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Socrates the Half-dog as a comics reading of a ‘first-class Greek tragedy’

Abstract: The comics *Socrates the Half-dog* tells a story of Heracles, accompanied by a dog called Socrates who has tendency to philosophize. The both of them also encounter a blind cyclops Homer, who is a songwriter, Ulysses, running away from Penelope, and a young Oedipus.

Key words: mythology, Heracles, Ulysses, Oedipus, comics, reception of antiquity, Joann Sfar, Christophe Blain

Towards the end of 2015 Wydawnictwo Komiksowe made all us fans of antiquity really happy by publishing a collection of stories about Socrates the half-dog. They were created by well-known French authors, Joann Sfar and Christopher Blain, whose other works had been published in Poland many times before¹. Sfar, an extraordinarily prolific artist and illustrator, the author of *The Rabbi's Cat*, republished in Poland three times and of *The Vampire*, this time was responsible for the story while Blain took care of the graphics and the colour scheme

¹ Joann Sfar: *Kot Rabina* series (vol. 1–2 Post, 2004–2006; collected edition vol. 1–5 Wydawnictwo Komiksowe, 3 editions: 2013, 2014, 2015; vol. 6 Wydawnictwo Komiksowe, 2015); series on Ferdinand the vampire: *Mały świat Golema* (Mroja Press, 2009), *Wampir* (timof i cisi wspólnicy, 2014), *Aspirine* (timof i cisi wspólnicy, 2015), *Ostatki* (timof i cisi wspólnicy, 2016); *Profesor Bell* series (vol. 1–3 Mroja Press 2010–2013); *Klezmerzy* series (vol. 1 Kultura Gniewu, 2009); *Mały Książę* (Znak 2009, 2015). Sfar is also a story creator of series *Merlin* (vol. 1–2 Znakomite, 2015). Christophe Blain: *Pirat Izaak* series (vol. 1–3 Egmont Polska, 2008); *Reduktor prędkości* (Egmont Polska, 2009); *Kroniki dyplomatyczne* (with Abel Lanzac: timof i cisi wspólnicy, 2015).

of the final volume. The authors had collaborated before on the series “Donjon”, in particular on the volume called *Donjon Potron-Minet*, created by Sfar and Lewis Trondheim in 1998.

The series *Socrates the Half-dog* (*Socrate le demi-chien*) was originally published by a French publishing house Dargaud and consists of three volumes: *Heracles* (*Héraclès*, 2002), *Ulysses* (*Ulysse*, 2004) and *Oedipus in Corinth* (*Œdipe à Corinthe*, 2009). The last volume announces the arrival of a next one called *Oedipus Rex*, which has not come out yet. Before Polish the series had been translated into English, German and Spanish. The main character is Heracles’ talking dog Socrates, who claims to be half-dog, half-philosopher. He is a half-dog or more appropriately a demidog because he is the son of Zeus’ dog and as Heracles, the son of Zeus is a demigod thus Socrates must be a demidog. The name itself is very meaningful and far from accidental – in pursuit of the truth Socrates uses the techniques of his namesake, testing his Socratic methods on Heracles, who, however, frequently recommends a simple ‘woof, woof’ instead of sophisticated conversation. Moreover, apart from being a talking dog, Socrates is also a dog who can read. The concept of a talking and philosophizing animal is nothing new for the readers of Sfar’s works. His brilliant book called *the Rabbi’s Cat* tells a story of a cat who talks, has frequent discussions with rabbis and also reads the Torah, Talmud, Mishna and Gemara. In another series *the Vampire* we meet a shy vampire Ferdinand and his cat, who does not talk but rather is a quiet companion of his master. Yet, he voices his objections to another reading of collected works by Proust.

Reading of *Socrates the Half-dog* is a strange experience. On the one hand what we are dealing here with is a funny story based on mythology, on the other, mythological motifs are mixed if not distorted. Surprisingly, these rediscovered ancient motifs despite being pulled away from ‘sacred’ classical contexts make Sfar’s and Blaine’s story more interesting, not at all annoying for the lovers of antiquity. I do not know the educational hazards of such mix-up, but since the comics is written for adult readers, not for children, the risk of being led astray is not very high.

The three volumes introduce us to the protagonists who are very significant for the mythology and ancient literature: Heracles, Ulysses and Oedipus. Socrates is the narrator of the story and the companion of Heracles (has been since Heracles’ childhood), their relationship is warm although Heracles occasionally forgets to wake up his dog and sets off without him.

