

“almost invisible until now”

Antigone, Ismene, and the Dramaturgy of Tragedy

KRISTINA HAGSTRÖM-STÅHL

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Sophocles' *Antigone* in relation to its Hegelian legacy, engaging with the play from a directorial perspective. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Anne Carson, Bonnie Honig, Peggy Phelan and Cecilia Sjöholm, I attempt to envision a contemporary *mise en scène* that repositions feminine subjectivity within the dramaturgy of tragedy. Centering on the relationship between Antigone and Ismene, as well as on the possibility of revaluing Ismene's position in terms of political and dramaturgical agency, I hope to challenge dramaturgical conventions that assume binary, heteronormative relations as the primary framework of interpretation for female characters, and death and destruction as the only possible outcome for what is positioned as feminine. This resituated reading of the drama examines the function of embodied performance in processes of meaning-making, and offers dramaturgical structure as a site for strategies of resistance.

KEYWORDS

dramaturgy, tragedy, Hegelian dialectics, feminist theory, performance practice

“almost invisible until now” ***Antigone*, Ismene, and the Dramaturgy of Tragedy¹**

Elle pense qu'elle va mourir, qu'elle est jeune, et qu'elle aussi, elle aurait bien aimé vivre. Mais il n'y a rien à faire. Elle s'appelle Antigone et il va falloir qu'elle joue son rôle jusqu'au bout...²

—Jean Anouilh

Cast firmly in an Oedipal tragedy, Antigone and Ismene nonetheless point to a different form of theatre sisters might one day invent.³

—Peggy Phelan

...they give utterance to the inner essence, they prove the rightness of their action (...) these characters exist as human beings who impersonate the heroes and portray them, not in form of a narrative, but in the actual speech of the actors themselves.⁴

—G.W.F. Hegel

What would it mean to stage a contemporary feminist performance of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which takes not only Antigone but also Ismene seriously in terms of political and dramaturgical agency? And why is this possibility so rarely considered? As Bonnie Honig suggests in her call to reconsider Sophocles' tragedy with the potential of sororal conspiracy and solidarity in mind, *Antigone's* history of reception and interpretation since Hegel (including feminist readings) points to near-universal agreement about Ismene as a mere "anti-political character who lacks the courage or imagination to act when called upon to do

1 Honig 2013, 170.

2 Anouilh 1946/1996, 10.

3 Phelan 1997, 15-16.

4 Hegel 1807/1977, 444.

so,” and who is therefore perpetually disregarded.⁵ Likewise, Simon Goldhill shows how post-Hegelian feminist analyses have tended to silence, dismiss, or avoid Ismene.⁶ Instead, dominant readings posit Antigone as the play’s lone heroine and (self-annihilating) political force, locked in an adversarial relationship with Creon as her primary interlocutor.

In the following essay, I would like to investigate the potential of a *mise en scène* that re-envision *Antigone* beyond the canonized and, in my view, coercive dramaturgy which privileges this reading of Antigone as isolated, autonomous, and death-bound, and which, I argue, is deeply entwined with the play’s philosophical legacy in the Hegelian and post-Hegelian tradition. Among other things, I hope to point to some of the challenges as well as the significant possibilities of valuing Ismene as an agent – and subject – within the drama. Were the character of Ismene and the relationship between the sisters considered important in a dramaturgical capacity – that is to say, in relation to the very structure or core of the reading of tragedy as dramatic form – I believe the conceptualization and positioning of Antigone as the play’s primary or singular figure of femininity would shift. Likewise, a different position would be granted to Ismene. Such re-evaluation would also have implications for conceptions of political action and the forms of resistance that Antigone is often thought to embody. Potentially, the very notion of dramatic conflict (or, in Hegel’s terms, “tragic essence”) as a dialectical affair would shift, too.

As such, I propose a re-situated reading of *Antigone*, oriented toward performance practice, which seeks to create space for female and feminine subjectivity, agency, and relationality, while critiquing a dramaturgical logic that assumes binary, heteronormative relations as the only framework of interpretation for female characters, and disappearance and death as the only possible outcome for what is positioned as feminine. This attempt takes into account the philosophical-discursive legacy of the play as well as feminist reworkings of that legacy (as Goldhill argues, it is through feminist readings of *Antigone* that “the inheritance of Hegel has been most explicitly negotiated”⁷), and employs what Cecilia Sjöholm, citing Adriana Cavarero, calls “alternative interpretative strategies” that would enable us to “discern the feminine subject buried in patriarchal society.”⁸ It looks for glitches and tears in the “net,” which Anne Carson invokes as an image for Sophoclean dramaturgy⁹ – small slippages which he himself, arguably, provides.

