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Tragic duality and gender identity: the sister pairs in Sophoclean tragedy

Abstract
Among the many instances of mirror scenes in Sophocles' plays, building on previous studies on the subject, this essay aims to explore two particularly singular episodes in which the tragedian uses a dramaturgical technique to visually show the characteristics and choices of the main character, which are better highlighted through the contrast with a counterpart character. In *Antigone* and *Electra*, a dual femininity is represented: each of the protagonists of the two tragedies calls on her sister in search of a confrontation that translates into concrete help. Through a thematic, linguistic and stylistic analysis of the dialogues between Antigone and Ismene, Electra and Chrysothemis, it should be emphasised how the identity of each is defined through the comparison with her sister, giving voice to two different ways of thinking, one linked to conventions, the other outside the established patterns. This "double mirror" reflects the ambiguity of the tragic world, in which there are no solutions, only difficult choices made necessary by what has happened before.

Tra i molteplici casi di scene speculari presenti nel teatro di Sofocle, il saggio intende approfondire, a partire dagli studi già condotti sull'argomento, l'analisi di due episodi particolarmente singolari nei quali il tragediografo adotta una tecnica drammaturgica volta a mostrare visualmente sulla scena le caratteristiche e le scelte del protagonista, meglio evidenziate attraverso il contrasto con un personaggio omologo. Nell'*Antigone* e nell'*Elettra* è rappresentata una femminilità sdoppiata: ciascuna delle protagoniste delle due tragedie chiama in causa la sorella alla ricerca di un confronto che si traduca in un aiuto concreto. Attraverso l'indagine tematica, linguistica e stilistica dei dialoghi tra Antigone e Ismene, Elettra e Crisotemi, si vuole sottolineare come l'identità di ciascuna si delinei grazie al confronto con la sorella, dando voce a due modi diversi di pensare, uno legato alle convenzioni, l'altro al di fuori degli schemi prestabiliti. In questo "doppio specchio" si riflette l'ambiguità del mondo tragico, in cui non ci sono soluzioni, ma solo scelte difficili, rese necessarie da ciò che è accaduto prima.

In *Antigone* and *Electra*, Sophocles presents a comparison between two pairs of sisters – Antigone and Ismene on one side, Electra and Chrysothemis on the other – centred on the request for complicity in a transgressive act: in the first case, the burial of Polynices; in the second, revenge for the murder of Agamemnon. Although both protagonists act independently of their sisters' collaboration, Sophocles constructs their respective dialogues as opportunities to represent a dual femininity in which the figures of the sisters function to show two possible female responses to family or political trauma[1].

Sophocles' *Antigone*, first staged in 442 BCE, has proved to be such a fruitful

[1] On Sophoclean characters, see, above all, KNOX (1964).

literary archetype over the centuries that it has influenced thinkers and artists of all backgrounds[2]. As George Steiner pointed out in his famous essay *Antigones*, the enduring appeal of this tragedy lies in the dense layering of conflicts that touch on the great tensions of the human condition: man versus woman, youth versus age, life versus death, individual versus community, and civil law versus divine law[3].

The contrast between mutable, historically determined rules – embodied by Creon, who forbids the burial of Polynices – and eternal, unwritten laws – defended by Antigone in the name of a sacred and familial order – is the beating heart of the play. Antigone defies the authority of the *polis* to perform funeral rites for her deceased brother, considering them a duty superior to any political imposition[4].

The central theme of the tragedy is expressed in lines 450-57[5]:

> οὐ γάρ τί μοι Ζεὺς ἦν ὁ κηρύξας τάδε, / οὐδ᾽ ἡ ξύνοικος τῶν κάτω θεῶν Δίκη / τοιούσδ᾽ ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ὥρισεν νόμους. / οὐδὲ σθένειν τοσοῦτον ᾠόμην τὰ σὰ / κηρύγμαθ᾽ ὥστ᾽ ἄγραπτα κἀσφαλῆ θεῶν / νόμιμα δύνασθαι θνητά γ᾽ὄνθ᾽ ὑπερδραμεῖν. / οὐ γάρ τι νῦν γε κἀχθές, ἀλλ᾽ ἀεί ποτε / ζῇ ταῦτα, κοὐδεὶς οἶδεν ἐξ ὅτου ᾽φάνη[6].

In these lines, Antigone forcefully declares that universal and natural laws – ἄγραπτα κἀσφαλῆ θεῶν νόμιμα – possess a far more ancient and enduring value than any earthly edict[7].

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[2] With regard to the copious bibliography on Sophocles' *Antigone*, there will be here mentioned, in addition to the extensive introduction by JEBB (1900[3], IX-L), only some essays and miscellaneous volumes (with bibliography), such as those by MOLINARI (1977); KAMERBEEK (1978, 1-36); CERRI (1979); BROWN (1987); LLOYD-JONES – WILSON (1990); STEINER (1990); SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1990); LLOYD-JONES (1994b); BELTRAMETTI (1997); BINO (1998); GRIFFITH (1999, 1-68); CIANI (2000); RODIGHIERO (2000); BELTRAMETTI (2002); CINGANO (2003); AVEZZÙ (2003); GIBBONS – SEGAL (2003, 3-49); BREZZI (2004); ALONGE (2008); BELARDINELLI (2010); BELARDINELLI – GRECO (2010); PATTONI (2010); BURIAN – SHAPIRO (2011, 5-51); GEROLEMOU 2011; FORNARO (2012a); FORNARO (2012b); SUSANETTI (2012, 9-51); PATTONI (2014); SPINELLI (2014); CAIRNS (2016); MONTANI (2017); BINO (2018); FARNETTI – ORTU (2019); BELTRAMETTI – GIOVANNELLI (2024), that explore the diverse themes and profound contrasts depicted in the tragedy and bear witness to the enormous popularity enjoyed by *Antigone* through the centuries.

