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Word and Object in Euripides' *Ion*: The Silent Truth of Family Heirlooms

The story that the family heirlooms tell in Euripides' *Ion* differs radically from the version of the hero's parentage that is authorized by Athena at the end of the play. Athena's gifts to the Erechtheids (Gorgon blood in a golden vessel and an ageless olive wreath) contribute to Ion's identification as the true son of Kreousa and heir to the autochthonous dynasty. By contrast, Athena's public pronouncement in the epilogue relegates this side of Ion's family history to secrecy. When he goes to Athens Ion is to be known as the son of Xouthos alone. In this paper I will argue that the "truth" told by objects undermines the authority of *logos* to effectively establish social identity; and, in particular, that objects are linked to the powerful deployment of female agency in this play.

The schism in Ion's identity created by his dual inheritance from Kreousa and Xouthos suggests a strong division between public and private components in the definition of the Athenian citizen male: we find juxtaposed on the one hand a man's public persona (whose son he is, in the eyes of the city) and on the other hand his private inheritance, or his true blood lineage. The latter is what we will investigate here. In Euripides' play, we will see that family heirlooms (and the narratives in which they are embedded) are actually in a privileged position with respect to *logos*. Whereas speech is represented as riddling, subject to misinterpretation, and a source of shame (especially to Kreousa) objects—and here I refer specifically to the gifts of Athena and the *spargana*—are represented as exactly the opposite: their meaning is transparent and their function easily established, once they are viewed in the open. This representation of objects is of course a fiction created by *logos*. Nevertheless, the authority which objects are accorded, I argue, underlines the importance of the private (female gendered) side of a citizen male's identity. Where Ion comes from, whose son he is truly, can be "told" in the end only by silent objects which have been guarded by women.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first part I establish the ambiguity and ineffectiveness of *logos* in the play. As examples, I cite Ion's comments (429-31) on Kreousa's secretive and riddling attack on Apollo, his doubts about whether Xouthos has clearly understood the god's prophecy (*esphalês ainigma akousas* 533), and Kreousa's struggle to unburden herself, through speech, of the shameful secret of Apollo's rape (859-61). In the next section, I examine in greater detail the significance of the heirloom which allows Kreousa to take action on behalf of her own family. The gift of Athena that Kreousa wears around her wrist symbolizes the importance of preserving blood purity within the Erechtheid family. At the same time it authorizes a form of non-verbal female agency that stands in powerful opposition to *logos*. In the last section I consider the recognition between Kreousa and Ion, effected through the mediation of the family heirlooms kept in Ion's basket. At the end of the play, the secret of Ion's true identity is once again entrusted to the silence of objects and of the people who guard them; but, as I hope to have shown here, silence should not be equated with powerlessness.