

The Prudent Dissident: Unheroic Resistance in Sophocles' *Antigone*

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Abstract: Most contemporary political theorists who have interpreted Sophocles' *Antigone* have focused on the fearsome clash between Antigone and Creon. The relationship between Antigone and her weaker, more cautious sister Ismene has not garnered similar attention. This essay addresses this gap by revisiting the tantalizing possibility that Ismene played a more significant role in resisting Creon than has often been assumed. The essay shifts the analysis of *Antigone*, first, by illuminating the complex and fraught relationship between two women and emphasizing the political and legal challenges that they face together as women. Second, the essay shifts focus from vertical power relations—that is, between the individual and government—to horizontal power relations between disempowered outsiders. On this reading, *Antigone* reveals less about the downfall of a character than it does about the political power of the weak and disadvantaged.

Introduction

Sophocles' *Antigone* and its boldly defiant heroine have not wanted for attention. Calling the play one of the most sublime works of art known to man, Hegel was unstinting in his admiration for "the heavenly Antigone, that noblest of figures that ever appeared on earth."¹ To Virginia Woolf, *Antigone* was an exemplar of "heroism itself . . . fidelity itself."² "You are right about Antigone," Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote to John Gisborn in 1821, "how sublime a picture of a woman. . . . Some of us have in a prior existence been in love with an Antigone, and that makes us find no full content in any

I am grateful to Lars Rensmann, Arlene Saxonhouse, Mariah Zeisberg, and Froma Zeitlin for their comments. Arlene Saxonhouse also helped translate several key passages of the play.

¹G. W. F. Hegel, *The History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (New York: Humanities Press, 1892), 1:441.

²Virginia Woolf, "On Not Knowing Greek," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, (London: Hogarth, 1994), 4:42.

mortal tie.”³ Echoing this admiration, some commentators have drawn comparisons between Antigone and Jeanne-Marie Roland, Germaine de Staël, Charlotte Corday, and Mary Wollstonecraft.

But what of Antigone’s weaker, more cautious kin, Ismene, who proclaims the senselessness of openly disobeying Creon’s decree? For the most part, Ismene has garnered comparatively little attention and scant professions of admiration. Often staged as the pale, hollow counterpart to the dark and intense figure of Antigone, Ismene has been eclipsed, even forgotten. Kierkegaard’s reading omits Ismene altogether; she is absent in Euripides, Seneca, and Racine.⁴ Even when attention has been paid to her, Ismene typically comes up short in comparison to her intrepid and valiant sister. For instance, in *Antigone and Creon*, Ivan M. Linforth describes Ismene as “a pitiable figure” that “cannot be called heroic.”⁵

Concentrating on Ismene affirms the long-standing depiction of her as a guarded young woman who, in sharp contrast to Antigone, sees herself—and the women of Thebes—as disempowered and assailable. Attentive to political vulnerability, Ismene refuses Antigone’s request to publicly violate Creon’s decree forbidding the mourning or burial of her brother Polyneices, on pain of death. To use the word most commonly associated with her, Ismene is weak. Orthodox interpretations tend to equate Ismene’s weakness with compliance, passivity, and inaction. But does Ismene’s sense of vulnerability or her refusal to assist Antigone in *overtly* defying Creon necessarily imply inaction or powerlessness? Or, to put the question more generally, is political disempowerment always allied with obeisance or quietude? The action of the *Antigone* itself seems to complicate this equation because Ismene does not passively disappear after refusing Antigone’s request. Rather, she publicly stands with Antigone, hoping to receive punishment by her side.

The bond between weakness and inertia is further loosened if we reconsider the idea that Ismene was responsible for the first burial of Polyneices.

³Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, ed. Mrs. Shelley (London: Moxon, 1840), 2:335.

⁴George Steiner, *Antigones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 144. Also see Simon Goldhill, “Antigone and the Politics of Sisterhood,” in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, ed. Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 141–163.

⁵Ivan M. Linforth, *Antigone and Creon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 211. Linforth notes that spectators of the play may “feel more resentment toward Ismene than Antigone herself expresses. Their sympathy for Ismene’s devotion and sense of loss could not outweigh their settled admiration and sympathy for Antigone” (ibid.). Also see Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Antigone’s Daughters Reconsidered: Continuing Reflections on Women, Politics, and Power,” in *Life-World and Politics: Between Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Stephen K. White (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 222–235.

This idea is not new; two classicists, Rouse and Harry, first raised it about a hundred years ago.⁶ Though this interpretation is not uncontroversial, it is worth revisiting.⁷ For, first, both Rouse and Harry composed brief sketches that were aimed at identifying a novel line of research; there is much they leave unexplored. And second, Rouse and Harry were unable to explain why Sophocles would construct Ismene as a duplicitous character. Looking at the play from a literary standpoint, motivation is a vexing question.

Motivation becomes less baffling, however, if we adopt a political perspective on the play that is attuned to power dynamics and sensitive to the asymmetries of information that are fundamental to politics. Seen in this light, Ismene's possible resistance complements the political complexities of the play. Ismene is an archetype of undaring defiance that is timorously attuned to power, sensitive to the vicissitudes of context, watchful for the tiniest fortuitous opportunity, and capable of cunning (so long as the risks are calculably small). This characterization does not require a prodigious suspension of disbelief. As James Scott illustrates in *Weapons of the Weak*, the unheroic weak—those who are aware of their vincibility and act within its constraints—have strong incentives to act furtively, to dissemble, to pretend to be compliant, and above all, to avoid direct or symbolic confrontation with those in authority.⁸ It may be that Ismene chooses this approach. Or it

⁶J. E. Harry, *Studies in Sophocles*, University of Cincinnati Studies 2, vol. 7, no. 3 (Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati, 1911), 20–25; W. H. D. Rouse, "The Two Burials in *Antigone*," *Classical Review* 25, no. 2 (1911): 40–42. For a more recent examination of Ismene's role in the first burial, see Bonnie Honig, "Ismene's Forced Choice: Sacrifice and Sorority in Sophocles' *Antigone*," *Arethusa* 44, no. 1 (2011): 29–68. My argument differs from Honig's in that it focuses on the sisters as distinct exemplars of resistance, while Honig examines their solidarity, arguing that the sisters represent the Lacanian concept of the ethical as a "forced choice."

⁷A. T. von S. Bradshaw, "The Watchman Scenes in the *Antigone*," *Classical Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1962): 200–11; Judith P. Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); George F. Held, "Antigone's Dual Motivation for the Double Burial," *Hermes* 111, no. 2 (1983): 190–201; R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments*, vol. 3, *The Antigone* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1897); H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London: Methuen, 1956); Hugh Macnaghten, *The Antigone of Sophocles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1926); Joseph S. Margon, "The First Burial of Polyneices," *Classical Journal* 64, no. 7 (1969): 289–295, and "The Second Burial of Polyneices," *Classical Journal* 68, no. 1 (1972): 39–49; K. A. Rockwell, "Antigone: The 'Double Burial' Again," *Mnemosyne* 17, no. 2 (1964): 156–57; J. L. Rose, "The Problem of the Second Burial in Sophocles' *Antigone*," *Classical Journal* 47, no. 6 (1952): 219–51; Richard M. Rothaus, "The Single Burial of Polyneices," *Classical Journal* 85, no. 3 (1990): 209–17; J. E. G. Whitehorne, "The Background to Polyneices' Disinterment and Reburial," *Greece & Rome* 30, no. 2 (1983): 129–42.

⁸James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

may be that she bides her time, patiently waiting for an opportunity that does not arise over the course of the play. Either way, Ismene as an exemplar of resistance by the unheroic weak needs further exploration.

