N

Chance and Fate
Chapter N is concerned with the large part that luck plays in narrative (and life). Thompson covered wagers and gambling (N0–N99), the nature of luck and fate (N100–N299), unlucky accidents (N300–N399), lucky accidents (N400–N699), accidental encounters (N700–N799), and helpers—human, animal, and supernatural (N800–N899).

Belief in fate is founded in the universal apprehension that the world is governed by unseen forces and steered by unknowable laws. Interpretation of the mysterious workings of fate has formed the foundation for many of the world’s religions as well as being one of the most commonly treated topics in folktales worldwide.

In the Norse religion, the power of the gods is subordinate to the impersonal power of fate, which dictates that most of them are to die during the “twilight of the gods” or Ragnarok, Doom or Destiny of the Gods.

The Norse god Odin and his wife, Frigga can see the future but are powerless to alter it. The Norse sagas also reflect the ability of select individuals to glimpse the workings of fate. Prophetic dreams figure in the Laxerdael Saga, while the title character in Njal’s Saga is most significant for his ability to see into the future, and many characters are configured as “lucky” or “unlucky.”

The Norse caste of shamans or predicted the future with the use of runes (runa), letters of the Norse alphabet and, when viewed individually, predictive devices (from Germanic raumen, “to whisper” ) thought by epigraphists to contain secret messages. They were believed to have been created by Odin, who achieved the ability to use them through ordeal. Each rune sign was believed to have its own property and to carry both a literal and a transcendent (predictive) meaning (Menninger 1992).
FATE PERSONIFIED

Fate in world folklore can be embodied in any number of ways (N110, “Luck and fate personified”). Often fate is seen as a human figure or figures, particularly female; one of the oldest personifications is Mammetum, the goddess of destiny, in Babylonian myth. Tyche was an early conception of fate, and fortune both good and bad, in Greek myth, assuming the guise of a minor goddess with the decline of the traditional gods (Hornblower and Spawforth 2002). The Roman goddess of chance or luck was Fortuna, probably via Tyche. While Fortuna was at first considered a stable and generally beneficent deity, “with the increasing skepticism and loss of confidence of the later Empire . . . the stable goddess of Italian religious tradition gives way to a figure who, like the Greek concept of Tyche, represents instability and the power of unpredictable chance” (Kratz 1988, 540).

Other personifications of fate feature three goddesses (A463.1, “The Fates. Goddesses who preside over the fates of men”). These goddesses, who are often portrayed as spinning and cutting the skein of life, may be found in Greek, Norse, Indian, Lappish, and Irish myth. The Three Fates in Greek myth are known as Moirae (Parcae by the Romans); Clotho spun, Lachesis assigned to man his doom, and Atropos broke the thread. The Norse goddesses, called the Norns, were named Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld; they lived in the roots of the great ash tree Yggdrasil, the world tree. In the “Lay of Helgi” (Poetic Edda), the Norns spin a magical thread at the time of the hero’s birth and then attach it to the heavens, marking with its ends the land over which Helgi would one day reign.

It has been suggested that such triune figures were originally inspired by the waxing, full, and waning phases of the moon (Dornseif 1925). (A more complex tableau is provided in Lithuanian folklore, where seven goddesses share the task of spinning, measuring, and cutting the woolen yarn that represents the span of a human life. The seventh washes the winding sheet they have created and gives it to the god of death.) Scottish and Irish folktales depict supernatural female fate figures as local spirits—the Banshees. They often comb their long hair, and their wailing signals that someone in the vicinity is about to die.

In the early French romance Perceforest (1300), direct survivals of the Three Fates are depicted: Lucinda, Themis, and Venus. Later versions of AT 410, Sleeping Beauty, substitute fairies who carry out the traditional role of the fates by decreeing length of life to the newborn. An evil fairy who was not invited to the celebration puts a curse on the infant that she shall die of a spindle wound (M412.1, “Curse given at birth of child”). Another fairy mitigates the curse from death to a hundred-year sleep (F316.1, “Fairy’s curse partially overcome by another fairy’s amendment”). In many variants of the story, the child’s parents attempt to escape the fate of the spindle by having all spinning wheels destroyed (M370, “Vain attempts to escape fulfillment of prophecy”).

There may be a connection between the spinning Germanic figures Holle, Holle, Hulda, and Holda and the ancient triune goddess. These supernatural figures are often depicted as able to control the weather and affect human destiny. They reward mortals for industry in spinning and for altruism and punish them for selfishness and laziness.

Some ancient religions feature a male death-herald figure such as the Assyrio-Sumerian Namtar. In some folktales, fate is embodied by a death figure who comes to fetch people, as in the Hebrew folktales “Fate,” in which a servant borrows his master’s fastest horse only to meet Death while trying to escape him (Hanauer 1935), and “The Castle of Death,” in which a clever man is able to cheat Death, thus changing his own fate during the encounter by asking to say a prayer and asking for fifty years to do it. In the Grimms’ “Godfather Death” (KHM 44), Death shows his godson the candles that represent individual lives: “Sec,” says Death, “these are the lights of men’s lives. The large ones belong to children, the half-sized ones to married people in their prime, the little ones belong to old people; but children and young folks likewise have often only a tiny candle” (Grimms’ Household Tales).

