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THE SYMBOLIC TOPOGRAPHY OF OEDIPUS' LIFE. SOME REMARKS

ABSTRACT. Wesolowska Elzbieta, The Symbolic Topography of Oedipus' Life. Some Remarks (*Symboliczna topografia życia Edypa. Kilka uwag*).

The author of *Oedipus Rex* manages to reconstruct the hero's life path against the background of the map of Greece of his day. In doing so he constructs the imaginary of the protagonist's identity, one that is inextricably linked to his mental blindness as opposed to the tragic, self-inflicted blindness meted out to himself as a punishment for his crimes.

Keywords: Oedipus; mental and physical blindness; identity; life path

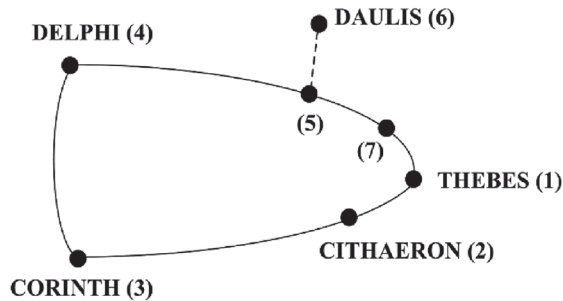
One writes about *Oedipus Rex* with trepidation. This feeling is likely to be compounded by the fact that this inexhaustible and multifaceted play continues to animate countless scholarly and critical debates which are becoming more and more focused.¹ The depth and timelessness² of this trademark Sophoclean

¹From this it follows that one must be up to date with the rapidly burgeoning body of studies on the subject. D.A. Hester's comprehensive article (1977) is an invaluable resource for Oedipus scholars. The author divides the state of research on the subject into the following eight categories, including the list of publications, concerning Oedipus: 1) The hero's crimes, 2) His innocence attributed to the impossibility of reverting fate and the will of gods, 3) His innocence without any reference to the above causes, 4) Political aspects of the tragedy, 5) The realism (or lack thereof) of the play, 6) Religion and myth, 7) Psychoanalytical interpretations of the play (with Papadopoulos 2005 as one of the recent publications on the matter), 8) Dates of stage adaptations of the play. The trouble is that this article was published over forty years ago and the above list does not exhaust the full range of discussions on the play. Other areas of interest include: the problems of attribution of the play to the early literary tradition and mythology (Kerényi 2002), truth and knowledge (Głombiowska 1989, Cieśluk 2008, Grelka 2013), disability (Rose 2003, Catenaccio 2012), the significance of language and curses (Brusewicz 2003), the suffering and self-consciousness of Oedipus (Maślanka-Soro 1991, Dodds 1966), the inconsistencies of diegetic and extradiegetic dramatic plot structure (Dawe 1982), the limits of the protagonist's freedom (Knox 2007), the human dignity (Kitto 1997), among others. These themes often overlap with each other.

²The universal aspect of the famous tragedy has inspired many notable literary and film adaptations of the play, such as the drama *Life Is a Dream* (1627–1629) written by P. Calderón de

tragedy inspire scholars to explore the complexity and originality of this most tragic or all tragic heroes – the famous patricide who wedded his own mother.³

The aim of this short article is to examine the role of literary topography from the perspective of geopoetics.⁴ My reflections on the life of Oedipus will be based on the analysis of the map of Greece of the playwright's day. I will focus on the places the hero visited (albeit at times unintentionally⁵) and influenced.



The above map charts the places that mark the most important and dramatic events of Oedipus's life. He is born in Thebes (1). Burdened with a curse, he is left to die on Mount Cithaeron (2). Saved by a well-meaning servant, he is first taken by a shepherd and later by the king of Corinth (3), Polybius. At (3) he is told about being a changeling. He then secretly leaves for Delphi (4) (across the sea). Hoping to learn about his origins, he consults the Oracle of Apollo but is left without a direct answer (v. 280–281).

Instead, he is told (in the form of a refined presupposition⁶) about two crimes he is fated to commit: he will kill his father and wed his mother. It is the combination of the oracle's cryptic presupposition (presuppositions are always cryptic), the young age of Oedipus, and the sense of anxiety about his origins that drives the

la Barca, the novel *Homo Faber* (1956) written by M. Frisch, and the film *The Bourne Identity* (2002) directed by D. Liman.

³Parker (1983: 308 f.) emphasizes the difficulty of interpreting this failed hero, whose tragedy of life is so inconceivable as to be completely detached from human everyday experience. However, this statement is only partially correct. If Oedipus's life is beyond all imagination, how to account for the hero's undying appeal and ability to tug at the heartstrings of his readers, thus inspiring *eleos kai fobos*, to put it in Aristotle's words. For Aristotle, Sophocles' play is the finest of all tragedies (*Poetics* 1453a7). For further information on an objection to this assumption, see Adkins 1966: 78–102.