Focusing on Ismene as an agent of an unmanly resistance shifts the analysis of *Antigone*, first, by placing emphasis on the political relationship between women. Rather than concentrating on the relationship between Creon and Antigone, Ismene's story directs our attention to the sisters' relationship with each other, to their interactions, and to the power dynamics that exist between them. With Ismene and Antigone, Sophocles imagines women as subjects not objects, which is one reason that feminist political theorists have been repeatedly drawn to the play.⁹ Moreover, Sophocles illuminates a complex and fraught relationship between women. He writes female-to-female dialogue, and he emphasizes the challenges that women face as women. Within the Western canon of political theory, the *Antigone* is exceptional in this regard.

Second, the play offers insight into weakness, into life lived in the shadow of the political will of others. The weak have been somewhat overlooked in political science in part because of the tendency to equate political power with strength and force. As Robert Dahl would have it, power is a coercive influence and, as such, it "is analogous to the concept of force in mechanics. In mechanics object A exerts a force on object B if A produces a change in the velocity of B."¹⁰ If political power is the capacity to force the change one desires, then the weak have little to tell us about politics. At best, they are the pawns of the powerful—that is, individuals whose lives trace the persuasion, coercion, or brute force of those who possess power. At worst, they are

⁹Butler, *Antigone's Claim*; Mary G. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," *Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (1985): 19–37; Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters," *Democracy: A Journal of Political Renewal and Radical Change* 2 (1982): 46–59; Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters Reconsidered"; J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Catherine A. Holland, "After Antigone: Women, the Past, and the Future of Feminist Political Thought," *American Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 4 (1998): 1108–32; Bonnie Honig, "Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception," *Political Theory* 37, no. 1 (2009): 5–43; Honig, "Ismene's Forced Choice"; Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Machiavelli's Sisters: Women and 'the Conversation' of Political Theory," *Political Theory* 19, no. 2 (1991): 252–76.

¹⁰Robert Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 41. See 50–51 for Dahl's discussion of power as "the domain of coercive influence" that alters the behavior of agents by severe penalty or deprivation.

insignificant. When the powerful direct their attention to others who, like them, possess power, who cares about the weak? Equating power with strength and force also narrows the study of politics to an analysis of the success or failure of the powerful to effect change. Context, history, process, deliberations, interactions, and relationships become secondary concerns.

A problem with equating power with strength and force is that it whittles politics down too far. As Hannah Arendt observed, it “is only after one ceases to reduce public affairs to the business of dominion that the original data in the realm of human affairs will appear, or, rather, reappear, in their authentic diversity.”¹¹ Scott makes a related point, urging political scientists to look beyond the extraordinary, heroic, and violent gestures of a Nat Turner or a John Brown that seem foreordained to fail. The weak, he points out, are typically not eager to die. Thus, they protect themselves with “onstage” behavior in public and power-laden contexts that is deferential and compliant, while their “offstage” behavior is markedly less so.¹² This form of resistance represents the safeguard of silence, the appeal of anonymity, and the possibility of “‘working the system’ to ... minimum disadvantage.”¹³

With the goal of becoming more attuned to Arendt’s “authentic diversity,” the first section of this essay explores the perplexing character of Polynices’ first burial and examines the possibility that Ismene is responsible for this act of “offstage” subversion. The puzzling facts of the first burial do not, of course, prove either that Ismene is responsible for this crime or that Antigone is not (nor, for that matter, do they disprove that another party altogether is to blame). It would be an error to conclude that Antigone is blameless because there is little evidence that she is to blame, just as it would be wrong to conclude that Ismene is to blame because there is little proof that she is not. To borrow from the language of police procedurals, there is no smoking gun. Setting the aim lower than proof and higher than unfounded suspicion, there is still quite a bit left to work with, including motive, opportunity, and admission of responsibility. The second section explores Ismene’s and Antigone’s characters as representing two archetypes of political action: heroic and unheroic resisters. Each possesses a distinct approach to context, means, inwardness, and equality, as well as a different understanding of the status of those formally excluded from politics.

The third section builds on this analysis by considering what this reading of Sophocles’ *Antigone* reveals about the politically dispossessed and the

¹¹Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 142–43. Also see Terence Ball, “New Faces of Power,” in *Rethinking Power*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 14–31; Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Beyond the Three Faces of Power: A Realist Critique,” in *Rethinking Power*, 32–55.

¹²Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 25, 41.

¹³Eric Hobsbawm, “Peasants and Politics,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (1965): 13.

subaltern more generally. *Antigone* extends and complicates current understandings by exposing the fact that weakness is plural. To put this in Sophoclean terms, resistance to the ascendancy of *nomos* (law, convention) can stand on the side of *phusis* (nature), as Antigone does, or it can stand between *nomos* and *phusis*, as Ismene does. This multiplicity of dissent does not alter the tragic outcome of the play, but it does reveal a latent possibility under the rubble of despair. Each sister's attempt to act in concert with the other leads to an unintended result: pronounced estrangement. The heroic approach leads to suicide, a radical and violent form of exile by a young woman who is a law unto herself, while the unheroic approach results in a desolate life filled with uncertainty and fear. Yet the final situation of each sister differs from the other's in one crucial respect: Ismene has life and all of the possibilities that it presents. Unlike Antigone, she holds the potentiality for a new beginning and represents the possibility of a novel form of *nomos* that is more responsive to the demands of *phusis*. She carries the hope of favorable circumstances in the future.

The Possibility of Unmanly Resistance: Ismene's Cunning

The *Antigone* begins with the unburied corpse of Polyneices.¹⁴ After the death of his father Oedipus, Polyneices fights his brother Eteocles for dominion over Thebes and their mutual death leaves their uncle Creon to be king and to decide on their burials. Creon decrees Eteocles a friend and defender of Thebes, while he deems Polyneices a traitor who must be left as carrion for the dogs and birds in the hills outside of Thebes. Burying Polyneices is a crime punishable by death.

By the close of *Antigone*, Polyneices has been buried, three times in all. The first burial is done hastily and covertly and is unobserved. The second burial has a different flavor altogether: Antigone acts in broad daylight, she is observed and arrested by Creon's sentries, and she makes a more thorough job of it, covering the body with dust and pouring a triple stream of libations. With this second, open burial, the tragic plot unfolds. Antigone is sentenced to a slow death by starvation in a nearby cavern. Ismene attempts to join her sister in death by admitting that she too is responsible, but Antigone rebuffs her. After a bruising dispute with the prophet Teiresias, a fearful Creon decides that he has made an error of judgment and reverses course, ordering his men to bury (for what is the third time) and entomb Polyneices and to free Antigone. Creon and his men are too late to save Antigone, who hanged herself, and they are unable to stop Creon's son, Haemon, from killing

¹⁴Unless otherwise noted, I use Elizabeth Wyckoff's translation of the *Antigone* in *Sophocles I*, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

himself at Antigone's side. The last to fall is Creon's wife, Eurydice, who commits suicide after hearing of her son's death.

