

**THE ALCESTIS OF
EURIPIDES: WITH NOTES
FOR THE USE OF COLLEGES
IN THE UNITED STATES**

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THEODORE D. WOOLSEY

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A L C E S T I S
OF
EURIPIDES,
WITH
NOTES,

FOR
THE USE OF COLLEGES IN THE UNITED STATES

By THEODORE D. WOOLSEY

PRESIDENT OF YALE COLLEGE.

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PREFACE.

THE *Alcestis* has a high rank, both for style and subject, among the plays of Euripides. Its style places it in the class with the *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Heraclidæ*, which were probably written before the other extant pieces of their author. Of these four plays, Elmsley says, in his notes on the argument of *Medea* (p. 69, ed. Oxf.): “Numeros habent severiores et puriores, a quorum ἀκριβείᾳ absunt cæteræ omnes, aliæ quidem propius, ut *Hecuba*, aliæ vero longius, ut *Orestes*.” While in those tragedies of Euripides which are undoubtedly his later ones there may be discovered negligence of composition, want of simplicity, especially in choral parts, and a style very remote from the severity of Sophocles, the simplicity of the *Alcestis* must, I think, strike even the careless reader; and the lyric parts have an elegant sweetness about them, which can hardly be paralleled by those of any of his other dramas.

The *subject* of this play presents us with an uncommon example of self-devotion and of conjugal love, and recalls to the mind those words of St. Paul, fitted to awaken hallowed thoughts in every breast: “Peradventure for a good man some one would even dare to die.” “On the score of beautiful morality,” says A. W. von Schlegel, “there is none of the pieces of Euripides so deserving of praise as *Alcestis*. Her determination to die, and the farewell which

she takes of her husband and children, are represented with the most overpowering pathos." Others express similar opinions. Thus Racine, in the preface to his *Iphigénie*, speaks of the scene which opens at v. 244 as "merveilleuse." And George Buchanan has the following words in the preface to his metrical version of this play, addressed to Margaret, sister of Henry the Second, king of France: "Est orationis genere leni et æquabili, et, quod Euripidis proprium est, suavi: parricidii vero et veneficii et reliquorum, quibus aliæ tragediæ plenæ sunt, scelerum nulla prorsus hic mentio, nullum omnino vestigium. Contra vero, conjugalis amoris, pietatis, humanitatis, et aliorum officiorum adeo plena sunt omnia, ut non verear hanc fabulam comparare cum libris eorum philosophorum, qui ex professo virtutis præcepta tradiderunt; ac nescio an etiam præferre debeam."

The subject of *Alcestis*, however, is not highly tragic, and the way in which the poet has managed it renders it still less so. We may, indeed, conceive a wife, who sacrifices herself for her husband, to be placed amid the most powerful conflicts of feeling, and in situations of the deepest interest: but in the case of *Alcestis* there is no conflict; the situations awaken none but gentle and tender sentiments; and these sentiments are somewhat weakened in their depth by the knowledge, which is derived from the prologue, of the result. *Admetus* also, for whom she dies, is not an interesting character. Admit that the good of their children, and of the state, required that he should consent to her suffering in his place, — put yourself in the position of a Greek auditor, if you please, and admit most un- gallantly that

εἰς ἀνὴρ κρείσσων γυναικῶν μυρίων δρᾶν φάος, —

yet a man who, for whatever good reason, purchases life by the death of another person, is not one with whom we sym-

pathize; and we cannot help suspecting that he is glad to save himself even at such a price. Hence, when Admetus reproaches his father (v. 629, seq.) with a cowardly love of life, and he in his defence asserts the principle that every body must take care of himself, — sorry as is the figure which the old man cuts, we feel that there may be an *argumentum ad hominem* in his words, and that selfishness may be the animating spirit of the son also. We hesitate, therefore, to ascribe great depth to his sorrow for the loss of his wife, for he preferred that loss and its consequences to his own death. Nay, he persuaded her to die on his behalf.

If the subject falls necessarily below the level of higher tragedy, the management is still less conformable to that standard. This is shown in three principal parts of the piece.

1. The prologue, by informing us that Alcestis will be rescued from the grasp of Orcus, and how this will be effected, takes away the stimulus of curiosity; we know more of the future than the characters in the piece do, and thus enter but weakly into feelings which are soon to be displaced in their minds.

2. Hercules, the deliverer of Alcestis, must be brought into such a relation to the principal persons of the drama, as to furnish a motive for his undertaking a labor of that description. This the poet effects by bringing him to the house of Admetus at the very time of the funeral; by making him gather, obtusely enough, from the ambiguous words of Admetus, that a stranger was to be interred; and then, on the discovery of the truth, by exciting his compunction for his ill-timed revelry; so that he is led, as an atonement for his fault and a compensation for the self-denying hospitality of his friend, to undertake the combat with Orcus. Here, not to mention that a comic side of Hercules is turned outwards, there is nothing in the situations of the parties

which is tragic; nor in the motives — the kindness of Admetus towards a guest, and the regret of Hercules for his mistake — which is particularly lofty.

