

ACTION AND CHARACTER IN THE *ION* OF EURIPIDES

Εἶδε τις φλέβες τῶν ἀνθρώπων
σὰν ἓνα δίχτυ τῶν θεῶν, ὅπου μᾶς πιάνουν σὰν τ' ἄγρῖμα·
προσπάθησε νὰ τὸ τρυπήσει.

Seferis.

I AM happy to offer this paper in tribute to the deep range of a dedicated Hellenist's life-work, not least for personal reasons. Professor Dodds first introduced me to the *Ion* towards the end of those happy twelve years of his career spent in the University of Birmingham. With his respect for Forsterian buckets let down into the subconscious, he may not be surprised that the introduction has had enduring effects. An early consequence was my verse translation of the play, eventually published in 1958¹ and, more recently (1968), produced on the stage by our Department of Drama and Theatre Arts.² Translations of Greek and Latin authors play an increasingly important part in our contemporary cultural life, especially translations of Greek plays for the stage and for broadcasting. This is an area of activity which scholars should not ignore. What Gilbert Murray so successfully practised in his time, Milman Parry emphasized in another context: '... scholars must see that they must impose their truths before others impose their fictions'.³ Over the years I have followed the discussions in books and journals which have added to our understanding of the power and complex meaning of the play. Only some of these can be mentioned in what follows, to enable me to express agreement or a difference of opinion or emphasis.⁴

The simply rationalistic interpretation of the *Ion* associated with the translation, preface, etc., by H.B.L. in 1889⁵ and with the work of A. W. Verrall in 1890⁶ and subsequently,⁷ was temporarily fashionable in certain quarters at the time. This interpretation no doubt stimulated further study of the play in this country, but there has been continuous corrective criticism of its aberrations.⁸

We are now more aware that the rationalism of Euripides was partial; that the irrational forces he portrays help us to recognise limitations in the extent to which ancient Greek

¹ *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. Grene-Lattimore (Euripides III), Chicago, 1958.

² Directed by Mr Clive Barker, concerned with the relevance of Euripidean drama as a professional man of the theatre. My thanks are due to Mr Barker for those fresh insights into the play which only skilful stage performance can give and also for discussions of his interpretation from this point of view; I have appreciated comments from other colleagues, including Professor J. G. Davies, Mr I. DuQuesnay and Mr E. W. Whittle, ever ready to share his scholarly appreciation of the subtleties of this play.

³ *The Historical Method in Literary Criticism in The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed. Adam Parry, Oxford, 1971.

⁴ Helpful recent bibliographies in D. J. Conacher *Euripidean Drama*, Toronto/London, 1967, and Shirley Barlow *The Imagery of Euripides*, London, 1971. My treatment here is necessarily partial and selective.

⁵ London, 1889. Verrall acknowledged his debt to this 'curious book . . . for most important aid' in

his Preface (p. vii) to his own *The Ion of Euripides* (n. 6).

⁶ When a performance of the *Ion* was given in Cambridge, for which Verrall wrote a translation and commentary, *The Ion of Euripides*, Cambridge, 1890.

⁷ *Euripides the Rationalist*, Cambridge, 1913, pp. 138-76.

⁸ See the comments of A. S. Owen in the Introduction (pp. xxxii-xli) to his edition of the *Ion*, Oxford, 1939. Cf. the pertinent comments by Dodds in his edition of the *Bacchae*, 2 ed., Oxford, 1960: 'It is interesting that no continental scholar of standing has ever (so far as I know) taken Verrall's interpretation of Euripides really seriously' (p. xlvi n. 2); and 'Verrall was in fact driven to maintain that Euripides' plays were, like the poetic dramas of his own time, written with an eye to the study rather than the theatre: "to the ultimate purpose the stage-exhibition at the Dionysia was indifferent"' (Introduction to the *Ion*, p. xlv). Yet Aristotle a century later still thought exclusively in terms of the stage-exhibition' (p. xlix n. 1).