⁴For further reference on the aspects related to geopoetics, see Rybicka (2008). Furthermore, the works of Berger (on the selected aspects of *deixis* in the play, 2013), Gregory (1995) and Halliwell (1986) in different ways approach the complexity of the place. The latter two publications relate to the scene of enormous dramatic significance, which takes place at the three-way crossroads.

⁵Needless to say, as an infant, Oedipus could not have remembered his journey from Thebes to Corinth via Mount Cithaeron. Cf. also film *Edipo re* (1967) directed by Pier P. Passolini.

⁶This denotes a situation in which the interlocutor provides answers which do not answer the speaker's question directly but convey hidden messages.

protagonist far away from the place where he fears he may encounter his parents.⁷ At this point, he goes on foot via a highroad and encounters a group of travellers at the crossroads (5). Offended and assaulted by the strangers, Oedipus kills all but one of them.⁸ Oedipus then takes the road from which the travellers came and heads for Thebes. Note that this event marks the last time that the youth can choose his way.⁹ After all, he might as well have taken the highroad to Daulis (6), which would have helped him stay away from Corinth, as intended. Instead, Oedipus chooses his way, determined to always keep right.¹⁰ Along the way, he comes across the monstrous Sphinx (7), whom he vanquishes using the strength of his intellect,¹¹ and returns to Thebes. Oedipus then basks in glory as the slayer of the monster that has plagued the local inhabitants for some time.¹² In return for his achievement, he is awarded the hand of the widowed Queen and the throne of Thebes.¹³ He therefore accidentally becomes the ruler of the land, which he should have inherited as the only rightful son of the king.¹⁴

Let us consider the route marked by numbers **1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 7 – 8**. The closed curve of the route is fairly unambiguous. Other characters of the play follow this trajectory too, both in the fictional present and the past. The events involving these characters are as follows:

1. Past events:

- a. The servant takes the infant away onto a hilltop (2)
- b. The shepherd takes the baby to the palace in Corinth (3)
- c. King Laius consults the Oracle of Delphi (4)¹⁵

⁷ It should be noted that Apollo says nothing about Oedipus' past as a changeling. After hearing the augury, however, Oedipus is no longer concerned with his origins. This problem seems to pale in comparison with the horrendousness of the prophesy.

⁸ Note (v. 810 f.) that Oedipus kills his oppressors with a staff as he has no sword at hand.

⁹ According to Knox (2007: 89), however, Oedipus continues to exercise his freedom of choice until the end of his life in one sense: "One freedom is allowed him: the freedom to search for the truth, the truth about the prophecies, about the gods, about himself".

¹⁰ I will revisit this aspect of the journey later in this article.

¹¹ For Knox (1966: 26), the scene in which Oedipus outsmarts, humiliates, and singlehandedly defeats the Sphinx anticipates the moment of Oedipus' own defeat to come.

¹² This stretch of time can be quite precisely determined: it begins when the king takes this route to meet his death at the hands of his son and ends when Oedipus returns from the crossroads and solves this riddle: one that is ambiguous to him, but quite plain for the reader (Chodkowski 2007: 19).

¹³ The words that Oedipus utters when addressing his wife echo the protagonist's tacit awareness that the throne comes with the dowry. See v. 579–580.

¹⁴ Knox (1966: 67) finds it acutely ironic that Oedipus is a self-made man in the land of his inheritance. The scenes of Oedipus's ascension to the throne and the crimes leading up to this event expose a doubling of meaning. The act of accidental patricide renders the throne vacant and the queen available to suitors. From this it follows that it is only by committing his crimes in this order that he could win the throne.

¹⁵ We do not know what bothers the king at this point. It is unlikely that his inquiry is related to the Sphinx, as the monster makes his appearance on the road after this event. One may risk an assumption that Laius wants to consult the Oracle to find out whether he is fit to have children.

