'Ercles Vein': Heracles as Bottom in Ted Hughes' *Alcestis*

Stephe Harrop*

Ted Hughes' version of Euripides' Alcestis *(1999) is a play which diverges significantly from its ancient source-text, most notably in an interpolated sequence during which the drunken Heracles re-enacts his own labours, before experiencing traumatic visions. This article identifies this un-Euripidean interlude as a characteristic instance of inter-textual adaptation practice, in which Hughes constructs a self-reflexive, meta-theatrical play on the bombastic, tyrannical 'Ercles', as exuberantly performed by Nick Bottom in Shakespeare's* A Midsummer Night's Dream *(c.1595). It locates this analysis within the context of developing scholarship on Hughes' adaptations from the classics, and an increasing focus on the poet's use of mediating texts, especially Shakespearean verse, in constructing complex, multi-layered and challenging re-writings of classical source-texts. It contends that the meta-theatrical comedy of Hughes' Heracles-as-Bottom offers a familiar analogue for some key elements of the 'prosatyric'* Alcestis, *while also allowing the modern poet to expand upon the back-story of Heracles' labours, as well as providing him with an opportunity to dramatize some of the darker aspects of the ancient hero's violent career. It finally goes on to consider how this characterization might be related to the wider reception of Heracles, especially in his maddened, murderous aspects, in recent adaptations for the theatre.*

Introduction

Ted Hughes' version of Euripides' *Alcestis*, published in 1999 and first performed by Northern Broadsides in 2000, is a play which diverges substantially from its ancient source–text. Hughes' *Alcestis* significantly expands upon Euripides' play, his add-itions including some very personal poetic reflections on illness, death, grief and endurance.[1] Hughes also adds several new characters to the ancient play's cast-list,

*Correspondence: Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, Lamorbey Park, Burnt Oak Lane, Sidcup, Kent, DA15 9DF, UK. Email: stephe.harrop@bruford.ac.uk.

1 These elements of Hughes' *Alcestis*, as well as the play's dramatic focus on a young wife's death, align it closely with the autobiographical reflections of *Birthday Letters* (1998). Sagar observes that 'Hughes cannot have failed to recognize in it disturbing echoes of his own story he was simultaneously telling in *Birthday Letters*'. He further argues that 'What *Alcestis* offered Hughes was a more hopeful treatment than the unsparing *Birthday Letters* of the theme of the attempt to recover in some sense a dead wife.' (Sagar 2009: 16–17). It is not the primary aim of this article to discuss the links between the poet's biography and his adaptation of *Alcestis*, although some key areas of critical debate will be highlighted.

and introduces an extended sequence during which an increasingly drunken Heracles re-enacts his own labours, before enduring disturbing visions of Prometheus, God and God's implacable servant, the Vulture.

This extremely free adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis* has divided critics.[2] The text's detractors have condemned its inclusion of contemporary language and references — 'Life is your hospital and you call it a funfair' (Hughes 1999: 7)[3] — its focus on images and themes drawn from Hughes' own poetic corpus, and its extended interpolations drawing on the mythology of Heracles and Prometheus. Perhaps the most extreme statement of this view came from Bernard Knox, who condemned Hughes' version as 'a desecration, the literary equivalent of spray-painting a moustache on the *Mona Lisa*' (2000: 85).[4]

Other readers have defended the play's re-working of the Alcestis myth as a contemporary response to tragic experience and human suffering, arguing that rather than attempting a faithful re-inscription of Euripides, 'Hughes is writing a new play, to rehearse myths of his own' (Gervais 2002: 146).[5] Sagar contends that Hughes sought to 'augment' a little-performed ancient play 'with something creative of his own':

The fact that *Alcestis* is a minor play allowed Hughes if not to appropriate it for his own purposes, at least to see himself as creative collaborator, filling out from bitter experience what Euripides only gestures towards. Hughes' version is half as long again as the original. (2009: 16)[6]

Hughes' defenders emphasize the modern poet's ability to 'contest, reject, and metamorphose what he finds in the ancient' (Hardwick 2009: 58), thereby opening a space for creative interplay between classical and contemporary responses to

2 Sagar observes that 'Hughes was not a classical scholar. As far as I know he was not fluent enough in any language to translate from it unaided. His method was to procure from someone else, often a friend, a crib — that is a straightforward literal prose translation, from which Hughes would then produce his 'version'. He would also, of course, read all the other translations he could get hold of' (2001: 7). See also Talbot (2006: 131–2).

3 In the course of the same speech, Death also displays anachronistic knowledge of 'general anaesthesia', 'morphine' and 'hypodermic syringes'. All subsequent references are to this edition.

4 A comparison might be drawn with Browning's 'Balaustion's Adventure' (1871), another transformative adaptation of *Alcestis,* and one which was also written by the surviving partner of a high-profile literary marriage. See Hall and Macintosh (2005: 442–5) and Brown (2009: 293–7).

5 Discussed in Hardwick (2008: 354–5) and Walton (2006: 189–92).

6 The 'bitter experience' identified by Sagar points to an important body of work concerning the relationship between Hughes' very public private life and his versions of Greek tragedy. Silk (2009) argues that aspects of the poet's biography, particularly the 'Hughes/Plath 'tragedy'' (262), create a 'huge network of cross-reference, a large subtext' (259) in Hughes' late adaptations from the classics.

ancient myth, 'reworking it to accommodate his own poetic and dramatic wisdom' (Marshall 2009: 276).

It has further been suggested that the creation of such a space between a classical source-text and its later versions is necessary to Hughes' self-consciously reflexive adaptation strategies. Brown argues that there are 'special resonances' in Hughes' versions of classical texts which 'depend on the reader's sense of the original, and thus of the gap between the two' (2009: 285). According to this view, the modern poet's many divergences from ancient precedent can both acknowledge and celebrate a contemporary adaptation's place within 'a larger, post-classical, literary landscape' (Brown 2009: 287).

