

SHORTER NOTES

ON THE DATE OF EURIPIDES' *ION**

In the prologue of Euripides' *Ion*, Hermes repeats the speech by which his brother instructed him to bring the newborn title character from Athens to Delphi. Apollo's words are (29–34):

ὦ σύγγον', ἔλθων λαὸν εἰς αὐτόχθονα
 κλεινῶν Ἀθηναίων (οἶσθα γὰρ θεᾶς πόλιν)
 λαβὼν βρέφος νεογνὸν ἐκ κοίλης πέτρας
 αὐτῷ σὺν ἄγγει σπαργάνοισί θ' οἷς ἔχει
 ἔνεγκε Δελφῶν τὰ μὰ πρὸς χρηστήρια
 καὶ θῆς πρὸς αὐταῖς εἰσόδοις δόμων ἐμῶν.

Brother, go to the people of famous Athens, who are sprung from the land (for you know the goddess's city), and taking a newborn child from the hollow rock bring him – cradle, swaddling clothes, and all – to my prophetic shrine in Delphi. There put him near the very entrance to my temple. (tr. following Kovacs)

Commentators do not seem to find anything significant in line 30 and thus pass over the parenthesis in silence. Indeed, it does not just look insignificant but is able to impress by its outright dullness, if we take these words, as Kovacs's translation suggests, to mean no more than that Hermes knows where Athens lies or that he has the average divine familiarity with the place. The question is, however, why Euripides (or Apollo and Hermes) should spend half a line stating what is self-evident in an otherwise not particularly wordy speech. As an explanation of why Apollo does not go himself to rescue his son this parenthesis is quite feeble. For, Apollo certainly knows the place from where he would have to pick up his son: the boy has been exposed in the same cave where Apollo had fathered him (line 17). The explanatory γὰρ is rather an indication of why he sends Hermes instead of any other god. The address 'brother' and Hermes' traditional roles as the gods' 'servant' (line 4) and as go-between of gods and men might seem to serve as natural and sufficient reasons. The fact that Apollo nevertheless emphasizes Hermes' knowledge of the city suggests that he alludes to something more specific, which both Hermes and the Athenian audience would understand, even if left unexpressed.

Now, in a certain way it is possible to say that Hermes is more familiar with Athens than any other god (Athena being a possible exception): our ancient sources confirm that a large number of 'Hermeses' or herms (there is of course no difference between the two terms in Greek) could be found at the entrances of private homes and temples and at roadsides around Athens.¹ Their number was big enough

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¹ Thuc. 6.27.1 and e.g. Paus. 7.27.1 (cf. H. Wrede, *Die antike Herme* [Mainz, 1985], 32); for the identification of Hermes and herm cf. Ar. *Pl.* 1153: *παρὰ τὴν θύραν Στροφαῖον ἰδρύσασθέ με*, and Wrede, 12–14.

to earn a central part of Athens the name of ‘herms’ or Hermai. If Apollo alludes to the herms, he does indeed explain why Hermes is preferable to any other god to go to the city: because of his exceptional competence regarding the topography of Athens, which is owed to his presence at virtually every corner of the city. The reference to his prominent role in Athens may be read as a *captatio benevolentiae* to Hermes. It is also a subtle flattery of the Athenians themselves, whose particular veneration for the god is recognized.

The tongue-in-cheek allusion to, and pun on, the god/pillar is not alien to the play, which has always been highlighted as one of the most striking examples of tragedy exploiting comic elements.² It is even less out of character with Hermes, the god of cunning, and Apollo, the god of the ambiguous and elusive oracle (both gods are shown in the prologue to enjoy their bit of trickery and deception).

If this interpretation of the parenthesis in line 30 is accepted, it has a serious impact on one of the most contested issues of the play: its date. No certain reliable criterion has been found to determine when *Ion* was composed. Athena’s prophecy of the foundation of the Ionian citizens by Ion (i.e. the Athenians) has been variously interpreted.³ The metrical analysis as well as formal theatrical criteria point to a time roughly around the middle of the 410s. The ratio of resolutions in the iambic trimeters assigns it a place between *Trojan Women* in 415 and *Helen* in 412 – but there is no linear development, and the statistics show several instances in which the pattern departs from a continuous increase of resolutions. Likewise, it is not guaranteed that Euripides’ recognition plays, to which both *Helen* and *Ion* belong, were clustered at a particular time in the tragedian’s career.⁴ The dates most commonly proposed by modern scholarship are 418/7,⁵ 414/3⁶ and 412.⁷ The reference to the herms may help to narrow this down, as these pillars were affected by one of the most notorious political scandals at the time, their mutilation just before the start of the Sicilian Expedition in 415.

