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ISMENE'S FORCED CHOICE: SACRIFICE AND SORORITY IN SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE*¹

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Alyssa Peterson (C Company, 311th Military Intelligence BN, 101st Airborne), one of the first female US soldiers to die in Iraq: “Appalled when ordered to take part in interrogations that, no doubt, involved what we would call torture, she refused, then killed herself a few days later, in September 2003 . . . According to the official report on her death released the following year, she had earlier been ‘reprimanded’ for showing ‘empathy’ for the prisoners. One of the most moving parts of that report is: ‘She said that she did not know how to be two people; she . . . could not be one person in the cage and another outside the wire.’ Peterson was then assigned to the base gate, where she monitored Iraqi guards, and was sent to suicide prevention training. But on the night of September 15th, 2003, Army

1 I am indebted to the students in my graduate and undergraduate seminars at Northwestern in the 2008 Winter quarter, where I first developed the ideas here presented, and to Paul Allen Miller for reading at that point a very early draft from someone he did not know and taking the time to encourage pursuit of what I called at the time “my crazy reading.” I am grateful as well to audiences at colloquia at Oxford University (the Political Theory Colloquium run by Chris Brooke, June 2009), including, in particular, Josephine Quinn; the University of Miami, Ohio faculty seminar commemorating Linda Singer (March 2010)—and especially there to Madlyn Detloff and Deborah Lyons; and the School of Criticism and Theory (Cornell, June 2010); as well as two readers for *Arethusa*. I thank for their encouragement at the early and late stages of writing, respectively, Jill Frank and Amanda Anderson. Rachel Ricci and Diego Rossello prepared the final manuscript for publication.

investigators concluded she shot and killed herself with her service rifle.”—Greg Mitchell (2009)

Ismene: Such wretched straits.

Oedipus: Hers [Antigone’s] and mine?

Ismene: And mine too, my pain the third.

Oedipus at Colonus

Efforts to think about politics and, especially, political dissidence in the last forty years in virtually all scholarly disciplines almost invariably encounter or remobilize Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles’ fifth-century play. Perhaps no element of the play’s reception history is more settled than the belief that Antigone’s sister, Ismene, is anti-political and lacks the courage or imagination to act when called upon to do so. Critics split the two sisters into active and passive characters. The contrast highlights the exceptionality of Antigone, dramatizing her (in)human boldness in the face of impossibility. It also calls attention to the dimensions of tragedy most favored by humanists and anti-humanists alike: the tragic thwarting of human aspiration and the isolation of the tragic hero by forces beyond the control of any individual, be these the gods, powerful men, or the cursed fate of one’s family line. For humanists, tragedy performs the paradoxically impossible when the art form makes meaning out of man’s insignificance. For anti-humanists, tragedy is the non-redemptive genre that explores human ambition and desire but then confronts the protagonists with the inevitable demise that destroys the human illusion of grandiosity.

Humanist and anti-humanist receptions converge in their tendency to orient readers and spectators away from tragedy’s political implications and toward an ethics, or what Nicole Loraux in *The Mourning Voice* calls (2002.26) an anti-politics of shared suffering or (for Lacanians) desire. Still others, including Loraux in her earlier work, seek the politics of tragedy in the fifth-century context or in its later receptions.² Often neglected is tragedy’s own exploration of the problem of political agency as action under conditions of (near) impossibility. Those who do seek in tragedy some instructive exploration of political agency, political theorists, tend to fasten on the humanists’ solitary heroine of conscience in Sophocles’ play or on Creon, the isolated (anti-)hero, as exemplars of political action, distracting attention from those elements of most concern to democratic theory: solidarity or

2 Loraux 1986, 1998, Hall 1991, Zeitlin 1992, Leonard 2005, and Goldhill 2006.

action in concert among equals. Indeed, political theorists vary in celebrating or faulting Antigone, but all agree she lacks any interest in mobilizing others to form a public. Both classicists and democratic theorists, even those who admire her, criticize her for being too self-centered or principled to a fault.³

The interpretation of *Antigone* offered here, developed as a close reading of the text, adds to the possibilities of political reception by highlighting dimensions of political agency heretofore unnoted in the play. This is done by sharpening the focus on action rather than suffering, words spoken rather than keening lamentation, and solidarity or intimacy over isolation and heroic action. This interpretation is promoted assertively in order to establish its viability against the likely incredulity of readers, but it aims to add to the uncertainties already circulating in Sophocles' text, not to override them, and this not out of a commitment to textual uncertainty or instability as such, but rather out of fidelity to a multilayered and endlessly fascinating text/performance. Moreover, the aim is to intervene not only in the play's philosophical and philological reception history but also in its dramaturgical reception. That is, this reading has implications for the play's staging and performance, suggesting that, in this instance, the repertoire, to use Diana Taylor's terms, may find new bearings in the archive.⁴

"WE ARE NOT BORN TO CONTEND WITH MEN": ISMENE'S RECEPTION HISTORY⁵

In the play's first scene, Antigone knows what she has to do, but she does not just go out and do it. She turns to Ismene seeking help, and despite the claims of centuries of interpretation that treat Ismene as a passive, compliant character, Ismene puts up quite a fight when she hears her sister's plans. In what follows, I read the play through the prism of this first scene in which Antigone responds to Ismene's entreaties by rejecting her sister and swearing an abiding inhospitality to her forevermore ("I'd never welcome you in the labor, not with me" (70 [83]).

3 Euben 1997.139–76, Elshtain 1983.61–75.

4 Taylor 2003. For an appreciative performance-centered response to Taylor, see Worthen 2008.10–33.

5 All citations are from Fagles' 1982 translation. References to the play put the Greek lines first, with the lines from Fagles' translation second, in brackets. For her help with this, I am grateful to Demetra Kasimis. Not trained in classics, I have checked all references against numerous translations and consulted classics scholars to be sure no interpretative weight rests on an idiosyncratic translation.

Antigone's apparent brutality toward her sister seems to conflict with Antigone's later claim that she was "born to join in love, not hate" (523 [590]). And Ismene's late effort to share her sister's fate seems out of place given her character-defining refusal in the play's first scene to defy Creon. These puzzles are solved by the reading developed here in which the sisters act in coordination beneath the radar of Creon's sovereignty. Reading the play with and against Alenka Zupančič's treatment, which elaborates on Jacques Lacan's account of ethics, I argue there is a case to be made for treating Ismene and Antigone as ethical and political actors, and one benefit of this approach is that it shows that established interpretations are driven by certain contestable humanist assumptions about agency, power, and politics.

Lacan does not himself grant ethical agency to Ismene. In this he is not alone. For centuries, Ismene has been cast as the inert, drab backdrop against which her more colorful sister stands out. Antigone is active, Ismene passive; Antigone is heroic, Ismene cowardly, argue conventional readings. Slavoj Žižek preserves them (1989.116–17):

We must oppose all attempts to domesticate her, to tame [Antigone] by concealing the frightening strangeness, "inhumanity," a-pathetic character of her figure, making her a gentle protectress of her family and household who evokes our compassion and offers herself as a point of identification. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the figure with which we can identify is her sister Ismene—kind, considerate, sensitive, prepared to give way and compromise, pathetic, "human" in contrast to Antigone, who goes to the limits, who doesn't give way on her desire (Lacan) and becomes, in this persistence in the "death drive," in the being-toward-death, frighteningly, ruthlessly exempted from the circle of everyday feelings and consideration, passions and fears.⁶

The splitting of Ismene and Antigone into passive and active characters, human-all-too-human and monstrous, oriented to survival or sacrifice, recurs even when the conventional takes on the two sisters are revalued. For example, Jill Frank argues that Ismene is not withdrawn or

⁶ Žižek's criticism of the idea that Antigone is a "gentle protectress of her family and household" (the guardian role to which Antigone is often consigned) is echoed by Alenka Zupančič. I think Antigone can be protective without necessarily being "gentle."

weak: she is patient and bides her time while Antigone, by contrast, is too quick to act, too fiery and thunderously loud to be truly effective (2006). Mary Rawlinson criticizes feminists for deriding Ismene's focus on survival in favor of Antigone's heroic martyrdom (n.d.). Ismene's this-worldly orientation is actually more valuable to feminism than her sister's sacrificial desire, Rawlinson concludes.

But Ismene does more than survive. She sacrifices herself in her own way when she responds creatively to a series of forced choices, and this is in keeping with, not in opposition to, what Alenka Zupančič casts as a Lacanian ethics of creativity and “forced choice” (1998). Indeed, I argue here that Zupančič’s treatment of Lacan invites an assessment of Antigone’s supposedly ordinary sister different from the one Lacan and his followers like Žižek and Zupančič give. When Ismene, who wants to die with Antigone, agrees to go on living without her, Ismene does not (contra Lacan, Žižek, and various feminist readers of the play) choose survival and avoid death. Instead, she performs what Lacan calls an ethical act: she confronts her own limit and does not back down. Her limit is not death but rather a living death: to go on living in the house of her sister’s killer, Creon. This is Ismene’s second forced choice, and she does not avoid it. As we shall see, she does not avoid the first forced choice pressed upon her either, and in relation to that one, she is creative.

The first forced choice, set in motion by Creon’s edict, is cast by Antigone as a choice between flagrant disobedience or cowardly withdrawal: will Ismene help bury Polynices or not? As I will show, here too Ismene finds a way to act otherwise, in keeping with Zupančič’s Lacanian ethics. But Ismene moves ultimately beyond ethics as such and into politics: a close reading of Sophocles’ play suggests that the two sisters act in concert in ways that are complementary not competitive—or both.

The play’s subtleties are worth attending to as democratic and feminist theorists continue to work through our centuries’ long relationship with Antigone and her receptions. Antigone is not just the familial heroine of burial and the guardian of the dead celebrated by Hegel for her service to her brother (1977.275), nor a witness protesting the injustice of her brother’s reduction to bare life, as readers of Giorgio Agamben might put it (1998). Nor are her actions best seen as vindications of would-be extra-political universals such as the ontological fact of mortality in light of which we are all positioned as mortal (White 2009) or the vulnerability that makes us all grievable (Butler 2004). Antigone may be all these things, but she is also—and more importantly for democratic and feminist theory—a

partisan sororal actor. Antigone ultimately sacrifices herself not just for the disgraced “ungrievable” (as Butler puts it) dead brother but also for a living equal: her sister. Antigone avows this sacrifice when she tells Ismene to go on living and says, “My death will be enough” (547 [617]). And Ismene subtly acknowledges her sister’s gift by ceasing at that point to remonstrate with her and accepting her own fate. The idea that political action is heroic has blinded us to the sisters’ actions in concert and perhaps also to sororal powers in the world around us. Such limited views of political agency are well tested by rereading the very play that has to some extent undergirded them and whose conventional interpretation is undergirded by them.

