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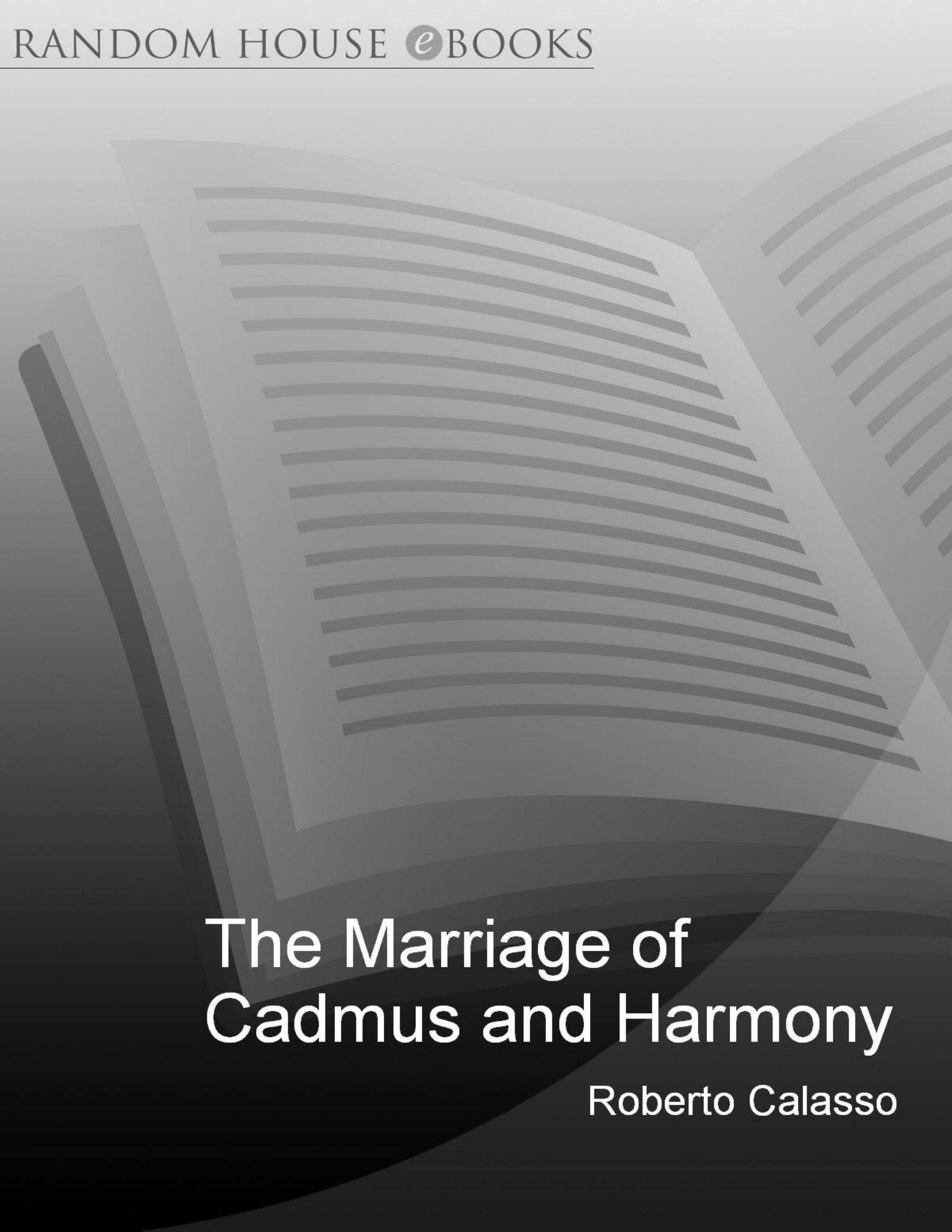

The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony

Roberto Calasso

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About the Author

Roberto Calasso was born in 1941 in Florence and pursued his studies in Rome. In 1962 he joined Adelphi Edizioni in Milan, the distinguished Italian publishing house known for its uncompromising literary excellence. *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is the winner of France's most prestigious Prix Veillon 1991 and the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger 1992.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Binding stamp:	Bernard de Montfaucon, *L'antiquité expliquée* (Paris, 1719).
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Chapter I:	Ibid.
Chapter II:	W. H. Roscher, *Ausfürliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884–1937).
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Chapter X:	Ibid.
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Roberto Calasso

