

**Athens Institute for Education and Research
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
LIT2016-1950**

**The Minotaur:
Canonical Translations of a Classical Monster**

**Daniella Amaral Tavares
PhD Student in Literature and Culture
UFBA - Federal University of Bahia
Brazil**

An Introduction to
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. This paper has been peer reviewed by at least two academic members of ATINER.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Amaral Tavares, D. (2016). "The Minotaur: Canonical Translations of a Classical Monster", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: LIT2016-1950.

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN: 2241-2891

31/08/2016

**The Minotaur:
Canonical Translations of a Classical Monster**

**Daniella Amaral Tavares
PhD Student in Literature and Culture
UFBA - Federal University of Bahia
Brazil**

Abstract

Featured in numerous rereadings of Classical Antiquity, the mythical character known as the Minotaur represents, among other roles, a kind of synthesis of the attributes that shape a classical monster: he is a hybrid with an infamous conception, he is a ferocious anthropophagous and he is also foreign. Originated from Crete, an island in the Eastern Mediterranean, ruled by the feared King Minos, the Classical Minotaur is not only a monster by excellence, but also a “bogyman” by excellence. His figure, often associated to the evil attributed to the monsters (beings presented as a deviation from the norm) and frequently depicted by literature and other arts, will be discussed here, starting from specific aspects: the arbitrary and changing conceptions of good and evil, majority and minority, as well as their respective conflicts. Since we intend to analyze the canonical figure of the Minotaur in verbal and visual rereadings, we add to our discussion the conceptions from descriptive studies in the Translation field and from intersemiotic translation, primarily defined as the “[...] interpretation of verbal signs by non-verbal systems of signs” (Jakobson, 2001, 65), after expanded to other possibilities.

Keywords: Minotaur, monster, foreign, rereadings, mythology.

Acknowledgments: Our thanks to Prof. Ph.D. Marlene Holzhausen, for her support and incentive; and to Fernanda Pedrecal, for helping us with the translation, from Portuguese to English, of this article. This research received financial support from FAPESB (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado da Bahia).

Introduction

Present in many productions dated from the Classical Antiquity, the mythical character known as the Minotaur (Figure 1) represents, amongst other functions, a kind of synthesis of the characteristics that define a classical monster: he is a hybrid creature with an infamous origin, a fierce cannibal and, we must not forget, a foreigner.

Figure 1. *Representations of the Minotaur in the Visual Arts of Classical Antiquity*



It is important to note this aspect from the start: in general, the monster of the Classical Antiquity lives in a place distant from the narrator's speech place, which makes it common that horrendous beasts populate a wide extension of the known world boundaries, according to Plutarcho in *Parallel Lives* (1991, 17). Besides arousing a deep fear amongst travelers, this fact works within travel reports as an irresistible attraction to the imagination of readers who, as the contemporaries of authors such as Herodotus, Ctesias of Cnidus (2011), or Pliny the Elder (2004), delight themselves with the mixture of exoticism and barbarism that blows through the texts which address the limits of the known world.

Coming from Crete, an Eastern Mediterranean island governed by the feared King Minos, the classical Minotaur is not just a monster, but also a "bogeyman" for excellence, as we will posteriorly discuss. Its figure, which is the study object of our doctoral degree project, is going to be discussed in this paper taking as a starting point some issues, especially the arbitrary conceptions of good and evil, majority and minority, and their respective struggles.

We start with a question: who is the Minotaur? He is a cannibal monster with a bull head and human body, killed in his prison, the labyrinth of Crete, by the hero Theseus. He is the bastard son of Queen Pasiphae with a sacred bull, but is also known as Asterion, the "ruler of the stars". He is the son of a lunar deity, who is the daughter of the Sun, and it is believed that he has been worshiped as a god in the remote Minoan civilization (Yourcenar, 1963, 157).