[3] See STEINER (1990, *passim*).

[4] Eva Cantarella (2024) recently offered a new interpretation of the opposition between Antigone and Creon, challenging the traditional image of the heroine, seen over the centuries as a symbol of resistance against tyranny, and of the defence of rights and the female struggle against male power, questioning the traditional definition of Creon as an absolute despot and restoring a tragic and politically complex dimension to the character, no less relevant than that of the protagonist.

[5] The Greek text and translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra* are taken from the editions by LLOYD-JONES (1994a); (1994b).

[6] «Yes, for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation, nor was it Justice who lives with the gods below that established such laws among men, nor did I think your proclamations strong enough to have power to overrule, mortal as they were, the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods. For these have life, not simply today and yesterday, but forever, and no one knows how long ago they were revealed».

[7] On the contrast between written and unwritten laws in Greek tragedy, the main reference text still remains the renowned essay by CERRI (1979), but see also CERRI (2010) revisiting the subject. On the

The first exchange between Antigone and Ismene (1-99) opens the tragedy[8]. The scene takes place in front of the royal palace of Thebes, immediately after the deadly duel between Eteocles and Polynice: staging the two sisters outside the house represents a first break with tradition, which will be repeated in the case of Electra and Chrysothemis (see *infra*). Antigone addresses her sister with meaningful epithets, κοινόν and αὐτάδελφον (1), which refer to an intense kinship, a bond of blood that goes beyond simple sisterhood, and highlight Antigone's attempt to assimilate Ismene into herself in a sort of profound intertwining of identities, feeling that family is a 'mystical body'[9]. This deep connection is reflected linguistically in the systematic use of the dual form νῷν (3; 21; 50, etc.), which grammatically expresses an indissoluble pair.

However, the pact of solidarity between the two sisters begins to crack almost immediately. Antigone informs Ismene of Creon's edict, which honours Eteocles with burial but condemns Polynices to remain unburied – dividing thus the brothers not only in death but also in memory. The structure of the speech is markedly binary: the connectives μέν and δέ signal a clear opposition between the two brothers – between right and wrong, between honour and dishonesty:

> οὐ γὰρ τάφου νῷν τὼ κασιγνήτω Κρέων / τὸν μὲν προτίσας, τὸν δ' ἀτιμάσας ἔχει; / Ἐτεοκλέα μέν, ὡς λέγουσι, σὺν δίκης / χρήσει δικαίᾳ καὶ νόμῳ, κατὰ χθονὸς / ἔκρυψε τοῖς ἔνερθεν ἔντιμον νεκροῖς· / τὸν δ' ἀθλίως θανόντα Πολυνείκους νέκυν / ἀστοῖσί φασιν ἐκκεκηρῦχθαι τὸ μὴ / τάφῳ καλύψαι μηδὲ κωκῦσαί τινα, / ἐᾶν δ' ἄκλαυτον, ἄταφον, οἰωνοῖς γλυκὺν / θησαυρὸν εἰσορῶσι πρὸς χάριν βορᾶς (20-30)[10].

Antigone does not question Polynices' guilt: what upsets her is that Creon's prohibition regards the most intimate and sacred sphere – that of the *genos* – and involves her and Ismene as direct relatives. For Antigone, indeed, Creon's κήρυγμα, although intended for the entire *polis*, affects above all them as the only survivors of the family unit. The crime of failing to bury the body impacts both the body of the deceased – exposed, outraged, deprived of tears and honours – and those who dare to violate the

relationship between Antigone and Creon, and more generally between women and the law in classical Greece, see also PONTARA (1990); SEALEY (1900); RABAGLIETTI (2000); BELTRAMETTI (2002); ZAGREBELSKY (2006); FORNARO (2012b); CIARAMELLI (2017); PEPINO – ROSSI (2019).

[8] For a detailed commentary on the entire passage, see KAMERBEEK (1978, 37-53); JEBB (1900[3], 8-28); GRIFFITH (1999, 119-39); SUSANETTI (2012, 153-81).

[9] For the complex translation of l. 1, see, for example, BELTRAMETTI (1997, 917); GRECO (2011). The bond between the two sisters is recalled by κοινωσάμην in l. 539 (see *infra*).

[10] «Why, has not Creon honoured one of our brothers and dishonoured the other in the matter of their burial? Eteocles, they say, in accordance with justice and with custom he has hidden beneath the earth, honoured among the dead below. But as for the unhappy corpse of Polynices, they say it has been proclaimed to the citizens that none shall conceal it in a grave or lament for it, but that they should leave it unwept for, unburied, a rich treasure house for birds as they look out for food».

edict, punished by public stoning:

> τοιαῦτά φασι τὸν ἀγαθὸν Κρέοντα σοὶ / κἀμοί, λέγω γὰρ κἀμέ, κηρύξαντ᾽ ἔχειν, / καὶ δεῦρο νεῖσθαι ταῦτα τοῖσι μὴ εἰδόσιν / σαφῆ προκηρύξοντα, καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμ᾽ ἄγειν / οὐχ ὡς παρ᾽ οὐδέν, ἀλλ᾽ ὃς ἂν τούτων τι δρᾷ, / φόνον προκεῖσθαι δημόλευστον ἐν πόλει. / οὕτως ἔχει σοι ταῦτα, καὶ δείξεις τάχα / εἴτ᾽ εὐγενὴς πέφυκας εἴτ᾽ ἐσθλῶν κακή (31-38)[11].

