

I saw it (on a map): Gendered Poetic Optics of Vilnius

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Abstract:

In this article, we present a map based on the poems published in the anthology "I Saw Vilnius: An Anthology of Poems on the Occasion of the 700th Anniversary of the First Mention of Vilnius" (Mačias Vilnius, 2023). The anthology includes classical texts written in Lithuanian or translated into Lithuanian from other languages (Polish, Yiddish, Belarusian, and others) and works by contemporary poets. The anthology is structured as a map of Vilnius. The great majority of poems are attached to the real locations of the city districts, streets, architectural monuments, and infrastructural objects, and are grouped accordingly. Thus, the reader of the anthology is invited to take a poetic route through the city and become a wanderer. The sequence of the poems suggests that the journey starts with observing Vilnius' clouds and panoramas from the heights of Vilnius Airport, and moves towards the downtown with the main historical objects and places - castles, churches, and squares, and then to the city outskirts. Most of the anthology chapters bear topographical names, making the route of the reader/poetic wanderer available for mapping. Some chapters are dedicated to the city's myths, symbols, and moods. Ultimately, Vilnius's poetic wanderers are granted subjective geographical knowledge of the city, authentic and imaginative simultaneously. The authors of the article have considerable experience in mapping Vilnius literature. During the projects that started a decade ago, references to Vilnius in various literary works were projected on the city map, and thematic maps of these works were drawn and analysed. One can explore them at <http://www.vilniusliterature.flf.vu.lt/en/> (Fig. 1).

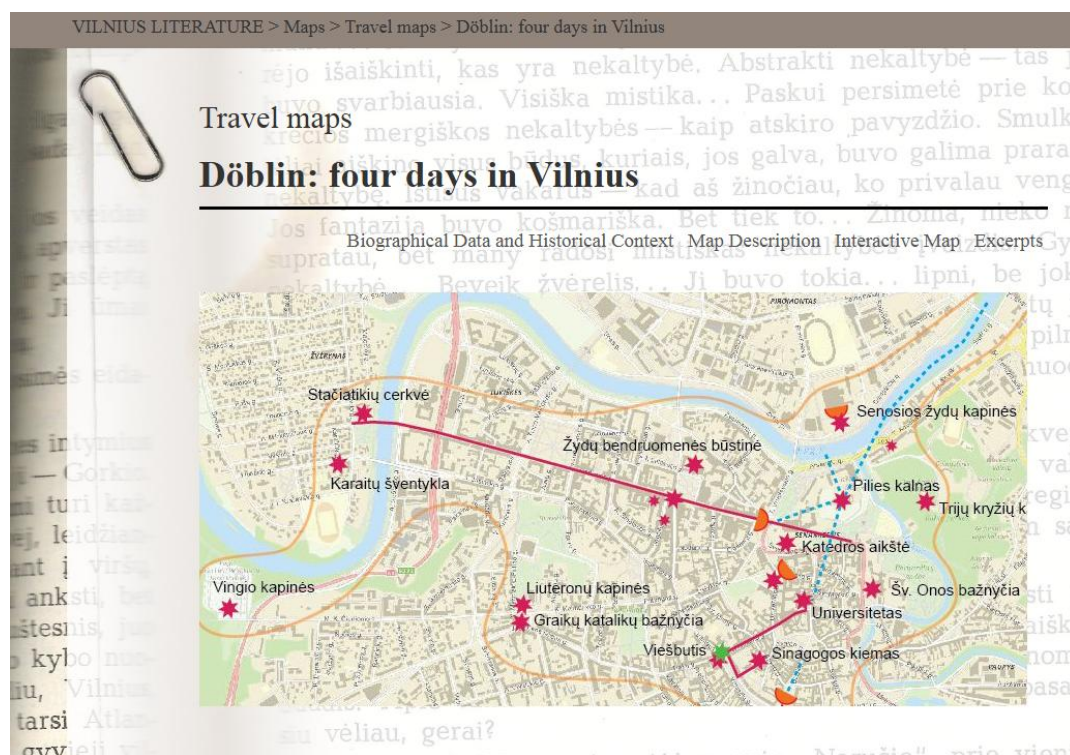


Figure 1. A fragment of literary Vilnius of German novelist Alfred Döblin (<http://www.vilniusliterature.flf.vu.lt/en/>)