He is the powerful son of Minos and Pasiphae, as said by Hesiod (fr. 145, Merkelbach-West). He is not mentioned by Homer. He is the proof of mad Pasiphae's crime in *Cretans*, the lost dramatic text by Euripides whose few remaining fragments allow us to glimpse a Pasiphae that is different from the infamous adulteress from the majority of Greek and Roman texts. The Minotaur is the foreign enemy, the monstrous "other" and the terrible son of a monstrous relationship. He can also be the commander of the Cretan squad and Pasiphae's lover (Plutarcho, 1991, 31), or just a man, the bastard son of the queen with Taurus, King Minos' fleet commander (Vilas-Boas, 2003, 247). He is Plutarch's "soulless beast" and also, as Ovidio reminds us, the brother of both perfidious Phaedra and unfortunate Ariadne (2003, 71-74; 131).

Faced with such different representations, present in narratives transmitted especially through literature, we observe that the Minotaur we know, the character with a human body and a bull head, whose story and appearance seem so well defined for us, is only one amongst the uncountable translations or rereadings of this mythical creature, not necessarily good or bad, not always monstrous or a devourer of human flesh. Here we observe that, according to the theorist André Lefevere (2007, 23-24), we use the term "rereading" as an equivalent to translation and, still according to the same author, we note that a production derived from a previous creation is oriented by multiple aspects that stimulate or inhibit the narrative choices and go beyond the mere aesthetic preferences and the traditional notion of "fidelity" to the source text.

Since we are going to approach the mythical figure of the Minotaur from both verbal and visual rereadings, we associated to our discussion the concept of intersemiotic translation, or transmutation, first defined as "[...] the interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal signs systems" (Jakobson, 2001, 65) and posteriorly enlarged to suit other possibilities. From this definition on, we point out that translations, whether interlingual or intersemiotic, are produced in contexts that are different from those where the source texts were produced. They also turn to other audiences, which may welcome the contents in different ways, especially in the case of an intersemiotic translation because, from the contemporary point of view, it may deal, for instance, with the passage of some content from a literary text to a painting, a film, an opera concert, or vice-versa.

In this sense, besides associating translation, especially the intersemiotic translation, with the idea of rewriting, we can also consider terms such as rereading and re-creation. It is worth noting that, according to the descriptive studies in the Translation field, where authors like Lefevere (2007) and Itamar Even-Zohar (1990) are situated, we can deal with rewritings as productions bound to sociocultural, political and economic factors (Even-Zohar, 1990, 51) whose encouragement and coercion forces act both upon creations and re-creations (Lefevere, 2007, 33-34).

Alongside these aspects, it is necessary to also include the polemic issue of the "origin", which we approach from a point of view that is different from the traditional teleological perspective because, after all, even if the figure of the Minotaur seems so very clear in our memories, having been perpetuated for

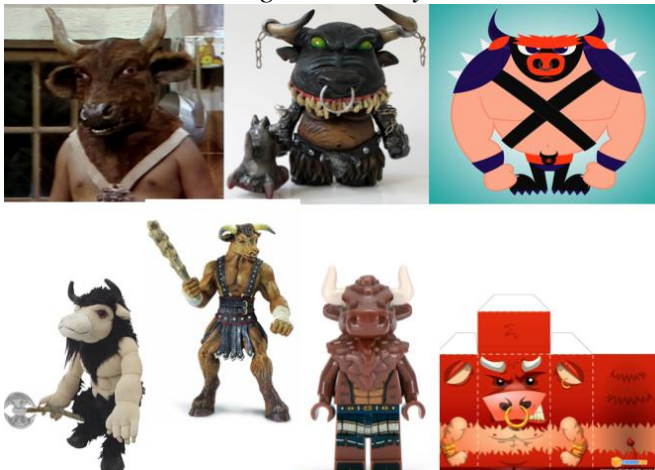
centuries, it is not the only form of representation the arts assigned the son of the sacred bull with Pasiphae.

As we state, when it comes to the mythical character of the Minotaur, the image of the creature with a human body and bull head, presented in the Figure 1, may be the first one that comes to our minds. But where does this representation come from? Perhaps only few can remember and clearly define where their Minotaurs came from, together with their Sphinxes, their Centaurs, their Chimeras. And even if it is possible to remember the first image of the Minotaur that has presented itself right before our eyes, we must remember that our “Minotaur-text” was fed by numerous hypotexts, or earlier texts (Genette, 2010) that, in this case, may be composed not only by literary references, but also by iconographic, audiovisual, or playful ones (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. *Contemporary Representations of the Minotaur – Cinema, Opera, Games and Sports*



Figure 3. *Contemporary Representations of the Minotaur – TV Shows for Children and Teenagers and Toys*



Beforehand, we consider the difficulty in precisely determining when and how a mythological character entered our lives, and perhaps it is even more

arduous launching a search for the source text, or the original text of a mythical narrative. This labyrinthic journey, full of countless gaps, would actually reveal itself as an impossible task.