Pursuing this idea of the adapted classic's situation within the landscape of more recent literature, critics have explored the complex layering of image, reference and symbol in Hughes' works derived from ancient sources. Hardwick proposes:

Analysing the nature and directions of the linguistic traffic between the ancient drama and Hughes' writing suggests that Hughes' dramatic dialogue is with his own poetry and with the tradition he writes from, rather than directly with the ancient source text and also that this 'intra-textual' characteristic has wider implications for the ways in which we can try to explain the relationship between ancient and modern in his work. (2009: 41).

As well as the 'intra-textual' characteristics of Hughes' works, inter-textual aspects of the poet's adaptation practice (the dialogue with tradition identified by Hardwick) have increasingly come under detailed critical scrutiny. Discussing Hughes' debts to T. S. Eliot, Talbot argues that 'effective criticism of Hughes's classical translations depends as much on attention to his use of mediating English sources as of the ostensible classical sources themselves' (2009: 63).[7] He also identifies a 'significant pattern' in Hughes' 'habit of absorbing classical topics through the mediation of Shakespeare' (Talbot 2006: 156),[8] an insight which may have significant implications for our reading of Hughes' *Alcestis*.

In her analysis of Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* (1997), Brown explores the example of Pyramus and Thisbe who arrange to make:

Their rendezvous the mulberry tree
Over the tomb of Ninus, a famous landmark. (Hughes 1997: 248).

Brown notes the absence of this final clause from the original Latin poem, and explains Hughes' addition as an acknowledgement of the later reception of Ovid's

---

7 See also Talbot (2006) and Brown (2009).
8 Shakespeare himself was, of course, an inveterate borrower from a range of literary sources, including the classics. On Shakespeare's reception of the classics see Martindale and Taylor (2004). On the evidence for Shakespeare's knowledge of *Alcestis,* perhaps in Latin translation, see Dewar-Watson (2009).

tale of doomed lovers in the comic amateur theatricals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

We may infer that the 'landmark' is literary as well as geographical, 'famous' because it is immortalized as 'Ninny's tomb' by Shakespeare's Francis Flute, the bellows-mender (2009: 287)

In this moment of inter-textual playfulness, an ancient text is made to nod to the influence of a later re-writing of its tale. Its characters, as well as the poem's narrating voice, seem aware of their literary and theatrical afterlives, 'to know that their fates are written in books as well as in the stars' (Brown 2009: 290).

A comparable instance of inter-textual play, developing its own echoes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, can also be identified among the complex layers of Hughes' *Alcestis*. Riley analyses Shakespeare's Bottom as an important figure within the Renaissance reception of Heracles, and the tradition of furious overacting associated with the role, describing him as the 'most egregious exponent of the Heraclean acting tradition' (Riley 2008: 103). The current argument approaches the relationship between hero and clown from the opposite direction, contending that the self-dramatizing, meta-theatrical comedy of Nick Bottom plays a crucial role in Hughes' distinctive characterization of Heracles, particularly in the controversially interpolated scene in which the drunken hero re-enacts his famous labours.

'I am the Lion': Heracles as Bottom

From the very beginning of this episode, Hughes' Heracles is characterized in terms which strikingly echo the histrionic buffoonery of Shakespeare's ultimate amateur thespian. Heracles' first utterance in Hughes' newly-authored scene of carousing shows him absorbed in high-octane theatricals of his own drunken devising: 'Iolaus, you are the lion' he instructs as he enters (49). The efforts of Iolaus proving inadequate ('Roar. Louder. The Nemean Lion was mean.'), the hero swiftly appropriates his leonine role:

Louder. No. Listen. I am the lion.
Heracles roars and leaps.
You be Heracles. Hit me with your club.
Heracles roars, chases Iolaus. Maids scream as he chases everybody. (50)

This exchange is strongly reminiscent of Nick Bottom's indefatigable determination to play every part in the interlude being rehearsed by his company, including the role of the lion which terrifies Thisbe:

Let me play the lion too. I will roar that I will do any man's heart good to hear me. I will roar that I will make the Duke say 'Let him roar again, let him roar again!' (I.ii.57–59)[9]

---

9 All references are to Foakes (2003).

Here, Heracles' lines ('I am the lion') closely echo Shakespeare's Bottom ('Let me play the lion too') which, read together with the two men's common certainty that no-one else can roar as terribly or as effectively as they, begins to imply an unlikely kind of kinship between these two bombastic self-dramatizers.[10]

This developing sense of a connection between Hughes' Heracles and Shakespeare's Bottom is strengthened by Bottom's willingness to stray beyond the cast-list of the play being rehearsed in order to demonstrate his acting prowess. Inquiring whether his own allocated role (Pyramus) is 'A lover or a tyrant?' (I.ii.17), he expresses a preference for the latter:

My chief humour is for a tyrant. I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split. (I.ii.21–22)

Bottom feels that his talents would be best served in the highly dramatic role of the ancient hero and, inevitably unhappy with merely asserting his competence to represent 'Ercles' (Heracles), he launches into an uninvited demonstration of his capabilities:

The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
    Of prison gates,
And Phibbus' car
Shall shine from far,
And make and mar
    The foolish Fates. (I.ii.24–31)

That, Bottom assures his fellow players, 'is Ercles' vein' (I.ii.32),[11] Shakespeare's meta-theatrical joke glancing at conventionally overstated theatrical representations of Heracles during the Renaissance, which were (as Riley observes) 'synonymous with frenzied overacting' (2008: 102). Hughes' Heracles is similarly insistent about his own representation in *Alcestis*' impromptu theatricals, eventually renouncing the part of the lion in order to demonstrate how his own role should be played:

No, Iolaus — you're the lion and I am me.
And this is how I killed you. (50)

10 I am grateful to my students at NODA Summer School 2012, with whom I rehearsed this scene, and whose heroic labours helped to stimulate my thinking on the subject. Thanks are also due to the company of *Alcestis* at JACT Classical Civilisation & Ancient History Summer School 2013.

