

Apollo's Oracle in Euripides' *Ion*

Ambiguous Identities in Fifth-Century Athens

JULIA KINDT
University of Sydney

Prelude

This article contributes to our understanding of Greco-Roman narrative a case study of how traditional and authoritative narratives were challenged during the late fifth century BC.¹ It looks at Euripides' *Ion* as an example of an author who both embraces and deconstructs the narrative construction of identity as difference. Through the conscious inversion of the norms and conventions of the oracular discourse Euripides unmasks the underlying principles that guide human knowledge, interpretation, and the establishment of meaning. The *Ion* challenges the Greek imagination of the gods as providing an alternative vantage point to determine the place of humanity in the world. The article thus traces an important stage in the development of Greek thought and literature, a stage during which some members of the elite questioned the capacity of Greek religion to provide a narrative that enables humanity to "make sense" of the world. The *Ion* ultimately allows an ironic reading of the gods' impact on humanity, which depicts religion (including the oracles) as driven by the same ideological contradictions as human society: Euripides' account depicts religion as both a powerful means of orientation *and* as a human construct with very little divine about it.

¹ I would like to thank Maaïke Zimmerman and the anonymous referees of *Ancient Narrative* for their invaluable feedback and criticism. I would also like to thank Aishwarya Lakshmi and Jennifer Johnson as well as my students at the Universities of Sydney and Chicago for the inspiring discussion of Euripides' *Ion* and its place in the history of Greek thought and literature. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 28th *Comparative Drama Conference* in Columbus, Ohio.

The Duality between Reality and Appearance

Duality, as Geoffrey Lloyd has pointed out, is already preconceived in nature, in the change between day and night, male and female, summer and winter.² Greek religion built on such natural dichotomies and expanded them to an elaborate religious semantics of human and divine, purity and pollution, sacred and profane. Early pre-philosophical Greek thought happily embraced the dual concept of the cosmos and opposites provided a simple framework of references to reduce and systematise the multiplicity of phenomena in the world.³

From pre-philosophical Greek thought, duality entered the speculative discourse of the presocratics. In order to overcome the crucial problem of a disorderly universe, for the presocratic philosophers, the duality between reality and appearance became a concept, which was ‘good to think with’. If one could find more stable qualities of the universe behind its apparent diversity and constantly changing nature the duality between reality (chaos) and appearance (order) could be harmonised.

The duality between reality and appearance and the desire to find a permanent quality of the universe further preoccupied the minds of those engaged in philosophy far beyond the speculation of the presocratics. Plato, for example, found the unchanging nature of things in eternal forms, a universe of ideas as independent and metaphysical realities, which are ideal blueprints (*paradeigmata*) of their ever-changing manifestations in the visible world. The ideas are at the same time separate from their unstable manifestations and immanent in them. In his allegory of the cave, Plato developed a model of the human condition in which he explicitly exploits the difference between reality and appearance and the limited possibility of humans gaining access to eternal ideas.⁴

Probably sometime between 413 and 411 BC Euripides’s *Ion* was staged in Athens.⁵ The universe of Greek tragedy is, of course, of a different quality and composition from that of philosophical speculation and I do not intend to suggest a direct reception of or reflection on philosophical speculation by Euripides. Rather, I argue that Euripides, in the *Ion*, participated in a wider societal discourse exploring the nature of an orderly universe, by exploiting

² Here and in the following Lloyd, G.E.R. 1966, in particular 80–85.

³ See Lloyd, G.E.R. 1966, in particular 41–48.

⁴ See Pl. *R.* 514a–521b.

⁵ On the debated issue of the drama’s date see Conacher 1959, 26–9, Walsh 1978, 313–15 and, most recently, Zacharia 2003, 3–7.

duality and the difference between reality and appearance.⁶ The tragic world of the *Ion* is based on an elaborate semantics of duality, which goes beyond a simple accentuation of binary oppositions ubiquitous in Greek thought and which translates the discourse on duality and order into its own dramatic universe.⁷ The tragic space of the *Ion*, I argue, depicts two seemingly incommensurable orders of being, the human and the divine, which struggle to gain control over the tragic plot. Like philosophical speculation about the nature of the universe, the *Ion* makes use of the distinction between reality and appearance to suggest a solution to the tragic crises springing from this duality. The *Ion* instrumentalises a semantics of duality on two interpretative levels:⁸ it initiates reflection not only on human modes of interpretation and the establishment of meaning, including, but not limited to religion as a form of “making sense” of the world.⁹ It also invites us to think about meaning in a more specific sense, namely the ‘meaning’ of a people, their identity. The *Ion* is an Athenian drama, which draws heavily on Delphic themes and the semantics of the oracular discourse to explore Athenian notions of self and other.

A Semantics of Duality

The Human and the Divine as Incommensurable Orders of Being

The distinction between the human and the divine spheres as competing forces driving the tragic plot is the most fundamental duality on which the drama's semantics is based. The drama has both human and divine charac-

⁶ See Zacharia 2003, 148 situating dialectic of the *Ion* ‘between what seems and what is’ in the larger context of the oeuvre of Euripides.

⁷ The use of binary divisions ranged from the spheres of economics to language and the law. See Garner 1987, 75–83. See Cohen 1992, 46–60 on binary oppositions in the sphere of economics and finance and G.E.R. Lloyd 1966 on polarity and analogy in early Greek thought. On duality in the *Ion* and in Greek tragedy more generally see Zacharia 2003, 155–165.

⁸ Phenomenology of religion distinguishes between simple pairs of opposites and duality as a religio-philosophical concept (See Bianchi & Stoyanov 2005, 2504–2505. See also Lanwerd 1990). The concept of duality is more specific than simple pairs of opposites as it requires these pairs to be competing causal forces. While Euripides's most fundamental opposition in the *Ion*, the dichotomy between human and divine agency, is a true duality I am going to use the term duality to refer to ‘true’, causal duality and to simple pairs of opposites, because the *Ion* is based on a complex semantics of dualities and analogies encompassing both true duality and simple opposites.

⁹ On Greek religion as a common language enabling the Greeks to “make sense” of the world, see Gould 1985.

ters: Ion, Creusa and Xuthos as the central human characters are supplemented by Hermes, Athena and (indirectly) Apollo. More importantly, however, the theme of human-divine communication is central to the very setup of the tragic plot: the *Ion* is situated in Delphi and staged around the consultation of Apollo's oracle by the royal family of Athens. With Xuthus and Creusa visiting the Delphic oracle the human and divine dimensions are represented as opposing and potentially supplementary spheres.

Euripides' depiction of the gods has to be seen against the larger background of Greek notions of human-divine communication as these condition the reception of the drama. From the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, for example, we know that oracles are seen as having the capacity of both confusing and enlightening those who seek divine advice.¹⁰ That is also the general picture that emerges from accounts of oracle consultations featuring largely in Greek literature: humanity frequently receives ambiguous information from the gods concerning future events.¹¹ Ultimately, however, these accounts stress that oracles are always truthful – the major challenge for humanity, however, is to actually understand their meaning.¹²

During the fifth century BC oracles, predictions and omens developed a particular popularity. The period of the Peloponnesian War generated an increased interest in oracles and divination as Thucydides can confirm.¹³ In situations of increased risk and uncertainty, the appeal of the oracular as a means of gaining orientation was an obvious one.¹⁴ As I will show throughout this article, Euripides in the *Ion* addresses and inverts such expectations towards oracles and the divine.

To start with, in the *Ion* human ignorance is not seamlessly supplemented by divine omniscience. As the tragic plot develops, the human and divine spheres do not seem to fit together to form a coherent universe. Communication between the two orders of being results in a complex entanglement of human and divine meanings. This entanglement is set up first within the drama in the scene in which the oracular response delivered to Xuthus is interpreted.

Euripides has taken great care in outlining the scene of the encounter and conversation of Xuthus and Ion upon leaving the oracular shrine. Their debate about the meaning of Apollo's prophecy is one of the most elaborate

¹⁰ hHom. *Merc.* 541–549.

¹¹ For a complete collection of accounts of oracle consultations see Fontenrose 1978.

¹² On the meaning of oracular obscurity see also Kindt 2006.

¹³ See for example Th. 2.47. See also the warning of the Melians by the Athenians in the Melian dialogue in Th. 5.103.

