

An Apology of Euripides: Defending the Poets

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One of the main prosecutors of Socrates on charges of impiety and corruption in 399 B.C.E. was the poet Miletus. In Plato's version of his *Apology* (22b), Socrates defends himself by pointing out that poets are merely inspired and their audiences are better at explaining their poems.¹ This critique of poetry is found and developed across Plato's corpus, especially in the *Republic* (604b–608d) where Socrates ends the ancient quarrel by exiling the poets from the city and philosophic education. This banishment, however, unleashed a new quarrel as to the meaning of Socrates' critique of poetry, especially in light of his generous use of poetic elements in Plato's dialogues.

Generally, this debate has examined whether Socrates' critique is ironic from the philosopher's perspective. In contrast, this analysis takes up Socrates' explicit challenge in the *Republic* (607e) for a defender (*prostatēs*) to give apology of poetry demonstrating that it is not simply pleasant but beneficial to regimes and human life. Offering two of Euripides' plays in defense—*Suppliant Women* and *Ion*—the article investigates Euripides' poetic contribution to understanding two enduring questions of political philosophy: what is the best regime; and what is the role of myth in political origin. Importantly, Euripides provides a serious account of such questions and reveals that a poetic education may be not only beneficial, but essential in any democratic regime.

Socrates' Critique of the Poets

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates' critique of the poets appears in the context of his defense against his old accusers. On a "mission" to disprove the Delphic Oracle's pronouncement that there was "no one wiser than he" (*Apology* 21a), Socrates turned first to the politicians only to discover they did not know what they claimed to know; he then turned to the poets to learn what he could from their carefully composed poems: he was "astonished" to discover that any member of his jury could "speak better" (*beltion elegon*) than their authors about the meaning of the poems (*Apology* 22b). He concluded that poets "made poetry not by wisdom but by means of nature (*phusei*) and divine possession (*enthousiaontes*) such as prophets and speakers of oracles" (*Apology* 22b–d).

Furthermore, because rich young men followed his example by exposing those who claim knowledge, powerful men like poet Miletus became hostile to him and philosophy (*Apology* 23c–d). This critique of poetry is similar to the *Phaedrus* (244b, 245a), where poets compose with a kind of divine madness; or the *Ion* (533e) where a rhapsode says nothing “until inspired and standing outside his senses with his mind is no longer in him.” Hence, as he restates in the *Gorgias* (502a–e) the poets are really rhetoricians, who flatter and gratify audiences without concern for what is best or beneficial. The implications of his critique are twofold. First, even though an average person better understands the poem than its maker, poetry still reveals some kind of potential knowledge. Second, whatever the poem’s meaning or potential wisdom, the most important human agent is not the poet but the listener or interpreter of the poetry.

Plato further develops this critique in the *Republic* as part of a political, then philosophic education. At first, the poets (and other artists such as musicians) are censored because their depiction of the gods as flawed, deceitful, and overcome by passions is damaging to a young guardian’s education (*Republic* 391d; 401a–d). In other words, rather than composing through inspiration, the poet should be guided by reason and teach young spirited souls to be courageous, moderate, and wise. Later in Book V, he suggests that lovers of spectacles (*philotheamones*) and hearing (*philēkooi*), such as those drawn to the “seeing place” (*theatron*), are similar to philosophers because both love to learn: however, they learn only opinions, not truth (*Republic* 475d–78e). Finally by Book X, Socrates offers the most derisive critique of tragedian poets (and other artists such as painters) who make images of images, which are three-times removed from what is (*Republic* 597b–599a). Hence, the problem is not only their inability to provide a rational account of their makings, but also their poems nourish the part of our soul that destroys calculation and, at most, provide phantoms of imitations of the truth (*Republic* 605b). For anyone concerned with justice and truth, poetry ought to be banished from the soul as poetry is dangerous and not serious (*Republic* 608b).

Plato’s critique of poetry, of course, is far more complex and problematic than this straightforward presentation of his censorious comments. Although a subject of intense debate, the ironic reading highlights two categories of issues.² Most obviously, rather than consistently critical of poetry, Socrates is often deferential to poets, most notably Homer. In addition, Plato’s use of narrative in the dialogue undermines a literal interpretation of his critique. What is more ironic, for example, then Plato’s imaginary interlocutor Socrates criticizing poets as dissemblers for

putting imaginary words in another's mouth. Finally, Plato consistently uses poetic devices throughout his corpus: the *Phaedrus* (253c–254e) suggests the soul is a chariot; the *Gorgias* (523a–524b) ends with a myth of judgment as does the *Apology* (40c–41e); and, the *Republic* contains many of his most memorable poetic images such as the cave (514a–520a), the divided line (509d–511e), and myth of Er (614b–621c).

