

## Introduction

### I. General

*Ion* is not one of Euripides' most popular or well-known plays. It will not be found in an anthology of seven or even ten Greek tragedies. To find it you have to look to Complete Plays. On the other hand his three most copied and read tragedies in late antiquity and the Middle Ages known as the Byzantine triad, *Hecuba*, *Orestes*, and *Phoenician Women* are also rarely read in school nowadays or performed on the commercial stage. *Ion* is not in the Euripidean canon of plays taught in school and commented on by scholars that includes the triad plus *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Andromache*, *Trojan Women*, *Bacchae*, and *Rhesus* (the last of doubtful authorship). Rather, *Ion* belongs to the edition that survives of nine of Euripides' plays in alphabetical order according to the first letter in the titles of the plays beginning with the letters from epsilon to kappa. Of the canonical ten a smaller selection has been made unofficially by the taste of our contemporaries, *Medea*, *Trojan Women*, *Bacchae*, to which (I hope) we can add *Alcestis* and *Hippolytus*, and outside the canon, perhaps *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Electra*.

*Ion* is almost universally praised as a charming piece of theatre, potentially so, one should add, since it is so rarely performed. It is fair to ask why a play with such a delightful character as the naive teenage lad Ion who dances with his broom, and the mature Creusa whose story of trauma and loss of her only child becomes more and more poignant, should be so neglected. Coming of age stories are popular as are treatments of the wrongs done to women and their triumph over them. In addition a boy without a name or a home is discovered to be son of the god Apollo and the queen of Athens. The play has an attempted murder plot and comes close to both filicide and matricide, both happily averted, but interfering with our generic expectation of tragedy that has been ingrained in us by Aristotle's favorite and ours, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (*Oedipus Tyrannos*), which includes patricide, incest, suicide, and self-mutilation (all done on purpose, by the way, but only the latter two with anything like full knowledge). Euripides' *Ion* (with the Sophoclean play never far from our consciousness, because of the setting, the oracular response, and the plot) treats these themes (excepting incest, I think, unless we consider that Ion seems to think Xuthus is coming on to him in front of the temple and self-mutilation) but turns them upside down: Ion does not shoot his father; Creusa's murder plot is foiled by pigeons in the pavilion; Ion never sends his mother to the executioners because his surrogate mother stops him. What makes this play so unacceptable to modern audiences and producers? It cannot be that our generic expectations that are based on modern definitions of the genres of tragedy and comedy are the main problem, though we do tend to expect multiple deaths in tragedy and to play comedy for laughs: in *Ion* (identified by many as a tragicomedy, a genre that did not exist in classical times) there is some humor, but the laugh-out-loud wit of Oscar Wilde (or Aristophanes) is lacking, though his subtlety is not. Well, to stop belaboring the issue, there are two things at least that make this a hard play to stage today: the presence and prominence of Greek gods and the political, patriotic theme. To be brief, gods, especially gods from the machine are an embarrassment and are rarely treated seriously in modern performances. Ion's cast includes two gods, Hermes and Athena, whose words must be taken more or less seriously whether at face value or with an ironic twist and its setting includes the hovering absence of a third, Apollo and his doubtful oracle. In addition, though a charming coming-of-age

drama, *Ion* is an origin story complete with eponymous heroes giving their names to the various Greek peoples. Along with this the autochthony myth of Athenian kings being born from the earth and the xenophobia that goes along with it provide many cringe-worthy moments for a modern audience. Xuthus and later Ion become victims of this hatred and fear of foreigners, immigrants to a land that produces its own children. The lies, half-truths, and truths voiced about them lead to plots to kill them to keep them from replacing the rightful citizens and rulers. These, then, are the themes we will take up after a brief look at the structure of the play and how it fits together.

## II. Outline of *Ion* and Parts of a Play

PROLOGUE (1–183): the part of the play before the entrance of the chorus. Euripidean plays usually begin with a monologue, often by one of the characters in the play, but sometimes by a god who does not reappear, as in *Alcestis*, *Hippolytus*, *Trojan Women*, and here, with the speech of Hermes. The monologue is often followed by a dialogue, but here it is followed by a song from the title character. The monologue gives the background so that we know the present situation of the characters: the rape of Creusa who still suffers the trauma, the birth and exposure (in a basket or hamper) of her son; his rescue (with the basket) by Hermes at Apollo's behest; the marriage and childlessness of Creusa and Xuthus, and their pilgrimage to the oracle, all of which are crucial to understanding the plot. At the end of his speech Hermes removes himself and becomes part of the audience, so that he (along with us) can learn just what happens to the boy, a hint perhaps that all will not go according to plan. The actor playing Hermes will return in another role (probably Creusa).

†Hermes is balanced by Athena at the end: both divinities are here to “godsplain” everything to us. —The song of Ion shows his simple life, devoted to Apollo, his filial affection for the god, and his attachment to Delphi, the temple and religious life (all crucial to the development of his character and the play's themes). †This is matched at the end by his acceptance of Apollo as his father and his departure for Athens and a political life.

Among the references that presage events to come:

- The Pythia inside the temple who will make an appearance in the *exodos*
- Injunction to the attendants to keep a reverent silence
- Phoebus as begetter
- Birds in the sacred space

PARODOS (184–236): Entrance song of the Chorus. The chorus enters along *parodos* A, (as if) climbing to the main temple from below, whether just arriving from Athens or coming from the guest lodgings or perhaps along both *parodoi* for a more balanced scene. They are in Delphi as attendants of Creusa, but right now on stage (i.e., in the *orchestra*, the dancing place for the chorus) as sight-seers. They are impressed with the art work on and around the temple and notice that it does not fall short of Athenian workmanship. Though the setting of the play is Delphi, Athens is not far from anyone's mind. They describe the temple sculptures as if they were real scenes. They are mythical, but known to the chorus from their own weaving.

The themes from their Art 101 class that recur:

- Monsters to be killed: the longest on Heracles with Iolaus against the Hydra
- The Battle of the Gods and Giants
- Athena with her aegis (The monstrous Gorgon has already been killed.)
- The presence of Bacchus

And with Ion in the second antistrophe:

- Rules of religious decorum broken in the 4<sup>th</sup> episode

† Artistic representation plays an important part in the 4<sup>th</sup> episode with the building of pavilion, a stand-in for the temple.

FIRST EPISODE (237–451) Ion, Creusa, and the chorus in conversation. Xuthus enters at line 392. The two main characters meet, compliment each other's mein and manners, and learn each other's stories. Creusa tells her story for the first time, but pretends she is "just asking for a friend." Ion's religious decorum insists that the oracle cannot be approached with a question about an alleged misdeed of the god. Xuthus enters with good news from Trophonius and goes about the business of consulting the oracle. Ion scolds Apollo.

Themes that recur:

- Athenian history and genealogy and especially autochthony
- Childlessness and orphanhood, mothers and children
- Criticism of gods

† The two (Creusa and Ion) meet again in the Exodos, she in terror, he in pursuit. Little by little, guided by the Pythia and Creusa herself, their natural empathy returns and prevails.

FIRST STASIMON (452–509): the chorus calls on Athena and Artemis, praises the home with children, goes over the scene of the rape of Creusa's "friend" and the tragedy she and the child have suffered.