Antigone’s sacrifice is usually assumed to be on behalf of the much talked about heroic and dead brother, Polynices, not for the sake of the still living, quiet, and anti-heroic sister, Ismene. I document the text’s suggestions that we would do well to look past Polynices and reconsider this portrait of Ismene. The dead brother is the object around whom the sisters connect and contend rather than the crucible that only divides them. And we unearth the sororal collusion at the play’s center by attending less to formal law and more to practice, less to the edict against burying Polynices (the focus of so much *Antigone* scholarship) and more to the two transgressive burials of Polynices (the focus of very little of the scholarship). This helps cast Ismene’s subtle agency into sharper relief, while also treating the two burials as distinct. Rather than, as is usually done, casting the first as a failure that is corrected or completed by the second burial, we see each as accomplishing something unique.

My argument begins by way of a close reading of Sophocles’ text and related commentary, then turns to extend that reading and consider its political implications in light of Jacques Lacan’s (1992) and Bernard Williams’ very different but overlapping treatments of ethics as the impossible negotiation of tragic dilemmas or forced choices (Williams and Smart 1973, Williams 1993). I close with a discussion of the distinctively sororal power in the play and in its reception, establishing some critical distance between this work and Simon Goldhill’s recent call (2006) to explore the power of sorority for thinking politically.

“I DON’T DENY A THING”: THE PROBLEM OF THE TWO BURIALS

Sophocles’ *Antigone* turns on the prohibition by Creon, ruler of Thebes, against burying Polynices and on the subsequent violations of Creon’s

edict. The violations are plural. Creon's edict is violated twice. The first time, at night, unwitnessed, someone performs a symbolic burial ritual: the body is not buried but dusted.⁷ The story of what happened that first time is told to Creon by a sentry, a sighted man who did not see it, in a scene that mirrors a later scene with Tiresias, a sightless man who sees all. Creon accuses both men of selling out for money. In both instances, the charge is false, and Creon's impatience with both characters is a clue that he will misread the signs they bring to him. In the case of the sentry's first scene, the signs have also been misread by critics ever since.

The sentry explains to Creon that he and his companions, posted by Creon to guard the body and prevent anyone from burying it, somehow failed to see something that must have happened right before their eyes. Someone came in the night and sprinkled dust over the body of Polynices in clear violation of Creon's edict. Creon suspects the guards of corruption and sends the sentry back to his post at the corpse site with strict instructions to find the offender (they also re-expose the corpse, though it is unclear they were instructed to do so).

The sentry soon returns to Creon with a prisoner: Antigone. Although the sentry congratulates himself on finding the culprit, his success is not a product of good detective work but rather of good fortune. There was a second violation of Creon's edict—a second burial. And this time Antigone was caught in the act; the guards witnessed her performing the rites for Polynices. In the ensuing scene with Creon and in centuries of interpretation since, the assumption is that this second act of burial was committed by the same person who performed the first. In fact, the mystery of the first burial is never solved.

The text does not explicitly contradict the assumption that Antigone committed both violations, but it does offer some suggestions that it might have been worth looking elsewhere for suspects, perhaps beyond the obvious or maybe right at the obvious (a counsel also apt in Oedipus's case in a later Sophoclean tragedy). The subtle suggestions in the play become more forceful once we ask *why* was Polynices buried a *second* time? Readers have over the years provided answers that support Creon's assumption that Antigone performed both burials, preventing the mystery of the first burial from becoming too pressing. For example, noting that in the first

⁷ On Creon's treatment of the dead body in the context of fifth-century burial politics, see Honig 2009. On the dusting, see Jacobs 2008.

burial, the body was only dusted, but that in the second, Antigone pours libations, Richard Jebb infers (1900, on verse 429) that Antigone must have returned because she had earlier forgotten the libations and needed them to complete the rite.⁸

Another possibility is that since the corpse had been unburied by the guards after the first burial, Antigone wanted to reperform the ceremony, to undo their undoing. This is Gilbert Norwood's suggestion: Antigone's performance of the second burial is a mark of her stubborn obsession with keeping her brother's body covered (1928.140, cited in Rose 1952.251 n. 7). Seeing the body re-exposed, she buried it again and so opened the series of events that ultimately led from one death to the next. The sentry's claim that Antigone, upon seeing the body, called down curses on the heads of those who had done "the work" may be seen to support Norwood. If Antigone cursed those who had unburied Polynices, this intimates that she knew about the first burial, presumably because she had performed it. However, the work she curses might be not the un-burial but simply the work of outlawing the burial: leaving the body unburied, guarding it, and so on, all of which led to the decay and decomposition that are cause enough for Antigone's cursing when she arrives, possibly for the first time, at the site.

Another reason for a second burial could be that Antigone's aim was not yet achieved. If her goal was not only to bury Polynices but also to stand up to Creon, she had reason to return. Indeed, this is Creon's perspective, which continues to frame critical receptions of the play: "This girl was an old hand at insolence when she overrode the edicts we made public. But once she had done it—the insolence, twice over—to glory in it, laughing, mocking us to our face with what she'd done. I am not the man, not now: she is the man if this victory goes to her and she goes free" (480–85 [536–42]). On a reading that accents Creon's claim, Antigone

⁸ Cf. Rose 1952.219–51. Hame 2008.11 argues that "Antigone on her own can provide only a limited number of funeral procedures for her brother in two separate visits to his body: sprinkling of dust on the body (*Ant.* 245–47, 255–56, 429) and pouring libations (*Ant.* 430–31). The rites Antigone is able to perform for Polyneikes are interpreted in the play as equivalent to burial. Antigone thus assumed responsibility for her brother's funeral rites and, although she was unable to perform preparatory rites, she did complete the main act of burial." Hame is right to point to the difference between the first and second "burials," but she does not comment on why dust and libations would be performed in two separate visits to the corpse. That is the *very* problem Jebb sought to solve. On Jebb's and other solutions to the problem of the second burial, see Rose 1952.219–23 and 245–51. For further sources, see Hame 2008, notes 37 and 38.

does not *want* to get away with her crime and is dismayed to think she has done so. When she realizes the soldiers might never catch her after the first burial, she comes back to do it again precisely so as to get caught in the act. This reading is not contradicted by the text, but neither is it given much support. Antigone never boasts about the two burials, nor is she represented in such unheroic terms that it is really credible that she would try once to defy Creon, fail (or forget the libations!), and have to try again. Still, this reading has one merit: it shows that the issue may not be just about Polynices. On this reading, Polynices is also an occasion for a political clash Antigone seeks to stage.

More suggestively, we might treat Antigone's second burial of Polynices in psychoanalytic terms. Creon's edict and Ismene's refusal deprive Antigone of the satisfactions burial provides survivors, trapping her in melancholy (Honig 2008). Failing fully to bury Polynices, she can achieve only a simulacrum of the proper rites, and so she acts out a repetition compulsion that might have gone on forever had it not been interrupted by her arrest. This interpretation finds support in, or lends support to, the claim that there is, "a repetition compulsion at the heart of the tragic theme" (Bronfen 2008.287, citing Cavell 1976.310).

This last is similar to the reading offered by J. L. Rose, who maintains that the solution to the problem of the second burial is solved by a close examination of Antigone as a tragic character obsessed by one idea: "Antigone's complete absorption in one idea or interest is manifested in her passionate support of what she considers right and in her courageous love of her dear ones," says Rose, drawing for support on A. C. Bradley's discussion of Shakespeare's tragic characters and further splitting the two sisters: "Strength and conviction and intensity of feeling attain in [Antigone] a great force. When she is brought into conflict with a selfish person, like Ismene, the utter unselfishness and self-sacrifice of her nature stand out clearly" (Rose 1952.221, citing Bradley 1929.20).

Thus it is possible to resolve the mystery of *why two burials?* without departing too far from conventional interpretations. But the focus on solving the problem of the second burial has distracted attention from the rather more productive problem of the first. And there is some evidence to suggest that the first burial was not done by Antigone.

First, when Antigone is caught by the guards and then brought before Creon, she does not only confess, she also is said not to deny violating Creon's edict. Confession and non-denial are not exactly the same thing, as Judith Butler also points out in the context of a different argument

(2000.8, 33). “We interrogated her,” the sentry says, describing the scene at the corpse site, “charging her with offenses past and present—she stood up to it all, denied nothing” (432–35 [482–84]). Again, when Creon asks if she buried the corpse and she says, “I did it, I don’t deny a thing” (443 [492]), what shall we make of these non-denials? They could be the civil disobedient’s classic confession, which takes entire responsibility and is anticipated by Antigone’s earlier admonition to her sister in the play’s first scene to shout the crime out “from the rooftops” and “tell the world” rather than hide it and keep it a secret (86–87 [100–01]). Or we could see some care, some crafting in the language. Does “I did it” go to the second burial? And “I don’t deny a thing,” which is not the same as “I did it,” go to the first?

