Skenè Texts DA • 4

What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

Edizioni ETS

S K E N È *Texts and Studies*. Text DA

SKENÈ. Texts and Studies (https://textsandstudies.skeneproject.it/index.php/TS)
Supplement to *SKENÈ. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*

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Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com
Distribuzione
Messaggerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)
Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN (pdf) 9-788846-7-6957-2
ISBN 9-788846-7-6958-9
ISSN 2421-4353

The ClaRE series collects publications about the receptions of Greek and Greek-related material in early modern English culture. The editions are expanded versions of the texts collected in the ClaRE Archive (https://clare.dlls.univr.it/), which presents three online databases of early modern English texts documenting Greek legacies, often via Latin mediations, as well as printed editions of Greek texts in England up to 1625 (GEMS, EMEC, CoLEEn). It also includes Latin and English grammars which show memories of Greek traditions (EMEGA). The series is part of the Research Project of National Interest PRIN2017XAA3ZF supported by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MUR).

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Unveiling Wives: Euripides' *Alcestis* and Two Plays in the Fletcher Canon*

Domenico Lovascio

Abstract

Shakespeare's familiarity with at least some of Euripides' works – *The Winter's Tale* and its reworking of *Alcestis* being one of the most egregious examples – has been a critical commonplace for several decades now. This essay argues that the affinities between the two had already been recognised and re-enacted on the early modern English stage by Shakespeare's fellow playwright John Fletcher. In line with Fletcher's penchant for appropriating classical elements and mixing them with contemporary ones into a uniquely irreverent and self-conscious artistic blend, his tragedy of *Thierry and Theodoret* builds and then subverts the audience's tragicomic expectations by setting up a reunion that is highly evocative of that between Hermione and Leontes from *The Winter's Tale* – with hints of *King Lear* – and especially by playing with the Euripidean trope of the supposedly dead wife who turns out to be alive by reappearing veiled before her husband, only to shatter the illusion of a happy ending and a tragicomic resolution. By creatively recuperating the theatregram of the veiled revenant woman in *Thierry and Theodoret*, Fletcher gratifies the playgoers' desire for being in the know, while simultaneously teasing and defying their generic expectations by inhibiting the transition of tragedy into tragicomedy.

Keywords: John Fletcher, *Thierry and Theodoret*, William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, Euripides, *Alcestis*

Introduction[1]

Ancient Greek drama has recently been proved to have had a wider circulation in early modern England than previously assumed

* This essay is part of the "Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama" Research Project of National Interest (PRIN2017XAA3ZF) supported by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MUR) .

1 I thank all the participants in the project for many fruitful discussions and stimulating exchanges. Michela Compagnoni, Lisa Hopkins, Peter Kirwan, Cristiano Ragni, Angelica Vedelago and Luisa Villa offered invaluable suggestions on earlier drafts of the article. If any errors remain, though, they are entirely my responsibility.

thanks to work carried out especially by such scholars as Laurie E. Maguire (2007, 97-104), Micha Lazarus (2015), Tanya Pollard (2017), Tania Demetriou and Pollard (2017). The largest share of the critical exploration of the engagement of early modern English playwrights with the works of Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides has been predictably devoted to trying to identify Greek echoes in the dramatic output of William Shakespeare.

Notwithstanding the resistance and scepticism with which the idea was met until the early twenty-first century (see, e.g., Braden 1985, 1; Miola 2000, 166; Nuttall 2004, 210-12; Silk 2004, 241), there now appears to be relative scholarly consensus over Shakespeare's acquaintance with at least a few among the dramatic works penned by Euripides. One Shakespearean play in which the Euripidean model is particularly on display is *The Winter's Tale* (1611), the concluding scene of which bears unmistakable affinities with *Alcestis*.[2] In Euripides' play, Alcestis accepts to die instead of her husband Admetus. However, when Hercules arrives at Admetus' house and learns what has happened, he wrestles with Death and brings Alcestis back to life, unbeknown to Admetus. Hercules then leads Alcestis veiled to her husband (who does not recognise her) and suggests that he take her as his new wife. Admetus is horrified at this prospect and adamantly refuses to remarry after losing such an incomparable wife as Alcestis. Hercules insists and, when Alcestis finally unveils, Admetus is overjoyed at the return of his beloved and supposedly dead wife. Alcestis says nothing though: three days need to elapse before she can speak again. Shakespeare reworks this story in *The Winter's Tale* – as he had already done about a decade earlier in *Much Ado about Nothing* (Bate 1994; Pollard 2017, 171-8; Wofford 2018). The play's main narrative source is Robert Greene's *Pandosto* (1588), in which the title character's wife, Bellaria, dies of grief with her child when he drives her away – and she stays dead. In Shakespeare, though, Hermione, the wife of Leontes, dies only apparently and is reunited to her husband sixteen years later. Paulina, a noblewoman and friend to Hermione, leads Leontes to see a newly sculpted statue of Hermione, which

2 The date limits and "best guesses" for all the plays mentioned in the article are those provided by Wiggins (2012-2018).

is covered by a curtain. The statue scene is redolent of the myth of Pygmalion as related in book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and beyond (Barkan 1981; Enterline 1997; Engel 2013; Porter 2013, 64-97; Delsigne 2014), but the reunion between a husband and a supposedly dead wife after the curtain is opened is principally modelled on the corresponding unveiling moment in *Alcestis*. Leontes is overwhelmed by happiness as Admetus is, and Hermione says nothing to her husband, though she does talk to her daughter.

