

ANTIGONE, INTERRUPTED

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Introduction

The *inter* of a political *interesse* is that of an interruption or an interval. The political community is a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local . . .

Jacques Rancière

The lifespan of man running towards death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they may die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.

Hannah Arendt

Interruption is one of the fundamental procedures constitutive of form. It extends far beyond the orbit of art. It lies at the root – to take only one example – of citation. To cite a text means to interrupt its context.

Walter Benjamin

This book is divided into two parts. In Part I, Interruption, I look at the role of Sophocles' play and its heroine in contemporary debates about agency, power, sovereignty, and sexuality. I suggest that the turn to Antigone in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first is best seen in the context of a series of turns to ethics, humanism, or maternalism, each aimed at countering certain forms of sovereignty or rationality (identified often with Oedipus). Lamenting sovereignty's excesses and the disappointments of rationalism, theorists and critics then seem to find in that very lamentation a new universalism that might take the place of these discredited contenders: whatever our differences, we are all mortal and we all lament our finitude, since the time of Antigone.¹ Thus, for them, lamentation also reassures as it steps in to take the place of the very thing whose loss we lament: universalism.

I go on to ask whether feminist and democratic theorists might rethink the rejection of sovereignty and consider devoting themselves instead to its cultivation. We might be critical of sovereignty's operations in particular contexts while still seeking to enlist the powers of sovereignty in others, for our own democratic or redistributive agendas. Analyzing some turns to Antigone, I ask whether the conventional figure of Antigone herself, much admired for her principled dissidence but also for her self-sacrifice, ultimately presses a certain impotence and resignation on her admirers as she leads them to embrace, as they think she once did, a politics of *lamentation*.

Part I's interruption of Antigone's reception history – in political theory, philosophy, feminist theory, and cultural politics – prepares the ground for a new reception, and stages my turn in Part II to an alternative reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* that might better inform and guide feminist and democratic theory. The aim is to break many theorists' fascination with rupture over the everyday, powerlessness over sovereignty, and heroic martyrdom over the seemingly dull work of maintenance, repair, and planning for possible futures.² My alternative reading identifies an Antigone who engages in a politics of counter-sovereignty. In place of the currently seductive politics of *lamentation*, I find in the play, read in fifth-century context and with twentieth- and twenty-first-century theory, a more robust *politics* of lamentation, in which lamentation is not "human," ethical, or maternal – tethered to the fact of finitude – but an essentially contested practice, part of an *agon* among fractious and divided systems of signification and power.³ The issue posed by the *Antigone* (as opposed to by Antigone, the character) is not whether to lament the dead but rather how to do so, and what undergirds that question, broached repeatedly in the play, is the knowledge that lamentation stands for certain forms of life, social orders, ontologies, and histories.

The work of decaptivation and, ultimately, recaptivation to which this book is dedicated requires an immanent counter-reading of *Antigone*. This I proceed to offer in Part II, Conspiracy. Although Parts I and II can be read independently of each other and in either order, Part I's interruptions are meant to prepare the way for Part II's conspiracies, and to show why such conspiracies are important now. From the politics of *lamentation*, the focus in Part I, I turn in Part II to the *politics* of lamentation, tracking the ways in which various elites in the play can be seen to conspire with or against the new fifth-century democracy which is not the play's dramatic setting but is the context of the play's performance. Moreover, I argue that Antigone herself is a figure of conspiracy. She begins plotting in the dark

with her sister and moves gradually into more open and then into more veiled confrontations with Creon. Her open confrontations, tragic, doomed, courageous, have been the focus of scholarship until now. Attending to her other mode of engagement, though, and approaching Antigone as a conspirator, we see something else, in particular, her nuanced facility with language or, as we will see, language's conspiracy with her: she whispers, nudges, and puns her way through to communicate things on stage and to her audience that go right over Creon's head. On this reading, then, she is a heroine not only of resistance and frank speech (though she tries these too) but also of the open secret, that conspiratorial form of communication whose figure is *adiaoeta*.

Interruption – there are several in the play – is the other important speech act, attention to which opens the play up in new ways. Although interruption is itself a speech act (even if J. L. Austin does not discuss it), it is the one kind of speech act to which the *Antigone's* philosophical readers have been inattentive. Why? Perhaps because interruption is an odd sort of doing, not always a sort of doing, in fact. Interruption, which aborts another's speech, may be a deliberate speech act – "stop!" or "I object!" – but sometimes interruption just happens as a side effect or by-product of other doings. Thus, it seems different from the performatives to which J. L. Austin (1962) and Jacques Derrida (1988) call our attention and it is harder to track. Is interruption any speech act that precedes or causes the cessation of another? If so, it might be entirely perlocutionary – exhausted by that trait, unlike Austin's other performatives, which carry other forces as well.

The speech act of interruption has even less content, as it were, than Eve Sedgwick's "periperformatives," which broach or dance around speech acts but are never quite uttered and in this reticence find their power (2003: chapter 2). Like periperformatives, interruption is rarely straightforward. It does not take the form of the conjugal "I promise" or "I do" (whose centrality to speech act theory Sedgwick rightly decries), though it could of course take the form of another iconic performative solicited at weddings – the rarely uttered response to: "If there is anyone who believes there is a reason why these two should not be wed, speak now or forever hold your peace."⁴ That is, interruption can take the form of saying or doing almost anything at all, if the effect is that of stopping the current speaker or redirecting unfolding events, or even just trying to do so (interruption may itself be interrupted, after all; and it may, like all speech acts, succeed or fail). Interruption is, then, often a *side* effect of other kinds of speech, whereas Austin's other, exemplary speech acts generally have effects that

are understood to be quite direct (indirect side effects are not ruled out but neither are they exemplary in Austin's speech act theory). This means we may miss the speech act of interruption unless we look out for it and this requires that we approach the texts we study dramaturgically. Those who approach Sophocles' play looking to identify its arguments or endorse certain of its characters' stances may miss the interruptions on which I will focus here. When political and feminist theorists approach the *Antigone* dramaturgically, we also interrupt many elements of its canonical reception history and open up new interpretative possibilities.

Set in a time and place distant from fifth-century Athens, Sophocles' *Antigone* provided a way for Athenians to work through issues that might have been too close to home to be worked out safely in an Athenian setting.⁵ The play's distant setting might have allowed Sophocles to broach for public consideration issues that would otherwise be dangerous to consider. It may be for this reason that, as Jean-Pierre Vernant (1988) points out, the hero of Greek tragedy is almost always alien and from a distant past.⁶

The play begins in the aftermath of near civil war. The conflict occurs in the wake of the rule of Oedipus who ruled Thebes wisely and well but who also, with his acts of parricide and incest – unintended, unknowing, but still his acts – polluted the polity and brought it to near ruin. Oedipus' reign ends with his wife's/mother's suicide and his own exile and death. Left behind are the four children of his incestuous marriage to Jocasta: Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene. The sons, Eteocles and Polynices, both claim the throne after their father leaves. Some versions of the story suggest they agree to rule by turns. Eteocles takes power first but when the time comes to pass the throne to Polynices, Eteocles refuses to do so. Polynices (whose name means *many quarrels*) marries a daughter of the Argives, raises an army at Argos, and besieges his native city to claim what is his. The brothers do battle and each dies by the other's hand.

The play opens with Antigone telling her sister Ismene awful news. Ismene has not yet heard it. Their brother Eteocles has been buried with full honors by Thebes' new leader, their uncle Creon. Antigone participated in this ritual. But Creon has decreed that Polynices, their other brother, is "to be left," as Antigone puts it, "unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure for birds that scan the field and feast to their hearts' content" (28–30 [35–36]).⁷ Creon, Antigone rightly perceives, has "graced one with all the rites and disgraced the other" (21–22 [27–28]).

Antigone cannot permit her brother's body to lie exposed. She feels compelled to bury him and assumes her sister will feel the same way. Thus

when Ismene demurs, Antigone is shocked and angry. She insists she will act alone and that she is willing to die for her cause – eager, even, to win glory. She leaves, resolute, and in the next scene a sentry, who has been guarding the body of Polynices to prevent its burial, appears before Creon to let him know someone has violated his edict. It happened at night and so quietly that none of the guards witnessed it. Creon sends the guard back to the scene with threats of dire consequences if he and his fellows do not guard the body better and catch the culprit who violated his edict.

The sentry soon returns with Antigone who this time has been caught in the act, dusting the body in broad daylight. Creon resolves to punish her along with her sister, whom he assumes was complicit. But, queried by the Chorus, he releases Ismene. Antigone is taken away. Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's betrothed, enters and tries to persuade his father to a more moderate course. Haemon argues that the people of Thebes support Antigone though they dare not speak up for fear of Creon. Creon rejects his son's arguments and the son leaves furious at his father's recalcitrance.

Although Creon had announced that anyone who violated his edict would be stoned to death, he now commands that Antigone be immured in a cave with enough rations to last a few days. It seems he is distancing himself from her death and is asking the gods to decide it. She is taken to the cave, outside the city, and along the way she sings her own dirge, lamenting her losses and her fate but not her actions.

