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CC 220: Classical Mythology

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The Effect of Jorge Luis Borges' "The House of Asterion" on the Popular Perspective of Minotaur

"The House of Asterion" is a magical realism short story by Jorge Luis Borges. It was originally published in the literary magazine *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* in 1947, then again in the *The Aleph* in 1949. Jorge Luis Borges was an Argentinian short-story writer who left a lasting impact on the Latin American magical realist movement of the 20th century. He was inspired by many art forms, such as paintings, as well as the German Expressionist movement which influenced the themes and writing conventions within "The House of Asterion" as well as many of Borges' other works. The many inspirations Borges had when writing "The House of Asterion" effected his interpretation of the Minotaur, named Asterion within his story. Borges depicts the Minotaur as both intelligent and misguided, deeply affected by his extended isolation. By choosing to depict the Minotaur in this way, Borges opened up a conversation about challenging dominant narratives and the treatment of groups othered by society.

In "The House of Asterion" by Jorge Luis Borges' the narrator, Asterion, addresses the reader directly. He states that he is trying to correct "defamatory claims" and clear up misunderstandings the reader is implied to have about him and why he never leaves his "house," which is actually the labyrinth. Asterion refutes the claim he is

imprisoned by arguing that his house has no doors and consequently no locks.¹ In an anecdote, Asterion describes that he had left his home at one point but had returned because he feared the faces of the terrified common people, who he describes as both revering and running away from him. He continues that the reason he cannot mingle with the general populace is due to how unique he is, which he credits a large part to his mother being a queen. Asterion then describes how he passes his days in his home; these descriptions allude to the effect long-term isolation has had on his psyche. He imagines companions and exhibits behaviors indicative of self-harm, intentionally overexerting himself through exercise and even throwing himself off of rooftops.² The narrator then describes a “ritual” which takes place every nine years, in which nine men enter his home so he can “deliver them from all evil” one of these tributes prophesied that Asterion’s “redeemer” would come. The story ends with Theseus, Asterion’s redeemer, telling Ariadne of his success, “‘Would you believe it, Ariadne?’ said Theseus. ‘The Minotaur scarcely defended himself.’”³ There are many allusions to the narrator’s identity within the text, however it is only until this ending that his identity as the Minotaur is made explicitly clear. Importantly, it is only an outsider, Theseus, who calls him this, and Asterion himself does not ever consider himself to be “the Minotaur.” The title of the Minotaur is a role imposed on him by others that view him as a monster. This revelation at the end of the story encourages the reader to reread the story again to find hints suggesting Asterion’s identity, as though we are Theseus retracing his steps in the maze.

¹ Borges, Jorge Luis. “The House of Asterion,” *Labyrinths*, 1962, pp. 138

² Borges, pp. 139

³ Borges, pp. 140

The themes present within “The House of Asterion” explore isolation, death and redemption, and the line between humanity and monstrosity. The text functions as an exploration of perspective, every event Asterion describes is written in a manner to better characterize him as a narrator and imply the warped perspective through which he is viewing these events. Borges writes “The House of Asterion” in such a way it becomes a form of “literary puzzle,” taking shape as a labyrinth within the readers mind while trying to read it. Dominant throughout the text is the theme of the cycle of death and redemption. Asterion “redeems” the tributes through death, and Theseus then does the same to Asterion in killing him, making him face consequences for killing the Athenian youths while also symbolically freeing Asterion from the labyrinth.

Despite the eccentricities and moral ambiguity of his actions, Asterion is written to elicit sympathy in the reader. His emotions are vivid and intense throughout the text, and incredibly human despite his “monstrosity.” Rather than an intrinsically violent monster, he is depicted more so as a person who became this way through isolation and his ignorance of the outside world, therefore creating more room for sympathy from the reader. The Asterion depicted is meant to be pitiful, further demonstrated by the ending quote from Theseus. Asterion does not attack Theseus and instead willingly lets himself be killed, not resisting at all. The fact Theseus kills Asterion anyway, makes the reader question the humanity of Theseus, especially as he gloats over how easy killing Asterion was.

