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## The “Ultra-modern” Euripides of Verrall, H.D., and MacLeish

Thomas E. Jenkins

This essay explores the modernity of ancient Greece. If this concept seems a paradox, it is; and it is that tension between antiquity and modernity, between constructions of classical rationalism and modern angst, that fueled three extraordinary adaptations of Euripides from the early 1890s to the mid 1960s. Drawing on a perception of Euripides as the most “modern” of ancient (perhaps even modern!) playwrights, A. W. Verrall, H(ilda) D(oolittle), and Archibald MacLeish all fashioned Euripides-inspired works that challenged contemporary perceptions of Euripides as a classic. As H.D. explains in her *Notes on Euripides*, “[W]e are too apt to pigeon-hole the Attic poets and dramatists, put them B.C. this or that, forget them in our survey of modern life and literature, not realizing that the whole spring of all literature (even of all life) is that one small plane-leaf of an almost-island, that tiny rock among the countries of a world, Hellas” (H.D. 2003: 277). H.D. here elides past and present (“B.C. this or that,” she writes breezily): antiquity and modernity are not, in her world-view, distinct, but integral. H.D.’s insistence on the modernity of Euripides colors her project of translating Euripides’ (modernist) *Ion* in an appropriate (high modernist) way. Drawing on contemporary, Einsteinian notions of time and progress, H.D.’s translation and commentary thus provides a bridge from the rationalist, modernist spin of A. W. Verrall’s 1890 Euripides to the darker, tragic vision of MacLeish’s nuclear-age *Herakles* (1967), a self-consciously Euripidean tale of modern ethical blight. Each adaptor applies a distinctly modern, albeit contemporary, aesthetic to their “updating” of the Euripidean original.

### Verrall’s *Ion*

There are, of course, many different facets to Euripides’ *Ion*: every scholar—and translator—is compelled to pick his or her own emphases. “Modernity” is but one of them. Verrall’s rationalist interpretation may be among the most eccentric, but it is hardly the only strong reading of the

play.<sup>1</sup> A century later the tendency has veered towards issues of politics and social constructions of the self. For Froma Zeitlin, for instance, the play “problematizes all the issues relating to identity and selfhood and what these categories might entail” (Zeitlin 1996: 290). Since the character of Ion is, in some senses, a blank slate onto which multiple identities are inscribed—son to Apollo, son to Xuthos, son to Kreousa, even, in a way, son to Pythia—the play explores how self-identity is fashioned and promulgated (rather than displaying Verrall’s binary emphasis on truth and delusion). Nicole Loraux’s influential, political reading is even more pointed: “Athens is the sole subject of Euripides’ *Ion*, the Acropolis its sole hero. Its catalyst is a woman called Kreousa and its topic is the specifically tragic discourse of autochthony” (Loraux 1993: 184). For Loraux, the play is largely an exercise in civic self-fashioning, and, like the *Oresteia*, a dramatization of the myth of democratic Athens.

There is, however, something about the perceived “modernity” of Euripides in particular that seems to attract radical adaptations of his work. In his 1890 Cambridge commentary and translation on Euripides’ *Ion*, A. W. Verrall famously introduced a sly, anti-religious interpretation of the play, later to be reworked in the 1895 volume *Euripides the Rationalist: A Study in the History of Art and Religion*. Asserting that the play inveighs against the notion of religious infallibility, Verrall claims that every action in the play can be explained by human, rather than divine, agency. Curiously, he does so by arguing on behalf of the play’s “modernity”: “The drama proper contains nothing plainly miraculous at all, and is ‘modern’, not in details indeed but in its whole spirit and color. ... The tone of the *Ion* is that of the age after Pericles” (Verrall 1890: xix). Verrall is a bit coy here with the term “modern”: he means, perhaps, “contemporary,” in that the *Ion*, on his reading, reflects fifth-century values. But then Verrall really *does* create a “modern” *Ion* by composing from whole cloth a dramatic epilogue to the play, one which answers many of the nagging concerns of the drama—most famously, the apparent contradiction between Apollo’s oracle concerning Ion’s parentage and the resolution of the play.

This narrative arc concerning the oracle is crucial, and something of an embarrassment in *Ion* criticism. At the beginning of the play, Hermes announces—apparently, truthfully—that Kreousa had given birth to a child, Ion, through rape by Apollo (*Ion* 12–13). Kreousa abandoned the child, but returned in guilt only to find it missing and presumed dead. In the

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<sup>1</sup> For a refutation of Verrall’s rationalist reading, see Wasserman 1940: “The *Ion*, while not denying skeptical aspects a place in the discussion, leaves no doubt that things are directed and arranged in the best way possible in this limited sphere of human conditions, emotions, and thoughts” (601, n. 31). This is about as optimistic an interpretation of the play as one can discover.

meantime, Ion had been spirited away to the temple of Apollo at Delphi, to live as an acolyte of the god. Kreousa later marries Xuthos but their marriage is barren. Xuthos seeks through the oracle a solution to his childlessness and is told—through the unimpeachable *logos* of Apollo—that the first person he meets coming from the temple is his son (534). The pair embrace; complications ensue. At the end of the play (and after two murder attempts and some truly involved business with tokens), mother and son are finally reunited, and Xuthos is revealed not to be the father. Ion is understandably baffled and hurt; he seeks an interview with the god to clarify matters. As a *dea ex machina*, Athena commands the two *not* to reveal the truth about Ion's parentage (1601): in this way, Ion may take his place among the kings of Athens with no possible political repercussions. At the surface level of meaning, at any rate, the oracle has lied to Xuthos.

Verrall's "Euripidean" epilogue attempts to explain away the fallibility of the oracle by arguing that there was in fact no god at Delphi at all, or at least no god that cares. It is a thoroughly engaging piece of work, in which a group of roving Athenians and a particularly glib actor named Cephisophon attempt to persuade the Delphians that they have in fact been duped by their oracle for ages. The text runs for several pages, and includes such tongue-in-cheek melodramatic devices as righteous indignation ("*Priest*. Athenian, this is all impious folly!"; xxvi); violence (the stage direction "[*Cephisophon*] strikes him a light blow, and parries that which the Delphian returns"; xxvii); hilariously generalized audience response ("*Murmurs of assent*"; xxxi); and even a *coup de théâtre* in which Cephisophon "proves" that the twig of sacred olive discovered in Ion's cradle is a fake (the result: "*Sensation*"; xxxiii).<sup>2</sup> The zany dénouement, in which Cephisophon exclaims, "And therefore it is, that I ask you with confidence—*Where is the necklace of Erichthonius?*" concludes with the direction, "*A shriek. Several of the Delphians run out into the darkness*" (xl). The entire epilogue is, of course, meticulously footnoted, a curious mix of drama and sustained academic argument.