¹⁴ On oracles as a response to risk see Eidinow 2007.

accounts of a discussion of an oracle's meaning we know of although similar scenes are found by other authors.¹⁵ What makes the account by Euripides special is not that different and conflicting interpretations are suggested by the characters but that Xuthus manages to convince Ion that his (misguided) reading of the oracular utterance is correct. This is even more remarkable because Ion, through his skilful interrogation of Xuthus, is able to work out both possible meanings of the oracular response and even points Xuthus to the possibility of misinterpretation. This is the only example in extant classical literature of an oracle story in which the correct interpretation of an ambiguous response is given by a character in the first instance but does not immediately gain the upper hand in the contest of different and conflicting interpretations, gaining general acceptance only much later.¹⁶

The confrontation between Xuthus and Ion is set out in different stages. Upon leaving the temple Xuthus meets Ion and seeks to kiss and embrace him as his newly found son.¹⁷ Ion's first reaction is a strong rejection of what he perceives to be an indecent bodily approach by Xuthus.¹⁸ Xuthus resolves the ambiguity in the situation with a clear statement of his intentions. However, he only discloses to Ion what he regards to be the most significant piece of information: πατήρ σός εἰμι καὶ σὺ παῖς ἐμός. – 'I am your father and you are my son.'¹⁹ Ion, however, now tries to turn Xuthus away by questioning the authority behind his assertion: τίς λέγει τάδε; – 'Who says so?'²⁰

When Xuthus reveals the oracular authority behind his claim, he puts Ion at the centre of what is putatively a tragic situation. Apollo himself, through his oracle, seems to confirm a statement which threatens Ion's existence at Delphi, the place where he has grown up and from which he draws his whole social identity. Ion is referred to within the play as ὁ μαντευτὸς γόνος – 'the son named by the god' (1209), ὁ πυθόχρηστος Λοξίου νεανίας – 'the young man named by Loxias' (1218), τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ – 'the god's boy' (1286), τοῦ θεοῦ ... δοῦλος – 'the god's servant' (309), or simply Λοχίου – 'Apollo's'

¹⁵ E. *Ion* 517ff. Hdt. 7.143.1–3 and Hdt. 9.33.2, are just two examples in which the interpretation of a Delphic oracle features prominently.

¹⁶ The categories of what is right and wrong with regard to the interpretation of Apollo's oracle are themselves problematic (see below).

¹⁷ E. *Ion* 519.

¹⁸ The homoerotic undertone of this scene was first noted by Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1926, 111 ('erotic attack' – 'erotischer Überfall'). As in this scene, the play generally uses a strong rhetoric of purity and pollution. On this see Whitman 1974, 74–6, Zacharia 2003, 13, 129.

¹⁹ E. *Ion* 530. All translations of the *Ion* are by Kovacs 1999. I have made alterations where necessary.

²⁰ E. *Ion* 531.

(311). Since his childhood he has spent his time in the oracular precinct, guarding the spatial and conceptual boundaries of the sanctuary.²¹ Thus, the only remaining way for Ion to ward off the threat to his existence at Delphi, the source of his identity, is to argue that Xuthus may have misunderstood the oracle: ἐσφάλης ἀνίγμ' ἀκούσας – 'You misinterpreted the riddle.'²²

Xuthus fails to acknowledge the point of Ion's critique by taking it as a matter of good hearing rather than the right interpretation (οὐκ ἄρ' ὄρθ' ἀκούομεν;).²³ But Ion is determined to demonstrate the correctness of his assumption by demanding to hear the exact wording of the prophecy from Xuthus.

Ion: But what did Phoebus say?

Xuthus: That the one who met me ...

Ion: What meeting is this?

Xuthus: ... as I came out of the temple of the god ...

Ion: What would happen to him?

Xuthus: ... is my son.²⁴

The ambiguity of Apollo's oracle introduces a further central duality into the plot: the duality between the literal and metaphorical meaning of the oracular response. Through his precise technique of investigating its wording, Ion eventually arrives at a full understanding of the potential semantic spectrum of Apollo's oracle.²⁵ Both the literal and the metaphorical reading of the prophecy are pointed out in his sharp question: σὸν γεγῶτ', ἢ δῶρον ἄλλων; – 'Your own son, or merely a gift to you?'²⁶ However, just as Xuthus has just failed to see the difference between hearing as a *formal act of perceiving sound* and hearing in the sense of *understanding information*, he does not now differentiate between the two potential meanings of the oracle: δῶρον,

²¹ See E. *Ion* 82–183.

²² E. *Ion* 533.

²³ E. *Ion* 533. The Greek word ἀκούειν means both 'to hear' as a simple reception of sound and 'to hear and understand' (the reception of its content, its meaning).

²⁴ E. *Ion* 534–536.

²⁵ It is part of the elusive character of Apollo within the play (see below) that the prophecy is not given in direct speech but is related to us only mediated, namely through the play's characters. It therefore does not make sense to reconstruct its 'original' wording as some scholars have attempted to do. See for example Owen 1939, xx, Neitzel 1988, Hartigan 1991, 76. For a discussion of the relevant passages of the *Ion* concerning Apollo's oracle see Gauger 1977, 78–89.

²⁶ E. *Ion* 537.

ῥῶτα δ' ἐξ ἔμοῦ – 'A gift, but my only true son.'²⁷ Like so many other human protagonists in oracle stories who misinterpret Apollo's obscure responses, Xuthus hears only what he wants to hear and sees only what he wants to see. He is not able to appreciate the possible alternative meaning of the prophecy and the other reality to which it refers. It is a further variation of the play's semantics that Xuthus, the foreigner, the transgressor of boundaries (see below), is unable to perceive the semantic boundaries between literal and metaphorical readings of the prophecy. In contrast, Ion, the boy obsessed with purity and the maintenance of actual and conceptual boundaries, has worked out the two different readings of the prophecy.²⁸

Why does Euripides choose to tell his story in this way? Why does he put so much emphasis on the interpretation scene by distorting and even inverting the patterns that Delphic oracle stories normally follow? The specific duality between the literal and the metaphorical readings of Apollo's oracle is organised along the axis of the more general duality between the human and divine spheres within the drama. Apollo's ambiguous oracle does not only represent the difference in perspective and knowledge between the gods and mortals (as is frequently the case in Delphic oracle stories).²⁹ It also reveals more specific differences in interpretation, signification, and the establishment of meaning between the human and divine spheres.³⁰ The characters always assume that there is a solution to the oracle's ambiguity, never considering ambiguity itself part of the oracle's meaning. In the human sphere ambiguity is nothing more than a semantic possibility. It is immediately resolved when the words in question are used to refer to something specific. This discrepancy between Apollo's language and its human interpretation thus calls our attention to the general differences between human and divine perspective, human and divine language, human and divine narrative.

²⁷ E. *Ion* 537.

²⁸ On Ion's purity see Zacharia 2003, 12–13.

²⁹ On oracular obscurity as a representation of the difference between the human and divine see Vernant 1991, 303–17, Manetti 1993, 14–19.

³⁰ Forehand 1979 reads the drama as being concerned about epistemology and cognition that teaches us in particular about the 'nature of absolute truth vs. the reality that we believe in.' (185) Whitman 1974, 78 argued that in the *Ion* 'the emphasis falls less on the problems of cognition itself and whether or not it is possible, and more on the pursuit of factual knowledge and, above all, the ability to understand it.'

Concealment and Revelation

After he has delivered his prologue, Hermes disappears into the laurel bushes [sic!] to watch the human tragedy unfolding on the stage.³¹ This emphasis on observation and the gaze draws attention to the staged nature of the dramatic universe and prepares the audience for its own role in assessing the tragic plot.³² The observing gaze of Hermes also finds its extension in the characters' constant reference to, and reflection on, how their actions might be perceived by others. Throughout the drama, the judging gaze of others is internalised and anticipated by the play's characters.³³ As we shall see the drama propagates a view in which notions of truth are negotiated and renegotiated in the public sphere.

The characters' perception of shame and revelation plays a central role here as can be seen in a statement of Creusa: 'My heart, how shall I keep silent? But how shall I reveal the secret union and lose my sense of shame?'³⁴ To avoid feelings of shame resulting from the disapproving gaze of others, Ion, Creusa, and the other characters within the drama constantly conceal potentially offending details of their life from each other. Creusa tells nobody about her secret union with Apollo and exposes baby Ion in the cave where she was raped. Likewise, she later seeks knowledge concerning the fate of the boy in a secret oracle (μάντευμα κρυπτόν).³⁵ The drama's elaborate semantic of secrecy and concealment and its opposite, revelation and exposure to the gaze, is frequently paired with brightness and darkness as additional semantic markers to bring out its inherent moral dimension.³⁶

According to this logic, what is concealed, hidden from the eyes of others, must necessarily be obscure, muddy and somehow shameful. It is in this sense that the drama's characters believe the ambiguous oracle to conceal a truth too shameful to reveal openly, for example when the chorus suspects: 'O prophetic son of Leto, what song was this you uttered in prophecy?'

³¹ E. *Ion* 76–77. As the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* testifies, the relationship between Apollo and Hermes is traditionally close.

³² See Zacharia 2003, 16, note 53 on the frequency of words of seeing in the drama.

³³ Shame and secrecy are a constant theme throughout Euripides oeuvre; see for example Phaedra's secret love for Hippolytus in E. *Hipp.*

³⁴ E. *Ion* 859–861.

³⁵ See E. *Ion* 334.