Creon is then visited by the blind seer Tiresias who warns him he has gone too far in leaving a dead body unburied and putting a live person underground. Creon remains recalcitrant but, increasingly concerned after Tiresias' departure, Creon seeks the counsel of his elders, then rushes to undo his actions. He goes to bury Polynices and then to release Antigone. When he gets to the cave in which she is immured, he hears the sound of Haemon wailing inside. Antigone has hanged herself and Haemon has found her corpse. Creon enters the cave, calling his son out. Haemon tries to kill his father, fails, and then kills himself with his sword. His body spurting blood on Antigone's, he dies in her arms in an iconic marriage-to-death scene. Creon carries Haemon's body home in his arms, lamenting the loss of his son, only to find when he arrives that his wife Eurydice has also killed herself, having already heard from a messenger the news of her son's death. The play ends with Creon lamenting all his losses, begging someone to kill him, to put him out of his misery. But, as with most of his other orders, no one seems to obey and he is led away.

This brief summary of the play passes over the Chorus' role and many other important details, some of which I address in the chapters that

follow. For now I want to call attention to one theme that is significant for my purposes: the several scenes in which Antigone is interrupted.

- *When Antigone tends to the body of her dead brother, Polynices, in violation of an edict against doing so, she is interrupted by her uncle Creon's guards and arrested.*
- *Later, when she sings her own dirge en route to her death, she is interrupted by Creon who mocks her and tells his guards to take her away.*
- *When the guards fail to act on Creon's orders, Antigone goes on with her dirge, but Creon interrupts her again. This time, he threatens the guards – if they do not act quickly they will be punished – and so the guards interrupt her and seal her in the cave that will be her tomb.*
- *Antigone is interrupted yet one more time when her final act, virginal suicide, scripted by her as a return to her natal family, is redirected by her betrothed and Creon's son, Haemon. When the grieving Haemon commits suicide on Antigone's corpse, he marries her in death (the messenger says: "he has won his bride at last poor boy" [1240–1241 (1370)]), and reclaims her for the conjugal family form she rejected in life.⁸*

Sophocles' *Antigone* may be the most commented-upon drama in the history of philosophy, feminism, and political theory. But the interruptions listed here play no role at all in most readings of the play. Theorists and philosophers neglect the play's *dramaturgy* to attend to the play's role in the history of philosophy and to focus on what they see as the play's *arguments* about burial, obedience, authority, sovereignty, religion, gender, and more.⁹ Other elements of the play, like gesture, tone, music, voice, rhetoric, and speech act for the most part go unremarked.¹⁰ But approaching the play with its dramaturgy in mind has, paradoxically, more to offer political theory than any "arguments" we may cull from the play. A dramaturgical approach treats the text as a performance that may succeed or fail rather than as an argument that may be true or false, right or wrong.¹¹ It attends to shifting contexts in the play, noting for example the significance of how information circulates, which things are said directly by one character to another, which are said within another's hearing and are overheard, which are uttered in someone's absence, and which are said over another's head. In addition, a dramaturgical approach calls attention to double entendres, puns, and jokes, most of which have escaped the notice of critics until now. Such an approach is attentive to the asymmetrical powers of different speakers, the errancy of utterance which may end up in the wrong place, the pace and trajectory of textual and historical events, the possibility of conspiracy, coded communication,

irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole. All of these, as we shall see, play important roles in Sophocles' great tragedy. And through them we are shaped into certain fundamental assumptions about humanity, universality, loyalty, and more. They carry the force of argument.

Looking, in Part I, at the reception of Sophocles' play and its protagonist in contemporary feminist and queer theory, cultural politics, and political theory, and then, in Part II, reading the play in historical and contemporary contexts, I tack back and forth between classics and philosophy, feminist and political theory, reception studies, and historical, contextual approaches. I approach these literatures critically, sensitive not only to the history of philosophers' reception of the arguments in the play but also to the fact that even interpreters oriented to arguments and utterances are affected, though unavowedly so, by genred expectations. Throughout, I look at how the genred expectations of philosophers, literary critics, and theater-goers have shaped receptions of text or performance until now.

Reading *Antigone* in part through the trope of interruption, this book stages yet one more interruption: that of the received "Antigone." Since G. W. F. Hegel first canonized the play for modern philosophy in the early nineteenth century, admiring the heroine who would go on to haunt his modern state as its eternal irony, the various contending readings of Antigone that have filled the pages of political theory and philosophy books tend to identify Antigone with one of three roles:

- (i) heroic conscientious objector who on political grounds violates an unjust law, challenges a powerful sovereign, and all by herself dares speak truth to power. This is the legalists' Antigone, invariably paired, whether or not to her advantage, with Socrates, that other famous civil disobedient.
- (ii) humanist lamenter of the dead, grieving sister/mother/daughter, whose cries for her brother accentuate a sense of loss said to be familiar to all humans, instancing a universal that is pointedly poised against time-bound, divisive, and merely political distinctions between friend and enemy.
- (iii) monstrous creature of desire unbound by the ordinary satisfactions of everyday life and therefore willing, even passionately eager, to die for her cause.

To these I add another; or better, against these I posit another.

The Antigone that emerges here is heroic but not isolated. She is pointedly political not transcendently universal but she can still speak to

us, centuries later, nonetheless. She laments, but she does so in a way that is also partisan, vengeful, not just mournful or humanist. And she is willing to die, yes, but not only for the divinely approved cause of equal burial rites nor because she exemplifies desire that, as followers of Jacques Lacan argue, appears as a monstrous attraction to death. She dies for her *atê*, her family *atê*, as classicists and Lacanians, in their different ways, have long argued. But she also, in a way perhaps less alien to contemporary readers, dies for her living sister. Antigone is impatient with Ismene and seems to scorn her, as virtually every commentator on the play has noted for centuries, but, as we shall see here, a close dramaturgical reading of the play shows that Antigone is also deeply loyal to the sister most critics think she only disdains.

This new Antigone may inspire those who see no path to action in times of confinement, constraint, or catastrophe. Herself faced with catastrophe (most of her family dead, her way of life criminalized by Creon), Antigone nonetheless acts politically in conditions of impossibility. When she laments, she does not only lament; she not only buries her brother against her uncle's edict, she also calls for vengeance against those who desecrated his body. She does not only resist sovereign power and martyr herself to an impossible cause, she makes a claim for sovereignty, both for herself and the form of life to which she belongs. She enters into political conspiracy against Creon, she conspires with language, and it with her (to borrow a phrase from James Martel [2011]), to solicit a public that may see things her way. These traits, I will argue here, rather than her resistance and martyrdom per se, are what democratic theorists now should be positing as exemplary. And we should be noting how Antigone does not act alone, though she is repeatedly isolated by devotees who celebrate her (or her act's) singularity. A close reading of the play shows that her actions are embedded in and enacted on behalf of forces, structures, and networks larger than the autonomous individual that modern liberals, humanists, and even radical democratic theorists tend to both love (as courageous, heroic) and berate (as anarchic or irresponsible).

The conventional Antigone – isolated and heroically transgressive, even monstrous – is also instructive. The new readings of the play developed over the course of this book show how selective were the canonical interpretations that generated the iconic tragic heroine and how symptomatic these insistent receptions were of her readers' needs, over time, for a certain kind of heroine: Christian martyr, Romantic suicide, idealized sister, heroic individual, maternal lamenter. That said, it must be owned that the new Antigone developed here may be a product of *its* moment as

well. She is surely made possible by recent work in classics on women's laments and the politics of burial in the fifth century. And she is surely enabled by over forty years of feminist work which has interrogated again and again received depictions of women in the history of philosophy and politics. New habits of reading, developed during that time, question every received gendered assumption and follow the injunction always to look again and take nothing for granted. These habits play no small part in generating the new readings offered here.¹²

There is also in these pages a not insubstantial engagement with queer theory, a relatively recently developed branch of political and cultural analysis rich with implications for *Antigone* interpretation. Some queer theorists are drawn to this heroine; most are not. Those who do turn to her differ in their judgments of her. Peggy Phelan (1997) rejects Antigone as a bad model for queer politics, while Lee Edelman (2004) and Judith Butler (2000) both endorse her, albeit for diametrically different reasons. Butler, who says that Antigone is a "not quite queer heroine," sees in her a generative example of political resignification – of language and kinship done otherwise – as well as a potent symbol of human equality in death (2000: 72).¹³ Edelman sees Antigone as personifying forms of adamant refusal that queer theory ought to endorse and cultivate. Finally, queer theory, in particular, has emerged in part out of a politics of contested death, mourning, and lamentation practices, dealing with the impact of AIDS on the gay community since the 1980s. In the context of AIDS and AIDS activism, we find more polarized, politicized death practices than those we get from the ethical, mortalist, or maternalist humanisms with which Antigone these days is so often affiliated. My turn to queer theory, like my turn to Antigone, is on behalf of democratic theory, the branch of political theory devoted to enhancing or rethinking equality, and to investigating the subtle and explicit workings of power, enabling and inequitable. Queer theory shares those commitments and is, like the great tragedians, also interested in exploring the possibilities of action in conditions of seeming impossibility. Queer theorists more than others attend to how the politics of lamentation slides all too easily into the lamentation of politics. Critical democratic theorists do well to enlist feminist and queer theory along with cultural critique, psychoanalysis, film and literary theory, in their quest to identify and overcome obstacles to equality.