Recurring themes:

- Birth (of Athena, of Ion)
- Continuation of the line of Erechtheus
- Misdeeds of the gods

SECOND EPISODE (510–675) Xuthus exiting from the temple tries to embrace Ion. He has been told that the first man he meets is his son. Ion, unused to visitors to the oracle being so effusive, shies away. Xuthus convinces Ion that they are father and son. Ion wonders about his mother and how he came to be in Delphi. Xuthus says he will take Ion home to Athens as his heir. Ion is concerned that the Athenians will resent him as a foreigner and a bastard (a hint of xenophobia and misogyny) and that Creusa will be more despondent: he admits to feeling for her childless fate. He ends with his happy life in Delphi. Xuthus takes charge of the situation and his fellow actors, announces sacrifices and a farewell feast, and coerces the chorus into silence.

Recurring themes:

- Fathers and sons
- Mothers and sons
- The line of Erechtheus (noble ancestry of Creusa)
- Athens and Delphi

SECOND STASIMON (676–724) The chorus sings in pity for Creusa and shifts to suspicion of Xuthus and Ion: villainy is afoot. Their xenophobia comes to the surface against these foreign interlopers and they pray for Ion's death.

Recurring themes:

- Xenophobia
- House of Erechtheus as rightful rulers
- Dionysus and Bacchae (female worshipers)
- Male deviousness
- Female bloodthirstiness

THIRD EPISODE (725–1047) Creusa returns with an old man, her late father's caretaker. This is a long and metrically diverse and emotionally intense episode, beginning with the chorus' divulging the secret in pieces, some true and some false assumptions. Creusa reacts to the (false) report that she will never have a child in a sorrowful interchange (*kommos* 763–99), in which she sings and the Old Man and chorus respond in the iambs of dialogue. The chorus tells of Apollo's gift of a son to Xuthus. The Old Man makes assumptions about Xuthus' treachery that lead him to suggest killing Ion and Xuthus. Creusa sings obliquely about the rape (her second telling of her story; already told by Hermes); and then in dialogue with the Old Man she repeats it point by point (her third telling). There follows a discussion of where and how to perpetrate the murder of Ion. The Old Man departs to carry out the plan; Creusa goes to her lodging.

Themes:

- Xenophobia
- Creusa's respect for her marriage
- Erichthonius and Erechtheus still influence the action
- Conspiracy to commit murder

THIRD STASIMON (1048–1105): the chorus prays that the plot will be successful. And sings of the usurpation by a foreigner and of men's treacherous adulteries.

Themes:

- Xenophobia: Shame of having a foreigner rule Athens
- Men's treachery in their relations with women

FOURTH EPISODE (1106–1228): A servant from the Athenian entourage rushes on stage, looking for Creusa, now the object of a manhunt. He gives the messenger speech, narrating the story from the moment Xuthus and Ion left through the feast and attempted murder of the boy. He keeps repeating the fact that Ion is the new son, chosen by the oracle.

Themes:

- Worship of Dionysus
- Art exhibits both mythological and cosmological
- Birds living freely in the temple precinct
- Ion's initiative
- Apollo's part in choosing the son for Xuthus

†The third and fourth episodes mirror each other: each is dominated by a servant of Creusa's, one

to contribute to and carry out her murder plot, the other to set up the scene and tell of its undoing.  
 †The description of works of art balances that of the Parodos.

ASTROPHIC CHORAL INTERLUDE (in lieu of FOURTH STASIMON), 1229–49: the chorus reacts to the news in fear for their mistress and themselves in a brief song in which they express a longing to escape and the futility of it.

Themes:

- Dionysus and death
- The injustice of their attempt to kill Ion
- One cannot escape what is

EXODUS (Closing Sequence) in four parts, 1250–1622. The *exodus* is everything that happens after the last choral ode, quite a lot in this play.

1. Creusa, Chorus, Ion (1250–1319): Creusa returns in terror and is persuaded by the chorus to take refuge at the altar. Ion follows in pursuit with harsh words. Creusa defends herself and takes the initiative.

Themes:

- Creusa's family tree: only the family of Erectheus has the right to rule.
- Mothers, fathers, and sons: inheritance
- Gods make mistakes

2. Prophetess and Ion, speaking; Creusa silent (1320–68): The Pythian priestess takes the rare step of leaving her oracular seat during a session and enters the play. She stops Ion from threatening Creusa. She gives him the hamper in which his mother exposed him and the objects with which she covered and adorned his body.

Themes:

- Tokens of recognition: the clues Ion needs to look for his mother
- Apollo's part in saving the child
- Parents and surrogate parents

3. Ion, Creusa (1369–1552): the recognition scene. Creusa recognizes the hamper and leaves the altar, but is restrained by the armed men who accompany Ion. Creusa is able to identify the items in the hamper in detail and is accepted by Ion as his mother. They share an emotional scene in which Creusa sings and Ion speaks in iambs. Creusa tells her story for a fourth time. Ion still doubts Apollo's paternity.

Themes:

- Weaving
- Athena's aegis
- Athenian history
- Genealogy of the ruling family
- Mother and son

†These scenes mirror the earlier meeting of mother and son and the empathetic feelings they show for each other's tragedies, that now become one story and an easing of the tragedy.

†The tokens Hermes identified for us are brought out and used to identify mother and son to each other.

4. *Deus ex machina* (1553–1618): Athena, Ion, Creusa. Athena appears above the temple to remove doubt and to prophesy the future of the characters, of the Athenian and other Greek peoples, and of her empire. The characters accept her dispensations. They all go to Athens where everybody will live happily ever after. A long line of descendants will be born.

Themes:

Oracles true and false

The unbroken line of Erechthids

Apollo's role

Choral Tag (1619–22): the chorus files out following Creusa and Ion to Athens.

†The tokens of Hermes are revealed; mother and son separated in Hermes' narrative are reunited.

†Athena at the end closes the circle.

The play is framed by the two scenes with gods. Within are numerous mirroring scenes with the murder plot and its failed execution at the center, surrounded by scenes of Ion meeting his parents. The ring composition suggested here can be developed in much greater detail.

### III. Themes and Hooks

#### 1. Is the oracle true?

“What Is and What Will Be” (*Ion*, 7)

“Is the god true, or are his oracles in vain?” (*Ion*, 1537), in consternation, Ion asks this question that to him is serious, after being told that Apollo is his father and knowing also that Apollo told Xuthus that Ion was his son. Are we left knowing what is true? Or knowing that what we have just seen is to be taken as true or should it be read as ironic (as many critics do) or not as authoritative as the divine presence wants us to believe?

Who is Ion? In other versions of his genealogy, Ion is in fact the son of Xuthus, son of Hellen, grandson of Deucalion and Pyrrha

After Ion the son of Xuthus they were called Ionians. Herodotus 7.94

After Xuthus received the Peloponnese [from his father Hellen] he fathered Achaeus (Achaïos) and Ion by Creusa daughter of Erechtheus; from Achaeus and Ion the Achaïans and Ionians are named. Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 1.7.3

See also Strabo and Pausanias who also refer to Ion as son of Xuthus.

From being no one's son, through Apollo, Ion acquires two fathers and two possible mothers (an unknown, unnamed Delphian victim of rape by Xuthus and his mother Creusa, victim of rape by Apollo). Apollo, a god, acts just like a man, like Xuthus he seduces a local girl and later like anybody's friend he gives a son for whom he has no use to a childless friend who needs an heir.

