HOFMANNSTHAL'S VERSION OF EURIPIDES' ALCESTIS

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When a modern dramatist presents us with a 'free translation' of a Greek tragedy it is frequently very difficult to decide whether the modern version should be regarded as a translation or rather as an adaptation of the original. Hofmannsthal's version of the Alcestis is one of the most interesting cases in which this problem arises.

On the whole Hofmannsthal has kept very closely to the structure of Euripides' tragedy. In adaptations we frequently find that some scenes are omitted and others added, but Hofmannsthal has kept all the scenes of the Euripidean original. And while in many adaptations we may find that the scenes are roughly the same but that their contents are completely different, he has on the whole adhered to the original plan of action, i.e. in each scene roughly the same events occur, the same discussions take place and the outcome is the same. Two scenes, however, have been altered more radically—the scene with Pheres where the quarrel develops on different lines, and the scene following on Admetus' return from the grave which Hofmannsthal has rewritten completely.

As was to be expected in a modern version, Hofmannsthal did not keep the choral odes intact. Where he reproduces part of their content, he usually gives the lines to a number of voices—men and women, young or old, and even slaves. But he has omitted the greater part of the choral odes. The parodos is most fully reproduced but the second stasimon is represented by only six lines. The second stasimon is longer (although completely new) but the third and fourth stasima have been omitted completely.

In some respects, therefore, Hofmannsthal has followed the original very closely, and he has given a free translation of a substantial part of Euripides' tragedy. But he has not hesitated to introduce changes. This is already noticeable in what he omits. In addition to the partial or even complete omission of choral odes, he frequently omits shorter or longer passages of dialogue. A good example is his treatment of passages of stichomythia. He completely rearranges these passages by giving longer speeches to the characters, and usually curtails this part of the scene.

In other cases Hofmannsthal has not only omitted a passage of Euripides but has also replaced it by a passage of his own invention. In these passages, therefore, he deliberately departs from Euripides' way of presenting the situation and gives a different version which is more congenial to him. These changes we find especially in passages which portray Admetus for, as we shall see, Hofmannsthal's conception of Admetus is somewhat different from that of Euripides. Finally Hofmannsthal not only omits and changes
but also adds to the original. These additions vary from single lines (or even half-lines) to passages of considerable length. These additions are of great significance for it is mainly owing to them that the atmosphere of Hofmannsthal’s version is so completely different from that of Euripides’ tragedy. It is in these passages that he has given his own interpretation of the story of Alcestis, and a closer examination of these additions will give us a good idea of the difference between Euripides’ and Hofmannsthal’s approach. I therefore propose to give a short résumé of the most important of these changes and additions.

Hofmannsthal’s version does not start with Apollo’s prologue but with a short introductory speech, or rather song, spoken by an unknown Voice. This Voice complains that Apollo, who has enjoyed the hospitality of Admetus’ house and charmed all the animals with his music, does not love his house any more. This speech is really a shortened version of the third stasimon which Hofmannsthal has omitted. As W. Jens has shown, Hofmannsthal prefers to prepare the atmosphere of a scene before plunging into the action, and he has very ably used Euripides’ own lines for this purpose.

In the prologue we find quite a number of changes. Apollo shows more feeling than in Euripides. He tells us that he has pleasant memories of the time he spent in Admetus’ house ‘weil immer doch Vergangnes lieblich ist’. He also tells us that he became fond of Admetus—in Euripides he only says he found him a pious man. Therefore—and also ‘weil sie so am Leben hängen, diese Sterblichen’—he went to the Fates and persuaded them to allow another person to go to Hades in Admetus’ place. Note that Apollo does not deceive the Fates as in Euripides. Hofmannsthal then tries to explain how it came about that Admetus accepted Alcestis’ offer—a problem which Euripides completely ignores, perhaps wisely so. Admetus begins looking for a substitute but immediately feels ashamed of himself.

