# From Hero to Man: Euripides's ***Alcestis***

In his 2003 history of the Greeks, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*, Thomas Cahill reports Aristotle's well-known observation that "'Sophocles said he drew men as they ought to be, Euripides as they were'" (131). This oft-quoted line raises several questions when we attempt to understand the playwright's intent in dramas such as *Alcestis*. How *were* men, in particular Euripides's fifth century B.C. audience? Were they different from people today? What tradition was Euripides heir to? What devices did Euripides use to show how men were, as opposed to how they ought to be? And finally, what meaning can we derive from a play produced in 438 B.C., one that in his introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Euripides' Alcestis* John R. Wilson says is "unique in extant Greek tragedy" (3).

In this essay I will attempt to answer these questions. Beginning with signs of the Homeric tradition in *Alcestis* - its preoccupation with fate, destiny and necessity - I will move to a brief look at the Athenian mentality in Euripides's day. Having glimpsed the received and actual environment in which Euripides was writing, I will move to a discussion of Euripides's impact on conventional Greek tragedy and, using examples from *Alcestis*, show how Euripides departed from the traditional model with its Aristotelian unities and introduced what to his audience was a disturbing and debasing realism. Finally, I will wrestle meaning from the play, a play that was clearly not the burlesque its Protosatyric position would have indicated, and conclude with a summation of why its disturbing implications are as relevant for modern audiences as they were for fifth-century Athenians.

Fig. 1. Alcestis preparing to die in her husband's place. Painting by Frierich Heinrich Füger 1751-1818

If all physical roads led to Rome in the ancient world, all literary ones led, and still lead, to Homer. In *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the human dilemma, conceived of as a struggle between the conflicting forces of humans and gods, is laid out. In such a world, ". . . human beings are caught . . . like figures in a tapestry who cannot undo their thread, playing out their assigned roles of hero or king, loving mother or sexual prize . . . with

only flickering insight into what result their conflicting character and needs will have upon the whole human enterprise" (Cahill 25, 26). Here we see the great theme of fate, destiny and necessity. When Hector must fight Achilles, an event almost certain to lead to his death, he tells his wife that she can expect "'the rough yoke of necessity'" at her neck, and departs from her forever with the words: "'And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it'" (Fagle 36, 37). It is "a fated universe ruled by passions human and divine" where violence is inevitable and where the great gods of the Greeks are not Zeus and Hera, Apollo and Aphrodite, but Might and Luck (Cahill 63).

On the surface, *Alcestis* appears to approach human struggle with this same fatefulness. From Apollo's opening lines to Alcestis's final summation, and in the sentiments expressed by the chorus everywhere, the message is the same: "fatal necessity" determines the course of events (Wilson 6). We see it when Admetus says to Alcestis, "Well, some destiny has planned things as they are" (14), and when in his grief Admetus cries out, "Oh destiny, what a wife you wrench from me" (17). Later Admetus tells his children, "You two and I are crushed by fate" (18), and explains to Heracles that Alcestis "has a special rendezvous with fate" (19). These references to "ineluctable fate" lead up to a pitch in the fifth choral lyric where the old men of the chorus first lament the assumption that there is "No anodyne that can cure the fate of man," and then, in the words of the translator Paul Roche, sing of "the inescapable weight of the bleak goddess Necessity" (37). It is only with the ending, one that critics such as Hazel Barnes and John Wilson refer to as "fantasy," or "fairytale" that fate is satirically denied with the introduction of a deus ex machina. As Heracles proclaims, "What was expected was never perfected/ And God has found a way for the unexpected" (40). For Barnes this shift at the end is in keeping with the irony that Euripides has built up all along, rendering *Alcestis* not so much a tragedy as a tragicomedy. The ending "cancels out all tragic dilemma" and "we are left with ambivalent feelings, aware that we cannot quite sum it all up, either intellectually or emotionally … the very essence of tragicomedy" (30). Thus despite the frequent references to fate and destiny, and the superficially tragic plot, *Alcestis* is a clear departure from the Homeric tradition.