Folktales from predominantly Buddhist cultures often personify the fate figure in male form and can exhibit strong determinist tendencies. In “The Half-Man and the God of Fate” from Ceylon, a poor man goes to the god three times to complain of his fate and is given each time a half-man in a sack. Even fate himself does not know what is in the sack. After the third visit, the poor man resigns himself to his destiny (Vedet 1992).

Boethius, writing his Consolation of Philosophy in the sixth century CE, gives us an early description of Fortune’s wheel, perhaps inspired by the spindle of the ancient Fates:

As thus she turns her wheel of chance with hasty hand, and presses on like the surge of Euripus’s tides, fortune now tramples fiercely on a forlorn king, and now deprives so less a conquered man by raising from the ground his humbled face. She bears no wretch’s cry, she heeds no tears, but wantonly she mocks the sorrow which her cruelty has made. This is her sport: thus she proves her power; if in the selfsame hour one man is raised to happiness, and cast down in despair, ‘tis thus she shews her might. (ch. 2)

CHANGING ONE’S FATE

Folktales concerned with the theme of fate may be divided into two main groups, those treating the future as immutable and those in which protagonists
are able to thwart or defy what fate has in store for them. In the story “Godfather Death,” mentioned above, the godson, in his role as physician, tries to cheat Death, but Death takes him anyway, and he is horrified to see that his candle is tiny; Death will not give him a larger one, but instead snuffs it out.

One of the most compelling critical readings of the Greek myth of Oedipus (AT 931, Oedipus) sees it as the conflict of free will versus fate. Despite the precautions taken by Oedipus’s parents and Oedipus himself to avoid the prophecies that he would kill his father (M343, “Parricide prophecy”) and marry his mother (M344, “Mother-incest prophecy”), his fate is inexorable and all that was foretold comes to pass. It is questionable, however, whether the Greeks themselves saw the conflict between free will and fate as central to the story, since classical Greek does not even have a term for “free will.”

An interesting example of a hero empowered to exercise free will is the African tale “Sleeping Fate” (Parrinder 1986), in which a poor traveler awakens fate after a twelve-year sleep, thereby improving the lot of others he meets along the way, as well as that of his own family. Other heroes who thwart their fate are those in the well-known German tale “The Bremen Town Musicians” and its Scottish variant “The White Pet,” in which a group of aged animals threatened with destruction set out in the world to create an alternative society. Likewise in the Slavic tale “Why People Today Die Their Own Death,” a community ends the practice of killing its old people when it is saved from starvation by the wisdom of the elderly protagonist.

As a further example, in “The Prince and the Three Fairies,” a newborn prince is doomed to die at the age of twenty-one. At that age, he becomes engaged to the princess of a neighboring kingdom. They come to a river, and the prince falls in the water and drowns. In her grief, the bride asks the death fairy to take ten years of her life and give them to her husband. The fairy of death takes pity on her and it is done, but the prince has to die ten years later. In “The Sayings of the Moirs,” a traveler overhears three women discussing the fate of a child just born to the innkeeper, it having been decided that she would marry no other than the traveler himself. The angry traveler throws the child out of a window and she is impaled on an arrow before being rescued by her mother. Years later, when going to bed with his wife, the man notices a deep scar in her side, the truth is revealed, and the couple agree that the pronouncements of the Moirs cannot be changed (Stamer 1990).

**WAGERS AND GAMBLING**

There are thousands of tales in which characters are shown taking chances and making wagers. One common type of wager is the competitive wager between, or about, prospective spouses. These tales may well have incestuous themes or overtones. Basile (1932) presents a common example in his tale “The Young Slave,” in which the sister of the Baron Serva-scura is the only woman able to jump over a rose bush and thus must marry her brother.

The “silence wager” between husband and wife (AT 1351) is found in tales all over Europe as well as China, Turkey, Pakistan, Korea, and South America. Another common type of folktales involving spouses and wagering forms the basis for Shakespeare’s play The Merry Wives of Windsor (ca. 1601). Some women strike a wager among themselves that the one who proves to have the most stupid, gullible, or least desirable husband should win a reward. Other types of folkloric wagers concerned with the fortunes of a marriage are exemplified by the ancient English tales that served as inspiration for Shakespeare’s Cymbeline (ca. 1606). In these tales, a wager is made concerning the virtue of the wife, often with comic or negative results for the wagerer.

