

Humanities Institute
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The Ion. 414-412. B.C.E.

Euripides

Overview

Comedy or religious political melodrama? The *Ion* stands out among the remaining plays of Euripides, and fires up our desire to know what we have lost, in the seventy of so plays we no longer have, from this multitalented playwright. Other of his remaining plays—*Medea*, *the Bacchae*, *Alcestis*—treat us to the diverse powers of the driven to the wall female, as do the numerous dramas—*The Suppliants*, *the Children of Heracles*, *Hecuba*—which track the woes of the victims of postwar Troy. In *The Ion*, however, we read a portrait of the lost child which takes us to places, in Euripides' imagination, which seem private, hurt, and intimate beyond what we would expect, of a writer of his place and moment.

Characters

Hermes,	messenger of the gods
Chorus of	Kreousa's female attendants
Kreousa,	Ion's mother, Xuthus' wife
Xuthus,	Kreousa's husband
Tutor,	to Kreousa, retainer in Erechtheus' household
Messenger	
Pythia,	priestess of the oracle of Delphi
Athens,	patron goddess of Athens
A crowd of	people of Delphi

Story

Setting. We are at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. The messenger god Hermes appears to fill us in on the now ancient seeming rape of Kreousa by the Sun God Apollo, her birthgiving to a son, and the cradle full of trinkets and mementoes which Kreousa left behind her, when she left the cave, and in fact left her infant to what she assumed would be his death.

Subsequent to this violent but fruitful act, Kreousa returns to Athens, where she marries a foreigner, Xuthus, who was himself the grandson of Zeus, and who had won over Kreousa by helping the Athenians in a war against the Chalcidians. Xuthus and Kreousa have come to Delphi to ask the god, Apollo, for help in producing a child—for they are almost at the end of their childbearing age.

Visitors. A chorus of Athenian maidens, followed by Kreousa herself, arrives at the temple, where they marvel at the wondrous sculptures and speak with the pure and simple temple sweeper—none other than Ion, the unknown offspring of Apollo and Kreousa. (The play as a whole will revolve about the mutual discoveries of their relationships among Apollo, Kreousa, and Ion.) Kreousa and Ion identify themselves to one another, but not sufficiently for real identification. Kreousa explains that she has come on behalf of a friend, who wants to track a personal query, whether a child she bore to Apollo can still be located around the temple. Meanwhile Xuthus returns from a walk around the temple compound; Kreousa begs Ion not to mention the conversation they have been having.

Xuthus. Upon emerging from the temple, Xuthus goes straight up to Ion, and calls him 'my boy'; he explains that the God has told him, within the temple, that the first person he sees upon exiting will be his son. Xuthus tells Ion to return to Athens with him—fatal demand to which the young man raises many objections, though at the last agreeing. Ion goes, but with the deep dissatisfaction that he does not, and cannot find out, who his mother is. Kreousa, meanwhile, has been left in the dark about Ion, who has disappeared with Xuthus.

Tutor. Kreousa returns to the temple later with her old family Tutor, who formulates a theory of what has Xuthus has done to Ion, and what damage Xuthus has done to her. He urges Kreousa to torch the Temple of Apollo, which she refuses to do, then to poison Ion, who is banqueting with his father, which she attempts but with the result that she is herself accused of attempted murder, and finds herself pursued by a furious lynch mob. Just as the drama seems lethal and hopelessly tangled, the Pythian priestess of Apollo appears, and draws the attention of mother and son to various pieces of evidence that testify to their kinship. Ion is joyfully at one with his mom, but dubious about Apollo's being his father. He is right to be so, affirms Athena, but Apollo is in fact the father of Ion. All was well planned. Xuthus is left to assume his fatherhood of Ion, Ion is made part of a noble household, and universally credited to be the founder of the Ionian race.

Themes

Interlacing. The interlacing of mortals and divinities could not be more pronounced than in the present play, where a divine-mortal marriage creates the main character of the play; and where the intimate texture of mixed mortal-human marriage is exposed. It is in fact noteworthy that both mother (daughter of Erichthonius) and son are pieces of divinity, and parts of a true family dialogue.