The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony

Translated from the Italian by Tim Parks

These things never happened, but are always

Sallust, *Of Gods and of the World*

I

ON A BEACH in Sidon a bull was aping a lover's coo. It was Zeus. He shuddered, the way he did when a gadfly got him. But this time it was a sweet shuddering. Eros was lifting a girl onto his back: Europa. Then the white beast dived into the sea, his majestic body rising just far enough above the water to keep the girl from getting wet. There were plenty of witnesses. Triton answered the amorous bellowing with a burst on his conch. Trembling, Europa hung on to one of the bull's long horns. Boreas spotted them too as they plowed through the waves. Sly and jealous, he whistled when he saw the young breasts his breath had uncovered. High above, Athena blushed at the sight of her father bestraddled by a girl. An Achaean sailor saw them and gasped. Could it be Tethys, eager to see the sky? Or just some Nereid with clothes on her back for a change? Or was it that trickster Poseidon carrying off another wench?

Europa, meantime, could see no end to this crazy sea crossing. But she guessed what would happen to her when they hit land again. And she shouted to wind and water: "Tell my father Europa has been carried off by a bull—my kidnapper, my sailor, my future bedmate, I imagine. Please, give this necklace to my mother." She was going to call to Boreas too, ask him to lift her up on his wings, the way he'd done with his own bride, Oreithyia, from Athens. But she bit her tongue: why swap one abductor for another?

. . .

But how did it all begin? A group of girls were playing by the river, picking flowers. Again and again such scenes were to prove irresistible to the gods. Persephone was carried off "while playing with the girls with the deep

cleavages."[1] She too had been gathering flowers: roses, crocuses, violets, irises, hyacinths, narcissi. But mainly narcissi, "that wondrous, radiant flower, awesome to the sight of gods and mortals alike."[2] Thalia was playing ball in a field of flowers on the mountainside when she was clutched by an eagle's claws: Zeus again. Creusa felt Apollo's hands lock around her wrists as she bent to pick saffron on the slopes of the Athens Acropolis. Europa and her friends were likewise gathering narcissi, hyacinths, violets, roses, thyme.

All of a sudden they find themselves surrounded by a herd of bulls. And one of those bulls is dazzling white, his small horns flashing like jewels. There's nothing in the least threatening about him. So much so that, though shy at first, Europa now brings her flowers to his white muzzle. The bull whines with pleasure, like a puppy, slumps down on the grass, and offers his little horns to the garlands. The princess makes so bold as to climb, like an Amazon, on his back. At which, the herd moves discreetly away from the dry riverbed and off toward the beach. With a show of nervousness, the bull approaches the water. And then it's too late: the white beast is already breasting the waves with Europa up on top. She turns to look back, right hand hanging on to a horn, left leaning on the animal's hide. As they move, the breeze flutters her clothes.

But how did it all begin? Shortly before dawn, asleep in her room on the first floor of the royal palace, Europa had had a strange dream: she was caught between two women; one was Asia, the other was the land facing her, and she had no name. The two women were fighting over her, violently. Each wanted her for herself. Asia looked like a woman from Europa's own country, whereas the other was a total stranger. And in the end it was the stranger whose

powerful hands dragged her off. It was the will of Zeus, she said: Europa was to be an Asian girl carried off by a stranger. The dream was extremely vivid, as though happening in broad daylight, and on waking Europa was afraid and sat silent on her bed for a long time. Then she went out, the way she always did, with her friends. They walked down to the mouth of the river, and Europa wandered about between the roses and the breaking waves, her golden basket in one hand.

A blondish bull appeared in the meadow, a white circle on his forehead. The animal had a sweet scent, which drowned the smell of the flowers. He came up to Europa and licked her neck. She stroked him, at the same time drying the saliva that dribbled freely from the animal's mouth. The bull knelt down in front of her, offering her his back. And the moment she climbed up, he made a dash for the sea. Terrified, Europa looked back toward the beach, shouted to her friends, one arm waving in the air. Then, already out in the waves, she hung on to a big horn with one hand and held the hem of her tunic up tight against her breast with the other. Behind her, the tunic billowed out in a purple sail.

But how did it all begin? Europa was out walking with her friends, a shining gold basket in her hand. Hephaestus had made it two generations before to give to Libye. And Libye had given it to her daughter Telephassa, who had given it to her daughter Europa. It was the family talisman. On the side, embossed in gold, was a stray heifer apparently swimming in an enamel sea. Two mysterious men were standing on the shore watching. And there was a golden Zeus too, his hand just skimming the bronze-colored animal. In the background, a silver Nile. The heifer was Io, Europa's great-great-grandmother.