But, some will object, most of these obstacles are material and, in current contexts of inegalitarian, neo-liberal capitalism and globalization, the reinterpretation of classical texts hardly seems the most pressing task. There is something undeniable in this. And yet, as I write this, Sophocles'

Antigone is being staged in London's National Theatre, has just finished a run in Perth, Australia, and plans for its staging are under way in Ramallah, where it will be the first play performed in a new theater school.¹⁴ The play's various restagings are not this book's object of inquiry. When I talk about "receptions" in this book I mean for the most part to refer to theoretical and philosophical receptions, not theatrical ones. But such restagings are surely part of its occasion. For the play, still alive, is working on us, framing our views of dissidence, martyrdom, and democratic politics, the politics of burial and lamentation, the clash between public and private, and the promise and politics of a pre-, post-, and ongoingly Christian humanism, often now secularized as a mortalist humanism. As I note here, those seeking to advance the cause of equality often turn to *Antigone* as a model of civil disobedience or alternative equality (of the dead) and are drawn, in part by received interpretations of this iconic figure, into mere resistance politics, reflexive anti-statism, or an extrapolitical humanism of equal dignity in death. There is another option: an agonistic humanism whose politics of counter-sovereignty, conspiracy, and solidarity is more promising for them and, arguably, more true to the richness of Sophocles' play and its complex reception history. The extrapolitical universalism of grief with which this classical heroine is increasingly identified in feminist and critical theory emphasizes equality in death; a politics of counter-sovereignty emphasizes equality in life. The latter is more properly the focus for democratic theory and is actually better, if still imperfectly, promoted by the divisive, vengeful, and politically partisan *Antigone* I find reason to promote from beneath centuries of distinct but overlapping Christian and Romantic interpretations caught up in an ardor for martyrdom that goes on to pervade the humanisms to which they give rise.¹⁵

CHAPTER 6

*Sacrifice, sorority, integrity: Antigone's
conspiracy with Ismene*

Ismene: Such wretched straits.

Oedipus: Hers [Antigone's] and mine?

Ismene: And mine too, my pain the third.

Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*

The scenes looked at in this chapter come earlier in the play than Antigone's dirge, the scene we just examined in detail in Chapter 5. If the ordering of these chapters violates the play's chronology, that is for two reasons. First, having established the context of burial politics in Chapter 4, it made sense to move immediately in Chapter 5 to discuss Antigone's dirge. Second, the earlier scenes I look at now here, in Chapter 6, include one in which Antigone conspires with Ismene, or so I will claim. That claim is easier to establish if we have in place some appreciation of Antigone's capacity to conspire with language and it with her, and this appreciation postulates the close reading of her dirge that was the focus of Chapter 5. Thus, the non-chronological ordering is necessary to undo several settled elements of interpretation and reception and to make room for a more agonistic engagement with the play.

Perhaps no element of *Antigone's* reception history is more settled than the belief that Antigone's sister, Ismene, is an anti-political character who lacks the courage or imagination to act when called upon to do so. Critics split the two sisters into active and passive characters, treating them respectively as heroic and withdrawn, courageous and cowardly. 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, desire, or compulsion but then confronts the protagonists (and the audience) with the inevitable demise that destroys human illusions 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 calls an anti-politics of shared suffering (2002b: 26–27) or (what Lacanians call) desire. Still others, including Loraux in her earlier work, seek the politics of tragedy in the fifth-century context or in its later receptions.¹ 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; and this distracts attention from those elements of most concern to democratic theory: solidarity or action in concert among equals. Indeed, political theorists vary in celebrating or faulting Antigone, but virtually all agree she lacks any interest in mobilizing others or constituting a public. Both classicists and democratic theorists, even those who admire her, criticize her for being too self-centered or principled to a fault.² She is often contrasted with Haemon, who knows how to argue reasonably, it is said (e.g. Nussbaum 1986 and Tully 1995), though making the case for this character as a model of deliberation requires delicately sidestepping his attempted parricide and his violent self-destruction.

The interpretation of *Antigone* offered in this chapter, 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 homing in on the moments when, as I argue, Antigone plots and conspires with her sister. Developing further the contrast of word and sound and exploring their intimacy, work begun in Chapter 5, I attend not just to the text but also to possible subtleties of tone and performance to generate new interpretative options. Also, in this chapter, I intensify the focus on action rather than suffering, solidarity over heroic isolation. The emergent interpretation is promoted assertively in order to establish its viability against the likely incredulity of readers, but of course this reading is, like all readings, partial and contestable. It highlights certain dimensions of the text and not others. I will argue in its favor, however, on interpretative grounds and also on political and dramaturgical ones. 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 (and not only vice versa).³

“WE ARE NOT BORN TO CONTEND WITH MEN” – ISMENE'S
RECEPTION HISTORY

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, notwithstanding centuries of interpretation that treat Ismene as a passive, compliant character, Ismene puts up quite a fight when she hears her sister's plans.⁴ In this chapter, I read the play through the prism of this first scene, in which Antigone tries to plot with Ismene and then responds to Ismene's entreaties by rejecting her sister and swearing to an abiding inhospitality to her forever more. “I'd never welcome you in the labor, not with me” (70 [83]).

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's edict. These puzzles are solved by the reading developed here, in which the sisters act in coordination beneath the radar of Creon's sovereignty.

Turning later to read the play with and against Alenka Zupančič (1998) who interprets the play elaborating Jacques Lacan's account of ethics, I argue there is a case to be made for treating Ismene and Antigone as plotters and conspirators who act ethically and politically. One benefit of this approach is that it shows how driven are conventional interpretations by certain contestable humanist assumptions about heroic individual agency, politics, and sovereignty.

Lacan does not 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 heroic sister stands out. Antigone is active, Ismene passive; Antigone is heroic, Ismene cowardly, are the refrains of the conventional readings.⁵ Slavoj Žižek preserves them:

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 ruthless, exempted from the circle of everyday feelings and considerations, passions and fears. (1989: 117)⁶

The splitting of Ismene and Antigone recurs even when the conventional takes on the two sisters are revalued, and Ismene is rendered more, not less, attractive than her beautiful sister.⁷ Jill Frank (2006) argues insightfully that Ismene is not withdrawn, weak, or incapacitated; she is patient and bides her time. Antigone, by contrast, is too quick to act, too fiery, too thunderously loud to be truly effective. Mary Rawlinson criticizes feminists for deriding Ismene’s focus on survival in favor of Antigone’s heroic martyrdom. Ismene’s this-worldly orientation is actually more valuable to feminism than her sister’s sacrificial desire, Rawlinson concludes.⁸

But Ismene does more than survive. She acts creatively in response 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.”⁹ Indeed, I argue here that Zupančič’s treatment of Lacan invites an assessment of Antigone’s supposedly ordinary sister different from the one he and his followers, like Žižek and Zupančič, themselves 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) simply 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 we shall see, Ismene finds a way to act otherwise.

A close reading of the text suggests that the two sisters act in concert in ways that complement rather than compete, or complement *and* compete. Sophocles’ readers and viewers, from Hegel to Lacan and from Segal to Goldhill and Butler, have thus far failed to detect the sororal solidarity at work in this play.¹⁰ Why?¹¹ Antigone’s solidarity with Ismene, and Ismene’s transformation, call into some question the remnants of the heroic, ruptural model of action by which even progressive theorists of politics remain bewitched.¹² An alternative Antigone, solidaristic and sororal, is important

to democratic and feminist theory, however, because her commitment to Ismene expresses a commitment to life, not just death. This Antigone was indeed, as she herself says, “born to love,” and she presses on us a question: what assumptions about sacrifice, heroism, and agency may perhaps blind us to sororal and other solidaristic forms of agency and their powers, both in the play and possibly in the world around us?

The play’s subtleties are worth attending to, as democratic and feminist theorists continue to work through our centuries-long relationship with Antigone, her readers, 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 the brother, nor is she a witness protesting the injustice of her brother’s reduction to bare life, as readers of Giorgio Agamben might put it. Nor again are her actions best seen as vindications of would-be extra-political universals, such as the ontological fact of mortality which positions us all as mortal, vulnerable, or grievable. Antigone may be all these things, but she is also – and more importantly for democratic and feminist theory – a partisan sororal actor in concert who sacrifices herself not just for the disgraced, “ungrievable” dead brother, but also for a living equal: her sister. Antigone avows the 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 conspiratorial and even 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.

The idea that Antigone’s death is a sacrifice is not new. In nineteenth-century Germany, philosophers from Hegel to Schelling, Goethe, and even the composer Felix Mendelssohn, approached Antigone through a sacrificial structure typical of their Christian moment. In the Christianized Germany of the 1840s, Sophocles’ heroine was identified with Mary Magdalene who put herself at risk to care for the dead when she took Jesus’ broken body down from the cross (Geary 2006). Antigone’s sacrifice for her dead brother was available to be appropriated not on behalf of the anti-statism in the name of which this heroine has so often since been redeployed but rather on behalf of the sort of uncompromising and selfless loyalty and devotion that stood as a particularly central virtue of modern Christianity and was useful to the still-new state form. This is the Antigone Friedrich Wilhelm wanted to see in his court theater in 1842, not the

dissident transgressor of Creon's law. Something like this Christian Antigone is taken up by Lacan and his heirs to this day as a forceful model for transgressive desire and for dissident politics. Feminists have been drawn to this heroic Antigone as well, perhaps also (even if unwittingly) to the power of her self-sacrifice.