Moreover, Verrall's "Euripidean" epilogue combines stylistic features of contemporary (modern) literature. On the one hand, it abounds with Shavian wit and innuendo, such as Cephisophon's sly slur on the Delphians: "This official then received young Xuthus, feasted him liberally, and introduced him to some women—Or (*to the Proxenus*) shall I say *procured*...?" (xxiii; emphasis original). It also introduces a Sherlock Holmesian emphasis on a singular, recoverable truth.<sup>3</sup> In fact,

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<sup>2</sup> These and all further references to Verrall's *Ion* are to Verrall 1890.

<sup>3</sup> Michelini neatly sums up this weirdly concocted mystery playlet as "worthy of Sherlock Holmes himself" (1988: 706).

Cephisophon can at times sound disarmingly like the master sleuth, as when he opines, “Between two contradictory statements, made by the same deponent, probabilities must decide” (xxiii). This seems to be a conscious corollary to Holmes’ famous maxim from *The Sign of the Four*, published the same year: “[W]hen you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth” (Doyle 1998: 112; emphasis original). Cephisophon’s attack on the Delphians applies its mystery-novel logic with a trowel: “And therefore, as without the necklace the fraud must have utterly failed, so with the necklace it was almost certain to succeed. Whatever blunders you had made, the ‘sole-sufficient proof’ of the necklace would have passed off anything. The wreath *was* a blunder, an over-finesse. It was that which put me on the track” (xl; emphasis original). This is Athenian as bloodhound: the framework of a modern mystery narrative superimposed on a Greek tragedy. By merging the two genres, Verrall creates a Euripidean epilogue that tackles the most “modern” of philosophical inquiries: nothing less than the (non)existence of God.

Verrall is nothing if not blunt: after the epilogue ends, he imagines that Euripides has attended the entire spectacle. Suddenly, we have a play on top of a play (xlii; emphasis original):

*An Athenian.* Let us go home.

*Euripides.* My friend, we are at home. The play is over, the story told, and the scene is our theatre again. Good-night.

*An Athenian* (sadly). And is there then *no* god, O Euripides?

*Euripides.* Neither that do I say, or have said, O Chaerephon.

True enough: but Verrall’s Euripides certainly implies the non-existence of God, and in fact falls back on the rational argument of “Which is more likely? That this frame of the heavens, this truly divine machine, is governed by beings upon whom our poor nature cries shame; or that a knot of men, backed by prejudice and tempted by enormous wealth, should try by cunning to keep up a once beneficent or harmless delusion for a little while longer?” (xlii). In his epilogue, Verrall obviously casts his vote for the latter argument, abandoning the iambic verse translation of his commentary, and crafting instead a modern, prose, drama: an anti-religious Euripides for the modern stage.

### H.D.’s *Ion*

If we go further ahead in time—and as we shall see, time has everything to do with the *Ion*—we find that Euripides’ modernity is again at issue. As one of the principal founders of the so-called Modernist Movement (along with Pound and Eliot), H.D. grapples throughout all of her works with the very notion of what constitutes modernity. In no other

work, however, does H.D. come so close to describing that notion as in her *Ion*, a bold translation from Euripides' original. H.D.'s corpus of classically-inspired works and essays runs the gamut from dramatic adaptation (the Euripides-inspired *Hippolytus Temporizes*) to classically-themed novels (*Helen in Egypt*) to modern autobiography (*HERmione*); in the *Ion*, however, she claimed to have created "a play after Euripides," and this work comes nearest to translation in the ordinary sense. H.D.'s choice of emphasis is striking—her adaptation is not rationalist, and it is not particularly concerned with Athenian self-fashioning on either the personal or civic levels. Instead, H.D. seems fascinated by the text's psychological depth, by its intense personal interactions, and by its evocation of ancient Greek beauty and timelessness, writ large. In general, scholars have seen in H.D.'s work an ethic that takes what could be a Eurocentric poetic movement (modernism) and invests it instead with a feminist aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> Even H.D.'s choice of the *Ion* indicates, as Eileen Gregory argues, an eagerness to explore the "feminine" within the male, as the ephebic, virginal Ion inhabits a shadowy space between father- and mother-identification.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Kreousa's extraordinary story obviously gives H.D. ample material to explore major transitions in a woman's life, from virgin to mother to wife and queen.

However, the most extraordinary aspect of H.D.'s translation is not the translation *per se*; it is the exuberant, almost manic run of "explanatory notes" that preface each of the nineteen sections of the poem. In her "Translator's note," H.D. seems almost dismissive of them: "[T]hese notes are merely the translator's personal interpretation; the play may be read straight through with no reference, whatever, to them" (149).<sup>6</sup> Yet one cannot help but read them: some of the notes actually fall in the middle of a passage, pinned like a butterfly, and the thoughts contained therein are often so weirdly wonderful that it seems criminal to exclude them.

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<sup>4</sup> Hughes provides a pithy summation of the state of things (1990: 375): "For all its innovations, literary modernism was deeply conservative in one important respect: It failed to question male entitlement and white supremacy. Rather than challenge Eurocentric and androcentric values, the high modernism of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Williams left these values securely in place." Hughes goes on to argue that H.D.'s modernism in fact constituted a challenge to Pound's (*et aliorum*) androcentricity.

<sup>5</sup> See Gregory 1990: "The male figure [of Ion] allows H.D. an oblique approach to the psychic figure of the mother. In his sexual indeterminacy the male virgin mirrors or bespeaks the female body...but without the girl's natural symbiosis with the mother; this figure thus allows H.D. to maneuver poetically within an ambiguous space that is at once both incestuous and homoerotic" (141). For themes of fertility and maturation in the *Ion* see Ebbott 2003: 77–83.

<sup>6</sup> This and all further references to H.D.'s *Ion* are to D[oolittle] 2003.

Certainly the notes help to explain some of the more obvious of H.D.'s editorial choices, such as the catalogue of excised passages (part of Ion's monologue, part of Xuthos' quarrel with Ion, part of the epilogue, and so on) as well as her description of "stock" characters from tragedy. Other aspects are more strange, such as H.D.'s insistence that the name Ion may mean both "one" and "violet," when in fact it means neither.<sup>7</sup> But most indicative of H.D.'s "personal interpretation" is her assertion that this "'modern' genius" (i.e., Euripides) created in the Pythia a character that "seems...to predict a type made famous by Siena and Assisi" (149). Here we have the kernel of two strains of interpretation that will play out through the explanatory notes and, more to the point, in the translation itself: the "modernity" of Euripides the playwright, and classical Greece's uncanny premonition of the modern era.

H.D.'s predilection for time in the *Ion* begins with a joke—but a telling one. She notes, "Roughly speaking, there were two types of theatre-goers in ancient Greece, as there are today. Those who are on time and those who are late" (150).<sup>8</sup> H.D.'s observation breezily elides the quite substantial differences between ancient and modern theater-goers, not least of all the temporal gap. For H.D., theater-goers in "ancient Greece" and "today" may be identically classified. Even at the start of the work, H.D. aims for a type of narrative synchrony.