Hermes in the prologue defines the oracle (5–7).

*I have come to this land of Delphi, where*

*Phoebus, sitting at earth's navel, intones  
oracles to mortals: what is and what will be.*

Hermes proceeds to tell what was and hint at the tokens that will reveal Ion's identity. It is left to the priestess and Creusa herself to reveal and interpret the tokens. Throughout history from Homer's revelation of Odysseus' scar tokens of recognition are true evidence of identity. Even the ones Euripides' Electra discounts: weaving, for example, or a lock of hair at other times have been proof that we have no reason to disbelieve. And Electra believes that a scar identifies her brother, though it seems a pretty generic scar. Ion doubts, then accepts the tokens (the first one is generic: it could have been made by any Athenian girl; the gold snakes are more specific to the Erechthidae of whom Creusa is the sole known survivor at present); he doubts, then accepts the paternity of Apollo, not quite believing his mother's allegation, but accepting Athena's word for it. Is he still the sincere lad of the parodos and first episode, though less naive, or has his growing up reached the point of cynicism? Must we rely on the director or trust to our own back and forth interpretation?

What Apollo planned is convenient for himself, for Xuthus, and the boy who will come into the inheritance that is his birthright, not from Xuthus, but from Creusa.

*That is why they have come here to the oracle  
of Apollo, out of desire for children. Loxias takes  
the lead in this. He has not forgotten, as you might think.  
He will give his own son to Xuthus when he comes  
to consult the oracle and he will tell him 70  
that he is his, so that when he reaches his mother's  
home he will be recognized by Creusa, but Loxias'  
sexual assault will remain secret and the boy will  
enjoy what is his right. Apollo will give him the name  
Ion, known throughout Hellas as founder of the Asian land. 75  
Well, now I'll move aside into this grove of laurel,  
so I can learn just what is decided concerning the boy. (66–77)*

Hermes wants to see if and how this plan will come true. Some of it, yes. But in lines 71–4 matters are more iffy. The purpose clause of 71–2 is far from logical. The recognition by Creusa is left up in the air. How would this unlikely recognition happen once Ion had arrived in Athens? Hermes would not be there to witness it, nor would the audience, unless we are all going (as in Eumenides) to Athens. Our prior knowledge that Ion survives to become the eponymous founder of the Ionians doesn't help with this question. By the end of the play we have seen what grief family secrets can cause. Ion will have a real mother and a surrogate father, but will have to pretend that Xuthus is his real father and Creusa his stepmother.

Hermes tells what is. What will be does not turn out quite as predicted. Ion is given to Xuthus as his son. This is reinterpreted by Creusa and Athena, as a friend giving his son to a friend to adopt as his heir. But for one thing: Xuthus is not his friend. Xuthus is convenient. Creusa points out that (914–15)

*[Apollo] sends home a son for my husband  
when no favors have been given.*

So we are told that Apollo's oracle is going to lie to Xuthus. We will find out at the end that, on advice from Athena, Xuthus is not to be told that Ion is not his son, so that the falsehood prevails.

And as we will see, Apollo is not a very good predictor of what will be. His dismissal of women as sentient beings with the power to act is both foolish and aggressive. On the other hand, history accepts Xuthus as the father of Ion and Athena predicts the naming of the Phylae and other peoples. The *phylae* have changed over time in name and number, but these are accepted names if not with the exact meanings Euripides attributes to them for the earliest tribal divisions. Hermes is not a good predictor either: the assault is widely known by the end of the play. Apollo gives him the name Ion, but so do Xuthus and Hermes. Xuthus thinks he is making it up himself, and the Old Man uses this as part of his charge of underhandedness against Xuthus.

In the first episode, Ion questions the validity of one of the founding stories, asking about the sacrifice of Erechtheus' daughters, he says "Is it true or a story idly told?" (275). At the end of the episode he scolds Apollo and other gods for acting like men and worse (as Creusa had done earlier), but knows he cannot question the god about it (a sign of his growing sophistication). Ion sees the cruelty of this blow to Creusa. He has even noticed that there may be something she is not telling him about the "friend" and her child. Trophonius' oracle was more truthful and inclusive and kinder, when he said that neither will go home childless.

A pattern of revelation and concealment runs throughout *Ion*. "Is the oracle true" is not an adequate question. Considering that Delphi is at the center of the play, Delphi, the place all the Greeks go to consult the god, to learn the word of the god, this must be significant. Where to start? At the beginning of the play or the first event that led to this particular revelation? The latter would have been when the golden-haired god revealed himself to the maiden Creusa, as she reveals in her poignant monody, for the first time acknowledging a glimpse of beauty in her terror:

*You came to me, your hair gleaming with gold,  
when I was gathering in my lap  
saffron strands, reflecting the golden rays. (887–90)*

At the beginning of the play Hermes reveals the boy's origins along with additional information, both true and not. Creusa was able (with Apollo's help, we are told) to hide her pregnancy and the birth of her child from her family and the palace staff. She exposes the baby, to hide him from her family, in the same cave where Apollo exposed himself to her. Apollo conceals the fact that the child has been saved, causing her unhappiness and futile hatred of the god. Apollo wants to keep his rape of Creusa secret: what reason can there be but a feeling like that of Ion that gods should be better than they are or at least seem to be? Creusa's loss of the child and with that loss her loathing for the god make it impossible for her not to talk about it. And talk she does, at first concealing her name as victim and mother, but revealing the acts of rape, childbirth, exposure of the newborn. Without knowing her personal involvement, Ion prevents Creusa from consulting the oracle on the grounds that the god would be unwilling to reveal something unfavorable to himself. Creusa asks that the story of her "friend" be concealed from Xuthus. In the next scene Apollo reveals an oracle that is at best only partially true. He has concealed the true birth of Ion, leaving the boy with questions like who was my mother? and what about your wife, Creusa? The boy is reluctant to accept his new father and homeland: he would rather stay in Delphi as Apollo's (foster) son and slave than go to Athens as Xuthus' bastard. Xuthus impetuously announces the oracle and commands the chorus on pain of death to conceal it from his wife. The chorus, whose loyalty (and xenophobia) are clear, can keep Creusa's secret, but not Xuthus'. They add a false surmise of their own: that Creusa is destined to never bear a child. Creusa then acts on false information, from the



god, from her women attendants, and from a slave in her entourage. This slave, beginning with the false information, adds some of his own, the self-serving schemes of Xuthus to father children outside the home. Xuthus himself (truthfully we imagine) assured his new son that he had remained monogamous since his marriage to Creusa. The elderly slave, using his own and others' false information plots with Creusa to kill the boy, who is saved by a bird and another slave. The second unknown slave turned out to be a truer mouthpiece of the god than some of the people who speak plain Greek when his untoward utterance is interpreted as a sign that saves Ion's life. The bird, a traditional omen, reveals in her death the plot on Ion's life. Next the Pythia brings out the tokens that she has carefully concealed up to this time, revealing only the basket decorated with fillets. These, under Ion's investigation, Creusa identifies, revealing herself as Ion's mother. But her interpretation of Apollo's motives in giving Ion to Xuthus is not satisfactory to Ion and he is about to demand an explanation from the god, something he has discouraged his mother from doing. Athena at last confirms Apollo's fatherhood and adds that it is a good idea to conceal it from Xuthus. One can imagine complications, but these are clever people. The essence of the play is falsehood revealed and truth concealed. To this day, to those who rely on the historians, geographers, and mythographers, Xuthus is Ion's father. Who is to say? Hermes as a character withdraws from our view to become one of us to find out what has been written for the lad. Nobody (but Euripides and the actors) knew at the beginning. Euripides puts a new twist on this old founding story.

