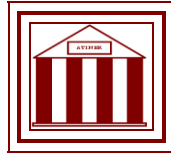


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**From Divinity to Madness:
Intersemiotic Translations of the Mythical
Character of Pasiphae**

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

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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:
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From Divinity to Madness: Intersemiotic Translations of the Mythical Character of Pasiphae

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

Abstract

Translated through centuries by numerous verbal and imagetic rereadings, the mythical character of Pasiphae - daughter of Helios, the Sun, and the Oceanid Perseis - is often associated with the idea of the perverted Cretan Queen, mother of the monster Asterion, also known as Minotaur. Considering the hypothesis that the divine condition of Pasiphae is gradually replaced, through literature and fine arts, by the image of a mad and shameful woman, we intend to analyse the liaisons between specific classic narratives and intersemiotic recreations about that powerful woman, punished with insanity by a vengeful god.

Keywords: Pasiphae, mythology, madness, perversion, passion.

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Introduction

Greek mythology narratives have been, over the centuries, the source for many rereadings, not only in verbal and visual productions, but also in audiovisual ones. Among the characters, we find gods, demigods, mortals who became deities and, less frequently, gods that were deprived of their divine status. Within this last group, we highlight the mythical figure of Pasiphae, who, according to mythographers like Diodorus Siculus, is the daughter of Helios, the Sun, and the oceanid Perseis (Book IV, 60.4).

Many authors agree that the most common role played by Pasiphae is that of the mother of the monstrous being known as the Minotaur. But besides conceiving a monster with a sacred bull, and many children with King Minos, Pasiphae was a powerful queen, and, even before that, she figures as a deity.

According to the historian Pausanias in *Description of Greece* (Book III, 26.1) Pasiphae, "the brightest one", or "the one that shines over all", was associated with the figure of the Moon in some areas of Greece. She was also worshiped in Sparta, where, according to Plutarch (1991: 386), she had a sanctuary and a highly prestigious oracle. In his *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero states that, as the daughter of the Sun and Perseis, and granddaughter of the Ocean, she should also be considered a Greco-Roman goddess, as we can verify in the following passage:

"If Ino is to be deemed divine, under the title of Leucothea in Greece and Matuta at Rome, because she is the daughter of Cadmus, are Circe and Pasiphae and Aetes, the children of Perseis the daughter of Oceanus by the Sun, to be not counted in the list of gods? in spite of the fact that Circe too is devoutly worshipped at the Roman colony of Circei." (3.19)

In another text, entitled *On Divination* (XLIII, 95), the Roman author also mentions the existence of Pasiphae's sanctuary and cult amongst the Spartans, whose magistrates used to sleep in her temple in order to receive her revelations through dreams. In the 10th century, there is a brief reference to Pasiphae in the *Suda*, a kind of medieval Byzantine encyclopedia: "Pasiphae, name of a goddess".

Most of the narratives, however, drive the daughter of the Sun apart from this sacred field. Thereby, we present next a brief summary of the version of Apollodorus (Book III, 1.3-1.4) for the story of the Minotaur, in order to situate the character of Pasiphae inside another configuration, where she appears as a mad queen and an adulteress who, sometimes, is also portrayed as a sorceress.

This version says that King Minos asked the gods a proof of his entitlement to the throne of Crete. He was pleased by Poseidon, who sent him a stunning white bull for sacrifice, as a way of showing his acknowledgement. Minos, however, did not honor the agreement, and Poseidon, to revenge himself on the king, made Pasiphae fall irresistibly in love with the animal. In order to fool and attract the sacred bull, the queen ordered the architect Daidalos to construct a perfect and hollow replica of a cow. She was put inside it and used it to conceive a hybrid creature, half a man, half a bull, which was

given the name of Asterion, which later became well known as the Minotaur. Since his birth, the monster was kept as a captive inside a labyrinth built by Daidalos, being fed with human flesh. For this purpose, Minos demanded that the city of Athens sent him, every nine years, as a tribute, seven young men and seven young women to be devoured. One day, the Athenian hero and prince Theseus departed bound for Crete in order to defeat the Minotaur. Using a ball of wool which was given to him by princess Ariadne as a guide, he managed to leave the labyrinth after killing the monster. He escaped with the princess, who, after being abandoned in Naxos island, was found by god Dionysos, her future husband.

Even if we consider the variations among the several narratives that retell this myth, we observe that the figure of Pasiphae was reduced to some traces: madwoman, adulteress, lover of a bull, mother of a monster.

