The Trouble with Pasiphaë: Engendering a Myth at the Gonzaga Court

Maria F. Maurer

The story of Pasiphaë and her insatiable lust for a bull occurs widely in classical art and literature, yet she was rarely depicted in Renaissance art before the sixteenth century.1 Beginning in the 1520s, the Cretan queen enjoyed a newfound popularity, particularly at the court of Federico II Gonzaga in Mantua, where she was depicted in a fresco by Giulio Romano at the Palazzo del Te (Fig. 6.1), and on two maiolica dishes produced by Nicola da Urbino (Figs. 6.2 and 6.3).2 In creating their images of Pasiphaë, Giulio and Nicola entered into a transhistorical dialogue with literary accounts from antiquity and the medieval period, as well as with classical visual representations and contemporary frescoes, all of which offered different interpretations of the myth.3 While images created under the aegis of Federico II Gonzaga are indebted to earlier accounts and depictions, neither Giulio nor Nicola adhered precisely to previous works. Instead, they wove together classical literary and visual characterizations of Pasiphaë with contemporary attitudes towards gender in order to re-imagine

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2 At least two other plates from Nicola da Urbino’s workshop depict Pasiphaë and the bull. Neither can be concretely connected to the Gonzaga court. The plates are currently at the Hermitage and the Victoria and Albert Museum: Elena Ivanova, ed., Il secolo d’oro della maiolica: Ceramica italiana dei secoli XV–XVI dalla raccolta del Museo Statale dell’Ermitage (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2003), no. 32.

Figure 6.1 Giulio Romano, Pasiphaë and the Bull, 1526–8.
Camera di Psiche, Palazzo del Te, Mantua (Permission of the Museo Civico di Palazzo Te)

Figure 6.2 Nicola da Urbino, plate with Pasiphaë and Daedalus, c. 1530–3.
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (© The State Hermitage Museum, photo by Vladimir Terebenin, Leonard Kheifets, Yuri Molodkovets)