Although the debate is complex with a great deal of nuance, the ironic reading can be categorized in two broad strokes. First, taking seriously the idea that poets are neither the source of their own inspiration nor able to articulate the meaning of their poetry, Plato's philosophy can be seen as an example of how the philosopher can, and potentially must, incorporate poetry to turn souls towards the truth. Hence, poetry is a necessary supplement, especially for the young and the masses who require more than philosophic persuasion to engage them in the ascent towards a genuine education.³ Significantly, this reading reinforces the dichotomy in which philosophy rules educationally-challenged poetry. Second, rather than reinforcing the dichotomy, the dialogue with all its allegories and myths can be seen as a kind of philosophic-poetry which engages not only rationality but also our passions in the pursuit of truth.⁴ Thus, as the philosopher-poet, Plato overcomes his own critique of poetry as his dialogues provide a rational account (and certainly better than the average juror could) directed not merely at images that flatter, but at the truth itself.

Importantly, these conclusions regarding the seriousness of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy are all derived from a Platonic perspective. Even the most generous reading for poets that Plato offers a philosophic-poetry still reforms poetry in such a way as to ensure philosophy regulates poetry. As such, the concerns of philosophy essentially displace the gods as its inspiration. The task remaining is to take up Plato's challenge as a defender (*Republic* 607d) to examine whether Plato's "charges" against the poet's art or his poetic reforms hold up under the scrutiny of a poet's apology.

Case One: What is the Best Regime?

Socrates' "charge" against the poets really asks whether poetry is beneficial to cities and souls or, as Socrates asks, can we "learn something" (*Apology* 22b)? In other words, does Euripides provide a serious examination of important political questions or offer nothing more than a pleasant or even potentially dangerous distraction? First, Euripides' *Suppliant Woman* provides an overt example of a poet dealing with a typical political question: What is the best regime? This was a

politically salient question that was explored by many ancient political philosophers (see Plato, *Republic* 544d–569c; Xenophon, *Hellenica* Books I–II; Aristotle, *Politics* 1279b1–10 and *NE*1160a35–61a10). In this play, Euripides raises the question in a formal debate (*agōn*) between Theseus (the Athenian mythological king who united the territory of Attica) and a messenger from the rival city of Thebes. Significantly, although Euripides reflects similar content to philosophic explanations, because he contextualized this question within a larger dramatic story, he exposes potential limits of a purely rational account of such questions.

Euripides' *Suppliant Women* focuses on the aftermath of battle of the Seven against Thebes, in which Oedipus' son Polynices led an Argive army against his own brother and city. As fated, the brothers die at each other's hands and their uncle Creon famously decrees that the enemy dead are to remain unburied. Sophocles' *Antigone* focuses on consequences of this decree in Thebes; this play tells story from the Argive perspective, beginning with the supplication the Athenian King Theseus by the widows of Argive generals. At first, Theseus rejects their supplication as the attack on Thebes was insolent and impious, but his mother convinces him to pursue glory and reject quietism (*hēsuchoi*) for the sake of justly punishing those who violate the Panhellenic custom regarding the dead (195–250; 300–355). Into this charged atmosphere, a Theban herald arrives to convince Athens to reject the supplication; he lands into immediate trouble, however, by asking to see the sole ruler (*turannos*) of the land (399). Insulted, Theseus replies that he spoke falsely (*tou logou pseudōs*), because Athenians are a free people who hold offices in turn and equally share honors (403–08).⁵ Thus begins Euripides' debate concerning the “best regime.”

Like many of Euripides' *agōnes*, critics have condemned this debate as stilted and irrelevant to the plot. Somewhat awkwardly, the first part of the debate focuses on the superiority of one-man rule versus the rule of the many, and does not explicitly include oligarchy, the most common regime in this period and the most realistic alternative to Athenian democracy.⁶ This inattention is likely due to the setting of the play in the mythological era of founder kings. Furthermore, as the herald's critique focuses less on supporting tyranny than on the short-comings of democracy, his argument reflects similar points made by the oligarchic faction. The second part of the debate moves to the question of whether Athens should intervene on behalf of the suppliants. Also, somewhat awkwardly, but potentially significant to interpretation, the debate is transposed with a founder king supporting the rule of the many and a commoner celebrating the rule of one man.⁷

