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The Ghost of Alcestis

Amy Wygant

The first post-antique singing engagement of the Euripidean heroine Alcestis seems to have been in 1660 in Venice.¹ But it was fourteen years later that her French operatic debut coincided with and indeed occasioned the beginnings of a great literary and intellectual quarrel, known as the ‘Querelle des anciens et des modernes’ (‘Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns’). This debate among the inhabitants of the French Parnassus of the day would create a public for literature, which would in turn create that public in whose name the wrenching cataclysms of the French Revolution would occur.² The story of Alcestis from Euripides is, precisely, the story of a return, a re-volution in the proper early modern sense of the word.³ The god Apollo having promised his host and friend, her husband and King Admetus, that this king’s impending death would be avoided if someone could be found to die for him, Alcestis volunteers. She dies and is duly buried. But when the hero Hercules discovers in the midst of his drunken and ill-timed visit to the house of his host and friend Admetus that Alcestis has died, Hercules wrestles with Death, wins, and brings back something veiled to her husband. But what or whom? This is a story of an uncertain return, as was the return of Hamlet’s father, visible and audible to Hamlet with terrible effect, but, to his mother the queen, nothing but ‘vacancy’, ‘th’incorporal air’ (III. iv. 118, 119). The question of whom or what, exactly, Hercules brought back to Admetus found its parallel in early modern France in the famous quarrel over what, in general, can be retrieved from the ancients. This study will follow the polemical texts around this question from the champion of the modernists, Charles Perrault (1628–1703), and the defender of the ancients, Jean Racine (1639–99), that appeared in the wake of the 1674 opera *Alceste* by the composer

¹ Reid (1993), 80–5. On the Venetian libretto and its adaptation for Handel’s *Admeto* (1727), see Heller (2005). ² DeJean (1997), and Wygant (2007).

³ ‘Revolution: A revolution, a full compassing, rounding, turning backe to its first place, or point, th’accomplishment of a circular course’ Cotgrave (1611).

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Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87) and the librettist Philippe Quinault (1635–88). But there is a second aspect of what Hercules brought back from his wrestling match with death that poses a problem: not only was it veiled but also it was silent. This is obviously a matter of some concern to Euripides' Admetus, 'But why is my wife standing here, and does not speak?' (1143),⁴ a matter of some concern to operatic conventions in general, and, more than a hundred years later, specifically a matter of concern to the opera which was hailed as the return of Greek tragedy to the stage of France, the Paris reform opera *Alceste*, by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–87) from 1776.

And it is a matter of concern as well to recent critical and psychoanalytic work that has taken seriously the wavering, beckoning figure of the ghost, and has seen a link between its troubled ontology and textuality in general.⁵ Classical scholars have noticed that, while Admetus seems to have learned from the death of his wife—'For now we shall make our life again, and it will be a better one.' (1156–7)—the silent Alcestis, allowing herself to be led into the house like a good Athenian wife, has a secret, and she takes it with her.⁶ What she may have learned or how the experience of dying will colour her future existence we do not see. This necessary hollowness or lacuna left in the play's reading is itself a kind of phantom, and it is this ghostly hollowness that opens the play up to music, or so I will argue here.

The ending of Euripides' play figures the uncertain return with some very suggestive vocabulary. Scholars have noted that Hercules returns Alcestis to her husband with gestures that evoke the Greek wedding rite, and that, in this final scene, while Admetus wears black, Alcestis is dressed suitably for both corpse and bride.⁷ Also, as Admetus had promised his wife, rather floridly, that he would have a statue of her made and would put it in his bed, the appearance of what might well be just the image of his wife in the final scene is suggestive for those who would like to read the image theme strongly.⁸ These strong readers would include both Quinault, in whose opera *livret* (libretto) Admète learns of his wife's sacrifice when a monumental image of her self-sacrifice is revealed (III. iii),⁹ and Gluck's librettist, François Louis Gand Leblanc du Roulet (1716–86), whose *Alceste* learns of her husband's fate on-stage from a colossal statue of the god Apollo.

But I would like to focus here upon a different kind of uncertainty, one that occasioned Charles Segal's observation that 'the play does not forget the magic of its victory over death'.¹⁰ To Hercules' assurance in the closing scene that 'This is your own wife you see. She is here' (1126), Admetus cautions, 'Be careful she is not some phantom from the depths' (1127). The word translated as 'phantom' is *phasma*, meaning a double produced by a god in the semblance of a living

⁴ All translations unless otherwise indicated from Euripides (1955).

⁵ Davis (2005); Buse and Stott (1999).

⁶ Segal (1993), 70.

⁷ Foley (1992); Euripides (1999), 100.

