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Creon and the Pressures of Being King

by Theresa Snitchler

(English 1159)

In Sophocles' two plays, *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*, we meet a man named Creon. In both plays we witness his tenacity for law and how everyone, kin or stranger, is equal in the eyes of the law. Though he holds fast to his views on law, his character wavers once he comes into power in *Antigone*. He was once very religious and a calm, reasonable man. Then, as the new king of Thebes, disregards the laws of the gods and becomes temperamental and irrational. Why does he act this way? He once had an equal share of power with Oedipus and was sensible. Once he gained power by himself, he became unreasonable. What was Sophocles trying to tell us through Creon? It is through his character that we can see how the decisions of one ruler can lead to great tragedy for the state.

In *Oedipus the King*, the audience meets Creon, brother-in-law to Oedipus. He is very passionate for the law and feels that no one, not even family, is above the laws of state. He holds true to this even when Oedipus accuses him of conspiring with Tiresias, the prophet, to steal the crown for himself. Creon knows these accusations are great and confronts Oedipus to defend himself. If Oedipus still finds him guilty, Creon wants Oedipus to arrest and execute himself: "...[I]f you detect that I and the clairvoyant/ have plotted... arrest me, execute me" (lines 679-681). Creon is showing that, even though he knows himself to be innocent, his king thinks he is guilty and does not deserve any leniency for being family. He will be tried like any other man. Creon takes this belief into *Antigone*. Once he took power, Creon addresses the people of Thebes. He tells them that he will not tolerate favoritism over the safety of the country. No stranger, friend, or family will be above the laws.

Creon was firm when it came to the laws of man, but he wavered in other aspects. Creon is a religious man in *Oedipus the King*. He was sent to Delphi to ask Apollo on what action they should take to free Thebes of the plagues. When it was discovered that Oedipus was the reason behind the plagues, Creon wanted to consult with the gods on what course of action to take: "First I wanted the god to clarify my duties" (1574). Asking Apollo for help and for, again, asking what kind of action he needs to take against Oedipus, shows how much Creon really valued and respected the gods. The ancient Greeks were a very superstitious people. Any little thing you did, had done, were about to do, had to be brought up to the gods. One would ask the gods to bless a marriage or a death. If you had a meal and did not give thanks to Hestia, goddess of hearth and home, you may end up having your family cursed for ten generations. Any small action could trigger the wrath of the gods. Creon had respected them and thought it always best to ask.

Creon became fickle in his beliefs towards the gods, however, when he assumed power. Polynices, one of the sons of Oedipus, was a traitor to Thebes. Creon's first act as king was to make a law forbidding the burial of Polynices. His body was to lay out in the streets and rot in public. This can be seen as a sound punishment. What government would want to bury a man among their honored dead when said man had waged war on that country? Unfortunately this reasonable law conflicted with the sometimes (most times) unreasonable laws of the gods. Creon knew full well that his law went against the gods, yet he did not back down from it. Instead he challenges them: "You'll never bury that body in the grave, / not even if Zeus' eagles rip the corpse/ and wing their rotten pickings off to the throne of god!" (1151-1153). Creon is resolved in not backing down from the first law he creates as king. He blatantly disrespects the gods and challenges them to try and take the body

themselves. Creon's normally calm demeanor and reasoning has faltered since he has become king.

Creon had always appeared to be a reasonable guy. Even in times of great distress, he approaches the situation calmly and collectively. An example of this shows when Oedipus accuses Creon of treason. Oedipus concludes that Creon and Tiresias were in cahoots to steal the crown. Creon calmly explains to Oedipus that this is just not the case, and that he was simply trying to help him. Creon's defense goes on for about thirty-nine lines and is filled with sound reasoning as to why he does not desire the crown from Oedipus. Unfortunately, it all falls on deaf ears and Oedipus throws Creon from the palace. However, Creon returns when it is discovered that Oedipus is the reason for the plagues. Creon does not return to mock Oedipus but to merely perform the duties expected of him as the brother-in-law of the, now former, king. Creon shows that it is important to keep personal feeling in check when making decisions that will affect the country. Creon holds no grudges against Oedipus. His mind is clear to assess the situation, listen and take into consideration the last requests of Oedipus. Creon then remembers to consult with the gods on a final decision.