11 This itself is an instance of inter-textual comedy, the outmoded diction of Bottom's speech deliberately parodying passages of either Jasper Heywood's (1561) or John Sudley's (1581) translations of Seneca. See Foakes (2003: 12, 66) and Riley (2008: 102–5).

The inebriated hero approaches the performance of his own career with distinctly Bottom-ish gusto, and a thoroughly recognisable conviction that he knows best how each role (including his own) ought to be played.

This pairing of Shakespearean clown and Greek hero may at first seem unlikely, but is actually a fitting response to a mythic figure whose physical invulnerability and superhuman appetites resulted in ancient Heracles appearing 'far more commonly on the comic than the tragic stage', where he was 'generally characterized as a cheerfully promiscuous glutton, always on the look out for more food, drink and lovers' (Stafford 2012: 105).[12] This is the Heracles we encounter in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405 BCE), a jovial enthusiast for pea soup, roast ox and dancing girls, capable of eating sixteen loaves at a sitting, fierce as a lion in his refusal to pay his bar bills, and liable to steal the doormat on his way home (Barrett and Dutta 2007: 154–5).[13] In fusing the boozy hero of *Alcestis* with the bombastic clown of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Hughes, therefore, is operating within an established classical tradition.

The kinship between Shakespeare's Bottom and Hughes' Heracles is further heightened by the fact that each is explicitly figured in their respective plays as a dreamer. Nick Bottom, in a play whose very title advertises itself as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, undergoes enchantment and metamorphosis at the hands of Puck and, in his altered state, enjoys a sensuous encounter with Titania, Queen of the Fairies. Waking in his accustomed shape, he announces: 'I have seen a most rare vision':

I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was — and methought I had — but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, not his heart to report what my dream was! (IV.i.200–7)

Like Bottom, Hughes' hard-drinking Heracles slips unexpectedly between the meta-theatrical play world of his enacted labours and transforming 'vision'.[14] Both men experience supernatural encounters which transform their comic role-playing into darker and more unsettling forms of enchantment, hallucination or

---

12 For appearances of Heracles in ancient comedy see Stafford (2012: 104–9, 112–17) and for satyr plays (109–12). See also Silk (1985).

13 The figure of the comic Heracles has recently become more familiar to UK audiences via the BBC drama *Atlantis,* starring Mary Addy as an affable, gluttonous and far from godlike Hercules.

14 In Euripides' *Herakles*, the first symptoms of the hero's madness occupy a comparably uncertain position between imaginative play and a darker diagnosis, provoking eye-witnesses to wonder 'Is the master playing or has he gone mad?' (Carson 2006: 59). In Seneca's *Hercules Furens,* Heracles' murderous rage begins with a delusion in which he believes himself to be re-enacting his first labour of lion-slaying.

dream. However, Bottom, emerging into the romantic comedy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, has the easier awakening of the two, his dreaming giving way to a dawning determination to have his experiences enshrined in poetry, and (inevitably) in autobiographical performance:

I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream; it shall be called 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. (IV.i.207–10)

Hughes' Heracles, by contrast, wakes into a scene in which the realities of Euripidean tragedy are re-asserting themselves,[15] with a servant insisting:

This is a house of mourning.
You are vandalising the funeral of the Queen. (63)

Hughes' stage-directions describe how Heracles '*tears off his garlands, suddenly angry and sober*', symbolically shaking off the self-parodic theatrical buffoonery that has allied him with Shakespeare's Bottom. However, the Bottom-ish antics of the preceding interlude will have significant consequences for a modern audience's reading of both the character of Heracles, and the ways in which Hughes frames his heroism in rescuing Alcestis from Death. Heracles' removal of his garlands may signify his formal re-entry into *Alcestis'* tragic narrative, but his kinship with Shakespeare's Bottom, and with the comically meta-theatrical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s 'rude mechanicals', pervades and profoundly influences Hughes' transformative re-writing of Euripides.

'The Most Lamentable Comedy': The rude mechanicals and prosatyric *Alcestis*

If Nick Bottom is the most obvious Shakespearean presence in this *Alcestis*, his (would-be) thespian colleagues' struggles with dramatic genre and tragic diction also inform the developing tone and style of Hughes' tragi-comic drama. The intertextual playfulness of Heracles' self-directed play-within-a-play sets up recurring echoes of Shakespeare's Athenian workmen, who labour doggedly to stage 'The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe' before 'the Duke and the Duchess on his wedding day at night' (I.ii.5–10). The mechanicals' performance is one which consistently (if inadvertently) defies categorization. Bottom assures his peers that it will 'ask some tears in the true performing of it' (I.ii.19), and yet is a 'merry' piece of work (I.ii.11). The verbal contortions that this generic indeterminacy provokes among Peter Quince and his troupe match the ineptitude of the amateur company, who unfailingly manage to plunge from the

---

15 A comparison can be drawn with the protagonist of Euripides' *Herakles* who, after his bout of madness, wakes from sleep to discover a world 'gone strange' (Carson 2006: 66). An equivalent scene also features in Seneca's *Hercules Furens*.

tragic heights of their chosen play to unintentionally comic depths, as in Thisbe's lament, performed by Francis Flute the bellows-mender:

These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks
Are gone, are gone.
Lovers, make moan;
His eyes were green as leeks. (V.i.312–17)

The unschooled players' habit of comic verbal infelicity is marked elsewhere, too, including Flute's famous promise that 'I'll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny's tomb' (III.i.79). The habit also seems to be infectious, with Philostrate confessing that the play's shortcomings 'Made mine eyes water' with 'merry' tears (V.i.68–70), and Theseus struggling to make sense of:

'A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus
And his love Thisbe, very tragical mirth' —
Merry and tragical? Tedious and brief?
That is hot ice and wondrous strange snow!
How shall we find concord of this discord? (V.i.56–60)

This tendency reflects the wider mood of the drama that Peter Quince's company belong to: a tale which begins with discordant couplings and parental wrath, and ends with weddings, dancing and blessings. In the closing stages of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the 'lamentable comedy' of Pyramus and Thisbe knits together the diverse strands of the play's action, from the mythic and fantastical to the vulgarly absurd.

These qualities make Shakespeare's play-within-a-play a fitting inter-text for *Alcestis* which, with its reunion of parted husband and wife, is itself an exemplar of ancient tragedy's occasional tendency towards apparently un-tragic situations and outcomes.[16] When the drama was first staged in 438 BCE, *Alcestis* was presented as the fourth play in its competitive tetralogy, the position normally allotted to the boozy, bawdy excesses of the satyr play:

The satyr plays were farcical and vulgar, burlesques rather than satires. The Satyr play was so called because it employed a chorus of satyrs led by Silenus. The satyrs were as unheroic and grossly physical as it is possible to get. They had abundant hair and beards, broad noses, pointed ears, horse tails, and large, permanently erect phalluses. They represented natural as opposed to civilized man, everything man shares with the beasts. Their characteristics were naive curiosity, acquisitiveness, lust, drunkenness, lying, boasting and cowardice. (Sagar 2001: 3).

---

16 For a fuller list of examples, see Foley (2010: 139–40).

Marshall offers an account of the ways in which the absence of the traditional satyr drama, and its accompanying revelry, makes itself felt in Euripides' alternative offering:

The interment of Alcestis means that Admetus' house has been made one without revels. As a fourth-place play, the audience is expecting, literally, wine, women, and song [...] When Heracles burst onto stage, inebriated, at line 773, we are, for a moment, back in the world of a satyr play (Marshall 2000: 234)

According to this interpretation, *Alcestis* is a play which replaces, but does not fully efface, the exuberant excesses of theatrical satyrdom, and which contains within its own narrative, and especially those scenes involving the boisterously celebratory Heracles, echoes of the silenced satyr. As Tony Harrison has argued:

In this play Euripides introduced his 'satyr', in the shape of Heracles, into the very body of the tragedy: the celebrant admitted before the tragic section had come to an end. The playwright thus showed both elements intertwined, doing what Johnson said of Shakespeare, depicting neither 'tragedy' nor 'comedy' but the real state of 'sublunary nature' in which '*at the same time* the reveller is hasting to his wine and the mourner is burying his friend', or, in the case of Herakles in *Alcestis*, getting drunk while Admetus is burying his wife (Harrison 2004: 9)

The spirit of the absent satyr thus infuses and de-stabilizes the drama, and Hughes' *Alcestis* displays a fascination with the incongruities and tonal shifts presented by this aspect of Euripides' play.[17] However, since the concept of 'prosatyric' drama is alien to the majority of contemporary theatre-goers, Hughes exploits the familiar antics of Nick Bottom and his cohort to present modern audiences with a recognisable model of anti-tragic buffoonery.

Shakespeare's rude mechanicals may, arguably, even perform a comparable function to that of the ancient theatrical satyr within the imagined world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, offering a vigorous subversion of the follies of romantic love before an on-stage audience (including the mythic figures of Theseus, Duke of Athens, and his bride-to-be Hippolyta) whose own more elevated amours have formed the subject of the foregoing drama. Like the theatrical satyrs of ancient Athens, their unintentionally coarse rendering of the classical tale of Pyramus and Thisbe,

17 Hughes' decision to give *Alcestis* to Northern Broadsides for its first production may have been influenced by his sense of the drama's 'prosatyric' qualities: the company's founder and artistic director, Barrie Rutter, had famously played Silenus in Tony Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1988, 1990). (I am grateful to Helen Eastman for lending support to this speculation on the basis of her own, as yet unpublished, PhD research). Rutter's appreciation of *Alcestis*' satyr-ish spirit is evident in his reported instruction to David Hounslow (playing the drunken Heracles): 'It's bar-room time, its satyr time, nowt's wrong with the world' (Nightingale 2000: 11).

and their terminal misadventures in the wood, transforms tragedy into hilarity.[18] Bottom himself possesses shades of the ancient satyr — exuberant, playful, lusty and vainglorious — and, of course, he spends a significant portion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* disfigured by Puck's mischievous addition of an ass-head, in which guise he fulfils the very satyr-ish fantasy of being courted by Titania. In his celebrated 1970 production, director Peter Brook, with whom Hughes collaborated on both *Oedipus* (1968) and *Orghast* (1971), even endowed the transfigured weaver (played by David Waller) with a monstrously oversized erect phallus.[19]

Hughes' Heracles-as-Bottom, then, offers modern audiences a recognisable parallel for the ancient Athenian satyr, exploiting the familiar characteristics of Shakespearean comedy in place of antiquity's alien conventions, while retaining, and even playfully expanding upon, some of the more distinctively satyr-ish qualities of *Alcestis'* Heracles. Hardwick draws on Appiah's model of 'thick translation' to reflect on a style of creative adaptation which 'aims to produce a new text that matters to one community the way the source text mattered to its community' (Appiah 1993: 816),[20] and in this instance we can see Hughes developing a recognisably Shakespearean analogue for an unfamiliar ancient theatre form.[21] Echoes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* play a major role in Hughes' characterization of the Heracles of *Alcestis* as an exuberant, overbearing and (at least initially) buffoonish figure, an absurdly over-zealous amateur actor whose foibles a modern audience can easily identify and engage with.

