Gender, Identity, and Anger: Trauma Narratives in *Ion*

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ABSTRACT

Ion is one of the masterpieces of ancient Greek dramatist Euripides, and its main characters, Ion and Creusa, are characterized by a typical trauma narrative. Although Creusa's trauma originates from the suppression of women by the Athenian male hegemony, while Ion's relates to his gentile status, anger is the common point of their traumatic reactions. Creusa's progression from verbal accusations against Apollo to an eventual counterattack reflects her active trauma repair. In Ion's shift from narrating his trauma to violent catharsis, his method of trauma repair is more extreme. The analysis of these two trauma narratives facilitates the interpretation of the plight of Athenian women and gentiles from a new perspective.

Keywords: Creusa, Feminism, Gentile, Ion, Trauma narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word "trauma" origins in the Greek, and refers to the physical injury suffered by an individual. Freud, Hermann, and others developed this concept, and it evolved to become the psychological and spiritual damage suffered by an individual or a collective. Ancient Greek drama is Western drama's oldest form, and has profoundly influenced its development. Despite this, few studies have analyzed it from the perspective of trauma narratives.

As one of Euripides' marginal works, attention was not paid enough to *Ion*, although the issues of the plight of women and the ethical identity of citizens it reflects are of high research value. Because of the pathological nature of trauma, its impact on individuals is multi-dimensional, and includes the emotional aspects of anger, anxiety, depression, and fear. By using anger as a starting point and focusing on the words and behaviors of Creusa and Ion in this emotional state, the paper analyzes the traumatic experiences that hide behind it. Creusa's is related to her vulnerability as a woman, while Ion's stems from his social identity as a gentile. The paper then explores the collective trauma of Athenian citizens under the influence of the Peloponnesian War and the harsh political system, to illustrate the damage the Athenian city-state system inflicts upon freedom and democracy; marriage and family; and ethics and morality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Few academic studies have been written on Euripides' *Ion*. From insufficient attention and narrow research content, we could see that *Ion* has been marginalized in the literature, and few scholars have interpreted it from the perspective of trauma theory. Interpretations of *Ion* focus on three main aspects: the question of citizenship; political issues; and the founding myth of Athens, and its associated ethical issues.

The former is the more studied direction. The exploration of Athens' unjust hierarchy is central to the scholarly interpretation of Euripides' work, and *Ion* is no exception. The basket Creusa uses to discard Ion is a symbol of the latter's identity; the woven cloth, the golden serpent ornament, and the wreath constitute identity markers (Michael C. Sloan, 2016; Melissa Mueller, 2010). The bird is another essential image in the symbolism of Ion's identity, and its presence plays a crucial role in the narrative's plot development and revelation (Froma I. Zeitlin, 1989; Brian D. McPhee, 2017). The importance of citizenship is also evident in several places in the play; examples such as Ion's sensitivity to his origins and Creusa's perception of

Ksutos as an outsider reflect the problems of racial purity in Athenian society (George B. Walsh, 1978). The anxiety caused by his lack of legal citizenship is an essential source of Ion's trauma, and studies address it are valuable explorations of the issue in Athenian culture.

The second orientation interprets *Ion* from a political perspective. The Athenian political system embodies exclusive imperialist discourse, and the tragedy of Ion is the result of its prevalence of blood politics (Demetra Kasimis, 2013). Other scholars used Foucault's speech about *Ion* as a base to contrast *Ion* with *Oedipus Rex*, and illustrated the relationship between truth and political power (Alexandre Macmillan, 2011). But academic evaluation of the Athenian political system is not all negative. The play ends with the triumphant return of Ion as a descendant of Erechtheus, in an affirmation and continuation of Athenian blood politics (Loraux, 1990; Sokolov, M.K, 2013). This reading, however, overemphasizes the political factors, and ignores the human causes of the tragedy, which is ultimately one-sided. Still, from a political science perspective, the social problems in *Ion* as a political tragedy provide a new view for its interpretation. Creusa's trauma is also inseparable from Athenian politics, which related to gender.

