

HYBRIDITY, THE ATHENIAN MALE AND EURIPIDES' ION

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Hans Robert Jauss argues that the reconstruction of the 'horizon of expectations' which attends a literary work in the historical moment of its emergence is especially useful for works drawn from the distant past and about which little is known. Foregrounding the work against others which the audience was implicitly or explicitly expected to know enables one to understand, he argues, how contemporary audiences "could have viewed and understood" (28) it and enables one to pose the "questions that the text gave an answer to" (28). Indeed, he suggests that the "past work can answer and 'say something' to us only when the present observer has posed the question that draws it back out of its seclusion" (32).

Much recent criticism of classical Greek theatre has, in line with such a view, stressed the importance of examining plays such as the Ion in relation to the general social context of their production in fifth-century Athens and, in particular, to the festival of the City Dionysia, the grand religious/civic/theatrical event of the Athenian calendar.¹ Oddone Longo points out that the annual City Dionysia was the occasion for Athenian self-glorification, that is, for official "celebrations of the *polis* and its ideology" (16) which, as such, "constituted the immediate framework of the plays" (16) that were such an integral part of the festival. Longo contends, too, that even though these plays might have frequently portrayed the transgression of social 'norms,' they ultimately endorsed precisely that cultural ideal endangered by these acts of abrogation. Theatrical "reinforcement of community cohesion in a context of social rituals and spectacles" (44) functioned to clinch those "axioms of the community's own ideology" (14) that emphasised egalitarianism, communal participation and civic unity, he adds.

On the other hand, Simon Goldhill contends, in Reading Greek Tragedy, that much Greek theatre critiques, rather than uncritically celebrates, the very civic discourse that the important pre-play ceremonies were designed to uphold. Fundamentally interrogative in nature, many of the plays scrutinise some of the most cherished notions which the *polis* possessed of itself and of the nature of social and metaphysical reality. They functioned for their audiences as a mirror of sorts in which the *polis* could come face-to-face with itself and thereby confront the most crucial social, religious and philosophical issues of concern to individual and body politic alike. It was in so doing that these plays frequently betrayed the strains, tensions and even downright contradictions that inhered in Athenian cultural poetics.²

¹See, in addition to Longo, Goldhill's "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," Winkler's "The Ephebes' Song: Tragoidia and Polis," as well as Winkler and Zeitlin, among others, for a fuller account of the social, political and cultural significance of the City Dionysia.

²The definition by Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin of 'cultural poetics' usefully underscores the ideological dimension that inheres in the very term. Cultural poetics consists, they argue, in the

process whereby a society and its subgroups construct widely shared meanings – behavioural conventions, social distinctions, conceptual schemes, aesthetic values, religious attitudes, moral codes, gender roles, and paradigms of sexual excitement. These meanings are jointly produced, distributed, enforced, and subverted by human communities. (4)

Their use of the term is undoubtedly indebted to the definition by Stephen Greenblatt, in

In what follows, I argue that the *Ion* is certainly best thought of as a species of the 'polis-drama' which was such an integral part of the City Dionysia. The Delphic setting of the play does not act here, however, in quite the same manner as Froma Zeitlin argues, in "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," Thebes most often does in Greek theatre, that is, as the "negative model to Athens's manifest image of itself" (131). It does not signify some anti-type from which escape is always possible through a return to an Athenian 'norm.' I would argue that Delphi in this play is, rather, but an extension of Athens itself, a mirror of sorts and a means as such to allow Athens to see itself from a slightly different perspective: "Things have a different face as they appear / Before the eyes or far away" (585-586), as Ion tells Xuthus at one point.³ As we shall see, however, the Delphi which emerges in this play is an Athens vastly different from the very self-satisfied portrait which it painted of itself in official propaganda.

Moreover, I argue that the *Ion* is a play which, directed primarily towards the male members of the audience, foregrounds the socially constructed nature of Athenian masculinity.⁴ It underlines the major strategies inherited from mythic discourse in relation to which the Athenian male had traditionally acquired a sense of identity. Tyrrell and Brown argue that the myths inherited from their ancestors and endlessly reworked in the theatrical productions of the City Dionysia were integral to the order of symbolic meanings collectively shared both consciously and unconsciously by Athenians. (John Gould defines myth as a "vehicle for the mapping and understanding of experience in terms which are not available to a society in its more explicit rules and customary norms" [52].) The myths in circulation in fifth-century Athens in effect constituted a dialogue with a pseudo-historical past that was the most important means by which Athenians sought to interpret experience. However, the *Ion* also explores the contemporary threats posed to both the traditional strategies of self-definition and certitudes inherited in this way by the ideological transformations attendant upon rapidly changing socio-political circumstances. Although myth continued to provide the most important framework which informed Athenian social discourse, as Goldhill (in *Reading Greek Tragedy*) and others point out, the myths themselves were no longer accepted as a matter of fact. As a result, their conceptual categories were becoming

"Towards a Poetics of Culture," of a 'poetics of culture' as the "study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into relations among these practices" (5). His concern is with how "collective beliefs and experiences" (5) are "shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption" (5). Greenblatt argues that the work of art is the "product of a *negotiation* between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society" (12; emphasis added). For a mimetic theory of art, Greenblatt substitutes in this way an interpretative model designed to "more adequately account for the unsettling *circulation* of materials and discourses" (1; emphasis added) at the heart of aesthetic practice.

³All references to the text are to Willetts' translation of the *Ion*, unless otherwise indicated. For numerous insights into the subtle nuances of the original Greek, I am very indebted to the comments of Professor Ross Arthur of York University, Toronto, Canada who read an earlier version of this essay.

⁴There is some uncertainty as to whether the audience consisted entirely of males or whether (some) women were allowed.

increasingly contested ones by the fifth century.⁵

Athenian masculinity is a category consequently revealed in the course of the play, I contend, to be in a state of flux, instability and uncertainty.⁶ Firstly, this is a play which undermines most of, if not all, the certainties of the Athenian male with regard to an identity conceived primarily as a function of his location on a patrilinear genealogical chain. Secondly, in presenting gender and ethnicity as fundamental to the several distinctions of otherness inherited from myth by which male Athenians categorised their social space, the play stages the disconcerting consequences for Athenian masculinity of the blurring of the rigid boundaries integral to this primarily negative mode of self-definition. It is in these two respects that the play would have had an extremely unsettling and even debilitating effect upon contemporary males in the audience. Euripides's *Ion* undermines precisely that sense of completeness, autonomy and certitude which the mythic images re-enacted on stage (in 'flesh and blood,' as it were) in the productions of his theatrical contemporaries were designed precisely to foster.

II

Descent

The crucial importance of the theme of so-called 'male initiation' noted by most critics of the play is certainly highlighted by the pre-play ceremonies themselves of the City Dionysia. At this time, the tributes collected from Athenian allies and vassal-states during the past year were displayed and honours distributed to notable patriots and benefactors. Of particular importance to the *Ion* is the fact that at this time also the *ephebate* were made to perform synchronised drills before the assembled crowd in order to prove their discipline and coordination. The term *ephebos*, anglicised as 'ephebe,' refers to adolescent young Athenian males who, around the age of 17 or 18, were isolated from their immediate family and subjected to a process of initiation (a significant portion of which was devoted to military training) before being reincorporated back into Athenian society as adults with the necessary skills to defend the polis should the need arise. These young men were delegated for a period of two years to garrison-duty at border stations where they were taught the disciplined and corporate mode of warfare integral to Athenian tactics during inter-city fighting.⁷ The ephebes were, in many cases, the orphans of Athenian fathers who had died

⁵See the chapter on the Sophists in Goldhill's *Reading Greek Tragedy* for the critical impact of their skepticism on Athenian social and philosophical thought in general and on the reception of mythic discourse in particular.

⁶See in this connection Winkler's argument, in "Laying Down the Law: the Oversight of Men's Sexual Behaviour in Classical Athens," that the widespread "cautionary attention" (182) paid to the sexual behaviour of the male speaks to the fragility of Athenian masculinity, to wit, the "odd belief in the reversibility of the male person, always in peril of slipping into the servile or the feminine" (182).

