

THE SILENCE OF THE SPHINX: OEDIPAL ERROR AND THE RECOVERED ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE

Jane Connell
University of Melbourne, Australia

Oedipus, son of Laius, had solved the
riddles that had baffled all before him,
and that dark prophetess, the Sphinx,
had flung herself from the cliff and
now lay dead, her puzzles forgotten.
Ovid

The truth is that the material element is
contained in the feminine, but the
subjectivity is contained in the male.
G.W.F. Hegel

An atmosphere of triumph attends Oedipus' response to the riddle of the Sphinx of Thebes and Freud's "discovery" of the Oedipus complex; these pivotal events mark Oedipus and Freud as intellectual heroes of their epochs. Just as Oedipus' victory is understood to inaugurate the secular philosophical tradition of the West¹ so the eponymous complex sends psychoanalysis on its influential way. And yet disquiet about the role of the Sphinx in the mythological narrative and a pervasive sense of lack of resolution about the riddle rest uneasily with the long-held view that Oedipus' defeat of the Sphinx was a straightforward *intellectual* success. Similarly, while the dominant influence of the complex is not seriously dented by the ongoing impossibility of fitting the woman into the developmental dictates of the Oedipal schema, this controversy haunts its deployments. In each case there is a difficulty *vis-à-vis* the woman that never quite abates, that threatens to undercut this air of uncomplicated victory.

Here the Oedipal myth itself will be used to interrogate the parallel problematic of the woman that pervades critique of the myth and of the

¹ See, for example, G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. Thomas M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975), p. 361.

complex.² In such a reading the Sphinx is necessarily recruited from her marginalised position. Although she is Oedipus' interlocutor, is opposite him as an intelligent, verbal subject, her speaking position has accrued little attention in discussion of the riddle. While her designated failure underpins Oedipus's victory, and thus also Freud's appropriation of his renown,³ the Sphinx's question counts for very little in the tradition that valorises these men. Powerful positive identifications with Oedipus and Freud are attended by a profound inhibition of any identificatory trajectory towards the Sphinx, attributable to her gender but also to her monstrosity—not that these traits are unrelated. A reading that refuses this inhibition, even this prohibition, provides a radically different perspective and reclaims—after two and a half millennia—another answer to her riddle that has apparently been lost. That this contestation and potential destabilisation of the security conferred by the Oedipal certainties of intellectual superiority to, and unqualified defeat of, the female creature gesture towards schismatic openings into traditional Western epistemology should not preclude exploration of an answer that reaches beyond that of the hero.

A riddler or a riddle?

That an answer to the riddle has been misplaced corresponds with Ovid's comment that the Sphinx's puzzles are forgotten (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: 759-6) for there are, and were, many written accounts of her riddles. If his remark reflects an unease about the Sphinx then this qualm resurfaces in the twentieth century. In 1915, in his extensive work, *Oedipus*, Robert writes: "[T]he Sphinx was the gravest problem in the logic of the narrative, one that the poets never solved."⁴ Here the creature whose role is precisely to pose the question, is turned over into being the problem in herself. This time honoured way of dealing with the problematic woman—objectification—paves the way for the Sphinx to be appropriated as a foil for theoretical speculation, while, as we shall see, her words are neglected. Edmunds' goes so far as to dispute the necessity of her presence *per se*; he argues that it is an extraneous and unnecessary addition to the myth;⁵ but he also notes the tendency for her to re-present:

² This reading draws on Goux's argument that it is in fact the myth of Oedipus and the Sphinx that explains Freud's "discovery" of the Oedipus complex rather than *vice versa*; see Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, 1993); hereafter abbreviated *OP*.

³ See, for example, Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London, 1988), pp. 154 and 171.

⁴ Carl Robert, *Oedipus: Geschichte E. Poetischen Stoffs im Griech* (Berlin, 1915); quoted in Lowell Edmunds, *The Sphinx in the Oedipus Legend* (Königstein/Ts, 1981), p. 12.

⁵ Edmunds, *The Sphinx in the Oedipus Legend*.

[T]he Sphinx in the Oedipus legend . . . provided what was to be for many centuries the most illustrious episode, so that Oedipus is still known amongst both scholars and laity as the great riddle-solver. And yet in these later times, with the thinkers just named [Freud and Lévi-Strauss], she begins to fade into the background. Will she fade away, or is she still there near Thebes awaiting future Oedipuses?⁶

More recently in the wake of Lévi-Strauss—to whom we shall come—representation of the Sphinx as an enigma in herself sometimes brings with it a reopening of the question of the riddle. De Lauretis proposes

that [i]t may well be . . . that the story has to be told differently. Take Oedipus, for instance. Suppose: Oedipus does not solve the riddle.⁷

Mulvey concludes that

[c]ertainty is the other side of the coin to anxiety. Curiosity and the riddling spirit of the Sphinx activate questions that open up the closures of repression and maintain the force of the “uncertainty principle” . . . [T]he story is still in the making. The Sphinx and her riddle are still waiting for a “beyond.”⁸

And Goux writes:

The riddle of the Sphinx? An expression to be taken in two senses: the riddle that the Sphinx proposes, and the one that the Sphinx herself constitutes. Oedipus thought he had resolved the first and Freud the second. But what if neither had found the answer?⁹

The waiting Sphinx becomes a strangely persistent motif; she reverts to her pre-oedipal position: she anticipates her next interlocutor.

Is this atmosphere of ambiguity and lack of resolution around the Sphinx and her words maintained in order to avoid what would seem to be the obvious way forward? Is it not strange to raise this tantalising idea—that the riddle of the Sphinx remains unsolved—without reconsidering *her question*, the riddle, in itself? Yet this is what has come to pass. The proposition that

⁶ Ibid., p. 290.

⁷ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: feminism semiotics cinema* (Bloomington, 1984), p. 156.

⁸ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York, 1989), p. 200.

⁹ Goux, *OP*, p. 24.

Oedipus failed to answer the riddle remains undeveloped. The riddle is neither re-examined nor subject to much scrutiny. If, in fact, the Sphinx's perspective, her point of view, bears on the meaning of the riddle then this passes unnoticed while the contention that she herself constitutes the puzzle is much taken up. She is perhaps a progenitor of that other great evasion of the woman as the authority *a propos* her own subjectivity—the “dark continent.”

Freud's riddle: the wrong question

Freud does not partake of these uncertainties about the Sphinx. He, like Oedipus, supposes that he more than has her measure; in fact he believes he knows more about her than she does herself. As she is brought into play in the shadows of his assimilation of the Oedipal myth, she is stripped of her seniority, subject to a temporary reassignment of her gender and has her speaking part entirely rescripted.

In a discussion of “the drama derived from the Greek legend” Freud, presumably in order to find an over-determined Oedipus complex in the myth, claims that

[t]he hero commits the deed unintentionally and apparently uninfluenced by the woman; this latter element is however taken into account in the circumstance that the hero can only obtain possession of the queen mother after he has repeated his deed upon the monster who represents the father.¹⁰

The discursive contest between a man and a woman is refused and reduced to the repetition of the violent engagement of male bodies. Oedipus makes a second, irritated lunge into violence; Freud's Sphinx becomes merely a player in a sordid, intrafamilial struggle—as a father.¹¹

Elsewhere Freud allows her a speaking position, but fiddles with her words:

It is not by theoretical interests but by practical ones that the activities of research are set going in children. . . . [T]he first problem with which it deals is not the question of the distinction between the sexes but the riddle of where babies come from. (This

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Dostoevsky and Parricide,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 21:188; hereafter abbreviated as *SE*.

