

Ismene: a tragic hero in antigone



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Though it was written over two millennia ago, Sophocles' *Antigone* features one of the preeminent symbols of female defiance in its title character. The play centers on the exploits of Antigone as she openly goes against the king's decree in the name of honor and piety. Though she ends her story in death, she nonetheless proves the powers of which the supposedly weak and subordinate are capable of having when they have righteousness on their side. It is therefore surprising to learn that perhaps Antigone is not the true hero of this classic Greek play, but rather her sister, Ismene. This is what Jennifer Kirkpatrick argues in her groundbreaking essay, "The Prudent Dissident: Unheroic Resistance in Sophocles' *Antigone*." Kirkpatrick brings forth an entirely different reading of *Antigone* that involves Ismene being the one who buries Polynices the first time, thus casting her as the unsung hero of the play. This idea is radical; however, upon careful examination one can see it is actually highly plausible.

In order for Ismene to have buried Polynices, the first and foremost thing to assure is that the plot of *Antigone* would allow it – which it does. As Kirkpatrick points out, Ismene has no alibi or witness placing her someone else on the night of the burial (Kirkpatrick 409). Thus, the reader is given permission to entertain the idea, as nothing is tangibly dismissing it. There are other perceptible hints in the plot that strongly suggest Ismene could have buried Polynices. One is the strangeness that surrounds the notion that Antigone conducted the burial rites two times – one quietly and hurriedly, the other publicly and thoroughly. While it is odd that she would choose to embark on a mission already completed, it is even odder that she would choose to make her initial burial so secretive. Antigone asserts to

Creon that “ there is nothing shameful in piety to a brother (Antigone 104).” Clearly, Antigone believes wholeheartedly in her actions, and is not afraid to pronounce them to the world. Her affinity for forthrightness does not align with such a clandestine act, making it unlikely that it was her own doing.

The other hint the plot offers that shows Ismene has a more significant role in the play than what is shown at the surface is her reappearance, in which she confronts Creon and offers herself up with her sister. Kirkpatrick notes that this final exchange contradicts Ismene’s role as Antigone’s foil and adds complexity to the sisters’ relationship (Kirkpatrick 413). This complexity is wasted, however, as it doesn’t change the plot; Ismene, while briefly threatened with punishment, is ultimately let go, and ends the play still the weaker version of her sister. It is possible then, that this complexity was added for a reason - that reason being Ismene truly does have a deeper significance to this play. Sophocles’ revealing of this transition in Ismene’s character is just the tip of an iceberg that can be further unveiled by exploring other traits of Ismene that would make her what James Scott would brand as the unheroic weak - “[someone] who [is] aware of [her] vincibility and act within its constraints” in order to accomplish her mission (Kirkpatrick 403).

Ismene would not have simply buried Polyneices without reason. Nor would she have done it purely out of pressure from her sister, Antigone. Rather, she would have had to have strong motivation that drove her to commit this unlawful deed. Ismene proves that she would have this incentive to go through with the action in secrecy, thus making it all the more likely that she did. In her initial exchange with Antigone in the play, Antigone states, “ I do
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them no dishonor”, in reference to the gods (Antigone 94). Through this quote, Ismene makes clear that, despite what her sister insists, she doesn't only care about obeying Creon, but also the gods. So, there is good reason to believe that she would have some desire to give her dead brother his proper burial rites as the gods would have intended. Another factor that would have motivated Ismene is her loyalty to her sister. By asking Creon, “ How could I endure without her presence?” when he threatens to punish her, she shows that she cares deeply for Antigone. Antigone is virtually all Ismene has left in the world, as both of her parents and her brothers are dead. Ismene would evidently be distraught if she allowed her sister to commit a crime for which she surely would receive capital punishment. This would motivate Ismene to commit the crime herself before Antigone has the chance to do so. Like with her sister, Ismene does have something to gain by burying her brother. Even though she does have the conflicting motivation to obey Creon, Ismene's reasons to act counter to this are strong enough for her to actually do it.

It has been established that literary-wise, Ismene is allowed to bury Polynices, as there are both plot holes for her to slither her way around and incentives for her to use as reason to. However, it is perhaps most important that Ismene show that with all these allowances, she has the capability to be an unheroic weak through her characteristics. Ismene displays numerous aspects of her personality that only further the argument that she is the true hero of the story. One is her secretiveness. Ismene first establishes her proclivity for secrecy when after hearing of Antigone's full-fledged commitment to burying, she asks Antigone that she “ disclose this plan to none” and “ hide it closely” (Antigone 93). This plea by Ismene shows that

she is sober to the benefits of keeping things under wraps. With this given, it would make sense that she would choose to embark on a secret burial, as Kirkpatrick implies in her paper.

Not only does Ismene have an inclination towards secrecy, but she also has a belief in the power and credibility secrecy contains. When Antigone criticizes Ismene for not taking action alongside her yet still wanting to share her honor, Ismene refutes by maintaining, “ Nevertheless, the offense is the same for both of us” (Antigone 105). This can be interpreted to mean that Ismene did commit the same crime as Antigone. The only difference in their crimes was that hers was done covertly. Ismene’s actions going unnoticed allowed them to be “ approved” by the mortal world, as Antigone suggests. Ismene believes that defiance does not need to be open in order to earn honor, and so sees her action as a valid means of showing reverence to the gods – something which she aspires to do.

