

ATHENIAN NATIONALISM AND OTHER FEMININE CONCERNS IN

EURIPIDES'S ION

CLARA TAFT

This article considers the central conflict in the play Ion by Euripides, in which the protagonist thinks her son is actually her husband's illegitimate child who will inherit her family's estate and accordingly tries to kill him. I will argue that the play ultimately asks us to accept that jealousy is a universal response to infidelity for both men and women, but it also draws parallels between a woman's jealousy and everyday political problems like citizenship, inheritance, and Athenian nationalism to encourage the audience to identify with a potentially controversial female character and her concerns.

I. Introduction

The play *Ion* follows the eponymous protagonist, whose mother, the Athenian princess Kreousa, was raped by Apollo and exposed Ion as a baby. Kreousa does not know that Ion was taken in by a temple of Apollo. When the oracle of Apollo suggests that Ion is Kreousa's husband's illegitimate child, she tries to kill him out of fear that she will be evicted from her home and a foreigner will become the king of Athens. However, Athena and a prophetess of Apollo intercede and resolve the misunderstanding before anyone dies.

One might, and many critics have, analyze the play by looking at the themes of xenophobia and Athenian autochthony.¹ However, I will also be focusing on the narrative's disapproval of illegitimate children and the implicit disapproval of the behavior that leads to fathering illegitimate children. The play presents an exaggerated nightmare situation in which a woman who ostensibly has no surviving children will be forced to pass down her family's political authority and distinguished estate to her husband's supposedly illegitimate son. The problems that arise deal with real-life concerns (i.e., inheritance, citizenship) and are sufficiently universal to appeal even to audience members who disapprove of jealous women: first, Ion is a threat not only to Kreousa's status and way of life, but also to Athenian ideas of sovereignty and the preservation of the *oikos* (household). These universal concerns are the most prominent, but they encourage the audience to sympathize with Kreousa's more fundamental and controversial concerns: her husband betrayed her simply by fathering an illegitimate child, a concern that many characters echo while they express varying degrees of solidarity with Kreousa. The play draws similarities between the experiences of men and women, and characters argue that it is better for a couple to share the same fortunes with respect to their children (or childlessness):

¹Arlene Saxonhouse, "Myths and the Origins of Cities: Reflections on the Autochthony Theme in Euripides' *Ion*," in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed. J. Peter Euben, (University of California Press, 1986); K.H. Lee. *Euripides: Ion*, (Aris & Phillips, 1997), 35.

neither a man nor a woman should have to resign themselves to their spouse having an illegitimate child. It is difficult for an audience member to avoid sympathizing with Kreousa without also adopting a certain carelessness about the preservation of Athenian identity.

Modern readers might wonder why it is so surprising that Kreousa is upset that her husband fathered a child with another woman, but male infidelity was relatively trivial for Athenians. For example, an adultery/justifiable homicide law allowed a man to kill with impunity another man who slept with his wife or female relative,² but no equivalent law existed to punish an adulterous husband who slept with a noncitizen or enslaved woman.³ Moreover, Ancient Greek men speak of affairs with enslaved women without any sense of moral judgement⁴ suggesting that the phenomenon “required no apology.”⁵ A woman who has a problem with her husband having an affair with another woman, therefore, is somewhat innovative in giving his behavior moral significance—which is why I assume that the audience is not predisposed to agree with Kreousa that her husband did something wrong.

II. Ion as a threat to Athens

Before the play begins to suggest that an extramarital sexual relationship is wrong per se, it deals at length with the threat Ion poses to Kreousa and the city because he is not her child and a foreigner. In the most obvious sense, Kreousa is afraid of Ion because she thinks he will become Xouthos’s heir and seemingly because she thinks he will kill her. When Ion confronts her in Apollo’s sanctuary after she has tried to poison him, she says, “I tried to kill you because you were an enemy to my house.”⁶ He asks if she thinks he is attacking “with what torches or

² Dem. 23.53.