The third category focuses on *Ion*'s Athenian city-building myth, and the ethical issues it raises. The dialogue between Creusa and Ion about origins places patriarchal expression at the forefront, which means the Athenian notion that patriarchal inheritance is superior to hermaphroditic reproduction (Loraux, 1993). While Ion's complex identity provokes and rebels against the myth of the earth-born, his tragedy is also an irony and a dissolution of the religious ethics of the Athenian city-building myth (Wang, Ruixue, 2022). Such studies also explore the place and role of women in this myth, and discuss the ways in which father-to-father transmission excludes the reproductive function of women (Zacharia, Katerina, 2003). In addition, the importance of the gods in Athenian city-building mythology has made the exploration of their sanctity and ethics the focus of these studies. Some scholars have affirmed Apollo's rationality in saving Ion and returning him to Athens in a legitimate capacity, which is a care for Creusa and Ion (Felix Martin Wassermann, 1940). Although such praise of Apollo's divinity is biased, explorations of the earth-born myth show the cultural origins of *Ion*'s interpretation.

In general, the literature to date provides reasonably comprehensive and diversified interpretations of *Ion*, but its analysis focuses mainly on the three categories mentioned, and its scope is relatively narrow. Research perspectives are also limited; they primarily analyze the development of the dramatic plot and character images, and neglect the trauma narrative. Studies on citizenship, political issues, and the Athenian founding myth are, however, inseparable from the trauma narratives of Creusa and Ion, and have contributed to the production of this trauma to a certain extent. Focusing on the traumatic experiences of the main characters in the plays can provide new theoretical perspectives for interpreting the oppression of women by the Athenian male hegemony, and the identity anxiety of the gentiles.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Freud, the founder of trauma theory, introduced the concept of trauma: "An experience which, for a very brief period, exposes the mind to a stimulus of such a high degree that it cannot seek to adapt in the normal way, thus permanently disturbing the allocation of the effective faculties of the mind." Jung, Hermann, and others inherited and developed Freud's theory, and the research scope extended from psychology and psychoanalysis to sociology, literature, and other fields.

Since then, many researchers have thought about the relationship between trauma and literature, and analyzed the manifestation and influence of the former on literary events. Susan Hanke proposed "writing therapy," in which writing helps a traumatized person heal. Dominique Carapra constructed the relationship between literary and trauma narratives by analyzing the invasive and compulsive repetition of trauma. Michel Barra considers literary trauma theory an emerging research method, he proposes that different types of trauma result in different traumatic experiences, for which diverse research perspectives and methods are needed. This viewpoint is compatible with the diversity of the current social state, and has strong practical significance.

Studying trauma narratives from a feminist perspective is currently a popular mehtod. Feminist criticism emerged in Europe and the United States in the 1960s, with Virginia Woolf and Simone Beauvoir as its theoretical pioneers. The publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which analyzed the uneven distribution of power between the sexes

from a social and cultural perspective, marked the formal formation of feminist critical theory. Elaine Showalter created the idea of "women's criticism," and Barbara Smith brought feminist "identity criticism" to a climax. Subsequently, the development of feminist criticism deepened, and became a keyword of literary criticism theory.

The feminist trauma narrative is most evident in Creusa, Ion's trauma focuses on the dilemma of gentile identity. Emotional manifestations of trauma include anger, anxiety, and fear, the former is the common denominator of both Creusa's and Ion's trauma, and can be used to interpret their trauma narratives in a way that analyzes the connection and commonality of their personal traumas, and explains more deeply the roots of feminist and gentile trauma generally.

4. CREUSA'S TRAUMA NARRATIVE

Creusa is the daughter of Erechtheus, the first king of Athens. Despite her noble birth, the lack of a female voice in the patriarchal Athenian society means she keeps silent about her rape by Apollo, subsequently, to avoid the accusations of Athenian citizens, she is forced to abandon her son ruthlessly. The trauma Creusa suffers is therefore both physical and psychological, and interpreting it from a feminist perspective can unpack the existential dilemma of women in Athenian society, and the possible paths of female trauma repair.