⁸ See Heller (2005).

⁹ Quinault (1994). All further citations from this edition.

¹⁰ Segal (1993), 48.

person. This is one of a number of words in Greek, including *eidōlon*, *oneiros*, and *psykhē*, for apparitions of uncertain status.¹¹ Hercules' reply, 'The guest and friend you took was no necromancer' (1128), disclaims any magical assumption of the power of raising a mortal from the dead (*psykhaōgon*). There was a legitimate leader of souls (*psykhaōgos*), but this was the god Hermes,¹² who indeed plays a role in Quinault's *livret* in opening up a path for Hercules to the underworld in Act IV. A sixth-century BC terracotta *plaque Campana* in the Louvre shows Hermes as the actual conveyor of an Alcestis who looks rather long-suffering. The two are accompanied by Hercules, but the carrying of the bundled-up Alcestis is left to Hermes.¹³

In France, the key word in this exchange, *phasma*, seems to be have been understood quite simply as 'ghost'. On one end of the chronological spectrum is the translation of the text into Latin undertaken by the great Scottish humanist George Buchanan (1506–82) in the 1540s, based on the Aldine edition, in which line 1127 becomes 'Ne larva ab umbris missa sit'.¹⁴ 'Larvae' in Roman myth were the souls of the dead, who could not rest either because they had died violently or because of their own guilt. They wandered as spectres or demons and might bring madness to the living. In modern Italian, the word's first meaning is still 'spectre, shade, ghost'.¹⁵ On the other end of the chronological spectrum, when Marguerite Yourcenar transformed the play into *Le Mystère d'Alceste* in 1963, Admète's meaning in this line was perfectly clear as 'Est-ce un fantôme?'¹⁶

But when the word for what Hercules returns to Admetus was misunderstood, or simply not read at all, all Hell, as they say, could break loose, and in a most instructive way. The clearest example of this comes from an early seventeenth-century tragi-comedy by Alexandre Hardy (1572–1632), *Alceste, ou la Fidélité* (*Alcestis, or Faithfulness*). In it, four different words translate the uncertain status of whatever it is that Admète sees: In Act IV, Pluto agrees to exchange Alceste's 'ombre' ('shade') for his dog, Cerberus.¹⁷ And when Admète perceives Hercules returning with something, his first word for it is 'charme', a magical spell: 'ô traîtres yeux | Qui recevez ce charme, il n'y a point de charme | Voilà son port, son front, sa vêtüre, et son arme' ('oh traitorous eyes | who admit this spell, but it's not a spell | It's her very walk, her brow, her clothes, and his sword') (1139–41). Hercule then calls her 'ta revivante idole' ('your idol come back to life') (1145), and Alceste herself finally assures Admète that she is not

¹¹ P. Vasseur-Legangneux, 'Des Fantômes épiques aux fantômes tragiques: Héritage, transformations, inventions dans l'antiquité grecque', in Lavocat (2005), 15–29.

¹² Euripides (1999), 411, n. 175.

¹³ Musée du Louvre, Exhibit No. Cp 6627, origin Cerveteri, 3rd quarter of the 6th cent. BC; Collection Campana, 1863; Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines. The image may be viewed at: {http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=24924}. Accessed 5 Oct. 2008.

¹⁴ Euripides (1983).

¹⁵ Reynolds (1975).

¹⁶ Yourcenar (1963), 148.

¹⁷ Hardy (2004). All further citations from this edition.

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‘une trompeuse image’ (‘a deceptive image’) (1169). His wife’s apparition thus semantically beclouded, Admète himself proceeds to turn into a ghost, his soul separated from his body, his eyes sightless, his understanding suspended. He is ravished:

De merveille ravi, son âme séparée,
Flotte entre la liesse, et la crainte égarée,
Nous regarde sans voir, nous entend, sans pouvoir
L’avis par son effet croyable concevoir. (1148–51)

His soul, ravished by this marvel, floats out of his body, lost between fear and joy. He looks at us without seeing, and hears us without being able to believe in this appearance.

In this scene of return, there is a curious set of reversals. Not only is Admète the ghost while his wife is clearly among the living (she had earlier attempted to seduce Hercules), it is Admète who is lost for words, while Alceste speaks with no problem, and is given the word ‘voice’ as her name: ‘Voix’ (1170), Admète addresses her, and again, ‘Voix’ (1172), assuring her that only her ‘celestic accent’ (1170) confirms her reality to him. In a final reversal of the ghost-narrative topos of the touch, while Euripides’ Admetus needed to be urged by Hercules to test her reality by touching his wife (and thereby to confirm their remarriage), here it is she who reminds Admète that she wants to touch him (1296–1305). It ends with a kiss.