This curious juxtaposition of ancient and modern continues with the introduction of Kreousa. Ion has spent a strophe vexed at the birds; suddenly, H.D. focuses the narrative on the outstanding female figure of the play: "The queen of Athens stands before us. How long has she been standing? If the delicate robes of her waiting-women are kingfisher or midnight blue, hers seem to fall in folds that are cut of pure stone, lapis. She has always been standing there" (171). Again, H.D. employs the concept of time as a *descriptive* device. What does Kreousa look like? She looks timeless as rock; she has "always been standing there." H.D.'s stage directions place Kreousa not only in space (as we would expect) but also in time (which we would not).

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<sup>7</sup> The question of H.D.'s competence in Greek—like her mentor's, Ezra Pound's—is a vexed one, and implicated, as Gamel explains, in a matrix of intellectual and social pursuits: "H.D.'s credentials—as a Greek scholar, as a translator, as a mother—may easily be impugned. ...The demands of her three careers were so disparate that it no surprise that H.D. is perceived as failing to reconcile them or to succeed at any one of them" (2001: 166–167).

<sup>8</sup> The epigram owes something to Oscar Wilde's *mot* from *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious" (Wilde 1915: 4). Each witticism refracts the world through its own narrative frames of theatrical and social performance.

When Kreousa finally moves, H.D.'s prose again melds the descriptive with the temporal: "[Kreousa] is about to step out of stone, in the manner of a later Rodin. It is impossible, at this moment, not to swing forward into a—to fifth-century Greece—distant future. This poetry rises clean cut today, as it did at the time of its writing. And today we may again wonder at this method and manner of portraiture, for the abstract welded with human implication is, in its way, ultra-modern" (172). For H.D., two temporal planes, the ancient and the modern, run concurrently. Binary oppositions overlap, or, better, collapse to a point: ancient statuary/Rodin; fifth-century Greece/distant future; ancient poetry/today's poetry; classical portraiture/ultra-modernity. The last phrase in particular—"ultra-modern"—displays H.D.'s rhetorical excess: Euripides is not just modern but ultra-modern, with a prefix that is paradoxically Latinate and un-classical.<sup>9</sup> (The word is therefore neatly of a piece with H.D.'s running argument.)

H.D. continues her manipulation of dramatic time: "It seems this queen of Athens had leapt forward that odd 450 years that separates this classic age from our own. She is mother of sorrows, indeed" (172–173). On the surface, it appears a new epoch has been added to the mix, as Kreousa is invoked as Mary (with Ion, by implication, as Christ). But in fact H.D. reaffirms the binary oppositions already elaborated: "our own" age encompasses everything after the birth of Christ, who is the dividing line between antiquity and modernity—a line continually demarcated, then erased, by H.D.'s updating of the ancient play. As she explains in another prose passage, "How can we believe that 500 B.C. and A.D. 500 (or our own problematical present) are separated by an insurmountable chasm? The schism of before and after Christ, vanishes. The new modernity can not parody the wisdom of all-time with its before and after" (203). Greek wisdom erases temporal boundaries: instead, we are confronted with ideas that are "all-time," that resist boundaries both temporal and spatial.

When Kreousa, mother of sorrows, then meets her son, H.D.'s poetry rises at its most "clean cut," and provides an excellent introduction to H.D.'s principles of "ultra-modern" translation. Below is Euripides' Greek towards the beginning of Kreousa and Ion's first exchange (*Ion* 271–

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<sup>9</sup> On this passage, Moyer links H.D.'s penchant for timeless archetypes to her definition of (ultra)modernity: "Her treatment of Kreousa in this passage signals an expansion of H.D.'s long fascination with female figures and their relationship to her own life in the wider context of the twentieth century. ...Her version of Kreousa is connected to her view of Euripides as 'ultra-modern,' of particular significance for H.D.'s modernist world" (1997: 111–112).



282).<sup>10</sup> It concerns the discovery and upbringing of Erichthonios, Kreousa's serpentine grandfather, as well as the unfortunate demise of his son. The Greek is followed by a literal translation.

Ἴων δίδωσι δ', ὥσπερ ἐν γραφῇ νομίζεται  
 Κρ. Κέκροπός γε σώζειν παισὶν οὐχ ὀρώμενον.  
 Ἴων ἤκουσα λύσαι παρθένους τεύχος θεᾶς.  
 Κρ. τοιγὰρ θανοῦσαι σκόπελον ἤμαξαν πέτρας.  
 Ἴων εἶέν·  
     τί δαὶ τόδ'; ἄρ' ἀληθὲς ἢ μάτην λόγος; 275  
 Κρ. τί χρῆμ' ἐρωτᾷς; καὶ γὰρ οὐ κάμνω σχολῇ.  
 Ἴων πατὴρ Ἐρεχθεὺς σὰς ἔθυσσε συγγόνους;  
 Κρ. ἔτλη πρὸ γαίας σφάγια παρθένους κτανεῖν.  
 Ἴων συ δ' ἐξεσώθης πῶς κασιγνήτων μόνη;  
 Κρ. βρέφος νεογνὸν μητρός ἦν ἐν ἀγκάλαις. 280  
 Ἴων πατέρα δ' ἀληθῶς χάσμα σὸν κρύπτει χθονός;  
 Κρ. πληγαὶ τριαινῆς ποντίου σφ' ἀπώλεσαν.

Ion. And she [Athena] gives him, just as shown in paintings ...  
 Kreousa. Yes—to the daughters of Kekrops, never seen.  
 Ion. I have heard these daughters opened the vessel of the goddess.  
 Kr. And that is why dying, they spattered the rocky cliff.  
 Ion. Well, is the other story then false or true?  
 Kr. What thing do you ask? For I am not restless with leisure.  
 Ion. Did your father, Erekhtheus, sacrifice your sisters?  
 Kr. On behalf of the country, he sacrificed those maidens.  
 Ion. How were you alone saved of your sisters?  
 Kr. I was just a new-born babe in the crook of my mother's arms.  
 Ion. Is it true that a cleft in the earth hides your father?  
 Kr. Blows of the sea-god's trident destroyed him.

There are a few potential pitfalls for a translator here. As Verrall notes *ad loc.* the introduction of τοιγὰρ θανοῦσαι inserts a note of “gentle malice”: the daughters died because their curiosity prompted them to discover the snakes guarding the infant son. The phrase καὶ γὰρ οὐ κάμνω σχολῇ is a bit opaque: in his recent Loeb edition, Kovacs translates it as “I have leisure and to spare.” Verrall, however, translates it exactly the opposite: “My time does not hang heavy.”<sup>11</sup> The striking verb ἤμαξαν requires an equally bold translation like “bloodied” or “spattered” in English. Erekhtheus' sacrifice of his daughters πρὸ γαίας, “for the land/earth,” makes his act both political and of a piece with the theme of autochthony that runs through

<sup>10</sup> The Greek text of the *Ion* is quoted throughout from Diggle's Oxford Classical Text (Diggle 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Owen 1939 *ad loc.* finds Verrall's reading unconvincing: “The words seem to mean ‘I do not fail in respect of leisure’, i.e. ‘I have plenty of time.’”

the play. In its compression of three generations of Athenian calamity, this passage provides obvious challenges to clarity.