Foolish protagonists who trade away fortunes (AT 1415, Lucky Hans) appear in such tales as “Hans in Luck,” “Gudbrand on the Hillside,” and “What the Old Man Does Is Always Right.” Non-Western examples of such tales are also plentiful. In “Old Man Oo Khány,” a Siberian tale, the protagonist makes one good trade after another, becoming rich by trading a shoulder blade. In the end, he is killed in revenge by his two young wives (Cowxell 1925). In such tales, two outcomes are consistent. In the first, the protagonist begins with something valuable (a horse, for example) and continues to trade with passersby for items of lesser value until he returns, happily, with something nearly worthless. In the second, the foolish character seems to be wagering or trading well but is in the end brought down by others he believes he has tricked.

In contrast to the fool who happily loses good fortune, the trickster figure proposes wagers, bargains, bets, or deals that will enable him (or her) to take advantage of other characters. Trickster figures exist in every culture for which records exist. These figures, usually mortal and outsiders to the communities in which they operate, are adept at manipulating the weaknesses of those around them and therefore altering their own destinies for the better.

People have been induced to take their chances on gambling for thousands of years. It is believed that both playing cards and dice arose from divinatory practices. The four suits of cards correspond to the four directions of the compass and were used in fortune telling; dice (“bones”) were originally vertebrae or knucklebones of animals (Fried 1949, 436-437). In a folktales from India, dice are made from bones from a graveyard (N1.2.2). Folk songs contain many laments about gambling, a common one being “Jack O’Diamonds, Jack O’Diamonds, I know you of old, / You robbed my poor pockets of silver and gold.”
Playing cards and dice may have originated in divinatory practices. In some tales, gamblers enlist supernatural aid in hopes of winning. From Meister Ingold, Das goldene guldin Spiel (1472).

Gamblers can enlist the aid of the supernatural, as for example D1407, “Magic object helps gambler win”; D1407.3, “Magic game board helps win”; and N6.1, “Luck in gambling from compact with devil.” There are also tales of gambling with a supernatural adversary (N3), a god (N3.1), or the devil (N4).

Pushkin’s short story “The Queen of Spades” (1833) is a haunting tale of gambling and the supernatural. During a long winter’s evening of card playing, a young Russian nobleman, Tomsky, tells the story of his grandmother, who, as a young woman in Paris, was told a gambling secret that allowed her to pay back a tremendous debt she had incurred. One of the men at the table, Hermann, becomes obsessed with learning the old lady’s secret and resolves to get to her by making love to her young ward. He does manage to gain access to the old countess’s rooms, but frightens her to death without gaining the information he sought. The night after her funeral, the ghost of the countess appears in his bedroom and tells him the cards: “The three, the seven, and the ace will win for you if you play them in succession, provided that you do not stake more than one card in twenty-four hours and never play again as long as you live” (E366, “Return from dead to give counsel”; N221, “Man

granted power of winning at cards”). Unfortunately, he does not heed the restrictions and the third time he plays he loses everything and goes out of his mind. Unlike poor Hermann, many protagonists in North American Indian tales are successful in gambling (N1.2, “Conquering gambler. Bankrupt gambler gets supernatural power and wins back his fortune”). The ultimate gamble, of course, is when one’s life is at stake (N2.2, “Lives wagered”), and tales with this motif are found in Burma, India, Iceland, China, Hawaii, North America, and Africa.

UNLUCKY AND LUCKY ACCIDENTS

Thompson lists hundreds of accidental occurrences that propel the fortunes of the folktales hero or heroine. Primary among these are “Valuable secrets learned” (N440–N499). Many sources of crucial information for a hero or heroine come from overhearing the conversation of animals (N451, “Secrets overheard from animal (demon) conversation”). This motif, which occurs in Types 516, 517, 670, and 673, is known in Buddhist myth and Chinese, Japanese, and Korean sources.

Treasure Trove

The finding of buried treasure is one of the oldest and most common motifs in folklore. AT 676, Open Sesame, has variants all over the world, including Iceland, China, Tahiti, New Zealand, Samoa, and Africa; the most famous is the story of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” from the Arabian Nights. Alarmed at the sight of a band of horsemen coming his way, Ali Baba hides by climbing a tree, from which he can see and hear everything (N455.3, “Secret formula for opening treasure mountain overheard from robbers”). A related tale, probably a variant, was collected by the Grimms (“Simeli Mountain” or “Simelberg,” KHM 142). The title character in AT 561, Aladdin, also from the Arabian Nights, is induced by a magician to go down into a treasure trove where, among other marvels, he sees trees that bear not fruit but precious gems, “such as emeralds and diamonds; rubies, spinels and balasses, pearls and similar gems astounding the mental vision of man” (Burton 2001, 587).

