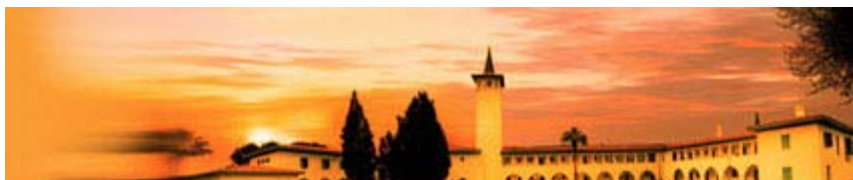THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF

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Euripides' *Ion*: Identity, Legitimacy, and the Ties that Bind

Marlene K. Sokolon, Ph.D
Associate Professor
Department of Political Science
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montréal, Québec H3G 1M8
Canada
marlene.sokolon@concordia.ca

If you have not heard about this tragedy or its main characters Ion and his mother Creusa, this is not surprising as Euripides chose to write a play based on a more obscure myth. In typical mythology, Ion was the forefather of the Ionian tribe of Greek peoples, which included Athens but also a significant portion of their empire. As progenitor, Ion was central to one version of the Athenian foundation mythology. Competing with this Ionian story, however, was a foundation myth that recognized Athenian autochthony. For the ancient Greeks, autochthony meant not only that Athenians were indigenous people who always lived on their land, but that they literally sprang from the earth itself. In the *Ion*, Euripides reworks the story of Athenian founding by bringing together these two competing myths. In doing so, he exposes the necessary role of

foundation stories in crafting political identity and satisfying our desire to be "ruled by one's own," as well as the limitations of such stories to provide an unambiguous understanding of the political self.

Euripides' Version of *Ion*

The play is set at the temple of Apollo in Delphi and in the prologue Hermes tells the backstory of how Creusa, the daughter of King Erechtheus (of the famous temple on the acropolis), was raped by Apollo and exposed the child. Unbeknownst to her, Apollo saved the boy who was raised at the temple. We also learn that Creusa and her foreign husband Xuthus are coming to the temple to ask the oracle for a cure to their childlessness. Apollo, Hermes tells us, will announce this child as Xuthus' son but not reveal the truth until after the couple return to Athens. In the *parodos*, the Chorus draws attention to the Delphic architecture depicting the battle between the autochthonous giants and Olympian gods.[1] Creusa then arrives ahead of Xuthus to inquire on behalf of a "friend" who was raped by Apollo what happened to their child; she meets Ion and the two recognize mutual suffering (childlessness and motherlessness) but not each other; she is prevented from asking the god what he would conceal. Xuthus arrives and receives the false oracle that the first person he sees after exiting the temple will be his son. At first Ion resists this news, because as a foreigner and bastard, he will not be welcomed in Athens; Xuthus agrees to keep his identity a secret but a banquet is planned to celebrate them as guest-friends (*xenoi*).

The Chorus and Old Tutor expose this attempted usurpation to Creusa and together they plot to kill Ion with poison of the Gorgon given to her autochthonous ancestor Erichthonios. Ion is saved when he pours out the wine and a bird dies by drinking it. He returns on stage to exact justice by killing the now suppliant Creusa, but she is saved by the Priestess of Apollo who

reveals the tokens found with Ion as a baby: a basket, a living olive branch, a weaving with the

Gorgon and serpents, and a necklace of golden snakes. With these tokens, mother and son come

to recognize each other as "one's own," although Ion remains sceptical that his father is a god.

Athena arrives, *deus ex machinē*, confirms his paternity and prophesizes Ion's sons will found

the four tribes and colonies of the Ionians. Creusa will have two more sons with Xuthus, Dorus

and Aeolus, who will found other Greek tribes. With this, the play ends: seemingly happily and

rather patriotic.

