

Passive Resistance in *Antigone*

The role of Ismene, Antigone's less overtly daring sister, is often oversimplified in studies of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Ismene is typically written off as a foil to Antigone, serving to emphasize the transgressive masculine behavior of her sister (Kirkpatrick 2011; Kirkwood 1958; Foley 2001). In such readings, she is both a lens through which we better understand Antigone and Antigone's actions, and a paradigm of "proper" femininity, exhibiting the submissive qualities expected of Athenian women (Kirkwood 195; Tyrrell and Bennett 1998). This paper argues that Ismene has a much more complex role than these approaches suggest. Through a close analysis of Ismene's own words and actions, as well as Creon's description of Ismene in lines 531-5, this paper contends that Ismene represents a more subtle form of gender transgression than Antigone.

This paper draws upon scholarship exploring the concept of "passive resistance," which argues that lack of power and dramatic action does not necessarily equate weakness (Kirkpatrick 2011). Ismene articulates a clear understanding of her place in the political and social hierarchy of the world she lives in, and the possible dangers that women face for breaking the rules (*Ant.* 59-68). Her statement should not be taken as an endorsement of traditional gender roles, however, because she ultimately advises her sister not to abandon her plans for burying their brother, but to perform the action secretly, without public proclamation (*Ant.* 84-5). This is not the bold, public form of resistance that Antigone wishes to undertake, but it is, nevertheless, a transgressive stance. Ismene is advocating a subtle form of resistance, one that utilizes discretion and caution. Antigone may not recognize Ismene as a fellow dissident, but Ismene is far from her opposite.

This paper further argues that Creon recognizes Ismene as dangerous and transgressive, and that his description of her as a snake underscores that she should not be interpreted as Antigone's foil (*Ant.* 531-5). This description portrays Ismene as a threat to her household, and demonstrates that her more subtle form of resistance is no less alarming in the eyes of Creon. Therefore, Sophocles is not presenting us with Ismene and Antigone as the correct and incorrect paths for women to follow, but rather as two sides of the same, equally dangerous, coin. Both Ismene and Antigone are destabilizing forces, and neither woman represents an ideal for Athenian women to look up to. Ismene, just as the snake that she is compared to, needs to be subdued as well for the sake of order

Bibliography

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