

Zoia Barzakh

SOPHOCLES *OT* 809: THE RESPONSE OF THE DEFENSE*

This paper is intended as a response to the expert opinion on the question of the guilt of Oedipus in killing Laius, recently published in *Hermes* by N. Almazova.¹ Here the expert concludes that “Oedipus is guilty of killing in excess of self-defense”.²

At the original trial, which took place on the stage of the Athenian Theatre of Dionysus more than twenty-five centuries ago, the defendant stood no chance: almost all procedural roles – including that of the ἄρχων βασιλεύς overseeing the trial, the injured party (διώκων) represented by the closest relative of the victim, the accused (φεύγων), the judge, and the executioner – were concentrated in a single pair of hands, and in those of a person who, by the very nature of things, could not have been impartial. To compensate for this miscarriage of justice, I hereby assume the duties of an advocate for the defendant and, in what follows, respond to the conclusion of the expert who sided with the prosecutor.³

* I express a gratitude for the anonymous reviewers of *Hyperboreus* for their profound and thought-provoking comments which helped me a lot in preparing this article for the publication.

¹ Almazova 2025, 159–170.

² Almazova 2025, 168.

³ B. Manuwald, in his commentary to the tragedy (2012, 40–42), answering the article of Harris (2010), where the author also states that Oedipus was, according to the Athenian law, guilty of homicide, questions the very relevance of such “juridical” approach to the tragedy – namely, the applicability of legal norms to the situation described in it. However, both the frequent use of legal terminology and procedural details of Athenian homicide trial in this particular tragedy (on which see esp. Knox 1957, 19–20, 80–81, and 95–97) and the testimonies about relevance of the law court practices for the understanding of Greek tragedy in general collected by Harris (2010, 129–130) speak for such approach.

Even the prosecution does not deny that, according to the description given in *OT* 802–813, it was Laius and his party who started the fight. Our sources give us the description of two cases – one real and one fictitious – tried before Athenian court, in which the defense maintained that the deceased was the initial aggressor. Surprisingly, in none of these cases does the defense insist that the life and health of the killer was in immediate danger and that he had to defend himself to avoid it. However, even in such situations, the defense based its argument on the mere fact that the initial physical aggression was that of the deceased and, evidently, could reasonably expect this to be enough for the killer to be absolved by the jury.

A real case of this kind is that of a certain Euaenus, reported by Demosthenes in the speech *Against Meidias* (Dem. 21. 71–76).⁴ Here, the defendant killed the victim during a private banquet in response to a slap in the face. According to Demosthenes, he was convicted by a majority of one vote (21. 75):

ἀκούω γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔγωγε μιᾷ μόνον ἀλῶναι ψήφῳ, καὶ ταῦτ' οὔτε κλαύσαντ' οὔτε δεηθέντα τῶν δικαστῶν οὐδενός, οὔτε φιλάνθρωπον οὔτε μικρὸν οὔτε μέγ' οὐδ' ὅτιοῦν πρὸς τοὺς δικαστὰς ποιήσαντα. θῶμεν τοίνυν οὕτωςί, τοὺς μὲν καταγόντας αὐτοῦ μὴ ὅτι ἡμίνατο, διὰ τοῦτο καταψηφίσασθαι, ἀλλ' ὅτι τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον ὥστε καὶ ἀποκτεῖναι, τοὺς δ' ἀπογόντας καὶ ταύτην τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τῆς τιμωρίας τῷ γε τὸ σῶμ' ὑβρισμένῳ δεδωκέναι.

In fact, according to what I personally hear, he was convicted by a single vote, and this happened without him shedding any tears or begging any of the judges or doing anything at all, large or small, to make the judges sympathetic to him. So let us draw the following conclusion: on the one hand, the judges who decided against him voted to convict not because he struck back but because he struck back in such a way that he actually killed him; on the other, those who voted to acquit allowed an extreme amount of retaliation to a man who was the victim of physical indignity.⁵

⁴ Harris 2010, 136 states that “the story of Oedipus’ killing of Laius bears a strong resemblance in certain regards to Euaion’s murder of Boeotus”.

