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Oedipus at Crossroads

In *Oedipus the King*, what is powerful about the image of crossroads is its dynamic capacity; it evolves in each of the five instances it appears in the play. The crossroads starts off dimly remembered by the characters, a seemingly innocuous detail that Jocasta reveals in a speech ironically intended to allay Oedipus' fears about prophecies—Laius was killed "at a place where three roads meet" (Sophocles 790). Here, the diction is straightforward and the role it plays literal. As Oedipus launches into a monologue about his encounter and act of violence at the place Jocasta mentions, the crossroads becomes perceived by the audience with increasing dramatic irony to be the location where he begins fulfilling his predicted destiny. Yet, while the symbolic meaning of the image becomes clear, it is still acting as a literal crossroads. Only in its final appearance in the aftermath of Oedipus' discovery and self-blinding does the symbolism of the "triple roads" (1531) to his life dawn upon him—Oedipus, in recollecting the key cursed moments of his life, now sees the thread of divine prophecy running through them all. To Oedipus, in retrospect, the crossroads transcends even the irrevocable moment when the prophecy closes in on him. The image makes a leap from the literal to the metaphoric—at last, a blind, beleaguered Oedipus can see with clarity how the crossroads encapsulates the converging of his identities and the confluence of his past, his present, and his future.

The first three instances of the image of crossroads revolve around a factual, vigorous interrogation of the physical location of Lauis' death. They appear in rapid succession, almost evocative of the swift initial unraveling of the truth that begins in this scene. The image first enters the play in Jocasta's speech, meant to cast scorn on the oracles and give Oedipus some peace of mind. She recounts to him how Laius was killed by thieves instead of his son, as prophesied, and drops the detail of "at a place where three roads meet" (790). This detail is startling for Oedipus, who probes and clarifies her description verbatim (805). His interrogation yields a precise site from Jocasta: "A place called Phocis, where two branching roads, one from Daulia, one from Delphi, come together—a crossroads" (808-810). This is the first inkling that Oedipus has of the fact that he might not be as innocent as he had self-righteously asserted before Tiresias, Creon and his citizens. The distinctive feature of a three-way road is what makes it hard for Oedipus to ignore his possible responsibility for Laius' murder. A momentous choice underlies this exchange; effectively, Oedipus is at a figurative crossroads in this scene—to pursue this lead or not to pursue. Tellingly, he chooses immediately to latch onto this detail and to vigorously pursue it, down a path of no return; as one truth unravels, so do other truths. Oedipus' self-willed action and his intense desire to know thus drive the expeditious manner in which the truth tumbles out, here and elsewhere in the play. There is no reason why Oedipus should immediately identify himself with a passing comment in Jocasta's speech, yet, he senses its congruence with the events from his life and actively works to uncover and thus indirectly secure his own culpability. With simple diction and descriptions stripped down to the essential features of the crossroads, the image serves as the concrete starting point of Oedipus' inquiry of the whole truth and the first incriminating detail of his identity.

As Oedipus reconciles the crossroads with the narrative of his life thus far, the crossroads takes on a more profound symbolism for his life. An overwhelming sense of dramatic irony is at work here. The crossroads is revealed to the audience as the crucial moment when his life converges with the prophecy, yet unbeknownst to Oedipus. This symbolism is a significant development from the practical concerns that the characters have with the crossroads in the previous instances—namely, the visible features and orientation of the roads. However, although the symbolic meaning of the crossroads becomes clear, it still acts as a literal crossroads in Oedipus' lengthy monologue. He describes in vivid detail the prophecy he heard from Apollo at Delphi, his fleeing from Corinth, "making my way toward this triple crossroad" (884), and how he killed a party which was trying to push him off on that very road. This cements Oedipus guilt as Laius' murderer. The crossroads takes on two layers of meaning. Unknown to Oedipus but known to the audience, it marks the pivotal beginning of his pattern of fulfillment of the prophecy. When Oedipus was at the crossroads, he was faced with the fateful decision of prophecy fulfillment, whereby killing the "old man" (888) was to irreversibly set the wheel in motion. While the forked paths of the crossroads give the illusion of human freedom and autonomy, the action on the crossroad that Oedipus recounts is weighed down by a sense of the inevitability of divine providence. Laius tries to thrust Oedipus "off the road" (889), almost allusive to an attempt to push Oedipus out of his destined orbit. Yet, just like how Laius' earlier attempt to evade the prophecy by abandoning Oedipus in Cithaeron only brought Oedipus closer to fulfilling the oracle's words, Laius' present attempt too remains futile and only serves to expedite the prophecy—it incites Oedipus to retaliate and kill him.