³ Cheryl Anne Cox, *Household Interests: Property, Marriage Strategies, and Family Dynamics in Ancient Athens*, (Princeton University Press, 1998), 73.

⁴ Dem. 59.122; Xen. *Oec.* 10.12; Lg. 840e–842a; Lys. 1.12–13.

⁵ David Kovacs, “Three Passages from the *Andromache*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 81, (1977): 131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/311115>.

⁶ Euripides, *Ion*, 1291; All translations are my own.

what flame?” and she responds, “You were intending to settle in my house and take it from me by force.”⁷ Kreousa echoes the fear which the old man expressed earlier; he claimed, “We are being thrown out of the house of Erechtheus.”⁸ When Ion asks, “And then you tried to kill me in fear that I intended to do this?” Kreousa responds, “So that I wouldn’t die, if you were not [merely] intending.”⁹

In addition to Kreousa’s fear for her personal safety and way of life, the chorus—as well as Ion himself—express concerns that it is insulting to the city of Athens that Ion, the heir to the kingship, is a foreigner. The situation is particularly serious because Ion’s ostensible father, Xouthos, is an Aeolian who married Kreousa because he was a military ally of Athens, and Kreousa’s father has no other living children—he killed her sisters as a sacrifice.¹⁰ Ion himself realizes that the Athenians, who consider themselves indigenous to Athens, will not accept a foreigner ruling over them: “They says that the famous Athenians came from the earth and are not an imported people; there I am invading having acquired two problems: being a bastard child, and born of a foreign father.”¹¹ He fears that he will be hated by the powerless as well as the politically inactive and the established elites, who “are the most hostile to rivals.”¹² The chorus (a group of female servants who sing songs about their perception of events) also sings about their distaste for Ion. They hope that Kreousa will successfully kill him and that “someone else from another house may never rule the city, except for the noble descendents of Erechtheus.”¹³ They call her “my mistress born from the earth,” referencing the Athenian autochthony myth.¹⁴ Kreousa and the chorus feel that rule by a foreigner would be so upsetting

⁷ Euripides, *Ion*, 1294-95.

⁸ Euripides, *Ion*, 810-11.

⁹ Euripides, *Ion*, 1300-01.

¹⁰ Euripides, *Ion*, 296-98, 277-80.

¹¹ Euripides, *Ion*, 296-98, 589-92.

¹² Euripides, *Ion*, 606.

¹³ Euripides, *Ion*, 1058-60.

¹⁴ Euripides, *Ion*, 1054.

that the chorus says Kreousa would kill herself if her plan was not successful: “For she would not tolerate, while she is alive in the shining light of the son, other foreign people ruling her house, she who was born from a noble house.”¹⁵

The chorus’s lament is particularly appealing to the audience because it exploits their national feelings based on their belief that their ancestors literally sprung from the earth—which Ion and the chorus reference as the reason for their xenophobia.¹⁶ The myth is very helpful for establishing their conception of themselves as a self-governing people: it creates a unity that “differentiates this city from others..., it offers a world whose boundaries are dictated by nature and not by human reason,” and it “eliminates another embarrassing question as well: to whom does, or did, the land belong?”¹⁷ The autochthony myth conveniently establishes Athenian nationalism defined in the sense of Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities: the Athenians have an (imagined) political community that is “inherently limited and sovereign.”¹⁸ This community is imagined because all Athenians feel as if they possess a common identity despite the fact that they are, in reality, too distanced from one another to be a literal community. It is limited because someone not descended from the original earth-born Athenians cannot be an Athenian, and it is sovereign because the autochthony myth gives a very good justification for why they deserve to rule the land. According to this perspective, a foreigner “threatens the unity and hierarchy of the city” because he has no claim to being a member of this imagined community.¹⁹

The plot of *Ion* recalls several established customs, which, if kept in mind by the audience, would remind them that Ion threatens not only Kreousa, but all Athenians who care

¹⁵ Euripides, *Ion*, 1069-73.

