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Euripides' *Ion* 1.528: an example of comic self-consciousness*

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Abstract: Euripides' *Ion* is a play with elements that challenge tragic gravity, and bring about a lighter tone. Although the body of criticism that discusses the comic elements of Euripides' tragedies (esp. the so-called tragic-comedies) is extensive, little attention has been given to cases of comic self-consciousness. The aim of this paper is to examine *Ion*'s 1.528, and more concretely *Ion*'s utterance ...ταῦτ' οὖν οὐ γέλωσ κλύειν ἐμοί;, as an example of comic self-awareness, that is, an instance that Euripides himself recognizes, in a metatheatrical way, as comic, while commenting at the same time on its reception on the audience's part.

Keywords: Euripides, *Ion*, metapoetry, comic self-consciousness/awareness

The aim of this paper is to examine an example of *Ion*'s comic self-awareness, that is, an instance that Euripides himself recognizes, in a metatheatrical way,¹ as comic, while commenting at the same time on its reception on the audience's part.

On the one hand, the outbreak of the pathology of Euripides' tragic characters might have led Aristotle to write that ὁ Εὐριπίδης [...] τραγικώτατός γε τῶν ποιητῶν φαίνεται

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¹ For Euripidean metapoetry, see for instance Torrance (2013).

(*Poetics*, 1453^a28-30 “Euripides [...] is seen as the most tragic of the poets”).² On the other hand, the ancient scholar Satyrus has noted in his *Life of Euripides* (fr. 39.7, col. vii) that many issues dramatized by Euripides influenced New Comedy:

πρὸς γυναῖκα καὶ πατρὶ πρὸς υἱὸν καὶ θεράποντι πρὸς δεσπότην, ἢ τὰ κατὰ τὰς περιπετείας, βιασμοὺς παρθένων, ὑποβολὰς παιδίων, ἀναγνωρισμοὺς διὰ τε δακτυλίων καὶ διὰ δεραίων, ταῦτα γὰρ ἔστι δῆπου τὰ συνέχοντα τὴν νεωτέραν κωμωδίαν, ἃ πρὸς ἄκρον ἤγαγεν Εὐριπίδης.

“...the husband against the wife, and the father against the son, and the servant against the master; or in the reversal of fortune, violations of virgins, substitutions of children, recognitions by means of rings and necklaces. For these are the things which comprise the New Comedy, and were brought to perfection by Euripides”.³

Ion is a play in which several of these elements are prominent; elements that challenge tragic gravity, and bring about a lighter tone. Seidensticker (1978) 305 has observed that “Euripides, from the *Alcestis* to the *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, again and again, experimented with different forms and techniques of the combination and integration of comic and tragic elements”,⁴ and that the Euripidean tragedy is soaked in both “comic elements” and “comedy elements”.⁵ Although a number of scholars has extensively examined *Ion*’s comic elements, no attention has been given to the way in which Euripides has one of his play’s characters demonstrate comic self-awareness.

At the beginning of *Ion*’s second episode, Xuthus comes on stage, and, as he is deceived by Apollo’s oracle, he recognizes Ion as his own son. This false recognition scene⁶ has been

² In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Lucas (1968) 147 *ad* 1453^a29 observes that the phrase τραγικώτατός γε “must mean that Euripides excels in arousing pity and fear”. Lucas believes that “on the evidence of the surviving plays it might be said that Euripides is most tragic in the sense that he is the most heart-rending of the poets”. Cf. Knox (1979) 270 n.1. Gasti (2017) notes that the description τραγικώτατος is explained by Euripides’ artistic adroitness in the effusive presentation of the tragic πάθος (p. 219, n.7), while in the *Bacchae* it is validated by the shift of fortune (*metabasis*) to adversity (*atuchia, dustuchia*) (p. 226).

³ See Hunt (1912) 176.

⁴ According to Thornburn (2001) 223, *Ion*’s “tragic elements are intermingled with a comic element broader than usually acknowledged. This broader comic element consists of a divine director’s miscalculation and frustration at producing a happy ending in spite of human intrigue and emotions”.