Socrates’ philosophy, as he claims himself, is based on a dialogue. Just as his namesake did, the dog pretends not to know anything and by asking his interlocutor numerous questions tries to guide him to answer the question he asked himself. Unfortunately, maieutics does not work very well as Heracles is a difficult conversationalist and he does not ask himself many questions. They do not talk much, sometimes the divine hero suggests some conversations to his dog,

which consist of a simple 'woof, woof'. Consequently, Socrates talks mainly to women who are adored by his master. The dog quite often assists his master in their seduction as 'women go crazy for little dogs' – he is then extra friendly and playful although in fact he is gloomy and quiet by nature. Socrates shares his observations and reflections regarding the role of women and their distinctness. He observes, for example, that his master, when talking to women tries to sound intelligent while actually all he does is stare at their bodies. Socrates is very blunt in his assessment of male-female relationships; he claims that while talking to women Heracles does not talk in his usual manner because he cannot hear what he is saying. He is shy by nature, and fortunately, the women falling prey to monsters he can kill with his bare hands saves him from conversation. At times the philosopher in the dog wins and then he calls women who play in water 'shallow bipedes' and 'unstable antropoids of streamlined shapes'. The divine hero gives his dog a secret mission – he is supposed to eavesdrop on women's conversations and report to his master.

Heracles is shown as a free man with no home or wealth, who likes solitary walks and does a lot of exercise. Since he grew up and manned up he has almost turned into Atlas supporting the weight of the world on his shoulders. He is extremely busy – all he thinks about is fighting and love. The image of a muscular Heracles with a club dressed in lion skin is compatible with the ancient imagery, although he does not have a beard as Farnese Hercules, a Roman copy of a Greek statue, probably by Lysippos², nor does he have curly hair – in the comics his hair is short and straight, quite often ruffled. The comics shows a few of Heracles' labours: the slaying of Nemean Lion, Lernaean Hydra and the capture of Cretan Bull, chasing Ceryneian Hind and stealing Mares of Diomedes³, but also the scuffles with centaurs and all the armed men approaching his camp thus seen as potential aggressors, and last but not least with cuckold husbands. The first volume closes with Heracles setting off for adventure. He intends to sail to see Ulysses and Penelope to find out what true love is.

In volume two, titled *Ulysses*, our protagonists arrive in Ithaca and there in the port they meet an old man in a hooded robe, who of course is Ulysses pretending to be someone else. The scene evokes the return of the sailor home before dealing with Penelope's suitors, this time, however, it is not the end of a journey but the beginning of another, the running away from home. Penelope, the symbol of marital loyalty and faithfulness, ends up being consoled by Heracles, who does not waste any time taking the relationship to the next level. They are discovered by a youth with a sword who Heracles kills, as he did before with all aggressors carrying swords (possibly jealous husbands). The youth turns out to be Telemach,

² K. Marciniak: *Mitologia grecka i rzymska*. Warszawa–Bielsko-Biała 2010, p. 258.

³ R. Graves: *Mity greckie*. Transl. from English H. Krzeczkowski. Warszawa 1991, pp. 396–413.

Penelope's and Ulysses' son, one of many facts simply unknown to Heracles. Our protagonists escape from the palace and sail away in a fishing boat, where they meet Ulysses, who is completely unaware of the murder of his son and still pretending to be an old man. Yet, he is not the only interesting character there; when a storm breaks out at night another passenger reveals himself. It is Jonas, who at his own wish is thrown into the sea in the hope that this may calm the tempest. And just as in the biblical story, a giant fish appears and swallows Jonas, but to no avail, the storm continues. The old man announces his real identity to the passengers and jumps into the water. Heracles breaks the mast and tries to save the drowning Ulysses but the mast hits the sailor in his head and he almost drowns. Seeing this Heracles throws himself into the sea trying to help while the boat sails away and the storm calms. Fortunately, they are rescued by a pirate ship, whose owners meet a tragic end fighting the divine heroes, who eventually reach Corinth. There they visit a temple where young girls practise religious prostitution. The authors are a bit ironic here depicting an ugly woman, who, having spent six months in the temple, was not wanted by anyone, and also a beautiful one, chosen by Heracles, but she is unable to climax, which makes him both depressed and deeply in love with her at the same time. Sadly, after fulfilling her religious duty the woman wants to come back to her husband, which drives Heracles to slit both of their throats.

