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Alcestis Redux

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In the vast panorama of Euripides' influence upon later literature,¹ certain of his tragedies—most notably *Medea* and *Hippolytus*²—undeniably stand out more than others. But *Alcestis* too has had a rich and remarkable afterlife, even if perhaps a somewhat less spectacular one than these other plays.³ Most often, poets have tended to detach the figure

This article represents a much revised version of an essay I published some years ago in Italian as "Alceste risorta tra Shakespeare ed Eliot," in Maria Pia Pattoni and Roberta Carponi, ed. *Sacrifici al femminile: Alceste in scena da Euripide a Raboni. Comunicazioni Sociali*. Anno XXVI Nuova serie. Sezione Teatro. Nr. 3 (Settembre-Dicembre 2004). Milan: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, pp. 360-68; that earlier version included a section on Shakespeare's *Winter Tale*, omitted here. In its original form this article was a lecture, and I have chosen to retain some elements of its oral style and to furnish it with only a skeletal apparatus of scholarly notes. I am grateful to the editor of the *NECJ* for her unremittingly gracious persistence and to that journal's anonymous reader for incisive, indeed stringent criticisms of an earlier version which have helped to make this one better.

¹ There is no satisfactory comprehensive study of the influence of Euripides on later literature, and indeed, given the extent of that influence, perhaps no such study is possible. An older general treatment, anecdotal, very incomplete, but still useful as a starting point, is F.L. Lucas, *Euripides and his influence* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1923; reprints New York: 1928, 1963); for a more detailed study of a particularly interesting period, cf. Uwe Petersen, *Goethe und Euripides: Untersuchungen zur Euripides-Rezeption in der Goethezeit* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1974).

² See now Angelika Corbineau-Hoffmann, "Medeia," in Maria Moog-Grünewald, ed., *Mythenrezeption. Die antike Mythologie in Literatur, Musik und Kunst von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart. Der Neue Pauly Supplemente Band 5* (Stuttgart-Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2008), pp. 418-28 (with bibliography); and Max Grosse, "Phaidra," in Moog-Grünewald, *op. cit.*, pp. 578-89 (with bibliography).

³ See on the influence of this play Kurt von Fritz, "Euripides' Alkestis und ihre modernen Nachahmer und Kritiker," *Antike und Abendland* 5 (1956) 27-70; Herbert Steinwender, *Alkestis—Vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart* (Diss. Vienna 1951); Margret Dietrich, "Vorwort," in *Alkestis. Euripides, Gluck, Wieland, Richter, Hofmannsthal, Lernet-Holenia, Wilder* (Munich-Vienna: Alber Langen-Georg Müller, 1969), pp. 9-71; Maria Pia Pattoni, "Introduzione," in *Euripide, Wieland, Rilke, Yourcenar, Raboni. Alceste. Variazioni sul mito* (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2006), pp. 9-48; L.P.E. Parker, "Alcestis: Euripides to Ted Hughes," *Greece and Rome* 50 (2003) 1-30; Pattoni and Carponi, ed., *op. cit.*; and now Peter von Möllendorff, "Alkestis und Admetos," in Moog-Grünewald, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-61 (with further bibliography).

of Alcestis herself from the complexities and ironies of the Euripidean plot which transmitted her, and to adduce her story within the context of their own compositions, rather simplistically, as a straightforward paradigm for noble self-sacrifice. Although some fully dramatized versions of the story have indeed been composed, from the late ancient Latin hexametric poem *Alcestis* preserved on a Barcelona papyrus⁴ to Thornton Wilder's *The Alcestiad*⁵ and beyond, it is hard to find among the later theatrical descendants of Alcestis anything to compare, for sheer genius or influence, with such works as Seneca's *Phaedra* and *Medea*, or with Racine's *Phèdre* or Cherubini's *Médée*. And yet one very remarkable theatrical play, T.S. Eliot's drama *The Cocktail Party*, does depend, surprisingly, upon that author's direct and highly original revisiting of the Greek play. In this article I consider Euripides' *Alcestis* in its relation with Eliot's play; in so doing, I focus upon those aspects of these extraordinarily complex plays that are most relevant to their intertextual relationships.

