

## CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1 introduces the human as a question. It revolves around the figure of the Theban Sphinx and her interaction with Oedipus. More specifically, it invokes the Sphinx as a presence that both prompts and challenges the way we think the human. Oedipus' troubled humanity emerges at the intersection between his success in solving the Sphinx's riddle and his apparent failure to understand how her words apply to his own existence. The story of his encounter with the hybrid beast introduces us to the idea of *logos* (reason) as a force that is frequently invoked in favour of human exceptionalism. The Sphinx' intervention at Thebes exposes a deep-seated vulnerability at the core of the human condition – a vulnerability springing from the fact that while the riddle of the human can be solved with the powers of reasoning, the human as a riddle remains enigmatic and beyond the application of *logos*.



1.1. The Theban Sphinx (detail), Attic red-figure lekythos (ca 460 BCE).  
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## The Sphinx (*Sphinx aenigmatica*)

**A**CCORDING TO A FAMOUS MYTH, THE CITY OF THEBES IN the central Greek region of Boeotia once faced a peculiar situation: on a mountaintop outside of the city's gates a monstrous creature had taken up residence – a sphinx with wings, the body of a lion, and the head of a woman.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is not just the apparition that terrifies but her wit as well. According to Apollodorus (first/second century CE) who offered a detailed account of the story, the Sphinx stopped in their tracks anyone wishing to pass and challenged them with the following question:

What is that which has one voice (*phōnē*) and yet becomes four-footed (*tetrapous*) and two-footed (*dipous*) and three-footed (*tripous*)?<sup>2</sup>

Solving the riddle is no idle pastime or amusing exercise. Rather, it is a matter of life and death. Those who fail to come up with the right answer are instantly devoured by the beast. The Thebans think hard what the solution to the riddle may be: 'They often met and discussed the answer, and when they could not find it, the Sphinx used to snatch away one of them and gobble him up.'<sup>3</sup> Numerous attempts at providing the answer fail and the resulting loss of life is great, according to some sources even comprising members of the Theban royal family.<sup>4</sup>

That is, until Oedipus comes along. He is the son of Laios, king of Thebes, but unaware of his lineage. As a baby, he was exposed in the wild and raised by foster parents in Corinth. Travelling to Thebes as a stranger, Oedipus, too, comes face to face with the Sphinx.

He ponders the question and – after careful reflection – provides an answer. The solution is as simple as it is perplexing: the creature in question is – you guessed it – the human! As a baby the human is crawling

on all fours, later he is walking upright on two legs and, in old age, man is using a walking stick, appearing decisively ‘three-footed’. The Sphinx’s riddle describes the different stages of human life, from infancy to old age.

The reaction of the Sphinx to Oedipus’ intervention is instantaneous, absolute, and final. Upon hearing Oedipus’ response, the beast throws herself down a cliff to her death. Oedipus reaps the rewards of his success: as a prize for liberating the city from the monster’s lethal grip, he ascends the throne of Thebes and marries the widowed queen, Jocasta.

The story could have ended here with king and queen living happily ever after, but this is not what happens. For all is not well in Thebes under Oedipus. Soon infertility, famine, and other calamities strike the city – sure (divine) signs that the humans in question have committed some sort of heinous outrage.<sup>5</sup>

What has gone wrong?

Didn’t the Thebans choose an outstanding individual to be their king, one who had just distinguished himself through his mental agility and power of reasoning?

Oedipus tries to find the source of the defilement – without success. Only once it finally dawns on him that he himself is the reason for the calamities that have befallen the city is he ready to consider the truth and embrace its consequences. Oedipus learns that he is not the biological child of the Corinthian royal couple that raised him but the biological offspring of Laios of Thebes and his wife Jocasta. Right after birth he had been given to a shepherd to be exposed in the wild because, years before, an oracle had predicted his parents’ offspring would kill his father and marry his mother. The shepherd, however, could not bring himself to follow orders. He passed baby Oedipus to one of his colleagues who, in turn, passed him on to the Corinthian royals who raised him as their own.

