

OEDIPUS AND TRIVIALITY

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"The three roads are of no particular significance in the Oedipus story. . . ."

B. M. W. Knox¹

THE CROSSROADS WHERE Oedipus killed Laius—not really a crossroads in the common English sense of the word "cross," but "triple roads" (τριπλαὶ ἀμαξίτοί), "the junction of three roads" (τρίοδος) or, most frequently, a "split/cracked/forked road" (σχιστή ὁδός)—is first mentioned at *Oedipus Tyrannus* 716. Most commentaries have so little to say on it that Stephen Halliwell has called the crossroads a "neglected detail" in the play. In one sense it is the fate of crossroads to be neglected not only by commentators, but also—until too late—by the play's characters. But at the same time, the circumstances of its existence seem almost to compel readers to seek many different kinds of significance for it.²

The first to describe the crossroads is Jocasta, in response to a question from Oedipus (*OT* 732–34):

Ol. καὶ ποῦ 'σθ' ὁ χῶρος οὗτος οὗ τόδ' ἦν
πάθος;

Io. Φωκίς μὲν ἡ γῆ κληίζεται, σχιστὴ δ'
ὁδὸς
ἐς ταῦτ' Δελφῶν καὶ Δαυλίας ἔχει.

Oe. And where is this place where this
happened to him?

Jo. The land is called Phocis; a split
road
comes together from Delphi and
from Daulia.

Viewed from the perspective of Thebes, the road from the west through Phocis is "split" with one branch leading north to Daulia, the other west to

1. In *Sophocle*, Entretiens Fondation Hardt, ed. J. de Romilly (Geneva, 1983), 182.

2. Stephen Halliwell, "The Place Where Three Roads Meet: A Neglected Detail in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*," *JHS* 106 (1986): 187–90. My own essay is a piece of unfinished business from a commentary (Sophocles, *Oidipous Tyrannos*², edited with an introduction and commentary, Bryn Mawr Commentaries [Bryn Mawr, Pa., 1990]). It has progressed through the years in various places, and I am indebted to Arachovites (Iriní Tangkalaki and her neighbors), an adopted Arachovite (Roland Moore), Sophoclean colleagues from Cornell (Fred Ahl, Gordon Kirkwood, and Pietro Pucci), friends from Gothenburg (especially the late Ole L. Smith) and the University of Colorado at Boulder (John Gibert and Eckart Schütrumpf), Donald Lateiner, and Sarah Iles Johnston, for the opportunity to discuss it as well as candid reactions and fruitful suggestions.

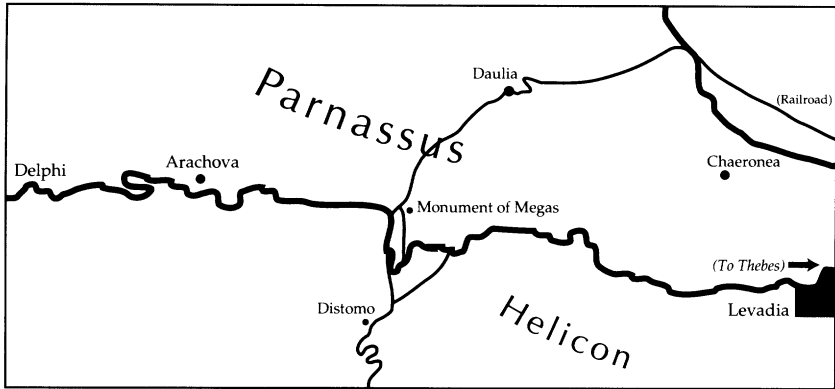


FIGURE 1: Major modern roads in the vicinity of the crossroads

Delphi (see the map in Figure 1). When they met, Oedipus was traveling east toward Thebes, and Laius seems to have been on his way to Delphi.³

The most common association of crossroads in ancient Greek literature is typified by Theognis 911–12: ἐν τριόδῳ δ' ἔστηκα· δὺ' εἰσὶ τὸ πρόσθεν ὁδοὶ μοι/φροντίζω τούτων ἥντιν' ἴω προτέρην. For many interpreters, reminded of philosophical choices set at crossroads (Pl. *Leg.* 799C or Prodicus in Xen. *Mem.* 2.1.21–34),⁴ the significance of the site lies in the imagined possibility that Oedipus could choose where to travel after killing Laius—and fatefully decided on Thebes; or, perhaps, that he could only have met Laius at this precise moment on their travels, otherwise each would have proceeded in a different direction.⁵

This reading can, however, be dismissed quickly: Even though Oedipus had no fixed destination, his own account of the killing (*OT* 798–813) does not allow for the slightest hesitation, and there are no grounds at all for supposing that the road not taken by him, the one to the tiny village of Daulia, was a real possibility.⁶

3. For the influence of Delphi in Sophocles' placement of the crossroads, see below, p. 101. Incidentally, I do not understand how R. D. Dawe can say that "Laius was killed on his way back from Delphi," (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* [Cambridge, 1982], at l. 734); this is true in some other stories (see n. 28 below), but in that case both would be travelling in the same direction, and the verb Oedipus uses of Laius and his servants (802–4) is [μοι] ξυνηντίζων, which is unlikely to mean "overtook." One of the subordinate questions we may ask is "Why did Laius go to consult the oracle?" No specific reason is mentioned at *OT* 114–15, but we are encouraged by the text to suppose that Laius decides to ask what to do about the arrival of the Sphinx (ll. 114–25 give no motive for Laius' trip to Delphi, but ll. 126–31 state that his death coincided with the visitation by the Sphinx). Some commentators (Jebb, Halliwell) think the Sphinx came only after Laius' death, but *OT* 130–31 does not say so. Halliwell's assumption that Laius was going to consult the oracle about Oedipus is not likely either, since he thought his son was dead.

4. Cf. Pind., *Pyth.* 11.38, and in general O. Becker, *Das Bild des Weges*, Hermes Einzelschriften 4 (Stuttgart, 1937), and Erwin Panofsky, *Herakles am Scheidewege* (Leipzig, 1930).