⁷Many plays, Sophocles's *Ajax* for example, explore the disjunction between the old Homeric warrior-ethos (predicated essentially upon the quest for personal glory) and the new imperatives of group-coordinated, phalanx-style warfare. Critics such as Goldhill (in *Reading Greek Tragedy*) see this as a reflection of the tension between an outmoded credo of heroic individualism and an emergent emphasis on the paramountcy of the community.

fighting for the *polis*, as a result of which responsibility for their upbringing and education had been shouldered by the state. After performing their drills, the ephebate were called upon to assume the military gear of the *hoplitês* (soldier) which was a symbol also of their entry into full manhood and of their becoming *politês* (citizens) with all the right and responsibilities attendant thereupon. They were recognised, in short, as members of the body politic before whom they were assembled and among whom they from that moment took their place. This recognition involved the acknowledgement of the Athenian ideal of the soldier-citizen, obligated to die if necessary to protect his homeland and duty-bound to participate in the day-to-day management of public affairs in the *polis*.⁸

The transitory status of the orphaned *ephebe* (neither boy [*pais*] nor man [*aner*]) immediately prior to his assumption of the status of *hoplitês* / *politês* finds its echo at the beginning of the play, I would contend, in the figure of the orphan Ion who, seen rhythmically sweeping and equipped with bow and arrow to chase sacrilegious birds, is also without parents and, thus, identity-less. Without any "clues" (329) as to the identity of his parents, Ion is able to name himself only in relation to the god he serves – "I only know that I am called Apollo's" (311). The dominant structural movement of the play is, few would deny, closely aligned in effect to a quest on Ion's part for knowledge of his parents' and thus of his own identity. This 'journey' of 'self'-discovery is certainly accomplished via many of the dramatic motifs conventionally attached to such an undertaking in Athenian drama. Included among these are two stock 'recognition' scenes: there is both a false one involving Ion and Xuthus, who has been duped by the oracle, and a true one where, after the requisite reading of the numerous undeniable signs of his noble birth, Creusa recognises her son and Ion lapses into the traditional clichés of death and rebirth, loss and rediscovery that invariably accompany such moments:

Dear mother, yes, you have me in your arms,
Who died and now have come to you alive. (1444-1445)

In the course of the play, in short, Ion proceeds from a position of relative non-personhood as temple "waif" (576) and "Apollo's slave" (309) to the point where Athene can confirm before Creusa that:

This woman is your mother,
Your father is Apollo; the one you know
Received you as a gift, and not because
You are his son; and this was done with purpose,
To find you an established place among
A noble house. (1560-1565)

With the providentially-guided recovery of Ion in this way, the threat posed to the ruling House of Erectheus and, by extension, to an essentially patriarchal and xenophobic social order by the absence of a legitimate male heir of Athenian descent is ostensibly done away with and Athens's future existence thereby assured.

This is the point for most critics where the apparently relatively straightforward nature of Ion's acquisition of identity precludes the need for further discussion thereof. Ion's journey is, for these, in the final analysis subservient to the more important themes of Athenian nationalism and imperialism to which the play primarily exists, in their view, in

⁸For fuller accounts of the ephebate, see Vidal-Naquet as well as Winkler's "The Ephebes' Song: Tragoidia and Polis."

order to pay tribute.⁹ Masculinity functions for these critics as something of what Monique Wittig might call an unmarked gender, that is, as something of a given, something assured and unquestionable that does not in any significant way need to be investigated. It is as a result of this that Ion's quest for identity is viewed in a rather uncomplicated light. The Ion's crucial importance lies however, I would contend, in the very insights that it affords into the traditional manner by which the identity of the Athenian male had been discursively constructed and, consequently, into the fragility of the masculine subject amid the vastly different social climate of fifth-century Athens. The Ion explores, in short, what it means to be a man in a social and political order that was changing significantly, with important consequences for the way in which the male individual conceived himself, his society and the cosmos.¹⁰ The focus of the Ion is, in this regard, less on the battlefield and the markedly military aspect of the ties binding citizen to *polis* implied by the parade of the ephebate than on everyday life in the city-state for the second half of the *hoplitês-politês* equation and the egalitarian imperatives imposed upon Athenian manhood by the dominant ideology of the *polis*.

It is perhaps not insignificant that Ion's initiation into manhood proceeds under the aegis of Hermes, the god identified in Athenian social discourse with the masculine pole of existence. Hermes' statue was located outside the *oikos* in consonance with the public role of the male and in opposition to Hestia (or the hearth within) that emblematised the domestic confinement of the female.¹¹ The opening words by which Hermes identifies himself serve not only to establish kinship as the key means by which to identify human, nonhuman and god alike but also to stress the centrality of the male. It is one's relationship to one's *forefathers* that is the vital determinant in this regard – the female is 'merely' the vehicle through which families in particular and kinship systems in general perpetuate themselves:

Atlas, who wears on back of bronze the ancient
Abode of gods in heaven, had a daughter
Whose name was Maia, born of a goddess:

⁹See Synnove Des Bouvrie as well as D. J. Mastronarde's "Iconography and Imagery in Euripides' Ion" in this regard. Hence, too, Nicole Loraux's assessment that in the play all roads lead to Creusa, the question of her lineage and the Acropolis, the play's central focus being the female protagonist and the nationalist and imperialist themes that the myth of autochthony subtends.

Other criticism on the play has tended to see Ion's initiation as subordinate to the following issues: the role of Providence in general, the debate oscillating between defences (see George Gellie) and indictments of the god Apollo; Athenian patriotism; questions of genre – the Ion as new comedy, tragicomedy and/or revenge plot with catastrophe reversed (see Anne Pippin Burnett); and so on.

By and large, the Ion has rarely been seen in other than a fairly simplistic and optimistic light which is not only out of tune with the intellectual subtleties and the iconoclastic bent of most, if not all, of Euripides' plays, but is also a critical misreading of the ironic subcurrents implicit not least in the conclusion to this particular play. For an important exception to this trend, see Christian Wolff.

¹⁰See J-P. Vernant's Origins of Greek Thought for a fuller account of these changes which can only be briefly alluded to below.

¹¹See Vernant's Myth and Thought among the Greeks in this respect.

She lay with Zeus and bore me, Hermes, servant
To the immortals. (1-5)

The inference in Ion's first meeting with Creusa, moreover, is that to properly identify oneself it is necessary to give one's name, to identify one's father *and* to make clear the country of one's birth:

Ion But tell me who you are, your family,
Your country. And what is your name?

Creu Creusa is my name, Erectheus's daughter,
And Athens is my native land. (258-261)

Athenian identity emerges, in short, at the intersection of genealogy with geography, that is, as the function as much of one's relation to one's paternal ancestors as it is of the place of one's birth.

John K. Davies offers a useful summary of the criteria of Athenian citizenship and, thus, of masculine identity in a society where citizen equalled male:

Classical Athens defined the membership of its citizen body, and thereby its civic space, rigorously in terms of descent. Citizens were those who were male; were sons of a citizen father; were born from a woman who was the daughter of a citizen father . . . only members of this body could own real property, assume the rights and duties assigned to the Solonian property-classes, and hold elective or allotted office. (105)

Athenian "obsessions, anxieties, and insecurities" (111), to wit, their evident siege mentality where foreigners and other groups who 'wanted in' were concerned were a clear indication, however, that the exclusivity of this mode of self-definition was increasingly under pressure. They hint of an uneasy sense that the rigid distinctions between Athenian and foreigner could increasingly only be maintained with some difficulty:

'Who is to be, and who is not to be, in the Athenian community, and why?' were continually being posed by pressures from within and without . . . the process of finding answers, and of justifying them, were a very important component of Athenian public and intellectual life. (106)

The laws and institutions (for example, the ceremonies in which legitimacy was recognised) that codified descent as the key criterion of citizenship were motivated, of course, by the immense political and economic privileges that were at stake. In short, as the dominant ideology, the whole notion of descent was designed to preserve these benefits for a select group: those of Athenian descent who were also male. The exclusivity of this definition, however, were under increasing pressure due to the influx of foreigners whose demands for the equality conferred by citizenship clamoured increasingly to be heard.

