

DEATH OF ALKESTIS IN EURIPIDES' *ALKESTIS*

Alkestis is the satyr play of the trilogy constituted of the *Kressae*, *Alkmaeon* and the *Telephos* staged by Euripides in the year 438 BC.¹ The popular opinion is that in this drama Alkestis offers to die in place of her husband, purely out of love for him. Despite this easy conjecture, the evidence goes somewhat differently. In this brief review I expect to show that her true concern was otherwise – it was for her children's sake that she was making her noble gesture, not for a man who hardly deserved it.

Just as in most Euripidean dramas, the plot of the *Alkestis* is derived from Greek mythology, in this instance, from the Admetos-Alkestis myth. According to the folktale motif of this myth, a young man is threatened with death on his wedding day,² with the offer made to him that he can be saved if *someone else voluntarily dies in his stead*. All others including his parents refuse to do so; *his bride consents*. However, *she does not die at once*. Divine powers are moved to admiration by her resolve and decide to spare both her and her bridegroom, who, thereupon, continue to live together in happiness. In the Euripidean treatment of this motif, Admetos was not threatened with death on the day of his wedding, but on a later unspecified time well after both his children were born (lines: 286-287). The proviso for his salvation is the same as in the folktale version of the myth (lines:13-14). Euripides does not dramatize Admetos' futile search for a substitute. The audience is simply told that he had approached everyone in his family and failed. His parents had refused; it was only his wife who finally agreed to die for him (lines: 15-18). For reasons of his own, which are not reflected in the drama, Euripides maintains an interval between the Alkestis' offer to die and her actual death.

The two reasons critics readily jump to in their assessment of the lady's death is that she died for love of her husband and/ or that she did so as was expected of her society – a kind of *sati* – to save her husband's death rather than join him in it.

¹ Euripides, as is known, lived from 485 to 406BC and has composed about 92 plays, of which only 19 survive. He has competed with the other two renowned tragedians of his time: Aeschylus (?525/4-456/5BC) and Sophokles (496/5- 406BC). He contested 20 times at dramatic festivals, and won in five.

² No ancient versions connect the threat to Admetos' life with his wedding. This information that was first found in Apollodorus (1.9.15.), who wrote in the second century AD, further mentions that Admetos failed to honour Artemis and found his bridal chamber full of coiled snakes. The account of Apollo's bargain with the Fates follows immediately in Apollodorus' story but not in conjunction with the previous event. Also cf. L.P.E. Parker (2003) 'Alkestis: Euripides to Ted Hughes' *Greece and Rome* 50.1: 1-2.

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Taking up the second of these – If Alkestis, as is thought, submitted her life to save her husband according to the expectation of her society, we should be able to encounter the following constituents in the drama.

- (a). The prologue informing the audience that Alkestis' sacrifice on behalf of her husband was a customary demand of her society with, perhaps, introducing Alkestis as the victim of such tradition or social custom.
- (b). The dialogues in the drama reflecting Alkestis' helplessness in the face of it – which gives quite a different tone to her character.

In the play, however, Alkestis is first introduced to the audience through the words of the female servant (lines:152-198) when the Chorus of Phaerian citizens inquires about the condition of their queen. She begins by stating her mistress' noble character with regard to the sacrifice, she had decided to make. In her mind and in the minds of the citizens Alkestis has, apparently, done so to value (προτιμῶσα) her husband above herself:

Τί χρὴ γενέσθαι τὴν ὑπερβεβλημένην
 γυναῖκα; πῶς δ' ἂν μᾶλλον ἐνδείξαιτό τις
 πόσιν προτιμῶσ' ἢ θέλουσ' ὑπερθανεῖν;
 καὶ ταῦτα μὲν δὴ πᾶσ' ἐπίσταται πόλις·

What must the woman be who could surpass her? How could a woman display that she values her husband's life above hers other than by willingly dying for him? This the whole city knows (lines:153-156).