5. E.g., P. Pucci, *Oedipus and the Fabrication of the Father* (Baltimore, 1992), 106; C. P. Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 222; Robert Eisner, *The Road to Daulis* (Syracuse, 1987), 14; so also Jean Bollack in his commentary "L'Oedipe roi" de Sophocle (Lille, 1990).

6. So, rightly, de Romilly and Knox, *Sophocle*, 182. There may have been a major north-south road in this area in classical times, see *The Great Isthmus Corridor Route: Explorations of the Phokis-Doris Expedition*, ed. Edgar W. Kase (Dubuque, 1991), but Sophocles' description does not include a route to the south.

The search for such a meaning and subsequent disappointment with it may lead to such negative conclusions as those of Knox quoted at the outset,⁷ but to reject the crossroads as the arena of chance or choice is not to exhaust the possibilities. We have only to pose the questions Oedipus asks Jocasta (*OT* 732–70): Where was the crossroads? What happened there? When did it happen? If we do, we find other questions implicitly asked as well, namely why did it happen, and what is the crossroads, that is, is it a place, a clue, a symbol? The following pages present the critical directions from which this crossroads may be approached, the things that may be found there, and the directions in which one can travel onward.

I. WHERE WAS THE CROSSROADS?

To answer the question “Where was the crossroads?” is first to note where it was not: it was not where Aeschylus had put it. It is important to remember that in taking up Oedipus as the subject of a drama Sophocles was making a challenge; there already existed an acclaimed version of the story in tragedy, canonical in that Aeschylus had been awarded first prize for it in 467.⁸ Nor should we forget that Sophocles’ original play was probably not known as *Oedipus Tyrannus* (added later to distinguish it from the *Coloneus*) but simply *Oedipus*, as Aeschylus’ play had been. Sophocles gave a different version of events, replaced a connected tetralogy with a monodrama, and a family curse with the oracle of Apollo. He received a clear reaction to this reinterpretation, in the form of second prize.

A scholion on *OT* 733 preserves part of a speech from Aeschylus (frag. 387a Radt):⁹

ἐπῆμεν τῆς ὁδοῦ τροχηλάτου	we were coming to a fork in a wheel-worn road,
σχιστῆς κελεύθου τρίοδον, ἔνθα συμβολὰς	a split path, where we were crossing
τριῶν κελεύθων Ποτειάδας ἡμείβομεν . . .	a confluence of three paths at Potniae. . . .

The very full style of these lines (which look like part of a messenger speech) is unusual—words for “road” are used three times in three lines, and words for “three” twice. Karl Reinhardt pointed out that this fullness suggests that the crossroads in Aeschylus introduced and set apart the narrative of the murder, so that there could be no doubt about the site’s importance.¹⁰

In Sophocles’ *Oedipus* the crossroads’ appearance is very different, and considerably more subtle: it is mentioned only in passing by Jocasta as a

7. Cf. de Romilly on the same page: “Je me demande en fait si la notion des ‘trois routes’ a une si grande importance pour l’ensemble de la pièce.”

8. For the fragments of the tetralogy (*Laius*, *Oedipus*, *Seven Against Thebes*, *Sphinx*) see Stefan Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta III: Aeschylus* (Göttingen, 1985), frag. 121–22a, 387a (where, however, they are separated into two parts) and “The Tetralogy,” in *Aeschylus*, “*Septem Contra Thebas*,” ed. G. O. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1985), xvii–xxx.

9. Radt seems to me over-scrupulous in placing it among the fragments *incertarum fabularum*; it could be from either *Laius* or *Oedipus*, but there can be little doubt that it was from the trilogy.

10. Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles*, tr. H. and D. Harvey (Oxford, 1979), 117–19, cf. his *Vermächtnis der Antike* (Göttingen, 1960), 352. Others have suggested the redundancy is a sign of corruption; for their emendations see Radt’s notes.

detail in her account of Laius' death—a story in which every detail is expressly chosen to convince Oedipus that the oracle at Delphi is irrelevant to their lives, and that no one known to her had any part in Laius' death (OT 708–30):

- | | |
|---|---|
| ΙΟ. μάθ' οὔνεκ' ἐστί σοι
βρότειον οὐδὲν μαντικῆς ἔχον τέχνης·
φανῶ δέ σοι σημεῖα τῶνδε σύντομα·
χρησμός γάρ ἦλθε Λαῖψ ποτ', οὐκ ἐρῶ
Φοῖβου γ' ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, τῶν δ' ὑπηρετῶν
ἄπο,
ὡς αὐτὸν ἦξοι μοῖρα πρὸς παιδὸς
θανεῖν
ὅστις γένοιτ' ἐμοῦ τε κακείνου πάρα. | . . . learn why for you
the prophecies of mortals have no skill;
I'll give you the proof of this quickly.
Once there came to Laius an oracle—
I won't say from Apollo, but from his
servants—
that the fate would befall him to die
at the hands of a son born from him and
me. |
| καὶ τὸν μέν, ὥσπερ γ' ἡ φάτις, ξένοι
ποτὲ
λησταὶ φονεύουσ' ἐν τριπλαῖς
ἀμαξιτοῖς· | And yet the report is that it was foreigners,
bandits, who killed him at a triple
wagon-road . . . |
| ΟΙ. οἶδ' ὃν μ' ἀκούσαντ' ἀρτίως ἔχει, γύναι,

ψυχῆς πλάνημα κάνακίνης φρενῶν. | Oe. Wife, as I heard you speak a moment
ago,
what a shudder of soul and disorder of
mind I felt! |
| ΙΟ. ποίας μερίμνης τοῦθ' ὑποστραφεῖς
λέγεις; | Jo. What anxiety overcomes you to
make you speak this? |
| ΟΙ. ἔδοξ' ἀκούσαι σοῦ τόδ', ὡς ὁ Λαῖος

κατασφαγεῖη πρὸς τριπλαῖς ἀμαξιτοῖς. | Oe. This is what I thought I heard you
say:
Laius was killed at a triple wagon-road. |

When Oedipus hears the story it instantly convinces him of the very opposite of Jocasta's view. The scene is the combination of recognition and reversal, ἀναγνώρισις and περιπέτεια that Aristotle praises in the *Poetics*. Yet the clue of the crossroads does not lead to the end of Sophocles' story, but only to the beginning of the end: it is not a false clue, not one neglected, but one not entirely understood either, since it is followed by what Reinhardt calls an "interplay of ignorance and apprehension, incomprehension and self-discovery."¹¹ The crossroads assumes meaning on several levels: one level for Jocasta, one for Oedipus, one for the audience.¹² By giving the crossroads much less emphasis (initially) than in Aeschylus, Sophocles has made it much more resonant.