It is with this in mind that I would suggest that the concerns of the House of Erectheus on stage would have been identical to those of any propertied male citizen in the audience living in the patriarchal social order of fifth-century Athens where inheritance was patrilinear and nomenclature patronymic. The consequence of 'descent' being the "dominating definition of the community" (110) and the patronymic, thus, of the individual was that the question of "family succession" (106) consequently hinged around the establishment of, firstly, the legitimacy and, secondly, the nationality of male offspring. Both of these were, evidently, predicated upon certain proof of paternity. The difficulties inherent in proving paternity beyond a shadow of a doubt is an issue around which the Ion continuously and anxiously circles. Indeed, by ultimately emphasising the absolutely indispensable role played not by the male but by the female in the patrilinear system of heredity upon which a patriarchal society is predicated, I will argue, the Ion would have had an extremely disconcerting effect upon contemporary male audiences.

Even the play's very setting at Delphi, which is described in Burnett's translation as the "earth's navel" (6), gestures to the central importance of the reproduction of heirs. (Willett's translates this a little loosely as "mid-center" which does not quite capture the implication of the reference to the womb carried by the Greek trope.) When the Chorus stresses the importance of children in general to the perpetuation of both *oikos* and *polis*, it is the male heir in particular of which they speak:

Wherever gleams bright the flame
And strength of youth,
A promise to the house of growth,
There a man has a fund
Of joy overflowing;
From the *fathers* the children will gather
Hereditary wealth, and in turn
Pass it on to their own.
They are a defense in adversity,
In happiness a delight,
And in war their country's shield of safety. (472-484; emphasis added)

An uninterrupted patrilinear process of inheritance within the *oikos* functions ultimately to maintain the economic and the sexual, and, thus, the socio-political status quo at the level of the *polis*, fostering thereby an illusion of immutability and inevitability.

The crisis, thus, that afflicts the House of Erechtheus and, by extension, Athens is one centered, precisely, around the lack of an heir. This is exactly the sense implicit in the Old Man's assertion to Creusa that a "storm embroils the fortunes of your house" (966). Creusa's personal joy upon being reunited with her son acknowledges the importance of the *royal* heir to the kingdom as a whole:

I am childless no longer,
No longer without an heir.
The hearth is restored to the home,
The rulers return to the land,
And Erectheus is young once more;
Now the house is delivered from night
And looks up to the rays of the sun. (1463-1467)

Her recognition elsewhere of the inevitability of change – "Such is man's life. All things must change" (969), she admits to her old tutor--as well as her statement at the height of her joy that "There is no harbor of peace / From the changing waves of joy and despair. / The wind's course veers" (1504-1506), amount to more than an expression of some vague metaphysical 'truth' about the vicissitudes of life. They constitute, more importantly, an implicit acknowledgement of exactly that socially and economically dangerous discontinuity, at the level both of *oikos* and *polis*, which an assured succession is designed to mitigate.

The *Ion* underscores the absolutely indispensable nature in this regard of establishing both the legitimacy, the nobility and the nationality of the male heir. Ion stresses to Xuthus that, Zeus for a grandfather or not, it is the practical consequences of his bastardy and his miscegenation, born *illegitimately* to, unfortunately, a *servant* girl and a *foreign* father, which would render his status in Athens so problematic:

The earth-born people of glorious Athens are said
To be no alien race. I should intrude
There marked by two defects, a stranger's son,
Myself a bastard. (589-592)

Creusa herself has no illusions in this regard. She too asserts that, divine father or not, it is the fact that his birth was preceded by none of the traditional ceremonies indicative of a

formal betrothal – “The marriage which gave you birth / Saw no torches or dancing, my son” (1474-1475), she emphasises – which has serious practical consequences.

It is on the grounds, particularly, of his ethnic hybridity that the Chorus condemns Ion as an intruder who

hopes

To rule, usurping

What others have wrought . . . (1087-1089)

He is one who, in their opinion, has dared to lift a “presumptuous hand”

Against the house of Erechtheus.

Let no others ever have

Sway in the city:

Only the sons of Erechtheus. (1056-1060)

Creusa, they argue, “would never endure to see / Foreigners ruling the house” (1069-1070).

Xuthus’s divine lineage (which Euripides deliberately distorts in order to make him the grandson of Zeus) is, of course, certainly not an unattractive “birthright” (559) in and of itself: “Could I wish for better . . . / Than descent from Zeus’s son?” (557-559), Ion asks rhetorically. This is an option, however, that the play seemingly cannot consider seriously for any appreciable length of time belonging, as it does, to a remote order of existence and being, thus, inapplicable to the realities of *polis*-life in fifth-century Athens. Claims of divine insemination are evidently the stuff of myth, traceable directly to the “legends” (506), “tales at the loom” (506) sung by servant girls which “[n]ever tell of good fortune to children / Born of a god and mortal” (507-508). Ion is certainly suspicious of all such claims, seeing them as an excuse on the female’s part for illicit sexual activity. Near the end, he asks his mother, whose own maternity is established indisputably by this stage:

are you not, deceived

As young girls are in love affairs kept secret,

Now laying blame upon the god, and say,

Attempting to escape the blame I brought,

That Phoebus is my father, though in fact

He is no god at all? (1523-1528)

At the end, moreover, Ion is simply not persuaded by his mother’s insistence upon the existence of a divine father. “My question cannot be so lightly answered” (1546), he informs his mother in reply to her attempt to cast the preceding events in a purposeful light. He is, similarly, sarcastically skeptical of Athene’s “revelations” (1570) on behalf of Apollo that ‘confirm’ both the god’s paternity and design: “this was done with purpose, / To find you an established place among / A noble house” (1563-1565). He states, somewhat enigmatically:

O Athene, child of mighty Zeus, we have received

What you say *on trust*. And I believe myself Apollo’s

And Creusa’s son – though that was credible before.

(1606-1608; emphasis added)

Willetts’s translation emphasises that Ion’s continuing silence is embarrassing before the invitation that the goddess extends to him to “Mount the ancient throne” (1617).¹² Creusa herself underscores the skeptical attitude that would have prevailed in the audience towards stories of divine insemination. She points out, too, the practical consequences of being the

¹²See the note to l. 1616 in Burnett’s translation that questions the assignment of the spoken lines only to Athene and Creusa.

son of a god within the Athenian *polis*: "Acknowledged as his son, you would have lost / All hope of heritage or father's name" (1542-1543). The fact of Ion's illegitimacy evidently remains an insurmountable one.

Ion's sense of the urgent need to locate an Athenian mother is, accordingly, not motivated by some sentimental desire:

unless I find my mother,
My life is worthless. If I may do so,
I pray my mother is Athenian,
So that through her I may have rights of speech.
For when a stranger comes into a city
Of pure blood, though in name a citizen,
His mouth remains a slave: he has no right
Of speech. (669-675)

Ion is well aware at this stage of his potentially marginalised status as an adult within what Goldhill (in *Reading Greek Tragedy*) has characterised, significantly, as the *polis* of words. Ion is conscious of the importance of a patronymic and of the social privilege that it signifies. He is aware, thus, of what he lacked in his former life – "unnamed, I had a life / Of service in Apollo's house; and fate / Was cruel, though the god was kind" (1371-1373). Accordingly, he is reluctant to receive, in this respect, any "unpleasant news. / If by some chance my mother was a slave, / To find her would be worse than ignorance" (1381-1383).

Although the paternal signifier is the one valorised in this way within Athenian social discourse, it is, ironically, the indisputable and indispensable role played by the mortal female in his own procreation which the *Ion* emphatically underscores. John Gould underscores the supplementarity (in the indispensable Derridean sense of the word) of the female vis-a-vis the Athenian male and, thus, the consequent lack of plenitude and autonomy on the part of the latter. Women certainly occupied, he argues, an ambivalent position within Athenian social discourse. As the object of exchange between men, the female was the indispensable *outsider* confined, paradoxically, to the *inside* of the *oikos*:

women stand 'outside' society, yet are essential to it (and in particular to its continued, ordered existence); their status derives from males but theirs, in turn, from the women who are their mothers. (46)

As Gould puts it a little later, women were absolutely essential to the patriarchal society that marginalised them precisely because they were "producers and bestowers of wealth and children, the guarantors of due succession, the guardians of the *oikos* and the hearth" (57).

