

## Ritual Re-enactment or Dramatic Metaphor? Creusa in Euripides' *Ion*

This paper asks two questions about Creusa, the Athenian princess raped by Apollo and reunited years later with her grown son, the title figure of Euripides' *Ion*. First, why does Creusa's story end happily when, as the play makes sure we remember, that of Cecrops' daughters, her mythical prototypes, ends in punishment and death? Second, if there is an answer to the first question, does it have to do mainly with ritual, with story and drama, or with both?

After criticism of *Ion* had reached something of a deadlock through preoccupation with the question of Apollo's culpability, stimulating work from the 1970s through the 1990s opened up new topics, including the play's contexts in Athenian myth and ritual and the ideologies of citizenship and empire. Focusing on the religious dimension, this paper considers Creusa as what Robert Parker calls a "living and breathing problem in theology." The starting point is Katerina Zacharia's 2003 book, which synthesizes earlier work (especially by Loraux 1993 and Zeitlin 1996) and offers a strong reading of the play's acknowledged centerpiece, Creusa's lyric denunciation of Apollo in her monody (859-922). Zacharia rightly accepts that the story of the Cecropids, who received the newborn Erichthonius in a vessel they were told by Athena not to open, disobeyed, and were punished with bloody death on the rocks of the Acropolis, provides both an *aition* for the Athenian ritual of the *arrhephoroi* and a mythical paradigm for Creusa's actions in *Ion*. After studying elements shared by myth, ritual, and play, she concludes that Creusa's story ends happily because it repeats the ritual pattern with a crucial difference, namely its setting within the performance of another ritual, the Festival of Dionysus. There are some problems with this approach both in general and in this case, but its many strengths point the way to a better understanding of Creusa's success through the power of dramatic storytelling and metaphor.

Once Creusa denounces Apollo, the energy she brings to the plot is transferred to others. That energy, an initially tentative but ultimately aggressive effort to confront the god in his oracular temple, arises from the trauma of rape, doubt about her exposed child's fate, and painful, paralyzing longing, all of which the play foregrounds to an extent not seen in any other dramatization of "the girl's tragedy." The result is that, by the play's midpoint, Creusa becomes a paradox, a sympathetic *theomachos* (opponent of the god), the paradigms for which within the world of the play are her fellow earthborns, the Giants and Gorgo. The danger that she will be punished like other *theomachoi* increases when she abandons the discourse of shame in and through her monody and then schemes to murder Ion. At the same time, she is essentially a spent force after she entrusts the act of poisoning to the Old Man. What she does in the first half of the play forces a change in Apollo's plans, and this can be celebrated, at least from a modern point of view, as a powerful act comparable to Demeter's when she wrings a compromise from Zeus in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Unlike Demeter, however, Creusa brings about no permanent change in the universe; the only practical effect of her resistance is that we, the spectators, get to witness the reunion of mother and son in Delphi rather than merely imagine it taking place later in Athens. But that "only" is the entire point: it's the reason there's a play worth watching.

After sending the Old Man off to poison Ion, Creusa takes only two actions, but both are important for interpreting drama's transformation of ritual into metaphor. Pursued by Ion and his men, who have discovered her role in the plot, Creusa seeks refuge at the altar of Apollo. When she says "I give my body to the god to hold. It's sacred," we cannot fail to recognize the repetition, with significant difference, of the act that engendered Ion. Then, when Ion begins to open the basket containing his birth tokens, Creusa literally jumps from the altar to embrace him. Her "leap of faith" might have led immediately, like the Cecropids' leap onto the Acropolis

rocks, to her death. We can wonder at her courage, as Ion does, but we must also acknowledge that both the act of seeking asylum and the leap reinscribe Creusa within the repressive norms of classical Athenian womanhood. Yet the power of her drama remains.

### Bibliography

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