The herald makes several points against democracy. First, he retorts that equality of holding offices in turn is a “game of luck,” whereby ruling fell to anyone regardless of qualifications (409–25; 465–510; 566–80). In a one-man rule, he continues, the city is safe from demagogues who manipulate the people for personal advantage; it also does not rely on the judgment of the common man, who neither speaks convincingly nor knows how to properly guide cities; since learning and ruling require leisure, even when a poor man is intelligent, he lacks the time to devote to these tasks. In addition, the best men in democracies tend to turn away from politics because popularity comes from facile speeches rather than real accomplishments that benefit the city. Finally, turning to why the Athenians are busybodies (*polupragmon*), he points out that the original battle was impious and did not involve Athens: in such situations, being a “quietist” (*hēsuchos*) is wise and courage requires discretion.⁸

In contrast, Theseus makes several points in support of democracy (403–8; 426–62; 514–62; 566–84). Unlike the unjust law which benefits one man, democracy establishes equality of written law (*isonomia*) which allows poor men to win just cases against those stronger and richer. In addition, democratic freedom consists not only by ruling in turn, but in allowing all men to hold their peace or participate and win fame by speaking freely (*isēgoria*). All citizens can benefit by acquiring wealth for their families rather than for the ruler. Furthermore, unlike tyrants who cut down young talent out of fear, democracies celebrate and promote their ablest young men. And, in his final rebuttal, Theseus stresses that democracies always defend the just cause, by going to war, if necessary, to uphold Panhellenic law.

The main points of this argument were most likely familiar to Euripides’ late 420s audience and were a preoccupation of philosophic thought. Like the herald, an anonymous author of a text known as the *Double Arguments* criticizes the Athenian practice of allotting positions by lottery because, like any skill, politics requires both knowledge and training.⁹ In the *Constitution of the Athenians*, The Old Oligarch challenges Theseus’ praise of amassing wealth, because it encourages the abuse of allies and bribery in the legal system. Similar to Socrates’ analysis of the decline of democracies into tyranny (*Republic* 558a–d; 565d), the Old Oligarch echoes the herald’s objection to equality of speech: it allows the many to follow the demagogue, no matter how immoral, if he promises them advantages. Later philosophers, such as Aristotle, examine the question of the best regime in a similar analysis that lists both sides of this debate. Aristotle recognizes that the rule of one man, if he is virtuous, is beneficial to the city (*Politics* 1284a1–20); however, in the exact

same metaphor as Theseus, tyrants are the worst possible rulers, because they cut down outstanding citizens like stalks of wheat and ensure no one is wealthy enough to challenge him (*Politics* 1311a20–30).¹⁰ Aristotle also praises the rule of law and the judgment of the many, which can be less corruptible than the tyrant; yet, like the herald, Aristotle argues that if the democratic assembly is sovereign over the law, the many are manipulated into believing the opinion of the demagogue, rather than the best men (*Politics* 1292a). This position is also found in the *Republic* (567c), where demagogues convince the people to turn against and exile the best among them; or, in the *Gorgias* (521e), where anyone with real knowledge of politics is compared to doctor brought to trial by a candy maker in front of a jury of children. Or in the *Apology* (31e), when Socrates states that he only lived as long as he did because he avoided democratic politics.

Euripides' *agōn* reflects many of the exact same debating points concerning best regime as the philosophical debates during the classical period. One possible interpretation is that Euripides is simply inserting a philosophical debate, which is in no way poetic, into his tragedy. Thus, similar to Plato's use of poetic elements in his dialogues, Euripides is a sophist or "rationalist" absorbed in philosophic arguments.¹¹ Hence, Socrates' critique is not directed at Euripides' *agōnes* per se, but against the more sensational aspects of his plays. This interpretation, however, relies on dissevering the *agōn* from his overall plot.¹² Yet, such a reading is undermined by examining the *agōn* in the larger dramatic context. First, for example, immediately prior to the arrival of the herald, Theseus previously rejected the suppliants; yet, his mother is able to change his mind by pointing out the personal glory of performing labors (like Heracles) on behalf of Panhellenic law. Similarly, at the end of the play, Athena appears *deus ex machina* to prevent Theseus from the error of demanding nothing but gratitude from the Argives (she demands a one-sided alliance). Thus, in the dramatic context of the play, Theseus reveals the inadequacy of the personal judgment of his one-man rule.

Second, when presented as pure debating points such as above, the *agōn* appears dispassionate, but Theseus is anything but consistent or composed. Portrayed anachronistically as some sort of king in the role of "democratic first man,"¹³ on the one hand, Theseus praises Athenian freedom of speech as recognizing the right of all men regardless of status (430–5); yet, on the other hand, he berates the common herald for being too talkative (567), insolent (575), and not simply repeating "what he has been told" (460). He also prevents the Argive king from speaking by telling him to "shut up" (*sig' eche stoma*) (514), since it is not his place to speak. The debate ends on the

topic of whether to intervene in the suppliants' cause, and although Theseus says he will not be angry, he dismisses the debate with the herald as "accomplishing nothing" and sets off to war, confident his *demos* will follow him in "whatever he wishes" (394). In contrast, it is the herald who calmly agrees to disagree on the question of the best regime and continues to speak his mind, despite Theseus' hostility toward open and honest debate (465–66).