Early modern dramatists both before and after Hardy’s time refused in their prefaces to pronounce upon the reality-status of the ghosts that they staged, which was, at any rate, a classic problem in exegesis and theology.¹⁸ And there was as well in prose narrative of the time a tradition of the revenant lover, who was almost always a woman.¹⁹ Prominent in these latter texts is the story of Philinnion, a young girl who rises from the tomb to consort with her parents’ houseguest,²⁰ and something of their increasingly explicit necrophiliac activities may have led to the detail of Alceste’s attempted seduction of Hercules in Hardy’s play. But when the ghost migrates later in the seventeenth century from spoken drama into opera, this problematic desire for the revenant will operate on a different level.

It is true that in Quinault’s *livret* for the 1674 *Alceste* Hercules, here called ‘Alcide’, is in love with Alceste, both before and after he rescues her from Hades in Act IV. But any ambiguity or indecision about the reality-status of her ghost, and ghosts in general, in Quinault’s *livret* has been eliminated, in two different ways. First, the ‘ombres’ (‘shades’) of Quinault’s fourth act are comic figures, impecunious and pitifully pleading for their passage across one of the rivers of Hell from a brisk, jaunty, no-nonsense Charon. No money, no boat ride, and the moral of the scene is ‘Et ce n’est point assez de payer dans la

¹⁸ Miller (1995), 175. See also La Taille, *Saül le furieux*, in La Taille (1968).

¹⁹ Chesters (2005), esp. ch. 5: ‘Ghostly Bodies II: The Revenant Lover’, 215–54. Certain strands of the story seem to derive from Phlegon of Tralles, *Book of Marvels*, now ed. and tr. William Hansen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996).

²⁰ Chesters (2005), 215–19; 238–46.

vie | Il faut encore payer au delà du Trépas' ('And it's not sufficient to pay during your lifetime | You still have to pay beyond the grave') (IV. i. 687–8). Here the comic possibilities of the ghost might be inherited from the burlesque *ballet de cour* (court ballet), in which all dangerous, diabolic associations with dancing phantoms are carefully denied by the *livrets*. Equally, the phantoms staged by the *ballet de cour* had an association, non-obvious to us today perhaps, with thievery, the common element being lightness, suppleness, and agility, needed by the thief in his trade and evinced by the ghost in its very condition.²¹ Quinault's ghosts, then, would be light, light-fingered, and light in the pocket.

Second, there is little ambiguity this time about what exactly Alcide has rescued. A character designated as 'l'ombre d'Alceste' ('the shade of Alcestis') participates silently in Act IV and climbs aboard Pluto's chariot for the ride back to Greece at the end of the act. But Admète instantly proclaims at the beginning of Act V that 'Alcide est vainqueur du Trépas, L'Enfer ne luy resiste pas. Il ramène Alceste vivante' ('Hercules is victorious over death. Hell has no defence against him. He is bringing Alcestis back alive.') (V. i. 798–800). If this proclamation were not enough to establish the true return of Alceste, then scene two, in which one strand of the secondary plot resolves itself when Lychas frees Straton, unbinding him from his chains, would serve as a beautiful emblem for release from the chains of death. But conquering death is not enough for 'un Héros aussi parfait et aussi sérieux que le doit estre Hercule' ('a hero as flawless and as serious as Hercules ought to be'), as Charles Perrault would put it in August of that year.²² Alcide must triumph not just over death but also over his love for Alceste. That is, he must effect the real 'triomphe d'Alcide' referred to in the opera's subtitle and triumph over himself.

This is, first, a topos on the French tragic stage, and it had been so since the first generation of successful regular tragedies in the 1630s and '40s. The emperor Auguste of Corneille's *Cinna*, first performed around 1640, comes immediately to mind, urged as he is to 'régner sur vous-même, et par un noble choix, | Pratiquer la vertu la plus digne des rois' ('rule over yourself, and through a noble decision, | practice the most regal kind of virtue') (IV. iii. 1243–4). But, second, Alcide's triumph represents the continuing efforts of the *livret* to address a major plot problem, that is, that Admète's quick and unheroic willingness to allow his wife to die for him always makes her heroic decision and subsequent return seem to fall a bit flat. Perrault pointed out that the convention was for lovers to volunteer to die for their mistresses, not the other way around.²³ So Quinault's *livret* firstly has Alceste decide to die without her husband's knowledge, and this is a solution that du Roulet will also take up for Gluck's *Alceste*. This allows for

²¹ Françoise Lavocat, 'Les fantômes du ballet de cour', in Lavocat and Lecercle (2005), 177–200.

