

Comparative Analysis of the Treatment of the Alcestis-Stuff by Euripides and by Wilder

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Abstract

This is the starting point of the following analysis: Life and death belong indissolubly together, but nobody of us knows what is waiting for us when we will have died. According to Christian religion the dead shall resurrect again and start immediately into an eternal life full of happiness in an unknown atmosphere without any sorrows and any problems to overcome. The ancient writers, that lived before Jesus Christ, had at hand an underworld as the realm of that god that is responsible for death. In very rare and exceptional cases a very deserved dead is given the allowance to enter again into his former earthen life. This procedure of bringing a dead person back to life might be a kind of deal between deities and mankind in this way that another person had to die and then to live in the underworld instead of the doomed person. This stuff is a subject-matter of legends, fairy tales and finally of classical drama. The heroes of the drama are Admetus and Alcestis – a royal couple; Admetus is doomed to death and his wife Alcestis wants to die instead of her husband. This treatise is written by an author who is as well a lawyer as a philologist. The treatise uses modern methods of literary comparison, that the author did learn at the examples of ancient texts and modern texts at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Saarland (Germany). The comparison between the Euripides-version and the Wilder-version is not an end in itself, the comparison aims to show the given literary differences based on the history of the development of the Alcestis-stuff in the light of the fact that the ancient text is the source for the modern text. Thus it becomes once more clear that the texts of old Greek authors do live on in a figurative sense

until modern times. Wilder himself is a modern American author who consciously sought connection to antiquity, also because he did go through very intensive university courses in archaeology. This connection to ancient Greek literature, of course, makes modern American literature very attractive for European readers and for readers from other areas of the world.

Keywords : Life, death, theodicy question, Admetus, Alcestis, Euripides, Wilder, fairy-tale, myth, tragedy

I. Introduction

The ancient Alcestis (Ἀλκίση) myth (to the myth cfr. Weber, 1936; Steinwender, 1951) has been handed down to modern times in the literary treatment of the old Greek author Euripides (485 – 406 BC, to Euripides cfr. Hose, 2008); his >Alcestis<, that was first performed in 438 BC, is the oldest of his surviving plays. This play, that was already controversial in ancient times, has found a broad reception in modern times: In the 18th and in the 19th century authors from the German-speaking world tried their hand on the Alcestis-stuff: E.g. Martin Wieland (1733 – 1813, to Wieland cfr. Schäfer, 1996) with his singspiel >Alkestes< (1773), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744 – 1803, to Herder cfr. Bäte, 1946) in his little drama >Admet's House< (1803), Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874 – 1929, to von Hofmannsthal cfr. Hömig, 2019) with his version of the >Alcestis< (1893) and Ernst Wilhelm Eschmann (1904 – 1987, to Eschmann's role in Nazi-Germany cfr. Hausmann, 2001, p. 103). In English-speaking countries the Alcestis-stuff was taken into account in Robert Browning's (1812 – 1889) poem ">Balaustion's Adventure< in 1871 (to Browning cfr. De Vane, 1955). The Alcestis-fabric is found concealed in Thomas Stearns Eliot's (1888 – 1965, to Eliot cfr. Schulze, 1999, pp. 316 – 325, p. 328 sq.) >Cocktail Party<; here is quoted (<https://tseliot.com/editorials/the-cocktail-party>): “Involving elements of Euripides' *Alcestis*, *The Cocktail Party* 'is a play on two planes': a divine, and a drawing-room comedy. The drama of the first act revolves around Edward Chamberlayne, who is hosting a cocktail party, all the while disguising the fact that his wife, Lavinia, has left him. In the course of the play a mysterious guest, originally played by Alec Guinness – and who transpires to be Harley Street psychologist Sir Henry – returns Lavinia to Edward, and teaches the two that their lives are better together, though superficial. Simultaneous to the main drama of the play is the story of Celia, described as 'Mr Eliot's most moving character'. Edward's mistress, Celia journeys beyond the drawing room and leaves to become a missionary in Africa. In a second cocktail party, two years after the first, she is revealed to have died horribly, literally crucified in the service of God”. But the most famous English language literary adaptation is

Thornton Wilder's (1897 – 1975) >The Alcestiad< from 1955 with the final addition of the satyr play >The Drunken Sisters< in 1957 (to Wilder cfr. Schulze, 1999, p. 390 sq. and p. 451 sqq, p. 637 sq.). The present paper aims to compare Wilder's version with the authoritative (old) Greek version of Euripides.

II. Wilder's relationship to ancient myths and dramas

Wilder's biography shows that he was very familiar with antiquity from his earliest childhood; his work is full of traces to antiquity:

1. Biography

Together with his brother Amos Thornton Wilder (to Wilder`s biography cfr. Simon, 1979; Harrison, 1983; Niven, 2012; <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/wilder-thornton-niven-1897-1975>) is said to have taken part in performances of Sophocles-, Aeschylus- and Euripides-plays as an extra at the >Greek Theatre< in Berkeley (California) between 1906 and 1911 (to the early Thornton Wilder cfr. Morgan, 1958). During the above-mentioned period as well as in the remaining years of his schooldays (until 1915) and during his college years Thornton Wilder learned Greek and Latin. He spent the years 1920 and 1921 with archaeological studies at the >American Academy< in Rome. In the 1930s he was employed for a total of six years at the University of Chicago as a lecturer for >Comparative Literature< (cfr. Borgmeier, 2001).

