

ALCESTIS

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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.

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.

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.