Not knowing his real identity, Oedipus inadvertently fulfilled the prophecy he tried so hard to prevent. By marrying his mother and killing his father, as the Oracle of Delphi had predicted years before, he committed unspeakable offence and incurred pollution. On realizing the defilement, he blinds himself and leaves Thebes – never to return. Later, at Colonus, he dies, having lost everything he once valued.<sup>6</sup>

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This is, in broad brushstrokes, the core of the well-known story of Oedipus. Situated in a mythical time before the Trojan War, it concerns the ancient Greek city of Thebes and its royal family, the House of Labdacus (the so-called ‘Labdacids’). But why start with this story? Why Oedipus and the Sphinx? What is this tale about and how does it relate to the larger themes of this book?

By turning the ancient figure into a ‘complex’ of the same name, Sigmund Freud maintained that we are all, in a way, Oedipus. Indeed, Freud’s psychologizing reading of the myth – one of the famous instances of the reception of the ancient world in the modern – has turned the specific struggles of Oedipus into everyman’s experience. We will see that this is by no means a coincidence: Freud could draw on an ancient story that already depicted Oedipus’ humanity as exemplary of the human condition.

This chapter focuses on the figure of the Sphinx to tell the story of her role in defining both ancient and modern humanities. We will find that she is the perfect creature inhabiting the opening chapter of this book. This is because her presence at Thebes introduces the question of the human by posing the human as a question. And not just any kind of question but one of the highest importance – literally a matter of life and death. Her riddle itself and its solution through Oedipus anticipate the ancient philosophical debate on the question of the human – the core of the [next chapter](#).

## THE THEBAN SPHINX AND OTHER SPHINXES

First some background on the role and meaning of sphinxes in the ancient world. What exactly were these peculiar creatures? Where did they come from? And what did they represent?

The figure of the sphinx was originally not Greek but came to the Greco-Roman world from Egypt or Mesopotamia, where sphinxes both small and large – think of the famous monumental Sphinx at Giza – featured as early as the third millennium BCE.<sup>7</sup> Yet right from the start of their appropriation into the literary and artistic production of the Greco-Roman world, the ancient Greeks and Romans endowed these creatures with a special pedigree that integrated them into their own supernatural universe. At the same time,

sphinxes always retained a particularly uncanny and inscrutable air due to their Egyptian origins.

The earliest reference in Greco-Roman literature comes from the seventh century BCE. In his *Theogony*, a grand account of the origins and structures of the divine pantheon, the ancient Greek poet Hesiod introduces the Sphinx as the monstrous offspring of two other no less monstrous figures: Orthos – a two-headed dog – and, in all likelihood, the Echidna, half woman, half snake.<sup>8</sup> And yet it would be wrong to make too much of this lineage. Not all Greco-Roman sphinxes looked the same. In terms of their physical appearances, they come in all sorts of shapes, forms, and sizes: while they always combine the body of an animal – most frequently a lion – and a human head, they differ in that the head could be either male or (more often) female. Some also had additional attributes such as wings or horns. In her hybrid body, the sphinx resembles numerous other monsters of Greco-Roman myth that also combine the parts of different creatures.<sup>9</sup>

The monstrous figure at the core of this chapter, the so-called Theban Sphinx, is thus the most famous specimen of a larger group of similar figures known to us from the ancient world. The Theban Sphinx stands out in the ancient record in that she is the only one with an extended literary life: while sphinxes were a prominent iconographic motif on Greco-Roman pots and are represented widely in monumental sculpture from the Minoan and Mycenaean periods onwards, literary references to other sphinxes are rare and do not involve an extensive storyline.<sup>10</sup> Throughout classical literature, there is no other example of a sphinx challenging humans to solve a riddle.<sup>11</sup>

How (and why) this creature set up shop at Thebes is unclear.<sup>12</sup> The ancient authors attribute her deadly presence to the intervention of a deity. But which one? Various gods are named as responsible for her appearance but without a specific reason.<sup>13</sup> And even though he is not among them, her riddling, hybrid nature also points to the god Apollo, the god of prophecy, music, and healing, whose oracles are frequently just as riddling as her words. It seems clear that the Sphinx provides a reason for Oedipus' appointment to the highest office in Thebes.<sup>14</sup> This makes her an integral part of the story of Oedipus – so integral, indeed, that various ancient painters chose her facing Oedipus as the central image of the myth.<sup>15</sup>

## SOPHOCLES' SPHINX AND THE FICKLENESS OF HUMAN FORTUNE

The figure of the Theban Sphinx is invariably linked to the humanity of a particular human: Oedipus. The figure of Oedipus, in turn, is intricately connected to the rendering of his story by a particular ancient author: that of the Athenian playwright Sophocles (ca 496–406 BCE). It is his telling of the story in his acclaimed tragedy *Oedipus the King* that set the ground for the reception of the ancient figure by Freud.