H.D.'s poetic solution to the stichomythic passages in the *Ion* might seem surprising: "The broken, exclamatory or evocative *vers-libre* which I have chosen to translate the two-line dialogue, throughout the play, is the exact antithesis of the original. Though concentrating and translating sometimes, ten words, with two, I have endeavoured, in no way, to depart from the meaning. ...Their manner [i.e., of Ion and Kreousa] is that of skilled weavers, throwing and returning the shuttle of contrasting threads" (174). That is to say, instead of adding elucidating remarks, H.D. actually subtracts. She distills Euripides into his ultra-modern essence (174–175):

*Ion* —yes, in pictures—  
*Kreousa* —Kekrop's daughters—  
*Ion* —had a basket—  
*Kreousa* —but their neglect—  
*Ion* —caused their own death—  
*Kreousa* —Erekhtheus—  
*Ion* —from the great cliff—  
*Kreousa* —hurled the sisters—  
*Ion* —how were you left?  
*Kreousa* —still an infant—  
*Ion* then an earthquake—  
*Kreousa* —blow of trident—  
*Ion* —slew your father?

The loss of literalness is fairly substantial, even if H.D. claims not to have departed from the meaning. Gone are the blood on the cliffs, the cradle of a mother's arms, the invocation of a sea-god. Entire half-lines are erased: the problem of what to do with Kreousa's weariness is solved by simply not translating it. Ion's hypermetric cry of woe is also cut. Finally, the clear alternation of interrogative and declarative sentences in the original is also blurred.

In its place, however, is an extremely fleet passage of alternating four-syllables lines, almost entirely composed of monosyllables and disyllables. The language is radically, wonderfully taut: ultra-modern, ultra-imagist. Even the longer narrative stretches—such as Erekhtheus' death by Poseidon's hand—receive just one, potent image: "blow of trident." The em-dashes that start and end most every line shatter the grammar, as questions, answers, shouts, and cries merge into one. Most striking is that, with the exception of the proper names, the Athenian "details" of the passage have been dropped: part of H.D.'s program of "modernizing" the *Ion* is to strip the Greek to its essentials. Politics are displaced. As the mother and son meet for the first time, their questions slice at cross

purposes, as they rarely finish their own thoughts, and only occasionally finish their interlocutor's.

There is also another modern artistic principle at work here: a pre-War tendency to "ritualize" the text by abbreviating line length. In his 1928 version of *Oedipus Rex*, Stravinsky had Cocteau's French libretto translated (idiosyncratically, as it happens) into "ritualistic" Latin by the future Abbé Jean Daniélou.<sup>12</sup> As Stravinsky explains, "What a joy it is to compose music to a language of convention, almost of ritual, the very nature of which imposes a lofty dignity! One no longer feels dominated by the phrase, the literal meaning of the words. Cast in an immutable mold which adequately expresses their value, they do not require any further commentary" (1962: 28). On the one hand, Stravinsky implies that merely using Latin ensures a sort of ritualistic quality (which, obviously, H.D.'s English translation does not do). On the other hand, the Latin phrasing most agreeable to Stravinsky's aesthetic principles is the opposite of Sophocles' rolling trimeters, and much closer to H.D.'s jaunty, pithy lines. Take, for instance, Oedipus' final moment of self-recognition (qtd. in McDonald 2001: 149):

Natus sum quo nefastum est,  
Concubui cui nefastum est,  
Kekidi quem nefastum est.  
Lux facta est.

The lines are short, repetitious, and percussive (Stravinsky insisted on hard 'k's for *kekidi*). As in H.D.'s *Ion*, the text is boiled down to its essence: Cocteau's libretto for the entire play runs to about five pages.<sup>13</sup>

In any event, this crucial, first exchange between mother and son runs a few more pages in H.D.'s text, zipping at breakneck speed through its four-syllable lines. At one point, Kreousa, concocting a story that a friend once abandoned a child, wishes to consult the oracle about the child's fate. That "friend" is of course Kreousa herself; unbeknownst to both characters, Ion is that child. In the original Greek, Euripides lays out

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<sup>12</sup> See McDonald 2001: 137–153 for a catalogue of ways in which the final libretto mirrors in broad outline the sections of a Catholic mass. In this way, Stravinsky equates the *pathos* of Oedipus with the suffering of Christ, in mystical, mythological language.

<sup>13</sup> In this sense—and this is fodder for another argument entirely—Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* prefigures such radical theatrical experiments as Heiner Müller's 1979 *Hamletmachine*, which similarly distills a lengthy theatrical text into a few pages. Mueller's work, however, could still take hours to perform (incorporating sound, dance, movement, and stillness).

the situation as an interrogation scene, with Ion as chief inspector<sup>14</sup> (345–354, followed by a literal translation):

Ιων ὁ δ' ἐκτεθεὶς παῖς ποῦ 'στιν; εἰσορᾷ φάος;	345
Κρ. οὐκ οἶδεν οὐδεὶς· ταῦτα καὶ μαντεύομαι.	
Ιων εἰ δ' οὐκέτ' ἔστι, τίνι τρόπῳ διεφθάρη;	
Κρ. θηράς σφε τὸν δύστηνον ἐλπίζει κτανεῖν.	
Ιων ποίῳ τόδ' ἔγνω χρωμένη τεκμηρίῳ;	
Κρ. ἐλθοῦς' ἔν' αὐτὸν ἐξέθηκ' οὐχ ἡῦρ' ἔτι.	350
Ιων ἦν δὲ σταλαγμὸς ἐν στίβῳ τις αἵματος;	
Κρ. οὐ φησι· καίτοι πόλλ' ἐπεστράφη πέδον.	
Ιων χρόνος δὲ τίς τῷ παιδί διαπεπραγμένῳ;	
Κρ. σοὶ ταῦτόν ἦβης, εἵπερ ἦν, εἰχ' ἄν μέτρον.	

*Ion.* Where is the exposed child? Does it see the sun?

*Kreousa.* No one knows. I seek a prophecy for these things.

*Ion.* If he's no longer, how did he die?

*Kr.* [My friend] expects that beasts slew him, hapless.

*Ion.* What proof did she ascertain of this?

*Kr.* Going back to the spot where he was exposed, she could not find him.

*Ion.* Was there not some trickle of blood on the path?

*Kr.* She denies it. And many times she scoured the ground.

*Ion.* How much time has there been since the child was done away with?

*Kr.* If he had lived, he would have the same measure of life as you.

