

OEDIPUS THE WORTHY – BUT UNLUCKY – KING

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Oedipus, the protagonist of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, exemplifies the qualities a good king should have. He cultivates civilization and order by working untiringly to bring peace and justice to the kingdom; he loves his people and wants the best for them, and they love him in return. Most of all, he understands his responsibility as a king and protector of the people, and he does not let lust for power distract him from performing his duty. Oedipus is a good king because he combines his sense of his responsibility with his genuine love for the people and his efforts to further justice and civilization.

From the very beginning of the play, Oedipus shows his love for his people by the way he addresses them. His first line begins, "Oh my children" (p 599), which immediately sets the stage for the way he will treat them in the rest of the story. He addresses them as his children because according to the traditional understanding of a king's role in society, his function is to protect them and care for them as a father would. When they are unhappy, so is he; for instance, when they call on him for help he tells them that he has "...wept through the nights" (p 601) for them. Their pain is his pain and this is appropriate because he is the one who is to still their griefs. He has to feel their sorrow to be able to do anything to remove it. The people recognize that he is working for their good and they love him for it. When the Chorus (Sophocles' representation of the people) is speaking of how Oedipus came to be king, they say he "lifted up our lives" (p 601). This further shows Oedipus' worthiness to be king, because the people's praise validates his efforts on their behalf. Oedipus loves his people, and they love him in return because he works for their good and brings justice to Thebes.

Oedipus also shows his worthiness to be king by his concern with justice. When he is

speaking to Tiresias he says “For a man to help others with all his gifts and native strength: that is the noblest work” (p 610). Oedipus knows that man cannot survive by serving only his own ends. Civilization depends on community, and if the king is not working to keep the community intact by making sure that justice is being meted out appropriately, he is not a good king.

Oedipus does not shrink from doing justice, even when he believes that it means stabbing his own eyes out and suffering torment for the rest of his life. He tells Creon “[Apollo’s] command was clear... death for the father-killer” (p 637); the god demands that the killer of Laius die, and Oedipus does not try to shirk his command. He has upheld justice all his life, and now that it demands his happiness, he surrenders it.

Oedipus knows his responsibility as king and works not to sacrifice his duty to lust for power. He understands his role as king to be one of protecting the city and the people, and this is what makes him a good king. “I am the land’s avenger” (p 603), he tells Creon, and he takes that duty very seriously. This sense of obligation is what causes him to set out looking for the murderer of Laius, and what makes him enact justice in the end, even though he turns out to be the killer. Oedipus tells Tiresias that “the crown the city gave me - I never sought it” (p 610). By making this statement, he is saying that he did not become king because he sought power - he became king because the city needed a protector. However, he can at times be possessive about the kingdom, as when he suspects Creon of plotting against him to take the city. During the course of the argument he calls out to “Thebes, my city!” (p 616) and Creon points out that it is not his city alone. Oedipus’ responsibility occasionally leads him to be overly suspicious of anyone who might be threatening his position, but overall he fulfills his responsibilities without letting a lust for power distract him.

Oedipus does his duties as a king as well as is humanly possible. He loves his people and his city, and they recognize this and love him in return. He upholds justice to the point of inflicting blindness on himself when he deserves to be punished, and he rarely becomes distracted by lust for power. Oedipus is a worthy king and an appropriate guardian for Thebes.

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