Antigone's sacrifice is usually assumed to have been 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 do well to look past Polynices and reconsider this portrait of Ismene. The dead brother is one object around whom the sisters connect and contend, rather than a 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 of the *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, each enacting a particular, exemplary kind of relationship not only to the dead but also to the living.¹³

I turn now to a close reading of Sophocles' text in relation to the classics commentary, then to extend that reading further and consider its political implications in light of Lacan's and Bernard Williams's very different but overlapping treatments of ethics as the impossible negotiation of tragic dilemmas or forced choices. I close with a discussion of distinctively sororal power in the play and in its reception, establishing some critical distance between this work and Simon Goldhill's (2006, 2012) recent calls to explore the power of sorority for thinking politically. One way to look at this intervention is to understand it as positioning Antigone somewhere between the heroism with which Bernard Knox identified her forty years ago, and the citizenship with which (sublimation into which) Julia Lupton has more recently argued Antigone should be affiliated.

"I DON'T DENY A THING" – THE PROBLEM OF
THE TWO BURIALS

Creon's edict prohibiting the burial of the traitor, Polynices, is violated twice. The first time, at night, unwitnessed, someone performs a symbolic burial ritual – the body is not buried, but dusted. 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 whether they were instructed to do so).

The sentry soon returns to Creon with a prisoner: Antigone. Although the sentry congratulates himself on apprehending 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' case, in that 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 burial the body was only dusted, but that in the second Antigone pours libations, Jebb infers that Antigone must have returned because she had earlier forgotten the libations and needed them to complete the rite (1966: 114).¹⁴

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 – that 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 line of events that ultimately lead 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 she knew about the first burial presumably because she herself had performed it. However, the work she curses might be not the unburial, 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.

Yet 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" (480–485 [536–542]). On a reading that accents Creon's claim, Antigone does not *want* to get away with her crime and is dismayed to think she has done. 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 the issue may not just be 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. I have explored this possibility elsewhere (2013), suggesting that Creon's edict disables Antigone's mourning, and Ismene's refusal to help Antigone do the work of burial makes matters worse. Without Ismene's help, Antigone cannot lift the body. This deprives Antigone of the fuller satisfactions burial provides survivors, and leaves Antigone trapped in melancholy. Failing to bury Polynices again and again, she can achieve only a mere simulacrum of the proper rites, and so she acts out a repetition compulsion that might have gone on forever

had it not been interrupted finally by her arrest. This interpretation finds support in – or lends support to – Stanley Cavell's claim that there is, in Elisabeth Bronfen's words, "a repetition compulsion at the heart of the tragic theme" (2008: 287; citing Cavell 1976: 310). (This, arguably, is what melodrama homes in on and intensifies.)

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 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 on A. C. Bradley's discussion of Shakespeare's tragic characters (Rose 1952: 221; citing Bradley 1929: 20) 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).

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 the first burial was not performed by Antigone.

First, when Antigone is caught 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 has also pointed out in the context of a different argument (2000: 8; 33; 2004b: 161–173). "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" (434–435 [482–484]). Again, when Creon asks if she buried the corpse, 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 [100–101]). Or we could see some care, some crafting in the language. Does "I did it" go to the second burial (434–435 [483–484])? And does her "I don't deny a thing," which is not the same as "I did it," go to the first burial?

If Antigone did not perform the first burial, the sentry's 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" (441–442 [489–491]). *Eyes fixed on the ground* is how the sentry describes himself and his comrades when they realize after the first burial 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" (269–270 [305–306]; emphasis added). 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?¹⁵ While the sentry speaks of 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" (434 [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.¹⁶

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?" (278–279 [316]). But the possibility is so thoroughly dismissed by Creon that no character in the play and few critics since dare revive it for serious consideration.¹⁷ "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!" (280–281, 288–289 [317–319, 326–327]). Creon is cutting: "Tell me, was it for meritorious service [that] they proceeded to bury him, prized him so?" (284–285 [321–322]). Insisting Antigone is 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.¹⁸ 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?*

"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. Instead, we have *two sisters, two burials*. And each is done in the characteristic style of each sister.

The first, Ismene-like, subtle, *sub rosa*, quiet, under cover of darkness, performed exactly, to a "T," 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]). Indeed, the furtiveness of the first burial is noted in the sentry's report: "someone's just buried it, then run off" (245–246 [278]).

The second, true to Antigone ("Dear god, shout it from the rooftops . . . tell the world!" (86–87 [100–101]), is performed with loud, keening, and vengeful cries out in the open, in the noon-time sun: "the sun stood dead above our heads, a huge white ball in the noon sky, beating, blazing down," the sentry tells Creon (415–417 [460–462]).

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.¹⁹ 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" (98–99 [114–116]). 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: "you are truly dear to the ones who love you" 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 emerging 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. What if this suggests something has shifted in her?²⁰ Reflecting on her love for Antigone, confronted with her sister's intransigence, 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 for political principle but for her sister, possibly for her brother, and possibly for herself as well. Although Ismene did not show it at the time, we may infer from the sentry's description of the first dusting of Polynices (as "just a light cover of road-dust . . . as if someone meant to lay the dead to rest and keep from getting cursed") (255–256 [290–292]) that Ismene may well have been unsettled to hear Antigone say that the sister, who refuses to act, will incur "the hatred of the dead, [who] by all rights, will haunt you night and day" (93–94 [108–110]). When the sentry says the dust provided was just enough to avert this fate, the hint is clear. Perhaps Ismene thought a secret nocturnal burial would be enough – just enough – to rest Polynices' soul (and, not coincidentally, a nocturnal act conforms more closely to the polis' new restrictions on funerals). Perhaps it would be enough to stop Antigone taking the risks of 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 better than others for the cries emitted by Ismene when Antigone is taken prisoner (491–492 [548–549]). Ismene would mourn her sister's fate, in any case. But she would surely mourn it all the more passionately had she put herself at risk to avert it. Her cries are so loud and unsettling, 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" (493–494 [549–552]). These lines are commonly taken to be more of Creon's late onset, Captain Queeg-like paranoia by readers who through the ages 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: his tragedy is, as he rightly senses, in the hands of plotters.

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" (495–496 [552–554]). One sister was quiet and surreptitious; the other flaunted her crime flagrantly. Accusing Ismene "of an equal part in scheming this, this burial" (489–490 [547–548]), Creon sees not just resistance but a plot, for which at this moment he intends to punish both women while distinguishing their levels of culpability in it. He is focused here on the planning or plotting (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, it is because 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 [555–556]) and sure enough, he falls for it: "Nothing. Then I have it all" (498 [557]). 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 [558–561]), she says before goading him one last time. Turning to the Chorus, she calls him a tyrant who rules by fear (505–507 [565–567]). 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" (531–535 [597–603]). Having indeed slunk, undetected, to perform the first burial of Polynices, Ismene now speaks out loud: "I did it, yes –" (536 [603]).

Why has no one for hundreds of years or more taken her at her word?²¹ She confessed. Not only does she not deny it, she actually owns it.

Perhaps her confession is overlooked because on other readings, which 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 wildly out of character. As Creon (whose perspective will subtly frame the critical reception of these scenes for centuries) said earlier, she must surely be "hysterical."

Ismene also abets those who claim she lacks agency, for 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" (536–537 [603–605]). Why the proviso "if only she consents"? If Ismene did do it, then why does she need Antigone's consent? If Ismene did not do it, then 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 a 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 to the puzzle's solution 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 her course of action 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 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.*²² *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 are you a coward for all your royal blood?" At first, Ismene seemed

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.²³ And Antigone says yes, and no.

Antigone acknowledges her sister in intimate terms, 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 earlier wanted (though of course she now claims not to want it; tragic belatedness is in operation here too). 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. 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.²⁴ 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 (536–560 [604–631]). From the perspective of a 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 reading²⁵), 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 other 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.²⁶

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? Butler says Antigone wants the deed for herself. But 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" (538–539 [605–607]).

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*" (542–543 [610–612]; emphasis added). These words 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 words, "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 (possible) truth statements and become, by dint of Antigone's dissent, the mere empty vessels Antigone accuses them of being: words alone. Notably, Antigone's own words here 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 mere words as powerless.²⁷

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. 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 [607]) 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" (544–545 [613–615]), Antigone responds with: "Never share my dying, don't lay claim to what you never touched" (546–547 [615–616]). 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 but not impossible line to walk, accenting the former for Creon, the latter for Ismene.