One central premise for my proposal is that “discursive practices” – to borrow Freddie Rokem’s term¹⁰ – within philosophy and performance have affected the canonization of the *Antigone* and with it the dramaturgical framework resulting from the play’s history of performance and reception, which arguably conditions meaning-making in contemporary performance practice. A second,

5 Honig 2013, 151.

6 Goldhill 2012, 232-33.

7 Goldhill 2012, 231.

8 Sjöholm 2004, 33.

9 Carson 2015, 8.

10 Rokem 2010, 3.

or counter-premise, is that performance practice, in turn, has the ability to affect and transform certain conditions and meanings that may seem given within theoretical discourse. My “alternative strategy” of interpretation assumes the dramaturgy of tragedy – by which I mean, beyond the ordering of events, the formal and dramatic structure by which an account is given and experienced, and meaning is made – as a potential site of resistance, and advocates for a repositioning of the feminine within this structure. In short, following Phelan, it “points to a different form of theatre.”¹¹ Such a reading entails searching at the margins and tracing the hidden, the unseen.

Antigone, according to Honig, “has a constitutive role in the formation of modern continental philosophy and democratic theory since Hegel,”¹² and indeed few plays are as commented-upon or as far-reaching in their theoretical and philosophical impact. However, as Joshua Billings points out, while the turn to tragedy around 1800 shapes speculative thinking, it simultaneously transforms the role of tragedy to become philosophical.¹³ And although this transformation may be situated in a larger paradigmatic shift toward thinking about art in “philosophical and often metaphysical terms” beyond the realm of the aesthetic, still, for the idealists, “tragedy held a privileged place” due to the fact that it came with an already established theoretical-philosophical system, articulated through Aristotle’s *Poetics*.¹⁴ The turn to tragedy within continental philosophy can thus be understood as responding to an already existing discursive (rather than dramaturgical) structure, even though it is in the dramatic core of tragedy, articulated through conflict, that Hegel locates the tragic “essence” that also shapes the core of dialectical thinking. In this tradition, “philosophical” readings rarely contend with dramaturgy, or with *Antigone* as a play; rather, as Honig shows, the drama and its constitutive components (plot, character, thought, to cite the first three *elements* that Aristotle lists in order of importance¹⁵) become *tropes*, or the play is “harnessed to, and in turn licenses” lines of inquiry central to philosophy.¹⁶

Furthermore, the positioning of *Antigone* as representative of tragic essence entails a “turn” reflecting the stakes of modernity. What makes *Antigone* (in which interest was scarce before 1800) so attractive to modern philosophical thought, Billings suggests, is its combination of “ethical conflict, political context, and foregrounding of gender relations.”¹⁷ Significantly, I argue, within this framework, notions of conflict, context, and relationality are conceived as dialectical – as are questions of ethics, politics, and gender. If the conflict between Antigone and Creon articulates an “original essence of tragedy,” it is because it manifests “the conflict of two substantive positions, each of which

11 Phelan 1997, 16.

12 Honig 2013, 181.

13 Billings 2014, 2.

14 Billings 2014, 1-2.

15 Aristotle 1987, 37-38.

16 Honig 2013, 185.

17 Billings 2014, 12.

is justified, yet each of which is wrong.”¹⁸ In Hegel’s words, “...each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and *damaging* the equally justified power of the other.”¹⁹ In their innate and paradoxical entanglement with ethics, the characters’ downfall results less from hubris than from one-sidedness: “both are equally right, and therefore in their antithesis, which is brought about by action, both are equally wrong.”²⁰ The simultaneous mirroring and incompatibility of two positions produces the conflict, expressed through action, that will eliminate one part and most likely also destroy the other. Or, as Hegel puts it: “The action, in being carried out, demonstrates their unity in the natural downfall of both powers and both self-conscious characters.”²¹