thought as a whole achieved the means of understanding and controlling them—limitations which have proved persistent.⁹ When he first suggested¹⁰ that the word ‘irrationalist’ fits Euripides—for our generation one of the most sympathetic figures in the whole of ancient literature—better than any other, Dodds pointed out that when the Victorians talked about ‘rationalists’, they generally meant anti-clericals; what Verrall wished to emphasise, and he was not concerned to deny, was the anti-clericalism of Euripides. To the word ‘rationalist’ he gave its older and wider meaning, as a description of that type of philosophy which in various transformations has on the whole (except for one long and very curious break) dominated European thought since Socrates. Such rationalism makes three affirmations: reason as the instrument of truth—as the essential character of Reality—as the means to personal redemption.¹¹ Probably, if the works of Protagoras and others of that kidney were extant, we should find the philosophical opinions of Euripides less surprising. As it is, Euripides remains for us the chief representative of fifth-century irrationalism; and herein, quite apart from his greatness as a dramatist, lies his importance for the history of Greek thought. The disease of which Greek culture eventually died is known by many names. To some it appears as a virulent form of scepticism; to others, as a virulent form of mysticism. Professor Murray had called it the Failure of Nerve. Dodds’s own name for it was systematic irrationalism.¹² Greek rationalism died slowly (even Plotinus is in many respects a rationalist); but it was already more than half dead when Christianity and the other Oriental religions administered the *coup de grâce*. Considerable elements of it were taken over into Christianity; but the next emergence of a complete or nearly complete rationalism is in the work of Descartes and Spinoza.¹³

If then it is true, as I agree it may well be, that the case of Euripides proves that an acute attack of systematic irrationalism was already threatening the Greek world in the fifth century,¹⁴ it follows that we should be wary of consenting to Kitto’s conclusion about the *Ion* that the wit of the whole piece lies in the conspiracy which Euripides makes with the audience¹⁵—though it is correct that Euripides obviously does not believe the story, that he pretends it is true, that it is *Ion*, not his creator, who is the simple-minded rationalist, that the supernatural machinery must stand or fall together: if there is no Apolline paternity there can be no Gorgon’s blood, no Erichthonios sprung from the soil, no miraculous olive.¹⁶ It is a different matter to make the wit of the piece lie in a conspiracy between dramatist and audience, on the assumption that the conviction that these things are false was held so widely in Athens that there was no point in insisting that they are false, but great amusement in pretending that they are true,¹⁷ because this may be a simplification which can only

⁹ What Dodds has to say about the contemporary recoil of doubt after a great age of rationalism in relation to a similar recoil in antiquity (*The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley, 1951, p. 254 f.) is relevant to my argument: ‘Was it the horse that refused, or the rider? That is really the crucial question. Personally, I believe it was the horse—in other words, those irrational elements in human nature which govern without our knowledge so much of our behaviour and so much of what we think is our thinking. And if I am right about this, I can see in it grounds for hope . . . the men who created the first European rationalism were never—until the Hellenistic Age—“mere” rationalists: that is to say, they were deeply and imaginatively aware of the power, the wonder, and the peril of the Irrational. But they could describe what went on below the threshold of consciousness only in mythological or symbolic language; they had no instrument for understanding it, still less for controlling it; and in the

Hellenistic Age too many of them made the fatal mistake of thinking they could ignore it. Modern man, on the other hand, is beginning to acquire such an instrument. It is still very far from perfect, nor is it always skilfully handled; in many fields, including that of history, its possibilities and its limitations have still to be tested. Yet it seems to offer the hope that if we use it wisely we shall eventually understand our horse better; that, understanding him better, we shall be able by better training to overcome his fears; and that through the overcoming of fear horse and rider will one day take that decisive jump, and take it successfully.’

¹⁰ *Euripides the Irrationalist* in *CR* 43 (1929), pp. 97 ff. The opinion is re-affirmed in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 187.

¹¹ *Ib.* p. 97.

¹² *Ib.* p. 103.

¹³ *Ib.* p. 104.

¹⁴ *Ib.* p. 103.

¹⁵ H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (3 ed. London, 1961), p. 317. ¹⁶ *Ib.* pp. 316 ff. ¹⁷ *Ib.* p. 317.

reduce the stature of the play. Just as there has been a consistent tendency for the *Ion* to be regarded as really serious drama only by those who find Apollo's virtues ultimately proved and hence the virtues of orthodox paganism justified, so those who doubt its seriousness have tended to judge its excellences in terms of dramaturgical pyrotechnics.

Thus Conacher,¹⁸ despite his well-argued reservations, agrees that: 'Any reader who has enjoyed the *Ion* must feel instinctively that these critics¹⁹ are right, at least in principle, in their appraisal of what is most important in the play;' and he concludes:²⁰ 'The Greeks mingled serious issues with their lighter entertainments more casually than we do. Should we not, then, regard this play in the way that perhaps the Athenians did, as a brilliantly constructed *jeu d'esprit*, alternately moving and amusing and rendered no less pleasing by a mildly ironic measure of Athenian self-flattery?'