Accidental Encounters

Accidental encounters of all sorts, both lucky and unlucky, are the driving force of stories. Folk songs commonly open with the words “As I roved out one morning” or “As I was a-walking one midsummer’s morning” and go on
to describe a chance meeting, usually with a paramour (N710, "Accidental meeting of hero and heroine"); T30, "Lovers' meeting"). An English folksong called "The Game of Cards" or "The Game of All Fours," collected in numerous variants, combines the motif of such a meeting with the motif of card playing (a metaphor for another kind of play) and ends: "So I took up my hat and I bid her good morning / I said: You're the best that I know at this game / She answered: Young man, if you'll come back tomorrow / We'll play the game over and over again" (Kennedy 1975, 402–403).

In tales the world over, a hero or heroine meets up with one or more helpers who provide crucial services on a quest or journey. A prime example is "The Six Servants" ("Die sechs Diener," KHM 134), in which a king's son, setting out to win a princess whose father sets impossible tasks for her suitors, meets up with an extraordinary array of characters with amazing abilities that enable him to pass the tests and gain the hand of the princess.

SUPERNATURAL HELPERS

There are many supernatural helpers (N810), including giants or ogres (N812), monsters grateful to the hero for being spared (N812.5), genies or spirits (N813), angels (N814), and deities (N817). Some are ghosts (R163, "Rescue by grateful dead man"); the motif of the grateful dead is the basis for several tale types (AT 505–508).

In some stories, the helper is met not on a journey, but inside the home (N831.1, "Mysterious housekeeper"). Men find their house mysteriously put in order. Discover that it is done by a girl (frequently an animal transformed into a girl"; AT 709, Snow-White). The mysterious housekeeper is a recurrent motif among North American Indian traditions and occurs in Africa, China, Korea, Indonesia, Melanesia, and other areas as well as throughout Europe.

Other supernatural helpers include three odd-looking spinners (The Three Old Women Helpers, AT 501) and the strange little man ("Rumpelstiltskin") who saves a girl's life, enabling her to become queen, by helping her spin straw into gold (AT 500, The Name of the Helper).

HUMAN AND ANIMAL HELPERS

The girl as helper (N831) is an important motif that appears in many tales and constitutes two types, AT 311 (Rescue by the Sister) and AT 313 and its several subtypes (The Girl as Helper in the Hero's Flight). The latter is well known from the Greek myth of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece and the help he receives from Medea. In many manifestations of this motif,
Choice of Roads

Motif N122.0.1, and Crossroads, Various Motifs

The motif of “Choice of roads” appears under the broader motif heading, “Ways of luck and fate,” N100–N299.

Throughout the world, the places where roads diverged or crossed have been regarded as unlucky or dangerous because of the presence of evil spirits, and in an effort to propitiate these spirits, deities have often been worshipped there. “We sacrifice... to the forking of the highways and to the meeting of the roads” is a formula from the Avesta, the ancient scriptures of Zoroastrianism (MacCulloch 1981, 330). MacCulloch says, “Men always fear demons and spirits which they believe lurk on the edge of the forest path or rude roadway, ready to pounce upon the belated traveler, and in many cases roads are believed to be infested by them... Hence they would be regarded as lurking at the intersection of roads, especially by night, when wayfarers were uncertain of the direction in which they ought to go” (1981, 332).

Crossroads have been invested with a sinister aura largely because, in numerous cultures (including ancient Greece and nineteenth-century England), they were the site of executions and/or burials. In addition, people must have felt great trepidation on reaching an unanticipated fork in an unmarked road, for much could be lost if they took the wrong road.

CHOICE OF ROADS

In many examples of folktales involving choice of roads, the decision of which road to take is randomly made, illustrating the old adage, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.” Historically, divination
was practiced in a variety of cultures when people were confronted with a choice of roads. An example is given by Macdonald in which the Machinga of Tanzania place a knife in a horizontal position and lay two roots against the blade: "The traveler then stands pointing to one of the roads and says 'Shall I take this one?' and if the roots remain still fixed he takes it, but if they fall to the ground he chooses the other path" (1969, 215).

An early depiction of divination in choice of roads occurs in the Old Testament, when Ezekiel speaks of the two possible routes, either to Jerusalem or to Ammon, that the king of Babylon could have taken when he came to a fork in the road: "For the king of Babylon stood at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination. He shook the arrows to and fro, he consulted the teraphim, he looked in the liver" (Ezekiel 21:21) (D131.117.2, "Divination by magic arrow").

In some tales animals choose which road to take (B151, "Animal determines road to be taken"). It may be an ass, bull, cow, elephant, fox, dog, or bird that shows the way.

THE QUEST

In stories of quests, the hero is often at the outset presented with a fork in the road, necessitating a decision as to which route to take in order to reach the object of the quest. Very often, such stories involve three brothers. An example is AT 550, The Bird, the Horse, and the Princess. The story has three brothers setting out to search for a golden bird that has been stealing golden apples from their father's garden. Thompson states, "As the brothers leave, they find a place where three roads part and where inscriptions on each tell what will happen if that road is chosen. Each brother chooses a different road" (1977, 107; N122.01). The story is extremely popular both in oral and literary tradition. Thompson notes that it is "quite as well known in Scandinavia as it is in Italy and Russia and the Baltic states, and, indeed all the rest of Europe. It is almost equally popular in western and southern Asia, where it appears in a number of versions in Armenia, India, Indonesia, and central Africa, and is told by the French in Missouri" (1977, 107).

