CONVERGING TRUTHS
EURIPIDES' ION AND THE ATHENIAN QUEST FOR SELF-DEFINITION

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4.3. Polyphony and Carnivalesque

So far we have spoken about the existence of two contradictory forces in late Euripidean drama, but in some respects this is too simple: there are not two voices but several, and in a musical metaphor we should speak of polyphony rather than a duet. Thus, for instance, the intrusion of Xouthos represents a tertium quid, neither Athenian nor Ionian but a foreigner, or rather a metic; and Apollo is a multi-faceted and polyvalent god rather than ambivalent. A near synonym for plurality of perspective is polyphony, a technical term in the literary criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin nowhere offers a clear definition of his innovative literary concept of polyphony. He does however caution that the musical metaphor of polyphony is only to be understood as ‘a graphic analogy, a simple metaphor’ and that the similarities between musical polyphony and pophonic novel end here. According to Bakhtin, in a polyphonic work the author permits his characters to engage in ‘a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices’; he creates a dialogue between the disparate viewpoints and becomes one of the interlocutors amongst equals, without in any way prioritizing his personal viewpoint over others. Bakhtin sets out to prove that Dostoevsky is such a polyphonic author and thus also ‘prove the concivability of polyphony’.

In his study of the generic and plot-compositional characteristics of Dostoevsky’s work, Bakhtin traces a number of influences ranging from the adventure plot to the Bible, from Socratic dialogue to Menippean satire, from French to German and Russian literature. This motley of elements was fiercely criticized in the nineteenth century as ‘a crude and absolutely unjustified violation of the “aesthetics of genre”’. Euripides too was criticized by his contemporaries and later by the Alexandrian commentators, and by nineteenth-century scholars, on grounds similar to the critics of Dostoevsky. In the nineteenth century Schlegel, in his hierarchic view of ancient Greek tragedy with its three stages of development, allocated to Euripides the last stage which coincided with the degeneration of tragedy into a vigorous yet anarchical debauchery. And Aristotle in his Poetics criticizes Euripides’ plot-construction but finds him the most tragic of all the poets (τραγικότατος ὑπὸ τῶν σοφότων), because by ending his plays with affliction he makes the most tragic impression in performance. His contemporaries and later ancient critics described Euripides’ art as ‘tangled and complex’ (σχηματικάς) and his style as closer to the genre of the oratory and philosophy (ὅ ἐστι τῆς σοφής φιλοσοφος, ‘the philosopher on stage’). The impact of Aristotelian literary criticism is seen as early as the fourth century (e.g. Antiphon’s Poisios), and during the following centuries the Alexandrian scholars are the continuators of the same line of Euripidean criticism. The scholiasts too criticize Euripides’ faults in organization of plot (οίκεια), and in character portrayal (aberrations from heroic ethos as in the hypothesis for Orestes); they also criticize him for inconsistencies, obscurities, and use of colloquialisms in language. They concern him for his deviations from the traditional versions of myth, for introducing contemporary political allusions and anachronisms, for using the chorus or the dramatic characters as his ‘mouthpieces’. He is frequently chastised for

67 Vidal-Naquet 1997; also above ch. 2.4.2. and 2.6.
68 See above ch. 3.6.
69 I have used the following editions and discussions of Bakhtin’s works: Bakhtin 1968, 1981, 1984; Emerson & Holquist 1986; Morson & Emerson 1990; Holquist & Liapunov 1990; Morris 1994.
70 This has led to a misreading of the term in scholarly criticism; see the discussion in Morson & Emerson 1990: 231–68.
71 Bakhtin 1984: 22; Morson & Emerson 1990: 485 n. 3, note that in his literary polyphony Bakhtin does not favour ‘simultaneous sounding’ and ‘consonance’ as expected in musical polyphony.
72 Bakhtin 1984: 6 (his italics).
73 Morson & Emerson 1990: 239.
74 Morson & Emerson 1990: 240.
75 Bakhtin 1984: 105.
77 On Aristotle’s references to Euripides in the Poetics, see Atkins 1934: 114–15.
78 Poet. 13, 1453a 29.
80 Quint. 10.157–8.
81 Clem. Alex. Stromat. 5.70.1.
82 This assumption was made as early as 1867 by Trendelenburg who claimed that the liberal scholarch either independently agree with the Poetics or derive from it. See scholion at Or. 996.
83 See scholia at Med. 232, 233; Hipp. 231; And. 415; Or. 371. On the political nature of Euripides’ tragedies, see also Dic Prus. 35(9),11, 35(9)2,15.
84 See scholia at Hec. 254, καὶ ἔπειτα τοῦτός ἔφορεσεν, περίκειται ὑπὸ καθ’ ἑαυτοῦ τῶν ἔρωταν καὶ τῆς γόνους συνήθους. Euripides is of this sort, assigning to the dramatic characters his own thoughts and mixing the times.”
introducing dramatic characters talking philosophy, as in Hipp. 953, where Euripides refers to Pythagoreanism and Orphism66 and in Or. 982, where he is said to 'mingle physics with his plots' like an Anaxagorean philosopher.67 Comedy and ancient biography too recurrently allude to Euripides' relationship to contemporary philosophers and their philosophical ideas. The reciprocal admiration between Euripides and Socrates is a good example of inference stemming from philosophical ideas found in the plays themselves. In Aristophanes' Clouds (1379), Euripides is Socrates' favorite poet; and in the Suda and in Aulis Cellinus, Euripides is said to have learned moral philosophy from Socrates.68 In the Origins and Life of Euripides 5, Socrates is said to have helped Euripides in writing his plays, as attested in a comedy of Telecles69 and in an Aristophanic fragment which may have been included in the first performance of the Clouds.70 Euripides' presentation through the distortions of comedies resulted in his representation in ancient biography as a miser and a reclusive poet-philosopher.71

As it may transpire from this rapid examination of the reception of the tragedies of Euripides, he was often criticized for introducing into his poetry elements foreign to the genre of tragedy. Dostoevsky in the nineteenth century was also criticized for doing much the same thing in his novels. A preferable literary analysis of Dostoevsky