Alkestis, however, nowhere refers or even hints at a custom or a tradition of the nature that requires such a submission from a wife. Also notable is the term used by the servant, when talking of what motivated her, which is 'honour' and not 'love' for the husband. Thus, the drift of this portion of the speech suggests that the offer of her life was totally at her discretion and it was not a matter of duty nor an expectation of the society a prevalent custom of her day. Dellner is right, therefore, when he argues that dying for Admetos was not obligatory for Alkestis since there was no obligation for her to die as wife in the place of Admetos.³

³ J. J. Dellner (2000) "Alcestis' double life" *The Classical Journal* 96.1: 06.

The conversation between Alkestis and her husband at the expiration of her trance where she was following her resolve to die in his place, - the long speech declaring this to Admetos, is also vital in the evidence we are concerned with. She emphatically states that she was not giving up a despondent life but a happy and a rich one (lines: 282-286 and 288). By stressing the fact that his own parents failed to die for him, their son, Alkestis highlights her own sacrifice. If this was no more than as demanded of her by society or if she considered it to be her duty, she could hardly have put such weight on her offer, and had she done so, the servants and the chorus would not have viewed her offer with such high esteem. Furthermore, this would not have provided any occasion for either husband or for wife to pass the obligation of dying to save the husband to another, even to reproach a third party, specifically the husband's own parents, for failing to do so.

Moreover, if Alkestis' death was expected by the custom of her society, Pheres would not have failed to mention it. Undoubtedly also, such a custom would have spared the ugly brawl that took place between the father and son (Admetos and Pheres), and consequently, this would have prevented Admetos' unseemly declaration of hatred towards his parents for failing to die on his behalf. Furthermore, in the prologue the god Apollo is not specific and does not mention or hint that it should be the wife Admetos is required to send to the nether world in his place if he wishes to extend his life, but simply, another corpse (ἄλλον διαλλάξαντα τοῖς κάτω νεκρόν· line14). Nor do any of the other speeches or conversations in the drama as a whole express the notion that Alkestis was reduced to the position of a victim who was obliged to offer her life to secure that of her husband. Accordingly, Alkestis' action (at least, in Euripides' treatment of it) was not a demand of the traditions or customs of her society.

If the reason for Alkestis's death was the second of the popular suggestions, i.e. because she was a loving wife, we should surely have evidence in the drama that she plays the role of the heroine who comes forward to save the husband *out of love*. Thus, we are to examine whether Alkestis expresses any love or concern amounting to love for Admetos because it is hardly likely that Euripides would have made her suppress such feelings altogether throughout the play, allowing his audience to take it for granted.

Some of the other characters in the play, such as Pheres and the chorus of Pherian citizens, while considering Alkestis' offer of life as a noble and praiseworthy act, admittedly assume that she is doing so out of love for Admetos. Pheres, who does not wish to die for Admetos, encourages and values Alkestis' action, using this assumption in his favour.

ἦτις γε τῆς σῆς προύθανε ψυχῆς, τέκνον,
καί μ' οὐκ ἄπαιδ' ἔθηκεν οὐδ' εἴασε σοῦ
στερέντα γῆρα πενθίμῳ καταφθίνειν . . .

She has given her life for yours, my son. | She would not see me
childless, let me waste away | into a miserable old age deprived of
you. (lines: 620-622).

But we have heard from Alkestis herself that her attitude towards Pheres was not as he himself assumed, but was absolutely contemptuous for failing to come forward to save his son's life - and consequently her own - by offering his. Alkestis even goes to the extent of considering Pheres' and his wife's rejection as of even robbing herself of the chance of continuing life with her husband to their mutual happiness (line 294).

The perception of the chorus of Pherean citizens on Alkestis' sacrifice is reflected in their prayer to obtain a loving wife like Alkestis, whom they appear to have seen as a role model for womenfolk (lines: 472-474):

τοιαύτας εἶη μοι κῦρσαι
συνδυάδος φιλίας ἀλόχου·
τὸ γὰρ ἐν βίῳτῳ σπάνιον μέρος·

It would be an accomplishment | to have such a love from a wife |
a rare share in life.

