

# ISMENE'S INTERPRETIVE HISTORY IN IRELAND: FROM TOM PAULIN TO OWEN MCCAFFERTY

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## **Abstract**

The subject of this paper is a study of the adaptations of Sophocles' ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone* by Tom Paulin, Brendan Kennelly, Seamus Heaney and Owen McCafferty which help to trace the path of history's manipulation in the years following the cessation of violence and the Peace Treaty in Ireland from 1985 to 2008, through the figure of Ismene. Unlike her rebellious sister, the relatively minor figure of Ismene explicates that neutrality may be the greatest defiance. Her stance helps to warn the leaders of the world that acceptance is not mere insubordination. The interpretive saga of this figure in Ireland thus remains a context in which she is entrapped but which also enables her terms of liberation.

**Key Words:** Ismene, peace, submission, history

History not only creates heroes but also nurtures victims. Irish historiography is gradually turning apolitical in nature with the reconciliation politics of the new Peace Treaty. Thus Ismene as the most uncontested character is extolled as we unravel her interpretation history. We delineate a politicization of harping on the apolitical, and what glory resides in a subversion of it. Sophocles' *Antigone* has been considered an emblem of the most uncompromising female spirit in major adaptations across the world but in the history of Irish *Antigone* adaptations, Ismene has emerged as the new heroine. But where does her 'heroism' lie and in what context does it emerge? When the sisters rebel against the king, their uncle Creon, conflicts arise between what should prevail and what does prevail. Amidst the expected ideality and the prevalent reality, the voices of Ismene, in regard to the protagonists,

serve to define the stance of the present century's moments of weakness and loss. They are not only words as distinct utterances, but words which may not be uttered or can only claim a partial right as a distinct utterance, and hence must remain compromised. We must also differentiate this from the language of victimization.

Ismene is always perceived as the voice of neutrality, compromise and cowardice. But is she always devoid of agency? Bonnie Honig traces an interpretive history of this figure but finds a choice she makes – forced though it may be:

When Ismene, who wants to die with Antigone, agrees to go on living without her, Ismene does not (contra Lacan, Žižek, and various feminist readers of the play) choose survival and avoid death. Instead, she performs what Lacan calls an ethical act: she confronts her own limit and does not back down. Her limit is not death but rather a living death: to go on living in the house of her sister's killer, Creon. This is Ismene's second forced choice, and she does not avoid it. As we shall see, she does not avoid the first forced choice pressed upon her either, and in relation to that one, she is creative. (33)

Ismene's position and power resides in survival ethics which is not confrontational, even as it is contrarian in nature. She obeys Creon but with a standing of her own in which lies her power of endurance. Moreover Ismene is given greater agency by Honig when she points out that Antigone not only sacrificed herself for her dead brother but also her living sister, and Ismene may have attempted the second burial due to claims of sorority.

Rather than a passive submission to Creon's edict, which has defined the interpretation of her character from the beginning, Ismene, in the Irish post-national context, is a much more vocal presence. When critics give her that neutral position, it is much contested like that of Antigone's, because they are both the cursed daughters of Oedipus, bound by the common curse of defiance and disobedience. They are both women and they speak about the public realm at the beginning of the play; especially significant if we consider them as 'attackers' of the newly-found laws of the polis. In the 1985 adaptation by Paulin, Ismene, as the voice of compromise is a more viable, though less spectacular element in human dignity amidst the troubles. Seamus Heaney, as a context to his 2004 commentary on *Antigone*, has reiterated the passive

insubordination of Ismene and how it has become widely accepted in Ireland:

[...] Conor Cruise O'Brien came back to the topic and published a famous revision of his earlier salute to Antigone as the representative of human dignity, recommending instead to the northern Irish minority the peaceable compromise adopted by Ismene. In 1972, four years after he wrote his first article, at a time when the Provisional IRA, the British army and the Loyalist paramilitaries were all fully in action [...]. ("Title Deeds: Translating a Classic" 419)

Ismene's act of non-violence is the voice of pragmatic knowledge but it is a 'compromise' acquired and required in times of peace. Paulin may find nothing spectacular in siding with Ismene and her cowardice, but the text gives scope for a different kind of interpretation. This is not an ambiguity on the writer's part but awareness, that what is commonsense is easily mistaken for cowardice. Paulin delineates the nature of this as well as its oppositional stance. Ismene concentrates on the beastly violence which will be inflicted on the body of Polynices:

ISMENE. And he says, our great Creon,  
That the crows can pick  
At his disloyal body---  
As the rats and the rain will---  
But no one may touch, bless  
Nor cover him over. (10)

These lines are significantly uttered by Ismene, in a tone of anger, whereas in previous interpretations it was always uttered by Antigone. The last line of the speech, "we must put our own lives" (10) is a forceful recognition of the reality of the existential condition, which obviously affronts her rebellious nature through these words, "right there on the line/ and show no fear of him" (10).

