

Re-Narrativizing the Visual: Poetic Ekphrasis in Modernist Distortion of Myth

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A whirlpool mirror that would draw and hold

All that night could hide or day unfold:

Daedalus, labyrinth, riddle, Oedipus King?

—Jorge Luis Borges, “A Poet of the Thirteenth Century”¹

This paper closely reads three modernist poems, W. B. Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” (1924), C.P. Cavafy’s “Ο Οιδίπους” (1896), and W. H. Auden’s “The Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938), all which contain by coincidence unnaturally winged beings from mythology—the metamorphized Zeus as swan who rapes Leda, the mechanically winged Icarus who falls from the sky, and the chimeric Sphinx who sets Oedipus a riddle. To what extent can we consider these three poems, all markedly influenced or based on specific paintings or their museum paratextual descriptions, ekphrastic? By ekphrasis, I refer to the poetic practice of basing a poem on a specific historical artwork rather than endeavoring to form a poem in the likeness of art. David Kennedy defines this former category of ekphrasis as “the complicated performance of historical fact, [where] works of art—a painting by Bruegel, a Greek vase or a self-portrait by Parmigianino—are

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, “A Poet of the Thirteenth Century,” trans. by William Ferguson as quoted in Kurt Brown, ed. *The Measured Word: On Poetry and Science* (Athens: U of Georgia, 2001), 165.

tangible historical facts whose meaning can only be produced by the addition of voices, opinions and fictions enacted by the ekphrastic poet.”²

Apart from some attention to John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” scholars typically offer “The Musée des Beaux Arts” as an example of ekphrastic poetry (particularly from the twentieth century). “Leda and the Swan” has too been described as ekphrastic, however qualified as “complexly” ekphrastic because it intentionally “obliterates” any traces to specific visual sources.³ “Ο Οιδίπους,” an early poem Cavafy himself repudiated and about which little criticism exists, has likely never been described as ekphrastic because its paratext purports to base itself merely on a description of a painting rather than the painting itself. What reasons do we have for bringing these three poems into dialogue, then, we might ask? Despite the disparate ekphrastic methods employed by each poem, if we can describe them thus, these poems return the pictorial images they consider, not to the narratives of the original myth, but to temporalized narratives, purposely warped to carry off their modernist distortion of classical myth. Ekphrasis becomes for these three a self-referential process that either lends temporality to distortions already present in the painting under consideration (as in the case of Auden) or injects a temporal “nugget,” into the painting’s visual scene (as in the case of Cavafy and Yeats) to skew the original mythic narrative.

Since I have singled out Auden from the other two, I begin my analysis with “The Musée des Beaux Arts,” which is often compared to William Carlos Williams’ similarly

² David Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 15.

³ Charles I. Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 111.

ekphrastic poem “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” which also comments on the Netherlandish painter Pieter Bruegel’s painting *The Fall of Icarus* (see Image 1, Appendix). Auden’s comparably longer poem argues in its first stanza that the “old Masters” accurately depicted the “human position” of suffering. The second stanza, focusing on one old Master, Bruegel, offers evidence of how his painting presents the social world’s indifference to such suffering. Against the vastness of a panoramic seascape, only the observer sees the last of Icarus’ legs as he plunges downward from the sky into the sea, recognizing also that no other being present in the painting witnesses the fall. Bruegel’s painting is already markedly revisionist: its title could be a misnomer since the painting at first glance is merely a coastal landscape, focalized on a centrally placed ploughman in the field. Only closer inspection of a detail in the right hand bottom corner of the painting discovers the pair of legs disappearing into the sea. Already here the sixteenth-century Bruegel comments on how Icarus’ misfortune goes unnoticed by those performing the ordinary, mundane labors of life and distorts the focus of his painting to emphasize this fact. Below is Auden’s poem in its entirety so that we may examine how it lends temporality to this visual distortion:

Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.⁴

Where Bruegel's painting works visual focus and perspective to prioritize the presence of the ploughman over Icarus, Auden's second stanza's diction describing Icarus' suffering ("the disaster," "the forsaken cry," "not an important failure," and "white legs disappearing") notes the inconsequential and is undercut by its proximity to descriptions of the bystanders' wealth and ease ("quite leisurely," "the expensive

⁴ W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts," in David Lehman, *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 501-502.

delicate ship,” and “sailed calmly on”). Bruegel’s painting captures the ploughman in a single, static second, his head cast downward, ignorant of the sea. Auden’s poem qualifies certain temporal potentialities to speculate why his head is averted at that instant. That “the ploughman may/Have heard the splash,” but it was not “an important failure,” in effect, qualifies Icarus’ suffering by introducing the ploughman’s capacity to hear, which is imaginatively impossible for the painting to convey. Similarly, the ship in the painting stands in close physical proximity to Icarus’ sea entrance. In the poem, however, it has a temporal “after-life” beyond the painting’s frozen frame, so its indifference (that it just “sail[s] calmly on”) is cruel, being even more pronounced. Only the sun, obliged to shine on all, by approximation comes closest to touching Icarus at his moment of demise; rather than spotlighting his fall, it aestheticizes the images of “white legs” and “green sea.” The blame-less sun in Auden’s poem is unlike Williams’ sun that serves as the common denominator between the otherwise unconnected farmers’ pageantry and Icarus’ fall (“the whole pageantry/of the year was/awake tingling/with itself/sweating in the sun/that melted/the wings’ wax”).⁵ Thus, the temporality of Auden’s poem intensifies Bruegel’s effort to show indifference.

Introducing temporality into the poem creates a sequence of events that narrativizes the pictorial scene through the syntactical notion of “interrupted action,” i.e., “while X was happening, Y occurred.” As the poem leans on the painting, the hard-working ploughman guiding his plough, the opulent ship sailing its course, the unchanging sun shining in the sky, all offer themselves as implied history existing prior

⁵ William Carlos Williams, “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” in *ibid*, 293-294.

to Icarus' fall. Thus, although the poem never describes Icarus as fully submerged, the temporal continuation of action of these other presences (ploughman, ship, and sun) implies this fact. In this instance of modernist distortion, Auden chooses not to eternalize the fleeting moment (Icarus' fall) through lyric narrative. Instead he shifts focus from this mythic climax to the everyday actions of non-mythic bystanders, making Icarus's presence almost anachronistic.

In fact, Icarus' presence in the painting is not merely diminished but subjective. As Peter Wagner points out, thanks only to the painting's title, *The Fall of Icarus*, can the viewer identify the "white legs" disappearing into the "green water" as Icarus himself.⁶ Already, the visual origin of this ekphrasis, Bruegel's painting, is invested with language since "synecdochically, the museum signifies all the institutions that select circulate, reproduce, display and explain works of visual art, all the institutions that inform and regulate our experience of it—largely by putting it into words."⁷ When we consider the context of the museum in regard to the ekphrastic nature of Auden's poem, we can image the poem as a meta-allegory for museum-going itself. Angela Leighton claims, "[Auden] forces us to consider the place, art-room or poem-room, where torture is serenely depicted."⁸ Hence, in this way, just as Bruegel's bystanders leisurely observe the horrible fate of Icarus, so too do those who visit the museum indulge such representations of suffering.⁹

⁶ Peter Wagner, ed. *Icons Texts Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996), 264.

⁷ *Ibid*, 264.

⁸ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 22.

