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# The Minatory Minotaur: Demythologizing Myth in “The House of Asterion”

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**ABSTRACT:** Recent critics of Jorge Luis Borges’s “The House of Asterion” (1947) have traced the author’s revisions in the original manuscript, charting his changing arrangement of information through the text. This essay investigates the information itself through structuralist and historicist theory. A structuralist reading analyzes Asterion’s worldview and shows how various narrators dock the integrity of his voice. Historicism probes aspects of religion, biology, and architecture to limn the true complexity of Asterion’s ties with society. Together, these theories reveal a trove of intricate intrigue and doubt. In this study I examine how Asterion, a reinvention of the Minotaur, is painstakingly shaped as a tragic figure. I describe how his trap is not a labyrinth but a gross misunderstanding, one which bars him from humans trapped in their own inaccurate views. With this groundbreaking short story, Borges accounts for the Minotaur with novel explanations while challenging many facets of his myth.

**KEYWORDS:** jorge luis borges; borges; minotaur; the house of asterion; asterion; ancient greece; short story; literature

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Few archaic bogeymen are as haunting as the Minotaur of Crete. This nightmarish creature, the child of King Minos and Queen Pasiphae, is well remembered for having the body of a man and the head of a bull. Legend holds this hybrid beast<sup>1</sup> in the labyrinth beneath Minos's palace, where he is said to have taken regular human sacrifices. A timeless fixture in Greek and Etruscan lore, he has sown the ground for epochs of terror and wonder. One among the more unique perspectives of this figure springs from the mind of Jorge Luis Borges. A titan of 20th-century short fiction, Borges achieved renown and revolution with such works as "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "Death and the Compass," and "The House of Asterion." Originally published in 1947, the lattermost piece breaks unusual ground in tapping the mind of the Minotaur himself. In exploring the Minotaur's perspective through a prose dramatic monologue, Borges paints the portrait of a pitiful, perverse, and woefully isolated wretch. In fewer than 1,000 words, Borges infuses the Minotaur with devastating and devastated humanity to challenge understanding of the classical myth and to question what truly defines a monster.

Of all literary theories by which to explore "The House of Asterion," structuralism and historicism are among the most revealing.<sup>2</sup> The concept of structuralism, first introduced by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, analyzes the distinctions, functions, and relationships of various narrative voices. One of its key concepts is focalization, which according to Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri is "the filtering of a story through a consciousness" (Horstkotte and Pedri 330). Here, focalization identifies multiple narrators—the Minotaur, the historian Apollodorus, an inquisitive scholar, and an anonymous prose voice—and shows how they lend a compelling sense of authenticity while weaving an almost entirely unreliable tale. Historicism, coined by literary historian Stephen Greenblatt, encourages mutual analysis of history and literature, "each influencing the other, and without a sense of stable facts" (Parker 269). Historicist analysis questions the Minotaur's reputation,

<sup>1</sup> The Minotaur qualifies as a liminal being, an entity on the threshold between two categories; other instances include centaurs, sphinxes, and cambions. An unexpected synonym lies in the term 'amphibian,' which literally means 'life of both kinds' and refers only connotatively to the animal class denoted by that name.

<sup>2</sup> Other analyses can be found in Amy Frazier-Yoder's "The 'Incessant Return' of the Minotaur: Jorge Luis Borges's 'La Casa de Asterion' and Julio Cortazar's 'Los Reyes,'" Elinor W. Gaden's "Picasso and the Minotaur," Ernest H. Redkop's "Labyrinths in Time and Space," and Linda B. Hall's "Labyrinthine Solitude: The Impact of Garcia Marquez."

biology, and habitat; this results in a Minotaur of great dimensionality and incredible pathos, suggesting that his aberrant behavior may be due to neglect and his fearsome image to misrepresentation. When read with structuralism in mind, "The House of Asterion" brims with many layers of narrative uncertainty—from the tragically wayward Asterion to the mysterious focalizers above him. Upon reading with historicist eyes, the true breadth of complexity in Asterion's relationships becomes apparent. Borges shows that Asterion and the human public regard each other with not only aversion but longing and that the labyrinth is not nearly as much a prison as a sanctuary.

