

“Manuscript (HE)ART”
A Symposium of the Research Group on
Manuscript Evidence

The Medieval Sphinx

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Prior work on Oedipus and the Sphinx

- Lowell Edmunds has done a lot of work on the Oedipus myth
- One of his findings:

“[. . .] **the Sphinx is a secondary element in the Oedipus legend**, added at some point in the development of the legend in order to motivate the hero's marriage to his mother. This proposition is directly opposed to the widespread view [. . .] that the Oedipus legend originated from the folktale of the hero who wins a bride by slaying a monster.”

Lowell Edmunds, *The Sphinx in the Oedipus Legend* (Königstein: Hain, 1981), pp. 147-148

A corpus of depictions of the Sphinx

- My focus: examining the depictions, in text and image, of the Sphinx in medieval manuscripts (through the sixteenth century) in terms of: human versus monstrous/animal characteristics, how the Sphinx is gendered, and how others (namely Oedipus) interact with the Sphinx
- More and more materials are being digitized and becoming searchable - primary sources, catalogue descriptions, etc.
- Given the considerable number of images available as well as the relative lack in the digital availability of texts, this talk focuses on illustrations (rather than descriptions) of the Sphinx

General overview of the current corpus of Sphinx images

Texts	Manuscript	Language	Year	Artist
<i>Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César, Wauchier de Denain(?)</i>	Carpentras, Bibliothèque inguimbertaine 1260	French	1250-1310 (?)	
	Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale 562	French	ca. 1260-1270	
	Bn fr 1386	French	1280-1320	
	Bn fr 20125	French	13 th century	
	Bn fr 168	French	1353-1359	
	Bn fr 9685	French	14 th century	
	Bn fr 301	French	1400-1405	Perrin Remiet, active in Paris from 1383-1415 for this miniature (of the 3 artists for this ms)
	Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 212	French	ca. 1460	Rambures Master, previously identified as the Master of Amiens 200 (active 1454-1475)
	Tours, Bibliothèque municipale 1850	French	15 th century	

General overview of the current corpus of Sphinx images

Text	Manuscript	Language	Year	Artist
<i>Liber de natura rerum</i> , Thomas de Cantimpré	Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale 320	Latin	ca. 1290 (?)	
<i>Roman de Thebes</i>	Bn fr 60	French	ca. 1330	
<i>L'histoire de Thebes</i>	Bn fr 15455	French	1401-1500	
	Cod. Bodmer 160	French	1469	
<i>Roman de Troie en prose, dit Livre de la destruction de Troyes</i>	Bn fr 254	French	1467	
<i>La destruction de la noble cité de Thebes</i>	Pierpont Morgan Library, G. 23	French	1474	
<i>La fleur des hystoires</i>	Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine 1562	French	ca. 1470-1480	
<i>Oedipi et Sphingis dialogus</i>	Free Library of Philadelphia Lewis E 164	Latin	late 16 th century	

General overview of the current corpus of Sphinx images (natural history encyclopedias and dictionaries)

Text	Manuscript / Incunable	Language	Year	Artist
<i>Liber de natura rerum</i> , Thomas de Cantimpré	Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale 320	Latin	ca. 1290 (?)	
<i>A vvorlde of wordes, or Most copious, and exact dictionarie in Italian and English</i>	incunable	English	1572	
<i>Huloets dictionarie newelye corrected, amended, set in order and enlarged, vvith many names of men, tovvnes, beastes, foules, fishes, trees, shrubbes, herbes, fruited, places, instrumentes &c.</i>	incunable	English	1598	

An illustration of the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx can focus one or more of four stages:

1. The Sphinx blocks access to and from Thebes
2. The Sphinx poses the riddle
3. The victor carries out the punishment
4. The aftermath (visual sign of what transpired)

Notes on the illustrations of the Sphinx & Oedipus

- The Sphinx is mostly presented as female (womanly breasts), sometimes male (beard), sometimes ungendered
- The Sphinx is often depicted with a human head, though not always
- The Sphinx is sometimes partially clothed (chest and arms, headwear)
- The Sphinx often appears in an animalistic stance (as a quadruped, either standing on all four legs or rearing up on two legs)
- The Sphinx is rarely depicted as monstrous
- The manuscripts with illustrations of the Sphinx are overwhelmingly French texts
- Oedipus is often depicted as attacking a non-threatening Sphinx
- Oedipus is often shown in full armor with a shield, as if in battle or a tournament
- Some evidence of the Sphinx being defined with no reference to Oedipus – still has human characteristics (natural history encyclopedia, dictionaries)

