From the women of classical legend I have chosen three. It seems to me that their virtues have generally been overlooked, or at least, have received less recognition than those of their more famous sisters.

Part I: The Greek Precedent

In extant Greek tragedy it is only Sophocles who exploits the dramatic situation of two sisters in conflict — the one more headstrong, more passionate and consumed with bitter resentment, the other more restrained, more law-abiding and, if you like, less heroic. Sophocles did not invent the characters of Chrysothemis and Ismene. The former is mentioned in Homer,\(^1\) and the latter has an independent existence in legend, giving her name to the source of the river Ismenus.\(^2\) The development of the stories of Electra and Antigone, familiarised by the tragedians, seems to have been due to the poets of the fifth century rather than to tradition. But in the lesser sisters Sophocles saw a perfect foil for his tragic figures of Electra and Antigone.

Chrysothemis does not appear among the dramatis personae of Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, nor of Euripides’ *Electra*. In Sophocles’ *Electra* she has a minor, though significant, role. Ismene appears with Antigone in the spurious last scene of Aeschylus’ *Septem*, where it is suggested that Antigone is regarded as the more important character. The words put into Ismene’s mouth are but an echo of her sister’s lamentations, and on the crucial point of Polyneices’ burial she is silent. In this scene we find Antigone supported by half the chorus of Theban maidens, while the other half provides the opposition which Sophocles, in his play, transfers to Ismene. In the Aeschylean manuscript Antigone is not alone in her resolve (though she does threaten to perform the burial unaided if need be) and the death penalty for disobedience to the decree of the Council of Thebes is nowhere specifically stated. Whoever was responsible for the addition of this scene to Aeschylus’ tragedy clearly has not used the Sophoclean treatment of the theme. It is a pity that our knowledge of Euripides’ *Antigone* gives no indication of the possible role, if any, of Ismene, though it would appear that here again was a different approach to the same legend.

Though Chrysothemis and Ismene are not found in identical situations, they have much in common. Ismene is the elder sister and, if the order of the names of Agamemnon’s daughters in Homer is any guide and not

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1. *Iliad* IX 145, 287.
merely *metri causa*, it is likely that Chrysothemis is older than Electra, who appears in Homer as Laodice.\(^3\) Both Chrysothemis and Ismene, though in secret sympathy with their sisters, refuse to take part in deeds that will inevitably result in the death of the perpetrators. In a red figure Attic vase, belonging to the first half of the fifth century and depicting the murder of Aegisthus (though not in a manner that belongs to an extant literary source) Chrysothemis, so named by the artist, stands with hands uplifted in horror at the deed.\(^4\) The two so-called weaker sisters, in their stand against lawless deeds, present the reverse side of the coin, so to speak. The opposition, the other point of view, represented by the two girls, was, of course, essential to Sophocles' dramatic idea. It was necessary that both Electra and Antigone should stand in splendid isolation in their resolves. Had they found willing allies and accomplices in their sisters the impact of the drama, in each instance, would have been considerably lessened. The contrast has been carefully sought and artistically contrived by the poet.

The attention of critics has, quite properly, been focussed on the principal characters, or on the plays themselves. However, judgments on Chrysothemis and Ismene, made in passing where they are made at all, are generally unkind or damn with faint praise. Jebb\(^5\) speaks of Electra, like Antigone, being contrasted with a weaker, though amiable, sister, and of Electra's stronger nature being brought into contrast with the feeble. Of Ismene\(^6\) he says that 'she is amiable enough; she cannot be called exceptionally weak or timid; she is merely the average woman', although elsewhere\(^7\) he uses the words 'selfish timidity'. Norwood\(^8\) dismisses both sisters with a brief 'Chrysothemis is another Ismene with more energy and lightness'. Haigh\(^9\) mentions 'the timorous but affectionate Ismene'; Sheppard,\(^10\) 'the weak and charming Chrysothemis'; Rose,\(^11\) 'weak but amiable sister, Ismene'; Waldock\(^12\) calls Chrysothemis kindly and well-intentioned and speaks of her timidity and her regard for the accepted standards. Bowra\(^13\) is less condemning, though he, too, says that 'Ismene is moved not by principles but by timidity'. Lesky\(^14\) mentions Chrysothemis' 'timid and temporizing character'.