## 2. Mothers and Fathers

### "Mixing of Seed" (*Ion*, 406)

Xuthus is known to be father of Ion. This must be so in order for the boy to have a name and a family, a genealogy, an inheritance, and a polis. Even without Apollo, Ion's family tree is good. At least Apollo does not have a Hera to persecute his children as she did Zeus' son Heracles and many others. The chorus points out that gods' offspring don't fare well.

After Xuthus arrives from his consultation with the oracle of Trophonius, Creusa asks:

*what divine word do you bring from Trophonius  
about the mingling of our seed to make children.* (405–6)

"Mixing of seed" implies equal contribution of both parents in the creation of the child. The mother is not just the nurturing ground for the seed to grow in. The earthborn beget only daughters, all ill-fated except Creusa, who is the last of the autochthonous race of Erechthidae. That is, there are no Erechthidae.<sup>1</sup> Creusa and her descendants it turns out will give birth only to sons (unless Athena leaves out daughters whether intentionally or inadvertently). The myth of autochthony favors the father. There is no mother, but the soil. In this play a central irony is that the mother is the carrier of the legacy of the earthborn kings. Another is that the earthborn are royal but also monstrous. Ion's address to Creusa, after she has tried to kill him, puts her firmly into the latter category (1261–5):

*Cephisus, with your bullish face, look what you*

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<sup>1</sup>*Erechthidae* is also used to mean "Athenians" in general, implying that the whole polis is autochthonous.

*produced as a descendant in this woman: a viper,  
a serpent, her eyes flashing a blood-red flame.  
Her daring knows no bounds and she's as potent  
as the Gorgon's blood with which she meant to kill me.* 1265

Fathers are most often named in genealogies. Mothers in narratives or scenes of deep emotions. Hermes gives the most intimate picture of motherhood, including pregnancy and giving birth. He is careful with the baby and wants him to be seen and found (unlike Athena with Erichthonius, who wants him protected but kept secret; both aims are because she feels responsible for him in some way).

The Pythia takes up the baby who will become Ion (49–50):

*She did not know  
Phoebus was his father, hadn't a clue who his mother was.*

Later Creusa asks the still unnamed temple servant if he has undertaken a search for his mother and he replies (329):

*I have not a shred of evidence to start an inquiry, lady.*

Speculation about his mother is a constant. Hermes tells us Creusa is his mother. This is a fact. But there are other mothers whether through birth or loving care. First the Pythian priestess who brought him up has always been looked on as a mother and she accepts the title and relationship. At first she wonders indignantly about the boldness of a Delphian girl leaving her baby at the temple, but those thoughts leave her as she begins to mother him (inspired by Apollo, or not). Creusa herself invents another mother in her “just asking for a friend” story. Ion wonders if he was born of the earth. More speculations flood in after Xuthus is given the boy: during the Bacchic rituals he admits that it's possible he slept with one of the Delphian young women. Ion hopes his mother turns out to be an Athenian of citizen birth. The Old Man invents an unnamed slave woman in Athens with whom Xuthus intentionally betrayed Creusa.

Ion's fathers are fewer: Apollo begot him by violently raping Creusa; Xuthus is declared his father and makes his fatherhood plausible by admitting to a possible unsanctioned affair with a local Delphian girl during a Bacchic celebration; a man who seduced Creusa or her “friend” both suggested by Ion himself. The giving of Ion to Xuthus maintains the priority of the father as parent, the more common way of looking at parenthood at that time. The father gives the name and birthright. But Ion's birthright as ruler of Athens in this case comes from his *mother*. In all probability Ion's name is a back-formation from his future as founding father of the Ionians (that is, they had a name and existence before he did); Xuthus gives him that name as if it comes from chance. The name has already been given to the character in our play by Hermes and Apollo. Apollo's gift of the boy to Xuthus is interpreted both by Creusa and Athena as a man's giving a son in adoption to a childless friend. This was not uncommon. The adopted child would have the same rights of inheritance as a genetic child and since these adoptions were often of adults, the early child-parent affection is not to be expected. Ion has already given that to Apollo (109–111):

*Since I have no mother, have no father,  
I serve these temples of Phoebus  
that have been both father and mother to me.*

And (136–40):

*Phoebus is a father to me, my begetter.*

*I bless the one who feeds me,  
and say the name of father,  
so kind to me,  
of Phoebus, present in this temple.*

Even the birds are building nests in the temple to raise their brood. Ion's address to the rising sun repeats the sunrise discovery of the baby in the basket. As the day progresses he has encounters with his real mother, his adoptive father, his surrogate mother, but never with his real father. He also moves from being a naive, happy youth, devoted to an ideal god, to being less naive about the god; from there to being a bit cynical about politics both in Delphi and in the outside world, to being a member of the adult Delphian citizen body enough to bring charges against his mother and under torture against her grandfather's surrogate father.

In the first episode another natural affection develops between Ion and his mother. Who is she?

*My name is Creusa. I am daughter of Erechtheus.  
My fatherland is the city of the Athenians. (260–1)*

This is what she has that he does not, a name, a heritage, a homeland. It is almost as if he really had sprung from the earth. The juxtaposition of Creusa's childlessness and Ion's orphanhood exposes an immediate natural empathy and desire to help each other. Until she decides to demand an answer from Apollo. Most ironically, Ion who continues to wonder about her almost ends the scene with, "she's no kin to me," just before scolding his actual father, the god Apollo. In the next episode he gets another father.

This theme continues in the first stasimon. The chorus sings of the motherless birth of Athena from Zeus' head without the need of the goddess who relieves childbirth in the strophe. In the antistrophe they praise the presence of children in a family (472–92):

Antistrophe

<i>For it holds out an unshakeable source of surpassing happiness to mortals for whom children thriving in their youth shed a bright light in the ancestral house leaving a succession of wealth from fathers</i>	475
<i>to children who will come later, protection in bad times, love in good times, in war they add a saving strength to the land of their fathers.</i>	480
<i>For myself I pray that the caring for children come before wealth and royal halls. I disdain the childless life and reproach anyone who prefers it.</i>	485
<i>With modest resources let me spend my life blessed with children.</i>	490

Think about this coming from slaves whose children would have been slaves. In Euripides' *Medea* the chorus, almost in despair because Medea has told them she will kill her sons, sings in favor of a life without children:

*Astrophic choral song (Medea, 1081-1115)*

*Often before now  
I have gone through the more subtle stories  
and I have pored over greater questions  
than women usually investigate.  
But we have a Muse too* 1085  
*who associates with us for sharing wisdom.  
Not with all of us,  
out of many women the number of us  
inspired with the gift of song is small.  
I have come to believe that human beings who* 1090  
*have never had the experience of rearing  
children, are much better off than  
those of us who are parents.  
Because they never have to worry  
whether children turn out to be* 1095  
*a pleasure for humans or a misery,  
the childless are free of many troubles.  
But those who have in their houses the  
sweet bloom of children—I see them  
worn down by care all the time,* 1100  
*first how they will bring up their children right  
and how they will leave them a livelihood.  
And worse than this it remains unclear  
whether their toil is spent on children  
who will turn out good or bad.  
But one misfortune—last of all* 1105  
*and worst for all humankind—I have to say it:  
yes, suppose they have found sufficient living  
and the children have grown up to young adulthood  
and they have turned out to be good. If fate  
should have it so, along comes Death* 1110  
*carrying off their children to Hades.  
How then does it profit, in addition to the other woes  
that the gods cast upon mortals,  
to bear this bitterest grief  
for the sake of children?* 1115

At the end of *Medea*, Medea's and Jason's children and Creon's child are dead leaving the parents with never-ending grief. At the end of *Ion*, there is a child for Creusa and (the same child for) Xuthus and the promise of more to fill their house with joy and be a strength in times of war. In the

epode of *Ion*'s first stasimon the darker side takes over: the daughters of Aglaurus are not known as dancers but as the girls punished for looking at Erichthonius which drove them mad. They danced at the site of the violent rape and secret exposure.