The relationship between *Alcestis* and *The Winter's Tale* has been variously discussed in the twentieth century by Tom F. Driver (1960, 197-8, 215-18) and Douglas B. Wilson (1984), among others. More recent examinations have been brought forward by Bruce Louden (2007), Sarah Dewar-Watson (2009), John Pitcher (2010, 13-15), Tanya Pollard (2017, 187-94) and Tom Bishop (2019). To be sure, the resemblance had been recorded as early as the second half of the nineteenth century, first by William Watkiss Lloyd (1875, 161-3) and then by Israel Gollancz (1894, viii). As Dewar-Watson points out, however, the parallel "had already been registered in performance" about a century earlier, as suggested by the fact that "An engraving dated circa 1780 depicts a scene from [David] Garrick's production of the play, in which Elizabeth Farren, as Hermione, leans against a pedestal bearing images from the *Alcestis*" (2009, 74). Yet, as I argue in what follows, Shakespeare's engagement with Euripides' *Alcestis* in *The Winter's Tale* had in fact been recognised even earlier by a fellow playwright who collaborated with Shakespeare in the writing of three plays in the early 1610s and who would go on to become the leading dramatist for the King's Men after his older colleague's death. That man is John Fletcher.

One of the distinctive marks of the works in the canon of Fletcher and his collaborators, which totals around fifty plays, is their constant, resourceful and irreverent engagement with Shakespeare's oeuvre (cf. e.g., McKeithan 1938; Leech 1962, 162; Frost 1968; McMullan 2000, 114–15; McManus 2012, 11). Aside from multiple Shakespearean verbal echoes, the plays in the Fletcher canon exhibit Fletcher's penchant for appropriating and reviving well-established units of repertoire, prominent action and character clusters, compelling bits of stage business or, to put it more concisely, effective "theatergrams" (Clubb 1989, 6) from Shakespeare's plays

— often with a playful attitude, to achieve unexpected effects or to re-enact them with a higher degree of sophistication and self-consciousness. The Shakespearean echoes and motifs artfully woven into Fletcher's writings for the stage over the entire duration of his dramatic career (1606-1625) testify to a collaboration with Shakespeare that was not limited to the couple of years during which they worked together on the lost 'Cardenio' (1612), *All Is True; or, King Henry VIII* (1613) and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613).[3] Well before then, Fletcher had in fact started an imaginary collaboration of sorts with Shakespeare that would continue long after the latter had stopped writing for the stage.

Yet, if Shakespeare was a major shaping influence on Fletcher's dramatic craft, it was not the only one. Fletcher was immensely fond of texts from the Continent, especially from Spain, France and, to a much lesser extent, Italy. He could probably read Spanish, French and Italian, but he habitually resorted to English translations. This was also true in the case of his engagement with classical texts. Even though Fletcher had attended the cathedral church grammar school in Peterborough (Mellows 1941, liv) and possibly Queens' College, Cambridge (Kelliher 2000), he seems to have favoured English or French translations over Latin and Greek originals and, in general, he appears to have been relatively unimpressed by the authority and solemnity of the classics (Lovascio 2022, 50-2). He read them, he was familiar with them, they helped him think about the world and about history, and he did sometimes rely on them for the sake of plot construction but, when he did, he invariably mixed them with vernacular texts, thus producing "an unmistakably characteristic blend of old and new, far and near, foreign and familiar . . . either with an ironic or unsettling intent, in such a way that classical patterns and conventions might be at least implicitly questioned" (36, 43).

Such a concoction of ancient and contemporary is to be identified – I argue – in *The Tragedy of Thierry and Theodoret* (1613-1621, probably 1617), written with Philip Massinger and Nathan Field. Here, the final scene of the play consciously revives the Euripides-

3 I follow the convention of the *Lost Plays Database* (https://lostplays.folger.edu) in indicating titles of lost plays by quotation marks.

like surprise reunion between Leontes and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. At the same time, it directly recuperates the theatregram of the veiled revenant woman from *Alcestis* itself, together with aspects of the Lear-Cordelia reconciliation towards the end of *King Lear*, which had in turn influenced the one in *The Winter's Tale* (Pitcher 2010, 19-21). On the one hand, Fletcher's retrieval of the Euripidean trope is in line with his catering to the tastes of the most sophisticated section of his audience; on the other, it is instrumental to his repeated teasing and defying playgoers' generic expectations: tragicomic resolution seems to be in sight all along, but it never materialises in *Thierry and Theodoret*. The fact that another play that Fletcher wrote in the same period with Massinger and Field, *The Knight of Malta* (1616-19, probably 1618), also makes use of the same theatregram, though employing it in its native tragicomic context, appears to leave little doubt as to the intended function of the Euripidean borrowing in *Thierry and Theodoret*.

Thierry and Theodoret, The Winter's Tale and *King Lear*

Before examining how the final scene of *Thierry and Theodoret* draws upon Shakespeare and Euripides, it seems helpful to provide some contextualization in light of the likely unfamiliarity of this relatively obscure play with most readers.