¹¹ Goux is troubled, even outraged, by Freud's elision of the Sphinx's femininity (*OP*, p. 23) but passes over the elision of her words.

in a distorted form which can easily be rectified, is the same riddle that was propounded by the Theban Sphinx).¹²

Freud reasserts this reformed version of the riddle several times¹³ and eventually, in a trajectory at times characteristic of his style, *equates* it with her riddle: “[T]he riddle of the Sphinx—that is the question of where babies come from.”¹⁴ This reallocation of meaning is neither explained nor justified. He does not interpret, he first corrects and then elides the Sphinx’s words. The riddle is degraded to a factual question, albeit a secret. Its answer rests on information to which Freud and his reader are party; it demands no abstract thought.

The intelligent, powerful creature blocking the path with an intellectual challenge is transformed into a naïve child questioning an omniscient parent. The riddle is made over and recruited to the Oedipal paradigm as was the Sphinx herself when refigured as “father.” It seems that, for Freud, just as psychoanalysis must not be thought without Oedipus,¹⁵ so it must not be thought with the Sphinx nor with her riddle. She may be a man or a child but the adult, female subject who knows the answer to her own question is excised. Such avoidance and confabulation invite interpretation and, as we shall see, Freud’s impositions onto the Sphinx’s riddle actually contain an exact negation of the forgotten answer to the riddle.

The Woman Speaks: or what is a riddle?

In the 1950’s Lévi-Strauss introduced a reading that disrupted the standing of the Sphinx’s words. He proposed that a riddle in a myth functions as ‘*a question to which it is postulated there will be no answer. . . . [This] inversion produces an answer for which there will be no question.*’¹⁶ Thus is the Sphinx, as a straightforward interlocutor, silenced. This idea has gained considerable traction. It is appropriated within feminist scholarship, for instance, De Lauretis closes over the possibility of an unsolved riddle: “[I]n any case if Oedipus does not solve the riddle, then the riddle is no longer a riddle; it remains an enigma, structurally insoluble because undecidable.”¹⁷ She enshrines Oedipus as the limit and dispenses with the specificity of the riddle.

¹² Freud, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” *SE* 7: 194-5.

¹³ See Freud, “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children,” *SE* 9: 135; “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy,” *SE* 10: 133; “General Theory of the Neuroses,” *SE* 16: 318.

¹⁴ Freud, “An Autobiographical Study,” *SE* 20: 37.

¹⁵ See, for example, Freud, “Three Essays on Sexuality,” *SE* 7: 226 n. and Jeffrey Masson, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess: 1887-1904*, trans. Jeffrey Masson (Cambridge: 1985), p. 272.

¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* 2, trans. Monique Layton (London, 1978), p. 22.

¹⁷ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: feminism semiotics cinema*, p. 156.

Within classical scholarship Vernant, after Lévi-Strauss, delves into the possibility that this riddle

should be understood as a question isolated from its answer, that is to say formulated in such a way that it is beyond reach; the answer cannot be connected with it. The riddle thus represents a defect or impossibility of communication in a verbal exchange between two interlocutors.¹⁸

But if, as Badiou reminds us, “what patient knowledge desires and seeks . . . is that nothing be undecidable”¹⁹ are these dismissals perhaps imprudent? At what point does one give up, stop thinking? Is it not dangerous to do so in the case of a prominent but problematic exchange between a man and a woman; particularly one in which it is allowed that he trounces her or that he faces an impossibility—but the reading that he cannot grasp her meaning is foreclosed?

At face value Lévi-Strauss’s analysis may foster avoidance of the content of the riddle—but if we take up Vernant’s suggestion of a defect, rather than an impossibility, of communication it can also alert us to the possibility that it may be precisely the gap between the question and the answer, between the interlocutors, that warrants further investigation. Thus while Lévi-Strauss’s claim raises productive lines of enquiry it should not prohibit exploration of this other possibility: that to claim that a riddle cannot be solved may be to refuse the perspective of the one who poses it. The problem *may* reflect an incompatibility of sensibilities, an impoverished perspective in the respondent. Our fascination with the event a propos the hero is accompanied by a tendency to overlook, to forget, the critical role played by his interlocutor, and thus to an *impasse*. So, rather than deferring further examination of the riddle or rendering it to the abyss of impossibility, let us consider the riddle from the perspective of the Sphinx; a shift to the perspective of the woman. In the context of a closer acquaintance with the monster herself does the riddle release any further secret or mystery?

Who is the Sphinx?

It is with the morphology of the Sphinx’s body that we tend to be familiar—the richness and complexity of the mythological imaginary that surrounds her tends to fall away. If this is in some measure to do with her

¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “The Lame Tyrant: From Oedipus to Periander” in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, 1988), p. 208 hereafter abbreviated “LT.”

¹⁹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London, 2005) p. 314.

femininity, then emphasis on her body²⁰ and her monstrosity in tandem with the marginalisation of her subjectivity, context, history and speaking position are, unfortunately, unsurprising.

While a Greek sphinx most commonly has a woman's face, lion's body, and the wings of a bird (Apollodorus *The Library of Greek Mythology* 3.5.8), sometimes a woman's breasts²¹ or occasionally other animal features such as a serpent's tail, the Theban Sphinx is heavily marked with a further trait—beyond the body but partly of it she speaks with a human voice. She has language, logic and intellect, the latter of a superior kind (Euripides *The Phoenician Women* 48). In her human aspect she is precisely an adult woman with whom one can talk: Can it be of only passing significance that she embodies this collision of monster and discursive female subject?

Readings of the myth that do pursue an understanding of her quasi-human status commonly ignore her capacity to speak and reduce her standing to that of an attacking mother-figure, a post-Freudian, indeed a Kleinian, depiction.²² If, when the Sphinx *is* identified as a human subject, or as representative of such, she is reduced to the malevolent maternal this does not constitute the deployment of *her* subjective position; it merely dispenses with the need to embrace her standing as a partly human subject in any other way and subordinates her most striking attribute—that of human intellect and speech—to the maternal. Furthermore this emphasis displaces the mythological narratives in which she is placed. In Greek myth, the play of received and proposed meanings is inseparable from other facets of the mythological context. If the being and words of the Sphinx are divorced from this milieu much is lost.

The Sphinx of Thebes arrives at her position in an off stage role in the Sophoclean drama—the intersection with Freud's complex—via two paths: one is her story as it was told at the time of Athenian tragedy; the other the series of transpositions she had undergone during the preceding millennia. She is not at Thebes as product of Oedipus' story—she has her own mission. In the most developed version she is sent to Thebes by Hera, as Goddess of marriage, to punish the Thebans for Laius'—that is Oedipus' own father's—

²⁰ This stress on the body is sustained when the "lameness" of Oedipus is put forward as the answer to her riddle. See, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schuepf (Hammondsworth, 1977), p. 215; and Vernant, "LT," pp 207-36.