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66 The scholiast at Hipp. 953 ποιεί ταυτότοτον θεοσοφίαν, 'he is always of this sort, introducing his dramatic characters as talking philosophy'. Euripides was censured also in Alc. 902; El. 1314; Pho. 388.
67 Anaxagorean influence is also detected in the invocation of the earth and sun at Hipp. 601 and in the innovative prayer of Hecuba to Zeus at Ira. 884. Euripides' debt to Anaxagoras has been extensively dealt with by Satyrus in fr. 37 ii; cf. Suda 5, where Euripides is said to have switched from philosophy to tragedy, 'after seeing Anaxagoras running into danger because of the opinions he had introduced' (fr. Kossas 1994: 11); and see list in Kossas 1994: 22–9. Cf. also Mantzou 1990, on Eur. fr. 912 N.
68 Cf. also Satyrus, fr. 39ii, a Socratic conception of the gods found in Euripides fr. 1007 ε Ν.
69 See fr. 41 K-A, Μηνήλαος δέ εένοις φρέστει τι δήμα καίνοι Ευριπίδης καί Σωκράτης τά φαγόνων ὑποτίθεναι, 'that man there is Mnesicles, who is roasting upon a new play for Euripides, and Socrates is laying the firewood' (fr. Kossas 1994: 3); see also Gallais, fr. 15 K-A.
70 Arist. fr. 392–9 K-A.
71 "Origins and Life of Euripides" 23, σοφότατος δέ καί σόφωσα καί σοφότατος φύσεις καί μορφές, 'he was regarded as sullen and pensive and stern, a hater of laughter and of women' (fr. Kossas 1994: 11).

is offered by Bakhtin who claims that 'this generic and stylistic foreignness is made meaningful and even surrounded in Dostoevsky, through the consistent polyphony of his work'.72 I would argue that the literary concept of polyphony, understood as the plurality of valid and autonomous voices all heard in a single cohesive piece of literary discourse, applies equally well to Euripidean drama, and that the generic experimentation in Euripides (above 4.1.) is closely related to the polyphonic character of his tragedies. To be sure, Bakhtinian theory needs to be approached critically and selectively. Any application of Bakhtinian terminology to Attic drama needs to be carefully qualified, especially since Bakhtin himself in his writings disregarded the polyphonic quality of the dramatic literature of the Classical period.73 My aim however is not to engage in a critical analysis of Bakhtinian literary theory, rather to tentatively explore it as a tool to cast a fresh look at the Ist as a characteristic example of the mature Euripidean style.

In Euripides, the intrusion of philosophical arguments and the mixing of high and low, serious and comic is more pronounced than in the works of his other tragic colleagues. It has been noted that Sophocles' Philoctetes of 409 BC is influenced by sophist thinking and scholars have gone so far as to label the play as 'melodrama', due to the averted catastrophe and the 'happy' ending.74 Yet there is no evidence that either Aeschylus or Sophocles ever included comic elements in their dramas. This feature is present in Euripidean plays often classified as 'tragic-comic'. As argued earlier (4.1.), the comic ingredients identified in late Euripidean plays, and indeed in the Ist, do not constitute a breach of generic boundaries. Rather, they are

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72 Bakhtin 1984: 105; see also pp. 14–18.
73 Hail 1997: 118–24 in her discussion of the 'sociology of Athenian tragedy' includes a section entitled 'polyphony', where she notes that women, slaves and metics are permitted to voice their opposition to the 'hegemonic value-system', and that 'tragedy consists of polyphony and antiphony... is dialogic... conceals the authorial persona' (pp. 118–19). A heavy influence of Bakhtinian literary theory is strongly implied, but interestingly, no such credit is given to Bakhtin anywhere in the text, notes or bibliography. Such an omission is clearly intentional. Such an omission is clearly intentional. Hail borrows Bakhtinian terminology but uses it more loosely, and thus avoids engaging in Bakhtinian criticism. Dunn 1986e duly recognizes his debt to Bakhtinian theory (on 'epic and novel') with respect to his ingenious discussion of Euripidean closure and narrative openness; see pp. 18–9, 127–28, 202 in Eur. Hes., and 199–200 in Eur. Pho.
74 Croiz 1979. It is also possible that the fragmentary Isto by Sophocles had a 'happy' ending, as the scholiast to Eupolis `Or. 1691 seems to indicate: ἐν τούτῳ Ἰστός ὁ Σωφρόνις τῷ τέλεις ἔτησιν.
 deliberative characteristics of a polyphonic work. Furthermore, this technique of deliberately ‘hetero-voicing’ the genre is characteristic of the literature Bakhtin called ‘carnivalized’. This type of literature is influenced by ‘carnivalistic folklore’ which pointedly combines the sacred with the profane.59

The Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque presupposes a presentation of ‘the world turned upside down’ aptly exemplified in its primary act of ‘crowning and decrowning the carnival king’, an act meant to underline the temporality and relativity of everything. All hierarchical social boundaries of rank, age and property are joyfully crossed and there is ‘free and familiar contact among people’.

Ultimate questions about reality, life and death, transfer ‘from the abstractly philosophical sphere’ to the ‘concretely sensuous plane of images and events’. And all these images ‘unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death, blessing and curse, praise and abuse.’ Dualism is at the very heart of the carnival. Action is set in the public square where people interact freely or on the threshold, be it that of life and death, sanity and insanity, falsehood and truth. Everything is in unfinalized transition; there is no ‘conclusive conclusion’ and ‘everything is still in the future’.

According to Bakhtin, tragedy, like all serious genres (epic, history, classical rhetoric), is single-toned and presupposes a finality, stability and wholeness alien to carnivalesque literature. I would argue that Bakhtin is wrong to relegate all tragedy to the single-toned serious genres. He does not consider such Euripidean plays as the Ion and some other late plays (e.g. Het., Or., Bae.) which not only represent a view of reality strongly characterized by ambiguity, as in most Attic tragedies, but also possess a polyphonic quality normally encountered in carnivalesque literature. Criticism on Bakhtinian theory and its assertions about classical literature is not new in classical scholarship; studies have focused on Bakhtin’s reluctance to include Old Attic comedy in the serio-comic genres59 and on his underestimating the multivocality of Attic tragedy and comedy.60 But if the polyphonic character of Attic tragedy can be asserted, the carnivalesque elements are more difficult to negotiate with the serious tone of Attic tragedy. We are not seeking to meet all the Bakhtinian criteria for carnivalesque literature, but hope to enhance understanding of late Euripidean tragedy through the study of its similarities to the literature of the carnival.61