We are not questioning in which moment of the classical period the presence of this lunar deity was erased in order to give way to another queen, an adulteress one. Since we are talking about a mythical figure, the origin of the narratives to which she is attached to are lost in time, in the sense that there is not a source text, or hypotext (Genette, 2010), from which other subsequent texts - or hypertexts - would derive.

Still considering the taxonomy mentioned here, proposed by Gérard Genette in his *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (2010), what really seems to exist are many hypotexts that indicate various times and cultures, from which would many hypertexts, present in distinct semiotic systems, would derive.

Thereby, we propose a brief analysis about some specific verbal and visual re-creations that resignified this mythologic figure along the classical period, spread over the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and reached contemporaneity. Once we turn to both verbal and iconographic representations, we adopted the perspective of the intersemiotic translation, or transmutation, a concept defined by Roman Jakobson in the 1960s, as the "[...] interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (2001, 65). It is important to note that, in contemporaneity, this concept covers the various dialogues among any kind of artistic expressions, like the rereading of a painting by a play, the passage of a literary text to a film adaptation, or the transformation of a poem into a musical performance.

Besides this perspective, we are discussing the figure of Pasiphae from some landmarks: the notion of translation as rewriting, the already mentioned issue concerning the derivation of a text from previous productions, present in the studies by Genette, and the contextual issue, present in the descriptive studies of Translation (Even-Zohar, 1990). According to the referred studies, especially the analysis proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar (1990), cultural productions - translations included - are strongly determined by external factors that go beyond mere aesthetic preferences.

To that extent, this brief route takes as a starting point - not as an origin - the archaic version of the deified Pasiphae, which has functioned, metaphorically, as a palimpsest that was erased to give way to other writings, colored with a *local colour* or *the colour of the time*, as writer Victor Hugo

(2010) says. When approaching literary creations, especially drama, the French author affirms that they "[...] should be radically impregnated with this colour of the time" (2010: 70). Indeed, if we observe the presence of "the colour of the time", or context, over the transition narratives between the goddess and the mortal, we find particularities that are far from being randomly set.

From A Goddess to a Mortal and Infamous Queen

If we go back to the Bronze Age, we find a Cretan version that presents Pasiphae as the object of desire of god Poseidon, who disguises himself as a bull to get closer to her and have sex with her. Following the Greco-Roman mythologic tradition, this flirting strategy was very common amongst gods, like Zeus, for example, who turns into a bull to seduce Europa, King Minos' mother, and, therefore, Pasiphae's mother-in-law.

In the remaining fragments of Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, probably dated from the 8th century B.C., the poet declares: "She, became pregnant, and bore to Minos a strong son, a wonder to see. For it resembled a man in its body down to its feet, but up above grew a bull's head" (This quotation is available in: <http://goo.gl/7I791Q>).

Not only in this passage but also in the following pictorial representation (Figure 1) we note that both Pasiphae and the Minotaur are not associated with a negative discourse. On the contrary: while Hesiod praises, in his text, the physical appearance of the Minotaur, the lawful son of Crete's royal couple, the image in the ceramic shows not the frantic seducer of a bull, but a mother taking care of her child.

Figure 1. *Pasiphae and the Minotaur. Detail of Attic Red Figure Kylix (4th century B.C.), Cabinet of Medals, National Library of Paris*



However, from the 5th century B.C. on, when the Greek maritime expansion had already surpassed the power of Crete, we find narratives that resume some aspects from the archaic hypotexts. But, at the same time, these same narratives also add some other aspects that emphasize the perversion of the relationship between the queen and the bull, a fact that, among the ancient

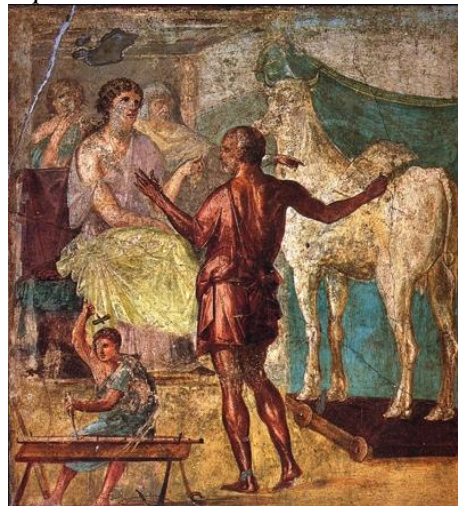
Greeks and Romans, justifies the birth of a monster. This load of negative connotations would also have affected other female figures related to Pasiphae. It is necessary to remember that she is the sister of Circe, the aunt of Medea and the mother of Phaedra - all women that, like the queen of Crete, are very powerful, seductive, and, consequently, considered dangerous, not only in Literature but also in Greco-Roman fine arts.

