AESCHYLUS, *SEPTEM CONTRA THEBAS* 780–7

In a recent paper, M. Finkelberg has endorsed part of M.L. West's emendation of the fifth strophe of the second stasimon in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (= *Sept.*). In her opinion, accepting West's emendation also allows adopting earlier emendations proposed by Schütz and Prien, leading to a better understanding of the passage.[1] It is recalled that this is where the chorus relates the disasters that ensued from Oedipus' discovery of the truth about his marriage. In the following short discussion, I intend to revisit and defend once again the reading, according to which the two acts mentioned in connection with Oedipus' discovery are gouging out his eyes and casting a curse on his sons, and not murdering his father and bedding his mother. The passage has come down to us as follows:

ἐπεὶ δ' ἀρτίφρων [στρ. ε]
ἐγένετο μέλεος ἀθλίων
γάμων, ἐπ' ἄλγει δυσφορῶν 780
μαινομέναι κραδίαι
δίδυμα κάκ' ἐτέλεσεν
πατροφόνωι χερὶ †τῶν
κρεισσοτέκνων δ' ὀμμάτων† ἐπλάγχθη.
τέκνοις δ' †ἀραίας† [ἀντ. ε]
ἐφῆκεν ἐπίκοτος τροφᾶς, 786
αἰαῖ, πικρογλώσσους ἀράς.

But when the miserable man became aware of his terrible marriage, aggravated with pain in his enraged heart, he committed two evils: with his parricidal hand †he went astray from his eyes dearer than children†. And upon his sons, alas, he laid bitter-tongued curses, angry on account of their †accursed† rearing.

Finkelberg has adopted West's emendation of line 782. West read δίδυμα κακά as referring to Oedipus' famous acts of killing his father and marrying his mother. She believes West's emendation of line 782 should be accepted as it allows for better understanding of the text that comes next, in terms of metre as well as of content. Let me begin, then, with West's reading, and then discuss the other emendations that Finkelberg believes go well with the emendation by West.

West's reading[2] is of particular interest as it omits the self-inflicted blindness and diverts the focus of the passage to Oedipus' past acts rather than to his spontaneous reaction. To this end, West suggests reading δίδυμα as δίδυμ' ἃ, thus turning this part of the sentence into a relative clause. In the main clause that follows, West suggests replacing κρεισσοτέκνων with κρεισσότερος, although there is no other known evidence that this form was in use. He also proposes replacing the noun ὀμμάτων with γνωμάτων, which, he claims, is the only option that makes sense and combines metrically with the verb ἐπλάγχθη. The resulting translation is:

[1] M.L. West (ed.), *Aeschyli Tragoediae cum incerti poetae Prometheo* (Stuttgart, 1990); M. Finkelberg, 'Aeschylus, *Septem contra Thebas* 780–7', *CQ* 64 (2014), 832–5.

[2] For the discussion, see M.L. West, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Stuttgart, 1990), 116–18.

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But when the unfortunate man became aware of his terrible marriage, unable to bear the pain in his crazed heart of the twin evils he had accomplished with his parricidal hand, he went astray from better judgement.

West maintains that the common reading of line 782 as referring to Oedipus gouging out his own eyes is erroneous. To his linguistic arguments, he adds one that regards content. He says that, if, in this context, the task of the chorus is to relate the background for the curse on the sons, then the self-inflicted blindness is not 'greatly to the point here'.[3] According to West, the blindness, once mentioned, acquires the same importance as the curse, weakening the stress placed on the curse as the culmination of the plot. West does not elaborate on why he thinks the expression πατροφόνωι χερὶ ('with parricidal hand') is 'curiously lacking in point if it refers to what Oedipus did after discovering the truth about his marriage'.[4] G.O. Hutchinson, for his part, correctly comments that these words simply intend to remind us that, by learning about his marriage to his mother, Oedipus simultaneously learns indirectly that the man he killed was his father.[5]

In West's version, then, the two evils mean the murder of his father and marrying his mother, but I believe that this is unlikely. The text implies that Oedipus had committed 'the two evils' with his parricidal hand, but saying that Oedipus murdered his father with his parricidal hand seems awkward. Moreover, the structure of the sentence suggests the following sequence of events: the improper marriage is revealed, the discovery causes unbearable pain, and two evils are consequently committed. The horror is doubled because the parricidal hand is the same hand that Oedipus uses to blind himself in punishment. In this context, J. Oberdick's proposed emendation that reads the verb ἐπλάγχθη as ἐβλάφθη, seems quite reasonable. It was adopted by Hutchinson[6] and by A.H. Sommerstein in his recent Loeb edition.