The Chorus ends (507–9):

*Not in my weaving nor in other tales  
have I heard that children  
born to mortals from gods have a share in the happy life.*

In the second episode Ion meets his father. Xuthus meets his son (as is known in earlier and later Greek literature). The chorus ends on the dark side: mortal children of gods don't fare too well. Even Heracles had a mortal father who stood by him in hard times. Ion needs a father. He does not warm to Xuthus who offers him a family and home, and a nationality, none of them seemingly his own. He reluctantly accepts Xuthus and continues to long for his mother. He is also reluctant to go to Athens as the son of a foreigner. Usually it is the father who gives legitimacy to the son's membership in the *polis*, but here it is the mother, the daughter and granddaughter of the autochthonous kings. Ion ends the scene praying that his mother is Athenian.

After the exit of Xuthus with his "son" the plot takes another turn. The chorus sees trickery afoot and wishes for Ion's death. This is followed by the murder plot and the report of the attempt to carry it out, followed by the death sentence against Creusa, bringing the play close to a recognizable tragic outcome. All is saved by the women: the Pythia, Creusa, and Athena.

Is the happy ending to be taken at face value or is it ironic? It depends on the reading of certain scenes. We feel the pain and losses of Creusa and Ion. He missed a mother's love; she missed seeing her son grow up. Is Xuthus such a buffoon as many critics take him to be? Is he perhaps rather a rationalist? He is not involved in the Athenian myth of autochthony. It is clear or could be that he is almost as despondent over his childlessness as Creusa is. She perhaps more so because she had a child and lost him. She like most of us is both daring and cowardly (even her slave accuses her of playing the coward). But then she takes matters into her own hands, first in a less than courageous way with almost fool-proof poison, a dark part of her heritage. Her second act of bravery is her leaving of the altar to claim her son. Xuthus had come to consult not only Loxias but Trophonius. He is taking their childlessness seriously. The old slave uses Xuthus' concerns against him to "mansplain" his alleged deceitful behavior. Xuthus is so eager that he accepts the boy whom he had barely acknowledged before. On the other hand he does show concern for his wife: has she been worried about his long absence? He doesn't want her hurt by his bringing home a son. Is Ion sarcastic, as some critics think, when he asks "was I born from mother earth?" He is enmired in the Athenian myths. And Xuthus' answer does not let himself off the hook, by saying that must be it, but by denying that there is such a thing.

In the Third Episode (761–2) the chorus unknowingly (making an assumption) delivers a false oracle. Standing in front of the temple, they tell their mistress she will never have a child. Some critics think this is a flat out lie, but I think that they, like Xuthus, are caught up in the moment. He finds out he has a child. He doesn't think to ask who its mother is. He doesn't think to consider asking the oracle if he and Creusa would have children together. Isn't that why they had come to consult the oracle? Whatever he asked the oracle, the oracle answered obliquely and falsely. But what would be the point of the chorus lying to hurt the mistress to whom they show both loyalty

and affection. The end of the second stasimon envisions Erechtheus commanding the Athenian armies against the foreign invaders, Ion who was a military hero in the more common version of his story and Xuthus whose heroism won him the kingship in Euripides' version. The third Episode begins with Erechtheus represented by a feeble old man, the late king's caretaker. The chorus jumps to a conclusion, based more on their deep feeling than on logic. Xuthus got the child. That was the end of his quest. The chorus sees this as the end for Creusa. They do not yet know that the child she is worrying about is her own. Apollo wanted the easy way out. First he gives the boy to his priestess. Then he gives him to Xuthus to take to Athens and regain his birthright. No explanations. Are we allowed to ask of this not-quite-tragedy, how is this going to happen? Well, in the play it doesn't happen the way Apollo wants it. But how will it work out among the mortals in the future that Athena foretells? Will they just bumble along? On the other hand what Xuthus learned is in some ways true. In the "real" world, Ion *is* "son of Xuthus". In order to be a member of human society he needs a mortal father. Xuthus will accept him. He has already. Creusa in the last scenes accepts him and Ion accepts her. Who is deceived?

Still in the third episode, Creusa claims that she left the child in the hope that his father would save him (965). A person can have more than one motive: Creusa hid the baby and abandoned him to escape disgrace and her parents' wrath. Her mother had had enough pain when her other daughters died in the sacrifice/suicide plot instigated by their father. Her distress was noticed by servants, if not by her parents (942–4). That fear does not preclude Creusa's thought that maybe the god would save their son, which in fact he did. She has given up her belief that this is what happened. But not entirely. She has come to the oracle to find out for sure (and is rebuffed by her own son and later by Athena). Ion does not want to see his god shamed, but he clearly knows enough about Delphic politics to know what *not* to expect from the oracle. As Gibert (p.18) writes, 'Like Creusa, then, Ion becomes a "living and breathing problem in theology."'

The Old Man offers his explanation of what happened, as if it were fact, ending with:

*He fabricated the new name to suit the timing,  
Ion, because the boy met his father coming to him.* (829–30)

The Chorus and the Old Man jump to conclusions, which draw Creusa into taking the next step, acting on those false conclusions that seem so logical when strung out into a complete story. I cannot help thinking of the ways that in our age conspiracy "theories" catch on and lead to violence. Euripides had the name already. He makes up the etymology to suit the occasion of his inventing the story of the parenthood of Apollo. Euripides is going back to a new beginning of this legend, giving it new meaning, a new solution and with it new complications. Are we invited to speculate, jump to conclusions like the characters in the play? What else can we do with it? Parenthood is complicated.

"[The Tralfamadorians] said their flying-saucer crews had identified no fewer than seven sexes on Earth, each essential to reproduction."

Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*.

### 3. Coming of Age: Purity, Naivete, Cynicism

From “The young man . . . sweeping the temple” (*Ion*, 894–5) to  
 “Take your seat on the ancient throne.” (*Ion*, 1617)

Ion’s childhood is described by Hermes in his monologue. He is already growing up and has been given the responsibilities of an adult. His devotion remains pure, naive, idealistic.