²¹ See Jean-Marc Moret, *Oedipe, la Sphinx et les Thébains: Essai de Mythologie Iconographique*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1984), vol. 2.

²² Goux in his lengthy discussion of "The Rite of the Sphinx" repeatedly positions her as a mother-figure and deadly threat while avoiding mention of the peculiar fact that she can talk; see *OP*, pp.40-59. A dissertation on the popular television sitcom of the sixties *Mister Ed* would hardly be complete without a discussion of the fact that *this* horse speaks; see *Mister Ed*, dir. Arthur Lubin *et al.* (CBS Television, 1961-1966).

abduction and sexual abuse of the boy Chrysippus; this episode, which precedes Oedipus' birth, sets *his* story in motion. Laius was cursed by Pelops, the child's father, and the gods decreed that Laius would die at the hands of his own son (Aeschylus *Seven Against Thebes* 720-820).²³ This pre-oedipal backstory of the myth means that insofar as the Sphinx's role was to visit retribution upon the Thebans she stands for recognition and justice *vis-à-vis* sexual abuse of children while Oedipus is marked by a morass of intergenerational incest and sexual transgression. Thus she is quite anti-Freudian;²⁴ she dispenses revenge against those who ignore such abuse whereas Freud sails perilously close to excusing the perpetrators by constituting the children as embroiled in fictional fantasies.²⁵

This mission is perhaps a little difficult to reconcile with a Sphinx whose overarching function is to represent the threatening aspect of the maternal. She is heavily marked by association with female entities but they carry varied and complex significances. In addition to her alliance with Hera, she is associated with the Furies (Euripides *The Phoenician Women* 1500-5) and also with the Muses who are said to have given her the riddle (Apollodorus *The Library of Greek Mythology* 3.5.8). She inhabited a realm marked by an admixture of the human and divine wherein female entities displayed both desire and effective agency; Greek goddesses lacked nothing of the passion, reason and strategic competence of their male counterparts—they were not subsumed to the maternal—and the monsters displayed some similar traits in their attempts to overpower aspirant heroes. The Sphinx had a subjectivity, intellect and sensibility; she both proposed the riddle and responded emotively to Oedipus's proffered solution.

However behind the Theban Sphinx are many other sphinxes. She had a chequered career a propos gender—the earlier Egyptian Sphinx was male,²⁶ usually the simple composite of a pharaoh's head on a lion's body. In

²³ See also Robin Hard's explanatory note in Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford, 1998), p. 225n106.

²⁴ This also rests uneasily with Nietzsche's interpretation of her role; he equates the "ambiguous Sphinx" with "nature" and nature in turn with the crime of incest; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York, 1956), pp. 60-1.

²⁵ The sexual abuse of children is a prevalent crime within our societies—its consequences in the victims have functioned as a riddle to which we have often misconstrued the answer. For example, the diagnosis of borderline personality disorder should often be revised to that of complex post traumatic stress disorder in the light of the high incidence of early sexual abuse sustained by many of the women who present with this distressing constellation of symptoms. This shifts the emphasis from the pathology of the woman to the severity of the contextual stressor thus refining both diagnosis and treatment. See, for example, Linda M. McLean and Ruth Gallop, "Implications of childhood sexual abuse for adult borderline personality disorder and complex posttraumatic stress disorder," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 160.2 (February 2003): p. 369.

²⁶ Joyce Tyldesley notes a unique female sphinx with the head of the unusually powerful consort of a pharaoh; see Joyce Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1994), p. 201.

the pre-Hellenic Cretian and Greek tradition it becomes female and accrues other human, animal and bird characteristics.²⁷ There was no story associated with the Egyptian sphinxes, although they were often inscribed with the name of a particular ruler.²⁸ Earlier Greek sphinxes are depicted on coffins and tombs; their role was simply to “escort the dead,” echoing the funerary traditions of Egypt.²⁹ The female Greek Sphinx then underwent significant changes as she moved towards her post on Mount Citheron.

The Morphing Sphinx

Thus her other story is that of the transformations she experiences over time within the Greek mythological imaginary. These shifts inform the verbal transaction she orchestrates with Oedipus; and such shifts are interwoven with those in society. Midgley concludes that changes in myth often foreshadow social transformations: “They are changing the myth in order to commit themselves to changing the wider reality, and that is the way in which serious changes are eventually brought about.”³⁰ If Oedipus is posited as the prototypical Western subject then, in the light of the changes the Sphinx undergoes as she moves towards her Oedipal denouement, this Theban Sphinx is more heavily marked in this way than is her interlocutor.

While a sphinx’s “most general function throughout classical antiquity is to act as a watchdog on a grave stele or pillar, to punish those who disturb the dead,”³¹ within the pictorial record there is a shift; here sphinxes are often flagrantly and dangerously erotic—the deadly sexual predators of young men.³² We are still much enamoured of this trait³³ but, in fact, the erotic element of a sphinx is what paves the way for the *Theban* Sphinx’s riddling role in the myth and thus for her acquisition of a human voice and intellect. As Vermeule notes

the theme of a raping sphinx was a popular and important one for Greeks reflecting on mortality. The act of love could be an act of death. It could be painful or pleasant, but for the Greeks it was usually instructive.³⁴

²⁷ Donald A. MacKenzie, *Myths of Crete and Pre-Hellenic Europe* (London, 1918), p. 295.

²⁸ Pierre Montet, *Eternal Egypt*, trans. Doreen Weightman (London, 1965), p. 259.

²⁹ Emily Vermeule, *Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 69.

³⁰ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York, 2003), p. 175.

³¹ Vermeule, *Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, p. 171.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ For example, Goux both emphasises the sexuality of the Sphinx and privileges it, not her voice, as her most human aspect; see *OP*, pp. 36-7 and 64.

³⁴ Vermeule, *Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, p. 173.

It is in this context that the Theban Sphinx becomes a teacher when she begins to speak. “The Sphinx spends much of her artistic life talking with young boys, with Oedipus or other youths of Thebes, posing them riddles of what life and manhood may be when they are still too inexperienced to understand.”³⁵

Some vase paintings depict the contest as mortal combat, Oedipus kills the Sphinx with a sword or a spear;³⁶ this is also the case in the written account of Corinna.³⁷ In these accounts the contest takes the customary form. But uniquely, in the case of Oedipus and the Sphinx, combat gives way to the version in which the monster is a poser of riddles. The transaction becomes a “trial by language” (*OP*, p. 59)—and the monster’s physical power is extended to include a command of intellect, words and wit. Thus towards the end of the sixth century as she is assimilated to the initiatory myth the Sphinx becomes an intelligent speaking being.³⁸

While the Theban Sphinx kills those who fail her challenge, initially her challenge rests neither on brutality nor sexual seduction. The agenda is *verbal* and it is she who introduces this new style, who partly wrests the ritual away from grisly combat and towards dialogue. She initiates these new terms therefore her role in the transition of the form subsumes that of Oedipus. She, like Oedipus, is an aberration, a post-traditional subject bringing her differences to the longstanding traditional form.³⁹ At some point there is a shift—recorded within the mythic form as a feminine initiative—to move beyond the heroic mode of brave and bloody deeds into the realm of the discursive. Well before the mid-fifth century when *Oedipus Rex* was first performed, she has become a thoroughly modern Sphinx.