11. Ibid., 118.

12. For such an index see Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *The Semiotic Challenge*, tr. Richard Howard (New York, 1988), 106–8. It is an index of another kind in the version ascribed to the mythographer Peisander, told in the scholia to Euripides, *Phoen.* 1760 (= *FGrHist* 16 F10, cf. Bernabé, *Poetarum epicorum fragmenta*, p. 18): "(Laius) was killed at the split road, both himself and his charioteer, after he struck Oedipus with his whip. After killing them, he buried them immediately in their clothing, but stripped off Laius' belt and sword, and wore them. He led away

We can also form some thoughts about Sophoclean innovations from Aeschylus' mention of the town of Potniae, a suburb of Thebes to the south, and the location, according to Pausanias (9.8.1–2), of a sanctuary of Demeter and Kore.¹³ There is in fact a triple road at this site: one branch leads to Athens, one to Thebes, and one bypasses Thebes for Delphi. If they met at this crossroads, Oedipus might have been traveling north to Delphi, but Laius must have been traveling south from Thebes. Sophocles' apparent displacement of the crossroads to a site northwest of Thebes has the effect of putting Delphi in control of the killing: this is the oracle that predicted the act in the first place, and that one day will demand its expiation; it is only right that Oedipus and Laius should meet when one is returning from having consulted it, and the other is on his way to do so.

II. WHERE IS THE CROSSROADS?

[Werner Jaeger] told me on his return to Cambridge that, while driving him to Delphi, his chauffeur offered to drive by a small detour to show him the crossroads where Oedipus slew Laius. "No!" I said to him, "Drive on."¹⁴

In addition to the question "Where was the crossroads?" should we not also ask, "Where is it?" To this one might answer, "Nowhere, since the play is a fiction," and a few interpreters have done so, as Werner Jaeger did implicitly, on his first (and evidently last) visit to Greece. He utterly rejected the relevance of the physical reality of the contemporary landscape to the interpretation of its literary past—we might recall that even Winckelmann never set foot in Greece.¹⁵ With this attitude, one can avoid the strong (and sometimes naive) impulse to use a place to authenticate a narrative, or to identify places as relics of literature.¹⁶ But it also closes off almost every line of interpretation relating to geography, including modern ones. We have seen that the earliest known disagreement over the crossroads' location was between Sophocles and Aeschylus, but even an author as unmythical as Thucydides notes (and on one occasion disputes) the contemporary location of stories from tragedies.¹⁷ In fact, there has never been a lack of interest in the crossroads' location.

For Pausanias in the second century after Christ, the entire landscape of Greece was already an artifact, a physical remnant of the (largely literary)

the chariot and gave it to Polybus. Then, after he had solved the riddle, he married his mother. Subsequently, after performing some sacrifices on Mt. Cithaeron, he was riding back on a wagon and had Jocasta with him; when they reached that spot of the split road, he remembered it, and showed Jocasta the place, told her what had happened and showed her the belt. She was shocked, but kept silence; she did not know that he was her son."

13. See Sarantis Symeonoglou, *The Topography of Thebes* (Princeton, 1985), 134.

14. Reported by W. M. Calder III, in *Classical Scholarship: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, ed. Briggs and Calder (New York, 1990), 215.

15. David Constantine, *Early Greek Travellers and the Hellenic Ideal* (Cambridge, 1984), chapter 5.

16. On places as relics see David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), 243–48. Recent examples from television (the Boston bar "Cheers") are numerous and well-exploited.

17. See my commentary, *Thucydides: "The Peloponnesian War": Book II* (Cambridge, 1989) on 2.29.3 (Tereus in Thessaly rather than Thrace), 2.102.5–6 (Alcmaeon in Acarnania).

classical past. As he was going from Chaeronea in Boeotia toward Delphi, he paused to meditate on the life of Oedipus, connecting it with many places (10.5.2):

As you proceed from here you come to what is called the split road. It was at this road that Oedipus' actions relating to his father's murder were committed. There ought to be monuments to what happened to Oedipus throughout all of Greece: when he was born they pushed spikes through his ankles and exposed him in Plataian land, on Mount Kithairon; Corinth and the land around its isthmus were Oedipus' nurse; the land of Phokis and the split road witnessed the pollution of the murder of his father; and for the Thebans there is even greater notoriety, for Oedipus' marriage among them and Eteocles' criminal behavior. But for Oedipus the split road and his boldness there began his troubles, and there still are the monuments of Laius and the servant who attended him in the middle of the crossroads, and the stones collected into a heap over them. They say that a man named Damasistratus, king of Plataia, found the bodies exposed and buried them.

He never once mentions Sophocles' play, and one might be tempted to assume the monument he found was independent confirmation that the site was so known before Sophocles, but of that one should be skeptical; he also claims to have visited the site of Oedipus' disappearance in Colonus, known to us only from Sophocles' later play, where its location is said to be a secret.¹⁸

For travelers in Greece seeking the crossroads today, most influential is the commentary on Pausanias by Sir James George Frazer, who also claims to have visited the site himself.¹⁹

The scene is one of the wildest and grandest in Greece. On both sides of the valley the mountains tower in huge precipices; the cliffs of Parnassus on the northern side of the valley are truly sublime. Not a trace of human habitation is to be seen. All is desolation and silence. A more fitting spot could hardly be found for the scene of so memorable a tragedy.