As pointed out by Michel Foucault in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (2011, 18), the beginning of an event is permeated by all sorts of discontinuities and conflicts, which makes the genealogist see before him not the untouched image of the origin, but the disorder and the erasures that overlap the narratives (2011, 15). In this sense, if we want to talk about a mythical figure, we should not go for an uncertain search for its origin, since this “beginning” is diluted and fragmented in time. To talk about the Minotaur, therefore, it is necessary to choose one amongst all the available rereadings of this character.

It is also important to remember that each interpretation or translation of a mythical figure is already a world in itself, and that this world is powerful enough to generate other equally vast worlds, as pointed by Claude Lévi-Strauss when he talks about the endless possibilities of resignification that mythical representations have: “One would say that mythological universes are destined to be sprayed as soon as they are formed, so that new universes can be born from its fragments”. (1985, 237).

Since we intend approaching this mythological figure, we start from a particular image which is the result of a synthesis of representations perpetuated by the arts, as we can see by comparing the contemporary representations of the Minotaur in Figures 2 and 3 with the ones in Figure 1. In the first figure they are functioning, according to the taxonomy proposed by Genette (2010), as classical hypotexts of a monster that also abandoned his infamous form and behavior in certain moments of literature and visual arts, in spite of being known as the horrendous bull-headed cannibal¹. At this point we observe that, in accordance with the thoughts of Foucault and Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze comments in his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1976, 5) that it is possible to assign a plurality of meanings to anything, whether it is an event, a

¹ The classical form attributed to the monster of Crete will be a constant until the Middle Ages, a period from which his appearance will be transformed by numerous iconographic rereadings (Platas, 2005, 149-151). One example of this change can be verified in Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum liber*, published in 1531, whose illustrations feature the Minotaur as a creature with both the body and the head of a human, and the lower members of a bull, just like the centaurs. The same thing happens with the painting by Rubens known as “Daedalus and the Minotaur”, dated from 1636, that presents a creature with a bull body and human face, contemplating the exterior part of the labyrinth next to the Athenian architect. In the 19th century, the Minotaur is depicted with a desperate air in the images by William Blake (1824-1827) and Gustave Doré (1861): while Blake chooses a figure similar to Alciato's Minotaur-Centaur, Doré retakes the classical form of a bull-headed man, but supplements it with some attitudes that bring the creature closer to his human heritage. In the 20th century, he becomes the fat “bull-man” of *O Minotauro*, a juvenile parody by the Brazilian writer Monteiro Lobato, published in 1939. In 1949, the prisoner of the labyrinth is depicted in a very similar way by Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar: in the short story “A casa de Astérion”, Borges presents a dreamer and shy Minotaur, while in *Os Reis*, by Cortázar, he is a poet that falls in love with his sister Ariadne and sweetly submits himself to death by the hands of an ambitious and opportunistic Theseus.

thought, or a narrative. In this sense, still in accordance with Deleuze's text, and back to what we have already presented at the beginning of this explanation, we see that the Minotaur can be perceived in many different ways, once we found different perspectives of him: a monster, a god, the lover of a queen, just a mortal or the son of an adulterous relationship. The way he most frequently shows himself is linked to the choices made by the person who appropriates this character. It is necessary, therefore, that we discuss this issue.