'Strangling Lions, Beheading Dragons': enacting the labours

The self-consciously theatrical self-representation of Heracles-as-Bottom also allows Hughes to dramatize a significantly expanded version of the ancient hero's back-story, much of which does not appear in the ancient *Alcestis*. In Euripides' drama, a working familiarity with the hero's exploits is assumed,[22] with Heracles

---

18 Wiles speculates that Will Kemp as Bottom may additionally have played a key role in the jig (a lively, boisterous and often bawdy mini-drama) which traditionally followed Elizabethan stage performances (1987: 54–5).

19 Pictured in Kehler (2001: 428).

20 See also Hardwick (2009: 59).

21 Hughes had engaged extensively with Shakespeare's work over the course of his career, including editing *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (1971), and authoring the monumental *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). See Bate (2011). Hughes' correspondence also reveals a recurring interest in satyrs, including an energetically obscene afterpiece that the poet wrote to follow Peter Brook's *Oedipus*, and which (although unstaged) eventually became 'Song for a Phallus' (Hughes 2003: 248–50). See also Reid (2007: 281) and Talbot (2006: 153).

22 By contrast, both Euripides' *Herakles* and Seneca's *Hercules Furens* contain narrative accounts of Heracles' labours, in which the chorus (in the former) and Amphitryon (in the latter) praise the hero's achievements.

informing the chorus upon his first entry that 'I have a labour to accomplish for Eurystheus', and that he's been charged to 'capture the horses of Diomedes in Thrace' (Carson 2006: 273). Heracles' reference to Eurystheus implicitly frames his current quest as part of his fabled labours but, while his exchange with the chorus highlights the danger of the venture, it offers a modern audience little sense of the exact place of this challenge within Heracles' varied and violent career.[23]

As we have seen, Hughes' response is to interpolate a whole new scene in which Heracles enacts his heroic labours.[24] In Euripides' *Alcestis,* the antics of the drunken hero are represented through the narration of an outraged servant, who reports how he:

[. . .] picks up a big ivory drinking cup in both hands,
drinks until the fire of wine is racing around in him,
crowns his own head with myrtle
and leans back to bay like a dog. (Carson 2006: 287)[25]

Hughes expands this messenger-speech, describing how Heracles:

[...] lifts a whole flagon and drains it.
Six litres, without resting his glottal!
'Kill the spider down there!' he bellows
And burps into the neck of the next flagon. (48)

This Heracles then goes on to add dancing to his anti-social repertoire (48), perhaps underlining his affinities with ancient theatrical satyrs, with the resulting uproar causing the servant to liken him to a 'wild man of the woods' (49). Then his reported

23 Both Hughes and Euripides manipulate Heracles' mythic biography in some complex ways. In Euripides' *Herakles* — dated by Riley to c.415 BCE (2008: 1) — the hero's slaughter of his family takes place after the completion of his labours. This reverses the usual account of his labours being imposed subsequently. See Silk (1985: 18), Riley (2008: 5), and Marshall (2009: 278). The earlier *Alcestis* (438 BCE) does not make reference to Heracles' madness. Within the mythic time-frame of Hughes' *Alcestis* it is unclear whether Heracles' madness belongs in his past or his future (55–6), although in the course of the play the hero is temporarily granted access to either repressed memory, or visionary foreknowledge, of that traumatic event. It might be most accurate to say that, in this sequence, Hughes' Heracles is remembering his future.
24 Hughes had previously presented a retrospective account of Heracles' labours in the 'Hercules and Dejanira' section of *Tales from Ovid* (1997: 157–9).
25 This portrait of the drunk Heracles, draped in flowers and singing raucously, may have helped to suggest parallels with Shakespeare's Bottom, who during the course of his bestial transformation is crowned with 'musk roses' (IV.i.3), served by fairies and feasted on honey and oats (IV.iii.10–31), and whose singing provokes a besotted Titania to comment that 'Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note' (III.i.115).

carousing actually invades the stage, presaged by a '*Shriek of Maidservants*', and the unexpected announcement that 'Heracles is killing the lion' (49).[26]

In the high-energy interlude that follows, Heracles-as-Bottom directs and stars in his own account of his twelve labours, growing more and more inebriated as he does so. Supported by Lichas and Iolaus, he marshals Admetos' servants into an impro-vised re-enactment of his encounters with a series of monstrous opponents, revelling in the violence and gore of his exploits, in a bombastic orgy of overacting and self-aggrandisement that recalls Bottom's own swerve into 'Ercles'-style histrionics. The self-dramatizing Bottom-as-Heracles is able to orchestrate a vivid re-staging of his own back-story, his exuberance and energy, together with the scene's inter-textual humour, easing a modern audience's engagement with the ancient hero's exploits and fame.

However, as this catalogue of violent clashes develops, and as its star player grows drunker, darker aspects of Heracles' achievements also begin to emerge. Alongside his celebrated conquests, Heracles recalls how he 'Wounded my dear old teacher, Cheiron':

He was immortal –
But touched with the lethal extract of my arrow
He crawled away to a deep cave.
He muffled his voice with a mountain. (52)

This expanded version of Heracles' exploits proves capacious enough to include the hero's mistakes and failures as well as his triumphs, preparing the way for Hughes to construct a more challenging, ambivalent Heracles as the play-within-a-play develops.

