

ANALYSIS

The Alcestiad, or Life in the Sun (1955)

Thornton Wilder

(1897-1975)

“Only once in his long career, in his play *The Alcestiad*, did Wilder abandon his obliquity—and with mixed success. As a child, he had first heard of Alcestis and her husband, Admetus, from *Bullfinch’s Mythology*. In one way or another, he wrote about them—implicitly in *The Women of Andros* (1930) and explicitly in *The Ides of March* (1948)—until he could no longer resist treating the myth formally. After a long gestation and many interruptions, *The Alcestiad, or Life in the Sun* premiered in Edinburgh on August 22, 1955, and remains Wilder’s only flop. There are good reasons.

Wilder could not find a way to make the play work as theater. He was never happy with its dramaturgy, nor with Tyrone Guthrie’s direction, nor with his friend Montgomery Clift’s behavior (Clift was picky and pulled out), nor with Irene Worth’s attack of opening-night nerves which slowed down the pace. In his review, Kenneth Tynan, who previously had been thrilled by Wilder, called him ‘a schoolmaster who would like to be a poet’ and pronounced the play a ‘dramatic nullity.’ Wilder himself thought that his ‘intellectual passion’ had been ‘dulled and dimmed’ and that he had allowed ‘the old TNW-pathos, the human tug’ to enter too largely; he had allowed it ‘to get out of hand.’ That may be true of the play on stage, but it is not true of the piece as literature on the page. The tale is simple enough. When Apollo’s son the doctor Aesculapius restores a dead man to life, Pluto is offended. Jupiter, at the request of his underworld brother-king, kills the doctor. Apollo, in retaliation, kills Cyclopes, the maker of Jupiter’s thunderbolts. Apollo’s punishment is to serve King Admetus as a common herdsman, no different from any other mortal laborer.

Admetus competes for Alcestis, a woman of otherworldly beauty and divine delicacy, and wins his bride through the help of Apollo, even though Alcestis longs only to know and to serve Apollo. When Admetus’s death is fated, he learns that he will be spared only if someone else volunteers to die in his place. But no one, not even his very aged parents, will do so. Only Alcestis is willing to sacrifice herself, and does. Hercules, however, is fond of Alcestis for her beauty and virtue. (He calls Antigone, Penelope, Leda, Helen, and Clytemnestra, each of whom he knows, ‘Dirt. Trash,’ compared to Alcestis). A dear friend to Admetus, Hercules travels to the underworld and with very great effort retrieves Alcestis, restoring her to Admetus. Wilder’s greatest alteration is to deny Admetus any knowledge that a surrogate will save his life—or that his wife is that surrogate.

Wilder touched on the story at a number of points in his career. Antedating the play is *The Ides of March*, a riveting epistolary novel about the events and characters surrounding that fateful day in 44 B.C. There Wilder gives us Catullus’s version of the Alcestis myth, or a part of it, since we are told, at a crucial point, that ‘the narrative breaks off.’ ‘And I?’ Alcestis asks, ‘what am I to do? What I am doing now? My interest is to inquire into the nature of the Gods—whether they exist and in what ways we may find Them. You may well imagine--.’ Exactly here, then, is the kernel of Wilder’s interest.

In his notes on *The Alcestiad*, Wilder tells us that stories about the gods have lasted precisely because ‘they are ambiguous and puzzling’: ‘We are told that Apollo loved Admetus and Alcestis. If so, how strangely he exhibited it. It must make for considerable discomfort to have the god of the sun, of healing and song, housed among one’s farm workers. And why should a divine love impose on a devoted couple the decision as to which should die for the other?’

This reflection is reminiscent of Pamphilus, the narrator of *The Woman of Andros* (1930), as he speculates similarly: ‘It seemed to him that the whole world did not consist of rocks and trees and water nor were human beings garments and flesh, but all burned, like the hillside of olive trees, with the perpetual flames of love,—a sad love that was half hope, often rebuked and waiting to be reassured of its truth...as

though it were waiting for a voice to come from the skies, declaring that therein lay the secret of the world.’ That secret is tortuously difficult to suggest.

In the notes, Wilder writes: ‘Following some meditations of Soren Kierkegaard, I have written a comedy about the extreme difficulty of any dialogue between heaven and earth, about the misunderstandings that result from the “incommensurability of things human and divine”.’ The unfathomable nature of love, Kierkegaard writes, is that ‘it is indeed less terrible to fall to the ground when the mountains tremble at the voice of the God, than to sit at table with him as an equal. And yet, it is the God’s concern precisely to have it so’.

James Como
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