⁵ Transl. Harris 2008, 113.

The expert cites this case as proof that “Athenian law did not guarantee the right to defend oneself by any means against anyone who struck the first blow”.⁶ However, Euaenus did not defend himself, but rather, he avenged himself. As far as we can judge from Demosthenes’ report, the defense in this case did not seek to establish that the defendant faced an immediate threat to life or limb; on the contrary, the defense’s position was that the slap in the face constituted such an unbearable offense that it justified the use of deadly force.

It is certainly true that this case “shows that the Athenian court did not consider provocation as automatic ground for acquittal”.⁷ However, it also shows that even a simple provocation, without threat to life, could serve as grounds for acquittal – otherwise, nearly half of the judges would not have voted to acquit a murderer in a case that clearly did not involve such danger.

Note that the context of Demosthenes’ speech points in the same direction: the case is introduced not to show that simple revenge cannot serve as grounds for the acquittal of a killer, but, on the contrary, to demonstrate that a bodily insult such as a blow to the face can constitute sufficient provocation even for a murderous attack, and that in such a case, the killer deserves understanding, if not pardon.⁸ Demosthenes accuses Meidias of assault and battery: the accused slapped the orator in the face during a public festival, at which the latter was serving as a *choregos*. The accuser aptly refers to the case of Euaenus for a dual purpose: to show how serious an insult a slap in the face is, and to contrast his own self-restraint and commitment to legal procedure with the impulsive reaction of Euaenus. The logic of Demosthenes’ argument is as follows: Boeotus slapped Euaenus in the face during a private banquet, when the insulted party was not engaged in official duties, after which Euaenus killed the offender and was convicted by the margin of a single vote. The insult I suffered was far greater: I was slapped in the face in public, while performing an official duty. Therefore, I could have killed Meidias on the spot

⁶ Almazova 2025, 159–160 with n. 5.

⁷ Harris 2016, 212. I am grateful for the anonymous reviewer of *Hyperboreus* for drawing my attention to this article.

⁸ In my analysis of the case of Euaenus in the speech of Demosthenes, I follow Cairns 2015, 651–652.

and would probably have been acquitted. Instead, I chose to prosecute him through legal channels – what a responsible citizen I am!

This is clearly an *a fortiori* argument and, as has already been shown by A. Sommerstein, it can likewise be employed by the defence in the case of Oedipus.⁹

The second, fictitious, homicide case in which, according to the defence, it was the deceased who initiated the fight, is the situation presented in Antiphon's *Third Tetralogy*. Here, too, the incident took place during a private banquet, where, according to the defence, a drunken fellow attacked the defendant and was eventually killed by him (or rather, suffered physical injuries that eventually led to his death, for which, according to the defence, the physician's incompetence in treating him was at least partly responsible). Analysis of this case shows that, according to M. Gagarin, "the fact that the victim started the fight could bolster someone's defence on the charge of intentional homicide but did not necessarily make the killing lawful". However, here again the wrongdoing in question is not a killing in self-defence in the strict sense of the term, but a killing following provocation, as the defence never claims that the life or health of the defendant was in any danger during the fight. Instead, from the opening of his first speech, the defendant bases his position on the assertion that "it is just" (δίκαιον) to use greater force against one who initiates the fight (Antiph. 4. 2. 2):

οἶμαι μὲν οὖν ἔγωγε οὔτε δίκαια τούτους οὔθ' ὅσια δρᾶν
ἐγκαλοῦντας ἐμοί. τὸν γὰρ ἄρξαντα τῆς πληγῆς, εἰ μὲν σιδήρω
ἢ λίθῳ ἢ ξύλῳ ἡμυνάμην αὐτόν, ἠδίκουν μὲν οὐδ' οὕτως – οὐ
γὰρ ταῦτ' ἀλλὰ μείζονα καὶ πλείονα δίκαιοι οἱ ἄρχοντες ἀντι-
πάσχειν εἰσὶν – ταῖς δὲ χερσὶ τυπτόμενος ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, ταῖς χερσὶν
ἄπερ ἔπασχον ἀντιδρῶν, πότερα ἠδίκουν;