One of the key features of carnivalesque literature is the free invention of new and innovative plots and a move away from the legendary. Euripides does not venture so far as to devise completely new plots. Phrynicus had already paid the price for his play too close to the contemporary present,62 and the days of New Comedy when the subject-matter would be informed by everyday life were still to come. But, although Euripides continued using the old vocabulary of the myths, he went a step further by re-appraising the facts of those myths. In the Orestes (395–6; cf. 295; 313–5), the hero’s illness, for the most part, is presented not as the result of the divine persecution, but as that of the reaction of his mind to the murder he has committed. The persecution by the Furies, as portrayed in the work of Aeschylus’ Oresteia (458 BC) and particularly in the Eumenides, seems to be replaced by Orestes’ mental illness which takes the form of hallucinations in the opening scene of Euripides’ Orestes (408 BC).63 Euripides rewrites Orestes’ script; the attempted murder of Helen, the abduction of Hermione and the

59 Bakhtin 1984: 107ff cites the Socratic dialogue, symposiastic literature and Menippean satire as prime examples of ancient carnivalesque literature.
60 Bakhtin 1994: 122ff.
62 See the excellent discussion by Edwards 1993. Since in classical Athens the utopia of the hegemony of the demos was realized, but the ideological hegemony was in the hands of the aristocracy, the political criticism in comedy was directed towards the demos’ regime and individual politicians and propounded conservative ideas. This ‘ideological appropriation of the popular grotesque’ runs against the Bakhtinian model of popular grotesque as ‘utopian mockery’ which aims to ‘assault power and authority as such’ (p. 97) that he finds in Rabelais. See also Suárez 1987; Goldhill 1991: 176–88.
63 Dunn 1996: 173–79 finds in the extravagant licentiousness in the Orestes ‘a carnival of forms’, though without reference to Bakhtin; the play constantly shifts from tragedy to comedy, and also diilythym was represented on stage in the song of the Phrygian slave and the chorus; see also 1989: 250.
64 Though both the Ion (above ch. 2.1, n. 1) and the Helen (above n. 47) are rare if not entirely new versions of the myths.
65 See above ch. 2.2, p. 62 with n. 20.
66 Though Euripides did ‘rationalize’ the Eumenides as a mental disturbance arising from within, he was not consistent about this. Electra, Menelaus and the chorus nowhere speak of the Eumenides as real divine beings; cf. 37–8, 316–17, 399–11; cf. 582–84. Dunn 1989: 424 remarks that one of the Euripidean innovations in the plot of this play was ‘to associate fear of the Eumenides not with their appearance but with their name’.
threat to burn down his paternal house are all efforts made by Orestes to break away from the constraints of his myth.

Euripides places under pressure not only myth but tragedy as well by challenging its subject matter, its conventions, and the character depictions of the figures of the myth. He takes the supernormal out of the myth and deprives the tragic heroes of their heroic status. Or at other times he appropriates the heroic vocabulary and lends to the most unlikely heroes: a ferocious woman, his Medea, is initially endowed with heroic stature only to disavow it in the course of the play. Furthermore, the figures of the myth were until then predominantly aristocratic, but Euripides was prepared to give more significant parts to humble characters. He gives important roles to the Nurse in the Medea, for instance, who utters the prologue, to the philosophizing nurse in the Hippolytus (186–97), to the old tutor in the Ion, and to the heroic famer of the Electra. And Orestes’ soliloquy at El. 367–400 stops the action of the play in order to lay down the new system of values for the evaluation of characters.

Not surprisingly, Euripides was ridiculed in Aristophanic comedy for the prominent roles he gave to humble characters in his plays. At Frgs. 494–50, Euripides is made to say that in his plays ‘both the woman and the slave spoke just as much as the master and the virgin and the old woman’ (ἀλλ’ ἔλεγεν ἡ γυνὴ τῇ μοί ὄλος δοῦλος συνήθεων ἱπτον/χα δεσπότης χα παλαιός χα γραφαὶ ἁκῶν). Aeschylus contends that Euripides ought to have died for doing so, but Euripides retorts that offering equal rights of speech to all characters in his plays was truly ‘democratic’ (952). Of course, such comic distortions cannot be taken seriously. They are only useful inasmuch as they offer a strong criticism of Euripidean technique here seen as in violation of the common language of the tragic genre. Yet, even if many humble characters are given significant parts in his plays, the social stratification is still maintained.

The Ion is a good example of the mature Euripidean style. We have already noted its polyphonic nature with respect to its generic experimentation. But Bakhtinian polyphony entails unfinaled, open-ended time and space. And this is indeed what we find in this rich play. The time is ‘crisis time’, a momentous point of change and transition. In the Ion, the frequent occurrences of υψόν, ‘now’ are a constant reminder of the urgency of the present and the pressure it exerts upon the characters to act immediately, without delay.

109 See Segal 1999: 12–3 for the ‘dark alternatives’ in store for Ion, Kreaous and Xouthos at the beginning of the play.

108 There are twenty-three instances in the Ion, twenty-eight in Med., seventeen to nineteen in Alc., Hb., And., Hec., and twenty in El. The instances in the Ion are: 124, 155, 550, 582, 596, 609, 654, 699, 902, 945, 975, 978, 1063, 1289, 1341, 1344, 1346, 1380, 1388, 1469, 1503, 1504, 1511, 1601, 1609, 1612. References to the past: (a) for a long time: 64, 370, 470, 1394; (b) when the time was ripe: 16, 828, 830, (c) a long time ago: 547, 1425, 1375 (I should have happened, but did not). References to the present: (a) now is the time: 1341, 1355, 1612; (b) now you see: 558; unless it is time to see (and indeed it is): 1552; (e) until now: 945, 1349; (d) a reversal of fortune occurs now: 1460, 1508, 1612. References to the future: (a) from now onwards: 1511, 1601; (b) when the time is ripe: 659, 1582; (c) for a long time (explains Xouthos’ absence): 1130.

