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OEDIPUS' EDICT AND CURSE

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, 236–243

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The article deals with the problem of the addressee of Oedipus' curse in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* 236–243. It is suggested that the curse is directed both against the murderer of Laius and against all potential informants who are concealing the murderer's name. The ambivalence, or rather the incongruity, of Sophocles' text is explained by the double rhetorical aim of Oedipus' monologue: it is at once an edict demanding to reveal the identity of the murderer and a curse against the murderer himself. The double rhetorical function of the monologue derives from its double dramatic role. On the one hand, it begins the action of the play, which consists in revealing the murderer's identity, and on the other hand, the curse acts as the play's leitmotif: it is cited throughout the tragedy and determines Oedipus' future fate.

Keywords: tragedy, Sophocles, Oedipus, edict, curse, murderer

Oedipus' monologue opening the first episode of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is crucial both for the development of the plot and for the thematic organization of the play. Oedipus declares here an edict requiring the Thebans to find and extradite the murderer, the edict which Oedipus himself will be destined to execute, and here he pronounces a curse which will eventually be turned against himself. At the same time, the monologue poses many problems related to textual criticism and to the interpretation of the text. We will attempt to resolve one of such issues in this article.

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When Oedipus proclaims his edict, he demands from the citizens of Thebes if any of them knows the murderer of Laius to share this knowledge with him (vv. 224–226):

ὅστις ποθ' ὑμῶν Λάιον τὸν Λαβδάκου
 κάτοιιδεν ἀνδρὸς ἐκ τίνος διώλετο,
 τοῦτον κελεύω πάντα σημαίνειν ἐμοί·
 Whoever among you knows at whose hands
 Laius, son of Labdacus, perished,
 him I command to tell me all!¹

Oedipus promises a reward to anyone who gives up the murderer; and if the murderer confesses himself guilty he will be released from punishment and will only have to leave the country (vv. 227–232):

κεῖ μὲν φοβεῖται τοῦπίκλιμ' ὑπεξελὼν
 αὐτὸς κατ' αὐτοῦ – πείσεται γὰρ ἄλλο μὲν
 ἄστεργές οὐδέν, γῆς δ' ἄπεισιν ἀβλαβῆς –
 εἰ δ' αὖ τις ἄλλον οἶδεν ἢ ἕξ ἄλλης χθονός
 τὸν αὐτόχειρα, μὴ σιωπάτω· τὸ γὰρ
 κέρδος τελῶ ἴγῳ χῆ χάρις προσκείσεται.
 If he is afraid taking out an accusation
 against himself: he shall suffer nothing else unwelcome,
 but shall leave the land unharmed.
 But if someone knows another of you,
 or a foreigner, to be the killer, let him not be silent;
 for I can dispense rewards, and gratitude also shall be his.

Then Oedipus announces what his actions will be if the Thebans remain silent and harbour the murderer (vv. 233–243):

εἰ δ' αὖ σιωπήσεσθε, καὶ τις ἢ φίλου
 δείσας ἀπάσει τοῦπος ἢ χαῖτοῦ τόδε,
 ἄκ τῶνδε δρᾶσω, ταῦτα χρῆ κλυεῖν ἐμοῦ.
 τὸν ἀνδρ' ἀπαυδῶ τοῦτον, ὅστις ἐστί, γῆς
 τῆσδ', ἧς ἐγὼ κράτη τε καὶ θρόνους νέμω,
 μήτ' ἐσδέχεσθαι μήτε προσφανεῖν τινά,
 μήτ' ἐν θεῶν εὐχαῖσι μήτε θύμασι
 κοινὸν ποιεῖσθαι, μήτε χέρνιβος νέμειν·
 ὠθεῖν δ' ἀπ' οἴκων πάντας, ὡς μιάσματος
 τοῦδ' ἡμῖν ὄντος, ὡς τὸ Πυθικὸν θεοῦ
 μαντεῖον ἐξέφηγεν ἄρ,τίως ἐμοί.
 But if you remain silent, and someone,
 fearing for a friend or for himself, rejects this order—
 what I shall do then you must hear from me!
 I forbid all belonging to this land,
 over which I rule and sit upon the throne,
 to receive him or to speak to him,
 or to let him share in prayers and sacrifices to the gods,
 or to touch holy water;
 but all must drive him from their homes,
 since we are polluted, as the Pythian oracle of the god
 has just now revealed to me.

¹ Here and elsewhere in this article the translation of Sophocles' plays by Lloyd-Jones is used (with some alterations).

He explains this edict by his ardent desire to fulfil Apollo's oracle demanding that the murderer of Laius be found and his willingness to help the deceased king (vv. 244–245):

ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν τοιόσδε τῷ τε δαίμονι
τῷ τ' ἀνδρὶ τῷ θανόντι σύμμαχος πέλω.

This is how I shall fight side by side with the god
and with the man who died.

Oedipus concludes his edict with two additional curses – one directed against the murderer and the other against himself if he deliberately conceals the murderer in his own house (vv. 246–251):

κατεύχομαι δὲ τὸν δεδρακότ', εἴτε τις
εἷς ὃν λέληθεν εἴτε πλειόνων μέτα,
κακὸν κακῶς νιν ἄμορον ἐκτρίψαι βίον.
ἐπεύχομαι δ', οἴκοισιν εἰ ξυνέστιος
ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ ξυνειδότης,
παθεῖν ἄπερ τοῖσδ' ἀρτίως ἤρασάμην.

