
Abstract

In this paper, the author deals with Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, 258–264. These lines are highly relevant to the development of the play, but their textual tradition is problematic. The author suggests a slight change in the wording (ἐπεὶ pro ἐπεῖ) and reassesses the whole interpretation both of this line and of the immediate context. In addition, in line 260, the author proposes the oldest extant Sophocles manuscript, L (Laur. 32.9), to be superior to the generally accepted text.

Keywords: Sophocles – *Oedipus Rex* l. 258 – *Oedipus Rex* l. 260 – Textual criticism – Sophocles’ manuscripts

(S. OT 255–265)¹

οὐδ᾽ εἰ γὰρ ἦν τὸ πράγμα μὴ θεήλατον, ἀκάθαρτον ἡμᾶς εἰκός ἦν οὕτως εἶν, ἀνδρός γ᾽ ἄριστον βασιλέως τ᾽ ὁλολότος, ἀλλ᾽ ἐξερεύναν· νῦν δ᾽ ἐπεὶ κυρῶ τ᾽ ἐγὼ, ἔχον μὲν ἀρχαὶ ὡς ἐκλίνος εἶχε πρὶν, ἔχον δὲ λέκτρα καὶ γυναῖκ᾽ ὁμόσπορον, κοινὸν τε παῖδων κοίν᾽ ἄν, εἰ κείνῳ γένος μὴ ὅστις γεγένη, ἦν ἄν ἐκπεφυκότα—

255 νῦν δ᾽ ἐς τὸ κεῖνον κράτ᾽ ἐνήλαθ᾽ ἡ τύχη· ἀνθ᾽ ἄν ἔχω τάδ᾽, ἐκεῖνον καὶ μόσπορον, ἔχω δὲ

260 ὁμολογοῦμαι, ...


¹ Textus vulgatus. Apparatus is mine.
Introduction

The Generally Accepted Text

Lines OT 258–264 are highly relevant to the development of the play. They mark the transition from the previous inert attitude of the city to Oedipus’ strong engagement in promoting a thorough investigation into Laius’ murder.

The coherence between ll. 255–264 is clear,

Even though the oracle had issued no command, you ought not to have allowed the death of so excellent a man and monarch to have gone unpunished; now however fortune has willed that he should perish: his throne and widow have come into my possession, and had he left offspring, that offspring would have been in common to him and me: wherefore it is my duty to take care, as if I were taking care of my father, that his assassin be put to death. 1

Conversely, the textual soundness of this passage is less firmly established, even if, at least since the end of the eighteenth century, no critic or editor of OT has ever assailed these lines, assuming that a slight metrical uncertainty of the manuscript tradition had been irrefutably restored by Burton. Moreover, the issue was considered closed after Burton’s conjecture was discovered in some recentiores. 6 And yet, I have the impression that this reading—considered a sure cure—creates more problems than it solves.

Literature Review

Objections to the Text. The succession ἐπεί (l. 258) – ἀνθ’ ὄν ἐπεί (l. 264) produces a strong anacoluthon in respect to which the commentators have

1 Mitchell 1840, 58.
4 The element corresponding to (ἐ)πί cannot be occupied by a short syllable. Dawe 1973, 109 reports, “ἐπηκυρῶν Ῥ”; ibid. 220, “Only Laur. Conv. Soppr. 66 has the correct reading, but Ῥ comes close to it with ἐπηκυρῶ.” Ῥ is the siglum for Vat. gr. 2291, but this codex (f. 45v) shows exactly the same reading as VGN (ἐπικυρῶ), as it is easy to verify at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.2291 (retrieved 2018–02–16). I don’t know from whence Dawe’s report came.
5 Ellendt (1835) 1002, s.v. κυρῶ, “Oed. R. 258, ubi pro ἐπεί κυρῶ, quod certa emendatione [emphasis added] Burtonus intulit, libri ἐπικυρῶ.”
6 Laur. Conv. soppr. 66 (ca 1291) and S (= Vat. Urb. Gr. 141, saec. xiv); data taken from the latest critical edition of Augustus 2016.
7 This expression means “For all which reasons” and is in itself perfectly correct (see, e.g., S. Ant. 237, El. 575, OC 967).
nothing better to quote than a Latin example from Cicero. In addition, it seems rhetorically unfit for the context. It is usually understood as a “free and conversational form”\(^{1}\), as in a sort of stream of consciousness\(^{2}\) where

l’anacoluto deve far pensare. [...] Sembra [...] che il locutore stia seguendo ora il filo di un soliloquio interiore. Edipo passa dal rimprovero ai Tebani [...] a elencare, come tra sé e sé, i diversi motivi per cui combatterà in favore di Laio.\(^{3}\)