I agree with West that the chorus provides the background for the curse cast on the sons. However, it is not clear to me why mentioning the blindness is irrelevant here. It would be more reasonable to see the self-inflicted blindness as a momentary impulse, a horrible but quite effective reaction to Oedipus' discovery that he is married to his mother. The acts follow immediately and are therefore spontaneous: in his shame and horror, he injures himself terribly, probably wishing to evade the looks of those around him. This is promptly followed by an act against the sons born of this impure union—the curse (more below). West's suggestion to replace ὀμμάτων with γνωμάτων in line 784 actually reduces the impressive impact of Oedipus' impulsive reaction to the discovery, and disrupts the symmetry between the two acts. As I see it, the two acts make one whole, and it would be reasonable to assume that Aeschylus would not omit the blindness motif, which had become so central to the myth of Oedipus by the fifth century B.C.[7]

A more straightforward solution would be that Oedipus' 'second evil' refers to the curse he cast on his sons. This motif already appeared in the *Thebaid* (fr. 3 West), but was the curse cast for the same reason in both the *Thebaid* and Aeschylus' *Sept.*? This question comes up following a comment of the scholiast on line 1375 of Sophocles'

[3] West (n. 2), 117.
[4] West (n. 2), 117.
[5] G.O. Hutchinson (ed.), *Aeschylus Seven against Thebes* (Oxford, 1985), 172.
[6] Hutchinson (n. 5), 172.
[7] Soph. *OT* 1371–4; Ar. *Ra*. 1182–95. Blinding as punishment for improper sexual behaviour is well known in Greek literature. See, for example, S. West, 'Phoenix's antecedents: a note on *Iliad* 9', *SCI* 20 (2001), 1–15.

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Oedipus Coloneus (= *OC*), where the scholiast quotes the part in the *Thebaid* recounting that Oedipus curses his sons for serving him the lesser part of the sacrificial meat. The scholiast comments: τὰ δὲ παραπλήσια τῶι ἐποποιῶι καὶ Αἰσχύλος ἐν τοῖς Ἑπτὰ ἐπὶ Θήβαις ('These things are similar to the poet of the epic and [to] Aeschylus in *Seven against Thebes*'). We could accept the scholiast's comment as it is, but in the Aeschylus passage a more natural reason for the curse would be Oedipus' fury at the discovery that his sons were born of incest. More probably, the scholiast misinterpreted the expression ἐπίκοτος τροφῶς on the basis of the reason for the curse in *OC*, where Oedipus curses his sons for their disrespectful and unsupportive behaviour.[8] However, one common meaning of τροφή is 'upbringing', and it is often used in the sense of origin.[9] It therefore seems quite natural to adopt Prien's emendation for the adjective ἀραίας in line 785 and replace it with ἀθλίας ('dismal', 'contemptible', 'miserable'). Indeed, this emendation seems to suit better both the metre and the context.[10]

It should also be recalled that in *Sept.* Oedipus' sons are described as born of an impure relationship (926–31), highlighting the horror of bedding one's mother: not only had Oedipus married his mother, he also had children with her.[11] Given this, Oedipus' spontaneous reaction to the discovery that his sons are also his brothers seems authentic: his curse, horrible as it is, is meant to destroy his impure offspring.[12] This excuse for the curse underlines a central aspect of the trilogy: twisted relationships between fathers and sons. As Thalmann noticed, Oedipus' attitude towards his sons brings to mind the attitude of Laius towards Oedipus himself—a father who wishes to dispose of a child born in questionable circumstances.[13]

Worth noting is also the discrepancy between the claim that the sons behaved abusively towards their father and the way in which other figures in the play view the sons, especially Eteocles. None of the other figures ever implies that Eteocles has in any way abused his father, nor do any of these figures blame Oedipus' death on his previous acts. The driving force that fulfils Oedipus' curse is the Erinys, regardless of any culpability by Eteocles or Polyneices. The Erinys' actions are the cause of the radical change in Eteocles' behaviour.[14] The Erinys is completely indifferent to the fact that Eteocles is innocent and sees himself as such. His suffering springs from his being the son of Oedipus, an offspring of Laius. In the current context, it would therefore be more reasonable to understand ἐπίκοτος τροφῶς ἀθλίας as 'angered at their wretched origin'[15] rather than 'angered for their wretched maintenance of him'.

[8] As Finkelberg indeed reads (n. 1), 834.