4.1 The Creation of Trauma: Creusa's Gentle Defiance of Apollo

The tragedies of Creusa and Ion stem from an atrocity committed by Apollo. The latter forces himself on Creusa, who gives birth to his child, forming an indelible trauma in her mind. *"In the face of sudden or catastrophic destructive events, individuals typically exhibit delayed, uncontrollable, recurrent dark fears and intrusive phenomena."* The post-traumatic stress response manifests emotionally in anxiety, depression, timidity, and anger. Creusa expresses this response in the play's opening scene, when she describes her rage at Apollo's atrocity.

Creusa: Oh, suffering women! Oh, the folly of God! What is there to say? Where shall we seek justice, if we perish for the sake of our master?

Ion: Ma 'am, why are you so upset for no reason?

Creusa: I won't say anything about it, and you won't ask any more questions(36-37).

Patriarchal Athenian society does not allow Creusa a voice, because women are subordinate to men: the overlords and spiritual leaders of women's lives. *"As far as the activities of the two sexes were concerned, the sexual role provided for women to perform household chores and care for children, while the other human performances, undertakings, and ambitions were the province of men."* In the presence of absolute patriarchal authority, Creusa is denied a way to recover from her trauma. Even the expression of her anger is necessarily restrained, and when Ion asks her why, she can only respond with silence.

Behind Creusa's misfortune and trauma is an imbalance of gender power. Still the physical trauma Apollo inflicts on her occurs not only in the dimension of gender, but also in those of politics and society. In the context of Athenian gender politics, political violence is implicitly behind physical violence. *"The female body trauma imagery is linked to the political and social elements of reality, the anxiety and embarrassment of the female body profoundly highlighted within the framework of the 'body of power' dominated by the male power discourse."* Female trauma narratives dominated by the patriarchy often focus on the female body, which is their most common vehicle. Women's subordinate status under the male-dominated discourse system also makes the female body the object of the male subject's gaze. Creusa's physical trauma is explicit, but the implicit psychological trauma behind it is unspoken. The imbalance of gender relations in this political context makes her afraid to resist male authority. Kate Millett points out that the relationship between the sexes is one of domination and subordination, with men dominating women according to their innate power, thereby achieving a subtle "internal colonization." Creusa's concealment of her rape and abandonment of her children are concessions to patriarchal power. This persistent yielding without a way to vent her pain creates psychological trauma. Creusa's expression of anger at Apollo in the temple is a gentle defiance that can only be vented through the stories of her friends. Unless something more unjust crushes all her hopes, she will never confront the violence of the patriarchy, and her trauma will be suppressed forever.

4.2 Repairing the Wounds: Creusa's Desperate Counterattack

Apollo tells Ksutos, in the form of an oracle, that Ion is his illegitimate son, and Ksutos then grants the latter the status of an Athenian heir. He does this without Creusa's knowledge, denying her the right to know about and engaging in this situation. This illustrates that Creusa is not an equal partner with Ksutos in their marriage, and places her again at the mercy of a man.

Creusa issues an accusation against males, represented by Apollo and Ksutos, and reveals her long-held secret to the old maid and the chorus (109-110). This is the first time Creusa confronts her trauma, and marks the beginning of her acceptance of it. *"When traumatized people can speak coherently about their lives, whether they recall the full traumatic event or not, they have achieved their efficacy as long as they are no longer haunted by the memories of the past.''* Creusa's scattered memory fragments are reintegrated in constructing trauma narratives, and the repressed traumatic experiences gradually regain their appearance in the process of externalization. They are then re-encoded and reproduced, to become an organic part of her mind. In this process, Creusa releases the pain pent up inside her, relieving and healing her trauma. Herman points out that speaking about a traumatic experience by confiding in a trusted person within a safe environment can have a healing effect. In this case, the old maid and chorus help heal Creusa's trauma by listening and giving her words of enlightenment.