*As a child he played, not straying far from the altars  
 that sustained him. But when he blossomed into young  
 manhood, the Delphians made him keeper of the god’s  
 gold and trusted steward of all his treasure. Here  
 in the temple compound his life is devoted to the god.* (52–6)

Ion’s monody depicts this present and his holy life of service to the god,  
*because I am pure and untouched by love.*

*May I never cease to serve Phoebus  
 this way forever,  
 or else somehow end up in good fortune.* (150–3)

His desire to continue this way forever most clearly reveals his youthful naivete. But with his other eye he is already looking for another possibility. Ion’s devotion to his service, his responsibility of overseeing the temple treasures, is seen at the end of the monody when he shakes his bow at the flocking birds. At this point the keeping of the god’s treasure is literal, physical, keeping the temple clean. His respect for the birds hints that it is not absolute.

*But I am ashamed to kill you  
 who bring the gods’ words  
 to mortals.* (179–81)

In the parodos and first episodes we see Ion in action: with the chorus of visitors to the shrine and then with Creusa and her husband. In interaction with others, he is polite, inquisitive, informative, and sympathetic, more open and affable with Creusa than any of the others. He maintains temple protocols, telling the chorus what places are off limits and Creusa that her inquiry is off limits. His frankness may be another sign of his youthful candor. Not so much the questions he asks freely, Who are you, who is your father, where are you from? Any Greek would ask such things. But in doing that he learns also about himself: he has no name, no parents, no polis. But he also shows frankness in his responses to the other characters: suggesting to Creusa that perhaps a fellow human had seduced her friend (and later, the same thing to her). His ideal view of Apollo has until now apparently led him away from paying much attention to scurrilous stories about the gods’ liaisons with mortal women and men, but now he scolds Apollo for not setting a higher standard. Later he will find fault with the notion that the altar can give asylum to everybody, guilty or innocent. And to Xuthus, in the second episode, even after accepting that he is his father, he is not too polite to remark about his status as a foreigner in Athens. To his father (about foreigners):

*I pray the woman who gave me life is from Athens,  
 so I’ll have freedom of speech on Mother’s side.  
 For when a foreigner chances to come to a city  
 of pure stock, even if he’s a citizen in name, still he has  
 a slave’s tongue and does not enjoy the right to speak freely.* (671–5)

Is he revealing cynical knowledge or supposition about Athenian politics and character in these and his earlier remarks? At first he rejects Xuthus' advances as a teenager would. Then rejects the idea of going to Athens as an illegitimate member of the royal family on political and intimate family grounds: he still has sympathy for Creusa. Then accepts the status of guest. In Delphi he has a role, but he cannot "be somebody" outside that character unless he belongs to a human family.

Beginning with the second stasimon, the view of Ion is distorted by how he is seen by others. The chorus sees him as a cheat, an insidious opportunist. We know Ion is innocent of these charges, but one can see how they might arise under the circumstances. The Old Man makes speculations about Xuthus and tells them as if they were true. This is how it happened. But did it happen? Did Xuthus spawn a child by a Delphian woman? Is there another bastard out there or is the bastard Ion as the chorus and the Old Man believe?

*A motherless, no account, born from some slave  
woman is brought in as master of your house. (837–8)*

The Servant's speech repeats again and again the newness and novelty of Ion's acquisition of a father (and a name which he does not use!): "with his new son." At the beginning, Ion continues his dutiful, careful life as the messenger zooms in on the scene. After the feast:

*While this newly identified  
son was holding a libation with all the others  
one of the servants uttered an inauspicious word.  
And because he was raised in the temple among noble  
seers, he took it as an omen (i.e., "bird") and ordered another fresh  
bowl to be filled. He poured the earlier one on the ground  
as libation to the gods and told everyone to pour theirs out. (1187–93)*

After the death of the bird who drank the wine from Ion's cup, he takes the initiative at the feast and shows his first signs of aggression (not unlike Oedipus' with the second shepherd):

*The son named by the oracle threw  
his arms, bare of his cloak, up over the table  
and shouted, "Who is it that was trying to kill me? 1210  
Tell me, old man, for the officiousness was all yours  
and I received the drink from your hand."  
He seized him by his aged arm and searched him  
so he would catch him red-handed, in possession of the poison. (1208–14)*

And he continues with the authorities:

*He took along some of the feasters and ran outside—  
Loxias' young man, delivered by the Pythian oracle.  
He took a stand among the Pythian leaders and said,  
"Holy Earth, the daughter of Erechtheus, 1220  
the foreign woman, has attempted to murder me by poison." (1217–21)*

The Exodos provides the crucial scenes for Ion's growth / coming of age as an adult human and the final scene his acceptance of his place as an adult male in society. The scenes with the Pythia, his surrogate mother and Creusa are the breakthrough moments. We begin with Ion's rage at a jealous woman who tried to kill him and not allow him to become a citizen. He talks of his own mother (1276–8):



*Any pity for you belongs more to me  
and my mother. She may not be with me in person,  
but the name of mother is never far from my heart.*

When he asks her to leave the altar, her response is the cruel, taunting (1307):

*Give that advice to your mother, whoever she is.*

Ion's relationship with the Pythia is formal and loving but not emotional until her loving embrace at the end. The Pythia, like her boss, is rational (this maybe a surprise to folks who have seen/heard her hallucinating). She is kind and thoughtful, preventing her surrogate son from hurting his real mother, as his real father prevented her from killing their son. Ion defers to her wisdom and concern for his welfare. She presents the basket. Ion accepts the tokens as a means of finding his mother. The Pythia is the one who had the joy of seeing Ion grow up, an experience Creusa will never have with him. This is a really intense moment. We watch Creusa, silent at the altar in this scene. When does she begin to have an inkling that this is her lost baby? She has already told us that Ion is about the right age. They liked each other in the first episode. And then the recognition scene: his wariness continues even as he begins to see her again as a woman with a grievance, a woman with courage, a woman with something to say. In the earlier scene he did not just ho-hum the story of her "friend" but took it seriously enough to upbraid the god he serves and loves. Taking the basket in hand, he thinks of his origins. He is using Creusa's story of her "friend." He sees his life up till now from another perspective: some would call it revisionist history. All history is, of course, revisionist. History is an inquiry. When we ask new questions we get new insights. He had told his father about his pleasant safe life in Delphi. Now

*[my mother] left me nameless  
in the god's temple where I lived the life of a slave. (1372–3)*

Having no name has been his fate so far, until his adoption by Xuthus. Having no name means no kin. This is the fate of a slave. No ancestors, no progeny. And again he feels for his mother and what she has lost. Then a doubt creeps in. What if she was a slave? No, I have to find out.

As he talks about the chest, revealing its decorations, its shape, its fabrication and materials, the silent Creusa is able to see it and leaves the altar.

*Seize her! (1402)*

How does this scene look? Ion's armed men (the Delphian posse) take hold of her. There must be a scuffle, but she is closer to Ion, though restrained. Ion's doubts begin to crumble as she names the items and what they mean. She gets all three right and he accepts her. Compare this with Xuthus' scene where he accepts not so much Xuthus as Apollo's oracle. Unlike others in the play who think only of themselves and their part in the story, Ion remembers his putative father. And now what about Father?

*Mother, Father should be here, too, to share  
in this gladness that I have given you both. (1468–9)*

Some more sophisticated thinking goes on here. Ion would be glad to have Apollo as his father by blood, not just one-sided affection. He accepts his mother but is dubious about her explanation of Apollo's gift and skeptical about Apollo's fatherhood.

