

## Ovid's Pasiphae and the Elegiac Grotesque

In his account of Pasiphae's lust for a bull (*Ars Amatoria* 1.289-326), Ovid shows how the perversion of love gives rise to intrusions of the grotesque into the landscape of elegiac narrative. Moved by an improper love of enormous magnitude, Pasiphae transgresses all limitations and enters the realm of grotesque sexuality. At the same time, the reader moves from a poetic domain in which the expected aesthetic experience is the refined one of amatory elegy into the realm of the grotesque, in which the conventions of elegy appear contemptuous and ridiculous. In this region of the imagination, elegiac *furor* develops into *furiosa libido*, a passion that threatens elegy with the destructive force of the grotesque (*Ars* 1.283ff) from within the elegiac narrative itself. For Ovid the vocabulary of grotesque passions and disorders is already part of the language of elegy, as is the possibility of a slippage of the aesthetics of amatory elegy into the aesthetics of the grotesque. The grotesque is a latent feature of the elegiac genre.

In this paper I argue that the story of Pasiphae represents a grotesque degradation of the elegiac narrative effected from within the elegiac genre itself. In the elegiac situation the rival is often depicted through metaphors of animal attributes (e.g., Prop. 1.8, 2.16; Cat. 69, 71). Occasionally this allows disturbing elements of the grotesque to emerge within the refined world of unrequited love. But what would happen to elegiac love itself and to the world that it governs, on the narrative and on the aesthetic plane, if the metaphors were literalized and the gender roles reversed? The myth of Pasiphae, in which the queen is cast as the suitor and the bull as the beloved, represents both an attempt at the literalization of metaphors and a reversal of gender roles. Love becomes profoundly grotesque, giving rise to perverted concepts of beauty and to a lust that results in the creation of a hybrid monstrosity (*Ars* 1.326).

The theoretical premises for this argument are derived from the works of Bakhtin (1968), Harpham (1982), Kristeva (1982) and, more recently, Russo (1995). In the past two decades several scholars – particularly in two special issues of *Arethusa* (Miller and Platter 1993; Braund and Gold 1998) – have demonstrated the relevance of the modern theory of the grotesque to the study of classical literature, particularly in such genres as satire and invective. Building on their work, and drawing on observations by commentators and Ovid scholars (Hollis 1997, Leach 1964, Armstrong 2006), I argue that, for Ovid, the grotesque is also central to the conception of elegy, the classical genre in which we would least expect to find it.

The textual evidence on which I base my argument includes Pasiphae's hope to see in her mirror the image of horns sprouting on her forehead (*Ars* 1.307-308), reading it as a grotesque development of the elegiac theme of *puellae*, whose business it is to be seductively beautiful (James 2003). I offer a grotesque reading of Ovid's derision of elegiac beauty, viewed from the perspective of animal physicality and grounded in Pasiphae's deception of her *vir* Minos – with a bovine *adulter* rather than another man – by costuming herself as wooden cow (*Ars* 1.325-326). The pleasure that Pasiphae expresses when she exposes the innards of cows slaughtered because they were her rivals (*Ars* 1.319-320) is a supremely grotesque image of her violation of biological, moral, and ritualistic boundaries. By her stratagem Pasiphae carries out a transgressive foray into the realm of the bull, from which she returns to her own world carrying within her body the hideous Minotaur, as the grotesque fruit of her action. On the aesthetic level, Ovid creates a narrative of transgression, largely by subjecting literary memory to a grotesque hermeneutics.

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