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EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS* – THE NORM OR THE IDEAL?

Among the tragedies of Euripides the *Alcestis* is admitted to be one of the most complex plays. There is no agreement among critics which genre the play pertains to.¹ Moreover, there are controversial ideas concerning the main issue of the play. Critics do not have unanimous opinion who the central character of the play is – Alcestis or Admetus.² From 1970s on, interpreters also focus on the gender problems of the tragedy.³ To our belief, in this respect the following question is to be thoroughly considered: What links can be traced between the leading literary fiction of the play – Alcestis' sacrifice and the author's contemporary social norms? I.e. the problem is in the following: whether Alcestis' action was regarded as a stereotype, as wife's normal behaviour and therefore sacrificing herself to her husband was Alcestis' duty as of a wife; or whether it was considered ideal in the society and correspondingly was committed on rare occasions.⁴

¹ B. Seidensticker enumerates the genres which the *Alcestis* is believed to pertain to. Seidensticker B., *Palintonos Harmonia: Studien zu Komischen Elementen in der griechischen Tragödie, Hypomnemata 72*, Göttingen, 1982. See also von Fritz Kurt, "Euripides' Alkestis und ihre modernen Nachahmer und Kritiker", *Antiker und Moderne Tragödie*, Berlin, 1962, 256-321.

² The following works are particularly relevant with respect to the main idea of the play: Luschning C. A., *The Gorgon's Severed Head, Studies of Alcestis, Electra and Phoenissae, Mnemosyne*, Licden, New-York, Köln, 1995.

Gregori J., "Euripides' Alkestis", *Hermes* 107, 1979, 259-270; Segal Ch., "Euripides' Alkestis: Female Death and Male Tears", *CA* 11, 1992, 142-158, esp. 152-157.

³ Vellacot P., *Ironic Drama, A Study in Euripides' Method and Meaning*, Cambridge, 1975; des Bouvrie, Synnove, *Women in Greek Tragedy: An Anthropological Approach*, Symbolae Osloenses, supp. 27, 1990.

⁴ While considering the reference of Alcestis' behaviour to the dominating social norms, we, naturally, do not attempt to trace similar cases in the context of Athenian lifestyle. Alcestis' behaviour is one of the expressions, although remarkably radical, of a wider phenomenon – of wife's extreme devotion to husband, woman's being at man's disposal, at his service.

The question is related to another problem as well – how Admetus' acceptance of Alcestis' proposal was acknowledged and what it was regarded to be. Was it husband's normal behaviour i.e. did Admetus behave in accordance with the existing stereotypes? The right answer is not easy to find. The play offers no obvious tips to qualify Admetus' and Alcestis' behaviours.

Clarification of the problems requires thorough consideration of the text. The paper presents the main points of the detailed analysis we have undertaken. Along with other issues, particular attention is paid to the appreciation of Alcestis' and Admetus' behaviours – Alcestis' and Admetus' perception of their own deeds as well as other people's ideas on what they had committed. The paper also points to what determines other characters' different interests towards them and whether their attitudes to the protagonists change in the course of the play; likewise, what conclusions come forth after considering the dynamic development of the appreciations.

The play starts with Apollo's prologue, which presents the disaster the leading characters have to endure – in particular, on that very day, Thanatus is to take away Admetus' wife Alcestis in accordance with the promise. After Admetus' parents and close friends refused to die instead of Admetus, his wife Alcestis appeared to be the only person who agreed to accept death instead of the king. Apollo intends to make Thanatus change his decision to take Alcestis' life away, however he is primarily concerned with Admetus' lot who is about to lose his wife. It seems Apollo does not pay much attention to Alcestis – he does not attempt to appreciate her devotion and mentions the queen's name only in line 52.⁵

The chorus of Pheraean old men is concerned with Admetus' lot as well. Although they admire Alcestis' decision, it is the king whom they pity and call unlucky (*Alc.*144) as he is to lose his wife. It is interesting how they treat Alcestis – whether they consider her the the best woman – i.e. regard her as an ideal, or whether she is one from the company of good people. Remarkably, the passage implies both appreciations – in lines 80-85 they claim Alcestis to be the best ἀρίστη of wives ever born, but later they consider her as one of the good (*Alc.*109). So far, interestingly, no one mentions the key moment of the story – the moment when Admetus accepted his wife's proposal. Evidently, Chorus, which expresses the opinion and disposition of the society, has not yet considered the point.⁶

⁵ Luschnig, 1995, 17-18.

