

## David Harsent on *The Cocktail Party*

### The Week in Books – *The Guardian*

In an exchange with E Martin Browne, who produced almost all of his plays, TS Eliot said of *The Cocktail Party*: “To begin with, no chorus and no ghosts.” It might be said, however, that there is a ghost in the play: that of Alcestis, both the woman and the great drama by Euripides.

It’s easy enough to detect points of reference to Euripides once the source has been revealed, but Eliot covered his tracks. “I was still inclined,” he wrote, “to go to a Greek dramatist for my theme [...] and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself.”

For those unfamiliar with *Alcestis*, here’s the backstory: Apollo persuades the Fates to allow Adametus, king of Thessaly, the privilege of finding someone to die instead of him, when his time comes. He asks his father and his mother to do so; they refuse. Finally, Adametus’s wife, Alcestis, agrees to be his substitute. After her death – though before Thanatos has taken her to the underworld (the Greeks liked to die in stages) – Heracles arrives at court. He’s a loud, irreverent type who likes a drink. Adametus says nothing of his wife’s death, and Heracles gets drunk and generally behaves in a loutish manner. Later, Heracles learns of Alcestis’s death. He is filled with remorse for his loutishness and lack of respect. His means of making recompense is to intercept Thanatos at the tomb of Alcestis and wrestle with him. He wins, and is able to return Alcestis to the land of the living.

That return is crucial in Eliot’s thinking. In an interview conducted by Donald Hall for the Paris Review in 1959, Eliot said: “*The Cocktail Party* has to do with Alcestis simply because the question arose in my mind what would the life of Adametus and Alcestis be after she’d come back from the dead.” Those lucky enough to get a ticket to the forthcoming production of this rarely staged play – at the Print Room, London W11, from Monday, accompanied by a series of talks on Eliot – would do well to old Alcestis in their minds.

*The Cocktail Party* runs from the 14 September – 10 October at the Print Room at the Coronet

Box Office: 020 3642 6606 [www.the-print-room.org](http://www.the-print-room.org)