The story begins with an epigraph by Ancient Greek historian Apollodorus, a single sentence in the third person: "And the Queen gave birth to a child called Asterion" (Borges 138). This sentence bears an undeniably Biblical tenor in power and simplicity; the inaugural 'And' implies continuance, and the act of giving birth is one of creation. The sentence finds tonal kinship with the first few sentences of Genesis, such as, "And God ... made the stars also" (*New American Standard Bible*, Gen. 1.14). The name Asterion means 'star' or 'starry,' further coloring the child and its mother with divinity. The subject and object signifiers in this sentence are simple, almost too simple, to the point of euphemism. The word 'child' connotes youth and innocence, two attributes which, as observed later in the text, seem only dubiously applicable to the character. The title of Queen connotes elevation and dignity yet in this context omits any further identification of the regent and glosses over her lurid mythical past. This past, in which Poseidon vengefully entices Pasiphae to copulate with a bull, bears a culturally held mockery of creation and debasement of royalty as well as women. This stands at odds with the imputation of divinity; indeed, as Amy Frazier-Yoder clarifies, "The Minotaur is often cast as the product of sin" (Frazier-Yoder 92). All considered, this first exterior focalizer<sup>3</sup> appears to sterilize the Queen's blemished past—and the nature of her child—with a tidy, elegant sentence.

After this epigraph, added by Borges in the original, the narration begins in the first person.<sup>4</sup> The internal focalizer promptly confesses, "It is true that I never leave my house" (Borges 138); from this the reader can infer the speaker to be Asterion and the narrative shift an entrance into his house. This house, the euphemized labyrinth, is

<sup>3</sup> An exterior focalizer looks in from the outside, as with the third-person omniscient voice.

<sup>4</sup> This innermost narrator is known as the internal focalizer.

a place of maddening multiplicity—of endless walls and ever-repeating doors. Asterion mentions these “doors (whose numbers are infinite)” (Borges 138), at which point an asterisk<sup>5</sup> leads to a footnote in the focalization of a new exterior narrator. Written as a gloss, it purports the existence of an original text in which Asterion uses the signifier ‘fourteen’ to signify infinity. This metafictional maneuver gives the effect of a conscious exterior focalizer attempting to decipher the text, as if the external narrator were an academic in the common era. By insinuating a narrative intermediary who seems to be altering and interpreting, Borges adds to the confusion and leaves it not only unattributed but unattributable. Is Asterion unfamiliar with the concept of numbers, or is the academic skeptical of the number’s concreteness in this usage? The brief but loaded addition of the footnote compounds the unreliability—and the intrigue—of the story.

Throughout his monologue, Asterion talks almost exclusively about himself and acts as his own focalized referent. As a narrator, he is largely unreliable; his wild, solitary roughhouse makes him “dizzy” and “bloody” and he speculates he may have created the world, “but I no longer remember” (Borges 139, 140). His awareness of the outside is limited to the sight of the sun and a jaunt among the public, from whom he sequesters himself in the belief that his royalty demands it. While he is called a child, Asterion’s age and perception of time are thrown into question when he says men enter his house, “Every nine years” (Borges 140). For Asterion to understand the concept of a recurrent nine-year elapse, he would need either a vague intellectual recognition or a clear experiential sense. In other words, he could have heard of the interval’s relevance to him and be relaying it on faith, or he could have marked the full nine years between each human entrance and verified the span for himself. The first is unlikely as he lives alone, and for the second he would have to be older than nine to viscerally associate even one human entrance with the weight of every nine years. He could be at least eighteen, possibly twenty-seven, even as old as or older than thirty-six. In any of these cases, he would not be a child, biologically. His use of the number nine invites skepticism, especially compared to his possible use of the number fourteen; both numbers may be alterations by the academic exterior focalizer, and Asterion confesses blithe disinterest in “what one man may transmit to another” (Borges 140). Whether due to Asterion’s doubtful intellect or the academic’s conjectural

<sup>5</sup> ‘Asterisk,’ meaning ‘little star,’ relates etymologically to the name Asterion.

flights, there is no way to ascertain how old Asterion is or how he registers the passage of time.