Note that this statement directly contradicts the principle of adequate and sufficient self-defence and could not have been made

⁹ Sommerstein 2010, 221 n. 29: Euaenus kills the drunk fellow on the spot for slapping him in the face, and "Demosthenes /.../, who tells the story, clearly expects his jury to sympathize with Euaion. Much more would they have sympathized with a man who had been subjected to a murderous assault by the leader of a party of five men on a lonely country road".

if this principle were applicable in the Athenian homicide court. It is unclear whether the statement contains a quotation from an actual legal provision;¹⁰ however, in the following speech (Antiph. 4. 3. 2) the plaintiff explicitly refers to a provision according to which the one who initiated the fight (ἄρξας τῆς πληγῆς) is responsible (αἴτιος) for the outcome under the law (κατὰ τὸν νόμον).¹¹ In what follows, the plaintiff does not deny the existence of such a law, but argues that it was the defendant, rather than the deceased, who initiated the fight.¹² In the final speech, the friends of the defendant – who by this time had gone into exile – refer to the same provision as a universally written law (γέγραπται, 4. 4. 7):

τῷ μὲν γὰρ ἄρξαντι πανταχοῦ μεγάλα ἐπιτίμια ἐπίκειται, τῷ δὲ ἀμυνομένῳ οὐδαμοῦ οὐδὲν ἐπιτίμιον γέγραπται.¹³

In this tetralogy, as in the previous one, a separate and well-known problem is posed by the repeated statement that the law prohibits killing “either justly or unjustly” (4. 2. 3: ὁ νόμος εἴργων μήτε δικαίως μήτε ἀδίκως ἀποκτείνειν, cf. 3. 2. 9, 3. 3. 7, 4. 4. 8).¹⁴ However, this “law” is in evident contradiction, not only with the principle of legitimate self-defense or retribution, but also with Attic homicide law in general, since that law establishes a separate jurisdiction – the Delphinion court – specifically for cases in which the defense maintained that the homicide had indeed taken place but was nevertheless justifiable under the circumstances (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 57. 3: ἐὰν δ’ ἀποκτεῖναι μὲν τις ὁμολογῇ, φῆ δὲ κατὰ τοὺς νόμους).

¹⁰ Carawan 1998, 302 suggests that both the provision about the use of greater force against one who struck the first blow and the exact wording of the speech, mentioning “sword, stone or stick” were directly borrowed from Dracon’s law about homicide.

¹¹ Gagarin 1978 a, 115.

¹² Cf. Gagarin 1998, 166 ad 4. 2. 1 ἄρχων... χειρῶν ἀδίκων: “The point might be decisive, if it were clear that the victim struck the first blow and the defendant was acting solely in self-defense, but it is not”.

¹³ Gagarin 1978 a, 115 n. 20. Cf. Gagarin 1998, 172 ad loc.: “the reference to a written penalty (γέγραπται) indicates that A. has in mind the written laws of all Greek cities”.

¹⁴ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of the article for drawing my attention to this problem.

Both Aristotle (*loc. cit.*) and Demosthenes (23. 53) provide a full list of such cases, including attempted sexual violence against a female relative, accidental killing during athletic competitions, and the killing of a fellow soldier in wartime after mistaking him for an enemy. Therefore, the “law” mentioned by Antiphon cannot have been part of the written Athenian penal code. This point has long been acknowledged by scholars, who have addressed the problem in different ways. Dittenberger¹⁵ uses it as proof that the laws cited in Antiphon’s tetralogies are as fictitious as the cases discussed in them, and therefore that the tetralogies should be excluded from the corpus of sources for Attic legislation. Gagarin argues that this prohibition is not, strictly speaking, a law at all, but a moral rather than a legal injunction, deployed for rhetorical purposes,¹⁶ while Carawan lists this provision among the arguments for a later date of the tetralogies and for their non-Antiphontean origin.¹⁷

In his later commentary on Antiphon’s *Tetralogies*, Gagarin suggests understanding *δικαίως* as “intentional” and *ἄδικως* as “unintentional”;¹⁸ however, he fails to support this proposal with examples of comparable uses of these adverbs (or adjectives derived from the same root) in other sources. As a result, he is forced to assume an idiosyncratic usage of this otherwise common root in these passages of Antiphon, an assumption that seems highly problematic.