⁹ Relevant to this point is Randall Jarrell's poem "The Old and the New Masters," which opens with a

Cavafy's poem "Ο Οιδίπους," which he would later repudiate, complicates the traditional role of poetic ekphrasis because it draws attention to the written context in which a painting is displayed (titles, descriptions). The paratext of his own poem clarifies that the poem's inspiration was not the nineteenth-century painter Gustave Moreau's painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (see Image 2, Appendix) but a paratextual description of the painting ("Εγράφη έπειτα από ανάγνωσιν περιγραφής της ζωγραφιάς/«Ο Οιδίπους και η Σφιγξ» του Γουστάβου Μορώ"). Easily we could place the poem in the tradition of Keats' "On Reading Chapman's Homer" or theorize it as a claim for the pictorial power of language. However, given what we know of early Cavafy, both of these explanations seem unlikely. Cavafy's use of paratext brilliantly exposes the "depth of field" (frame within frame, observation in observation) inherent in the mechanics of the genre of poetic ekphrasis from early examples in antiquity (i.e. Theocritus, *Idylls* 15). We might consider the assumption behind the ekphrastic process: Cavafy writes about a descriptive text (which we only have access to through Cavafy's poem) that itself attempts to offer a technical ekphrasis of Moreau's painting.

Cavafy focuses on the same visual scene portrayed by Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, where Oedipus confronts the Sphinx, correctly solves her riddle, and saves the city of Thebes. Moreau depicts the intense encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx, each looking into the eyes of one another. The paws of the Sphinx rest against the chest of Oedipus in feline-esque manner; partially visible at the bottom of the painting is the corpse of the Sphinx's previous failed opponent, and in the background is a

response to Auden's "The Musée des Beaux Arts" ("About suffering, about adoration, the old masters/Disagree. When someone suffers, no one else eats/Or walks or opens the window—no one breathes/As the sufferers watch the sufferer"). Suzanne Ferguson, *Jarrell, Bishop, Lowell, & Co.: Middle-generation Poets in Context* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee, 2003), 122.

mountainous terrain through which a narrow road perilously weaves. Cavafy's poem, although it mimics the painting's positioning of Oedipus and the Sphinx, chooses to divert Oedipus' gaze. By means of this altered glance, a narrative train enters into the visual scene; hence the poem prematurely introduces the mythic misfortune of Oedipus in a way the painting cannot. Here is Cavafy's poem in its entirety to illustrate better this disparity.

Ο Οιδίπους

Εγράφη έπειτα από ανάγνωσιν περιγραφής της ζωγραφιάς

«Ο Οιδίπους και η Σφιγξ» του Γουσταβου Μορώ.

Επάνω του η Σφιγξ είναι πεσμένη
με δόντια και με νύχια τεντωμένα
και μ' όλην της ζωής την αγριάδα.
Ο Οιδίπους έπεσε στην πρώτη ορμή της,
τον τρόμαξεν η πρώτη εμφάνισή της —
τέτοια μορφή και τέτοιαν ομιλία
δεν είχε φαντασθή ποτέ έως τότε.
Μα μ' όλο που ακκουμπά τα δυο του πόδια
το τέρας στου Οιδίποδος το στήθος,
συνήλθε εκείνος γρήγορα — και διόλου
τώρα δεν την φοβάται πια, γιατί έχει
την λύσιν έτοιμη και θα νικήση.
Κι' όμως δεν χαίρεται γι' αυτήν την νίκη.
Το βλέμμα του μελαγχολία γεμάτο

την Σφίγγα δεν κυττάζει, βλέπει πέρα
τον δρόμο τον στενό που πάει στις Θήβας,
και που στον Κολωνό θ' αποτελείώση.
Και καθαρά προαισθάνεται η ψυχή του
που η Σφιγξ εκεί θα τον μιλήση πάλι
με δυσκολώτερα και πιο μεγάλα
αινίγματα που απάντησι δεν έχουν.¹⁰

Certainly the poem alters details in the painting. But because we do not know if Cavafy saw the actual painting or only read its description, we cannot determine his sources. The first revision is a slight one. Cavafy's poem makes reference to the two legs of the Sphinx leaning on Oedipus' chest, implying that the Sphinx is the size of a lioness. In the painting, however, the Sphinx is much smaller, and in fact, all four of her legs press against Oedipus. That the poem describes the Sphinx attacking Oedipus with teeth and nails also conflicts with the visual depiction where both figures are motionless, only exchanging an intense gaze.