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?" (548 [618]) 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" (549 [619]). Is this not a coded way of saying *psst; 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 [620]). 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 is a good question. It helps us see that Antigone may have a different aim: to 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 [620–622]). This line is least attended to by critics and indeed cannot be made sense of by most conventional readings. 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 [622–623]). Antigone's answer is straightforward: "Save yourself. I don't grudge you your survival" (553 [624]).²⁸ It is a gift, a shift from her earlier position when she did indeed begrudge Ismene's focus on survival. Here that focus is affirmed not mocked, though. When late in the day Antigone says, "My death will be enough" (546 [617]), it is clear the option of survival is not what it once was: 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.²⁹

These lines may convey Antigone's insistence on protecting her sister. *Don't be a fool*, she virtually whispers. (Simpson and Millar [1948] call it an "aside.")³⁰ *Be quiet. Let me handle this.* Then out loud she accuses her sister of being all words and no action. But methinks she doth protest too much. Why the harsh charge? She is desperate to neutralize Ismene's response to Creon. Perhaps Antigone suspects 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 quarrel from the first scene, but this time it is a theatrical performance for Creon's benefit.³¹

What does Creon know of sisters? Or of conspiracy? 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 when Creon rages that Haemon cannot "save those two young girls from death" (769 [865]). "No, not her" he concedes (waffling like a democrat, elites like Antigone might have said) (771 [867]). Ismene will live.³²

On this reading, Ismene is not, as Antigone charges, all empty words and no action. On the contrary, as the double entendres might have suggested to a knowing audience, especially one composed partly of women, Ismene's words are well earned by her quiet courageous actions: first, perhaps, the first burial of Polynices, which Antigone may now suspect and credit as a worthy act and, perhaps second, 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 Ismene 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.³³

The same motivation, the desire to protect Ismene, may motivate Antigone's later melodramatic cries that there is no one left to mourn her, that she is "the last of a great line of kings" (941 [1031]).³⁴ If she goes out of her way to diminish her sister, that is because Antigone does not know that Creon will soon crumble. She thinks he will go on ruling Thebes and Ismene must survive 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, but also much less so. 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, as Simon Goldhill's account of Sophoclean irony should lead us to expect. 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.³⁵ That is what Antigone does; she outwits.³⁶ She helps Ismene by mastering the opacity for a moment, redeploing it using *adianoeta* 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 inconsistent: sister dutiful to Polynices but not to Ismene.³⁷

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 had she heard them at the time 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 natal family.³⁸

If Antigone saves Ismene, then she reminds us again of none other than Intaphrenes' wife, the woman whose words Antigone will in her next scene obliquely re-cite. As we saw in Chapter 5, Darius, having sentenced Intaphrenes and his family to death, responds to the wailing of Intaphrenes' wife by offering her the opportunity to save one relative. She chooses her brother and explains her choice with such clever reasoning that Darius is moved to "reward" her by freeing not only her brother, as asked, but also her eldest son. Re-citing the story here, Antigone toys with Creon. She cites only the part about the irreplaceable brother, but she surely calls to her audience's mind the whole of the tale. In so doing, she puts the lie to her claim in that very same dirge that she is the last remnant of the Oedipal line. For the re-cited tale calls to mind not only the saved brother but also the remnant son, reminding the audience if not the unobvious Creon of none other than the remnant sister: Ismene.

As noted in Chapter 5, others (Weber, Dewald and Kitzinger) have pointed out that Antigone is not really like Intaphrenes' wife. The latter acted prospectively and was able to save her brother from Darius' 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. These readers forget about the woman's son, unasked for but released by Darius to mark his pleasure at the woman's reasoning. These same readers also overlook Ismene and do not notice that, without Antigone's interventions on her sister's behalf, and without the Chorus' protestations, Ismene (regardless of her implication, or not, in the first burial) too would have been killed by Creon. Thus Antigone does act prospectively. She succeeds, no less than Intaphrenes' wife, when she saves her doomed sister. Ismene is the remnant of the remnant, the unasked for unaccounted for gift, to whom we are directed by Antigone's subtle reference to the story of Intaphrenes' wife. Darius throws in the eldest son, a dividend that exhibits the abundance of his power (and possibly his cunning). Creon, by contrast, characteristically simply gives in. Questioned by the Chorus, deceived by Antigone, and 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 plotting and conspiring in resistance to overreaching sovereign power but acting also in love or loyalty for each other. The sisters do not form a democratic collectivity (they may well represent the fifth-century aristocracy's views, as I argued in Chapter 4) or a feminist solidarity, per se. But – on this reading – the sisters care for each other in turn: each guesses at the other's sacrifice in quiet isolation, and each utters the lines and performs the acts that both suit and extend her character. Read in their sororal solidarity, the sisters exhibit a fuller range of virtues, character, desperation, and hope than is discernible to readers who assume Antigone acted alone, which is to say almost all of the play's readers.

If this sororal conspiracy has been almost invisible until now, that may be because readers and spectators do not admire conspiracy as a mode of action and they have trouble imagining a female agency that is agonistically and solidaristically sororal and not merely subject to male exchange. And most critics internalize Creon's perspective. Even those critical of him as a tyrant share his view of Antigone as an anarchic, wild, transgressive flouter of law.³⁹ Romantic lovers of transgression may find heroism in this, liberal and left readers may see here a prefiguration of the dictates of conscience and integrity they admire, and others may disapprove of what they see as disrespect for authority and public order. But all share Creon's perspective.

Simon Goldhill is captured by it too 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. Feminists ignore this at their peril, he says. 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 that should discomfit feminists, but something else that has remained undetected for even longer: a sororal solidarity less discernible perhaps in the *logos* of the sisters' talk than in the *phonè* of their intonation; an agonistic sorority that is solidaristic, not merely subject to male exchange, infused with love, anger, rivalry, complicity, mutuality, devotion, and care. To see this, we must set aside the Creonic framing that has become hegemonic, in which heroic action alone, solitary and disruptive, counts as action.

"LET HER CHOOSE" – LACAN'S ETHICS AND/AS
FORCED CHOICE

how loose or tie the knot? (Ismene)⁴⁰

I wonder, Sister, are you still crouching like some used, forgotten toy in a corner of his Palace? (Jina Politi)

Antigone, who says she was born to die, seems tailor-made for Jacques Lacan.⁴¹ From Lacan's perspective, Antigone is not opposed to Creon (as Hegel says) but is rather dependent upon him. Creon provides the occasion for her to meet her antecedently formed death wish.⁴² In her being-toward-death, she is able to resist the lure of choices we normally mis-take for ethical ones.⁴³ 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. Both are alien: the service of the goods tames our desire into feeling (wrongly) satisfied by the faux-satisfactions of endless chains of goods, while ethical codes hold us to account by principles that have nothing to do with the particular shape of our unique personality, which is betrayed by the demand for universality. Lacanian ethical action resists both of these, says Paul Allen Miller: it "is Kantian in its devotion to a pure concept of duty, 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).

This approach, equally critical of both Kantianism and utilitarianism, calls to mind Bernard Williams's critique of both Kantianism and utilitarianism on behalf of an alternative ethics that is immaterial, code-defiant, and personal (in Smart and Williams [1973]). Williams too sees the tragic or forced choice as a formative and sometimes destructive choice that calls for ethics, not for goods or codes, nor for politics.⁴⁴ And Williams too sees that the tragic situation breaks the grip of the everyday. But Lacan affirms this rupture, for it forces into the forefront our own unique desire, while Williams regrets it, for it threatens to destroy us. For Williams, such moments are best avoided, for they threaten our integrity, while for Lacan, our openness to the tragic choice situation forces us beyond our mere traits to a more existence-affirming awareness.⁴⁵ Still, these two very different thinkers, one psychoanalytic, the other an acute practitioner of philosophical psychology, converge in their judgments of Antigone.⁴⁶

The echo to Lacan is unmistakable when Williams casts Antigone in *Shame and Necessity* 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" (1993: 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 rather than her partisanship, and so both stress her solitariness rather than her sorority, her massive self-assertion rather than her sotto voce conspiracy. But Lacan's ethics provides a way to read past that. The way is prepared by Alenka Zupančič's elaboration of Lacan's ethics of creativity and forced choice. With this definition of ethics, Lacan turns to Antigone, Zupančič points out. Drawing on her own and Lacan's readings of the play, Zupančič argues that Lacan's idea of an 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" (1998: 110). Antigone is seen in relation to the classical. The modern is exemplified by the heroine of Paul Claudel's 1911 melodrama, *The Hostage*, Sygne de Coufontaine, also discussed by Lacan. But, as we shall see, the forced choice labeled "modern" fits Ismene well.

The classical "forced choice" model 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. In Zupančič's words: "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" (1998: 109–110; emphasis original).

In other words, the impossible choice is possible. There is a third term that makes it so, "something which exceeds life."⁴⁷ It can be many things, anything that serves as an "ultimate point of identification for the subject," as his or her "ultimate support" (Zupančič 1998: 110). Costas Douzinas (1994) captures it when he refers to Antigone's "I-must." Alternatively, it may be the Lacanian *Si* that anchors the signifying chain and is not itself subject to that chain's metonymic trade-offs 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." 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 (citing Lacan 1986: 279). (On our reading thus far, Ismene could also be seen to occupy that place for her sister.)