At first glance, *Alcestis* seems to be very simple, indeed almost skeletal in its reduction to the bare essentials of the story-line: the plot is entirely linear, and nothing happens that does not move the action along towards its resolution. And yet, beneath this superficial appearance of simplicity, the fundamental structure of the play is determined by an extraordinary set of ironic complexities and conceptual tensions.⁶

The first and most basic of these complexities is the play's generic heterogeneity. What is transmitted from antiquity as the tragedy *Alcestis* in fact combines into an uneasy synthesis elements deriving from quite different literary genres. As we know from the hypothesis to the play, which goes back to the Hellenistic scholar Aristophanes of Byzantium and precedes it in the mediaeval manuscripts, Euripides staged it as a fourth tragedy after the other three in the year of its first production, that is, in the

⁴ P. Barcinonensis Inv. Nos. 158ab, 159ab, 160ab, and 161a: see Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Alcestis Barcinonensis. Text and Commentary*. Mnemosyne Supplement 103 (Leiden-New York: E.J. Brill, 1988).

⁵ The play was first performed in 1955 at Edinburgh and served as the basis for Louise Talma's opera *The Alcestiad*, for which Wilder wrote the libretto. See Thornton Wilder, *The Alcestiad: or, A Life in the Sun. A Play in Three Acts, with a Satyr Play, The Drunken Sisters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

⁶ See now especially L.P.E. Parker, ed., *Euripides Alcestis. With Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), of which I cite the edition of the Greek text; also worth consulting, though rather less ambitious, is Gustav Adolf Seeck, ed., *Euripides. Alkestis* (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). Among older monographs and commentaries, cf. especially Albin Lesky, *Alkestis, der Mythos und das Drama* (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1925); A.M. Dale, ed., *Euripides Alcestis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954); Gustav Adolf Seeck, *Unaristotelische Untersuchungen zu Euripides. Ein motivanalytischer Kommentar zur 'Alkestis'* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1985); Peter Riemer, *Die Alkestis des Euripides. Untersuchungen zur tragischen Form* (Frankfurt a.M.: Athenäum Verlag, 1989).

position reserved traditionally for a satyr play after three tragedies.⁷ Indeed, the hypothesis asserts that an element of the satyr play can be recognized in *Alcestis*, for the plot veers finally towards delight and pleasure, and reports that some ancient scholars wanted to deny that it was a tragedy at all.⁸ And in fact a number of important plot elements found in this tragedy are typical of the satyr play, for example Heracles' drunkenness, and the imprisoning and eventual liberation of the protagonist Alcestis.⁹

On the other hand it is evident that we are not dealing here with a satyr play. For one thing, there are no satyrs in it. Instead, what we find is a drama *sui generis*, a generic hybrid into whose composition enters not only the satyr play but also various other literary genres: the folk tale, with the personified character of Death himself who arrives in person at the beginning, bearing his typical attributes, and who, it will turn out at the end, can be fought and even conquered in a wrestling match (at least by Heracles); and of course traditional Greek tragedy as well, with its familiar themes of struggle, self-sacrifice, and heroism, and its conventional structural elements such as divine prologue, dialogue, speech, messenger's speech, agon, and so on. Thus, although there can be no doubt that in the final analysis *Alcestis* is indeed a tragedy, it is a uniquely multi-generic one among the surviving productions of Fifth Century Attic theater. No wonder ancient scholars experienced such difficulties in trying to pigeonhole it.

A second complexity is that *Alcestis* is characterized compositionally by a radically bipartite structure. Various kinds of bipartition are found in many of Euripides' tragedies.¹⁰ For example, in some plays of his, like *Medea*, *Hecuba*, and *Orestes*, the plot can easily be divided into a first half in which the main characters suffer terrible misfortunes and provoke our outrage and sympathy for their plight, and then a second half in which they go on to avenge themselves upon their tormentors so cruelly that we end up feeling less compassion for them and more for their victims. *Alcestis* too displays a clear bipartition, but here the two parts are characterized in quite a different way. This play begins as a tragedy of loss, in which for the whole first half the characters passionately lament as irreparable the privation of something they consider to be gone once and for all, the life of Alcestis. Then there is a central hinge with a scene in which everything is

⁷ Hypothesis (b) 4.4-6 Parker: πρῶτος ἦν Σοφοκλῆς, δεύτερος Εὐριπίδης Κρήσσαις, Ἀλκμέωνι τῷ διὰ Ψωφίδος, Τηλέφῳ, Ἀλκῆστιδι . . .

⁸ Hypothesis (b) 4.6-7, 11-14 Parker: τὸ δὲ δράμα κωμικώτερον, ὅτι εἰς χαρὰν καὶ ἡδονὴν καταστρέφει . . . τὸ δὲ δράμα ἐστὶ σατυρικώτερον, ὅτι εἰς χαρὰν καὶ ἡδονὴν καταστρέφει παρὰ τὸ τραγικόν. ἐκβάλλεται ὡς ἀνοίκεια τῆς τραγικῆς ποιήσεως ὅ τε Ὀρέστης καὶ ἡ Ἄλκηστις, ὡς ἐκ συμφορᾶς μὲν ἀρχόμενα, εἰς εὐδαιμονίαν (δὲ) καὶ χαρὰν λήξαντα, (ἅ) ἐστὶ μᾶλλον κωμωδίας ἐχόμενα.

