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The Tragic Io: Defining Identity in a Democratic Age

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As the first generations of Athenians in the late 6th century BCE and throughout the 5th were learning to wield democratic government, Athenian tragic playwrights revised and reinterpreted archaic stories for their own new political moment.¹ They cultivated the audience's capacity for critical moral reflection by challenging certainties both old and new.² Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (c. 463 BCE) and *Prometheus Bound*

1 For the development of the *polis* and democracy, see especially Forrest (1966); Ostwald (1986); Ober (1989 and 1996); Hansen (1991); Raaflaub and Ober (2007); Hall (2007); and Meier (2012). Athens was not unique among Greek *poleis* 'city-states' in its development of democratic ideas: see, for e.g. Robinson (1997). Kurke (1997, p. 156), citing Morris (1996) considers the Athenian democracy part of a broader "panhellenic" process. For the role of the tragic festival in shaping Athenian ideology, see especially Goldhill (1990). Goldhill also explains that "tragedy's *paideusis* can be located in the re-telling of the myths of the past for the democratic *polis*" (2000, p. 48). Regarding the tragedians' reinterpretation of ancient myth and their anachronistic conflation of past and present, see especially Podlecki (1986, pp. 82-86); Herington (1986, p. 110); Meier (1993, p. 125). For the historical and political context of the *Suppliants*, see Mitchell (2006). Concerning the composition and diversity of 5th century audiences and the variety of responses, see Roselli (2011).

2 Sommerstein maintains that by the 5th century, myth was already "a powerful instrument of education and socialization" (2010, p. 117). Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides challenged not only ancient, traditional, non-democratic values but also the newly-emerging, radically democratic political ideals. For the competition between democratic and aristocratic ideology in tragedy, see, for e.g., Goldhill (1990 and 2000) and Griffith (1995, esp. p. 63, n. 3 and 109, n. 143). Concerning the contro-

(possibly c. 456 BCE or later)³ both refashion archaic tales in dramatic form.⁴ The ancient myth of Io permeates both plays,⁵ and the basic plot of the tale remains the same: both present Io as the victim of Zeus' lust,⁶ a girl turned into a cow and goaded

versial question of whether tragedy “endorses,” “constructs,” or “questions” Athenian civic ideology,” see especially Saïd (1998, pp. 281–284) and Cairns (2005). See also Euben (1990, pp. 18, 35–36, 51–55 and *passim*); Boegehold and Scafuro (1994); Ober (1999); Goldhill (1990 and 2000); Barker (2009, esp. pp. 268–275). Goldhill finds tragedy’s questioning in tension with 5th century Athenian democratic ideology (e.g. 1990, pp. 124–129 and 2000, pp. 35, 46), but other scholars see questioning as central to democratic ideology (e.g. Ober [1996, pp. 142–143] and Pelling [1997, pp. 225–235]). Maintaining that “democracy is much more than a set of institutions; it is a way of thinking and acting in the world” (1997, p. 83) (and similarly Hansen [1992, p. 21]), Ober identifies “the symbiosis of democracy and criticism” (1996, pp. 142–143). Arguably, a distinctive but paradoxical feature of democratic ideology is that to question democratic ideals is to affirm them.

3 Concerning the question of Aeschylus’ authorship, see Griffith (1977 and 1984); Conacher (1980, pp. 140–174); Saïd (1985); Gantz (1993, pp. 158 and n. 14, 199–200 and n. 3); Bassi (2010, p. 84 and n. 41–45, with additional bibliography); Sommerstein (2010, pp. 228–234). Sommerstein concludes that the *Prometheus Bound* is “Aeschylean in concept but not in execution” (2010, p. 232). For the date of the *Suppliants*, Garvie (1969) suggests the late 460s, Taplin (1977) suggests 466–459 BCE, Johansen and Whittle (1980) opt for 463 BCE, which Sommerstein also finds possible (2010, p. 96). Scullion (2002), however, argues for an earlier date of perhaps 475 BCE. For the date of the *Prometheus Bound*, see especially Flintoff (1986). Murray (1958) places the *Prometheus Bound* close to the *Suppliants*. Herington (1986) suggests 456 BCE as a likely date. Sommerstein, however, inclines toward a much later date, even as late as 431 BCE (2010, pp. 231–232 and n. 23). Regarding the relationship of these plays to their own trilogy, see, for e.g., Garvie (1969, pp. 188–211); Herington (1986, pp. 104–108, 171–177); West (1990, pp. 169–72); Gantz (1993, pp. 158, 204–206); Zeitlin (1996, esp. pp. 160–171); Mitchell (2006, pp. 207–210); Sommerstein (2010, pp. 100–108 and 224–228).