Such dramatic elements reveal a potential challenge to a straightforward interpretation of rational debating points. As representative of the democratic position, Theseus reveals instances of poor political judgment, susceptibility to arguments of personal glory, and aggression towards those who oppose his views, and he leads with the confidence that the people will do "whatever he wishes." He is an embodiment of the herald's critique that democracies are susceptible to political rulers who lead the people "this way and that" for his own advantage.¹⁴ Yet, Euripides also presents Theseus as exercising good judgment to retrieve the bodies, attempting to end that conflict with negotiation first, and engaging in a limited war without sacking the city; he even washed the bodies of the common soldiers for burial (670–5; 720–25; 767). This opposing perspective reinforces both Theseus as an ideal king and Athenian self-interpretation as an active defender of justice.¹⁵ On the other hand, although the herald supports one-man rule, his entire argument presents a challenge to the view a common man could not rationally attend to the city's business. Could the herald's self-contradiction indicate support for democracy? Thus, the dramatic context invites us to explore the question of the best regime beyond the content of debating points and consider the dramatic context of character and plot as crucial to judgment. In other words, one has to consider not only what the characters say, but to whom they say it, how they say it, and, most importantly, whether their actions are consistent with their speech.

Significantly, Euripides appears to employ the tragic genre to examine this important political question in a format which can only be done within a dramatic work. Considering the complexity of his plot and characterization, it is difficult to be convinced that Euripides wrote from pure inspiration without understanding how his plot could challenge his audience to think beyond the content of rational *agōn*. This approach to answering such questions can only be somewhat approximated in the dialogue form of philosophic writing. Although careful attention to how Socrates speaks differently to different interlocutors can reveal new meaning, there is neither plot nor anything to "see." Socrates may still retort that whatever is learned from poetry relies on the capacity of "anyone of jurors" (*Apology* 22b) to be the agent of understanding and explain the

poem's meaning. In addition, he might dismiss the complexity of Euripides' treatment of this question, which offers no clear answer by remaining unresolved and uncertain, as offering no knowledge beyond the many ambiguous opinions concerning questions like what is the best regime (*Republic* 475b; 478d–480a).

Case Two: Does a noble lie still taste as sweet?

As mentioned previously, Plato's dialogues do not simply banish poets and depict rational discourse; instead, Socrates embraces poetic elements from myths of the afterlife to allegories of ships of state and chained prisoners in the cave. One of the most memorable is the myth of the metals which he presents as a noble lie—*gennaion pseudomenous* (*Republic* 414a–6e). Plato's myth of the metals is a story of autochthonous origin. For the Greeks, autochthony could emphasize, as it did for Thucydides, the uninterrupted continuity of a people who “ruled always” (*aei*) without invasion over their land (1.2); or literally referred to a people born from the earth itself (*auto-chthōn*).¹⁶ Euripides' *Ion* recounts a story of autochthonous origin that similarly involves falsehoods and ends with a divine lie called a “sweet belief”—*dokēsis hēdeōs* (*Ion* 1602). Taken together, these two founding myths allow for a comparison of poetic versus philosophic insight into the useful lies and beliefs at the heart of political community. The comparison also challenges the interpretation that poetry requires guidance of philosophy or that a philosophically reformed poetry provides a superior form of education.

Plato's Myth of the Metals: The Useful Lie

Plato's introduces his autochthonous tale in the context of training guardians. The myth is noble or well-born, because it is necessary, even if it requires a great deal of persuasion (*Republic* 414c15e). The first part of the lie, similar to the Theban sown-men, reveals that all citizens were fashioned along with their arms and implements deep within, and born from, the earth-mother. This part creates unity and solidarity in the city; since all citizens (*politikōn*) are born of same mother-earth, they are brothers who will defend each other and their mother-land. Second, the citizens will be further told that a god mixed gold in the souls of those competent to rule; silver in the souls of the guardians; and iron and bronze in souls the craftsman and farmers. Furthermore, since children will not always be born with the same metal soul as their parents, the rulers are required to move children to the group performing the function of their metallic souls. Finally, an

oracle will be set up prophesizing the destruction of the city if ever a bronze or iron man becomes its guardian. Thus, the second part of the lie further supports the established unity and solidarity by ensuring that brother-citizens will perform their natural function.