And I pray that the doer of the deed,
whether a single man has gone undetected or he has acted with others,
may wear away a miserable life in misery, miserable as he is.
And I pray further that if he is by the hearth
in my own house with my own knowledge,
I may suffer the fate with which I have just cursed others.

The interpretation of this text is highly controversial. One of the main questions for commentators concerns the words τὸν ἀνδρ' ἀπαυδῶ τοῦτον in v. 236. Who is Oedipus referring to here?

Most scholars² believe that the order to exclude “this man” from social life in the city should refer to the murderer. There are compelling reasons for this point of view.

First, in vv. 241–243 Oedipus indicates the reason why “this man” should be denied communication and participation in shared sacrifices: he is the bearer of μῖασμα, as the oracle revealed. We know that the oracle in calling for the expulsion of μῖασμα was referring specifically to the murderer of Laius. Creon, conveying the command of the oracle in the prologue, begins by quoting this oracle: ἄνωγεν ἡμᾶς Φοῖβος ἐμφανῶς, ἀναξ, / μῖασμα χώρας, ὡς τεθραμμένον χθονὶ / ἐν τῇδ', ἐλαύνειν μηδ' ἀνήκεστον τρέφειν “The lord Phoebus orders us plainly / to drive out from the land a pollution, one that has been nourished in this country, / and not to nourish it till it cannot be cured” (vv. 96–98). Then he explains that the bearer of the filth is the murderer: τούτου θανόντος νῦν ἐπιστέλλει σαφῶς / τοὺς αὐτοέντας χειρὶ τιωμεῖν τινὰς “He was killed, and the god now tells us plainly to punish his killers, whoever they may be” (vv. 106–107).

Second, the words of Oedipus' command are repeated several times further on in the tragedy, and the characters when recalling them always refer to the murderer. Initially he is addressed by Tiresias. Annoyed by the anger of Oedipus who does not understand why the soothsayer conceals the name of the murderer from him Tiresias says (vv. 350–353):

² Blaydes 1859, 49, comm. to v. 242; Schneidewin 1856, 54, comm. to vv. 236–237; Ribbeck 1858; Ribbeck 1861; Jebb 1914, 43 (trans.: ‘the slayer’); Lloyd-Jones, Wilson 1990, 86; Finglass 2018, 247–249, comm. to vv. 236–240.

ἐννέπω σὲ τῷ κηρύγματι
 ὄπερ προεῖπας ἐμμένειν, κάφ' ἡμέρας
 τῆς νῦν προσαυδᾶν μήτε τοῦσδε μήτ' ἐμέ,
 ὡς ὄντι γῆς τῆσδ' ἀνοσίφω μιάστορι.
 I call on you to abide by the proclamation
 you made earlier, and from this day on
 address neither these men nor me,
 since you are the unholy polluter of this land!

When Oedipus asks him to explain these words (ἀλλ' αἴθεις φράσον “say it again”, 361), Tiresias replies: φονέα σέ φημι τάνδρὸς οὗ ζητεῖς κυρεῖν “I say that you are the murderer of the man whose murderer you are searching for” (362).

Then Oedipus himself begins to guess that the stranger he killed may have been Laius, and recalls his own curse in dread (vv. 815–820):

τίς τοῦδ' ἄνδρὸς νῦν ἂν ἀθλιώτερος,
 τίς ἐχθροδαίμων μάλλον ἂν γένοιτ' ἀνήρ,
 δν μὴ ξένων ἔξεστι μηδ' ἀστῶν τι
 δόμοις δέχεσθαι, μηδὲ προσφωνεῖν τινα,
 ὠθεῖν δ' ἀπ' οἴκων; καὶ τὰδ' οὔτις ἄλλος ἦν
 ἢ γὼ 'π' ἐμαυτῷ τάσδ' ἄρα ὁ προστιθείς.
 who now could be more miserable,
 and who more hateful to the gods, than I,
 whom no stranger and no citizen may receive in his home,
 whom no man may address,
 but all must drive from their houses. And it was none other
 than I myself who laid upon myself these curses.

Finally, Oedipus recalls the curse again at the end of the play when he learns a terrible secret about himself and is finally convinced that his curse is turned against himself. He wishes to flee the country and not stay in his house any longer, for he falls under the curse he has uttered (ὡς ἐκ χθονὸς ῥίψων ἑαυτόν, οὐδ' ἔτι / μενῶν δόμοις ἀραῖος, ὡς ἠράσατο, 1290–1291).

On the other hand, some commentators attribute this command of Oedipus not to the murderer but to those Thebans who will conceal the name of the murderer³. This interpretation can also be justified by quite strong arguments.

First, this meaning follows from the logical development of Oedipus' speech. Initially, Oedipus promises a reward to the one who will not remain silent and reveal the identity of the murderer (vv. 227–232). The next part, which begins with the words εἰ δ' αἴσιωπήσεσθε, should obviously contain a threat or a warning to those who will not carry out the edict and will not betray the murderer.

Second, Oedipus' words in vv. 249–251 ἐπεύχομαι δ', οἴκοισιν εἰ ξυνέστιος / ἐν τοῖς γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ ξυνειδότης, / παθεῖν ἄπερ τοῖσδ' ἀρτίως ἠρασάμην “And I pray further that if he is by the hearth / in my own house with my own knowledge, / I may suffer the fate with which I have just cursed others”, expressing the hero's readiness to take the curse upon himself if he harbours the murderer in his house, are understandable only if he has previously uttered the same curse against the other Thebans (ἄπερ τοῖσδ' ἀρτίως ἠρασάμην).