Creusa's leap from suppressed voice to a rebellious actor is a proactive process of trauma repair, and she decides to "do what women do'' by poisoning Ion. Naomi Weiss (2008) notes that, as she transforms from passive sufferer to active protagonist, she moves from silence to speech, from victim to aggressor, and from an object of male exchange to an autonomous female subject. From the role of trauma-dominated "victim" to that of resisting "avenger", Creusa no longer tolerates the vices of the male aggressor but takes the initiative to defend her subjectivity as a wife and mother, and realizes the awakening of her female subjectivity. Her expression of anger can be seen as a "discourse of confrontation," which Foucault argues is the production of new knowledge, the utterance of new truths, and the consequent construction of new power. By constructing her discourse of confrontation, Creusa rebels against and deconstructs the patriarchal discourse of Athens.

4.3 The Failure of Trauma Repair: Re-concealing the Truth

At the narrative's end, Creusa compromises with the patriarchal authority due to the intervention of Athena's divine power. They conceal Ion's origins from Ksutos, and the former returns to Athens a descendant of the latter, the restoration of moral order coming at the cost of a woman's silence. Creusa's concealment of her rape and the secrecy surrounding the violence to which she was subjected allow the future of Athens to be secured. Ion's return means the reconstruction of Erechtheus' lineage, and the dissolution of women's reproductive status in Athenian gender relations. *"In the end, the order is restored: the lost and found child is now a man who will have children of his own; the lineage is ultimately male; and the woman returns to the shadows."* Creusa's anger disappears, and is replaced by praise for Apollo. (189) The failure of trauma repair is marked when the traumatized woman actively accepts the male arrangement, identifies with the values of the patriarchal society, and returns to the traditional model of femininity.

Creusa's failure to repair her trauma is the result of both divine power and male hegemony. The intertwining and entanglement of these forces constitute the mechanism of the Athenian feminist trauma narrative. Under the dominant discourse and ideology monopolized by male power, the marginalized women could become a unified opposing force — and thereby form a new gender relationship and social imagination — if they could only make their voices heard. Although Creusa's trauma repair fails, it is a constructive attempt to resist male hegemony. Although she again suppresses her trauma, Creusa has announced Apollo's atrocities to the chorus and the old maid, and the truth will have the chance to surface again.

5. ION'S TRAUMA NARRATIVE

Because of his orphan status, Ion never acquires legal citizenship. In the context of Athenian blood politics, the ambiguity of his ethical self traps him in a long-term identity dilemma. Ion's trauma is more psychological than Creusa's, where physical and psychological traumas coexist; his anger towards both Apollo and Creusa is related to his anxiety and unease about his citizenship.

5.1 The First Sign of Trauma: Anger at the Sun God Apollo

After hearing what happened to Creusa on the excuse of "a friend of mine," Ion expresses his wrath directly at Apollo (61-62). A closer analysis of the reasons for Ion's accusations reveals that he is angry not at Apollo, but at his "unknown parents" who caused his trauma, and whose irresponsible behavior resembles that of Apollo. While Ion blames Apollo on the surface, he is accusing the "perpetrators" of his trauma: the parents who abandoned him.

Ion's sensitivity to identity is reflected in several details, and the first conversation he has with Creusa revolves around the issue of status.

Ion: So who are you? Where did it come from? Who was your father? What shall we call you?

Creusa: My name is Creusa. I am the son of Erytheus. Athens is my home city.

Ion: Ah, in a famous city, from a noble ancestor, my lady. I do respect you (37).

The first time Ion meets Creusa, he assumes her noble status and praises her noble identity, then asks four consecutive questions to inquire about her origin. The question of who you a person is represents their self-perception. And Ion is most concerned with paternal lineage and homeland, which directly affect the ethical identity of all citizens. Only by unearthing the origin of his identity can Ion heal his psychological trauma. From his anger at Apollo to his extreme concern about his identity, Ion externalizes the traumatic experience of abandonment, and a long time of uncertainty about his origins, through his behavior.