²² Perrault, *Critique d'Alceste*, in Quinault (1994), 77–102 (p. 91).

²³ *Ibid.* 118.

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the scene of the revelation by the image, Admète's reaction being to repeat, four times in all, 'Alceste est morte' ('Alceste is dead'), and to faint dead away. The resolution of this plot strand by Alcide completes the lifting of heroic weight from Admète. Indeed, Perrault will note that Admète 'represente un homme ordinaire et du commun' ('represents a man of the most ordinary and common sort'). Heroism and the extraordinary then transfer to Alcide: 'La Gloire est le partage d'Hercule qui represente les Heros et les hommes extraordinaires' ('Glory belongs to Hercules, who represents heroes and exceptional men').²⁴ This is a solution that will emphatically not be adopted by the Gluck opera.

Ghosts, then, seem unproblematic in Quinault's *livret*. They are decorative and mildly amusing in Act IV, and completely pushed beyond consideration in the matter of Alceste's return, which takes up other seemingly more culturally urgent matters. But the theoretical possibility of the return of the dead is at the heart of the discourse surrounding the opera. Perrault's *Critique d'Alceste* consists of a long negative criticism of Euripides, based first on an unacceptable characterization of Hercules as intemperate and brutal—'Ce n'est plus aujourd'hui l'idée que l'on a d'Hercule' ('This is no longer how we think of Hercules today', 91); second, on the veiling of Alceste at the end, which would be acceptable for Perrault only if the play were a comedy; third, on the fact that Alceste, with grown children, is too old to be a proper heroine; and finally, that Admète, in addition to being generally unadmirable, unheroic, and craven, actually, in lines 252–7, urges his wife to hurry up and die for him. These lines in Euripides represent a fearful vision of separation and disorientation, where Charon beckons her brutally from across the horrid marsh:

I see him there in his two-oared boat in the marsh,
the ferryman of corpses,
Charon, with his hand upon the pole,
and he calls me now: 'What keeps you?
Hurry, you hold us back.' He is urging me on
in angry impatience.

Jean Racine, the great dramatist, defender of Euripides, and, more to the point, one of the greatest Hellenists of the day, responded that this last criticism was unfounded, that Perrault was working from a defective edition, and moreover, that he was reading in Latin.²⁵ The printer had simply neglected to indicate that it was Alceste, not Admète, who was speaking these lines. It is a question here of her own hallucinatory vision, not that of her husband, and Racine supplies a French translation of the disputed lines, the only remnant of his own plan to set *Alceste* for the French tragic stage.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid. 96.

²⁵ Jean Racine, 'Préface d'*Iphigénie*', in Quinault (1994), 103–10 (pp. 108–10).

²⁶ Louis Racine, 'Mémoires sur la vie et les ouvrages de Jean Racine', in Racine (1950), I. 23–120 (p. 60).

Perrault's response, probably written shortly thereafter, took the form of a letter written to the secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie française, François Charpentier.²⁷ It is a defence based both upon philology and upon principle. As for the philology, Perrault points out that in two of his editions, the 1597 Portus and the 1602 Canterus, which he was, incidentally, reading in Greek, Admetus in fact does pronounce the questionable lines.²⁸ He is perfectly aware, says Perrault, that other editions contradict these, 'Mais de sçavoir presentement quelles sont les meilleures, c'est ce qui n'est pas sans difficulté' ('But to know at this point which ones are the best is not exactly easy'). What is it then that Racine would resurrect as a function of his great love of the ancients? Perrault goes on to point out that, if editors and translators were prepared to attribute these lines to Admetus, it is because the base nature of his character in Euripides made it believable that he would exhort his wife to die quickly.

Racine's reply, if any, to Perrault has not survived. But the defence of or attack on Euripides and on his *Alceste* had already hardened into the battle lines of Ancients and Moderns. If the partisans of the Ancients, however, had had the benefit of historical hindsight, they might well have cried foul, for the conclusion, it seems to me, was foregone, and for a number of reasons. In the first place, *Alceste* is an example of the successful modernist genre par excellence, opera, and I mean that in the full light of the paradoxical aim of its inventors of reinventing Greek tragedy, and this through the famously unsuccessful figure of Orpheus, whose failed hellish rescue mission figured the end of the humanist dream. Indeed, Plato's *Symposium* distinguishes between Alcestis, who succeeded in returning from the dead, and Orpheus, who did not succeed in bringing his wife back. Alcestis actually died for her love before going to Hades; Orpheus did not, and so was shown by the gods, 'only a phantom of his wife for whom he came, but not giving her real self because they [the gods] thought him soft, being a zither-player'.²⁹

Second, the modernists were always going to have the upper hand in a quarrel structured around Lully's *Alceste* because the opera figures a double triumph: that of Hercules and that of the opera itself; and it does this at the expense of all ambiguity in the original about what came back from the dead. For, *Alceste* being well and truly alive in the Lully opera, all remnants of ghostliness have been ignored, steamrolled, or, more interestingly perhaps, repressed.