Ulysses is depicted as a slim man with a mane of auburn hair and a beard, with a pinch of suffering. After coming back to his beloved wife and many years of adventures he gets bored with everyday life at his palace. What is more, 'after being married with three children, having had twenty mistresses and experiencing a world war' he discovers that what he appreciates is the company of men. And because Socrates witnessed the intimacy between the two men (Heracles and Ulysses) he is cast away on a small volcanic island, where a cyclops pastures his sheep, to make sure that he never breathes a word of this relationship to anyone. It is not an ordinary cyclops, however, it is a cyclops with his eye poked out and his name is Homer. There is no coincidence in the choice of the name here, as Homer the cyclops used to sing poems to the public but when he grew over six metres tall Socrates the philosopher announced that he posed a threat to Athens, at which point Homer was given a choice: exile or hemlock. On hearing the story Socrates the dog cannot reveal his name nor can he admit to being a philosopher. He does not even confess that he is a dog. He becomes a nameless ram and befriends Homer who spends his evenings humming stories to the sound of his lyre. Although the stories feature the well-established protagonists and themes – the impossible love leading up to war that spread over the whole of the Mediterranean, they are slightly changed every evening. As it turns out, Homer himself was a cyclops by accident – in his family everyone has just one eye. They suffer from monophthalmia which makes it difficult to read the scrolls.

Homer finds out from Socrates that it was Ulysses who poked out his only eye. So he goes to his marine father – Poseidon, also depicted with one eye – to

ask him for help finding the runaways. The god is not very willing as he does not want to start a fight with his older brother Zeus, Heracles' father. It turns out, however, that the latter with the help of his mercenaries besieged Ithaca defended by Ulysses. Penelope locked herself in a tower and spends her days weaving and her nights unravelling her work. It is an interesting reversal of the chronology of events as well as of the person Penelope shies away from. According to the myth, she was hiding away from her suitors, in the comics she avoids Ulysses. After the fight between Homer and Heracles the former frees Ithaca and consequently becomes the king of the city and the latter, free at last, finally is 'a nobody' and sails away. The authors plant some jokes here and there, they make the blind cyclops stretch a bow and unwittingly kill the minister of economy and finance⁴. Meanwhile Ulysses gets involved with a girl called Circe, marries her, they have three children, he grows fat, organises an army to defend the island and soon becomes the leader of the community. So, in fact he ends up where he started – with the duties of a leader but, as the narrator puts it, without the former glory. At that moment the narrator – Socrates – decides to leave Ulysses. And that is the end of volume two.

In volume three, called *Oedipus in Corinth* we meet Oedipus right after he was born. His future has been prophessed just like in the myth; he is supposed to kill his father and marry his own mother so the father hands the boy over to a guard so that he kills him somewhere in a remote place. But, as it happens in stories and in this particular myth as well, the guard is far too kind-hearted and he just abandons the boy in the forest hanging him upside down on a tree. That is where the roads and the lives of the child and Socrates meet. Socrates trying to save the child takes him off the tree when he gets shot by the king of Corinth. He manages, however, to persuade the king to employ him as the boy's teacher. From time to time the philosopher gets visions of Zeus in the form of eyes (as Zeus-tree, Zeus-stone, Zeus-bird, Zeus-leaf, Zeus-water and Zeus-stone-fish-dog reflection, although he also appears as a suitor in the form of a cloud, a bull, a swan and golden rain) and has conversations with him where the god warns him of Oedipus. He says 'if you save him we are in for a first-class Greek tragedy'. Socrates argues with the god, asks him about free will, does not accept determinism and believes in the role of education. These are all very crucial philosophical questions and the fact that they are asked or rather rediscovered here is the great value of the comics – the book whose function is merely to entertain not educate.

In his nightly conversation with the king of Corinth Socrates suggests the solution which will save Oedipus from his fate and prophessed madness, violence

⁴ One may speculate whether the character of the minister is at all significant. I personally am inclined to think that it is yet another joke of the authors. Between June 2002 and March 2004, which was when the second part of the series was being written and which was also the term of the second cabinet of PM Jean-Pierre Raffrain, a reform of pension system was proposed (in 2003), which sparked protests in the street and resulted in the general discontentment of the society.

and sexual conduct. The dog believes that the boy must be rid of all sexual desires and the predilection to violence by growing up amongst women, in a temple. As he will get there everything he needs, he will not fight, will not go mad and instead he will just read. The king of Corinth agrees, since he prefers a goof adept at the art of love to a frustrated bully. The childless wife of the king does not accept that, however, which results in Socrates being exiled and Oedipus kidnapped together with one of the women from the temple to take care of the child. Socrates is rescued from the armed search party formed by the king by no other than Heracles himself, who he manages to convince that it is the wish of Zeus to assign his son the thirteenth labour, which is to help bring up young Oedipus. Thanks to the cow's milk supplied by Heracles the boy shoots up, the passage of time can be seen only when looking at the greying hair of the woman from the temple. When it comes to appearance, Heracles and Socrates are like Egyptian pharaohs – timeless. Heracles is overjoyed. He assumes that Oedipus is his reincarnation and he treats him like a son, while the woman from the temple acts as his stepmother. Teenage Oedipus has long, ruffled hair and looks and behaves like a typical rebellious teenager, who eventually fulfills in part the prophesy connected with his mother, although in this case it is just a strange woman claiming to be his stepmother. She meets her tragic end by Heracles' hand – as all cuckold husbands who crossed him before did. Oedipus is banished into a cave where he must have a right of passage fight with wolves. The authors decided to finish the last volume with a cliffhanger, but, since they already announced the next one, also telling a story of Oedipus we may rest assured that he survives the ordeal.