Her story too was one of abduction and metamorphosis. Tormented by a gadfly, she crossed and recrossed sea after sea in a state of constant mental anguish. She even gave her name to the sea that led to Italy. Zeus's love for her had brought her to madness and disaster. It all began with some strange dreams, when Io was priestess in the Heraion near Argos, the oldest of all shrines and the place that gave the Greeks their way of measuring time; for centuries they numbered their years with reference to the succession of priestesses in the Heraion. Io's dreams whispered of Zeus's passionate love for her and told her to go to the fields of Lerna, where her father's sheep and oxen grazed. From now on she would no longer be a priestess consecrated to the goddess but an animal consecrated to the god, like the ones that wandered freely about the sanctuary grounds. Thus her dreams insisted. And so it was.

But one day the sanctuary grounds would expand to become the whole world, with its boundless seas, which she was to ford one after the other without respite, forever goaded by that relentless gadfly. And the vaster the landscape about her, the more intense her suffering became. By the time she came across another victim, Prometheus, what she wanted most of all was to die, not realizing that she had found another sufferer like herself who could not hope to die. But for Io, as for Prometheus, release from obsession did come at last. One day, after she had crossed to Egypt, Zeus skimmed his hand lightly over her. At which the crazed young cow became a girl again and was united with the god. In memory of that moment she called her son Epaphus, which means "a hand's light touch." Epaphus later became king of Egypt, and rumor had it he was also the ox called Apis.

As she walked down toward the flowery meadows near the sea, what Europa was carrying, embossed in precious metals, was her destiny. As in a piece of music, her own tune was the melodic inversion of her ancestor, Io's. A bull

would carry her off from Asia toward the continent that was to be called Europe, just as years before the desperate sea wandering of a young cow who had first grazed in Greek pastures was to end in Egypt with the light touch of Zeus's hand. And one day the gift of the golden basket would be handed down to Europa. She carried it along, without thinking.

. . .

But how did it all begin? If it is history we want, then it is a history of conflict. And the conflict begins with the abduction of a girl, or with the sacrifice of a girl. And the one is continually becoming the other. It was the "merchant wolves," arriving by ship from Phoenicia, who carried off the *tauropárthenos* from Argos. *Tauropárthenos* means "the virgin dedicated to the bull."[3] Her name was Io. Like a beacon signaling from mountain to mountain, this rape lit the bonfire of hatred between the two continents. From that moment on, Europe and Asia never stopped fighting each other, blow answering blow. Thus the Cretans, "the boars of Ida,"[4] carried off Europa from Asia. They sailed back to their home country in a ship shaped like a bull, offering Europa as a bride to their king, Asterius. One of Europa's grandchildren was to have the same celestial name. He was a young man with a bull's head, and he lived in the middle of a labyrinth, awaiting his victims. What they usually called him, though, was the Minotaur.

But how did it all begin? When they arrived in Argos, the Phoenician merchants spent five or six days selling the wares they'd brought from the Red Sea, Egypt, and Assyria. Their ship lay at anchor while on the shore the local people gazed at, touched, and bargained over those objects from so far away. There were still some last things to be sold

when a group of women arrived. One of them was Io, the king's daughter. The bargaining and buying went on. Until all of a sudden, the seafaring merchants leaped on the women. Some of them managed to escape. But Io and a number of others were carried off. This was the abduction the Cretans were revenging when they carried off the Phoenician king's daughter, Europa. But the Phoenicians have a different version: Io was in fact in love with the captain of the foreign ship. She was already pregnant and ashamed, and so left with the Phoenicians of her own free will.

Out of these events history itself was born: the abduction of Helen, the Trojan War, and, before that, the Argonauts' expedition and the abduction of Medea—all are links in the same chain. A call to arms goes back and forth between Asia and Europe, and every back and forth is a woman, a woman and a swarm of predators, going from one shore to the other. Nevertheless, Herodotus did note a difference between the two sides in the dispute: "To abduct women," he writes, "is considered the action of scoundrels, but to worry about abducted women is the reaction of fools. The wise man does not give a moment's thought to the women who have been abducted, because it is clear that, had they not wanted to be abducted, they would not have been."[5] The Greeks did not behave wisely: "For one Spartan woman they gathered together a great army and, arriving in Asia, laid low the power of Priam."[6] Since then, the war between Europe and Asia has never ceased.