4 The characters in the *Suppliants* antedate Homer’s characters by several generations, and Homer refers to the Greeks often as Danaans, i.e. “descendants of Danaus” (e.g. *Il.* 1.42, 9.34; *Od.* 1.350, etc.), Gantz observes that “an extensive tradition” regarding the myth of the Aigyptioi and the Danaïdes predates Aeschylus (1993, p. 203). The Danaid Chorus themselves assert the legendary status of Io’s story (e.g. *Supp.* 531–533), and Hesiod apparently told the story of Danaus and his daughters (frs. 127–129 M–W; PEG fr. 1). Pindar also references the story (*Pyth.* 9.112–117). For details of the Danaid myth, see Garvie (1969, pp. 131 n. 3, 138–139, 177–179, 180); Johansen and Whittle (1980, vol. 1, pp. 44–46); Sommerstein (2010, pp. 100–108). Hesiod gives a substantive account of the story of Prometheus in his *Theogony* (*Tb.* 521–616) and *Works and Days* (*W&D* 42–105). Apollodorus 2.12ff. provides a detailed, but much later, account.

5 Bednarowski argues that a 5th century audience would probably have been familiar with the story of Danaus and his daughters (2010, esp. pp. 204–205, 208). Bassi makes a similar claim about the stories of Io and of Prometheus (2010, p. 89). Herington observes that in the *Suppliants*, the theme of Io “forms a kind of secondary plot on the lyric level, above and behind the development of the dramatic action” (1986, p. 99).

6 Although references to Zeus’ intercourse with Io are absent from the *Prometheus Bound* (Gantz [1993, pp. 200–201]).

from Greece to Egypt by a maddening fly. In the *Suppliants*, as a repeated choral reference to establish the Danaids' inherited, biological identity, Io serves to foster a political crisis and promote conflict. In the *Prometheus Bound*, as a sentient victim of divine cruelty, Io exemplifies a connection between experience and knowledge and foreshadows a resolution of violent conflict. A catalyst for conflict in the first play and a constructive role model in the second, the depiction of Io exposes exclusive veneration of hereditary identity as a potential source of violence, experience as a potential source of knowledge, and individual choice and behavior as a potential source of understanding and conflict resolution. In prompting consideration of the nature of individual identity, these two versions of the story of Io appear to reflect and even promote an attitude shift accompanying 5th century Athens' novel democratic political experiment. Together, they undermine a traditional, aristocratic admiration for identity defined by kinship ties and cultivate a democratic, more egalitarian appreciation for the constructive potential of identity defined by individual experience and conduct.

In the *Suppliants*, Io never appears onstage, but the Danaids use her story to justify their claim to kinship with the Argives.⁷ Seeking asylum in Argos to escape marriage to their Egyptian cousins, the Danaids identify Io as the source and emblem of their own descent from Argive blood, claiming that their γένος “race” derives from οϊστροδόου βοός “the gadfly-driven cow” (*Supp.* 16-17).⁸ They refer to Io as προγόνου βοός “ancestral cow” (*Supp.* 42) and σεμνᾶς ματρὸς “august mother” (*Supp.* 141, 151). Calling on Zeus and Io (163ff.), the Danaids suggest that Zeus will justly incur blame if he now fails to honor τὸν τᾶς βοός παῖδ’ “the child of the cow” (*Supp.* 170). To the Argive king Pelasgus, the Danaids insist Ἀργεῖαι γένος / ἐξευχόμεσθα, σπέρματ’ εὐτέκνου βοός “We proclaim that we are Argive as to our race, off-spring of the cow who had many fine children” (*Supp.* 274-275). They conclude their account of Io’s descendants (*Supp.* 313-324) by telling the king εἰδὼς δ’ ἄμὸν ἀρχαῖον γένος / πράσσοις ἂν ὡς Ἀργεῖον ἀνστήσης στόλον “Knowing my ancient race, you could act as one encountering an Argive band” (*Supp.* 323-324). They insist that Io establishes their kinship with the Argives (*Supp.* 330-332, 651-652), a claim their father corroborates (*Supp.* 496-498, 983-984).⁹ They are certain that

7 For the ritual and gender associations of the Danaids, see Foley (2001, esp. pp. 28, 53-54 and n. 121).

8 All textual citations of the Greek are from the Oxford Classical Text of Page (1972). The translations are my own attempts at literal (not poetic) renderings.