107 See especially: (a) the false recognition scene between Xouthos and Ion: ‘accept your father now’ (556); ‘dear mother’ now, more than ever, I yearn to behold you, whoever you are’ (564); (b) the scene where Kreaous and the old tutor contrive the plan of their revenge: ‘now, then, kill the son who has been produced at your expense’ (978); ‘come, it is time for you to contribute something now’ (984); ‘kill him here now, where you can deny your guilt’ (1028); (c) Kreaous’s surpahpt scene: ‘sit now upon the altar’ (1258); (d) the scene when Pythia reveals the birth tokens to Ion: ‘now I am showing you’ (1341); ‘take them now and labour to find your mother’ (1355); (e) Kreaous’s change of heart: ‘now I gladly clap the ring upon his door’ (1612). Apart from the adverb υψόν, cf. the use of the noun χρόνος, ‘time’ and καιρός, ‘opportunity’, the adjective χρόνος, ‘late’, and the adverb ζήτομεν, ‘(more) quickly’, which may also call attention to the pressure of the present situation and the need to resort to immediate action. For instance, when Kreaous says to the old tutor that she has already begun savouring the pleasure of Ion’s imminent murder (προλαγάζομαι γενιῶν τῶν χρόνων τῆς Ἕβρωτης). ‘I enjoy my pleasure the sooner’, 1029), the implication is that the Athenian queen can barely wait for the execution of their plan. The sooner Ion dies the more pleasure she will enjoy. Such a demand exerts pressure upon the old tutor who is to act as the agent of the murderous plan; wishing to achieve the desired result as soon as possible (cf. ζήτομεν, 1180), the old man manages to entice the basket into drinking from the goblets he distributes (so as to make sure that Ion receives the one which he will have spiked with poison), under the pretext that if they exchange their small cups...
The dramatic setting too shares many characteristics with the space of carnivalized literature. The space before the Delphic temple is a sacred space whose access to the inner sanctum is strictly regulated but whose precinct is accessible to all visitors. The play opens with Ion engaging in his daily cleaning tasks on the very threshold of the Delphic temple. Indeed Ion’s life in more than one sense is a life on the threshold: in his capacity as a temple servant, he is in charge of the space outside the temple, never quite entering it; he is also in transition from adolescence to adulthood (ch. 3.4) and from sanctuary to polis (ch. 1.3). By the end of the play he sets off on his journey to Athens to fulfill his high destiny: the temple servant will soon turn into a king of Athens and future colonizer of Ionia. The same space is a pivotal space for the other main dramatic characters as well: Kreousa fulfills her transition from maidenhood through barrenness to motherhood and Xouthos is granted a son and heir to the throne.  

The off-stage space of the tent is a public carnivalized space open to all the Delphians (1140, 1166–8) who feast in shared collectiveness, honouring the crowning of the temple servant and his transition to adulthood and the polis. Laughter appropriately arises in the carnival tent amongst the feasters when the old tutor bostles about mixing and serving the wine in a short comic episode within the larger more serious frame (1171–73). This is a sacred tent (806, 982) and Ion takes due care to prepare it, but profane language is unexpectedly heard (1189). In the course of the symposium celebrating the new beginning, the new life lying ahead of Ion, a narrowly averted murder attempt by Kreousa’s old tutor reminds us of ‘the joyful relativity of evolving existence’. A similar focus on the relativity of human nature and ideas is achieved through the juxtaposition of antithetical scenes and images. Ion’s faith totters on the border of impiety when he comes within a hairsbreadth of killing Kreousa at the god’s altar; and, Kreousa completes her transition from lack of faith to complete reverence (1285; 1609–13). The fate of mortals are ever-changing (1501–17), but the grip of Apollo is also faltering. The relativity, polyphonic quality, multiplicity of tone (mixture of high and low, serious and comic), and open-endedness117 of the Ion, I argue, make a good case for identifying in the play clear carnivalistic overtones. 

Furthermore, amongst the numerous instances of laughter in the play we find good examples of what Bakhtin called ‘reduced ambivalent laughter’ in carnivalized literature118 where the loud comic aspect of the carnival is reduced and recedes into deeper levels of irony and humour. The laughter caused by the hustling and bustling of the old tutor is louder, as befits the public space of the tent (1171–73). But laughter is muffled and more ambivalent in Ion’s monody, or in the false recognition scene between Xouthos and Ion119 after Ion’s final recognition of his mother, when he takes Kreousa aside and questions her about the real identity of his father, and supposes that behind the story of her rape by Apollo she hides a more mundane tale (1523–29), or in Xouthos’ happy delusion (1602) to be retained for years to come. In Bakhtinian theory of the carnival, laughter has a ‘genre-shaping power’: it can comprehend both poles of a phenomenon in the process of becoming and when allowed to shape a scene, laughter ‘imparts a carnival sense of change and transition’, ‘the carnival sense of truth’. According to this reading, each of the above mentioned examples from the Ion are better understood as phenomena in transition which have irony at their very core and

111 See above ch. 2.5.3; see also Segal 1999.  
112 See Zacharia 1995: 55 where this episode is identified as a short ‘piece of Old Comedy’ within the tragedy.  
113 Bakhtin 1984: 164. This is not the same as relativism which Bakhtin very specifically excludes from the polypronic approach, as it would render dialogue irrelevant (p. 69).  

115 See above ch. 2.5.3.  
116 See above ch. 3.6, 3.7, 3.8.  
117 See above ch. 3.8, pp. 177–78.  
119 Knox 1979: 259 finds here an instance of laughter at a louder register than what I am prepared to accept; see Zacharia 1995: 49; Lee at 112–83.  
121 This is a portentous moment full of irony, soon to be assuaged by Athena. It is also an authentic and down-to-earth reaction in a traditional Greek society. For an anthropological parallel from mountainous north-west Greece in the 1930’s, see Campbell 1964: 110, reporting that a pregnant Sarakatsani girl suspected of incest with a cousin ‘claimed that she had been impregnated by divine, not human means, but little attention was paid to this suggestion’.  
entail within them their opposite pole of transition. Notably, the old tutor represents a carnival image himself for in spite of his old age he serves the wine, a task normally assigned to a young handsome boy; soon his disguise is exposed and he is apprehended. Xouthos’ all-knowing confidence is void; he remains oblivious to the true outcome of his visit to Delphi, a figure of secular authority deceived by gods and mortals alike. Soon after his joyful monody, Ion will come to question the morality of the god he serves. In answer to Ion’s impulse to test the oracle and Kreousa’s account of his birth, Athena’s epiphany confirms Apollo’s begetting of the Ion and thus Kreousa’s truthfulness.

