

Necessary Roughness: Lucius as Plato's Black Horse in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

Several readers of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* have noted that the return of Lucius' white horse, Candidus, near the end of the novel is likely one of several pieces of "Platonica" scattered throughout the novel [Schlam]. The white horse is a nod toward Plato's allegory of the tripartite soul in the *Phaedrus* in which that horse represents the purity and reason which draws the soul, unbidden without whip or goad, toward the divine [Drake, Dowden]. In Book 11 Lucius recognizes the true divinity of Isis and this is underscored by the return of his white horse which had abandoned him early in the novel as he sets upon his path of *serviles voluptates*. Readers have also noted, however, that if the "Candidus episode" is indeed a Platonic allusion, it is an incomplete one at best. Where, for instance, is the unruly black horse which strains at cross-purposes with the white horse and charioteer in the Platonic myth? Where is the charioteer? The thinness or even laziness of the allusion has caused some [Griffiths, Sandy] to question whether Apuleius intended a Platonic tag here at all.

I argue that the "Candidus episode" is not only a deliberate Platonic allusion but is also just a small part of a much larger use by Apuleius of the soul-chariot allegory throughout the novel. In fact, I argue further that the *Phaedrus* myth provides a template which explains principal narrative arcs in the *Metamorphoses* as well as an argument for the overall unity of the novel. To do this we must recognize that Lucius, as the ass, is the unruly black horse of the Platonic allegory. There are several details in the *Phaedrus* passage against which Apuleius seems to invite us to read his asinine Lucius. Plato's black horse is described as having rather asinine features (crooked, fat, flat nose, thick neck), the passions and shortcomings of both the black horse and the Apuleian ass are described in terms of and centered upon physical lusts, and both texts use the euphemism of "tail" (*κέρκον, cauda*) to refer to the male phallus and as symbolic for the flawed, unruly character of the respective beasts. In addition, we may even see a parody of or allusion to the *Phaedrus* myth in the aborted escape with Charite (*Met.* 6.27-30). Here the girl seems to play the part of the charioteer attempting to pull Lucius to the right (both in terms of direction and salvation of sorts) while he fights against her coercion and ultimately delivers them both back into the hands of the thieves.

More importantly, we must recognize that the horses of the Platonic myth should not be understood in the stark white horse/good, black horse/bad terms as many readers seem to have facilely interpreted them. Rather, a close reading of the episode shows that the neighing and

tugging of the black horse (albeit misguided) is *necessary* to approach the divine; the black horse reminds the timid and excessively restrained white horse and charioteer of their ultimate goal and pulls them toward it [Belfiore, Ferrari, Stoerber]. The myth goes on to say that after many shameless and lurching attempts to approach the “beloved”, the black horse finally gives in to the guidance of the charioteer, lays aside his hubris, and gazes upon the divine in reverent awe. This is, in a nutshell, the story of Lucius—he stumbles, lusts, runs, escapes, eavesdrops, is whipped and beaten through the better part of ten books before he collapses before the image of the goddess on the Cenchrean shore. Through the lens of the *Phaedrus* we see that Lucius’ debased wanderings are not a random series of events before a shocking or narratively discordant divine reversal, but rather make up the “necessary roughness” required to push the sinner toward salvation.

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