The *Ion* explicitly acknowledges that the patriarchal order of fifth-century Athens hinged around the very female that it strove so anxiously to exclude. The play denies the Athenian male his egocentric dream of sexual solipsism by emphatically stressing that Ion's ultimate accession to the throne of Athens occurs through a female: "Go with your son," Athene tells Creusa, "to Cecrops's land, and then / Appoint him to the royal throne" (1571-1572). Euripides deliberately distorts genealogy in this regard, making the House of Erechtheus heirless in order thereby to stress the role of the female in its continued survival.¹³ Creusa's function in this regard is similar to that of the *epikleros*, a figure that especially encapsulates the supplementary role of the female within Athenian social space. The *epikleros* was an heirless father's daughter via whom his patronymic would be passed on through her marriage either to the nearest male relative on her father's side or to her father's adopted son.

The reassertion here of the pivotal role of the female in the sexual reproduction that

¹³See *Man, Myth and Magic* in this regard.

is indispensable to patrilinear succession should be read in relation, firstly, to the effacement of the female that is implicit in both the discourse of autochthony and the manner of the birth of Athens's patron goddess. This is a play saturated through and through with the discourse of autochthony by means of which Athenians sought to legitimate their status as true 'sons of the soil.' There is, accordingly, not much difference in this respect between consulting the oracle about one's "country's crops – or children" (303). Creusa traces her lineage to Erichthonios, her father's ancestor who "sprang from the earth" (269), a story that piques the curiosity of an Ion eager to uncover his 'roots.' Erichthonius was produced, significantly, when Hephaestus' seed spilled upon the earth during his unsuccessful attempt to rape Athena, who herself was born from Zeus' brow. Later, after being falsely informed that Xuthus is his father, Ion suggests that "Earth then was my mother" (541). Xuthus curtly dismisses the idea: "Children do not spring up there" (542) is a sentiment that many in a fifth-century Athenian audience would arguably have echoed.

Indeed, the play as a whole should be read in relation to what Zeitlin describes, in "Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*," as the "Aeschylean world-building" (159) that takes place in the conclusion to the *Oresteia*. This was designed, she argues, to emphasise the "binding nature of patriarchal marriage where the wife's subordination and patriarchal succession are reaffirmed" (159), the control of woman being the "social and cultural prerequisite for the construction of civilisation" (160). Apollo, here, stresses in particular the paramountcy of the male in sexual reproduction, citing Athena as proof:

The mother is no parent of that which is called
her child, but only nurse of the newly-planted seed
that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she
preserves a stranger's seed, if no god interfere . . .
I will show you proof of what I have explained. There can
be a father without any mother. There she stands,
the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus,
she who was never fostered in the dark of the womb.
(Aeschylus 1953, 658-65)

In the *Ion*, by contrast, both 'fathers,' Xuthus and Apollo, are notably absent from the conclusion of a play which seems to deny the Athenian male, both father and son, all comfort of a certain paternity.

Of course, in a play in which the chain of lineage that binds one to one's paternal ancestors is at the very least uncertain, one's links to one's descendants and, by extension, to the future might at first seem to operate as something of a saving grace. Hermes certainly proffers a teleological conception of masculine identity in the prologue. He openly equates Ion's very significance as a human being with his glorious fate as the eponymous founder of the people that bear his name:

Apollo will bestow on him the name
Of Ion, make that name renowned through Greece
As founder of ancient cities. Now, because
I wish to see this young boy's destiny
Complete, I shall conceal myself within
These laurel groves . . . I
Will be the first of all the gods to call
Him by his future name of – Ion. (74-81)

Hermes grandiloquently relates the significance of Ion's name to the cities he is destined to found through the children he will father. Ion is painted at the end of the play as being in a

position to embark upon this providential "destiny" (76) by rightfully proceeding to the throne of Erectheus and thence procreating the sons, "four branches from / One stock" that "shall name the country and its peoples, / Divided in their tribes, who live about my rock" (1575-1577).

Firstly, however, if sons cannot be sure of their fathers, as we have seen, fathers equally cannot be sure of their sons: neither can be certain that their mothers/wives have been faithful: "tell no one," Athene whispers almost conspiratorially to Creusa, "that Ion is your son, / And Xuthus will be happy in his belief" (1601-1602). Secondly, the grand destiny allegedly implied by the very name Ion is mocked when Xuthus grants him a name in the false recognition scene that seems more linked to chance than destiny. Xuthus names him Ion merely because the god had prophesied that the first person he would meet coming out of the temple would be his son. The name Ion, derived as it is from a present participle meaning 'coming' or 'going,' gestures to Ion's Janus-like location on the genealogical chain and his relationship, accordingly, to both his ancestors and his descendants. In so doing, it connotes a lack of plenitudinous self-presence, underlining the liminality in fact inherent in an identity predicated upon the logic of descent: to identify oneself on the basis of one's present position on the chain of lineage, that is, in relation simultaneously to both the past and the future, robs the subject of any claim to a moment of pure self-possession unimplicated in the passage of time.¹⁴

The traditional association of Hermes with transitions, boundaries and margins is, from this perspective, doubly unfortunate, not only suggesting the journey that Ion takes from the Acropolis to Delphi and back to Athens but also serving, significantly, to underscore that 'in-betweenity,' that 'identity-in-differential,' according to Spivak, which he never relinquishes in the course of the play. Even if he were not denied the comfort and the security conferred by a confirmed paternal heritage and a glorious destiny, Ion, trapped like any Athenian male in a 'no-man's' land between past and present and caught in the interstices between his ancestors and his descendants, is in the final analysis denied, by the very nature of the logic of descent, the ontological fullness and, thus, the certitude so avidly sought in the present.

III

Distinction

If the Athenian male's identity is endlessly *deferred*, that is, is temporally marked by the trace of what Derrida might describe as 'retentions' and 'protentions' as a result of being

¹⁴Although it is tempting to think, at moments like these in the text, of an iconoclastic Euripides openly aware of the connotations which accrue to his diction, what may be at stake here is really a question of what Paul de Man would call figurative or rhetorical excess – the so-called surplus of signification – undoing the meaning seemingly indicated by the syntactical structure of the words in question (the misleadingly named 'literal' meaning). De Man puts it this way: the grammatical model . . . becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. *Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration.* (226; emphasis added)

caught in a limbo between past and present, his identity is also 'spatially' *displaced*. It ought to be clear in the light of the foregoing that distinctions on the basis of gender and ethnicity were fundamental to the sense which the Athenian male had of himself. Fifth-century Athenians possessed, it should be stressed, a relational notion of the subject informed by a binary logic not very different from that which in fact informed, as Hartsock makes clear, the Cartesian conception of the self as autonomous, unified and self-originating which would subsequently emerge within modern Western European thought.

There are differences, it is true, between Athenian and Cartesian conceptions of the self. Identity for the Athenians was something always in the process of being actualised and, thus, neither a *fait accompli* nor, as in the Cartesian scheme of things, an *a priori* that could be introspectively ascertained. As Vernant writes, in Mortals and Immortals, the Athenian experience of the ego is

neither bounded nor unified. The individual is projected and objectified in what he accomplishes, in what he actually carries out. These are the activities and undertakings that allow him to grasp himself, not in their potential but in their actuality . . . there is no introspection. The subject does not make up a closed interior world he must penetrate in order to find himself. (327-328)

It is in this light that Goldhill, in "Character and Action, Representation and Reading: Greek Tragedy and its Critics," contends that any understanding of Athenian theatre based upon the notion of the individual as a unified and autonomous agent must be rethought. He stresses, in this regard, that the Greek term *ethos*, often translated as 'character,' does not attempt to "express a whole personality or the make up of a psyche, but rather a particular disposition or set of attitudes that can be instantiated in a particular course of action" (102). (Zeitlin makes a similar point, in her introduction to Mortals and Immortals, to Goldhill's: she argues that the Athenian concept of the self was "firmly attached to social *practices*" [20; emphasis added].)

