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THE PRESENCE OF A «GREEK PAST» IN THORNTON WILDER'S *THE WOMAN OF ANDROS*

Thornton Wilder sternly believed that every modern notion has its origin in the thoughts of great authors, just as every current activity is rooted in the deeds of those who lived long ago. The guiding principle and recurring theme in his works has been "Everything that happened might happen anywhere and will happen again."¹ Since his education and training owed much to ancient heritage, it is not surprising that the first three novels that he wrote were either set in remote periods of time or in foreign land. However, his perennial nostalgia for the classical past found its direct expression in the 1930s with *The Woman of Andros*, set in Hellenistic Greece and much further back in time and place than *The Cabala* (1926) and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927).

Wilder, devoted to books the older the better, testified that his writing had been "a series of infatuations for admired authors." He liked to acknowledge that most of his plots had been borrowed and to specify their sources as in the note that precedes *The Woman of Andros*:

The first part of this novel is based upon the *Andria*, a comedy of Terence, who in turn based his work upon two Greek plays, now lost to us by Menander.²

Terence's plays were adaptations from the Greek New Comedy, which flourished in Athens by the end of the fourth century, and was so called to be distinguished from the Old Comedy of the fifth century as a different dramatic form, also reflecting the different conditions of life in the latter period. The Old Comedy of Aristophanes — along with the grand themes of Aeschylus and Sophocles who had studied deep problems of ethics and religion in the Attic Tragedy — had reflected the youthful spirit of a satirical commentary on the events of the time. However, after the political changes, the New Comedy evaded public interests and man was viewed not as a citizen but as an individual involved in ordinary affairs of domestic life whose otherwise monotonous existence became graciously colored by the passion of love.³ In the characters of Euripides (Phaedra or Medea, for example), love had been depicted as a destructive force and the plays lacked the romantic attitude

1. Malcolm Cowley, "The Man Who Abolished Time", *Saturday Review*, 39 (October 6, 1956), p. 51.

2. Thornton Wilder, *The Woman of Andros* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930), p. 3.

3. See Introduction and Commentary by G. P. Shipp in P. Terenti Afri, *Andria* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 1-14.

encountered in the New Comedy. The comedies of Menander were then "domestic comedies drawn from the life of a community, rather weary and disillusioned, with little variety or power to change, but more civilised and urbane than any other in the ancient world."⁴ Their cosmopolitanism lacking political interest, consequently unrestricted in time and place, made them more easily understood by the modern reader and provided one of the reasons for their adoption by the Roman stage.

Terence was attracted to these comedies and employed a technique called "contaminatio", a post-classical term that describes the process of combining parts of two or more Greek comedies so as to form a single Latin play. Thus his *Andria* (166 B. C.) is based on Menander's *Andria* and *Perinthia*. In its turn, the Roman playwright's influence was remarkable among his contemporaries but also in the Middle Ages and in more modern times. *Andria* is reflected, for example, in Michel Baron's *Andrienne*, Richard Steele's *Conscious Lovers* and Edward Moore's *Foundling*.

The sentimental Wilder, also attracted to Terence's romantic comedy, adapted it freely, not into a play but into a rather short conventional linear novel. *The Woman of Andros* is the story of the life and death of Chrysis, a beautiful Alexandrian courtesan who came to settle down on the small Greek island of Brynos. The theme of "true love" is dominant as it had been one of Wilder's major convictions in life and, of course, the central theme of New Comedy. The plot – typical of the New Comedy as well – "depicts the efforts of a youth to obtain possession of his mistress, often in the face of the determined opposition of a parent or a guardian."⁵ In the history of the novel, at least before the present century, the reader "has followed the fortunes of a youth in his wooing of a maid until he won her and they lived happily ever after."⁶ For the Athenian society that Menander depicts in his plays similar plots and themes were rather impossible as marriages were prearranged by the head of families. On the other hand, Greek morality allowed for the society of the courtesan-hetaera (companion), usually gifted with beauty, generosity of spirit, charms of conversation and manner, and outstanding intellectual abilities who set her apart from the average daughter of an Athenian family. The "good" hetaera has been considered an innovation of Menander who saw seriously, like Wilder, the inherent goodness in mankind.⁷

