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The Manipulation of Tradition in Euripides' *Ion*

Euripides' *Ion* is much concerned with origins and identities. Kreousa offers multiple reconstructions of her past in the play while versions of Ion's own past accumulate as he tries to establish his "true" identity. These characters' various attempts to form a coherent narrative of their past mirror the active role of the poet in shaping, and even inventing, Attic tradition in the fifth century. Since references to Attic legends and heroes were relatively scarce in Homer and Hesiod, Athenian dramatists had a seminal role in formulating Athenian mythology. Stories central to the *Ion*, those of the early autochthons, were far from fixed, as Plato's *Critias* reveals when Cecrops, Erechtheus, and Erichthonius are given as evidence of ancients whose names have been preserved without "any memorial of their deeds" (110a). Euripides, therefore, was working within a scattered tradition that offered ample room for innovation. In this paper, I argue that the multiple personal histories, etymologies, and aetiologies offered by the characters dramatize the malleability of myth and draw attention to the manipulation of tradition underway in the *Ion*.

Euripides received, and elsewhere adopted, a tradition that named Xouthos as Ion's father. Both Hesiod (fr. 10a) and Herodotus (7.94, 8.44) record this as does Euripides in his *Wise Melanippe* (665a-c). Even if Euripides did not invent the idea of Apollo as Ion's father in the *Ion*, the fact that later versions of the story revert to the standard Xouthos lineage shows that he was making a departure. Euripides' masterstroke was to incorporate the conventional Xouthos lineage into his plot. Euripides' new tradition (Apollo as father) even offers an aetiology for the usual version of the myth (Xouthos as father). The two fathers/potential traditions are present in the drama, but the poet wryly suggests the Xouthos version is a saving fiction foisted on both Xouthos in the play and those who accept this prevailing account of Ion's past. Euripides inscribes this process of recasting tradition into the characters' narratives in the *Ion* and thus offers a self-reflexive commentary on the fluidity of Attic legend.

In Kreousa's initial exchange with Ion (265-74), she validates and expands upon the stories about her family that Ion has already encountered. Kreousa's version of the early Attic myths points to gaps, inconsistencies, and the blurring of identities in these tales. The stories surrounding Erichthonius/Erechtheus were still inchoate when Euripides first staged the *Ion* (ca. 413?). Earlier sources mention "Erechtheus", but "Erichthonius" does not appear until 440/430, when differentiation also begins to appear in sources that have Erichthonius as the father or grandfather of Erechtheus. Ion's queries about these figures enact the confusion still present in the tradition when Euripides was writing his play. The ambiguity of line 267 suggests the possibility of dual lineages since the Greek can mean that Erichthonius is either the father or grandfather of Erechtheus. The interchangeability of these names and narratives can be seen in the differing accounts of Athena as caretaker. Homer (*Il.* 2.547-8) and Herodotus (8.55) have Erechtheus as Athena's charge while here (267-70) and on vase paintings Athena nurses Erichthonius. Kreousa again shows the elasticity of her family history when she suggests that Erechtheus sacrificed all of his daughters, which conflicts with other accounts, even Euripides' *Erechtheus*. The

characters, as the poet, are self-consciously singling out the strands of tradition while in the midst of weaving them together into what will become a new source for these myths, the *Ion*.

Kreousa also innovates as she plots with the Old Man (987-95). She introduces Athena as the slayer of Gorgon, a variant that is possibly first brought into the tradition by these very lines. The Old Man's question about this version hints at its novelty (994), as does Kreousa's oblique answer (995). His use of the word *muthos*, like Ion's use of the related verb at 265 enlarges the meaning of the word in this play to allude not only to casual speech but also oral legend. So this word may generate meaning at multiple levels when used, for example, by Xouthos as he claims to be Ion's father (529). A meta-poetic gesture is perhaps even more obvious when the Priestess starts to reveal the secrets of Ion's Apollonian lineage. Ion exclaims that a "new *muthos*" is being brought into the narrative of his past (1340). A new *muthos* is simultaneously unveiled by the Priestess in the play and introduced into Attic mythology by the poet.