SURVIVING DEATH: **EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS*** AND MYSTERY CULT

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Abstract: In this article I shall argue that, in addition to the Eleusinian-Orphic themes suggesting contemporary religious parallels to the characters' plight, Euripides' *Alcestis* also brings heroic narratives into the political forefront of fifth-century democratic Athens. The play frequently employs mystical motifs with intense emphasis. I have shown extensively elsewhere that as each scene progressively darkens through cleverly embedded narrative techniques, Alcestis boldly confronts death, distancing herself from superficial vanities that threaten her moral integrity. However, the play consistently underscores the pointlessness of metaphysical beliefs, particularly the illusionary benefits of an afterlife. Admetus and the Chorus strongly maintain that death is an inescapable reality. For Alcestis' heroic victory and Heracles' moral resolve to be fully recognised, the religious doctrines offering salvation must substantiate their promises. These ideologies, promising bliss in the afterlife for the righteous, intertwine with Athenian democratic discourse that valorises heroism and confronts the human tendency to diminish life in the face of death.

Keywords: Euripides, Alcestis, Eleusis, Orphism, Athens, democracy.

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Introduction[1]

In this article I shall argue that, in addition to the Eleusinian-Orphic themes suggesting contemporary religious parallels to the characters' plight, Euripides' *Alcestis* also brings heroic narratives into the political forefront of fifth-century democratic Athens. The play frequently employs mystical motifs with intense emphasis. I have shown extensively elsewhere that as each scene progressively darkens through cleverly embedded narrative techniques, Alcestis boldly confronts death, distancing herself from superficial vanities that threaten her moral integrity.[2] However, the play consistently underscores the pointlessness of metaphysical beliefs, particularly the illusionary benefits of an afterlife. Admetus and the Chorus strongly maintain that death is an inescapable reality. For Alcestis' heroic victory and Heracles' moral resolve to be fully recognised, the religious doctrines offering salvation must substantiate their promises. These ideologies, promising bliss in the afterlife for the righteous, intertwine with Athenian democratic discourse that valorises heroism and confronts the human tendency to diminish life in the face of death.

1 Both the Greek text and the English translation are drawn from the Loeb edition of Euripides by David Kovacs, 1994.

2 Markantonatos 2013, pp. 131-159.

Much like the funeral speeches honouring the war dead that reinforce Athenian pride and self-respect, the Attic Eleusinian-Orphic tradition constantly reevaluates the world's worth. Both funeral orations and mystical teachings provide a sophisticated framework explaining the value of sacrifice, thereby countering the sense of despair and insignificance that can pervade human existence.[3] They champion a vision of truth and righteousness that extends beyond our mortal lives. This is why Euripides focuses not only on Alcestis' immense act of self-sacrifice but also on her miraculous return, affirming that mystical hopes and motives are surprisingly realistic, despite a prevailing narrative of enduring sorrow. When religious faith wavers and traditional beliefs are questioned, a pessimistic fatalism emerges, reviving old fears of divine malevolence. The play's twists, which disrupt a narrative of continuous suffering, reassure the audience of the mystical concepts' reality and the existence of other societal and political mechanisms for maintaining unity and endurance. Without this, humans would struggle to find meaning in their fight for survival. In this article, therefore, I seek to show that the dramatic perspective of the play broadens to incorporate distinctly contemporary Eleusinian-Orphic thoughts and traditions through direct allusions to Orpheus, the archetypal healer, and a host of underworld deities closely tied to Orphic beliefs.