To reconsider the idea that Ismene was responsible for the first burial, it makes sense to begin, as the play does, with the conversation between the two sisters about the necessity of administering burial rites. Adamant that Polyneices must be buried and stressing the absolutist nature of Ismene's familial obligation, Antigone attempts to convince her sister to join her. Antigone orients herself in relation to the family, especially her dead family, and the question of whether to bury Polyneices is not truly a question for her. It must be done. Thus, the main problem Antigone confronts is not whether but *how*. She turns to Ismene, meeting her outside the palace gates and reminding her of their singular bond as sisters and of their common tragic lineage.¹⁵

Ismene's first reaction is to help Antigone, stating, "If things are as you say, poor sister, how can I better them? how loose or tie the knot?" (39–40).¹⁶ But, as becomes evident, Ismene is clearly of two minds. While she recognizes Antigone's desire to honor Polyneices, she refuses Antigone, emphasizing that, as women, the sisters are forced to yield to the unjust commands of men. What is more, she suggests that secrecy, silence, and deceit are the instruments available to the sisters to resist injustice. She urges Antigone to adopt a course of discretion and prudence that makes use of silence, anonymity, and a vow to protect one another. "At least give no one warning of this act," she asks Antigone, "you keep it hidden, and I'll do the same" (84–85). It is important to note that Ismene not only suggests violating Creon's decree in secret, she also unhesitatingly offers to assist Antigone in this duplicity. Ismene is willing to offer Antigone what she would not give her before: her assistance. And a crucial change is in the *method* of the action. Ismene's desire for concealment may not just be a temporary preference in the given situation but rather intrinsic to her character. Creon later describes her in similar terms. Ismene, he says, is "lurking like a viper in the house, who sucked me dry" (531–33); she "possesses sly intent" of

¹⁵The role and significance of the minor characters is subject to debate. Rothaus notes, for instance, that "such an important action cannot be attributed to a minor character" like Ismene, while Benardete remarks, "Ismene stands next to Antigone as the most important figure in the play" (Rothaus, "The Single Burial of Polyneices," 209; Seth Benardete, *Sacred Transgressions: A Reading of Sophocles' Antigone* [South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 1999], 11). Also see Jill Frank, "The Antigone's Law," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2 (2006): 336–340; A. N. W. Saunders, "Plot and Character in Sophocles," *Greece & Rome* 4, no. 10 (1934): 13–23; Saxtonhouse, *Fear of Diversity*.

¹⁶Translation by David Grene, in *Sophocles I*, ed. Grene and Lattimore, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Wycoff translates lines 39–40 "If things have reached this stage, what can I do, poor sister, that will help to make or mend it?"

“secret plotters” (493–94).¹⁷ As Creon presents it, Ismene shares Antigone’s destructive desires, though she slithers through the dark, often undetected. Antigone’s response to Ismene is unequivocal, assertive, and vociferous, just like the form of resistance that she favors: “Dear God! Denounce me. I shall hate you more if silent, not proclaiming this to all” (86–87). She wants no part in subterfuge.

As she parts with Antigone, Ismene knows two things: Antigone is determined to administer the burial rites in an unambiguous, frank way, and Creon will kill anyone found responsible. To borrow from Ismene’s own formulation, she is confronted with a knot that must be either loosened or tied differently. Antigone’s demands pull in one direction, while Creon’s yank in the other, straining the discord between them and making the knot of their conflict seem insoluble. As the daughter of Oedipus, Ismene is perhaps better equipped than most to solve this riddle. Is it possible to do the seemingly impossible—to honor her dead brother, to obey Creon’s decree, and to thwart Antigone’s seemingly suicidal mission?

If we assume that Ismene attempts to solve this puzzle, her answer lies in easing up on the demands of each of these components: honoring the dead does not require a full burial but an adequate one; obeying Creon requires only the appearance of compliance, not true obedience; and stopping Antigone only requires administering burial rites with greater speed and stealth.¹⁸ Ismene could have accomplished these more modest demands by burying Polyneices in secret and informing Antigone that their shared burden had been fulfilled.¹⁹ Ismene has the opportunity to commit the

¹⁷It is possible that Ismene does not see herself as deceitful even if she is. On the intriguing relationship between cunning, appearance, and self-deception, see Don Herzog, *Cunning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 71–121.

¹⁸More orthodox interpretations argue that responsibility for the first burial lies with Antigone or the gods. For the first argument, see Rose, “The Problem of the Second Burial”; Bradshaw, “The Watchman Scenes in the *Antigone*”; Held, “Antigone’s Dual Motivation”; Rockwell, “*Antigone*: The ‘Double Burial’ Again”; Rothaus, “The Single Burial of Polyneices”; Whitehorne, “The Background to Polyneices’ Disinterment and Reburial.” For the second argument, see S. M. Adams, “The *Antigone* of Sophocles,” *Phoenix* 9, no. 2 (1955): 47–62; H. D. F. Kitto, *Sophocles, Dramatist and Philosopher* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 56–57; Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 159–61.

¹⁹Honig, Macnaghten, and Rouse believe Antigone is unaware of Ismene’s role in the first burial, a situation that adds dramatic tension to their second exchange (Honig, “Ismene’s Forced Choice,” 22; Rouse, “The Two Burials in *Antigone*,” 41–42; Macnaghten, *The Antigone of Sophocles*, xiv). On this reading, it is difficult to make sense of the guard’s description of Antigone in lines 423–28. Why would Antigone curse those who had stripped the body if she did not know that Ismene acted? If, however, Ismene informed Antigone of the burial, then line 556—“At least I was not silent. You were warned”—may refer to this exchange.

deed; there is nothing in the sequence of events that obstructs her. She has no alibi and no witnesses to place her elsewhere. If we read the text this way, Antigone goes to Polyneices's corpse in broad daylight for the *first* time to do the deed as it should be done. Thus, her dramatic, breathtaking burial is not only an overt act of defiance to Creon's authority; it is also a disavowal of Ismene's compromising and (in Antigone's view) compromised actions.

Though her motives to refrain from acting are certainly strong, Ismene also has several inducements for acting, the first of which is protecting her sister and directing suspicion elsewhere.²⁰ Ismene also may have been impelled to act out of piety.²¹ According to Athenian custom, two actions were required for the successful transition of the soul to the netherworld: the administration of burial rites and the fulfillment of the *eniausia*, the annual commemorative visits to the tomb. Without these actions by the living, the deceased would remain *ataphoi*, the unburied dead, who, Euripides explained in the *Suppliants*, were denied entrance to Hades and doomed to remain tethered to the earth.²² In the *Antigone*, the requirements of *eniausia* are especially noteworthy because they demand something that, if both sisters act recklessly, Polyneices may lack: a living relative. As Antigone reveals in the opening dialogue of the play, she fully expects to die. "For me, the doer, death is best" (72). And, yet, if Polyneices's soul is to remain at rest in the tomb that is constructed for him by the play's end (1200–1205), it may be that one of his sisters needs to decide that death is not best.

²⁰The pool of suspects is sizable. It is possible, for instance, that a non-Theban passerby buried the body without knowledge of Creon's decree. See Agathias, *The Histories*, trans. Joseph D. Frendo (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 13; Benardete, *Sacred Transgressions*, 33–34, 62. On this practice, also see E. L. Harrison, "Three Notes on Sophocles," *Classical Review* 12, no. 1 (1962): 13.

²¹The requirements of Greek burial in the play are subject to much debate, as is the question whether the first two burials are actual or symbolic. See Harrison, "Three Notes on Sophocles"; Margon, "The Second Burial of Polyneices"; Whitehorne, "The Background to Polyneices' Disinterment and Reburial."

²²In Euripides' *Suppliants*, Theseus describes burial rites as "a Panhellenic law" (526). While much is unknown about the *eniausia*, it is clear that Athenians understood this duty to the dead to be of great importance. *Eniausiai* were so significant that a childless Athenian man could adopt an heir for the sole purpose of ensuring that annual visits were conducted. And, in the case of a legal dispute over inheritance, failure to visit the tomb by an heir could be used to contest the kinship claim. The *eniausia* also played a role in the political process. Before appointment to a political office, an Athenian citizen had to prove that he had regularly fulfilled the requirements of *eniausia*. See Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 104–20; S. C. Humphreys, *The Family, Women and Death: Comparative Studies*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 85–88. The significance of tomb visits is also emphasized in Sophocles' *Electra*, in which much of the action unfolds around separate visits by Orestes and Chrysothemis to Agamemnon's tomb.