We cannot, for obvious reasons, estimate how widely the conviction was held in contemporary Athens that 'these things are false'. No doubt the philosophic Euripides, probably taught by Anaxagoras to call the divine sun 'a golden clod',²¹ would have shared the conviction as rational argument; just as there is no doubt that Thucydides, discussing the consequences of the plague, mentions growing scepticism towards established religion;²² and so on. But when we have mustered all that kind of argument, it remains true that orthodox paganism died a slow death, while new pagan cults and mystery religions went on flourishing, and we cannot estimate properly the extent of scepticism except among intellectuals. Euripides, as dramatist, ever sensitive and respectful towards popular sentiment, would not have been likely to enter into a conspiracy even with a section of his audience, simply because popular sentiment made no easy distinction between secular and supernatural.

Although he agreed that the term is not altogether satisfactory, Kitto included the *Ion*, along with the *Alcestis*, *Iphigeneia in Tauris* and *Helen*, in a group of 'tragi-comedies'—though the *Iphigeneia* ought perhaps to be called 'romantic melodrama' and the *Helen* 'high comedy'.²³ More recently these four plays have been joined to the *Andromache*, *Herakles* and *Orestes* in a treatment of 'seven Euripidean examples of an unorthodox tragic form'; and of these, some 'in slightly different company, have been called the "happy ending plays", or again the "tyche plays", and all are usually classed as melodrama'.²⁴

If roughly a quarter of surviving Greek tragedy is to be classed as melodrama, clearly fresh thinking, or better still perhaps, old thinking, is required for our understanding of what Greek tragedy was. A healthy corrective to what may turn out to be an unrewarding pursuit of typological labels has now been supplied in a sympathetic study of the *Helen*, which sees beneath the consummate dramatic craftsmanship 'a basic seriousness of situation and tone, a pattern of carefully reiterated serious themes . . . which recent critics, pre-occupied as they are with the skilful construction of individual scenes or with the basic tenets of the playwright's "philosophy", have almost universally ignored'.²⁵ A similar

¹⁸ D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto/London, 1967) p. 276.

¹⁹ Viz. G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London, 1941) p. 279: 'The aim [of the play] is not to prove anything at all, but to dramatize;' Kitto *ib.* p. 312: ' . . . the first purpose of the dramatist in writing these plays [*Ion* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*] was to create an effective stagepiece; to exploit the resources of his art for their own sake, not for the sake of something bigger;' André Rivier *Essai sur le Tragique d'Euripide* (Lausanne, 1944) p. 124 n. 3: ' . . . L'intérêt patriotique ne saurait motiver la composition du drame qui cherche à peindre des sentiments humains.'

²⁰ Conacher, p. 285. Cf. Christian Wolff, 'The

Design and Myth in Euripides' *Ion*' *HSCP* 69 (1965) p. 169: 'If one thinks of it as a kind of romance, then a certain leisurely digressiveness—descriptions, talk of myths, of political life in Athens—is not inappropriate, and a number of critics, complaining of distracting irrelevancies, might be fairly answered. Yet the play is also genuinely serious, to which at least its near catastrophe can testify; it must somehow qualify as a tragedy.'

²¹ Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* p. 182, citing *E. fr.* 783. ²² 2. 53. 4. ²³ Kitto, p. 309.

²⁴ Anne Pippin Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford, 1971) p. 1.

²⁵ Anthony J. Podlecki, 'The Basic Seriousness of Euripides' *Helen*', *TAPA* 101 (1970) pp. 401 ff.

corrective plea can be extended to the interpretation of the *Ion*. Further, it may be useful to recall what we all know: (a) that only a modest proportion of Greek plays survive of the very many that once existed; and (b) that Aristotle knew far more about them than we are ever likely to know.