4. See Introduction by Sidney G. Ashmore, *The Comedies of Terence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1908), p. 1.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

6. P. Terenti Afri, *Andria*, intro. G. P. Shipp, p. 4.

7. The extreme example is Aspasia of Pericles. Menander had Glycera, to whom it is said that he referred in his comedies. Glycerium (sweetie) used in Terence and by Wilder is an affectionate diminutive common in comedy, mostly in the names of "meretrices" (approximate latin equivalent for hetaerae) although Rome at the time had no similar institution.

Wilder used the story of the comedy of Terence but effected considerable changes to the plot. In *Andria* the action takes place in Athens, where young Pamphilus, son of Simo, falls in love with the sister of Chrysis Glycerium and — because he is supposed to marry the daughter of his neighbour Chremes — he encounters all kinds of obstacles which are happily removed upon the felicitous discovery that the “sister of Chrysis”, who has perished in the meantime, is actually Chremes's daughter and consequently the prospect bride of a legitimate matrimony. In Wilder's novel the setting is not Athens but an imaginary Greek island — “the happiest and one of the least famous” — across from Andros, the native island of the heroine.⁸ By placing her in a “provincial and commercial” environment Wilder can more easily work around her portrait and his lifetime credo that people who are “different” remain alone. Like other Wilder's characters, Chrysis's presence is surrounded by mystery and fascination for the antique, not only for the contemporary reader but the people of her own time:

Chrysis moved slowly down the long twisting flight of stairs. She was wrapped about by a great scarf of antique finely wrinkled material and wore a broadbrimmed Tangran hat of woven straw... It was her business to be invested with the remoteness and glamour of a legend, for at that time Greek taste turned upon a nostalgia for the antique; it was her business to be as different from other women as possible...⁹

The Andrian's “glamour of a legend” is followed by the “furtive glances” of the islanders, who “haunted by a passionate admiration for poise and serenity and slow motion” regard her “with mingled awe and hatred.”¹⁰ She is educated and sensitive, deeply versed in the teachings of Socrates and favors Euripides among the great tragedians; moreover, she is charitable and providing for the hungry, the homeless, and the sick.¹¹ By being exceptional she is inevitably isolated from the world she lives in, the Brynians and her own household. Isolation has been one of Wilder's favorite themes and Chrysis figuratively equates her loneliness with “death.”¹²

Herself she summed up in a word: she regarded herself as having “died”. Dead then as she was the inconveniences of her profession,

8. Wilder, p. 8.

9. *ibid.*, p. 44.

10. *ibid.*, p. 45.

11. In many ways she suggests Alix of *The Cabala*.

12. See Castronovo's analysis of *The Cabala*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *The Woman of Andros* treated as foreign novels in which isolation is the dominant theme. David Castronovo, *Thornton Wilder* (New York: Ungar, 1986), pp. 31-60.

the sneers of the villagers, the ingratitude of her dependents, no longer had the power to disturb her.¹³

And because society is similarity, her favorites are also different and exceptional. Philocles had been the greatest navigator on the Mediterranean, "first in skill and experience, first in fame". Like her he was "laconic in a chattering world and with quiet hands in a gesturing civilization."¹⁴ He had been one of the persons Chrysis had most loved in all her life because "they saw in one another's eyes the thing that they had in common, the fact that they had both died to themselves."¹⁵

The young Pamphilus she falls in love with is different as well; there is "something of the priest" in him and meeting her changes his life. Wilder's preference was with the portrayal of characters that could actually change one's life and Simo, Pamphilus's father, after his unexpected conversation with Chrysis, suddenly realises that "he lived among people of thin natures and that he was lonely" and "out of practice in conversing with sovereign personalities whose every speech arose from resources of judgment and inner poise."¹⁶ On the contrary, to the dismay of Chremes, Pamphilus's prospect father-in-law, Chrysis has brought with her the "whole air of Alexandria", "perfume and hot baths and late hours", and can recite poetry and "whole tragedies without the book."¹⁷ Following the custom of the Alexandrian and Corinthian courtesan she holds symposia during which the young men discuss the teachings of Greek philosophy and drama.