‘und die Frage, kaum getan,
gereut’ ihn, und er wäre lieber tot ...’

But his young wife offers to die in his place and before he can prevent her, her offer is accepted and her fate is irrevocably decided.

‘und als er wild
in Angst die Arme um sie klammerte,
umschlang er eine Todgeweihte schon.’

Thus Admetus can do nothing whatever to prevent her from dying in his place.

In the parodos Hofmannsthal has given us a shortened version of the Euripidean ode. But there are two very typical additions. The chorus in Euripides only asks why it is so silent before the palace; in Hofmannsthal

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1 Hofmannsthal und die Griechen, Tübingen, 1955, p. 31.
they describe the impression the silence makes upon them:

‘Unheimlich still ists.
Stumm als ob die Luft
der Atem einhielte.

Mich graut. Mir ist, als wär die Luft voll Stöhnen
und voll Geräusch von Händen, die sich regen.’

The following scene in which the female servant tells how Alcestis took
leave of her house and servants, is mainly the same as in Euripides. But
again there is one typical addition. On this last day of her life Alcestis’
voice has undergone a subtle change:

‘Nur ihre Stimme—wenn man so sie kennt
wie ich—war eigentümlich herb und fremd,
als hätte sie Entsetzliches versenkt
in ihrer Brust und hätte Angst davor,
sich selbst zu rühren mit gewohntem Klang.’

In the place of the first stasimon Hofmannsthal only gives a short prayer
to the god of healing. Then Alcestis and Admetus appear. In the first part
of this scene Hofmannsthal has closely followed Euripides, and has only
added single lines in a number of places. But these lines are important. In
Euripides Alcestis merely calls upon the sun and the clouds, but in Hof­
mannsthal she also describes the feelings they arouse in her:

‘Die Sonne, schau. Sie streichelt meine Hände,
Und Wolken! wie sie gleiten, gleiten! weh!
Die kommen auch nicht wieder.’

Similarly, while in Euripides Alcestis merely calls upon her parents’ house
and her marriage bed, Hofmannsthal tries to establish a connection
between Alcestis’ experience of the phenomena of nature and her memories
of the past:

‘Wenn ich da schau, wie sich das abhebt,
das dunkle Dach vom Himmelsblau, da fällt
mir etwas ein . . .’

Where Alcestis describes her vision of Charon waiting for her, Hofmanns­
thal only adds a few lines giving expression to Alcestis’ feelings on seeing
Charon: ‘Ich habe Angst, Admet!’ and: ‘Ich will nicht diese Wege gehn.’

In Alcestis’ speech, too, he has only added some expressions of endearment
towards Admetus (the absence of which has greatly troubled most modern
commentators!) and a more passionate avowal that she could not live
without Admetus.

When we come to Admetus’ speech we find more substantial changes. He
seems to feel the loss of Alcestis more sharply than in Euripides, or at any
rate expresses his loss in more passionate terms. No other woman will wear
her royal dress:
'Der Gürtel und der Reif, die bleiben leer,
leer wie mein Herz, wie meine Arme leer . . .'

He cannot find any consolation in a statue as substitute for Alcestis, like Euripides’ Admetus. Hofmannsthal has omitted these much criticised lines and replaced them by a highly poetical passage describing how Sorrow will stand behind his bed and how he sometimes will mistake her for Alcestis:

‘und manches Mal schlaftrunken wähl ich dann,
du stündest da, und strecke meine Arme
nach ihr und slafe selig lächelnd ein,
bis sie mir ihre kalte Hand aufs Herz
hinkegt und schauerlich der Wahn zerriht.’

The idea of a common grave gives no comfort to this Admetus.

When Alcestis dies, the Euripidean Admetus only says: ‘This calamity has not come upon me unexpectedly. I knew it and it has been torturing me for a long time.’ In Hofmannsthal, however, he is much more passionate:

‘Dies namenlose Leid, ich ahnte es
seit langem schon, und manchmal in der Nacht
beugt ich mich über sie in solcher Angst,
alas müsste ich plötzlich, wie die Kerze licht,
 ihr Leben mir im Arm auslöschen seh.’