There may be good reason to take Ismene at her word: “I did the deed” (536–37). After Antigone is caught, this is, of course, what Ismene says—“I did the deed.”²³ It may be that Ismene speaks the truth; her declaration is an admission of blame. But what are we to make of the oddly deferential addendum of Ismene’s statement: “I did the deed, if she agrees I did. I am accessory and share the blame”? Ismene’s addendum has been read as an indication of her timorous, compliant, and prevaricating nature: she confesses out of affection and respect, but lacks the fortitude to carry it through to the end. But this reading overlooks the significance of Ismene’s entrance in which she, weeping like a sister, “mourns, with clouded brow and bloodied cheeks, tears on her lovely face” (528–30). In the Greek it is unclear if Ismene mourns for her brother, for her sister, or for both of her siblings. If she mourns for her sister, then she does so in advance of her death.²⁴ If Ismene mourns her brother, she is openly violating the second element of Creon’s decree that none may weep for or bewail the death of Polyneices (while she is on the verge of admitting that she violated the first element that none may bury or entomb him). Either way, these are not the actions of a compliant or indecisive young woman. From the moment she steps into Creon’s presence, Ismene makes it perfectly plain where her loyalties lie and, given the political significance of her wordless gesture, it is less surprising that she attempts to share in the blame for the crime. If Ismene is responsible for the first burial, her entrance effectively unites her “offstage” and “onstage” personas; she appears to us here fully for the first time.

In contrast to the wrath that she incites in Creon (531–35), Ismene is deferential and solicitous to Antigone. Taking into account Ismene’s second entrance and her admission of responsibility, Ismene’s addendum may refer to the sisters’ initial disagreement over the tactics of the disempowered. Will Antigone now agree to the legitimacy or efficacy of a subterranean form of resistance and will she now admit to a plurality of opposition? Read in this way, Ismene’s addendum broaches this issue again, giving Antigone one more chance to see that covert resistance is resistance nonetheless. In making her case to Antigone, Ismene stresses their commonality, begging Antigone, “don’t fence me out from honor, from death with you,

²³Of Antigone’s confession (433–34), Adams notes that it “seems necessary to point out that this Greek does not and can not mean that she confessed to both burials” (Adams, “The *Antigone* of Sophocles,” 53). Segal points out that Antigone’s “confession to ‘both acts,’ ambiguous in any case, makes as good sense as part of her defiant spirit as a statement of what really happened. Note the similar ambiguity in her defiant confession of 443 and her possessive reaction to the deed at Ismene’s confession in 536–9” (Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 443). Also see Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 7–9; Honig, “Ismene’s Forced Choice,” 12–13.

²⁴The chorus supplies the description of Ismene’s entrance, and it seems odd that they would take her lament to be for a still-living Antigone.

and honor done the dead" (544–45). Though they adopted divergent approaches, Ismene defends her weaker action, noting that her decision was not made in silence and that "the blame is equal for us both" (558).

Antigone rejects Ismene, and this refusal is even harsher than her dismissive words at the close of the first scene (93–97). But here again, the possibility of Ismene's secret action adds an intriguing and unexpected layer of meaning to their exchange—that is, of cruelty in the name of kindness.²⁵ When Creon suspects Ismene (489–96), Antigone directs his attention immediately back to her and the imminent prospect of punishment: "Do you want more than my arrest and death?" she asks, indicating that her crime and death are enough (497). More explicit still, she urges Creon to kill her immediately and incites his wrath toward her by once again making the implicit claim that she is his equal and his enemy (499–507).

In addition to affirming a valorous standard of resistance, it may be that Antigone is heroic in another sense, one that can be missed if we overlook the prospect of Ismene's shared responsibility. Antigone may sacrifice herself not only for her dead brother but also for her living sister. From Antigone's capture until her death sentence, Creon assumes that both sisters are responsible, but Antigone successfully convinces him that this is not the case. Thus, if we understand that Ismene attempts to save Antigone by administering the burial rites before her sister does, this action is mirrored by Antigone's efforts to preserve Ismene. Though fiercely at odds and seemingly unable to act in concert, neither sister seems to want the other to die.

The possibility of Ismene's secret burial makes sense of two incongruities in *Antigone*, one concerning character and the second concerning plot.²⁶ Everything that is revealed about Antigone's character in the first scene

²⁵Honig, "Ismene's Forced Choice"; Jebb, *Sophocles*, 3:xxix; A. W. Simpson and C. M. H. Millar, "A Note on Sophocles' *Antigone*, Lines 531–81," *Greece & Rome* 17, no. 50 (1948): 78–81; Adams, "The *Antigone* of Sophocles"; J. T. Sheppard, *The Wisdom of Sophocles* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1947). Among scholars focused on the relationship between Ismene and Antigone, there is no agreement on whether they act as enemies, as friends, or as both. See Honig, "Ismene's Forced Choice"; Simpson and Millar, "A Note on Sophocles' *Antigone*, Lines 531–81"; W. Blake Tyrell and Larry J. Bennett, "Sophocles' Enemy Sisters," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 15/16 (2009): 1–18.

²⁶These inconsistencies may help explain why literary reinterpretations of *Antigone* have been more generous to Ismene, both by narrating events from her perspective (as Yannis Ritsos does in her poem *Ismene*) and by depicting Ismene as a figure of resistance. In his 1944 version, Jean Anouilh portrays her as a late-blooming resister, while in Satoh Makoto's *Ismene*, Ismene defies and deceives Creon by switching her brothers' sheet-covered bodies. Jean Anouilh, *Antigone*, in *Five Plays* (London: Methuen, 1987); Yannis Ritsos, "Ismene," in *The Fourth Dimension: Selected Poems of Yannis Ritsos* (Boston: Godine, 1977); Satoh Makoto, *Ismene*, in *Alternative Japanese Drama*, ed. Robert T. Rolf and John K. Gillespie (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992).

suggests that, at her core, Antigone is antithetically disposed to dissembling or perfunctory efforts. Antigone possesses a clear, absolutist, and disciplinary notion of how her opposition must take place, an ideal revealed in full when, after being spared an immediate death for her crimes, she takes her own life. And yet, the first burial of the corpse reveals none of this perfection, control, and discipline. It is haphazard, and, though technically complete, it is devoid of the pomp and spectacle of the second burial. It appears to be the work of a compromiser rather than an absolutist.²⁷ If Antigone is responsible for the first burial, why does she vary her approach so radically the second time?²⁸

In terms of plot, there are questions as well. If Antigone conducts the first burial, it is unclear why she returns to the corpse.²⁹ The first burial fulfilled the necessary requirements. The “ritual [was] complete” (247). Given this, what compels Antigone to act to excess, to rebury the buried?³⁰ There is a similarly nagging question why Sophocles brings Ismene back into the action of the play a second time (531–581). In their first dialogue Sophocles masterfully establishes that the two sisters are like “two swords whose sharpness, gleam, and power we must experience in order to apprehend something

²⁷Harry calls the first burial “the work of the erstwhile shrinking Ismene” rather than of the fearless Antigone” (Harry, “Studies in Sophocles,” 22). Honig notes that the first burial is “Ismene-like, subtle, sub-rosa, quiet, under cover of darkness, performed exactly . . . as Ismene herself counseled Antigone” (Honig, “Ismene’s Forced Choice,” 15).

²⁸Harry, “Studies in Sophocles”; Honig, “Ismene’s Forced Choice”; Macnaghten, *Antigone of Sophocles*; Rouse, “The Two Burials in Antigone.”