Were this true, we would be witnessing the transformation of Oedipus from a king haranguing the crowd to a ridiculous, babbling teenager. So, given that the adjustment of one slight metrical error results in several thorny issues, there are reasons enough for sharing Heath’s statement (under verse 266 = 258 of modern editions): “tô ἔπεις respuit plane et syntaxeos et sententiae ratio”.\(^{5}\)

**The Manuscript Evidence**\(^6\). My argument, however, is open to an apparent objection since Burton’s conjecture was later found to be the reading of two manuscripts that were not available to him: *Laur. Conv. Soppr. 66* (around 1291) and *Vat. Urb. Gr. 141* (early xiv cent.). Although not quantitatively relevant, this evidence ought not to be overlooked nor may it be rejected without discussion. The witness of ms. *Laur. Conv. soppr. 66*\(^7\) is especially prominent, owing to its relatively early date, shortly after the start of the large-scale flourishing of the Byzantine scholarship that began circa 1290.\(^8\) For “copies made before c.1300 are more likely to remain unaffected by the operations of Byzantine scholars”.\(^9\) In these circumstances, we must determine whether the metrically correct reading transmitted by *Laur. Conv. soppr. 66*

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1 Trollope 1825, 25, “ἔπεις is followed, v. 264. by the relative ὅς instead of ὁ νῦς. Elmsley compares Cicero, Orat. I. 14. Nam, quoniam, quicquid est quod in controversia aut in contentione versetur, in eo, aut sime, aut quod sit, aut quale sit queritur: – sitne, signis; quid sit, definitionibus; quale sit, recti praevique partibus; quibus ut uti possit orator, &c.” The reference is to Elmsley 1825, 22.
2 Mitchell 1840, 58.
3 Stella 2010, 204, “fusso di pensieri”.
4 Stella 2010, 204.
5 Heath 1762, 28 = Heath 1791, 292.
6 This section is not superfluous, as someone objected to me. Proposing a conjecture today should be more than indulging in an exercise of fantasy. Whoever ignores this “seems to be still committed to the distinction between *emendatio ope codicum* and *ope ingenii*, rather than to the one be/tween *recensio* and *emendatio*.” (Timpanaro 2005, 82-3). In a scientific perspective, conjecture has to take into consideration the data of the manuscript tradition and “*Emendatio ope codicum* becomes a necessary presupposition of *emendatio ope ingenii*.” (Conte 2013, 72).
7 Battezzato 1996, 33 n.19, “per le tragedie sofoclee della triade il modello sembra unico”, which exempts us from a closer analysis of Vat. Urb. Gr. 141, the more recent of the two witnesses.
8 Turyn 1949, 94.
has really been preserved by genuine tradition or it was arrived at by
conjecture. It is generally accepted that Byzantine scribes or readers were
hardly inclined to replace crabbed and obscure expressions with perfectly clear
equivalents, although the transmitted text was obviously corrupt.¹ This is even
more relevant when dealing with the metrics of a text. “A test of Byzantine
metrical knowledge is afforded by O.T. 1505, where παριδῆς passed
unquestioned. The line had twelve syllables, and that was enough!”² However,
exceptions sometimes occur and some scribes or readers seem to have been
capable of correcting at least some errors. In our particular case, the unmetrical
reading of the majority of witnesses appears to have really struck some
Byzantine scholars as unsuitable to the extent of stimulating its change in the
way we can find in ms. Paris. gr. 2820 (188)³ of the fourteenth century⁴: νῶν
dε γ’ ἐπικυρῶ τ’ ἐγώ. This reading received the honour of being adopted in
some old editions⁵, but the most acute critics did not fail to reassert its manifest
color of interpolation.⁶ Here, “we swiftly come to recognise [...] the
universal panacea γε [...] for adjusting quantities.”⁷ Conversely, ms. Laur.
Conv. soppr. 66 offers an entirely dissimilar solution, as it is not content with
patching up a damaged verse, but offers instead a reading which involves a
different word division combined with a divergent syntactical structure. So, it
works as a good foundation text, and I believe a mistaken transcription of a
genuine reading to be the case.