Third, only if Oedipus' curse is directed against those who know the murderer and do not denounce him, we can explain the response of the chorus to his monologue

³ Classen 1861; Knox 1957, 81–82; 1959; Carawan 1999.

in vv. 276–278: ὡσπερ μ' ἀραῖον ἔλαβες, ᾧδ', ἀναξ, ἐρῶ. / οὔτ' ἔκτανον γὰρ οὔτε τὸν κτανόντ' ἔχω / δεῖξαι “As you have made me subject to a curse, so, my lord, shall I speak. / I did not kill him, neither can I point to / the killer”. Commentators usually assume that the chorus, by calling itself ἀραῖος “subject to a curse”, refers to the final words of Oedipus’ monologue, where the hero appeals to the gods to continue sending misfortunes to those who fail to obey his edict: καὶ ταῦτα τοῖς μὴ δρῶσιν εὐχομαι θεοὺς / μήτ' ἄροτον αὐτοῖς γῆς ἀνιέναι τινὰ / μήτ' οὖν γυναικῶν παῖδας, ἀλλὰ τῷ πότμῳ / τῷ νῦν φθереῖσθαι κἄτι τοῦδ' ἐχθίονι “And for those who take no action I pray that the gods / may not send up crops from the earth / nor allow their women to bear children, but that they may perish / by the fate that now afflicts them or by one yet worse” (vv. 269–272)⁴. However, the combination of the two confessions οὔτ' ἔκτανον ... οὔτε τὸν κτανόντ' ἔχω δεῖξαι is too reminiscent of the condition previously defined by Oedipus under which the culprit should be excluded from public life: εἰ δ' αὖ σιωπήσεσθε, καὶ τις ἢ φίλου / δείσας ἀπώσσει τοῦπος ἢ χαυτοῦ τόδε “But if you remain silent, and someone, fearing for a friend or for himself, rejects this order” (vv. 233–234). Furthermore, the expression μ' ἀραῖον ἔλαβες coincides with the foregoing words from the finale of the tragedy, where Oedipus himself turns out to be “subject to the curse”: ἀραῖος, ὡς ἠράσατο, words that refer specifically to his edict of exclusion from public life.

Finally, it is only with this interpretation of the curse that the exchange of remarks between Oedipus and the chorus following Oedipus’ monologue (vv. 292–296) is understandable. The hero here expresses regret that, although everyone has heard that Laius was killed by some strangers, no one has seen the murderer (τὸν δὲ δρῶντ' οὐδεὶς ὄρᾳ, 293). The chorus suggests, however, that if the murderer is familiar with fear, he will not resist Oedipus’ curse (ἀλλ' εἴ τι μὲν δὴ δειματός γ' ἔχει μέρος / τὰς σὰς ἀκούων οὐ μενεῖ τοιάσδ' ἀράς, 294–295). This line can only have one meaning: according to the chorus, the murderer will certainly tell about his deed and then free himself from the curse⁵. Hence, the chorus considers the curse to be valid only if the murderer is hiding; it is the concealment of the secret, not the murder itself, that is the basis for the present punishment.

Thus, as we may see, Oedipus’ claim in vv. 236–243 can be understood in two ways, and each interpretation has a convincing evidence. Each commentator chooses one of these two interpretations and rejects the other, and that always leads to an artificial or simply wrong understanding of the words of the edict itself as well as other related passages. Let us first take a look at the mistakes made by those scholars who attribute the curse to the Thebans harbouring the murderer, while denying that it can refer to the murderer himself.

We shall begin with the text of this command. As I noted above, Oedipus demands that “this man” be excommunicated, referring to the oracle, which indicated the existence of μῖασμα in the city (vv. 241–243):

⁴ See Finglass 2018, 261, comm. to vv. 276–278.

⁵ Finglass understands this passage in a different way. He believes that, according to the chorus, the murderer, in fear of Oedipus’ curse, must flee. However, it is unlikely that the murderer’s secret escape could be seen as fulfilling Apollo’s will and would satisfy Oedipus. In support of his point of view Finglass refers to the words in the first stasimon ὄρα νιν / ἀελλάδων / ἵππων σθεναρότερον / φυγᾶ πόδα νομᾶν (vv. 466–468), but there escape is a poetic image describing the murderer’s departure into exile.

...ὡς μιάσματος
 τοῦδ' ἡμῖν ὄντος, ὡς τὸ Πυθικὸν θεοῦ
 μαντεῖον ἐξέφηεν ἀρτίως ἐμοί.

since we are polluted,
 as the Pythian oracle of the god
 has just now revealed to me.

