

The Minotaur of London

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In July of 1885, English newspaper editor W.T. Stead published a series of essays in the *Pall Mall Gazette* titled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.” These articles exposed the horrors of the child prostitution trade in London at the time, arguing for the age of consent to be raised and for anti-prostitution legislation to become stricter. The essays became highly controversial and shocking pieces of investigative journalism. Stead calls the underground trade of young virgins the “London Minotaur,” and in the very first article explains this metaphor by describing the classical myth of the Minotaur, a half-bull, half-man monster to whom young tributes are given for the monster to feast upon. In the same month, Victorian artist George Frederick Watts painted *The Minotaur*, a portrait of the same beast, reportedly in reaction to Stead’s shocking articles. The Minotaur stands alone at the top of a parapet in this painting, gazing out to sea with his back towards us as he awaits his tributes. Watts at that time was a well-known artist, mainly of portraits as well as paintings of classical subjects, drawing largely from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, so he was no stranger to incorporating mythology in his work. He was also no stranger to social reform. In this essay I aim to demonstrate how Watts, like Stead, reinterprets the Greek myth of the Minotaur as a symbol for lust and brutality. But Watts also significantly departs from the terms of Stead’s crusade by portraying the monster’s bestial half as familiar and tame, while his human half emanates all the savagery.



Watts, George Frederick. *The Minotaur*. 1885. Oil paint on canvas. 1181 x 945 mm. Tate.

The story of the Minotaur sits strangely in the overall collection of Greek mythology in that its origin is not Greek itself, but Cretan. As told by various classical sources such as Ovid, Plutarch, Euripides, and Virgil, the creation of the Minotaur came about when the king of Crete, King Minos, prayed for Poseidon to send him a beautiful white bull, with the promise that he would sacrifice the bull to the god. Instead, Minos decided to keep the bull for himself, and, as punishment, Poseidon caused his queen Pasiphae to lust after the white bull and (through some creative help from the famed craftsman Daedalus) conceive the Minotaur. Human from the neck down but bearing a bull's head, the Minotaur was locked up by Minos at the heart of an inescapable labyrinth designed by Daedalus and was fed seven young Athenian men and women on a regular schedule (annually, or every seven years, or every nine years). These youths were demanded from Athens by Minos as punishment for killing his son, a ruling emblematic of the harshness and cruelty said to be characteristic of Minos. The Athenian hero Theseus ultimately killed the Minotaur and was able to navigate the labyrinth with the help of Minos' daughter Ariadne. Euripides' play *The Cretans* focuses on Pasiphae and Minos' unfair treatment of her following the birth of the Minotaur, and most other art shows the Minotaur in battle with Theseus. The beast is defined by his relationships to others -- to King Minos he is a punishment for his disrespect to the gods, to Pasiphae a consequence for having acting on her unnatural lust, to the Athenians a monster feasting on children, to Theseus a beast to be slain as part of his heroic arc, to Daedalus a prisoner to keep captive.

In early Greek depictions, the fight between Theseus and the Minotaur was fairly popular, but post-6th century Greek art with the Minotaur became fairly rare according to

Ziolkowski. It only appears seventy-two times, and, of these portrayals, most are found in Etruscan and Roman art, coinciding with the rise of the Mithras mystery cult at the end of the first century.¹ The Mithras cult was, indeed, centered on bull-slaying, and the secretive mysticism of the cult is well suited to the aura of ‘otherness’ that already surrounded Minoan civilization from a Greek perspective. This advanced ancient civilization long preceded that of the Greeks, and prior to 1420 B.C.E., was the dominant power in the Aegean Sea before Mycenaean Greeks took that role. The prevalence of bulls in Greek mythology regarding Crete is no doubt due to the presence of another mysterious bull-cult that existed in ancient Minoan religion, which the ancient Greeks then adapted and reimagined.² Thus the myth of the Minotaur even at its inception is a reinterpretation, likely designed to integrate Minoan culture into Mycenae's developing religious beliefs while also stigmatizing it. Theseus' defeat of the Minotaur could even be seen as symbolic of the historic downfall of Crete and Mycenae's separation from its rule, as modern critics view it: “The labyrinth became seen as the site of a decisive turning point in the history of civilization, for it was there that the Athenian hero Theseus slew the Minotaur, in that one stroke severing all ties to both the dark, archaic world represented by Crete and the human bestiality incarnated in the monster”.³ Ziolkowski quotes Rhys Carpenter as saying “there is no Minoan or Asianic blood in the veins of the Greek Muses” to point out that the classical Athenians viewed Crete as alien and Cretans