How did Sophocles represent the newly appointed head of Thebes? And what role does the Sphinx play in sketching out Oedipus' particular struggle?

On the face of it, merely a minor one. Despite the central role of the riddle in the story of Oedipus, it is strangely absent from Sophocles' telling. Contrary to what one may expect, the moment of Oedipus facing the Sphinx and the specific words of her riddle do not feature in *Oedipus the King* at all – hence the references to Apollodorus' version of the tale in the opening section of this chapter.<sup>16</sup> The play is set in a mythical time *after* Oedipus solved the riddle, following the demise of the Sphinx and Oedipus ascending to the throne of Thebes. It tells the story of Oedipus inquiring into the source of the pollution that has befallen the city, his gradual and belated understanding that *he himself* is its cause, and the suffering that springs from insight into his past transgressions and wrongdoing.

And yet despite this absence, the Sphinx's riddle has a distinct presence in the play. The ancient audiences would have been well familiar with the basic storyline of the myth, including the wording of the famous riddle. So, Sophocles' drama makes repeated reference to the Sphinx's enigma at key moments throughout the play without, however, spelling it out in detail. Moreover, the Sphinx is itself enigmatic. In *Oedipus the King*, she is called a 'prophesying maiden with hooked talons' a 'winged maiden', and a 'versifying hound' – thus pointing to her looks, her gender, her closeness to other articulations of the supernatural (see below), and her partial membership in the realm of animals.<sup>17</sup>

Direct pointers to the role of the Sphinx in the story of Oedipus then come in the form of a voice that speaks to us from within the drama: that of the Chorus of Theban elders. As a collective voice, such choruses always carry considerable weight. This particular chorus speaks with particular

authority because it consists of older citizens. In *Oedipus the King*, they provide a commentary on the action. And they remind us more than once that the presence of the Sphinx is central not merely to the humanity of Oedipus but to the human condition more generally.

Dwellers in our native land of Thebes, see to what a storm of cruel disaster has come Oedipus here, who knew the answer to the famous riddle and was a mighty man, on whose fortune every one among the citizens used to look with envy! So that one should wait to see the final day and should call none among mortals fortunate, till he has crossed the boundary of life without suffering grief.<sup>18</sup>

By pointing to the fact that the now fallen Oedipus was once the envy of the town, the Chorus here asserts a view that is also articulated elsewhere in ancient Greek thought and literature: that human life can only be deemed a success or failure towards the end of one's lifetime, once one has lived its full course.<sup>19</sup> This is because human fortune is fickle and subject to change sometimes due to divine intervention. As a result, it is impossible to know what the future will hold until it has actually become the present, and perhaps even the past.

Oedipus is a case in point. His success and fortune (in solving the riddle) are followed by loss and suffering later in life. In highlighting Oedipus' suffering and his futile attempts to get on top of the situation, Sophocles illustrates the reversal of fortune as a fundamental characteristic of the human condition. In the words of the Theban elders:

Ah, generations of men, how close to nothingness I estimate your life to be! What man, what man wins more of happiness than enough to seem, and after seeming to decline? With your fate as my example, your fate, unhappy Oedipus, I say that nothing pertaining to mankind is enviable.<sup>20</sup>

So, Oedipus' humanity emerges between his success in solving the riddle and his failure in recognizing how it relates to his own life. And the resulting struggle is symptomatic of the human condition more broadly.

Incidentally, perhaps, the very same point, that human life is fickle and subject to dramatic shifts and changes is already anticipated in the Sphinx's riddle itself. By pointing to the different stages of the human life cycle – childhood, adulthood, and old age – it also takes a bird's-eye view of human



life in its entirety. The Chorus' words point back to the Sphinx's riddle as the apparent apex of his success. It is in the tragic space between his capacity to solve the Sphinx's riddle and his failure to grasp his situation in the here and now that Oedipus' humanity is situated.

