

### 3. THE CURSE OF THE SPHINX

The feline Sphinx roamed free as air and smiled  
In the dry desert at those foolish men  
Who saw not that her crafted Riddle's clue  
Was merely Man, bare man, no Mystery.  
But when they found it out they spilt her blood  
For her presumption and her Monstrous shape.  
Man named Himself and thus assumed the Power  
Over his Questioner, till then his Fate -  
After, his Slave and victim.

from 'The Fairy Melusine' by Christabel LaMotte  
[A.S. Byatt, *Possession*, 292]

Sophocles was still in his twenties when he wrote *Antigone*, and Athens was still at the height of its power and glory. It is often assumed that his plays must therefore be underwriting the optimistic patriarchal rationalism of his time. Yet Melville claims that it is the function of the great imaginative writer at any time to say 'No! in thunder' to the most cherished and unquestioned beliefs and values of his culture, and this is precisely what Sophocles did in his plays if not in his public life. Athens was founded upon the Promethean values of reason, technology, the conquest of Nature, and independence from the gods (except such gods as Athene and Apollo who could be interpreted as giving divine sanction to the tyranny of the male intellect). Sophocles sees these values not as heroic and glorious but as leading to a spurious and hubristic kind of 'progress' which must in the long run prove disastrous.

Theatre for the Greeks was not an entertainment. Though the comedies and satyr plays were very entertaining, they were not only that, and the main business of each day of the Great Dionysia was the performance of a trilogy of tragedies. Nor was it, as we are often told, a way of enforcing civic solidarity. The Great Dionysia was a religious festival, the greatest of the year. It was an act of worship of Dionysos, god of wild things and nature's bounty, of women, and of irrational creativity. The function of the annual festival, presided over by the statue of Dionysus, was to keep alive deeper values than those expressed the rest of the year in the rhetoric of the politicians and administrators (who were no fools, and tried several times without success to put a stop to the Dionysia). Its function was metaphorically to break down the walls within

which man attempted to pursue his autonomous life, and let in the disorderly energies of Nature.

There is a common critical vice of ascribing to authors views expressed by their characters. This vice is an ancient one. Both Pericles and Demosthenes were to quote Creon in *Antigone* as if Sophocles had intended the audience to approve his specious arguments, as the chorus does for most of the play. There is a convention that oracles and soothsayers always speak the truth, but not that choruses do. The chorus in *Antigone* is about as morally reliable as Polonius. These Theban elders are, from the start, morally obtuse. They do not question Creon's ruling that the body of Polynices be left unburied; for the dead and the living, they say, his will is law.

The play as a whole makes perfectly clear that Antigone is wholly in the right and Creon wholly in the wrong. That anyone at all should be 'left unburied, his corpse / carrion for the birds and dogs to tear / an obscenity' [68] (in Creon's own words) is an offence against the gods. Any man who seeks to pursue his enemy beyond death usurps the province of the gods. In *Ajax*, probably the earliest of Sophocles' extant plays, the same issue had already been dealt with unambiguously. Menelaus and Agamemnon order that Ajax should be left unburied. Teucer is completely vindicated in his defiance of them. What Creon has done is an act of moral and physical pollution, which might well cause an actual plague, but, in any case, rises stinking to the nostrils of the gods. It is a violation both of human morality and natural law.

It is not that Creon is evil, rather that he is one-dimensional. His high intelligence operates solely in the secular, political dimension - 'our country is our safety'. He believes that any opposition to him must be politically motivated. The chorus continues blindly to support Creon, the status quo, law and order, right up to the revelations of Teiresias late in the play.

The manly qualities particularly eulogized in the famous Ode on Man are mastery and cunning, the qualities of Prometheus and Odysseus. Indeed, the first example given is man's mastery of the sea. Man is defined as he who 'crossing the heaving grey sea, / driven on by the blasts of winter / on through breakers crashing left and right, / holds his steady course' [76]. The power of the sea is to be evoked later in the play with exactly the opposite meaning, as a symbol of the irresistible power of the divine curse:

the ruin will never cease, cresting on and on  
from one generation on throughout the race -  
like a great mounting tide  
driven on by savage mountain gales

surging over the dead black depths  
rolling up from the bottom dark heaves of sand  
and the headlands, taking the storm's onslaught full-force,  
roar, and the low moaning

echoes on and on [91]

or of Destiny itself:

neither wealth nor armies  
towered walls nor ships  
black hulls lashed by the salt  
can save us from that force.