Chrysis is Socratic (in fact, quotes Socrates at length) in her approach to life, in her spirit of inquiry, and in her having a group of young disciples. Like Socrates, she is at odds with society but, being an outcast and unconfused and uncomplicated by social conventions, she is able to live and observe life in its pure state."¹⁸ During her banquets there is reference to classical texts where the central conflict is "the seeming impossibility of a fulfilled earthly love, a resolution involving reverence for human erotic impulses and a series of social forces that suppress the instincts."¹⁹ Inevitably, it is Euripides's concern with humane passions that befits her rather than the Aeschylean absolutism or the detached acceptance of Sophocles: "the conversation then turned upon the plays concerning Medea and Phaedra... and upon all manifestations of extravagant passion."²⁰ The subject of both Euripidean

13. Wilder, p. 39.

14. *ibid*, p. 84.

15. *ibid*, p. 86.

16. *ibid*, p. 29.

17. *ibid*, p. 15.

18. Rex Burbank, *Thornton Wilder* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1978), p. 51.

19. Castronovo, p. 57.

20. Wilder, p. 51.

tragedies is unrequited love, the hopeless passion of the female, rejection and its tragic consequences that foreshadow Chrysis's unfortunate attraction to Pamphilus and Glycerium's tragic death.

Moreover, Plato's *Phaedrus* — also at length quoted in Wilder's text — is a discourse on love and Chrysis reads the prayers that mark its ending:

Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, grant that I may become beautiful in the inner man and may whatever I possess without be in harmony with that which is within.²¹

At this moment the thirty-five year old Chrysis realises that "the world of love and virtue and wisdom is the true world and the failure in it all the more overwhelming". She falls in love with Pamphilus and "she loves him as though she were loving for the first time and as one is never able to love again."²² She realises that her love is infinitely greater, an old Wilder theme, "there is always one who loves and one who lets himself be loved". She also recognises that "the most difficult burden is the incommunicability of love", a belief from her "reiterated theory of life that all human beings — save a few mysterious exceptions who seemed to be in possession of some secret of the gods — merely endured the slow mystery of existence, hiding as best they could their consternation that life had no wonderful surprises after all."²³

Wilder believed that people, in general, move through life unaware and unfeeling with the exception of a few who are blessed with the awareness of recognition and appreciation.²⁴ In the latter group belong Chrysis, Pamphilus, Apollo's priest and later Simo while the rest of the Brynians "with hearts that are not strong enough to love every moment" are like "living dead" for "we can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasure."²⁵ The presence of a "miserable existence" and the pressure of the environment are central themes in *The Woman of Andros* and Chrysis's superiority is made more apparent amidst provincial Brynians like Chremes and Sostrata. The unbearable presence of "the living dead" in a small society is also one of the major themes in the works of James Joyce, whom Wilder greatly admired. It had been, the former's almost exclusive theme in his first collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, in which he focused on problems like the customs of forced marriage and marriage of convenience. On the other hand, the theme of marriage arrangements, the wealthier classes keeping to themselves and the amount of the dowry being an

21. *ibid.*, p. 60.

22. *ibid.*, p. 61.

23. Mildred C. Kuner, *Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1972), p. 82.

24. Wilder, p. 36.

25. See also the role of the poets in Wilder's play *Our Town*.

all-important consideration, had been one of the favorite subjects of Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy, providing material for plots of a lighter kind, especially in Plautus while Terence tended to combine it with more serious plots.