⁵ Seidensticker (1978) 305 calls “comedy elements” the “extensive use of structural forms, characters, dramatic situations, motifs, themes, and story patterns which were already or were soon to become typical elements of comedy”, while he posits that the “comic elements” can be used as “a general term for the ‘laughable’ (τὸ γέλοιο) in its various manifestations and tones”. Seidensticker is of the opinion that “a comedy element in the context of a tragedy is not necessarily comic”. Diamantakou-Agathou (2012) 23 claims that “Euripidean tragedy offered rather fertile ground not only for comic elements, but also for elements of comedy”.

⁶ By “false recognition scene” I mean the scene in which two characters recognize each other, being both deceived (here both Xuthus, who believes in Apollo’s deceitful oracle, and Ion, who believes Xuthus) and at

seen as the most comic of the play. Ion mistakes Xuthus' emotional outburst (ὦ τέκνον 1.517 "my son", δὸς χερὸς φίλημά μοι σῆς σώματός τ' ἀμφιπτυχάς 1.519 "give me your hand as a greeting and let me put my arms around you") for homoerotic advances; this misunderstanding results from the ambiguity of the term τέκνον (1.517) which can mean either "son" or just "boy".⁷ At this point, Xuthus has not revealed Apollo's oracle yet, and this is why it is highly unlikely that Ion understands the term τέκνον as "child". Therefore, the only explanation Ion is able to give to Xuthus' behavior is that a middle-aged man is making vigorous sexual advances to him.⁸

Moreover, in this scene the trochaic tetrameter is predominant.⁹ This is a meter that is mainly used in Attic comedy, and whereby the comic dimension of *Ion*'s false recognition scene is formally emphasized.¹⁰ This "metric maneuver"¹¹ also denotes a different way of both speech delivery and stage action, for the trochaic tetrameter has "a more pronounced 'beat' than the iambic trimeter",¹² and, when it is used, the physical movement on stage becomes agitated and/or rapid.¹³ This "maneuver", however, is generic as well. Euripides embeds into Ion's utterance ποῦ δέ μοι πατήρ σύ; ταῦτ' οὖν οὐ γέλωσ κλύειν ἐμοί; (1.528 "you

least one of them (Xuthus in the *Ion*) is never said the truth. In a false recognition scene, there are some elements common with that of the real recognition scenes yet modified to be differentiated from those of the real ones. Taplin (2003) 52 observes that in the *Ion*'s false recognition scene there are neither songs nor lingering endearments, elements that are typical in a real recognition scene. For lack of other false recognition scenes in the extant plays, it is impossible to draw up a typology of the false recognition scenes.

⁷ See Knox (1979) 260; Lee (1997) 216 *ad* 517. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1926) 111 *ad* 517 believes that Ion's fear would be taken for granted for the Athenians: Ion is an *ephēbos*, and if an old man wants to wrap him in his arms, then it is a sexual assault, which Ion should fear. For the ambiguity of the term τέκνον which would have been avoided if Xuthus had used the address ὦ παῖ, see Poole (1990) 115. Lee (1997) 216 *ad* 517 does not seem to quite accept that the comic tension of the scene is generated by the ambiguity of the word τέκνον since τέκνον "is not a word regularly used in sexual approaches (contrast παῖς, παιδικά 'boy, darling boy'), and it can be taken simply as an affectionate term between an older man and someone whom he looks on as his 'child'". On the other hand, Owen (1957) 107 *ad* 518 contends that it is not Xuthus' words, but his effusive display of affection that occasions the misunderstanding.

⁸ Cf. Knox (1979) 260.

⁹ According to Lee (1997) 214-215, the trochaic tetrameters of this scene "express a heightening of emotion". For the trochaic tetrameter when used in Greek tragedy, see Krieg (1936); Imhof (1956); Drew-Bear (1968) 385-405; Owen (1957) 106-107 (for its use by Euripides). Mastronarde (2002) 74-75 notes that "trochaic tetrameters seem to have been used frequently in early tragedy [...], then were very little used in the mature period of tragedy, and were revived in many plays of Eur.'s last decade".