Critics agree that the plot of the *Ion* is excellent. Instead of stating this agreement apologetically, as if stage craftsmanship were not the real business of a great dramatist, we may as well, as Schiller did, praise Aristotle because he laid the greatest emphasis, as far as tragedy is concerned, on the connection between events; and perhaps we have grown so familiar with what Aristotle said in his comprehensive definition of tragedy that critics have failed to see how fittingly it applies to the *Ion*:²⁶ *ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἠδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν.* The plot is the soul of tragedy, as imitation of action done by performers; and action can only be judged in the light of what we know of the character of the doer and of what he says in explanation of his actions.²⁷

As Owen says,²⁸ the plot of the *Ion* is more intricate than that of any other play of Euripides. That particular pleasure which arises from pity and fear through imitation is twice achieved in the sort of tragic incident which Aristotle most commended.²⁹ Not only is complexity resolved in the climactic recognition scene, but recognition is itself parodied in a mistakenly contrived scene of false recognition. The subtle delicacy and shifting patterns of the verse structure are interwoven with the developing action in masterly fashion, giving some indication, even from a study of the text, of the powerful impact the play must have made in a performance embellished with appropriate music and dancing. The imagery engages the imagination of the audience evocatively in terms of light and place.³⁰

Spatially the action moves, directly or descriptively, between Delphi and Athens, temporally between a mythical past and contemporary allusive reference, through the interaction of character at three levels: Olympian deities (and Pythian priestess); principal characters; directly involved attendant female chorus (with the old man and the servant).

²⁶ *Po.* 1449b 24–8. Cf., however, Kitto, p. 314: 'It appears then that the absence of a tragic theme is the direct explanation both of the regular form and brilliant execution of these plays, and of the blend that they present of the pathetic, the amusing and the melodramatic;' and p. 318: 'We have seen already that the Euripidean tragi-comedy reverts to the normal type of plot. Formally, the *Iphigenia* obeys the same Aristotelian canons as the *Tyrannus*; a fact which Aristotle duly acknowledges. But though these plots obey the laws (a fact that we need not stay to demonstrate) they obey them in a new spirit, and the new spirit causes interesting changes in technique.' Whilst agreeing that Kitto's general description of the ethos of tragi-comedy accords well with the tone of the *Ion* and on the whole provides an excellent direction for the frame of mind in which we should approach the play, Conacher (p. 282) is bound to add: 'This description is, however, too consistently worked out for the material it concerns: one feels that Kitto understands the tragi-comic *genre* more thoroughly than Euripides does, a fact which is not surprising when one considers the matter historically. Thus while we find that much of the *Ion* conforms with Kitto's general description, there are moments in this play (as in others) when we find Euripides breaking Kitto's rules.'

²⁷ *Ib* 1449^b 31, 37, 1450^a 1, 38: with Lucas's comments.

²⁸ Owen, p. xviii.

²⁹ *Po.* 1453^b 11 ff.

³⁰ Shirley Barlow, *passim*. Cf. also Wolff, p. 181: 'The myths, then, as they are presented partly suggest detachment, a self-sufficient poetry, enhanced by images of nature—stars (84, 797, 870, 1078, 1147, 1151 ff.), sun (41, 82 f., 1134, 1148, 1439, 1467, 1516, 1550), moon (1080, 1155), night (85, 717, 955, 1049, 1150), rocks (11, 274, 492 ff., 714 f., 871, 936 f., 1267, 1479 f., 1482), caves (17, 288, 500 ff., 892, 937 f., 948, 958, 1239, 1494), water (95 ff., 105 f., 116 ff., 147 ff., 167, 174 f., 872, 1075, 1081 ff.), laurel (76, 80, 103, 112 f., 148, 422, 919), ivy (217), olive (1433 ff., 1480)—and the colouring of gold (9, 25, 146, 157, 192, 431, 459, 887, 890, 909, 1007, 1030, 1085, 1154, 1165, 1175, 1182, 1429 f.). But even as these elements of nature, apart from their suggestion of a withdrawn calm, take on the associations of a story which began in the darkness of a cave and unfolds in the natural beauty of Delphi, so the myths have their symbolic relevance... they reflect the role of violence in the play... and with violence a benign end. The images of fire and snake are similar.' On fire and snake see Wolff's refs. and comments *ad loc.*

The levels are not static, but fluid, they interpenetrate in terms of human action. Hence prologue and epiphany are also orthodox essentials of the play. As Owen rightly says of the epiphany,³¹ the goddess appears not so much to extricate a tangled plot, since Ion's doubts seem to have revived *in order* to warrant her appearance, as to give occasion for a prophecy about the future of the Ionian race who should be Ion's descendants, thus fulfilling a purpose (favoured by Euripides) which Aristotle describes as the legitimate use of the *deus ex machina*.