Creon explains his reasons in lines 162-210, justifying the decree as an act of political justice towards Eteocles and condemnation of Polynices. But for Antigone, the logic of civic power is secondary to the sacred duty owed to her dead. To her uncle, who considers the enemy as such even in death, Antigone replies: οὔτοι συνέχθειν, ἀλλὰ συμφιλεῖν ἔφυν (523)[12].

The final appeal to Ismene assumes the tone of a moral challenge: her sister will truly be εὐγενής (38) only if she joins in the act. Ismene seems to grasp the weight of the invitation but tries to buy time with her questions: ποῖόν τι κινδύνευμα; ποῦ γνώμης ποτ᾽ εἶ; (42)[13]. When Antigone reveals her intent to bury Polynices and asks for her help, εἰ τὸν νεκρὸν ξὺν τῇδε κουφιεῖς χερί (43)[14], her sister attempts a rational response, invoking the history of their family's tragic fate: Oedipus, Jocasta, the fratricidal brothers (49-60). This long list of misfortunes seems intended to dissuade Antigone, implying that acting against the law would mean continuing the chain of misfortune. Ismene insists on the need for prudence and moderation, using verbs that express thought, reflection, and evaluation: φρόνησον (49), σκόπει (58), ἐννοεῖν χρή (61). Her objection does not stem from indifference, but from an awareness of her own fragility as a woman: ἀλλ᾽ ἐννοεῖν χρὴ τοῦτο μὲν γυναῖχ᾽ ὅτι / ἔφυμεν, ὡς πρὸς ἄνδρας οὐ μαχουμένα· / ἔπειτα δ᾽ οὕνεκ᾽ ἀρχόμεσθ᾽ ἐκ κρεισσόνων / καὶ ταῦτ᾽ ἀκούειν κἄτι τῶνδ᾽ ἀλγίονα (61-64)[15].

She concedes that it might be right to honour Polynices but declares herself incapable of doing so: ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν αἰτοῦσα τοὺς ὑπὸ χθονὸς / ξύγγνοιαν ἴσχειν, ὡς βιάζομαι τάδε, / τοῖς ἐν τέλει βεβῶσι πείσομαι. τὸ γὰρ /περισσὰ πράσσειν οὐκ ἔχει νοῦν

[11] «This is the proclamation which they say the good Creon has made to you and to me—yes, I count myself also—and he is coming this way to make the proclamation clear to those who do not know of it. He is not treating the matter as unimportant, but for anyone who does any of these things, death in the city is ordained, by stoning at the people's hand. There you have the way things stand, and you will soon show whether your nature is noble or you are the cowardly descendant of valiant ancestors». See AVEZZÙ (2002b).

[12] «I have no enemies by birth, but I have friends by birth». On this line, see the reading of ARRIGONI (2014).

[13] «What dangerous thing is to be done? What have you in mind?».

[14] «Will you bury the dead man, together with this hand of mine?».

[15] «Why, we must remember that we are women, who cannot fight against men, and then that we are ruled by those whose power is greater, so that we must consent to this and to other things even more painful!».

οὐδένα (65-68)[16].

Antigone responds with a definitive severance, physically expressed by separating their hands: the union between the sisters is broken, and with it the language of duality. The dialogue becomes polarised in an alternation of 'I' and 'you' (69-99): two diverging paths, two separate destinies. Antigone walks towards death, Ismene chooses survival. One performs a solitary action, the other remains on the sidelines, powerless.

The second exchange between the two sisters in lines 536-81 marks the culmination of their divergence[17]. Ismene is summoned back onto the stage by Creon, who believes her to be Antigone's accomplice (488-90), and the chorus announces her entrance from the palace gates (526-29). Ismene appears distraught and declares herself ready to share the consequences of Antigone's actions, if the latter will allow it. She tries to reconnect the broken thread of *koinonia* and to reestablish the bond Antigone had invoked at the beginning. But Antigone categorically rejects this belated solidarity, emphasises her loneliness, and reiterates her refusal with a triple negation: ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἐάσει τοῦτό γ᾽ ἡ δίκη σ᾽, ἐπεὶ / οὔτ᾽ ἠθέλησας οὔτ᾽ ἐγὼ ᾽κοινωσάμην (538f.).

Ismene, eager to share her sister's fate, even offers herself to death (545), but Antigone rejects her: having not participated in the burial, she cannot even share her punishment (544-48). In the first dialogue, Ismene had taken her leave with affectionate words, declaring herself *phile*, a friend and sister nonetheless (98f.). But now Antigone reiterates that love expressed only in words holds no value: λόγοις δ᾽ ἐγὼ φιλοῦσαν οὐ στέργω φίλην (543)[18]. Even though Ismene returns to speak of shared participation, declaring herself guilty only out of love, Antigone no longer recognises her as a true sister (556-60). The fracture is definitive, not only in terms of choice, but also in terms of the perception of blood ties. The solidarity that once seemed natural now crumbles in the face of the inflexibility of the heroic gesture. Antigone's accusation is clear and cutting: σὺ μὲν γὰρ εἵλου ζῆν, ἐγὼ δὲ κατθανεῖν (555)[19].