However, in Mortals and Immortals, Vernant also points out that the Athenian experience of the ego is

turned outward, not inward. Individuals seek and find themselves in others, in those *mirrors* reflecting their image, each of which is an *alter-ego* for them--parents, children, friends. . . . The subject is extroverted . . . the individual must look elsewhere to apprehend himself. (327; emphasis added)

Vernant's use of the trope of the 'mirror' underscores the extent to which the Athenian male, in founding his own identity upon the sense which he possessed of his sheer distinction from several anti-models of his own making, possessed an autonomy and a plenitude that was, in fact, entirely illusory. In other words, the Athenian male's self-definition was completely a function of the several forms of Otherness which he fabricated to this end. Categorical distinctions drawn from myth served, Vernant emphasises in Mortals and Immortals, "purposes of reflection" (111): the

representation the Greeks made of others, of all those whom . . . they ranked under different headings in the category of difference, and whose representations always appear deformed . . . these figures--barbarian, slave, stranger, youth, and woman [as well as, I might add, monster and immortal] -- are always constructed with reference to the same model: the adult male citizen. (111)

The dichotomy between Athenian and barbarian, Free man and slave, Elder and youth, Male and female all functioned in the final analysis precisely to validate a masculine Athenian ideal by opposition to which, significantly, all else was measured. A similar array of binary oppositions is responsible for the illusion of autonomy upon which the Cartesian subject

would come to be predicated in early modern and modern Europe.

The *Ion* is a play, however, which foregrounds the way in which the hierarchical oppositions between Athenian and foreigner, human and monster, male and female as well as human and divine all undo themselves. The result of this is a general "confusion" (616) (in the sense of a 'mixing together' or 'con-founding') of categories, a dissolution emblematised in the play in the figure of the Gorgon, source of both poison (from its snakes) and cure (from the "hollow vein" [1011]). In deconstructing the clear-cut boundaries integral to the antithetically-opposed categories inherited from mythic discourse, I would contend, the *Ion* has radical implications for an Athenian male whose self-definition was predicated upon negation and exclusion. By foregrounding the exotopic nature of all identity, the play underscores that inevitable suspension in relation to otherness which impedes the claim to plenitudinous self-possession.

This deconstruction of the binary opposition between Self and other ought to be viewed against the background of the ideological transformations which had occurred in Athens in the period leading up to the fifth century BCE. Vernant points out, in *Origins of Greek Thought*, that Athens by the fifth century had undergone a series of social changes that had witnessed the displacement of the hierarchical social structure (with the sovereign at the apex) of the earlier Mycenaean/Achaean period by the egalitarian ideal of the *polis*. Even if it was not exactly the case in actuality, the *polis* was at least conceptualised, by contrast, as centered around relations of mutual equality and reciprocity, that is, as a homogeneous whole, without hierarchy, without rank, without differentiation . . . the social realm had the form of a centered and circular cosmos, in which each citizen, because he was like all the others, would have to cover the entire circuit as time went round, successively occupying and surrendering each of the symmetrical positions that made up civic space. (101)

This new, synchronic and egalitarian conceptualisation of social and, by extension, cosmic order contrasted with the diachronic, hierarchical theogonies that predominated in traditional mythic thought. These latter were, largely speaking, myths of sovereignty predicated on notions of rank and domination that were obsessed with seeking the *genesis* of cosmic, seasonal and social order. In these theogonies, the problem of origin in its strict sense is, if not wholly implicit, at least present in the background. The myth does not ask how an ordered world could arise out of the chaos; it answers the question of who was the sovereign god, who had obtained dominion . . . over the universe. (113)

In short, myth sought to emphasise the connection "between the principle that exists chronologically at the beginning of the world and the prince who presides over its present arrangement" (114).

By contrast, the intellectual revolution of the, not insignificantly named, *Ionian* natural philosophers (Anaximander *et al.*) consisted in their refusal to conceptualise the universe temporally in terms of an *arche*, origin or source. By rethinking it in spatial or geometric terms, as Vernant points out, the Ionians with "one stroke obliterated the mythic image of a layered world" (121): henceforth, the center was conceived of as the fixed point around which an egalitarian space, made up of symmetrical and reversible relations, was arranged in both society and nature. (128)

The Ionian rethinking of cosmic and social space in this way served to blur the rigid boundaries between Self and other that had hitherto informed Athenian social relations and served the Athenian male's self-definition so well. In other words, the principle of mirror-like symmetry, interchangeableness and, thus, supplementarity evident here stands in stark

contrast to the asymmetrical oppositions that characterised those hierarchical conceptualisations of the universe specific to earlier generations but which continued to circulate in the form of the myths inherited by fifth-century Athenians. Indeed, the continued and widespread popularity enjoyed by myth was the expression of the Athenian male's anxious longing, caught as he was in the throes of the crisis of indistinctness that was directly traceable to the emergence of the *polis*, for the concretely discrete and the purely differentiable.

One of the principal Others from which the Athenian male sought to differentiate himself was the sub-human. This is perceptible with regard to the motifs, for example, of giantomachy which occur in juxtaposition to our first glimpse of Ion performing his duties in the temple. The serene contentedness of his hymns of devotion express the sheer joy through service that he feels as he does so:

O Healer! O Healer!
 My blessing! My blessing!
 O Leto's son!
 Fair, fair is the labour,
 O Phoebus, which
 I am doing for you . . .
 I have a glorious task:
 To set my hands to serve
 Not a man but the immortals.
 I will never weary
 Over my pious tasks. (127-137)

The serenity depicted here contrasts, however, with the violent images of Man-monster conflict that adorn the temple friezes and which suggest, not accidentally, those that in reality decorated the Parthenon. The temple images include allusions to Zeus triumphant over the Lernaean Hydra and Mimas, Athene over Enceladus and the Gorgon, Bellerophon over the Chimaera, Bacchus over "another of Earth's giant sons" (218) and refer to the figures of Hercules and Iolaus. In a process that is certainly a recurrent feature of Athenian myth, moreover, the struggle depicted by these images is one implicitly rendered, significantly, in gendered terms. The forces of chaos and disorder, represented by the giant offspring of Earth/Gaea, take the form of nightmarish exaggerations of the 'other' sex which are subdued by the exertions of essentially masculine Olympian deities and human heroes on the side of civilised and moral order.

Ironically, however, in a play informed at every stage by the myths of autochthony through which Athenians traced their ancestry to their original earth-sprung rulers, "Erichthonius, son of Earth" (22) and Cecrops, it becomes difficult to distinguish men from the very giants and monsters, equally descendants of Gaea, who in the temple images are defeated by pillars of masculinity. It is not insignificant, to boot, that Cecrops, half-man, half-serpent and son of Earth, stands "wreathed . . . in coils / Of serpents" (1163-1164) at the entrance, precisely, to the tent in which Ion's initiation into manhood occurs.