Methodology and Results

An Alternative Solution. Given the above, one issue that needs to be
asked is what textual shape was responsible for both the text of the majority of

¹ Zuntz 1965, 154, “the corruption is of the most obvious; the need for correction, with
Byzantine scholars, hardly so”.
² Campbell, Abbott 1886, lxii-xiii. See also Di Benedetto 1965, 166–7, “Giorgio Pisides, del
settimo secolo, è secondo il Maas [to wit Maas 1903] l’ultimo poeta che segue la prosodia
antica pressoché senza eccezioni. Dall’ottavo secolo alla metà del X, invece, non si riscontra
una regola fissa: si constatano continuamente errori prosodici [...]”. D’altra parte, se queste
«licenze» prosodiche si permettevano i versificatori dell’epoca, ancora di più è da ritenere che
fossero disposti a tollerare inesattezze simili i grammatici dell’Università che venivano a
contatto con un testo già corrotto in tal senso. In realtà, sino alla fine del secolo XIII
l’ignoranza perfino delle regole più elementari del trimetro giambico deve essere stata assoluta.
È Manuele Moschopulo, infatti, il primo che abbia incominciato ad intuire la natura del
trimetro e alcune sue correzioni rappresentano il primo riaffiorare di una sensibilità metrica
dopo secoli di ignoranza.”
³ It is readable online at http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b107229295/f161.item (retrieved
2019–01–16).
⁴ See Turyn 1949, 165.
⁵ Dalzel 1811, 22.
⁶ Elmsley 1825, 22, “manifesta interpolatione”.
⁷ Dawe 1964, 44. We must likewise judge the proposal afforded by Heath 1791, 292, νῶν δ’ ἀρ’
ἐπικυρῶ τ’ ἐγώ.
witnesses and the variant in mss. *Laur. Conv. soppr.* 66 and S. If we glance for
a moment at the possibilities of verbal emendation, I dare give the best theory I
have been able to frame: ἐπεί is a corruption of a previous ἐπεί. Some time in
the history of the text a抄ist arrived at the words NYΝΔΕΙΠΕΙ and
interpreted them in the most obvious way: νῦν δ᾽ ἐπεί (ἐπι-κυρ-appearing being a
conjecture showing that all other manuscripts struggled to make sense of the
corrupted syntax). Therefore, the order of the variants should have been ἐπεί >
ἐπεί *Laur. Conv. soppr.* 66 and S > ἐπι-κυρ-appearing rell. > νῦν δὲ γ᾽ ἐπικυρῶ
*Paris. gr.* 2820. ἐπεί should be interpreted as a dative of the cause or reason
and it should be translated, “thanks/owing to a word”.

Discussion

The word ἐπεί is a clear reference to Oedipus’ defeat of the Sphinx,
whose riddle Oedipus solved by means of one word (ἄνθρωπος). There is no
surprise. Oedipus is repeatedly depict as proud of his own capacities through
the whole drama and the “saving word” of Oedipus has a necessary
counterpart in the silence of Teiresias (OT 391-2): πῶς ὡς, ὥς ἡ ῥαψῳδός
ἔφηδ᾽ ἦν κῦων, / τόδε πρὸς τὸ τοίοῦτο ἀστοίην ἀκλητήριοι; Moreover, this theme
is closely related to another regular pattern, Oedipus as “child of Tyche – who
has treated him well” (cf. OT 1080-1). In fact, immediately after ἐπεί Oedipus
says, κυρός τ᾽ ἔγὼ / ἔχων, etc. It is about a periphrasis κυρῶν ἔχων = ἔχω. It is
well attested in Sophocles, as we can easily infer from Ellendt’s *Lexicon*,
where we are offered this specific definition: “Longe crebrius cum participio
dicitur, cui κυρῶν *quali forte conditione* [emphasis in original] res est,
significationem addit.” A point that is confirmed by all of the examples quoted