² e.g. B. Seidensticker, *Palintonos Harmonia: Studien zu komischen Elementen in der griechischen Tragödie* (Göttingen, 1982), 211–41.

³ The Ionian revolt against Athenian rule in summer 412 and the adoption of the old tribes by the oligarchs in 411 have most recently been suggested as *termini ante quos* by K. Zacharia, *Converging Truths: Euripides’ Ion and the Athenian Quest for Self-Definition* (Leiden, 2003), 5. This has not met with general approval, cf. L. Battezzato, rev. of Zacharia *CR n.s.* 54 (2004), 308–9.

⁴ On the ratio of resolved trimeters cf. E.B. Ceadel, ‘Resolved feet in the trimeters of Euripides and the chronology of the plays’, *CQ* 35 (1941), 66–89, at 70. Further analyses of metrical anomalies reach the same conclusions: A.M. Dale, *Euripides: Helen* (Oxford, 1967), xxiv–xxviii, M. Cropp and G. Fick, *Resolutions and Chronology in Euripides: The Fragmentary Tragedies* (London, 1985), 61. For a brief discussion of the significance of structural elements see M. Wright, *Euripides’ Escape Tragedies* (Oxford, 2001), 44–7.

⁵ A.S. Owen, *Euripides: Ion* (Oxford, 1939), xli.

⁶ A. Lesky, *Greek Tragic Poetry* (New Haven/London, 1983), 316; James Diggle in his OCT states ‘circa annum 413 a.C.’.

⁷ M. Cagnetta, ‘Una città in preda al terrore (Euripide, *Ione* 598–601; Tucidide VIII 65 sq)’, *QS* 8 (1978), 365–72, at 368; most recently: Zacharia (n. 3), 3–7, who also presents arguments against a later date. Such later dates have been proposed, for example, by U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Euripides: Ion* (Berlin, 1926), 24 and R. Klimek-Winter, ‘Euripides in den dramatischen Agonen Athens. Zur Datierung des Ion’, *Gymnasium* 103 (1996), 289–97, but are rarely considered.

On one level, the factual basis for Hermes' knowledge of Athenian topography disappeared for some time (and not all herms were repaired).⁸ Since so many of the herms were mutilated, their faces⁹ smashed, it would be hard to speak of Hermes' privileged knowledge of the city on account of his omnipresence. On a much more serious level, we might ask if soon after the scandal such a reference to the herms was acceptable to the Athenian audience. There is no doubt that the Athenians were aware not only of the possible political significance of the crime, but also of its seriousness on a religious plane: while Thucydides plays down the religious notions in the prosecution of the mutilators in order to emphasize the Athenians' fear of an oligarchic revolt (Thuc. 6.60.1), it is clear that the crime and the following judicial procedures did have these notions.¹⁰ So the act constituted an offence against Hermes; a remark highlighting his 'suffering' and the precariousness of Athens' relation to him might hit an all too sore spot of the Athenians.

The significance of the allusion becomes clearest if we look at the impact the mutilation of the herms may have had on the other great, and eminently political, genre of Athenian drama. In extant comedy the affair is conspicuous by being largely absent. In Aristophanes' *Birds*, performed in the year after the incident, no references can be found to what must have been one of the greatest scandals in the past year. There are allusions to the Sicilian expedition (363–4) and to Nicias' behaviour in the assembly (639). The summons (and flight) of Alcibiades, a painful event and turning point of the Sicilian expedition, is touched on briefly and allusively (145–7) but clearly enough to make it recognizable and specific.¹¹ This last event occurred a couple of months later than the mutilation,¹² so Aristophanes clearly had the opportunity to include a reference to the earlier scandal in *Birds*, which was staged in the following year. Remarkably, the allusion to Alcibiades is not associated in any way with the scandal and the accusations that led to his defection.