If Antigone did not perform the first burial, the sentries’ charges might be the first she has heard of it, and she might well be confused as she stands there accused, first by the guards, then by Creon. “*What past offenses?*” she might be silently wondering, denying nothing but not affirming anything either, since she did not, in fact, commit all the crimes with which she is charged. Confusion may be evident in her posture as she stands accused before Creon. After hearing the sentry’s report, Creon says to her, “You, with your eyes fixed on the ground—speak up” (441–42 [489–91]). “Eyes fixed on the ground” is how the sentry describes himself and his comrades when they realize after the first burial that someone must go tell Creon his edict has been violated: “One man spoke out and made us *stare at the ground*, hanging our heads in fear” (268–70 [305–06]). In the context of the play, this is a posture of cowardice, out of character for Antigone. Perhaps, then, it is a sign of something else. Might Antigone avert her face from Creon to hide confusion?⁹ While the sentry speaks of

9 Critics explain it, as Boegehold 1999.19–23 shows, but they resort to claims that she is ashamed of her action or scared of Creon. That is, they try to make sense of the Greek term for lowered head at the expense of what we know to be the case about Antigone, who is neither ashamed nor frightened. Boegehold argues that her “eyes on the ground” signifies a gesture of nodding—in this instance in agreement with the sentry’s charges as he makes them upon entering; her resistance to Creon, in his presence, wordless, begins immediately. Boegehold thus distinguishes, as do I, between the cowardly downward glances of the sentries and the nodding of Antigone. Some alternative explanation (perhaps mine) might be called for, however, by the vase noted by Boegehold in the final footnote of his paper that depicts Antigone with head lowered as two guards bring her before Creon: “She is nodding, saying Yes,” Boegehold says. “If she were showing shame or guilt or confusion, she would be covering her face with her himation.” (Surely, though, this is more clearly the case for shame or guilt than for confusion.) “This should be clear enough,” he goes on,

an earlier burial she knows nothing about, she may listen and think about how to handle the questions that will inevitably follow.

When Antigone says, “I cannot deny it,” is she wondering: “Did someone else bury Polynices before I got there? But who?” She does not know; the first she heard of that first burial, she was standing in front of the sentries, called to account for “offenses past and present” (433 [483]). Antigone has no way to find out more. She can’t ask her accusers. She thought she acted alone, but now it seems perhaps there is another. She won’t betray that secret supporter by calling attention to the mystery of the first burial, nor will she lie and say she did it.

More to the point, the style of the first burial is not at all in keeping with Antigone’s character. Her “shout-it-from-the-rooftops” attitude is hardly in evidence in the secret nocturnal performance so quietly performed that the guards miss it.

Did someone else bury Polynices? But who? Who has motive, opportunity, and with whose character is this particular performance of the crime well fitted? The chorus hazards a guess to Creon, “Could this possibly be the work of the gods?” (279 [316]). But the possibility is so thoroughly dismissed by Creon that no one in the play and few critics since dare revive it for serious consideration.¹⁰ “Stop—before you make me choke with anger—the gods! You, you’re senile, must you be insane?

. . . Exactly when did you last see the gods celebrating traitors? Inconceivable!” (280–83, 288–89 [317–19, 326–27]). Creon is cutting: “Tell me, was it for meritorious service that they proceeded to bury him, prized him so?” (284–85 [321–22]). Insisting that Antigone is solely responsible for both burials, Creon makes it unthinkable that anyone *else*—divine or human—might be responsible for the first one. If we assume, as the sentry clearly wants us to and as Creon does, that Antigone performed both burials, then the case is neatly solved. Antigone is a lone burial zealot, and we need not worry, as the chorus does, about the gods.

But there is also another possibility, less thinkable to the chorus, and less imaginable to audiences through the ages: what if Ismene did it?

“but a convention of the times was for a painter to represent honorable women as looking downward. And so the illustration is ambivalent” (1999.23 n. 15).

10 Segal is one of few to consider it seriously (1981, 1995). Jacobs 2008.1–26 notes with interest efforts to establish the non-overlap between Antigone’s agency and the gods’ (Benardete 1999) or the contiguity of their actions (Steiner 1996).

“KEEP IT A SECRET”: IF ISMENE DID IT

If Ismene did it, we no longer need to puzzle out why Antigone might have buried Polynices twice, nor why the gods would intervene, seemingly settling too early the question posed by this tragedy, that of the (in)justice of Polynices’ exposure. Instead, we have *two sisters, two burials*. And each is done in the characteristic style of each sister. The first, Ismene-like, sub rosa, quiet, under cover of darkness, performed exactly to a tee as Ismene counseled Antigone to do it in the play’s first scene: “Then don’t, at least, blurt this out to anyone. Keep it a secret” (84–85 [98–99]).¹¹ The second, true to Antigone, is performed with loud keening and vengeful cries out in the open, in the noontime sun: “The sun stood dead above our heads, a huge white ball in the noon sky, beating, blazing down,” the sentry tells Creon (415–17 [460–62]).

But how can this be? Didn’t Ismene express horror and shock at the thought of defying Creon? Didn’t she try to dissuade Antigone from committing this very act? Didn’t she opt for human over divine law? Didn’t she express confidence that the dead would forgive her this very choice?

Ismene did indeed say all these things. But she said still more. At the end of their harsh and typically sororal exchange in the first scene, Ismene declares her love for Antigone.¹² Perhaps alone on stage, perhaps in her sister’s silent presence, Ismene says: “Then go if you must, but rest assured, wild, irrational as you are, my sister, you are truly dear to the ones who love you” (99–100 [114–16]). How should we read these lines? How should they be performed? Historically, the lines have been taken to convey a passive declaration of unconditional but resigned love for her impossible, impetuous sister. But imagine this: Ismene says the lines thoughtfully, as if a new idea is coming to her, a plan is forming. When she says, “You are truly dear to the ones who love you,” it is not a regretful apology, not a request for forgiveness or understanding, not an indulgent or resigned, “Whatever you do, we love you anyway,” but a statement of still emerg-

¹¹ The furtiveness of the first burial is noted in the sentry’s report: “Someone’s just buried it, then run off” (245–46 [278]).

¹² Typically sororal in that sisters fight like cats and dogs and soon again are best friends. Thus it is not difficult to make sense of the fact that Antigone “moves from a passionate appeal to the normativity of sisterhood to an equally total rejection of her sister. From intense recognition to no recognition at all, from common blood to refusing the claim of the common.” Simon Goldhill, whom I quote here, says this is a symptom of fifth-century shifts in family form (2006.157–58), a claim I decenter below.

ing resolve and a reflection on what love *calls* for. Ismene may with these words show a plan in formation, an intention to do something—to stop her sister from the rash act that will surely bring about her death. Reflecting on her love for Antigone, Ismene may resolve to *do* something about it.

If she buried Polynices first, before Antigone could do it, Ismene may have hoped to save her sister from her fate, to make it unnecessary for her to take on Creon and risk her life. To do this, Ismene had to go beyond her keenly felt limits. Some limits were stubborn. Just like her sister, Ismene, too, is unable to lift the body alone. She can only give it, at best, the ritual dusting the sentry describes to Creon. Unlike her sister, Ismene is not inclined to transgress Creon's law. She sees no honor here, only danger and reckless disobedience. So she takes the smaller risk of a stealthy nocturnal act. Still, she gives up the idea that women are "not born to contend with men," that submission is the sisters' lot (61–62 [75]). If she did bury Polynices, she did it not from political principle but for her sister, and possibly for her brother as well. Perhaps a secret nocturnal burial would be enough to rest Polynices' soul (and, not coincidentally, a nocturnal act conforms more closely to the fifth-century requirements that prohibit daytime performance of certain funerary practices). Perhaps it would be enough to stop Antigone taking the risks of a public transgressive action. (Was there, perhaps, also a tad of sibling rivalry in Ismene's doing it first? Perhaps no more than in Antigone's need to do it better, louder, more heroically.)

This reading accounts well, also, for the cries emitted by Ismene when Antigone is taken prisoner (491 [548–49]). Ismene would mourn her sister's fate in any case. But she would surely mourn it all the more passionately had she risked herself to avert it. Her cries are so loud and unsettling that Creon comments on them: "I just saw her inside, hysterical, gone to pieces. It never fails: the mind convicts itself in advance, when scoundrels are up to no good, plotting in the dark" (491–94 [549–52]). These lines are commonly taken to be more of Creon's paranoia by readers who assume Ismene's incontrovertible innocence and passivity. But if she is not innocent, then Creon's lines may signal a quintessentially tragic stumbling on a truth just barely out of reach.

Creon shows some perhaps dim awareness of the twinned and complementary character of the two burials and the two buriers when he says, first of Ismene, that she has been "plotting in the dark" (494 [552]) and then adds, regarding Antigone: "Oh but I hate it more when a traitor, caught red-handed, tries to glorify his crimes" (495–96 [552–54]). One

sister was quiet and surreptitious, the other flaunted her crime flagrantly. Accusing Ismene “of an equal part in scheming this, this burial” (489–90 [547–48]), Creon at this moment intends to punish both women while distinguishing their levels of culpability in a single crime. He is focused here on the planning (in which he believes Ismene is implicated) and the action (of Antigone), but his words work as a perfectly tragic double-entendre. He could just as well be speaking of two crimes, two burials: the first performed in stealth, “in the dark,” and the other, “caught red-handed,” out in the open. If the sisters’ guilt is “equal,” as he insists, in spite of the fact that, as he says, one only planned the deed while the other carried it out, perhaps Creon senses something else may be the case: their crimes, though not identical, are actually not that different: *two sisters, two burials*.

This is the moment at which Creon commands that Ismene, until now in this scene heard but not seen, be brought from the palace: “Bring her here!” (491 [548]). Antigone responds by frantically trying to distract him. Like someone seeking to save another from a raging bull, she waves a red flag in his face and calls his wrath upon herself: “Creon, what more do you want than my arrest and execution?” (497 [555]), and sure enough, he falls for it: “Nothing. Then I have it all” (498 [556]). To which Antigone, still protecting her sister by focusing the bull’s enraged gaze on herself, says: “Then why delay?” That is, why wait for Ismene to be brought from the palace? And then to keep his focus, Antigone provokes him further: “Your moralizing repels me . . . Enough. Give me glory!” (499–502 [557–61]) she says, before goading him one last time. Turning to the chorus, she calls him a tyrant who rules by fear (505–06 [565–66]). But her effort to monopolize his wrath falls short.

“I DID IT—YES”: ISMENE SPEAKS

The question of Ismene’s fate is not settled by the time she arrives on the scene. As she enters, Creon turns his attention fully to her, once again stumbling, unknowingly, on some truths: “You—in my own house, you viper, slinking undetected, sucking my life-blood! I never knew I was breeding twin disasters, the two of you rising up against my throne. Come, tell me, will you confess your part in the crime or not? Answer me. Swear to me” (531–35 [598–603]). Having indeed slunk, undetected, to perform the first burial of Polynices, Ismene now speaks out loud: “I did it, yes” (536 [604]).