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1 The same error has been emended by 2016, 16. At OT 376 (inserted after
365) he reads, ὕν γὰρ με μὴν κρατεῖ μεγάλον ἐπεί (: ἐπει codd.) and translates, “(Say as
much as you want; it will be said in vain.) fatum non est, ut moriar a te ex verbo”.
2 Moorhouse 1982, 89, “This dative makes a remoter kind of instrument, and its use is
especially developed by Sophocles.”
3 For a comparable example, see OT 296, ὅσον ἐπεί φοβεῖ, “a word will not frighten him.”
4 See, for instance, Apollod. 3.5.8., Οἰδίπους δὲ ἀκούσας ἔλευσεν, εἰς θανὸν τὸ αὖθα τοῦ ὄντος τῆς
Σφίγγους ἔλεγον εἶναι In his treatment of initiation and self-teaching, Goux 1993,
132-3 casts an interesting light on the psychological meaning of this motif. The gesture by
which Oedipus situated himself so as to respond to the “riddling bitch”, guardian of the
initiatory threshold, and the belief that he could abolish her with the word “man” in a
presumption of auto-initiation, are what institute, in counter effect, the difference between what
will later be called consciousness and unconsciousness. [my emphasis]
5 See Hermann 1833, 84, “İngenii autem illa vis, qua Sphingis aenigma solvit Oedipus, tot locis
hac in fabula et ab ipso et ab alius in summa laude commemoratur, ut sui plane obitus esse
Oedipus putari deberet, si eam praeteriret etc.”
6 Renger 2013, 14.
7 On this subject see Bentein 2012, 24.
8 Mitchell 1840, 58.
9 Ellednt 1835, 1003.
in the same work. And it is here (forte conditione “fortuitous circumstances”) that many translators seem to be dissatisfied with such a humble Oedipus having the look of an administrator pro-term, who must account for everything he does on a case-by-case basis (“Given that I accidentally have the throne”). As a consequence, that specific nuance of meaning is what gets lost in translation, most of the times. Still, Oedipus’ insistence, in vv. 258–264 and in the proclamation in general, that his possession of the kingdom is contingent (l. 258), that Laius’ death – a work of chance, τύχη (cf. l. 262), and that he is a ‘stranger to the story and the deed’ (l. 219f.) is charged with tragic irony. For none of it is obviously true and Iocasta’s and Oedipus’s belief in the rule of τύχη (977–9, 1080) will prove delusional in the end. However, that periphrasis can earn all its expressive power only in conjunction with ἔξω (the ability of the riddle solver and the generous gift of Tyche3), since the improbable modesty of Oedipus distorts its meaning radically. As for the rest, the postpositive form ἐγὼ has no special weight4 and the transmitted τέ is certainly to be preserved against τέ proposed by Benedict.5 It is a “non–connective” τέ and marks the passage from the speaker’s perspective to a shared knowledge (“as is known”) and anticipates an immediately following enumeration (“μέν... δέ...”).6 We could render it in this way: “This time, however, as is known, ...” Moreover, in this passage the μέν ... δέ complex “conveys little more than τέ ... καί”, with no idea of strong contrast. Now, research shows that, with the μέν ... δέ complex, a “transition from participial to finite construction is often

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1 It seems to imply that otherwise, he would have remained indifferent, not unlike the Thebans he has just finished criticising for not having checked the situation (ll. 255-258).

2 See Brunck 1808, 5, “Nunc vero auctor sum ipse quoque (he means, besides god), qui et regnum obtineo ...”, Fainlight and Littman 2009, 11. “Now that I rule with the same power he held, become his kin, his wife and bed now mine”, Stella 2010, 67, “Ma ecco, siccome ci sono io a comandare, perché è mio il potere che prima era suo ...”. Instead, an interesting interlinear scholion in ms. Paris. gr. 2820 (188): κ(α)ί ὃ θ(ε)ῖς κτων κ(α)ί ἐγὼ ἐπιβεβαιῶν heads in the direction of κυρόω, with ἔξω still all but unclear. Reading ἔξω instead of ἔξω seems to be the only way we could make sense of κυρόω (in this regard, see Dawe 1973, 109 and 220, as discussed on footnote 5 above). But the absence of the article is difficult to justify. Moreover, if, as seems to be the case, ἔξω mean the divine oracles, we cannot hide the fact that Sophocles never uses ἔξω (oracle(s)) without a modifier that may clarify this peculiar connotation (cf. OT 89; Tr. 822; OC 624 and 629). And besides, “to confirm” is not the meaning that we would expect. “To accomplish” would be much more suitable, but κυρόω does not convey this meaning as early as Sophocles.