Alcestis and Athenian Mystery Religion

The play consistently questions the Attic Eleusinian-Orphic promise of deliverance from death, even as Alcestis' enduring legacy is universally acknowledged.[4] While her deep, selfless love earns her the heroic honour of a revered tomb, the Eleusinian-Orphic assurance of salvation receives no significant advancement in light of the undeniable tragedy at Thessalian Pherae. Faced with his wife's impending demise, Admetus retreats into poetic fantasy, ultimately acknowledging, in a profoundly moving manner, his powerlessness to save Alcestis from death. He references the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice in Hades, yet this story becomes a mere reflection of his immense loss and utter despair. The play suggests that the comforting notion of Orphic-Dionysiac bliss is severely compromised by the immediate anxieties and conflicts of subsequent scenes, diminishing any hopeful anticipation of mystical salvation:

> *εἰ δ' Ὀρφέως μοι γλῶσσα καὶ μέλος παρῆν,*
> *ὥστ' ἢ κόρην Δήμητρος ἢ κεύνης πόσιν*

3 See principally Markantonatos 2012, esp. pp. 27-32.

4 For some preliminary thoughts, see Markantonatos 2009a. For a general discussion of Orphic echoes in Greek tragedy, see Markantonatos 2009b.

ὕμνοισι κηλήσαντά σ' ἐξ Ἅιδου λαβεῖν,
κατῆλθον ἄν, καὶ μ' οὔθ' ὁ Πλούτωνος κύων
οὔθ' οὑπὶ κώπῃ ψυχοπομπὸς ἂν Χάρων
ἔσχ' ἄν, πρὶν ἐς φῶς σὸν καταστῆσαι βίον.
(357-362)

If I had the voice and music of Orpheus so that I could charm Demeter's daughter or her husband with song and fetch you from Hades, I would have gone down to the Underworld, and neither Pluto's hound nor Charon the ferryman of souls standing at the oar would have kept me from bringing you back to the light alive.

In the play's second stasimon, Alcestis' immortal honour receives additional emphasis, paralleling Orphic depictions of divine splendour. This is particularly evident in the third stasimon, where Apollo is portrayed as a celestial Orpheus, enchanting wild beasts with his music.[5] From this point onward, the Chorus emerges as the primary conduit for Eleusinian-Orphic themes, layering mystical allusions that resonate uniquely with each audience member's depth of interpretation and familiarity with mystery cults:[6]

πολλά σε μουσοπόλοι
μέλψουσι καθ' ἑπτάτονόν τ' ὀρείαν
χέλυν ἔν τ' ἀλύροις κλέοντες ὕμνοις,
Σπάρτᾳ κυκλὰς ἁνίκα Καρνεί-
ου περινίσεται ὥρα
μηνός, ἀειρομένας
παννύχου σελάνας,
λιπαραῖσί τ' ἐν ὀλβίαις Ἀθάναις,
τοίαν ἔλιπες θανοῦσα μολ-
πὰν μελέων ἀοιδοῖς.
(445-454)

Poets shall sing often in your praise both on the seven-stringed mountain tortoise shell and in songs unaccompanied by the lyre when at Sparta the month of Carnea comes circling round and the moon is aloft the whole night long, and also in rich, gleaming Athens. Such is the theme for song that you have left for poets by your death.

5 See also Thorburn 2000.

6 Cf. also Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, p. 318.

The impending transformation of Alcestis into a figure of radiant privilege, celebrated at Sparta's Carnea (or Carneia) festival and Athens' dramatic festivities, introduces an optimistic expectation of heroic virtue into the play.[7]

More than that, amidst prevailing sorrow, the anticipation of Alcestis' eternal renown sets the stage for further praise. The Chorus then offers a brief, heartfelt farewell to Alcestis, alluding to posthumous rewards for the morally pure (741-746; cf. 463).[8] The emotional depth of this farewell is amplified by the climactic invocation of Persephone, aligning the address with Eleusinian-Orphic tradition and suggesting Alcestis' potential role as Persephone's attendant and counsellor in the afterlife – a position evocative of Orphic reverence for Persephone's maternal protection of initiates. As the Chorus suggests, Alcestis is poised to receive Persephone's favour, much like Minos or Rhadamanthys would adjudicate the dead, affording special grace to the virtuous in the underworld:

ἰὼ ἰώ. σχετλία τόλμης,
ὦ γενναία καὶ μέγ' ἀρίστη,
χαῖρε · πρόφρων σε χθόνιός θ' Ἑρμῆς
Ἄιδης τε δέχοιτ'. εἰ δέ τι κἀκεῖ
πλέον ἔστ' ἀγαθοῖς, τούτων μετέχουσ'
Ἄιδου νύμφῃ παρεδρεύοις.
(741-746)

Alas, alas! O resolute in courage, heart noble and generous, farewell! May Hermes of the Underworld and Hades receive you kindly! And if in that place the good have any advantage, may you have a share in it and sit as attendant beside Hades' bride!

