itself from the body. Although accused of corrupting the Athenian youth, Socrates is depicted by Plato as being able to save them through philosophy from their baser elements, as Theseus saved the youth of Athens from the flesh-devouring Minotaur.

Theseus and Socrates are connected by their championing of the soul over the body, the importance of the ship and of Apollo to their heroic journeys (Apollo’s oracle prompts Socrates’ search for a man wiser than himself, and the ship makes its pilgrimage to Delos in honor of the god), their shared concern for the health of Athens, and even their aid and subsequent distancing from women. All of these suggest another layer of meaning in the text than is immediately apparent. While Plato’s discussion of the body and soul occurs within a wide religious, cultural, and even mythological context, the pointed reference to Theseus expands the meaning of the *Phaedo* and elevates Socrates to the heroic plane by linking him with a founding hero of Athens. This connection, so far unexamined in Platonic scholarship, will provide new insight into Plato’s evaluation of Socrates’ place in Athenian culture and history.

**Selected Bibliography**

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