Most of all, in Bakhtinian theory reduced laughter is more prominent in the position of the author who places the dramatic characters in these situations and brings them into an open-ended dialogue. The position of Euripides with respect to his play we will examine in the next section, where we will evaluate some Bakhtinian notions of knowledge and sophist challenges to knowledge in order to show that the carnivalesque overtones in the Ion noted above are not entirely gratuitous but relate to the Euripidean attitude towards the pursuit of truth. A comparison of the Ion to its ‘sister plays’ Helen and Andromeda will also aim to illustrate the state of mind Euripides was in during the time of authorship of these plays in 413/412 BC.

The truth is one, illusion manifold, and diversity makes a play
Mary Renault, The Mask of Apollo

4.4. Dialogic Vision of Truth

Euripidean pluralism is not merely a literary device; it is a way of getting at the truth about the world. Euripides’ approach is both similar to and different from those of the sophists who regard true reality as strictly unknowable. Gorgias had shown in his treatise entitled On Nature or on the Non-existent, first, that nothing exists, second, that even if anything exists man cannot know it, and third, that even if someone could know it, he could not communicate it to anyone else. But with the connecting link between language and reality severed, all that was left was a multiplicity of discourses, no one of which could be proven by any criterion to be truer than any other. From this premise, different sophists drew different conclusions. For example, Antisthenes argued that it was impossible to speak falsely, or for two people to contradict each other, while Protagoras claimed that it was possible to argue for or against any proposition. If truth could not be attained, then only the plausible could be aimed at; rhetoric came to dominate Athenian culture. Some sense of the form such sophist agônes logoi could take is provided by the Disoi Logoi, in which for each of a number of topics opposing arguments are set out. A mordant parody of such contentions is staged by Aristophanes in his Clouds as the dispute between ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ logoi.

The notion that the proper mode of procedure in investigation was the juxtaposition of opposing discourses went on to achieve such success in Athenian culture that it left conspicuous traces even in those genres whose authors did not doubt that knowledge of reality could in fact be attained. Thus Thucydides’ History can be understood in part as a rhetorical manual, or logon technê, in which pairs of opposing speeches are collected which set out the strongest possible arguments for or against particular kinds of action, in particular kinds of situations (e.g. the Mytilene debate, 3.37–48). And, some decades later, even Plato evidently felt that, whatever form the esoteric philosophical instruction he provided orally to his students within the Academy took, the only mode in which he could publish in writing his views on philosophical issues and make them known to

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133 Bakhtin 1984: 165.
134 Wallace 1998 argues for greater differentiation in our treatment of sophists, who were not a unitary phenomenon. They were not confined to Athens and sophistic views changed over time.
136 δώ κόσμοι ρίστην περί ποιότης πράγματος ἀνυποκείμενως ἀλήθειας, ‘there are two logos concerning everything, these being opposed to each other’, DK 80a1. Protagoras wrote Analogiai. This view is echoed in Eur. Andr. fr. 119 N2: ἐκ πείρας ἐν τις πράγματις δικαίαν λόγον ἀγάπαν θεῖς ἢν, εἰ κῆρεν εἶναι σωφρ., ‘If a man were a skilled speaker, he could construct a debate between two arguments on every topic’.
137 Disoi logos or Dialecitis treated sets of polar opposites, such as agathon/kalon, kalon/kakon, dikaios/aidios, aesthesis/pseudos (good/bad, beautiful/ugly or fine/disgraceful, just/unjust, true/false). For an edition of the Disoi logos, see Robinson 1984.
138 See Clouds 889–1114 on education; or the contrast between old and new education, see esp. 935–39, 900ff; see also Δια ταληκ (Banqueters, 427 BC) for a debate between two brothers—one virtuous and one evil. Cf. Fowles on poetry.
unknown readers was in the form of dialogue. After all, Socratic truth was born through dialogue and the interaction amongst people, through the Socratic devices of synecesis (i.e. juxtaposing different points of view on the same topic) and anacrisis (i.e. provoking the interlocutor to express his opinion).

So for some of Euripides’ contemporaries, plurality of discourses is necessarily linked with the unknowability of reality. But in Euripides’ Ion, I would argue, truth is not unattainable, but in practice it can be reached via this very plurality of discourses by means of a kind of synecesis. Truth is the varying point upon which all the individual perspectives converge. Or to put it in another way, there is no single truth but there are a number of converging truths. Each of the dramatic characters sees only a fraction of reality—in some cases the fraction is very small indeed. If they could find a way to confer and lay open their individual perspectives honestly and uninhibitedly in a genuine dialogue, then they would perhaps eventually be able to reach reality. So too the members of his audience, if they could continue with one another outside the confines of the theatre the dialogue that they witnessed during the dramatic representation, might themselves comprehend better the truth of their own lives.

These are troubled times for the Athenians (ch. 1.1). As argued earlier (ch. 1.2), it is my convention that the Ion was performed in the City Dionysia in Athens in 412 BC along with the Helen and the Andromeda, two plays of rescue and romance securely dated in that year. There are some considerable thematic similarities between these plays which deserve our attention. Both the Ion and the Helen are dramatizations of rare or innovative plots. The Helen and the Andromeda share an exotic setting (Egypt; Ethiopia); the Ion and the Helen share a sacred setting (Delphic oracle; tomb of Protesus). In Helen, the heroine appears as a suppliant at the tomb of Protesus to avoid marriage with king Theoklymenos; in the Ion, Kreousa seeks refuge at the altar of Apollo to avoid Ion’s murdering intentions; Helen is rescued by her husband Menelaus; Kreousa is rescued by the intervention of Pythia, Apollo’s priestess. Priestess Theonoe, Theoklymenos’ sister, also intervenes in favour of Helen and Menelaus and conceals their escape from her brother. When he finds out he threatens to kill her, but the Dioscuri stop him, just as the Pythia stopped Ion from killing Kreousa, or Athena stopped Ion from entering Apollo’s temple to interrogate him about his paternity. In the fragmentary Andromeda, the young heroine is rescued from a sea-monster in Ethiopia by the young hero Perseus and a romance develops; Kepheus, her father, disapproves of Perseus and tries to kill him with the help of an unwanted suitor who pursues Andromeda; the couple is rescued and the romance is allowed to continue probably by divine intervention. Ion is rescued from the unsuccessful murder attempt against him; this time it is not a foreign king, as Theoklymenos in Helen or Kepheus in Andromeda, who threaten the hero, but his own unknowing mother. The foreign king in all three plays (Theoklymenos, Kepheus, Xouthos) is kept in check by the gods and certainly in at least two of the cases is cheated by the humans: Theoklymenos is told that Menelaus is dead and is promised marriage to Helen if he allows her to complete the burial of her husband, which of course is a stratagem for their escape; Xouthos too is deceived by Kreousa who will pretend to accept Ion as her husband’s son and conceal his true parentage, and he is also deceived by Apollo in thinking that Ion is his own son; Theoklymenos’ delusion of marriage with Helen is paralleled by Xouthos’ delusion of having male offspring separately from Kreousa.