¹⁰ Cf. Dodds (1960) 152. Knox (1979) 260 observes that the trochaic tetrameter in Xuthus and Ion's dialogue is employed "for undeniably comic effect".

¹¹ By "metric maneuver" I mean the deviation from a "metric trajectory" and the immediate or non-immediate return to this "trajectory". More concretely, here, ll.540-565 deviate from iambic trimeter used before the Chorus' stasimon (ll.452-509), and then, in 1.566, iambic trimeter is used anew. The switching from iambic trimeter to trochaic tetrameter and then to iambic trimeter (after the false recognition) is not coincidental. Martin (2018) 287 *ad* 566-58 is of the opinion that the change of meter in 1.566 to iambics signals "the transition to a new segment of the plot".

¹² See Mastronarde (1994) 319 *ad* 588-637. Martin (2018) 272 *ad* 510-565 notes that "the change of metre generally signals intensification of dramatic speech or action".

¹³ According to Mastronarde (1994) 319 *ad* 588-637, "in scenes in which it [*i.e.* the trochaic tetrameter] is used not only are the emotions more agitated or the tone somehow altered by frenzy or demonic authority [...], but physical movement is either being initiated or becoming more rapid".

my father? How not to laugh at what I hear?")¹⁴ a comment of generic self-consciousness/generic determination in the sense that a play's character defines this scene as comic, while at the same time adjusting audience's reception of this scene:¹⁵ ταῦτ' οὖν οὐ γέλωσ κλύειν ἐμοί; Euripidean intention is to make his audience laugh at this scene.

Similarly,¹⁶ in *Bacchae*'s first episode, Pentheus, considering the appearance of Cadmus and Tiresias, who have donned the Bacchic costume, to be comic, comments as following:

ἀτὰρ τόδ' ἄλλο θαῦμα· τὸν τερασκόπον
ἐν ποικίλαισι νεβρίσι Τειρεσίαν ὄρω
πατέρα τε μητρὸς τῆς ἐμῆς—πολὺν γέλων—
νάρθηκι βακχεύοντ'·... (ll.248-251).

“But here's another strange business: I see the diviner Teiresias dressed in dappled fawnskin, and my mother's father—a ridiculous sight—playing the bacchant with a wand” (Translation of David Kovacs, LOEB)

In a manner similar to the *Ion* (l.528), the utterance πολὺν γέλων (in *Bacchae*, l.250) constitutes a sign of comic self-awareness. In a paper focusing on *Bacchae*'s comic elements, Seidensticker (1978) 315 argues that the scene of Cadmus and Tiresias, whether comic or not, strongly suggests “the possibility of a comic reading (and staging)”. Seidensticker also observes that “Pentheus' laughter is the reaction the author intended to produce”. I believe that Seidensticker's point of view is valid, especially if we consider that Pentheus acts as an internal spectator (ὄρω, l.249) of the two old men's appearance, and that in this way he suggests a model for the external audience's reception of the scene.¹⁷

Ion's utterance ...ταῦτ' οὖν οὐ γέλωσ κλύειν ἐμοί; (l.528), on the other hand, may

¹⁴ The translation here is my own.

¹⁵ Trochaic tetrameter functions as a technique for the audience's reception of the onstage speech. Cf. Mastrorarde (2010) 239. For the difficulty in reconstructing audience's exact reaction to the false recognition scene, see Zacharia (1995) 54. Seidensticker (1978) 314 notes that “an epic poet can easily indicate the quality of a scene and thus direct the emotional reaction of his audience by introducing a comment into the text: ἄσβεστος δ' ἄρ' ἐνῶρτο γέλωσ (*Iliad* A 599). A dramatist, however, if he cannot take refuge in stage directions, can only try to suggest the reaction he deems appropriate by employing one of his characters”. Cf. Zacharia (1995) 54-55, n.42. Gredley (1996) 206-207 believes that a tragic character is quite unlikely to react by laughing.