In this manner, Hegel’s idealization of the *Antigone* brings about a shift in the Aristotelean legacy, creating a theory of tragedy attuned to – and providing support for – his own theory on dialectics as well as his developing notion of history (for such conflicts and paradoxes can, according to Hegel, be historically situated – indeed the notion of historical progress is based in dialectical movement wherein clashes between normative systems produce paradigm shifts²²). One could say that Hegel engenders what he claims to uncover as tragic essence (and similarly, as Judith Butler remarks, “Antigone emerges as a figure for Hegel (...) only to become transfigured and surpassed in the course of Hegel’s description of what she does”²³). As tragic drama the *Antigone* does not necessarily or inevitably call for readings privileging only two central characters, operating in antithesis; however, as Billings notes, idealist readings have shaped contemporary understandings of tragedy.²⁴ Regardless of whether ensuing readings of the play agree with Hegel’s particular argument regarding character and the stakes of politics and ethics within the play, the dialectical framework, and the understanding of conflict, have had a lasting hold.

My aim here is not to locate an originary or “true” understanding in place of existing dominant readings, nor is it to negate the role and importance of the philosophical legacy of the *Antigone*. I wish to highlight and complicate this genealogy, which is constitutive for my own directorial reading of the play. A purely discursive and dialectical focus on the dramatic text, however, risks producing a form of categorical neatness which overlooks – and arguably does violence to – explicit claims pointing elsewhere within the play. The binary logic informing this interpretational practice also tends to underscore and reproduce patriarchal structures and misogyny prevalent in idealist philosophy as well as the (discursive and non-discursive) practices of modernist theatricality (not to mention psychoanalytic theory).

18 Roche 2006, 12.

19 Hegel quoted in Roche 2006, 12.

20 Hegel 1807/1977, 448.

21 Hegel 1807/1977, 448.

22 Roche 2006, 12.

23 Butler 2000, 12.

24 Billings 2014, 12.

For the conflict between Antigone and Creon is no symmetry of “substantive positions”, but must be seen as always already marked by difference and gendered positionality. Hegel’s notion of tragic essence is equally bound up in the transgression, excess, and contamination that is pervasively linked to femininity and female gender; his argument, as S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė point out, has the potential to work “as a mechanism for female exclusion.”²⁵ This is because the feminine, as Cecilia Sjöholm writes, “incarnates a tension between the ethical domain and that which can neither be included in it nor controlled by it,” and thus its agents constitute “disruptive threats” to the community, from which they must therefore be excluded.²⁶ In the *Antigone*, this has to do with the appeal on Antigone’s part to divine rather than human law; in that it “exceeds the ethical order” the divine is regarded as “lack or failure” in that same order, and Antigone becomes part of a pattern in Greek tragedy of women opening up to such combined lack and excess.²⁷ In the context of modern philosophy, this conflict may be translated into a threat against the ethical. “Modernity,” Sjöholm concludes, “has striven in vain to contain these excesses.”²⁸

In this reading, the feminine is always both too much and too little, impossible and death-bound. Tragic female characters, as embodiments of the feminine, are destined to self-destruct; as Sjöholm puts it, the feminine “must be excluded” in response to its positioning as transgressive and threatening. Viewing tragedy as a cultural product of Athenian society, she writes that the significance of Antigone as heroine must be measured against the invisibility of women in that society and their exclusion from the spheres both of democracy and tragedy: “The question is not why female characters are flawed or evil, but why they appear at all.” Are not these female characters mere projections by men, for men, positing the female/feminine as “a threatening fantasy of the Other,” who will inevitably be punished (through “unheroic,” suicidal death) for her transgressions?²⁹ I would tend to concur with Sjöholm on the latter but would add that this positioning cannot be connected to character formation alone – it is intimately connected to questions of dramaturgy, canonization, and the performativity of theatrical performance.³⁰ The performative function of femininity and female characters in tragedy must, I argue, be at the heart of any feminist consideration of *Antigone*. For me, as a director, the question is not *per se* why female characters appear, but rather what we can do with the premise that tragedy, as we know it, appears to need singular, ostensibly “heroic” female (or feminine-positioned) characters who perform transgressive acts only to be dispensed with violently and/or at their own hands.