¹⁶ Saxonhouse, “Myths and the Origins of Cities,” 255.

¹⁷ Saxonhouse, “Myths and the Origins of Cities,” 255.

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (Verso, 1983), 6.

¹⁹ Saxonhouse, “Myths and the Origins of Cities,” 256.

about the city. The most significant is the idea of Athenian autochthony, which I have referenced, but the play also treats Kreousa as an *epikleros* (heiress) and alludes to Pericles's citizenship law. The audience of the play would be familiar with these institutions in their everyday lives, and it might make Kreousa's problems feel more relevant to problems they could empathize with, such as the preservation of insular Athenian identity and the *oikos*.

Since her father has no surviving sons, Kreousa would be an *epikleros* in contemporary Athens.²⁰ Although she would not herself inherit his estate, the family property would be passed down to her children two years after maturity.²¹ Kreousa's family situation does not completely adhere to the relevant laws; she should technically be married to her father's closest male relative (i.e., her uncle or cousin, most likely), and if she was already married with no children—and she is—she should divorce Xouthos to marry this relative.²² Although Euripides takes some creative liberties, one imagines the audience would have been aware of the similarities between her situation and the situation of *epikleroi*. The purpose of the law was to perpetuate the male line and keep property within the family;²³ the audience might at least find it jarring that, from their perspective, Kreousa's marriage is legally irregular and fails to keep her inheritance in the family. The situation with Ion is an additional insult, since her heir is ostensibly not even her own child. Kreousa herself is concerned about this as well; she laments, "I will live in desolation in a house with no heir."²⁴ Her speech, "though not quite technical... suggests concern with producing an heir in order to keep the kingship and her father's property within the family."²⁵

²⁰ David Schaps, *Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 25; John C. Gibert, ed., *Euripides: Ion*, (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 247.

²¹ Schaps, *Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece*, 26.

²² Schaps, *Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece*, 28.

²³ Kirk Ormand, "Marriage, Identity, and the Tale of Mestra in the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women." *American Journal of Philology* 125, no. 3 (2004): 330, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/173393>; Cox, *Household Interests*, 95; Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 143-44.

²⁴ Euripides, *Ion*, 791-92.

²⁵ Gibert, *Ion*, 245.

Ion also makes reference to the Athenian citizen law proposed by Pericles in 451/450 which establishes that only the child of two Athenian parents is an Athenian citizen.²⁶ He tells Xouthos of his worries that his mother might not be an Athenian: “If it is expedient, I pray that the woman who gave birth to me is an Athenian, so that I will have free speech rights from my mother.”²⁷ He stresses that a foreigner who “enters the unadulterated city” does not have such rights.²⁸ His father is not a native Athenian, so he would not meet the requirements of the citizenship law anyway, but I will return to the significance of this later. Cynthia Patterson writes that the citizenship law reflected in part a desire to limit the number of “shareholders” in the prosperity of Athens;²⁹ when the chorus says that they feel insulted by an invader, their indignation might also arise from a fear of sharing their portion with a foreigner in a very important position. She also suggests that the law prohibited “foreign claims on Athenian property” by disqualifying from citizenship the children of Athenians and foreigners, which is exactly the concern that characters in the play have about Ion.³⁰

Ion fears that the city will not accept a foreigner, but he also seems to think that this problem would be resolved if his mother were Athenian. In reality, this is not how the citizenship law functioned. The play is not calling back to an earlier citizenship law either, since, as far as we know, there *was* no official preexisting citizenship law, and if there was, it likely mandated that a citizen only had to have an Athenian father.³¹ Nicole Loraux admits that Euripides incorporates real-world legal inspiration quite haphazardly but says there is “no way to give an account of Kreousa’s legal position except to involve every possible approach simultaneously.”³²

²⁶ Cynthia Patterson, “Athenian Citizenship Law,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law*, ed. Michael Gagarin and David Cohen, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 278.