Tourists like Pausanias or Frazer can commune so deeply with the ancient atmosphere of the crossroads because for them it is the gateway to an unmediated experience of the past.²⁰ If the contemporary site is allowed its

18. See N. J. Richardson, "Innovazione poetica e mutamenti religiosi nell' antica grecia," *SCO* 33 (1984): 25.

19. J. G. Frazer, *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, vol. 5 (London, 1898), 231, partially quoted in *The Blue Guide to Greece*³ (London, 1977), 394. A similar visit is described by R. C. Jebb in his commentary on the play.

20. Another scholar of Greek mythology treated the crossroads as a puzzle. Carl Robert's *Oedipus: Geschichte eines poetischen Stoffs* (Berlin, 1915) combines a matchless knowledge of pictorial and written sources with an insistence on using them to deduce the "original form" of every aspect of the story (from which all others are derived). He sent Gerhard Rodenwaldt to Greece in 1909 to take photographs and draw maps of the area of the crossroads, but he put them all in the service of a theory (p. 83) that originally both Oedipus and Laius must have been driving wagons at the crossroads, and assumed that any version that contradicted this one was later and therefore less genuine. Rodenwaldt's photographs and maps give the impression of great topographical thoroughness, but it is difficult to relate them to Robert's descriptions, or to any aspect of the sites today. (Whether Robert himself ever visited the site I have no idea.) For more intelligible guidance to the site see John Fossey, *The Ancient Topography of Eastern Phokis* (Amsterdam, 1986), 44–45.

own identity as well, a more complex set of impressions must be processed. In practice, such a restriction by classicists is often a strategy for marginalizing any Greece but the literary, ancient one, but at least it avoids the traps awaiting those who attempt to connect the ancient with the modern by assuming an aesthetic, religious, or ethnic "continuity" from ancient to modern Greece, especially in the remote countryside.²¹ They may also attempt to devalue "post-classical" Greece in comparison with its ancient glory, perhaps ascribing the deterioration to Greece's political subjugation to Rome, the influence of Orthodox Christianity, or the Ottomans; or, alternatively, they may locate their impressions in a new, independent category of "folk-culture."²²

Several of these paradigms are observable at once in the essay of Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Dean of Westminster, who visited Sophocles' crossroads with the British ambassador to Greece, Sir Thomas Wyse, in 1861:²³

The course of the three roads is marked far and near by a dark and conical hill, on the top of which, or at the foot of which, the cairn of Laius must have been raised. But with that charming continuity of illustration with which Greek history and geography abound, this tragical spot had become within the last three years invested with a second cycle of dramatic interest, which in a remarkable manner explained and enlivened the first. As we approached the fatal hill, the everlasting chatter of the guides and muleteers flowed into one channel, deepening and widening as we descended the ravine. It was not of Oedipus or Laius they were talking, but of the great robber chief Daveli, who, in 1856, had perished on the spot.

Stanley goes on to memorialize the daring and honor of the brigand Christos Davelis, the eventual entrapment of Davelis and his men by a blockade of all three roads, his death at the hands of the policeman Yannis Megas of nearby Arachova, and the death of Megas himself in the same fight. When they travel on to Arachova itself, they ask to view a local dance recommended by the Queen of Greece, and discover that the mayor is the husband of Megas' daughter, while Megas' son leads the music, and the song recounts the fight at the pass and the laments of Megas' wife and Davelis' mother.

Stanley's extended interpretation of the Megas/Davelis complex begins from Pausanias—already himself, as we have seen, a topographical interpreter of Sophocles' play—and feeds on the assumed identity of the sites, associations with violent death, a duel between two great men, even the fact that the contemporary word for a song, like the one that commemorates this event, is τραγούδι (which he derives from the songs of goat-herds). The tragedy of Oedipus and Laius turns into the τραγούδι of Megas and Davelis, for which Stanley supplies a verse translation. The physical link with

21. See the critique by Loring Danforth, "The Ideological Context of the Search for Continuities in Greek Culture," *JMGS* 2 (1984): 53–87; but the attitude is already implicit in Greek authors of the Roman imperial age such as Herodes Atticus, Dio of Prusa, and Philostratus; see E. L. Bowie, "Greeks and Their Past in the Second Sophistic," *Past and Present* 46 (1970): 1–41.

22. Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology and the Making of Modern Greece* (Austin, 1982) and *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (Cambridge, 1987).

23. Stanley's untitled essay is printed in Sir Thomas Wyse, *Impressions of Greece* (London, 1871), 321–27.

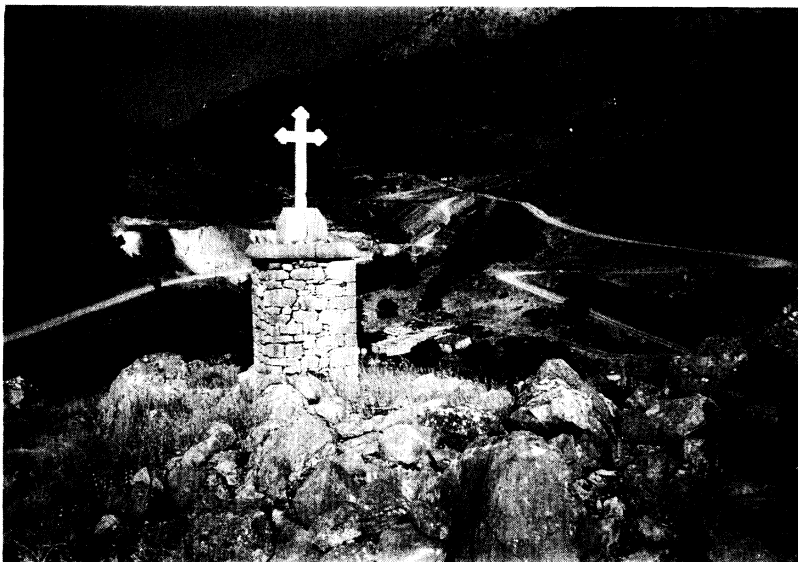


ILLUSTRATION 1: The monument of Yannis Megas, looking west to the foothills of Parnassus and roads leading toward Delphi and Daulia.