To understand Euripides's accomplishment and the full implications of his departure from the conventions of Greek tragedy, it is useful to place him in the context of his own place and time. For whom was he writing plays such as *Alcestis* and *Medea,* works that challenged the audience as no other playwright had done? Cahill sees the ancient Greeks as strivers more than individualists and sums their civilization up with the word *aretē*, (excellence). He tells us that the aristocrats called themselves *aristoi*, (the best), and explains that their drama forced them to question what it meant to be the best. "There can be no question," Cahill asserts, "that *aristoi* striving for *aretē* don't kill their fathers or sleep with their mothers," and we could add here, in the case of *Alcestis*, let their wives die for them. For Cahill, shame is the hidden engine that ran Greek life, the fear of being numbered among the *kakoi* ("the worst, the craven, the dumb shits"). He goes on to say that "The Greeks, as their playwrights if not their philosophers knew, were in desperate need of the admonition – the vicarious comeuppance – that a play such as Oedipus could provide." (128,129).

Euripides, known to have famously severed himself from a society that both dismayed and rejected him, takes this admonition a step further. The mirror Euripides held up to his audience reflected distinctly unheroic characteristics they could recognize

as their own. This was an audience, as Cahill points out, "full of men who cheated on their wives, who got rid of their wives once they tired of them, who had taken up with teenage chippies, men whose self justifications were the quintessence of eloquence" (131). With this in mind, Admetus's protestations of suffering at the loss of his wife take on a sharp irony, especially since, as Barnes points out "this is all for the wife he could save by the simple act of refusing her sacrifice!" (28). And one wonders how such an audience reacted to the lines Admetus speaks just before Alcestis falls back dead: " I'll have a sculptor make an effigy of you/and lay it sleeping in my bed./ I'll fall on it and fondle it,/calling out your name,/and think I have my darling in my arms/whom I have not." For Alcestis's part, her exhortations to her husband to not remarry take on a poignancy when we consider woman's position in what Cahill refers to as a society of "entitled Greek males" (134). One imagines what Cahill refers to as "Euripidean discomfort" thick enough to cut with a knife during the following scene where the orphaned boy, Eumulus, cries out "I am all alone and little,/Deserted, Father, by my mother,/My mother darling…Oh what anguish!" Euripides then drives the knife in a little deeper when he has Eumulus say "It failed Father, failed:/Your marriage never lasted/Till old age with her" (18).

Euripides also lived at a time when Greek philosophy (love of wisdom) was, if not flowering, at least budding. From the sixth century B.C. on, the Greeks delved into the mysteries of the *Kosmos* (elegant order). Philosophers such as Heraclites with his insistence that change was the only reality sparred with Parmenides and his "immutable permanence." The belief in a multiplicity of gods was also being attacked, and as Cahill suggests, so was the Homeric portrayal of gods who resembled "flip-flopping mankind" (146, 147). Euripides was clearly writing for a public for whom the myths were becoming fantasy, a public who could increasingly recognize the symbolic function of their gods. Realism was waiting for its hour upon the stage and Euripides fit the bill. Here was a playwright unwilling to people his stage with the same old heroes. Instead he used those familiar personae to delve deeper into what makes us click. As Barnes explains, "Euripides chose to work with genuine problems in his play and he does so through a blend of realism and fantasy" (28).

With Euripides then, the plays were no longer the mere representation of old myths. As William Arrowsmith points out in his essay, "The Turbulence of Euripidean Tragedy," "The fact of Euripides' theater is the assumption of a universe devoid of rational order or of an order incomprehensible to men." In such a universe, the Aristotelian notions of responsibility, tragic flaw, and heroism are not pertinent. A dissonance results from the clash between "perceived reality - i.e. myth, and fact - or experienced reality." Thus "in *Alcestis*, Euripides juxtaposes the traditional magnanimous Admetus with the shabby egotist who results when a 'heroic' character is translated into realistic fifth-century terms" (106). This is especially evident in Admetus's bitter denunciation of his father and Phere's scathing reply, a scene that still shocks with its unflinching realism. Though, as Arrowsmith argues, it was "this technique of realism, this systematic exposure and deflation of traditional heroism, which earned Euripides a reputation of 'debasing the dignity of the tragic stage'" (107), it also allowed him to experiment with new forms and new music, and to explore human psychology in ways traditional Greek tragedy had not been able to do. If Euripides's "anti-traditional and

realistic bent" resulted in the disappearance of the hero, it also opened up drama to a more complex psychological analysis, something whose time had clearly come.