[108]

The second claim made for man is that 'the oldest of the gods he wears away - / the Earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible - / as his plows go back and forth, year in, year out'. He exhausts the only apparently inexhaustible mother by perpetual rape. By the time of Sophocles man had worn away the earth to such an extent that he was already well on the way to reducing a green and fertile land to the largely rocky desert Greece is today. Plato's Critias remembers a time when 'the country was unspoiled: its mountains were arable highlands and what is now stony fields was once good soil. ... What now remains is like the skeleton of a sick man, all the fat and soft earth wasted away and only the bare framework of the land left'.

Next the Ode passes to man the hunter:

And the blithe, lightheaded race of birds he snares,  
the tribes of savage beasts, the life that swarms the depths -  
with one fling of his nets  
woven and coiled tight, he takes them all,  
man the skilled, the brilliant!

[76]

Yet only four pages later the sentry gives us a less anthropocentric point of view when he compares Antigone screaming over her brother's body to 'a bird come back to an empty nest / peering into its bed, and all the babies gone' [80]. And it is to be the unnatural behaviour of birds which prompts Teiresias to make the tests of sacrifice which reveal that the blight upon Thebes is Creon's doing.

Another of the supposed achievements of man is in 'training the stallion, clamping the yoke across / his shaggy neck'. But Creon is shortly to be proved

wrong in his assertion that (speaking of Antigone) he has known 'spirited horses you can break with a light bit' [83]. Against the Ode's claim for the wonder of the use of language, the play sets Antigone's screams, her dumb resistance, her spit in the face of Creon . Against wind-swift thought, it sets the deeper motions of the heart. The chorus is later forced into a choice between Creon and Aphrodite. It chooses Creon, for Love is a madness:

Love! -  
you wrench the minds of the righteous into outrage,  
swerve them to their ruin. [101]

What Creon calls woman's law is the law of Love, not only the law of Aphrodite, but also of Zeus himself, the god of family love. Polynices is Creon's nephew. His denial of the sanctity of love and marriage ('You'd kill your own son's bride?' 'Absolutely: there are other fields for him to plow' [89]) and family bonds makes it appropriate that his punishment should be to lose both wife and son. As Teiresias says: 'this is violence / you have forced upon the heavens' [115].

The last achievement the Ode specifies is that man has 'the mood and mind for law that rules the city'. But we are soon to see that while Creon inhabits an exclusively human and male world of what passes for intelligence and civic values, Antigone is throughout associated with that which lies beyond the city walls, with what Segal calls 'the subjugated natural world', and with the gods, including the gods of night and the underworld. The chorus sides with Creon partly because he is male and Antigone female. Creon himself makes the most of that distinction. We must, he says, 'never let some woman triumph over us' [94]. What a man prays for, he says, is 'to produce good sons'. His imagery reveals that he would really like to reduce women to the status of slaves, or even beasts of burden. It needs Teiresias (a man who had known what it was to be a woman) to heal the split, to show that neither the psychic health of the individual nor the health of the state can be maintained cut off from what lies beyond and beneath the city, the one life we share with animals and gods.

The Ode to Man ends with the absurd hubristic claim for 'ready, resourceful man' that he is 'Never without resources'

never an impasse as he marches on the future -  
only Death, from Death alone he will find no rescue  
but from desperate plagues he has plotted his escapes. [77]

Odysseus himself would hardly have dared to make such a claim. By the end of the play the chorus is to be suitably humbled:

The mighty words of the proud are paid in full  
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last  
those blows will teach us wisdom. [128]

And Creon, the embodiment, for the chorus, of all the virtues of man, is judged by the play, and, ultimately, by himself, to be the very nobody Odysseus was so determined not to be: 'I don't even exist - I'm no one. Nothing' [126].