Why has no one for hundreds of years or more taken her at her word?¹³ She confessed. Not only does she not deny it, she actually avows it.

Perhaps her confession is overlooked because, on other readings that treat Ismene as a quiet, passive woman who cannot think of challenging Creon's authority, this late effort to share her sister's fate seems so wildly out of character that it almost demands to be discounted. As Creon (whose perspective will subtly frame the critical reception of these scenes for centuries) said earlier, she must surely be "hysterical" (492 [549]). Ismene also abets the blindness of those who claim she lacks agency. No sooner has she confessed than she seems to take it back: "I did it, yes—if only she consents—I share the guilt, the consequences too" (536–37 [604]). Why the proviso, "if only she consents?" If Ismene did do it, why does she need Antigone's consent? If Ismene did not do it, why does she say she did?

Most critics focus on the last question and try to account for how it is that Ismene here shows courage that, on their readings, she earlier lacked. But focusing on the first question: why the proviso, "if only she consents?" we may find a clue in the play's first scene. Ismene has refused to help Antigone bury Polynices and has tried to persuade Antigone away from her course using every possible rhetorical tactic, reminding her of the ignominious fates of their father, mother, and brothers, underscoring their limitations as women and underlings dependent upon the hospitality of their uncle, and urging her sister to see that her plan is extreme. Antigone listens but is undeterred. And then, impatiently, harshly, she says, "I won't insist, no, even if you should have a change of heart, I'd never welcome you in the labor, not with me" (69–70 [82–83]). This withering rejection may still ring in Ismene's ears several scenes later. Ismene may have it in

13 There are two exceptions. After completing this essay, I was made aware by Jennet Kirkpatrick of a research note and a reference to it, both from 1911: Rouse 1911.40–42 and Harry 1911.3–46. Rouse's reading lights on some of the same details as mine (uncannily, he even borrows, as I do below, Shakespeare's "Methinks she doth protest too much")—but he does not treat the first burial in connection with the play's later development of the sororal relationship on which I focus here. The existence of this research note poses the question of why this reading has failed to penetrate *Antigone* scholarship. This failure goes to the power of critics' investments in Ismene's passivity. Kirkpatrick (n.d.) lights on the same possibility as I do here regarding the first burial, but she allies Ismene with the "weapons of the weak" literature (Scott 1987), which leads her to underline the contrast between the sisters, one powerful, the other weak. Moreover, as I note below, Kirkpatrick also treats the sisters' second scene in conventional terms. By contrast, for me, the possibility of Ismene's transgressive action invites a new consideration of sororal action in concert, largely ignored or dismissed by critics in spite of the text's support for it.

mind when she confesses her act and then seeks her sister's permission to confess. Ismene says, in effect: "I did have a change of heart. I did the labor. But because of what you said earlier, I won't confess without your consent. Won't you welcome me in after all?"

In Creon's "will you confess your part in the crime or not?," Ismene may hear an echo of Antigone's earlier: Are you "worth your breeding, Ismene, or a coward—for all your royal blood?" (37–38 [45–46]). At first, Ismene was unable to rise to the challenge. Seemingly frozen within the binary terms of Antigone's forced choice—hero or coward?—Ismene chose inaction. But then Ismene saw her way through. She is "neither-nor": a quiet actor willing to take some risks but not powerful enough to stem the tide of events. And now here, confronted with Creon's either-or, she again seeks a third way. Will she confess or not? Not for her the heroics of isolated autonomy. She will confess, but in order to do so, her sister must consent.¹⁴ And Antigone says yes, and no.

Antigone extends protection to her sister *and* refuses to allow her to confess. When Ismene earlier asked Antigone to keep her own transgressions a secret, Antigone mocked her sister, but here her gift to Ismene is the very secrecy Ismene wanted. For Antigone has now decided: she will sacrifice herself for her sister. The sisters then argue in front of Creon about whether Ismene should share Antigone's fate, and the argument is won by Antigone, who never utters her sister's name again. Antigone is often criticized for this. It is a sign of her coldness, critics say.¹⁵ But what if the erasure of Ismene is Antigone's gift to her, the gift of survival to the sister who initially sought to survive?

"WORDS ALONE": THE SISTERS' SECOND FIGHT

If Ismene did it, then the final scene between the two sisters takes on an incredible dramatic pathos (536–61 [604–31]). From the perspective of a

14 In other words, Ismene's confession, which depends on another's, is a speech act that combines constative and performative features. If such speech acts work, it is not in spite but rather because of that category-breaking commingling, as Derrida argues in "Declarations of Independence" (1986).

15 Garry Wills parses the conventional view: "She says it is the highest duty to be true to 'one's own' (*philoī*, not 'friends' merely, but family and allies—the adjective refers as well to one's own property or one's limbs); yet she turns with enmity on her sister, Ismene, when the latter says the burial cannot succeed (it doesn't), and then generously tries to join her in taking credit for the failed attempt at burial" (2004).

sororal agonism, Antigone's accusations against Ismene operate as a double-entendre that is nothing short of brilliant. Instead of a set of flat accusations leveled unlovingly to her unjustly despised sister (the dominant reading¹⁶), Antigone's words in this scene convey a series of complex realizations and strategies. Perhaps for the first time it is dawning on Antigone that Ismene, now ready to share her punishment, may be the performer of the first burial, still unexplained. When Ismene says, "I did it, yes," Antigone may hear her. Antigone, after all (on this reading), is the only one present who *knows for certain that she did not herself* perform the first burial. Antigone's response to Ismene, who went beyond her limits in the first burial, is to go beyond her own limits now: Antigone affirms the path she earlier demeaned as cowardly: that of survival.¹⁷

When Ismene says she wants a share in the deed, and Antigone will not consent, does Antigone belittle her sister? Or does she affirm her? Intonation is everything. And, indeed, the same words, differently delivered, could support either possibility: the line can be said with loving regret or with sneering disdain: "No, Justice will never suffer that—not you, you were unwilling. I never brought you in" (538–39 [605–06]).

But then surely the next lines suggest only disdain! "Who did the work? Let the dead and the god of death bear witness! *I have no love for a friend who loves in words alone*" (542–43 [610–11]). This speech may signal heartless rejection. But there is another possibility. With these words, Antigone neutralizes Ismene's confession, calling on the gods and the dead to negate Ismene's, "Yes, I did it." Only Ismene's second phrase, "if she consents," is left standing. And Antigone will not consent. The words of Ismene's confession thus cease to function as truth statements

16 Including Kirkpatrick, who claims Ismene performed the first burial, but then reverts, when it comes to the sisters' second scene, to the conventional reading: "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 worldviews wedge between them. While the invocation of *koinon autadelphon kara* at the beginning of the play raises the hope that they will act in concert, this optimism is dashed by the play's close" (n.d. 25; emphasis in original).

17 Antigone need not suspect Ismene's secret support regarding the first burial in order to be motivated to treat her sister in this last scene with the kindness and self-sacrifice I will attribute to her here. That is, my reading of this second scene as one of sororal action in concert does not depend upon my reading of Ismene as having performed the first burial, though, dramaturgically, establishing the possibility of Ismene's earlier action renders this later scene especially forceful.

and become, by dint of Antigone's dissent, the mere empty vessels Antigone accuses them of being: words alone. Notably, Antigone's own words are wounding, hence critics' distaste for the heroine in this scene. There is an interesting paradox here: the blunt force of Antigone's words belies her dismissal of words as powerless.

Antigone's dramatic, indeed melodramatic, speech may speak to the largeness of her character in Creon's newly small post-heroic Thebes. But it may also signal something else: a staged theatrical performance internal to the play whose addressee is not actually Ismene but rather Creon, who is himself right there witnessing it all. In this scene, Antigone plays out the sisters' divisions rather than their unity for Creon to witness. It is surely to him that the exculpatory, "I never brought you in" (539 [606]) is addressed. It is not, after all, news to Ismene. Ismene is the one person who would know it is false. Antigone did try to bring her sister in, and Ismene refused her.

When Ismene begs, "Oh no, my sister, don't reject me, please, let me die beside you, consecrating the dead together" (544–45 [613–14]), and Antigone responds with, "Never share my dying, don't lay claim to what you never touched," we can imagine her saying these words as a cold, demeaning rejection, but we can also hear them said with great tenderness, resignation, and sacrifice. It is a delicate line to walk, accenting the former for Creon, the latter for Ismene. But certain tones or gestures would make it work.

This approach is supported by the fact that when Ismene insists further on dying with Antigone, Antigone responds in a way that seems calculated to remind her sister that Creon is present. "What do I care for life, cut off from you?" Ismene says, recklessly making dangerously known once again her love for her sister. And Antigone, sensing the danger, moves to bring her to her senses: "Ask Creon. Your concern is all for him" (548–49 [617–18]). Is this not a coded way of saying, "Pssst, he is right here!" Ismene does not completely understand yet, but sensing the change in temper, she latches onto the falseness of the charge: "Why abuse me so? It doesn't help you now" (550 [619]). She is trying to sort it out. She asks the question to herself as well, not just to Antigone: "Why does my sister talk like this if it will not help her?" It won't. But it might help Ismene. And this Antigone makes clear immediately: "You're right," she says, "if I mock you, I get no pleasure from it, only pain" (551 [620–21]). Here Antigone hints broadly that her martyr's goal is now also to save Ismene, who should go on living. And it works. Ismene gives in, her next

line accepts Antigone's subtle instruction: "Tell me dear one, what can I do to help you even now?" (552 [622–23]). Antigone's answer is straightforward: "Save yourself. I don't begrudge you your survival" (553 [624]).¹⁸ It is a gift, a shift from her earlier position when she did, indeed, begrudge Ismene's focus on survival. Here that choice is affirmed not mocked, and it is clear that survival now is no longer the option it was earlier. When late in the day Antigone says, "My death will be enough," Ismene is asked to go on living in the household of the man responsible for her sister's death. "Save yourself" is a rough gift indeed.