It is essential to an ethics of forced choice that the tested subject does more than simply yield to the force of the choice.⁴⁸ 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).⁴⁹ We might think this "new possibility" refers to her sororal solidarity, but Zupančič is not alert to that. Her Antigone is only ethical, not political, and it is because she is ethical that, 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 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 Žižek is helpful here. Parsing the same point as Zupančič, Žižek says that (for him, for Lacan), "[a]n ethical act is not only beyond the reality principle . . . it rather designates an intervention that changes the very coordinates of the reality principle." It "is not simply beyond the good, it redefines what counts as good." The example to which Žižek here turns is Antigone, "the standard case of civil disobedience" whose act does not simply violate positive law out of fidelity to "a more fundamental law." Her civil disobedience is "more radically performative" insofar as it "defies the predominant notion of the good" (Žižek 2000: 671–672).

There is a further case to be made for Antigone's politicality, though. Žižek and Zupančič do not make the case but Sophocles' text rewards those who return to it with their Lacanian questions in mind.⁵⁰

When Antigone is subjected by Creon to a forced choice, she may seem simply to pick one of the options presented. For example, in response to the edict that forbids the burial of Polynices, which presents her with the

forced choice – leave your brother unburied or bury him and die – 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, owns 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 rather than democratic terms, when she cites Herodotus' 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 or political situation and reformulated it.⁵¹ She performs the burial of Polynices in a way that she hopes will recast the situation. She will, she tells Ismene, perform the burial heroically, publicly, and the people of Thebes, confronted with their own forced choice, will celebrate her for it (Zupančič 1998: 113).⁵² 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 henceforth. This, more than any of the traits Zupančič looks at, is Antigone's creativity, surely. Note though that her creativity here 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 through first plotting and then conspiracy, she solicits the support of a public possibly cowed by him, yet sympathetic to her.

These maneuvers are made in the context of other forced choices imposed on her along the way and already analyzed here, but if we return to them with Lacan's rubric in mind we can now see them in yet another new way. For example, when Antigone says "I did it; I don't deny a thing" in response to Creon's interrogation, she does so, we may now note, in response to a forced choice with which Creon confronts her. When Creon asks Antigone if she violated his edict, he has a specific way of asking. He frames this question as a forced choice that rules out any heroism: "Do you deny you did this, yes or no?" Her only choice is to deny, or not (441–442 [491]). The only affirmation on offer is that of 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 his framing of her act; she rejects the double negation – non-denial – to which he tries to confine her.⁵³ She fastens on a more heroic affirmation of her act, 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' incredulity, to Intaphrenes' wife.

And then there is the last forced choice, imposed on Antigone at the scene of her entombment: 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" (885–888 [973–974]; emphasis 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, death rather than 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 he wants to obscure. Antigone finds a third way. Although she will in the end die 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 compares herself to Intaphrenes' wife and frames her action as one of fidelity to a law of singularity mentioned here by her for the very first time.⁵⁴

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 as mere impotent delay – she is trying to buy time, he charges, but it won't work. Rather than grant to her, as later executioners will to their victims, the right to respond to the question: "have you any last words?" Creon mocks Antigone for her use of words. As we saw in Chapter 5, he suggests that she means to defer dying, that she does not have the true hero's taste for death. But she will put the lie to that with her suicide.

In response to her effort to frame the meaning of her act and bequeath her conspiracy to others, Creon not only 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 [976–977]). It is for these, surely, that Antigone fights in her moments of overliving – for the right to make meaning of her life, to tell her story in her own way, promoting her cause and preserving her memory.

Most receptions of the play have not risen to the lure of Antigone’s creativity, staying rather within the domain of the forced choices that she seeks to transform: public versus private, male versus female, order versus anarchy. In sum, if Antigone forces a forced choice on us, we have so far managed to evade it.

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. (She leaves out the public, mentioned above, though they fit her account and they fail too.) As coldly as Creon, Antigone makes the stakes clear to Ismene: we’ll soon see what you’re made of, she says to Ismene: “Worth your breeding, or a coward.” And, Zupančič says, Ismene “makes the wrong choice (or rather she refuses to recognize that there is a choice)” (1998: 111). 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 has force, that it is for her, that it forces itself on her.

Faulting readers of the play from Hegel onward, Zupančič goes on forcefully to claim: 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]; emphasis added).⁵⁵ 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” (1998: 111). Ismene “understands the stakes of the choice” but fails to rise to its challenge. She “panics.” Creon, too, is said to “panic” (1998: 111–112). The charge rings truer in his case than in hers. Ismene is distressed in the first scene, but there is no evidence in the text of panic. And she, unlike Creon, does rise above the choice Antigone forces upon her. Ismene reformats the situation she faces though Zupančič does not see this and indeed Zupančič and Žižek both

obscure Ismene’s creativity by repeating the familiar lines about Ismene – gentle, normal, uninspired, cowardly – so as better to highlight, by contrast, Antigone’s exemplary heroism.

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 does what Zupančič admires as quintessentially ethical and which I have been suggesting here is surely better understood as political insofar as it effects a re-partition of the sensible: Ismene creates “a new possibility there where the options seem to be exhausted” (1998: 111).

However, the limiting, contested binary of obedience versus dissidence reasserts itself when Ismene’s act is covered over by Antigone’s act – the second burial. That may be why Ismene so often disappears in the play’s pages, invisibly unimportant except as a point of contrast to the heroine. The strident act renders the subtle invisible.⁵⁶ The grand gesture obscures the quiet work of conspiracy. If her aim was to save Antigone the trouble of transgression, Ismene fails. 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

And ultimately, I think that this is just what queer critique must do: use our history and presently quite creative work with pleasure, sex, and bodies to jam *whatever* looks like the inevitable. (Elizabeth Freeman; emphasis original)

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 that “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*” (1998: 115; emphasis original).⁵⁷

The example given by Lacan and analyzed by Zupančič is that of Sygne de Coufontaine, the heroine of Paul Claudel’s 1911 play, *The Hostage*. Confronted with a forced choice of 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 (which is as contrived as most melodrama, and may be seen as a fable of the forced choices 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 she is harboring from Napoleon’s forces. The man who seeks to marry her is a Jacobin named Turelure who had her aristocratic parents executed before her eyes during the Revolution and now says that if she will not marry him he will apprehend the pope. If she marries Turelure as he demands, she will save the pope but she will marry someone she detests, thus 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.⁵⁸ 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: “[S]he is asked not to sacrifice herself for the Cause (something which she would do without hesitation), but to *betray*, to sacrifice this Cause itself, to give it up . . .” (Zupančič 1998: 115–116; emphasis original). 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” (cited in Zupančič 1998: 116). True sacrifice calls for her to give up not her life but her reason for living. She must sacrifice and live.⁵⁹ 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 mimes the head-shaking gesture that normally means *no*.⁶⁰

Zupančič argues, following Lacan, 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.⁶¹ We certainly get something like it from utilitarianism, the modern social theory that casts as moral (not ethical, *per se*) any action that brings about greater pleasure over pain. Early utilitarianism would surely say that Sygne must insert herself into the situation to bring about the socially preferable outcome, regardless of the individual suffering she may undergo as a result.⁶² Indeed, some might argue that utilitarianism is, arguably for this reason, and notwithstanding its avowed secularism, deeply sacrificial in structure.

Against the utilitarian view, Bernard Williams (Smart and Williams 1973) argued that such sacrifices cannot be morally required, for the one thing that morality cannot ask of us is to give up who we are. Our integrity is the postulate of ethical life; it cannot be positioned as one of its calculated trade-offs. Williams recognized we are sometimes put into such situations – he had a deep appreciation of Greek tragedy – and wrote about the need to face such tragic situations with integrity. He understood that in the modern world of plural values, such tragic situations were an ineliminable feature of moral life. But he found repugnant to morality the utilitarian demand to consider our obligations in calculative and ultimately sacrificial terms. On this point, Žižek (2000) is in agreement.

For Williams, Sygne’s tic would be a significant symptom, marking the regret or remorse that Williams sees as properly attending the sacrificial choice when it is made, as it may be, under duress. To be clear, then, the problem with utilitarianism, for Williams, is not its recommendation of self-sacrifice, *per se*, but its claim that when such sacrifice is called for (by the felicific calculus), it is the right thing to do, without remainder. Utilitarianism, Williams argues, is committed to the idea that any regret manifested by the moral agent who acts in the utilitarianly best way is irrational. In short, the problem with utilitarianism, for Williams, is its refusal to grant regret the moral salience it deserves. Utilitarians would fail to see or grant the significance of Sygne’s tic.

The subject of integrity that grounds ethics and politics for Williams is for psychoanalysis a result of the subject’s fortressing within layers of painful psychic defense (that enable some elements of subjectivity). 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 our integrity, may seem promising. The goal of psychoanalysis is, after all, precisely to dis-integrate the subject. But to call this ethics is

another matter and to intimate from it a politics (as contemporary Lacanians seem to want to do) is yet another matter, still.⁶³ We need not, however, adjudicate the questions of ethics and integrity in order to gain new interpretative insight from the structure of 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.⁶⁴

It is Ismene who says in the first scene, "I'm forced, I have no choice" (66 [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 [618]; cf. 566 [639]), 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. 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 [620–621]). That pain is not just a marker of the difficulty of acting out a feigned derision for the sister she loves. It is also recognition of the fact that Ismene, fated to 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, marks the difference between the two sisters in this classical play. Both sacrifice, both extend themselves, but 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. They plot together, diverge, come back together, conspire, plan, and stage the scene of Antigone's final conspiracy with language. 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, never as conspirators?