Similarly, Sjöholm notes that the violent end met by so many of tragedy’s female characters “appears to be motivated by a cause *internal* to tragedy

25 Wilmer and Žukauskaitė 2010, 3.

26 Sjöholm 2004, 30.

27 Sjöholm 2004, 34.

28 Sjöholm 2004, 34.

29 Sjöholm 2004, 33.

30 Hagström-Ståhl 2016, 73-84.

itself” (and not simply by “(patriarchal) society’s desire to dominate,” a view with which Hegel appears to have agreed).³¹ This “cause” may be linked to the dramaturgical element of catharsis – certainly, male characters also routinely face a violent end. Moreover, Sophoclean dramaturgy may be seen as coercive in a manner that isn’t explicitly gendered; as Carson remarks in the preface to her translation of *Antigone* it has “a quality of tidiness that can be terrifying,” and she asks, rhetorically, “Why did anyone think they could escape?”³² However, this internal mechanism cannot be entirely disassociated from patriarchal society or masculinist discourse, which reserves a particular, if paradoxical, “place” for femininity. As suggested earlier, the formal and measured dramaturgical structures of tragedy are undeniably and intimately paired with the violent transgression and excessive desire that Carson suggests constitute tragic essence, and which tend to be linked to the feminine.³³ Unlike modernity, tragedy seeks to unleash rather than contain these excesses, displaying the disastrous consequences. The unleashing does not in itself constitute a transgression or violation of the “core” of tragedy, and nor does disaster; both are part of the what the drama “needs” to work. However, modernist discourse following Hegel has intensified and transformed the linkage within tragedy between femininity, destruction, and death (as when Lacan suggests that Antigone’s relationship to Creon is one of dependency rather than opposition because he “provides the occasion for her to meet her antecedently formed death wish”³⁴), and with this transformation the position of femininity becomes increasingly fixated and its potential for dramatic and political agency increasingly curtailed.

Phelan remarks that as long as the drama remains in the grip of the “masculine Imaginary” the dramaturgy of *Antigone* will “reproduce the static suffering of tragedy.”³⁵ Unless challenged, and due to the iterative tendencies of both canonization and theatrical performance, this premise will perpetuate itself to the point of meta-commentary, as when in Jean Anouilh’s 1944 version of *Antigone*, the character of the Prologue concedes that Antigone might have liked to live, but there is nothing to be done – a character by that name will be required to play its role to the end. The challenge, however, is not merely to rehabilitate Antigone – or, for that matter, Ismene – as trope or character. Instead it consists in interrogating the given circumstances that create a fixed position for Antigone while rendering Ismene invisible – and then allow oneself to imagine otherwise. These characters may constitute “a product of a society dominated by men, a threatening fantasy of the Other,” but as Sjöholm writes, nevertheless “Greek literature (...) lets female ‘countercultures’ shine through.”³⁶

One such form of counterculture emerges through Honig’s reading of moments where “Antigone plots and conspires with her sister,” giving rise to an

31 Sjöholm 2004, 54.

32 Carson 2015, 8.

33 Carson 2006, 7-9.

34 Honig 2013, 171.

35 Phelan 1997, 15.

36 Sjöholm 2004, 33.

interpretation of the play that emphasizes “tragedy’s own exploration of the problem of political agency as action under conditions of (near) impossibility,” rather than suffering. Foregrounding “solidarity of action in concert among equals,” Honig envisages female characters as the subjects of such action.³⁷ Here, Ismene is figured as responding to Antigone’s plans to transgress Creon’s edict with resistance rather than passivity, agreeing with her cause but disapproving of her method. In order to spare her sister, Ismene performs the first burial of Polynices herself – but does so in secret, avoiding detection. When Antigone is caught in the act of performing the second burial, and Creon confronts Ismene, she readily admits: “I did the deed I share the blame.”³⁸ In response, Honig rightly asks: “Why has no one for hundreds of years or more taken her at her word?”³⁹

Support for a different reading of the character of Ismene and a new interpretation of the play as a whole is, she argues, present in the text – it simply needs to be *articulated*; what becomes intelligible and plausible to the audience is a matter of the actors’ interpretation of the subtext and intentionality of the characters’ utterances and dialogue. Thus, the relationship between Antigone and Ismene can be understood in radically different ways, depending on the actors’ portrayal: “the same words, differently delivered, could support either possibility.”⁴⁰

Indeed the first scene of *Antigone* – the “prism” through which Honig reads the play⁴¹ – presents the central ethical conflict of the drama through the facet of the relationship between Antigone and Ismene. This relationship, in turn, is distilled in relation to principal plotlines. Its opening line, in which Antigone addresses Ismene (“O Ismene / O one and only sister”⁴²) establishes Ismene’s position as unique and their relationship as one of primacy. Furthermore this scene presents Ismene as an equal, together with whom Antigone wants to act. The two female characters are given space for sustained exchange during which the play’s central agents are introduced and the given circumstances are fleshed out without interruption. Such a set-up indicates a centrality of character, and that the sisters’ difference in approach to the principal dramatic conflict will be of bearing in the denouement of the play’s plot and action. This is hardly insignificant, and to a spectator of the play can be overlooked only with difficulty.

