

The Origins of Half-Human, Half-Animal Creatures

Jorge Luis Borges

The following excerpts from Jose Luis Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings* (originally published in 1957) examine the origins of monstrous combinations of human and animal. The monsters are

terrifying because of their perversion of what nature has kept separate: the human combined with a horse, bull, bird, fish, or lion. Borges was an Argentine writer whose works helped create the genre known as *magical realism* — a rendering of day-to-day life imbued with magical events. Among his many works are *Ficciones* (1944), *El Aleph and Other Stories* (1949), and *Labyrinths* (1962).

A child is taken for the first time to the zoo. The child may grow up to be you or me, or, conversely, we may once have been that child but have forgotten. At the zoo, that terrible "zoological garden," the child sees living animals he has never seen before—jaguars, vultures, buffalo, and, strangest of all, giraffes. He sees for the first time the confused variety of the animal kingdom, and the spectacle, far from alarming or frightening him, delights him. It delights him so much, in fact, that a trip to the zoo becomes part of the "fun" of childhood, or what passes for fun. How is one to explain this common and yet mysterious occurrence?

We can, of course, deny it. We can tell ourselves that children brusquely led into that garden become, twenty years down the line, neurotic, and the truth is, there's not a child who has not discovered the zoo and not an adult who is not, when carefully examined, discovered to be neurotic. Or we may assert that the child is, by definition, a discoverer, and that discovering the camel is no more remarkable than discovering mirrors, or water, or stairs. We may assert that the child trusts his parents, those who take him into that place filled with animals. Besides, the stuffed tiger on his bed and the tiger in the encyclopedia have prepared him to look without fear upon the tiger of flesh and blood. Plato (should he join in this discussion) would tell us that the child has already seen the tiger, in the world of archetypes, and that now, seeing it, he but recognizes it. Schopenhauer (still more startlingly) would say that the child looks without fear on tigers because he knows that he is the tigers and the tigers are he, or, more precisely, that tigers and he are of one essence—Will.

Let us move now from the zoo of reality to the zoo of mythology, that zoological garden whose fauna is comprised not of lions but of sphinxes

and gryphons and centaurs. The population of this second zoo should by all rights exceed that of the first, since a monster is nothing but a combination of elements taken from real creatures, and the combinatory possibilities border on the infinite. In the centaur, horse and man are mingled; in the Minotaur, bull and man (Dante imagined it with the face of a human and the body of a bull). Following this lead, it seems to us, any number of monsters, combinations of fish, bird, and reptile, might be produced—the only limit being our own ennui^o or revulsion. That, however, never happens; the monsters that we make would be stillborn, thank God. In the last pages of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, Flaubert brought together all sorts of medieval and classical monsters, and even (his commentators tell us) attempted to invent some of his own; the total is not great, and those creatures that exert power over mankind's imagination are really very few. Readers browsing through our own anthology will see that the zoology attributable to dreams is in fact considerably more modest than that attributable to God.

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We do not know what the dragon *means*, just as we do not know the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the image of the dragon that is congenial to man's imagination, and thus the dragon arises in many latitudes and ages. It is, one might say, a *necessary* monster, not some ephemeral^o and casual creature like the Chimera or the catoblepas.

We would add that we have no illusions that this book, perhaps the 5 first of its kind, contains within its covers every fantastic animal. We have pored through the classics and through Oriental literature, but we are perfectly aware that the subject we have undertaken is infinite.

The Centaur

The centaur is the most harmonious creature in fantastic zoology. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid calls it "biform," but it is easy enough to overlook its heterogeneous nature and to think that in the Platonic world of essences there is an archetype of the Centaur just as there is of the Horse or of Man. The discovery of that archetype took many centuries; primitive and archaic monuments portray a nude man to which a horse's rump

ennui: a feeling of boredom or dissatisfaction.

ephemeral: very short-lived.

can only uncomfortably be fitted. On the western facade of the Temple of Zeus on Olympia, the centaurs have equine limbs; at the place from which the animal's neck should emerge, there emerges the torso of a man.

Ixion, the king of Thessaly, was said to have engendered the race of centaurs upon a cloud to whom Zeus gave the shape of Hera; another legend has it that they are the children of Apollo. (It has been said that the word "centaur" derives from "gandharva"; in Vedic^o mythology, the Gandharva are minor deities who rule over the horses of the sun.) Since the Greeks of Homer's time did not ride horses, it is conjectured that the first nomad they saw seemed to them to be one with his steed, and it is also alleged that the Indians of the New World saw Pizarro's and Hernán Cortés's soldiers as centaurs. William H. Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru* gives the following account of that first meeting:

It might have gone hard with the Spaniards, hotly pressed by their resolute enemy so superior in numbers, but for a ludicrous accident reported by the historians as happening to one of the cavaliers. This was a fall from his horse, which so astonished the barbarians, who were not prepared for this division of what seemed one and the same being into two, that, filled with consternation, they fell back, and left a way open for the Christians to regain their vessels!