³⁶ See for example E. *Ion* 562, 911, 955, 1134, 1549–1550. For the drama's semantics of secrecy, concealment, shame and the gaze more generally see also E. *Ion* 242–246, 272, 336–341, 429–432, 582–584, 666–667, 744, 758, 816–831, 865–875, 934, 944, 967, 983, 1029–1036, 1069–1073, 1369–1372.

This boy nursed about your altars, from whence did he come? From what woman? This oracle is not to my liking: perchance it may involve deceit. ... Strange is the word of the god and strange the things it reports to me. There is some clever trickery in this boy raised here and begotten elsewhere.³⁷ The 'out of place' language of the oracle, arouses the suspicion of the chorus and is believed to transmit things 'out of place' (ἄτοπος ἄτοπα γὰρ παραδίδωσί μοι / < τάδε θεοῦ φήμα>).³⁸ The ambiguous language of the oracle here bestows an ambiguous and potentially deceitful identity on Ion.

But can the semantics of concealment and revelation also be applied to the divine sphere? The characters certainly seem to think so, for they constantly speculate within the framework of openness and concealment about the nature of Apollo's character and his further plans for those human beings who are at his mercy. When Creusa suggests consulting the oracle about the fate of the little boy he fathered Ion wonders: 'Will the god prophesy a thing he wants concealed?'³⁹ And upon Creusa's intervention that this must surely be the case Ion answers himself: 'Shame is what he feels at this matter! Do not show him up.'⁴⁰

Classical scholarship has disagreed on the question of whether Apollo's rape of Creusa is meant to challenge his moral integrity.⁴¹ Is what is perceived to be shameful for Creusa, a human being, also shameful for a god?⁴²

A first, sympathetic reading of the gods in the *Ion* could start at the – frequently noted – absence of Apollo from the drama in which he plays such a central role.⁴³ For despite all the criticism directed against him, Apollo never appears on the stage as a character in his own right to defend himself. In the drama's moral universe, however, shame results from exposure to the human gaze. By avoiding the gaze of the drama's characters, it could be concluded, Apollo avoids confronting the moral dimension of his dealings.⁴⁴ Secrecy and revelation as a framework for moral assessment of self and other belong to the human sphere. It can be part of human speculation about the nature of the gods, but is not itself part of a contingent divine moral uni-

³⁷ E. *Ion* 681–693.

³⁸ E. *Ion* 690–691.

³⁹ E. *Ion* 365. See also E. *Ion* 357.

⁴⁰ E. *Ion* 367.

⁴¹ See for example Burnett 1962, 90–1, Gellie 1984. A good summary of the different scholarly positions on this issue can be found in Zacharia 2003, 105–106.

⁴² Zacharia 2003, 121.

⁴³ See for example Zacharia 2003, 103.

⁴⁴ Compare Athena's explanation of why Apollo sent her to speak to Ion and Creusa rather than appearing on the stage in person in E. *Ion* 1555–1559.

verse (such a thing, as Katherina Zacharia has rightly argued, does not exist).⁴⁵ The divine sphere seems to have another semantics of concealment and revelation, which is not linked to questions of morality and shame.

This sympathetic reading of Apollo would then move beyond questions of shame and focus on Apollo's intentions as communicated through Hermes. Rather than further emphasising existing distinctions in the human sphere, Apollo, through his ambiguous oracle, sought to reconcile them. In this reading, the divine sphere, and Apollo in particular, has a mode of communication, which conceptualizes duality not as an antagonism of opposing forces but as the existence of two supplementary principles. In the divine sphere duality is complimentary rather than exclusive. The gods neither just conceal, nor do they simply reveal. As Heraclitus has expressed in his famous dictum, they indicate through signs (*semainein*) – a form of communication, which transcends or combines the duality between revealing and concealing. Apollo thus speaks in obscure language in order to describe the complexity and frequently contradictory nature of social relationships within the human world.

This reading would be in line with Greek views according to which the gods held a special vantage point.⁴⁶ From there they could view the human world as a whole, including and encompassing all the dichotomies, which structure it from within. Mortals, in contrast, have a much more limited perspective. They favour explicit and unambiguous language and the drawing of sharp lines to establish identities through differences. For in the mortal world, there is no child without parents, no husband without a wife, no citizen without aliens.

A good example for the limited human perspective is Xuthus. Xuthus, like all human beings, has a vantage point different from that of the gods. Xuthus, Ion, Creusa, and her servants look at social relationships from within the society of which they are part. They are active agents in the establishment of social identities through the creation of differences. Thus, Xuthus cannot possibly participate in Apollo's double reading of reality as communicated through his obscure language. This already becomes clear during the debate about the oracle's meaning. From the human point of view Apollo's oracle appears deceitful.⁴⁷ Blinded by his strong desire for a legiti-

⁴⁵ Zacharia 2003, 121 rightly points out that such accusations of Apollo's moral integrity 'are to some extent misconceived, insofar as they start from the stated or unstated premise that Apollo is a symbol of unimpeachable moral authority.'

⁴⁶ See for example Plu. *Moralia* 384D–394C (*The E at Delphi*).

⁴⁷ See E. *Ion* 685.

mate heir, Xuthus can only see the literal side of things that constitute his reality. The metaphorical meaning of the prophecy would threaten his identity as king of Athens by excluding him from the lineage of its royal family.

The second, unsympathetic reading of Apollo and his oracles would focus on the two aspects of Apollo that *are* constantly visible on the stage – and hence subjected to human judgement within the drama and by the audience: the consequences of Apollo's deeds on the human characters (in particular the suffering of Creusa) and Apollo's oracles as the only 'tangible' representation of this divinity on stage. The first focus is clearly negative: the audience is constantly reminded of Apollo's rape through the profoundness of Creusa's suffering. If we look at Apollo's oracles, the drama raises even more disturbing questions concerning Apollo's morality, integrity and predictive capability. Within the tragic plot, these questions are verbalised by none else than Ion himself, who asks 'Is the god truthful or does he prophesy falsely?'⁴⁸ The course of the tragic plot will reveal that Apollo's oracle (and that of Trophonius) becomes true not in an absolute sense, but for different characters in different ways. But does this really answer Ion's question concerning the truthfulness of Apollo's oracles, or, as it were, that of the audience?

In this second, ironic reading the audience would look through Apollo's plotting and cheap excuses. His ambiguity would appear to be not so much a representation of the special vantage point of the gods. Instead, the ambiguous response would be seen to reflect Apollo's somewhat selfish goal to reinstate his son to his proper social position – without, however, himself risking a direct confrontation with Creusa, his own past immoral behaviour, and, finally, the drama's audience.

In this reading of Apollo, his ambiguous oracle, which gives everybody the answer they want to hear, would then appear to be a somewhat cheap trick – more typical perhaps for selfish politicians and other demagogues who all too readily make different, even contradicting, promises to the people to further their own cause. The alleged persuasive double-talking of the sophists might also come to mind. A divinity that gives everybody the oracle they want to hear even though it might not represent the truth might be of little comfort for those seeking divine guidance. For what divine substance can there be in oracles the truth of which is in the eyes of the human beholder? Judgement in this matter, however, obviously depends on the further development of the tragic plot and hence must be postponed until the end of the drama.

⁴⁸ E. *Ion* 1537.

Meanwhile, the ambiguous oracle delivered by Apollo to Xuthus initiates Ion's quest for his identity and temporarily disturbs the continuous narrative of the origin myth of Athens. Human cognition makes distinctions where Apollo, through the ambiguity of his language, may envisage unity. Instead of one powerful narrative describing the continuous succession in the Athenian earthborn royal family, we thus find a variety of conflicting and largely incompatible narratives of the individual characters.⁴⁹ Apollo's ambiguous response triggers a process of conflicting interpretations by different characters, a process in the course of which Ion's identity becomes itself ambiguous.⁵⁰

*Reading Social Identities
Identities within the City and the City's Identity*

By delaying the moment when the meaning of Apollo's prophecy is finally established until the end of the plot, Euripides creates tragic space in which various dualities which structure Athenian social identity are presented and debated by the drama's characters. Thus Apollo's oracle has a paradoxical effect. Through his attempt to identify and legitimise Ion as the true successor of the royal house of Athens, Apollo triggers a process of communication between the characters which reveals some of those crucial differences through which Athenian social identities are established: differences in social class, men vs. women, legitimate vs. illegitimate birth, and *astoi* (local inhabitants of Attica, in particular *politai*, citizens) vs. *xenoi* (foreigners). Again these differences are presented as dualities, as interdependent but antagonistic forces that structure Athenian society from within. And one side of these dualities always takes precedence over the other insofar as it is more positively loaded, more desirable or otherwise preferable to the other.