As Honig points out, although Antigone is set on a course of action, “she does not just go out and do it” but turns to Ismene, seeking help and support.⁴³ From the outset a simultaneously agonistic and conspiratorial relationship is established between the sisters, setting the scene for two different possible courses of action – Honig suggests that the pair “act in concert in ways that

37 Honig 2013, 152.

38 Sophokles 2015, 29.

39 Honig 2013, 164.

40 Honig 2013, 166.

41 Honig 2013, 153.

42 Sophokles 2015, 13.

43 Honig 2013, 163.

(...) complement *and* compete.”⁴⁴ Rather than recasting Antigone and Ismene as the new adversaries of the play (which would be falling in line with the dialectical tendency), however, Honig instead emphasizes solidarity and reads both figures as more complex and ambivalent than most interpretations to date will allow.

Similarly, my motivation in foregrounding the relationship between the two women is to question the premises that cast them as opposites rather than as differentiated equals. I too see the potential of seeking in *Antigone* the distinctly non-Hegelian possibility of “action in concert among equals,” and view the conflict of the sisters as allowing for the co-existence of love, identification, and competition, as well as a form of opposition in which the parties, significantly, do not destroy each other. The possibility of more than one position of femininity and female agency brings to bear on the question of dramaturgy; even if Antigone chooses a course of action that results in her death and elimination, this is not the only imaginable trajectory for a (female) character seeking to honour a dead brother whose dignity in death has, arbitrarily and for political purposes, been denied.

Furthermore, that dead brother, Polynices, ceases to be the only or even the primary object of Antigone’s love and devotion, if we can perceive that the life and death of both sisters are at stake in the course of the drama. The “sororal solidarity” of which Honig speaks is manifested through the actions of both sisters, and Antigone’s insistence on taking full responsibility for the double transgression of Creon’s edict – so often made into an example of her extreme autonomy and individuality – comes to express “a commitment to life, not just death” in that she is sacrificing herself not only for her dead brother but also for her living sister.⁴⁵ Likewise, in a form of sacrifice which hitherto has perhaps never been acknowledged as such, Ismene forms an agreement with Antigone to go on living while her sister dies. The scene that the sisters perform in the presence of Creon, in which Ismene attempts to share the blame for the burial as well as persuade Creon to let Antigone live, becomes “a double entendre that is nothing short of brilliant” as it sees Antigone effecting a reversal in her attitude toward Ismene: “Antigone affirms the path she earlier demeaned as cowardly: that of survival.”⁴⁶

As Butler suggests, Antigone herself speaks at the price of death (“Her language is not that of a survivable political agency”⁴⁷), but in this counter-reading it is as if Antigone simultaneously has the capacity to think critically about her own forms of utterance, as well as to admit the value of what appears to be an inversed position. Such a reading effectively destabilizes and displaces the presumed Hegelian “essence” of tragedy, allowing as well for more than one position of subjectivity accorded to a female character. It is essential to recognize that the received perception of Ismene as passive, non-political, and non-transgressive also confirms and fixates Antigone’s course of action as

44 Honig 2013, 154.

45 Honig 2013, 154-55.

46 Honig 2013, 165.

47 Butler 2000, 28.

transgressive; traditionally, the two sisters are played out against each other, with Ismene simply vanishing the moment that Creon decides she is no threat and therefore may live. In such a framing her disappearance from the play confirms an already established assumption that she has refrained from action, countered no edict, broken no law. In a sense, she becomes a non-agent of the drama, insignificant to its dramaturgical or political meaning. However, allowing for an alternative dramaturgical imaginary where Ismene’s character (including her relationship to Antigone) is concerned, her absence from the seemingly inevitable tragic outcome may signal a countercultural glitch, an opening in Sophocles’ dramaturgical “net”, and is not, as such, opposed to the position of Antigone.⁴⁸