²⁷ Euripides, *Ion*, 670-72.

²⁸ Euripides, *Ion*, 673.

²⁹ Patterson, “Athenian Citizenship Law,” 279.

³⁰ Patterson, “Athenian Citizenship Law,” 282.

³¹ Patterson, “Athenian Citizenship Law,” 283.

³² Nicole Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, trans. C. Levine, (Princeton University Press, 1993), 203.

Euripides seems to be again taking creative liberties with his depiction of Athenian citizenship laws with the result that he emphasizes Kreousa's role in "bestow[ing] legitimacy" and makes Ion a citizen from the perspective of the audience, who knows his mother is an Athenian (provided they will play along with his judicial activism).³³

I will move on to discussing the characters' objections to the Ion situation that have more to do with Xouthos's unfaithfulness itself than its threatening consequences for Kreousa and the city. Kreousa and the characters who sympathize with her express that Xouthos has betrayed her because he fathered an illegitimate child. The average ancient audience member might not see any problem with a husband's unfaithfulness. Perhaps for this reason, the playwright has contrived the unrealistic nightmare situation in which Ion threatens Athenian autochthony itself as well as Kreousa's feelings. Kreousa's situation is quite extreme; if she or her father had more children, or if they were not such important people, the stakes of the play might not seem as high, particularly for Kreousa. Since the play deals with such an extreme example of the problem it identifies, it perhaps appeals to the audience more than it would otherwise: if Athenian men struggle to understand why an ordinary woman would feel threatened or offended by her husband's illegitimate child, they might be more sympathetic if the child also threatened Athenian sovereignty. The playwright hopes that the audience will suspend any disdain for a jealous woman if some of her motivations make sense to them.

III. Ion as a threat to Kreousa's feelings

The characters in *Ion* are all very aware that Ion threatens their ideas of Athenian self-rule and the preservation of the house of Erechtheus, and these are most likely the primary reasons that the conflict arises between Kreousa and Ion. However, Kreousa and her associates

³³ Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, 189; On the other hand, one wonders whether Athenians would really have a problem accepting the child of an Athenian and a god as a citizen.

(such as the chorus and the old man) also feel outraged because they believe her husband did not, in fact, happen upon a child given to him by Apollo; rather, they think he secretly fathered a child outside of their marriage because he was unable to have a child with Kreousa. This would be exclusionary to Kreousa and a grave betrayal of the agreement between a married couple that they will share the same fortunes. The old man claims that Xouthos violates this implicit agreement by seeking his own personal good fortune at Kreousa's expense.

The foreigner who married you and came into the city and the home and received your inheritance has gathered the fruit of a child from another woman in secret... Since he perceived that you were childless, he was not content to bear the same fate as you, and he took a slave girl and slept with her in secret, and he had a child, and he made him a stranger and gave him to someone in Delphi to bring up.³⁴

The old man first emphasizes that Xouthos has gained a great deal from his marriage to Kreousa: he shares her home, city, and inheritance, but he is unwilling to experience the same struggle as her with respect to their childlessness.³⁵ He criticizes Xouthos for betraying her trust and fathering a child in secret. The old man suggests that there is an element of solidarity in an ideal marriage: the responsibility to support one's spouse through shared misfortunes should supersede one's interest in avoiding misfortune altogether. The old man's values resemble a modern idea of marriage as an equal partnership, at least insofar as a husband and wife have similar responsibilities to each other. Just as it would be illegal and frowned upon for an Athenian woman to commit adultery, he believes that Xouthos should not sleep with an enslaved woman, even if his marriage to Kreousa does not produce any children.³⁶ He elaborates, "It would be a simpler problem if, having persuaded you by speaking of your childlessness, he brought into the house a child of a well-born mother. And if this was bitter to you, he should have sought after a

³⁴ Euripides, *Ion*, 813-21.