We have already noted some dualities in the Ion and the fundamental duality between appearance and reality in the Helen (ch. 4.2); we cannot be certain of any dualities in the fragmentary Andromeda, but fr. 114 N² presents a literal repetition of Andromeda’s words by Echo who was heard off stage during the prologue of the play, a scene duly parodied in Aristophanes’ Thesmophoriazusae 1018–20. Generic experimentation is not only found in the Ion (ch. 4.1.), but also in the Helen, and though it would be difficult to draw any assumption about the Andromeda, it appears that catastrophe was averted there too. All three plays shared a happy outcome for the

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130 See Nightingale 1995.
131 Bakhtin 1984: 110.
132 The source for the dating for the Helen and the Andromeda is Arist. Thesm. 1012 with schol., 1061, and schol. Fr. 53.
133 See above ch. 1.2, n. 12 for verbal parallels between Ion and Helen.
134 On the plot of the Ion, see above ch. 2.1, n. 1. On the ‘new’ version of Helen’s myth according to which Helen never went to Troy and the war was fought over her phantom, see above n. 47.
main heroes. Interestingly, in all three plays, the male heroes are given the chance to recover their identity: Menelaus, the shipwrecked hero, is reinstated as a heroic warrior; Perseus, the pauper, proves himself as the brave Gorgon slayer; Ion, the temple servant, recognizes his true ancestry as the son of Apollo and Kreousa, acquires his civic identity and prepares to assume his role as the future king of Athens and colonizer of Ionia. A note of reconciliation towards Sparta is heard in both the Ion and the Helen. In the Ion, we have already discussed the conciliatory gesture towards the Doriens in the prophecies of Athena in the epilogue (ch. 2.9). In the Helen, the comments on the futility of war and power of speech for the resolution of conflicts (Hed. 1151–60) are at the very core of the play. At the end of both the Ion and the Helen, some of the earlier oppositions seem to turn to complementarity; in the Ion, Apollo is better understood as a compound of the different views expressed about him in the course of the play (ch. 3.8); in the Helen, the distinction between Helen, the life-dispenser, and Menelaus, the violent soldier from Troy with strong associations with the realm of death, steadily progresses towards 'a union of contraries' through the theme of rebirth of Menelaus and renewal of his marriage to Helen. Rebirth is also in store for dead Proteus (Hed. 1011–16) and Echecleus (Ion 1465).

In the end, both plays at different levels celebrate life and renewal. This positive outlook, the promise of a bridging of opposites in the future and the conciliatory gestures towards Sparta are more reasons in support of the production of these two plays in the same year.

With these similarities between the three plays in mind along with the historical and cultural context of the time, we may perhaps now have a better idea of the frame of mind Euripides seems to have been in while creating these plays for the City Dionysia of 412 BC. To return to the Ion, another way of appreciating this play is as a

microcosm of what Bakhtin termed the dialogical vision of truth encountered in the real world. Euripides creates a world in which disparate views of reality are in dialogue in much the same way as they are in the real world. Matters are not resolved and ends are left loose to be settled, perhaps, in the 'great dialogue' of life which always exists, will exist and should exist in the human world. Euripides stages the dialogical perspective of truth in his play. In his polyphonic work, meaning is to be found amidst the several voices of his characters; a better understanding of the ways of the world will result only from creative dialogue. Bakhtin's insights on literary discourse are again pertinent here. He identifies two types of discourse: the monologic and the dialogic. Monologic discourse is authoritarian and permits no alternative voice; a single point of view, the author's, is given absolute primacy and as a result the text denies a dialogue with its readers, and remains a closed and finalized text. Dialogic discourse, on the other hand, encompasses a plurality of viewpoints. The author's viewpoint is only one of the many embodied voices in the text and is in constant dialogue both with the other voices in the text and with its readers, hence the text is open and unfinalized. The prime author of a dialogic discourse for Bakhtin is again Dostoevsky. In his novels Dostoevsky does not dominate his text by imposing monologically his single-minded view of the world; any one-sided seriousness which may stem from personal experiences of the author (e.g. Dostoevsky as a journalist) becomes only one of the many different voices in the novel. Individual characters may possess one-sided views but 'the author, who causes them to collide in the "great dialogue"' of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and puts no finalizing period at the end. Similarly, in Euripidean drama a multiplicity of voices is heard. We have explored earlier in some detail the different viewpoints about Apollo in the Ion (ch. 3.6.) and have observed that no single view is given authoritative prominence. Of course Euripidean thoughts are dispersed in his plays, but the author himself cannot be pinned down to any particular view. The distinction between

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137 Segal 1986: 251, 260.
138 Webster 1967: 199.
139 On the conciliatory tone of the Helen, see Poole 1994: 28–9; perhaps a contemporary gloss can be put on the end of the play, which should then be read as a call to Athens to forget past injuries and to be reconciled with the old foe. At any rate, 1151ff. contain an impassioned plea, more general than is found elsewhere in Euripides, for disputes to be resolved by verbal agreement rather than through the folly of war.
140 Segal 1986: 247–54; quotation from p. 252.
141 On Proteus, see Segal 1986: 140–9; on Echecleus, see above ch. 1.3. p. 53.
142 Dialogic sense of truth is the second criterion constitutive of Bakhtinian polyphony; the first being the position of the author required for getting at this sense of truth; see Morson & Emerson 1990: 234.
143 Bakhtin 1984: 165.
monologic and dialogic discourse is helpful for the understanding of the grand design of the Iou, which can be seen as the triumph of human dialogism over the attempted monologism of Apollo, whose uncompromising initial plan is derailed by the competing programs of the human agents and needs to be adjusted accordingly. In this sense the Iou is not only, as we have seen in chapter three, an ‘anthropocentric’ play, but also a ‘dialogistic’ one.