Through the character of Antigone, Sophocles presents a woman who assumes responsibility for memory and the sanctity of kinship, acting as if she were the last guardian of family ties. In the world of Greek tragedy, the bond between brother and sister carries a special significance. With the death of all the male members of the *genos*, the virgin sister, neither wife nor mother, becomes the one who must preserve

[16] «So I shall beg those beneath the earth to be understanding, since I act under constraint, but I shall obey those in authority; for there is no sense in actions that exceed our powers».

[17] The dialogue, as the definitive confrontation between Antigone and Ismene, is examined in KAMERBEEK (1978, 107-16); JEBB (1900[3], 104-11); GRIFFITH (1999, 214-18); SUSANETTI (2012, 261-71).

[18] «I do not tolerate a loved one who shows her love only in words».

[19] «You chose life, and I chose death!». An interesting interpretation on Antigone's choice, burial practices and conflictual relationship with Ismene can be found in FOLEY (2001, 172-200); BERTOLASO (2006); GOLDHILL (2012).

their memory and defend their honour. Antigone is a virgin precisely for this reason: only as someone who does not belong to another *oikos* can she embody the continuity of her father's lineage. The *philia* that binds her to Polynices is absolute, exclusive, non-negotiable. In the name of this bond, she opposes the law of the city and risks everything, even her life[20].

Creon, by contrast, represents the law of the *polis*: a masculine law that allows for no exceptions. According to him, Polynices is a public enemy and Antigone is a woman who has dared to challenge masculine power and the institutional order. Throughout the play, the ruler repeatedly states that Antigone behaves 'like a man' (484f.; 525; 648-55) and for this reason must be punished: she has reversed the code of citizenship by daring to perform a man's act with her female hands.

Ismene shares her sister's pain but reacts differently. Faced with the edict, she takes refuge in prudence and in the recognition of the limits imposed by her condition as a woman and shared by Greek culture. Her reasoning is consistent, though less forceful: she chooses not to act because she knows that any transgressive gesture will bring destruction[21].

In this sense, Ismene represents a moderate form of femininity: she does not deny the value of family ties, but operates within the boundaries of the *polis*, seeking a middle ground between private and public life. Ismene seems to propose a new interpretation of *philia*: the feeling she experiences is not an exclusive bond that ties those who are part of a close circle, but rather a relationship based on interpersonal connection that extends beyond blood. She offers Antigone a less heroic form of love, one more rooted in reality and beyond the laws of *genos* and *polis*. Hers, too, is an act of freedom, albeit a quieter one. She is not a heroic figure, but neither is she completely passive: in the second scene, she tries to take responsibility and claims a bond that Antigone denies her. In this sense, Ismene is no less tragic than Antigone, who – unable to conceive of *philia* except in the extreme terms of heroism and sacrifice – judges her sister unworthy, not *eugenes*[22].

Antigone constructs a new form of heroic femininity, in radical contrast to the traditional one embodied by Ismene. The two sisters reflect each other like images in a distorting mirror: Antigone rejects what Ismene represents, denies it, yet cannot help but define herself in relation to it. By leaving the domestic space of the *oikos* and acting in the public sphere, Antigone breaks with all pre-established roles. Her action is not a simple gesture of pity, but a political act in the most radical sense: she claims the right

[20] BETTINI's essay (1998) is interesting in that it traces a significant precedent for the relationship between sisters and brothers in Hdt. III 119, 5ff.
[21] On the *amechania* of Ismene, see STEINER (1990, 238f.).
[22] BREZZI (2004, *passim*).

to remember, to honour, to act, even knowing it will lead to her death[23].

In the transition from *Antigone* to *Electra*, Sophocles revisits and further explores the theme of mirrored sisterhood, creating a new contrast between two female characters: Electra, determined and irreconcilable, and Chrysothemis, temperate and accommodating[24]. Although the exact date of *Electra*'s composition is uncertain, it is generally believed to belong to the author's full maturity, due to its affinity with *Philoctetes* from 409 BCE[25].

As in *Antigone*, the opening scene here begins with a male absence here as well: Orestes, accompanied by Pylades and his tutor, plots revenge against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus for the murder of Agamemnon. The action takes place in a suspended time, marked by a power vacuum. Just as Creon has not yet officially presented himself as ruler at the beginning of *Antigone*, in this case too Aegisthus is absent from the palace, allowing the dramatic action to unfold.

In the first dialogue between the sisters, which takes place in lines 324-470, Sophocles reverses the order found in *Antigone*[26]. This time, the chorus is already present when the two sisters meet and acts as a mediator between their perspectives. The *choryphaeus*, in particular, invites both to listen to each other: μηδὲν πρὸς ὀργὴν πρὸς θεῶν· ὡς τοῖς λόγοις / ἔνεστιν ἀμφοῖν κέρδος, εἰ σὺ μὲν μάθοις / τοῖς τῆσδε χρῆσθαι, τοῖς δὲ σοῖς αὖτη πάλιν (369-71)[27]. This balanced tone is entirely absent from the dialogue between Antigone and Ismene, a sign of greater openness in *Electra*'s emotional register. Although they share elements of revenge and family mourning, Antigone and Electra face profoundly different situations. While Antigone struggles with the conflict between divine and human laws, Electra experiences a family conflict and a thirst for revenge that lead her to take extreme actions. Antigone embodies an ideal of justice and respect for divine laws, while Electra is an example of how pain and anger can lead to destruction.

The setting, as in *Antigone*, is at dawn, a symbolic moment of transition that suggests the possibility of new actions. The spatial position of the two sisters is also

[23] See BINO (2018, 30).