Wilder discarded characters and situations from Terence but retained the Terentian "double plot" by developing as a second conflict in the novel the love affair of Pamphilus and Glycerium and the consequences upon the discovery that she is pregnant by the former. Terence's play ended with the couple's reunion and the birth of a child while in Wilder's novel Glycerium dies at childbirth. Although we do not see Glycerium in Terence's comedy, she occupies the center of the action and perhaps the most interesting shift in Wilder's novel — much more interesting than the unhappy *dénoûement* — is the choice of the major character.²⁶ In fact, in both Wilder's long "greek" works the main focus is on the portrait of a woman: Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros* and Alcestis in *The Alcestiad*. This woman is idealised; she is beautiful, intelligent, charitable and "different". Her supreme learning and sophistication and other qualities become manifest in a great philosophy of being that expresses Wilder's emotional and intellectual development:

I want to say to someone... that I have known the worst that the world can do to me, and that nevertheless I praise the world and all living. All that is, is well. Remember some day, remember me as one who loved all things, the bright and the dark.²⁷

In Wilder's previous novels, personalities like Mlle de Morfontaine and the Marquesa de Montemayor had set themselves toward one unworthy goal and failed to appreciate the values of the present.²⁸ On the contrary, Chrysis, Pamphilus, and the young men who frequent the symposia over which she presides have the opportunity to receive the warning that to savor the fulness of life they must enjoy all events as they occur, the simple and the complex, the serious and the light, "the bright and the dark". And as wisdom is usually instructed through fables and allegories, Chrysis finds recourse to an old Greek myth to illustrate her convictions. Zeus moved by the memory of the past allowed a hero who was "wandering in the gray marshes of Hell" not only to return to earth but to the past and relive the least eventful day of his lifetime "with a mind divided into two persons, the participant and the onlooker", the former repeating the deeds of the past and the latter foreseeing the end. The hero rapidly returns to the Underworld

26. In Wilder's novel, "the woman of Andros" is the hetaera Chrysis while in Terence's *Andria* Glycerium, her sister, is "the girl from Andros" (See *The Girl of Andros*, English translation of Terence's *Andria* in *The Comedies of Terence*, trans. F. Perry, pp. 1-62).

27. Wilder, p. 107.

28. The former in *The Cabala* and the latter in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

quite distressed because the earth is "too dear to be realised."²⁹ The implicit lesson becomes more apparent, eight years later, when a similar situation occurs in the Second Act of Wilder's famous play *Our Town*, when Emily decides to visit her parents' household after her death.

For *The Woman of Andros* Wilder has been accused of didacticism and lack of live characterisation to carry the themes across the plot. On the other hand, the style of the work reveals Wilder's ambitions for the composition of the novel. Malcom Cowley has called *The Woman of Andros* a "Greek pastoral" and Rex Burbank agrees that "its heightened diction, quiet tone, and spare, classical structure give it the qualities of a narrative poem."³⁰ The opening paragraph is certainly graceful:

The earth sighed as it turned in its course;
the shadow of night crept gradually along the
Mediterranean, and Asia was left in darkness.

.....
Triumph had passed from Greece and wisdom from Egypt, but with the coming on of night they seemed to regain their lost honors, and the land that was soon to be called Holy prepared in the dark its wonderful burden. The sea was large enough to hold a varied weather: a storm played about Sicily and its smoking mountains, but at the mouth of the Nile the water lay like a wet pavement. A fair tripping breeze ruffled the Aegean and all the islands of Greece felt a new freshness at the close of day.³¹

Its poetic resonance, similar to that of the opening paragraph in *The Cabala*, where a "long Virgilian sigh" descended over the land, reveals the poetic, romantic side of Wilder, which distinguished him from most of his contemporaries. Although *The Woman of Andros* has been accused of an overpoeticised mythopoesis by most of the critics, several, like Burbank, for example, who make a list of the novel's drawbacks, do not fail to acknowledge the author's skill in fine writing, the concise and evocative qualities of his style.³² The sentence structure recalls the aestheticism and poeticality of his first collection of plays *The Angel that Troubled the Waters* but "more elaborate and rather consciously beautiful" throughout the novel until its closing paragraph.³³