The Ode is not, in fact, a portrait of ideal man, but of a false ideal, of outrageously, blindly arrogant man, and a portrait therefore of both Creon and Oedipus.

In the final ode of the play the chorus belatedly remembers that Thebes is the 'mother-city' of Dionysus, whom they invoke as the only remedy for the ills caused by man. The healing spirit for which they plead, the joyful renewal of nature's bounty, the participation of men and women in the cosmic dance, is manifest in the very language and rhythms of this ode, as though in anticipation of the full flowing of that spirit in *Oedipus at Colonus*:

Lord of the dancing -  
dance, dance the constellations breathing fire!  
Great master of the voices of the night!  
Child of Zeus, God's offspring, come, come forth!  
Lord, king, dance with your nymphs, swirling, raving  
arm-in-arm in frenzy through the night  
they dance you, Iacchus -  
Dance, Dionysus  
giver of all good things! [119]

\* \* \*

Oedipus, even more than Creon, exactly fits the picture of a paragon in the Ode to Man. Before his fall he is the man proclaimed by Protagoras as the measure of all things. He manifests precisely those qualities which were deemed at the time to be characteristic of Athenians, a 'will to action' (in Pericles' phrase), courage, adaptability, intelligence, public spirit, respect for law and order. Sophocles measures Oedipus and finds him wanting. Since Sophocles was himself a model Athenian, *Oedipus the King* has all the urgency and depth of self-interrogation. Sophocles found in Oedipus the perfect metaphor both for his own nature and for the most urgent issues of his time. We have inherited that nature and those issues.

The Oedipus mediated to us by tradition - the innocent man predestined by fate to inescapable horrors - is not the Oedipus of Sophocles, still less of the original myth. If we can shed such preconceptions, we must recognize that, though Oedipus himself frequently proclaims his innocence, Sophocles holds him fully responsible for his own fate. There is no play in which it is more true that character is fate. Sophocles does not, within the play, see the oracles as a problem in relation to free will. Apollo simply foresees what sort of man Oedipus will allow himself to become, what terrible dangers lie in the path of someone so perversely blind. Oedipus has always held his head too high to see the pitfalls:

Pride breeds the tyrant  
violent pride, gorging, crammed to bursting  
with all that is overripe and rich with ruin -  
clawing up to the heights, headlong pride  
crashes down the abyss - sheer doom! [209]

Oedipus could not know that Laius and Jocasta were his parents, but one might have expected any man, let alone a man with such warnings behind him, not to be so rash and violent as to escalate a quarrel about priority at a crossroads into multiple murder, including the murder of a man old enough to be his father, not to think the oracle so easily cheated that he can blithely marry a woman old enough to be his mother. Oedipus is the perfect tragic hero because it is the nature of tragedy to ensure that the full price must be paid for every flaw, especially those flaws which might well pass as strengths in ordinary life.

The gods in Sophocles are not the savage sadists Oedipus believes them to be; and he seems to believe in gods at all only when looking for someone else to blame for his predicament. His hubris is most evident in his treatment of Teiresias (whom Creon in the *Antigone* has also insulted and threatened). He

calls Teiresias 'this scheming quack, / this fortune-teller peddling lies, eyes peeled / for his own profit - seer blind in his craft!' [182]. Teiresias, he says, cannot harm anyone 'who sees the light'. Only the holy man, after long training in spiritual disciplines and rituals, can be allowed to know something of the secrets of earth and 'the dark and depth of human life' known to the gods. Oedipus presumes to solve all life's riddles by unaided mother-wit. He shares Jocasta's contempt for oracles and seercraft. The chorus knows that such scepticism is the thin end of the wedge: 'But if any man comes striding, high and mighty / in all he says and does ... the gods, the gods go down' [210].

There would, nevertheless, be something disproportionate about Oedipus' fate if it were the result of nothing more than pride. Surely more is involved in the curse upon Thebes than the failure to punish the murderer of Laius. That is Creon's rather literal interpretation of the oracle's words: 'Drive the corruption from the land'. Other characters, both at the end of this play and in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, seem to find the incest more horrifying than the parricide.