The tale is commonly known in Russia as "The Firebird," which Boris Zvorykin translated into French, along with three other Russian tales, in the 1920s in a volume called L'Oiseau de feu et d'autres contes populaires russes. In that version, a column stands where the roads diverge, and the inscription on it reads: "He who travels from the column on the road straight ahead will be cold and hungry; he who travels to the right will be safe and sound, but his horse will be killed; and he who travels to the left will be killed, but his horse will be safe and sound" (Onassis 1978, 6, 14).

Other tales involving choice of roads include AT 300, The Dragon-Slayer, and AT 303, The Twins or Blood-Brothers (N772, "Parting at crossroads to go on adventures"). These tale types are often combined. In his Folktales of Germany, Ranke gives a tale called "The Three Brothers," which is a combination of these two as well as Type 304, The Hunter. In it three brothers go off into the world together.

After they had been walking along for some time, they came to a big tree where three paths separated. The eldest one said to the others, "Brothers, now we have to part. For we cannot stay together all the time," and the others agreed. Since Hans had nothing left in his knapsack, he was given a little by his brothers, and before separating, they all put their knives into the tree and they decided that he who first came back to this place should look at the knives. If he found one of the knives particularly rusty, he would know that its owner was in difficulty, and he was to go along that one's way in order to help him if he was still alive. When this was settled, the oldest brother went to the right, the second one took the middle path, and Hans went to the left. (Ranke 1966, 53)

Thompson gives as another example of the choice of roads motif a story from the Miao of China in which three brothers part at a "mountain pass." Although there is no literal crossroads or fork in the road, the brothers take different paths on a quest.

THE METAPHORICAL CHOICE OF ROADS

The metaphorical use of the choice of roads motif has a long literary tradition stretching back to the Sermon on the Mount: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13–14). In his study The Pilgrimage of Life, Chew gives numerous examples of the motif in early Christian, medieval, and Tudor-Stuart sources. For example, in Reson and Sensuality, John Lydgate (ca. 1370–1450) dreams that Dame Nature offers him the choice between the Road of Reason and the Road of Sensuality (Chew 1962:176).

In the Puritan tract Histrio-Mastix (1633), William Prynne speaks of two roads leading to two very different destinations: "The road to heaven is too steep, too narrow, for men to dance in and keep revel rout. No way is large or smooth enough for kipping roisterers; for jumping, skipping dancing dames, but that broad, beaten, pleasant road, that leads to hell" (F171.2, "Broad and narrow road in otherworld").
Emily Dickinson's poem (xxii) in Poems, Second Series (1891) uses the image of life as a journey, with coming to a fork in the road signaling impending death:

Our journey had advanced;
Our feet were almost come
To that odd fork in Being's road,
Eternity by term.

Robert Frost wrote "The Road Not Taken" in 1915, supposedly inspired by walks taken in Gloucestershire with his friend Edward Thomas, who, after taking one road, would often regret not having taken the other one.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood...

According to Lawrence Thompson (1964) and other scholars, Frost meant the poem to be gently ironic, although the irony was lost both on the general public and on Thomas himself. The poem may have been informed by an experience at a crossroads that Frost recounts in a letter of February 10, 1912:

Two lonely cross-roads that themselves cross each other I have walked several times this winter without meeting or overtaking so much as a single person on foot or on runners. The practically unbroken condition of both for several days after a snow or a blow proves that neither is much travelled. Judge then how surprised I was the other evening as I came down one to see a man, who to my own unfamiliar eyes and in the dusk looked for all the world like myself, coming down the other, his approach to the point where our paths must intersect being so timed that unless one of us pulled up we must inevitably collide. I felt as if I was going to meet my own image in a slanting mirror. Or say I felt as we slowly converged at the same point with the same noiseless yet laborious stride as if we were two images about to float together with the uncrossing of someone's eyes. I verily expected to take up and absorb this other self and feel the stronger by the addition for the three-mile journey home. But I didn't go forward to the touch. I stood still in wonderment and let him pass by; and that, too, with the fatal omission of not trying to find out by a comparison of lives and immediate and remote interests what could have brought us by crossing paths to the same point in a wilderness at the same moment of nightfall. Some purpose I doubt not, if we could but have made out. (Sergeant 1960, 87-88)

CROSSROADS

Murder and Burial at Crossroads

Sophocles says in Oedipus the King (ca. 429 BCE) that it is at a place where three roads cross that Oedipus meets and slays a man he does not know, who is, in fact, his father. Only later, when Jocasta tells Oedipus that King Laius was murdered at the meeting of three roads near Delphi, does Oedipus suspect that he is the murderer of Laius; still later he learns that Laius was his father, and that in murdering him Oedipus has fulfilled the first part of the terrible prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Aeschylus, in telling the story of Oedipus in The Seven Against Thebes (467 BCE), places the murder in a different location, but still specifies that it was a spot "where three roads meet" (Gould 1970, 92, n. 716). Gould notes, "At Laws 9, 873b, Plato specifies that patricides, fratricides, and infanticides, when they have been put to death, must be thrown 'naked out of the city at a designated place where three roads meet . . . the Laws are full of ancient customs only very slightly reordered, so Plato may be preserving an old custom" (1970, 92, n. 716; E431.17, "Criminals buried at crossroads to prevent walking").