It has been suggested that the notorious decree of Syrakosios (prohibiting any references by name to anyone, or at least to people condemned for impiety in connection with the mutilation of the herms and the profanation of the mysteries) accounts for Aristophanes' silence about the scandal.¹³ Indeed down to *Frogs* in 405, nobody convicted of mutilation or the profanation of the mysteries is mentioned by name in extant comedies. But even if it existed,¹⁴ it will have no impact on our discussion here, because it must have been restricted to reference by name; so the decree alone cannot be responsible for the near-total absence of allusions without names. The proof that there was no absolute prohibition to mention the mutilation comes from the two surviving clear instances of allusion to it. On the other hand,

⁸ Cf. T.L. Shear Jr., 'The Athenian agora: excavations of 1971', *Hesperia* 42 (1973), 121–79, at 165.

⁹ Thuc. 6.27.1: οἱ πλείστοι περιεκόπησαν τὰ πρόσωπα, cf. W.D. Furley, *Andokides and the Herms: A Study of Fifth-Century Athenian Religion* (London, 1996), 28.

¹⁰ Cf. D.M. MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens* (London, 1978), 198 on both the profanation of the mysteries and the mutilation of the herms.

¹¹ Cf. N. Dunbar, *Aristophanes: Birds* (Oxford, 1995), ad loc.

¹² Furley (n. 9), 21–3.

¹³ A. Sommerstein, 'The decree of Syrakosios', *CQ* n.s. 36 (1986), 101–8.

¹⁴ Some scholars have voiced doubts regarding the existence of such a decree: S. Halliwell, 'Ancient interpretations of ὄνομαστί κωμωδεῖν in Aristophanes', *CQ* n.s. 34 (1984), 83–8, J. Trevett, 'Was there a decree of Syrakosios?', *CQ* n.s. 50 (2000), 598–600.

the scarcity¹⁵ of these allusions and the caution the comic playwrights apply when making them are clear signs of some reluctance to give these events the scathing treatment one might have expected from the way in which Aristophanes attacks the political manoeuvres of Cleon.

In *Lysistrata*, performed in 411, the sexually aroused men are warned by the chorus (1093–4): *εἰ σωφρονεῖτε, θαῖμάτια λήψεσθ', ὅπως | τῶν ἐρμokoπιδῶν μὴ τις ὑμᾶς ὄψεται* ('If you are wise, take your cloaks lest one of the mutilators see you'). This may signal that the Athenian attitude towards the scandal had become slightly more relaxed (Alcibiades had already made advances to return) and that despite the catastrophe that had happened to them in Sicily they were able to crack jokes about the incident again. We should not, however, read this as evidence for the licence to exploit these events purely at one's own discretion or as proof that Athenian concerns and anxieties had ceased. Henderson rightly stresses that these lines express a certain relief on the grounds that all the people involved were believed to have been punished or exiled.¹⁶

The second passage, a fragment of Phrynichus (*PCG* 61), is more specific:

- A. *ὦ φίλαθ' Ἑρμῆ, καὶ φυλάττου, μὴ πεσὼν
 σαντὸν παρακρούσει καὶ παράσχηις διαβολὴν
 ἐτέρωι Διοκλεΐδαι βουλομένωι κακὸν τι δρᾶν.*
EPM. *φυλάξομαι. Τεύκρωι γὰρ οὐχὶ βούλομαι
 μήνυτρα δοῦναι τῶι παλαμναίωι ξένωι.*

(A.) 'My dear Hermes, be *careful*, so you don't fall and knock a piece off yourself, and give an opportunity for slander to another Diocles who wants to cause some trouble.' (Hermes) 'I'll be careful; I don't want to offer a reward for information to the murderous foreigner Teucus.'