Thierry, the King of France, has married the young Ordella, thus prompting his mother Brunehaut's preoccupation that the young woman will eclipse her in court. As a result, Brunehaut manages to have Thierry drink an anaphrodisiac potion at the wedding banquet, which makes him temporarily impotent. In this way, Brunehaut surmises, Ordella will be dissatisfied with her match, and the marriage will sink. Surprisingly, Ordella turns out to be very understanding of Thierry's predicament, so that Brunehaut needs to devise another plan to ruin their marriage. Given that Thierry is worried about his own ability to beget an heir, Brunehaut suggests that he consult the eminent astrologer Lefort, who is in fact one of her minions disguised. The fake astrologer tells Thierry that the only way to regain his sexual prowess and generate children is to kill the first woman he will see come out of the Temple of Diana the

next morning before sunrise. Brunehaut arranges for that woman to be Ordella. As Thierry and his friend Martel wait outside the temple, Ordella exits veiled. Thierry is ready to sacrifice the veiled woman, but he cannot bring himself to do it when she unveils and he discovers her identity. He abruptly runs away. Ordella threatens suicide, but Martel dissuades her from her decision and hides her.

Meanwhile, Martel tries to expose Brunehaut's machinations. He tells Thierry that Ordella has killed herself in order for her husband to generate offspring and urges Thierry to get married again. Thierry, initially reluctant, finally accepts Martel's suggestion and chooses the young Memberge, the daughter of Thierry's late brother Theodoret, whom he believes to have been his adopted brother, as Brunehaut has told him after having him stabbed because Theodoret meant to interfere with her dissolute lifestyle. Horrified at the possibility of incest between Thierry and Memberge, Brunehaut recants her previous report, but Thierry no longer believes her. To avoid the incestuous union, Brunehaut then gives Thierry a poisoned handkerchief that will kill him by depriving him of sleep forever. As Thierry is on his death bed, Martel enters the stage with a veiled woman, who is then revealed to be Ordella. Thierry initially takes her to be a spirit but then realises she is the real Ordella. They kiss, exchange words of love and then die, Ordella passing away from a mixture of excessive grief and joy. Brunehaut dies too, offstage, committing suicide at the sight of her lover Protaldi being tortured, and the kingdom passes to Martel, who marries Memberge.

Few readers will be familiar with the final segment of the play. Hence, in order to make it easier for readers to appreciate the similarities with Shakespeare, I find it convenient to quote the section of the denouement sequence between Ordella and Thierry after her unveiling at some length:

> THIERRY What's that appears so sweetly? There's that face —
> MARTEL [*To Ordella*] Be moderate, lady.
> THIERRY That angel's face —
> MARTEL [*To her*] Go nearer.
> THIERRY Martel, I cannot last long. See the soul
> (I see it perfectly) of my Ordella,
> The heavenly figure of her sweetness there. —

Forgive me gods! It comes! [*To her*] Divinest substance! —
Kneel, kneel, kneel everyone! [*To her*] Saint of thy sex,
If it be for my cruelty thou com'st —
Do ye see her, ho?
MARTEL Yes, sir, and you shall know her.
THIERRY Down, down again. [*To Ordella*] To be revenged for blood,
Sweet spirit, I am ready. – She smiles on me,
O blessèd sign of peace.
MARTEL Go nearer, lady.
ORDELLA [*To Thierry*] I come to make you happy.
THIERRY Hear you that, sirs?
She comes to crown my soul. Away, get sacrifice
Whilst I with holy honours –
MARTEL She's alive, sir.
THIERRY In everlasting life, I know it, friend.
O happy, happy soul.
ORDELLA [*Weeping*] Alas, I live, sir,
A mortal woman still.
THIERRY Can spirits weep too?
MARTEL She is no spirit, sir; pray, kiss her. – Lady,
Be very gentle to him. [*She kisses Thierry.*]
THIERRY Stay, she is warm,
And by my life the same lips – Tell me, brightness,
Are you the same Ordella still?
ORDELLA The same, sir,
Whom heavens and my good angel stayed from ruin.
THIERRY Kiss me again.
ORDELLA The same still, still your servant.
[*Kisses him again.*]
THIERRY 'Tis she! I know her now, Martel.
(5.2.148-72)[4]

Moments later, the two lovers die. Thierry's reconciliation with the supposedly deceased Ordella is the playwrights' invention and nowhere to be found in the historical sources upon which the events dramatised in the play are based, the most relevant one being Edward Grimeston's translation of Jean de Serres's *A General Inventory of*

4 Quotations from all early modern English texts are modernised in spelling and punctuation or are taken from modernized editions.

the History of France from the Beginning of That Monarchy unto the Treaty of Vervins in the Year 1598. Fletcher and his collaborators possibly consulted Grimeston/de Serres in the 1611 edition, in which the name of the King of Burgundy is spelled "Thierry" and not "Thierri" as in the 1607 edition (Ulrich 1913, 7-25).[5] This makes Fletcher's veering towards Shakespeare even more manifest and interesting. The final scene in *Thierry and Theodoret* exhibits evident affinities with the much better-known reunion between Leontes and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* described above. A supposedly dead wife is returned veiled by a third party to her husband, who is at first incredulous and then ecstatic on recognising her. The closeness between the two scenes even includes a direct verbal borrowing – "she is warm" (5.2.167; cf. *The Winter's Tale*, 5.3.109) – but there are also a few differences, such as the fact that in *Thierry and Theodoret* the third party is a man, the couple is childless, a much longer time elapses in *The Winter's Tale*, Ordella is not presented as a statue, she does talk to her husband, and they both die.