Depending on their delivery, these lines may convey Antigone's insistence on protecting her sister. "Don't be a fool," she virtually whispers. (Simpson and Millar call it an "aside.")¹⁹ "Be quiet. Let me handle

18 Butler rejects the idea of female solidarity between Antigone and her sister, saying: "She owns the deed that she did, which is in itself a somewhat awesome thing: She's asserting that she is a sovereign subject who performs an act [i.e., she was not put up to it] and that it is her act and hers alone. And she won't let anyone else take credit for the act. Ismene tries to come in, claim solidarity, says: 'I'll say I did it too. Antigone says: No, no *you* didn't do it.' So it is not a notion of feminist solidarity that one derives from Antigone! I think that's one of the misappropriations one sees in Luce Irigaray and others" (Butler and Rabinow 2001.39). In response to Butler, I would note that Antigone's protest: "Never share my dying, don't lay claim to what you never touched," does not end there but rather with: "My death will be enough," which suggests she has made a calculation and is thinking not (just) about the rightness or justice of the claims of who did what but also about the consequences of owning the act. Also, Butler seems to share what she takes to be Antigone's perspective when she suggests Ismene's words are empty, or unearned, unconnected as they are to real actions. But we can read the charge as made by Antigone as intentionally false. All of this suggests, contra Butler, that the text allows for the possibility of solidarity, though of what sort remains an open question.

19 Hester 1971.30 cites Simpson and Millar for the view that Antigone's harshness is a device meant to save Ismene. Hester says critics are overly subtle in making this case, but Simpson and Millar's arguments (1948.78–81), which I discovered only after developing the reading offered here, are compelling, and Hester, in his otherwise fine article, offers few reasons for dismissing them. As Simpson and Millar themselves note, their reading is supported also by Jebb (for more on Jebb's interpretation and its reception, cf. n. 8 above), who says that Antigone's "taunt in 549 was made from Antigone's wish to save Ismene's life" (1948.79). They go on rightly to ask: "Is it not possible that the whole scene may be interpreted in this way? Might not Antigone throughout the whole scene be acting the part of harshness, to mislead Creon as to Ismene's part in the affair?" They cite as well J. T. Sheppard's wonderful little book, *The Wisdom of Sophocles* (1947). They do not, however, connect the innovative reading of this scene with any re-exploration of the question of the first burial, as I do here. And my reading differs from theirs on several points. The largest point is this: for them, what motivates Antigone is familial love for her sister. They make Antigone consistent—she bears both Ismene and Polynices a sisterly love. In my view, things are somewhat more complicated, as Antigone's change of tone with her sister sug-

this.” Then out loud she accuses her sister of being all words, no actions. But methinks she doth protest too much. Why the harsh charge? She is desperate to neutralize Ismene’s response to Creon, and perhaps Antigone suspects that there *was* an act and not just words—in fact a wordless act, the first burial of Polynices, yet to be explained. Ismene did it. Antigone sees that but cannot say it. Creon is right there. In this sisterly exchange, the sisters reperform their fight from the first scene, but this time it is a theatrical performance for Creon’s benefit.²⁰

What does Creon know of sisters? He falls for it, or at least the chorus does (but are they complicit?). He is softened up by the sisters’ performance for the chorus’ query. “Ismene too?” they ask later when Creon rages that Haemon cannot “save those two young girls from death” (769 [865]). “No, not her,” he concedes (771 [867]). Ismene will live.

On this reading, Ismene is not, as Antigone charges, all empty words and no action. On the contrary, Ismene’s words are well earned by her quiet courageous actions: the first burial of Polynices, which Antigone may now suspect and credit as a worthy act and, then, the attempt to die with her sister, also a worthy act. Antigone’s too loud words are necessary to stop Ismene from confessing, to neutralize what she has said, to render her actions invisible, to make it thoroughly unthinkable that quiet little spineless Ismene could ever be the one who did it, the one who first buried Polynices.²¹

The same motivation, the desire to protect Ismene, may motivate Antigone’s later melodramatic cries that there is no one left to mourn her.²² If she goes out of her way to diminish her sister, that is because Antigone

gests. Love for a dead brother is different from love for a live sister. Also, there is in the sororal relation a politics of equality.

20 Some critics argue that the coy exchanges between Odysseus and Penelope toward the end of the *Odyssey*, before he fully reveals his identity, are due in part to the presence of slaves around whom they have to speak cautiously; this corresponds well to the suggestion here that Antigone and Ismene are speaking in code, as it were, in the presence of Creon and the chorus: it offers a precedent that Greek audiences would have recognized. (Thanks to David Konstan on this.)

21 Antigone’s treatment of Ismene here is seen as brutal: Simpson and Millar 1948.78 cite Norwood 1928: “‘That tenderness and womanly affection which we attribute to (her) are . . . inventions of our own, except the love she bears Polyneices. This love . . . is simply an instinct . . . to which she will . . . sacrifice all else,’ and ‘Antigone has no reasons; she has only an instinct.’ He also calls her conduct ‘brutality’” in a reading that complements the anti-humanist reception of Antigone by Lacan and his followers.

22 Simpson and Millar do not make this connection, though it fits with their reading as well as mine. It is also possible that Antigone imagines herself unmourned because she, not

does not know that Creon will soon crumble. She thinks he will rule Thebes henceforth and Ismene must live in his household. If he thinks Ismene is nothing, Creon may let her survive.

If Ismene did it, then Antigone becomes much more of a tragic heroine than on other accounts. She is surrounded by words whose meanings exceed her grasp, enmeshed in relations she does not fully appreciate or understand. In this, she is much like Creon in this play and like Oedipus in his. Ismene's actions also stage for Antigone the heroic scene in which Antigone, by absolving her sister, outwits Creon, as she will soon do again with her suicide. That is what Antigone does, she outwits. She helps Ismene, mastering the opacity for a moment, redeploying it to save her sister in a way that makes sense of Antigone's otherwise strange claim that she was born to join in love and ridding us of the problem, much wrestled with in the literature, that she is a sister dutiful to Polynices but not to Ismene.²³

If Ismene did it, then her insistence at the end of the play's first scene on the love she bears Antigone is significant. These are not empty words. That Antigone might have mistakenly thought so is part of Antigone's tragedy. Arrogating to herself alone the right of action and thinking her acts alone—brazen, bold, provocative—*qualify* as action, she sees in the words of others only the emptiness of non-performance . . . until nearly the end of her life. In the end, the charge sticks to Creon, who shouts and warns about consequences he ends up trying to undo, but not to Ismene. Late in the action, Antigone awakens to the truth of Ismene, suspects her action, respects her power in stealth (so different from her own), and offers her the protection that love demands, the sort that suits the recipient. Playing out a sororal enmity that is as false as it is convincing to Creon, Antigone saves her sister's life and leaves alive a remnant of the family.

unreasonably, expects Ismene will be prevented by Creon from mourning her, just as she herself was prevented from mourning Polynices.

23 Anna Muddle is just the most recent in a long line to charge Antigone with needless cruelty to her sister and with wrongly privileging her brother (2009.183–200). It is worth noting that the reading I give here, and that developed by Simpson and Millar (and Jebb, more limitedly), all grant to Antigone a victory over Creon and assume she fools him with subtle speech. Is this why there is ongoing resistance to the idea that Antigone's lines can be read in the double-entendre way I sketch out here or, in Simpson and Millar's words, as an "aside"? That is, do most of the play's readers have trouble with the idea that Antigone outdoes Creon with subtle logos (contra Dewald and Kitzinger 2006.26) and not just by going to extremes?

If Antigone saves Ismene, then she reminds us of none other than Intaphrenes' wife, the woman whose words Antigone will recite in her dirge for herself. Others have pointed out that Antigone is not really like Intaphrenes' wife (Weber 2004, Dewald and Kitzinger 2006). The latter acted prospectively and was able to save her brother from Darius's death sentence, but Antigone's brother is already dead, and all she can wrest from sovereign power (and she fails) is the right to bury him. But these readers forget about the woman's son, unasked for but also released by Darius to mark his pleasure at the woman's reasoning. These same readers also overlook Ismene: without Antigone's interventions on her sister's behalf, and without the chorus' protestations, Ismene, too, (regardless of her implication, or not, in the first burial) might have been punished by Creon. Thus Antigone does act prospectively. Questioned by the chorus, deceived by Antigone, distracted by the sisters' coded conversation, Creon relents and Ismene lives.

If Ismene did it, and if Antigone sacrificed herself for her sister, then we have here the story of two women partnered in their difference—one brazenly bold, the other possessed of a quieter courage—both acting in resistance to overreaching sovereign power but acting also in love or loyalty for each other. The sisters do not form a democratic collectivity or a feminist solidarity *per se*. But on this reading, they care for each other in turn: each guesses at the other's sacrifice in quiet isolation and utters the lines and performs the acts that suit and extend her character.

If this sisterly solidarity has been almost invisible until now, that may be because readers and spectators internalize Creon's perspective. Even those critical of him as a tyrant share his view of Antigone as an anarchic, wild, transgressive flaunter of law. Romantic lovers of transgression may find heroism in this, liberals may see here a prefiguration of the dictates of conscience and integrity that they admire, and others may disapprove of what they see as disrespect for authority and public order. But all share Creon's perspective and do not question it. Simon Goldhill is captured by it also when he notes how beholden are Antigone's feminist readers to "the myth of the heroine [Antigone, which] is constructed with all the inspirational force and selective blindness of hero worship" (2006.160). For Goldhill, this hero worship ought to give way to an unblinking assessment of Antigone's unpalatable rejection of her sister. Goldhill is right; relinquishing our habitual reading of Antigone as heroic (solitary, autonomous) opens the play up. What we see, however, when we do so is not, contra Goldhill, a really unkind and unheroic Antigone who should discomfit feminists,

but something else that has remained undetected for even longer: an agonistic sorority that is solidaristic, not merely subject to male exchange, and infused with love, anger, rivalry, complicity, mutuality, devotion, and care. To see this, we must set aside the Creonic framing that has become hegemonic by way of the play's Romantic and liberal receptions in which heroic action, solitary and disruptive, alone counts as action.