While the play presents close parallels to the Orpheus myth, marked by both familiarity and ambiguity, it is only in the dramatic climax that we fully appreciate the Orphic themes' broader implications. It is worth noting the optimistic undercurrent in the play's mystical promises, as seen when the Chorus describes Apollo, associated with Asclepius and his life-saving offer to Admetus,

7 See Di Benedetto 1971, pp. 241-242; Conacher 1993[2] *ad* 448-9; Parker 2007 *ad* 448-9. See also Rabinowitz 1999, p. 102, who argues that despite the all-male character of the festival, Alcestis might have had a heroic celebration. Cf. also Pettersson 1992, ch. 3. Similarly, Rutherford 2001, p. 32, discussing the reference to the παιάν-singing at the Spartan Carnea, suggests that "Alcestis is worthy of being honoured as a man in death, unlike her feckless husband". One wonders whether κυκλάς (448), meaning "the circling month of Carnea", hints at the performance of *kukliοi khoroi* at the Carnea festival in honour of Alcestis (cf. also Fearn 2007, p. 230, n. 9, who does not exclude the possibility that "*kukliοi khoroi* were a feature of the Karneia too"). Moreover, Rehm 2003, p. 125 notes that "Alcestis' singular act of dying for her husband will last forever by returning annually, much like a Christian saint's day, when martyrdom and miracle come around each year and are celebrated in the liturgy".

8 On heroic reputation, see Ekroth 2007 and 2009. Cf. also Ehnmark 1948.

as a compassionate figure akin to Orpheus. This association, underscored by Apollo's portrayal as a shepherd capable of charming animals with his music, reinforces the culturally ingrained belief in the life-affirming power of musical celebration. His depiction as a shepherd playing the lyre while the wild animals dance round him is not in any way purposely emphasised only to be frustrated:

> *ὦ πολυξείνου καὶ ἐλευθέρου ἀνδρὸς ἀεί ποτ' οἶκος,*
> *σέ τοι καὶ ὁ Πύθιος εὐλύρας Ἀπόλλων*
> *ἠξίωσε ναίειν,*
> *ἔτλα δὲ σοῖσι μηλονόμας*
> *ἐν νομοῖς γενέσθαι,*
> *δοχμιᾶν διὰ κλειτύων*
> *βοσκήμασι σοῖσι συρίζων*
> *ποιμνίτας ὑμεναίους.*
>
> *σὺν δ' ἐποιμαίνοντο χαρᾷ μελέων βαλιαί τε λύγκες,*
> *ἔβα δὲ λιποῦσ' Ὄθρυος νάπαν λεόντων*
> *ἁ δαφοινὸς ἴλα ·*
> *χόρευσε δ' ἀμφὶ σὰν κιθάραν,*
> *Φοῖβε, ποικιλόθριξ*
> *νεβρὸς ὑφικόμων πέραν*
> *βαίνουσ' ἐλατᾶν σφυρῷ κούφῳ*
> *χαίρουσ' εὔφρονι μολπᾷ.*
>
> (569-587)

> *O house of an ever hospitable and generous man, even Pythian Apollo of the lovely lyre deigned to dwell in you and submitted to become a shepherd in your pastures, playing on his pipe mating songs for your herds on the slanting hillsides.*
>
> *Under his shepherd care, in joy at his songs, were also spotted lynxes, and there came, leaving the vale of Othrys, a pride of tawny lions, and the dappled fawn stepping beyond the tall fir trees with its light foot danced to your lyre-playing, Apollo, rejoicing in its joyful melody.*