But Euripides is different from the Bakhtinian example of the ideal novelist, Dostoevsky, in various ways. Firstly in that, of course, he is operating in a different genre and has to draw his material from the same limited mythic repository as his tragic colleagues. But, more importantly, he does not go as far as Dostoevsky who gives substance or ‘life’ to his fictitious characters to a degree which allows them actually to contest his own ideology as equals and even to wrest from the author control of the outcome of this dialogue. By contrast, Euripides’ directorial touch may still be felt (see ch. 3.7, 3.8). On the other hand, he never becomes a propagandist, but remains a playwright who invites rather than forces his audience to accept and share his pluralist worldview. Euripidean truth is not contradictory or ambiguous; it requires two or more voices and his plays precisely ‘embody’ this dialogical vision of truth.

How did he arrive at this position we can only speculate, but I suggest that the answer may lie not just in the general late fifth-century intellectual milieu but in his own individual apprenticeship as a dramatist. During this process, I suggest, and through his observations as a practitioner of theatre, he began appreciating theatre as another way, his own personal way, through which he could reach an understanding of the world. He is not so much interested in attaining the philosophical truth; rather, he offers another vision of the world through his chosen medium of theatrical representation and makes a suggestion about the multi-facetedness of objects, the importance of context, the multiplicity of voices and perspectives and finally the inherent pluralism of reality.

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15 Segal 1986: 265; 'unlike Plato, Euripides has no conviction of ideal truth'.

4.5. Conclusion

We have had more than one occasion in the course of this study to note the ways in which Euripides poses dilemmas to his spectators in all their problematic intensity but leaves it up to them to decide about these issues as they see best. For example, Euripides exposes the limitations of widespread Athenian ideas about the autochthony and purity of their race, and explores the tensions between Ioniaism and autochthony (ch. 2). He explores Apollo’s morality and responsibility, the ambiguity of divine favour, and the equivocality of oracular responses; he invites his audience to look from a distance at the overall image of Apollo and points out to them how all the conflicting views about him expressed in the course of the play by the various dramatic figures are, in the end, to be taken to be complementary. A better understanding of the god’s nature would entail the synthesis of all the views expressed into a single image of the god, which, of course, would retain its ambiguity beyond the logic of any merely human interpretation (ch. 3.8). The interweaving of tragic and comic elements in this play does not lessen its seriousness but is a testimony of its polyphonic quality. The play cannot be labelled as anything but a tragedy. The happy ending is itself more ambiguous than interpreters have been inclined to allow (ch. 4.1).

It is a characteristic of many successful dramatic authors that they tend to propose questions to their audiences rather than imposing answers upon them: for in an act form performed publicly before large and diverse groups, the play that triggers a lively debate in (and outside of) the theatrical space is likely to be more popular than one that stifles discussion by insisting monologically upon a single truth. Moreover, the competition between the tragic poets at the Festival of Dionysus meant that any playwright who wanted to carry off the victory would have been well advised not to alienate large segments of the audience by attempting to show the falsity of some of their cherished beliefs. And finally, the very form of drama, in which different characters propose their differing views of what is right and proper, and in which the dramatic conflict arises out of the discrepancy between these plausible beliefs, is peculiarly well suited to laying before the audience the variety of opinions that might be held about any issue and testing them in the crucible of action and circumstance.

But, beyond these features common to the whole poetic genre
within which the playwright worked, Euripides in particular seems to have been especially engaged in provoking his Athenian audiences. No doubt this is one reason why in his lifetime his theatrical success was so modest—but this same capacity to stimulate audiences also helps to explain his posthumous popularity. Euripides’ plays, at least on the surface, do not give answers; they pose questions. For example, he creates dramatic plots in which the question of the gods is insistently raised, and dramatic characters, under the force of personality and circumstance, give voice to various extreme views on this question; but it would be an elementary error of method to identify any of these views as expressions of authorial opinion. In the light of this fundamental feature of Euripides’ poetic art, many of the debates that have characterized particularly the older phase of the reception of Euripides—was he a believer or an atheist? a mystic or a rationalist? a friend of women or a hater of women? a friend of Athens or a critic of Athens? etc.—seem at best misplaced, at worst simply futile. If, as Aristophanes suggested, the dramatic poet must be a teacher not only of choruses but also of audiences (Ach. 656–8; Frogs 686–7), then Euripides understands his pedagogical mission as requiring him not to convey particular doctrines, but to teach his audience how to think and to look for the truth that lies beneath the surface, to appreciate its complexity and pluralistic nature.

But this does not mean that one cannot discern in the very way Euripides poses his questions the outlines of the kind of answer he himself would most likely have endorsed.146 So in the Io, Euripides is ultimately inquiring into the nature of the Athenian civic ideology and the value and limitations of the Athenian achievement. It is no accident that this play is so explicit, thorough, and detailed in its account of early Athenian mythology: for Euripides is not remind-

ing his audience of a rare legend,147 rather he proposes an agreed version that can serve as a kind of poetic constitution for the future. Euripides is in no doubt that Athens is a very special city and he is convinced that upon its success depend the hopes not only of its own citizens, but also those of all humanity. But the Athens which he believes in is not the bigoted, narrow-minded Athens which he has inherited, and which is represented in different ways by the one-sided obsessions of the characters with which he begins—Xouthos’ trivializing rationality, Kreousa’s dangerous emotionality, Ion’s ingenuous purity—but instead the purer, humanized, more liberal and generous Athens which he represents by means of the intervention of Athena at the end of the play. When Athena calls herself ‘benevolent’ (1554) and says that Apollo has done all things well (1595), Ion and Kreousa believe her, and so perhaps must we. That these characters can learn to set aside their fears and to recognise their solidarity with one another and even, within certain limits of course, with the outsider Xouthos, is a lesson of humanity whose import was surely not intended to be limited to this play alone or, indeed, to the Theatre of Dionysus alone. Kreousa has come to Delphi to seek a cure for her barrenness, but at the end it is not only she who is healed, but also the city over which, as her very name indicates, her essence is to be the ruler. In the gradually deepening and ultimately overwhelming crisis of the Peloponnesian War, Euripides is asking how Athens became what it was and what it has to remember about itself if it is to continue to survive. If his legendary dramatic characters can manage to improve themselves in the course of his play and to discover, beyond the predictably human defects of misunderstanding, blindness, and self-interest, their deeper shared humanity—if indeed, as Athena promises, even Xouthos and Kreousa will be able to create a κοινόν-είος (‘a common race/offspring’, 1589)—then perhaps, like these characters and through them, Euripides’ troubled real contemporary audience will be able to improve themselves as well.