2. Testimonies in the published work

Following these external data a number of Wilder's self-testimonies gives evidence of his great knowledge about Greek and Latin literature: In the year of the first performance of his >Alcestiad< Wilder wrote the preface to a bibliophile new edition of the Sophoclesian >Oedipus<, which shows his admiration for Greek tragedy (cfr. Wilder, Oedipus, p. X): "One of the remarkable aspects of the survival of literary masterpieces down through the centuries is the diversity of reasons which the successive ages have found for admiring them. They are like great slowly-revolving lamps which turn a different face to each new generation that confronts them. Many of them have outlasted the spoken life of the language in which they were written and the social and religious ideas that played a large part in their inspiration, but such is their depth and variety that ever new aspects emerge to replace those who have lost their immediacy". In the preface to the English edition of the drama >Jakobs Traum< by the German poet Richard Heer-Hofmann (1866 – 1945, to Heer-Hofmann cfr. Helmes, 1993) Wilder explained what modern authors have to bear in mind when dealing with myths in their plays (cfr. Wilder, Jacob`s Dream, p. XVI): "There are three pitfalls in the way of writers who

undertake to retell a myth: they may seek to transpose them into rationalistic and realistic terms; they may seek to make them the vehicles of autobiographic identification; and they may solely rely upon their antiquity and accumulated authority for force, without convincing us that they have wrestled with the basic ideas inherent in the story and found their authority within their own creative vision". These three dangers threaten the myth-maker, who is not creative in his subject matter; for if rational investigation and rationalism deprives the myth of its universal validity, then its chaining to the individual fate of the author must impair the binding nature of the myth. To repeat the myth unchanged means nothing other than not hearing the question or avoiding the answer (to the dramatic techniques cfr. Wixson, 1972). Following the above passage Wilder then formulates positively that the myth-teller must turn to what is actually poetic, if he wants to fulfil his task (cfr. Wilder, *Jacob's Dream*, p. XVI): "A myth, passing from oral tradition into literature, moves most congenially into the poetic drama".

3. Preliminary references in Wilder's work to the Alcestis-stuff

From the foreword to >The Alcestiad< written by Wilder's sister Isabel it is clear that Wilder's >Alcestiad< seemed ripe for dramatic revision at least since 1939. According to Isabel Wilder a world dominated by war was opposed to the spirit of >The Alcestiad<, which was characterised by love and sacrifice. Thornton Wilder himself was considerably restricted in his literary production, because he voluntarily served as a rather high-ranking officer in the American Air Force since 1942. In 1942 the >Alcestiad< was provisionally completed as a one-act play: "I have the manuscript of THE ALCESTIAD in my kit. I have been thinking how I could make it into a good one-act". Two years later the manuscript of this first act was lost. When Wilder resumed the >Alcestiad< in the year 1945 and even wanted to start working on the second and third act, he lacked the strength to complete the work. But after his success with >The Matchmaker< (to this play <https://www.concordtheatricals.com/p/650/the-matchmaker>) at the >Edinburgh Festival< in the year 1954 he completed his Alcestis-project in three acts: It should be noted that other works of Wilder, that were published before the >Alcestiad< and that do have a starting point in ancient times, in some way do point forward to the >Alcestiad<:

- In the short scene >Proserpina and the Devil< (already written in 1916, to Proserpina cfr. <https://the-demonic-paradise.fandom.com/wiki/Proserpina>) a variation of the ancient Proserpina-myth is given: The mother of the dead Proserpina – it is the goddess Ceres (i.e. Demeter in Greek mythology) – was able to achieve an agreement according to that her daughter was allowed to

return from the underworld to earth for six months every year (cfr. Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, book V, vv. 376).

- Two passages from the novel >The Woman of Andros< (published in 1930, to this play cfr. Haber, 1950) seem to point forward to the >Alcestiad<: During a meal of sophisticated women Chrysis tells the following story: A young man, who once rendered a very important service to Zeus, faced an early death. Therefore he asked Zeus for help: Zeus made a deal with the King of the realm of the dead according to this the young man was allowed to relive one hour of his 15th birthday on earth. But even before this hour was over the young man asked for allowance to return back to the underworld. The double engagement as an active participant in his own 15th birthday and as a spectator that came back from the underworld to life on earth was unbearable for him. For Chrysis her own life seemed bearable from a consciousness that was traced to the experience of death.
- Emily in >Our Town< (published in the year 1936, to this work cfr. Kenneth, 2013, pp. 121 – 131) was also given the opportunity to return to earth to relive her 12th birthday; hardly having reached the cemetery she could not bear to be a spectator and an actress at the same time.
- In >The Ides of March< (1949 published in the year) the Roman love-elegist Catullus (1st century BC, to Catullus cfr. Wiseman, 1985) tells of his intention to treat the Alcestis-subject in a poetic way; the beginning of the plot of the myth is dealt with in fragments.

III. To the version of Euripides

The version of Euripides is very complicated:

1. To fairytale and myth

The ancient Alcestis-myth has been handed down to us through the literary adaptation of Euripides (cfr. Parker 2003; Matthiessen, 2004). In former Alcestis-research the thesis is formulated by Albin Lesky (1896 – 1981) that the myth of Alcestis is based on a widespread fairy tale that is still generally accepted (Lesky, 1925). His research, which cannot be reproduced here in detail, leads to the conclusion that the following story in fairytale-form recurs in many countries and is the most original form of the myth (cfr. Graf, 2012, pp. 39 – 57): A young man shall die in the prime of his years; therefore the responsible deity is asked for help. On the condition, that someone else is found to take his place, the request is granted. While his parents and close relatives refuse to die instead of the young man, the young man's beloved is willing to do so. The fairy tale, however, has a happy ending: Either the deity, that is responsible for death, releases his prey or the young man regains his freedom in a fight with this deity. This, however, should, not to be taken as a

premature conclusion of Lesky's understanding of myth, legend and fairy tale (to ancient fairy tales cfr. Ackermann, 1981):