[9] H.C. Baldry, 'The dramatisation of the Theban legend', *G&R* 3 (1956), 24–37, at 31; G.R. Manton, 'The second stasimon of the *Seven against Thebes*', *BICS* 8 (1961), 77–84, at 82; Hutchinson (n. 5), xxv; J.R. March, *The Creative Poet. Studies on the Treatment of Myths in Greek Poetry* (*BICS Supplement* 49) (London, 1987), 143.

[10] The replacement of ἀραίας with ἀθλίας was accepted by Finkelberg (n. 1), 833; March (n. 9), 141 n. 116; Hutchinson (n. 5), 172; A.H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

[11] In the *Oedipodea* version (fr. 1 West), Pausanias says that Jocasta bore Oedipus no children (because of Hom. *Od.* 9.271-80). This and other sources are discussed in M. Davies, *The Theban Epics* (Washington, DC, 2015), 21–4.

[12] March (n. 9), 144 n. 136: although the curse is not explicit about the sons killing each other, this is implied, especially in line 726, where there is clear mention that this was the result of the curse. Cf. also lines 840–1, where the chorus says: ἐξέπραξεν, οὐδ' ἀπεῖπε | πατρόθεν εὐκταία φάτις ('The curse of the father did not fail but has come true').

[13] W.G. Thalmann, *Dramatic Art in Aeschylus's 'Seven Against Thebes'* (New Haven, CT, 1978), 20.

[14] F. Solmsen, 'The Erinys in Aischylos' *Septem*', *TAPhA* 68 (1937), 197–211, at 200. The change was clearly apparent from line 653 on.

[15] Cf. LSJ on ἐπίκοτος: 'in wrath at the sons he had bred'.

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All the arguments brought above lead to the conclusion that the emendation of line 784 to read δωμάτων as proposed by C.G. Schütz and endorsed by Finkelberg is disputable. Although one cannot ignore the possibility that Aeschylus was familiar with the motif of Oedipus' exile and may well have included it in the second part of his 'House of Thebes' trilogy, I fail to see the exile surfacing from the lines under discussion. The myth of Oedipus had undergone various changes between the first time it was mentioned in writing in the *Odyssey* and the tragedies of the fifth century B.C. The curse of the sons is without doubt a motif that keeps appearing in the different versions of the myth, but the sources are not unanimous about the reason for Oedipus' curse on his sons. Among the reasons are: abusive behaviour (*Thebaid*); Tiresias' prophecy (Stesichorus, *PMGF* 222[b].209, 211–12); punishment by the Erinyes: after Oedipus murdered his father, the Erinyes punished him by starting a war between his sons (Pind. *Ol*. 2.33-42); the sons' betrayal: they did not support their father after the discovery, and preferred reign and power (Soph. *OC* 421–7, 450–60, 1383–96); and imprisonment of Oedipus in the palace (Eur. *Phoen.* 872–7). We could well assume that the reason for the curse in the *Sept.* reflects Aeschylus' own interpretation of Oedipus' story, and is not the same as the reason brought in *OC*.[16] The self-inflicted blindness and the curse on the sons seem to be linked in the corrupted passage, and occur for the same reason: Oedipus' spontaneous horror at discovering that he had married his mother, and that his sons are the rotten apples born of this marriage. I propose to read the text as follows:

ἐπεὶ δ' ἀρτίφρων	[στρ. ε]
ἐγένετο μέλεος ἀθλίων	
γάμων, ἐπ' ἄλγει δυσφορῶν	780
μαινομέναι κραδίαι	
δίδυμα κάκ' ἐτέλεσεν	
πατροφόνωι χερὶ τῶν	
†κρεισσοτέκνων† δ' ὀμμάτων ἐβλάφθη.	
τέκνοις δ' ἀθλίας	[ἀντ. ε]
ἐφῆκεν ἐπίκοτος τροφᾶς,	786
αἰαῖ, πικρογλώσσους ἀράς.	

But when the miserable man became aware of his terrible marriage, aggravated with pain in his enraged heart, he committed two evils: with his parricidal hand he damaged his eyes †dearer than children†. And upon his sons, alas, he laid bitter-tongued curses, angry on account of their wretched origin.

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[16] Similar to the famous difference in the prophecy given to Laius. Aeschylus chose to phrase the prophecy as an implicit warning or as an indirect command and not as fate: '… he should die without offspring to save the city' (748–9). Sophocles chose to make the prophecy more personal, one that regards the father and his son, and not the whole city. He also phrases the prophecy as Laius' inevitable fate: '… that he will be fated to die by the hands of the son that will be born of me [Jocasta] and him …' (713–14).

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