Therefore, we may assume that, according to the practice of the Athenian homicide courts, in cases where the victim had initiated the fight, this could constitute grounds for the acquittal of the killer, even if his life or health was not in immediate danger, and the killing was, strictly speaking, retaliatory rather than defensive.¹⁹

¹⁵ Dittenberger 1896, 271–277.

¹⁶ Gagarin 1978 b, 291–306.

¹⁷ Carawan 1993, 254–268.

¹⁸ Gagarin 1997, 151.

¹⁹ The question of whether we possess the exact formulation of this principle in the form of statutory provision is more complicated than it may seem at the first glance. Our main primary source on Draco’s homicide law is *IG*³104, the severely damaged stela dated from the end of the 5th century (for the history of its restorations and publications, see Harris–Canevaro 2023, 2). The restoration *ἐὰν ἄρχον]τα χειρῶν ἀ[δίκων κτείνῃ* for its lines 33–35 was proposed by Köhler in 1867 and since then accepted almost unanimously (see e. g. Roberts–Gardiner 1905, 67; Gagarin 1981, 61–62). However, E. Harris has lately doubted this

When we look closely at the detailed description of the encounter at the crossroads in *OT* 802–813, we see that Sophocles persistently stresses that the initial aggression was that of Laius and his attendants. As P. Finglass aptly observes in his commentary, “the fatal encounter is highly factual reportage, with no explicit attempt by Oedipus to justify his homicide”.²⁰ Yet, as J. Bremmer notes, “it would have been easy for the poet to add a line or two and make Oedipus the aggressor, as Euripides did in *Phoen.* 41–44. But Sophocles preferred to show an Oedipus who, being attacked (vv. 802–805) on a lonely mountain pass, defends himself against an unprovoked assault”.²¹

The first aggression was that of the τροχηλάτης: the expressions πρὸς βίαν ἤλαυνέτην in v. 805 and τὸν ἐκτρέποντα in v. 806 can only denote physical assault. As J. March puts it in her recent commentary, “Oedipus makes it clear that the driver was the aggressor and that he himself struck back in retaliation”.²² Note that Oedipus’ words ὄχου παραστείχοντα in v. 809 can only mean that, after a violent but brief exchange with the τροχηλάτης, Oedipus eventually gave way to the procession – as opposed to the description in Euripides *Phoen.* 40–41, where Oedipus, μέγα φρονῶν, refuses to give way until his feet are wounded by the horses’ hooves.

Everything could have ended with a brief exchange of blows – and perhaps some inurbane words – with the τροχηλάτης, were it not for Laius’ unprovoked attack.²³ “We note that Laius does not merely strike out of retaliatory anger, but watched and waited, and then

restoration, referring to the autopsy of the stone by R. Pitt in November 2016 and arguing that the restoration is mistakenly based on the literarily sources, all of which are relevant for the law about assault (αικείας), not the law about homicide (Harris 2016, 203–216). In his recent republication of the inscription (Harris–Canevaro 2023, 50–52) Harris refers to the relevant portion of the text as follows: “after l. 29, we can read only a few letters at the beginnings and the ends of the lines, as far as l. 58”. We cannot argue against the autopsy and agree that the most of the texts containing the expression ἄρχων χειρῶν ἀδίκων deal with the non-lethal violence; however, this is not the case with the third tetralogy of Antiphon, and we cannot see why, according to Harris 2016, 213, here, too, “the defendant is *clearly* relying on the law about assault” (italics mine).

²⁰ Finglass 2018, 409.

²¹ Bremer 1989, 156.

²² March 2020, 244.

²³ To my knowledge, this detail was paid attention to only by Gregory 1995, 144.

struck with malice aforethought”, as J. March aptly remarks again.²⁴ He waited (τηρήσας,²⁵ v. 808) until Oedipus passed the carriage²⁶ and then struck at the precise moment when the blow was most dangerous and could even have been fatal.

