PRESENTATION

JANE CONNELL AND THE INVISIBILITY OF THE SPHINX

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A long time ago, a young wanderer named Swollen Feet, met an old man and killed him after a brief and disrespectful struggle. Continuing his journey, he found a partially leonine, partially flying, partially female hybrid monstrous. After a short conversation, in which the hero thought that he had deciphered the enigma proposed by the creature, the beast killed herself, suffering with the revelation of her secret. Following the road, the Corinthian prince receives the widow queen of Thebes in marriage, producing with her an offspring of four children. Years later, he discovers that the murdered man was his father and that his wife was actually his own mother. The new Sphinx revealed, the Queen kills herself and Swollen Feet pierces his eyes as one day his parents drilled his heels, sentencing him to death.

In this myth, one of the most famous in the West, the Sphinx is itself a puzzle. Questioning the discourse and questioning in her strange and multiple body, before her we are all reincarnated Oedipus, reliving the same illusion of having deciphered her secrets. Throughout history, the Sphinx was just a mirror that reflected identity, culture, time and place of her interpreters. Never being an individual, she became an assassinated father, a deflowered mother or a cursed stepsister of a hero who perpetuates incest, of which the Sphinx is also a result: Hesiod tells us that the Sphinx was born from the divine and monstrous Echidna with her son Ortro (*Theogony*, lines 306-332).

However, such effort to find in the myth any meaning that is not the Sphinx herself not only results in a revealing but above all in veiling what the creature itself could be, do or say. Being anything but her, the Sphinx was condemned to silence and this silence echoes not just a series of misreadings allegedly revealing as well as the very core of gender differences that pervade and pervert the course of our culture. By silencing the Sphinx, would not Oedipus be silencing the only chance he would have of knowing himself? In other words, by making her invisible – turning the Sphinx into mother, father or sister – would not the interpreters powerfully be missing the target, losing the opportunity to learn from her puzzles, her banned silences, her secrets?

It is in this space of action and reaction, of attack and escape, victory and defeat, which constitutes the bitter and ironic – why not tragic? – victory

of Oedipus over the Sphinx that the reading of Jane Connell asserts itself as a new and fundamental interpretation of myth and culture. By dialoguing with anthropology, mythology, culture and psychoanalysis, interspersed with philosophy, religion and art, Connell reveals what was hidden in the history of silences, blinds, apathy and denial. In responding to the question of the Sphinx with "The Man", would not be the Oedipus of all times restricting the rare opportunity to face a real dialogue? Is not that what the Sphinx proposes, this FEMININE and SPEAKING creature? And if we use the capitals is because Connell now forces us to pay attention to something that if obvious, was not to any previous interpreter.

Reading Freud, Hegel, Lévi-Strauss, Ovid, Goux and Edmunds, among others, Connell weaves in her text a great number of historical and metaphysical comings and goings that denudes the male and western effort to wear, to ensure, to hide a difference that if not shattered, was duly silenced in the course of our history.

In this case, it is about realizing in the silence of the Sphinx not only the silencing of half human race, but the tragedy experienced by this hero – male, white, western, etc. – that never leaves the house of the father and the bed of the mother, the tragedy of a hero that refuses himself to grow. By silencing the Sphinx, by ignoring her voice, her identity, her femininity and the ambiguous response required by a similarly ambiguous puzzle, the hero fails, misrepresents himself, condemned his own identity to the obscurity, ironically finding himself victorious and sovereign.

Connell's essay is one of those rare examples of analysis that strives for clarity, delicacy and subtlety. However, a text that uses these devices to impact the readers with a thesis that could not – or should not – be ignored. After her reading, we are no longer victorious Oedipus, but juvenile heroes, still trying to learn from the Sphinx's voice and body the enigmatic mysteries of a genre that gradually teaches the West something that had been ignored for centuries.

Echoing Edmunds, Connel wonders if the Sphinx would not still be there, at the gates of the Greek city of Thebes, enigmatic in speech and body, awaiting future Oedipus. Perhaps the decoder will still delay to come. However, after reading Connell, he at least will be more attentive to the voice and to the body of a creature that is above all female, much more than monstrous. Are we prepared for such a perception? Or will we prefer the staggering gait of a hero named Swollen Feet, a hero above all condemned to blindness? These are some of the questions raised by Jane Connell in her unique and impactful text.