¹⁶ Moreover, cf. *Orestes' exodos*. Menelaus, once he appears on stage to find out what happened to Helen and save his daughter from Orestes' intrigues, notes that

...ἀλλὰ τοῦ μητροκτόνου
τεχνάσματ' ἐστὶ ταῦτα καὶ πολὺς γέλωσ (ll.1559-1560).

The utterance πολὺς γέλωσ here too is a sign of comic self-consciousness. Cf. Willink (1986) 340 *ad* 1556-1560.

¹⁷ For a contradictory point of view, see Gredley (1996) 206-207 who notes that Pentheus' very reaction lies in the mistaken “reading” of the role of the two old men's disguise, and does not suggest models for the audience's reactions.

constitute a speech act as well; in other words, Ion's utterance describes his linguistic behavior itself: Ion is laughing as he utters this line.¹⁸ Gibert has recently noted that this utterance is "an internal stage direction for a derisive laugh".¹⁹ By means of his negative answer (οὐ· τρέχων ὁ μῦθος ἄν σοι τὰμὰ σημήνειεν ἄν, 1.529 "no! The story as it runs on would quickly make my situation clear to you") to Ion's previous question, Xuthus tries to avert the comic mood and bring back the scene into its solemn realm. Hence, his strong negation οὐ has a metadramatic resonance. Xuthus' denial of the existence of a comic tone is absolute, for the negative particle οὐ is strong (instead of μή) and is used to denote absolute and objective negation. Moreover, the negation here is explicit and unequivocal since the οὐ is followed by a semicolon.²⁰ Xuthus believes that his upcoming narration (ὁ μῦθος) about what he has learned inside the altar does not fall into a comic context, while the repetition of the ἄν, accentuating the potentiality of the optative σημήνειεν, brings about a "pragmatic complexity"²¹ that in turn highlights the respective "generic complexity" –and by "generic complexity" I mean that for Ion, Xuthus' wording has resulted in a comic realm, yet, for Xuthus, the solemn quality remains undeniably invariable.

To sum up, in this paper I have examined an example of comic self-consciousness/comic self-awareness in Euripides' *Ion*. During the false recognition scene between Xuthus and Ion, the latter mistakes Xuthus' emotional outburst for homoerotic advances. Being told that he is Xuthus' son, Ion exclaims: ποῦ δέ μοι πατήρ σύ; ταῦτ' οὖν οὐ γέλωσ κλύειν ἐμοί; (1.528 "you my father! How not to laugh at what I hear?"). I have suggested that this utterance is a comment of generic self-consciousness/generic self-determination in the sense that a play's character defines this scene as comic, while at the same time adjusting audience's reception of this scene. I have also argued that Ion's question constitutes a speech act: Ion is laughing as he utters this line.

¹⁸ Cf. Seidensticker (1978) 315 for Pentheus' utterance πολλὸν γέλωσ (*Bacchae*, 1.250). For a contrary point of view, see Gregory (1999-2000) 66-67, esp. 67.

¹⁹ Gibert (2019) 211 *ad* 528.

²⁰ For the meanings of the οὐ and its semantic differences from the μή, see LSJ⁹, pp. 1266-1267, esp. 1266, s.v. οὐ.

²¹ Slings (1992) 103 writes that the doubling of the ἄν dovetails with "the complexity of the sentence: the more complex the sentence, the higher the chance of a double ἄν. This complexity is double: syntactic and pragmatic". By "pragmatic complexity" Slings means "a high information load: the quantity of new information in a sentence, plus the number of words that by their very meaning carry a certain emphasis, like question words and adjectives denoting quantitative intensity ('big,' 'many,' 'all')". Based on Slings, Martin (2018) 279 *ad* 529 observes that the "pragmatic complexity" here lies in the focal shift in 1.539 "from the manner (τρέχων ὁ μῦθος) to the purpose (σημήνειεν) of the announced speech act".

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