- On the one hand, Lesky denies the correctness of Wilhelm Grimm's (1786 – 1859, to Grimm cfr. Köstlin, 1993) thesis, that fairy tales contain the last remnants of ancient myths.
- On the other hand, Lesky denies the correctness of Wilhelm Maximilian Wundt's (1832 – 1920, to Wundt cfr. Jüttemann, 2006) thesis that fairy tales, that are fixed to time and place, develop in a first step into legends and in a second step into myths. Lesky finally adheres to the position of Erich Bethe (1863 – 1940), which is mediated between the two extremes mentioned above, that fairytales, legends and myths cannot be fixed in a particular order in terms of a stringent time-table; they influence each other. In individual cases the temporal priority of one or other genre can be determined with some certainty.

Kurt von Fritz (1900 – 1985, to von Fritz cfr. Hose, 2005) has formulated intermediate stations on the path from fairy tale to myth (cfr. to the connections between myth and tradition Pradhan, 1978):

- It is typical of the Greek fairy tale that the young couple is very soon replaced by a royal couple (although not yet specified by names).
- It is obvious that it is not the lover himself but the well-known hero Heracles, who is virtually predestined for the fight with the deity responsible for death.

2. To the literary version of Euripides

It is still not clear, which sources might have been available to Euripides (for an introduction cfr. Parker, 2007; for a commentary to the whole play cfr. Roisman, 2003; to a particular problem cfr. Lionetti, 2020). It has often been speculated, whether the >Alcestis< of Phrynichos (Φρύνιχος, 540 – 470 BC, to him cfr. Marx, 1928) might have served as a pattern. The tradition that Phrynichos wrote an >Alcestis< is on shaky ground: In addition to a line from the Greek grammarian Hesychios (6th century AD) a medieval scholiast has noticed the following on the ancient Virgil commentary by Servius (5th century AD): "Alii dicunt Euripidem Orcum in scaenam inducere gladium ferentem, qua crinem Alcetiadi abscidat, et Euripidem hoc a Phrynicho, antiquo tragico, mutuatum"; in English translation we have this notice: "But others claim that Euripides made Thanatos appear on the stage with a sword in order to cut off Alcestis' hair with it; he took this from Phrynichus, an ancient tragedian" (= translation by the author of this paper). Although ancient sources testify, that Phrynichos did indeed treat the Alcestis-stuff dramatically, only one line of the work itself has survived; therefore attempts to draw conclusions from this single line cannot be dealt with here in

a more serious manner. The following gives a summary of the Euripidean plot (cfr. Stephanopoulos, 1980):

- From a monologue of god Apollo we learn the prehistory of the plot: Apollo himself had been condemned by Zeus (to Zeus cfr. Arafat, 1990) to work as a kind of slave for several years for a mortal and thus King Admetus of Pherai (i.e. Thessaly) became his >mortal boss<. In gratitude for the former kind treatment by the king Apollo did save the king from death by persuading the goddesses of fate that someone else should die in his place; but none of his relatives was willing to die in his place except his wife Alcestis (vv. 1 – 271).
- Then the day has come for Alcestis to fulfil her promise and shall die instead of her husband. Apollo wants to persuade the already approaching death-demon Thanatos (to him cfr. Willinghöfer, 1996) to spare Alcestis. His efforts are not successful, but he prophesies that someone else will snatch the victim from >Thanatos<.
- The choir (to the function of the choir in Greek drama cfr. Silk, 1999, pp. 1–2; p. 16) approaches the Admetus' palace in doubt as to whether the prevailing silence means that Alcestis has already died or is still alive. The choir's doubts are dispelled when a servant steps out of the palace and describes in a kind of a messenger's report how Alcestis is preparing for death.
- After another choral song Alcestis and Admetus appear on stage with their small children. Alcestis takes leave of her loved ones: If she already sacrifices the most precious thing for Admetus, life, then he should not marry again – especially out of a sense of duty to his children, Furthermore, she tells him to hate his father and mother because of the refused sacrifice. Several times Admetus vows to keep to this and repeatedly prays for his inconsolability about the imminent loss of Alcestis.
- After the preparations for the funeral Heracles arrives at the palace on the way to one of his adventures to avail himself of Admetus' hospitality (to hospitality in ancient times cfr. Hiltbrunner, 2005). When he sees that the house is in mourning, he wants to move on, but Admetus deceives him about the true fact by claiming that only one slave has died. The choir rebukes Admetus for his untimely hospitality, but he defends himself by saying that the people can never be satisfied.
- When the funeral procession is about to set off, there is a fierce argument between Admetus and his father. When the father is accused of not being willing to sacrifice because of his age, the father replies that even in old age life is not to be despised. The son has no reason to

reproach him, because the son himself was too cowardly to die at the time he was told to.

- In the palace breaks out a dispute between Heracles (to Heracles in the version of Euripides cfr. Pardo, 2023; to Heracles in world literature cfr. Galinsky, 1972) and a servant. Heracles accuses the servant of a bereavement, but this is no reason to treat a guest with a sour face. But when the servant informs Heracles that Alcestis has died, Heracles makes a plan to snatch Alcestis from the demon of death (Thanatos).
- In the final scene Admetus comes back from the funeral wailing. Shortly afterwards Heracles appears with a veiled woman whom he has allegedly won in a competition. Heracles asks Admetus to take this woman into his house, until he returns from his next adventure. Admetus first refuses to host this woman in his palace, whose figure reminds him of Alcestis. He refers to the promises made to his wife and he fears becoming the subject of malicious gossip, if he hosts a young woman in his palace. Heracles finally manages to persuade Admetus and Heracles is lucky to discover that the veiled woman is Alcestis. But Heracles tells him not to speak to her before the end of the third day; after returning from the underworld she has to be purified according to certain rites.