⁶ On the male perspective of Chorus, see Rosenmeyer, Thomas G., *The Masks of Tragedy*, Austin, 1963, 219, also Scully S.E., "Some Issues in the Second Episode of Euripides' Alcestis" in Cropp H., Fantham E., Scully S., *Greek Tragedy and Its Legacy: Essays presented to D. J. Conacher*, Calgary 1986.

After Chorus' part the woman servant appears, who describes the last minutes of Alcestis' life. Her words are entirely dedicated to Alcestis. She does not take interest in Admetus' feelings. She mentions him only when Chorus asks her about the king. She treats him critically. According to the woman servant, Admetus has no idea what awaits him. He has to endure before he realizes. King Admetus is going to face an awful sorrow, suffering – ἄλγος, which he will never forget. So, the characters of the play split into two groups when it comes to appreciation of the protagonists' behaviours. The woman servant represents the female perspective of the play. From this perspective, Alcestis is the best (noblest)⁷ of women, is an ideal wife. With regard to the interpretation of the ideal, the dialogue of Chorus and the woman servant is particularly noteworthy. When Chorus calls Alcestis the best wife, the woman servant agrees with their appreciation specifying and explaining the general term "best":

"Noblest? – how not? – what tongue will dare gainsay?
 What must the woman be who passeth her?
 How could a wife give honour to her lord
 More than by yielding her to die for him?" (*Alc.* 153-...)

As for Apollo and Chorus, they express the male perspective of the play. They perceive tragedy within the scope of Admetus' feelings.⁸ In their song (stasimon I), Chorus does not respond to the woman servant's critical words towards Admetus. It imitates Admetus' unconscious reluctance to face the reality.⁹

Alcestis, who enters the stage in the company of her household, utters her farewell words through which she explains the motive for her behaviour:

"I, honouring thee, and setting thee in place
 Before mine own soul still to see this light,
 Am dying, unconstrained to die for thee.
 I might have wed what man Thessalian
 I would, have dwelt wealth – crowned in princely halls.
 Yet would not live on, torn away from thee,
 With orphaned children ..." (*Alc.* 284-288)

⁷ The text has ἀρίστη, the English equivalent for which is "the best". However, along with it, we also give in the brackets the term "noblest" as the English translation we refer to uses it for the Greek word ἀρίστη.

⁸ They do not give a critical appreciation to Admetus' behaviour. Evidently, they believe the king's action, acceptance of Alcestis' proposal, was normal. According to Vellacot, Chorus sees nothing blameworthy in Admetus. Vellacot, 1975, 104.

⁹ Luschig, 1995, 40.

The words imply that Alcestis had an opportunity to make choice and that she chose to die for her husband; her action is an extraordinary one and not the norm compulsory for a wife – anyway, this is how Alcestis herself appreciates it. Her words make it clear that she behaves in accordance with the ideal which she has set to herself.¹⁰

Alcestis unambiguously considers herself the "best" of wives, and remarkably, is determined not to lose the position of the "unique" – she makes Admetus promise not to bring a step-mother to their children. Evidently, apart from the care for her children, she is driven by a deeper motive as well – she is categorically against Admetus' sharing their bridal-bed with another woman; she fights for the matrimonial ideal she sacrifices herself to.¹¹

In his farewell speech, Admetus gives Alcestis a promise of faithfulness and admits that no woman can replace Alcestis.¹² Evidently, he has not yet acknowledged his deed.¹³

Meanwhile, appreciations of Admetus' and Alcestis' deeds change. The female perspective starts to prevail. In III stasimon Chorus unambiguously regards Alcestis as the best and the unique.¹⁴ Along with it, Chorus seems to question the king's dignity.

Alcestis' status of the "unique" and the "best" faces another threat that comes from a male character, Pheres, Admetus' father. Pheres' appreciation of Alcestis is somehow general in the beginning, Alcestis is ἐσθλή (noble) and σόφρων (virtuous) (*Alc.* 615). However, when Pheres responds to Admetus' critical words in the same critical way, he calls Alcestis ἄφρον (reckless) as he considers reckless the woman who intends to fulfill one role only – that of a wife – and is ready to sacrifice her life to it. The choice is the result of her narrow vision, which Pheres criticizes.