[24] Regarding the relationship, similarities and differences between the two sisters, see the recent essay by COO (2021). Cf. also SEGAL (1966); FOLEY (2001, 145-171); LLOYD (2005, 84f.; 90-92); CRISCUOLO (2012, 107-39).

[25] For a comprehensive reading of the tragedy, see JEBB (1894[3]); SEGAL (1966); KAMERBEEK (1974, 1-20); LLOYD-JONES (1994a); SHAW (1996); RODIGHIERO (2000); MARCH (2001, 1-23); CARSON – SHAW (2001, 3-40); AVEZZÙ (2002a); AVEZZÙ (2003); LLOYD (2005); FINGLASS (2007, 1-17); BURIAN – SHAPIRO (2010, 187-228); CONDELLO (2010); CRISCUOLO (2012, 9-176); DUNN (2012); DUNN – GENTILI – LOMIENTO (2019, XI-XXXIX); ROISMAN (2020), with bibliography.

[26] An analysis of the passage can be found in KAMERBEEK (1974, 57-74); MARCH (2001, 161-70); FINGLASS (2007, 194-234); DUNN – GENTILI – LOMIENTO (2019, 197-223).

[27] «I beg you, say nothing in anger! There is profit in the words of both, if you would learn to make use of hers and she in turn of yours».

meaningful: Chrysothemis leaves the palace, summoned by Clytemnestra to bring offerings to Agamemnon's tomb, while Electra is already outside, a sign of her marginality and distance from the *oikos*. Here too, leaving the house becomes a form of rupture with the established order.

As soon as she appears, Chrysothemis addresses Electra affectionately and with some surprise ὦ κασιγνήτη (329). The choice of this appellation emphasises their close familial relationship but also carries a certain emotional emphasis. However, the tone quickly shifts when Chrysothemis reproaches her sister for her stubborn lamentations, almost accusing her of taking pleasure in her own suffering:

> τίν᾽ αὖ σὺ τήνδε πρὸς θυρῶνος ἐξόδοις / ἐλθοῦσα φωνεῖς, ὦ κασιγνήτη, φάτιν, / κοὐδ᾽ ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ διδαχθῆναι θέλεις / θυμῷ ματαίῳ μὴ χαρίζεσθαι κενά; / καίτοι τοσοῦτόν γ᾽ οἶδα κἀμαυτήν, ὅτι / ἀλγῶ ᾽πὶ τοῖς παροῦσιν· ὥστ᾽ ἄν, εἰ σθένος / λάβοιμι, δηλώσαιμ᾽ ἂν οἷ᾽ αὐτοῖς φρονῶ (328-34)[28].

In the language of the two sisters, as in *Antigone*, images and metaphors drawn from the sphere of war recur: Electra speaks with ardour, animated by a warrior *thymos* (331), while Chrysothemis declares her lack of strength to oppose the powerful, whom she hates.

Electra, however, like Antigone, does not allow herself to be dissuaded. She laments the impiety of her mother's command, which her sister is carrying out: namely, to bring funeral offerings from Clytemnestra herself, the murderer of their father. For Electra, this is an unbearable offence to the memory of the dead man. Just as Antigone asks Ismene to help transgress the edict, Electra also invites Chrysothemis not to carry out her task, but to overturn it. She encourages her to dispose of the offerings and honour Agamemnon with locks of their own hair instead:

> ἀλλ᾽, ὦ φίλη, τούτων μὲν ὧν ἔχεις χεροῖν / τύμβῳ προσάψῃς μηδέν· οὐ γάρ σοι θέμις / οὐδ᾽ ὅσιον ἐχθρᾶς ἀπὸ γυναικὸς ἱστάναι / κτερίσματ᾽ οὐδὲ λουτρὰ προσφέρειν πατρί / […] οὐκ ἔστιν. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν μέθες· σὺ δὲ / τεμοῦσα κρατὸς βοστρύχων ἄκρας φόβας / κἀμοῦ ταλαίνης, σμικρὰ μὲν τάδ᾽, ἀλλ᾽ ὅμως / ἄχω, δὸς αὐτῷ, τήνδε λιπαρῆ τρίχα / καὶ ζῶμα τοὐμὸν οὐ χλιδαῖς ἠσκημένον (431-52)[29].

In the dramatic memory of both author and audience, the situation is reversed

[28] «What are these things that you have come out to say by the door we leave the house by, my sister? And will you not learn, after so long, not to indulge in futile fashion your useless anger? Why, I know this much about myself, that the present situation grieves me; so that if I had the power, I should show them what are my feelings towards them».

[29] «My dear, do not place on the tomb any of the things you are carrying! It is not right in the eyes of gods or men that you should place burial offerings or bring libations from a hateful woman to our father […]. It cannot be! Abandon these, and cut locks from your hair and from that of this unhappy person—a small gift, but all that I possess—and give them to him, this hair denoting supplication and my girdle, decorated with no ornaments».

compared to *Antigone*: there, the issue was the denial of funeral honours to Polynices; here, it is about paying honours to Agamemnon's tomb on behalf of his murderer. In both cases, however, it is a transgression of the unwritten laws regarding the honour due to the dead, even if such laws seem to be antithetical.

What in *Antigone* was a conflict between two irreconcilable ethical visions is repeated here in a similar form: Electra too accuses her sister of siding with power and of *de facto* cohabiting with murderers. Just as Antigone reproaches Ismene for loving with words (543), Electra denounces Chrysothemis for her verbal hatred and concrete inaction: σὺ δ᾽ ἡμὶν ἡ μισοῦσα μισεῖς μὲν λόγῳ, / ἔργῳ δὲ τοῖς φονεῦσι τοῦ πατρὸς ξύνει (357f.)[30].