Another interesting change in the final part of this scene is in the words spoken by the young Eumelus when his mother dies. It was quite an innovation in Euripides’ time to let children speak on the stage, and it was to be expected that he would have some difficulty in employing this technique. There is nothing absurd in what his Eumelus says but he speaks in very general terms and more like an adult. In Hofmannsthal Eumelus, much more like a real child, cannot understand what is really happening:

‘Vater, die Mutter macht so grosse Augen,
sie hat so starre Finger. Mutter, hör doch!
Was legen sie die Mutter auf die Trage?
Kann sie denn nicht mehr gehen, hat sie verlernt?’

In the place of Euripides’ second stasimon in which the chorus praises Alcestis, Hofmannsthal has inserted a number of lines spoken by women and slaves, which has no connection at all with Euripides’ odes, except for the prayer that Alcestis’ passing to Hades may be peaceful which Hofmannsthal repeats in different form. The other lines exhort men to enjoy life for death is inevitable:

‘O brechet die Früchte, umschlingt einander,
beladet mit Leben die fliehenden Stunden,
mit Lachen und Liebe, mit Herrschaft und Lust!
Was frommen die duftenden, goldnen Sandalen,
was frommen die Spangen, was frommen die Blumen,
um nieder ins Dunkel zu folgen dem Tod?’
Then Heracles appears. Hofmannsthal finds it necessary to emphasise his reputation as a great hero, and therefore he adds a number of lines in which the men, young and old, express their admiration for Heracles in somewhat extravagant terms. One old man is deeply thankful that he has seen Heracles before his death and will be able to relate this experience in the underworld! The following passage of stichomythia in Euripides in which Admetus tries to deceive Heracles with half-truths concerning the identity of the woman who has died in his house, has been greatly shortened. Admetus only tells Heracles that someone has died in his house and when Heracles wishes to depart, he refuses to let him go; the deceased is no relation and it is not in accordance with his royal dignity to turn away a guest from his door.

In Euripides the chorus utters a mild protest against Admetus’ decision to entertain Heracles, and he defends himself with the plea that it would only have aggravated his sorrow if he had turned him away. In Hofmannsthal Admetus anticipates all criticism. To all his subjects it should be sufficient that the king has done it. And furthermore, Alcestis’ voluntary death has imposed the duty upon him of showing himself worthy of that sacrifice. Her death will give new life to the whole country:

‘Der schöne Leib der jungen Königin
ward in die Erde eingesenkt als Same:
nun sollen Wunderbäume Zweige spreizen,
von Taubenschwärmen rauschend; alle Flüsse
in meinem Lande sollen kühner rollen
in lauterem Triumph und rollend spiegeln
den Schatten wundervoll erhöhten Lebens.’

In these lines Hofmannsthal has expressed a theme which later becomes very important in his work—the mysterious power of sacrifice and the transformation it brings about.

The Pheres scene, which in Hofmannsthal follows without any intervening choral ode, has been changed completely. In Euripides, when Pheres comes to sympathise, Admetus immediately attacks him in a long speech, and a bitter quarrel ensues. Hofmannsthal does his best to enlist our sympathies on Admetus’ side. Pheres is depicted as a very old man, already senile, but still taking the utmost pleasure in life. Admetus at first tries to restrain himself: ‘Es ist der Vater, denk, es ist der Vater!’ but at last he can endure this man’s sympathy no longer and orders him to go away:

‘Ich lud dich nicht, ich hiess dich nicht willkommen!
Ich will dich nicht! Geh fort und lass die Tote
mich doch begraben.’