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3. Aelian *Var. Hist.* 4. 26. It seems that Laodice is to be identified with Electra.
Weak, amiable, timid, kindly and well-intentioned — are these really just epithets to apply to either Chrysothemis or her counterpart Ismene? Is it feeble to refuse to connive at a murder, even of a murderess? Is it weak to submit to a régime from which there is no lawful means of escape? Is it merely timidity to shrink from breaking the law of the state where the mandatory penalty is death? If so, then surely the world must be peopled largely by cowards. When Antigone has committed the deed, Ismene shows no lack of courage in being ready to meet death at her sister’s side. Once the act is done and cannot be undone she is eager to share equally the blame and the penalty. Does this sound like a ‘timorous’ person?

Of the strong bond of affection between both pairs of sisters there can be no doubt, and the love that Chrysothemis has for Electra, and Ismene for Antigone, is proof even against the harsh words levelled against them by their sisters. Surely this devotion and loyalty shows more than merely ‘amiable’ character? We should not forget that Chrysothemis and Ismene have suffered no less than their sisters. Chrysothemis has lived with her murderess mother under the unlawful rule of the usurper Aegisthus, and Ismene, for many years, with the suspicion and distrust of the Theban who drove her father out. Electra, by refusing to submit, or to subdue her hatred, has called down on herself cruel reprisals from her mother. Chrysothemis clearly sympathises with her sister’s bitter feelings, but it must be emphasised that the only alternative offered in this play is the horrifying one of matricide. Is it then quite fair to call Chrysothemis a ‘collaborator, who has reached a *modus vivendi* with the murderers and now has ease and plenteous living?’ Antigone has suffered poverty and hardship as she accompanied her blind father on his wanderings, but was Ismene’s lot at Thebes, where she would be regarded with horror because of her relationship to Oedipus, much easier to bear? Is it quite just to sum her up as ‘ready to compromise and to turn away from the moral law under the stress of hardship?’

Electra and Antigone are the exceptional characters, inaccessible to fear and coercion; to this we must agree, but that seems no reason to belittle the behaviour or characters of their sisters. If ‘A’ is exceptionally courageous, it does not necessarily follow that ‘B’ is timid or a coward.

Of course, if we go around looking at the characters through a magnifying glass we shall miss the essential meaning and beauty of the tragedies and this it is not my intention to do. It has been argued that in Greek tragedy characterisation, even where there is excellent character drawing, is sub-

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15. Jebb (Antigone p. xxix) argues unconvincingly that Antigone is merely trying to dissociate Ismene from her own deed and thus to save her life.
18. Prof. H. D. F. Kitto on a visit to South Africa in 1967 in a lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand argued convincingly that ‘Aristotle was right in saying that the plot was the most important element in Greek tragedy’. 

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ordinate to the dramatic idea of the poets. My main concern has been to remove from the lesser sisters the slur on their names and the opprobrium of such epithets as timorous, weak, and the wishy-washy amiable. We may admire the great moral courage of an Antigone (despite the futility of her self-martyrdom); we may sympathise with, we can hardly admire, the bitter resentment of an Electra; but let us not decry the commonsense and the sober sanity of a Chrysothemis or an Ismene. The Mary’s are rare but the Martha’s are not to be despised.

Part II: A Roman Corollary.

In considering another pair of sisters, Dido and Anna, we leave the realms of drama but not of tragedy. The parallel is not close, but if we listen carefully we may hear in Anna an echo of Ismene. Perhaps Vergil also heard that echo.

It seems to be pure chance that Anna, a minor character in Vergil’s book of Dido, was not cast by the poet for the major role of the tragic queen herself. In an earlier version of the legend¹⁹ it was Anna, and not Dido, who died for love of Aeneas. Vergil, however, chose to immortalise Dido and to relegate Anna to an obscurity from which she has seldom, if ever, emerged.

Anna is undeniably a minor character. Even so we might have expected that, as the favoured sister of the queen of Carthage (and for the devotion between the sisters there is ample evidence) she rates some kind of a description, however brief, which Vergil never gives. We know that Dido was beautiful (I 496, IV 60, 192) and that she had golden hair (IV 590, 698). We are told of the gorgeous apparel she was wearing as she stepped from the palace to meet Aeneas on the day of the fateful hunt (IV 136—139). We are given a description of Aeneas as he first appeared to Dido’s gaze (I 588—593) and of the costly cloak and sword he wore as the queen’s gifts (IV 261—264). Was Anna as beautiful as her sister or was she unfortunately ill-favoured? Did she, too, wear costly raiment on festive occasions? We do not know. Dido entertained the Trojans to a sumptuous banquet, when the halls were decked with splendour and the tables groaned under the weight of gold and silver plate (I 637—642). We are left to guess whether Anna took her place at the side of her royal sister or partook of a humbler meal in the women’s quarters. On all such matters touching Anna Vergil is strangely silent.

