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Euripides and the Ionians

Converging Truths. Euripides' "Ion" and the Athenian Quest for Self-Definition by K. Zacharia

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## EURIPIDES AND THE IONIANS

K. ZACHARIA: *Converging Truths. Euripides' Ion and the Athenian Quest for Self-Definition*. (*Mnemosyne* Suppl. 242.) Pp. xiv + 231. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003. Cased, €80/US\$93. ISBN: 90-04-13000-4.

Zacharia begins her book with a novelist's flair: 'At the end of March 412 B.C. the real-life sanctuary of Delphi was a noisy place' (p. 1). The book is not a novel, though. It is in fact three different books, all discussing the *Ion* of Euripides: a scene-by-scene reading of the play (Chapter 1); an essay on the interaction between literature, politics, and religion in classical Athens (Chapters 2 and 3); and a work of literary theory (Chapter 4). The most original sections deal with Athenian identity, 'Ionianism', and Apollo (Chapters 2 and 3). Chapter 4 discusses the mixing of genres in the play, and makes extensive use of Bakhtin's concepts of 'dialogism', 'carnival', and 'polyphony'; this is the most ambitious and debatable section. The book will be very useful to students and scholars working on the play. Its central chapters offer an important contribution to the present debate on ethnic identity and cultural politics in classical Athens.

Metrical criteria suggest that the *Ion* was written between 417 and 413 or 412 B.C. (Z., p. 3 n. 11; M. Cropp–G. Fick, *Resolutions and Chronology in Euripides: The Fragmentary Tragedies* [London 1985], p. 23). In the play, Athena prophesies Athens' domination over Ionian cities. Ion's sons, eponymous of the four Ionian tribes, will colonize the Cyclades, the Asian coast, and the area around the Hellespont; 'this fact will give strength to my land' (*Ion* 1584–5). Wilamowitz (*Hermes* 18 [1883], 242 n. 1, with further references) claimed that the appeal to the Ionian allies was impossible after the winter 413/412, when the empire was on the verge of collapsing (Thuc. 8.2.2). Z. rightly points out that this is not a definitive point, as Wilamowitz himself later conceded (*Euripides' Ion* [Berlin, 1926], p. 24), but she gives us no reasons why she rules out 413, and why the appeal is 'exactly right' for 412 only (p. 4). She suggests 411 as a *terminus ante quem* for the play (a late date anyway, on metrical criteria). According to Z., the honorific reference to the *four* tribes would be an inappropriate allusion to the Four Hundred, 'a detested regime' (p. 5). However, the allusion to the old four tribes is conjectural. The Four Hundred did not abolish the ten-tribe system (Aristot. *Ath. Pol.* 29.5 and 31.1), and, as Z. admits, the tragic festival (spring 411) *preceded* the establishment of the new regime (summer 411). The plans of the oligarchs might have been known in advance (Z., p. 5; Thuc. 8.54) but, as Thucydides and Aristotle say, the regime was seen by many as a necessary evil under the circumstances. In conclusion, the date remains uncertain, even if the appeal to the Ionian allies suggests a time of imperial crisis such as 413 or 412.

But why is Euripides making reference to the *four* Ionian tribes? In her second chapter, Z. convincingly connects this with Athenian imperial politics. A century before the *Ion*, Kleisthenes replaced the four traditional Ionian tribes with a new system of ten tribes, named after Athenian heroes (Hdt. 5.66). As Z. stresses, the traditional four tribes had only cultic relevance in classical Athens; Ionian cities retained them as 'names of tribal sub-divisions' (p. 51). Z. rightly notes that Athena's prediction is 'overtly boastful, but at the same time and in a more subtle way conciliatory' in its reference to a system 'still much alive in contemporary Ionia' (p. 51). In this connection, Z. discusses the *temenos* of Ion in Samos (pp. 52–4).

As Z. shows, the 'Ionianism' of the play is an important document of Athenian

self-definition. Herodotus claims that ‘even now’ most of the Athenians and Ionians ‘seem to be ashamed of the [Ionian] name’ (1.143.3). Z. convincingly argues that passages about ‘Ionian military inferiority to Dorians’ do not prove ‘that the Athenians themselves felt inferior and suffered from low self-confidence because they were Ionians’ (p. 54). At the end of the *Ion*, Athena traces the descent of Dorians to a half-brother of Ion. Z. reads this as an ‘indirect attempt to promote Pan-Hellenic unity’ (p. 55), but the Hesiodic genealogy (fr. 9 Merkelbach–West) made Dorus the uncle of Ion. Euripides certainly meant to flatter Athenian self-confidence, and to disparage Sparta; it would have been difficult to claim that the Spartans were not Greek, even during a war.

In her third chapter, discussing the rôle of Apollo, Z. again rightly urges against any simplistic schematization (pp. 103–49). The negative portrayal of Apollo in the *Ion* and in other plays has been explained on political ground: the god of Delphi supported the Spartans over the Athenians (Thuc. 1.118.3, 2.54.4). Z. analyses historical and epigraphical evidence showing the extent of Athenian reverence towards Apollo, and discusses the ‘apollinization’ of mythical imagery in classical Athens. She argues that the less than admirable moral choices of the god in the *Ion* are nothing exceptional in the lives of classical Greek gods (pp. 118–22). Ion, one could object, thinks that Apollo should behave differently (*Ion* 429–51). According to Z., in that passage ‘Ion is beginning to discover who Apollo really is’ (p. 130), that is a complex and ambiguous god (p. 121).

In a detailed analysis of Creusa’s monody, Z. interestingly argues that the queen, in narrating her own story, takes up ‘mythemes’, i.e. narrative elements, from myths about early Athens, such as the myths about Erechtheus and Kekrops (pp. 65–70). One correction: according to Z., ‘it must be significant that she [Creusa] does not call upon the Sun’ in her monody; ‘instead she calls upon the starry seat of Zeus’ (p. 85). Creusa could not call upon the Sun. Many Greeks, including Euripides in *Phaethon* 224–6 Diggle (Euripides, *Phaethon*, ed. by J. Diggle [Cambridge, 1970], with the note ad loc.), identified Helios with Apollo, Creusa’s rapist.

In Chapter 4, Z. rightly argues that ‘the identification of . . . comic episodes and themes in the *Ion* does not . . . make the play any less of a tragedy’ (p. 151; see now Mastronarde, *ICS* 24–5 [1999–2000], 17–39 and J. Gregory, *ibid.*, 59–74). This is certainly true from a synchronic point of view, even if we may wish to use a different label as a heuristic tool, or in a diachronic perspective. Z. discusses ‘duality’ in Euripides, a term which encompasses everything from ‘verbal repetition’ (p. 155) to ‘alternative views’ of reality (p. 161); she then argues that in some plays there are ‘not two voices but several’ (p. 166). Z. connects this to Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony. However, Bakhtin insisted that differences in ideology were expressed through different languages, all present in the voice of the author. Z. has to point to ‘generic experimentation in the *Ion*’ to find a sign of its ‘polyphonic nature’ (p. 173). The language of tragedy is homogeneous, even when characters of low social standing are speaking; Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony was formulated precisely to mark the uniqueness of the novel among literary genres.

Z. ends the book by arguing that Euripides ‘invites rather than forces his audience to accept and share his pluralist worldview’ (p. 182). I do not think the Ionian allies would have found the patronizing appeal of Athena a ‘pluralistic truth’ (p. 188), but even if we do not converge with Z.’s conclusions, we should be glad to have a ‘pluralistic’ book that tackles this complicated play from many different, thought-provoking points of view.