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The Penguin Editions of Sophocles' Oedipus the King and their Significance for the Reception of this Tragedy by the English Public since 1947*

Introductory Remarks

This study is one of the first attempts to examine something that is not frequently mentioned in the classical and translation studies: the construction of notions classical Greek tragedy and the tragic in the English-speaking world through translations and theatrical performances. Its scope, however, is far more limited since it deals only with Sophocles' Oedipus the King and how this drama was perceived and constructed by one British and one American translator in the second half of the twentieth century. This paper discusses how the Penguin editions of two English translations of Oedipus, made by classical scholars and poets such as E.F. Watling and Robert Fagles, helped —each in its own way—in the reception and appreciation of this Greek tragedy from the British and American target systems (TSs).

Penguin Editions of Oedipus: Watling's King Oedipus (1947-1984) and Fagles' Oedipus the King (1984-up to the Present)

In 1982 a new translation of Sophocles' Oedipus appeared in the North American and British markets simultaneously: Robert Fagles' Oedipus The

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King.1 This translation was destined to be one of the most influential translations of Oedipus the King in English since it was first published by the Penguin Classics in 1984.2 Up to that year, among the most influential translations of Oedipus was Watling’s King Oedipus which was first published by the Penguin Classics in 1947.3 But why had Penguin Books, one of the most important publishing houses in translated literature, decided to change the translator and translation of this Sophoclean tragedy after almost fifty years of publishing Watling’s King Oedipus? To understand the change in the process of publishing, we shall start with a textual comparison between these two different editions and then venture to define the term “a successful translation”. In conclusion, we shall have the opportunity to explore how certain patterns emerging from the popularity of these translations of Oedipus with the British and North American TSS can show the interrelationship between the process of canonization of Oedipus, as a cornerstone of the Western theatrical and dramatical tradition, and the variability of a wider English TS.

1. Textual Differences between Watling’s King Oedipus (1947) and Fagles’s Oedipus the King (1984)

Let us now turn our attention to the beginning of the texts of Watling’s King Oedipus and Fagles’s Oedipus the King, and see how each of these scholars rendered the introductory speech delivered by Oedipus. The opening speech of Oedipus (vv. 1-13) in the texts under discussion appears as follows:

Watling’s King Oedipus

OEDIPUS: Children, new blood of Cadmus’ ancient line
What is the meaning of this supplication,
These branches and garlands, the incense filling the city,
These prayers for healing of pain, these lamentations?
I have not thought it fit to rely on my messengers
But came here to learn for myself — I, Oedipus,
Whose name is known afar.
(To the PRIEST) You, reverend sir,
In right of age, should speak of all of them.
What is the matter? Some Fear? Something you desire?
I would willingly do anything to help you;
Indeed I should be heartless, were I to stop my ears
To a general petition such as this.

Fagles’s Oedipus the King

Oh my children, the new blood of ancient Thebes,
why are you here? Huddling at my altar,
praying before me, your branches wound in wool.
Our city reeks with the smoke of burning insense,
rings with cries for the Healer and waiting for the dead.
I thought it wrong, my children, to hear the truth
from others, messengers. Here I am myself —
you all know me, the world knows my fame:
I am Oedipus.

Helping a Priest to his feet

Speak up, old man. Your years,
your dignity — you should speak for the others.
Why here and kneeling, what preys upon you so?
Some sudden fear? some strong desire?
You can trust me. I am ready to help,
I’ll do anything. I would be blind to misery
not to pity my people kneeling at my feet.
At first glance, one difference, although superficial and quantitative, becomes obvious; whereas Watling’s translation has 13 lines, Fagles’s consists of 16; still there are some similarities between these two excerpts. First, both passages present Oedipus coming unexpectedly on stage, thus forming our first view of Oedipus: a man in the public eye, a beloved ruler who is sought by his people. Second, both Watling and Fagles’s renderings provide the visual relationship between the “solitary” figure of Oedipus and the large group of the suppliants which is immediately reinforced in a very striking way: “Ω τέχνα...” “Children...” (Watling), “Oh my children...” (Fagles). This is the very first word of the tragedy and shows Oedipus’ role at this point: he is the leader, the protector and the patriarch of this people. Yet the similarities of these passages end here.

