

**ALCESTIS**

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

**Alcestis** (in Euripides' *Alcestis*)      **conscientious**

**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.

**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?