It is none other than Ion himself who first raises the matter of illegitimate birth. With a simple reference to the oracular authority behind his claim (*ἀναφέρω δ' ἐξ τὸν θεόν*),⁵¹ Xuthus is eventually able to silence Ion's resistance. Ion now accepts the literal reading of the prophecy and his new identity as the son of Xuthus, but immediately raises the question of the identity

⁴⁹ Zacharia 2003, 166–182 places these narratives in the larger context of polyphony in and of the drama. More on this below.

⁵⁰ On Ion's ambiguous identity see also Zacharia 2003, 124.

⁵¹ E. *Ion* 543. In 560 Xuthus even encourages Ion to embrace him by saying that this would mean to be *πιθόμενός γε τῷ θεῷ* – 'in obedience to the god'.

of his mother. When Xuthus fails to give Ion a satisfactory answer, both Xuthus and Ion dig up an old story. The illegitimate affair Xuthus had with a Delphic girl before he married Creusa is used as a welcome explanation of the maternal side of Ion's identity: Ion seems to be relieved and rejoices 'I have escaped servile birth.'⁵² However, new worries arise only a little later, when Ion imagines what his existence in Athens will be like: 'They say that the famous Athenians, born from the soil, are no immigrant race. I would be suffering from two disabilities if I were cast there, both the foreignness of my father and my own bastardy.'⁵³ With this blot upon my name I would remain powerless and be called a nobody (myself) and the son of nobodies.'⁵⁴ Considering the consequences that his identity as the son of a foreigner and as a bastard child would have in Athens, Ion wonders whether he would be better off staying in Delphi.⁵⁵ The problem Ion addresses here concerning his birth outside marriage is neither trivial nor just a matter of xenophobia, but refers to the deeper foundations of Athenian identity.

I have argued above that in the human sphere duality is set up as the struggle of two antagonistic, seemingly incommensurable forces and that identity is thus conceptualized as difference. The concept of "father" is defined in relation to "child" but as its polar opposite: "father" *is* "not child" just as "day" *is* "not night" and "hot" *is* "not cold". One side of a dual pair is defined through the simultaneous presence and absence of the other. The myth of origin offers a strong definition of what constitutes Athens as a community by drawing a clear boundary between the autochthonous Athenians on the one hand and everybody who is not autochthonous and thus outside the community on the other hand. The Athenian myth of autochthony explains the strong notion of exclusivity inherent in Athenian (political) identity:⁵⁶ 'The artificial boundaries and artificial connections of a political unit were made natural by original birth from the earth. But they also gave the city its exclusiveness and its aristocracy, its rejection of what was other and of those not descended from the original earthborn race.'⁵⁷

⁵² E. *Ion* 556.

⁵³ For the problem of bastardy as presented in Greek tragedy see also E. *Hipp.*

⁵⁴ E. *Ion* 589–94. See also E. *Ion* 668–75.

⁵⁵ The question of whether or not bastards were regarded as citizens in Athens during the fifth century BC is contested (see Macdowell 1976, Rhodes 1978).

⁵⁶ On exceptions to the descent rule in Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BC see Davies 1977/78, Cohen 2000, 63–70. On myth in Athenian public and political discourse more generally see Loraux 2000.

⁵⁷ See Saxonhouse 1986, 272.

The conceptualisation of identity as difference is supported within the drama by a complex semantics of inside and outside.⁵⁸ Throughout the drama there is a strong emphasis of boundaries, transgression and purity.⁵⁹ The theme is set up spatially first, when Ion guards the Delphic oracle against the birds which threaten to foul it.⁶⁰ The concept is extended when he guards the ritual boundaries of the oracle against the chorus of Creusa's maidservants who address him with the question: 'You there, I speak to you in the temple: may we cross with pale foot the sanctuary's bound?'⁶¹ and when entry is denied to them agrees: 'I do not transgress the laws of the gods: what is outside (ἄ δ' ἔκτοδς) will delight my eyes.'⁶² The spatial and ritual purity of the Delphic oracle, however, represents the purity of Ion's Delphic identity, which he (unsuccessfully) guards against pollution. The drama thus extends the inside and outside theme from a spatial to a religious concept and finally to a concept of personal identity to visualise the duality of identity as difference.

The *Ion* does not simply endorse the Athenian myth of origin but considerably complicates it by disrupting the continuous succession of the earthborn royal family of Athens. In the drama, the inclusive and exclusive dimensions of identity appear intertwined and incompatible because they mark as external to the community of Athens what should be and aims to be inside. All characters of the drama are at the same time insiders and outsiders to the society to which they strive to belong.

Among all the characters, this applies in the most fundamental sense to Xuthus, who is at the same time king of Athens and a foreigner, which poses specific problems for the Athenian community of the earthborn. Xuthus is a highly problematic figure. Admitted to Athenian community and to the royal

⁵⁸ See Zacharia 2003, 68 on 'the symbolism of open and closed doors, exteriority and interiority'.

⁵⁹ See for example E. *Ion* 43–46, 154–170, 517–18, 535, 702, 1253–4, 1320–1323, 1356, 1612–1613.

⁶⁰ E. *Ion* 153–183. In the *Ion* birds are semantically meaningful as crossers of boundaries. As transmitters of prophecy they are both part of the human and divine spheres. The drama's human characters, however, frequently see them as a threat to the purity of their identities exactly because of their capacity to transgress spatial and conceptual boundaries. See for example E. *Ion* 106–108, 796–798 (Creusa wishing to be able to fly away to escape her suffering), 916–919 (Creusa fears that wild birds have promoted baby Ion's transition from life to death), 1196–1210, 1238–1243 (the chorus laments about that only feathers will enable them to escape death). See also Gavrilov 1994, who reads the birds as representing Ion's two fathers and his mother.

⁶¹ E. *Ion* 219–221.

⁶² E. *Ion* 230–232.

family of Athens because of his achievements for Athens in warfare, Xuthus represents an entirely different definition of participating in a community than by descent. In the *Ion*, he is thus depicted as the crosser of (spatial and conceptual) boundaries. He is not only the intruder into the Athenian community of the earthborn⁶³ but also the only character who is able to consult Apollo's oracle, although both Ion and Creusa plan to do so.⁶⁴

But Xuthus is not only outside the group of the autochthon.⁶⁵ More significantly, he threatens the identity of the community by not participating in their shared mythical narrative that constitutes the Athenian autochthonous community.⁶⁶ Because he is himself not born from the earth he sees no problem in introducing Ion, whom he considers to be his son begotten outside marriage, into the royal family of Athens as legitimate heir of the royal power. *De facto* this would mean the end of Athens as the community of the autochthonous. The prospect of Ion's entry into the Athenian royal family as the son of Xuthus, a foreigner, thus challenges and threatens the existence of the Athenian identity as defined through the myth of autochthony.

Why does Euripides present Ion as a challenge to Athenian identity? John Davies has argued that although we tend to assume Athenian citizenship based on descent to be a fairly stable factor in the social and political history of Athens in the late fifth century BC, citizenship was, in fact, a challenged concept at that time.⁶⁷ Davies states that 'the subject did become, and remained, a matter of intense interest and preoccupation: that the questions 'Who is to be, and who is not to be, in the Athenian community, and why?' were continually being posed by pressures from within and without ...'⁶⁸ But instead of offering a straight answer to these questions, the *Ion* reflects on their social repercussions and depicts them in an elaborate semantics of inside and outside. In doing so, the drama explores the inclusive and exclusive dimensions of Athenian political and social identity.

Citizenship based on descent had already been an issue earlier in the fifth century BC, when Pericles introduced a new law concerning the group from which the *politai* should derive. At the time of Cleisthenes, a father had to be

⁶³ See Zacharia 2003, 75.

⁶⁴ See E. *Ion* 334, 1546–8.

⁶⁵ His status as an outsider is further emphasised within the drama by his emotional detachment from the suffering of the other characters.

⁶⁶ Assmann (1997, 39–40) correctly observed that to keep its integrative power, the narrative of a communities' past needs to be shared by the members of the community.

⁶⁷ Davies 1977/78.

⁶⁸ Davies 1977/78, 118.

an Athenian citizen to pass on citizenship to his children.⁶⁹ Since 451/0 BC, however, the new citizenship legislation of Pericles required both parents to be Athenian citizens.⁷⁰ The law of Pericles soon lost its force (although it was revived later) and during the oligarchic regime of 411 BC political rights were bestowed on 5000, who could support the oligarchs with money or military service. Military support was also the crucial factor of the mass extensions of political citizenship during the Peloponnesian War. During the turbulent times of the late fifth century BC diverging definitions of citizenship were thus discussed in Athens and elsewhere in Greece and the actual realizations varied between extreme exclusion (during the oligarchic regime) and far-reaching openness. By depicting the *de facto* social position of the drama's characters as largely incompatible with the Athenian myth of autochthony, the *Ion* depicts the gap between ideological pretence and reality as lived and thus visualises conflicting discourses within contemporary Athenian society. At a time of war, when ideologies of identity and Athenian supremacy were particularly stressed, Euripides challenged ideologically biased ways of thinking. Athenian claims to leadership of the Greeks (or at least the Ionians) during the Peloponnesian War, for example, were certainly part of the ideological background of the drama's audience.