This humanity consists, to a significant extent, in the suffering springing from the need to navigate in the uncertain and shifting territory between fate, chance, and human moral responsibility – to find one's way in a world in which the gods intervene seemingly at random and in which even a man who strives to be righteous can find himself responsible for unspeakable wrongdoing.<sup>21</sup> In the myth, Oedipus' fall from grace is overdetermined – a consequence of fate (the result of a curse that was once cast on Oedipus' father Laios that affected the family over several generations) *and* his own actions. Oedipus is easily irritable, prone to resort to violence, and seems to have an unwavering trust in his own intellectual capacities.

And yet Oedipus' suffering is not just a personal tragedy; it is closely tied to his role as king of Thebes.<sup>22</sup> While there are many facets to Oedipus' humanity, the suffering springing from his increasingly futile attempts to uphold truth and justice – in a world where truth is hard to establish and justice ephemeral – looms prominently in a story in which his personal tragedy doubles as a collective crisis for the city.<sup>23</sup> When his mother Jocasta urges him to give up in his quest to find Laios' murderer, he insists: 'You will never persuade me not to find out the truth!'<sup>24</sup> But what if this truth shakes not just the fundamentals of the one who seeks it but the very foundations of society itself?

### THE HUMAN AS RIDDLE

In highlighting the fickleness of human fortune and the cascading human uncertainties and suffering that result, the Chorus speaks to larger questions of knowing and not knowing which are central to Oedipus' tragic experience. Time and again Oedipus emphasizes his clever wit and his critical spirit, as evident in particular in his ability to solve the riddle. It is, for example, invoked when he reproaches the seer Tiresias for having been unable to free Thebes from the deadly clutches of the Sphinx:

Why, come, tell me, how can you be a true prophet? Why when the versifying hound was here did not you speak some word that could release the citizens?

Indeed, her riddle was not one for the first comer to explain! It required prophetic skill, and you were exposed as having no knowledge from the birds or from the gods. No, it was I that came, Oedipus who knew nothing, and put a stop to her; I hit the mark by native wit (*gnōmē kurēsas*), not by what I learned from birds.<sup>25</sup>

Oedipus here compares and contrasts the seer's supernatural knowledge as it informs his prophecies and predictions with his own critical ingenuity. Even though he has no special knowledge derived from the gods, he is quick to point out that it was he and not Tiresias who solved the Sphinx's riddle and released the Thebans from the monster's grip. The confidence on show here is also at work in Oedipus' subsequent attempts to find Laios' murderer and the reason for the pollution incurred by the city.

Yet despite his drive to get to the bottom of things, Oedipus has an astonishing capacity to overlook what is right there before his eyes. The poetics of seeing and blindness, both literally and metaphorically, evolve alongside – and as an articulation of – the poetics of knowing and not knowing mentioned above.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the drama is full of puns on knowing, including extensive wordplay involving Oedipus' own name, one meaning of which alludes to the ancient Greek for 'I know' (*oida*).<sup>27</sup> His *logos* allows Oedipus to tackle some problems and challenges successfully. Full recognition and understanding, however, remains elusive. Oedipus may have successfully solved the riddle, but when it comes to himself, and his own identity, he has a considerable blind spot.

It is here that the Sphinx's epithet as a prophesying voice and Oedipus' insistence that the solution to her question requires 'prophetic skill' (*ek theōn ... gnōton*) matter.<sup>28</sup> In his reading of the riddle, Oedipus makes a typical mistake: Similar to numerous consultants at oracles like Delphi, he thinks he knows the answer to the riddle (the question) but does not really understand how the words of the Sphinx relate to his own life.<sup>29</sup> He may understand the human condition as an abstract idea, an intellectual concept – described by the Sphinx's words in the temporal arc from birth to death – but falls painfully short of realizing their deeper meaning for his own life.<sup>30</sup>

Oedipus' uncompromising drive to understand whilst turning a blind eye to what becomes more and more obvious carries the whiff of hubris.<sup>31</sup>

### OEDIPUS' EXEMPLARY HUMANITY

That there is a fundamental correlation between Oedipus' humanity and that of man is not merely pointed out by the Chorus. It is also already evident in the Sphinx's riddle itself. First, its imagery of the 'footedness' of man points to Oedipus himself whose 'footedness' is itself an issue: his name reflects the fact that his ankles were swollen from being pierced as an infant when he was exposed (ancient Greek *oidein* is 'to swell' and *pous* means 'foot').<sup>32</sup> Second, Oedipus features in the myth as the one who knows (*oida*) the answer to the question of the foot – another link between the name and the riddle.<sup>33</sup> Third, *dipous* ('two-footed') is part of Oedipus' name. So, Oedipus as the riddle solver features within the imagery of the riddle itself.<sup>34</sup> When he comes upon the Sphinx, Oedipus is himself clearly in the two-footed stage of his life. As such, the riddle prompts him to place his own humanity within a larger understanding of the human condition.