Though conscious of an outer world and lonely enough to invent “the other Asterion” (Borges 139), Asterion’s ignorance and alien morality make him terminally incompatible with people. He openly feels that “nothing is communicable by the art of writing” and has “never retained the difference between one letter and another” (Borges 139)—a consummate irony as his story is conveyed, albeit by more than one exterior focalizer, in writing. When men enter his house, he “[runs] joyfully to find them” and euphemistically “[delivers] them from all evil” (Borges 140), leaving their corpses as landmarks through his house. For this, Amy Frazier-Yoder concludes, “death holds little meaning beyond ordering his universe” (Frazier-Yoder 97). Asterion views the world as inherently evil, considering death a sweet escape and murder a noble service. His own desire for death is evidenced clearly through the text. One of his games, “There are roofs from which I let myself fall until I am bloody” (Borges 139), reads like a routine suicide attempt, and he brightens at the news of his own imminent “redeemer” (Borges 140). At the very end of the story, Asterion asks, “will [my redeemer] perhaps be a bull with the face of a man? Or will he be like me?” (Borges 140), which triggers the final focal shift from internal to exterior. This third framing focalizer, neither scribe nor academic, reads once again in the third person and exposes the identity of said redeemer: Theseus, the son of King Aegeus. In the original myth, according to Buket Akgün, Theseus slaughters the Minotaur and escapes with the latter’s half-sister, Ariadne (95). Here, addressing Ariadne, Theseus marvels: “The Minotaur scarcely defended himself” (Borges 140). Asterion’s misguided death wish, evidenced further by his lack of self-defense, supplies the ultimate argument for his unreliability and gives his death an especially tragic cast.

Structuralism proves instrumental in comparing Asterion’s unreliable view of the world with the commentary of other nested narrators.<sup>6</sup> Historicism provides a wider compass, comparing Asterion’s unreliable view of the world with the world’s unreliable view of him. It is understandably said that the citizens of ancient Greece feared and hated the Minotaur for his ferocity. This is not only reflected but given explanation in the first sentence of Asterion’s internal focalization:

<sup>6</sup> In Uexküllian semiotics, an organism’s perception of its world is termed the Umwelt; an Umwelt within the “wide, objective reality within which it operates” is known as an Umgebung (Sherringham 109).

“I know they accuse me of arrogance, and perhaps misanthropy, and perhaps madness” (Borges 138). Reducing humanity with ‘they,’ Asterion generalizes “the common people” (Borges 138) outside and feels they receive him with overwhelming, ill-informed disdain. While Asterion does spark fear and hatred in the public, the public sparks the very same in him; he admits this in recollecting the “one afternoon [he] did step into the street” (Borges 138). This venture, sometime in the past and the only point of open-air contact, sees a dramatic mutual upset between the populace and Asterion. He remembers the “helpless crying of a child” heralding his public recognition, after which people flee and mount “the stylobate of the temple of the axes” (Borges 138-139). He even recalls some individuals gathering stones, presumably to lob at him. Disturbed as the commoners are to see Asterion, the latter is similarly branded by “the fear that the . . . common people inspired in me” (Borges 138). Reasonably convinced of their repulsion, he retreats to his house and judges them on their judgment; he goes as far as to nurse ominous plans against them: “I shall exact punishment in due time” (Borges 138). This threat, however passing, is more chilling from Asterion than from any other, especially since Asterion considers his retribution separate from—and far worse than—the charitable act of murder. He seeks to repay the people for their perception, perception as reasonable yet as incomplete as his own. This hopeless cycle of contention shows that while Borges’s Cretans do fear the Minotaur, he fears them just the same.

As bleak as this relationship seems, an undercurrent of meaning keeps it alive. Asterion and the public do exchange mutual fright and animus, but their interaction is much more complex. Asterion describes townsfolk crying, fleeing, and preparing to stone him, but he also shares reactions of a starkly different kind; he recounts people praying and says some “prostrated themselves” (Borges 138). These gestures, as fleeting in mention as Asterion’s threat, expose the deeper truth of their ties. Elinor W. Gadon calls the Minotaur “a creature from . . . where the gods live side by side with monsters” (21). Though reviling his appearance, at least some of the crowd acknowledge his status as not just a prince but a demigod. Myth holds the Minotaur as a grandson of Helios via Pasiphae, which gives Asterion’s exposure to and unique recognition of “the intricate sun” (Borges 140) a bright significance. The Minotaur is what Audrey Notvik Iversen calls “an aggressive, an oppressive god” (51), and Asterion’s relationship with humans is never clearer than in her verse:

Like the Athenians, the people acquiesce.

Reluctantly they yield their young, randomly selected.

Though parents weep, the victims are unafraid.

