

## The Punishment of the King

At the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus, king of Thebes, ends up banished forever from his kingdom. Additionally, Oedipus physically puts out his own eyes, for several reasons which will be discussed later. The question is: Did Oedipus deserve his punishments? There are many factors that must be considered in answering this, including how Oedipus himself felt about his situation. His blinding was as much symbolic as it was physical pain. After all factors have been considered, I think that only Oedipus' banishment was the necessary punishment..

It is important to keep in mind the whole basic reasoning for Oedipus' search for Laius' killers: he wished to put an end to a deadly plague, and that plague would only be stopped when said murderer is killed, or driven from the land (pp 4-5). Thusly, when it is revealed that Oedipus himself murdered Laius, then banishment seems to be the only option. Death, in my mind, is not valid simply because of what it might do to the kingdom's people. Even though it seems that Oedipus has not been a particularly good monarch, in fact his only major accomplishment seems to be killing the Sphinx all those years ago, having a king put to death could have serious repercussions on the rest of the kingdom. So in the end, the only way to cure the plague and keep the kingdom stable seems to be the banishment of Oedipus. In this case, the question of whether or not he deserved to be punished seems irrelevant; Oedipus' only goal was to stop the plague and by leaving, he has accomplished that goal. Banishment was the only choice.

But what exactly was Oedipus being punished for? Even after re-reading the play, this still seems to be a gray area. Incest? Immoral, to be sure, but Oedipus was obviously ignorant to his actions, and to my knowledge, in Sophoclean times, there was no written law against it and therefore no punishment for it. Oedipus' punishment may have been for killing Laius, but how could you punish someone for being a victim of fate? Greeks believed at the time of the play's writing that a man's life was "woven" by the 3 fates (Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos) and that he was irrevocably bound to that destiny. Knowing this, and knowing that Oedipus became king of Thebes only because it was his destiny to murder Laius and kill the Sphinx, how could he rightfully be punished? Even Oedipus himself knows that his actions are not by choice, but by acts of the gods, he mentions this twice in the play: "Some savage power has brought this down upon my head." As well as "My god, my god -- what have you planned to do to me?" Such quotes clearly show that Oedipus knew that he had no choice in his actions. In this manner and in this manner alone, Oedipus is undeserving of said punishment. Oedipus may not have been a particularly good man, but in the end he knew what was best for his kingdom: "Out of this kingdom cast me with all speed" ...for only that would save his former subjects.

Were that Oedipus' only punishment, the play might have been quite a bit simpler (and this essay quite a bit shorter), but Oedipus, in a fit of rage, stabs his own eyes with Jocasta's dresspins. This was Oedipus' way of trying to punish himself, as well as an escape. Oedipus would no longer gaze upon the faces of his subjects, his brother (uncle?) Creon, or even those of his children. He is plunged into a world of darkness. It must be noted that this was more than simply a punishment, though I'm sure that it was one of the ways Oedipus intended it. The physical pain alone seems to prove that. There are much easier ways of becoming blind to the world than stabbing one's eyes out. As I have stated before though, Oedipus was blinded by his foolish pride long before the beginning of the novel. He only realized the truth behind Laius' murder when it was right in front of his nose. He was by no means stupid, in fact he came off as quite a clever man, but his was a world of blindness because of pride and power.

I have been concentrating on the two most obvious of Oedipus' punishments, but there is another one that may not seem so clear. Keeping in mind that Sophocles

made it very clear that Oedipus was a man of so much pride that he may have thought himself to be akin to a god, was not Oedipus basically stripped of that pride at the end of the play? The true punishment has been revealed.

Oedipus' life was based on pride. It was what led to the murder of Laius, which in turn led to the killing of the Sphinx, which led to his becoming king. As he continues on his particular thread of life, Oedipus becomes more and more powerful, and as such, his pride also increases proportionately. He threatens both Tiresias and Creon, and single-handedly tries to unravel the mystery of Laius' death. What must go on inside his mind when he finds out that not only did he murder his father, the king, but he also slept with his mother? Knowing full well that his kingdom would eventually find out his acts, how could he hold his head up when walking through the city streets? How could his subjects respect and revere a king who was a murderer and commiter of incest? Oedipus is thusly stripped of his pride, the driving force behind his whole personality. He has been crushed, and that which he had so much of before has been denied him. Where he was once at one extreme (hubris), he is now at the other. To take away the very thing that drives a man is worse than any physical pain or even death itself. That is truly, as Sophocles intended it, Oedipus' ultimate punishment.

When the curtain falls and the lights go out on Oedipus Rex, the king's punishments total three. Though in my mind at least, one far outweighs the other two, they are all important and they all contribute to the total experience of the Greek tragedy. In the end, I do not feel that Oedipus truly deserves the punishments he is handed, but that is only because of the fact that I place myself in the time period that this was written in, using the beliefs of that time for my own. Were this story to have taken place in modern times, Oedipus certainly would have deserved his punishment, but this idea is irrelevant because, quite simply, this did not take place in our "advanced" civilization. Oedipus was a victim of fate, incapable of free will, and as such he should have not been punished, save banishment only to cure the plague.