"LET HER CHOOSE": ETHICS AND/AS FORCED CHOICE

Antigone, who says she was born to die, seems tailor-made for Jacques Lacan. From Lacan's perspective, Antigone is not opposed to Creon (as Hegel says), but is rather dependent on him. Creon provides the occasion for her to meet her antecedently formed death wish.²⁴ In her being-toward-death, she is able to resist the lure of choices we normally mis-take for ethical ones.²⁵ For Lacan, a properly ethical choice abjures the conventional "service of the goods," which orients us to mere want satisfaction, and defies the governance of ethical codes. The service of the goods tames our desire to feel satisfied by the faux satisfactions of endless chains of goods, while ethical codes hold us to account by principles whose universalism betrays our unique personality. Lacanian ethical action resists both of these, says Paul Allen Miller: it "is Kantian in its devotion to a pure concept of duty,

24 On this, see Miller 2007.61–99, who criticizes classicists who fuss with the text, supposedly philologically, in order to position Antigone's stated willingness to die as an effect of Creon's edict. That makes Antigone's death wish less disorienting but also allows them to avoid, not confront, her monstrosity, Miller argues. Thus, in Miller's words: "Creon, then, does not so much represent the tyrant who forces Antigone to make an impossible choice between life and freedom, but rather he is the inflexible embodiment of the civic norms that her pursuit of a desire beyond the bounds of those articulated within the realms of common life both requires and transcends" (2007.83). Miller adds: "Creon's dictates make possible Antigone's desire to transgress them, and Antigone's affirmation of her desire can only point beyond the law by recognizing that it is defined and bounded by the law. If Antigone were an innocent, blithely unaware of Creon's edict when she buried her brother, there would be no tragedy, no transcendence. In more orthodox Freudian terms, the death drive is necessarily implicated in the pleasure and reality principles even as it points beyond them" (2007.84). Truly, if Antigone were that innocent, she would be more like Billy Budd, the hero of the Melville story in which the only really tragic character is, as Hannah Arendt knew, not the innocent Billy but rather the knowing and conflicted Captain Vere (Arendt 1990.82–86).

25 Her choice to act and die "is shaped," Miller says, "neither by the banality of a self-interested selection among communally recognized goods nor the self-loathing of conforming to a code that is both recognized and despised" (2007.83, citing Julien 1990.112; Žižek 1992.77).

but psychoanalytic in its predication on a highly individualized desire that cannot be generalized, with regard to its content, into a universalized maxim” (2007.83, citing Lacan 1986.68, 365–66).

This approach, equally critical of both Kantianism and utilitarianism, calls to mind Bernard Williams’ critique of both Kantianism and utilitarianism on behalf of an alternative ethics that is immaterial, code-defiant, and personal (Williams and Smart 1973). Williams, too, sees the tragic or forced choice as a formative and sometimes destructive choice that calls for ethics, not goods or codes, nor for politics.²⁶ And Williams sees that the tragic situation breaks the grip of the everyday. But Lacan affirms this rupture—it forces to the forefront our own unique character and desire—while Williams regrets it because it threatens to destroy us. For Williams, such moments are best avoided, since they threaten our integrity in a world of plural, conflicting goods, while for Lacan, our openness to the tragic situation forces us beyond our mere psychological attributes and needs to a more existence-affirming awareness. Still, these two converge in their judgments of *Antigone*.

The echo of Lacan is unmistakable when Williams casts *Antigone* in *Shame and Necessity* (1993) as death-bound in a way that precedes and exceeds Creon’s edict: “Creon’s obstinacy does not simply elicit a noble response from Antigone. It triggers a ready and massive self-assertion and the fact that her end can mean what it does mean (and still more, what it has come to mean) is in a sense Antigone’s good luck” (86–87). *Antigone* was fated to die unnaturally in any case. Creon just gave her a reason. For Williams, however, such self-assertion is not, as in Lacan, the rupturing manifestation of a desire that knows no law; it is the assertion of self by a person who is a law unto herself—as we all are or might be.

Both thinkers focus on *Antigone*’s uniqueness, and so both stress her solitariness rather than her sorority. But Lacan’s ethics provides a way to read past that. The way is prepared by Alenka Zupančič’s elaboration (1998) of Lacan’s ethics of creativity and forced choice. Drawing out Lacan’s readings of *Antigone*, Zupančič argues that Lacan’s idea of an

26 There are two other key differences between Williams and Lacan: Lacan is drawn to the beauty of such situations, while Williams focuses more forcefully on the suffering that attends them. (As Miller says: “For Lacan, it is the beauty of *Antigone*’s choice of a good beyond all recognized goods, beyond the pleasure principle, that gives her character its monumental status and makes her a model for an ethics of creation as opposed to conformity” [2007.83, citing Lacan 1991.13]). Second, Lacan is focused on being-toward-death, while Williams is focused on survival.

ethics of “absolute choice” should be understood in connection with his concept of the “forced choice,” of which there are two kinds: the first, she calls “classical,” the second, “modern.” Antigone is seen in relation to the classical, and the heroine of Paul Claudel’s 1911 play, *The Hostage*, Sygne de Couffontaine (also discussed by Lacan), exemplifies the modern, according to Zupančič. But as we shall see, the forced choice labeled “modern” fits Ismene well.

The classical “forced choice” captures Antigone’s predicament and has a familiar structure. The example given by Lacan is, “your money or your life,” in which the two terms are asymmetrical. “If I choose the money, I lose both. If I choose life, I have life without money, namely a life deprived of something.” In this forced choice, one of the two options, life, “is not simply one of two alternative possibilities but is [also] the indispensable condition of the choice itself.” Does this mean we should choose the money, then? Not quite, says Zupančič: “This minimal structure already allows us to deduce the ethical figure to which it is related. It could be defined as the ability *to choose where there is no choice*” (Zupančič 1998.109–10; italics in original).

In other words, the impossible choice *is* possible. There is a third term that makes it so, “something which exceeds life” (Zupančič 1998.110).²⁷ It can be many things, anything that serves as an “ultimate point of identification for the subject,” as his or her “ultimate support.” Costas Douzinas captures it when he refers to Antigone’s “I-must” (1994). It may be the Lacanian “S1,” the anchor of the signifying chain that is not itself subject to that chain’s metonymic tradeoffs and translations. Or it is a principle, idea, commitment, or affiliation without which life would no longer be what it is—without which life would no longer be worth living. It may be what Bernard Williams calls “integrity.” Or it may “appear, for instance, as a ‘point of honor’ but [whatever it is] it is always something in which the subject recognizes his/her own being—something which determines the subject beyond life and death” (Zupančič 1998.110). This is what makes sacrifice or martyrdom possible. This, for Lacan, is what Polynices is to Antigone, the one irreplaceable thing that is the ground of all else (1986.279). (On our reading thus far, Ismene could also be seen to occupy that place for her sister.)

27 The subject is able to make the impossible choice because he identifies with something beyond life—this is why we say that he or she is “larger than life,” Zupančič points out (1998.110).

It is essential to an ethics of forced choice that the tested subject does more than simply yield to the force of the choice. Caught in the snare of the forced choice, Antigone, Zupančič argues, is not merely re-active, she is creative. No mere passive resister or civil disobedient, Antigone not only says “*no* to Creon and is willing to pay for it with her life” (that, presumably, would be merely to submit to the force of the choice), she creates “a new possibility there where the options seem to be exhausted” (1998.111).²⁸ We might think this “new possibility” refers to her soral solidarity, but Zupančič is not alert to that. If Antigone is ethical for Zupančič, it is because when she is confronted with the forced choice that defines ethics, she not only makes the impossible choice, she does so in a way that “*forces others to choose, confronts them with a forced choice*” (1998.111; emphasis in original). It is not entirely clear what precisely is ethical about passing along a forced choice to others, and not much detail is provided by Lacan nor by Zupančič regarding the specific elements of Antigone’s ethical creativity, but Sophocles’ text rewards those who return to it with these questions in mind.

When Antigone is subjected by Creon to a forced choice, she may seem simply to pick one of the options presented. For example, Creon’s edict forbidding the burial of Polynices presents her with the forced choice—leave your brother unburied or bury him and die—and does not Antigone choose the latter? So it seems, but there is evidence of creativity in the way Antigone conducts herself under pressure. After all, there is more than one way to bury Polynices; we know that from the three very different burials given him.

Thus the issue may not be whether or not Antigone buries Polynices: that anemic framing is Creon’s “are you with me or against me” way of presenting it. The issue is *how* she does so. Antigone buries Polynices, avows her deed, and sings her final dirge seeking to frame her own and not Creon’s understanding of her act for posterity. When she avows her crime, frames her actions in heroic terms, and cites Herodotus’s story of Intaphrenes’ wife, all of these are *part of her act* and show she has not limited herself to the small question of obedience but has embraced the larger ethical situation and reformulated it. She will, she tells Ismene, bury Polynices heroically, publicly, and the people of Thebes, confronted with their own

²⁸ From this angle of vision, as Zupančič notes, Antigone moves out of the traditional position to which she is relegated (first, by Hegel) as guardian of divine law or family honor and into the position of creator.

forced choice, will celebrate her for it.²⁹ Creon will come around, or not. Either way, she will have glory, and the implication is that, as a result, the awful choice that staged all of this for her will lose its force. This, more than any of the traits Zupančič looks at, is Antigone's creativity, surely. But her creativity is not merely ethical, it is also political. Aiming to create "a new possibility there where the options seem to be exhausted" (Zupančič 1998.111), Antigone makes public an act criminalized by Creon and solicits the support of a city possibly cowed by him yet sympathetic to her.

These maneuvers are made in the context of other forced choices imposed on Antigone. When Creon asks Antigone if she violated his edict, he frames his question as a forced choice that rules out any heroism: "Do you deny you did this, yes or no?" (441–42 [491]). The only affirmation on offer is that of a double negation, that of non-denial. Thus as we now see with the help of Zupančič's rubric, and in addition to our earlier reading, something creative is going on when Antigone responds with, "I did it, I don't deny a thing." With these words, she rejects the forced choice that seeks to limit her to (non)denial. Ignoring it, she says, "I did it," and then in case Creon fails to get the message of her reframing, she makes clear her rejection of the vernacular of denial—"I don't *deny* a thing," as in: "I don't do denial." Thus she not only claims responsibility for the forbidden act; she rejects the double negation—non-denial—to which he tries to confine her.³⁰ She fastens on a more heroic affirmation, something she will pick up on later when, in dialogue with the chorus, she tries to connect her situation first to Niobe, then, in the face of the chorus' resistance, to Intaphrenes' wife.