The ceremonies that accompany Ion's belated entry into manhood are surrounded by tapestries that also recall motifs of centauiromachy, 'barbarian-omachy' and amazonomachy. The walls "of barbarian design" (1159) depict not only combat with "creatures, / Half-man, half-beast" (1160-1161) but also Greek ships in battle with foreign navies and men on horseback hunting deer and lions. These are situated, significantly, below roof tapestries ("spoil from / The Amazons" [1143-1144], no less) that depict cosmological order in the form of the endlessly repeated sequence pursued by the Sun, Moon and stars. Although such motifs would still surface from time to time at the very least as part of the official rites of male initiation, they acted, I would argue, as woeful reminders of that outmoded warrior-

paradigm of manliness which, although no longer relevant to the cultural, social and political imperatives of everyday life in the democratic *polis*, nevertheless still underpinned popular conceptions of Athenian manhood. The distinctive individualism implicit in this obsolete model of manhood was quite out of 'sync,' in short, with the *polis*' emphasis on communalism and equality. In *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, Vernant repeatedly stresses in this regard, like Goldhill in *Reading Greek Tragedy*, that the relation of fifth-century Athenians to their inherited myths was no longer one of simple credulity. Reflecting the growing rationalist spirit of the age, Athenians were quite aware of the gap between myth and actuality. There were no more monsters to kill (at least in the neighbourhood of Athens!) and thus to prove one's manhood in this way seemed somewhat anachronistic even in the fifth century.¹⁵

Another important binary opposition in fifth-century Athens, as we have seen, was that between male and female. Although there is an intriguing disjunction between the female's prominence and articulateness on the Athenian stage, on the one hand, and her historically marginalised and silenced social status, on the other, many critics agree that women in particular operate in Athenian drama to define and validate masculinity by their very otherness and are not the central focus in and of themselves. The female, as the marked gender in so many of Euripides' plays, has certainly been the object of intense critical scrutiny. Much debate from Aristophanes onwards has centered explicitly around the issue of whether the playwright's agenda was a misogynous or proto-feminist one. Helen Foley suggests, however, that although Euripides' plays challenge standard attitudes towards women, women are ultimately utilised to "argue out problems and explore social contradictions central to the lives of male Athenians" (134), while "imagined female experience" (134) is used to "explore those aspects of life to which cultural norms denied the male full access: the irrational and the natural" (134). In a similar vein, Froma Zeitlin stresses, in "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," that the female's

demands for identity and self-esteem are . . . designed primarily for exploring the male project of selfhood as these impinge upon men's claims to knowledge, power, freedom and self-sufficiency. (67)

For her, therefore, Athenian drama is largely androcentric, a "species of recurrent masculine initiation" (66) that is "designed as an education for its male citizens in the democratic city" (66).

Foley suggests, too, that women function in Euripides' plays ultimately to reassert a patriarchal norm of social order by demonstrating the disastrous social consequences attendant upon any disruption of the traditional distribution of gender roles. Athenian society certainly depended, Gould stresses, upon rigidly segregated gender roles for its ordered existence, to wit, an "inviolable boundary marking the separateness of male and female 'territories' and areas of activity" (48) which eventuated in a *polis/oikos*, public/domestic split, the former being the male's domain and vice-versa. This resulted, of course, in the legal, institutional and ideological marginalisation of the female. Legally without the right to own property, the female was a non-person whose identity was determined solely in relation to the male nearest to her, be it father, husband or guardian, depending on the period and the circumstances of her life. As Gould puts it, she "has no personality and exists only as an extension of her male *kyrios*" (45). As Gould also puts it, however,

male attitudes to women, and to themselves in relation to women, are

¹⁵See, again, Tyrrell and Brown in this regard.

marked by tension, anxiety and fear. Women . . . do not belong easily in the male ordered world of the 'civilised' community. . . . [T]hey threaten continually to overturn its stability or subvert its continuity, to break out of the place assigned to them by their partial incorporation within it. (57)

It was precisely because women threatened constantly to break out of the barriers erected around them that these borders had ceaselessly to be policed.

In the *Ion*, the female frequently transgresses the 'natural' boundaries assigned to her sex, thereby overstepping the limits of what constitutes 'normal' femininity and motherhood in a way that ultimately serves to deconstruct the conventional distinction between male and female in Athenian society. (Even the very name Athens gestures towards a deconstruction of the binary opposition between male and female. Its founding goddess Athene, significantly, was often depicted as having very masculine attributes in a way that underscores the androgyny inherent in her very figure.)¹⁶ Here, firstly, the female does not confine herself to the *oikos* and domestic concerns. Both Creusa and her servant-girls are prominently displayed in public, in fact, worried about the future of both home and nation. The female, moreover, does not submit dutifully to her husband and lord: the Chorus, for example, appropriates an 'unwomanly' violent vocabulary in appealing to Creusa to take action against her husband's son and the threat that he represents. Nor is the female in the *Ion* content with the status of nonentity that her culture granted her. Creusa's position as chattel (she was given as a prize of war to her husband in return for his military aid to Athens) would certainly seem, at first glance, designed to confirm the female's 'non-existence' apart from her role as an object of exchange between men. Creusa, however, speaks and acts on her own behalf, putting her own interests on par with those of *oikos* or *polis*. Creusa's servant-girls, too, lambaste Xuthus as much for his personal betrayal of their mistress as for the consequences that his new-found son holds for the kingdom. It is Creusa's plan to poison her own son Ion – she takes to heart the Old Man's warning to kill both her husband and son "before death comes / To you from them" (845-846) – which signifies, however, the most radical abandonment in the play of conventional gender prescriptions. Clearly, Creusa's actions in this respect threaten to strike at the very core of a patriarchal social order by menacing three of the cornerstones upon which it rests. She contemplates, at the Old Man's suggestion, burning down the oracle, killing her husband and comes perilously close to infanticide.

The play, however, does not construct the female solely as the purveyor of anarchy. If women only remained a menace to the patriarchal order, it would be a relatively manageable process to categorise, circumscribe and thus contain the danger posed (as occurs in the *Oresteia*). The play's insights into the woman's lot as well as the justifications it provides for her conduct make her seem only too human in a way that does not allow her to be dismissed either as a mere emblem of disorder or as a monstrous aberration. It is difficult, for example, not to at least listen to Creusa's claim that "trouble is very easy / When women deal with men . . . good and bad / Are not distinguished, all of us are hated. / To this misfortune we are born" (398-401). The sense that women are victims of the "injustice of power" (253) wielded by men and of the unfairness of both men and gods, the claim that men are an "unrighteous race" (1095) who more deserve the condemnation of poets than women do, are sentiments that clamour to be heard (albeit, perhaps, to uncertain effect) at various points in the play.

By the same token, moreover, while it would have been tempting for an audience to express horror and dismiss Creusa as an 'unnatural' mother for exposing her infant or for

¹⁶See *Man, Myth and Magic* for further details on Athene in this regard.

wanting to murder (even if unknowingly) her own son, the play is equally at pains to establish the guilt that she feels in the first instance and the extent to which she considers she has no other choice in the second. Her desire to kill Ion is painted as understandable in the light of the precarious position of the wife within the *oikos* where her only function is to provide her husband with heirs. The lot of childlessness is akin to disaster for a barren wife – “Mine is the childless part, / The solitary life in a desolate house” (790-791), she laments – and all the more so when the future of the ruling family and thus the *polis* is at stake. It is with this in mind that the Priestess invites Ion (and the male audience) not to be blindly cruel: “Women are unkind to children not their own” (1329).

What is more, in this play men do not behave much differently from women. For example, the Old Man’s loss of virility (he stumbles, his eyesight is weak and his limbs support him with difficulty) is accompanied by a stereotypical ‘effeminisation’ of sorts in other respects. Although he is the mouthpiece of the House of Erechtheus and stands as something of a father-substitute for Creusa, he demonstrates an equally ‘feminine’ mendaciousness and a wily capacity for plotting chaos. He is the one who articulates so persuasively the threat that Xuthus’ son poses to Creusa’s position as his wife and who encourages her to either burn Apollo’s oracle, murder her husband or kill Ion. Moreover, it is he who, using a quintessentially ‘feminine’ device, actually attempts the poisoning. The Ion would seem even in this regard to deny even the comfort of old age to the Athenian male.