¹ Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Minos and the Moderns: Cretan Myth in Twentieth-century Literature and Art*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

² Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Minos and the Moderns: Cretan Myth in Twentieth-century Literature and Art*. 2008.

³ Florman, Lisa Carol. *Myth and Metamorphosis: Picasso's Classical Prints of the 1930s*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000.

as wicked.⁴ The Greek Muses are thought of as the pinnacle of intellect and humanity; barbarity is Minoan. Lisa Florman explains that the myth is inherently shocking just in terms of visual symbolism: “the Minotaur upset the clear distinction between man and animal -- all the more so in that its lowly, brutish features appeared at the pinnacle of its human form, the site that should have been the locus of the most elevated aspects of its being.”⁵ The idea of a man’s logical and enlightened brain being replaced with that of a bull’s was disturbing, as it continues to be in uses of the Minotaur by Stead and in other metaphorical representations of the monster.

W. T. Stead begins his article on London prostitution with a retelling of the myth that focuses more on the plight of the Minotaur’s victims than on the beast himself. The first reference to the Minotaur is as “the foul product of an unnatural lust” -- the lust of course referring to Pasiphae’s desire for a bull in the original myth, but the vagueness of this description allows Stead to more aptly fit the myth to his crusade.⁶ The unnatural lust he refers to is the lust of the men of London for young virgins, of which the prostitution trade itself is the foul product. “The maw of the London Minotaur is insatiable, and none that go into the secret recesses of his lair return again,” Stead states, drawing a parallel between literal and sexual consumption, as well as likening the tendency of young girls to become trapped in the prostitution trade to the Athenian youths unable to find their way out of the labyrinth.⁷ Stead also cites Ovid’s description of the labyrinth as a place designed to keep the Minotaur out of sight, hiding the shame and barbarity of his

⁴ Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Minos and the Moderns: Cretan Myth in Twentieth-century Literature and Art*. 2008.

⁵ Florman, Lisa Carol. *Myth and Metamorphosis: Picasso's Classical Prints of the 1930s*. 2000.

⁶ W. T. Stead, Antony E. Simpson, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*. Lambertville: True Bill Press, 2007.

⁷ W. T. Stead, Antony E. Simpson, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*. Lambertville: True Bill Press, 2007.

consumption of humans (*Met.* VIII.152-182). Similarly, the child prostitution trade is kept secret to maintain the illusion of London's civility.. Overall, this metaphor is designed to break the illusion and inspire revulsion in readers at their own city being exposed as the inhumane labyrinth of old. It should be noted that Watts' and Steads' Minotaur is not exactly the same as the Minotaur that exploded into public consciousness several decades later following the archaeological uncovering of the palace of Knossos (the claimed site of the labyrinth) on Crete by Arthur Evans at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ziolkowski's book *Minos and the Moderns* states explicitly that "with a few notable exceptions those myths were conspicuously absent from the cultural imagination of the nineteenth century," referring to any myths involving Crete.⁸ The London Minotaur is no doubt one of those exceptions. However, similar archaeological findings from the 1870s onward, sensationalized by the claims of finding mythical sites, added a pseudohistorical legitimacy to Greek mythology in Victorian eyes. This context helped to create a "a distinctive and vivid, if unscholarly, sense of connection with the world of Greece and Rome."⁹ This milieu also connected the modern Victorian world to all the darker aspects of antiquity, aspects that painted that world as "a place of moral depravity in which gluttony, drunkenness, and fornication were rife."¹⁰ No doubt it was this emerging connection that allowed Stead to easily link the barbarity of their modern society with that of the myth, especially since Crete was thought of as even more barbarous by the Greeks themselves.