How differently the two dramatists have treated this scene may be seen from the fact that in Euripides these words appear right at the beginning of the scene!
In the following Heracles scene Hofmannsthal has tried to invest the hero with more dignity. The speech in which Heracles lectures the indignant servant on the necessity of making the most of each day is one of the most amusing in Euripides, but does not suit Hofmannsthal's conception of the hero. His Heracles has a much more serious view of life; he sees a mystic resemblance between drunkenness, being in love and death:

‘Göttliche Art der Trunkenheit vielleicht ist, was wir Totsein heissen!
Weintrunkne und Verliebte, die Berauschten der Kypris, schaun mit solchen sonderbaren Augen . . .
   kämen aber Tote wieder,
sie hätten noch viel wundervollre Augen . . .’

By means of these words Hofmannsthal also very aptly prepares us for the scene in which Alcestis returns. This Heracles, too, has great admiration for Admetus’ great sacrifice in receiving him under these circumstances:

‘Du, das ist schön! Das ist viel mehr als Trunk und Gastgeschenk, wie’s Könige wohl geben.’

Immediately after Heracles’ departure Admetus returns from the grave. In Euripides we find a long kommos between Admetus and the chorus, followed by a speech of Admetus in which he complains that after all Alcestis is more fortunate than he, who has to live without her. Hofmannsthal has made no attempt to reproduce this scene. In its place we have a number of lines spoken by young men, describing how Alcestis’ grave will be honoured (the idea is taken from Euripides’ last stasimon which has been omitted), and two speeches by Admetus which are completely new. These two speeches are very typical of Hofmannsthal. Everything in his vicinity reminds Admetus of Alcestis and the loss he has suffered, and he finds it intolerable.

‘Aus leeren Augenhohlen starrst du her, mein Haus.’

(Note that Euripides only has: ‘O hateful sight of a house which is bereaved.’)

And later:

‘Das Land ist furchterlich! die Wiesen reden von ihr, die Teiche sehnen sich nach ihr!
Die Bäume sind, als ob sie weinen wollten, seid lieber häßlich, starr und stumpf als so!’

It is a very subtle touch that at the end of this scene Admetus sees Heracles approaching and imagines that it is Death leading a woman. In this way the transition to the following scene is made very smoothly. Here, in contrast to the previous two scenes, Hofmannsthal has for the most part followed Euripides very closely, even in the passage of stichomythia in which Heracles persuades Admetus to receive the strange woman in his
house, a scene in which some comic touches occur. He has only added some lines to Admetus’ first speech in which he describes the strange feelings this young woman arouses in him; now he feels his loss even more sharply than before:

‘Die dumpfe Starrheit meines Innern löst
in Sehnsucht qualvoll ihre Gegenwart . . .

Zwischen zu Boden sehn und sie anschauen
durchleb ich neu das Wissen des Verlusts . . .’

And finally, while in Euripides Heracles only exhorts Admetus to be just and show respect towards guests, Hofmannsthal gives him a longer speech in which he also tries to explain the meaning of Alcestis’ sacrifice:

‘Des Lebens Früchte geben sich nicht uns,
sie lassen allenfalls sich nehmen: diese
gab sich dir hin und gibt sich dir aufs neu
so ganz, wie kaum dir selber du gehörst.’