⁹ See in general Dana F. Sutton, *The Greek Satyr Play* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1980). Parker himself downplays, in my view somewhat excessively, the importance of satyr play elements in Euripides' tragedy, *op. cit.*, pp. xx-xxiii.

¹⁰ See for example Anne Pippin Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

turned upside-down (773-860): this is the episode in which Heracles arrives on stage completely drunk and thoroughly unaware of the circumstances, but then learns of the true situation from a slave. Upon receiving this information he immediately sobers up and snaps out of his confusion. Indeed, not only does he rise above the level of ordinary ignorant humanity, in which people do not know what is happening around them (the typical situation of tragic irony, in which a dramatic character does not know something of importance to him, but the audience does); what is more, he ascends above the highest level to which the rest of humanity can aspire and he becomes once again a hero, who will be able to wrestle successfully with Death himself:

δεῖ γάρ με σῶσαι τὴν θανοῦσαν ἀρτίως
 γυναῖκα κὰς τόνδ' αὔθις ἰδρῦσαι δόμον
 Ἄλκηστιν, Ἀδμήτω θ' ὑπουργῆσαι χάριν.
 ἐλθῶν δ' ἄνακτα τὸν μελάμπτερον νεκρῶν
 Θάνατον φυλάξω. . . (840-44)

I must save this woman who has died
 so lately, bring Alcestis back to live in this house,
 and pay Admetus all the kindness that I owe.
 I must go there and watch for Death of the black wings,
 master of dead men. . .¹¹

This *anagnorisis*, Heracles' recognition of the true state of affairs, represents the moment of the intervention of the element of the divine into the human drama of the tragedy. It can hardly be accidental that the divinity responsible for Heracles' taboo-breaking and revelatory intoxication, Dionysus, is the very same one in whose honor the tragedy itself was performed: at the center of this tragedy performed at the Greater Dionysian festival, Dionysus inebriates Heracles and, in violation of all human expectations and customs, thereby manages to create a happy solution to what seemed destined to be an inevitably mournful outcome. After this point, the rest of the *Alcestis* is no longer a tragedy of loss but instead a comedy of restitution, which seems to celebrate the apparently full restoration of Alcestis' life, which everyone had been convinced throughout the first half was lost forever.

Third, this bipartite plot structure is accompanied by a whole series of conceptual ironies involving the characters, their personalities, and their choices. To begin with the protagonist: Alcestis is the perfect wife, but during the course of Euripides' play it turns out that the perfect wife may

¹¹ Richmond Lattimore, trans., *Alcestis*, in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, ed., *Euripides I* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 40. I have modified Lattimore's translation of line 843 to match Parker's text. Subsequent translations from *Alcestis* are all derived from this edition and are cited by page number.

well be a dead wife. For if Greek culture ordinarily defines the perfect wife by her willingness to sacrifice herself completely for the sake of her family, here Euripides exaggerates that cultural stereotype to the point of revealing its fragility and ultimate collapse. For it is only by accepting as her own a death which is not hers that Alcestis reveals herself to be the perfect wife, for if she had refused Admetus' request and chosen to survive, she would no longer be perfect. But precisely by sacrificing herself in order to save her husband, she casts him into a despairing sadness from which he sees no possible escape; and by sacrificing herself to save the life of her family, she leaves her child to pronounce a heart-breaking funeral lament for her (393-403, 406-15). As for Admetus, he had wanted nothing other than to save his own life, but he discovers that the very means he has chosen in order to achieve this end, namely the death of his wife, in fact deprives his life of all meaning.¹² He has done everything he could in order to survive but the result of his success is that he no longer wants to go on living: the only means available to secure the end he sought, once he has deployed it, destroys that very end—an irony typical of Greek, and not only of Greek, tragedy.