Unity of time is strict but carefully manipulated to hasten the action and provide verisimilitude by motivating abrupt shifts in plot and equally abrupt changes in attitude. The play begins at dawn. The festive tent is built with careful attention to the passage of the sun so that the guests will not be inconvenienced by its midday or its setting rays. Parody of reversal is paralleled by irony of understatement that so much can happen within such strict time limits:

ἄρ' ἐν φαειναῖς ἡλίου περιπτυχαῖς
ἔνεστι πάντα τάδε καθ' ἡμέραν μαθεῖν:

says Ion.³²

To acknowledge such orthodoxy of construction obliges us to recognise the plasticity of Aristotelian formulae and, even more so, the unflagging skill of Euripides' restlessly ironic manipulation of the stage conventions of his time.

Wilamowitz changed his mind more than once about the precise dating of the *Ion*.³³ No decisive arguments have been produced by Grégoire, Owen and other scholars. We have to be content with an approximate dating within the decade 420–410. There is also uncertainty about the mythology of Ion;³⁴ and Euripides could (and did) manage his version for his own dramatic purposes. Direct political allusions have also proved difficult to pin down and it does not, I think, much help our appreciation of the purpose of the play to be told that it is the last of the patriotic plays of Euripides, the successor of the *Herakleidai*, *Supplices* and *Herakles*.³⁵

In this connection, Zuntz has made salutary comments. He finds no instance to support a common opinion that the Exodos of Euripides' plays is only loosely connected with the main action and may overstep the boundaries of the mythical subject and hint at some contemporary event. The Exodos widens the sphere of the drama, it never relinquishes it. The Exodos of the *Ion* does not in any way break the artistic illusion in order to allude to some particular historical event. Athene's prophecy about the descendants of Kreousa and Ion provides that glance into the (relative) future which normally serves to assign its place within the tradition to the particular version of a myth which the tragedy has presented. In appropriate mythical terms Athene calls up, among other things, an image of the Athenian empire; an image which would be appreciated by the audience at any time (and no less so, if at the time of the performance they were fighting to retain or recover it). The prophecy then falls in with the general notions of the audience—it could not have been otherwise—but it entails no breaking of the dramatic illusion nor any particular reference which could help to date the play.³⁶

Which is not to deny that the *Ion* is political or patriotic, but we may have to look beneath the surface of events to see how it may be both political and patriotic. Exact

³¹ Note *ad* 1549 citing *Po.* 15 and comparing *IT* 1435, where the shipwreck has been brought about so that Athene may utter her prophecies. But there is no evidence in the *Ion* scene of the use of a real *μηχανή*, since the vision appears above the temple and Athene could have stood on the top of the building which made the back-scene.

³² L. 1517 f. and Owen's note on the interpretation

of ἄρα as ἄρ' οὐ.

³³ Between 420 and 416, *Analecta Euripidea* (1875) pp. 173, 178–9, cf. *id. Hermes* 18 (1883) p. 242 n. 1; between 415 and 412, *Ion, Einleitung* (1926).

³⁴ See Owen, pp. ix–xvii.

³⁵ Owen, p. xli.

³⁶ G. Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides* (Manchester, 1955) p. 64.

dating may not greatly matter. Enough was happening within that decade to make choice and action deeply decisive. This is a play of sharp confrontation—of character with character, of ignorance with knowledge, of false belief with truth (or partial truth), of illusions with reality.³⁷ At Delphi, of all places, people should know themselves; and the people of the play do, in varying degrees, get to know themselves and know reality; but on the whole they then know less about how the others know themselves. When they leave us we have seen part of a process which has set them in a new situation which we know cannot remain as it is, a situation in which a comment of only connect would be optimistic and perhaps one of how and why connect at all more fitting.

The close involvement of the chorus with Kreousa and her mission to Delphi makes them essential to the action. The pattern of the plot is thus arranged as a series of well-knit scenes which at the same time reveal facets of character, mood and motive in terms of statement, dialogue and lyrical expression.

Hermes in the prologue gives an account of the events which have preceded the beginning of the play. He presents some obscure details of Athenian mythology and indicates what particular interpretation the dramatist is going to place upon the legendary stories of Kreousa, Xouthos and Ion. For purposes of the action of this play Euripides will accept the divine birth of Ion as true, in accordance with his not infrequent practice of adopting romantic legends at their face value but simultaneously treating character at the human level, shorn of heroic or divine qualities. In the case of the *Ion* the practice is employed with ironically devastating effect, because Euripides was willing to grant to Apollo far greater measure of irrationality than Verrall was willing to grant to Euripides. Using Hermes as mouthpiece of communication, Euripides allows Apollo to become Kreousa's lover as a god. In the prologue he is still a god. In the play he will be judged by human standards. Hermes concludes his prologue with a foreword to the action of the play. Apollo has not forgotten his responsibilities. Xouthos will be declared the father of Apollo's son, who will be named Ion, received into his mother's house, made known to her and so gain his proper rights. Hermes then withdraws into the laurel groves to watch events.