Indeed, a closer examination of the scene shows that Oedipus’ aggression was not merely retaliatory, but self-defensive.²⁷ The expert’s main argument is that “(t)he extent to which he (scil. Oedipus – Z. B.) was in danger depends on the weapon used by Laius to strike his blow”.²⁸ This weapon, διπλᾶ κέντρα (v. 809), according to the expert, could have been either a whip or a goad.

Before turning to the crucial question – whether the weapon used by Laius was a whip or a goad – we should note that, even if it was a whip, Oedipus could reasonably have believed that his life was in danger. Indeed, P. Finglass translates κέντρα as “a whip”,²⁹ but nevertheless concludes that “Oedipus could have expected to be acquitted by an Athenian court, at least, on the ground of self-defense when his life was in danger”: he was attacked twice, the second time by the leader of a group of five men. Moreover, even a whip itself, if that is indeed what it was, could have proved to be a deadly weapon. It was used to strike bulls and horses, and its blows must therefore have penetrated thick hides; this implies that such a blow could be fatal when used on a human being. Indeed, in the prologue of *Ajax*, the protagonist, in a state of divinely sent frenzy, kills bulls with this

²⁴ March 2020, 244.

²⁵ It is true that, as noted by the anonymous reviewer of this article, the basic meaning of τηρέω is “to see, to watch”, not “to wait”. However, part. aor. τηρήσας with acc. cum part. always means “watch for, wait for” or even “seize an opportunity when” (LSJ s. v. τηρέω II. 2). Jebb (ad loc.) cites as a parallel Dem. 53. 17 τηρήσας με ἀνιόντα ἐκ Πειραιῶς ὄψῃ περὶ τὰς λιθοτομίας, “lay in wait for me near the stone quarries, as I was coming back from the Peiraeus”. Cf. Thuc. 8. 108. 4–5 τηρήσας ἀριστοποιουμένους, “waiting until they were at their midday meal”; Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 2. 3. 5 τηρήσας τοὺς Λάκωνας διαβεβλημένους διὰ Πausανίαν, “...who seized the opportunity when the Lacedaemonians were discredited because of Pausanias”; Phlegon, *De mirab.* 4. 2. 3.

²⁶ On the syntax and textology of the passage see below.

²⁷ Pace Harris 2010, 135–139, who concludes that Oedipus’ aggression was retaliatory, not defensive.

²⁸ Almazova 2025, 162.

²⁹ Finglass 2018, 417.

very weapon, which proves *a fortiori* that for a human being this instrument posed a real danger.

However, κέντρα in v. 809 is, in likelihood, a goad rather than a whip. The expert concludes that “during the encounter at the crossroads Laius used a whip and did not try to kill the passer-by”.³⁰ Nevertheless, she admits that “(t)he general meaning of the word κέντρον is ‘any sharp point’ (LSJ s. v.)”.³¹ Indeed, the primary and most widespread meaning given by LSJ is “horse-goad” (LSJ s. v. κέντρον, A1). From this derive the metaphorical meanings such as “incentive” or “torture”. The word can also denote the “point of a spear”, the “sting of a bee”, or the “quills of a porcupine”, but it very rarely, if ever, refers to anything flexible.

It is true that, when the context allows – or even requires it – the word κέντρον can refer to a driver’s implement in a general sense. This is, as noted by the expert,³² the case in the tragic fragment quoted by Hesychius (Soph. fr. dub. 1140 Radt = fr. 802 Pearson), where the oars are likened to ῥηκτηρίοις κέντροισιν. Here, it is not important for the proper understanding of the simile which specific driver’s implement is meant – a goad or a whip. The similarity lies, as the expert observes, “down to function rather than form: the waves are likened to the horses and the oars to the instrument with which the driver beats them”. This broader sense – “the driver’s implement” – can also be assumed in two of the three Homeric passages cited by the expert.³³ In one of them (*Il.* 23. 384–390), κέντρον is used with negation: in v. 384 Apollo knocks the whip (μάστιγα) out of Diomedes’ hand, and his horses continue running ἄνευ κέντροιο (v. 387), until Athena returns the whip (μάστιγα, v. 390) to Diomedes. Here, it is clear from the context that the implement in question is a whip, and ἄνευ κέντροιο can safely be understood in the broader sense of “without being urged on by a driver”.