Fourth, Euripides has constructed the plot of his play in such a way that Admetus' actions are characterized by a further, crucial ironic dimension. For there can be no doubt that Admetus commits a serious social and, indeed, religious error when, at the very moment in which his house is in mourning for Alcestis, he nonetheless refuses to reveal to Heracles the true state of affairs and instead invites him to enter into his palace and to accept his hospitality. This is a mistake which the Chorus does not hesitate to point out to him as such (551-52): τί δρᾶς; τοσαύτης συμφορᾶς προσκειμένης, | Ἄδμητε, τολμᾶς ξενοδοκεῖν; τί μῶρος εἶ; "Admetus, are you crazy? What are you thinking of | to entertain guests in a situation like this?" (p. 30) Admetus himself admits that his behavior might well seem strange to other people (565-66): καὶ τῶ μὲν, οἴμαι, δρῶν τὰδ' οὐ φρονεῖν δοκῶ, | οὐδ' αἰνέσει με "There are some will think I show no sense in doing this. | They will not like it." (p. 30) But it is only thanks to this mistake that Heracles will then find himself in the situation of not only being obliged to save Alcestis but also of being capable of doing so. It is precisely by making such a serious mistake that Admetus creates the conditions of possibility for resolving this desperate situation in a much more positive way than he or anyone else could possibly have imagined.

Fifth, the thematic core of *Alcestis* resides in the tension between two fundamental spheres of Greek social life: marriage on the one hand and friendship, especially the friendship of a host or guest, on the other. For example, Apollo helps Admetus precisely because the god has been a guest in his house and now has the obligations of a ξένος with regard to him (8-9):

¹² Sheila Murnaghan, "The Survivors' Song: The Drama of Mourning in Euripides' *Alcestis*," *ICS* 24-25 (2000) 107-16, points out how difficult it is to console a man who feels directly responsible for the death of the woman he mourns.

ἐλθῶν δὲ γαῖαν τήνδ' ἔβουφόρβουν ξένω, | καὶ τόνδ' ἔσωζον οἶκον ἐς τόδ' ἡμέρας. "I came to this country, tended the oxen of this host | and friend, Admetus, son of Pheres. I have kept | his house from danger, cheated the Fates to save his life | until this day . . ." (p. 7) But it is above all Admetus who finds himself divided between his obligations with regard to Alcestis, his wife, on the one hand and his duties with regard to Heracles, his guest, on the other. By privileging his duties to Heracles, he violates the former for the sake of the latter, but it is precisely by doing so that he manages to save both. Both social practices, marriage and hospitality, introduce an outsider into the house: just as the bride comes from her father's home outside and can only remain within her new household because she adopts the status of a wife within it, replacing her earlier allegiance to her father with a new loyalty to her husband, so too the guest, who comes into his host's house from outside, is honored because he becomes a friend within it. In ancient Greek, both a wife and a guest can be called φίλοι, "dear ones." But there are different categories of φίλοι, and whatever else it is doing, Euripides' tragedy is also investigating the sometimes difficult relations between the potentially competing duties with regard to these various types of φίλοι. It is worth noting in this connection that various forms of the adjectives φίλος and φίλτατος, the substantive φιλία, and the verb φιλέω occur respectively 38, 5, and 4 times in this short play, or about once every 25 lines; they are applied to a wife 22 times, to friends 9 times, to parents 6 times, to children thrice, to a host twice, and to a husband once.¹³ Admetus' declaration, at the climax of his funeral eulogy for Alcestis, that he will never bury anyone else more dear (φίλτερον) nor kinder to him (431-32), acquires special prominence and poignancy within the context of this sustained and almost systematic investigation of the meanings and tensions of φιλία.

Besides these basic aspects of this tragedy that will be important for later transformations of the myth, there is one episode in particular of Euripides' *Alcestis* in which all of its ironies, difficulties, and tensions are concentrated into an especially suggestive moment. At the end of the tragedy, the veiled woman whom Heracles has brought to Admetus and whom he asks Admetus to keep in his house is revealed to be Alcestis herself, returned from the Underworld. At this point Admetus wants Alcestis to speak with him, but the woman remains silent, and it is left to Heracles to explain to Admetus why it is that Alcestis does not speak to him:

¹³ φίλος or φίλτατος applied to the wife: 15, 165, 201, 230 twice, 351, 355, 376, 432, 460, 599, 895, 991, 992, 1095 (1094-95 del. Wilamowitz), 1133; φιλία 279, 473, 877, 917, 930; φιλέω 1081. To friends: φίλος 212, 218, 369 twice, 562, 935, 960, 1008, 1011. To parents: φίλος 15, 339, 407, 630, 668, 701. To children: φίλος 264, 376; φιλέω 302. To the host: 23 (by metonymy), 42. To the husband: 264. There are also five applications of these words to life as especially dear (φίλος 340, 722 twice; φιλέω 703, 704) and two usages of unclear application (165, 530). Cf. also φιλόξενος: 809, 830, 858.