If the Aristotelian search for a tragic hero becomes meaningless, what are we to make of a play like *Alcestis*? Even if we take the story at face value, we must ask, as Paul Roche does in the preface to his translation, "Can a man, a provenly decent man, let his wife die for him?" (3). Likewise each woman would be forced to reflect on the extreme to which she might go for love? Could she orphan her children to save her husband? If we follow this course though, we are confronted by the problem of the ending. Euripides makes the audience work at the meaning of his happy endings. As Kurt von Fritz points out in his essay "The Happy Ending of *Alcestis*," an ending such as this is not happy at all. "We cannot take seriously his ending where a deus ex machina appears and with one stroke resolves everything . . . Can anyone believe that Admetus and Alcestis will be happy afterwards?" (83). In his introduction to *Alcestis* (and the other nine plays in this edition), Roche agrees that the happy endings of plays such as *Alcestis* and *Medea* seem silly and suggests that they must have seemed silly to Euripides too. But he explains it by saying: "In all these quasi-deus-ex-machina escapes from reality it is as though Euripides were saying: 'You want a happy ending, but can't you see that the ending would not have been happy? Very well, I'll give you an ending you can't believe in'" (x).

Fig. 2. The Return of Alcestis by Eugene Delacroix, 1862

Another problem with taking the play literally rears its head; what to do about all those "objectionable scenes"? In his essay "The Importance of Admetus" Ivan M. Linforth asks, "May not the objectionable scenes be important in the poet's plans?" He notes "the pathos of Alcestis's death scene defiled by the indecent wrangling of Admetus and Pheres over her dead body" and "the beauty of Alcestis's sacrifice marred by the weak and selfish character of her husband" (108). Linforth asks, "May not our disapproval of the play be due to our failure to perceive what Euripides has actually done?" (108). He notes, too, the comparative values of the play and forces us to question why Euripides would have named the play after a character who speaks only seven percent of the lines. Linforth concludes that "These figures suggest that the mere

representation of the death and resurrection of Alcestis is not the author's chief purpose" (108).

Similarly, in his essay "Rhetoric and Characterization," A. M. Dale argues that "Euripides had little interest in what sort of person Admetus was. The main consideration is what points can be made here." He contends that in *Alcestis*, as in any well-constructed Euripidean tragedy "what controls a succession of situations is not a firmly conceived unity of character but the shape of the whole action (109)." Thus we need not worry if Admetus is both "magnanimous" and "shabby." And we can put to rest our nagging suspicion that Pheres was right in labeling Alcestis a "simpleton" rather than a paragon of nobility for agreeing to die in Admetus's place. What matters are the questions raised by the unfolding of events, by the characterizations as a whole, by the very title. What is it to be noble? To be hospitable? What is love? Is life worth living if one sacrifices honor? And what about the gods? Where do they spring from and what do they tell us about the human condition?

We must keep in mind that Euripides "placed the play, as if it were a comedy or satyr play, after the usual three preceding tragedies" (Roche 3) and presented it at the Dionysia, a festival honoring the god Dionysius. Cahill cites Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in which the German philosopher identifies Dionysius as one of the two poles of Greek civilization, (the other being Apollo the god of daylight, intellectual clarity, mind and measure). Dionysius represents darkness, emotion, inspiration and chaos, and is the inspirer of tragedy. According to Cahill, he is the more important god. While the Greeks preferred Apollo, "Euripides reminded them that there was a subterranean reality they were unaware of, a god whom despite their festival, they had yet to acknowledge" (135, 136).More than two millennia later, plays like *Alcestis* still remind us of this dark reality and one senses that Euripides had some inkling of what modern psychology has taught us: that that subterranean reality is not only that archetypally represented by gods such as Hades or Dionysius but the dark and sometimes incomprehensible shadows of the human psyche. Or as Roche concludes, "People did not realize that Euripides was propounding great moral problems, demanding a new analysis of human nature, its instincts, passions, and motives. He deals with the cornered human heart of the individual, at bay against the tyranny of a false theocracy. He deals with the cruelty and selfishness of man" (x).

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