³⁵ There is perhaps some implicit resentment when the old man calls him a foreigner (*xenos*) or a belief that a foreigner should be especially grateful to receive a position and wealth that a citizen deserves more.

³⁶ Athenian law required that a husband should divorce his adulterous wife (Dem 59.87) or else become disenfranchised; the woman was not allowed to attend public religious rituals (Dem 59.85).

marriage to an Aeolian.”³⁷ The old man still would not completely approve of Xouthos fathering an illegitimate child with Kreousa’s consent, but he says that this would be preferable to the actual situation as he understands it. So, although *Ion* is not about a jealous woman in the same way that others of Euripides’s plays (such as *Andromache* and *Medea*) are, a character still expresses the recurring belief that a woman should be allowed to have strong opinions about her husband’s sexual behavior.

Both Kreousa and the chorus (who identify very strongly with Kreousa until she becomes violent), echo the old man’s sentiments that her husband betrayed her when he ostensibly had a child with another woman, and they also suggest that adulterous men should be criticized like adulterous women.³⁸ Kreousa asks, “Didn’t my husband become a traitor?” and the chorus joins her in criticizing the actions of men who mistreat women—most notably, men who engage in the same schemes as Xouthos.³⁹ In response to the old man’s accusation that Xouthos fathered an illegitimate child secretly to whom he is intending to pass down the kingship of Athens, they respond, “Alas, I always hate evildoing men, who construct injustices and then embellish them with their scheming.”⁴⁰ Later, the chorus clarifies that they are upset with men for injustices pertaining to sexual immorality: “See, you who sing with discordant songs, when you sing, about our beds and unholy couplings of unlawful Cypris, how superior in piety we are to men’s unjust procreation. Let discordant and contrary-speaking songs attack men with respect to their sexual behavior.”⁴¹ They criticize Xouthos specifically (although the explanation of his transgressions also describes Apollo): “In his house he did not share with my mistress their procreative fortune, but he granted another favor to Aphrodite and obtained a bastard child.”⁴² The chorus, like the

³⁷ Euripides, *Ion*, 839-42.

³⁸ Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, 191.

³⁹ Euripides, *Ion*, 864.

⁴⁰ Euripides, *Ion*, 829, 832-34.

⁴¹ Euripides, *Ion*, 1090-98.

⁴² Euripides, *Ion*, 1101-05.

old man, feels that it is a transgression for a man to sleep with another woman if his wife can't have children.

They suggest, moreover, that Xouthos acted this way out of base desire (associated with Aphrodite); they do not even consider that he might have wanted to father an heir or continue his lineage, and one assumes that they would have mentioned this consideration if they thought it was legitimate. The chorus questions why women face such accusations of promiscuity when men act this way, as well. This is a particularly egalitarian statement, since men mention their own extramarital relationships frequently; these relationships are simply not frowned upon in the same way as adultery involving a married woman. Again, even in a play where illegitimacy is more at issue than romantic jealousy, the characters associated with the protagonist assign blame to the man who slept with another woman and fathered the illegitimate child in the first place. Even Ion himself echoes the concern that Kreousa will feel abandoned when she realizes that her husband had a child without her: "When I come into someone else's house as a foreigner, and your childless wife, who previously shared her misfortunes with you and now has drawn a bad lot and carries it bitterly by herself, how will I not reasonably be hated by her?"⁴³ He points out, like Kreousa and the chorus and the old man, that she will reasonably be very upset that she no longer can share her disappointment with her husband, and she will take it out on Ion.