{Αδ.} τί γάρ ποθ' ἦδ' ἄναυδος ἔστηκεν γυνή;
{Ηρ.} οὔπω θέμις σοι τῆσδε προσφωνημάτων
κλύειν, πρὶν ἂν θεοῖσι τοῖσι νερτέροις
ἀφαγνίσηται καὶ τρίτον μόλη φάος. (1143-46)

Admetus: But why is my wife standing here, and does not speak?

Heracles: You are not allowed to hear her speak to you until
her obligations to the gods who live below
are washed away. Until the third morning comes. (p. 52)

Why is it exactly that Alcestis remains silent in front of Admetus? Heracles repeatedly tells Admetus that he is permitted to touch her and to speak to his wife:

ἐς σὰς μὲν οὖν ἔγωγε θήσομαι χέρας. (1113)

I will put her into your hands and into yours alone. (p. 50)

{Ηρ.} τόλμα προτεῖναι χεῖρα καὶ θιγεῖν ξένης.
{Αδ.} καὶ δὴ προτείνω, Γοργόν' ὡς κατατομῶν.
{Ηρ.} ἔχεις; {Αδ.} ἔχω, ναί. (1117-19)

Heracles: Be brave. Reach out your hand and take the stranger's.

Admetus: So. Here is my hand; I feel like Perseus killing the
gorgon.

Heracles: You have her? *Admetus:* Yes, I have her. (pp. 50-51)

{Αδ.} θίγω, προσείπω ζῶσαν ὡς δάμαρτ' ἐμήν;
{Ηρ.} πρόσσειπ'. (1131-32)

Admetus: May I touch her, and speak to her, as my living wife?

Heracles: Speak to her. (p. 51).

But she herself is not allowed to say anything to him. We witness on the stage a moment of intense physical and emotional proximity after the most absolute separation imaginable, and yet it remains oddly one-sided, and the possibility of a reciprocal and symmetrical verbal contact between the two characters is invoked and yet explicitly and strictly denied.¹⁴

Why does this happen? Some scholars have hypothesized that dramaturgical conditions might have made it impossible for Euripides to have a third actor in this play: if so, then only a mute actor, not an additional speaking one, was available to play Alcestis and greet her

¹⁴ A humanely insightful poetic response to this scene is to be found in Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), pp. 150-52. I thank Nicole Jerr for the reference.

husband.¹⁵ But this can surely not be true, for in the scene earlier in the play in which Admetus, Alcestis, and the son had said farewell to one another there had been three actors on stage at the same time who had all spoken or sung. Any third actor who would have been capable of singing the boy's heart-rending song (393-403, 406-15) would certainly have been able at the end of the play to say a few words in the voice of Alcestis—if Euripides had wished him to do so. Hence it seems hardly plausible to seek the reason for Alcestis' silence in purely dramaturgical considerations.

But what other reason might be imagined for Alcestis' strange silence? In the lines quoted above (1143-46), Heracles himself provides a religious explanation when he says that after someone has been consecrated to the gods of death but then has been saved from death, he or she must remain silent for three days in order to be freed from obligations to the Underworld. Astonishingly, there have actually been some Classical scholars who have believed that in ancient Greece there really was a traditional religious ritual of the sort apparently attested here.¹⁶ Instead, it must be pointed out that there is no evidence whatsoever for such a ritual anywhere else—and that in fact it would be extremely surprising if there were, given that the situation in which a dead person returns to life from the Underworld could scarcely have happened very often, if it ever happened at all. After all, Alcestis' return from the Underworld is the stuff of which fairy tales are made, not an ordinary (or even extraordinary) occurrence of everyday Greek life; the very notion that there might have been some standard religious procedure in the real world of ancient Greece that was applied in order to deal with the kind of situation that happens only in fairy tales is surely absurd.

Evidently, Heracles is inventing this explanation—or, to put the matter more precisely, Euripides is allowing Heracles to invent an *ad hoc* religious motivation which is not attested anywhere else and which is put into Heracles' mouth so that it can be proclaimed with that hero's authority. But why is he doing this? Certainly, Euripides could easily have let Alcestis say something or other; or alternatively, he could have had her stay silent but avoided pointing out to the audience that she was not saying anything. Instead, Euripides not only silences Alcestis: he also thematizes the woman's silence, making it impossible for us not to notice that she is remaining silent, and emphasizing in this way the absence of any kind of verbal response whatsoever on her part with regard to her husband. To be sure, we do not see Alcestis speaking to Heracles or to anyone else either¹⁷; and yet surely we are more interested in what she might have to say to the husband for whom she had died and to whom she has now returned, it is he who is invited repeatedly to address her directly, and hence it is her silence towards him that seems most remarkable.