They landed on a large island but didn't stop. Instead they pushed on into the hills. Only when they'd reached Gortyn, under a huge, shady plane tree, did Zeus and Europa make love. Zeus was an eagle. Afterward he disappeared. But left his loved one with a guardian. In the silent heat, Europa

heard the clopping of bronze hooves coming from far away. Someone was riding flat out. It must be a machine, or a being from another age, a child of the ash nymphs. It was both: Talos, another bull, the guardian bull, sentry of the island; or alternatively, as some said, a mechanical giant put together by Hephaestus. A long vein stood out on his body, running from neck to hooves—or perhaps feet. And there a bronze nail stopped the gush of blood and sent it bubbling back inside. That nail was the secret of the creature's life, and likewise of the art of casting. Talos would gallop about and hurl stones all over the place: at nothing mostly, or at approaching strangers. Back in the Palace of Sidon, Europa had been used to waking to the sound of friendly voices, the companions she went down to the sea with; here she woke to silence, and in the depth of that silence a distant sound, which would gradually become deafening. But she saw no one. She knew that Talos went on running up and down the coasts of the large island: Crete, Europe.

Io, Telephassa, Europa, Argiope, Pasiphaë, Ariadne, Phaedra: the names evoke a broad, pure, shining face that lights things up at a distance, that lights up all of us, like the moon. "Huge, pale figures, tremendous, lonely, dark and desolate, fatal, mysterious lovers condemned to titanic infamies. What will become of you? What will your destiny be? Where can you hide your fearful passions? What terrors, what compassion you inspire, what immense and awesome sadness you arouse in those mortals called to contemplate so much shame and horror, so many crimes, such great misfortune."[7] So said Gustave Moreau.

Diodorus Siculus: “They also say that the honors given to the gods and the sacrifices and rites of the mysteries originally came down to other men from Crete, and in making this claim they offer what they believe is an extremely strong argument. The initiation rite that the Athenians celebrate in Eleusis, the most illustrious, one might say, of all rites, and again the Samothracians’ rite and the rite begun by Orpheus in Thrace among the Cicones, all these rites are passed on from one initiate to another in secret. But in Cnossos, Crete, it has always been the custom to practice such initiation rites in broad daylight and to let everybody know about them. What is considered unnameable among other peoples is available for all who want to hear in Crete.”[8]

Mystery, in Crete, was made plain to all, no one tried to hide it. The “unnameable things” that abounded in Attica were laid open to everybody. But there was no sense of challenge about this. Crete, with its hundred cities and not a single defensive wall around them, looked like a huge plaything. Only a tidal wave, or dark raiders striking from the sea, could have been its doom, not the recklessness of the sort of civilization that seeks self-knowledge, and in so doing destroys itself.

A few thousand years later, a famous morphologist of civilization was to be baffled by Crete, for, having studied the whole multitude of Cretan remains, he could find not a single indication of any historical, political, or even biographical consciousness, such as had always dominated Egyptian thought. For a man who hungered after the signs of great civilizations, Crete had something childish about it, something elusive, something below par.

The Linear B Tablets include many names of gods: about half were to go on living as Olympian gods, the other half were lost. We know nothing about them: they are mere names that appear alongside those of Zeus, Poseidon, Hera. As if the Olympian gods had once been far more numerous and now carried around with them the shadows of their lost brothers and sisters.

Crete: pots of grain numbered in the storehouses, seals showing beasts half one thing half another, delicate frescoes, ivory knots, lists of offerings, honey, inscribed poppy pods, ox skulls, double-edged axes. Columns of cypress wood, palaces with stairways and shafts of light, nameless tombstones. Tiny idols heaped in piles, not statues, not doubles made of stone. Nothing of the verticality of the divine, no sign of the hallucinatory presence of upright stone.

Stories never live alone: they are the branches of a family that we have to trace back, and forward. In the rapture of her sea crossing on the back of a white bull, Europa conceals within herself, like still undiscovered powers, the destinies of her love-crazed granddaughters Phaedra and Ariadne, who would one day hang themselves out of shame and desperation. And down among the celestial roots of this story tree we come across the wanderings of the mad heifer, the ancestral Io, who again holds within herself the image of another mad heifer, mother of Phaedra and Ariadne: Pasiphaë. And she too hung herself in shame.

From a rock, Ariadne watches Phaedra on a swing. Lost in thought, she waits. Both are young princesses, in Cnossos.