Zupančič's distinction between classical and modern forced choice helps us to extricate ourselves from that sedimented reading and further to develop neglected dimensions of sorority and conspiracy in Sophocles' *Antigone* and its reception history. But, scripting the two kinds of choice in temporal terms, Zupančič oddly limits the reach of her rubric, ironically claiming periodicity at the very moment at which she proposes the promise of classics for late modernity.⁶⁵ Since her temporalization is belied by the co-incidence in the play of both kinds of forced choice, classical and

modern, we could criticize her terms and simply correct them by de-temporalizing them. 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷

“ὃ κοινὸν ἀντάδελφον ἰσμῆνης κάρα” – “ISMENE-HEAD”
Gemeinsamschwesterliches! (Hölderlin, *Trauerspiele des Sophokles*)⁶⁸

In a recent paper on Ismene, 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. Rawlinson guides us to the other sister, but when she picks one to be the heroine (even if it is the other one), does she not remain captive to the hero model that Simon Goldhill says has wrongly gripped feminists until now?

Goldhill also makes the case for Ismene. Criticizing Irigaray and 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 1985a) or on its contamination (Butler 2000). Either way, Ismene is erased by feminist readers of the play and by its heroine. When Antigone calls herself ‘the last remnant of the house of your kings’ (40–1), Goldhill says, “Ismene is written – spoken – out of the family line. This silencing is all too often repeated, rather than analysed, by the critics” (2006: 157).

For Goldhill, the relevant context for taking Ismene seriously is the shifting politics of the fifth century in which “[t]he 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.” 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,” not just a familial-political one (2006: 148). From the brothers whose conflicts were central in heroic epic to the new political claim of equal citizenship as fraternity, something like Derrida’s “phallocracy” is evident, Goldhill says, but “against the claim of fraternity, sisterhood also changes as a normative term. Sisterhood learns to speak” (2006: 148).

As we have just seen, however, 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 takes on this phrasing in his recently published book, which includes a revised version of his essay, to which I respond in more detail below.) Goldhill provides support for this thought when he notes the odd way in which Antigone addresses her sister, in particular, the alienness of Antigone’s speech in her address to her sister whom she calls, in the play’s opening words, *autadelphon* (“ὦ κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον Ἰσμηνῆς κάρα,” “Oh dear sister of the same womb, [something like] *Ismene-head*”). This may well point to the doublings of incest in this perverted family context, as Miriam Leonard points out (2005), or to the contortions to which sisters are driven by institutional tensions in a time of transition, as Goldhill persuasively argues and as I myself suggested in Chapter 4, focusing on different elements of the play than those on which he focuses. But it may also suggest another possibility worth considering: like many intimates, plotters, and conspirators, might these sisters have a private language, a coded way of speaking between themselves that eludes the understanding of outsiders? Sorority may be as untranslatable and elusive as the play’s famously difficult first line.⁶⁹

Sororal power can be belittled, of course, as Creon mocked and belittled the daughters of Oedipus. But, as the Chorus knew, sometimes powerful forces are underestimated by their belittlers.⁷⁰ These sisters may bury the brother, as Hegel required of (one of) them, but they do not only do 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. In *Skirting the Ethical* (2008), Carol Jacobs 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 conspiracy. In her individuality Antigone is, as Hegel would rightly note, fated to mere negativity and little more. In their sorority, however, the sisters’ twinned negotiations of their forced choices model a tragically doomed politics that is, notwithstanding its tragic

character or perhaps even because of that, 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. I have argued elsewhere that statist law and politics ascribe dissidence to individual actors where there are in fact networks and concerted actions doing the work of politics (2006). It is ironic that feminists who often seek to stake out anti-statist politics fall into the habit of seeing like a state in their receptions of Antigone, often missing the concerted, solidaristic action and celebrating the lone hero (who may, however, as Irigaray insists, long for connection). Such misreadings are shaped by conflation of heroic agency with agency as such and are enabled by Creon’s perspective, which so many readers of the play unconsciously adopt, rather than interrupt. They further are misled by a failure fully to apprehend the politics of agonism, in which not only struggle and rivalry but also mutual respect and equality – even care – are characteristic elements.⁷¹

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.⁷² It is rather an effort to exhibit the benefits of a more agonistic, conspiratorial, and political (that is, less moralistic, less heroic, less sentimental) 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 site of agency everywhere, as some feminists might argue. Indeed, it is necessary to enter 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 phallocracy 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 phallocracy 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 “sororal love” (1997: 16). Embedded in the “Law of the Social,” Phelan argues, sisterhood is not enough. But surely it is a start. Or at least it is what we encounter here, 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 (1997: 15). 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” (1997: 15–16).⁷³ My aim here has been to highlight the ways in which this theater has always already been invented, by conspiring sisters who perform it, or by the tragedian who (re)invented them, or by the language that took charge of them, and to suggest that the failure thus far to see this promise within Sophocles’ great tragedy is a fault not just of the play but of our own reading and spectating practices.⁷⁴

ADIANOETA AND THE IRONIES OF RECEPTION

Words often understand themselves better than do those who are using them. (Schlegel, quoted in Goldhill)

Simon Goldhill has recently responded to my criticisms of his 2006 essay with his own critique of mine on Ismene and so I end this chapter with a response to his just-released *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (2012), which attends to linguistic structures, rhetorical figures, and reception contexts in its readings of tragic drama. In his book, Goldhill shifts his attention from his own earlier essay’s emphasis on sorority, as such, to call for more of a focus on sorority’s varied and vexed workings, in the play, in feminist politics, and in the world at large. Responding to my reading of sorority in the play, charging that it is anachronistic and willful, Goldhill positions himself in this most recent book somewhere between those feminists who ignore Ismene entirely (Irigaray and Butler, blinded by “hero worship” for Antigone [246]), and myself, whom he charges with overemphasizing sorority in a “drastic redrafting of Sophocles’ play,” which features “a new image of sisters who despite their bitter arguments really love each other” (247).

While in his earlier version of this argument, to which I responded above, Goldhill emphasized contra Butler and others that it is important to bring Ismene in so that at last “sisterhood learns to speak,” here, in his book’s revised version of that argument, he emphasizes, as I did earlier as well, that “it is worth our while to look carefully at *how* sisterhood learns to speak” (248; emphasis added). The “tragic myth of Antigone” (but no longer the play?), Goldhill goes on, “offers a profound way of thinking about myth and feminism productively through a critical gaze at the politics of sisterhood.” A critical gaze is called for because invocations of sorority tend to exclude others along established lines of (racial, class, geographic) privilege.⁷⁵ I agree. This is one of the reasons I cautioned

against mistaking a reading of sorority in Sophocles for a normative promotion of this sort of relation for feminism.⁷⁶ There was also another reason for caution against such idealization: sorority’s dependence on the patriarchal, Oedipal contract.

But let us return to the play from the tragic myth, for it is the play that has been harnessed to, and in turn licences so many of, the basic questions and assumptions of continental philosophy and contemporary feminist theory. At stake for Goldhill, it seems to me, in his own reading of the play, is his central claim that Antigone is isolated and unable or unwilling to enter into collective relationships. Perhaps most striking in his account are the parallels, unthematized by him, between his reading of Antigone’s relationship with the Chorus and her relationship with Ismene. The Chorus responds to the hero, who confronts us with the problem of “excessive commitment,” by trying “to assimilate, comprehend, negotiate with excessive, demanding, transgressive individuals,” says Goldhill, and thus the Chorus was “good for Athenians to think with, politically” (132–133). Writing about Antigone’s *kommos* with the Chorus, he sees the Chorus’ “flowing relationship” with her, by turns consoling and condemning. But he focuses solely on their many moments of divergence and not at all (as I have done here, in Chapter 5) on their one moment of convergence. He underlines the Chorus’ failure finally to reintegrate Antigone into the social order (132). She resists them and stands alone, he says.

Similarly, he notes how Antigone’s relationship with her sister is one of pairing and separation, emblemized by *lusis*. He notes that in the play Antigone twice uses the word *non* in her initial exchanges with Ismene “to bring the sisters together” (32) – (Ismene also uses the term at line 50 to talk about “our” father) – but that the sisters’ closeness soon falls apart. He sees in Sophocles’ staging of the sisters a “difficult and unresolved claim of sisterhood.” Difficult and unresolved because Ismene speaks but Antigone, typically, does not listen. In their final scene together, we hear the “language of communality claimed [Ismene] and denied [Antigone]” (241). In the play’s first scene, Antigone and Ismene disagree and their eventual separation is prefigured, “anticipated in a fascinating habit of Antigone’s language. She never uses a first-person plural verb to refer to herself and another person,” Goldhill says (31). Antigone uses linguistic forms that stress her isolation from others – not “ours,” but “yours and mine,” and this, he argues, “constantly anticipates the separation of the sisters away from a ‘we’ into a contrasting ‘you’ and ‘I’” (32).⁷⁷ In her exchanges with Ismene, Antigone confines herself to

what we might (taking a cue from Michael Oakshott [1991]) call collecteds (which are summative, you and I) rather than collectives (which are more organic, we).