The audience now knows, through Hermes, what has occurred, by means similar to that device called the Alienation or Estrangement Effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in contemporary Brechtian dramaturgy.³⁸ The purpose of the device is usually to prevent the audience from sympathising or identifying with the characters of the play—the antithesis of both empathy and illusion in the theatre. If the outcome is thus initially revealed the audience will no longer be so much concerned with the sequence of events (with what happened) but will critically judge the actions of the characters (how it happened as it did).

Thus Apollo is placed from the beginning at the centre of the action. Although he never actually appears, he remains pervasive. The action takes place before his temple, the imagery of light gives allusive indications of his presence; and, most important, he becomes involved in the action and in consequence also becomes subordinated to the processes of action like other characters in the play. The *Ion* supplies a special case in Greek tragedy where something is apparently assumed in a prologue as going to happen and then does not happen after all. Because Hermes is not omniscient and Apollo is neither omniscient nor omnipotent, the audience will nevertheless be taken by surprise through a misleading statement in the prologue. If Apollo and Hermes had been divinely

³⁷ Cf. Conacher, p. 268: 'The peculiar structure of the *Ion* is admirably suited to the full exploitation of its ironic possibilities, for it enables the same ironic situation to be played up in a variety of different ways.' He continues (and here, I disagree): 'Indeed, so fundamental to the theme and plot is this

ironic play between the real and imagined situations that, in this drama, the irony becomes almost an end in itself and not (as in more serious drama) a means to an end, a way of heightening the tragic climax which gives final expression to its meaning.'

³⁸ As Mr Barker has pointed out to me.

beyond error, Kreousa should not then have discovered that Ion was declared by Apollo to be the son of Xouthos until he had arrived in Athens. Murder-plot and counter-plot would not then have occurred.³⁹

Apollo does not neglect his son; but he omits to follow his established and acceptable practice of giving an ambiguous oracle. Such an easy means of both having and eating his cake can hardly have been overlooked by Euripides. Nor can the peculiarity of formulating a plan which his prophetic powers (alluded to by Hermes in ll.6-7) should have sufficed to warn him would miscarry.⁴⁰ It is through participation in action therefore that Apollo becomes reduced to human level and thereby prone to human error. It is only too easy to deride him as barbaric, selfish and shabby—but so are many human beings, who ought to know and do better, similarly responsible for the sorry plight of others. Critics have been too reluctant to give Apollo at least the credit for trying, however clumsily and unsuccessfully, to put things right.

The play begins with Ion's long and beautiful monody (82-183) which is metrically divided into three parts:⁴¹ an anapaestic transition from the prologue iambics to lyric, perhaps in recitative (82-111); lyrical strophe and antistrophe, with short refrain in paean form and a work-song for the sweeping of the temple precincts (112-43); and lyrical anapaests (144-83).

As the focus is shifted from Apollo to the boy, a new day is dawning, its fresh promise in keeping with Ion's ingenuousness, apparently innocently happy in his devoted service to the god. He has spent a contented, sheltered boyhood. His menial tasks of sweeping and sprinkling, preventing the birds from fouling the buildings, are for him a mystic rite. The birds are both real and symbolic. They disturb⁴² the dawn stillness of Ion's new day, the day which is to turn out to be the most momentous of his life. He scruples to kill them, since they announce the will of the gods to men—as of course Apollo does at this shrine. Later in the play these scruples will be rewarded when other birds intervene to save his life (1196 ff.). One of them, he thinks, is intending to build its nest here. He is shocked—as the priestess was shocked when she had found him as a baby before the temple and overcame the impulse to take him away and reared him instead at the sanctuary in accordance with the god's designs (40 ff.). Kreousa, in contrast, thinks that the child had been carried away by birds (903, 917), because of Apollo's indifference. Describing himself as motherless and fatherless, Ion, with unconscious irony, expresses his reverence for the shrine of Apollo which has nourished him (109) and then more explicitly praises Apollo as a father (136).

