

Between Tragedy and Materiality: The Sphinx in the 5th century B.C.

Monsters have always excited the human psyche. The Mycenaean and Minoan civilizations freely imported monstrous creatures from the iconographic repertoires of Egypt and the Near East (Verdélis 1951). One such import was the sphinx, a composite creature originally one part human and one part lion (Zivie-Coche 1997). Once in the Aegean, the sphinx became a favorite iconographic motif, survived the collapse of the Bronze Age and gained a Greek mythological pedigree in Hesiod's *Theogony* lines 326-327 (ca. 700 BC). Later Greek authors picked up the Sphinx's story and eventually at some unknown point in time she is grafted onto the story of Oedipus as an essential component in his elevation to the Theban throne (*LIMC* 1997). Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all deal with the myth of Oedipus and through their language create a 'tragic image' of the Sphinx. Previous scholarship concerning both the iconography of the Sphinx and her appearance in tragedy either treat her iconography exhaustively with only cursory references to the 'tragic' Sphinx or concentrate solely on her relationship to the Thebans and Oedipus (Demsich 1977). These approaches, in my opinion, do not fully recognize the system of repeated imagery that flows back and forth between the Sphinx's appearances in the arts and tragedy during the 5th century B.C. In this paper I argue that the 'tragic image' of the Sphinx is both complementary to and at points at variance with the her image as it was conveyed in 5th century B.C. Greek vase painting, sculpture, coroplasty, and decorative arts.

Aeschylus begins the 'tragic image' of the Sphinx. For him the Sphinx is a feral raw human flesh-eating beast in both the *Seven against Thebes* (539-543, 558-560, 776-777) and probably in the *Sphinx* as well, but with a comic twist (*TrGF* III F 236). Aeschylus' emphasis on

the Sphinx's animality shows up most clearly in the archaeological record in scenes where the Sphinx is attacking a single Theban (Langridge-Noti 2003). It also appears in parody scenes.

Sophocles in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (36, 130-1, 391, 506-7, 1199-1200) continues the 'tragic image' of the Sphinx but strongly emphasizes her quasi-oracular vocal abilities. In the *OT* she is truly defined by her ability to sing hexameter verse, a quintessentially Greek activity made all the more incongruous coming from a lethal female *Mischwesen*. This emphasis on orality allows her to show up in the archaeological record whenever the riddle scene is depicted with only the Sphinx and Oedipus in attendance (Moret 1985).

Euripides concludes the 'tragic image' of the Sphinx as we know it in the *Phoenissae* (45-50, 806-811, 1019-1042, 1504-1507). His Sphinx combines the feral animality of the beast in Aeschylus with the riddling oracular ability of the singer in Sophocles, thereby resolving the inherent tensions between the two by uniting them into one. By combining all these aspects he gives his Sphinx the greatest number of appearances in the archaeological record. She is present wherever scenes of the Sphinx attacking a single Theban, the riddle scene with only the Sphinx and Oedipus, and Oedipus fighting and killing the Sphinx are seen (Moret 1985: 81).

All these 'tragic images' of the Sphinx indicate a sophisticated dialogue between text and material culture where questions of influence must be seen as flowing both ways. The Sphinx's long pre-Greek iconographic history made her image fixed yet at the same time malleable and pliant. Fusing, as she does, on a symbolic and physical level, elements and behavioral patterns from both civilization and savagery, culture and nature, as well as straddling human, bestial and divine modes of existence, the Sphinx was uniquely suited to be perfectly at home whether in solid stone at the top of a column at Delphi or in words on the tragic stage at Athens.

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