

The private life of the Sphinx

Through structural analysis of the "parallel lives" of Oedipus and the Sphinx, and by drawing on L. Edmunds' (1981) development and antecedents of the Oedipus legend as finally canonized in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, it is possible to draw new conclusions about the peripheral character of the Sphinx and her relationship to Oedipus himself: in an expansion of the long-noted double significance of the Sphinx' riddle--namely that "Oedipus himself" is a reasonable second answer to it (Lattimore 1958)--it is clear that Oedipus not only parallels the Sphinx's career as a kēr upon Thebes but in fact takes on that role upon the death of the monster, becoming an equally ignorant divine kuōn in the process. That ignorance is one of the particular claims of this paper, namely that Oedipus is a riddling figure exactly as the Sphinx is, and that as structural mirror images of one another (Segal 1981) we can conclude that neither figure knows the answer to his or her riddle. This leads to the conclusion that the action of the drama is the process of an impersonal mission to produce the real answer to the original, misdirected riddle of the Sphinx, and that it is carried out by an exactly parallel process of interrogation and violence. By using Oedipus as a structural mirror of the Sphinx new conclusions can be drawn about the monster herself, a character who has no physical presence in Sophocles' drama but whose prefiguration of its hero directly informs our understanding of the drama; through Oedipus we can obtain insight into this liminal figure and in so doing illuminate more clearly the action and significance of the tragedy itself. This investigation into the private reality of an absent monster represents a very 21st century, and very modernist, approach to literary criticism of the classics.

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