The situation with the compositum κεντρηνεκίας in *Il.* 5. 752 = 8. 396 is similar: the reader already knows that the implement Hera uses to urge on her horses is a μάστιξ (*Il.* 5. 748 = 8. 392), and the epithet can therefore be understood as “being urged on by the driver”.

³⁰ Almazova 2025, 168.

³¹ Almazova 2025, 162.

³² Almazova 2025, 163 with n. 28.

³³ Almazova 2025, 162.

It is worth noting that in neither of these cases is κέντρον used on its own, but rather either with a negation or as part of a compositum. In both instances, the context makes clear which driver's implement the reader is meant to imagine, and κέντρον or its derivatives can thus be employed in a wider sense.

In our passage, however, the reader or spectator is given no indication beyond the word κέντρον itself as to which implement was used, and it is therefore natural to understand the term in its primary sense, namely as “a goad”. In the third example cited by the expert, the instrument in Antilochus' hand is first called κέντρον (*Il.* 23. 430) and later ἰμάσθλη (23. 582). However, more than 150 verses separate these references, and both poet and audience may well have lost track of which implement was originally specified. The Homeric poems contain many such minor – and sometimes more substantial – contradictions, whether in the number of delegates sent on the mission to Achilles (*Il.* 9), the weather on the day of Odysseus' vengeance against the suitors (*Od.* 20. 114, cf. 104), or the presence or absence of the gods on Olympus at the time of Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon (*Il.* 1. 423–435, cf. 222).³⁴

The expert admits that “the direction of the blow indicated by μέσον κάρα might speak in favor of a goad: it is easier to strike an exact blow to the center of the head with a sharp object than with a whip, especially a double whip”.³⁵ However, she accepts the emendation ὄχον for the manuscript reading ὄχου and construes the modifier μέσον as governed by it. The resulting sense is “watched me pass the center of the carriage”. It is, however, uncertain if any emendation is required in the first place. Already Erfurdt, in his edition, noted that “nihil, si quid video, in vulgata est, quod iure possit displicere”. He punctuates vv. 807–808 as καὶ μ' ὁ πρέσβυς, ὡς ὄρᾳ, / ὄχου, παραστείχοντα τηρήσας... and translates as follows: “Senex, inquit, simul ac vidit (verberari a me aurigam), e curru, observans illud ipsum temporis momentum, quo praeteribam, ferit me”.³⁶

³⁴ On the small inconsistencies and contradictions in Homer, see: Scott 1921, 137–144; Murray 1924, 243; Kirk 1983, 76, 97; Zaicev 1990 [А. И. Зайцев, “Древнегреческий героический эпос и ‘Илиада’ Гомера”, in: Гомер, *Илиада*], 405–406; Janko 1998, 7–8; Reese 2005, 50–56.

³⁵ Almazova 2025, 164.

³⁶ Erfurdt 1827, 236–237.

Similarly, Jebb in his edition translates vv. 807–809 as “from the chariot – having watched for the moment when I was passing – he came down upon me, full on my head (μέσον κάρα, accusative of the part affected), with a double goad”, and comments that “the genitive ὄχου marks the point from which the action sets on”.³⁷ The genitive as a “whence” case – that is, a genitive of separation denoting the point of departure of a movement – is used by Sophocles with remarkable freedom. Jebb (*ad loc.*) cites as a parallel *OT* 152 (lyr.) Πυθῶνος ... ἔβας. To this we may add *OT* 97–98 (χώρας ... ἐλαύνειν), 142–143 (βάρθρων ... ἴστασθε), 229 (γῆς δ' ἄπεισιν), 431 (οἴκων τῶνδ' ... ἄπει), 1004 (λαβοῖς ἐμοῦ), *Phil.* 613 (ἄγοιντο νήσου τῆσδ'), 1003 (πέτρας ... πεσῶν), and *OC* 1024 (χώρας φυγόντες τῆσδ'). In his exhaustive analysis of the uses of the genitive case in Sophocles, T. Goodell lists all instances of the “genitive of separation (including under that term departure, deprivation, failure, and the like)” in the tragedian’s works; his catalogue includes no fewer than 252 examples. Goodell concludes that “the freedom with which this genitive of separation is used with all sorts of words and expressions denoting removal, issue, deprivation, distinction, [and] separation is surprising. Apparently Sophocles felt free to indicate these relations by the genitive with almost any word... Accordingly, where the only objection to an MS reading is the presence of an ablative genitive of separation, that reading should without hesitation be retained”.³⁸ This conclusion is fully applicable to the present case.