And then there is the last forced choice: after Creon has told his soldiers to take her away and wall her up in her tomb, he adds: "Abandon her there, alone, and *let her choose*—death or a buried life with a good roof for shelter" (885–87 [973–74]; italics added). Once again, we might think that Antigone fails to contravene the terms of the forced choice. After all, she chooses one of the two options, quick death, not the slow death of buried life. But to see things this way is, again, to stay inside the forced choice framework Creon favors and to miss the very thing that he *wants* to obscure. Antigone finds a third way. Although she will in the end die

29 Butler 2000 sees rivalry with Polynices: Antigone will get the glory that eluded him.

30 Ismene does a similar thing: asked if she would confess or not to implication in the crime, she responds creatively, not with a yes or no as demanded but with a hybrid conditional, "Yes I did it—if she consents."

a quick death by her own hand, she uses the moments that follow Creon's pronouncement of her "free" choice—"Let her choose"—to sing the dirge for herself in which she cites the speech of Intaphrenes' wife and frames her action as one of singular fidelity to a motivation mentioned here by her for the very first time.³¹

Thus "the fact that her death can mean what it does mean," is not simply, as Williams puts it, a matter of "good luck" (1993.86–87). It is a consequence of Antigone's creativity: she responds to the forced choice thrust upon her by constructing for herself something like the elongated, beautiful death of Homer's heroes. Before her immurement in the cave, Antigone participates in the *agon* over the meaning of her actions, a privilege Creon seeks to reserve for himself when he restricts her to menus of predetermined options. He tries to economize; she is excess. When he says, "Take her away, you're wasting time," he diminishes her dirge to mere impotent delay—she is trying to buy time, to defer dying. She does not, he implies, have the true hero's taste for death. But she will put the lie to that with her suicide, to which his insult may even help drive her.

In response to her effort to frame the meaning of her act and secure the meaning of her death for posterity, Creon mocks Antigone for her use of words. He also anticipates. After saying it is her choice how to die, he makes clear the falseness of the choice: either way, "Dead or alive she will be stripped of her rights, her stranger's rights, here in the world above" (890 [976–77]). It is for these rights, surely, that Antigone fights in her moments of overliving: for the right to tell her story in her own way, promote her cause, and preserve her memory. And yet most receptions of her have resisted the lure of her creativity and stayed within the domain of the forced choices that her actions try to break apart: public versus private, male versus female, order versus anarchy.

Recall, however, that for Zupančič, Antigone's creativity lies specifically in her making the impossible choice in a way that "*forces others to choose, confronts them with a forced choice*" (1998.111). Zupančič argues that within the frame of the play, three people are solicited by Antigone into the structure of the forced choice: Ismene, Creon, and Haemon, and all three fail.³² (She leaves out the public, mentioned above, though they

31 She calls this singular fidelity a law. This speech was long thought to be inauthentic, but it makes sense in the historical context; see Honig 2010.

32 As coldly as Creon, Antigone makes the stakes clear: we'll soon see what you're made of, she says to Ismene: "worth your breeding or a coward." As Zupančič says (1998.111),

fit her account: they fail too.) Faulting readers of the play from Hegel onward, Zupančič goes on forcefully to claim that this is no “solitary ‘isolated’ sacrifice that [Antigone] owes her brother and her gods.” Instead, Antigone sees her choice “as something which very much concerns others and not solely as a private act” (1998.111). Thus when Ismene says she is unable to help bury Polynices and expresses her fear for Antigone, Antigone responds in ethical terms: “Don’t fear for me. *Set your own life in order*” (83 [97]; italics added). She even invites Creon “to resubjectivise himself as a master, but instead Creon tried to *reaffirm* himself as the master” which, Zupančič points out, “is not at all the same thing.” Ismene “understands the stakes of the choice,” but fails to rise to its challenge. She “panics.” Creon, too, is said to “panic” (1998.111). The charge rings truer in his case than in hers. Ismene is distressed in the first scene, but there is no evidence of panic. And she, unlike Creon, does rise above the choice Antigone forces upon her.

Ironically, Zupančič’s focus on the failure of Ismene and Creon to take up the invitations issued by Antigone reinstates the very thing Zupančič says she is trying to overcome: the idea that Antigone’s is a “solitary ‘isolated’ sacrifice.” On Zupančič’s reading, Antigone may try, but she never succeeds in enlisting others to her side. On the reading developed here, however, Antigone succeeds in making (contested) meaning out of her acts. And Ismene finds her own way. Burying Polynices surreptitiously, Ismene does not duck the choice, nor does she pass the forced choice on to another. She breaks its spell, choosing neither flagrant disobedience nor meek inaction. She does not consent to leave her brother unburied, nor will she allow herself to be drafted into a disobedience she considers inconceivable. She

Ismene “makes the wrong choice (or rather she refuses to recognize that there is a choice)” or better, we might say on Zupančič’s behalf (for this is not our reading), Ismene refuses to recognize that the choice is inescapable, that it forces itself on her. Another reading is possible. What if Antigone merely mimics Creon when she presents Ismene with a forced choice? Rather than repackage the terms, doesn’t Antigone merely pass them along? On this reading, she reenacts against her sister the violence enacted by Creon against her. Even in this mimicry, however, might something open up (especially if we think of mimicry in Butler’s terms)? I have argued throughout for the non-privacy of Antigone’s act, but here we see a new dimension of its public nature. It solicits others, enlists them into the performative ethico-political frame of action, challenging them as well to alter the frame of, and find in, the forced choice some other, possibly orthogonal way to act. Something like this is what Jacobs seems to have in mind when she talks of “skirting the ethical” in her book by that name (2008).

does what Zupančič admires as quintessentially ethical: Ismene creates “a new possibility there where the options seem to be exhausted” (1998.111).

The limiting, contested binary of obedience versus dissidence reasserts itself when Ismene’s act is covered over by Antigone’s—the second burial. That may be why Ismene often disappears in the play, invisible and unimportant except as a point of contrast to the heroine. The strident act renders the subtle invisible.³³ And if her aim was to save Antigone the trouble of transgression, Ismene fails there too. But this is not her only forced choice. In her final scene with Antigone, she faces another forced choice, and here failure is not an apt term for what occurs.

“WHAT DO I CARE FOR LIFE, CUT OFF FROM YOU?”: ISMENE’S MODERNITY

Ismene’s last forced choice is different in structure from the one described by Zupančič as “classical.” Indeed, it bears an uncanny resemblance to the one she calls “modern.” By contrast with the classical forced choice captured by “your money or your life,” the modern forced choice is captured by “freedom or death.” Here it appears that we have a choice, but really we do not, since choosing freedom under threat of death is hardly a free choice. Zupančič explains, quoting Lacan: “ . . . in the conditions in which someone says to you *freedom or death!*, the only proof of freedom that you can have in the conditions laid out before you is precisely to choose death, for there, you show that you have the freedom of choice.” The strange thing about the structure of this choice, Zupančič says, is “the only way you can choose A is by choosing its negation, the non-A: the only way the subject can stay true to his Cause is by betraying it, *by sacrificing to it the very thing which drives him/her to make this sacrifice*” (italics original; 115).

The example given by Lacan and analyzed by Zupančič is that of Sygne de Coufontaine in *The Hostage*. Confronted with a forced choice dubbed the modern sort, Sygne comes to realize that she cannot choose death in order to preserve her “reason for living,” because death would be the easy way out and the situation (a contrived, perhaps melodramatic tale of the fate of the French aristocracy in post-revolutionary France) demands something else of her. She is asked to marry a man she detests in order to save the life of the Pope whom she is harboring from Napoleon’s forces. The

33 On the displacement of subtlety by stridency, see Lars Tønder (forthcoming).

man is a Jacobin named Turelure who had her aristocratic parents executed before her eyes during the Revolution and now threatens to apprehend the Pope unless she yields. If she marries Turelure, she will save the Pope, but she will marry someone she detests (violating the sacrament of marriage) and cede to him her family's aristocratic title and land.

Sygne's first instinct is to kill herself; her second is to fight Turelure even if it means everyone in the house, including the Pope, will be destroyed.³⁴ But there is something about the situation that presses Sygne further. Her family's priest, Badilon, asks her to take the hardest course of all: "Not to sacrifice herself for the Cause (something which she would do without hesitation)," but to go on living without her reason for living (Zupančič 1998.116). Badilon says to Sygne—as she wrestles with her decision and considers her honor for which she is willing to sacrifice her life—it is good "to have something of one's own. For then have we something which we can give" (lines 54–55, cited at Zupančič 1998.116). True sacrifice calls for her to sacrifice and live. She will marry Turelure and live as his wife to save the Pope. She will be his hostage. Her deep resistance to the course she chooses manifests itself corporeally. Toward the end of the play, she is beset by a facial tic, an involuntary twitch that mimics the head-shaking gesture that normally means "no."³⁵

Zupančič argues that it is only with modernity's loss of a possible faith in an afterlife and its redemption that we get the idea that ethics may demand not the sacrifice of one's life but of one's reason for living.³⁶ We certainly get something like this idea from utilitarianism, the modern social theory that casts as moral any action that brings about greater pleasure than pain. Early utilitarianism would surely say that Sygne must

34 In his famous critique of utilitarian moral reasoning, Williams imagines the hero of his example, Jim, faced with a similarly mortifying tragic situation, having the same initial reaction before coming to his senses. Forced to choose between killing one native villager and allowing ten villagers to be killed by another, Jim wildly thinks about grabbing a gun from his tormentors and shooting them all, but quickly realizes that this is impractical and will only make matters worse. Jim is NOT counseled by Williams (as is Sygne by Badilon) to live without the thing most precious to him. For Jim, Williams argues, such sacrifice is supererogatory at best and certainly not morally required.

35 She dies protecting Turelure. Does she sacrifice herself for the husband who forced her into marriage? Or does she find a way, in keeping with her sacrifice, to free herself from the hostage situation? Or both?

36 For Lacan, it is only in modernity that other definitive features of tragedy emerge—for example: the status of the sign, for which Sygne's name is said to stand, but this is not germane to Zupančič's largely formal reading.

insert herself into the situation to bring about the socially preferable outcome, regardless of the individual suffering she may undergo as a result. Utilitarianism is, arguably for this reason and notwithstanding its avowed secularism, deeply sacrificial in structure, and it is, indeed, this trait that Bernard Williams finds morally repugnant.