146 In fact, Bakhtinian polyphony does not advocate the absence of expression of authorial opinion. ‘On the contrary, the author . . . may participate in the novel’s dialogue, principally by creating characters who express various aspects of his ideology . . . in addition, Dostoevsky’s [i.e. the polyphonic author’s] perspective is embodied in the form-shaping ideology of the work, with its dialogic conception of truth’; but the polyphonic author ‘does not take unfair advantage of his position as author to arrange for the triumph of his own most cherished convictions’, Morson & Emerson 1990: 252; see also pp. 232–33. Or in Bakhtin’s own words (1984: 67), a work ‘without an authorial position . . . is in general impossible . . . The issue here is not an absence of, but a radical change in, the author’s position’.

147 See above ch. 2.1. n. 1.
This book has tried to show that the *Ion* was a complex work of art characterized by duality, dialogism and polyphony: the voice of the author is anything but obfuscatory. Nevertheless I have argued that Euripides was trying to challenge his audience by the innovative way he handles what by 412 BC was already a traditional medium. We may sum up his intellectual program by saying, paradoxically, that the lesson is that there are no simple monologic lessons. The political program was also complex, and for that reason alone (quite apart from the absence of civic state interference in Athenian drama) it would be wrong to call the play ‘propaganda’: propaganda is strident and monologic. But the *Ion* not only blends autochthonous and Ionianism in a subtle and ingenious mix, it does not even use Ionianism in a simple way: he Athenian colonization of Attica, the Cyclades and Ionia is predicted and asserted, as is Ion’s seniority to Dorus; but at the same time we are reminded not only that the Ionians are Athens’ kin by the usual colonizing metaphor, but also that Dorus and Ion are in fact brothers. This is, in fact a sort of panhellenism because of the known Spartan associations of Dorianism. These were delicate issues and had to be handled obliquely and by exploiting the two-facedness of myth. Phrynichus was perhaps the last tragedian to handle the Ionian theme so explicitly, and he seems to have done so in an acceptably frontal and direct fashion. All his successors, including Euripides, must have taken note. After Phrynichus, politics in tragedy, if it was to be there at all, must be

insinuated and suggested. In 412, in the aftermath of national humiliation, that must have been true more than ever.

The *Ion* is at another level a play about oracular Apollo. We recall that after the terrible news from Sicily reached Athens, the Athenians were angry with their politicians and also with the ‘oracle-mongers and seers who by divination had raised their hopes of taking Sicily’. Pythian Apollo was of course no cheap oracle-monger, but it would not be surprising if in some quarters the mood in March 412 was one of general scepticism, and that some of the sceptical remarks in the play would have been heard with silent applause. And yet by the end of the play Apolline foresight has been vindicated, albeit after suffering some damage and derailing on the way. Crucially, the predictions about Athenian colonizing and thus imperial greatness depend on the accuracy of the prophecy transmitted by Apollo’s agent Athena, the city’s tutelary deity. If we cross from play to audience, we can well believe that the conciliatory reassurances offered by Athena were desperately needed and welcome at this time of civic emergency.

The oligarchs of 411 were able to exploit the mood of indignation against demagogues. They were also, and this is important, able to exploit ignorance. Their cries of ‘back to Solon!’ and ‘back to Kleisthenes!’ were a confidence trick: neither of those two reformers had in reality disfranchised the thetes as the oligarchs pretended, and it was breathtaking impudence to suggest that the events of 411 were any sort of return to the ‘ancestral constitution’. As with all confidence tricks, the surprise is that it succeeded; as Thucydides himself comments, ‘it was no easy matter to deprive the Athenians of their liberty after a century, during most of which time they had been accustomed to rule over others.’ After 410, the Athenians resolved never again to let the constitution be hijacked in this way and they gave instructions for a codification of the laws. Ignorance had opened the door to distortion of historical and intellectual truth, and that door must henceforth be kept shut: this was the certainty achieved by 410, and the atrocities of the preceding year were the

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1 Bakhtin 1984: 166 (his italics).

2 See Gould & Lewis 1988: 36- for the slippery evidence for dramatic censorship at Athens; and cf. below for Phrynichus. For warnings about the use of the word ‘propaganda’ for classical antiquity, see Hornblower in *OCD* under ‘propaganda’.

3 Thuc. 8.1.2.

4 I do not give detailed references for the historical facts in this section; for an admirable recent succinct account, see Andrews 1982. For the connection between the codification of the laws and the oligarchic revolutions, see e.g. Rhodes 1994: 567.

5 Thuc. 8.68.4.
price of its achievement. But back in March 412, the intellectual mood was anything but certain. Oustight oligarchy was still in the future, but the democracy had already taken steps which indicated unease. The volatility of Athenian public opinion in these months is brilliantly conveyed by Thucydides in the opening chapter of book Eight: a huge mood-swing from 'fear and panic', φόβος Ὑέ καὶ κατάληξις, to the firm resolve a few lines later 'not to submit', μὴ ἐνδιέδοναι, but to launch on energetic military and naval action. Euripides must have been aware that at that moment of all moments, a moment of pazzlement and contradiction, simple political solutions and strident preaching were to be avoided. But nevertheless truth was in demand. I have argued that his fondness for pluralism was already well established before 412 and the date of the production of the Ion, but now, perhaps, was an exceptionally good moment for the voice or voices of pluralism and pluralistic truth to be heard. Nor should we forget the sister-play Helen, which treats, after all, an originally Spartan heroine (we can say little about the lost Andromeda) and hints towards the end at her future Attic cult on an offshore island. The mood in 412 was, I suggest, specially appropriate for a play which runs through vicissitudes and narrowly avoided horrors but closes with Ionianism triumphant and hints at a panhellenic solution. In the same way the Athenians at this time passed through mood-swing and political and military vicissitudes but kept their empire intact and managed (though without in the end the compromises which panhellenism i.e. meaningful pacific gestures towards Sparta would have entailed) to retain the loyalty of their allies in Ionia.

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6 See above ch. 1.1. n. 8 for the appointment of the prōboulēs.