(tr. Olson)

Teucus denounced a number of Athenians as participants in the profanation of the mysteries and was granted immunity in turn; Diocles claimed to have observed a gathering in the theatre of Dionysus on the night of the mutilation, but was executed probably that same year because his testimony was soon demonstrated to have been false.¹⁷ Neither of them was actively involved in the events that were condemned as impious. The reference here, of an uncertain date,¹⁸ is a clear jibe at the informers. The passage is not a comment about the mutilation itself; it only takes events after the profanation and mutilation as starting points for a side blow on the Athenian treatment of denouncers. In this way it is related to the complaint about sycophancy and the abuse of court proceedings which recurs

¹⁵ Pherecrates, *PCG* 64 is likely to precede the events of 415, cf. Sommerstein (n. 13), 106. Other passages that may show awareness of the scandals of 415 are elusive, if anything, cf. Furlley (n. 9), 131–44. Edmonds is particularly keen on making connections to the mutilation in his edition, e.g. on Aristophanes, *PCG* 601 and Teleclides, *PCG* 12. None of these references stands closer scrutiny.

¹⁶ J. Henderson, *Aristophanes: Lysistrata* (Oxford, 1987), 194.

¹⁷ Andoc. 1.37–43, 65–6. Cf. S.D. Olson, *Broken Laughter: Select Fragments of Greek Comedy* (Oxford, 2007), 219.

¹⁸ Andocides (1.66) suggests that Diocles was tried and executed fairly quickly. However, Phrynichus' complaint about rewards for denouncers and cheats makes better sense if Diocles was still alive. Even the earliest possible performance of Phrynichus' comedy, at the Lenaea in 414, took place several months after his arrest (conjecturally dated by Furlley [n. 9], 128 to late July).

throughout fifth-century comedy. In Phrynichus' fragment, as in *Ion*, Hermes (that is the victim himself) is addressed; but the comedian distracts from the violent act, speaking of a natural cause of damage instead, and attacks individuals. In *Lysistrata* too the joke singles out the mutilators as a narrow group. Thus both passages do not focus on the particular event but on the obscene nature of the men's 'dress' or the character of the false informers. Hermes is never highlighted as victim; instead, even in the second case he is only the tool that allows him to speak about the misconduct and follies of his fellow citizens.

If *Ion* had been composed shortly after the events of 415, a reference to the herms would be biting sarcasm. Apollo would intend to send Hermes to a place where he has been most heavily maltreated and would even allude to the fact that he has come to 'know' (*οἶσθα*) the Athenians all too well. In contrast to the comedians, Euripides' Apollo would focus on the act itself and on the god who was affected. The joke would be at nobody's but Hermes' expense: there is no point to be scored apart from the salt rubbed into his wound. Euripides would point only to the now disrupted relationship between the Athenians collectively and the god. He would make Athens the place of the greatest offence against the god, without any reservation that would limit the responsibility to certain people instead of the Athenians collectively. The anxiety of the Athenian playwrights to avoid saying or staging anything unpropitious¹⁹ suggests that Euripides would not have run the risk of seriously offending the god and frightening his audience. His plays may sometimes be disturbing and unsettling but, I dare say, they (and the *Ion* in particular) are not in this way damaging to Athens. And it may be even more unlikely that we find such an allusion in a tragedy, when comedic writers mention it so rarely and cautiously.

There is one more level on which a strange effect would be created if the play had been staged soon after the mutilation. Apollo is asking a favour from Hermes and should therefore be flattering his brother. In the play it is Hermes who repeats the speech to the audience, apparently proud of the fact that his mighty brother entrusts him with the mission and thus shows how much he relies on him in this way. Of course the mutilation did in any case not take place before the time in which the play is set, but Euripides' audacity in making a reference to the herms a *captatio benevolentiae* would be breathtaking directly after 415.

To conclude: I would like to rule out 414 as a possible date for the *Ion* and regard the following years, perhaps until the recall of the mutilators in 411,²⁰ as still unlikely. Since we know that the play was not part of Euripides' tetralogy of 415, the metrical criteria should be regarded as inadequate for the exact dating of this play (in particular in relation to *Helen*, produced in 412). Structural and motific considerations may suggest composition after 412, while only a date prior to 415 could definitely rule out a sarcastic reading of Apollo's flattering remark.

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¹⁹ R. Parker, 'Gods cruel and kind: tragic and civic theology', in C.B.R. Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997), 143–60.

²⁰ Thuc. 8.97.3.