Similarly, in England it was the custom until 1823 that suicides be buried at a crossroads, with a stake driven through the body (E431.16.3. "Suicide buried at crossroads"). Although this practice was nowhere stated as law (Stephen 1996, iii, 105), it was so ingrained that it took the passage of a statute (4 George IV, c. 52) to stop it ("it shall not be lawful for any Coroner . . . to issue any Warrant or other Process directing the Interment of the Remains of Persons, against whom a Finding of Felo de se shall be had, in any public Highway: but that such Coroner or other Officer shall give Directions for the private Interment of the Remains of such Body of such Person Felo de se, without any Stake being driven through the Body of such person").

In the previous year, 1822, Lord Londonderry, Viscount Castlereagh, leader of the House of Commons, committed suicide, and in order to bury him in Westminster Abbey the coroner's verdict stated that he was "under a grievous disease of mind" when he killed himself. Lord Byron wrote in the preface to cantos VI-VIII of Don Juan, "if a poor radical . . . had cut his throat, he would have been buried in a cross-road, with the usual appurtenances of the stake and mallet" (Gates 1988, 5). Indeed, the following year a young man who killed himself was rudely buried at the crossroads formed by Eaton Street, Grosvenor Place, and the King's Road, although a contemporary report notes that a stake was not driven through the body (Gates 1988, 6). It may well have been the juxtaposition of the radically different treatments of the two foregoing suicides that spurred the statute abolishing crossroads burials.

Writing after the abolition of the custom, two novelists preserve the memory of it. Emily Brontë, in Wuthering Heights (1847; set in 1771–1803), has Heathcliff angrily say in regard to burial arrangements for Hindley Earnshaw that "correctly . . . that fool's body should be buried at the crossroads, without ceremony of any kind. . . . he has spent the night in drinking
himself to death deliberately!” (cited in Gates 1988, 8). In Thomas Hardy’s short story “The Grave at the Handpost” (1897), the members of a choir, walking out to sing just before midnight one night near Christmas, see men working at a newly dug grave and they immediately understand whose it is. “The choir knew no particulars—only that [Sergeant Holway] had shot himself in his apple closet on the previous Sunday. . . . The coroner’s jury returned a verdict of felo de se.” Accordingly, he is buried at “the junction of the four ways, under the handpost” without a coffin and with a stake driven through him.

It appears that crossroads have generally served as a place of burial in many times and places; examples include ancient India, where a dagoba or stupa (a mound in which the bones and ashes were placed) was erected at crossroads; Uganda, where stillborn children and suicides were buried at crossroads; and Hungary, where persons believed to have succumbed to the malice of a witch or demon were sometimes buried at crossroads (MacCulloch 1981, 331).

**Magic and Fairies at Crossroads**

Besides divination, various other magical rites as well as supernatural creatures are associated with forking and crossroads. For example, in an attempt to repel the demons and ghosts that were thought to exist at crossroads, divinities were sometimes worshipped there (D1736, “Magic power at crossroads”).

In most of the versions of the ballad “Tam Lin” in Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, the disenchantment of Tam Lin, who is held captive by the fairies, must occur at “Miles Cross” or some other “Cross,” which is likely a crossroads. Tam Lin asks his mistress to go there that night and pull him down from his horse as the fairy procession approaches (F2173, “Fairies assemble at cross-roads”) in order to free him from their spell.

Gloomy, gloomy, was the night,
And eerie was the way,
As fair Janet, in her green mantle,
To Miles Cross she did gae.
About the dead hour o the night
She heard the briddles ring,
And Janet was as glad o that
As any earthly thing.

Besides fairies, other supernatural creatures associated with crossroads include the jinn in Arabic cultures, vampires in Russia, and witches in various parts of Europe (MacCulloch 1981, 331).