At that time, we were focused on the works that had the maximum number of geographical references to Vilnius possible to map. All of them were written by men, and, accordingly, the website of Vilnius Literature only included maps based on men's writing. The absence of women's city maps reflects the general situation in using geographical tools for research on gender issues (e.g., Rose 1993) and should be revisited. In the anthology "I Saw Vilnius" among the authors, only a quarter are women. Thus, the women's knowledge of the city and their gendered position and interests reflected in the poems play a lesser role in creating a poetic image of Vilnius in terms of how the city is experienced and depicted. Such under-representation has led to attempts to explore the gendered aspects of the anthology. We intended to assess the peculiarities of the distribution of spatial references in Vilnius to see if there are places in the city that are more "feminine" and if they reveal any significant trends. The literature mapping model we had developed for our research (Beconytė et al., 2019) did not address the gender of the author or the characters. Therefore, we have decided to limit ourselves to mapping the 58 places by the gender of the authors included in the anthology and to the theme of parenthood, which is more characteristic of women's writing than men's. The theme of fatherhood related to a geographic location was found only in one poem, mentioning a suburban residential district. In contrast, the theme of motherhood links to eight locations, and concentrates in the Old Town and the green areas nearby. There are marked differences between the places referred to by men and women in the anthology. The number of references to locations by women is generally smaller (47 vs. 107 references) and the locations are concentrated in the Old Town of Vilnius (Fig. 2).

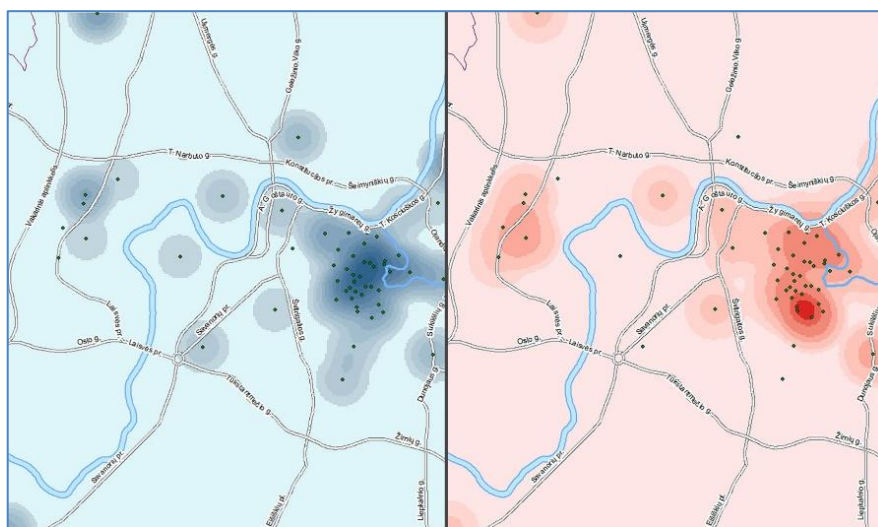


Figure 2. Density of locations mentioned in men's (left) and women's (right) poetry

The maps have been published at the Lithuanian Spatial Information Portal and creatively visualized using different methods. Such maps help to draw public attention to the under-representation of women's voice in literature that provides specific feminine experience of the city. They also encourage interest in fictional geographies of literary works. As research material, maps allow for various spatial insights into the social life of the city, which is still relatively new in literary studies. In the future, we plan to develop a data model for literary space references that includes more gender-related aspects. We will present the key features of this model and discuss how it allows us to create richer maps and gain more significant spatial insights into gender differences.

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