9 But cf. Wohl (2010, pp. 416-422), who reduces the significance of the Danaids’ bloodline in order to argue that the play turns their story into “a reassuring tale of Greek men saving Egyptian women from

descent from Io entitles them to Zeus' support (*Supp.* 531-542, 588-589).

Prioritizing Io's bloodline, the Danaids present the ancestor of their γένος "race" as an innocent victim of divine lust and cruelty, capable of little active agency. The Danaids emphasize Io's passivity as they tell her tale to Pelasgus: born in Argos and a servant in Hera's temple, Io is desired and raped by Zeus, turned into a cow by Hera, raped again by Zeus in bull's form, guarded by the hundred-eyed Argos, goaded from the land by a gadfly, and impregnated by Zeus (*Supp.* 274-324). Later, re-telling the tale of Io's flight from Argos to Egypt (*Supp.* 525-599), the Danaids insist on both her passivity and her lack of mental control, since ἰὼ /οἴστρωι ἐρεθομένα /φεύγει ἀμαρτίνοος "urged by the gadfly, Io flees, erring in her mind" (*Supp.* 540-542). In the Danaids' account, Io takes no active control of her situation, arriving in Egypt still μαινομένα πόνοις ἀτί- /μοις ὀδύναίς τε κεντροδα- /λήτισι, θυιάς Ἡρας "maddened by dishonorable, unavenged griefs and goading pains, a frenzied Bacchantess of Hera" (*Supp.* 562-564).¹⁰ The Danaids continue to emphasize Io's passivity, as they describe her as πολύπλαγκτον ἀθλίαν /οἴστροδόνητον "much wandering, wretched, driven wild by the gadfly" (*Supp.* 572-573). In the Danaids' version of Io's tale, her eventual release comes not from her own agency, but only when ἀπημάντωι σθένει /καὶ θεΐαις ἐπιπνοΐαις /παύεται "she is stopped by the unharmed might and divine breath" of Zeus (*Supp.* 576-578).¹¹

The Danaids' interest in Io as a passive marker of blood-kinship exposes the inconsistency and hypocrisy of their conception of kinship obligations. By recalling the story of Io and claiming that they are entitled to protection as blood-kin, the women paradoxically suggest that the first rape retroactively accomplishes a good purpose, justifying their current right to asylum. They acknowledge that Io's suffering results and terminates in procreation (*Supp.* 313-324), but their own rejection of marriage means a refusal to procreate themselves and continue their kinship line.¹²

Egyptian men" (p. 422). Conversely, see Mitchell for a nuanced discussion of the role of kinship in the *Suppliants* (2006, e.g. p. 205).

10 As compared to the description of Io's journey in the *Prometheus Bound* (PB 703-746; 786-815), the Danaids' less detailed account (*Supp.* 540-564) correlates with their main interest in Io as a marker of their kinship connection to Argos. For contrasts between the two portraits of the journey see, for e.g., White (2001, p. 116) and Sommerstein (2010, pp. 214, 267).

11 Regarding the portrait of Zeus in the *Suppliants* and *Prometheus Bound* see, for e.g., White (2001, pp. 107-109); Wohl (2010, p. 425); Sommerstein (2010, pp. 218-219, 267).

12 Gantz notes "the somewhat paradoxical appeal to a god's lust as grounds for preserving females from further lust" (1993, p. 204). Regarding the Danaids' fear of sex and childbirth, see Bachvarova (2013, esp. pp. 432-433).

They evoke Io repeatedly to establish their own identity as Argive by birth and to justify their claim to asylum, but their understanding of this biological relationship apparently entails no reciprocal obligations on their part, as it does not prevent them from threatening to imperil their Argive kin. They allude to Io as they consider suicide (*Supp.* 154-166), and they insist that Zeus will incur δικάϊοις ψόγοις “just censure” (*Supp.* 168-169), if he fails to honor them as the descendants of the child he himself engendered in the cow (*Supp.* 168-174). But since they threaten to hang themselves from the images of the temple gods (457-465), the Argive king Pelasgus understands that they threaten pollution and consequent destruction to the Argives (472-473).¹³