¹⁵ See the cautious discussion in Dale, *op. cit.*, pp. xix-xx, 129-30 ad 1146.

¹⁶ Parker's careful analysis, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-81 ad 1144-6, seems in the end to go in this direction.

¹⁷ I owe this point to Corinna Most.

Surely this striking theatrical invention ought to have the effect, and presumably also had the intention, of making us ask ourselves the following question: supposing Alcestis could have spoken to Admetus, what exactly would she have said to him? Already as Alcestis was dying, and even more painfully after her death, Admetus has learned that he had committed a terrible mistake in having Alcestis sacrifice herself for him (see especially 861-961).¹⁸ Doubtless we spectators are encouraged by Euripides' play to share with him a recognition of the truth of this lesson. But during this same period of time, while Admetus and we have been on the earth and Alcestis has been in the Underworld, what if anything has she learned? If she has learned nothing, then Admetus' lesson will be diminished in value, for it will be restricted in its pertinence to him. If she has learned a lesson different from his, then the audience will become confused and will not know which lesson to believe. But if she has learned exactly the same lesson as he has, namely that it was a mistake for someone like Alcestis to sacrifice herself for someone like Admetus, then what could Alcestis possibly say upon her return from the Underworld to the man for whose sake she had sacrificed her very life? Can we really imagine Alcestis greeting him with tender words of loving affection, as though nothing whatsoever had happened? If she did, would the play's conclusion not be intolerably trivialized and sentimentalized thereby? And yet we can hardly imagine her launching upon her return into an angry invective against her worthless husband and asserting that she had erred gravely in choosing to die for him. A scene like that might have worked well in comedy, but surely such an ending would have been disastrous on the tragic stage.

Of course, it is hardly likely that Euripides would really like us to imagine his play ending with the resurrected Alcestis bickering with her bewildered husband. But what else could she have said that would have been both psychologically plausible and dramatically effective? It seems undeniable that whatever words Alcestis could have said to Admetus at the end of the play would have been very difficult indeed to imagine plausibly and to stage successfully. In other words, we can easily accept the return of Alcestis from the Underworld as the concluding part of a narrated folktale, but it is virtually impossible to fill such a motif with the kind of complex, realistic psychological content that would be necessary for a staged play. In

¹⁸ It is controversial just how seriously we are to take Admetus' recognition of his error. Charles P. Segal, *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow: Art, Gender, and Commemoration in Alcestis, Hippolytus, and Hecuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 59, argues that Admetus works through his grief and eventually achieves clarity; C.A.E. Luschnig and Hanna M. Roisman, ed., *Euripides' Alcestis: With Notes and Commentary*. Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture 29 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), p. 203, are far more skeptical about the clarity and depth of Admetus' realizations. I incline toward the former position, which seems to me to be supported by Admetus' resistance to Hercules' offer of the veiled woman at the end of the play.

fact, it is not even possible for us to understand just what it is that Alcestis might be thinking when she returns to her husband. The veil with which she returns to the stage can be interpreted as a dramatic trick to delay the inevitable recognition, as the covering normally placed upon a corpse, and as the traditional outdoors garb of a proper living woman. But that veil is also a sign of a fundamental opacity which obscures Alcestis' subjectivity at the end of the play and which, even after Heracles removes it at line 1122, makes it impossible for us to penetrate and fully to understand her psychological state at this point. We do not know what she herself thinks about this transaction between men, in which she is an indispensable element but does not participate as a fully acknowledging partner. Even unveiled, Alcestis *redux* remains opaque, for Admetus and for us. Her silence cannot but cast a shadow, fleeting in its duration but lasting in its effects, upon the seemingly so joyous conclusion of Euripides' play.

T.S. Eliot wrote *The Cocktail Party* in 1949¹⁹; two years later, in 1951, he gave a lecture entitled "Poetry and Drama" at his old university, Harvard, in which he retraced the course of his dramatic career and along the way revealed something of which up until that very moment no one had apparently ever had even the slightest suspicion: namely that he had derived this play from Euripides' *Alcestis*.²⁰ He suggests, doubtless somewhat ironically, that it is proof of his consummate artistry that he was able so successfully to conceal from every one of his readers, audiences, and critics all the elements of this derivation, however evident it may be *a posteriori*. In his lecture, Eliot also gave some specific indications to demonstrate the real existence of the relation that he asserted between the two plays.