The language here is exact, forensic, and epistemological. For the possible murder, Ion wants the details (ποῦ 'στιν, "where is it?"), the method (τίνι τρόπῳ, "in what way?"), the type of proofs (ποίῳ...τεκμηρίῳ, "by what token/sign?"), the evidentiary traces (σταλαγμὸς...τις αἵματος, "what trickle of blood?"), and, finally, the timeframe (χρόνος δὲ τίς, "how long ago?"). Kreousa, in her turn, concentrates on *ways* of knowing, including prophecy, relocation, autopsy, and conjecture. In their give and take, both characters zero in on the abandonment of the child—a kind of forensic duet.

H.D.'s "ultra-modern" version again pares the text to its essentials, even adding (I detect) a psychological/Freudian element (178):

*Ion* —child of Phoibos?

*Kreousa* —hid in the rocks—

*Ion* —where—where is it?

*Kreousa* —she bids me ask—

*Ion* —has it perished?

*Kreousa* —she thinks, wild beasts—

*Ion* —but why think that?

*Kreousa* —she looked for it—

*Ion* —did she find tracks?

<sup>14</sup> One can see where Verrall may have picked up his Sherlock Holmes idea.

*Kreousa* —there was no trace—

*Ion* —when was all this?

*Kreousa* —how old are you?

In broad outline, the passage has an identical shape: the interrogation of Kreousa by Ion. Though Ion's questions are just as pointed—"where?", "why?", "did?", "when?"—all extraneous details have been omitted. Kreousa's reply skips the line about prophecy (none of Verrall's cynicism for H.D.!) and instead focuses on the psychological state of a mother in a desperate quest for her son, of whom there is no trace. But the real point of the passage is the extraordinary ending, in which Ion asks for a timeframe, and Kreousa (consciously? unconsciously?) asks Ion his age. This is, of course, indicated in the Greek, but Euripides' line is far more convoluted: "If he had lived, he would have the same measure of life as you." H.D.'s line ("—how old are you?") makes clear the possible physical connection between the baby and Ion, but also Kreousa's uncanny mental connection: perhaps this is her son.

Not all of H.D.'s choices are so felicitous, however. Kreousa's four-syllable mind-meld with her son makes a certain amount of sense: the two characters are, after all, flesh and blood, and each in their own way quests for identity. Having them speak with nearly one voice—in, effectively, compound eight-syllable lines—anticipates the play's *dénouement*, in which Kreousa and Ion are reunited as a family entity. Kreousa's identically-formed exchanges with her own old manservant are less easy to explain and pose additional challenges of interpretation. Towards the end of the play, Kreousa believes that Xuthos has discovered a long-lost son, while she remains childless. She is furious, and decides to have her revenge. But on whom, exactly? The psychological twists are tortuous enough in Euripides' text: possible solutions include arson of the temple ("no, I have enough troubles," 975), slaughtering her husband ("no, we used to have a good marriage," 977), and murdering Ion ("If only that were possible!", 979). H.D. tries her best to capture the twists in this logic (217):

*Kreousa* —but what is left?

*Old Man* —revenge; strike—

*Kreousa* —strike at the god?

*Old Man* —burn this, his house—

*Kreousa* —that will not help—

*Old Man* —your husband, then—

*Kreousa* —my bridegroom, no—

*Old Man* —then, kill this child—

*Kreousa* —what? ah—

*Old Man* —a sword will serve—

*Kreousa* I go—

*Old Man* —on to the tent—

In the Greek, Kreousa's decision to kill Ion—the dramatic pivot of the play—receives one full trimeter line: πῶς; εἰ γὰρ εἴη δυνατόν· ὥς θέλοιμί γ' ἄν, "How? If only it were possible! How much I wish to!" (979). In H.D.'s version, Kreousa exclaims, "—what? ah—". This is actually shorter than the lines preceding or subsequent: for H.D., the greater the psychological pressure, the more compressed the line. On the stage, the line "—what? ah—" might provoke laughter (and indeed has, at two staged readings at my university). And while Euripides is certainly capable of writing witty scenes—such as the recognition scenes of the *Helen*—this is not one of them. On the page, "—what? ah—" is Kreousa's psychological *aperçu*, her realization that this is (as the Euripidean source text states) what she wishes. Her subconscious has known all along, and now her conscious mind first hears it ("what?"), then comprehends its own about-to-be-unleashed Id ("ah—").

In many senses, H.D.'s *Ion* is a response to—and argument against—Verrall's epilogue-as-interpretation. She even refers to Verrall's argument explicitly: "A great English critic has used this play to point out forcibly the irony and rationalism in the mind of the poet. We do not, however, altogether accept his estimates" (156). H.D.'s Euripides has the intelligence imputed to Euripides by Verrall, but not the foolish drive towards literalism. For H.D., the world of Euripides was—like the world of H.D.—open to a boom in pioneering science (156):

At this moment, in the heart-beat of world-progress, in the mind of every well-informed Greek—and who of that shifty, analytical, self-critical, experimental race of the city of Athens, at any rate, was not well-informed?—there was a pause (psychic, intellectual), such a phase as we are today experiencing; scientific discovery had just opened up world-vistas, at the same time the very zeal of practical knowledge, geometry, astronomy, geography, was forcing the high-strung intellect on a beat further beyond the intellect. As today, when time values and numerical values are shifting, so here.

It is not entirely clear what H.D. is getting at here, and her mystical language ("a beat further beyond the intellect") smacks one as lofty rather than meaningful. I take the "shifting time values" of the last sentence, however, to be a reference to Einsteinian notions of space/time, and indeed, quantum physics seems to run as a leitmotif throughout H.D.'s *Ion*, informing her ideas of temporal flux, and ultimately of "timely" translation.

Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, originally published in German in 1905 and 1915, turned Newtonian physics on its head, particularly its arguments that time is not an absolute. In a famous passage, Einstein concocts a thought experiment in which the same event is seen by passengers on an embankment and a train: "Events which are

simultaneous with reference to the embankment are not simultaneous with respect to the train, and *vice versa* (relativity of simultaneity). Every reference-body (co-ordinate system) has its own particular time; unless we are told the reference-body to which the statement of time refers, there is no meaning in a statement of the time of an event" (Einstein 1920: 32). Later, and more enigmatically, Einstein observes, "The non-mathematician is seized by a mysterious shuddering when he hears of 'four-dimensional' things, by a feeling not unlike that awakened by thoughts of the occult. And yet there is no more common-place statement than that the world in which we live is a four-dimensional space-time continuum" (65). In 1955, towards the end of his life, in a letter to the widow of a deceased friend, Einstein explains the application of his time-space continuum to our rather more human, quotidian sorrows: "Now [your husband] has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion" (qtd. in Dyson 1979: 193).