However, in this first confrontation, the bond between the sisters remains intact. Despite the tension, Electra continues to address her sister with tenderness: she calls her *phile* (431), begs her to speak to their father in Hades, asks her for a gesture of solidarity. Their dialogue ends not with a rupture, but with a fragile agreement.

Chrysothemis' response to Electra's pleas is surprising: she decides to go along with her, not out of conviction, but because she feels that her sister is right. It is a dangerous gesture, as she herself acknowledges, yet she does not hesitate. She only asks the chorus to remain silent, knowing that if Clytemnestra were to learn of her choice, she could punish her harshly:

> δράσω· τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οὐκ ἔχει λόγον / δυοῖν ἐρίζειν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐπισπεύδει τὸ δρᾶν. / πειρωμένῃ δὲ τῶνδε τῶν ἔργων ἐμοὶ / σιγὴ παρ᾽ ὑμῶν πρὸς θεῶν ἔστω, φίλαι· / ὡς εἰ τάδ᾽ ἡ τεκοῦσα πεύσεται, πικρὰν / δοκῶ με πεῖραν τήνδε τολμήσειν ἔτι (466-71)[31].

This passage reveals a deep difference with the relationship between Antigone and Ismene. Chrysothemis is fearful, but not without initiative. Although she takes a more moderate and less exposed path, she demonstrates a sense of ethics and familial loyalty that, in this case, leads her to act, even against her mother, despite her lack of power or protection. Chrysothemis does not share Electra's extremism, but she recognises her moral strength. Her courage is quiet, almost domestic, but no less meaningful. Sophocles presents her as a more cautious character but never reduces her to a servile or passive figure. Her role, though secondary, is essential: without her, Electra would not even imagine a shared intent.

The second and final confrontation between Electra and Chrysothemis takes place

[30] «But you who say you hate them hate them in words, but in your actions you keep company with your father's murderers».

[31] «I will; for when an act is right, reason demands that two voices should not contend, but hastens on the deed. But when I attempt the task, dear friends, do you, I beg you, keep silent, for if my mother hears of this, I think I shall have reason to regret my daring venture».

in the third episode of the tragedy and marks the most intense and dramatic moment in their relationship (871-1057)[32].

The scene opens with Chrysothemis returning to the stage with hopeful news: she has found clear signs of Orestes' return at Agamemnon's tomb, a lock of hair and funeral offerings, which she shares enthusiastically with her sister. But Electra, immersed in dark despair, refuses to believe her.

In this exchange, the roles seem reversed compared to their earlier encounter: Chrysothemis now takes a more energetic and hopeful stance, while Electra is enclosed in absolute grief. The former, realistic and confident, claims to know with certainty that Orestes has returned; the latter, overwhelmed by the tutor's account of her brother's presumed death, can no longer distinguish truth from lies. Her blindness is not physical, like Oedipus's, but psychological and ideological: she has listened, but not seen.

Chrysothemis, on the other hand, has seen with her own eyes and knows the truth[33]. When Electra accuses her of naivety, her sister replies in astonishment: πῶς δ' οὐκ ἐγὼ κάτοιδ' ἅ γ' εἶδον ἐμφανῶς; (923)[34]. But Electra is now convinced that the loss is irreparable: τέθνηκεν, ὦ τάλαινα· τἀκ κείνου δέ σοι / σωτήρι' ἔρρει· μηδὲν ἐς κεῖνόν γ' ὅρα (924f.)[35]. From this point onwards, Electra adopts an increasingly resolute stance: if Orestes is truly dead, she will avenge Agamemnon. She offers herself as the executor of family justice, ready to take her brother's place in the act of revenge. It is an epic and delirious turning point, comparable to Antigone's decision to defy established power alone[36].

Just as Antigone appeals to Ismene to prove her nobility of spirit (37f.), Electra now urges Chrysothemis to perform an act worthy of their origins:

> ἀλλ', ὦ φίλη, πείσθητι, συμπόνει πατρί, / σύγκαμν' ἀδελφῷ, παῦσον ἐκ κακῶν ἐμέ, / παῦσον δὲ σαυτήν, τοῦτο γιγνώσκουσ', ὅτι / ζῆν αἰσχρὸν αἰσχρῶς τοῖς καλῶς πεφυκόσιν (986-89)[37].

In a rhetorical crescendo, Electra paints a glorious future for them both; if they succeed in avenging their father, the people will honour them as two heroines and saviours of their father's house:

[32] For an interpretation of this passage from the tragedy, see KAMERBEEK (1974, 119-42); MARCH (2001, 194-202); FINGLASS (2007, 370-424); DUNN – GENTILI – LOMIENTO (2019, 275-302).
[33] Chrysothemis repeatedly uses the verb ὁράω in lines 885f.; 892; 900; 923.
[34] «But how can I not know what I saw with my own eyes?».
[35] «He is dead, poor creature! Your chance of salvation by him is lost; do not look to him!».
[36] For an analysis of Electra as a political figure see KONSTAN (2008); MELLO (2018).
[37] «Come, my dear, comply, work with your father, labour with your brother, save me from my sorrows, and save yourself, recognising that a shameful life is shameful for those nobly born!».

