

**SCENES FROM
EURIPIDES.
THE ALCESTIS**

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Scenes from Euripides. The Alcestis by A. Sidgwick

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A. SIDGWICK

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THE ALCESTIS**

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EURIPIDES

Rugby Edition

By A. SIDGWICK

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IN RUGBY SCHOOL

THE ALCESTIS



RIVINGTONS

London, Oxford, and Cambridge

1874

292. g. 7. 56.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

Ἄπολλον, the god.

Θάνατος ('Death').

Ἄδμητος, king of the Pheræans in Thessaly.

Ἄλκηστις, his wife.

Φέρις, his father.

Ἡρακλῆς, the hero.

Servants of the household.

Chorus of old Pheræans.

*The scene is the palace of ADMETUS, and is the same
all through the play.*

P R E F A C E.

THE *ALCESTIS* is the earliest of the extant plays of EURIPIDES, and was exhibited B.C. 439, the poet being then forty-one years of age. Athens was at this time in profound peace, and was producing, under the sway of the great PERICLES, that splendid crop of masterpieces in all departments of literature and art which has been the wonder of all succeeding generations.

The *ALCESTIS* has some weak points (or points which seem weak), but it has always deservedly been a favourite play. A work of art is valued in the long run for what is best in it, and there is nothing sweeter or more profoundly touching in all the master's writings than the character of *ALCESTIS*, both in itself and in its effect after her loss upon her husband. It is said of EURIPIDES, and, on the whole, truly, that his strength lies not in ideals, but in depicting the common emotions and characters of men, and in his rare insight into the finer shades of thought and feeling which make life rich; but in *ALCESTIS* he draws a picture of domestic life and love, which, for its nobleness and tenderness combined, is certainly the highest point touched in this kind by Greek literature. The farewell speech of the dying wife, and the deep and sacred love which the husband wakes to feel after losing her, suggest an ideal of marriage of which Greek life, with its lax morality and low condition of women, furnishes, as far as we know, no counterpart; and the fineness of the feeling in the best scenes of the play finds naturally its expression in language of a pure and sweet simplicity which is nowhere surpassed in Greek poetry.

PREFACE.

The plot of the play is as follows:—

ADMETUS, King of Phœrae, when about to die, obtains from the gratitude of APOLLO (who had been a slave for awhile in his household) permission to escape death if he can find another to die for him. None is willing to make the sacrifice but his beloved wife. Accordingly she dies, and is carried out to burial. But HERAKLES, who is passing through Thessaly on his way to Thrace, stops at the King's palace, and is hospitably entertained. ADMETUS carefully conceals his grief from him, that he may not drive him away, but one of the servants reveals it. HERAKLES goes out and wrestles with DEATH, and rescues and restores ALCESTIS.

The situation of ADMETUS in this plot constitutes one great difficulty for the poet. It is hard to feel any interest in a man who appears in the ignoble position of asking others to die for him. This is obvious, and has earned much cheap criticism. But it has not been sufficiently observed that since the Gods have ordained that he should so escape death, the arrangement is, to a Greek mind, a thing of course, and is taken without question. And EURIPIDES adds the true poetic touch in making the soul of ADMETUS wake, so to speak, to nobleness under his loss, so that at last he sees that life so saved is not worth the saving. This is very delicately and impressively treated. The "finely touched spirit" of ALCESTIS has its "fine issue" in raising her husband by her death to her own level, till we feel, when she is restored to him, what only a poet could have made us feel, that he is worthy to recover her.

Another point of common offence in the play is the scene (the fifth in this edition) of somewhat mean recrimination between the King and his father PHERES. It does seem beneath the dignity of tragic characters in an ideal poem, that one man should taunt another, and his father, too, for not sacrificing his short remainder of life to save his son, and that the father should make the just but somewhat brutal reply that every man ought to die for himself. But though this scene is certainly not wholly successful, it may be noticed (besides the fact that the moral platform is shifted and raised by its being

PREFACE.

the Gods' order that ADMETUS should be so rescued) that there is the further object of contrasting the two kinds of selfishness : PHERES hard and cold and cynical ; ADMETUS blustering with the violence of a man already half self-condemned and slowly rising through his sorrow to a consciousness of his mistake. This is very finely and skilfully brought out in BROWNING'S transcript of the play, "BALAUSTION'S Adventure:" a Poem, which, despite some trifling errors in translation, and some more important faulty colouring of the spirit, through the admixture of modern refinements,* is so rich with Greek feeling and subtle poetic insights, that it is a greater help to the true understanding of the drama than all the commentaries put together.

Two more faults have been found, on which a few words will suffice.

In the fourth scene occurs a rather frigid colloquy between ADMETUS and HERAKLES, wherein the former elaborately puts the latter on a false scent about the mourning of his household. We must in justice, however, remember that this would appear far less strained to a Greek audience, who felt that the duty of not turning a guest from the doors was a sacred one, to be carried out at all costs.

Again, in the sixth scene, modern taste is offended by the boisterous conviviality of HERAKLES in the house of woe, making the contrast too startling, and presenting HERAKLES in a light somewhat beneath the dignity of a hero. But it should be borne in mind, what even BROWNING seems to have overlooked, that the ALCESTIS was the fourth piece of a tetralogy, and though not a Satyric drama strictly, was probably expected to contain a Satyric element, which the poet supplies in the picture of the revelling HERAKLES.

The following is the order of the scenes : —

APOLLO relates the story of his service in ADMETUS' house,

* Such I conceive to be the whole treatment of Herakles, represented as the great-hearted, indefatigable benefactor of mankind. It is a very fine conception, but there is too much earnestness of purpose about it.