THE SETTING OF THE PROLOGUE
OF SOPHOCLES’ ANTIGONE

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In her influential 1989 study, “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles’ Antigone,” Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood argues that the acutely sympathetic portrayal of Antigone offered by many modern readings is misguided—a reflection of the gap that distinguishes the values and concerns of today’s readers from those of the fifth-century Athenian polis, but also of the failure of modern critics to respond to the prompts offered by Sophocles’ text.¹ This discrepancy, she maintains, becomes apparent from the very opening of the play, as Sophocles makes a point from the start of distancing the audience’s sympathies from the protagonist and raising questions about the nature and validity of her motives: “At the very beginning of the play the audience saw two women in the dark, in a place which ... is beyond the courtyard’s gates, and thus a place where they ought not to be. This frames them negatively ....”²

We are presented with two related charges: that Antigone and Ismene are perceived as gathering in a conspiratorial fashion in the dark, which biases the audience against them, and that the audience would in any case regard with suspicion any women who strayed beyond the confines of the oikos. The first of these charges points to the much-debated but as yet not fully resolved issue of the temporal setting of the play’s opening, which will be examined afresh in the discussion that follows; the second has been addressed more fully in other studies and will be touched on only briefly here. Both disputes, however, raise interesting questions concerning the communication between playwright and audience, and the sorts of prompts to which the critic is to respond in attempting to construct a reading of an ancient tragic text.

Sourvinou-Inwood cites many useful critical axioms at the beginning of her piece, but one that she neglects is the importance of considering the play as experienced in performance rather than on the printed page. On the modern stage, or in film, it is indeed possible to present Antigone and Ismene in this initial scene as a pair of co-conspirators meeting on the sly amidst gloom and shadow, but the difficulties of doing so in the Theater of Dionysus in March are considerable. Either we must revive the long discredited notion that plays actually began before dawn (a notion that has been dispatched, most recently, by Cliff Ashby)\(^3\) or we must place immense weight on Ismene’s passing reference to the Argive forces having departed ἐν νυκτὶ τῇ νῦν (“on this current night”?) at line 16—the sole reference in this scene to the time of day, and scarcely emphatic enough to build much of a case upon. Calder and Knox, in particular, cite parallels from other plays, with Knox commenting that, “(n)ight scenes on the Attic stage are simply indicated by a verbal reference,”\(^4\) but if we compare other nocturnal prologues, we find that solid parallels are hard to come by, while Knox’s assertion turns out to be simply misleading.

In cases where the temporal setting is significant to an understanding of the ensuing action, we discover, as one would expect, that a reference to the time of day appears early, and that this reference is both emphatic and unambiguous.\(^5\) In the majority of instances, some mention of night, the night sky, activities or items appropriate to nighttime, or the appearance of dawn occurs within the first few lines of the play, or at the open-

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\(^3\) Ashby (1992). See, e.g., Schmidt (1971) 38 f., where an attempt is made to identify which plays might have been first in their respective trilogies based on references to morning in the prologue and/or parodos. Such an investigation is futile, given that plays commonly assume a morning setting as a default for their opening scenes, even in instances where the temporal setting receives no particular emphasis (consider, for example, Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, the third play of the *Oresteia*). In any case, the fact that each day of performances at the City Dionysia would have begun with prayers and offerings to the gods makes it impossible to assume a pre-dawn curtain time for a particular work, even had the playwrights envisioned such an unpractical arrangement.

\(^4\) Knox (1964) 180 f. n. 43.