3. To the problems of the Euripides` plot

The plot of Euripides' >Alcestis< poses problems for due interpretation (cfr. Lang, 1972): It cannot be decided from the text, whether or not there is a longer period of time between the promise of Alcestis to die for her husband and her own death (cfr. Maurer-Zenck, 2007, *passim*). Caution is therefore also called for when referring to Browning's – subsequent – claim: The moment Alcestis is actually to die, her death appears very different from the moment she made the promise. The objection to Browning's proposal is based on how the spouses could have lived happily together under the sign of certain substitute-death. In the final scene Heracles brings Alcestis back from the underworld, this action is rather problematic as well. Verrall (1895) gives a rather strange explanation: Euripides, who was a rationalist, rejected traditional religion; therefore he wrote his play in such a way that the naive Greek spectator could accept everything, but the sceptical had to realize that a condemnation of the funeral cult was intended. It has to be concluded from the filling scenes in the middle section of the play that Alcestis was buried in a great hurry. This indicates that Alcestis was not dead at all, but only apparently dead. Therefore Heracles does not fight with the death-demon (Thanatos), but only convinces himself whether she was really dead or not. When Heracles found his assumption confirmed, that she never died, he simply brought her back to Admetus. But the real problem in the final scene is that Alcestis does

not speak a word. On the one hand, reference is made to the stage convention of the Greek theatre; on the other hand, there is the fact that Heracles forbids Admetus not to speak to Alcestis before three days have passed, since she has to be purified according to certain rites due to her stay in the underworld. The plot problems mentioned above can hardly be satisfactorily solved; this is also not necessary in so far as Wilder – as it is shown below – avoids these cliffs of the Euripidean version.

4. To the variations of the Alcestis myth in other works of ancient authors

The reason, why the variants of the Alcestis-stuff in other works of ancient authors are briefly discussed here, is that the repeatedly asserted thesis that Wilder had recourse exclusively to Euripides, cannot remain as it is. In the >Eumenides< (cfr. <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/aischylo/eumenide/eumenide.html>) of Aeschylus (525 – 456/5 BC, to him cfr. Sommerstein, 2010) it is alluded to a part of the prehistory of the Alcestis-myth: According to >Eumenides< (vv. 723 sqq.) Apollo wrested the concession of substitute death from the goddesses of fate by making them drunk. In the Euripidean version it is only stated that he had obtained the concession cleverly. In Apollodorus (2nd century BC, to him cfr. Gods, 1976) the myth of Alcestis is not written in verse but in a rather concise prose narrative. Here the plot is brought forward to the wedding day of the royal couple: After Admetus having fulfilled the conditions set by Pelias (Alcestis' father) he forgets to sacrifice Artemis for the forthcoming wedding feast. Artemis wants to take revenge and arranges his death, but Apollo prevents this. The author leaves it open, whether Heracles brings Alcestis back from the underworld or whether it is Persephone, the mistress of the underworld, that sends Alcestis back to earth.

IV. Wilder expands the Alcestis-myth

Thornton Wilder expands the Alcestis myth in several respects (cfr. Kosmopoulou, 2022; Roisman, 2017; particularly to the dramatic techniques cfr Wixson, 1972):

1. Expansion of the Alcestis-myth forwards (Act I)

The first act takes place on Admetus' and Alcestis' wedding day. On the wedding day Alcestis is still undecided, whether she should become Admetus' wife or not; she has always wanted to become a priestess of Apollo in Delphi (cfr. "No, Aglaia, not another man. The thing, I love more than Admetus is a God, is Apollo" (Wilder, Alcestiad, p. 13 – Act I).) and "to live and to die as a priestess of Apollo at Delphi" (Wilder, Alcestiad, p. 15 – Act I).). She is waiting for a sign from Apollo. She also receives this insofar as

Aglaia – she is Admetus' former wet-nurse – tells her that Apollo had taught Admetus in a dream how to fulfill the suitor-conditions set by her own father, namely by harnessing the city of Jolkos three times with a lion and a wild boar being chained together. Wilder thus expands the Alcestis-myth here – in comparison with the version of Euripides – forward. He probably took over the suitor's conditions from Apollodorus but nothing more and nothing less. Furthermore, the shepherding service of Apollo reported in the prologue of the Euripides' version as a prequel is considerably expanded by Wilder: The blind seer Tiresias (to him cfr. Brisson, 1976) leads four shepherds to the court of Admetus and announces that one of them is Apollo (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, pp. 23 – Act I). However, it is not known, which of the four is Apollo. In ancient literature Tiresias is not related to the Alcestis myth; according to Kuhn (1972) Wilder's aim in introducing this figure was to dramatize the relationship between God and mankind; Tiresias shall serve as a kind of mediator between both areas. Alcestis is also unsuccessful when she tries to find out which of the four shepherds is actually Apollo (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, pp. 26 – Act I). Apparently, the beneficial – hidden – work of Apollo leads Alcestis to her agreement in marrying Admetus.