Ion's chronic identity trauma is also reflected in his name. In the beginning, as a slave in the temple, he has no legal name; he only becomes "Ion" when Ksutos claims him as his son. For more than a decade, Ion has been a nameless "other". According to Milan Kundera, *"A man's name means his continuity with the past, and a man without a past is a man without a name."* The absence of a name symbolizes identity trauma: a person without a name does not belong to a family group or blood genealogy. The identity anxiety caused by the lack of belonging is a significant source of Ion's psychological trauma. *"Identity anxiety refers to people's concerns about their place in the world."* Identity is an essential medium for individuals to prove their existential nature to the outside world, and connects the self with the external environment.

Once an individual loses their identity, it is difficult for them to gain access to a group, and an identity crisis arises.

Behind the identity anxiety of Ion is a reflection of the shortcomings of Athenian democracy. Athenians have always been proud of their highly democratic political system. *"Our system is called a democracy because power is in the hands of all citizens, not in the hands of a few."* But the relationship of democratic power distribution contradicts this description, whose "all citizens" did not include women, gentiles, or slaves. What's more, the expansion of the Athenian empire attracted large numbers of gentiles to Athens, who, although an essential part of the city-state's population, were excluded from exercising democratic power as subjects. *"One of the most important words of the Greeks was arrogance […] A strong sense of local pride, naked lust for power, and arrogant individualism permeate the entire history of Greece."* In this sense, Athenians were the most typically arrogant of the Greeks; their strong sense of local pride meant they attached great importance to their native origins, and only allowed pure-blooded Athenians to participate in political activities. Democratic politics became identity politics, inevitably leading to identity anxiety among individuals in the city-state.

5.2 Trauma Escalation: Anger at Creusa

Ion briefly recounts his traumatic experience to Creusa, and as with her trauma repair, this act helps relieve his pain. From narration to revenge, the catharsis of Ion's trauma transformed from mild to extreme. When Ion participates in the adoption ceremony with Ksutos, he is on the verge of receiving legal citizenship, and repairing his identity-based trauma seems possible. When he discovers Creusa's deadly plot, however, he becomes enraged, and attempts to kill Creusa, not knowing that she is his mother. For Ion, Creusa becomes the "abuser" who disrupts his trauma repair process, and he is traumatized twice. Ion is highly sensitive to any act that undermines his identity. Although he knows Creusa is "justly hated," he seeks revenge on her for attempting to kill him. *"The traumatized individual's revenge mentality is essentially a claim mentality."* Although the traumatized individual believes that the "perpetrator" should compensate him for the trauma suffered, revenge is part of the former's struggle with the trauma. Nevertheless, the transformation from victim to perpetrator can cause

conflict between this revenge and the individual's ethics. An act of revenge does not dissolve the trauma, because *"revengefulness is essentially a manifestation of the traumatic memory still in a frozen state."* Until the traumatized individual actively moves beyond the trauma, there is a chance that its adverse effects will be reproduced. In this case, Ion, the victim of identity violence, becomes the perpetrator, and is unknowingly trapped in an identity loop. His trauma repair is, therefore, much more difficult.

Trauma repair requires emotional catharsis, which has multiple forms depending on the extent of the trauma. While less severe trauma requires milder forms of catharsis, when the level of the trauma reaches a psychologically unbearable point, the conditions for catharsis escalate, and more extreme forms (such as violence) can manifest. The violence triggered by Ion's anger suggests Creusa's intent to murder him exacerbated his traumatic experience. *"The destructive nature of the traumatic event goes beyond the victim's normal self-psychological defense mechanisms, causing the victim to lose normal self-control, ability to relate to others, and to make sense of things."* Violent catharsis manifests the traumatized person's loss of self-control, where reason is overwhelmed by the intensity of the traumatic experience, and engages in extremely vindictive behavior. Creusa is the target of Ion's violence, although she is suffering from trauma herself, and she attempts to poison him in a similar act of violence. The two traumatized individuals have gone from empathizing with each other to committing violence against each other, and from being victims, have become perpetrators. This violence does not repair their trauma, but rather aggravates it. One of the signs of trauma repair is that the traumatized person can face the traumatic event peacefully, and Ion's anger and violence prevent him from achieving this.