Even the female servant seems to consider Alkestis' death in the place of Admetos as the highest devotion a wife could show for a husband (line 155).⁴

Such then were the perceptions of the outsiders of Alkestis' sacrifice. But what is important is whether Alkestis, herself mentions or suggests that it was love for Admetos that induced her action in other words, not what they thought but what she herself considered in making her supreme sacrifice.

Both Lloyd⁵ and Dyson⁶ point out that Alkestis is always portrayed as dying for her husband. But the lines (i.e 18, 155, 180, 282, 284, 462, 620, 1002) which

⁴ *Vide supra*. the first quotation in this paper.

⁵ M. Lloyd (1985) "Euripides' Alkestis" *Greece and Rome* 32. 2: 123.

⁶ M. Dyson (1988) "Alkestis' children and the character of Admetos" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108: 15.

Lloyd⁷ cites from the text as his evidence do not really bear this out. Of these, only lines 282 and 284 are from Alkestis' speech and these merely inform us of Alkestis' decision to be his substitute to save him, not the reason behind that decision. The other lines (as said earlier) reveal no more than the assumption of the others, and not of herself as the cause for her submission of life.

Golden argues that "the text clearly indicates that Alcestis sacrifices herself for two basic reasons: her love for Admetus and her love for her children".⁸ He further states that the attitude of Apollo coming to rescue Admetos is parallel to the attitude of Alkestis to die in the place of Admetos, once again, to save him because both act out of affection and of altruistic regard for Admetos.⁹

As for the first, though the text does clearly mention Alkestis' love for her children as the reason for her sacrifice, there is no indication to testify that her love for Admetos had induced her action—a point that will shortly be discussed in detail in this study. Also I have reservations in considering the attitude of Apollo and Alkestis towards helping Admetos as analogous, because neither Alkestis' conduct, as reported by the female servant, nor her conversation with Admetos reveal such regard for him. Our observation as to whether Alkestis died in place of Admetos because of her love for him will solve the second problem as well.

As already stated, a careful study of the text shows that there is not a single display or expression of love for Admetos, overtly expressed or even suggested, in Alkestis' actions or in her conversation with Admetos. The only phrase in Alkestis' speech that may lead even to misinterpret the cause of Alkestis' death as love for Admetos, I find, is the following:

οὐκ ἠθέλησα ζῆν ἀποσπασθεῖσά σου
σὺν παισὶν ὀρφανοῖσιν·

I would not wish to live separated from you with orphaned children (lines: 287-288).

But here she puts more weight on her displeasure to live alone with orphaned children if Admetos were to die, being unable to send another dead to the underworld in his place, rather than showing unconditional affection for Admetos. The underlying idea is that Alkestis is prolonging Admetos' life for the sake of their children. They would end up as orphans anyway as a result of their mother's (her)

⁷ Lloyd (1985): 123.

⁸ L. Golden (1970-71) 'Euripides' *Alkestis*: structure and theme' *Classical Journal* 66.2:119.

⁹ Golden (1970-71) *ibid*: 119.

death, yet, they would be in a strong position under their father's protection in this patriarchal society. As Grube¹⁰ rightly argued, Alkestis is dying for saving Admetos as the father of her children, master of their hearth, lord of the household and the ruler of the land, which would then benefit the children in every way. It is their safety she is trying to ensure and he will be able to provide them a protection she by herself would have been unable to provide.¹¹ Thus, a strong desire to assure the welfare of her children seems to have motivated her to die in place of Admetos.

