Creon’s Role Of King And His Responsibilities Essay, Research Paper

Creon’s Role Of King and His Responsibilities

The role of the king in the time of Greek tragedies was simultaneously

desired and dreaded because of the king’s responsibility to the people and

because of the effects of the position on the king’s character. Creon reveals

such ambivalent thoughts towards the kingship in his speech defending himself

from Oedipus’s conspiracy accusation in Oedipus the King; these ambivalent

thoughts reveal much about the nature of the kingship, especially in conjunction

with Creon’s later actions in Antigone.

In attempting to refute Oedipus’s assertion that Creon has taken part in

a conspiracy to obtain the kingship, Creon evaluates the nature of the kingship

and of his present role. First, he says, “Consider, first, if you think any

one/ would choose to rule and fear rather than rule and sleep” (36.584-585). By

this, Creon means that the main difference between his position and the king’s

is that of the accompanying action to ruling. In both positions, one is a ruler

who holds great power over the state. However, the king is placed in a greater

place of accountability to the people. This accountability is what Creon says

inspires “fear” in the king, for if affairs of state or of the people fall into

decline, the king is the first person whom the citizenry look to blame. This is

analogous to executive leaders throughout history, as one can see in looking at

American presidents and the correlation between the present conditions and

events of the nation to the public’s opinion of the president, regardless of the

actual impact that his decisions may have made in these conditions. Creon

maintains that he has the same amount of power as the king but without the

accountability that inevitably leads a king to distress.

Creon’s reasoning concerning the equality between his power and

Oedipus’s leads him to state:

I was not born with such a frantic yearning

to be a king- but to do what kings do.

And so it is with every one who has learned

wisdom and self-control.

(36.587-590)

He means that he has never desired the position of king, because he sees no

advantage over his present position in the state. Rather, he sees the

disadvantage of the fear that accompanies the position of king. Creon has

evaluated this situation for his circumstances and then goes further in stating

that anyone with wisdom and self-control would come to such a conclusion as well.

This could be interpreted as an insult to Oedipus in two different ways. Creon

could mean that Oedipus and anyone else who desires and assumes the kingship are

by nature not people of wisdom and self-control- or he could be saying that the

position of the kingship is one that strips an individual of his wisdom and

self-control.

In support of the assertion that the kingship changes one’s character,

one could point to the events of Antigone and Creon’s striking change in

character in the play. In Oedipus the King, Creon reveals himself to be a

reasonable ruler, who makes rational decisions and is not quick to anger, as is

revealed by his calmness in his responses to Oedipus’s heated accusations.

However, in Antigone, Creon has become prideful and irrational. His dealings

with Antigone and Teiresias and his stubbornness in the play indicate a change

in his character. In fact, his actions, especially in his dealings with

Teiresias the prophet, are very similar to Oedipus’s actions in Oedipus the King.

Just as Oedipus had done before him, Creon refuses to completely believe

Teiresias’s prophecies for the state. Creon also emulates his predecessor’s

actions in his accusation of bribery directed towards Teiresias: “Out with it-/

but only if your words are not for gain” (201. 1128-1129). Creon’s words and

actions in Antigone indicate that he has taken on the negative characteristics

of king that he describes in his speech in Oedipus the King. He has same amount

of power as king, but he now seems to have lost his wisdom and self-control.

This indicates that perhaps his words to Oedipus are, in fact, mainly an insult

to the position of king and to what it evokes from a person’s character rather

than an insult solely directed towards Oedipus.

Creon also feels that the king is generally not responsive to the

desires of the citizenry: “But if I were the king myself, I must/ do much that

went against the grain” (36.590-591). By this, Creon means that in his present

position, he is more apt than the king to know the will of the people and to

respond accordingly. Again, this seems to be a flaw inherent in the kingship

based on Creon’s actions in Antigone. As king Creon is blind to the fact that

the people of Thebes are opposed to his actions concerning the punishment of

Antigone. One who is not king, Creon’s son Haemon, senses the will of the

people:

But what I can hear, in the dark,are things like these:

the city mourns for this girl; they think she is dying

most wrongly and most undeservedly

of all womenkind, for the most glorious acts.

(188.746-749)

Haemon has sensed that the people feel Creon’s actions are unjust, which is

something that Creon is not aware of. However, in his speech, Creon is also

asserting that a king, even when aware of the will of the people, does not

respond accordingly. He demonstrates this in Antigone when he says, “Should the

city tell me how to rule them?” (189.794). Once again, Creon’s words in Oedipus

the King and actions in Antigone correspond and indicate that his speech reveals

characteristics that are inherent in the kingship and not just in Oedipus’s rule.

Creon finds these characteristics of a king to be despicable and prefers

his own present position. “How should despotic rule seem sweeter to me/ than

painless power and an assured authority?” (36.592-593). He is saying that his

present power is less painful and even more effectual than that of a king. It

is less painful in that he is not held directly accountable for the conditions

of the state. It is more effectual both in that he has a better sense of the

will of the people and in that he is less likely to allow selfish interest and

pride to interfere with his execution of the will of the people.

Creon’s speech serves two purposes, both effectively. First, it is a

convincing argument to prove that he is not involved a conspiracy to overthrow

Oedipus, although Oedipus’s pride does not allow him to be convinced by this

argument. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Creon’s speech gives insight

into the two-sided nature of the kingship, for although it is a position of

great honor and power, it is also a position that often corrupts the man who

holds it. Creon believes that there is a certain type of man who desires such a

position, a man who has not learned wisdom and self-control. He believes that

he is a man who has learned these attributes; thus, he would not be susceptible

to desire for the kingship and the corruption which would inevitably follow.

However, his actions in Antigone show that there are very few men who will

reject the kingship if presented with the opportunity and even fewer men who

will not allow the kingship to corrupt them.