Glaucon admits no “device” (*mēchanēn*) exists that would allow the first generation to believe such a ridiculous and outrageous lie but, with repetition by word of mouth (*phēmē*), future generations believe such traditional foundation stories (*Republic* 415c–d). Importantly, the myth is a “device” used to buttress Socrates’ earlier opinions regarding the origin of cities and justice. In Book II, Socrates suggests that “political communities come into being, in my opinion (*ōs egōmai*) because each of us happen not to be self-sufficient, but need much” (*Republic* 369c). Later in Book V, Socrates suggests that what divides cities is when “not all give the name “my own” to the same thing, but different men give it to different things [...] which introduces private pleasures and griefs” (*Republic* 464c). Since the origin of political community rests in our common need for each other, the noble lie is useful as it ensures each citizen views all others in the community as “my own.” Similarly, the second part of the myth of metals provides an allegorical explanation for Socrates’ earlier statement that “nature is not the same in each, but it varies as one man naturally can perform his function, another performs another function” (*Republic* 370a). Hence, our metallic souls reflect that natural function that each of us perform because “we are in need of much.” Most importantly, if all citizens performed the one natural function of our metallic soul, the community would be organized according to Socrates’ definition of justice: “this or something like this, as it seems to me (*ōs emoi dokei*), is justice [...] to do the thing belonging to one and to not be a busybody” (443a–b). Finally, the noble lie reinforces this understanding of justice as the city will be destroyed if bronze or iron men become busybodies by attempting to become guardians or rulers.

Although there are many good reasons to argue that the city in speech is not intended as an ideal city but as an examination of the limitations of justice, this ironic reading does not undermine the symmetry between Socrates’ development of the city in speech and the noble lie. The mythological story of the noble lie is an allegorical repetition of the argument of the city in speech. It is possible that Plato crafts this myth as an example of philosophy ruling or directing a new kind of useful mythology. The gods in this story, for example, do not rape human women but helpfully mix metals into the souls of citizens which make them useful to each other. Conversely, Plato’s noble lie could be seen as assimilating or absorbing mythology as a necessary aspect of his philosophical

examination. Hence, the irony of Plato's censorship is that poetry is a useful "device" of philosophic thought. With either interpretation, the symmetry between Socrates' rational argument and the myth of metals is not coincidental and the ultimate utility of the myth is that it provides philosophy with a superior education.

The Autochthonous Athenian: Euripides' new and improved Ion

As much as Plato's noble lie is one of his most famous passages, Euripides' *Ion* is a lesser-known play about a virtually unknown character. Ion was the progenitor of the "ethnic" Greek sub-group of Ionians, who were distinguished, at least according to Thucydides (*Peloponnesian War* 1.2, 1.63), by common dialect, clothing style, and shared religious festivals. The Athenians and most, but not all, of the *poleis* of their empire were Ionians, as opposed to their Dorian enemies—the Spartans and Corinthians.¹⁷ We know very little about Ion beyond this play. In a fragment from Hesiod, Ion is the true son of Creusa and Xuthus; Herodotus suggests Ion was a general who led his people into Attica and beyond. Euripides' play is a complicated reimagining of Athenian mythological origins which reinvents Ion as a semi-divine founding father, while simultaneously undermining the function and utility of such mythologizing.

The *Ion* retells the story of Athenian autochthony.¹⁸ In this version, the autochthonous lineage was traced to Erechtheus, a child born of the earth when it became fertilized in Hephaestus' failed attempt to rape Athena; Creusa is his only surviving descendant. The play opens with Hermes telling the backstory: Apollo's rape of Creusa; her exposure of the child and his rescue to Delphi; her marriage to the foreigner Xuthus after he saved Athens from invasion; and their subsequent childlessness. Hermes also reveals an essential element of the plot: Xuthus will be given a false prophecy that he is Ion's father (1–81). The play proceeds in a typically convoluted Euripidean fashion. At first, Creusa and Ion fail to recognize each other. Xuthus is told Apollo's lie; he, in turn, decides to deceive Creusa by concealing that Ion is "his" son. Enraged at what she thinks is Xuthus' plan to overthrow the Athenian autochthonous line, Creusa and her tutor try, but fail, to kill Ion. He is prevented from killing Creusa in retaliation by the Delphic priestess and the mother and son finally come to recognize each other. In the finale (1553–1625), Athena arrives *deus ex machina* to confirm Ion's parentage and his future lineage: his sons will be the eponymous founding fathers of the ancient Ionian tribes; Creusa and Xuthus will also have two sons together. Finally, Athena commands that Xuthus continue with the god's "sweet belief" that Ion is his son.