⁸ Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Minos and the Moderns: Cretan Myth in Twentieth-century Literature and Art*. 2008.

⁹ Kallendorf, Craig, Ward W. Briggs, Julia Haig. Gaisser, and Charles Martindale. *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*. 2007.

¹⁰ Kallendorf, Craig, Ward W. Briggs, Julia Haig. Gaisser, and Charles Martindale. *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007.

The painting of the Minotaur by Watts, however, tells a story different from either Stead or traditional versions of the myth. Watt's Minotaur is not hidden from sight inside his dark labyrinth as emphasized by Stead, but outside in the light. The horizon is below eye-level, the sky taking up a majority of the background, which suggests that the Minotaur's look-out point is high up and also gives the painting an airy quality, emphasized by the fact that the beast is given a large amount of space around him in the frame despite his bulk. His body only extends outside of the frame in the lower right corner, which is the darkest point of the painting and is the only part that carries some reminder of the dark labyrinth. While most of his body remains below the horizon, his head (his bestial part) is entirely set above, which emphatically divides his two aspects. It also lends a sense of movement to the painting, as if the Minotaur is straining upwards towards freedom, his head literally in the clouds. This metaphor is strangely apt -- the Minotaur's expression, or what we can see of it, seems vacant and dazed, with his wide eyes and the mouth gaping open and his tongue hanging slightly out. To the left, just on the horizon, is a white brushstroke resembling a sail. The Minotaur is looking out in its direction, his leaning body pointing towards it, his body pressed up into the corner of the parapet, suggesting eagerness. Perhaps the sail belongs to the ship bringing the Minotaur his maiden tribute, in which case his mouth might be agape because he is panting or salivating in anticipation. But more than anything, his face resembles that of a dog more than it resembles that of a bull, with a certain innocent stupidity, or sadness, expressed in his droopy mouth and his long-lashed wide eyes. Even his horns are short and stubby, not sharp or in any way appearing dangerous. The dog-like expression gives him a tameness entirely alien to typical portrayals of the Minotaur, and indeed alien to the rest of his

body, which is muscled to an almost unbelievable extent. Beneath the Minotaur's hands, which are curled up as if to resemble paws (again strengthening his resemblance to a dog) is a tiny crushed bird. The bird's beak is open as if crying out in pain, its feathers bent beneath his fingers. The Minotaur's posture has his hands drawn close to his chest, supporting his weight as he leans out towards the water. This posture combined with his inattention to the bird makes it seem like he is momentarily unaware of its presence, as if he accidentally crushed it without realizing, or did crush it intentionally earlier and has already forgotten his actions, distracted by the approaching sail. Interestingly, the curve of the bird's wing visually matches the curve of a few highlighted hairs in the Minotaur's bull tail, drawing an unexpected parallel between the two animal elements and mapping the bird's obvious innocence, or perhaps helplessness, subtly onto its predator. Light is used strangely in the painting: rich golds illuminate the Minotaur's muscles and dapple the sky with a glow. These colors are warm and soft, colors that aren't usually paired with ill intent and danger. It is not obvious where the source of light is because the Minotaur does not cast any visible shadows on the wall he leans on, only on himself, thus creating a sense of the fantastical, and the unclear time of day renders a timelessness to the scene. There is, however, a perfectly rectangular shadow cast on the wall by an unseen object, hinting at further architecture that might comprise the unseen labyrinth. Finally, there is a small light scribble on the Minotaur's elbow, which, although illegible, I am prepared to guess is Watts's signature.