Ion at the end of the play will be a different person. He grows up quickly.⁴³ So much happens in the course of this day. We have to accept this and all the other rapid changes partly, as I have suggested,⁴⁴ for plausible reasons of stage convention. There may perhaps be another reason. The formal structure of the monody is suited to Ion's official position as temple steward of the god and is therefore likely to have motivated conventional expressions of sentiment towards his duties as towards the god he serves—which is not saying that they are insincere. If so, those sudden realistic insights with which Ion is soon to surprise us may have been found less surprising by a contemporary audience. Although he protests his incredulity when Kreousa tells him about her affair with Apollo, pretending it happened to someone else (339), he soon reluctantly agrees that the god is in the wrong (355)

³⁹ Cf. Owen, p. xix and n. 1.

⁴⁰ I owe these shrewd observations to Mr Whittle.

⁴¹ Owen, pp. 74, 185-6; Max Imhof, *Euripides' Ion. Eine literarische Studie* (Berne, 1966) pp. 19-21; Shirley Barlow (pp. 45-8) has an illuminating analysis.

⁴² Shirley Barlow, p. 48, cf. p. 144 n. 27: 'It is true that the birds are seen by Ion as the bearers of

omens from gods to men (180), but the point is that they are *other* gods who do not impinge upon Ion's particular devotion to Apollo. His attitude is similar to that of Hippolytus who will take only Artemis seriously as the object of his worship.'

⁴³ Cf. Owen, p. xxvii.

⁴⁴ P. 205.

and advises Kreousa, with shrewd reasons, not to put any questions to the god⁴⁵ (369–80), as innocent trust in the gods is replaced by frankly expressed fears of their power. In the false recognition scene with Xouthos, he shows distinct maturity of judgement about power politics in Athens, the likely difficulties of family relationships if he moves there, and sober appraisal, by contrast, of the advantages of a secluded life of religious service at Delphi (585–647).⁴⁶

Our first encounter with the women of the chorus as they wander about the precincts, chattering in excitement, reminds us that we are in an everyday world, where Delphi can be compared in its marvels with Athens (184–236). The boldness of innovation in intruding realistic details of contemporary atmosphere into the archaic world of the myth has been considered consistent with Euripides' technique of expanding and complicating the unitary concentration of the myth; and comparison of the Delphi of the *Eumenides* with that of the *Ion* suggested as an index of the difference in the Aeschylean and Euripidean approaches to tragic technique: 'In the austere Delphi of Aeschylus, the locale is briefly outlined with a few significant details at the beginning of the play, and only the characters essential to the drama are present. The Delphi of Euripides is alive with the hustle and bustle of temple servants, gaping sightseers, and local townspeople. The description of routine cult activity and of the aesthetic delights of Delphi's artistic treasures suggests a scene taken from contemporary life.'⁴⁷

The women talk with Ion who politely and efficiently deals with their queries (219–37). They are joined by Kreousa and later by Xouthos (238–451). Changes of mood are markedly rapid. Kreousa and Ion are drawn together by natural sympathy—the reverse of what happens when Xouthos appears.⁴⁸ There is no irony in their pity for each other. Ion now really tells more of his inmost feelings than we have learnt from the ingenuous monody. For we learn that he longs to find his mother; and his sense of loss is seemingly aroused from confrontation with the childless mother. As their sympathetic talk discloses the experience of the childless mother and the motherless child, Ion is induced to question the dealings of Apollo with human beings. Then he takes refuge in convention and a dogmatic defence of Apollo, right or wrong, as he warns Kreousa not to go too far in questioning the god. Kreousa is prepared to forget her misery in the midst of the process of prophecy and fulfilment anticipated by Hermes, as Xouthos appears. All blame of Apollo will lapse if she gets her child, now more important than justice. Ion, left alone (429–51), tries to dismiss the disconcerting thoughts aroused by what he has learnt and decides to get on with his menial tasks. The attempt at suppression fails and he abruptly decides that he must confront Apollo with his wrong-doing. How can gods break laws they have ordained for men?⁴⁹

The chorus in their song (452–508) follow Kreousa in their thoughts as she goes around the altars, at her husband's request, praying to the gods for a happy issue in his quest for an oracle with promise of children. The strophe is a prayer for the royal succession to be maintained; the antistrophe sings the delights of children and the family over wealth and position; the epode pessimistically recalls the misfortunes of children born of gods and mortals—with sympathy for Kreousa but no disbelief in gods.

