

Antigone and Ismene: Sisters as Political Agents in Sophocles' *Antigone*

Sophocles' *Antigone* is one of the most well known and popular Athenian tragedies, and has been especially well received by political theorists and activists for its examination of the themes of law and hierarchy, family and the state, *nomos* and *physis*, and righteous rebellion. These themes find expression from the very beginning of the play, in the opening exchange between the sisters Antigone and Ismene, daughters of Oedipus (*Antigone* 1-99). By offering a detailed examination of this opening dialogue and engaging closely with pertinent scholarship, this presentation explores the character of Ismene in particular and the meaning of her interactions with Antigone in the context of Athenian politics. My argument is that while Antigone is clearly recognized as a political character, her sister, Ismene, can also be read to impart a contrasting and perhaps more subtle political statement.

This presentation takes as its starting point the conflicting scholarly arguments concerning the scene, including that of Honig (2011), who argues – in contrast to virtually every other Sophoclean scholar except Rouse (1911) – that Ismene is indeed a political agent in her own right, and that she in fact colludes with Antigone in a surreptitious burial of Polynices. My paper, however, proposes a new interpretation of the character of Ismene and how she contributes to a specifically political reading of *Antigone*. My paper demonstrates how political themes specific to Athens in the fifth century were allusively woven into *Antigone*, and especially into the characters of both sisters by presenting evidence of significant resonances with contemporary events—for example Pericles' alleged brutal treatment of the captured sailors after the Samian revolt in 439 BC which included denying burial for their corpses (Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 28). I will also consider critical disapproval of Ismene's political disengagement (Kaufman 1968) and Athenian expectations about female behavior and Ismene's conformity with

societal norms (Griffith 2001). My textual analysis will focus on two passages in particular: first, on the opening exchange between the sisters (*Antigone* 1-99), and second, on the conversation between Creon and the two sisters following the exposure of Polynices' burial and Creon's condemnation of Antigone (*Antigone* 531-581). Close attention to these key exchanges between the sisters will illuminate both characters, and their reception by Creon. Thus, my examination endeavors to provide a nuanced assessment of Sophocles' representation and utilization of female characters and their interactions, both with family and society, as well as suggest how the playwright engages this literary mechanism to explore contemporary attitudes and events within the Athenian political context.

Works Cited

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