The return of the repressed, then, the return of the uncertainty about the return of the dead, would take place not in the opera's plot but instead in the high-stakes battle surrounding the opera, a refuge of ghostliness. The ghost disappeared from the opera, but it re-emerged as the past and its uncertain status in the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns. Why do some see apparitions where others see only 'th'incorporal air'? Perrault's analysis, second, goes to

²⁷ Charles Perrault, 'Lettre a Monsieur Charpentier', in Quinault (1994), 111–22.

²⁸ The Bodleian Library, Oxford (GB-Ob), holds copies of both Canterus and Portus, and the lines are indeed attributed to Admetus in them.

²⁹ Plato (1956), 179b5–d7.

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principle: what the defenders of the ancients are in fact defending is not actually the writing of the ancients—because who knows in fact what those writings are?—but instead their own old schoolmasters. They remain schoolboys all their lives, ‘sans s’en apercevoir’ (‘without realizing it’).³⁰ And if Perrault had known the word ‘nostalgia’, he would have used it, for he accuses them as well of a longing to return to their school days: ‘Ces auteurs leur remettent dans l’esprit les idées agréables de leur jeunesse’ (‘These authors take them back to the pleasant thoughts of their youth’). Further, these defenders want to show, it seems, that their souls can go straight to the Elysian Fields and there access the authentic without passing any intermediary obstruction: ‘Ils s’imaginent puiser les bonnes choses dans leur vraie source et les voir dans le centre de la lumière’ (‘They imagine that they drink at the wellspring of everything good and see right to the heart of the light’). And they imagine leaving everyone else in Purgatory: ‘dans la bourbe et dans l’obscurité’ (‘in dirt and darkness’).³¹

Perrault’s analysis does indeed have an explicitly sacred context: ‘renonçant à toutes les lumières de leur esprit, ils traitent de divin tout ce qu’ils y lisent’ (‘they give up using their own minds and treat everything that they read in the ancients as though it were sacred’), but, at the same time, the ghostliness of his analysis should probably not be read too strongly. It is an intriguing congruency only, this accusation that the defenders of the ancients are worshipping a ghostly uncertainty, and for particular reasons that we would call psychological. But it is perfectly clear nevertheless that the real hero in the matter is the man who does not love the dead, the one whose renunciation of the once-dead is called a triumph, Hercules.

Thereafter, the ghost on the stage becomes even more rare, and its theoretical possibilities seem to be unappreciated. For the Abbé du Bos (1670–1742) in the 1719 *Réflexions sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, a phantom is a representation that fails to move the audience or to gain the public’s support. In speaking of allegories, Du Bos says that they are phantoms ‘à qui nous ne saurions prêter des passions pareilles aux nôtres, (ils) ne peuvent pas nous intéresser beaucoup à ce qui leur arrive’ (‘to whom we could never attribute passions like our own, so we’re never really concerned about what happens to them’).³² Françoise Lavocat has examined the inventories of opera costumes, which survive from between 1748 and 1781, and it seems that they include accessories for demons, furies, aerial spirits, faunes, and dreams, but nothing at all for ghosts.³³ And as for the story of Alceste, its plot becomes increasingly literalist and generally turns away from death and its mysteries. Eighteenth-century reworkings of the reasons for Admète’s illness, for example, have him suffering from indigestion,³⁴ joining the army,³⁵ or, in a wish-fulfilment construction of kingship, taking onto himself the suffering from the

³⁰ Perrault, ‘Lettre a Monsieur Charpentier’, in Quinault (1994), 121.

³¹ On the ghost and the question of Purgatory, see Greenblatt (2001).

³² Quoted in Emanuelle Hénin, ‘Fantôme et mimésis à l’âge classique: la théorie hantée’, in Lavocat and Lecercle (2005), 229–45 (p. 239).

³³ In Lavocat (2005), 179.

³⁴ Biancolilli and Romagnesi (1731).

³⁵ Piis (1776).

plague that is afflicting his people.³⁶ Alceste rarely dies, and when she does, the wonder is not that she returns from the grave but that any pretty wife would bother to die for her husband. As one closing vaudeville memorably puts it, ‘C’est ce qu’on n’a point vû de la vie, | Et ce qu’on ne verra jamais’ (‘It’s what we never have seen in this life, | And what will never be seen’).³⁷

Nevertheless, just as the ghost of Alcestis, suppressed for ideological reasons in Quinault’s plot, migrated to a different, theoretical context and lent itself to the quarrel of the ancients and moderns, so I would wish to argue that in the eighteenth century the ghost moves out of the plot of Gluck’s 1776 opera. Ghostliness instead invades his music.