And what of the Sphinx? Oedipus refers to the Sphinx as a 'chanting Fury'. The Furies, as we have seen, were not simply man-eating monsters, but ancient powers of earth concerned to prevent or cleanse moral corruption. Why had Teiresias not acted against the Sphinx? Surely he could easily have solved its riddle? Oedipus boasts:

*I stopped the Sphinx! With no help from the birds,  
the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark.* [182]

We remember the claims of the Ode to Man in *Antigone* that man's thought, 'quick as the wind' had the remedy for every ill. Perhaps even in his greatest triumph, the solving of the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus had, as in all else, been wide of the mark. The life of Oedipus has been a series of disasters. All his encounters - with the oracle, his father, his mother, Teiresias - he gets disastrously wrong, in ways predictable in terms of his character. Why should we think that this sequence of disasters has been interrupted by a perfectly successful encounter with the Sphinx?

At the beginning of the play Thebes is a Waste Land, a 'city of death, one long cortege':

and the fruits of our famous earth, they will not ripen  
no and the women cannot scream their pangs to birth -  
screams for the Healer, children dead in the womb ...

so many deaths, numberless deaths on deaths, no end -  
Thebes is dying ...

[169]

The Athenian audience of 425 would not think of ancient Thebes, but of the mysterious plague which only three years earlier had killed a third of the population of Athens; of which Thucydides wrote: 'The bodies of the dying were heaped one on top of the other, and half-dead creatures could be seen staggering about in the streets'. Sophocles here lifts that raw horror onto the mythic plane where it can be given meaning.

Something has happened to break Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once. The cause of plagues was believed to be often a rotting corpse. If *Oedipus Tyrannos* were part of a trilogy, the previous play in the trilogy must have dealt with the killing of the Sphinx, and ended with the coming of the plague. What had become of the Sphinx's body? Had Oedipus simply left her where she fell, assuming that her question about the brief life of man ('What goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?') had died with her? Could the cause of the Theban plague have been the rotting body of the Sphinx?

If we turn to Seneca's *Oedipus* we find that this is indeed so:

That subtle creature's dust now rises up  
To fight against you. She, the accursed pest  
Whom I destroyed, is now destroying Thebes!

[213]

And in Ted Hughes' adaptation of Seneca's *Oedipus* these lines become:

yet she's not dead as if I'd never solved her riddle  
she never died she changed I drove her off the rock  
and the questions stopped but her rottenness is flying  
her stench is a fog smothering us as if we were living inside her carcase

[19]

Thus Thebes suffers far more from the dead Sphinx than from the living.

And this is no archaic fantasy. It is an accurate forecast of such actions as the burning of toxic waste to scatter dioxins over the grass which sheep and cattle eat, infecting meat and milk. The poison seeps into the waters under the earth (the very bloodstream of the goddess) and pollutes the whole ecosystem, causing deaths, misbirths and sterility.



castle of reason, which is founded upon a soil that they consider to be dead but is actually alive, breathing, and threatening to shift.

[*Occidental Mythology*, 80,86]

Why is the Sphinx so monstrous? Jung interprets the Sphinx as 'fear of the mother':

In the Oedipus legend the Sphinx is sent by Hera, who hates Thebes on account of the birth of Bacchus; because Oedipus conquers the Sphinx, which is nothing but fear of the mother, he must marry Jocasta, his mother, for the throne and the hand of the widowed queen of Thebes belonged to him who freed the land from the plague of the Sphinx. The genealogy of the Sphinx is rich in allusions to the problem touched upon here. She is daughter of Echidna, a mixed being; a beautiful maiden above, a hideous serpent below. This double creature corresponds to the picture of the mother; above, the lovely, human and attractive half; below the horrible animal half, converted into a fear animal through the incest prohibition.

