

The Sphinx is the Monster with a Riddle

When King Laius of Thebes was murdered, along with his herald, by an unknown in a Phocian road, the king's brother-in-law, Creon, came to power. It is during this first regency of Creon that the Sphinx came to Boeotia and Thebes, some say sent by Hera, others by Hades, and systematically started ravaging the fields and gobbling up people

The Sphinx had the face of a woman, the breast, feet and tail of a lion, and the wings of a bird. She had learned a riddle from the MUSES, which she chanted in inharmonious songs, and sitting on Mount Phicium, propounded it to any Theban willing to take the risk of solving it. As she declared that she would not depart unless anyone interpreted her riddle, Creon in accordance with an oracle, issued a proclamation promising that he would give the kingdom of Thebes and his sister Jocasta in marriage to the person solving the riddle of the Sphinx.

The chance to get both kingdom and queen tempted many. But the Sphinx had also declared that she would destroy whoever failed to give the correct answer. And while nobody was able to give the correct answer, she devoured the candidates one by one. This was the riddle of the Sphinx:

"What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" [Apollodorus, *Library* 3.5.7]

When many had already perished, Oedipus, having heard the proclamation, came to Thebes, and meeting the Sphinx, gave the right answer, declaring that the riddle referred to man; for as a little child he is four-footed, as an adult two-footed, and as an old man he uses a staff as a third limb.

The Sphinx kept her promise, for on hearing the solution to her riddle, she threw herself from the citadel and died. In this way Oedipus became king of Thebes, and by marrying his own mother Queen Jocasta, he unwittingly fulfilled the oracles that had declared that he would kill his father and lie with his mother.