

**Euripides' *Alkestis* "A Drama of a Devoted Wife?"**  
**Translation from the Original Greek into Sinhala with an Introduction and**  
**Commentary**

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Euripides, as is known, was one of the greatest of Athenian dramatists and produced tragedies for the dramatic festivals held in honour of the god Dionysos. He lived from 485-406BC. He has composed about 92 plays, of which only 19 survive. He has competed 20 times in dramatic festivals and won the first place<sup>1</sup> in five. Unlike Aeschylus (?525/4-456/5BC) and Sophokles (496/5- 406BC), Euripides was regarded as a revolutionary dramatist at least by some of his contemporaries and the attacks he received from Aristophanes in his comedies provide evidence for such information. Alkestis was the last or the satyr play in a collection of three tragedies, namely, *Kressae*, *Alkmaeon of Psophis* and *Telephos* which he staged in 439BC and won the second place. Being a satyr play, *Alkestis* is not completely a tragedy but a tragedy with a happy ending. Moreover, Euripides has very tactfully injected his play with new concepts such as that the dead cannot be brought back to life. He also ridicules Olympian religion through this play.

Since a Sinhala translation of this drama of Euripides is not yet available I have taken up the onerous task of translating it in order to cover the demand from students studying Greek drama in the Sinhala medium. The importance of translating it from the original Greek is to make the translation much closer to the original Greek text. When translating a text from English to Sinhala there is a risk of distorting or misunderstanding the original Greek concepts and ideas and eventually this may not benefit the targeted audience. When such a translation is preceded and followed by an introduction and a commentary written after thorough research it will naturally benefit the specialist as well as the general reader. Moreover, this may stimulate further research in the field of Greek literature and history.

In this paper I explore one aspect I have mentioned briefly in the commentary of my translation which is whether Alkestis sacrificed herself on behalf of Admetos because she loved him or because she considered it her duty.

The present study mainly depends on library research, where a number of editions of *Alkestis* published in original Greek and research articles written on the subject were extensively used.

In order to make this paper comprehensible to the non-Classics audience, I perceive that a brief summary of the drama is essential:

Admetos the king of Pherai is doomed to face an early death. But the god Apollo, who was serving him as a slave at the time, tricked the Fates to agree to spare the life of Admetos if one of his family members agreed to die in his place. His family consisted of his parents, two very young children and his wife. When the time came, his parents refused to die in his stead. But his wife, Alkestis, died for him and freed his life. When she was already laid out in death, a friend, Heracles, visited Admetos. Admetos persuaded him to enter the house and be his guest on the pretext that the funeral in the house was of a non-family member and entertained him. Heracles somehow learnt the truth from a servant and determined to help his noble friend by saving his wife from Death, who was due to come and fetch her. Finally Heracles comes with Alkestis and claims to have fought with Death to save her and hands her over to Admetos.

The speech of the female servant who reported the behaviour of Alkestis in preparing for her death, the conversation between Alkestis and Admetos and the behaviour of the household are crucial items to observe in discussing what is proposed. The servant's report gives no indication that Alkestis sacrificed herself out of love for Admetos nor that she considers it her duty to die for the husband, but it indicates her great concern and love for her children. Neither does the conversation between Alkestis and Admetos indicate her action to be motivated by love for or duty to, her husband. On the other hand, this again proves her concern for her

offspring. Nonetheless, the contrast in the behaviour of Alkestis in these two scenes shows us that she is psychologically disturbed. Moreover, the behaviour of the rest of the household does not show that her death was expected and even Pheres seems to consider her death as a noble voluntary sacrifice but he thinks it was offered on behalf of himself and his son. Though space does not permit me to

state my argument here it will be spelt out in my paper.

In conclusion, what is clear is that her motherly love predominates over her other concerns and this anxiety has persuaded her to offer her life on behalf of Admetos.

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This paper is an outcome of the research project I have undertaken with the help of a Research Grant awarded by the University of Peradeniya, to translate the tragic-comedy *Alkestis* of Euripides into Sinhala from the original Greek.