As Mark Griffith shows, Antigone – considered, as he writes, the “true ‘hero’” of the play by “most modern audiences” – also disappears “from view and from consideration” during the last third of the play,⁴⁹ leaving Teiresias and the Chorus to “take over from her as the voices of piety – and paternal authority.”⁵⁰ As such, neither Antigone nor Ismene could sustain any conventional protagonist status; instead the play disposes of them each in their own way. However, while Antigone is confirmed dead, Ismene, who is left – despite her own protests and lamentations – to go on living without her sister, remains at large at the end of the play. We really have no idea what happens to Ismene, the one principal character who is unaccounted for at the conclusion of the final scene. For this reason, Ismene as character and agent embodies a certain radical potential: her survival, however marginalized, signals the possibility of escape. Her survival and non-return effectively challenge the notion, articulated by Carson, that Sophoclean dramaturgy “tucks in every stray thread.”⁵¹

The question is how to convey this “alternative interpretative strategy” to an audience presumably familiar to some extent with established receptions of Sophocles’ tragedy. According to Honig, “intonation is everything,”⁵² but from a directorial perspective I can only partially agree. While Honig’s attention to the work of the actor (like Hegel’s) is brilliantly invigorating, and while her careful reading is fully plausible from a discursive and “against the grain” (or countercultural) dramaturgical point of view, the non-discursive workings of theatrical performance do not automatically comply with the intentions underlying such re-interpretation. The process of signification enacted in the encounter between actor(s)/performance and spectator(s) tends to exceed the intentionality of the performance makers and, as such, an interpretive meaning cannot be pre-determined as precisely as Honig appears to wish. A counter-canonical staging must also take into account received interpretations of the drama and be specific in its manner of addressing these. Some performance matters, which Honig attributes to intonation and individual acting choices, are, moreover,

48 Anne Carson refers to Sophoclean dramaturgy as a “net.” Carson 2015, 8.

49 Griffith 2010, 112.

50 Griffith 2010, 131.

51 Carson 2015, 8.

52 Honig 2013, 166.

rarely conveyed through those particular means.

Instead, if the audience is to reorient their understanding of the plot or their own emotional and identificatory investment, a counter-dramaturgical staging must be established as a framing, or given/enabling circumstance, of the performance as a whole. Thus, while intonation and textual interpretation of existing scenes are an essential part of supporting or challenging an aesthetic and interpretive framework that is established and developed through iterations of scenic utterance, the manner in which Antigone and Ismene come to engage a spectator relies not only on the verbal utterances of the actors playing these roles, but also on the extra-textual – unknown or perhaps hidden – components of the play.

For example, while plausible, the possibility that Ismene could be responsible for the first burial of Polynices is nowhere mentioned in the play but must be inferred by other means. Otherwise, how is an audience to surmise that during her first absence from the stage, Ismene is in fact off scattering dust over her brother's dead body? And how would an audience be able to perceive the subtext of her admission, or the double entendres of her interactions with Antigone, if no premise has been established for understanding the performance in this manner? Ismene's ability to function as a political and ethical agent is admittedly also a challenge if, as the existing manuscript indicates, she is only present in a mere two scenes before seeming to vanish without trace or comment. Were one to attempt to stage the play with this premise, the reimagining would have to reach far beyond the intonation of specific lines. Honig concedes that her effort at "recrafting" the play may necessitate "re-plotment and genre-bending"⁵³ but doesn't quite suggest how.

I argue that one must go further still: the kind of re-envisioning or establishing of a counter-culture that would grant subjectivity to both sisters, while enacting the far-reaching consequences for plot, dramaturgy, and dramatic conflict of their collaborative-yet-agonistic actions, requires imagining not only beyond genre but beyond the limits of representation in the structure of tragedy as we know it. It requires imagining beyond the structures of the visible, in terms of how vision and visual regimes have come to operate and condition spectatorship in modernist theatricality – for the relationship between Antigone and Ismene is a struggle with visibility and visuality. As Phelan points out, the inability to see and visualize sororal affinity is no mere problem of reception, but "the consequence of a Sophoclean-Oedipal blindness" from within which "the allegiance that might pass between women cannot be dramatized theatrically or psychoanalytically, that is cannot be imagined."⁵⁴ As long as heteronormative (if in one case potentially incestuous) relationships – between Antigone and her uncle, her father, her brother – maintain primacy as locus of conflict, affinity and desire, the dramaturgy of *Antigone* will only reproduce "the tragedy of desire within the paternal symbolic."⁵⁵ In a similar vein Honig writes that if the relationship between Antigone and Ismene, "has been almost invisible until

53 Honig 2013, 194.

54 Phelan 1997, 15.

55 Phelan 1997, 15.

now,” it is in part “because readers and spectators (...) have trouble imagining a female agency that is agonistically and solidaristically sororal and not merely subject to male exchange.”⁵⁶