For Ion, his true ethical self is not the best solution to his trauma, legal and socially accepted citizenship is at the core of his identity claim. The union of man and god is inconsistent with the moral norms of Athens' earthly society, and Ion's birth is amoral and anti-ethical. Although Creusa and Apollo provide the complete genealogy of Ion's bloodline, they do not touch the root of his identity trauma. The final piece of the ending is based on lies and deception: Ion's true identity is that of the illegitimate son of a woman and god, but he returns to Athens with the false identity of being the biological son of Ksutos and the stepson of Creusa, who is his birth mother. The source of Ion's trauma is his orphan status, but now his trauma has morphed into a complex interweaving of two fundamental and false identities. The new identity based on a lie is precarious, and if his secret is discovered, his complex ethical identity will place him in a new set of traumatic circumstances.

6. CONCLUSION

The imbalance between Athenian blood politics and gender power means Creusa and Ion ultimately fail to repair their respective traumas, which are not individual and one-sided, but reflect the collective trauma of Athenian citizens. The year before the play was set, Athens was comprehensively defeated in the Peloponnesian War. Consequently, its political and military environment deteriorated, and people began to reflect on their former pride in a democracy that was now fractured. In its further concealment of the truth, Ion's return to Athens is an ironic ending, although with it Euripides reflects on the reconstruction of the Athenian city-state. Athenian society needs fresh blood, and the illegitimate son Ion might bring new hope to its rigid and narrowly localized politics.

Before her attempted poisoning of Ion, Creusa represented the majority of women in ancient Greek society: silent, weak, and obscure. Most female figures praised by dramatists are gentle and virtuous, and few works encourage women to resist patriarchal oppression and violence. There are, however, exceptions, such as Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Antigone*. From a sociological point of view, the usefulness of ancient Greek women is usually in their fertility value, which is still attached to men. *"The mother of a man called a child is not the procreator of that man [...] who gives birth to a child is the impregnator; she only preserves the seedling as a guest of that guest."* Despite their critical role, women are merely the nurturers of children, and are subordinate even in the reproductive process. Athenian city-building myths often focus the sanctity of patrilineal inheritance, where men could produce offspring without the women's consent. The ancient Greek marriage system, for instance, had strict rules for women, who had no autonomy to choose their husbands, but were obliged to marry whoever their fathers (or other male relatives) deemed suitable. From marriage to childbirth, women were deprived of their autonomy and subjectivity, and even from a sociological view, female trauma was widespread. The term "gentile" in *Ion* is applied only to Athenian society, but if construed sociologically, it

can be interpreted as "foreigner". According to Zimmer, *"a gentile is a potential wanderer [...] who is fixed within a particular spatial group [...] to which he does not belong from the beginning..."* Most gentiles in Athens had this awkward "foreigner" status. Marginalized by two cultural systems, their ambiguous social identities dissolved their sense of group belonging. The trauma of identity anxiety among such individuals, whether "gentiles" or "foreigners", is a common social phenomenon that deserves attention and interpretation.

Since the investigation centers on the traumatic experiences of Creusa and Ion, the paper's evaluation of Apollo, who caused the trauma, is not appropriately nuanced. The analysis does not address the fact that Apollo secretly asks Hermes to save Ion, and gives him a new identity with which to return to Athens. In addition, because the play does not cover Ion's traumatic experiences in depth, his trauma is less evident than that of Creusa, and its trauma narrative can only be based on his words and actions, which are inevitably one-sided. Despite these limitations, however, this paper is one of the few to analyze ancient Greek drama from the perspective of trauma narratives, and as such can provide reference material for future interpretations.

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