A study of the conduct of Alkestis would help us gain insight into her character in this process. The speech of the female servant provides a good source of information as to this since it reveals both her external and internal dispositions *i.e.*, what she allows the others to see as her demeanor and the psychological turmoil within her. Externally, she is a strong character, well aware of her plight and yet continues her duties without tears and sighs (line 173 ἄκλαυστος ἄστένακτος). In the last hours of her life, the only worry visible to the most is her concern for her children. Perhaps she is also using this as a device to conceal her overall heartache over the fact that her husband chose to save his life at the expense of her's. She begins the farewell by praying to Hestia to secure the safety of her children. Her internal commotion is very well depicted through the narrated bedroom episode, sandwiched between the two scenes reported in the same speech, showing her dealings with the others. The servant's report also unveils her psychological turmoil and the consternation she experiences at the thought of Admetos remarrying after her death. In this scene there is no indication of motherly love or love for her husband, on behalf of whom she dies. She externalized her disturbed state by accusing the marriage-bed which brought her to this crisis:

ὦ λέκτρον, ἔνθα παρθένει' ἔλυσ' ἐγὼ
 κορεύματ' ἐκ τοῦδ' ἀνδρός, οὐ θνήσκω πέρι,
 χαῖρ' · οὐ γὰρ ἐχθαίρω σ' · -ἀπώλεσας δέ με
 μόνην· προδοῦναι γάρ σ' ὀκνοῦσα καὶ πόσιν
 θνήσκω. (lines: 177-181)

O marriage-bed! Farewell! Here, once I offered my maidenhood to this man, now I offer my life to him. I do not hate you, but you destroyed me. *I alone did not betray you nor my husband and for this I die.* [Italics mine].

¹⁰ G. M. A. Grube (1941) *The drama of Euripides* (London): 129-146.

¹¹ *ibid*: 129-146.

These words are rich in meaning and reflect what is going through her mind. In a society where marriages were proposed, 'offering maidenhood' is reminiscent of the arranged marriage by the father, a second party, probably without consulting the daughter concerned. Then the present circumstance, 'giving away her life', is also happening for the interest of another party, her children, the agents who link the two circumstances. The words that follow referring to her faithful conduct (lines:180-181) clarify it further. Here, she stresses that she bore legitimate children to her husband and also draws attention to her virtuous conduct, further intensifying the value of her life that is about to be terminated for the sake of his salvation.

Clearly, therefore, there is no space for love as such here for the husband. If it was out of deep love that she offered herself, the speech would have taken a different line. Moreover, what is evident here is her grief, apparently emerging from self-pity fuelled by the frustration and disgust towards her husband, for whose behalf she offered to die, for accepting her as the substitute death without hesitation in order to prolong his own life, the very opposite of her own stance. Significantly, there is not even a trace of love expressed by Alkestis for Admetos. The conduct of Alkestis in this scene is in total contrast to her behaviour in the two scenes that immediately precede and follow and it is a psychological explosion where her personal thoughts of losing a wonderful life and jealousy towards a potential new bride gets into shape.

Nonetheless, in the following scene Alkestis resumes her strong character and bids farewell to her children and her servants. Here, she is again the loving mother and the respectable and the kind-hearted mistress of the household. This same idea is conveyed later when the male servant regrets not being able to attend the funeral procession of such a kind mistress since he was assigned to attend to Heracles, Admetos' guest (lines: 764-771). Such conduct of the members of her household shows the high regard in which she was held in the household and thus we have to dismiss any concern that may occur as to whether Alkestis' decision to offer her life resulted from the low, insignificant position ascribed to her within it.

Dellner,¹² referring to Robinowitz's view¹³ that she dies because she is a woman and her death saves a man, points out that this, (Alkestis' decision to die in the place of Admetos) reaffirms male dominance in her society as she sees herself as "intrinsically of less value in the first place." But we have seen in her behaviour, either through what others say about her or her own words, that she does not consider herself to be inferior because she is a woman; she is well aware of her position, as a young wife, mother of her children and as the mistress of the

¹² Dellner (2000): 08.