It would be reasonable to associate μιάσμα precisely with the murderer and to understand the participle clause with ὡς as causal, just as it is used further when Tiresias repeats the curse, referring it to the murderer Oedipus ἐννέπω σὲ... / <...> / ...προσαυδᾶν μήτε τοῦσδε μήτ' ἐμέ, / ὡς ὄντι γῆς τῆσδ' ἀνοσίῳ μιάστορι (vv. 350–353). Usually τοῦδε is seen as the masculine genitive of ὄδδε; we shall examine this phrase further and offer a slightly different interpretation, but in any case it is obvious, that it is the murderer who is the chief bearer of μιάσμα, and it is the murderer to whom the oracle mentioned by Oedipus links μιάσμα (ὡς τὸ Πυθικὸν θεοῦ / μαντεῖον ἐξέφηεν ἀρτίως ἐμοί, 242–243). Knox in his translation⁶, when referring Oedipus' words not to the murderer but to the man who knows but conceals the truth, understands the first ὡς, introducing the participle, in a comparative rather than causal sense – “as if he were himself the source of infection”. Carawan sees here an even stronger and a more direct statement; in his opinion, it is already clear to the audience that the one who has been initiated into the murder mystery is a carrier of filth, so the participle clause can also have a causal meaning (“all must drive him from their homes as a defiler of us all”). But in both cases the reference to the words of the oracle remains unclear – the oracle did not say that one should persecute someone who knows but is concealing a murderer or that this particular person is associated with the filth. Carawan leaves this inconsistency in his interpretation unexplained, and Knox simply smooths it out in his translation. He suggests that the reference to Apollo explains only the word μιάσμα and not the entire preceding phrase (“as if he were himself the source of infection *which* Apollo's oracle has just made known to me”). In that case, however, the Greek text should read ὄ and not ὡς.

Carawan tries to relate to the potential informant all the subsequent passages as well, which bring us back to this curse⁷. In his view, when Tiresias, in his anger, reveals the secret to Oedipus, stating that he himself must undergo the punishment he has determined (ἐννέπω σὲ τῷ κηρύγματι / ᾧπερ προεῖπας ἐμμένειν, 350–351), he says only that Oedipus knows the murderer, but does not yet call him the murderer. But then what about the following statement by Tiresias, in which he clarifies the meaning of his enigmatic hint? Tiresias says it directly here: φονέα σέ φημι τάνδρὸς οὗ ζητεῖς κυρεῖν – “I say that you are the murderer of the man whose murderer you are searching for” (v. 362). According to Carawan φονέα is not used in this phrase to mean “murderer/killer”, but “guilty as the killer”. Needless to say, such an interpretation is impossible and is only due to the scholar's desire to find the meaning he wants in the line. This same desire leads him to a highly dubious interpretation of two other passages in which Oedipus himself recalls the curse – first fearing that he might be the murderer (vv. 813–820) and then being convinced of it (vv. 1290–1291). In his view, Oedipus is referring here only to his “additional” curse, the one he has directed against himself in case of concealing the murderer

⁶ Knox 1959.

⁷ Carawan 1999, 213–217.

in his house (vv. 249–251). It is difficult to dispute the fact that he does not accidentally utter this “additional” curse and that it also echoes at the end of the drama, but the main and most tragic echo here is certainly with his strongest and the most emotional command in vv. 236–243, and it arises because Oedipus turns out to be the murderer and not someone who knows but is hiding the truth.

On the other hand, those commentators who link vv. 236–243 exclusively with the murderer also have to rely on far-fetched interpretations to prove their point.

Let us first turn to the very command to exclude the culprit from communication and the context in which it is made. Oedipus first promises leniency or a reward to those who will tell about the crime. Then he begins to talk about what he is prepared to do if the Thebans keep quiet. Obviously his words should sound like a threat and the threat should be aimed at those who will disobey, i.e. those who will remain silent (vv. 233–235):

εἰ δ' αὖ σιωπήσεσθε, καὶ τις ἢ φίλου
 δείσας ἀπόσει τοῦτος ἢ χαυτοῦ τόδε,
 ἄκ τῶνδε δράσω, ταῦτα χρὴ κλυεῖν ἐμοῦ.

But if you remain silent, and someone,
 fearing for a friend or for himself, rejects this order—
 what I shall do then you must hear from me!

Commentators, for whom the subsequent curse is directed against the murderer, have to understand these three verses differently. Henry and after him Finglass explain them as follows⁸. In their view, Oedipus is not threatening but is willing to accept that the murderer will not be extradited. With his command to exclude the murderer from social life he only wants to reduce the risk of filth – he expects the Thebans to, if they are not ready to completely get rid of the filth, at least limit it by cutting off communication with the murderer. This is, by the way, how Shervinsky also understands the passage and translates it into Russian:

Но если *даже* вы и умолчите,
 За друга ли страшась иль за себя, —
 Дальнейшую мою узнайте волю:
 Приказываю, кто бы ни был он,
 Убийца тот, в стране, где я у власти,
 Под кров свой не вводить его и с ним
 Не говорить⁹....

Not only does such an interpretation weaken the meaning of this claim, depriving it of the power of a terrible curse that can echo in crucial moments of the drama, it is also grammatically impossible. In the futural conditional sentence εἰ δ' αὖ σιωπήσεσθε, καὶ τις ἢ φίλου / δείσας ἀπόσει τοῦτος ἢ χαυτοῦ τόδε it is not conjunctive that is used, but emphatic forms of the future tense which are supposed to express the meaning of admonition or threat. Thus Oedipus' command can only be a threat addressed to those who refuse to speak.

Those who attribute Oedipus' curse exclusively to the murderer point to the expression τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον in v. 236. According to Finglass, the generalizing τις standing in the

⁸ Henry 1969, 126; Finglass 2018, 248.