> λόγων γε μὴν εὔκλειαν οὐχ ὁρᾷς ὅσην / σαυτῇ τε κἀμοὶ προσβαλεῖς πεισθεῖσ' ἐμοί; / τίς γάρ ποτ' ἀστῶν ἢ ξένων ἡμᾶς ἰδὼν / τοιοῖσδ' ἐπαίνοις οὐχὶ δεξιώσεται, / "ἴδεσθε τώδε τὼ κασιγνήτω, φίλοι, / ὼ τὸν πατρῷον οἶκον ἐξεσωσάτην, / ὼ τοῖσιν ἐχθροῖς εὖ βεβηκόσιν ποτὲ / ψυχῆς ἀφειδήσαντε προὐστήτην φόνου. / τούτω φιλεῖν χρή, τώδε χρὴ πάντας σέβειν· / τώδ' ἔν θ' ἑορταῖς ἔν τε πανδήμῳ πόλει / τιμᾶν ἅπαντας οὕνεκ' ἀνδρείας χρεών" (973-83)[38].

At the core of the tragedy, the protagonist stands out for her heroic and idealised vision that transcends the boundaries of personal pain and projects itself into a public and political dimension. The passage offers an extraordinary reflection on the power of language, public memory and the possibility of a female heroism that defies convention. Electra is not just a tragic figure: she is a visionary, a rhetorician, a subversive. The language she adopts is epic, utopian and deeply rhetorical: she imagines herself and her sister Chrysothemis as protagonists of a gesture of collective salvation, worthy of being celebrated by the city with civic honours and monuments, just as happened to the Athenian tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton. The surprising nature of the celebration and the quality it celebrates are reinforced by several literary echoes, and the comparison with the two tyrant killers is not accidental but rather strategic[39]. Harmodius and Aristogeiton, historical and mythologised figures, were celebrated as liberators of the *polis*, and their public cult – carried out with statues, inscriptions and rituals – represented the pinnacle of civic honour. Electra, evoking this memory, radically subverts traditional expectations of the role of women in tragedy and in fifth-century Athenian society. Women, usually confined to the domestic sphere or ritual lamentation, are here presented as agents of justice and political renewal[40]. The power of Electra's vision lies also in her rhetoric. Through a refined literary device, she imagines what "people will say" in the future: a fictitious discourse that is not limited to a single, anonymous voice, but takes on the tone of universal acclamation (975; 984). The length and intensity of this praise – made of seven lines, more than in other similar examples – reinforce the idea of a shared and lasting glory. This is not a private dream, but a public memory, carved in the stone of the city.

However, what makes this vision truly striking is its application to a pair of women. Female heroism, rarely celebrated so explicitly in ancient literature, takes on a concrete and monumental form here. Electra not only imagines the acclaim but almost

[38] «Then as to fame on the lips of men, do you not see how much you will add to you and me if you obey me? Which of the citizens or strangers when he sees us will not greet us with praise? "Look on these sisters, friends, who preserved their father's house, who when their enemies were firmly based took no thought of their lives, but stood forth to avenge murder! All should love them, all should reverence them; all should honour them at feasts and among the assembled citizens for their courage!"».

[39] On the passage and literary references, see FINGLASS (2007, 403-408). See also BUDELMANN (2000); CACCIARI (2007, V-XIV); BATTEZZATO (2008).

[40] The topic is discussed in JUFFRAS (1991); BACELAR (2023).

constructs it: she describes the physical presence of the sisters, as if they were already part of a celebratory monument. Juffras has hypothesised that Electra is describing an actual imaginary monument, similar to the one erected for the tyrannicides[41]. But the text seems to suggest something more immediate: the living presence of the sisters, witnesses and protagonists of a heroic act (975).

Yet this vision is not lacking tension. Electra's perspective is utopian, idealised, and not necessarily shared by Chrysothemis, who appears more cautious, more tied to reality and to the limitations imposed by the social context. Electra's rhetoric, however powerful, clashes with her sister's reluctance, revealing the gap between the ideal and the feasible, between dream and reality.

Chrysothemis, like Ismene before her, brings her sister back to reality: οὐκ εἰσορᾷς; γυνὴ μὲν οὐδ᾽ ἀνὴρ ἔφυς, / σθένεις δ᾽ ἔλασσον τῶν ἐναντίων χερί (997f.)[42].

Electra's epic vision collides with the realisation of a different, more fragile female nature, more prone to risk. Ironically, Electra claims to honour her mother's nature through her combativeness (605-609). The daughter who hates her mother ends up reflecting her: just as Clytemnestra killed for revenge, Electra now seeks the same, ready to take Orestes' place in the violent act[43].

But the distance between the two sisters is now definitive. Chrysothemis refuses to follow Electra in her insane and dangerous plan. Her opposition is rational, deliberate, prudent, τίς οὖν τοιοῦτον ἄνδρα βουλεύων ἑλεῖν / ἄλυπος ἄτης ἐξαπαλλαχθήσεται; (1001f.)[44], and Chrysothemis' final words on stage (1055-57) are full of melancholic lucidity: she invites her sister to reflect, warning her that she may soon find herself alone, left to suffer the consequences, and only then she will realise who was right. It is a dignified, firm farewell, far from Ismene's heartfelt abandonment. Chrysothemis leaves the stage for good, but her words continue to resonate as a warning.

Here too, as in *Antigone*, the dialogue between sisters ends with an irreparable break. Electra, in her solitary choice, distances herself from the only person who might have stood by her. Her determination is admirable but also disturbing: lucidity gradually gives way to exaltation, fury, and ideological delirium.