A Perverse Initiation: who is Oedipus?

Freud’s requisition of the Oedipal myth places it as “universal” and enshrines it and its hero as a fixed entities—shaped by a transhistorical and transcultural unconscious. But Oedipus, like the Sphinx, is the product of the fluid field of mythological meanings. This claim for universality of the myth is,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

³⁶ See Moret, *Edipe, la Sphinx et les Thébains: Essai de Mythologie Iconographique*, vol. 2, p. 63.

³⁷ Albert Schachter notes this aspect of Corinna’s version of the myth; see *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford, 2004), s.v. “Sphinx.”

³⁸ See Jenny March, *Cassell’s Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, (London, 2001), s.v. “Sphinx.”

³⁹ The Sirens share some features with the Sphinx: they are a composite figure of bird and woman; they have a singing voice; the words of their songs are sometimes cited; and in some accounts they die by suicide. However no particular face to face dialogue with a hero is elaborated. See, for example, Homer *Odyssey* 12: 188–91.

at the least, contentious.⁴⁰ Furthermore as Goux has pointed out this myth is an *atypical* myth even within its own Greek context. And it is precisely the patricide and incest—events that Freud claims as markers of universal human desire—that mark it as the most unusual of the myths of its kind (*OP*, pp. 8-12, 19): such aberrations were the stuff of meaning for the Greeks.⁴¹

Goux identifies a narrative sequence within Greek myths of heroic initiation—those of Pericles, Bellerophon and Jason: the hero is rejected by his father, the king, who sees him as a threat; on the brink of adulthood, he encounters a second king who sets him a potentially deadly trial; he takes up the challenge, a confrontation with a terrifying female monster; this effects a tripartite test of his courage in combat, his ability to resist sexual seduction and his capacity to keep his wits about him in perilous circumstances; with the help of a god, usually Athena, he slays the monster; and he is then rewarded with a “princess bride,” the daughter of a third king whose kingdom he inherits (*OP*, p. 6-8).

Oedipus starts his story in the usual way. After his birth his father, in fear of a prophecy that he will die at his son’s hand, has him left exposed to die; Oedipus is found and taken in by another royal family. Hereafter, although the narrative refers constantly to the prototype, every turn of the plot carries a variation loaded with significance. There is no challenge set by a second king; instead, Oedipus inadvertently kills his own father when, in a fit of pique, he clubs to death an old man who blocks his path. He then encounters the Sphinx and answers her riddle using only his intellect to meet the challenge. There is no combat, nor need for sexual continence and he solicits no divine intervention: he meets her as a man alone. The Sphinx suicides. Oedipus is not rewarded with a royal princess but marries the widowed queen Jocasta and accedes as ruler of Thebes—unknowingly bedding his mother with whom he has four children.

Thus, in Goux’s analysis, in its Oedipal form the initiatory myth is inverted; it comes to represent a failed or avoided masculine initiation—and Oedipus experiences a perversion of the traditional outcome (*OP*, chs. 1, 4). Subversions of the form occur in other heroic myths but here they extend to hyperbole. From this perspective Freud’s assertion that a universal desire for

⁴⁰ Goux notes that while a “monomyth of the male hero, a prototype myth of royal investiture” can be found in many cultures (Goux, *OP*, chap. 5) and that Dumézil has identified particular features of the monomythic plot that are repeated within the Indo-European sphere (Goux, *OP*, chap. 4) however these cross-cultural mythical forms are *not* marked by the occurrence of patricide and incest (chap. 1).

⁴¹ The Oedipal myth and complex are commonly characterised as “universal” but, in fact, the Sphinx’s riddle may have a stronger claim to this standing. It is not particular to the Greek corpus and has been identified in many cultures. See Edmunds *The Sphinx in the Oedipus Legend*, p.18; and Frazer in Apollodorus *The Library*, trans. Sir James George Frazer, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1967), p.347.

patricide and incest drive the plot more than misses the point. Patricide and incest are markers of the *difference* of the myth. They relate to the socio-historical problematic that this particular myth, and its eponymous Sophoclean drama, address—the transition of the subject from a traditional to a post-traditional society.⁴²

Oedipus' victory over the Sphinx rested on the secular employment of his intelligence. The challenge was not set within the time-honoured rites of passage from youth to adulthood; either Oedipus sought it out himself or the Sphinx, herself, blocked his path. The members of a family, of a royal house, are placed outside their traditional roles and within the existential frame of “everyman” or “everywoman.” This is what underscores Oedipus' misrecognition of his father and mother. Oedipus tilted the position of the hero further in the direction of the autonomous, secular and post-traditional subject than did his counterparts in other Greek myths; he assumed the freedoms and risks of the democratic subject.

Women, Death and the Fear of Flying

Oedipus' fragile status as triumphant hero is anchored in his moment of conceptual prowess as he solves the riddle; its fragility is revealed in the mythic consequences and explored in the tragedies. Latterly, with Freud, this specifically Oedipal failure is much overlooked; the Sphinx however is always seen as a failure and her death is understood to reflect this. But it is true that, unlike the other monsters, she decides her *own* fate. In her journey through mythological transmutations the advent of the verbal exchange means that her death is no longer a foregone conclusion; however the ritual form is not subverted to the extent of her survival. She makes her own exit from the scene by casting herself from her rocky perch, sometimes into the abyss.⁴³ And the mode of her death is not without meaning.

Loraux has identified that the deaths of women in Athenian tragedy, and thus in the myths that inform it, are of two distinctly different kinds; one is that of the virgin who dies by the sword—always a sacrificial act, the other is death by hanging, the suicide of a wife. A propos the former she notes that to resolve the “discrepancy between the real and the imaginary”—the Athenian practice of animal sacrifice and the sacrifice of virgins in the tragedies—there was a widespread tendency to metaphorically “animalize the doomed virgins.”⁴⁴

⁴² See, for example Bernard Knox's introduction to “Oedipus the King” in Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (Middlesex, 1984), pp. 138-142.

⁴³ See, for example, Diodorus 3: 21-23.

⁴⁴ Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge, 1987) p34; hereafter abbreviated “TW.”

Loraux finds, in the suicides of wives, a pervasive thematic connection between hanging and falling: “Falling from the heights of a rock or held in the noose it makes no difference” (*TW*, 19). The “falling” in turn is linked to the idea of winged flight—the play of these significances explains the tension inherent in a winged creature enacting its own death by falling. Loraux’s analysis of the corpus associates this trope of “flight” with escape, with being “overwhelmed by events” (*TW*, 18) and with silence (*TW*, 21-23). This death is chosen by the heroines “who are too feminine” (*TW*, 19). Hanging denotes the death of a wife rather than that of a mother (*TW*, 14-15). The wife who hangs herself does so in the context of her relationship with a man, a husband. “Just before woman leaps into the void it is the missing presence of the man that she feels for the last time, in every corner of the *thalamos*” (*TW*, 24).