What happens between Antigone and Ismene requires re-invention and re-plotment not only of *Antigone* but of the terms of theatrical performance and philosophical tradition as well. Performance practice is perhaps in a unique position to undertake this work, given its ability to communicate through and beyond the textual, and to include corporeality, gesture and gaze into its processes of meaning-making and utterance. For if we are to believe Hegel, after all, “the performance [of tragedy] displays to the audience – who are also spectators – *self-conscious* human beings who *know* their rights and purposes, the power and the will of their specific nature and know how to *assert* them.”⁵⁷ Can feminine subjectivity and agency be included in this description of theatrical performance? If so, and if we can imagine, with Phelan, that Antigone and Ismene in their corporeal manifestation suggest “another way to play this drama,”⁵⁸ variations on the canonical understandings and enactments of *Antigone* may enter the stage.

“Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.”⁵⁹ Returning us once more to the question of “tragic essence,” Carson attributes tragedy’s core and *raison d’être* to its audience’s (rage and) grief, as well as to needs born out of that grief. Excessive emotion and transgression are central to what tragedy “does,” but Carson also posits the audience’s emotional identification with tragic action as central to its impact. In her argument, tragedy meets a contemporary need to frame the audience’s own emotions and to let these be played out with actors as stand-ins for ourselves; the role of the actor is to enable, through action, “a mode of deepest intimacy of you with your own life.”⁶⁰

In the context of envisioning a restaging of *Antigone* that foregrounds the two sisters and their relationship, I ask myself what feelings of grief and rage could be stronger than those arising out of the futility of action, out of helplessness before a disastrous but preventable course of events? Ismene perhaps embodies the ultimate expression and position of rage and grief within the play: despite all her efforts to prevent further tragedy, her sister is killed and she becomes the very last of the family line. Despite her resolve, she agrees to let Antigone die and to go on living with her loss. Even within the canonical framework for understanding *Antigone*, as spectators we should want to ask ourselves: what will become of Ismene? Yet, none of this plotment is discernible in the extant dramaturgy of the play – Ismene’s loss cannot be recognized, her grief cannot be envisioned, because she is not a discernable subject. Her position at the play’s conclusion is one of absolute negation, excluded from the dialectical

56 Honig 2013, 170.

57 Hegel 1807/1977, 444.

58 Phelan 1997, 16.

59 Carson 2006, 7.

60 Carson 2006, 7.

struggle for recognition and subjecthood, and cannot itself be seen or even really marked as absence.

Should we accept that through her presumed initial failure “to act when called upon to do so”, Ismene herself confirms or perhaps even initiates the process of erasure and exclusion of her character (and that as such, she too becomes destined to perform her role until the end)? This may be the case if we accept that the only recognizable form of (political or dramatic) action is undertaken by singular actors, in direct and overt opposition, at the price of death or annihilation. However, one of Honig’s several contributions to the reading of Sophocles’ tragedy is her offering of an alternative framework for political and dramatic action, such that Ismene too may become an agent in the stakes of the play. Meanwhile, Honig’s emphasis on “acting in concert” prevents this reframing of the play, which brings Ismene’s dramaturgical arc, her actions, and her grief into focus, from becoming an opportunity to rescue her character in order to substitute Ismene for her sister, that “other” (non-)protagonist. Instead, recognition of – perhaps even identification with – Ismene’s position entails an engagement with absence and non-visibility, as well as resisting the impulse to centralize her perspective, thereby eclipsing others.

Repositioning the feminine within the structure of tragic dramaturgy means affecting that very structure and its performative regimes. Such transformation also (re-)touches the function of transgression in tragedy, so that it too may be considered in relation to dramaturgy and Sophocles’ stray threads. If escape is possible, there are variations on – or transgressions of – *Antigone* that are as yet unknown. My investigation of a *mise en scène* begins there, in the simultaneous immediacy and as-if conditionality of theatrical performance. What form it takes remains to be seen.

AUTHOR

Kristina Hagström-Ståhl is Professor of Performative Arts at the Academy of Music and Drama and PARSE (Platform for Artistic Research Sweden), University of Gothenburg. She works at the intersection of critical theory and performance practice, with research interests in feminist and decolonial theory as well as interdisciplinary collaboration in the arts. Kristina also works as a director and is currently preparing a production of Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

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