2. Significant changes of the traditional core of the Alcestis myth (Act II)

The second act takes place twelve years later: A guard – he has a function comparable to the Euripidean choir – is reporting that the shepherds got into a fight and Admetus was accidentally stabbed (probably by Apollo himself) and now has to die (p. 35 – Act I). However, a message is brought from Delphi, which can ultimately be interpreted by Alcestis and a shepherd in such a way that Admetus' imminent death can be averted, if someone else dies for him (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 39 – Act II). The more distant part of the prehistory, namely how Apollo managed to gain the possibility of substitute death from the goddesses of fate, is only presented in the satyr play at the end of the entire work. In terms of content Wilder probably goes back to a passage in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, because there Apollo also makes the goddesses of fate drunk. Subsequently, the traditional core of the Euripidean Alcestis-myth is continued to be used, but with considerable changes: No less than four people are ready to make sacrifices here: Aglaia, the guardian, the shepherd (to whom Admetus inflicted the injury) and Alcestis, but Alcestis reserves this sacrifice for herself, because this sacrifice only acquires meaning, if it is made by the one, who loves Admetus most. She rejects the shepherd, for example, on the grounds that by accepting his sacrifice he only wants to free himself from his guilt (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 43 – Act II). Admetus is portrayed – and this is completely different to the Euripides' version – as a man, who knows,

that he himself will die and does not suspect the possibility of substitute death (cfr. Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 51 – Act II):

>>ADMETUS: "I shall die before sunshine (...)"<<

In the following passage it is shown, how the forces causing death are diminishing in Admetus and are increasing in Alcestis (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, pp. 54 – Act II):

>>ADMETUS: "No. I don't know why it is, but the pain seems to have (...)".

ALCESTIS: "Lift your hand! (...)".

ADMETUS: "This lightness! (...)">>

Then it becomes clear that Alcestis understands better what process is taking place here and that this process has a transcendent depth (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 56 – Act II):

>>ADMETUS: “ (...) I don't understand (...) My knee does not tremble (...)”. Alcestis! It may be (...) it may be I shall live”.

ALCESTIS: "Living or dead, we are watched; we are guided; we are understood. Oh, Admetus, lie quiet, lie still". >>

Not Admetus is dying, but Alcestis. When Alcestis presents to Admetus the possibility of substitute death, he categorically rejects it (cfr. Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 57 – Act II):

>>ALCESTIS: "(...) I would find it a natural thing, if a message came from Delphi to me, saying that I should give my life for my children or for Thessaly or (...) for my husband." >>

ADMETUS: "No. No. No man would wish another to die for him. Every man is ready to die his own death." >>

In the end even Admetus realizes that Alcestis may die instead of him (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, pp. 57 – Act II):

>>ADMETUS: " (...) Alcestis, you are in trouble! Aglaia! Aglaia! (...)".

ALCESTIS: "Take me to my bed."

ADMETUS: "You are ill. Are you ill, Alcestis?"

ALCESTIS: "(...) Take my life. Be happy. Be happy. (...)">>

After the death of Alcestis Heracles arrives roaring in the palace, whose coming had already been announced beforehand. Aglaia – on Alcestis' order – tells him the lie that a servant of the house has died (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 62 – Act II). When he later presses Admetus with the question, who the dead woman is, he receives a correct answer (p. 66 – Act II): "She called herself the servant of the servants". But Heracles cannot understand it. His increasingly urgent questions finally lead Admetus to confess the death of Alcestis (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 68 – Act II). In the further course of the conversation (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 70 – Act II). Heracles confesses to Admetus that he had once approached Alcestis by force, but that she had forgiven him. Then he decides to bring her back from the underworld, at the same time rejecting Admetus' help (Wilder, *Alcestiad*, p. 71 – Act II):

"Hercules, I shall come with you".). From the following stage-directions the reader learns that Heracles brings Alcestis back to Admetus; she leans against him and he leads her back to the palace. In this second act it is clearly shown that Wilder only maintains the core of the outer plot (i.e. possibility of a substitute death – Alcestis dies for Admetus – return from the underworld). Wilder avoids the plot-problems of the Euripidean version, that he is certainly familiar with. In the Wilder-text there is clearly no significant time difference between Alcestis` decision to die this sacrificial death and her dying as such. The problematic recognition scene in the Euripidean version is completely omitted. Wilder`s Admetus is quite different from the Greek version: He knows nothing about the possibility of substitute death; when the possibility of substitute death is hypothetically presented to him, he categorically rejects it; he is aware of Heracles' rescue operation and offers his assistance. What is completely new in the Wilder-version is that not only Alcestis, but three other people are now ready for sacrificial death, and the transition of the forces causing death is shown.

3. Extension of the Alcestis myth to backward (act III)

The third act takes place again twelve years later. Admetus has died in the meantime and Alcestis lives as a slave of King Agis of Thrace (to Agis cfr. Badian, 1967), who had seized the Thessalian throne by force. The country is ravaged by a plague; Alcestis is regarded as the guilty party, since she had once returned from the underworld (Wilder, *Alceciad*, p. 74 – Act III). In this situation her son Epimenes – accompanied by his friend Cheriander – returns unrecognised to Pherai (Φεραί) to take revenge on the tyrant Agis. Alcestis manages to dissuade both at the very last minute. When Agis receives the news that his daughter Laodamia has died of the plague, he wants to descend into the underworld (like Heracles) to bring her back (Wilder, *Alceciad*, p. 100 sq. – Act III). Then Alcestis teaches him in gentle persuasion that the girl's death must be made meaningful by accepting this suffering and changing his tyrannical life. Then the conqueror returns broken to his mother-country. This third act is a complete re-invention of Wilder; it has no parallels whatsoever in an ancient source of the Alcestis myth or in other modern reenactments. In the opening chapter it is shown that Wilder is a profound connoisseur of antiquity: With the Greek names chosen here, however, he does not point any particular hint: For Wilder Agis is a Thracian king, who conquered Thessaly, but from a strict historical point of view Agis is the name of the Spartan kings in the 3rd century BC. Neither tyrannical adaptations of any of these kings nor a conquest of Thessaly by the Spartans is reported for the above-mentioned period:

- Laodamia is neither the subject-matter of an ancient myth nor does there exist a Laodamia as a daughter of Spartan kings.