This interpretation differs significantly compared to conventional classical interpretations, where the Minotaur often actively fights back against Theseus. However,

it does serve to exaggerate and highlight themes present within certain classical interpretations which illustrate a possible power imbalance present within their fight. In classical depictions, the Minotaur is often unarmed, or only wielding a rock, while Theseus is depicted with either a sword or club. This difference creates a metaphor for the Minotaur representing an ethnic “other” which is defeated by the developed, “civilized” Athens which Theseus represents. Additionally, the Minotaur is sometimes depicted as having been asleep when Theseus found and killed him, and also even is illustrated as being bound by Theseus, as described by Pausanias.⁵ The relationship between hero and monster becomes unequal, now that Asterion’s death is taken out of the context of an equal fight and the line between characters proximity to humanity and monstrosity is blurred. Despite Theseus being lauded as a hero and the Minotaur viewed as a monster, Borges uses these characters to make a broader claim that even when people are labelled as “good” or “evil,” at their core people have the capacity for both. The complicated reality of life means no one person can act in a purely moral way, in fact, these morals are often purely subjective. Nihilistically, the story states that everyone is monstrous in some way, however at the same time presents an equal capacity for goodness.

Jorge Luis Borges’ translations of German Expressionist writings and articles concerning the movement are credited as the primary reason the genre was introduced to

⁵ Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Johns Hopkins University Press, vol. 1, 1993. pp. 266

The illustrations described by Pausanias are derived from *Descriptions of Greece*, the Throne of Amyklai (3.18.11), the Chest of Kypselos (5.19.1), and the reclining Minotaur is from a Corinthian painting dated to about 570 B.C.

the Hispanic literary scene.⁶ Borges' relationship with this movement left its fingerprints across his body of work, Borges himself said that the spirit of German Expressionism was to express "a subjective, inner reality and spiritual truth."⁷ German Expressionist poetry often makes stylistic choices to better portray emotion, which is reflected in Borges' conversational style of narration and sentence structures' fragmentary rhythm. Another theme within German Expressionism reflected in Borges' work, is the use of characters as metaphorical representations of broader societal concerns.⁸ For example, Asterion as a metaphor for "othered" social groups, and Theseus as those who oppress these groups.

In its original context, the painting which inspired Borges, *The Minotaur* (Figure A), painted by George Frederic Watts in 1885 was not intended to be a sympathetic depiction of the Minotaur and instead was made in dialogue with an article by journalist WT Stead, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (1885) published in the Pall Mall Gazette. This article confronted the rampant problem of child prostitution within London at the time, through use of the Minotaur as a metaphor for those who profited from the London sex trade and the children victim to this system as the Athenian tributes. However, divorced from this context, the anticipation Watt's intended to depict was interpreted as longing melancholia by later audiences such as Borges.

⁶ Maier, Linda S. "JORGE LUIS BORGES AND GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM." *Romance Notes*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1986, pp. 143–48.

⁷ Borges, "Lírica expresionista," p. 10. Original text: "[E]s la tentativa de crear para esta época un arte matinalmente intuicionista, de superar la realidad ambiente y elevar sobre su madeja sensorial y emotiva una ultra-realidad espiritua," Translated in Maier, "JORGE LUIS BORGES AND GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM," pp. 144

⁸ Maier, "JORGE LUIS BORGES AND GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM," pp. 148

The reason these disturbing traits are often projected onto the Minotaur by artists such as Watts and Stead, is because, being half-human and half-beast, he becomes a canvas for societal ills and a metaphorical reflection of human nature. The monstrosity of the Minotaur is a visual representation of the unrestrained ID of the human mind, which is why he is often depicted as unthinking and mindless, reflecting a wilder aspect of humanity. This is a largely accepted interpretation of the Minotaur in the original myth, as well as continuing into modernity evidenced by Stead's article, and other sources, such as Pablo Picasso's series of illustrations and paintings of the Minotaur, for example, *La Minotaure* (Figure B), *Minotaur with Dead Mare in Front of Cave* (Figure C), and *Drinking Minotaur and Reclining Woman* (Figure D), and Charlie Fletcher's Young Adult novel *Stoneheart* (2006). Within these, the Minotaur is a symbol of male virility and aggression, not constrained by human conventions and an expression of instinct, desire, and power.⁹