Contrary to Aristotle's suggestion that tragedy should reverse good to bad fortune (*Poetics* 1452b), according to the chorus all ends well since "the noble hold what they deserve and the bad, as is their nature, will never do well" (1620).

Although potentially overlooked by modern readers, the significance of Athena's prophecy would not be lost on Euripides' fifth-century audience.¹⁹ The four sons of Ion—Geleon, Hopletes, Argades, and Aigikores—are the founders of the traditional four tribes (*phulē*) of Ionian Athens (Cleisthenes' democratic reforms replaced these four with ten new electoral tribes that cut across traditional class and regional divisions). Importantly, they are also the founders of the Ionian tribal diaspora that stretched into Asia Minor. Euripides' revisions firmly place an autochthonous Athenian king as the patriarchal forefather of most of their subject states. Second, the new improved Ion becomes the semi-divine, older half-brother of Dorus, the founding father of their Dorian Spartan enemies. Again, in more typical mythology, Dorus and Xuthus are both sons of Hellen (not the Helen of the Trojan War, but Zeus' son) and Ion is the true son of Xuthus. Thus, he is Dorus' nephew and a generation further removed from divinity. In this case, the Spartan founder is fully human and three generations removed from divinity. In contrast, Euripides' retelling gives the Athenian founder a mythological upgrade and improves their justification for hegemony over not only its allies, but their Greek rivals. From this perspective, Euripides recreates a patriotic tale that not only reinforces the unity of the autochthonous Athenians but also constructs a rationale for the superiority of this Athenian identity.²⁰

If, however, the audience gives the plot a sober second glance, Euripides provides clues that contest this easy celebration of Athenian patriotism. First, despite portraying the gods as violent rapists and deliberately deceptive, Euripides' play is as unapologetically critical of unjust gods as Socrates (*Republic* 391d; 401a–d). Echoing Plato's critique, for example, Ion frankly and directly reproaches Apollo for prescribing laws for mortals, when he "pursues unjust pleasures without penalty and teaches men to be wicked rather than good" (430–50). More subtly, by granting Creusa a strong voice to express her pain and shame, Euripides provides a rare example of portraying the victim of a god's attention as a sympathetic agent rather than mere vessel of divine lust.²¹ In addition, beyond the violence of Creusa's rape, the gods deliberately tell falsehoods: Apollo lies to Xuthus and Athena orders this "sweet belief" to continue. The reason for this deception is not obvious. Human men often knowingly raised the gods' progeny and Xuthus will have his own true sons. It is possible that Euripides is using the plot to criticize the Delphic oracle which openly

sided with Sparta during the war.²² However, the knowledge that the prophetic god deliberately lies raises an important subsequent question: About what else has he lied? Are we subject to a “sweet belief” that Ion is his son and, as the boy suggested, was this tale merely a cover-up of a more realistic illicit human affair? Is Athenian autochthony of earth-born ancestors false—as the husband of the autochthonous heir bluntly puts it: “the ground does not bear children” (540)? Would the people, those jurymen of Socrates, see the lies embedded in origin stories, no matter how often repeated by word of mouth (*phēmē*) or how sweet?

Second, Euripides’ story also undermines a straightforward reading of Athenian patriotic superiority. Plato’s version of autochthony was noble because it was useful and necessary: it expands the identification of “my own” beyond the natal family and solidifies broader communal unity. Euripides’ version of autochthony can be read as taking this idea a step further. On the one hand, Ion is re-born as semi-divine founder of the autochthonous lineage of all Ionians, which could be seen as a useful lie that justifies Athenian supremacy; on the other hand, the *deus ex machina* finale simultaneously changes the genealogy of Dorus and Achaeus from his uncles to his half-brothers. This sleight of hand establishes the main founders of the Greek tribes as all sons of Creusa, who are equally autochthonous brothers of the same earth. To state the obvious, Euripides’ re-identifies “my own” not with Plato’s narrow xenophobic view of the *polis* community, but with a broader Greek identity. Although the exact dating of this play is unknown, it most likely was performed sometime between the failure of the Peace of Nicias and Oligarchic coup.²³ As such, rather than justifying Athenian domination, the play can be read as a critique of their increasingly brutal suppression their Ionian brothers who made up most of the city-states of the empire. It could also be a critique of the breakdown of Greek norms of war committed by both sides. Thus, depending on the date of production, the emphasis on the brotherhood of Greeks could be a thinly veiled dismissal of Athenian annihilation in 415 B.C.E. of the neutral Melos (a Dorian colony of Sparta) or their subsequent ill-treatment by Syracuse following their ill-fated expedition: if we are to believe Plutarch’s *Life of Nicias*,²⁴ the only survivors claimed they were saved by singing Euripides’ choruses. Since the Peloponnesian war degenerated into similar Greek-on-Greek atrocities, by emphasizing the common blood between the Spartans, Athenians, and their allies, Euripides could be promoting an anti-war message as a signal for peace among the warring brothers.