¹⁰ Vellacot gives a different motivation to Alcestis' behaviour. He believes, Alcestis took the decision for the sake of her children and placed their happiness higher than her own. According to Vellacot's interpretation of the text (*Alc.* 284-288), the idea becomes clear from Alcestis' words, Vellacot, 1975, 102.

¹¹ Luschnig, 1995, 44.

¹² Admetus not only promises Alcestis to be faithful to her, but also vows, he will not be happy any more. According to Luschnig, it is Admetus' attempt to pay her back, to die to pleasure as she died to the light. Luschnig, 1997, 48, Cf. Scully, 1986, 142.

¹³ Vellacot regards the issue in a different way. According to him, Admetus' words: "The Sun sees what we both suffer, and can witness that we have done the gods no wrong to deserve your death" (*Alc.* 247) indicates that Admetus realizes his guilt. It is "the first stirring of guilt below the surface". Vellacot, 1975, 104.

¹⁴ "Farewell, you are the best, but there, in Hades", sings the chorus (*Alc.* 436). Poets will praise her in Sparta and Athens at Festivals. According to Luschnig's interesting remark, Alcestis' fame will spread beyond her hearth to two polis with opposite ways of seeing and treating women: if her heroism is masculine in an attic setting, perhaps we are invited to view it in a Laconian one; Luschnig, 1995, 55.

On the other hand, according to Pheres, the reckless deed of the reckless wife is quite favourable to her husband's position. Naturally, men would only benefit if Alcestis' behaviour became a norm and other wives as well took after her.

"Cunning device hast thou devised to die
Never, cajoling still wife after wife
To die for thee" (*Alc.* 699-700)

"...Thus to wed, I say,
Profiteth men – or nothing – worth is marriage" (*Alc.* 627-628)

To our belief, Pheres' idea on generalizing Alcestis' deed insults her even more than his calling her "reckless", because Alcestis cherishes her uniqueness more than anything else.

Besides, the scene marks the beginning of Admetus' self-acknowledgement.¹⁵ Pheres openly blames Admetus. He shamefully avoided death and is today alive only because he let his wife die. Pheres qualifies him as coward. But the most shameful thing is that he, a man, appeared weaker than a young woman (*Alc.* 694-695). Admetus severely criticizes Pheres' words, but later it becomes clear that they reached the target.

Admetus, back at home after burring his wife, starts to perceive the lesson, "ἀρτὶ μανθάνω, he says. In our opinion, Admetus endures emotionally and acknowledges rationally that it was improper, moreover, wrong of him (*Alc.* 961) to accept Alcestis' proposal. But most important is the fact that he, Admetus, only now starts to understand the essence of life bought at such a price, and to appreciate what he himself is after all. He realizes that henceforth he will be called a coward, and the most tragic point is that the qualification is going to be true. Through her behaviour, the woman achieved honour and glory, while accepting Alcestis' proposal, he received unendurable life. Henceforth, he will constantly suffer from guilt. "This is a play about a good husband and an admirable marriage which, confronted with a crisis of Necessity, suddenly faces not merely the loss and sorrow, which are the common lot, but disgrace and guilt arising from the rare performance of what everyone recognizes as a wife's duty to her husband".¹⁶

In IV stasimon Chorus sings about Alcestis. The female perspective reaches its peak. Alcestis is unambiguously recognized as the ideal, she surpasses the limits of human dimension and becomes the "blessed daimon" (*Alc.* 1001-1003).

¹⁵ Vellacot, 1975, 105.

¹⁶ Vellacot, 1975, 105.

Consideration of the dynamic development of the characters' appreciations brings up the following conclusion: The entire emotional chaos entailed by Alcestis' death, and especially, Admetus' ultimate tragic realization compels to think that Alcestis' deed is regarded as altogether extraordinary. Correspondingly, the generalized understanding of the behaviour – the extreme devotion and self-sacrifice of a wife to her husband should not be regarded as a norm in matrimonial relations. It was a cultural ideal. Unlike the society, Euripides had critical attitude towards the ideal. His position becomes clear when he presents a picture of Admetus' lot – acceptance of the ideal brought him only humiliation and tormenting sense of guilt. Beside the partner, who himself acknowledges the wrong and improper nature of his own choice and calls himself a coward, Alcestis is more distinguished as the woman of supreme dignity and the person who accomplished the highly noble deed.