It is remarkable that so many of the characters speak with one voice vindicating Kreousa's anger at her husband for fathering an illegitimate child. In general, Kreousa is the most authoritative figure in the play, and, accordingly, the narrative and the characters treat her almost like a Mary Sue. Loraux writes that Kreousa is at the center of the play: everything revolves around her, and everything depends on her. The other characters and the eventual resolution agree with her grievances; moreover, Kreousa "recognizes the child [Ion] and

⁴³ Euripides, *Ion*, 607-11.

transmits to him the land of Athens and the power to rule it,” and she “alone presumes to upset the plans of Apollo.”⁴⁴ When the play discusses the transgression of men against women, Kreousa speaks from her own perspective. We hear of her rape by Apollo almost entirely from her: she discusses its negative impact on her and the brutality of her experience.⁴⁵ She admits that she intends to “violate the norms of female discourse and prove...Xouthos and Apollo to be ungrateful traitors,” but Euripides still chooses to tell this part of the story through her eyes, and the chorus agrees with her both with respect to “a particular idea of the condition of woman, who is born unfortunate” and in that they also “have consistently refused to be reduced to silence.”⁴⁶ It is unusual in a Euripides play for the chorus to be so directly involved in the action of the plot. The role of the chorus (according to Horace) is to keep a secret, but the chorus in *Ion* tells Kreousa that her husband has been given a child, even though Xouthos told them to stay quiet under pain of death. In this way they foil Apollo’s plan to keep Kreousa in the dark.⁴⁷ The chorus subverts the authority of the king of Athens and a god, but they are loyal to Kreousa. Even when she transgresses against expected female behavior, the play tacitly approves; this should also apply to her indignation that her husband fathered an illegitimate child who now threatens her city.

There is one final, albeit less obvious, reason that the play asks us to side with Kreousa over Xouthos: as I have mentioned, she is an *epikleros* responsible for passing down her father’s estate to her son. Aside from raising the stakes of the play, this status somewhat detaches her from the authority of her husband. The *epiklerate* reflects a concern for the continuation of the *oikos* and creates an edge case regarding the question of whether women “belong to their fathers

⁴⁴ Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, 189-90.

⁴⁵ Euripides, *Ion*, 877-80, 891-904.

⁴⁶ Gibert, *Ion*, 260; Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, 190-91.

⁴⁷ Louise Matthaei, *Studies in Greek Tragedy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1918), 65; Hor., *Ars P.* 200; Lee, *Ion*, 666-67, 760, 774-75.

or to their husbands.”⁴⁸ In the case of an *epikleros*, her husband certainly had the same authority over her as in any other marriage, but he did not own her father’s estate, and she could be taken away from him and married to a relative: according to Ormand, “she is never really ‘his’” because “the woman belongs to the paternal line.”⁴⁹ Insofar as was possible in ancient Athens, Kreousa is very much her own woman. She is not entirely subsumed by her husband, and, if she should instead be subsumed by her father and his family, her father is dead, and no one in her family has taken responsibility for her.⁵⁰ She is, by default, the leader of the house of Erechtheus. Kreousa is the spiritual foremother of all Athenians, which gives her a certain mythological status surpassing Xouthos. It should be at least as counterintuitive for the audience to prefer the concerns of a foreign ruler over those of one of the *original* Athenians as it would be for them to sympathize with a woman who feels insulted by her unfaithful husband.

If the audience is not inclined to agree with Kreousa’s feelings of betrayal, they must at least agree with the concern for the preservation of Athenian sovereignty and the *oikos*. The challenge for the audience is not to understand why there is any conflict at all—the challenge is to understand that, just as a woman can share their concerns about the city, a woman can also experience the same betrayal from an unfaithful husband. The conflict is not totally one-dimensional without this understanding, but the audience does not have a complete perspective of Kreousa’s personal feelings and motivations without it.

⁴⁸ Ormand, “Marriage, Identity, and the Tale of Mestra,” 330.

⁴⁹ Ormand, “Marriage, Identity, and the Tale of Mestra,” 329-30.

⁵⁰ Indeed, it is only possible for Kreousa to have this uniquely independent position because Euripides makes his characters neglect inheritance law.

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