The Danaids’ use of Io to validate this hypocritical and threatening concept of their inherited, biological identity promotes the central political conflict in the play.¹⁴ Io’s identity as the Danaids’ ancestor exacerbates the political crisis for the Argive king Pelasgus, whose kinship obligations to protect the Danaids conflict with his kinship obligations to protect the Argive populace. Pelasgus understands that acknowledging the Danaids’ descent from Io and consequent blood kinship to the Argives will prompt war, telling the women βαρέα σύ γ’ εἶπας, πόλεμον ἄρασθαί νεόν “you, at any rate, have spoken grievous and weighty things, to raise (the threat of) a new war” (*Supp.* 342). Referring to the women by the oxymoron ἀστοξένων

13 For negative interpretations of the Danaids’ threats, see especially Murray (1958, p. 79); Kitto (1961, p. 11); Burian (2007, p. 205); Johansen and Whittle (1980, vol 2, p. 360); Herington (1986, pp. 107-109); Conacher (1996, p. 91), cf. Belfiore (2000, p. 42); Sommerstein (2010, pp. 96-98, 267, 290), although Sommerstein attributes greatest responsibility to the Danaids’ “cynically manipulative father” (p. 305). Other critics minimize the negative view of the threats: e.g. Mackinnon (1978, p. 77); Parker (1983, p. 312). Wohl maintains more generally that the *Suppliants* depicts “female agency as a threat” (2010, pp. 419-420). Bachvarova argues vs. Turner (2001, pp. 40-48) that the Danaids’ threats “allude to and invert themes proper to nymph cult” (2009, p. 290), but Foley maintains that the Danaids opt to preserve conventional female behavior, citing *Supp.* 195-203 and 724-725 (2001, p. 122). Bednarowski suggests that Aeschylus may have invented the detail of the Danaids’ threats as a challenge to the audience’s expectations (2010, pp. 202-204).

14 Herodotus similarly associates Io’s tale with violent political conflict but includes no allusion to problematic or competing kinship obligations. Herodotus offers two rationalizing, non-supernatural accounts of Io’s rape as a catalyst for violent conflict: the Persians depict Io as passive and inarticulate, as the Danaids portray her in the *Suppliants*, but do not mention Io’s descendants (*Hist.* 1.1-2). By contrast, the Phoenicians describe a willing and subsequently pregnant Io making choices for herself (*Hist.* 1.5), but unlike the *Prometheus Bound*, neither of these non-Greek accounts permits Io to articulate her own experience. Herodotus’ non-Greek rationalizing versions of Io’s tale pose no challenge or alternative to a conception of identity derived exclusively from blood-kinship.

“citizen-foreigners” or “citizen-guestfriends” (*Supp.* 356),¹⁵ he anxiously wishes that εἴη δ’ ἄνατον πρᾶγμα τοῦτ’ ἀστοξένων, /μηδ’ ἐξ ἀέλπτων κάπρομηθήτων πόλει /νεῖκος γένηται τῶν γὰρ οὐ δεῖται πόλις “this matter of the citizen-foreigners be harm-free, and that strife not occur for the city from these unhopd-for and unforeseen things; for the city does not need these things” (*Supp.* 356-358).¹⁶ But the Danaids remind him that ἀμφοτέρους ὁμαίμων τάδ’ ἐπισκοπεῖ /Ζεὺς ἑτερορρεπῆς “Zeus, who makes now one side and now another preponderate, oversees these matters for both (sets) of kinsmen” (*Supp.* 402-403). Foreseeing the inevitable conflict (*Supp.* 439-442; 468-471), Pelasgus recognizes the risk of shedding ὁμαίμον αἷμα “kindred blood” (*Supp.* 449).¹⁷ A decision to protect the Danaids will result in war between the Argives and the Egyptians (who are similarly related, biologically, *via* Io, to the Danaids and the Argives), but Danaus reassures his daughters that the Argives μαχοῦνται περὶ σέθεν, σάφ’ οἶδ’ ἐγὼ “will fight concerning you, I know it assuredly” (*Supp.* 740). The play’s conclusion prefigures the violence still to come in the mythical tale, as the Danaids pray for Zeus to prevent γάμον δυσάνορα /δάιον “a hostile marriage with a bad husband” (*Supp.* 1062-1064) and to give κράτος “power” to women (*Supp.* 1068-1069).¹⁸ These two prayers frame and undercut their reference to Zeus’ release of Io from suffering (*Supp.* 1064-1067).¹⁹ Following the defeat of the Argives, the Danaids will ultimately marry their cousins the Aegyptioi, and all but one of them will murder her husband on their wedding night.²⁰