Daughters of Minos and Pasiphaë. They have lots of brothers and sisters. And a half brother too, Asterius. Asterius has a bull's head, because his father was the big white bull Pasiphaë fell in love with. Asterius has been shut up in a building designed by an Athenian inventor who is on the run because, so rumor has it, he killed somebody. That covered building is strange indeed. The princesses were already familiar with the labyrinth, but in the past it had been out in the open for everybody to see, a broad space for the dance. They didn't realize—nobody would have told them—that, when their father, Minos, set out to conquer the continent and the Cretans began to have too many dealings with the Greeks, the moment had come for them to cover up their secrets, and ultimately to be ashamed of them. Daedalus, the Athenian, designs a building in Crete that hides behind stone walls both mystery (the pattern of the dance) and shame (Asterius, the Minotaur). From that day on, the mystery is also the thing you are ashamed of.

This development depended, in turn, on the developing history of metamorphoses. Forms would become manifest insofar as they underwent metamorphosis. Each form had its own perfect sharpness, so long as it retained that form, but everybody knew that a moment later it might become something else. At the time of Europa and Io, the veil of epiphany was still operating. The bellowing bull, the crazed cow, would once again appear as god and girl. But as generation followed generation, metamorphosis became more difficult, and the fatal nature of reality, its irreversibility, all the more evident: Only a generation after Europa, Pasiphaë would have to crouch inside a wooden cow, a big toy on wheels, and have herself pushed as far as the meadows of Gortyn, where the bull she desired was grazing. And from their union was born a creature who would never be able to go back to being either beast or man. He would be a hybrid, forever. And just as the craftsman Daedalus had had to invent an inanimate object

to allow the mother to love the bull, so now he had to invent another object, the labyrinth, to conceal the son. The Minotaur would be slain, Pasiphaë was to die in captivity and shame. Humans could no longer gain access to other forms and return from them. The veil of epiphany was rent and tattered now. If the power of metamorphosis was to be maintained, there was no alternative but to invent objects and generate monsters.

"Since it is the custom in Crete for the women to take part in the games, Ariadne was there with the others, and she was amazed when she saw Theseus, and admired his skill as, one after another, he overcame all adversaries."[9] While Ariadne gazes at the Stranger, Crete crumbles. Before being betrayed herself, Ariadne chose to betray her island.

Dionysus courts her, then accuses her, then kills her, then rediscovers her, then transforms her into the crown of the northern sky, Corona Borealis. But this is a different Dionysus from the one Ariadne knew in her childhood. He wasn't even called Dionysus then. He was the Bull: the total Bull, who descends from the heavens like Zeus, rises from the sea like Poseidon, grazes under the plane trees of Gortyn. He encompassed all things: he was in the honey and blood offered to the gods, he was in the slender horns at each side of the altars, in the ox skulls painted along the walls of the palace. Youths with armbands, loincloths, and wavy hair gripped him by the horns at a run. The Bull had always followed Ariadne about, right from the start, always accompanied her, always kept his eye on her.

Now the Bull steps aside and the Athenian hero moves in. They would appear to be enemies, but they swap places very smoothly. The scene is already set. No more monster business now, but sordid affairs. That is Ariadne's destiny. No more the childish, the regal palace, but the porticoes

and public squares where tough, clever men take the first opportunity to stab each other in the back, where the word, which in Crete had served to take inventories of goods in warehouses, would become sovereign, vibrant, revered. Ariadne would not live to see all this: she stopped halfway, caught on another island, rocky and inhospitable. She closed her eyes, so as never to have to see again either the god or the man who of their natures could do nothing more than appear and disappear.

Theseus transformed the divine habit of carrying off young maidens into a human pastime. Every adventure he sets out on he carries off a woman, whether it be the Cretan Ariadne when he goes south or the Amazon Antiope when he heads north. There was always something playful and even reckless about these adventures. And some of them hardly finished in noble fashion, for no sooner had Theseus conquered a trophy than he was in a hurry to be rid of it, so as to go after another. At fifty he was still at it, carrying off a certain Helen who danced in the shrine of Artemis Orthia. On that occasion he was assisted by the only being to whom he would be faithful to the end: his friend Peirithous.

They first met as enemies and were supposed to fight to the death. But, when they saw each other, just as they were about to fight their duel, each found he was admiring his adversary. Each was attracted to the beauty and strength of the other. From that moment they became companions in adventure. And Theseus was never so happy as when he was with Peirithous, inventing irreverent adventures, going through with them, talking about them afterward. They knew the world, these two, they had seen it all, had killed mythical beasts, carried off princesses. Nothing could separate them, least of all a woman.

. . .