The reconciliation between Thierry and Ordella also displays analogies with *King Lear*, which had itself helped Shakespeare shape the denouement of *The Winter's Tale* (Pitcher 2010, 19-20), most evidently in the reworking in *The Winter's Tale* (5.3.76-7) of Lear's believing that Cordelia's lips have life in them during his delirium (*King Lear*, 5.3.109-10). Daniel Morley McKeithan has usefully recorded the similarities between the reunion of Thierry and Ordella and the reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia (*King Lear*, 4.7):

1. Ordella, like Cordelia, is cautioned to be gentle with the sick man.Thierry, like Lear, takes the lady to be a spirit in bliss. . . .
2. Lear kneels to Cordelia, and Thierry, though possibly too ill to kneel, commands the other characters present to kneel before Ordella.
3. Both Lear and Thierry think at first that the spirit has come to inflict punishment. . . .
4. Each is amazed to see the spirit shedding tears.
5. Each soon recognises his loved one and is overjoyed at having her again.

5 *Pace* Wiggins (#1848), who indicates as the main source Claude Fauchet, *Les antiquités et histoires Gauloises et Françaises* (Paris, 1579; 2nd edn 1599).

6. The name Ordella may possibly have been derived from the name of Cordelia.

(McKeithan 1938, 144-5)[6]

The reconciliation scene in Fletcher's play therefore fuses material from at least two Shakespearean plays, the latter of which (*The Winter's Tale*) had been in turn influenced by the former (*King Lear*). Fletcher appears to be looking at *The Winter's Tale*'s denouement and consciously tracing its literary and dramatic roots. In doing so, he also recognises that *The Winter's Tale* is in active conversation with Euripides' *Alcestis*, and he crafts the last moments of his own play accordingly.

Thierry and Theodoret and *Alcestis*

That the final scene of *Thierry and Theodoret* has affinities with the story of Alcestis has been casually remarked before by Nancy Cotton Pearse, who argues that "the plot of *Thierry and Theodoret* implies that Ordella is a modern Alcestis" (1973, 228) and notes a few similarities between the stories of the two women (170-1), though she never mentions Euripides himself or his play and rather refers generically to "the Alcestis myth" (171n20), which would seem to imply some scepticism on her part as to Fletcher's first-hand knowledge of *Alcestis*. Ordella indeed shares some traits with Alcestis: she voluntarily accepts the prospect of death for her husband and expresses love for the same husband who has brought the sentence about.

Another important resemblance between the scenes is the fact that in *Thierry and Theodoret*, just like in *Alcestis* (and *The Winter's Tale*), a third party, Martel, guides the husband through a recognition scene with his supposedly dead wife. In all cases, the third party deliberately withholds information from the husband – especially the knowledge that the wife is in fact still alive. Moreover, the third party, as in *Alcestis*, tries to convince the husband to remarry, and

6 In addition to McKeithan's last observation, it is worth mentioning that Ordella's unhistorical name is possibly reminiscent of "Cordella" in *King Lear and His Three Daughters* (1589).

these manoeuvres function as a prelude to the recognition scene. Interestingly, in *Thierry and Theodoret* the agent of restoration is a man, Martel, as is Hercules in *Alcestis*, rather than a woman, as is Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*. Fletcher is going back to the roots of Shakespeare's scene. There is never any ambiguity, though, for the audience, as to Ordella's being still alive, unlike *Alcestis* or *The Winter's Tale*, in which the audience is surprised to see the heroines come back from real or apparent death. Thierry is more favourably presented than Admetus because he cannot bring himself to sacrifice his wife – the fact itself that this issue arises in the first place is more directly Euripidean than Shakespearean – and in any case the quick pace of the action would not allow the play to present, as does Shakespeare's, "how the husband transforms himself through suffering to become worthy of his wife" (Wilson 1984, 351).

The crucial element, however, is clearly the Euripidean theatergram of the presumed deceased veiled wife restored to her grieving husband, which Fletcher reproduces much more closely than Shakespeare. It is impossible to ascertain exactly where Fletcher may have become acquainted with the Euripidean motif. To be sure, even if we assume that Fletcher had no sufficient knowledge of ancient Greek to read *Alcestis*, at least one Latin translation would have been available to him. As Pollard expertly and helpfully summarises,

> *Alcestis* was among the most popular Greek plays in the sixteenth century; the play appeared in fourteen individual or partial editions before 1600 . . . Included in the first printed edition of Greek tragedies, a 1495 selection of four plays, it was subsequently translated into Latin by George Buchanan for performance at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux between 1539 and 1542. Although we do not know which edition he read, in 1545 Roger Ascham attested to the play's visibility in England, when his Toxophilus discusses with Philologus the "Alcestis of Euripides, whiche tragidie you red openly not long ago". Buchanan's translation was published in Paris in 1556, and reprinted in 1557, 1567 (in separate editions), 1568 (again in separate editions), and 1581; Italian translations appeared in 1525 and 1599; and additional translations of the play appeared in editions of Euripides' complete works. (2017, 179-80)