Lust. Apollo's desire for Kreousa was so strong that he could not resist her, grabbed her by the waist and raped her in a cave. This is not a rare event, in the Greek god-human sphere, where the gentler virtues of love—the soft side of love—are rare. Where those virtues appear, their form will tend to the maternal rather than the romantic.

Idyll. When we first see Ion sweeping the temple precinct at Delphi he seems completely at peace, but as he begins to talk with Kreousa, whom he finds deeply buried in the depths of his memory, we see the outlines of future recognition begin to appear. One thinks of Euripides' Iphigenia among the Taurians, when she first makes contact with Orestes and Pylades, in the temple precinct of Tauria.

Triumph. The spectator feels, from the outset of the play—right after the entrance of Kreousa—that some skein of disclosures is going to bring mother and child together. It is not that the world of Euripides is benign, any more than the world of Charles Dickens' David Copperfield, but that the narrative logic of the fictions these writers establish require resolutions and ultimate stasis, in order to fulfil their nature

Character Analysis

Ion Ion is the main character, in the sense that he, as a child of Apollo, carries immortal blood in his veins, is destined to serve nobly as King of Athens, and will eventually be counted as the founder of the Ionian race. Perhaps for these good reasons, Ion is a volatile young man, as we see in the narrative. Shocked by the realization that his mother lives, and that he is the product of a divine rape, right in the locale where he has been serving and living his young life, he is doubly blindsided by the sudden claim of Xuthus that he, Ion, is his son, and by his own, if reluctant, accompaniment of his father to Athens. Inwardly conscious of this destiny which is closing in on him, Ion is enraged by his mother's effort to kill him with poison drops, so that he will never—the Tutor stressed this—prove to be a contender for the rulership of Athens.

Illustrative moments.

Curious. Observing the visitors to the Temple of Apollo, Ion is struck by the sight of a well born lady—it will turn out to be Kreousa—about whom, we would say, he has a premonition of special importance.

Puzzled. Ion, who is perceptive, puzzles over Kreousa's claim that she has come to the temple to inquire, for a friend, about an extraordinary rape experience the friend has had there. Not much later, Ion listens to Kreousa talking with great intensity about her friend and her friend's experience. 'Why does this strange woman talk so wildly against Apollo?' he asks himself.

Astonished. Ion is astonished, when Xuthus emerges from the temple of Apollo with the declaration 'I am your father.' Ion accuses Xuthus of having misinterpreted a riddle from the god Apollo, and of talking nonsense.

Accusatory. Ion accuses his mother of having tried to poison him, at Xuthus' banquet. He is correct in his accusation, although Kreousa's criminal act was the result of the harsh pressure her Tutor was bringing on her.

Withdrawal. Ion, still under the impression that Kreousa is out to get him, withdraws anxiously when she—who knows much more than he about the truth of their relationship---reaches to embrace him.

Parallels. Shakespeare is fond of plots in which characters come to realize their true identity, even their nobility, which had long been hidden: one thinks of *A Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, or of the case of Perdita in *A Winter's Tale*; in all of which works the protagonist only later realizes who he or she is. The same could be said of such figures of religion and myth, like Moses and Oedipus, who realize later in life that they have been exposed as infants, and who must realize their self-identities in terms of this new information.

Discussion questions.

What kind of religious experience do the worshippers of Apollo have of this god—to judge from the events in *The Ion*? Is Apollo in any sense transcendent—super powerful or wise, down to earth, ready to assist humans?—or is it difficult to determine what attitude toward the god the ancient worshipper held?

Why was Kreousa so strongly moved by the arguments of her tutor, who felt so strongly that she should take vengeance on her son and Xuthus? Was she jealous of the bonding between those two individuals? Did she consider herself a victim of rape—or was she in some sense also flattered by the attentions of a god?

Do you appreciate the dramatic power of a figure like the Pythian oracle? Is too much explained away too deliberately by such interventions? Does that explanatory intervention deprive the narrative of some of its inherent power to persuade?