Thus, although Plato's autochthonous myth was many written years after the *Ion*, Euripides' portrayal challenges Socrates' lie on its stated purpose: its utility. Plato's myth is useful because it creates a political community in which we do not meddle in the work of the others, especially those ill-suited to ruling. Euripides' play, which points beyond the *polis* to a larger Greek identity, unveils the dark underbelly of such foundation myths. Not only do these myths hide the violence and falsehoods of the founding but they also conceal the dangers and contradictions at the heart of such inventive mythologizing.²⁵ Plato's myth, for example, creates an artificial unity by reclassifying "my own" to all citizens which ensures its well-trained standing army is fierce with enemies; in contrast, Euripides' play reveals the real consequences of such narrow, xenophobic political identity to the larger Greek community, which was at war for most of his adult life. We, of course, would want to take Euripides' critique much further to question how nation-state political identity is at odds with the reality of modern immigration patterns and a peaceful global community. Neither Plato nor Euripides hint at such a global world view and Socrates is openly critical of collapsing distinctions between citizen and foreigner (*Republic* 462e).

Importantly, Euripides' version of the autochthonous origin myth is multifaceted and multidimensional. It can be understood as story of political origin reflecting a rather Platonic "sweet belief," wherein the gathered Athenians and their allies at the Great Dionysia festival watched a new version of Ion's story that established as the semi-divine progenitor of their empire. Yet, Euripides' autochthonous lie also challenges such a one-dimensional interpretation by revealing the dangers of a myopic view of political identity. Importantly, this sober second questioning of a straightforward reading is found not only in the textual dialogue but in the dramatic context. Euripides' audience, again, not only hears Ion's critique of unjust gods but also the effect of their actions on victims such as Creusa. In addition, the audience is left to deal with the uncertainty of how to understand the *deus ex machina* of Athena (not Apollo who continues to conceal himself) revealing Ion's identity, the revamping Greek tribal genealogy, and the ensuring the continuation of the "sweet belief." Taken as a defense of poetic storytelling, Euripides' tragedy provides a rich and complex story that challenges the necessity for a Platonic reformed poetry.

Conclusion

In the two these examples of Euripides' tragedy, the poet has provided what appears to be a serious investigation of political questions such as the best regime and the tensions at the heart of political

origin stories. In both cases, possible interpretations arise from not only from what Aristotle would call the “reasoning” (*dianoia*) or speech that the agents employ (*Poetics* 50a) in the tragedy, but from specific aspects of the tragic genre, such as plot, characterization, and style. It may be possible that such complexity is simply reading into Euripides’ play a meaning unknown or unintended by the poet. This was, of course, Socrates’ main critique of the poets: that an average juror could understand the play better than the poet himself. In contrast, poets merely gratify their audiences without knowledge or concern for what is beneficial. Considering Socrates’ statement more carefully, however, his critique may speak more to the explicit audience of tragedy, rather than a serious dismissal of the poets’ capacity to understand or articulate the meaning of their poems. Importantly, Euripides’ primary audience was the same as Socrates’ jury: the adult, male citizen community of Athens. The point of the tragic poetry was not for the poet to explain the meaning of his poem, use it to articulate a particular perspective, or espouse his own opinion regarding important political questions; instead, the poet used the public space of the theater to raise such important questions and present diverse views for consideration by his fellow democratic citizens. The point of tragedy, hence, is not to present a rational argument with a definitive answer, but to make the audience the agent of meaning. In other words, the poet provokes the jurors to think. Thus, the comic playwright Aristophanes was able to portray his own character Euripides in the *Frogs* as stating his plays were intended to teach the spectators “to think, to see, to understand, to be challenged, to plan, to see the bad, to think through everything” (955–60).

Even if tragedy inspires its audience to think, the kind of thinking may not be sufficient to overcome Socrates’ critique of the poets. After all, Socrates never suggests the poets are incapable of inspiring their audience to think, only that their education is at best insufficient and at worst corruptive. Thus, the lovers of spectacles, at most, learn opinions about the world of coming into being and passing away (*Republic* 475d–79c). In other words, the quarrel between poetry and philosophy remains if poetry cannot guide the spectators beyond opinions of the particulars to a consideration of an objective standard of the beautiful, the noble, or the good. Euripides’ final retort might be that it is no coincidence tragedies were performed at the “seeing place” during the festival of the god Dionysus, a god of contradiction and paradox. As shown above, his plays asked the same important questions as philosophy, but presented it in the form of contradictions and paradox not to foreclose the answer to such questions, but in order to draw the audience into “critical thinking” in order “to grasp and recognize” (*Frogs* 975).²⁶ In this way, Euripides’