But that the poem changes the direction of Oedipus' gaze is its most salient point. "Το βλέμμα του μελαγχολία γεμάτο" looks, not intensely into the eyes of the Sphinx but instead toward "τον δρόμο τον στενό που πάει στις Θήβας." Andreas Markantonas posits that "the apparent melancholy of Oedipus' glance reveals an extraordinary insight into the pressing, but tantalizingly unanswerable questions that human destiny poses for mortals."¹¹ Cavafy intentionally minimizes Oedipus' triumph (by solving the

¹⁰ C. P. Cavafy, "Ο Οιδίπους" in C.P. Cavafy, *Τα Αποκηρυγμένα* (Ίκαρος 1983).

¹¹ Andreas Markantonatos, *Oedipus at Colonus: Sophocles, Athens, and the World* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 24.

riddle, he saves the city of Thebes) and inserts into the visual scene a temporal glimpse of the future misfortunes at the myth's conclusion. The poem's depiction of the narrow road that lies beyond the Sphinx—for Oedipus, the prescience of what is to come—spatially configures time. Thus, Cavafy's poem temporally distorts the original mythic narrative—Oedipus is clairvoyantly aware of his fate days before the recognition moment in the original myth. Without straying from the frame of Moreau's painting, the poem inscribes a provocative visual narrative that destabilizes the very myth from which it draws. Moreau's painting, we should note, does not attempt this revisionist disordering but provides the visual "canvas" for such disordering to unfold. Cavafy's poem does not intensify distortions already present in the painting, as in the case of the Auden appropriating Bruegel, but both poems perform similar narrativization of the visual image to distort classical myth.

The final poem in this analysis, Yeats' sonnet "Leda and the Swan," undoubtedly is the most theoretically discussed of the three, but not always in regard to the notion of ekphrasis. Camille Paglia, writing generally of the poem, claims "all human beings, like Leda, are caught up moment by moment in the 'white rush' of experience[,] for Yeats, the only salvation is the shapeliness and stillness of art."¹² For Yeats, Charles Armstrong argues "the images of poetry and those of the visual arts are not isolated from one another,"¹³ and ekphrasis serves to eternalize "the fleeting" in lyric. Unlike the other two poets, Yeats never textually, paratextually, or even biographically specified the

¹² Camille Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-three of the World's Best Poems* (Pantheon, 2005), 118.

¹³ Charles I. Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 111.

visual sources of his overtly ekphrastic poem.¹⁴ Because of biographical scholarship we know that Yeats had a copy on his writing desk of Michelangelo's *Leda and the Swan* (see Image 3, Appendix), which he is said to have admired.¹⁵ Ian Fletcher has argued that Moreau's painting *Leda* (see Image 4, Appendix) also influenced Yeats' conception of the sonnet.¹⁶ But these two visual depictions of the myth are disparate. Michelangelo's painting is far more erotic than Moreau's. The latter presents the swan resting its head atop a seated Leda; the two figures look in opposite directions. The former, however, shows Leda and the swan kissing sensuously and languorously intertwined. Below is Yeats' sonnet, so we might read it in proximity to the other two paintings.

Leda and the Swan

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

¹⁴ Ibid 111.

¹⁵ Sunil Kumar Sarker, *W. B. Yeats Poetry and Plays* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publ. and Distributors, 1997), 244.

¹⁶ Ian Fletcher, "'Leda and the Swan' as Iconic Poem" in Richard J. Finneran, *Yeats Annual No. 1*. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1982), 97.