'A Tyrant's Vein': Hughes' ambivalent Heracles

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, too, a story concerning centaurs serves as a sign of the uncertain status of Heracles. Presented with a range of possible wedding enter-tainments (of which Quince's players are eventually the successful candidates), Theseus first rejects 'The battle with the Centaurs, to be sung / By an Athenian eunuch to the harp' (V.i.44–5):

We'll none of that; that have I told my love
In glory of my kinsman, Hercules. (V.i.46–7)

Theseus is conventionally interpreted as meaning that he has already told the tale of the Battle of the Lapiths (found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) in order to glorify his heroic kinsman, although Nestor, who narrates the tale in Ovid, actually pointedly

---

26 This movement from uncouth merriment to the re-enactment of violent feats perhaps echoes Heracles' descent into madness in Euripides' *Herakles*.

refuses to valorize Heracles in his account of the fight. At the close of his tale, Nestor is challenged by Tlepolemus, 'displeased sore' by this omission, and comparing Heracles' own re-telling of the bloody tale:

My lord, I muse you should forget my fathers prayse so quyght.
For often unto me himself was woonted to recite,
How that the cloudbred folk by him were cheefly put to flyght. (12. 597–9)[27]

Nestor defends his unwillingness to discuss Heracles' feats, describing how:

[...] feerce ageinst my fathers house he usde bothe swoord and fyre.
And, (not to speake of others whom he killed in his ire)
Twyce six wee were the sonnes of Nele all lusty gentlemen.
Twyce six of us (excepting mee) by him were murthered then. (12.611–14)

In this Ovidian tale, Nestor's perspective re-figures heroic violence as murderous 'ire', making the Battle of the Lapiths a problematic instance of Heracles' 'glory'. Alternatively, as Brown notes, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s reference 'could equally be to the battle with Pholus and his cohorts, in which Hercules nearly eradicated the centaur race from existence with his arrows' (1998: 182–3, 180).[28] Either way, this reference points towards a characterization of Heracles that is more concerned with his murderous martial feats than with the type of heroic rescue presented in *Alcestis*. Elsewhere in the play Heracles figures as an equally uncomfortable figure. Even as he revels in his histrionic excesses, Bottom is unambiguous in labelling 'Ercles' 'a tyrant' (I.ii.22), an uncompromising character analysis drawing on Renaissance receptions of the Senecan Heracles. Throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and despite the efforts of Theseus to stress the 'glory' of his kinsman, Heracles is presented in ways which emphasize his violence, excess and (in Bottom's extempore recitation) even villainy.[29] This portrait of Heracles in 'a tyrant's vein' may suggest another reason for Hughes' adoption of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an inter-text for *Alcestis*.

In her study of the performance and reception of Euripides' *Herakles*, Riley identifies the modern development of a 'neo-Senecan Herakles', an 'ambivalent, hubristic, restless and autarkic hero' (2008: 337), whose madness, rather than

---

27 Nims (2000: 315). All references are to this edition. On *Metamorphoses* as a major source for Shakespeare's dramas see Bate (2000). On the reception of Ovid in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* see Brown (1999: 59–69).

28 This is the same story re-enacted by Hughes' Heracles (51–2), in which his old teacher Cheiron is maimed.

29 Hippolyta's recollection of being 'with Hercules and Cadmus once, / When in Crete they bayed the bear / With hounds of Sparta' (IV.i.109–11) is an exception, though even this presents Heracles engaged in a mildly blood-thirsty pursuit.

being externally imposed by supernatural forces,[30] is the logical and recognisable consequence of his life and labours:

Like Seneca before them, MacLeish and Armitage have located the psychological causation of Herakles' madness in an obsessive and excessive *modus vitae* and in the labours [...] They have substantially reconfigured the madness itself, internalizing and rationalizing it as the inevitable culmination of a deep-seated individual and cultural complex. (Riley 2008: 337)

In Riley's analysis, modern theatre's Heracles is a killer whose murderous madness is firmly rooted in contemporary psychology, and whose actions can be reasoned as the result of his violent career of heroic bloodshed.[31]

Hughes' interpolated account of Heracles' feats can also be placed within this modern tradition, showing the ways in which the hero's exhilarating slaughter of beasts and monsters tips over into more troubling recollections. In Heracles' inebriated imaginings, his encounter with 'The Queen of the Amazons', and projected journey 'down into hell' become confused with other, more bewildering images:

I see my wife. I see my dead wife.
Who killed her? (56)

Iolaus attempts to contain this vision, insisting that 'You did it in a dream':

You had a strange nightmare.
A horrifying dream. Your dream became famous.
You told it and they made a play about it.
You're getting your dream mixed up with what will happen.
You're thinking of that play. (55–6)

The 'play' mentioned by Iolaus is then identified by his master as 'The madness of Heracles'. Here, Hughes explicitly references Heracles' murder of his family, and makes the suppressed memory, or prophetic pre-vision, of that domestic carnage a contributing factor to his actions later in the drama, with Heracles' heroic redemption of the play's heroine (like his future rescue of Prometheus) implicitly set in the

---

30 See further Riley (2008: 30–34) and Silk (1985: 17–18).
31 Tony Harrison's earlier play *The Labourers of Herakles* (1995) had diagnosed contemporary European genocides as 'the moral madness of the modern Herakles' (Harrison 1996: 153). See further Riley (2008: 340–2). Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004), although based on Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, explores similar themes in its portrayal of 'The General' as a homecoming soldier 'accused of war crimes' (2).

balance against an excessive career of cartoonish monster-bashing and its tragic overspill into familial catastrophe.[32] As Macintosh observes:

When Heracles unwittingly intrudes upon the personal suffering of Admetos and his household, he brings with him not only an equally rumbustious entourage but also a whole new dimension to Euripides' play [...] with this interpolation, we are forced to reflect on the full significance of Heracles' involvement with his genial host. For, like Admetos, Heracles too killed his wife (and his children) [...] (2001: 306)[33]

The figure of wife- and child-murdering Heracles (especially in his Senecan incarnation) is a recurring preoccupation in Hughes' earlier works. In *Crow* (1970) the mad Heracles appears in multiple guises. The protagonist of 'Crow's Account of St George':

Drops his sword and runs dumb-faced from the house
Where his wife and children lie in their blood. (2003: 226)[34]

While, in the person of Crow himself:

Grappling with Hercules' two puff-adders
He strangled in error Dejinira. (2003: 240)[35]

Hughes also incorporated text from *Hercules Furens* into *Orghast* (1971), in which 'Krogon slaughters his family, believing them to be evil birds'

32 As Hughes' sobering Heracles muses: 'What good are my fancy labours - / Strangling lions, beheading dragons, / Pitching homicidal mesomorphs / Out of their strutting careers. / These are paltry work.' (64). This speech may deliberately echo the home-coming hero of Euripides' *Herakles*: 'Farwell my labors! / That was all pointless. / I should have been here.' (Carson 2006: 43). On Euripides' opposite approach see Silk (1985: 18): 'The logic of Euripides' drama is dependent on his inversion of events in the myth [...] by abandoning the sequence of madness followed by labours, he avoids any suggestion that Heracles can be redeemed by a saviour god's exercise of superhuman powers.'

33 See also Macintosh (2000). Hughes deliberately accentuates Admetos' degree of responsibility for Alcestis' death, perhaps to align him more closely with the wife-killing Heracles, as in the vitriolic exchange where Pheres directly accuses him: 'You killed her. You. You. You.' (45). On the critical identification of this aspect of the play with Hughes' biography see (for example) Bassett (2000), Halliburton (2000) and Sagar (2009: 16–17). On the limitations of this reading, see Clanchy (2000) and Macintosh (2001: 305–6).

34 Hughes described this poem as 'the classic nightmare of modern English intelligence in particular — as Hercules Furens was of the Roman' (Reid 2007: 339).

35 Another poem from *Crow*, 'Criminal Ballad', may contain further traces of Heracles-style filicide: 'And now he ran from the children and ran through the house / Holding his bloody hands clear of everything' (2003: 228–9).

(Marshall 2009: 278).[36] Returning to this theme in the later *Alcestis*, Hughes (in line with the 'neo-Senecan' perspectives explored by Riley) invests the comic-heroic Heracles of Euripides with disturbing echoes of his tragic madness, which critically informs his dawning determination to win back Alcestis from Death.[37]

Hughes depicts Heracles as a profoundly ambivalent figure who, like Bottom assuming the lion's part, has performed the role of outsize, unstoppable, swaggering monster-slayer 'too terribly', and with consequences even more catastrophic than those Peter Quince predicts for his over-enthusiastic star actor: 'And you should do it too terribly, you would fright the Duchess and the ladies that they would shriek; and that were enough to hang us all' (I.ii.60-2). As his amateur theatricals spiral out of control, Hughes' Heracles is revealed to have inhabited a comparably self-dramatizing performance of violent heroism which has ultimately brought (or will ultimately bring) real and irreparable harm upon those nearest to him. His light-hearted switches between heroic and monstrous identities ('I am the lion') are shown to have been all too ominously apt. In this *Alcestis,* ostensibly playful borrowings from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* allow darker influences from the Roman and Renaissance receptions of Heracles to infuse Hughes' own writing, making it a short step from Bottom-ish fooling to the Senecan tragedy of a murdered wife and children.

Conclusions

Hughes' transformative re-writing of Euripides' *Alcestis* significantly reconfigures the ancient play's dramaturgy, placing Heracles, his heroic exploits, and his mad-dened slaughter of his own family at the heart of the ancient tale. As Macintosh, in her study of *Alcestis'* performance history, notes:

[...] the major change that he has brought to Euripides' play is the removal of both Admetos and Alcestis from centre stage: here it is neither Alcestis' wifely duties nor Admetos' (possibly) mixed motives that dominate. Instead it is the character of Heracles in his truly heroic battle with death that ultimately commands our attention. (2001: 306)

In the process, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes a crucial inter-text for Hughes' *Alcestis*. Nick Bottom offers the modern poet a model for the ancient Heracles who is able to function both as a familiar analogue for the role's rumbustious, satyr-ish aspects, and (by way of the two men's shared appetite for amateur dramatics) as a means of bringing onstage Heracles' extended mythic history of violence, madness,

36 The genesis of many of these works during the late 1960s and early 1970s (as with the parallel development of *Alcestis* and *Birthday Letters*) seems unlikely to be coincidental. On the *Hercules Furens* theme in Hughes' work during this period, see Smith (1972: 96–8), Jury (2000), Reid (2007: 313, 316–17), and Sagar (2009: 9–10).

37 Earlier in the play, Hughes' Death has been characterized as the possessor of '*a shattering roar*' (5), perhaps marking him out from the beginning as a suitable conquest for the slayer of the Nemean Lion.

excess and familial bloodshed. His inter-textual affinities with this Shakespearean alter ego grant Hughes' Heracles licence to 'carouse and cavort like a clown' (64), and just as Bottom's meta-theatrical exuberance allows him to stray beyond the confines of his own play, so the self-dramatizing Heracles of Hughes' *Alcestis* is freed to enact multiple versions of his own myth. By tapping into the Shakespearean-Senecan heritage of the bombastic, overacted, ranting Heracles — what Bottom himself describes as 'Ercles' vein' (I.ii.32–3) — and locating his own Heracles within this meta-theatrical tradition, Hughes is able to move flexibly between comic, heroic and tragic aspects of the ancient Heracles, incorporating narratives and themes that go far beyond the hard-drinking, friendship-honouring hero depicted in Euripides' *Alcestis*.