A. Moorhouse points out that, if we accept the manuscript reading ὄχου, we obtain two genitives depending on καθίκετο, ὄχου and μοῦ, which, according to Moorhouse, is “very awkward”.³⁹ However, there is nothing inherently awkward about two genitives depending on a single verb. For instance, the verb τυγχάνω can govern a double genitive: a genitive of the thing obtained, and a genitive of the person from whom it is obtained⁴⁰ (e. g. *Soph. Phil.* 1315 ὧν δέ σου τυχεῖν ἐπίεμαι, *Xen. Anab.* 5. 7. 33 οὗ δὲ δὴ πάντων οἰόμεθα τεύξεσθαι ἐπαίνου). Similarly, two genitives – one denoting a person and the other a thing – can depend on the verb ἀκούω⁴¹ (e. g. *Dem.* 18. 9 τῶν ὑπὲρ τῆς γραφῆς δικαίων ἀκούη μου).

³⁷ Jebb 1883, 152 ad v. 808.

³⁸ Goodell 1884, 16–21, 24.

³⁹ Moorhouse 1982, 66.

⁴⁰ LSJ, s. v. τυγχάνω II. 2 C; Smyth 1956, 322 § 1351.

⁴¹ Smyth 1956, 323 § 1362.

Thus, with μέσον κάρα construed together as an accusative of the part affected, we must assume that Laius struck Oedipus on the middle of the head, which would be almost impossible to accomplish with a whip – especially a double whip – but relatively easy with a goad.

The expert's crucial argument concerns the epithet διπλᾶ modifying κέντρα: she assumes that the use of a double whip is well attested both in vase painting and in literature, whereas a double goad is mentioned only once by Nonnus and once by John Chrysostom, in both cases metaphorically, to denote a double disaster.⁴² However, διπλᾶ κέντρα can mean either “a double goad” or “two goads”,⁴³ and there is at least one vase painting from the classical period in which a charioteer is depicted holding two goads.

I refer to an Attic black-figure oinochoe of the fifth century BC, preserved in the collection of antiquities at Oundle School in Northamptonshire (fig. 1). In the only publication and description



Fig. 1. Attic black-figured oinochoe. Reprinted from Arafat 2005–2006, 125, with the permission from Oundle School in Northamptonshire, UK.

⁴² Almazova 2025, 167.

⁴³ LSJ s. v. διπλόος A III, Almazova 2025, 158 with n. 56.

of this vase known to me, the author notes that the “charioteer ... holds two goads and reins”.⁴⁴ The reason Sophocles equips Laius with two goads is obvious: a blow delivered with two goads is twice as harmful and dangerous as one delivered with a single goad. Thus, even through this seemingly minor detail, Sophocles emphasizes that Oedipus was acting in legitimate self-defence.

Thus, we may conclude that the killing of Laius is depicted by Sophocles as an act of self-defence. This interpretation is consistent with *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus repeatedly claims that during the fatal encounter at the crossroads, he acted in self-defence (*OC* 271, 992–994). The expert argues that claims about *OT* cannot be supported by reference to *OC*, since “the latter tragedy was staged much later, and it is unlikely that the audience would have remembered Oedipus’ account from *OT* in detail”.⁴⁵ However, a close analysis of the later tragedy shows that the poet assumed that at least part of his audience possessed detailed knowledge of the earlier one.⁴⁶ It suffices to mention the almost verbatim quotations in *OC* 787–788 (cf. *OT* 370–371) and *OC* 806 (cf. *OT* 545), as well as the careful elaboration of the vocabulary and imagery of the earlier tragedy in *OC* 1130–1136 (cf. *OT* 1413–1415).