Whatever the way through which *Alcestis* reached Fletcher,[7] the fact that ancient Greece was much on Fletcher and his collaborators' minds as they wrote *Thierry and Theodoret* is also forcefully suggested by other Hellenising details that more or less stridently clash with the Merovingian setting of the play and depart from Fletcher and his collaborators' main narrative source. First, the characters repeatedly invoke the gods in the Greek pantheon: there are at least sixteen mentions of or invocations to the "gods" throughout the play, and Theodoret specifically refers to "the Thunderer" (i.e., Zeus/Jupiter) while talking to Martel (*Thierry and Theodoret*, 1.2.9). Second, one of the key locations in the play is the Temple of Diana/Artemis, which is clearly out of place in medieval France and obliquely recalls Shakespeare's self-consciousness in having "Greek female institutions such as the Delphic oracle and the temple of Diana at Ephesus" in *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* (1607) respectively (Pollard 2017, 14). Third, when Martel resoundingly extols the virtue of the allegedly dead Ordella, he claims that in her "All was that Athens, Rome or warlike Sparta / Have registered for good in their best women, / But nothing of their ill" (*Thierry and Theodoret*, 4.2.111–13). Fourth, Brunehaut conceptualises the clash she herself has set up between her sons Thierry and Theodoret in terms of the hatred between Eteocles and Polynices, the sons of Oedipus and Jocasta, who had been doomed by their father to kill each other. Brunehaut claims that she has been forced by Theodoret "to divide / The fires of brotherly affection, / Which should make but one flame" (*Thierry and Theodoret*, 2.1.15–17), with a subtle allusion to the version of the myth – related both by Lucan (*Pharsalia*, 1.549–52) and Statius (*Thebais*, 12.429ff) – according to which the flame arising from their funeral pyre divided into two separate fires to signify their never-ending hatred. Fifth, in the opening scene, Theodoret violently reproaches his mother for her lascivious ways and, just before leaving the stage, bids Brunehaut to "live like Niobe" (*Thierry and Theodoret*, 1.1.125), thus evoking again a figure belonging to Greek mythology, who was largely identified in the early modern period as a symbol of grief (cf. Shakespeare,

7 On the question of the *Alcestis* intertext in Shakespeare, see, within this volume, Colin Burrow's and Tania Demetriou's essays.

Hamlet, 1.2.149: "Like Niobe, all tears") and was a widow as well. Sixth, Ordella intervenes to defuse a rapidly escalating quarrel between Martel and Protaldi that threatens to end in a duel by asking Thierry not to "suffer / Our bridal night to be the Centaurs' feast" (2.3.103-4), with another explicit (and ominous) allusion to Greek mythology, namely to the feast to celebrate the wedding of Pirithous, King of the Lapiths, a group of legendary people based in Thessaly, with Hippodamia. The Centaurs, mythological creatures with the upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse, were invited. Under the influence of wine, to which they were not accustomed, one of them attempted to abduct the bride. The other Centaurs followed suit, trying to seize women and boys. A bloody war ensued, which ended with the Centaurs' defeat and banishment from Thessaly.

Finally, and even more importantly, Fletcher's characterisation of Ordella seems to glance sideways to a further Greek female myth – though not necessarily to a specific Greek play in this case – by virtue of a connection between the myth of Iphigenia and a biblical story. As first noticed by Emil Koeppel (1985, 36), the scene in which Thierry and Martel wait outside the temple for the first woman to come out is redolent of the tale of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:30-9) – and is absent in Grimeston/de Serres. After defeating the Ammonites in battle, Jephthah vowed that he would burn the first thing that came out of his house and offer it to Yahweh. The first thing that came out, however, was his daughter, who then encouraged her father to fulfil his vow, which he eventually did. Fletcher had already modelled on this story a passage of one of his solo plays, *The Mad Lover* (1616), set in Paphos, a coastal city in southwest Cyprus. There Cleanthe, the waiting-woman of the Princess Calis, bribes the Priestess of Venus to tell Calis that she should marry the first man she meets on leaving the Temple of the goddess and tells her brother Syphax to wait outside, all ready to marry her (*The Mad Lover*, 3.6.21-32, 4.3.25-6).