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?¹⁷

Undoubtedly a complex visual image of bird and girl caught up in one way or another appears here. But the disparity between its two visual sources (Michelangelo and Moreau) raises the issue as to which painting matches Yeats' ekphrastic description. When we turn to current scholarship, we discover disagreement in how Yeats represents the rape. Armstrong argues that the sonnet details the intensely violent nature of the rape itself, which, if supported, explains why Yeats cannot be said to be presenting an unbiased, imagistic depiction of the scene.¹⁸ Helen Vendler, however, in her line-by-line reading of the poem, emphasizes that the word "caressed" (line 2) indicates Leda's gradual willingness to accept Zeus' erotic advance and points to Leda's thighs "loosening" by their own volition, rather than forcibly "loosened" as further evidence against the idea of rape.¹⁹ But if we judge the entire sonnet to portray the

¹⁷ W. B. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan" in Stephen Burt, and David Mikics. *The Art of the Sonnet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2010), 265.

¹⁸ Charles I. Armstrong, *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 117.

¹⁹ Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2007), 175.

violence of rape, then we are left with an example of what Vendler, in a separate piece of criticism unrelated to this poem, calls “the serenity of form,” the harmonious form of the sonnet, torturing its violent content.²⁰ But if the act is not rape but instead is regarded as non-violent, which is in agreement with Michelangelo’s depiction, then there exists a greater disparity between the sexualized act described in the octet and the following line that unmistakably describes the violent fall of Troy (“The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead”).

This line stands outside both the visual and temporal frame that encapsulates the remainder of the sonnet. It enters not as description of the visual scene but as a narrative metonym for Helen at her moment of conception. The sonnet then drops this prophetic temporal jump in narrative, the fall of Troy, prematurely into the chronologically earlier visual scene. Just as Cavafy “makes us have the prophetic vision” of the catastrophe at Thebes alongside Oedipus through the image of “τον δρόμο τον στενό,” so too does Yeats, as Vendler fittingly argues,

make[] us have the prophetic vision before our last glance at Leda. We cannot deny, as we finish reading the sonnet, our Yeats-given knowledge of the future catastrophe of Troy, and so we are forced—as we return in line 11 to Leda’s story—to bring along that knowledge with us, unable to forget it as we finish the poem.²¹

²⁰ Helen Vendler, *The Music of What Happens* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1989), 129.

²¹ Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2007), 177.

But Yeats leaves the reader to decide whether Leda herself glimpsed these things to come, “Did she put on his knowledge with his power”—that is, did Leda become cognizant of Zeus’ intentions to destroy Troy during their momentary passion? This question modifies the line about the fall of Troy, which itself is a temporal “nugget” that enters the poem through metonymic association. Yeats, like Auden and Cavafy, performs a modernist distortion of the original myth; introducing the possibility that Leda had prescience of Troy’s fate and forcing the reader to accept a warped narrative that already glimpses the myth’s end at its start, comprising a comprehensive metonymic sequence).

Finally we might conclude by framing this analysis within of the German Enlightenment humanist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s seminal theoretical work *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), where he draws a dichotomy between verbal art and visual art. In his preface Lessing characterizes his work as a critical response to,

many recent critics [who] have drawn the most ill-digested conclusions imaginable from this correspondence between painting and poetry, just as though no such difference existed. In some instances they force poetry into the narrower limits of painting; in other they allow painting to fill the whole wide sphere of poetry.²²

The visual art of painting, he argues, is a vehicle of the imagination that captures a unique moment in any action, whereas the verbal art of poetry expresses the given

²² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, Trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), 4-5.

action as a continuum through narrative. Lessing never mentions the term “ekphrasis” but he does single out Homer’s ekphrastic description of the shield of Achilles in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*, calling it the “most decisive instance of how discursively and yet at the same time poetically a single object may be described by presenting its coexistent parts.”²³ Lessing may concede that this episode in Homer manages to be simultaneously image-focused yet sequence-driven, but were he able presciently to anticipate these modernist ekphrastic poems, how would he characterize these examples of re-narrativized visual images?