Pausanias is completed by a monument to Yannis Megas on top of the “conical hill”: a cross supported by a mound of stones (see Illustration 1), inscribed Ἰωάννης Μέγας ἐφονεύθη τη 15 Ἰουλίου 1856.²⁴

But Stanley also presents his account as folklore. He classes the modern “renewal” of the classical myth as village folk tradition, complete with amusing local informants (“everlasting chatter of the guides and mule-teers”), acquaintance with the surviving children and grandchildren, confirmation of the hero’s tomb in the village church, and a transcription of the authentic village song.²⁵ For an Englishman, the entire episode might just as easily have been placed in an utterly different context, since banditry in nineteenth-century Greece, often in the form of kidnappings of foreigners, was an explosive theme: bandits were viewed by traditionalist Greeks

24. I do not know when the monument depicted in Illustration 1 was erected, but it is mentioned already by Frazer, *Pausanias*. In particular words of Sophocles’ play Stanley might have found even more continuities. The killer(s) of the representative of order and government (Laius, Megas) are characterized as “brigand(s)” (ληστές, the word applied in nineteenth-century Greece to the bandits, who, however, called themselves κλέφτες or αρματωλοί). The captain of police, on the other hand, has an unusually classical and resonant name: when in Sophocles’ play Oedipus asks, “What was Laius like?” (OT 742), Jocasta responds at first with a single word: μέγας (“tall”).

25. For the song of Davelis’ death see John Koliopoulos, *Ληστές, η Κεντρική Ελλάδα στα μέσα του 19ου Αιώνα* (Athens, 1979), 189 and Irini Spandonidi, *Τραγούδια της Αγοριανής (Παρνασσού)* (Athens, 1939), 42. It is noteworthy how quickly all this tradition has been put together; no less a personage than the Queen of Greece had suggested that they visit Arachova and ask to see the dances. For contemporary tourism in Arachova see Roland Moore, “From Shepherds to Shopkeepers: The Development of Tourism in a Central Greek Town” (Ph.D. diss., Berkeley, 1992).

as the continuation of resistance under Turkish occupation, by nationalists as guerrillas against European interference, by irredentists as the vanguard of a military force that would one day retake the Byzantine empire. Meanwhile, outsiders were either alarmed and indignant (France, Britain) or gratified (Ottoman Empire) at the weak response from Greece's fledgling national government.²⁶ Stanley's account suppresses all these backgrounds; anxious Britons are offered a story of banditry that involves only Greeks (in fact Davelis first gained fame with the abduction of an officer from the Anglo-French force occupying Piraeus), ending in the death of a great hero and his nemesis (although it is left open which one of these is Davelis, and which Megas), whose "dramatic interest" and "charming continuity" have not a political and historical significance, but an aesthetic one. The process by which the crossroads acquired a physical reality and made Oedipus' act a quasi-historical event is now reversed: the literary and dramatic energy of the site transforms the deaths of Davelis and Megas into a myth.²⁷

III. ROAD WARRIORS

To answer the question "What happened at the crossroads?" let us hear the testimony of Oedipus himself (*OT* 794–812):²⁸

κἀγὼ 'πακούσας ταῦτα τὴν Κορινθίαν	And when I'd heard this, measuring off by the stars
ἄστροις τὸ λοιπὸν ἐκμετρούμενος χθόνα	the land of Corinth, I went into exile forever,
ἔφευγον, ἔνθα μήποτ' ὀψοίμην κακῶν	where I would never see the evil charges of the oracle fulfilled.
χρησμῶν ὄνειδῃ τῶν ἐμῶν τελούμενα.	
στείχων δ' ἵκνουμαι τούσδε τοὺς χώρους	As I travelled, I came to these places in which
ἐν οἷς	
σὺ τὸν τύραννον τοῦτον ὀλλυσθαί λέγεις.	you say this king was meeting his death.
καί σοι, γύναι, τάληθές ἐξερω. τριπλῆς	And, wife, I will tell you the truth:
ὅτ' ἢ κελεύθου τῆσδ' ὁδοιπορῶν πέλας,	when I was walking close to this triple path
ἐνταῦθά μοι κῆρυξ τε καὶ πωλικῆς	a herald met me, and a man such as you describe
ἄνῃρ ἀπῆνης ἐμβεβώς, οἶον σὺ φῆς,	mounted on a horse-drawn wagon.

26. For the concept of the "borderer" as nationalist and resistance fighter see Herzfeld, *Anthropology*, 140; for European reactions at their most extreme see Romilly Jenkins, *The Dilessi Murders* (London, 1961); in general, see John Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece, 1821–1912* (Oxford, 1987) and "Enemy of the Nation: Attitudes Toward Brigandage in Nineteenth-Century Greece," in *New Trends in Modern Greek Historiography*, ed. A. L. Macrakis and P. N. Diamandouros (Hanover, N.H., 1982).

27. In fact almost every visitor to the site has made some interesting error in describing it: that Oedipus killed Laius on top of the hill (like Megas; Stanley, 323); that the crossroads was placed here by Aeschylus (Koliopoulos, *Brigands*, 247); that Megas was killed in 1858 (rather than 1856, Stanley, *ibid.*); that the monument contains a verse inscription (Frazer, *Pausanias*); that it is the tomb of a brigand (Jebb, perhaps thinking of Pausanias' "tomb of Laius"). Once again, the most dispassionate description of the site is by Fossey, *Topography*, 44–45.

28. The engagement is elaborated still further in subsequent accounts: according to Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 3.5.7, Oedipus was also on a wagon—see Robert, *Oedipus*, 83; Eur. *Phoen.* 37–45 gives an even fuller account of the fight over the right of way.

ζυνηγτίαζον· κάξ ὁδοῦ μ' ὃ θ' ἡγεμών	And the one in front and the old man himself
αὐτός θ' ὁ πρέσβυς πρὸς βίαν ἡλαυνέτην. κάγῳ τὸν ἐκτρέποντα, τὸν τροχῆλάτην,	tried to use force to run me off the road. In a rage, I hit the driver who was pushing me off.
παῖω δι' ὀργῆς· καί μ' ὁ πρέσβυς, ὡς ὄρᾱ,	And the old man, when he saw this, kept an eye
ὄχον παραστείχοντα τηρήσας, μέσον	on me as I walked beside the wagon, and came down
κára διπλοῖς κέντροισί μου καθίκετο. οὐ μὴν ἴσῃν γ' ἔτεισεν, ἀλλὰ συντόμως	right on my head with his double oxgoad. He got worse than he gave, though: in a flash
σκήπτρῳ τυπεῖς ἐκ τῆσδε χειρὸς ὑπτίος	he was hit by my stick and rolled straight out
μέσης ἀπῆνης εὐθὺς ἐκκυλίνδεται·	onto his back from the middle of the wagon.
κτείνω δὲ τοὺς ζύμπαντας.	I killed them all.