The mythological story by Sfar and Blaine is also a story of creating, storytelling and the role of poetry. Heracles does not like poets, he thinks them cowards who spin their stories as they are too afraid to stand up and fight. That is why, whenever he meets one he provokes him to fight in order to give him some material. He himself thinks that the only thing worth talking about are his adventures – ‘real stories with some action, scuffles and love’. And when Socrates, knowing how much Heracles enjoys a good story, starts embellishing his tales of women who he supposedly observed, Heracles realises the lie and points out to the dog that his story goes flat like a national dish of the authors of the series – *sufflet* – which apparently is not an ancient dish but one originating from mere 18th century. Such inconsistency should easily be forgiven, however, as it illustrates perfectly what happens to a story whose tellers have exaggerated. In another passage, after Heracles kills Telemach, Socrates says that his master has probably just killed a very important literary character. In the second volume he is outraged by the fact that two literary characters (Heracles and Ulysses) are mocking him for having a really ugly wife. This remark puts him not so much in the role of the omniscient narrator but rather of the modern reader approaching the text equipped with the knowledge of all canonical texts. Similarly Zeus, warning Socrates against saving Oedipus and saying that ‘we are in for some

first-class Greek tragedy' expresses an opinion of someone who is well-read and aware of the literary tradition.

The scene where Socrates meets Homer, who every evening tells the same story but on every occasion in a slightly different way, poses questions about the nature of storytelling. For Homer, telling a true story and a made-up one makes no difference, just like there is no difference between comedy, drama, a story for children and the one for adults. It is the telling that is important. The characters in the comics know that they have creative powers. Homer himself claims that he would like to play a role in a tragedy (the tragedy of Ulysses). And when he becomes the king of Ithaca he realises that being king entails some serious obligations and that his duties will leave him with no time to create new stories. He also manages a self-reflection that blindness does not hinder him as a poet, on the contrary, it helps create distance to things. It would have been much worse, had he been an illustrator not a poet. During a duel between Homer and Heracles the poet bitterly states that he pities people as they do not distinguish between theatre and circus, that they have lost the sense of tragedy. He adds that gods do not love them anymore – before they looked at people, now they turn their eyes away, thus expressing one of the major problems in modern philosophical thought – the absence of God in today's world.

Fittingly for a true philosopher, Socrates also comments on war. Captured together with Homer and tied to a mast whispers a request that Homer sing a song, break the chains, call his father who could put an end to it all. According to dog the philosopher, war is nothing good, 'war is poo'. What we learn from many comments scattered all over the book is that Socrates is also against individual acts of violence, moreover, he simply fails to understand it. This quite forceful remark on war is hardly surprising given that the second volume of the comics was finished in July 2004, when the war in Iraq was still going on, and that merely four months previously there had been a terrorist attack in Madrid.

The ancient costume of the story is present but not overwhelming, there are no details jumping out of a frame and blurring the story. Many scenes take place outside, in nature. The artists correctly drew the monuments, temples, boats or outfits of the characters. All this, however, does not seem to be very significant – the story is set at some moment in ancient history, it may well be the antiquity of the mythological heroes but the stories of love in its broad sense and of war as well as the themes of Homer's songs are universal.

The postmodern take on the myths, consisting in their mix-up and completion with new elements is designed to entertain. The story told by the French authors combines comic and dramatic elements, true stories (in the sense of literary canon) with the made-up ones and although it is not a tale for children but for adults it is – according to Homer the cyclops and I'd like to think the readers would agree – a good story, which is universal, gripping, entertaining and beautifully drawn. Aristotle defined a poet as someone whose task is not to present real events

but those that might have happened⁵. Even though the authors are not poets, they showed us a fragment of an alternative mythological universe. Even if the story is not strictly educational it may spark some interest in ancient literature. *Socrates the Half-dog* is a story one wants to return to, especially if, or when the authors make the fourth volume on Oedipus Rex promised seven years ago.

⁵ Arist. *Poet.* 1451b.