There is an interpretation present in many authors from the Classical Antiquity that defines the myth and the figure of the Minotaur from certain common elements that we are going to briefly summarize, so that we can think about some issues that derive from this version. According to Plutarcho (1991, 33), "The most well-known version of this myth is, as we can say, in every mouth [...]":

It is said that King Minos claimed to the gods an evidence of his right to rule the island of Crete, and he had his wish granted by the master of the seas, Poseidon, who sent him a beautiful bull to be sacrificed as a sign of gratitude. However, the king broke the agreement and the god, moved by revenge, made Queen Pasiphae irrationally fall in love with the bull. As a way to seduce the animal, she ordered Daedalus, the Athenian inventor and architect, to make a hollow replica of a cow, inside which she was put. The creation helped her conceive a creature, half man, half bull, that became known as the Minotaur - the monster that was locked in a labyrinth also built by Daedalus and was fed with human flesh. For this, Minos required that, at each nine years, the city of Athens sent him, as a tribute for the murder of the Cretan prince Androgeus, seven young men and women to be devoured. One day, the Athenian prince Theseus left to Crete in order to end those sacrifices. Guided by a ball of wool given to him by princess Ariadne, he made his way out of the labyrinth after defeating the monster, and ran away with the princess, who was after abandoned by him.

This narrative, whose origin, or emergence point, as noted by Foucault in relation to the use of the term by Nietzsche (2013, 23), dates back to the oral tradition, is rewritten in a way to present an abominable creature, shamefully originated, locked in a prison, the labyrinth, or the "multiple house with blind ceilings", in the words of Ovidio (1983, 161).

This "strange biform monster" (1983, 146), as defined by the Roman poet, is banished from human society and finally killed by a hero who can only achieve this privileged position because there are terrible and evil monsters that occasionally threaten a given community.

Here we go back to the discussion about giving meaning to something, proposed by Nietzsche in the first essay of his *Genealogy of morals* (2013) and commented by Gilles Deleuze (1976, 36). More specifically, we refer to the act of attributing a sense of good or evil to something, plus associating this choice to the canonical figure we address here: the canonical Minotaur has an origin that is considered vile in spite of his noble ancestry; he is the son of the criminal lust of Pasiphae (Sêneca, 1985, 116-117); he is a hybrid monster, a

cannibal (a condition he was imposed since birth), a barbarian, a foreigner¹, and thus, according to the classical point of view, undesirable and bad.

Opposed to this frightful character is Theseus, the celebrated Athenian hero, perfectly suitable for the “equation of aristocratic values”, as noted by Nietzsche (2013, 23): “[...] good = noble = powerful = handsome = happy = dear to the gods [...]”.

Theseus, the prince of Athens, the famous killer of monsters and criminals, supposed to be the son of god Poseidon, and a handsome civilizing hero, is “the warrior”, or *bonus*, as Nietzsche says (2013, 20), who establishes the Athenian democracy, gives his city its name (Plutarco, 1991, 37) and the shape of a nation for those who can feel they are part of a collectivity, a powerful majority², that makes a fortune from the pillage of a civilization which collapses together with its monstrous prisoner. In the end, he would be just the collector of the Athenian debt towards the island of Crete. For Athens, however, the infamous devourer of its young men and women was the one to be blamed and, therefore, the term “debtor” is applied here as a synonym, if we consider the close relation between guilt and debt, proposed by Nietzsche (2013, 48).

As for Minos, who had the power to appoint the Athenians as “debtors” and “bad”, it was necessary to collect the debt the way he pleased, since the Athenians had killed his beloved son. Considered guilty, they were punished with the death of their youths and, most of all, with the political submission to Crete, which was adorned to celebrate the death of the Athenian foreigners.

As Nietzsche reminds us, punishments have many uses: “Punishment as neutralization, as the prevention of further damage [...] Punishment as a party, or, in other words, as an outrage and the derision of an enemy finally won. Punishment as the creation of memories” (2013, 63-64). All these uses were ably manipulated by fair King Minos, who curiously also has the function of a judge in the kingdom of the dead, in some narratives (Grimal, 1993, 313).

In a fair way to Athens, but not to Minos, the Athenian community, Minos’ debtor, ceases its debts with the death of the debt executor by the hands of Theseus, who reminds us that justice and injustice do not exist in themselves, but only from a certain point of view (Nietzsche, 2013, 59).

In his turn, what is the Minotaur’s fault? In Classical Antiquity, the ancestors’ fault fell unmercifully upon the following generations, as we can verify in the *Iliad*, by Homer (X.70; XI.140), in a sense that it was not associated to a direct responsibility for the fault itself or, in other words, for the incurred “debt”. The Minotaur was especially guilty because he was the son of a condemned union and, therefore, he carried the mark of the crime: his

¹ The island of Crete, situated in the eastern Mediterranean, is, alongside with Cyprus, a kind of frontier between the Hellenistic territory and a vast barbarian world, whose language, customs and religious traditions sometimes mingle with the Greek culture, sometimes diverge from it (Ragusa, 2001, 115).