Therefore the move from death by bloody murder to a suicide by falling may mark a significant shift in the status of the Sphinx as a female subject. If so the death of the speaking Sphinx relates more strongly to her human elements than her animal ones and is marked as that of a wife rather than that of a virgin or mother.⁴⁵ She dies in the manner of an adult female subject—marriage was the mark of maturity for Greek subjects of both genders (*TW*, 42). In so orchestrating her death she situates herself and Oedipus as correspondingly mature and gendered subjects. Thus, while the customary reading is that the Sphinx suicided simply because she had lost face and was thus effectively killed by the hero (Euripides *The Phoenician Women* 129), this willing death may have other meanings. Oedipus went on to spectacularly fail his further tests of maturity; the Sphinx enacted the death of a mature woman *in relation to a man*. This shapes the meaning of their exchange, of the riddle.

If escape from a cyclical repetition of slaughter and abuse motivates the Sphinx, if she is the initiator of change, the emissary and agent *vis-à-vis* this crucial cultural shift then this furnishes a particular context for her suicide. If indeed Oedipus failed to answer her riddle she was bound to kill him, even to eat him: But what of a partially correct answer? If he had met her more closely than the many who went before him perhaps this was for her a quandary; perhaps in Loraux’s terms she wanted to escape, was “overwhelmed by events,” silenced. Disappointed in her endeavour to fully translate the bloody rite into dialogue she chose a particular death. Language had somehow failed her and she enacted her own oppression,⁴⁶ resorted to the behavioural

⁴⁵ Loraux considers Antigone’s death by hanging to be an exception that arises from the parallels made with marriage as her story draws to a close; see *TW*, 31-32.

⁴⁶ As Irigaray suggests “masquerade” can be “understood as what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in a man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing

symbolic, as women have through the millennia—what else is the hysteria that Freud encounters? The Oedipal schema does not work for the post-nineteenth century woman, perhaps neither it did for the woman of ancient times—nor her representative monster.

The Tragic Flaw: Socialised Heterosexuality

As Oedipus and the Sphinx converse, they stretch the boundaries of the traditional form; each figures as a transitional subject struggling within a received *modus operandi*. This is often put forward as an important context for Oedipus—but not so for the Sphinx. She is figured as a sacrificial animal, as a man, as a child, as an eroticised object, as an objectified maternal or as a puzzle or abstraction in herself but not as a representative of female subject grappling with the same tensions as Oedipus. Thus the possibility that the socialised heterosexual dynamic might be at odds with the shift from hero to *anthropos*, might even represent the site of its possible failure is not brought into play.

But given the intensification of the monster's position as a *human* female opponent or interlocutor and the perverse intensification of the heterosexual interaction that will ensue for Oedipus this reading should not be neglected. It would seem prudent to use it to frame an attempt to understand any residual anomaly, any lingering difficulty, in resolving the issue of Oedipus' evident failure with his "triumph" over the Sphinx. After all the Greeks were no strangers to this issue. The subtlety of analysis of gender in works such as *Antigone*, *Medea* and *Lysistrata* speaks to our contemporary sensibilities. Greek thought was moving in new directions. Blundell has pointed out that

[b]y the second half of the fifth century thinkers known as the Sophists were arguing that values and institutions which were assumed to be grounded in "nature" were in reality social constructs, an approach which may well have influenced the dramatists' questioning of conventional gender distinctions.⁴⁷

The story of Oedipus revolves around misrecognition which is closely meshed with the shift towards a post-traditional subjectivity. The myth translates the adolescent hero's accession to maturity into the existential subject's grappling with a potentially unstructured social world. Oedipus does not recognise his father and the anonymous old man is ignominiously slaughtered; blind to the identity of his mother Oedipus marries outside the

their own." See Luce Irigaray "Questions" in *The Irigaray Reader*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, ed. Margaret Whitford (Cambridge, 1991), p. 135.

⁴⁷ Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 181.

safety of the traditional form. The monster who blocks his way as he moves from the first scene to the second accosts him verbally—speaking subject to speaking subject, debate not combat. Oedipus supposedly makes out the answer to her riddle.

On this basis Oedipus, like his later fellow traveller Freud, is lauded as the one who “knows.” But while his answer brought him the status of hero, it did nothing to improve his blundering progress of tragic misrecognition. He went on to wed, bed and impregnate his own mother and to find himself the object of his own criminal investigation. This strongly suggests, as Goux emphasises, that something has gone amiss in his encounter with the Sphinx.⁴⁸ Oedipus’ failures are usually attributed to a character flaw which produces both the possibility of the post-traditional subject and its tragedy. This is not disputed here, but the nature of the flaw or flaws will be expanded. It is proposed that there is a continuous, not broken, sequence of specific *mis*recognition that included the Sphinx; that the flaw that prevents such recognition is, in fact, quite evident; and that it is at this point that the possibility of an ethically informed liberation of the subject and his or her society is turned to an agoraphobic, even incestuous, stasis.

Insofar as the myth addresses the difficulties of the subject confronting existential limits unmediated by social or religious forms, Oedipus’ answer to the riddle, “man,” fits quite well. It depicts the lifespan of a person marked not by divine, social or parental parameters but by factors intrinsic to the individual. The lone subject crawls, walks and then hobbles through a lifespan—is defined in terms of space, time and its physicality. This answer reflects the move from a subject embroiled within the tangle of divine forces and traditional social structures to one within an existential frame—as does the anonymous atmosphere of Oedipus’ interactions with his parents which bracket the episode of the riddle.

However the answer would not exist if there were no question; and it is *the Sphinx who proposes the riddle*. This is given no weight in readings of the myth. The woman’s initiative is simply appropriated by the male interlocutor. Goux asks: “Is it not Oedipus who, prefiguring and typifying Greek destiny, rationalised the terrible and agonising encounter to such an extent that the riddle, a trial by language, became the sole and sufficient moment of initiatory passage?” (*OP*, p. 59). He asserts that “we must not overlook the meaning of the reply” (*OP*, p. 74): But what of the question? That it is the Sphinx who sets up the extra-traditional content of the riddle, who instigates the *conditions* for this shift—makes the offer to side-step brutish violence and to appeal to intellect and dialogue—passes unnoticed and this constitutes a significant blind

⁴⁸ See, for example, *OP*, p199. In the end Goux opts for impiety as the explanation for Oedipus ‘failure’, for the subsequent disasters—an over reliance on reason rather than any intellectual shortfall; see *OP*, pp. 14-15.

spot within the Western tradition. The transpositions of form of the myth, however, emphatically mark this point.

Presumably this reading has been so thoroughly shunned because the Sphinx's "otherness" prevents her being assigned lines of identification and critique that other characters in the myth attract. There is an occasional untrammelled but fleeting identification made by poets⁴⁹ but not elsewhere. De Lauretis comes closest:

The fact is that at this moment in history it is women, feminists, who speak from the place of the Sphinx, and who look at Perseus while Medusa is being slain, may not be inconsistent with the structural-Hegelian paradigm. But then, that would mean that the moral order of meaning and the rule of law of patriarchy are no longer those in relation to which woman is being constituted as subject.⁵⁰

In other words to identify with the Sphinx we must imagine something that is beyond our previous experience . . . or only understand her when she is safely swathed in the pronouncements of the theoretical lions of the Western tradition. Her monstrosity is turned over into a revised version of the almost unrecognisable which functions to impede empathic recognition. Why not eschew such grounds for trepidation and attempt a more straightforward identification? She may have had something of her own to say about these matters.