Though these three modernist poems span almost forty years, from Cavafy writing in the late 1890s to Auden in the late 1930s, they are tied by the similar subversion they attempt in their poems. The type of ekphrasis they perform differs from more traditional examples and highlights certain underlooked ironizing features of its practice, thus producing and bringing greater aesthetic complexity to visual, historicized objects. Here we should consider ekphrasis less as a practice in itself, where it governs the aesthetic principles of its own process, and more as the means by which these poets achieve their desiredly distorted overarching modernist agendas.

²³ Ibid, 85.

Appendix:



Image 1: Pieter Bruegel, *The Fall of Icarus*

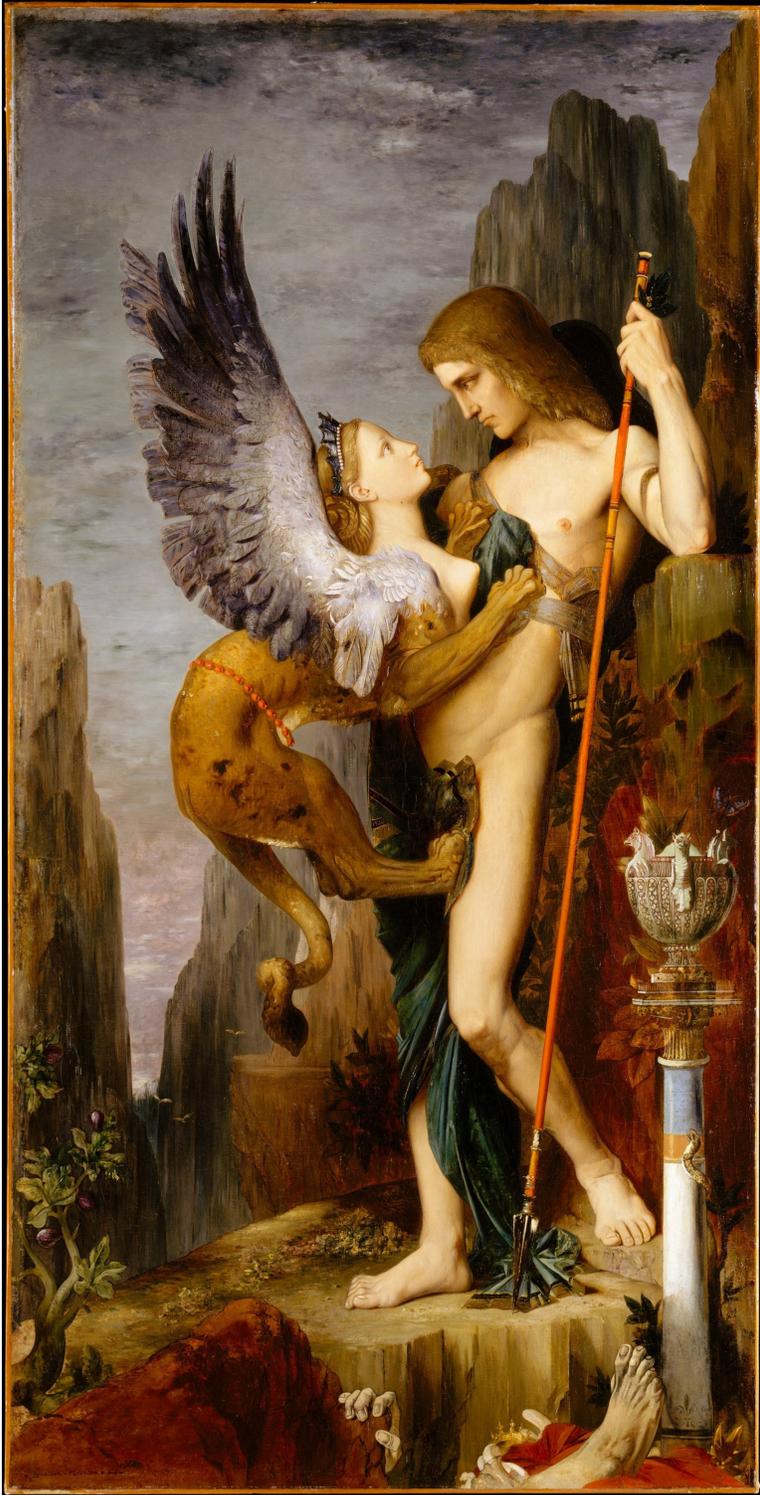


Image 2: Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*

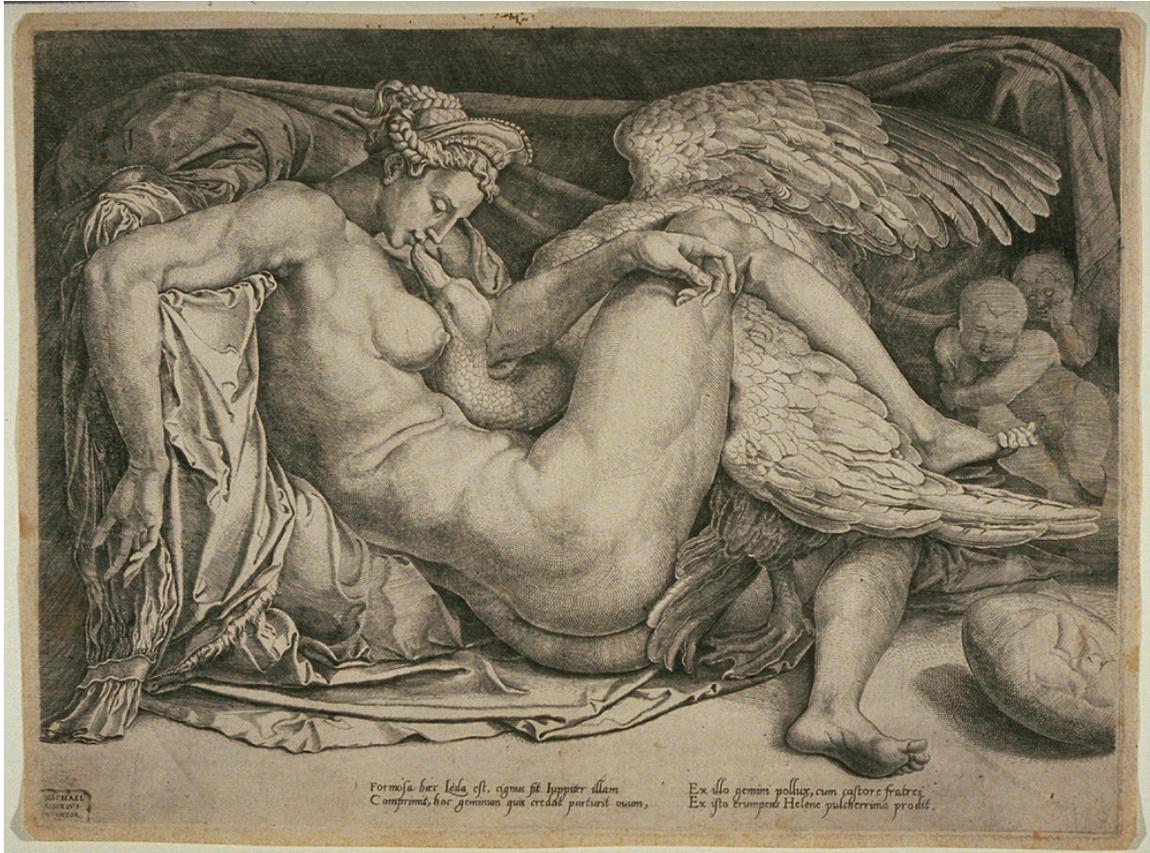


Image 3: Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*



Image 4: Gustave Moreau, *Leda*

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