**Guardians of the Crossroads**

The divinities associated with crossroads were almost always deities of darkness. Among the ancient Greeks, the goddess Hecate was commonly portrayed in triple form with faces turned in three directions. Representations of her, called Hecatea, were set up at the crossing of three roads, and these places were considered sacred to her (Jung and Kerényi 1969, 112). Travelers asked for her protection and made offering to her at crossroads, especially since, in her darker aspects, she was associated with the underworld and with ghosts and demons and could presumably keep them at bay (MacCulloch 1981, 333). The god Hermes also was associated with roads and crossroads, as well as with travelers, thieves, merchants, and boundaries; he was also the escort of the souls of the dead to the underworld. Statues called herms were erected as mile and boundary and direction markers and here too travelers would make offerings. The herms were famously decorated with erect phallics, “the sexual organs as warders-off of evil spirits” (MacCulloch 1981, 332). Similar phallic symbols, chimata-no-kami, or “road-fork gods,” and sahi-no-kami, “preventive deities,” were set up at crossroads in Japan (332).

The ubiquitous African trickster god known as Esu-Eleghba (Nigeria) and Legba (Benin) bears a striking resemblance to Hermes. He has spread throughout the African diaspora and appears in folklore of the Caribbean, South America, and the United States. He is the messenger of the gods, the guardian of the crossroads, “a phallic god of generation and fecundity” and “master of the elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane” (Gates 1988, 6).

**The Devil at the Crossroads**

Handbooks of magic from the Middle Ages mention crossroads as a place to conjure the devil and perform other rites. The antiquity of this location for magical operations is attested in Mathers’s translation of several ancient Hebrew manuscripts of kabbalistic magic, called *The Key of Solomon*. While Mathers stresses that these works are not concerned with black magic, the following instructions occur:

The places best fitted for exercising and accomplishing Magical Arts and Operations are those which are concealed, removed, and separated from the habitations of men. Wherefore desolate and uninhabited regions are most appropriate, such as the borders of lakes, forests, dark and obscure places, old and deserted houses, wither rarely and scarce ever men do come . . . but best of all are cross-roads, and where four roads meet, during the depth and silence of night. (Mathers 1889, 84)
The crossroads figures in the Faust myth, an elaboration of the very old motif of the “Bargain with the devil” (M2111). The character of Faust, who sells his soul to the devil, seems to have been based on an actual person. A chapbook published in Frankfurt in 1587 called Historia von D. Johann Fausten tells of a scholar who mastered not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the sciences of medicine, mathematics, astrology, sorcery, prophecy, and necromancy. These pursuits aroused in him a desire to commune with the Devil, so—having made the necessary evil preparations—he repaired one night to a crossroads in the Spessar Forest near Wittenberg. Between nine and ten o’clock he described certain circles with his staff and thus conjured up the Devil. (Ashliman 2001)

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), the protagonist sets out one evening on an unspecified but “evil purpose”:

He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest.
...It was all as lonely as could be, and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveler knows not who may be concealed by the immemorable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude.

Soon enough, “at a crook in the road” he meets a mysterious stranger whom we recognize as the devil.

In the American South, there was a superstition circulating among blues musicians in the first half of the twentieth century that some had sold their souls to the devil to play as well as they did. When Robert Johnson returned to his fellow musicians in Banks, Mississippi, in 1932 after having traveled deep into the Mississippi Delta, his guitar playing was so accomplished that Son House is said to have voiced the belief that he had struck the bargain. Another musician, named Tommy Johnson (no relation to Robert), told his brother how he himself became so proficient on the guitar:

You take your guitar and you go to where a road crosses that way, where a crossroad is. Get there, be sure to get there just a little 'fore 12:00...You have your guitar and be playing a piece there by yourself...A big black man will walk up there and take your guitar, and he'll tune it. And then he'll play a piece and hand it back to you. That's the way I learned to play anything I want. (Guralnick 1989, 18)

There is a rich tradition of motifs regarding choice of roads and crossroads in both folklore and literature; for additional motifs on roads (for example, C614, “Forbidden road. All roads may be taken except one”), see the Motif-Index.

See also: Individuation.

REFERENCES

Mathers, S. Liddell MacGregor. 1889. The Key of Solomon the King (Clavicula Salomonis). London: George Redway.
Found in mythology, legend, folktales, and literature, the wise old man or woman is a protective figure who comes to the aid of the hero in his or her journey or quest. "For those who have not refused the call," writes Joseph Campbell, "the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (Campbell 1973, 69). The motifs are N825.3, "Old person as helper"; N825.2, "Old man helper" (a motif in Types 307, 329, 480, 512); N825.3, "Old woman helper" (a motif in Types 400, 480, 707); H1233.1, "Old person as helper on quest"; H1233.1.1, "Old woman helps on quest" (motif in Types 400, 425); and H1233.1.2, "Old man helps on quest."

Sometimes a wizard, hermit, teacher, shepherd, seer, priest, or crone, the wise old man or woman bestows wisdom, useful knowledge, or a charm that is beneficial to the hero (Leeming 1997, 493). In "The Phenomenology of Spirit in Fairytales," Jung defines the wise old man as a spiritual archetype in "the guise of a magician, doctor, priest, teacher, professor, grandfather, or any other person possessing authority" who always appears when "insight, understanding, good advice, determination, planning, etc., are needed but cannot be mustered on one's own resources" (Jung 1990, 216). Jung illustrates the concept with an Estonian fairy tale ("How an Orphan Boy Unexpectedly Found His Luck") in which an abused orphan who has let the cow escape meets a little old man with a long gray beard who advises him not to return home to further punishment and provides him with a burdock leaf that magically changes into a boat when he needs to cross water. Thus the old man, representing wisdom and insight, points the way for the youth.