A Poverty of Perspective: the Riddle

Those who propose that we are not finished with the Sphinx and her riddle consign resolution to the future—perhaps another great man will intervene. The residual enigma is rarely juxtaposed with the more simple reading—that the horrific consequences Oedipus endured were due to a straightforward failure to *completely* meet the challenge. The Sphinx herself offered at this tense, transitional, potentially liberating hinge-point an interesting perspective: So should we not reconsider the actual words of her riddle? That the riddle is lost in Oedipus' answer is odd; but it is perhaps even stranger that, while the various accounts of the myth include two significantly different forms of the riddle, this phenomenon excites little comment and

⁴⁹ See, for example, Muriel Rukeyser, "Private Life of the Sphinx" in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (New York, 1978), pp. 278-9 and W. B. Yeats, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" in *W. B. Yeats Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London, 1974), pp. 86-8.

⁵⁰ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: feminism semiotics cinema*, p. 210n76.

virtually no exegesis. This would represent an omission *vis-à-vis* any much quoted piece of text but in the case of a riddle is quite extraordinary.

One version qualifies the posited being as having “one voice,” the other does not. The two most commonly cited versions, those of Apollodorus:

[W]hat is it that has a single voice, and has four feet, then two feet, and then three feet? (*The Library of Greek Mythology* 106)

and Athenaeus (4:569) retain the reference which is also included in the more literary version found in the scholia to Euripides’ *The Phoenician Women*:

There is on earth a being with two, four and three feet and with a single voice that, alone of all those that move on the earth, in the air and in the sea, changes its nature. But when it walks supported by the most feet, that is when its limbs are the least rigorous.⁵¹

The account of Diodorus (3:21) omits it. Statius, who writes a particularly graphic description of the Sphinx’s murdering and devouring of young men, omits any mention of the words of the riddle (1:433).

The riddle continues to be cited in one form or the other, but the trend is to omit reference to “voice.”⁵² This is a misrepresentation of the Greek corpus which functions to fit the woman’s words to the man’s answer. When the phrase “one voice” is quoted it is usually ignored—Oedipus’ answer then is the first instance of this subsequent and bizarre tradition of denial.

On the rare occasion that the phrase attracts comment Oedipus’ failure to account for it is ignored. Instead there is a minor received tradition of explanation; a single voice is said to indicate a single “essence,” that is, one creature. This is puzzling. The use of the singular form necessitates no clarification as to the unitary nature of the being and the slide from “voice” to “essence” has no basis; it is justified neither in terms of the language nor the extant classical corpus. Some more recent scholars have been troubled by this. Robin Hard does not overtly dispute this matter but notes that the link between voice and essence is “obscure” and thus remains unexplained.⁵³ This

⁵¹ See Vernant’s translation, “LT,” p. 468 n. 20.

⁵² J. Lemprière *Lemprière’s Classical Dictionary* (London, 1984), s.v. “Sphinx.” Sources which refer to the transcultural and transhistorical prevalence of this riddle completely disregard the occurrence of the two different forms.

⁵³ See Hard, *Greek Mythology*, p. 225 n.106. Vernant retains the received interpretation acknowledging this difficulty by venturing the new explanation that while all other creatures “live and die within a single modality of locomotion (m)an is the one to change the way he moves about . . . Man is a being who both remains the same throughout (he has a single voice, *phōnē*, a single essence) and also becomes other.” This is perhaps a little tricky a propos butterflies and frogs. See Vernant, “LT,” p. 214.

is the closest we come to acknowledgment that this phrase is a problem, a puzzle: but it is.

We are dealing, then, with words that have been relegated to the extra-systemic—even though they are absolutely intra-systemic. What are we to make of the avoidance of one of the lines of a short poem within which the most notorious riddle in the history of our civilisation is recorded? Oedipus and Freud are each party to the elision—Oedipus by ignoring the phrase and Freud by recasting the whole riddle. But have we not been taught, by Freud himself, both to attend to all that is said rather than to select on the basis of preconception and, furthermore, that censored content may be exactly that which has the most import?

If the constant rehearsal of this event from an Oedipocentric perspective is put aside we arrive at the analysis of an overlooked detail of the riddle that has been consigned to the abyss of disregard. And the context in which the riddle is put—a unique moment of dialogue between a hero and a monster—surely suggests that the reference to voice warrants careful attention.

Indeed if this phrase “one voice” is reclaimed for consideration, and an answer inclusive of it is not immediately apparent, it is because of an age-old and pervasive difficulty that itself explains precisely the blind spot that occludes the answer.⁵⁴ It is the elision of the woman that informs Oedipus’ error—and the subsequent marginalisation of this phrase.

There is consensus that the riddle refers to the developmental changes that take place during the human life span; that it depicts the baby, the adult and the older, unsteady person. Now heroic initiation is a marker of a significant life change—it is quintessentially about adolescence and entry into civic responsibility. Oedipus is precisely an adolescent hero.⁵⁵ The Sphinx sets her challenge, in keeping with the traditional form, at the brink of the aspirant heroes’ adulthood. She looks at Oedipus; she contemplates this teenage boy. Awareness of the perspective of the subject who poses the question furnishes a response inclusive of that of Oedipus but beyond it.

If a creature has one voice then it is not a creature that has more than one. Half of the human race has more than one voice in the course of its life and one such is Oedipus. The voice of the adolescent male “breaks:” he speaks during this stage of his life with two strikingly different voices. The longer

⁵⁴ There are riddles in recent circulation that play on this blind spot. For example: A man is killed and his son suffers a head injury in a motor car accident; when the child is brought to the emergency department the attendant neurosurgeon says: I cannot operate on this boy he is my son. Who is the neurosurgeon?

⁵⁵ This is abundantly clear in the pictorial record: See, for example, Vermeule, *Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, p.171; and Moret, *Œdipe, la Sphinx et les Thébains: Essai de Mythologie Iconographique*, 1: chap. 2.

form of the riddle includes a reference to adolescence, to the developmental phase that is at issue in the formulaic transaction between the monster and the hero. The answer to this version of the riddle is not “man” as proposed by Oedipus, it is “woman.”⁵⁶

Life Without Sphinxes

From this perspective Oedipus was only partially correct; he both passed and failed the challenge. As a theoretician he was doing passably well but his gender blindness impeded his reach. His limited response ablated the woman and passed over the clue in front of him—the human voice of the Sphinx. For him modalities of movement and the ability to use a simple adjunct such as a crutch adequately marked us as human. Voice, which better differentiates us from other creatures, was passed over despite the anomaly of the creature facing him at the time. Language, intelligence and wit, that with which we confront an awareness of the tyrannies of existence and with which we take up our places within civil society, was not brought into play in his answer.⁵⁷ As she confronts Oedipus the Sphinx stands as a speaking, and thus revolutionary, creature within a formulaic, highly gendered, traditional transaction. The puzzle, in the longer riddle, rests on the consequences of the politics of gender: this shapes the challenge she sets the young men—the aspect that Oedipus did not master. She proposed the inclusion, the non-exclusion, of the adult female civic subject in the shift away from the traditional pattern: but she was not heard—perhaps, is not, even still?