The image of the crossroads evolves into a richer and more evocative one in its final appearance in the text. Finally, Oedipus tragically realizes his own impotence in the face of

divine will and catches up on what the audience has understood all along. If previously Oedipus had merely perceived the crossroads as a physical location and condemning detail, he now—with his newfound knowledge of his identity and of the inevitable human submission to divine prophecy—grasps the symbolism of the crossroads to the unfolding of his life. It is worth noting that Oedipus is now aware of how defining the crossroads was as a juncture in his life, as he laments it, "O triple roads" (1531), alongside the other significant milestones—"O Cithaeron" (1524), "O Polybus, Corinth" (1527), and "O marriage" (1537). Looking back with his knowledge, he is aware of the foreboding symbolism of the crossroads: "O triple roads—it all comes back, the secret,/ dark ravine, and the oaks closing in / where the three roads join" (1531-33). A retrospective, plaintive note of *if-only* hangs over the entire monologue, but it is conveyed with most effect when Oedipus ruminates over what he had failed to see at the crossroads, especially in the outcry: "it all comes back" (1531). With the crossroads taking on new significance, Oedipus now remembers hints and subtleties that he neglected in the past. Many small vivid details of the scene that he had left out in prior recollections are now couched in excruciatingly poignant terms. The choice of words such as "secret" (1531) and "dark" (1532) evokes a belated sense of disquiet, foreshadowing several things: the similarly dark deeds that await Oedipus, which he calls "the blackest things a man can do" (1541-1542); Oedipus' own blindness that he viscerally describes as "dark, horror of darkness / my darkness, drowning, swirling around me" (1450-1451); and lastly, the "dark power" (1436; 1448) of the gods that engulfs him like "a black sea of terror" (1682). The disturbing, abominable destiny that awaits Oedipus is inescapable, powerfully echoed by the oaks that close in at the triple roads as the prophecy closes in on his ignorant past self. It is almost an entrapping.

With Oedipus grasping the symbolism of the "triple roads" (1531) to his life, the image reinforces the prevailing theme of three in his life, effecting a leap from the literal to the metaphorical, the particular to the universal. The repeated instances of "triple" (884; 1531) and "three" (790; 805; 1533) evolve in meaning as the play moves along, transcending the literal connotations of crossroads. Oedipus' language now reflects his using of the crossroads as a lens to understand the divine providence; he rhetorically groups the various facets of his life in three. In the moment when the truth all comes to light from the mouth of the shepherd, Oedipus exclaims in anguish that he is "cursed in…birth, cursed in marriage, cursed in the lives…cut down with these hands" (1309-1310). The stylistic use of groups of three continues. By fulfilling the prophecy, Oedipus becomes "fathers, brothers, sons" (1540) in an unnatural confluence of roles. He is simultaneously father and brother to his two daughters, and son of his wife. This violation of the order of human nature similarly muddles up Jocasta's identity—she becomes "brides, wives, mothers" (1541). Beyond these, the crossroads becomes fully representative of what the moment of discovery entails for Oedipus. It is a moment when the past, the present, and the future all bear down on him. The past merges with the present moment of discovery when Oedipus finds out that he had fulfilled the prophecy long ago; the present merges with the future when Oedipus finally submits himself wholly to divine will; the past and the future are no longer in contention, as the intricate pattern of Oedipus' destiny is complete when he knew the truth. Oedipus' now illuminated perception of the interconnections between his past, present, and future points precisely to what the gods know more than man and what Oedipus was originally ignorant of—the gods possess divine foreknowledge.

No other image in the play so elegantly ties together the thematic constant in Oedipus' life from ignorance to discovery, from innocence to violence, from past to present to future. The

crossroads facilitates not only Oedipus' prophecy fulfillment, but also his renewed conceptualization of the universe and of man's place in it. This has broader implications for the larger fictional universe, in which the civilization—represented by the chorus of Theban citizens—is too at crossroads. Their wavering between the power of divine providence and the urge to tear down the towering religious edifice finds for itself a microcosm in Oedipus' experience. When Oedipus finally clearly sees the pattern of preordination at work in his life and submits to divine will, the chorus too grasps the overwhelming power of destiny, that is "the reduction of man to nothing" (Bernard Knox 150). And that is what draws us to Oedipus' quest for truth. The Sophoclean play brings us to reconcile ourselves with our own impotence as fallible humans. And that is how Oedipus struggle becomes universal.

Works Cited

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