⁴⁵ But he expresses renewed indignation and determination to confront Apollo with his actions when Kreousa has left him (436 ff.). Owen says that the pious young votary of Apollo becomes the mouthpiece of Euripidean views, hardly appropriate to his character or office. May it not be rather the case that we do here have a revealing glimpse of strength of character supported by confidence in Ion's knowledge of temple ritual, of what may and may not be done—of which we have clear evidence in his answers to the women attendants when he

first meets them? (219–32).

⁴⁶ Wolff, pp. 174 ff., gives proper emphasis to the importance of this speech.

⁴⁷ Froma I. Zeitlin, 'The Argive Festival of Hera and Euripides' *Electra*', *TAPA* 101 (1970) pp. 645 f. and n. 3. The realistic atmosphere of Delphi described in the *Andromache* (1085–1160) is compared.

⁴⁸ See Owen's note *ad* 237.

⁴⁹ For the thought as typically Euripidean see Dodds, *CR* 43 (1929), p. 103, citing *Hipp.* 120, *Ba.* 1348.

Ion appears, wanting to know if Xouthos has received his answer (510-16). There follows the false recognition scene between Xouthos and Ion (517-675)—blundering mainspring of all else. Ion must believe what Xouthos says, since he is not yet prepared to doubt the oracle in all things. Once convinced that Xouthos is telling the truth about the oracle, he joins him in trying to make sense out of falsehood; and they naturally arrive at false interpretation. By acceptance Ion becomes heir to wealth, position, authority. Now he begins to use worldly reasoning that directly contrasts with the ingenuousness of the opening monody. He may nostalgically recall the blessings of simple belief and temple service but he is committed now to action in the world outside. Xouthos dispels his misgivings. Falsehood begets falsehood, as means are agreed for deceiving Kreousa—of course in her own best interests and the interests of the succession.

The chorus sing their sympathy for their mistress. They too have begun to disbelieve, to suspect fraud. The dangers foreseen by Ion as possible seem likely to become real, as the women clarify their allegiance to Kreousa and their opposition to strangers (676-724).

Kreousa returns with the old man, a trusted family retainer. She speaks of the mutual support that should sustain people in face of adversity. The support that Kreousa will rely on is, however, weak and infirm, as the chorus of women and the old man become levers of desperate action. The old man believes in Apollo; the deceit and betrayal are the responsibility of Xouthos; the chorus are with him. Kreousa's despair and outraged suffering are channelled to desperate violence (725-1047). The chorus sing an incantation of vengeance and nostalgically recall a festival time in Athens—Athens now threatened by an usurper (1048-1105).

The servant graphically describes the horror of the attempted murder. Deception upon deception have indeed brought Ion into the world of action as the will is generated in him to kill his own mother (1106-1228). The chorus fatalistically proclaim that there is no escape from punishment. Justice demands that action for good or ill shall be requited accordingly (1229-43).

From this point until the end of the play, the action is performed through Ion and Kreousa, Ion and the Pythian priestess, Ion and Kreousa again, and later with Athene. After the priestess leaves, Ion is tempted by self-interest not to enquire further into his origins—the one quest now most clear to him—and resists the temptation. The recognition proceeds. He is united with his mother, but realises that his father should be there to share their happiness. The basis of the reunion is false even though their relationship is true by nature. Kreousa is bound to tell Ion the facts of his birth. As the chorus remind us that from what we have seen, no man should ever think that any chance is hopeless, Ion is afflicted with renewed doubt; but Kreousa is determined to believe, to abandon justice now that she has her son and a true succession is assured; and she is prepared to improvise excuses, to become a partner in renewed deception. Even if Xouthos is duped, we feel it to be vain hope that others will accept Ion under the guise of her husband's son. Ion is resolved to probe deeper—and then Athene appears to make it seem that Apollo is acting in Ion's best interests, provided he is prepared to accept deceit as the basis of a solution. Kreousa is won over, but Ion not. His continued silence after apparent acceptance is indication enough of his attitude. The chorus point the dilemma of the final situation by equating trust in the gods with goodness and worth in the end, evil with the lack of them. This pious hope denies all that we have seen unless we are prepared to accept that doubt about the gods, which, in terms of the action, has been repeatedly stressed as implying the search for truth and justice, is evil in itself. This no doubt would have been the view of orthodoxy. The dramatist has been concerned to portray conflict and change in character, the consequences of decision in a world of action, consequences which are much less simple to define in human terms.