The focus on the bipedal, upright Oedipus, however, is hardly an innocuous way of pointing to the human. The capacity to walk upright on two feet features prominently in the efforts of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers to distinguish the human from all other animals.<sup>35</sup> It is at the centre of the human look 'down' on animals, both literally (because many animals are smaller than humans and, as quadrupeds, look down towards the ground rather than up) and metaphorically (as creatures inhabiting a lower rung of existence than humans).<sup>36</sup> Incidentally, the most detailed variant of the Sphinx's riddle we have comes from the second-century CE Greek author Athenaeus who himself got it from a fourth-century source. It reverberates with similar efforts to present the human as a unique animal through its upright posture. In Athenaeus' account, the riddle reads like this:

There is a creature upon the earth that has two feet and four, a single voice, and three feet as well; of all that moves on land, and through the air, and in

the sea, it alone alters its nature. But when it makes its way propped on the largest number of feet, then the swiftness in its limbs is the weakest.<sup>37</sup>

The first part of this version of the riddle reads like the one in Apollodorus quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The second part, however, is new. It offers a biologizing description of the human that refers to the popular Greek differentiation between terrestrial, avian, and maritime animals. At the same time, it also resonates with the ‘man-only *topos*’ of Greek philosophy by insisting on man’s uniqueness (see Chapter 2).<sup>38</sup> The human stands out from all other animals in that he changes his form of locomotion over his lifetime. Moreover, the human stands out in the apparent paradox that he is slowest when he walks on the greatest number of legs.

The Sphinx’s riddle also resonates with the ancient conversation on what it means to be human in other ways. Its appeal to reason points to *logos* as a core distinguishing feature invoked by the philosophers to separate man from beast – as does its solution. Moreover, to describe man as a creature whose form of movement changes over time is to define man as an abstract concept. The capacity to derive abstract concepts, however, is another feature invoked by some ancient philosophers as specific to humans only.<sup>39</sup> By reminding us that man does not always walk upright, that human *logos* has its limits, and by juxtaposing an abstract conception of the human with its concrete manifestation in the humanity of Oedipus, the Sphinx’s riddle challenges conceptions of the human without, however, itself offering a firm answer to the question of who and what is man. It is only when the blinded Oedipus finally leaves Thebes, hobbling away on a walking stick – himself now decisively *tripous* (‘three-footed’) – that the link between Oedipus’ own story and the meaning of the riddle has become clear to him.<sup>40</sup> The figure of the Sphinx as a hybrid, liminal, and female creature seems uniquely suited to prompt this process of leaning. She speaks from the off, outside of the city, and outside of any other definite identity that would ground her message in a particular time and space, thus depriving it of its inherent ambiguities.

The insight into the meanings of the riddle (and thus the paradoxes and intricacies of the human condition) makes the figure of Oedipus the quintessential human. The world and the human place within it, as

enacted by Sophocles, is characterized by a profound and pervasive ambiguity which makes it difficult to navigate.<sup>41</sup> This ambiguity is deeply inscribed in the figure of Oedipus himself. It articulates itself as a series of sudden reversals.<sup>42</sup> To mention just a few: the stranger from Corinth turns out to be a citizen of Thebes; Jocasta's husband is also her son; the savior of the city turns out to be a threat to its well-being; the figure praised and exalted for his intellect turns out to be blind to his own innermost secrets, and so forth.<sup>43</sup> Once these truths are out in the open, Oedipus gouges out his eyes and thereby trades one form of blindness for another. The inner defect has somatized: it has taken on physical form.<sup>44</sup>

Both Oedipus and the Sphinx, then, share a double nature, a hybridity or, indeed, ambiguity.<sup>45</sup> The moment of their encounter brings them, quite literally, face to face. This is the ultimate reason why their encounter – albeit not part of the events related to us by Sophocles – is central to the story: the Sphinx highlights the friction between knowing and not knowing and between our human and animal sides as essential to Oedipus' inner nature – and, more generally, the nature of the human as such. She is a part of Oedipus and indeed all of us who struggle to make sense of the world and the human place within it.<sup>46</sup>

