Democracy Rising: Gender and *Genos* in the Not-so-Minor Characters of Sophocles' *Antigone*

In two centuries of post-Hegel Antigone criticism, few have paid any interest to Antigone's sister Ismene or Creon's son Haemon. Those who do tend to figure the "minor" characters as representing political or gender normativity. I argue instead that Ismene and Haemon each transgress conventions of gender and class offered by their more studied counterparts, and embody a more compassionate kind of democratic citizenship. Through these not-so-minor characters, Sophocles exposes, and critiques, the limitations of a political order shaped by such rigid social roles.

For some, *Antigone* dramatizes the divide between οἶκος and πόλις between an elite, enslaving female and an elite, enslaving male: Antigone fights to perform customary funeral rites for her dead brother, while Creon subordinates his family to his power and his political edict. Antigone, however, is far more concerned with αἷμα [blood] and the fact that she is εὐγενής [well-born] than she is concerned with the household. For Antigone, burying Polyneices is about honoring her noble origin—her γένος—and ensuring the house of Oedipus is not disgraced (further than it already has been, that is).

This essay will explore how Sophocles challenges intersecting notions of gender and class that define femininity by its distance from the πόλις and masculinity by its proximity through the characters of Ismene and Haemon. Though Antigone does transgress by speaking and acting in the πόλις, through her language she establishes and defends an apolitical—literally, ἄπόλις (370)—devotion to her γένος and constructs her identity as a woman by her connections to family, both dead and alive. For Antigone, family is determined by a nexus of terms, including φιλία [affectionate regard; friendship], φύσις [nature], αἷμα [blood], τὸ κοινόν [the

common], and νόμος [custom; law]. To show how Ismene departs from Antigone in her gender performance, I will track how Ismene makes use of these words and their cognates to a different end from Antigone. Ismene never even obliquely references some words (γένος, αἷμα) and she posits a separate, more democratic understanding of φύσις, νόμος, and τὸ κοινόν: e.g., her φύσις [nature] is not as a member of the polluted house of Oedipus, but as a woman in the Theban social order; and νόμος is not household custom, but the law. Ismene thus positions herself as in support of the city rather than the γένος.

After discussing how Ismene constructs her gender identity through more democratic language, I will turn to Haemon, who poses a parallel challenge to his father Creon's notion of a πόλις-centered elite masculinity. In *Antigone*, Creon warns his son about the danger of an "evil wife [γυνὴ κακὴ]" (651) and extols the virtue of obedient children (642), who might help their father, and their πόλις most of all. Family, however, is not seen in such utilitarian terms by Haemon. He loves Antigone, and would rather act in accordance with γένος-centered principles than remain loyal to the city. Unlike in Ismene, Sophocles does not articulate the corresponding difference in Haemon through the aforementioned terms. Rather, it is Haemon's final act—killing himself, so that he might be wedded to Antigone in death—that responds to his father's anti-οἶκος kind of masculinity.

Both Ismene and Haemon distinguish themselves from Antigone and Creon most clearly in the way loyalty to either the γένος or the οἶκος shapes their identity. I will thus trace how each character understands relationships, both those that are consanguine and those that are more social, to make sense of their intersecting performances of gender and class. It becomes clear that Sophocles uses minor characters to subvert the limited gender performances of Antigone and Creon. Far from representing "conventional femininity," masculinity, and so too nobility, Ismene

and Haemon actually respond to their counterparts, and challenge ideas of gender that align women with the household and men with the city. In portraying two characters who gesture toward less limited kinds of gendered and classed citizenships, Sophocles envisions a more democratic social order.

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