In Eliot's comedy we find, in comparison with Euripides' tragedy, a double metaphorization that operates in terms of a systematic spiritualization.²¹ What was material or physically real in Euripides becomes symbolic in Eliot: everything that was literal in the ancient play becomes figural, and especially metaphorical, in the modern one. This procedure is in general quite typical of modern revisions of ancient literary texts: what was true at a real or pragmatic level in the ancient text is now understood at a symbolic level in the modern one. For example, in James Joyce's *Ulysses* we find once again all the monsters that Odysseus

¹⁹ I cite the play from T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950).

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), reprinted in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957).

²¹ On the relations between the two plays, see especially Virginia B. Phelan, *Two ways of life and death: Alcestis and The cocktail party* (New York: Garland, 1990); also H.B. Heilmann, "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," *Comparative Literature* 5 (1953) 105-16; and R.G. Tanner, "The Dramas of T.S. Eliot and Their Greek Models," *Greece and Rome* 17 (1970) 123-34. Parker, *op. cit.*, p. xxxiii, mentions the relation of the two plays only very briefly and superficially.

encountered during his wanderings, but now they are understood not as real monstrous creatures but only in a Euhemeristic allegorical key, as historically real human beings embodying the moral qualities that had been symbolically associated with those ancient monsters—as if the spiritual meanings which the allegorical tradition had always tried to discover within the depths of Homer’s poetry had now finally come to the surface. But without a key, the textual references of such allegories can sometimes be hard to unlock. That is why a whole industry of scholarship has been able (and has been obliged) to come into existence, in order to work out as far as possible the references in Joyce’s *Ulysses* to Homer’s *Odyssey*.²² That is also why the first readers and audiences of Eliot’s *Cocktail Party* completely failed even to notice the fact that his play had its source in Euripides’ *Alcestis*, and why it is convenient for his later ones that Eliot eventually felt impelled to make this fact public himself. If he had not done so, one wonders whether anyone would ever have noticed, or whether any scholar who had suggested such a link would have been believed.

What is surprising in Eliot’s play is not that it metaphorizes Euripides’ story, but rather that it subjects it to a double metaphorization. The fundamental plot structure of Eliot’s comedy presents a story of loss and then of restoration exactly as in Euripides, but operating first of all on a metaphorical level. At the beginning of the play there is a married couple, Lavinia and Edward, and a cocktail party in which Edward is the host. He is an unwilling host (unlike the excessively good one Admetus), because Lavinia has just left him. But she has left him not in a radical and permanent sense, because she has died (as Alcestis left Admetus), but only in a relative and ordinary way, because their marriage has fallen apart. Edward has tried to cancel the cocktail party that was organized for that very afternoon, but he did not manage to reach some of the guests in time to stop them, so they have come to his house expecting a party. Thus in this play we find not the perfect marriage, but a failed marriage, and not the perfect host, but an unwilling host. And at the cocktail party itself we see an unknown man who (like Hercules in the *Alcestis*) becomes completely drunk, starts to sing, and promises to bring back to his host his missing wife—which is exactly what he will go on to do. Only later do we discover that this unknown guest is a psychoanalyst named Harcourt-Reilly.

Harcourt-Reilly represents symbolically the divine figure who restores to the husband the wife whom he has lost and who, by abandoning him, had, as it were, died for him. It is hardly coincidental that the first two syllables and the last one of Harcourt-Reilly’s name, taken together, are almost exactly equal to the name “Hercules.” When Harcourt-Reilly promises to bring Edward’s wife back to him, he tells him, “it is a serious matter | To bring someone back from the dead.” Edward answers in surprise, “From the dead? | That figure of speech is somewhat . . .

²² The industry began at least as early as Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce’s Ulysses: A Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930).

dramatic, | As it was only yesterday that my wife left me." Edward's word "dramatic," set into conspicuous relief by the slight pause that precedes it, alludes covertly to the Greek dramatic original, in which the woman's death had not been merely a figure of speech, and prepares the way for the guest's sententious conclusion, "Ah, but we die to each other daily." (p. 71) What had been a real death in Euripides has now become the symbolic death consisting in the alienation between two people who have remained physically alive the whole time but who have grown apart from one another over the years and who no longer really understand or love each other. Besides this fundamental relation between the basic plots of the two plays, there is also a series of precise parallels and reversals ranging from the characters, their names, and their actions, to such crucial dramatic devices as the imposition of verbal silence after the unexpected restoration. When Harcourt-Reilly restores Lavinia to her husband Edward, he strictly imposes upon both of them a whole series of verbal prohibitions: Edward is not permitted to ask Lavinia anything about why or where she went, and Lavinia is not permitted to ask anything of him (pp. 72-73).