### ENTER FREUD: THE INNER SPHINX AND HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY

One person who pondered exactly these questions in the modern world is Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), whose interest in Greek mythology has yielded the term 'Oedipus complex'.<sup>47</sup> It is to the role of the Sphinx in his oeuvre that we now turn. We do so for two reasons: first, because Freud had a defining impact on modern ways of 'thinking the human'. Even though many of his concepts have now dated, he decisively shaped modern notions about the complex inner life of the human animal. Second, because Freud's interest in the Sphinx goes straight to the core of his conception of the human.

Freud's reading of the Oedipus myth is one of the famous and often invoked examples of classical reception. And yet while Freud's Oedipus has received plenty of scholarly attention, his references to the Theban Sphinx have not received the same level of scrutiny.<sup>48</sup> This is because, in contrast to some other modern thinkers (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel,

Vladimir Propp, Claude Lévi-Strauss), Freud does not grant the Sphinx a central place in his oeuvre.<sup>49</sup> The Sphinx appears only a handful of times in the course of his discussion of the Oedipus complex.<sup>50</sup>

And yet, the few times the Sphinx *does* make an appearance are invariably revealing. In Freud's writing, her presence is part of a larger attempt to generalize (and thus universalize) the observations he derived from work with his clients. At the same time, Freud's Sphinx speaks to us from inside the human psyche, thus expanding on Sophocles' representation of this figure in ways that are representative of a larger 'inward turn' in the reading of the Oedipus myth during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>51</sup>

Before we explore the intricacies of Freud's Theban Sphinx, it is worth pointing out that Freud took a broad interest in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt and their various literary and material productions. Together with his brother, he had travelled to Greece and Rome and owned a sizeable collection of antiquities including several sphinxes, as well as an original Athenian red-figure *hydria* (an ancient Greek water jug used to store liquids) depicting Oedipus seated before the Sphinx.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Freud was widely read in Greek and Roman literature and in parts of classical scholarship, as evident in numerous references throughout his oeuvre.<sup>53</sup> It is through this evidence that Freud engaged with the myth of Oedipus. And he did not read just for leisure; rather, as we will see, his engagement with the ancient world informed his views on human psychology. It is therefore no surprise that the infamous Oedipus complex is not the only condition he named after a mythical figure: another one, that of 'narcissism' got its name from the ancient figure of Narcissus, who fell in love with (the image of) himself.

Freud's interest in Oedipus remains focused on his parental relationships (patricide and incest) as they articulated themselves in the Oedipus complex. His work *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899/1900) features the earliest published account of the complex.<sup>54</sup> Freud starts with a general description of it and highlights its potential to turn into a neurotic condition if not handled properly.

In my experience, which is already extensive, the chief part in the mental lives of all children who later become psychoneurotics is played by their

parents. Being in love with the one parent and hating the other are among the essential constituents of the stock of psychical impulses which is formed at that time and which is of such importance in determining the symptoms of later neurosis.<sup>55</sup>

So according to Freud, children in early infancy form a complex of desires revolving around the wish to possess the parent of the opposite sex and to eliminate the parent of the same sex – the classic Oedipus complex that played such an important role throughout Freud's writing.<sup>56</sup> According to Freud, this wish is present in all children. It is a normal developmental stage. It is only if it is not mastered (that is redirected, controlled, and thus managed) that this becomes a problem later in life.

However, Freud does not end with a description of the complex but extends it into a discussion of the ancient myth after which it is named:

This discovery is confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity. What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles' drama which bears his name.<sup>57</sup>

This reading of the story of Oedipus is grounded in Freud's broader understanding of myth as a repertoire of experiences so fundamental and universal that they manifest themselves in the form of timeless tales. Like dreams, myth provides insight into everyone's subconscious thoughts, fears, and desires. The myth of Oedipus is a case in point. The conflicts specific to his persona are not merely Greek but reveal something fundamental about the human condition. As Freud states in his essay *A Case of Hysteria* (referring back to his *The Interpretation of Dreams*):

I have shown at length elsewhere at what an early age sexual attraction makes itself felt between parents and children, and I have explained that the legend of Oedipus is probably to be regarded as a poetical rendering of what is typical in these relations. Distinct traces are probably to be found in most people of an early partiality of this kind – on the part of a daughter for her father, or on the part of a son for his mother; but it must be assumed to

be more intense from the very first in the case of those children whose constitution marks them down for a neurosis . . .<sup>58</sup>

In Freud's reading, the ancient story of Oedipus articulates a desire that he attributes if not to all of us so at least the male half of the population sometime in early childhood: the wish to slay our father and marry our mother. What makes the figure of Oedipus stand out, then, is that he actually acted upon it.