From his surviving correspondence,³⁸ we know that Gluck was working on the French revision of his *Alceste* (originally written in Italian for Vienna in 1767) in Vienna in the spring and summer of 1775. As he works furiously—‘It has given me no sleep; my wife is in despair; it seems to me that I have a hive of bees constantly buzzing in my head’—interrupted by illness in the autumn, to get the first two acts into the post bag for the 1 January 1776 courier to Paris, a series of letters to his French librettist du Roulet gives us some idea of the genesis of this version of the opera. The ending was a particular problem, and one about which they were still arguing in December. The problem was not, as we might think, the status of the heroine but rather the role of the chorus and its contribution to the construction of kingship. Gluck is unhappy because in du Roulet’s version the chorus is ‘quite forgotten’ in the third act. In the first two acts, he points out, ‘your chorus are always active and the piece revolves very much around them, for they do not wish to lose so perfect a King and a Queen’. This formulation, ‘so perfect a King and a Queen’, might give us pause. We have seen that the character of Admetus as inherited from Euripides is anything but a perfect king, and that Perrault, for one, called him ‘un homme ordinaire et du commun’. Why would Gluck want his chorus to take so much interest in preserving this sovereign that he could declare that ‘the piece cannot finish before these poor people have been consoled’?

In the first place, Alcestis and Admetus seem generally to have been appropriated to support fantasized models of a loving royal couple in a contemporary climate of increasing suspicion about the actual conjugal relations between Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. Images referencing the Lully-Quinault opera still place Hercules front and centre, as can be seen in a 1764 Gobelins tapestry in the Louvre.³⁹ But what triumphs, in the mid- to late eighteenth century is increasingly not Hercules, but instead ‘l’amour conjugal’ (‘conjugal love’). This had been the

³⁶ Boissy (1740). ³⁷ Biancolilli and Romagnesi (1731), 280.

³⁸ Gluck (1962). All further citations from this edition.

³⁹ Musée du Louvre, Exhibit No. OA 9389; Atelier de Michel Audran and Atelier de Pierre-François Cozette, after Charles Coypel’s *Deux pièces de la troisième tenture des Scènes d’opéra, de tragédie et de comédie. Alceste* de Quinault; Paris 1764–1765; wool and silk; Département des Objets d’art. The image may be viewed at {http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=car_not_frame&cidNotice=18112}. Accessed 5 Oct. 2008.



Figure 6.1 Pierre Peyron, *La mort d'Alceste, ou l'héroïsme de l'amour conjugal* (1785), Paris, musée du Louvre, reproduced by permission of the Agence Photographique des musées nationaux (Copyright © RMN / René-Gabriel Ojéda).

title of Charles-Guillaume Alexandre's opera, first performed at the Tuilleries in 1755,⁴⁰ and 'L'héroïsme de l'amour conjugal' ('The Heroism of Conjugal Love') is the subtitle of the painting, 'La mort d'Alceste' ('The Death of Alcestis') by Pierre Peyron (1744–1814), exhibited at the Salon of 1785 (Figure 6.1). This scene is unusual in the iconographic tradition of the story, the more usual scenes being Hercules wrestling with Death, or the return of Alcestis. Moreover, Peyron's drawing of the scene, now in the Musée des beaux-arts in Rennes, shows that neither married love nor kingship was necessarily inherent in his image, the place and form of the figure which will become the king kneeling on the left in the

⁴⁰ Reid (1993), 82.

painting having been occupied by a woman mourner in the drawing, and the very prominent gold crowns worn by both Admetus and Alcestis an addition to the painting.⁴¹

Attention turned away, then, from the heroism of Hercules, who was in fact completely absent from du Roullet's original *livret* for the Paris version of *Alceste*, and who had earlier been completely absent from Calsabigi's 1767 Vienna version of the libretto.⁴² The Paris Hercules was a post-première addition, one of the changes made by Gluck in response to a mediocre public reception of his opera, in order to relieve the unremitting tension of the work. But the monarchist associations of the Vienna version of the opera, persisting for very good dynastic reasons in Paris, also contributed to the focus on the chorus at the end.