In a sense, then, H.D. is applying Einsteinian notions of a space/time continuum to her reworking of a tragedy, and is in fact relying on the "mysterious shuddering" of the reader at radical notions of Time to achieve her poetic affect. Though not "occult," the *Ion* is mystical, and H.D.'s vocabulary reflects this aspect: "In spite of the so-called rationalists, and the much-quoted critic with his 'irony is lurking at every corner,' I prefer to believe that the poet speaks through his boy-priest, Ion, with his own vibrant superabundance of ecstasy before a miracle; the sun rises" (156). Here, H.D. finesses the possible contradictions between scientific inquiry and religion: Ion may embody the brightness of fifth-century Athens, but his is an ecstatic response, not an ironic or rational one. When H.D. later claims that "Greek unity gives us freedom, it expands and contracts at will, it is time-in-time and time-out-of-time together, it predicts modern time-estimates" (185), she is, I believe, invoking the language of Einsteinian relativity *and* spiritual epiphany. For H.D., Greece is literally timeless, a land, a people, and a epoch that can, with imagination, be superimposed upon our modernity, giving us "freedom." We are no longer bound by linear, literal notions of time.

Ion's opening song to Phoebus demonstrates H.D.'s "modernizing" of the Euripidean lyric; it also shows the effects of imagism on notions of time (and indeed, follows H.D.'s remark on knowledge, then and now, "forcing the high-strung intellect on a beat further beyond the intellect," quoted above). Below is the Greek and a literal translation (82-93):

ἄρματα μὲν τάδε λαμπρὰ τεθρίππων·  
 "Ἡλιος ἤδη λάμπει κατὰ γῆν,

ἄστρο δὲ φεύγει πυρὶ τῶιδ' αἰθέρος  
 εἰς νύχθ' ἱεράν· 85  
 Παρνασιάδες δ' ἄβατοι κρουφαὶ  
 καταλαμπόμεναι τὴν ἡμερίαν  
 ἀψίδα βροτοῖσι δέχονται.  
 σμύρνης δ' ἀνύδρου καπνὸς εἰς ὀρόφους  
 Φοίβου πέτεται. 90  
 θάσσει δὲ γυνὴ τρίποδα ζάθεον  
 Δελφίς, αἰείδουσ' Ἑλλησι βοάς,  
 ἃς ἂν Ἀπόλλων κελαδήσῃ.

[Behold] this gleaming four-horse chariot; now Helios shines over the earth while the stars, [startled] at this heavenly fire, scatter into the sacred night. The pathless peaks of Parnassus, all aglare, receive for mortals the day's wheel. Smoke from arid myrrh wafts toward Phoebus' roof. The priestess of Delphi sits at her holy tripod singing chants for the Greeks, things Apollo bellows forth.

At the least, this is a remarkable way for Euripides to present a daybreak: an instant of time spread over many verses. The sun god Apollo receives a fully anthropomorphic treatment, riding his chariot across the sky. By metonymy, the scene shifts from Apollo's celestial time-ride to his command over *future* time, as a Delphic priestess sings his oracles. The passage is also imbued with religious overtones, including the epithets ἱεράν, "holy," and ζάθεον, "sacred."

H.D.'s imagist talents come to the fore in her adaptation (156–157):

O, my Lord,  
 O, my king of the chariot,  
 O, four-steeds,  
 O, bright wheel,  
 O, fair crest  
 of Parnassus you just touch:  
 (O, frail stars,  
 fall,  
 fall back from his luminous onslaught:)

O, my Lord,  
 O, my king,  
 O, bright Helios,  
 god of fire,  
 from your altar,  
 more fire drifts  
 and smoke  
 from the incense of sweet-myrrh;

O, my Lord,  
 from your tripod  
 the sounds ring,  
 of the Pythoness



chanting to all Greece,  
your commands,...

Though Hermes' initial monologue also features some compressed language, nothing in the first few pages of H.D.'s adaptation is as compressed or hieratic as this passage. By prefacing so many lines with "O," H.D. changes the narrative from the third person to the first person: Ion addresses his "Lord" as if an initiate or priest. The longer narrative passages in Euripides' text are distilled into bursts of images: "four-steeds," "bright wheel," "fair crest." In his study of Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, Daniel Hooley notes the initial, "'aggression' phase" of translation, in which a translator "must ruthlessly select from the potential significances of the source text" (Hooley 1988: 43). Here, H.D. has "aggressively" excised the language of "holiness" (ἱεράν, ζάθεον) but has salvaged that religiosity in the form: this is tragedy-as-incantation. In this imagist style of writing, time moves from burst to burst, image to image, in a repetition of "O"s, before settling on the Pythia's oracle.

H.D. clearly has more sympathy (and verbal fireworks) for Kreousa's plight than for Xuthos'. Her description of Xuthos, in fact, sounds like the dissection of a modern, not ancient, marriage (perhaps, even, her own) (182):

...he stands there, solid, conservative, loyal. He does not even faintly realize her predicament; that is fortunate. If Xouthos had met her, had touched, at all, on her other life, she would not have been able to keep this inner sacred chamber of her spirit, free. She has lived only half a life with him. No doubt, he has guessed this, but his queen will never know it. Fate has given him a difficult part to play. He plays it with dignity and without imagination.

H.D. intentionally contrasts the introduction of Xuthos with Kreousa: both "stand there," but Kreousa stood like stone or a Rodin, about to shatter her mold in a fashion "ultra-modern." Xuthos, by contrast, is inert and ultra-conservative: it is a description not without a touch of pathos (Xuthos realizes, deep down, that he has failed to unite spiritually with his wife) but not otherwise kindly expressed.

As H.D.'s Xuthos emerges from the temple to reunite with his prophesied son, "he is transformed by joy, into the likeness of the sun-god" (192). The language of the subsequent recognition scene is spare, even for H.D. Here is Euripides' Greek, followed by a literal translation (*Ion* 517–521):

Ξο. ὦ τέκνον, χαῖρ'· ἡ γὰρ ἀρχὴ τοῦ λόγου πρέπουσά μοι.  
 Ιων χαίρομεν· σὺ δ' εὖ φρόνει γε, καὶ δὴ ὄντ' εὖ πράζομεν.  
 Ξο. δὸς χερὸς φίλημά μοι σῆς σώματός τ' ἀμφιπτυχάς.  
 Ιων εὖ φρονεῖς μέν; ἢ σ' ἔμνηνεν θεοῦ τις, ὦ ξένε, βλάβη; 520

Ξο. οὐ φρονῶ, τὰ φίλταθ' εὐρών εἰ φιλεῖν ἐφίεμαι;

Xuthos. O son, be well! For this is a fitting way for me to begin my speech.

Ion. We are well. But you should show good sense, and we both will fare well.

Xu. Give your dear hand to me and accept my embraces!

Ion. Are you not well in your mind? Or has some derangement, sent by a god, afflicted you, o stranger?

Xu. Am I not sane, if I am eager to touch what is most dear to me?

