

## Thornton Wilder's *Alcestiad*: A 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Experiment in Aristotelian Tragedy

Thornton Wilder incorporates the elements of tragedy described in Aristotle's *Poetics* in his play *The Alcestiad*, a three-act play tracing the myth of Alcestis. The three acts, together with Wilder's satyr play *The Drunken Sisters*, comprise Wilder's modern version of a Greek tragic tetralogy, loosely modeled on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Although *The Alcestiad* occupied Wilder's attention for twenty-five years, its first performance in Edinburgh in 1955 received a poor critical reception (Blank 1996). The second half of this paper will argue that the directorial decision to perform *The Drunken Sisters* between Acts I and II fundamentally disrupted the Aristotelian composition of the play, which may have contributed to its poor reception.

Wilder pays special attention to Aristotle's guidelines regarding *mythos* (plot). Each act chronicles the events of a single day, and presents a coherent and complete causal chain of events, as outlined in *Poetics* 8-9. Each also sees a central character fall victim to *hamartia* (error). Alcestis, Admetus and Agis also all experience *anagnorises* (recognitions), usually accompanied by *peripeteiai* (reversals of fortune) in accordance with *Poetics* 11. Alcestis learns in Act I that her understanding of divinity is inherently imperfect, and she accepts her marriage to Admetus. In Act II, modeled loosely on Euripides' *Alcestis*, Admetus learns too late that his new lease on life has come at the cost of his bride. In Act III King Agis is forced to acknowledge his inability to save his daughter's life. Where Wilder departs from Aristotle's prescriptions, he usually follows classical models. For instance, although Aristotle asserts that the best *peripeteia* is a change from good fortune to bad, Sophocles' Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* and Euripides' Admetus in his own *Alcestis* each win positive resolutions to their problems. Wilder's echoes of each scene are much more subdued. His departures from the norm without classical precedent are relatively minor.

Taken collectively, the three acts form a coherent Aristotelian plot. Each act follows logically from the one preceding it. Each recognition and reversal of fortune confronts a main character with her or his flawed understanding of the divine. Taken in combination, these elements outline Wilder's Aristotelian *dianoia* or meaning, which he related in his own program notes: "Following some meditations of Søren 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'" (Wilder 1955).

For the premier in Edinburgh, director Tyrone Guthrie made a number of changes to the play, the most notable of which was to perform *The Drunken Sisters* between the first two acts. Although the events of the satyr play should take place there chronologically, the move causes the play to violate *Poetics* 8 by eliminating the element of surprise and breaking continuity. The play's comic elements also disrupt the otherwise consistent character of Apollo.

While each work in Wilder's corpus has received significant critical attention since its publication, his devotion to classical models has often been overlooked. Even critics who are necessarily aware of the classical influence in works like *The Alcestiad* (Haberman, 1967; Brady, 1999) have not ventured to interpret Wilder's work using a classical model. The failure of Wilder's first director to recognize and respect his Greek tetralogy form is symptomatic of this oversight. By calling attention to the influence of Wilder's classical background on his writing, this paper better contextualizes and interprets the work of an essential American author.

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