Chrysothemis, for her part, is not a passive character. Although she does not share her sister's radicalism, she is moved by genuine affection and a practical sense of things. Her courage is quiet, not ostentatious, but capable, when necessary, of

[41] See JUFFRAS (1991, 103f.).
[42] «Do you not see? You are a woman, not a man, and your strength is less than that of your adversaries».
[43] On the special relationship between mother and daughter, see LLOYD (2005, 85-90); CRISCUOLO (2012, 141-76).
[44] «Who, then, shall plan to kill such a man and emerge unscathed by disaster?».

translating into action. Unlike Ismene, she does not limit herself to opposing or crying: she acts, warns, tries to save Electra. In this, Sophocles assigns her a decisive dramaturgical role.

By staging Antigone and Ismene on one side and Electra and Chrysothemis on the other, Sophocles constructs a pair of sisters whose roles are similar in both tragedies. We can therefore speak of a mirroring of two analogous situations that highlight the tragic nature of the protagonists, who find themselves reacting in different ways to a family and political crisis[45]: one marked by matricide and the usurpation of power in Argos, the other by civil war and the breakdown of order in Thebes. In both cases, the sisters are faced with a choice: resist, obey, avenge, or wait. And in both cases, only one of the two chooses to act radically, while the other takes a more measured, hesitant attitude, but not without ethical sense.

The dynamic is clear: Antigone and Electra embody a form of absolute and often destructive heroism; Ismene and Chrysothemis, on the other hand, represent an alternative form of resistance, more prudent, more silent, yet not entirely submissive. The former place themselves outside the *oikos*, challenge power, and embrace death as a form of identity affirmation. The latter remain within the domestic confines, but this does not mean they renounce their own form of action.

In *Antigone*, the protagonist acts in the name of *philia*, understood as a sacred and indisputable family bond. The burial of her brother is a duty for her, regardless of his political guilt. Despite sharing a bond of blood, Ismene refuses to accompany her in the undertaking for fear of the consequences, aware of the limitations imposed on her condition as a woman. Only when Antigone is already condemned does Ismene attempt to take the blame: too late to be credible, but enough to show affection.

In *Electra*, the mechanism is repeated but with greater complexity. Chrysothemis is not an exact copy of Ismene. She is less passive, more articulate. She shares her sister's hatred for Clytemnestra but considers it senseless to openly challenge such an established power. However, when Electra asks her for help in honouring Agamemnon, Chrysothemis does not back down. She is ready to act as long as the action is limited and not self-destructive. She feels fear, of course, but also affection. And in the second confrontation, it is she who brings a message of hope, while Electra sinks into nihilism.
The presence of Ismene and Chrysothemis in the two tragedies is essential. They ask questions, raise doubts, and represent an alternative voice of conscience. They are not useless or minor figures, but characters who offer a different interpretation of *philia*, based not on death but on life[46].

[45] The motif of double and pairs of sisters in tragedy, particularly in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra*, is explored by BELTRAMETTI (1997); NICOLAI (2010); TAGLIABUE (2017); BINO (2018).
[46] On this topic, see NUSSBAUM (1996, 133-90).

Sophocles uses the pairs Antigone-Ismene and Electra-Chrysothemis to articulate two different responses to the collapse of traditional family and civil structures. In both cases, these are women living in a context marked by the abuse of power. Their choices are not simple moral options, but symbolic acts that challenge the very foundations of political and family coexistence.

Antigone and Electra take refuge in the cult of the past. Faced with the confusion of roles and the violence of the established power, they react by rigidly defending a lost order. Antigone honours her brother as the only remaining bond after the annihilation of Oedipus' family; Electra devotes herself to the memory of an idealised father, ignoring his faults and contradictions. Both purify the memory, detach it from its dark side, to transform it into an absolute and indisputable principle.

Ismene and Chrysothemis, on the other hand, accept complexity. They do not deny pain but try to reconcile it with the need to survive. They do not celebrate death but seek a way to live with injustice without being destroyed. They represent a less conspicuous, more internal form of resistance, which leaves open the possibility of change.

In both dramas, the maternal figure is seen as deeply problematic: Jocasta, marked by incest and suicide, and Clytemnestra, guilty of matricide and usurper of the throne. For Antigone and Electra, the mother is a presence to be denied, to be removed. They define themselves as daughters of their father, a father who is now dead and mythologised, to be honoured through absolute gestures.

Neither Antigone nor Electra builds a true alliance with their sister. Both, at the decisive moment, choose solitude. But it is precisely in that choice that the tragedy of their fate is measured: they are not victims, but neither are they victors. They carry out an action that only makes sense in destruction: they offer no way out, only an extreme form of consistency[47].

Ismene and Chrysothemis, on the other hand, represent perhaps a middle ground. They do not openly rebel, but they do not fully accept the imposed order either. They are attentive, silent, cautious. While Antigone and Electra idealise a past to be saved at all costs, Ismene and Chrysothemis seem open to a slow transformation, based on endurance and moderation[48].

In fact, while the dramatic function of Ismene and Chrysothemis is entirely analogous, Antigone and Electra are different: what they have in common is tragic inflexibility; they choose the radical path and expose themselves to destruction. Those who prefer caution, Ismene and Chrysothemis, disappear into the shadows. Neither path guarantees salvation.

[47] See LAURIOLA (2007).
[48] Cf. BELTRAMETTI (1997, 918).

Their words, their silences, their differences are not just dramatic devices: they are ways of thinking, strategies for survival, human gestures in the face of the unacceptable. This double mirror, this constant comparison between sisters, reflects the ambiguity of the tragic world: a world in which there are no solutions, only difficult choices, made necessary by what has happened before[49].

[49] On the ambiguity of these tragic figures, see BINO (2018, 28-31).

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