²⁹Charles Segal comments, “Why Antigone returns for this second burial is one of the most puzzling details of the plot” (Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization*, 159). Honig points out that burying Polyneices twice is excessive (Honig, “Antigone’s Laments, Creon’s Grief,” 37). Jebb’s initial explanation—Antigone returns to pour the libations on the body—is controversial. Rouse asks “how the Antigone of the rest of the play could be so foolish” to forget the libations on her first visit and “so reckless to haunt the spot where her deed was done: so strong to plan, so weak to do” (Rouse, “The Two Burials in Antigone,” 41). Also see Margon, “The Second Burial of Polyneices,” 40, 48–49.

³⁰It may be that Antigone returns to the body because she knows that the guards have uncovered it, and thus she cries out like a “bitter bird” when she sees the body stripped of earth. While certainly credible in terms of her character, this interpretation does not explain how Antigone knew that the guards had swept away the dirt on the corpse. As Whitehorne notes, “the trap (if it is a trap) is never set by making any announcement that they have exhumed Polyneices, nor does the text give us any reason to suppose that Antigone’s return to the body is motivated by anything she may have heard or suspected to this effect” (Whitehorne, “Background to Polyneices’ Disinterment,” 139). If, instead, Antigone knows of Ismene’s perfunctory efforts and goes to correct them, her cry may signify anguish over the exposure of her brother’s body and distress at her sister’s perfunctory burial.

of the lightening that flashes when they strike," as Heidegger poetically puts it.³¹ If Ismene is primarily a foil to Antigone, this relationship is established in their first exchange; there is no obvious reason why it needs to be reestablished. Odder still, their final exchange undercuts Ismene's role as a contrasting character and instead reveals that the relationship between the sisters is more complex and multifaceted. Why, then, does Ismene reappear? What is at stake for Sophocles in adding this complexity to Ismene's character?

There is, of course, another possibility raised in the play that is worth considering: a god is responsible. The guard hints at the idea of divine intervention when he describes the first burial as a supernatural accomplishment (249–59) and his intimation is picked up on by the chorus, who address the issue directly to Creon and identify a path of honorable retreat for him (279). If a god is protecting the body, then for Creon to alter his decree may be sensible and pious as opposed to inconsistent and fearful.³² But Creon rejects the notion of miraculous burial in no uncertain terms.

While Creon's certitude is not dispositive evidence—over the course of the play he proves to be wrong about much—there is good reason to be suspicious of the guard's account. A comic, sly figure that readily bickers with the king, the guard is, by his own admission, intent on extricating himself from the charge of complicity or dereliction of duty (238–40, 264–68). When Creon calls him a "quibbling rascal through and through," he doesn't disagree, perhaps because he knows that his banter provides fertile ground for self-preserving intimations, evasions, half-truths, and exaggerations (320).³³ Indeed, looked at carefully, the guard's narrative suggests problems with the idea of divine intervention. By his own account, none of the other guards believed that a god was responsible, but rather they lay blame squarely in the human realm (they accuse each other, 260–64). The guard also says that the burial was "enough to turn the curse," an odd statement to make if a deity were responsible (255). Humans need to avoid the curse of the unburied dead, not gods.³⁴ Another question is raised later in the play when Antigone, on the way to her tomb, asks, "Why, in my misery, look to the gods for help? Can I call any of them my ally?" (921–22). Bereft of any indication from the gods and doubtful about their intent, Antigone longs for a sign of approval. If a god buried and protected her brother's corpse, it seems strange that Antigone would want for divine allies or wonder at the absence of divine intervention.

³¹Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 98.

³²Bernard M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 69.

³³Margon, "The First Burial of Polyneices," 293.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 293–94.

Two Archetypes of Weakness

The issue of the first burial cannot, it seems to me, be answered definitively. It may be that Ismene, with viperlike stealth (531), attempts to solve her own sphinxless riddle by hurriedly casting a few handfuls of dirt over her brother's corpse, an act she admits to only after her sister is caught (536–37). If so, this Ismene bears resemblance to Sophocles' later depiction of her in *Oedipus at Colonus* where she is a politically savvy young woman devoted to her family. As her magnificent entrance on horseback suggests, the Ismene of the *Colonus* is a figure of action (312–321). Ismene decides to leave Thebes, alone, on an arduous journey in search of her father and sister in order to bring them crucial political, familial, and religious news (361–85, 389–90). This exploit is followed by another. After Oedipus unwittingly trespasses on the Furies' domain, he requests the help of one of his daughters to make the necessary expiation. While Antigone is silent, Ismene steps forward without hesitation and declares: "I'll go and do it" (502).

The Ismene of the *Antigone* may well not possess the same pluck. It is entirely possible that this time she hangs back. In this case, Creon's description of her as a viper fits in another sense: she is like a viper that waits too long to strike and is preempted by another. Exploring the possibility of Ismene's covert resistance—without arriving at a conclusive answer—is valuable nonetheless. Though not decisive, the argument is useful because it engenders a shift in perspective on the play and on Ismene. It throws often-overlooked portions of the action into high relief, such as Ismene's second entrance, mourning as a sister in front of Creon (528–30). It focuses attention on the Ismene-Antigone dyad. It also suggests a view of Ismene as an intriguing, layered character, which provides insight into a general type of political subjectivity: the unheroic weak.

The first insight that Ismene's character points to is a comparative sensitivity to political context and power dynamics. For Ismene, the political specifics of the situation matter. Ismene speaks of the war between Polyneices and Eteocles from the first (11–16). Concerned with political consequences, Ismene also stresses that to bury Polyneices is to violate a prohibition of the city and to risk death (59, 78–79). Ever aware of the implications of the context for herself and others, Ismene says she is apprehensive for her sister (82), and she reveals that Antigone and Haemon are betrothed (568). Antigone, in contrast, is comparatively blind to context and her awareness of power relations seems muted. Antigone makes no mention of the war throughout the play. Indeed, if we had only Antigone's lines, three crucial facts about the context would be unclear: we would not know why Polyneices died, nor that he was killed while attacking Thebes, nor that he and Eteocles killed each other. Ismene reveals these facts. Because the unheroic resister is more like a fox than a lion, she or he must be a consequentialist who is both keenly attuned to surroundings and, of course, the presence of traps. Thus, unheroic resistance involves waiting and watching.

It necessitates a willingness to sit patiently on the cusp of action, as well as the fortitude to bear the consequences (and perhaps the guilt) of inaction. It is a disposition that can translate into action, but need not.

The contextual fact at the forefront of Ismene's mind—and, one suspects, that of unheroic disobedients more generally—is the political inequality of the larger group of which she is a part. In the prologue Ismene encourages Antigone to step back and take a more expansive view of the situation and the lot of women. In a statement that has troubled feminists, Ismene draws attention to one pertinent contextual fact that Antigone has seemingly neglected:

We must remember that we two are women
so not to fight with men.
And that since we are subject to strong power
we must hear these orders, or any that may be worse.
So I shall ask of them beneath the earth
forgiveness, for in these things I am forced,
and shall obey the men in power. I know
that wild and futile action makes no sense.³⁵

(61–68)

Ismene reminds Antigone that women are forced, by violence, to yield to the unjust commands of men, and she draws a sharp distinction between the situation of men and that of women, suggesting that, because women are unequal, their lot is distinct. Prudent action for women must work within the constraints of their position, recognizing, first, that the male authorities possess formal power; second, that they wield violence; and, third, that they demand displays of obedience from women. To do otherwise, she says, is to “hunt the impossible” (107, Grene translation).

