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SOMMARIO

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ALCESTIS THE GHOST

– I can summon spirits from the vasty deep.
– Aye, but will they come when you summon them?
Macbeth

At the end of the play named after her, Alcestis is resurrected but with a well-known proviso, which is that her husband should not speak to her:

οὔπω θέμις σοι τῆσδε προσφωνημάτων
κλύειν, πρὶν ἂν θεοῖσι τοῖσι νερτέροις
ἀφαγνίσηται καὶ τρίτον μόλῃ φάος. (1144-146)[1]

This curious proviso is anticipated and elaborated in two other instances. Taken together, these three instances make Alcestis a special sort of displaced person, one displaced in a literal sense, of course, because she has been removed from her grave, but also in a phenomenological sense[2]. She is something of a ghost, something of an apparition, and this peculiar displacement accounts not only for her three-day hiatus but also for two other features of the play, the difficulties attending her burial and her abortive heroization.

The proviso that Alcestis be silent is anticipated by Admetus himself, when he says that as far as he is concerned, she is untouchable (1115). Even when Heracles insists, he yields in words that explain his repugnance: καὶ δὴ προτείνω. Γοργόν' ὡς καρατομῶν (1118). He thinks his wife is a monster.

Unwillingness or inability to see his wife is the theme of the next of the three instances. Hinted at in lines 1144-146, this unwillingness meets with confirmation shortly afterwards, when Admetus has been told who she is and has been shown her face and thus has no further reason to fear her (1121). He sees and feels her, he beholds her, yet he nonetheless refuses to believe his eyes: ὅρα δὲ μή τι φάσμα νερτέρων τόδ' ᾖ (1127). After this comes the third, conclusive instance, when the untouchable, invisible Alcestis must be silent for three days. Consistent with these instances is Admetus' refusal to mention his wife by name and his failure even to speak to her except once (1133-134)[3].

Some perplexity hangs in the air, affecting the perceptions of the very man who knows Alcestis best. Even Heracles, who does a good deal of explaining in this scene, has no helpful word to offer. He limits himself to this disclaimer, uttered in reply to line 1127: οὐ ψυχαγωγὸν τόνδ' ἐποιήσω ξένον (1128).

[1] Lines in the play are hereafter referred to by number. The text used in this paper is that of J. Diggle, *Euripidis Fabulae*, I, Oxford 1984. I thank C. Segal, V. Citti and L. Miller for their comments.

[2] Her importance in the play makes it misleading to call her a 'marginal' figure, while 'liminal' is misleading with respect to her burial, which does not serve as a passage or *limen* between life and death.

[3] The refusal to mention her by name is noticed by C. Segal, *Euripides' Alcestis: How to Die a Normal Death in Greek Tragedy*, in *Death and Representation*, Baltimore-London 1993, 223.

But his disclaimer only complicates matters, for as the scholiast to this line notes, *psychagogon* evokes Thessalian witches. Alcestis is under a witch-like power, and in Greek belief this makes her a ghost, a limbo-dweller trapped between life and death. Similarly, she is trapped between solid, physical reality and illusion. She is displaced but also eerie and even frightening[4].

Two of Admetus' words in the final scene confirm this view. *Phasma* is a term that Euripides applies only to persons midway between opposite states, be these life and death or appearance and reality, 'reality' meaning solid, physical existence. *Gorgo* is a complementary term, applying to those on the boundary between life and death. Both words evoke eerieness and fear.

In *Orestes* and *Helen*, *phasma* is used of family members given up for dead. In *Orestes*, it is pessimistic. Used of Orestes while he is on his sickbed, it implies uncertainty as to his recovery while evoking the wasting effects of his illness. In *Helen*, it is optimistic, since Menelaus uses it when he cannot believe his good fortune in rediscovering his wife. In *Hecuba*, it is used several times of ghosts or prospective ghosts[5]. It is notable that in each case it is used not by the person or ghost beheld, but by the beholder at a moment of intense excitement.