3. When Hercules has rescued Alcestis, she must be restored to her husband within the limits of the drama. The poet has effected this much more skilfully than if a messenger had narrated the affair; but the situations necessarily border on the comic. Hercules, in his turn keeping Admetus in ignorance of the truth, wishes to produce a pleasant surprise. The struggle in the mind of the latter against lodging the supposed stranger under the veil in the female apartments of his house, being founded on ignorance, must soon be succeeded by very different feelings, which are already, from the first, in the spectators' minds; who, therefore, rather enjoy his pain than suffer with him.

It may be said, in defence of the structure of this play that the comic can heighten by contrast the effect of the tragic.* This is true, but does not apply in the present case. The comic must not be so linked in with the tragic, that succeeding portions of the drama shall grow out of it. It heightens the effect of sorrow to give a glimpse, as Shakespeare has often done, of mirth and insensibility close by its side; but the mirth must not be the cause which determines the progress of the action. It must stand over against the tragic, and not mingle with it.

* Patin (*Études sur les Tragiques Grecs*, Paris, 1843, Tom. III.), in a highly laudatory critique upon *Alcestis*, quotes with commendation from Villemain an opinion of the purport mentioned in the text. In the same work may be found a sketch of the attempts of sundry French dramatic writers, and of Alfieri, to make the plot of *Alcestis* more tragic and better suited for the modern stage. The attempts, even of the celebrated Italian dramatist, seem to be abortive. Another recent writer, an earnest partisan of Euripides, Hartung, in his *Euripides Restitutus* (Hamburg, 1843), I. 216 - 234, gives a very favorable criticism of this drama

A passage in the second argument prefixed to this play, which was brought to light from a Vatican manuscript by William Dindorf, in his Oxford edition of 1834, seems to show that Euripides himself despaired of giving a thoroughly tragic color to the fable of *Alcestis*. We are there informed that the play occupied the fourth place in a tetralogy which was usually assigned to a satyric drama. It thus came after three tragedies, in which the stronger emotions had been excited, and brought into the place of agitation a quiet and satisfied feeling of joy. In this Euripides showed his good sense; the subject being unfit for tragedy proper, and yet in part deeply pathetic, he did not seek to raise it up on stilts, and put it into a category where it did not belong. It is a drama of domestic love, full of sweetness, tenderness, and grace; but has none of that moral depth, and world-wide application, which tragedy has when it is an interpreter of the relations of human ignorance or crime to Divine Providence.

The *time* when this drama was exhibited is ascertained by means of the new portion of the second argument, to which we have above referred. It is there said to have been performed when Glaucinus was archon at Athens; and although neither the reading is correct where the Olympiad is named, nor the year of the Olympiad is given, there can be no doubt that the second year of Olymp. 85 was intended. In that year, Glaucides, as Diodorus calls him, or Glaucinus, as the Scholiast on Aristoph. *Acharn.* 67 must have read the name, was archon. It was but a short time before that the *Antigone* of Sophocles had been acted; the Peloponnesian war began eight years afterwards, and Euripides was now about forty-one years old.

The *text* which was adopted by the present editor in his first edition (1833) closely followed that of W. Dindorf in his *Poeta Scenici Græci* (London and Leipzig, 1830).

In the successive revisions of the years 1837 and 1841, several changes were made, and others still more numerous may be found in the present edition. The text is now more nearly like Dindorf's in his Oxford edition of 1834, and like Witzschel's, who has used Dindorf's readings, than like any other. Yet it departs less frequently from the vulgar text, than that of the last-mentioned editor. Nothing has been said of the text in the notes to this edition, unless it seemed necessary for the purposes of interpretation and of exercising the judgment of young students. Teachers, who wish to decide upon the merits of the text here exhibited, will naturally consult Matthiæ's and Dindorf's collections of various readings.

The notes, too, and the exhibition of the metres, have been considerably altered in this fourth edition. Several errors have been corrected; a number of important notes have been inserted, and others are left out, as being superseded by the excellent helps which are now in the hands of American students. The notes are more copious than the comparative ease of the style demands; because in the editor's plan, since carried out, this play formed an introduction to the study of the Attic drama.

The editions of *Alcestis*, whether published by itself or with other pieces, which have been consulted, are chiefly the following: the Glasgow edition of the Works of Euripides (1821, containing the notes of Barnes, Musgrave, Markland, Monk, Kuinoel, etc.; Monk's special edition appeared in 1816); Wüstemann's (Leipzig, 1823, with Monk's and his own notes); Hermann's (Leipzig, 1824); Matthiæ's, in his edition of Euripides (Leipzig, 1813 - 1829); Dindorf's, of the text, already mentioned; Pflugk's, in the Gotha series (1834); Major's (London, 1838); and Witzschel's (Jena, 1845). To these may be added reviews of Dindorf's, Pflugk's, and Witzschel's editions in Jahn's *Jahrbücher* for the years 1836, 1837, and 1847, and of Monk's