The drama also mirrors contemporary concerns about who should be 'in' and who should be 'out'.⁷¹ At the same time, the *Ion* moves beyond that question by inducing a more specific reflection on the divisions within Athenian society. This play, staged first in front of an Athenian audience, probably between 413 BC and 411 BC, supports the definition of Athenian citizenship as based on descent, but at the same time reflects on its exclusive aspects.⁷²

Ion is not the only one who fears exclusion from the power circles of the society to which he strives to belong. The same is true for the reception of the oracular utterance by the chorus of Creusa's maidservants. Fearing that if

⁶⁹ On Athenian citizenship see (among others) Sealey 1983, Manville 1990. See also Davies 1977/78, Osborne, M. 1978, Vatin 1984, Sinclair 1988, in particular 24–34, Lambert 1993, 25–57.

⁷⁰ On the Periclean citizenship law of 451/0 BC see Patterson 1981, Walters 1983, Todd 1993, 177–178, Boegehold 1994. Cohen 2000, 63–70 has suggested a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of *astos* and thus of the law of Pericles. However, in a review of Cohen's book Robin Osborne has shown that *astos* what not opposed to *polites* but was used instead of it in a legal context (Osborne 2002).

⁷¹ For a reading of the drama which seeks to place it more explicitly in the historical context of Ionianism and Athenian imperialism see Zacharia 2003, in particular 48–55.

⁷² On the debated issue of the drama's date see Conacher 1959, 26–9, Walsh 1978, 313–15 and, most recently, Zacharia 2003, 3–7.

the plan of Xuthus works, their mistress will be excluded from the autochthonous royal lineage of Athens, they again stress Ion's illegitimate birth and his foreignness.⁷³

Such feelings lead the chorus to disclose to Creusa what Ion and Xuthus have cooked up, in spite of the threat by Xuthus to kill them if they do so. Again it is an old servant and not Creusa herself who loudly expresses his outrage about the plan of Xuthus and colourfully depicts its consequences: Creusa's exclusion from the autochthonous royal lineage of Athens.⁷⁴ In addition, the chorus offers its own reconstruction, its own oracle story about what happened: 'He [Xuthus] came as a foreigner to the city, married you, and received your house and your patrimony, but now it is clear he has reaped in secret a harvest of children by another woman. How he did so in secret I will tell you. ... He took some slave woman, lay with her in secret, and begot this boy. He took him out of the country and gave him to some Delphian to raise. ... When Xuthus learned that the young man was full grown, he persuaded you to come here to ask about your childlessness. So the god was no liar. The liar was Xuthus ...'⁷⁵

Misguided assumptions, story-telling, and deceit, all built on literal readings of Apollo's oracle, and the limited perspective of the human condition result in a widening gap between the true state of things and the characters' perceptions. Throughout the drama there is a tension between reality and appearance as the drama's characters get ever more entangled in story-telling and diverging narrative constructions of their own and each others' lives.⁷⁶ Much of the drama's situational irony springs from the widening gulf between what the characters say and what they know, between their perception of self and other and the audience's insight concerning the true nature of things. As Ion rightly observes in a somewhat idiomatic statement that is relevant to more than just the situation in which it is uttered: 'things do not look the same close up as from a distance.'⁷⁷ The increasing conflict between reality and appearance eventually leads to the paradox in which Creusa plans to kill Ion, the latest offspring in the autochthonous royal line of Athens, in order to protect her own social and political position and that of her autochthonous house. Ion, the boy concerned with purity, has himself become a

⁷³ See E. *Ion* 681–5, 719–24. See also E. *Ion* 1069–73.

⁷⁴ E. *Ion* 808–11. For a reading of the drama that focuses on the men-women dichotomy see Dunn 1990.

⁷⁵ E. *Ion* 813–25.

⁷⁶ On truth and reality in the *Ion* see also Jäkel 1977, Forehand 1979.

⁷⁷ (οὐ ταῦτ' ἴδως φαίνεται τῶν πραγμάτων / πρόσσωθεν ὄντων ἐγγύθεν θ' ὄρωμένων) E. *Ion* 585–586.

stain on the purity of Creusa's lineage. However, Creusa's intentions are discovered through a bird omen, and the Delphians vote to stone her for the attempted murder of Ion.⁷⁸

The two ways of reading Apollo's prophecy are like two different paths the characters can take. Although combined they will eventually give the tragic plot a happy ending, the literal reading alone allows the consequences of the question to be played through: what if Ion was indeed the son of Xuthus? The ambiguous oracle, with its unstable boundary between literal and metaphorical meaning, thus invites the characters and with them the audience, to explore the boundaries of Athenian notions of identity as difference.⁷⁹ Three crucial divisions within Athenian society become visible: differences in class, legitimacy of birth vs. bastardy, and citizens vs. aliens. The boundary between who is 'in' and who is 'out' is approached from both sides of the line through the different perspectives the characters offer.

At the centre of the conflicts which arise from the one-dimensional reading of Apollo's obscure prophecy is Ion himself. In the beginning of the drama he derives his identity entirely from his relationship to Apollo. Xuthus however redefines his existence as roaming: 'leave the god's precincts and your homeless life'.⁸⁰ Towards the end of the drama, Ion seems to have accepted this interpretation when he refers to his life at Delphi as ἀνόνομος, nameless.⁸¹ Meanwhile, in the different human interpretations of Apollo's ambiguous oracle Ion's social existence loses its purity and becomes itself ambiguous. During his transition from Delphi to Athens he is depicted as an *astos* and a *xenos*, as the long-desired heir and the disliked usurper of royal power, as a bastard and a legitimate son.

⁷⁸ This is revealed through the account of a servant who was present at the incident. See E. *Ion* 1122–8. Interestingly, in his account Ion's identity is still linked to Apollo's oracle. The Delphians see the attempt to poison him as an attack on Ion's purity and as a pollution of the sanctuary (see E. *Ion* 1222–1225).

⁷⁹ Such connections between language and society are not specific to the *Ion* but can also be found in other Greek tragedies, 'which depict and analyse the tensions, uncertainties and collapse of social order, return again and again to the shifting, distorting qualities of language – the ambiguities of the normative terms of society, the tensions in the civic and familial vocabulary and discourse, the twisting manipulations and over-rigid assertions of agonistic debate'. Goldhill 1986, 2.

⁸⁰ E. *Ion* 576.

⁸¹ E. *Ion* 1372.

Ambiguity Resolved
A Divine Oracle Spoken in Human Language?

The scene in which Creusa and Ion finally recognise each other mirrors the scene of the first encounter of Xuthus and Ion at the beginning of the drama. There are striking parallels between both scenes in their internal structure and in their significance for the development of the tragic plot. Whereas the former emphasises ambiguity and initiates Ion's quest for his identity, the latter brings clarity and revelation and initiates a process through which Ion can finally gain true self-knowledge. Whereas the first scene which introduced the drama's dilemmas takes place in front of Apollo's temple, the second scene, which eventually brings closure to the tragic plot, unfolds right inside Apollo's holy shrine.⁸² And, perhaps most significantly, in both scenes it is the interpretation of a divine sign (Apollo's oracle and the wicker cradle that the Pythia had kept at Apollo's request) that initiates and terminates Ion's inquiry into his identity. Both scenes correspond with important stages in Ion's initiation into his real identity. First, the metaphorical identity of Ion as Apollo's 'son,' which Ion has assumed instead of his biological identity, is disputed by Xuthus, thus leaving Ion in a state of insecurity, namelessness, doubt and confusion (see above). This vacuum is filled in a second step when Ion learns that Creusa is his biological mother and Apollo his real father.

Why is true recognition possible in the second instance but not in the first? Why can the obscure wicker cradle help the characters understand who they are, whereas Apollo's equally obscure oracle cannot? By constructing the two scenes parallel to one another, Euripides again draws our attention to the differences between human and divine language, interpretation, and the establishment of meaning.

The most expressive image of the tragic plot is the antagonism between mother and son. The crisis between the two reaches its climax in the scene in which Ion seeks to kill Creusa, who has fled to Apollo's altar as a suppliant.⁸³ The conflict between Ion and Creusa is described as a total reversal of the ordinary from Ion's point of view. From Ion's perspective Creusa has intruded into his social space (the oracular precinct represented by the al-

⁸² See Segal 1999 for a reading of the *Ion* in terms of its depiction of generational passage. See Zeitlin 1989 for an interpretation of the drama as an inquiry into the identity of the self.