If a living being is considered real and a dead one unreal, a *phasma* is in-between. So in the *Bacchae* this word refers to a phantom, in *Hecuba* to a dream, in *Iphigenia in Tauris* to a vision[6]. It connotes some phenomenological difficulty, but in a context of both terror and intimacy. Applied to a family member, it evokes the prospect of a loss that itself verges on death. It is both affective and exaggerated, the idiom of the mourner or would-be mourner when he conceives himself as a victim of the death of a loved one[7]. The Indo-european root, *fa-, meaning 'to shine' may account for the aspects of intensity and terror[8].

The *phasma* of the last scene is not without precedents earlier in the play. Admetus and the chorus both suffer confusion as to whether Alcestis is alive or dead, and the term *phasma* develops this familiar theme[9]. *Phasma* also

4 Schol. *ad* 1128. For witches and ghosts, see E. Rohde, *Psyche: Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, Freiburg i. B. 1894², *App.* VII, followed by J. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*, Princeton 1983, ch. 4. For a different view, seeing Alcestis not as an ambiguous figure but instead «a symbol of death», see E. Bradley, *Admetus and the Triumph of Failure in Euripides Alcestis*, Ramus 9, 1980, 125.

5 Given up for dead: *Hel.* 569, *Or.* 407. Ghost: *Hec.* 53, 94, 389. Dream: *Hec.* 704.

6 *El.* 704, *IT* 41, 1262, *Ba.* 629.

7 Or in Menelaus' case, the beneficiary of unexpected good fortune. See M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Cambridge 1974, 171-78, for examples of similar contrasts between the mourner and the deceased and 181f for contrasts including accusations of abandonment lodged against the deceased. In *Alcestis*, see 866, 895-99, where Admetus contrasts Alcestis with himself but to her advantage.

8 Derived, like phan-, from *bh(e)h_2, also meaning 'to shine', which suggests that the fundamental meaning of *phasma* is 'emanation of light'. Unlike many words derived from the same root, *phasma* has no ambiguous connection to *phêmi*. See *DELG*, s.v.

9 Confusion: 125, 257. The famous, parodied lines: 521, 530.

develops a visual motif, that of Alcestis' phenomenologically and ritually charged movements on and off stage. Each time she enters or leaves the stage, her relation to death or reality shifts.

The shifts begin even before her first appearance, when Death enters the house after the prologue. In response Alcestis takes the stage and envisions her own death before it occurs:

> ὁρῶ δίκωπον ὁρῶ σκάφος ἐν
> λίμναι· νεκύων δὲ πορθμεύς
> ἔχων χέρ' ἐπὶ κοντῷ Χάρων
> μ' ἤδη καλεῖ· Τί μέλλεις;
> ἐπείγου οὐ κατείργεις· τάδε τοί με
> σπερχόμενος ταχύνει. (351-56)

In this scene Alcestis assumes the role of Electra in *Orestes* or Menelaus in *Helen*, and imagines a family member midway between life and death; the difference is that she is envisioning herself and not someone else as the person returned from the dead, the *phasma*. Instead of being a real person seen in the light of terror and loss, the *phasma* is now a figment prompted by the same emotions. It has become a *phasma* of a *phasma*.

Alcestis' subsequent exit and later re-appearances are less spectacular in their poetry, but weightier in visual impact. Alcestis must leave the stage on a litter after collapsing, reappear on a bier in her new status as a corpse[10], and later reappear robed from head to foot, clothed in a visual analogue to her husband's refusal to look at her. If unveiled, the usual interpretation of line 1121, she does not become any less of a *phasma*, or difficulty, both because of Admetus' sceptical reaction and because unveiling does not give her the power of speech.

She is, moreover, compared to a *Gorgo*, a creature both horrifying and *phasma*-like, in that it inhabits the psychic realm of fear of death[11]. But the emphasis shifts, for while *phasma* stresses the emotion of loss, *Gorgo* stresses that of horror, and through its mythic associations implies that only a hero can deal with the threat.

But if Alcestis is a ghost or apparition and thus a kind of displaced person, she must be revived and restored, and numerous critics have thought that the three-day period of silence suggested by Heracles accomplishes this purpose. The interpretations vary, but all meet with difficulties[12].