The author's perception surrounding the idea that the Minotaur is inherently violent is intrinsic to how the Minotaur is depicted, and central in wrestling with the cycle of violence within the story, as the authors attempt to try and fit the Minotaur into the box of either perpetrator, victim, or both. Within the original myth, the Minotaur is victimized by King Minos by being trapped in the labyrinth, and then victimizes the tributes which are dedicated to him, resulting in his slaughter at the hands of Theseus.¹⁰ The moral values ascribed to the Minotaur ultimately is dependent on how much agency the

⁹ Gloyne, Liz. *Tracking classical monsters in popular culture*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, pp. 170-7.

¹⁰ Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, pp.

Minotaur has in the victimization of the tributes within different interpretations of the myth.

In Watts' painting *The Minotaur*, he is the beneficiary of a predatory system and derives his own personal gratification from this system dependent on the suffering of others. Within "The House of Asterion," his actions are based in misunderstanding and misinformation likely instilled in him by the people who wish to keep him complicit within the labyrinth.¹¹ While unintentionally, he still works as a cog in the political machine it is implied Minos is benefiting from. In the context of the original myth, through the deaths of the Athenian youths Minos is able to consolidate power over Athens, which he blames for the death of his son, Androgeos.¹² Instead of being the direct beneficiary as in Watts' *The Minotaur*, Borges displays the Minotaur as a political tool unaware that his misunderstanding of the circumstances is being taken advantage of by those in power.

[Stanford Professor Rene] Girard describes the scapegoat, the innocent victim upon whom the crowd settles in a mimetic crisis, as most often an outsider, someone foreign or distinguishable because disfigured (or beautiful) or suffering from a mental handicap, sometimes from a social class that rivals the perpetrators. Though this person (or group, if a minority is targeted, as in Nazi Germany) probably has nothing to do with the outward crisis or catastrophe, the crowd believes, at least temporarily, that the scapegoat caused the problem¹³ The Minotaur becomes a victim of the subconscious structural discrimination described, within Borges' interpretation.

¹¹ Borges, pp. 104

¹² Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, pp. 262

¹³ Brinig, Margaret F. "Explaining Abuse of the Disabled Child." *Family Law Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2012, pp. 272. *JSTOR*.

The hybridity of the Minotaur, within the context of the original myth he is derived from, is a physical marker of the Cretan royal family being punished for disobeying Poseidon. The idea of the Minotaur being innately evil, bestial, and blood-thirsty is to showcase how unnatural bestiality is and the consequences of disrespecting and tricking a divinity with absolute power. His role is essentially, the scapegoat (or scapebull), which symbolizes all of the misdeeds and crimes of King Minos and Pasiphae. His existence is their punishment and so he is punished by them, this is not considered unfair to the Minotaur because he is considered an unthinking beast. He becomes an instrument in Minos' revenge on Athens, and due to being the instrument with which Minos exacts this revenge the matter is considered resolved with his death, without any punishment for Minos.¹⁴

Bull God (2020) by Roberta Gellis, is a romance novel which casts Ariadne as a young high priestess of Dionysus, who then falls in love with the god she worships. The novel then rewrites the mythological events surrounding the Minotaur's birth to be that the bull which impregnated Pasiphae was Poseidon himself. The child born from this union was conceived in order to become a rival for the position of patron god of Crete with Dionysus. This way, Pasiphae could consolidate more power for herself as the new god's mother. Following Borges' footsteps in identifying the theme of using the Minotaur for personal gain, this novel even more explicitly makes clear the parallels between the victimization and treatment of the Minotaur with that of children born with deformities and disabilities.