¹³ N. Robinowitz (1993) *Anxiety veiled: Euripides and the traffic in women* (Ithaca and London): 71.

household. She points out that her existence is equally required for her children. When informing her children of the nature of the urgent support they are to lose - especially her daughter - as a result of her demise, she is in fact highlighting her value as a mother. However, when it comes to securing the inheritance of children, the survival of the father becomes crucial and more important than everything and everyone else. Thus, her submission of life is not directed towards affirming any supremacy or even equality but towards ensuring the welfare of her children.

We further notice that Alkestis, having assured Admetos of the value of her death, compels him to promise her to abstain from marriage. Once again she puts her motherly love and care for her children's future to the forefront. We are aware that in Athens of classical times, children generally inherited their status and property from the father, regardless of the mother's status, and the death of the father could cause problems for their rights to inherit,¹⁴ and consequently, they could be reduced to an utterly helpless state. Although the loss of the mother could also bring about unhappy consequences to her children, the gravity of this could be minimized when requisite action was taken. It could be due to this that Alkestis chose to save the husband for the children's sake and took necessary precautions to secure their safety by appealing to the husband not to give her children a stepmother (line 305 μητρειά), someone who had the capacity to nullify the precious expectation of her sacrifice, i.e. providing a better future for the children.¹⁵

τούτους ἀνάσχου δεσπότης ἐμῶν δόμων,
καὶ μὴ ἴπιγῆμης τοῖσδε μητρειαν τέκνοις,

... ..

μὴ δῆτα δράσης ταῦτά γ', αἰτοῦμαί σ' ἐγώ.
ἐχθρὰ γὰρ ἢ ἴπιούσα μητρειὰ τέκνοις
τοῖς πρόσθ' , ... (lines: 304-305 ...308-310)

Make them the sole inheritors of my house,
and do not give them a stepmother,

... ..

Please do not do this, I beseech you.
For, a stepmother comes in as an enemy
to children, ...

¹⁴ A. R. W. Harrison (1968) *The Law of Athens* vol. 1 (Oxford): 130-132 on succession and cf. 134-149 on problems.

¹⁵ Also cf. Dellner (2000): 18.

She makes Admetos promise with caution and holds the chorus of Pherean citizens and her children as witnesses, who may act as the guardians of the oath. Moreover, the emphasis she lays on the importance of her survival also presses Admetos to comply with her request. Once again, these scenes provide no indication of love, not to mention any overt expression of love, for her husband.¹⁶ Also notable is the fact that these scenes are also devoid of any of her personal anxieties for the husband. Instead, she is heartbroken over her husband accepting her death and is even sarcastic over his display of sorrow:

Αδμητος: ἄγου με σὺν σοὶ πρὸς θεῶν ἄγου κάτω.
 Αλκηστις: ἀρκοῦμεν ἡμεῖς οἱ προθῆσκοντες σέθεν.

Admetos: Oh, take me with you, in the god's name take me too!

Alkestis: It is for you I am going; one death is enough. (ll.)

In conclusion, it would seem that through the character of Alkestis, in this play the aspirations and expectations especially ascribed to women within the limits permitted by Athenian society are upheld and demonstrated. Her conduct, as can be seen on stage or through reports, informs us that Alkestis' motherly love has predominated over her desires as an individual, such as to lead a happy life, being remarried to another Thesselian prince (ll. 285-286).¹⁷ This concern for her children has given an added value to her sacrifice because the security she intends to create for them through her death also demands her survival. She, therefore dies, not as a loving wife or as a victim of her traditional social circumstances but as a devoted and loving mother.

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¹⁶ A. P. Burnett (1965) "The virtues of Admetus" *Classical Philology* 60. 4: 245.

¹⁷ ἀλλ' ἄνδρα τε σχεῖν Θεσσαλῶν ὃν ἤθελον,
 καὶ δῶμα ναίειν ὄλβιον τυραννίδι.

(I could have married any Thesselian I chose and ruled a palace rich and royal).