

## Comparative Approaches to Greek Mythology – Oedipus

Greek mythology differs from other fields of classics in that its methodology is undefined and its subject matter ill-defined (e.g., do you include such literary creations as Plato's Er?). For our purposes, a myth is considered to be a narrative (verbal or visual) which is traditional (no known author – common property of the ancient Greeks). Myths never appear as a simply story until late (Roman times – e.g. Ovid's Metamorphoses); Greek myths are imbedded in a text, such as the Iliad or the Odyssey. We need to look at 3 things: (1) the myth itself (2) the source & (3) its interpretation.

The consequences of the definition and the aspects to be examined are (1) inevitably a theory of myth must be held by the researcher (no possibility of "honest empiricism") whether explicitly or not (2) Greek poetry and Greek myth are not identical (there were other sources, including oral storytellers) and (3) the use of Greek myth is always argumentative (including counter arguments in the retelling).

Greeks myths often only survive in one version. Comparative mythology can give us an idea of how it might look in the other versions. This can be (and commonly is) other Indo-European material, but the Near East is also commonly on. (Note the current dispute about the degree of influence on the Greeks from Semites or Egypt, most recently Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*. Edmunds' Johns Hopkins University Press volume Oedipus contains many modern folk tales on the Oedipus story. *Approaches to Greek Myth*, edited by Edmunds, is currently in press from the same publisher.)

The Burmese story of Pauk-Tyaing (see attached summary) takes the same motifs (the smallest meaningful units of story) as the Oedipus story but combines them differently. (This is not to argue that there is a historical connection between the Oedipus story and the Burmese tale, though that is not impossible.) The motifs include such elements as the monster, the young hero, riddle-solving, etc.

The Sphinx element in the Oedipus story poses a problem. In vase-paintings dealing with the Oedipus story, there are two categories of scenes (1) Oedipus and the Sphinx (attached plates B & D) and (2) the Sphinx and Theban youths from the Oedipus story. The iconography of vases is a form of story-telling independent of the written versions. A vase painting, like the logo of a company, is a single scene which tries to express everything essential to that myth. The essential point seems to be that a riddling monster afflicts Thebes until a traveler solves the riddle (and gets the queen). But in the story, the Sphinx is not really necessary. The Delphic oracle coordinates the plot action (Laius and Oedipus both). Without the Sphinx, Oedipus could still have come to Thebes; the Sphinx is not mentioned in the version of the Oedipus story found in *Odyssey XI*.

In the folk-tale Oedipus analogs collected from various cultures by Edmunds, the only one with a riddling monster is the Burmese tale of Pauk Tyang, the 9<sup>th</sup> kind of the 2<sup>nd</sup> dynasty, known from folklore and historical chronicles. His story, on the attached sheet, was distilled by Edmunds from the set of variants (needed to establish the base tale) found in the five versions of the Pauk tale available in Western translations and coordinated with the motif index of Stith-Thompson and the type-index of Aarne-Thompson.

Most of the Oedipus elements are there, but in different arrangements. The dragon was probably the father of Pauk, so father and monster are here combined. Unlike the Sphinx, the dragon is the subject of the riddle (here posed by the queen). There is no prophecy involved, no guilt over the

parricide and incest (which seem not even to be revealed to the characters in the story). The only negative result of these acts is the blindness of Pauk's sons, the children, not the parents pat for the sins. Blindness is in both stories, but the Greek hero blinds himself, while the Burmese hero lives happily ever after, though his sons are born blind.

Why is the Sphinx so important in the vase-paintings and almost superfluous in the verbal narrative? The Sphinx and her riddle have no necessary connection with Oedipus or These (it is a side episode), but the Burmese tale combines the queen, the riddle and the dragon. (Incidental to the story is the fact that the queen's husbands all die on their wedding night – "the monster in the bridal chamber" motif.)

Pauk has to defeat the monster twice: physically on his wedding night and mentally in the riddle. The monster-slaying is thus "over-determined", just as in the Oedipus story the exposure of the infant Oedipus is over-determined – the binding of the feet as well as the exposure on the hill-side. In the Pauk story, monster-slaying, parricide and incest are all packed together.

The Pauk tale shows a narrative scheme of which the Oedipus story was capable but which it refused. The second oracle to Oedipus (when he consults Delphi over the remark about Plybus and Merope not being his parents) is not seen in other fold tales; that, too, is over-determined, but it brings the hero's consciousness into play. Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx but not the riddle of his own birth.

The form of the Greek narrative prepares Oedipus to be subject to personal guilt, whereas the vase-painting version (like the Pauk tale) emphasizes the testing of the hero, making the Greek visual story closer to the Burmese story to the Greek narrative. (N.B. For Etruscan vase-painters, the scene of Oedipus cursing his own sons was a favorite).