⁹ But *even if* you keep silent, / whether you fear for your friend or for yourselves. / Find out my further will: / I command you, whoever that murderer may be, / in the land where I am in power, / not to bring him under your roof, / nor speak to him...

subordinate clause cannot be continued by this emphatic and a very particular phrase, and therefore τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον cannot refer to those who are silent – it must necessarily refer to the murderer¹⁰. This argument, however, is flawed. We find a similar use of οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος in a general rather than specific sense, and also with a reference to the preceding sentence, e.g. in *Antigone*, vv. 666–671:

ἀλλ' ὃν πόλις στήσειε, τοῦδε χρὴ κλύειν
καὶ σμικρὰ καὶ δίκαια καὶ τάναντία.
καὶ τοῦτον ἂν τὸν ἄνδρα θαρσοίην ἐγὼ
καλῶς μὲν ἄρχειν, εὖ δ' ἂν ἄρχεσθαι θέλειν,
δορός τ' ἂν ἐν χειμῶνι προστεταγμένον
μένειν δίκαιον κάγαθὸν παραστάτην.

One must obey the man whom the city sets up in power
in small things and in justice and in its opposite.
This is the man whom I would trust
to be a good ruler and a good subject,
and when assigned his post in the storm of battle
to prove a true and noble comrade in the fight.

Here τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρα refers to an even more generalised character – not even τις, but the unexpressed and unspecified subject of the verb κλύειν. In another example, from *Philoctetes* (vv. 456–458), just like in the words of Oedipus, οὗτοι οἱ ἄνδρες in the main clause summarizes the previous subordinate clause that also has a generalizing meaning (it is introduced by ὅπου “wherever”):

ὅπου δ' ὁ χεῖρων τὰγαθοῦ μεῖζον σθένει
κάποφθίνει τὰ χρηστὰ χῶ δειλὸς κρατεῖ,
τούτους ἐγὼ τοὺς ἄνδρας οὐ στέρω ποτέ.

Where the worse man has more power than the better,
what is good perishes, and the coward is in power,
the men in that place I will never tolerate.

Those commentators who see τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρα as the murderer and not the one who harbours him have to somehow manage the curse that Oedipus has turned against himself. Oedipus says (vv. 249–251):

ἐπεύχομαι δ', οἴκοισιν εἰ ξυνέστιος
ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ ξυνειδότης,
παθεῖν ἅπερ τοῖσδ' ἀρτίως ἠρασάμην.

And I pray further that if he is by the hearth
in my own house with my own knowledge,
I may suffer the fate with which I have just cursed others.

The pronoun τοῖσδε must refer to the chorus, the Thebans; hence, Oedipus here speaks of his readiness to take the punishment he had just threatened the citizens of Thebes with. Assuming that the command he had just made for excommunication applied to any citizen of Thebes who did not denounce the murderer, this new curse is understandable and stands in its place. If, however, τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρα signified the murderer, then what is the meaning of the words ἅπερ τοῖσδ' ἀρτίως ἠρασάμην? Why does Oedipus use this demonstrative pronoun to indicate the present person, and also in plural? Jebb and Campbell assume that ἅπερ τοῖσδ' ἀρτίως ἠρασάμην refers to the curse upon

¹⁰ Finglass 2018, 248.

the murderer uttered in vv. 246–248: κατεύχομαι δὲ τὸν δεδρακότ', εἴτε τις / εἷς ὧν λέληθεν εἴτε πλειόνων μέτα, / κακὸν κακῶς νιν ἄμορον ἐκτριψαί βίον “And I pray that the doer of the deed, / whether a single man has gone undetected or he has acted with others, / may wear away a miserable life in misery, miserable as he is”. They suggest that the plural τοῖσδε derives from Oedipus’ assumption that there may have been several murderers (εἴτε τις εἷς ὧν λέληθεν εἴτε πλειόνων μέτα)¹¹. However, the hero is hardly so concerned with this assumption as to start speaking about murderers in plural; the phrase εἴτε τις εἷς ὧν λέληθεν εἴτε πλειόνων μέτα is more a rhetorical enumeration of all existing possibilities than an independent judgment. An even more obvious objection can be made by drawing attention to the adverb ἀρτίως. According to Jebb and Campbell, it should refer back to the previous phrase. However, when ἀρτίως refers to some words previously said in the text, it always brings us back to them – back after another conversation, another discourse, or another event. “As I have just said” always sounds like a reminder; this expression cannot follow immediately after the words spoken (cf. all examples from Sophocles: ἀρτίως in *Ajax* 1321 brings us back to the previous scene ending at vv. 1315, in *Electra* 347 to vv. 333–334, 481 to 417–423, in *Oedipus Tyrannus* 243 and 474 to 96–98, 726 to 716, 745 to the curse in vv. 236–237, 1054 to 859–860, in *Trachiniae* 346 to 248–290, in *Philoctetes* 764 to 656–657). Other commentators and publishers prefer to emend the text. Ribbeck moved these verses to the end of the monologue, inserting them after Oedipus’ final curse upon all those who would not obey his edict (καὶ ταῦτα τοῖς μὴ δρῶσιν εὐχομαι θεοὺς / μήτ' ἄροτον αὐτοῖς γῆς ἀνίεναι τινὰ / μήτ' οὖν γυναικῶν παῖδας, ἀλλὰ τῷ πότμῳ / τῷ νῦν φθереῖσθαι κάτι τοῦδ' ἐχθίονι, 269–272)¹². However, this generalising curse concludes the monologue perfectly, and the mentioning of Oedipus’ particular case then disrupts the rhetorical ending; moreover, it intrudes inappropriately between this curse and an equally generalising wish for the welfare of all those who would agree to obey the king’s commands (ὕμῖν δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοισι Καδμείοις, ὄσοις / τάδ' ἔστ' ἀρέσκονθ', ἢ τε σύμμαχος Δίκη / χοῖ πάντες εὖ ξυνεῖεν εἰσαεῖ θεοί, 273–275). Finglass and Lloyd-Jones, following Wecklein, exclude vv. 249–251 from the text¹³; however, these verses contain, and perhaps even most strongly express, the tragic irony with which the entire Oedipus’ monologue is filled – the irony that Oedipus is actually turning his words on himself.