This insight regarding Antigone's language is valuable but how should we read it? If we think beyond Antigone's own conspiracies with language and attend further to how language conspires with her (and with us), we may speculate that, although she never says "we," she may nonetheless act out of a desire to do so. That is, the desire for a "we" may inspire her "you" and "I"; or it may not. This is one question with which to return to the text. There are others, as well. The challenge is to attend to her language while resisting the nominalism that often results from such attention. And so when Goldhill charts Antigone's linguistic habits, he invites us to ask: does her use of "you" and "I" testify to her inability to join up with others, and signal her final, isolated fate? Or is it a marker of the social situation that intervenes repeatedly into her efforts to join up, and interrupts her desire to do so? In what sort of mood, with what sort of affect does she say "you" and "I"? Tenderly? Resignedly? Brashly? Confrontationally? Sarcasically? Might the terms "you" and "I" mean more than one thing at once? Might they point not only to division, but also to other forms of commonality or sorority that are different from Ismene's model? Might "you" and "I" undergo some sort of transformation over the course of the play, beginning as markers of sororal differentiation, then operating as markers of an enacted union, perhaps even with their plural, signifying power bringing the sisters *into* a union they (and the audience) never sought nor thought possible? When in the end one sister dies and the other survives, might each nonetheless be transformed precisely by the "you" and "I" whose plural powers go missing when Goldhill reads it as a univocal linguistic marker?

In Antigone's sorority with Ismene, Goldhill sees a progressive deterioration from would-be union to isolation and estrangement. Ismene recognizes "that she and her sister are a pair ["now we are two"] – the dual again," but, says Goldhill, this "is part of an ominous narrative of paired destruction." It may be. But it may also – at the same time – be part of a narrative of agonistic sorority in which the sisters work through their collected versus collective self-understandings, two or more different kinds of joining, by quarreling with and providing cover for each other. When Ismene disappears and Antigone dies, this may signal division, again. Or not: on my reading, it is possible that Antigone dies not just for Polynices' sake but also for Ismene's. And this reading may have force whether or not Antigone understands herself in this way, as a martyr. That is, there is

evidence for it in the sisters' situation, and in the language and the speech acts that work their way through them.

This seems to fit rather well with Goldhill's own innovative characterization of Sophoclean irony. Earlier in his book, he says such irony is different from the traditional, reassuring sort of irony where the audience securely knows something about the significance of an actor's words, about which the actor himself is ignorant. Instead, Goldhill finds in Sophocles a "flickering irony," a kind of irony that implicates the audience in the doubts and uncertainties and fissures of tragic language and leaves "the reader in a far more uncomfortable position than the strong model of dramatic irony presupposes" (27; cf. 250–254). Goldhill chooses *lusis* to illustrate this point, while I focus on other key moments in Sophocles' text, but Antigone's "you" and "I," ironically, seems to provide us with a common stage on which to think together about these issues. Perhaps another way to make clear the differences between our approaches is to pose the question like this: through what figure should we read this "you" and "I"? Goldhill reads these lines through the figure of irony (which he recasts innovatively); I have proposed not just irony but also *adianoeta*, which, as I noted earlier with James Martel, means "that various members of an audience [and later readers and critics] will understand the same words differently" (2011: 98). (This fits as well with Froma Zeitlin's point about tragedy and discrepant awareness, also noted above, though it is more subversive, less tethered than on her account to the city's pedagogic purposes.)

I think the readings I develop in this book, because they are attuned to *adianoeta*, are also more attuned to the sort of irony Goldhill theorizes in his book and could therefore be seen for the most part to support Goldhill's own position. Why does Goldhill not see this? In my view, it is because he insists too strongly on the singular meanings of the terms he traces. But it may also be my fault: it may well be because I present the reading of the sisters' sorority in what may seem to be a rather intentionalist frame, as if Antigone is fully in charge of her words (if not of their impact) and is finally victorious in a traditionally tragic sort of way. It may seem that I am claiming here that Antigone is quite deliberate when she puns, mimics, and parodies her way through her dirge, for example, or speaks sotto voce to Ismene (and to the audience, and the guards, and the Chorus) in Creon's presence. But this is not and need not be the case. This may be Sophocles or even language itself conspiring through her. (As I suggested at the end of Chapter 4, many possible and even conflicting conspiracies are arguably discernible in the play.) There is no reason to

assume that Antigone's various speech acts are hers in some authorial or intentional sense at all. If I have in my readings attributed to her a variety of possible motivations, hidden thoughts, and strategies, that is because reimagining the play this way seemed to help make room for new readings that might rival older, more established ones.

More to the point, as I suggested throughout, Antigone may be engaged in the various efforts I attribute to her while nonetheless saying more (or less!) than she is aware of at each moment. For example, she may reach for Intaphrenes' wife blindly, without full awareness of what it will mean to recirculate that story in her own context. Or, as I suggested in Chapter 5, Sophocles may put that story there, in her mouth, as it were. Or, as we also saw earlier, when Antigone moans and laments, she may call to mind Ajax, but this need not be seen as a choice of hers, nor as a reference. This is language (and even the non-linguistic world of sound and cry) conspiring with her, working through her, even with and against her – agonistically. For this reason, I have insisted that Antigone (and Sophocles as well!) conspires with language *and* that it conspires with her (and with him). Hence too my alert to readers at the beginning of the chapter and article on Ismene: "The emergent interpretation is promoted assertively in order to establish its viability against the likely incredulity of readers, but of course this reading is, like all readings, partial and contestable" (cf. 152 above; Honig 2011a: 31).

Goldhill wants to argue that even though Antigone "famously claims" that she was born "to join together in mutual bonds of duty and obligation" rather than to "join together in hatred," this is ironically undermined by her linguistic utterances in the rest of the play because "joining together with others, ironically enough, is exactly what she finds hardest to do" (2012: 32). The audience is not "in" on the joke but is, rather, vulnerable to it, just as she is made vulnerable to it, as well, by her apparent lack of self-awareness. My own reading suggests a different irony – in which the audience (as Goldhill wants) is once again not "in" on the right or real meanings of what is said, but in which, contra Goldhill, Antigone's commitment to joining together with others is *not* so thoroughly undermined. It is subtly at work throughout the play, inconsistently, and it is always an object of struggle for her. But if we attend to it, we may see that it is possible that she is, in her second scene with Ismene, returned to joining rather than division. In this scene, the irony is in the situation which compels Antigone to distance herself from her sister at a moment of great closeness (in ways that find precedent, as already mentioned, in Penelope's and Odysseus' *adianoeta*).

There is no shortage of ironies here: Antigone, who began demanding flagrant disobedience, ends with sotto voce conspiracy, first in her scene with Ismene and then in her dirge for herself. The voce is so sotto that, though its speaker succeeds in one respect, she fails in the other: Ismene does live, but Antigone does not secure her own *kleos*. The story as she wants it told is not told. Or, put less intentionally, her story as it might have been told is not told. Her martyrdom has for centuries been assumed to be obviously for her dead brother and not for her living sister. Her effort to frame her act with reference to the story of Intaphrenes' wife has been dismissed as offensive and inauthentic. Her devotion to life disappears beneath her devotion to death, and her quest for sovereignty disappears as well. There is irony too in the fact that Antigone's agency, powerful if also thwarted, is virtually unsuspected and that the argument for it even seems "cheap," as Goldhill says.

The charge of cheapness is linked to that of anachronism and the value of the classical is raised by way of the contrast with mass-mediated modernity. When Goldhill says that the idea suggested here, that the sisters have an intimacy that subtends or exceeds or grows out of their conflicts, is the product of a familiar "Hollywood family cliché," he not only reinstalls a distinction between high and low culture that this project seeks, with Benjamin's help, to attenuate. He also inexplicably attributes to Hollywood a cliché that was certainly at home in the fifth century. The Muses and Erinyes were sisters, and since the Erinyes were sisters in vengeance, they already modeled sororal vengeance in concert.⁷⁸

A final irony is this: when Goldhill calls mine "an extra-ordinary act of willful reading against the grain," he uses a term – willful – that Sara Ahmed has claimed recently as a cardinal feminist virtue (2010). I do not want, with this observation, to risk sliding from irony into political correctness. Goldhill sets the standard in Sophocles scholarship. As my various citations to him above make clear, I am indebted to his work, and where we disagree, he is always "good to think with." Let me end, then, with one final expression of that debt. Goldhill is right: the reading presented here *is* willful – pressing its case forward against other rivals, trying to make room for itself, amassing the evidence, seeking to reach beyond the established structures and figures of language, pluralizing them and the genres of reception. I cannot resist noting, however, with what I take to be Goldhill-inflected Sophoclean irony, that it is a bit unclear whether it is me or the reading that he calls willful. Either way, it is certainly fair to say that it may well be that Antigone has had her effect on me, too.