Contemporary aggression on the road has been abundantly studied—there are of course significant differences between Oedipus' encounter with Laius and events on a modern highway, but the similarities are significant also. Behind highway violence is a territorial imperative: car-space is an extension of body-space, but it is even more the combination of proximity with the wrong situation that produces a violent reaction, especially the situation of being in progress toward a goal that is perceived to be blocked by another. Males are most prone to it, especially when under stress from other factors.²⁹

How common is such behavior? "A study in Scotland found that in the seventeen to thirty-five age group, a quarter admitted to giving chase to drivers who had offended them in some way. Eight percent had actually been involved in fights with other motorists."³⁰ Oedipus' confession quoted above may be compared with an interview conducted by Parry:

Everything went wrong that day. . . . One thing and another, the rush hour got on my nerves. Then when I was almost home, following slowly behind a line of traffic, the car in front stopped and some chap decided to park there with the whole lot of cars behind him. I was furious and honked at him, but he waved me on, telling me to drive around his car. People behind me were also honking, but he started walking away. So I drove my car right into the back of his. . . . The man came running back and tried to drag me out of my car. . . . There was a terrific argument then. . . .³¹

The results are less deadly than in Oedipus' case, but the stressful prelude (unwelcome news from Delphi), sense of progress thwarted, and alternate escalation of a quarrel (a rude command, blow with fist, blow with weapon, battle to the death) are features that recur.³²

29. Peter Marsh and Peter Collett, *Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car* (London, 1986); Meyer H. Parry, *Aggression on the Road* (London, 1968); A. C. Porterfield, "Traffic Fatalities, Suicide and Homicide," *American Sociological Review* 20 (1960): 897–901.

30. Marsh and Collett, *Driving*, 153.

31. Parry, *Aggression*, 32.

32. Notable also is the subject's later statement that the encounter had no further significance, the sort of "premature narrative closure" that bedevils so many characters in Sophocles' plays (see J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin [Chicago, 1990] 72–74).

Another interview about aggressive driving suggests it may be an identifying trait: "There is nothing wrong with doing that. I bet most people behave like that when driving. It's perfectly natural. Why? Because everyone else drives like that. When I was taught driving, my dad told me the only way to become a good motorist was to make sure no one ever got the better of you."³³ Oedipus and his own father also think alike, and the encounter between them is a sort of sign within the play, a further clue to Oedipus' identity, since the operative word is anger (παῖω δι' ὀργῆς, *OT* 807). It requires anger on both sides to produce such a struggle, and Oedipus and Laius both have it; we learn from Jocasta (*OT* 740–45) that they are in general similar. Creon says (674–75): "Such natures are most painful for themselves to bear"; Oedipus' hot temper has already gotten him in trouble at the crossroads, and the emotional resemblance of Oedipus to Laius is a necessary element of the killing. But it is the road, and in particular the territory of the crossroads that activates the murderous impulse.³⁴

IV. NO-MAN'S LAND

Crossroads may have an unusual status in ancient Greek religion. Stephen Halliwell first drew attention to such junctions, studied in detail by Sarah Iles Johnston:³⁵ any road, boundary or entrance in ancient Greece was a place of uncertain ownership, the place where one passes from one property, city, or country into another; these were places of potential danger, from the spirits of the dead or other polluting forces. A junction of three roads offers so many boundaries that it becomes a no-man's land, and a sort of dumping ground for religious wastes: the polluted remains of purification rituals were left there, as were the bodies of parricides, according to Plato (*Leg.* 9.873B). It is also a good place to bury a lead tablet with a curse against an enemy, to reach the evil spirits close to their homes. Shrines of the goddess Hecate were placed there especially, as Johnston shows, probably for protection against this accumulation of evil rather than to embody it.

Thus in ancient Greece one function of a fork is to be a repository of things that no other place can bear—a description eventually applicable to the outcast Oedipus himself. In fact, according to the messenger in the later play *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus comes to a crossroads again at the end of his life, when he wanders at Colonus and stops at "a road of many branches." There he stops, sits down, and asks his daughters finally to purify him there. Rudnytsky and Seidensticker have pointed out the symmetry by which he thus enters and leaves his career of misfortune at the same *limen*.³⁶

33. Parry, *Aggression*, 38.

34. Searchers for ancient/modern continuity will note the frequently aggressive traffic behavior by Athenians attempting to pass through the narrow main street of Arachova (Moore, "Shepherds," 20–21).

35. Halliwell, "Place" (n. 2 above); Sarah Iles Johnston, "Crossroads," *ZPE* 88 (1991): 217–24. See in general (without mention of Oedipus) Martin Puhvel, *The Crossroads in Folklore and Myth* (New York, 1989).

36. Bernd Seidensticker, "Beziehungen zwischen den beiden Oidipusdramen des Sophokles," *Hermes* 100 (1972): 274; Peter L. Rudnytsky, *Freud and Oedipus* (New York, 1987), 324.

V. GENERATIONAL AND SEXUAL TERRITORY

Envisioning the event at the crossroads as the violent confrontation of two travelers determined to reach opposite goals acquires an extra dimension from the relative ages of the combatants. Terence Turner puts it in structural terms: "the three-forked crossroads is . . . a symbol of generational *passage*. . . . Laius, in striking Oedipus aside, is symbolically trying to prevent him from crossing the dividing line between childhood and manhood; the narrowness of his path makes this imperative if he is to 'continue on his way,' which consists, metaphorically speaking, of blocking Oedipus' *passage*."³⁷ An extension of this reading has resulted, finally, in the most controversial description of the crossroads and what happened there: that the juncture of three roads (double into single) figures the female genital region—an obscene hand-gesture seemingly based on this figure is as old as Rabelais.³⁸ Freud's friend Karl Abraham long ago suggested that the conflict between father and son at this site symbolizes a double struggle between them for control of the mother.³⁹ One aspect of this struggle is the son's escape from the narrows of the womb, the other is the father's (and later the son's) penetration into the split of the vagina.

