

Affect and Suspense in Euripides' *Ion*

Euripides has long been acknowledged a master at creating and heightening suspense (Diller 1962, Arnott 1973, Goward 1999, Wright 2005), a skill especially evident in “intrigue” plays involving a recognition (*Electra*, *IT*, *Ion*, *Helen*). The recognition may be an end in itself, as when Ion and Creusa are belatedly discovered to be mother and child, or may be the means to an end, as when the reunited Helen and Menelaus conspire to escape from Egypt, or Electra and Orestes proceed to plan their revenge against Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Yet although on this view suspense is a plot device generating uncertainty about events, equally important is suspense about the characters involved and uncertainty concerning their affective bond. From this perspective, “affective suspense” causes us to ask how a bond can be established between two individuals who are related but do not know one another, and how the bond can then enable a murder or escape.

This paper considers Euripides' *Ion*. Affective suspense is sustained for almost the entire play, from Hermes' prologue, recalling how Creusa abandoned her child to die (15-18) and anticipating their eventual reunion (71-2), to the emotional embrace of mother and son some 1400 lines later (1437-42). Suspense over such an interval is maintained through comic misdirection: first Ion is united with his “father” in a false recognition scene with Xuthus; then in successive anti-recognition episodes, the mother first mistakenly tries to murder her son, and then the son prepares to kill his mother. Yet these are not mere twists of the plot. The emotional power of the bond between mother and child is transferred, deflected, and mirrored in various ways as the play proceeds, thus simultaneously activating and deferring the longed-for affective outcome.

For example, the need of mother and child for one another, and the audience's desire to see

them establish an affective bond, are played out at length in the first episode. When Creusa tells the young temple servant that she and Xuthus lack children, he responds with an unexpected degree of sympathy (“Poor woman! Otherwise fortunate, you are unfortunate,” 307) and thus ironically draws attention to the potential bond between them. Creusa answers in kind (“And who are you? Since I think your mother blessed,” 308), and on learning that he is an orphan, voices her sympathy directly (“So now, stranger, I pity you in return,” 312). Their mutual sympathy deepens as the scene proceeds, staging an affection between mother and child that is displaced onto the long-lost mother of Ion and the unnamed “friend” of Creusa. Ion even uses the same expression (“poor mother!” ἡ τεκοῦσα δ’ ἀθλία, 355) to describe Creusa’s friend as Creusa to describe Ion’s mother (“poor mother,” μητέρα’ ἀθλίαν, 360). Although expressed in this way through surrogates, the mutual affection of mother and child establishes as the play’s emotional goal the reunion of Creusa and Ion, and gives tantalizing hints of its realization.

Through the vagaries of the plot, the affective bond between mother and child remains a concern, even as it is displaced, mirrored, and inverted in various ways. At the moment of recognition they embrace, and Ion (1437-8) and Creusa (1439-42) both express their joy, but the moment is short-lived, and any bond is displaced by Ion’s skeptical questions, Creusa’s rehearsal of her past sufferings, and the intervention of Athena. Even as Ion’s search for family and home succeeds, the long-sought bond of child and mother remains unrealized.

Recent readings of *Ion* tend to focus on its representations of individual psychology (Pedrick 2007, Weiss 2008) and civic ideology (Loraux 1993, Zacharia 2003), especially as these are embodied in Ion and Creusa respectively. A reading of affect and suspense turns instead to the complex relation between the protagonists, and by focusing on interpersonal dynamics and the shifting emotional relations between two figures, it addresses the heart and soul of tragedy.

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