Despite Ismene’s apparent inclination for avoiding hostile confrontation with authority, she does have the facility to be defiant. While this defiance never shows itself to be as bold as that of Antigone, it is nonetheless an important trait to note on top of the other clues that Ismene committed the crime. Kirkpatrick notes in her essay that the most apparent sign of Ismene’s rebellious is when she enters before Creon in tears (Kirkpatrick 410). This act goes against Creon’s edict, which declares that “ none shall entomb [Polynices] or mourn him, but leave him unwept” (Antigone 92). By coming to Creon crying, Ismene is flouting this edict in one of two ways: either she is mourning the death of her brother Polynices, which the edict strictly prohibits, or she is mourning the almost certain fate of her sister,

showing her sympathy for someone who challenged the edict. Whether she weeps for a pariah of the state or a soon to be one, Ismene is challenging her previously-made conviction to obey Creon. If she has the fortitude to do this, then it becomes all the more plausible that she would also have the fortitude to bury Polyneices.

Jennifer Kirkpatrick writes that it is common for the unheroic resisters to be sensitive to “ political context and power dynamics”, as well as “ the political inequality of the larger group of which she is a part” (Kirkpatrick 414-415). It is important that these resisters are sensitive to these things, because it makes them more aware of their own limitations and allows them to work within them. In her first exchange with Antigone, Ismene displays her sensitivity to circumstance. First, she explains how she and her sister are the descendents of a family tree ridden with shame and scorn from society, and impels her sister to “ think how [they] shall perish . . . in defiance of the law, more miserably than all the rest” (Antigone 93). Unlike Antigone, Ismene knows that there would be serious consequences to come if either of them went against Creon. Ismene then appeals to her sister by reminding her that a poor lineage isn’t the only thing working against the sisters. Nay, they are also hindered by their status as women – a status that does not allow them to “ strive with men” and perpetually forces them to be “ ruled of the stronger” (Antigone 93). These two arguments made by Antigone should not be seen as proof of her unwillingness to act in defiance. Instead, they are indications of Ismene’s consciousness of the greater world around her. She knows what is realistic to expect from her own abilities, rather than overestimating them like Antigone does. To add on to this, she knows that

she does not avoid action in order to stay within her limits, but rather she only need to act prudently so as to bring honor and avoid punishment by Creon.

With the information Ismene has at hand, it is also important that she know how to use this information best to her advantage. In fact, to carry out such a difficult task that she does, it is absolutely crucial she have the ability to be resourceful - knowing how to make the most of what she has and to be imaginative enough to think her way out of tricky situations. When Antigone begins revealing her plan to bring nobility to her name, Ismene asks what it is she can "do or undo" (Antigone 93). This provides evidence that Ismene is aware that problems needn't have absolute or limited solutions; rather, there are multiple avenues one can choose to travel down in reaching an ultimate end. Sophocles asserts Ismene as a resourceful character through this line, and there are several scenes in the play where Ismene exemplifies this characteristic. One that Kirkpatrick emphasizes in her essay is the scene where she is crying in front of Creon - an act that is radical in its disobedience of the king's edict yet conventional in its conformity to the archetype of the mourning Greek woman. Such a "docile and defiant" act can confuse the king and possibly cause him to question his decision to punish mourners (Kirkpatrick 418). Ismene is yet again able to show her capacity to manipulate her situation by playing directly to Creon's fatherly sentiments. She asks the patriarch, "But will you slay the betrothed of your own son?" (Antigone 105). Ismene is using this key detail of Antigone's romantic ties to Creon's son, Haemon, to persuade Creon into not killing her off. Though this does not change the king's mind, it still says a lot that when

Ismene saw Creon was not going to change his mind out of moral insight into Antigone's actions, she quickly thought to rather remind him of the great disservice he'd be doing to his own kin if Antigone were to be punished by his hands.

Sophocles' *Antigone* ends in tragedy. The main character dies by suicide, as do two other significant characters of the play, Haemon and Creon's wife. To add on to this, Ismene and Creon end the book in despair, with nothing but bleak, lonely lives ahead of them. Essentially, the actions undertaken by Antigone, the story's supposed hero, brought about no good. This tragic ending cannot merely be read as the unfortunate consequence of Creon's refusal to adhere to the gods' will. Rather, it can be read as a punishment for Antigone's intervening with Ismene's plan. If Antigone had left the grave alone, Ismene would have been successful in her plan to bury her brother while still feigning allegiance to the king. Nobody would have died, nor would anybody have been left miserable. This would have been a true accomplishment for a story's hero. As Kirkpatrick points out, "Ismene's underhanded tactics are more in line with a commitment to nonviolence because they attempt to dodge government violence altogether" (Kirkpatrick 424). Antigone thwarts the efforts of Ismene that would bring about a more appealing ending, however, by seeing honor as something that can only be earned out in the open. This could be a lesson from the author, then, that the true heroes are those that act quietly yet admirably, and that those who let ego play a role in their actions (as with Antigone) will never succeed in actually bringing about goodness.

Just as Ismene knows that transparency is not necessary in doing heroic deeds, Sophocles knows that transparency is not necessary in depicting heroes of the story. In the case of Antigone, the hero was not the obvious choice. Rather, it was the “unheroic” Ismene. Ismene serves as the ideal dissident through acting covertly and therefore pragmatically. Furthermore, Ismene serves as the ideal hero in Antigone by proving grandiose display is not essential to accompany an action, but rather all the action needs is righteousness behind it.