Perhaps the first and the most evident difference between the English translations of Oedipus is Watling’s “Children” an Fagles’s “Oh my children”. The former sounds more abrupt, carries imperative overtones and also signifies Oedipus’ effort to draw the immediate attention of this assembly (including the audience) to himself; the latter, instead, is an exclamation of surprise and pity at the same time. In contrast with Watling’s more demanding and abrupt “Children”, Fagles’s “Oh my children” represents better the concern of a leader for his people as well as his sympathy for them. This mixture of concern, sympathy and pity is not only expressed by the rest of speech but also by the repetition of the same word “τέχνα” (6) which is omitted in Watling’s but rendered as “my children” by Fagles.

The opening word “Ω τέχνα” is also of great importance because, on the semantic level, it connotes something more: that the speaker has an intimate relation with his interlocutors. The intimacy between Oedipus and the first assembly of people is also coupled by Oedipus’ “Ω γεραίε, φράζ” (9). In this phrase, the exclamatory “Ω γεραίε” (oh old man) conveys not only intimacy but also respect and softens down the imperative “φράζ” (speak up). This simple phrase, which is, however, a carrier of many denotations and codes of social behaviour, is translated as “[y]ou, reverend sir ... should speak” by Watling and as “[s]peak up old man” by Fagles. The fundamental difference between these two renderings is that in the former there is no such intimacy in Oedipus’ address to the Old Priest, and there is nothing of the swiftness and the expectancy of the original. In contrast, Fagles’s “[s]peak up old man” conveys not only the intimacy between Oedipus and the Old Priest but also the expectancy and impatience of Oedipus to hear why this group of people has gathered in front of his palace and what they expect from him.
The difference in social codes and behaviour between these two rendering is striking, and we may wonder why. At this point we may conjecture that this difference is the result of differentiated British and American Tss and of two different periods. We should not forget, on the one hand, that Watling was a classical scholar who was brought up in England, where monarchy is one of the traditional aspects of British constitutional life. Moreover, he wrote his version for a wider, mainly British public in the late 1940s. If we think in these terms, it is not strange that there is a social distance between Oedipus and the suppliants. On the other hand, Fagles is a classical scholar who has been raised in the USA, which is a republic. Furthermore, he wrote his Oedipus the King for a wider English public of the early 1980s, a public which was further removed from Greek studies than that of England in 1947. This is one of the reasons why the translated text in Fagles’ translation of Oedipus the King always seems longer, more explanatory and specific than Watling’s King Oedipus. One of the most characteristic examples of this attitude is the rendering of the initial situation at Thebes; whereas Watling translates it into “…this supplication / These branches and garlands…”, Fagles renders it into “[h]uddling at my altar, / praying before me, your branches wound in wool”. In Fagles’s rendering we are able to see two different dynamics; first we can perceive the horror of the full scene more visually and vividly than in Watling’s. Second, we discern a conscious effort on behalf of Fagles to make the text of his translation longer in order to facilitate our understanding of Oedipus and, thus, “compensate” us with passages that will help us feel closer to the original. A better example of this mechanism used by Fagles is his effort to avoid using “Cadmus” or any other Greek mythological name in the rest of his translation which may mean nothing to an average contemporary reader; instead, he employs “ancient Thebes”.

2. Position of Watling’s and Fagles’s versions of Oedipus in English

2.1. A Wider Readership

2.1.1. Watling’s King Oedipus

EKATERINI NIKOLAREA


2.1.2. Fagles’s *Oedipus the King*

Although it may be too early to draw definitive conclusions, we can affirm that Fagles's *Oedipus the King* has been one of the most popular translations of *Oedipus* in English since its first publication in the Penguin Classics in 1984 and in the Norton Anthology in 1985. We can also assert that this translation has been considered suitable for different kinds of readers; for example, a diverse readership oscillating between average non-Greek readers and students and scholars in the departments of Classics has benefited from the Penguin Classics edition of *Oedipus the King*. Second, students and scholars of English and Comparative Literature, who have employed either the various editions of the Norton Anthology of World Literature or some other anthologies, have been able to read and comprehend Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* thanks to Fagles’s contemporary English idiom. Third, Fagles’s rendering of *Oedipus* have been used by students and scholars in many theatre or drama departments since this translation was also published in various drama anthologies. Finally, another kind of sophisticated readership has benefited from Fagles’s *Oedipus the King* theatre semioticians or philosophers.

2.2. A Wider Theatrical Audience

2.2.1. Watling’s *King Oedipus*

When he made his version of *King Oedipus* in 1947, Watling was primarily aiming at a wider readership as well as a theatrical audience. Yet, there is no evidence whether this rendering has ever been used in actual theatrical performances. Of course, this lack of evidence raises more questions than it answers, especially when there is a plethora of data about contemporary performances of Fagles’s *Oedipus the King*.