But behind the thick beds of clouds the moon soared radiantly bright

29. Wilder, pp. 33-36.

30. Cowley, pp. 13-14 and 50-52. Burbank, p. 52.

31. Wilder, pp. 7-8.

32. Burbank, p. 50.

33. Kuner, p. 89.



shining upon Italy and its smoking mountains. And in the East the stars shone tranquilly down upon the land that was soon to be called Holy and that even then was preparing its precious burden.³⁴

It has been argued that "the historical theme represented by the coming of Christ, was thrust into the story arbitrarily at the beginning and the end."³⁵ The presence of the Christian element has been overstressed by the majority of critics who seem to read sometimes non-existent Christian overtones in Chrysis's classical spirit. For example, the comment "as the tale moves along, Wilder sets out pieces of his mind on the conduct of the Christian life, but fails to illustrate his ideas suitably" is not justified.³⁶ Similarly Castronovo's comment that "the book is damaged by the narrator's tedious sermonising about the Christian future" is rather inappropriate.³⁷ Streseau seems to view the opening and closing paragraphs with a better understanding of the text, seeing the passage of time suggested "in the simplest words, the world's turning point, the world's hour foretold."³⁸ However, the assumption that Apollo's young priest "in a manner unexpressed, anticipates the savior whose coming is indicated at the beginning and at the end" is, as stated, just "a manner unexpressed" for Wilder had been simply well versed in the classical Greek humanistic spirit.

It is obvious the author intended to tackle the problem of suffering and the relationship of man to divinity.³⁹ However, if *The Woman of Andros* "asks whether paganism has any answer for the inquiring sufferer and by anticipation, whether the maxims that entered the world with the message of Christianity are an adequate guide", there is little basis for serious discussion of the Christian element, especially in assuming that Wilder's portentous references foretell "a new dispensation in which all things shall be made clear and divine and will always be available to mankind."⁴⁰ Wesley

34. Wilder, p. 162.

35. Burbank, p. 50.

36. Malcolm Goldstein, *The Art of Thornton Wilder* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 68.

37. Castronovo, p. 56.

38. Hermann Stesau, *Thornton Wilder* (trans. Frieda Schutze) (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971), p. 42.

39. Chrysis wishes the gods were sometimes present instead of having only a vague idea that there lies the principle of living. Glycerium believes that her plight is the result of arrogance (hubris) and she is punished by the gods because she trusted her own happiness.

40. The former quotation is a paraphrase of Wilder's summation, reported by Norman Fitts in the *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1930 in Gilbert A. Harrison *The Enthusiast, A Life of Thornton Wilder* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1983), pp. 3-10; the latter from J. Wesley Thomas, "Thornton Wilder and the Search for the White Whale" in *Mythos und Aufklärung in der Amerikanischen Literatur* (ed. Dieter Meindl and Friedrich W. Horlacher) (Erlangen: Universitätsbund Erlangen — Nürnberg, 1985), p. 405.

Thomas rightly argues that "it is more likely that he (Wilder) intended to simply announce the coming of one who, to a greater extent than any other, was to show disinterested love and the affirmation of life."⁴¹

It remains a fact that if *The Woman of Andros* is to be judged in comparison with *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *The Cabala*, it can be defined as considerably inferior and its publication did cause an unforgettable dispute. Critics like Michael Gold accused the book of its "escapist - like quality" and attacked Wilder's defending critics and public. Since it was 1930, the crucial years of the American Depression, what right did any author have to compose a novel filled with

a daydream of homosexual figures in graceful gowns moving archaically among the lillies? And is this the style with which to express America? Is this the speech of a pioneer continent? Is Mr. Wilder a Swede or a Greek, or is he an American? No stranger would know from these books he has written.⁴²

