

Ismene's *Antigone*: Rereading Sophocles through Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*

The interpretive benefits of reception studies are well known to Classicists, both for what they can reveal about the receiving text and for the clarifying light they can shed on the source text (Hardwick and Stray 2008, 4). This paper explores the insights that emerge from reading Sophocles' *Antigone* through Kamila Shamsie's 2017 *Home Fire*, a novelization of the Sophoclean tragedy set in present-day Britain and America and figuring the House of Laius as British Pakistani Muslims. Specifically, I will focus on Shamsie's adaptation of Ismene, which, I argue, illuminates the function this character serves in Sophocles' play.

Scholars are increasingly giving Ismene her due and pointing out how previous inattention to her has hampered understanding of the play (e.g., Engelstein 2011 and 2017, Goldhill 2006 and 2012, Honig 2011 and 2013). Paralleling this direction in scholarship are modern feminist adaptations of *Antigone*—like Shamsie's—that give Ismene greater prominence than she had in Sophocles' tragedy (Wald 2021, 209-210). Such redemptions of Ismene's character typically focus on her agency as well as on the sororal relationship between Ismene and Antigone.

This paper shifts focus to Ismene's temporal priority within the narrative and the interpretive implications thereof. Shamsie divides her novel into sections, each of which is devoted to a different character and channels that character's perspective (cf. Weiss 2022). She starts with Isma, her configuration of Ismene. This hearkens to the novel's Sophoclean forebear, in which Antigone and Ismene take the stage first and together introduce the story, thus shaping how it will be perceived. But in Shamsie's adaptation, Isma alone has this privilege, and it is her perspective, by virtue of its coming first, that colors the rest of the story. In Isma's section we

learn that she is the eldest sibling, tasked with the upbringing of her younger brother and sister upon the untimely deaths of their parents.

Shamsie's reworking not only aligns the reader's sympathies with Isma's character in *Home Fire*, it also offers a lens through which we may view and review Ismene in Sophocles' play. For example, Antigone's first lines (1-11) are posed as questions about their family misfortunes that, although addressed to Ismene, can appear merely rhetorical, serving primarily to set the scene. But through the lens of Shamsie's Isma, whose perspective introduces *Home Fire* and shapes the reader's perception of it, Antigone's opening words (e.g., Ἴσμήνης κάρα, 1; οἴσθ', 2) gain new meaning as signals of Ismene's primacy, authority, and knowledge. Furthermore, it is Isma's section that introduces Eamonn, Shamsie's configuration of Haemon; Isma and Eamonn develop a friendship and, in Isma's case, romantic feelings. This element of Shamsie's adaptation is an obvious departure from its Sophoclean source text, and it invites us to think about Ismene in conjunction with and even in relation to Haemon. Shamsie's lens sharpens the similarities not only between Antigone's and Creon's intransigence (cf. Apfel 2011), but also between Ismene and Haemon in their attempts to reason with their respective interlocutors. This in turn begs consideration of what other parallels there might be between Ismene and Haemon, as I will explore.

This paper is situated within the recent interpretive gravitation toward Ismene by deploying reception studies to illuminate her previously underexamined role. By reconsidering Sophocles' play through Shamsie's adaptation, I contribute to the broader argument that receptions can function as tools for interpretation—and enhanced understanding—of ancient works.

## Works Cited

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