This suggestion seems so bizarre and utterly irrelevant to students of the play in ancient Greek that it has recently become the terrain of a scholarly duel, Dawe mocking it (without naming its source) in his introduction, then Halliwell claiming that he cannot find Dawe's sources, seeming to suggest that Dawe has invented the interpretation himself.⁴⁰ Jean-Pierre Vernant's attack on this interpretation is even more sweeping, amounting to a denial of the relevance of "Oedipality" in the Freudian sense anywhere in Greek myth.⁴¹ Yet, although Abraham did not adduce it, the very word that designates the crossroads (σχιστή) is in itself strongly suggestive of this interpretation. Two glossaries of ancient words from the Roman empire give suggestive definitions of "cracks" (σχιστάι): the *Onomasticon* of the Roman writer Pollux 4.105 (on dances) writes, "there was also the term 'dragging the cracks,' a position of choral dance; one had to switch legs while leaping" (ἦν δὲ καὶ τὸ σχιστάς ἔλκειν, σχῆμα ὀρχήσεως χορικῆς. ἔδει δὲ πηδῶντα ἐπαλλάττειν τὰ σκέλη), and the lexicon of Hesychius calls it "a position of the leg, the splits; also a dance-position" (σχῆμα ποδός, τὰ σχίσματα· καὶ ὀρχηστικὸν σχῆμα).

A more extensive wordplay is found in a comic duel between father and son in Aristophanes' *Wasps* 1373, where the rejuvenated father Philocleon is treating his son like an elderly man. The old man has stolen a nude young

37. Terence Turner, "Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form," in *Forms of Symbolic Action*, ed. Robert F. Spencer (Seattle, 1969), 42.

38. For the British hand gesture of the "palm-back V" as aggressive and obscene (it antedates Winston Churchill) see Desmond Morris, Peter Collett, Peter Marsh, and Marie O'Shaughnessy, *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution* (London, 1979), 228, 232.

39. Karl Abraham, "Two Contributions to the Study of Symbols: II. The Trifurcation of the Road in the Oedipus Myth," in *Clinical Papers and Essays on Psycho-analysis*, ed. Hilda Abraham (London, 1955), 83–85. For the possibility that Freud himself might not have agreed, see n. 43 below.

40. Dawe, *Oedipus*, 3; Halliwell, "Place," 187.

41. "Oedipus without the complex," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, ed. J.-P. Vernant and Marcel Détienne (London, 1981), 85–112.

prostitute from a party, but denies her existence to his son, pretending she is a torch:

Βδ. δᾶς ἦδε;

Φι. δᾶς δῆτ'. οὐχ ὀρᾶς ἐσχισμένην;

(Son) This is a torch?

(Father) Absolutely, a torch: don't you see that she's cracked?

As he points to her genitals, Philocleon claims the nude female on stage is a torch made from wood that is "cracked," a participle from the same stem as the adjective for the crossroads.⁴² The medical writer Rufus of Ephesus is more explicit in his work *On medical terminology*, when he defines the related word σχίσμα ("cracking") as "the vulva." Thus to hear the σχιστή in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the "crack" of the crossroads, as the sexual terrain of the mother is not, perhaps, so far-fetched after all.

Double designations for the female body accompany the story of the struggle over the body of the mother (clearly relevant to Abraham's interpretation) between the very first father and his eldest son in Hesiod's *Theogony* 154–82.⁴³ When Gaea produced the offspring of Uranus, "as soon as one was born, Uranus hid them all in Gaea's depth, and did not let them up to the light, . . . huge Gaea groaned within, blocked-up. . . ." But the mother has her revenge: "She fashioned a great sickle, and instructed her children," of whom the eldest son, Cronus, agrees to carry out her plan:

εἶσε δέ μιν κρύψασα λόχῳ, ἐνέθηκε δὲ
χερσίν
ἄρπην καρχαρόδοντα, δόλον δ' ὑπεθή-
κατο πάντα.

She let him down in an ambush (= "child-birth"), and placed in his hands a jagged-toothed sickle, and taught him the whole trick . . .

and eventually,

ἦλθε δὲ νύκτ' ἐπάγων μέγας Οὐρανός,
ἀμφὶ δὲ Γαίῃ
ἱμεῖρων φιλότῆτος ἐπέσχετο, καὶ ῥ'
ἐτανύσθη
πάντῃ· ὁ δ' ἐκ λοχέοιο παῖς ὠρέξατο χειρὶ

Great Uranus came bringing on night,
and around Gaea
he pressed desiring love, and she stretched out
on all sides: but the child from his ambush
(= "childbirth") reached out
with his left hand, and in his right he held
the huge sickle,
the long jagged-toothed one, and he quickly cut off
the genitals of his own father, and threw them
to be carried away.

42. See Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*² (Oxford, 1991), 146–47 (where however the interpretation of Eupolis frag. 287 is to be rejected; see the notes of Kassel and Austin ad loc.).

43. It is important to note that Abraham's interpretation does not in fact go back to Freud, who repeatedly misremembered and distorted Hesiod's story of divine succession: see Lawrence Kahn, "Un Père, un fils, on mange: une version mythique de la dévoration," *Lieux de l'enfance* 6–7 (Toulouse, 1986), 209–41. Freud's

In one sense, as Vernant insists, this story is that of the separation of Earth (Γαῖα) and Sky (Οὐρανός). But it is also a fusion of several images, as has long been recognized. To quote a scholar who has never been accused of Freudian fantasies, M. L. West: "the story must have been that the Titans were kept in Gaia's womb by Ouranos' unrelenting embrace: that is why she is so distressed, and why castration solves the problem."⁴⁴ The eldest son is striving to be born, but the father's penetration of the mother's vagina prevents it; the mother conspires with her eldest son to castrate the father from inside the womb, which allows his passage to the outside.