But unlike the Indians of the New World, the Greeks did know the horse. It seems more likely that the centaur was a deliberately drawn image, not some ignorant confusion.

The most popular of the fables in which the centaurs figure is that of their battle with the Lapiths, who had invited them to a wedding feast. The guests were unused to wine; in the midst of the celebration, a drunken and lustfully inflamed centaur, Eurytus, seized the bride and, overturning tables, set in motion the famous Centauromachia that Phidias or one of his followers sculpted on the Parthenon, Ovid sang in the twelfth book of the *Metamorphoses*, and Rubens took for inspiration. The centaurs, defeated by the Lapiths, had to flee to Thessaly. In another battle, Hercules's arrows extinguished the entire race.

Anger and rustic barbarism are symbolized in the centaur, though Achilles and Aesculapius were tutored by Chiron, "the most gentlemanly" of the centaurs (*Iliad*, Book XI), who instructed his charges in the arts of music, hunting, warfare, and even medicine and surgery. Chiron figures memorably in the twelfth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, which is gen-

¹⁰ Vedic: relating to sacred Hindu writings, especially the Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda, and Yajur Veda.

erally called the "centaur canto." See, in this regard, the fine observations made by Momigliano, in his 1945 edition.

Pliny says that he saw a Hippocentaur, preserved in honey, which was sent to the emperor from Egypt.

In his *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, Plutarch tells the humorous story of one of the youths who tended the flocks of Periander, despot of Corinth. It seems the herdsman brought the ruler the foal, wrapped in a leather bag, that a certain mare had given birth to just that morning; the newborn's face, neck, and arms were human, while the rest of its body was that of a horse. It cried like a baby, and everyone thought this a terrifying omen. The wise Thales looked at it, however, laughed, and told Periander that he should either not employ such young men as keepers of his horses or provide wives for them.

In the fifth book of his poem *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius declares the centaur an impossible creature:

Centaurus never existed, nor at any time can there be creatures of double nature and twofold body combined together of incompatible limbs, such that the powers of the two halves can be fairly balanced. Here is a proof that will convince the dullest wit.

Firstly, the horse is at the best of his vigour when three years have passed round; not so the boy by any means, for even at this time he will often in sleep seek his mother's milky breast. Afterwards, when the strong powers of the horse are failing in old age and his body faints as life recedes, then is the time of the flower of boyhood, when youth is beginning and is clothing the cheeks with soft down.

The Minotaur

The idea of a house built expressly so that people will become lost in it may be stranger than the idea of a man with the head of a bull, and yet the two ideas may reinforce one another. Indeed, the image of the Labyrinth and the image of the Minotaur seem to "go together": it is fitting that at the center of a monstrous house there should live a monstrous inhabitant.

The Minotaur, half man, half bull, was born out of the lovemaking of Pasiphae, the queen of Crete, with a white bull sent by Poseidon from the sea. Daedalus, the artificer who built the device that allowed such a passion to be consummated, also built the Labyrinth destined to house, and hide, the monstrous offspring. The Minotaur ate human flesh; to satisfy its hunger, the king of Crete required that Athens render Crete a yearly

tribute of seven youths and seven maidens. Theseus resolved to save his kingdom from that terrible taxation, and volunteered to go. Ariadne, the daughter of the king, gave the young man a spool of thread so that he would not become lost in the mazy corridors of the Labyrinth; the hero killed the Minotaur and followed the thread out of the maze.

Ovid, in an attempt at a witty turn of phrase, speaks of the "man half bull and the bull half man"; Dante, who was familiar with the words of the ancients but not with their coins and monuments, pictured the Minotaur with the head of a man and the body of a bull (*Inferno*, XII, 1–30).

The worship of the bull and the double-headed axe (whose name was *labrys*, and so might well have evolved into "labyrinth") was characteristic of pre-Hellenic religions, which held sacred festivals in their honor, known as Tauromachias. To judge from murals, human figures with the heads of bulls figured in Cretan demonology. The Greek fable of the Minotaur is probably a late and somewhat uncouth version of very ancient myths—the shadow of other, still more horrific, dreams.

Sirens

Through the centuries, the Sirens' shape has changed. The first historian of these creatures, the rhapsodist of *The Odyssey* (Book XII), does not describe them; Ovid tells us they are birds with golden plumage and the face of a virgin. For Apollonius of Rhodes, the top half of their body is a woman's and the bottom, a seabird's; for Tirso de Molina (and for heraldry), they are half fish, half woman. Nor is their nature any less disputed: Lemprière's dictionary says that they are nymphs, while Quicherat's says they are monsters and Grimal's, demons. They inhabit one of the Western Isles, near the island of Circe, but the body of one Siren, Parthenope, was found in the Campagna. She gave her name to the famous city that we now know as Naples; the geographer Strabo saw her tomb and witnessed the gymnastic games that are periodically held in her memory.