The audience is encouraged to draw parallels between Apollo's supernatural shepherding and Orpheus' ability to charm beasts.[9] References to the Thessalian

9 Cf. Segal 1982, pp. 74-75, who places special emphasis on Orpheus' music as "a potentially ordering, peace-bringing, and therefore civilizing force" (p. 75). On the accumulation of visual detail, see Fairclough 1897, p. 51; Barlow 1971, pp. 18-19.

meadows and hillsides where Apollo delights in music-making might also evoke the sacred grove of Eleusinian-Orphic tradition, a key element of underworld imagery and a symbol of agricultural abundance, aligning with Demeter's role as the harvest goddess overseeing grain and earth's fertility.

However, in the subsequent passage, the promise of Eleusinian-Orphic salvation is presented with a sense of poignant vagueness, highlighting the challenge of reconciling mystical assurances with the inevitability of death and the unpredictability of human fate:[10]

> *ἐγὼ καὶ διὰ μούσας*
> *καὶ μετάρσιος ᾐ̃ξα, καὶ*
> *πλείστων ἁψάμενος λόγων*
> *κρεῖσσον οὐδὲν Ἀνάγκας*
> *ηὗρον οὐδέ τι φάρμακον*
> *Θρῄσσαις ἐν σανίσιν, τὰς*
> *Ὀρφεία κατέγραψεν*
> *γῆρυς, οὐδ' ὅσα Φοῖβος Ἀ-*
> *σκληπιάδαις ἔδωκε*
> *φάρμακα πολυπόνοις*
> *ἀντιτεμὼν βροτοῖσιν.*
> (962-972)

> *I have soared aloft with poetry and with high thought, and though I have laid my hand to many a reflection, I have found nothing stronger than Necessity, nor is there any cure for it in the Thracian tablets set down by the voice of Orpheus nor in all the simples which Phoebus harvested in aid of trouble-ridden mortals and gave to the sons of Asclepius.*

Euripides' allusions to Orphic texts, as exemplified in *Hippolytus* 952-954 (ἤδη νυν *αὔ*χει καὶ δι' ἀφύχου *β*ορᾶς / σίτοις καπήλευ' Ὀρφέα τ' ἄνακτ' ἔχων / βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν καπνούς, "Continue then your confident boasting, adopt a meatless diet and play the showman with your food, make Orpheus your lord and engage in mystical rites, holding the vaporings of many books in honor"), underscore the intimate connection between Orphism and its

10 The Chorus accept their defeat with resignation, hence their attempt to offer a "consolation" example of far greater familial disaster in vv. 903-906; see Hodler 1956, pp. 161-162 on the Chorus' striking diction; Hultin 1965; Johann 1968; Parker 2007 *ad* 903-906.

literature, suggesting that Orphic doctrines likely spread widely through written records. Notably, the "voice of Orpheus" is an evocative phrase that might conjure images of the decapitated head of Orpheus singing oracles.[11] This reference, coupled with the concept of *ἀνάγκη* ("Necessity") which appears three times in the Derveni Papyrus (8.13, 13.6, 25.7) and is here intertwined with Thanatos (973-975) as an unyielding deity indifferent to human pleas, encapsulates the stark tension between metaphysical ideals and the grim reality of death's stillness.[12] Soon, Heracles will introduce a new set of powerful mystical symbols, rooted in the Athenian political landscape, delineating "existence" from "non-existence". With his extraordinary courage, he will dispel any remaining scepticism about the unverified, mystical comforts offered to humanity.[13]