In their references to Io as their biological ancestor, their threats against their own kin, and their instigation of violence, the Danaids in the *Suppliants* expose the potential for violent conflict inherent in defining identity by heredity rather than by

15 Zeitlin considers the term “an excellent metaphor for the ambiguities of women’s social status in the community” (1996, p. 125 and n. 6). For the play’s depiction of the Danaids as “both insiders and outsiders” (p. 212), aligned with the Argives by blood, but physically different, see Mitchell (2006, pp. 210-218). For the ambiguity of the Danaids’ role in Argos, see also Foley (2001, pp. 54-55).

16 For the portrait of Argos and Pelasgus, see Mitchell (2006, pp. 218-220).

17 Bednarowski (2010, p. 205).

18 Bednarowski identifies the foreshadowing of violence in the final ode of the *Suppliants* (2011, esp. pp. 555, 569-578).

19 Bachvarova points out that “Io’s suffering was resolved through the birth of a son” (2013, p. 433), but in the play’s current situation the Danaids’ claim to descent from Io fosters conflict.

20 Detienne (1988); Gantz (1993, pp. 204-206); Zeitlin (1996, pp. 123-124); Bednarowski (2011, pp. 555, 575). In the *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus also details the murderous violence to come (*PB* 860-863), telling the story in passing (*PB* 853-869).

individual conduct. The portrait of Io in the *Prometheus Bound*, however, emphasizes the potential for harmony implicit in defining identity, conversely, as the active pursuit of knowledge and understanding. In the *Suppliants*, the Danaids portray Io as a passive marker of blood-kinship, but the *Prometheus Bound* features Io as a character capable of articulating her individual experience of her own suffering.²¹ Still tormented by the gadfly, she cries out in pain repeatedly as she encounters Prometheus (*PB* 565–602). Narrating her own story (*PB* 640–686), Io expresses her feelings, claiming that καίτοι καὶ λέγουσ' αἰσχύνομαι / θεόσσυτον χειμῶνα καὶ διαφθορὰν / μορφῆς “I am ashamed even speaking of the divine-sent storm and the destruction of my form” (*PB* 642–644). She relates the misery of nightly dreams telling her of Zeus’ lust (*PB* 645–657). Detailing her father’s inquiry of the oracles and his eventual decision to drive her out, Io reveals her own perspective as well as her father’s, since τοιοῦσδε πεισθεὶς Λοξίου μαντεύμασιν / ἐξήλασέν με κάπέκλησε δωμάτων / ἄκουσαν ἄκων “persuaded by these oracles of Loxias, he drove me away and shut me out of his halls, against my will, against his will” (*PB* 669–671). She shows her awareness of her own appearance and others’ reaction to it, describing her transformation into a cow, ὡς ὄρατ’ “as you see” (*PB* 674). (Contrast the external perspective implicit in the Danaids’ description of Io as ὄψιν ἀήθη “an unusual sight” at *Supp.* 567.) Her emotional account features her own subjective impressions, as she identifies the gadfly as ὀξεστόμωι “sharp-stinging” (*PB* 673–674), describes her erstwhile pursuer Argos as ἄκρατος ὀργῆν “untempered and excessive as to his temper” (*PB* 678), and insists that οἰστροπλήξ δ’ ἐγὼ / μάστιγι θεῖαι γῆν πρὸ γῆς ἐλάνομαι “I, gadfly-stung by the divine scourge, am driven from land to land” (*PB* 681–682).

This articulate Io in the *Prometheus Bound* contrasts not only with the passive figure described by the Danaids in the *Suppliants*, but also with the Danaids’ own actions as autonomous agents, since this Io actively seeks knowledge and understanding. The Danaids’ conception of identity as purely hereditary gives them absolute certainty; they act without question, seek no additional information, and show no awareness of or concern for the predicaments of others. But Io enters the *Prometheus Bound* asking questions. Encountering Prometheus chained to the rock, she wonders τίς γῆ; τί γένος; τίνα φῶ λείσσειν / τόνδε χαλινοῖς ἐν πετρίνοισιν / χειμαζόμενον; “What land is this? What race? Whom am I to say is this man that

21 Scott observes that Io is “the sole representative of mankind” in the *Prometheus Bound* (1987, p. 91). Scholars have tended to concentrate on Io in this play as evidence for or against an understanding of Zeus’ behavior as tyrannical, e.g. Herington (1986, p. 168) vs. White (2001, p. 130 and n. 88).