The complex of possible responses on the part of the male members of the audience to the *agon* which occurs between Ion and his mother is an intriguing issue in this regard. The Chorus’s earlier self-reflexive allusion to the City Dionysia, it should be stressed, is an invitation to the (male) audience to remember their own deep involvement in the issues at stake in the play. It imagines, significantly, the ‘intruder’ Ion seated among members of the audience:

O the shame to many-hymned Dionysos, if by the springs
Where lovely choruses are danced,
Apollo’s bastard son shall behold
Unsleeping, keeping the watch,
The torches burning on the festival night. . . . (1074-1079)

It would have been difficult, I would suggest, for an audience to decide exactly who represented the greatest threat to the social order, male or female, resulting in a great deal of ambivalence. Ion is certainly depicted, as we have seen, as as much a potential source of social disorder as Creusa is. In a startling reversal of gender roles which stands in sharp contrast, for example, to the situation which obtains in the Oresteia, it is the female who defends the interests of the ruling House of Erechtheus and, by extension, Athens while, by contrast, it is Ion who is painted (especially by the Chorus and the Old Man) as a usurper who intrudes from outside. Reaction towards Creusa’s position would arguably have been divided between seeing her as a woman and would-be murderer, on the one hand, and viewing her, on the other, as representative of the patriarchal *status quo* and opposed to the principle of invasion and usurpation for which the ‘intruder’ Ion stands. Similarly, reaction to Ion would conceivably have been divided between sympathy for him as a man and the contrasting prospect of disorder that he symbolises. Ion’s defence of inheritance, for example, on the basis of meritorious service might conceivably have struck a sympathetic chord in the hearts of that legitimate but unpropertied segment of the audience who were not first-born sons, while the same men would have been equally opposed to the dangerous possibility that the Ions of this world could “snatch those homes without an heir” (1303). The unresolvable nature of the Ion-Creusa debate (and, indeed, of Euripides’ *agons* in general!) encapsulates the degree to which the Ion is, in sum, an extremely troubling play

for the male's confidence in his own sheer distinction from the female.

In the course of the play, moreover, even the Immortal/mortal, Heavenly/earthly distinction breaks down with the result that even the Athenian male's firm belief in the existence of and, thus, subordination to the gods is no longer a sure measure of his own identity. The Chorus' plea, first of all, for some form of divine intervention to save themselves and their Mistress recalls, not so subtly, the *deus ex machina* ending of plays such as the *Medea*:

They will stone my mistress to death.
 What winged flight can I take,
 Down to what dark caverns of the earth
 Can I go to escape the stones of destruction?
 By mounting a chariot
 Drawn by horses with speedy hooves,
 Or the prow of a ship?
 There is no concealment, unless a god wishes
 To withdraw men from sight. (1237-1245)

In so doing, the play seems to deliberately foreground not only the generally contrived nature of such conclusions but, in so doing, the extent to which the role of the gods in human affairs had come to be increasingly questioned and their very existence ascribed to flights of fancy.

Indeed, Ion evinces a keenly interrogative stance throughout the play. Notwithstanding Athene's express confirmation of the exact identity of his forbears, he ultimately never resolves quite to his satisfaction his search for the truth of his identity. Moreover, even if his objections to this are ultimately dismissed, Ion also openly questions the role of Providence in facilitating the joyful reunion of mother and son. He recognises its improbable nature, underscoring in so doing the *art*-ificiality inherent in the frequency of such reunions on the Athenian stage: "There was no more unlikely chance than this," Ion tells his mother, "To find that I am, after all, your son" (1450-1451). What is more, the Chorus' conclusion that from "what we have seen happen here, no man / Should ever think that any chance is hopeless" (1510-1511) is deliberately juxtaposed to Ion's misgivings about reading the happy turn of events too positively:

O Fortune, who has already changed the lives
 Of countless men from misery to joy,
 How near I was to killing my own mother,
 How near myself to undeserved disaster.
 But do the sun's bright rays in daily course
 Illumine such events as this--all this? (1512-1517)

Athene's assertion that "The gods perhaps / Move to action late, but in the end they show their strength" (1614-5) seems just a little too self-congratulatory in the light of Ion's questioning and, in the wake of Apollo's rape, a little too emphatic of divine 'strength.'

Creusa's insistence, moreover, to the Old Man that "good and evil do not mingle" (1017) contradicts the sense that emerges with regard to Apollo's role by the conclusion. Apollo's temple is depicted in the opening scenes as a sacred place, one of dignified seclusion, free of pollution and devoted to the contented contemplation of otherworldly concerns. It is ostensibly an oasis of peace and tranquil order where, however, violence is occasionally necessitated in order to purge the temple of the potential stain of sexual reproduction: Ion, himself "holy and chaste" (149), chases with his bow and arrow the birds who would "foul the offerings" (108) by building a "nest of dry twigs for its young" (173). The distinction, too, that the opening lines of the play purport to make between Pan's sunless cave as a place of unbridled sexuality, on the one hand, and the purity and

abstinence of Apollo's sun-filled shrine, on the other, also evidently collapses when the Old Man speaks, significantly, of "Pan's altars and his shrine" (938).

Furthermore, the gods emerge as strikingly human in the unusual emphasis placed on the cruelty of Apollo's violation and on its effect upon Creusa. This undermines the traditional motifs (Creusa is, for example, the deflowered-maiden-while-out-picking-flowers) that are usually part and parcel of the rather blithe and euphemistic treatment accorded divine rape in mythic discourse:

On you, Latona's son, here
 In daylight I will lay blame.
 You came with hair flashing
 Gold, as I gathered
 Into my cloak flowers ablaze
 With their golden light.
 Clinging to my pale wrists
 As I cried for my mother's help
 You led me to bed in a cave,
 A god and my lover,
 With no shame,
 Submitting to the Cyprian's will.
 In misery I bore you
 A son, whom in fear of my mother
 I placed in that bed
 Where you cruelly forced me. (885-900)

This description seems a far cry from Athene's assertion at the end that Apollo has "managed all things well. He made your labor / Easy, so that your parents should not know" (1595-1596).

Indeed, Ion's trust in and devotion to the god is considerably shaken when he learns of the rape. He feels a sense of incredulity – "Not Phoebus and a mortal woman. No!" (339) – and vents his outrage in a severe indictment of the god's behaviour:

To force a girl
 Against her will and afterward betray!
 To leave a child to die which has been born
 In secret! . . .
 All evil men are punished by the gods.
 How then can it be just for you to stand
 Accused of breaking laws you have yourselves
 Laid down for men? But if – here I suppose
 What could not be – you gave account on earth
 For wrongs which you have done to women, you
 Apollo and Poseidon and Zeus who rules
 In heaven, payment of your penalties
 Would see your temples empty . . . justice now demands
 That we should not speak ill of men if they
 But imitate what the gods approve, but those
 Who teach men their examples. (441-452)

The gods appear awfully human in other respects as well. Ion emphasises the likelihood that Apollo will not want to reveal his secret shame and that he will wreak 'divine' vengeance upon the priestess for assisting Creusa. Apollo, too, gives Xuthus a deliberately false oracle which prompts Ion to question the truth of the oracle in general:

But, mother, does Apollo tell the truth,

Or is the oracle false? With some good reason

That question troubles me. (1537-1539)

The god, moreover, cowardly refuses to appear at the end "lest he should be blamed for what / Has happened in the past" (1558-1559).

Apollo's role appears dubious in even other respects. He is described by both Hermes and Athene as the omniscient divine orchestrator behind events: his is the power to pass "judgment / On what is happening now and what will come" (7-8), we are told; he is the one who puts ideas in the priestess' mind and who decides, albeit inscrutably, when it is time for Ion to leave the temple. This sense of a divine scheme behind things is, however, exploded at the end. Athene explains:

when this plan he made

Was open and laid bare, he was afraid

Your mother's scheme of murder would succeed,

Or she be killed by you, and found some means

Of rescue; but for this he would have kept

The secret longer and in Athens revealed

Creusa as the mother and himself

The father of his child. (1562-1568)

The allegedly omniscient Apollo appears almost to be caught napping by unexpected human actions that force him to play his hand earlier than he had planned.