Euripides' Innovations

Although Ion is a relatively obscure mythological figure, Euripides does make several

innovations which bring together the two competing versions of Athenian identity. One

foundation story highlights the Athenians as Ionians, who were one of the main (but less

noteworthy) migratory Greek peoples.[2] Herodotus, for example, tells us the Ionians were driven

out of their original homeland in northern Peloponnese into Attica and beyond.[3] The second

version is that Athenians are autochthonous people. For the ancients, autochthony had a dual

meaning.[4] It stressed a continuous or uninterrupted living on the land, such as Thucydides'

comment that the Athenians "always lived in Athens."[5] It also could mean literal autochthony,

in that the ancestors were born from the earth itself (*auto-chthōn*).[6] This original ancestor was

Erechtheus and/or Erichthonios. Mythological accounts are not clear whether this is the same or

a different people, but Euripides makes Erechtheus the son of Erichthonios.[7] Erichthonios was

born when Hephaestus failed to rape Athena and she wiped off his sperm which fertilized the

earth. Unlike other versions of autochthony, such as the giants or Theban sown men who sprung

from the earth as full grown warriors, Erichthonios was born a helpless baby who was given to

be fostered to the daughters of Cecrops, who was the first king of Athens and also an autochthon who was half snake from the waist down.

Significantly, Euripides brings together or reconciles these two myths: Ion is the founder of the Ionians and a descendent of the autochthons.[8] Thus, the story provides convenient justification for Athenian domination over the largely Ionian empire.[9] In addition, since he is revealed to be a demigod founder, Athenian origins rival the Spartan claim to descend from Heracles as well as downgrade their forefather Dorus to Ion's younger human half-brother. In more typical versions, such as Hesiod, the common Greek ancestor Hellen had three sons: Xuthus, Dorus, and Aeolus.[10] In Hesiod's version, there is no doubt that Xuthus is Ion's father. Thus in Euripides' version, his innovations bring together the competing myths of origin and create a new, improved version of Ion and Athenian identity.

Lessons from the *Ion*

There are several lessons highlighted by Euripides' reworking this story of political origins. It is probably significant that the play is set in Delphi, which was not only considered the center of the world for the Greeks, but the place where all colonies began.[11] Delphi is equally famous for the inscription "know thyself" *(gnōthi seauton)*, which was inscribed on the entrance of Apollo's temple.[12] Well-known for its inspiration of the Socratic philosophic quest for self-knowledge, this inscription also draws attention to the question of how we come to know or recognize our own. Furthermore, since Ion is the autochthonous heir, his personal journey of self-discovery is interconnected with Athenian identity. In other words, Ion's story reveals that it is not only individuals, but political communities which confront the question "who am I."

The play points to two crucial factors in answering this question. First, as in Ion's recognition scene with Creusa, we come to identify each other through tokens of community. In the case of Creusa and Ion, these include the basket, the olive branch, a weaving of the Gorgon, and the golden necklace of snakes. Such tokens are laden with meaning for the Athenian audience: for example, the golden necklace represents the snakes Athena put in Erichthonios' basket and such necklaces were still given to Athenian children as a token of their identity.[13] Today we continue to use symbols, such as textile design, animal icons, and national flags, as forms of community identification. Importantly, such symbols can only take on meaning in the specificity of their context.[14] By highlighting this need for explanatory significance, Euripides points to the second crucial factor of identity: symbols and signs of community are meaningless without the story the community tells about itself and its origin. Without the story, the tokens are merely empty objects.

So stories, like this very myth of Ion told by Euripides, are essential to understanding "who we are" and to identifying "who is one's own." Importantly, through his retelling the story of origin and identity, Euripides exposes the limitations such stories have to place origins on firm foundations. Such stories of origin, as Plato also highlights in his subsequent examination of noble lies, are crucial to forming community; yet, they are not established on reliable truths.[15] There are several indications in the tragedy that origin stories are not all they seem. For one thing, there are many instances of partial or inaccurate stories. One of the main stories, for example, told and retold throughout the play is the rape of Creusa: Hermes tells the story in the prologue; in Creusa's first telling she claims it was a "friend" who was raped; she retells the true story to the Chorus and Old Tutor without the information that the child lived; and finally she reveals the truth to Ion in the end.[16] Also of significance is that both Creusa and Ion have to be

prevented from questioning the god about the rape, because it something which he chooses to conceal. This retelling of Creusa's rape reveals the secrets and partial knowledge embedded in the telling and retelling of origin stories. Such stories are always partial because they conceal ignorance of the past or the shame of events, usually violent and chaotic, connected to our foundings.