10 As implied by Admetus' promise of ἐκφορά at 422 and the chorus' last farewell at 741. See A.M. Dale, *Euripides' Alcestis*, Oxford 1954, ad loc.

11 Cf. Vernant's comment that «Gorgo marks the boundary of the world of the dead», in J.-P. Vernant - P. Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, tr. J. Lloyd, New York 1990, 192. But Alcestis is a gorgon whose power is revealed when she is unveiled, not beheaded. For a different view, minimizing the horror of Alcestis as a Gorgon, see Dale ad loc. 1118.

12 A reverse ritual, though not a funeral: A. Burnett, *The Virtues of Admetus*, CP 60, 1965, 240-55, esp. 255 n. 24, following G.G. Betts, *The Silence of Alcestis*, Mnemosyne 18/4, 1965, 181-82. Purification prior to remarriage: R. Buxton, *Le voile et le silence dans Alceste*, CGita 3, 1987, 167-78, and similarly R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death*, Princeton 1994, 95. Purification without remarriage: E. Trammell, *The Mute Alcestis*, CJ 37, 1941-42, 144-50. For other views,

One view is that the three days constitute a ritual of rebirth, as proposed by Betts[13]. Such a ritual is reported by Plutarch:

> ὥσπερ ἐξ ἀρχῆς τικτόμενον, ταῖς γυναιξὶν ἀπολοῦσαι καὶ σπαργανῶσαι καὶ θηλὴν ἐπισχεῖν. οὕτω τε δρᾶν καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἅπαντας. ὑστεροπότμους προσαγορευομένους.[14]

The difficulty with this view is that Plutarch's ritual of rebirth is only for those falsely reported to be dead, and Alcestis' death is not a false report.

A different view is that the three-day wait is an inexplicable and arbitrary element consonant with the fairy-tale atmosphere at the end of the play. This atmosphere was first described by Lesky, who viewed the play as consisting of a realistic center with a fairy-tale frame[15]. The restoration of Alcestis also corresponds to the fate of the Alcestis-figures that Lesky discovered in several folktales he identified as Greek or Armenian parallels, if not sources, for Euripides. In these tales God miraculously revives the dead wife[16], while in the play, Heracles begins the job of bringing her back to life, the gods of the underworld give their assent, and then other, unnamed supernatural agencies apparently finish the task. But Lesky's explanation cannot account for Admetus' refusal to see or touch his wife. It overlooks the displacement of Alcestis, as opposed to her silence.

A third view is that the three-day wait marks a remarriage. The overlap of a remarriage and funeral resembles the very common overlap of a first marriage and a funeral, as analyzed among others by Rehm[17], who considers the second marriage different because of Admetus' 'feminization'[18]. Like Lesky's view, this one overlooks Alcestis' displacement, and in addition excludes a factor accounted for by Betts and perhaps Lesky, too - removal of pollution[19]. Most of all, this view does not account for Admetus' viewing his wife as a

see n. 15 below.

13 Betts using the same primary sources as Trammell but relating the ritual to Alcestis' silence as well as to her death, which was Trammells focus.

14 *Qu. Gr.* 264f.

15 A. Lesky, *Alkestis, der Mythus und das Drama*, Wien-Leipzig 1925, incorporating many of the views of C. Robert, *Thanatos*, Berlin 1879, 28-36. For a more recent statement of the tripartite division, see D. Conacher, *Structural Aspects of Euripides Alcestis*, in *Greek Poetry and Philosophy: Studies in Honour of L. Woodbury*, ed. D. Gerber. Chico, Ca. 1984, 73-81.

16 Lesky 27-28, citing D. Hesseling, *Euripides Alcestis en de Volkspoezie* (Verslagen en Medelingen d. kgl. Ak. Amsterdam, v. 4.12), Amsterdam 1914, who published tales gathered by N. Politis, and Lesky 30, citing B. Chalatianz, in *Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für Volkskunde* 19. Jahrgang, Berlin 1909, 368-69.