Here, as elsewhere in his extensive canon of poems and plays adapted from the classics, Hughes creates a complex and self-reflexive account of an ancient source-text. Hughes' inter-textual play upon elements of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (which itself draws on, and comically subverts, both Ovid and Seneca) places his own new version of an ancient tale within a lengthy continuum of re-writings, re-framings and re-visionings of classical myth, presenting a multi-layered and challenging Heracles who, through a process of comically Bottom-ish self-dramatization, comes face to face with the Senecan horrors of his own excesses and crimes.[38]

References

K. A. Appiah, 'Thick Translation', *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (1993), pp. 808–19.

D. Barrett and S. Dutta (tr.), *Aristophanes: Frogs and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 2007).

K. Basset, 'Ted's Swan-Song Gets a Rough Ride', *Independent on Sunday*, 24 September 2000, p. 6.

J. Bate, 'Shakespeare's Ovid', in J. F. Nims (ed.), *Ovid's Metamorphoses, The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2000), pp. xli–l.

——, 'Hughes on Shakespeare', in Terry Gifford (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 135–49.

E. C. Brown, 'Many a Civil Monster: Shakespeare's Idea of the Centaur', in S. Wells (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey* 51 (1998) pp. 175–92.

S. A. Brown, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

——, 'Classics Reaminated: Ted Hughes and Reflexive Translation', in R. Rees (ed.), *Ted Hughes and The Classics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 282–99.

A. Carson (trans.), *Grief Lessons: Four Plays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2006).

K. Clanchy, 'Friends with the Brave', *PN Review* 26, no. 4 (2000), p. 50.

M. Crimp, *Cruel and Tender* (London: Faber, 2004).

S. Dewar-Watson, 'The *Alcestis* and the Statue Scene in *The Winter's Tale*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2009), pp. 73–80.

R. A. Foakes (ed.), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

H. Foley, 'Generic Ambiguity in Modern Productions and New Versions of Greek Tragedy', in E. Hall and S. Harrop (eds), *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice* (London: Duckworth, 2010), pp. 137–52.

D. Gervais, 'Tragedy Today: Ted Hughes' "Oresteia"', *Cambridge Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2002), pp. 139–54.

E. Hall and F. Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660-1914* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

R. Halliburton, 'Greek With a Yorkshire Accent', *Evening Standard,* 12 October 2000, p. 53.

L. Hardwick, 'Translated Classics Around the Millennium: Vibrant Hybrids or Shattered Icons?', in A. Lianeri and V. Zajko (eds), *Translation and the Classic: Identity as Change in the History of Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 341–66.

——, 'Can (Modern) Poets do Classical Drama? The Case of Ted Hughes', in R. Rees (ed.), *Ted Hughes and the Classics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 39–61.

T. Harrison, *Pays 3: Poetry or Bust, The Kaisers of Carnuntum, The Labourers of Herakles* (London: Faber, 1996).

——, *Plays 5: The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus, Square Rounds* (London: Faber, 2004).

T. Hughes, *Tales from Ovid: Twenty-Four Passages from the Metamorphoses* (London: Faber, 1997).

——, *Alcestis* (London: Faber, 1999).

——, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

L. Jury, 'Unpublished Hughes Poem to Raise Cash for Cancer Fight', *Independent on Sunday,* 12 November 2000, p. 8.

D. Kehler (ed.), *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays* (London: Routledge, 2001).

B. Knox, 'Uglification', *New Republic* 222, nos. 16/17 (2000), pp. 79–85.

F. Macintosh, Programme Note: Northern Broadsides, *Alcestis* (2000).

——, 'Alcestis on the British Stage', *Cahiers du GITA*, 14 (2001), pp. 281–308.

C. W. Marshall, 'Alcestis and the Problem of Prosatyric Drama', *The Classical Journal* 95, no. 3 (2000), pp. 229–38.

H. Marshall, 'The Hughes Version: Commercial Considerations and Dramatic Imagination', in R. Rees (ed.), *Ted Hughes and the Classics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 263–81.

C. Martindale and A. B. Taylor (eds), *Shakespeare and the Classics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

B. Nightingale, 'Please Do It for Ted, She Said, and He Has', *The Times,* 11 September 2000, pp. 11–13.

J. F. Nims (ed.), *Ovid's* Metamorphoses, *The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2000).

C. Reid (ed.), *Letters of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber, 2007).

K. Riley, *Reasoning Madness: The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Heracles (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

K. Sagar, 'Alcestis', (2001). http://www.ted-hughes.info/criticism/online-articles/sagar-keith/alcestis/alcestis-part-ii.html (accessed 31 August 2012).

——, 'Ted Hughes and the Classics', in R. Rees (ed.), *Ted Hughes and the Classics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 1–24.

M. Silk, 'Heracles and Greek Tragedy', *Greece & Rome* 32, no. 1 (1985), pp. 1–22.

——, 'Ted Hughes: Allusion and Poetic Language', in R. Rees (ed.), *Ted Hughes and The Classics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 233–62.

A. C. H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis* (London: Methuen, 1972).

E. Stafford, *Herakles* (London: Routledge, 2012).

J. Talbot, ' "I Had Set Myself Against Latin": Ted Hughes and the Classics', *Arion* 13, no. 3 (2006), pp. 131–61.

——, 'Eliot's Seneca, Ted Hughes's *Oedipus*', in R. Rees (ed.), *Ted Hughes and the Classics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 62–8.

J. M. Walton, *Found in Translation: Greek Drama in English* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

D. Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987).