It is also from this moment that Pasiphae, already far from her divine condition, is portrayed as a jealous sorceress, responsible for the torments that were cast upon King Minos. According to Apollodorus (Book III: 197 - 198), the queen bewitched Minos so that he would ejaculate snakes and scorpions when having sex with his lovers. This curse only had an end after the intervention of beautiful Procris, who would have received special favors from the king in return.

Curiously, Circe and Medea are equally presented (and properly libeled) as terrible witches that had the power to ruin their lovers, or to make them powerful, if so they wanted to.

In Roman art, it is possible to verify the preference of artists in representing the mistake that the passionate queen intends to inflict on the bull, with the help of Daidalos. In Figure 2, we see Pasiphae updated as a Roman matron that checks Daidalos working on the production of the cow simulacrum. As we have already mentioned, this is going to be a theme constantly resumed by classical antiquity productions, like in the works by Ovid and Seneca, both authors who condemn the behavior of Pasiphae, even considering that she acted while inflamed by madness.

Figure 2. *Pasiphae at Dedalus atelier. Roman Fresco from House of the Vettii (1st century A.D.) - Pompeii*



In his *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid says: "[...] now his family's disgrace had grown big, and the queen's foul adultery was revealed to all by her strange hybrid monster-child" (This quotation is available in: <http://goo.gl/rrYYJX>). In *The Heroides*, by the same author, Phaedra declares to Hippolytus: "[...] my mother could pervert the bull; will you be fiercer than a savage beast?" (2003: 74). Ovid also resumes the figure of the queen of Crete in his *The Art of Love*,

when he talks about the pleasures of illicit loves. In a particularly ironic passage, he describes the strategies used by the queen not only to seduce the bull, but also to move him away from her rivals, to whom she addressed jealous and furious looks: "Pasiphae burningly wished to be his lover; jealous, she hated the beautiful heifers" (2001: 29). Next, he questions the irrationality of her behavior, because of her futile attempts to look beautiful, even facing the indifference of the bull.

"Why, Pasiphae, wear these splendid garments? The one you love is insensitive to your wealth. Why this mirror when you go meet the herd upon the mountains? Why comb your hair so many times? Oh, foolish woman!" (2001: 30)

Seneca¹, in turn, who based his tragedy *Phaedra* on Euripides' hypotext, declares that Pasiphae is the one whose womb conceived both treacherous Phaedra and the monster Minotaur. For the Roman author, the disgraceful lust of the queen marked her offspring in an ineffaceable way.

As for the madness of the queen, it is worth saying that it constitutes an element that was probably introduced by Euripides² in his tragedy *The Cretans*, whose remaining fragments tell the judgement of Pasiphae by Minos, and points out a rare moment: in his text, the Greek playwright presents the pleading for Pasiphae at the court that was instituted to sentence her to death.

In a touching (and somehow sarcastic) appeal to the supposed common sense of the king, the queen says:

"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? Did a sea of fire smolder in his eyes? Was it the red tint of his hair, his dark beard? His body, so [different] from my husband's? [...] Are these the things that drew me to lie in his bed, in my cow skin [...]? I did not imagine that my lover could give me children [...] What diseased my mind?" (Fr. 472e).

¹ In the 5th century B.C., Euripides dramatizes the tragic story of Hipolito and Phaedra, which is also rewritten by the French playwright Jean Racine in the 17th century.

² The presence of madness as an element that causes misfortune is especially outstanding in Euripides' work. Some of his most famous tragedies, respectively, *Medea*, *Hippolytus* and *Heracles* revolve around the irrational and devastating violence that the main characters inflict on their families. It is worth to remember that, similarly to what happens to Pasiphae in *The Cretans*, the main characters of *Hippolytus* and *Heracles* are also punished with madness as revenge from the gods.

It seems that the voice given to Pasiphae by Euripides, and even the presentation of her defense, are uncommon choices in the classical narratives. It is necessary to note that the Greco-Roman world did not give their women the same performance space and freedom that Cretan women had, in far Bronze Age. The character of a foreign queen, one that holds the power (including the power to have the lovers she wanted to have), was very different from the female figure that, in Classical Antiquity, was usually limited to the domestic sphere and, in Rome, was submissive to the authority of the Pater Familias.

From the Middle Ages to Contemporaneity: The Obsession with the Perversion of the Queen

According to what was mentioned at the beginning of this explanation, the figure of Pasiphae is resignified by many productions in the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods, especially by imagetic representations. Thus, we are going to briefly present and analyze some works, in order to identify the traits that describe the character since Classical Antiquity.