I see tempest-tossed in rocky bridles?” (*PB* 561-563, repeating her initial question at 577). Io understands that human actions have consequences, because she repeatedly asks what Prometheus did to deserve his suffering (*PB* 564, 614, 620) as well as what she herself did to deserve hers (*PB* 577-581). She knows, too, that knowledge and human effort might ease or end suffering, as she asks Prometheus to give her a clear indication of what remains for her to suffer (*PB* 605-606) and how she might be cured, insisting τί μῆχαρ, ἢ τί φάρμακον νόσου; /δείξον, εἴπερ οἴσθα, / θρόει, φράζε τᾶι δυσπλάνωι παρθένωι “what contrivance or drug is there for the disease? Show it, if indeed you know, utter it, declare it to the maiden wandering in misery” (*PB* 606-608). She also wants to know the time-limit of her miserable wandering (*PB* 622-623). Despite Prometheus’ insistence that τὸ μὴ μαθεῖν σοι κρεῖσσον ἢ μαθεῖν τάδε “not knowing these things is better for you than knowing” (*PB* 624), and his claim that σὰς δ’ ὀκνῶ θράξαι φρένας “I shrink from troubling your thoughts” (*PB* 628), Io repeatedly seeks to know the truth (*PB* 625, 627, 629, 683-686, 779).

Io’s narration of her own experience produces some positive benefits, as the reactions of the Chorus and Prometheus imply. The Chorus suggest that in telling her own story, Io can bring them pleasure (ἡδονῆς *PB* 631), and Prometheus acknowledges Io’s capacity to do this, saying σὸν ἔργον, ἰοῖ, ταῖσδ’ ὑπουργῆσαι χάριν “the work is yours, Io, to do these women a favor” (*PB* 635). Although her tale provokes revulsion and terror (687-695), the Chorus also recognize the healing power of knowledge, as they urge Prometheus λέγ’, ἐκδίδασθε: τοῖς νοσοῦσί τοι γλυκὺ /τὸ λοιπὸν ἄλγος προυξεπίστασθαι τορῶς “Speak, teach thoroughly. To the sick, you know, it is sweet to thoroughly understand clearly beforehand the remaining suffering” (*PB* 698-699).

Io’s experience in the play affirms this Choral claim, since her quest for knowledge brings her a measure of understanding and even comfort. Knowledge of the suffering and experiences to come (*PB* 703-746; 786-815) forewarns and empowers her to avoid additional dangers (e.g. *PB* 712; 715; 718; 730-731; 804; 807).²² Her pursuit of knowledge brings her the reassurance that mortals will always remember her story and that her crossing will give the Bosphorous its name (*PB* 732-734). And Prometheus tells her: χρόνον δὲ τὸν μέλλοντα πόντιος μυχός, /σαφῶς ἐπίστασ’, Ἴόνιος κεκλήσεται, /τῆς σῆς πορείας μνῆμα τοῖς πᾶσιν βροτοῖς “know clearly

22 But contrast White, who finds both positive and negative force in “the gifts of Prometheus” (2001, pp. 121, 133, 136-138). Scott (1987, pp. 91-94) and Sommerstein (2010, pp. 216, 277) see no positive benefits resulting from Io’s behavior and foreknowledge, although Scott explains that Prometheus gives Io “perspective” (1987, p. 93). This “promethean” perspective comes, however, not by chance but only as the result of Io’s own questioning and her determination to discover the truth.

that for future time that recess of the sea will be called ‘Ionian,’ a memorial to all mortals of your crossing” (*PB* 839-841). Io also learns the limit of her wandering, as Prometheus explains that she will reach the Nile delta οὗ δὴ τὴν μακρὰν ἀποικίαν, /Ἰοῖ, πέπρωται σοί τε καὶ τέκνοις κτίσαι “where, Io, it has been fated for you and your children to found a long-standing colony” (*PB* 814-815). The *Prometheus Bound* acknowledges the significance of Io’s bloodline, since Io discovers that Prometheus’ rescuer will be her descendant (*PB* 771-774; 848-874),²³ but the revelation comes only as the consequence of Io’s questioning.