- The name >Epimenes< (to him cfr. Kirchner, 1894) is handed down for a Thessalian general of the 2nd century BC; nothing more is known about him.
- The name >Cheriander< is invented by Wilder; it is not documented in any literal ancient source.

V. To the depiction of the royal couple in the Euripides-version and the Wilder-version

In the following there is examined the personal relationship between the spouses Admetus and Alcestis in the Euripides-version as well as in the Wilder-version. For this purpose the respective farewell-scene is suitable, even if the conditions are somewhat different in each case: In the Euripides-version Admetus knows that he no longer has to die, as Alcestis is willing to die for him. Wilder's Admetus assumes that he shall die; he knows nothing about the possibility of a substitute death, but he would have rejected it.

1. To the promise of celibacy in the Euripides-version

In the case of Euripides it is striking that Alcestis is not concerned about her husband; in her long farewell monologue the explicit concern for the welfare of her children is clearly in the foreground (vv. 280). Again and again she expresses the fear that a bad orphan mother could neglect her children (vv. 305, vv. 314). Therefore she asks her husband not to remarry after her death (v. 307). Admetus vows to keep this promise (vv. 328) and grotesquely swears to have a statue made of his wife, who from now on shall rest on the marriage bed (vv. 345). After Admetus' answer Alcestis calls the children as witnesses (vv. 371):

"You children have heard it yourselves. The father never leads another woman to your house and never forget me!"

This is provoking his reaffirmation and then she utters the following words (v. 374):

"And say it again and it will be done!"

In the farewell-monologue there may be noted a chill, that Alcestis feels for the man, she dies for. That this thought is not completely absurd is shown by the much more personal farewell of the royal couple.

2. To the recollection of the wonderful days spent together in the Wilder-version

At the beginning of the farewell monologue Admetus draws a positive summary of his life (Wilder, *Alcesteiad*, pp. 53 – Act II):

>>"It is the healing sun, but for others. I have put all that behind me. I do not need hope. My life was short, but a single hour can hold the whole fullness of time. The fullness of time was given to me. A man who has been happy is no

longer the subject of time (...) Come, we'll say to each other what is still to be said on this last day." <<

Admetus then is reflecting on the past and Alcestis is answering to him (pp. 55 – Act II):

>> "ADMETUS: "You didn't hate me, as I came around the corner straining over those damned beasts?"

ALCESTIS: "No. I suffered the more for it. I had begun to love that stern-faced young man from Thessaly. You were the only suitor who attempted that trial twice (...).

ADMETUS: "(...) I, I saw. (...)".

ALCESTIS: Beloved Admetus (...) you saw. You married this self-willed, obstinate girl."

ADMETUS: "(...) Our love! Our love! (...) Our whisperings in the night! (...) The birth of Epimenes, when I almost lost you (...)". <<

Without any doubt the love of the spouses for each other is in the foreground here, whereas in the Euripides-version there is hardly found a word about it.

VI. Wilder`s Alcestis-myth in its interpretation of Christian mystery

The relationship between the Alcestis-stuff and Christian mystery is obvious and deserves a closer look:

1. Apollo as a very dominant figure of the play

At the beginning of the piece Apollo makes allusions to death, the meaning of which remains completely closed to it (Wilder, Alcestiad, p. 7 – Act I): "I have come to set a song in motion – a story (...)". Then we read this (Wilder, Alcestiad, pp. 8 – Act I): "They have begun to understand me. At first they were like beasts – more savage, more fearful. Like beasts in a cage, themselves the cage to themselves. Then two things broke on their minds and they lifted their heads: my father's thunder, which raised their fears to awe; and my sunlight, for which they gave thanks. In thanks they discovered speech, and I gave them the song. These were signs and they knew them". A superficial observation would be limited to the fact that here – in comparison to the Euripides-version – the various positive functions of Apollo (to him cfr. Solomon, 1994) are expressed: He is the bringer of speech and song, he is the bringer of sunlight and healer of diseases (cfr. Wilder, Alcestiad, p. 76 "god of healing" – Act II). It should be noted, however, that Apollo – in contrast to the Euripides-version – is a very dominant character in the play. He is not limited to his role of wringing the possibility of substitute death from the goddesses of fate; the divine work of Apollo is also evident in the return of Alcestis: Without of the divine assistance of Apollo the semi-god Heracles would not have been able to do so (Wilder, Alcestiad, pp. 71 – Act II): "(...) Apollo, I am Hercules, called the son of Zeus and Alcmena. All Greece says

that you have loved these two – Admetus and Alcestis. You know what I'm about to do. You now I can't do it by myself. Put into my arm a strength that's never been before. You do this - or let's say, you and I do this together. (...)”. It has to be noted that Apollo is constantly present on stage in the light of sun and it has to be seen this statement in the satyr play (Wilder, *Alcesteiad*, p. 116 sq. – Act III): "I am the god of sun. It is always sun where I am (...)”. Metaphorically speaking he brings light, which shall help people to understand the true meaning of their lives. In the opening passage quoted above Apollo asserts a kind of evolution of the whole human race; this idea can also be applied to the characters in the play, but especially to Alcestis.