One day Peirithous felt lonely; his wife, Hippodamia, had recently died. He thought he'd go and see his friend Theseus in Athens. And the widower found another widower: Phaedra had hung herself. As so often before, they talked and talked, and pretty soon they fell to talking about new adventures. There was a girl in Sparta, Peirithous said, ten years old and more beautiful than any woman. Her name was Helen. Why not carry her off? When they had captured her, they shook a die to see who would have her. Theseus won.

And one day, together as always, during one of those coded conversations that were their greatest pleasure in life (neither the women nor the adventures in themselves could offer so much in the end)—one day it occurred to them that, having roamed more or less the whole world, the only thing left for them to do was to violate the underworld. They had carried off earthly princesses, so why not carry off divine queens? They'd managed to trick living kings, so why couldn't they do the same in the kingdom of the dead? Thus Peirithous and Theseus went down to Hades to carry off its queen.

Theseus is he who gets up and goes. Not even Helen can hold him, happy prisoner as she is. And, while fears of reprisals are mounting and the abductor's friends are closing ranks to protect her, Peirithous comes up with his idea: head off even farther down the Peloponnese, as far as Cape Taenarum, where you can climb down into Hades, and carry off the most powerful of queens. And off Theseus goes. This time it isn't a question of abducting a twelve-year-old (or had she been ten?), dancing in the shrine of Artemis, nor is it a matter of learning the dances of the

labyrinth from a ravishing girl. This time the project is tougher: “these two tried to snatch Dis’s bride from her marriage bed.”[10]

. . .

The punishment reserved for Theseus by the king of the underworld is a subtle one, answering mockery with mockery. Hades listens to the two friends politely. He asks how he can help them, he invites them to make themselves comfortable on two golden chairs set into the rock. But an invisible bond glues the friends to those chairs. They can’t get up. Peirithous, “he who wanders in circles,” and Theseus, the abductor, must forget their very selves, sitting still in the kingdom of the dead. When Heracles saves Theseus, dragging him from the chair by force, he leaves strips of flesh behind. Which is why, they say, Athenian boys have such small, lean buttocks.

All around Athens, before it was called Athens, the country was full of brigands and wild beasts who attacked and tormented travelers. One day a herald arrived from the sea with the news that a young man had made the rounds of all the roads and slain all the troublemakers: Sinis and Phaea, Sciron, Cercyon, and Procrustes, to name but a few. But what was this young man like? people asked. He had a sword with an ivory hilt slung over one shoulder and two shining javelins, one in each hand. He wore a Spartan cap over tawny curls and a purple jersey on his chest under a woolen cloak from Thessaly. A wicked light flashed in his eyes.

Theseus wore his hair short in front—so that nobody could grab it in a fight, he said—and long and plaited behind. The

curls that fell on his forehead he had dedicated to Apollo in Delphi. When first he appeared in the vicinity of Athens, he was sixteen years old and wore a long Ionian tunic. His hair had been twisted into a handsome plait behind. The laborers working on the temple of Delphinian Apollo—they only had the roof to go—jeered and shouted jokes. What on earth was a marriageable young girl doing wandering about beneath the Acropolis on her own? Theseus didn't answer them. He went up to a cart with a bull yoked to it, freed the bull, and tossed it in the air. They saw it fly up above their still unfinished roof. It was the first time Theseus had had dealings with a bull.

But how many more were to cross his path! The Minotaur in Crete, into whose boy's body he would bury his sword. The bull he would capture at Marathon to the joy of the Athenians. Then a bull would rise from the sea to kill his son, Hippolytus. And on many other and more obscure occasions Theseus would find himself up against the bull. So close was his relationship with the beast that he put a bull's head on the first coins he minted in his city, the sacred Athens. It was Theseus who chose the name.

There is something blasphemous about Theseus, an indomitable insolence that looks forward to Alcibiades. When he and his friend Peirithous embark on their trip to the underworld to snatch back Persephone, an adventure that smacks of parody, one thinks of Alcibiades, whose critics accused him of celebrating religious mysteries with prostitutes and vagabonds. And just as Alcibiades would one day with great solemnity lead a procession along the Sacred Way toward Eleusis, so Theseus presided over the city's most secret rites. He played with those secrets because he knew them so well, because they had belonged to him from birth.