Much has been made of the first published score of Gluck's *Alceste*, from 1769, with its dedication to Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany containing a manifesto for reform opera. But less has been made of the first libretto, published in the year of the Viennese premiere, 1767, and dedicated to Maria Teresa of Austria, the mother of the Grand Duke and of the French Queen Marie-Antoinette, Gluck's former singing pupil and later patron in Paris, and of fourteen other children. The libretto's closing chorus, printed in capital letters, and sung amidst general rejoicing as Apollo returns Alceste, reads as a hymn to Maria Teresa as well as to Alceste:

Regna a noi, con lieta sorte
 Donna eccelsa, a cui sul trono
 Altra donna ugual non fu.
 Bella, e casta; e saggia, e forte:
 Tutte in te congiunte sono
 Le bellezze, e le virtù.

Reign over us with happy fortune, most lofty Madam, to whom no other woman on the throne was ever equal. Beautiful and pure, wise and strong, in you are united all the beauties and the virtues.

The year 1767 had, in fact, seen Calsabigi's dedicatee nearly die of smallpox: Maria Teresa had been at the gates of death and indeed had been given the last rites, but, Alceste-like, had recovered.

These aspects of the Italian libretto may help us understand why Gluck would be so concerned about consoling the chorus at the end of his Paris opera, at the expense of any apparent concern about Alceste. And, although the role of the children is reduced in the Paris *livret*, in the final scene Alceste addresses only them, while it is Admète who speaks words of comfort to the people. In this

⁴¹ Jean François Pierre Peyron, 'La Mort d'Alceste ou l'héroïsme de l'Amour conjugal', Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts, INV 75.6.1. The image may be viewed at http://www.culture.gouv.fr/Wave/image/joconde/0002/m021101_rimg4436_p.jpg. Accessed 26 Mar. 2009.

⁴² Calsabigi (1767).

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detail, the embedded homage to the mother of Gluck's Paris patron and of her fourteen brothers and sisters coincides with the increasing cultural imperative to construct Alceste as a loving wife and mother, not a beckoning and sexy object of necrophiliac desire.

This is not to say, however, that Gluck forgot about the ghost. He himself seems to have been of quite a rational turn of mind about this, and we should not look to his personal statement of the quarrel of the ancients and moderns for any apparitions. The ancient Greeks, he reminds du Roulet in the letter of 2 December 1775, had actual, not ghostly, bodies, with gender markers, and the senses of smell and sight. They 'were men like us with a nose and a pair of eyes', and we must 'sever the chains with which they wish to bind us, and try to become original in our own right'. It is perhaps a bit strange, though, that in his description of the bodies of the ancients, Gluck would leave out their ears. And, in a process allowing for tremendous psychological complexity, acute listeners have in fact heard ghosts in Gluck's music. Mozart, for one, quite simply copied Gluck's music for the oracle's pronouncement in I. iv,⁴³ a single repeated note, and turned it into music for his own ghost in the setting for the Commendatore's fearful invitation to the Don in *Don Giovanni*. Or at least this is what another pair of acute ears, those of Berlioz, heard: 'Les sombres accords de trombones qui l'accompagnent ont été imités ou plutôt copiés par Mozart dans *Don Giovanni* pour les quelques mots que prononce la statue du commandeur dans le cimetière' ('The sombre accompanying trombone chords were imitated or rather copied by Mozart in *Don Giovanni* for the few words uttered by the commander's statue in the graveyard').⁴⁴ When Gluck wrote an entire chorus, fifteen measures of music, consisting of a single repeated note, *lento* at that, for the scene set in the underworld in Act III, scene iii, his friend the abbé Arnauld defended his practice by pointing out that these are *ghosts*, after all ('ombres') who are singing.⁴⁵

But what of our star ghost, Alcestis herself? Du Roulet's plot never allows her to die, but only takes her to the gates of Hell in Act III. However, plot changes for Paris result in her living through the hell of telling Admète in Act II that she is going to die, and she does this in the midst of some of Gluck's most beautiful music for choral dance and rejoicing over Admète's as yet unexplained recovery. Literally surrounded on both sides of her aria by the breath and light of pizzicato strings in G major, Alceste takes up the musical motif of the single, repeated note, and, hanging in impossible tension between life and death, she becomes a ghost. Her apparently untroubled textual ontology, one that relieves her figure of the non-weight of ghostliness in order to turn her into a mere body of wife and mother, becomes in music a hauntology. Her words sing of her body and its

⁴³ Gluck (1957), I.7, p. 100.

⁴⁴ Berlioz (1844), 295.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Prod'homme (1948), 264.

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Flöte-Solo

Violine I

Violine II

Viola

ALCESTE
ALKESTIS

Violoncello

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Fl.

Viol. I

Viol. II

Viola

ALC.
ALK.

Vcllo

à part
beiseite

O Dieux! Sou - te -
O Gott! Laß mein

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Fl.

