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Portfolio Contents:

1. Short Story: 'Deliverance' (Word Count: 1,163)
2. Critical Commentary (Word Count: 794)

Total Word Count: 1,957

Deliverance:

Asterios. That is what they called me. Named after the stars, then locked in a labyrinth far from their silver caress. Only my mother ever used my true moniker, when I was still a sprightly, dew-eyed calf. She would sneak away from my stepfather to visit my extravagant prison, using the secret passageways beneath the palace shown to her by the architect Daidalos. He had a liking for her, I believe. It was his hands which had crafted the wooden cow my sire had taken to stud, unaware that my mother was hiding inside. His hands which had carefully planned and sculpted the winding passages I called home. I wanted to gore him for the part he had played in my conception and imprisonment. I spent many long hours imagining such a thing. My horns penetrating his stomach, separating skin from bone and spilling his steaming entrails across the floor.

As I grew, my mother's visits grew less and less frequent. Her baskets of food dwindled, as did the light in her eyes whenever they met mine. I missed her easy hugs, the caress of her fingers through my fur, even the thick moisturising balms she would make to keep my horns from cracking.

'Did I do something wrong?' I asked one day, as her eyes flitted from mine to rest on the smattering of dark hair across my arms. 'Why can you no longer look at me?'

‘I see my shame in you,’ she finally admitted. ‘You are living proof of your stepfather’s hubris and my own unnatural lust. It was easier to forget, when you were a child; you were your own sweet self and nothing less. Now, when I see that face, I no longer see my son. It is the face of an animal that stares back, and I can only remember the beast I allowed to ravage me.’

She left then, and with her went the final threads of my claim to humanity. Without the anticipation of my mother’s visits, my days became cold and lonely, and my stomach grew empty. Besides my mother’s heaping baskets of meats and cheeses and sweetcakes, I was only fed when one of my unseen caretakers remembered my existence. As time passed their memories seemed to fail them more often, until I was a starved, half-crazed husk of myself.

With nothing else to entertain me, I found myself captivated for hours by the howling of the wind through the passageways of my home. There must have been cracks in the masonry, channelling a breeze from above, for the sound and direction changed depending on location. I fell asleep most nights to a howling lullaby.

I don’t know how long I languished there, weak and famished, with only the wind for company. When the heavy doors to the outer world finally creaked open, I thought I must be imagining things. My finely dressed visitor was familiar, though his hair had greyed, and his face now bore heavy lines that hadn’t been present in my youth. Instinct made me lower my horns and charge towards him, though my

stepfather did not flinch in the face of my attack. When I drew up short, snorting and stamping my hooves, he smiled. 'You have grown since I set eyes upon you last. Your mother Pasiphae was right, what a fine specimen you've turned out to be.'

'What do you want?'

My stepfather tutted, 'Is that any way to address your king?'

I snorted once more, the hot air steaming from my nostrils, 'My apologies. What do you want, *your majesty*?' Despite my gruff tone, my stepfather's grin only grew wider.

'I wish to make a deal with you, child of my folly. Dispose of my enemies, feast on their entrails, and in return you shall be granted periods of freedom from this dismal retreat.'

Even then there was something suspicious about his words, but all I could think of was the freedom I had been offered. The chance to finally see the sky. Still, I found myself asking, 'Who are your enemies?'

'That is of no matter. Seven boys and seven girls a year I shall send to your door. Your freedom depends on their death.'

And so, I found myself agreeing. Monster, they called me from that day forth. Not family, not friend, and certainly never 'son'. As my stepfather promised, fourteen people a year were sent to my halls. I slashed at them with swords and claws. I

mauled them with my horns and sucked the marrow from their bones. I ate of their flesh and drank of their blood, and within me a sickness grew that I had not expected. The more I indulged, the more control over myself I lost, until I was little more than a mindless beast. Despite my stepfather's promise, I never did see the sky.

Two years passed in such a manner. In what little clarity remained to me, I longed for an end to my suffering and the torment I inflicted on others. But blood was my elixir now and tender flesh my muse.

It was the third year in which Theseus came to me. My murderer and my saviour. He crept upon me where I lay in the heart of my prison, from the secret passages that only my mother and Daidalos knew existed. He charged towards me, clutching a thread that gleamed like starlight in one hand and pummelling me with his other.

In my madness I thrashed and howled. I gnawed at Theseus with my blunt teeth and tried to skewer him with my cracked horns. I missed every time, and every time his blows grew stronger. In no time at all I found myself prone. Theseus towered above me like a god. On his skin I smelt a familiar jasmine – the scent of my half-sister Ariadne which had clung to my mother like perfume. I knew it for the sign it was.

Taking a final, deep breath, I allowed my eyes to flutter closed. 'Thank you,' I whispered, though the only sound that left my lips was a gurgle. Theseus gave a final blow, and with it I felt the thread tethering me to this life snap.

I rode the wind out of my labyrinth, slipping through the cracks in the mortar with ease. When I finally beheld the night sky in all its glory, I felt as though I would weep. The stars glimmered down on me, their silver fingers running comfortingly through my fur.

