

Alcestis: A Story of Unyielding Love?

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Unconditional love and self-sacrifice are both admired themes that are displayed in countless romance narratives, both in the present day and in the past. However, despite popular belief, *Alcestis*, is NOT one of those stories. In the play entitled, *Alcestis*, the main character feels that it is her obligation as a woman to sacrifice her life for her husband's. She does not forfeit her life because she feels it is what she should do or because it is what she truly *wants* to do, but instead, she dies for her husband because that is what is expected of her as a woman. Though no one directly states that a woman's life is less valuable than a man's, it can be implied by numerous statements given throughout the play. Many of the characters, including Alcestis, try to cover up this idea by claiming that she is dying for her husband as an act of unyielding love, not because her husband is more valued in society. Though it appears that Admetos does care for her to a certain extent, it is obvious that he does not feel that her life is as important as his own. Unfortunately, the attitude that Admetos' life is more important than the life of his wife goes beyond the attitude of Admetos himself and extends into the entire community.

At the beginning of the play, Apollo, the god of music and medicine, states that, "a woman is dying . . . she is giving up her life so that her husband can live. And this is the day of her death" (Euripides 3). At this point in the story, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly why Alcestis is dying for her husband. However, because not much is known about the circumstances surrounding the situation, it first appears to be an act of *agape* love, or selfless love that one individual has for another. Conversely, as the story continues, it is obvious that there are underlying issues and beliefs that have a huge effect on Alcestis' decision to give up her life for

her husband. From the very beginning of the story, Admetos is glorified. Apollo states that, “Admetos is a remarkable man. A savior of his people, an inspired prince. A man for whom the whole country prays” (5). Obviously, from how Admetos is described, all of Thessaly would be devastated by his death. In fact, according to Death himself, “His [Admetos’] death would have been a national catastrophe” (7). In order to escape his premature demise, Admetos selfishly asks his parents to die for him. However, his parents do not feel that it is their moral obligation to save him, and, as a result, they refuse to die for Admetos. Pheres, the father of Admetos, tells him, “I gave you your opportunity in life. Nothing obliges me to give you mine. A man is born for himself, born alone, remember, to die alone. Everything a son can expect of a father I gave you” (54). By requesting that his parents die to save him, Admetos is implying that, because of their old age, their lives are less important than his.

Soon after Admetos’ parents refuse to give up their lives for their son, Alcestis steps in and volunteers to sacrifice her life. It is obvious that Alcestis volunteers because she feels pressured, not because of her uncompromising love for Admetos. If it had truly been an act of love, she would not have hesitated to be the first to offer to surrender her life, rather than allowing him to ask his parents first. It appears that Alcestis feels subservient to her husband and the other men in her life, which is why she goes to such an extreme measure in order to feel that she is fulfilling her societal duty as a woman. In one scene in particular, the maid explains to Admetos’ friends that, once Alcestis was alone in her room:

She kneeled beside the bed and buried her face in it. It was shocking to watch her. To see her there, clawing at the coverlet, kissing it. Then she got up and ran blindly away from

it, and scrambled along the wall, groping for the door . . . She was like a fly caught in a spider's single strand. (18)

The way in which Alcestis reacts proves that she feels more sorrow than any other emotion. On the contrary, if she was dying because of *agape* love that she felt for her husband, she would be more accepting of death knowing that Admetos will be saved and will live another day. Before Alcestis dies, she forces Admetos to promise to, "not take another wife" (27), in order to preserve their children's welfare. It is obvious that she does not feel that Admetos is competent enough to make decisions involving their children on his own. If Alcestis was truly concerned with Admetos' wellbeing and happiness, she would not make such a request. It is at this point in the story that Alcestis' own self-centeredness begins to shine through.

Alcestis is not the only individual in the play that is guilty of loving herself more than her own family. According to some of Admetos' friends, he had a say in whether or not Alcestis died and, rather than saving her and accepting his own death, he egoistically let her give up her life. When talking amongst themselves, Admetos' friends stated that they thought that, "Admetos is a strange one to let her die in his place" (13). The power was in his hands. He could have prevented her death, but he was too much of a coward. As the story continues, the moment finally arrives and Alcestis is forced to fulfill her "duty" as a wife. At the moment of her death, Admetos exclaims, "Alcestis, look at your children. Don't leave us! How can you leave your children?" (31). Not only is his exclamation ridiculous because it was ultimately his own choice to allow Alcestis to sacrifice herself, it is also tremendously egotistical. Rather than expressing his appreciation for what Alcestis has done for him, he selfishly puts the blame on her and complains about how her death is going to negatively affect his children.

After Alcestis' death, Admetos begins the funeral arrangements. Soon after, Pheres comes to the castle to show respect for Alcestis and to console his son. When he first arrives, he tells his son that, "Her [Alcestis'] bravery has redeemed all women" (50). This quote is particularly interesting because it implies that there is some universal reason why women *need* to be redeemed, which adds to the idea presented in the story that women are thought of as less respectable than the men in their society. Rather than thanking his father for his kind words, Admetos calls his father numerous names and even blames him publically for Alcestis' death. Later that same day, Heracles, one of Admetos' dearest friends, arrives at the castle. Instead of turning him away out of respect for his recently deceased wife, he offers to let him stay in the castle and does not even tell him about her death. Eventually, Heracles does find out about her fate, and offers to fight Death himself in order to bring her back. Fortunately for Admetos, Heracles prevails and brings Alcestis back to the castle. When Admetos realizes that it is truly her, he asks Heracles if she can speak to him. Heracles replies, "Three days of silence. It is a small payment. Three suns will cleanse her" (102). This is yet another example of the sexist views of their society. For what reason does Alcestis need to be *cleansed*? Rather than thanking Alcestis for what she has done for him, Admetos praises Heracles for bringing *his* woman back and says nothing to his wife. Once again, the man is praised for his "bravery" and the woman's sacrifice is unacknowledged.

In the play titled, *Alcestis*, the main character dies for her husband, not as an act of love, but because she feels she must fulfill her role in society. It is obvious from Alcestis' actions that she feels that she is less valuable than her husband. The pressures of the society in which Alcestis lived caused her to submit to her husband to such a tremendous extent that she felt that she had to sacrifice her own life to prove herself to her community. Though it is never directly

stated in the text, the idea that a woman's life is less important than a man's can be implied from several statements given by individuals throughout the play. Though Admetos ultimately makes the decision to allow his wife to die in order to save himself on his own, it is the fault of the entire community because of their failure to appreciate the female citizens of their society.

Works Cited

Euripides. *Alcestis*. Trans. Ted Hughes. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.