By the time Heaney wrote his version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the voice of neutrality had overwhelmingly become the voice of impassivity, which blindly follows change. We must not however confuse it with the voice of acceptance, which cannot rebel against male authority. Here she is outspoken, but later her very outspokenness becomes part of the herd instinct, accepting compromise, accepting any forceful assimilation of

ideas. She does not dishonor the laws of the gods and the dead but also says that she is not “strong enough to defy the laws of the land” (6).

Of course acceptance remains the most heroic approach in times of peace, but it also points towards an undesirable orderliness. In the midst of such a transition, during the years of counterinsurgency following the Peace Treaty, Ismene acquired a moment of glory, especially when the reconciliation ethics was in vogue. D.W.M. Barker, in a note to the chapter entitled “Listening to Haemon: Citizenship in the *Antigone*”, emphasizes that the focus on Haemon is “opposed” to Ismene, “first because the latter never directly confronts Creon; and second, although Haemon and Ismene share an interest in the value of ‘yielding,’ Ismene, unlike Haemon, does not explicitly spell out a conception of political speech” (155). But we must realize that they tread similar grounds. Firstly, Bonnie Honig points out that the sisters, especially Ismene in her quiet rebellion, do not form a democratic collectivity or a feminist solidarity per se. Secondly, Haemon also enunciates a reconciliation ethics based on concrete opposition when he points out to his father that the people of Thebes are against Creon’s tyranny. Hence his submission to his father, even at the end, is given distinct embodiment in his suicide; with Creon, in vain, trying to prevent it. Death in *Antigone* is always an act of rebellion, all of them emphasized by their unnatural nature. Therefore in Haemon’s compliance we can trace defiance. Barker’s book excellently defines the reconciliation as it is tempered with rebellion, but he himself acknowledges that the figure of Ismene needs to be furthermore dealt with. Ismene’s lack of a definite political speech act is a stance easily misinterpreted for compliance and submission. Yet this ‘lack’ delineates an understated power whose coordinates of opposition are different. Hence she is not merely the feminist heroine battling against male authorial and governmental repression but one who transmutes history’s victimization into the new century’s victim power.

Ismene however does not wish to reside in the binaries of love and hate which define Antigone’s opposition. Rather, in Brendan Kennelly’s version she protests against Antigone’s choice of residing in those very binaries. Her claims of assertion are different in nature.

ISMENE. We *must* not go against men.

[...]

*We must obey*  
Even when we do not believe  
In our obedience.  
*We must obey* in spite of disbelief.  
[...]  
It is foolish to go against a strong man.

It is foolish to disobey. (9) (Emphasis mine)

The assertive “must”, points out that Ismene exercises a distinct kind of ‘polyvocalism’ because she decides to support the state and its laws like Creon, even without belief. Hence she dramatizes a conviction which is not forced, even as it demands and exacts compliance. Much later in Owen McCafferty’s text she advocates the benefits of responsible citizenship and the disadvantages of an open defiance, to Antigone: “I only hope that it is true and you are not just disobeying the king because you are headstrong and need something to attack – because you hate the fact that it’s there at all” (7).

Ismene here warns us that Antigone’s voice may also dangerously become part of a “herd instinct” like her own. Paulin may say that to side with Ismene is to side with Creon but this appropriation of authorial utterance is ultimately dramatized in terms of failure – of both Ismene and later Creon. In the 2011 article, Honig, in a note, cites from Derrida’s argument in the latter’s work “Declarations of Independence” (1986): “In other words, Ismene’s confession, which depends on another’s, is a speech act that combines constative and per formative features. If such speech acts work, it is not in spite but rather because of that category-breaking commingling”(44). This accommodation and appropriation is explained by McDonagh as “polyvocalism” which is “applicable to Kennelly’s vision of Ireland’s post-colonial identity in that he strives to articulate those voices that are consciously ignored in the building of the fortress of national identity” (47). Ismene’s voice may not accomplish an action but it does warn us about the false actions of others.

The italicized assertive also points out a similarity with Paulin’s creation of Ismene, who is crying out for change in Ireland:

ISMENE. Would you have me cry?  
For some great change

out there in nature?

