

Borges' Asterión: Failure of a Matrilineal Model of Royalty

In his short story *La Casa de Asterión* (1947), the Argentine writer Jorge Louis Borges at once recounts and reinvents the classical myth of the Minotaur. The readers are thrust into the inner thoughts of Asterión, an individual of self-professed royal lineage, who somberly reflects about the world in which he lives. In a shocking twist, the last few lines change to a third-person narrative giving away the identity of Asterión as the bull-headed humanoid and disclosing his demise at the hands of the Greek hero Theseus. Scholars have showed appreciation for the subversive quality of Borges' reinterpretation of the myth, particularly his lending a voice to an otherwise underrepresented monster. This paper embraces a quite different perspective.

First, I contend that, with Asterión, Borges propounds a model of royalty based on matrilineal descent. Asterión's royalty is in fact ascribed to the queenly status of his mother Pasiphae. Second, this representation of royalty is meant to antagonize the Homeric archetype of kingship that Minos embodies and that privileges the paternal line via Zeus. For Minos' kingship thrived on the ability to instill fear in his subjects (*Od.* 11.321-2) and the promise to deliver fertility to the lands over which he ruled (*Od.* 19.178-80); likewise, in *La Casa*, Asterión is more than able to arouse reverential fear in the Cretans and sees himself as in charge of the generative process of creation of the *kosmos*. Third, with the killing of the Minotaur at the end of *La Casa*, when Borges' rewriting of the myth aligns again with the traditional story, the readers are reminded of the unfeasibility of the model of matriarchal royalty advocated through Asterión by Borges. Theseus, the monster slayer, may be construed as a representative of the patrilineal model of royalty with his identity depending on, and split between, his two putative fathers, mortal Aegeus and godly Poseidon. Theseus' murder of Asterión, I would argue, seals the ultimate failure of the anti-patriarchal model of kingship that *La Casa* proposes until its

conclusion. Trapped in the inescapable labyrinth of Greek tradition much as his character Asterión, Borges seems to fall back to the acknowledgment of the compelling power of the traditional male-transmitted royalty model.