Insofar as the riddle scene represents the hinge-point between hero and *anthropos*, this denial inevitably dogs the tracks of those who come after. Oedipus having missed his chance to recognise the discursive woman, accedes

⁵⁶ That the word used for “voice,” *φωνη*, has a primary meaning of sound or tone can only add weight to this proposition; see Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1976), s.v. “*φωνη*.” Interestingly there is a version of the riddle that lacks mention of “voice” but includes the information that the “being” “*changes his cry*” [my emphasis]; this may be an alternative longer version *à propos* the answer “man.” See Vernant, “LT,” p. 468 n. 20. It is a poet who, allowing the Sphinx a subject position, has come closest to this answer—although still missing the significance of the reference to voice. Rukeyser posits a second meeting between Oedipus and the Sphinx who tells Oedipus that his answer was wrong in that he said nothing of “woman.” Oedipus protests that “Man” includes woman: “Everyone knows that.” The Sphinx replies: “That’s what you think.” See Rukeyser “Myth”, p. 498.

⁵⁷ Vernant takes the riddle to refer to both the physical and *social* stages of “childhood, adulthood, and old age” thus differentiating the human from other creatures but like Oedipus he retains modes of locomotion as the marker. Voice would seem a better candidate for such reference to the *human* social world. See “LT,” pp. 214–5. The phrase “alone . . . changes its nature” in the version from the *scholia* to Euripides’ tragedy may refer to the capacity of the self-reflexive subject to change its received positions.

to a throne but in the process proves himself unequal to the next challenge: How to find an adult woman who is not already your mother? The misrecognition of the mother, the inability to differentiate between mother and partner, is a consequence of a dangerous blind spot that arises from an anxiety about the possibility of the woman as an equivalent self-reflexive subject in the first place. Unlike other heroes he marries a mature woman rather than the young daughter of a king—but in the end the possibilities of this union are flawed by the refusal of maturity without maternity.

As he appropriates the Sphinx to his oedipal schema Freud all but gives the game away in the hyperbolic consequences of his denial: For why would her gender be so problematic as to necessitate its elision? In reading her as a man, Freud repeats Oedipus' original and disastrous mistake.⁵⁸ And in asserting that children's curiosity centres on "the same riddle that was propounded by the Theban Sphinx" that is "*not [on] the question of the distinction between the sexes* but the riddle of where babies come from" [my emphasis], he proposes the answer to the Sphinx's riddle by negating it . . . exactly at the point of changing the question in order to avoid the answer.⁵⁹ The answer to Freud's rewritten riddle points only to the woman as *mother*: thus he follows in the footsteps of Oedipus and his *sequential* misrecognitions. Both of them are fated to find the mother when they encounter the adult woman because it is the psychic adolescence of the girl that they refuse to recognise—her adulthood outside of her sexual and procreative functions. It is the specificities and thus the possibilities of a different model of the woman's pubertal transition that is eclipsed both by the limited answer to the riddle and by the Oedipus complex. The "one voice" of the riddle refers to puberty as a different transition for the girl—but not in terms of her sexuality. It potentially unyokes the social pubertal transition for all subjects from the necessities of violence and the transmission of autocratic power, gesturing to thinking and language as the critical modes for access to maturity.

The riddle posits precisely the need to refuse the hegemony of the heroic or *macho* adult male identification by drawing attention to the girl's

⁵⁸ Nietzsche also draws on the riddle scene as he formulates his idea of the *eternal return*. In the two transpositions of the riddle scene evoked in this passage—the tableau of the dwarf blocking the path of Zarathustra on a high stony path and the exchange between Zarathustra and the shepherd during which a riddle is proposed—again the players are rendered exclusively male. If the woman is present at all it is as the serpent that has "bit itself fast" inside the shepherd's throat, as the mute and *silencing* monster. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (England, 1966), pp. 155-60.

⁵⁹ Strachey notes this confusion, that the "primary question" vacillates between matters of gender and of origin; see Freud, "The Sexual Enlightenment of Children," *SE* 9: 135n2.

adolescent transition which has never been pictured as a brutal pathway to heroic glory.

More recently we do not necessarily escape these pitfalls. When feminist scholarship draws the Sphinx into critique a close reading of her words and thus of the different forms of the riddle is overlooked while the assumption that she is self-evidently representative of the maternal is widespread — at times this extends to situating her as representative of an earlier matriarchal society;⁶⁰ the latter being more than a little tricky given her masculine pre-history. But to privilege the female subject as mother often enough functions to avoid the possibility of the woman having equal weight in the imaginary as a representative self-reflexive subject.

Despite Goux's finely worked argument that the myth of Oedipus itself explains limitations of the Western subject and the Freudian schema, when it comes to the Sphinx his line of reasoning is more conservative. He argues that other heroes recruit divine assistance to slay a female monster, self-evidently a matricide, and thus acquire the adult status of king; it is the avoidance of this presumed matricide that marks Oedipus' as a different hero. Oedipus defeats the monster with reason alone effecting a “de-projection” of the gods and thus a repressed “apprehension of the enigmatic depths” (*OP*, p. 201), figured as the Sphinx herself. It is this unconscious that Freud later “discovers.” Oedipus' horrific incest occurs because the absence of a matricide prevents “liberation of the feminine”—the availability of the princess to the hero is for him an unproblematic model for such liberation (for example, *OP*, p. 27, 38-9)—and sets Western philosophy off on its path of repression. The only adult woman in this model is the princess “liberated” into a matrimony which cedes power to her husband. The Sphinx becomes first a mother and then the unconscious, that is a voiceless abstraction (*OP*, p. 199). Surely apprehension of the woman as an equivalent self-reflexive subject is a better basis for an adult partnership than effecting an apparent maturity based on the murder of a mother figure?

Goux, like Freud, draws very near to realising the inclusive answer to her riddle:

The gesture by which Oedipus situated himself so as to respond to the “riddling bitch”, guardian of the initiatory threshold, and the belief that he could *abolish her with the word “man”* in a presumption of auto-initiation, are what institute, in counter effect, the difference between what will later be called consciousness and unconsciousness. [my emphasis] (*OP*, p. 132-3)

⁶⁰ See, for example, Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 177-8.

But Oedipus' refusal of the woman in the riddle and thus of the Sphinx slips past unnoticed and for Goux "[t]he madness of Oedipus has become Western reason" (*OP*, p. 202). However if we consider the more comprehensive answer to the riddle it could then also be said that the madness of the irrationality necessary to justify a daily praxis of oppression limits the reach of Western reason. As Goux makes clear

[b]y situating himself as a viewpoint on the world, as the central and unique measure of all things, man simultaneously acquires the objective view that solves all riddles, calms all terrors, hurls all Sphinxes into the abyss. (*OP*, p. 129)

But life without Sphinxes—alive and speaking ones that is, *not* those discarded as remnant dead mothers—may be impoverished.