17 See n. 12 above.

18 Rehm ch. 6.

19 Rehm 95. Lesky does not mention pollution, but his emphasis on the reality of her death may imply that pollution is present in the last scene.

Gorgon, not a submissive, human female.

Least satisfactory is the view that the three-day wait is not meant to remedy Alcestis' displacement, but instead meets a structural and ideological requirement that she be silent. This view reduces the play to a story of one man's *xenia* prompting another's and likewise reduces Alcestis to a hero's captive, who has no her business speaking up and interrupting reciprocity among the men[20]. All the objections made to Rehm apply here as well, as does the additional objection that Alcestis' silence lasts only three days.

Another view focuses on a central event in the play, Alcestis' burial. In several respects this burial is marred. The resulting difficulties account for her being stranded between life and death, solid reality and illusion; at the play's end, Heracles eliminates these difficulties when he recommends that Alcestis remain silent for three days. The burial, in short, is the problem, and a change in the burial - in fact, a cancellation of it - is the answer, at least from Heracles' point of view.

As summarized by Kurtz and Boardman, a Greek burial served to put the dead to rest[21]. Stage by stage, the deceased and the survivors were separated, and the pollution resulting from contact with death was checked and removed. The laying out of the corpse was intended to prevent such mistakes as Plutarch describes, and the orderly succession of events reduced death to a ritual and thus to a distinct and limited phase in the lives of the mourners. With an important reservation that found expression in hero cult, a Greek burial severed the realms of the living and the dead[22]. In the play's terms, it prevented displacement.

But Alcestis' burial encounters several difficulties, first of all the presence of pollution. When the chorus complain of no lustral water before the house (98f), Alcestis is still alive, but no water is provided later, either, even after her death. Nor is the house cleansed of pollution after her burial, another ritual obligation that goes ignored[23]. Even if Heracles' confinement to the men's quarters spares him pollution while he is in Admetus' house, the corpse he retrieves is evidently polluted and will pollute those who touch it. The offerings at the grave strengthen the theme of pollution; so does Apollo's

20 See N. Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, tr. A. Forster, Cambridge Ma. 1987, 28-30, though she argues that this exchange is mitigated or rendered ironic by the 'feminization' of Admetus. For a different view of the 'feminization', see Rehm 93.

21 D. Kurtz - J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, Ithaca 1971, on confirmation of death: 142, on pollution: 142, 44, and on the return to normalcy: 142, 47. Similarly Alexiou 5, who regards Plato's view, *Phdr.* 107d, that a *daimon* led the soul down to Hades as a popular tradition and adds that the success of this journey depended on proper burial. See also E. De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*, Torino 1958, 12-56 on crises resulting from improper burial.

22 Bremmer as in n. 3 above; M. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, tr. F. Fielden, Oxford 1949[2], 100-04. Both begin with the Homeric examples of Patroclus and Elpinor.

23 R. Parker, *Miasma*, Oxford 1963, 40, citing Eur. *Hel.* 1430, Dem. 47.70, Ant. *Chor.* 37. Similarly, *Greek Burial* 146.

remark in the prologue[24]. The language of the last scene does not state the theme, but does not need to: Alcestis' presence does. The first purpose of a burial, the separation of the living and the dead, thus goes unmet.

The second purpose, reducing death to a ritual, also goes unmet. One difficulty is that it is unclear what sort of ritual will take place. Thanatos has involved Admetus in a blood sacrifice in which Thanatos is the priest, Alcestis the *hostia*, and Admetus the unnamed but implicit worshipper. When Heracles predicts that Thanatos will be lurking by the grave, drinking pools of blood, he sketches details for this sacrifice, which apparently involves vampirism[25]. Only the word *aphagnisêtai*, corresponding to *hagnisêi* at v. 76, brings this version of Alcestis' death to a close[26].

By then Heracles has substituted another version, the battle with Thanatos and subsequent rescue. Unlike the version propounded by Thanatos, it cannot be dismissed as a thwarted alternative. The difficulty with Heracles' version of Alcestis' burial is much simpler: the burial has been a mistake. It does not matter that all goes well after the initial confusion[27]. Alcestis has returned, so the mourners must put aside their mourning. Their ritual must be canceled[28].

