

Myth and implication: why did Oedipus solve the Sphinx's riddle?

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Abstract. This paper presents an obvious explanation for why Oedipus even attempted to solve the Sphinx's riddle, given the high cost of failure.

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When my riddle is solved

Love is dissolved.

In Robert Graves's telling, this is the Sphinx's riddle and her associated behaviour:

‘What being, with only one voice, has sometimes two feet, sometimes three, sometimes four, and is weakest when it has the most?’ Those who could not solve the riddle she throttled and devoured on the spot... (1960)

Graves later describes Oedipus as guessing the answer, a description I am not comfortable with. But leaving this aside, why did he even attempt the challenge at all, given the cost of failure?

Here is the obvious response: he was trying to evade the prophecy that he would marry his mother but he was nevertheless interested in marrying and he felt that he could achieve both ends by entering this city guarded by the Sphinx. If he were to marry at all, this looks to be the safest place to do so. I have not seen this reasoning in presentations of the Oedipus myths, but perhaps the mythmaker or

makers were of the opinion “We don’t say that kind of stuff. Any intelligent person would work that out.”

I imagine that the Thebans themselves guessed why Oedipus entered into a battle of wits with the Sphinx. Then they found out what the mother he had left behind in Corinth looked like and just about every woman styled themselves like that. The Thebans were never convinced that Oedipus was good enough for them.

Reference

Graves, R. 1960 (revised edition). *The Greek Myths*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.