2.2.2. Fagles’s *Oedipus the King*

As discussed earlier, Fagles’s *Oedipus the King* has been very popular with a wider English readership for it has repeatedly been published in Penguin Classics as well as in a great variety of anthologies. Yet such success could deceive and lead us to wrong assumption that this translation has remained only a printed text, if we had not been provided with very important additional information. Therefore, it is our intention in this sub-section to show that Fagles’s *Oedipus the King*, besides its popularity with a wider English readership, has been an equally successful script when produced in theatre, and broadcast in radio and television.

Upon its first publication in the USA (1982) and in the UK (1982 and 1984),
Fagles’s *Oedipus the King* has been performed at least eighteen times in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia, broadcast by the BBC Radio and by The Royal National Institute for the Blind and produced for a TV program in Maryland. Looking closer at Works Cited (“FAGLES, Robert”), we can elicit two major categories in the theatrical performances of Fagles’s *Oedipus* in North America and Great Britain. Whereas this version was produced primarily at colleges or universities by students of theatre/drama in North America, in the UK the same translation was produced mainly by professional companies.

These two categories in the theatrical performances of Fagles’s *Oedipus the King* also point to a substantial differentiation between the perception of Greek tragedy in general and *Oedipus the King* in particular by the North American and the British publics. On the one hand, of eight productions of Fagles’s *Oedipus* in the USA, five were realized by theatre students and only two by professional companies. This situation shows that, after most of theatre of drama departments were established in North America in the late 1940s, a slow process of canonization of *Oedipus the King*, as one of the most important plays in the Western tradition, was activated within this target system (TS).

On the other hand, of eleven productions of Fagles’s *Oedipus the King* in England nine were run by professional companies and only two by university students. We may now wonder why these has been such an explosion of theatrical productions of *Oedipus the King* by professional companies in the UK since the mid-1980s. An answer to this inquiry comes indirectly and only from another theatrical context. Commenting on the importance of Greek tragedy and *Oedipus the King* for the contemporary British public, Michael Kustow claims that *The Thebans*, the most recent translations and theatrical productions of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone* in England are, “[t]he newest addition to the edifice of productions, translations and critical re-readings which over the past decade has set Greek drama at the heart of our [British] theatrical and, in the most fundamental sense, our political concerns. Can it be a coincidence that this has occurred during a massive shift in the world-view of rich nations from the public realm to private interests; the collapse of Communism and the disclosure of the cruel mechanics of its power; the even harsher conflicts that have followed; and the spread of reportage and news values as our chief means of comprehending these upheavals?” The importance of this statement for the present study lies in that it draws our
attention to one of the principal reasons⁴ for the popularity of Greek
tragedy in general and Oedipus the King in particular with a British and
a wider European public since the mid-1980s. In Kustow’s opinion, political
circumstances, such as massive changes in Europe have created a tremendous
shift in the reading, interpreting and performing Greek drama and Sophocles’
Oedipus the King in the UK. It is also in Kustow’s statement that we can
partly find an explanation why Fagles’s Oedipus the King has been performed
eleven times in England since its first publication by the Penguin Classics
in 1984.

Concluding Remarks

The above discussion leads us to the conclusion that the Penguin editions
of the translations of Sophocles’ Oedipus the King made by Watling and
Fagles have played a vital role in the reception of this tragedy by the British
and American TSS at particular times. Nevertheless, the inquiry of this
article points to the fact that the influence of these editions upon the British
and American publics has varied and resulted in different perception and
reception of this play by these TSS, a difference which can be attributed to
the systems themselves.

Although Oedipus the King has been considered as one of the most
important classical tragedies to be translated, read, taught and performed,
a wider North American public, on the one hand, has received this tragedy
through Fagles’s translation whose theatrical performances were realized
primarily by students of theatre/drama departments. On the other hand,
a wider British public has received the same play through the same translation
with one big difference: the theatrical performances of this translation were
run primarily by professional companies.

Finally, this study shows that the impact of the Penguin editions of
particular translations upon the reception of Greek tragedy and Oedipus
the King by the British and American TSS during particular periods can be
a gold-field for translation, theatre and comparative studies, a field whose
only a very small part has been explored in this article.

Notes

1. Robert Fagles, Oedipus the King. Sophocles: The Tree Theban Plays, in-
troduction and notes by Bernard Knox (New York: The Viking P, 1982) 112-232, and
Oedipus the King. Sophocles: The Tree Theban Plays, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox (London: Allen Lane, 1982); the 1982 edition is out of print.