The story of Jephthah's daughter had been revived relatively recently by the Admiral's Men, who had staged the lost "Jephthah" (1602) by Anthony Munday and Thomas Dekker. Besides, the tale may have reached Fletcher not only via the Bible but also via *The Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus*, translated by Thomas

Lodge (1602), or George Buchanan's older Latin play *Jephthes, sive Votum* (1542).[8] This play is particularly interesting in this context, insofar as it is largely based on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, in which the title character accepts to be sacrificed for the sake of the Greek nation by her father, the General Agamemnon, after learning that according to a prophecy the Greek fleet will not be allowed to sail for Troy unless Agamemnon's daughter is immolated. In a tragicomic twist of events, though, Iphigenia disappears at the moment of sacrifice. She has been saved by Artemis, who has sent a hind to replace her. The wind begins to blow again, and the Greek can finally depart for Troy. Although Buchanan's *Jephthes* does not share *Iphigenia in Aulis*' unexpectedly happy resolution, the link between the two plays is further underscored by the fact that the daughter, unnamed in the Scriptures, became Iphis in Buchanan's play (Pollard 2017, 45). Another play of the same period, *Iephthae* (1543-1547, probably 1544), which John Christopherson first wrote in Greek and then translated into Latin, significantly draws upon *Iphigenia in Aulis*. While Fletcher and his collaborators' familiarity with Christopherson's play (only available in manuscript at the time) is unlikely, this suggests that the association between Jephthah's nameless daughter and Iphigenia was customary in the early modern period (see also Shuger 1994, 134-66), which strengthens the likelihood that Fletcher and his collaborators may have had both women in mind when creating Ordella in *Thierry and Theodoret*.

In heroically and enthusiastically accepting the prospect of being immolated for the sake of her country in act 4, scene 1, Ordella comes off as an Iphigenia-figure that elicits sympathy through her expression of powerful emotion. To be sure, Ordella's willingness to sacrifice herself by means of suicide is largely irrelevant for the plot but enables Fletcher to create a very intense sequence in which the virginal, Iphigenia-like Ordella manages to mobilise the playgoers' feelings. While discussing *The Winter's Tale*, Pollard argues that Shakespeare, by harking back to *Alcestis*, "not only dramatises a wife's miraculous return to life from apparent death, but also links this recovery with the performance of female lament, which elicits sympathies and melts audiences into supportive alliances" (2017,

8 On Buchanan and Euripides, see Crawforth and Jackson 2019.

171). In this way, Shakespeare exhibits "a particular investment in redeeming female suffering" (23). By contrast, although Fletcher does channel potent emotions through Ordella's performance, there is no moral redemption in store for any of the characters, and the emotional impact of the temple scene – which Charles Lamb "considered as the finest in all Fletcher, and Ordella to be the most perfect notion of the female heroic character" (1808, 403n100) – in fact proves to be secondary, as we now shall see, to two other interrelated effects on the audience that the play seems to pursue through the reuse of the Euripidean theatregram, thus bringing, in my opinion, the ancient Greek model in even fuller view than it is in Shakespeare's play.

Playing with the Audience

Fletcher shapes the final scene of *Thierry and Theodoret* largely after the corresponding segment of *The Winter's Tale*; at the same time, he anatomises Shakespeare's scene, goes back to two of the models that stand behind it, namely Shakespeare's own *King Lear* and Euripides' *Alcestis*, and decides to set up a sequence to which all three texts become equally confluent contributors. In doing so, Fletcher creates an intricate architecture of allusions that self-consciously and triumphantly bring to the fore multiple layers of dramatic *contaminatio*. The self-aware dimension of this artistic stunt is probably to be viewed as a nod to the sophisticated palates of those playgoers who were *au fait* with ancient Greek drama and probably relished feeling so. It is as though Fletcher were metaphorically nudging them, complacently asking: "Do ye see what I did there?" Here, like elsewhere in his canon, the impression is that Fletcher wants the play's mechanics and building blocks to be conspicuously on view: he wants his artfulness to be exhibited, not concealed.

The appropriation of the Euripidean motif in *Thierry and Theodoret*, however, serves another function in terms of the playwright's intended effect of the stage action on his audience. Fletcher had established himself as a successful playwright on the London scene by virtue of such influential tragicomedies as

Philaster (1609) and *A King and No King* (1611), both written with Francis Beaumont – and a tragic outcome averted thanks to a sudden reversal of fortune in the nick of time had become one of the hallmarks of his dramatic art and craft. As José A. Pérez Díez points out, Fletcher customarily "experiments with generic uncertainty", thereby exposing "the frail boundaries between genres", not only "nod[ding] to traditional generic constraints", but also bringing forward a "playful questioning of [generic] definitions" (2022, 5, 37). As it happens, Euripides is sometimes identified as the initiator of tragicomedy, and *Alcestis* itself has been frequently described as a tragicomedy rather than a tragedy because of the final reconciliation between Admetus and Alcestis.[9] (The same applies to the above-mentioned *Iphigenia in Aulis* because of the final divine rescue of the title character.) Fletcher appears to have been aware of this and to have teased the audience throughout the play with the prospect that tragedy might turn into tragicomedy. As Charles Squier observes,

> If Theodoret were to survive being stabbed, Brun[e]ha[u]t repent at the sight of Thierry's sleepless agony and produce an antidote, no harm would be done, least of all to the fabric of the play. Tragedy would become tragicomedy, but the essentials, the mood, the tone, and the dramatic feel of the play would not have been changed. (1986, 112)

The negative judgement that Squier passes on the play in his book is, in my view, largely unjustified, but he has a point in this case. Fletcher plays with the audience's expectations that things might somehow turn miraculously for the better, as his previous dramatic offerings had made them accustomed to with their sudden revelations and surprising twists of events, but tragicomedy never occurs in *Thierry and Theodoret*.