² At this point, we consider the perspective adopted by Arjun Appadurai about the relations between major and minor groups, present in his *Fear of Small Numbers* (2009). According to the author, the identification of a certain group as a major one not necessarily has a relation with its dimension in numeric terms (2009, 47).

damned hybridism, his anthropophagy, his beastly behavior: the classic Minotaur is a monster for excellence.

Again we note that his anthropophagy was not a result of a choice but an imposition of Minos, although this issue is not questioned by the classical texts, at least not at those which came to our hands. Maybe, we suggest with a large dose of academic-poetic license, these aspects, so unfair to a contemporary look, might have been put by Euripides in his lost text *Cretans*. In its few remaining fragments, we can perceive the author's irony about the punishment that is imposed to Queen Pasiphae, whose action was driven by madness and not by her own will, as she declares during her judgement:

“There is nothing to gain now by deceiving you; what has happened is already too well known. But consider: If I had sold the gifts of Kypris, given my body in secret to some man, you would have every right to condemn me as a whore. But this was no act of the will; I am suffering from some madness brought on by a god. It's not plausible! What could I have seen in a bull to assault my heart with this shameful passion? Did he look too handsome in his robe? Was it the sea of fire smoulder in his eyes? Was it the red tint of his hair, his dark beard? His body, so [different] from my husband's? [. . .] I did not imagine that my lover could give me children [. . .] What diseased my mind?” (Fr. 472e)

Having right before us this curious muting the classical texts imposed on Pasiphae, a character with divine origin, we have a question about her son: can the Minotaur speak? Apparently, he cannot. A classical author rarely gives a monster this privilege, so there is not any possibility of defense. The Minotaur, the monster without a choice, is exiled in his particular ghetto lacking in a voice: his bull head does not allow him to speak like a human.

In this sense, classical literature is not interested in speaking in his defense, nor in giving him the permission to use his human name – Asterion. As every common criminal, Pasiphae's son has a second name, one that is associated to his condition: Minotaur, “the bull of Minos”.

But fortunately the Minotaur exists. And all the other monsters – Centaurs, serpents, dragons and horrible giants, they all exist. If they did not exist to be feared, excoriated and killed, how would men become heroes? How would so many kingdoms be constituted and have their origins exalted by the poets? As Arjun Appadurai reminds us, the construction of an identity, which he classifies as “predatory”, starts from the contrast with the stereotyped “other” and his extinction (2009, 46-47).

Athens, the future Greek naval power (and here the myth mixes with history), represents the young collectivity that is threatened and need to stablish itself from the submission of this old oriental civilization, which gives a curious liberty to its women (Plutarco, 1991, 32).

We still must add that if we attribute an undesirable, a nonhuman, or subhuman, aspect to the “other”, as it happens to the Minotaur, it becomes even easier and more interesting to desire its extinction, as we verify in the text by

Appadurai (2009, 48-49), when he refers to the brutal attacks brandished by the Nazis against the Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other “minorities”. Still in accordance with the Indian author, the farther “they” are from “us”, both in the spatial and in the appearance points of view, the easier it is for us to get rid of “them”.

It is no accident that the Minotaur lives in the Orient, the homeland of monsters, according to classical playwrights such as Herodotus, Ctesias of Cnidus (2011) and Pliny the Elder (2004)¹; he lives in the “edge of the world”, as the representations of old maps show. It is no accident that he is imprisoned in a place no light or human society can reach.

The mechanisms of exclusion and eradication of the undesirable “other” only have their contexts and targets changed, as well as they are updated as the technologies allow them to. Their motivations, unfortunately, continue along history.

It is necessary to remember Appadurai’s comment, at the beginning of his text (2009, 48-49), about how the Nazi propaganda ostentatiously worked on attributing a subhuman and threatening appearance to the figure of the Jew, in order to arouse revulsion and inflame even more the desire of exterminating this segregated, imprisoned, tortured and maligned enemy, so appropriately and conveniently called *monster*.