The Odyssey says that the Sirens' singing would lure sailors to shipwreck and death by drowning, and that in order to hear the Sirens' song and yet not perish, Ulysses commanded his rowers to stop their ears with beeswax and tie him to the mast. The Sirens tempted the warrior with the knowledge of all things on earth:

Sea rovers here take joy
 Voyaging onward,
 As from our song of Troy
 Greybeard and rower-boy
 Goeth more learned.

All feats on that great field
 In the long warfare,
 Dark days the bright gods willed,
 Wounds you bore there,

Argos' old soldiery
 On Troy beach teeming,
 Charmed out of time we see.
 No life on earth can be
 Hid from our dreaming.

A legend contained in the *Library* of the mythologer Apollodorus tells 20 that Orpheus, in the Argonaut's ship, sang sweeter than the Sirens, and that upon hearing him, the Sirens threw themselves into the sea where they were transformed into rocks, for they were fated to die whenever a man did not fall under their spell. (The sphinx also threw itself from a mountaintop when its riddle was guessed.)

Sometime in the sixth century, a Siren was captured in the north of Wales and baptized, and even listed as a saint in certain ancient calendars, under the name Murgan. Another came through a break in a dike in 1403, and lived in Haarlem until her death. No one could understand her, but she taught people to spin and she worshipped the cross, as though instinctively. A sixteenth-century chronicler reasoned that she was not a fish, for she knew how to spin, nor yet was she a woman, for she could live in water.

The English language makes a distinction between the classical Siren and that creature with a fish's tail that is called a mermaid. It was no doubt an analogy with the Tritons, deities in the court of Poseidon, that influenced the shape of these latter creatures.

In the tenth book of the *Republic*, eight Sirens preside over the revolution of the eight concentric spheres of the heavens.

"Siren: an imaginary marine animal," we read in one particularly uncouth dictionary.

The Sphinx

The sphinx found on Egyptian monuments (called "Androsphinx" by 25 Herodotus, to distinguish it from the Greek creature) is a recumbent lion with the head of a man; it is believed to represent the authority of the pharaoh, and it guarded the tombs and temples of that land. Other sphinxes, on the avenues of Karnak, have the head of a lamb, the animal sacred to Amon. Bearded and crowned sphinxes are found on monuments

in Assyria, and it is a common image on Persian jewelry. Pliny includes sphinxes in his catalog of Ethiopian animals, but the only description he offers is that it has “brown hair and two mammae on the breast.”

The Greek sphinx has the head and breasts of a woman, the wings of a bird, and the body and legs of a lion. Others give it the body of a dog and the tail of a serpent. Legend recounts that it devastated the countryside of Thebes by demanding that travelers on the roads solve riddles that it put to them (it had a human voice); it devoured those who could not answer. This was the famous question it put to Oedipus, son of Jocasta: “What has four feet, two feet, or three feet, and the more feet it has, the weaker it is?”¹

Oedipus answered that it was man, who crawls on four legs as a child, walks upon two legs as a man, and leans upon a stick in old age. The sphinx, its riddle solved, leapt to its death from a mountaintop.

In 1849 Thomas De Quincey suggested a second interpretation, which might complement the traditional one. The answer to the riddle, according to De Quincey, is less man in general than Oedipus himself, a helpless orphan in his morning, alone in the fullness of his manhood, and leaning upon Antigone in his blind and hopeless old age.

¹This is apparently the oldest version of the riddle. The years have added the metaphor of the life of man as a single day, so that we now know the following version of it: “What animal walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at midday, and three in the evening?”

Understanding the Text

1. Why does Borges say that the child is a “discoverer” (par. 2)? What are the different types of discovery he cites?
2. What does Borges mean when he calls the dragon a “necessary” monster, as opposed to the Chimera or catoblepas (par. 4)?
3. What are the different relationships that humans have had with horses in history? How does that seem to have worked its way into the creation of the centaur?
4. The inventor Daedalus figures in both the conception of the Minotaur and the creation of the Labyrinth. In what ways does he serve as a contrast to Theseus, the hero in the Minotaur myth?

Reflection and Response

5. In his Introduction, Borges writes, “The zoology attributable to dreams is in fact considerably more modest than that attributable to God” (par. 3). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give examples from both the world of mythology and the world of nature to support your argument.
6. Note that there are both positive and negative portrayals of the centaur in mythology. Why do you think these contradictory attitudes exist?

Making Connections

7. Borges says that the Sirens tempted Ulysses (Odysseus) “with the knowledge of all things on earth” (par. 19). Compare that with the temptation of Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, as described in the Bible (Genesis 3:1–24). What does this temptation say about human nature — and about the creation of monsters? Find other examples of this sort of temptation.
8. Borges quotes Lucretius’s argument for why the centaur could never have existed. How does his logic differ from contemporary arguments about why different species such as human and horse could never create offspring?
9. Research other combinations of species that appear in mythology, such as the Chimera, griffin, or catoblepas, or misshapen animals, such as the Cerberus or Hydra. Argue whether such monsters have the same impact on the human imagination as ones that combine human and animal qualities, using evidence from your research to support your answer.