That psychoanalysis, which seeks to plumb the depths of the human personality, might be interested in such self-abandonment makes sense, for the integrity that grounds ethics and politics for Williams is for psychoanalysis the cause of suffering, a result of the subject's fortressing within layers of painful psychic defense. In the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis in which a great deal of what makes us who we are numbs us to the real, the idea of giving oneself up, sacrificing integrity, may seem promising. The goal of psychoanalysis is, after all, precisely to dis-integrate the subject. But to call such dis-integration ethics is another matter, and to intimate from it a politics (as contemporary Lacanians seem to want to do) is yet another matter still. We need not, however, adjudicate the questions of ethics and integrity in order to gain new interpretative insight from Zupančič's "modern" forced choice. For in Sophocles' *Antigone*, there is one character who comes close—awfully and anachronistically close—to this "modern" position, the position in which "the subject is asked to accept with enjoyment the very injustice at which he is horrified," and that character is Ismene.³⁷

It is Ismene who says in the first scene, "I'm forced, I have no choice" (67 [79]), and who sees the "madness, madness" (68 [81]) of the situation. It is Ismene who is asked to remain living when she would rather die, to dwell in the household of her sister's murderer, and to depend upon the hospitality of a man who has usurped her parents' place. When she begs to be allowed to die with her sister, "What do I care for life, cut off from you?" (548 [617], cf. 566 [638]), Ismene makes clear the difficulty of going on. But Antigone, playing Badilon to her sister's Sygne, says "no." There is something about the situation that calls for Ismene to live. And so the exchange with her sister is, for Antigone, painful: "You're right," she says, "if I mock you, I get no pleasure from it, only pain" (551 [620–21]). That pain is not just a marker of the difficulty of acting out a feigned derision for the sister she loves. It is also marks the fact that Ismene, fated to

³⁷ Strikingly, this very formulation, "The subject is asked to accept with enjoyment the very injustice at which he is horrified," parses Bernard Williams's own rather horrified criticism of utilitarianism (Williams and Smart 1973.98–99).

live, will suffer a martyr's life no less than Antigone will suffer a martyr's death. Thus we see that what Zupančič maps in temporal terms, classical and modern, also marks the difference between the two sisters in this classical play: one dies for her cause in her own way on her own terms, the other lives for it, in her own way and not on her own terms. Both sacrifice, though one is more otherworldly and oriented to death and the other is more this-worldly and oriented to life. Both act not just ethically but also politically, especially Antigone, who embraces publicity, but also Ismene, who acts in solidarity with her and is finally willing to risk publicity too. Why then are critics of all stripes unified in seeing these two women primarily as (un)ethical actors or solitary political (anti-)heroes and never as partners in action in concert?

Zupančič's distinction between classical and modern forced choice helps us to extricate ourselves from that sedimented reading and to develop neglected dimensions of sorority in Sophocles' *Antigone* and its reception history. But why does Zupančič oddly limit the reach of her rubric by periodizing it, even while she seeks to establish the promise of classics for late modernity?³⁸ Her temporalization of the two kinds of forced choice (martyred death and living martyrdom) as classical and modern, respectively, is belied by the coincidence in this classical play of both kinds of forced choice, classical *and* modern. We could simply correct Zupančič by detemporalizing her terms. Or we could find in that very temporalization an invitation to anachronize the play, to see it as simultaneously classical and modern, lift it out of its timeline of so-called origin (classical) and subsequent linear (modern) reception history and conclude that *Antigone* is both more modern and (because) more classical than we thought, and vice versa.³⁹ The conclusion makes sense since this play, perpetually restaged and reread, has a constitutive role to play in the formation of modern continental philosophy and democratic theory since Hegel. That constitutive role has been authorized by the claim that the play is a canonical, classical text—an original—even while its recirculation in copy after copy, interpretation and performance, secures and evidences its inexorable modernity.⁴⁰

38 For this phrasing, I am indebted to Kris Trujillo.

39 See Jacques Rancière: "In order to constitute a moment in thinking, a moment that gives itself to thought, it is perhaps always necessary for there to be two temporalities at work," and "To conceptualize the 'contemporaneity' of thought requires the reliance on a certain anachronism or untimeliness" (Rancière and Panagia 2000.125, 123).

40 On classics' texts' role in constituting post-colonial modernity, see Goff and Simpson 2007.4. On their perpetual recirculation, see Sitze 2006.349–72.

“**Ō KOINON AUTADELPHON ISMĒNĒS KARA**”: “ISMENE-HEAD”

In a recent paper (“Antigone, Agent of Fraternity: How Feminism Misreads Hegel’s Misreading of *Antigone*, or Let the Other Sister Speak”), philosopher Mary Rawlinson focuses on Ismene as a better model for feminist politics than her more renowned sister. Ismene privileges the world of the living, Rawlinson argues, and she looks toward the future. “Why should we feminists valorize Antigone’s embrace of the dead brother over the living sister?” she asks. Simon Goldhill also makes the case for Ismene. Criticizing Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, he argues that they allow Ismene to be shut up with the women while embracing Antigone as a model for a feminist politics based on the purity of blood (Irigaray 1984) or on its contamination (Butler 2000). Either way, Ismene is erased by feminist readers of the play and by its heroine, as when Antigone calls herself the last of the line of Oedipus. “Ismene is written—spoken—out of the family line. This silencing is all too often repeated, rather than analysed by the critics,” Goldhill claims (2006.157).

For Goldhill, the relevant contexts for taking Ismene seriously are the shifting politics of the fifth century in which, “The general frame of the city-state, on the one hand, and the specific frame of Athenian democracy, on the other, change the structuring politics of the personal” (2006.148). As “key institutions of the family, like burial, and key terms of family affiliation are taken over by the State . . . brothers can become a civic, political symbol” (2006.148), not just a familial-political one. From the brothers whose conflicts were central in heroic epic to the new political claim of equal citizenship as fraternity, something like Derrida’s “phalocracy” is evident, Goldhill says, but “against the claim of fraternity, sisterhood also changes as a normative term. Sisterhood learns to speak” (2006.148). With this claim, Goldhill opens the possibility of taking seriously the sorority of Ismene and Antigone, but he does not follow it up. In any case, as we have just seen by tracking the coded communications that pass between Ismene and Antigone in front of Creon, *how* sisters speak may be the more fundamental issue, not *whether* they do. Goldhill himself provides support for this thought when he notes the odd way in which Antigone addresses her sister—in particular, the alienness of Antigone’s opening words, “*ō koinon autadelphon Ismēnēs kara*,” “Oh dear sister of the same womb, [something like] *Ismene-head*.” This phrase may well point to the doublings of incest in this perverted family context, as Miriam Leonard

suggests (2005.127), or the contortions to which sisters are driven by institutional tensions in a time of transition, as Goldhill argues. But it may also suggest another possibility worth considering: like many intimates, sisters, siblings, or others, might these, too, have a private language, a coded way of speaking between themselves that eludes the understanding of outsiders? Sorority, especially when caught in the interpretative grip of a certain model of heroic action, may be as untranslatable and elusive as the play's famously difficult first line.⁴¹

Sororal power can be belittled, of course, as Creon belittled the daughters of Oedipus. But as the chorus knew, sometimes powerful forces are underestimated by their belittlers. These sisters may bury the brother, as Hegel required of (one of) them, but they do not do *only* that. Or better, in burying the brother, they also do something else. It matters that there are two of them, not just one, for as they act in agonistic concert, they hint at an alternative politics, and an alternative to Hegel's dialectic. Carol Jacobs (2008) sees how Antigone must escape and exceed the negativity of the Hegelian dialectic. She does not pause to note how this excess may be rooted not in Antigone's heroic autonomy but in her sororal relation. In her individuality, Antigone is, as Hegel would rightly note, fated to mere negativity and little more. In their sorority, however, the sisters' negotiations of the forced choices thrust upon them model a tragically doomed ethics and *politics*. Notwithstanding their tragic character, or perhaps even because of it, this politics may be a more serious force and a more powerful example to feminists now than the individual and sacrificial politics of conscience for which Antigone is traditionally celebrated (even by radical feminists from Irigaray to Butler), and more than the alternative politics of anti-heroic (but still heroic, since the focus is on the one sister, not the other) worldiness staged through recent promotions of Ismene over her sister.

The move to mark the sororal agency in this play should not be mistaken for a normative effort to promote sorority as a privileged site of agency. It is rather an effort to exhibit the benefits of a more agonistic and less moralistic approach to the texts and contexts of classics and politics on behalf of the plural and surprising sites of agency we may find. That we find here an agonistic sorority is not reason to privilege sorority as a

41 For an extended reading of efforts to translate it, see Miller 2007, who criticizes philological domestications of its alienness.

site of agency everywhere, as some feminists might argue. Indeed, it is necessary to register a still further caution by way of conclusion: the move to sorority, contra Goldhill, may turn out only to restage rather than interrupt the fraternity or phalocracy we seek to contest. The sisters are sisters, after all, by virtue of the Oedipal contract, which claims kinship is prior to politics even while it mobilizes one form of juridically secured kinship against others not so favored. This suggests we may not be able to break the spell of Oedipus or phalocracy simply by moving to sisters rather than brothers. This is what Peggy Phelan means when she notes that Antigone and Ismene are “cast firmly in an Oedipal tragedy” in which the “desire two women feel for each other” can only appear as “soral love.” Embedded in the Law of the Social, Phelan argues, sisterhood is not enough. But surely it’s a start. Especially when the form it takes is one of agonistic mutuality, pleasure, care, rage, cooperation, and rivalry, and not simply, as Phelan herself assumes, along with almost everyone else, a “speedy abandonment” of one sister by the other. Phelan attributes that abandonment to “a Sophoclean Oedipal blindness” that renders “the allegiance that might pass between women” unimaginable. She hopes the play nonetheless “suggests, while not realizing, another way to play this drama,” one that may “point to a different form of theater sisters might one day invent . . . a new theater of desire” (Phelan 1997.14–15).⁴² My aim here has been to highlight the ways in which the failure thus far to see this promise *within* the play is a fault not just of the play but of our own reading and spectating practices.

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42 I am grateful to Anna Rosensweig for calling Phelan’s book to my attention.

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