(*Points at the audience*) (Paulin 12)

Paulin later mentions that Antigone “(*Looks away from the audience*)” (13). In the world of negotiated peace it is difficult for the defiant Antigone to be the successful heroine. Recognition is given to Ismene, who is trying to effect change. There may be failure and inaction on her part, but there is still a choice made in the voice of neutrality. In her neutrality resides inertia, but it has the distinct agency of inaction. As McCafferty emphasizes through Antigone, Ismene is “powerless” because she “chooses not to act”. (5). This change is of course tempered, a balance between submission and subordination, to be effected during a time of peace. When Antigone goes against Creon’s “peace”, it is the specific terms of the Peace Treaty. One woman is cornered while the other rebels, but both disobey. In a later poem, *Woman in the Doorway* Kennelly enunciates the basis of this rebellion, which is emblemized by a solemn quietism, a passive disobedience:

She never complained. She let them come and go,  
Live and die in their chosen, enslaved ways,  
She lives now as she lived before.  
They entered and quit her life.  
She lays no blame on anyone  
But stands, strong and watchful, at her door.(47)

At the threshold (the door) of the private and the political the response must always be negotiated, but we must never take it as “compromise”, because it is this voice of “compromise” who considers Creon's word as “law” in Kennelly's version. This recognition of Creon's legality is not to recognize this law as the sole source of power. Ismene engages in what we can call an adjudicative interaction with law. Derrida’s concept of law as a performative action relating to a particular moment in history has a resonance in the *Antigone* myth as Creon and Antigone refer to a law, legal at one time and illegal in another – once Polynices is the patriot and at the same time a traitor. In a chapter O’Brien cites from Derrida’s “The Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority”: “Each exercise of justice as law can be just only if it is a ‘fresh judgment’ ... This new freshness, the initiality of this inaugural

judgment can very well – better yet, must very well – conform to a preexisting law”(15). Ismene’s protest against both Antigone and Creon clarifies our ideas a little more. A respect for one’s judgment is not enough and may offend justice. A constant epistemological probing is required wherein Ismene’s situational response proves appropriate, protesting against an upholding of singular laws by both Creon and Antigone.

McCafferty emphasizes on the various dimensions of the “failed” words of Ismene. It does not only accept Creon’s law for fear of him but rather because of a love towards Antigone. It is not the disobedience of a headstrong person but one who wishes to share the suffering as cursed sisters. Creon is hardly a feared tyrant by McCafferty’s version. Helen Meany in a theatre review of this play in *The Guardian* writes:

Swearing at each other in the heat of anger, Antigone and her uncle Creon are flawed, all-too-human characters, rather than mouthpieces for a moral argument about the power of the state versus religious allegiance. (“Review of McCafferty’s *Antigone*”)

Suffering and endurance are now, new forms of rebellion, trying to contain the simmering anger and violence at the heart of Sophocles’ tragedy, even as the physical aggression is kept off-stage with much difficulty.

Kennelly moves beyond feminist rebellion because his intention is to seek a tentative hope amidst the haunted; to seek justice when disobedience is necessary. In the context of this change, action, as Paulin recognizes, is important: “ANTIGONE. What thing ever I must do / there's one audience / will understand it” (13). Ismene however continues that it will change nothing. Antigone does acknowledge the futility but continues in her vain attempt. She reiterates that it is not "pride" which is pushing her, but her soul and honour, which cannot bend or sell.

After we have traversed such binaries of action and inaction, proclamation and silence, Kennelly's discussions in his version are all the more fruitful. Word for him, is not the same as action. Antigone points out, “Brood on the word, dear sister. Action will follow” (8). In a recent article Fanny Sidetrack cites from Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1998) on action which never achieves its purpose. What it

accomplishes, however, is that “it ‘produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things”(181). What matters, again, is that a story is being produced; not that action follows the exact course that we had hoped for it to take. Antigone’s act of honouring is more an act of her own conscience but Ismene’s “compromised” response is a proper negotiation between word and deed, even as it is never able to accomplish the actual act. It also exposes the problematic of a communal recognition for the dead, whether as personal desire and/or the desires of the people.

We also find relevant Arendt’s comment that in our present world the public realm in which human beings can act and speak in concert is not easily definable anymore. Haemon’s advice cannot be easily accepted by Creon, in the newfound state of disorder, which Ismene acknowledges. While an age consistently betrays its rules and codes, the best voice cannot be one of reconciliation but only a sincere and persistent attempt at it. Justice will lie not in a correct understanding but the best possible understanding. The Chorus, in Kennelly’s play, can then give the last words and trace the path of action based on a stance which accommodates both certainty and change:

CHORUS. We fix and label you with whatever names we will  
You smile at every name’s bewildering syllables’  
[...]  
A man burns with his words, choosing his special mark,  
Pity that triumphant man, god of the change of heart. (43)

As our words always change in implications according to situations and in meanings, a mature perception of a voice of “compromise” may be fruitful. Ismene is the “heroine” of history because in her neutrality resides the power of opposition and betrayal, of course on a minor scale which we teeming millions can afford.

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