The *Ion* also reveals that origin stories are unreliable and may contain deliberate lies.[17] What, for example, is the audience to make about the fact Hermes tells us in the prologue that Apollo will not reveal the truth of Ion's identity until after they arrive in Athens; however, Apollo is forced to reveal this truth in Delphi. This seems to indicate that his prophecies are neither reliable nor accurate. Even more problematic, however, is that this god of prophecy tells a deliberate lie to Xuthus concerning Ion's paternity and commands, through Athena, this lie to continue.[18] The god of prophecy does indeed "speak falsely." Thus more than simply partial or unreliable, origin stories conceal deliberate misrepresentations.

Foundation Stories and the Ties that Bind

The most obvious comment on political identity in the play is the connection between kinship and broader community identity. The play's denouement is the discovery that Creusa and Ion are their "own" and that he is the semi-divine founder of the Ionian people. This renewed identity has been interpreted as providing a nice justification for Athenian hegemony over the empire, especially since Ion is now superior to Spartan myths of founding.[19] From this perspective, Euripides reveals the role of story in recreating new improved heroes to solidify bonds of community. Yet, for all his genealogical revision, Euripides' version also undermines such a straightforward patriotic reading.[20] In his version, Ion may be the founder of the Ionian

peoples, but through Creusa all the combatant Greeks are really brothers and descendants of the autochthonous line of Erechtheus. In addition, the Ionian colonies have their own foundering fathers in his sons. In other words, who is celebrated as founder depends only on how far back one cares to look.

A second aspect of community identity revealed by the *Ion* concerns the status of the "other" in the community.[21] This is most vividly represented by the Chorus' xenophobia against the "too many foreigners" in Athens and their attitude toward Xuthus.[22] Although Xuthus does intend to lie to Creusa (ostensibly to protect her feelings) regarding his "son," this presentation of the untrustworthy other is destabilized in the story. For one thing, Xuthus is not the subject, but the object of all the major falsehoods; for another, we learn he married the autochthonous Creusa because he saved the city from invasion and Creusa refuses to kill him because he has been good. The foreigner proves not dangerous, but invaluable to the continuance of the city.

All of this bias against Xuthus emphasizes the Chorus' desire to be "ruled by one's own." As they stress: "may no other from any other House grasp and rule the city, except one of the noble Erechtheid."[23] This desire reveals the political vulnerability at the heart of such bias. On the one hand, there is no indication that Xuthus is a bad or ineffectual ruler; in fact, he saved the city. On the other hand, there is no indication that Ion will be a good ruler; in fact, he is revealed to be impious when he almost murders his mother when she took sanctuary.[24] Yet for the Athenians, the boy who was to be murdered is easily celebrated as legitimate hero: yet, nothing changed but recognition of kinship. This categorical rejection of the foreigner and unconditional support of one's own reveals the connection between this very ancient desire to be ruled by one's own and an equally ancient understanding of justice: helping friends and harming enemies.[25] In this case, the play offers the most simplistic and narrow interpretation of friends as equated with

kin and enemies with foreigners. Again Euripides undermines such a simplistic reading with constant reminders in the play, such as the description of the giants' war or Gorgon's poison, that autochthony is not unconditionally good: in most stories, including this one, autochthony proved a sterile foundation without the intervention of the other. Although Creusa claimed she kept the vials of Gorgon blood separate because good does not mix with bad, throughout the story, autochthony is revealed to contain both.[26]

Conclusion

Euripides' *Ion* is a story of origin, identity, and political foundations. Ion's own journey of self-discovery, fraught with danger and misunderstanding, reveals the importance of such stories to the experience of community. We come to recognize "one's own" by the stories we tell of our common origin, but these stories are neither straightforward nor uncomplicated. As symbolized by Creusa's rape, much of the origin story is partial and conceals the violence of beginnings. Although our own myths of nationalism have roots in our nation-state system, there is much in the *Ion* which still provides lessons for our political self-understanding.[27] Our own foundation myths – necessary to bind communities – also contain partial knowledge and deliberate lies. Origin stories also reveal the simplistic and biased view of the "other" and undermine the valuable and equally necessary contributions of foreigners to the continuance of community. One has to be cautious of identity stories, as Ion himself says: "things do not look the same up close as at a distance."[28] Thus, the most valuable lesson of the *Ion* for modern attempts to understand our national identities is that origin stories are not to be trusted without examination. The Delphic message of "know thyself" proves to be not only an inspiration for a philosophic, but also a political journey of self-discovery.