The polemic ignored completely the relevance that fiction could have to each time without depicting the present moment and the fact that the struggle within the body politic is only part of the perennial human struggle of the psyche. In any case, questions about "the bright and the dark" of life seem to undoubtedly fall into time and place during the years of the Depression and Gold represented a certain group who believed that "if people had elegance, breeding, or a sense of style, they were artificial and unreal."⁴³

Among Wilder's defenders were Edmund Wilson and Hart Crane, the latter designating Gold's review as "the recent rape of *The Woman of Andros*."⁴⁴ There is no evidence in any form that Wilder was seriously annoyed by all those critical assaults. But in an interview eight years later, he admitted:

For years I shrank from describing the modern world... Now, though many of the subjects will often be of the past, I like to feel that I accept the twentieth century, not only as a fascinating age to live in, but as assimilable stuff to think with.⁴⁵

41. *ibid.*

42. Michael Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ", *New Republic*, 64 (Oct. 22, 1930), pp. 266-67.

43. Kuner, p. 92.

44. Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), pp. 502-503

45. Kuner, p. 93. "Although Wilder never conceded its impact upon his work, Gold's article immediately preceded Wilder's writings about middle class American life: *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* (1931) *Heaven's My Destination* (1934) and *Our Town* (1938)". Richard

Although in the years that followed until 1938, Wilder did not produce (except for a translation) any work from other than American background, he never gave up his search for continuity with past literature. His last play to appear *The Alcestiad* (1960) is definitely a work of "greek inspiration" that examines in dramatic form several of the philosophical and other dilemmas that primarily appeared in *The Woman of Andros*.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Μαρία Κουτσουδάκη, *Η παρουσία ενός «ελληνικού παρελθόντος» στη Γυναίκα της Άνδρου του Θόρντον Γουάιλντερ*

Η *Γυναίκα της Άνδρου* (1930) χαρακτηρίζεται ως το «ελληνικό» μυθιστόρημα του Θόρντον Γουάιλντερ. Εκφράζοντας τη λατρεία του συγγραφέα για την κλασική αρχαιότητα και την πίστη του στην αθανασία του παρελθόντος μέσα από τα έργα μεγάλων δημιουργών, είναι εμπνευσμένο από την *Ανδρία* του Τερέντιου που, με τη σειρά της, βασίζεται σε δύο κωμωδίες του Μενάνδρου. Εξιστορεί τη ζωή μιας Αλεξανδρινής εταίρας σ' ένα μικρό ελληνικό νησί όπου κυριαρχούν αυστηρός τοπικισμός και επαρχιακή νοοτροπία. Με αφορμή τα δρώμενα και το θάνατο της ηρώιδας, ο Γουάιλντερ διαπραγματεύεται τα περισσότερα από τα αγαπημένα του θέματα, την αληθινή αγάπη και ευαισθησία, πνευματική καλλιέργεια και μόρφωση, αυταπάρνηση και αυτοθυσία, όσα χρωματίζουν το άτομο με μια ιδιαιτερότητα που αναπόφευκτα οδηγεί στη μοναξιά.

Η δημοσίευση του έργου προκάλεσε μεγάλη διαμάχη και αρκετοί κριτικοί κατηγόρησαν τον Γουάιλντερ ότι με την εκλογή αρχαιοπρεπών θεμάτων δήλωνε άγνοια και αδιαφορία για τα προβλήματα της οικονομικής κρίσης της Αμερικής του 1930. Παρά το γεγονός ότι η *Γυναίκα της Άνδρου* υστερεί έναντι άλλων πεζών και δραματικών έργων του συγγραφέα, παρουσιάζει ενδιαφέρον για τον έξοχο λυρισμό του ύφους και το ρομαντισμό που διακατέχεται σε σύγκριση με άλλα έργα της ίδιας περιόδου.