In my view, there is ample evidence suggesting that Euripides, in the play's closing scene, seeks to explore the complexities and challenges of mystical salvation. The old men's deepening anguish over Alcestis' premature death prompts somber reflections on mortality. The audience is left to ponder the veracity of the Chorus' contemplations on human constraints and death's invincibility. While one might overemphasise the sceptical remarks, it is crucial to recognise that Alcestis' remarkable resurrection aims to validate the truths of Eleusinian-Orphic commitments. The profound mystery surrounding her return from the realm of the dead, following Heracles' moral rearmament and Admetus' emotional breakdown, transcends personal or purely human concerns. It brings coherence and resolution to an otherwise morally intractable situation, thus affirming the Eleusinian-Orphic worldview as a climactic revelatory moment.[14]

The audience likely perceives that Alcestis' selfless sacrifice, with its mystical echoes, profoundly affects the moral perspectives of Heracles and Admetus. Compared to Alcestis' extensive altruism, the self-indulgent tendencies of Heracles and Admetus' evident frailty draw sharp criticism. Yet, both characters ultimately embrace deeper insights into human transience and vulnerability, thereby undergoing a soul-refining journey marked by frustration yet hope.[15] Heracles' rowdy drunkenness is sobered by the Servant's disapproval

11 See Parker 2007 *ad* 966-969. Cf. also Hall 1999, p. 114.

12 On the concept of ἀνάγκη in Euripides and especially in the play, see, for instance, Otto 1955, pp. 261-286; Riemer 1989, pp. 107-109; Hose 1991, p. 208; Mikalson 1991, pp. 26-28; Pucci 1994 and 2005.

13 Cf. Egli 2003, pp. 15-20. On *hieroi logoi*, see Baumgarten 1998.

14 On the play's remarkable complex of moral issues, see (e.g.) Burnett 1965; Lloyd 1985; Gregory 1991, pp. 19-49; Goldfarb 1992, who draws from Arrowsmith 1963; Rabinowitz 1993, pp. 66-99; Rehm 1994, pp. 84-96; Ferrari 2004, pp. 258-260; Iakov 2012, *passim* and 2020; Slater 2013, esp. pp. 31-66; Markantonatos 2013, ch. 2 with exhaustive bibliography.

15 See also Ehrenberg 1973², p. 253, who is right to point out that knowledge comes to Admetus rather late though not too late that 'to be alive in unhappiness may not be preferable to death' (esp. v. 940, ἄρτι μανθάνω).

(747-772, 803-804), while Admetus, facing societal condemnation (954-961) and realising his wife's happier state in death, stretches his anguish to its limits (935-936). Despite ominous forebodings of a meaningless world, Heracles' admirable deed allows Admetus to continue his life with renewed hope, knowing now that his struggles bear significance.

Epilogue

To sum up: both religion and poetry possess the extraordinary capacity to transcend human limits, defy death, and envision a supernatural existence. In Euripides' *Alcestis* and Attic Eleusinian-Orphism, death is ultimately conquered. Heracles, destined for Olympian greatness, physically overcomes Thanatos without descending into the underworld. This triumph, while primarily physical, does not diminish the play's mystical depth nor detract from the metaphysical intensity of the miraculous events at Thessalian Pherae. The play's unexpected turning point has far-reaching moral implications, leading to an optimistic realisation: human misery is penetrable, the absoluteness of Necessity can be challenged, and the capricious whims of the gods are not entirely inscrutable.

The political significance of the play to an Athenian audience is clear and immediate. Euripides stages characters within an Eleusinian-Orphic framework to emphatically underscore that celebrating lives dedicated to selfless labour, alongside the perpetuation of death-defeating mystical traditions, reinforces the essence of the heroic ideal. This ideal was crucial for the survival of the Athenian polis, embodying an untiring quest for honour through creative effort and steadfast bravery. Attic tragedy and religion acted as vital bulwarks against moral decay, extolling civic power and duty in the face of death, and dispelling any reservations about the Greek core moral conviction that reputation and high merit surpass the value of life itself. Mystical lore, in particular, elevated a set of principles and beliefs upheld by Athenian citizens. Despite the presence of myth-debunking scepticism and a realism that often frustrates hope, the Eleusinian-Orphic concept of salvation, as lauded in the play, weaves human suffering into the civic fabric of the polis.

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