Theseus has no particular reason for deserting Ariadne. There wasn’t another woman. It was just that she slipped his mind for a moment, a moment that might be any moment. And when Theseus gets distracted, someone is lost. Ariadne had helped the Stranger kill her half brother with the bull’s head, she had left the family palace, she was ready to wash Theseus’s feet in Athens, like a slave. But Theseus has forgotten, he is already thinking of something else. And the place where Ariadne gets left behind becomes, once and for all, the landscape of abandoned love. Theseus isn’t cruel because he leaves Ariadne. If that were the case, his cruelty would be no different from that of so many others. No, Theseus is cruel because he leaves Ariadne on the island of Naxos. Not the home where she was born, and certainly not the home she hoped to be welcomed in, nor even some country in between. Just a beach lashed by thundering waves, an abstract place where only the seaweed moves. It is the island where no one lives, the place where obsession turns round and round on itself, with no way out. A constant flaunting of death. This is a place of the soul.

Ariadne has been left behind. The clothes fall from her body one by one. It is a scene of mourning. Awake now, but still as the statue of a Bacchant, Minos’s daughter gazes into the distance toward the eternal absentee, for Theseus’s swift ship has already disappeared over the horizon, and her mind rises and falls with the waves. The thin ribbon that held her blond hair slips off, her cloak falls away leaving her chest bare, her breasts are no longer supported by their sash. One after another, the clothes in which she left Crete forever fall and scatter at her feet. The waves toy with them in the sand and seaweed.

As Ariadne gazed naked into the empty distance and thought how much she would like to be in Athens, as Theseus's bride, and to prepare his bed for him, though she would never lie in it, and to serve another who would lie in it, and to offer Theseus a bowl of water to wash his hands in after the banquet—as, in short, she was making a mental inventory of all the most minute demonstrations of servility she would have liked to show her vanished lover, a new thought occurred to her: perhaps another woman had had feelings like her own; her dedication and degradation were not unique, as she had at first liked to think. But who was that other woman? The queen, the all-splendid, shameless Pasiphaë, her mother. In the end she too, shut up in her wooden cow, that awkward, clumsy, colored toy on wheels, had agreed to play servant to a mere herdsman. She had bent her neck to let them put her in the yoke, she had whispered words of love to a dumb bull chomping grass. Hidden in the suffocating dark, in the smell of the wood, the herdsman's pipes got on her nerves, because there was only one sound she wanted to hear: the lowing of that white bull.

Then another thought occurred to Ariadne, a thought that followed from the first: if she, Ariadne, had done nothing more than repeat the passion of her mother, Pasiphaë, if she herself was Pasiphaë, then Theseus was the bull. But Theseus had killed the bull, her half brother, and killed him with her help. So had she been helping Theseus to kill himself? Or were the only people to get killed in this story themselves: Pasiphaë, who hung herself, Ariadne, who was preparing to hang herself, and her sister, Phaedra, who would hang herself some time later. While the bulls and their victors just seem to swap places, over and over, as if for them the process of killing and being killed was as simple an alternation as undressing and getting dressed again. The bull didn't experience the ultimate

perpendicular death of hanging, the being lifted away from this earth.

When the enamel blue prow of the Athenian ship arrived in Crete, when Theseus stopped King Minos from laying his hands, as he always would, on one of the Athenian girls, when during the games Theseus beat the hateful, imposing General Bull, who used to trounce everybody, then Ariadne began to think that this irreverant stranger might be strong enough to break the bull-obsessed circle in which her family was imprisoned. So she betrayed the divine bull who had dazzled her in a cave, betrayed her brother bull, the Minotaur, betrayed her mother, who had gone mad for a bull, and betrayed her father, who had chosen not to sacrifice the white bull from the sea but to put it out to pasture because it was too beautiful to be killed. At the end of all these betrayals, she found herself on a deserted beach, abandoned by Theseus. But she hadn't managed to escape the bull.

When Dionysus appeared, sham and seductive, too punctual, too merry, Ariadne sensed that somehow Dionysus and Theseus weren't rivals at all, but accomplices. Amid the clamor of flutes and tambourines, Dionysus suffocated such thoughts. Ariadne was dazzled by the divine glory the god offered her. And secretly she sneered at Theseus, who had brought that glory on her by his very treachery. She sensed the deviousness of the affair: if Theseus hadn't broken his word (but he had taken an oath to Athena, she remembered with a start, and Athena scorned marriage), Dionysus wouldn't have raised her to himself. No point in crying like a peasant girl, when you have a god next to you. But Dionysus doesn't stay next to anyone. A god is never a constant presence. And off

Dionysus went with his noisy followers, to India. Ariadne was alone again.