The only conclusion that can be drawn from all what has been said above is that both interpretations of Oedipus’ command to deny communication to the culprit are correct, it is directed both against the murderer and against those of the Thebans who would conceal the truth. His curse is ambiguous¹⁴, or rather inconsistent. In the context in which

¹¹ Jebb 1914, 44, comm. to vv. 246 and 45, comm. to v. 251; Campbell 1879, 162, comm. to vv. 246–251.

¹² Ribbeck 1858.

¹³ Wecklein 1880; Finglass 2018, 251; Lloyd-Jones 1994.

¹⁴ The double reference of the curse was suggested by Dyson, who sees here a deliberate authorial ambiguity (Dyson 1973, 205–206). According to him, an important fact, known to the audience but not yet understood by Oedipus, is the equivalence between the witness and the murderer, and the ambivalence of the curse should underline, for an informed audience, this equivalence. Dyson finds another example of the same identification in the conversation between Oedipus and the chorus that follows the monologue (vv. 292–296) already mentioned above. Here,

these words are spoken, we expect a threat against the person who harbours the murderer, but the command itself should rather refer to the murderer; then, over the course of the drama, these words are given one meaning and then another.

Some suggestions can be made about the reasons for this inconsistency. It may be due to the fact that Sophocles, in constructing Oedipus' monologue, seeks to solve two dramatic problems simultaneously. First, the monologue begins the action of gradually solving the murder of Laius. Oedipus must issue an edict allowing him to begin the search for the murderer – the edict requiring the Thebans to name the murderer. The denouement of this storyline will be the moment of recognition, i.e. the discovery of the murderer. Second, here Sophocles forces Oedipus to pronounce a curse upon the murderer, which will also be crucial to the plot: the author will come back to it throughout the drama, and it will determine Oedipus' fate after the recognition. The author solves both of these problems by ironically emphasising Oedipus' lack of understanding of his situation. On the one hand, the hero demands to share information with him, not realising that he is in possession of it. On the other hand, he threatens to punish the murderer, not realising that he himself is the murderer.

These two compositional tasks also determine the monologue's two rhetorical functions – it is both an edict addressed to the Thebans and a curse upon the murderer. It begins as an edict, demanding that the murderer be exposed (vv. 224–226):

ὅστις ποθ' ὑμῶν Λάιον τὸν Λαβδάκου
κάποιδεν ἀνδρὸς ἐκ τίνος διώλετο,
τοῦτον κελεύω πάντα σημαίνειν ἐμοί.

Whoever among you knows at whose hands
Laius, son of Labdacus, perished,
him I command to tell me all!

to the words of the chorus about Laius' death *θανεῖν ἐλέχθη πρὸς τινων ὁδοιπόρων* (v. 292) Oedipus, according to the manuscript reading, replies: *ἤκουσα κάγω· τὸν δ' ἰδόντ' οὐδεὶς ὄρᾳ* (v. 293). This reading must refer to the witness who is hiding and thereby concealing the truth. The next chorus' remark *ἀλλ' εἴ τι μὲν δὴ δειματός γ' ἔχει μέρος / τὰς σὰς ἀκούων οὐ μενεῖ τοιάσδ' ἄράς* (vv. 294–295) in this case should also refer to the witness. However, Oedipus unexpectedly refers it not to the witness, but to the murderer: *ᾗ μὴ 'στι δρῶντι τάρβος, οὐδ' ἔπος φοβεῖ* (v. 296). In Dyson's opinion, here again we face the identification of the witness and the murderer – an idea which, as the researcher believes, runs "deep in the king' mind". This interpretation, however, can by no means be correct. First, we have to assume that the character's words do not express his own thoughts, but his subconscious notions, and this is alien to the whole structure of Greek tragedy. Second, Oedipus is convinced that this murder had no bystander. The only person who was present and survived was one of Laius' servants, who, as reported to Oedipus, fled in fear and saw nothing but that there were many murderers (118–123). Therefore we must certainly, together with Finglass (2018, 264, comm. to v. 293), accept the conjecture in v. 293 *τὸν δὲ δρῶντ' οὐδεὶς ὄρᾳ*.

It is impossible to agree with Dyson not only because of his misreading of v. 293. The equivalence between the witness and the murderer cannot be a mysterious truth known to the audience but escaping Oedipus for the moment. This equivalence is an obvious fact for everyone: a murderer is always a witness to his crime. Oedipus understands this perfectly well, repeating twice in his edict that the murderer is obliged to denounce himself (vv. 227–228 and 234); what he does not understand is that he himself is the murderer and the witness. Thus, if the ambivalence of this passage is deliberately conceived by the author, its purpose cannot be explained.