This passage highlights a second general characteristic of the unheroic weak: they are attentive to the inequality of the disempowered. Consider how Ismene implicitly contrasts the lot of women with that of Theban men, and in particular with the merciless and cruel war between Polyneices and Eteocles. This war and the long, cold shadow it casts over the sisters underscore Ismene's point that, as women, their lives are governed by the violence of men. Moreover, the war reinforces her argument that, as members of an accursed family, the sisters are the recipients of misfortunes that they did not create (49–60).³⁶ But there is another aspect of the war that is especially pertinent to Ismene's argument that the lot of women is distinct from that

³⁵Hugh Lloyd-Jones translates the final line of Ismene's speech “for there is no sense in actions that exceed our powers” (Hugh Lloyd-Jones, ed., *Sophocles: Antigone, the Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994], 11).

³⁶As Goldhill observes, these questions about gender difference extend to sibling relations as well (“Antigone and the Politics of Sisterhood,” 156).

of men. Polyneices battled Eteocles as a man—that is, frankly and aggressively on the battlefield, as an equal. Faced with what he understood to be an unjust decree, Polyneices gathered his forces, declared war, and forthrightly marched across the hills to attack Thebes. Eteocles defended Thebes in much the same way, with the plain and unambiguous methods of brute force. They fought as equals and as men and died that way as well. Much in the same way as her brothers, Antigone acts in response to an unjust decree, girds herself for battle, and prepares for death. Antigone does not directly respond to Ismene’s statement on the lot of women, and what her character says about gender is subject to much debate.³⁷ Antigone’s actions are less ambiguous; she fights as if she were a man and as if she were an equal of men.³⁸ In so doing, Antigone transgresses the foundational boundaries of gender and politics and calls these limits into question.³⁹ More firmly rooted in the power dynamics of her situation, Ismene accuses Antigone of making a category mistake, of seeing unlike things as alike.

A third general insight concerns intent. For the heroic weak, the intent of the political actor all but disappears on the bloody battlefield of conflict, as action, wounds, and a tallying up of victories take precedence. But to the unheroic disobedient the purpose, will, or inclination of the actor are crucial, both as a basis of judgment and as a mechanism of identification. It is by her intent that we know the unheroic disobedient. Inwardness and individual conscience—as best as they can be identified and observed—are paramount. Here again, the sisters articulate this fundamental disagreement. As Antigone sees it, so long as Ismene’s internal disposition remains internal, that is, unmanifested in action, it is immaterial. Ismene faced a choice: she could either honor the dead by joining Antigone or she could honor Creon. Locked into the binary logic of obedience and resistance, Antigone does not

³⁷Benardete notes that although the word for woman (*gunē*) occurs eighteen times over the course of the play, Antigone never uses the word. Antigone is “anti-generation, the true offspring of an incestuous marriage” (Benardete, *Sacred Transgressions*, 10, 61). According to Saxonhouse, “Antigone neuters herself; she is neither male nor female. Her name captures her stand: *anti-gone*, against birth, against generation” (Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity*, 69). Butler writes that when Antigone speaks to Creon, she “becomes manly; in being spoken to, he is unmanned, and so neither maintains their position within gender and the disturbance of kinship appears to destabilize gender throughout the play” (Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 10).

³⁸Saxonhouse observes that Antigone becomes a “warrior whose glory can be achieved only at the moment of death” (Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity*, 70). Benardete notes that “Antigone borrows the language appropriate to the patriot soldier whose dying on behalf of his country coincides with his fighting” (Benardete, *Sacred Transgressions*, 11–12).

³⁹Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*; Euben, *Corrupting Youth*; Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 73–74, 80–82.

think it possible to do both.⁴⁰ For Antigone, the appearance of honoring Creon *is* honoring Creon and a façade of obedience *is* obedience. There is no difference between the visible and the actual; they are one and the same. And speech alone—that is, the voicing of one’s intent, future purpose, or suffering—does not suffice for action. To put this in religious terms, Ismene could choose to ally herself wholly with the dead and the gods of the underworld or she could choose to honor the city and preserve the living. There is no middle ground. And for Antigone, an outward show of honoring life—no matter how complicated the truth or complex the intentions—is tantamount to honoring life only. Thus, she tells Ismene, “you chose to live when I chose death” (55) and “you live. My life died long ago. And that has made me fit to help the dead” (559–60). The action—preservation of life or forfeiture of it—is what matters to Antigone.

In directing his punishment wholly at Antigone, Creon sanctions her binary logic of obedience and resistance, of friends and enemies, and of piety and irreverence. This is an unexpected point of concurrence, to be sure. The scene ends with Creon, urged on by the chorus, issuing Antigone’s death sentence. All the violence that Creon can muster is arrayed against Antigone; the antagonism between them is palpable. Yet, for all their antipathy, Creon’s punishment of Antigone—and his concurrent lack of interest in the shades of complicity represented by Ismene—reaffirms Antigone’s twofold notion of resistance and obligation. For both Creon and Antigone, the landscape between friends and enemies is barren. What is crucial is the poles themselves: obedience, duty, responsibility, and honor, on one hand, and opposition, traitorousness, and irreverence, on the other. What gets coded as obligation or resistance depends on how the objects of duty are defined.⁴¹ Despite this crucial difference, their understanding of the way that obligation and resistance operate oddly mirrors one another. Obligation exists or it does not; resistance is either present or absent. There is no middle ground, no point in between.

Ismene’s resourcefulness, her flexibility, and her opportunistic disposition also suggest a fourth, more ubiquitous characteristic of unheroic disobedients who, lacking access to normal political channels, must improvise with what is available. Recall Ismene’s initial response to Antigone: “If things are as you say, poor sister, how can I better them? how loose or tie the knot?”

⁴⁰Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 256–57; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Also see Jennet Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil Disobedience: Studies in Violence and Democratic Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴¹Phillipe Nonet writes that Antigone’s law “is never capable of being written: it is strictly speaking unsayable. Because it is unsayable, Sophocles must leave it unsaid. . . . Antigone’s living law is Antigone” (Nonet, “Antigone’s Law,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2 [2006]: 324).

Ismene's approach is conciliatory, and she sees multiple avenues of action: a conflict can be eased by loosening the constraints, or it can be changed by constructing a new arrangement altogether. Though she may be aware of another alternative—that is, directly cutting the “knot” of the conflict—she does not mention it.

This resourcefulness is underscored in Ismene's second entrance, in which she mourns like a sister with tears and scored cheeks. Though speechless, Ismene communicates her fidelity to her family and symbolically challenges Creon's power. In this entrance, Ismene manipulates traditional feminine roles—what Linda Zerilli has referred to as “proper femininity”—into a weapon.⁴² Appearing before Creon, Ismene uses what she has at hand: the long-standing role of women in mourning and burial, and the traditional Homeric mourning practices in which the bereaved, often women, expressed their sorrow through self-laceration and wailing.⁴³ Ismene performs this traditional Homeric role. Her bloodied cheeks and tears are silent signs that she is an obedient and compliant woman who knows her proper place in her social and political world. Her silence may also imply traditional or conventional femininity.⁴⁴ Yet because this form of Homeric mourning is illegal and opposes Creon's power, Ismene's mourning is also not at all obedient, compliant, traditional, or indicative of proper femininity.⁴⁵ Her actions threaten the social and political order; she exceeds her role as a woman. The meaning of Ismene's troubled demeanor, her weeping, and her scored cheeks is doubled, revealing that she is docile and defiant, pious and irreverent, and a figure of proper femininity and chaotic femininity.⁴⁶ Ismene's entrance directs attention to the terrain between each of these binary poles, rather

⁴²Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁴³On the contextual significance of the transition from Homeric funerary practices and those of fifth-century democratic Athens and women's role in administering traditional burial rites, see Honig, “Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief”; Larry J. Bennett and W. Blake Tyrrell, “Sophocles' *Antigone* and Funeral Oratory,” *American Journal of Philology* 111, no. 4 (1990): 441–56.