When we review all these changes and additions, it is clear that many of them are closely connected with the portrayal of Admetus. Modern readers are usually very troubled by the fact that in Euripides he seems to accept Alcestis’ sacrifice as a matter of course, and that he can reproach his father with his refusal to die for his son without seeing the vulnerability of his own position. Hofmannsthal gives us a different version of how he came to accept Alcestis’ offer; he did not wish her to die in his place but her fate was decided before he could reject her offer. In the Pheres scene, too, he shows how Admetus is provoked to the utmost by his senile father. Furthermore he stresses Admetus’ exalted view of his duty as king, especially in the speech in which he gives his reasons for receiving Heracles. We get the impression that such a king deserved Alcestis’ sacrifice. Many other passages are devoted to the description of Admetus’ feelings and show how deeply he feels the loss of Alcestis. All these passages serve to show Admetus in a much more sympathetic light. Heracles, too, has become a more dignified figure. Special attention is drawn to his great reputation and when he becomes drunk he gives a profound justification of his drunkenness by means of which Hofmannsthal tries to put this scene on a higher level.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that Hofmannsthal’s only or even principal purpose in giving this version was to ennoble the characters of Admetus and Heracles. In his treatment of this story Hofmannsthal has tried to give expression to some deeply felt ideas on life which later were to play an important part in his plays. One of them is the profound meaning of sacrifice and the transformation it effects in other people. Alcestis dies to save Admetus. As a result of her sacrifice he gets a new vision of his duty as king. He wants to show himself worthy of Alcestis and therefore he acts as he does towards Heracles. By his unprecedented hospitality the hero in
his turn is induced to rescue Alcestis from Death. Thus we have a threefold sacrifice. Another favourite idea of Hofmannsthal, the close unity of life and death, also finds expression in the play, especially in Heracles' words to the complaining slave. Heracles very aptly tells the story of a woman who returned from the brink of the grave and was completely changed by her experience. Closely connected with this passage is Heracles' explanation of Alcestis' silence on her return from death:

'Drei Tage schweigt sie, bis die Lebenslust aus ihrer Seele nimmt, was übermenschlich—unsäglich ihren inneren Sinn erfüllt und wie im tiefsten Traum gebunden hält.'

Another outstanding feature of Hofmannsthal's version is the greater attention he gives to the analysis of his characters' feelings. While Euripides frequently only states a fact and leaves the spectator to draw his own conclusions, Hofmannsthal loves to elaborate the impression which the event has produced. Most of the quotations from his version which I have given illustrate this tendency. These passages are especially rich in imagery—images which frequently deal with the mysteries of life and death. It is mainly by means of these passages that Hofmannsthal has succeeded in creating an atmosphere of his own in his version, an atmosphere which is very different from the realism of Euripides; everything seems to take place in a dream world. Hofmannsthal himself wrote that the dominant mood of his Alkestis was 'das unsäglich Wundervolle des Lebens'.

In recent years two critics have expressed sharply contrasted opinions on the merits of Hofmannsthal's version. W. Jens has given us a penetrating analysis of the inner differences between Euripides and Hofmannsthal, but he tends to exaggerate these differences. Frequently where Hofmannsthal only adds a few lines, he needs a whole paragraph to explain the deep philosophical meaning of the added lines and he tends to overrate the profundity of his ideas.

As a reaction against the exaggerated admiration of Hofmannsthal's thought, which is quite common today, K. von Fritz's attitude is at first stimulating when he speaks of 'die schöne Sprache, die Musik der Verse, den samtenen sanften Glanz, der wie so oft bei Hofmannsthal über allem liegt, die „tiefen“ poetischen Gedanken, die darum nicht wahr zu sein brauchen' and gives as his opinion: 'Was bei der Umarbeitung der Euripideischen Tragödie herausgekommen ist, ist ein traumhaftes Spiel, bei dem man nicht allzugenau nachprüfen darf, wie die einzelnen Teile menschlich und moralisch zusammenpassen'. Nevertheless I think that he is not quite fair to Hofmannsthal. He tends to regard his version only as an attempt to

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2 op. cit., pp. 30-44.
improve upon Euripides and to criticise it only as such. But I do not think that this was Hofmannsthal's main purpose. He wanted to reinterpret the myth for his own time and in accordance with his own ideas, and his version must be judged in its own right. It is true that this play does not have the concentrated force of his Elektra, but it must be remembered that he was only 19 years of age when he produced this version, and that he was at the beginning of his development as a dramatist. In this period he still had a mystic sense of unity with the universe which is clearly noticeable in this play. When he lost this sense of unity, he could write a stark tragedy like Elektra. That he succeeded in giving his own interpretation of the plot while keeping so closely to the original is a lasting achievement.
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