[*Psychology*, 112-13]

In another version of the legend, the Sphinx had been sent to Thebes by Hera to punish Laius for introducing pederasty to mankind. By laying claim to sexual self-sufficiency, Laius had denied his dependence on the female, who, in response, turns monstrous and destructive. This fear of the mother, and hence of the female in all its manifestations, is a characteristic neurosis of the predominantly narcissistic and homosexual Greek male. This fear is expressed in fantasies of devouring female monsters, which are then projected onto any aspect of nature which he experiences as threatening to his ego and autonomy.

Nietzsche also links the solving of the riddle with the parricide and incest:

How should man force nature to yield up her secrets but by successfully resisting her, that is to say, by unnatural acts? This is the recognition I find expressed in the terrible triad of Oedipean fates: the same man who solved the riddle of nature (the ambiguous Sphinx) must also, as murderer of his father and husband of his mother, break the consecrated tables of the natural order. It is as though the myth whispered to us that wisdom ... is an unnatural crime, and that whoever, in pride of knowledge, hurls nature into the abyss of destruction, must himself experience nature's disintegration.

[*Birth*, 61]

In the mythic realm, the killing of the father and breaking of the incest taboo with the mother may be heroic acts, stages in the process of individuation and rebirth. As Joseph Campbell puts it:

The mystical marriage with the Queen goddess of this world represents the hero's total mastery of life. ... And the testings of the hero, which were preliminary to his ultimate experience and deed, were symbolical of those crises of realization by means of which his consciousness came to be amplified and made capable of enduring full possession of the mother-destroyer, his inevitable bride. [Hero, 120-21]

But in order for this to happen, the acts must be performed in full consciousness, or the full implications must be consciously accepted subsequently.

By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states, by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires is potentially the king, the incarnate god of the created world. [116]

Oedipus is emphatically not that hero. He cannot see Nature other than as the Sphinx's maw. He understands nothing. His approach is with the maximum of commotion and minimum of kindness. His blindness is not the blindness of Teiresias, the price to be paid for inner vision. It represents a refusal to see what, at the denouement, is being thrust in his face.

Hughes, in his adaptation of Seneca, does not merely link the Sphinx and the mother but fuses them. 'Song for a Phallus' is Hughes' savagely comic retelling of the story. Here Oedipus works on the principle of what you don't understand, kill:

Oedipus took an axe and split  
The Sphinx from top to bottom  
The answers aren't in me, he cried  
Maybe your guts have got 'em.  
Mamma Mamma

The answer indeed emerges from the Sphinx in the form of his own mother. But Oedipus is ruthless, crazed in his determination to smash his way out of the darkness, the cycle of birth, death and eternal recurrence represented by the mother:

He split his Mammy like a melon  
He was drenched with gore  
He found himself curled up inside  
As if he had never been bore.  
Mamma Mamma

Hughes' Crow makes all the mistakes of Oedipal or Socratic man, but he learns; he undergoes a psychic death and resurrection (in *Cave Birds*). He and his victim (mother and bride) with infinite care, kindness and assurance, bring each other to perfection. At the point where he has at last paid in full, has become capable of seeing her as she is, 'she gives him his eyes' ['Bride and Groom'].

The archetypal image remains the same. The interpretation of it varies according to ideological prejudice or conditioning. There is, for example, the image of a male and female being on either side of a flourishing tree. Associated with the female is a serpent. In Neolithic times the image was interpreted as the Great Goddess, Mother of All Things, through whom the life force (the serpent) becomes the fertile world (Tree of Life). Chief among her creations is the male, who now, as her consort, honours and balances her. The same image appearing in Judeo-Christian culture is interpreted as sinful Eve being seduced by the evil serpent to taste the forbidden fruit and betray her consort, thus spoiling the perfect world which had sprung from the mind of God. So, too, the image of a man sitting deep in thought before a beautiful maiden with the body of a winged lion was probably once interpreted as man receiving from the goddess an oracular revelation of her triple nature. Later it became Oedipus solving the riddle of the terrible Sphinx, thereby annihilating it.