2. Alcestis as the special human being in whom the work of God is shown in an exemplary way

Alcestis steadily gains greater clarity and insight into the ways of God; she is also searching for the above-mentioned signs. The work of God is to be shown in an exemplary way in this unusual mankind:

– Alcestis recognises from Aglaia's point – cumulatively one could accept the hidden presence of Apollo as shepherd in Pherai – that the right and God-willed way is decisive for the marriage with Admetus. Alcestis interprets the message from Delphi correctly: Although others are willing to die for Admetus, she realises, that she herself must make the sacrificial death; she knows that love is stronger than death. After her return from the underworld Alcestis realises that suffering – whether in slavery or due to a plague sent by Apollo – is related to the concept of life and death. The Christian idea, that love forgives everything, becomes particularly clear, when Alcestis dissuades her son from thoughts of revenge and she turns to her oppressor Agis. Her deeper insight is shown in her statements to her son (Wilder, *Alcesteiad*, pp. 86 – Act III): “Great happiness was given to me once, yes (...) but shall I forget that now? And forget the one who gave it? All that has happened since came from the same hands that gave me the happiness. I shall not doubt that it is good and has apart in something I cannot see (...)”. Apollo explains in a conversation with the demon of death (Thanatos) that only those are to be brought back from the realm of the dead who have died for others (Wilder, *Alcesteiad*, pp. 77 – Act II): “Yes, my lesson – that! can bring back from the dead only those who have offered their lives for others”. This Apollo-quotation can only be understood correctly, if it is seen in connection with the above-mentioned Heracles' prayer before his descent to the underworld: Only with the help of Apollo can a dead man be brought back from the underworld. Apollo has given the reason for Alcestis' return from the underworld to earthen life. Alcestis is granted a kind of resurrection. With love, death and resurrection Wilder brings to light a meaning of the early Alcestis myth, that points to and forward to the Christian mystery. Käte Hamburger (1963) has

worked this out perfectly: Delphi is, of course, not yet the Christian heaven (i.e. God's throne), but the place of knowledge, the so-called *gnothi* seauton (Γνώθι σεαυτόν – to this philosophical concept cfr. Courcelle, 1974 – 1975). Alcestis' return from the underworld to earthly life means within the Greek myth – as Wilder interprets it – the necessary preparation for a higher stage of development, namely the experience of death, which is part of the knowledge of life. The fact that Alcestis' first dying was for the sake of the beloved person, but that at the same time her longing for knowledge was directed from early on to the passage through death, and that she already imagined her marriage to Admetus as a way to achieve this, is presented as a connection between love, knowledge and death, from which the concept of a very particular human existence unfolds like a flower: Immortality consists in the possibility of overcoming through these higher forces that distinguish mankind from the mere being of nature, i.e. above all unselfish love as the most important impact. It seems to be very probable that Wilder introduced the Christian idea of love into the ancient Alcestis-stuff: If we read Corinthians 13 from the New Testament in the Bible (quoted according to this source in <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013&version=ESV>), we may read Wilder's >Alcestis< in a new perspective: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love“. This Bible text is one of the most beautiful texts in world literature, it is undisputed that the Bible is also part of world literature. Even people, who do not believe in God, may admire this text.

3. To the theodicy question

In Act III the goddess of death expresses to Apollo his incomprehension of why the God of salvation sends a plague over the land,

whose inhabitants – especially Alcestis – he loves (Wilder, *Alceste*, p. 76 sq. – Act II): "But I confess to you, Lord Apollo, I don't know what you mean by it: you are the God of healing – of life and healing – and here you are the sender of plagues and pestilence (...)." Thus – in contrast to the Euripides-version – the question of theodicy is posed (to this problem cfr. Bowker, 1970; Griffin, 1976; Colpe/Schmidt-Biggemann, 1993; Larrimore, 2001; van Inwagen, 2006; Ward, 2013; Gerhards, 2017: Why are there catastrophes, injustices, etc., despite divine omnipotence on earth? To this question there does not exist a sufficient answer. The problem is this: If there does exist God, why does he not avoid all these tragedies? The only answer might be that God wants to test the faith of mankind.

VII. To the determination of the literary genre

It is difficult to determine the literary genre of the >Alcestis< of Euripides the >Alcestis< of Wilder:

1. To the >Alcestis< of Euripides

To simplify matters literary opinions can be divided into two areas, one of which denies the >Alcestis< the characteristics of a tragedy and brings it close to comedy, the other clearly considers it to be a tragedy. The 2nd hypothesis of the Alexandrian grammarian Aristophanes of Byzantium (257 – 180 BC, to him cfr. Goulet, 1989, pp. 406 – 408) – the Alcestis-stuff being a kind of content of the play combined with a sparse commentary – can be taken from this:

- The outcome of the play is rather comical.
- The play has something of a satyr play in itself, because it ends cheerfully and amusingly instead of tragically.
- In addition, the above-mentioned testimony lists four plays that Euripides is said to have lost to Sophocles (to him cfr. Segal, 1995) in the following order: >Cretan Women< (cfr. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199284030.003.0001>), >Alcmeon in Psophis< (cfr. Pausanias 8,24,8), >Telephos< (cfr. Strauß/Heres, 1994) and >Alcestis<. Since >Alcestis< is mentioned here in the fourth place, it was obvious that it was only the satyr play of this tetralogy. The judgement of ancient philology, that gives it the character of a happy end without any restriction, has been almost uncontroversial up to this day: Greenwood (1953) says of the final scene, that it can hardly be taken seriously: "The serious interest of the play is over by the time we reach this hasty winding-up of the story". Lesky (1925) paraphrases thus: Admetus still has a little intrigue to survive, in that Heracles spends the devoured Alcestis on a stranger

and tests his loyalty, but then the happily united ones are allowed to step over the threshold of the palace into a new life.