And so we need Athena to fly in on her chariot to tie up any loose ends. She alibis for Apollo. And tells the future of the "race" (*ethnos*), that is, its actual past which has affected the way things are now in imperial Athens. There is no life for any of them except their offspring. Ion,

Creusa, Xuthus all cease to be of much interest. Once Ion stops “becoming” and accepts his name and future he simply joins the eponymy myth of “begats.” The ease with which he accepts Athena’s explanation suggests that he accepts not only Creusa’s motherhood, but also his name and his place in Athenian society and by agreeing not to tell Xuthus the truth, he also accepts him as his father, both in public and private. He will participate in the vignettes he has pictured but without causing pain to his mother (611–13):

*She will have good reason to hate me when I stand  
at your side while she still has no child of her own  
and will look with bitterness on all you love.*

Remember he had never seen anyone cry at the temple before. Within the play he has many experiences and reactions to them that contribute to his coming of age as an eponymous hero. In the meantime, Euripides has given him a much more interesting story.

#### 4. Autochthony and Xenophobia: Conspiracy Theories

“Motherless, no account, born from some slave” (*Ion*, 837)

The themes of autochthony and xenophobia are inextricably linked: Creusa is the last known living descendant of the Attic kings sprung from the earth. From there the xenophobic fear that the foreigner Xuthus intends to usurp the birthright of the natives leads to assumptions about him and Ion, another foreigner. As the assumptions grow wilder and seem all the more plausible to the parties involved they feel they must act against the conspirators with violence.

Hermes identifies himself and his relationships and then launches into the story of Erechtheus’ daughter, Creusa (*Ion*, 11). He also makes this a tale of two cities, Delphi and Athens. Part of Hermes narrative is of a birth within the birth of Ion, that of Erichthonius from whose birth came the family custom of using gold snakes as protective talismans for infants (a clue for the recognition of the foundling): a custom of the descendants of Erechtheus of whom Creusa now is believed to be the last. Erichthonius, of course, was protected by real snakes.

*in a covered round wicker basket,  
keeping the ancestral custom of the earth-born  
Erichthonius, beside whom the daughter of Zeus had placed  
two snakes as protective guards of his life and given him  
to the daughters of Aglaurus to keep safe. Ever since then  
for the descendants of Erechtheus the custom is to rear  
children with gold-studded snakes. (19–26)*

I cannot help wondering if Hermes (like Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim) was “unstuck in time” since the Erechthidae are yet to be born. We are not to forget Athenian autochthony. Apollo directs his brother to:

*go to the people of glorious Athens,  
born of the earth ( 29–30).*

The narrative continues with Creusa’s marriage. Xuthus, now Creusa’s husband (61–4), is identified as a foreigner:

*with his spear [Xuthus] led Athens to victory,*

*for which he won the honor of marrying Creusa,  
though he was not native born. He is in fact an Achaean,  
son of Zeus' son Aeolus.*

Xuthus is an Achaian now, but his son Achaïos, who gave his name to that people of the Greeks, is not yet born. Apollo will give this boy to Xuthus:

*so that when he reaches his mother's  
home he will be recognized by Creusa. (71–2)*

As it turns out, Ion is recognized by Creusa not at her home, but at his own childhood home. This is where the tokens are and the proof of his earthborn genealogy.

In Ion's solo, his opening the temple at dawn and address to the sun, mirrors his discovery by the priestess at dawn. Sun casts his light over earth. What springs from the earth in his song is benign, cleansing, and fostering, neither monstrous nor regal, the pure waters of Castalia (147–150). Ion's geography is more expansive here than that of the other characters, confined as they are to Athens and to a lesser extent to Delphi. He ranges from his temple home and its environs to the island of Delos, the river Alphaeus (at Olympia), the Isthmus of Corinth, all important cult sites. After this the chorus tightens our focus on the temple of Apollo and its ornamentation, from Heracles (another god's son) to the battle against the Earthborn (in their more monstrous shapes). They narrow the focus even more in asking about the navel of the earth inside the temple (222–4):

CHORUS

*Is the central navel of the earth really  
inside the temple of Phoebus?*

ION

*Yes, wrapped in bands of wool with Gorgons all around it.*

In the first episode, Creusa identifies herself as daughter of Erechtheus. The conversation turns to Erichthonius and the misfortunes of the daughters of Cecrops and then to the tragic fates of Creusa's sisters. And finally the death of Erechtheus, leaving Creusa quite alone but firmly established in her family myths, making Xuthus even more of an outsider:

ION	<i>What husband did you marry from among the Athenians, lady?</i>	
CREUSA	<i>He's not from the city, but a stranger from another land.</i>	290
ION	<i>Who is it? He must be a person of noble birth.</i>	
CREUSA	<i>Xuthus, son of Aeolus, descendant of Zeus.</i>	
ION	<i>And how did a foreigner manage to marry you, a native?</i>	
CREUSA	<i>There is a city, Euboea, a neighbor of Athens . . .</i>	
ION	<i>Separated by water, as I hear, from the mainland.</i>	295
CREUSA	<i>He sacked this land fighting alongside the people of Cecrops.</i>	
ION	<i>He came as an ally? And then got your hand in marriage?</i>	
CREUSA	<i>Yes, he won me as the dowry of war and the prize of his spear. (289–97)</i>	

In spite of this she recognizes him as well-born (392–3):

*I see my noble (eugenē posin) husband, Xuthus,/ coming toward us.*

When Xuthus and Creusa have left the area to tend to their oracular business, Ion reproaches himself for worrying about Creusa and neglecting his duties (433–4):

*Well, what's the daughter of Erechtheus to me?*

*She is no kin of mine.*

Childbearing and the joy of having children in the home is the subject of the first stasimon, but in particular the chorus prays to Athena and Artemis (469–71):

*that the ancient line of Erechtheus  
with clear oracles meet at last  
with lasting fertility.*

By the end of the drama Athena has answered this prayer with her list of the descendants of Ion and of Creusa and Xuthus. The ode ends with the birth and supposed death of Ion by the Long Rocks (499–506).

The second episode is taken up with the bestowing of Ion on Xuthus as his son. The observant chorus notices that he now has a son, but his wife does not. Nor do they forget their prayer of the previous stasimon:

*I would have wanted our mistress to be blessed  
with children and the house of Erechtheus to prosper. (567–8)*

Ion, too is aware of the circumstances:

*They say the renowned city of Athens is born of the  
earth and not an alien people of immigrants to the land,  
so that I will come in plagued by two drawbacks:  
I am the son of a foreign father and a bastard. (589–92)*

*And besides I feel pity for your wife, father,  
as she grows old without children. With her noble ancestry  
she does not deserve the curse of barrenness. (618–20)*

Despite his misgivings Ion follows his father, first to the site of the feast. He will go with him to Athens as his son, in the guise of a guest.

This is where the suspicions start.

*Where did he come from, this boy sustained  
at your temple? From what woman?  
The oracles do not flatter me  
into thinking there is no deceit in this. (683–6)*

...

