

ALCESTIS

Euripides

Overview *Alcestis* was first performed in 438 B.C. It is the earliest surviving play of Euripides, and won second prize in the annual contest, defeated by a play of Sophocles. As a drama, it has often been considered a 'comedy,' since the ending is 'happy,' and yet there are darkneses in the play—the uneasy imagination of death, the bad spirit of Admetus' parents—which undercut any notion of comedy. What is certain is that Alcestis herself emerges from the play as noble and willing to sacrifice herself, and thus as a universally admirable model.

Story

In the mythical background to this play, Alcestis has been beset by many ardent suitors, and it has been declared that she will be given to the first man who can yoke a lion and boar together. Admetus is the victor in this challenge and yet in the end forgets to perform the necessary marital sacrifices to Artemis, and finds his bed full of snakes. Apollo steps in to solve this problem, urging the Fates to declare that if anyone will substitute for the old Admetus, in death, it will be allowed. The search is on for a substitute.

At the outset of Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 B.C.E.) it has been agreed that Alcestis will take on herself the death of her husband, who is no longer well. Apollo appears in front of the palace of Admetus; he is eager to get away before the dreadful oncoming death of Alcestis (Admetus' wife) takes place before him. Thanatos, the god of death, has arrived at the Palace, to take away Alcestis, and reminds Apollo that he has no power to delay this death. The death is an agreement made between Admetus and his wife. Apollo exits grumpily, muttering that a hero will be coming—the god Heracles—who will wrestle Alcestis away from death.

At this point the chorus enters, searching for indications of the mourning rituals to accompany the death of Alcestis. The chorus leader wraps up their anxiety, by giving up any hope, that rituals will in this case prevail against death.

At this point a maidservant takes center stage, weeping; her mistress is already dead, though she is still alive, in her bedroom. In other words, she hovers on the brink of death. There follow voluminous prayers for the life and nobility of Alcestis; the noble lady embraces her children, and makes dying demands on her husband, Admetus—that he should not remarry, nor put some revengeful stepmother in charge of her children. At this point Alcestis dies.

At that moment Heracles, an old friend of Admetus, arrives at the Palace, and Admetus decides not to tell his innocent friend about the dispiriting death of Alcestis. Unfortunately, Heracles, who is a partying type and ignorant of Alcestis' death, gets drunk, cuts up and seriously pains the whole household, which is inwardly mourning the loss of the lady of the house.

One of the servants finally snaps, and tells Heracles the full story. The hero/god is hugely embarrassed, determines to make up for his gaffe, and takes the decision to confront Death, wrestle him to the ground, and free Alcestis. When he returns to the stage, on the far side of this decision, Heracles brings with him a veiled woman, whom he hands over to Admetus, with the request that the palace host look should after the lady until Heracles' return from his labors. Admetus is at first reluctant to take the woman by the hand, but when he does he sees that the lady appears to be Alcestis. She will not be able to speak for three days, but will after that time be restored to full life. The virtue of Alcestis has proven itself powerfully to her husband.

Themes

Self-sacrifice. Alcestis willingly agrees to sacrifice her life for that of husband. (The fates have declared that this substitution is possible.) It must be added, that Alcestis is anxious and worried on her death bed; for which reasons she leaves many parting strictures on Admetus.

Appreciation. The kindness and willingness of Alcestis have made her much beloved. She goes to her 'death' deeply appreciated.

Humiliation. Heracles is humiliated when he realizes that he has bumbled into Admetus' palace just after Alcestis' death; furthermore, that he has gotten drunk and made a fool of himself. He compensates for his folly by wrestling Thanatos, and bringing Alcestis back from the dead.

Characters

Admetus, the King of Pherae, In Thessaly, and the husband of Alcestis, is on the verge of death, when an old deal with the gods, arranged by Apollo intervenes to save him.

Alcestis, the faithful wife of Admetus, who agrees to die on his behalf, and who is brought back from death, at the end of the play, a tribute to her own virtue.