Oedipus calls the Sphinx a 'Dog-faced Witch', but the chorus refers to her as the 'winged maiden'. If we can discount the distortions of Oedipus' 'evil eye of ignorance' and the equally deficient vision of that whole culture of which he is representative, we see the Sphinx on her mountain, virginal and maternal, beautiful and terrible, combining bird, lion and woman, as unmistakably an incarnation of the archetypal Great Goddess. Jung called her 'the great nocturnal goddess, the veiled Sphinx', Graves 'the winged moon-goddess of Thebes'. Jane Harrison described her as a soothsayer, who answered

riddles as well as asked them, 'the oracular beast of the earth-oracle', which perhaps explains why Teiresias had been reluctant to act against her.

Peter Redgrove draws attention to an Attic cup which depicts Oedipus sitting deep in thought in front of the earth-oracle, the Sphinx on her column. She has a lion body, but is also 'a lovely attentive maiden' [*Black Goddess*, xxviii]. She is a symbol of the union of opposites, the earthly and the divine, body and spirit, instinct and intelligence, male and female, ugliness and beauty. Redgrove writes:

If Oedipus had been aware of the duty he owed to forces greater than himself, the tragedy would not have occurred and the city would have been free of pestilence. But then he would have been the priest-king of an earlier rule. The ignorance of Oedipus ushered in the plagues of our superbly empty-clever modern age, full of disasters unconsciously invited.  
[xiv]

The Sphinx threw herself into the sea. Redgrove interprets this as a descent into the unconscious where she 'still operates in our lives as both curse and blessing. Moreover, the unconscious mind is no mere lumber-room of childhood errors and traumata but a living, breathing, sensing, perfumed, luminous Sphinx' [xxx].

The Sphinx, then, is the female, the Earth mother seen by civilized man as a threat and a monstrosity. He seeks to unriddle her mysteries, to replace her with the rule of his own unaided cunning and will. The Sphinx's riddle Oedipus solved was not really very difficult, Christmas cracker stuff, unless we take, as Oedipus did not, its deeper symbolic meaning. I cannot improve on Segal's account:

The riddle that both exalts and defeats Oedipus has to do with the anomalous position of man in the natural world. Not only has he evolved from the four-footed beasts to his unique two feet, but, thanks to his use of tools, he alone possesses that strange third foot. That third foot, however, can kill as well as support a lamed gait. Oedipus uses his staff both to kill his father, who is also the king, and to assert his own authority as king. ... In Oedipus' hands 'the third foot' contains the ambiguity of man's civilizing power and his destructive capacity: *homo faber* is also *homo necans*.  
[Segal, 216]

In Hughes' words 'he pounded and hacked at her / With numbers and equations and laws / Which he invented and called truth' ['Revenge Fable']. Modern man is still Oedipal man. Like a genetic engineer he plucks out the heart of her mystery: 'With tweezers of number / He picks the gluey heart out of an inaudibly squeaking cell -' ['Crow's Account of St. George'].

The serpent was, for the ancient Greeks, an exoteric symbol of *zoë*, undifferentiated life. But there was also a deeper symbol, which was esoteric, forbidden knowledge. The heart of Nature's mystery was symbolized for them by the double helix of a pair of entwined mating serpents. Tiresias, before he became a seer, had been the prototype of the genetic scientist, probing this secret. His punishment, like that of Oedipus, was blindness (a condition of inner sight) and to become for a while a woman, thus correcting the imbalance of his psyche.

Hughes sees the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx as very similar to the story of St. George and the dragon in that it 'sets up as an ideal pattern for any dealing with unpleasant or irrational experience, the complete suppression of the terror. In other words it is the symbolic story of creating a neurosis' This suppression of the terror, whether projected as devil, dragon or Sphinx, 'in fact suppresses imagination and suppresses vital natural life'. In Hughes' poem 'Crow's Account of St. George', the hero, like Heracles, sees monsters everywhere, goes mad, and slaughters his own wife and children, in accordance with Nietzsche's saying 'He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby becomes a monster' [*Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 146]. The real challenge to the hero is to find a way of negotiating with the dragon, thereby including it in the world.