⁸³ E. *Ion* 1250ff.

tar)⁸⁴ and turns the normal order of things upside down: Creusa, the one who tried to murder him, the god's boy, now sits at Apollo's altar and claims that she, and not Ion, is dedicated to the god. At the same time Ion himself, by making a move to kill Creusa, a suppliant at the god's altar, now threatens to pollute the very temple he was busy purifying earlier.⁸⁵

In the end, it is none other than the Delphic priestess herself who 'as Apollo's agent'⁸⁶ sets out to resolve the crisis. Coming from Apollo's holy seat she speaks to Ion (and Creusa) right from the centre of the earth and, in fact, from the spatial and conceptual centre of the tragic plot itself. With Apollo's authority behind her, the priestess offers an alternative, more powerful *logos* than that of Ion, Creusa, and the other characters within the drama and is thus able to prevent the escalation of the crisis.

With the appearance of the priestess, Apollo takes over again to bring order to the chaos of human relationships. The priestess prepares the play's final reversal that will resolve the crisis between the different characters by providing Ion with the necessary token to recognise Creusa as his mother: the wicker cradle she has kept since she found baby Ion on the steps of Apollo's temple.⁸⁷

The reading of the wicker cradle is like the reading of a prophecy.⁸⁸ It is delivered by the priestess on behalf of Apollo.⁸⁹ Like an oracle, it does not reveal its meaning directly. Its contents must be examined carefully in order to disclose its significance. However, the wicker cradle, despite being a sign provided by Apollo, requires human knowledge and language to become meaningful. As Rebecca Bushnell has put it: 'the cradle is a hidden or mys-

⁸⁴ Wiles (1997, 188) states that 'although suppliants in normal historical practice might take refuge anywhere within the bounds of a shrine, in the schematic and simplified world of the play the suppliant must cling to the stage object that represents the altar or the statue of the god.'

⁸⁵ See E. *Ion* 102–83.

⁸⁶ Rosivach 1977, 292.

⁸⁷ E. *Ion* 1337ff. Compare E. *Ion* 329 where Ion tells Creusa, who has asked him if he has never tried to find his parents, that he has no sign or token (τεκμήριον) from which to begin such an inquiry.

⁸⁸ See Bushnell 1988, 123.

⁸⁹ See E. *Ion* 1347–9. The fact that the priestess claims that Apollo made her keep the wicker cradle poses interesting questions of Apollo's capacity to foresee and direct the course of events depicted on the stage. Does this mean that Apollo foresaw that his plan would go wrong and that the wicker cradle would be needed to enable Ion and Creusa to recognise each other in his temple or why else would he ask priestess to keep it?

terious sign that the god has now revealed, the tokens within are also the *symbola* of the mother, and not of the god.⁹⁰

This time the characters can reach a successful interpretation because it is human, and not ambiguous divine language, through which Apollo pursues his plan. The wicker cradle only *guides* the communication between Creusa and Ion to the desired end. Moreover, it is human, not divine knowledge through which the meaning of the wicker cradle is revealed. Ion knows what tokens are hidden within the wicker cradle and can therefore verify Creusa's description of what is inside. He can authenticate the truthfulness of Creusa's claim that she is indeed his mother. The wicker cradle does not itself communicate this knowledge. Whereas the (mis-) reading of Apollo's ambiguous oracle could not induce true recognition of self and other on behalf of the characters, the reading of the wicker cradle initiates a process in the course of which Ion can successfully establish a stable identity. It is only at the end of the play that Ion learns about his divine descent. In the drama *anagnorisis*, the mutual recognition of loved ones, is also self-recognition of the play's central character.⁹¹ The wicker cradle thus reveals Ion's origin and tells a new, much stronger narrative of his identity than his Delphic existence could ever provide.

But even though his matrilinear descent is now firmly established Ion still has doubts concerning the identity of his father.⁹² Perhaps Creusa just invented the story about the divine rape to conceal an even more shameful affair with a human being? The way in which Ion suggests that Creusa reveal his identity to him secretly (*περικαλύψαι σκότον*) is extremely telling,⁹³ as *σκότος* covers a broad range of meanings including *darkness*, *blindness*, *dizziness* and, significantly, *the darkness of the womb*. Again, here, the drama's semantics of darkness, concealment, shame and the gaze is used to visualize the frame of reference for the characters' perceptions of self and other: Ion, whose identity as the fruit of Creusa's belly has just come to the light, suspects that the darkness of Creusa's womb hides a secret too shameful for both mother and son to be revealed openly.

Before Ion can consult Apollo himself about his true fatherhood, the goddess Athena intervenes and confirms Creusa's account.⁹⁴ In accordance

⁹⁰ Bushnell 1988, 123.

⁹¹ Lee 1996, 103 states that '... the recognition re-presents the moment of Ion's birth and exposure'.

⁹² E. *Ion* 1523–1527.

⁹³ See E. *Ion* 1522.

⁹⁴ The mythical narrative of Ion was well known in Greek thought and literature; not, of course, as a seamlessly unified story, but in different, frequently mutually exclusive ver-

with the drama's semantics of shame and the gaze, Ion's immediate reaction to Athena's appearance is to wonder whether he had better avert his eyes: 'Let's get away from here, mother, and not look on the gods – unless its time for us to see (μὴ τὰ δαίμονων / ὀρώμεν εἰ μὴ καιρός ἐσθ' ἡμᾶς ὀρᾶν).'⁹⁵ But Athena encourages both to stay. With her 'sun-like countenance' (ἀντὴλιον πρόσωπον), which announces her presence at Apollo's oracle⁹⁶ and which signifies that it is indeed now time to see, Athena brings revelation. The epiphany of Athena combines both previous forms of divine revelations: a divine voice *and* a physical presence. She does not only throw light on the specifics of the oracular plot set up by Apollo, but also anticipates events that lie beyond the action depicted on the stage: that Ion's four sons will become the founding fathers of cities in Asia and Europe and that the Dorians and Achaeans will be named after the offspring of Xuthus and Creusa. The openness and clarity with which she addresses her human audience both on and off-stage, comparable only to the speech of Hermes in the prologue, is in strong contrast with the ambiguity of Apollo's oracle. The drama's final scene thus once again creates awareness of the differences between ambiguous speech and clear speech, and the source of the drama's tragic entanglements is now resolved.

Duality Reconciled?

Significantly, however, Ion's Delphic identity is not entirely replaced by his new Athenian identity. In the end both identities are combined, for it is not only Ion who now shares the identity of the earthborn. In accepting him into the continuous line of their autochthonous ancestors, the Athenians in turn participate in Ion's former identity: as Ion's descendants the future Athenians will all be 'sons' of Apollo.

Duality plays a central role within the semantics of the *Ion*. Starting with the duality between the human and the divine spheres, duality pervades all levels of the tragic plot. It is included not only in the two competing interpretations of Apollo's ambiguous oracle, but permeates all scenes of the drama in a variety of antithetical pairs: inside vs. outside, purity vs. pollution, ab-

sions and variations (see Cohen 2000, 79–90, Zacharia 2003, 60–65). That Apollo is the boy's true father, however, is not attested before Euripides' play (see Conacher 1959, 23–26, Gellie 1984, 94).

⁹⁵ E. *Ion* 1551–1552.

⁹⁶ E. *Ion* 1550.

sence vs. presence, truth vs. lie, to mention just a few. Duality is a fundamental structuring principle of the *Ion*. At the same time duality is also part of the drama's reflection on identity and the establishment of meaning.

Perhaps the most impressive image of duality and the human response to it can be found in the two drops of Gorgon blood with their opposing deadly and healing powers. Significantly, Creusa just wants to make use of the deadly one to kill Ion. She has no use for the other. Both the human and the divine spheres know duality, but whereas the divine sphere conceptualises duality as the contingent and supplementary relationship between two opposing principles, duality in the human sphere is marked by the antagonism of seemingly incommensurable opposites.

At the end of the tragic plot, however, duality is reconciled. Good and bad do mingle, although Creusa had earlier asserted, regarding the two drops of Gorgon blood, that they would not.⁹⁷ Creusa, for example, is both a life-giving and a potentially life-threatening force to Ion's existence. Such integration of opposites finds its extension on a more abstract level in the drama's reflection on Athenian identity. Although *astoi* and *xenoi*, men and women still exist as opposing identities, they do not seem to be mutually exclusive any more. At the end they can coexist peacefully in the *oikos* of Ion, Creusa and Xuthus. As Katherina Zacharia has rightly argued, the drama encourages a more integrated perspective towards duality, a perspective, which does not simply drop one side of the equation to the benefit of the other but moves towards the acceptance of polyphony as the coexistence of independent voices.⁹⁸

This applies not only to the human characters within the drama, but also to the human spectators, attempting to make sense of the tragic plot depicted on the stage. The drama's modern audience finds itself in a similar position to its human characters. Like the drama's characters favouring the literal side of Apollo's ambiguous oracle, the human spectators have (unsuccessfully) attempted to establish a consistent reading of the drama itself by dissolving its ambiguities. Is this a tragedy or a comedy? Is the plot driven by human or divine agency? Is this a play of human or divine narrative? Is this drama about Ion or Creusa? About Delphi or Athens? Classical scholarship has read the *Ion* as a thoroughly ambiguous play.⁹⁹ These disagreements are, I be-

⁹⁷ E. *Ion* 1017. See also Zacharia 2003, 165: 'Euripides' play ... does indeed mingle good with evil. In Euripides' plays there are always two drops of blood.'