4. E.F. Watling, King Oedipus. Sophocles: The Theban Plays (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1980) 25-68; hereafter this publication will be referred to as Watling 1980. To the best of my knowledge, this is the last edition of Watling’s translation of Oedipus by the Penguin Classics before the same publishing house introduced Fagles’s Oedipus the King in 1984.

5. In another study, I pointed out that the establishment of many Theatre/Drama departments and various departments of Comparative Literature in North America in the late 1940s and the mid-1950s respectively created a wider and more sophisticated audience. See Ekaterini Nikolarea, A Communicative Model for Theatre Translation: Versions of Oedipus the King in English (Diss. U of Alberta, 1994) 172-73 and 248-49; hereafter this study will be quoted as Nikolarea.


7. I am deeply obliged to Professor Robert Fagles (Department of Comparative Literature, Princeton University) who so kindly offered me most of the information used in this section. I should also recognize that without his support and encouragement, I would not have been able to complete this part of my study. For references to various editions of Fagles’s Oedipus the King see Works Cited appended to this article.

8. I am deeply grateful to Robert Fagles (Department of Comparative Literature, Princeton University) who so kindly offered me such valuable information about the performances of his Oedipus. Needless to say, that without his help, I would not have been able to develop this section or, worse, I could have drawn the wrong conclusions.

9. We refer to The Robinson Players (Bates College, Maine, 1990) and The King’s Players (The Winnipes Festival, 1993); see Works Cited.

10. Although two of these productions took place at the University Theatre, Manchester, and at the Alton College, Alton, Hampshire, they were realized by the professional companies named The Contact Theatre Company and The Turning Theatre Company respectively.

11. One was at the Corpus Christi at Oxford University (1980) and the other was at the Wilson’s School, Mollison Drive, Wallington, Surrey (1990).


14. Some other reasons have been: new theatre criticism (Oliver Taplin), various discourses, such as structural anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics and feminism, the re-reading and re-writing of some Greek tragedies by creative writers, like Tony Morrison.
Words Cited


—. Oedipus the King. The Bedford Introduction to Literature. Ed. Michael Me-
EKATERINI NIKOLOAREA


**Performances, Radio and TV Broadcast**

__Oedipus the King._ State University of New York, Plattsburgh. Spring 1982.
__Oedipus the King._ Equity Guest Artist Production, Program in Theater and Dance, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. December 1983.
__Oedipus the King._ St. Louis Community College, St. Louis, Missouri. September 1984.
__Oedipus the King._ The Educational Theatre Program, The University of Lethbridge, Alberta. February 4-9, 1985.
__Oedipus the King._ The Contact Theatre Company, University Theatre, Manchester. April 17 - May 11, 1985.
__Oedipus the King._ At Caerleon Gwent. March 9, 1986.
__Oedipus the King._ Corpus Christi, Oxford University. Oxford. 1988. 3 performances.
__Oedipus the King._ The Robinson Players, Bates College, Maine. January 1990. 2 performances.
__Oedipus the King._ Wilson's School, Mollison Drive, Wallington, Surrey. March 29-31, 1990. 3 performances.
__Oedipus the King._ The Literature Project, Maryland Public Television. 1991.
__Oedipus the King._ Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana. October 9-12, 1991.
THE PENGUIN EDITIONS OF SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS THE KING


Π ε ρ ι λ η ψ η

Αικατερίνη Νικολάεα, Oι Εκδόσεις Πενγουίν των Οιδίποδα Τυράννου και η Σπουδαϊότητή τους για την Πρόσληψη αυτής της Τραγωδίας από το Αγγλικό Κοινό από το 1947

Αυτή η μελέτη είναι μια από τις πρώτες προσπάθειες για την εξέταση του πώς η αρχαία Ελληνική τραγωδία γενικότερα και ο Οιδίπος Τυράννος του Σοφοκλή ειδικότερα έχουν προσληφθεί από ένα ευρύτερο αγγλικό (βρετανικό και αμερικανικό) κοινό μέσω δύο μεταφράσεων κατά το δεύτερο ήμισυ του εικοστού αιώνα. Αυτό το άρθρο παρουσιάζει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο δύο μεταφράσεις του Οιδίποδα, που έγιναν από τον Watling και τον Fagles και εκδόθηκαν από τον εκδοτικό οίκο Penguin το 1947 και το 1984 αντίστοιχα, επέδρασαν στην καλύτερη πρόσληψη και κατανόηση αυτής της τραγωδίας από το βρετανικό και αμερικανικό κοινό.