Sophocles then turns to the formula typical for edicts – he promises a reward for law-abiding citizens and threatens punishment for those who disobey¹⁵. Obviously, the reward is for those who tell about the murderer and the punishment is for those who keep quiet. However, the poet wants to put another, quite different theme into this context – punishing the murderer – and he introduces the murderer into both parts of the formula. It turns out that Oedipus is primarily waiting for information from the murderer himself. If the murderer reveals himself, he will only be removed from the country without any other punishment (καί μὲν φοβεῖται τοῦτίκλημ' ὑπεξελών / αὐτὸς κατ' αὐτοῦ – πείσεται γὰρ ἄλλο μὲν / ἄστεργές οὐδέν, γῆς δ' ἀπεισιν ἀβλαβής, – “If he is afraid (to tell) taking out an accusation against himself: he shall suffer nothing else unwelcome, but shall leave the land unharmed”, 227–229); if he does not fulfil the commands of Oedipus and continues to hide, he will (of course, after the exposure) be excluded from social life in the city. The murderer becomes the main object of Oedipus' threat. Although the king mentions alongside with him those who are close to him and who may be harbouring him (καί τις ἢ φίλου / δείσας ἀπόσει τοῦτος, 233–234), it is the murderer himself that is important to Sophocles. He is named at the end of this conditional clause (ἢ χαῦτοῦ, 234), so the audience should refer the phrase τὸν ἄνδρ' ἀπαυδῶ τοῦτον to him first of all.

This insertion of the curse upon the murderer into the edict requiring the sharing of information raises other problems beyond the semantic ambiguity of the curse itself. First, it is not entirely clear how the fate of the murderer, if he confesses, will in fact differ from his fate if he remains silent. In both cases he faces exile. Both his leaving the country without any other harm to him in the first case and his excommunication in the second are essentially the same punishment: both mean exile. The contrast is created here purely rhetorically by opposing the word ἀβλαβής to a long series of phrases expressing the idea of punishment: μήτ' ἐσδέχεσθαι μήτε προσφωνεῖν τινά, / μήτ' ἐν θεῶν εὐχαῖσι μήτε θύμασιν / κοινὸν ποιεῖσθαι, μήτε χέρνιβος νέμειν· ὠθεῖν δ' ἀπ' οἴκων πάντας (vv. 238–241).

The second problem the author has to solve is how to turn this threat of punishment, which was originally part of the edict, into a curse. This is necessary for Sophocles so that later on in the tragedy, when he refers to this passage, it sound with particular force and really determine the whole fate of the hero: the execution of the punishment to which he has condemned himself must be supervised by the gods. This is why Oedipus immediately turns his edict into a curse. Solemnly concluding the edict with the words ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν τοιοῦδε τῷ τε δαίμονι / τῷ τ' ἀνδρὶ τῷ θανόντι σύμμαχος πέλω (vv. 244–245), he adds a curse upon the murderer to it: κατεύχομαι δὲ τὸν δεδρακότ', εἴτε τις / εἷς ὧν λέληθεν εἴτε πλείονων μέτα, / κακὸν κακῶς νιν ἄμορον ἐκτρῖψαι βίον (vv. 246–248), and then he uses the word ἀρά to define the very command to exclude the murderer or

¹⁵ We find a similar contrast, for instance, in Creon's edict in *Antigone*. Creon assigns posthumous honours to Eteocles and posthumous punishment – refusal of burial – to Polynices who fought against his native city. He ends the edict with words stressing the opposite treatment of law-abiding and bad citizens: τοιόνδ' ἔμὸν φρόνημα, κοῦποτ' ἔκ γ' ἔμοῦ / τιμῆ προέξουσ' οἱ κακοὶ τῶν ἐνδίκων. / ἀλλ' ὅστις εὐνοῦς τῆδε τῆ πόλει, θανὼν / καὶ ζῶν ὁμοίως ἔκ γ' ἔμοῦ τιμήσεται (vv. 207–210).

his concealer from communication – in a new curse, already addressed to himself, Oedipus says ἐπεύχομαι ... παθεῖν ἄπερ τοῖσδ' ἄρτίως ἠρασάμην (vv. 249–251)¹⁶.

Thus, the semantic ambivalence of vv. 236–243 arises from the fact that this passage, conceived and needed by the author as a curse upon the murderer, is placed in the context of an edict demanding that the Thebans extradite the murderer. This ambivalence also corresponds to the two roles which Oedipus himself unknowingly plays and which Sophocles ironically stresses: Oedipus is both the murderer and the one who knows about the murder; all the curses which he addresses against both the murderer and his concealers apply to himself.

Now it is worth looking at how Sophocles tries to resolve the resulting inconsistency in the passage in question.

As we have already noted, the basis for excluding the culprit from communication in the city here is the fact that he is, according to the oracle, the bearer of μῖασμα (ὡς μῖασματος / τοῦδ' ἡμῖν ὄντος, ὡς τὸ Πυθικὸν θεοῦ / μαντεῖον ἐξέφηεν ἄρτίως ἐμοί, 241–243). This is true of the murderer, but in no way applies to the possible informant who is hiding the truth. Therefore Oedipus does not address his curse against every informant, but only to the murderer himself and his close ones. (εἰ δ' αὖ σιωπήσεσθε, καὶ τις ἢ φίλου / δείσας ἀπώσσει τοῦπος ἢ χαυτοῦ τόδε, 233–234). Those who are in direct contact with the murderer are subject to the same filth as he is; so Oedipus is ready to turn the curse upon himself if he deliberately harbours the murderer in his own home (ἐπεύχομαι δ', οἴκοισιν εἰ ξυνέστιος / ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ ξυνειδότης, / παθεῖν ἄπερ τοῖσδ' ἄρτίως ἠρασάμην, 249–251). An excellent illustration of this notion is a passage from Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, which reveals such a great lexical closeness to the passage from *Oedipus Tyrannus* that it could be considered an allusion to the text of Sophocles. Euthyphro explains to Socrates that he is right in prosecuting his father, whom he considers responsible for the death of the *thes* (θής), i.e. hired labourer. According to him, if he begins to live in the same house with the murderer, sharing the hearth with him, and, knowing about the murder, does not report on his father, the filth will spread on him:

Γελοῖον, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὅτι οἷε τι διαφέρειν εἴτε ἀλλότριος εἴτε οἰκεῖος ὁ τεθνεώς, ἀλλ' οὐ τοῦτο μόνον δεῖν φυλάττειν, εἴτε ἐν δίκῃ ἔκτεινεν ὁ κτείνας εἴτε μὴ, καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐν δίκῃ, ἔαν, εἰ δὲ μὴ, ἐπεξιέναι, ἔάνπερ ὁ κτείνας συνέστιός σοι καὶ ὁμοτράπεζος ἦ· ἴσον γὰρ τὸ μῖασμα γίγνεται ἔαν συνῆς τῷ τοιοῦτῳ συνειδὼς καὶ μὴ ἀφοισίς σεαυτὸν τε καὶ ἐκείνον τῇ δίκῃ ἐπεξιῶν (4b–c).

It's ridiculous, Socrates, that you think it makes a difference whether the dead man is from outside or inside the household, but that you don't have to watch out solely for whether the slayer slew lawfully or not, and if it was lawful, let him go and if not, prosecute, even if the slayer

¹⁶ Dyson (1973) has pointed out the genre duality of the monologue which includes both an edict and a curse. But he believes that firstly the command to exclude the culprit from communication only sounds like part of the edict, and only later, in the following parts of the play, it is reinterpreted as a curse. In his view, Oedipus adds the curse in vv. 246–248, referring to the situation in which the murderer remains unidentified: then let the gods make his life miserable. However, Oedipus cannot consider this option. The only aim he seeks is to discover the identity of the murderer. Dyson also misunderstands the phrase ἄπερ τοῖσδ' ἄρτίως ἠρασάμην in v. 251, relating, following Jebb, τοῖσδε to the murderers mentioned in v. 247. As we have seen, this understanding of τοῖσδε is impossible, this pronoun can only refer to the object of the threat in vv. 236–243; thus already here in v. 251 this threat is called a curse.

shares your hearth and board. You see the pollution is just as great if you knowingly associate with such a person and don't cleanse both yourself and the other man by taking him to court¹⁷.

The second way in which Sophocles softens the inconsistency of his text is by a certain ambiguity in the phrase ὡς μιάσματος τοῦδ' ἡμῖν ὄντος (vv. 241–242). Interestingly, Tiresias, quoting Oedipus' edict in the next scene, slightly changes the words and the whole construction. He commands the king (vv. 350–353):

ἐννέπω σὲ τῷ κηρύγματι
ὄπερ προεῖπας ἐμμένειν, κἀφ' ἡμέρας
τῆς νῦν προσαυδᾶν μήτε τοῦσδε μήτ' ἐμέ,
ὡς ὄντι γῆς τῆσδ' ἀνοσίφ μιάστορι.

I call on you to abide by the proclamation
you made earlier, and from this day on
address neither these men nor me,
since you are the unholy polluter of this land!

Instead of μιάσμα he uses the word μιάστωρ, which unequivocally refers to the murderer and attributes the participle clause to σέ (the dative case depends on the verb ἐννέπω and is used here instead of the genitive, so that the participle clause is not dependent on ἐμέ). Thus, here the phrase is clearly referring to Oedipus the murderer, who is the source of the filth and therefore is to be punished. In Oedipus' monologue, however, the same participle phrase sounds completely different. The word μιάσμα does not describe a person, but a phenomenon¹⁸; the participial construction does not correspond to τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον, but is used absolutely; the pronoun τοῦδε can hardly refer to 'this man', defined by a completely different demonstrative pronoun. Taken together, these three grammatical facts seem to suggest that Oedipus is not so much referring to the murderer, but to the filth that comes from murder in general. τοῦδε should then be understood as a form of the neuter gender rather than the masculine: "Since this is a filth to us". τόδε and μιάσμα, denoting not a particular person, but the whole phenomenon of filth in general, can already be referred to anyone on whom the filth spreads, and with this interpretation the phrase would explain why not only the murderer himself, but also his close ones should be expelled.

In this article I have touched upon an important feature of Sophocles' style that needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting his text. Commentators tend to expect logical order and consistency from a text. However, they often achieve this order by distorting the obvious meaning of individual passages. We should admit that the poet may allow inconsistencies, sacrificing clarity in the presentation of facts for other purposes that prove to be more important to him. Sophocles aims more at rhetorical expressiveness and dramatic coherence than at logical clarity and certainty. In this case, he creates a passage of a great emotional power to which the characters will be able to refer again and again throughout the drama and which will ultimately determine Oedipus' fate itself. This passage is placed in a not entirely suitable context, the author tries to smooth over the contradictions that arise between the passage and its context, some inconsistency still remains, but this is not very important to Sophocles, as his artistic tasks are quite different.

¹⁷ Trans. C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy.

¹⁸ In classical Greek literature μιάσμα refers only once to a person who is a source of filth — in v. 1028 of *Choephoroi*, which may be a later interpolation (see Fraenkel 1950, 778 and 815).

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