⁹⁸ Zacharia 2003.

⁹⁹ On the *Ion* as tragedy or comedy see (among others) Conacher 1959, 35–9, Knox, 1979, Gellie 1984, Matthiessen 1989/90, Zacharia 1995, Zacharia 2003, 150–5. I was unable to consult Kiso 1996. On Delphi and/or Athens as the drama's major focus see Zacharia

lieve, not due to the lack of an interpretative framework sophisticated enough to allow a coherent reading of the play. Rather, I would like to argue with Katherina Zacharia that such divergent readings are inscribed in the drama's semantics of polyphony itself.¹⁰⁰ Put into the larger picture of how duality features within the *Ion*, the duality between the diverging interpretations of the drama is integrative and supplementary rather than exclusive: the *Ion* is about Athens *and* Delphi about Ion *and* Creusa, is a tragedy *and* a comedy. Dual pairs do not exclude each other, but can coexist as mutually enforcing principles.

Before I conclude I would like to return to the question of the drama's depiction of the gods. As I have shown above, the drama allows for both, a straightforward reading of the gods, most notably Apollo, as powerful agents and truthful reference points, and an ironic reading, in which the gods are ultimately unable to provide truth and guidance. Here, too, I think we should accept both alternative perspectives as dialogical (or dialectical) complements.¹⁰¹ The persistent interpretative possibility of a straight and powerful reading of the gods on the one hand and of an ironic reading of divinity on the other adds another dimension to our interpretation of the drama as one of challenging authoritative discourses of identity.

The drama's tragic entanglements, I have shown, challenge the exclusive structures of ideologically motivated discourses of superiority and uniqueness, and show the absurd conclusions following from them. This applies not only to Athenian narratives of identity, but also to religion as an authoritative source for such discourses. Not only does the drama allow an ironic reading of Apollo and his oracles. Even in the end, after Athena's intervention and the final words of Ion, who now embraces his new identity, a feeling of unease remains. For the audience might think of the high prize at which this harmony is achieved: Creusa and Ion only reach their reconciliation by keeping Xuthus in the belief that he is the real father of Ion. The way in which Athena's *ex-machina* appearance brings the still existing frictions and controversies between the characters to a halt and makes the ending fit the tradi-

2003, 7–43 (discussing earlier scholarship). For the debate of whether the *Ion* depicts a positive and/or negative image of Apollo see (among others) Conacher 1959, 30–5 (discussing earlier scholarship), Burnett 1962, Erbse 1975, Gauger 1977, 61–123, Gellie 1984, Lloyd, M. 1986, Zacharia 2003, 103–49, in particular 145–9. On human or divine agency and causation in the drama see Burnett 1962, Erbse 1975, 53, Lloyd, M. 1986. On Creusa (rather than Ion) as the drama's central character see Whitman 1974, 82, Loraux 1990.

¹⁰⁰ See Zacharia 2003, 147–149. See also Gellie 1984.

¹⁰¹ See Zacharia 2003, 176–182.

tional story raises further questions. Her appearance is so abrupt and artificial that it becomes quite clear that this end of the story is a happy fantasy. The real world, unfortunately, does not work like this.

I believe that Euripides on purpose leaves open the question of whether the gods can be trusted or not. The drama allows for a reading in which the gods both give and fail to give final closure. In the *Ion*, religion appears to be both a powerful source of orientation *and* just another human construction with very little divine about it. Perhaps the most disturbing dimension of the drama lies in its depiction of divinity: the gods are fundamental to the interpretation of the drama but certain questions remain unanswered.

This reading of the *Ion* can be supported by a look at the drama's depiction of another authoritative source for ideological claims of identity and superiority: mythology, in particular aetiological foundation stories. While it is itself a retelling of myth, the drama's characters allude to many other mythological stories which Walter Burkert has defined as '[traditional tales] with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance.'¹⁰² But instead of accepting the collective value of tales such as the one justifying Delphi's claim of centrality, the drama frequently questions their truthfulness, thus constructing a duality between myth and history as incompatible and mutually exclusive opposites. Upon their first arrival at Delphi the chorus asks Ion in his capacity as the temple servant: 'Does Phoebus' temple truly stand upon Earth's midmost navel?'¹⁰³ Instead of an answer Ion, here, simply refers to another story remaining within the system of myth: 'Yes, the navel stone is wrapped in fillets and surrounded by Gorgons.'¹⁰⁴ But throughout the drama, such reality-checks of Greek mythology become ever more pressing, for example in Ion's question γῆς ἄρ' ἐκπέφυκα μητρός; 'So was I born from earth as my mother?'¹⁰⁵ and the immediate response by Xuthus, οὐ πέδον τίκτει τέκνα, 'The ground does not give birth to children.'¹⁰⁶

By focussing attention on the difference between myth and reality the *Ion* challenges the implicitness with which mythical tales are used (by the characters) to make certain claims and thus questions the validity of these claims. The drama questions and reflects on the nature of myth through a series of re-entries: myth as reality – reality as myth. For large parts of the

¹⁰² Burkert 1979, 23.

¹⁰³ E. *Ion* 223.

¹⁰⁴ E. *Ion* 224.

¹⁰⁵ E. *Ion* 542.

¹⁰⁶ E. *Ion* 542.

tragic plot the two seem fundamentally opposed but in the end, through the successful reading of the wicker cradle, myth and reality seem to be reconciled. What is first no more than a tale constructed to provide Ion with a substitute identity now describes his real origin: Apollo is indeed his father. Myth and history are no longer in confrontation – the difference between them has lapsed. One insight we certainly take from this drama is that like the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical reading of an oracle, myth can be literally untrue but still contain profound truths on a more abstract level.¹⁰⁷ However, by juxtaposing both literal and metaphorical readings of myth throughout the tragic plot Euripides has successfully revealed the ironies springing from a confusion of literal and metaphorical readings – and has hence deconstructed the very basis of ideological fundamentalism, which operates precisely by confusing literal and metaphorical readings of mythology.

Conclusion

In the *Ion*, Euripides has translated the discourse exploring the nature of an orderly universe into the cosmos of Greek tragedy. Just like the cosmologic theories of Greek speculative thought, the tragic universe of the *Ion* is governed by far-reaching chaos and constant change. Over large parts of the drama's plot the human characters cannot reach a stable and sustainable perspective of themselves and their relationships to each other. The chaos of human relationships as lived seems to supersede a harmonious social order. Like the Greek speculative thinkers Euripides introduced the difference between reality and appearance to raise the question of the existence of a unifying principle behind the disorderly universe. The chaos of human relationships as assumed by the characters within the drama is contrasted by the perspective of the drama's audience, which knows the real state of affairs.

The *Ion*, however, does not depict an abstract cosmos. Like the philosophical discourse of his time, the focus of Euripides is on the political cosmos of fifth-century Athens. The contrast between reality and appearance is in-

¹⁰⁷ Jan Assmann makes an interesting point concerning the distinction between myth and history in the cultural memory of societies. He argues that identity requires the memory of a shared past and that this account of a shared past can be either mythical or historical. Assmann argues that in this particular function of the past within the cultural memory of a community, the distinction between myth and history lapses (Assmann 1997, 52). The way in which the *Ion* instigates reflection on the distinction between myth and history seems to confirm this point.

troduced to draw attention to the structures of Athenian identity. The drama encourages its audience to reflect critically on the exclusive aspects of these structures. Especially towards the end of the Peloponnesian War, a war fought about Athenian supremacy in the Greek world, Euripides puts forward a play that fundamentally challenges ideologically biased ways of thinking.¹⁰⁸

The mutual desire of Creusa and Ion to kill each other is the attempt to turn duality into singularity, to cancel out the opposite side of the dual pair they represent. Identity, however, exists only as difference and thus Ion and Creusa depend on each other. There is no son without a mother and no mother without a son. In the end, the drama thus reconciles the two and thereby turns contrasts into complements. The characters and with them the audience are encouraged to appreciate the other side of the equation, which is frequently suppressed in dual constructs of reality.¹⁰⁹ Collective identity exists only if it can serve as an umbrella identity encompassing all the individual differences it harbours within.

That Delphi, the centre of the Greek world and the centre of true knowledge, is the site of this deconstruction of meaning and identity is, perhaps, irony on behalf of Euripides. But that would be very much in line with the tongue-in-cheek Euripides we know. Ambiguities, as it were, determine the realities within the play and the very appearance of the drama itself. Is there a better backdrop for such a propagation of ambiguities than Delphi and its oracle?