For this conclusion is the gravamen of his advice to Admetus to allow three days silence. A typical funeral lasted three days, and so the cancellation must last three days. Deconsecration will satisfy the gods below, and Admetus proclamation of a festival will create the impression of normalcy, but the possessor of the truth, Alcestis, will not disturb the happy ending by reporting that she is not yet fully alive - that she is still a corpse, albeit a displaced corpse that can walk but not speak.

First a displaced woman, now a displaced corpse. Is there no way for Alcestis to avoid an abnormal death? There is a hope for an abnormal death with more attractive consequences, and this hope is heroization[29]. As a heroine, Alcestis would be subject to the reservation that allows the living and the dead to commingle rather than remain separate[30]. But while Alcestis the

24 22-23, 844-45.

25 Cf. 36-50, except that here Death drinks, and not any dead human being.

26 *Aphagnisêtai* thus means 'deconsecrate', *hagnisêi* 'consecrate'. The contrast is perhaps unique. At Paus. 2.31.8, for example, *aphagnisa* means 'consecrate'. Similarly, the schol. to Alc. 98 describes purification as *aphagnismos*. *Aphagnisêtai* is the only instance of the compound verb in the tragedians.

27 Though all goes well only if one allows for dramatic foreshortening, which squeezes the three days of a typical funeral into one. Another noteworthy feature is that the funeral and its preparations come earlier in Alcestis than in many plays, as noted by G. Seeck, *Unaristotelische Untersuchungen zu Euripides: ein motivanalytischer Kommentar zur Alkestis*, Heidelberg 1985, 21, and its repercussions come early as well.

28 Similarly, J. Gregory, *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians*, Ann Arbor 1991, 43, on the 'cancellation' of Alcestis' death.

29 A possibility also raised by Segal, though he regards Alcestis heroization as having little palliative effect, 227.

30 Bremmer 100-04.

heroine receives worship in choral odes, she is unacknowledged elsewhere in the play. This oversight and the lack of other sources about her cult may account for her being minimized in studies of Greek heroines.

Two such studies, those of Lyons and Larson, establish a typology for heroines, who for Lyons differ from heroes in that they cross the boundary between life and death more readily. The deification of Semele, the afterlife of Iphigenia as Hecate, and the removal of Helen to the Isles of the Blessed, all illustrate the modes of immortality available to heroines, and in Helen's case, available to a heroine and her spouse[31]. The chorus of this play adds yet another mode: Alcestis will sit beside Persephone: Ἄιδου νύμφῃ παρεδρεύοις (746). The image suggests an attendant divinity, and so it has something in common with each of the three examples just cited - Semele's lofty position in Olympus, Hecate's chthonic associations, Helens eternal good fortune.

Besides a heroine's fate, Alcestis will enjoy a heroine's cult: worship in both Sparta and Athens, indicating panhellenic popularity, divine honors, pilgrimage to her shrine, songs in her honor at great festivals[32]. The language of the odes suggests actual cult, while the play's plot offers the *aition* for the cult. Alcestis' own statement about her *kleos* anticipates such an outcome[33].

But Alcestis' heroine cult does not receive confirmation via a typical Euripidean *aition* appearing at the play's conclusion. With respect to this structural norm, Alcestis is once again displaced, this time as a heroine. The reason is that canceling the burial also entails canceling the *aition*. Alcestis no longer dies for her husband. Instead she will die years later and presumably experience an ordinary death followed by an ordinary interment.

Plato's version of the story shows the difference between a simple sacrificial death and the situation contrived by Euripides. In the *Symposium*, Alcestis dies, goes to the underworld, and Persephone sends her back[34]. The chorus in Euripides' play agrees with Plato and refers to Alcestis' descent to

31 J. Larson, *Greek Heroine Cult*, Madison 1985, on Alcestis 147. D. Lyons, *Gender and Immortality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult*, Princeton 1996, ch. 1 passim on heroine's amphibiousness. Both accept A. Brelich's definition of a heroine as a woman having a myth and receiving veneration in a cult, *Heros: Il culto greco degli esseri semidivini*, Rome 1958, 14. Iphigenia as Hecate: Stes. fr. 215 *PMG*.