Oedipus' slow and painful (re)discovery of his true identity, then, is a way of coming to terms with this experience. Freud compares Sophocles' enactment of the myth and its focus on the long and painful process of Oedipus' self-discovery with the revelatory processes of psychoanalysis.<sup>59</sup> In the modern world, the tale of Oedipus has lost nothing of its dramatic appeal.

So Much for Oedipus in Freud's oeuvre: what about the Sphinx?

In contrast to the deadly hollows of the Oedipus complex, Freud's depiction of the Sphinx has a surprisingly uplifting touch that (for today's reader at least) may border on the comic. This is because to Freud, the Sphinx points to the first, biggest, and arguably most fundamental of all problems: the question of where babies come from. This point reappears formulaically whenever Freud mentions the ancient myth of Oedipus.<sup>60</sup> What triggers this question, according to Freud, is more often than not the arrival of a new sibling. So, in Freud's reading, the Sphinx's description of the different stages of human life – prominently on show in ancient representations of the Sphinx's riddle (see the first part of this chapter) – points to the question of its origins.

Various modern commentators have pointed out that this idea in effect establishes a link between the figure of the Sphinx and that dimension of the human psyche not usually accessible to critical reflection: the unconscious.<sup>61</sup> When children do not get a satisfying answer to the question of the origins of human life, the Sphinx's riddle keeps preoccupying their minds in less obvious, open, and psychologically productive ways (so Freud's theory).<sup>62</sup>

The Sphinx's affinity to Freud's conception of the unconscious brings us to a final dimension of her identity in his oeuvre: her femininity and, in particular, her sexuality. Intriguingly, perhaps, Freud's interest in this



dimension seems to be linked not (just) to the myth itself but to its representation in the works of a painting of which a print was in his possession.

The renowned French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) provided several renderings of the myth, all focused on the same, sexualized scene of the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx.<sup>63</sup> In the version he completed in 1808 and extended in 1827 (Figure 1.2), the Sphinx’s female attributes are – literally – the focus of attention. Sitting on a rocky ledge and surrounded by a mountain cave, she sports bare breasts, ostentatiously pointed towards the young, fully nude, and exceedingly handsome Oedipus. The breasts are directly in front of Oedipus’ eyes – bringing her gender emphatically into focus. The artist’s decision to illuminate them with natural light underlines this. Oedipus stretches out



1.2. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (*Oedipe explique l'énigme du sphinx*, 1808/1827). Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre) / Stéphane Maréchalle

a finger as if to touch the beast/the breasts. His other hand holds a spear and (inadvertently) points to himself – a gesture perhaps representing the solution to the Sphinx’s riddle and the conception of the human as such. The Sphinx engages with her counterpart by staring Oedipus right in the eye and extending a front paw towards him. The whole scene carries seductive undertones in which the Sphinx, from her elevated position and with her direct stare, seems to play an active part.

Sexually suggestive as the encounter may be, it is not free from undertones of death and danger. The remnants of the Sphinx’s previous victims – a foot, skull, and some bones – are clearly visible in the lower left of the picture. The creature’s deadly powers thus quite literally underpin the moment, providing a counterpoint to the vitality of the two figures at its core. Another man flees towards the city, visible through a cleft in the rocks in the background. The whole scene raises a new series of questions: is the Sphinx’s sexuality, and not her riddle, the real source of danger here? Or is her sexuality perhaps the riddle?