Tiny tots run joyfully to meet their god,

And young men willingly lay down their lives  
(51)

Essentially, some fear him and others revere him. Instead of a terrifying prospect, it may be an honorable duty and a joy to be dispatched by the holy bullman. This seems implicit in the passive, clean description of the slaughter: “The ceremony lasts a few minutes. They fall one after another without my having to bloody my hands” (Borges 140). Save the one who prophesies Asterion’s redeemer “at the moment of his death” (Borges 140), there is little to no resistance from the Minotaur’s victims, evidence perhaps of their elation to die for a god. Perhaps some people agree with Asterion that death is a pleasure—or at least that this method is much more fulfilling. Another indication of deeper feeling and dependency between the humans and Asterion is the latter’s silent wish: “I cannot be confused with the populace, though my modesty might so desire” (Borges 139). He dreams of overcoming his royalty, which he blames for his isolation, and connecting with the people. He even exhibits the classical Greek welcoming concept of *xenia* in a comment to the internal focalized: “Anyone may enter” (Borges 138). His sense of humility and social aspirations clash with his looming threat for the people’s aspersions; though he resents the public and considers their prayers “rude supplications,” he still desires to be among them (Borges 138).

One central aspect of the classical Minotaur myth specifies that he devours his human tribute. As Akgün relays, “every nine years, seven young male and seven young female Athenians [were] sent . . . to be devoured by the Minotaur” (95). Borges’s story, however, presents a Minotaur far less sanguinary. After the victims die, Asterion says, “They remain where they fell and their bodies help distinguish one gallery from another” (Borges 140). Not only does this use of the corpses serve to order the labyrinthine chaos, it presents the possibility of no such man-eating actually taking place. As Asterion claims to loathe “ridiculous falsehood” (Borges 138), he has no evident reason to conceal, lie, or be unclear about the fate of his quarry. Biology also backs the case

against Asterion's bloodthirst. Endowed with a human body and a bovine head, the Minotaur would lack the tools required for savagery. Bulls are herbivorous with flat, wide teeth designed for grazing—not for tearing flesh or crushing bone. Absent the canines of a carnivore, Asterion would have no practical method of carving up his victims. Instead, Borges's Minotaur contradicts the classical myth and offers a much more realistic variant.

Borges also challenges the classical conception of the labyrinth. The traditional view holds Daedalus's maze as a trap, built to hold its denizen without any hope of escape. This appears not to be the case with the house of Asterion; its doors are said to be "open day and night," and Asterion affirms "there are no locks" (Borges 138). He praises the place with an almost prideful air, relishing the "quiet and solitude" while claiming it to be "like no other on the face of this earth" (Borges 138). While austere in the way of furnishings, the house is full of stimuli. Asterion lists several amenities: "mangers, drinking troughs, courtyard pools" (Borges 139). These fixtures prefigure the modern dog dish and birdbath, installed with care by someone keen on comfort, rather than detainment. In addition to these comforts, Asterion speaks of his exposure to the sun. This implies the labyrinth might not be subterranean or even as cut off from the world as the classical myth maintains. The sun can be inferred as Asterion's grandfather Helios looking down on him, which may mean that this labyrinth was knowingly designed to grant Asterion divine supervision. Borges reinvents the labyrinth as less of a jail and more of a monastery; its careful and considerate construction shows that in some way, if only by his family and as a pet, the Minotaur may be loved.

Crete supplied the ancient world with a truly harrowing monster. The Minotaur lumbers from the depths of his pen into the depths of people's dreams. Eons of myth paint him as a menace and call his maze a trap; to history, he is malicious at worst and mindless at best. In "The House of Asterion," Borges humanizes the Minotaur—first by giving him his real name, then by letting him speak. Digital Humanities professor Nora Benedict has used multispectral imaging to analyze the early handwritten drafts of Borges's manuscript, tracking his careful insertion of cryptic clues.<sup>7</sup> This study has explored many of these clues through structuralist and historicist theory, teasing out the scope of their implications. A structuralist

read identifies the carefully layered narrators—the titular Asterion, a sacramental scribe, a curious scholar, and a novelistic voice—while illuminating the unreliability of Asterion's morals, age, perception, and language. Historicist analysis reconsiders Asterion's relationships with the public, his habits, and his home to reveal him as a deeply pathetic figure. By demythologizing myth, Borges creates a monster of exceptional humanity—one whose murder by a traditional hero is a point not of celebration but of sorrow. In so doing, he challenges the traditional notions of monstrosity and heroism altogether, suggesting that the latter flourishes by destroying what it fails to understand. Borges's Minotaur is misunderstood indeed, a well-meaning yet ill-starred misfit whose youth is less literal than mental. He may well be biologically mature, but estrangement has begotten derangement; psychologically he is ever a child, conflating joy with death and play with murder. His home is carefully built, but its mangers, drinking troughs, and courtyard pools say it all: far more care has been given to the house of Asterion than to Asterion himself.

<sup>7</sup> See "Digital Approaches to the Archive: Multispectral Imaging and the Recovery of Borges's Writing Process in 'El muerto' and 'La casa de Asterión.'"

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