education reflects a contemporary approach to interpreting Plato's dialogues as neither presenting a doctrine nor system of thought, but as teaching the activity of thinking seriously about the enduring questions of human existence, such as what is the best regime or what is the origin of political community.²⁷ Plato was careful, after all, to qualify Socrates' pronouncements of the origin of community or justice with phrases like "in my opinion" (*Republic* 369c) or "it seems to me" (*Republic* 443a). As such, even though tragedy is embedded in the world of particulars, since Euripides' plays foster a similar activity of thinking he turns out to be a kind of poetic-philosopher in the same way as Plato is often viewed as a philosophic-poet.²⁸

Despite this potential similarity, however, an important distinction remains between tragic poetry and philosophy. To return to Euripides' intended audience, the spectators of the Great Dionysia festival were primarily the multitude of Athenian citizens. As Salkever points out, Socrates is critical of mass education because it is unable to educate different souls differently and the multitude "can never be brought to accept the existence of an objective standard of the beautiful or noble that is different from their own desires."²⁹ In addition, the tragic poet's attempt to educate the masses fails because the multitude is always more persuaded by what is already pleasing to them than by what is true or good. In other words, even if Euripides was a poetic-philosopher, his audience was too large and too diverse to foster a serious questioning of the community's cultural norms; poetry could never lead the many from opinions to objective standards.

Euripides' plays, however, reveal his poetic education was neither straightforwardly pleasing nor an uncontested celebration of Athenian cultural prejudices. Theseus, for example, could be viewed as an ideal ruler upholding the Athenian self-congratulatory perception of defending the weak and upholding justice; yet, because Theseus' behavior is often at odds with his stated support of democracy, his character allows for serious thinking about how democratic leaders manipulate their supporters. The story of the *Ion* similarly could support Athenian hegemony or be seen as undermining it. It is not illogical to assume that different audience members left the festival with different interpretations of the meaning of the play. Some citizens, of course, may see only what reflects and confirms their opinions and norms, but others may question and think through the limitations of Athenian political norms or particular ideas. In the end, the weakness of a poetic education proves to be its strength: tragic education was not found in philosophic schools like the Academy or limited to the leisured literate. It exists in regimes not ruled by philosophers and can reach the multitude of citizens, especially those that had little time to study or consider such

questions. In the end, since democracies must require their citizens to think about and make judgments concerning which policy is good or bad or what is just or unjust, poetic education may prove to be the most indispensable form of education in any democratic regime.

Notes

1. All in text citations are the author's translation of the Greek text in the Loeb editions.
2. The literature on this debate is voluminous. For examples of recent volumes see Elias; Levin; Naddaff; Destrée and Herrmann; Petraki. For some examples of Plato's critique as ultimately a serious critique of poetry's capacity to educate, see Partee; Hatab.
3. For some examples see Strauss; Bartky; Levin.
4. For some examples see Elias; Naddaff; Petraki; Burns.
5. For discussion see Lloyd; Conacher.
6. For further discussion on oligarchy and reasons for inattention see Carter; Storey.
7. Morwood.
8. For discussion of the Athenian foreign policy debate between the "quietist" and "activists"—those who were "busybodies" see Carter).
9. For a discussion of the sources see de Romilly 215–6.
10. This image of the tyrant cutting down the talented like wheat comes from Herodotus (*Histories* 5.92) story of Thrasybulus the tyrant. See Smith.
11. For a discussion of this perspective see Ford.
12. For discussion see Storey; Lloyd.
13. Morwood; Carter.
14. Carter.
15. Mills.
16. Loraux; Zacharia.
17. For a discussion of Ionianism and alternative versions of Ion's story see, Hall; Saxonhouse, "Myths and the Origins of Cities."
18. For more discussion of the complicated and contradictory origin stories of Athens see Zacharia; Hall; Rosivach.

19. For more discussion of the more typical stories of the lineage of the ancient tribes and Euripides' potential innovations see Loraux; Zacharia.
20. Zacharia.
21. Swift.
22. Zacharia.
23. Swift.
24. Plutarch 29.
25. Rosivach; Saxonhouse, "Myths and the Origins of Cities"; Loraux; Kasimis.
26. Zacharia would suggest that "Euripidean pluralism is his statement of a truth about the world" (176).
27. For example, Craig; Saxonhouse, "The Socratic Narrative."
28. Or at least a sophistic-poet. See Allan.
29. Salkever 284.

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