2. The present events:
 - a. The envoy arrives from Corinth (3)
 - b. The servant arrives from the outskirts of the town (1)
 - c. The shepherd arrives from Cithaeron (2)
 - d. Teiresias arrives from the town (1)
 - e. Sent to consult the oracle, Creon returns from Delphi (4)
 - f. After his self-mutilation and death of his wife, Oedipus intends to head for Cithaeron (2), which he chooses as the place of his death and which is where he was meant to die from the beginning.¹⁶
 - g. However, Creon wishes to consult the Oracle of Delphi again (4), before making any decisions concerning the fate of Oedipus.¹⁷

Moreover, the mystery of Oedipus' life can be explained by the fact that Oedipus hoped to avoid his future without knowing his past. His symbolic death as a blind man seems to mirror his life of blindly following the paths of fate.¹⁸ It is also worth considering two adverbs of place and time in ancient Greek: *opisthen* (denoting that which takes place in the past and is situated in front of something) and *prosthen* (that which takes place in the future and is situated behind something). Oedipus lives in the illusion of his future life without having access to his past, in which his present life is rooted. Unable to make sense of his life out of the incoherent scraps of knowledge about his past, he is doomed to fail. It is worth pointing out that by blinding himself, Oedipus reduces himself in stature to Tiresias, the blind prophet whom he disagrees with and disparages.¹⁹ Interestingly, the position of Tiresias is ambivalent and heavily contingent on the veracity of his prophecies.²⁰

In Sophocles' play, blindness is more than a metaphor uttered by the madly despairing protagonist. An experiment carried out in the early 2000s and involving blindfolded participants who were asked to walk straight ahead showed that the participants tended to stray to one side.²¹ It could be assumed that if the participants continued to walk long enough, the trajectory would close itself into

¹⁶It could be argued that by heading for Cithaeron, Oedipus responds to a call, and the call may be coming from the road, which, being an infant, he cannot remember from the past. Another reason may be that Oedipus is only capable of following paths charted by the fate and circumstances that determine his life.

¹⁷Cieśluk (2008) attributes the fictional representation of the characters' migration to and from Delphi to the will of Apollo.

¹⁸For further information on the relationship between sight and knowledge and the double meaning of the name Oedipus, see Grelka 2013.

¹⁹Such as when he accuses the blind prophet of his failure to solve the riddle of the Sphinx and thus to save Thebes from the monster (v. 390 ff.).

²⁰Cf. Fowler 2008: 58. For further reference on the position of the blind prophet in the Greek tragedy as compared with Seneca's version of the story, see Roisman 2003.

²¹See Souman et al. 2009.

a near-circular pattern.²² Since Oedipus is reluctant to talk about his early days, of which he is anxious and uncertain,²³ it is impossible to retrace the route followed by Oedipus on the basis of the characters' account. There are, however, descriptions of the protagonist's disfigured feet (v. 717–718 and 1032). He is so used to his disfigurement that, unlike the reader, he is unable to connect the dots, so to speak, when hearing a story of a child with injured feet abandoned in the mountains.

The Greek dramatist ingenuously weaves another layer of meaning into this already complex work. When Oedipus, as a man of extraordinary insight,²⁴ is manacled by the inability to relate to his past, he actually can see less than the blind prophet Tiresias, who has failed to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. The topographical and historical pattern of his life path, whether read on the page or seen on the stage, stands for the imaginary of his fate. Oedipus has never followed the heroic code of honour. He has no qualms about killing his assailants with a walking staff²⁵ or vanquishing the monster by outsmarting him. Moreover, during an agon on the stages of human life, Oedipus has his staff close at hand, despite the hidden meaning of the Sphinx's riddle.²⁶ Furthermore, Oedipus could neither claim descent from gods nor count on their support. A wanderer and stranger to everyone, given to the weaknesses of the human condition,²⁷ he ends up destroying the lives of all who cross his path. From Corinth to Delphi, from the crossroads of Delphi to Thebes, he follows the pattern of a closed loop or a noose, such as the one tied around the neck of Jocasta.

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²²The total duration of the experiment was below twenty minutes.

²³He is deeply worried that he may be a changeling and a child of slaves, which can be gathered from his dramatic response.

²⁴An ancient anecdote relates the story of the great thinker Thales, who, lost in thought, failed to see a hole in the ground, fell into it, and suffered injuries.

²⁵Which, considering his physical impairment, is probably his essential facility.

²⁶In this riddle, a stick or a staff are an attribute of old age used for supporting tired legs. Although Oedipus is a young man, he outsmarts the monster and solves the riddle.

²⁷It is probable that the title of Max Frisch's novel *Homo Faber* is an ironic reminder that man is not the architect of his own fortune in either general or specific sense of the term.

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Summary

aside from its wealth of meanings and contexts, the timeless tragedy of Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, shows a unique intuition of its author, who succeeded in animating the conventional *topos* of life path by showing its complex topographical dimensions. He manages to reconstruct the hero's life path against the background of the map of Greece of his day. In doing so he constructs the imaginary of the protagonist's identity, one that is inextricably linked to his mental blindness as opposed to the tragic, self-inflicted blindness meted out to himself as a punishment for his crimes.