⁴⁴Mark Griffith observes that “one of the most distinctive signs of ‘femininity’ on the tragic stage is a failure to speak at all (Sophocles' *Iole*, Aeschylus' *Iphigenia* or *Helen*, Euripides' veiled *Alcestis*), or an inability to keep on speaking—whether this silence is brought about by intimidation, by rhetorical convention, or by physical removal (Sophocles' *Chrysothemis* or *Tecmessa*, Euripides' *Phaedra* or *Alcestis*, Aeschylus' *Cassandra*, *Io*, or—ultimately—*Clytemnestra*)” (Griffith, “*Antigone and Her Sister(s): Embodying Women in Greek Tragedy*,” in *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society*, ed. Andre Lardinois and Laura McClure [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001], 123–24).

⁴⁵Honig, “*Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief*.”

⁴⁶As Griffith notes, there is no authentic or unified voice of a woman that emerges from the play; the duties, expectations, and roles do not cohere tidily (Griffith, “*Antigone and Her Sister(s)*”).

than at the extremities of the poles themselves. It also points to the inventive-ness of the unheroic weak and the capacity to spontaneously use the available materials to stitch together something novel and unexpected.

The fifth and final general characteristic suggested by the *Antigone* is that the weak tend to long for something that they cannot have: perfect and absolute unity in collective action. Sophocles introduces this theme from the start, using Antigone's first lines to express her wish for an extreme form of cohesion with Ismene. As the play opens, Antigone addresses Ismene with a highly unusual phrase, *koinon autadelphon Ismenēs kara*—literally, “my very own sister's common head of Ismene.”⁴⁷ *Koinon*, “common,” emphasizes what is shared with others, what unifies a group, or what is not private.⁴⁸ In the context of Antigone's opening lines, *koinon* identifies what is shared between the sisters and what unites them in partnership—that is, the fact that they are siblings, *autadelphon*. To be more specific, they are the same (*autos*), sisters who come from one womb (*adelphos* is related to *delphus*, “womb”).⁴⁹ The last word of Antigone's opening greeting, *kara*, “head,” is the most formal mode of address in Greek tragedy, and it can be translated more fully as a metaphorical head or top. For instance, *kara* is used to address Oedipus as king.⁵⁰

At first glance, this opening greeting suggests an admirable hope for solidarity and sorority. But given the incestuous history of the royal line of Thebes, there is reason to suspect an ominous side to Antigone's longing for unity. Ismene and Antigone are the daughters and half-sisters of Oedipus, the daughters and granddaughters of Jocasta, and the sisters and nieces of Polyneices. They are sisters and nieces to one another.⁵¹ The incest of their family tree implies a tendency toward too much sharing and an unhealthy or unnatural closeness. As Seth Benardete notes, Antigone

⁴⁷Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “Another Antigone: The Emergence of the Female Political Actor in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 4 (2005): 474; Steiner, *Antigones*, 85, 209–11; Benardete, *Sacred Transgressions*, 1–2; Goldhill, “Antigone and the Politics of Sisterhood,” 145–46, 52–56.

⁴⁸Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity*, 9–15, 198–200. In Book II of the *Politics*, for instance, Aristotle asks what citizens should share together (*koinon*) in the city, and in particular if they should share children, women, and property as Plato's *Republic* seems to suggest. For Aristotle, inquiring into the *koinon* of the city means exploring what draws citizens together, what unites them in common purpose or, as Carnes Lord translates *koinon*, what joins them in partnership (Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 55).

⁴⁹Perhaps to emphasize their familial connection even further, Antigone mentions Oedipus in the following line (2) and reminds Ismene that they share both a mother and a father.

⁵⁰Eva Brann, “Welcome to Colonus,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Fall 2007, 55–56.

⁵¹In explicating *koinon autadelphon kara*, Eva Brann observes that Antigone and Ismene “are even, as it were, their own children by being in two generations at once” (*ibid.*, 56).

asserts that Ismene's head is "nothing but a sister's" and thus reveals her "virtual identification" with Ismene.⁵² George Steiner echoes this point, observing that Antigone's "prolusion strives to compact, to 'ingest,' Ismene into herself." With *koinon autadelphon kara*, Antigone demands "a 'single-headed' unison."⁵³

Thinking more generally about this desire for oneness, it is not difficult to understand its appeal to those who are excluded from full participation in public life or who are in some way "outside" of politics. Recall Locke circling back to the phrase "one body politic" and its various iterations—a "community [of] one body," "the power to act as one body," and "the act of the whole"—in the *Two Treatises*. Echoing the homogeneity at the heart of Rousseau's general will, American Whigs on the verge of the Revolution assumed that the people were a divinely ordained, single, organic unit: "for God hath so tempered the body that there should be no Schism in the body, but that the Members should have the same care for one another."⁵⁴ Thomas Paine characteristically put the motivation plainly in *Common Sense*—"It is not in numbers, but in unity that our great strength lies"—and clarified the potency of this wish when the enemy was represented by the single body of a monarch.

But *Antigone* ultimately raises questions about an ideal that implicitly suggests a phalanx of undifferentiated hoplites or oarsmen at sea (541). Antigone's vision of an undivided sisterhood of resistance proves illusory; it is followed by harsh words, heated clashes, and an inability to act in concert. Through the conflict between Antigone and Ismene, the play suggests that collective action among the weak is not a naturalized or uncomplicated process that can either be merely assumed or wished for. Moreover, it implies that the politically dispossessed are a pluralistic and varied lot. It may also point to the poisonous nature of the ideal of unity and oneness among resisters. This standard has the paradoxical effect of tearing Ismene and Antigone apart in the name of bringing them together.

Insights into Weakness: *Antigone's* Offering

With their motivational cocktail of fear, conflict avoidance, and pragmatism, their internalized vulnerability, and their penchant for subterfuge, the weak

⁵²Benardete, *Sacred Transgressions*, 2.

⁵³Steiner, *Antigones*, 209. Also see Nicole Loraux, "La main d'Antigone," *Métis* 1, no. 2 (1986): 165–96. In this respect, Antigone's opening line is reminiscent of her inability (or unwillingness) to draw a distinction between Polyneices, who attacked Thebes, and Eteocles, who died defending the city. To Antigone, her brothers are the same: "Death yearns for equal law for all the dead" (520).

⁵⁴Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 58.

evoke a range of reactions. Sounding a common theme of disparagement, Beelzebub observes in *Paradise Lost*, "To be weak is miserable, doing or suffering." Christianity has argued most forcefully for the redemptive quality of weakness, urging that it is better to receive a wrong than to do one and promising that the weak will triumph. "Strength is made perfect in weakness," as Corinthians has it. As vivid as these assessments are, they reveal little about the role of the weak in politics. What do the politically weak look like? How do they behave? With his ethnographic study of Malaysian peasants facing the destruction of their livelihood through a so-called green revolution in the 1970s, James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* directs attention to these questions and develops a portrait of political weakness in a particular context. Tipping his hat to Balzac's pillaging Tossards in *Les Paysans* and Brecht's opportunistic and delusory Schweyk (*Schweyk in the Second World War*), Scott illuminates a banal form of peasant resistance based on steady, low-profile actions that are ad hoc, involve little coordination, and shun open confrontations with authority.