Hence, the powerful *coup de théâtre* that should have been achieved by the unveiling of the supposedly deceased wife turns out to be generically ineffective in *Thierry and Theodoret* because it fails to convert tragedy into tragicomedy as one may have expected:

9 On the links between this fact and early modern tragicomedy, see Dewar-Watson 2017.

while "the specter of Alcestis . . . loom[s] so large in [Shakespeare's] tragicomic imagination" (Pollard 2017, 178), when Fletcher goes back to Euripides in this play, he cannot ward off tragedy. No happy ending is in store for Thierry and Ordella. In this sense, their fate is closer to Lear and Cordelia's tragic one than Leontes and Hermione's or Admetus and Alcestis' unexpectedly happy one. Besides, the audience *know* all along that Ordella is alive, which inevitably lowers that potential for surprise of which Shakespeare's romance and Euripides' tragicomedy both take advantage.

As I argue elsewhere, it is a typical trait of Fletcher's dramaturgy "to look at everything that has to do with classical antiquity with a measure of detachment, suspicion, and scepticism, as though the classical past was no longer able to provide viable models and examples" (2022, 9). In this case, I believe that Fletcher treats a very influential classical theatregram with characteristic scepticism and irreverence by emptying it of its genre-changing power. The prospect of tragicomedy is suggested but averted; Fletcher teases the Greek precedent and deflates it; romance tries to intrude in tragedy but is effaced, blocked out by the death of the newlyweds. In a different context, Lucy Munro has called attention to how *Thierry and Theodoret* presents, in regard to its "odd, unclimactic fashion" of dramatising death, especially the death of Theodoret, "an offhand, even satiric treatment of generic convention, in which an expected response is shut off through disjunctions of narrative and tone", thus "steering their spectators in alternative directions" (2017, 269). The same has been observed by Fredson Bowers as concerns the play's misleading deployment of elements typical of the sub-genre of revenge tragedy. Bowers (1940, 168) observes that *Thierry and Theodoret* features "[t]raditional characters of revenge tragedy", and that "situations are begun which would normally lead to revenge as the motivation for the future course of the action, and then nothing happens". Bowers also helpfully singles out a telling example:

> considerable pains have been taken to prepare the audience for Memberge in the role of the revenger for her own slain father [i.e. Theodoret]. But after her first furious demand to Thierry for vengeance, a scene in which she seems willing to contemplate incest with him if it will procure revenge, she does not appear again

> until it is time to stand mute beside the bed of the dying Thierry and receive Martel as a husband. (169)

Fletcher's treatment of the Euripidean model in the final scene of the play then appears to be the culmination of this strategy, a conscious effort systematically to defy the expectations of the audience in terms of genre and theatrical conventions.

That this is a deliberate move on Fletcher and his collaborators' part is more fully borne out by their using the trope of the veiled woman apparently returning from death once more in *The Knight of Malta* – this time to fully tragicomic extent. Although there can be no absolute certainty about how the two plays relate in date, on balance *The Knight of Malta* is likely to have been written after *Thierry and Theodoret* (see Wiggins, #1848 and #1870). In this case, the reunion scene between the old Spaniard Gomera and his lost wife Oriana – who wakes up Juliet-like in a crypt in which she had been laid after being secretly poisoned by the evil knight Montferrat's Moorish maid Abdella with "a sleeping potion / . . . of sufficient strength / So to bind up her senses that no sign / Of life appeared in her" (*Knight of Malta*, 4.1.117-20) – recalls that between Admetus and Alcestis, as already remarked in passing by John Genest as early as the first half of the nineteenth century (1832, 273; see also Pearse 1973, 171n20, 189), as well as that between Leontes and Hermione (Cartwright 1864, 89).[10] Again, given the unfamiliarity of this play with most readers, I feel it is helpful to quote from its final scene. After Miranda has ordered the guards to bring some captives onstage, he commends a lady to Gomera, which prompts the crucial exchange:

> Valetta What countrywoman is she?
> Miranda Born a Greek.
> . . .
> Gomera Excuse me, noble sir. Oh, think me not
> So dull a devil to forget the loss
> Of such a matchless wife as I possessed
> And ever to endure the sight of woman.
> . . .
> Castriot We cannot force you, but we would persuade.

10 For a detailed synopsis of the play, see Wiggins (#1870).

GOMERA Beseech you, sir, no more. I am resolved
To forsake Malta, tread a pilgrimage
To fair Jerusalem for my lady's soul
And will not be diverted.
MIRANDA You must bear
This child along w'ye then. [*Shows the child.*]
GOMERA What child?
ALL How's this?
MIRANDA Nay then, Gomera, thou art injurious.
This child is thine, and this rejected lady
Thou hast as often known as thine own wife,
And this I'll make good on thee with my sword.
GOMERA . . .
Woman, unveil.
ORIANA Will you refuse me yet? [*Unveiling*]
GOMERA My wife?
VALETTA My sister?
GOMERA Somebody thank heaven:
I cannot speak.
ALL All praise be ever given!
(*Knight of Malta*, 5.2.101, 105-8, 119-28, 131-3)

This sequence rewrites the corresponding segment in the play's narrative source, namely the thirteenth "Questione d'amore" from Book 4 of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Filocolo* (Sherbo 1952), which Fletcher may have read in the 1567 English translation by H. G., probably Henry Grantham, as *A Pleasant Disport of Diverse Noble Personages*, reprinted as *Thirteen Most Pleasant and Delectable Questions* in 1571 and 1587 (Edwards 2006, 151). In Boccaccio's *questione*, a woman comes back from apparent death with a new-born child to the surprise of her husband, but she is not veiled. Apart from the veil, however, the passage from *The Knight of Malta* features other resemblances and points of contact with *Alcestis*.