3 It could be taken as an example ante litteram of what Machiavelli calls astuzia fortunata (that is, a mix of intelligence and fortune), permitting to attain the ruling power without violence or cruelty.


5 Benedict 1820, 64–65.

6 I owe this analysis to the online publication Bonifazi, Drummen, de Kreij 2016, IV.2.3.1, §§ 54–69 and 2.3.6. §§ 85–87 at https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6216 (retrieved 2019–02–06).

7 Denniston 1970, 370 adds, “This is particularly the case when the same word is repeated before μέν and δέ.”
found”, and such a syntactical change usually involves a new topical spin “or it may mark a new intonational contour.” If that is the case, probably the reading transmitted by L, Λ, P.ascii and Zc (to wit: ἔχω δέ : ἔχων δέ cett.) is to be preferred as lectio difficilior. Besides, avoiding a too obvious symmetry, underlined by anaphora, it is perfectly suitable for a magniloquent style. Thus, I process these statements through three distinct argumentative levels (l. 258-259: the political motivation; l. 260: the moral supporting reason; ll. 261–3: the emotional appeal or pathos, yet almost incidentally enunciated) and possibly as many intonation units. As a result, having changed ἐπεὶ into ἔπει and accepted ἔχω δέ instead of ἔχων δέ, I should translate the whole passage (ll. 258–264) as follows: “Now, however, thanks to one word, I happen to possess, as is known, the ruling power that he held in earlier days. / What’s more I possess his bed and the wife common to both of us / (and cognate [brothers] of cognate children would have been born to us, / if he had been blessed with descendants. / But evil fortune turned on that man). / For which reasons, as if he were my own father, / I shall fight for his cause ...”

Conclusions

Expressed in these terms, the speech flows smoothly and logically from section to section; and in its conclusion there is no more trace of the disturbing anacoluthon: (l. 264–5) ἀνθ᾽ ὧν ἐγὼ τάδ᾽, ὡσπερεὶ τοῦ μοῦ πατρός, / ὑπερμαχοῦμαι. Moreover, our emendation highlights the true nature of these lines: in this passage lies an extraordinary example of tragic irony. These words encapsulate the central theme of the play: Oedipus proudly believes in the power of his sagacity and underlines that his kingship is a matter of chance (not the result of inherited power), but the reality shows us Oedipus’ will

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2 It can be spelt out in conjunction with Oedipus’ not being related to the victim by bonds of blood (as he thinks) and the highly significant, in this play, tension between kin and nonkin. Cf. Segal 1998, 141 and Steadman/Palmer 2003, 342, 347.
3 Bonifazi, Drummen, de Kreij 2016, IV.2.2.3, § 34.
4 See Scattolin 2016, 120.
6 I translate “cognate”, not “consanguineous”, because they all would have been related by birth by being born from the same mother. On consanguinity (κοινὼν/κοινά), see Avezzù, Longo 1991, 25–61, 127–39.
7 How can we forget Teiresias’ savage irony in l. 440, οὕκοιν σὸ ταῦτ’ ἄριστος εὐρήσκειν ἔφυς;
8 See also OT 441, τοιοῦτ’ ὄνειδις’, οἶς ἐμ’ εὐρήσκεις μέγαν.
facing his destiny which lies hidden a new riddle from whence he will come out defeated.¹

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¹ See Vernant 2006, 27-28, “Œdipe est double. Il constitue pour lui-même une énigme dont il ne devinera le sens qu’en se découvrant en tout point le contrarie de ce qu’il croyait ou paraissait être. Le discours secret qui s’institue, sans qu’il le sache, au sein de son propre discours, Œdipe ne l’entend pas. Et nul témoin du drame sur la scène, en dehors de Tirésias, n’est non plus capable de le percevoir. Ce sont les dieux qui renvoient à Œdipe, en écho à certaines de ses paroles, son propre discours déformé ou retourné. Et cet écho inverse, qui / sonne comme un éclat de rire sinistre, est en réalité un redressement. Ce que dit Œdipe sans le vouloir, sans le comprendre, constitue la seule vérité authentique de ses propos [...]”
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