Ismene provides another portrait of weakness, one that allows us, by focusing on her character, to open up interpretive space both inside the play and outside of it to examine the politics of the vulnerable and the dispossessed. Though certainly no peasant, Ismene is aligned with the weak because, as a woman, she is formally excluded from politics, and, lacking membership or representation through a *kurios*, a male guardian, she is the object of a government power from which there is no redress. Moreover, Ismene identifies with the weak, seeing herself as living in the shadow of unjust decrees and brute force, and she gestures to the depths of such an existence when she notes that greater injustices than Creon's decree may very well await them. We "must hear these orders," she tells Antigone, "or any that may be worse" (64). While Antigone seems unable to comprehend an injustice more painful than Creon's decree, Ismene is clearheaded about the multitude of sufferings of political exiles. She loves life despite its cruelties and thus tends toward the survival mechanisms that Scott evocatively describes in *Weapons of the Weak*.

And Ismene reveals a survival skill of the weak that Scott does not mention—forgiveness—when she states, "I shall ask of them beneath the earth forgiveness, for in these things I am forced" (65–66). Given her less exacting nature, Ismene willingly requests forgiveness for choices in which she lacks meaningful choice and, one suspects, she extends forgiveness to others in a similar situation (witness her equanimity toward Antigone). Moreover, she affords forgiveness to herself, foremost by giving up any claim to the unreasonable and impossible standards that her sister willingly embraces (90).

Antigone extends and complicates our understanding of weakness by revealing a complex, rich, and dynamic relationship *between* those who lack formal political power. The play depicts one character that fully accepts her weakness and works within its limitations as well as a character that rejects

powerlessness and refuses the weapons of the weak. Illuminating the desires and psychology of both kinds of weakness, the play provides an understanding of the impulses that propel both the unheroic weak and the heroic weak to pursue their distinct courses of action. Moreover, the play brings these two forms of opposition into dialogue, or, more accurately, into a splintering and sputtering exchange that is marked as much by what is left unsaid as by what is spoken.

The tragedy to this reading is that collective action among the weak is a fraught affair and unlikely to succeed. Offering a disheartening assessment of the possibility of collective action by outsiders to politics, the play evinces skepticism that the unheroic weak and the heroic weak will be able to see past their differences long enough to join forces. By their final exchange, Ismene and Antigone's relationship is in tatters, destroyed by hurled insults, charges of mockery, and declarations of hatred. Though they are similarly situated, the sisters do not act in concert or accomplish anything *together* throughout the play because divergent tactics, principles, values, and world-views are wedged between them. While the invocation of *koinon autadelphon kara* at the beginning of the play raises the hope that they will join forces, this optimism is dashed over the course of the play. At *Antigone's* end, Ismene and Antigone are separated by a boundary that, as the play itself underscores, is of the utmost importance: the border between life and death. The ever-widening chasm that opens up between Ismene and Antigone suggests, first, that a compromise between the disempowered about means is as crucial to collective action among the politically dispossessed as a general agreement about ends. Shared objectives, sisterly affection, and a common royal lineage are not enough to bridge the divide between the unheroic weak and the heroic weak. A discussion of means, which Ismene and Antigone never have, seems necessary to concerted action.

The breach between the sisters at the play's close emphasizes, second, the folly of the standard of absolute unity and cohesion contained in *koinon autadelphon kara*. By virtue of their vulnerability and lack of resources, the weak are prone to see the virtue of collective action and implicitly understand strength in numbers. The goal of acting in concert is, however, a distinct aim from the ideal of cohesion. *Antigone* exposes the gap between these two conceptions of collective action and illuminates the devastating consequences of an aspiration of self-sameness, homogeneity, and lockstep unity. As Ismene herself might put it, to seek oneness among the weak is to hunt the impossible.

Placed in the context of the failure of collective action between the sisters, the virtues and vices of both heroic and unheroic resistance are thrown into sharp relief. The heroic resistant has a righteous spirit, charisma and dynamism, a sharp tongue, and a love of spectacle that invariably draws the eye to them. It is impossible not to watch the heroic resister, who seems too perfect for this world and thus doomed to be expelled from it. And it is important to note the virtues of plain, unequivocal confrontations with authority

that attempt to undermine the power or the legitimacy of unjust political leaders or their policies symbolically. Heroic resistance functions like a historical marker of dissent that can be seen and observed throughout time. Heroic acts of resistance may also make a public claim of equality for an excluded group that can be especially meaningful to future generations struggling for inclusion, membership, and legal rights. Heroic, “onstage” resistance leaves still another kind of historical marker: it denotes a point in history in which piety, principles, morality, and honor supplanted self-preservation, utilitarian calculations, and pragmatism.

And yet the costs of foredoomed failure can be high. The would-be martyr must sever ties with her community in order to make a claim for that community.⁵⁵ The *Antigone* clarifies this counterintuitive proposition through Antigone’s strange and contradictory approach to her family. Antigone’s public and vocal adherence to her familial commitment to Polyneices—and the courting of death that it implies—means that she must cleave ties with her current family, Ismene, and her future family that would be created by her union with Haemon. In one of the cruelest lines of the play, Antigone proclaims on the way to her death chamber, “Look, leaders of Thebes, I am the last of your royal line” (940–41).⁵⁶ Though technically untrue, the line reveals a chilly truth that Antigone is alone and has been alone since deciding on public, confrontational tactics. Her death makes her metaphysical solitude manifest. This sundering of communal ties is particularly painful because it is Antigone’s surviving family, in particular Ismene, who will bear the long-term consequences of her dramatic disobedience. In broadcasting her opposition, Antigone exposes what was hidden and encourages antagonism toward this once shrouded foe, Ismene. Though certainly harrowing and grievous, Antigone’s suicide exempts her from the unpleasant fate of living under a constant gaze of suspicion and surveillance and it relieves her of the unceasing fear of a life lived on borrowed time. This is Ismene’s fate.

Ismene’s future distress underscores another proclivity of overt defiance: it tends to be followed by violence and suffering. Sophocles underscores this point in the bold and broad strokes of tragedy in which death is piled

⁵⁵Jill Frank asks, “Where might we look for the *Antigone’s* law, grounded in the human practice of justice, that is a combination of human art and activity, respectful of what is, and appropriate to the world of plurality that is the *polis*? The answer, I think, lies in a figure in the poem who, despite her age, seems to know how to pay attention to human matters and ‘wait’: Ismene” (Frank, “The *Antigone’s* Law,” 339). Also see George Eliot, “The *Antigone* and Its Moral,” in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 265.

⁵⁶Goldhill ties this line to Ismene’s erasure, observing, “Ismene is treated as if she were indeed no longer alive or no longer kin, no longer of the common blood. Ismene is written—spoken—out of the family line. This silencing is all too often repeated, rather than analyzed by the critics” (Goldhill, “*Antigone* and the Politics of Sisterhood,” 157).

upon death and mourning is compounded by suffering and wretchedness. Though it offers an extreme example of this suffering, *Antigone* touches on an actuality of the heroic resistance of the martyr. Valuing principle over life, the martyr risks death and pain (both her own and the suffering of others). Ismene's approach of underhanded resistance and false compliance, in contrast, might well have mitigated the use of brute force and curbed the scope of distress. Antigone gives Creon a target for his ire and violence. But Ismene occludes this target. To put this point somewhat differently, Ismene's underhanded tactics are more in line with a commitment to nonviolence because they attempt to dodge government violence altogether. Though not responsible for the brute force that Creon directs at her, Antigone does not attempt to avoid violence, death, or suffering. Ismene, who possesses a pragmatic love for life and an instinctual avoidance of pain, does.

How might Sophocles' *Antigone* have ended if Ismene's approach had succeeded? One can only speculate. But it seems plausible that Sophocles' play would be slightly less brimming with woe, destruction, and violence. Its emphasis might instead be on the power of the powerless, cunning, and on silent acts that take place when no one is looking.