¹⁴ Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, pp. 261

The Minotaur is not intrinsically evil within this retelling and is instead a child with needs which his mother neglects and refuses to understand additionally, he is unable to communicate these needs normatively. Furthermore, she is disgusted by his appearance and mistreats him based off that alone. The child Minotaur within Gellis' novel is overtly treated within the text as disabled. Borges' Minotaur is less explicit in his coding as representative for any one group, instead representing a nonspecific group which has been othered by society at large, however the themes of isolation have clear parallels to the domestic and medical abuse of disabled children and adults. "The House of Asterion" then can be interpreted as exhibiting a broader political belief in spreading awareness of society's tendency to isolate "othered" people, such as those who are disabled, and the effects of this isolation on its victims.

Word count: 2418

Link to "The House of Asterion" by Jorge Luis Borges

https://dekeweaver.com/courses_arts343_fall16/media/borges.pdf

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Figure A: The Minotaur, 1885, George Fredric Watts, Oil paint on canvas, Tate collection



Figure B: Pablo Picasso, *La Minotaure*, 1935

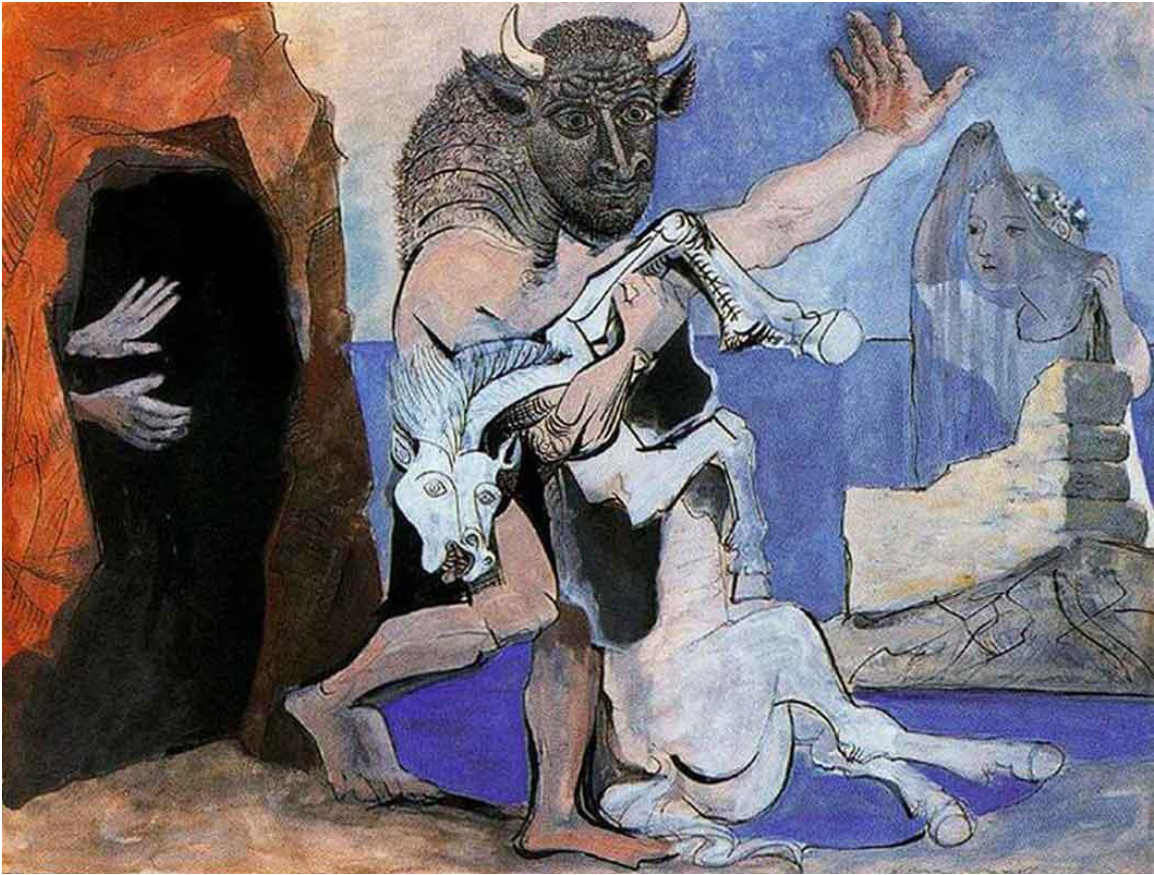


Figure C: Pablo Picasso, *Minotaur with Dead Mare in Front of Cave*, 1936



Figure D: Pablo Picasso, *Drinking Minotaur and Reclining Woman*, 1933

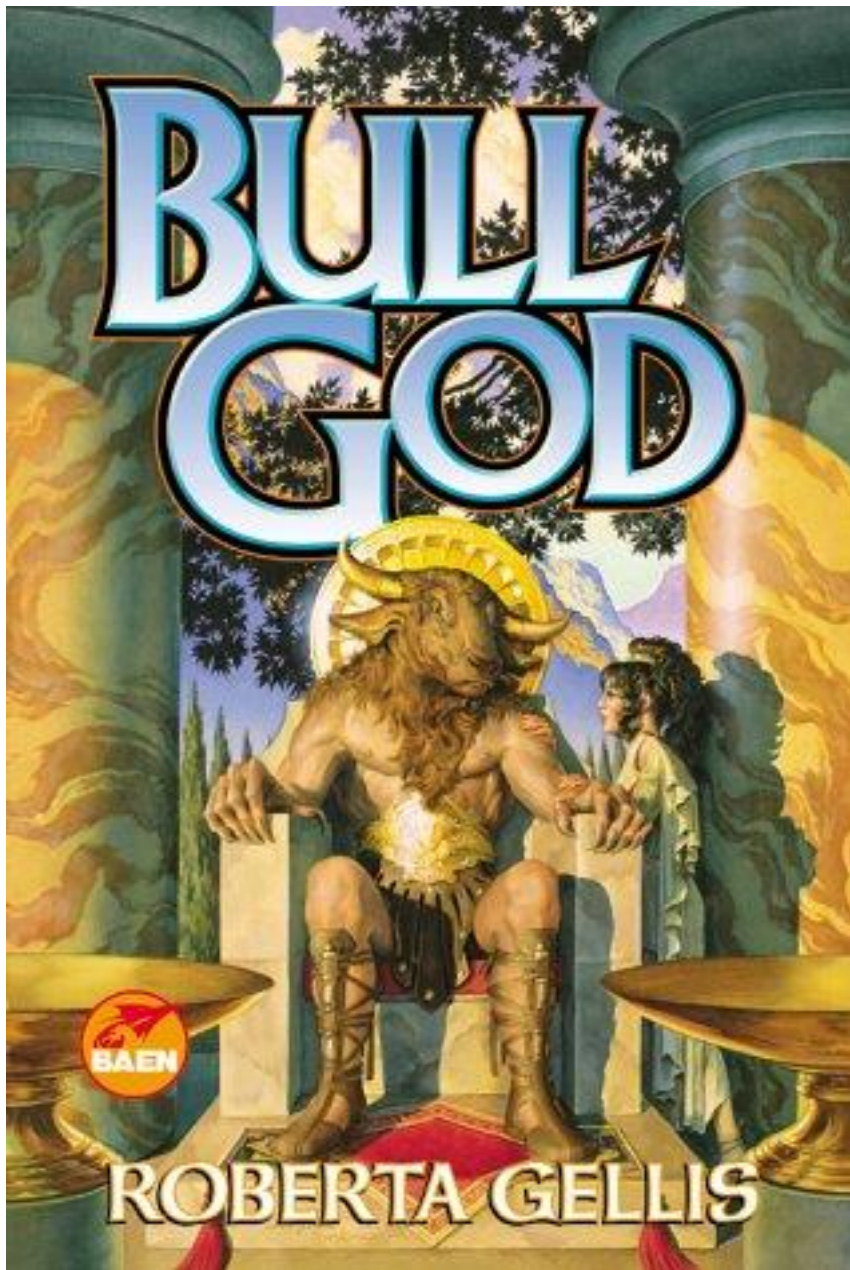


Figure C: Book Cover for *Bull God* (2020) by Roberta Gellis