A print of this painting decorated Freud’s consulting rooms at 19 Berggasse in Vienna.<sup>64</sup> It hung on the wall at the end of the couch on which his investigations into human psychology took place – clearly visible to all those having their lives examined. Of course, we cannot know what Freud saw in Ingres’ painting. Did the way in which Ingres’ Sphinx drew on conceptions of the oriental female appeal to his interest in ancient Egypt as a cultural tradition different from the prevailing Eurocentrism?<sup>65</sup> And, if so, did it reverberate with Freud’s disillusionment with prevailing racist theories of Western superiority that increasingly gained public currency towards the end of his life? Whatever the answer may be, we will not be far off the mark if we assume that he was as enticed by the creatures’ apparent sexuality as by Oedipus’ response to it. Freud obviously identified with Oedipus as the solver of riddles.<sup>66</sup>

Owing to this association with the figure of Oedipus, Freud’s conception of psychoanalysis took on a gendered dimension. Throughout his oeuvre, the analytic gaze is imagined as a distinctly male gaze focused on the unconscious imagined as female, seductive, and riddling.<sup>67</sup> The implications of this analogy are far-reaching and go beyond Freud’s conception of the unconscious framed as female. The doctor assumes a fundamental primacy of the male over the female. The male body and male sexuality remain the

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constant point of reference for the description of the female psyche, without the obverse applying as well. Indeed, female concerns remained such a mystery to him that he (in)famously referred to female sexuality as a 'dark continent' and to women themselves as 'a riddle'.<sup>68</sup>

The implications of this view for Freud's reading of the myth are readily at hand. They have given rise to a sustained critical engagement with Freud and the principles and practices of psychotherapy more generally. In particular, feminist scholars have dismissed the overt androcentrism of Freud's view of the human. To some of them, Freud's work provides a powerful source with which to explore the structures of patriarchal society itself.<sup>69</sup>

But with these developments, we have reached the reception of Freud and developments that really took off in the 1960s and 1970s, long after his death. As far as his oeuvre is concerned, women appear as a force deeply at odds with society. Like the Sphinx, they remain outside the gates of the city – that space defined (in the ancient world) by the male pursuit of the cultural, social, and political. They remain a force ambiguous and capable of violent intervention into human life.

In *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, a late work from 1930, Freud writes:

The work of civilisation has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable . . . Thus the woman finds herself forced into the background by the claims of civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it.<sup>70</sup>

The ancient city of Thebes, it seems, is never far away. The Sphinx's poisonous influence lives on in many ways, not least in the unfulfilled modern women who resist and resent their partner's roles in society. Or so Freud would have us believe . . .

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In psychologizing and universalizing the figures of both Oedipus and the Sphinx, Freud generalized the conception of the human he saw in play in Sophocles' telling of the story – and thus indirectly also that of the Sphinx, Oedipus' perennial sparring partner.<sup>71</sup> For this purpose, he focused on those aspects of the ancient story that seemed to confirm

his theories of the human psyche while neglecting others. At the same time, he internalized the figure of the Sphinx, turning her into a representation of the unconscious while also elaborating on her female and threatening features. All this served Freud's larger purpose to name and describe parts of the human psyche that exist across time and space.

It might be tempting to see Freud's use of the ancient story as a misappropriation of the classical past. Yet that would be to misunderstand the nature of his interest in the ancient world. Freud never aimed at a faithful reading of Sophocles. Rather, he drew on myth as an articulation of the timeless nature of man, which helped him universalize his observations. Yet his use of the ancient story helped to ensure its enduring appeal in the present: it is thanks to Freud that the figure of Oedipus – and with it that of the Sphinx – have been popularized in the modern imagination. Even though the psychological profession has long moved on, many of Freud's concepts and theories endure in the modern cultural imagination. In the twenty-first century, Oedipus and his complex are a household name. And the idea that *logos* is a means of human self-definition, albeit one with its own weaknesses to be considered, is now more widely accepted than ever. In some ways, it seems, we are indeed all Oedipus.

In facilitating such considerations, the Theban Sphinx rightfully holds a place at the core of the opening chapter of this book. In both her ancient and modern renderings, she anticipates various themes and points of contestation that will feature in more detail in later chapters: by presenting the human as an enigma, her riddle raises the very questions of who and what is man. By offering a biologizing description of the human animal as different from all other creatures, the Sphinx's riddle also resonates with the idea of human exceptionalism as articulated most clearly in the 'man-only *topos*' of the philosophical debate. At the same time, the way in which Oedipus approaches the challenge – through the application and exercise of reason – anticipates the logocentric ways in which certain philosophers have sought to answer the question from the beginning of the debate in classical antiquity to the present.

And it is to this debate that we turn next.