Works Cited

- Alleman, B., Gutzen, D., and Koppen, E. (eds.). 1975. *Teilnahme und Spiegelung: Festschrift für Horst Rüdiger*, Berlin – New York: de Gruyter.
- Assmann, J. 1997. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich: Beck.
- Bianchi, U. and Stoyanov, Y. 2005. 'Dualism,' in L. Jones (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Second ed. Detroit, Mich. [etc.]: Thomson/Gale, 2504–2517.
- Boegehold, A.L. 1994. 'Perikles' Citizenship Law of 451/0 BC.,' in A.L. Boegehold and A.C. Scafuro (eds.), *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*. Baltimore [etc.]: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 57–66.
- Burkert, W. 1979. *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*. Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press.

¹⁰⁸ This theme features throughout Euripides' oeuvre of that period, but is especially prominent in the *Ion*. See for example E.*Hec*, E.*Tr*.

¹⁰⁹ See Zacharia 2003, 147–149, 180–181 on the complementary of opposites in the drama.

- Burnett, A.P. 1962. 'Human Resistance and Divine Persuasion in Euripides *Ion*', *CPh* 57, 89–103.
- Bushnell, R.W. 1988. *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Cohen, E. 1992. *Athenian Economy and Society: A Banking Perspective*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 2000. *The Athenian Nation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Conacher, D. 1959. 'The Paradox of Euripides' *Ion*', *TAPhA* 90, 20–39.
- Davies, J.K. 1977/78. 'Athenian Citizenship: The Descent Group and the Alternatives', *CJ* 73, 105–21.
- Eidinow, E. 2007. *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Erbse, H.E. 1975. 'Der Gott von Delphi im *Ion* des Euripides', in Allemann *et al.* (eds.), 40–54.
- 1984. *Studien zum Prolog der Euripideischen Tragödie*, Berlin [etc.]: de Gruyter.
- Farrington, L.R. 1991. 'Gnothi Seauton: Social Self-Knowledge in the *Ion*', *RhM* 134, 120–136.
- Fontenrose, J. 1978. *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations*, Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press.
- Forehand, W.E. 1979. 'Truth and Reality in Euripides' *Ion*', *Ramus* 8, 174–87.
- Garner, R. 1987. *Law and Society in Classical Athens*, London [etc.]: Croom Helm.
- Gauger, B. 1977. *Gott und Mensch im *Ion* des Euripides: Untersuchungen zum dritten Episodion des Dramas*, Bonn: Bouvier.
- Gavrilov, A. 1994. 'Die delphischen Vögel im euripideischen Prolog (Eur. *Ion* 154–83)', *Hyperboreus* 1, 92–112.
- Gellie, G. 1984. 'Apollo in the *Ion*', *Ramus* 13, 93–101.
- Goldhill, S. 1986. *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gould, J. 1985. 'On Making Sense of Greek Religion', in Easterling, P.E., Muir, J.V., and Finley, M.I. (eds.), *Greek Religion and Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–33.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. 2000. *The Greek Philosophers: From Thales to Aristotle*, London: Routledge.
- Hamilton, R. 1978. 'Prologue Prophecy and Plot in Four Plays of Euripides', *AJPh* 99, 277–302.
- Hartigan, K.V. 1991. *Ambiguity and Self-Deception: The Apollo and Artemis Plays of Euripides*, Frankfurt a. M. [etc.]: Lang.
- Jäkel, S. 1977. 'Wahrheit und Trug in den Dramen des Euripides', *Arctos* 11, 15–40.
- Kindt, J. 2006. 'Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus' *Croesus Logos*', *CP* 101, 34–51.
- Kiso, A. 1996. 'From Tragedy to Comedy: The Dramaturgy of Euripides' *Ion*', *Classical Studies* 14, 1–26.
- Knox, B. 1979. 'Euripidean Comedy', in B. Knox, *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theatre*, Baltimore [etc.]: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 250–274.
- Kovacs, D. 1999. *Euripides: Trojan Women, Iphigenia among the Taurians, Ion*, edited and translated, London [etc.]: Loeb Classical Library.
- Lanwerd, S. 1990. 'Dualismus', in H. Cancik, B. Gladigow and M. Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch Religionswissenschaftliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, Stuttgart [etc.]: Kohlhammer, 233–236.

- Lee, K. 1996. 'Shifts of Mood and Concepts of Time in Euripides' *Ion*', in M.S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 85–109.
- Lloyd, G.E.R. 1966. *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press.
- Lloyd, M. 1986. 'Divine and Human Action in Euripides' *Ion*', *A&A* 32, 33–45.
- Lloyd-Jones, H. 1971. *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Loraux, N. 1990. 'Kreousa the Autochthon: A Study of Euripides' *Ion*', in J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 168–206.
- 1993. *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship & the Division between the Sexes*, transl. Levine, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Macdowell, D. M. 1976. 'Bastards as Athenian Citizens', *CQ* 26, 88–91.
- Manetti, G. 1993. *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity*, Bloomington, Ind. [etc.]: Indiana University Press.
- Manville, P.B. 1990. *Origins of Citizenship in Ancient Athens*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Matthiessen, K. 1989/90. 'Der *Ion*: eine Komödie des Euripides?', *SEJG* 31, 271–91.
- McDermott, E.A. 1991. 'Double Meaning and Mythic Novelty in Euripides' Plays', *TAPhA* 121, 123–32.
- Mikalson, J.D. 1991. *Honor thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*, Chapel Hill, N.C. [etc.]: University of North Carolina Press.
- Neitzel, H. 1988. 'Apollons Orakelspruch im *Ion* des Euripides', *Hermes* 11, 272–9.
- Osborne, M.J. 1978. 'Athenian Grants of Citizenship after 299 B.C. Again', *AncSoc* 9, 75–81.
- Osborne, R. 2002. 'Review of Edward Cohen, *The Athenian Nation*', *CP* 97, 93–98.
- Owen, A.S. 1939. *Euripides' Ion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Parker, R. 1990. 'Myths of Early Athens,' in J.N. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, London [etc.]: Croom Helm, 187–214.
- Patterson, C. 1981. *Pericles' Citizenship Law of 451–50 B.C.*, Salem, N.H.: The Ayer Co.
- Rehm, R. 2002. *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rhodes, P.J. 1978. 'Bastards as Athenian Citizens', *CQ* 28, 89–92.
- Rosenmeyer, T.G. 1963. *The Masks of Tragedy: Essays on Six Greek Dramas*, Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press.
- Rosivach, V J. 1977. 'Earthborns and Olympians: The Parodos of the *Ion*', *CQ* 27, 284–94.
- 1987. 'Autochthony and the Athenians', *CQ* 37, 294–306.
- Saxonhouse, A.W. 1986. 'Myths and the Origins of Cities: Reflections on the Autochthony Theme in Euripides' *Ion*', in J.P. Euben (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 252–273.
- Sealey, R. 1983. 'How Citizenship and the City Began in Athens', *AJAH* 8, 97–129.
- Segal, C. 1999. 'Euripides' *Ion*: Generational Passage and Civic Myth', in M.W. Padilla (ed.), *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece: Literature, Religion, Society*, London: Associated University Press, 67–108.
- Sinclair, R.K. 1988. *Democracy and Participation in Athens*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Todd, S.C. 1993. *The Shape of Athenian Law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Vatin, C. 1984. *Citoyens et non-citoyens dans le monde grec*, Paris: Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur.

- Vellacott, P. 1975. *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vernant, J.-P. 1991. 'Speech and Mute Signs', in F. Zeitlin (ed.), *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays Jean-Pierre Vernant*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 303–317.
- Walsh, G.B. 1978. 'The Rhetoric of Birthright and Race in Euripides' *Ion*', *Hermes* 106, 301–15.
- Walters, K.R. 1983. 'Perikles' Citizenship Law', *CA* 2, 314–36.
- Webster, T.B.L. 1967. *The Tragedies of Euripides*, London: Methuen.
- Whitman, C.H. 1974. *Euripides and the Full Circle of Myth*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, U von. 1926. *Euripides Ion*, Berlin: Weidmann.
- Wiles, D. 1997. *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilmington-Ingram, R.P. 1976. 'The Delphic Temple in Greek Tragedy,' in J.M. Bremer, S.L. Radt and C.J. Ruijgh (eds.), *Miscellanea Tragica in Honorem J.C. Kamerbeek*, Amsterdam: A. Hakkert, 483–500.
- Zacharia, K. 1995. 'The Marriage of Tragedy and Comedy in Euripides' *Ion*', in S. Jäkel and A. Timonen (eds.), *Laughter Down the Centuries*, vol. 2, Turku: Turun Yliopisto, 45–63.
- 2003. *Converging Truths: Euripides' Ion and the Athenian Quest for Self-Definition*, Leiden [etc.]: Brill.
- Zeitlin, F.I. 1989. 'Mysteries of Identity and Designs of the Self in Euripides' *Ion*', *PCPhS* 35, 144–97.