When the god reappeared, loaded with treasures and slaves, Ariadne observed his triumph and caught the passionate glance Dionysus threw at a young Indian girl, a princess, just one among his many Oriental spoils. Soon Ariadne would find herself crying on a beach again, her hair loose in the wind. With his overwhelming lightness, Dionysus had saved her from what Theseus had done to her, only to repeat the crime himself a short while later, thus making it at once more awful and more splendid. The Indian concubine polluted their bed. Ariadne cried and was constantly obsessed by the fear that Theseus should never come to hear of it! But how ingenuous … Hadn't she realized yet that Dionysus and Theseus were not really enemies? Those two opposed figures were both manifestations of the same man who went on betraying her, while she went on letting herself be betrayed. "I have grown used to loving the same man forever."[11] That capacity to love forever was her death sentence, it destroyed any hope of escaping from her obsessive circle, her resplendent crown.

From first to last Ariadne's story is woven into a crown. "My cousin's arriving," the young princess thought when they told her Dionysus had landed on the island. She had never seen this relative, born from his mother's death pyre and rumored to be so handsome. When he appeared, Dionysus didn't want to stay in the palace. He gripped her wrist and led her to one of Crete's many caves. And there the darkness was rent by a dazzling crown. Fiery gold and Indian jewels. Dionysus offered Ariadne the crown as a gift on the occasion of this, their first embrace. Sign of perfection, "herald of propitious silence,"[12] the crown was a

circle of seduction. But *to seduce* also means “to destroy” in Greek: *phtheírein*. The crown is the perfection of deceit, it is the deceit that circles in on itself, it is that perfection which includes deceit within it.

By the time Ariadne turned her gaze on the handsome Theseus, she was no longer a girl playing with her sisters in the palace of Cnossos. She was a god’s bride, even if no one knew of their union. The only witness had been that shining crown. But when Theseus came up from his father Poseidon’s underwater palace, he too had been holding a crown. It was made of small apple blossoms, dripping water and radiating light. He gave it to Ariadne, as Dionysus had given her his crown. And at the same time Ariadne gave Theseus Dionysus’s crown. For his part, Theseus was repeating the god’s gesture; for hers, Ariadne was betraying the god, so as to enable the Stranger to kill the Minotaur, who belonged to the bull god. When he set off into the dark passages of the labyrinth, Theseus was led by the light of the resplendent crown. His sword sparkled in that light before he buried it in the body of the youth with the bull’s head. So Ariadne brought deception to a higher level: she betrayed her divine partner and at the same time offered his love gift to the man who was taking his place.

But wasn’t the deception already there from the beginning, in the god’s gift to her? Ariadne is deceived precisely as she deceives: she imagines Theseus is the god’s opposite; she sees him as the man who will take her as his bride to Athens, beyond the vicious circle of the bull. When he reappeared in Naxos, Dionysus was waving a shining crown. Ariadne looked at it and thought of the other crowns that had been behind the other deceptions in her life. She realized now that that crown was the same crown and always had been. Her story really was over now; Ariadne would be forever alone, prisoner of that radiant crown in the sky: Corona Borealis.

In any Cretan story, there's a bull at the beginning and a bull at the end. At the beginning Minos summons Poseidon's white bull up out of the sea. If it appears, he promises, he will sacrifice it to the god. The bull does appear, but Minos doesn't keep his promise. The bull is too beautiful, he doesn't want to kill it, he wants it for his own. It is for that bull that Minos's wife Pasiphaë will develop her fatal passion.

At the end, Theseus captures a bull at Marathon, and once again it's the Cretan bull risen from the sea. After its couplings with Pasiphaë the bull had turned wild, and Minos had called for Heracles to capture it. The hero caught the bull and took it away to the mainland. For a long time the bull wandered about the Peloponnese before turning up in Attica. Where nobody had been able to get the better of it, not even Androgeus, Minos's son, who used to beat all the Athenians in their games. Theseus captured it, at Marathon. He offered it to his father, Aegeus, who sacrificed it to Apollo. Everything between that beginning and that end, which is to say Ariadne's destiny, takes place within the displacement of a sacrifice: from Poseidon to Apollo, from Crete to Athens. That passage is strewn with corpses. The mute, the sacrificial victim is part and parcel of the religious rite. But the myth claims other victims for itself, those who fall around the place of sacrifice, iron filings in the magnetic field. Out of the sacrifice, together with the blood, stream the stories. Thus the characters in the tragedy emerge. In the Cretan stories these characters are Pasiphaë, the Minotaur, Ariadne, Phaedra, Minos, Hippolytus, and Aegeus himself. Returning from Crete, Theseus forgets to lower the black sails, and Aegeus kills himself by leaping from the Acropolis. It's the last footnote to the displacement of the sacrifice.