It seems evident that we have here a version, for all its evident ironies and reversals, of the thematic core of Euripides' tragedy. But the restoration of Lavinia to her husband is only the first level of the process of spiritualization Eliot performs on *Alcestis*. There is also a second level, one which is religious in nature. In the second act, after Lavinia and Edward have been brought back together and return to a normal, banal, mediocre life (the life they knew before, the life that for Eliot is typical of the lives of almost all of us), another character returns to the stage whom we had seen earlier: a young woman named Celia (that is, "Caelia" or "Celestial, Heavenly"), who no longer finds satisfaction in the banalities of her ordinary existence in this world, and in consequence has developed an acute sense of sin. To her the psychoanalyst Harcourt-Reilly suggests that she work out her salvation with diligence. And this is just what Celia will go on to do, as we will discover near the end of the play: she will go to a small island in the Pacific where she will try in vain to save the natives from a plague, and they will kill her by crucifying her in a particularly terrifying and savage manner.

Celia's self-sacrifice represents, paradoxically, the restoration to herself of a person who had become completely alienated from herself. On this second, religious level, the loss which Eliot's play presents to us is the loss of one's self, of one's moral identity, and the restoration coincides, at least in this case, with a martyr's death. It is precisely by means of her death that Celia may be presumed to have been restored to herself and to have rediscovered a meaning in her life. It is hardly accidental that in the end we learn that the natives of this island, after having killed Celia, have dedicated a temple and a cult to her, thereby founding a new form of religion (one that of course bears manifest affinities to Christianity).

Clearly, the spiritualization which Eliot performs upon his Greek model operates on two levels. On the one hand, spirit means for Eliot the object

of a contemporary science, psychology: Harcourt-Reilly is a psychoanalyst and he has patients whom he tries in his own, rather idiosyncratic way to cure of what he, and they, consider to be their psychological maladies. But on the other hand, spirit also means, on a religious level, the religious soul of a man or woman, and Harcourt-Reilly, though he is a professional psychoanalyst, also has the rather odd habit of telling his patients to work out their salvation with diligence. One wonders how many real psychoanalysts speak to their patients in this way.

The heterogeneity between these two levels—the psychological level, represented by a marriage that is rescued by the overcoming of a temporary crisis and by the return to the husband of the wife who had abandoned him, and the religious level, in which a human soul is saved from the meaninglessness of life but at the cost of life itself—has repercussions upon the form of Eliot's play. For *The Cocktail Party* begins as a brilliant bourgeois comedy, what the English call a drawing-room comedy because of its typical setting, like many of the plays of Oscar Wilde or Noel Coward; but it ends as a drama of religious salvation. This generic heterogeneity is rather peculiar; after all, none of Oscar Wilde's comedies ends with fully serious questions about the meaning of life and the destiny of the human soul. It reminds us far more of the generic hybrid of tragedy, satyr play, and fairy tale in *Alcestis* than of anything in the easily recognizable and rather homogeneous tradition of drawing-room comedies. The fact that Eliot's play begins with rather trivial witticisms and ends with quite profound reflections may well have been one of the factors that caused serious problems for its understanding and popularity among its first audiences, and this complexity has no doubt limited its success in later years as well. But this development of the play seems to have been a deliberate choice on the part of Eliot, who wanted to give to the story of *Alcestis*, as Euripides had told it, a depth of spiritual content which, in his eyes, was at most only implicit in the ancient text but had to be brought to the surface in the work of a modern author.

At the time that Euripides wrote his tragedy, the idea of bodily resurrection was not central in his culture, and there was no problem for him or for his audiences in regarding *Alcestis* as an extremely rare, probably quite unique exception. By contrast, for Eliot, it was impossible to read this ancient story without seeing implied in it the fundamental mysteries of Christian religious thought, just as it was impossible to think of the figure of Heracles without thinking of Jesus, with whom through the ages he has always had so much in common.²³ By this transformation, Eliot has created a highly didactic comedy, a play that is far more edifying in tone and character than Euripides' is, and he has filled the enigmatic and irritating silence of Euripides' *Alcestis* with an exquisitely Christian and perhaps rather palliative content. Certainly, by the stern standards of the Classical

²³ See in general Marcel Simon, *Hercule et le Christianisme* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1955).

scholar, in Christianizing Euripides' tragedy in this way he has distorted it, at least to a certain extent. Yet at the same time a modern playwright has resuscitated Alcestis, who has come to dramatic life again after her death, not only within the terms of Euripides' play, but also long after the end of antiquity, in such plays as those of Eliot. In this way not only has Euripides' Alcestis returned to a new life: so too has Euripides' *Alcestis*.