Carpentras, Bibliothèque inguimbertaine 1260, f. 52v



Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale 562, f. 67v



ca. 1260-1270

Bn fr 1386, f. 2v



1280-1320

Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale 320, f. 64r



ca. 1290

c

Bn fr 20125, f. 91v



13th century

Bn fr 60, ff. 1r-2v



1r



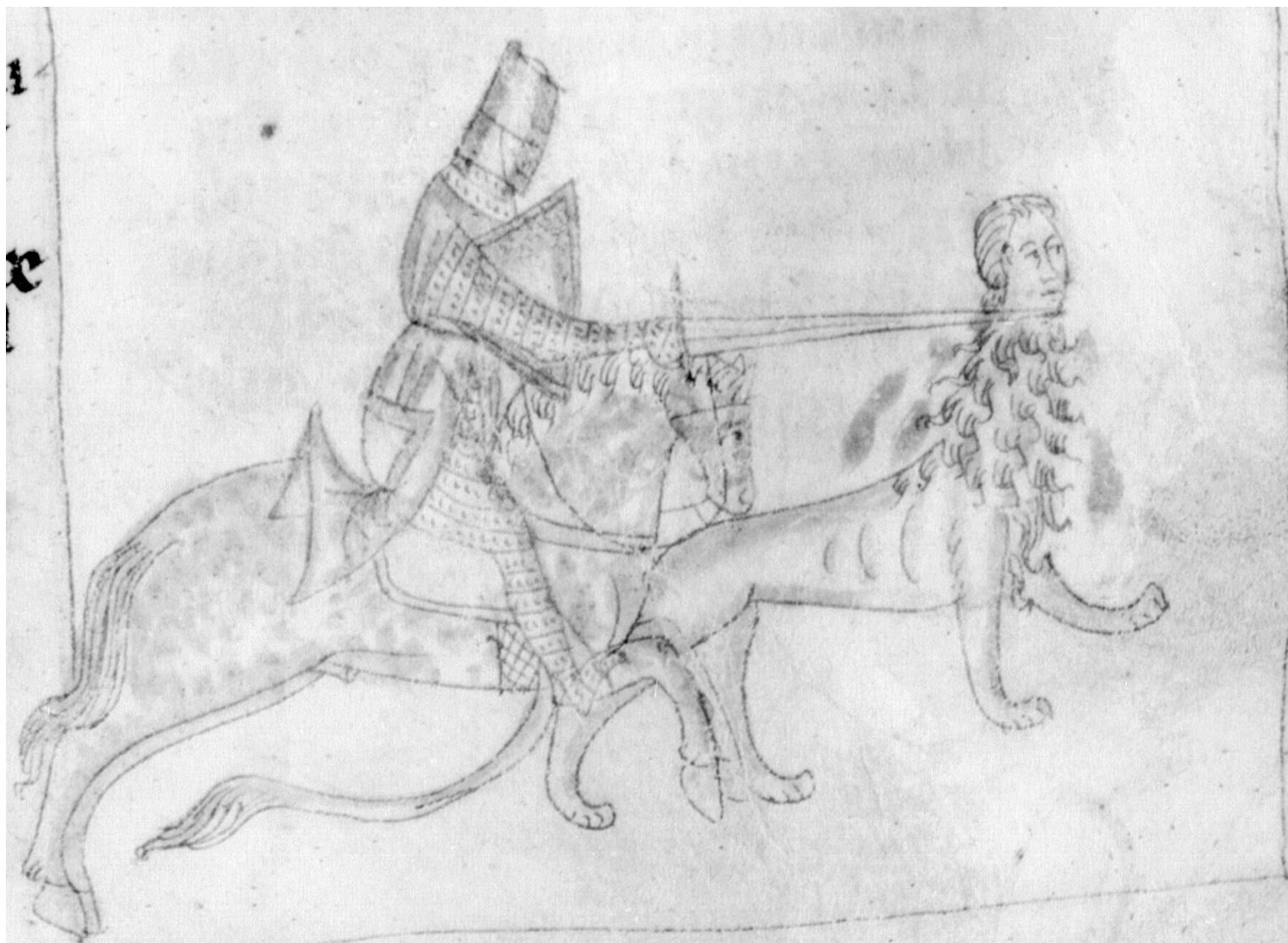
circa 1330

2v

Bn fr 168, f. 81r



Bn fr 9685, f. 67r



14th century

Bn fr 301, f. 2v



1400-1405

Pierpont Morgan Library M. 212, f. 51v



ca. 1460

Bn fr 15455, f. 73v



Cod. Bodmer 160, f. 9v



Bn fr 254, f. 15r



Pierpont Morgan Library G. 23, f. 8r



© Morgan Library, New York

Paris, Bibliothèque Mazarine, 1562, ff. 174v-175r



174v



175r

ca. 1470-1480

Tours, Bibliothèque municipale 1850, f. 8



15th century

Free Library of Philadelphia Lewis E 164, f. 3



late 16th century

*A worlde of wordes, or Most copious, and exact
dictionarie in Italian and English*

Sfinga, a beast called a Sphinx, hauing a
face and voice like a woman, and hand
and feete as a lyon.
Sfinge, a kinde of Apes verie hairie, ha-
uing long teates, who are easilie taught
to forget their wildenes.

Sfinga,
a beast called a Sphinx, hauing a face
and voice like a woman, and hand and
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