If we consider the illumination presented in Figure 3 out of a context, it just portrays a medieval lady in a very friendly attitude towards a bull. However, if we observe that it illustrates a Belgian rereading of *The Metamorphoses* by Ovid, an author whose text was largely resignified until the end of the Middle Ages and supplemented with moralizing contours, aligned with the christian discourse. Even though discreet, the reference to Pasiphae in the anonymous work *Moralized Ovid* (fólio 100v) marks not only the reprehensible behavior of the queen, but also the shame of its anonymous author, who warns the readers about his refusal to use his plume to write a story as vile as the terrible narrative about Pasiphae and the bull is. About the referred text, the researcher Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1996: 322-323) points out that the sinful perversion of the queen is identified as "lust" by the anonymous text, and that her unnatural behavior would sentence her to death in medieval Europe.

Figure 3. *Pasiphae and the bull. Illumination of a Belgian Manuscript of Metamorphoses (15th century) - National Library of Paris*



Among many Renaissance iconographic rereadings, we chose a fresco by Giulio Romano, from 1530, as it is presented in Figure 4. In this painting, we can observe an outstanding characteristic of the Renaissance: the dialogue with classical hypotexts, not only with iconographic works, but also with literary ones. In his painting, Romano exhibits details about the invention of Daidalos, which was thoroughly described by Apollodorus (known as pseudo-Apollodorus) in the 1st century of the Christian era.

"He constructed a wooden cow on wheels, took it, hollowed it out in the inside, sewed it up in the hide of a cow which he had skinned, and set it in the meadow in which the bull used to graze. Then he introduced Pasiphae into it; and the bull came and coupled with it, as if it were a real cow." (Book III, 1.4).

Figure 4. *Pasiphae and the Bull. Painting from Giulio Romano (1530) - Palazzo del Te - Mantua*



In the middle of the 19th century, the symbolist painter Gustave Moreau recreated a Pasiphae, passionate and eager for the attention of the bull (Figure 5) as the character was in her previous representations, even though in this

work the character appears free from her cow cover and feeling frustrated up against the indifference of her beloved one. It is also important to note that both Moreau and Romano include a classical image of Eros (the Roman Cupid) next to the queen, in order to emphasize the presence of her delirious passion.

Figure 5. *Pasiphae and the bull. Painting from Gustave Moreau (19th century) - Gustave Moreau Museum, Paris*



At the beginning of the 20th century, besides her passage through the surrealist art, the mother of the Minotaur is briefly mentioned in *Os Reis* (2011: 22-25), a text by Julio Cortázar. In this text, the Argentinian author suggests that she dies after giving birth to the Minotaur.

Although he operates some detours in relation to the classic narratives, like, for example, the creation of a poet Minotaur that falls in love with his sister Ariadne, and the obliteration of both the revenge by Poseidon and the artifice of a wooden cow, Cortázar resumes the character of Pasiphae taking two constant elements from canonical texts as a starting point: the mortal condition of the queen and the depreciation of her behavior. The King Minos conceived by Cortázar refers to Pasiphae as an "ilustrious, prostituted queen" that surrenders to the "scarlet bull" moved just by an execrable desire. Minos says, with bitterness, about the meeting of Pasiphae with the bull, to whom she surrenders, in a delirious ecstasy, in front of the peasants: "The bull came to her like a flame that lights up in the wheat fields [...] Strayed, blissful, she screamed names and things, foolish nomenclatures and hierarchies" (2001: 24).

Later, after a few more mentions, Pasiphae disappears from the text of Cortázar, a fact that also aligns with the choices of the classical narratives.

Final Considerations

Except for the prominent role given to Pasiphae by Euripides in his play *The Cretans*, which had most part of its text unfortunately lost, we observe that the queen of Crete is generally restricted to the position of an adulteress, a perverted co-star, whose participation ends after the conception of a monster.

This condition, according to our approach, is very different from the role performed by Pasiphae in the pre-Hellenic imaginary, and even in the Spartan society of the Classical Period. However, we observe that, in accordance with the practices and thoughts that insert women in an lower condition to that of men, female mythologic figures tend to lose their representation and even their privileged place, being frequently harassed in many ways, whether in Literature or in fine arts.

Contemporaneously, even in the field of astronomy she is literally presented as a strange satellite. According to the website of the *National Aeronautics and Space Administration* (NASA), she is one of the eight smaller moons of Jupiter, a curious classification for this lunar divinity transformed into a damned queen, who, in turn, goes back to the sky in a different but similar way: according to astronomers, Pasiphae is a small star with an eccentric orbit and unpredictable behavior.

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