Gomera, like Admetus, does not want to welcome the veiled woman brought into his house by another man, the virtuous knight Miranda, because he is still reeling under the loss of his wife; Oriana is described as an exceptionally virtuous woman and, as she is still veiled, Miranda informs Gomera that she was "Born a Greek", which appears to be a pointed reference to the Greek provenance

of the motif of the veiled woman, another of those self-conscious allusions that Fletcher and his collaborators may have inserted for the benefit of the most learned section of the audience. As Pearse remarks, Miranda's "act of restoration" of Oriana to her husband Gomera "completes Miranda's purification. In the spectacular grand finale, the wicked Mountferrat is ceremonially degraded from the Order while the angelic Miranda is formally initiated as a Knight of Malta. The play concludes with a double ceremony of expulsion and apotheosis; lust is expelled and chastity triumphs" (1973, 189).[11] In *The Knight of Malta*, then, Fletcher and his collaborators – act 5 is generally attributed to Field – reuse the structural trope of a grieving husband's acceptance of a veiled woman who turns out to be his allegedly dead wife to transform potential tragedy into tragicomedy, thus abiding by the original generic direction of the theatregram. The comparison between its two uses therefore brings into even starker relief the self-consciousness and dexterity of Fletcher's dramatic writing in the concluding segment of *Thierry and Theodoret*.

Conclusion

As I write elsewhere, "Fletcher's most intense and enduring literary interest seems to have lain in contemporary continental European writings, and even the choice of those Greek or Latin texts that he every now and then did mine for plot material would seem to signal some form of disregard for the texts that represented the golden age of classical literature and history" (2022, 32). In that context,

11 A veiled wife returning from presumed death also appears in Field's *The Triumph of Love* in *Four Plays, or Moral Representations, in One*, which probably predates (1613) both *Thierry and Theodoret* and *The Knight of Malta*. The situation in this play, however, is different from what occurs in either *Alcestis* or *The Winter's Tale*. The wife, Cornelia, does not really return from another place: she has been hiding all along in Milan, where the story is set, after the Duke, her husband, has been exiled by a usurping tyrant, and she only unveils after the rightful Duke has been restored on his throne. Hence, it is technically the husband who comes back rather than the wife. Besides, there is no third party involved in facilitating the recognition of Cornelia by the Duke: she acts on her own initiative.

I did not discuss the Euripidean presences analysed in this article in any detail, as I was interested in specific, recognizable *texts* that Fletcher seems to have read, and I was primarily focused on those classical writings that contributed to shaping Fletcher's conception of ancient Rome and history. The foregoing discussion of Fletcher's use of a characteristic Euripidean trope then adds to my findings and argument as put forward in *John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics* by confirming Fletcher's penchant for mixing the ancient and the contemporary together with his habit of playfully interacting with conventions and traditions. His fashioning of this originally Euripidean theatregram – which veritably became, primarily through Fletcher and his collaborators' responses to it, a theatregram on the English stage – in *Thierry and Theodoret* as a failed attempt at turning tragedy into tragicomedy proves to be in line with "Fletcher's sceptical outlook on classical models and his urge to call them into question" as it emerges from his canon, together with his typically "egalitarian or irreverent use of classical sources" (Lovascio 2022, 7, 181).

While discussing Fletcher's tragicomedies, Russ McDonald argues that a vital element of his dramaturgy was that he and his collaborators "set out to make their audience aware of their awareness of conventions . . . by identifying and exaggerating some of the topics and strategies of their contemporaries" (2003, 165), while Lee Bliss observes that Fletcher's tragicomedy often "draws attention to its artifice and to the playwrights' amused elaboration of a generic *topos*" (1986, 160). *Thierry and Theodoret* provides a spectacular instantiation of Fletcher's penchant for setting up a hugely eclectic dramaturgy oozing with virtuoso artfulness and a heightened sense of theatricality in its deliberate exposure of the layers of literary mediation and adaptation that contributed to Shakespeare's creation of the final segment of *The Winter's Tale*. In so doing, the play gratifies the playgoers' desire to be "in the know", while simultaneously teasing and defying their generic expectations by inhibiting the transition of tragedy into tragicomedy. True, in relying perhaps excessively on the arch self-consciousness and ironic strategies typical of Fletcherian drama, *Thierry and Theodoret* may not be among the most successful specimens of Fletcher's playwriting – and an excessive reliance "on a shared knowledge of . . . dramatic conventions" might have resulted

in making a portion of playgoers feel "disconcerted or left behind" (Munro 2017, 271) during the performance. Whether one likes the play or not, though, matters less than its elaborate theatrical adroitness, which is both its cipher and its mainstay. *Thierry and Theodoret* might be many things, but it is definitely not theatre for the uninitiated.

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