Viol. I

Viol. II

Viola

ALC.
ALK.

Vcllo

nez mon cou - ra - gel Je ne puis plus ca - cher l'ex - cès de
Herz nicht ver - za - gen! Nicht berg ich län - ger noch das Ü - ber -

Figure 6.2 Christoph Willibald Gluck, 'O Dieux! Soutenez mon courage!' (Act II, sc. iii) from *Alceste/Alkestis* (*Pariser Fassung von 1776*), ed. Rudolf Gerber, in *Sämtliche Werke* (Kassel, Basel, and London: Bärenreiter, 1957), I. 7, pp. 201–202, reproduced by permission of the publishers and of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (shelfmark Mus. 1c. 265/1 (7)).

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Fl. *mes dou - leurs.* *Ah! Mal - gré moi des pleurs sé -*
ALC. *maß der Qual.* *Schon quillt der Trä - - nen Strahl und*

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Fl. *chap - pent de mes yeux,* *et bai - gnent mon vi -*
ALC. *netzt das Ant - litz mir,* *die Kraft will mir ver -*

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Fl. *sa - - ge, et bai - gnent mon vi - sa - - ge.*
ALC. *sa - - gen, die Kraft will mir ver - sa - - gen.*

Figure 6.2 Continued

tears—but her music has already left her body, for those who have ears to hear (Figure 6.2).

In closing, it might be well to return to a point made by Charles Perrault in the course of his drive to desacralize the ancient tragedy of Euripides and seek critical space for a modernist tragedy. In his polemic, we recall, one of the reasons why the return of Alcestis required a thorough rewriting was that when Hercules presented her again to her husband, she was wearing a veil. This would be fine, according to Perrault, if this were a comedy. But the doffing of a veil to reveal the truth of a previously uncertain identity and engineer a happy ending has no place in tragedy. Although Perrault was not seeking to reflect upon the birth of tragedy, it is strangely coincidental that it should be veils and veiling, and specifically the veil of Alcestis, that marks off the generic space of tragedy, not comedy, for Nietzsche.

Nietzsche uses a number of different words to describe veils and veiling in *The Birth of Tragedy*. There is *Verhüllung*, as in ‘it was veiled [*verhüllt*] and withdrawn from sight’, where ‘it’ is nothing less than the deep dark roots of the Olympian magic mountain, the wisdom of Silenus that ‘what is best of all is . . . to be nothing. But the second best for you is to die soon’.⁴⁶ There is *ein Schleier*, as in ‘it was only (the Greek’s) Apollinian consciousness which, like a veil [*wie ein Schleier*], hid this Dionysian world from his vision’.⁴⁷ These may be contrasted with all of the cognate forms of ‘masked’, which frequently refer to the actual physical presentation of the actor, ‘that masked [*maskierte*] figure’, an ‘awkwardly masked human being’.⁴⁸ When Alcestis enters, then, in section eight, at a moment of strong formulation of Nietzsche’s discussion of tragedy’s birth, and just before his text’s turning to its death, his only description of her figure is that it was ‘heavily veiled’, *in Verhüllung*.⁴⁹ The veiling of her form, which knows death, is precisely that aspect which makes it, as Nietzsche says in so many words, an exact analogy for the experience of tragedy. For Admetus contemplates her apparition just as the spectator contemplates the approach on the stage of the god. It is now ‘the world of the day’ which is veiled, and which yet reveals a new, clearer, and more moving world. This is the world which is continually reborn in the tragedy.

And yet, that world is not without its ghost. It is, Nietzsche says, ‘*doch shattengleicher*’, like a shadow, like a shade, like a ghost. This Alcestis-allegory of all tragic experience leaves Perrault’s mild generic worries far behind in order to embrace the veil as the very condition of the birth of tragedy. But it is a curious state of affairs that, if my reading of Gluck’s Alcestis-ghost and its transmigration into his music is correct, then Nietzsche too was reading the ghost in the notes, for tragedy was born and must be born again ‘*aus dem Geiste der Musik*’, as his

⁴⁶ Nietzsche (1967*a*), 42. All German-language references to Nietzsche (1967*b*).

⁴⁷ Nietzsche (1967*a*), 41. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 66. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

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original title read. It is an old chestnut to point out that *Geist* in German means the ghost as well as the spirit, but in the case of *Alcestis*, it seems non-redundant to say that the spirit of her tragedy, its wavering, ungraspable, yet infinitely consoling spirit, was indeed born from the ghost of music.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ It is a pleasure to recall that an earlier version of this chapter was fortunate to have provoked a response from Edith Hall on the subject of Nietzsche, and to record the debt which these observations owe to her comment.