Of course, Sophocles could not have expected all – or even the majority – of the spectators to remember the earlier tragedy in detail. But he surely expected some of them to do so. On this point, I follow M. Revermann, who has proposed the notion of a “stratification of competence”.⁴⁷ According to Revermann, the original audience of ancient Greek drama was multi-layered with respect to its ability to understand and appreciate the full range of the poets’ theatrical devices, including intertextual references. The drama was intelligible and meaningful even to those at the lowest level of competence, while for spectators at higher levels, such references generated additional layers of meaning. Accordingly, since at least part of the audience was expected to remember details of the earlier tragedy, the poet was most likely careful to avoid direct contradictions.

⁴⁴ Arafat 2005–2006, 125.

⁴⁵ Almazova 2025, 161. Similarly, Harris 2010, 137–138.

⁴⁶ Seidensticker 1972, 255–274.

⁴⁷ Revermann 2006, 99–124.

That said, we should note that this interpretation lines up with Sophocles' general treatment of the Oedipus myth, in that he depicts the killing of Laius in a manner that leaves no doubt as to the hero's innocence. In this tragedy, Sophocles carefully suppresses or avoids every traditional motif that might lend any sense of justice – or even intelligibility – to the gods' cruel will. He eliminates the motif of hereditary guilt and renders the oracle given to Laius (*OT* 711–714) unconditional, in contrast to Aeschylus, who emphasizes that Laius could and should have avoided begetting a child, thereby making Laius' sinful disobedience the cause of the subsequent disasters.⁴⁸ In Sophocles' version, the ways of the gods remain entirely opaque. It is nonetheless understandable why, as the expert notes at the beginning of her article, “the extent of Oedipus' guilt in both the eyes of Sophocles and his audience and our contemporaries is an everlasting debate”,⁴⁹ however innocent the hero may appear, the cruel and inexplicable will of the gods implied by this innocence is unacceptable – and ultimately unbearable – to the human mind.

Zoia Barzakh

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

zoia_barzakh@mail.ru

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⁴⁸ Finglass 2018, 391–392 ad 711–714.

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This paper is aimed as an answer to the article about the guilt of Oedipus in killing Laius, recently published in *Hermes* by N. Almazova, where the author concludes that Oedipus is guilty of killing in excess of self-defense. The analysis of the sources on Athenian homicide law shows that the notion “the excess of self-defense” is alien to the Athenian juridical practice and that the killer could be acquitted if it was the killed who started the fight, even in the cases when the reaction exceeded the limits of necessary self-defense. On the other hand, the close look at the description of the scene at the crossroads in Soph. *OT* 800–813 shows that Sophocles presents Laius and his party as aggressors and Oedipus as defending his life. We interpret διπλᾶ κέντρα in v. 809 as “two goads” and illustrate the possibility of this interpretation by evidence from the vase painting.

Настоящая статья является ответом на недавно вышедшую в журнале *Hermes* статью Н. А. Алмазовой, где автор приходит к заключению, что в сцене убийства Лаия в трагедии Софокла “Царь Эдип” (ст. 800–813) герой изображен виновным в превышении необходимой самообороны. Анализ источников, касающихся афинского уголовного судопроизводства, показывает, что термин “превышение необходимой самообороны” применительно к этому судопроизводству является не вполне корректным и что в случае, если агрессия изначально исходила от убитого, убийца мог быть оправдан даже в том случае, если он превысил необходимую самооборону. В то же время, как показано в статье, в описании столкновения Лаия и Эдипа Софокл подчеркивает, что агрессорами являлись Лаий и его люди, а Эдип защищал свою жизнь. Διπλᾶ κέντρα в ст. 809 – орудие, которое было в руках у Лаия, – мы интерпретируем как “два стрела”; возможность такой интерпретации подтверждается вазовой живописью.

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