The real riddle for Oedipus was how to relate to the Sphinx, that is, to Nature. To that she is herself, in her fusion of all the opposites, the answer. It is, in part, the problem of mortality. Her solution is the acceptance of death as a condition of renewal. Thebes seeks the hero who will free it from death. That riddle Oedipus got disastrously wrong. He attempted not to solve it but to unpick it, separating out the two halves of the goddess. The acceptable, safe, tameable, human part becomes Jocasta, the rest, the unacceptable, the inhuman, is the nightmarish, monstrous Sphinx, who can then be simply obliterated. But the destruction of the Sphinx brings the real horror, death without renewal.

Oedipus' assumption that there are no questions Nature can ask to which Man is not the answer drove her over the cliff. The suicide of the Sphinx is a symbol of the death of essential connections in the human spirit. Oedipus is triumphant and rewarded, but at the cost of plague, horror, exile and blindness.

\*

In the myth before Sophocles, Oedipus is hounded to death at last by the female guardian spirits of Nature, the Furies, cousins of the Sphinx. Why, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, did Sophocles change the story so radically, making the sacred grove of the Furies at Colonus into a sanctuary for Oedipus the holy man, and the place of his apotheosis? Oedipus, like Lear, is given a second chance, and gets it right.

Though the Oedipus of this play remains the old Oedipus, aggressive and unbending in his relations with men like Creon and his own sons, who still inhabit the world of power-politics, he claims that suffering has taught him the great lesson of acceptance. He is now a man at one with his fate, content to 'brood on the old prophecies, stored / in the depths of all my being, / that Apollo has fulfilled for me at last' [310]. He has come to terms with his own death, secure in the knowledge that 'only the gods can never age, / the gods can never die' [322]. The young Oedipus had approached a foreign city as hubristic hero and saviour, bringing, in the event, disaster. Old Oedipus approaches a foreign city as outcast and suppliant, bringing salvation.

More specifically, he accepts the Furies. Had he now approached them in the same spirit in which he had approached that 'chanting Fury' the Sphinx, he would have attempted to outwit and destroy them, to evade his own death and free Athens from the curse of these 'Terrible Ones'. He would have seen them as Orestes saw them, as simply monstrous, the unacceptable face of Nature. But his vision has been cleansed by suffering. He no longer projects the contents of a sick psyche onto the face of Nature. There is no longer that disastrous split down the middle of his psyche between acceptable and unacceptable. He asks their awesome names so that he can pray to these 'Daughters of Earth, Daughters of the Darkness' [285], and is told that these 'Terrible Goddesses' are called 'the Ones who watch the world, the Kindly Ones'. He later prays to them as 'you sweet daughters born of primeval Darkness' [290].

This fusion of opposites is no longer a problem for Oedipus. This is the true solving of the true riddle. Perhaps in this new spirit of Dionysian acceptance and wholeness, he might have prayed to the awesome Sphinx, acknowledging that there is no answer to the riddle of birth and death. And perhaps the Sphinx, accepted, would have shown him her kindly face.

The Sphinx stood in relation to Thebes as the Furies to Athens, a focus and personification of the spirit of the surrounding countryside on which the city depends. What had the Thebans done to earn the enmity of the Sphinx before the arrival of Oedipus? I have already mentioned the introduction of

pederasty by Laius. More likely to have concerned Sophocles was his similarity to his son, quick to anger, determined to thwart the oracle, even, in his case, at the cost of murdering his child. But it may well be that not only the ruler but the whole of Thebes had offended in ways prefigured in the Ode to Man in *Antigone*. It is a consistent story of male violence from the founding of the city out of the teeth of the slaughtered serpent, through the crimes of Pentheus against Dionysus, his Bacchantes and all the women of Thebes, the crimes of Oedipus, the crimes of the warring brothers Polyneices and Eteocles, to the murderous misogyny of Creon.