Io’s successful pursuit and acquisition of knowledge exposes the play’s complex portrait of the relationship between knowledge and power, since knowledge fortifies Io’s endurance without empowering her to change her destiny. As a knowledge-seeking, autonomous agent, Io confers some pleasure and gains some peace of mind, but she remains unable to alter events. And yet, her conduct validates the constructive potential of identity understood as the sum of individual experience shaped by the pursuit of knowledge, since her example foreshadows a resolution of the play’s central conflict between Zeus and Prometheus.²⁴ Zeus’ absolute power remains precarious because he lacks the knowledge that only Prometheus can provide.²⁵ The *Prometheus Bound* promises a resolution of this problem repeatedly and from the outset (e.g. *PB* 26-27; 186-192; 258; 508-514; 771-772). But only Io’s questioning makes Prometheus reveal the secret that Zeus must learn in order to retain power, a secret that he can only learn by reconciling with Prometheus (*PB* 757-770).²⁶ The conclusion of the play connects knowledge to experience, and evokes the possibility of Justice, as Prometheus calls to his mother and the upper air, crying, ἔσορᾶς μ’ ὧς ἔκδικα πάσχω “you see how I am suffering unjustly!” (*PB* 1093).²⁷

23 The story of Io and Heracles does not seem to have been connected to the Prometheus myth before the *Prometheus Bound*, so this element may be the playwright’s innovation (Conacher [1980, pp. 15-20]; Griffith [1983, p. 189]).

24 Herington identifies Io’s experience as a model for Prometheus and Heracles, symbolizing a movement “from present torment to ultimate peace and fulfillment” (1986, pp. 173-174). White also connects Io’s exit to the trilogy’s resolution (2001, p. 122). But cf. Bassi, who considers Io instead “a transitional figure from the dramatized scene of crime and punishment to the projected scene of torture and interrogation” (2010, pp. 92-93).

25 Herington defines the opposition between Zeus and Prometheus as an opposition “between brute force and the powers of the mind” (1986, p. 169).

26 If Zeus has sex with a goddess that he is currently pursuing, she will produce a son stronger than his father, who will overthrow Zeus (*PB* 757-770).

27 Cf. White’s argument that Prometheus deserves his punishment (2001, p. 129) and that neither

These two interpretations of the ancient tale of Io exemplify the malleability of Greek myth and the “democratizing” force of tragedy in its capacity to evoke critical moral reflection.²⁸ Mythical tales naturally induce objectivity and creativity, because the audience may have no vested interest in the story’s outcome and can approach the issues without passion or partisanship. The *Suppliants* demonstrates the potentially destructive consequences of an aristocratic conception of identity derived exclusively from biological heredity, as the Danaids’ references to Io’s bloodline justify and promote violent conflict. Conversely, the portrait of Io in the *Prometheus Bound* demonstrates the potentially constructive force of a more egalitarian conception of identity derived from conduct, as Io’s experience and behavior produces knowledge and prefigures the possibility of reconciliation.

In prompting consideration of the nature of individual identity, these two versions of the story of Io appear to reflect and even promote an attitude shift accompanying 5th-century Athens’ novel democratic political experiment. Together, they affirm ideals necessary to the constructive functioning of democratic political institutions. They challenge an ancient, aristocratic confidence in the value of hereditary allegiances and posit, instead, an essentially democratic, more egalitarian interest in knowledge derived from experience, and in conflict resolution resulting from individual conduct.²⁹ As a passive symbol of blood kinship, Io embodies a problem; as a knowledge-seeking autonomous agent, she constitutes a constructive role model.³⁰ While sectarian violence based on kinship allegiances continues to ravage the modern world, we can recognize in these two versions of Io’s tale a beneficial understanding of identity crucial to conceiving and promoting a successful democratic society.

gods nor mortals can yet understand Zeus’ “new justice” (2001, p. 133). But White nevertheless defines this development as a departure from the primacy of kinship relationships, arguing that “the implicit theodicy of the play, then, is less ethnocentric than ethocentric, its ideology not tribalist but exceptionalist” (2001, pp. 139–140).

28 See note 2 above.

29 Mitchell asserts that autocratic power in archaic and classical Greece was largely “family-based” (2013, pp. 91–118).

30 But cf. Bassi’s understanding of the Io of the *Prometheus Bound* as “a figure for the dehumanizing effects of state-inflicted pain, epitomized in the gradual loss of human speech” (2010, p. 93).

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