The lack of description in itself, of course, is not surprising, for detailed characterisation was not the concern of the epic poet. Vergil’s characters, as Otis says, ‘do not stand out as individuals, as real people in a real society, to anything like the same degree as those of Apollonius or Homer’. Otis ascribes this, in part, to the character of Vergil’s narrative style which he

¹⁹. Varro according to Servius Danielis Aen. IV 682 and V 4
calls empathetic-sympathetic. ‘Virgil,’ he says, ‘not only reads the minds of his characters; he constantly communicates to us his own reactions to them and to their behaviour’. 20

The poet’s editorial attitude to his characters produces an artificiality that would be intolerable, were this merely a romantic tale of love. As it is, we must look beyond the stiffness of the characters to perceive the great moral purpose of the epic. Through this perception we realise that Dido is ill-starred from the start — infelix, male sana, furens are her epithets. In this respect she is like the Agamemnon of Aeschylus. Dido, like Agamemnon, is doomed from the first, and nothing that she, or he, can do will avert the final catastrophe. Vergil’s Roman audience, like the Greek audience in the Athenian theatre, knew this very well, and the knowledge adds poignancy to Dido’s tragedy. At the side of Dido is the attendant figure of Anna, like a shadow of that great chorus of Argive elders, filled with a sense of foreboding, but as ignorant as they of the full extent of the tragedy to come. 21

The Dido episode, of course, is but one link in the long chain of the epic narrative — one further reminder of Aeneas’ mission and of his pietas. But the dramatic qualities 22 of this book are so striking that it may not be fanciful to see in Anna’s role something of the functions of the chorus of the Greek tragedy. Vergil’s treatment of Anna is largely functional. She appears four times in the course of the seven hundred and five lines of Book IV, and on each occasion has a specific duty to perform. On her first appearance it is to give ill-advised, but well-meant, counsel to Dido (IV 31) and on her second, to act as intermediary between the lovers (IV 437). Her third task is to build the funeral pyre (IV 500). Finally in the climax of the book Vergil summons her to discover Dido in her dying agony (IV 672). These are just such tasks as would often be performed by the Greek tragic chorus.

The only aspect of Anna’s character that emerges is her clear devotion to Dido. Pöschl 23 calls her a tender, loving sister and this she certainly is. All her actions are performed through love. When she advises Dido to forget her avowed loyalty to the dead Sychaeus and to marry Aeneas and thus unite the Trojan and Punic nations, it is because she is concerned only with her sister’s happiness and welfare. To Anna such a marriage was a matter of good sense. Vergil makes it plain that this counsel was wrong, for it strengthened Dido’s resolve, gave hope to a bad cause and ‘loosed her modesty’ (IV 55). But Anna was ignorant of the true purpose of Aeneas’ journey and of the will of the gods. Throughout she acts in ignorance.

21. Fraenkel, in his great commentary on the Agamemnon, like Kitto and others, argues that the chorus was not aware of Clytaemnestra’s murderous intentions.
22. cf. the article by K. Quinn in Greece and Rome April 1965.
Anna becomes Dido's messenger and tries to prevail upon Aeneas to delay his departure; she does not understand the double meaning hidden in Dido's words, and she is ignorant of the fact that her sister is already contemplating suicide. When Anna builds the fateful funeral pyre she is ignorant of its real purpose. When, in the end, she clasps her dying sister in her arms and comes to know the part she has unwittingly played in the tragedy, how bitter must have been the knowledge. Like Ismene in that other tragedy she, too, longs to share her sister's death, for now she will be bereft of all that she loved in life. We pity the tragic Dido, plaything of the gods and victim of her passion. Let us spare some of our pity for the unhappy Anna. Anna's tragedy is only the less for being the more commonplace. Again I plead the case of the lesser-known sister — another Martha who deserves our better understanding.

24. Pöschl (op. cit. pp. 84—85) quotes a number of the lines containing these double meanings.
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

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