The great Ode of *Oedipus at Colonus* is an Ode to Life, to Nature and its gods and goddesses at their most beneficent. Colonus, the chorus claims, is 'the noblest home on earth', a place where man lives at one with his environment. At the centre, the source, is the 'sacred wood ... where the Reveler Dionysus strides the earth forever' [326]. Here the narcissus is the 'crown of the Great Goddesses / Mother and Daughter dying / into life from the dawn of time'. Here are springs that never fail, 'the fountainhead ... quickening life forever, fresh each day - / life rising up with the river's pure tide / flowing over the plains, the swelling breast of earth'. It is the home also of the Muses and of Aphrodite. This land is famous for the 'grey-leaved olive, mother, nurse of children, / perennial generations growing in her arms', under the 'eternal eyes of Guardian Zeus' and great Athena. Famous too for its horses, horses not broken by men, but by Poseidon 'lord god of the sea-lanes'. It is Poseidon's ship, not man's, which mounts the white manes of the sea. There is not a trace of hubris in this Ode. All the pride and power and glory is credited to mother earth and the great Nature gods. And Nature, in response, yields all sane men could ask. The imagery unifies city, cultivated land and wild untouched nature, as it also unifies Olympian and chthonic deities. It is one with the movement of the whole play towards the unification of the human world in history and individual experience with the divine mysteries.

In contrast to his ready and blasting answer, which was death to the Sphinx, Oedipus approaches the sacred grove with tentative questions. In contrast to his brandishing of language as an all-powerful weapon, he enters it in silence. This deep silence leaves room for the voice of the god to be heard, gently but firmly calling on the hesitant Oedipus (Oedipus who had rushed so rashly into every previous encounter with the divine), to hurry.

The death of Oedipus has much in common with initiation into the Elusinian mysteries. He is led where none may follow by Hermes, the Escort of the Dead, and Persephone, Queen of the Dead. But the Mysteries are not of death, but of rebirth, a transformation exactly the opposite of that in *The*

*Bacchae*, from destruction and terror into creation and kindness. From the violation of the mother Demeter springs the lovely maiden, the Kore (Persephone), and from the violation of the daughter springs the lusty son Dionysos. According to one version of the myth, it was Dionysos himself who had sent the sphinx to Thebes, that city of pride and violence. The very founding of Thebes had been in despite of Nature. Cadmus had slain a serpent, guardian of the waters and sacred to Ares. The sown teeth of that serpent had produced a race so belligerent that most of them quickly killed each other. (Pentheus was the son of one of the survivors.) Now Oedipus repays that ancient debt.

It is apt that the bringer of sterility to Thebes on the sacred mountain of the Sphinx should spend his last moments 'near a hill sacred to Demeter Eucloos, protectress of what springs green from the earth' [Segal, 371]. This is where Apollo the Healer has brought Oedipus at the end of his painful wanderings, granting him at last a vision of the atonement he had rejected in his pride. But it is more than a vision. Oedipus is to be himself a Healer, his grave a guarantee of the victory of Athens over Thebes. Theseus cannot at first see that Athens has any need of Oedipus, since there is no likelihood of war with Thebes. But Oedipus reminds him that no man can see what the future holds, that no amount of intelligence, goodwill, liberal-humanism, can lift an individual or a state out of the turmoil of history, independent of the operations of non-human powers. For wholeness, Athens needs to acknowledge Oedipus, a permanent reminder of the danger of self-sufficiency. Athens needed Oedipus as Arthur's court needed the green girdle, as Prospero needed Caliban.

Oedipus in his death leaves no polluting corpse. The power to which he finds access at last, and of which he becomes himself a transmitter, is a power which stems only from a proper contact with the unknown. Such healing as the artist can offer his countrymen, Sophocles offered in *Oedipus at Colonus*. The image of blind Oedipus, who stumbled when he saw, confidently leading his daughters to the sacred grove of the Eumenides where he is to become himself one of the invisible powers and presences he had formerly mocked is a wonderful image of healing. There is no longer any crippling division between the human and divine, between Olympian and chthonic gods, between intelligence and prophetic vision, between male and female, between civilization and Nature.

When Sophocles wrote this play, Athens was in desperate straits, within two years of finally losing, through insane hubris, the long and crippling war against Sparta. But by the time the play was performed, Athens had fallen and its great age was over.

© Keith Sagar, 2005, 2012. This essay may be quoted within the terms of fair use, and with due acknowledgement to this website.