It was with great reluctance that I turned from them, for I knew how this ended. I would go where all souls went, to the halls of Hades. I waited for the dread lord's call, but to my surprise I felt his gaze alight upon me and then pointedly look away. With that gesture came another call. One that spoke of hidden depths, and silver kisses and acceptance. A call I was more than happy to answer.

Critical Commentary

For my creative response I opted to write a short story exploring the Hellenistic myth of the minotaur. 'Deliverance' speculates on how the original story would differ when told from the minotaur's perspective. The piece includes themes of freedom, prejudice and human nature, with an emphasis upon tragedy. My aim was to tell a story that was true to the original myth yet turned on its head the idea of the minotaur as an unthinking, unfeeling beast. Throughout this commentary I recount the process of crafting the story and drawing upon source material, including critical reflections on my research and practise.

My primary sources of information came from Apollodorus' *The Library of Greek Mythology*¹ and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*². Writing from the second century AD and 8 CE respectively, both writers relay classical myths at the time they were popular.

I settled upon writing the story from a first-person limited perspective, allowing the reader to grow closer to the Minotaur and his inner thoughts in a way that is not possible in the original myth. My aim was for the reader to sympathise with the minotaur and his situation. I encouraged this by highlighting the protagonist's

¹ Hard, R., *Apollodorus: The Library of Greek Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

² More, B., *Ovid: Metamorphoses* (Boston: Cornhill Publishing, 1922)

declining relationship with his mother and his despair at being trapped within the labyrinth.

In the various iterations of the myth, the minotaur is always described as a bloodthirsty beast. Ovid informs us that the minotaur was nourished on Athenian blood and presents as a “strange hybrid monster” ³. I decided to give the minotaur a reason for his behaviour – one that would spark empathy within the reader and allow them to reconcile the minotaur in this piece with the minotaur they know from myth. A distant mother, a conniving stepfather, and an unsatiable bloodlust from eating human flesh was how I chose to portray this. Though the actions of the minotaur cannot be excused, they can be understood, allowing my ideal reader to support him. The contemporary reader prefers an individualistic, three-dimensional narrator. By assigning the minotaur with motivations and desires, readers are better able to suspend their disbelief and maintain their attention on the story.

From a structuralist perspective, ‘Deliverance’ appears little different to the original myth. Indeed, it includes the same mythemes and abstract schemes of events, including, but not limited to, seduction of the minotaur’s mother, incarceration and a hero on a journey. Smithson notes that the structure of a piece can change but the

³ More, B., Ovid: Metamorphoses (Boston: Cornhill Publishing, 1922) Bk VIII:152-18

transformed result will still be recognisable as belonging to the same overarching 'type'.⁴

The difference lies in the execution. I deviated from the original point of view of the myth, the hero Theseus, and chose instead to write from the perspective of the archetypal monster. Booker states that a monster's animal characteristics 'represents its unconscious instinctive self.'⁵ He goes on to say that the monster encompasses the worst of humanity. I steered the minotaur away from the archetypal idea of what a monster is by giving him depth and motivations. I also changed the theme from overcoming adversity and the conflict between civilisation and savagery, to the search for freedom and connection.

Though I believe I successfully captured the intended themes, next time I will expand my exploration of the setting. The labyrinth is a fascinating space I could not fully give page time to in the given word count. To provide the reader a better understanding on how the minotaur must live his closeted day-to-day life, my description of the setting could have been expanded upon and is an aspect I am eager to explore in the future. Candy rightfully notes that creative practise takes

⁴ Isiah Smithson, 'Structuralism as a Method of Literary Criticism', *College English*, 37.2 (1975), 145-159 (p. 146) <https://doi.org/10.2307/375060>

⁵ Christopher Booker, C., *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (London: Bloomsbury: London, 2024) p.555

many years of learning through reflection, and I am always aiming to improve my work.⁶

Throughout the story I used the symbolism of stars to represent freedom. The Minotaur's very name, 'Asterios', means 'the starry one'. I found it apt to carry this theme throughout the story. Abbar explains that symbolism, particularly in modernist literature, permits authors to 'transcend literal meanings and delve into deeper thematic explorations.'⁷ Though the piece ends in tragedy, I wished to convey a glimmer of hope for both the reader and the minotaur through this continued symbolism. In death, the minotaur catches his glimpse of the stars and discovers the freedom he was always searching for.

In conclusion, I researched my chosen myth by reading both the classical texts and modern retellings of the minotaur. I chose to speculate upon how the story would differ when told from a modern point of view and the minotaur's perspective, considering themes, motivations and character. I gave a critical analysis of my own work, explored the themes of freedom, prejudice and human nature, and told a story that was true to the original myth yet gave the minotaur more depth of character.

⁶ Linda Candy, *The Creative Reflective Practitioner* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020) p.62

⁷ Emad M. Abbar, 'A Critical Analysis of Symbolism in Modernist Literature with reference to T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes', *Journal of Arts, Language and Literature*, 5.4 (2023), 138-142 (p.139) DOI: 10.36346/sarjall.2023.v05i04.005

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