32 444-52, 997-99, 1002-006, especially the phrase *makaira daimon*, which incorporates the various possibilities.

33 324-25, echoed by the chorus 994.

34 *Smp*. 179b. The word *phasma* appears in Plato as well, but applied to Eurydice, 179d. See also Apollod. 1.9.15, who heightens the role of goddesses in the story by making Artemis the one who requires Admetus to die. An alternative story thus emerges: Artemis in lieu of Apollo, Persephone in lieu of Heracles, and Alcestis as a heroine trapped in a partly beneficial, partly hostile relationship to these goddesses, who demand her death but reward her afterwards. For such ambiguous relations between goddesses and heroines, paralleling those between gods and heroes, see Lyons, ch. 3.

the underworld. Yet Heracles gives a different report. In a passage central to Alcestis fate as a heroine, he limns two futures for her. One is that she will go to Hades. If so, she will come under the power of Persephone, as in Plato's story, and Heracles will have to ask permission to bring her back:

> ... εἶμι τῶν κάτω
> Κόρης Ἄνακτός τ' εἰς ἀηλίους δόμους
> αἰτήσομαί τε (851-53),

The other fate is that if Heracles finds Death lurking by the grave, then

> ... κύκλον δὲ περιβάλω χεροῖν ἐμαῖν.
> οὐκ ἔστιν ὅστις αὐτὸν ἐξαιρήσεται
> μογοῦντα πλευρά. πρὶν γυναῖκ' ἐμοὶ μεθῇ (847-49).

In this version Alcestis does not so much die as escape Death's clutches. Her burial is real; her death is more complicated. Death is given anthropomorphic form, which makes him vulnerable to heroic attack and yet also lets him take part in a ritual of consecration and deconsecration that deprives him of his sacrificial victim.

With respect to Alcestis the heroine, the greatest change between the two versions is the position of Persephone, the goddess who acts as her protectress. In Plato's version (perhaps a reflection of popular stories, even if Lesky is right in thinking the stories comparatively recent)[35] control over Alcestis lies with the queen of the dead. In the alternative version, borrowed from Phrynichus, control lies first with Thanatos, then Heracles. Similarly, in Plato's version control does not pass from one party to another. Heracles must ask, Persephone must grant, thus retaining control of events even as she surrenders Alcestis. But in the alternative version, control shifts.

In Euripides, the alternative version prevails. Rather than reach Hades and sit beside Persephone as a heroine, Alcestis leaves the grave and comes home, to sit beside her husband as his wife[36]. After Heracles' three-day waiting period, her displacement comes to an end.

Yet Heracles' plan does not truly remedy her displacement. The action of the play occurs within one day and Alcestis will therefore be made whole two days after the play ends. This delay brings about a fourth and final displacement, this time a displacement of the resolution of the story. Within the confines of the play itself, Alcestis remains a *phasma*; similarly, dramatic expectations remain unfulfilled, since the resolution of the story does not occur when and where it might be expected to.

[35] Lesky 44-52, arguing against Wilamowitz's view that the story in Plato was older than Phrynichus' story of a wrestling match between Heracles and Thanatos.

[36] See Larson 79 on the rarity of heroines who are wives without being «faded goddesses» or mere companions to more important husbands. Lyons does not address the issue, but her emphasis on heroines' ease of passage between life and death suggests the value of parallels from later ghost literature, including Lucian *Philops*. 27, where a wife returns from the dead but compensates for her own loquacity by imposing silence on her husband.

The model in each instance is Alcestis' body, which is not in the grave where both ordinary burial and hero cult require it to remain. In the course of the play, *phasma* and body share the stage and eventually the first is the harbinger of the second, just as the action is a harbinger of the resolution that comes two days late. These pairs - *phasma* and body, action and resolution - are parallel, and this structural feature lends the play an implicit self-consciousness.

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