Overwhelmingly, the visual details mentioned above hardly paint the figure as the horrifying beast one might expect to be inspired from a newspaper article about child prostitution. Like a princess held captive in a tower, this Minotaur is trapped but allowed

to look wistfully at the unlimited planes of the sea and sky. But he has also destroyed a symbol of freedom and innocence, and the presence of the sail, coupled with our knowledge of what it brings, lends a sense of foreboding which seems at odds with rest of the picture. Why would Watts place the mark of his identity and authorship on the horrific symbol of brutality and rape condemned by Stead? One possible answer could lie in the separation between the bull and the man -- it is the man's brute strength that crushes the bird and the man's body that leans eagerly out towards the maiden tributes. The bull's head displays no violence, even asking for pity from the viewer, and the parallel between the bird's feathers and the Minotaur's tail further hints that it is not the bull-half that gives the Minotaur his violence. Rather, it is his human-half that is highlighted as brutal and bloodthirsty; it reminds us of the real villain of the myth -- King Minos, who unlike the animal Minotaur, is fully aware of his destructive actions and the horrific consequences of sending tributes to be fed to the Minotaur.

In a biography of Watts, Chesterton relates that, "he told Mr. W. T. Stead that he had defended and was prepared to defend the staggering publications of the "Maiden Tribute"; it was the only way, he said, to stem the evil."¹¹ Watts in general was politically active and a social reformer, and this was consistently reflected in his other allegorical paintings of Greek mythology. His paintings have also often been cited as primarily character studies rather than just realistic portraiture. This interpretation of *The Minotaur* as a character study is enforced by Bills and Bryant in their own analysis, where they emphasize how the white highlighting draws attention to the Minotaur's eye as "essential to Watts's meaning, which is as much about the inner life of the Minotaur as his

¹¹ Chesterton, G. K. *G.F. Watts*. London: Duckworth, 1904.

cruelty.”¹² This unusual focus on the Minotaur’s character, as well as the alteration of the setting of the original myth, is not unexpected for Watts given that his general portrayal of classical material deviated from standard neoclassical practices.¹³ His vision of Pheidian sculpture at the Parthenon, which inspired much of his work, is described by him with terms not usually associated with classical art: “‘colour,’ ‘flexibility,’ ‘richness’ -- qualities antithetical to the neoclassical reverence for whiteness, generality, purity.”¹⁴ This untraditional ideal, implemented by his use of rich color, serves to make *The Minotaur* more of a living, breathing being of the present, instead of a cold removed figure of the past. Such a tone makes the beast more familiar, which in turn unsettles the viewer.

While the painting may indeed be Watts’ defense of *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, it seems to make a slightly different argument than Stead, who uses the metaphor of London’s Minotaur to emphasize the inhuman and animalistic nature of the child prostitution trade, and indeed generalizes with the abstract concept of London’s perverse lust rather than singling out the individual people responsible for the child prostitution. Watts instead seems to offer a generalized expression of the evil in humanity, not via a metaphor, but simply as a character study of a destructive individual. Like Stead exposing the London Minotaur, Watts brings his Minotaur up into the light, but the light illuminates his familiarity as well as his savagery. Painting London’s dark side as another world, as an alien “other,” is not helpful in addressing the atrocities

¹² Bills, Mark, Barbara Bryant, and George Frederick Watts. *G.F. Watts: Victorian Visionary: Highlights from the Watts Gallery Collection*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008.

¹³ Trodd, Colin, and Brown, Stephanie. *Representations of G.F. Watts: Art Making in Victorian Culture*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004.

¹⁴ Trodd, Colin, and Brown, Stephanie. *Representations of G.F. Watts: Art Making in Victorian Culture*.

committed. Perhaps the only way to “stem the evil” is to acknowledge that cruelty is a human trait, and not the bull’s at all.

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