Heracles, the slightly buffoonish God/hero who bumbles into Admetus' palace on the day of Alcestis' death, overdrinks and makes a fool of himself, and in the end rescues Alcestis from the dead.

Thanatos. The eery figure of death, that comes to collect Alcestis after she agrees to die in place of her husband.

MAIN CHARACTER

ALCESTIS (conscientious)

Character Alcestis herself is a noble character in a hard situation. Her husband, Admetus, has won from the Fates and Apollo the privilege of avoiding death, if he can find someone to die in his place. Alcestis, his wife, is the only person who can be found to substitute for Admetus in death, and most of what we know of Alcestis springs from her willingness to take over her husband's death. She is eventually dispensed from her own death, but the fall out from that resurrection (by Heracles) is largely understood through the responses of Admetus. Alcestis herself is known chiefly for her selflessness.

Parallels Self-sacrificing women abound in the literatures created by those cultures in which women play a passive and subordinate role. Ancient Greek culture provides telling examples: Iphigenia gives herself up to sacrifice so that her father can lead the Greek forces to Troy; the Trojan queen, Hecuba, is famously long suffering and patient, in the face of the downfall of her family and city; Penelope persists for twenty years of abnegation, awaiting the return of her husband, Odysseus; Hecuba's daughter, Polyxena, willingly and nobly sacrifices herself, rather than letting herself become a slave to the Greeks. If one were to pick a modest and self-abnegating female from the richness of the British 19th century novel, it might be Dorothea, the lover of Casaubon and his knowledge, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872).

Illustrative moments

Rational Though close to death, Alcestis has strength for one long speech to Admetus, before she dies. She begins by emphasizing the reason for her self-sacrifice, that she wants her husband 'to live and see the daylight.' She makes it clear that she could have found her own way in life, by marrying 'any man in Thessaly,' and remaining in her own house, in 'queenly state.' Instead, she says to Admetus, 'I made certain you would live and see the daylight.' Her act is an *acte pur*, as she does not show huge love for her husband. She does, however, seem confident that he will care for the children.

Resigned As she develops her thought, in final peroration to Admetus, Alcestis returns to the painful issue of Pheres (the father of Admetus) and his wife; to their refusal to die for their son. Alcestis deeply resents this refusal, especially since these parents were too old for child bearing, and had no good reason to demand more out of life than they had. Her only way out, into understanding this act of selfish refusal, is to suppose that 'some god has so wrought that things shall be this way...' Aware that the gods can act singly—and not just as a collective power of Fate—Alcestis surmises (correctly) that a particular god (Apollo) has tweaked her life.

Doubtful Alcestis imposes on her husband a last request, even demand. 'Keep them as masters in my house, and do not marry again.' From there she goes on to outline the miserable fate of children under stepmothers; 'no viper could be deadlier.' 'The little boy has his father for a tower of strength.' Alcestis cannot die in any kind of peace, unless she is certain that her offspring will be well treated, and though Admetus assures her he will follow her request, she has ample cause, in his proven narcissism, to feel insecure. The sting of doubt pulses through her words.

Jealous When it comes to a final address to her daughter, Alcestis is so overwrought that she forgets—or does she just doubt?—that her husband has promised not to remarry. She will not be there to coach her daughter when the young woman marries, or to shield the youngster from the attacks of Admetus' new wife. She worries about specifics. Will the new wife make up vile stories about Alcestis' daughter, to tarnish her? Will the new wife obstruct that daughter's wedding prospects, out of jealousy? 'For I must die,' Alcestis says, still in dialogue with Admetus, but in fact addressing her own children.

Discussion questions

Is the *Alcestis* a comedy, or a tragi-comedy? While the descent of Alcestis into the Underworld might seem to be her death, she in fact 'comes back to life.' Does that 'happy ending' make the play a comedy?

What is Admetus' attitude toward his wife's willingness to sacrifice herself for him? Is he grateful? Do you feel satisfied with his response to his wife's self-sacrifice?

What is Euripides's point, finally? Is it that death can be overcome if we have the courage to take it consciously onto ourselves?