And H.D.'s version (192):

*Xouthos* My own—my beloved—

*Ion* —own? beloved?

*Xouthos* —your hand—your face—

*Ion* —madness—

*Xouthos* O, I would only touch—

Again, we turn to the interpretive framework of "aggressive" translation, in which the translator is forced to single out the salient characteristics of a source text. The original text plays with (at least) two ideas: that of *φιλία*, "friendship," and that of "madness" (with many roots centered around the key Greek concept of *φρήν*, the organ of intelligence). There are other nuances as well: Xuthos' lofty proclamation that he shall begin a *λόγος*, "speech," thereby adding the flavor of rhetoric or oratory to the mix; and Ion's suspicious and threatening apostrophe, "o stranger," at once deliciously ironic (because Xuthos is his "father") and absolutely truthful (because Xuthos is actually is a stranger). H.D.'s terse rendering—just eighteen syllables—chooses bewilderment over tenderness, and touch over sound. Confused by Xuthos' speech, Ion echoes back to Xuthos his same words—"beloved," "madness"—thereby limiting the semantic range of the encounter still further. Compared to the initial encounter between Kreousa and Ion, H.D.'s recognition scene between Ion and Xuthos seems calculated to emphasis the emotional and cognitive gap between "father" and "son."

H.D.'s final "explanatory note," concerning the modernity of the play, is a masterpiece of its type, as bold and bizarre a specimen of prose as one could stumble across. In it, H.D. waxes grandiloquent about the beauties of the Athenian past, and its resonances for today. It also provides an extraordinary (and in a sense novel) segue to Athena's final speech. The Greeks, she argues, were content "with one and but one supreme quality, perfection" (254), an impulse made manifest in all their sculpture and architecture. Late Rome and the Middle Ages—again, H.D. invokes time as a leitmotif—abandoned this quest for abstract understanding. Modernity, however, relives this lost past: "Today, again at a turning-point in the history of the world, the mind stands, to plead, to condone, to explain, to clarify, to illuminate; and, in the name of our magnificent heritage of that

Hellenic past, each one of us is responsible to that abstract reality" (255). H.D. next envisions the return of the first Athenian to Athens after the sack of their city by the Persians: what would be his compatriots' reaction to the olive shoot that managed to renew its growth after the devastation?

Today? Yesterday? Greek time is like all Greek miracles. Years gain no permanence nor impermanence by a line of curious numbers; numerically 1920, 1922 and again (each time, spring) 1932, we touched the stem of a frail sapling, an olive-tree, growing against the egg-shell marble walls of the Erechtheum. ...while one Ionic column lives to tell of the greatest aesthetic miracle of all-time, welding of beauty and strength, the absolute achievement of physical perfection by the spirit of man, before the world sank into the darkness of late Rome and the Middle Ages, this goddess [Athena] lives. (257)

H.D.'s argument, which traces the epiphany of Athena to the modern age, is neither pithy nor subtle. As representative of "all-time," a temporal neverland, Athena appears in a sense *simultaneously* to the Greeks and to us: "today" and "yesterday" are meaningless—the "miracle" of Greek time precludes such arbitrary divisions. The embodiment of "intellect, mind, silver but shining...with splendour," Athena, "this most beautiful abstraction of antiquity and of all time, pleas for the great force of the under-mind or the unconscious" so that, through knowledge of our "subterranean forces," we can attain our great "reward" (254). It is little wonder that Freud (with whom H.D. had spent in a year in psychoanalysis) enjoyed this ending, as he penned in a postcard to the playwright: "I have just finished your *Ion*. Deeply moved by the play (which I had not known before) and no less by your comments, especially those referring to the end, where you extol the victory of reason over passions, I send you the expression of my admiration and kindest regards" (qtd. in Robinson 1982: 378). In her final, wild burst of woolly prose, H.D. has tapped into Freudian (even Jungian?) notions of an under-mind, a cosmic force without time. For H.D., and for her *Ion*, Euripides is "ultra-modern" not just because of his penchant for prefiguring a Christian future, but for his willingness to reveal our modern, essentially changeless, psyche.

### MacLeish's *Herakles*

Though many playwrights have since adapted tragedy to the modern stage, few have followed quite in the direction that H.D. struck. Perhaps the closest analogue to H.D. on the level of form is Tony Harrison's 1981 *Oresteia*, with its percussive sing-song epithets and its deliberate, ritualistic staging (by Peter Hall). On the level of theme, however—a brash, wonderful mixing of Euripidean past and modernist present—the closest relative would be Archibald MacLeish's 1967 *Herakles*, an updating of Euripides' play (with glances, too, at Sophocles' *Trachiniae*). As in H.D.'s

work, MacLeish's focus is not so much on classical characters as on ideas: how does our self-identification as modernists hinge implicitly on our interpretation of antiquity? In H.D.'s version of Euripides, modern commentary runs concurrent to ancient text but always separate from it; in MacLeish's version, antiquity and modernity run separately, but then (astonishingly) at the same time, and to a startling climax. In this way, MacLeish's play extends and transforms H.D.'s already radical experiments with classical tragedy by having modern and ancient narratives morph into one. H.D.'s slender division between antiquity and modernity, as embodied in her translation and commentary, simply disappears.

*Herakles'* curious structure mirrors its temporal oddities. Though the play is in two distinct acts, the first is far shorter than the second, about one-third of the running time. The setting of the first act is entirely modern. A Nobel-winning scientist, Professor Hoadley, stops over in Athens on his way back from Stockholm, where he has delivered a stupendously well-received acceptance speech concerning the possibilities of (scientific) progress in an era of general despair. Hoadley's wife and daughter, Little Hodd, and governess, Miss Parfit, accompany him. After the departure of Parfit and Hodd, Hoadley launches into a grand peroration on the glories of Herakles, who rails "against the universe" and "won't despair / or hope or trust or anything—who struggles— / dares to struggle— dares to overcome" (19).<sup>15</sup> In disgust, Mrs. Hoadley dismisses Herakles as mere myth, which infuriates Hoadley. Gradually, the evening devolves into a shouting match between Hoadley and his wife, including veiled (and Albee-esque) references to their absent, homosexual son. As part of his defense of Herakles, Professor Hoadley insists that Herakles, having conquered the world, went to the oracle to find out "[w]hat happens now when everything is mastered / everything won—acclaimed—rewarded? / What happens to him now?" (20)—and that when the oracle refused to answer, "He gives the oracle himself. That ends it" (21). A skeptical Mrs. Hoadley vows to travel to Delphi to discover the truth of the myth.

In this charged first act, we see already some common themes with H.D.'s treatment of Euripides. The relationship between science and myth, which H.D. investigates through her Einsteinian notions of time and progress, is here highlighted, with Hoadley, "the great / the world-renowned professor" (1) transparently the Heraklean "hero" of the play.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> This and all further references to MacLeish's *Herakles* are to MacLeish 1967.