Conclusion: To be or not to be a poet

There is much to suggest that if we side-step the pervasive Freudian standpoint of a masculine—and attempted feminine—identification with a universalised Oedipus and instead frame the Sphinx, not as a monster or a mother, nor even as a “universal” female subject, but as a representative of the socialised heterosexual woman, who grapples with the possibilities of change as does Oedipus,⁶¹ this reading will tap the wisdom of the myth. We could construe that the flaws of the traditional social frame shaped both Oedipus' response to the riddle and her response to his answer. And then ask: Why, if she was reluctant to kill him, to eat him, as she had those who came before him but with whom *no* mutuality of understanding had arisen, did she not hold a little longer to the verbal exchange, draw him out a little and instruct him as to his mistake? Perhaps because this would have been too much, too soon. As an *adversary* the Sphinx pushed the boundaries of the initiation rite, situating it partly in language rather than bloody combat or in deadly seduction but, despite her role as a teacher of young Theban men, in this non-eroticised

⁶¹ The Sphinx, then, may be the other side of our preoccupation with Antigone. The machinations between a young woman and a dangerous older man have become the principal lever for analysis of gendered interactions *à propos* the Greeks—not those between a teenage boy and an older dangerous woman. Antigone sacrifices herself for the honour of an impulsively violent man; the Sphinx too enacts a form of sacrifice for an inadequate man but, unlike Antigone, *voluntarily* removes herself, a potentially more challenging act *à propos* the status quo in that it gestures towards other possibilities. It is of interest that each, although unmarried, is accorded the manner of death of a wife; each dies, as it were, within the socialised heterosexual dynamic—or because of it?

situation she was precluded from, or herself avoided, holding more firmly to the position of teacher, philosopher or poet. Her initial bid to be recognised as an equivalent subject failed and she spoke no more; instead she chose to absent herself, to give up. Both she and Oedipus fell short of the liberating possibilities . . . they took us so far but no further.

Conceivably the Sphinx, as a speaking subject, no longer tied to her traditional identifications within the bodily realms of violence and sex, nonetheless felt subject to the man's endorsement of this new role—and his answer to her riddle refused her precisely this. She remained unrecognised and slipped from language into an enactment of his mistake. Was this a mute attempt to attract his attention? Her self-inflicted death displayed his error, his refusal of her, not that such sacrifice did anyone much good in the end—Oedipus entered into an unstructured horror and the field was left open for insistent representations of a womanless tradition.⁶²When the Sphinx cast herself into the abyss she took an opportunity with her—and society is not yet rid of this inadequate reaction. The Sphinx's symptomatic suicide, its inculcation into our tradition as a purely "emotive" response and Oedipus' subsequent blighted assumption of triumph and superiority are, unfortunately, still sometimes characteristic of our gendered adaptations within the socio-cultural space.

As the bloody initiation rite was translated into an encounter with existential angst there was no longer any structural necessity for the feminine subject not to be equivalent. Sophocles, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, rehabilitates Oedipus after his botched rite of passage and hands him another chance: Why not her? If the Sphinx had *her* time again and had eschewed the position of victim, brought herself to a position of greater responsibility and drawn Oedipus out a little—the possibilities of the situation might have been further exploited: she and Oedipus may have continued to talk. This conversation may have necessitated the traversal of an *aporia* by each participant but it would have clarified the "universality" of the developmental importance of an existential crisis. The failure of her riddle demonstrates the pervasive denial that such a crisis is as necessary for maturity in the woman as the man, or any other "different" self-reflexive subject: Surely a better model for adolescent

⁶² Perhaps beginning with Sophocles' sequel to *Oedipus Rex* which is less securely tied to mythological narrative than the earlier play and in which the rehabilitation of Oedipus late in his life spawns a new mode of direct succession from king to king effected by the passing on of a "secret." See Bernard Knox's introduction to the tragedy in Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays*. The woman is no longer instrumental in passing power from father to husband nor present in her function as a trial, a test of capacity. A less violent tradition is inaugurated—but the problem of the woman is not addressed and her significance is erased. The sexually or physically challenging female creature is gone, eradicated by the one hero who experienced the alternative—dialogue with a woman—as the test of his maturity and could not quite cope.

adaptation to adult status than the transient elation of superficial triumph over an objectified other?

In facilitating cathexis in language and dialogue rather than violence such an alternative model might pre-empt the arduous task of introducing productive verbal negotiations into areas of entrenched, violent, civic strife. The critical individual developmental period for the history of our civilisation may not be the presumed Oedipal phase of childhood but rather an adolescent transition that might more accurately be denoted Oedipal. The circuit of interactions between Oedipus and the other characters in the myth, most constituted around sex or violence, produced a perpetuation of exactly sexual transgression and violence. Something is rotten in the inter-generational transition and will repeat until the problem is recognised.

Oedipus's inadequate answer to the riddle and the Sphinx's subsequent silence constitute a playing out of the failure of this recognition. Their dialogue marked the site of a possible exit from this persistent strife; but this hero's capacity to use reflection and language to escape the cycle of violence and sexual oppression was limited. The tensions between Oedipus and the Sphinx waver between language and the violent dispersal of bodies. As a signifier of gender difference "voice" draws the imaginary *vis-à-vis* the problematic of gender towards the discursive and away from reference to sex and violence *per se*. The shifts of content within the lineage of the myth, the bifurcation of form of the riddle itself and the loss of one of its answers all elaborate the instabilities of this area—and of the path of Western civilisation.

The Sphinx too met her limitations; had she been more comfortable with her own authority she might have facilitated not only a debunking of the assumption that violence and murder are prerequisites for maturity but also the awareness that the gendered pattern of oppressive interpersonal politics associated with the traditional form was deeply flawed. These two things may be fatally linked—and it is precisely this that the Sphinx's riddle addresses.⁶³ It critiques exactly the interaction in which she plays a part: Oedipus misses this point.

The Sphinx offered Oedipus a transition to adulthood based on reflective discourse, one that critiques the objectifying praxis that is one of the

⁶³ De Lauretis posits a "remake of the story" in which if the riddle is unsolved by Oedipus and thus insoluble, "the Sphinx does not kill herself in self-hatred . . . but continues to *enunciate* the enigma of sexual difference, of life-and-death, and the question of desire" [my italics] *Alice Doesn't: feminism semiotics cinema*, p. 156. Sexual difference attracts its overworked status as enigma, the ultimate signifier of difference, the site *par excellence* to interrogate desire but its possible link to the problematics of the speaking position of the woman is passed over. The risk of this manoeuvre is of offsetting with a certain theoretical glamour the position of sexual difference as a paramount site of the entrenchment and perpetuation of objectification and prejudicial oppression in civil society.

greatest risks to the stability of civil society; a mode of maturation that would disrupt, rather than shore up, the transmission of this problem from generation to generation. If we lived within an imaginary—and riddles call on this as much as they do on intellectual prowess; Oedipus’ failure was perhaps more in this realm than it was in the other—where the answer to the longer riddle was immediately apparent we would inhabit a different mentality⁶⁴ and thus a different society.

⁶⁴ Within the Western tradition it was presumed that direct intervention apropos the body would be the “answer” to the problem of over-population when, in fact, all that was necessary was to equalise opportunity for access to education, to view the woman as a speaking subject not a reproductive body—which fact was discovered in the breach and only then grasped conceptually.