[1] Donald J. Mastronarde, "Iconography and Imagery in Euripides' *Ion*," in *Oxford Reading in Classical Studies: Euripides*, ed. Judith Mossman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 294-308; Charles Segal, "Euripides' *Ion*: Generational Passage and Civic Myth," in *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece*, ed. Mark W. Padilla (Lewisburgh: Bucknell University Press, 1999), 67-108.

[2] Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 46-54.

[3] Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robert Strassler (Toronto: Anchor Publishing, 2009), 1.145, 7.94, 8.44.

[4] Nicole Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, trans.Caroline Levine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Nicole Loraux, "Kreousa the Autochthon," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?* eds. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 168-206; Katerina Zacharia, *Converging Truths* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 56-99.

[5] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.2.

[6] V. J. Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians," *Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987): 294-305.

[7] R. Parker, "Myths of Early Athens," in *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, ed. Jan Bremmer (London: Routledge, 1987), 187-214.

[8] Laura Swift, *Euripides' Ion* (London: Duckworth Companions, 2008), 69-85; Arlene Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony in Euripides' *Ion,*" in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed. Peter J. Euben (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 252-73; Carol

Doughtery, "Democratic Contradictions and the Synoptic Illusion of Euripides' *Ion*," in *Demokratia*, eds. Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 249-270; Zacharia, *Converging Truths*, 44-99.

[9] Gary S. Meltzer, *Euripides and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kevin H. Lee, "Introduction to Euripides' *Ion*," in *Euripides' Ion*, ed. K. H. Lee (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1997), 21-42; Doughtery, "Democratic Contradictions"; Loraux, "Kreousa the Autochthon," 168-206.

[10] Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*, trans. Glenn Most (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), F. 9-10.

[11] David Kovacs, "Introduction," in *Euripides iv*, ed. David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 315-320; Anne Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[12] Dora C. Pozzi, "The Polis in Crisis," in *Myth and the Polis*, eds. Dora C. Pozzi and John M. Wickersham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 126-63; Zacharia, *Converging Truths*, 103-4.

[13] Euripides, "Ion," in *Euripides iv*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1425-30.

[14] For discussion in contemporary political thought see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, trans. Rupert Swyer (London: Tavistock, 1972); Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communites*. 2nd ed. (New York: Verso Press, 2006).

[15] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 386a-412b; see Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony in Euripides' *Ion*," 252-73.

[16] Euripides, "Ion," 10-65, 335-65, 875-915, 1470-1570.

[17] Ibid. 10-65, 375-80, also 810-20, 1055-60.

[18] For discussion see A.S. Owen, "Introduction," in *Euripides' Ion*, ed.A.S. Owen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), ix-xliii; Anne Burnett, "Human Resistance and Divine Persuasion in Euripides' *Ion*," *Classical Philology* 57 (1962): 89-103.

[19] Nicole Loraux, *Born of the Earth*, trans. Selina Stewart (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Kovacs, "Introduction," 318.

[20] Francis Dunn,"Euripidean Aetiologies," *Classical Bulletin* 76 (2000): 3-27.

[21] Loraux, *Born of the Earth*, 47-64; Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony in Euripides' *Ion*," 252-73.

[22] Euripides, "Ion," 720-5.

[23] Ibid. 1050-60.

[24] Ulrich Sinn, "Greek Sanctuaries as Places of Refuge," trans. Judith Binder, in *Greek Sanctuaries: New Approaches*, eds. Nanno Marinatos and Robin Hagg (London: Routledge, 1993), 88-109.

[25] Mary Whitlock Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[26] Burnett, "Human Resistance and Divine Persuasion in Euripides' *Ion*," 89-103.

[27] Ernst L. Hettich, *A Study in Ancient Nationalism* (Williamsport: Bayard Press, 1933), 7-15.

[28] Euripides, "Ion," 585.