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Campbell gives an example of the wise old woman in the East African legend of Kyazumba, in which a desperately poor man is searching for the land where the sun rises. On his journey, he encounters a decrepit little woman who, on learning the nature of his quest, wraps her garment around him and magically soars, transporting him above the earth to the zenith of the sun. There she intercedes for Kyazumba with a brilliant chieftain who sits feasting with his retainers. After receiving a blessing from the chieftain, Kyazumba is sent home and thereafter lives in prosperity.

The protective figure in American Indian mythology of the Southwest is Spider Woman, an underground, grandmotherly personage friendly to humans (Jobes 1961, 1483). In the story of the twin Navajo war gods who journey to the house of their father the Sun, Spider Woman temporarily appears from a subterranean chamber with beneficial advice that enables the young heroes to meet their father's tests and thus be acknowledged as his children. She also provides magic weapons to protect them against enemy gods (Bierhorst 2002, 98). In
many other North American Indian test and hero tales, an unnamed woman, usually referred to as “grandmother,” advises the hero “how to kill monsters, escape from dangerous situations, what path to take, how to overcome obstacles on his way, etc.” (Leach and Fried 1949, 819). Glooscap, the culture hero of the Northeast Woodland tribes, appears to the Indians with a woman “whom he ever addressed as Grandmother—a very general epithet for an old woman. She was not his wife, nor did he ever have a wife” (Thompson 1929, 5). This figure is an example of Motif A31, “Creator’s (or culture hero’s) grandmother,” which is primarily an Algonquian motif but occurs sporadically in the American West (Thompson 1929, 275).

In mythology, the wise old man or woman is usually a god or goddess. In Homer’s Odyssey, the young Telemachus is guided in the search for his long-absent father Odysseus by Mentor (actually Athena, the goddess of wisdom, disguised as the wise old teacher) and by the master charioteer King Nestor, who “in his wisdom . . . tell[s] . . . history and no lies” (1992, 2.23-24). In the Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata, the god Krishna assumes the guise of an old man to guide the hero, Arjuna.

The wise old man motif also exists independently of the quest. An ancient Assyrian story about King Asarhaddon’s wise counselor Achikar, found in a papyrus text of about 420 BCE, illustrates Motif H561.5, “Wisdom of hidden old man saves kingdom.” This motif appears in folktales (Type 981 of the same title) around the world, including much of Europe, in Turkey, India, and China (Aarne and Thompson 1961, 345). In these tales, the wise old man does not function as a guide to a younger man on a quest, although he does provide needed guidance. The story, in brief, is that all old men are ordered killed, but one young man hides his father. When everything goes wrong in the hands of the young rulers, the old man comes forward, performs assigned tasks, and rescues the kingdom through his wisdom. In a Japanese variant, a son hides his mother after the ruler decrees that all old people must be killed. Meanwhile, the ruler is overthrown by an enemy who will spare his life only if three seemingly impossible tasks are performed: making a coil of rope out of ashes (H1021.1, “Task: making a rope of sand”), running a single thread through the length of a crooked log (H506.4, “Test of resourcefulness: putting thread through coils of snail shell”), and making a drum sound without beating it. The hidden old mother cleverly provides the answers to these riddles, thereby saving the life of the ruler, who then rescinds the edict against the aged (MacDonald and Sturm 2001, 225).

In Biblical legend, as Stith Thompson notes, King Solomon’s wisdom is illustrated by many stories of kingly wisdom accreting to the Solomon cycle (Thompson 1979, 266).

Medieval literature and legend provide other examples of the wisdom figure. In Arthurian legend, the wise enchanter or wizard Merlin uses magic and his knowledge of the past and future to help young Arthur defeat his enemies and establish the Round Table (Elkhadem 1981, 138). Perhaps Merlin was the model for the wizard Gandalf, who guides the hobbit Frodo on his perilous quest to deliver the magic ring to its source in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings (1954–1955).

Apart from wisdom, the old man or woman often embodies a moral dimension as well: he or she will test a character and then reward or punish that character. Kindness and charity are rewarded while churlishness and selfishness are punished. There are many tales of this type (AT 480, The Spinning Women by the Spring, The Kind and the Unkind Girls); one of the most well known is the Grimms’ tale “Mother Holle” (KHM 24), and Thompson notes that variants are found “over nearly the whole world.” (Thompson 1979, 126) Psychologically, the figure of the wise old man or woman in these tales represents the spiritual function of the personality welling up from the unconscious.

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See also: The Kind and Unkind.

REFERENCES