*the boy reared from foreign blood  
has about him some trickery and chance. (690–1)*

Deceit, trickery, chance are the start. They fear something bad will happen. They also assume Creusa is and will remain childless:

*but she is left barren and without children. (680)*

From being suspected, Xuthus and his son are now about to commit some mischief:

*The wretch, who came as a stranger to our home  
into great wealth, but did not share the luck equally.  
Curse him! Curse him for deceiving my mistress,  
And may he not reach the gods'  
blessing with his offerings  
burnt on the altar's fire. (703–8)*

. . .  
*Already they are close to committing villainous deeds,  
 this new son and this new father. (711–12)*

By the time they reach the epode, the chorus is praying for Ion's death and equating it to a foreign invasion:

*Our city would have a motive for  
 keeping off foreign incursion,  
 with our former leader, king Erechtheus,  
 marshaling the troops. (718–22)*

In the third episode, the chorus, in the presence of their mistress and Erechtheus' old minder repeat their assumption as fact, as if it came directly from the oracle. The news is devastating to Creusa and on top of that they tell what the oracle really did: it gave a son to Xuthus. From the chorus' true story (of the oracular falsehoods) the Old Man jumps to full blown conclusions complete with a back story:

*Mistress, we have been played false by your husband  
 and his machinations—I feel your pain—and we are  
 insulted and cast out of the house of Erechtheus.  
 I'm not saying this because of any animosity toward  
 your husband, but I love you more than I care for him.  
 First he immigrated to this land as a stranger;  
 then he married you and took your home and inheritance;  
 now he is found in secret to be producing children  
 by another woman. I can explain how he managed it:  
 when he discovered you were barren, he did not desire  
 to share the same ill fortune with you,  
 but he took a slave woman to his bed and secretly  
 fathered the child and put him in the care of one  
 of the women of Delphi to bring up. The boy grew up  
 freely in the god's precinct, so he would be kept secret.  
 When Xuthus realized the child would be grown up,  
 he persuaded you to come here because of your childlessness.  
 So the god did not lie, your husband was the one who lied,  
 long ago, rearing the boy, he wove this kind of deceit.  
 He has been caught out and is trying to palm it off on the god.  
 He came here desiring to fight for time, intending  
 to invest the boy with the rulership of the country;  
 he fabricated the new name to suit the timing,  
 Ion, because the boy met his father coming to him. (808–30)*

The chorus believes every word and agrees to take part in the murder of Ion.

This plot line is delayed by Creusa's telling her story of Apollo's rape, her pregnancy, labor, and exposure of the child and Apollo's putative abandonment. Ultimately the two become one, in this illogical progression as if paying back were the goal regardless of the target.

CREUSA      *What must I do? Misfortune stifles the mind.*

OLD MAN     *Pay back the god who first wronged you.*  
 CREUSA     *How can I, as a mortal, outdo a god's power?*  
 OLD MAN     *Set fire to the venerable oracle of Loxias.*  
 CREUSA     *I am afraid to. Even as it is, I have enough suffering.*  
 OLD MAN     *Then undertake what's possible: kill your husband.*  
 CREUSA     *I have respect for our marriage, from when he was a good man.*  
 OLD MAN     *Then the child who has turned up to replace you.*  
 CREUSA     *How? I would be happy to do it if it's possible. (972–80)*

The two then plot a nearly fool-proof murder scheme to be rid of Ion. The chorus' third stasimon is a confirmation of this plan. The assumed conspiracy of Xuthus and his son, named by the god, makes his murder an absolute necessity, but also associates the people of Erechtheus with their monstrous past.

*Guide the filling of the deadly drinking cup  
 against those whom my mistress aims them  
 with drops from the earthborn  
 Gorgon's slit throat  
 against the man trying to lay siege  
 to the house of the Erechthidae. (1052–7)*

...

As long as she lives

*in the shining rays of the sun  
 she will not put up with outsiders  
 from foreign lands lording it in her home,  
 born as she is of a line of noble ancestors. (1070–3)*

...

*The son of Zeus' sons shows  
 his ingratitude,  
 not fathering children in the house  
 and sharing this happy fate  
 with our mistress. But giving pleasure  
 to another Aphrodite,  
 he begot a bastard. (1099–1105)*

The fear that the foreigners are conspiring to replace the rightful rulers seems chauvinistic, at the least, to us, toxically anti-immigrant. Equally striking is the way a whole theory of invasion and usurpation grows from a truth (that Apollo gave Ion to Xuthus) to a fabrication based on the fact that Creusa is left without a child while Xuthus has a son to take home (that Creusa is destined to never have a child) to the spinning of the conspiracy all the way to murder with one plausible tale after another.

The messenger does not hesitate to remind us that the lad is an upstart, calling him the new son in one phrase or another five times. He also includes a mention of Cecrops:

*At the entrances, Cecrops with his daughters  
 beside him, twisting with snaky spirals, the offering  
 of one of the Athenians. (1163–5)*

Perhaps Ion had chosen this as a tribute to the Athenians, in this, his first use of the temple treasure

in a public feast. Using these weavings at the entrances is symbolic also of Ion's entry into Athenian political myth. It is Ion who brings up the fact that the woman, a foreigner here in Delphi, who tried to kill him is Erechtheus' daughter (1220–1). His mother carries on the conspiracy theory in their scene together. Ion, who has never been to Athens since the day he was born, is already an invader leading an army.

CREUSA

*I wanted to kill you because you are an enemy to my house.*

ION

*I didn't invade your land leading an armed force.*

CREUSA

*You did! To set fire to the house of Erechtheus.*

ION

*Where are the torches? Where the blazing fires?*

CREUSA

*You plan to live in my home, to take what's mine by force.*

ION

*You were trying to kill me in fear of my intentions? (1291–5, 1300)*

To her the invasion is so vivid that she can see him carrying blazing torches, just as the chorus sees him appropriating their sacred rituals. At the end of their scene Creusa rejoices in finding her son, but this is of necessity conflated with the continuation of her heritage:

CREUSA

*I am no longer childless;  
our home has a hearth; the land has its kings;  
and Erechtheus is young again.  
The home of the Earthborn no longer looks on darkness,  
but looks up on the sun's shining rays.*

1465

Instead of wanting to kill the child to prevent his tyranny, now she welcomes him lovingly. But she and her father's surrogate came so close to losing everything because of their fear and hatred of foreigners and their belief in a family myth that is far from wholesome, once we take into account the deaths of so many daughters and realize that the woman believed to be the last of the line was until a moment ago under threat of execution.

What does Athena add? She makes all Greeks related through her genealogy. Through Ion, Creusa and Apollo are the ancestors of the Athenians and Ionians. Other Greeks are the descendants of Creusa and Xuthus (1571–94).

*Take your son and go to the land of Cecrops,  
and seat him on the royal throne,  
for he is born of the line of Erechtheus  
and it is right for him to rule my land. (1571–4)*

...

*Apollo handled all these details very well . . . (1595)*

And so he did: Apollo saw to it that the baby was saved and able to grow up to fulfill his destiny. Where he failed was in the more personal details: Creusa's trauma and grief and his own desire to keep his secret. These led to additional complications which in turn had to be solved by avian or

Apolline intervention and with the Pythia's foresight. He also failed to tell the truth, but that may not be a serious consideration for an oracle universally viewed as biased as well as enigmatic. Creusa and Xuthus each has a child, no matter that it's the same child. Ion has a name, an inheritance, a polis, and a genealogy (or two). And so they all go to Athens. It reminds me of the ending of the 1960 film *Never on Sunday*, directed by Jules Dassin. The female lead Ilya (played by Melina Mercouri) insists, "Yes. She [Medea] gets him [Jason] back, and everybody go away and everybody is happy and they go to the seashore. And that's all!"

Cecelia Eaton Luschnig  
Moscow, Idaho  
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