References

- Appadurai, A. (2009). O medo ao pequeno número (Fear the small number). In *O medo ao pequeno número: ensaio sobre a geografia da raiva (Fear the small number: essay on anger geography)*. Translated by Ana Goldberger. São Paulo: Iluminuras. [In Portuguese].
- Ctesias. (2011). *On India*. Translated by Andrew Nichols. London: Bristol Classical Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1976). *Nietzsche e a filosofia (Nietzsche and Philosophy)*. Rio de Janeiro: Rio. [In Portuguese].
- Eurípides. *Cretans*. Retrieved from: goo.gl/sU5LVK. [Accessed: 10 January 2016].
- Even-Zohar, I. (1990). Polysystem studies. In “Poetics Today”, *International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication*. Durham: Duke University Press, 11: 97-175.
- Foucault, M. (2011). Nietzsche, a genealogia e a história (Nietzsche, the genealogy and history). In *Microfísica do Poder (Microphysics of power)*. Translated by Roberto Machado. São Paulo: Graal. [In Portuguese].
- Genette, G. (2010). *Palimpsestos: a literatura de segunda mão (Palimpsests: literature secondhand)*. Extracts translated by Cibele Braga, Erika Viviane C. Vieira, Luciene Guimarães, Maria Antônia R. Coutinho, Mariana M. Arruda, and Miriam Vieira. Belo Horizonte: Viva Voz, [In Portuguese].
- Grimal, P. (1993). *Dicionário da mitologia grega e romana (Dictionary of Greek and Roman mythology)*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil. [In Portuguese].

¹ In *History*, *Indika* and *Natural History*, respectively.

- Jakobson, R. (2001). *Linguística e Comunicação* (Linguistics and Communication). (18th edn.) Translated by Isidoro Blikstein and José Paulo Paes. São Paulo: Cultrix. [In Portuguese].
- Lefevere, A. (2007). *Tradução, reescrita e manipulação da fama literária* (*Translation, rewriting and manipulation of literary fame*). Translated by Claudia Matos Seligmann. Bauru: EDUSC. [In Portuguese].
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1985). *Antropologia estrutural* (*Structural anthropology*). Translated by Chaim Samuel Katz and Eginardo Pires. Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro. [In Portuguese].
- Nietzsche, F. (2013). *Genealogia da moral* (*Genealogy of Morals*). Translated by Paulo César Lima de Souza. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. [In Portuguese].
- Ovídio. (1983). *As metamorfoses*. Translated by David Gomes Jardim Junior. Rio de Janeiro: Tecnoprint. [In Portuguese].
- Ovídio. (2003). *Cartas de amor: as Heróides* (*Love Letters: The Heroides*). Translated by Dunia Marinho Silva. São Paulo: Landy. [In Portuguese].
- Platas, F. D. (2005). El Minotauro: una imagen 'al pie de la letra' (The Minotaur: an image 'to the letter'). *Quintana* - Santiago de Compostela 4: 141-152. [In Spanish].
- Pliny, the Elder. (2004). *Natural History*. Translated by Trevor Murphy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Plutarco. (1991). *Vidas Paralelas* (*Parallel lives*). Translated by Gilson César Cardoso. São Paulo: Paumape. [In Portuguese].
- Ragusa, G. (2001). Da castração à formação: a gênese de Afrodite na Teogonia (Castration training: the genesis of Aphrodite in Hesiod). *Letras Clássicas* 5: 109-130. [In Portuguese].
- Sêneca. (1985). Fedra. In *Fedra e Hipólito: tragédias de Eurípides, Sêneca e Racine*. Translated by José Eduardo do Prado Kelly. Rio de Janeiro: Agir. [In Portuguese].
- Vilas-Boas, G. (2003). O Minotauro e os labirintos contemporâneos (The Minotaur and contemporary labyrinths). In *Cadernos de Literatura Comparada 8/9: Literatura e Identidades*. Porto: Instituto de Literatura Comparada Margarida Losa, 245-271. [In Portuguese].
- Yourcenar, M. (1963). *Le Mystère d'Alceste et Qui n'a pas son Minotaure?* (The Mystery of Alceste and who does not Minotaur?). Paris: Plon. [In French].