Creon, as king, develops a completely different personality than from before he was king. He becomes an irate and irrational dictator. When it is discovered that someone had buried Polynices, Creon becomes paranoid and starts suspecting everyone of treachery, instead of gathering facts to find out the truth. He had just finished addressing his people, praising them for their "unshakable loyalty" (187) to the crown. Now, mere hours later, he sees them disloyal and corrupt: "These are the instigators, I'm convinced-/ they've perverted my own guard, bribed them/ to do their work" (333-335). Not just the citizens, but Creon suspects his own personal guard of taking bribes to bury the body. The priests had tried looking at it logically. Perhaps the gods had buried the body since Creon's law would have offended them? Creon instantly turns on the priests, calls them senile and insane, and says it is not even fathomable for the gods to care for a traitor. After Antigone is caught as the one burying Polynices, Creon's behavior becomes childish when his son, Haemon, tries to tell him the people of Thebes feel sorry for Antigone and want Creon to be lenient with her, that she is just a sister who wanted to bury her brother. Creon responded, "And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?" (821). Creon's irrationality and inflexibility cause him to become deaf to the advice of others. He is so concerned with his image as king that he fails to listen to the concerns of his people.

Creon had once believed that to be the one holding the crown would bring too much trouble that's why he never wanted it from Oedipus. He greatly enjoyed having equal power to the king without having to directly shoulder the responsibilities of a king. This is why he appears much more collected in *Oedipus the King*. He and Oedipus were equal partners in running the state, offering council to the other. The people's concerns were heard and taken into account. Creon could more clearly see what needed to be done because he felt no pressure to maintain the image of a just and fair ruler.

In *Antigone*, however, Creon obviously cracks under pressure. Thebes just came out of a war and is in need of a strong, unwavering leader. Creon does his best to fill these shoes. The first law he makes is a sound one: punish the one who betrayed the state, his body is never to be buried. Unfortunately, it was the wrong law to make for it conflicted with the gods' laws. In trying to be the steadfast leader Thebes required, he refuses to be lenient with Antigone. He told the entire city that he will not hold anyone above the law. Even as more and more people try to change his mind, for fear of the gods, Creon does not relent. His virtue is now a failure, for his stubbornness comes from his concern with how his character is perceived by the public. To give into the actions of a woman would show him to be a weak leader. The people want Antigone to be freed, for her punishment will bring plagues upon the city. But Creon's concerns are for himself and not directly for his people.

Sophocles was a believer in the power of the people, a democracy. It's through Creon that he shows what tragedies can fall on a city when all the power and decisions are on one person. There were two minds running the city in *Oedipus the King*, and the people were heard then. The citizens would voice their concerns to Creon who would then relate it to Oedipus. Creon is found recalling

this to Oedipus: "...all salute me, / now all who request your favors, curry mine" (668-669). In *Antigone*, Sophocles shows what happens when there is no balance in power. One man can disregard the voice of many. Creon did not listen to the citizen's concerns for Antigone. His only concern was for how he would look as a ruler if he went back on his law. Creon became a tyrant because he ruled for himself and disregarded the voice of the people. If power was given to the citizens, in a democracy, decisions can be made together to better benefit the city.

Creon was passionate for the law right up to the end. He held no one above it. He was so firm in this that it caused a contradiction to his religious beliefs. He went from being a calm, reasonable man to being temperamental and irrational. Having all the power of state placed on himself, and not divided amongst anyone else, caused Creon to feel the pressures of needing to be a perfect ruler that then turned him into a dictator. Sophocles used Creon as a way to show the value of giving the power of the state to its people. The decisions of one ruler, that cannot be challenged, can doom an entire people. The voice of the people is what truly can keep a city strong.

Works Cited

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