Since the mid-1960s two interpreters have opposed this almost unanimous opinion:

- Kurt von Fritz (1963) doubts, that the play was a satyr play, because it is – despite some burlesque elements (like Heracles) – far from a happy and exuberant character of a satyr play: Kurt von Fritz sees the tragedy embodied in the figure of Admetus: A human being can never be only a part in the life of another person and it is impossible to sacrifice him like any other possession for the sake of maintaining one's own life – even with his consent – without this not having profound consequences for the survivor, no matter how much he/she is aware of it. The final scene is an artificial happy end; it is an outward return to the beginning of the old fairy tale. The muteness of Alcestis is just what is needed to hide the fact that the spouses cannot simply fall into each other's arms and carry on as if nothing had happened.
- Rohdich (1968) sees the tragedy in the royal couple: Their belief in the idea of overcoming the world from the inherent power of mankind and their resulting willingness to make sacrifices failed in the end. The couple was divided into a winning and a losing part by the tragic nature of sacrificial death. The winner Admetus could not live his life as before (cfr. v. 878 with Admetus' bitter-ironic wish that it were better never to have married).

A decision for one of the above opinions is difficult; it seems to be somewhat easier to assume the hypothesis that there is given a satyr play of tetralogy. But even if this were true, little would possibly be gained for the following reasons: Unfortunately out of 76 Euripidean plays only 18 have survived, all of which are tragedies except for the >Alcestis<. Of the remaining 58 plays 8 are said to have been satyr plays. Dale (1954) has made an obvious but no less important observation: Even including the >Alcestis< one would only come up with 9 satyr plays from a total of 76 plays. The number of satyr plays would have to amount to a quarter (19), because Greek playwrights would have produced tetralogies in principle. It is therefore likely that tragedies with burlesque features could have replaced satyr plays. The >Alcestis< could therefore have replaced the satyr play as a tragedy with burlesque features.

2. To the >Alcestis< of Wilder

The relative independence of the three acts of Wilder's >Alcestis< may justify calling the play a trilogy; in weak analogy to Greek patterns Wilder's

>Alcestis< including the satyr play may be called a tetralogy. According to the view presented here there is only a formal trilogy given (cfr. Burbank, 1961 p. 127; Häberle, 1967, p. 118): Neither one of the three acts taken alone nor all three acts taken together can be viewed as a tragedy: However, Apollo's statements in >The Transition from the Alcestiad to the Drunken Sisters< initially seem to contradict this text (pp. 107 – Act III): “We claim that the tragic insight cannot stand alone. It tends to its own excess”. The same refers to pp. 109 (Act III) on the choice of the satyr play: "We have another: it is not very funny. Tonight did you ask yourselves how it was possible that the life of King Admetus was extended?" If one works with Heilmann's understanding of a tragic character as a split one who consciously makes a choice between imperatives and/or impulses pushing in different directions (Heilmann, 1960), one can only come to the conclusion that Wilder's Alcestis is not a tragic character; Burbank gives the following explanation (pp. 129): “Absence of conflict also makes Alcestis' victory (...) less impressive than it might because it is won with less struggle than it seemingly requires. She suffers no real soul-searching before committing herself to her choices. Her dark night of the soul in Act I is brief, and no real doubts disturb her decision to turn away from Apollo and live solely for Admetus. Because of these factors, she lacks the depth and complexity a greater struggle might have given her (...). Thus, too, the struggle over the sacrifice is not a struggle over whether to die for Admetus (...) but over the question, who will do it (...) and although Alcestis decides she will do it because she most loves life and, therefore, will be making the greatest sacrifice, the fact that it is a great sacrifice to her is not evidenced by any visible suffering on her part. The power of love is so great that no agonizing struggle is necessary for such a sacrifice as Alcestis makes“.

Summary

The mythical subject of a wife's substitutionary death for her husband was as at some point related to a royal couple. The ancient drama focuses on the royal couple Admetus and Alcestis; this ancient material already raises very profound questions (cfr. Maurer-Zenck, 2007). What awaits people in the existence after their death and will there be an opportunity to escape the afterlife? This is believed to be possible in ancient drama. Thornton Wilder – like other modern authors – takes up this difficult topic, expanding the plot of the drama both forward and backward in the timeline in a very particular way. The fundamentally new insight, however, is that the person who is allowed with divine permission to return from the realm of the dead into the world of the living will not be happy: On the one hand, this person cannot bear to take part in people's lives again, and on the other hand, he cannot bear his role as a quasi-spectator of earthen life into that he is forced. Above all is the question of the intimacy of life and death: Wilder touches this question with a very

convincing approach, although it was clear to him that no mortal would be able to solve this question; even the Bible does not solve the question (cfr. Haasbroek, 2024). In the end it can be summed up that Euripides and Wilder are world-class authors and that the works discussed here are immortal. Although the Euripides-play and the Wilder-play are of extreme high quality, a core question, that refers to life and death, is not solved: If there does exist God, why does he not avoid all these personal tragedies? May be that the answer to this question is given only after death. This comparative analysis shows that the ancient Greek drama has lost nothing of its fascination; the American star-author Thornton Wilder has used Euripides as a source and has presented the Alcestis-stuff in a very new light.

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