<sup>16</sup> See also Galinsky 1972: 248: "Sophocles had shown what happens when Herakles used all his powers and labours for his own good. By adapting this theme for dramatizing the uses and abuses of modern technology and science and their destructive and dehumanizing potential, MacLeish has given it a dimension that is both relevant to our time and timeless." Colakis argues that Professor Hoadley can also claim Theseus as a



Euripides actually collides, temporally and narratively, with modernity. Mrs. Hoadley, with daughter and governess in tow, follows a guide to the oracle at (modern) Delphi. As the guide points to the great bronze doors of the oracle, a woman "appears among the stones, a fine woman in the full of life, shawl fallen back from golden hair" (41). This is Megara, and from this point on, antiquity and modernity are inextricable. In fact, it is hard to tell whether the modern characters have interloped into ancient Greece, or vice versa. Megara waits (while sewing) for her errant husband to come home; she never believed that he would leave on his foolish quest to become a god, and certainly does not believe it is "true" that he has become one: "If truth were only true because it / happened to have happened what would / truth be? Anything can happen" (51). Next, Herakles bursts triumphantly onto the stage and effects an awkward recognition scene with Megara, whom he has not seen since setting out on his labors. His last triumph was, he boasts, the slaughter of "my enemies [who] were round me, leaping, laughing / big as bullocks in the blundering light. / I killed them in the gate of Thebes!" (58).

These "enemies" were, of course, Herakles' children. As Megara sadly remarks, Herakles is "like a dog come back from the wolves who's done / what dogs don't" (59), and the remainder of the play continues until a painful exchange between the Pythia and Herakles, a modern (or ancient?) mirror of Euripides' reunion between Herakles' father, Amphitryon, and his son (*HF* 1109–1152). Time here is skewed and contradictory. At first the modern characters interrupt and chastise the ancient ones (Miss Parfit to the hero: "Be patient, Herakles! / Everything is told in time") or to interrogate them (Little Hodd: "That's twice she's [Megara] said it. What does she mean?") (65). As Megara wraps her comforting arms around (modern) Little Hodd, she wonders if the dead can ever return: "How can they come when the world changes / time by time? A night changes it..." (67). Even as the dead (or the mythical) touch the living, they ruminate on the mysteries of time's passing.

Gradually, the ancient characters take over the drama, as Mrs. Hoadley disappears for dozens of pages, a sad spectator of a still sadder play. By the time Herakles screams in horror at the recognition of his sons' corpses—"Take them away!" (87)—the drama is entirely "classical": just the unhappy trio of Herakles, Megara, and the Pythia examining the somber aftermath of a godlike rampage. Then, a touch again of modernity, as Mrs. Hoadley breaks her silence and softly addresses Herakles: "Have pity on yourself" (88). It is a short line, but one pregnant with meaning, as Mrs. Hoadley confronts not only the idea of Herakles but also of Professor Hoadley, Herakles' modern surrogate. As the other characters quit the stage, Mrs. Hoadley, like an ancient Greek chorus, speaks the last word: "Oh, release me from this broken story, / this myth remembered by a

mouth of stone / among the stone mouths of the ruined fountain!" (91). Though a representative of modernity, Mrs. Hoadley has been "trapped" in a classical, "remembered" play, craving release. MacLeish, however, denies her either a temporal or spatial release.<sup>17</sup> She leaves the stage, dejected. However, just as the stage is nearly empty, Little Hodd runs up to the oracle's imposing door, which swings open at her touch. Behind it is "only the sky blue with light" (91): it is the new generation that can shatter the cycles and the stories of the old.

In some respects, none of these experiments in modern Euripidean translation succeeds when considered as straightforward adaptations for the stage. In a letter to classicist Karl Galinsky written just a few years after the premiere and publication of *Herakles*, MacLeish laments that "I failed to make my point on stage" (Galinsky 1972: 248),<sup>18</sup> and indeed *Herakles'* fantastic, but largely static, plot seems better suited to radio than the stage (and thus akin to MacLeish's radio plays from the 1930s). Likewise, H.D.'s *Ion* appeared to have more success as a radio play—a play for voices, as it were—than as a fully performed stage drama, and in fact the play was broadcast on British radio in just that form.<sup>19</sup> Something of H.D.'s approach to the reading of her poetry can be caught in the sing-song melody of her recitation of *Helen in Egypt* (now preserved at the Academy of American Poets), in which individual characterization is subordinated to the lyricism of the verse itself.<sup>20</sup> Verrall's epilogue to the *Ion*, though written as a play, was obviously composed for the purpose of argument, not stagecraft: in any case, it's a curiosity rather than *echt* theater.

Whatever its failings on the level of pure theatricality, however, each work does engage in a reasoned, inspired response to the "modernity" of its ancient subject—Euripides "remused" for the modern age. What is fascinating is that the modernity of Euripides, as filtered through these contemporary lenses, is hardly uniform: for Verrall, it is Euripides' agnosticism and inexorable logical drive; for H.D., his pre-Einsteinian, pre-Freudian sense of the abstract; for MacLeish, his intuition that a

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hartigan 1984: 36: "MacLeish's play closes with Mrs. Hoadley's plea to be released from the myth. But her wish is impossible of fulfillment, since the play itself has shown that past and present are one, that the will to power is continuous, that the myth of the all-conquering hero has lasting validity and thus will never end."

<sup>18</sup> The letter is dated March 18, 1970.

<sup>19</sup> From Louis Silverstein's H.D. Chronology, now online at: <<http://www.imagists.org/hd/hdchron.html>>, in an entry dated for late 1954: "1954 (?) December 21 (?). H.D. at Kusnacht with Bryher; hears broadcast of *Euripides Ion*, 'the Tuesday of Xmas week', as referred to in 'Compassionate Friendship' (p. 28, 71)."

<sup>20</sup> Available at <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/18046>>.

superpower (whether Heraklean or American) must inevitably face disillusion. Form mirrors interpretation—as mystery, hymn, and melodrama—as each adaptor casts Euripidean source material into a comprehensible modern framework. It is perhaps a harbinger of things to come that a recent adaptation of *Medea* by Oscar van Woensel (1998), transforms the Euripidean original into a medley of American rock lyrics, including snippets from R.E.M., The Doors, Twisted Sister, and Meatloaf. At one point van Woensel's chorus sings (1998:63):

And I know  
 Love hurts  
 Love is a battlefield  
 Love is a murderer  
 Love murder  
 Murder love  
 I know  
 But I can't help  
 I can't stop it  
 I am the chorus  
 The chorus all over the world  
 I am everywhere  
 All the time

Though the lyrics invoke Pat Benatar ("Love is a battlefield"), the final line is of a piece with a century's worth of Euripidean adaptation: a Euripidean chorus that is indeed ubiquitous and—as Verrall, H.D., and MacLeish have demonstrated—of every time.

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