

A STUDY ON SLAVES IN EURIPIDES' ALKESTIS

Chandima S. M. Wickramasinghe

Dept. of Classical Languages, University of Peradeniya

Introduction

This study will focus on one of the earliest plays of Euripides, *Alkestis*. Euripides is known to be a revolutionary playwright, who introduced novel characters and themes on to the ancient Greek stage. There are two slaves, one female and one male, playing a significant role in the play *Alkestis* and contributing to character and plot development. The objective of this study is to examine how Euripides uses the two slave characters effectively in the play to create an overall effect on the drama.

Methodology

The present study employs a literature survey accompanied by critical studies and analysis on Euripidean techniques on characterization and plot development. The speeches of the slaves and the dialogues in which they form a part will be studied closely. Besides, the other Euripidean plays with slave characters will also be studied closely. Secondary literature on Euripidean plays, Greek society and slavery and Greek drama will also be used as appropriate.

Results and Discussion

Plays of Euripides and various aspects of Euripidean drama have been studied extensively over the centuries. Though the slave characters as Andromachy and Hecuba have attracted scholarly attention the slave characters in *Alkestis* have not received sufficient attention. The present study therefore attempts to research this problem.

Euripides is known for reforming the traditional configuration of ancient Greek plays by introducing strong female characters and intelligent slaves. As a result, Euripides was considered to be a revolutionist and he was criticized heavily by his society. The play *Alkestis* presents two slaves, one male and another female, their characteristics indicate that they are typical slaves who are loyal to their master / mistress and are devoid of restrained manners and intelligence.

Though these two slaves appear only very briefly on stage, their presence is crucial for the development of the plot and of the characters of Alkestis and Admetos. Euripides was criticized by Aeschylus for incorporating certain characteristics, for example bold speech, as can be seen in the *agon* of Aristophanes, into his slave characters. However, these characteristics are distinct in the play through the two characters in the same way that Hecuba, Andromachy or Ion are represented in their respective plays.

It is through the words of the slaves, especially those of the female slave that Alkestis becomes a dominant figure throughout the play despite her brief appearance.¹ Euripides uses the slave characters to attract and to retain constant attention on Alkestis. Euripides has assigned specific roles, at specific instances, to these two slaves in rousing *pathos* in the play and the master sentimentalist has cleverly woven them into the plot of the play. Sometimes, the words of slaves represent their individual heartfelt declarations (*Alkestis*, lines 192-196), at other times they are spokes-persons of their slave community (*ibid*, lines 762-764; 769-771). At times they also disclose the views of the whole Phaerean society (*ibid*, lines 152-155). It is through the words of the female slave that the contrasting characteristics of Alkestis and Admetus were presented first to the audience. By using the female slave, Euripides, on one hand highlights the noble and virtuous character of Alkestis and, on the other hand the cowardice of Admetus. Furthermore, the unrestrained nature of her servile character stands in contrast to the reserved noble etiquettes of Alkestis. Such was Alkestis' manner at her public appearance (*ibid*, lines 169-173). Yet, if not for the employment of the slave character, who had access to Alkestis' private sphere of life, Euripides would not be able to draw the contrast between her internal element of morality that is expressed by the conflicts in her mind, and her external element of morality (displayed in her public appearance), which is sure to have multiple regulators.

Moreover, the contribution of the female slave, through reporting Alkestis' concern for her children, is vital to accomplish the effective

¹ Alkestis is brought on stage at the 244th line and her speech lasts for only 45 lines in a play with 1163 lines. She appears later at the 1008th line but remains veiled and silent.

introduction of the child motive. In addition, the remarks of Alkestis gain more weight when they are reported by a loyal slave. In like circumstances the audience is prepared to meet a mother wailing for her children's safety. This anticipates or forms a prologue to the resolution at which Alkestis' later arrives to safeguard her children (*ibid*, lines 302-303).

The character of the male slave on the other hand reveals to Heracles that the queen Alkestis is dead, the very thing Admetus wanted to hide from him. Here too through the unrestrained nature and recklessness of the slave, Admetus is reunited with his wife, Alkestis thus turning the play into a tragicomedy. It also helps Admetus to regain his lost *kudos* as a king whose hospitality is boundless. In addition, it is the betrayal of the male slave that draws Heracles' attention to Admetus' hospitality, thus it is the slave who prompts Heracles into action. Moreover, the male slave's remark, that Alkestis was a mother to him and to the fellow slaves indicates that she was an exceptionally kind mistress who never bullied her slaves psychologically, as any other slave owner of the time did. The comparison of the temperaments of Admetus and Alkestis towards their slaves makes us wonder whether Admetus was not as mild as Alkestis.

Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that the two slaves are necessary to stir pathos of the play. Their contribution to the development of Alkestis' and Admetus' characters is vital and significant. Euripides has cleverly used these slave characters not only in the development of the plot but also in introducing a change into the play by using Heracles to bring back Alkestis. In addition, the slave characters inform us of the condition of slavery that prevailed in Admetus' house. It can be stated that Euripides would not have appealed as much to audiences if not for the slave characters.

References

- Hadly, W. S., *Euripides'Alkestis*, Cambridge, 1953.
Arnott, G., April 1973, "*Euripides and the Unexpected*" *Greece & Rome*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 49-64.
Dillon, M., 2004, "*Euripides and the Philosophy of His Time*" *Classics Ireland* Vol. 11, pp. 47-73.
Mierrow, H. E., Oct. 21, 1935, "*The Trend of Euripidean Criticism*" *The Classical Weekly*, vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 9-11

Wright, M., 2010, "*The tragedian as critic: Euripides and early Greek poetics*" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 130, pp. 165-184.