Divine immorality and incompetency make Ion seriously question, in short, not only the very foundation of the code of morality distinguishing good from bad, but also, what is unthinkable, the hierarchical distinction between immortal and mortal that was central to the other binary oppositions by which the male Athenian conceptually organised human existence in general and in which, consequently, he took some comfort. In the final analysis, although the very location of Apollo's temple at the earth's mid-centre/navel would seem to underline its function as the focal point of the intersection of the secular and spiritual realms, Apollo's altar emerges less as a meeting-point of heaven and earth than a site of confusion and 'miscegenation' where human is no longer distinguishable from divine, Athenian from foreigner, bastard from well-born and where "good and bad alike" (1318) are granted the "right of refuge" (1314).¹⁷

The *Ion* underscores in this way how immense changes in the Athenian social landscape and, consequently, radical alterations to the very fabric of its discourse had clearly and significantly complicated life for the fifth-century Athenian male. The blurring of clear-cut distinctions between past and present, between Athenian and foreigner, between human and sub-human, between male and female and their respective spheres of interest, and between mortal and immortal had made it so that, for the male, the old certainties no longer seemed so assured and specific, straightforward courses of action no longer so easily decidable. Life in the Athenian *polis* of the fifth century was, as a result, a far cry from the heroic battlefields of myth and the martial paradigm of manhood operative there. In this play, for example, the old 'masculine' ethos of love-your-friends-and-kill-your-enemies ("All men are pure who kill their enemies" [1334], Ion argues to the Priestess) gives way to a

¹⁷See Vernant's *Origins of Greek Thought* for a fuller discussion of both the Athenian conception of the universe as a hierarchical space made up of very distinct cosmic levels and the *religious* symbolism conferred upon the 'centre' which was consequently conceived as a meeting point between distinctly different divine and human realms.

new creed of forgiveness-for-the-sake-of-social-harmony.¹⁸ The *polis* itself is, however, equally far removed from the peaceful nature of Ion's former life of contemplation and religious devotion where there was, as Ion puts it, "no one / To thrust me rudely from my path" (635-636). In Athens, by contrast, Aristotle's *zoon politikon* has to contend with unlimited competition, rivalry and aggression between fellow citizens that is the function of the fact, paradoxically, that no one is supposed to be distinct from or superior to the other.

The result of such social indistinctness is a certain paranoia that informs Athenian social relations. Ion enunciates a rather grim indictment in this regard of life in the *polis* where, as the bastard son of a foreigner, he is damned if he does seek political sway and damned if he does not. If he is content to "remain obscure" (592-593), on the other hand, he will be counted "nothing, nobody's son" (594). Paranoia breeds aggressiveness, moreover. If he aspires towards authority, he will incur both the envy of the powerless and the ridicule of those "not eager / For public life" (599-600) who "wisely keep their silence" (599). He will, furthermore, be "countered by the moves" (602) of those already in power. Burnett's translation brings out a little more clearly the rivalry, the continuing struggle for pre-eminence and, consequently, the constant manipulation of democracy that is the norm in fifth-century Athens:

And if I somehow gained a reputation, I would find myself
Fettered by those few persuasive voices
That tame the city's vote. Such is statesmanship--
Each man who rules and knows the pomps of power
Must find in every rival a mortal enemy. (602-606)

The image that emerges of "Athens's crowded fears" (601) is not a very favourable one: it is one of a city riven by jealousy, ambition and internecine struggles. It is moments like these in the play which make it difficult to see it as constituting a *pæan* of praise to Athens and to its inhabitants.

Paranoia explains, too, the greater aggressiveness, both physical and verbal, that Ion himself comes to personally demonstrate. Ion emerges as markedly different after his initiation into adulthood from the Ion we first meet. (The sacrifice and the banquet seem to be a combination of the *amphidromia* [the rite shortly after birth by which the father acknowledged the child's legitimacy], the *koureion* [the rite around puberty when the boy was registered in the *phratry*] and the transition from *ephebe* to *hoplitês*, effected during the pre-play ceremonies of the City Dionysia, that signalled entry into full manhood.)¹⁹ He pursues Creusa, for example, with sword in hand at the head of a mob and grasps the Old Man tightly, compelling him "against his will" (1216) to reveal who is behind the assassination attempt. The new Ion, moreover, is not restricted to the "shield and spear" (1305) that befit the son of a mercenary-warrior and with which Creusa openly strives to associate him. He uses a bloodthirsty rhetoric, laced with invective, towards his would-be murderess that is out of tune with the gentle tongue of the Ion whom we first meet. He makes, too, a conscious attempt to maliciously use the persuasive power of rhetoric that is indispensable to life in the *polis*. He takes his stand before the Delphian nobles in order to convince them that "'A foreign woman, daughter of Erechtheus, / Has tried to poison me'" (1221-1222; emphasis added). He uses an argument in this regard designed to appeal to

¹⁸See Goldhill's [Reading Greek Tragedy](#) and Vernant's [Origins of Greek Thought](#) for fuller discussions of these changes.

¹⁹See John Davies as well as Winkler's "The Ephebes' Song: Tragoidia and Polis" for further information on these ceremonies.

their chauvinistic (in both senses of the word) expectations which could not fail to be recognised by a male Athenian audience both on-stage and off.

It is perhaps also possible to understand in this light Ion's recourse to the stereotype, to personal invective and to hysterical denunciations, a strategy designed to restore the purity of distinction where vagueness and imprecision threaten. Accordingly, it almost (but never quite) goes without saying that it is a "woman's part" (483), to kill husbands and sons "by sword, / By poison or some trick" (845-846). Hence it is, we are told, that entry into the house of a foster-mother jealous of her husband's sons can be a fatal error. Hence, too, Ion's labelling of Creusa's outrageous and seemingly unjustified conduct as "treachery" (1278), his emphasis on her shamelessness (she is a "woman who will balk at nothing" [1264]), his construction of her as a woman possessed of the clever ability to lie ("how she can twist / One scheme upon another!" [1278-1279]) and his association of women in general with secrecy and deceit, with keeping illicit pregnancies hidden from their parents and keeping the truth of the fatherhood of her children from their husbands. Hence, furthermore, his comparison, by means of a cliché, of the female's viciousness to that of the viper and the serpent.

With each repetition of a stereotype, another brick is lodged in the wall of feminine otherness which male Athenians sought so anxiously to erect. With each pejorative stereotype, too, the male Athenian in effect validates himself in his sheer difference and his contrasting decency. With each anxious repetition, however, the in-distinction which these metaphors are designed to mask is simultaneously metonymically betrayed. It is not insignificant in this regard, for example, that even as Ion compares the female to a viper, Cecrops, half-man, half-serpent and son of Earth, should stand "wreathed . . . in coils / Of serpents" (1163-1164) at the entrance, precisely, to the tent in which Ion's initiation into manhood occurs.

IV

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have argued that the *Ion* presents a crisis scenario where the two principal but obsolete criteria of Athenian masculine self-definition, descent and distinction, deconstruct themselves. These strategies, inherited from mythic discourse, had become contested categories and appeared increasingly inadequate, if not downright outmoded, in the very changed social formation that was fifth-century BCE Athens. The play, consequently, speaks both of and to a bewildered masculinity stripped, firstly, of the conventional signposts of kinship by which the male had normally negotiated his location in Athenian social space and dispossessed, secondly, of the requisite Others – the fe-male, the sub-hu-man, the im-mortal and so on – in opposition to which he had traditionally understood his identity.

In a play that undermines in this way all the devices by which the male had traditionally sought to anchor his being safely and securely and denies him, thus, most grounds for certitude, Ion's doubts are, I would suggest, every Athenian male's. By evaginating almost all his favourite myths in which he sought refuge and by which he strove to fetishistically disavow the alterity in fact inherent in his own precarious subjectivity, the *Ion* would arguably have left the male members of the audience with a anxious sense of unease about their identity and place in the world and feeling in the final analysis profoundly confused and uncertain. Uncertain about the empirical evidence of their eyes (noble appearances conceal not noble "character" [239] but murderesses) and of their ears (how could they trust their hearing when divine oracles prove to be demonstrably false?).

Uncertain about the rationality of their traditional belief-systems, that is, about the oft-told stories of divine fatherhood and of springing autochthonously from the earth, among others. Uncertain about ever proving paternity beyond a shadow of a doubt and rudely denied that belief in the solipsistic supremacy of the male in matters sexual which had long undergirded the Athenian male's conception of his own pivotal, autonomous, unique and self-sufficient position at the centre of civilisation. Absolutely bewildered as to their utter distinction from foreigner, subhuman and female alike. Unsure about divine omniscience and providence and dubious of the existence of an absolute code of morality when the gods turn out to be obscenely anthropomorphic and, thus, fallible. Dubious, even, of the much vaunted democratic glories of Athenian concept of the *polis*. The *Ion* would have in the final analysis left male members of the audience profoundly disturbed and skeptical towards most, if not all, the tall tales with which the Athenian male had traditionally sustained and soothed his ego.

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