One index of the multiple meanings of the event is the word λόχος for the place in which Gaea places Cronus: it means at once "ambush" and "childbirth," suggesting a semantic connection that would be difficult to discern apart from this story. In the next generation of stories from Hesiod detailing fathers' attempts to prevent their sons' births, there is a similar semantic connection between the "womb" (νηδύς) from which Cronus rips the young of his wife Rhea, and his own "belly" (νηδύς again) in which he swallows and represses them.⁴⁵

Like Cronus, Oedipus cuts off his father's access as he attempts to penetrate the "crack." But the figurative meanings of Oedipus' activity at the crossroads go beyond birth: he replaces his father in sexual possession of his mother's body. Even without Abraham's prompting, we need not look very extensively within Greek literature to find paradigms of such father-son conflict. From Homer's character Phoenix (who, at his mother's urging, seduces his father's mistress), to Euripides' Hippolytus (accused of rape by his father's wife), to the disobedient sons of New Comedy (especially Menander's *Samia* and Plautus' *Casina*, which turn on potential sexual rivalries between father and son), a dominant dynamic between father and son is one of rivalry and estrangement over a woman;⁴⁶ in such cases it is as if sons' strivings to become husbands (and ultimately fathers) can succeed only at the price of their fathers' decline and replacement.⁴⁷

From Greek literature we can also learn of the central position of the wife/mother in this conflict. She can decide which of the two she will support, and hope her support will be decisive (e.g., Phoenix's mother in *Iliad* 9.451–52, or the mothers in Terence's *Phormio* or Plautus' *Casina*); but she may also be the prize of the conflict. Dreams of incest with the mother are frequent,⁴⁸ and sexual penetration of the mother's body is

error omits Gaea, since he is concerned only with the males (Kahn, "Père," 223). Kahn herself contrasts devouring and castration as manifestations of father-son violence; her article would have been much complicated by the knowledge of the newly discovered fourth-century Orphic theology in which the genitals of the castrated Uranus are then swallowed by Cronus: see J. S. Rusten, "Interim Notes on the Papyrus of Derveni," *HSCP* 89 (1985): 121–40.

44. In his edition of Hesiod's *Theogony* (Oxford, 1966), at l. 158.

45. See Kahn, "Père."

46. For the "comic Oedipus situation" (Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," in *English Institute Essays*, 1948, ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr. [New York, 1949], 50), see especially F. Wehrli, "Die Vater-Sohnrivalität," in *Motivstudien zur griechischen Komödie* (Zürich, 1936) chapter 4.

47. See especially Barry Strauss, *Fathers and Sons in Ancient Athens* (Princeton, 1993).

48. *OT* 981, Pl. *Resp.* 9.571D, Artem. 1.79; see also John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1990), 37–38, and George Devereaux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy* (Berkeley, 1976), xxii.

regularly interpreted as the accession to political power. Such was the incestuous dream of Julius Caesar according to Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 7, or that of the exiled Hippias in Herodotus 6.107. The actual incest of the child (and future tyrant) Periander marks the political power the mother embodies by her name, Crateia ("Sovereignty").⁴⁹ The principle is stated in Artemidorus, *On the Interpretation of Dreams* 1.79 (91.21): "intercourse with one's living mother is lucky for every demagogue and public figure. For a mother signifies one's native country and, just as a man who follows the precepts of Aphrodite when he makes love completely governs the body of his obedient and willing partner, so the dreamer will control all the affairs of the city."⁵⁰

Thus the name of the crossroads may double as a designation for sexual territory, territory that is simultaneously the threshold of emergence into life and of accession to political power. That a woman's body may become the terrain of sexual and generational rivalry is especially overt in the case of Jocasta; like prized territory—and unlike Gaea and other mothers who intervene in the conflict—she is passive and without will in their struggle, diminished in importance after it is over, yet still despised as if she were somehow complicit in it.⁵¹

* * * * *

When Vernant, in his attack on a sexual interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, isolates one central theme of the play, and excludes any interpretation that is "in conflict with [this] tragic intention,"⁵² his reasoning resembles Oedipus' attempt to exclude himself from Laius' murderer(s) by stating "One person cannot be identical to many" (*OT* 845). By the same token, one act—the killing of Laius at the crossroads—should not be many either. Just as the search for Laius' murderer does not narrow his identity, but multiplies it until he becomes many people (traveler, exile, murderer, royal heir, son), so the questions of the crossroads' location, what Oedipus did there, and its meaning, reveal many overlaid answers. His act and its arena may be many;⁵³ he commits violence against an unknown opponent in a dispute for the right of way; he gives himself a memory that will explode one day into significance; he becomes a polluted man at the place where pollution was deposited, and where he himself will one day be purified; he fulfills the first part of the prophecy he has just received, and opens the path to fulfilling the rest; he eliminates his predecessor as king; he escapes from his mother's womb by killing the one who is blocking it; he enters

49. A sanitized and riddling variant is Livy's story (1.56.12) of the Delphic oracle promising rule to the first man to kiss his mother, whom Brutus understands as the earth.

50. See S. R. F. Price, "The Future of Dreams: From Freud to Artemidorus," in *Before Sexuality: the Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, 1990), 381.

51. See Nicole Loraux, "L'Empreinte de Jocaste," *L'Écrit du temps* 12 (1986): 35–54.

52. *Myth and Tragedy*, 109.

53. Cronus also does many things at the λόχος: he is the first birth, he separates heaven and sky, he overthrows the ruler and takes his place, he carries out the plot of his mother, and becomes himself the father and ruler.

his mother's vagina after killing the one who is leaving it. Not least, Oedipus is the accomplice of Sophocles in supplanting Aeschylus, his own literary progenitor, not only in displacing the crossroads, but also in creating a rival version of the story, replacing him in the tragic canon with this (for Aristotle) perfect play. The crossroads is the portal through which, among other things, prophecy becomes history, heir becomes king, son becomes father, father becomes corpse, and Sophocles becomes a classic.

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